

A one-room school building has been Balqis's home for the past 15 years. The ramshackle structure, which stands amid a grove of Kikar trees, has neither doors nor window frames. Located on the outskirts of Madhi village in Haryana's Nuh district 60 km from the national capital, it is all that Balqis has by way of shelter. A monthly old-age pension of ₹1,800 and the occasional wages she gets for washing dishes at weddings are her only sources of income.

Balqis, now in her late 50s, sits outside the building, thread basting a lap quilt. She takes a deep breath before she begins her story. Three decades ago, she, along with her then five-year-old son, was tricked by their family's domestic help into travelling to a village in Nuh on the pretext attending a family function. Once they reached Nuh, she was sold to a man, a Nat by caste (traditionally a community of jugglers and entertainers), for ₹2,500.

Salim Khan, a Nuh-based social activist, says that Balqis Tai (Tai is 'aunt' in Haryanvi) was from a well-settled Pathan family in Bidar, Karnataka, and was married to a bus driver at the time she was trafficked. Left stranded in Nuh with neither money nor the means to return to her parents in Bidar, she resigned herself to her fate.

"Those were simple times. The women were too naive and innocent," sighs Balqis, who was surrounded by some of her grandchildren. Four of them are in school, while the eldest, a girl of around 18, got married three years ago. Balqis's only son, Karim, is illiterate and works as a daily-wager. Her daughter-in-law is expecting her 14th child in a few months.

Jaleva, the man who 'purchased' Balqis, was already married but childless. "He frequently beat me up and made me do all the household chores. He also maltreated and abused my son," she recalls in a matter-of-fact manner. She and her son were thrown out of the house after 15 years of marriage when it became clear that she could not bear a child. She had to fend for herself without any source of income. Jaleva has since bought and married two more women.

Led by Khan's father, affectionately known as Deena sarpanch, villagers then helped arrange the abandoned school building as a makeshift shelter for the distraught woman and her son. But the room has now been partially encroached by local 'dabangs', or musclemen, who have begun using it to store cattle fodder, leaving little space for the family. Karim recently erected a 'kachcha' room adjoining the building to accommodate his growing family.

Demand for cheap labour

Shafiq R. Khan, the founder of 'Empower People', a non-governmental organisation (NGO), has been working with trafficked women in Nuh since 2007. He emphasises the point that the need for cheap labour is the single biggest factor behind the demand for trafficked women in Nuh and other parts of Haryana. The heavily skewed sex ratio in the State (879 females per 1,000 males, as per the 2011 Census) further sharpens the demand.

"Inadequate irrigation facilities and large-scale animal farming are the two reasons for the enormous demand for cheap labour in Nuh," says Shafiq. "In fact, there is a big demand for labour across the agricultural States of Haryana and Punjab."

Elderly and physically/mentally challenged men are also among the buyers of women, as they fail to find a match locally. The women are usually trafficked from Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam and West Bengal. Widespread poverty and lack of employment opportunities have made them the preferred 'source States' for traffickers.

These women, who are each purchased for around ₹40,000-50,000, are in the prime of their life and often end up being sexually exploited at home and used as cheap labour in the fields. The patriarchal nature of society in Haryana ensures that even local women do not get to own land or have a say in family and social matters. So it is almost inconceivable for the trafficked women, derogatorily addressed as 'Paro' or 'Molki' (the term for 'purchased'), to seek these rights. They rarely participate in local customs and cannot even dream of visiting their natal family or village after 'marriage'. Though most of these women, especially those from West Bengal and Assam, are non-vegetarian, they are forced to adjust to vegetarian food habits that are prevalent in Haryana. Those in nuclear families may enjoy relatively more autonomy within the family, but not in the society at large.

Downward spiral

Separated from their loved ones in their early teens, often sold multiple times and repeatedly abused and assaulted for years, the women discover, as they reach menopausal age, that they have an even tougher future awaiting them. In their late forties, with their physical strength on the wane and men beginning to lose interest in them, they become 'unwanted'. As the men begin to look for younger girls, the older women are abandoned along with their children. And no one – civil society, the political class or the local administration – comes to their rescue.

Those who are widows have a similar fate. Denied both property rights and



Picking up the threads: There have been efforts to develop community support for the trafficked women. In some instances this has led to the organisation of village communes that are managed and led by the survivors. Picture shows a survivor from a village in Haryana. •R.V. MOORTHY

The ‘outsiders’ of Haryana

Trafficked into Haryana in their teens, they were sexually exploited and physically abused all through their youth before being abandoned by their ‘husbands’ in their middle age. **Ashok Kumar** reports on the plight of the hundreds of survivors of trafficking, some elderly, who, in the absence of any support from the local administration or civil society, have been left to fend for themselves



social acceptance, these women are left to fight their own battles, with little access to government schemes meant for the poor and the widowed. To make matters worse, most are illiterate and do not have identity documents. Even their children, especially the daughters of these women, are not socially accepted. The boys find it difficult to get a local match.

She fought back

About 30 years ago, Manisha, 50, a native of Nanded in Maharashtra, was sold to a man who was more than twice her age. Her struggle over the decades typifies the plight of innumerable such women who become destitutes in their twilight years.

Unlike other women, Manisha had a relatively better life as long as her husband, Kishan Chand, was alive. But after he passed away, her in-laws tried to get her killed in order to grab her property. "My husband's brothers hired goons to abduct and kill me," she says, wiping her tears. "When it did not work, they overpowered me one day, tied me up and tried to run a tractor over me. This happened seven years ago."

A scar on her left hand bears silent testimony to the brutality she has endured. Had it not been for the Muslim families in the village who came to her rescue on hearing her screams, the goons would have killed her that day, she says.

Pushed to the wall, Manisha decided to fight back. Refusing to be subdued, she sold her husband's land and opened a fixed deposit with the money. "I filed a case of attempt to murder against my in-laws and spent a good amount of money fighting it, but they got away scot-free," she says. "I now work as a daily wager. For the past two years, I have been getting ₹1,800 a month as widow pension. The 5 kg of wheat from the government ration shop is also a great help." She has been staying in a rented room in Sakras village since the time she was forced out of her own home after her husband passed away.

Communes for the survivors

'Empower People' has also been trying to develop community support for the

trafficked women and build solidarity among them. It has organised some of them into village communes that are managed and led by the survivors themselves. These communes, which number around 100, run skill centres where trafficked women can meet and form bonds of support and solidarity with other women. Ten survivors have also been joined these communes as paralegal volunteers under the watch of Nuh's District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). The women are paid ₹400 per day when on DLSA duty, which is subject to a maximum of 10 days a month.

There is also the story of Sabiha. Trafficked from Bihar when she was 11, Sabiha, now in her late 30s, has over the last three years transformed herself and taken on a new identity as a community leader, leading a commune, and paralegal volunteer. She now meets senior officers from the police, the judiciary and the local administration and commands respect among the trafficked women. "I now know that I can approach the police in case my husband beats me up, and that it is a crime," she says. "I interact with women from Kansali and the neighbouring villages of Moolthan and Kareada to discuss their issues. We hold small meetings to inform them about their rights and the legal recourse available to them."

Sabiha, a mother of four, was trafficked by her neighbour in Bihar more than two decades ago. He sold her to Mobin, who was 20 years older. She be-

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SALIM KHAN, Nuh-based social activist



Salim Khan interacting with some of the survivors in Mewat district in Haryana •R.V. MOORTHY

came a mother at 13. Her family managed to trace her a few years ago but it was too late by then. "Mobin used to regularly beat me up," Sabiha says. "But the violence and the abuse has become less frequent after I became a community leader." While Mobin stays at home, the household runs on what she earns.

Sabiha also helps trafficked women get identity cards through the village panchayat so that they can claim the benefits of various government schemes. She feels that it is the elderly women among the survivors who have had the toughest life and that they are "better off dead". In support of her opinion she says that most of the older women, who are disowned by their husbands and families, are often uneducated and work as daily wagers to make both ends meet. They mostly live on the charity of others, she adds.

"Not all of them are able to access government schemes such as old age and widow pension," she says. "Most do get rations from government shops, but that is inadequate," she adds. Of the 25 women she knows, around seven do not have the requisite documents.

"If we take the entire Nuh district for instance, at least 33% of elderly trafficked women are without any government support," adds Khan. Given that there are an estimated 12-13 trafficked women in a village of 250 families, the number of such abandoned elderly women in Nuh alone, which has over 400 villages, could run into several hundred. "For Haryana as a whole, this figure could easily run into the thousands," he says.

Even those who avail of government schemes are mostly enrolled only for pension or widow schemes and subsidised rations. Says Shafiq: "As they do not have voter identity cards, they are deemed as outsiders and excluded from

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SHAFIQ R. KHAN, Founder, 'Empower People'

schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, insurance schemes, and the distribution of plots under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana [for affordable housing for the poor]. Not a single trafficked woman in Nuh has received a plot in any government scheme."

Still in denial

The plight of the survivors was even more dire before 'Empower People', in association with the local administration, launched a special campaign, in 2010, to prepare identity cards for them. The NGO, through its village communes, generated official identities for the survivors by registering them in local government records as the wives of the men who were claiming them as spouses. It also managed to persuade the husbands to transfer a portion of their land to the women. Several of the survivors now own land gifted to them by the men who had bought them.

Says Shafiq: "Another scheme, known as 'Pahal', reached out to trafficked women with the aim of making identity cards for them. But it lost steam following a lack of response from the local administration." The NGO now plans to make one of the survivors contest the Assembly elections in 2019. "This is not about winning or losing," he says. "It is just to make a statement that these women also belong to society and that they too can do what the locals do and even contest elections. We came close to doing this in 2014, but our candidate bowed to local pressure and withdrew."

While it is not exactly known when Nuh became a trafficking hub, Shafiq claims to have met a woman who had been sold as early as in 1947. The phenomenon appears to have abated considerably in recent years, primarily because of an increase in divorce rates and the reports of ill-treatment that local women face. "Since the men had the option of buying women from elsewhere, their marriages with local women did not last long. The locals have realised this and are now opposing trafficking," he says. "We now get support from villagers in our battle against trafficking. This was not the case a few years ago. Greater awareness in the 'source States' such as Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam and Uttar Pradesh has also

helped to fight the menace."

Villagers, however, are still reluctant to acknowledge the problem. Former Madhi sarpanch Hazi Muse Khan claims that he has never heard of any woman being trafficked to his village. He adds that even if a woman was ever brought from outside, she would have been "treated like a flower".

The political class too avoids talking about the controversial issue lest it angers the local community. This has resulted in corporates staying away from funding projects that help the trafficked women, as they are anxious to remain in the good books of politicians. This, says Shafiq, has made the job of social activists and NGOs even more difficult. "The resources are scarce. I could not arrange for enough funds to even get a study on the subject published," he says. "Sometimes I feel like quitting."

Shafiq lays stress on the fact that the magnitude of the problem in the case of ageing and abandoned victims of trafficking is far greater than that of the widows of Vrindavan or Varanasi. The judiciary and society at large have at least recognised the problem with regard to the Vrindavan widows and even come to their rescue, he says. But elderly trafficked women here continue to suffer in silence.

Earlier this year, 'Empower People' organised a long march against trafficking. The campaign began on March 25 in Assam and ended in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh on June 1, covering 70 trafficking-prone districts in 10 States. Despite all the efforts being made to raise awareness on the issue, human trafficking, which is a crime under the Indian Penal Code, remains grossly under-reported.

National Crime Records Bureau data for 2016 show that only 149 victims were trafficked in Haryana, which included 97 females. Similarly, a total of 108 victims of human trafficking were rescued, including 80 females. Of those rescued, the highest number (46) had been trafficked for sexual exploitation, prostitution (27), begging (8), forced marriage (6) and one each for organ theft and forced labour. Nineteen had been trafficked for other reasons.

As for Balqis, like the hundreds of other trafficked women, she still hopes to see her parents and siblings before she breathes her last. While memories of her early life have faded, she does remember that she had six siblings (three brothers and three sisters) and that she was the middle child. "Had I been not trafficked, my life would have been so different. But I do not want to blame anyone now. It was, perhaps, my destiny," she says, getting back to working on her lap quilt in preparation for the approaching winter.

The names of the trafficked women and their family members have been changed to protect their identity