

# Jayjeet Kumar: An Inspiring Story

PRATYAY JAGANNATH with ANIL K. VERMA

*Jayjeet's journey proves that one is never too young to be an agent of change; most essential is the inclination to identify methods, the conviction that old ways must give way to newer, more cost-effective ways to ensure food sufficiency, and the spirit to take calculated risks*

In 2007, Jayjeet Kumar was a 13-year-old middle-school student in Bihar, India, whose family managed to produce just about enough food to feed the family for seven months each year. By 2011, he had come a long way. The Government of Bihar honoured him as a 'Young Star' for the impact he had had on the lives of hundreds of farmers and the training he had provided to the agricultural officials; he was recognized by the President of India for his efforts to help marginalized rice farming households in his area improve their food security.

What altered his life? The sight of a farmer planting rice in his field in a neighbouring village, Shekhwara, made him curious. A keen observer, Jayjeet noticed that a farmer near his village school was doing something different. This was not how he had seen rice being planted. He was planting very young seedlings of rice.

He watched the process daily and began to follow and learn the methods of this unfamiliar way of rice planting. He noticed that the farmer used much less water and seeds and yet the plants that grew were thriving and heavy with grain. He saw that healthy tillers had started coming up in a seemingly poorly transplanted plot. He went to the field and interacted with the concerned farmer. He realized that this method would surely lessen his family's hassle for food security.

## **HOW IT ALL STARTED**

He was very excited and shared his experience of observing the benefits of this low-cost cultivation, which promised high returns, with the villagers of Ghantadih, where he lived. In this remote area where people followed traditional methods with no modern farming technologies, the villagers rejected the idea outright and did not believe him.

Jayjeet and his family were dependent upon agriculture as their primary source of livelihood. They devoted most of their time to cultivation. However, there was a basic difference between the traditional and the SRI method followed in Shekhwara village. The inputs there were low and production was significantly higher. Jayjeet's family could hardly meet their subsistence needs. They needed an impetus in their livelihood and he thought that his family should try out the SRI method in their fields. This would mean more production and better food security for his family.

He talked about it at home and was keen to use this new method on their land but his family was reluctant to take any risks. Only after much persuasion did his parents agree to try the new method on their 0.3 ha of land; they knew that if the crop failed, they would be destitute. However, instead of their usual 80 kg of rice, they harvested 240 kg, going from food deficit to food surplus in one season! The news spread, and at 13, Jayjeet began showing other villagers how to achieve the same dramatic results.

Jayjeet was a keen learner and an avid practitioner and he tried to observe, seek the guidance of his neighbouring villagers and learn the technique of the SRI. He learned that one of the fundamental differences between the two methods was that SRI did not consider paddy to be an aquatic plant. The SRI method does not require the field to be over-flooded. The same was true for the other inputs such as seeds, manure and pesticides. This meant lower recurrent costs

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to cultivate paddy. In spite of all these benefits, it was difficult for people to conceptualize an increased yield from such a system. Skepticism continued and the farmers were reluctant to adopt SRI, still preferring to continue with the traditional method.

PRADAN has been implementing SRI prototypes all over the country and it was Jayjeet who was instrumental in inviting PRADAN (a national-level NGO, promoting livelihoods for the resource poor in India) to his village in the Gaya district of Bihar. He persuaded two farmers in his village to allow their plots of land to be used for SRI demonstration.

He followed all the technical processes of SRI, beginning with the grading of seeds to the treatment of seeds, as suggested by extension workers of PRADAN. He was involved in the processes of raising nurseries and transplanting of seedlings to the field, as required for paddy cultivation. During a visit by government officials to his village, he escorted the officials and showed them the different stages of the paddy under the SRI method of crop cultivation. He interacted with all the government officials and got recognition among various stakeholders of agriculture.

The results were seen by the other villagers and soon government and non-government officials heard about the changes. People began to visit their land. Jayjeet was happy to share with the others what he had learned from the neighbouring village. With intense passion and energy, he demonstrated and

elaborated the SRI method of cultivation to all who wanted to learn it. The farmers were amazed at the results and inspired by the enthusiasm of this young boy. The Joint Director, Department of Agriculture, Government of Bihar, visited and praised the young man's efforts.

In 2009, he trained 96 small and marginal farmers of three villages, including his own, and provided them support through careful attention, correction and reassurance in their first experiments with the SRI. In 2010, in extreme drought conditions, he trained and provided support to 80 farmers in the SRI-Paddy and 70 farmers in SRI-Wheat (System of Root Intensification: the principle followed is the same as in paddy cultivation). He applied the principles of SRI to other crops such as vegetables and rape seed in his own fields and found the same magical results that he saw earlier in paddy. The phenomenon was magical for a region that had never seen such bumper yields in any crop. The farmers from other districts started coming to visit Jayjeet's field to see the SRI work and to draw lessons and adopt the technique. His success and efforts were made more popular by the local print media publishing his success story, which attracted a lot of public attention.

Recognition of his work and the recently conferred honour motivated Jayjeet to help fellow villagers to learn and adopt the technique. His leadership qualities were evident because, at the age of 13, he was training farmers about SRI. He has since trained over 150 farmers in the method. Impressed by his skills, the Government of Bihar invited him to train 50 Agricultural

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Extension Officers, all far more senior than him and all experts in their own fields.

#### **TURNING POINT**

Jayjeet is the second son of his father Basudeo Yadav and mother Kunti Devi. He has three brothers and two sisters. His eldest sister and

brother are married. Before they adopted the SRI method, his elder brother and father worked as agricultural labour in the landlord's cultivable land.

Jayjeet Kumar is quite innovative and has introduced different methods of crop cultivation, including sugar cane, with support from PRADAN. He has helped farmers in other villages as well in adopting these new technologies. He did the *machan vidhi* of SRI vegetables. He has also tried low-cost polymer made vermi-compost. He tries out all these various innovations and helps other farmers to scale up innovative activities in the area. He has minimized inputs in various ways and has become a model for fellow farmers. He has introduced a reduced seed rate of paddy from 40 kg per acre (0.4 ha) to 2 kg per acre. He has demonstrated that the labour requirement in SRI is far less than in the traditional ways of cultivation. He has also demonstrated water-saving measures with the SRI method of crop cultivation.

By his innovations in the area of preparing natural manure and natural pesticides, he showed how small and marginal farmers can avoid high costs of inputs in agriculture. At the same time, he has also demonstrated how vegetables produced under natural farming are free from pesticides and, hence, are

healthier to eat. All his efforts have not only ensured his family's livelihood but also have resulted in the enhancement of income of a large number of other peasants. He is greatly respected in the community and in the other villages where he has provided training and hand-holding support.

Jayjeet's popularity brought more laurels and he was invited by the Government of Madhya Pradesh, to provide training and hand-holding support to the farmers on SRI. He visited several districts to train their officials on SRI. At present, he is involved in training and providing hand-holding support to farmers in Katni district of Madhya Pradesh.

He has become a well-known face in the field of SRI by his sheer dedication, hard work and ability to influence people in his eloquent manner. He is a regular participant in all SRI promotion activities. Government officials, extension workers and many others have applauded the very young change agent aka Jayjeet. Prof. Norman Uphoff, the global leader on SRI, appreciated Jayjeet's work during a visit to India.

Jayjeet's family lives in a fairly remote part of Bihar, where people depend on agriculture for their food and income. He mastered the SRI techniques hoping for a better life for his

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family; his passion for teaching others is motivated by a desire to share the benefits of this technique.

#### **IMPACT ON OTHERS**

Besides higher yields with SRI methods, farmers cut their costs by using less water, seed and agro-chemicals. Among subsistence farmers, this can make the difference between chronic hunger and food on the table. By itself, the lower seed rate with SRI (2 kg per acre instead of 40 kg) is an enormous saving. Besides training others in these methods, Jayjeet is successfully applying the SRI principles to other crops such as wheat, rape seed, sugar cane and vegetables. In 2010, even in extreme drought conditions, the region saw bumper yields.

Jayjeet is respected in the community for his evident dedication, hard work, eloquence and an ability to bring about positive change. The story of his accomplishments has spread to Madhya Pradesh, which has invited him to visit several districts and train farmers and officials there on SRI. Jayjeet is also a tireless innovator. With support from PRADAN, he tries out new methods of cultivation for other crops such as sugar cane, experiments with vermi-compost and develops natural pesticides that are safe to put on vegetables. All along he helps other farmers to practice and scale up these innovations.