

THE BOOK REVIEW

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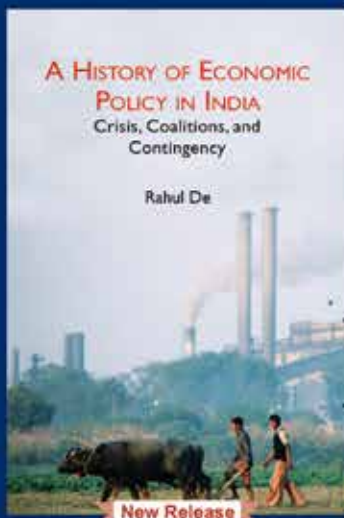
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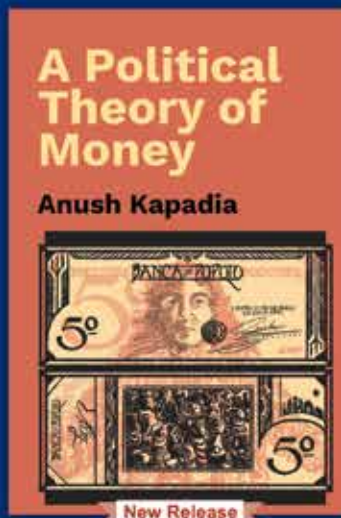


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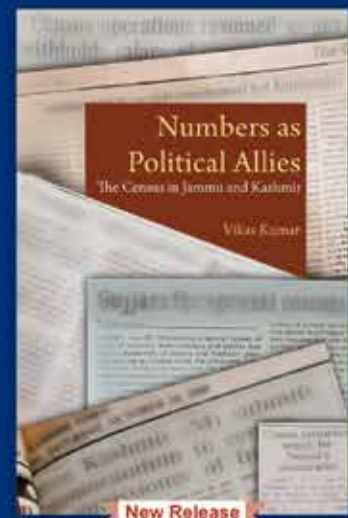
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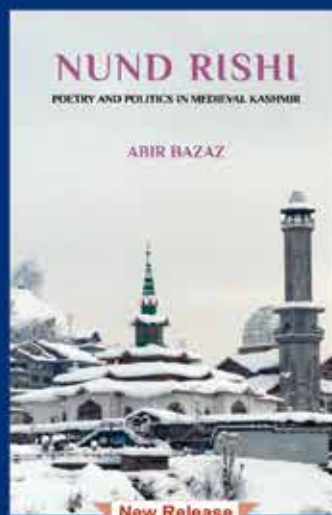
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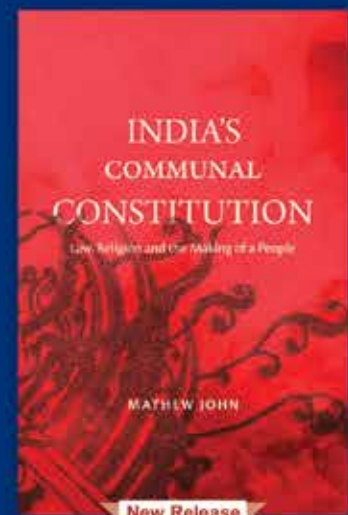
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Children' Books 2023

The Book Review team brings yet another bonanza of nearly a hundred titles for children of all age groups. We would like readers to note that this special issue, we are proud to say, is one with a difference. We found that publishers like Eklavya, Pratham, Jugnoo/Ektara and others have pitched their books for the beginner and middle level readers to highlight some of the major concerns we face all over the world today: education, environment, marginalization of large sections of society due to economic and social inequalities, women's empowerment, among others, by the simple but effective expedient of using the 'grammar of fancy and the dictionary of the imagination', as the renowned writer Dhangopal Mukherji expressed it in the last century about writing for children. So we decided to let the titles flow from one section to another, academic reviews of books on education, epics, biography, environment, knowledge variants, stories and more, without following any rigid categorization by age group. The books under review, one and all, will provide joy to adults, the very young and even the millennials and the gen-nexes. If, as Mario Miranda puts it, art is a meditation on life around the world, so also are books, which 'on wingless flights', can, with Jamshed Tata, 'connect the world', or with William Blake find the world itself 'in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower'.

A big thank you to all the contributors to this issue. Your wonderful, evocative prose in the reviews illumine the special issue. We hope our readers, young and old, will find as much joy in this issue as we at TBR have done in putting it together.

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Revisiting Themes in Education: Essays in Honour of Krishna Kumar

Meenakshi Thapan

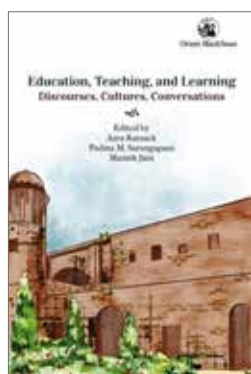
EDUCATION, TEACHING, AND LEARNING: DISCOURSES, CULTURES, CONVERSATIONS

Edited by Azra Razzack, Padma M. Sarangapani, Manish Jain
Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2023, pp. 400, ₹ 2395.00

This book is a collection of essays in honour of Professor Krishna Kumar, doyen in the education world in India, by his former students and colleagues. The Department of Education (or the Central Institute of Education (CIE), as it is more popularly known) is the premier Department for Education Studies in India including the professional courses of B.Ed. and M.Ed, in its academic programmes. Krishna Kumar spent the best part of his academic career at this Department, apart from his stint as Director of the NCERT in Delhi. He needs no introduction as an author, critic, and leading figure in education studies in India. His significant impact, apart from his academic contribution and the many articles he has authored in the media, is in his mentoring of many students at different levels at the University and his engagement with colleagues with varying interests. This book therefore holds particular meaning because it is more than a token of appreciation: it is about gratitude, sincerity and affection on the part of his students and former colleagues! It is also about the continuation of Krishna Kumar's ideas through research and reflection on various themes.

It is a fine collection, addressing most of Krishna Kumar's concerns about education in India. The introduction outlines some of his most prominent interests as well as his contribution to the field of education and provides a summary of the chapters in the book. It is a competent commentary on the history of the discipline of education in India intertwined with Krishna Kumar's work, and some personalities and institutions that he engaged with. The most engaging essay in the book is one that uses an autobiographical approach to understand the challenges associated with having educational ideals and working them out in practice, especially in the context of a community in which one is located.

Taking on the mantle of leadership in a male bastion is not the work of a practising Muslim woman, and



Azra Razzack offers a fresh and inspiring perspective as she walks us through the razor's edge she experienced in her new job as Honorary Secretary of the Education Society of a minority school in Delhi. The difficulties she encountered were paramount in teachers' perceptions of their roles, or lack of, perhaps, and their complete lack of commitment to either the students or the school. The anomie in education comes out so clearly in this personal essay where the triumph of the students emerges as reflective of their agency. Razzack takes us through a nuanced telling of students' expectations, their being thrilled with little innovations, and their demands for better practices at school. However, their lives were at risk as children were often recruited into the petty crime and drug culture that encircled the school's location. Moreover, Razzack's encounters with members of the community taught her about minority politics and priorities which were often at odds with what was good for the school or its main inhabitants, the children. Razzack survived the years she was associated with the school and left with no small sense of accomplishment, pleased by the little gestures of farewell made by students or grateful parents. Above all, it showed her that being in her position and her engagement with the everyday life of the institution gave her valuable insights into school education that no textbook could have prepared her for. It is a remarkable journey as an administrator, seeking to establish a work culture and an educational setting that favours the growth of children and provides them with the cultural capital they lack.

Krishna Kumar probably faced similar difficulties in his long career associated with the University of Delhi and the NCERT and the section on Conversations in the closing pages of this book seeks to capture some of that. It also vividly brings out the dilemmas Krishna Kumar has faced as an academic and as educator. He notes that the discipline of education has a kind of a 'living edge, a responsibility' so that one is never taken seriously as an academic (p. 356). In my own experience at a premier social science institution, it is considered a pedestrian discipline, with no oomph or saleable quality. It's too much about the 'real' world and hence cannot be used to advantage in cementing one's position in an academic hierarchy that relies on celebrating that which has currency in contemporary discourse. It is also with some poignancy that we learn that what Krishna Kumar values most about his education is his ability to 'stitch and weave' that gives him 'a lifelong sense of emotional satisfaction' (p. 363). To cherish this quality above all others tells us also something about Krishna Kumar the person and the values he endorses. Working with the hands is absolutely crucial to any education and he lauds Gandhi's ideas about this as a 'breakthrough idea'.

Gandhi's reflections on nonviolence also find space in this volume as Nidhi Gaur examines his educational

thought and practice. I would only argue that we perhaps need not idealize nonviolence as a virtue as most of us are violent, if not physically, in our ideas, thoughts, interactions of different kinds. Can we be aware of this violence in ourselves and watch the processes as they unfold in our relationships with others? Observation and understanding of violence in our own lives, without posing the ideal of nonviolence, would be the first step in overcoming violence and valuing its absence as part of educational processes. Fear, emanating from the authority of the teacher, the textbook, or examinations, or other sources as Poonam Batra points out, is present in large measure in educational institutions. This limits students' abilities to learn as well as teachers' capacities to function to their fullest potential. Batra delineates the many acts of 'violence', the forms of exclusionary practices in schools that humiliate children, induce fear, and do not allow for a free and harmonious culture in schools. The effort to instill 'discipline' and reform children and young adults remains at the heart of educational practice that serves to restrain, emphasize obedience, and ensure conformity. While reflecting on one's own fears as teachers, and on the wider social and political reality is no doubt important, it is also equally important to first be able to develop a relationship as teachers and students, without dominance or authority and engage with one another in dialogue about the nature of our fears and examine them together. This equal sharing of our challenges helps foreground a culture of interaction at educational institutions that is not based on authority. It is possible to do this and through this also deal with conflict which is inevitable in any institution.

In his conversation with Disha Nawani (in the concluding section of the book), Krishna Kumar suggests that conflict is avoided in alternative schools and that children in such schools are cocooned in a kind of 'rosy, cushioned kind of experience' (p. 370). He particularly mentions the Krishnamurti Foundation schools. Nothing however could be further from the truth! Conflict is a part of everyday life and the Krishnamurti schools are not immune to it and nor do they brush aside conflict under

It is also with some poignancy that we learn that what Krishna Kumar values most about his education is his ability to 'stitch and weave' that gives him 'a lifelong sense of emotional satisfaction' (p. 363). To cherish this quality above all others tells us also something about Krishna Kumar the person, and the values he endorses.

the carpet. Every situation is dealt with by teachers and students through dialogue with students, often involving parents, and sometimes, certain consequences are inevitable. But these are not imposed in an authoritarian manner. The students themselves are asked to reflect on the conflict and suggest how we may resolve the issue at hand. In this way they are partners in the resolution of conflict whether it is between themselves, with teachers, or with school norms. There is a serious effort to ensure that nothing is left unresolved as this may lead to a simmering of discontent and result in further conflict. In this manner, there is no illusion or ideal about schooling, only an insight into how conflicts must, and can, be resolved!

There are other insightful pieces in this book. Malvika Gupta's essay provides a detailed and very informative account of the history of educational provisions for Adivasis. Through her analysis, she deftly brings out the complexities associated with a pedagogy of assimilation. The boarding schools, *ashram* schools, perhaps represent the worst forms of 'cultural genocide', that Gupta suggests, open up a debate on how to provide education that is more inclusive of Adivasi culture, traditions and life practices. Manish Jain's essay on nationalist imaginaries during the colonial period addresses one of Krishna Kumar's early and continuing concerns with the role of the textbook in pursuing nationalism and citizenship goals through the perpetuation of a national identity. Other essays that address issues surrounding educational policy through the lens of 'talent' in students (Philip), child-centred education (Sarangapani), and reforms vis-à-vis teachers (Priyam) focus on a critique of policy, and suggestions for change. They are well documented and address policy concerns with their ear to the ground and pose important questions for consideration.

Krishna Kumar has had a lifelong interest in understanding learning, its many dimensions, how we may reconstruct our approach to teaching and learning, to help students understand the world they inhabit, and become responsible citizens in a complex world. Mohammad Talib takes up this aspect of Krishna Kumar's interest in his essay on Modes of Learning. To my mind, it is also important to not assume that all learning is *not* participatory. If we do so, we deny agency to both teachers and students! While textbooks and examinations, based solely on their content, are the norm in this country, all teachers are not merely following occupational diktats without voice or agency. They often work against all odds to help students learn through participation! Sociology, which Talib particularly writes about, is a participatory discipline in itself. Fieldwork is essential to an understanding of social reality and has now become part of the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula in many universities in this country. Sociology and social anthropology in higher education is not only

about 'western texts' or the dominance of western writers (p. 231). As is well known, social anthropology in India was not a homegrown discipline. It was an import and to that extent, the classics by western academics were present in the works students read. At the same time, writers such as AR Desai, GS Ghurye, Irawati Karve, MN Srinivas, among others were all part of the same discourse. On the basis of an article by Gerard Heuze, Talib criticizes scholars such as MN Srinivas and Andre Beteille for not supporting affirmative action in the 1990s. Is being 'politically correct' or supporting causes, however worthy they are, at all times the best defining feature of sympathetic or 'participatory' academia? How do teachers teach in their classrooms? What texts do they bring to the table? How do they help students understand the nuances of Indian society through both 'theory' and experience? Some of the best teachers in higher education 'lecture' but the connections they make in that lecture, the texts and illustrations they cite, and their analysis of all this material, helps students understand, with often deep and moving insight, the social world we inhabit. Ethnographies, autobiographies and biographies, archival documents, and other sources all serve to make it a participatory discipline. While the course on 'Participatory Sociology' started in Jamia is no doubt laudatory, we need to be open to other, equally promising, ways of 'knowing' the world.

Perhaps, as an ethnographer, I missed an emphasis on ethnography in this volume! Prabhjyot Kaur's very interesting contribution on the construction of Sikh masculinity may however fall within this genre. It addresses an oft neglected aspect of gender and sexuality studies in education in this country: how masculinity is constructed in and through schooling practices, the influence of the media, popular culture and of course, socialization practices. Krishna Kumar's early essay 'Growing Up Male' in the *Seminar* (February 1986) was a timely contribution to masculinity studies in India (unacknowledged by Kaur!). Kaur focuses on popular culture, the cinematic genre, and through her study of students in two schools, examines its influence on Sikh adolescents. In doing this, her focus is more on the cinematic constructs of masculinity and perhaps she sometimes misses out on the significance of Sikh tradition in this process. For example, she mentions 'being helpful' as a characteristic the young Sikh boys most aspired for. She does not comment on this but quickly asserts the influence of Dosanjh on other aspirations of 'being stylish, naughty, and fun-filled' (p. 246). However, 'being helpful' is a characteristic the students have directly received from the Sikh tradition of *kar-seva* (voluntary labour). The influence of Sikh tradition is undeniable as Kaur herself comments on the 'inner moral constraint' that inhibits a turbaned Sikh from amoral acts. It would be interesting if Kaur could expand on this influence of the Sikh tradition

on these young students and the importance of family and religious tradition in their lives. No doubt cinematic influence is increasingly paying a significant role in shaping young minds and their behaviour but uncovering the role of family and tradition in this regard may help us better understand the complex processes that underlie constructions of masculinity among Sikh adolescents.

In gratitude and celebration, the editors have put together a very diverse set of essays as their gift to Krishna Kumar. It must be a moment of pride and honour for Krishna Kumar who continues to reflect and write on education, in all its dimensions, and remains an inspiration to many students and practitioners in education.



Good Education is a Matter of the Heart

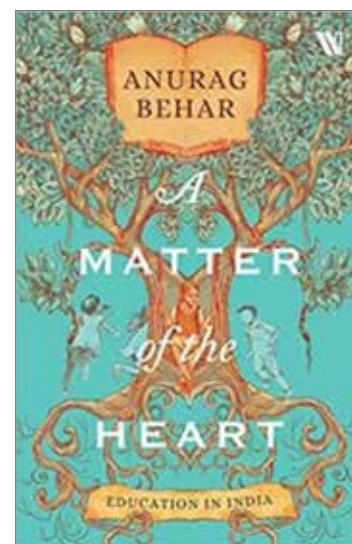
Toolika Wadhwa

A MATTER OF THE HEART: EDUCATION IN INDIA

By Anurag Behar

Westland Books, 2023, pp. 375, ₹ 599.00

Anurag Behar has a rich experience in the field of education in working with Azim Premji Foundation and travelling extensively at the grassroots level. Like others who have worked in the field, he points out quite rightly, good education is in the end, 'A Matter of the Heart'. This insight is a clear indication of how the profession of teaching is unlike any other



profession. With other caregiving professions, including medicine, accounting, protective forces, and law that require close interaction with the primary stakeholders, patients, clients, etc., there is a certain level of detachment warranted, not at the cost of compassion, but for retaining distance and maintaining professional behaviour. All these rules become a hindrance in the practice of the teaching 'profession'. One must be passionate and care deeply and genuinely for their students. This is evident across the hundred-odd anecdotes that Behar shares in his book. Without above average level of dedication and

Behar's extensive fieldwork covers hitherto ignored villages and nondescript sites. The book is a valuable source through tapping into these stories that would have been lost in history ... These stories are stories of inspiration, of bringing about a change in the lives of students, of positive transformation, of hope, peace, and possibilities.

commitment, no school at the grassroots can evince a positive transformation. Behar's field experience stands testimony to the same.

Behar's extensive fieldwork covers hitherto ignored villages and nondescript sites. The book is a valuable source through tapping into these stories that would have been lost in history. The documentation of the changes that are being brought forth by the works of Renu Upadhyaya in Uddham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand, Shobha in Gulbarga, Karnataka, and teachers and principals in different parts of the country, is a reminder for teachers to maintain commitment and zeal towards their work, wherever they are. These stories are stories of inspiration, of bringing about a change in the lives of students, of positive transformation, of hope, peace, and possibilities.

Apart from personal commitments and actions of teachers, Behar also brings to the fore the important role of the government in education. By various policies that work against teachers, such as recruiting teachers at various pay levels by bureaucracy and inadequate funding, the government has largely relegated schools to the sidelines. He highlights that despite the widespread prevalence of private school education, it is the public sector that has the power to make a real impact. He correctly points out to the ability of private players to provide low cost education. Low fee charging private schools are 'parasitic' in their exploitation of the labour market. By so doing, we leave it to the individual teacher who, entirely dissatisfied with the workplace, would somehow find the inner strength and resolve to provide high quality education to students. A committed teacher would teach well not because of good infrastructural facilities, decent pay scale, and a supportive environment, but would teach well despite a lack of all of this. In 'The Ideology of Education' (pp. 116-118), he discusses two studies that point out that there is no substitute for public education in ensuring quality education at the grassroots.

Two important school practices that can be culled

out from the anecdotes that Behar shares point towards the importance of community. On the one hand school-community partnership, where community members play an active role in improving the quality of education that their children receive, has greatly improved relationships between school teachers, administrators and the local community. Community members demonstrated pride in the government school system that worked authentically towards the growth and learning of their children. On the other hand, building a community of teachers, through various teacher volunteer groups, has proven time and again to be effective in improving pedagogic inputs. Behar raises an important question: '... how many employees in their organisations will show up regularly on holidays, paying for their own commute, to learn things so that they can do their jobs better, without any external incentive or mandate' (p. 314). Such is the power of voluntary teacher groups who work with no other motive than to improve their learning and take the same to the classrooms.

The book has been divided into six parts. Loosely put together in themes, each anecdote, in whichever part it may have been placed, can be read independently. However, part six, the concluding part is the most intriguing. Although the anecdotes are not chronologically arranged, the episodes in this part are thoughtfully selected for concluding the book. The writing in this part brings to the fore the mix of emotion that Behar has experienced. The writing is fragrant with a mixture of frustration with field realities but also the romance of wanting to bring about a change. Part six has been titled '*Is Bahakti hui Duniya ko Sambhalon Yaaron*', which Behar apologetically does not translate into English, vaguely means, 'manage this delusional, misled world'. It is almost euphemistic to look at the world of education from this perspective. But presented at the end of the innumerable field experiences carefully curated by the author, the description is so apt. It requires a great amount of commitment and zeal to work in the field of education. People with exceptional calibre and passion for teaching are doing justice to the profession and bringing about real change in the lives of children across the country. This has been well documented by Behar. His book also brings to the fore the large scale government apathy and shirking of responsibility towards education. In the final chapter, 'The Importance of being Stubborn', he writes about the importance of *zidd*, being firm in one's resolve. It takes great resolve to break barriers of caste, gender, corruption, and resist the pressures of the bourgeoisie. He concludes: 'We must all be *ziddi* together, with a shared moral purpose...' (p. 372). Although he wrote it in 2016, sadly the field does not evidence much change since then. We must, thus, continue to be *ziddi* together.



A Play with Ideas

Christian Lee Novetzke

THE THIRD EYE AND OTHER WORKS: MAHATMA PHULE'S WRITINGS ON EDUCATION

Translated from the original Marathi by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar.
Foreword by Bhalchandra Nemade

Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2023, pp. 248, ₹ 855.00

In the middle of the 19th century, Savitribai and Jotirao Phule began their systematic critique of how they believed caste, gender, and power worked together to suppress women, Shudras, and Dalits. Faced with the prospect of trying to change an ancient system accepted as normal by millions of people, and etched into all aspects of everyday life, the Phules started small: they opened a school for girls in Bhide Wada in Pune in 1848. This led to two more schools, and by 1852 they ran three schools open to people of all castes, genders, and religions. They could have rooted their social justice work in any field, but they chose education because they identified at the heart of the gender-caste-power complex a system of knowledge segregation by virtue of birth. They argued that if one can address and eradicate this knowledge segregation through universal education, one could begin to unravel a primary impediment to social equality.

This core principle of the Phules' political thought is brilliantly expressed in the play *Tritiya Ratna*, written in Marathi by Jotirao Phule in 1855, but never published and essentially forgotten until 1979. Now, for the first time in English, Rohini Mokashi-Punekar presents to the world her lyrical translation of this key text within the Phules' critical and artistic thought. Given its long hiatus from the public eye, attention to this play has been minimal in the English scholarly sphere, both in India or outside. With Mokashi-Punekar's superb translation, we now have ample space for scholarly studies and uses in English of this extraordinary play.

Built around the content of the play and its times are three path-breaking essays by Mokashi-Punekar contained in this book. One essay historicizes Phule and his politics, another engages with the 'play of ideas' within the text itself, and a third situates Phule within the politics of education in the 19th century. This latter essay stands on its own as an exemplary engagement with the interflows of colonialism, missionary work, Brahmanical male 'reform' efforts, pre-existing Indian modes of public education, and the long-standing efforts of women, Shudras, and Dalits to find avenues toward education in India over centuries.

Mokashi-Punekar translates the title of the play as *The Third Eye* though the Marathi title shifted between *Tritiya Ratna* ('The Third Jewel') and *Tritiya Netra*

('The Third Eye') in Phule's own designation. The many generative concepts around these three renderings of the play's name—two in Marathi and one in English—are fully engaged with by Mokashi-Punekar in her carefully crafted introduction to the work. Is this a reference to the angry third eye of Shiva leashed upon a cruel and unjust world, or the jewel

uncovered at the churning of a violent ocean? This title will pique the interest of those who know of Jotirao Phule's many critiques of normative, mythological, and traditional Hinduism, and Mokashi-Punekar leads the reader carefully through these possibilities.

The play itself has a 'ripped from the headlines' quality that would not be out of place even today: Expectant Couple Duped by Crooked Astrologer. The couple in this case are Shudras who are made to fear for their unborn child's future after a greedy Brahman astrologer warns them of the dangers the stars pose to their daughter. Their common sense is overwhelmed by the dark auguries of the astrologer, and bereft of education, they place their trust in the knowledge of the soothsayer. As the astrologer's fees mount, and he draws in his wife and brother-in-law to deepen the shakedown, Phule inserts a *Vidushak* into his play, a role classically assigned to a kind of Brahman-buffoon character, but here, though his caste is never identified, he functions as a voice of reason highlighting the greed of the Brahman astrologer and the ignorance of the Shudra couple. As Mokashi-Punekar convincingly argues, the *Vidushak* ventriloquizes Jotirao Phule's position and politics most directly in the play (44, 51ff), inverting the 'fool' character of the *Vidushak* to make him wise as Phule places his own thoughts and politics into the traditional voice of a Brahman male character on stage. This was perhaps Phule's way of suggesting that not all Brahmins are the same, as indeed he counted some Brahmins among his allies and supporters.

As the couple goes deep into debt to be able to pay for the astrologer's services, they come into the company of a Christian missionary, a Padre, portrayed without the many complications of Christian missionizing in India, but rather as a clear voice of reason guiding the Shudra couple toward a rational view of the astrologer's con game, and stopping short, Mokashi-Punekar reminds us, of an actual attempt at converting the Shudra couple. Through their interaction, the Shudra man turns his 'inward eye upon the whole wide world', seeing the ploys of the astrologer in the new light of reason. Now with the benefit of this mode of knowledge, the couple breaks the thrall of superstition, even while they must settle the bill



with the astrologer. In debt but closer toward freedom, they dine together as something like equals and commit themselves to education 'where...Savitribai Phule has started a school for young girls and women...and...adult men which Jotirao Phule has begun right next to it'. The play, in other words, leads to the open doors of the Phules' schools and beyond, to a world of education set against the regime of knowledge segregation.

Mokashi-Punekar renders Phule's words with the colloquial flow the play deserves, perfectly pitching the English translation to capture which liminal space between spoken and performed language. She wisely retains Marathi words in the English, reminders to the reader of the vernacular roots of this text. Phule was a writer with a sense of humour, and Mokashi-Punekar allows the drama and comedy of this play the space to speak into a new language. One can imagine that with this new translation Phule's play might yet find a stage in India and beyond.

In addition, Mokashi-Punekar includes a new translation of an early ballad or *povada* by Phule, 'Brahmin Teachers in the Education Department', as well as a reprint of the English preface to *Gulamgiri* from 1873 and an English address to the Hunter Commission in 1882. The inclusion of this additional translation and two reprints of Phule's English work provide a greater empirical scope for understanding how Phule's commitment to education as a means of eradicating caste-gender injustice was sustained, but it is also vital in contextualizing the last of the three important essays Mokashi-Punekar includes in this volume.

Mokashi-Punekar begins by noting that those who struggle against the caste-gender-power complex today do so publicly and too often tragically within the field of education, and in particular, higher education. While she focuses primarily on situating Phule and this work within its historical contexts, underwriting her scholarly engagements is an eye toward the contemporary political relevance of the play. There are many ways that Mokashi-Punekar's analysis of this play and other work presented here move forward our collective analysis of Jotirao Phule's legacy, but two especially stand out to me.

After the first essay that introduces Phule and his times, a second essay engages the significance of the play and privileges an aspect of Phule's legacy often missing or muted in scholarly writing and public memory, which is the role of Phule as a writer and an artist, in particular as a political performance artist who used his tremendous gift of writing to render lyrical and literary his political thought. Phule the Artist is a figure that Mokashi-Punekar carefully draws from his texts and from history itself. She positions him and the play within larger histories of drama and theatre in India, engaging in a wide-ranging discussion that includes classical forms and Marathi ones like *kirtan*, *tamasha*, *sangeet natak*, and *bharud*, but also

the emergence of modern theatre influenced by English and global trends. She also situates Phule within the worlds of subaltern and Dalit writing that will emerge in the century after his life. She sets these histories within the political forces of the day, including the enduring forces of Maratha and Peshwa history felt in the colonial period in Western India, and especially in Pune. Her extended analysis of the play will help the reader understand the many nuances, tropes, and references of Phule's work.

Phule as political performance artist can also be seen in the fact that this play was written specifically to be an entry into the annual Dakshina Prize, a hold-over from the Peshwa period when Brahman men were awarded gifts (*dakshina*) for their literary work, competition maintained during British rule. It was doubtful the 28-year-old Jotirao Phule thought he stood a chance of winning such a prejudicial competition. The play instead also took the form of protest itself, a wrench inserted into the cogs of the old caste-patriarchy intended to cause a catalyst, as well as a self-reckoning, delivered by an artist who also knew how to deploy his art in its own highly public and performative way. One may marvel at the brilliance and the courage of the Artist as a Young Man.

As Bhalchandra Nemade, the famous Marathi writer and scholar, says in his provocative Foreword to this work, Phule often appears to elide the violence, ruthless extraction, and racism of British colonialism. This is true of the characters of the play as well who 'do not seem to know that they were working tirelessly for the farmyard of England' (p. xii). This is of course at the heart of many debates about colonialism, subaltern politics, and the 'liberalism' of Empire that have shaped academic thought over the last thirty years. Just as many caste and class elites took advantage of the imposition of colonialism upon India, so too did women, Shudras, and Dalits make such strategic use of this political force on the subcontinent when it could improve their condition in some way, especially in relation to missionary and liberal ethics toward education—loaded as they were with producing certain kinds of subjects (Christian, docile, etc.). Mokashi-Punekar in her second essay suggests that Phule's occlusion from the main of post-colonialist historiography may be due to his 'rather soft position on imperialism, colonialism and missionary activity' and yet 'Phule reposes hope in the British rule, even as he interrogates the lacunae in their administrative capacity and will [because]...Only British rule, in his view, holds the promise of the overthrow of the Brahmins and their duplicitous hegemony' (pp. 73-4). This problem is brilliantly explored in the last of her substantive essays, 'Situating Phule within the History of Education in India'. In this work, Mokashi-Punekar skillfully intertwines an astute assessment of the invested politics of several players within nineteenth-century India. Eliding the 'sharp binary' of West and non-West,

Mokashi-Punekar renders Phule's words with the colloquial flow the play deserves, perfectly pitching the English translation to capture which liminal space between spoken and performed language.

colonial and colonized, inaugurated by Said's work and underwriting all postcolonial thought, Mokashi-Punekar instead shows how multiple spheres overlapped in the nineteenth century around what education and the reform of educational systems meant both for those who sought to preserve their elite power and those that hoped for a means toward a better life and basic rights. She nuances Macaulay's (in)famous *Minute* as not an assault on all Indian literature and thought, but specifically on Brahmanism and caste patriarchy. She sustains a significant engagement around the differing class backgrounds of Protestant and Catholic missionary work—and why the former may have been more inclined to read caste opposition as a mode of class upliftment. Protestant missionary writing led to ways of reading Hindu mythological and iconographical materials and modes of argumentation that the Phules would also adopt in some measure. This essay crucially helps contextualize the role of the Padre in the play as a metonym for the kinds of rhetorical strategies the Phules would adopt. She outlines the collusion with the Imperial Government of a broad class of 'upper-caste' men. Alongside these state and social structures, Mokashi-Punekar engages with parallel movements where Protestant missionary concepts and rhetorical styles entered the Marathi and bilingual public sphere through new publications that offered radical critiques of normative and Brahmanical Hinduism. Mokashi-Punekar argues that in this sea of crosscurrents and eddies, non-elite and subaltern people sought ways to leverage all possibilities toward actual political change in their favour. While she does not make this connection explicitly, I read this cogent and careful essay as a direct response to how Phule felt about imperialism and colonialism—a moment of disruption in traditional regimes of knowledge segregation that might open spaces for the oppressed to seek the light of day. In other words, for the Phules there was not a question of the freedom of an abstract Indian nation, but a question of what kind of nation might have the moral and social capacity to stand free. Mokashi-Punekar's translation of *The Third Eye* and its accompanying set of essays is a gift to anyone with an inner eye open to the wide world.

What Constitutes Alternative Schooling?

Alka Behari

UN/COMMON SCHOOLING: EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENTS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY INDIA

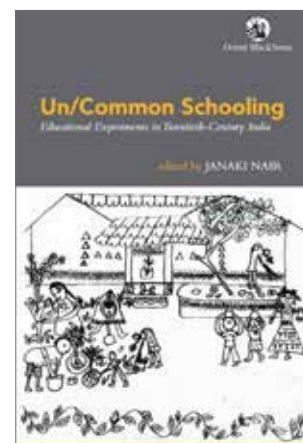
Edited by Janaki Nair

Orient BlackSwan, 2022, pp. 296, ₹ 1145.00

Mainstream education in a society as stratified and diverse as ours finds it often difficult to reach children of geographically remote and socially marginalized communities. Alternative structures and processes of schooling outside the mainstream system assume significance in their endeavour to find effective and sustainable ways of providing access to these children and also an opportunity for them to participate in a process of education which promises acceptable equality. The alternative schooling strategies under DPEP did focus on some progressive ideas of education in terms of flexibility of structure, duration, curriculum and pedagogy, but brought in a cadre of para teachers which goes against the very tenets of a good education system. As Shyam Menon writes in the Foreword of the CIE (2004) study, 'admittedly alternative schooling evoked a major debate on quality, the state's and the country's responsibilities in education and particularly the whole issue of para teachers'.

The book *Un/Common Schooling* presents case studies of alternative schooling which transform the lives of children, particularly those from the most underprivileged conditions who either have never been to school or have dropped out of the formal school system. The cases present unique and alternative ways, differing from the existing rigid structure, which is insensitive to the learner, and the processes and practices of the formal system. The cover of the book and the photographs catch the eye of the reader. They give a glimpse of the teachers' and students' engagement in the process of learning.

The book is presented in three parts. Part One focuses upon 'Reflections on Alternative Education' by three educational practitioners, on the Tilak Nagar Children's Centre, Karnataka, by KT Margaret, the Sita School, Karnataka by Jane H Sahi and Eklavya's work, Madhya Pradesh by Rashmi Paliwal. Part Two comprises 'Experiments' undertaken particularly in a rural setup,



The cover of the book and the photographs catch the eye of the reader. They give a glimpse of the teachers' and students' engagement in the process of learning.

and includes narrative accounts of practices in Tagore's Sriniketan by Pradip Kumar Datta, Vikasana by MC Malathi and Kanavu by Shirly Joseph. Part Three includes essays based on life histories that were collected as part of an Oral History Project sponsored under the Transnational Research Group (TRG) of the German Historical Institute of London, and also an alternative education workshop. It consists of narratives of KN Sunandan, Shivangi Jaiswal and Megha Sharma. The concluding piece is by Nair on Un/Common Schooling based primarily upon Dalit autobiographies. Each of the ten essays demonstrates a vision of alternative education in our country. It offers a reflective account of how different institutions were built and delved into providing innovative approaches to learning and institution building.

The introduction by Nair poses several pertinent issues or questions which motivate the reader and keep her/him engaged. These are broadly described in subsections such as, 'What were alternative schools an alternative to?', 'What made alternative schools possible?', 'Alternatives to education and an ethics of care?', 'What form can alternative schools take today?', taking stock of alternatives in education. In the very beginning, Nair questions the alternative as an alternative to what? As highlighted by Koerrenz et al (2018), the alternative element of alternative schooling refers to a difference that can change schooling in general and the impact of schooling on society in particular. Alternative schooling is not just about making a difference in a formal way, but about doing something better to improve schooling.

On closer examination, it is seen that the focus in the book is on both the dimensions of the alternative, one that offers a choice to the conventional education provided by state-run schools to the other that builds on a system of education which contributes to the vision of equity, justice, democracy and inclusion as ideals enshrined in our Constitution.

A lucid description followed by discussion on several common themes is seen to run across the different essays, and may be elucidated as follows: teaching-learning processes and practices, the place of the community, teacher training, innovative practices, the notion of alternative, the issue of replicability, and ideas that complement and facilitate learning such as ethics, care and support. Aspects of networking and censorship also find a place in the text.

Teaching-learning includes flexibility in pedagogy and curriculum, notions of learning and unlearning the role of the teacher, student and the family. The view of a teacher as one who cares for children/learners, understands them within their social, cultural and political context, views learning as a search for meaning out of personal experiences of her learners, creates conducive conditions for each learner in respect of the kind, pace and styles of learning, and views knowledge generation as a continuously evolving process of reflective learning. The view of the learner which the essays echo is that of an individual with a unique potential and living in a socio-cultural context, who is more than a mere psychological entity. These ideas related to teaching-learning, the learner, the teacher, the curriculum and pedagogy come very close to the paradigm shift which is discussed in the National Curriculum Framework, 2005. Many characteristics of alternative schools as articulated by Vittachi (2007) are shared in the essays. An emphasis on an individualized approach to education and learning and according equal respect to all children is evident. Most prominently, an integration of children with mixed abilities and or different socio-economic groups and even mixed ages in the classroom are highlighted. The learning process is experiential and interest-based rather than focused only upon textbooks/teacher-dominated lessons. The curriculum interlinks different disciplines enabling children to see interconnections across various aspects of learning.

Other themes prevalent in the essays include efforts at establishing theory-practice linkages in the classroom (as emphasized in Sriniketan), and learning and unlearning of all which had been learnt earlier in teacher training (as observed in Neel Bagh). Gaining the support of parents was crucial. However, the essays bring out a point of concern: the realization of the parents that they were sending their children to the alternative centres more because the quality of education provided there was better came rather late! What had appealed to them initially was the fact that these centres were free of cost and ensured safety of their girl child.

Themes also evident in the narratives are Ethics and the Politics of Care. The figure of a Caring Teacher emerges as a common factor in some narratives. Nonetheless, what strikingly came out in the discussion was the possibility of this figure becoming a benevolent and patronizing figure of *authority*. It was considered to be real. In fact, this revelation in the book tends to corroborate recent researches, such as Hassan (2008) and others in the field of Teacher Education, which present a critique on the preparation of a caring teacher for our future schools. Another dimension discussed in the book is the place of Language. The preference of English by many parents and the community over their own mother tongue is highlighted. English is viewed not just as a

language but a judicial/ legal apparatus, a political system, a semiotics of modernity, and more beyond.

As regards the issue of Replicability, it has been clearly articulated that this was not the interest of the practitioners, so it has not been elaborated upon. In any case, as Nair remarks, these experiments pursued by inspired individuals, who were able to channel their skills and interests as well as their cultural capital into schools run without government support. They were outsiders to the communities they served and were able to sustain their efforts largely through external financial aid and support. Hence, she asserts, there is impossibility of replicability on any large scale.

Some references to the Right to Education Act, 2009 have been made in the text pointing out as to how an initiative that started with an objective of bringing out progressive systemic changes became a roadblock for some unconventional efforts at individual level. This is being voiced in the light of the ruling that after the implementation of the Act, any school which is not registered by the state would be declared illegal. This ruling came as a setback to individuals who were working towards running alternative schools.

A characteristic feature is that of networking among alternative education network centres. These serve as a great support system for the practitioners involved in times of stress, challenges, and as Joseph says, 'to buoy one up' during the phase of implementation. The views presented in the various essays complement each other and build upon each other's ideas. However, what stands out is Malathi's essay where she recommends that schools need to work with freedom from government control, parental influence and universalization. One may question the feasibility, the academic soundness and the desirability of creating such isolated islands of learning!

What is noteworthy is that each essay is presented as a critical reflective account of the experiment/life history or case thereby providing ample scope of understanding the vision, the merits, the challenges, the lessons to be learned and a look into the implications that this has for the future. It is remarkable that these have also been presented in some narratives as forms of self-censorship, which act as a window to view how learners made sense (later in life) of their experiences. Reading gaps in the narratives were also observed, which again became a source of deeper understanding of the lives of the learners. Many questions have been posed by the writers in each chapter, that question the success of their experiments and cases. However, very pertinently, Nair points out that these were the scarcely glimpsed promises of an alternative, for which terms like 'success' or 'failure' would be entirely inappropriate. It would be in place to appreciate the merit of this submission by the editor.

The book will serve as an invaluable resource for researchers and practitioners in the field of Education and

Teacher Education, and offers food for thought for policy initiatives. The existence of a Journal titled, *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* gives an indication of how, perhaps, the dissatisfaction with the present system of education is compelling educationalists, researchers and practitioners to explore alternative ways of learning and schooling. Moving further, it is significant to note that nowhere in the book is 'Unschooling' presented as an alternative.

The book assumes significance more so in the light of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 which gives greater importance to alternative forms of schooling in addressing the problems of dropout rates and ensuring universal access to education at all levels. It has strongly recommended to put in place alternative and innovative education centres in cooperation with civil society to bring back children into mainstream education.

As the book is a collection of writings by individuals who founded alternative schools in India located mostly in remote villages with little or no access to basic civic amenities, it may serve as an essential reading for all practitioners who wish to make an impact on teaching and learning in their school. For researchers in the field, the book offers valuable insights on Methodology and Design of Research. In fact, it would not be out of place to affirm that even teachers working in mainstream education can draw upon several dimensions of classroom processes as demonstrated in the essays, into their own classes. The review may aptly be concluded with these lines of Nair: 'The critical assessment of India's educational history in Krishna Kumar's *Political Agenda of Education* should leave us in no doubt that the necessity of thinking alternatives is no less urgent today than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. A record of these experiments, their achievements and failures alike, as attempted in this book, is just the inaugural step.' To this, as an educationist, one cannot agree more!

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Nidhi Gulati

DAKSHIN ASHIYAYI KALA MEIN SEEKHNAA SIKHAANAA (TEACHING-LEARNING IN SOUTH ASIAN ART)

By C. N. Subramaniam

Eklavya, 2023, pp. 67, ₹ 95.00

This book on the historiography or rather a social-cultural history of education is a rare example of this phenomenon. Subramaniam is interested in how education has been imparted over a long duration of history. He begins from the ancient, traverses the medieval and ends with the colonial period.

The first essays begins with a Sumerian archaeological site image, cuneiform tablets. Then the discussion focuses on Bharhut stupas, Ajanta frescoes and sculptures from the Mathura Museum, and Greek paintings and pottery. The second essay begins with a discussion of a sculpture from the Pala dynasty, and dwells on the medieval period, including Vijayanagara sculptures from Lepakshi temple, an image from the *Bhagavat Purana*, pages from *Khamsa* of Nizami and *Razmnāma*. The third chapter focuses on art that shows influences of cultural mixing, and stylistic influences, specifically in the colonial period. It is evident that the author draws on a vast range of sources.

Historians make use of records, documents, manuscripts, and texts. This book, on the other hand, is focused on the 'image' of the learners, teachers, learning spaces, and educational practices. It looks for them in paintings, sculpture boards, pottery, friezes, frescoes, folios from manuscripts and bas-reliefs. Subramaniam shows that art is a valid document of the social and political history of education. First, the book gives a story of what happened instead of a history that focuses on problems in its narrative of events. Where are the places for teaching and learning? Are they amidst banana trees or the places where people live and work? Where do the teacher and students sit? Subramaniam peers into children's textbooks to see what they are writing, thus, veering into a micro-analysis.

Second, it engages in a range of teaching-learning processes and activities. He documents what people think and do about teaching, pedagogy, the teacher's role, punishment and discipline. He uses classroom practices as the pivot to foray into the different dimensions.

Subramaniam's history works with the field of education, especially with the critical theory of education in the discussions. Here are a few examples of engagement with the discipline: What could be the possible beginnings

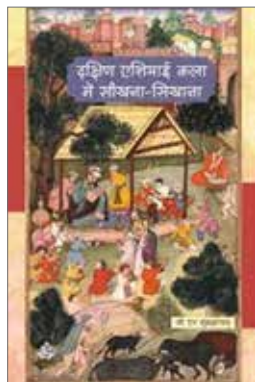
of a pedagogue? Subramaniam looks for clues in Greek statues made of terracotta from the 3rd century AD. How do class sizes and the number of students per teacher change over time? How do parents and teachers talk to each other? In his discussion of class, gender and caste, the foundations of critical theory are evident. What are the children wearing? Do we see boys and girls going to school together? When do the girls disappear in the school pictures? The way he looks at art and aesthetics shows how he critiques psychological and political ideas. It can be seen in discourses of punishment and discipline, the post-industrial factory model of education, and teaching-related ideas and practices. The essays cast doubt on the notion that education for life in a bureaucratized, technologically advanced society, no matter how sophisticated it is, is in any way an improvement of the human condition.

The book talks about how school systems change and stay the same. The reader can observe historical variations in how parents structure children's lives to ensure they learn knowledge and skills that are deemed vital to survival. Preparing the next generation has indeed changed throughout time and between societies. Yet, it is undeniable that not much has changed in our classrooms. We can examine facets of life around us to determine how much has changed. This quick thought-exercise helps us realize that the only place where we still use the same tools and technologies from 4,000 years ago is in education. On the first page of the book, there is a picture of a classroom in Sumeria. Its layout is eerily similar to schools we see today.

It is also important to note that schooling was not separate from life a few centuries ago, but it is now. The school in the colony grows further distanced from everyday life. We also observe continuity in the way that most children's childhoods are still marred by punishment and violence.

The language of the book is easy to understand as it flows like a conversation between close friends, using everyday vocabulary, concepts and ideas. The book discusses what dropouts, pedagogue, authority/power, discipline, punishment, and the link between the community and school mean. The book does justice to how it reads the images from different periods in history. Particularly significant are the junctures where Subramaniam pays attention to aesthetic aspects like weight balance or visual composition.

The images in the book are, essentially, an aesthetic experience. The imagery is powerful and redolent with ideas about teaching and learning. The reader is invited to enjoy the images and understand them. One thing is certain, the mental trek we take on reading this book may inspire thoughts about the future of education. This is still possible despite the bleak and inconclusive evidence of change.



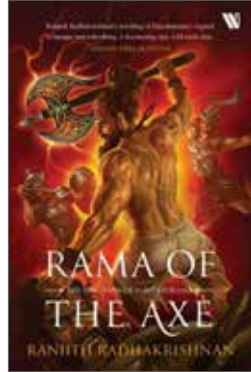
Ilika Trivedi

RAMA OF THE AXE: THE SAGA OF PARASHURAMA

By Ranjith Radhakrishnan

Westland Books, 2023, pp. 368, ₹ 499.00

Parashurama. Just the name of this avatar of Vishnu is enough to pique our curiosity and attract our attention. Almost everyone who is familiar with Hindu mythology knows that there are said to be ten avatars of Vishnu, of which the tales of Rama and Krishna are known to all throughout India. But there is another avatar of Vishnu whose name is also Rama, one whose tale we may not be as familiar with. *Rama of the Axe* is a wonderful attempt to capture the intriguing and terrifying story of Parashurama.



Hindu mythology is often seen as a contradictory, complicated compendium of stories that we all have heard parts of, but do not truly know in entirety. This makes them inaccessible to most audiences. Despite the unique characters and layered stories involved in Hindu mythology, the existence of multiple versions and sources of the same myths makes it difficult to involve children in knowing about these extraordinary tales. *Rama of the Axe* takes this challenge head-on by capturing the beautiful essence of the story of Parashurama.

This novel shows us the coming of age of Parashurama in a coherent way in a beautiful narrative. Fans of fantasy books should be the first to grab a copy, because it has all the ingredients of a truly iconic mystical story. The mystery of ancient prophecies, the beauty of powerful weapons earned through dedicated meditation, the strength of pure family bonds, the satisfaction of finding one's path through effort and self-realization, the aura of mythical kings and priests, and epic battles between good and evil bring out magical realism at its finest.

The author has taken great care to bring out the beauty of Hinduism and its principles throughout the book, while carefully structuring the foundations of Hindu society in a moralistic tone. During the battle of Tripura, a character in the book discusses how Sanatana Dharma is important in front of a crowd completely opposed to it. For Hindus, this moment can provide valuable direction to understand the reasons for the practices that we consider normal in our day-to-day life. For people of other religions, this moment answers the whys that those of another culture might have when looking at our strange practices from the outside.

Another crucial facet is how the continuation of the caste system by birth is clearly denigrated by the

protagonist while the antagonist is explicitly said to be in the wrong for propagating a birth-based caste system. It is important to highlight that Hinduism is open to reform, and equality of birth and opportunity is an essential component of Sanatana Dharma.

The book uses language that can be challenging at times but it is a great way for younger readers to build on their vocabulary, while slowly going on Parashurama's adventures with him. A word of caution though: the book occasionally handles some adult themes—both of a sexual nature and some portrayals of extremely violent battle scenes. It is a great read for young adult and adult readers interested in Hindu mythology, but it also deals with themes that might not be suitable for extremely young readers.

Ranjith Radhakrishnan is a skilled writer who knows exactly how to capture the interest of the reader. He is excellent in leaving loose threads that leave questions in the mind of the reader, only to tie them up later in a spontaneous way when the reader is least expecting it. The visual appeal of the book is extraordinary with detailed descriptions that build the world around us when we read. It is no surprise that we encounter characters like Shiva, Nandi, and Indra whose mere presence excites the reader, but be prepared to appreciate characters that one might never have heard of before, or just heard their names in passing, but who will be cherished by the reader once they are done with the book. While the former category of characters is portrayed in unique and mysterious ways, the latter is presented with a depth and devotion that truly binds the reader to the story. Akrita is one such character that the reader will unabashedly adore and root for.

This is an unputdownable adventure story from start to finish which leaves one wanting more. Thankfully, there is a second part of the series to look forward to.



Ira Saxena

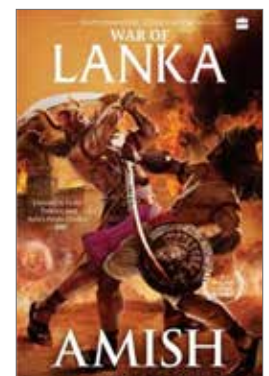
WAR OF LANKA (RAM CHANDRA SERIES BOOK 4)

By Amish

HarperCollins, 2022, pp. 504, ₹ 499.00

The title of the book straightaway points towards the concluding war in the great epic Ramayana, and celebrated during the age-old festival of Dusshera, of the victory of Rama over Ravana, the victory of good over evil, as dramatized in Ramlila throughout India.

This is the fourth book in the Ram Chandra Series



written by the well-known writer of mythology, Amish Tripathi. Although the thrilling saga of the great story of Rama has already been covered in other volumes of the series, this book, the final part of the series stands alone as captivating fiction. Once I started reading, it was unputdownable, crisp and riveting.

The story of the war focuses on fragmentary details of preparations of war leading to the main action and the involvement of characters that grip through entrancing descriptions. For sure, the intricacies, the ins and outs and the trivia of the weapons and measures used in those days, the armour, the battle strategies, the amazing formations of battalions are presented with methodical precision, which is always fascinating to the young audience.

In the battle, planning of carrying over the Elephant Corps across the seas is complicated, yet provides added advantage to Rama's army. The entire scene, the available resources of nature as well as the actions of warriors create the magic of parallel worlds. The author succeeds in enlivening the existence of people living close to nature and excelling efficiently with available wherewithal.

All characters are far removed from their familiar super-hero iconic positions of religious significance; instead, they are ordinary human beings with exemplary training, courage and also weaknesses. Rama is a noble man, miserable after the abduction of his wife, fighting a war to bring back his soul-mate, as well as aspiring to live up to his ideals in this battle for dharma. On the other hand, Ravana, slave of his ego thought he was invincible. Activated by greed, rage, grief, love, the actors of Ramayana assume the commonness of an average human.

A story of war implies the predominance of heroes versus anti-heroes, there is an assortment of worthy warriors and noble soldiers here. The demeanour of Rama, the incarnation of virtuousness and a heartbroken noble, depicts the image of purity and kindness, and is pitted against the anti-hero who is a fine artist, master of the Vedas, a forlorn lover and no less a devil incarnate. Ravana wins sympathy right at the onset when his story of dejected love explains his act of abducting Sita, accomplishing his suicide mission at the hands of Lord Vishnu in his incarnation as Rama. There is an atmosphere of general goodness prevailing among the characters and their actions subscribing to dharma. Ravana adheres to the rules and protocols of humanity and compassion.

The question of dharma is always centrestage in the book, respected at length by important characters in conversation or a dream sequence of Sages Vishwamitra and Vashishta and yet again in flash-back. The entire course of the sequence in the story thrives in the beauty of thought and dharmic practice. The genuine, unyielding Sanatana traditions governing the prescribed standards of living, find confirmation in simple chats, again and again, only to strengthen the rock-solid principles of faith.

The pace of fiction moves along with its philosophic content, neither slowing the action, nor dragging the story. Throughout, the text balances action like a steady flow of a brook to advance the tale, exciting and mysteriously churning events while employing different strategies. The fictional element stays fixed, unwaveringly; it is not intended to be judgemental and examines whether the tale drifted away from the original story. The presentation of the story beautifies the rich emotional content of the plot, adding sparkle to the underlying sentiments of characters.

As it is, the story of Rama-Sita and Ravana is suffused with abundant enchantment, magical events and fascinating characters. The racy fiction of *War of Lanka* rings with the thrill of adventure inspiring virtues of nobility and heroism, attainable in the smooth flow of a conscientious text delivering the enchantment of storytelling.



Dipavali Sen

SON OF ARJUNA: ABHIMANYU

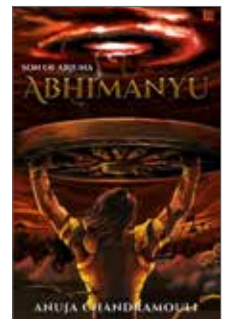
By Anuja Chandramouli. Cover Design by Chinmayee Samant
Leadstart, Mumbai, 2022, pp. 370, ₹ 399.00

Abhimanyu is not a forgotten or neglected character of mythology but a live one throbbing in the Indian heart. When slaughtered at Kurukshetra, he was sixteen, roughly the age when a kid today faces the 10th Boards. His is a popular name, associated with prowess in battle. It is not by mere chance that Shah Rukh Khan had the name Abhimanyu

Roy in his television appearance as a trainee army man in *Fauji* (1988). Vernaculars have absorbed the term '*Chakravyuha*' to mean an impossible trap, and the phrase '*Saptarathir maar*' to mean an unfair attack.

Here is a study of Abhimanyu by a young author, Anuja Chandramouli, from Tamil Nadu. She brings a burst of fresh energy to the understanding of the Mahabharata in modern India as initiated around late 19th century. Through around ten best-selling books as well as YouTube presentations, she is fulfilling this very essential task of connecting the youth of today to historical and mythological figures. This book is a sequel to her *Arjuna: Saga of a Pandava Warrior Prince*, and its dedication is to Krishna and Arjuna, the author's 'eternal favourites'. The Prologue is as per Vedavyasa, describing how in the midst of the battle, Arjuna senses that something is amiss.

The interlude reflects more of imagination, describing



the conception of a child by Subhadra, whom both the parents want to be the culmination of their aspirations.

The next chapter is about the 'propitious' event of Abhimanyu's birth, with Arjuna saying, 'I will teach you everything I know...' (p. 35). The treatment is vibrant, the approach contemporary. The conversation between Arjuna and Subhadra about whether they would have a son or a daughter ending with Arjuna's statement that a daughter would be a 'blessing' (p. 19) is likely to resonate with the readers of today and is not out of keeping with the essentially tender character of Arjuna. Such touches of imagination, available throughout the book, make the age-old characters more real.

In the fifteen chapters that follow, Abhimanyu grows up as the conflict within the Chandravamsha becoming more and more serious. At the time the war starts, he is still a juvenile in today's terms but already a married man and prospective father, with military training from both his uncle and father. The book sketches those developments without getting bogged down in details and losing momentum, till it takes Abhimanyu 'Into the Jaws of Death'.

This is the climactic chapter of the book, all the more so because it was not even a brigade of six hundred who rode into the jaws of death but only two, young Abhimanyu and his charioteer Sumitra. The narration is quite in accordance with the original, with innovative references to, say, Ghatotkacha and Pradyumna.

What happened to Abhimanyu after he got through the barrier of this battle formation? Why did he not get the support of the Pandava elders (other than Arjuna who was elsewhere in the battlefield)? How did he face the fact that despite the assurances and good wishes of his guardians, he had to face life—or death—alone?

Chandramouli describes all this in a masterly fashion, never transgressing the established outlines. She clarifies how Jayadratha prevented the Pandavas from following Abhimanyu into the *vyuha* he had opened up, and how Lakshmakumara's death provoked his father Duryodhana into his unethical command to Shakuni, Karna and even a 'soul-less' Dronacharya (p. 361).

'Standing in the middle of the dark vortex of sustained violence and calculated evil...Abhimanyu thought of his father... With the fierce determination, born of an indomitable spirit, Abhimanyu grabbed a chariot wheel and raised it over his head. It was not over, and he would fight to the very end' (p. 360). The lines brought back the memory of an old illustration of *Abhimanyu-vadh* in the rhymed Bengali Mahabharata by Kashiram Das of early seventeenth century.

Anuja Chandramouli's retelling of Abhimanyu's story contains inspirational value for the young facing overwhelming odds all alone. Perhaps like Subhash Chandra Bose hemmed in by impossible circumstances.

The Epilogue provides a soothing touch to this saga

of violence passionately told. It says that Abhimanyu was an avatara of Varchas, the lustre or glow of the moon after whom the Chandravamsha is named. The Moon-God had let him come down only for a short stint, just to provide 'his own seed' (p. 363) once the dynasty had been decimated.

So, readers will now wait for a Son of Abhimanyu—Parikshit. But perhaps also for references to some original material consulted, if only to encourage the interest the book is sure to generate.



Nita Berry

SUBHADRA

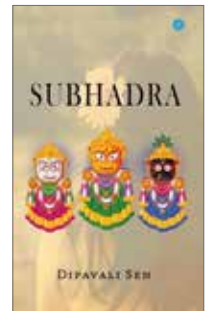
By Dipavali Sen. Cover Design by Geetika

BlueRose Publishers (self-published), 2022, pp. 220, ₹ 229.00

Here is a book by Dipavali Sen that takes us on a long and wonderful journey, back to the times of the Mahabharata, as seen through the eyes of Subhadra who plays many pivotal roles—as the daughter of Vasudev and Rohini, sister of Krishna and Balarama, the wife of Arjuna, the mother of Abhimanyu...and right down to her deification as an idol at the Jagannath Temple in Puri.

All this takes place within the framework of a modern setting in Gurgaon. And so, *Subhadra* is an unusual book in that it is a combination of the past and the present, myth and reality, as it presents the life of the deity from ancient times to the present day in the modern urban context.

The entire story of the Mahabharata unfolds before us through the eyes of Subhadra or as narrated to her by Arjuna, her husband—the thrilling Subhadra-*haran* by Arjun, when the mighty archer is incredulous at her handling of the chariot and its horses, the *swayamvara* of Draupadi, Arjuna's exile, Subhadra at Indraprastha, and her pregnancy when Arjuna would talk to her about warcraft and battle formations like the infamous *chakravyuha*, when she falls asleep, Yudhisthira's Rajasuya-yagnya which was followed by the disastrous game of dice at Hastinapur, that led to all the troubles, and then a day-by-day account of the battle at Kurukshetra with its horrific killings of near and dear ones, including the treacherous and heartrending slaying of young Abhimanyu, the son of Subhadra and Arjuna. Enthralling and evergreen legends and little-known episodes of the Mahabharata have made the major and minor characters of the epic come alive. The compilation of all these momentous events must have involved extensive and



detailed research by the author.

Dipavali takes us to the end of Subhadra's life with the mesmerizing process of her turning into an inanimate piece of wood in Dwaraka, wedged between her two lifeless brothers. This is the beginning of her deification as an idol without limbs, unable to carry out any action, before the trio is transported to the Jagannath Temple in Puri.

Coming to the present which is juxtaposed with the past in an interesting way, Priyanka is fascinated to watch the Rathayatra telecast from the Jagannath Temple at Puri and feels an inexplicable empathy for the deity Subhadra. There seems to be a connection between them through the eras. There's more to the story as Subhadra, stifled over the centuries in her mummified form in Puri, now longs to be set free. Can the modern context find explanations and solutions? And can Priyanka and her friend help Subhadra?

Written in Sen's engrossing and expressive style, and embellished with a great many details that give it a feeling of authenticity, the book makes an interesting read. In the process, one picks up much history of the time and legends of the epic, effortlessly.

The cover illustration of the three deities at the Jagannath Temple in Puri is bright and striking. Self-published by BlueRose Publishers, the paper quality and font of the book are good, and it is reasonably priced. However, some punctuation and editing errors should have been taken care of by the publishers, as also occasional printing errors, like words running into each other on some pages. These can detract from the reading pleasure at times.

Thanks to Dipavali for the heart-warming dedication to the members of the AWIC and their precious contributions to children's literature! There is indeed an unspoken bond between all those who share a passion for writing and creating for the young.



Indira Ananthakrishnan

RISHIKA

By Dipavali Sen. Cover Design by Priyanca Singh
BlueRose Publications, 2022, pp. 232, ₹ 248.00

An unusual theme coming from a talented writer made me hold the book in my hand and turn it around staring in bewilderment at the arresting title and also the cover design that depicts a woman clad half in an ancient garment and half modern. I started reading, turning the pages with avid rapidity. Six stories from the Hindu scriptures embellished with vivid descriptions and garnished with twists to suit the mood of the protagonist,



Ila, kept me riveted. It took me on a journey extraordinaire to relive the lives of six strong-in-spirit women sages known as the rishikas. Their male counterparts, the rishis, are more in number and their stories are better known.

Ila is a twenty-first century young working woman, single, living alone, having had her struggles in dealing with men in her life so far. As we read along with Ila, it dawns on us that the stories are not just a recap of Upanishadic incidents but a staggering journey bridging ancient times and the present through the eyes and mindset of Ila. To read how the value systems in the lives of the rishikas bear an uncanny resemblance to that of Ila takes one's breath away.

A wave of pathos engulfs us as we experience Ila's predicament in the opening pages. But we are soon introduced to the inimitable Rishika Gargi as Ila starts reading her story. The dialogue between Gargi and Yajnavalkya is well known. Both endowed with a splendid gift of repartee carry on an edge-of-the-seat discussion that is presented by the author in crisp, fleet-footed prose. Gargi realizes she is one notch down as against Yajnavalkya's knowledge and accepts defeat with dignity. Her father welcomes her back home with not a shade of annoyance, but with fatherly affection. Yet, surprisingly, she suddenly asks him: 'Do you ever feel bad, father, that you don't have a son, only a daughter that is me?' Her father answers promptly with a benign smile: 'You are worth two sons to me.'

Does the answer satisfy Gargi, or for that matter, Ila? This query and more are answered as we continue to read Gargi's tale and sigh at the strange twist at the end of it. We pause to ponder with Ila and draw parallels and distinctions in her life and Gargi's. Ila gets interested in drawing more such parallels. She reads on, taking the eager reader along with her. This time it is the story of Apala. She reads 'not about Apala but as Apala'. The striking similarity between Apala's life and Ila's tugs at the emotional strings of the reader. No matter how far apart in time women lived, their agonies and ecstasies seem to match in one way or another, in varying degrees.

The story of Shavari from the Ramayana that Ila reads next is an endearing tale of utmost faith and devotion of a poor tribal girl to Lord Rama, steadfast till the fag end of her life on earth. Having met Rama, she passes on joyfully. What parallel would Ila have to draw out of it? Well, she does have something to put across to the reader.

It is past midnight when she begins to read about another rishika from the Ramayana named Swayam Prabha. She is not only intrinsically incandescent, but extrinsically also she spreads light around her, guiding and helping others. No doubt an interesting tale with the evergreen, lovable hero Hanuman and his monkey brigade

interacting with Swayam Prabha, taking her advice and guidance. She herself exhibits her super-human, apsara-like talents. As we come to the end of the tale, we look forward to reading about the connection that Ila's life has with Swayam Prabha's activities.

After a short nap, Ila reads again, this time about Sujata, daughter of the wise Sage Uddhalaka. She has a difficult time blooming into womanhood, being the only female in her father's ashram that housed several male disciples. She liked her father's teachings and got a good grasp of it. He, too, treated her as his disciple in no way less than her male counterparts. In fact, she would be the rishika to manage the ashram after him. But, falling in love with her classmate leads her into a quagmire of problems. She manages to wriggle out of it with some creative help of the writer's pen. In addition, it makes Sujata's story somewhat akin to Ila's.

In conclusion, Amba's story as the *pièce de résistance* projects her as a different kind of rishika. The rishikas in the stories so far did not avenge the unfair treatment meted out to them. But Amba is quite different. She rebels against her fate and vows to avenge the wrong done to her. A gripping tale from the Mahabharata, indeed! In contrast, this time, there is no parallel that Ila draws from Amba's life. She is not going to avenge the wrong done to her except making an early Will to protect her son.

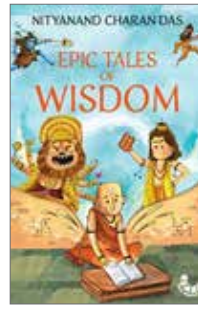
Finally, Ila admits that she had been pursuing her career as a penance like any one of those ancient rishikas. 'There was no specific rishika whose life was exactly like hers. But there were elements of all of them alive in her despite the centuries that separated them...and that is why their stories had grown into her own experience', says the author.

EPIC TALES OF WISDOM

By Nityanand Charan Das. Illustrations by Nirzara Verulkar
Red Panda, 2023, pp. 120, ₹ 250.00

Hinduism as we call it today has been known as Sanatana Dharma to the ancients. It has shown people from time immemorial the right way of performing worldly duties that are sustained by value-based restraints and natural laws. To explain the how and wherefores of this, Vedic systems were born. Myths, legends and folklore developed, the most popular ones being the Ramayana, the Mahabharata including Bhagavad Gita and the *Puranas*. They established the meaning and purpose of life on earth with the help of drama presentation and message-packed stories. Though based on Hindu spiritual tradition and culture, they impart messages that are universal and timeless.

Fortunate are the readers of the book *Epic Tales of Wisdom*. It is a varied and interesting collection of thirty-six stories well chosen from the above mentioned spectrum and



presented in a happy, child-like format by a stalwart spiritual guru, Nityanand Charan Das. In a well-expressed introduction by the author himself, he says: 'Happiness comes with connecting to our spiritual core, which is the purpose of *Epic Tales of Wisdom*'. The illustrations need special mention. They match the child-oriented presentation of the script and are made attractive by their simple strokes in one colour, black.

Stories such as the ones in the book originally flowered in the oral tradition. There were many storytellers and the listeners were many more. Neither the teller nor the listener was tired of the activity. The stories got repeated frequently till the messages conveyed by the stories were embedded in the system and seamlessly adopted in day-to-day living.

The stories in this book need to be read again and again, silently or aloud, and understood, so that the values imparted by them become a way of life.

Some stories in the book, like 'Sage Agasthya and Vatapi', or 'Who is the Greatest?' need some adult guidance so that their significance is not lost or misunderstood or misinterpreted. One child, after reading 'The Divine Protector' asked me what happened to the father with 'broken legs'!

The humour in the stories, coupled with the illustrations, will captivate the child reader. Actually, the reader need not necessarily be a child. The stories will interest all age groups including grownups, because somewhere down the line some of us may have missed the bus and neglected to hold on to values that lead us down the right path.



Ilika Trivedi

COLOURS WITH RADHA KRISHNA (RANG RADHA KRISHNA KE SANG)

By Anjali Jaipuria and Sudeepti Tucker
AdiDev Press, Boardbook, 2023, pp. 20, ₹ 699.00

Picture books hold a special place for children. They are a tool for learning, a visual journey, the basis for story time with family and a tactile resource for sensory exploration. *Colours with Radha Krishna* is a visual treat that is bound to capture the attention of children and make them involved in flipping through this book.

It is a beautiful hardcover book with thick pages that have a significant weight to them when you flip them slowly. It is easy to imagine holding a little child's hand and guiding it through the pages of this book, while

allowing her the time to feel the colours and illustrations through touch as well as sight. A short and crisp book, one can read it in one go to take it all in or go through it in parts, if required for the learning of children.



The poem that runs throughout the book is bilingual with simple rhymes. Both Hindi and English are given equal importance and going through the book is a great way to build on a child's languages with simple words and visual supplements. There is a common issue for children to be more focused on a single language rather than being equally good in speaking and understanding both English and Hindi. The parallel story in both the languages is a good way to keep the emphasis on both Hindi and English, and parents can take care to ensure that children do not lose out on developing their basics in either of the languages. Parents can also read this book aloud to children in soothing voices and make story time a beautiful memory for the young ones.

Each page of the book focuses on a single colour and the poem that runs side by side describes the essence of that colour in its truest sense. Each colour also describes real world things that children see around them and would help them identify the colours of their natural surroundings. So, not only will children learn to identify new colours, but they will also develop the sense that rivers are said to be blue while honey is yellow and leaves are green. A unique aspect of this book is that the colours are not limited to the standard primary and secondary ones, but the book goes on to dedicate full pages to the metallic shades of gold and silver as well as the dynamic and pretty colour of pink and the mystical black. Children fond of art, drawing and colouring can also take inspiration from the fully fledged pages of this book and emulate the colours on their own, further developing their interest and learning in art.

The uniqueness of this book lies in the fact that it brings together a beloved couple of Hindu mythology and religion into a children's book, both visually and lyrically. Since it is impossible to find anyone who does not know about Radha-Krishna in this country, this makes it a book that would be equally treasured and loved by all. The writing is supported by the friendly images of Radha and Krishna playing, dancing, or cherishing time together. This book can thus, act as a good starting point to introduce kids to these legends, through simple stories explaining their significance and importance.

Story time with children can be an experience with this book and parents can come back to this one repeatedly, either for its beautiful illustrations and art or for the lyrical poetry or simply for both.

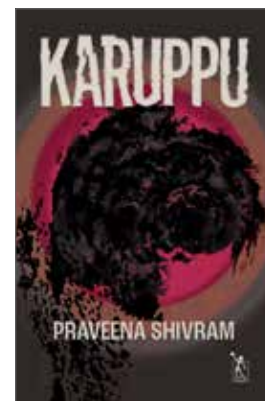
Ranjitha Ashok

KARUPPU

By Praveena Shivram

Young Zubaan, an imprint of Zubaan Publishers, 2023, pp. 240, ₹ 495.00

How do you review a book like *Karuppu*? I've asked myself this question ever since I finished reading it. Last page read, book shut...and there I am, left with a feeling that I have yet to emerge from a fog-shrouded mystical world, sprinkled with violence, poignancy, tragedy, micro-stories of relationships filled with sharp shards, and a sense of something ending. Alongside are clearly etched images, sentences that spring out at you—and the very compelling presence of the author's powerful imagination.



This is a story which takes place in a rather special 'Underworld', filled with 'spirals'—dwelling places for Yama, the Lord of the Underworld, and his Yamadootas. Yama's spiral expels upon exhalation 'the dense clutter of death energy' into the River Vaitarni, which surrounds this world.

It has been two days since Yama disappeared, along with his diary, the Yamagata. At the most recently held Council of the Gods, which happens once every century, Brahma reveals that Earth has reached the 'end of its capacity' and that Gods can no longer 'apply' to 'enter Earth as mortals'. Incidentally, Earth was just 'Project Earth'...which was begun mainly to 'give immortal Gods a chance to experience mortality'. Earth is where you forget your divine roots.

And now, Yama, forced to confront the decaying of his precious world, disappears with the book.

Yama's lineage is impressive—his father Vivaswat powered the Sun, and Grandfather Vishwakarma is the divine architect and 'chief consultant for Project Earth'. Yama was just 14 when he was sent to Earth, only to die of snake bite because 'the Gods still hadn't completely figured out this mortality business'. All mythical beings here are essentially flawed and vulnerable, riddled with existential doubts and angst. Clearly, this is a world which is still a work in progress.

The book tells two interwoven stories, with the chapters alternating between Sigappi and Karuthamma. Karuthamma is the child of the only female Yamadoota, Karuppu, who is Yama's twin sister Yami's daughter, and appears to be at the storm centre of all the chaos unleashed now. Karuppu's adopted son, Sigappan, taken to the underworld as an infant, grows up with the

Yamadootas. The story speaks of the relationship between Yama and Yami, who was 'the reason for Yama's being'. Yami, an immortal on Earth, is trying to maintain order in the face of her brother's disappearance.

So much seems to exist in the in-between in this book—fluidity between realms, between Earth and the Underworld, between different spirals, the living and the not-completely-dead. Even gender can be fluid—as expressed in the character of Sigappan.

The afterlife is as confused and layered as life on Earth. This is a place where you learn to 'navigate dreams, jump dimensions, and generally begin to work with your mind, rather than your body'. So, as Karuthamma discovers, it is not a place of monsters, dead souls waiting to feast on human hearts, with Yama riding around on his buffalo wielding his dreaded noose. The mere thought of food ensures a meal arrives before you, fully cooked. The air simply cleanses itself every day, so everyone is always fresh. At the end of mortal life, the soul travels to the Underworld, and then on to 'Kanavu'. Dreams and memories are living entities, conjoined wheels, with memory being smaller.

Aimed at Young Adults, the language is easy, accessible—protagonist Sigappi uses the pronoun 'you', breaking down the fourth wall and bringing the reader into this rather torturous journey, navigating the chaos Yama has created.

But at times you find yourself wondering, 'What exactly is going on?' and wish there was more clarity, even explanations provided by back-stories, the whys and the hows behind each step in the story's progress. This creates a sense of something incomplete, with a constant promise of revelations and explanations that are never fulfilled.

For instance, nearly seventy pages into the book, you wish someone would explain why 'spirals', and exactly how they work. Finally, a few pages later, you get a hint. The Yamadootas are all fascinating in their own right—you sense intriguing backgrounds hovering behind each of them, but their stories stay tantalizingly hidden.

There are some truly arresting sentences—a description of someone's death throes: 'his breath coming like wisps of smoke from an agarbatti'. Or this one: 'the grains of sand falling through my fingers like broken promises'. And this tragic summing up of a human life experience: 'You see the truth of your life only when you are not in it.'

You also like the fact that non-English takes its place comfortably alongside English—it is 'balappam', not 'chalk', and even better, no self-conscious italics. And comfort food is not chicken soup but 'warm rasam rice', balm to many South Indian hearts.

When you finally emerge from that aforementioned fog, a thought remains—that there is a lot more to these characters. If delved into again, there's a whole world here waiting for more stories to be told.

Tales of Cosmic Morality in the Times of Anthropocene

VB Tharakeshwar

WHEN THE WIND GOD FELL SICK AND OTHER FOLK TALES

By Chandrasekhar Kambar. Translated from the original Kannada by Krishna Manavalli

Rupa Publications, New Delhi, 2023, pp. xviii+108, ₹ 250.00

Chandrasekhar Kambar, though recognized as one of the foremost Navya (modernist) writers in Kannada, along with the likes of UR Ananathamurthy, P Lankesh, Girish Karnad, Ramachandra Sharma, Shantinath Desai and KV Tirumalesh, was always different from them. While the others had read European literature of the day and were trying to define their style vis-à-vis their counterparts in Europe and blending it/bending it here to suit the needs of post-Independence India, Kambar created his own world/cosmos and named it Shivapura. Most of his writings, whether narrative pieces or even dramatic pieces, where he is involved in what other critics have identified as 'myth making', take place in this Shivapura. The present collection contains a play (which in turn is based on a 'folk' story) and six other stories which also take place in Shivapura, this imaginary village, which is the world/cosmos of the narratives of Kambar. It is in this imaginary space that the tradition-modernity, fertility-infertility, poverty-richness conflicts play out on the axis of urban-rural, caste and gender.

In this book, the translator Krishna Manavalli brings to us carefully chosen stories/plays of Kambar where the conflict is between the forest and city/village. The narrative style and tropes are modelled on folk stories, hence they are called folk tales. Here the human beings and other beings, flora and fauna, and natural elements like wind and rain jostle with each other. The god/s, ghosts are no exception to it. The tales are full of anthropomorphism. The stories fashion morality not just by defining human relations within a society, but by defining a cosmic morality where the relationship between living beings, imaginary entities and natural elements is explored, and an ideal relationship between these entities is projected at the end of the tale. The stories point at a harmonious co-existence of these entities, in spite of the antagonistic relationships that exist between them whether



they are natural or social. It takes the ups and downs in the relation in its stride and exudes confidence through the narrative resolution that a balance, an equilibrium, could be achieved for the benefit of all. It focuses on the interrelatedness of these entities: the city/village cannot survive without the forest. The forest/forest produce find their goal being fulfilled by the human beings. It argues for a non-exploitative relation between these entities, one which is not marked by greed, but through mutual cooperation. There is not much difference between natural elements, mysterious old women/men, gods, ghosts/demons, nymphs; they all have their share of wrath, love, kindness, jealousy. Here, these folk-elements, folk-style narratives not just come as a metaphor to speak about the modern-human social issues, but narrate to us the need for a cosmic-morality, ethics of a non-anthropocentric world.

The play *The Tale of the Flower Queen* (*Pushpa Rani* in Kannada) has already proved to be a theatrical success in Kannada with umpteen number of productions/shows. It has 16 scenes and occupies nearly half of the collection. It is appropriate that this play is now available in English. Even the other tales, though not presented explicitly as plays, are highly dramatic and stage-worthy. The conversation is visually presented as dialogues in direct speech; of course, the other parts are in prose. They are meant not only to be read, narrated aloud to a group but worth enacting on stage.

The tales make the readers enter a magical world where the all elements of nature appear as characters and enter into conversations, exhibit all human emotions, get transformed as the plot unfolds to reveal to us an insight into nature. It enthralls the readers, holds their attention till the end, and, that is the magic of weaving of these stories by Kambar.

The principle of selection of the translated collection is clearly stated in the 'Translator's Note', as 'ecological ideals' (p. xiii). The note by the translator Krishna Manavalli, who has established herself in the last decade as one of the leading translators of Chandrasekhar Kambar's works into English, talks about not just translating the text, but also the reader. She clearly states that while trying to prepare global readers to enter this world of Kannada, she has to tread a fine balance between making it readable and also locating it in a culture and context which gave rise to it. For this purpose, she has foot-notes to explain the context/culture. But they are very few and do not come in the way of the experience of the cosmic folk-world for the readers. The intended readers are those belonging to the younger generation, who are into the world of the smart-phone. If this generation can pick up this book, I am sure they would partake of this cosmic conversation and immerse themselves in this cosmic morality.

The book also has an introduction by the author

where Kambar clearly specifies that he doesn't write for the 'academic and highbrow intellectual circles' (p. ix). He clearly marks these tales as writings for children in his introduction. The issues of environment and the ecological perspective are gaining credentials in academics; the collection focuses on those stories which address the issues of ecology. Thus, I would argue that these stories are meant not only for the smart-phone savvy generation, but also for grown-ups; they provide a perspective which academia is looking for in the context of non-anthropocentric and environmental perspective of literature.

You cannot put down the book once you start reading it; it urges you to go on. But the sad part of it is that it ends within a little over hundred pages. One is left with a feeling of wanting more.



Unforgettable Joys of Folk Tales

Md. Faizan Moquim

DAKSHIN: SOUTH INDIAN MYTHS AND FABLES RETOLD

By Nitin Kushalappa MP

Puffin Books, 2023, pp. 240, ₹ 299.00

Since the emergence of Folklore Studies in the nineteenth century, the study of folklore grew exponentially in the twentieth century and continues to thrive through academic as well as popular literature in the twenty-first century. In the context of India, there is a sizeable market for books dealing with oral traditions as in recent years, many major and minor publishing houses have brought out several collections, indicating not only that there is a healthy appetite for the consumption of such books in the market but also the continued relevance of folklore in the everyday lives of people. In its various guises, ranging from songs, proverbs, tales, jokes, lullabies, epic-length narratives in prose and verse to dances, games, toys, and performing arts like street magic and theatre, folklore permeates 'every aspect of Indian life, in city, village and small town' ('Tell it to the Walls' p. 463). The title under review draws upon the rich folkloric heritage of India to retell an array of fascinating tales.



Nitin Kushalappa MP by profession is a software developer, but his interest in history (especially that of Coorg), mythology, and translation has resulted in seven books. The governing principle of selection in the book under review has been to show 'the vibrancy of the folklore, myths and legends of the Deccan region of India' (p. xiii). It provides an interesting slice of folktales from south Indian languages including Kodava, Kannada, Tamil, Badaga, Malayalam, and Telugu. In addition, the selection also features retellings from Nadikerianda Chinnappa's collection of Kodava folk songs, *Pattole Palame* (1924) which was translated for the first time in English in 2003.

Each retelling is prefaced by a brief introduction, wherein the author contextualizes the tale and points out little-known facts and makes sure that the target readers, i.e., children aged 9 and above, do not miss the didactic angle of the story.

In view of this, Kushalappa concludes each retelling with a moral instruction, centred on patience, greed, truthfulness, hard work, and righteousness among others. In addition to capturing the key moments in the story, the well-detailed illustrations come in handy in visualizing the mood and dramatic tension of the narrative. Moreover, the author employs a 'Did you know?' motif that serves to pique the curiosity of readers and provides interesting information. For example, in 'The Tale of the Miser' the author writes: 'Did you know that the legend of Moosay Kaka the miser was passed down from one generation to the next for 100 years?' (p. 161); it also acts as a bridge connecting the past with the present or rather finding the traces of the past in contemporary culture; for instance, the author writes towards the end of 'The Moon Prince': 'Did you know that even today Kodava men carry an ornate sheathed knife with them during various festivals and ceremonies? Often made of silver, although in the past the handle and sheath were made of wood, leather or other material, this knife is called the *piche kaththi*. Even now, the *piche kaththi* of the Kodavas bears the mark of a crescent moon, to signify the moon prince of the lunar dynasty' (p. 220).

The tone, pace, and style of narration come together to bring out a delightful reading experience. While reading the book, children will also encounter a few games that were played in the past. It would be exciting for young as well as adult readers to acquaint themselves with games like Hillata described in 'The Tale of the Good Boy' and the games of Tar and Chend Kutti in 'The Seven Fairy Princesses'.

Though each tale in the collection is unique and engrossing, what I enjoyed the most was 'The Tale of the Last Sun'. The author points out that this 'story was originally told by the Mundas of Odisha's Mayurbhanj district, and it was collected and translated by folklorist and author Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra (p. 149).

In the story we are told that there were seven suns in the beginning of the world. Due to this, the earth was exceptionally hot. So, one day the seven Munda brothers decided to cool down the world. They 'shot down six of the glowing suns!' 'Seeing this, the last sun felt fear in its fiery heart' (p. 150) and fled to take refuge behind a huge mountain. Consequently, the earth was engulfed in darkness, and everything came to a halt. With such a premise, the story is about how animals convene an emergency meeting to resolve the issue. When tiger, elephant, peacock, jackal, and hare fail in their attempt to bring back the last sun, a cock crows 'KOK-AREY-KOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO' (p. 155) and succeeds!

In this fascinating collection, Kushalappa's skillful narration keeps the reader anticipating the next twist and provides ample occasion to relish the world of folklore. The author, however, does not attempt to tease out differences between fables, myths, and folktales. A note toward this end in the introduction would have added clarity to these seemingly interchangeable terms for the young readers. As AK Ramanujan rightly said, a folktale is a 'travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling' ('Preface', p. xi). Kushalappa's retelling is certainly bound to inspire readers to find new horizons of meaning.

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Semeen Ali

THE CAT WHO BECAME KING AND OTHER STORIES FROM INDIA FIERCE-FACE THE TIGER: JUNGLE STORIES

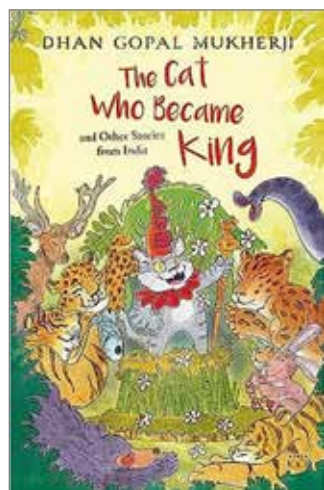
Both by Dhan Gopal Mukherji

Both published by Talking Cub, an imprint of Speaking Tiger, 2023, pp. 156 & 160, ₹ 250.00 each

Even our brains are not good enough unless our hearts are calm. You must try to sharpen your wits. But, above all, be calm. If you are calm, nothing can frighten you... Our fear kills us before we are killed by an enemy. He who is without fear has no enemy.

Growing up in the nineties in a small town, the literature that one had access to was fairly limited. One grew up on a fat diet of Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Enid Blyton's writings, the Anne of Green Gables series and relied heavily on the books that the relatives got

from abroad. The comics were a different ball game with *Chandamama*, *Tinkle*, *Champak*, *Chacha Chaudhury*, *Pinky*, *Billoo* to name a few and of course, *Archies*. Now when one looks back at the gamut of English literature that was available for children, one is taken aback by the paucity of children's literature from India that was available.



The identification that one had with the Blytons and the Drews and others stopped short when the landscape that was described in those books was not at all relatable; the food as well as certain words and phrases that were not at all used in one's surroundings. That chasm grew. Cut to the present times, and there is no longer a dearth of literature that is getting translated or written for children. The richness of words surrounds the children of today's world. I was curious when I came across the writings of Dhan Gopal Mukherji (1890-1936). He was writing for children when he moved abroad and won much acclaim for his books. Visiting his books as an adult fills one with wonder about how time has been captured in his works.

The short story collection titled *The Cat who Became King*, draws inspiration from *Panchatantra* stories and infuses new life into these old folktales. We even have a story from the Mahabharata, a post-war story of the friendship between a dog and a man. The man here being the eldest of the Pandavas. Although there are no names given in this particular story, the overall description and the characters give away the identity of the protagonist. It is a beautiful story of the bond between a human and an animal that transcends even the gates of Death.

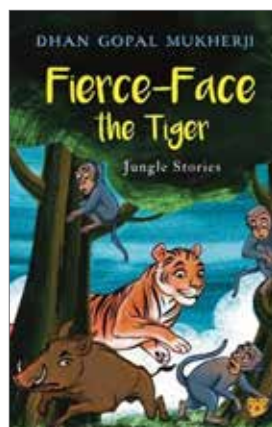
'Now the animal asked his friend, "What does the darkness that we left behind mean?"

Dharma answered, "It is called memory by men. All old men and women like to live here." "If the darkness is memory," asked the beast, "what is this light, O King, in which we are moving?"

Dharma answered again, "This is hope. All young men and women like to live here. Whatever you see here is young..."

There are a lot of references to God, divine justice and how the characters when they turn to the Almighty for staying on the righteous path, receive the blessings to do so. The book contains not just references to Indian mythological characters, folk tales or myths; the book provides indirect reference to myths from across the world:

'That instant something unthinkable happened. The throne on which the king had been sitting turned into a



living creature, half-lion and half-man.'

And another one, that is an indirect reference to one of the Biblical myths—

'Just then the thunder roared, the lightning flashed and the summer rains began to fall. "God is going to send down a flood in order to put their selfishness to a final test," said the silver leaf to itself as it curled up when the first rain

drop struck its back.'

The retelling of myths and folktales connect the worlds, creating links between the world of the past with the world of the present and how these stories function through the pattern of narratives helping the self, relate with the surrounding world.

What is interesting to note is that the language of the book at times has a tinge of Shakespearean language that emerges from time to time with words like 'thou art', 'thee', 'shalt' and so on peppering the rest of the book. The switch in the pronunciation occurs when a particular character is in a pickle and turns to help or encouragement. A clever strategy used by the writer while giving a glimpse of the times in which he was writing where such words and phrases were in circulation. The book turns into a chronicle of the times as well in which it has been written. It is not just contained in this collection of stories, but in the delightful read which is the next book that contains two stories, one about a tiger cub, Fierce-Face and included in the same volume is the celebrated story of an elephant, Kari. It is important that the introduction is read first in this book before embarking on the narrative about the animals. The writer informs the adult reader to carefully scrutinize the stories in order 'to notice the unique presentation of reality. Those who read aloud to children will be able to read the story without being misunderstood. Certain simple pauses and reiterations have been placed so as to enable the listening youngsters to feel as if a voice from India is broadcasting.'

The first story is about a young tiger cub called Fierce-Face, who along with his mother goes through the ups and downs of life, facing threats as well as adventures. It is a story of resilience, of learning to fend for oneself, of facing a world that at times can be a threatening one.

'Fierce-Face was an animal; he had to be educated to become a good one in the manner resembling that of a human child. The difference that marks the training of the young of the two species lies in this: a tiger is trained within the first fifteen months of his life, while men educate their offspring for years.'

The clash between humans and animals arises out

of fear; the fear of the unknown. And misunderstood by the narratives and the myths that surround the other; the story brings out the perceptions of both the sides without favouring one over the other.

‘In order to feel safe, the villagers came to their parched fields with beat of drums, roar of trumpets, and lighted torches. The cringing bipeds had united their forces to meet the triple tiger-menace. No matter how brave, any tiger would run from the thunder of drums and swaying of a dozen torches.’

‘Not an animal was afraid of man now; the fear of fire had made all the forest forget the lesser of mankind.’

There are echoes of the first book in this volume and one can relate to the other book well after reading this one. The forest is painted with the colours of an artist and one receives insights with regards to parts of the country through this book; the way it used to be. Landscape turns important here as a visual aspect providing not only a space where the narrative gets played out but also turns into a repository of the geographic and the cultural scenes thereby tying up one’s identity with the place that one comes from. The idea of home comes along with its set of definitions that are different for different pair of eyes.

The story about an elephant named Kari is an emotional one and one finds shadows of both the stories in this book in each other. When Fierce-Face, in the previous story asks his mother about the ‘beast’, i.e., Man, the mother tells him:

“Do not come near man when on the neck of an elephant. He belches out unerring death-fire.” “Why are elephants so stupid as to let a man ride them?” “Because Thick-Hide is a vegetarian, and like cattle and horse submits to man.”

Kari is described throughout the novel through the voice of its master. A young elephant who is an adorable one. ‘Kari was like a baby. He had to be trained to be good and if you did not tell him when he was naughty, he was up to more mischief than ever.’

Many facts are also shared with the reader as the story progresses; from how an elephant reacts when afraid to how they are celebrated for their memory. ‘An elephant is willing to be punished for having done wrong, but if you punish him without any reason, he will remember it and pay you back in your own coin.’

The story sheds light on the hunting practices in India; how it used to be a gentleman’s game and the various adventures that one faced while going from city to city. The city of Banaras of the yesteryears comes alive and the struggles that one faces while travelling through thick forests as well. If Fierce-Face was free to roam the natural surroundings and be as he wished to, Kari does not enjoy the same rights. Although Kari receives the love and attention of the family with whom he lives, he is bound to them. It is the narrator who continues to be the voice of the animal until a dream sequence turns the tables and

Kari is given a voice. It is in this realm that Kari finally shares all that he has to say.

There is in both the stories a small space provided to the idea of death that the creatures come face-to-face with. While Fierce-Face and his mother stumble upon the area where all the old tigers go to die. Kari facing the cruelty of human finally decides to leave forever. ‘Kari’s last impression of human beings must have been so terrible that when the Spirit of the jungle asserted itself in him, he allowed it to lure him away forever from the habitations of men.’

Reading these two books, one wonders at the dynamics that arises while writing for children, There is a concern to be in tune with the changing times as well as how to insert texts that would otherwise remain invisible or lost to time. Most of the adults, while revisiting familiar stories and texts, find comfort in them as they take them back to a time when life was less complex. Reading these two books as an adult opens up perspectives that perhaps can get lost in the innocence of the story telling. The book turns into a home—for a child, it satiates the curiosity of getting to know about the psyche of the animals whereas for an adult reader, a revisit to these realms provides answers to some questions about life.



Shivi

THE POET

By Radhika Ramesh. Illustrations by Shivangi Singh
Eklavya, 2023, pp. 24, ₹ 70.00

The Poet by Radhika Ramesh is a poem about coming out of grief. It is a complete journey. It offers a resolution to the problem in the narrative it begins the problem in. The plot follows a classic problem-resolution style of a linear narrative. Yet, it is commendable how Ramesh lays down the problem. The narrative does not begin in the most classical manner. In the protagonist’s life, all is not merry.

Right at the beginning, a character, who is actually not a character but an apparition in the life of the protagonist, gets introduced. Ramesh introduces Carlos, who may be seen as an alter ego, a schizophrenic response, or a delusion in the life of Andrea, the protagonist. To call Carlos simply a figment of Andrea’s imagination, is to diminish the power that he holds over her.

In her first-person account, Andrea mentions where she finds Carlos. She defines the dark, unreachable place



that he holds her in. She calls him his 'teacher'. While it is clear that more than being her teacher, Carlos is the dictator of her life. Quite early on in the narrative, the readers get to know that Andrea has recently lost her mother. Carlos seems to have taken birth as a response to that traumatic event in Andrea's life. Andrea blames herself for her mother's demise and Carlos fans that feeling. He is a representation of her psyche, the beliefs that she has, and the world that she resides in. It is clear that the more she feeds him, the more he grows. It is not hidden that Carlos is Andrea herself, a part of her that she struggles to evade but ends up milking.

Carlos keeps Andrea for himself. So much so that he does not even let her near her own father. Andrea's father is struggling after the death of her mother. Carlos makes her believe that he is distanced from her. Andrea is also made to believe that she does not deserve happiness. Each time she comes across a speck of happiness, Carlos pulls her down. He immerses her back in the grief she unwillingly came out of. When Andrea's English teacher asks her to pen down a piece of poetry, it serves as a connecting link between the father-daughter duo. Even as Andrea's father does not help her write her poem, he gives her the space. He defines the true essence of writing poetry to her, which is to express oneself. Carlos comes back to Andrea several times. He makes her believe that to be happy is to forget her mother. Andrea suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, which makes it difficult for her to come to terms with the subsequent process of healing. It is later revealed that Andrea's mother had committed suicide. She needed some things from her life that Andrea had failed to provide her with. Carlos nails these facts into Andrea's mind, making it difficult for her to live her life. Carlos states Andrea is a 'murderer'. She pays for being happy or even trying to be. According to Carlos, in Andrea's happiness, there lies the forgetfulness of her guilt. In a sudden turn of events, Andrea finds a friend in Manuel, who takes her away from the world that she had built with Carlos. Instead, she lives in the world that everyone resides in. She plays ball with other school children and in the rush, forgets. There is a cathartic resolution in the plot where Andrea releases the tension surrounding her mother's death by crying it out loud with her father.

Ramesh has beautifully captured the problem. She speaks from the point of view of a child who has found a friend, or rather, a teacher in her depression, and also provides him with a name. He tells her what to do and how guilty she should exactly feel. He binds her and keeps her in her place. It is worth noticing how the light brushstrokes of the illustrations keep the narrative together. In her darker times, Andrea is clutched by an apparition of Carlos, who does not have a set shape or definition even in the illustrations. Just as Ramesh intends him to be, he is only a construction. As Andrea starts to

spend less time with Carlos, the illustrations move from duller hues of purple to those of brighter greens and blues, signifying a change in her outlook towards life. As she keeps busy, she is no more surrounded by shadows, but by blooms.

Andrea represents the mind of a seventh grader, struggling to come to terms with the realities of her life. All she needs is the support and direction that she somehow seeks in Carlos. It is only later that she realizes, through the medium of Manuel, that she does not require a teacher, for she is her own teacher.



Jane Sahi

EVERYDAY STORIES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

By Gemma Sou, Adeeba Nuraina Risha and Gina Ziervogel

Illustrated by Cat Sims

Eklavya, 2023, pp. 38, ₹ 100.00

It is challenging for anyone to grasp the gravity of the impact of the climate crisis on our planet. It is even more challenging to share these concerns with children and students without it becoming overwhelming or depressing. In recent years many books have come out that analyse the causes and effects of global warming or look at the devastating effects of fast changing habitats of the animal world. What is special about this book is that the facts of the climate crisis are presented through the daily lives of people across the world who have directly suffered from its effects. The data is given faces, situations and people's everyday struggles!

The characters in the book are fictionalized but based on the encounters of the three authors' experiences in five countries across the world—Bangladesh, South Africa, Bolivia, Puerto Rico and the island of Barbuda in the Caribbean. The three academics who have documented the impact of climate change on people's lives have succeeded in sharing their work in a form that is lively and accessible to students. They write that comics allow the researcher to give voices, identities, and personalities to people in a way that traditional media and articles rarely capture. This visual presentation of stories, images, quotes and dialogues is designed to engage the student with complex issues that neither minimize injustice and suffering nor paralyse us into not responding.

As many have pointed out, the impact of climate change is most keenly felt by those already marginalized and disprivileged. Each story presents a vulnerable family's struggle to adapt or recover from the impact of the disasters of drought, hurricanes and salinization of fresh water sources. The stories focus both on the immediate effects of disaster on the secondary and long-term effects of trauma, displacement, break-up of families,

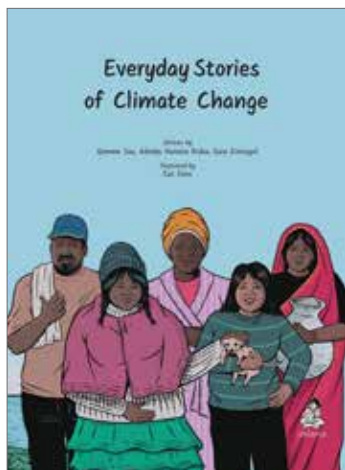
unemployment and pollution. In addition, the text shows the way that the situation can be exploited by market forces for commercial gain.

Two dominant themes come across: on the one hand the resilience and determination to survive of people affected and on the other, the willful neglect of governments or those in power to support people in constructive ways. In four of the five stories it is women who play a critical role in trying to change their situation. They are shown reaching out to others in solidarity and articulating their demands for justice. The media and non-governmental organizations are also shown as potential agents for change.

At the end of the book, background information is given about the process that went into creating this resource and also about the broader issues of climate change and possible responses to this enormous challenge. A number of the questions are posed to the reader in such a way to foster a deeper awareness and sense of responsibility for what is happening and what could change.

Everyday Stories of Climate Change is described as a teachers' resource and potentially could be invaluable as a prompt for critical discussion and action in the school context. A different framing of the book could have made it more 'reader friendly'. For example, the five stories are set within a single lesson on climate change in an Australian high school classroom. They are presented one after the other giving the students (or the reader) little time to digest or reflect on the specific issues of that narrative. At one point when students ask some relevant question they are told to 'hold their thoughts' and wait until the end of the class. At the end of one story the teacher comments on the students' responses by saying, 'These are all brilliant points that we'll discuss at the end of the class.' But then she quickly moves on to yet another story.

There is only a very brief introduction to each of the stories and sometimes more information could have been woven into the text to make the context more understandable. However, the lively and detailed illustrations do provide an inviting entry point to imagine and empathize with people in difficult circumstances. Underlying the book is the message that this is everyone's shared responsibility.



Anil Singh

AABOHAWA ME BADLAV KE ROZANA AFSANE*

By Gemma Sou, Adeeba Nuraina Risha, Gina Ziervogel.
Illustrations by Cat Sims. Translated from the original English into Hindi by Laltu

Eklavya, 2023, pp. 40, ₹ 100.00

The story of Climate Change and its impact is not very old. It is a by-product of our development in recent years. However, the debate around it and the issues related to it are reduced to sloganeering and jargons in the developed world community. Neither is the common person able to connect to the issue nor is there a clear picture of the impact of its seriousness on ordinary everyday life. Many a times, governments debate this issue through a political or diplomatic lens or merely as a formality.

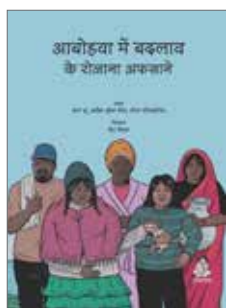
Everyday Stories of Climate Change published in January 2023 has turned the debate around climate change on its head. Supported by Parag and published by Eklavya, this book is actually based on the work done by some serious ground level researchers, who have focused on common lives and actual characters, rather than on technical and conceptual issues.

According to the book, usually when we talk about Climate Change, we say 'the earth is heating up', 'rains have become unpredictable', etc. For the common man, it is difficult to relate to this jargon, because it does not say how the daily lives of the common person will be affected or how their daily lives might change or are changing because of this. No report talks about this. Reports only mention people affected by climate change as a cohort or statistical figures.

The Australian doctor, Gemma Sou, Adeeba Nuraina Risha of Bangladesh and Dr Gina Ziervogel from Cape Town, South Africa, study issues such as natural disasters, climate change, environment policies, citizen rights, water crisis, etc. The scope of their study includes the attitude of the local administration, the role of media and the impact of these changes on common people. All of them have together done ground level studies of climate change and its impact on the everyday lives of ordinary families in different corners of the world. This is not some classical or scientific study; in fact, it is a diary of the daily struggles of common people. It includes conversations with those people, real and emotional stories of their efforts, of how they dealt with change and the compromises they have made by changing their habits and lifestyle.

In Khulna district of Bangladesh, due to increase in the salinity of the river, women are left with no choice but to travel a long distance to get drinking water. Halima's family is thinking of shifting to Dhaka. Raju cannot brush his teeth with tap water, it is so salty. They collect rainwater and use it for cooking, bathing and growing





vegetables.

In Cape Town, South Africa, water supply was reduced in the city due to lack of rainfall. Elna and her family think up ways of living with reduced water. They have discovered seeds of vegetables that grow in less water. She approaches the ward councillor to get the water leakage fixed, but racial discrimination

and inequality just make matters more complicated. She then takes up the matter with a local citizen rights organization.

In a small town, Cochabamba, in South America's Bolivia, Mauge is forced to sell wares as a street vendor to raise her grandchildren. Her daughter, Noelia, is away in Madrid, Spain, to earn more money to get their house repaired in Cochabamba. Due to unpredictable rains in that area, their house is prone to sink in and get damaged. Mauge has been more worried since the previous week, when a neighbour's house sunk in, and the local administration refused to provide any help as the neighbours did not have proper papers for the house.

In Puerto Rico's Toa Baja, life is chaotic because of Hurricane Maria. There is no work and unemployment is on the rise. People are deprived of basic nutritious food, as things get costlier. Luisa has found a new recipe to make chicken soup with peas instead of chicken. To adapt according to the circumstances seems the only way out.

Travelling to various corners of the world, the book finally takes us to Codrington, Barbuda. Nine months post Hurricane Irma, life is still not back to normal. Denise, who works at a restaurant, is living under the fear of the next hurricane season. Children get scared if the wind blows just a little harder.

Climate Change pointedly brings out before us the inequality that already exists world over in people's health and everyday lives. For diverse reasons, it affects those who are already weak.

The wonder of this book is that it is published in graphic form, and illustrated by Cat Sims, a graphic designer from London. She has brought the geographical and cultural identities of people in the book to life through her art. The writer, Laltu, has done such a magnificent job at the Hindi translation that it seems like an original story collection.

The book is a genuine document of genuine stories which attempts to understand and explain complex issues that are otherwise limited to lengthy reports and debates, through the lives of real, living characters. A black and white book of merely 40 pages, it definitely leaves a mark!

*Review translated from the Hindi by Shivani Bajaj.

Ragini Lalit

OUR BEAUTIFUL WORLD

By Bibek Bhattacharya. Illustrations by Joanna Davala
Pratham Books, 2023, not paginated, ₹ 90.00

A few weeks ago in Himachal Pradesh, this year's monsoon flooded towns and swelled rivers, causing buildings and bridges to collapse, entire mountain sides to cave in, and cars and concrete structures to be washed away in an angry, muddy, and swollen Beas. It was a harrowing reminder of what we humans do to the land we live on. Sitting in a relatively safe part of the lower mountain ranges, I wondered how more of us aren't alarmed at the state we are in, when it so clearly is the only world we know, and it is on fire. Year after year we share WhatsApp forwards and watch primetime news tickers of houses crumbling down into concrete and rubble-filled rivers, forest fires raging across hectares of hill sides, coastlines becoming more vulnerable to intense cyclones, Adivasi communities protesting against mining projects that threaten our *jal-jangal-zameen*. Yet we observe these things as though the crisis is somewhere far off, and as though the health of the world we live in is somehow disconnected from the foundations of our own lives as a species.

Our Beautiful World, written by Bibek Bhattacharya, is an attempt to open a conversation with its readers about how humans have managed to 'create a monster: climate change'. As a non-fiction picture book, it nudges us to think about the cost of our comforts, of making our lives easier and easier while 'the world is becoming a desert. Oceans are rising, glaciers are melting, crops are failing. The heat is rising.' It traces the story of the earth, starting about 12,000 years ago when the ice age retreated, earth's climate became warmer and stabilized, and the geological epoch Holocene was ushered in. From then on, it follows humans and our relationship to the world around us as agriculture was discovered, civilizations flourished, trade grew, land use changed and with it the industrial age began. Written in the form of a chronological narrative, *Our Beautiful World* tries to put in very real terms what climate crises mean for the future of the world we know, 'when cities like Mumbai and Kolkata might be deserted and the sea levels will rise, when glaciers will melt faster and heatwaves will make forests burn every year, wildlife will starve and drinking water will be hard to get by, pandemics and epidemics like COVID-19 will become more common' and so on.

The last few pages of this book focus on the possibility of hope, suggesting that if the whole world stopped burning fossil-fuels and if our ways of drawing energy could increasingly be sun, wind and water-based, we can defeat the 'climate change monster'. In an as yet small but





significant section of children's literature talking about various facets of the climate emergency we live amidst, this book is a notable addition. As a non-fiction resource that spells out the history

of the climate crisis and tracks how we reached this stage viz., our relationship to earth, it would be a comfortable and engaging read for independent readers. The illustrations by Joanna Davala are intricate and delightful, the pages are littered with human and non-human subjects in play with each other. The use of abstract symbols and non-linear representations in an otherwise chronologically linear text make for an interesting design and layout of the book and I am sure young readers will feel involved in each page's visual narratives.

The effort of writing in deep and engaging ways about the climate crisis for young readers from all walks of life is admirable; however to me this book falls short in its understanding of what can be done about the climate crisis. It doesn't acknowledge the geopolitics the environmental movement is situated within. In promising the defeat of climate change 'if every country around the world says NO to fossil fuels' and stopping there, it is limited in its understanding of the state's role in capitalist resource consolidation and the flagrant violations of and changes to environmental laws and policies we are witnessing all around us. Many of our textbooks, too, while starting conversations on environmental crises evade talking about their interconnections with the structural systems of capitalism, caste, patriarchy, sexuality, ableism, imperialism and more. Talking about climate change and environmental destruction can't be removed from virulent poverty, ever-widening inequality, its impact on displaced, marginalized communities and already endangered species, and neo-liberal and profit-making agendas.

Perhaps *Our Beautiful World* has been written with the aim of not wanting to heap younger readers with too much information. If so, there is also a case to be made for treating our readers as equals, and as thinking beings who don't need over-simplified content at the cost of cutting out portions of the picture. The readers will engage with the book and its questions and ideas in their own ways, and so it would have been valuable to see some questions, little nudges or resources, links for readers to explore to see the insidiousness of climate change in all our lives. Inviting readers to examine the climate emergency's relationships to our different social, economic, political, historical, and cultural worlds would have also allowed for more contextual grounding. As with *Our Beautiful World*, Pratham Books' consistent attempts

to engage with the climate emergency through a variety of narrative-forms is urgently needed and commendable. Pratham Books' commitment to making books available in multiple languages and in print as well as digital forms makes these stories even more accessible. I hope that going forward one sees a transition from books exclusively imparting knowledge and raising awareness about the climate crisis to also building skills for critical reflection, and helping readers rethink ideas of well-being, resilience, and our relationships to the world we live in.



Lakshmi Karunakaran

SEA (ENGLISH); SAMANDAR (HINDI)

By Amandine Laprun. Translated from the original *Mer* in French into English by Ranjitha Seshadri. Translated from the English into Hindi by Madhuri Tiwari.

Eklavya Foundation, 2023, pp.10 each, ₹ 400.00

Board books are one of the first ways in which a baby encounters printed words. It's through these books that a fundamental journey of decoding, and making meaning begins. Board books with their sensory experience of touch, visual contrast and animation, bring joy and excitement to a child's learning experience. Made of cardboard, they are sturdy enough to be handled by the child and allow the child possibilities of independent interaction, to develop hand-eye coordination, develop fine motor skills and offer much tactile appeal. They also offer parents the possibility of building an intimate bond with the child and participate in their journeys of meaning-making through books.

With just a word a page and vivid illustrations of sea creatures, *Sea* (in English) and *Samandar* (in Hindi) is Eklavya Foundation's latest offering for the earliest of readers. Translated from the French, written and illustrated by Amandine Laprun, the book offers a gentle peek (quite literally) into the world of deep-sea creatures including turtles, crabs, dolphins, star fishes and so on. Originally titled *Mer* in French, this book is a part of a series of similar board books, along with others such as *Rivière* (River), *Jungle* (Jungle), *Forêt* (Forest), *Couleurs* (Colors) and so on. The translation and production of the book was made possible by support from the Publication Assistance Programmes of the Institut Français.

Each page of the book has a black and white illustration of a sea creature, almost like a silhouette, placed in a cut-out panel window. There are two pull-out panels on either side of the page. The pull-out panel on the side of the black and white illustration reveals the same picture in vivid colours. Whereas the one on the opposite page gives the name of the sea creature. This animated feature offers possibilities of much surprise

and play for the young reader. The final summary page offers the coloured illustrations of all the sea creatures introduced earlier including the beautiful Blue Tang featured on the cover. This animation element, and the various ways of interaction it offers is the key highlight of the book. The book is carefully produced to ensure that the pages are of high quality in its board and the panels create a lock during the pull, so that they do not slip out altogether. Though, like all much-loved books do, they do run the risk of the lock/slide becoming loose and that is of course, like all dog-eared books, a sign of much-loved affection for the books. Despite the possible high production effort and cost, and possibly because it is made available in two languages and the grant from the Institut, the cost of the book has also been kept affordable.

At a time when we are fighting off screen time for our children, especially toddlers, and encouraging parents to read to children from birth, board books are an essential for every child—and *Sea/Samandar* would make for an exciting addition to your baby's board book circle.



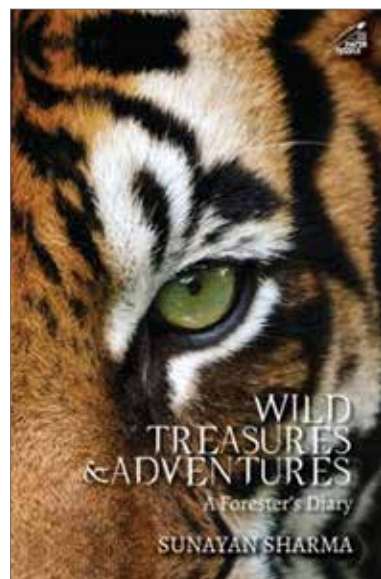
Sanaah Mehra

WILD TREASURES & ADVENTURES: A FORESTER'S DIARY

By Sunayan Sharma

Niyogi Books, 2023, pp. 208, ₹ 385.00

Reading *Wild Treasures & Adventures: A Forester's Diary* feels like stepping into the cosy home of one of your parent's friends, who has the most captivating profession. They serve you dinner and start to weave tales from their extraordinary work life. Throughout the night, you find yourself perched at the edge of your seat, eyes



wide with wonder, transported to their enchanting world. Sunayan Sharma invites us to peek into his remarkable career as a Forest Officer. He unveils seventeen engrossing anecdotes that manage to ignite a spark of fascination in the readers about forests, their vibrant wildlife, the tapestry of biodiversity, and the arcane people who inhabit these wild domains.

'It is dangerous to go near a tiger on its kill but we, unaware of its presence, did so.' Such captivating captions accompanied by illustrations and images at the beginning of each chapter, leave you wanting to know more. You'll find yourself consumed by questions: Can Lala outwit the cannibalistic Kathodiyas and survive? Is Ajabgarh truly haunted by evil spirits? Will the cunning shikari who slit his throat manage to elude arrest?

Sharma doesn't have to be an exceptional writer for us to grasp the enduring and almost infectious reverence he has for the forests and their wilderness. Without explicitly stating it, the author conveys the allure of these natural sanctuaries through his own experiences. He narrates even the most mundane facts with such fascination that it ignites in the reader an urge to immerse oneself in the heart of these landscapes and listen to the call of the sambar while examining the pug marks on the trees.

Sharma, in a rather elementary and non-biased way, explains the problems faced by the forest officers because of cattle owners, Adivasis, politicians and shikaris. Upon reading the book, one not only develops a deep interest in the wilderness but also acquires knowledge about the intricate challenges that the officers and natives of these forests face. When we, as readers, one day get to experience these majestic forests, we will know better than to approach a lone elephant and will make sure to uncover the history behind the temples within the forests. Sharma covers a wide array of themes enabling readers to truly comprehend the hardships and thrill of the forest life.

The author is candid about his failures, disappointments, and prejudice. He reveals that through his interactions with the Adivasis, he eventually let go of his prejudice against them and learned to unlearn. The author's perspective on sati, however, left me with some reservations. Despite his attempts to provide extensive explanations, it seemed as though he may not be entirely critical of the practice; in fact, he appears to view it as an act of honour.

The stories about raids to stop the timber thieves, the elephant hostage situation, the translocation of tigers and the author's endearing late-night walk to reach the Kalighati checkpoint keep you hooked and wanting to know more. Sunayan Sharma attempts to keep these events fast paced and exciting. The writing style, however, at specific points does not flow as easily and the unnecessary repetition of words makes the most adventurous and exciting stories less gripping.

Wild Treasures & Adventures: A Forester's Diary offers

us the rare opportunity to vicariously experience the adventurous side of a forester's life from the comfort of our homes while also fostering a deep respect for those who undertake the crucial duty of safeguarding our natural reserves.



Shailaja Srinivasan

THE ADVENTURES OF SIRDAR: THE CHIEF OF THE HERD

By Dhan Gopal Mukherji. Cover illustrations by Jayesh Sivan
Talking Cub, an Imprint of Speaking Tiger Books, pp. 160,
₹ 250.00

The Adventures of Sirdar is an interesting story about the life of a herd of wild elephants. It begins with the dramatic selection of 'Sirdar', a thirty year-old male elephant as the youngest leader of the herd and his life from then on. The author, Dhan Gopal Mukherji, describes how Sirdar leads his herd.

Mukherji wrote children's books in the 1920s in America and was the first Indian writer to win the prestigious Newbery Medal in 1928 for *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon*. Mukherji predominantly wrote about India, animals and things Indian—his stories gave the world an interesting window into a land largely unknown at the time.

Our story is told from Sirdar's perspective by a narrator and the *hathi* speaking in the first person. Mukherji gives the animal protagonists in his books a voice, to 'speak' directly to the reader. To quote, 'It is not hard for us to understand him,' the first-person narrator says, in *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon* of the anthropomorphic bird, 'if we use the grammar of fancy and the dictionary of the imagination'. This can be applied to Mukherji's other protagonists from the animal kingdom.

The author describes how the herd goes about its business of living in the jungle, its composition, how they choose their leader, gather their food, find water and shelter, encounter danger, stay safe, mate, the birth of young ones and where they go in the deepest jungle when they sense the end is approaching...the entire life cycle of the pachyderms. He does so with sensitivity and insight from the point of view of Sirdar. Mukherji ascribes human emotions to his animal protagonists in many of his stories. The stars of this book, the elephants, feel parental love, loyalty, fear, anger and grief, emotions

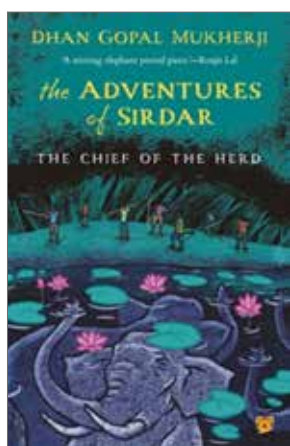
that motivate everything they do. Just as Mukherji ascribes human emotions to his 'animal' characters, he also fashions the elephant families and the herd, on the hierarchy and patriarchal structure of human families of his time. An elephant herd is led by a matriarch—the oldest female elephant as shown by scientific studies now. And it is the mothers who nurture and raise the elephant calves. Father elephants are not involved in this activity as our Sirdar was shown to be. The publisher's note at the end of the book is very useful and important to correct the information for impressionable young minds reading the book and taking the story to be the basis of their knowledge! However, the author's imagination gives us a lovable hero and his adventures.

The charming cover illustration by Jayesh Sivan picturizes the highpoint from the chapter 'The Art of Leadership', and how Sirdar helped his herd escape a band of gun-bearing men who wanted to trap them. Sirdar instructed his herd to run to the lotus lake and to do as he did. To escape the hunters and their bullets, he submerges himself in the lotus lake with only the tip of his trunk sticking out just above the surface of the water, concealed by a lotus leaf. *Hathi* after *hathi* quietly follow their leader's example and escape being shot for ivory or captured for labour.

The cover endorsements by Ranjit Lal and Bijal Vachharajani are teasers for what you can expect in the story! The author's lyrical style and descriptions of the setting and the social milieu of the period—the laws for the protection of wild elephants and those allowing shooting of rogue ones in pre-Independent India, the *kheddah* operations and the man-animal interactions, the crop raiding activities of errant members of Sirdar's herd.

Mukherji's keen observation of nature and expression of the same in lyrical prose will make his readers linger on a page, read again and vividly picture the story and setting in their mind's eye. For example: 'The twilight passed. The solemn moment of silence that separates day from the dark throbbed on the drum-like surface of the lake then sang into the stillness of the night. Tigers roared far off, owls hooted, bats fanned the air above our heads as we swam across the lake behind the ambush of dusk.'

I was amused by the passage quoted below; how effortlessly Mukherji transports a bulky elephant herd in time and space, while describing what they ate! 'After the mating season was over the herd moved in many directions. They ate the June foliage of Bramhaputra plateaus and the July grass of the Tista. August found them moving slowly towards the Gangetic Valley of the south.' *The Adventures of Sirdar* was originally published as *The Chief of the Herd* in 1927. This kid-lit gem, retitled and published in this new edition by the Talking Cub imprint of Speaking Tiger Books will enchant children and also their parents, who may have missed the sublime writing of Dhan Gopal Mukherji.





Bharati Jagannathan

ELEPHANTAM MISOPHANTAM

By Vinoy Thomas. Translated by Nandakumar K. Illustrations by Sagar Kolwankar

Eka, Westland Books, 2023, pp. 120, ₹ 250.00

The forest department wanted to capture Lightning Tusker. But he is no ordinary tusker, and the most experienced experts are summoned to do the job. And at the end of this insufferable 107-page novel, they fail. This novel could not have been more than 20,000 words but I struggled to finish it. The proclamation on the cover that the author was a winner of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi award in 2021 made it impossible to dismiss it as complete nonsense. I reminded myself that Malayalam has a robust tradition of experimental literature, and this might be in the magic realist and/or surrealist genres. Nothing helped to make it an even halfway tolerable read. The narrative jumped haphazardly from real to magic to the absurd.

Elephantam is apparently the distilled goodness of the world and happens to be present in truckloads in Lightning Tusker. Misophantam is the opposite force. Those who wish to capture the magnificent elephant are, naturally, the wicked ones. On the one hand, there are detailed descriptions of the techniques employed to capture wild elephants, and just when you begin to engage with it, you read about secret messages that pass through hidden channels of the earth and of trees and the distilled essence of elephantam that comes to rescue the captured elephant time after time. I lost sense of time, space, narrative. About how many times Lightning was nearly captured and escaped. About the random cast of characters who appeared and disappeared to catch this free elephant. The numerous magical interventions that foiled their evil designs. The impossible back stories narrated by grandma elephant to countless baby elephants. The convoluted stories of the ancestry of Lightning. Apparently, his father had rainbow-coloured tusks—a sure sign of pure elephantam. Lightning has a brother, Tuskless Tusker, who was timid as a calf but grew rogue and became filled with misophantam. However, at a crucial juncture near the climax, Tuskless Tusker became filled with goodness and, with a tiger riding on his back, came to help free his elder brother and, if I understood the story correctly, walked off adorned with



the rainbow tusks. Go figure! Other than the inexplicable transformation of Tuskless Tusker, the good are filled with elephantam, the wicked with misophantam, and never the twain shall meet. Zero nuance.

And for a story about elephants, written originally in Malayalam, the language of literally the home-State of elephants, the degree of ignorance about the gentle pachyderms is immense. Female elephants typically live in herds with their calves, while males, once they have reached adulthood, are solitary. But in this crackpot novella, the parents of Lightning Tusker, Peacock Plume Tusker and Leaf Ear, were a devoted romantic couple who roamed everywhere together. There is actually a sentence about theirs being the ideal marriage!

If this is a fantasy, I fail to appreciate the details about the dangerous sharp nail-studded barriers that are used to capture wild elephants, or the stun guns and jeeps and other paraphernalia. On the other hand, it has too much of the absurd to be realist. And it is certainly not an environmentalist tale about respecting wildlife/nature, for it appears that nature has untapped magical resources to protect itself.

Frankly, I wish I could unread this book!



Tuhina Sharma

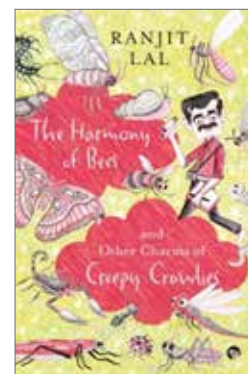
THE HARMONY OF BEES AND OTHER CHARMS OF CREEPY CRAWLIES

By Ranjit Lal

Speaking Tiger, 2023, pp. 210, ₹ 399.00

A freely roaming centipede in the bathroom or a happy family of lice in our hair is the stuff of nightmares and feverish dreams. In horror, we often ask, 'Why on earth do we need a mosquito?' As it is with mother nature, there is always an answer. Turns out, there would be no life on earth without these seemingly disgusting and terrifying little beings. Biologist and Naturalist EO Wilson rightfully called them, 'the little things that run the world'.

In *The Harmony of Bees*, Ranjit Lal takes us on a friendship journey with twenty different insects and arachnids, making them less fearful and more intriguing on the way. These include some ubiquitous ones like ants, bees and spiders, and others like bugs, wasps and mantis that one finds only on careful looking. An introduction, afterword and a two-page glossary towards the end further supports the chapters.



The book begins with and carries a sombre acknowledgement. Insects are scary, yes, but they are also our neighbours on this planet. While we go to great lengths to protect ourselves from them, it is we who pose a bigger threat. Mostly however, creepy crawlies leave us alone. In turn, we rob them of the fruits of their toil and take advantage of their love lives to grow crops and use them to turn waste into rich, *fruity soil*.'

Each chapter illustrates the short lives of these creepy crawlies, highlighting their physical features, food, hunting habits, procreation and the irreplaceable role they play in maintaining the delicate ecological balance. A master storyteller, Ranjit is able to make each insect a protagonist in the earth's story. In the chapter on wasps, he writes, 'The tiny fig wasp makes pretty sure that no banyan tree can have a bloated ego.'

Lal's writing is fast paced and attractive, quickly pulling the reader in. True to his characteristic lightness, and sureness about everything nature, he is also able to highlight the drama that ensues in each of their lives, leaving out any prospects of a boring read.

'Sometimes, dung-beetle couples work together; while the husband rolls the ball, the wife shouts directions and encouragement and helps if he has to push it up a slope. They have to be snappy, because other dung beetles are only too ready to snatch and grab.'

A matter-of-fact, lively and contemporary use of language further adds to the engagement. Much of the context to each chapter comes from the author's own observation, subtly encouraging curiosity and observation in readers as well. 'A spider once built a small web in the corner of my bathroom, virtually at floor level. I thought she was nuts—nothing would come her way. But she'd figured it out.'

Non-fiction books have long been imagined as dusty, dry reference books at the far end of the library. In India, they are typically equated with encyclopaedias and quiz books, attributed solely to facts. This makes non-fiction a slippery genre, with a fine line existing between a good non-fiction and a text-book. *The Harmony of Bees* is authentic, readable and engaging, making it an exemplary piece of non-fiction and nature-writing. This is the book that might lead someone to house a beetle in their pencil box.



Aakangshika Dutta

OLD TREES HAVE SECRETS

By Ruskin Bond. Illustrations by David Yambem

Talking Cub, an imprint of Speaking Tiger Books, 2023, pp. 16, ₹ 250.00

All of 16 pages, this children's book is one that must find its rightful place in every library across schools

and homes. It is appropriately narrated without any purple prose, and it is about big, old and ancient trees. No poem has a single unnecessary description and the message conveyed is deep to arouse the child's curious mind.

The title itself is an invitation to the child, as well as the reading and thinking adult, to move away from the obvious. Trees surround us, many of us have seen saplings grow into trees that today provide shade and comfort during summer months, and yet, few of us have the time to think about trees more deeply.

Ruskin Bond writes a rhythmic verse that draws the attention of the reader and also makes it very appropriate to remember and deliver at a poetry recitation. He begins with an account of how trees are containers and witnesses to precious secrets of this society, from individual stories, friendship, love to hatred, trees are steady witnesses.

In today's world where challenges of climate change are experienced by all of us, trees point towards many possible solutions that could provide a respite to Planet Earth. They have been natural habitat for a wide variety of flora and fauna. They help capture rainwater; they strengthen the soil by preventing erosions of mangroves. Besides we know that trees, especially those that are several thousands of years old have grown to great heights and have an intricate root network system that not only is a source of nourishment for themselves but also prevents the death of other trees that maybe growing nearby.

Ruskin Bond reflects poignantly in so many ways on what 'being alive' entails, on the wisdom acquired through 'steady presence', '... that trees have seen it all happening ... the folly of hate and the joy of loving'. It shows children that this world is often filled with joy and sadness. If there is fun of friendship, then the world also experiences the chaos of fighting and hatred, the happiness of weddings and the chaos of armies fighting battles and wars.

This poem is one that speaks of the resilience of trees, to be able to stand through storms and lightning, through burning cities and armies that come from other lands.

These many noteworthy characteristics of trees give them a new perspective, this creates and encourages curiosity among children and adults alike to draw inspiration for being strong and steady as well as for patience and resilience. The wisdom that such big and old trees carry is really in knowing that every winter is followed by spring and summer and that every storm will bring out the rainbows.

Illustrations by David Yambem complement the poem; they are colourful, fluid in style and the book itself is printed on glossy paper. Makes for a wonderful addition to the collection.



DANCING WITH BIRDS

Written and illustrated by Bulbul Sharma

Talking Cub, an imprint of Speaking Tiger Books, 2022, pp. 16, ₹ 250.00

It is a delightful, colourful book and the illustrations are a big attraction. Bulbul Sharma, an artist and an author has previously authored *The Book of Indian Birds* and *Birds in my Garden and Beyond*, both of which bring together her joy in painting and writing.



This poem is a visual and auditory treat for children, as the author makes generous onomatopoeic usage throughout. For instance, the Buzzzzing of the Bubble bee, the grrrrr grrrumbling of the Lorikeet and the tuk-tuk of the woodpecker.

However, the usage of a voice for the different birds and then the narrator that is a child is largely confusing. That the narrator is a child is revealed towards the end, where we see an illustration of a child hanging upside down from the trees and speaking to the readers about the fun and joy of dancing with the various birds.

This being a poem, the writer's usage of words is judicious, however, making little sense of how the child narrator is really 'Dancing with Birds'. One can only guess that possibly the child narrator is indeed surrounded by these different bird species which she has the chance to observe as well as imitate, yet they seem too distant for her to be engaged in a dance. Neither do these birds seem to be pets, they are most likely wild and flying high wherever they please.

The author is a keen observer of birds and characterizes them as the Lorikeet being particularly noisy and oft being mistaken for other noisy birds like the seagull. The Barbet has a crass and incessant call, and the woodpecker makes a rhythmic pecking sound on the tree trunk.

The author suggests that children often enjoy being surrounded by nature and that they have a natural affinity for most things wild and free. The book can be an enjoyable experience if teachers and adults reading this amplify its effect with animating the sounds as well as substantiate with tiny, interesting details; for instance, where are toffee trees primarily grown in India and does their fruit really taste sweet? Are Lorikeets found only on toffee trees?

The book presents a wonderful opportunity for children to admire that which often is small, appears ordinary and yet represents an integral part of our environment, our planet.

We know that harsh environmental changes, ever expanding and encroaching human settlements have taken away the homes of many birds and many have entirely

disappeared from cities, never to be found again. Human actions have had a serious and adverse impact on many bird species, but new bird species have begun to appear as well.

Birds represent a unique and complex world of their own. There is much skill, intelligence and communication that birds engage in, whether it be to preserve themselves from the harsh winters, to fly in synchronized packs, crossing vast lands and water, or to build complex nests to take care of their offspring. Our children must be taught such facts and encouraged to pause and watch.



Shivani Bajaj

THE PLANT WHISPERER

By Sayantan Datta. Illustrations by Bhavya Kumar

Pratham Books, 2022, pp. 24, ₹ 85.00

This book is based on the true story of Dr. H Jaishree Subrahmaniam, who has done some amazing research based on mustard plants. She studied in India, New York and then France.



Jaishree shifted from studying engineering to studying plants because she felt closer to them and was intrigued by their behaviour and their world. A true plant lover, she believes and has shown that plants help each other in times of stress and pressures. She also goes on to say that there is so much humans can learn from this behaviour of plants!

The book gives us a window into Jaishree's world—both professional and a bit of personal. As a child, she was sensitive, loved climbing up trees and being close to plants and nature in her grandmother's garden. Even after growing up, she fondly remembers a tree that was her 'friend'. In fact, her interest in plants emanates from those childhood associations which left an impact on her.

Very simply written, minimally expressed and matter of fact, the story even appears to be somewhat sketchy, but then we can understand the entire story needs to be told, so details cannot be the strong point. In fact, the questions in her mind and where and how she pursues them, seem to form the mainstay of the book.

Sayantan Datta has a keen interest in science and dabbles in the sphere of science communication. His experience of writing for children is new. Sometimes, in trying to keep the story short, simple and in trying to cater to a certain kind of reader, the author has to compromise on storytelling. This is a Level 3 Pratham

book and hence not meant for proficient readers. There could have been more about Jaishree's early life and growing up years, to draw the interest of the young readers and it could have been made into a level 4 book, while telling the story better.

The illustration on the cover warms the heart as Jaishree sits beside her mustard plants as one would sit among friends. Other illustrations by Bhavya Kumar, especially those of birds and animals on the trees, add life to the book.

All said and done, it is an unusual subject for a book and a much neglected one as well. Women scientists are ignored, and their stories are hidden from the world. To top that, we have an 'Indian' woman scientist. The author has done a great job of bringing this story to light, that too for our young readers. This ensures children get to know about them and also be inspired by them to pursue science, even though it might not be the first choice for most girls in certain sections of India, even today. The book for that reason deserves its place in the Parag Honour List 2023.



Saakshi Joshi

STRANGE TREES

By Katie Bagli. Illustrations by Ajanta Guhathakurta
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 33,
₹ 80.00



How much do we know about the trees in our surroundings? *Strange Trees* may make you ask this question and look around. Set during a school summer vacation in the fictional Suryanagar village, this book explores the interdependent lives of trees, birds, animals, and humans.

Strange Trees progresses through encounters between a group of six children (Super Spies) and the eighty-year-old Thimakka Dadi (grandmother). These encounters form the basis of the four stories which together constitute the book. Each story focuses on specific trees. Readers learn about the life cycles of trees, the process of pollination, and the connected nature of our ecosystem. For instance, in the story 'Stranglers' readers get to know about different kinds of figs, their pollination through birds/squirrels/bats, and the life cycle of a Banyan tree which takes nourishment from, and grows on another host tree. From 'The Dink Laddoo Ghost' readers learn how water rises from the roots upwards to the trunk of a tree, how humans make use of the gum on a tree's bark, and about pollination through an example involving odour and flies. The story also depicts the emotional inter-special bond

between humans and trees through Thimakka Dadi's recollection of her mourning for a tree from her youth. In 'Jack of All Fruits', the children get all their yummy treats: juice, snacks, curry, pudding, and ice cream from one ingredient, jackfruit! The last story in the book 'The Tree that Snows', gives another example of pollination through the red silk cotton tree. This story also highlights our coexistence, how we depend on one another; the flowers of a red silk cotton tree being home to different birds, the tea stall owner not cutting down the tree so the birds' home is not destroyed.

Offering clever titles and straightforward plots, the stories are easy to follow. Katie does a commendable job in teaching science using a story format. The conversations between the different characters effectively take the story forward. But there are a few instances of stereotyping which could have been avoided. For instance, Dadi telling the kids that they should be on their way when it gets dark because their 'mothers must be waiting' (p.10). This reinforces the idea of females as the primary caretaker in a family setting. Or, a dialogue which paints boys as pranksters who enjoy teasing girls, and girls as scared of their pranks (p.15).

With the book's font size, there is no difficulty in reading the text. The language is mostly simple but some scientific concepts, words, or phrases such as host-parasite relationship, enzymes, latticework may require explanation. In some places, the sentences are too long and disrupt the flow of the read.

Ajanta Guhathakurta's watercolour illustrations are richly coloured, bright, and delightful! But the stories are text-heavy. One is left wanting for a better match between the text and these beautiful works. The distribution of the illustrations across the book is varied. There are full-page illustrations, there are pages with illustrations occupying less than half a page, then there are some pages with only text and no illustrations. Where present, the illustrations are visual representations of what is already mentioned in the text. They depict a fruit, a flower, a tree, as the characters of the stories. They can help the readers visualize how a strangler grows on top of another tree, the flies near the bark of a ghost tree from which gum oozes out, or the 'cotton' falling from a red silk cotton tree. But the illustrations are not interactive.

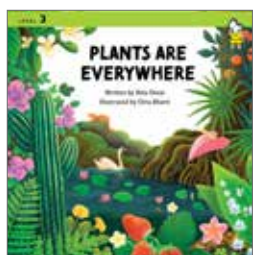
Strange Trees is a treasure-trove of information on different local trees which coexist with us, but about which we may not know much.



Andal Jagannathan

PLANTS ARE EVERYWHERE

By Ritu Desai. Illustrated by Ekta Bharti
Pratham Books, 2023, pp. 6, ₹ 70.00



The dominant colour for the book cover, green, sets the tone for the book. The illustrations and the text do a fabulous tango together, bringing alive the world of plants for young readers. The text placement—

‘scorching heat’ on desert sands and ‘shivering cold’ on snow—is an ingenious way of enhancing the reader’s understanding of the context.

The book is a ‘Level 3’ title aimed at children ready to read independently. Older children too can benefit from reading the book. In fact, I (whose childhood is several decades behind me) learned a new word from the book—*haaq*. I had to look it up and while on that quest, I also learned that snow acts as a blanket for plants—provides insulation, and traps heat. The snow cover actually protects plants from extreme temperatures and winds. Oh, and *haaq* are mustard greens.

There are an infinite number of conversational points in the book. This book can be a wonderful tool in the hands of an inquisitive child who has access to an adult who is willing to answer questions.

A lot of thought has gone into the illustrations. My favourite is the one of the desert with shadows, of a camel and a cactus, adding an extra dimension to the page. Yet another talking point—some children will surely ask about the shadows!



Parvin Sultana

WHEN WE ARE HOME

By Priyadarshini Gogoi.
Illustrations by Pankaj Saikia
Pratham Books, 2023, pp. 9,
₹ 70.00



Every year the State of Assam loses large tracts of land to yearly floods and land erosion. Lakhs are displaced and loss of property is on a large scale. Many have witnessed the vanishing of their home and hearth in the middle of the mighty Brahmaputra. Many are forced to live in relief camps while others are compelled to search for newer habitats. This mobile impermanent life is a lived reality for thousands of families in Assam.

Pratham books are known for bringing stories for children rooted in the lives of people across the nation and this book is no different. Priyadarshini Gogoi’s book *When We are Home* brings such a story. Beautifully illustrated by Pankaj Saikia, it gives voice to the experience of a large number of families in Assam. This is the story of Huntu and his family. Through vivid and colourful pictures and simple narratives, their experience

is presented from the point of view of these two children. Every page of the book gives an account of how home feels to the little ones. Every page also carries a picture of the children sailing on a makeshift boat made of banana tree trunks.

The book uses ample objects from everyday lives of a rural household in Assam. From food to items in the house, we get a glimpse of a rural household. These are also the people living in temporary villages near rivers or *chaporis*. And they are the most vulnerable section during floods. The displacement deprives people and especially children of the familiarity and security of home—the place which to them comes in the forms of the *til pithas* (homemade cookies made from sesame seeds’ paste) made by grandma or the snores of a hardworking father taking an afternoon nap, the smell of orchids or the playful goats.

Where father sleeps, there is a makeshift study table and a cut out of the popular Assamese Magazine *Prantik* with a photo of Dr Bhupen Hazarika. There is a laminated certificate from the Axom Xahitya Xabha which is the primary institution working for the development of Assamese language and literature. The presence of a handloom where the mother sits and works, a portrait of Jyotiprasad Aggarwala and a copy of *Hemkosh* also reflects the various aspects of the lives of an Assamese family.

As floods devastate homes and lives of people in Assam, they long for a return to this familiar set up. Relief camps and make-shift tents are no replacement to this. The nostalgia that even children feel towards their home is portrayed beautifully through this book. In a simple and easy to grasp way, the author relayed perhaps the biggest problem of the people of Assam—yearly floods and displacement.

The book will familiarize people not only with the problem of flood but also the socio-cultural lives of the people of Assam. However, the rural lives of people in Assam have undergone much change. This pristine portrayal of a thatched hut and a simple life is a caricature of a past frozen in time which comes back to us in the form of powerful nostalgia. Displacement, erosion is no more a simple problem with similar experience across the communities. Displaced people have been either rehabilitated in some other places or many have squatted on government land. Recent cases of eviction show that the evictees were mostly people displaced by floods. The experience of people also varies depending on their location. Areas in lower Assam, especially border districts like Dhubri, have not only seen the highest loss of land but also raised questions of identity and citizenship of these displaced people. Priyadarshini Gogoi’s book while presenting a simplified linear version of floods and displacement in Assam does put forth a humanitarian crisis which is often overlooked as a problem of a distant border State. This book will appeal to universal human emotions of loss and longing for one’s own home.

Sanaah Mehra

THE BOOK OF STAMPS

By Vidya Math

Olympia Publishers, London, 2022, pp. 108, £4.99/₹ 459.00

The Book of Stamps is a fantasy novel that brims with enchantment. The narrative unfolds through the eyes of Othelia. Each night, her parents read to her from a book titled *The Book of Stamps*. This shared title between her storybook and our reality sets the tone for a story where everything feels interwoven and interconnected. The author skillfully keeps readers engaged and enchanted by the mystical Land of Zohor.

The central plot of the story revolves around eliminating the hunters from the Zohor Kingdom and having good triumph over evil. Math has woven the story in such a seamless way that the reader, until the very end, is left wondering, 'How does Harry know things about Othelia?' 'How are their worlds interconnected?' and so on. The reader is expected to pick up on hints throughout the story, which makes the book engaging and fun.

The novel opens with Othelia reading her bedtime storybook about the king, the shepherd, the dancing girl, and the hunters of the land of Zohor. She brings these characters to life through the embossed pictures in the storybook and with the help of her imaginary (or real?) companion, Harry. What follows is our devouring of the book with just as much enthusiasm as Othelia. The reader is constantly intrigued by the enchanting, fast-paced nature of the book. The events happening in the story that Othelia reads and her experiences with Harry have an effect on her real life. In addition to being an engaging adventure and fantasy novel, it also offers a sense of freshness through its characters and storylines. The prince's character stands out as exceptionally unique and refreshing. He is allowed to be soft, delicate, kind-hearted and scared rather than being compelled to conform to a rough, fearless and 'masculine' image.

Written in a non-preachy yet impactful way, the book imparts essential life lessons in a rather subtle manner, making use of positive and reinforcing dialogues like: 'That is why we must do our best for the good of all', and 'One day, all things that ever went wrong...are put right.'

The Book of Stamps can be a bit confusing at times. But hang on tight. The author has intentionally crafted it this way, and she doesn't ever leave us alone; instead, she guides us to unravel its mysteries.



A Timely Exploration of India's Constitutional Journey

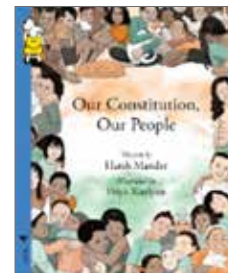
Adnan Farooqui

OUR CONSTITUTION, OUR PEOPLE

By Harsh Mander. Illustrations by Priya Kurian

Pratham Books, 2022, pp. 49, price not stated.

Our Constitution, Our People by Harsh Mander is a timely and insightful introduction to the Indian Constitution, designed specifically for the young. The book successfully distils the essence of the Indian Constitution, making it easily accessible without being pedantic. Complemented by vibrant illustrations by Priya Kurian, the book offers a vivid impression for young readers, although the distracting doodles scattered throughout the book could be perceived as a minor flaw.



The book commences by contextualizing India's constitutional journey within the broader framework of anti-colonial struggles worldwide. It eloquently introduces young readers to critical concepts such as empire, colonialism, and imperialism, highlighting how the drafting of the Constitution for a free India aimed to underscore the universal importance of values like equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity, which were fiercely fought for by Indians and other colonized countries in the Global South.

One notable aspect of the book is its emphasis on the relatively peaceful nature of India's struggle for Independence, largely under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi. The narrative underscores the majority's belief that an Independent India would celebrate its diversity and transform it into strength. The book lauds the founding fathers for embracing both democratic and republican ideals, a testament to their visionary approach during the national movement.

Mander's book does not shy away from addressing crucial issues such as caste-based discrimination, the horrors of Partition, and extreme economic inequality. It adeptly conveys the gravity of the challenges faced during Independence and how the leaders of the national movement navigated through these tumultuous times, culminating in a Constitution that sought a clean break from the past and aspired to realize the cherished ideals of the Independence movement.

The author thoughtfully presents the essential features of the Indian Constitution, focusing rightly on the



Preamble. Through a meticulous exploration, Mander prompts readers to contemplate the complexity of the challenges faced by the founding fathers during the drafting of the Constitution. Moreover, the book sheds light on the sensitivity and pragmatism that shaped the Constitution, which officially came into force on January 26, 1950.

In conclusion, *Our Constitution, Our People* is an important and essential read for children and adults alike. It offers a compelling exploration of India's constitutional journey, encapsulating the struggles, aspirations, and visionary ideals that continue to shape the nation's trajectory. Mander's approach in presenting this vital subject matter in an engaging and accessible manner makes this book a valuable educational resource.



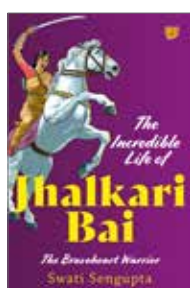
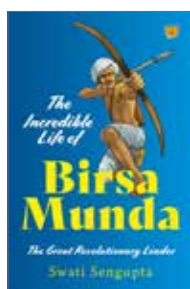
Nilima Sinha

THE INCREDIBLE LIFE OF BIRSA MUNDA: THE GREAT REVOLUTIONARY LEADER

THE INCREDIBLE LIFE OF JHALKARI BAI: THE BRAVEHEART WARRIOR

Both by Swati Sengupta

Speaking Tiger Books, 2023 & 2022, pp. 116 & 120, ₹ 250.00 each



Birsa Munda, a popular hero in Jharkhand, is not so well-known in the rest of the country. We are grateful to Swati Sengupta for presenting this hero of the Independence movement to the Indian reader. The author has described, in detail, the life of the brave youth who dared to fight against the powerful British, and the landlords whom they patronized.

Jharkhand was a part of Bihar and became a separate State in the year 2000. The original inhabitants of this hilly, forest region were tribals, who roamed freely in the land, until the British took over. They introduced the new system of Permanent Settlement, under which intermediaries were appointed as landlords who collected land revenue from the tenants and deposited it with the British Government. The land rights of the Munda tribals were weakened and they were reduced to labourers working for others.

Birsa's father, Sugana Munda, was a labourer, moving from place to place, looking for work to help support his family. He soon moved to Chalkhad in Khunti district of Jharkhand, the village of Birsa's mother. After Birsa's primary education in schools nearby he was admitted into a German missionary school at Chaibasa. Here he learnt English and became a Christian. After four years there,

he left and began working at Bandgaon as an agricultural labourer. He stayed with Anand Panre under whose influence he became a Vaishnavite. At Bandgaon he also learnt about the problems the Mundas faced. The land policies of the British were destroying the old system and moneylenders and zamindars were taking over the tribals' lands. The village headmen, the Sardars were rebelling, leading the fight against the British and their unfair rules.

Birsa soon returned to Chalkhad and began to speak to the villagers. He emerged as a spiritual leader who spoke about social reforms. People began to listen to him and to believe in him. They flocked to hear him and soon he came to be called '*dharti aba*', father of the earth. Birsa's popularity alarmed the British. He was arrested and put in jail.

The two years in jail made Birsa even more popular. Once again people began to gather around and listen to him. His words soon sowed the seeds of an uprising in the minds of his followers. An ideal hiding place, amidst the forest hills and valleys, became the home of the rebels, who formed a guerilla army to fight the unfair rulers. Meetings were held and attacks planned against British rule. Birsa was chased from one hiding place to another, and rewards were announced to catch him. Finally, he was caught while asleep in a hut. He was tried, sentenced, and thrown into a jail in Ranchi. Shortly after, the police declared that he had died of cholera.

Birsa became a hero. His revolt forced the Government to recognize the rights of the tribals and make laws to protect them. He continues to be a symbol of Adivasi pride. His statues decorate important crossroads in the cities of Jharkhand. Sengupta has related the story of Birsa Munda in a simple but effective style.

Jhalkari Bai, the Dalit woman who fought alongside Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi and helped protect her from being attacked by the British. But not many historians tell us much about this courageous woman.

All those who have read about Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, who fought the British in 1857, have admired the brave queen. Jhalkari Bai, a soldier in her army, is mentioned briefly as the woman who was chased by the British army while the Rani escaped through another gate. That is all that we know about Jhalkari Bai.

The author tells us much more. Jhalkari Bai was born in a Dalit family in village Bhojla, not far from Jhansi. While still a girl, she managed to kill a tiger that attacked her in the jungle, where she had gone to collect wood for her kitchen *choolha*. In another incident, she chased away three dacoits whom she saw stealing in a neighbour's house. The two incidents impressed everyone in the village.

Jhalkari had no interest in domestic chores like cooking, but loved horse riding, sword fighting and shooting. Her father, proud of his brave daughter, encouraged her. Later, her husband, Puran Kori, a soldier in Jhansi, also encouraged Jhalkari. Together, the two

would go riding and practice shooting and sword fighting.

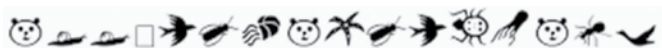
Meanwhile, as the author writes, the King of Jhansi, Gangadhar Rao had died. Laxmibai now ruled on behalf of their adopted son. Like Jhalkari, the Queen, too, was skilled at horse riding and sword fighting. Jhalkari admired the young queen and was thrilled when Puran took her one day to meet her. To the surprise of both, they found that Jhalkari had a striking resemblance to Laxmibai. Rani Laxmibai invited Jhalkari to join the women's army, Durga Dal, that she had formed. Impressed by her skills and power, Laxmibai soon appointed her as its leader.

The British attack on Jhansi began not long after. Jhalkari led the Durga Dal and fought bravely. The attack continued for several days, and many lives were lost. At last, the British succeeded in overpowering the Indians. As the attackers began to enter Jhansi, a plan was made.

The Queen must escape so that she could return with greater strength to fight the British again. Jhalkari would dress up as the Queen and fool the attackers while the Rani escaped through another gate. That is exactly what happened. Jhalkari was taken to be the fleeing Queen and chased while Laxmibai rode out to safety.

What happened to the Rani is well known but Jhalkari's story is not so clear. Some say she died fighting; others, that she was caught but set free and lived on. Jhalkari's story may not find a place in history books but is still told in the area where she lived.

As with her other books on historical characters, the author has told the story well. Jhansi, its palace and fort, and the surrounding area are described vividly. Jhalkari does not remain a shadowy figure. In the author's hands, she gets her place in history.

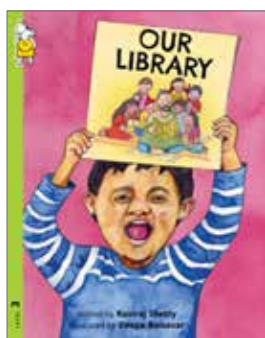


Ragini Lalit

OUR LIBRARY

By Raviraj Shetty. Illustrations by Deepa Balsavar
Pratham Books, 2023, not paginated, ₹ 80.00

Our Library is a warm hug of a book. It's audacious in its vision, gentle in its narrative. The picture book follows the usual rhythms of a library, but in so doing, it paints a beautiful conception of a library that is all of 'ours', a library that has room for all of its members' dreams, desires and explorations and that nurtures safety, joy and freedom. It's a library that deeply cherishes each of its visitors and in visualizing such a space it invites us readers to dream up our versions of libraries as



places to thrive in.

Our Library is a visual treat, with each page unfolding a different facet of the space and people's relationships with and within it. This library is not a quiet, didactic space of surly adults who hush the young readers; instead it's a space of whooshing, tumbling, chattering and laughing. It's a library that belongs to its young readers, i.e., in a true sense—'our' library, since the young readers form the main cast of this book with adults who help them, sometimes make reading tables, sometimes make quiet reading dens, and other times translate books to make them more accessible.

Without hitting you over the head with it, the library as portrayed in this delightful picture book is a safe haven for queer individuals, for neuro-divergent and disabled folks, for all those who need a safe space and their caregivers to thrive. It is, for instance, a retreat for Marriam to explore race-car magazines and Parmeet to read with magnifying glasses, a space for Amrita and Kumail to mend books with care, for new stories to be read and written, and for close friendships formed over stories being translated to braille. This book doesn't follow a traditional narrative arc of having specific protagonists who are faced with a conflict or a story with a beginning, middle, climax and end. Instead, it is simply a sweet book about an ordinary day in the library, developing a vision of what a children's library located across the corner from one's house could look like.

Thoughtfully written by Raviraj Shetty and illustrated by Deepa Balsavar, *Our Library* is available in multiple languages in print and as with most of Pratham Books' publications, accessible on the digital platform StoryWeaver. Consciously making it inclusive, the layout of the text in the book would ensure that it's a very comfortable read for those being read to as well as those learning to read independently. This is a picture book which is carefully written, not making it too wordy and instead allowing the readers and the illustrations to interact with the members of this library, their activities in it and the feelings each of them carry to the space and each other. The illustrations are vivid, detailed and realistic, and they breathe life into this library. The library entrance on a busy street of a close-knit community, the colourful display shelves, the hastily removed chappals at the entrance, the books, games and cushions scattered about, the quiet corners for watching light dance on pages and (my favourite double-page spread) the big carpet with the motley gang of children and adults all tuned in to the story being read-aloud make imagining this vibrant, living, community library all the more possible.

For far too long, our understanding of children and childhood in children's literature and picture books has been trapped in neat little boxes of what is 'appropriate' for children to know and passes the norms of what is socio-culturally 'good' for them. Dominant narratives

that feature most popularly on bookshelves categorized as children's fiction are more often than not stories of upper middle-class, savarna, Hindu, cis-heterosexual, neurotypical and able-bodied children and their families.

The few stories which do deviate from this in any small way are often categorized and marketed under diversity-themed books, stories to open up 'difficult' topics or labelled inclusive literature. They often fall short, stopping at promoting acceptance and hopefully garnering empathy from the so-called mainstream readers. The stories that offer honest portrayals of under-represented realities and marginalized lives in rich and sensitive ways occupy a very small proportion of the larger children's literature market.

Our Library is one such book that doesn't stop at making small signals of inclusion. It is a love-letter to libraries that are woven with *all* our needs in mind without justifying and explaining its existence, or becoming another story that stops at acceptance and coexistence. It is an unrestrained jump into a world where we all have spaces of joy, safety and reciprocal relationships of care, simply because we must. For those of us who know the magic of a library that feels ours, this book will make you smile with its promises of homemade food smells, laughter and chatter in an accessible, inclusive, community library; and for those of us who are yet to discover the magic of community libraries, turning the pages of *Our Library* will be a window into the many possibilities that libraries as places offer.

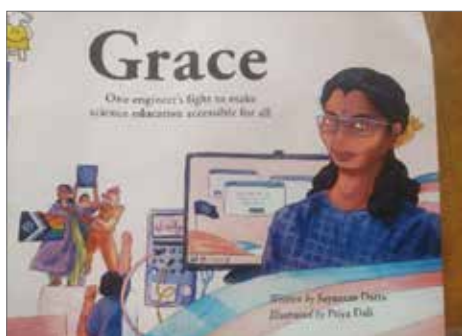


Bharat Kidambi

GRACE: ONE ENGINEER'S FIGHT TO MAKE SCIENCE EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL

By Sayantan Datta. Illustrations by Priya Dali
Pratham Books, 2023, pp. 20, ₹ 85.00

For those not familiar with Grace Banu, she is a Tamil Nadu-based transgender and anti-caste rights activist, who fought and won the case for getting the transgender community the right to study medicine like any other student. Her life is a true illustration of grit, determination and courage to challenge the gender and caste biases that still exist in our society. This storybook has been made very creatively, with the illustrations and text being in complete sync.



Such stories ought to be told and made accessible to young adults, sensitizing them to the environment around them at an early age. The story traces the early years of Grace, born into a Dalit family, as she was growing up in Tuticorin. From not being able to sit with other students in the class, to later being targeted for her awareness of her own sexuality, the young Grace faces discrimination at every stage of her growing up years. She was put in an all-boys school, where the other boys ridiculed her for not being like them. Very early in life, she decided to leave home; she was adopted by a transgender, Munnamma, who ran a shop making halwa. It is in this home that the young Grace could be herself.

Munnamma encourages Grace to pursue her studies, after which she completes a diploma in computer engineering. After working for a few years, Grace wanted to pursue higher studies, and applies to the University for a Degree in Engineering. She soon discovers that the application did not have any gender categories for transgenders. When the college denied her application, the feisty Grace, with the help of a lawyer, asks the university why transgenders cannot study engineering. She is later admitted to a private engineering college and completes her degree.

Grace realizes that unless the cause of the Dalits and transgender community is taken up as a social movement, they would continue to be denied the right to access education and employment opportunities. She adopts a young transgender woman Tharika. When Tharika faces the same issue that she had faced while wanting to pursue her higher studies, she files a case in the High Court on behalf of Tharika against the university. This time Tharika and Grace win the case, The High court judgement is clear; it mentions that the transgender community had the right to study medicine and any other field like everyone else.

Written in simple style with appropriate illustrations portraying the emotional journey of Grace, this book will help young adults to be more sensitive on gender and caste-related discrimination that exists.

Book News

Book News

A Young Innovator's Guide to STEM: 5 Steps to Problem Solving for Students, Educators, and Parents by Gitanjali Rao, innovator and recognized as America's Top Young Scientist, puts the spotlight on the innovation journey, introducing readers to what it takes to turn ideas into reality. More than ever, there is a need to develop innovative solutions for different problems using resources, tools and tips unique to each individual.

Rupa Publications, 2023, pp. 166, ₹ 295.00



Shubhra Seth

THE SWEET KITCHEN: TALES & RECIPES OF INDIA'S FAVOURITE DESSERTS

By Rajyasree Sen

Aleph Book Company, 2023, pp. 128, ₹ 399.00

The book under review is a sweet interaction between the past and the present. The book takes the reader through the cultural and historical on sweets popular in various parts of India. The diversity of sweets in their varied shapes and textures together prepare each chapter with a historical base topped with its present understanding and existence and then generously sprinkled with the recipe towards the conclusion of the chapter.

While reading the book it felt that one was inside a sweet shop where every shelf with trays lined in perfect symmetry tells the tale from origin to modern day twists in the chosen sweet. Let us first take the tray of Sandesh, a quintessentially Bengali sweet influenced by the early Portuguese settlers in Bengal and their fondness for cottage cheese. The *chhana* curdled from milk is mentioned as an accidental discovery and after being flavoured with date palm jaggery, these roundrels have never looked back and continued their journey—popular till date in their new avatars of baked and blueberry flavours. The celebrated sweetmeat makers (Moiras) wove the caste-fragmented social fabric with sweet stitches of *mishtis*. *Makha Sandesh* continues to give dollops of happiness while the *Sankh* (conch shell) *Sandesh* announces happiness for all.

Moving forward is the large steel trough filled with Rosogolla. This chapter is an interesting essay on the rosogolla complete with information on the GI status battle between Banglar Rosogolla and Odia Rosogolla. The mythological interpretation of the sacrilege called '*chhana katano*' (making cottage cheese by cutting milk with lemon/acidic substance) may find its reflection in the Rath Yatra ritual of Bachinaka as part of Niladri Bije ceremony where khirmohana is thrown away out of all other items lined up for the *bhog* prasad. Rosogolla Day coinciding with November 14 is a cheerful news for children and of great happiness for Nobin Chandra Das and Haradhan Moira. Rosogolla today stands at the helm of food diplomacy and this accidental sweet discovery is now available in myriad flavours and textures, some ripe with *nolen gur* (date palm jaggery).

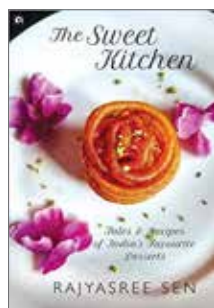
Next on the shelf is Christmas Cake. Monkey cap and Christmas cake bring in December in Calcutta as the author rightly shares: the baking of this rum-soaked

fruit cake is in itself a classic example of the melting pot involving the baker to the client and the celebration of *Burra Din* (Christmas) in Calcutta. The chapter takes us to New Market where Nahoum's and Sons founded in 1902 resembles an archive of Jewish cultural institutions in the city. Portuguese influences with Kabuli contributions of candied seasonal fruits and that whiff of fresh baked Christmas cakes fill the localities of Calcutta from Kanchan Bakery to Flury's.

Next to the shelf of cakes is the Kheer counter. The ubiquitous *kheer/payesh/payasam* is the sweet rice pudding in varied consistency which is the most humble and ready to prepare dessert in Indian homes across States. It appears naturally in homely celebrations—whether it is payesh (thickened milk with rice and jaggery added at times), or the Sheherwali version of kheer (an interesting combination of combining milk with sour raw mango). While the *payasam* popular in South India has milk, coconut milk, rice, pulses, jaggery and bananas. There is also the *sevaiyan* prepared during Eid celebrations and the coloured versions of *kheer* made with black rice in Manipur and red rice *payasam*. The recipe shared by the author at the end of this chapter makes the humble *payesh/payasam/kheer* appear in a tabular chart with its three common ingredients of rice, milk and sugar and an equally simple recipe for spreading happiness at home.

The chapter on halwa warmly greets the reader next. With the budget announced a few months ago, the bureaucratic tradition of preparing halwa before the enormous exercise of budget planning and presenting takes us back to the trade routes of India through which the halwa came, and soon became an important member in the great Indian mithai family. Halwa, as the author notes, originated in Arabic lands and came to India via Persia. Prepared with wheat, semolina, carrots, chick pea, eggs and many more variants, a dollop of halwa with a generous shower of dry fruits soaked in clarified butter/ghee is a sure recipe for warmth in cold winters of north India particularly.

The trays of Barfi and Gulab Jamun are like a commoners' corner in most sweet shops. Snowy origin to the legend of Bandhi Chhor Diwas, the tale of barfi is squarely sweet in its narration. The Persian connection to the nutritious snack for local wrestlers, the barfi has moved from just its plain versions to the richer *kaju katlis* and gluten-laden, wheat-rich *dodha* barfi. The texture of the sweet allows it to be presented in different shapes and be offered in multiple hues unfurling national pride. In the essay on Gulab Jamun, the author takes us back to the Olympic Games where the Greek poet Callimachus mentions the ancestors of gulab jamun being similar to 'honey tokens' which were served to the winners. The Mughal emperors introduced this sweet to the Indian palate. Since then *kafila-e-lugmat* has continued to grow in lighter and darker shades, from *kalo jam* to an ode



to Lady Canning with the *ledikenni*, this simple round or oblong sweet happily swimming in sugar syrup has become synonymous with celebrations, be it workplace or home.

The simmering cauldron of Jalebi is often used as a landmark while navigating through narrow by-lanes in Indian cities and towns. The Indian *jalebi* with its Middle Eastern cousin *zalabiya* is present in different versions and finds earliest mention in the thirteenth century Arab cookbook *Kitab al-Tabikh*. Navigating through these concentric circles the reader is taken to the airy delicacy found in the streets of Old Delhi between Diwali to Holi. The dessert which is whipped up from the *malai* is called *Daulat ki Chaat*, mapping its journey through the Silk Route and sharing the story of the Kyrgyz Botai tribe in Central Asia and preparation of *kumis*. A dessert enjoyed alike by the Mongols and Mughals continues to bring joy till date as the moon continues to smile on this heavenly concoction while it prepares itself in cold winter nights only to be dressed with slivers of almonds and saffron with a generous drape of palm sugar.

Discussing the historical background and routes through which the sweets have travelled the Curd Culture greets the reader next. *Lal Doi* or *mishthi doi* is the sweet sibling of the plain curd with its range of sourness. Thickened milk with sugar or date palm jaggery has been an element of experiment in the kitchens of dairy farmers like Gopal Chandra Ghosh or *mishthi* makers like Kali Ghosh. This sweet version of hung curd becomes *shrikhand* in Gujarat and Maharashtra taking forward the importance of curd in its different flavours and consistency since the era of the Rig Veda.

Colonial influences and their amalgamations into the local cuisine and kitchen are narrated well through the 'Goan Sweets' and 'Relics from the Raj'. Along with potatoes, tomatoes, custard apples and vanilla, the Portuguese most notably brought to Goa sweets like *doce*, *serradura* and *bebinca*. These recipes have blended into the local cuisine and kitchens of Goan households. Relics from the Raj discuss the British and French influences on culinary techniques and cuisines. For example, the Franco-American wonder called Baked Alaska, along with caramel custard, bread puddings, soufflé and trifle. Each is an example of innovation with country-made re-arrangement of ingredients for the dish to sustain Indian weather conditions.

'Ambrosia', the concluding essay is an offering to cultural congeniality where religious celebrations bring people together through '*mishthi*' (sweet) sharing. Each festival in India brings with it a special sweet preparation with a legacy of its unique preparation, distribution and consumption. Sankranti the harbinger of new harvest brings with it a bouquet of *pithas* (steamed rice delicacies); folded, round, fried or flat, these preparations are a divine combination of rice, coconut and jaggery. While the

author shares the details of Bengal and Odisha, she shares her experience of having *Kada Prasad* in the gurudwaras. While *Nokul Dana* or *mishri* is Prasad in temples, *Kada Prasad* is the everyday offering in the gurudwaras. Festivals in their diverse manifestations (*seviyan* in Eid, *modaks* on Ganesh Chaturthi, *mohanthal* with its nutty toasted flavours, *shakkara pongal* and *chitau pitha*) from north to south and west to east bind people together through 'sweet' sharing.

This panorama of sweets across centuries and the gathered intercontinental influences is at times a kitchen tale, sometimes a work of reference for cook-books and culinary texts, and at other times a recipe book. The author has reached out to the reader in myriad ways like the hidden layers of the marvel called Baked Alaska. Just a simple note for the connoisseurs of sweets: *bhalo thakben!*



Story of a 'Survivor'

Toolika Wadhwa

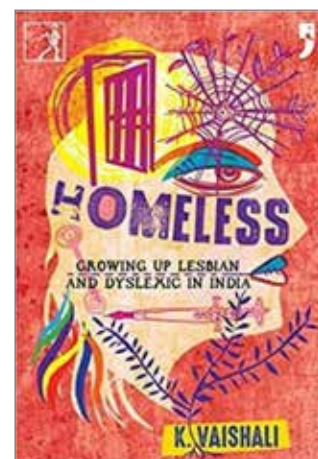
HOMELESS: GROWING UP LESBIAN AND DYSLEXIC IN INDIA

By K Vaishali

Simon and Schuster India, 2023, pp. 234, ₹ 499.00

Homeless, a memoir, is a book about a young woman struggling with coming to terms with the complexity of her life. Although how much of it is autobiographical has not been clearly mentioned in the book, based on the author's social media presence, the book is a personal reflective journey along with an effort to bring to fore the challenges and struggles of being lesbian in India. Despite homosexuality being decriminalized, popular perceptions haven't stepped far away from stereotypes and misinformation. The book provides an inside account of a lesbian discovering her sexuality and facing everyday discrimination, snide remarks, fearing social boycott, and dealing with the constant inner debate of choosing whether to come out to the world or stay closeted.

The book will appeal to youth on the margins at many levels. The protagonist has a late diagnosis of dyslexia and dysgraphia. Along with this, at least partly stemming from a dysfunctional family, she suffers from several psychological disorders, including depression,



anxiety and/or panic disorder and, obsessive-compulsive disorder. Identifying as a lesbian and struggling to hide her identity in a predominantly heterosexual world that gives little indication of understanding and acceptance, the book has the potential to serve as a cathartic tool to many young women undergoing similar exploration and identification.

The book starts with a young woman describing her experience of moving to different houses, living across cities and trying to make sense of her life as her family struggles with alcoholism, domestic violence, and financial instability. In the first chapter, the author describes the episode of coming out to her mother. Steeped in Brahmanical values, her mother is appalled that she could engage in premarital sex and being lesbian becomes secondary. The distance in the family widens as her mother refuses to accept her and she is forced to step out. Interestingly, Vaishali writes several reflective episodes reminiscing about the decisions she has taken. Were they bold stands of freedom or sheer conveniences that led her to move out of the city and away from her mother? These reflective episodes about her family, her friends, and her identity are indicative of the inner turmoil that she undergoes.

An important aspect of her life is her diagnosis of learning disabilities. Being labelled as 'the same illness from the Bollywood film' was enough to trivialize her diagnosis. Being diagnosed very late in life, she found school learning difficult and was lumped with additional classes and teachers who never understood her problem. Dropping out of different courses and the inability to get university education to normalize addressing learning difficulties did not help her academic career or her reputation in her 'Brahmin' family. All of her life surrounded her bargaining with her mother for special allowances in exchange of saving the family face.

Vaishali documents the struggles in finding her identity, defying social norms of dress, behaviour, gender expression and sexuality. None of this is easy for anyone. When this is compounded with family discord and psychological disorders, it creates a world that is hard to believe. The book is inspirational as a survivor's story.

Many of the psychological disorders have been talked about very loosely. While dyslexia and dysgraphia are mentioned to have been clinically diagnosed with due process, for others, depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder, there is no clear mention of clinical diagnosis. In case of any kind of clinical assessments in medicine, it is better to err on the side of caution and this seems to be an area where the author has not exhibited due care. The benefit of doubt stems from the book largely presenting her experience and thus has artistic licence.

The book is a grim reminder that five years after decriminalization of homosexuality in India, the society

finds it difficult to accept people on the sexuality spectrum in their homes, in educational institutions and work places. Similarly, despite being included in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, many psychological disorders remain invisible, undiagnosed and untreated. Our society is far from being inclusive. Like changes in law and acts, this book is a tiny step ahead in making the society more open and accepting. All people have to do is to pick up and read it.



Of Endearingly Different Minds

Mythily Chari

I HAVE AUTISM AND I LIKE TO PLAY GOOD BAD TENNIS: VIGNETTES AND INSIGHTS FROM MY SON'S LIFE

By Debashis Paul

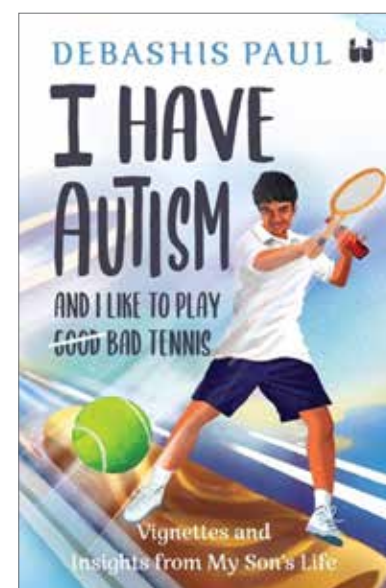
Westland Non-fiction, 2023, pp. 224, ₹ 299.00

Imagine one morning you find a spacecraft (belonging to 3023) landing in your back garden. What would you do? You may start with some hypothesis and try to figure out what this is. You may try to open the doors with the tools you have. Understanding Autism is also like that. These children are light years ahead of us

in terms of evolution. They are great teachers; possess immense patience, will to be joyful and free with tons of unconditional love for us. They do not judge us for our immature and often pathetic attempts at modifying them.

A savant who was subjected to a battery of tests got a score of mental age 3! When I asked him why he didn't cooperate, he said he hated being tested. He remarked that the money spent by his mother on speech therapy was a waste as he had 'chosen silence over chatter'. There is great power in silence. He clarified that for him mother tongue was not what was spoken by his current mother, but what all the previous birth mothers spoke. He said he was still well versed in Bengali, Tamil and German.

There isn't a condition more misunderstood than



Autism. O’Kanner’s ‘Inward looking’ behaviour was discarded, and we focused on mannerisms. Often parents are given Hyperactivity Attention Deficit Disorder as the first diagnosis. Higher vibration is different from hyperactivity. It is like the iPhone that we use now and the cumbersome phones we used 50 years ago. Where is the comparison? Usually, drugs are prescribed to control this condition, Risperidol or Ritalin, whereas the daily schedule should have grounding activities. While the Higashi method is most suited having incorporated physical activities, Yoga and *pranayam* are the very bedrock for any child to ground. Using five elements in a daily schedule are some of the tips I could suggest, low cost, highly effective and user friendly.

Debashis Paul’s book, *I Have Autism and I Like to Play Good Bad Tennis* offers a window into the world of challenges and joys of parenting. The ‘I’ in the title refers to his son Noel, who was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at the age of three and a half. Having worked for 35 years and seen more than 600 children, I found Noel is many souls rolled into one. Usually, I find bonding between mother and son or daughter. Father and son bonding is not so common. Noel struggled with writing; holding a pen or pencil was cumbersome for him. Vishal, a savant, commented in Hindi, ‘*kalam kis ke liye, mouse behatar hai mere liye.*’ The paradox is that no one in his home speaks ANY Hindi! He typed using facilitated communication when his energy had to be channelled by another person, like earthing an electrical gadget. Aishwarya Sriram wrote every day in a journal which we published as *Avalukentru Oru Manam*. Writing is catharsis. It must have been for Debashis too.

Noel simplifies his behaviour by saying ‘I have autism’. Aishwarya poignantly wrote, ‘I have autism, Padmasheshadriyum pokale (a prestigious school in Chennai) and Stella Marisum pokale.’ Her sister attended these.

In chapter 2, ‘My Blue Corsa’ (p. 27), Paul gets a swankier car from the company. Noel misses the Blue Corsa. I was touched by Noel’s love for the inanimate Blue Corsa.

How he comes to terms with the passing away of his grandfather is a poignant insight. Many children have difficulty understanding death. On the other hand, when I lost my partner, three Savants, Anthony (California), Anudeep (Hyderabad), and Chandrakant (Kottayam) communicated that death was just one door closing and another opening; none of them offered condolences, though all of them consoled me.

In ‘One More Day in Rome’ (p. 45), the PA system announces ‘*Kripaya dhyan dein.*’ Noel is fascinated that an unknown voice can control you. In ‘I am Speaking to a Stranger’ (p. 62) it is amusing to read how Noel solves the dirty clothes’ issue when reprimanded by saying, ‘*OLX mein bech de.*’

Debashis trying to make up by coming early from work just to hear ‘Hiya Dad’, shows how bonded he is with his boy, a rare gift of sensitivity (p. 85). After experiencing empathy and kindness from the coaches, job mentors and others, Paul comments, these people have been touched by God. His love for his teacher who leaves for Canada stands out. To be touched by Noel even though only through this book is a blessing. He promised he will not make his dad sad. However, I mourn his passing. Debashis has a great gift. Many children like Noel need his guidance and love.



Tultul Biswas

RESILIENCE WITH BHAKTI SHARMA

TRANSFORMATION WITH CHANDRO AND PRAKASHI TOMAR

TRUST WITH P T USHA

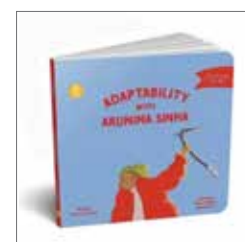
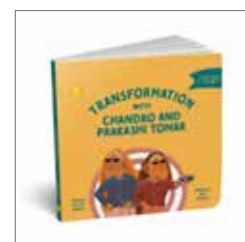
ADAPTABILITY WITH ARUNIMA SINHA

All 4 by Pervin Saket. Illustrations by Proiti Roy, Ria Mohta, Rajyashree Sarkar and Aparajitha Vaasudev respectively
AdiDev Press, Women in Sports Series, 2022, pp. 20 each, Set Price ₹ 2000.00

India has just finished its campaign at the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou, China, with a total of 107 medals, its biggest-ever haul at a single edition. Out of the 28 gold medals won, 9 were bagged by women/women’s teams and 1 mixed team. Similarly, out of the 38 silver medals won by Indian players, 17 were won by women (teams) and 2 mixed teams and among the players winning the 41 bronze medals 19 were women or women’s teams and 2 mixed teams.

Yet, sports is an arena ridden with gender inequality. As per recent research by BBC, statistics show that approximately 75% of the Indian population believe that sports is significant in their day-to-day lives; however, only 36% of them engage in any sort of sport or physical activity. Of these only 29% of women engage in sports.

It is in this kind of a paradoxical background that we look at the set of four books from AdiDev Press narrating stories of Indian women in sports—written in short,



playful verse by Pervin Saket and illustrated by different artists. The verses and the pictures narrate the stories of five pioneering Indian women: Bhakti Sharma, Arunima Sinha, PT Usha and Chandro and Prakashshi Tomar building on some larger values that these sportswomen can be identified with. They made a mark in the spheres of Athletics, mountaineering, swimming and shooting. The books are a part of a larger series called 'Learning to be', where other similar sets of biographies of women scientists and spiritual leaders have been published. AdiDev Press claims to 'introduce children to South Asian culture, history and traditions' through their books.

Resilience with Bhakti Sharma—a story that dwells on the life experiences of the first Asian woman and the youngest in the world to set a record in open swimming in Antarctic waters. Sharma, born in Mumbai and growing up in Udaipur, Rajasthan, started swimming at a young age of two and a half years, coached by her mother Leena Sharma. After having participated in many State and District Level competitions, her first open water (Sea) swim was a 16 km swim from Uran port to Gateway of India in 2003. Sharma was just 14 years old at that time. Sharma is only the third person in the world to have swum in the Arctic Ocean, and then also swam in the freezing waters of the Antarctic Ocean to become the youngest to swim in all five oceans.

Pervin Saket has a way with words—and the simple rhyming story-telling could serve as a good read-aloud for the toddlers and early/emergent readers. However, board books are meant to be handled and manipulated (and read) by children at an early age, and here the rhymes and some words used may prove to be a challenge for readers of this age group. Prioti Perna Roy's illustrations in all the spreads are as free-flowing as Bhakti herself—swimming in open waters. The colour scheme and strokes match the spirit and mood of the content.

Adaptability with Arunima Sharma talks about the first female amputee to climb Mt Everest. Born in Ambedkar Nagar near Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, Arunima liked football and was a national volleyball player. She wanted to join the paramilitary forces. In 2011, she got a call letter from the Central Industrial Security Forces and faced a life-changing accident while travelling to Delhi. Robbers snatched her bag and pushed her out of the running train. She fell on the tracks and was unable to move due to severe injuries. A train coming from the opposite side ran over her leg below the knee. The locals then took her to the hospital.

While still being treated in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, inspired by cricketer Yuvraj Singh (who had successfully battled cancer), Arunima decided to do something with her life. She resolved to climb, and after recovery, excelled in the basic mountaineering course from the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, Uttarkashi. Encouraged by her mother, Arunima climbed Mount

Everest in 2013 with a prosthetic leg.

Arunima's story of facing challenges and adapting to the situations around her, and yet not giving up on dreaming and making her dreams come true—is rendered beautifully by Pervin Saket. Aparajitha Vaasudev's illustrations claim a special mention here—as they express the different moods and emotions, ups and downs that Arunima braves. Aparajitha's colour palette has a beautiful mix that illustrates both the rugged challenges of the snow-capped mountains, as well as the hope and determination that Arunima depicts.

Trust with PT Usha, the third book, tells the story of India's lead athlete. Usha was born in a village near Kozhikode in Kerala in 1964. She was first noticed in 1977 by Indian athletics coach OM Nambiar, at a sports prize-distribution ceremony. She has been associated with Indian athletics since 1979. She has won four Asian gold medals and seven silver medals. She is often called the 'Queen of Indian track and field'. Usha was awarded the Padma Shri in 1985. She retired in 2000 at the age of 36 and set up a School of Athletics in Kozhikode. In December 2022, Usha has been elected President of the Indian Olympic Association unopposed.

PT Usha's story is narrated somewhat simplistically, with no mention of the systemic difficulties that she faced being a woman. Rajyasree Sarkar's somewhat cartoon-like illustrations also are comparatively less appealing than those in the other books of this series. The eyes of the characters are stunning, but beyond that, there is much to be desired in this book.

The story of Chandro and her sister-in-law, Prakashshi Tomar (called Revolver Dadi) features in the fourth and the last book of this series. Prakashshi Tomar is an icon in the world of shooting. Born in 1937, she is an Indian sharpshooter from Johri village of Uttar Pradesh's Baghpat district and is one of the oldest sharpshooters in the world. Her career begun in 1999 at the age of 62. Her daughter, Seema Tomar (now an international shooter), joined the Johri Rifle Club but was hesitant to go alone. Prakashshi decided to accompany her to the academy as an encouragement. At the academy, coach Farooq Pathan and others were shocked when she shot the target skilfully while trying to show Seema how to hold the gun. Pathan advised her to join the academy, and has since won over 25 national and international championships.

The story of Prakashshi and Chandro is that of the neglect and discrimination that Indian women face traditionally. And yet, the grit and perseverance that they show leads them to transform both their own lives and those of their near ones. The colourful art by Ria Mohta depicts the naughtily resilient life of these two badass women with a blend of fun and sensitivity.

Overall, the effort invested into bringing out such fascinating narratives that remain largely untold, especially in children's literature is laudable. The series is addressed

to young children in its form and size—with its boarded pages and handy size, as well as the colourful illustrations. However, the values being talked about, and the language used make the books a valuable addition to a middle school going child's library. The pictorial life-sketch of each of the sportswomen in the end-pages is a beautiful rendition of life histories—but may be accessible only to a higher age group of children as well as adults. Lastly, the pricing of the books is another inhibiting factor, making them inaccessible to a large majority of young Indian readers.

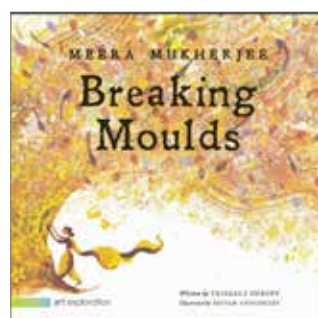


Nidhi Qazi

MEERA MUKHERJEE: BREAKING MOULDS

By Vaishali Shroff. Illustrated by Shivam Choudhary. Designer: Bhavana
Art1st and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, 2023, pp. 84, ₹ 650.00

Meera Mukherjee was a sculptor from India who was known for her innovative bronze casting technique which she learnt from the Bastar sculpting tradition of Chhattisgarh. The book traces her journey from her childhood days and presents a glimpse of the artist's life and pursuit for sculpting.



Written in third person, on the lines of a fictionalized biographical piece, the book also presents pieces from her sculpting work. But a glimpse into her life only serves as a simplistic gaze into the mind and heart of the artist, Meera. The writing of an artist's life should have delved into greater details, giving us more food for thought but it falls short of doing that. Instead, a hurried, simplistic narrative and lack of focus on the inner conflicts reflects throughout the book.

There's repetition of the following lines on each page:
Art found Meera, Meera found art...Everywhere she saw, everything she felt.

This repetition doesn't lend itself to any heart-touching effect to be able to establish an emotional connect with the artist.

Highly designed and stylized, the book distracts one from the artist's work, since each page has illustrations by another artist; which may leave its readers disengaged or not hold them enough and give them more time and space to engage with Meera the artist.

Biographical accounts are a difficult terrain; it is not

easy to get into the artist's life, especially posthumously. But a more honest, engaged effort from the author's side to understand Meera's life would have made the book a meaningful read.

Meera's journey, as the book presents, was also of having made a shift in medium. She started with painting, went on to learn it formally in European countries but suddenly decided, on returning to her roots, to shift to sculpting. The writing doesn't offer any closer examination of the reasons that determine Meera's decision to return to India and associate with tribal communities in Chhattisgarh to learn sculpting.

Use of some expressions in the context of Meera's observation of the people of tribal communities of Dhokras, Gharuas, Malhars, Acharyas also feels insincere:

She created sculptures of people around her.....Their large, pensive eyes were an expression of sadness. Their elongated necks and large arms spoke of labour.

Such use of language confuses the reader: is this what Meera felt really or is it the writer's interpretation of Meera's work? Moreover, such expressions make us feel distant to the realities of tribal communities without giving us any window to their lives and struggles. Simply mentioning 'Sadness', 'labour', reduces them to mere words and does not offer anything more than just the generic view of an outsider.

The book would have made for a better read if only we had been given more authentic details of artist Meera's life, her choices and conflicts.



Seema

I WANT TO BEEEE

Written by Anushka Ravishankar. Illustrations by Rathna Ramanathan

Tara Books, 2023, pp. 40+4, ₹ 750.00

This book gives wings to a child's wishes. They imagine themselves to be a number of things apart from what they already are. We see quite a range in these imaginations, for instance, a cup of tea, a twelve-armed octopus, a sneeze, a tadpole's tongue, a question mark, a smelly sock...and many many more.

The book attempts a mix of nonsense verse and typography forms. Twinning of the author and the illustrator can be felt on all pages. The alphabets and the words have been represented in the image form sometimes making them like a word puzzle. The book will certainly help the beginners trying to make the connection between the meanings and visual representations of the words.

Ramanathan has enhanced the reading experience of

the book by using images, sound, colour, texture and voice in type play. One gets to see direct representation through many different kinds of connections throughout the book, for example, the word cup is shown with cup spelled in the shape of the cup and the same is done with question mark as well. Some of the connections are indirect and lateral. Sock from smelly sock is illustrated with the texture of the cloth. The way letters of the rocking chair have been written makes you feel that a chair is rocking showing its movement. A tube of glue is in the shape of a tube of glue. Bee is written as beeeeeeeeeee to make the reader feel a bee buzzing by. The words 'a pie, a tie, a dotted I' have been illustrated instead of being spelled.



However, I could not understand what wishes the duo are trying to show with 'a THINGA MAJIG...a where it's at' and 'A HOOJAMAFLIP...A dingDOODAD'.

There is colour mismatch in a few places like black cloud is shown blue, the orange peel pink and the reddish Mars pink. Children trying to recognize colours might find it confusing. This can be a mistake in printing or one needs to go through the book a few more times to really understand it.

One of the strengths of any good book is that with every read there is always a new aspect and perspectives that can be explored. This book does exactly that. It starts interacting with the readers opening various layers every time they read it. Readers who see words visually and not just spell them will enjoy this book more.

The ending shows the child being self-content after imagining all their wishes which points to self-realization. Also, most books show gender as binary. But what's special about this book is that gender neutral 'I' has been used which gives space to persons of various genders relating to the character.

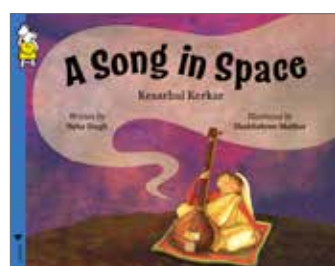


Partho Datta

A SONG IN SPACE: KESARBAI KERKAR

By Neha Singh. Illustrated by Shubhshree Mathur
Pratham Books, New Delhi, 2023, pp. 20, ₹ 85.00

This is a good introduction to the celebrated vocalist Kesarbai Kerkar and a story about how her recording of Raga Bhairavi 'Jaat Kahan Ho'



was included in a disc that was sent into space. In the 1970s, Carl Sagan the famous astronomer and scientist was in charge of a project to put together sounds and music from earth and wanted a representative selection of the greatest musicians across cultures. It was Robert Brown who alerted Sagan to Kesarbai's recording and that was how her track was included. This was put in the Voyager that NASA was sending into interstellar space; the hope was that it would encounter other intelligent beings who would be able to discover the wonders of the earth.

The inclusion of Kesarbai in the Golden Disc may have been a matter of chance, but there is no doubt that if there was one voice that exemplified the achievements of the Hindustani classical tradition, this was it. Her authoritative vocalism, confidence and musicality have remained unrivalled. Most of her recordings were made on discs ranging from seven to eight minutes and the more conventional format of three to four minutes between the late 1930s and 1950s. Shubha Mudgal and Aneesh Pradhan have issued her early recordings as a CD through their Underscore label and most of her other recordings for HMV are available now on YouTube, Spotify and other platforms. Her music circulates and continues to mesmerize. She set very high standards and few can emulate her vocalism today. Her speciality was chiselled *taans* and a breathtaking ability to hold the *sam* at bay. Critics and enthusiasts never stopped marvelling at her even tone, technical dexterity and aesthetics.

The conventional way to place Kesarbai is to invoke the dedicated training she received from her teacher, the maestro Ustad Alladiya Khan who is well known as the founder of the Jaipur gharana. It is true she received training for many years and mastered the difficult repertoire of the Jaipur tradition especially the *jod* ragas for which it is famous. Linking her to the established male *ustadi* tradition of raga music has been a way to incorporate and legitimize her place in Indian music history. However, Kesarbai also represented an alternative tradition of women from the singing communities who always had a significant and autonomous place in the traditions of raga music. These women were the first to embrace modern technology like recording and played an important role in modern theatre and cinema. They learnt from ustads but also incorporated their own songs and compositions which have become a part of the tradition of classical singing. The early recordings by Zohrabai, Gauharjan, Malkajan, Kashibai are now classics. Kesarbai and her contemporaries, Mogubai Kurdikar, Siddheshwari Devi, Rasoolan Bai, Begum Akhtar, Hirabai Barodekar, Sundrabai Jadhav and Indubala carried forward the legacy. They commanded and set important precedents for public performance which male vocalists had to acknowledge.

There are legendary and delightful stories (in memoirs

by Sheila Dhar, DN Joshi, Kumar Mukherjee, and Namita Devidayal) of Kesarbai's imperious dismissal of contemporary vocalists and patrons. All those who had a brush with her powerful personality came away chastened but with their admiration doubled. Rabindranath Tagore hailed her as 'Surashree'. When All India Radio inaugurated the National Programme of Music in the 1960s, she was one of the vocalists invited to open the series. Like all great artists, she chose to retire voluntarily when her vocal prowess declined. Hopefully, this book will encourage a new generation to connect to her music.

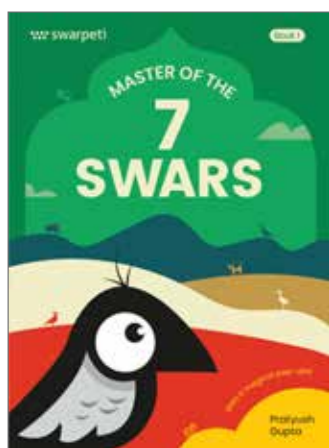


Vivek BG

MASTER OF THE 7 SWARS

Written and designed by Pratyush Gupta
Swarpeti, 2023, pp. 44, ₹ 1650.00

What could be more exciting than a book filled with vivid illustrations? A book where the pictures pop to life right from the pages! What if I tell you that there's a pop-up book wherein you can incorporate both light and sound into your storytelling? The book published by Pratyush Gupta, an interactive pop-up book for children (and grown-ups alike), not only takes readers on a captivating adventure but also serves as a bridge to the enchanting world of Indian classical music.



Master of the 7 Swars is the first book in the 'Swarpeti' series. In the pages of this book, we find ourselves in the neighbourhood of the palace of Tansen, the legendary singer. From here, the protagonist Kaga embarks on a profound journey of self-discovery, a journey intricately linked to the *Sapta-swaras*, or the seven *swars*, of Indian classical music.

Maria Minsker in her article 'How Pop-Up Books Can Boost Reading Skills' recognizes three aspects that draw children to a pop-up book: they are interactive, they help build vocabulary by encouraging repetition, and they teach the value of visualization. This book hits a notch higher with its enchanting pop-ups that spring to life when you illuminate them with a flashlight, unveiling age-old secrets regarding the seven '*swars*' or musical notes.

Books on music are, well, books on music—mostly text, maybe some illustrations. Seems unfair! Pratyush

recognized this problem early in his journey. Speaking about the inspiration behind the book he says, 'When I was just six years old I started to learn Indian classical music, and at first, it seemed very hard and not very interesting. It felt like something only adults could enjoy. [...] I couldn't find any books or things that made it easier for kids like me to learn about this genre of music.' He found it unrelatable to the world around him. To bridge the gap and augment the storytelling experience, accompanying this extraordinary book is an online Swar-tarang that allows you to both play and hear the *swars*. It offers the opportunity to experiment with diverse musical combinations and partake in Kaga's adventurous quests. Additionally, readers will find a delightful bonus in the form of stickers, which can be affixed to musical instruments at home or school, seamlessly integrating them into the story's narrative.

The colours, sounds, and light aside, the the book isn't just about Kaga's journey. We accompany Kaga on his quests. Remember strumming on a rubber band as a child? If you are like me, you do this even now! The activities in the book encourage children to pay attention to the sounds around them, prompt them to notice the differences in pitch, play with each note first-hand, connect *swars*-to-alphabets, and see if there is an emotion that arises within, or smell, or maybe taste.

Master of the 7 Swars is not just a book; it's an immersive learning adventure that ignites young minds with the magic of music. Swarpeti's innovative approach to storytelling, combined with the book's activities and Swar-tarang, makes it a must-have for every library or book collection. I can't wait to get my hands on the sequel, *Kings of the 6 Ragas*.



Bharati Jagannathan

THE BOY WHO LOVED TO FLY: J.R.D. TATA
THE GIRL WHO LOVED TO RUN: P.T. USHA
THE BOY WHO PLAYED WITH LIGHT:
SATYAJIT RAY

By Lavanya Karthik
Duckbill, Penguin Random House,
Dreamers' Series, pp. 2021, 2023, 2023,
pp. 48 each, ₹ 199.00 each



Biography is an evergreen genre. The urge to know about famous people's lives seems fairly insatiable as can be seen from any major publisher's list. And yet, these slim books by Lavanya Karthik manage to stand out, for they deal not with the great glories of the famous persons they are about



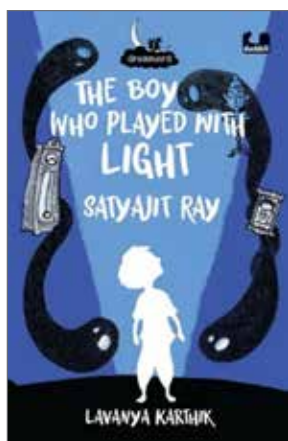
but with small occasions from their childhood that sowed the seeds for the direction their lives would take in the future. Each story is crafted from the perspective of the child that was.

JRD Tata, the man behind Air India (which was originally Tata Airlines) was fascinated by planes as a boy. His unique childhood, spent partly in France and partly in India owing to his mixed heritage, his introduction to bomber aircrafts during World War I and to gymnastic fliers after the end of the war, and his first ride in a biplane are entirely from a child's point of view. He declares to his mother that he will fly too. And when she asks if he wanted to do tricks or drop bombs across enemy lines, he says he wants to connect worlds. I wonder whether there is any record of young Jeh saying such a thing, or if this delightful phrase came out of the author's imagination—either way, a fabulous imagery for what he eventually did!

Satyajit Ray—a boy called Manik, was fascinated by the play of light and shadow. The author hints at the legacy of creative work that he inherited through a mention of the notebooks Manik's father filled with poems and drawings. Tragedy—in the form of loss of this father at a very young age—too is depicted hauntingly through the imagery of shadows: 'The shadows that settled under Ma's eyes after Baba died. The shadows that pooled on the floor of the press [run by his father] as, one by one, the machines fell silent.' Manik saw stories in the play of light and shade; like his father, he drew and he wrote. And when the time was right, he pictured the stories with their subtle nuances of light and shadow in film.

The Golden Girl of Indian athletics was just another tongue-tied schoolgirl. A sports teacher saw her potential when she was merely fooling around with her friends and encouraged her to compete with the district champion, a girl much older and bigger than herself. Little Usha was perplexed and unsure, but his belief in her made her imagine what she felt like while running. The wind in her face and her lungs. The sensation of flying. The rest, as they say, is history.

The illustrations in these three delightful books—complex collages made with sketches, ink, superimposed photographs of faces, and drawing on the specific contexts (late 19th to early 20th century portraits of the Parsi community, Sukumar Ray's artwork and Kerala murals)—perfectly complement the texts. Short, delightful, educative reads!

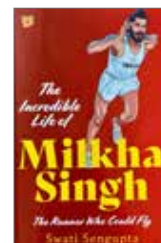


Deepali Shukla

THE INCREDIBLE LIFE OF MILKHA SINGH: THE RUNNER WHO COULD FLY

By Swati Sengupta. Illustrations by Devashish Verma
Talking Cub, An Imprint of Speaking Tiger Books, 2022,
pp. 120, ₹ 250.00

When the list of books for review for TBR 2023 was shared, the title of this book attracted me, as this is a biography and I love reading them! Secondly, there are many books written on the life of Milkha Singh and I was curious to see how one written for children would present the life of this iconic athlete.

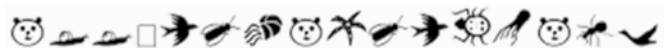


The story begins in Govindpura village, where Milkha spent his childhood with his family. A lively description of wheat fields, dirt roads, and flying kites is given in the first chapter describing young Milkha's activities. Milkha's loneliness at the time of Partition, relationship dilemmas, and acute worry about the safety of loved ones have been handled very sensitively. Swati has written in simple language making it easy for readers to understand. Information boxes help explain special contexts and concepts such as the Partition of India, National Games, Commonwealth Games, etc.

The book brings out many events from Milkha's life. One incident describes stealing rations from the railway station upon arrival in India. It compels the reader to think about the difficulties faced by the runner in his early life and empathize with the circumstances shaping the personality. The events from Milkha's life draw the reader's attention to the restrictions placed on children by elders. These incidents bring out behind-the-scenes truths about the lives of public figures and show us that famous and iconic people too face their challenges. Inflection points in the life of Milkha Singh like a conversation with Brig. Vora after induction in the army, being mentored by his coach, and competing against the Pakistani runner Abdul Khalik, help to understand what shaped the man.

The book is written with children 10 years of age and older in mind. The author has focused on Milkha's determination and his journey as an athlete and a star runner. The fond hope is that this may generate an interest in the readers about track and field sports.

The font size used in the book is age-appropriate to make reading more appealing. The text is illustrated in places depicting the backdrop and context of the story. The book includes a timeline of Milkha Singh's life marking salient milestones, many of which have been elaborated upon in chapters. The author ends with a note with her thoughts on Milkha's life.



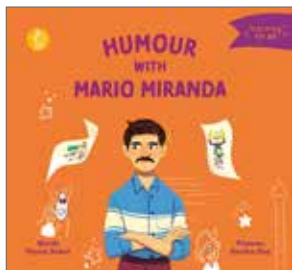
Nidhi Gulati and Shivi

HUMOUR WITH MARIO MIRANDA

By Pervin Saket. Illustrations by Devika Oza

AdiDev Press, Learning to Be Series, 2023, pp. 20, ₹ 499.00

Humour with Mario Miranda is a picture book thick in board page format. The text focuses on Mario's growing up years and the themes in his art. Mario was fascinated by the everyday characters he encountered, life and its traits, families and cityscapes. Like other texts from the Learning to Be series, this book is a biography in fragments.



The pages are designed with well-justified proportions of text size, text space and picture space. The text by Pervin Saket is evocative. It attempts to capture the spirit of an artist who looked at common life around him with the eyes of a hawk as it watches over its brood, sharp yet compassionate. It shows how childhood carries the possibility of creativity in absurdity. Saket translates his visual wit into easy, flowing verse. The text does justice to the quirky, absurd, witty art that Mario made. The rhyme used in the text also uplifts the mood. Each line, while narrating, also fits the rhythmic aspect.

About the art that Mario created. Mario Miranda though remembered as a social cartoonist, was more than an illustrator or a cartoonist. His ink-and-pen, charcoal, and colour sketches on social life, characters and cities are enigmatic. How common people form relationships with their environments—cities especially—forms the core of his art. The oddness, absurdity, frailty and foibles that Mario sees in these relationships swerve and dislodge what is deemed normal. We can laugh at his wit as it lurks in the exaggerations. Some of these are the egg-shaped chin, the long ears, the bulging eyes, and the pointy nose in characters; the always late buses, always overcrowded buses on the roads; the overfilled cafes in cities; the fandom frenzy around starlets and corrupt politicians. At the same time, we can feel sympathy for the local characters as they live their city life. He shows us the capacity for gentleness and tolerance. Mario's art is a meditation on life around the world.

Illustrating a book about one of the most quirky artists of our times is daunting and tricky. It is here that the book disappoints. The illustrator chooses vibrant hues all over, failing the interplay of shades and texture. The illustrations also fail to depict the mood of the text. Even as Mario experiences failures in his life, the colour palette remains as bright as it could be. We see only three of Mario's artworks in the book. None of

these bring the spirit or the oeuvre of Mario's work. For instance, his artwork on the temples and churches in Goa, autobiographical sketches, and sketches of a bus full of people rapt with social satire could have added to the narration of the text. Including Mario's illustrations on more pages would have brought delight to children. They would have left an indelible mark on their minds on how to look at society. The bliss that pervades his characters—the secretary Ms. Fonseca, the actress Ms. Rajani Nimboopani, and Minister Bundaldass—evades this book. This book missed an opportunity to bring to children Mario's art, where nothing in everyday life was ever unexpected, or inconvenient, or unusual!



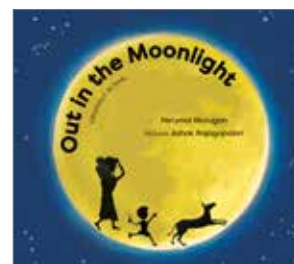
Sucharita Sengupta

OUT IN THE MOONLIGHT

By Perumal Murugan. Translated from the Tamil and illustrations by Ashok Rajagopalan

Tulika, Chennai, 2023, pp. 24, ₹ 215.00

Out In the Moonlight is the adaptation of a chapter from noted Tamil author Perumal Murugan's book *Thondra Thunai*, published in the English language as *Amma*. The story is based on the author's recollection of his mother's life. This book recounts a night in the life of his mother when his brother is five years old and the author himself is a ten-month-old baby, as shared with the author by his mother.



Amma is a farmer, worrying about her home, children and the state of her fields after the harvest. She wants to clear her field of stubble, but like all mothers doing countless tasks, hardly finds time during the day. On a moonlit light, she sets off with both her children, walking through the village, braving narrow paths, and finally reaching her field. She must work but has to keep an eye on her children. Her older child helps her out in the task even as he plays with a stray dog, ensuring that his infant brother is comfortably asleep, so that the mother can work in the field throughout the night.

This tale of a night is presented as an adventure, but in reality is a narration of the difficult life of Murugan's mother. The travails of an impoverished woman combine with the tenderness and anxieties of a mother's heart, extending not just to her own children, but to farm animals and birds. For her older child though, it is an adventure by the moonlight, and a chance to play the night away.

The book is a wonderful entry point for young readers into the literary works of Perumal Murugan. Designed for readers around the age of 5 years, the adaptation is simple yet suffused with joy. The illustrations will fire any reader's imagination, and more so that of a child. Apart from English, this children's adaptation has been made available by the publisher in Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati and Bengali. The story will delight readers, as much as it will develop their sensibilities towards those marginalized in society.



Mudit Shrivastava*

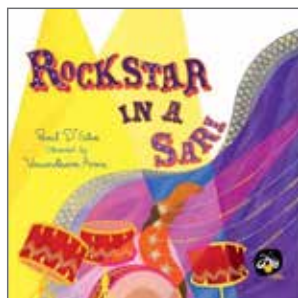
ROCKSTAR IN A SARI

By Pearl D'Silva

Jugnoo/Ektara Trust, 2023, pp. 32, ₹ 100.00

'Rockstar in a Sari' was the title of a video recommendation I once saw on Youtube and that was the first time I saw and heard Usha Uthup. She was wearing an exquisite Kanjeevaram sari and matching shoes. With guitar in hand, spectacles resting on her nose, a big bindi and a mike in front of her, she was singing an amazing song. One of the first thoughts that crossed my mind was that this woman is so different and unique. She was probably the first person I had seen like her—sari clad with a guitar in her hands. This is Usha's magic. The book tells the story of the world created by Usha for herself. Of how she became a rockstar from Usha. Reading this book will help start turning weaknesses in you into strength.

Usha was drawn towards singing from her childhood but she never got an opportunity to do so at school. Her teachers told her that her voice was low-pitched and deep. Like a man's. Even then she did not give up her interest in singing. Once she had accompanied her aunt to a night club. She ended up singing in front of a crowd there for the first time. And people went gaga over her. This started a chain reaction which gave the world its 'Rockstar in a Sari'. Pearl D'Silva tells Usha's story in her carefree and daring manner. It feels as if Usha is narrating her story and Pearl is just penning it down. The book tells the story of a bold girl courageously. Vasundhara Arora has stolen colours from Usha's sari and used them beautifully for the illustrations in the book. One of the illustrations show Usha walking boldly on the road with her blue Kanjeevaram swaying away in the distance. As if teasing the people who discouraged her and telling them that she



was on her way...and that she would not stop.

*This review has been translated from the Hindi by Apoorva Raje.

LADY TARZAN! JAMUNA TAKES A STAND*

By Lavanya Karthik. Illustrations by Rajiv Eipe

Jugnoo Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust, 2023, pp. 16, ₹ 90.00

What can a single woman do on her own? The question can also be posed as 'can a single human do anything significant by themselves after all.' The story of Jamuna Tudu



is one such tale. Lavanya Karthik has presented Jamuna's story in a very interesting manner. One hears the swish of an arrow the moment they open the book. Seeing this arrow from Jamuna's quiver, the axes pulled out to cut the jungle trees of Muturkham village trembled with fear. The story begins with a scene from Jamuna's childhood. Her father tells her that trees are also like our brothers and sisters. 'Who takes care of you when your parents or your siblings are not around? Who provides you with candies-toffees and food? And who bandages you when you get hurt?' The readers find themselves with these questions right away and the answers they come up with are the picturesque trees illustrated in the book.

From that day onwards, Jamuna decides to think of trees as her brothers. Upon reaching the Muturkham village after her marriage, she finds herself unable to see the trees being cut. She requests the villagers to take a stand against this but ends up going alone to save the trees after all. This is what the story is about. The story of how a single woman steps out of her home to save the trees and the jungle without caring about her life and emerges as a *morchha*. And spends her life for the trees.

People like Jamuna are superheroes and wonder women in the truest sense. The illustrations by Rajiv Eipe are done as beautifully as the story has been narrated. The trees in the book have been etched with such beauty that one feels that they are getting into the dense jungles of Muturkham! This is a new and rare way of presenting biography for the children. Share it with children and read it yourself.

Jamuna Tudu, an Indian environmental activist, with five other women prevented illegal felling of trees near her village and this later expanded into an organization. She is called 'Lady Tarzan' for taking on the Timber mafia and Naxals in Jharkhand. Born 19 December 1980, in Mayurbhanj, she is the daughter of Bagrai Murmu (father); Bobyshree Murmu (mother).

*The review has been translated from the Hindi by Apoorva Raje.



Vinatha Viswanathan

THE GREAT POOP WAR

By Ranjit Lal. Illustrations by Ambika Karandikar
Red Panda, An imprint of Westland Books, 2023, pp. 130,
₹ 275.00

Set in the ubiquitous apartment complex peppering our cities, *The Great Poop War* story revolves around a mystery pooper in Skyline Apartments. Skyline Apartments is populated with several dogs and cats, and the pets automatically become the suspects in this stinking crime. As suspicions mount and accusations fly, the adults, owners and others, dogs and cats are all clueless as to who this audacious repeat offender could be. Meanwhile, the head of the research facility next door, resident Shiri Ghoos, covets the now unpopular dogs and cats for some secretive experiments. Finally, the teen duo of Parvati and Bharat are the ones who manage to sniff out the culprit and save the lives of the apartment pets and the residents from much misery.



Ranjit Lal has unerringly picked a topic that bothers many of those who step out each morning for a brisk walk and breath of fresh air—the errant four-legged pooper in buildings, housing colonies and neighbourhoods. As the number of dog and cat lovers increases in urban areas, the story accurately portrays polarized groups in these dwellings—that of animal lovers and pet haters. The mystery here is the identity of the pooper who manages to strike unseen, baffling all residents, two- and four-legged. Lal tells this story in his imitable style. A relentless pace, a plot that keeps you guessing, colourful characters with hilarious even outlandish names and a mystery that remains one till almost the end. The story has pompous adults, nosy children, dogs and cats that talk to each other, much plotting and investigating, and even a whiff of a romance... And crucial to the plot is science. Lal's fondness for natural history can be seen in his protagonists' interest in David Attenborough and their use of techniques in the study of wild animals to bring *The Great Poop War* to an end. However, in vilifying some other techniques of science that are integral to the story smacks of a populist's indulgence.

Ranjit Lal is a prolific popular-science writer and author of children's books. He skilfully weaves a story

yet again for children in this light-hearted yet engrossing story published earlier this year. Ambika Karandikar's illustrations provide adequate relief to the reader without drawing them away from the narrative. A book for 10–12-year-olds, Lal's latest offering is a good read.



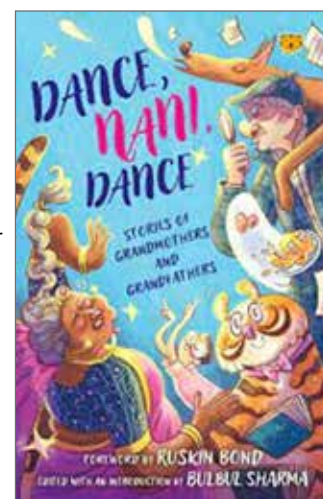
Ruchi Shevade

DANCE, NANI, DANCE; STORIES OF GRANDMOTHERS AND GRANDFATHERS

Edited with an introduction by Bulbul Sharma. Foreword by Ruskin Bond

Talking Cub, An Imprint of Speaking Tigers, 2023, pp. 232,
₹ 399.00

The title caught my eye! So did the theme of the book when I read the blurb. Excitedly, I started the book. Written for fluent readers and young adolescents this has imagined stories and real-life events, brought to us by 15 authors, all carrying their own charm of storytelling. There are stories capturing many moods; of adventure, quirks, pranks, wit. There are also a couple of stories on grief and loss, of losing one's grandparents.



Having grown up in a family with *dada*, *dadi* and *nani*, the theme felt close to my heart. As I started reading, a parallel chain of thoughts also attempted to recall if I knew any interesting anecdotes of my own grandparents. (For those curious, I did remember two of the funniest of them all.)

As much excited I was to read it, just as much hesitant was I to write about it; for I couldn't figure, for days, what went wrong. But, as I read further, I found myself less and less intrigued and involved. As much as I wanted to enjoy the stories, there was an involuntary aloofness at times, gradually turning into disinterest with the book.

As I am set to write the review, I seem to have reached an impasse. On one hand, it feels unfair to entirely rely on an intense inner response, coming, not out of faults of writing, pushing me to be slightly objective. While, on the other hand, a part of me seems quite clear, straightforward and blunt, focusing on my own experience with the book. (As I am about to type, there seems to be a winner!)

I must say that the way characters have been portrayed, and the style of narration in *Dance, Nani...* is quite engrossing. It really stayed with me. One that I found

most delightful was, 'Traveling with Detective Dida' by Bulbul Sharma, 'A Photograph' by Ruskin Bond and 'Dadu and Jack' by Swapna Dutta. I still feel like giggling over them. I dare you all to hold back your laugh after reading Bijal Vaccharajani's 'My Grandma Hoards Stuff'. (Hahahaha!! I certainly can't). It reminded me of Mariko Shinju's Mottainai Grandma.

Another couple of stories that touched me were 'Where the Peacocks Dance' by Adithi Rao and 'Talking to Ants' by Ashok Banker. Aahh!! What a beautiful way of penning down two rich, heartwarming and difficult life experiences, fictional(!?). So, can be rightly said about 'When Granny Died' by Jerry Pinto.

I have a short list of books, narrating the stories woven around grandparents and their grandchildren; varying themes, varying styles. With these stories from *Dance*, *Nani*... I now have some more valuable additions to the list.

Sigh!!! An urge to be honest with you all is pulling me to go back to an unpleasant chain of thoughts and confess it. Yes, that 'other' part of experience, that I had while reading this very book.

As much as I found some of the stories quite lovely and intriguing, my first read of this book was still filled with an inexplicable disappointment. Upon much musing, I realized that I didn't find some of the stories fresh, as imaginative, as warm, as inviting. At times some of them even appeared a bit spurious. It's difficult to explain, but it was strongly sensed.

Initially, I got the impression that all the stories in the book were out of real experiences. Some of them indeed were. But as I turned the pages, I felt a sense of disappointment to see fictitious ones, majorly present throughout the book. And that was another put off. I am sure many of us would have a range of anecdotes and memories to recall, if only one is to compile the stories from real life. It would have been much more interesting (for me) to read.

Some of the stories appeared to be written for children, who are offered a life protected by a bubble. There's just enough pinch of adventure, of imagination and of emotions, enough to take a toe-dip. In my case, perhaps the yearn for deep-dive took over.

All said, I am quite curious to hear from others, what their favourites (and the ones put in 'other' category) would be, from *Dance*, *Nani*, *Dance*!



Jane Sahi

TWO PLAYS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE: THE SOMETIMES RIVER AND REMEMBER, REMEMBER

By Nayantara Nayar and Amulya B

Eklavya, 2022, (Developed as part of the ThinkArts Residency)
pp.171, ₹ 300.00

This book is the outcome of a residency programme for playwrights in 2021 through a collaboration of ThinkArts, Parag and Eklavya. The unintended backdrop of this residency was the Covid 19 pandemic, so it is not surprising that the subject of these two plays has a sense of urgency to reimagine how our relationship to nature could be reordered.

The two plays fall within a post-apocalyptic genre. In quite different ways the characters of both plots are survivors of cataclysmic events that have all but wiped out the chances of a regeneration of Planet Earth. Neither of the plays are didactic or overtly moralistic, but each story invites the audience to grapple with emotions and ideas that are inescapable in our present troubled and, increasingly, fragile world.

In *The Sometimes River* the few human survivors have retreated under the earth to escape from the blistering heat of the arid land. They live in 'the shadowy remains of a dead world' with only a fading memory of rainclouds, flourishing vegetation and a thriving animal world.

The drama opens at a time of crisis as life in the caves is 'sliding into chaos'. There is a vacuum of leadership as the dwindling community faces problems of scarcity and theft; communication has broken down and only rumours, secrets, broken promises and lies are rife. Tensions rise as sickness and death increase and chances of survival for the whole community seem to diminish.

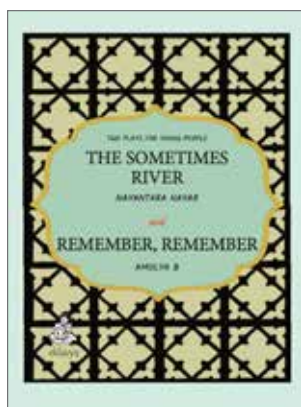
There are Runners who forage for food under cover of darkness above ground and Diggers who search for underground sources of water but rivalries between the two are on the increase as the situation deteriorates.

Mariamamma, the Keeper of Stories, can offer little solace. She describes her role as 'Rewriting stories that are crumbling'. But others accuse her of not seeing things as they really are and mock her art of storytelling. For many, in that dire situation, stories seem to have lost their power except to frighten the foolish from exploring any other way out of their plight.

It is Mariamma's grandson Ko and her precocious young apprentice Varun who urge the narrative forward and try to seek some other way than denial and paralysis. Both Ko and Varun are ready to risk their lives and liberty to find answers to the questions that might bring relief to the whole community. This prompts two of the senior members of the community to act and not evade the responsibility they hold.

Haunting stories and dreams are skillfully woven into the text. Broken relationships begin to be re-forged, and a new story starts to emerge. The search for 'The Sometimes River' reveals unexpected disaster and a realization that it will take a different kind of leadership to affirm that the human community is still part of a living planet.

The second, shorter play in the book is *Remember*, *Remember* by Amulya B. It is a poignant play that centres round the aftermath of a catastrophic flood following the



collapse of a dam. The two survivors exist in a Museum of Lost Objects in the hope that one day the salvaged objects they preserve will once again be part of a dynamic world of relationships and interdependence. The dusty museum begins to become a place of meetings and creation. The drama moves back and forth in time and,

most significantly, towards a future as the characters lament not only what has been lost but remember what gave their lives meaning.

Loss and longing are two central themes of the play. The struggle to recreate the butterfly and not just construct 'a mini metal drone' means understanding processes that cause destruction and those that give life.

Plays are not an easy genre for readers to enter but, as written in the introduction, 'a play compels readers to become active participants instead of passive receptors.' In one way reading a play is rather like studying a two-dimensional architectural plan as opposed to experiencing it as a three-dimensional lived space. Both these plays are a challenge for the reader to visualize the story in action, sound and image but also give freedom to interpret the words.

The plays are licensed under Creative Commons and the chance to perform these plays is open to all. These two dramas are specifically written for young people and the act of transposing the printed word to the theatre space would demand a deep engagement with the contemporary issues they confront.

The two plays engage with the reality of a threatened planet, but both offer some possibility of agency in reading the signs, protesting about destructive development and realizing some hope of regeneration and new beginnings.



Jane Sahi

THE TREASURE OF THE KHASI HILLS (JAWKHER DHAWN)

By Hemendra Kumar Roy. Translated from the original Bengali by Jashodhara Chakraborti

Talking Cub, An Imprint of Speaking Tiger Books, 2023, pp.160, ₹ 299.00

When seventeen-year-old Kumar throws a skull found in his grandfather's trunk out of the window into a ditch, he very nearly misses the whole adventure of a search for lost treasure. Kumar begins to realize that this is no ordinary skull when the same night a burglary takes

place in his house in Kolkata.

It is then that he consults his older and wiser friend Bimal and together they begin to unravel the mystery of the skull with its curious markings and its link to the message written in his grandfather's notebook. A second burglary convinces them that no time is to be lost. Bimal and his devoted attendant, Ramhari along with Kumar and his ever-faithful dog Bagh embark on a journey which takes them from the safety of Kolkata across the magical Padma River to the grandeur and perils of the Khasi Hills. It is only the friendship and loyalty between the four adventurers that help them to overcome all obstacles.

These scenes take place in the opening chapters of *The Treasure of the Khasi Hills*, a story written by the renowned Bengali author, Hemendra Kumar Roy. It was first published in 1930 as *Jawukher Dhawn* meaning 'The Yaksha's Treasure'. Jashodhara Chakraborti's translation makes this the first children's book by Roy to be made accessible beyond a Bengali readership. She was immersed in Bengali children's literature from childhood and remembers herself as a young girl being enthralled by this particular book; her excitement remains as she ably captures the flavour and texture of the story in English.

The fast-moving narrative is gripping for any reader but is particularly geared to young readers 10 years and above. The tale is set against the beauty of the Khasi Hills and its caves and the hovering presence of the ghosts and spirits who reportedly live there. Kumar is the narrator and describes not only their skirmishes with near disaster but his own feelings at times of fear and despair.

'Danger makes me happy,' boldly declares Bimal to his more timorous friend Kumar just as they set out. But even Bimal has no idea just how perilous their adventure would prove. The story is packed with cliff-hanging suspense from beginning to end. Their journey is made more terrifying by the ruthless pursuit of the greedy Karali, a treacherous former friend of Kumar's grandfather, who will stop at nothing to grab the treasure for himself.

A ghostly ghost story at the cremation grounds adds to Kumar's sense of dread so that even the cry of young cranes seems to him like the dreadful wailing of babies. Nightmare and reality are blurred as they are trapped in a maze of pathways below ground and hear spine chilling 'horrible metallic laughter'.

Although the book was written nearly a hundred years ago, the pace and the dramatic tension of the book hardly falters for the modern reader. The context of pre-Independence India and life in Calcutta in the times of the Raj is evocatively described. There is an undercurrent



of nationalist fervour and Bimal is undeniably a fearless hero prepared to meet the challenge of any bully or adversary—familiar or alien. Bimal, in the tradition of a Sherlock Holmes, relies on his intellect and power of logic even in the face of seemingly supernatural happenings.

In one way, the book is dated by its portrayal of the manservant Ramhari who is expected to sleep outside with the dog until Bimal realizes he depends on his protection inside the room! But finally, it is Ramhari who shows the greatest wisdom about what is truly valuable in life.

There is also a marked absence of female figures and the frequent references to male prowess makes one feel uncomfortable. However, in the present context where middle-class children, including teenagers, are rarely allowed far out of sight from adult supervision, it is refreshing to read of an earlier time when youth were encouraged to be more independent and resourceful. The ingenuity and skill of Bimal confronts every kind of challenge from combating marauding tigers and vicious thugs to making a bridge across a gaping gorge and lighting a fire from the resin of pinewood.

The ending is not what the reader might have expected but there is a resolution that is more satisfying than a more conventional 'happy ending'.

This is only one of thirty stories that have been written about Bimal and Kumar's adventures. It is to be hoped that others will also be made available for a wider audience.



Manika Kukreja

KUNGFU AUNTY VERSUS GARBAGE MONSTERS

By Shweta Taneja

Talking Cub, An Imprint of Speaking Tiger, 2023, pp. 192, ₹ 299.00

'Aah! Lizard', was my expression when I saw one in the kitchen. But as I kept looking at it, I observed it looking at the fruit flies and that brought about a realization for me: It was there because of those fruit flies hanging around my food peels bin near the kitchen sink. After I ate my food, the flies had found their food and the lizard found its in turn. Suddenly, my feelings of disgust and fright at the sight of the lizard changed to that of a non-pushy, co-existing neighbour. Shweta Taneja, similarly, and subtly, hints to the ideas of flies, mosquitoes and rats not being human enemies in her book *Kungfu Aunty versus Garbage Monsters*.



This science fiction is set in a time of the future when the ruler of the world is a pest representative called Trash Rajah. There is trash all over the place, humans are not allowed to keep dustbins, clean and dust surfaces. They need protective suits and oxygen helmets since the air is not clean to breathe as it is, the plants are black with dirt and pollution. 'Monsterquitos', 'bloatrats', and 'fatflies' comprise the Rajah's army that is in charge of maintaining the dirt and trash in the surroundings. And humans who go against the trash rules are cleanorists, or cleanliness terrorists.

The protagonist of the story is Kabir, a 9-year-old boy who idolizes Wild Wuss, doesn't want to stand out or do heroic deeds, rather just follow the rules. However, his younger sister Lila, a rebel in Kabir's words, on every occasion pushes his boundaries since she is the total opposite of Kabir. Lila leads Kabir to their deceased mother's lab downstairs from their home to discover a clean bot created by their mother. This story follows two siblings saving the city from the clutches of Trash Rajah with help of the clean bot and their school friends.

The story takes the reader to a place where trash and junk take over human lives. It shows a scenario of what could happen if we don't manage our waste properly. This 'what if' aspect makes it a good read for young adults and adults interested in issues of waste management. However, the story briefly also explores the idea of 'power' which interested me the most. There is an incredible backstory to how the Trash Rajah came to power by helping the people clean their mess. It was a much-needed support to keep the humans away from the waste and so Trash Rajah was appointed by the humans to keep their surroundings in check; but to feed its army and their growing demands heaps of trash, decaying food and polluted water bodies came about in the city. What started from helping the common, became about having a place that serves only the ones who have power. This allegory on the political system is astute and gives the story a new perspective for discussion.

The book details out the descriptions, it proficiently works with the language and will be a suitable option for students to work on story plot and language skill building. Upper primary teachers might want to use this as text for their Social Science and English classrooms as well.



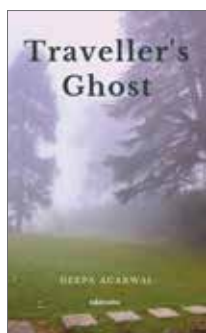
Parvin Sultana

TRAVELLER'S GHOST

By Deepa Agarwal

Ukiyoto Publishing, 2023, pp. 123, ₹ 150.00

Deepa Agarwal's *Traveller's Ghost* is the story of three teenagers—Kriti, Mohit and the journalist Neel



Pargat. The story starts in the hilly town of Banari where the families have gone for a holiday. They learn of missing children. All the children have been however photographed by the eccentric photographer Mr. Yatri before they went missing.

Kriti always feels uncomfortable around Mr. Yatri and these uncanny coincidences make her more

suspicious of him. But as Mohit and Kriti start helping Neel Pargat in uncovering the truth about the missing children, they discover many sinister aspects about Mr. Yatri. When the missing children return and Mr. Yatri vanishes, Kriti and her friends are relieved. But they have not seen the last of him.

Some days later another mysterious person enters the lives of these three friends—an artist Mr. Pathik. He starts teaching them art and does portraits of many. But just like Mr. Yatri, the subjects of Mr. Pathik's portraits start withering away. Again, Kriti and her friends are successful in stopping Mr. Pathik before anything untoward happened.

As life starts returning to normal and Kriti and her friends settle for a cozy Delhi winter, another young boy vanishes from the Diwali Mela. He is supposed to have been seen last in the hall of funny mirrors. Kriti, who seems to have an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*, feels that this was related to the earlier incidents. To uncover the truth, they visit the mirror shop owned by one Mr. Muzaffar who is unnaturally fat and short—just like the distorted image in one of the funny mirrors.

But as luck would have it, they miss him. Around the same time, Kriti and her friends are invited to revisit Banari with Mrs. Roy for a picnic. They are in fact booked into the same house where Mr. Yatri lives—a house which feels haunted. There is thunder, lightning and power cut during the night, and Kriti feels the presence of an unnatural being in her room. Her encounter explains the obsession of Mr. Yatri and his later avatars with Kriti. As Kriti takes a stand against this being, a restless soul is finally put to rest.

This atmospheric story plays on the age-old fears of people—child snatching, souls being captured for infinity and souls feeding on youth like parasites. Sinister intentions are attributed to those engaged in this crime. But the author in a very nuanced way deals with the grey areas of the issue. Can ghosts be lonely and yearn for companionship? Is there a space between good and evil? Written in a very lucid way, the small story is a page turner and engages the readers.

The twists and turns will keep the readers guessing about the plot. Introducing young readers to the genre of horror is a challenge in itself. Authors need to see to it that too much gore is not involved. At the same time,

elements of shock, supernatural, etc., must be there. The author does an excellent job of presenting a scary story. The atmospheric feeling reminds us of the ghost stories written by MR James—which make readers look over their shoulders often. Like James, Agarwal emphasizes more on the psychological aspect of fear rather than the physical one—the suffocating feeling of being trapped in a photograph, a portrait or a mirror, the eerie sensation of being constantly watched, are all relayed perfectly in the book.

The editing of the book could have been better.



Bharati Jagannathan

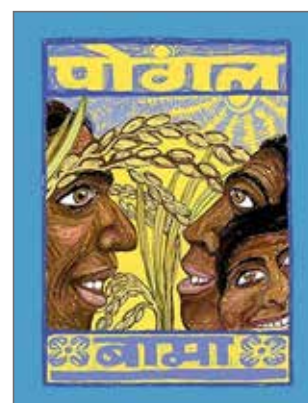
PONGAL

By Bama. Illustrated by Karen Haydock. Translated from the original Tamil by N Ravi Shankar
Muskan Books, 2021, pp. 20, ₹ 175.00

Festival: the very word conjures up images of good food and new clothes. And yet, whose is the celebration? What does a festival mean to the dispossessed, the marginalized? Bama's *Pongal* takes this head on, with the very first sentence, 'Pongal after Pongal, Madasami would pay his respects to his landlord and do whatever he had to, as tradition demanded. It was thus that this Pongal, too, he collected whatever was required and got ready to go.'

For Madasami, who works as a farmhand, having previously failed in several minor businesses, primarily because 'caste' folk would not touch the tea or eatables he made and served, the greatest festival of the year meant taking a rooster, a large pumpkin, a large bunch of bananas and a sack of rice—stuff he and his family could ill afford—to the landowner who, in return, gave him a small measure of cooked *pongal* and a cheap towel. This year, Esakkimuthu, the only one of Madasami and Rakkamma's seven or eight children to have gone to school, refuses to participate in this humiliating ritual, logically arguing that they could eat for several days if they kept the gifts for themselves.

However, Madasami and his wife, Rakkamma, tradition-bound, go off to make the presentation. But the landlord, who had watched, from his terrace, the argument between the parents and the son, decides to punish them by withholding even the cheap towel that



he gifted them every year. The powerful story ends with Madasami recognizing the force of his son's argument and the exploitation that forms the core of the traditional practice.

Esakkimuthu, we learn, despite having qualified to become a teacher, continues jobless and wanders around working for daily wages. While indicating the transformative power of education, the author has woven in a scathing commentary on the social order which manages to keep the downtrodden permanently marginalized. The tragedy of our educational system, however, is that other than exceptions like Esakkimuthu, the majority who go to school emerge without questioning 'tradition'. *Pongal* should be essential reading for a beginning towards that transformation.

The fabulous illustrations by Karen Haydock multiply the raw power of the story.

This is a book that should find a place in every school library across India.



Deepa Agarwal

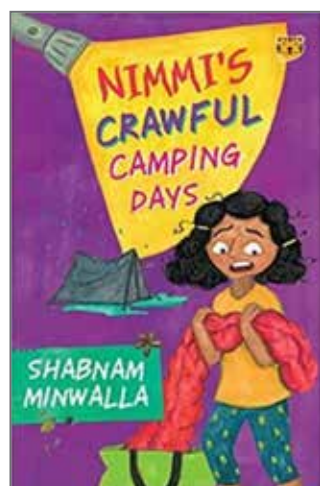
NIMMI'S CRAWFUL CAMPING DAYS

By Shabnam Minwalla

Talking Cub, An Imprint of Speaking Tiger Books, New Delhi, 2023, pp. 176, ₹ 250.00

Twelve-year-old Nimmi Daruwala is not an outdoorsy person. However, Mr Bakshi, the 'kind and enthusiastic' Principal of Vidya World School, decides that a Team Building Camp would be the best way to launch the school year for troublesome Grade 7. And so, Nimmi sets off with her unruly classmates to spend a 'night under the stars' in 'the lap of Mother Nature' hoping to bond and discover 'altogetherness'.

Shabnam Minwalla is the acclaimed author of several award-winning books for young readers and this title is the fourth in the well-loved Nimmi Daruwala series. It explores the complex emotions and everyday problems of a girl on the cusp of adolescence with humour and empathy, and the author expertly juggles a large cast of characters who somehow feel both familiar and yet larger than life. Filled with situations that any twelve-year-old might identify with, it replicates the angst of



contemporary pre-teen existence with keen insights and much understanding. The Instagram anxiety, the never-ending stream of messages that keeps everyone on a constant simmer, the outrageous rumour mongering—they are all there.

What is it like to be an almost-teenager? When you feel like you're ready to start dating and yearn to be as cool as the coolest kid in class? But somehow, things refuse to go the way you would like them to. Nimmi's mother is totally opposed to dating and beauty treatment before she is sixteen. More so, being an ardent recycler, she insists on sending her to camp with an ancient sleeping bag stuffed into a green Amazon Fresh plastic bag, which becomes the unexpected catalyst of astonishing events. It evokes scorn from the fancy and superior Evil Threevil—Alisha, Devina and Nimmi's erstwhile friend Sophia, and mouthwatering hope for goodies being denied in camp for Imran and Rohan, the 'trouble-magnets' of the class. Worst of all, it arouses sinister suspicions in Sumit, who has a score to settle with Nimmi and is convinced this bag will clinch his revenge.

Thus, the stage is set for a crazy+awful (Crawful) chain of events which will keep the reader chuckling and turning pages till the startling denouement. The journey to Camp Happy Heaven on the 'Hapy Jorny' bus becomes torturous when Nimmi discovers that the snooty Alisha has developed a crush on her friend Kabir and persists in her attempts to lure him away while bombarding Nimmi with cutting remarks all the way. On arrival, Mother Nature's lap does not turn out to be soft and welcoming, they are greeted with a thunderstorm instead. The camp organizers and the accompanying teachers turn out to be woefully inept, the food is revolting, and the tents provide scant shelter from the rain.

Somehow, Nimmi has to survive the 'grastliest night of life'. Nothing could have prepared her for the 'ghim and grastly' experience of trying to find sleep in her 'poky, proddy' sleeping bag in a leaky, drippy tent with two of the Evil Threevil and the perpetually Groaning Grishma. A night that metamorphoses into the stuff of her worst nightmare when the tent is invaded by terrifying intruders.

Together with this saga of weird events, the battle to be Class Rep is playing out—a crucial part of the action, along with the bullying, rivalries and groupism of school life that are vividly depicted in this exuberant, true-to-life story.

'Crawful' is itself an indication of what to expect in this hilarious but heartwarming narrative. The brilliantly expressive made-up words, so typical of the language kids coin at the drop of a hat, heighten the comic element and add immensely to the reading pleasure.

What really struck me was how effectively the communication gap between kids and the adults in charge

of them is highlighted in this book. From the 'kind and enthusiastic' Mr. Bakshi, well-meaning but clueless, who totally misreads the verbally challenged Rohan's cryptic email, the disconnected teachers who also take it at face value without bothering to use reason or their personal knowledge of their students, to the DreamTeam members who are to conduct team building activities but have no experience with children—it is the adults who are responsible for the comedy of errors which leads to the disaster at 4.48 am in Tent No. 5.

But all's well that ends well, as it should in a children's book. Kind-hearted Nimmi amply demonstrates her mettle, coping heroically in a crisis situation. And eventually, it is the unbreakable bond of friendship that carries the day as Nimmi's friends Kabir, Diya and Kavya help her to recognize her own strength.

The comical cover illustration by Tanvi Bhat provides the perfect peek into the action of the book and will no doubt entice many young readers.



Jane Sahi

THE GHOST WHO PLAYED TENNIS AND OTHER STORIES*

Illustrations by Ankur Mitra

Children's Book Trust, Golden Set, 2022, pp. 142, ₹ 190.00

Many of the stories in this collection are designed to attract young readers, including the reluctant reader! The humorous story that gives the book its title, 'The Ghost who Played Tennis' by Santhini Govindan, opens with the tantalizing statement, 'Shankar did not believe in ghosts until he met one.'

The stories have been especially chosen for children between the ages of nine and twelve years. This book is welcome, in providing this pre-teenage audience with sustained reading opportunities that reflect multiple aspects of their everyday lives.

For many children of this age, it is a significant time of transition. Children typically become more self-conscious but also more aware of things and people around them. By the age of twelve children are often beginning to question teachers, parents and adults who order their lives; they may become more assertive and articulate about what they want and don't want. Several of the stories in this book capture some of those turning points as children juggle their own wishes with the demands that are made on them.



Some of the stories deal with the challenges many children have to face such as adjusting to a new school, dealing with conflict and jealousy, finding true friendship and, on occasion, accepting failure or disappointment.

The fifteen stories are very diverse. They include a night adventure of four boys which very nearly ends in disaster and the struggle of a boy to be accepted as he is and not just someone to feel sorry for. The settings vary from events at school to interactions in an apartment complex, from survival on an almost uninhabited island to a dangerous encounter with intruders at a cave temple in the middle of the night.

In terms of the socio-economic context there is less variety; and most of the stories are about, and intended for, middleclass children. There are occasional encounters that cross these lines such as Vinny's meeting with Didamma, a newspaper vendor and waste collector in 'Vinny. Control. Alt. Del' but on the whole, the stories do not confront the divides in society or attempt to cross socio-cultural boundaries in any significant way.

The stories were selected as part of a writers' competition, and it would be interesting to know what the criteria for choosing them was. While there are a few passing references to wider issues like concerns about the environment, most of the stories are more about personal situations. There is one story that is situated within a broader context as it explores how traditional ways of life are changing with 'development'. In 'Number 9' Benita Sen creates a realistic story of how a real estate dealer almost succeeds in breaking up the home of a large joint family in Kolkata. It is the narrator's father who finally outwits the greedy and unscrupulous 'wheeler dealer'. The life of a joint family is sharply and vividly observed and reported in the voice of one of the children of the family.

There are several stories that sensitize the reader to gender issues. In the story of Bini Pishi by Benita Sen, there is a tender relationship between the young girl and her unconventional widowed aunt who defies all expectations of conservative society but is welcomed into her brother's house and finds her own particular niche in the family where she is able to make her own choices. 'Before and After' is a very different story by Nandini Nayar. It is about a young girl who discovers that maturity doesn't mean dressing up in a sari but finding her voice and 'speaking up' when needed. Nisha is rudely awakened into the reality of sexual abuse but earns the whole family's respect by publicly expressing her outrage at the violence.

The stories are somewhat uneven in depth and authenticity. In 'The Jungle is Calling' the story does, ostensibly, look at the vulnerability of the Van Gujar community in the foothills of the Himalayas. The story even hints at ways of resolving the conflict between officialdom and the indigenous people but the message

gets confused by inaccuracies and unlikely, and somewhat fanciful, adventures, given the context of the Rajaji National Park.

The collection brings together a rich menu of stories that are mostly engaging and thought provoking. Determination, resilience and honesty are the dominant characteristics that the protagonists show but children are also shown overcoming their struggles with jealousy, lack of confidence and frustrations.

Inviting not only different authors but also different illustrators could have further enriched the book for young readers.

*Prize-winning entry/short stories (9-12 years) in the Competition for Children's Books organized by Children's Book Trust.



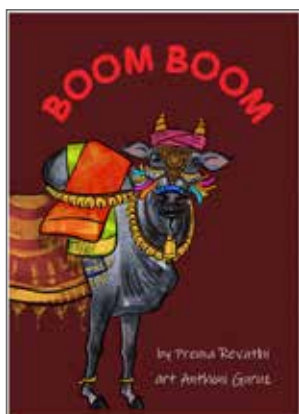
Simran Sadh

BOOM BOOM

By Prema Revathi. Illustrations by Anthony Guruz
Tulika Books, Chennai, 2022, pp. 60, ₹ 295.00

Boom Boom is the story of Sura, a young boy living with his mother in Velankanni in Nagapattinam. He spends his days selling stickers at the Velankanni Church, playing with his friends, and climbing coconut trees. His mother, like many in the community, begs at the shrine. While the family gets by each day with difficulty, their life is depicted as one of abundance and not deprivation. The story unfolds as Sura joins his Thatha who is a *Boom Boom Maaattukaarar* and his *Boom Boom Maadu*, a decorated ox on their trips to the neighbouring villages and towns. On these trips he learns about his grandfather's trade as a fortune teller, about their nomadic community and the fading traditions as modernity takes over.

When the Ox falls sick and Thatha loses hope, Sura is sent back to the village but with a newfound perspective about his community. His longing for travel takes him to Chennai where he learns more about the ways of the strange world. The detailed illustrations in the story complement the text and walk us through the characters' journeys through diverse landscapes and situations. They depict the contrast in the simple abundance of the village and the enormity of the city very well.



Stories wherein a series of challenging events lead to a transformation in the protagonist's character fall into the 'coming-of-age' genre. While Sura does end up exploring himself and his cultural identity in the story, he was never really a stranger to the harsh realities of life. The characters in the story help us understand the conflicts, challenges and dilemmas of their generation. Thatha who had lived through the practices of the community has to now see them wither away. While he is in despair, he is not cynical but instead resilient. Even though Sura's father doesn't directly appear in the story, he represents a generation, first among the others, who had to choose an alternative path for the sake of survival. Sura's Thatha has made it a point to pass on the legacy of being a *Boom Boom Mattukaarar* to him. While Sura realizes its importance for himself, he must also adapt those practices according to the contemporary times. The story gives a glimpse into the lives and values of a community which is left to fend for itself in the absence of state support but still ends on an optimistic note. The text at the end of the story is helpful in making the readers aware about the *Boom Boom Mattukaarars* in Tamil Nadu, their socio-economic condition and the existence of similar communities in the country.



Manoj Nigam*

WHO CLICKED THAT PIC?/ WOH PHOTO KISNE KHEENCHI

Both by Nandita da Cunha. Illustrations by Priya Kuriyan
Jugnoo/Ektara, Parag Trust Initiative, 2023, pp. 22 each, ₹ 100.00 each

Who clicked that pic? If there is a question in the title of the book, then there is bound to be curiosity. Today, when mobile cameras are common in most hands, older readers will be nostalgic seeing the cover, and younger readers full of regret that they did not get to see this two-lens heavy weight camera. Flipping open the cover page, you are greeted with a lot of picture frames, waiting for pictures to be put in them.

The story set in 1930s begins one morning with Mother saying 'Pari! Leave your camera and brush your teeth! Are you missing class again to take your photos?' Mother's admonition capturing the girl's passion for photography is a story inspired by the life of India's first female photojournalist Homai Vyarawalla (1913–2012), written by Nandita da Cunha and illustrated by Priya



Kuriyan to. This picture-story is originally written in English and translated in Hindi as वह फोटो किसने खींची by Sarika Thakur. Let's see Homai Vyarawalla's journey in pictures.

Pari knows that Mr. Nakhrawalla's newspaper pays ONE rupee for pictures of the festival Ganesh Chaturthi and Pari wants to earn this money to buy a new film roll. She sets out on a bicycle in search of a perfect photo with Parvez. Parvez snatches Pari's camera and takes a photo of Pari. She is dismayed that now only nine pictures instead of ten are possible in that roll. Some readers may wonder why the fuss over ONE rupee and nine out of ten photographs. You can imagine the value of a rupee 90 years ago! On Ganesh Chaturthi, the streets are merry with children, drummers, magicians, monkeys and many more interesting things. Every two-page spread in the book shows the captured images where Pari tries to compose a stunning visual and every time something unexpected happens. Every time she worries and counts how many pictures are left. Each two-page spread of the book ends with a question —Guess what I click?

Pari remembers her mother's sacrifice of selling her loom, so that she could spin her photo stories. She needs money to buy a film roll, the only hope was Mr. Nakhrawala's newspaper. She feels the pressure with only two pictures left. An empty balcony appears, is it safe to climb? She climbs up and clicks the tops of turbans, topis, drums, dhotis, tokris and dolls, but that is not an amazing photo. 9 wasted and last photo to go. BOOM there is a thunderclap. As soon as the first drops of rain fall, children start dancing with joy, everyone looks up in delight... Click! Click! Click! A sea of umbrellas open as it keeps raining.

Pari and Pavez come out of the balcony, covering the camera. The photo is sold in the name of Parvez. What would happen if Mr. Nakhrawala came to know that the photo was taken by a girl? When he sees the title 'Procession' by Parvez Mistry, he roars, 'How dare you two?' Pari confesses and explains the reason. Mr. Nakhrawala orders them to leave, 'I will decide what to do.'

Early next morning, Mama screams, 'Pareeeeeee!' Has Mr. Nakhrawala come to complain? Mother asks happily, 'Is that my Pari? On the front page, no less?' Pari also throws a punch in the air YES!! Being on the front page of *The Bombay Buzz* newspaper was a pleasant feeling. The story does not end here; this picture story weaves in clever anecdotes with the help of pictures. For example, at a time when the existence of women as professional photographers was denied, to avoid the argument of picture credit or 'Who took this photo?', Pari would quietly include Parvez in the frame!

Jugnoo, an imprint of Ektara Trust, has brought out this wonderful book for just one hundred rupees. The book has also received The Big Little Book Award for

Priya Kurian's illustrations. The spontaneity of Priya's illustrations comes from a subtle observation of the life around her, every picture is like a photo-frame, which makes the book even more special.

Bahuroopi Books have also published this book *Ee Pic Yaara Click?* translated by Rashmi S in Kannada at a price of Rs.160.00.



Vivek Singh Thakur*

TARIQ KA SOORAJ (TARIQCHA SURYA)

By Shashi Sablok. Illustrations by Tavishaa Singh

Jugnoo Prakashan, 2019, pp. 24, ₹ 110.00

Children are always Crestless and ready to go out and play, be it day or night. Tariq also wants to go out and play at night but does not have permission to do so. Then he comes up with a plan! But his plan creates a problem for the old, wise Owl. Somehow Tariq manages to solve that problem, but then the moon gets annoyed at Tariq's plan. Finally, Tariq gets a permanent fix for everyone's problems.



Tariq ka Sooraj is a wonderful book for budding readers. The story and illustrations keep the reader connected. The protagonist/main character of the story is Tariq, a child who wants to play at night, but the darkness outside stops him from doing so. While giving due space to children's feelings towards other creatures, this story clearly shows that this world is for everyone, and everyone has specific and varied roles to play in it. There is an interesting dialogue between Tariq and the Owl, where the Owl says— "I eat mice and insects. You can pull down your sun for some time." Tariq pulled down the sun with a stick.' Children will be able to see themselves in Tariq's character.

Tavishaa Singh has made beautiful illustrations with the help of water colours. Especially the illustrations on the cover page, which has darkness, the sun, shadows; in a way it is the entire story in a nutshell. There are some illustrations where the moon is hiding behind some clouds. Then on the same clouds, very beautifully, the sun has also been shown. Illustrations are very attractive and while reading the text, they hold the reader's eye. In that moment, one is able to feel the story better. A picture book of twenty-four pages, helps one to find the Tariq in oneself; it reassures and affirms that you are an indispensable part of this world.

At times, one feels that the story ends a bit abruptly.

Some more characters could have been added. Overall, *Tariq Ka Sooraj* is a good read which has the potential to become a popular story, well-enjoyed by children. In fact, a series should be published on Tariq and his stories should go on continuously.

*The review has been translated from the Hindi by Shivani Bajaj.



Tejaswi Shivanand

EDI SHIKARI

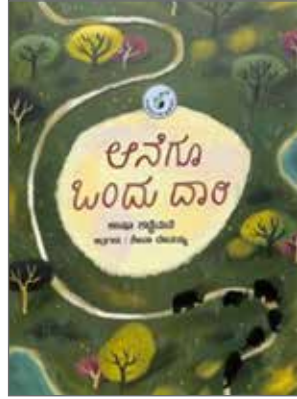
By Girish Muguthihalli. Illustrations by Pooja Mugeraya
Navakarnataka, 2023, pp.16, ₹ 50.00

ANEGONDU DAARI

By Usha Kattemane. Illustrations by Sheena Devaiah
Navakarnataka, 2023, pp. 20, ₹ 60.00

Kannada has seen a long tradition of writing for children starting with the 1845 publication of a translation of *Aesop's Fables* followed by the first book for children written originally in Kannada, a book of moral stories by MS Puttanna, the *Nitichintamani* that was published in 1884. The twentieth century was led by various prominent writers, with some like GP Rajarathnam writing almost exclusively for children while literary giants like Kuvempu (KV Puttappa) also contributed occasionally with significant pieces. In the 1970s and beyond, various other significant names emerged in this field including Anupama Niranjana, Na D'Souza, HS Venkatesh, Bolwar Mohammad Kunhi, Nagesh Hegde, Nagraj Shetty and others who extended the themes from rhymes and moral stories to a contemporary approach with tales, poetry and plays involving children's lives and landscapes being reflected in them in stories of adventure, mystery, science fiction and non-fiction related to the environment.

While illustrated books in Kannada have been part of NBT and CBT translations in the 1960s and beyond, the closest to picture books in Kannada were translations of some Russian picture books that appeared in the 1970s. The first series of picture books published in Kannada were translations available of Tulika books published in the 1990s. Since then, Tulika has continued to publish translations to which were added titles by Pratham in the 2000s. Well-known Kannada publishers such as Ankita Pustaka, Navakarnataka have also ventured into



publishing translations of picture books supported by the Parag Initiative of Tata Trusts. Yellara Pustaka, a small indie publisher, must be credited with early attempts to publish board and picture books for children in the late 2010s. However, full-fledged, high-quality picture books with original Kannada writing were virtually unheard of until the publication of *Edi Shikari* by Girish Muguthihalli and illustrated by Pooja Mugeraya, and *Anegondu Daari* by Usha Kattemane and illustrated by Sheena Devaiah.

The narrative of both books is set in the rural, monsoon-drenched landscape of the Malnad of Karnataka, a region known for its rain, hills, lush vegetation and productive farmland. *Edi Shikari* opens with a description of the location, and we are introduced to the protagonist, a boy named Chinkra, his dwelling and life. The story is told in third person but with a sensitivity to Chinkra's ways of engaging with the world and his responses to it. The main plot follows Chinkra, and his father hunting crabs in paddy fields. There is a detailed description of different types of crabs, their habits and habitats, and the process of hunting them is gone into with a sense of lightness and humour. Chinkra is depicted as being empathetic to the crab's loss of life and limb while being curious and attentive to the details of the hunt. This observation reflects deep insight on the part of the author, who appears to instinctively know and inhabit a child's mind with ease.

Anegondu Daari tackles human-elephant conflict with a young girl, Shalini, encountering elephants on her grandparents' farm on the edge of a forest. The story begins with contrasting images of Shalini's life in grey and brown of Bangalore and the green and blue of the Western Ghats. It progresses to touch upon the dynamic nature of human presence in the Western Ghats ranging from a scene where the girl observes protesters against dam building to her direct meeting with elephants. The entire attempt of the story is to encourage coexistence over conflict. Shalini helplessly but perceptively states that she doesn't have a solution to the repeated incursions by elephants but urges the adults to recognize the old pathways of elephant movement that pre-date cultivation in that location. The story is very visual, but conversation plays an equally important role in taking it forward.

The illustrations by Pooja Mugeraya in *Edi Shikari* and Sheena Devaiah in *Anegondu Daari* capture the flavour of the landscape, and the essence of the stories in great detail. In *Edi Shikari*, the rich tones used to bring the monsoon skies, flooded fields, crabs as well as the emotions on the faces of the various figures are the highlights of Mugeraya's style. The ability to select the right elements of the scene to not only bring the writing to life but also do a parallel storytelling mark her approach to illustrating this story. No detail escapes her: from the house located in a vast, variegated, green and blue landscape, each



individual Mimosa flower that Chinkra plays with, the details of clothing the characters wear, the perspective of being inside a crab hole looking out, to the details of utensils in the kitchen, each page

is rich and stands out to tell the story. Even in a story where hunting is involved, and described, the illustrations do not highlight any scene involving violence. Devaiah's approach in *Anegondu Daari* with its slightly dreamy effect, is very effective in bringing out the landscape in the hills of the Western Ghats.

Considered together, the two books present the many complex shades of lived experiences in rural areas. *Edi Shikari* is a story where rural children can see themselves; their homes, their food, their language and their games, all find a place in the published book. The author has avoided falling into the trap of using this book as a space to teach language and has stuck to the language of a specific rural dialect while retaining simplicity in word usage for children. This makes for a refreshing change from writing for children that can be stilted or excessively formal. While wordplay in poetry (especially rhymes and even otherwise) and some prose can involve long words, there is often a notion prevailing that stories are primarily a vehicle to teach language. Stories should first be good tales that engage, entertain and cogitate, language will be learnt in the process.

Writers, particularly those from rural and marginalized backgrounds, should come forward with more such books in Kannada, illustrated by good artists who can imagine and support the process of co-creating the final picture book. Publishers should not hesitate to publish such stories anymore. If there is a fear of the lack of market, then they must remember that there are active, revitalized libraries in every gram panchayat in Karnataka. They run into thousands and can house these books. Thus, the books can potentially reach millions of children living in these landscapes who are waiting to see and hear themselves in stories written for them. There are teachers and parents in these rural and smaller urban centres who will appreciate these books for their worth. It might need a generation of investment in this area which has shrunk over the years, citing the cost of producing books in colour. It is commendable that Navakarnataka is stepping forward here to publish this book, joining Ankita Pustaka and Yellara Pustaka who have published in the past and others like Bahuroopi who are waiting in the wings to publish picture books in colour for children. I would say to all the writers, illustrators and publishers: join in this journey.

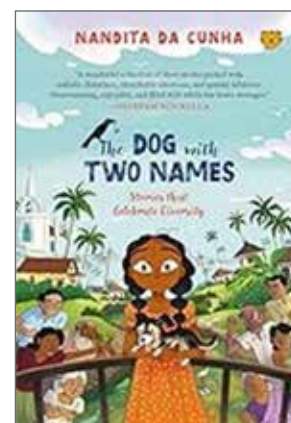
Parul Bajaj

THE DOG WITH TWO NAMES

By Nandita Da Cunha

Talking Cub, an imprint of Speaking Tiger, 2023, pp. 195, ₹ 299.00

While Nandita's short stories have been published in collections like Talking Cub's *Dance, Nani, Dance*, this is a first book which is entirely a collection of her short stories. Her previous children's books include *The Miracle on Sunderbaag Street*, *Pedru and the Big Boom*, *Who Clicked that Pic*, *My Trip to La La Land*, and *Just Like Papa*.



Her earlier books have won recognition, and she is often at schools and literature festivals engaging children in sessions around her books. This book is a collection of twelve short stories, as the byline to the title says, that celebrate diversity. Publisher's classification tags it as a fiction book for middle grade readers and ages 9+. The main characters in each story are of similar age too. Stories are 8-14 pages each with appropriate titles. Illustrations are minimalist in line with being a chapter book. Each story's cover page has a small illustration representing something key to the story. Illustration of the cover page brings alive the story titled 'The Dog with Two Names'.

The book lives up to being a collection of stories that 'celebrate diversity' and does it well. The story 'Uniformity in Uniforms' is a good example of the same. No wonder it was a story Nandita chose in a session she did to engage children with the book at the Neev Literature Festival 2023. The story is about the efforts of two school-going girls and best friends, Naisha and Ayesha, to fight in their own ways, against the uniformity being enforced by the new school Principal Miss Bhoopalan. What finally wins over Miss Bhoopalan is the response they initiate and catalyse the new weekly project in art class 'Uniformity in Art'. The teacher's call for standardized thumbkins is responded by many students with thumbkins that are uniquely each child's, and this celebration of diversity wins over uniformity.

The outlook in the stories is of hope and belief in a world that is made more beautiful because of our diversity, there is interest in the other and respect for the other, and yet joy and pride in who one is. The characters in the stories embody these qualities. And, yet the treatment is very subtle. The qualities are felt and not told. The challenges are acknowledged too, and there is a process of discovery that unfolds in the stories. The



three boys in 'The Three S's' are of different religions and inhabit a society where these differences make the lives richer and coexist harmoniously, and it is a story about the falling apart and coming together that characterize deep friendships, especially in school years of any kind, including this. In the story 'The Nose Knows' one gets to know intimately the world that Moin lives in—a cluster of shanties—and also journey with him in his changing perceptions about his world as he encounters how children who come from much affluent settings experience it. In the story 'Of Salaams and a Slap', the reader enters the world of a child on the other side. Though the two stories have their own characters and plots, the humanness of children on both sides is brought out in a very natural way through good storytelling.

Even though all stories are by the same author, there is enough variation from one story to the other. The variation is not only in the characters and plots, but also in the writing style. The start of some stories takes a little more effort for the reader to enter into the new story, and that is something on the craft that author can work on. Each story told from the perspectives of the particular child or children takes on the language and tone that define their unique characters. The other strength of the stories lies in being very relatable in urban Indian contexts and shows how children think and function. The book is a useful addition to home and school libraries especially as well written stories for children that celebrate diversity are much needed in the world we live in today.



Saakshi Joshi

AFO AND I

By Canato Jimo

Pratham Books, 2023, pp. 20, ₹ 80.00

'Things are changing...'

These words from the book offer a beautiful summary of the story that is *Afo and I*. At its heart is Vinoka and Afo's sibling relationship. Jimo superimposes Vinoka's feelings about his sister Afo moving away with changes happening in their landscape. This becomes an entry point for readers to explore migration, habitat alteration, and the idea of home. The story progresses as Vinoka navigates fears linked to changes in his life, and how he makes peace with these changes.

From the start, Vinoka's feelings rub off on us too. There is hurry. There is fear. There is worry. Jimo creates this impact with the speed of his words. They are short and crisp. They help us leap into the next page. Vinoka's worries and anxieties give way to possibilities as the story builds up—writing letters, travelling to meet Afo.

Although physical distances are increasing, the siblings can stay connected. So, there are ways to live with changes. For Vinoka, for the reader.

A non-linear narrative form adds to the story's pace. Grasping different feelings, there is much back and forth for Vinoka. There is a present—Vinoka taking a short cut to reach Afo. There is a past flashback of the siblings engaged in different activities together. There are moments of rhetoric—Will Afo miss Vinoka? What is a city like? And towards the end is a hint at the future—Afo will miss Vinoka. For those learning to read, a non-linear narrative can be unfamiliar territory. Especially if one is familiar only with linear, start-to-end forward moving stories.

Jimo's illustrations link the personal changes in Vinoka's family to the macro changes in their landscape. Sometimes, when the text is referring to Vinoka's feelings about his sister moving away, the illustration shows an altered landscape as a background to this text. Thus, the illustrations nuance the words, adding layers of meanings. Jimo utilizes contrast effectively to depict difference or change. For instance, skyscrapers towering over pointy, leafless trees. The sharp lines of these elements add to the mood of unpredictability as Vinoka tries to imagine what a city is like. Turning the page, we find Vinoka standing under the green shade of a tree, near its big bark. He is overlooking a settlement of houses on rolling hills. The imagery is softer, not pointy. It shows a landscape which is familiar to Vinoka. A cushioning against the changes he is grappling with.

Afo and I is a heartfelt read about siblings; about a small child experiencing big transitions. Through the themes of migration to the city and cutting of trees, change is shown as voluntary or forced. Yet, one can find ways to persevere. The book closes with Vinoka finding acceptance amidst the changes. And the readers get a name for Vinoka's unsettled feeling—'miss'.



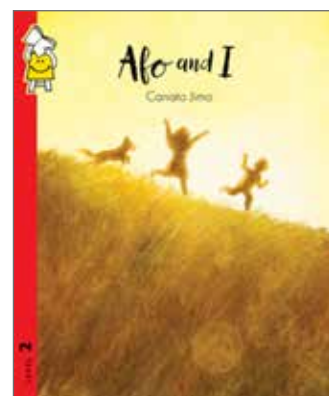
Deepali Shukla

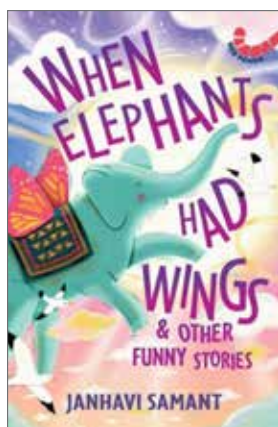
WHEN ELEPHANTS HAD WINGS & OTHER FUNNY STORIES

By Janhavi Samant. Illustrations by Nirzara Verulkar

Red Panda/Westland, 2023, pp. 130, ₹ 250.00

It is indeed a special feature of stories that they travel, continuously; passed on from one generation to the next. With time and with the tellers, each story gets a





new addition to it, appearing more and more relatable to the listeners. This is particularly true in the case of folk stories, which many times appear familiar to us, despite having heard that particular story for the first time. In this book, Janhavi Samant has compiled a selection of stories that she was told as a child.

‘When Elephants had Wings’ narrates a legend. It is

a simple and crisply narrated story of the troubles caused by elephants’ wings and the ploy that follows to take the wings’ away. It also has a tint of morality.

As the title explains, ‘The Girl who Hated Farts’ is a story about a still tabooed yet quite natural process of farting. The story attempts to convey the latter part through the plot. Kittu, the protagonist, loves her family and has a particular hate for farts. In the course of the hate, what she decides puts her family in worry. This story is full of familiar sounds. The young readers will enjoy the story and it also has a scope for discussion. It reminded me of an anecdote shared by a friend. My friend farts frequently, and their daughter once said, ‘Papa, you fill the whole house with the smell. Please fart outside.’ This anecdote relates to Kittu’s experiences in the story.

‘The Boy who knew No Fear’ is a story of Abhay, who doesn’t fear anything. The story revolves around how this somehow distances him from his family and peers. I realized once again, how the surroundings play a role in shaping a child’s personality. The story also attempts to break stereotypes. But what made me wonder is: why is it always a mother’s job to show her child the ‘right path’?

‘When the Beaches had Flour, Not Sand’ is a story based in the southern part of India, on the theme of human greed and exploitation of resources. Murugappa and the other villagers are left with no option but to manage food on their own. The story comments on the nature-human relationship and on the potential risk of food shortage in the near future. Besides, the story also reminded me of a folktale on ‘Why the Oceans are Salty’.

‘The Giant Pumpkin’ is quite an imaginative story. The protagonist and a daydreamer Ganya and his wife weave a rather creative yearning about a hefty pumpkin. Pumpkins have been one of the neglected vegetables and the story indeed further validates the same. The way of re-telling is quite interesting; how in folktales, there’s always that one wise individual who puts the misery to end; there’s someone in this story as well. The story reminds me of *Man ke Laddoo* published by Eklavya.

‘A Tale of Two Siblings’ personifies the sun and the moon, weaving a story revolving around both. However, there’s nothing fresh that the story has to offer and is

less interesting as compared to the other stories from the collection.

Some of the stories in the collection are about individuals with big hearts and wisdom. For example, ‘Eashwaran’s Generosity’ and ‘The Wise Man who Refused to Lie’. The first one is about how Eashwaran’s wife saves the food and the latter one is about how the eager king fails to make Farooq lie. The queen stands by Farooq the whole time.

The stories such as ‘Lord Ram and the Little Squirrel’, ‘When the Moon Called Lord Ganesha Fat’, ‘The Boy who Saved the Moon from Drowning’, have been re-told on many occasions and there’s a lot written about them too.

There are some stories of courage and struggle, one of which is ‘The Legend of the Brahma Rakshasa’. It narrates how Dadi and Shambhu save the village. This is a traditional story. One may also need to see the connotations of the word Rakshasa in the story. For whom are words such as Rakshasa and Danavas used is the question to ask. The said folk story offers a space to reflect upon this. Another story, ‘The Dragonfly Army’ narrates a conflict between dragonflies and monkeys, bringing out many crucial issues to think about.

Some of the stories expose human foolishness. There are quite a few folk stories in this book narrating such accounts, such as ‘The Three Wasted Wishes’, ‘The Seven Silly Brothers’, ‘Two Stupid Brothers’ and ‘The Man who was Too Proud of His Beard’.

While re-telling these stories, Janhavi has added to the flow to the stories, with her own quite creative writing style. The illustrations help the readers better comprehend the stories.



Andal Jagannathan

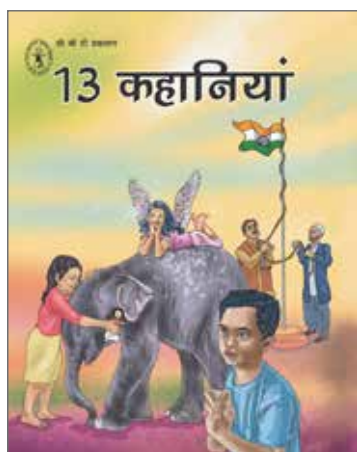
13 KAHANIYAN

Edited by Kusumlata Singh. Illustrations by Ashok Kumar Sen
Children’s Book Trust, 2023, pp. 128, ₹ 170.00

13 *Kahaniyan* is an enriching compilation of 13 stories in Hindi, each carrying valuable lessons, meticulously curated and edited by Kusumlata Singh and published by the Children’s Book Trust. Within this literary treasure-trove, the stories paint a vivid picture of diverse societal issues and human experiences.

In Manjari Shukla’s story, ‘Bhola’, readers are confronted with the heart-wrenching reality of children unable to pursue education due to their lack of resources. This narrative underscores the pressing issue of educational inequality.

Asha Sharma’s ‘*Adhunik Yug Ka Eklavya*’ immerses



readers in the world of an Adivasi Bhil village, shedding light on the dearth of educational facilities in marginalized areas, and emphasizing the need for equitable access to education.

Md. Arshad Khan's '*Sachchi Raah*' weaves a tale of a young boy whose judicious use of water initially brings him

ridicule from his peers but later gets him admiration. This story underscores the significance of responsible resource management.

'*Jab Jaago Tab Hi Savera*' by Rajesh Ahuja addresses the theme of wasteful expenditure, encouraging readers to reflect on their spending habits and the importance of financial prudence.

Shatabdi Garima's '*Ambar Aur Rinki*' ventures into a subject often shunned—child sexual abuse, revealing how perpetrators are frequently individuals known to the child and family. This narrative is a poignant call to address and combat this grave issue.

Dinesh Pathak's '*Atma Vishwas Ki Jeet*', Neelam Rakesh's '*Dard Ke Paar*', and Suryalata Jaiswal's '*Yeh Duniya Hamari Hogi*' offer heartwarming motivational stories in which injured children summon their inner strength to overcome adversities. These tales serve as inspiring reminders of resilience and the indomitable human spirit.

Sanjeev Jaiswal's '*Main Phir Aaongi*' introduces a touch of magic and fairies to spotlight the dire consequences of environmental pollution on Earth, emphasizing the pressing need for awareness and conservation.

Amitabh Shankar Roy Chaudhary's '*Chayanat*' delves into the struggles faced by farmers, revealing the challenges of agricultural life and highlighting the importance of supporting rural communities.

Sudha Puri's '*Khel-lila*' is a different flavour with its tale of fasting and feasting. The story also narrates an incident from Mahatma Gandhi's life, about how he fasted in jail.

The book culminates with the tale of 'Bholu' by Madhulika Agarwal, an enthralling narrative centered around a baby elephant separated from its mother. This story illustrates the resilience of life as humans must force-feed the young elephant to ensure its survival, serving as a symbol of hope in the face of adversity.

13 Kahaaaniyan is a diverse and thought-provoking collection of stories that encapsulate a wide range of human experiences, from the pressing issues of education and child abuse to the power of resilience and

the importance of environmental consciousness. Each narrative encourages readers to contemplate the lessons within and inspires them to engage with the world more compassionately and consciously.



Shubhra Seth

LALTU SE GUPSHUP

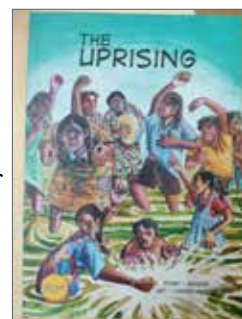
Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, 2023, pp. 23, ₹ 55.00

TUNTUNI

Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, 2023, pp. 22, ₹ 55.00

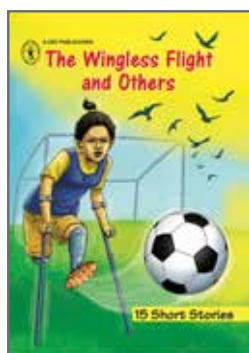
THE UPRISING

Muskan, Madhya Pradesh, pp. 31, ₹ 200.00



The three books strung together can be read in continuation with one another. *Laltu Se Gupshup* has curious questions and observations of children yet to touch their teens, their little world cocooned around parents and their interactions to the sun, moon and the stars. *Tuntuni* and *The Uprising* deal with simple yet important issues of our everyday lives. Both in their unique way represent the strength of a collective and power of reasoning. These three books offer a sense of joyous learning and young readers can also make some small notes from it for their long journeys ahead.

Conversations with children are like vibgyor, each colour mingling into the other. Similarly *Laltu se Gupshup* is a melange of themes that surround young minds as they carefully observe and absorb from their surroundings. The conversations between Laltu Senior (the author) and Laltu Junior range from emotions to dreams to understanding routine realities. Laltu Junior finds a patient friend in Laltu Senior who gives him time and indulges in conversations with the child. This underlines two essential traits when interacting with children, patience and empathy. The author delves into sensitive themes like penning down emotions and allowing alphabets to speak with the readers. The cyclical process in this universe of construction, destruction and then reconstruction are talked about in the story '*toda tabhi toh joda*'. How a child observes the role played by his parents when he



his journey as a satirist, in a weekly publishing political humour, specially making fun of politicians and public men. The Trust has been inculcating the habit of reading amongst children and young adults for seven decades now. The books have also travelled to places in various exhibitions through the National Book Trust.

The CBT takes the entries through a national-level story-writing competition suited to different categories of age groups, with the themes of Indian culture, heritage, and morality, as has been done for this book. Navigating through fifteen stories of the hard-bound book, one could travel through the different corners of India from the interesting names of the characters to the inclusion of peculiar topographies in the book. This golden set of anthology has stories by multiple authors and interestingly most of them include regional culinary traditions with authentic names like *ulundu kali*, *masala vadai*, *bisi bele bath*, *saaru* and *palya*. The book is a beautiful adventure through the lifestyles of the fisher community of Chennai to the weaver community of the Brahmaputra.

As Shankar envisioned storytelling through cartoons, following the tradition this volume too supplements a page-long colourful illustration for each story by Saurabh Pandey. The fiction collection includes information on government initiatives like the Night Shelter project for the deprived, Corporate Social Responsibility, work on the state of art technologies, and the function of capital generation for NGOs. These details can act as a catalyst for young minds to find interesting ideas to embark on an expedition of their own.

The book follows the tradition of didacticism but lacks the genre of humour which children's literature ideally should also be endowed with. Stories like 'How the Stories were Saved' come to aid by employing sterling creativity in fiction and tell a tale of story-telling through an occult character 'Kahani Khaa'. This story brings pure joy to the readers, while others tap on moral underpinnings about matters like firecrackers burning, ecosystem conservation, and courage in the grimmest of times. The book also explores serious themes like militancy through the lens of a young girl who loses her limb in a mine blast, a story which also forms the title of the book. These issues are political in nature and an incomplete context of the militancy can raise a thousand questions in young minds which remain unanswered in the story. 'The Rival Kings' takes the readers back to the era of Janapadas where the rivalry between the empires of Avanti and Kaushambi gets resolved through a mutual thread.

'Three on a Track', a story about three friends,

celebrates friendships, mourns the transience of childhood and paves the way for the future amidst penury. This story reminds me of Stephen King's novella *The Body*, from his *Different Seasons* collection, the most commemorated cinematic adaptation of which is 'Stand by Me' by Rob Reiner.

When I was a kid, I read a story that dealt with the insecurities of a young girl, until she sits down and engages with her emotions in depth rather than escaping them. I remember how deeply I could relate to the anxieties of the protagonist and how beautifully the text wired the emotions in a few pages. This is the influence a narration could leave on the tabula rasa of a young mind. Children's literature does not need to be always informative in an academic sense but a lot can be learned from the dilemmas, experiences, and existential contemplations of the characters.

The volume is for children between the age group of 9-12, and that is the time they start observing the human emotions of adults around them. For instance, 'Breakfast at the Waffle Place', most ordinary in its setting and pace, engages with the compound sentiments around separation. Through its subtleties and nuances set in a waffle place, the child protagonist collects the pieces of a withering marriage wrapped in the acrimonious conversation of his parents. The story does not give readers a definitive clincher but ends when Amma turns back and looks at the façade of the Waffle place saying 'This might remain, somehow, you know.'

In terms of technicalities, the volume lacks story titles as the running heads in the interior pages which even in a children's book are essential to orient readers. In a few stories, at places, the position of the narrator switches between the first and the third person. Barring these minute incongruities, the volume serves its reader with all that is expected from an edition of Children's Book Trust publication.



Ira Saxena

UPAR KE GAON KA RAHASYA

By Neha Bahuguna. Illustrations by Susrata Paul
Jugnool/Ektara Trust, 2023, pp. 70, ₹ 200.00

Here is an interesting title capturing all the necessary elements that evoke interest to pick a book to

Read: mystery, wonder and mention of a strange unique place, the *Uparwale Gaon*. The author has not only succeeded in arousing interest through the title, but she also manages to sustain it throughout.

It is a realistic story, presenting the scenery and the characters in their true perspective. The setting of the story in the hills chooses to focus on the event of Ramlila,



a prominent occasion in the hilly region. In small villages around the hills, Ramlila is a much-celebrated event where the local population participates with great interest. In the rural countryside in the hills where everyone knows everyone, Ramlila is a great social happening. During the festivity people look forward to the drama every evening, particularly, meeting the locals, people from neighbouring hamlets, and later discussing the function over months. The author has selected the location appropriately where the characters seem to blend into the background performing their role naturally, true to expectations.

Little Gopika assumes significance through raising the question of skipping the arduous journey to enjoy the drama of Ramayana in the further village on the

higher plateau by holding Ramlila in their own village. Thus begins the inquiry into the existing practice of the distant location and searching into the mystery of the current fixed spot for Ramlila festivities. Both Minnie and Gopika, called Gopu for short, run up and down the connected hamlets in the hills, investigating. Interesting characters like the police daroga, schoolteacher, old Dadi of the village, local priest, a roving wanderer, typically the common hill folks, appear from different corners sparking the mystery. The characters are down to earth and solutions simplistic. A fine story in an unusual background.

The tale moves on interestingly capturing the scenery, which could have been elaborated further to enhance the beauty of the scene—hilly tracks, and habitat. Some more polish to the text would have benefitted the natural charm of the plot and characters which fit naturally in the setting.

Anjana Neira Dev

For Beginners



HELLO, SUN!

Written and illustrated by Rajiv Eipe
Pratham Books Level 1, Bengaluru,
2022, ₹ 75.00

barbets and spiders, wildflowers and tailor birds. No leaf is left unturned, and no corner forgotten and as evening turns to dusk and the boy goes home, the day has been well spent. It was William Blake who reminded us that if we look carefully enough, it is possible to see 'a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower'; and this book does just that.

This joyful little book by Rajiv Eipe is the perfect way for a young reader to enter the magical universe of books and reading, by being transported into a world seen from the wonder-filled eyes of a little boy. Each page is delicately illustrated with just enough detail to make it fascinating. The alliterative and code-mixed vocabulary with a generous sprinkling of onomatopoeia, is carefully chosen so that a Level 1 reader can enjoy the sounds of the words and make sense of most of them. I can visualize the wide-eyed attention with which the young reader would listen to the story being read out and perhaps put a grubby finger on each new magical fellow creature of our world, as it is introduced on each page. The skies are just clearing after a shower of rain and as the leaves shake off the last of the raindrops, a little boy bursts upon the scene, and jumps straight into an irresistible puddle. From here begins the exploration of the wonderland just outside his front door and we are introduced to all the citizens of this natural paradise, from slugs and snails to

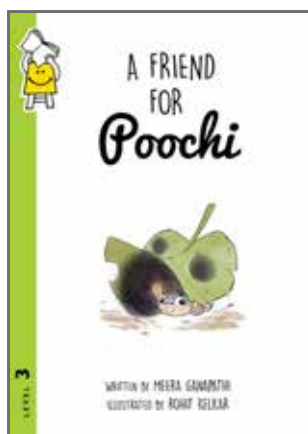


PLASTO

Written and illustrated by Aithihya
Pratham Books Level 2, Bengaluru,
2023, ₹ 70.00

of reversing this damage can be. Aithihya has chosen well to use only the power of images to tell her story and hopefully convert all the readers of the book into eco-advocates who will save the planet from the evil monster thoughtless human beings have created.

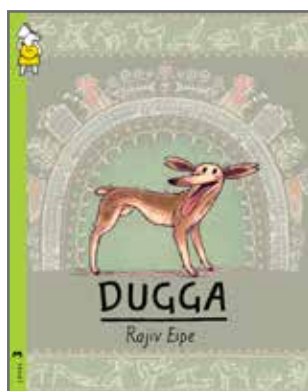
Aithihya's abstract art amply illustrates the theme and intent of this little 'wordless' book as the young reader is shown rather than told, about the monstrous impact of all the plastic we so thoughtlessly litter our world with. The Cyclops-like creature is the eponymous Plasto who devours our waste with voracious delight and assumes awesome proportions as its gluttony finds enough to satisfy it. Very soon the monster becomes bigger than the human beings on the page and turns into a real threat as it dominates the landscape and takes over. Since this is a book for young readers, the dystopian images are effectively balanced with a solution, the eco-warriors who valiantly cut the monster down to size as they reuse, reduce and recycle, and segregate the waste into manageable proportions. The devil is in the detail and this book demands that each page be 'read' carefully for the images are the text. The speed with which the monster grows is a timely warning and the carefully drawn panels on the closing pages, a clear reminder of how laborious the process



A FRIEND FOR POOCHI

By Meera Ganapathi.
Illustrations by Rohit Kelkar
Pratham Books Level 3,
Bengaluru, 2021, ₹ 90.00

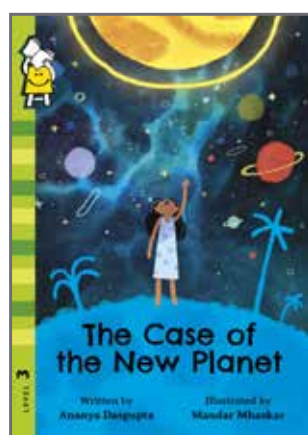
Meera Ganapathi's text and Rohit Kelkar's illustrations that complement it make this book a sensitive intervention about the importance of love and understanding in everyone's life, especially someone who is visibly 'different' and suffers for it. This is the story of Poochi, a hairy, six-eyed creature, and a sentient being conscious of the trauma of being shunned by all who saw it. This continuous rejection makes the little creature very lonely and sad. So impactful is the personification of Poochi, that very early on, the reader is moved by its plight and shares in its sadness when neither the busy ants, nor the shy snail, nor the rowdy mosquitoes and not even the wasps, respond to his overtures of friendship. Each of these creatures is cleverly introduced to the young reader not only through the verisimilitude of their portraiture but also by giving each of them distinct and memorable personalities. The first person whom Poochi meets who does not sneer or squirm when she sees him is a little girl's grandmother who tells her that 'Poochis are a gardener's best friend'. It is she who gives Poochi a place to belong to, a large, damp and stinky compost pit, and a whole host of jocund company. This book is a gentle reminder that the world is full of Poochis who only need someone to love and appreciate them for what they are, and I am sure that this theme will resonate with all young readers struggling to feel at home in the world which can sometimes be a difficult place to adjust to.



DUGGA

Written and illustrated by
Rajiv Eipe
Pratham Books Level 3,
Bengaluru, 2021, ₹ 65.00

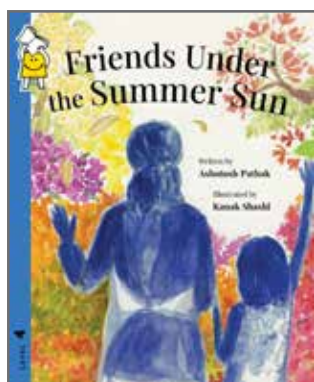
As I opened the first page of this moving story by Rajiv Eipe, I found so much to absorb my attention that I spent a happy time weaving stories around the urban landscape and the minutiae that filled it with life. In the midst of all this busyness is our hero, Dugga, whose adorable expression and lifelike antics make him come alive and I joined him on his adventures, as I am sure the reader will be compelled to. Each frame of this graphic narrative is so vivid that words are rendered redundant, and the images carry the story forward effortlessly. The other advantage of this 'wordless' book is that the readers can give free rein to their imagination and animate the story as their fancy takes them. Day follows happy day as Dugga goes about his doggy business with never a care in the world, until he decides to chase a particularly pesky insect, as dogs seem hard-wired to do, and then disaster strikes. The poor creature is badly hurt by a careless car and lies writhing in pain until a good Samaritan comes to his rescue. It is her care and creative rehabilitation that give Dugga a new lease of life, a home and a second chance at life and happiness. There are many Duggas out there and this book will remind us to keep a kindly eye on them and in the process find a friend for life.



THE CASE OF THE NEW PLANET

By Ananya Dasgupta.
Illustrations by Mandar Mhaskar
Pratham Books Level 3,
Bengaluru, 2023, ₹ 85.00

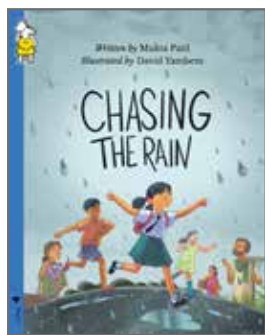
As soon as you read the title, you know there is adventure and a mystery to look forward to and that is a made to order recipe for a delightful reading experience. Ananya Dasgupta's story and Mandar Mhaskar's illustrations segue to make this a story that you almost wish was not fiction. A clever trick is the fun that the typesetter has had with the fonts, as they fluctuate in tandem with Anvi's adrenalin, when she spots a spaceship in her backyard! We all know the adage about curiosity, but our intrepid explorer is undeterred by any such thoughts and steps right into the spaceship and travels with the aliens, bald red blobs with three eyes and two noses, to their home. Of course, it is her best friend (and not some sceptical adults) whom she shares the details of her nocturnal adventures with and gets to know that she probably visited the exoplanet Proxima Centauri B. This book made me want to immediately look up all I could find about the Solar System, speculate about the possibility of a world beyond it and imagine it peopled by aliens who are as curious about our world as we are about theirs. The blurb labels this as a High-Low book for older readers who want to increase their reading fluency and with such an engaging story, that is bound to be the happy outcome, especially since there is enough fiction in the science to make it interesting and enough science in the fiction to stimulate the reader's imagination and curiosity.



FRIENDS UNDER THE SUMMER SUN

By Ashutosh Pathak.
Illustrations by Kanak Shashi
Pratham Books Level 4,
Bengaluru, 2019, ₹ 75.00

How do you tell a story about a person whose identity has been the subject of prejudice and stereotyping for generations of ignorance and narrow-minded bigotry? You do so by making a trans character a friend, who is comfortable in her skin and negotiates questions about whether she is a boy or a girl, with unselfconscious ease. Nimmi is frustrated and sulky because she cannot go out and enjoy the fleeting joys of summer with her friends and instead must help her mother with the household chores and the care of her one-month-old brother, Momo. In many ways this is a coming-of-age story and as Nimmi carries twelve white eggs to Akka's Cakes and Bakes, she meets Shri the young baker and learns about the joys of taking something you love and giving it a shape, the most evocative description of baking I have ever come across. From Shri, with her enviable collection of shoes and nails painted in all the colours of summer, Nimmi learns how insignificant gender binaries are in the larger scheme of things and with her, she bakes an un-birthday cake, that is summer personified with all its smells and rainbow hues. As Shri had promised 'the things you love never go away', even after the seasons change, as this is a memory that Nimmi will carry with her for life. Ashutosh Pathak and Kanak Shashi have put together a story that carries an important message, with a touch that is as delicate as the summer breeze, redolent with joy and immutable treasures.



CHASING THE RAIN

By Mukta Patil.
Illustrated by David Yamben
Pratham Books Level 4,
Bengaluru, 2022,
₹ 90.00

This is a story of real heroes and heroines, those 'incredible people' working across the length and breadth of India to help us decode the monsoon in all its shape shifting avatars. These are the scientists, atmospheric physicists, statisticians, meteorologists, academics, researchers, farmers, members of civil society and indigenous communities, who have joined hands to make the monsoon a time of joy and thanksgiving once again, as it traditionally was, and not something to dread, as floods alternate with droughts and devastate lives and livelihoods. This well-researched and interesting story brings home to us in compelling ways, the impact of climate change on our beautiful planet, the only home we have. If the first part of the story deals with the vagaries of the monsoon and its deleterious impact on our lives and is a doomsday prophecy of the bleak future of the natural world if we do not mend our ways, the second brings a ray of hope as we are told about initiatives being taken to cope with climate change and adapt to the changing patterns of the cycles of nature. The book ends with the hope that we can once again dance with joy when the first drops of rain fall on the parched earth and look up at the sky with relief and profound gratitude and thankfulness. Mukta Patil and David Yamben have given young readers hope, inspiration and a direction, as they prepare to make the world a happier place where nature once again becomes a benevolent friend and not an enemy to fear.



Shazia Salam



CHHAPAAK!!! (A BIG SPLASH)

By Niveda Ganesh. Translated by Nidhi Saxena. Cover design by Tanvi Parulkar. Edited by Seema & Bharat Tripathi
Karadi Tales, 2022, pp. 76,
₹ 80.00

Lives of children in rural parts of Tamil Nadu are beautifully captured in five short story books originally published in English by Karadi Tales Company. The stories under review are the translations published by Eklavya Foundation. A collection of thought-provoking tales aimed to educate children, inculcate sensitivity in them, help them shed prejudice and learn good life lessons at an early age. It is an earnest attempt to highlight the struggles and lives of the marginalized people of rural India and give them a

voice.

Chhapaak is an insightful tale of a determined young girl who, despite being differently abled reaches for the stars with unwavering determination. It imparts valuable lessons about courage to dream, and making and preserving friendships with love and empathy.

Since the age of four, Dhivya had been a constant presence in the water, spending her days swimming in the nearby lake close to her home. She revels in swimming but forming friendships proves to be a challenge in her life. Her fiery temper often leads to disputes and alienates her from other children in the village. She is never accepted in their play group. Dhivya's life takes a turn when she meets Ramu who advises her to take part in competitive swimming. She seizes this opportunity, embarking on a new journey in her life—from someone who loved swimming for fun to a determined competitor.

A regrettable incident one day leads to a heated falling out with her friend Ambika, with Dhivya speaking hurtful words in a fit of anger. Once again, Dhivya finds herself without a cherished friend. It is her encounter with people like Ambika who make her learn important life lessons that change her perspective and her ways of dealing with people.



ASAADHARAN GHAR (HOUSE OF UNCOMMONS)

By Vishakha George.
Translated by Sushil Joshi.
Edited by Seema & Bharat Tripathi. Cover design by Tanvi Parulkar

Karadi Tales, 2022, pp.100,
₹ 100.00

Asaadharan Ghar is a sensitive tale of resilience, hope and optimism, portraying the journey of young individuals living with HIV as they strive for a normal life. The story revolves around Krishnan, a teenager from Chincholi village in Karnataka, who is reluctantly on his way to Snehaga, also known as the 'Village of Love', located in the Krishnagiri District of Tamil Nadu. Krishnan is puzzled about why his uncle had brought him to the village, leaving his home behind, carrying only a few clothes and his late mother's cherished blue sari as a keepsake.

Snehaga serves as a safe place for children who are HIV+ and face social stigma. After a few days there, Krishnan quickly forms close friendships and finds his interest in sports. He discovers his passion for running, initially challenging but gradually improving with consistent practice. His sports teacher, Coach Rohan, recognizes Krishnan's commitment and sees his potential as a marathon runner. He gives him hope and a purpose.

At Snehaga, students are introduced to a parliamentary system where the concept of working in an organized and responsible manner is fostered in them. They deliver speeches and take charge to manage their education, health and order at the school. Krishnan enjoys his role and takes great pride in how he and his friends are gradually coming to recognize their ability to work for themselves. These children uplift each other to lead the lives that society outside denies them.

Asaadharan Ghar dispels misconceptions about HIV. The story underscores the significance of understanding and empathy when dealing with HIV+ individuals, reminding us that our ignorance and prejudice against such people is a social malaise.



PHIR SE GHAR KI AUR (COMING HOME)

By Preeti David. Translated by Lokesh Malti Prakash. Edited by Seema and Bharat Tripathi
Karadi Tales, 2022, pp. 63,
₹ 70.00

All published by Eklavya.

Phir se Ghar ki Aur tells a story about the power of ideas. This is a tale of imaginative children who come together to turn their dream of building a new school into reality. In the process, they also create job opportunities for the youth of their Adivasi community and help the community imagine a better future.

Selva attends the village school where there is only one teacher who does not come regularly to school. In his absence it is often the older students who take on the responsibility to teach the younger students. After school, Selva and other children visit Thulir, a two-room after-school activity centre in Sittilingi village. Thulir serves as a space where children engage in various activities such as playing in a sandpit, solving puzzles, reading from an extensive library and gardening.

One afternoon, during a discussion with other children about building a new room at Thulir, Selva surprises everyone by suggesting that they should build their own school. His idea sparks the movement to establish a new school in Sittilingi. All the students get together and by using locally sourced, eco-friendly materials they start constructing the school. Once done the other educated ones from the village conduct workshops for youth and school dropouts to acquire skills. Thus, a transformation begins. The school becomes an example of how meaningful conversations lead to effective change.

Phir se Ghar ki Aur is a story of dreams and the determination to work towards them. It is the story of how small steps lead to big changes.



SAYANI NANDINI (NO NONSENSE NANDINI)

By Aparna Kartikeyan. Translated by Arpita Vyas. Cover design by Tanvi Parulkar. Edited by Seema & Bharat Tripathi
Karadi Tales, 2022, pp. 84,
₹ 90.00

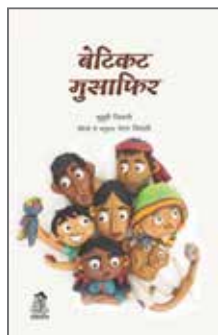
Sayani Nandini is a heartwarming story of courage and hope. We are introduced to Nandini, who resides with her parents, siblings, and her supportive grandmother. Life in Sivagangai is incredibly challenging, with her parents working tirelessly in the paddy fields day in and day out to make ends meet. Nandini, a bold and adventurous girl, loves going to school and dreams of becoming a Collector. However, a fall that injures her leg and hips leads to poor performance in her math board exams, threatening to

shatter her dreams. Nandini refuses to be deterred and keeps her sights set on the future. She eventually moves to the city, enjoying a happy family life until tragedy strikes, and she becomes a young widow.

Returning to her hometown with her two young children, Naresh and Deepa, Nandini embarks on a journey to secure a better future. She starts her own farming business, cultivating vegetables and the fragrant 'sampangi' flowers, which are used for garlands and essential oils. However, this endeavour is no easy feat, with mounting debts and numerous challenges

to overcome. Despite the exhaustion and time-consuming nature of her work, Nandini finds immense satisfaction in being a farmer.

Sayani Nandini tells us that it requires courage to pursue our dreams, but it's equally courageous to let go of one's old dreams, discover new ones, and relentlessly pursue them.



**BETICKET MUSAFIR
(NO TICKET, WILL
TRAVEL)**

By Subuhi Jiwani.
Translated by Bharat
Tripathi. Cover design
by Tanvi Parulkar.
Edited by Seema &
Bharat Tripathi
Karadi Tales, 2022,
pp. 62, ₹ 80.00

Beticket Musafir is a collection of stories about the harsh lives of migrant labourers in India. Chandra Shekhar's life is a story of hope, love, and longing. He learns about the practice of travelling on trains without tickets from another young man like himself. Desperate for work and needing to save every penny for his family, he often contemplates taking the risk of traveling ticketless, knowing that getting caught by a ticket checker could lead to fines. Despite the disappointment of not being picked up for work due to perceived lack of physical strength, Chandra continues to hold onto dreams of better days.

Aruna, a young girl, resides with her grandmother while her parents work as construction labourers in Kochi. She eagerly anticipates travelling to the

city during vacations with her aunt and uncle. However, the journey involves crowded buses and ticketless travel. Despite losing her slipper in the commotion, Aruna looks forward to reuniting with her mother, with the promise of a new pair of slippers. This story touches on the themes of separations and reunions. For children living apart from their parents for extended periods, the experience is far from child's play. They cherish the moments when they can be reunited with their loved ones.

Balu, a daily wage earner experiences hunger pangs after exhausting workdays. During periods of job scarcity, Balu has to endure sleepless nights due to hunger. When fortunate enough to find work, he labours on tar roads under the scorching sun on the city's outskirts. Balu has a deep love for poetry and once pursued a B.A. in Tamil Literature, though he had to leave it unfinished due to financial constraints. He finds solace in reciting the poems of Sri Sri Rao, a modern poet of the masses, which help him endure the demanding days of hard physical labour.

Sadia's story highlights the life of a young mother who nurtures her passion for needlework despite her demanding role as a construction labourer. Sadia engages in strenuous labour during the day, lifting heavy loads as a labourer. However, she eagerly looks forward to her time at night when she can indulge in her love for embroidery. She stitches blankets from colourful fabric scraps and creates dolls from tennis balls and beads to sell, thereby earning extra income for her family.

These stories shed light on the harsh reality faced by countless Indian migrant labourers. Driven by uncertainty and poverty they are compelled to travel across State lines and even out of their home State in search of livelihoods. Theirs is a solitary and arduous struggle that deserves recognition and empathy.



**CHITTI: EK KUTTA AUR
USKA JUNGLE FARM
(CHITTI: A DOG AND HER
FOREST FARM)**

By Sero. Translated from
the English by Jitendra
'Jeet'. Illustrations by Rajiv
Eipe. Layout by Tanya
Majumdar. Hindi layout by
Kanak Shashi. Edited by
Seema
Kalpavriksha, 2023, not
paginated, ₹ 115.00

Chitti: Ek Kutta aur Uska Jungle Farm is a story of a stray dog who finds her forever home on the author's farm, nestled deep within the Western Ghats. Despite coming from the city, she quickly adapts to her new life in the rich forest farm where sheesham and cinnamon grow in abundance. The farm is the author's universe and she welcomes Chitti into it with open arms. She wonders whether Chitti, a city dog will get along in her environ and with her other dog called Scrabble but Chitti surprises her.

Despite being used to the shining lights of the city and not the pitch darkness of the farm, Chitti becomes one with her surroundings. She goes around jumping in joy, chasing monkeys and feasting on fruits, termites, jackfruit chips and moths in the wild. Often, she would come home with her face splattered with wild berry colours. Through Chitti we get to see different seasons, vegetation, flora and fauna of the Western Ghats.

The thundering rains visit more than often and the narrator and her pet dogs take comfort in cuddling together to evade the scare and noise. Apart from an expression of friendship and trust between the author and her pets, it is a reference to the impact of climate change in the story. Weather in the Western Ghats is seeing noticeable changing rainfall patterns and it is causing distress to the farmers who rely on crop production for their livelihood.

Chitti gradually becomes an attraction for students from the city who come for nature camps and walks. As time goes by, Chitti gets old and spends most of her time around the house. After living through thirteen monsoon seasons, she passes away. To respect Chitti's love for the land she so willingly adapted to, she is buried at one of her favourite spots under the wide open sky where the stars would watch over her and trees would form a warm embrace around her grave.

Chitti's story is a powerful tale of relationship between animals, humans and nature. It is a story about being loyal and faithful in our relationships. It also reminds us of our responsibility to give back to mother earth and utilize the resources in a responsible manner. The beautiful illustrations contribute to the story by bringing the greenery alive.



Annie Pruthi



SO JA ULLU

Pictures by Bhooribai. Design by Kanak Shashi
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2023,
₹ 100.00



JUMBO HAATHI

By Vaidehi Patne. Illustrations by Soumya Shukla
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2023,
₹ 100.00



CHIKNIK CHOO

By Sushil Shukla. Illustrations by Atanu Roy
Eklavya, 2023, ₹ 150.00



COWS

By Nandini Majumdar.
Illustrations by Ishaan Dasgupta
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2023,
₹ 120.00



LISTEN TO APPA

By Asha Nehemiah. Illustrations by Shubhashree Mathur.
Edited by Shailaja Srinivasan and Vinatha Vishwanathan.
Visualization & Design by Ishita Debnath Biswas
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2023, ₹ 60.00



APPA KI SUNANA

By Asha Nehemiah. Illustrations by Shubhashree Mathur. Design by Ishita Debnath Biswas
Translated from the English by Sushil Joshi
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2023, ₹ 55.00



AMMA'S JOURNEY

By Asha Nehemiah. Illustrations by Barkha Lohia. Design by Kanak Shashi. Edited by Shailaja Srinivasan and Vinatha Vishwanathan
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2023,
₹ 100.00

A series of books published by Eklavya is perfect for your kids! Be it *So Ja Ullu* which is an amusing tale of an owl in search of sleep or *Jumbo Haathi*, a pet elephant of a little girl who loves to spend time with it, be it *Chiknik Choo* about a buffalo who is irritated with the questions of lice on its head, or *Cows* which is certainly an interesting counting book, or be it *Listen to Appa* about a little girl who would not let go of her father's grip, or be it about *Amma's Journey* and her vague instructions that leave her grandkids to pack all the wrong things for her train journey.

One such wonderful children's board book, *So Ja Ullu*, is beautifully illustrated by the gifted Bhooribai. This charming story opens the nocturnal world via an owl's eyes, making it ideal for young kids. Set in a forest, it revolves around an owl, who is having a difficult time falling asleep. The story develops through an amusing series of wildlife disturbances. Woodpeckers tap on the trees through their beak, deer rustle through the leaves and squirrels nibble on grain, while the owl makes a valiant effort to fall asleep. Frantic morning chorus is augmented by the buzzing of bees, monkeys playing and crows cawing. However, as soon as night falls, a calm stillness envelopes the forest. The story takes a wonderful turn as the woodland is awakened by the owl's 'cha cha cha'. This quirky touch gives an already fascinating story the ideal ending.

It's right to say that the lovely story is given life by Bhooribai's pictures, which turn it into a visual feast.

Another board book *Jumbo Haathi* in Hindi is an endearing story which describes a girl's love for Jumbo, her pet elephant. The relationship between the two is beautifully illuminated in Soumya Shukla's vibrant artwork. The book shows their shared activities such as singing and watching TV together, in addition to their leisure activities. It's ideal for young readers because of its durable board book shape, which will last through multiple reads. *Jumbo Haathi* highlights fellowship, amusement, and the fundamental pleasures of spending time with a special buddy.

The wonderful counting book *Cows* by Nandini Majumdar introduces young readers to the fascinating world of Varanasi's streets, where cows hold a special place. It features charming pictures by Ishaan Dasgupta. This book not only engages children in the joyful practice of counting but also invites them to explore the behaviour of cows.

The Hindi board book *Chiknik Choo* by Sushil Shukla, enhanced with enthralling pictures by Atanu Roy, promises to make young readers laugh out loud. Children are transported into a fanciful world where a buffalo takes refuge in the water only to be bombarded by the persistent questions of lice that are living on its head. These curious lice make amusing associations with Hindi phrases as they enquire into the enigmas of horns, reflections, tail wags, and the size of a buffalo's intellect. An unexpected and hilarious twist occurs when the buffalo's displeasure grows and it splashes water, shocking the interested creatures and other aquatic animals. Young readers will like the book and it can be used for many readings because of its sturdy board style, which guarantees its endurance. The endearing combination of humour and wisdom in *Chiknik Choo* elevates it above the level of a simple story, making it a suitable addition to the children's section of your library.

Of all the fascinating stories I've read, *Amma's Journey/Amma ka Safar* and

**AMMA KA SAFAR**

By Asha Nehemiah. Illustrations by Barkha Lohia. Design by Kanak Shashi. Translated from the English by Sushil Joshi
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2023, ₹ 75.00

Listen to *Appa/Appa ki Sunana* entertained me the most.

Readers embark on a pleasant voyage with Amma, a grandmother on the go, in Asha Nehemiah's *Amma's Journey*, also translated as *Amma Ka Safar*. This bilingual story (in Hindi and English) is published by Eklavya and features detailed illustrations by Barkha Lohia.

Nina and Abu, her enthusiastic grandkids, assist Amma with packing as she dashes to catch her train. Some of their decisions turn out to be amusing as they try to understand Amma's hasty directions. Amma's instructions are vague, but the grandkids do not ask any questions. The whole packing is being done by them as per Amma's orders.

When Amma orders that the 'blue ones' have to be packed so that they can be used in water, she does not specify her reference to shoes. So, the kids pack a blue umbrella and a blue bucket. This is followed by a red thing which Amma wanted for the night. The red item is a torchlight, but since she forgets to mention that too, the kids pack something else. A sequence of entertaining mishaps occurs as the journey progresses. Amma's meal gets put in the wrong bags, which results in unforeseen interactions and new connections. A surprising twist emerges when the ticket collector asks Amma to show her ticket and it is revealed that Amma's ticket was meant for the zoo, not the train. Meanwhile, the next day Abu and Nina have to purchase a new ticket for the zoo.

The illustrations of *Amma's Journey* by Barkha Lohia are indeed brilliant. The narrative is wonderfully woven together by each image, which vividly depicts Amma's rush and the kids' hilarious packing. Every element is evidence of Lohia's artistic ability, from Nina and Abu's expressive faces to the funny interpretation of Amma's directions.

Amma's Journey masterfully blends uplifting and humorous moments to perfectly convey the essence of familial ties and celebrates the bond between Amma and her grandkids.

Another book by Asha Nehemiah, *Listen to Appa/Appa ki Sunana* which features charming illustrations by Shubhashree Mathur, takes young readers on a lighthearted adventure with Kala and her father, Appa. This bilingual book is available in Hindi and English. Kala enthusiastically follows Appa as he leaves for Paati's residence as the rain stops. Appa advises Kala to follow Appa's directions. Kala is adamant about not letting go of Appa's strong grip. She takes his instructions literally, which results in hilarious misadventures including jumping over puddles when asked not to walk over it and whispering when asked not to speak loudly. These simple errors give the story a lighthearted element. An appealing quality of a child's obedience is shown by Kala's sincere desire to follow her father's instructions in this story. It's certainly a lovely addition to any child reader's library and would leave them giggling.

**Samina Mishra****AAPA KI AAPDI**

By Gulzar. Illustrations by Allen Shaw
Jugnoo/Ektara, 2023, pp. 29,
₹ 130.00

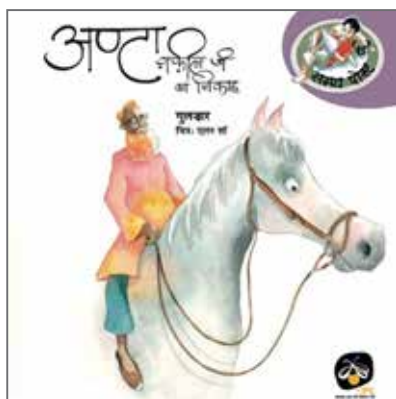
The thing about nonsense verse is that while it seems like it has no meaning, the play of words is actually very meaningful. Gulzar's *Aapa ki Aapdi*, accompanied by such wonderful art by Allen Shaw, is just that. The word 'aapdi' itself, probably a neologism, contains within its playful syllables the nature of being an Aapa—an older sister, perhaps bossy, perhaps a know-it-all. The book disrupts that power equation in a light-hearted and imaginative way. Anta Ghafel, the delightful character found in another book by Gulzar, is presumably reciting this nonsense verse to entertain a band of children. Unpleasant things befall Aapa in the verse affecting her *aapdi*, the innate quality of being an older sister. She falls into a puddle of water and her *aapdi*, her bossiness is dampened. She is hung up to dry and her know-it-all-ness drips away. She is ironed to dry her out and the *aapdi* is flattened. And horror of horrors, she is discovered to have licked some slimy moss that was in the puddle and the only way to fix that is to have her drink soap and wash her out thoroughly. The Aapa that emerges is shiny and new, a bilori, a fluid tawny colour that changes like a kaleidoscope. Poor Aapa, at the mercy of disagreeable accidents and a gang of little kids who she has probably previously bossed over! The little children's delight at her *aapdi* being

reduced is so evident in the cheerful rhythm created by the use of repeated syllables and words. The chanting quality is broken periodically by a line containing a verb that works like a slogan—*Aapa ko dhoop mein sukhaao! Aapa ko istri karaao!* So, while it is indeed nonsense verse, the writing is a wonderful example of how language can be used to craft a pleasurable reading experience.

The art is splendid. Allen Shaw uses the fluidity of watercolours to create settings that are real and imaginative at the same time. For example, there is a spread of a village pond in which the action is in the foreground—children and

buffaloes splash together while women wash clothes. But the composition plays with perspective imaginatively and fluid strokes of blue in the top half of the spread isolate this from reality. Similarly, the composition of a spread in which Anta Ghafeel is saying 'Aapa ko dhoop mein sukhaol' has him seen from a low angle with someone at a washing line in the top right corner, almost like a thought bubble. The quiriness of the characters emerges through the use of line and colour such as the orange henna-coloured hair and beard of Anta Ghafeel, or the large eyes of the characters that sometimes convey shock and sometimes joy.

The book brings children and adults together in an unspoken way, underlining the importance of play. It is a wonderful example of how words and art can come together in picture books to create a truly joyful reading experience.



ANTA GHAFEEEL JI KA NIKAH

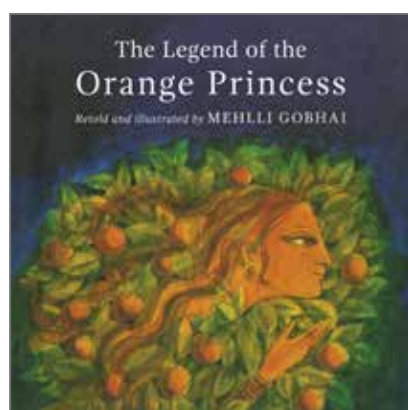
By Gulzar. Illustrations by Allen Shaw

Jugnoo/Ektara, 2023, pp. 34, ₹ 120.00

From the very first spread that shows a top angle view of Anta Ghafeel, the hakim, with his horse, Allen Shaw evokes the solitariness of the character through the use of space. We see Anta Ghafeel across the book surrounded by empty space—sometimes the blank page, sometimes lightly-washed to indicate the sky, walls and diaphanous curtains. Anta Ghafeel stands out with his henna-orange hair and beard as an eccentric character, self-contained, pondering, absent-minded. His name draws upon the Urdu word for carelessness or obliviousness—*ghaflat*—and indeed Anta Ghafeel is so lost in his thoughts that he does not realize how he falls off a chair, or when children are teasing him while he's half-awake. Anta Ghafeel inhabits a world in which people care about him and try to help him with the challenges thrown up by this careless self-absorption. Perhaps, they also want to rid him of what they perceive as loneliness. And so, they coax him into a marriage. But Anta Ghafeel remains *ghafil*—both unaware and/or unwilling. So, at the appointed hour, instead of responding like a bridegroom, he responds with his hakeem's instinct, doles out a prescription and walks off into the sunset with his horse and solitude.

The pleasure of reading the story lies in the simple rhyming text by Gulzar that has the quality of nonsense verse or nursery rhymes. The whimsy of the character is

matched by a playfulness in the way words are used, the titular character's name included. Stories for children have always included eccentric characters, like Sheikh Chilli or Mulla Nasruddin, who allow for unreal situations and exaggerated actions to become acceptable on the page. There is a blurring of the lines between reality and imagination in such stories that mirror children's ability to move between them in their everyday life. Anta Ghafeel is one such oddball and hopefully, there will be many more stories about him that will go on to delight readers.



THE LEGEND OF THE ORANGE PRINCESS

Retold and illustrations by Mehlii Gobhai

Talking Cub, An imprint of Speaking Tiger, 2023, pp. 32, ₹ 250.00

Mehlii Gobhai, known as one of India's foremost abstract artists, writes a magical tale and paints in a most un-abstract style in *The Legend of the Orange Princess*. Presented as a retelling of an ancient legend, the story is about a princess who is an orange by day and woman by night, and a prince who falls in love with her. As in many fairy tales, the magical realism becomes a way to speak of love, transformation, conformity, memory. The art is figurative and often suggestive of miniatures in the way the narrative unfolds visually except that each spread is a step in the story rather than one image containing the entire story. There are some beautiful spreads in which rich colours come together to create dense forests, rippling water, a floating breeze. The compositions evoke the central emotions—the surprised king in the foreground and the sad queen in the background when the orange princess is born, the stereotypical close-up of the prince and princess to convey their love, the outstretched hand of the prince in the centre of the spread as the orange princess fades away into the sunlight.

While the artwork is lovely and the idea of an orange princess is whimsical, the characters are quite flat, and the story is unremarkable. Nothing terribly exciting happens once we have learned about the princess transforming daily. The only other plot point is the prince getting into trouble and the orange princess rescuing him that leads to the end. It is good of course to have a role reversal with the princess doing the rescuing. So read this one, mainly for the art!



Nidhi Qazi

**PARCHHAI KA KHEL**

By Indu Nayar. Illustrated by Vasundhara Arora
Eklavya, 2023, pp. 84,
₹ 80.00

Parchhai ka Khel is a simple read about a girl and her exploration of her shadow.

Once the girl explores her shadow, what follows is her various movements and changing shadows. Whatever the girl does, her shadow follows.

The book tries to explain the concept of shadow through a linear narrative. If a reader is someone who isn't familiar with the concept, the book doesn't give enough for the reader to really understand the same. It uses the word '*parchhai*' plainly, in a matter-of-fact way, assuming the reader knows it. Simultaneously, the book does intend to introduce the concept as well but isn't able to do that, in a lucid manner. It hurriedly comes to the concept rather than building it up through the story. In the first page itself, we are told: 'लड़की ने आसमान की तरफ देखा। आसमान में सूरज चमक रहा था। उसने ज़मीन पर देखा। उसे अपनी परछाई दिखी। लड़की ने आस पास देखा कि सबकी एक ही परछाई बनती है।'

What follow in the subsequent pages are the girl's movements and her changing shadows. Her relationship with the shadow is central to the story but there isn't enough depth or meaning given to this relationship. Just as the the story hurriedly reveals to us the existence of the phenomenon of shadow, it hurriedly gives away the fact about how sunlight/light are conducive to the phenomenon of shadow. The girl quickly understands one fine day when it rains, shadows do not appear.

'आसमान में बादल घिरने लगे... सूरज को जब बादलों के ढंक दिया तो परछाई गायब हो गई। उस रात लड़की ने बन्द कमरे में टॉर्च को अपने हाथ से ढंक कर देखा। दीवार पर उसके हाथ की परछाई भी गायब हो गई।'

To observe, for a long time through scientific enquiry, is key to understanding complex phenomena or recognizing them. We humans spend days or at least a long time observing the world around us to conclude some natural happenings. But in this case, as pointed previously, the writer hurriedly ends the story thus making it a bit unrealistic on the part of a child to be so promptly observing and inferring the phenomenon.

The illustrations are less explanatory and more impressionistic; they don't really help add further meaning to the text or help the reader understand the concept of shadow better. Some of the illustrations also come across as strangely ambiguous and terrifying.

This book serves as an introduction to the scientific concept of shadow. If only it had been done in a more engaging, fun way. It stops short of exploring shadows from a girl's point of view, thus, lacking lustre and joy of playing with shadows. Going by the title *Parchhai ka Khel*, the book doesn't give us enough '*khel*', either play of narrative, language, or imagination.



Shivani Bajaj

**MUNNI MONSTER**

By Madhurima Vidyarthi.
Illustrations by Tanvi Bhat
Duckbill Books, 2023,
pp. 92, ₹ 250.00

A story about a 10-year-old girl and her small family, is very readable for any child in the age group of 8-12 years. Her parents, grandmother and she represent a simple, happy, middle-class family with no 'apparent' problems or complexity, till something happens...!

The book is based on a real-life character who is family to the author and loved dearly by her.

It covers a variety of topics and issues that might be of concern to any 10-year-old in today's world and times. Written from the perspective of Mishti, who lives with her parents and grandmother in a small flat in a big city, the story deals with her insecurities, her fears, her beliefs. Her bond with Thamma, her grandmother is very special, and she is extremely happy in her small world till someone else enters it. Then adjustments are made, things are shared—space, relationships, attention and even money. Mishti asks some very pertinent questions about managing money, relationships, family—which, after all is more important? And how does one achieve that balance? What makes a home happy and when will they be happy again? Her own planned struggle to end all unhappiness and to get her earlier happy home back, is with the help of a 'close' school friend. A friend who—as she only later discovers—is not actually helping her, but only making Mishti feel inferior and less privileged, thereby establishing her own superiority.

The book gives an opportunity to the young reader to look at their own struggles—in being accepted by the peer group/some special friends in school; with parents in doing the 'right' things

in life and learning the 'correct' values; with life in general. Mishti's own struggle to 'belong' to a certain class is subtle and underlying. She seeks acceptance from her 'best' friend who is rich and actually selfish and haughty. This is a real problem for her from the beginning of the story, something that has been there all along.

The characters are very strongly portrayed. Her parents—Joyeeta and Sachin—are loving and caring but will not tolerate any indiscipline or nonsense from their little daughter. In fact, they treat her like an adult when she says she is not a small child anymore. It is a treat to read about the near perfect relationship of the parents and the grandmother, though a bit hard to digest wherein both generations understand each other and appear to have the same opinion on a number of issues.

Sometimes it takes a mishap to make one realize what they truly desire or love. In that moment of confusion and tension, one realizes what values one lives by and what matters the most to them. Mishti, till now, has been unable to put her finger to her life's values and what she desired most. She wanders in her mind and fights for all she 'thought' she wanted, but in the end realizes it was something she always had—within her and around her—the love of her family, of her near and dear ones. And somewhere the jigsaw of what makes a happy home comes together and fits perfectly! One is also tempted to ask: is it in a moment of emotional upheaval and reaction that Mishti 'realize' this? And will it change again once things are back to normal? Or is this feeling thought-through and here to stay? How easy was the process thereafter of accepting Munni and sharing her entire life with her and how easy or difficult were the challenges that followed?

The language used is very advanced and makes one believe that the character is a serious one. Very believable illustrations especially of the 'monster' called Munni. Definitely a good one-time read that may lead the reader to reflect on their own personal lives, while opening a new area of challenges.



TCA Sharad Raghavan



KIKI AND PIKLU PLAY HIDE AND SEEK

By Kavitha Punniyamurthi.
Illustrations by Shashi Shetye

Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 16,
₹ 60.00

The book won Second Prize in the category Read-aloud books/Picture Books in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by CBT. Punniyamurthi is the author of another CBT title *Vini's Garden*.

The book captures a charming and funny little story about Piklu the dog and Kiki the frog, and a game of hide and seek. Piklu wants to play for fun, but Kiki has a funny and naughty side and the shenanigans will have toddlers reading it cackling away.

Not only an engaging read, but the story also incorporates a theme that encourages children to learn and practice counting. Overall, a fun read for a child,

but perhaps could have featured less text on each page. The book might have become slightly longer, but the imagery would have been even more eye-catching than it is.



THE BLOCK PRINTED TIGER

By Joeanna Rebello Fernandes. Pictures by Nina Sabnani and Piyush Verma

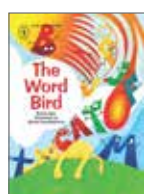
Tulika Graphix, 2022,
pp. 32, ₹ 265.00

A fabulous use of colour and imagery—in keeping with the theme of the book. It's about a tiger, Foxy Farouqi, escaping from Ranthambore Tiger Reserve and heading straight to Japiur. Why? Not to eat laal maas, but instead to get his striped coat block printed, of course!

It's a very cute story that also features a vibrant use of colour that's not just appealing to the eye, especially of those of children, but also flows very well with the text. What's more, the story deftly weaves in traditional Indian handicraft and textile

techniques into the story, neatly introducing these names into the lexicon that the little readers are exposed to. Of course, the rhyming structure of the text too adds to the fun.

It's a fun and relatable story for parents as well, since the tiger's initially dull coat and subsequent striking makeover is something we all can appreciate!



THE WORD BIRD

By Benita Sen. Edited by Navin Menon. Illustrated by Ajanta Guhathakurta

Children's Book Trust, 2023, pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

The book won a prize in the category Concept Books in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by CBT. Sen is the author of three other books published by CBT—*A Whale of a Time*, *Will Busy Bee Find Her Home?* and *Dress Him Up!*

Vibrant and engaging, the story is nonsensical in the way that will appeal to all toddlers. How did the letters in the alphabet become words? With the help of the Word Bird, of course! Ideal for young minds, eager to devour any new information

coming their way, the book's illustrations involve pictures of the different letters. This will help children recognize them over time. The layout of the book is perfect for toddlers, too, with a pleasing image-to-text ratio on each page. That is, there's lots of colour and imagery to keep children interested, with few words in big text to move the story along.



LETTERS FROM MOM

By Nandini Nayar.
Illustrations by
Subir Roy
Children's Book
Trust, 2022,
pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

The book won first prize in the category Kid-Friendly Non-Fiction (7-10 year) in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by CBT. The author has written three other books published by CBT—*The House of 14 Cats*, *Mouse and Bear*, and *Prince Zafar's Very Important Notebook*—apart from stories in several collections.

The title of the book is somewhat misleading at first, since it's not about a maternal relationship but in fact are fictional letters written by the Mangalyaan or Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM). In that respect, however, the book is outstanding. The personalized letter format, as if MOM is itself writing back to Earth, is a great way to

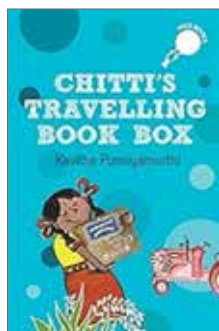
not only introduce children to the Mars Mission itself, but also help them engage with the step-by-step process of sending a ship to another planet.

It's not just a matter of pressing a button here and that's it. Each step—from launch to leaving Earth's atmosphere to detaching the initial thrust rockets to navigating to Mars and entering its orbit—is documented as a personal letter from MOM, complete with pangs of joy, exhilaration and, inevitably, loneliness is the vastness of space.

The book is aimed at slightly older readers, clearly, but hits that aim very well.



Nita Berry



CHITTI'S TRAVELLING BOOK BOX

By Kavitha Punniyamurthi.
Illustrations by Niveditha
Subramaniam
Duckbill Books/ Penguin
Random House India,
2023, pp. 72, ₹ 199.00

Nobody wants the old tractor. Its days of ploughing the fields and carrying loads of goods in its trailer are over. It stands in a corner of Appa's farm where Chitti and her friends make it their play area. They have so much fun here that Chitti wishes that Appa won't ever be able to sell it.

When she goes to her uncle and aunt in Madras for the holidays, she comes back as always with a great idea, and carrying an even greater box! What could be in it, her friends try to guess... No, it's not Mysore Pak, it's not an autographed cricket bat, nor a puppy—it's gorgeous books of every size in bright colours and with loads of stories inside! There are no such books in Chitti's small village in Tamil Nadu, and the nearest library is the

government library in Ananoor, far away on the other side of the river. Chitti has fallen in love with books—but she's in for a shock! Her friends are disinterested and find her books boring... till she begins to read stories aloud to them, and then everybody is hooked! But Appa is selling the old tractor at last. What will Chitti and her friends do now?

Chitti's Travelling Book Box by Kavitha Punniyamurthi is a heart-warming chapter book for young readers of around 6-8 age years, and one of a series of 'Hole Books' by Duckbill Books, dedicated to 'libraries, librarians and little readers everywhere'. Just 'Jump into reading through a Duckbill hole,' says the back cover. And that's just what this small book does as Chitti wants to share the magic of books with everyone. It celebrates the joy of reading and encourages children to love books.

Packed with fun and action, Kavitha Punniyamurthi's story unfolds descriptively with big dollops of humour. 'All through Chitti's seven years, the tractor had clunked, thumped and rattled its way up and down, in and around the farm. It had splashed through muddy puddles and jounced over rocky paths...' The young reader can literally hear and see the action through the sounds of words. The author makes liberal use of Tamil words which give it an authentic local flavour. However, words like *paavadai-chattai*, *vaapa*, *umma*, *paati* etc., may be incomprehensible for children of other regions.

Kavitha Punniyamurthi is an award-winning author for children, whose charming picture book, *When Bholu Came Back* was given the South Asia Book Award.

Niveditha Subramaniam's fun-filled illustrations with their expressive faces and figures complement the text perfectly to bring out the fun. Niveditha is an author-illustrator for children and has received the Bal Sahitya Puruskar for her book, *Mayil Will not be Quiet!* which she co-authored with Soumya Rajendran.

Young readers will look forward to many more entertaining books from this talented author-illustrator duo, we are sure!



Andal Jagannathan



WHAT THE DARK SOUNDS LIKE

By Aparna Kapur. Illustrated by Krishna Bala Shenoi
Pratham Books, 2023, pp. 12,
₹ 85.00

The book's cover and the first few pages are predominantly black, setting the background just right for the narrative's introductory theme—the dark night. Soon the background colour changes to white with the main character—a young child—venturing out into the world with a sense of wonder and curiosity.

The book touches upon both tangible and intangible concepts. The child explores trees, mud, and cakes, as well as the dark, and abstract concepts of love, and confusion.

While a treat for young readers, the book is a useful read for adults too. It awakens the child in us. Terms such as 'what confusion tastes like' and 'I ate a dream', bring back a forgotten sense of curiosity and wonder. The last page acknowledges the 'magic' that is all around us. After reading the book, I stopped to look around, observe, and appreciate so many everyday things that I take for granted. From the shining sun to the gentle breeze bringing the scent of champa flowers in full bloom, to frolicking squirrels and chirping birds—I took it all in and sent a silent 'thank you' to the author.

The illustrations, capturing a sense of wonder and curiosity, touch the right chord in readers' minds. My favourite is the last page with the serene expression on the child's face.

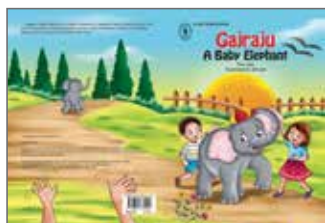


ELEPHANT WANTS TO PLAY

By Cheryl Rao.
Illustrations by Ajanta Guhathakurta
Children's Book Trust, 2022,
pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

As you pick up the book *Elephant Wants to Play*, and flip through it, the colourful illustrations pique your interest. You want to know what all the animals are up to. The expressions on the elephant's face are extremely well done. I loved the wide-eyed elephant, on page 2, peeping out from behind a tree. All the other animals are cute too, but then we are all allowed to have our favorites, aren't we?

Young children will find the numerous instances of the elephant trying to hide extremely funny. The fun-filled story with multiple characters will be a treat for many young readers. The poetry format of the story is pretty engaging. Snake, Rabbit, Elephant, Deer, and other animal names are used as proper nouns and not as common nouns.



GAJARAJU: A BABY ELEPHANT

By Ritu Jain. Illustrations by Shivani
Children's Book Trust, 2022,
pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

This is the story of a super cute baby elephant called Gajaraju who is separated from his mother and the rest of his herd. A little unwell, Gajaraju is admitted to a hospital. Two children, Mithoo and Kuhu, take keen interest in Gajaraju and spend a lot of time with him. Once he recovers and is well enough to go home, the children's father, a veterinarian, ensures that Gajaraju is released back into the forest and that he rejoins his herd.

Gajaraju's tale is a heartwarming one brought to life with very apt illustrations. The story was first published in Hindi—*Gajaraju Ek Nanha Haathi*—and it won the first prize in the category 'Social Emotional Learning' in a competition organized by the Children's Book Trust.

The illustration on page 9 reminded me of how elephants swallow wood apples whole and excrete them with the shell intact. As the shell of the wood apple is porous, the digestive juices of the elephant digest the pulp and leave the shell empty but unbroken!



TENZIN'S YAKS

By Neera Jain.
Illustrations by Subir Roy
Children's Book Trust, 2022,
pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

A touching tale about a little girl and her yaks, *Tenzin's Yaks* is a story set in mountainous Ladakh. The story gives glimpses into life in such tough terrain. Young readers will undoubtedly come up with multiple questions about the region, animals, and lifestyle that come alive within the pages of the book.

The story was first published in Hindi as *Tenzin ke Yak* and won the first prize in the read-aloud books category in a competition organized by the Children's Book Trust. While the English translation does have a

vernacular flavour about it, the superbly drawn illustrations soon draw you into the story, so comprehension is not affected in the least.

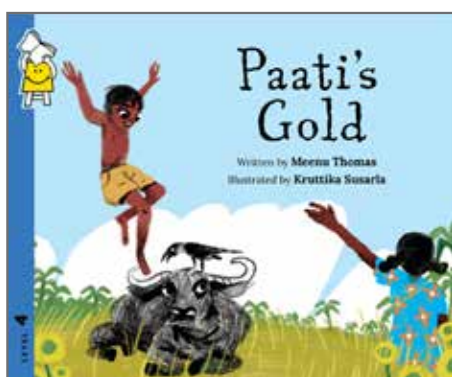
**YES, WE CAN!**

Written and illustrated by Viky Arya
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 16,
₹ 60.00

The author Viky Arya has written and illustrated a sweet little book! It is about an adventurous ant named Chintu who leaves his ant family to follow a sweet smell that gets stronger as he gets closer. He finds the source of the sweet smell and needs help.

Here, the author has deftly slipped a small general knowledge lesson into the story. Adults may have to quickly look up information about how ants communicate to answer young readers' questions about ants and their antennae.

The cute illustrations move the story along well just as all the ants get together to take home the source of the sweet smell! What was it? Now, now, we shouldn't be telling you everything here!

**Shiv Narayan Gour****PAATI'S GOLD**

By Meenu Thomas. Illustrations by
Kruttika Susarla
Pratham Books, 2023, pp. 24, ₹ 80.00

Paati's Gold, a picture story book for children, has as its core theme a family that is concerned about their failing rice crops. The story addresses a problem that many farmers in the country experience. As a result, the book becomes important to a wider audience.

The story begins with a fight between Paati and Appa. The children, Selvan and Savi, are not pleased with the conflict. The issue of their struggle is that they are concerned about failed rice crop due to the use of lab-created seed. Appa believes that the lab-created seed is the high-yielding variety, and the production would be high. Paati, on the other hand, is not convinced. Paati reassures the family that she has a solution in the form of gold. Paati withholds the gold until the very end of the story, when the family is on the verge of losing their fortune. Instead of using gold as is, she has used gold as a euphemism for the seeds of native rice varieties.

This short story sheds light on a variety of issues, including the issue with lab-created seeds, the importance of native varieties, the effect of crops on soil, the emotional and mental distress caused by a failed crop season on a family,

the overall effect of the new types of seeds, the workings of a village community, and others.

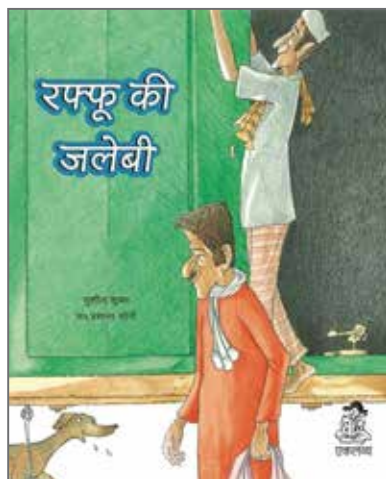
Now, these issues are being addressed and discussed in many writings of fiction and non-fiction. However, creating a tale for children about these matters is vital and important. The story is told in an innovative way with the help of illustrations as well. Kruttika Susarla's illustrations enhance the plot and make the book more vivid. Stories on such important subjects become more child-friendly by means of vibrant illustrations.

The absence of children's character arcs is noticeable in the story. A story written for children does not give the characters of the children in the story much of a role. The children are distressed because of the quarrel between Appa and Paati, which raises a larger problem concerning the impact of familial acrimony on children. However, when a kid is reading a story in which the child's character is given very little role, it may be difficult for them to relate to it. Nonetheless, the illustrations assist with this problem. The lively nature of children, as depicted in the illustrations, makes up for their absence in the text.

Overall, the book is enjoyable and entertaining to read. It discusses the issue of rice crops, yet this issue applies to other crops, making the story more inclusive. As previously stated, the book is not only for children, it may also be a fascinating read for individuals of all ages and can aid in learning about difficulties affecting rural regions in the country. Pratham Books, the publisher, has been playing a significant role in publishing children's literature.



Sonika Kaushik



RAFFU KI JALEBI

By Sushil Shukla. Illustrations by Prashant Soni
Eklavya, Supported by Parag Trust, 2023, pp. 24, ₹ 75.00

dog and even a pampered donkey have come to partake in this madness. Soni has created a world of characters through his illustrations who depict the wait for Raffu's *jalebis*.

The humour in the text is subtle and Soni's illustrations allow the humour to be played out through the images of the people they portray. The text never loses its gentle flow and only indicates in words the mayhem that the illustrations portray. The coupling of the contradictions of the steady rhythm of the text and the building up of madness in the illustrations is intriguing for the reader. *Raffu ki Jalebi* has a quiet existence and it unleashes a madness of its own kind. Every town or colony can boast of its own Raffu.

The book is an absolute delight and invites several visits for there is much to be enjoyed with each reading.

Jalebis epitomize the ordinariness in this poem and the pleasure of that ordinariness. Eulogizing the ordinary, which Sushil Shukla often does in his poems (*Bhains ki Shaan Mein*) and at times, making visible the unseen and the unnoticed (*Kabhi Batooni Lagti Hain*, unpublished), the poem presents a slice of the mundane as an event. Perhaps, the most common sweetmeat after *laddu* in the plains of north India is the coiled mithai—the syrup loaded *jalebi*. However, Shukla subtly couples the ordinariness of the *jalebi* with the exquisiteness and tenderness he brings to Raffu's craft of making *jalebis* with the gentle flow of words.

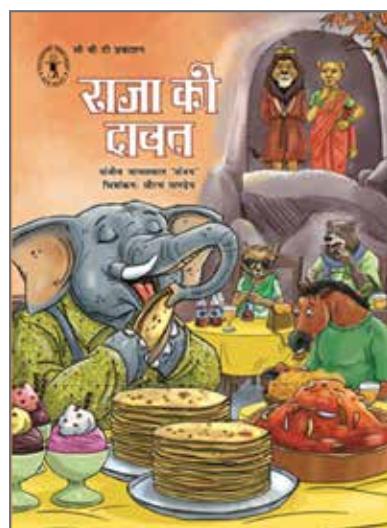
Such is Raffu's craft that he is *farebi* (crafty) enough to make people swoon over his *jalebis*, while he quietly goes about the business. The attention Raffu pays to the *jalebis* and the leisurely manner in which he makes them is conveyed through the description of every detail of the process. More than a culinary feat, Raffu's *jalebi* making is an act of love, carried out with utmost attention and care.

Ek-ek ka haal jaankar

Achche se tale hain

Prashant Soni's illustrations flesh-out the commonplaceness through vivid images of the common man, woman, child on the street, urbane young man and goons and several such people who make the crowd. Ordinary are the jostling, the mayhem, the wait and the triumph—all for the *jalebis*. The gymnast mice, the squabbling mynahs, the hopeful

Kavita Tiwari



THE KING'S FEAST/ RAJA KI DAAWAT*

Both by Sanjeev Jaiswal 'Sanjay'.
Illustrated by Saurabh Pandey
Children's Book Trust, 2023.
pp. 16 each, ₹ 60.00 each

This bilingual book is a delightful reading for 3-6 years old children. It caters to their imagination. It unfolds the story of a feast hosted by King Lion, where the expectations of the attending animals take an unexpected turn.

What I like about the book is the King Lion's friendly behaviour with all the animals. The Lion instead of coercing the animals to eat, engages in polite conversation with them when they express dissatisfaction with their meals. The narrative takes an interesting twist when Lioness intervenes to resolve the issue, showcasing problem-solving skills.

Another commendable aspect is the book's use of short sentences and easy words in both languages (English and Hindi) making it accessible and engaging for its target readers.

However, I didn't like the portrayal of female animals in the story. Depicting female animals wearing *churi*, *bindi*, lipstick, necklace, dupatta, etc. may form a particular image of women in young minds. Can't we imagine a female character without this? I think a broader representation of female characters that goes beyond traditional stereotypes should be encouraged.

*1st Prize, Concept Books, Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by CBT.



THE CIRCLE OF SEASONS/ MAUSAM KA PHER**

Both by Sonima Trisal.
Illustrated Viky Arya
Children's Book Trust, 2023,
pp. 16 each, ₹ 60.00 each

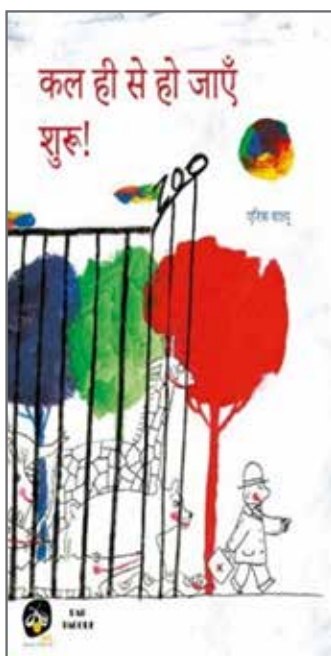
This is a charming bilingual book designed to introduce the concept of seasons to early readers. Written in the form of verses, a format often appreciated and connected with by children, the book engages young readers. The vivid and attractive illustrations complement the text, effectively depicting the transitions of the seasons.

One of the book's strengths lies in its ability to present the cycle of seasons in a simple and engaging manner. However, there are instances (especially in Hindi) where the language may pose a challenge for its intended readership. The use of words such as धरा, संदेश, ऋतु may be less colloquial and potentially unfamiliar for young readers. I think simplifying the language to use more common terms could enhance the accessibility of the book for its target audience.

** 2nd Prize, Social-Emotional Learning, Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by CBT.



Simran Sadh



KAL HI SE HO JAAEIN SHURU

Written and illustrated by
Eric Battut. Translated from
the French into English by Ira
Saraswat
Jugnoo/Ektara, 2023,
pp. 34, ₹ 230.00

Originally published in French, written and illustrated by Eric Battut, the story is about the homesickness and nostalgia felt by the residents of a cityside Zoo. When the animals confide in the Doctor who is visiting them for their annual health check-up, he realizes the uselessness of his medicines and prescriptions in the face of the deep despair all his patients feel. The obvious fictional solution for us and him is that the animals be led to freedom in their natural habitats by the Doctor. The unexpected turn of events, however, is what sets this story apart.

A Story from Afar is how Ektara and Jugnoo publications introduce its translated stories from non-Indian origins, and it can be agreed that there is a charm in reading children's literature from other parts of the world, for the feeling of transcension, albeit briefly. The role of translation then becomes important; as crucial as it is to capture the essence of the original meaning, it also must allow space for the local contexts to prevent alienation. While the book has been able to maintain a balance between the two, disorientation sets in at brief moments in the story due to the choice of words which the intended reader of 4+ age might find difficult to comprehend.

The illustrations in the story, like most of Battut's work, are vivid in colours. The use of primary colours to depict the animals' surroundings and at times simple line figures are able to communicate a lot about the range of the emotions of the characters. As the story unfolds, one finds oneself engulfed in the hopelessness of the animals but at the same time, being held accountable for the harsh consequences of the anthropocentric activities on other creatures. However, it doesn't leave the reader stranded there but gives optimistic hope and the need to build a better tomorrow which has space for everyone and everyone's interests. A world which is a little less like the one they are in now and more like the one they all dreamed of in their despair. The story opens opportunities for conversations about the mental state of animals living in zoos and their shrinking natural habitats due to climate change and the role (some) humans and their notions of development have had to play in this. The story is also an exploration as well as reimagination of human-animal relationships. It allows a starting point for discussions on environmental impact with young readers and is an important theme to explore through children's literature.



Vinatha Viswanathan

A young boy comes home from school one day to face the loss of his Dadu. Aayan has many memories of his dear grandfather that he cherishes. He thinks of his Dadu with fondness and sadness. However, that is not all that troubles him. His grieving Dadi



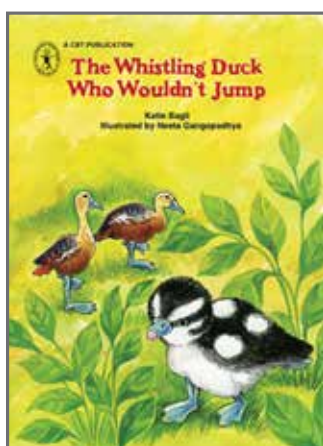
THE TANK OF MEMORIES/यादों से भरी टंकी

By Kavitha Punniyamurthi.
Kavita Singh Kale. Translated
into Hindi by Kusumlata Singh
Children's Book Trust, 2023,
pp. 16, ₹ 60 each

is difficult for him to watch. To cheer her up, he finds a way to honour and celebrate his Dadu's life with his Dadi and the family's memories with him, especially those of Dadu and Dadi with each other. He builds his Dadi a tank of memories.

A heartwarming tale of a close-knit family's loss as seen by a child. Death, loss and how children and other family members deal with it in their own ways is a topic that has been explored in too few books. In addition, most of these are in English and CBT's translation into Hindi is welcome. Kavitha Punniyamurthi has captured well the thoughts of a young child—the memories, the details that children remember about people, often little things that adults don't register or remember. She also uses Ayaan's eagerness to please his Dadi and make her smile again to showcase the good memories of his Dadu and Dadi, their struggles and hard work in the making of this joint family. The illustrations by Kavita Singh Kale suit the tale, even add to the text—portraying how everyone else seems to get on in some way with their lives while Dadi does not do so for many months. The Hindi translation is stilted at some points though it makes for a much smoother read than Kusumlata Singh's earlier work.

The Tank of Memories won a prize in the Category Social and Emotional Learning (5-8 years) in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by CBT.



THE WHISTLING DUCK WHO WOULDN'T JUMP/सीटीमार बतख जो कूदी नहीं

By Katie Bagli. Illustrations
by Neeta Gangopadhyaya.
Translated into Hindi by
Kusumlata Singh
Children's Book Trust, 2023,
pp. 16, ₹ 60.00 each

A pair of whistling ducks looks for a nesting site around their traditional habitat—a lake. Unable to settle on a spot, Ohm and Maya take a chance on the terrace of a building in a town close to the lake. Maya lays a clutch of 18 eggs that hatches soon. One day later, Ohm and Maya lead their fledgelings off the terrace, onto the ground and onwards to the lake. All but one of them follow. Dinkoo is unable to find the courage to launch himself off from such a height despite seeing all his siblings do so without coming to harm. His mother waits for him while the rest of the brood waddle off with their father. How Dinkoo finally manages to jump—trying to save his mother trapped by a hunter—is the exciting twist in this tale.

The story by Katie Bagli is about the breeding behaviour of whistling ducks woven in the form of a fictional tale. A style quite suitable for the intended readers. This is a book about animals that talks about them in an environment most of us are familiar with and in which we see most of our wildlife—our homes, neighbourhoods and their edges adjoining natural habitats. Details about the breeding habits of these ducks are casually inserted in the narrative without making it onerous. However, the chancing of a hunter at that location handy with a net seems a bit unlikely. The illustrations by Neeta Gangopadhyaya translate the tale. The translation in Hindi at some points lacks the flow on the English original. The text could have benefitted from a heavier hand at editing.

The Whistling Duck who wouldn't Jump is a welcome addition to the genre of books that marries non-fiction and fiction for young children. It has won a prize in the Category Read Aloud Books/Picture Books in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by CBT.

Chandra Chari



I looked again at the transparent spokes of the wheel and this time I saw the sand slipping along the spoke, one grain at a time, and suddenly I realized that these four spokes were actually two hourglasses, with a narrowed section in the middle.

Cheryl Rao is a prolific writer of children's books. She is the author of, apart from short stories in several collections, *Adventures Two*, *Holiday Adventures*, *Camp Adventure*, *Dusty the Daschund*, *The Missing Zoo*, *The Clothes Monster*, *The Boy who Liked Khichdi*, *Something to Do*, *Elephant wants to Play*, *Grumpy Man*, and *Gymming on the Beach*, all published by CBT. We at *The Book Review* have, over the years, always carried reviews of her titles in the special issues of Children's Books. Personally, Cheryl Rao is among my favourite authors of books for young readers.

So, it is with a keen sense of anticipation that I chose to review *Stay Out of the Basement* and its Hindi translation. And I was flummoxed, even after three reads of the book, as to what the author had in mind for the storyline. I decided to write to the author herself and she obligingly answered all my queries cogently. Hence this review is being written in a

**STAY OUT OF THE BASEMENT;
TAHKHAANE SE DUUR RAHNA***

By Cheryl Rao. Illustrations by Saurabh Pandey. Edited by Navin Menon and Kusumlata Singh
Children's Book Trust, 2022,
pp. 24 each, ₹ 70.00 each

different format, almost in the nature of 'In the Author's Own Words'.

To begin with, 11-year-old Aleena and Grandma Annie (Aneela), are the protagonists. When Aleena and her mother and elder sister arrive at her grandparents' home in the hills, they find Grandpa weak and ill and Grandma catatonic. Grandma's strange unresponsive condition is very troubling and although Aleena has been warned by her mother to stay out of the basement, her grandmother's favourite—and exclusive—place, she makes her way in with the hope that she could get some insights into her grandmother's condition

there. The bit by bit unraveling of the mystery and finally its impact on grandma—her waking up from a deep sleep/coma—makes up the storyline.

Chandra Chari: Cheryl, when I first read the book, it seemed to be the story of ageing which the young have to deal with along with their parents in modern times. However, that seems incidental to the main storyline. It would be great if you could let me have some inputs about what your thinking was when you created this story.

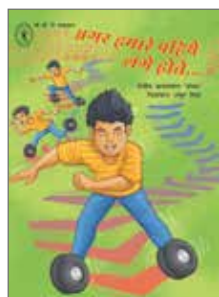
Cheryl Rao: My thoughts centered around secrets when I created the story: how secrets are a burden to carry, how secrets never stay secret, how wonderful it would be if we could shed our secrets somewhere and unburden ourselves with the knowledge that those secrets would not find their way out to others, what would happen if there was a reliable Keeper of Secrets somewhere but one day that Keeper hears something terrible that she tries to stop from happening...

CC: Not surprisingly, the warning to the young protagonist and her sibling to stay out of the basement by their parents is enough for Aleena to be determined to do so at all costs.

CR: You are right. Her entry into the basement is somewhat magical (as is her exit). In the basement, Aleena realizes that her grandmother is studying plants and other things as a nature-healer, but she is perplexed by her own reaction (all kinds of voices in her head) when she touches a bead curtain there. She also finds a wooden wheel on the wall, and she sees that there are two hourglasses in it. Aleena accidentally bumps into the wheel, and later discovers that she has moved Time for herself—and in the hope that she can do the same for her grandmother and get her back to her former energetic self, she goes back to the basement to try and make that happen. I hope this will be a part of the voyage of discovery for the young reader.

Armed with Cheryl's inputs, here is *Stay Out of the Basement* which the savvy young pre-teen reader would enjoy and imagine more magical happenings in the basement. The illustrations by Saurabh Pandey are adequate but a bit too stylized to create the aura of magic which the author seeks to bring to her story.

**Stay Out of the Basement* won the 1st Prize in the Category 'Get Ready for A magical Time' in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books by CBT.

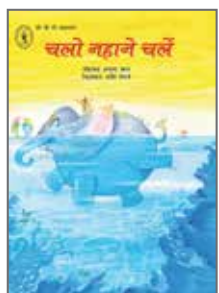
**AGAR HAMARE PAHIYE LAGE
HOTE; IF WE HAD WHEELS**

Both by Sanjiv Jaiswal
'Sanjay'. Translated from Hindi into English by Navin Menon. Illustrations by Ankur Mitra. Edited by Kusumlata Singh.
Children's Book Trust, 2023,
pp. 16 each, ₹ 60.00 each

The original Hindi title won a prize in the Category Concept Books in the Competition for Children's Books in Hindi organized by CBT. Jaiswal is the author of another CBT title *The King's Feast*.

Children's imagination is proverbially like a kite blowing in the wind. Sonu wonders why he does not have wheels with which he could run really fast like cycles, scooters and cars which go zip...zip...zoom. Till his sister reminds him of the drawbacks like having to fill air into the tyres, or getting punctures...Sonu then thinks the better of wanting wheels and understands that humans have the brains to invent the wheel!

Both the original and the translation read well and the quirky illustrations would make a child laugh out loud. I found one proof error, avoidable in such a small book.

**CHALO NAHAANE CHALEIN;
LET'S GO TAKE A DIP**

By Mohammad Arsha Khan.
Translated from Hindi into English by Navin Menon.
Illustrations by Shashi Shetye. Edited by Kusumlata Singh
Children's Book Trust, 2023,
pp. 16 each, ₹ 60.00 each

Chalo Nahaane Chalein won the Second Prize in the Read-Aloud Category in the Competition for Children's Books in Hindi organized by CBT. The other title published by the author for CBT is *Khujli Aise Hui Chhoomantar*.

The quirky little bilingual book is bound to hold the child reader enthralled. The English translation in particular has one chuckling with every turn of the page. For what would Mummy and Papa do when a summer day is hot and humid? Turn on the air conditioner, of course! But not the big elephant who fans himself with his big ears and leads

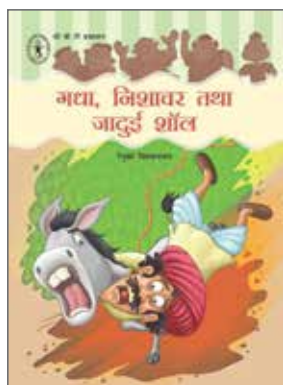
the way when the monkey suggests a dip in the pond, followed by the monkey, cat, pig, buffalo and deer. And this is where the author slips in effortlessly morsels of information about the habits of various animals: the cat keeps herself clean by licking herself all over; the little sparrow by rolling in the mud, and lo and behold! No dip in the pond for pig likes best to cool himself by wallowing in slime and mud in a ditch. Each one to his own...and so on.



DHRUV KI GAADI; DHRUV AND HIS TOY CARS

By Amitabj Shankar Roy Choudhury. Translated from Hindi into English by Navin Menon. Illustrations by Shivani. Edited by Kusumlata Singh. Children's Book Trust, 2023, pp. 16 each, ₹ 60.00 each

Man ki Gaadi published under the new title *Dhruv ki Gaadi* won the Second Prize in the Category Social Emotional Learning in the Competition for Children's Books in Hindi organized by CBT. Without sounding like a morality tale, the idea that sharing is good is highlighted by the author. All parents would identify with a child's angst at being asked to share favourite toys and books, and yet it is something which no parent can fail to inculcate early in a child's life. The larger than life images in the illustrations are great tools to convey anger, dismay, and love of the various characters in this little book.



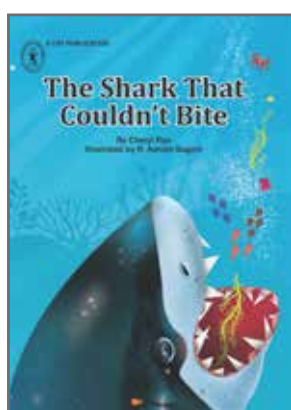
THE DONKEY, THE GHOULS AND THE MAGIC SHAWL; GADHA, NISHACHAR TATHA JADUYI SHAWL

By Renuka Vishwanathan. Illustrations by Ankur Mitra. Translated from English into Hindi by Kusumlata Singh. Edited by Navin Menon. Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 32 each, ₹ 80.00 each

The Donkey, The Ghouls and the Magic Shawl won the Second Prize in the Category Get Ready for a Magical Time in the Competition for Children's Books organized by CBT. The other book by the author published by CBT is titled *Lucky the Licking Dog*.

As stories go, this book by Renuka Vishwanathan is a non-starter, in spite of the fact that it has won a prize. The storyline is flat, full of unexciting dialogues to explain concepts like ghouls which will not be comprehended by the very young reader, nor will it grab the attention of the older child. The illustrations are not eye-catching. There is no difference in the way humans and ghouls are depicted. Neither

the original in English nor its Hindi translation, written in dull prosaic sentences, will enthuse any reader to keep turning the pages to know what happens. In today's milieu of AI, it is doubtful if children of any age would relate to this bilingual title. CBT should aim to keep pace with the times in which it is clear that the young generation today has made a quantum leap in terms of cognition and intelligence quotient.



THE SHARK THAT COULDN'T BITE; SHARK KA VAAR NA HUA SHIKAR

By Cheryl Rao. Illustrated by R. Ashish Bagchi. Translated from English into Hindi and edited by Navin Menon, Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 16 each, ₹ 60.00 each

The Shark that couldn't Bite by Cheryl Rao won a prize in the category Read-Aloud Books/Picture Books in the Competition for Children's Books organized by CBT. Rao is a prolific writer of children's books and her latest book before the one under review *Gymming on the Beach* was reviewed in the November 2022 issue of *The Book Review*.

A visit to the dentist is terrifying to the old and the young; how then could a shark with crooked teeth not be scared of the Dentist Squid? But all's right with the world for the hungry/angry shark once his teeth are straightened out and he can eat to his heart's content. Imaginatively created, the narrative is so alive with the attractive illustrations that the young reader will swim and float in the sea in his/her imagination with the shark. Go out and order a copy to read out the tale that begins by saying: But there was once a shark.



Jaya Krishnamachari

Aayi Aur Mein is the story of a girl whose mother has been hospitalized for a while and what her thoughts and emotions are on the day of her home coming. The girl and her dog Nimki are eagerly looking out of the window waiting for that moment. When she hears the familiar voice of her mother calling out to her, she rushes to hug



AAYI AUR MEIN

By Mamta Naini. Illustrations by Sanket Pethkar. Hindi Layout by Puja K. Menon. Translated from the original English by Sushil Joshi. Edited by Seema

Eklavya Foundation, 2023, pp. 36,
₹ 95.00

her. The story has been narrated in the first-person format, so the reader gets a feel of what the girl is thinking to herself. She remembers the day her mother goes to the hospital and explains to her what the doctor has told her about the need for surgery. Her mother had also assured her that she would be back in the time it would take for her to learn her tables. She still feels disconsolate and keeps wondering whether her mother would really come back. On seeing her mother back home, that fear is allayed. But she senses that things are changed as far as her mother's appearance is concerned as also the smell about her. She wonders and feels anguished about the short hair her mother is sporting now. She thinks about her mother's long tresses that she had also inherited and how her grandmother always remarked about her looking exactly like her mother. She is angry with the doctor who had altered her mother's appearance and wonders why her mother did not prevent him or why her grandmother did not object to it.

All these feeling of the little girl have been portrayed by the author in a natural and sensitive manner since it is not easy for children to understand the gravity of some illnesses. The girl tries various methods to make her mother cover up her altered appearance, but her mother just smiles and tells her she is content to be as she is now. This obstinacy of the mother also annoys the child. Finally, the little girl finds a solution that will make her mother and herself look alike, just as in the past. Her mother is astonished at what she does but just laughs and hugs her tight. I would like the young readers to read the book and find out for themselves what solution the girl has found. Her solution gets the approval of her granny also who assures her that she would always be like her mother, whatever changes may occur since her mother would always be within her being.

Mamta Naini is an award-winning author who has written more than 30 children's books, many of which have been acclaimed nationally and internationally. She is inspired by the vivid imaginativeness of children and finds her stories in them.

The illustrations in this book are very evocative and will make the story interesting for the young reader. The artist Sanket Pethkar is a Mumbai based freelance artist and designer for different Indian publishers. He loves to develop illustrated story books for children.



SUNDARBAGH STREET ME CHAMATKAR

By Nandita da Cunha.
Translated from English
by Yashodhara Kaneriyar.
Illustrations by Priya Kuriyan
Ekalavya Foundation, 2023,
pp. 22, ₹ 100.00

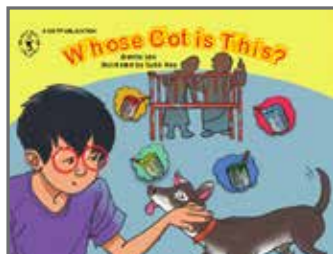
Sundarbagh Street Me Chamatkar is the story of a little girl Zara who helps transform a dump yard into a beautiful garden, restoring it to its past glory. The story revolves around Zara and her old school crafts teacher Gappi who helps her to make this magical transformation possible. Zara is a motherless girl with a father who has no time for her, gets into the habit of going to the dumpyard near her house to ward off her loneliness and sitting on the bench there watching the birds and all the junk lying around. A group of young boys also comes there daily as darkness creeps in. They practice their Rap songs ignoring Zara's presence; so she is able to sit there by herself. But this doesn't last since, one evening she finds her old school crafts teacher opening the gate and coming in to sit on the bench. Zara is not pleased at this because she is a talkative lady who keeps up a steady chatter. Miss Gappi takes to bringing bird feed for the sparrows, makes something out of the available junk, and slowly Zara finds herself looking forward to her coming. On the pretext of having dropped her knitting needle she gets Zara to search for it by pulling out all the grass around the bench, like she herself does. Zara is amazed at the heaps of mud around the bench. The next day Miss Gappi brings and scatters some seeds around and keeps watering them every day. This kindles Zara's interest especially when the seeds start sprouting.

From then on Zara's desire to grow flowers in that place takes wings. She is fascinated with Miss Gappi's stories of how a beautiful garden had existed in what was now a dump yard. She dreams about the garden every night. The story goes on to tell the reader how she ropes in the Thod Phod gang boys who visit the dump yard to dig up the whole place, how a gentleman whose trucks carry the junk from the yard helps to get fresh soil for the garden and how, gradually, the people of that colony get interested in her project of making the dump yard into a park once again. The craft teacher's ingenuity in unobtrusively firing the imagination of a young lonely child to do something constructive is also an interesting part of the story that touched me very much. As the story progresses we find Zara's garden growing beautifully, slowly and steadily, with the help of all the people living around that place who contribute with their time and labour to make her

dream come true. They call their group 'Build our Bagh'. They also organize a function to celebrate the re-opening of the park where the chief guest is no other than Zara's father and when Miss Gappi introduces him to the youngest member of the team who made this transformation possible he is surprised to see Zara as the architect of this project.

Nandita da Cunha with an MBA degree from XLRI worked in companies like Arthur Anderson and KPMG before taking up her favourite job of writing books for children. She loves plants and has more than 80 plants in her home.

Priya Kuriyan's illustrations are very attractive. She writes and illustrates books for children. She has directed some educational films for children and has also makes Animation Comics and Doubles for them. She is an accomplished artist who is doing a lot of work in the field of children's books.



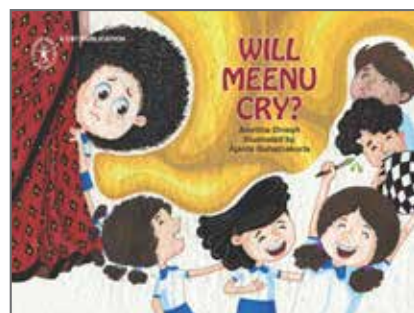
WHOSE COT IS THIS?

By Benita Sen. Illustrated by Subir Roy
Children's Book Trust, Delhi,
pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

In *Whose Cot is This?* Bobo's grandmother and mother are excited over a baby cot in which both had slept as kids and think Bobo would feel similarly. But Bobo has one look at the old, rusted cot and feels no enthusiasm at their discovery. His mother understands his feelings and suggests a way to make the cot attractive for him. Once she sets to work in improving the looks of the cot Bobo also joins in and feels very happy when he sees the end result. But before he can sit in it, his pet Haru occupies it and looks at him as if to say, 'too late'. All the three burst out laughing to see Haru lying asleep in the cot.

A simple but interesting story that children are sure to enjoy. The author has shown how even an old object can be imaginatively transformed, thus encouraging young ones to try their hands at creatively transforming old things in their homes. This book has won a prize in the category Social-emotional Learning in the Competition for Writers of children's books organized by CBT.

The illustrations by Subir Roy are very evocative and will certainly kindle an interest in the book.



WILL MEENU CRY? (KYA MEENU ROYEGI)

By Amrita Dinesh. Illustrated by Ajanta Guhathakurta
Children's Book Trust of India, Delhi,
pp.16, ₹ 60.00

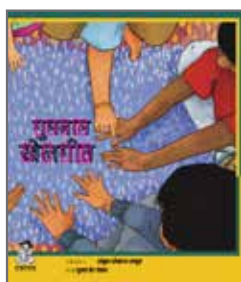
Will Meenu Cry? is a bilingual book written both in English and Hindi (*Kya Meenu Royegi*) as a read aloud book. The author has very imaginatively created the story of a child who cries daily while her working mother takes her to school. She makes up some excuse or the other for not wanting to go to school and every day her mother has to cajole her and plead with her to get her into school. Between them, the mother and Meenu's teacher make sure she attends school. By including the names of the weekdays in narrating the story for Meenu's behaviour on each day, the author has included a learning process for the young ones. Meenu's crying stops on the week-end since Saturday and Sunday are holidays. After a fortnight Meenu finds a reason to stop crying and I would leave the children to find out why that happens. The author leaves the children with a question, 'Will Meenu cry on Monday?' It would be interesting to know what the kids feel.

This book won the First prize in the category Social and Emotional Learning (3-5years) in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by CBT.

Ajanta Guhathakurta has imaginatively portrayed the story's theme through her illustrations.



Anil Singh



GUMNAAM KHELEGET*

Ankur Writer's Group,
Ankur Society for
Alternatives in Education.
Illustrations by Pooja Menon
Eklavya Foundation,
2023, pp. 48, ₹ 110.00

Whether it's children or adults, we all sing and hum while doing mundane chores. Not only does this add to the fun of work, it also gives energy and freshness. This is our spontaneous nature and *Kheleget* (songs that are sung while playing) are not any different. Such songs become all the more important for games since there is a feeling of togetherness in them, there are rules, fun, energy and a certain pace to them.

In different parts of the country, various outdoor and indoor games

are played. And all of them have something common in them. And that is a tune and a beat—of fun and frolic, of laughter, of rhythm, of the inherent pace and of music. This erupts from within children. Without singing these songs, how can their games ever be complete?!

We have all heard ‘*Akkad bakkad bambe bo*’ or ‘*chhutti hone wali hai, rail ka dibba khali hai*’. We have also sung these rhymes during our school days. But there are also such songs which are sung in different corners of the country along with minor variations. Most of these are made up by children themselves.

*Bus ke neeche kela, ram ji ka mela, mele me jayenge, rasmalai khayenge,
Rasmalai achchhi, hamne khai machchhi, machchhi me tha kaanta, tera mera chaanta,
Chaanta laga zor se, hamne khaye samose, samose me aaloo, nana bada chaloo*

These songs have such flexibility and so much potential/possibility, that children can customize and modify them according to their requirement. If they do not like a word, they can bring in another word in its place. They easily use work, names and trends related to their contexts in these songs. The entire country, along with its diversity, is present in these songs.

These *Khelgeet* have been put together by the Ankur Writer’s Group (Ankur Lekhak Samooh). Children in this group are in the age group of 10-15 years.

Apart from the common popular rhyming verses such as ‘*Aam choori, chhappan chhuri, garam masala, pani puri*’, there are some that might shock us. Not only with the content, but also for the inherent humour in them. Let’s take a look at this song:

*Ram ke darbar me ho raha tha match
Kumbhakaran ne chhakka mara, Ram ne kiya catch,
Ram bola out out, Sita boli get out*

Or, take a look at this:

*Hero honda, police ka danda, police ne mara kaise?
Hero honda, police ka danda, police ne mara aise.*

Amazing interactions are taking place in these songs a lot of times.

This collection has 38 *Khelgeet*. Some of these are really exclusive. Illustrations of children playing and singing in their surroundings make the songs come alive. At home, in the park, on the roads, in the field, in their *bastis* or in a bus, these songs are present everywhere. And in all these places children are playing in small groups or groups of two. Pooja Menon, in her illustrations, has portrayed children and their games in their entirety. In these illustrations, the surroundings are as prominent as are the expressions of the children.

The special thing about this book is that along with the songs, it also gives details of the game during which they are sung. The method of playing a game and how exactly a particular song is used in it, draws a vivid, vibrant picture of each game in the mind of the reader.

This wonderful collection of *Khelgeet* is supported by Parag. These songs have been compiled so that they do not get lost with time. For all those who work with schools, libraries, *aanganwadis* and the community, this collection of *Khelgeet* will be very useful.

*This review has been translated from the Hindi by Shivani Bajaj.



Aruna Vajpeyi



Jacinta Kerketta is a poet, activist and a freelance journalist. Belonging to the tribal area near Jharkhand, she is the voice of the tribal community. She writes about oppression of Adivasis, displacement of local communities in the name of development, appropriation of their natural resources, gender based violence, conflicts over land, problems of living inside the forest and government apathy. The book under review was written while she was a writer in residence at the Takshashila Bal Sahitya Srujanpeeth.

Jacinta's Diary brings together a collection of tales of travel through tribal areas of Jharkhand, the Niyamgiri Hills and adjacent areas of Odisha. Her diary deals brings interesting insights into tribal society, forests, hills, villages, houses and customs. She describes the atmosphere of freedom among the people. There are no taboos. The boys and girls mix

JACINTA'S DIARY

By Jacinta Kerketta. Illustrations
by Priya Kuriyan

Jugnoo Prakashan/Ektara,
2023, pp. 42, ₹ 120.00

freely, girls can go out at night, dance, swim in the pond or roam around without any restrictions.

Uraony is a tribal area near the border of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. There is a residential school in the village Bhagitoli where English and their native language 'Kudukh' are taught. She narrates the day-to-day activities of the children of the hostel.

In the evening, the younger girls take the cows out for grazing. After school the boys and girls go to the forest to collect 'sarai' fruits. Oil is extracted from the seeds of these fruits while the waste is fed to cows and buffaloes.

The village elders speak to Jacinta about their ability to communicate with their ancestors through the signals they get from nature. Nothing happens in nature without reason. The wedding ceremonies and festivals are performed by the riverside, trees or hills to seek their blessings.

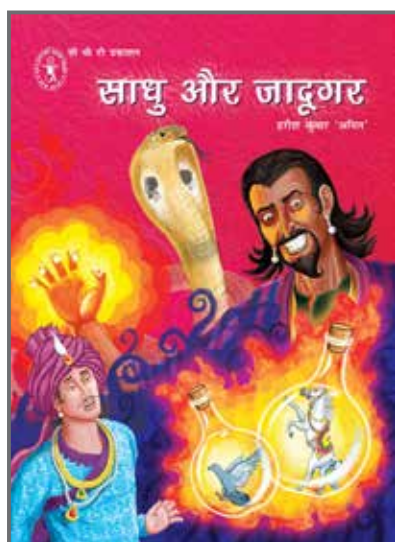
Jacinta next visits Saranga, her own place on the border of Odisha and Jharkhand with the Koel river flowing nearby. Now they have roads and electricity. But the tribals are not interested in the development of the area as it attracts all types of unwanted people like the sand mafia or mining mafia, inviting police in the area which in turn disturb the peace and harmony there. Tribals are scared of the police.

Another interesting entry in the *Diary* is about the Konch tribals of Niyamgiri Hills. The Niyamgiri festival is not exactly a festival but is a celebration of a protest by about 112 villages to protect the Niyamgiri Hills from the mining mafia. This festival has been taking place for many years to show their unity. The tribals say that they will sacrifice their lives to protect the gifts of nature.

The Asur tribals of Netarhat Hills were skilled in procuring iron by melting stones and making implements for use in agriculture and to kill animals. But it was banned by the British Government. So they shifted their occupation to agriculture. They celebrate the festivals connected with land, agriculture, forest, climate, etc.. They worship trees, land, and items which are in their daily use. It is interesting to know that they name their settlements by the tree under which they first take shelter. There are about 100 villages in Netarhat Hills like this. The community is better placed financially and culturally and generally good looking.

'Mini' and 'Gilehari ki Bhasha' are two stories which are not related to tribals in *Jacinta's Diary* in which Jacinta ponders over the utility of language. There are four poems in the diary, all related to nature and the destruction of forests and hills in the name of development.

The book is very informative. Most of us are not familiar with the life led by tribals, who mostly live in Central India. Ektara Takshashila Bal Sahitya Srujanpeeth and Kalakendra have made an effort to highlight the tribal lifestyle, their language, their villages in their publications. The drawings by Priya Kuriyan are beautiful and very appropriate.

**SADHU AUR JADUGAR**

By Harish Kumar 'Amit'.
Illustrations by Ankur Mitra
Children's Book Trust, New Delhi,
2022(Reprint), pp. 32, ₹ 80.00

Sadhu aur Jadugar received the first prize in the category of 'Jadu Bhari Kahania' in the Hindi Children's Literature Competition organized by the Children's Book trust.

Rajkumar Sarang wants to marry Princess Kanchan of the adjoining kingdom, but his parents are not in favour. Rajkumar leaves the palace in a huff, and after a long journey reaches a thick forest. He meets a snake who promises to help him to get married to Princess Kanchan. But he cannot because he was transformed from sadhu to a snake by a Jadugar and lost his supernatural power. How does the snake help the Prince? The snake can do so only if he finds the Jadugar to get his supernatural power back. Only the pigeon knows where to find him. The pigeon gives them several clues one after another. Ultimately after solving several clues, they find the Jadugar. Since he was the original culprit, the Sadhu punishes him by transforming him to a rat.

The final outcome of the whole story is left to the imagination of the children.

Too many characters using their supernatural powers unnecessarily make the story long. The introduction of Pigeon with its clues is superfluous. The illustrations by Ankur Mitra are eye catching and relevant.

The other drama is *Fanse Gaya Pecha* written by Dipti. The story is about generational gap. The trauma, the youth face if their point is not understood. Here there is also a tussle between father and daughter due to differences of opinion.



Contributors

Aakangshita Dutta graduated with Honours in English Literature from Jesus and Mary College. She has been working as a Communications and Industry relations specialist for well over a decade, based out of Delhi.

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Alka Behari is Professor in the Department of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi. She is profoundly interested in the dynamics of the undergraduate classroom. Her areas of research interest include Comparative Education; Pedagogy in Tertiary Education; Assessment and Evaluation; Indian Writing in English: Poetry and Fiction and Children's Literature.

Andal Jagannathan works with the Quality Assurance team at Clearly Blue, a content and design studio. In her other avatar, she is a waste warrior who dreams of plastic-eating microbes saving the world.

Anjana Neira Dev is Associate Professor of English at the Department of English in Gargi College, University of Delhi, Delhi.

Anil Singh works with the Professional Development vertical of Parag Initiative. He has been a course faculty for two long-term courses, the Library Educators Course and the Children's Library Course, offered by Parag. A passionate storyteller, Anil has been active in the field of school education for over two decades.

Annie Pruthi has an MA in Political Science from Jamia Millia Islamia. She is currently working as a Research Intern at PRIDE, Lok Sabha Secretariat. She is also the co-author of the book *Will You Stay?* (Invincible Publishers, 2019).

Aruna Patel, former Joint Director, Information & Public Relations, Government of Gujarat, is currently Managing Trustee, Media India Centre for Research and Development, New Delhi.

Bharat Kidambi is a Bangalore-based Entrepreneur.

Bharati Jagannathan teaches at Miranda House, University of Delhi, Delhi. She enjoys doing crosswords and Sudoku, and watching birds and trees.

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Deepa Agarwal is an author. Her work has been translated into several Indian and foreign languages. *The Begum, Journey to the Forbidden City, Kashmir! Kashmir!* and *The Arthashastra for Children* are among her recent titles.

Dipavali Sen is a retired college-teacher of Economics and free-lancer on Indian Mythology.

Deepali Shukla, associated with the publication programme of Eklavya Foundation for over ten years, loves reading, especially children's books. She is an enthusiastic photographer and storyteller.

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Indira Ananthakrishnan is good at addressing children through the written word in the form of short stories, historical and scriptural tales, biographical sketches, plays and picture books. She is also an appealing storyteller. Her works include *The Phoenix in the Sky* (Hachette India, 2020) and *The Queen Who Ruled the Wave* (Hachette, 2022).

Ira Saxena is a child psychologist, writer, and critic of children's books on themes ranging from computer crime to Gandhian thought. An award-winning writer of English and Hindi fiction and non-fiction, she is a founding member and secretary of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children.

Jane Sahi has been working in the area of education for the last 38 years. Born in England, she moved to India in 1968 in search of a deeper understanding of Gandhiji's life and values. In 2000, she wrote a book entitled *Education and Peace*. In 1975, she started the Sita School, an alternative school. She has been actively involved in the Alternative Education Network, an informal group of individuals working in the field of education.

Jaya Krishnamachari is a freelance multilingual translator.

Kavita Tiwari is an Associate Editor with *Chakmak*, a well-known Hindi magazine for children, where she has worked for the past 14 years. She is also a copy editor for Hindi magazines published by Azim Premji University.

Lakshmi Karunakaran leads Parag, an initiative by Tata Trusts to support the development of and access to good quality story books for children in Indian languages. Over the years she has worked with children experiencing social exclusion in government schools, special needs schools, remedial schools, and in disadvantaged communities.

Manika Kukreja is an enthusiastic children's books reader. She likes to read fictional tales and believes in the significance of expression of experienced events and emotions articulated through realistic fictional stories and non-fiction.

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Nidhi Gulati is Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi, Delhi. For children, Nidhi likes to write about films. For adults, especially those who take their work seriously, she writes basically anything and everything else about children's lives and learning, teachers, and the nature of childhood.

Nidhi Qazi is part of the Professional Development vertical. She comes with a rich experience of and insights about facilitating courses and teacher trainings. Committed to the public education system, ensuring a fruitful learning experience for teachers and herself remains at the core of her work.

Nilima Sinha, a graduate from the University of Delhi, is an author of mystery-adventure stories for children. Her works include *The Chandipur Jewels*, *Vanishing Trick at Chandipur*, *Adventure on the Golden Lake* and *SOS From Munia*. Her *Adventure Before Midnight* was selected for the White Raven List for libraries internationally. She was Vice-President, IBBY and is presently President, AWIC/Indian IBBY.

Nita Berry writes short stories, picture and activity books, historical biographies and full-length non-fiction for children of all ages.

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Ragini Lalit is an educator and researcher. She is currently exploring what it means to create critical learning spaces for children and young adults in a way that centres hope and compassion. She is particularly interested in the use of children's literature and performing arts in education.

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Sanaah Mehra is a final-year BA student specializing in Sociology. She is interested in writing and researching within the realms of public policy and international relations. Her easy escape from academic pursuits is the enchanting world of fictional books, with one of her favourites being *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

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Shivi is an English teacher at Queen's Valley School and a published writer. She has a Master's in English from Ambedkar University, Delhi. She is also a storyteller and analyses narratives.

Shiv Narayan Gour has been working in the field of education and publication with Eklavya Foundation for more than twenty years. He enjoys reading, telling stories, and writing.

Shubhra Seth is Associate Professor at the Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi. She interacts and learns with young adult women as part of her professional responsibilities and attempts alongside to take forward her research interest in forced migration, both conflict- and climate-induced. She aspires to pen experiential short stories of women and children who have been rendered homeless and now seek asylum across borders.

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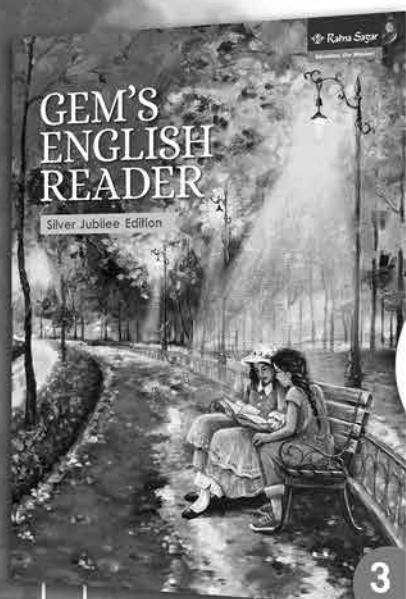
VB Tharakeshwar is Professor, Department of Translation Studies, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

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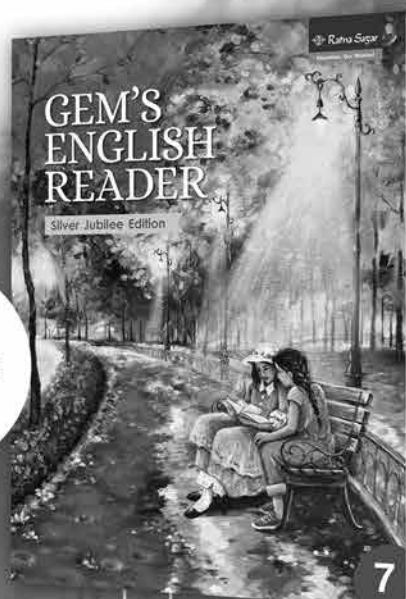
Working in areas of children's education and literature, **Vivek BG** finds himself always surrounded by books. He considers himself lucky to all-too-often stumble upon some gems of books.

Vivek Singh Thakur has worked with Parag as a Library Manager, in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. He holds a Master's degree in Management and in Education.

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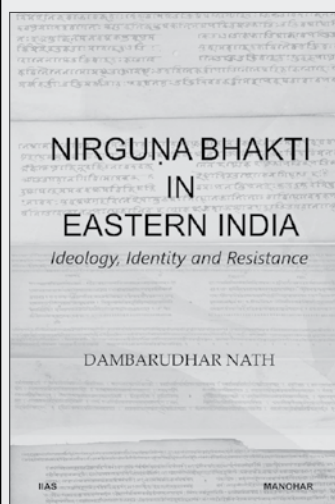
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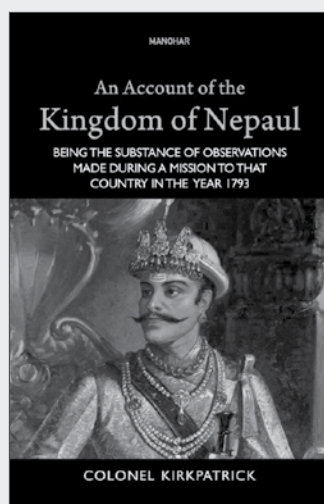


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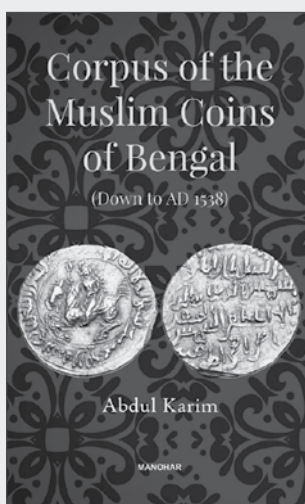
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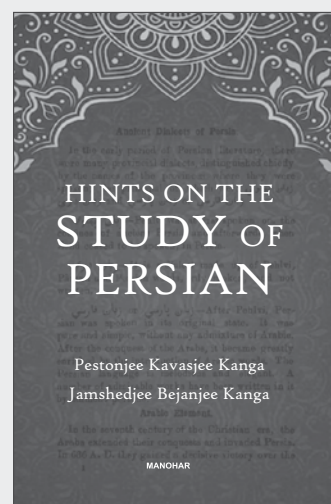
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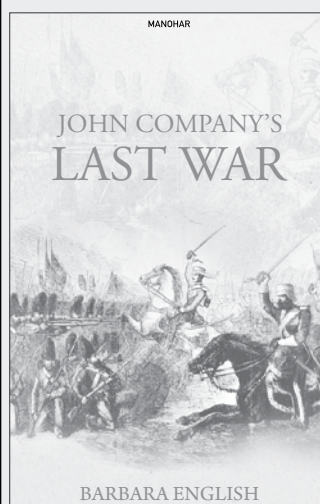
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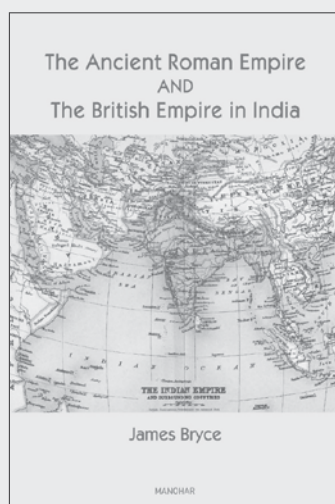
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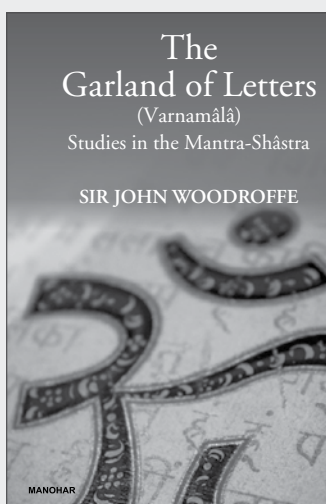
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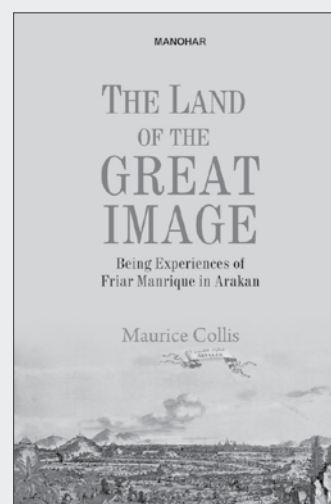
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Parag Honour List 2023 Bookshelf Essentials for children

Parag Honour List

is an annual curated collection of outstanding books for children in English and Hindi. The list comprises of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry books across genres for children, young readers, and young adults.

Parag Initiative

of Tata Trusts supports the development and dissemination of good-quality children's storybooks in Indian languages. By building the capacity of publishers, teachers, librarians, and facilitators, Parag aims to improve children's access to and relationship with books.



PHL is a great addition to a child's library at home or in school. Scan the QR code and add Parag Honour List 2023 books to your collection today!

ETHOS LITERARY FESTIVAL 2023

3rd Edition

18 NOVEMBER 2023

AMBASSADOR

New Delhi-IHCL SeleQtions

SCHEDULE

9.00 am to 9.45 am

Registration | Tea and Snacks

9.50 am to 10.20 am

Revenge Theory

Unravelling the Layers of Social,
Cultural, and Political Influences

Onkar Sharma, in conversation
with Rajeev Ranjan

10.25 am to 11 am

The Journey of the

Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English

Sukrita Paul Kumar and Vinita Agrawal,
in conversation with Rajorshi Patranabis

11 am to 11.40 am

Politics of Writing, Teaching and Reviewing Poetry

Speakers: GJV Prasad, Ajanta Paul and Akshaya Kumar

Moderated by Shamayita Sen

11.45 am to 12.25 pm

Since Time Immemorial: Mandalas of Time

Malashri Lal, in conversation with Seema Jain

12.30 pm to 1.15 pm

Poetry reading by Raja Chakraborty, Ajanta Paul,
Rajorshi Patranabis, Alka Balain, Bhawna Vij Arora,
Amlanjyoti Goswami, Jagari Mukherjee,

and Mukulika Batabyal

Moderated by Kiriti Sengupta

1.15 pm to 2.05 pm

Lunch

2.10 pm to 2.40 pm

Deep & Personal Wounds

to the Making of a Shelter:

Wound is the Shelter

Formal launch by Sukrita Paul Kumar

Angshuman Kar,

in conversation with Sutanuka Ghosh Roy

2.45 pm to 3.30 pm

Beyond Grief

A Talk by Swati Pal

Introduced by Sutanuka Ghosh Roy

3.35 pm to 4.35 pm

Limitations of Classroom Teaching:

Where do we place contemporary

Indian English Poets?

Speakers: Achingliu Kamei, Bhawna Vij Arora,

and Jayanthi Manoj

Moderated by Jagari Mukherjee

5.00 pm

Coffee and Snacks



Registration: info@hawakal.com
bookalignshop@gmail.com