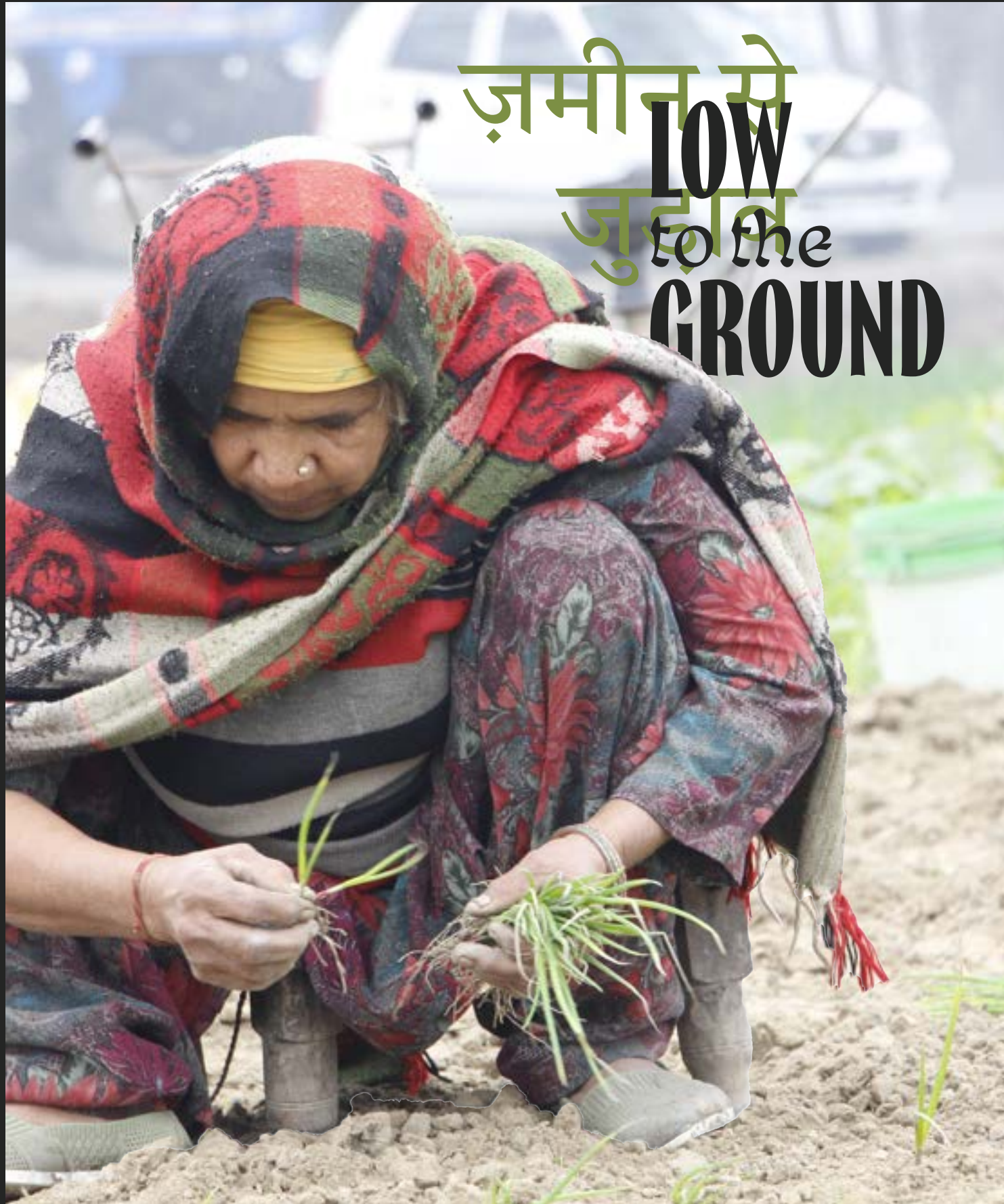


ज़मीन से LOW to the GROUND



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

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



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

By SEBASTIAN STUDIER

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

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

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

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

weddings and their sons' educations.

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

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

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

Next came tragedy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Birmati misses her daughters.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amit is a longtime family friend and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

