

# Untouchable dreams

A village girl from the lowest caste in India survived a childhood of discrimination and domestic abuse to pursue education and bring hope to those who raised her.

by ZACH WALKER

Manisha stared at the stanzas of “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost under a solar lantern. The electricity in her home was out, like it was every day between 7 a.m. and 11 a.m. She mumbled the 20 lines of the American poem in English until she could speak it from memory like her teacher wanted.

She recited it perfectly in her ninth-grade classroom at the Government High School in Titram, a rural village in Haryana, the next day. She spoke in front of the same classmates who wouldn’t drink water if she helped the teacher deliver it to the room. They were upper caste and Manisha was not. She was Dalit, the lowest caste in Northern India, a label that has haunted her family for generations, classifying them as “untouchable.”

The poem reading was another success that led to her fourth-straight ranking at the top of her grade level, but she had no idea what the words meant.

To her, “The Road Not Taken” was a collection of foreign sounds written by an American poet 30 years before Indian independence that, according to her teachers and the Indian education system, would make her smarter if she could repeat them without looking down at a piece of paper. She had no idea those four stanzas told her story.

Manisha’s story is one of exceptions. It tells of breaking from the norm and not allowing India’s history, traditions, misogyny or caste system to determine her fate.

Manisha sits in a corner of the second floor of her home in Titram. To her left is a storage room where her mom fries roti over an open flame every morning after praying in a small room decorated with paintings of a religious prophet.

EMMA GOTTSCHALK



It is a story of possibility. Of what can happen when a father stops drinking, a mother labors in the wheat fields, a professor believes in a shy student and that student studies hard enough to disprove the classmates and teachers who often made her feel untouchable.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both*

—“The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost (1916 in England)

Manisha, now 22, wanted an education, a future free of domestic abuse and caste-based discrimination. But to get what she wanted, she needed help.

“I am the product of many people,” Manisha said.

In public school, Manisha’s upper-caste teachers would never pick her for the honor of getting water for the class. They thought she was unclean.

Even though she finished at the top of her class in fifth grade, an achievement her mother, Shakuntala, calls her proudest moment, the teachers and students from other castes saw her as untouchable.

Manisha’s parents never expected her academic rise. Even after naming her Manisha, the Hindi word for “wisdom,” they were more focused on their future children. After two girls, Manisha and her older sister, Pinki, they wanted the next one to be a boy.

“Society [in rural India] is orthodox patriarchal,” Titram community organizer and friend of Manisha’s family Kumar Mukesh said. “The son is assumed to be the real representative of the family dynasty. The daughter is someone else’s property.”

Manisha’s parents’ hopes came true when Sachin, 20, was born, followed by Sourabh, now 18.

The family is classified in the Valmiki caste, a group of North Indian people considered Dalit, or “untouchable.”

The Valmiki people have been bound to sweep streets like her father does or scoop excrement from outhouses by hand like he did as a child and his ancestors before him did since ancient times. Of the hundreds of castes that fall under the Dalit classification, which is not a government restriction but a societal and religious norm, Valmiki is the lowest.

More than 100 Valmiki families live in Manisha’s neighborhood in Titram, just four hours from the business meetings and progressive student protests of New Delhi. But the people of Titram mostly work in the fields.

Manisha remembers gathering wheat one day with her mom and sister outside her village, the only source of income apart from her father’s job as a sweeper at the local police station. The entire day, they picked up single grains from the dirt. By sundown, they had collected two handfuls. But before they returned home,

a woman from an upper caste stomped into the field.

“Why are you in this field?” the woman screamed. “You are lower caste!”

She knocked the grain from their fists and Manisha, her sister and her mother wandered home with dust-covered palms.

And Manisha remembers the time her sixth-grade classmates tossed balls of sweet rice that was to be their school snack into the garbage because it was made by a woman from Manisha’s community.

Upper-caste parents complained to teachers and refused to allow their children to eat food touched by untouchable hands. So, the next day, the woman was fired and replaced by a worker from a higher caste.

But Manisha received top marks at the end of the year, finishing ahead of every upper-caste classmate.

Her memorization was better than the others, and because the government education she received through 10th grade was based entirely on memorization, that was enough.

Her parents can’t read, but they gave her time to do her schoolwork. Shakuntala rarely forced Manisha to do household duties or field work because they would take time away from doing homework and studying for the battery of exams to qualify for the next educational checkpoint.



Manisha laughs with her aunt, Rani, and another woman from Titram on the concrete area outside her aunt’s and uncle’s home. When Manisha was a child, Rani gave her the nickname “Ghadla,” which means “very cute.” “If [Manisha] becomes something, it will be good for our whole family,” Rani said. “The whole village will know that she is from our family.”

EWMA GOTTSCHALK



After talking to five female police officers at the Kaithal City Police Station about their education, her father started saving money for his daughters' tuition bills.

"The female officers talked confidently and everyone in the community said 'Namaste' to them," Manisha's father, Madan Lal, said. "Education is the only means."

So Manisha studied.

She wasn't invited to her 10th-grade award ceremony in the nearby city of Kaithal after topping her class in academics. An upper-caste teacher listed another student in her spot because that student wasn't Valmiki. Manisha's grades were higher, like they had always been, but the teacher thought caste mattered more.

Manisha missed the crowd and the cheering and the chance to accept the grand prize – a red solar lantern powered by a two by two-foot panel – on stage in front of her friends and her parents and the people who thought she couldn't do it.

## "I am the product of many people."

– Manisha, 22

Instead, Manisha took the lantern home from the Public Welfare Office without a celebration.

Instead of cheering, she heard car horns.

"I missed that golden opportunity," Manisha said.

*And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

Even with the prize lantern to brighten her studies during blackouts, the darkness persisted at home.

Her father had been a drinker since he was a teenager. He would come home drunk after a day sweeping and scream at his wife for not cooking dinner to his liking. Sometimes, the carrots didn't have enough salt. Other times, the roti was over fried. Most times, he just wanted to fight, because no matter how his wife altered her recipes, he found something to criticize.

Manisha said she watched many nights as her father beat her mother with a stick or his fists. She sat outside the door or in the adjacent room as the screams and penetrated the brick walls.

When Manisha was in fourth grade, her mother left home without the children for two months to escape the abuse. Her father went to her mother's childhood village of Jheel, one hour from Titram, where she hid, and promised he would stop drinking if she would just come home. But when she returned,

he went back to the liquor bottles and the yelling.

Shakuntala fled to Jheel several times after that, sometimes taking her four children.

But through the drinking and the screaming and the beating, Manisha and Pinki kept studying. In 2010, Pinki became the first girl in her neighborhood to enroll in 11th grade, beyond the traditional 10th-grade graduation.

When he wasn't drunk, Manisha's dad would assure his children he was going to make enough money to pay for their college education. Shakuntala said, even when he stumbled through the house, he encouraged them to finish their homework. But the beatings didn't stop.

For 10 years, the abuse was routine for Manisha's family. Like harvesting grain in the upper-caste neighborhood or memorizing poems. But one night in 2011, when Manisha was 14, Shakuntala decided she wanted out.

The neighbors heard the screaming from several houses away. When they arrived, only Manisha, her father and her three siblings stood in the hall outside the two rooms. The door to the left was closed.

Shakuntala had locked herself in the bedroom after a screaming match with her husband. Then Madan Lal's brother, who lived in the house to the left, spotted her

through a small window in the corner of the green wall. She was tying a rope around a ceiling fan. He ran to the house and told the family to bust down the door.

When the lock popped, the door swung open. Shakuntala stood on the bed slipping a noose around her neck. But Manisha's uncle forced her off before she could hang herself.

Later that same year, Manisha's father bought his final drink.

His brother-in-law, Nawab Singh, had called him three times a week for a year and encouraged him to pray to an Indian sage named Valmiki, the author of an epic poem and the religious namesake of Manisha's family's caste.

"Follow Valmiki and everything will be OK," Manisha's uncle would say. "The drinking will go away. The abuse will go away."

If Madan Lal were in the upper caste, Hinduism would have been the answer. But since his family was deemed untouchable centuries back, the most common religion in India was not as common within the alleyways of Titram. His caste didn't visit the temples on a regular basis, and his ancestors weren't allowed to be cremated with the bodies of upper-caste worshippers.

"Generally, lower castes never worship Hindu gods," Kumar said. "Rather, they worshipped local gods or natural powers like sun, earth, fire and mountain."

After a year of refusing to adopt any religious practice, Manisha's father caved. He traveled four hours alone by city bus to the Valmiki temple in New Delhi.

He stood before paintings of Valmiki and prayed. After the drive back to Titram, he never laid a hand on his wife again. The drinking stopped. Valmiki had taken its place.

*Manisha's parents, Shakuntala and Madan Lal, sit on a cot patched with a plastic bag on the second floor of their home. After Madan Lal gave up drinking, he stopped his routine of screaming at Shakuntala before dinner and instead started to sit down with her and his children at meals to talk as a family.*

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Shakuntala digs a metal hoe into the ground to extract weeds along a canal on the outskirts of Titram. After she completed the job, she sat on pure dirt with the nine other women in her work group, and ate halwa, an Indian sweet dish, to celebrate. "The work is finished with peace," Shakuntala said. "That is why we are happy."

For the next six weeks, Manisha's father traveled to the Valmiki temple every Friday to repeat his prayers. At home, he prayed twice a day. Before finding Valmiki, he would stand on the brick surface outside his home while a spiritual teacher sacrificed pigs, goats and chickens, and local boys cleaned up the blood that pooled around the dead animals. The community was superstitious and suggested sacrifice to get rid of family troubles.

But he stopped screaming at his wife about the food, and instead sat around a plastic table and talked with his family about his sweeping at the police station and Shakuntala's labor in the wheat fields and Manisha's dream to attend a prestigious university.

"It was a new life for us," Shakuntala said. "Peace and harmony came to our family."

After 10th grade, Manisha and her family had a choice. She could stop right there like most people in her village. She could forget further education and take up goat farming or street sweeping or washing her future husband's clothes.

Or she could keep studying. She could continue her streak of academic achievement that is celebrated by the metal trophies painted gold and wrapped in plastic foil that sit on a wooden shelf above the bed in the room opposite where her mother tried to hang herself.

*And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.*

Manisha's plan was to move on to 11th grade like her sister. She memorized more poems and sharpened her Hindi writing skills and scratched physics formulas onto lined notebook paper.

But going to school meant leaving home, as the school she wanted to attend required its students to live on campus. It meant sitting through classes taught in English, a language Manisha couldn't speak, and missing the first month because it overlapped with harvest season.

After 10th grade, Manisha was accepted into Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, or JNV, an upper-level school for 11th and 12th-grade students in Titram, where only 80 applicants are accepted for each class from a pool of up to 4,000, about 2 percent.

She didn't memorize poems at JNV. She learned their meanings with help from her new teachers, such as Gupreet Kaur, who mentored her in geography and encouraged deep analysis of every piece of writing assigned to students.

Teachers supported her beyond academics as well. Mrs. Angeli noticed Manisha crying in the hallway outside a physics classroom during her first week at JNV and hugged her until the tears stopped.

Her dorm room was a new home, but it wasn't her real home. She

didn't see the green paint or smell the mustard oil in her favorite rice dish. She didn't hear the buzz of her little brothers talking about wrestling and cricket. And because everyone was new to her, she didn't stroll through residence halls and chat with every face that popped through a door like she did in her neighborhood.

She cried every night for the first two months, even when she called her parents. But as classes continued and Manisha aced monthly exams, the brick buildings and dirt courtyards started to feel more like home.

Outside of the seven hours in class each day and four more studying, she hung out with friends, including Sheetal, a girl who lived across the hall and joined the school at the same time as Manisha.

Each year on April 14, her birthday, at JNV, she danced in one of the school courtyards to a Haryanvi beat played on a metal plate. Her 34 classmates danced around her and the group ate chocolate candies purchased with the five rupees given by each student to fund the party.

Students from every caste danced together, and nobody mentioned they were celebrating an untouchable. In that moment, they were celebrating Manisha.

Back home in Titram, her family was still untouchable.



“To start a journey, we need to decide our path. We are not following anyone else.”

– Manisha

Her father rode a Honda Hero motorcycle into work every morning to sweep leaves from dirt paths with a bamboo broom. He swept past closed doors with upper-caste police officers inside to make 8,000 rupees, or \$112 each month.

Her mother worked, too, which is a rare occurrence in rural India, as more than 75 percent of women stay at home to care for their husbands and children, as reported by The World Bank Group in 2018.

Shakuntala is a laborer through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, or MNREGA, an Indian government program that guaran-

tees 100 days of work to poor members of rural communities, including almost every adult woman in her neighborhood. Shakuntala joined the program in 2015, when Manisha was 18, adding a second stable income to put toward education for Manisha and her siblings.

She has worked in places like a schoolyard and a human-made pond and a rural canal in the middle of a wheat field, where she rode to the site in a three-wheeled vehicle called a tuk tuk with nine other women, cleared a half-mile of weeds with a metal hoe and danced with her coworkers in a circle –after eight hours of work – while she waited for the tuk tuk to pick her up.

With the extra income from Shakuntala, Manisha’s family continued work on the second floor of their home that was built in 2014 with 16 years of savings. Now, a stone staircase leads to an exposed area between two additional bedrooms, a kitchen with coffee-themed wallpaper, a storage room that Shakuntala uses to cook roti over a cow manure-fueled fire and a small prayer room adorned with framed pictures of Valmiki and a stick of incense.

After paying for the addition, some of the family’s money went to daily necessities like clothing and bags of flour. The rest went to Manisha.

After graduating from JNV, she became the second person from her neighborhood to attend college – the first was Pinki – which Manisha did at Dev Samaj College for Women in Firozpur.

After college graduation, she wanted to go farther.

She wanted to attend Jawaharlal Nehru University, a university in New Delhi that is considered the Harvard of India for the study of humanities.

She spent three hours every day for six months working through practice books for the JNU entrance exam, a test few

prospective students crack each year as the school accepts about 5 percent of applicants. But with the help of Jasmeet Brarj, an upper-caste political science professor at her college, she learned from his experience of failing the exam twice.

Manisha cracked it.

“Crack.” That’s the verb Manisha uses to describe what she did. To describe the moment when she became the exception.

“The only equalizer is education,” Manisha said. “We don’t have means. We only have education.”

*Shakuntala’s work group walks along a canal outside Titram. The 10 women work together at every site during the 100 days of work guaranteed by a government program. “Because of our work, we become closer and our lives become happier,” Shakuntala said. “It creates harmony with each other.”*



**“The only equalizer is education.  
We don’t have means.  
We only have education.”**

– Manisha

*Two roads diverged in a wood,  
and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,*

Manisha entered JNU the daughter of illiterates. She stepped into an unfamiliar world and was met by more than 2,000 new faces. She was no longer top of her class, but the students above and below her academically never asked about caste or if she had touched any of the food.

The other students’ glances toward Manisha were accompanied by smiles, and everyone, even those from different castes and religions and states of wealth, wanted to speak to her.

But it took time for her to return the favor.

She sat in the back row of lecture halls and didn’t speak during class. The proper British English language her professors spoke sounded partially foreign. While the students

who came from lifetimes of English language education scribbled notes and asked questions, Manisha kept silent and pressed the record button on her cell phone.

She would listen to a lecture recording three to five times in her dorm room until she understood the lesson. And she tried to speak English when she chatted with her new friends. After a few months, she could comprehend the lectures in real time. After a few more, English became, at least at JNU, her first language.

Back home, her mother worked hard like her daughter so Manisha could pay for tuition, housing and food at JNU.

Of the 12,000 rupees, or \$168, her mom and dad earn each month, 8,000, or \$122 go to Manisha.

After work one day when Manisha was visiting from New Delhi, Shakuntala rode a tuk tuk back home and walked to the washroom,

a small tiled area where she scooped lukewarm water from a plastic bucket onto her body. After her bath, she kneaded wheat flour with water to make roti dough and fried the discs over an open flame fed by twigs and water buffalo manure. She brought the fresh roti downstairs and served it with chicken curry, mustard-leaf saag and a plate of salted carrots and radishes for her family. Then, she prayed to Valmiki in the incense-scented room and crawled into bed below the ceiling fan.

The routine was a way for Shakuntala to ensure that Manisha wouldn’t suffer like she did. That Manisha could make a living doing more than her mother did as a child, picking cotton for upper caste families who would steal the profits after the harvest, and that Manisha wouldn’t end up abused by her husband and unable to read the signs at bus stops.

“I wanted my kids to be educated,” Shakuntala said.

Her father kept sweeping, brushing away dust and leaves with the same motion he’s been making for 27 years, that steady rhythm that put his daughter through college.

Every other morning, after bathing out of a bucket, praying to Valmiki and eating his regular breakfast of roti and masala chai, he shines his black work shoes with Cherry Blossom polish.



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But at the end of the work day, dust covers the shine.

The same type of dust coated Shakuntala’s blue jeweled slippers one day next to the canal. Every scrape of her hoe kicked up more dirt that covered her feet. The same happened for the nine women next to her chopping weeds.

The sun beat on their patterned shawls that covered downturned heads. Underneath, their faces were wrinkled. Some of their teeth were missing, but they still smiled.

“I want to be remembered as somebody who never said

anything bad about anyone,” Shakuntala said. “If you do good works and have good intentions, people will remember you.”

On the same bank, Manisha stood wearing brown Vans and a pink faux-fur-lined jacket. She remembers doing the same work as a girl, matching her mother’s motions with a hoe and working to keep a roof over the stone floors and roti in their stomachs.

She didn’t swing a hoe that day. Instead, she talked about the future. She explained how she wants to parlay her degree in international relations into a position as the first female District Collector of Kaithal, an

*Manisha talks with friends and family in her aunt’s and uncle’s house, which sits across a small pond from her house in Titram. Manisha used to visit her aunt and uncle every week as a child, but only sees them a few times every year after leaving for JNU. “[Manisha] has become a reason to make our family proud,” Manisha’s aunt, Rani, said. “[She] has given us a better name in the village.”*

administrator who handles city finances and planning and can enact policies that change the status quo.

Under Collector Manisha, every boy and girl would be educated until the 12th grade. Teachers would teach meaning over memorization. Women would go



to school just as long as men. And caste wouldn't matter.

"Unity is good, but uniformity is not good," Manisha said. "Differences are always with us. Our differences make us unique."

If Manisha were District Collector, her neighbor Santro would be literate and wouldn't have to depend on milk from the three water buffalo that graze in a dirt field speckled with food wrappers and plastic bottles outside her brick home.

"If I was literate, I could get a job," Santro said. "People didn't know about education [when I was a girl]. They were too focused on agriculture."

The local shepherd, Sube, wouldn't have to sleep in a bamboo hut with 20 goats. And the others, those outside the alleyways of the untouchable neighborhood, would treat Manisha's neighbors, whom she calls family, as people with food worth eating and hands worth touching.

But her neighbors say she's already changed the village.

"[Manisha] is a reason for the whole community to be proud," neighbor Phooli said.

*And that has made all the difference.*

Manisha remembers when she became an equal. Her Pedagogy for Education professor at JNU, Dr. Avijeet Pathak, called her name as she sat quiet in the back row of an 80-person lecture hall. She had never spoken in his class. But he motioned her toward the podium.

He instructed her to explain the previous day's lesson to the rest of the class. Then he told her to tell the story of her journey to JNU. She began speaking in Hindi.

She told of growing up in Titram. Of attending government school. Of joining JNV and Dev Samaj College for Women and finally, JNU.

Twice after that, her professor called her back to the podium. He, a man from an upper caste, wanted to keep listening to her.

Then he assigned "The Road Not Taken," the same poem that looped in her 10th-grade mind until she could recite it without peeking at the text.

But this time, she studied it.

"To start a journey, we need to decide our path," Manisha said. "We are not following anyone else."

Finally, she knew what the words meant. ❄

**"Unity is good, but uniformity is not good. Differences are always with us. Our differences make us unique."**

– Manisha

Manisha's family's home is surrounded by other brick and cement houses that shelter people from the same caste. A few children keep pigeons for entertainment after dropping out of school before 10th grade. Two young siblings scurry through the alleyways and often cross the gate into Manisha's house to say hello and give hugs. "We are really happy about Manisha," Shakuntala said. "We hope other girls are inspired by her."