

In India, a Small Band of Women Risk It All for a Chance to Work

The Indian Constitution guarantees equality under the law. But for women facing a patriarchal social order, strict caste rules and centuries of traditions, that guarantee means little.

By ELLEN BARRY; Photographs by ANDREA BRUCE JAN. 30, 2016

On a humid, sweaty, honking afternoon last summer, two women were making their way through the court complex in the north Indian city of Meerut, searching for the office of the subdivisional magistrate.

They walked past the purveyors of stamp papers and affidavits, typists clickety-clacking on stools, barristers-at-law in flapping gowns, pillars of wadded files bound in twine.

It is fair to say that these two did not belong. They had the swaying walk of village women — half-duck, half-ballerina — who have spent their lives balancing bundles of firewood on their heads. When they entered the office of a criminal defense lawyer, in the sweat-stained broom closet where he receives clients, they were at first so conscious of their low status that they tried to sit on the floor.

They were engaging his services because they wanted to work. They lived 10 miles away, in a small settlement where, for generations, begging had been the main source of income. A few weeks earlier, the male elders of their caste had decreed that village women working at nearby meat-processing factories should leave their jobs. The reason they gave was that women at home would be better protected from the sexual advances of outside men. A bigger issue lay beneath the surface: The women's earnings had begun to undermine the old order.

It came as a surprise when seven of the women, who had come to rely on the daily wage of 200 rupees, about \$3, refused to stop. The women would have to, the men said, blocking the lane with their bodies. They did not expect the women to go to the police.

It would have been impossible — this appeal to the distant, abstract power of the Indian state — if the women had not been so angry.

Geeta, the younger of the two, was born angry. Even as a child, if her siblings took her portion of food, she was apt to throw everyone's dinner into the dirt. "A real bastard-woman," one neighbor called her, eyes widening with admiration.

"Let their ladies sit and cook for them," Geeta would hiss to her friend Premwati, as they walked together past their neighbors. "Our husbands are with us."

Premwati was a more cautious sort. In the tradition of their caste, the Nats, a person challenging a community punishment could offer a defense at trial by picking up a red-hot piece of iron and walking five steps toward the temple. If her hands burned, she was guilty, and would be placed in a hole in the ground until she confessed.

They had wandered into dangerous territory, she and Geeta. She knew that. When evening fell in the village of Peepli Khera, Premwati would crouch over her clay stove, rolling chapatis in and out of the embers, and survey the forces arrayed against them. Too poor to afford a house with a door, she lay at night under a thatched roof, listening for the footsteps of people she could not see.

Last summer, as they fought to remain in the work force, Geeta and Premwati made up a small part of a big economic puzzle.

In India, women's participation in the labor force stands at around 27 percent, lower than any other country in the G-20, except for Saudi Arabia. Standard models suggest that a lucky confluence of factors — economic expansion, rising education levels and plummeting fertility — would draw women swiftly into India's economy.

Instead, the opposite is happening: From 2005 to 2012, women's participation rates slid to 27 percent from 37 percent, largely because rural women were dropping out of the work force. Of 189 countries studied by the International Labour Organization, India ranks 17th from the bottom.

This is terrible news for India, as it strains to become a competitive producer for world markets. Economists have put forward two theories to explain the decline. The first is that India's boom has created jobs in segments that are generally not accessible to women, like construction. The second has to do with culture: Unless their choices are dictated by destitute poverty, Indian families seek the status that comes from keeping women at home.

The Nat families were just crossing that threshold, and many things were changing. Premwati and Geeta could feel the grip of the local moneylenders loosening; the taste of independence made them bold. In this way, over five months last spring and summer, the unstoppable force of economic need met the immovable object of social control.

The cost of remaining in the work force, they discovered, was very high.

The Bossiest Woman in the Village

At 10 o'clock on a morning in May, Geeta and Premwati wrapped fried bread in plastic bags and set off on foot toward the meat-processing factories. It was blindingly hot, and stray dogs and buffaloes lay in strips of shade on either side of the road.

To save the 5-rupee, or 7-cent, fare for an auto-rickshaw, they walked the whole dusty distance, nearly an hour from their small community of Nats, who are Hindus, through the Muslim neighborhoods that surround the factories. They kept their dupattas pulled all the way down over their faces, following the medieval tradition of purdah, or veiling, but men in skullcaps lingered in the doorways anyway, gawking.

“What is your name?” one of the men yelled, breaking the silence.

“Geeta,” came the reply, bell-clear.

The two met as young wives, taken away from their home villages and deposited among strangers in Peepli Khera. Geeta, who had barely hit puberty, landed in the grip of a mother-in-law who believed that drinking tea made a girl greedy for extra helpings of food.

So Geeta would sneak over to see Premwati, who made buckets of tea, watery and sweet. Geeta was scrawny and mouthy. She tended to alienate women — maybe it was the way she called them fat buffaloes — but Premwati calmly allowed Geeta’s insults to bubble over her. Geeta returned the favor by stomping over and intervening whenever Premwati’s husband beat her.

“It has become a habit to take a beating,” Geeta said one day, scowling.

In this way, Geeta had carved out a role for herself as the bossiest woman in the village. No one beat her. “Her husband is like a chicken — if she tells him to get up, he will get up!” chuckled the chief in the town where she grew up.

As the women approached the factories that morning, they pulled their scarves over their faces against the smell, a stomach-turning odor that wafts off tallow-rendering vats and suggests rotting meat. Over the last five years, with the market for flash-frozen buffalo meat booming in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and China, India had quietly become the world’s largest meat exporter. The factories outside Meerut were expanding.

For this reason, about five years earlier, Geeta and her friends had been drawn into the labor force, supplementing their husbands’ seasonal earnings as wedding-band musicians. Inside the boundary walls of the factories, they broke rocks into

rubble and carried cement mix in shallow pans, balanced on the crowns of their heads, to stonemasons building interior walls. Some washed meat pans; some assembled cartons; some carried bricks.

Geeta and Premwati found the work boring, and also terrifying. The women of their community live by rules: If an older man approaches, they cannot sit on any surface above the ground, so it is not unusual to see them suddenly slither down off cots and chairs. They are forbidden to have physical contact with men from outside the community, with the exception of physicians or bangle sellers.

At first they went to work with their stomachs knotted with fear that a strange man might grab their hand. At this prospect, even Geeta's nerve collapsed. Once, while carrying a load of mud at a factory that crushes bones for animal feed, she slipped and fell into a 10-foot trench, her leg buckling beneath her. But when the factory's clerk, a Muslim, reached a hand down to help her up, she jerked away, as if his touch would scald her.

She lay there in the mud, at the bottom of the ditch, until Premwati arrived to help her clamber out.

As the weeks passed, though, their fears ebbed. At the construction sites, they watched migrant workers from Nepal and Bangladesh, buyers who flew in from China, and the sons of the factory owners, roaring in and out in BMWs and Audis.

At night, returning home, they withdrew sweaty, folded bills from their blouses. A hollow-eyed woman named Pooja announced, with some surprise, that her husband and mother-in-law had stopped beating her. "When you earn money," she said, "you are of some use to them." As for Geeta, it became clear to her that the men swarming around the factory grounds were not making sexual advances.

"When you start working, your heart opens up," she said. "Then you're not scared anymore."

At this point, the women began to make changes to their appearance. Geeta took note when the other workers recoiled from her, and began to wash twice a day, with

soap. She bought seven-foot lengths of cotton, the brighter the better, and paid tailors to stitch it into billowing pants.

Premwati, whose husband spent most days stretched out drunk on his rope cot, felt, for the first time in years, that she was standing on solid ground. With her earnings she married off three children. One last son needed settling. Then she could exhale.

Geeta's plans were wilder, more improbable. Though she had never been taught letters or numbers, she worked her cellphone constantly, using a system of vigorous trial and error. In the financial cooperative that the village women had formed, pooling their resources and extending loans, she proved to be an excellent, if frightening, debt-collector. She began making payments into a life insurance policy with such a generous payout that she sometimes daydreamed, a little wistfully, about her husband's untimely death.

She took advances on her salary, which were interest-free, rather than patronizing the local moneylenders.

Then, last spring, she attracted attention by building a second house for herself, of rosy, freshly kilned brick, abutting the compound of Roshan, the village's most powerful man.

Far From the Modern World

When Roshan, the Nat chief in Peepli Khera, is ready to perform an exorcism, he starts out by asking a coy question: "Do you want to see the real drama?"

Then he trembles. His eyes roll back, he arches his tongue against his teeth like the goddess Kali, who communicates to him through a string of wooden beads that he holds up to his ear, as if it were a cellphone. Nat families who are mistrustful of hospitals — that is, nearly all of them — come from miles away to see Roshan, who claims to be able to evict the jinns that have inhabited their bodies.

Asked how many of his patients survive, he barks laughter. "How do I know that? If they survive, they survive."

In the half-light of evening, Roshan surveys the settlement, his chest thrown out. He has the high cheekbones of his nomadic ancestors, who made a living walking tightropes to entertain the Mughal courts. His lips are speckled and plump as cuts of liver. This is his dominion — about 40 miles northeast from Delhi as the crow flies, but far from the modern world.

Villagers live in a few dozen houses arranged around a whitewashed temple. A plaque notes that the temple was built by Roshan's family, though no one needs to be reminded, and anyway, only two adults here know how to read. No one uses a surname or knows his or her age. One man, asked how old he thought he was, responded, "I don't have any teeth left, and I am about to go."

On a recent morning, a woman named Usha, her leg shrunken from polio, held a 4-month-old baby who was suffering from vomiting and diarrhea. His limbs were wasted, and he looked up with the slow, narcotic gaze of a very old man. His vertebrae pressed sharply out of the parchment skin of his back. He was too weak to cry.

Three of Usha's children had already died. The three who had survived infancy were sitting on the ground near her, eating dry toast from a plastic bag. One was so hungry that he grabbed a raw, half-peeled potato, speckled with rot, out of her hand, and bit into it. When a passing neighbor asked why they were so dirty, she grimaced.

"We are poor people," she said hoarsely. "We were born in dirt, we live in dirt, we will die in dirt."

Roshan's proudest moment occurred decades ago, when a police officer, sniffing for bribes, made the mistake of venturing into the square and grabbing his cousin by the neck. Roshan, then a young man, picked up an ax handle and hit the officer hard in the face. Since then, he likes to say, the police have not found occasion to come here. A boundary had been demarcated: This is a place beyond the reach of the state.

With the arrival of the factories, that boundary had begun to disappear. Roshan's village was being swallowed by an expanding city. He forbade the women in his own family to work at the factories, but watched with distaste as his neighbors

left in the morning. He looked back with nostalgia at the time when the Nats supported themselves by begging.

“Life was much better 20 years back,” he said. “It was a nice society. Now women are going out and meeting strange men.”

In the spring of last year, after Geeta built her new house, Roshan’s son Dharmender began observing her with special interest. He noted her new outfits, the way she came home “with the crease in her clothes still visible.” He scanned her friends’ faces for traces of makeup. He shared his suspicion that they worked at an air-conditioned site.

Their work, he said, had a whiff of immorality.

“They have everything: Clothes to wear. Enough to eat,” he said. “Why would they need to work? They still have husbands. It’s not just insulting to them, it’s insulting to the whole village.”

Money and Respect

It was difficult to say where the rumor started. It concerned Geeta’s neighbor Pinki, who had fair skin and a little girl’s high, fluting voice. She was married with one child and worked at one of the new construction sites, breaking rocks with a hammer. Some reported that Pinki had been seen riding on a strange man’s motorcycle, others that a man from the construction site had shown up at her family home.

In May, Roshan vanished into the temple to present the matter to his most trusted authority: the goddess Kali. After a long conversation over the magic necklace, he emerged saying that the goddess had shared a piece of disturbing news. Women in the village, he said, were engaged in prostitution.

“If Kali tells us this person is wrong,” he said, “this person is wrong.”

Roshan wrapped his head in the stained turban that marked him as the chief, and for more than an hour, as the smell of heat and dung filled the square, the men of the village debated what to do. The problem, Roshan said, went beyond Pinki, to

the general question of what went on when their women disappeared into the factories.

His younger brother was in full agreement: Female employment, he said, “has spread like wildfire” and was hurting the reputation of the village. A third elder, their cousin, observed that his own wife worked at a factory, adding 5,000 rupees a month to the 1,800 he earned in a wedding band, but that there was an important difference between these income flows. “My money,” he said, “is the money that is earned with respect.”

It was decided: The village’s women would stop working.

Geeta gathered a war council on the floor of her house. They were a party of seven, including Premwati, Pinki and another neighbor, Rekha. Geeta’s proposal was to ignore Roshan’s ban. If their female neighbors were willing to quit their jobs, it was only out of fear. The fear would fade, maybe in a month, maybe in two. In the meantime, she told her friends, they had the full support of the Indian government.

The government she had in mind was a Muslim politician named Jahiruddin Mewati, who had served as chief of the village of Peepli Khera until a few years earlier, and who was running again in the fall.

Mr. Mewati’s furred belly peeks out of the bottom of his dress shirt, and he has Tourette’s syndrome, so he emits a stream of grunts and tics. In the middle of a conversation, he slammed his hand with great force on the table, exclaiming, “I am on the side of the truth! I am not worried about votes! I am the true servant of the people, because injustice has been done!”

Mr. Mewati’s study of politics, especially the tactics of the British Raj, had persuaded him that there was much to be gained — specifically, votes — by inserting himself into local controversies. With all adult men and women counted, there are about 150 votes in the Nat community, nothing to sneeze at in a district where elections are won by a margin of 20 or 30. When Geeta appeared in his reception area, a collection of plastic chairs arranged under a tree, he smelled opportunity.

“Nobody can stop them from going to work,” he said staunchly. “We don’t have a Taliban here. It’s a democracy.”

Heartened, the women decided they would simply leave for work in the morning. Except, when they did, their neighbors were standing there, telling them to stop.

‘These People Can Beat Me’

“On 18.05.2015 at 9:00 A.M. I was going for work,” reads the report filed at the police station in Kharkhauda, signed with Pinki’s thumbprint and written in the hand of their sponsor, Mr. Mewati.

“These people started saying that we were told not to go to the factory, because bad things are happening at the factory. These people became angry and started abusing me and they threatened to kill me. I request you to lodge my report and take legal action.”

She added, for good measure, “these people can beat me at any time.”

The station officer, Manoj Kumar Singh, took her complaint with a grain of salt. He had seen versions of this drama playing out in other hamlets where young women were leaving for work. The old, patriarchal order was dying in rural India, dying slowly, and releasing toxic bursts as it did.

“That may be the cause of this whole trouble, that they are losing control,” he shrugged. “These old practices are going away.”

When word got out that the women had gone to the police, Roshan’s son Dharmender was the one sent to tell them how they would be punished. He stood in the lane and yelled it over the wall, using the old phrase “Hookah-pani bandh,” a sanction that dates back to medieval times, when sharing a water-pipe packed with tobacco was the prerogative of adult men in rural India. From this point forward all seven women would be outcasts — symbolically denied the hookah, as well as pani, water, from a shared pump.

Geeta, Premwati and their friends tried to wrap their heads around it. As children they had heard of the rite of ostracism — it was used to frighten them into obedience — but they had never seen it imposed. At first they found ways to adjust, avoiding a confrontation with their neighbors by sticking to the lanes and handpumps that had been constructed with government money.

A few days passed before the finger of the punishment touched them. Geeta's teenage niece greeted the girl next door and watched her glide by wordlessly, like a ghost. Rekha dialed the numbers of relatives, one after the other, and when she told them what had happened to her and spoke the phrase "hookah-pani," they hung up.

Then a wedding was held at the home of a neighbor of Geeta's. There was a bus full of well-wishers, rice and dal for families who converged from a constellation of villages. The outcasts could hear the music from their homes.

A delegation had come from Geeta's home village, and it included her mother, Anguri. Geeta remembered her tenderly massaging her legs before sending her away to be married. She thought she was around 10. She had seen her on rare occasions since then.

Geeta offered her mother a glass of water. She refused. Geeta offered her tea. She refused. Geeta invited her in. She refused.

"I feared that if I drank it they would declare me an outcast," her mother said later. "We have no outcasts here. In our community, the elders are supreme."

Geeta's mother began to weep, right there in the road. Then she turned her back and returned to the neighbor's house.

Geeta liked to think of herself as hardened, but this took her by surprise. "She always loved me before this dispute," she said.

Unwilling to cry in front of the neighbors, Geeta turned, walked into her own house, closed the door, and wept.

Living as Outcasts

Dharmender was astounded that the seven women persisted in going to work. The rest of the village's women spent their days collecting firewood, and by mid-July, the piles had grown into towering, tangled masses that threatened to topple over. In the mornings, when Geeta and her friends left for the factories, men lined the roadway and jeered. "Are you going to star in a pornographic movie?" one of them called out.

The whole thing was strange, Dharmender said. The women had been offered a deal, allowing them back in the community if they confessed to "immoral acts" and paid a fine, but they had refused it. Ostracism was such a severe punishment that dissenters usually relented within 24 hours, paying whatever fine the elders demanded. Geeta and her friends had already lived as outcasts for three months. "Who," he wondered aloud, "would be willing to suffer so much?"

The women, too, were in uncharted territory. Every two weeks, they made a trip to the magistrate's court in Meerut to renew a restraining order that the police had recommended, which would impose a 50,000-rupee fine on anyone who resorted to violence.

Their lawyer, Mohammed Yusuf Siddiqui, had rarely sat across his desk from such nervous clients. In his practice, it was not unusual to see state justice conflict with caste justice. One of his clients, who had appealed to court in order to obtain a divorce, had been assigned a punishment by his village council, to spit on the ground and then lick the spit.

Still, there was something unusual about these women, who signed each document with a thumbprint. Mr. Siddiqui watched them curiously.

"They know nothing about court procedure," he said. "They never ask me questions. They just say one thing: 'We are not wrong. We are not wrong. We are not wrong.'"

Premwati, it turned out, had not fully reckoned how much she had to lose. Earlier in the year, she had managed to arrange a marriage for the second of her sons, a muscular teenager named Bhima. She had found a way to secure a bride without

going deeper into debt, enrolling him in a mass wedding sponsored by the government to ease the financial burden on poor families.

Under the circumstances, Bhima was braced for disappointment, but the girl Premwati had found was, improbably, a beauty: her eyes large and luminous, brows arched like a film star. Bhima was boggled with love.

By late July, two months after Premwati was ostracized, that small victory had curdled. The girl, Puja, now an outcast by virtue of her marriage, was not allowed to attend her brother's wedding, and she was wild with anger, crouching on the ground and murmuring to herself. She glowered at Bhima if he so much as put his arm around her. In the evenings, he began to beat her, energetically enough that the neighbors heard.

One hot night, Puja's father swaggered into the family's courtyard, a flask of Besto whiskey and a toy revolver tucked into his waistband, and announced that he was going to take his daughter back to her home village. He lifted one foot and kicked a chunk out of the mud wall that marked the edge of Premwati's homestead.

"All these problems are caused by one woman. I don't want to say her name right now," he said, and turned his bleary gaze to Premwati.

Just like that, the young bride was gone. Puja dressed up on the morning of her departure, putting on the rhinestone-studded kitten-heeled sandals she had worn at her wedding. They kicked up a cloud of dust as she disappeared down the road.

Premwati seemed deflated. The monsoon rains had brought down the wall of her hut in a lumpy mass, and when night fell, clouds of mosquitoes moved in. Now her son, withdrawn into a lovesick funk, blamed her for the breakup of his marriage. She looked exhausted. "I have worked so hard," she said. "But still there is always trouble in the house."

Roshan had followed the sequence of events with satisfaction. These women, he said, were trying to show that they could exist without the community. When he heard that the girl was gone, he smiled.

"Slowly, slowly, they will understand our power," he said.

A Return to Begging

Around the hearths of the Nat women, the ones who had agreed to resign their jobs, pressure was building. They wanted to be loyal to the community elders but by September, stripped of the 200 rupees a day that had been supporting their families, they were running out of money.

Geeta's neighbor, an imposing woman known as Big Suman, surveyed the homesteads one by one with the experienced eye of a general. She had disapproved of Geeta's rebellion, but she grumbled about having to give up her income. One morning, a moneylender stormed down the lane, bellowing, "Give me my money or I will take your bicycle!"

On one of her rounds, Big Suman spotted something peculiar: A widow with grown children was trudging back from the nearest town with a sack of flour balanced on her head. Big Suman did a double-take. She knew what begging looked like. This was an activity — "spreading your hands before strangers" — that the Nats were trying to leave behind.

The widow's story was what she expected. She had run out of flour two days earlier. The thought of going deeper into debt terrified her, so she did not want to approach Roshan, who would lend money but charge interest. She wept, and then she went to beg.

That morning, Big Suman decided the time had come to end it. She visited all the women who had resigned from the factories, stopping by at times when they would not be overheard by Roshan. They agreed that they would break into small groups, leaving when the men slept, and take their case to the one person who could clear the way for them to work again.

When Mr. Mewati, the Muslim politician from down the road, saw the crowd of women enter his courtyard, he perked up. Local elections were two months away and he was feeling lively, like a bear coming out of hibernation. Several days later, at 7:30 one September morning, he bumped down the road in his decrepit Maruti Gypsy jeep, its suspension squeaking as it hit ruts in the road.

He moved with purpose. His shirt was clean and crisply ironed. He parked the Gypsy in front of Roshan's homestead, and a series of Mr. Mewati's male cousins unfolded themselves from the back seat, assuming positions in Roshan's yard. The two headmen sat down on a rope cot, exchanging compliments.

"I am with you with all my heart," Mr. Mewati said.

"I know you are," Roshan said.

"Even if I die, I will support you," Mr. Mewati said.

"I can die, but I cannot fight against you," Roshan said.

Mr. Mewati assembled the villagers and informed them that the Indian Constitution guaranteed equality under the law. Women could not be prevented from working, and Geeta and her friends should be forgiven. Then he withdrew 3,000 rupees in folded bills from his pocket, enough to cover the fine for Geeta's disobedience, and handed it to Roshan.

"Take care of this mess," he said.

The machinery of compromise cranked into motion. Roshan's brother sprinkled sugar on the ground outside the temple, reversing the rite of ostracism. Geeta and her friends lined up and their neighbors embraced them gingerly, barely grazing one another with their arms. Geeta gathered the women to celebrate, and a shoe dangled on a pole above her house, in an ancient symbol of contempt for her accusers.

The matter was unfinished. Some tension flickered in the night. Dharmender, livid at his father's lenience, grabbed Roshan by the shoulders and tried to shove him out of the town square.

"Your mind is not working," he said.

'A Black Mark Has Been Drawn'

It was late at night, two nights later, that the police stationed at Kharkhauda received a report of violence from the village of Peepli Khera.

The officer on duty was Subinspector Ankit Chauhan, a babyfaced 28-year-old. Striding down the center lane into the settlement, heavy loops of khaki braid hanging from each shoulder, the subinspector noted that there were few men present, only a gaggle of women who had, he deduced, spent the last hours exchanging terms of abuse. He recalls examining “scratches and bruises,” nothing serious.

Finally, because he saw the necessity for some kind of action, he detained a short, excitable man, one of several who had been named in a complaint from Geeta, a female resident of the village.

He then gathered the villagers and reminded them that it was necessary to embrace modern life. Subinspector Chauhan recorded this encounter as a constructive, civil one. Then, satisfied that he had performed his duty, he got back into his service vehicle and left the village.

Those who remained could hear the familiar sound as the police car bumped away down the rutted dirt road. Chup chup chup chup chup.

At night, the settlement is engulfed in darkness, oceans of darkness.

The electricity flickers on for a few hours a night, creating pools of light from single bulbs suspended inside each house. Beyond that, for miles around, there are only crickets, stars and sugar cane fields.

Jackals, gray and ghostly, dart in and out of the croplands.

When the sound of the police car had become faint enough, Dharmender and his brothers and his cousins and uncles came back out of the sugar cane field.

Premwati watched them advancing across the village square, some two dozen men closing in. When bricks began to fly, she and her friends ducked inside a house and braced their bodies against the door. Seated on the floor by the light of a candle, Premwati could see the faces of her neighbors, some pressed up against the grill on a window: Those she loved, those in her family, those she had known since childhood.

“They have put a black mark on us,” she said. “It will stay as long as we live together.”

Pinki, whose 4-year-old daughter was trapped outside with the crowd, had begun to sob.

“They said, ‘By morning you will come out,’” Pinki recalled. “They said, ‘We will sit here all night for you.’”

Karim Khan, a Muslim neighbor, rushed over from his sundries shop when he heard about the melee, certainly more excitement than he had gotten from the Nat village in a long time.

“Those women peed their pants from fear and it was running out onto the floor,” he chortled. “They peed their pants! All these men were standing outside and banging on their doors, abusing them. They knew if they fought again, they would be killed.”

Inside the tiny house, Geeta’s friends watched as she dialed the cellphone again and again that night. But the government was not available. Mr. Mewati remained in his compound, about a mile away. He claimed later that his phone’s battery had died and he had been unable to receive calls.

Subinspector Chauhan, for his part, was not in a hurry to return to this corner of his precinct twice in the same night. He found the reports of serious injury to be dubious. Where the Nats were concerned, he reasoned, injuries could be caused by any number of things.

“These people are all drunkards,” he said. “They are so drunk that even if you push one of those guys into a drain, he will fall down. These women try to exaggerate, they say, ‘This person attacked us, that person attacked us.’”

Mr. Siddiqui, their defense lawyer, saw no need to report the incident to the magistrate who had issued the restraining order. Sometimes, he said, it is better to allow a community to settle its own differences rather than initiate a laborious investigation. Anyway, he added, the police are very busy.

“This is a country with 1.4 billion people,” he said. “The police can’t stand behind every single person.”

The women were alone. When it became clear that Geeta’s friends were securely barricaded, Dharmender gathered a few men and made his way to the other end of the village.

Coursing through him, he explained later, was a certain kind of anger that he associated with being part of a mob. He had felt it before; it is gone after 15 minutes. But for that period, anger can make ordinary men strong enough to flip over a truck. Geeta had already called the police, and Dharmender saw no further reason to avoid violence.

Geeta’s husband, Sanjay, was in his undershirt at a neighbor’s house, watching a television serial, the children asleep under mosquito nets. When he looked up he saw that the door was blocked by bodies. He recalls the sight of his niece, slumped beside a drain, crying, and a heavy blow to the back of his head, and then nothing.

Dharmender felt pity as he beat Geeta’s husband: Sanjay was a poor boy, a decent boy. It was not his fault.

“If he was a bad person, we would feel O.K. that he had gotten hurt. But he’s a good guy,” Dharmender said. But the beating was necessary, he said, with a heavy sigh. “Until someone gets hurt, people don’t learn.”

The crowd dispersed some time later, leaving Sanjay unconscious in a pool of blood, with a deep cut on his arm, a slit snaking across a cheekbone, and a red knot on his forehead. His neighbors recalled seeing him lying unconscious on a woodpile. The police, when they finally arrived, recommended that he be taken to the hospital.

Sanjay would spend five days in a hospital bed. He had always been a small and quiet man, but when he returned to the village, he was somehow smaller and quieter. He took to slipping in and out in the half-light, trying to avoid crossing paths with the men who had beaten him.

“Anyone who has beaten you in the night can do it again,” he said.

Geeta, too, had lost her swagger. When people asked about Sanjay, she told them that he had fallen off the roof. She denied that she had been trapped in the house with the other women. She was no longer eager to boast about her campaign against the village council.

“They are powerful,” she said. “They are stronger. They beat us up like dogs.”

On the day Sanjay was discharged, Roshan was lounging with his male relatives on a rope cot outside the temple. The heat was soporific, and beside them, two buffaloes nosed through a pile of dung, quietly grunting.

All told, it had been an expensive night, Roshan said. To avoid criminal charges, he had had to pay 3,000 rupees for Sanjay’s medical care and an additional 4,000 to ensure there would be no investigation. But it was worth it, they all agreed.

Even Roshan’s concession — allowing the women of the village to return to work in the factories — had turned out in his favor. Though the Nat women had headed out almost immediately, nearly all of the factories were now shuttered: China had closed its markets to Indian meat, and Brazil’s currency had declined so sharply that its meat was now cheaper than Indian buffalo.

So that was that. No one was hiring.

Roshan could not help preening a little. “See, in our community, a woman is a woman and a man is a man,” he said. “This is what it is here. Women have lower status and men have higher status.” If any more women propose to challenge that principle, he said, “we will quietly, politely tell them this is not a good thing.”

And that night, as the sun slipped down over the sugar cane, Roshan and the others laughed and laughed.

This story was reported over a five-month period by Ellen Barry in Peepli Khera, Meerut, Alipur, Atrara and Ganeshpur, India. Descriptions of events are based on her firsthand observations, and on dozens of interviews with villagers, law enforcement and legal officials, factory staff members and owners, and local politicians. Ravi Mishra and Hari Kumar provided interpretation and reporting assistance.

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Young Rural Women in India Chase Big-City Dreams

Experiments like one in Bangalore, luring migrants to fill factory jobs, collide with an old way of life that keeps women and girls in seclusion until an arranged marriage.

By ELLEN BARRY SEPT. 24, 2016

BANGALORE, India — The factory floor is going full throttle when the new girls walk in. Everywhere is the thrumming of sewing machines, the hum of fans, the faint burning smell of steam irons. On narrow tables that run between the machines, half-assembled Marks & Spencer miniskirts are thrust forward by fistfuls. The tailors, absorbed in the task of finishing 100 pieces per hour, for once turn their heads to look.

The new girls smell of the village. They have sprinklings of pimples. They woke well before dawn to prepare themselves for their first day of work, leaning over one another's faces in silence to shape the edges of each eyebrow with a razor blade. Their braids bounce to their hips, tight and glossy, as if woven by a surgeon. On their ankles are silver chains hung with bells, so when they walk in a group, they jingle.

But it is impossible to hear this sound over the racket on the factory floor. The tailors glance up for only a moment, long enough to take in an experiment. The new workers — teenagers, most of them — have been recruited from remote villages to help factories like this one meet the global demand for cheap garments. But there is also social engineering going on.

A government program has drawn the trainees from the vast population of rural Indian women who spend their lives doing chores. In 2012, the last time the government surveyed its citizens about their occupation, an astonishing 205 million women between the ages of 15 and 60 responded “attending to domestic duties.”

Economists, with increasing urgency, say India will not fulfill its potential if it cannot put them to work in the economy. They say that if female employment were brought on par with male employment in India, the nation’s gross domestic product would expand by as much as 27 percent.

Experiments like the one in Bangalore run against deep currents in India, whose guiding voice, Mohandas K. Gandhi, envisioned a socialist future built on the small-scale economy of the village. They also collide spectacularly with an old way of life, in which girls are kept in seclusion until they can be transferred to another family through arranged marriage.

Bangalore is the first city the 37 trainee tailors have seen. They are dazzled by the different kinds of light. Picking their way through the alleys around the factory, a column of virgins from the countryside, they stare up at an apartment building that towers over the neighborhood and wish their mothers could see it.

Among them are two sisters, Prabhati and Shashi Das. They have come from a village at the end of a road, a place so conservative that the single time they went to a movie theater, their male cousins and uncles created a human chain around them, their big hands linked, to protect them from any contact with outside men. They are, as far as they know, the first unmarried women who have ever migrated from the village to work.

Neighbors in the village are waiting to see what happens. The nasty ones say, with obvious relish, it will end badly. They whisper about migrant workers whose

eyes were removed by organ traders while they slept. They say Prabhati and Shashi will be “used this way and that.”

Still, they go. Prabhati, at 21, is stubborn and able, and Shashi, two years her junior, pretty and fizzing with suppressed laughter. The two sisters hook pinkies when they walk down the lane that leads to the factory.

“All the flirts and ruffians in the whole world must have been born on this lane,” Shashi grumbles, but she is laughing. Attention is like water to her.

The sisters are waiting, too, to see what will happen to them. They are both at the age when they could be summoned at any moment to be displayed to a family of strangers as a potential daughter-in-law. And each of them wants something else, something impossible.

It is late May, the first day of their factory summer — of love letters folded into squares and dropped onto work stations; of fevers sweated out on the floor of a bare hostel room; of supervisors shouting in a language they do not understand, a couple of words — “work” and “faster” — gradually becoming clear; of capitalism, of men and of a bit of freedom.

Luring Idle Young Women

It all started in March, in the drippy jungle of rural Odisha, when two distant relatives happened to meet on the roadside.

One of the men had found employment as a “mobilizer” for Gram Tarang, a for-profit agency contracted by India’s government to recruit and train workers. He mentioned that Gram Tarang was offering a cash incentive — roughly 450 rupees, or about \$6.75, a head — to mobilizers who identified young women willing to enroll in a training program for garment factory jobs.

The second man, Hemant Das, perked up, sensing the approach of a change of career. Hemant had an underfed look and teeth rimmed with tobacco stains. Among the first college graduates from his family, he had tried his hand at laying bricks, tutoring schoolchildren, programming computers, setting up wedding tents and

waiting tables before finally falling back on the only job widely available to men here, working as a field hand for 200 rupees a day.

Hemant was from a village called Ishwarpur, and as it happened, idle young women were something Ishwarpur had in great quantity. That they could be monetized came as good news.

On its economic merits alone, Hemant figured, the government scheme would prove tempting: After two months of training, their daughters would be placed in a factory in the industrial center of Bangalore, where they would earn the legal minimum wage, 7,187 rupees per month, or about \$108, which is more than most of their fathers make. Six months after arriving in Bangalore, they would be free to return home if they wished.

Hemant set out the next day with a fistful of pamphlets and an uncharacteristically sunny disposition. But as he made his rounds of local families — 30 of them, at least — they shook their heads. No. “Letting go of female children is dishonorable, in itself,” explained Pramanand Das, who presides over an informal family council.

Minati Das, the mother of a 19-year-old, got to the point quicker. “Not everyone wants a daughter-in-law who is a working woman,” she said. “They think she has lost her chastity.”

The village had its own plan for these young women. Upon reaching adulthood, they would be transferred to the guardianship of another family, along with a huge dowry that serves as an incentive to treat them well. The transfer is final. Once married, the new bride cannot return to visit her parents without permission, which is given sparingly, so that the bonds to her old home will weaken.

She must show her submission to the new family: She is not allowed to speak the names of her in-laws, because it is seen as too familiar, and in some places she is not allowed to use words that begin with the same letters as her in-laws’ names, requiring the invention of a large parallel vocabulary. Each morning, before she is allowed to eat, the daughter-in-law must wash the feet of her husband’s parents and then drink the water she has used to wash them.

Hemant would have been completely out of luck if he had not thought to try Karuna Das, who had two daughters of marriageable age. Karuna was a sinewy day laborer, and he had roamed far from the village in his younger days to work in iron foundries in Chennai and Hyderabad. The gossip was that Karuna agreed to enroll his eldest daughters because he was unable to scrape together 100,000 rupees for dowries. That was undoubtedly the case.

It was also true that Karuna did not care much what other people said. He had never behaved like a poor man. When word spread that he had agreed to send Prabhati and Shashi, the village elders convened emergency meetings to determine whether this violated “*purdah*,” or separation between the sexes, and whether this would damage the marriage prospects of their own daughters. Women stopped by to tease the girl’s mother, Radha Rani, who wept inconsolably.

It turned out that Karuna had not been asking for permission. He instructed his daughters to pack four or five changes of clothes. Go see what the world is like, he told them. “They were reluctant to go anywhere because they were a bit scared,” he said. “I told them being scared is O.K. O.K., you’re scared. Now you have to move on.”

First Train Ride

Prabhati has never seen a train, much less ridden in one, and on the 33-hour journey to Bangalore the earth seems to heave under her. As miles of paddy fields slide by, she vomits. Thatch roofs are replaced by peaked roofs, and she vomits. When they reach south India, rain begins to hit the window in fat spatters.

It had come as news to Prabhati that the training program involved traveling 900 miles. But some intention had hardened within her. She wanted to prove the neighbors wrong. She did not care about her marriage prospects because, after examining the marriages that surrounded her in Ishwarpur, she decided she did not want to marry at all.

“I will go to Bangalore,” she told her parents. “If I come back, then you can get me married. If I don’t come back, you can’t get me married.”

Shashi sits beside her retching sister and strokes her back. She had not wanted to come. Happy enough with a future as a housewife, she had focused her energy on making mischief. Among friends, she introduced herself as “45 kilograms of hotness.” Out of the corner of her mouth came a stream of dirty jokes, and she made the other girls dissolve in helpless laughter by comparing breast sizes to vegetables (including, mournfully, a kernel of corn).

Working on an assembly line was not Shashi’s idea of fun. But Prabhati plunged forward, and, as usual, Shashi cruised along in her wake.

The sisters, lugging a bag of clothes, sit with 35 other girls from Odisha who are making the same journey.

They have all dressed in baggy purple-and-gray uniforms, with ID cards swinging from their necks. Their parents had made last-minute attempts to keep them from leaving, which had to be repelled with sustained tantrums. A girl called Baby, who is 18 and bespectacled, said that she had secured her mother’s permission only by refusing to eat for two days.

“They wanted me to come home,” she says. “I’m not going home.”

The Gram Tarang instructors had taught them an anthem about self-sufficiency, and they sing it on their journey to Bangalore, again and again, for comfort.

*We will stay a month and train ourselves
This job is the story of our lives
The job is as important as prayer
We won’t fear, and we will go ahead.*

The sun has not yet risen when they arrive at the hostel that will be their new home for the next six months: 137 women in 15 unfurnished rooms, every inch covered with girlish flotsam, underwear and bras drying on the window grates, sentimental verses penciled on the walls.

Prabhati and Shashi’s room is being painted, so on the first night 25 of them crowd into two rooms, so tight that one of their roommates stretches out on the

kitchen counter. “I thought there would be beds,” murmurs one, and the chaperone from Gram Tarang looks exasperated.

“They complain, ‘You could have given us this, you could have given us that,’” he says. “We sweetly explain that it is not possible. They don’t have the bed system in Bangalore.”

But the girls are too keyed up to sleep. Climbing onto the roof, they can see the sun rising over a landscape of other roofs, where, in all directions, migrants seek a breath of quiet. There they can gaze up at the 22nd story of an apartment building, where residents come out to hang their laundry on balconies. It is the most amazing thing they have ever seen: big people looking tiny.

“I want to see what I haven’t seen,” murmurs one of the girls, sleepily. “I want to see what I don’t even know exists.”

Baby says something about her eventual return to India, and when someone corrects her, she looks up sharply.

“Bangalore is in India?” she asks.

Unlearning Village Lessons

For the first few weeks, everything is new. Stepping out of the hostel, the trainees are surrounded by men: Men on balconies, men on scooters, men lounging in doorways, staring. The road is plastered with signs saying “tailors wanted,” and one girl gives a yelp of alarm, mistaking them for wanted posters.

On the day of a Hindu festival, Prabhati peers down from the roof at a troupe of transgender dancers, smiling and twitching suggestively as men press in around them. When one bends down so that an onlooker can stick a folded bill in her cleavage, Prabhati is so shocked that she has an impulse to reach for a stone and throw it.

“If this happened in the village,” she says, “you would all be dead.”

In rural Odisha they like to say that “a girl’s shyness is her jewelry.” But here, there is no space for the newcomers unless they make space for themselves. To cross the street — a throbbing two-lane road coursing with auto rickshaws, clattering cargo trucks, scooters carrying whole families — requires stepping in front of the slower-moving vehicles, if necessary stopping them with their bodies. The girls waver, and then they plunge.

Much of what they learned in the village must be unlearned here. One evening when Baby begins preparing dinner, several of her roommates protest. She is menstruating, and caste tradition dictates that menstruating women must live in isolation, sleeping alone and taking care not to step into the kitchen, lest they contaminate the food and water. So two of the younger roommates cook, emerging an hour later with a glutinous, inedible glop. At this point, Baby is irritated. Menstruating women are allowed to work in the factory, aren’t they? She walks into the kitchen, and the scent of spices and onions fills the room. After a brief discussion, they agree that the menstruation rules will be void for as long as they are living in Bangalore. Then they stuff themselves with food and fall into a deep sleep.

When they are introduced to a factory supervisor and dive to touch her feet, a traditional gesture of respect toward elders, the supervisor jumps back as if she has been stuck with a hot poker. She then assumes a slight crouch, as if preparing to defend herself from further reverence.

Back in their bedrooms, the girls laugh hysterically at this. From childhood, they have been told that it is disrespectful for a girl to laugh out loud in the presence of elders. In the event of irrepressible laughter, girls must cover their mouths with anything at hand: the corner of a dupatta, a hand, a washcloth. This lesson, too, flies out the window. In the hostel they laugh like tractors. They laugh so loud they spit their water out.

Low Wages, Long Hours

“I’m giving you 25 seconds to thread this needle,” the supervisor says in Hindi. The recruits, whose native language is Oriya, barely understand. Thirty-seven tailors bend their heads, trying to guide frayed threads through a maze of eight loops.

At the K. Mohan & Company Exports Private Limited, the girls have entered a world of machines: massive industrial extractors, laser cutters, a rapid-response protocol that kicks in when a needle tip breaks off.

And yet, incredibly, garments worn in the West are still made by humans — nearly all of them women, working exhausting hours, with few legal protections and little chance of advancement, for some of the lowest wages in the global supply chain.

As the trainees practice sewing straight lines on pieces of scrap fabric, supervisors pace the aisle, hoping to spot one with machinelike dexterity and speed. One of them slows, and then stops, beside a girl called Cuddles, the daughter of a truck driver. The supervisor blinks, looks again. This is — there is no other word for it — talent. She has covered the fabric with seams as straight as the lines on ruled notebook paper.

Cuddles is among the first in the group to be integrated into an assembly line, bent over, eyes straining. Her task is to stitch together three small tags for the Marks & Spencer stretch corduroy skirt: one that identifies the brand, one that gives washing instructions and one the size, a scrap so tiny that it is nearly impossible to hold straight between finger and thumb. If she allows a tag to slip to the floor, or fly away in the gusts from the ceiling fan, her salary will be docked. She will be under pressure to complete this task 100 times per hour for eight hours, with one half-hour break for lunch, for a base daily wage of around \$2.

A man with a loft of dyed black hair steps out of his office to greet the group. This is N. Manjunath, the assistant general manager for human resources at the factory. He is recruiting rural workers through the government program because he is desperate: City-dwellers are no longer interested in factory jobs like these, with their low pay and punishing conditions, and attrition rates are high. Migrant women are more docile. This is what Manjunath is hoping.

Prabhati, Shashi and the other recruits take seats in a canteen, and sit with their hands folded in their laps. They are to work every day but Sunday. They can collect their pension in 40 years. Should they die on the job, state health insurance will cover funeral costs.

They are drowsy. The numbers fly by them in flocks. When a response is expected, they chorus “Yes, miss,” or “Yes, sir,” as they would to a schoolmaster.

Any questions?

“Can we work on Sundays?”

Manjunath thinks of himself as a kind man. But the complications of employing village girls have strained his last nerve: the weepy petitions for leave to return to the village for essential functions, like a father having a hemorrhoid removed; the domestic squabbles, which on one occasion ended in the consumption of toilet cleaner; and the “love cases,” in which a tailor, upon forming a romantic attachment in the factory, is summarily ordered home.

Lately, when the girls come to him with complaints, he listens skeptically, with a sardonic smile. He assesses this latest batch of recruits, the second from Odisha, as “lackadaisical.” He believes they have come here for an adventure, and will gravitate back to the village as soon as their parents tell them to come home.

He is right to worry. After six months on the job, when the government incentives are paid out, around half the trainees brought in by Gram Tarang return to their villages. Only 40 percent stay longer than a year.

It comes down to this: If the village has a plan for the girls, so does the factory. Leading them through the rows of machines, Manjunath wags his finger.

“Don’t get married too soon,” he warns them.

Dreaming of Love

Within two weeks of their arrival, one of the sisters’ roommates has eloped straight from the factory gates, not even stopping by the hostel to pick up her clothes. Those who remain spill their secrets to one another. Tanushree Behera sleeps entangled with a girl she calls her wife. Jayasmita Behera is divorced, having left her husband less than two weeks after the wedding.

“If I had stayed,” she says, “my life would have been destroyed.”

The rest spend their evenings in quiet conversation with boyfriends, whose existence is unknown to their parents. They examine each other's palms for creases that indicate they will be among the small number of Indians — as low as 5 percent, according to one survey — who marry for love. At the factory, they stitch their boyfriends' names on scrap fabric. Male tailors stroll by as they work, dropping love letters folded into fat wads, and the girls read them aloud, to comic effect, at the hostel. "My dear, my lever," someone writes to Shashi in broken English. "I have tied you up in my heart."

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, they compare notes on evasive maneuvers they use to avoid being shown to prospective in-laws, like Roadrunner slipping away from Wile E. Coyote. Shradhanjali Mallick, the beauty among them, says she used to have success with bouts of hysterical crying, but that moving to Bangalore has been more effective. "How can they marry me off if I am not physically present?" she asks innocently, and Prabhati laughs. "Let them hold a wedding of mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law," she says. "Because that's the only kind of wedding they will be able to pull off."

This is not something Prabhati can laugh about at home. Her views on marriage were set in stone several years back, when a young wife in her village was set on fire in a domestic dispute. Prabhati has been arguing for years that she should be allowed to remain single, that her parents should proceed to fixing a marriage for Shashi, who is pretty and will get better offers. "I will become a nun," she says. But her parents flick away her comment, casually, as if it were a fly. So she thinks of escape.

This is a subject she cannot discuss with her sister. Three years ago, Prabhati came across a mobile phone that a secret boyfriend gave Shashi as a way of keeping in touch, rigged, as if for espionage, with no audible sound or light, to be switched on at times when they have agreed to speak. Prabhati snatched the phone away and informed her father. Shashi screamed at her father that day — don't break that phone! — but she never saw it again. For months, she could not look him in the eye.

The sisters were never as close again. When it comes to the future, Prabhati and Shashi keep their own counsel.

Praying for Sunday

By the first week of June, the new girls are praying for Sunday to arrive. Their joints hurt. Their backs hurt. They come home from the factory with fingers punctured by needles or sliced by industrial clippers. Sitting still for eight hours is strange and new, and at times, the boredom is maddening. They sing to their machines. They pull hairs out of their chins. Baby amuses herself by giving herself little scratches on the wrist.

They are locked into the hostel except for “out passes” on alternate Sundays, which are granted by the factory human resources staff. A Gram Tarang “life skills” instructor makes the rounds inside the hostel, selling them 600-rupee jars of an Herbalife energy drink, which she tells them will help them keep up with the pace of work in the factory. It does give them energy — it includes caffeine and maltodextrin — but it also gives them diarrhea and eats up their remaining cash. This is no small problem, because they are running out of money for food.

They count the days until June 10, when they will be paid for their first two weeks of work. Prabhati and Shashi, who had left home with 5,000 rupees, or about \$75, find themselves with 100 rupees between them. “If there’s no salary today, it’s going to be a problem,” Prabhati says.

On June 10, they are not paid. Three more days pass, and they still are not paid. Outside the factory window the sky has turned black and the air is churning; a curtain of monsoon rain is about to sweep in.

About 15 girls walk into Manjunath’s office, hearts pounding, to demand their pay. He looks up from his desk, annoyed. The usual genial expression has vanished from his face. He explains that he cannot solve their problem: The company has opened bank accounts for them, but the bank has not delivered their A.T.M. cards. Anyway, he dismisses the suggestion that the girls are running out of money. And who, he wonders, has given them the idea that they can make demands? He surveys the group in search of its leader.

“My clear understanding is that if you have a basket of fruits and only one is not good, it will spoil the other fruit,” he explains. “You have to take one out.”

When Jayasmita steps forward to say they have not eaten since yesterday, he swivels his head in her direction. He does not speak Oriya. “What did she say?” he asks a caseworker.

The girls are promised an advance for rice and are ordered to leave his office. They shuffle out. They had been planning to stop working unless they were paid immediately, but their strike has lasted less than five minutes. Jayasmita slumps against a wall, and vows never to try anything like that again.

“When you come to a new city,” she says, “you have to learn to care for yourself, and not bother with others.”

The money for the first two weeks’ work comes through three or four days later — after withholdings for pension, health insurance, lodging, food and kitchen furnishings, a grand total of 1,874 rupees, or roughly \$28. This sum must last them for the next month. In the hostel room where Prabhati and Shashi stay, the amount of the paycheck is not relevant. They have never earned money before, only asked their fathers for it. A wave of happiness washes over all of them. They do not feel like girls, they say: They feel like boys.

They transfer credit — 30 rupees, 50 rupees — to the cellphones of their mothers, brothers, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law and boyfriends, as if they were distributing sweets to celebrate some windfall.

Unable to wait, they call their families from cubbyhole A.T.M.s to share the news. This is not always welcome. Cuddles transfers a balance of 50 rupees to her father’s phone, but he considers it shameful to accept money from a daughter. He calls her, angrily, to say, “Never do that again.” Cuddles doesn’t care; she has never been so happy.

Prabhati and Shashi are among the last to receive their A.T.M. cards. They find a bank machine in between Krishna Jewelers & Pawnbrokers and Blooming Buds India Playschool. Leaving the A.T.M., Prabhati feels joy, but she is not the type of person who shows it. She scans the street, looking for some way to celebrate, and finally asks a man if she can borrow his bicycle for a moment. She climbs on top of it

and pedals as hard as she can, her braid flying behind her. Then, taking note of his look of worry, she swings the bicycle around and returns it to its owner.

Shashi dances down the stairs and most of the way home. The money sends a wild thrill through her, so that she wishes she could fast-forward through the next month, and the month after that, and after that. So that life is a long string of paydayes.

The two sisters make a pact: They will stay in Bangalore at least a year. They spend much of their paychecks on nose rings for each other, tiny specks of 22-carat gold. They place them on each other in front of their roommates, beaming, their faces so close together that they could be kissing.

Then Prabhati lies down on her stomach, full length, cheek to the cool linoleum. She is not feeling well.

Among the First to Falter

It is strange that one of the first girls to falter is Prabhati, who was the most resolute about staying in Bangalore.

She has contracted a fever that comes and goes for two weeks. She stops eating and then stops talking; her eyes are so hollow that you could place a handful of rice in them. Shashi stays home, combing her sister's hair and forcing her to bathe.

But then she must return to work, and Prabhati is left shivering on the floor. "In city life," Prabhati says, "even if you are dead, people will just get dressed and go to the factory without being bothered."

Minati Mahji, who has lived in the hostel for six years, observes them wearily. Of 130 women who arrived at the same time, only she and her four roommates have stuck it out. She tried switching to another factory, but it was no better, and she wound up back in the hostel. Her pay has crept up to 9,800 rupees, or \$146 per month.

She has seen wave after wave of young women arrive from the countryside, freshly hatched, and she knows how it usually ends — with the girl's disappearance

into that old world as a daughter-in-law. “Whatever they are planning, it doesn’t happen like that,” she says.

Even through her fever, Prabhati knows she wants to stay. She tries to keep her illness from her family, handing her crisp new 500-rupee bills to a street-corner doctor who seems to give all his injections in the buttocks. It is Shashi who tells their father that her sister is sick. Her father calls the Gram Tarang training center, demanding that Prabhati be sent home, and the training center calls the factory.

On the day she is to board a train to return to Ishwarpur, Prabhati stands at the edge of the roof, tears streaming down her face, and watches her younger sister walk down the lane toward the factory.

The mood in the hostel sags. “The day she left, she told me: ‘I told you I would stay a year. And I couldn’t even stay for two months,’ ” Jayasmita recounts.

Minati doubts Prabhati will return. The family, having violated custom once by letting the daughters go, is not likely to do it twice. “People mean to come back,” Minati says. “But they don’t come back.”

On the assembly line, someone covers Prabhati’s sewing machine with plastic sheeting. Three weeks later, two burly men come to push it to an area marked “idle machines.”

Just like that, Prabhati is back in her mother’s thatch hut, feeding kindling into a clay oven. Coming home is like falling into cotton. Rice is sprouting up through great reflective planes of water, so vivid it hurts your eyes to look at it.

The neighbors stop by, seeking an outcome to the family’s experiment. “So, are your daughters back from their jobs?” asks one, in a voice thick with self-satisfaction.

Prabhati’s mother, Radha Rani, takes her to a country witch, who traces shapes around her head with a broom and declares that someone has cast an evil eye on her. He blows on her, a holy wind. Outside there is the smell of things growing. Prabhati sleeps as if she is under a spell. When she calls her sister, hoping to arrange for her return to Bangalore, Shashi sounds far away.

Becoming a City Girl

It turns out factory life agrees with Shashi. She has been absorbed into an assembly line expected to produce 100 pairs of khaki chinos an hour. In the morning she takes her seat among hillocks of pants, and spends the next eight and a half hours in a work-trance, punctuated by the shouting of supervisors and a half-hour break for lunch. A whiteboard lists the per-hour target. They are always behind.

Behind her in the assembly line, a potbellied man in his late 30s peppers her with the gustatory queries that pass for small talk in south India. Have you eaten today? Are you hungry? Do you want to eat more? She swivels in her chair to ask him, “Would you like me to shove these pants down your throat?”

Shashi finds it interesting that she, the screw-up in the family, is the one becoming a city person. She examines her face in the mirror for signs that she is becoming paler. She tells the family that Prabhati should not return, and that she cannot send money home this month. Instead, Shashi arranges for a meeting with Sunil, a boy from a neighboring village whom she wants to marry.

Six years ago, when Sunil first asked Shashi to meet him in person, she was escorted by a female cousin and was too shy to look at Sunil’s face. When he sat on the chair, she would go to the bed. When he went to the bed, she would go to the chair. Finally he told her to stop and listen. She sat still. Whatever it was he said to her, it made her feel that he was her own.

“I love him, you know?” she says. “I do not know whether he is good or bad.”

Since that day three years ago when Prabhati discovered the cellphone Sunil had given her, Shashi has been proceeding cautiously with a plan to persuade her parents to agree to her choice for a husband. She and Sunil have chosen names, Situ and Sukhi, for a girl and boy. “If I work for a long time,” she says, “and I really insist on it, there is a chance.”

Now that her sister is gone, it is no longer necessary for Shashi to keep this a secret. It is a blessed relief, like taking off a shoe that is cutting into a tender part of your foot.

On the August day when her third paycheck comes in, Shashi doesn't tell anyone what she has planned. Leaving the hostel means breaking curfew, but she persuades her friends to go with her. The small group threads its way along the darkening street, past rotting cauliflower and coconut shells. The girls are headed to a bright shop where smartphones are displayed in glass cases.

The shopkeeper is about 25, his shirt unbuttoned to reveal a glint of gold chain. He has seen many girls like these, provincials, fishing out coins at the vegetable market. He does not hide his disdain. But when Shashi announces that she wants to buy a 4,000-rupee Lava A59 smartphone, he is suddenly wide awake, respectful.

Shashi's face is a mask of concentration as she repeatedly counts the bills and arranges them into a fan to show the shopkeeper. The girls around her are hushed. The amount is more than half her month's pay. It is the weightiest decision she has ever made.

When they step back onto the street, something flickers across Shashi's face — triumph — and she pumps her fist. Back at the hostel, she drops her new purchase into the hands of her roommates, who immediately go through it, looking for WhatsApp, which they discovered the week before.

Sunil will be calling soon. He has been badgering Shashi to make this purchase so she can send pictures over the internet. She disappears into the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She is gone a long time. She lies for a moment on the floor, staring at the ceiling. Then she dials a number in the village.

“Elder sister,” she says. “I got my phone!”

Not the New Girls Anymore

September has arrived, and every day there is a new reason Prabhati cannot return to Bangalore. Her mother has stomach cramps. Her younger siblings' tuition bills are due. No adult male is available to accompany her on the train journey. Prabhati mentally reviews the cost of the ticket: 1,350 rupees for the train, 300 more for the auto rickshaw from Majestic Station. She jokes, a little nervously, that she should

steal the money. A voice in her head tells her that if she doesn't go now, she never will.

And yet that voice is becoming fainter. She can feel the village's drowsy peace overtaking her. Her mother says, in an offhand way, that it is time to start finding a groom. This is not how it was supposed to go. Shashi ensconced in the city, and Prabhati stuck in Ishwarpur. "Before, I was at home, and I didn't know anything, and it was O.K.," she says, dully. "Now I know something, and it's not O.K."

Back in Bangalore, the factory girls' fathers have begun to call. They expect them to come home on leave in December, after the six-month factory stint is up.

Jayasmita's father says a marriage proposal has come from a man in Cattuck. "I tell them I'm not going anywhere," she says. "The moment I heard talk about marriage, I hung up." Shradhanjali says she will return, and plans to wriggle out of yet another proposal. "If possible, I'll fight it off," she says, but sounds uncertain.

"You know where you'll find her in a year?" Jayasmita says, teasingly. "At her in-laws."

The factory girls seem less afraid every month.

Shashi sees her boyfriend, Sunil, as planned. He takes the overnight train in from Kerala, where he has migrated for work. They meet at a nearby gas station and walk in a park for most of the day, holding hands. At 4 p.m., he returns to the train station and boards another overnight train back to Kerala. She uses Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate with him, as if the internet were two tin cans attached by a piece of twine. Every time they get into a fight, she uninstalls the apps.

Her smartphone has become an appendage. She presses it to her ear while she is walking down the lane, striding over rats flattened into the pavement. Waking in the night, she rolls over and checks it for new messages. A group of her friends are toying with the idea of leaving the hostel, seeking higher-paid work at another factory.

She is amazed at how far she has come.

On an outing last Sunday, she arranged to meet a male cousin, another migrant worker, and a group of them strolled together at the edge of a highway overpass, breathing in the exhaust from 12 lanes of traffic. They don't have money to step into a restaurant, so they sit on a pipe on the ground outside a Toyota dealership, in the bright sunshine, comparing phones.

That's another thing: Shashi and her friends are not the new girls anymore. The new girls are arriving from Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. Their braids are tight and glossy. Dropping their bags in their rooms, they climb up to the roof to gaze at the 22-story building, which is the most amazing thing they have ever seen.

Their eyes widen at the girls from Odisha, in their jeans and T-shirts. The girls from Odisha regard them with friendly condescension. They invite them into their rooms, as if they've been here forever.

This article was reported over four months by Ellen Barry in Bangalore and Ishwarpur, India. Descriptions of events are based on her firsthand observations and on dozens of interviews. Andrea Bruce contributed reporting assistance. Jennifer Harrison provided interpretation.

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