

Life unveiled

After enduring years of inequality, one woman advocates for the social, economic and political independence of all women in her conservative village.

by EMMA HARVILLE



Santro Gill walks down the cobblestone paths of Peoda, a rural village in Haryana four hours from New Delhi, her smiling face fully veiled by a thin blue scarf. The light brown streaks in her gray-black hair gleam in the morning sunlight like the two red bangles around her left wrist or the silver ring on her finger. She walks with a quiet authority, her feet slapping the earth beneath her as she navigates the winding streets.

One by one, villagers poke their heads out from balconies and windows, greeting her with a feverish chatter. A little boy tugs at the hem of her scarf, begging for just a moment of her attention. Once she steps inside the four walls of her gray cement home, she strips the mask from her face, each line around her deep brown eyes a testament to her strength.

Behind the village-required veil, this Santro, the one who laughs in the face of suffering, the one who sees men not as gatekeepers of society, but as equal partners in community growth, is the Santro women throughout Peoda have come to revere. She was confined to the cultural customs of her time and place and broke down those barriers for her daughter's independence, helping to drive a movement of women

for social change in Haryana, one of India's most conservative states.

At 16 years old, Santro was the only girl in her village to graduate 10th grade. As a young woman, she had three options: become a housewife, a nurse or a teacher. She wasn't qualified to teach, and she was determined to work outside the home, so she settled on nursing. Santro credits her parents with this freedom, saying most other parents in the village didn't give their daughters a choice at all.

After applying to a nursing college with near-perfect high school grades, she says she was denied admission "on technical grounds." An administrator at the nursing college told Santro he could get her admitted if she agreed to spend the night with him.

"I didn't tell anybody," Santro said. "I fought back and said 'No.' With tears in my eyes I left that office and went home."

When her mother asked her why she didn't get admission while other girls with lower grades qualified, she simply replied, "The administrators were not good people."

Meanwhile, her father had arranged for her to marry a 24-year-old man named Hoshiar Singh. When

Hoshiar and his family discovered Santro wanted to become a nurse, they quickly extinguished any dreams she had of working outside the home.

"They said, 'We don't want this girl to work or study any further,'" Santro said. "They thought that if I went for higher education, then I wouldn't agree to the promise my father made with his family for the marriage."

So Santro married Hoshiar against her will, soon learning he was an alcoholic without a stable job. He had three major accidents while he was drunk, the third causing an injury to his chin that required plastic surgery in 1989.

Santro spent her days working in the fields and cooking meals for her husband, a stranger who now slept in her bed. Hoshiar worked odd jobs, like electrical work in the village houses, but his income was unstable. Santro wanted her own job so she could support her family herself.

She noticed women were not respected in her village or society. She noticed they were beaten by their husbands and could not leave their homes. And she noticed their children were watching and learning. When she gave birth to her

son and then a daughter a few years later, she knew she wanted to create a life of independence for them.

"At that time, there was no difference between an animal and a woman," Santro said. "After marriage, I lived my life like an animal, always busy and working hard."

At age 25, she started working at an *anganwadi* center, a rural child-care system started by the Indian government in 1975 to fight child hunger and malnutrition. Santro never became a nurse, but at the *anganwadi* center, which means "courtyard shelter" in Hindi, she fuels a fierce courage in the women and children of her own village.

Every day for the past 25 years, Santro has walked to the center and played with the 15 to 20 preschool children who skip through the orange, white and green gates, singing the Hindi alphabet with them and teaching them how to count to 10 in English.

Because wages were low and the conditions of the center were poor, Santro soon joined a labor union and began attending protests, meeting deputy commissioners and creating connections that have helped her spark change in her community. Through her



Santro instructs a young girl before leading her class in a song at an anganwadi center. Santro started the job because she wanted independence outside of the home. "When I was not an anganwadi worker, and my husband and his friends would sit together and drink, I couldn't join them," Santro said. "But now I can join them with a glass because I am much more confident."

"At that time, there was no difference between an animal and a woman."

- Santro, 51

relationship with a doctor at the local hospital, she gets subsidies for women in need of immediate care.

"The doctor said, 'Do you run an orphanage? Because you bring in someone new every day who cannot pay their bill,'" Santro said with a smile.

Many of the mothers who drop off children at the *anganwadi* center each morning endure domestic violence and oppression, so Santro has made it her mission to help the women who are afraid to step out of their homes. She says she has helped at least 25 to 30 women escape abusive situations by offering them refuge at the child care center and inspiring them to earn their own living.

Nirmala is one of those women. Her husband routinely beat and slapped her in front of their three children,

and she spent several nights outside huddling under an ox cart because she believed it was safer than living with the abuse in her own house.

"When we were married, he was very nice for a few days," Nirmala said. "But then he started to spend money on clothes and mobile phones. Today, if I ask him for money for our children, he fights with me."

In 2004, Nirmala's husband told her he was seeing another woman in the village and wanted Nirmala to leave. He didn't want her anymore. In response, Nirmala swallowed a bottle of pesticide.

"I thought it would be better if I was not there," Nirmala said.

Moments later, her three children saw their mother vomiting outside and alerted neighbors who rushed her to the hospital.

Nirmala's husband followed her to the hospital and tried to remove the IV bag from her arm.

She believes he wanted her dead.

Today, Nirmala's right hand is limp from the incident. When she builds a fire or washes dishes for the children's center, it serves as a reminder of what happened and how she battled to move on.

"I am living with the same man today, despite everything," Nirmala said. "But I am in authority now."

Santro learned of Nirmala's situation when Nirmala's son attended the *anganwadi* center and helped her get a job there.

Nirmala also grows rice and wheat in the fields and earns 50 rupees, or 70 cents, per kilogram of milk she gets.

When Nirmala's husband heard she got a job as an *anganwadi* helper in 2003, he asked why she washed dishes at a child care center when she could be managing her family's land. Her husband, who still fights with her, has refused to eat food with her for the past six months, she says. Santro says although Nirmala's husband is still upset with her, he will no longer beat her because Santro taught Nirmala to say, "How dare you touch me?"

"Santro is more than a best friend," Nirmala said. "She is my sister. There are other women, but I like her [pro-

gressive] views. She's educated, and I trust that she will give me good advice."

Now, Nirmala takes inspiration from Santro to empower her own children. Nirmala's 22-year-old daughter Jyoti says although her father still wants to divorce her mother, Nirmala will not leave her or her two siblings. Jyoti says she hopes to become a clerk in a school or hospital to earn money before preparing for a higher-level job through India's Union Public Service Commission, the country's premier central recruiting agency. She says she is not ready for marriage.

"I don't want to be dependent on another person right now," Jyoti said. "I am inspired by my mother. She gives us education

Santro and her best friend Nirmala stand on the rooftop of Santro's home. Santro encourages Nirmala to defy her abusive husband and the restrictions placed on women in her village. "Nirmala's husband beat her and she never said anything," Santro said. "But now her husband is afraid of Nirmala because she has guts. She can say to him, 'How dare you touch me?'"

"I am living with the same man today, despite everything, but I am in authority now."

- Nirmala, 43

Nirmala's hand was left partially paralyzed after she swallowed a bottle of pesticide in 2004. Her husband, who would beat her regularly, had told her he was having an affair before she attempted to take her own life.

so that we can find a partner someday who won't behave like my father."

Santro remembers another woman whose alcoholic husband died abruptly. Always borrowing money for liquor, he was indebted to many other men in the village. These men came to the widow and demanded she pay them her late husband's debts. Santro recruited the woman to cook meals for the children in the center, a paid position.

"I said to her, 'Be bold. And if someone comes to your house and asks for money, call me,'" Santro said. "Say, 'I will give you your money, but give me time.'"

Within six months, the woman paid off the debt she never owed.

Sheetal, Santro's 23-year-old daughter, stands behind her mother with her arms wrapped around Santro's neck. With tears in her eyes, she says she admires her mother's courage and conviction, which allow Sheetal the freedom to choose what she wears, where she travels and what education she gets.

When Sheetal attended a prestigious boarding school in Titram, where only 2.9 percent of applicants qualified this year, she only saw her parents on the occasional weekend. Deciding to ask her mother for new clothes the next time she saw her, Sheetal was astounded when

her mother arrived with the clothing already in hand.

"She knows what I want before I even tell her," Sheetal said. "I admire the way she talks and her courage to speak anything. And her tolerance and her capacity to bear anything."

In May, Sheetal will take the International English Language Testing System, a standardized exam that will measure her proficiency in English and determine whether she can travel to Canada to continue studying writing and reading. Santro says she wants her daughter to become a geography professor in America. But the only thing she really wants is for her daughter to be free.

"What I've experienced in my life, I won't have that happen to my daughter," Santro said. "We had so many relatives who have said, 'Why aren't you finding a husband for your daughter?' But I said, 'No, I want to give a different kind of life to my daughter.'"

Santro's husband still drinks. He says he drinks around eight glasses of Malta masti – a fruit-based country liquor – every night. His empty bottle is tucked away on the cement staircase between a vent and a red tank of propane.

When Santro began to attend activist meetings and events, he would accompany her to confirm where she was going and what she was doing. Eventually, he stopped coming.

Santro gathers women to compete in the races at Titram's female sports festival Jan. 14. "Whenever there is a new kind of event in Titram, I love to visit and be involved," Santro said.



"I see the good she is doing and I like the way she speaks in the community," Hoshar said. "She's outspoken and not submissive, and that's earned her a reputation."

A majority of married women in Peoda, as well as in all other rural villages of Haryana, are required by their husbands to wear a veil over their faces in the presence of village men who are older than their husbands.

Kumar Mukesh, a community organizer and activist for women's rights in Titram, a nearby village, says while educated families who have migrated to cities have largely abandoned this tradition, the practice is still very common in rural villages like Peoda.

"It is believed that if a woman tries to come out of her veil, she is not of moral character," Kumar said. "But many people in the village are saying that Santro has broken this tradition. Many people who follow this tradition, including women, don't like Santro because she is teaching them that they shouldn't do it."

Santro says if she were prime minister of India, she would ensure women had the freedom to leave their homes when they want, unaccompanied by men.

"I would also make them not have to cover their faces," Santro said. "It is a disease – women having to cover their faces."

From the roof, Santro can see her husband in his cream sweater, his leathery skin weathered from years of playing cards in the sun. He is surrounded by four or five other men and a thick cloud of smoke. She steps down the cement steps and then out the front door, slipping the blue scarf over her face again.

But when the men turn their backs, Santro slowly inches the scarf from her face, revealing the deep brown eyes that sustain the women of Peoda. ✱

PHOTOS BY KATIE VIESSELMAN

"What I've experienced in my life, I won't have that happen to my daughter."

- Santro



Santro's daughter, Sheetal, stands over her mother with tears in her eyes. Santro has sparked a movement for women's independence in her conservative village in order for her daughter to have better opportunities. "In the beginning of the marriage, my husband would ask why I would do that," Santro said. "And I would ask, 'What's wrong with it?' I had the guts to walk around in the village alone at midnight!"

✧ What do you hope for?

Several women from Santro's village gathered at a friend's home in Peoda one Sunday afternoon for tea. After three women performed a traditional Haryana dance for the group, they all stepped outside into the courtyard, where each woman answered this question: "What do you hope for?" Here are some of their answers:



Geeta, 32

"My hope was to study well, but I wasn't able to. Now, I am a housewife."



Santro, 51

"My grandson has gone off to take competitive exams to prepare for a job. My hope is that he will settle."



Meena, 20

"I am studying 12th grade and I hope to pass with flying colors."



Ramarti, 48

"I hope for success for my grandson and granddaughter. I also hope for just one more grandson."



Premo, 62

"My hope is to stay fit, so that all my body parts will work until the day I die."



Kali, 50

"I don't have many hopes because my son died when he was very young."



Sonia, 25

"My hope is for my two daughters to study well and get a job."



Parmilla, 32

"I didn't get the chance to study in my childhood, so my hope is that my children will."

"I want to be a doctor. I don't want to get married because then I'd have to leave my family."

- Khushboo, 9

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