

# Excursions

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Cover Photo: Home by Farah Alrajeh

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# Bobbos of Ahun: A Photo Essay

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## **Abstract**

‘Bobbos of Ahun’ is a photo essay about women from my paternal family residing in our native village called Ahun, documenting their negotiations within the patriarchal home through stories of everyday struggles and resistance.

‘Bobbo’ is a term of endearment which loosely translates to ‘a little girl’ in Haryanvi while Ahun is a speck in the universe, a small hamlet in the state of Haryana, India. The village is inhabited by families who are dependent on small-scale farming of paddy and wheat along with raising cattle. By photographing these women in their familial space, I look at home as a gendered site where contestations, of labour (visible and invisible), of self and family identity, of longing, belonging and estrangement, of care and neglect, happen every day. I speak about the complex metaphor of home, both as an inhabited space and portable feeling by photographing my grandmother, cousins, sisters, aunts and neighbours residing in Ahun. The photographs narrate stories of these women who remain displaced from the home because of gender roles and fear of community sanctions.

## Introduction

*Bobbo* is a term of endearment which loosely translates to ‘little girl/sister/daughter’ in Haryanvi, a regional dialect of Hindi that is spoken in my home village Ahun, in the district Kaithal and in other parts of the state of Haryana, India. Though the term’s direct origins are not known, it is common in many languages of northern India. In fact, in languages and dialects like Hindi, Punjabi, Haryanvi and Marwari, most of the words conveying family relations are repetition of monosyllables, with for instance, *Ma* or *Bebe* for ‘mother’, *Mama* for ‘maternal uncle’, *Nana* for ‘maternal grandfather’, *Chacha* for ‘paternal uncle’, *Dada* for ‘grandfather’ or ‘elder brother’ in some parts of India, *Baba* for ‘grandfather’, and *Bobbo* for ‘sister’. Children are taught to identify and address their near relatives through such words as they are easy to learn and remember from a young age. Over the years, as well as being used to address a sister, *Bobbo* has become a term of endearment for daughters and girls.

*Bobbos of Ahun* is a photo essay about women from my paternal side of the family who reside in our native village Ahun in India. It speaks to their negotiations with life within their homes and reframes the domestic as the space animated by stories of their everyday struggles and resistance against strict gender norms, conservative community values and patriarchy. Ahun is a small village that falls under the district Kaithal, located in Haryana, a state in northern India. Although previously the village was under the boundaries of the undivided state of Punjab, the Indian government reorganised state boundaries in 1966 and that is how Ahun came to become part of Haryana. The village (including its agricultural area) is spread across 10km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of about 3600 residents. It is located in the holy land of Kuruskshetra, which holds religious importance for Hindus as the land where the epic war of *Mahabharata* was fought and the sermon of *Bhagavad Gita* was delivered. Currently, it is inhabited by 650 Hindu and Sikh families who practice small-scale farming of paddy, wheat and sugar cane, along with

raising of milch cattle (mostly cows and buffaloes). In *Ahun Gaanv Ka Itihaas*, possibly the first written history of any village in Haryana, Kumar (2021), documents that girls in Ahun started attending school only in 1955. My father was the fifth generation to leave Ahun to raise his family in Delhi. Despite being brought up in the city, I was raised to appreciate my roots and the history that connected me to my ancestral village. I would often visit my grandparents back home and listen to stories of my grandmother's youth, my cousin sister's struggles at school and our neighbours' animated conversations about their daily routines and expectations from life. These oral re-tellings of intimate feminine histories were my inheritance; they deepened my sense of belonging and formed my understanding of what it means to be a woman.

This project initially began in an effort to understand my identity vis-à-vis my family and ancestral home and to make sense of my homesickness after getting married during the first wave of the pandemic. My inability to visit my grandmother due to Covid safety protocols and state-enforced lockdowns added to my feeling of guilt and estrangement. Following a brief visit, my grandmother held my face in her hands and said, "*Bobbo, tu supne si aawe*" ("Little girl, your visit is as fleeting as a passing dream"). Her words made me realise how much I had missed my Ahun, my grandmother's presence and how this familiar ache of longing for the 'familial' was a shared feeling. This particular conversation raised many questions for me as a woman having had to leave my paternal home after marriage; as a daughter of parents who left their village and moved to the city for a better life; as a granddaughter, who despite tracing her roots to her ancestral village, remains estranged from the land and its people. I was also struck with the realisation that the lives of women in my village were not very different from mine when it came to negotiating with domestic roles and responsibilities. The expectation of care and labour, of putting others' needs before ours was common to us all. There was an echo of conversations I had had before.

As I visited Ahun again on a sunny afternoon in November 2021, many stories were shared over cups of tea. *Bobbos'* stories spoke of women's exclusion, their invisible labour in building a home, the neglect and loneliness of elderly women, the expectation of unquestioned obedience to gender norms and community sanction in case of transgression, gendered access to resources and property and their peripheral existence in the patriarchal family set up. While some were stories of everyday struggles, others were tales of resistance and self-assertion that reveal the emancipatory potential of home. *Bobbos of Ahun* hence became a collection of photographs I captured of all *Bobbos*, some of whom were born to- and some of whom who married into the family, and the stories they shared.

These photographs show women of my village in their domestic space, engaging in routine activities like cooking, feeding cattle and cleaning. The pictures also show them reclaiming their domestic space and asserting their self-identity through simple acts of leisure like smoking *kalli* and *hookah*, sharing a laugh, stitching clothes as a side hustle, sporting jewellery, getting haircuts, getting piercings on nose and ears and tattooing their hands. Through these pictures, I look at home as a gendered site where contestations, of visible and invisible labour, of self and family identity, of belonging and estrangement, of care and neglect, happen every day. I speak about the complex metaphor of home as a site of exclusion and emancipation. The photographs narrate stories of these women who remain displaced from the home because of gender roles and conservative community norms while also offering hope through small acts of rebellion that they undertake to occupy this space in their own right. This photo-essay hence explores the shifting meaning of home – as a place that limits women through gendered expectations and as a revolutionary space for growth and emancipation.

## Photos

*Bobbo* has draped a white scarf over her head, partially exposing her grey hair and a pierced ear-bone, the tragus. She is wearing a *salwar* suit, which is commonly worn by women in northern parts of India. Covering hair with a scarf is a customary practice for married or elderly women as a mark of respect for older male family members. *Bobbo* likes wearing lighter colours like whites, beiges and dull pinks. Throughout her life, *Bobbo* has braved many difficulties while living in a conservative community. Despite facing societal stigma because of her marital separation, she chose to raise her three children alone. At 85 years of age, *Bobbo* divides her time between living with her son's family in Delhi and living in Ahun where her friends (both human and animal) keep her company. *Bobbo* often reminisces about the time when she used to attend school and would get ear piercings and tattoos with her friends, a time one often associates with youth, energy and perhaps, freedom.

*[continued on the next page]*



*Photograph 1. Bobbo is a lone soldier*



*Photograph 2. Bobbo's labour keeps the family together*

*Bobbo* is cooking food over a handmade-mud stove which uses wood and cow-dung cakes as fuel. *Bobbo* is seen surrounded by a wheeled cart on the left and some plants on her right. This *Bobbo*, like others in the village, wakes up at the crack of dawn, cleans the house, cooks for the family and works throughout the day. Such domestic labour is expected of women and yet remains unappreciated. *Bobbo's* act of growing herbs and tending to her plants holds emancipatory potential, for this remains one of the only activities that she does for herself.



*Photograph 3. Bobbo built her own home but may never own it*

*Bobbo* is looking towards the home that she built with her own hands, admiring the outcome of her hard work. However, *Bobbo* may never be able to own this house because of the conservative property laws in the state of Haryana which declare all ancestral property of a male inheritor to be his separate property, in effect disqualifying daughters from inheriting properties from their fathers.



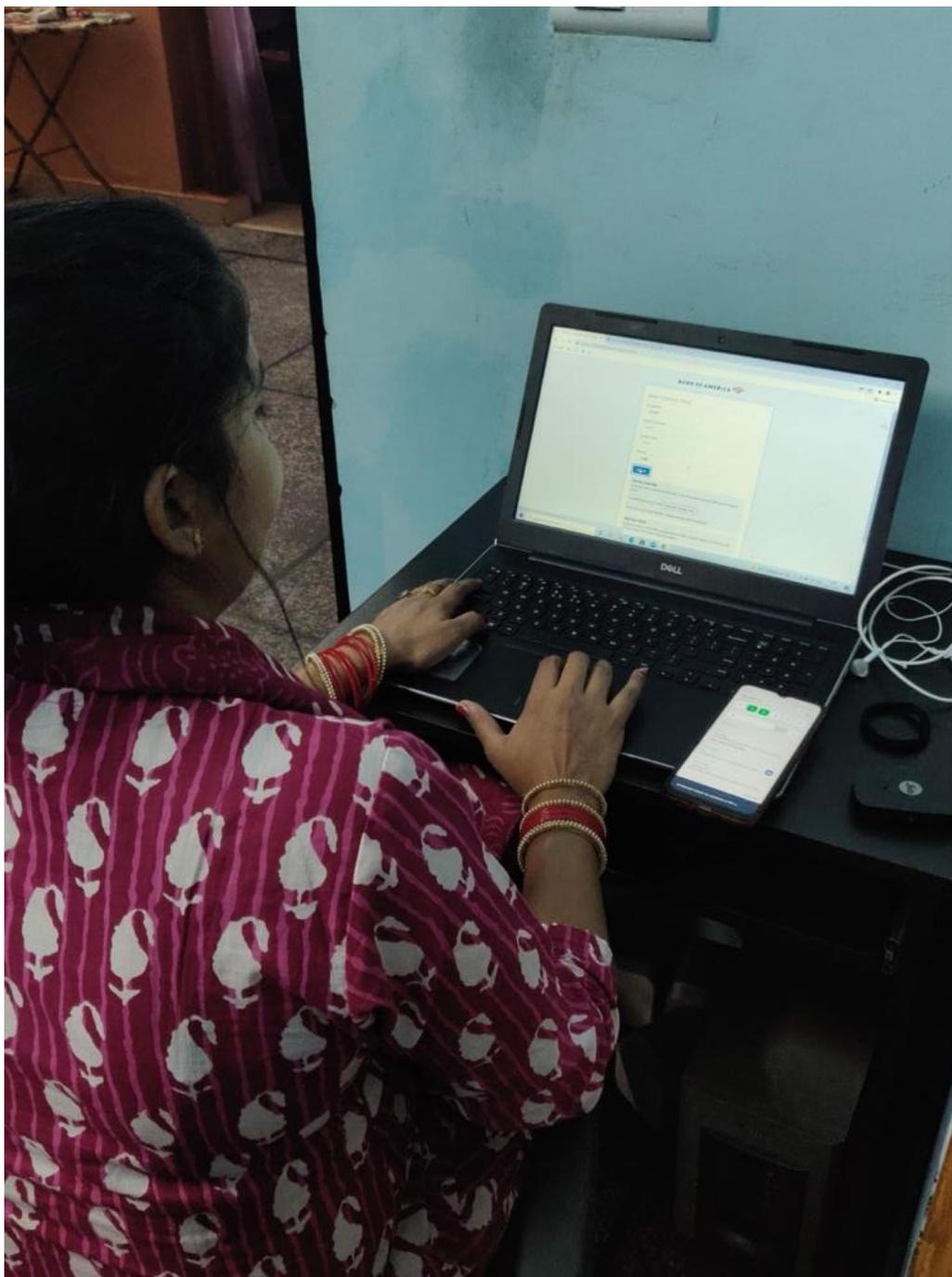
Photograph 4. Married Bobbo refuses to cover her head and sports a haircut

*Bobbo* is seen with her multi-coloured *dupatta* (scarf) on her shoulders and sports short hair. Traditionally, in Ahun, all married women are expected to keep their heads and face covered both in front of all older male family members and in front of other villagers, as a sign of respect. It is, in other words, a patriarchal symbol which marks married women. It is uncommon for women to get haircuts, especially those involving shorter lengths. *Bobbo's* uncovered head is a refusal to partake in this patriarchal tradition and is an assertion of self. As *Bobbo* looks back at her life when she got married, she remembers how she has had to struggle to make ordinary life choices for herself like taking up employment in a school, pursuing a Master's degree or simply getting a haircut. Despite facing some resistance, she now has doctorate degree, teaches in a renowned school in Delhi and is admired for being one of the only few *Bobbos* who know how to drive a car.



*Photograph 5. Bobbo stitches clothes and attends college*

*Bobbo* is stitching a pink fabric on her sewing machine while sitting on the ground. She is a student who attends college by day and stitches clothes for other women in the village as a side-hustle. Though stitching and embroidery are gendered expectations, often considered desirable among girls of marriageable age, it is rare to come across a *Bobbo* with the entrepreneurial zeal to capitalise on this skill set and make a living from it. Here, *Bobbo* subverts and reinvents the meaning of stitching as an act symbolising financial freedom.



*Photograph 6. Bobbo works on a computer*

*Bobbo* is photographed while she does her office work from the computer at her in-laws' home. *Bobbo* is currently working remotely from the village following the Covid-related lockdown restrictions in the country. She is an educated woman and is one of the only few women in Ahun who can operate a laptop with ease. Despite her long working hours, she is expected to attend to all domestic responsibilities.



*Photograph 7. Bobbo tends to her four-legged friend*

*Bobbo* is seen wearing a lavender coloured *salwar* suit, a long shirt worn with pyjamas along with a scarf, commonly worn by women in northern India. She is standing next to a calf that licks her left hand with affection. Animal husbandry for dairy products is a common vocation practiced in Ahun. While the responsibility of bathing and milking buffaloes and cows is equally shared with male family members, it is generally women who bear the responsibility of collecting and carrying fodder from the fields. Women traditionally clean after their cattle and collect cow dung which is later dried and used as fuel for cooking. Much like other domestic work, even here, women's labour remains unpaid and is not taken into consideration for calculating GDP of the country.



*Photograph 8. Bobbo passed away and her home remains empty*

*Bobbo's* small brick and mud house stands abandoned and locked since she passed away of old age in 2020. She lived there alone as her sons moved away to other cities for work. Though our *Bobbo* always had neighbours and street dogs to keep her company, neglect and loneliness among older *Bobbos* is common in Ahun. Families often struggle to take care of them due to various financial constraints. As villagers migrate to bigger cities to seek better jobs, the higher cost of living, lack of adequate housing facilities and diminished spending power prove to be difficult for making ends meet. The added cost of medical expenses holds families back from taking their ageing and ailing family members with them to the city. In many cases where families are willing to do so, they are sometimes met with reluctance from the elderly *Bobbos* who may not wish to leave behind their existing life and relations in the village. The fear of being a misfit in the city and the worry of being a burden on their children restrains women from leaving their home in Ahun. The decision to leave or stay comes at a cost.



*Photograph 9. Bobbo loves smoking a kalli*

*Bobbo* is sitting on a chair and smoking from her *kalli*. Like *hookah*, *kalli* is an instrument used for smoking tobacco whose smoke has been filtered through a water chamber. While *hookah* is comparatively larger, placed on the ground and mostly used by men, *kalli* is smaller, more portable and traditionally shared and passed around among women. The smoking of *kalli* and *hookah* is a collective activity and an established means of socialising among family, neighbours and friends in northern parts of India. In Ahun, very few *Bobbos* smoke *kalli* while it is common for men to smoke *hookah*. Interestingly, the smoking of cigarettes by women is still considered a taboo there, as it is associated with modernity and something opposed to traditional values, despite the fact that both cigarettes and *hookah* are smoked for tobacco.



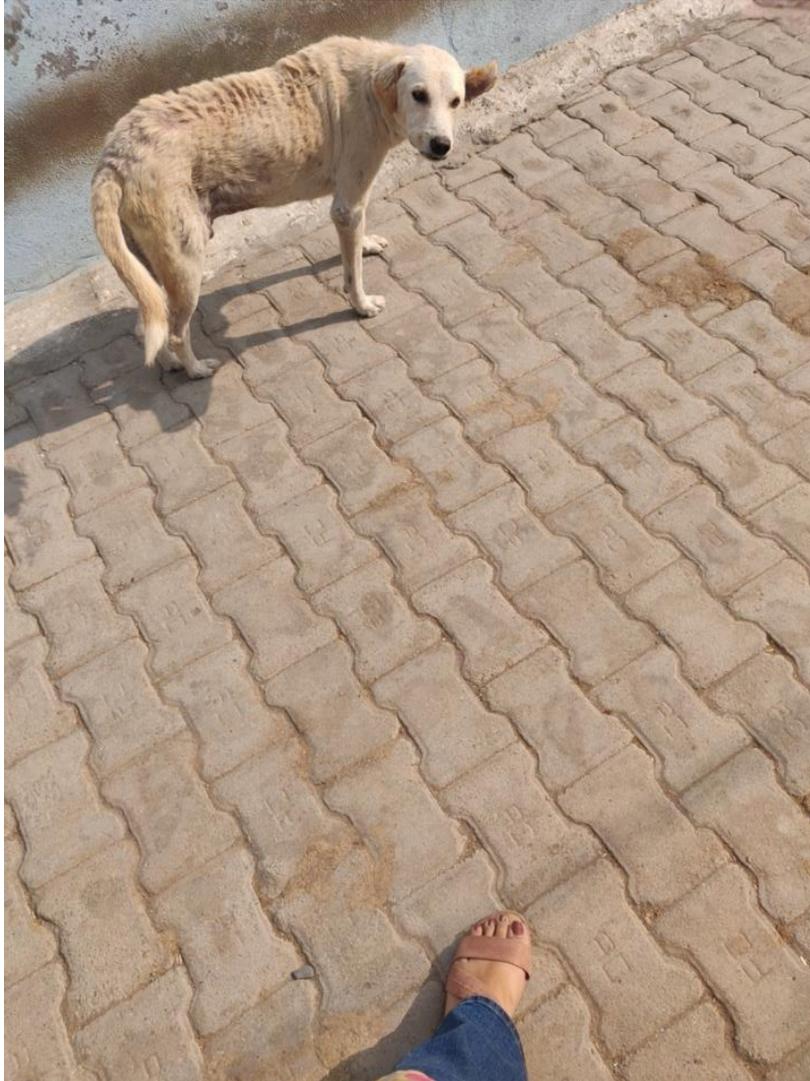
*Photograph 10. Bobbo keeps her own time*

*Bobbo* sits with her hands one on top of another. She has a bird tattooed on her left hand and a watch tattooed on her wrist. She is wearing a ring and bangles. *Bobbo* remembers how as a young girl, she and her friends would sit together and poke tattoos on each other's hands and feet. While some *Bobbos* chose to get religious symbols and their names written on their hands, this *Bobbo* decided on a parrot and a watch. While tattoos were representative of personal style and fashion, in *Bobbo's* case, they were aspirational. Owning a watch was a luxury not everyone could afford, and if one could, it was usually the male members in the family. The lack of resources did not deter *Bobbo* from desiring a watch. In one way, her ownership of the watch is more permanent than any man's for she has etched it on her body. She will never lose it and will own it until the end of her time.



*Photograph 11. Bobbo bursts into a laugh!*

*Bobbo* is famous for her cackling laughter in the village. She loves to make jokes, to sing folk songs and to keep her gold jewellery close to her heart. She lost her teeth quite early but that does not stop her from enjoying a good joke. *Bobbo's* loud and boisterous laugh is somewhat of an anomaly, for *Bobbos* are expected to be shy, quiet and restrained in the way in which they inhabit spaces.



*Photograph 12. Bobbo goes back home but the dogs still chase her*

A photograph of *Bobbo's* extended leg on a tiled street. *Bobbo's* pair of blue jeans and painted toenails are visible in the same frame in which a street dog eyes her suspiciously. *Bobbo* is now a lawyer and lives in the city but misses Ahun. Having gotten married during the pandemic, she feels she has not been home enough. Her fondness for her village has now turned into a yearning for the familial and the familiar. The dogs haven't seen her in a long time and treat her as a stranger.

## Reference

Kumar, S. (2021) *Ahun gaanv ka itihaas*. Kaithal: Shiv Kumar.