

Woman on wheels

CYCLING GLORY She tours villages with tips for better farming and empowering women. Meet rural Bihar's 'Kisan Chachi'

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At first, 54-year-old Raj Kumari Devi appears no different from millions of rural Indian women. Indeed, for life would have taken a predictable turn for this sturdy matriarch of Anandpur village in Bihar's Muzaffarpur district — 80 km north-east of Patna — had she accepted her situation as the wife of an unemployed farmer.

Instead, she took to the fields as a farmer, despite opposition from her father-in-law. That was in the early 1980s. Today, documentary producers are queuing up to tell the story of Raj Kumari — popularly known as 'Kisan Chachi' — who has been honoured with the Kisan Shree award.

The feat? In a region famed for growing cannabis and tobacco since the 1970s, she has persuaded farmers to switch to mango, banana, litchi, papaya and vegetables.

Raj Kumari began her journey to empowerment by selling elephant's foot (*oal*) pickles at Krishi Vigyan Kendra stalls at district fairs. She then picked up the spade and shovel, and got down to doing farming, hitherto, a male domain.

"When I was younger, I was an active health services volunteer. When I learnt that chewing tobacco leads to cancer, I vowed to stop farmers from growing it. I started giving them tips on fruit and vegetable farming. Since finance was a major concern, I asked the women to set up self help groups (SHGs), and then apply for loans from banks under the Swarn Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana, which they did," she says.

Today, Raj Kumari employs women to prepare pickles for commercial purposes, for wages of Rs 50 per day. She has successfully mobilised around 350 women of Saraiya block to form 35 SHGs, which assures them of a comfortable living.

For these women, Raj Kumari is the interface between the banks and the SHGs — cycling up to 30 km every day, dispensing tips on agriculture and business. Says, Meera Devi (45), secretary of Khushboo SHG, "Kisan Chachi has changed our lives. Now, we are at



■ Raj Kumari has managed to motivate farmers to grow fruits and vegetables instead of tobacco and cannabis

RAJ KUMARI HAS SUCCESSFULLY MOBILISED 350 WOMEN OF THE SARAIYA BLOCK TO FORM 35 SELF-HELP GROUPS

least assured of two meals a day."

Closer home, she has single-handedly managed to marry off a daughter and packed off the other to pursue a computer course in Muzaffarpur. But *Kisan Chachi* is not done yet.

Having unsuccessfully contested the 2006 Panchayat elections, she will give it another shot the next time. Why politics? "I will have more opportunities to serve people and I know I will succeed, too."

STRIVING FOR CHANGE

Raj Kumari, popularly known as 'Kisan Chachi', has been honoured with the Kisan Shree award because she has managed to persuade farmers to switch to fruits and vegetables, in a region famed for growing cannabis and tobacco since the 1970s.

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Though most of the SHGs are engaged in Bihar's primary occupation of agriculture, some of them have diversified into idol making, pisciculture, making lac bangles and pickles, pottery, and animal husbandry.