

AN INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLING PROJECT / HARYANA, INDIA / 2024

TEXTURA

vol. 4

**STORIES OF
DESPAIR,
DEVOTION
& DIGNITY**



On the cover: Birmati Kashyap kneels next to the hay-sourced fire Jan. 18 as she talks about the joys of her grandchildren. Birmati says they are always a helpful hand around the farm and keep her on her toes. Her purple-speckled headband and mixed-patterned shawl keep her warm through the cooler months of winter. Birmati often wears bright colors that make her stand out from the green farm. | Photo by Abbi Bates

Above: Reena's friend invites Texturans to dance with her as they celebrate guests in Reena's home. From Gohran, she visits Reena and is the first to start the dance party. | Photo by Mild Du

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Home IS WHEREVER I'M LOST



MAYA PHILLIPS

By KUMAR "RAFI" ABHIMANYU

My grandparents migrated to Haryana during the partition of India in 1947. My paternal grandparents speak Jhansi and the maternals speak Multani, different versions of Punjabi. As for me, I was raised in Haryana, stranded from either of the languages. I know one of the few versions of Haryanvi and I can read Telugu and Kannada too. I studied English in institutions but my mother tongue is Hindi. My music taste lies in all languages — or rather, the language doesn't matter. I have embodied different cultures through people and their words.

Every person here carries a different history and culture in their body and beings, yet they all belong to Haryana. While constantly trying to put a label on our identities, we forget India is a hybrid culture. We try to look for purity in identities, which fails as an idea even before it buds.

Where do I belong? Is it on the outskirts of Titram, a village in northwest

India — the home I left about 10 years ago? Or is it Delhi, the city that taught me to fight for our rights? Or is it Mumbai, where I act, dance and make my bread? My language has changed. So have my lifestyle and friends. I fit everywhere, yet nowhere at all.

While leading a team of people from a different country with an altogether different culture, I had all kinds of doubts: Will they understand the context, the emotions and the subtext of what their sources say? Will I be able to translate all the pauses and silences?

There's a saying in Haryana that our dialect changes every 10 miles and new words come into play in daily practices. As language changes, culture does too. You can tell a person's hometown region by just knowing if they say 'कड़े' (*kade*) or 'कति' (*kit*), both meaning, "Where?" While talking about Haryana to my friends in Delhi and Mumbai, I have always described it as green ... or yellow, depending on the season. We thrive on

sweets and dairy products. We have a strong sense of community and our festivals sew our social threads together.

Our vocabulary is rich but our words fall short. We have different words for the word "*achha*" — "good" — and all of them taste different on the tongue. The word can mean other things: "fine," "okay," "like." Confusing, right? And if you add a nod or a punctuation, it's an altogether different game of interpreting it that only we understand.

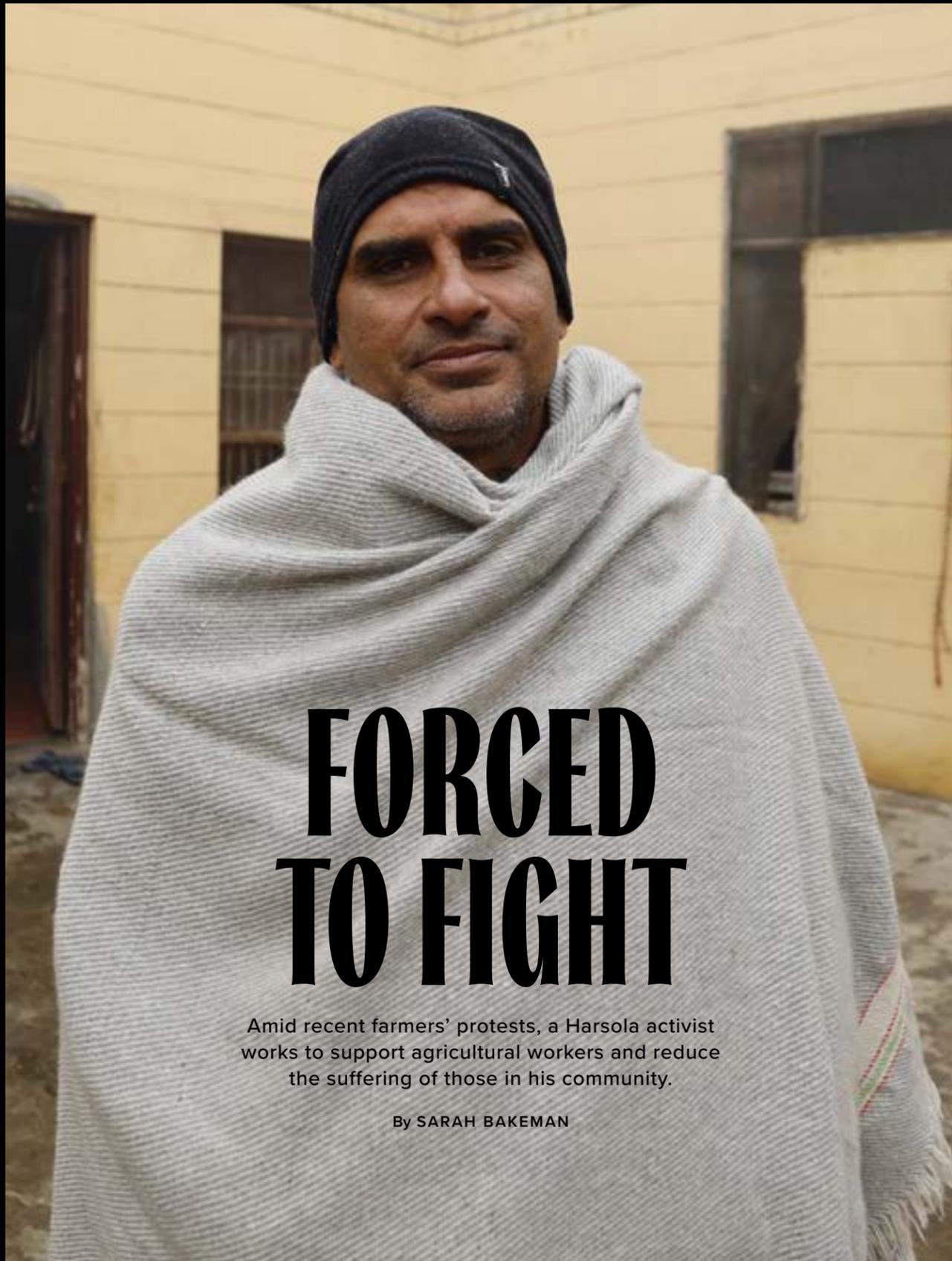
Even though I have known this place and its people since my birth, meeting people during this project was a revelation to me. I saw individuals fight for their beliefs and assert themselves and their identity — not just social and cultural but personal, too — in the larger scheme of justice. In this small radius of 6 miles, many of the working-class migrant people are trying to find a home in a place far away from their own homes. Some are trying to leave Haryana to make a new one in the West. And some,

Kumar "Rafi" Abhimanyu walks fields outside the village of Titram in the Kaithal district that he saw with new eyes as a reporting partner for Textura India 2024. | Photo by Anna Pearson

mostly women, are trying to find a sense of belonging within their own homes.

Going back home took me places. My hometown, like every other city, is not a unified region painted by just one color, much like our identities. Haryana is a lot of things and locating oneself within it is even more difficult. So, where do I belong? Maybe the answer doesn't lie in knowing a place but in revisiting it again and again and rediscovering yourself. ✕





FORCED TO FIGHT

Amid recent farmers' protests, a Harsola activist works to support agricultural workers and reduce the suffering of those in his community.

By SARAH BAKEMAN



Jasvinder Dhull's buzzing phone interrupted his afternoon nap with a sequence of WhatsApp notifications. Fellow Harsola residents' frantic messages came together to create a clear picture: A neighbor's wheat farm was burning, and the fire was spreading quickly. Jassi rounded up his 8-year-old son and the two headed toward the flames.

From the back of the motorcycle, the boy asked a question: "If the whole field is burned, how will the farmer's children buy books for their education?"

Although Jassi and other residents were able to extinguish the fire before the damage was too devastating, the boy's question lingered for Jassi. If a child could recognize the volatility of agriculture work in India, it must be important.

Jassi is not a farmer, but he knows what land means. He knows if a wheat field burns or a land-dispute court case is lost, a livelihood goes with it. He knows it takes protesting, tractor parades, refusing government bribes and sometimes jail time to protect those who cultivate the soil. He knows that at its best, land provides for children, and at its worst, land moves men to murder.

Jassi draws from his own difficult past to inspire the goal behind his farm activism: minimize human suffering.

Farming is central to life in Harsola, a village of 5,000 people. According to the Haryana Department of Agriculture and Farmers, 70% of residents depend on agriculture for their livelihood, and the majority of farms are small-scale and family-owned. Land is the single most important household asset and determinant of wealth.

"I know that the land will take care of me even if I am not successful," Jassi said.

Jassi is one of the many whose inheritance was family land — 10 acres of Harsola earth from his paternal grandfather, Ram Sarup. Jassi, however, did not inherit the knowledge of how to cultivate it. Other working-class farmers spent their childhoods weeding out rice paddies, collecting and watering from a tube well and gathering harvested bundles of wheat. But Jassi spent much of his childhood at a boarding school, an hour away from his birthright.

He was enrolled in seventh grade by his grandfather and maternal uncle, who repeatedly cited the importance of education. But Jassi knew that beneath their

Above: Jassi talks with friends on the streets of Harsola during a busy morning. Bikes, tractors and cars pulled through the village as farmers gathered to drink chai and talk agriculture before voting in a Primary Agriculture Cooperative Society election. | Photo by Sarah Bakeman

Opposite: Jasvinder Dhull stands outside his Harsola home on a hazy January day after returning from the Kisan Mazdoor Canteen. He lives in the house with his wife, his mother and his two sons. "My sons are now almost as tall as me. I believe they'll live long and well," Jassi said. "I've kept my family safe. If something were to happen to me, I hope and believe that they'll take my place." | Photo by Sarah Bakeman

talk of classes and opportunities, boarding school was an act of protection. He would be away from his home village of Harsola. That's where his father, Sewa Singh, could find him.

"There was never a connection between us," Jassi said. "Our relationship was always shattered."



Above: Jasvinder Dhull leans over a man's shoulder at the voter registration table Jan. 11, ensuring all those who came to vote are farmers. The election was for the Primary Agriculture Cooperative Society, a local farmers' union for which Jassi's uncle, Hukmi Dhull, was running. Jassi spent election morning talking with farmers before they went to vote and after they exited the polls. Later that afternoon, it was announced that Hukmi won the election. "I want to do something for my village and for my society. I want to be proud of what I do," Jassi said. | Photo by Sarah Bakeman



Right: Hukmi Dhull holds up a ballot listing the names of farmers' union candidates. | Photo by Sarah Bakeman

Here is Jassi's version of his origin story: Before he was born, his father left their family to be with another woman. His mother, Kelovati, became a six-months-pregnant, soon-to-be single parent. She had to make a decision: abort the child and remarry, providing stability in a patriarchal society, or keep her child and remain a somewhat-shunned single mother. She chose to raise Jassi.

By the time Jassi was a teenager, Sewa would make occasional returns to Harsola. The visits were quickly soured by death threats and a visible pistol in the man's pocket. Sometimes he came alone, and sometimes he came with friends who backed his threats with more words and pistols.

"He used to come into our lives just to create a mess," Jassi said. "He never thought of me as a son."

Sewa wanted the 10 acres that belonged to his father. But he knew the land was to be passed down to Jassi, and he would kill his own son to get it.

Boarding school could provide distance and protection, Jassi's grandfather hoped.

While Jassi's removal from Harsola eased his family's fears, he felt his own anxiety worsen. Between the school's pink-painted cement walls, Jassi thought about his grandfather dying — either by natural causes or by murder. He thought about his father claiming the land in his absence. And he thought about himself — how he'd be working on his handwriting or studying for a math exam,

unaware of the drama playing out an hour away.

"If my father were to kill my grandfather, he'd get everything," Jassi said. "My mother's sacrifice would be for nothing."

Education couldn't provide survival, Jassi thought. Only land could do that. At 16, after three years at boarding school, he returned home.

"People told me not to leave my school. It's a good school and not everybody gets an opportunity to study there," Jassi said. "But I was worried about my land and my grandfather. I had to come home."

Throughout 11th and 12th grade, Jassi reconnected with the village. He made friends with boys his age, deepened his relationship with his mom and grandfather and felt more supported than ever before. If Sewa came with friends and pistols, Jassi says his own friends would come to his house in a group. Jassi remained safe for three years.

That's when Sewa attempted to murder Jassi's grandfather.

When Ram felt a firm push on his back and the concrete slipping beneath his feet, he realized Sewa's threats were no longer empty. Ram was standing on his roof, next to a ledge and a 20-foot drop. He caught himself and yelled for his son-in-law to help. Although Sewa's attempt failed, it was unclear how, when and if he would attack again. Jassi's grandfather decided to transfer ownership of the land to Jassi.

Instead of following through on threats of physical violence against his son, Sewa brought his grievances to India's legal system. He claimed the land rightfully belonged to him, arguing it was ancestral, not self-acquired. In other words, he said the land should be distributed between all family members — Ram had no right to give it to Jassi.

A string of three civil cases ensued, lasting from 2006 to 2018. Starting when he was 24 years old, Jassi spent over a decade in and out of hearings. He called it a full-time job, where his father stood across the courtroom with that familiar pistol glinting in his pocket.

"He kept filing cases against me," Jassi said. "One after another. He never tried to make amends. He was always against us."

In response, Jassi bought a pistol of his own. He kept it hidden underneath his shawl most of the time. He says he didn't buy it to be pointed or shot. Instead, when Jassi moved the fabric of his shawl to reveal the weapon to his father, he hoped to send a message.

You may be strong, but so am I.

Jassi's friends did the same with their own pistols, often coming to the courtroom to show support during those 12 years.

"The best moment for me was when my friends stood by me," Jassi said. "They had no greed. They knew I could get shot at any point."

Jassi's extended time in court can be chalked up to

"The best moment for me was when my friends stood by me."

मेरे लिए सबसे अच्छा पल था जब मेरे दोस्त मेरे साथ खड़े थे

“After I won my land, my family had something to fall back on. Then I had the confidence to go out and work for others.”

India’s notoriously backed-up judiciary. The delays are largely due to a low judge-to-population ratio. According to The New York Times, there are 50 million court cases pending in the country. At the current rate of court system proceedings, these cases would take 300 years to clear.

Among these pending cases, land and property disputes account for the largest fraction.

During his 12 years in court, Jassi’s first wife committed suicide, he was remarried and then had two sons with his second wife. With all that happened in that time, his case was still completed eight years sooner than the average land dispute.

Jassi won his maternal family’s 10 acres 16 years after the attempt on his grandfather’s life. Nonetheless, Jassi celebrated. He felt this victory would not only provide for his family, but recompense the sacrifices his mother made in choosing to birth and raise him, as well as the time his friends spent supporting him in and out of the courtroom.

“I thought it didn’t matter how the world was against me as long as my mother, grandfather and family stood by me,” Jassi said.

Instead of farming, Jassi supports his family by contracting his land to small-scale wheat and rice farmers, who use their profits to support their own families. While those families till and harvest from his inheritance, Jassi

concerns himself with protesting for their rights. Often, Jassi says the Indian government does not act in favor of family farmers or the labor class that works in the fields.

During his court case and after, he would think back to the childhood years when he felt scared and oppressed by Sewa’s threats. His mother would repeat an affirmation to him.

“Our time will come when we will be happy,” she would say. “Now, I want you to be a good citizen, and I want you to help others.”

Jassi says he felt obligated to take an active role in farmers’ protests, a story that has dominated Haryana and all of India for the last four years. At first he showed up as a listener, furious note-taker and chanter in the crowd, and later as the man speaking into the microphone.

“Whenever he sees bad things happening to people, he just wants to help,” Kelovati said.

In 2015, Jassi helped organize a protest in Titram, 5 kilometers from his home, in which demonstrators were on the street 24 hours a day for 49 days. The action sparked after the Haryana government announced a plan to build a highway that would travel across eight villages in the Kaithal area. The proposed road would cut through the farmers’ lands — earth inherited through generations even before English colonialism — and landowners would

receive 27 lakhs INR (\$32,500) per acre. This was not the fair value of the land.

The same year as the protest, Indian politician Shanta Kumar chaired a committee on the restructuring of the Food Corporation of India. The FCI is in charge of maintaining the minimum support price for crops in India, a safety net for farmers. This MSP guarantees farmers will earn a certain level of income for their crops and won’t experience losses. The United States Department of Agriculture does the same thing for American farmers.

But the Shanta Kumar Committee Report revealed a new truth. Only 6% of Indian farmers received the government’s guaranteed MSP for their crops. And now, Kaithal-area farmers were being offered less than the standard value for the land.

They were tired of not receiving their fair share.

Although the event started with about 40 people, the protest grew to more than 10,000 frustrated farmers shouting from carts and flatbed trailers. Police tried repeatedly to break up the demonstration through bribery or threatening legal action. Some protesters were offered new cars in exchange for compliance, something Jassi says is common for him. Basically, a local government official would offer Jassi or other organizers their choice of vehicle. A non-luxury car can cost up to 52 lakh (\$65,000).

In the end, the government raised its offer price

to 47 lakhs per acre, almost double the original offer. This deal was the fair value of the land, Jassi said with a toothy smile.

Jassi still drives to protests on his motorcycle.

In 2018, Jassi’s court case was completed. As he drove down village roads with friend and fellow activist Kumar Mukesh, the man asked him a question.

“What do you want to do now?”

Jassi knew the answer. He wanted to be a leader and political activist for farmers in Haryana. And now, he could do it without worrying about court dates or unwanted interactions with Sewa or stress about lawyers and finances.

“After I won my land, my family had something to fall back on,” Jassi said. “Then I had the confidence to go out and work for others.”

A few weeks later, Jassi set off from Kaithal with a band of 16 farmers and seven tractors for another protest. The group was Delhi-bound, with a plan to pick up more farmers along the 184-kilometer route. If everything went according to plan, the group would arrive in the capital and demonstrate to bring attention to the 2004 Swaminathan Report written by the National Commission on Farmers.

The report is mostly economic in content, as it details recommendations for enhancing the profitability and sustainability of farming in India through selling price

protection. Despite talk of profits and losses, the report wasn’t solely about boosting farmers’ bank accounts. It was rooted in a concern for how the monetary stress of agricultural work in India contributes to high farmer suicide rates.

Fourteen years after the report’s original release, that same concern remains.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, a government intelligence agency, 10,600 farmers and agricultural laborers committed suicide in 2020 — a number Jassi believes to be inaccurate. He suggests that the rate is much higher, but downplayed by the government to ease farmer uprisings.

Jassi isn’t alone in a growing skepticism surrounding government statistics. During the 2023 G20 Summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s failure to conduct the 2020 census, a process that has been delayed nine times, faced criticism. India is the only G20 country that has not completed the census. Additionally, Indian National Congress leader Jairam Ramesh spoke at the summit, saying that the Modi government “discredits, discards or even discontinues collecting any data that it finds inconvenient to its narrative.”

During the 2018 protest, Jassi and the farmers drove their seven tractors as far as Hisar, 124 kilometers southwest of Kaithal, before they were stopped by police. Jassi was jailed for seven days in Kaithal.

In 2019, they tried the same protest again, with the same hope of calling attention to the report and farmer suicides. This time, they made it to Kailram, only 15 kilometers south of Kaithal. Again, they were confronted by police, and Jassi was jailed for another seven days.

May 15, 2020, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the introduction of three farm bills. These bills, if made into law, would reshape agriculture for India’s 150 million smallholder farmers and their dependents.

The goal behind the bills was simple: change India’s agricultural sector from public-run to private-run. In other words, minimize the government’s role in farming and open up room for private investors.

Modi and government-controlled media said the market-friendly bills would bring growth.

“The bigger media houses were bought off,” Jassi said. “They portrayed these bills as something that would double or triple a farmer’s income.”

Many farmers opposed the bills, stating they would eliminate state protections and regulatory support, such as the already-insufficient MSP protections. Smallholder farmers would be left under the heel of large, for-profit corporations who would now decide the minimum price.

Other farmers didn’t even know the bills existed. And

some knew about them, but couldn’t read them — they were originally only published in English.

After farmers’ union leaders translated the bills into Hindi and Haryanvi, Jassi and fellow farmers’ activists decided to spread the word. For the most part, Punjabi farmers were aware of what was happening. Haryana’s farmers were not. From village to village, Jassi talked about the three bills, what they meant and how they would impact people.

“These bills are going to kill you,” Jassi would conclude.

Sept. 27, 2020, the bills became law.

21
judges
per million
people in
India

150
judges
per million
people in
America

SOURCE: THE NEW YORK TIMES

“I want to do something for my village and for my society. I want to be proud of what I do.”

In the month that followed, Jassi protested locally alongside activists and farmers, chanting on streets and posting clips of the gatherings to Facebook to spread the word. Similar protests spread across the whole of Haryana and Punjab. But after two months, the phrase *Dilli chalo*, translating to “Let’s go to Delhi,” was repeated from protester to protester.

In November, Jassi attended a rally in Pipli, a village 6 kilometers from the Haryana-Delhi border. Like the tractor protests that preceded, the goal was to go to the nation’s capital, this time using the national highway that connected Pipli to Delhi. Thousands gathered, the majority of them men. Some took the road by tractor or truck, but the bulk of the protesters moved on foot, cheering and chanting as men spoke into megaphones.

Not long into the rally, the police showed up and beat protesters. Requests to march the capital city had been denied, with the Delhi police citing COVID-19 protocols.

Jassi then relocated to the Punjab-Haryana border, where another *Dilli chalo* movement was starting. As thousands of farmers made their way south, they were met with water hoses and tear gas, sent over police barricades. Nov. 25 ended with protesters breaking through barricades and Delhi police officers allowing entrance into the capital for a peaceful protest. This kicked off the 2020 Indian farmers’ protest.

The demonstrations lasted for a year, with thousands of farmers and activists, including Jassi, setting up self-sufficient camps in the capital. Rows of tents and tarps lined highways through a bitter winter and scorching summer. Children and elders alike huddled inside, fixing their tents after windy days and swatting away mosquitos on humid nights. Food was supplied from farmers back home, primarily in Haryana and Punjab. Water was gathered, laundry done and meals cooked, all in these temporary settlements.

In those 13 months, 750 people died on the streets. Most of these deaths were due to natural causes. Many of the farmers protesting were elderly, fighting for the only livelihood they had known, passing away in tents far from their land.

“People did not care if they were to live or die during the protest. They wanted to win,” Jassi said. “That’s what made me realize that we’ll win this fight.”

Jassi stayed in Delhi for seven months before he returned home. For the remaining five months, he split his time between Harsola and Delhi.

It became clear that the protesters, who continued to collect a steady income of food and donations for their villages, were not letting up. Additionally, important elections for Modi’s party were coming up in 2022.

Oct. 29, 2021, Modi spoke for four minutes in a televised address to the nation.

“*Main aaj deshavaasiyon se kshama maangate hue,*” he said.

“Today, I apologize to my countrymen.”

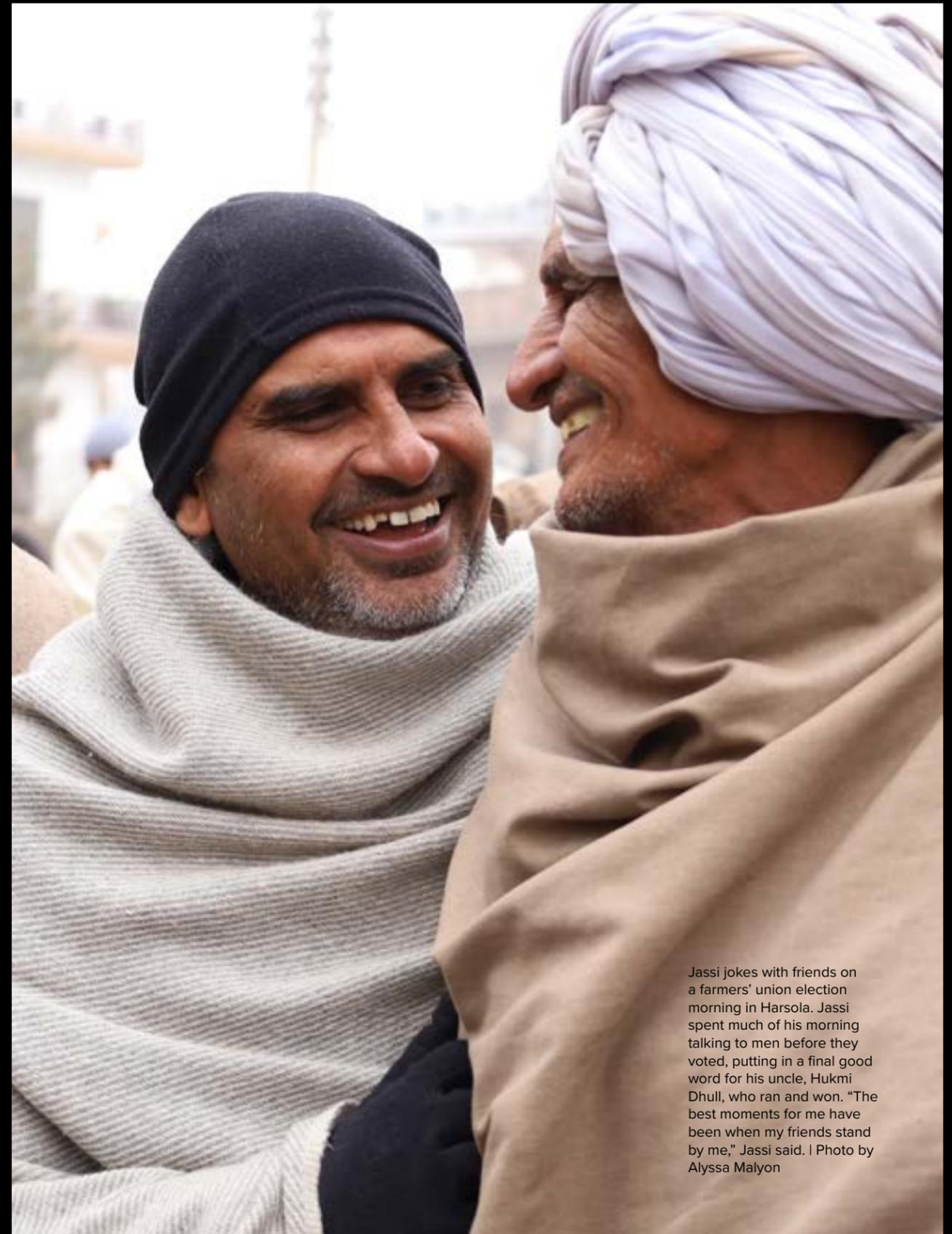
Modi followed this with an announcement: the three farm laws would be repealed. He then advised farmers and activists to take down their tents and return to their homes.

On the streets, some protesters ate *Jalebi*, an orange coil of fried maida flour. Music played and men danced with their arms reaching out over their heads, firecrackers popping on the pavement they had called home. But others refused to take their tents down. They wanted to see a formal repeal of the laws before packing up and leaving for good.

Jassi celebrated alongside the men, but later became philosophical.

“We are forced to fight,” Jassi said. “We don’t want to protest. We don’t want to die on the streets. We don’t.”

Between bigger protests, Jassi spends his time on community projects or small protests. In January, he helped his uncle Hukmi Dhull’s campaign for the local farmers’ union and celebrated after the election was won. That was after he crowdfunded money for two now-completed wells in his village. Now he’s helping get supplies to build a new temple in Harsola. As the builders work on archways and the scaffolding gets higher, it’s Jassi’s job to make sure they never run out of bricks. ✕



Jassi jokes with friends on a farmers’ union election morning in Harsola. Jassi spent much of his morning talking to men before they voted, putting in a final good word for his uncle, Hukmi Dhull, who ran and won. “The best moments for me have been when my friends stand by me,” Jassi said. | Photo by Alyssa Malyon

PREPARING BRIDES FOR MARRIAGE



India's long-standing tradition of henna, especially among women and weddings, creates a safe space for women to talk with one another.

By TALIA MCWRIGHT

Sisters Ritu and Anjali will marry on the same day, both to men they've only seen in photographs. On a cool January night, the sisters sat in the bubblegum-pink bedroom of their childhood home surrounded by family members and neighbors, arms stretched out for two hours during their traditional henna wedding ceremony, Mehendi. Their wedding would be the next day.

"I'm not mentally prepared for marriage," Anjali said at the Mehendi.

The sister's henna artists, Renu and Ekta, are both unmarried, unable to provide much marriage advice to the women. But Kaithal, Haryana-based artist Sapna can.

Sapna, 22, has been doing henna for 13 years, preparing brides for marriage during their Mehendi. Married at 16, Sapna offers brides advice while painting their arms and legs for hours at a time. In this region of Northern India, henna marks special occasions and brings *shagun*, meaning good luck or fortune. As Sapna is grateful to have had a positive marital experience, she shares this with her clients. The environment she creates is a safe space for women to talk about their fears and desires.

"It is very important for a bride to have henna, because this is a tradition we [Indian women] have been following for many years," Sapna said.

"It is very important for a bride to have henna, because this is a tradition we [Indian women] have been following for many years."

Opposite: Sapna stands in her small kitchen Jan. 10, making chai and chatting with her guests. At seven months pregnant, Sapna is not currently working, but ordinarily she earns her own income through hair and makeup, henna and stitching. "I want to run my own parlor," Sapna said. | Photo by Anna Kapsner

ANGELA GONZALEZ



Sapna pulls colorful fabrics from the drawers in her room Jan. 10. In addition to henna, she mends clothing to pay for her daughter's education. "I want her to be educated," Sapna said. "But it all depends on whether she wants to be married or not." | Photo by Bella Haveman

Ritu and Anjali have known about their arranged marriages since fall 2023, only a few months prior to their January weddings. Neither expressed excitement about the wedding, but rather nervousness about how soon they would be brides and worry about how their lives might change. Though their family and neighbors celebrated, they couldn't be certain their marriages would be worth the excitement.

Sapna's clients often feel nervous. Women ask Sapna questions about what to expect, especially regarding intimacy on the wedding night. Brides often have a limited knowledge of sexual education, and Mehandi might be one of the only times they can talk about it. When Sapna was unmarried and doing henna, women did not ask her these kinds of questions. She does not share every detail of what might happen during the bride's first night with their spouse and sometimes feels shy when answering their questions, but shares anyway because she too had questions about her wedding night.

"I didn't expect they'd be asking these questions, but yes they ask," Sapna said.

Sapna remembers her wedding night. How she worried about what her husband Santosh's demeanor would be, about how her body looked and what he might think of her. He made her feel beautiful and was gentle with her. This experience has given her confidence to reassure new brides that their marriages might be like hers.

"I tell them nothing is going to happen, just be patient," Sapna said.



The henna process requires time, focus and a steady hand. During Mehandi, Sapna uses between seven to eight cones of henna — each the size of her hand — for one bride. In her earlier days, her hands would cramp with pain, but now having painted more than a thousand hands, she is used to the feeling.

Brides typically pay Sapna 2,500 rupees (about \$30) for henna, and other clients pay her 150 rupees per hand. With the money she earns from henna, Sapna has been able to buy groceries and pay for her 5-year-old daughter Neha's education. Neha is already interested in henna and Sapna will teach her when she's older, but she wants Neha to become a doctor or a lawyer.

"I want for her to be educated," Sapna said. "But it all depends on whether she wants to be married or not."

During Sapna's pregnancy with Neha, she was doing henna frequently. She's now seven months pregnant with her second child and understands the importance of taking rest for a healthy pregnancy. She stopped the practice in her sixth month. Family members have expressed to Sapna and her husband their hopes that the baby will be a boy, insinuating that a boy would grant them more freedom and opportunity. Sapna shared that the couple is happy to be pregnant and does not care what the gender of the

child will be, as they are excited to have two children. When Sapna first started with henna, people thought her designs weren't impressive and clients even paid her less than they had agreed if they didn't like her work. She felt judged by people who doubted her but kept practicing until her skills improved. Having gained experience, not only do people seek her out to do their henna, but they use her as a counselor during their session.

"I didn't believe in giving up," Sapna said.

Sapna and her family are renting their current home. The kitchen where she makes chai is a short walk outside of her bedroom, as is the bathroom. Her bedroom contains all she needs to run her henna business, sew Punjabi suits and play with her daughter. The space is temporary, but it houses her family and holds important memories, like the photo of her late sister she keeps under her mattress. The space is a home, but it's missing one thing: an area where Sapna can practice her passions, like an established business.

"I want to run my own parlor," Sapna said.

Though Ritu and Anjali have yet to experience the reassurance that their



Top (left): Anjali shows a photo of her future husband, who she is marrying the next day. She is lucky to have seen a photo beforehand, and though she is nervous, she thinks he is handsome. | Photo by Anna Kapsner

Top (right): Ritu watches as Ekta slowly adds to the intricate henna design Jan. 15. They have been friends and neighbors for years, but after Ritu gets married, they will likely not see one another again. | Photo by Anna Kapsner

husbands will treat them well, they each have their own plans for the future. Ritu has her master's in English from Kalavati Memorial Government College in Narwana, Haryana. She wants to become an assistant professor and teach in India. Anjali wants to get her bachelor of science in nursing at a school in Australia or Canada. The sisters' families support their career goals and can only hope that their new families will do the same. After their wedding, the henna stains on their arms become a reminder of the last night the two shared together before becoming married women. ✕

CHANGING THE GAME

A pitcher breaks cultural obstacles to reach national baseball and cricket teams, and tries to inspire the girls of her village to follow her.

By TAYLOR HANSON

Jyoti Sain sat on a plane about to take off for Hong Kong in 2023. At 20 years old, she was leaving India for the first time. Flying for the first time.

She had been preparing for this moment for a year. She had gone through competitions, tryouts and 6 a.m. practices to make the international baseball team. All so she could make the phone call to her family when she announced she would pitch for team India.

Jyoti attends Kurukshetra University in India's northern state of Haryana as a two-sport athlete. She dreams of becoming independent from her family and coaches the game of baseball to the young girls in her home village of Peoda.

"Girls should be able to do anything. They have the potential to learn anything in their life. To drive, to become an athlete," Jyoti said. "It's my motivation that every girl becomes independent from her father. To stand on her own feet."

Jyoti grew up playing cricket in Peoda. In a village of 5,000, she grew up in a home with two rooms: one bedroom and one kitchen, along with an outdoor space where neighbors could sit on cots and drink chai. It's a town

where girls wear dresses and women cover their faces.

But Jyoti walks around in cargo pants and sneakers.

Throughout Jyoti's childhood, her family struggled financially. With five kids living on her father's laborer income, her parents struggled to support them. Her father operated a printing press and had very little education. But he wanted his three daughters to study.

"Her family has been very supportive. Most families don't allow their daughters to be like this," community organizer and activist Kumar Mukesh said. "The neighbors were always discouraging her family about her playing with the boys. But her parents were always supportive of her sports instincts."

So Jyoti went to a public school where she would play cricket with the boys. She loved playing with them. One day, while playing cricket at recess with her friends, one of the coaches saw her pitching.

He asked the other teachers, "Who is that boy?"

But the other teachers laughed at him.

"That's not a boy, that's a girl."

With her short-cut hair, she blended in with the boys. But she didn't care. She only cared if she could beat them.



Jyoti Sain, 21, stands in front of her town of Peoda, India, Jan. 9, ready to throw a fastpitch. Jyoti represented India in the 2023 Women's Baseball Asian Cup, where India ranked sixth overall. Now, she practices every day to secure her spot in the 2024 World Cup that will take place in Canada. "You may take many pressures in life, but just relax, play well and win," Jyoti said. | Photo by Taylor Hanson

“People were talking behind my back, saying it was just a dream. [I] had to take strong action, to stand against it.”

Jyoti and her best friend Nitu laugh as they spread white chalk down along the dirt, with the outline of Peoda in the distance. They tease each other as they turn a field with no grass and no bases into a baseball diamond. They play on the same national team and take the same courses at Kurukshetra University. They were also the first young women in their village to show interest in baseball.

During their final year of high school, a new coach showed up who knew nothing about cricket — he only knew baseball. He started coaching Jyoti, turning her spinning cricket tosses into curveballs on the diamond. After a year of playing baseball, she made India’s international team for the Women’s Baseball Asian Cup in 2023.

For a while, only four girls knew how to play in the village. But to have a complete team, they needed nine players. They recruited friends from Peoda. As they continued to practice after school, Jyoti and Nitu decided they wanted to start coaching the younger girls for fun.

They went around the village asking for donations to fundraise for their team. They asked for fundraising from government sources who refused, saying they had never heard of the game of baseball.

So with no financial support or help from anyone, they held practices for the younger girls in the village. It started out with only a few girls from the village, but now they coach 50 girls. Nine girls tried out for the national team. Nine girls made the national team. All nine had been coached by Jyoti and Nitu.

For a while, Jyoti struggled to find space for the girls to practice because the village leaders didn’t want them to practice. They believed that the girls should be staying at home with their mothers.

“Choosing cricket as a village girl is quite uncommon, because she was a ‘tomboy’ type of kid, which is very rare in this part of Haryana,” Mukesh said. “And then choosing baseball, which is a very rare sport, and going to the international level is quite rare.”

When she first started to train the girls, the men of her village sent buffalo and cows to the practice field to prevent the girls from playing. Jyoti would argue with the villagers, claiming that she had a right to coach the girls on public grounds.

“There are a lot of problems in life,” Jyoti said. “I have been fighting with the villagers since I was a child.”

Before Jyoti made the international team, she says people in her village did not support her as a female athlete. But her family never told her to stop chasing her dreams. She says they encouraged her to study and become whoever she wanted to be.

“People were talking behind my back, saying it was just a dream,” Jyoti said. “[I] had to take strong action, to stand against it.”

Jyoti started playing cricket for her school team in 11th grade. A year later, the team qualified for nationals.

But nationals never happened. The COVID-19 pandemic took away her season. In order to be eligible to play for her school team one more season, she didn’t take her exams. She waited so she could have one more season. One more chance.

In 12th grade, she came back ready to pick up where the team had left off the season before. But it wasn’t that simple. Their coach decided to transfer, leaving their school and leaving their team.

The new coach, Bhupinder, didn’t know anything about cricket. He only knew about baseball. He wanted Jyoti to become a baseball player. So she decided to become a pitcher.



In cricket, a bowler propels the ball toward the batter. The bowler can be compared to the pitcher in baseball, but they use different throwing motions.

“Cricket is a technical game and it takes a lot of time to understand it,” Jyoti said. “But with baseball, we understood the rules after two or three practices.”

She worked on her skills, practicing a new throwing motion that pitchers use over and over again, changing what she knew — so that she could know baseball better. And being a left-handed pitcher gave her an advantage on the mound. She can also throw hard.

“When I started playing, my throw was the fastest,” Jyoti said. “Girls don’t have such fast throws.”

And after one year of practicing, Jyoti’s first-ever school baseball team qualified for nationals.

After graduation, she decided to continue her education at university, pursuing a diploma in yoga. She got into

Kurukshetra on a sports scholarship to play cricket — and baseball. During her time at university, she represented her school at different championships.

Then came the tryouts for India’s international team.

Here’s how it works: the five best players from Haryana move on to tryouts for the international team. 20 players were selected to represent India at the 2023 Asian Cup. They selected Jyoti to be the pitcher.

When she called her family to tell them that she made the team, she worried about finances. She didn’t want anyone else in her village to know that she made the team because it was expensive. She also knew the people in her village wouldn’t approve. But when people found out that one of their “daughters” was going to represent India, they were excited. They came together to raise money to

The women’s baseball team of Peoda, India, plays in a scrimmage Jan. 9. Jyoti and her best friend, Nitu, played baseball and cricket together when they were younger. But now, they are coaching the next generation of players in their village. “They are upbringing this new generation so it is easier for these girls who are learning,” community organizer and activist Kumar Mukesh said. “But it was very difficult for Jyoti and Nitu ten years back.” | Photo by Emma Carmichael

support Jyoti. With the financial support from her village and funding from the government, Jyoti became the first in her family to go abroad.

“I can’t even explain the emotions I was feeling,” Jyoti said.

A dozen teams compete in the Asian Cup. Within those 12, the top four teams secure a spot in the 2024 World Cup. India finished sixth. However, the next Asian Baseball Federation meeting will



Left: Jyoti Sain gathers 23 girls to play baseball on a weekly basis in the dirt fields of Peoda, Haryana, Jan. 9. Jyoti has always loved coaching and playing baseball, so to help these boys and girls play and learn makes her nothing but happy. “[Girls] won’t depend on anyone. The main thing is that girls should be able to do anything,” Jyoti said. | Photo by Emma Carmichael

TAYLOR HANSON

“My main reason [for coaching] is that the girls are equal to the boys. They won’t depend on anyone. The main thing is that girls should be able to do anything.”

discuss allowing India to participate in the 2024 World Cup. Until then, Jyoti trains every day to ensure that if the team gets selected to compete, she will have a spot. She is confident in her abilities as a pitcher and the potential of her team. And with that, she believes that the next time she leaves India, she will be on her way to Canada.

From an early age, Jyoti knew she wanted to be independent of her family. In India, it is custom that the daughters are dependent on their brothers and fathers.

Four women in Peoda know how to ride a motorcycle — and Jyoti is one of them. She also decided she wanted to learn how to drive a truck. So now, she takes classes at the Driving Institute of Kaithal with 12 other women.

It makes Jyoti proud to see how far she has come in the past few years. To know that when she started this journey, she had the support of her family and the support of her coach. But now, a whole village stands behind her and 50 girls show up each day ready to learn from her.

“My main reason [for coaching] is that the girls are equal to the boys,” Jyoti said. “They won’t depend on anyone. The main thing is that girls should be able to do anything.”

As the girls arrive to practice, they walk through the gate with smiles on their faces. Each one proudly sports their blue and white tracksuit with the words “play well” printed on the front. They come from two-room homes with laundry hanging on every roof, surrounded by brick roads and mustard fields. They watch Jyoti intently as she leads them through dynamic stretching and a game of catch, demonstrating the motion of her fingers as she releases the ball from her hand.

“She is a very good trainer, but when we make some mistakes, she is very angry,” right fielder Anu Sharma said. “And sometimes, if it is a big mistake, she slaps us.”

The girls run laps around the field before practice begins. Then, they rotate through at-bats, learning to read the curveballs Jyoti throws past them. Jyoti watches intently, never afraid to let them know when they have made a mistake.

“Any girl can make mistakes — even Nitu makes mistakes — so I shout at them very frankly without any hesitation,” Jyoti said. “But they respect me and follow the rules. They accept that I am the coach and I feel that respect all the time.”

They practice each day from late afternoon until the sun disappears behind the outline of buildings in the distance.

When Jyoti is on the mound, nothing else matters. The gender barriers, the disapproval from the people in her village and the comments from her own teammates fade away.

“I don’t think about anything,” Jyoti said.

Before every game, the team circles up at the pitching mound. Huddled closely together, they hype each other up by reciting a religious chant used by people in a temple:

“Jaikara maa sherawali da bol sache darbar ki jai, ki jai, ki jai. 1, 2, 3 c’mon team!”

It’s always been Jyoti’s dream to play cricket at the international level. As a little girl, she would sit in front of her television watching professional cricket matches and think to herself, *I want to do this when I grow up.*

“I represent India [in baseball] but I want to represent India in cricket too,” Jyoti said.

So Jyoti will ride her motorcycle down dirt roads she grew up running through. Past the school that taught her she can learn anything. Past the house that raised her to be a strong woman in a society that tells her otherwise. Past the dirt field where she coaches 50 girls every day. And she will continue to play the games she loves while representing her country.

“I am team India.” ✕

A child OF LEPROSY

Komal, 17, has spent a lifetime in leprosy colonies despite not having the disease, causing her to grow up in isolation.

By ANGELA GONZALEZ

Komal couldn't believe the words that had just escaped from her teacher's mouth.

She had been cut from school. Too many absences. She couldn't help but let the tears spill out, and they continued to fall as she walked home. Inside the safe space of her house, her mom came up to her, concerned. Why wasn't she at school? And why was she crying?

Her mom comforted her, telling her it was all OK. She could now learn what was really important: housework. Later, Darshan — Komal's now-fiancé — took her out for a bit and bought her chocolates. But Komal continued to feel defeated for the next three days.

"My mom was sick and I had to help her," Komal said. "I didn't have time to study or go to school. Nothing is more important than my mom."

Komal is part of the second generation of 40 families living in a leprosy colony, bricked off from the rest of Kaithal. There sits a wide cobblestoned, soccer-field

sized courtyard with a few trees dotting the area. The red cement houses are connected and wrap around the courtyard. Each home consists of one room and a small kitchen. Colorful curtains are used as doors and lines are tied between trees to dry laundry.

Here families dealing with leprosy can live away from the stigmas and receive donations to live off of. Dealing with similar backstories, those in the organization have built their own community and have become one big family. But those like Komal who have no leprosy grow up in a place not meant for them and seem to make sacrifices everyday.

A makeshift fire flickers underneath the weathered brown hands of women. They speak to one another in Hindi as they snack on peanuts, feeding the shells to the flames. Komal's mother, Sushila, holds a metal tube with her rash-covered hands, ready to blow in if the fire begins to die.

Sushila was born in a leprosy organization in Andhra Pradesh, about 1,000 miles from Kaithal. Both her parents had the disease. At 17, her parents passed away, but not before she was arranged to marry Komal's father, Ishwar Prasad, a son of another family in the colony. He too had leprosy. All the two have ever seemed to know are leprosy colonies.

Sushila has had leprosy since she was 14 and at times can barely use her hands due to the pain, leaving Komal to

do what she can't. Komal is used to carrying big buckets of water around when needed, washing laundry and cleaning dishes right outside her front door. She even helps her father unload his cart full of donations at the end of each day.

For five years Komal has lived in the Kaithal organization owned by a Hindu priest with her parents and 14-year-old brother Dev. Even before living there, the family lived

"My mom was sick and I had to help her. I didn't have time to study or go to school. Nothing is more important than my mom."

in another leprosy organization in Delhi, but moved to Kaithal due to the rebuilding of the houses in Delhi.

On the gray cobblestones sitting in front of her small home, white powdered chalk flowers lead Komal and her family to the front door where more black swirls, shapes and blooming flowers are painted on the threshold of the door.

On Independence Day, Komal can be seen dancing for her family and the rest of the colony, moving along to both Bollywood music and traditional Haryana songs

Komal does laundry in front of her home Jan. 15. She spends most of her time at home to help her parents do what they at times cannot. Helping with chores gives her mom a chance to relax while her hands flame up from leprosy. "I've never felt pressured to do this," Komal said, "but people would make fun of me for not taking care of my parents and seeking an education." | Photo by Angela Gonzalez



Komal draws with colored pencils inside the leprosy colony Jan. 18. She sketches floral designs next to her brother and a few other kids from the colony. "I learned how to paint on YouTube," Komal says. "Googling photos and trying to draw them." | Photo by Bella Haveman

with a smile on her face. Dancing is something that makes her think of her two older sisters who taught her how to dance. They are now married and have moved out, leaving her the only teenage girl.

Komal also enjoyed wrestling. A man used to come visit the organization and teach the kids games like kho kho. Every Sunday Komal would be eager to play and wrestle with the other kids of the colony. But one day the man never came back. Wrestling was over.

"I miss it," Komal said, her dark brown eyes falling on her mother, "but I just want to learn stitching. Wrestling was just for fun."

"There is no guarantee of life," Sushila said. "We need to teach our children the important things."

Now, with no school to go to, Komal spends her days doing housework and being there for her mother. Soon, once she gets a stitching machine, she'll learn how to make different designs on clothing, something her mother thinks will benefit her.

Despite Komal being cut from school, her mother thought it was best if she stayed home anyway. Sushila wanted Komal to learn the ways of being a good housewife, but also feared for Komal's safety at school.

"There was a boy outside the school who would take drugs," Sushila said. "He would follow Komal to school and back home. I talked to the police about it, but they did nothing."

Along with that, Komal and her brother have faced bullying in school.

They'd endured the name "Child of Lepers" and many avoided them, thinking they had the disease and that it could spread with one touch.

"They would always remind us about our parents having leprosy," Komal said. "But I would ignore them. I was taught to treat others like how I want to be treated."

Komal has accepted the life she has, but that doesn't stop her from thinking about what her life would look like without leprosy.

"I would want us to have our own house," Komal said. "My father wouldn't have to beg and we wouldn't have to rely on donations."

Each day, instead of going to a job, Komal's father heads out on a red bike with a big cart attached to the back. He rides to nearby neighborhoods, knocking on doors, asking for any type of donation for the colony. On a good day his cart is filled with large bags of food, bundles of clothes and an assortment of rupees.

As he gets home, Komal and the boys are sent to help him unload the cart.

But what stands out the most is the tall red Hindu temple sitting at the far end of the courtyard. Colorful lights hang in the canopy and a turquoise door leads Komal inside. Blue and white statues of gods sit inside with twinkling lights and golden flowers.

The temple is called Shama, which translates to "sorry."

When a donor comes, the sound of a ringing bell alerts all the families to come and receive the donation — usually clothes and food. Many people come every day, but not many stick around to get to know the families, or sit around a fire to share tea.

The organization is seen as a place for the colony's neighbors to receive forgiveness from the Hindu gods. When Haryana people go through hard times or feel guilty, they go to their priests, seeking guidance. They're told that if they make a donation to the colony, the gods will be pleased and forgive them. They come to the temple and quickly leave.

"No one ever really stays," Komal said. "They come for the temple. Only the priest comes to visit and talks to us."

With no kids around her age, not being able to go to school anymore and no one ever staying to talk, Komal mostly spends time with her family and older neighbors.

Komal lay in bed, unable to move much. Her already small body had become more skinny, her ribs unusually visible. She hadn't been able to keep any food down for a while.

As her mother did her best to tend to her, she wondered if this sickness would ever go away. It wasn't long till her father reached home, a bag in hand. He went over to his small Komal and pulled something tiny and colorful out.

Candy.
Komal smiled as her father handed it to her. "At least something is being eaten," he thought.

It took Komal a while to get better, but in the meantime she was able to suck on the little candies her father brought her.

Komal and Sushila sat together, sipping chai. They laughed together, recounting all the times Komal was naughty as a child.

Once, she and her older sister were dancing. As they swished around, they took turns picking each other up for aerial moves. Komal prepared herself for another throw. Her sister gripped her sides and threw her up again, but the throw was weak. Komal fell in a heap on the hard ground, her head bursting in pain. Her sister rushed to her side and helped her up. Komal's head throbbed in the back. She put her hand to where it hurt the most. Her eyes widened — it felt wet. She was bleeding.

Komal began to panic with her sister. What would their mother say if she found out? Komal's sister found a cotton cloth and did her best to clean up the wound. They had to hide it from Sushila. That didn't go well for them.

At the time, that incident was scary, but now the two can't help but giggle at the story.

Komal, her parents and her brother sat bunched up together on their bed, their faces lit up by the shine of the horror movie playing on the TV. Dev slid off and got in front of the TV, a smile on his face. Soon the whole family was laughing as Dev did his best snarls and growls,

impersonating the monsters flashing on the screen.

"I'm not looking forward to leaving," Komal said. "I'll miss my family a lot."

Komal has been arranged to marry Darsham, who she's gotten to know since they were kids and who is also her second cousin. In leprosy communities courtships are

studying. But he's not like that."

Soon she and Darsham will marry and will have to leave. Only those with leprosy are able to stay and live in the organization. Neither Komal or Darsham have leprosy.

Komal hopes to stay in Kaithal near the organization, some place she and Darsham

"This can happen to anyone, but this is a normal life. What can I say? What does God say? No one knows."

very different from regular Indian courtship, all due to the stigmas that come with leprosy. Those living in the colony hardly ever get to meet new people, much less grow a relationship with them.

"We're okay with it," Sushila said when talking about the matter. "We all know each other here."

Most marriages happen with others in the organization. They are able to understand each other and have no fear of being judged or being treated differently.

Komal's marriage was arranged, but she had already fallen in love with Darsham. He has given her gifts, knows her parents well and takes her out on walks.

"I was scared at first," Komal said. "I was thinking once we got married he wouldn't be nice and wouldn't allow me to go back to

could rent and visit her family as much as she can. She wants to continue learning how to stitch and eventually open up her own boutique. She also wants to go back and finish her education when she has the chance.

Despite living an isolated life, Komal has learned so much during her time at the colony.

"I'm learning everything about the organization and how it works," Komal said. "This can happen to anyone, but this is a normal life. What can I say? What does God say? No one knows." ✕



Anjali, 15, warms up on a punching bag before afternoon practice. Punching bags and old tires are used for training and are hung up in the courtyard of Harsola's government school. | Photo by Emma Lovell

PUN

CHING THROUGH POVERTY

RIGHE
LEE
RIGHE
RIGHE
LEE

Through a government program, a 15-year-old girl boxes to become a champion and fights to earn more money for her family.

By SORAYA KEISER

Above: Fifteen students warm up before sunrise with little visibility through the fog for an early morning boxing practice. Because of a power cut, they run through drills and exercises by the light of a phone flashlight and the rising sun. | Photo by Luca Lombardi

At 6 a.m. Harsola sleeps, the fog a blanket across the town. Alongside a few stray dogs and cows, teen boxers make their way to school four hours before classes begin. Some ride bikes or are dropped off by mothers wrapped in scarves against the 35-degree cold. Anjali, 15, and her brother walk themselves along the main road and through the gate of the school — barely visible to anyone unless they are less than 10 feet away. Students arrive out of the mist, like singers stepping through a fog machine onto a stage.

As the child of a dairy farmer who shares one room with six family members, Anjali trains twice a day, six days a week to become a champion. She hooks, jabs and slips punches with her peers so she can help her family buy land and move into a bigger home. Anjali's parents seek to provide more for their children, but it isn't enough.

Boxing is the answer.

Because Anjali's father Sadbir wants more for his children than living in a cement room that fits six single bed frames. More than the

buffalo tied up 20 feet from where his family sleeps. More than long hours laboring in the wheat stalks on his one acre of land.

“Whatever I am doing, I am doing for Anjali,” Sadbir said.

Athletic training takes resources — both time and money, neither of which are available to the working class of Harsola. But a government-funded program allows these athletes to train without having to pay or commute to a big city.

There’s no electricity in the school’s boxing hall due to a power cut, so the children throw their bags on the edge of the ring and along the school’s wall before turning to the courtyard to begin practice. Coach Kiranpal arrives at 6:15 to run the children through drills. Practice starts the same as it does in the afternoon — running laps, dynamic stretching, shadow boxing — but it’s completely dark. All that signifies practice is the scuffle of feet along the cobblestone courtyard and huffs of exertion. Fewer students make it to morning practice, but by the time the sky has turned from complete darkness to a pale gray, 15 children are dripping in

sweat, no longer feeling the chill in the January air.

After a few sprint drills and sets on the pull-up bar between two trees, the boxers move inside the still-dark boxing hall. As students push through the wooden doors and climb over discarded playground equipment to sit in the ring, the green, yellow and red-painted walls of the building remain indistinguishable. “Boxing Hall” written in bold, black English letters is shrouded in darkness above the door. By the light of a phone flashlight, Kiranpal runs them through stretching and ab exercises.

At 7:30, practice wraps up with a chant honoring the gods and the country. Every practice ends with this chant, serving as a reminder of who makes the children’s training possible.

Two years ago Anjali’s physical education teacher suggested she take up boxing because of her interest in athletics, so Anjali started going to the practices after school. Three days into practice she had her first match and lost. But she kept showing up.

Aspiring boxers from smaller towns in Haryana usually have to travel to Kaithal, 6 miles north of Harsola, daily for coaching, paying upward of 1,000 rupees (\$12) a month for transportation and equipment. Instead, Anjali is trained by Kiranpal and Satish, men from the Harsola community. Anjali and the other students trained in Harsola receive 1,500 rupees (\$18) a month for their participation in the sport through Khelo India, a national program for sports development in India. Kiranpal receives 20,000 rupees (\$240) per month for his time as a coach, but Satish volunteers as a coach.

As the setting sun hits the courtyard, bathing everyone in a warm glow of light, Satish stands close to the older boxers practicing on the punching bags, circling their movements and providing tips when needed. While Kiranpal runs the younger students through shadow boxing and footwork drills, Satish focuses on one thing — turning his best boxers into champions.

A former boxer with 20 state, six national and five Indian railway department employee tournament medals over 13 years, he hopes to continue his own and

15-year-old boxer Anjali focuses during mitt training at evening practice Jan. 11 at the Harsola public school. Anjali attends two practices a day six days a week to become a champion boxer and help her family out of poverty. | Photo by Emma Lovell



the town’s legacy through the children.

He knows each child by name, and they greet him with *pranaam*, a sign of respect in Hinduism by touching an elder’s feet. Of all the children Satish has coached, he says Anjali is one of the quietest.

“I have never met a girl who is so shy that she doesn’t even look at me,” Satish said. “Even when we meet in the streets, she says ‘*namaste*’ and runs away.”

But Anjali’s shyness melts away the second she pushes her tan mouth guard over her teeth with her gloved hands and slides under the ring ropes. Her clothes — black pants, black long sleeve, white T-shirt, black athletic shoes — stand out against the pastel purple walls and faded green boxing floor on a January afternoon. A rope tied across the room creates two rings. Three kids each side, trading off between rounds. Two rounds on, one round off.

When Satish blows the whistle signaling the start of a practice round, Anjali quickly taps her red gloves together and squares up her opponent, her feet dancing across the stained ring as she calculates when to throw her first punch.

When Anjali punches, she has one goal in her mind: to get the person in front of her on the floor.

Right, left. Right, right, left. Anjali’s arm swings and collides with her opponent’s ear. It’s just minutes into the first round, and her nose and cheeks glow pink with exertion. She accepts pointers from Satish with a nod of the head, never taking her eyes off of her opponent, never stopping her feet from bouncing back and forth in anticipation. Anjali punches left, slightly stepping back as her opponent tries to land a hit. Then she jabs right, hitting him squarely in the cheek, his head twisting on impact.

Another whistle signals the end of the final round, and Anjali lets out a large breath as she jumps down from the ring and removes her gloves, ripping the Velcro with her teeth. Her close-cropped black hair sticks to her forehead, drenched in sweat. Anjali feels deflated after the match because she feels like she didn’t play very well this practice, but she will be back again tomorrow, determined to be better.

Since losing her first match, Anjali has won three district-level matches, but she has yet to win an entire competition. She keeps training for the opportunity of a

shiny medal and prize money of 300,000 rupees (\$3,607) for winning a national-level competition.

Anjali’s parents also want money and fame for their daughter, and they work to make those dreams attainable. They bought Anjali her own pair of boxing gloves and headgear, they don’t give her chores so she can go to both practices and they make sure she has warm shoes and clothes for practicing during the winter months. Anjali’s 1,500-rupee stipend for boxing helps offset her family’s income: 7,000 to 8,000 rupees (less than \$100) a month. That addition is significant, enough to ensure Anjali continues to box with the sun rising and the sun setting each day.

As Anjali walks back from practice, the light fades around her. She makes her way down the main road and turns right through her family’s metal gate, past the 10 buffalo and into her home. And the routine will continue. If this is what it takes to become a medal-winning, title-bearing world champion boxer, she will show up at 6 a.m. tomorrow. X



In the village of Harsola, school-aged boys and girls perform dynamic warmups to kick off their evening boxing practice. The school grounds are also home to many sports practices, including boxing, allowing students athletic instruction without traveling to a big city. | Photo by Emma Lovell

THE STAIRS

ईश्वर
तक की
सीढ़ियां

TO GOD



Haryana folk musician Balbir Sharma never gave up on his passion, despite pressure from his father. Now, his songs weave through his family and community.

By ANNA KAPSNER

Balbir twisted a stick through the ventilation hole in his room, lifting the latch locking his door from the outside. A folk music program played that night, but Balbir's father had forbidden him from attending and locked him inside.

Balbir wanted to become a folk musician despite his parents' wishes. He says his education prevented him from studying music under a guru, but he decided to learn everything he could from attending as many programs as possible.

More than 40 years later, Balbir Sharma, 60, has achieved his dreams. While his farmland and government job in public relations provide for his family, his love of music has only grown. He teaches and performs Haryana folk music.

"I have a passion for music. I will keep doing it until I become old and my voice is not in good condition," Balbir said. "I will keep doing it as long as I have the people's love."

Chajjuram, Balbir's father, wanted his son to study and get a "good job." They were a wealthy and from an upper caste, and Chajjuram said there was neither money nor prestige in music. He told his son no one would marry him if he became a singer and instead purchased a tractor for Balbir. For three years, Balbir appeared to obey his father, spending time in the fields and marrying his wife, Ramkali, when they were 17.

But Balbir discreetly continued to attend and perform in folk music programs, learning and practicing vocals and instruments. Once, Balbir

traveled three hours from his village of Deoban to buy a banjo so he could play while alone in the fields. Over time, he became a master of vocal performance, the harmonium, the banjo and the ghadva — a Haryana folk

instrument made from stretching rubber over the mouth of a water jug to make a drum.

"It was a great conflict between me and my father, but my mother motivated him to say, 'Let him do what he wants,'" Balbir said.

Balbir wanted his father to support his music and attend a performance, but he was afraid to ask. By age 20, Balbir had traveled with a group of musicians and was ready to organize his first program. He played the Vishwakarma Day Festival, which honors the craftsmanship of artisans, engineers and laborers. The villagers gathered in front of an open-air stage. His mother, Chameli, surprised him there. She stood at the front of the crowd, watching her son perform for the first time.

"I will be happy with the

talent I have and I will do my work well," Balbir told himself before his performance. "I will not lose. I will not be shy. I will not be afraid."

After the performance, Balbir's friends told him Chajjuram attended the program. Decades later, Balbir recalls the certainty he felt during his performance that his father was watching. When he returned home that night, he and his father did not speak. But the following day, Chajjuram called Balbir into a side room and told him to sit.

"He said he appreciated my music and gave me his blessing," Balbir said. "He told me, 'Always remember two things. Always be honest and loyal; do not cheat anyone. And always do your best.' The cost of my hard work was a success when my father said those words to me." ✕



Balbir and son Govind tie rubber onto a pot to create a ghadva drum Jan. 8. The pots are typically used to carry water and other food but are also used as instruments for folk music. "Life is a beautiful journey and we should enjoy it," Balbir said. | Photos by Talia McWright

"I will be happy with the talent I have and I will do my work well. I will not lose. I will not be shy. I will not be afraid."

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हन्दी मीगजीन

समय पत्रिका साधनापथग हलकषमी उदयइंडिया नरिंगधाम मॉडरन खेतीइंडिया टुडेदेवपुत्र
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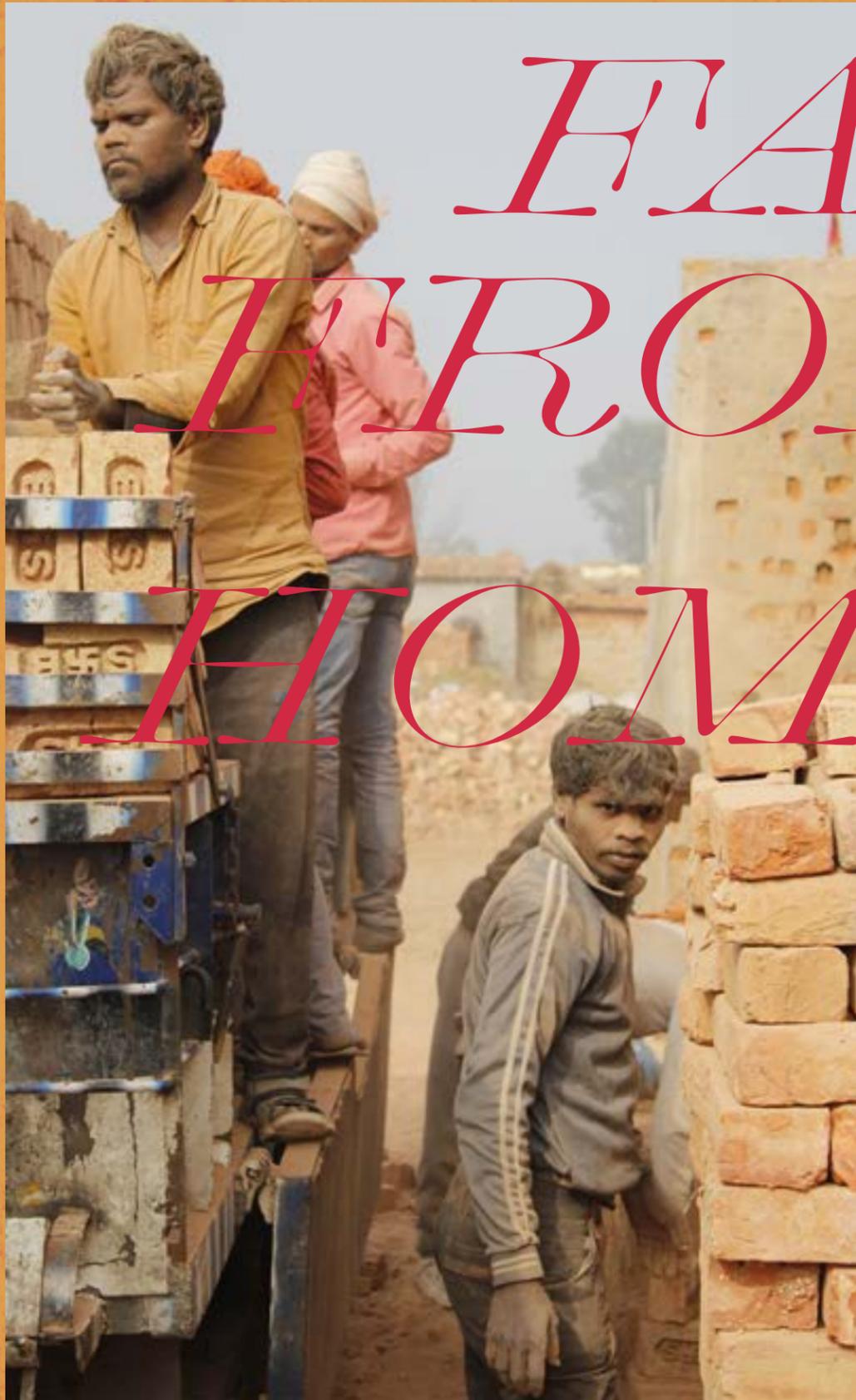
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FAR FROM HOME

Migrant workers load bricks onto trucks to be transported and sold. Many laborers live at the brick factory eight months out of the year, giving them enough money to send home to family in different states. | Photo by Luca Lombardi

Migrant laborers, including children, fill the factories of Haryana, working long hours to support families who live hundreds of kilometers away.

By SORAYA KEISER

Rohit cleans machinery and dyes rice in a factory. He is 13.

On the main road between Kaithal and Titram, the rice factories run 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Trucks bring bags of raw rice from the fields, which are shucked, cleaned, dyed and sorted. The best goes to countries throughout Europe and the Middle East, and the broken or discolored rice ships throughout India.

Factories run continuously primarily thanks to migrant labor. Impoverished workers find seasonal or permanent work in the fields harvesting mustard and wheat. Others send money home, predominantly to eastern states, for their work in factories processing rice, making bricks and distilling liquor. A major agricultural and industrial state, Haryana owns an abundance of hard labor jobs compared to poorer, eastern states. The promise of wages drives young men such as Rohit to make long journeys away from their families to find work.

As of 2021, the total migration rate in India was 28.9%, compared to the United States' rate of 12.6%. Migrant labor is especially common

in northern India. The Indian government does not regularly survey this data by individual state, so current numbers are difficult to find. According to the Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment, 1,333,644 people moved to Haryana for work and employment in 2011, and this number only seems to be growing.

The relativity of the value of low wages and harsh working conditions maintains the system. For workers like Rohit, the wage means survival for his family. For a factory owner, the wage means that business can expand, perpetuating wealth and exploitation.

Rohit's family lives in the town of Phulhara in Bihar, 350 miles north of Calcutta and 825 miles east of Haryana. Originally from a family of 10, Rohit is the only source of income. His five older sisters have been married off and no longer live at home. His brother works in Punjab and does not send any money back to the family. His father died of cardiac arrest while on a train to Calcutta to find work. This left Rohit, his younger brother and his mother alone.

Rohit was 7. His family was desperate.



Rohit, 13, huddles up with a blanket near a fire pit at the Kisan Mazdoor Canteen outside of Titram, Haryana. Rohit is a migrant worker who has been working at the factory in front of the canteen for six months. | Photo by Devanie Andre

After dropping out of school, he found work making sweets in Calcutta, 14 hours from home.

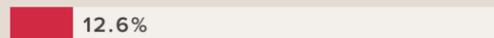
Six months ago, he made the more than 24-hour train ride from Bihar to Haryana. He knew of work in Kaithal through Pramod, 23, who works at the rice factory and serves as an agent for the factory to find cheap migrant labor. He receives a commission for promoting work at the factory and signing laborers.

In India, child labor is illegal. The government's official website states that it is working to address child labor, but the practice has not been eradicated. In fact, according to statistics from the International Labour Organization, a United Nations initiative, more than 3.2 million children between ages five and 14 work illegally. Child labor is a cheap commodity in which employees have no power to complain about dangerous conditions. However, with 37.6% of the Indian population living under the poverty

TOTAL MIGRATION RATE OF INDIA



TOTAL MIGRATION RATE OF UNITED STATES

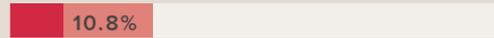


OF MIGRATING PEOPLE IN INDIA:

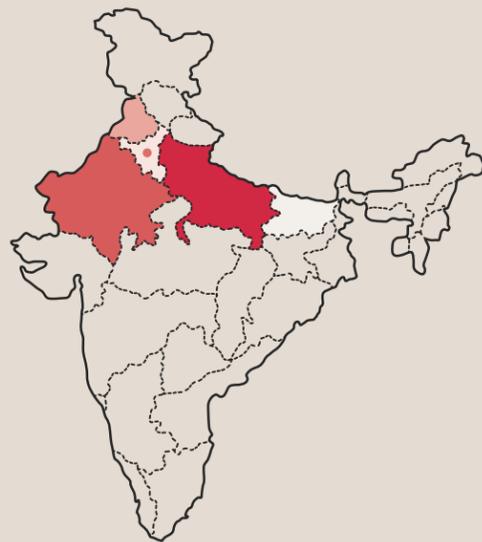
% from rural India



% employment-related



MIGRATION RATE PER STATE



The number of people moving to each state for work:

Punjab: 1,244,056

Uttar Pradesh: 3,156,125

NCT Delhi: 2,029,489

Rajasthan: 1,709,602

Bihar: 706,557

Haryana: 1,333,644

SOURCE: INDIA MINISTRY OF STATISTICS AND PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

line, families send their children to work out of necessity.

“It is illegal to work, but at least [Rohit] is helping,” Pramod said at a roadside canteen in front of Rohit. “If he doesn’t work, who will send money to his mother?”

Pramod and Rohit both live within the walls of the factory in the worker housing behind the sheet-metal building where they process rice created to have a higher nutrition level. Inside cement walls, workers sleep four or five to a room on wooden pallet bed frames with mattresses made of used rice bags. Their clothes hang to dry along the walls, and cloth covering the iron-barred windows serves as panes to keep out the January cold. An open-air kitchen’s cement walls are blackened with ash from the fire where men and boys cook, share their meals and warm their hands.

“We live together as brothers,” Rohit said.

However, unlike his older brother, the men Rohit lives with in the cell-sized rooms also send money back home.

About 100 feet from where Rohit and Pramod sleep, Nitin Goyal, 31, sits at a glass-topped desk he shares with his brother Shubham, 29. A business graduate from Radha Krishan Sanatan Dharam College in Kaithal, Goyal also has a degree in interior design. Everything in the office has been picked out by him, from the brown ornamental wallpaper to the marble flooring to the painting of the Hindu god Ganesh in a gilded frame behind the desk. Each piece represents the professionalism and wealth of Goyal and his family.

As a multi-generational family business, Goyal and his brother were expected to get involved young and expand the company as they continued. Goyal started working for the family business when he was 23 in 2015. Since then the business has seen a 250% increase in rice production. Goyal says he shows respect to his employees because they are earning for the company.

“We don’t treat them like an employee,” Goyal said. “We treat them like a family.”

Rohit has never spoken to Goyal. Rohit makes 8,000 rupees (\$96) a month for his work at the factory. About 5,000 rupees (\$60) go to his mother.

3,000 (\$36) remain with him. He uses the money to buy snacks and train tickets home. If he didn’t send money home, his mother and brother would starve, he says. He calls his mom every day on a phone he bought with some of his earnings. She always asks: *Have you eaten? Have you eaten? How is your health?*

Workers in the rice factory are occasionally given days off, and sometimes they take longer periods to catch a bus or train home. Pramod says they don’t stay home for long, preferring more pay over the rest time. As laborers they work 12-hour shifts from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., or 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. 15 days of the night shift, then 15 days of the day shift.

When Rohit was younger, he would play the rural game *gulli-danda*. Players try to strike a small stick, the *gulli*, in midair with a longer stick, the *danda*. Now, he doesn’t have time to play. When he does have free time, Rohit watches comedy videos on Instagram Reels or plays car racing games on his phone.

Right: Raw rice is brought to the factory in roughspun bags from local rice farmers. The bags are sewn and repaired by hand by migrant workers in the factory before they are reused. | Photo by Devanie Andre

Below: Rice factory workers transport bags of raw rice that will be made into synthetic rice at the factory. The process consists of adding nutrients to the rice before preparing it for wholesale to send to places like schools. | Photo by Luca Lombardi





He dreams of going back to school, but he doesn't know what to study. Having left school at 7, Rohit doesn't know what the subjects are. He also dreams of building a bigger house for his family than their mud house in Bihar. He wants his mom to be happy, and ultimately, he wants to return home. Not abroad or off to a big city, just to his home village.

Over the phone Rohit hears about fights between his mother, uncles and other members of his extended family. Threats of violence and possibly death worry him.

"When there is no fighting, I'm happy," Rohit said.

Rohit believes if his father were alive, he wouldn't have these problems. There would be no fighting. His family would not have to worry about where money for their next meal will come from. He could go to school.

But if he does not work, he will starve, which is something Goyal has never had to worry about. Right now, Goyal focuses on his family's recent purchase of two new factories to increase production. These new factories

Opposite (top): A worker from the brick factory moves bricks from the cooling process to a cart that then will be moved to a different part of the factory for temporary storage. A wooden flatbed wheelbarrow is used to transport bricks around the factory by workers. | Photo by Emma Lovell

Opposite (bottom): The migrant workers at the brick factory live just meters from their daily workplace in an area of the factory designated as living quarters. It is common for migrant workers to live on factory premises, making it easier for them to work seasonally or permanently. | Photo by Emma Lovell

have employed about 200 people, primarily migrant workers, since they have been opened. The hardest part of his job, he says, is buying the raw rice from area farmers at a low cost so that he can make the most profit. Cheap labor costs help keep the profit margin high. But this work does not keep him from spending time with family, sometimes even bringing his 2-year-old nephew with him for meetings in the office.

Across the street from the factory, Arun, 15, flips roti, wipes tables and chops vegetables at the Kisan Mazdoor Canteen. A year ago Arun slept in the same lodgings as Rohit, working in the same factory, doing the same jobs in the same 12-hour shifts. As the cousin of Pramod, Arun traveled from the same village of Phulhara in search of the work Pramod offered at the factory. After one month, he moved on to a nearby restaurant.

Vikram, the canteen's manager, took Arun in when he was sick, and now Arun works as a cook and server at the canteen. When there are no customers, he studies. Arun hopes to become a teacher one day — something that seemed impossible while working in a factory.

Just under two miles down the road from the canteen, among the fields of Titram, smoke streams out of a brick chimney atop a brick furnace. At the brick factory, bricks are everywhere, and the migrant workers use this to their advantage, making their homes on the factory land almost entirely out of bricks. The walls are held together by cement made of cow manure, and bricks keep roofs of corrugated tin in place. Patterned scarves hang from

clotheslines to dry, but they will soon be, along with everything else in the makeshift village, covered in a layer of red dust.

Men and women alike work for eight hours a day collecting clay, making bricks, manning the furnace and transporting bricks onto trucks after they are baked. It takes 36 hours for one set of bricks to bake fully before cooling in the furnace for 15 days. The factory is set up on a rotation so that bricks are baked continuously for eight months from October to June. During monsoon season the laborers will return to their homes.

Natthuram serves as an agent for the brick factory. Originally from Badaun in the neighboring region of Uttar Pradesh, 235 miles southeast of Titram, he receives 20% commission on workers he brings to the factory. Families can make about 50,000 to 60,000 rupees (\$601 to \$721) a season.

"Just come and work," Natthuram says to potential recruits. "You'll get good money." Good money that buys vegetables or saves for a bigger house. Either way, it's more than they would be making back home. Some, like Rohit, send money to family members who remain behind.

While Rohit sweeps the cement ground of the factory collecting broken rice to be reprocessed, Goyal rarely walks the factory floor. He sticks to his office behind opaque glass doors. He chooses the best gold chain to match his outfit for a business meeting and is at work by 9:30 a.m. He is home in Kaithal by 8 p.m. with time to write songs about love and play billiards in the evening.

Rohit dreams of taking a train back to Bihar and staying for good. But only when his family isn't so desperate. X



Behind the veil

In the village of Titram, where traditions and customs weave into everyday life, local women find empowerment in the simplicity of covering their faces with veils.

By MERRINA O'MALLEY



Birmati (opposite: left) and Reena Kumar (opposite: right), like many of the women in the village, frequent the beauty salon to feel confident in themselves. According to Birmati, she is one of the few women over 40 who visits the salon and is not afraid to speak of it. "There are other women [of my age] that go to the salon, but they are secretive," Birmati said. "I'm the only one who's open about it." | Photos by Maya Phillips

With newly-threaded eyebrows, Nirmala flips a pink, patterned veil over her face and walks home, weaving through the back streets of Titram. Like many women of her village, she comes to the salon to feel beautiful not by the standards of men, but by her own.

"I wear a veil [over my face]. I am doing [the beauty services] for myself," Nirmala said.

In the heart of Titram, beauty traditions evolve, blending tradition with individual expression. Behind the veils and in the privacy of intimate salons, women celebrate themselves, defining beauty on their own terms.

This custom of veiling in the presence of older men is commonplace in Haryana, especially after visits to the salon for events like weddings and festivals. Many women are told to cover themselves both out of respect for their husbands

and because of the sacredness of their beauty services. Many women like Nirmala say that, outside of their husbands, their beauty is for themselves. It is a way to make themselves feel beautiful beneath their veils and scarves.

Reena Devi — a salon owner of 11 years — says that during Karva Chauth, a festival where Hindu women fast for their husbands, her salon sees a surge in customers. Up to 30 women seek makeup services in just one day, a drastic change from her normal one to two customers per day. Most of these women get elaborate looks with kajal liner and bright lips, but they still choose to veil themselves until they are home with their husbands.

The women of Titram also prefer more secluded salons. Initially facing challenges with privacy — curtains that covered the door would flutter open to streetside onlookers — Reena relocated her salon within the

walls of her home after six months of having it open on the main street front. Her new salon is still covered by curtains, but being tucked away provides more comfort to salon-goers. This move ensured the sought-after privacy and boosted clientele.

"Women don't flaunt confidence on the streets because of men," she said. "But it's okay if they're inside with curtains."

Most women above the age of 40 are secretive about their salon visits, mostly because of societal standards, according to local midwife Reena Kumar. 55-year-old Birmati — her name revealed by a tattoo on her left arm — breaks from this norm. She continues to get salon services without hesitation, and much of the time she leaves the salon without a veil.

"If it weren't for society, she would be walking around in a bikini all the time," Reena Kumar jokes. ✕

A



death IN HARYANA

The mourning and celebration of a grandmother includes songs and a funeral pyre.

By MAYA PHILLIPS

Opposite: Phooli's body, bedding and personal belongings burn for a day. The men gathered in the cold, foggy morning to witness the cremation, and left quickly after the pyre was lit.

Bottom: Phooli's daughter-in-law Sheela is surrounded and comforted by friends and relatives. After the cremation service, men gathered outside Amit's house while women congregated inside to sing and cry together. "Of course we are sad," Sheela said, though the focus of the day was on celebrating Phooli's life. | Photos by Merrina O'Malley



Phooli Devi's body, bedding and personal belongings were cremated on a Sunday morning in January. Her grandson Amit, 40, touched a flame to the straw piled around the pyre of dry dung fuel that encapsulated Phooli's carefully prepared body, and the circle of men stepped back as black smoke filled the air.

Within minutes, most of the gathered men left, returning to Amit's house. Those who remained lit cigarettes and stood talking in a huddled group, and when they finished their cigarettes they returned to Amit's house where the day had begun.

This was the first of thirteen days Amit's house would spend mourning and celebrating his grandmother according to Hindu practices common in their state of Haryana. Traditionally, this process should have taken place at Phooli's eldest son's house and he should have been the one to light her pyre — but both Amit's father and uncle died when he was young, so as the eldest of Phooli's three grandsons, the responsibility fell to him.

Back at Amit's house, the shifting group of about 20 men assembled quietly outside the front door, drinking tea and smoking an elaborate hookah, and an equally-sized group of women gathered inside the house's courtyard, sitting down in a layered circle with older women at the center leading the group in a song. At the edge of the space, a smaller circle formed around Phooli's daughter-in-law Sheela, placing hands on her head as she wiped her eyes with the teal scarf covering her head. Between lyrics of the large group's song, crying and wails arose from the small group, amplified by the two-story walls of the courtyard.



The women in the large circle finished their song and rose to their feet, and most left after quietly offering their condolences to Sheela and other family members. The small group that remained made chai over a fire and mixed with their male relatives who came in from the street. Sheela and her daughter Priyanka began sharing stories of Phooli's 90 years of life, especially recalling the difficulties Phooli had faced at the deaths of her husband and two sons, and they accredited their family's house, land and education to Phooli.

"Whatever we have is because of her," Sheela said. "She played a lot, loved a lot."

"She was very particular about her diet," Priyanka added, remembering stories her grandmother told of her youth. "She never had chai until old age."

But in the weeks before she died, all she asked for was lassi, a drink usually made with buffalo milk and spices. She rejected chai, milk and, in her final week, even food. But when Sheela brought her lassi, Phooli would drink a single sip and say she didn't want it.

In the last coherent conversation Sheela had with her mother-in-law, she recalled Phooli telling her, "Stay safe, stay good, stay happy. I don't have a long time here."

Then, the Phooli they had known was gone.

Following Hindu tradition, Sheela put Gangajal — water from the holy Ganges River — into Phooli's mouth immediately after her death late Saturday night, the first step in releasing her soul, and her body was moved from her bed to the floor to form a connection with Mother Earth. The next day, she was brought downstairs to the entrance room of Amit's house, where she was bathed and sung over by female family members.

Sunday morning, mourners gathered at Amit's house. The men stood outside in the street, wrapped in shawls to keep warm and wearing either normal clothes or funeral white. Married women in brightly-colored clothes and head scarves gathered inside the courtyard, which they reached by passing through the space where Phooli's body still lay, wrapped in a red and yellow blanket on a wooden bed. Whispers were exchanged among both groups, but the house was mostly quiet.

A funeral procession arranged itself, with the men in front carrying Phooli's body and possessions and the women following, singing funeral songs as the group moved slowly down the street. Just a few minutes later, they reached the cremation grounds and the women,

without pausing their song, sat down on the cobblestone street far from the funeral pyre. As unmarried women are traditionally excluded from attending funerals, married women are excluded from the cremation service because it is difficult to witness. In some families, like Phooli's, this tradition is not enforced, but none of the women present chose to follow the men. They chose tradition.

The cremation ground is a grassy field with walls on three sides and a lake on the fourth. That morning, the winter cold and the fog above the lake seemed to rush the cremation proceedings.

The men lay Phooli's body atop a pyre already built there, and a few volunteers ran back to Amit's house to retrieve forgotten jugs of lighter fluid. Other men worked quietly to cover the body with more dry dung, their silence broken only by phones ringing and a few muffled conversations.

The lighter fluid arrived, and the men doused the straw surrounding the bottom of the pyre while Amit crouched over and lit a flame in a mud pot filled with butter, clutching a large stick in his hands. He stood, threw the stick over the pyre to send his grandmother's soul beyond her body and touched a flame to the straw.

The pyre burned for the rest of the day.

Two days later, the family went back to the cremation grounds to gather Phooli's remains. For most Hindus, the next step would be to bring the remains to a holy river and to perform further rituals. For Phooli's family in the Kurukshetra district of Haryana, any local river will do because this region was the site of the Mahabharata War — a key piece of Hindu history and a place where gods died, making the land and every river holy.

Each day of mourning, Amit's house was open to visitors, anyone present at the funeral as well as more distant friends and relatives, and they spent those days as they spent the first: singing, remembering and sometimes crying. On the last day, they celebrated Phooli's long life, her impact on theirs and her soul's future.

"Of course we are sad," Sheela said, "but she had lived almost 100 years. All her teeth were gone, but they had started to come back, like a child's."

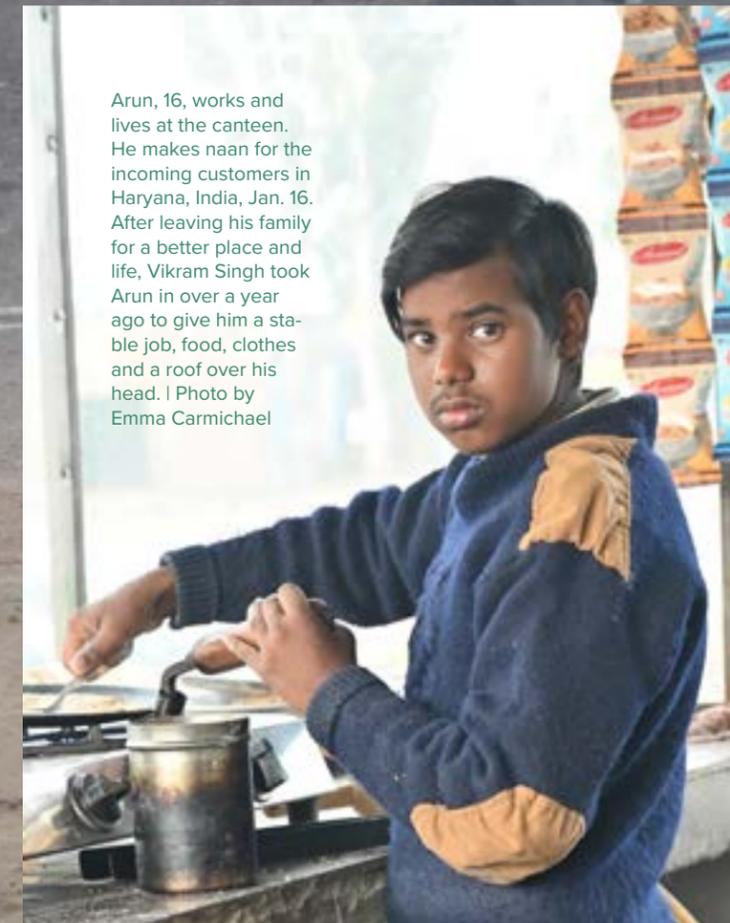
Phooli was ready for her next life, but she left a legacy of love and dedication for the family she spent a lifetime caring for. ✕

family

SERVING FAMILY

The 2020 farmers' protest led to the founding of the non-profit Kisan Mazdoor Canteen in Kaithal, Haryana to serve community members.

By **ABBI BATES**



Arun, 16, works and lives at the canteen. He makes naan for the incoming customers in Haryana, India, Jan. 16. After leaving his family for a better place and life, Vikram Singh took Arun in over a year ago to give him a stable job, food, clothes and a roof over his head. | Photo by Emma Carmichael





Left: Karan Singh, Arun and Vikram Singh bustle together to make plates full during the lunch rush Jan. 16. Karan rolls out the dough, Arun cooks it over the flame and Vikram dishes the plates and delivers them to guests. The three men support one another daily and are consistent in checking in on one another's lives. The relationship between the three of them goes beyond the workplace. | Photo by Luca Lombardi

Opposite: Vikram Singh dishes butter onto naan to bring out to serve customers. He races from the kitchen to the dining room to make sure customers have plenty of fresh, warm naan to supply their meal. Vikram will continue to give customers naan until they tell him to stop, ensuring customers are full. | Photo by Abbi Bates

Arun Kumar stands with Karan Singh in the kitchen buttering roti and stirring dahl. Dirty dishes stack up behind them during the lunch rush. Vikram Singh greets hungry customers in the middle of their long workday. They are welcomed with a warm plate of local food that shows they are supported and valued despite the harsh conditions of most of their workplaces.

But this gathering place didn't always stand. The canteen, Vikram says, is a product of hard work, commitment and the 2020 farmers' protest throughout India, which had defining moments at this stop on this farm-lined highway between Kaithal and Delhi.

The protests started in response to the passing of three farm acts by the parliament of India. The main concern of farmers was that income from crops would decrease as a result of a deregulated system by a government-run wholesale market. The goal of the protest was to revoke the three laws and have minimum support prices guaranteed by the government. After more than a year of protests, the government relented on both.

As community members of Haryana and other neighboring states participated

in protests, local community organizers began to brainstorm ways to serve and support protestors.

Jagbir "Jagga" Kundu belongs to a family that contributed to the village of Titram's desire for social justice. His father wanted to make India a place for everyone to have freedom. As a leader of the Titram District for the farmers' protest, he asked: "What can we do for our people of India?"

This is where the idea of the canteen sparked.

The canteen was formed for protestors to have food and water during encirclements, sit-ins and traffic obstructions during the fight. Now, the building stands as a way to serve local farmers, migrant workers and labor-class employees by providing them with healthy food and water for all three meals of the day at minimum or no cost.

Vikram was at a restaurant next to the canteen when he met Arun. At the time, 15-year-old Arun was sick with a fever, cough and cold. Vikram hired him as one of his employees at the canteen. But now, Vikram says he sees Arun as a son.

Arun had been a migrant worker in Haryana from Bihar, a 21-hour drive east, where jobs — even bad ones — aren't as

available as they are in Haryana. He previously worked at a rice factory across the street from the canteen. He says the job left him hungry and sick.

"A kid with this kind of honesty shouldn't spoil his life working in these kinds of conditions," Vikram said.

Now, Arun grins as he welcomes visitors and regulars into the canteen.

"Arun is a very pure-hearted, honest child," Jagga said.

Three men run the canteen: Amit Kumar, Jagga and Vikram. Amit donated his land, a field right off of the main road between Kaithal and Titram village. Vikram manages the cooking, cleaning and deliveries. Jagga helps defend the canteen's mission and is quick to serve food and flip roti or bus stainless steel plates. A dozen active Titram volunteers provide financial and in-house support to the canteen.

Vikram's wife works out of his house, which is their only source of income. She supports his mission to serve local farmers, migrant workers and laborers despite the financial instability it causes at times, he said.

Scents of ginger from chai and pepper from masala drift into the air. Storage shelves line the wall with stacks of chai

mugs, stainless steel cookware and dry lentils in laundry detergent containers. Green tarps draped over the dining room are structured with bamboo poles. The walk-up window is filled with Vikram's smile and a "How many people?" or a "What can I get for you? Take a seat!"

Behind the dining room is a common space for gathering, warming hands over the small bowled pitted fire and taking a hit of hookah while sitting on woven cots.

Arun and Karan earn a living from the canteen. The two share a roti assembly line as Karan rolls out the dough and Arun cooks, flips and crisps to taste over a flame. They rarely look up through the plexiglass toward the main road at tractors pulling house-sized piles of hay, government buses blaring horns and tuk-tuks or motorcycles weaving around both.

The canteen keeps its meals consistent and nutritious. Arun's favorite canteen-classic dish is dahl — a side dish made of dried split pulses like lentils, peas and beans cooked with jalapeños and onions. The canteen serves 40 to 60 daily, more during peak farming season.

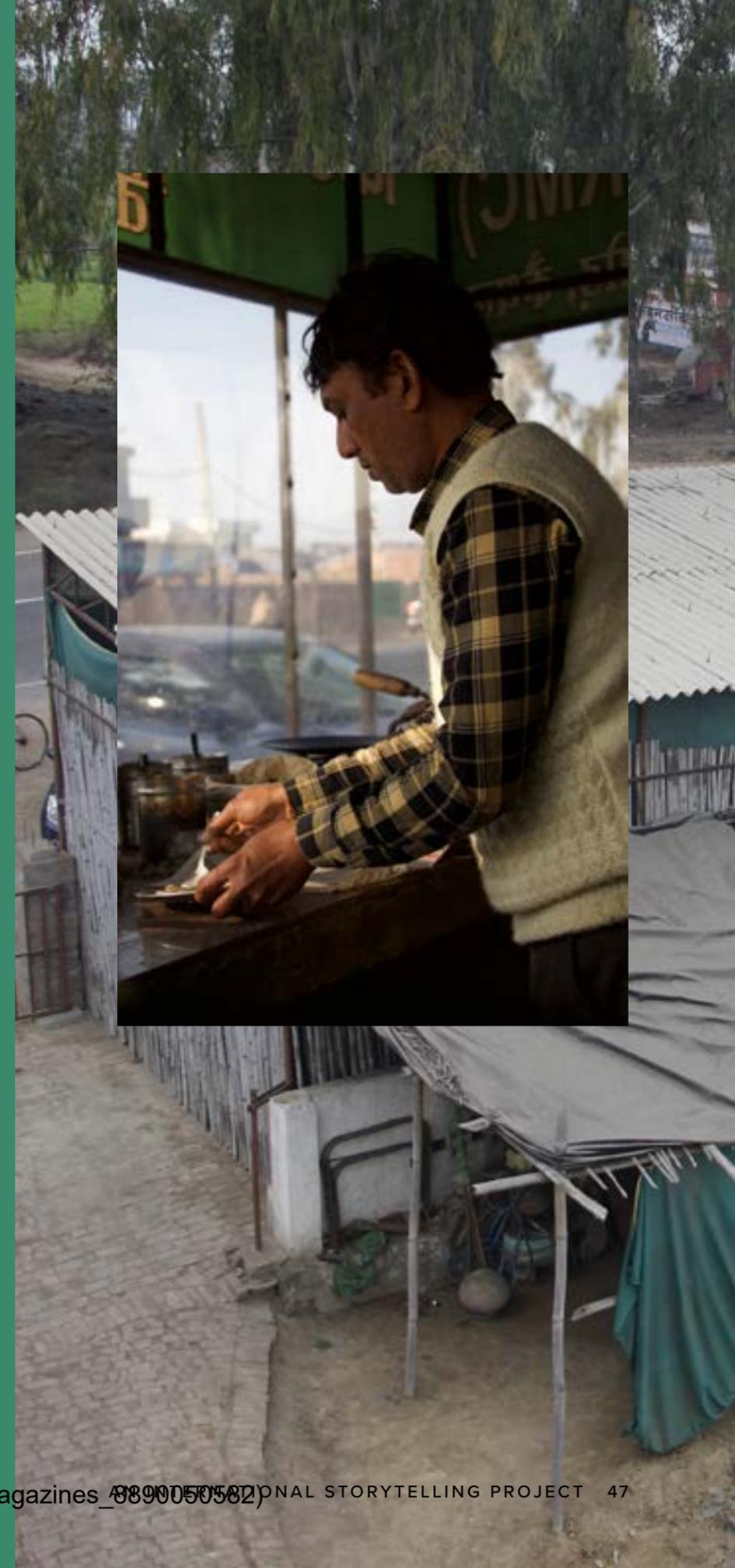
Vikram helps Arun during the lulls of the day to study Hindi sentences and English letters using word cards and basic language books. Arun dreams of being a teacher and studying in the United States.

Arun loves the environment of the canteen, as adult men from Titram mentor him emotionally and relationally. But they also help him with more practical things, like his laundry.

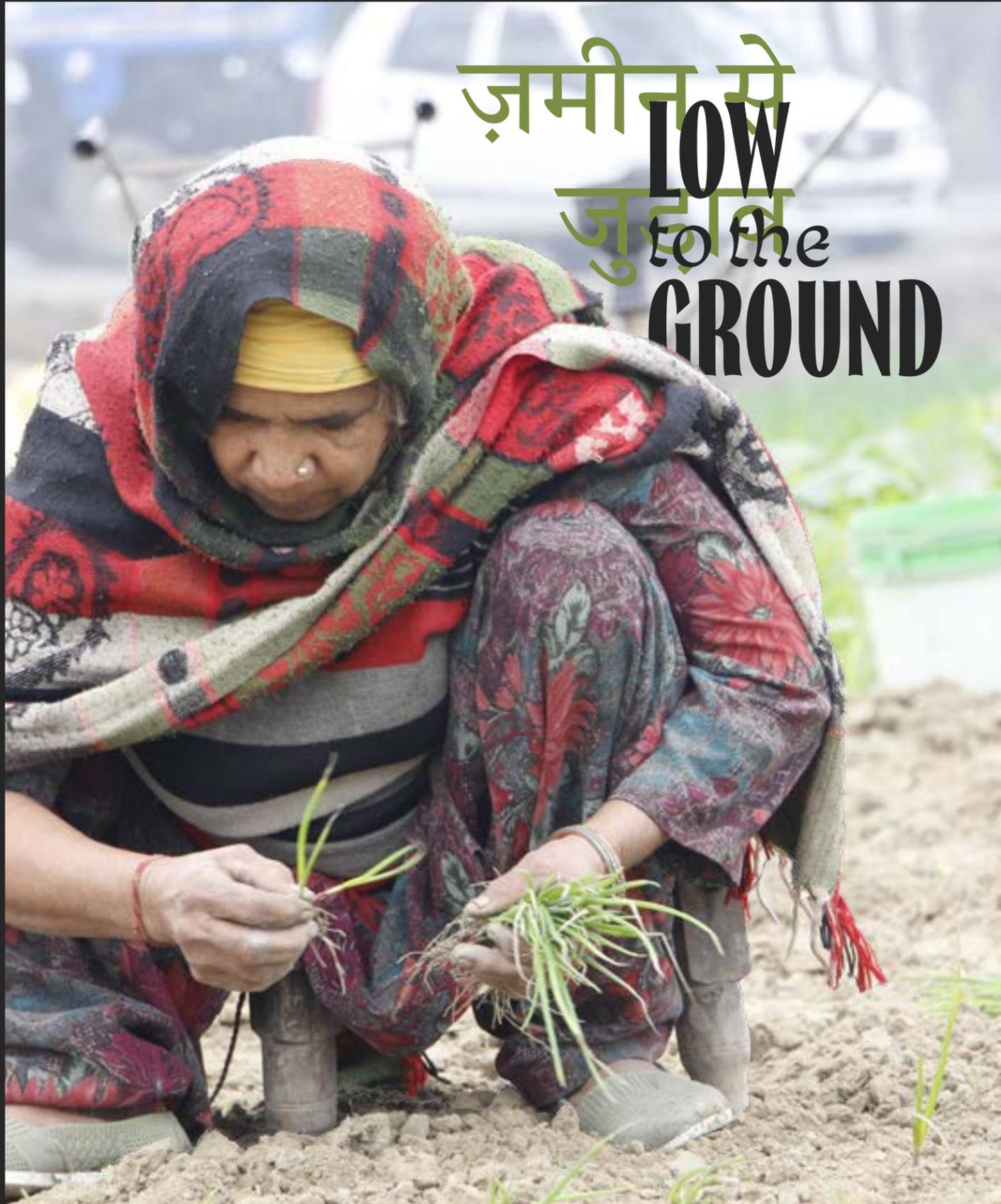
"I have a family here. They might be older guys, but they will still play football with me," Arun said.

Jagga hopes to make the gathering space a foundation that inspires social change in the future. They have no plans of using future profits to pay other members. Jagga would rather use profits for things like building other canteens or contributing to children's education and cultural activities.

"Our canteen may be small, but our hearts are big," Vikram said. ✕



ज़मीन से LOW to the GROUND



Opposite: Birmati Kashyap sits on her small woven stool and harvests onion crops Jan. 10. Birmati spends time harvesting and washing crops on her and her husband's farm. The couple faces a challenging financial situation due to the unpredictability of farming as well as a need to support their son Rahul and their grandchildren. | Photo by Sebastian Studier

Right: Balwan squats in the middle of a plot, cutting chives to make room for another batch. Guava trees line the plots, as it is the couple's favorite fruit to wash and serve to guests. Smog lines the horizon — Haryana has an average air quality index of 243 pollutants per square meter of air. Farmers struggle with air pollutants that hurt crop growth. | Photo by Abbi Bates



A working-class farm couple faces past tragedy and ongoing economic struggle while attempting to find support from the community.

By SEBASTIAN STUDIER

Balwan and Birmati Kashyap lost two daughters by suicide within the same week. Until then, Birmati believed they were a happy family.

Left to cope with this sadness, the farming couple also faces the challenges of supporting a son in debt and dealing with everyday slights and obstacles.

Balwan and Birmati, ages 60 and 55, live and farm on a 1-acre plot of land in Titram, Haryana. They face the unpredictability of farming and a meager income, which limits their hopes and dreams beyond their farm. Representing the reality of living as labor-class farmers in Haryana, India, Balwan and Birmati must fight to financially and physically stay afloat. The couple seeks support from their landowner and the people of the Kisan Mazdoor Canteen, a non-profit farmers' organization.

Before they resided on the land in Titram, Balwan drove cargo trucks for 30 years while Birmati took care of their home and family. The couple was more economically comfortable at this point, saving up money for their daughters'

weddings and their sons' educations.

Birmati cared for the house, children and cattle. One to two times each year, during peak farming season, Balwan and Birmati would farm together while Balwan took a break from driving.

"I faced a lot of struggles in order to save that money," Birmati said.

Balwan enjoyed driving, but his eyesight started to deteriorate and he was no longer able to see the traffic well enough. He thought that he would be able to retire from driving because his two sons, Rahul and Sunil, started making money themselves and could help contribute.

Next came tragedy.

About 15 years ago, Balwan and Birmati's daughters, Meena and Kavita, committed suicide. They had both been married for eight months to a pair of brothers from another family from Manthana, Haryana. On the day after Karwa Chauth, a Hindu tradition in which women fast from sunrise to moonrise for the safety and longevity of their husbands, Meena and Kavita both intentionally swallowed poisonous pesticides, which is a common suicide method in Haryana. The daughters

had been having disputes with their in-laws, which drove them to make this decision.

Kavita died immediately but Meena was rushed to the hospital, still alive. She died a week later.

Neither Birmati nor Balwan knew about the troubles their daughters were facing.

After the deaths, Balwan began to face mental health issues and looked for ways to escape the pain.

"He would drink liquor that would help him sleep at night and help him forget things," Birmati said.

Birmati misses her daughters.

"At every festival and every occasion, I think about my daughters and think that I would be happier with them there," Birmati said.

Each morning on the farm, the two wake up at 6 a.m. to work. Birmati focuses on harvesting crops before washing them to prepare them for sale. Balwan fertilizes, weeds and chops firewood for warmth and cooking. Once crops are ready, Balwan sells them on the highway in front of the Kisan



Balwan Kashyap, a farmer of many years, loves to take moments to sit down and have a smoke time and time again in Titram, Haryana. Balwan and his wife Birmati enjoy spending their days on their farm talking, gardening and hanging out with their two grandchildren, Sakshi and Kartik. "If we do farming collectively, then we are able to earn more," Balwan said. | Photo by Emma Carmichael

Mazdoor Canteen, which locals simply refer to as "the canteen," every other day from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Across the acre of land, which is about 75% of an American football field, lay square and rectangular plots of traditional Haryana crops. On the land surrounding the front, right and back sides of the home lay square and rectangular plots of red carrots, radishes, spinach, coriander, bright yellow mustard, cabbage, fenugreek, loki (bottle gourd), ladyfinger (okra), cucumber and eggplant.

When it is time to sell, Balwan wheels his cart — a bicycle attached to a flat plywood cart — full of fresh vegetables down a stone path connecting the canteen to his farm and parks his cart roadside. Grabbing a chair, his hookah and a newspaper, Balwan sits and waits, hoping that he will make a large profit despite vegetable sales being lower in colder months.

Living as farmers in India not only brings low finances but also brings what Balwan believes to be the most

challenging aspect of his and Birmati's life: the unpredictability and insecurity of farm life which can be caused by weather disasters or unfair payment for crops.

"Sometimes we face heavy loss and sometimes we get heavy profit," Balwan said.

Amid struggle, both Balwan and Birmati are proud of their two sons, Rahul and Sunil. Rahul, 31, is a furniture maker and Sunil, 37, is a government employee on the electricity board.

"Both of us did not pressure our children to do field work," Birmati said. "We always motivated our children to go to school and study."

Birmati is proud of her sons for staying away from smoking, alcohol and drugs.

Within the last three months the couple has had to spend nearly 100,000 rupees (about \$1,208) on medical expenses for their grandchildren, one of whom broke a leg. In addition to this, the couple's younger son, Rahul, has a number of loans he needs to pay back. Balwan and Birmati help Rahul as much as they can but are not financially able to pay off his debts.

Birmati's one wish for the future is that Rahul is able to pay off his loans and use the extra cash he earns to help pay for his children's education and health.

Balwan and Birmati's economic situation is ingrained into everyday life.

When Amit Kumar comes to the farm to smoke hookah with Balwan, the farmer grabs a *charpai* — a traditional woven bed used throughout South Asia — for the two to sit on. He then situates himself on the part of the bench with only a few connecting strings, which locals say is seen as the "lower" part of the bench. Meanwhile, he lets Amit sit on the more esteemed side with many more strings. When Amit visits, Birmati makes her way to her kitchen inside of the house, a "safe place" for women in India when men come around. These traditions have existed in India for 4,000 to 5,000 years.

Amit is a longtime family friend and

governmental bus conductor. He owns the land that contains the canteen and the farm. He decided to give this spot to the couple rent-free while splitting farm profits 50-50, with some of the harvest going to the canteen.

Amit comes from a farming family and is part of a land-owning, politically effective caste in India. Balwan and Birmati, on the other hand, come from generations who were skilled only in farm labor, so the Kashyap family has had to rely on people like Amit.

Amit says he views Balwan and Birmati as family. And the inverse is true as well.

"He treats us both like family," Balwan said. "He has strong economic power from his job and his land and sometimes gives us money for personal expenses."

In front of Balwan and Birmati's farm right off the road is the canteen, a non-profit welfare system that gives out free food to those in need. The establishment came into existence after farmers' protests across India that fought against anti-farmer governmental policies and the COVID-19 pandemic when restaurants in the area began to open up and charge higher prices for all of their foods.

Vikram, one of the main members of the canteen, will occasionally purchase vegetables from the couple and is often seen helping out on the farm in his spare time. He enjoys spending time with Balwan, sitting down to smoke hookah and share a few laughs.

At the end of each day, Balwan often dreams of a better future but feels constrained by his economic struggles. Sometimes he thinks about owning 10 acres of land and having a number of people who work under him.

"Every person has some desire to go anywhere and to do anything," Balwan said. "We also have this desire. Our desire is endless."

Even with desire, Balwan believes he will not fulfill his and Birmati's dreams. ✕

"Every person has some desire to go anywhere and to do anything. We also have this desire. Our desire is endless."



Birmati and Balwan pass crops between each other next to the road in front of the canteen. Every other day on the farm, Balwan wheels his crops to the road to make sales. During the colder months, sales drop. "Sometimes we face heavy loss and sometimes we get heavy profit," Balwan said. | Photo by Emma Carmichael





One woman army

Women's protection officer Suneeta fights for women's rights, raising awareness of gender discrimination in Haryana.

By ANNA KAPSNER and TALIA MCWRIGHT

"I fight for women. I make her aware of her rights. That's what makes me the happiest."

Suneeta stood in front of the Superintendent of Police. She asked him for help. One of her clients faced domestic violence. But instead of taking action and filing the correct legal forms, he wrote a note to the woman's husband telling him to stop abusing his wife. This action was not enough.

"If you cannot respect women," Suneeta said, "there is no point in coming to you."

Suneeta, 47, has been a women's protection officer in Haryana for 10 years. She oversees the Kaithal and Jind districts and runs the OneStop Center. She works 9 to 5, but if it means making sure her clients are safe, Suneeta will work until midnight. In 2022 alone, Haryana documented 1,362 cases of violence against women, and the numbers are increasing. And many incidents go unreported in this traditional northern state.

"I fight for women," Suneeta said. "I make her aware of her rights. That's what makes me the happiest."

Suneeta says violence against women goes beyond physical actions and includes mental, emotional and exploitative abuse. Once, a woman came to Suneeta because her husband was following her to and from work. Her employers and neighbors doubted her character due to her husband's lack of trust, affecting her mental health and social standing.

Another time, when Suneeta was a new mother, a woman came to her office holding a hungry 6-month-old baby in her arms. Suneeta fed the baby her own breast milk.

Another woman cried in her office for hours, tired of her husband's lack of respect and care. He was her second marriage and although she was in her 50s, she was expected to cook, clean and care for a family that was not her own.

"That's why I want to work for women," Suneeta said. "Because they cannot make their own decisions. Firstly, when they are born, their parents rule their life.

They always make decisions for them. And when they go to university, their brothers take protection of them. After that, when they get married, their husbands rule their lives. That's why working for women is really important."

Suneeta remembers getting her period in seventh grade, the day of her brother's wedding. Because she was bleeding, she was not allowed to attend. Due to the stigma surrounding menstruation in India, her family made her sleep in another room and said she was not allowed to touch food in the kitchen. She says this memory was the first time Suneeta was told being a woman made her impure. She'd never forget.

"I'm waiting for my daughter's period," Suneeta said. "I'm going to celebrate it."

Suneeta says she is raising her 12-year-old daughter Aratia to create her own boundaries and expectations. Aratia's marriage, education and life will be her own choice.

"I teach my daughter to say 'no,'" Suneeta said.

When Suneeta was pregnant with Aratia, her community hoped for her baby to be a boy. The birth of a boy represents freedom, stability and opportunity, and when a healthy baby girl was born, there was no celebration. Even the women in her community were disappointed. Suneeta explained that women are convinced of men's superiority and cannot see that by playing into the culture of gender discrimination, they are becoming their own enemies.

"Men have played with our mentality a lot," Suneeta said.

Suneeta believes that these cultural values are subject to change, because when one woman takes a stand, others follow. Her job has allowed her to experience this in action. Suneeta has become close friends with many of her clients, finding strength in their womanhood.

"My plan is to fight for women even if I retire," Suneeta said. ✕

PHOTOS BY ANNA KAPSNER



WOMEN
ARMY

One

FERTILIZING भवषिय को उर्वर बनाना THE FUTURE

After a near-death experience from farming chemicals, Ishwar Singh spent 10 years perfecting an organic alternative. Now, he is on a mission to get the rest of Haryana, India's most agricultural state, to switch before irresponsible practices cripple the industry.

By CYRUS RUCH



Haryana farmer Kuldeep looks over the field that he saved using Ishwar's products Jan. 12. Like many farmers, Kuldeep was distrustful of organic products until he tried Ishwar's and saw its effectiveness. | Photo by Alyssa Malyon

Sitting at his desk, Ishwar Singh pointed at the awards lining the wall.

"The first is always the most important," he said.

The award in question was a fourth-place consolation prize from the National Innovation Foundation. His shelf was lined with more prestigious awards, along with pictures of him next to Abdul Kalam, the former president of India. But this first award, he says, shows the first big accomplishment of a lifelong goal.

Ishwar keeps these awards in his office, along with certificates and books about agriculture. He says that he would read other books, but they don't interest him. Ishwar is founder of Arable, an organic fertilizer company based in Kailram, a village in the northern state of Haryana, India. With the help of his two sons, he produces chemical-free products for farmers throughout the country, including spray for soil treatment, seed treatment and plant food.

All his products are made to fix one of India's greatest problems: the long-term effects of poorly-managed farming practices. However, due to mistrust and tradition, he struggles to get farmers to adapt to organic, environmental solutions, even when, as he says, the benefits are clear.

After high school, Ishwar worked several jobs, including a tea shop in Delhi. Eventually, in 1988, he returned to Kaithal to work at a pesticide store for five years. Then one day, he spilled some phorate, a common and dangerous pesticide. The fumes he inhaled knocked him unconscious, and he lay on the floor for several hours until another shopkeeper found him and brought him to the hospital. His lungs and right ear were injured from the experience, and he still has trouble breathing and listening on that side.

Ishwar said the medicine doctors gave him didn't work, and it wasn't until they switched to using natural, organic medicine

— Ayurveda — that he recovered. Two days later, when he left the hospital, Ishwar decided he needed to create a chemical-free alternative so that accidents like his couldn't happen again to farmers or workers.

In 1995, Ishwar began crafting what he believed to be the perfect healthy fertilizer based on the same Ayurvedic practices that saved his life. For the next five years, he worked on this science during any free time when he wasn't running his farming equipment and repair shop. Distant relatives thought he was a little crazy to be spending so much time on this project. He concocted new recipes to try on his infertile land.

One time, he tried five solutions and one of them managed to work. However, he realized afterward he didn't remember the recipe for the successful batch, and spent a week of sleepless nights worrying he'd never find the solution.



Ishwar, 63, sits behind his desk at the Arable warehouse Jan. 9. He runs this company with the help of his two sons, Sunil and Susheel. “[My] work is not just about selling products, but stopping the spread of poison to farms,” Ishwar said. | Photo by Anna Pearson

“Whatever we eat affects us, affects our body. The more we put out pesticides, the more we get sick.”

“Now that I started, I don’t have anything else to do,” he said. “The shop that I had, I had no interest in. It was just for the income.”

Eventually, he perfected the recipe. He says it worked so well that awards from foundations started to pile up.

But local farmers continue to use non-organic farming materials out of tradition. These largely came about during the Green Revolution — a time period where intense changes happened in the farming industry in India — and the results have been mixed, according to scientists. Community organizer Kumar Mukesh noted little attention was paid to the long-term effects of these changes.

“Farmers faced economic pressures to ensure high yields and meet market demands,” he said. “Pesticides were seen as a quick and effective solution to protect crops and ensure a successful harvest, even though the long-term environmental and health impacts were not fully understood or considered.”

Kuldeep Kundu, a farmer who lives about 2 kilometers away from Ishwar’s workshop, sprays his crops with Ishwar’s organic option.

Opposite (top): Ishwar explains some of the treatments he has used on the small garden outside his warehouse. Even years after his product first hit the market, he continues to use this space to try out new recipes and treatments. | Photo by Merrina O’Malley

Opposite (bottom): Ishwar holds the organic materials he uses in his products outside his home Jan. 9. His first commercial product took five years of experimentation to develop. He doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty in his line of work. | Photo by Merrina O’Malley

For him, switching to organics was a last resort. After a heavy period of rain, Kuldeep found his wheat field flooded. The ground couldn’t absorb any more moisture, leaving his crops in danger of drowning, so he went to Ishwar for help. Ishwar gave him a product which he said would allow the soil to absorb more water, and said Kuldeep would only have to pay for it if it worked.

His field dried out. His crops and income were saved. This proof was enough to hook him. He began to use Ishwar’s products in his other fields. His mustard field grew bigger and faster than previous years.

Another relative of Kuldeep, Ramdia Kundu, made the switch after he saw firsthand workers being injured when pesticides got in their lungs while working. He became distrustful of side effects and wanted to find a healthier alternative to the harsh chemicals.

“Whatever we eat affects us, affects our body. The more we put out pesticides, the more we get sick,” he said.

But Kuldeep’s father and brothers, who share neighboring property, continue to use the old, toxic synthetic chemicals. ✕



ALL ABROAD

Hundreds of people in Haryana are getting the bug to move out of India — but for one man and his family, the dream disappeared in the Mediterranean Sea.

By ANNA PEARSON



Shiv Kumar stands in front of a field after recounting the details of his son's immigration attempt. The family is still struggling to receive the go-ahead to be able to get a DNA test from the Indian government in order to determine whether Sahil has been identified among the rescued migrants. | Photo by Merrina O'Malley

Most of the people have left from here. We are also about to leave. If you don't hear from me for a few days, don't worry."

Shiv Kumar hasn't heard from his son Sahil since that voice message, sent June 8, 2023, the day — as he understands via messages from his son — that Sahil and 753 other migrants boarded an overloaded fishing boat on the north coast of Libya. The boat, the *Adriana*, was meant to carry 250 at capacity, according to an article from *The New York Times* detailing the predestined doom of the ship. Since Sahil departed from his home in Kailram, Haryana, March 28, he had called his family every morning and night with updates about his journey out of India.

Even when he had no cellular service, other migrant men from Pakistan, sharing the lowest level of the ship, would share phones to contact loved ones back home, so Sahil's family learned to expect calls from any number and hear Sahil's voice on the other side.

He is 19 years old.

In the months since, the family knows time — and hope — is running out.

Sahil's yearning to leave is similar to many hopeful Haryana natives seeking opportunities abroad. If someone in the family hasn't gone

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abroad, everyone knows a neighbor, in-law or friend who has. This increasing trend has become a new aspiration for those seeking work, living or education possibilities.

More people are emigrating out of India now than ever, with the world's largest diaspora population as of 2020 — 18 million India natives live outside of their home country. Haryana is seeing this migration trend firsthand, especially with younger generations, seeking work or further education in countries from Australia to the United States. Friends' and relatives' stories of success abroad have become fuel for those who dream of one day leaving India for something deemed bigger and better.

Six other young men from Kailram, with a population of around 8,845, have gone abroad — mostly to the U.S. and Europe, according to Shiv. Shiv would rather his sons work on the family's land, but Sahil was not interested in pursuing agriculture and had never cared much about his studies.

Shiv was originally hesitant to encourage his son to follow in the footsteps of others in the village, but Sahil maintained what his father called his stubborn composure long enough for Shiv to give in. Plastered over the streets of the city are advertisements around every corner for visas and immigration agencies, sporting bright Canadian, American and Australian flag depictions.

Signs reading "Gold Loan," listing the types of visas offered and donning

slogans like "Come with a dream, go with a career" grab the attention of passersby looking for a way to begin their journey to leave India. Advertising themselves as immigration agents and overseas education consultants, billboards boast names, locations and contact information to reach out to agents.

Obtaining a visitor visa for the United States requires a multi-step process, in which the order of completion varies by U.S. Embassy or Consulate. For people ages 14-79, interviews are generally required for visa applicants, and appointments for such interviews can have wait times over 200 days for the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi.

Applicants also must pay a non-refundable visa application fee of \$185 before their interview, with no guarantee of an approval. If approved, they may also be required to pay a visa reciprocity fee.

Two different types of immigration agents work with Indians seeking a way abroad — one is in visible immigration offices, posting advertisements on billboards and primarily assisting in obtaining study visas through legal channels.

The other type operates discreetly, facilitating illegal means of immigration without formal offices, and work scattered without a fixed location. Lacking a central location requires individuals to identify these agents solely through references from those who have successfully reached their destinations.

Sahil insisted he didn't have a future ahead of him if he stayed in India, so he

Sahil's journey

MARCH 28:
left Haryana for Dubai

APRIL 2:
flew from Dubai to Hurghada, Egypt, on the way to Libya

JUNE 8:
left Libya on a ship headed for Italy

JUNE 14:
shipwrecked 50 miles off the coast of Pylos, Greece

TOP INTERNATIONAL
MIGRANT DESTINATIONS
AS OF 2020



- United States of America: 51 million
- Germany: 16 million
- Saudi Arabia: 13 million
- Russian Federation: 12 million
- United Kingdom: 9 million

TOP COUNTRIES GIVING
INDIANS CITIZENSHIP IN
2021



- United States of America: 56,000 people
- Australia: 24,000 people
- United Kingdom: 21,000 people

COUNTRIES WITH THE
LARGEST DIASPORAS IN
2020



- India: 18 million
- Mexico: 11 million
- Russian Federation: 11 million
- China: 10 million
- Syria: 8 million

SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

SOURCE: THE ECONOMIC TIMES

“Most of the people have left from here. We are also about to leave. If you don’t hear from me for a few days, don’t worry.”

arranged with immigration agents in Haryana a way to get to Italy. Choosing Italy as the final destination was largely due to the cost, as it would be cheaper — costing only 12 lakhs (around \$14,500).

The fishing boat Sahil traveled on, the Adriana, began having problems after a few days at sea and capsized about 50 miles off the coast of Pylos, Greece, according to reports from The New York Times. The captain repeatedly ignored the passengers’ calls for help. The immediate death toll: 79 found on the first day after the accident, with three more dead found in the following two days.

Seven months after the boat accident — which caught the attention of major news outlets to cover stories on the migrants from Pakistan, Syria and Egypt — there was still no mention of the few Indian men on board.

“The hope is still there, because there is no proof,” Shiv said. “There is always floating information, like that there was more than one rescue ship. Sometimes they say there were two or three.”

Sahil’s family has declared him missing. They refuse to say he might be dead.

Shiv’s wife Anita can’t talk about her son’s disappearance without having to lay sick in bed for multiple days afterward. She

rarely leaves the house. Sahil’s younger brother Vivek, 16, agrees with their father — with no proof, they must hold onto hope.

Shiv, a folk musician, closed his music studio in order to travel to Kaithal four times a week for meetings with lawyers and administrators, who pored over the details of his son’s journey countless times, and knows the numbers of passengers on the ship by heart. He sits calmly, portraying the details of the story with an unwavering voice and a grave look on his face as he recalls the details.

For other families in Haryana, that hope is instilled in others’ successful journeys abroad. Parveen, 35, recently set off for the United States. His wife Savita and their two daughters, 7 and 2 years old, awaited news of his arrival for a month as their lives continued on in Kaithal.

Opposite: Shiv Kumar and his youngest son look over the documents they’ve gathered, containing details about Sahil and his journey to Italy. In the months since Sahil’s disappearance, the family has checked for news updates as much as possible, such as on the YouTube channel InfoMigrants. “Right now, there is no news because it’s an old event,” Shiv said. “So you won’t get any news on that.” | Photo by Merrina O’Malley



In the streets of Kaithal, advertisements boast anything from gym memberships and beauty products to visas for students and immigrants. One wall of billboards advertises an education consultant's study abroad program to popular destinations such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. | Photo by Hersh Singh



After not getting a government job in India, Parveen sought a life with fewer confines in the U.S. Savita feels the struggle of an overbearing schedule, hoping she can find open opportunities outside of India as well.

“There are so many boundaries here,” Savita said. “There, we work for five days and enjoy two days. But here, we have to work ... we don’t have time [for a break].”

Parveen reached the U.S.-Mexico border Jan. 29 and successfully made it to America. His group, loaded with hiking backpacks

and donning light puffer coats, triumphantly rushed toward the rocks surrounding the wall as they pulled themselves up and over.

For the family Parveen left hopeful in Haryana, the wait was over. Now, they worry less about Parveen’s safe travels and await news of financial success.

“This is the wall of America, by God’s grace we have reached,” one of the men with Parveen said, running toward the wall. “Bow down to this land, bro. Reached. We have reached — Who says the donkey route is difficult?”

The term “donkey route” refers to the Punjabi word *dunki*, meaning to move from one place to another, and references the process of illegal border crossings via indirect routes, often with multiple stops in other countries before the final desired destination. This process was portrayed in a movie released in December 2023 titled “Dunki,” which details four friends’ experiences following such a route.

According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data, a record 96,917 Indians were apprehended between October 2022 and September 2023 attempting to illegally enter the country from Canada and Mexico.

Despite his son’s uncertain fate, Shiv still understands why others want to leave India. He doesn’t necessarily discourage others from attempting to immigrate, and thinks attempts to seek a better life are justified.

“India is suffering a lot,” Shiv said. “I don’t believe in such treatment. There are such people here too. Every child is a citizen.”

One of Parveen’s relatives, Shiven, 19, awaits news of an approved visa to attend college in Australia at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology to pursue a bachelor’s degree in business. He decided last year to study abroad because of his brother, who had also gone to university in Australia, and hopes to be able to leave India in the next year and a half.

Shiven doesn’t have many expectations for leaving, other than repeatedly talking about his excitement for the day when his visa comes to get the ball rolling on his plan. For Indians leaving the country as students, their plan to apply for college and get a student visa is more straightforward than other immigrants.

The agents that advertise their services all over Haryana seldom have direct connections to the desired destination countries — their plan often includes a chain of agents, stringing along the hopeful migrants from country to country, visa to visa, day by day.

Sahil’s plan used a string of five agents to help him along the way. His first destination was Dubai, leaving with the knowledge that his agents told him they had obtained a 35-day visa for his second stop of Libya. The cost was 35 lakhs (about \$42,000) for one visa.

“Maybe tomorrow they’ll take us to Italy,” Sahil said in a phone call to his family once he arrived in Libya.

The agents who Sahil used on his journey abroad had no personal relationship joining them outside of their desires to make money, Shiv says now. The last agent arranging Sahil’s trip, Randeep Kaur, left India before the ship Sahil was on capsized.

She is now reportedly in the United States, escaping an ongoing investigation into Sahil’s disappearance and the boat accident by his family. Sahil’s family have filed multiple complaints with the police concerning the agents involved in their son’s travels, but no tangible progress was made to get Kaur back in India for legal proceedings.

Despite the family’s efforts to seek support from influential figures in the police and political spheres, all attempts have been unsuccessful.

“We are kind of powerless in front of the U.S. administration,” Shiv said. “Because most of the people that have gone from here don’t have any power to get her back from the U.S.”

In January, seven months after the accident, the ongoing court proceedings have become droning and have made Shiv numb to the details of his son’s disappearance. Every day, the family checks for news updates on Facebook or the YouTube channel InfoMigrants, dedicated to countering misinformation for migrants available in six languages: French, Arabic, English, Dari, Pashto and Bengali.

In the meantime, Shiv and his family focus on obtaining access to a DNA test from the Indian government to send to Greece, where most of the shipwrecked migrants from the *Adriana* have taken refuge. The family is urging local police to explore avenues for collecting DNA samples with the intention of sending them to Athens for comparison with refugees or the remains of individuals who may have died.

The Indian Embassy in Athens has been notified of the requested test and Shiv is ready to independently facilitate the process, but police have been so far unresponsive.

If they are able, the DNA test results would allow them to find out if any of the migrants who were found — dead or alive — are Sahil. ✕

“We are kind of powerless in front of the U.S. administration. Because most of the people that have gone from here don’t have any power to get her back from the U.S.”



हरियाणवी बनना Becoming Haryanvi

Out-of-state brides face journeys through linguistic, cultural and community barriers to build families and futures in Haryana.

By MAYA PHILLIPS

Thirteen years ago, 33-year-old Bahadur finished his night shift as a security guard at Swami Vivekanand College near Haryana's capital city of Chandigarh. His phone rang, and Bahadur answered the call from his father back in his home village of Titram. His father had news: *You're getting married.*

At the same time, a three-day train ride away in West Bengal, 20-year-old Geeta considered her options after rejecting the marriage proposal of a man from Calcutta. She described him as rich but ugly — she couldn't imagine herself with him. Besides, she had no interest in Calcutta.

"I was ready to get married," she said. "And I wanted to see Delhi."

Geeta says her mother had been mentally ill for most of Geeta's life, with mood swings and an easily distracted mind. Her father had denied her an education when she was a girl, bringing her home from school halfway through the only day she ever attended because, he reasoned, there was no point in educating a girl who would only grow up to be a housewife. After her father died when she was 10, her oldest brother Gautam took on the role of a parent at age 14. Geeta and her other brother Nitayi worked in their home rolling *bidis*, a small, cheap cigarette made from unprocessed tobacco.

The day after his father called, Bahadur and seven relatives left Haryana for West Bengal. Bahadur and Geeta met the day of their wedding, a small and inexpensive Bengali-style ceremony. Two days later, they headed home to Haryana, each unfamiliar with the other's language and culture.

Geeta left her home as the wife of a man she had known for less than a week. She wanted a husband who could take her to Delhi, because that would prove his ability to provide her and her future family with a comfortable life.

Bahadur had already paid a mediator — Geeta's cousin Chanchal Das — 45,000 rupees (about \$544), and also paid for



Geeta and Bahadur stand on the roof of their new house in Titram Jan. 5. In the house they shared with Bahadur's two brothers' families for 12 years, Geeta, Bahadur and their children were often treated as lesser family members. "Now there is no problem," Geeta said. "It's not like before." | Photo by Anna Pearson

Opposite: Geeta and Bahadur wed in West Bengal 13 years ago. The couple did not speak a shared language and knew each other for less than a week when they married. "She changed my life," Bahadur said of his wife. | Photo by Maya Phillips



Opposite: Geeta does laundry in the courtyard of her house while Bahadur and sons stand above her on the stairs. Geeta hopes Manish and Mayank will grow up to lead good lives as Haryanvi men, and she tries to provide them with opportunities she didn't have. "Now everything is different," she said, remembering the problems her family faced when she was young. "We had to cook food in anger." | Photo by Anna Pearson

Right: Geeta carries her wet laundry up to the roof to hang it out to dry. She pushed for this house to be built exactly the way she wanted it, ignoring her brother-in-law's opinions and putting her family's needs first. "I didn't agree," she explained. "I made it separately." | Photo by Anna Pearson



himself and his relatives to travel to West Bengal. After their wedding, he brought Geeta to Delhi for a week. Despite Gautam's disapproval of the match because he didn't want his sister to move so far away, Geeta was satisfied.

Her family respected her choice, and though he provided no dowry, Gautam gifted Geeta gold jewelry. She returned home five months after her wedding to reassure him that she was living the life she wanted, and he felt better about the match.

Bahadur thought he was getting married once before, years earlier. But when his prospective wife and her family met him and his family, she decided to marry his younger brother instead. From that moment, he says rumors began to spread through Titram about Bahadur and he became an undesirable match, so he left the village and resigned himself to being a bachelor.

In Bahadur's home state of Haryana, the 2023 gender ratio at birth was 916 girls to every 1000 boys, one of the lowest rates of female births in India but still a much improved rate compared to when Bahadur was born. With such an imbalanced sex ratio, Haryanvi men who make up the excess part of the male population face two options: bachelorhood or using a

mediator to find a bride from out-of-state, as Bahadur's father arranged for him.

The demand for out-of-state brides has changed Haryana at political, communal and familial levels. Politicians seek to gain the support of young male voters by running on platforms promising brides, mediators make money by striking marriage deals between families, human trafficking has arisen with underage brides and villages across Haryana are now home to women from Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and other states. In their attempt to build better futures than they could have in their home states, these women navigate cultural differences, language barriers and, often, discrimination from their community and husband's family.

Geeta had a plan, but life in Haryana came with more barriers than she expected.

Geeta and Bahadur shared a home with both of Bahadur's younger brothers, their families and his father. Geeta spent the first two years of her marriage copying her sisters-in-law to learn their language and behaviors, but she says they often left her out of social gatherings, even such simple activities as fetching water from a well. They were embarrassed by her difficulties communicating in Haryanvi.

Geeta says she worked hard for her new family, but when her work ended and she was alone, she cried and thought about her home. She prayed for help.

"I can't break off the marriage," Geeta said. "I can't go back home like that."

Leaving her husband would reflect poorly on Geeta as a wife, and she would have to return to Gautam's house with a slim chance of ever leaving to start her own family one day.

She began to turn to her husband, and as they shared their troubles with each other, Bahadur spoke slowly in Hindi rather than his usual Haryanvi dialect to help Geeta, who spoke Bengali and a bit of Hindi, understand.

"If I leave him here, he will also be humiliated," she said. "We have to think about both of us."

The two of them settled into their lives, Bahadur working in a shop and Geeta tending to the house and, after a few years, to their two sons, Manish and Mayank. With her children around, Geeta no longer felt lonely.

But Bahadur says his brothers looked down on his marriage, telling Bahadur and Geeta that their sons were lesser grandchildren than their own because of their Bengali heritage. They claimed that the family house, land and other possessions did not belong to Bahadur's family.

“If I leave him here, he will also be humiliated. We have to think about both of us.”

Despite Bahadur’s insistence that he wants Geeta to be comfortable, Geeta has always chosen to wear Haryanvi clothes instead of the sarees traditionally worn by married Bengali women, explaining that sarees attract more attention to her body than she likes. She has worn a veil and covered her face in public to fit into Haryana’s more strict culture, even though it sometimes gets in her way and makes her run into things. Her sons have grown up with knowledge of just a few words of Bengali, and when she brings her family to Bengal for two or three weeks every summer, she acts as their translator.

“You have to adjust,” Geeta said.

As Manish and Mayank grew older, they also came into conflict with their cousins.

“Her kids would beat up my kids,” Geeta said, speaking about her sister-in-law. “She would scold and beat my kids and sometimes even throw them out of the house.”

Nine years after arriving in Haryana, when Geeta felt confident enough in her language skills and her sons were old enough to be in school, she found a job outside of her home cleaning a science teacher’s house. For years, money from the family land had gone to Bahadur’s brother Shamsher. Geeta had made her peace with this, but now she wanted to make her own money and get her family out of this house.

If Manish and Mayank bothered their aunts while Geeta was at work, they were locked outside the house until she came home. The sight of them sitting on the street, sometimes crying, only motivated her more, she said.

Geeta is one of about 130,000 women in Haryana who have faced these circumstances, being in some way “purchased” for marriage by Haryanvi men, as Bahadur paid a mediator to arrange his marriage to Geeta. These women travel to Haryana in the hope of building a better life for themselves and their families but, in most situations, face difficult barriers of language, culture, isolation and degradation.

Tanu, a bride from Himachal Pradesh who also now lives in Peoda, about 10 kilometers from Geeta, rarely leaves her home after three years of marriage because of her difficulties adjusting to Haryanvi dialect.

“They tried to teach us with love,” Tanu said of her in-laws.

But the language, along with differences in custom like wearing a veil in public, are still foreign to Tanu. She feels comfortable in her husband’s family’s house, but the broader community is intimidating. So she cooks and cleans in her home, and in free time watches television or learns to make crafts from YouTube videos, decorating her bedroom with bright paper flowers of pink, red and yellow.

She visits her siblings back in Himachal Pradesh every few months for a week or two, and still feels connected to her home.

Another bride, also named Geeta, is originally from Assam but has been living in Haryana for 14 years. She doesn’t know her exact age, but believes she was around 20 years old at her wedding.

Like other out-of-state brides, her first challenge was communication.

“It’s been 10 years [and] I still make mistakes,” she said, speaking quickly. “When I came here, I couldn’t understand a word. I learned slowly.”

She remembered being very scared to get married and move so far from home, and that her parents didn’t approve of such distance. Her desire to build a better future carried more weight than concerns of distance.

“I wanted to get married in a wealthy state,” she explained. “This was my standard.”

Her husband had been married before and had a daughter, but after he was widowed he couldn’t find another wife in his community. Geeta spoke to him on the phone and then met him in person two days before their wedding, and she liked him.

Today, Geeta has four children, ages 8 to 13. Like Geeta from West Bengal, she has not taught them her native language. When she visits Assam for a month every two years, she brings two of her children and acts as their translator. While in Haryana, she doesn’t miss Assam, and while in Assam, she doesn’t think about Haryana, she says.

The loneliness she felt when she first arrived in Haryana disappeared when she had her children, and she has adjusted to Haryana’s more conservative society by veiling her face in public and not wearing jeans. She feels equally like an Assamese and a Haryanvi woman, identifying herself as Indian and encapsulating both cultures. She is glad her children are Haryanvi. Here, they can get a good education and maybe travel even farther than she did.

“If the kids study, they will get a job,” Geeta said.



“They will have their freedom. They will do whatever they want.”

Not all of Haryana’s out-of-state brides eventually settle into their new lives, or even want them.

Though neither local nor federal government statistics exist on India’s out-of-state brides, the United Nations and other independent organizations have raised concerns over the trafficking of women and girls within India. As of 2021, 23% of marriages in Haryana include an underage bride.

Eighteen years ago, Snehlata’s son Ajab worked as a truck driver and fell in love with a girl, Anita, from Bihar, a state just north of West Bengal. They married at the respective ages of 17 and 16, making them both underage,

and moved into Snehlata’s home.

“She comes from a very poor family,” Snehlata said, explaining that Anita’s parents lived in a mud house and could afford to eat only bananas and rice. “Here she has everything. She likes it here.”

But Anita is not here. She is in Bihar with her family, and Snehlata cannot say when her daughter-in-law will return.

Snehlata emphasized Anita’s respect and dutiful nature, saying that Anita loved her more than her own daughter did.

“Her complexion is a little dark,” Snehlata concluded, “but I like her. She works for me.”

One year ago, Geeta and Bahadur built their own house in Titram. Bahadur’s brother

Shamsher tried to tell Geeta how to build her house, coming by regularly to judge her decisions. She ignored him.

“They get jealous of us,” she said of her husband’s family. “I am putting my own money here, so I will make it as I want.”

She still works for the science teacher’s family, and she is called “sister” by his wife and “auntie” by his children. Her sons attend school and say that they do not feel different from their peers despite their Bengali heritage.

Today, Geeta considers herself a Haryana woman, despite what her husband’s family might say, and raises her sons to be Haryanvi men.

“Now, I don’t have any problems,” she said, 13 years after arriving in Haryana. “Now, I am happy.” ✕

Geeta stands in the doorway of her new house in Titram Jan. 13. Building this house was an expression of freedom for Geeta and her family, and it is still a work in progress. “We will keep investing as much money as we can,” she said. “Whenever more money comes, we do something.” | Photo by Maya Phillips

A NAME FOR herself



Sonia stands in the courtyard of her home in Titram, on the brink of a smile as she poses for a portrait. The courtyard is often full of life, as women and children of the village gather wherever Sonia is. | Photo by Anna Pearson

One woman fills her schedule with ambitions and reaches for her dreams while feeling held back by a lack of respect in her marriage.

By ANNA PEARSON

Sonia is known by her own name, not her husband's.

In the village of Titram in Haryana, Sonia pursues independence through the salon she runs on the main street, the community of women in the village and packing her daily schedule. Most of the women who gather in her salon or courtyard each day are called by their husband's names when talked about by others.

At 35, she craves more than what other married women in Haryana are generally expected to do — obey their husbands and manage household and farm work.

Sonia wants a career. An education. A fulfilling life.

She says she is respected outside of the four walls of her family's courtyard, but that's not enough. What she really wants is respect in her own household.

When she married in 2007, her mother-in-law wanted Sonia to cover her face and become a dutiful housewife for her son. Sonia pushed back against her in-laws' constraints despite the conflict that arose from her refusal to be subdued.

"How can I survive [like that]? I'm not that type of person," Sonia said.

Sonia completed her B.A. in 2011 at Hindu College in Jind, just over an hour away from Titram, after getting married one year into the program. She has a certification in Junior Basic Training, qualifying her to teach in primary schools. She also has a yoga certification, took a beautician course to open a salon, works for the National Rural Livelihood Mission — a government initiative group helping alleviate poverty — and

is finishing up a course at Kaithal Driving Institute to receive her heavy motor vehicle license so she can drive industrial trucks and buses.

Up at 5:30 a.m. each morning, her day begins by boiling water on the stove, then bathing herself and her kids. She makes roti flatbread for breakfast, does chores around the house and is off to work at school by 9:30. About 2:30 p.m., Sonia returns and opens her salon and beauty shop, which usually takes between two and five customers a day before closing at 7 p.m. so she can cook dinner for her family.

At 8:30, she watches one episode of something on television, and by 9 p.m. she is dead tired and goes to bed. The next day, the cycle repeats.

The house is chaotic but serene when Sonia's husband Naresh works during the day, gone until dinnertime. Naresh owns three cars, personally driving one while the others are rented out for events like weddings in Kaithal or nearby cities.

Floral curtains over the doors blow in the wind and are pushed aside by packs of young children running around the courtyard, led by Sonia's two sons — Jatin, 13, and Yash, 12. Women gossip in the dimly-lit salon on the street front, and the occasional car, cow, motorcycle or pedestrian makes an appearance outside the green front gate.

When Sonia's father found a husband for her, she did everything she could to resist marriage. In college, she had joined Om Shanti, a religious group that advocated against marriage. Her father feared that Sonia's

independence and involvement in the group would lead her to leave home and become an unmarried saint.

Tears were shed during the six months leading up to the wedding, but Sonia ultimately gave in for the sake of her family's honor, she says.

The first year and a half of marriage passed — then Sonia asked to continue her studies, and her in-laws shut that down. They imagined her settling down in married life as a housewife.

"They wanted to keep me subdued, but I did not give in," Sonia said.

Screaming matches broke out between Sonia and her husband's family as her mother-in-law sought to control her, insisting she cover her face and abandon her studies and

"They wanted to keep me subdued, but I did not give in."

career. Sonia wanted an education, and her mother-in-law wanted her to milk the cows.

After years of dreaming, Sonia told her husband she was going into Delhi for an appointment with her mother Shyam Devi, leaving out the detail that it was for a passport identity verification.

At the office, Sonia's brother was waiting for her. He repeatedly

asked for her documents and told her that having a passport was not right. Sonia tried to minimize the harm, but everyone in her village was asking about it. When her passport finally came, Sonia and her husband fought.

First, it was about the passport. Then it was about the usual suspects: covering her face, their kids, talking to other people and her work. Sonia took her youngest son, 2 years old at the time, and fled to Shyam Devi's house an hour away from Titram.

"Women are being discriminated against. They are being played with," Sonia said. "It's happening, and what can be done about it? Responsibility is unequally distributed between men and women."

She stayed with her mother for three years.

Sonia's childhood was full of love. Before his passing in 2008, her father taught her how to drive. Shyam Devi, who completed her studies after marrying and worked as a health supervisor in a hospital, encouraged Sonia to pursue what she felt was right. Under her mother's roof, the widespread disapproval did not matter. She was supported. She was loved. She was respected.

"My parents taught me that we should respect our elders, not hurt anyone and that you are a person of great importance the way you are," Sonia said.

Shyam Devi defended her and told her husband's family that if fights were going to continue, she would not send her daughter back into their household. She demanded that something change.

Ultimately, Sonia made the decision to come back for the sake of her family's honor and social image. Her father-in-law passed away in 2014, and she decided it was safe to return to her husband. Getting divorced or remarried is difficult — especially when she already had a son — so she went back to her husband's household on her own terms.

Now 10 years after coming back to her husband, fights still happen, but Sonia has learned to give in first when she knows her husband will not break his stance. She would rather minimize

the arguments around their sons, who she worries will continue on their path of disrespecting her based on seeing their father's behavior.

In her own household, Sonia feels like nothing.

"[My husband] thinks so low of me. So low, that it feels like he hasn't brought me to this house after our wedding. It feels like I'm pushed and tied like a cattle," Sonia said. "He has an incredibly low mindset, to a point where he doesn't think that I was wedded into the house."

In the village, Sonia is known for accomplishments in the community and the contributions that she's made through working in the school, advocating for women through the government group NRLM and being a role model for women she knows.

Her friend Kavita, 31, whom she's known for four years, has seen the evolution of Sonia's independence as her list of achievements continues to grow. The pair became friends when they were recruited for NRLM together, and Kavita's schedule has consequently become packed from spending much time with Sonia.

"[Her reputation] is all good, but even if other women speak behind her back, she doesn't care about it," Kavita said.

Sonia's eyes sparkle as she says she's not afraid of anything, but there's a softness in her gaze as she recounts the lack of respect she feels in her own home.

"The people outside my house like my nature — that's why they respect me," Sonia said. "But I don't consider that as respect. I would feel respected if people at my home and people outside both respected me."

She seeks for anyone who comes in contact with her to feel uplifted after their interaction, whether that be a child, poor man or other woman. Their self-value should only increase after their interaction, a change that Sonia wants to continue to make in her community.

"I admire her, and I believe in what Sonia has to offer," Kavita said.

Despite having strong footing in so many parts of Titram, Sonia still feels like it's not enough. Her passport sits tucked away in a drawer of her home, untouched — an excuse to daydream about going

abroad, even while she fills her daily schedule to distract herself from the pain inside her home.

"I would've left [India] a long time ago if I weren't married," Sonia said.

For Sonia, receiving her HMV license in order to be a truck driver feels like one of the last pieces of the puzzle to fulfilling her biggest bucket list item — leaving India. No matter what she fills her time with in Haryana, she won't feel appreciated until she receives respect from her husband.

When Sonia was 21, her brother moved to Dubai to make a life for himself. He was able to buy a car and build a house, and pay for his own medical treatment when diagnosed with cancer because of the money he made. His success was inspiring and is something Sonia holds onto when she dreams about leaving.

Sonia filled out the application for the HMV license course without telling her husband until afterward and is one of only two married women enrolled in the course. As she attends Kaithal Driving Institute for lessons, the profile of the Ashok Leyland Ecomet trucks tower over her small frame, clashing against the stark gray backdrop of the institute with a bright pink puffer vest and pearly white purse.

Sonia's main mission is to learn how to drive to go abroad, and she knows she will someday get there — after all, she knows she's achieved a lot of smaller goals along the way.

"If I start thinking about the past life that I had, I will just be stressed and sad all day. And I don't want that," Sonia said. "Let's just think about what's happening and what's going to happen." ❌

"If I start thinking about the past life that I had, I will just be stressed and sad all day. And I don't want that. Let's just think about what's happening and what's going to happen."



फ्रैक्चर को ठीक करना

Mending the fractures

An eldest son from a rural village in Haryana vows to protect his family and break the cycle of abuse imposed by his alcoholic father.

By ALYSSA MALYON

Right: Anmol Tansal, 15, poses in front of the field where he helps his brother in the mornings. Anmol's brother Sachin provides for the family through work while Anmol stays at home and takes care of their mother. "My brother is still a child and he spends some money here and there, but he'll learn," Sachin said. | Photo by Mild Du

Below: Sachin Tansal, 18, reflects on the lasting effects of his father's actions while walking out to the Gohran fields Jan. 8. Sachin has stepped up to be the man of the house, working to support his mother and act as a protector. "When I leave, I'll make sure that my father can't hurt my mom," Sachin said. "I want to make sure she's safe, 24/7 safe." | Photo by Madelyn Kremer



Sachin Tansal picked up a phone call from his mother, Shimla, as he worked at a grocery store in the village of Siwan, Haryana last August. He heard his mother's muffled cries through the phone and took off running. Swinging open the wooden gate to his home, he saw his drunken father, Ramkaran, beating his wife — Sachin's mother — with a fire stick. Sachin pushed his father to the ground, picked up a brick and hurled it at Ramkaran, fracturing his leg.

For a month following the incident, Sachin watched as his mother tended to the bedridden man who hit her across the face and chest, causing swelling and bruising so severe she could hardly see through her slitted eyes. Still, she cooked for her husband every day, massaged his leg and purchased medicine for him that she could barely afford. Shimla felt it was her duty as a wife to care for him no matter how he treated her, and worried that if she kicked him out, the other villagers would ridicule and shun her.

"Their father, he's always been like that. He doesn't give us anything — it's like he's against us," Shimla said six months after the fight. "But what am I supposed to do?"

Sachin, 18, his younger brother Anmol, 15, and three older, married sisters, Babie, Geeta and Beeta are no strangers to their father's abuse, alcoholism and lack of contribution to the family's well-being. But they used his example as inspiration to pave a new path for themselves, their children and the



Shimla Devi tells the story of how she got the bruises on her face and body. Shimla has suffered abuse at the hands of her husband, Ramkaran, but continues to care for him. “He ripped my hair out, hit me with a rod [across my face] and on my shoulder,” Shimla said. | Photo by Madelyn Kremer

future generations. This new path, they hope, will lead to a life where domestic violence is uncommon.

Four years ago, Geeta moved home with her 1-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter to escape her verbally abusive husband. She swore she would never allow her

at the hands of their husbands, but according to Shimla, hardly anyone divorces for fear of making their situation worse. Shimla said she would rather stay with Ramkaran because she knows the type of man she’s dealing with, but fears the possibility that remarriage would

Sachin wished his mother and sisters would stop criticizing him and let him be.

“When he used to fight [with my mother] before, we were kids, and I didn’t know any better,” Sachin said. “When I realized what was happening, I knew my mother was right. I feel a responsibility to protect them now.”

As he matured, Sachin began to realize the true nature of his parents’ relationship. The faultless version of his father Sachin clung to slowly withered away with each bruise that appeared on his mother.

But it wasn’t until Sachin’s best friend took his own life at 16 that his outlook on life changed forever. He felt as though nobody in the village cared what had happened — they accepted his death as a “mistake” and moved on with their lives.

“After my friend’s death, I didn’t trust anybody in the village,” Sachin said. “I thought everybody was selfish.”

Before that loss, Sachin described himself as “useless,” saying he’d “roam the streets and just pass the day” — but after experiencing

grief of that magnitude, Sachin committed himself to making the most out of the life he’d been given and vowed to keep his family safe.

Around the time of his friend’s death, Sachin met Amarjeet Singh, a highly respected man in the community, when a village member wrongfully accused him of stealing a cell phone. Although Sachin was innocent, the villagers refused to listen until Amarjeet defended his character.

Amarjeet placed trust in Sachin, and Sachin did the same.

“My mentor, [Amarjeet Singh], changed my life,” Sachin said. “He showed me a different path and he taught me how to talk to people with respect.”

Amarjeet taught Sachin to take care of his own and kept him from using any substances — lessons he never learned from his father.

Ramkaran’s presence around the family’s two-bedroom concrete home has dwindled over the last few years. At times, he has left for months with no explanation. With growing financial burdens and the lack of a steady income, Sachin stepped up. But his education suffered.

“He had to take on the responsibility of the house and he had to leave school,” Shimla said. “If the child is stressed at his home and his father isn’t right, what can you expect from him [at school]?”

After failing two classes in the 10th grade, Sachin was forced by the school to drop

out. Soon after, in October 2022, he began a carpentry apprenticeship. He worked there for a few months until he could no longer withstand the verbal abuse from his mentor. During his second apprenticeship in Siwan, a nail pierced through the middle finger on his left hand. At the hospital, Sachin watched as the doctor severed off half of his finger. He then swore never to take another job in carpentry.

Still, he wanted to provide for his family, so he took odd jobs installing closed-circuit television cameras and working at a local grocery store.

Every rupee Sachin earns, he gives to his mother.

“Even if I earn 10 rupees [12 cents], I’ll still give it to my mother,” Sachin said.

Shimla and Sachin earn for the household — pooling every penny they earn and working together to make financial decisions for the family.

In a few years, Sachin dreams of saving up enough money to move abroad, where he could make a higher income to send back to his family.

“When I leave, I’ll make sure that my father can’t hurt my mom,” Sachin said. “I want to do something with my life. I won’t be like my father, who didn’t do anything.”

Three weeks ago, after Ramkaran’s leg healed well enough for him to walk, he stole a few hundred rupees and left to buy a bottle of alcohol. Returning home drunk, he found Shimla resting alone. She was recovering from her second medical procedure that month to repair a damaged nerve after

a nurse made a wrong incision during her first procedure to remove potentially cancerous ovarian cysts.

Ramkaran asked Shimla to clean the house, but when she told him she was too tired, he picked a fight with her. His words soon turned to violence after discovering she had gone into the fields earlier that day to pick pea pods. Shimla worked for most of the day, making 200 rupees to pay off a 1,500-rupee debt Ramkaran loaned from the farmer. In Ramkaran’s mind, if she could go to work, she could also clean the house.

He grabbed her by the hair, ripping a chunk from her scalp, and dragged her outside. Once again, Shimla reached for her cell phone to call the one person she could rely on for help — Sachin.

But before she could press the dial button, Ramkaran snatched the phone from her hand, released his grip on her hair and bolted down the dusty path.

“He has not returned home after that; he’s afraid the boy will beat him,” Shimla said. “[Sachin] will not let him touch me anymore.”

But uncertainty still lingers in the household, and Sachin lies awake at night with thoughts of his father’s return.

“I can’t sleep sometimes and I get nightmares,” Sachin said. “I get up and check up on [my mother] every time I wake up. Wherever I go, I am wondering if she’s doing okay.”

Sachin can only hope his father stays away for good this time. ✕

“When I leave, I’ll make sure that my father can’t hurt my mom. I want to do something with my life. I won’t be like my father, who didn’t do anything.”

children to experience the same fate, so Geeta remained in her childhood home for four months — until her husband and in-laws appeared at the family home on multiple occasions, begging her to return and promising that the abuse would cease.

In Gohran, a rural village in Haryana of less than 1,500 people, many women endure similar abuse

subject her to a life with a man that would mistreat her more than her husband already does.

Sachin did not always side with the women of his family, however. Because of his age, gender and the influence of traditional gender roles in rural India, he viewed his father — who spent the family’s money on alcohol and rarely worked a consistent job — in high regard.

SHOCK AND synthesis

By SARAH BAKEMAN

Haryana, India, was both culture shock and human synthesis.

Haryana, India, was interviewing Shimla, a woman with crescent moon-shaped swatches of purple under each of her eyes. It was faded bruises from the hand of her estranged husband, their pigment still clouding her smile-lined skin. It was sitting on white plastic lawn chairs placed along Shimla's pink, flower-painted bedroom wall and hearing about her recent health complications, her debt and her husband's repeated pattern of leaving, coming back to steal and abuse, then leaving again. It was shock: the sharp sting of a life so different from my own.

Haryana was also standing from those plastic lawn chairs, putting my notepad away and pulling up Haryanvi music on YouTube. It was the opening of Shimla's front gate — the one with the tricky latch — and welcoming in friends from the village to dance with us. It was attempting to mimic Shimla and Reena's rolling wrists and swaying hips, but devolving into my own jutting elbows and sharp shoulders with a laugh. Shimla laughed in return, gesturing to her chest — an unspoken way of telling me I shimmy

too much. It was synthesis: the effortless joy that comes from being human alongside another.

Shock was spending days with Krishan, a local milkman and the subject of our documentary. It was following his 12-hour work days and seven-day work weeks, because crops need tending and buffalos need milking and babies need nourishment every day. It was his hope for the career to die with him — for his son Mohit to find passion over mere provision. It was sitting with Krishan and Mohit on cots during midday downtime, sipping chai as Krishan took long draws from his hookah. It was sharing stories and photos from home. It was Mohit asking if there was anything like the caste system in America.

I felt synthesis when Paige answered his question. India's social problems are its own — the caste system, misogyny, wealth gap — but back home, we battle inequality too.

I felt synthesis when Krishan's 8-year-old niece Suhani got bored, lifting her hands toward me. I showed her the hand games I learned back on my elementary school bus, full of claps and interlocked fingers. Synthesis remains in my Spotify search his-

tory, where Suhani would find her favorite songs and play them for me. Synthesis, I realize, was often found without a word.

I felt shock in a cruelly literal sense during the Lohri festival, an annual celebration of the winter sowing season's end and a plea for abundant harvest. A six-foot bonfire blazed in Kumar's backyard and music blared from speakers as my classmates danced. The sun had set and the party began, but behind a bedroom door, my body was shutting down from a harmless-looking mini-muffin. Anaphylactic shock. I felt the inside of my mouth swell. A fuzzy, wool sweater sensation took over my tongue. Under my ankle-length skirt and black long-sleeve, hives usurped my skin. My lips were Kardashian plump, with inflated ears and eyelids to match. I radiated heat like my old, virus-ridden laptop before it inevitably gave out. But I could still breathe.

My mind drifted to the anxiety-induced pre-trip Google searches. Reddit forums about traveling to India with a severe tree nut allergy, featuring uplifting comments such as "dead on arrival" and "WTF! Don't come here." Telling Scott (my professor) and Mild (my roommate) that I



was too scared to go on Textura India 2024. Going anyway. Realizing I'd never been through a reaction without my mom.

The only thing that pulled me out of this shock was synthesis. It was Madi and Mild gently holding my slippery hands so I would stop running them over my increasingly swollen ears. It was India partner Gunjan breathing with me, telling me to suck air into my stomach, not my chest. It was professor Paige administering my EpiPen after two Benadryls didn't help, and Scott pacing as he lined up a trip to the emergency room. It was Rafi playing Simon and Garfunkel on the foggy road to Kaithal and dragging me by the arm to a doctor who knew just what to do. It was returning to

the hotel to play Avalon in the dining room over roti and sizzler with Scott, Gunjan, Rafi, Mild and Madi while bonfires blazed and music blared across Haryana just outside.

For me, India was a constant state of both shock and synthesis. It was my first time out of America and an affirmation that I want to keep leaving again and again. Everyone involved in this publication took a risk — whether it be embracing a new experience or sharing a story. And I'm sure it was worth it. ✕

Sarah Bakeman

Sarah Bakeman dances with Reena at her home in Gohran as neighbors and friends gather to watch. Sarah departed for India with big fears of unknown circumstances and an anticipation of being shocked by the unfamiliar culture. | Photo by Madelyn Kremer



More than one way to love

By ALYSSA MALYON

Krishan Kundu pulled a crumpled cloth handkerchief from his jacket pocket and dabbed the corners of his eyes as he stood in the parking lot outside of the Koel Tourist Resort in Kaithal. I felt a tear roll down my cheek and wiped it with the red shawl Krishan had gifted our team earlier that night.

Glancing at my teammates Sarah, Mild and Madi, I saw their faces: wide smiles and squinted eyes welling with tears. We stood in a circle around Krishan, expressing our gratitude for the moments we shared, yet feeling unprepared for this to be the last one.

It was our last night in Haryana — time to say goodbye to Krishan, or “the Milk Man,” as we called him — who welcomed four American girls into his home to document his life less than two weeks prior. My team’s relationship with Krishan and his wife, son and niece was founded on admiration of our likenesses and differences. And although we didn’t speak the same language, we quickly formed indelible bonds that will remain safely tucked in the crevices of my heart.

“My soul sisters,” Krishan said to us in Hindi, “I wish you all the happiness in the world. And I wish that you, my sis-

ters, never face sadness. And if God were to give you sadness, I wish that he would give it to me first.”

Our India partner, Hersh, translated Krishan’s parting words and added, “It sounded even more poetic in Hindi.”

I believe it. But those words still struck deeply in English.

Here stood Krishan, a man who wakes before the sun rises every day to milk his buffalo and doesn’t rest until the late hours of the evening after his lengthy milk collection and distribution route is complete. No days off, because “the community needs their milk,” he said.

Even with the awareness of my privilege, Krishan still hoped God would spare me sadness and give it to him instead.

I wish the English language had more than one word for “love.” In English, the same four-letter word is used to describe platonic, familial and romantic affection. Because of the significant weight of this one word, people hold back from saying it out of fear it may be misinterpreted.

In that moment, I wanted to tell Krishan I loved him in an “I appreciate you and I’m thankful I met you” type of way. I wanted to tell every member of my team that I loved them. And I wanted to

Alyssa Malyon smiles for a photo with a mother and child in Delhi, India, Jan. 1. Locals frequently approached Malyon and the group of 20 Bethel University students for photos during their three-week stay in India. | Photo by Mild Du

tell my professors and India partners that I loved them.

But I held back because I lacked the proper words to express my feelings.

I learned that many forms of the word “love” are used throughout India, as there are more than 1,500 languages spoken. In Hindi, “*pyaar*,” “*prem*” and “*mohabbat*” all mean love but with different connotations.

If there were some magical time-warping instrument that could bring me back to the Koel Tourist Resort, I would use it to say, “*Tum sab meri jaan ho.*”

“You all mean the world to me.”

But of course, it sounds more poetic in Hindi. ✕

Alyssa Malyon



Beyond words

By ANNA KAPSNER

A woman posed at the tomb while her friend took her photo, smiling gently. Her friend grinned and yelled something at her from behind the camera, and the woman’s laugh burst out, transforming her. She became loud and joyful and genuine, throwing her head back and clapping her hands. *Click.*

A boy on a bicycle wove between his friends playing cricket, unaware of another boy sneaking up behind him with a plastic bat. *Whack. Click.* The ball shot past the batter’s head as the pitcher laughed, ignoring the one-bounce rule. Though I did not speak Hindi, I was pretty sure I had just learned how to say “asshole.” *Click.*

Kiran, a dancer at the Titram Cultural Festival, stood on the side while her coach and another dancer performed. While the other girls whispered and giggled, her eyes followed every stomp and twist as she mouthed the words of the song. Watching her, I was 14 again, waiting for my turn while my friends danced, my fingers crossed so tightly they turned white. *Click.*

I came to Haryana without knowing the language and was foolishly surprised when my own language failed to express

what I was seeing. Photos got closer than words, but even that was not enough. The third night in Haryana, I called my brother and told him I was not sure I could do this because no one would understand the stories I was trying to tell.

I was wrong.

I understood Parmila perfectly well as she pushed me into the middle of the room to dance, and she understood as I pulled her with me, telling her we would dance together or not at all.

Neham, Sapna’s daughter, understood her strange new friends liked writing, so she sat knee-to-knee with Talia, my borrowed notebook in her hand, scribbling spirals intently on the page.

A girl at the goodbye party saw me struggling with my shawl and helped me tie it. Ash’s mother and I shared victory cheers during the Titram games. Anita yelled at her grandson as he sprinted away, a box of matches in his little-kid fist, then rolled her eyes at me and smiled. Balbir put his hand on my head in blessing and called me daughter.

I stumbled through dances and laughed until my face hurt. I shared meals and chai in quiet rooms, each of us absorbed in our food. I agreed with Balbir

The children outside Sapna’s house pause their game of street soccer to peer through the gate at the strange American visitors Jan. 11. They shouted and waved. | Photo by Anna Kapsner

when he said music was a gift from god, though he is Hindu and I am Christian.

I learned that no matter where I go in the world, some things will always be the same. There will always be joy, and good food, and sore bodies after long days. There will always be knowing smiles between women and children who just want me to play with them. There may not always be men getting knocked off of motorcycles by cows, but there will always be moments when perfect strangers look at each other as if to say, “Did you see that too?”

I learned that even without words, we can understand each other. ✕

Anna Kapsner

MEET OUR TEAM...

Bethel University's journalism and graphic design programs believe in social justice and cultural stories about people on the margins.

Since 2017, they have teamed with international partners to produce Textura magazines, video projects and the seektextura.com website. The #TexturaIndia2024 team came together with 20 Bethel students, six India partners and leaders from each country.

Textura leaders know none of these transformative experiences are possible without our international partners. You can meet more of them on the next few pages.

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OUR DRIVERS AND VOLUNTEERS



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समय पत्रिका,साधना पथ,गृहलक्ष्मी,उदय इंडिया,निरोगधाम,मॉडर्न खेती ,इंडिया टुडे,देवपुत्र,क्रिकेट टुडे,गृहशोभा,अनोखी हिन्दुस्तान,मुक्ता,सरिता,चंपक,प्रतियोगिता दर्पण,सक्सेस मिरर,सामान्य ज्ञान दर्पण,फार्म एवं फूड,मनोहर कहानियां,सत्यकथा,सरस सलिल,स्वतंत्र वार्ता लाजवाब,आउटलुक,सच्ची शिक्षा,वनिता,मायापुरी,इंडिया हेल्थ,रूपायन उजाला,ऋषि प्रसाद,जोश रोजगार समाचार,जोश करेंट अफेयर्स,जोश सामान्य ज्ञान,जोश बैंकिंग और एसएससी,इंडिया बुक ऑफ रिकॉर्ड्स,राजस्थान रोजगार संदेश,राजस्थान सूजस,सखी जागरण,अहा! जिंदगी,बाल भास्कर,योजना,कुरुक्षेत्र,हिन्दुस्तान जॉब्स

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