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## Beyond the rat race

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Jyoti Devi had never met [Nitish Kumar](#), nor did she know anything about his politics or what his party stood for. So when the call came from the Magadh commissioner while she was planting tomato seeds in her small field, she almost jumped out of her skin. He asked her to come to Gaya immediately and after a hurried meeting broke the news to her: the Bihar chief minister wanted to meet her.

"I was terrified," she says. "Why was the CM calling me? What wrong had I done?" But there was no time to think. Jyoti Devi and her husband Baleshwar Bhuiyan caught the next train to Patna and reached 1, Anne Marg, the official residence of Nitish Kumar.

"When we entered the CM's chamber, Nitish ji turned towards us and asked rather abruptly what had brought us to his house. Though I was shocked at the question, I gathered all my courage and said, 'Tuhi na bulaye ho hamra ke' (It's you who invited me.) He laughed and began talking about the work I was doing in my village, on my fields, for my community. We left after a few minutes."

There was more shock in store for her. A fortnight after the meeting with Nitish Kumar, someone told her that her name had appeared in newspapers as the JD(U) candidate from Barachatti in Gaya district. Soon, another call asked her to collect the party's symbol.

It was a blur after that. "I had absolutely no idea what was happening and why they were happening," she says, smiling. "I had never imagined I would contest elections. I got the ticket without asking when people all the time talk about even the highly influential and rich lobbying endlessly for such an opportunity."

Forty-two-year-old Jyoti Devi's life story is as amazing as the prelude that brought her to politics, making her a legislator from a caste marginalised by even the most marginalised, a Dalit even for the Dalits — the rat-eating Musahars, a community that feeds on rodents for want of proper food and in 2010 still struggles with a literacy rate that's below 10 per cent.

It didn't help that the woman who is now the JD(U)'s MLA from Barachatti — she trounced her RJD rival by over 23,000 votes in Bihar's recent assembly elections — was left to fend for herself and put in an orphanage by her parents when she was just five. "I was only five when I was deserted by my parents, poor, landless farmers that they were. It must have been 1973." It was also the place where she met and married Baleshwar.

Authorities at the orphanage later sent the couple to Babu Gram to work among other Musahars like them. "A villager, Ganesh Manjhi, donated a tiny patch of land on which we built a small hut, but we had no source of income. I started stitching clothes and moved from one village to another requesting people to give me clothes for stitching," Jyoti Devi remembers.

It was later, after she got three acres of Bhoodan land from the government, all barren though, that things started looking brighter. She laboured hard for two decades after that and made the land cultivable. Fate finally smiled on Jyoti Devi and her husband after they learnt a new technique in farming from a Gaya-based NGO, Pradan, and experimented with it on their land a couple of years back. "The result was unbelievable," the MLA now says. "In one katha of land, the rice yield through the new technique was over 150 kg against 30 kg that we were getting earlier." About 300 families, largely Musahars, in Babu Gram and Sarvodyapuri villages now follow the technique that Jyoti Devi made popular. And these two clusters are like an oasis in a difficult, arid belt with barren land that is too hard for even thorny hedges to grow. Rainfall, too, is scanty and there are no systems of irrigation in place yet.

In fact, it was this tremendous greening of the twin villages that got Jyoti Devi noticed in the JD(U). They saw a winner in her — and a courageous one. Barachatti, her constituency, and Fatehpur, where she lives, are extremely poor and a breeding ground for Maoists. Not surprisingly, she was a target to be won over by the rebels. "Once a gang of theirs locked us in my house and asked us to join them. But I told them I work for the uplift of the most downtrodden, and through peaceful means. If they also believe in empowering this section, they should join me instead. They went away."

Those around her are deeply indebted to the feisty leader. "We owe our empowerment to this couple," says fellow villager Lutan Ravidas. "They dragged us out of the darkness of poverty and hunger, and showed us the way to progress. This is a big social revolution."

The change is quite visible. About a dozen boys have done their graduation and 10 villagers have been able to buy motorcycles; a few even have colour TV sets. There is at least one mobile phone with each family. Their children go to the only middle school in the village. And they don't eat rats anymore.

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