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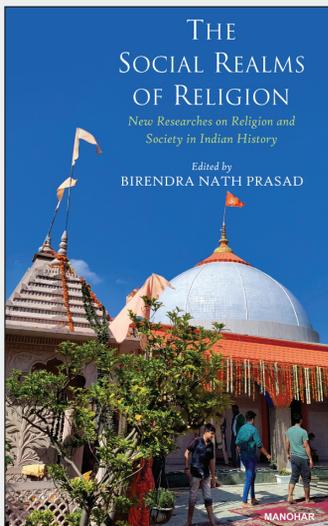
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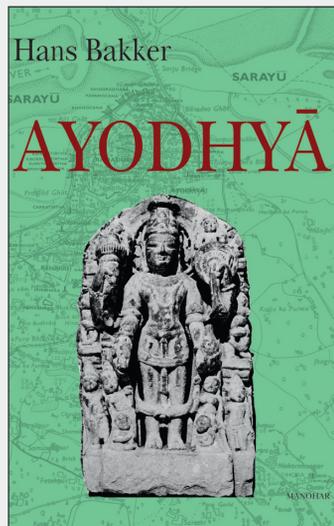


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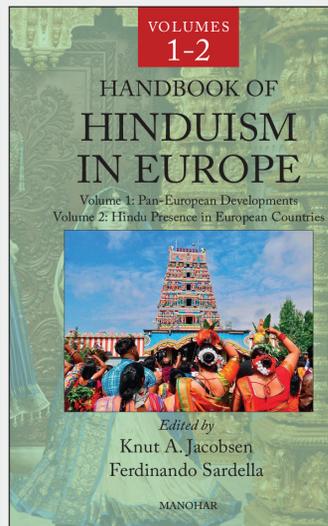
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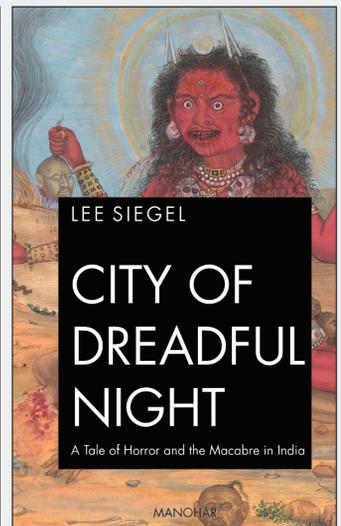
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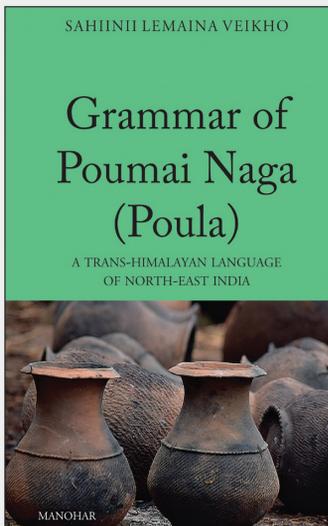
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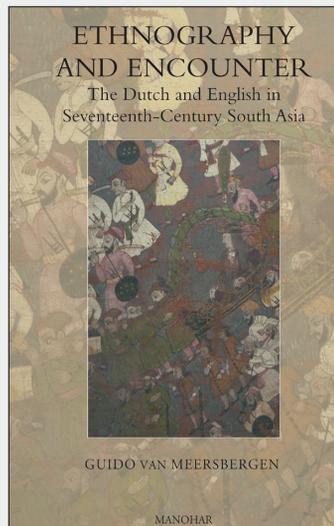
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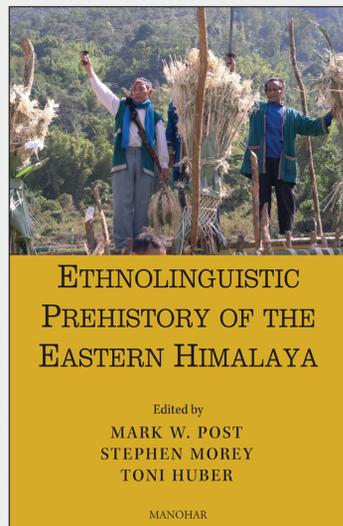
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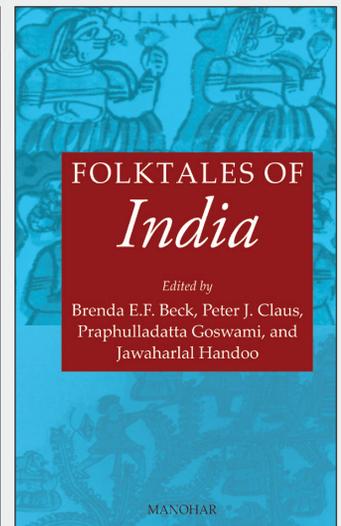
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## Special Issue On Books for the Young



This special issue of *The Book Review* is on books published for children and YA in 2024-25. As in the years past, the numbers are huge and we have faced space constraints. We thank all our reviewers for keeping to deadlines. Some reviews have had to be held over, and we assure our reviewers that they will all be published in the December issue. The project of putting together this special issue is a learning experience for Team TBR every year, as it has been this year. The themes covered are manifold: education, issues of adoption, inequality and the struggle for inclusiveness in the classroom, picture books and activity books for the beginner readers, engaging fiction for the YA... the list is endless. We hope you will enjoy reading this special issue. We would appreciate your insights on how we can improve the Children's special issue in the years to come.

This special issue has been sponsored by some members of the TCA family in memory of their mother, late Smt. Kamala Ramanujachari, who passed away on 2 February 2025. She was married to late Shri TCA Ramanujachari, a retired member of the IAS, a well-known criminal lawyer before he joined the civil service, and the architect of the Deed of The Book Review Literary Trust. After his passing away in 1998, she gave her apartment in Vasant Enclave almost rent free for the office of *The Book Review* where it continued to be published from till July 2023, when the apartment was sold. Kamala Chari took immense pride in the journal run by her daughter, Chandra and adoptive daughter, Uma Iyengar. She was an interested observer of the process of editing the translation series: Past Continuous in the late 1990s, and an invitee at the Rashtrapati Bhavan when the three translations were received by President KR Narayanan from the translators. Chitra Narayanan, the founder editor of *The Book Review*, a devoted admirer of Kamala Chari's ageless beauty and warmth, never failed to visit her when she came to India from her postings abroad as an IFS officer. The three women team of TBR continue to miss her.

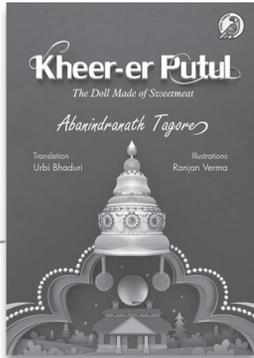
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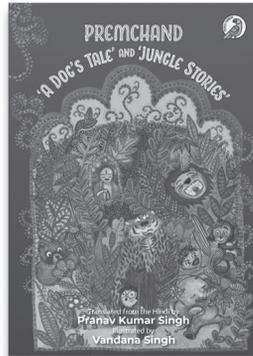
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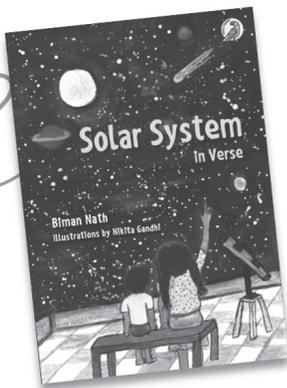


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(adores lore & language)



**The Future Sleuth**  
(loves secret labs)

**The Science Poet**  
(counts meteors)

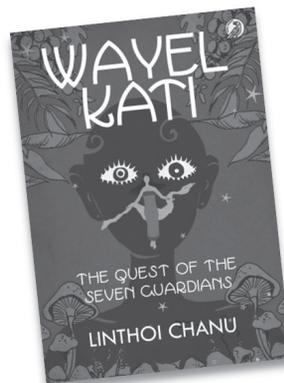
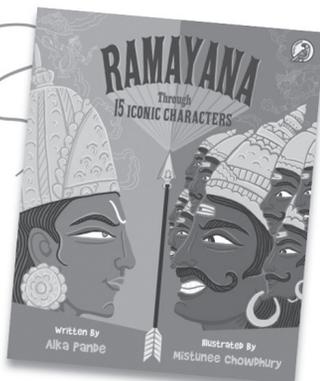


**The Eco-Dreamer**  
(plants questions)



**The Tongue-Tickler**  
(invents recipes, loves word-play and giggles)

**The Myth Weaver**  
(asks "why Rama?")



**The Mountain Storyteller**  
(drawn to rivers, songs, and timeless folk magic)



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# The Multifaceted Nature of Diversity and Inclusion through Child Adoption Lens

Vinita Bhargava

In the contemporary world, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) have emerged as a critical framework for understanding human coexistence and equity. They capture the multiplicity of human identities such as gender, caste, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, language and ability. Inclusion refers to the active processes through which individuals and groups are recognized, respected, and empowered to participate fully in social, cultural, educational and organizational contexts. Academic discourse on D&I has evolved from liberal notions of tolerance to critical frameworks that interrogate power, privilege, and structural inequities.

Bringing together diversity as categories and diversity as a continuum is important. Categories are important for visibility, recognition and justice. Continuum perspectives are essential for a nuanced understanding of lived experiences, identity fluidity and intersectionality.

The notion of D&I is rarely neutral. Politics determines which differences are recognized, whose voices are amplified or silenced. The global scenario is restructuring the understanding of D&I, movements highlight intersectionality and systemic inequities, pushing D&I beyond tokenism. Climate-induced migration and displacement create new categories of diversity (climate refugees, indigenous environmental rights). Diversity is being reframed as not just a social good but also a business imperative for innovation and global competitiveness.

We move from a brief outline of diversity and inclusion to understanding it through a practical lens of Child Adoption. The Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) website displays that there are more than 36000 parents registered for adoption. 'Why are there such long waiting lists when there are so many children in institutions?' is a common question. The reason stated by agencies was that at any given time, not all children were 'legally free' for adoption. Children who were relinquished by their parents have to remain in institutions for a mandatory two-month period, giving the biological parents the time to reconsider their decision. A child who is abandoned or lost, or whose parents are untraceable must first be declared 'free for adoption' by the juvenile justice system through the Child Welfare Committees. Various agencies, such as the police, medical institutions, and a probation department are involved, and each take their own time to file reports. Currently,

more rigid timelines have been given to fulfill various requirements.

A visit to an institution is an eye-opener because of the heterogeneity of children, both in terms of age, gender, medical condition, and their legal status. I would observe a seemingly healthy child at an agency, only to be told that the child had hepatitis B or C, was cytomegalovirus (CMV) positive, or had tested positive for HIV. The incidence of a transitory health problem such as low birth weight, developmental delays, cleft palate, club foot, tuberculosis, or hernia is another significant reason for children remaining in institutions for long periods. Children whose parents are deemed 'unfit' or children with 'no visitation', are two categories added on more recently by the Supreme Court of India. The last two are extremely subjective categories to determine.

The availability of residential care becomes an attractive immediate solution to the problems faced by very poor families struggling to meet the survival needs of their children. Lack of support by the government to parents facing financial, medical, or social challenges has been one of the most significant reasons for children being assigned to institutional facilities. Most parents who relinquish their children for adoption or have their children taken away from them do so because of economic and social issues. The people who adopt them are most often middle and upper-middle-class people. The mainstream child rights and feminist movement have, by and large, been pro-adoption and have resisted an explicitly intersectional position on the inequities and injustices that typically bring adoptive families together. There are many reasons for this, but here are the two that are prominent. It is assumed that the decision to relinquish a child for adoption is a choice that people make freely. The upper class, highly educated and more powerful

Diversity and inclusion today are not only about who is included but also about how global systems of power, economy, technology, and environment shape belonging, equity, and justice.

In the contemporary world, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) have emerged as a critical framework for understanding human coexistence and equity. They capture the multiplicity of human identities such as gender, caste, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, language and ability.

people, are better parents of children.

There will always be some children who need to be adopted into families. The desire to become a parent through adoption does not make anyone entitled to someone else's child. Today, market forces, coupled with classist state interventions and a do-good societal narrative, make adoption a fairy-tale ending. This means that people who have class privilege will continue to build their own families through the constrained choices, coercion, and loss of those who do not. On one side, single, unmarried, poor women are denied their rights, and on the other, a variety of family types are asserting their right to adopt a child.

The Juvenile Justice Act is not only a protective law but also a rehabilitative framework for Children in Need of Care and Protection (CNCP). It ensures that children without family care are provided with alternative care options, education, vocational skills, and long-term reintegration pathways, always guided by the principle of being 'in the best interest of the child'. Yet, determining it remains complex because it requires balancing safety, long-term development, cultural belonging, and the child's own voice. The court has stressed that the best interest of the child must override all other considerations, ensuring adoption is not reduced to commodification and has laid down safeguards and priority to Indian families. Inter-country adoption is considered a last resort, in line with the principle of subsidiarity (Article 21, Hague Convention, 1993). Children with physical or mental disabilities, serious medical conditions, or older children (above 5–6 years) are frequently considered for inter-country adoption as they are rarely adopted within the country.

Once a child is adopted abroad, the giving country has limited means of ensuring post-adoption monitoring or cultural continuity. Adoptees frequently report identity struggles, experiences of racism, and the loss of connection with their origins. Accountability remains asymmetrical: scandals involving trafficking or coercion in giving countries are met with global criticism of their systems,

whereas the demand-side pressures in receiving countries are rarely problematized.

Power inequalities in intercountry adoption extend beyond economics into law, culture, and representation. They reflect broader patterns of global inequity, where children from the Global South are relocated to the Global North under a humanitarian discourse that often obscures structural causes of family breakdown.

Sometimes adverse early childhood environments (ACEs) lead to maladjustments with the adoptive family and the return of the child to the institution. This is called 'adoption disruption' when done before legal finalization, or 'adoption dissolution' if done after finalization of the adoption. The adoptive parents cannot 'return' the child privately—this would be treated as abandonment.

In countries like the U.S., rehomings is often used to describe situations where adoptive parents, unable or unwilling to care for a child, place the child with another family through private arrangements, sometimes even via online forums or personal networks. This practice bypasses child protection authorities, adoption agencies, and courts. It raises serious risks: child trafficking, abuse, lack of background checks, and violation of the child's rights. Internationally, it is seen as a failure of the adoption system to provide adequate pre-adoption preparation and post-adoption support.

In this highly complex phenomenon of Child Adoption, D&I emerges as a critical framework for understanding and restructuring. The conceptual understanding means a movement from rigid categories to fluid, intersectional, and hybrid identities. Inclusion is being reframed as creating belonging and equity. D&I are no longer defined only within borders but across global movements, diasporas, and international institutions. The global scenario is restructuring D&I by expanding its scope, shifting it from static categories to dynamic, intersectional continuums, and situating it within global justice concerns. Diversity and inclusion today are not only about who is included but also about how global systems of power, economy, technology, and environment shape belonging, equity, and justice.



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## Vikas Baniwal

**DALIT, AADIVASI AUR SCHOOL: MADHYA PRADESH KE SANDARBH MEIN KUCHH ANUBHAV**

By Sukanya Durgashankar Dharmik, Balkishan Sharma, Yogesh Malviya, Vinod Gupta

Eklavya & Samavesh (Third Reprint), Bhopal, 2024, pp.156, ₹ 125.00

Originally published in 2003 by the Eklavya Foundation, this book is a seminal contribution to understanding the complex dynamics of caste-based and culture-based discrimination in the Indian society, particularly in educational institutions. The book emerged from extensive field research conducted primarily in Madhya Pradesh and offers a penetrating analysis of educational experiences. The book captures the nuanced experiences of children, parents, and teachers in great detail. The emerging picture reveals the complex negotiations that occur within educational spaces. This methodological choice proves particularly relevant as the intent is to document the lived realities rather than numbers.



The book presents a romantic view of the role of education in personal transformation, and social and political mobility. The parents try to learn more about the opportunities that their children might avail themselves of. They have high hopes regarding their children's futures. However, the hope that the unschooled generation has in schools paints a picture that is completely different from the reality that exists inside the schools.

Based on a 14-month-long engagement with educational institutions in rural and tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh, the authors worked extensively with children from marginalized communities. The decision to focus on the educational experiences of Dalit and Adivasi communities was made to gain a deeper understanding of their educational experiences following various reforms and provisions introduced by different governments after Independence.

The book's strength lies in its grounded approach, drawing from extensive fieldwork conducted in Harda & Ujjain districts of Madhya Pradesh. The focus was on grade 3 in primary classes, grade 6 in middle classes, and grade 9 in senior secondary classes, totalling 240 students from eight schools. Conversations were planned with parents, teachers, other community members and administrators, along with 6- to 8-month-long observations in government-provided hostels (p. 11).

The textual narrative highlights the tensions and dilemmas faced by parents and students regarding their school's expenditure, teachers' attitudes, administrative norms for the duration and timing of holidays and vacations, and the balancing of home responsibilities with the school's demands. The authors reveal how Adivasi children face linguistic discrimination when their mother tongues are not only ignored but actively discouraged. The authors document how children are punished both for speaking their mother tongues and for their inability to communicate effectively in the language of instruction. This double bind creates a form of enforced silence that teachers then interpret as evidence of intellectual deficiency or lack of engagement. This linguistic discrimination extends beyond mere communication difficulties to represent a fundamental assault on cultural identity. When schools dismiss Adivasi languages and cultural practices as primitive or irrelevant, they engage in a form of epistemic violence, leading to the systematic devaluation of indigenous ways of knowing and being. There is a significant transformation of cultural consciousness under the pressure of the educational system.

The economic dimensions of educational exclusion receive particular attention, with the book documenting how poverty creates additional barriers beyond social discrimination. Families struggle with the direct and indirect costs of schooling, often forced to make difficult choices between immediate economic needs and long-term educational investments. The anecdotes reveal how these economic pressures interact with caste discrimination to create what one parent describes as a situation where children don't learn and are discriminated against.

The analysis extends beyond simple documentation of discrimination to examine how multiple forms of marginalization intersect to create compounded disadvantages. Dalit and Adivasi girls emerge as particularly vulnerable, facing a triple discrimination based on caste, gender, and economic status. Their parents feel insecure, and the teachers blame the parents without much reflection on the systemic roots of the challenges that these girls face. Thus the challenges emerging from these intersecting identities require more sophisticated analytical frameworks.

One of the book's most significant contribution is its analysis of how discrimination operates through teachers' expectations, classroom interactions, and institutional practices. The authors document numerous instances where educators, who should serve as advocates for marginalized children, become instead agents of exclusion. The book reveals how teachers often harbour deeply ingrained caste prejudices that manifest in their classroom practices, from seating arrangements to academic expectations. The institutional response to discrimination

receives critical examination, with the authors revealing how schools often lack robust mechanisms to recognize and address caste-based discrimination. Even when discrimination is reported, the book documents how reparative and punitive measures are never taken, creating a culture of impunity that allows discriminatory practices to continue unchallenged.

The teachers' struggles with issues of community beliefs, cultural norms, and deficit staffing are also well-documented. The challenges include bureaucratic control, repetitive paperwork, unrealistic policies, centralized control over academic and administrative decisions, a lack of trust and respect among parents, children, and administrators, as well as contract-based appointments with low salaries. The problems become multi-fold when there are only one or two teachers in the school. Teachers often find no platform to raise these issues, and they feel voiceless, lacking a sense of agency and autonomy. Furthermore, the book shows how intersections of caste and gender dynamics create a discriminatory work environment and unprofessional conduct even with persons in superior positions. Such experiences break the spirits of even the most accomplished teachers and principals.

The systemic inequalities that perpetuate educational exclusion for India's most marginalized communities become alive through descriptions and analysis by the researchers. It documents the lived experiences of Dalit and Adivasi children navigating an education system that continues to reflect and reinforce centuries-old hierarchies of oppression. It proves the existence of exploitative relationships based on caste, class, gender, region, and religion that we often claim to have left far behind in our quest for modernity and liberalism. The book presents these realities in such detail that it moves, incites, and shames our educated sensibilities. It presents to us a reality of communities systematically disempowered and marginalized, becoming a burning example of internal exclusion, i.e., being excluded after an apparent inclusion in the system.

Despite its focus on discrimination and exclusion, the book does not present Dalit and Adivasi communities as passive victims. Instead, it documents various forms of resistance and resilience that these communities show while navigating the difficult educational spaces. The authors reveal how families develop strategies to support their children's education despite systemic barriers, and how children themselves develop coping mechanisms to deal with discriminatory treatment.

In an interesting chapter, the authors highlight that some parents secure simultaneous admission for their children, especially girls, to three schools. In the mornings, they attend government schools, and in the afternoons, they go to a private school. The third school is run by an NGO that provides uniforms, books,

stationery, and a hundred rupees per month to students. The reasons for these are varied, including receiving free grains from the government or NGO, keeping the girls busy throughout the day, and the hope that attending two schools would improve the children's learning. Even teachers and the Principal participate in these practices, as they need to maintain a decent teacher-student ratio to avoid being transferred to a faraway school. The shift from public to private schools has increased over the past years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many public schools were shut down, leading to learning gaps and an increased reliance on low-fee private schools that operate in public halls, such as panchayat halls or open spaces with unqualified teachers and no supervision.

There are also stories of hope and change. For example, caste discrimination was marginal in a school in Ujjain, which a mill owner had earlier managed. The school was handed over to the government on the condition that no worker or teacher would be removed or transferred from their positions. Thus, the social setting of the mill and the attitude of teachers impacted the composition and character of the school. Such cases could help us understand the impact of parents' workplace culture on the school culture. From the same school, we also find the story of Anand, who is a third-generation school-going child. He excels in his school, and there seems to be no discrimination in his classroom. However, such a scenario seems to be an exception only. Another story of hope which the book highlights is that of the Bairwa community, which has carved out a space for itself in all aspects of public and political life through its organized efforts.

The authors' analysis suggests potential points for intervention in reforms. Moving beyond superficial measures for inclusion, the authors call for addressing structural inequalities. They advocate for curricular reforms that incorporate Dalit and Adivasi languages, histories, and knowledge systems, challenging the hegemonic assumption that mainstream knowledge is inherently superior. The authors advocate for more comprehensive approaches that address both material conditions and sociocultural factors.

In conclusion, *Dalit, Adivasi Aur School* is a significant contribution to understanding educational inequality in contemporary India. Through its careful documentation of discrimination, thoughtful analysis of structural factors, and clear advocacy for systemic reforms, the book provides both an examination of current educational practices and a roadmap for creating more equitable systems. The book prompts us to think beyond the simplistic logic of education as a commodity, service, or resource development.



# The State in the Classroom

Samridhi Agarwal

## LESSONS IN STATE CAPACITY FROM DELHI'S SCHOOLS

By Yamini Aiyar

Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 256, ₹ 1250.00

‘What is your name?’ ‘My name is\_\_\_\_\_’. Written on the book’s cover, this simple sentence caught my attention immediately. It is often the first question we ask a child, but the answers I’ve encountered over the years through my fieldwork have been anything but uniform. Some children respond fluently, adding their age, grade, and even their favourite subject. Others pause, gather courage, and take time to speak. This seemingly minor observation has stayed with me, reminding me that even the most basic question reflects the profound inequalities in confidence, fluency, and trust that define our school system in India.

Reading Yamini Aiyar’s *Lessons in State Capacity from Delhi’s Schools* felt like being handed a vocabulary for questions I’ve always grappled with—about the nature of the Indian state, about reform and resistance, and about what it takes to build institutions in a democracy as complex and unequal as ours. The book is not merely about Delhi’s education reforms; it is a pedagogical offering on how public systems function, adapt, and sometimes stall despite the best of intentions.

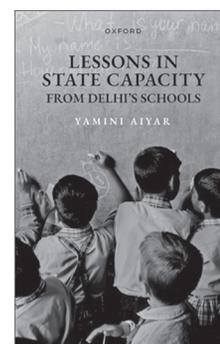
As an economist in training, I have often been inclined to think of state capacity only in quantitative terms such as budgets, personnel ratios and survey outcomes. But after spending time in government departments and remote school sites where piles of files and broken furniture coexist with hopeful citizens and overburdened officials, I began to understand state capacity differently. It is not only what the state delivers, but how it delivers; not only what the state promises, but how those promises are negotiated, reshaped, or abandoned on the ground. Crucially, these experiences taught me that the state cannot be understood by isolating its institutions or actors. The schools, district offices, local politics, bureaucratic hierarchies, and community expectations form an interdependent system, and it is in the interaction between these parts that the multiple layers of state capacity are revealed.

Aiyar’s scholarship is significant in this context, as she critiques the dominant ‘plumbing’ view in public policy, where problems are seen as technical bottlenecks to be fixed by better design. Instead, she centres the lived reality of institutions, showing that systems are shaped as much by relationships and histories as by rules. Through

vivid ethnographic detail and sharp institutional analysis, she unpacks what happens behind the scenes of a policy success story—the celebrated reforms in Delhi’s public schools under the Aam Aadmi Party government. The book moves beyond metrics to explore the daily lives of teachers, mid-level bureaucrats, and policymakers, each entangled in the dual pressures of political ambition and administrative logic. The ethnographic accounts reveal a deeper structural paradox: systems that relentlessly demand accountability from the bottom often undermine the very autonomy that enables frontline actors to respond with purpose. By tying every action to compliance with hierarchies, reforms risk hollowing out the discretionary space teachers and bureaucrats need to innovate or adapt to local realities.

One of the early chapters draws a powerful distinction between capacity and capability. Individuals may have skills and commitment, but unless organizations are structured to align and harness those skills, capability cannot emerge. This distinction resonated with me deeply, especially in education, where teachers often operate in environments that neither empower nor support them. One of the book’s most enduring questions stayed with me long after I turned the last page: Why do mission-mode reforms, despite short-term success, often fail to institutionalize themselves? She points to an uncomfortable but necessary truth: political will, charismatic leadership, or even increased budgets are not enough. Real reform depends on long-term investment in bureaucratic trust, routine systems, and institutional memory. Here, she charts how Delhi’s education reforms managed to partially transcend their ‘mission mode’ origins by embedding certain practices and reworking relationships between political and administrative actors. But this was not automatic; it was built slowly, often against resistance, and remains fragile.

The book’s portrayal of mid-level bureaucrats is particularly compelling. These are not villains in the story, nor are they passive implementers. Instead, they are often emotionally and professionally stretched, tasked with ‘delivering’ on reforms while navigating unclear procedures, frequent political changes, and limited autonomy. Her reading of their role dismantles the usual binary between reformers and resisters. It also challenges the casual use of phrases like ‘systemic change’ that permeate policy discourse. It shows us, in granular and processual terms, what that change actually looks like: messy, incremental, shaped by contestation and compromise. It reminds us that the state is not a black box, but a living institution shaped by the people within it, which always needs careful study. Her research involved being present with the state capturing real-time activities, talking to multiple



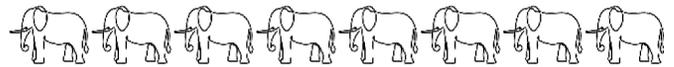
stakeholders offering rich and rare insights that most case studies or official documents do not capture. She studies state capacity through observing and engaging with the state's ability to initiate reforms and work on them to foster deeper transformation in teaching and learning. As Iyer puts it eloquently in the book: 'State capacity is, after all, a voyage of discovery in which all actors have to be taken along.'

A particularly insightful section examines the contradictory role of government school teachers expected to be professional educators but burdened with non-teaching tasks ranging from surveys to election duty. This has shaped a dominant narrative of victimhood among teachers, one I frequently encountered while surveying schools in rural Odisha for my thesis work. Nearly every teacher I spoke to expressed frustration at being pulled away from the classroom. Yet, as she rightly argues, this narrative can also deflect accountability. The classroom is not just a site of constraints; it is also shaped by teachers' own choices. Many adopt a narrow view of their role, focusing on syllabus completion for top-performing students to maintain exam performance, while neglecting foundational learning for the majority. This creates what Aiyar calls the 'classroom consensus'—an unspoken agreement among teachers, parents, and administrators that education is about examination scores, not learning. This insight was particularly striking for me. The classroom consensus, as Aiyar argues, mirrors a societal consensus about the goals of education in India, where success is defined by select achievements rather than universal learning. Reform, then, must confront not just institutional bottlenecks, but deeply embedded social norms.

*Lessons in State Capacity from Delhi's Schools* is not just a case study of Delhi or education. It is a book about the Indian state—its rhythms, its frictions, and its capacity to both inspire and disappoint. It cautions against over-reliance on performance metrics and quick fixes, and urges a long-term commitment to building institutions that can reflect, learn, and adapt. The involvement of political leaders who turned into reformers restoring the dignity of government teachers and schools, engaging in a new language of participation and deliberation while navigating the tussle between bureaucracy and reformers, reveals what 'systemic change' actually comprises.

As I closed the final chapter, I realized that Aiyar's work is not just an exploration of Delhi's education reforms, but a methodological guide for how to study the state itself. Her insistence on immersive, ground-level engagement, speaking with teachers, sitting in classrooms, navigating cramped district offices, pushes back against the tendency in policy research to rely solely on aggregated data or neat theoretical models. For me, this built an understanding that meaningful scholarship requires patience, humility, and the willingness to embrace messiness. In this sense, *Lessons in State Capacity from Delhi's Schools* is both a

compelling narrative and a quiet manifesto for the craft of public policy research in India. It reminded me that state capacity is not just a matter of design, but of politics, relationships, and trust. And most importantly, it reminded me that it is important for policy scholars to be present in the lived realities of the state, to understand how and why the process of change is slow, and why it requires societal participation as an everyday task.



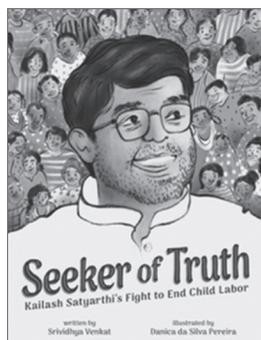
## Namita Ranganathan

### SEEKER OF TRUTH: KAILASH SATYARTHI'S FIGHT TO END CHILD LABOR

By Srividhya Venkat. Illustrations by Danica da Silva Pereira  
Puffin India, 2025, pp. 40, ₹ 299.00

Kailash Satyarthi is the winner of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel Prize was granted in recognition of his efforts of over 40 years to save over 100,000 children from exploitation and help them realize their right to education. His work brought global attention to India's child labour crisis which is a global challenge and continues to affect over 160 million children across the world. It was first highlighted, as early as 1839, in *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens' narrative on the child chimney sweeps of the post-industrial revolution in England.

India's child labour laws have evolved significantly over time, shifting from regulation to outright prohibition beginning with the Indian Factories Act of 1881, which banned work for children under seven. Post Independence, protection of children was built into the Constitution (Article 24 prohibits hazardous child labour and Article 39 urges the state to safeguard children from exploitation). The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, banning children under 14 from hazardous jobs and regulating others, was passed in 1986, followed by the 1987 National Policy, which emphasized rehabilitation and education. Subsequently, in 1996, the Supreme Court's 'M.C. Mehta vs State of Tamil Nadu' judgment mandated schooling and compensation for child workers and made employers accountable. In 2009, the Right to Education Act made free education a right for children aged 6–14, reinforcing the legal framework against child labour. The Nobel recognition of this global challenge in 2014 galvanized public awareness, intensified policy focus, and added urgency to reform efforts within India. Just two years later, in 2016, India amended its Child Labour Law to prohibit all employment of children under 14, with limited exceptions, and banned



hazardous work for adolescents aged 14–18. The 2017 Rules followed, detailing enforcement and rehabilitation. Satyarthi's Nobel Prize was thus more than symbolic—it helped shift the national conversation from tolerance to zero tolerance, accelerating legal and social change.

This illustrated children's book was created by Srividhya Venkat. Her other books are *Girls on Wheels*, *Dancing in Thatha's Footsteps*, *The Clever Tailor* and *Pickle Mania*. The illustrations are by Danica da Silva Pereira, an illustrator and graphic designer hailing from the lush landscapes of Goa, with an MA in Children's Book Illustration from the Cambridge School of Art. She has infused the book with a profound personal connection, having observed the echoes of child labour portrayed in these pages. The vividness of the illustrations and the brevity with which impactful messaging has been built into the play of the narrative will make this depiction an easy-to-disseminate publication. A very attractive feature of the book is the depiction of the child's reflective mind that seeks to make sense of the world around, particularly issues of discrimination, untouchability, unfairness, and marginalization. The book has a sensitive manifest appeal which is likely to entice child readers through the very telling narratives and illustrations, and a much deeper subtext for the adult mind at a latent level.



## Pinkal Chaudhari

### MIDDLE SCHOOL JEEV VIGYAN: SHIKSHAKON KE LIYE EK SANSADHAN

By Arvind Gupte, Uma Sudhir, Kishor Panwar, Bharat Poore, Bholeshwar Dubey and Sushil Joshi. Illustrations by Tarundeep Girdhar Ranjit Balmuchu, Karen Haydock  
Eklavya Foundation, 2025, pp. 164, ₹ 275.00

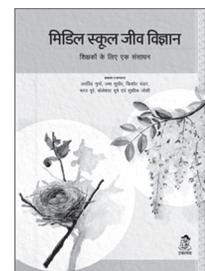
*Middle School Jeev Vigyan: Shikshakon Ke Liye Ek Sansadhan* is an extensive resource book designed for science teachers to effectively teach biological sciences at the secondary school level. The resource book was developed by the Eklavya Foundation, which is associated with the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP). The book comprises nineteen well-structured and logically sequenced chapters focussing on biological concepts from both botany and zoology, addressing various areas of study such as morphology, physiology, anatomy, and cytology. The chapters cover topics that include the

study of leaves, seed germination, seed dispersion, floral structures, biodiversity in the living world, food, sensitivity, the animal kingdom, microorganisms, reproduction in plants and animals, animals' internal organs, animal life cycles, plant nutrition, and the growth and development of both living and non-living entities. As a resource book, the text and topics align with the objectives of science education, specifically the enhancement of scientific literacy, the cultivation of a scientific attitude, the promotion of scientific inquiry, and the development of science process skills among learners, with special emphasis on the biological sciences. It also serves to encourage teachers to foster higher-order cognitive skills, which include analysis, classification, synthesis, and evaluation.

The book encourages a pupil-centric biology teaching-learning process. It also includes various tools and techniques for formative and summative assessment in the biology classroom. It bridges the gap between biological concepts and learners' real-life experiences. It also focusses on understanding biological processes and science through experiments and observations in the natural milieu. The book democratizes biology education for learners with diverse socio-cultural and learning abilities in the Indian context. It includes several stories of scientific discoveries. Students can thus explore the history of biology. The pictorial representations are hand-drawn, which stresses the importance of drawing diagrams, a very important aspect of studying biology. The book has Learning Kits at the end, and as per their need, learners can cut the kit and study various biological concepts.

Each chapter advocates empiricism and scientific inquiry among learners in a broader context that encourages knowledge construction from their daily lives to engage in the process of science. Every biological concept in the chapters is presented in a way that learners can think beyond the classroom. The organization and structure of the topics and subtopics are logical and scientific. Notably, various methods such as excursion/field visits, demonstrations, discussions, and projects are integrated into the instructional form, including preparation, precautions, requirements, and steps of the various experiences and activities. The recommended activities are sustainable, cost-effective, and context specific. They can be conducted using affordable, locally available materials from schools and the surrounding area. Additional record sheets are also provided. The language used in the book is informal and easy to understand for teachers and students. Pictorial representations are simple; the printing and binding quality of the book is good, and affordable.

As science encourages questioning in the classroom and promotes scientific inquiry among learners, this resource book helps teachers and learners to pose



questions and seeking answers scientifically. Conceptual illustrations in Hindi encourage the participation of learners from Hindi language backgrounds. Most significantly, the complex and subtle nature of biological sciences can be studied from real-life experiences, which this book makes possible.



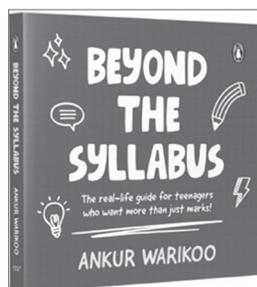
## Rohini Rangachari Karnik

### BEYOND THE SYLLABUS

By Ankur Warikoo

Penguin, 2025, pp. 240, ₹ 229.00

How do you go about meeting new people and making friends? What ways do you use to grow your money or invest? How do you deal with ups and downs in your relationships? What’s your thought process when it comes to figuring out your career path? What do you do to develop a mindset that really works for you?



Offering thoughtful approaches on dealing with such questions which are often not taught in the ‘syllabus’, Ankur Warikoo guides on money and independence, relationships and social life, mindset and mental strength, work and future readiness, and digital life and the real world.

Marketed as a real-life practical manual for teenagers, *Beyond the Syllabus* proves to be apt even for adults dealing with such questions. An internet entrepreneur based in India, Ankur Warikoo is one of India’s top content creators. His aim through his content is to make sure all the choices you make in life come from a point of awareness and not ignorance—says his Homepage.

This motivational book ends with letters written to himself at different ages where he tells himself that he will be okay through it all, a message for all teenagers (and adults!) grappling with decision making. Compact, practical, insightful, reflective, realistic and non-traditional are just some of the adjectives that come to mind when thinking of *Beyond the Syllabus*.

Readers who want a realistic and compact guide to navigating real-life challenges with introspection and actionable strategies will find this book valuable. It is especially useful for those looking to build the right mindset and make informed decisions on matters outside the typical school syllabus.

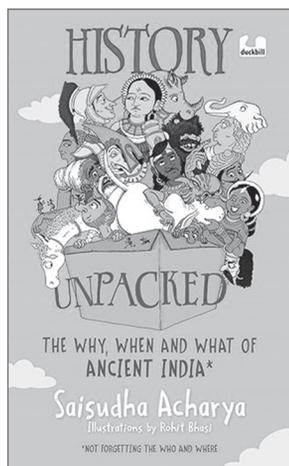


## Lakshmi Subramaniam

**HISTORY UNPACKED: THE WHY, WHEN AND WHAT OF ANCIENT INDIA**

By Saisudha Acharya. Illustrations by Rohit Bhasi  
Penguin Books, 2025, pp. 310, ₹ 399.00

*History Unpacked* is for young adults. It offers a comprehensive and readable summary of events, personalities and institutions that marked Indian antiquity. The excellent illustrations transform the book into something more than a mere textbook or repository of facts with which we are already familiar. In fact, they provide a complementary and occasionally a counternarrative that is bound to pique the young reader's curiosity.



The sections on the formation of the Harappan cities and their eventual degradation are very well done, bringing out important lessons for today's urban catastrophe and the challenges of climate change. It highlights the silting of rivers and the changing of their courses, which students would otherwise read about without really understanding the phenomena as they happened in the past, or reflecting on them through the prism of today's disasters. The author could, however, have avoided the quiz questions that accompany every chapter and in fact, make it tedious. Instead, there could have been suggestions for practical activities, helping the young reader to actually do history rather than simply see it as an enshrined memorial of the past. This is not to take away the work of the author and illustrator who must be commended for enabling a contemporary understanding of events of the remote past, which nevertheless continue to exert influence on our lives today, whether in the form of caste or yoga or the use of Sanskrit for ritual. The book broadens the scope of the discussion on what it entails to write an engaging but relevant history of antiquity for children. The section on South India and the Kamarupas in the Northeast is particularly useful because often we ignore the history of these areas and their salience in constituting the complex civilization of India.

The mandate for the book is clear. It tries to make history a subject of interest rather than treating it as a mere compendium of events and dates. In this it is successful to an extent even though the strategies it uses are not uniformly effective. One such strategy—the use of contemporary expressions like 'OMG'—carries the risk

in this reviewer's opinion, of patronizing young readers and trivializing the human stories that constitute history, which is more than the recording of events but rather the interpretation and telling of stories. This practice of history writing is crucial for children and young adults to understand in order to develop their own critical skills and to understand how the telling of the past is a complex exercise mediated by several factors.

The fun in doing history responsibly and creatively comes through only in spurts. The historian as a detective and storyteller peeps in sporadically throughout the book and it is on those occasions that it becomes a fun read. Take, for instance, the arrival of Mortimer Wheeler and his efforts to overhaul the Archaeological Survey of India and his much-touted theory of the Aryan invasion as the cause for the collapse of the Indus Valley culture. We are told how prejudiced he was about Indians and Indian society, and held firmly but wrongly that all material advances came from outside (Mesopotamia in this case) and that a technologically superior fighting force was responsible for the calamitous collapse of the Indus cities. Wheeler was proved wrong, but the usefulness of providing details on his prejudiced attitude lies precisely in conveying to the young reader that history is about individual interpretation, which must necessarily be subject to constant scrutiny and verification. That 'invasions' or migrations constituted a key element in the making of ancient India is to state the obvious. It is a theme that finds recurrent mention in the book. While the author does not acknowledge the extraordinary degree of anxiety about invasions that runs through standard textbooks, she does review the dynamism of cultural encounters and gives these a light and even humorous touch.

*History Unplugged* is an important experiment. We do not as a rule treat history as a fun subject in school or indeed as an exciting genre to be read for its own sake, even though we have in India a rich and vibrant tradition of both storytelling as well as of popular history writing in the vernacular. Yet amidst the tyranny of modern and unimaginative pedagogy, history has suffered and is treated with boredom and ennui, seen as an endless litany of names and dates to be memorized and not as a record of human ingenuity as evinced by the ways in which people settled landscapes, practiced agriculture, planned and built towns, and structured their societies around different ideologies and organizing principles. The book brings back the drama of human achievements vividly in text and image, and is bound to generate some curiosity in the young adult and in the conscientious teacher who will find it invaluable in animating class room discussion and hopefully in creating a new generation of argumentative Indians.



## Amol Saghar

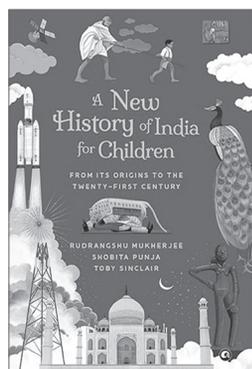
**A NEW HISTORY OF INDIA FOR CHILDREN: FROM ITS ORIGINS TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

By Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Shobita Punja and Toby Sinclair  
Aleph Book Company, 2025, pp. xxi + 295, ₹ 499.00

The well-known historian of Ancient India, Ram Sharan Sharma, once quipped that while it is not so difficult to teach history to college and university level students, given that they already have some grounding in the subject, it is a herculean task to teach the same subject, but in an engaging and exciting manner, to school students.

Besides making the subject 'attractive', it is important for those trained in the historian's craft to make school students familiar with historical knowledge which is accurate and, at the same time, non-sectarian. Several historians and history enthusiasts have, in recent years, made sincere efforts to make the subject more accessible to school level students. Works like those of Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, Devika Rangachari, Subhadra Sen Gupta, Roshen Dalal, Devika Cariappa, and Archana Garodia Gupta, to name a few, are commendable in that they allow school students to understand complex facets and debates of Indian and world histories in simple terms, and in a language bereft of jargon. Moreover, these books contain colourful illustrations which add richness to the narrative. To this list we may also add the classic NCERT history school textbooks—written by some of the leading historians of India, including Romila Thapar, RS Sharma, Satish Chandra and Bipan Chandra—as well as Audrey Truschke's recent magnum opus, *India: 5,000 Years of History on the Subcontinent* (2025). Engaging and richly textured narratives, these books are an attempt at making the young minds understand that one cannot understand contemporary India without appreciating its deeply contested past, which continues to shape current events and socio-political controversies.

Written by Rudrangshu Mukherjee, along with cultural historian Shobita Punja and photographer-archivist Toby Sinclair, *A New History of India for Children*, is an important addition to this list. The volume, containing twenty-one chapters, vividly narrates India's history from the prehistoric times to the 21st century. Based on thorough research, each of the chapters dissect the multi-layered and, at the same time, complex, Indian society. Importantly, rather than focusing primarily on the political and dynastic history, the study examines at length the socio-economic issues concerning the lives of



the non-elite sections of the society. Mukherjee, in this respect adopts a 'history from below' approach, instead of a 'top-down' method. Further, chapters like 'The Gupta Age and Beyond, c. 320 CE-c. 900 CE' (pp. 89-112), and 'The Northeast up to the Coming of British Rule, c. 1200 CE-c. 1850' (pp. 197-206), reveal that rather than being region specific, the volume has a pan-Indian approach. An in-depth discussion on the early South Indian States in the aforementioned section, 'Breakdown of the Gupta Empire', further strengthens this argument.

Given that in majority of the writings on Indian history, the Northeast region appears as a footnote, Mukherjee's study is essential. In the portion pertaining to the Northeastern parts of the country, the author outlines the broad historical trajectories of the region. While examining the political history of the area, the section highlights the distinctiveness of the various tribal formations, including the Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kacharis, and Koch. Far from being homogenous each of the tribal groups, we are told, was unique. And socio-cultural facets like dance, diet, clothing, religious rituals and beliefs were tribe specific. However, tribal villages were, as the author argues, 'by no means self-sufficient' (p. 201). The fact that the tribal population of the region was actively taking part in local as well as trans-local trade shows that interactions and exchange of commodities was essential to the very survival of the villages. An important portion of the present chapter explores the socio-economic changes which came about in the various tribal formations following their interactions with the Mughals, and subsequently the British colonial state.

The establishment of Mughal rule in the territories of Koch and Ahom tribes, towards the end of the sixteenth century, witnessed an increased use of money, given that the Mughal state collected revenue in cash. Apart from revenue, cash was now, following this development, increasingly used in commercial activities by the people of the region. Initiation of a detailed land survey (1681-1751) by the Ahoms, and 'emergence of a land market especially in the western parts of the region' (p. 302), were some other important developments which were witnessed in the North East, as a result of the presence of the Mughal state in the region.

However, the penetration of the British colonial state in these regions had adverse effects on the social and economic orders of the various tribal kingdoms. That the emergence and development of tea plantation economy—unique to these parts of the country—led to an increased level of economic exploitation of the local peasantry, has been stressed upon by the author. Thus, as the author rightly notes, the creation of the 'planter raj', a term coined by Amalendu Guha, 'lorded over and tyrannized the entire population of the region' (p. 310).

The initial couple of chapters on the protohistoric period of India, viz. the Harappan Civilization ('Harappan Culture', pp. 25-42) and the Rig-Vedic period ('Society

and Ideas in the Age of the Vedas', pp. 43-48), are important in that they lay bare several myths pertaining to these ages. Besides studying the political, social, economic and religio-cultural facets of these eras, Mukherjee in these chapters makes a sincere effort to address the controversial issue of the close links between the people of Harappa and the Rig-Vedic period. Through a detailed study of the archaeological reports and material remains of various Harappa sites, including Sutkagendor and Rakhigarhi, as well as the results of DNA sequencing from the areas occupied by these people, the author is able to convincingly demonstrate that the two groups were distinct. Moreover, in 'Society and Ideas in the Age of the Vedas', it is suggested that Aryans were *not* (emphasis mine) the original inhabitants of this region and that they migrated to India in several waves. And Mukherjee, not surprisingly, too debunks the 'Aryan invasion' theory.

At a time when the present dispensation is blatantly tinkering with India's glorious past, and is leaving no stone unturned in promoting a version of history which is biased and sectarian, Rudrangshu Mukherjee's *A New History of India for Children* is an important scholarly intervention. Interspersed with colourful pictures of exquisite miniature paintings, archaeological remains, archival photographs, and maps, the volume provides a detailed and an unbiased picture of India's history. That India has had a rich tradition of intellectual pluralism and public debates—a theme explored at length by Amartya Sen in *The Argumentative Indian* (2005)—has been stressed upon by the present author. Again, thorough discussions on the Bhakti Movement, Sufism, Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical sects and emergence of Sikhism, enable young readers to understand the diverse religious traditions of the country and the manner in which each of them has shaped Indian society and state.

In the portion dealing with India's freedom struggle, the complete absence of the revolutionary phase is striking. The author completely ignores the important developments which unfolded during this period. Given that the revolutionaries including Ramprasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan, Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad, Sukhdev, Rajguru, Batukeshwar Dutt, and Jatindra Nath Das, among others, posed a formidable challenge to the colonial state through their acts of resistance, one would have appreciated a discussion on these freedom fighters and their times. Moreover, it would have helped young readers to understand that there were multiple strands of the freedom struggle. However, it is believed that in the future revisions of the book, this gap would be addressed.

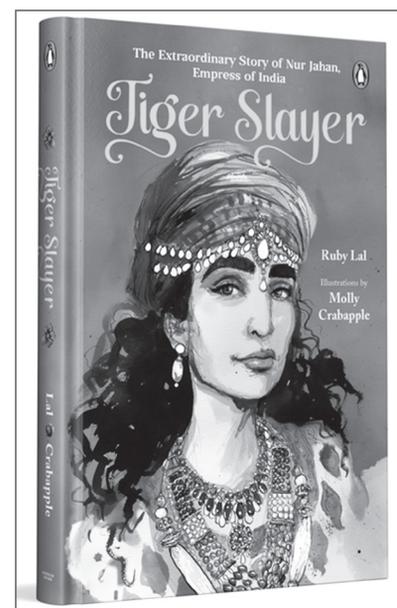
Nevertheless, Rudrangshu Mukherjee's richly textured *A New History of India for Children* will be of interest to, not just school students, but also teachers of the subject as well as history enthusiasts.

## Meena Bhargava

### TIGER SLAYER: THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF NUR JAHAN, EMPRESS OF INDIA

By Ruby Lal. Illustrations by Molly Crabapple  
Penguin Books, 2025, pp. xi +174, ₹ 699.00

*Tiger Slayer* is an interesting contribution that combines the work of a historian and an artist to present the story of Mughal Empress Nur Jahan. The rigour of both is remarkable that brings together a well-documented, visually aesthetic book, which would certainly grasp the attention of the children but also of those interested



in knowing Mughal history, and particularly its glorious women. Introducing the book rather differently, and giving it an individualistic persona, Lal talks about the story maker and the artist of the book, which includes herself and the artist Molly Crabapple. Narrating the story sessions with her mother when she was a young girl, Lal tells us how she went into a 'trance' on hearing the tale of Nur Jahan, the empress that captured her imagination and 'conquered' her mind. Molly Crabapple too, was influenced by her mother, an illustrator for toy companies and children's books. Even as Crabapple spent time in her mother's studio, and museums and libraries, she was fascinated by Indian miniature paintings. Inspired by Edmund Dulac's lively illustrations, a painter was born in her. It is in this context that Lal takes the reader to the year 1577, more than four hundred years ago, to tell the story of Mihr un-Nisa, later known as Nur Jahan, the circumstances in which she was born, and then her long odyssey into the Mughal Empire. The illustrations of each event, each episode, and each occasion are exceptionally enthralling and revealing.

Perhaps to stimulate and hold the interest of the children keen on star-watch and astronomy in present times, Lal brings in the story of a large comet that passed close to the earth in the year of Nur Jahan's birth, and follows it up with a brief description on comets, and what they entail in astrology. Persia at that time was in crisis. Several Persians, including Ghiyas Beg and



Asmat Begum, the parents of Nur Jahan, left their country for a better future in Mughal India known for its permissiveness and acceptance. Persia too practiced tolerance. In fact, for several decades, Persian artists, musicians, doctors, soldiers, diplomats, and several others had come to the wealthy, indulgent Mughal Empire for secure opportunities. As the caravans journeyed on the roads from Persia to India, Nur Jahan, 'the migrant girl' was born. Bringing alive the birth of Mihr un-Nisa, with minute details, Lal recounts the ways in which the caravan served as Mihr's first nursery, and the city of Lahore as her second nursery till she along with her parents reached the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar in Fatehpur Sikri, where a large house in the center of the city became her first home. Notwithstanding the patterns of formal education then, open only to elite, royal boys, Mihr grew to be a highly literate, well-read girl in Persian literature, and wrote sophisticated poetry. At age 17, Mihr was married to a Mughal officer, Ali Quli Beg. Lal regales the reader with elaborate arrangements and the actual conduct of the nuptial ceremony, illustrated remarkably by Crabapple.

From being one among many, Mihr rose to become the favourite wife of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, who married her in the sixth year of his reign subsequent to the demise of Ali Quli Beg. Sharing an extraordinary, sensitive relationship with his twentieth wife, Jahangir gave her a new royal name: Nur Jahan or Light of the Palace. A woman with unusual strength and phenomenal political shrewdness, Nur Jahan was not only enormously influential in the harem, but also fully immersed and pre-eminent in male dominated feudal court politics. Challenging her confinement to the harem, she travelled the Mughal territories with the emperor and his mobile court, a significant aspect of Jahangir's reign. This portended a new paradigm in Mughal history: for the first and perhaps the only time, the Empress governed as a co-sovereign. Later, court historians defined her power as *fitna*—civil strife or universal disorder. European travellers, such as Pelsaert and Ralph Fitch depicted her as the 'crafty wife of humble origin', and 'a very cunning and ambitious woman'. Regardless, it would not be iniquitous to suggest that she was distinguished by her exceptional ambition, courtly endurance, military and trade acumen, and ascent to power. She was often involved in strategizing the court hierarchy, approving official appointments, and signing the *farmans* or decrees independently as a co-sovereign. So, while the Mughal archive has abundant evidence on Nur Jahan, there is, Lal argues, erasure of her contributions and accomplishments from popular history. This was probably because of her non-conformist, daring, and emboldened spirit that threatened the patriarchal order. The Persian chronicles and imperial court records evaluated her within patriarchal norms and also reinforced them. The

prejudices of the patriarchy-driven male writers of her time and later downplayed the life, works, and talents of Nur Jahan. The emphasis on her romance with Jahangir, argues Lal, truncated her biography that diminished her; her stories stopped with her marriage to Jahangir, when actually her life's best work began. Lal resurrects Nur Jahan, goes beyond her love story with Jahangir, and the personal moments between them, and reiterates that Nur Jahan's history was much more. She, of course, embodied love: a capacious kind of love, and that she was indeed, as Lal asseverates, a humane, magnificent empress.

Written simply and lucidly, *Tiger Slayer* would unequivocally hold the attention of its readers: teenagers or otherwise. Reading Lal's work on Nur Jahan, whether this one or her earlier one, *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan*, reveals her passionate writing of the Empress. Sometimes it seems like a eulogy, a tale of a perfect woman. But then, that does not take away the author's vision as a feminist historian, her commitment to facts of history, and her subtle communication. The book, equipped with the details of the period in which Nur Jahan lived, the attributes of Jahangir's reign, his campaigns, Mughal court, etiquettes, diverse culture, language, poetry, music, education, cuisine, clothing, jewelry, nature: including birds, flowers, animals, cities: their geography and demography, and the description of the journey from Persia to India, is vivifying. The detailed paintings are sensitively done and are enlivening. The pull-out boxes, list of 'Major Characters', the map of the Mughal Empire of 1605, the Sources and Notes complement the book. An engaging book indeed!

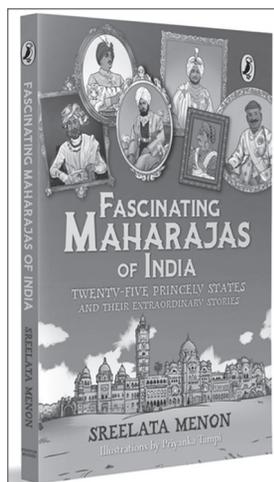


## Laila Tyabji

### FASCINATING MAHARAJAS OF INDIA: TWENTY-FIVE PRINCELY STATES AND THEIR EXTRAORDINARY STORIES

By Sreelata Menon. Illustrations by Priyanka Tampi  
Puffin Books, Penguin Random House, pp.164 plus  
bibliography, ₹ 499.00

Maharajas, once the very apex of the Indian pyramid, are now officially extinct; their titles, power, and privileges stripped by Indira Gandhi in 1971. However, in the regions they once ruled, their name and prestige still has a presence. At the time of accession to the Indian Republic there were 565 kingdoms, each with its Maharaja, Nawab, or Raja. Old timers are often nostalgic about the days when they held sway. Maharajas inevitably came in all sizes, shapes and temperaments, and some were undoubtedly lazy, vain, spendthrift, dissolute, and occasionally plain wicked. But by and large, they



(and their Maharanis) were benevolent, accessible and hands-on; knowledgeable about their people and their needs, in a way a remote, impersonal Central Government can seldom be.

Because of their huge wealth and lavish lifestyles, they could afford their eccentricities. Sadly, they are often remembered only for this. For example, the last Nawab of Junagarh is generally remembered for his love of dogs (he had 2000 of them and

arranged elaborate and expensive weddings and funerals for them), but few recall that he was also a conservationist who banned the hunting of wildlife and set up the Gir Forests Reserve (accorded sanctuary status in 1965) in 1913, enabling the increase of the lion population from 15 to their present 500.

Similarly, the Maharaja of Alwar is more known for buying all the cars in the Rolls Royce London showroom and converting them into garbage trucks in revenge for the insolent way the sales manager treated him, than for his erudition and oratory, and the dams and irrigation canals he built for the rural farming community. Another prime example is the Nizam of Hyderabad who has gone down in history as a miser who even stitched his own shoes and caps. Yes, he led a simple, austere life but he spent his huge fortune on schools, colleges and universities, as well as health, dams, banking, and the state's infrastructure. He was a pioneer of women's education. He also gave 14,000 acres of his personal land to Vinoba Bhave for distribution to landless farmers, banned cow slaughter and donated huge sums to temples and gurdwaras as well as mosques, plus 5,000 kilos of gold to the Indian Army.

Sreelata Menon's book, *Fascinating Maharajas of India: Twenty-Five Princely States and Their Extraordinary Stories* rectifies some of this, bringing alive these figures of the past for a new generation.

Writing books for children is an art. An art that is difficult to get right. Writing in simple, accessible yet engaging prose. Especially if what you are writing is fact not fiction. How to strike that balance between simple, engaging prose and getting your information right? Inevitably each chapter of Sreelata Menon's book, covering over a millennium of history in just a few pages, becomes a roll-call of names, titles, dates, battles and achievements, with a few fun anecdotes to leaven the mix. Sreelata tries to make the book more appealing to younger readers by mixing in colloquial, chatty phrases, often more suited to Billy Bunter yarns than royal history. Here is a random selection: 'ruled the roost', 'many moons

later', 'set up shop', 'lock, stock and barrel', 'smart and canny', 'on the prowl', 'How come?', 'So then', 'Who cares?', 'muddled along for a while', 'matters became hunky-dory', 'sitting pretty', 'taking the cake', 'on a roll'. People 'tuck into splendid banquets', crowds always 'mill', elephants are always 'majestic', while fireworks 'dazzle'...

These rather cliched idioms don't always fit the subject matter. For instance, to describe the 1947-48 Indo-Pakistan War as us giving 'Pakistan a bloody nose and sending them packing' is a rather casual dismissal of a year-long conflict with over 2500 fatalities that set a tragic pattern for repeated hostilities over the years. Similarly, describing the Government of India laying claim to the Nizam's priceless jewels as 'taking first dibs' is equally offhand!

Disappointingly, the look and feel of the book also belies its almost ₹ 500 price tag. Puffin Books, part of the Penguin imprint, used to have eye-catching, lively covers and a glossy tactile format and finish. Handling and collecting them was such a pleasure for children. This one looks like a NCERT textbook. Luckily its contents and illustrations are more appealing.

Luckily too, the book is full of interesting stories, many unknown to the general public. People who have heard about the Gwalior silver toy train bearing dishes round the regal dining table don't know that the Scindias pioneered an actual train system and even aviation, that much of the wealth of Bikaner came from the palace's bushels of bat droppings sold as guano fertilizer, or that Baroda was the third largest hatchery of dinosaurs 6 million years ago, or that the ruler of Nabha, traversing the city's roads in his custom-made silver car in the shape of a swan, spitting out water and laying gold eggs in the path of his subjects, was also eclectic and liberal, building temples and mosques as well as gurudwaras. I myself was unaware that Bharatpur, now a tranquil bird sanctuary, once captured Delhi under Suraj Mal, and was one of the wealthiest kingdoms in India. In Bhopal, successive generations of ruling Begums were warriors and sportswomen, as well as wise and progressive rulers. There are stories of great valour, loyalty and sacrifice too: Mehrangarh Fort was built on the remains of Rajaram Meghwal who volunteered to be buried alive to avert the curse placed on it.

Rulers alternated between enlightened patrons of art and charities, and spendthrifts who spent the state coffers on golden cars and cannons. So Malhar Rao of Baroda was a profligate but Sayaji Rao III promoted the arts, education, banking; made child marriage illegal and primary education free, developed the railways and a navy. Enlightened Maharaja Pratap Singh of Jaipur was succeeded by spendthrift Sawai Jagat Singh, who wanted to gift half his kingdom to his nautch girls.

However, most Indian rulers were generally caring of their people, irrespective of their community and religion.

In Cochin, Jews, Christians, and Arab Muslims were all welcome, and the first mosque in India was built there in the actual lifetime of Prophet Mohammed. Travelling to the West frequently as they did, Indian Royals brought back progressive and liberal ideas, abolishing child marriage, supporting the remarriage of widows and universal education, creating legislative assemblies. Ronald Ross, who won the Nobel Prize in 1902 for his pioneering work on Malaria, did his scientific research in Hyderabad, supported by Nizam Asaf Jah VI.

Just as the Muslim Nizams built numerous temples and funded the restoration of ancient religious sites such as Ajanta and Ellora, the Hindu Gaekwads were equally supportive of their Muslim populace and their beliefs. In fact, the famous Baroda Pearl carpet, nine feet long, made of deerskin, silk and embellished with pearls, rubies, diamonds and emeralds was originally commissioned by Khanda Rao Gaekwad the Second in the 1870s as a gift for Prophet Mohammed's Tomb at Medina. This was typical of the secular, all-embracing outlook of most Indian rulers. In fact, Jodhpur under Hanwant Singh, initially wanted to align with Pakistan!

We should not forget that the foundations of modern India—secular, liberal, progressive, with its network of schools, colleges, hospitals, roads, railways, dams, and charitable institutions, were built originally by these autocratic, all powerful, but also far-sighted and compassionate kings. Their stories and their legacies should live on.

Dynastic absolute rule has no place in the twenty-first century. However, there are still Maharajas and Nawabs in our midst, though officially not recognized. They run hotels in their magnificent palaces, head charities, sponsor art and culture, enter politics, are much in demand as Patrons and Chief Guests. Their delicious cuisines, stunning costumes, and cultured patronage continue to inspire our contemporary lifestyles. As should the stories of their ancestors told in this well timed, much needed book.



### Book News

### Book News



*A Girl, a Tiger and a Very Strange Story* by Paro Anand and Priya Kuriyan is about Junglee, the Padhi girl and Raunaq, the tiger cub. Together, the two foundlings form a bond that transcends human imagination. Told as two sides of the same story, Junglee's in words and Raunaq's in pictures, this beautiful tale inspires peace and understanding by overcoming fear and mistrust with love.

Puffin Books, 2025, pp. 256, ₹ 399.00

## Ira Saxena

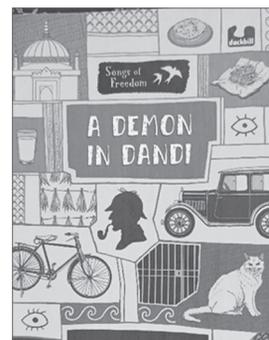
### A DEMON IN DANDI

By Lavanya Karthik. Cover illustration and design by Samar Bansal

Penguin, 2025, pp. 172, ₹ 250.00

The Penguin series 'Songs of Freedom' explores the lives of children through the length and breadth of India during the struggle for Independence.

As evident from the title, this book being one in the series, deals with the historically significant movement of the Salt Satyagraha, popularly known



as the Dandi March. But the word 'demon' in the title strikes as a devious intrigue to the reader. Additional pictures of Sherlock Holmes, a cat, a goat, and an evil eye on the cover of a historical event promise pages of suspense and mystery rather than a single interesting chapter from history.

The beginning transports the readers straight into the period and the focal point of the story, introducing the fascinating, mystery-loving, young hero, Dinu, associated with the group of devoted Bapu's lads, the Arun *Tukdi*, for setting up camp for marchers from Sabarmati. In the process of social contact, the youngest of salt marchers, Dinu, just sixteen years of age, makes friends with Alif by entering the residence of a local village elite, and shortly, finds himself involved in the murder of the family's cook. Ardent to solve the puzzle like his guru, Sherlock Holmes, Dinu plays truant neglecting the duties of Arun *Tukdi*. He sinks further into glitches of theft, goons, arrests and yet another murder, taking him and four members to jail by the English superintendent. Before Gandhi ji's scheduled arrival, the murder mystery is resolved and matters get sorted.

The gripping storyline retains the principles of satyagraha, which the volunteers of the Salt March—the handful of young boys—stick to in their daily routine of the *prabhat pheri*, coaching spinning on *takli*, camp arrangements and talking about the struggle for independence from foreign rule to the village folks. Actions declare their convictions in the non-violent battle, belief in truth-force, economic strength through charkha, and the spirit of Swadeshi for Swaraj. In a very subtle manner, the Gandhian ethos comes across in the narration of events and role of characters. The author proclaims significance of the Salt March to Dandi in the freedom struggle within the scope of fiction.

Here, fictionalizing a historical event draws young

readers into the folds of India's unique victory in overthrowing the British Empire. There is little knowledge about the salt marchers, which is appropriately covered by fictional elements. It does not distort history, rather supports the tight plotting. At places the fiction part takes off perfectly from actual happening. Appearance of the towering activist Sarojini Naidu and her friend, Mithu ben Petit, fits in perfectly with the course of events; as do her amusing style of no-nonsense resolve, her repartee in Queens English with the English police officer, and subsequent flow of the tale connecting the story with actual suppositions. On the same lines, the deductive analysis of fictional Sherlock Holmes is woven convincingly through the plot, which would surely become an attraction to the young readers. The plot ranges from the true aspect of interesting characters, authentic rural setting, 'stretches of water-logged land and clumps of trees', chilling sequences, murders, clues, and enigmas wrapped around an outstanding turning point in history.

All the characters, living in Dandi and the *Tukdi* from outside Dandi, present a delightful mix of genuine people, each bearing realistic mark of distinctiveness, striking, and interesting variety of personalities. A village *vaid* appears twice and leaves the impressions of his individuality, and at the same time, demonstrates existing values of medical practice for checking on the patients wherever possible, because the fact of lesser population in those days meant that most patients stayed in doctors' memory. Ghulam, Kirit, Kanti—all portray the true spirit of Gandhi's training as they stand united with Dinu when the police come to arrest him. Throughout, descriptions draw a detailed image of the scene. Crisp conversations define the speaker visibly—from Mukhi of the village, Wasim Seth, the rich resident or his son Alif, and the inhabitants of a small village. This is the place where, as perky little Gema believes, Bapu is coming to take away the salt belonging to Dandi dwellers.

This exciting book is unputdownable and inspires one to read the others in the series.



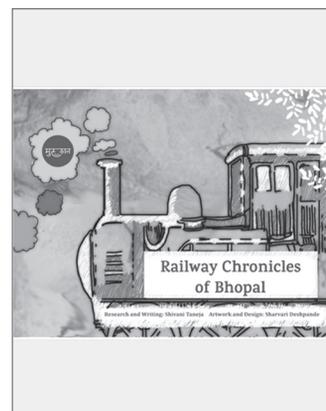
## Uma Chakravarti

### RAILWAY CHRONICLES OF BHOPAL

Research and writing by Shivani Taneja. Artwork and Design by Sharvari Deshpande  
Muskaan, 2024, pp. 36, ₹ 200.00

How should we tell history and who should we tell it for? How can we link it to the lived lives of those who will in any case get it from learning spaces, from

everyday conversations and storytelling, and from other ways in which 'knowledge' circulates, whether we regard it as history or not? For whom shall we write—children, young adults, scholars and ordinary people not classified in the way outlined here? This book



manages to tell its story to anyone who might come across and read it and go along the different paths it does, to tell the story of how the railways came to Bhopal and then tell it in a way that we come across the many layers of what happens to Bhopal as a city, traversed by its lifeline of communication over the decades that the stories take us through. From the time of the Nawabs of Bhopal, a line of illustrious women rulers with a remarkable capacity to govern their State as few rulers have done, until we reach the very present in which we are located. Along the way we see how the railways carry people in peace time and in conflict, during Independence, Partition and migration, down to the time of the gas leaks which devastated the people who lived alongside the tracks and many acts of everyday humanity as the gas leak took its toll on the ravaged people of Bhopal.

*Railway Chronicles of Bhopal* is unusual because it takes the laying of a railway track as its starting point but then weaves its story to introduce us to the administrative skills of the Begums who were the then Nawabs of Bhopal. These women rulers released funds from their public and private estates for the laying of the tracks and argued for broad gauge and not narrow gauge because that would carry more people, what services should be available at the station, what women who travelled on the train might need. And going beyond the rulers, the book tells us about the labour that built the rail tracks, the special skills of the Oddas who were brought in from the south as they were known to be the best earth workers known to the experts at that time. But no one remembers because history records the 'greatness' of the rulers, with hardly anyone knowing about the special skills of those who labour, the family teams that perform the labour listing women and children who built the railway tracks, the challenges of laying the tracks across a hilly terrain excavating tunnels through the hills and building bridges across rivers.

Reading *Railway Chronicles of Bhopal* was something of a nostalgia trip for me as I was reminded of when I first went along the broad gauge tracks that the Nawabs of Bhopal wisely settled for, on the occasional summer vacation that my family managed to organize, of the stations that whizzed past, the tunnels that suddenly plunged us into darkness and so I was especially delighted

to be told by this book that Bhopal was the centre of India, and that the Nawabs of Bhopal not only helped the restoration work in Sanchi but also wrote a book in Urdu on the monument, and wisely decided to support the railways in linking Bhopal to other parts of India. I remember the early morning sun as it rose over the Stupa at Sanchi as the railway carriage I was seated in went past it.

*Railway Chronicles of Bhopal* is beautifully written, wonderfully conceptualized and most creatively executed. From the original idea to its final form, the book takes you on a journey that tells you what history could be about if we dumped the storyline that we are constantly being told about, the good and the 'bad' rulers according to the political dispensations of the day. Here is a history that is marvellously crafted by Shivani Taneja, beautifully executed by Sharvari Deshpande and Maheen Mirza and is an interesting read. There is a wealth of historical material in the photographs used and the visuals tell their own stories. Oral history and interviews have been used to bring the experiences of ordinary people into the narrative. The images are most creative, the historical material carefully assembled and simply stated. Three generations of my family have read it and enjoyed it and so will you too if you get hold of the book. Do that now and enjoy the read. And think about it too when the big debates on history are thrown at you and you are reduced to thinking about history in narrow and monolithic ways!



## Ilika Trivedi

### VIVEKANANDA: A STORY OF KINDNESS

By Falguni Gokhale

Tota Books, 2025, pp.15, ₹ 275.00

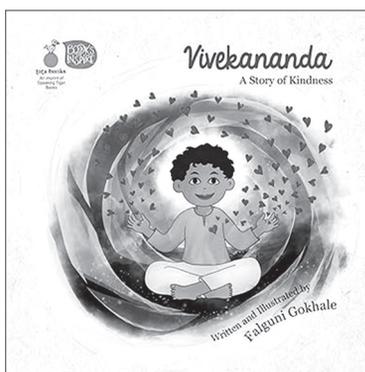
### THE LIFE OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

By Dr. Rajeev Tamhankar. Illustrations by Abhinav Sajan

Westland Books, 2025, pp. 36, ₹ 299.00

Swami Vivekananda's life continues to inspire generations with its message of kindness, courage, and spiritual awakening. Two recently published children's books, *Vivekananda: A Story of Kindness* and *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*

offer distinct yet complementary portrayals of this iconic figure. While the former is a gentle introduction for very



young readers, the latter is a visually rich graphic novel suited for older children and adolescents. Together, they form a compelling duo that can guide children through the early and later phases of Vivekananda's life and legacy.

Falguni Gokhale's *Vivekananda: A Story of Kindness* is a beautifully crafted book that introduces children to the early life of Narendranath Dutta, who later became Swami Vivekananda. With just 15 pages, it is ideal for read-aloud sessions with toddlers or for early independent readers beginning their literary journey. The narrative focuses on Naren's personal qualities, his kindness, curiosity, and spiritual inclination, rather than diving into complex philosophical ideas. This makes the book accessible and relatable for young minds.

The illustrations are simple yet evocative, offering a warm visual backdrop to Naren's family life, friendships, hobbies, and interests. Children can see him engaging in music, physical fitness, meditation, and studies.

One of the standout features of this book is the gamified version of Snakes and Ladders, inspired by Naren's life. This interactive element is not only fun but also educational, subtly reinforcing the values of perseverance, hard work, and compassion. It's a clever way to make the story more engaging and to help children internalize the lessons from Vivekananda's life.

Toward the end, the book also includes a short biography that connects Naren's childhood traits to his later accomplishments. This section is particularly valuable for parents and educators, as it emphasizes the role of nurturing a child's talents and curiosities, and sends a powerful message: every great leader was once a child, and with the right guidance, today's children can grow into tomorrow's changemakers.

In contrast, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* by Dr. Rajeev Tamhankar and illustrator Abhinav Sajan is a more intense and visually dynamic portrayal of Vivekananda's spiritual and reformist journey. With 36 pages of graphic novel-style storytelling, this book is better suited for mature adolescents who can appreciate the depth of Vivekananda's mission and the historical context of his work.

The illustrations are bold and expressive, capturing the emotional and spiritual intensity of the transformation from Naren to Swami Vivekanand. The lettering and layout are designed to spark curiosity and keep readers turning the pages. The book traces his relationship with his spiritual guru, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, and the eventual realization of his life's purpose—to spread the message of tolerance, acceptance, and unity across the world.

The book goes beyond the personal and delves into the philosophical. It highlights Vivekananda's role in representing India and Hinduism on the global stage, particularly at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. The narrative is compelling

and respectful, showing how Vivekananda's spiritual calling led him to become a missionary of peace and understanding, and a global ambassador of Hindu philosophy and India, even before our country gained Independence.

The book also touches upon the final phase of Vivekananda's life, including his reflections on mortality and his passing on to the next world. This aspect adds a layer of depth and poignancy, making it suitable for older readers who can grasp the concept of legacy and spiritual fulfillment.

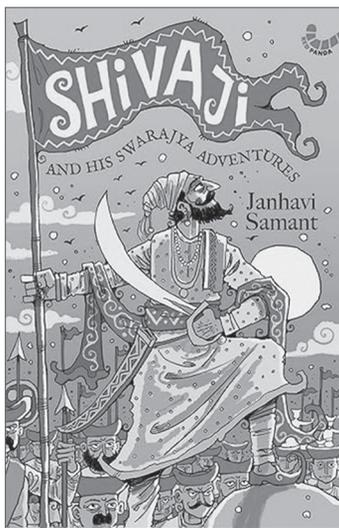
Together, these two books complement each other: the first, ideal for introducing very young children to the idea that kindness, curiosity, and discipline are the building blocks of greatness; the second, perfect for older children as it provides context to Vivekananda's teachings and actions, helping readers understand the significance of his work in shaping modern India's identity and values. Both books offer a layered understanding of Swami Vivekananda's life, from his formative years to his spiritual mission. They serve as excellent tools for educators, parents, and caregivers who wish to introduce children to one of India's most influential thinkers in a way that is age-appropriate, engaging, and inspiring.

In today's world, where divisiveness often overshadows unity, the message of Swami Vivekananda is more relevant than ever. Whether you're looking to introduce your child to Indian history, spirituality, or simply a story of kindness and courage, these books are a wonderful place to start.

#### SHIVAJI AND HIS SWARAJYA ADVENTURES

By Janhavi Samant. Illustrations by Charbak Dipta  
Red Panda/Westland Books, 2025, pp.122, ₹ 250.00

Janhavi Samant's *Shivaji and His Swarajya Adventures* is a vibrant and engaging introduction to one of India's most iconic historical figures, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Written for children and adolescents, this 122-page book is a delightful blend of storytelling, history, and cultural education. With its simple yet evocative language, rich illustrations, and thoughtful thematic focus, it offers young readers a compelling gateway into the life and legacy of Shivaji.



Samant writes with clarity, making complex historical events understandable without diluting their significance. The prose is simple enough for middle-grade readers to grasp, yet it subtly challenges them to expand their vocabulary and comprehension. The storytelling style is engaging, often sparking curiosity to know more about the events, people, and cultural contexts mentioned.

Interspersed throughout the book are full-page illustrations by Charbak Dipta which depict imagined scenes from Shivaji's life. These visuals are not mere decorations; they turbocharge the reader's imagination, adding colour and emotion to the historical narrative. Some illustrations which stand out are dramatic moments from his military campaigns like the killing of the great Afzal Khan and the capture of Torna Fort. For children especially, these images serve as powerful anchors, making the historical content more relatable and memorable.

A standout aspect of Samant's storytelling is her emphasis on the role of women in shaping Shivaji's life and values. The book repeatedly highlights the extraordinary parenting of Jijabai, whose teachings and moral compass deeply influenced Shivaji's vision for Hindu unity and his respect for civilians, women, and children. In a genre where male heroes often dominate the narrative, Samant's focus on Jijabai adds depth and balance. It also provides young readers, especially girls, with strong historical role models, reinforcing the idea that leadership and courage are not confined by gender.

*Shivaji and His Swarajya Adventures* is rich with leadership lessons. These are not buried in subtext; they are clearly highlighted, making it easy for readers to identify and reflect upon them. This approach makes the book particularly suitable for read-aloud sessions, where parents or educators can pause to discuss the values and decisions that defined Shivaji's leadership. From strategic thinking and resilience to inclusivity and ethical governance, the book offers a treasure-trove of lessons that are relevant even today. It's a great tool for character education, subtly guiding young minds toward thoughtful leadership.

Samant also uses the book as a cultural bridge, introducing readers to unique aspects of Marathi heritage. Special boxed sections provide quick references to traditions like *powadas*—heroic Marathi ballads that celebrate historical events. These cultural nuggets enrich the narrative, offering readers a glimpse into the regional context that shaped Shivaji's worldview. For children unfamiliar with Marathi culture, these elements serve as an inviting introduction, fostering appreciation for India's diverse historical tapestry.

At its core, the book is a well-rounded introduction to Shivaji's life. It covers his childhood, his character, his military innovations like *ganimikawa* (guerrilla warfare), and his administrative style. It also delves into his commitment to religious tolerance and inclusivity as well as his efforts to establish *Hindawi Swaraj*, a self-rule

rooted in indigenous values. These themes are presented in a way that allows readers to draw inspiration from the different facets of Shivaji's life. Whether one is moved by his strategic brilliance, his moral convictions, or his vision for unity, there is something in this book for every reader to admire and emulate.

This is more than just a children's book; it's a thoughtful tribute to a visionary leader, a celebration of cultural heritage, and a guide to values that transcend time. Janhavi Samant has crafted a narrative that is both educational and inspiring, making history accessible without compromising its complexity. This beautifully illustrated and well-written book is a worthy addition to any young reader's library.



## Nilima Sinha

### THE BATTLE FOR BARAMULLA

By Mallika Ravikumar

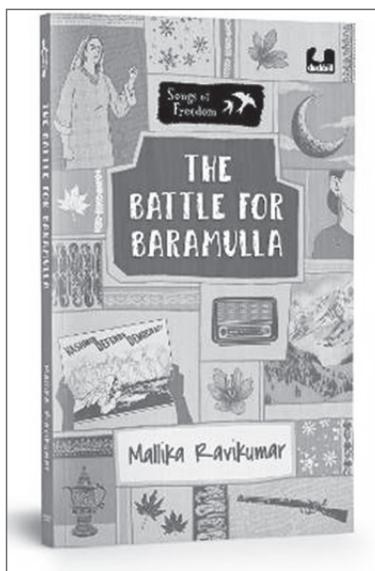
Duckbill Books, Penguin/Random House, India, Songs of Freedom Series, 2025, pp.128, ₹ 250.00

### QUEEN OF WATER

By Devika Rangachari

Duckbill Books, Penguin/Random House, India, Queens Series, 2025, pp. 220, ₹ 299.00

*The Battle for Baramulla* is part of a series of books with stories about children living in India during India's Freedom Struggle. It deals with the bravery shown by them at the time. Mallika Ravikumar's book is set in Jammu and Kashmir during the year 1947. The various kingdoms existing in India at the time, had to decide whether they would join India or Pakistan, the two nations the country was to get divided into. Hari Singh, the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, wanted to stay independent and not join either India or Pakistan. Pakistan, however, wanted J&K to join it. It encouraged the tribes in the North-West frontiers to attack J&K, together with its own troops. The attack on Baramulla took place on 22nd October 1947.



This book relates the story of a young girl, Zooni, and her friends and family, during the attack on Baramulla. It also describes the action taken by a young boy, Maqbool Sherwani, Zooni's cousin.

Zooni, her parents, grandparents, and other relatives live in peace and harmony with the other citizens, Hindu, Sikh and Christian, who live there.

Her neighbour, Gopal Kaul's daughter, Chandra, is pregnant. Worried about the coming attack on Baramulla, her parents request Zooni's family to shelter their daughter Chandra in their home. Chandra is expected to give birth soon and is admitted in the Christian Hospital run in the city by European nuns. Zooni stays with her to help and give her company.

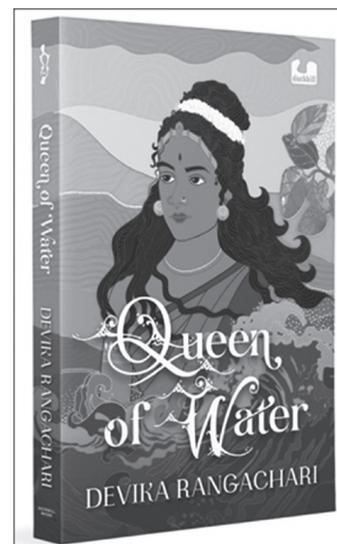
The hospital was considered to be a safe place, but, to everyone's shock, it is attacked by the invaders. Shots are fired, and hefty, bearded men are all over the hospital, looting and killing. Zooni has other worries, too. She steals out into the garden to save her pet rabbits. She succeeds in putting the rabbits back into their hutch and tries to go home. On her way back, she is forced to hide high up in the branches of a tree. From there she witnesses an unexpected, shocking sight.

What is it? What is her cousin Maqbool up to?

This exciting story about the attack on Baramulla, and the resultant suffering of its citizens is described with care and sympathy. We have read about incidents in other parts of India. Stories about Baramulla and the area around had remained untold. We are grateful to the author for providing such a vivid picture of what took place in the area.

Devika Rangachari has written tales about queens who have reigned in areas across India, ruling wisely and well. *Queen of Water* is about a woman who, though not actually a queen, 'reigned' as adviser to two great kings in South India.

This remarkable person was Kundavai, daughter of the mighty ruler, Sundar Chola, who ruled over most of the Southern region of India. After his death, she continued to stay in her brother's palace, to help and advice first her brother Rajaraja Chola 1, one of the most powerful kings of medieval India, and later his son, Rajendra. The latter, Rajendra, in fact, was also a powerful monarch, who expanded his empire even further to include parts of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Kundavai remained beside him, not only providing the new Chola king with valuable advice but also building temples and a hospital.



The author has described Kundavai and her life in great detail, beginning with her life as a young girl, the beloved sister of two brothers, Aditya and Arulmozhi, and her marriage to Vandiyadevan. Kundavai is bright and intelligent, and takes interest in the history of her Chola ancestors as well as in the affairs of the present rulers. Later, after the death of Sundar Chola and the passing away of her elder brother, Aditya, her uncle, aspiring to be king, takes over as the next ruler of the kingdom. It is only after his death that the younger son of King Sundara, Arulmozhi, becomes the ruler.

The author also describes the river Kaveri, around which the Chola capital was situated. In fact, the *Queen of Water* provides fascinating glimpses of the southern region of India, about which many of us in the North remain ignorant. With phrases and verses from Andhra Pradesh she shows her familiarity with the culture of the region. *Queen of Water* may be recommended as a must read for everyone interested in the history and geography of the Southern part of our country.

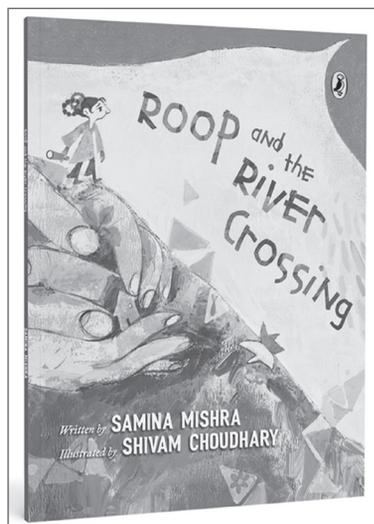


## Shiv Narayan Gour

### ROOP AND THE RIVER CROSSING

By Samina Mishra. Illustrations by Shivam Choudhary  
Puffin Books, Penguin/Random House India, 2025,  
pp. 40, ₹ 250.00

Samina Mishra's *Roop and the River Crossing*, illustrated by Shivam Choudhary addresses the historically difficult theme of Partition of India and Pakistan with remarkable ease and sensitivity for children. Memories of the Partition are deeply rooted in the minds of people of both countries, and stir deep emotions. We come across a vast variety of literature, ranging from anecdotes, stories, poems to articles, essays, biographies and memoirs. The book stands out for viewing this tragedy through the eyes of a child. Award-winning author Samina Mishra tells a poignant tale of a dark chapter in history. Through Roop's journey, she weaves a story of connections,



resilience and finding an anchor in turbulent times.

The protagonist, Roop, a young girl, doesn't understand what Partition means. But she overhears conversations among the adults in her home and listens to the radio broadcasting news of the Partition. In an attempt to keep her safe, her parents and family members try to shield her from the trauma of Partition. Roop is deeply troubled by separation from her friends Noor and Preet due to Partition.

Two key elements in the story offer a unique perspective. One is Roop's toy: a kaleidoscope. Roop sees the world through it, blending colours together. For her, red, blue, green and purple are not separate. They merge into one. The kaleidoscope unites them. But when she sees the world outside, where colours are divided, it hurts her. The second is the river, which serves as a metaphor. Rivers often mark boundaries. You can see the other side, but crossing it isn't easy. It requires resources and helps from others. Roop receives help from a Pathan to cross the river. Initially, she hesitates to trust him because of his appearance. A reflection of preconceived notions which are also present in a child's mind. But it is this very Pathan who helps her cross, challenging her biases. Through Roop's journey, Samina Mishra weaves a story of connections, resilience and finding an anchor in turbulent times

A common practice in many stories for children is that their characters are always treated in a 'childish' manner. We assume that children cannot understand certain things so we avoid discussing them, or we over-simplify things for them. However, Samina challenges this notion in her book. The writer understands that its characters live in the real world; hence, she does not shy away from introducing sensitive and important topics through the characters in her story.

The story captures the emotional upheaval of losing one's home overnight, perhaps never to return, setting out in search of a new one. For a child, this is deeply distressing. Yet, there is hope. Home is made of people, and Roop's family is with her.

The illustrations by Shivam Choudhary expand the narrative beautifully. They tell their own story alongside the text, conveying emotions and offering glimpses into the unique world of children. If we were to view words like 'Hindu', 'Muslim', 'Sikh', and 'Christian' through a kaleidoscope, they would blend into a single colour, a single shape. The words swirling in Roop's mind would no longer appear separate, they would merge into something new and unified.

In essence, this is a captivating book for children. It presents the topic of Partition with great sensitivity. The production quality of the book is also exceptional.

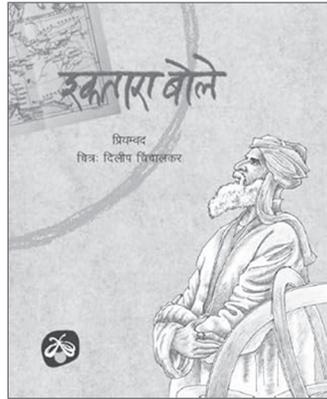
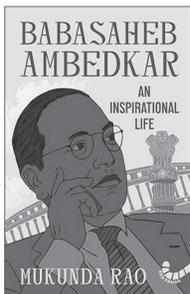


## Gauri Sharma

**IKTARA BOLE**

By Priyamvad. Illustrated by Dilip Chinchalkar  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2025, pp. 108, ₹ 275.00

*Iktara Bole* focuses on poetic observation rather than the conventional plot. It is focused on broadening a young reader's awareness of the world, history, and current issues. The book is structured as a series of columns or essays by Priyamvad that explore larger topics, such as the experiences of foreign travellers in India (on figures like Fa-Hien, Xuanzang [Hiuen Tsang], Al-Biruni, Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, Vasco Da Gama, William Hawkins, and François Bernier). The book's clear structure, with one chapter dedicated to each traveller, makes it an excellent resource for young history enthusiasts. The text explores the travellers and their major works, such as Al-Biruni's *Tariq-ul Hind* and Marco Polo's *A Discussion of the World*. The illustrations by Dilip Chinchalkar support the educational nature of the text, often depicting the historical figures or concepts being discussed. This volume is an excellent tool for nurturing a young person's interest in history, geography, and critical observation.

**Book News****Book News**

*Babasaheb Ambedkar: An Inspirational Life* by Mukunda Rao traces the extraordinary journey of Dr BR Ambedkar, from a child facing daily humiliation to a scholar, reformer and the architect of the Indian Constitution. Without glorifying struggle, it lays bare the grit, intellect and unyielding sense of justice that made Ambedkar one of the most towering figures in Indian history. A comprehensive account told in simple, stirring language, this inspiring biography charts his formidable journey, from the early acts of protest against a rigid caste system to his pivotal role in building the nation.

Red Panda, an imprint of Westland Books, 2025, pp. 128, ₹ 299.00

## Uma Krishnaswamy

**5 FANTASTIC FACTS ABOUT THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION**

Illustrated by Ashok Rajagopalan  
Tulika Books, Chennai, 2025, pp. 24, ₹ 250.00

Across the world in the twenty-first century, we're learning that we can't take democracy for granted. Understanding the law is an essential part of being an informed citizen, and constitutions



codify the fundamental framework for a nation's laws. So it makes eminent sense to tell children as much as we can about the constitution governing the laws of India. Sure, it's complicated, but it's also incredibly relevant to every citizen's life, so why not find a way to show young readers what it's about?

The Indian Constitution, it turns out, is a marvellous creation—the world's longest, developed through a remarkable process of consultation and consensus. And here at last is a children's book worthy of its breadth, depth, and farsighted effort to reach into a just and equitable future. From its mango-yellow end-papers with letters scribbled across them in multiple Indian languages to its freshly voiced text and its colourful, energetic illustrations by Ashok Rajagopalan, *5 Fantastic Facts About the Indian Constitution* is a welcome invitation to young readers from Tulika Books.

The narrative voice is engaging and deceptively simple. It's conversational yet informative. It's never stodgy. It never talks down to the young reader. It is well edited for clarity and consistency but it's also got a real sparkle to it. This passage describes universal adult franchise: 'All Adults, no matter what gender, religion, caste or class they belong to, have the right to choose who they want to put in government.' In Rajagopalan's lively drawings for this spread, small figures outlined in black ink, filled with bright, flat colours, converge upon the centre of the page, arriving on foot and by bus, scooter, bicycle, train, rickshaw, boat, tractor and bullock cart. A strategically placed voting booth draws the eye, the whole nexus of words and images making a central point that doesn't have to be explicitly stated: when you can, when you're grown, vote. The ballot matters.

The spread that explains the nature of diversity is equally skilled in construction, with a single line of text setting up material, cultural, and religious diversity with

elegant brevity. Other spreads deal with its length, the process of developing the Constitution, its secular nature, and equal protection under the law.

The final spread, 'The Constitution and Me', walks the ideas behind the book right into the reader's mind and thoughts, with a range of activities that give young readers many ways to use drawing, writing, reflecting on likes and abilities, imagining a world without rules, and even constructing a child-sized constitution. It's not a worksheet with a predetermined set of correct answers, but a way to get kids thinking about their place in the nation.

The airy design welcomes adults and children alike. It's a reminder to people of all ages that laws matter. This is a book that cries out loud to be read by an adult and a child together—not because an eight-year-old couldn't read it independently, but because it is an invitation to a dialogue about crucially important ideas.



## Adnan Farooqui

### 10 MAKERS OF THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

By Karthik Venkatesh

Duckbill, 2025, pp. 136, ₹ 250.00

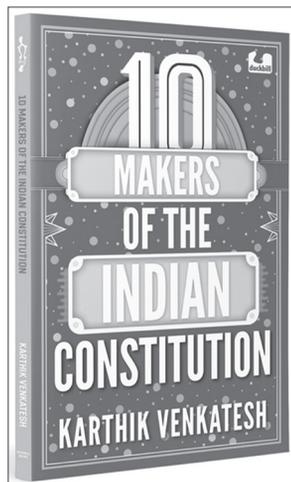
### HANDS THAT WROTE HISTORY: HOW PREM BEHARI NARAIN RAIZADA CALLIGRAPHED THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

By Mamta Nainy. Illustrated by Priyanka Gupta

Puffin, 2025, pp. 40, ₹ 240.00

Two new books for young readers take us back to the making of the Indian Constitution. Together, they remind us that the Constitution is not only a political charter but also a cultural treasure: born of many voices, inscribed by a steady hand, and alive with stories that still speak to children and adults alike.

The making of the Indian Constitution was one of the great democratic experiments of the twentieth century. Unlike older democracies that evolved gradually, India chose to enshrine its democratic ideals at the very birth of the Republic, in a written Constitution. For a society as diverse as India's—divided by caste, language, religion, and region—the stakes were immense. The document had to guarantee liberty and



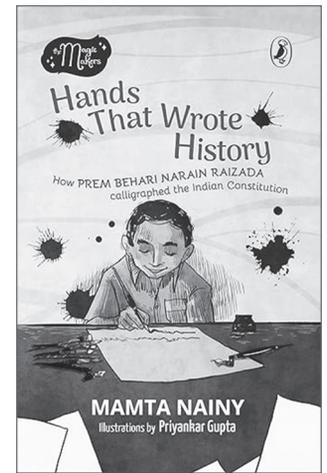
equality, while also holding together plural identities. Its strength lay not just in the values it proclaimed but also in the inclusive process by which it was crafted.

It is this spirit of inclusivity that animates *10 Makers of the Indian Constitution* by Karthik Venkatesh. Written with children and young readers in mind, the book tells the story of ten remarkable individuals who played defining roles in shaping the Constitution. Yet, its lucid prose and vivid storytelling make it equally engaging for adults. For anyone seeking a lively introduction to the lives and ideas behind the Constitution, this slim volume serves as a perfect entry point. Karthik Venkatesh succeeds admirably in making complex debates accessible without oversimplification—a rare feat in writing about constitutional history.

The narrative naturally begins with Dr. BR Ambedkar, whose life was marked by the harsh realities of caste discrimination. Those early experiences forged in him a determination to secure dignity and justice through state action. His disagreements with Gandhi on caste are well known: Ambedkar insisted that political independence could not be meaningful without social emancipation, while Gandhi preferred a united front against colonial rule. Yet, the nationalist leadership acknowledged Ambedkar's brilliance, inviting him to chair the Drafting Committee. Ambedkar himself rose above differences, pouring his formidable intellect into the task. The principles of liberty, equality, and affirmative action bear his unmistakable stamp. As Dr. Rajendra Prasad later observed, Ambedkar's role was nothing short of foundational.

Where Ambedkar spoke for the oppressed castes, Jaipal Singh Munda gave voice to India's tribal communities. A man of many talents—an Oxford graduate and captain of India's gold-winning hockey team—Jaipal Singh founded the Adivasi Mahasabha and articulated the distinct identity of tribal peoples. In the Assembly, he secured safeguards and raised awareness of tribal concerns, ensuring that Adivasi voices were heard in the making of the Republic.

The Assembly also needed legal acumen, and here Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar proved invaluable. A seasoned lawyer, he helped define the terms of Indian citizenship and defended the controversial inclusion of Emergency provisions, arguing that a fledgling nation could not afford instability. At the same time, he was a staunch believer in universal adult franchise, a principle that made India's democracy truly radical at Independence.



Among the Assembly's most striking figures was Dakshayani Velayudhan, the only Scheduled Caste woman member. Coming from a community historically subjected to untouchability, she could have demanded reparative measures for her people. Instead, she took the unusual position of opposing reservations for the Scheduled Castes, fearing they might compromise dignity.

Hasrat Mohani, poet and radical, had demanded *purna swaraj* as early as in 1921. His eclectic political journey—spanning the Congress, the Muslim League, and even the Communist Party—illustrated the ideological turbulence of the time. In the Assembly, elected on a League ticket, he opposed the Partition and questioned the legitimacy of an indirectly elected body drafting the Constitution.

Equally significant was KM Munshi, lawyer, writer, and cultural nationalist. He combined a desire that the Constitution reflect India's spiritual essence with pragmatic positions—supporting free speech, reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and compromise on the national language through the Munshi-Ayyangar formula.

Where Munshi straddled tradition and modernity, Hansa Mehta pushed firmly for inclusivity. At the United Nations, she famously altered the wording of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to read 'all human beings' instead of 'all men'. At home, she presented the national flag to Nehru on behalf of Indian women on the eve of Independence, and in the Assembly, she championed women's rights.

Regional diversity found its defender in James Joy Mohon Nichols Roy, whose advocacy resulted in the Sixth Schedule, granting autonomy to tribal areas in the Northeast. The Assembly's functioning was also sustained by figures like G Durgabai, a child prodigy turned lawyer, whose work on the Steering Committee helped clarify complex amendments for the wider body.

Overarching all these voices were Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the two figures who shaped the moral and political environment in which Constitution-making unfolded. Gandhi never entered the Constituent Assembly, yet his imprint was everywhere—in the insistence on nonviolence, the moral weight of inclusivity, and the conviction that the Constitution must speak to the poorest and most marginalized. Nehru, in turn, provided the political leadership within the Assembly. His *Objective Resolution* laid out the guiding principles of the Constitution, but his influence went further. He worked tirelessly to balance ideological divides, persuading colleagues to set aside personal ambitions for collective consensus. Just as Gandhi encouraged co-option of critics and dissenters, Nehru reached out to figures across the spectrum, scouting talent and ensuring their voices were heard. The complementarity of their leadership—Gandhi as moral compass, Nehru as political organizer—gave the Assembly its plural character and its ability to absorb difference without breaking. For young readers, their

stories together highlight the truth that building a nation requires both vision and patience, principle and pragmatism.

The book also pays tribute to the 'other makers'—B.N. Rau, the constitutional advisor whose drafts were invaluable; Nandlal Bose, whose artwork adorned the manuscript; and Prem Behari Narain Raizada, the calligrapher whose elegant script gave the Constitution its visual grace.

What makes *10 Makers of the Indian Constitution* particularly engaging is the way it weaves these diverse stories into a coherent narrative. Written for younger readers, it explains complex debates in simple, elegant prose. Yet, adults will find it no less rewarding, for it captures the drama, diversity, and idealism of Constitution-making without drowning in technicalities. Venkatesh deserves praise for striking this balance—educating without patronizing, narrating without diluting. His book is both an introduction for children and a refresher for adults; a reminder that the Constitution was born from debate, diversity, and the moral imagination of its makers.

A fine companion volume is *Hands That Wrote History: How Prem Behari Narain Raizada Calligraphed the Indian Constitution* by Mamta Nainy, with illustrations by Priyanka Gupta. Here the narration captures the range of emotions a child feels—curiosity, excitement, even playfulness—drawing readers into the story as if they were listening to family elders recounting tales of the past. Nainy's prose has a lyrical quality, while Gupta's illustrations bring to life Raizada's quiet yet extraordinary role in turning the Constitution into a visual masterpiece. The book allows children to marvel at how something as simple as calligraphy could become a nation-shaping act, while adults will appreciate the reminder that beauty and artistry were woven into the making of the Republic. If Venkatesh's book highlights the voices that debated and shaped the Constitution, Nainy and Gupta's work celebrates the artistry of the man whose elegant pen inscribed it. Read together, the two books show that India's Constitution is not just a legal document but also a cultural treasure—crafted by many minds and quite literally written into history.



The Book Review Literary Trust has organized, as part of TBR@50 celebrations, a half day event to discuss Publishing for the Young: Challenges and Rewards at the India International Centre on 15 November 2025. A report of the dialogue will be carried in the December 2026 issue of *The Book Review*.

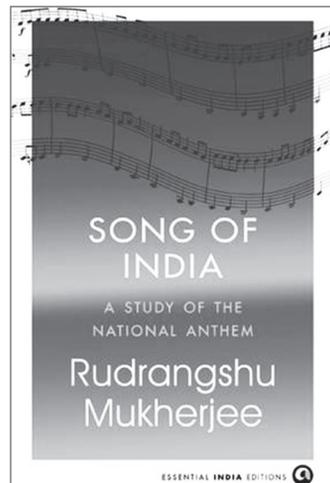
## Amol Saghar

**SONG OF INDIA: A STUDY OF THE NATIONAL ANTHEM**

By Rudrangshu Mukherjee

Aleph Book Company, 2025, pp. 86, ₹ 399.00

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's *Vande Mataram: Biography of a Song* (2003), explored the long and checkered antecedents of the song and the socio-political conditions which transformed it into an icon that it is. The book not only sheds light on the little-known details relating to the origins of this song but also makes an effort to understand the reasons that led this poetic paean to the nation, written originally in 1870s by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and first published in 1882 in his Bengali novel, *Anandmath*, to become a symbol of communal dispute. While Bhattacharya's book studied the officially recognized national song of India, the present work by Rudrangshu Mukherjee focuses on the other 'song' of India, recognized publicly as the national anthem of India, viz., 'Jana Gana Mana'.



The song played at all major national and formal events in India is a promise and a pledge to uphold the noble ideals and traditions of India. While it is known that the song was written by the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, few are aware of its vivid history. Mukherjee's *Song of India* brings to light fascinating details pertaining to the composition of the anthem as well as its musical rendition. Along with a short, but crisp, introductory section (or 'Overture'), there are two chapters in the first half of the book, namely, 'Harmony Variations' and 'Notes of Dissonance'. In the 'Overture' section, the author makes his readers aware of the prevailing political conditions in which Tagore grew up. The colourful history of the Tagore family is largely discussed against the backdrop of political developments which unfolded in Bengal in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rabindranath Tagore's own political worldview, Mukherjee argues, was majorly shaped by the Partition of Bengal in 1905, orchestrated by the then Viceroy, Lord Curzon. Tagore actively participated in the resistance movement and the counter, Swadeshi Movement, which was launched on August 7, 1905. The idea of swadeshi—the boycott of foreign goods and the use of Indian ones—was championed by Rabindranath. While

significant, the idea of swadeshi as outlined by Tagore in his works did not figure prominently in the subsequent anti-colonial movements which built upon the Swadeshi Movement of 1905, particularly the Noncooperation Movement, initiated under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in 1921. The focus of the latter, as is known, was on economic boycott, rather than intellectual rejection.

Again, it was during the course of the Swadeshi Movement that Tagore penned some of the most memorable patriotic songs. Of the many, two stand out for their popularity, namely, 'Amar Sonar Bangla' (My Golden Bengal) and 'Jai Tor Dak Shune Keu Na Ashe Tobe Ekla Cholo Re' (If no one listens to your call, then walk alone). While the former, as is known, became the national anthem of Bangladesh in 1971, the latter was one of Mahatma Gandhi's favourite songs.

Tagore, as the book indicates, was a multi-faceted personality. Besides social and political activism, which included working towards solving the problems plaguing people in the Indian villages, Tagore was also engaged, simultaneously, in several creative activities. Composing poems, writing plays, songs, novels, essays, and painting were just a few of such activities. His interest in painting developed quite late in his life. Primarily self-taught, the litterateur started painting sometime in the 1920s. His paintings, noticeably, became quite popular in Europe. Significantly, his plays like 'The Post Office', too gained popularity in large parts of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. It was in fact famously performed in the Warsaw Ghetto in July 1942 by Jewish children during the Holocaust, shortly before they were deported to the Treblinka extermination camp. The primary theme of the play of a child's journey to an eternal home and the immortal legacy of love and goodness provided a sense of peace and also 'helped' children 'prepare' for death with dignity.

As far as Tagore's socio-political career was concerned, the period between 1920 and 1930s, Mukherjee suggests, was important. Tagore, during this phase, travelled extensively within India and across the world including to Japan, the United States of America, large parts of Europe and Latin America, Soviet Union, and China. Through such tours, Tagore attempted to spread his message of universal humanism and international cooperation (p. 19). Here Mukherjee argues that Tagore's 'message of universal humanism went hand in hand with his rejection of nationalism and blind patriotism' (p. 19). Mukherjee, in the present section, also highlights the impact that his travels within India, especially in Bengal, had on his writings. His tours to the landed estates of the Tagore family in and around Santiniketan, for instance, brought him face to face with the sufferings of the poor. Such regular interactions led him to write essays and poems, we are told, which shed light on the plight of the downtrodden. In a 1901 prayer like poem, for example,

he movingly wrote, 'Give me strength never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might.' Similar sentiments were echoed in his later day essays like 'Sahitye Aitihāsikata' (Historically in Literature), which was written in 1941.

Rudrangshu Mukherjee explores the political developments which led 'Jana Gana Mana' to become the national anthem of India. An important portion of 'Harmony Variations' narrates the story of the composition of the anthem. Written and set to music by Tagore in 1911, 'Jana Gana Mana', was *not*, as the author stresses, composed in praise of King George V, the man credited with revoking the Partition of Bengal. In fact, Tagore himself, in a lengthy correspondence with his close associate, Pulinbihari Sen, refuted this argument in 1937. Rather, Tagore claimed that 'Jana Gana Mana' was a hymn to India's 'God of Destiny', the eternal charioteer who guides the nation.

Significantly, as the work demonstrates, 'Jana Gana Mana', even before it became the nation's anthem, was adopted by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army. The section in this context touches upon the fascinating details pertaining to the rendition of the song in Hindustani by Abid Hasan, Mumtaz Hussain and Ram Singh Thakur. The song, we are informed, was adopted by Bose in 1942, following the inauguration of the Free India Centre in Germany. Mukherjee, in the same portion, also describes in detail the meaning of each verse of the song. Additionally, the deliberations which took place with regard to the adoption of the song as the nation's anthem, following India's Independence, have also been highlighted. Equally fascinating is the section which sheds light on the critical role that Jawaharlal Nehru played in getting the United Nations to recognize 'Jana Gana Mana' as the national anthem of India.

While there were disagreements as far as the adoption of 'Jana Gana Mana'—outlined at length, in the succeeding 'Notes of Dissonance' chapter—as the national anthem was concerned, they were short lived. There was a section of political leaders, including the premier of Bengal, who preferred 'Vande Mataram' to the former, as the national anthem. However, given the pan-India vision of Tagore's song, vis-à-vis, Bengal centric 'Vande Mataram', it is hardly surprising that the latter got an overwhelming support from political leaders across party lines, as well as the general population.

Bereft of jargon, Rudrangshu Mukherjee's short but engaging study of the national anthem is a reminder that the idea of 'Indianness' is based on the twin concepts of pluralism and secularism. That the country adopted 'Jana Gana Mana', and not any other composition, reveals the inclusive nature of its leadership.



## Prabir Purkayastha

### UNCODED: A TECHNOLOGICAL HISTORY OF INDEPENDENT INDIA

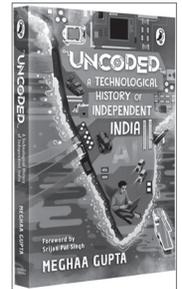
Meghaa Gupta. Foreword by Srijan Pal Singh  
Puffin Books, 2025, pp. 296, ₹ 399.00

Popular science and technology writing in India, particularly for students, is, unfortunately, a rarity. Science writing has become even more challenging, as the two great transformations—Einstein's Theory of Relativity and the work of Bohr, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, and others in quantum mechanics—have eroded the certainties of our world. They have also removed space, time and even matter from what we thought we understood, even if not very well. Both space and matter have now dissolved from what we had earlier taken for granted, into something that only the specialists can now understand, that too in the language of mathematics, not the language of our everyday world.

While figures like JD Bernal, CV Raman, and Satyen Bose, who were at the cutting edge of *this* physics, would never have agreed with science being removed from people's understanding of the world, today's world focuses much more on advances in technology. The excitement focuses on space travel, rockets reaching the moon or beyond, the world of microchips, intelligent machines, or artificial intelligence. While popularizations of science had scientists in various countries writing about science, we technologists have not done a good enough job.

Popular writing on technology occupies a more barren space. Without such writing, we cannot meet the curiosity of both young and old—those who want to know more about the world we live in, in which science and technology are of critical importance. Meghaa Gupta's book, *Uncoded: A Technological History of India*, which is targeted at young readers who may take the current world for granted, is a welcome initiative. It covers a large area, from electricity—hydro to atomic energy, rockets, both its military and civilian uses, to electronics, and also its role in our democracy, apart from the cell phone, such as the electronic voting machine.

In travelling this ground, we also need to understand the relationship between science and technology. The most advanced technological products we use are also the products of science. Significant advances, for example, in electronics, utilize ultraviolet (UV) or extra-UV lasers to produce chips, in which the transistor size is measured in nanometres. These advances in lithography, or the transfer of patterns using light or lasers, create the nanometre-level circuits on the chips. They are also used in our everyday



lives, such as the laser printer in our offices or at home. The same laser technology is also being considered for use *against* missiles or as an anti-missile defence system. This was Ronald Reagan's dream of a Star Wars-like missile shield, reborn again in Donald Trump's vision of a Golden Dome (his name) over the US.

Gupta takes us on India's post-Independence journey, which involved not only expanding the existing few science and technology institutions we had at the time, but also creating the new ones we needed. Although the British had established administrative and police structures to govern the country, they had left us with a very poor infrastructure in science and technology. There were only four technology institutions that I can think of, in Roorkee, Guindy (Chennai), Pune, and Shibpur (Howrah). The urgent task for an independent India was not only to expand our infrastructure, but also to build a cadre of scientists and engineers who would lay the foundations of this new India. Gupta, therefore, focuses not just on *what* we then did but also on *who* the key figures in this journey were. She also covers some of the key areas that were of strategic importance and foundational to India's development, including rockets and electronics. These technologies were not only critical in developing the economy but also helped our democracy, for example, through the use of electronic voting machines.

Rockets have always captured India's imagination as our entry to the new age dominated by big players. The TV series *The Rocket Boys* is a testament to people's interest in the history of India's humble beginnings in the space programme, from its early stages to its current advanced state. The nascent space programme involved borrowing rockets, instruments, and computers from the US, France, and Russia. From this to developing Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan are giant leaps, catapulting India into a select group of countries that can even carry out commercial launches for other countries' satellites. From what had appeared to many as a vanity venture, it has become critical not only for military reasons but also crucial for telecommunications, agriculture, and ecology. This journey involved three essential elements: building indigenous satellites, rockets—both liquid and solid fuelled—and communications systems to track and control the satellite.

I will not go further into the details of how India also developed rockets, not just for the satellite programme but also for military purposes. The US had always viewed India's space programme with considerable suspicion, regarding it as a cover for developing its independent military and strategic capabilities. India's vision of strategic autonomy was integral not only to its politics but also to its science and technology policy. For the US, then and still today, the phrase 'you are either with us or against us' holds true. India's nonalignment, its vision of playing an independent role in global politics, was anathema to the US and its allies.

In this journey of developing strategic autonomy, we

tend to focus more on the landmarks, such as rockets, satellites, and nuclear bombs, but often forget the people who built these programmes and their vision. Bhabha, Sarabhai, and UR Rao, along with Kalam, are key figures in the development of India's space and nuclear programme. They shared not only the vision of India becoming a developed economy but also the desire for strategic autonomy in the bipolar world of that time. And that strategic autonomy required a scientific and technological base in the country. It is also crucial to plan for a successful strategy, not only for indigenizing the technology but also to build the institutions, from BARC to ISRO.

The second key area that Gupta's book covers is the development of Electronic Voting Machines, or EVMs. EVMs have become a sensitive topic, as many believe that they can be hacked and, therefore, should not be used in elections. The problem is that the earlier paper-based voting system was prone to booth capturing and thus not immune to 'hacking', either. In the earlier era, booths could be hacked; today, the voting machines are the target. The hacking of booths is both visible and can be prevented if parties get together and utilize their cadre to prevent hostile booth capturing. In the case of EVMs, people believe we are at the mercy of the invisible 'algorithm' within the machine, which, if hacked, can alter the outcome. It is not that earlier elections could not be hacked, but the perceived powerlessness that fuels the feeling today that elections are being hacked via the EVMs.

Gupta has provided us with a history of how the EVMs were developed, with two professors from IIT Mumbai, AG Rao and Ravi Poovaiah, creating the basic architecture and design, which was then implemented by Bharat Electronics Ltd (BEL) and Central Electronics Ltd (CEL). The key feature in this design was that the machines were not programmable; even the mapping of the election symbol to the buttons we press for casting our vote is done via data, not through any programming change. The basic programme was burnt into the chip and could be altered only by changing the hardware. The Indian EVM, unlike many others in the world, runs in a stand-alone mode and without an operating system.

I, along with Bappaditya Sinha, have written about EVMs elsewhere (<https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/revisiting-evm-hacking-story>), so I will not get into this issue here. Gupta's account, although it does not delve into the EVM hacking issue, provides an overview of some key features of the machine and its impact on Indian democracy. Do I hold that Indian EVMs are not hackable? No, any machine we create can also be hacked by us. However, this is only possible if the political parties and their polling agents understand what EVMs do and are vigilant against any such attempts. Instead of chasing the chimera of the bug in the machine, they should look—as many are now doing—at the mundane tasks of examining the correctness of the Election Commission's voter lists,

mobilizing their voter base to go and vote, and challenging bogus voters.

The other welcome feature of the book is the set of quick references that she provides for further reading. One minor criticism here is regarding the visualization of the data which Meghaa provides. This task is better performed not just with numbers and some graphics as she has done, but with better tools for data visualization, which, for example, what Visual Capitalist (<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/>) uses. Comprehending the data Gupta provides would have given the readers a better understanding of the magnitude of what we, as a nation, have accomplished after Independence. Though we would also do well to remember Robert Frost's words of caution: that we still have 'miles to go before I (we) sleep'.



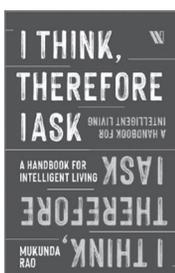
## Anjali Noronha

### I THINK THEREFORE I ASK: A HANDBOOK FOR INTELLIGENT LIVING

By Mukunda Rao  
Westland Books, 2025,  
pp. 170 ₹ 499.00

*I Think, Therefore I Ask* is an attempt at bringing the discourse of different perspectives on ideas that inform and permeate society, that influence the way we deal with and relate to people and the world around us. It attempts to do so in a simple but **not** simplistic manner. Each big idea forms a chapter of the book.

The major perspectives that are discussed are Indian (Hindu, Buddhist, Jain), Abrahamic (Judaism, Christianity, Islam); modern western or eastern



philosophical thinkers and sometimes references to Greek philosophical thought are also drawn in. But no particular system is shown to be superior to any other. In not privileging any one strand, Rao gives the message that there are different ways of thinking on each of these issues and none is intrinsically better than the other. This is a very important message today.

The writing is breezy and engrossing for mature readers who have some background knowledge of and interest in the thought paradigms of different religions and philosophies. Each chapter gives you much to learn and much to reflect on, examples chosen from ancient history and religious and spiritual traditions. For example, in the chapter on Freedom Rao quotes Marx's theory, 'His (Marx's) theories were oriented towards freeing the masses who were struggling for survival through a proletarian revolution to the "realm of freedom".' He then posits Bakunin's ideas critical of Marx's 'dictatorship of the proletariat': 'He (Bakunin) described a free person as one who has "severed every link with the social order and with the entire civilised world; with the laws, good manners, conventions, and morality of that world".' This concept of the free person Rao connects with the concept of *avdhuta* in India and in this context mentions the two outstanding female avdhutas of the twelfth and fifteenth centuries Akka Mahadevi and Lalleshwari, respectively. Thus, weaves the threads between centuries and continents. The book would be engaging for young readers, especially adolescents, who are attracted to these expansive ideas and grappling with them. However, they may not have the background knowledge required to comprehend such large sweeps. Each of these chapters could be read separately and discussed with groups of young readers, guiding them to look for associated knowledge on the internet.

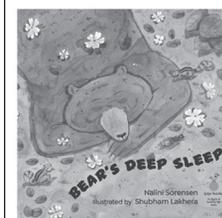
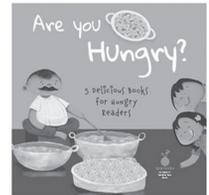


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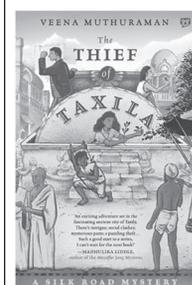
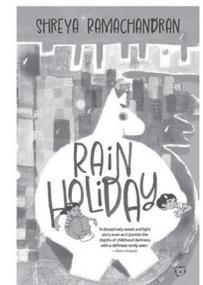


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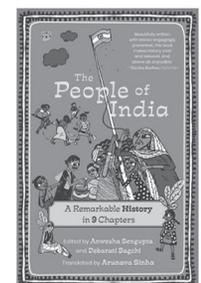


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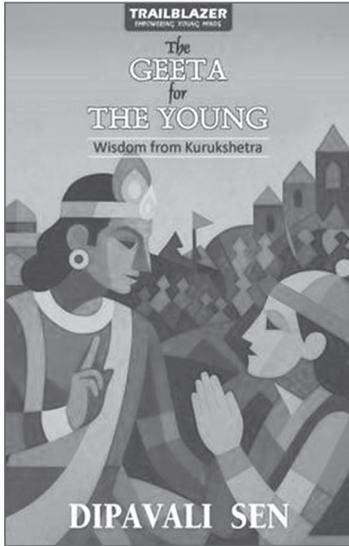
info@speakingtiger.com  
www.speakingtigerbooks.com

## TCA Anant

**THE GEETA FOR THE YOUNG: WISDOM FROM KURUKSHETRA**

By Dipavali Sen

Unicorn Books, 2025, pp. 168, ₹ 340.00



The Bhagavad Geeta, or the 'Song of God', holds a central place in understanding Hindu philosophy. Set as a prelude to the Battle of Kurukshetra, it unfolds as a conversation between Arjuna and Lord Krishna—about duty, courage, truth, and the purpose of existence.

Across its 700 verses and 18 chapters, the Geeta distils the core teachings of the Vedas

and Upanishads into a practical guide for daily living. The text harmonizes the major spiritual disciplines: *karma yoga* (the path of action), *jnana yoga* (the path of knowledge), and *bhakti yoga* (the path of devotion), not as competing ideals but as complementary avenues toward the realization of both Self and the Divine.

Yet, despite its timeless relevance, the Geeta remains underexplored. Dipavali Sen's book represents an effort to introduce this valuable text to us in a simplified, accessible manner. A retired academic from Delhi University and a prolific author of children's books, Sen is a scholar with extensive knowledge of Sanskrit. She has written several books for children that introduce them to the wisdom of the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas. Her stories have been published by the Children's Book Trust (CBT) and the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC).

In this book, Sen takes on the challenge of presenting the Bhagavad Geeta to a young audience. Instead of approaching it as a commentary, Sen adopts a creative narrative frame: an extended dialogue between a grandfather and his two grandchildren with occasional interventions from the mother. The background of the story is that their elder brother has joined the army and gone for training. The grandfather has given him a copy of the Geeta as a moral guide. The grandchildren express a desire to know why. Their intergenerational conversation forms the heart of the book, transforming what otherwise would have been an abstract theological exposition into a conversational exploration of ideas.

Everyday events in the children's lives become springboards for discussion. Through stories of school, friendships, and sibling rivalries, we are introduced to the teachings of the Geeta in ways that are concrete and relatable. The familiar setting introduces the readers to concepts like dharma (duty), karma (action), and bhakti (devotion), not as religious ideals but as practical guides to everyday life.

Each section features selected verses from the Bhagavad Geeta in Sanskrit, accompanied by English transliteration and lucid translation. Sen also draws on stories from the Puranas and other classical sources to explain these concepts.

The selected verses are carefully chosen to highlight the main messages of the Geeta: selfless action, mental control, perseverance, and the unity of knowledge and devotion. In some places, the link between the verse and the accompanying anecdote feels slightly forced, as if they were selected more to cover complex ideas rather than for narrative flow. Yet, this is a minor quibble. The book's tone remains gentle and didactic without being heavy-handed, making it engaging.

Overall, *The Geeta for the Young* succeeds in its primary aim: to make the timeless wisdom of the Bhagavad Geeta accessible to children and young adults. It may well serve as an inviting first step for readers of all ages toward one of the world's great spiritual dialogues. In bridging philosophy and storytelling, Sen has crafted a book that educates, inspires, and delights in equal measure.



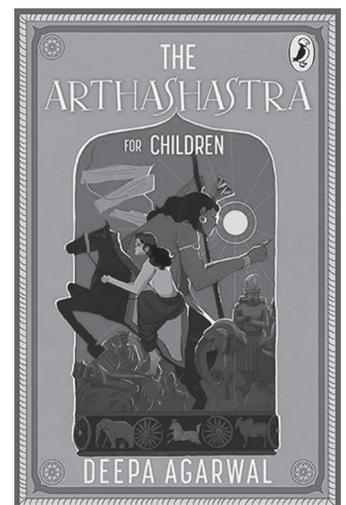
## Dipavali Debroy Sen

**THE ARTHASHASTRA FOR CHILDREN**

By Deepa Agarwal. Illustrations by Radhika Dinesh

Puffin Books, 2023, pp.182, ₹ 299.00

The Introduction: 'What is the Arthashastra?' provides much-needed information about how the long-lost palm leaf manuscript of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* came to be discovered by Rudrapatna Samasastry in 1904 at the Mysore Oriental Library. Written in the Granthi script used to write Sanskrit in the Tamil-speaking



areas of South India, it was a momentous discovery. For, despite references to it in works, say of Vishnusarma or Megasthenes, no written copy of it was known to exist. The Sanskrit version was published in 1909, the English translations in 1905-09, and the German and French ones subsequently. The 'Introduction' then moves on to the date and structure of composition of the *Arthashastra* (p. xix), and points out that, though associated with the name of Kautilya, it is not the work of any single individual. It then tells children about who Kautilya could have been (pp. xxii-xxv).

Sprinkled with lively illustrations by Radhika Dinesh, the book has nine chapters, followed by a systematic bibliography.

'All About Kingship' points out the 'training' that Kautilya thought a king should have. It is this training that perhaps Chandragupta Maurya received, including the martial arts, self-discipline and re-cap of the day's lessons (p. 4). Kautilya had even drawn out an eight-period time-table for the trainee king. (pp. 7-9). Suffering from their rigorous routines, children today should find themselves in empathy! This chapter also contains Kautilya's instructions on security provisions for the king, architectural as well as procedural (pp. 9-14). Deepa Agarwal rightly says, 'If we compare the plans of these palaces with that of high-security buildings in modern times, it would seem that many ideas have been borrowed from this ancient text' (p. 9). This chapter also tells children about revolts and rebellions, about the issues of succession, and even of royal incompetence or infirmity.

'What is a Well-Organized State?' is perhaps more relevant to the child of today. As Deepa Agarwal puts it, 'The contemporary world may have advanced in numerous ways over the centuries but the basics of good governance remain the same as in the times of the *Arthashastra*... Kautilya gave much weight to the organization of the state in such a manner that it was effectively protected against hostile forces and remained prosperous through the dedicated pursuit of agriculture and trade. He provided instructions to accomplish this in minute detail, attending to almost every aspect of agriculture and trade' (p. 25). Of course, the 'state' in the *Arthashastra* is really the *janapada* (p. 26). 'New Settlements' describes how the king should get the countryside populated in safe and secure spots but in fertile areas with due assignment of workers and officials. 'The Royal Councillors and Ministries' relates to the allocation of official duties, their roles, their hierarchy, salaries, responsibilities and even fines upon them! Preparing the budget was especially the Chancellor's privilege. The Royal Scribe (somewhat like a personal secretary to the king, p. 43) had to have a good handwriting. The Treasurer, the Chancellor, the Chief Comptroller and Auditor, and Frontiers Officers all had their rights and responsibilities spelt out. Corrupt officials

were to be exposed through secret agents; thieves and bandits were to be paraded in public (p. 47).

The economy then was very largely agricultural (only more diversified now) and Kautilya had given due emphasis on it in 'How To Make a Country Prosperous'. But Deepa Agarwal, in an engaging fashion, puts across the proposition that there was an industrial sector too (textiles, metal, salt) and a corresponding trade sector (pp. 51-54). While Kautilya wanted the king to encourage trade activity, he also proclaimed that merchants were thieves and should not be allowed to exploit the people (p. 57). Snippets like this from the author liven up the book and should make the children go on turning its pages to topics such as the Marketing System, Import and Sale of Foreign Goods, Sale Through Agents and Retailers, and Consumer Protection as well.

'How Were Funds to Be Written?' is followed by 'Babudom According to Kautilya'. 'Towards Justice and an Orderly Society' presents Kautilya's ideas on justice and order including women's rights embodied in *streedhana* (p. 101). 'About Spies and Secret Agents' will enthrall children by telling them about the various types of spies engaged in those times. 'Foreign Policy—Allies and Enemies, War and Peace' encapsulates the theory of *rajamandala* which Kautilya is most famous for (p. 119). With a diagram of concentric circles (p. 121), it clarifies how the *Vijigishu* or king 'who wants to win' should strengthen his position among his neighbours far and near. It also presents succinctly the six ways that a king has for making progress, and the matter of Treaties, Equal and Unequal.

Children will be fascinated by 'The Business of Making War' where Kautilya's insights have been related to still-prevalent tactics as in the Russian invasion of Ukraine (p. 169). A listing of Classics on Statecraft (pp.172-73) follows.

In my three decades of teaching Economics, I have often felt that the subject as taught in schools, or at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels in India, is almost entirely the Economics of the West, specifically British and American. Policymakers too are largely trained in the western tradition, though in some universities there may be special papers such as 'History of Economic Thought' with a few accompanying textbooks. But year after year, students get their degrees without learning what truly 'Indian' Economics is. Though definitely not a textbook, *The Arthashastra for Children* by Deepa Agarwal may fill that gap.

However, the boxes (of rare information) are too dark in shade or too light in font. Couldn't they have been left un-shaded, merely outlined? But then, the book *is* for younger eyes!



## Nita Berry

**HACHETTE CHILDREN'S YEARBOOK AND INFOPEDIA 2025**

Research and Content Writing by Anadya Narain, Lakshika Ahuja, Umikha Hemant Rathod, Navaneethakrishnan, Charvi Solanki, Mouli Joshi. Cover design by Syed Salahuddin

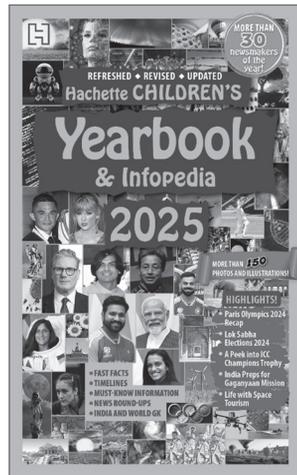
Hachette India, 2024, pp. 224, ₹ 399.00

There has been an explosion of information in every sphere of life in recent times—new advancements in science and medicine, fresh discoveries in the natural world and outer space, whereas in sports, records are made and shattered every few months. It is difficult to keep up with newsmakers around the world, be they people, places, awards, or even the weather.

*Hachette Children's Yearbook and Infopedia 2025* is a great, fun way of getting all your news and information at your fingertips. This annual bestseller is your ultimate reference book, bringing it all to you between the covers.

The *Infopedia* has been divided into ten sections for clarity and easy reference. First there's wide-ranging News of India and the world—medicine, people, politics, the environment, even an underwater metro, awards and newsmakers as diverse as Gukesh, Sonam Wangchuk and Taylor Swift. Anniversaries are listed in The Year Ahead followed by Updates on sports, politics, and world events. A short section on Literature details all you would like to know about different genres and terms. All the Countries of the world are listed alphabetically along with some important details. Now we come to fun facts about the Earth—around and inside, details about continents, climate and animals, present and prehistoric, before we reach Space, the final frontier. Space missions, astronauts and fascinating first-hand information on planets are followed by a section on space tourism and even on how to book your tickets!

Next, we go back into time with History. Useful words are explained and a brief timeline of World History follows, beginning with 5000 BCE and ending with present-day landmarks. Everything becomes clear, as events fall into place and comparisons of places and people around the world are simplified. Indian history is now tabled with timelines for Ancient, Medieval (which includes the Mughal era and the British Raj) and Modern history (post-Independence). Here is history literally at your fingertips! So, it becomes easy to grasp milestones, do



a comparative study of cultures and get a comprehensive overview of world events.

In India: States and Union Territories Statistics are listed alphabetically with relevant details down to State Animal and Bird. We also find Superlatives of India like its smallest bird, hottest place or deepest lake.

Science and Technology forms the ninth section. It goes back to the early period with major breakthroughs from India from 900 BCE, after which Indian scientists of the twentieth century and scientific achievements are listed year wise, continuing into the twenty-first century. Branches of science and the basics of Physics, Biology and Chemistry are explained lucidly. Artificial Intelligence which has taken the world by storm very recently has actually a long history going back to the seventeenth century, as we learn from the Artificial Intelligence Timeline.

Section ten, Sports, gets off with a journey of sports in India, going back to the third millennium BCE. Landmarks of the present century are followed by specific sports like archery, badminton, chess and cricket, with champions, rankings, newsmakers and awards in world sports.

This is the sixteenth updated edition of India's first ever children's yearbook. A lot of research and reading must have gone into the content writing of this *Infopedia!* What is more, heaps of illustrations and photographs on every page make the text alive and absorbing. The cover is an attractive collage of well-known and recognizable newsmakers. Well produced with good paper and printing, the book is a great fact finder to help you with assignments, projects and general knowledge quizzes. It keeps you well informed at a glance, and head and shoulders above everyone else! No wonder it is a bestseller! So go ahead, impress your friends and teachers with all you have discovered in these pages and score brownie points! This *Infopedia* becomes a wonderful take off point for getting down to further unlimited research on the internet for the serious student.

*Book News**Book News*

*Shanti & Amani: Secret of the Pickled Dream* by Yesha Gambhir Mirza is a story of curiosity, connection and the quiet magic passed down through generations. Can a jar of *achaar* really bring a family—even a neighbourhood—closer together? Read how Amani becomes a pickling expert overnight.

Simon & Schuster, 2025, pp. 64, ₹ 199.00

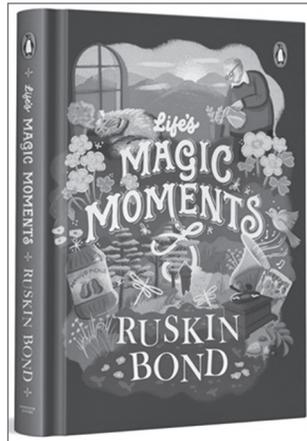
## Sucharita Sengupta

**LIFE'S MAGIC MOMENTS**

By Ruskin Bond

Penguin/Random House, New Delhi, 2025, pp. 136,  
₹ 399.00

The indefatigable Ruskin Bond is back with his latest offering, *Life's Magic Moments*. The book is a collection of his musings. At the age of ninety-one, Bond the writer shows no signs of slowing down, a most heartening thought for his readers and also for other writers. After all, so many of us can cope with all sorts of losses so long as we do not lose our ability to spin the warp and weft of words. That seems to be Bond's primary concern too, as he mentions his ageing body, slow gait, weakening eyesight and some trips to the hospital, inevitable with old age.



The legendary author reflects from his comfortable and beautiful home in charming Landour, just a bit above bustling Mussoorie. He looks at his favourite flower, the purplish cosmos, ubiquitous but slowly disappearing, like time itself. Much as the flower that needs to run wild to grow has been stopped in its tracks by construction activity across the high Himalayas, the kind of slow and comfortable time that the author passed his life in has also become a scarce commodity. As he ponders and grows brightly coloured weeds, watches his three-legged cat live on her own terms, and imbibes life affirming sips of tea, his words implore us to slow down too. With his longing for a less hurried and harried life, he makes the readers long for magic and beauty only to be found in the recesses of a calm mind.

Through the self-professed ramblings of the author, he tells us not only how to stay untouched while daily life carries on with crashes and booms around him, but also unravels the secret to writing. His all-time favourite author, Emily Bronte, wrote in dreary solitude of a house called Wuthering Heights, the place that gave the legendary masterpiece its title. All of his favourites did two things—wrote in solitude and wrote for themselves. Writing is indeed somewhat like the daily tippie—mildly addictive and fuel for the fecund soul. Not all his favourites lived as long as he has, says the author with self-awareness tinged with both sadness and gratitude—so many passed on early either due to disease or personal decline. Whether the heartbreak of a writer is romantic or

not depends totally on how one views life—Bond is not inclined to see it with rose-tinted spectacles—but what is certain is the depth of feelings that arise in the heart when the world is both fascinating and disappointing, and these feelings must under all circumstances find the words and be released into the vast universe. And so, we find writing is an incurable ache.

Much as the author's thoughts wind their way across clear streams and fragrant forests, as he thinks about the carnage wrought upon nature by power-hungry old men, he gives a hat tip to two of his most iconic and unforgettable characters—Biniya from *The Blue Umbrella* and of course Rusty, his own alter ego. Flipping through the pages of this tiny volume, it is impossible to not be drawn deep into a past when we could still own time and own our own lives. Hopefully, all readers of the great Mr. Bond will enjoy his magical moments and their own through this book.



## Nita Berry

**WALK WITH ME: A NATURE JOURNAL**

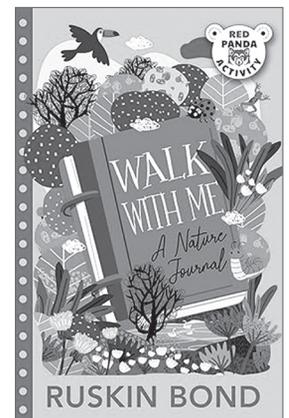
By Ruskin Bond. Cover design by Saurabh Garge

Red Panda, an imprint of Westland Books, 2025, pp. 128,  
₹ 299.00

This charming nature journal comes like a whiff of fresh air, brought to young readers by none other than India's great nature lover and most-loved writer, Ruskin Bond.

'Nature is like a giant magical book, waiting for you to open its pages,' he observes. After all, it is 'brimming with amazing wonders—wild creatures scurrying about, tall trees swaying in the breeze and colourful butterflies dancing from flower to flower! With so much to see, hear and feel, every walk outside can become an exciting adventure.'

So, we set out to uncover the secrets of the great outdoors, using this nature journal like a treasure map. We follow the simple steps outlined as we gear up with all our tools...pencils, erasers, crayons, a magnifying glass, binoculars, a small jar, camera or phone and a bag pack. And now we are equipped to explore for the next 10 days as we observe flowers, creatures, the sky above, creepy



crawlies below, and the enchanting sounds of nature.

Refining all our five senses to become a 'nature ninja' we move on to a 5 day-5 senses challenge. There are fun charts to jot observations along the way.

The changing seasons bring in exciting and subtle changes in the environment round the year. So, a Seasonal Nature Tracker helps record these transformations as we pay close attention to trees, flowers, animals and the weather, all of which have their own seasonal surprises. It's not surprising that we become nature sleuths next, tracking animals through their prints, watching the sky, listening to the sounds of nature and finding varied colours of nature. Several blank pages are thoughtfully provided for sketches, lists, descriptions, collages and anything of extraordinary interest that we may come across.

*Walk With Me: A Nature Journal* is innovative and creative, inspiring sensitivity to nature. It makes avid nature lovers of us all, whether we are nature sleuths in just our balconies or backyards, or in the great outdoors like a jungle safari, a beach or even a neighbourhood park. These activities bring a new dimension into lives which are for the most part spent cooped up in closed apartments, saddled with schoolwork or extra classes. They open our eyes to the many wonders of nature which we mostly take for granted or ignore. A new generation of nature lovers could perhaps resolve the severe crises of climate change and environmental degradation that threaten the very survival of our planet today.

Attractively brought out by Red Panda, with bright images, a clear font and good paper, although the cover paper could have been a little heavier, this reasonably priced hands-on journal will make a true adventurer and detective of you. So, grab your tools and get set to explore a whole wide world that is waiting for you out there! And what better guide can you have but India's eternal nature lover, Ruskin Bond!



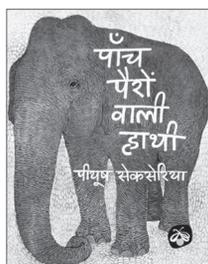
## Manika Kukreja

### PANCH PAIRON WALI HATHI

By Peeyush Sekhsaria

Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 48, ₹ 175.00

Have you ever looked towards the sky at dawn? It is humbling to observe the sky with its changing shades. Lines of red hue form patterns preceding the view of rising sun. It is humbling to be a part of a vast universe that is out there and is



constantly evolving with us. The short stories in this book seem like the author's initiative to re-live, reflect over, and share with his readers a few of those humbling experiences of his life. The experiences that make him feel like a small part of a big world. He ignites those feelings in his readers too.

The book is a collection of short accounts on nature, arranged in eleven topics ranging from big trees and animals to small plants and birds. It is a wonderful resource for young adults and teens who are interested in nature observation: going on nature walks to read, write, and draw based on observations made during those walks. Similarly, it is for educators who like the experience of reading nature musings and wish to share further with people around.

Hindi enthusiasts and educators will also enjoy the book as the narratives are written from a deeply reflective point of view. Peeyush writes in the Introduction that the events mentioned in the book are aspects of nature that caught his interest. He describes it as if he had only caught hold of one end of a story; thus, making him attempt to find 'the other end'. So, he seeks the story behind these encounters and research more. And, penning down these tales is a way of remembering, with gratitude, all those who shared their experiences, their knowledge, their hopes and their feelings of helplessness.

Each story mulls over various dimensions of life like political boundaries, scientific observation, anecdotal events, social associations, etc. while sharing the common theme that they all emerged from—the love for nature!



## Lakshmi Karunakaran

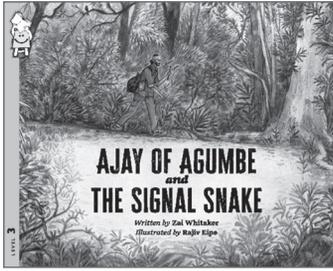
### AJAY OF AGUMBE AND THE SIGNAL SNAKE

By Zai Whitaker. Illustrated by Rajiv Eipe

Pratham Books, ₹ 105.00

Surrounded by the Western Ghats' mountains and lush rainforest, Agumbe is often called the 'Cobra Capital of south India'. It is home to the highest population of King Cobras—the world's longest venomous snake. *Ajay of Agumbe and the Signal Snake* follows a day in the life of Ajay Giri, who has spent decades researching, rescuing, and rehabilitating these extraordinary reptiles. Ajay is the Director of the Agumbe Rainforest Research Station, founded by Romulus Whitaker, and run by the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust.

For Ajay, the rainforests of Agumbe are both home and a research ground. He begins his day before dawn,



when the forest stirs awake. With an antenna in one hand and a notebook under his arm, he listens intently—his ears often sharper than his eyes. He notes the draco gliding past, the Malabar

whistling thrush calling, and most importantly, the faint radio signal that guides him to the King Cobra he has tracked for years. Once he locates it, Ajay quietly records every movement. Perhaps the cobra, now accustomed to his presence, recognizes him too and continues its life undisturbed. For Ajay, the forest is never silent—it is a living manuscript; one he studies with patience and awe.

Through verse, Whitaker tells this remarkable story of Ajay's relationship with one of the most feared creatures on the planet. His respect, resilience, and dedication shine through, offering children a window into the lives of conservationists who work quietly, tirelessly, and often unseen in our forests. The book also highlights Ajay's community work—teaching people to respect and coexist with snakes—and introduces young readers to the science of telemetry, a vital tool that allows researchers to study animals in their natural habitats without intrusion.

The rainforest comes alive through Rajiv Eipe's illustrations, rendered with richness and depth through a combination of sketches, water colours, and soft pastels. His King Cobra, particularly in the dramatic middle spread, seems to leap off the page. His play of light and shadow brings texture to the forest, capturing its mood and mystery.

At its heart, *Ajay of Agumbe and the Signal Snake* is not just the story of a man and a cobra, but of the delicate balance between humans and the wild. It invites children to step into the rainforest, to listen closely, and to discover that even the most feared creatures have a place in our shared world.



## Ragini Lalit

### OUR RICE TASTES OF SPRING

By Anumeha Yadav. Illustrated by Spitting Image  
Red Panda, an imprint of Westland Books, 2025, pp. 32,  
₹ 299.00

Even the hens and pigeons do not eat the new grains.  
'How can we trust it, when the birds don't?'

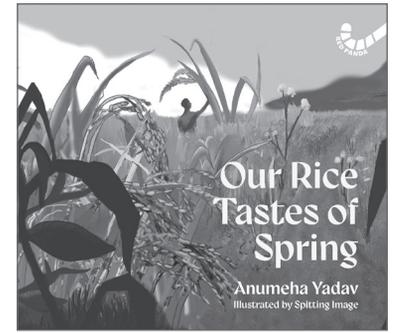
This question reverberates in Anumeha Yadav's book,

*Our Rice Tastes of Spring*—a beautiful and critical addition to the collection of children and Young Adult literature from this year.

The story takes us into the world of young Jinid from a fictional village in Jharkhand's Chhota Nagpur region whose family has been growing several traditional varieties of rice. In their memories and conversations, they keep alive this treasure trove of knowledge passed down from their ancestors. The diversity of paddy grains is intimately linked with the cultural, nutritional, and ecological biodiversity of the region and people's lives. Through the conversations of Jinid's grandparents, we can savour the melodious names of the rice varieties—Kalamaliphool, Ranikajal, Jeeraphool, Noichi-Dhaan, Garib-Sal... We learn which rice will grow best in the wetlands, which seeds will survive scattered showers, which grains will tolerate cyclone and flood-like situations, which rice *maand* is naturally sweet, what varieties are medicinal, how do these rice varieties preserve the soil and nurture all the other species dependent on them and so much more—this knowledge, built on generations of Adivasi cultivators' careful observations and seed preservation efforts, highlights the rich food diversity that has been passed down and sustained. As Jinid's grandmother reminds us at one point, rice is much more than the nutrients it may provide: it is the very source of life.

What happens then when this source of life and dignity is threatened by a man in dark clothes and shoes? Promising higher yields, quicker selling, and uniform-looking white rice which will cure all sickness, a hybrid variety of rice is introduced *en masse*. The diktat of this 'revolution' rice comes along with synthetic 'PPP' petrochemical-based supplements to prepare the soil. The book follows the story of the changing landscapes of Jinid's village as the community members respond to this 'invention' imposed upon their village.

Although told in fictionalized terms, this narrative speaks to very real conversations and circumstances around the erosion of food diversity and sovereignty. For one, it's alluding to the reality of large-scale chemical fortification of rice supplied through the Public Distribution System in States like Jharkhand. Foisted upon rural, poor people at a large scale who have been given no choice in the matter, these new grains are referred to as 'plastic rice' by many rice-growing farming communities. Born out of Anumeha Yadav's work as a researcher and journalist in Jharkhand on India's public sector food programmes, this visual narrative holds in it the potential to sit with the questions and complexities



of food-politics in India, rather than succumbing to easy techno-solutionism. It also allows us to envision alternative ways of life for the future, remembering our older resilient and diverse food cultures.

In the story, Jinid's village community comes together to respond to the crisis quickly and a neat story arc emerges—perhaps a bit too neat. The everyday life of people's resistance in the face of assimilationist policies is slow and arduous; it is lived in various small and big struggles, and victories are few and far between. More than a picture book with a linear narrative, this book's strength is as a visual archive and testimony to people's solidarities in the face of extractionist policies and food monocultures. Using mixed-media design which bring rich illustrations and photography together, the team at Spitting Image breathes life into this story of Jinid's village, which is also the story of many communities across India. At the core of this simply written and visually captivating narrative is a plea to preserve these resilient seeds, forests and rivers which nurture us, so that we can keep alive the taste of spring.



## Ashwini Rajpoot

### FLOOD IN THE BASTI

By Maya Yadav, Neha Patel, Tinam Nishad and Pooja Singh. Translated by Shreya Khemani. Illustrated by Ubitha Leela Unni

New Learning Centre, Raipur, 2025, first published in Hindi in 2021

How can a story of lives being lived on the edge of precarity be told? Perhaps only by those who have lived them. *Flood in the Basti* does exactly this, offering us an unflinching yet tender portrayal of communities in bastis, where floods are recurring calamities folded into everyday life.

The book is remarkable for its intense subjectivity—characters and their perspectives remain at the centre. The children's gaze anchors the narrative and illustrations, allowing readers to inhabit their worlds with immediacy and intimacy. Each of the three stories opens with a moment of ordinary life abruptly pierced—a sky darkening, a mother shaking children awake, sound tearing through sleep. In the lives of these children, calamity arrives without warning, indifferent to rest or routine. We see not just



the struggle and helplessness but also moments of quick thinking, resilience, and even humour amid crises. Joy is not erased, but it is not romanticized.

The translator's decision to leave words like *gundi*, *mundi*, *murgi*, and *naala* untranslated keeps the text rooted in its world. This choice reminds us that these stories cannot be neatly relocated elsewhere.

The first illustration is of a girl looking up at red clouds, her eyes taking in the signs of what is to come. As the stories unfold, it is through the children's gaze that we witness the flood. The final illustration, of a girl looking up at the sky, extends this act of seeing, holding within it the paradox of children who possess great inner strength yet must endure calamities far beyond their control.

At its heart, the book asks scathing questions. Why do bastis flood? Why must certain communities always bear the brunt of systemic neglect and injustice? Without offering easy solutions, it indicts the structures that keep survival precarious, even as it honours the everyday endurance of its people.

*Flood in the Basti* is an important book—for all those who need to reckon with inequality and the truths submerged in our cities, and for those who don't.



## The Book Review Literary Trust Children's Story Contest

On the occasion of the fiftieth year of the publication of *The Book Review*, The Book Review Literary Trust is pleased to invite submissions for the Short Story Contest 2025 from Children in two categories – ages 8-11 and 12-17.

Please find guidelines below:

- Only one submission per person.
- Submissions must be original and unpublished.
- Submission must be in English.
- Translations will not be accepted.
- Word limit: 1000-2000 words.
- Submissions must be sent on a Word Document, typed in Times New Roman, font size 12, with double spacing.
- Kindly include your full name, age, class, name of school, home address, mobile number and email ID with the submission.
- Submission deadline: 31 May 2026

Results will be announced in August 2026.

First prize : Rs. 10,000/

Second prize : Rs. 7500/

Third prize : Rs. 5000/

6 consolation prizes.

Please email entries to: [tbrchildrenstorycomp@gmail.com](mailto:tbrchildrenstorycomp@gmail.com)

# Comics: A Cross-Cultural Evolution

By Krithika S.

Comics are one of the most enduring forms of visual storytelling. One can argue that Egyptian hieroglyphics, Europe's eleventh century Bayeux tapestry and ancient Indian cave paintings are early signals of image-text narration. This medium, in modern times, has only grown from caricatures, magazine strips, to now comic books, graphic novels and autobiographies. In this dynamic space which welcomes diverse narratives, voices and identities, France and India host a culturally distinct industry for comics.

Visual storytelling is an integral part of our country's history but comics as a form emerged as a viable narrative medium only after the British had occupied the subcontinent. One needs to understand that India's geographical vastness and complex historical trajectories do not allow to establish a clear and categorical historiography since each region had different timelines, distinct influences and varied understanding of image-text narration. Hence, it is difficult to define the origin of the Indian comics in a monolithic fashion. However, throughout this essay, I would try to highlight the important milestones to trace the evolution and cross-cultural influences of Indian comics.

The first occurrence of narrative drawing was in the *Delhi Sketch Book* in 1850. Inspired by British satirical magazine *Punch*, it showcased the life of Britishers in the city. Although short lived, over the next two decades, cartoon magazines sprung up in Bengal, Lucknow, Punjab, Gujarat, Lahore and Bombay. These magazines were mildly humorous and usually were a commentary on everyday life. According to John Lent, comics historian, Indian comics sprung up early twentieth century onwards. In *The Asian Comics*, Lent retraces that political cartooning became a prominent feature as C Subramania Bharti tried it in *Chitravali* in 1910 and weekly magazine *Ananda Vikatan* in 1926 in Tamil Nadu; Kerala had *Viswadeepam* and *Shankar's Weekly* in late 1930s, also Bengal's *Amrit Bazar Patrika*. During this period, Independence movement influenced sharply the themes and tonalities of publication.

Indian comics were influenced by British culture as many cartoons published were in newspapers and magazines that were established by the British like the *Times of India*, *The Bengal Gazette* and *The Statesman*. The British administrative and railway networks determined the circulation patterns, which followed the British trade routes. The paradox of using British editorial and distribution models to found an anti-colonial movement through political cartooning and satire is not at all lost.

Post-Independence, comics witnessed a transformation in terms of format, themes, production and distribution

as British stronghold started to wane and other international cultures began to influence the print culture and subsequently the comics production in the country.

*Parallel Trajectories—Indian and French Comics Heroes:* In the 1960s, illustrator Pran Kumar Sharma created two iconic characters: teenager *Daabu* and the old, wise *Chacha Chaudhary* for the Hindi belt readers while Bengal also witnessed Narayan Debnath's *Bantul*, Bengal's first superhero. More Indian-produced comic books began to appear. Anant Pai while reprinting American illustrator Lee Falk's *The Phantom* at Indrajal Comics realized the need for an indigenous culture of comics. In 1967, he created *Amar Chitra Katha*, one of the most celebrated Indian exports internationally in the world of comics.

Fascinating similarities emerge when examining the creative trajectories of Indian comic pioneers Pran Kumar Sharma and Anant Pai alongside their French counterparts René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo. Both regions developed distinctively unconventional protagonists that diverged dramatically from American superhero archetypes, immensely popular at that time.

Pran catapulted to extraordinary success through his beloved creation, a bumbling yet intelligent elderly protagonist uncle Chaudhary, who remained deeply anchored in traditional Indian society and cultural values. Meanwhile, Anant Pai meticulously relied on rich mythology, extensive historical narratives, and vibrant local folklore to establish an authentically indigenous comics culture through his acclaimed *Amar Chitra Katha* series.

Simultaneously in France, similar creative forces were gaining popularity. René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo introduced the hilarious duo *Astérix and Obélix* (who first debuted in 1959), two bumbling Gallic warriors who took pride in their ancient Celtic identity. While in Belgium, Hergé's intrepid young reporter *Tintin* (first appearing in 1929) and his globe-trotting adventures shaped the popular culture of both France and Belgium, establishing influential storytelling conventions. Belgium and France are intricately tied in comics' production and editorial process. These oddball yet culturally rooted protagonists created amusing situations while heroically saving their village, is a refreshing departure from those of American comics who portrayed typically flawless, physically perfect male saviours.

The serialization format proved equally crucial in both traditions. Each volume presented fresh adventures featuring recurring characters, incorporating cultural clashes, exotic geographical discoveries, and episodic storytelling that maintained reader engagement across multiple instalments.

The distinctive visual aesthetics, bright, clean colouring techniques and conventional panel layouts that eventually reached Indian comics publishers likely drew considerable inspiration from these successful French and Belgian counterparts.

*Diverging Destinies—Indian and Franco-Belgian Comics After the 1980s:* From 1980s onwards, the destinies of Indian and Franco-Belgian comics diverged dramatically, despite their shared foundation in comical, serialized narratives designed for general audience.

The pivotal difference emerged through governmental recognition and institutional support in France and Belgium. The French government began acknowledging comics' significant cultural value, implementing various policies and funding mechanisms to nurture this growing artistic medium. Calling it the 'ninth art form' elevated its significance and provided crucial intellectual legitimacy. Art schools offering professional comics training, internationally acclaimed comics festivals celebrating authors and amateurs, public libraries preserving sequential art collections, and museums showcasing comics as legitimate cultural artefacts, all of it nurtured the ecosystem for the comics to flourish. Meanwhile, Indian comics lacked comparable governmental recognition and institutional support.

*Cross-Cultural Collaboration*—Since the 2000s, renewed interaction between Indian and Franco-Belgian comic cultures have invigorated comics production and reception. This period marked significant translation initiatives, bringing beloved Franco-Belgian classics like the adventurous *Astérix and Obélix* series and Hergé's internationally acclaimed *Tintin* adventures to Hindi-speaking audiences.

French creators Artoupan and Labremure depicted Indian cultural experiences, bringing subcontinental perspectives to European readership through their graphic narrative *Maharaja* (2014). Meanwhile, Indian graphic artist Appupen joined hands with French scientist Laurent Daudet, exploring intersections between visual storytelling and science to publish *Dream* in 2024. Simon Lamouret represented the city of Bangalore in all its chaos and glory to the French audience in his narrative *Bangalore* (2021).

To inform and discuss about complexities of urban geographies, comics make a fertile medium to challenge socio-economic representation through their visual language. While French comics have innovated the language of comics to include various kinds of histories and storytelling consistently, the Indian comics are yet to use this medium to their advantage to complement their existing visual storytelling practices.



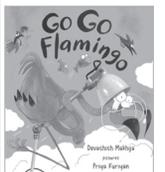
## 2025 releases!



### 5 FANTASTIC FACTS ABOUT THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

illustrations: Ashok Rajagopalan

A first look at India's Constitution, with quirky pictures and thoughtful activities that underline diversity.



### GO GO FLAMINGO

text: Devashish Makhija pictures: Priya Kuriyan

The flamingos are in a twist...

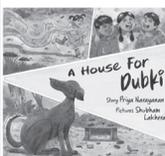
Satirical verse and stunning visuals paint a telling picture of the violence humans inflict on the natural world.



### IT'S SO HOT! (bilingual)

text: Aruna Shekar pictures: Charbak Dipta

Vignettes of a chaotic, cacophonous day when the heat is getting to everyone!



### A HOUSE FOR DUBKI

text: Priya Narayanan pictures: Shubham Lakhera

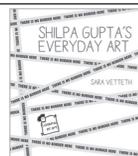
A warm story of friendship, around the idea of home and displaced migrant workers.



### RUN! (wordless)

Kavita Singh Kale

Three children flee down the hills of Himachal from a big Himalayan sheepdog... who only wants to play!



### SHILPA GUPTA'S EVERYDAY ART

Sara Vetteth

Well-known contemporary artist Shilpa Gupta turns everyday objects into art, as she seeks answers about identity and belonging.



### THE NIGHT SKY

text: Samina Mishra pictures: Ananya Srinivasan

To the moon! Tipu's star-filled quilt becomes a cosmic playground for him and his puppies.

## Forthcoming!



### KISHORE ASHORE

text: C. G. Salamander pictures: Sahitya

Kishore is joining his father at sea for the first time, and he's afraid. For he's heard the sea turns men into monsters. A coming-of-age graphic novel.



### SHERA

text: Arun Fulara pictures: Allen Shaw

Raju and Monu long to see the leopard in the jungle near their village. Do they? Breathtaking visuals capture the film set in Uttarakhand, on which this graphic novel is based.



### SHEELA'S TWO HOMES

Nina Sabnani

Sheela is any happy child growing up in Sind – until Partition tumbles her world. A true story, adapted from an animation film.

Tulika Publishers, Chennai [www.tulikabooks.com](http://www.tulikabooks.com)

## Partho Datta

**RANG BARSAYO RE: KUMAR GANDHARVA AUR VISHNU CHINCHALKAR KI JUGALBANDI**

Edited by Seema, Kavita Tiwari and Kanak Sashi. Design by Kanak Sashi

Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, 2024, pp. 13, ₹ 35.00

**TEN INDIAN TRADITIONS OF FOLK MUSIC THAT TELL OUR STORIES**

By Mamta Nainy

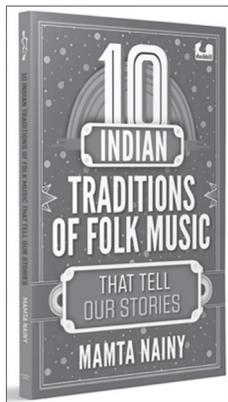
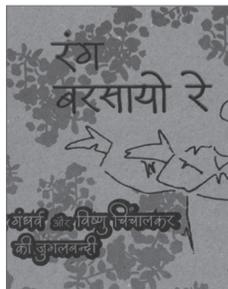
Duckbill, Penguin Random House, Gurugram, 2025, pp. 152, ₹ 250.00

A very striking set of sketches of Kumar Gandharva—done in bold strokes by his devoted friend, the artist Vishnu Chinchalkar—was first published in the 1992 issue of the children’s science magazine, *Chakmak*. Reprinted for the centenary, this beautifully produced little book is a collector’s item.

Chinchalkar’s unique sketches capture Kumar Gandharva in performance with remarkable accuracy—his expansive gestures: the tilt of the head, the way his body leaned, the raising of the arm. His minimalist approach emphasizes the thinking musician—the broad forehead, the distinctive jowl, the crease of the kurta. There is no face, yet this is unmistakably Kumar Gandharva. Like his music, the power of the unsaid is manifest in these sketches. They invoke personality, and it is possible to imagine why listeners were drawn to more than just the music. Accompanying the drawings are a handful of lyrics around *Holi*, from the Braj repertoire sung by Kumar Gandharva.

In an essay that is also a kind of statement, Chinchalkar marvels at the detritus of nature—broken twigs, fallen leaves, seeds, fruits, even dust—and their ability to suggest pattern and design. He reflects on the power of quotidian objects to communicate and express the human condition. Perhaps this is also a suggestion about the organic nature of Kumar Gandharva’s music—its deep roots in the lived experience of the folk. Elsewhere (*Kaljaye Kumar Gandharva*, 2014), Chinchalkar paid tribute, hinting that his lifelong connection and association helped him absorb a way of life and thinking from his ‘guru’.

*Ten Indian Traditions of Folk Music that Tell Our Stories* is a remarkably written book by Mamta Nainy. What



we often call *folk* is in fact the expressive culture of the labouring classes—their music is diverse, deeply rooted, and profoundly moving. In ten chapters, the author presents a rich mine of information on various performing communities and their distinctive musical traditions: Bidesia (Bihar), Langas and Manganiyars (Rajasthan), Bhand Pather (Kashmir), Qawwals (Delhi), Pandavani (Chhattisgarh), Lavani (Maharashtra), Jogappas (Karnataka), Kabir Vaani (Kutch), Bhatiyali (Bengal), and Li singing (Nagaland).

I can’t think of another recent account that brings together so much on the subaltern traditions of Indian music—combining depth with accessibility. Nainy’s narrative is not only informative but also animated by a strong social conscience. Especially compelling are the curated YouTube links and the carefully selected readings that accompany each chapter.

The book also makes several insightful and unexpected connections. For instance, in her discussion of *Bhand Pather* in Kashmir, Nainy traces a tradition of political satire from medieval literature through Premchand to contemporary figures like Shashi Tharoor. Her exploration of Sufi cultures around Nizamuddin Auliya’s dargah in Delhi includes a thoughtful reflection on the legend of Amir Khusrau and the Qawwal Bacche tradition—a refreshing alternative to the often uncritical and romanticized accounts of the Khusrawi legacy found in conventional music histories. I was especially fascinated by the chapter on Naga musical traditions and the *libuh*, an *ektara*-like instrument.

To borrow Satyajit Ray’s evocative phrase—this is a book for everyone, from eight to eighty.



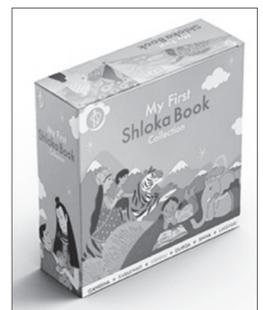
## Dipavali Debroy Sen

**MY FIRST SHLOKA BOOK COLLECTION: GANESHA, SARASWATI, VISHNU, DURGA, SHIVA, LAKSHMI**

Translation by Sarita Saraf and Chitwan Mittal. Full colour illustrations by Bhargavi Rudraraju

AdiDev Press, 2024, pp. 16 each, ₹ 150.00 each (₹ 900.00 for the set)

The box/set is attractive as well as sturdy. The Board Books are easy for the child to take out and put in, but hard to swallow, chew up, or tear up. Each contains a delightful collection of simple, well-known *shlokas* translated into readable English by Sarita Saraf and Chitwan



Mittal. Arrows act as links between Sanskrit words and English translations, ingenious and accurate. For example, the book *Lakshmi* has the Sanskrit *shloka* in the Devanagari script. Below it is the English transcription or phonetic rendering. Then there follows the English translation. Below the specific, relevant words of the English translation, there are pointers or curved arrows linking them to the transcribed words. 'I bow to you, O sweet Mahalakshmi' comes with 'namastastu' below pointing to 'bow to you' (p. 1). In the book *Shiva*, below 'O Lord Shiva, you are the lord of the mountains', an arrow links 'lord of the mountains' to 'geerisham' below it (p 9). No italics are used, thankfully, keeping the target readers in mind.

The illustrations are bright and colourful, strapping two pages and yet not interfering with the text, cutting across, or overlapping. The children in the illustrations are also in contemporary outfits, identifiable by the readers. This may help assuring them that the gods and goddesses do not just belong to ancient times.

The books are in line with *My First Prayer to Lord Ram: A Translation of Tulsidas' Prayer that Kids can Read, Understand and Enjoy* by Chitwan Mittal, Sarita Saraf and Aparajitha Vasudev (AdiDev Press, 2023). But because they are in a set, they are toys, books and library all rolled into one.

As a child, I had a couple of such sets, e.g., *Pooh's Pot of Honey* (Methuen) and *My Nature Library* (A Reader's Digest Mothercare Book). I treasured them, like I will do this 'review copy' of Shloka Books.



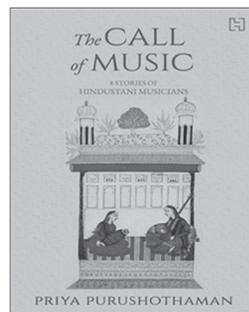
## Ashwini Deshpande

### THE CALL OF MUSIC: 8 STORIES OF HINDUSTANI MUSICIANS

By Priya Purushothaman

Hachette India, 2025, pp. xvii + 276, ₹ 699.00

Is a legendary musical inheritance a blessing, a burden, or both? How does such a legacy shape the artistic practice of the next generation, as they seek to craft their own distinctive voice while contending with inevitable comparisons to their illustrious forebears? How do those without a hereditary claim to this tradition gain entry into the hallowed portals of this exacting art form and carve out a place for themselves? While men are often free to devote themselves entirely to *sadhana*



(discipline and learning), women must navigate the competing demands of rigorous training, performances, marriage, motherhood, household chores, and social expectations. How do they manage this balancing act?

Through eight compelling portraits of Hindustani classical musicians, Priya Purushothaman, herself a practicing vocalist, explores these questions with nuance, resulting in a deeply engaging volume. With this book, she joins a small (but hopefully growing) cadre of writers (among them Namita Devidayal) who combine lucid prose with insight drawn from their own musical journeys to offer an insider's perspective. These are no ordinary insiders: they are embedded deeply enough to grasp the complexities, the beauty, the ecstasy, the hardship, and the cultural codes of this demanding world, where patience, perseverance, and access to authentic *gharana taalim* matter as much as innate talent.

Purushothaman's sensitivity as a writer allows her to zoom out from individual lives and situate them within broader social realities of gender, caste, and community. This wide-angle lens, which acknowledges how both opportunities and constraints shape musical progression, is rarely found in clichéd accounts that resort to tropes of 'divine calling' or in hagiographies that blur the line between fact, fiction, and rumour. This refusal to romanticize is what sets the book apart.

Rather than a single sweeping panorama, the book offers a mosaic of eight musical journeys. None of its protagonists has yet reached the absolute pinnacle of their profession, but this is no limitation: together, they represent a cross-section of genres, genders, castes, religions, and starting points, whether born into a musical lineage or entering from the outside. Some have found both critical and commercial success. Others, like Suhail Yusuf Khan (grandson of Ustad Sabri Khan), have chosen to break almost completely with tradition.

The opening chapter narrates the story of Alam Khan, son of legendary sarod maestro Ali Akbar Khan and grandson of Baba Allaudin Khan, the formidable founder of the Maihar gharana. Alam appears weighed down by the crushing expectations of his lineage, complicated further by his upbringing as a mixed-race child in the United States, a perpetual outsider both there and in India, and by the challenge of embracing a tradition that may initially have felt alien. I had not heard him before reading the book, but after watching clips online, it is clear that years of *riyaaz* have borne fruit. Yet Alam is sceptical of what he calls the over-emphasis on improvisation, claiming that the level of preparation before a concert leaves little room for true spontaneity. Connoisseurs would likely dispute this, arguing that it is precisely the capacity to transcend rehearsed material and innovate in the moment that made his father and other Maihar greats (Vidushi Annapurna Devi, Pandit Ravi Shankar) legendary.

Other legacy musicians featured include violinist Kala Ramnath and tabla maestro Yogesh Samsi, both of whom deviated from the precise paths laid out by their families but succeeded in carving distinctive identities. Suhail Yusuf Khan's story, meanwhile, vividly illustrates the tension between honouring the family name and forging a personal direction.

Equally fascinating are the accounts of 'outsiders' who entered this rarefied world by unconventional routes and made their mark. Shubhada Paradkar, an accomplished *khayal* exponent, and Shubha Joshi, who pursued the less mainstream tradition of *thumri* singing, still burdened by traces of its past stigma, faced different challenges. Shubhada ji balanced marriage, motherhood, and domestic responsibilities, aided by a supportive family, while Shubha ji rejected the conventional family path altogether. Both her choices, to specialize in *thumri* and to remain single, were met with familial resistance, but she held her ground.

The most dramatic and expansive account is that of Sudhindra Bhaumik, one of Purushothaman's own gurus. A metallurgy student at IIT Kharagpur before embarking on music, he was a late entrant into this world. His two-chapter story, which includes personal tragedy and repeated obstacles, is an extraordinary testament to resilience and grit.

Then there is the profile of Rumi Harish, whose narrative is compelling primarily as a story of gender transformation rather than as a musical chronicle. While I found recordings of Harish's lectures online, I could not locate music recordings to experience his artistry, which made this portrait feel somewhat incomplete to me. For all the other musicians, I went beyond the curated playlist at the end of the book and explored more of their music, which deepened my engagement with their stories.

The book offers enough insider detail to delight connoisseurs while remaining accessible to the general reader. At its heart, these are stories of aspiration, perseverance, elation, and the occasional heartbreak of falling short of one's own expectations, or those of family and tradition. In that sense, they speak to a universal human experience. This is a richly rewarding and highly recommended read.

### Book News

### Book News



*My Big Book of Fun with Friends, Volume 1* created by Geeta Dharmarajan contains 51 story-based activities to teach a child to read the Katha way. This is an action-packed FunBook where the intrepid child adventurer solves mobius strip twists,

launches a colony club, and as a reader-leader, challenges herself daily.

Katha, 2024, pp. 76, ₹ 495.00

## Paresh Kumar

### A NEW WORLD ROMANCE

By Susham Bedi. Translated from the original Hindi by Astri Ghosh

Zubaan Books, 2025, pp. 368, ₹ 595.00

In 2018, Susham Bedi wrote the novel *Navabhoom Ki Raskatha* in Hindi. Seven years later the book is still being read in the original tongue. A hardcover imprint by the Hindi Book Centre seems quite popular.

Last year, in 2024, this book was one of the twelve that were translated to English by Astri Ghosh under 'The Women Translating Women' project. An effort of the Ashoka Centre for Translation funded by the eponymous Susham Bedi Memorial Fund and printed by Zubaan Publishers, New Delhi.

Titled *A New World Romance*, the English translation is faithful to the language and construction of the Hindi original. Very often with translations the decision to remain true to the original can be a Faustian bargain. In this case, despite Ms. Ghosh's sincerity, we end up losing much of the froth and fun that Ms. Bedi packs in the original.

In India a vernacular novel and a novel in English often cater to very different demographics. With very wide gaps in social and cultural moorings. What may be normal for one set of readers may be unthinkable for another. What maybe current for one set may feel dated to another. What may seem familiar and comfortable to the vernacular reader may seem alien and contrived to the English reader...and vice versa.

As someone who speaks mainly in Hindi and reads mainly in English, I can only sympathize with Ms. Ghosh as she took on the task of translating this deeply felt, very personal and fully engaged work on love, longing, desire and loss.

The book begins with the author talking to the reader. The *sootradhaar* works seamlessly in Hindi but the sturdy introduction of the original seems cloying and plods in English. This continues for the first seventy pages. The book, which sets off to a hot start in Bedi's Hindi original, splutters and coughs in Ghosh's English effort. This despite the several shining situational and emotional turns that the translation brings out ably. In English the book simply fails to make the kind of purchase it needs to on the reader.

Luckily the reader's interest grows along with the ardour and passions of our protagonists. By half mark Ketaki and Aditya have doubts about the form their



relationship is taking. The Hindi reader will be fully vested in the lovers' conundrum. And despite what is lost in translation, the first nibbles of anxiety mean that the English reader isn't too far behind.

From here on both the Hindi and the English versions of the book tend to remain quite engrossing. Too much choice can be a bad bad thing. And this comes across fully regardless of language. As the relationship between two mature, sweet people quickly rams through the honeymoon phase into the murky toxic world of suspicion, distrust and mutual antipathy, readers are hooked.

A trainwreck is fascinating in any language.

The end again is something that seems false in Hindi and downright hideous in English. The tryptic of conclusions offered by Susham Bedi is a lazy end at best. In translation Astri Ghosh may have chosen to commit to one of the three possible endings.

The book would have worked better with such a liposuction.

Recently there has been much debate on the license allowed by the Korean writer Han Kang to her English translator Deborah Smith. When they were both awarded the Man Booker prize, there were fans who said that Smith deserved Kang's Nobel. While there were others who said Smith's liberties have destroyed the very spirit of Kang's writing.

While most of us will never read the original in Korean—we have thoroughly enjoyed the total novelty of the English translation just like hundreds of thousands of other readers.

So, could Ms. Ghosh have chosen to re-engineer Ms. Bedi's book while translating it into English? As a reader all I can say is if that wasn't allowed, then at least a nip tuck may have been considered.

Niggles aside, the translation does a great job of bringing Bedi's treatise on choice in general and feminine choice in particular to English. The English reader will feel the excitement, elation, joy, jealousy, helplessness, frustration, dread, confusion and despair along with Ketaki and Aditya. And as a result, will be the richer for it.

Additionally, Bedi in her book refers to several Indian classics. When Aditya quotes Jayadev's *Gita Govindam* to Ketaki, the ancient meter seems to pulsate with their desire for each other. Thanks to this translation, curious English readers may choose to be reminded of Bhojaraj and Kalidas, and peruse works hitherto neglected.

A reader such as myself would never have stumbled on Susham Bedi without Astri Ghosh's English translation—tragic though it is, I suspect this is quite common among Hindi speakers who read in English. The translation got a wonderful writer to the likes of us. As well as to the world of non-Hindi readers, making it a laudable effort.



## Vyjayanti Raghavan

**YOU HAD ME AT ANNYEONG! WHEN LIFE TURNS INTO A K-DRAMA, CAN LOVE BE FAR BEHIND?**

By Malini Banerjee

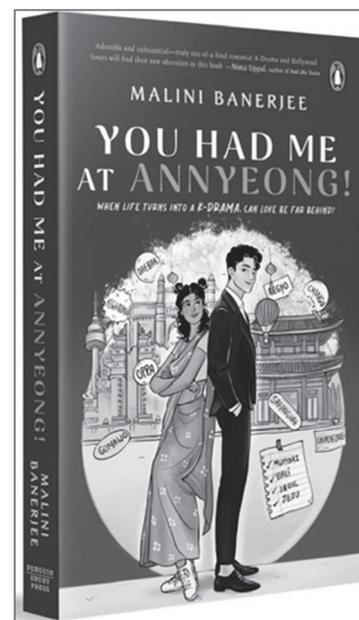
Ebury Press, Penguin/Random House, 2025, pp. 352,  
₹ 399.00

Few from the present urban youth in India would have not heard of *Hallyu* or the Korean Wave—cultural imports from South Korea. It encompasses not just K-pop and K-Drama that have exploded, but also fashion, food, language, beauty and anything else that is culturally importable. The young fans want to look like, and imitate, their K-Pop and K-drama idols and artists. *You Had Me at Annyeong!* by Malini Banerjee is also an outcome of this.

It might be one of the first novels based on a Korean romance. The earlier books *Hallyu Namaste: Korean Waves on the Indian shores* or *Korean Wave in India: Fandom, Cuisine and Consumption* are more academic and analytical that study the impact of Korean culture. Malini Banerjee, however, is 'a media professional turned singer-songwriter', as the blurb introduces her. She admits to being smitten by the K-drama bug. That's apparent both from the turn of phrases or expressions she uses.

*You Had Me at Annyeong!* (Annyeong means hello, bye and also peace, depending on its usage) reads like a novelized version of a Korean serial drama very much in the Mills & Boon style. The setting is Mumbai, Bali and Seoul. An Indian woman (Timara) in her mid-thirties and from a mixed background of a Bengali mother and an Assamese father, falls in love with a Korean man (Haneul). He is a few years younger than her. The way this happens is very much like in the formula format of Mills & Boon of yonder years. Timara has been jilted by her boyfriend (Rodrigues) in India and therefore resigns from her job as an executive in a PR firm and goes away to Indonesia to get over it. There she is spotted quite by chance by Haneul who is there for an advertisement shoot for his firm. Timara accidentally faints into his arms. He is totally smitten by her. But there matters end because Timara is clueless about this.

Haneul returns to Korea and advertises for a position



in his advertising firm and tailors the requirement to suit Timara. She happens to spot the advertisement, applies for it and lands up with the job in Haneul's firm. Though she does not recognize him, she is charmed by his looks and demeanour, while her ex-boyfriend Rodrigues tries to return to her life.

The rest is the serialized drama which is worth reading for its easy and interesting flow. The dialogue between the various characters and the sequence of events are all highly dramatized, humorous and very entertaining.

This book is for the K-drama afflicted youth familiar with Hindi and Korean. They are bound to love its filmy phrases, like '*Hansome Haneul ki hanshi mein main NOT phansi*' or '*Koi Hero yahan, koi Zero vahan*'. The chatty and funny dialogue is interspersed with a lot of Hindi, Korean and at places Bengali words and expressions, making it obvious that the writer is comfortable in all these languages, besides of course, English. It is good to take with you while travelling.

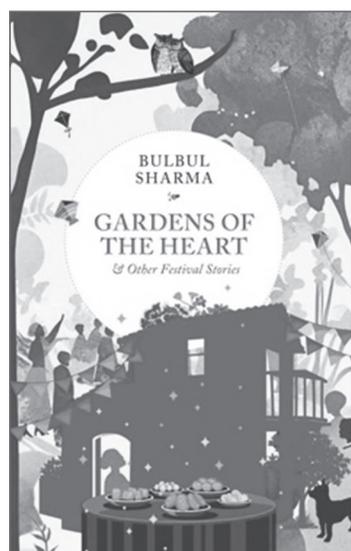
Given the K-drama craze in India, this could well become a pioneer of such fiction.



## Kusum Burman

### GARDENS OF THE HEART AND OTHER FESTIVAL STORIES

By Bulbul Sharma. Illustrations by Shonali Shukla  
Women Unlimited Ink, 2024, pp. 138, ₹ 450.00



relationships with generous helpings of traditional foods.'

There are ten different stories set against the backdrop of ten festivals widely celebrated all over India. Not only that, the book also features recipes of the dishes associated with each festival! This may sound rather contrived, but in actual fact the recipes follow the stories quite seamlessly

and add a lip-smacking celebratory finish to each tale! These simple-to-follow recipes—I haven't tried them yet, I must admit—are by Shonali Shukla and come from the different States of India. The illustrations are also done by her.

Bulbul Sharma has a fluent, flowing style and given her sharp insights into human relationships and behaviour, the book makes for a very entertaining read. The stories are varied with a wide variety of characters. Some stories like 'A Windfall in Christmas' are funny but with an underlying pathos, while others like 'Ma's Mahasankranti' fill one with nostalgia for lost parents and places, and above all, one's lost childhood...

On the other hand, you have 'Card Tricks at Diwali' which is all about women who regularly play cards and the depths their competitiveness can make them stoop to. 'Poojo Feuds' is somewhat on the same lines but ends with an unusual twist.

In fact, most of Bulbul Sharma's stories have a 'twist in the tale' which is difficult to predict. This keeps the reader's interest right till the end. The title story, 'Gardens of the Heart' is a good example of the unexpected ending. It is about an ambitious self-made millionaire who takes up gardening as a hobby after his emergency bypass.

In a totally different vein is 'A Chador for the Dargah'—a sweet story about the innocent friendship between a Muslim girl and her Hindu classmate. This story is set in Old Delhi and captures the atmosphere to perfection. In fact, the stories have varied settings. 'Playing with Memory' is about a woman based in New York who comes home to Chennai for Pongal. Another story is set in London while 'A Windfall at Christmas' has Goa for its locale. The characters too are very varied. Some are very young, some middle-aged and some very old, but they are all so realistically created, and the descriptions and conversations so deftly done that one is pulled into the story with a total suspension of disbelief! Even the ghost story, 'A Life Recalled' gives one the goosebumps and seems totally believable while one is reading it!

There are a couple of really weird stories like 'Colour the Sky'—about a cop who likes to dress up like a woman—and 'This Land is Mine'. The latter is a highly imaginative tale about the Hindu god Mahabali who comes to Earth for ten days during Onam and meets an English tourist in Kerala!

Well produced by Women Unlimited Ink, the new trade imprint of Women Unlimited, the book has an attractive cover, good paper and printing. All in all, *Gardens of the Heart* is an extremely entertaining and readable collection of stories with a cookbook thrown in for good measure!



## Annie Pruthi

### THE FANTASTIC AFFAIR OF DESPAIR

By Doorva Devarshi

Picador India, 2025, pp. 241, price not stated

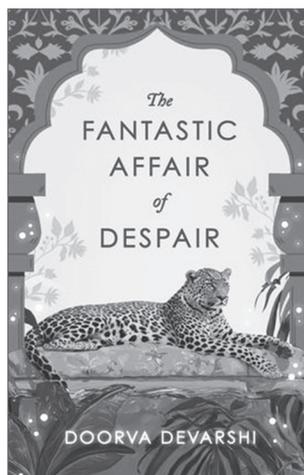
Doorva Devarshi's debut novel, *The Fantastic Affair of Despair*, set in the backdrop of a newly independent India, dealing with its identity of a new postcolonial nation, brings forward the story of a 'she' or as the author calls it, 'The Narrator', and with her, provides voice to the various voiceless.

Although a work of literary fiction, this book does not revolve around a single, dramatic storyline as one might typically expect. Instead it is about the daily occurrences that are too mundane, too obvious, so much so that often they are normalized, if not completely overlooked. The use of highly complex language may pose difficulties for readers. The organization of sections also feels somewhat confusing at times, and a more streamlined structure could have made the narrative more approachable.

Devarshi's book engages with many themes at once. It brings forward the many silenced women and their stories, different from one another and yet alike in their experiences of violence. It raises questions on how systematic violence becomes a new normal. It is the story of many characters, including an uncle who abuses the Narrator when she is a nine-year-old girl, who have no option than to live life as it comes.

The book begins with 'The Narrator's' daily churning at her office where she works as a copy editor and encounters male chauvinism every day at the hands of different characters, from the 'Chief', who is the founder of the magazine to his emotionally estranged son, Kumar, who takes over after his father's death. The Narrator lives in a rented apartment and Mrs. Pradhan, the landlady, alone and childless, extends a helpful hand. Although the two women are separated by several decades, they are fine companions. Along with the two women, various other characters are mentioned in passing.

When the Narrator is sent to the city of frescos to write a piece for the magazine, she leaves Mrs. Pradhan and her life in the city, but only after stealing her nutcracker, which is the Narrator's unusual obsession—to deprive someone of what they love the most. Her assignment is for a week, but unable to continue her life



in the city and living the way she had been, the Narrator enters into a self-imposed exile with no plan in her head for her future.

In the Himalayan Dharamsala, a dilapidated hut in the valley becomes her new residence. Soon she runs out of money to remain a guest at the Dharamsala. She meets Leela Ma, the child bride of Kailash, the owner of Dharamsala, who wants her to accompany his pregnant wife in return for her continued stay. The Narrator learns of the story of Leela Ma and her childhood, how she lost her mother to the beating of her father, how she was raised by her grandmother until she was married to Kailash, how she manages to remain calm despite the violence she has seen up close since her childhood onwards, how she is too young to birth a child. Leela Ma gives birth to a son, Kamal. When the Narrator reaches her hut, she finds a leopard's green and yellow eyes staring back at her. She rushes back to Kailash's home only to find the newborn lying dead in his crib. The Narrator buries the little boy under a deodar tree.

In the third part of the story, the Narrator moves to an unnamed village in search of the leopard as Mother Nature unleashes her fury on the villagers. The rumour is that the dam in the north of the village will be abandoned soon as the rains do not stop, leaving the poor villagers wondering what to do next. Her arrival in the village coincides with a group of climbers. She is in search of the leopard which the Narrator imagines as an extension of herself. The village is flooded during the night leaving it devastated. The call of the wild emanating from the heart of the valley grows louder, and she cannot help but embark upon a treacherous trek across the mountainous expanse to answer it. She has to leave the village and decides to join the climbers for their trek up north. During their trek, the rains continue to dampen their plan and many are left behind. The leader of the trek, Edwin, has only one obsession, to cross the valley of flowers as is evident from his reluctance to slow down or wait for his own companions. Soon, she is abandoned in the thick of the forest, but her purpose is fulfilled as she comes face to face with the beast once again.

Despite its somewhat complex language and structure, the book remains a valuable read that offers much to reflect upon.



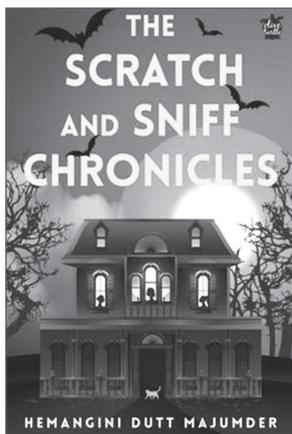
The Book Review Literary Trust has planned several events to celebrate TBR@50. We thank all our donors for their generous funding which has made these events possible. The TBR website carries the names of all the donors.

## Anjali Noronha

**THE SCRATCH AND SNIFF CHRONICLES**

By Hemangini Dutt Majumder  
Niyogi Books, 2025, pp. 332,  
₹ 495.00

I picked up this book to review as I wanted to explore the ways of enquiry and how



they're used in different genres. *The Scratch and Sniff Chronicles* turned out to be quite different from what I had imagined! The blurbs promised that there were mysteries to be solved and there would be some sniffing out of clues aka Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes—there definitely is some amount of detective enquiry towards the end. Whatever there is, is embedded and intertwined in a lot of other things.

The book weaves together the quintessential aspects of the Bengali bhadralok and it is a quaint mixture of traditional Bengali culture and western (British and French) cultures— from the names, to the dishes, the wines and the language, metaphors included. The descriptions of food and feasts reflect the same fusion as in the pairing of wines with traditional Bengali food and the feasts at Neelbari. It is a book that the Bengali bhadralok and their children and those, like me, who are familiar with Bengali families, will enjoy. For others, it is a little difficult to get into in the beginning as there is too much diverse information to absorb.

Another interesting aspect is

the powerful presence of women of different generations in the book and their singular power. There is no powerful or oppressive character, dead or alive; Shankar, the influential panda, comes closest to a male trying to manipulate, but he too is kept in check by one of the women! The young women are in their late twenties but remain unmarried. Ollie's menstrual irregularities are mentioned off and on as they are related to her uncanny sense of olfaction.

Names are another intriguing aspect of the book which blends Bengali and European cultural aspects. Ollie, the main protagonist, is Olympia, born in London and Fishy is her Pishi or aunt in Bengali.

While the second part of the book is gripping and like any good detective fiction, grips the reader, the first part of the book is fast moving but jumpy, and therefore a bit confusing. New characters and events are introduced fast, often with few connectors. Hence, it would be accessible to those young either familiar with the context or highly proficient in complex reading. More mature adults will enjoy the book for cultural fusion and detective fiction.

**Book News****Book News**

Eklavya, Bhopal brings for young readers small booklets as part of the Hovishika@50 series on varied subjects, all published in 2024. Among them are: *Vigyan, Samaj aur Shiksha* by Yash Pal (Rs 25.00); *Kudrat ke Kuch Such: Kush Bikhare Huye Sawaal* by Laltu (Rs 25.00); *Karke Dekha, Samajh Gaya* by Subhash Chandra Ganguly (Rs 30.00); and *Ek Samayheen Mahaul mein Samay: Bunker mein Jeewan* by L Geeta (Rs 20.00). These short essays will be useful for teachers and students to cull a great deal of information.

**A BAKER'S JOURNEY**

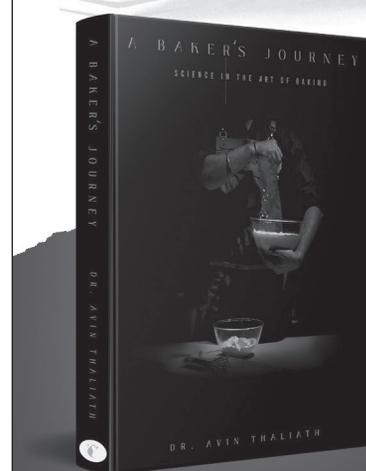
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Baking bread is an ancient custom, one many enjoy but few understand.

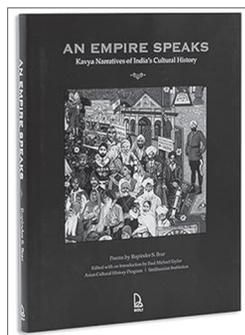
That may soon change thanks to *A Baker's Journey*, the first in a fascinating new series from author, baker, and educator Dr. Avin Thaliath. Like the art of bread making itself, this comprehensive guide is rich with culture and culinary magic, crafted from the science of the present and the secrets of the past. If you've ever wondered about the history of your favorite loaf, or want to learn how to bake with the best of them, this is one book you don't want to miss!

 **PARTRIDGE**

## Sudhamahi Regunathan

**AN EMPIRE SPEAKS: KAVYA NARRATIVES OF INDIA'S CULTURAL HISTORY**

By Rupinder S Brar. Edited by Paul Michael Taylor  
Roli Books, 2025, pp. 120, ₹ 1,995.00



In my childhood, when we asked our grandmothers for a story, they would often laugh and say, ‘Yenna kadai solattum, poranda kadaiya, poohunda kadaiya?’ (What story should I tell you? The story of my birth or the story of where I entered?) (meaning the in laws house into which she got married). We would get a medley,

sometimes about an old widowed aunt or sometimes mythology like the story of ‘Dharmaputra Yudhishtira’, all in one breath. The illustrated book, *An Empire Speaks: Kavya Narratives of India's Cultural History* by Rupinder S Brar and edited by Paul Michael Taylor, felt like I was in a story telling session of old times. Some stories are told of an ancient past which we all have accessed only through narratives in one form or other, and then moving through the gamut of time there are poems of nostalgia and personal experience. It is a book that brings together the emotional heart with well researched facts.

Dr Rupinder S Brar is a cardiologist, writer and poet who lives in California. Quoting Bhamaha, a seventh century poet, he says that his intent with this book was also, ‘... to grasp the nature of the world and all tastes (rasa), one by one...’. He chose the verse form to write because he says, ‘Narrative poetry... can be read aloud, sung to music, even enacted. Poetry can create an immersive experience that scientists have demonstrated can forever alter the brain’s chemistry.’ His reasons for choosing poetry being what they may be, his verses are easy to read and evocative at the same time. On Shankara, for example, he writes:

*A murder of quarrelsome crows,  
Resembled the land of Aryavarta.  
Reduced was Buddha to an idol,  
And Vedanta, to an argument.  
Blundered even the scholars,  
Floundered around, learned men.*

In the same section there is one titled ‘Of Metaphysics—Who is I’. The poem begins thus:

*I think therefore I exist,  
The rest may well be a dream.  
Thus, spoke up once, the intellect,  
In words of an enlightened giant.*

*A hasty conclusion, it seems  
Came a doubtful voice from the East.  
Who does the speech belong to?  
What is the I that speaks in you?...*

To the contemporary youth, for which this book is also meant, the above verses may make no or less sense. Therefore, Taylor’s introduction carries a para on the context, brief but explanatory and enough to kindle the curiosity of the young reader. Taylor also explains the design of the book which is truly interesting. He writes, ‘We have designed the present book with selected illustrative artworks relating to the themes of the poems... Consistent with the connections to diasporic extensions of the south Asian experience, we have selected a few great artworks from ancient sources and with their kind permission, also used works by “The Twin Singhs”... contemporary British artists ...’ The arrangement of the artworks within the book is such that it does not compel you to adopt it as the imagery to the poem...both the poem and the illustration are in the book, the choice to match them is yours since they do not necessarily appear on facing or subsequent pages.

The elegantly illustrated book is divided into five sections. The first is titled Ancients, bringing together poems on a wide range of people and ideas, from Ganga to the Taj Mahal and Shankara to Khusrau. The second section is on the Nanakians. The third titled Acacia around the Orchard is described thus, ‘Like a fence guarding the field, acacia trees around the orchard, a serpent coiling the sandalwood tree, a hound watching the door. (So must a Sikh protect the saintly and Dharma.)’ This section has poems on Banda Singh Bahadur, Shivaji, the Marathas, Ghallughara 1762 and so on. This section is followed by one titled Imperium Imperfect which begins with an apt quote from EM Forester and an illustration by the Singh Twins titled ‘Jalianwala: Repression and Retribution’ on the facing page. The quote reads, ‘One touch of regret—not the canny substitute but the true regret from the heart—would have made him a different man, and the British empire a different institution.’ The last section is titled Diasporic Reflections. An interesting poem in this section is titled ‘On Pakistan—Three Homelands I Claim’. The title is self-explanatory. The poem ‘Immigrant Nostalgia’ ends with the verse:

*Riding on the shrinking beams,  
Went a message from a homesick heart,  
To go tell a certain town in Punjab  
A heart still beats for it, from shores afar.*

An excellent production, an interesting format; cerebral and comforting read.

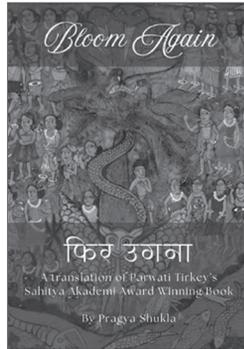


## Mridul Moran

**BLOOM AGAIN (PHIR UGNA)**

By Parwati Tirkey. Translated by Pragya Shukla  
Rupkatha Books, 2025, pp. 154, available for free  
download

As a part of the Rupkatha Translation Project 2025, Pragya Shukla has translated Parwati Tirkey's (b. 1994, Gumla, Jharkhand) Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar-winning (2025) Hindi poetry collection *Phir Ugna* (2023, Rajkamal Prakashan), into English (*Bloom Again*). It is noteworthy that this poetry collection is Tirkey's debut creation. This poetry collection, published in digital format, is currently available for free.



In an interview with *Outlook India*, Tirkey said about her poetry: '*Phir Ugna* reflects the intrinsic connection Adivasis have with water, forest and life itself. It's about their emotional bond with nature and their deep faith in it; how nature shapes their social structures, and how committed they are to preserving it. The forest is not just resources; it is an emotional and spiritual space for Adivasis. The poems revolve around this deep love for the forest and society born from it. However, I believe different readers may interpret the message in their own unique ways' (p. xii-xiii).

Parwati Tirkey's poetry is a profound and evocative body of work that serves as both a cultural archive and a living, breathing testament to the indigenous worldview of the tribal communities of the Chhota Nagpur plateau. Her poems are not merely literary creations but are deeply embedded in the ecological, spiritual, and social fabric of her heritage.

Tirkey's central poetic project is the representation of a tribal cosmology into contemporary verse. Her work dismantles the modern binaries of nature and culture, human and non-human, spiritual and material. Instead, she presents a holistic world where everything is interconnected and animate. The forest, rivers, mountains, and celestial bodies are not resources or backdrops but sentient kin, guides, and active participants in life. Poems like 'Spirits of the Forests' and 'Earth' articulate a creation myth built on cooperation between animals and humans, establishing a worldview where reverence, balance, and relational accountability are paramount.

A dominant theme in her poetry is what can be termed 'ecological intimacy'—a sensory and spiritual attunement to the natural world inherited through ancestral memory. This is vividly illustrated in poems like 'Nakdauna Bird',

where the bird's song and the Kurukh people's language merge to create a shared 'dialect' for forecasting rain. Similarly, in 'Dhano Granny's Songs', human voice commands the elements, showcasing a world where language is a bridge to the more-than-human world. Her poetry often carries the cadence of oral traditions—chants, lullabies, and ceremonial invocations—making it a vehicle for preserving and transmitting ancestral knowledge.

While deeply spiritual, Tirkey's work is not divorced from historical and political realities. She subtly critiques the forces of cultural erasure, Brahminical oppression, colonial imposition, and extractive modernity. Poems like 'Soso Bungalow' recount the betrayal of land through linguistic trickery, while the 'Hunting Festival of Women' and 'Their Language of Revolt' celebrate feminist resistance, the defense of tribal autonomy and gender equality. Her lament for the lost traditional education system, the 'Dhumkudiya', is a powerful protest against the systematic exclusion of indigenous pedagogies.

The very title *Bloom Again* (or *Phir Ugna*) encapsulates the collection's core ethos. It is not a nostalgic look at a lost past but a powerful assertion of a cyclical ethic of renewal, re-rooting, and reclamation. Even as poems like 'Migration', 'Civilization', and 'Return' mourn the dislocation caused by urbanization and modernity. The collection collectively gestures toward hope and resistance. It suggests that tribal lifeways are dormant, not dead, and can bloom again through the revival of language, storytelling, and ecological reverence. The editor says, 'The title *Phir Ugna* suggests rebirth and invokes a cyclical ethic, where blooming is not a one-time event but a recurrent act of re-rooting, reblooming and re-claiming. This is cultural vegetation, where forgotten songs, rituals, and kinship ethics begin to re-emerge. Modern displacement imposes a linear, irreversible temporality like progress, development, and migration. But *Phir Ugna* restores the seasonal cycle, where loss is followed by renewal, and memory is transformed into future growth. The title affirms that tribal lifeways are not extinct but dormant, waiting for the right conditions to bloom again. The title is not just symbolic; it is directive. It calls upon all to return to ancestral knowledge and create spaces—literal and metaphorical—where tribal cosmologies can flourish again' (p. xxiv).

In conclusion, Parwati Tirkey's poetry is an essential voice in contemporary Indian literature. It offers a crucial, ground-up perspective that challenges dominant narratives of progress and development. Her work is an invitation to listen to the land, to learn from ancestral wisdom, and to envision a future built on the values of harmony, community, and a deep, abiding love for the natural world.

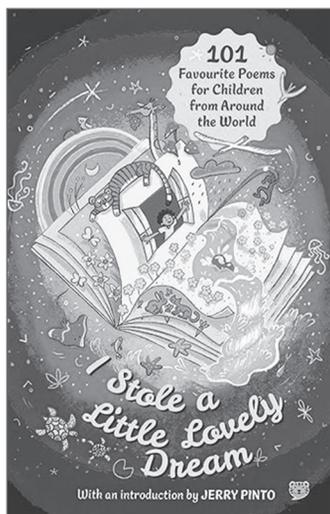


## Simran Chadha

**I STOLE A LITTLE LOVELY DREAM: 101 FAVOURITE POEMS FOR CHILDREN AROUND THE WORLD**

Edited with an Introduction by Jerry Pinto  
Speaking Tiger Books, 2025, pp. 256, ₹ 399.00

When the country's loved and respected writer of fiction, Jerry Pinto, curates an anthology of poetry, rest assured it's bound to be a page turner. While the uncanny intensity of Pinto's gut-wrenching narratives stem largely from his lived experience of growing up and coping with his mother's bipolar disorder, and the existential reality of the metropolis of Bombay, take for instance *Em and the Big Hoom* or *Murder in Mahim*, Pinto's linguistic panache owes undoubtedly to his steady diet of poetic verse during those early, formative years.



This collection of poems by Jerry Pinto entitled *I Stole a Little Lovely Dream* carries 101 of Pinto's favourite poems and I daresay 101 sanctuaries to which he would surely have escaped when the 'real' became unexplainably intimidating. Louis Carroll, Robert Frost, Keki Daruwalla, Rabindranath Tagore, Edward Lear, Arundhati Subramanian, RL Stevenson, PS Shelly, Rudyard Kipling, William Shakespeare, Sukumar Ray, Vikram Seth, Alfred Noyes, Lord Tennyson, Mamang Dai, Victor Hugo, Christina Rossetti, and Emily Dickinson are among the greats rubbing shoulders amidst the pages of this volume. The list does not end there. This easy to carry-along book is designed to provide respite from the tedium of the world and our daily lives.

The book carries a poem or two from the random listings of poets cited above. The curation shows scant regard for spatial and/or temporal boundaries. This reviewer would refrain from referring to the collection as a symphony, tempting as the word may be, for while with a symphony each cord, each note is synchronized to meld into a harmonious whole, which is not the case with this delightful little book. Not that there is a discordant note anywhere but on no account do the selected poems build upon any one particular thematic or point towards new revelations—philosophical, existential or otherwise, but want the reader to appreciate each poem as a stand-alone

piece. Popular English ballads such as *The Highwayman* and *Lord Ullin's Daughter* have been favourites for school elocution competitions in postcolonial India as also Alfred Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

On another level however each poem can also be treated like a door opening into a resplendently vast archive. I could not help but be reminded of the Greek hero Odysseus's quest for unending newness as he voyaged to undiscovered corners of the earth's surface. Alfred Tennyson in the poem *Ulysses* likens Odysseus's unquenchable thirst for adventure to an unending series of arches as the horizon keeps expanding furthermore. Similarly, while Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem *The Mountain and the Squirrel*, a part of this anthology, can well be enjoyed for and by itself, it is also an ideal introductory point into Emerson's oeuvre. It invites the reader to dwell deeper into Emerson's theory of transcendentalism, American individualism and venture into a readable excursion of Emerson's magnum opus, *Walden Pond*. Likewise, Shakespeare's *Round About the Cauldron Go*, one of my favourite recitations as an undergraduate student could well be an entry point into the intensely dramatic Shakespearean tragedy *Macbeth*:

*Round about the cauldron go;  
In the poison'd entrails throw,  
Toad, that under cold stone  
Days and nights hath thirty one  
Swelter'd venom sleeping got  
Boil thou first I'the charmed pot.  
Double double toil and trouble  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.*

Then there's Easterine Kire's *Just Be*, and this reviewer's delight knew no bounds on discovering within these pages a poem she'd been looking for since forever and practically given up on, *Karengé ya Marengé* by Countee Cullen.

The anthology includes lesser-known poems by famous authors such as William Butler Yeats' *The Stolen Child* and Keki Daruwalla's *Tiger*, an accomplishment regarding present day environmental concerns. In his characteristic style Daruwalla speaks of the extinction of the majestic tiger from the jungles of India. The reasons for this are manifold, varying from human greed, the desire to possess tiger skin and myths regarding the recuperative power of tiger bones. Now juxtapose this poem with William Blake's *Tyger*, an ode to the majestic Tiger, and also a lament for what was being lost of the English way of life on account of rapid industrialization and scientific discovery.

The cover of this collection pronounces it to be a book of poems for children, albeit around the world, but there is no saying why a discerning adult would not enjoy and cherish these nuggets as well. For those smitten by verse and rhyme who did evolve into being poetry-aficionados,

this volume provides the space to re-immense into poetic nostalgia.

So if you're looking for that ideal gift to introduce a young one to the richness of the world of the poetic imagination or for that matter even for an older friend to delight in, and you do not want to settle for yet another one of those mindless rip-offs from the capitalist marketplace, well, here lies the solution to your gifting dilemma! This poetic book is a gift to be cherished and will have you sending out a lot of good will into the universe.



## Jane Sahi

### LINES (LAKEEREIN)

By Samina Mishra. Translated from the English by Shashi Sablok. Illustrated by Kripa

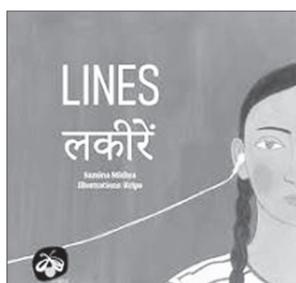
Parag in collaboration with Ektara Books, 2025, pp. 40, ₹ 220.00

The unusual title of the book and the image on the cover immediately invite exploration even from the most casual browser! Inside the book, the minimal text (in Hindi and English) and uncluttered images are disarmingly simple and direct.

They channel the viewers' vision and thoughts on the painful themes of loss, alienation and displacement, but also give the space to imagine a different kind of pathway.

Samina Mishra says that the book began with a conversation about borders with children from Afghani families when she was engaged in a project at the Simurgh Centre in Delhi—a cultural centre that fosters exchange between Afghani and Indian artists. The discussion about borders between countries, the experience of borders in daily life, and borders within ourselves inspired her poem. It captures the experiences of children through the voice of a young adolescent girl, whose family was forced to leave home, the country, relationships and means of livelihood to struggle for stability again.

The metaphor of 'lines' is creatively traced both through text and visual image. The vivid images in the poem are given context and feeling through Kripa's striking illustrations where washing lines are blown by the wind, a file of refugees walk through the cotton fields to find safety, and closed doors and gates represent the insensitivity and indifference of officialdom. The fragile and inadequate lines of communication between the



young girl and her grandmother are powerfully evoked by the edge of the page, both on the cover and in the picture of outstretched arms which struggle to touch and console the young girl. The narrator's identity is not only defined as a refugee but she is also typical of any young girl who can feel the limits of her confidence, or is trapped in a mesh of seemingly arbitrary authority. But lines are open-ended and have a potential for movement, and the book closes with the possibility of a different kind of future where straight lines can bend and flow.

The clear-cut lines between the colours—mainly the earth colours of ochre, the rich blue of the precious stone lapis lazuli, and cyan, which is the light bluish-green associated with water and the sky—harmonize to create a landscape in the mind that goes beyond division and separation.

At a time when migrants are often met with worldwide hostility, resentment and misunderstanding, this book reminds us of our shared humanity and each one's need for a home that gives safety and peace. According to UNHCR, approximately 49 million children across the world are presently suffering from forcible displacement. *Lines* as a poetry and picture book would work well as a prompt for discussion and creative expression with older children. The book, by its nature, elicits a sensitive and thoughtful response to share our own and to imagine others' experience of longing for freedom and acceptance beyond the bars of fear and exclusion.



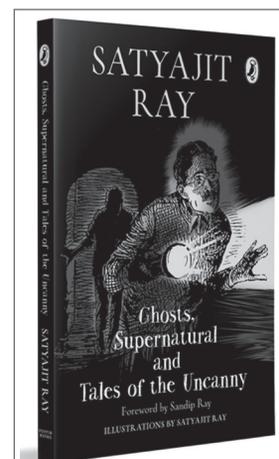
## Somdatta Mandal

### GHOSTS, SUPERNATURAL AND TALES OF THE UNCANNY

Written and illustrated by Satyajit Ray. Translated by the author, Gopa Majumdar and Indrani Majumdar. Foreword by Sandip Ray

Puffin Books, Penguin Random House India, 2025, pp. 216, ₹ 399.00

A true polymath, Satyajit Ray was not only a visionary film director, but also a brilliant writer, illustrator, designer and music composer. His literary works, spanning short stories, novellas, poems and articles in Bengali, continue to captivate readers of all ages. Apart from being the creator of the beloved Feluda series of detective stories, Ray had a penchant



for writing stories full of mystery, magic, macabre and the supernatural. As his son Sandip Ray informs us, since childhood Satyajit was an avid reader, drawn to the adventure stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, Jules Verne and others. Later, he subscribed to foreign magazines on ghost stories, paranormal and science fiction. In 1961, after a long hiatus, when he decided to revive the Bengali children's periodical *Sandesh*, originally founded by his grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chaudhuri in 1913, Satyajit started writing a great deal and became an immensely popular writer for young readers, writing in different genres.

*Ghosts, Supernatural and Tales of the Uncanny* is a classic collection of fourteen eerie short stories by Satyajit Ray written originally in Bangla and translated into English, some by Ray himself and the others by Gopa Majumdar and Indrani Majumdar. The first thirteen stories appeared in *Sandesh* from December 1962 to July 1985 issues, and the last story 'Telephone' appeared in the festive number of *Ananda* in 1987. The stories explore the themes of doppelgangers, metamorphosis, ghosts, supernatural encounters, as well as uncharted gray areas of human psychology. Usually, the protagonists are often solitary figures, thrust into extraordinary circumstances that disrupted their otherwise mundane lives. Ray always tries to kindle the imagination and inquisitiveness in the young reader's mind and offers a chilling yet poetic look at haunted houses, themes of mystery, magic, and the macabre with a quiet suspense rather than loud horror. In the stories strange things happen all the time—doors creak open, shadows shift when no one's looking and some places never quite forget their past; a man transforms into a bat, a snake transforms into a man. Each story has a dramatic and often unexpected twist at the end, which is also the hallmark of a good short story. They also bring out Ray's keen eye for human behaviour belonging to different social strata and the complex intricacies of their subconscious thoughts.

It is very difficult to even summarize the stories here because the twist at the end of each tale would not permit me to do so. Nevertheless, some of the titles and their backdrop and characters can be briefly mentioned here just to give the readers an idea about what to expect. In 'Anath Babu's Terror', the protagonist Anath Babu, who is supposed to be an authority on ghosts and all things supernatural, goes into a hundred-year-old dilapidated Haldar mansion to encounter ghosts and spend his night there. In 'The Vicious Vampire' we find the menace of a bat in an old, dilapidated house and encounter a character called Jagadish Mukherjee who lived in the graveyard and used to hang himself upside down from the trees every evening just like a bat. In 'Indigo', a twenty-nine-year-old bachelor called Aniruddha Bose stays for the night at an old bungalow where an old indigo planter lived a hundred years ago, and the narrative tells us about his

strange experience at night when he himself turns into the old planter. The title of 'Ratan Babu and That Man' is suggestive as Ratan Babu visits a little town with the railway station not far away and encounters a stranger who turns out to be his look alike whom he cannot dismiss. 'Fritz' takes us to the small town of Bundi in Rajasthan where the protagonist has a tryst with a broken doll that he buried thirty years ago as a child. 'Mr. Brown's Cottage' is set in Bangalore where two friends go and spend the night witnessing a ghost in an old, dilapidated cottage.

One of the most macabre stories in this collection of course is 'Khagam' where Dhurjati Babu, who dismissed tall stories because he thought people heard of strange happenings all the time but never saw one himself, goes into a hermitage in the forest to meet Imli Baba and encounters his pet cobra called Balkishen who apparently came every evening to drink milk. What happens when he kills the King Cobra is the climax of the story. In 'Bhuto' we read about a ventriloquist and what happens to him after his puppet comes alive and resembles a live person. All the stories have such unique settings, locale and treatment.

The volume presents all these hauntingly beautiful stories, featuring Ray's original sketches, illustrations and artworks which help the less perceptive reader to savour the stories even more. It is indeed the USP of this edition. All said and done, it is wonderful to read and access old wine in a new bottle, and the book is strongly recommended as a collectable edition to be possessed as well as gifted to a new generation of young adult readers, especially for people who do not or cannot read the original stories in Bangla.



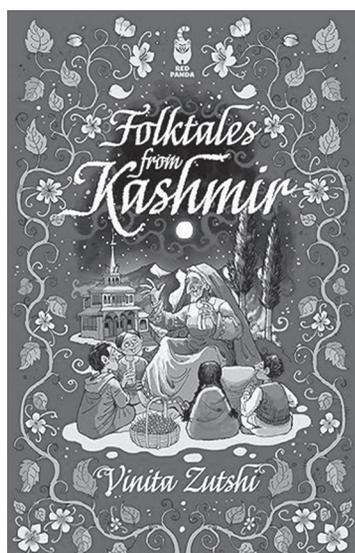
## Sunat

### FOLKTALES FROM KASHMIR

By Vinita Zutshi. Illustrations by Charbak Dipta  
Red Panda, 2025, pp. 200, ₹ 399.00

Stories are humanity's oldest companions—whispered across hearths, fields, and family gatherings long before books or screens existed. Folklore belongs to no single author; it is a collective treasure passed down, enriched each time someone tells it. These tales do more than entertain: they hold the memory of a people, their wisdom, and their imagination. In the digital age, such stories are slipping into the background, but *Folktales from Kashmir* by Vinita Zutshi gently brings them back into the light.

Zutshi's collection offers eighteen tales from the Kashmir Valley—stories seldom told beyond its borders.



Within these pages, foolish kings succumb to their own folly, clever tricksters are undone by their schemes, and ambitious old women overreach. You'll meet daughters caught between worlds, bargaining jackals, trembling brothers confronting danger, duelling kings and devs, and princes trying to escape cruel fates. Each tale carries a lesson—

but not with a heavy hand. Instead, wisdom drifts in on laughter, surprise, and mischief, lingering after the story ends, inviting reflection without feeling didactic.

What makes this collection even more special is how the stories are framed. Each one begins with an introduction to an object deeply connected to Kashmiri life—a garment like the *pheran*, a jewelry piece like the *saraf*, or a flower or musical instrument. These small cultural anchors make the stories feel anchored in place, allowing readers to feel textures, colours, and sounds while reading. Scattered through the text are Kashmiri words—italicized and luminous, like little portals into the language itself. They subtly remind us that stories are not just spoken or written—they are tied to the rhythms and sounds of a culture.

Although the book is accessible to children, it is not a children's book in the narrow sense. A child—especially one drawn to magic, talking animals, and witty turns of fate—will find delight within these tales. But adults, too, will feel invited in. There's nostalgia here: the memory of sitting close to an elder as they wove a tale; the hush of attention that descends when a story unfolds. For those not raised on Kashmiri folklore, these stories offer something different—a yearning for a slower, more communal way of experiencing the world, where stories were as essential as food.

The collection is also beautifully illustrated by Charbak Dipta. Her images are playful and vivid, capturing the quiet might of devs, the sly humour of tricksters, and the everyday beauty of life in Kashmir. These illustrations don't just decorate the words—they become another entry point into the story, inviting imagination to roam freely.

At first glance, *Folktales from Kashmir* may seem like a simple retelling of old tales. Yet it is much more: it is a quiet reclaiming of cultural memory. In an era when identity is often pulled into the realm of headlines and politics, Zutshi reminds us that the heartbeat of a culture lives most vividly in the stories we share. These tales challenge the notion that wisdom must appear solemn.

Here, insight comes wrapped in laughter, surprise, and unexpected twists—proof that the most lasting lessons are those that stay with us because they were felt, not imposed.

Reading this book is like stepping into a warm evening, settling into another world a story at a time. It is a book to share—between parent and child, among friends, across generations. Folklore, after all, is not something to be stored on a shelf; it lives when told and retold, carried forward by those who loved it enough to pass it on. Zutshi keeps her promise: these stories land softly in the hollow spaces of our hearts, filling the gaps left by time and reminding us that wonder is not lost—it waits quietly for us to rediscover it.



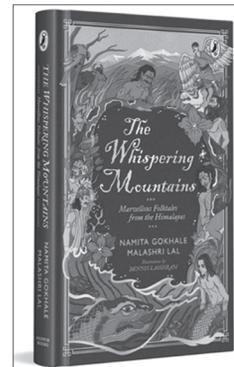
## Jaya Krishnamachari

### THE WHISPERING MOUNTAINS: MARVELLOUS FOLKTALES FROM THE HIMALAYAS

By Namita Gokhale, Malashri Lal. Illustrations by Dennis Laishram

Puffin Books, Penguin/Random House, pp. 268, ₹ 799.00

*The Whispering Mountains* is a collection of folk tales put together by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal. These are folk tales compiled and adapted from the Northeast, Jammu, Kashmir, Bhutan Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and north Bengal. This project had the support of The Royal Norwegian Embassy, New Delhi. Everyone has heard of the *Panchatantra Tales* and the *Jataka Tales*, but very little is known about the folklore from the Northeast, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir and Uttarakhand. Tremendous effort has gone into collecting, translating and adapting these stories from lesser known languages. It is a piece of great teamwork that needs special appreciation. It is marvellous that generations of story tellers and communities have served as the custodians of memories—keeping these stories alive through their timeless retelling. The stories in this fascinating book have been adapted and translated by many people including the authors. At the end of the book is a list of the names of the authors as also the regions and languages from which the stories have been sourced. For many of us this is a welcome addition since we are not familiar with the names of the languages spoken in those regions. This collection of tales is both interesting and informative,



and would go a long way in familiarizing the readers with the Himalayan regions, their languages and their folklore carried forward by generations of story tellers.

The varied terrain of the Himalayan region hosts its own species and life forms, and each has a story to tell. The first section of the book has stories devoted to Birds and Animals, Flowers and Trees. The stories that follow in the second section lead into the mysterious world of ghosts, goblins and cunning tricksters. Such elusive figures have always dwelled in the mountain paths and caves, and continue to do so. The stories in this section, while surprising and startling, will make the reader think and reveal new ways of seeing. The third section has stories about Shapeshifters—the fluid spirits who can metamorphose their bodies at will, and the fourth is all about River, Lake and Mountain Spirits. I found these stories very interesting since it is true that things are not always what they seem to be. The fifth section has tales that look at the mysteries of nature and the sources of their origin. The last section has folklore that reflects daily life and ways to navigate its challenges. They are practical, sometimes even cynical, and acknowledge the harshness of nature and the flaws of humans, as the foreword to this chapter says.

*Whispering Mountains* with its marvellous collection of stories from the Himalayan regions will appeal to the young and the old alike. I for one learnt a number of quaint words like *Acho La La* (Moon, Bhutan), *Kherengbar* (a kind of Orchid), *mai* (wooden pestle) and *tham* (mortar), *Ka Phreit* (the Khasi wren), etc. I am certain that reading these stories will kindle the reader's interest to know more about these regions. It is a collector's item that is worth having in every book lover's library.



## Shailaja Srinivasan

### THE MUSEUM DETECTIVE

By Maha Khan Phillips

Tranquebar, 2025, pp. 326, ₹ 499.00

*The Museum Detective* by Maha Khan Phillips is a young adult crime novel set in Karachi, Pakistan. Phillips masterfully weaves fact and fiction and writes a suspenseful story inspired by an archaeological hoax (when a gilded mummy of a Persian princess is 're-discovered' by smugglers, trying to sell it for millions of dollars) with a compelling fictional subplot about Gul, the young woman archaeologist, asked to validate the find. Gul'sa 'Gul' Delani struggles with personal guilt and frustration to find her niece, missing for three years. Intelligent, driven, uncompromising and kind, she is

aided by her loyal friends to find out the truth behind the mummy and in looking for her niece, little knowing that the two investigations will collide in unexpected ways.

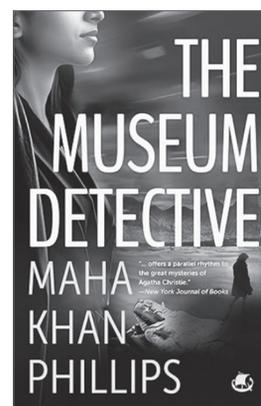
The story begins with Gul being woken up in the middle of the night by the police to validate an object they found during a drug bust. The book presents enough archaeology and 'mummy facts' to make the finding of the sarcophagus interesting, and appreciate the significance of the 'find'. When Gul overcomes all opposition and threats, and conducts forensic examination that proves the mummy to be fake, she is haunted with the question as to who the young woman in the sarcophagus could be, perhaps a murder victim.

Maha Khan Phillips presents through Gul's lived experience a glimpse into the elite of Karachi and contemporary life inside a conservative Islamic nation that shows its citizens enjoying trendy styles and modern music. Gul is estranged from her family for having rejected the life they expected her to lead. The disappearance of Mahnaz, her curious and spirited niece is blamed on her. Through her protagonist, Maha Khan Phillips also explores what it means to be an incredibly smart woman working in a field where she is summarily dismissed by men, subtly exploring the theme of women fighting for space in the world and the challenges they must confront.

Gul Delani's investigation is fraught with tension and danger; there are betrayals and lies. Phillips does not skirt the issues of systemic corruption and power struggles but puts them out for her young readers to get a glimpse of reality. This is also a story about family secrets skillfully revealed as the two investigations progress.

The story piqued my curiosity to find out more about the hoax in the year 2000 that had the international archaeological community in a tizzy and stirred a debate between Iran and Pakistan over rightful ownership of this unparalleled find. It also made me wonder how much of Gul's character was inspired by Dr. Asma Ibrahim from the National Museum of Pakistan, the real-life archaeologist who investigated the mummy.

In *The Museum Detective* there is intrigue and a plot that takes fun and unexpected turns. Finally, Phillips offers surprising solutions to both the theft of the sarcophagus and the disappearance of Gul's niece! A thoroughly enjoyable read and if this is the beginning of a series, I for one cannot wait to see what Gul uncovers next!

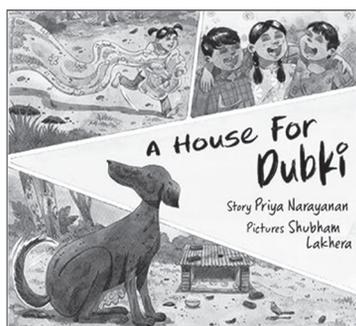


## Sonam, Bansi and Ruchi

### A HOUSE FOR DUBKI

By Priya Narayanan. Illustrations by Shubham Lakhera  
Tulika Books, 2025, pp. 215, ₹ 215.00

This is a simple story of a girl and her friends planning and then building a house for their other dear friend, Dubki, a dog. The girl, Yasmin, comes from a family of migrant workers, who have shifted to a new locality.



Shubham Lakhera's illustrations appear interesting for the colour palette used. But what I have to say about the book doesn't end here. There was something inexplicable which I could not pin-point nor articulate, and yet did not sit right, seem right. The story did leave me conflicted and clueless. So much so that I resorted to help from my friends to be able to process and articulate it. The reflections I am about to share are from the round of reflection that the three of us had.

At first glance, the story seems to be trying to address what many of us have been talking about in the discourse of children's literature. About what experiences reflect in stories, carrying whose voice, in what tone, how it is portrayed. Do we have stories from across diverse walks of life, from across diverse childhood experiences and social realities that further shape those experiences? But, upon a careful closer view, the story does reveal some unsettling concerns.

A friendship between human and other living beings, other animals, the warmth and care shared between them, and love, has many, many forms to manifest itself, many experiences and in many ways. It is intriguing that the author chose the idea of building the house for a dog, considering the context and life of the family being portrayed in the book. The observation remains noticed but unanswered.

'We hear a giggle... we do hear the word "Jungle"'. Ali and Nabila ignore the taunt... But I run indoors and curl up in a corner... when didi comes by I wrap my hands around her and cry. "Ei why bother? She asks."

Umm... There could have been anger experienced, for the disgust shown for them. Could we not have considered that as a possibility? What was the author thinking when she chose to show that Nabila and Ali ignored the taunt? Was it a deliberate choice to choose ignorance over a spectrum of emotions that could have been felt upon hearing something taunt-like and hurtful

said for someone?

The next sentence says, 'Abbu says we are like Dubki—wild and free.' Well, sure. But where is the author coming from here? What have been their experiences with the kind of life they are talking about in the story? What and how much is the exposure? And is it fair to attempt at glorifying, philosophizing something that we may not have a closer idea of?

At one point Yasmin says, 'I ask them why we have to live here when they help build sturdy brick houses for others.' The parents' response to this is, 'Because we have to save money, Yasmin. So that you can go to school. So that you won't have to do the kind of work we do when you grow up.' Particularly in children's books where words are few and carefully crafted, one wonders what choice is being made in saying that the parents choose to live under a tin roof, and how this narrative portrays the grim reality of labour, migration and deeply stratified society—priced at INR 215 for an urban, obviously middle class child to consume.

When the children begin building the house, it ends up reproducing the parents' occupation and Dubki's house being the same as Yasmin's house. This creates another deeply unsettling parallel between Dubki and Yasmin, besides them being 'wild and free'.

'We hang Ammi's torn dupatta as a shade from the sun. Jacob runs home and returns with an old cushion for Dubki.' Well, unconsciously this brings out the way the characters' lived reality is being perceived by the author. Why is it a 'torn' dupatta and not just Ammi's dupatta? And why is it an 'old cushion' when it could have possibly been old and rugged? (As shown in the story, Yasmin and Jacob belong to different economic backgrounds and the articulation reinforces a very problematic view of economic diversity subtly.)

The story shows that children from two different economic backgrounds become friends. There're Yasmin, Nabila and Ali, and then there are Jacob, Sareeka and Nooreen. Yet another intriguing question is, why did the author feel the need to introduce the latter three? Could it not have been a story of just the first three and Dubki? When Yasmin is 'shooed' by the guard, the latter three come to the rescue with a cardboard box from the new washing machine. When there isn't space for agency and dignity of the portrayed migrant life, what ends up happening?

To us, the story posed a complex scenario of intentions and choices: the choice of milestones, characters and the stand the story does/does not take, and the articulations contradict what we would like to assume was the intention of bringing out a story attempting to address the presence of diverse realities and experiences.



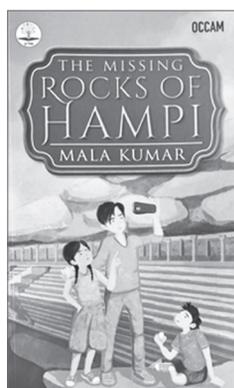
## Vivek BG

**THE MISSING ROCKS OF HAMPI**

By Mala Kumar. Illustrations by Megha Vishwanath  
 BluOne Ink, FIHCR's YUVA Series, 2025, pp. 160, ₹ 350.00

Any attempt to define the 'meaning' of monsoon takes me on a retrospective journey. Back in childhood, it meant an all-night cacophony of frogs, paper boats, squeaky slippers, and even a bout of cold. Bangalore and I have grown since then. Bangalore is now (in)famous for its traffic snarls and potholes. After-school playtime is now after-work travel back home. Monsoon in Bangalore now means many added layers of dread, not to mention the missing frogs! Muck is not the only thing making a splash—news is splashed with flooded roads, inundated homes, and apathy of civic bodies.

It's monsoon. Devyani's school in Bangalore is flooded and closed until further notice. Together with her brother, Sarang, and cousin, Nakul, they are the Seekers, a mystery-solving trio who have no case to solve besides retrieving a very special rock from Devyani's desk



in school. Devyani's mother, Dr. Brinda Ratnagar, is a water resource expert working on a high-profile project in Hampi. The Seekers tag along. Someone wants Dr. Ratnagar off the project and silenced. Thus, the mystery begins. An apt case for the Seekers to solve!

Mala Kumar's *The Missing Rocks of Hampi* skillfully weaves two mysteries—one set in the time of the Vijayanagar Empire, and the other in the present that the Seekers are after. The ingenious engineering feats of the Vijayanagar empire in harvesting rainwater, transporting water from the foothills to the heart of the kingdom, and urban planning form the warp of this tale. Mala takes you on a walk along the grand streets of Hampi: the bustling marketplace, the queen's hammams, the palace garden, the stables, and the aqueducts quenching the need for water.

As mystery unfolds across timelines keeping the reader hooked, history conspicuously comes alive. The true charm of the book lies in its ability to place history and architecture in an all-too-relatable and contemporary context of urban planning and resource allocation. History taught in schools carries with it baggage that often renders it 'outdated' or 'boring'. Mala's attempt to strip history of that baggage and contextualize it for a young audience is commendable.

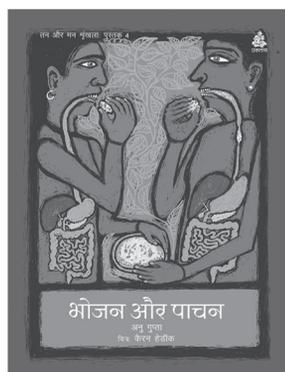
While I relive the nostalgia of the monsoon from my past, *The Missing Rocks of Hampi* offers a peek into what history could mean to the present, a reminder that history, much like the monsoon, is never that far away.

## Aruna Patel

**BHOJAN AUR PAACHAN**

By Anu Gupta. Illustrations and Design by Karen Haddock  
 Eklavya, Body and Mind Series, 2024, pp. 94, ₹ 120.00

*Bhojan aur Paachan* is a mine of information about food and its digestion. A culmination of workshops held in various villages of Dewas District of Madhya Pradesh, the book discusses the relationship between the food we eat and its effects on our body. Scientific research shows that oil and ghee, foods grains and vegetables, meat and fish, milk and curd all have nutritional values. Similarly, carbohydrates, protein, fibres, vitamins, iron, calcium, salt, magnesium, potassium, sodium, etc. are essential



for maintaining a healthy life.

The book has a chapter on how to find out the purity of these minerals by giving a brief history of scientific study of food that we eat. Properties of the minerals are explained. We get answers on malnutrition and overnutrition from the book. Almost 30 pages are devoted to the subject. It discusses the quality of fast food sold in boxes. Poverty and lack of proper knowledge are the main reasons for undernourishment. Types of cholesterol as good HDL and bad LDL which can be managed by healthy diet are discussed in detail.

The book also discusses the problem of digestion and what are the body parts affected by indigestion. Swelling of the stomach, heartburn, ulcers, etc. are the result of acidity due to indigestion and its cure is also suggested.

Vitamins save us from illness and help us in absorbing nutritional properties of the food we consume. All these are described in detail with sketches.

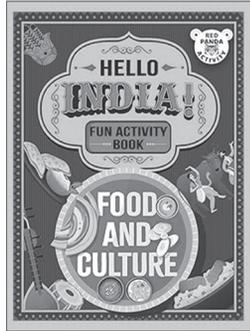
The book written in Hindi is very useful not only for the common man but also for paramedics and healthcare workers. It will be particularly useful in the classroom to teach as it has diagrams, exercises for the students to do and facts in points to learn and remember.

## Deepali Shukla

### HELLO INDIA! FUN ACTIVITY BOOK: FOOD AND CULTURE

Red Panda, an Imprint of Westland Books, 2025, pp. 64, ₹ 250.00

Food plays a significant role in life and is an essential aspect of culture. In various cultures, food reflects the entirety of cultural experiences and the transformations that occur within them. One can gain considerable insight into a community through its food. Additionally, exploring the art and history of a culture offers another avenue to understand its people. Both adults and children can find enjoyment in these topics, particularly when presented with engaging books that facilitate dialogue and exploration of the world.



Activity books serve as a beneficial medium for discussing such topics. Creating an activity book focused on food and culture can be challenging due to the diversity within cultures, such as the variety of foods, beliefs, and art forms across different regions. This raises questions about what to include in the book and the criteria for those selections. When designing content for children, it is essential to represent this diversity comprehensively while ensuring that activities are enjoyable for the readers.

*Hello India!* is an engaging activity book which illustrates the richness of culture through representations of art, folk festivals, and food. The themes highlighted in the book encompass festivals, nature, food, forests, animals, history, mythical characters, and arts. Activities such as puzzles, questions, and matching games are creatively integrated across various pages. Each page encourages readers to think, write, or draw, providing both new information and opportunities to connect with their prior knowledge and experiences. Additionally, ample space is provided on each page to avoid overwhelming the reader with information.

One activity related to the Mughal Legacy poses questions about the Mughal court, language, and historical figures like the king associated with the Peacock Throne, along with multiple-choice options. This enables a deeper understanding of the Mughals and their era. There are also prompts to investigate what a Persian-style garden entails, recalling for the reviewer the Mughal Gardens observed during a visit to Srinagar. This demonstrates cultural diversity and its importance. One section features information about the spinning top, recognized as a childhood toy for over 2000 years.

Some activities aim to foster civic sense, such as asking what initiatives a village Sarpanch would prioritize, and about the decisions of the Panchayat. This allows urban children to learn about the Panchayat system and municipal operations in cities, enabling an analysis of Panchayat elections and the challenges associated with this governance structure. Another engaging task involves matching traditional clothing to their respective States. While some outfits are familiar, others may require additional research, promoting a better understanding of various States and the evolution of traditional clothing. Certain activities relate to mathematics, but their presentation could be improved. For example, the activity involving the counting of the Maharaja's jewels might benefit from a different approach; the task of sharing sweets lacks sufficient engagement.

Overall, this book is a commendable effort to highlight the country's cultural diversity. The activities are likely to engage both children and adults, although the illustrations could be enhanced. Some lesser-known cultures could also have been included for a broader representation.



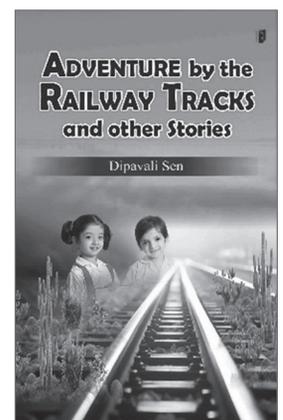
## Anjana Neira Dev

### ADVENTURE BY THE RAILWAY TRACKS AND OTHER STORIES

By Dipavali Sen

Kavya Publications, Delhi, 2024, pp. 242, ₹ 299.00

Children's literature in India is slowly coming of age, and bookstores and literary festivals have just about begun to feature original and contextually relevant stories for young/adolescent readers who have for long read about adventures by children who seem to inhabit a reality quite distant from their own. So, when I picked up Dipavali Sen's evocatively titled book of six stories interlinked by the cast of central protagonists, I was looking forward to reading about the adventures of children whom I have played with or seen playing in my neighborhood; and that too by the 'railway tracks', the parallel tracks of which coming from elsewhere and going elsewhere symbolize distant horizons and possibilities—where the past and future are equally shrouded in mystery.



The longest of the stories in this collection, the

eponymous 'Adventure by the Railway Tracks', attempts a lot of things at the same time. First, we have two intrepid young sleuths, Kushmi and Gaurav, both of whom are spending some time in Sonarhat, away from their homes in Kolkata and Delhi, finding, losing and then recovering buried/drowned treasure. Then we have the regional history of thuggee and zamindari, not to mention terracotta temples; inscrutable (but stereotypically servile) tribals; a minor kidnapping and an interesting description of the local flora and food. The story involves the attempted theft of 'priceless' terracotta tiles for a city builder and the mantras of education and employment as panacea for all social ills. Despite the potentially exciting ingredients that could have made this an interesting story, the pace is frantic but rarely exciting, and the action is largely confined to climbing up and down the embankments on either side of the titular railway tracks, which does not contribute significantly to the plot in any way. While the local colour and history do give the story a strong cultural rootedness, the sententious tone of the narrator dilutes the sense of adventure, as does the slightly contrived dénouement.

Each of the stories that follow has at its heart a strong lesson, harking back to the original impulse of children's literature that was conceived in the first instance as a way of instructing young readers to grow up into good and socially useful human beings, and being 'taught' lessons through a simple binary of reward and punishment, triumph and tragedy. So whether it is Kushmi's encounter with vitiligo in 'Pachyderm', or Gaurav falling into a disused baoli in 'Lost in the Past'; making a burglar alarm for his grandmother in 'Quite Alarming' or hearing a listicle of maxims that he is advised to follow in 'Getting Help from Chanakya', or even the final story which brings our two young sleuths together again, this time bent upon 'Knowing the Rakshasas'—each story trundles to a halt with its moral and pedagogical imperative, and in the process becomes rather far removed from what would motivate often reluctant readers to turn the page. The author has valiantly attempted to give the young readers, for whom I imagine the book has been intended, lessons in Indian history and mythology, but the careless editing and proof reading as well as the inadequate triangulation of plot, character and action, make these stories satisfactory at best to find a place in a school text book, as they do offer many teaching moments and opportunities for discussion. However, in the ultimate analysis, this book does not contribute in any significant way to the journey of Children's Literature in India as I doubt if readers would be inspired to finish reading the stories with breathless excitement, which is after all what adventure stories, at their best, should achieve.

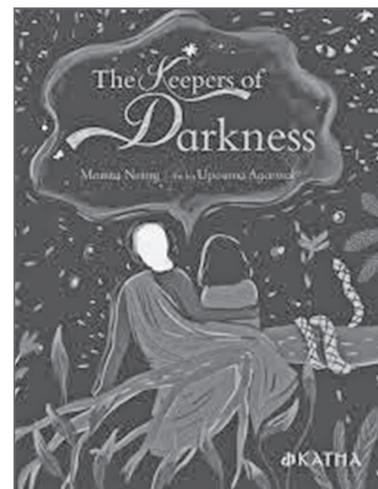


## Manika Kukreja

### THE KEEPERS OF DARKNESS (ANDHERON KE RAKHWALE)

By Mamta Nainy. Illustrated by Upasana Agarwal  
Katha, 2024, pp. 24, ₹195.00

*The Keepers of Darkness* is a picture book about the indigenous tribal community named Irula. It takes the readers through the vibrant colours which exist in darkness too—as opposed to the popular belief that colours are visible only in the light. Mamta Nainy and Upasana Agarwal have done a very good job of bringing the colours of connectedness and community knowledge alive in the darkness.



The book presents the recounted words of grandmothers' sayings about who the Irulas are, and what they do. There are words that tell us how tribespeople belong to the forests, and how the forests connect the land and ocean. Then there are also words that tell us about co-existence:

*'Kaale ghane jangalon ke bina hum kuch nahi hain,  
aur hamare bina yeh jangal kuch nahi hai.'*

(Without our damp, dark forests, there is no us,  
And without us, there are no forests.)

Such poignant words illustrate the various shades of the night sky, and the many creatures that come alive at night.

I got the opportunity to read both the English and the Hindi book together, and found that reading the words in these two languages simultaneously opened my mind to different perceptions. It was a glimpse of the vibrance of a simple life without really sharing any specific anecdote to glorify or make the readers overly sympathize with the Irulas' lifestyle.

This book will be a wonderful addition to one's library if the children like to draw, like poems, or are interested in tribes. The book is a beautiful addition to the type of books that dwells on the theme of communal lifestyle.

I'm glad I got to read it and I'm sure my engagement with the book doesn't end here. It will keep coming to me in various stages of my life.



## Indira Ananthakrishnan

**WONDER TALES FOR A WARMING PLANET**

By Rajat Chaudhuri. Illustrated by Isha Nagar  
Niyogi Books, 2025, pp. 111, ₹ 295.00

I like browsing in a good library or bookstore. Once in a bookstore, I was looking at the new titles when I caught sight of two girls at a nearby shelf. One seemed to be a budding teenager and the other a pre-teenager. The former pulled out a book from the shelf. I strained my neck to get a glimpse of the title. It was *Wonder Tales for a Warming Planet*. The younger girl plucked it from her sister's hand and read the title aloud.



“*Wonder Tales*” sounds good, but what is the meaning of “*For a Warming Planet*”? she said and grimaced. ‘No, I don’t want this book.’ ‘Listen,’ reasoned the elder sister, ‘mother has allowed only one book for the two of us. I’ll read it and tell you what the “*Warming Planet*” stands for. It will be interesting reading, I can guess.’ She flipped through the pages and continued, ‘Look, there seems to be a lot of fantasy in the tales. I’m sure you’ll like it. And again... there are activities for us at the end of the book. We can have hours of fun. Come on.’ She took the book, pulled her sister’s hand and went to her mother standing at the counter, waiting for the girls.

This scene kindled my curiosity. The trio stepped out of the store, book in hand and I picked up another copy of it from the shelf and turned the pages. ‘Hmm... looks like I have to buy it too,’ I said to myself. So here I am now, with the book in my hand, relaxing in the warm winter sun in the balcony of my home, reading the book. It did not take long for me to decide to review it so as to make more children interested to read it.

A word about the catchy title: at first, I read it as *Wonder Tales for a Warming Planet*. The next moment my oversight dawned on me. The title actually is *Wonder Tales for a Warming Planet*. It straightaway seems to address the earthlings and transmits a power-laden message to them. It proclaims ‘the wonder tales are for you; you, who are somehow surviving today on a planet that is rapidly warming up. Think about what would happen tomorrow if this warming continues?’ This is woven into the stories with the learning notes and activities acting as props. It is up to the readers to recognize the problem that confronts them today, while at the same time, enjoying the uncanny, fantasy tales.

For long, fantasy stories like Julia Donaldson’s *Room*

on a Broom with a beautiful message woven into it, and many other collections of weird fantasy stories have caught the attention of children. Later, the *Harry Potter* series or Indian tales like *Samsara: Enter the Valley of the Gods* have taken young minds by storm.

And now comes *Wonder Tales for a Warming Planet* which attacks the burning issues of today like global warming and its consequences through the medium of the ever-popular genre—fantasy. If the fantasy part of it mesmerizes the early middle schooler, the powerful message the stories carry gives food for thought to the older children and young adults, and me, too.

An opening letter from the author addresses the reader directly. The historical structure of the letter leading from yester years to the rather miserable present-day state of affairs arrests the reader’s attention. The letter closes in a comforting tone, ‘Let these stories about a warming planet be your friend and companion... Listen to their messages and use what you learn in your life... you will one day bring back the seasons and the planet will be cooler. The birds will sing with joy again and the demon will not step into your minds anymore.’

There are three stories in all, each with an active demon at work. The protagonist is Tina in the first story, a shy, Cinderella-type oppressed college girl who gets to travel with a stranger to strange places. His weird dress and name remind her of vampires. In the second, we meet a no-ordinary boarding school teenager, Gogol, who meets spooky but friendly creatures in a graveyard adjacent to his hostel. But he loses them. The book must be read to resolve the mystery of why they left. We are introduced to an ‘old lady’ in the third. She is addressed as ‘Ouma’ by the young macros swimming in the water. Ouma has a ‘large, pendulous head, twenty-feet long, covered with reddish-blue scales at the centre of which gleams an all-seeing eye’. The black and white illustration depicting Ouma and the macros helps the reader to paint a vivid and fantastic mental picture of the scenario.

The other black and white illustrations in the book also kindle the imagination of the reader to create unusual, goose-bumpy mental pictures that metamorphose into comforting ones, as and when the stories begin to give solutions to the dire present-day condition, namely that of a rapidly warming planet. Learning notes at the end of each story are helpful. They explain briefly terms like ‘alternative energy’, ‘sustainable technologies’, and ‘geo-engineering’, etc. They are educative and useful. The activities at the end of the book will stimulate the readers to play the innovative games that will enhance reflective thinking, decision making, comprehension, coordination, awareness of problems and finding solutions for them, and more.

The book speaks for the author and reveals him as a dedicated environmentalist who is keen to drive home the subject of protection of the environment. He is targeting

an impressionable age. So, I do hope there comes about a distinct change in the outlook of the readers, planting a necessary seed in their minds that will soon sprout, and propel them to find and take steps to arrest the disastrous warming of our dear planet earth.

So go ahead and buy the book. It may not appeal to one and all. But children with a good reading habit will truly appreciate the seriousness of burning issues presented by the stories, while, at the same time, they get mesmerized by the imaginative travel the stories take them on.



## Semeen Ali

### THE JUNGLE IN A POT

By Vinod Kumar Shukla. Translated by Tazeen Ali.  
Illustrated by Chandramohan Kulkarni  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 20, ₹ 75.00

### GODOWN

By Vinod Kumar Shukla. Translated by Tazeen Ali.  
Illustrated by Taposhi Ghoshal  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 8, ₹ 75.00

My introduction to Vinod Kumar Shukla's works happened only in recent years. The scarcity of books in Hindi in contemporary bookshops has turned the act of finding them into a fine art. Discovering writers and poets, new and old, within the small section allotted to the language is another challenge altogether. The thing with cities is this— they run on the currency of the dominant language, and no matter how much we speak in one tongue, we often end up reading in another. Ironically, my first encounter with Vinod *sahab* was not in the language he writes in, but through his works translated into English. That encounter stirred a curiosity in me to read him more deeply and to seek out his writings. To my delight, I discovered that he had written for children as well. The two books I take up in this review have been rendered with rare delicacy by Tazeen Ali.

The question of translation always brings with it multiple expectations. For some, a translation must remain faithful to the original; for others, the text should

be supple enough to absorb the nuances of the language into which it is being carried. Having read these two books in Hindi, I found that the translations move between the two languages with a fluidity and grace that feels entirely organic. One does not deny that reading the original is an experience beyond words, yet translations are equally vital: they allow readers entry into worlds that might otherwise remain closed. Literature, after all, knows no boundaries.

In *The Jungle in a Pot* (*Gamle Mein Jungle*), he writes with such simplicity that the words themselves seem transparent; yet what they reveal is profound enough to take one's breath away. In just a few pages, a quiet philosophical insight emerges. This is not a book only for children— it is one for adults too, to sit with slowly, to breathe in, and to return to, again and again.

In this book, the engagement with the interior is not confined to the material world alone. It extends beyond what is written on the page. For a child, the questions the book poses are arresting; thought-provoking ones that invite young minds to linger over words rather than skim past them. For an adult, the book opens into a deeper engagement. It is not merely about what is said, but it compels one to attend to what remains unsaid. The illustrations by Chandramohan Kulkarni honour this little book beautifully; the brushstrokes fill the pages, refusing to confine colours to neat compartments. Lines appear to define boundaries, only to dissolve into one another, creating a sense of interconnectedness that is impossible to ignore, and rightly so. Just as the words blend and flow into one another, the illustrations evoke that same unity in a quietly magical way. Three artists converge in the making of this remarkable book: the poet, the translator, and the painter.

The connection with nature persists in another work; a short story titled 'Godown (Godam)', again translated by Tazeen Ali. Here, the writer guides us through his personal journey of finding rented spaces to live in, bound by a singular, non-negotiable condition: there must be a tree nearby. That requirement shapes the narrative, highlighting the houses that meet his criterion and those that fall short. The bond he shares with trees, especially with the one outside his current residence, emerges with remarkable clarity and intensity in this book.

'Monsoon had set in. One day, the landlord said, "You'll have to vacate the house within a month."

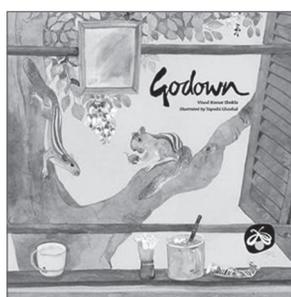
"Please don't ask me to vacate now. The rains are here," I said.

"But we need the space where you stay."

"It's hard to find a place on such short notice."

I had to restrain myself from saying, "It's hard to find a place with a tree on such a short notice."

Once again, the sensitivity with which he navigates his writing shines through, and in a profoundly heart-rending



way. Without resorting to grandiose or lofty language, he dismantles the reader gently, narrating simple stories in simple words. For children, this sensitivity is preserved and emerges with remarkable clarity. Once again, the translation succeeds in retaining and conveying the emotions that the original evokes.

The illustrations by Taposhi Ghosal are tender and luminous. Scattered across the pages, they resemble patches of sunlight filtering through leaves, mirroring the gentle illumination of the story itself. Taposhi has captured the essence of the narrative with remarkable subtlety, giving visual form to the emotions the text evokes.

These two books are a gift of a lifetime for the children who encounter them. For adults, the depth of meaning expands with age, growing richer as readers themselves grow older.

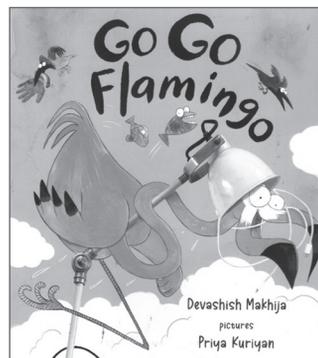


## Vian Bawa

### GO, GO FLAMINGO

By Devashish Makhija. Illustrated by Priya Kuriyan  
Tulika Books, 2025, pp. 38, ₹ 275.00

This is a bittersweet book combining simple yet deeply meaningful verse with the harsh reality of what our world has become. Here, the flamingos land on a lake they migrate to, only to find an unimaginable amount of plastic. It starts off as a playful dance putting on the different things they find in the heap, but turns into a rather contrasting, harsh ending. The illustrator presents real objects like syringes, plastic nets, utensils, lamp shades and all disposed objects to bring a unique and realistic touch to the book. These illustrations are a standout feature that bring a rather bright tone to the book. This book for young children encourages them to care for their environment by showing all the wrong that can happen if they litter. The author conveys a deep, impactful message to the reader in the form of simple, bright and entertaining verse.



This book is written in the form of a poem where sentences rhyme with names of the different characters: the flamingos. The simple vocabulary is used in such a way that the book is given a fun and easy-to-understand touch. This book is, in a way, thought provoking for

anyone who reads it, pushing the reader to understand and visualize what happens to all the creatures that actually face this. Another admirable feature of this book is how the author shows rapid urbanization through a picture book with simple, yet deep words.

The illustrations in the book are inspired from dense urbanized places with inadequate space wildlife. Beyond images and verses of catchy rhyme, there is the dark background representing the disastrous effects of dumping overwhelming amounts of junk and litter into water bodies, of which the animals and birds have to face the consequences. They depict the magnificent contrast between the striking beauty of nature and the horrific sight of massive junk we humans produce. This not only highlights human carelessness but provides a message connecting with and encouraging the reader to do something about all the trash being dumped in the ocean, and all the lives being lost due to ignorance. The illustrations are used as innovative means of showcasing pollution through art.

In conclusion, the book *Go, Go Flamingo* is a beautifully created and meaningful picture book that combines rhythmic sentences and creative illustrations to portray the harsh realities of pollution through the example of how these flamingos suffer, encouraging a world where wildlife is respected and cleanliness is the norm.



## Nikita and Murselin

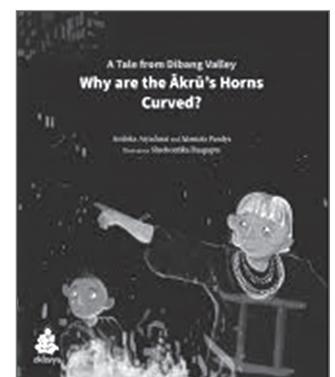
### WHY ARE THE AKRU'S HORNS CURVED?— A TALE FROM DIBANG VALLEY; AKRU KE SEENG MUDH KAISE GAYE — DIBANG VALLEY KI EK KAHANI

By Ambika Aiyadurai and Mamata Pandya. Illustrations by Shrobontika Dasgupta  
Eklavya, 2024, pp. 20 each, ₹ 85.00 each

*Why are the Akru's Horns Curved?*, is a delightful story. The title itself arouses a sense of curiosity in both children and adults. Set in Etabe village of the Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh, the tale unfolds through the conversations between young Jeeha and his grandmother, Naya.

Their bond of storytelling is something every reader can relate to, as it reminds one of the universal comfort of listening to stories in a grandparent's lap.

At the heart of the story lies Akru, a strange and



fascinating animal. The plot revolves around a humorous yet thought-provoking contest between the Idu Mishmi tribe and the spirits of the mountains (Ngolo/Golos) over Akru's ownership. The story gently introduces children to broader issues—such as the importance of protecting endangered wildlife, valuing indigenous knowledge, and caring for forests. It makes the readers reflect: if communities, forests, and animals are not cared for, will our jungles one day lose their diversity altogether?

The book's biggest strength lies in its simplicity, both in language and narration, as it introduces children to folklore and wildlife conservation in a way that is engaging, fun, and easy to follow, both in Hindi and English. We shared the story with our children in the Jeevan Shiksha Pahel school in Bhopal and found them quite engaged and curious throughout the story.

Shrobonika Dasgupta's illustrations are vivid and engaging, bringing to life the terrain of Dibang Valley, the features of the people, and the appearance of akru. The visuals, alongside the story, create a strong impact which words alone could not achieve. Beyond its entertainment value, the book opens doors to many questions—who are the Idu Mishmi people? Is akru a real animal?

The factual notes at the end of the book provide answers, revealing that the Dibang Valley is India's least populated district, with just about 14,000 people. The Idu Mishmi tribe depends on jhum cultivation and forest products for livelihood. Readers also learn that akru is, in fact, a goat-antelope found in parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and China.

Some local words (like *Mancho*, *Maye*, *Tacho*) might seem difficult for readers unfamiliar with them. A glossary of such terms would have made the book even more accessible, especially for children.

Overall, *Why are Akru's Horns Curved?* is not just a charming folk-inspired tale but also an educational journey to the Dibang valley and the Idu Mishmi community. It keeps alive the rich heritage and culture of India's Northeastern communities.



## Shivani Bajaj

### CHITTY—A DOG AND HER FOREST FARM (CHITTY— EK KUTTA AUR USKA JUNGLE FARM)

By Serow. Translated by Jitendra 'Jeet'. Illustrated by Rajiv Eipe

Kalpavriksh (English) and Eklavya (Hindi), 2021 and 2023, pp. 34 and pp. 40, ₹ 200.00 and ₹115.00 respectively

The original book, published by Kalpavriksh, is in English. It is based on a true incident and is

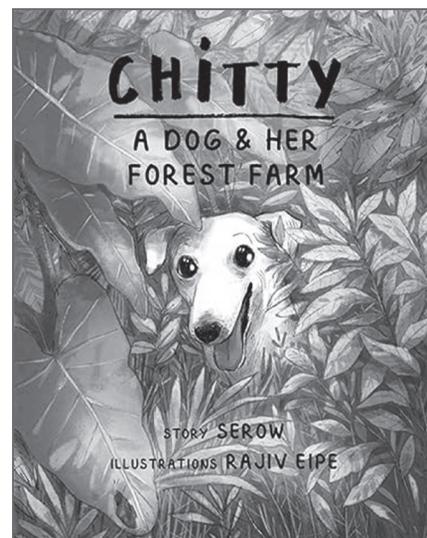
a memoir of sorts. Chitty is a small stray dog who finds a home in a farm located in the Western Ghats, in the jungles of Karnataka. She is a wise, sensitive, fun-loving dog and does not seek much attention. She adapts to the forest farm quite well and spends a lot of time in the open fields and surroundings, forming bonds with other creatures in the jungle. Her favourite pass-time is to look silently at the dark, starry skies, as if trying to decipher the mysteries that exist deep therein and within.

Alongside the story of the flora and fauna in the Western Ghats, the changing monsoon patterns, and lives of those dependent on it getting affected—all weave into the backdrop of the book. This becomes food for thought about the close connection between nature and humans, which the latter tend to overlook, especially when living at a 'comfortable' distance from it.

The author gets used to Chitty's presence sooner than she can comprehend. Thirteen monsoons pass by. As both the human and dog grow older, their interaction and communication get stronger and more comfortable. So much so that when it is time to say goodbye, it leaves the author melancholic and numb. The last chapter of this beautifully written and illustrated book leaves your eyes moist and has you thinking about death... and life. And the continuity.

The book has an intensity, emotion, and beauty to it, which makes sure you read it in one go. Whether its Chitty's playfulness, the rich landscape or some moments of emergency, the description holds your rapt attention. In fact, the translation reads as well as an original, in that it retains the essence quite effortlessly, and that is very rare. Illustrator Rajiv Eipe's phenomenal imagery lends the same depth to the Forest as it does to Chitty's eyes! He equally captures the many varieties of trees and birds, as he does the numerous emotions in Chitty's eyes and face. At the end of the book, one feels one has just come back from a long, adventurous, overwhelming journey to visit a Dog and her Forest Farm in the Western Ghats. What could be more satisfying and fulfilling than that!

A book worth keeping for a lifetime... at least.



## Jane Sahi

**THOMA AND THRESIA**

By Meenu Thomas. Illustrated by Barkha Lohia  
Eklavya Foundation, 2024, pp. 23, ₹105.00

This book is unusual in several respects. The title itself is a surprise when the reader discovers that the two names belong not to children or pet animals but to two middle-aged adults! The book is not about children; instead, Meenu Thomas creates a credible story about adults for children.

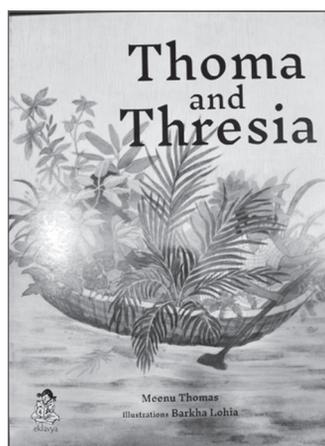
Thoma and Thresia have an unconventional but endearing relationship in the way they work and live together and, above all, how they share their love for the garden. The relationship is unconventional according to the way adults are generally represented in children's books, though probably quite normal in the everyday, modern world.

Thoma and Thresia clearly do have their differences both in character and ways of working in the garden. The story tells how they sometimes shout and hold secrets from each other, but refreshingly describes how they can laugh and celebrate things together and alone. They also find ways to resolve their squabbles in amicable and gentle ways.

The plot revolves round the disappearance of a precious plant. There is some tension as neighbours accuse each other of jealousy and theft but the diverse community also comes together in an effort to solve the mystery. There is a moment in the eerie shadows of dusk when it looks as though the supernatural has played a part in the strange turn of events, but as with all the other rumours, this too proves unfounded. Happily, all works out in the end, and there is an unexpected twist when the culprit eventually confesses to the crime!

The story is set in the scenic backwaters of Kerala. Barkha Lohia vividly illustrates the distinctive landscape and the people who live there with humour and sensitivity. Each character is drawn with skill, wit and careful observation, and the range of facial expressions and hair styles alone are a delight for any reader.

The text and images blend perfectly together to make it a book to be enjoyed at any age!



## Toolika Wadhwa

**AN ABSENCE OF SQUIRRELS**

By Aparna Kapur. Illustrated by Siddhi Vartak  
Duckbill/Penguin, 2025, pp. 215, ₹ 250.00

*An Absence of Squirrels* is the fictional account of a small island called 'Thutta'. Katli, a young girl, lives on the island with her family. To cope with the challenges of life, Katli is taught by her father to adopt different roles for brief periods of time. Various versions of Katli are shy, timid, confident and adventurous. Responding to the moment, Katli selects the role that she wants to play to face the situation. She feels most comfortable around her parents and her friend Abhay. In interacting with her school friends, she comes across repeated mention of the Captain of the island being their protector and an overarching authority. Nobody is allowed to leave the island, unless they decide not to return.

Tracing the mystery of copper hats that buzz over people, making them forget their memories, Katli and Abhay come across a page in the library that talks about squirrels that had earlier existed on the island. They realize that on the Captain's orders, anyone speaking the word 'squirrel' is met with a bronze hat. The children of the island join together to overturn the somewhat tyrannical Captain. The people of the island establish new rules and develop a more open society.

The story incorporates elements of magical realism and dystopian fiction. The book is marked appropriate for children ten years and above. The illustrations are suitable and the print quality and language are also suited for the age group.

The reference to how Katli's various personalities handle situations will be meaningful to readers. Katli's realization that she does not need to switch between personalities and can be herself around people who love her unconditionally (her parents and her friend Abhay) is an important insight. The story also brings to fore the complexities of friendships among children. With parental intervention, children are sometimes forced to break friendships. At other times, small fights can lead to distance. Many of these conflicts are resolved, and children demonstrate resilience in rebuilding friendships.

For an informed reader, the references to absolute authoritarianism and what it can possibly do to society,



hold significance. What happens when you defy the authority who believes in punishing difference of opinion? What happens to the person in a position of authority? How do closed societies impact the lives of people? Some of these questions can be part of discussions that children can engage with.

Aparna Kapur's storytelling takes the reader to a world of imagination. It is a reminder that imagination, books, and education are tools of resistance against oppression. Squirrels in this book are symbols of histories erased from collective unconscious. Silencing of truths to serve the tyrant's purpose needs to be challenged—on Thutta, and beyond. The book is much more than a children's tale. It serves as a mirror to contemporary social structures and is a reminder of the possible consequences of erasure of memories, and creating false imagery, in the absence of resistance.

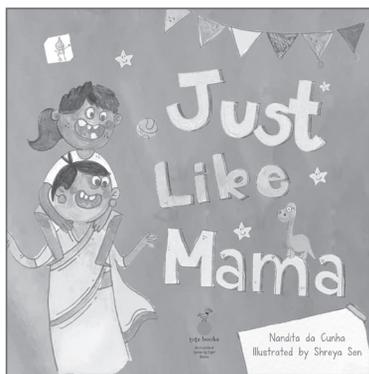


## Shiv Narayan Gour

### JUST LIKE MAMA

By Nandita da Cunha. Illustrated by Shreya Sen  
Tota Books, Speaking Tiger Books LLP, 2025, pp. 24,  
₹ 275.00

*Just Like Mama* by Nandita da Cunha is a picture book that opens the door to profound questions about life in a family and shared society. At its core, this book explores the delicate balance between personal freedom and social responsibility as it begins from the smallest social unit, i.e., the family.



The story follows a young girl who, in her early years, enjoys complete freedom. She can eat when she wants, play where she likes, leave her toys scattered, and sleep whenever she feels sleepy. But as she begins to grow, she notices that even in a small family of three, she is now expected to follow rules. These rules have a severe impact on her because they are created and imposed on her by her mother, whom she adores.

This creates a conflict in the child's mind. Her loving mother, who once seemed like the most caring person in the world, now appears somewhat like a strict enforcer. She asks her not to make a mess, to clean up after playing,

and to sleep early. The young girl is slowly becoming a slave to time and schedule, just like us adults. The situation becomes more complicated when the mother announces the arrival of a new baby, which brings mixed emotions for the child.

Things begin to shift when the girl decides to play with her newborn sibling, and through that game she plans to remind her mother to be a 'fun Mama'. In the beginning, she recreates her version of freedom with no rules and restrictions. However, her experience quickly teaches her that without rules, life becomes not just chaotic, but also unsafe. She understands that babies are vulnerable and they require constant attention, as they tend to put themselves in precarious situations; and without rules or supervision, serious harm could occur.

Through this experience, she begins to understand her mother's perspective and develops sensibilities as an older sibling. What once felt like controlling behaviour now reveals itself as care, concern, and responsibility.

Nandita da Cunha's story is gentle yet impactful, and Shreya Sen's illustrations complement the narrative with warmth and charm. However, according to me, the illustrations could have been more provocative. Illustrations are not just limited to describing the narrative in pictorial form, but they play an important role in creating space for imagination. Nonetheless, the book encourages readers of all ages to think about family dynamics, societal living, and the necessity of structure in everyday life.

*Just Like Mama* is a thoughtful commentary on growing up, understanding others, developing a sense of care, and learning to see the world through someone else's eyes. It also offers readers a nostalgic return to their own childhoods and the evolving understanding of parental love and discipline. The book is a delightful and thought-provoking read for both children and adults.



## Shivi

### VINCENT CAN'T GO

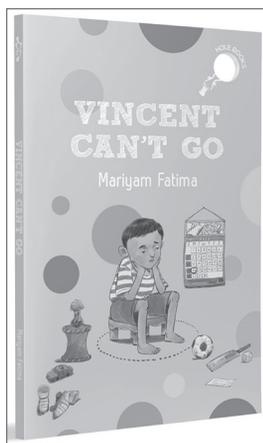
By Mariyam Fatima  
Duckbill/Penguin, 2025, pp. 80, ₹ 193.00

*Vincent Can't Go* is a classic take on the parent-child yes-no conflict. Vincent has just turned eight and now thinks himself to be grown up enough to take his own life decisions. His plans to be the master of his own wishes are thwarted as his father moves overseas for some work. It seems as if the key to Vincent's free will was taken away by his father. His mother is a nurse who often

## Anuraag Basu

**AGASSI AND THE GREAT CYCLE RACE**

By Khyrunnisa A. Illustrated by Saumya Oberoi  
Puffin Books, 2025, pp. 77, ₹ 299.00



works night shifts and cannot seem to manage between the responsibilities of the house and her son's wishes.

Conflict arises when Vincent has to go to his best friend's birthday party. He devises multiple tricks so that his mother notices his itch to go. An interesting take occurs when Vincent, after having decided that he would gift roller skates to his best friend, tries to make

his mother notice the requirement for the same. He writes the same in their grocery list, hoping for her to notice. There are a total of ten chapters before Vincent actually gets the way out. He suffers from a peculiar itch till he gets the solution to his problem. He tries to run away from his best friend unless he is sure that he will in fact go to the party. In the end, Vincent finally gets to go, with the assistance of his best friend and his own mother.

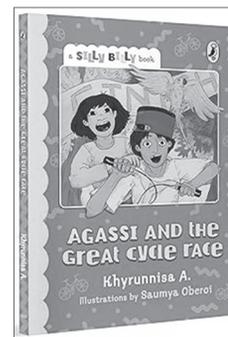
Vincent makes it evident that his freedom is uncompromisable. He is an eight-year-old fighting for autonomy in the world of adults who decide what is right and wrong. It also highlights a forgotten era where children in fact, were left alone to explore and find their way. The mother is shown as someone who is overprotective of her child in the absence of her husband. She tends to overlook her son's needs amidst so many of her household chores. Yet, the case is clear. The freedom and the agency to provide it lies with the father. The book does feed on the narrative that fathers let their children breathe much more than mothers do. It also highlights a tired mother, who juggles between an overarching household and a growing child with needs of autonomy.

The illustrations do justice to the narrative. Whenever Vincent gets an itch, the illustrations provide a symbolic insight into his mind. The drawings are done in pencil sketch, mirroring Vincent's desire for a solution as soon as possible. Habib Ali artfully describes the predicament of an eight-year-old and captures his eventful world.

The fierce emphasis on how Vincent has in fact grown up enough to travel alone at night and return home by himself, is the driver of the tale. In a world where children's problems and their perspective cease to exist, *Vincent Can't Go* serves as a reminder of how children's problems deserve equal attention. It provides an inverted lens into Vincent's life, making his problems as important, and at times, more important than his mother's. Mariyam Fatima rightly captures the mind of an eight-year-old with the simplistic aspirations of going to his best friend's birthday party.



'Determination is the key to success.' *Agassi and the Great Cycle Race* is the perfect portrayal of this proverbial saying. The story is a seamless blend of humour, perseverance, and friendship. With lively illustrations and vivid character sketches, the book invites young readers to join Agassi on his adventurous journey, reminding us that trying something new can lead to unexpected joy.



The story follows the protagonist, Joel Agassi Roy, a boy who dislikes tennis-inspired first names and the overall nature of sports. When a local cycle competition is announced, Agassi, despite having no knowledge of how to ride one, enlists himself in the race through sheer enthusiasm. His resolve and resourcefulness drive the plot as he even borrows a cycle and takes rigorous lessons from his friend Zeba. Regardless of the tight deadline and numerous bruises, Agassi upholds resilience through his actions. The protagonist's supporting parents, Zeba, and Steffi the parrot—all contribute majorly to building the plot, bringing in elements of humour and the charm of reading.

The plot conveys a strong message to the audience, encouraging children to find confidence within themselves and that participation and effort hold greater value than victory. It also delivers a significantly relevant note about sustainability. Occasional mention of the environmental benefits of cycling over motor vehicles, as well as community spirit, acts as a valuable learning experience for the young readers.

I feel very connected to the protagonist, since Agassi's story narrates a common challenge faced by children, that is, self-doubt. The author is successful in addressing this relatable issue to the readers and motivates them to imbibe an optimistic outlook. The secondary characters play a vital role in shaping the plot. Zeba, for example, is a brilliant symbol of friendship and positivity. Agassi's parents act as the primary pillar of support during his journey of hard work. Despite the protagonist's frequent disapproval of his name as a tennis player, his parents never failed to uphold his desires and demands. The story sets out a great message for the readers, whether it is regarding self-development or addressing modern-world issues.

The illustrations play a key role in the book. The whimsical, colourful, and full-of-energy artworks bring the characters to life, adding a playful touch to each page. The

sketches support the storytelling by creating enthusiastic visuals, which breathe life into each dialogue and scene.

What stands out the most about *Agassi and the Great Cycle Race* is not merely its laughter or animation, but the subtle echo of questions it plants in its readers: what does determination mean in a world which celebrates only winners? The book leaves the gentle note that success is not achieved overnight, but through persistent effort. Moreover, confidence does not grow from victory, but blooms from one's mistakes and struggles. The tale of Agassi, as he pushes his limits in the bicycle race, despite the loss, is a poignant portrayal of this message. The final takeaway of the narrative is not about winning a race or cycling faster, but overcoming self-doubt and embracing one's personality. As the last few pages are turned, we are left with a lesson; one lingering with friendship, resilience and humour.

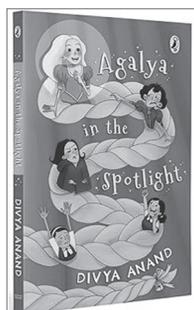


## Prathana Pankaj

### AGALYA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

By Divya Anand. Illustrated by Indrani Ghosh  
Puffin Books, 2025, pp. 136, ₹ 250.00

Most books for kids are either full of fantasy or try too hard to teach a lesson. Divya Anand's *Agalya in the Spotlight* is different. It feels close to real life, while still being fun and inspiring. It takes a classic fairy tale—that of Rapunzel—and flips it into a school story about a girl who isn't a princess at all, but just a normal nine-year-old trying to figure herself out.



Agalya is chosen to play Rapunzel in her school play, and at first, she's over the moon. She dreams of getting claps from her teachers, love from her classmates, and the proud smiles of her family. She wants to be perfect on stage. You can almost feel her excitement in the first part of the book, because we've all imagined that moment of being the star. But life doesn't make things that easy. Agalya suddenly has to face problems she never thought about. Her best friend Prisha, instead of cheering her on, becomes jealous. Their friendship starts to fall apart, which is the worst thing that can happen when you're already nervous. On top of that, Agalya develops alopecia and starts losing her hair. For a girl playing Rapunzel, a lot of whose identity is long hair, this feels like a cruel joke. Suddenly, Agalya isn't just worrying about acting well—she's questioning how she looks, how others see her, and whether she's good enough at all.

What's powerful is how the author presents Agalya dealing with these problems. Anand doesn't make it simple like, 'Agalya was sad, but then she got over it.' Instead, we see her go through every stage: the fear, the anger, the insecurity, and then, slowly, the acceptance. Agalya learns that being herself matters more than being 'perfect'. Such lessons don't come in a lecture—they come through one's own mistakes and realizations, which makes the story feel honest. The friendship angle is also very real. Anyone who's ever had a friend get jealous or competitive will understand what Agalya goes through. Prisha isn't written as a 'bad person', just someone struggling with her own feelings. And that's what makes the story work—it shows that friendship is complicated. Sometimes your best friend can also be the one who hurts you. But the book also shows how talking, listening, and forgiving can help heal things. It's a reminder that relationships take work, even when you're nine.

Another thing I liked is the writing style. It's simple and easy to follow, but never boring. Agalya's thoughts are funny and relatable. She's dramatic sometimes; she worries too much, even imagines crazy scenarios—but that's exactly how kids (and teens, honestly) think. The story mixes humour with serious moments, so you never feel weighed down, and still get something meaningful out of it. The illustrations by Indrani Ghosh add a lot too. They bring out Agalya's emotions and the world around her, making you connect with the story visually as well as through the words. For readers who enjoy pictures along with text, the drawings make the experience even better.

What I think makes *Agalya in the Spotlight* stand out is that it talks about real issues kids face but doesn't make it heavy or preachy. Issues of self-image, peer pressure, family expectations, and friendship drama are all things we go through in school, and Anand captures them perfectly. It's not just about one girl in a play—it's about learning to accept yourself, even when life throws challenges your way. By the end, Agalya isn't a perfect heroine. She's not someone who 'wins' every battle. She's someone who learns, stumbles, forgives, and grows. That makes her more relatable than any fairy-tale character.

This book is written in a way that's easy to read, but the themes are deep enough to make you think about your own life—your friendships, your insecurities, and your goals. In short, *Agalya in the Spotlight* is funny, emotional, and inspiring all at once. It celebrates courage, resilience, and the messy but amazing process of growing up. If you've ever felt nervous about being in the spotlight, or struggled with friends, or worried about how you look, this book will speak to you. And even if you haven't, Agalya's story will remind you that perfection isn't the goal—being yourself is.



## Toolika Wadhwa

### HOW TO BE HAPPY WITH WHO YOU ARE

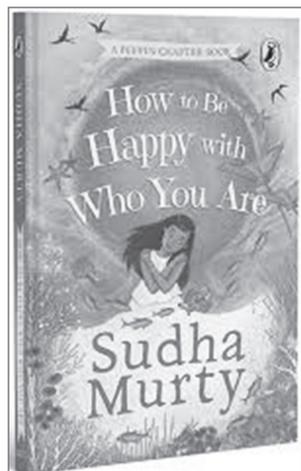
By Sudha Murty. Illustrated by Shruti Hemani  
Puffin/Penguin, 2025, pp. 31, ₹ 250.00

Sudha Murty's book presents the story of a young princess who pleads with her father to let her live a different life, believing that her friends are happier than she is. Her father honours her wish and helps her to explore alternative lives for one year each, until she ultimately realizes that her life is as good as any of her friends'.

To engage early readers, Murty has adopted a fantasy theme. The protagonist, the Princess of the Sea, is joined by other characters representing princesses of a river, a mountain and a tree. This will appeal to children and they will be tempted to follow the princess's journey through to the story's end. The hardbound book features beautiful illustrations printed on glossy paper, with a unique palette of soft pastels, that lend warmth to the reading experience.

Stories such as this one serve the important purpose of helping children learn life lessons that will not automatically emerge either from academic education or everyday family conversations. The story effectively delivers its key idea: life will have its ups and downs, but we can still be happy by embracing what we have. In addition, there is a multitude of small and big lessons that can be learnt from the book. However, not all of these will be suitable for children as young as five years old, for whom the book is marked. Older children, who have developed the cognitive abilities for perspective taking, can learn the importance of looking at life from many dimensions and understand the trade-offs of various possibilities. Parents can themselves learn the lesson to allow and even help children to explore alternatives before they make a choice. This need not be restricted to making major life choices but is equally applicable to everyday life decisions.

For self-reading or read aloud sessions, follow up discussions can be organized on various themes emerging from the story. At the beginning of the story, Princess of the Sea is mocked by her friends for having endless salty water. Readers or listeners can be encouraged to question if friends should mock each other. What could be possible ways of handling such a situation? The author misses an opportunity to break the stereotype of gender-exclusive



friend circles. This could also be another discussion point. Throughout the story, the princesses face many challenges. As a mountain, one faces excavation; as a river, the second faces floods and droughts; as a tree, the third faces the various seasons and eventually, the threat of being victim to deforestation. Each of these situations provides opportunity to explore emotions that the princesses undergo—fear, anger, sadness, and disappointment. Further, the situations open up conversations about necessary and unnecessary human intervention, and their impact on the environment.

The book holds tremendous potential for parents who are interested in introducing reading to children at an early age. It will also serve as a valuable addition to school and private libraries, and reading corners of foundational stage classrooms.



## Phongang Buchem

### THE SUNSHINE PROJECT

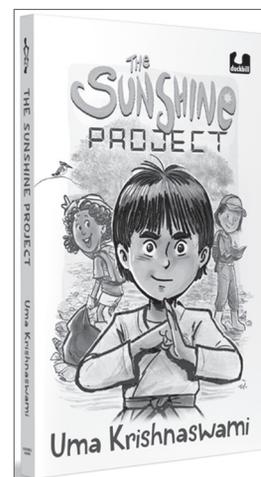
By Uma Krishnaswami  
Duckbill, 2025, pp. 224, ₹ 299.00

*The Sunshine Project* covers various topics in thirty-two sections, from daily conflicts of life to activism. An inspirational book, it tells how a shy, timid boy brings changes in his society. Full of captivating illustrations and very relatable affairs of life, the book is not just a mundane story book on character development but a creatively written book on holistic development.

In a world that is constantly plagued, where the environment is degrading and 'no pollution' sounds utopian, this book for children is needed now more than ever. It talks about Anil, a young boy who enjoys karate, spending time with his friends, and advocating for solar power in his community. However, he prefers to avoid conversation, listening to his karate sensei's advice that 'The best fight is no fight.'

Anil is disheartened when he learns that the city plans to build a new solar panel factory on land that includes a mangrove. While the factory promises sustainable energy, it threatens the local ecosystem and livelihoods of the fisherfolk who depend on the mangroves.

A school project forces Anil to act as a Young



Reporter, where he eventually realizes that somebody has to step up. Slowly, he begins to ask questions about the factory's safety regulations. With the support of his friends Yasmin and Reeni, and the guidance of his community—including the retired teacher known as Book Uncle—Anil tries to find a solution which maintains the perfect balance: affecting neither the environment nor development.

In conclusion, *The Sunshine Project* is more than just a children's story. It is a tale about courage, friendship and responsibility. Through Anil's journey, the book highlights how even shy individuals can become the voice of change when faced with challenges. By blending personal growth with environmental and social issues, Uma Krishnaswami inspires young readers to believe that their actions, albeit small, can make a difference. The book ultimately leaves its readers with the message that with awareness, teamwork and determination, a balance between development and sustainability is possible.



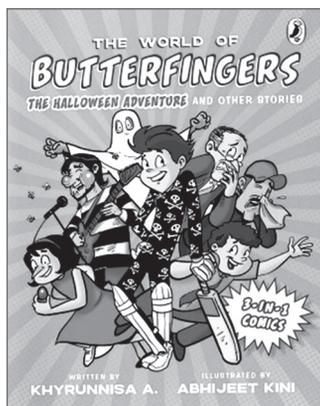
## Shazia Salam

### THE WORLD OF BUTTERFINGERS: THE HALLOWEEN ADVENTURE AND OTHER STORIES

By Khyrunnisa A. Illustrated by Abhijeet Kini  
Puffin Books, 2025, pp. 99, ₹ 399.00

A generous dose of slapstick humour, realistic school drama, and a plot sprinkled with mischief, *The World of Butterfingers: The Halloween Adventure and Other Stories* written by Khyrunnisa A and illustrated by Abhijeet Kini is a delightful celebration of comedic school stories that appeal to readers of all ages. Through the lead character Amar Kishen—a student of Greenpark Higher Secondary School (Butterfingers) acting as a humorous klutz; a sweet and endearing anchor around whom the turmoil continuously swirls—Khyrunnisa turns ordinary school moments into hilarious and exaggerated rides of naughty and fun-loving boys. While school children will relate to this being their immediate reality, older readers will be taken back to the sweet school days where chasing mischief used to be the highlight of everyday experience.

There are three stories in the book. Whether it is inadvertently helping a rock band with screening a



documentary in 'The Heebee Jeebes and the Bees'; making it through a Halloween trip to Ooty and finding themselves in the middle of a bank heist and a haunted home in 'The Halloween Adventure'; or enduring the trials of a school exhibition in 'Butterfingers and the Antiquity Stall', every adventure takes Amar and his friends on crazy, hilarious rides. Warm, sincere friendships, puns, school pranks, honest blunders, and outrageous misunderstandings are all interwoven in these creative and funny stories. From classroom mistakes to the desire for adult acceptance, young readers in particular will find a lot to relate to.

The illustrations are a major factor of allure. Each page is bursting with Abhijeet Kini's artwork which depicts all blunders and errors in a lively manner. Characters' emotions range from confused adults to bedazzled children. Every gag's humour is enhanced by the artwork, and the story's tempo and graphics blend flawlessly, never overpowering the young reader or letting the adrenaline waver. A lively, engaging reading experience is created by body language and facial expressions which frequently convey the joke before the dialogue does.

The humour of Khyrunnisa's jokes usually arrives naturally from the people and circumstances rather than feeling forced. The tone is friendly and inclusive, and there are just enough chaos and fun to keep kids and adults laughing without ever getting crude or nasty. The stories are enjoyable with clever allusions to pop culture, literature, and school hall cliches.

*The World of Butterfingers: The Halloween Adventure and Other Stories* is a joyful, loving tribute to school memories, humorous mishaps, and the ageless delight of laughing at life's small mistakes. Strongly suggested for children aged ten and above, as well as adults who wish to rediscover the joys and excitement of reading comics.



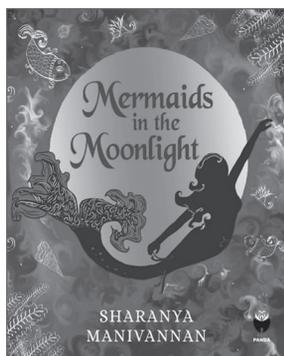
## Bansi

### MERMAIDS IN THE MOONLIGHT

Text and illustrations by Sharanya Manivannan  
Red Panda, 2021, pp. 40, ₹ 299.00

*Mermaids in the Moonlight*, written and illustrated by Sharanya Manivannan and published by Red Panda, is a tale within tales—stories of mermaids from around the world, interwoven with a journey on a moonlit night.

It begins with Nilavoli and her Amma setting out to the Mattakalappu lagoon, drawn by the mysterious sounds believed to be those of mermaids. As their boat



drifts deeper into the water, Amma shares stories of mermaids and mer-creatures from far and wide—Brazil, West Asia, Mali, Cornwall, and India. It is fascinating to discover how across cultures, stories persist of such beings—often female—who belong both to water and land. The central storyline takes an

unexpected turn as Nilavoli and Amma's journey begins to merge with the mermaid tales themselves.

The illustrations expand the text in surprising ways, offering depictions beyond the familiar. We meet a mermaid in a wheelchair, a mer-guy cooking for his companion, a plump mermaid, and even glimpses of the lagoon's fraught history of conflict and disaster. These visual choices enrich the narrative and push the boundaries of what mermaid stories can be.

At the same time, both the narrative and the artwork feel densely packed. The stories within stories, layered with intricate illustrations and a wide-ranging colour palette, sometimes overwhelm the reader. The richness risks becoming clutter, leaving less room for imagination to wander. Given its potential to transport readers across times and cultures, the book might have benefited from more visual and narrative breathing space.

Especially for urban middle to high school readers, *Mermaids in the Moonlight* is a book of wonder and possibility—yet one that calls for stronger clarity and restraint to fully unlock its power.



## Rafay Habibullah

### JOYRIDES: CARNIVAL OF CREEPS

By Neil D'Silva. Illustrated by DoodleNerve  
Puffin Books, 2025, pp. 240, ₹ 399.00

Neil D'Silva's *Joyrides: Carnival of Creeps* whisks readers to Funmania, a new amusement park on

Bongo Island, whose dazzling lights and spiralling rides promise a day of carefree excitement for all visitors. Riz, Anvita, Tiana, and Palash are four friends eager to explore the world's largest roller coaster, the Big Loopy, who soon discover that the carnival's seemingly idyllic environment conceals darker secrets. The park is first presented to the reader as the perfect vacation spot, and the friends seem to be really enjoying themselves. However, the adventure takes a twist when Cyrus, one of their friends, boards the

Big Loopy and vanishes mid-ride, leaving behind only his vacant seat and a long trail of unanswered questions. While the trip begins as just a way for the friends to spend more time together, it quickly develops into a thrilling race to confront the mystical forces that exist behind Funmania's seemingly cheerful image.

The narrative created unfolds with brisk pacing and carefully planted twists, with each chapter closing on a note that propels the reader forward; with each hand on the chapter headings almost beckoning the reader onward. This makes it perfect for a lot of the younger readers whom the book targets, as it ensures that even those with shorter attention spans can be engaged by the well-paced and gripping story. One of the prominent values of the book is how D'Silva captures the almost unsettling contrast of the carnival: bright lights and long shadows, the loud, upbeat music muffling any screams. The four friends are described with enough individuality to make their fears and flashes of courage convincing to younger readers; their loyalty and camaraderie providing the emotional connection that keeps the story grounded in one's mind.

Part of the pleasure of the book, for me, lies in its visual design. Dramatically sketched chapter headers and full-page illustrations punctuate the text, heightening suspense and giving shape to the park's menacing architecture. The artwork mirrors the story's shifts from glittering excitement to creeping dread, offering readers a second narrative in images. The illustrations create strong images of the characters in the heads of younger readers, allowing them to assign definitive faces to their favourite characters.

For developing readers, *Joyrides* offers a satisfying blend of mystery and mild horror. The balance that D'Silva develops through the plot and illustrations is chilling enough to quicken a young reader's pulse without tipping into nightmare. While the novel doesn't contain a strong element of emotional and psychological depth, it still maintains realism in the mind of a young reader, and its gripping plot tied with its exploration of childish adventure and emotion makes it a good read for an advanced reader as well.

*Joyrides: Carnival of Creeps* stands on its own as a self-contained adventure, proving that fear and fun can share the same ride. It is an assured addition to contemporary Indian children's literature and an invitation to young readers to test their courage while savouring the thrill of the unknown.



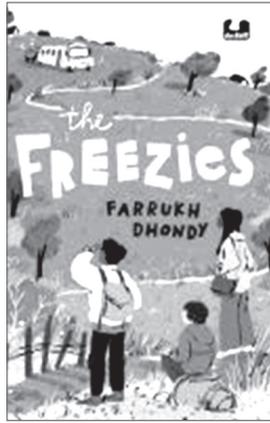
## Ritvik Agrawal

**THE FREEZIES**

By Farrukh Dhondy

Duckbill/Penguin, 2024, pp. 176, ₹ 299.00

*The Freezies* by Farrukh Dhondy is a novel that uses urgency and comedy. It presents the miniature misadventures of a child who is afraid of a world that struggles with migration, borders, and belonging. The novel revolves around three misfits—Suleikha (Sully), Leo, and Kai: outcasts among their peers—taking comfort in each other's friendship to blunt their pain. They call themselves the 'Freezies', a title that betrays both their common experience of feeling disconnected and their survival. But beneath that episodically comedic tone, the novel follows the blistering truth of exile, displacement, and the human heart's need to be a sanctuary.



The story begins with a dented van and trailer pulling into their village green, 'The Mead'. Its occupant is Mr Christaki, a Syrian violinist who washed up on the shores of England with his adopted child. To the young people, he is both strange and drawable: a man whose music and gentleness embody another world. When he is taken by the deportation machinery, the Freezies decide to act. Their solution to attract national attention to his case is both ambitious and admirable, a reversal to children yielding power against an adult world.

Dhondy's mode of narration (using the three children's voices) breathes a sense of freshness into the writing. Each voice is individualized, fraught with cultural and familial experience—Indian, Caribbean, and mixed race—that reflects the diaspora of Britain today. The boys' conversations are rich with humour and candour, yet they always allow us a glimpse of the prejudices and fault lines of their world.

Thematically, the novel revolves around solidarity and exclusion. The Freezies comprehend in Christaki a mirror of their dislocation. Friendship with him is a granting of symbolic asylum. Dhondy employs that friendship to offer us a reflection on asylum and sympathy. The argument that the youngest, ordinarily the most ignored voices of a society, might be capable of possessing values which the elders often forget.

Symbolism runs secretly through the pages. The car which Christaki lives in is an image of shortness, of tenuous belonging, even while it proves a temporary

refuge for the children's minds. His violin is not just a token of his earlier existence but a thread of connection between cultures; of music without frontiers. 'The Mead', or the open village green, by comparison, is both a communal hub and contested ground—a comment on the doubleness of welcome and rejection.

Even bare style delivers poise through omission. The novel resists falling into sermonizing. Rather, through the courage of its teenage protagonists and heroine, the reader witnesses ethical repercussions of the questions posed. That is the purpose of this story: to pose questions of sanctuary, racism, and the dignity of man. Finally, *The Freezies* is a novel about children only. It is a fable of belonging, with wit and concision. Dhondy reminds us that even the softest of voices, raised together, can challenge the hard machinery of insensitivity.



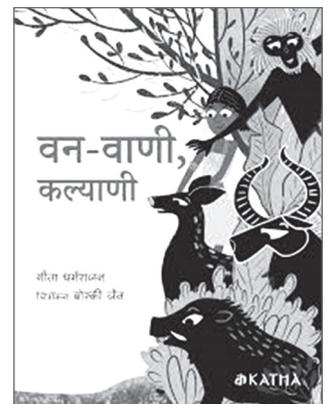
## Neetu Yadav

**VAN-VANI KALYANI (WILD VET KALYANI)**

By Geetha Dharmarajan. Translated into Hindi by Pratyush Dwivedi. Illustrated by Boski Jain

Katha, 2024, pp. 80, ₹ 205.00

*Van-Vani Kalyani* is an inspiring story based on the life of veterinarian Dr. N. Kalyani. She was the first woman from the Irula tribe to study veterinary science. This story is not just about one individual's life, but also a celebration of her courage, her sensitivity and love for animals, and her example of true education—all woven together by the author in a captivating way.



The poem begins with the very first line: 'Trin-trin *ghanta baji*, phone *aya...*'; and then on the next page: '*...Kalyani jangal ke kinare ghar par khana paka rahi thi.*' Reading this, one feels that Kalyani is a striking character, carefully crafted by the author—skilled not only in using technology but also in everyday abilities like cooking. She is fearless and brave. The illustrator has portrayed her with such simplicity that any ordinary reader can easily relate to her. Her life by the forest's edge also symbolizes her deep love for nature. The book presents Kalyani as a strong, simple, and sensitive character, and beautifully depicts the bond and cooperation between Kalyani, the forest, and the animals.

Written in verse form, the book uses short sentences and simple words, which attract young readers. Unique names like Mukurthi, Paniyale Saanp, and Bhangraj provide readers special experiences. However, at places, some proofreading feels necessary.

The illustrations highlight the tribal backdrop. The use of colours is so impactful that readers can not only understand but also feel the day-and-night scenes, the forest landscapes and its atmosphere. The vividness of the illustrations makes the narrative even more powerful.

From an educational perspective, the book opens up discussions about the Irula tribe, Dr. N. Kalyani, and the lives of all tribal communities living in forests. The poem conveys compassion for animals and nature. It sparks curiosity and sensitivity among children—especially those from rural or marginalized backgrounds. It presents the life of a tribal woman with dignity and also instills the realization that with courage and determination, every obstacle can be overcome. Moreover, it introduces young readers to the world of science and veterinary medicine, inspiring them to explore it further.

Generally, in stories, the big animals of the forest are shown preying on the weak. But imagining a situation where these very animals become the hunted and cry out for help adds a new dimension to this story. The way ants and crawling caterpillars stand up bravely against predators symbolizes that every creature, whether small or large, carries a special strength within.

The activity given at the end of the book will prove to be very useful for teachers and facilitators working with children, as it enables them to create opportunities for children to reflect on the book, expand their imagination, and connect with it more closely. At the same time, the brief note on the Irula tribe will enrich discussions conducted with children.

*Van-Vani, Kalyani* is not just a life story, but a book that conveys the spirit of education, equality, and responsibility toward nature. It is valuable for anyone who wishes to connect children with inspiring and meaningful literature.



## Aniket Chouhan

### BARAH SAU KI BAATI AUR ANYA KISSE

By Shivnarayan Gour. Illustrated by Nilesh Gehlot  
Eklavya Foundation, 2025, pp. 35, ₹ 80.00

Shivnarayan Gour's book, *Barah Sau ki Baati aur Anya Kisse*, has fascinating anecdotes based on real-life incidents, memories, and experiences. The anecdotes are deeply connected to the people around us, their habits

and everyday life. They are like character-oriented short stories and have storytelling power. When you read them, it feels as if someone is telling these tales to you.

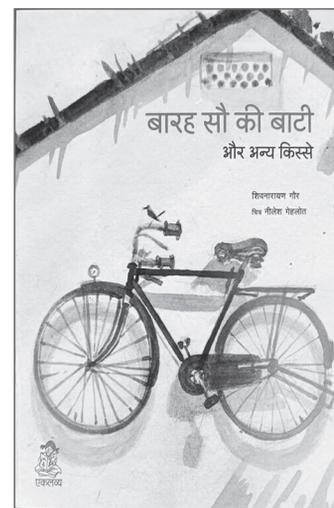
Gour has put these memorable characters and their habits into words with great sensitivity and ease. It mostly has anecdotes of people who have lived or are living their lives in a completely original way, and they don't care much about how people view their quirks. The evocative water-coloured illustrations by Nilesh Gehlot give the book a charming look. They help set the spatial context for the anecdotes.

There are fourteen such anecdotes in this book; each unique in itself. The originality of each character is central to the anecdote and leaves a deep impression on the reader's mind. For example, 'Cycle wala Chacha' is great not only because of its humour, but also because of its paradox. Chacha has property and wealth, yet his greatest passion is stealing bicycles. The irony is that here the theft is not motivated by need, but by habit, even a kind of ecstatic pleasure. What makes the story really interesting is how his hobby reshapes his entire social life. His frequent imprisonments become opportunities to meet people, collect stories and gain extensive knowledge about villages and individuals across the region. In other words, this bad habit of his becomes the source of his storytelling ability.

'Mahesh ka Saanp-Prem' is an interesting anecdote about Mahesh's love of, and living with snakes since his childhood, carrying them to school and taking them for a ride on his motorcycle. Mahesh doesn't just keep snakes as a hobby; he builds an entire world around them. His separate house, his carefully designed pots with air holes, his daily routine of taking each snake for a walk—all these details turn his fascination into a way of life. This anecdote isn't just 'interesting' because it is shocking; it is also interesting because it challenges our notions of fear, danger, and human relationship with snakes. Mahesh embodies a deep affinity with creatures that most people instinctively avoid. In doing so, he highlights how relative fear can be; what is normal for one person can be life-threatening for another. That tension is what makes this anecdote unforgettable.

'Barah Baras Baad' is one of the most emotional and memorable anecdotes of the collection. The return to home of Kaka, the protagonist of the anecdote, after a long time, takes the reader to a world of surprise, nostalgia and emotions.

There has been an old and rich tradition of telling and



listening to anecdotes and stories in Indian society. We gain insight into our surroundings through the anecdotes of Akbar-Birbal, Tenali Rama, Vikram-Betal, and the stories told by elders in the family to their children about the times of their time. The same tradition seems to come alive in this book.

The book is written in a chatty style, almost conversational. There is a familiarity in Gour's style of narration, which connects with the reader deeply. With every rereading, a new layer opens up and new emotions come to the fore. This is the reason the anecdotes of the book touch the heart and are remembered for a long time. Books of this genre are rarely seen. These anecdotes not only describe character-oriented stories; they also illustrate how the unique quirks of different human characters can become anecdotes or narratives.

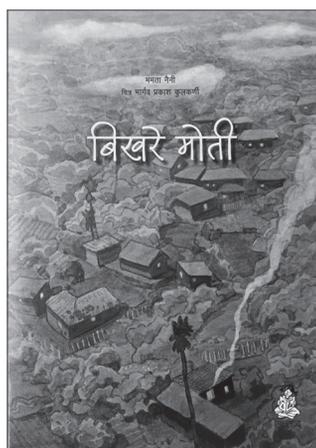
The quirky temperament of the book's characters lends a unique colour to these anecdotes. Sometimes their innocence, sometimes their craziness, sometimes their frankness—all these bring a smile to the face while reading, and sometimes make one think deeply. The biggest strength of these anecdotes is that they present a live picture of our society and time, without any pretense.

*Barah Sau ki Baati aur Anya Kisse* introduces children and young readers to social diversity, originality and the complexities of human behaviour, breaking away from traditional children's literature. This book strikes a balance between humour and sensitivity, which not only engages readers but also makes them empathetic. In today's times, when literature is distancing from everyday life, this book bridges that gap. It is a priceless experience for those readers who want humour, sensitivity and the depth of human relationships simultaneously.

#### BIKHRE MOTI

By Mamta Nainy. Illustrated by Bhargav Prasad Kulkarni  
Eklavya Foundation, 2024, pp. 20, ₹ 60.00

*Bikhre Moti (Scattered Pearls)* is a story about a young boy, his sister Ratna, and their mother, Amma, who set out to the forest with bamboo baskets under their arms to collect mahua flowers. The collection of mahua flowers is a seasonal traditional practice that has deep cultural and emotional significance for tribal communities and rural village people. The summer season is mahua season for



villagers; they wait for this season to arrive because with the mahua season, the entire village atmosphere changes.

Nainy gently unfolds the magic of these moments, thread by thread—the silence of the morning, cricket chirps, waking up early, carrying bamboo baskets, the fragrance of mahua wafting through the forest, crunching dry leaves beneath footsteps, people camping overnight to gather mahua, and finally, the sight of mahua flowers scattered like tiny pearls on the floor of the forest. The mahua flower is beautifully set as the center of this story.

This story could unfold in any tribal village or rural area of central and northern India. The village is situated close to the forest where people from almost all households go to collect mahua. Their collection and sale are a major source of livelihood for the village people. Collecting them is the first step: it requires several days to dry them for sale. Villagers sell them at local markets to be able to purchase necessary items.

The flowers hold significant social, economic, and cultural value for the tribal community. They have been central to festivities and celebrations as a symbol of abundance as resilience. The flower is also recognized as the key component in the liquor that shares its name, crafted by tribals. In tribal villages, mahua flowers can be seen spread like a sheet in every house, in its courtyard and on the roof. These sweet and juicy flowers bring joy to both kids and adults, as well as cattle and other animals!

Nainy's work succeeds in weaving cultural beliefs, traditional practices and ecological relationships into a seamless narrative; it helps readers understand why mahua flowers are truly pearls for the tribes of central India. The work also captures the harmonious coexistence of people, nature and livelihood, underlining the mahua flowers' role as living heritage of the region.

This book is designed extraordinarily well. What the reviewer liked the most are the illustrations, especially because colour combinations are skillfully employed to add to the charm of this book. When reading this story, one can imagine through the pictures and colours; the illustrator has added a lot of movement to his pieces on every page. These illustrations make the story more accessible and help readers understand it more thoroughly. They help put ideas from the story into context.

In all, in this fictional account of an average villager's routine in the mahua-gathering season, Nainy has used simple words and short paragraphs while relying on fantasy and imagination to allow it to remain understandable to children. Her writing draws readers into the world of rural foraging and helps them feel the excitement.



## Eishita Tiwari

**THE SAW**

By Sushil Shukla. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust, 2024,  
pp. 24, ₹ 70.00

**KUTTE NE SOCHA**

By Zuzanna Kotkiewicz. Illustrated by Priya Kuriyan  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust, 2024,  
pp. 14, ₹ 40.00

**DHUNNA KAI PADIYA**

By Prerna Shukla. Illustrated by Atanu Roy  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust, 2024,  
pp. 12, ₹ 40.00

**LIGHTNING**

By Prabhat. Translated by Tazeen Ali. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust, 2024,  
pp. 32, ₹ 550.00

**THE FIVE FANTASTIC FLIGHTS OF JEH; JEH KI PAANCH ANOOTHU UDAANE**

Both by Nandita de Cunha. Illustrations by Kavita Singh Kale  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust, 2025, pp. 48  
each, ₹ 175.00 each

**HARA SAMANDAR, GOPI CHANDAR**

By Varun Grover. Illustrated by Allen Shaw Jugnoo Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust, 2025,  
pp. 20, ₹ 100.00

**LUNAR SOIL**

By Shiraz Hussain. Illustrated by Allen Shaw, Proiti Roy, Shiraz Hussain, and Rajiv Eipe  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust, 2024,  
pp. 32, ₹ 120.00

The first thing a child reaches for is often a crayon, clutching red to draw a sun or filling the sky with pink instead of blue. Children perceive blue that swirls like water, green that stretches wide like a playground field, brown that holds the warmth of soil, and white that floats like clouds across the sky. To little eyes, every shade is alive with secrets. Psychology and colour theory remind us: colours shape emotions, nurture creativity, and quietly teach life's first lessons. Hence, it becomes important to understand children's books and the colours used in them.

In the same light, *The Saw* finds its place. This little picture-poem book filters the elemental world into a meditative sequence—water, wind, colours, soil, sky. Each element unfolds across a spread where textured, broken brushstrokes, collage-like colours on the left are mirrored by calm, unbroken hues on the right, setting up a rhythm of looking and listening. The refrain breaks when 'the saw' fells a tree, disrupting the chain of elements

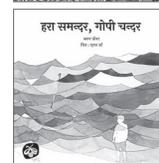
and providing a thought-provoking entry into understanding ecological interdependence. Although the abruptness of 'the saw' motif may puzzle young readers, its strength lies in spare lyricism.

In the next book, *Kutte Ne Socha*, a cascade of comparison begins with the line, 'I wish I were a bird,' where every creature dreams of another's form; never content with its own. The illustrations combine fine, delicate strokes with expressive faces and earthy backgrounds. The hand-drawn quality allows animal elements, like round eyes and flowing fur, to be relatable. It speaks with quiet irony: what seems to be a fable for children is also a parable for adults who endlessly imitate and aspire, never comprehending their own worth. It asks us to pause and accept the beauty of being ourselves.

In *Dhunna Kai Padiya* (Dhunna's calf), the poem in the Awadhi dialect describes the calf's mischief. It captures rustic humour and affection through a vivid portrait of a spirited calf, comparing its gallop to a rushing train. The simple yet expressive illustrations use warm earth tones and bold outlines to amplify domestic scenes, children's faces, and village landscapes, anchoring them in everyday life. It animates the black calf against a textured background, echoing oral storytelling. The work seems aimed at cultural preservation for younger generations, valuing ordinary speech and sight, carrying the hope of reaching them.

The next story is of a tigress. *Lightning's* tale, told with gentle lyricism, celebrates the fierce tenderness between a tigress and her Ranthambore. Vivid traditional artwork, gulmohar afternoons, bright-yellow joyful flights, dusky moonlit scenes, and Mandana-inspired borders capture Rajasthan's mural art traditions, adding local flavour. School children and women at wells appear as lively portraits. Artwork details, like expressive brushstrokes and organic ink drops, reward close attention. The narrative subtly questions human intervention: rescue becomes captivity, evoking empathy and unease. One drawback is the oversized format which hampers portability. Despite this, the art and story make a thought-provoking picture book.

From tales of the wild, we soar to J.R.D. Tata's life in *The Five Fantastic Flights of Jeh*. The bilingual book presents itself as a visual biography in which J.R.D.'s five flights chart a trajectory of curiosity, risks, and public service. Yellow backgrounds in the first and last flights create a circular structure, emphasizing continuity. Each



flight teaches a lesson, initiation, generosity, perseverance, dignity of labor, and resilience, with 'the power of small beginnings' at its heart. Hand-painted planes, a detailed map with landmarks, and tiny inscriptions on planes, sacks, and banners evoke nostalgia, bringing these journeys to life with authenticity and visual delight.

Next, we move to a work that captures childhood innocence laced with quiet tragedy. In *Hara Samandar, Gopi Chandar*, a single, small lie corrodes a child's inner world. It teaches how a lie, effortless when spoken, gradually hollows the self, leaving only longing for what might have been. The sea-green umbrella becomes his mirror: once bright, later rusted and abandoned in the school storeroom. The cover depicts a child and his older self by the sea; the interlocking shades of the umbrella, the sea, and the boy reflect shifts in his inner self. Softly blended colours and lone images transform everyday symbols (an umbrella as a boat) into vessels of imagination and resourcefulness.

Ending on a note of wonder, the book *Lunar Soil* is a window into the secret theatre of childhood. Each story, a train's moving TV screen, Nana Sahib and the barking dog, Hasan's revenge from the white cat, or Bittu's music lessons, unfolds the world as children see it: raw, playful, bruised, yet endlessly curious. Everyday life becomes extraordinary, stitched with local Hindi-Urdu idioms and unvarnished street speech that preserves its earthy truth. The illustrations match the stories' mood: playful, hand-painted teachers and creatures in 'Lunar Soil', ink-sketched train windows in '*Kasam Se Ye Zamana Na...*'; the dog, mosque, and terrace in '*Nishan*' evoking quiet distance; the haunting cat in '*Safed Billi*'; and the bright shirt and guitar in 'Pappi Sir'. Together, these mirror childhood's wonder, fear, and resilience. The dark purple cover, evoking the cosmos and labs, represents stories that remind us how childhood is but an experiment in imagination.



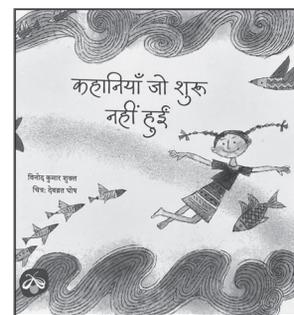
## Shagun Tomar

### KAHANIYAN JO SHURU NAHI HUYI

By Vinod Kumar Shukl. Illustrated by Debabrato Ghosh  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 48, ₹ 185.00

In *Kahaniyan Jo Shuru Nahi Huyi*, the title is perfectly chosen as each tale flows like a continuous ribbon of wonder—one story handing off its atmosphere to the next so that young readers drift effortlessly from one curiosity to another. The illustrations heighten this effect. Guided by a stark palette of black and yellow, the images provide

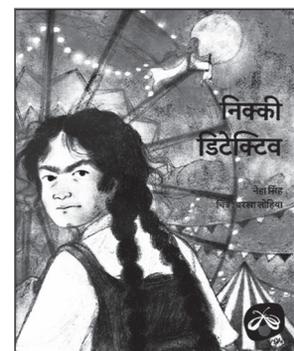
both contrast and continuity, like a shadow play glowing with mystery. In Vinod Kumar Shukla's '*Kam Hote Ujale Mein*', the everyday itself becomes a stage of wonder. At its heart lies an elderly aunt, whose room transforms into a theatre of tales. Whenever she feels better, she calls the children of the neighbourhood and even shadows from another realm. She begins with ghosts and spirits but her aim is not just to frighten, as 'fear means defeat'. Each story glows with its own strangeness. '*Gutargu*' fills the house with the conspiratorial cooing of pigeons. '*Baaya aur Dahina Haath*' follows a severed ghost-hand carried by a ghost dog, turning memory and belonging into riddles. In '*Sone ke Beat*', pigeon droppings turn to gold, while '*Kukadkoo aur Kankad Koo*' brings a hen that lays golden eggs, stirring gossip through the village. Children imagine sand raining down in '*Ret ki Barsaat aur Patthar ke Ole*', proving imagination itself is freedom. And in '*Naam Badalta Rehta Hai*' and '*Teeno Naam*', a girl's shifting names remind us that identity is playful; never fixed. What unites these tales is Shukla's plain yet luminous language, carrying the rhythm of whispered secrets and evening shadows.



### NIKKI DETECTIVE

By Neha Singh. Illustrated by Barkha Lohia  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2025, pp. 83, ₹ 180.00

*Nikki Detective* is a story about a girl from Meerut who dares to become a detective, even as her city whispers rules about what girls can and cannot do. When rumours of a ghost stir the streets, Nikki follows their trail. Yet, what she truly uncovers are questions about dreams, risks, and the right to wander without fear. Neha Singh's words carry both care and fire. She gives us a novel for young readers that is a celebration of sisterhood, loitering, and the stubborn joy of choosing one's own path. Barkha Lohia's illustrations deepen this world with dark, breezy nights and shadows alive with possibility. These images belong to young girls who want to step out, discover, and dream on their own terms.



## Ritika Gour

**THE FOUR AVENGERS VERSUS THE ELEPHANT: TWO TALES FROM THE PANCHATANTRA**

Retold by Meena Arora Nayak. Illustrated by Apoorva Lalit  
Aleph Book Company, 2025, pp. 40, ₹ 250.00

**THE RABBIT IN THE MOON: TWO TALES FROM THE PANCHATANTRA**

Retold by Meena Arora Nayak. Illustrated by Apoorva Lalit  
Aleph Book Company, 2025, pp. 36, ₹ 250.00

We live in a world of stories and fables, and these stories travel—not just geographically but also temporally. They change, evolve and sometimes vanish. These stories feature many things including our biggest companions on this planet, i.e., animals. Humans always find a way to stay close to nature. Now be it through keeping a plant in our house, watering it every day and watching it grow, or be it keeping water and food for the birds on a hot summer day. Our ways of staying connected with nature also reflect its importance in our lives. As a result, our nature enters the world of our stories. And the *Panchatantra* is a product of that process.

The *Panchatantra* is a collection of five books of animal fables and magical tales collected in their current form between the third and fifth centuries AD. The German-Sanskrit historian Johannes Hertel (1872-1955) asserted that the original collection was compiled in Kashmir around 200 BCE, when many of the stories were already ancient. We come across many adaptations and translations of the *Panchatantra*. Meena Arora Nayak's recent works are two such examples.

*The Four Avengers versus the Elephant* and *The Rabbit in the Moon* are two books consisting of two tales each retold by Meena Arora Nayak and illustrated by Apoorva Lalit. Retelling of some of the most important fables of the Indian subcontinent is a very important task in itself; and Nayak does a wonderful job at that.

The first book, *The Four Avengers versus the Elephant*, consists of 'The Tale of the Dimwit Lion and the Wise Hare' and 'The Tale of How the Sparrow, Woodpecker, Bee and Frog Teamed Up to Kill the Elephant'. The first story, a classic and one of the most popular fables of the *Panchatantra*, is of a forest with a Lion king (Mandamati) who goes around slaughtering animals to satisfy his hunger. This continues until a smart Hare comes up with



a solution to get rid of the king altogether. The second one, on the other hand, includes many characters such as the Sparrow couple, Woodpecker, Bee, Frog and a wild Elephant. While the emphasis on teamwork is central to the tale, the name of the tale is quite a mouthful. A title is the first element that draws a reader's attention, and it works best when it preserves the intrigue of the narrative rather than revealing it. In this case, however, the title somewhat describes the whole narrative. This is true for other titles as well in the second book.

Among the many translations and adaptations of the *Panchatantra*, this one stands out for its simplicity. The smooth, easy language creates a natural flow between prose and verse, making the stories enjoyable for both young readers and adults. Nayak's use of simple language is an important step in keeping the essence of the tales while making the book an accessible read.

The second book, *The Rabbit in the Moon*, contains the fables of 'The Tale of How the Bedbug's Selfishness Cost the Louse Her Life', and 'The Tale of How the Rabbit in the Moon Saved His Relatives'. The former is a story of a Louse who lives comfortably in the bed of a King (of a wealthy kingdom) until a Bedbug decides to find shelter in the same bed. The Bedbug's impatience eventually leads to the death of the Louse. The latter story includes a herd of elephants suffering from water scarcity because of the drought in their region. They eventually find a lake full of water, but it is also a home to many rabbits. Inadvertently, the Elephants kill many Rabbits. Until the Rabbits figure out a way to get rid of the Elephants.

The two tales focus on the lives of many different kinds of creatures. The first tale's distinct feature is the lives of parasitic insects, i.e., the Louse and the Bedbug. These creatures exist in our worlds, but they rarely exist in our stories. However, an ancient collection of animal fables did not forget about them, and neither did the author when she selected this specific tale for the book.

Fables are almost always centered around messages and morals. Personally, I do not usually look for the 'lesson' in a story, nor do I need it spelled out. But with the *Panchatantra*, morals are an inseparable part of the reading experience. The readers are expected to learn something from these tales. But it is the writer's job to ensure that it is subtle and fitting in the narrative, and Nayak has done a terrific job.

Apoorva Lalit's illustrations accompany the tales. These illustrations build the narrative in pictorial form. However, the absence of colours in the illustrations can be experienced by the reader. Colour naturally brings vibrance and visual appeal. It also carries emotional and psychological weight, so removing it limits the ability to create mood or atmosphere. There is potential to refine the illustrations for greater impact.

These two books make for an engaging read across

generations. After all, it is the *Panchatantra* presented in a form that is engaging and approachable for contemporary readers. Through Meera Arora Nayak's retelling, these age-old fables gain a fresh voice, making them enjoyable for young and adult audiences alike while preserving the depth that has made the *Panchatantra* enduring across generations.

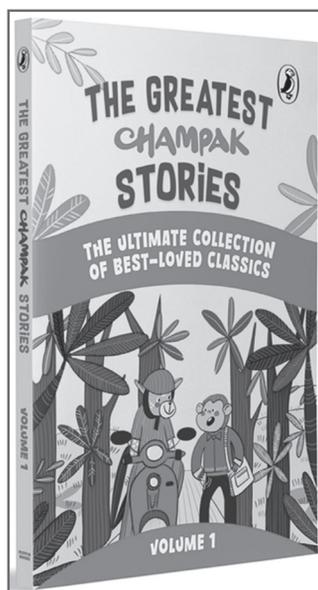


## Arish Talwar

### THE GREATEST CHAMPK STORIES: THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION OF BEST-LOVED CLASSICS, VOLUME 1

Puffin Books, an imprint of Penguin, 2025, pp. 128, ₹ 299.00

I love classic stories, especially the ones which act like a window into others' lives in the most interesting of moments. *The Greatest Champak Stories* uses characters—be them talking animals, curious children, or comically muddled kings, to draw us into small but vivid worlds. Each tale feels like a glimpse into an adventure, sometimes whimsical, sometimes mysterious, sometimes tender, but always wrapped in charm.



What makes this collection special is not just its variety of settings and themes, but the feelings it stirs: laughter, wonder, nostalgia, and the simple delight of storytelling.

'Monsoon Mischief' feels like a splash of childhood, reminding readers of muddy adventures and small troubles that become larger in imagination. 'The Clingy Friend' is warm yet gently cautionary; it is sure to resonate with anyone who has struggled with clingy friendships. Readers feel both amused and intrigued, recognizing themselves in the humour while being comforted by its soft resolution. 'An Adventure Turned Nightmare' evokes the thrill of daring, followed by the shivers of uncertainty. 'Who's the Real Ghost?' is a playful mystery with a spooky air; this story entertains without frightening. The atmosphere is fun-scary—like telling ghost stories under a blanket. 'Adi and Ramlila' is a story rooted in cultural familiarity which feels festive and communal. The Ramlila setting creates an aura of tradition, celebration, and small mishaps that make festivals memorable. 'A Strange

Reflection' is a haunting yet whimsical story which evokes a sense of wonder mixed with unease—the uncanny feeling of seeing oneself differently. 'The Hall of Magical Mirrors' bursts with fantasy and visual delight. The shifting reflections feel almost like stepping into a dream world, full of trickery and laughter. In the light-hearted and comedic 'King Muddleberry and Cheeku', readers feel amused, entertained, and warmly connected to the familiar *Champak* characters, making it one of the more comforting tales of the collection.

'Mozzarella Cheese Sticks' is deliciously playful, filled with the mouthwatering pull of food imagery. The cheese becomes a symbol of temptation, indulgence, and simple joy. Curiosity drives 'The Mysterious Box', making it impossible not to keep turning the pages. The box becomes a symbol of both wonder and suspense, capturing the universal thrill of discovering the unknown. Sweet and uplifting, 'Better than Chocolate' delivers joy like a treat. The title sets up an impossible standard, but the narrative surprises by showing values and bonds sweeter than indulgence. 'Translation Trouble' captures the playful frustration of words gone wrong, creating light chaos that entertains without stress.

Deliciously sweet in mood, 'Penny's Cupcakes' wraps itself around themes of creativity and sharing. The cupcakes evoke sensory delight, while Penny's journey is sprinkled with charm. Charming in its simplicity, 'Jiffy Casts His Vote' introduces children to fairness and responsibility in an engaging way. 'Muscle Mess' is laugh-out-loud fun, poking at vanity and overconfidence. Readers would feel relieved that perfection isn't necessary for happiness. Heartfelt and relatable, 'Not Fair, Ginni' addresses fairness in relationships, especially among children. Its tone carries a gentle moral without preaching. Mysterious and atmospheric, 'The Ghost in the Well' leans into folklore tones while keeping things playful; while 'The Perfect Cup of Tea' feels calm and satisfying as the ritual of tea is elevated into something magical. An adventurous spirit runs through 'Where Did the Map Go?', inviting readers into a puzzle-like chase. Finally, we have 'Sally's Tail': gentle and whimsical, this story explores difference and acceptance with humour.

Taken together, these twenty-one tales remind us why *Champak* has endured across generations. Their simplicity hides a richness of feeling, their humour carries gentle wisdom, and their magic lies in making the ordinary extraordinary. Volume I of *The Greatest Champak Stories* is not just a children's collectable but a reminder for all ages of the joy in curiosity, the warmth of kindness, and the laughter found in life's little surprises. It is a book to be read, reread, and shared, like the sweetest memory of childhood.

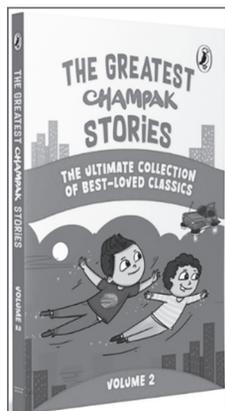


## Aarav Patel

**THE GREATEST CHAMPAK STORIES: THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION OF BEST-LOVED CLASSICS, VOLUME 2**

Puffin Books, an imprint of Penguin, 2025, pp. 136, ₹ 299.00

Calling stories a preservation of culture, language, and identity would be injustice. They are tools that help shape our imagination, and our perspective of the world. The collective stories in this book form a chest brimming with timeless narratives, where each narrative—be it ‘Wings to Fly’ or ‘A Fair Exchange’—carries a lesson for our most prized generation: the youth.



This volume is a thematic anthology specifically aiming to engage the young, ranging all the way from playful adventures to animal escapades. It is easy to say that each story will truly aid children to view life from different angles; every new character, every new plot—be it Shyam Singh or falling off a sled—consistently urges the young children to continue reading.

The book must also be commended for its accessibility: simple language, salted with everyday humour that any child could understand, positively impacts the book’s reach to children who can read and write. The most important aspect that affects the readership of the book, however, is the clever partitioning of a lot of short stories—a tactic that ensures that readers could jump out, and dive right back into the collection while still taking the most important lessons out of each narrative.

In addition to every new character and plot, the illustrations present amplify each story, adding colour and emotion. Even though some pages are text-heavy, the visuals never seem to fail in holding the attention of the readers, and in adding a sense of vibrance to the story. The occasional oversimplification of convoluted human behaviour expressed through anthropomorphism along with the blend of colours is another strong pillar that retains the reader’s attention.

*The Greatest Champak Stories, Volume 2* is successful in conveying the playful spirit of childhood and in sharing a variety of stories that every young reader who picks up the book will enjoy. While the book may not delve into complex themes like some other books, its core value sprouts out of its well-woven simplicity and universal accessibility.



## Toolika Wadhwa

**DEALING WITH FEELINGS: MY STORYBOOK COLLECTION-BOX SET 3**

By Sonia Mehta  
Penguin, 2025, pp. 288, ₹ 999.00

Includes six books:

*Being Cranky is No Fun*  
*There’s No Need to Feel Guilty*  
*It’s Okay to Not Come First*  
*Being Stubborn isn’t Fun*  
*It’s Okay to be Wrong*  
*It’s Okay to Feel Left Out*

Targeted for age five plus, this storybook collection comprises six books, each of which addresses a different emotion. Sonia Mehta has used animal characters living in ‘Foggy Forest’ to introduce emotional challenges—dealing with failure, not being stubborn, accepting mistakes, feeling left out, managing guilt, and overcoming crankiness. While the series is titled *Dealing with Feelings*, each of the books focuses on helping children deal with social-emotional situations that feelings bring.



In *Being Cranky is No Fun*, Yoyo unicorn is always whining. His crankiness causes his friends to exclude him. With a change in perspective, he learns to appreciate life and is welcomed back.

In *There’s No Need to Feel Guilty*, Zee Zee Zebra’s birthday party is planned by all the animals. Higgledy Hippo bakes a cake, but trips and drops the cake. Feeling guilty about spoiling Zee Zee’s birthday, Higgledy decides to skip the party. Her friends convince her to accept that dropping the cake was an accident and she shouldn’t feel guilty, as another cake is available.

In *It’s Okay to be Left Out*, Tippy, the turtle, is left behind by his faster friends on a hiking trip. He makes use of this time by making natural paints. He realizes that one can also enjoy alone as much as one enjoys socially.

In *It’s Okay to be Wrong*, Ooblek, the Owl, thinks that he is the wisest and can never be wrong. He misses the signs of a storm. The rest of his friends save their homes and, in the end, provide shelter to Ooblek. He realizes that it is okay to be wrong.

Rinkydink racoon, in *Being Stubborn isn’t Fun*, always wants his friends to agree with everything he decides. Fed

up of always agreeing to him, his friends leave him alone to do his own thing. He soon realizes that he misses his friends and should have to let go of his stubbornness.

In *It's Okay to not Come First*, Kibbledoo Kangaroo loses to Hoppity Hare in the hopping race. Kibbledoo's friends help her realize that she is good at many things and it is okay to not win a race.

A common thread across all the books is the idea of reflection on one's attitude and behaviour. Some follow up discussion questions can be: why is Yoyo cranky? Is exclusion justified? Higgledy Hippo was not at fault but the story doesn't explore guilt when one is at fault. Is it okay to leave behind Tippy, who can't match pace? Why did Ooblek think that he is always right? Is acceptance of one's error dependent on being supported by friends? Would Kibbledoo have felt differently if her friends had won? Are competitions about winning? These are important questions to be explored with children.

The books raise important concerns that children face. The use of animal characters is bound to resonate with them. Whether they—as young as five years—experience guilt, or being left out, is subject to debate. If parents and caregivers feel that foundational stage learners (3 to 8 years) are ready, the stories and activities can be powerful tools. The vocabulary building activities can be initiating points for building a deeper emotional understanding. Other activities support motor skills and problem-solving. The illustrations will enrich personalized read aloud sessions. Each story and activity book must be followed by discussions around the take away messages.



## Neena Jaisingh

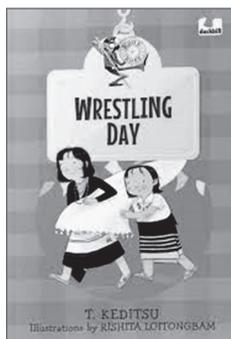
### WRESTLING DAY

By T. Kreditsu. Illustrated by Rishita Loitongbam  
Penguin Random House India, 2025, pp. 40, ₹ 225.00

*Wrestling Day* by T. Kreditsu, illustrated by Rishita Loitongbam, is a charming book that gently ushers young readers into the pleasures of reading while introducing them to the traditional sport of wrestling in Nagaland.

The story unfolds through the perspective of two sisters, Arieü and her younger sibling, Ashunuo, who are filled with excitement when their cousin Aneingu is set to compete for the very first time.

On wrestling day, the sisters wake up eager to see



their cousin off, only to discover that Aneingu has already left with his friends. Loitongbam's expressive artwork captures their excitement as they run to the edge of the *thehouba*, or communal meeting area, to wish their cousin strength. At the decorated wrestling grounds, the sisters find Aneingu dejected. He has forgotten to bring his mother's shawl and must make do with an ordinary cloth. In the Naga tradition, the mother's shawl is believed to carry strength and protection into the wrestling ring. Loitongbam's artwork beautifully captures both Aneingu's dejection and the ceremonial significance of this tradition.

Faced with their cousin's distress and determined to help, the sisters embark on their first independent journey to fetch the shawl. This walk through the town is the highlight of the book. Kreditsu's simple, evocative prose, paired with Loitongbam's vibrant illustrations, brings to life the sensory experience of the children's world—the bustle of taxis and minibuses, the honking traffic, shops selling chicken, fish, and pakoras, the familiar music store, and the neighbourhood ration shop. Everyday details of town life are rendered with affection, making the journey both an adventure and a celebration of day-to-day life.

After their eventful journey through town, the sisters arrive just in time to hand over the shawl to Aneingu. The story culminates in their joy as their cousin steps into the wrestling ring, feeling brave and tall. The sisters feel a sense of achievement when their mission is accomplished. Loitongbam's final illustrations capture the triumphant moment through the sisters' proud expressions.

More than a tale of sport, the book is an exploration of sibling camaraderie, childhood curiosity, joy of the ordinary, and the thrill of small acts of independence. Kreditsu's lucid prose and Loitongbam's expressive artwork together create a reading experience where simple storytelling resonates with both culture and emotion. Accessible in language and rich in cultural texture, *Wrestling Day* is a delightful read for children aged five and above. Its warmth and striking visuals make it not only engaging but also a valuable introduction to the cultural practices of Nagaland, encouraging young readers to connect with both books and tradition. The activity page on synonyms at the end adds a playful, educational touch, while curious readers may be inspired to learn more about the Naga terms used throughout the story.



The Book Review Literary Trust is organizing a book discussion of *One Sixth of Humanity* with authors Devesh Kapur and Arvind Subramaniam as part of TBR@ 50 celebrations at 4pm on December 14, 2025, in the Lecture Hall, IIC Annexe, New Delhi.

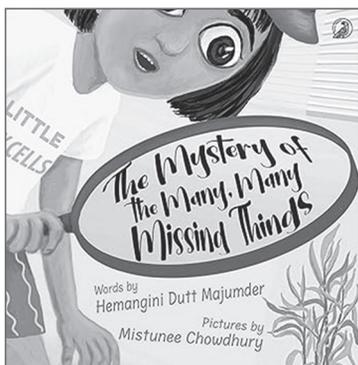
## Indira Ananthakrishnan

### THE MYSTERY OF THE MANY, MANY MISSING THINGS

By Hemangini Dutt Majumder. Illustrated by Mistunee Chowdhury

Niyogi Books, 2024, pp. 24, ₹ 299.00

The alliteration in the title of the book caught my attention. However, my thoughts ran, 'Will it attract the target reader?' Why not? It's a picture book; no doubt. Nevertheless, it occurred to me that it could cover a wide range of young readers.



The lap-sit reader, sitting on the mother's lap would be fascinated by the illustration on the front cover continued on the back cover. She would pull the book from the mother's hand; turn it front to back and also start flipping the pages with wide-eyed wonder. Soon parent and child would be lost to the world with eyes glued to the illustrations, page after page, with 'oohs' and 'aahs', mother trying to interpret them in a way the child would appreciate.

To the beginner reader, the rhyme and rhythm of the words would be an added attraction.

*The dimple in his chin  
and his cheeky grin  
can get him out of many a sin.  
Several others such.*

To the next higher age group of readers, reading the book becomes a good activity as well, to connect the generously large and bright illustrations with the words associated to them on each page. To the primary school readers, depending on personal comprehension level and the kind of help received from the parent, the story becomes captivating. The senior primary school reader is on her/his own. The book becomes a good companion. Read aloud happens with eyes on the illustrations as well. You can see the pages turned back and forth to enjoy the words and illustrations. The large, round, expressive eyes of the characters steer the reader through their emotions and feelings.

I became such a child at heart with the book in my hand. My child ego blossomed, pushing the adult ego to the back burner. Putting my fingers to the keyboard to write a review came at a later stage. It is worth mentioning the takeaway—the exciting hunt for the thief of the missing things in the house culminates in an endearing

family relationship which surfaces towards the end of the story in a natural way. The invaluable worth of such a relationship if etched in the young mind at this stage will last a lifetime.

*'Mummy, you should rest.  
You don't always have to be your best.'  
We bring her breakfast in bed,  
masala chai and anda bhurji  
on warm and fluffy bread...*

...says the young protagonist as her wobbly younger brother and cocker spaniel as lazy as a snail trail behind her. The ending of the story on an inspiring and happy note is worth mentioning.

I hope young parents will decide to buy the book for their children and/or for birthday gifting. Though at first glance the book may feel pricey, I can say it wouldn't be money wasted. There are enough thoughts and actions that could be organized and comprehended on a simple mind map tree that will be hours of fun learning for the reader.



## Vishesh Unni Raghunathan

### CHINTU LOSES A CONTINENT

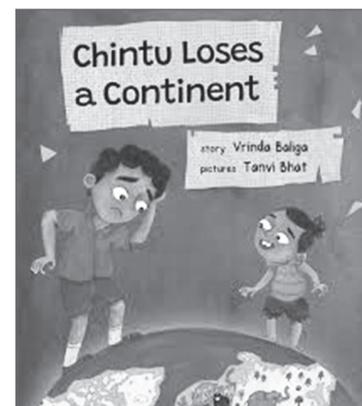
By Vrinda Baliga. Illustrated by Tanvi Bhat

Tulika, 2024, pp. 24, ₹ 195.00

Set in a Konkani household, we find Chintu Chitnis in a place we are all but too familiar with— realizing that one has forgotten to do an assignment right before one has to leave for school!

Luckily, the task at hand is to make a globe with all the continents, and the materials needed are right at hand. Chintu takes a big blue ball from Pihu, his sister, and pulls down the 'Animals Around the World' chart from the wall. With scissors and glue, and an able assistant in Pihu, the job's done! With a globe in tow, Chintu rushes off to school triumphantly.

But something is amiss—a continent is missing—where in the world could it be? *Chintu Loses a Continent* is a fun and humorous story, with bright colourful art by Tanvi Bhat. The emotions on Chintu and Pihu's faces



bring the story to life, and add to the humour.

The writing by Vrinda Baliga introduces young readers to various animals associated with the various continents. It also introduces the words for different family members in Konkani.

*Chintu Loses a Continent* is a simple and wonderfully put-together book, with a spot of humour and dashes of bright colours. It makes for a great show-and-tell, either at home or in a classroom. It also has the potential for enough and more activities around a globe.

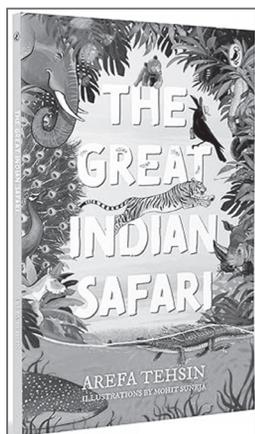


## Aadidev Agarwal

### THE GREAT INDIAN SAFARI

By Arefa Tehsin. Illustrated by Mohit Suneja  
Puffin Books, 2025, pp. 87, ₹ 399.00

More epic than the *Odyssey* (at least for me!), *The Great Indian Safari* takes us across India on a journey that's anything but boring. Forget buses, guides, or maps—our leader is a sarcastic crow called Charred the Bard, who cracks jokes, rhymes, and poems while showing us the wild side of India. The poems are short but funny, and they leave you with a tiny picture in your head at the end of each chapter.



The first stop? Ranthambore National Park, where the tiger—India's prince of stripes—rules. Sleek, quiet, and terrifyingly cool, these cats can weigh more than two-hundred kilos and live up to twenty years. Next, Charred takes us to Keoladeo National Park, home of the peacock: India's 'winged sweetheart'. Imagine a bird that can grow almost as tall as you (seven feet!) and still look glamorous in all those colours.

In Jim Corbett National Park, we meet the giant Asian elephant—gentle and wise; weighing up to four tons. But right behind him slithers danger: the King Cobra from Agumbe, a massive reptile that is eighteen-feet long and actually not true cobra (surprise!). Things get darker at the National Chambal Sanctuary, where the endangered gharial, with its long snout and sharp teeth, lurks in the water, threatened by 'who-mans' (as Charred likes to say).

From there we climb to the Himalayas and spot the shaggy brown bear, a seven-foot-tall hibernator who is cute from far away but not someone you would want as

a neighbour. Then come the speedy hares, the gymnasts of the forest. In Kaziranga, we bump into the legendary one-horned rhinoceros—giant, tough, but oddly adorable. From tiny architects (termites in Mudumalai) to the enormous whale shark in Lakshadweep that can live for a hundred and thirty years and weigh twenty tons (!), the book introduces us to the smallest creatures and the biggest. Finally, in the Rann of Kutch, the Indian wild ass makes a dramatic dust-stormy exit before Charred the Bard leaves us with a farewell poem.

What I loved the most is that the book is easy to read yet never boring. The illustrations are bright and detailed, making the animals pop out like they're alive. Fun facts and safari rules are sprinkled everywhere, and Charred's jokes keep things light even when the facts are serious. For me, *The Great Indian Safari* is part comedy, part guidebook, and part adventure. Whether you're an animal lover or just someone who likes stories that feel alive, this book is worth the ride.

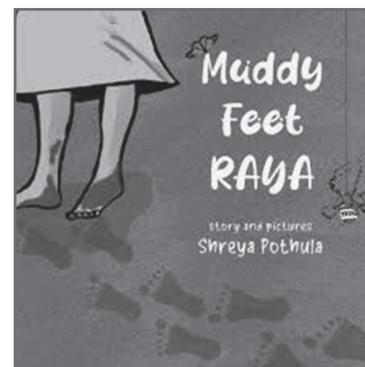


## Zorawar Singhal

### MUDDY FEET RAYA

Written and illustrated by Shreya Pothula  
Tulika Books, 2024, pp. 24, ₹ 195.00

Children's books are often dismissed as light or simple. Yet, beneath their colourful and vivid scribbles, we can find a world full of profound lessons that even adults can learn. *Muddy Feet Raya*, written and illustrated by Shreya Pothula



and published by Tulika Books, is one of many books that remind us of creativity and imagination. At first it appears to be centred around Raya, who is fascinated by creatures many of us are frightened of. But in actuality, it aims to show us a larger picture—how wonder, naivety, and empathy can reshape our relationship with the world around us.

The story follows Raya's encounter with a spider—a creature which seems terrifying for many. Instead of pushing the spider away, she draws it closer. Her mother, a scientist, encourages Raya's quiet nature of exploration and tells her the name of the spider, *Argiope anasuja*. The events taking place in Raya's little world are not rushed

or dramatized; rather, the narrative lingers on the spider's daily tasks—spinning silk, weaving webs, and caring for its eggs. This pace mirrors real discovery: patient, careful, and full of small revelations. This gentle pacing prepares the ground for the book's deeper themes of empathy and perspective.

A book becomes compelling when it transforms raw, realistic moments into sources of fascination. Raya's character, although a child, is still shown as mature and understanding and these traits make her a deeply endearing character. Her observing nature is a catalyst for learning, which develops understanding of not only her surroundings, but also the world around. Spiders are not monsters but artists, architects, and mothers. She understands this and tries to create an environment better suited for them. This highlights emotions such as empathy and compassion. Her mother's support evokes the role of parents in allowing their children to explore. To show intricate relationships, especially, in a children's book, is a nuanced form of writing.

The illustrations are the main medium of communication between the audience and the writer in a children's book. With their tender, evocative quality, they bring the spider's delicate world to life. Instead of making the character intimidating, the illustrations aim to change the perception of its younger audiences by softening the portrayal of the spider. For children, the visuals invite empathy and reflection; for adults, they serve as a reminder that art and storytelling together can make even the most ordinary subjects captivating.

Children's Literature thrives on learning. While older readers prefer mature themes and genres such as romance, fantasy, or thrillers, younger audiences resonate with books that give them an opportunity to explore their inquisitive nature. These books have the ability to be informative while being interesting; they teach us that every day is and can be an opportunity to learn something new. *Muddy Feet Raya* reminds us that even the smallest creatures can open doors to wonder. In doing so, it shows how children's literature is not just for children—it is a literature of empathy, imagination, and rediscovery.



## Toolika Wadhwa

### WHAT COULD IT BE?

By Bharti Singh. Illustrated by Richa Bhembre  
Penguin, 2025, pp. 40, ₹ 250.00

The book *What Could It Be?* is the story of a young girl, Diya, who finds her father terrified of something in the bathroom. Her imagination soars to demons and

ghosts lurking in her bathroom. However, she later discovers that it is a lizard. Along with her friend, Farah, she sets out to shoo the lizard away, only to have the even more scared lizard shed her tail. At this, her mother scolds Diya for disturbing the non-troublesome lizard. The two girls decide to keep the lizard as a pet, and soon, her father also overcomes his fear of the small reptile living in their home.



The story is simple, age-appropriate, and colourfully depicted with well-designed illustrations which indicate a middle-class household. The print quality and the font size are age appropriate. There is enough mystery in the story to keep young readers engaged. The last page of the book introduces the concept of alliteration to the readers using an example from the story, and giving an interesting follow-up exercise that parents and teachers can use with them.

Singh, subtly but definitively, challenges gender roles and stereotypes through the characters in the book. The father is scared of lizards, while the mother is not. It brings in the idea to children that men, even grown men, are allowed to be afraid. Later in the book, Diya shares her experiences with her bus driver, Rani, and her friend, Farah. By choosing to portray a woman bus driver, Singh has again broken the stereotypical notion of male bus drivers.

Friendship between Diya and Farah is a significant point of discussion for forging a friendship that breaks the barriers of religion. It is subject to debate, though, whether children in their early years of education can categorize people into religious groups based on their names. If they are not, should this concept be introduced to them? Answers to this question are based on the religious exposure of children. Unless the notion of friendships being divided by religion has already been introduced to them, there would be no need to point out the variation, and the possibility of forging friendships to transgress religious boundaries would be unnecessary. By weaving the friendship of Farah and Diya into the story, Singh has normalized the idea of interreligious friendships.

When Diya's mother tells the young girls to leave the lizard alone, it brings in the idea that animals should be treated with compassion as well. Diya goes as far as to apologize to the lizard for causing it pain when it shed its tail. This episode also presents an opportunity for discussion on the environment, human-animal relationships, and evolutionary biology.

Considering the instinctive aversion that many feel

towards lizards in the house, the book will be an unlikely choice for parents and educators, unless they overcome their own discomfort. However, as has been mentioned above, the book presents many opportunities for discussion and learning.

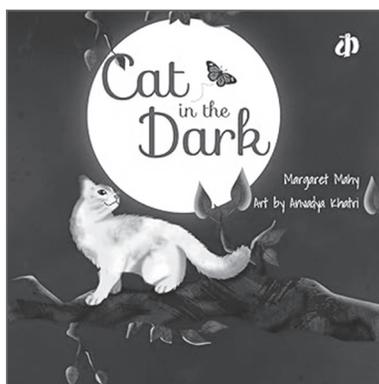


## Bhavna Jaisingh

### CAT IN THE DARK

By Margaret Mahy. Illustrations by Anvadya Khatri  
Katha, 2023, pp. 40, ₹ 255.00

Every parent knows that moment when night sounds stir a child’s imagination. Margaret Mahy’s *Cat in the Dark* transforms this universal bedtime anxiety into a delightful moonlit adventure of comfort and curiosity. The verses aid the children



in trying to make sense of the world after dark, while leading them, step-by-step, from worry to wonder.

‘Mother, mother, what was that?’ Each time, the answer comes soft and sure: ‘Hush my darling! Only the cat.’ Yet, this is no ordinary cat. This is a prowly-yowly, sleepy-creepy, fighty-bitey kind of cat. These cascading adjectives vividly bring the cat to life, portraying it as both cuddly and fierce.

The artwork by Anvadya Khatri heightens this duality and complements Mahy’s playful language. Using inky blues and warm yellows, the illustrations create moonlit scenes that feel mysterious yet safe, reassuring children that the cat’s prowling is more mischievous than menacing. Khatri’s work carries the freshness of a young illustrator and the assurance of an experienced hand—lively and perfectly tuned to the sensibilities of the poem.

Like Margaret Mahy’s other acclaimed works, this book works on multiple dimensions—soothing children’s fears, while celebrating cats as both companions and wild creatures. The repetitive structure makes it ideal for participation, encouraging the young readers to join in with the rhyming refrains.

What elevates the book beyond a simple bedtime story are two thoughtfully designed educational extensions. First, a page on ‘Time to TADAA!’, calling children to ‘Think, Ask, Discuss, Act, and Achieve’. This section

guides young readers into reflective engagement, shifting the experience from enjoyment to exploration. Children are encouraged to notice their feelings, wonder how cats feel, imagine ways to be kind to them, and even create their own cat-inspired art.

After reflection comes discovery with the section on ‘Fun Facts about Cats’, where imagination meets real-world learning. Did you know cats sleep almost two-thirds of the day; can leap six times their body height, or pick up scents spanning the width of a football field? These informative tidbits bring the poem to life, linking the verses to actual cat behavior and ensuring young readers leave with delight and knowledge.

*Cat in the Dark* is part bedtime story, part nature guide, part creativity spark. The story doesn’t end when the cover is closed. It lives on in rhymes, giggles, questions, and acts of kindness. And always, at the heart of it all, is the cat, who is sneaky-peeky, furry-purry, ever-so-mighty, turning the moony dark into something magical.

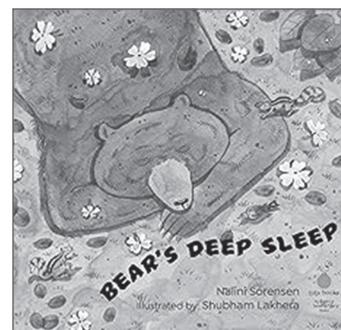


## Nita Berry

### BEAR’S DEEP SLEEP

By Nalini Sorensen. Illustrated by Shubham Lakhera  
Tota Books, an imprint of Speaking Tiger Books, 2025,  
pp. 32, ₹ 275.00

Bear is unhappy because she misses the fun of Christmas every year. But she is so sleepy that she can’t stay awake even though she tries. ‘It’s a very deep sleep called hibernation. It’s what bears do,’ she explains to Monkey, her friend.



Christmas is Monkey’s favourite time of the year, and he doesn’t want Bear to miss all the festivities and fun. So he plans to wake her up along with a lot of friends and presents. They go to her cave the night before Christmas—with presents, honey and berries that they place under her nose. But Bear is snoring, deep in sleep, and will not wake up.

All of Bear’s friends who have gathered there—Mosquito, Koel, Rooster, Duck, Goat Horse and even Elephant, try their hardest to wake her with their own peculiar sounds and actions. But nothing works, and Bear

just keeps snoring! The friends give up sadly, and plan to come back when it is warmer. Maybe her hibernation will be over by then.

Many months later, in warm April, when the friends line up outside Bear’s cave once again with all their Christmas presents, they are in for a great surprise themselves. Turn the pages to find out what it is!

This heartwarming picture book with its simple story of Bear and her friends also tells little children all about hibernation. These days, even small kids are expected to absorb a lot of information at school, and the story has been found to be the most effective medium of teaching for all ages. This was recognized even long ago in ancient India when storytellers or *kathavachakas* would orally instruct the vast illiterate mass of men, women and children through their stories in the village square, at a time when there were no schools, books or even the written word!

A note on hibernation at the end of the picture book complements the story of *Bear’s Deep Sleep* with many interesting facts on hibernation, making the information complete.

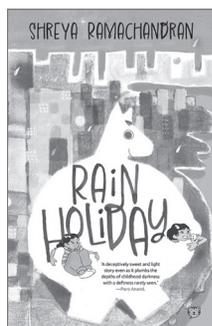
This enjoyable book holds the reader’s attention right through to the end and will amuse him or her with all the loud and sometimes strange animal sounds, as they try to shake Bear out of her deep sleep. The expressive and entertaining illustrations complement the text effectively. Nalini Sorensen is an award-winning children’s author who has written for various age groups and publishers in India. She has also written readers for schools. The illustrator, Shubham Lakhera, is also an award-winning illustrator of children’s books and magazines, and won the Illustrator of the Year Award at the Publishing Next Industry Awards, 2023.

Well printed on good paper in an attractive size, with a clear font and colours, one only wishes the cover paper was heavier to withstand all the rough handling by little ones! This is especially so as this picture book is priced quite high.



*Book News*

*Book News*



*Rain Holiday* by Shreya Ramachandran, set against the backdrop of a rain-slick Mumbai, is a tender, funny, and hopeful novel about sadness, anxiety, joy, and the magic of friendship when the clouds roll in.

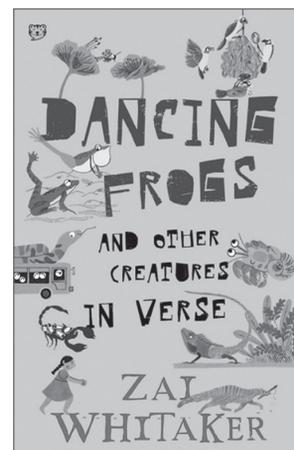
Talking Cub, an imprint of Speaking Tiger Books, 2025, pp. 214, ₹ 399.00

## Shailaja Srinivasan

### DANCING FROGS AND OTHER CREATURES IN VERSE

By Zai Whitaker. Illustrated by Bhargavi Rudraraju  
Talking Cub, 2025, pp. 128, ₹ 399.00

In *Dancing Frogs and Other Creatures in Verse*, Zai Whitaker—a renowned writer and naturalist—presents animal poems for children that explore peculiar behaviours through catchy rhymes and imaginative language. The collection of thirty verses covers amphibians, birds, fish, insects, reptiles, mammals and even fossils of reptiles!



In the titular poem ‘Dancing Frogs’, Zai humorously draws the reader’s attention to the evolved ‘dancing’ behaviour of the frogs in order to attract mates, as the singing (croaking) to woo—the romantic ballads—were getting drowned in the sound of gushing streams and roaring waterfalls of their habitat. That the dancing frogs are still seen today is proof that the strategy worked!

Each verse is preceded by a 100-150-word description where Zai has focused on some well-known character traits, distinctive or curious behaviour that may seem whimsical or odd to the observer, and the reason for the same, helping to foster love for both poetry and the natural world.

The verse that I enjoyed the most, one that might tickle the taxonomists too, was ‘Ridiculous Names’. Did you know that the Paca is a rodent and so is the Coypu? I did not. Nor did I know Beyonce horsefly! Every species has a unique scientific name. The first person to formally ‘describe’ a species in a scientific publication is given the privilege of naming it. This name can refer to a physical feature, such as colour or shape, or be named to honour a particular person. There are numerous entertaining taxonomic anecdotes. The buzz created by *Scaptia (Plinthina) beyonceae* immortalized the pop star in the insect world!

The cover is attractive with Bhargavi Rudraraju’s vivid illustrations of some of the creatures featured within, however all illustrations inside are in black and white. The inside illustrations in colour would have greatly added to attracting a younger audience too, to enjoy the collection.

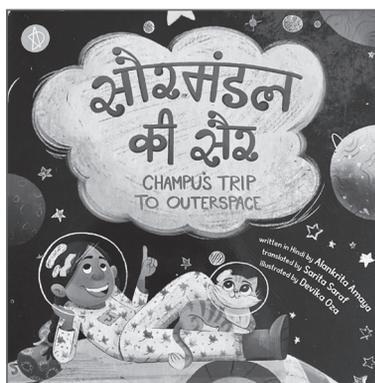


## Deepali Shukla

### CHAMPU'S TRIP TO OUTERSPACE

Written in Hindi by Alankrita Amaya. Translated into English by Sarita Saraf. Illustrated by Devika Oza  
Adidev press, 2024, pp. 20, ₹ 399.00

I selected this book after reading its title. The solar system is an interesting subject in itself. There is always curiosity to read about the planets which we see from the Earth, and about which we have heard stories in our childhood. The second reason was that this book is available in both Hindi and English.



Alankrita Amaya has written the story in Hindi. This story is about a character named Champu and her journey to the planets. Distinguishing characteristics of each planet have been woven into the story—an easy and engaging way to learn about planetary facts! It has been written in Hindi in a rhythm that at some places gives the feeling of the rhyme of a poem. At some places, some words bothered me, for example, 'लघु बुद्ध'—I did not understand what is meant by 'लघु', and secondly, there is probably a difference between 'बुध' and 'बुद्ध'. While it is good to use popular vocabulary while writing for children, it is important to use the correct terms and present the reader an opportunity to learn a new word. As the story progresses page by page, the interest decreases because the suspense in the story becomes limited. The English translation is somewhat better than the Hindi one. Attention has been paid to age-appropriate vocabulary.

This is a solar system-themed board book for children aged five and above. Since this is narrative non-fiction, it is important that the information in it is clear and correct and presented in an interesting manner. The reader should be inspired to acquire further information on his own. As an educational resource, it is essential that the content is presented clearly and in an engaging manner. The goal is to encourage readers to seek out additional information independently.

The illustrations of the story have been made by Devika Oza, and there are many colours in the illustrations, based on which an attempt has been made to depict the solar system. However, the illustrations depict only what is written in the story. When illustrating books for children, if there are elements different from the story, not only does the reader enjoy reading the story, but

there is also a space to connect with some information. Devika has tried her best to maintain dynamism in the illustrations, depicted by a cat accompanying Champu in his journey!

Overall, it seems that children will enjoy it. And if a librarian uses it, he or she should add some more facts about the solar system to their pre- or post-read-aloud activities.



## Vivek BG

### JUMBLE SALE (SILLY BILLY SERIES)

By Shabnam Minwalla. Illustrated by Isha Mangalmurti  
Puffin Books, an imprint of Penguin, 2025, pp. 88,  
₹ 299.00

The entirety of my childhood and adolescence were spent in my dad's officers' quarters in Bangalore, a neighbourhood where everyone knew everybody else. Living in such proximity meant growing up not just in your own household, but in your neighbours' homes too: being witness to their quirks, their tempers, their routines, and their unspoken rules.

In *Jumble Sale*, we enter the vibrant Parsi colony of Khorshed Baug, where the Sethna siblings Dorab and Dina can pretty much bring the roof down. Then odd thefts begin to haunt the colony: everything from 'Digene' tablets to pink bottle brushes vanish. It sets off a laugh-out-loud mystery. Rumours of a mischievous ghost and a thieving crow only add to the neighbourhood frenzy. As suspicions swirl, Mrs. Tinaz Toddywala, a beaky nosed, puckered mouth teacher-neighbour is on a mission to take down the Sethna siblings.

The charm of the book lies not just in the mystery but the people. Every character is sketched with quirks that make them memorable, from strict parents and teachers to busybody neighbours. Dorab and Dina, though endlessly mischievous, remain utterly lovable. Their take on recycling and reusing everyday items feels delightful.

Shabnam's writing is fast paced and filled with witty flourishes. She has a knack for crafting eccentric characters



who feel instantly real. Tinaz Toddywala’s detective zeal, Dorab and Dina’s wide-eyed schemes, teachers and neighbours all come alive with little quirks and sharp humour.

The illustrations add a whole other layer of charm, capturing the mood, the mayhem, and the mischief with just the right amount of exaggeration. And underneath all the fun is a subtle nudge towards creativity, recycling, and the unexpected uses of everyday things, something Dorab and Dina explore in their own wild way.

*Jumble Sale* is part of the Silly Billy series, which delivers exactly what the name promises: books that don’t take themselves too seriously, and are fun to read. With mystery, adventure, and a whole lot of humour, this book is a fantastic pick for young readers and for not-so-young readers who still find joy in a neighbourhood full of oddballs, ghosts, and disappearing bottle brushes.

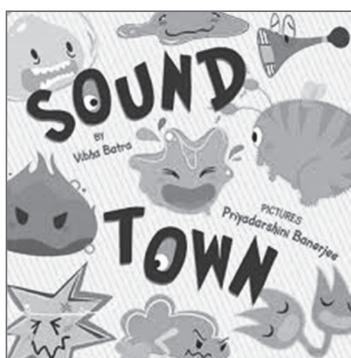


## Yugveer Agarwal

### SOUND TOWN

By Vibha Batra. Illustrated by Priyadarshini Banerjee  
Tulika, 2024, pp. 24, ₹ 195.00

Do you remember the first book you ever read? I don’t mean a long novel or some boring textbook. I mean those small picture books or comics with lots of colours and just a few words. Those were the books that actually made us start reading. But now that we are older, we kind of forget how important they were. That is precisely why I am writing about *Sound Town* by Vibha Batra, illustrated by Priyadarshini Banerjee.



When I first got this book, I thought, ‘Really? A picture book? At my age?’ It felt a bit silly. But when I opened it, I realized I was so wrong. The drawings are amazing! The pages are big and square, and every single one is full of bright colours. The pictures look so alive that you feel like you’re actually inside the story.

The main character is Zip-Zap, who zooms into Sound Town on skates. He’s super energetic and fun. Then comes Whoosh, who looks all cool and navy-blue, and plays hide-and-seek with the trees. There are also little things happening in the background, like two fishes

swimming, which made me smile. Next is Splash, who loves jumping into muddy puddles. He reminded me of myself when I was younger (and sometimes even now!).

There’s also a messy character who totally reminded me of my messy room. Then there’s Thakitta Tharikitta, who makes music with footsteps. You can almost hear the beat just by looking at the picture. And finally, there’s Pop, who is trying so hard not to burst while creepy fingers follow him around.

All these sound-characters are so different, but together they make the story really fun and unique. It’s not like a regular story with a beginning, middle, and end. It’s more like a world of sounds that come alive and make you imagine things.

When I finished the book, I realized something important. Every time I read a big fat novel, I should remember that it was small books like this which first got me into reading. *Sound Town* shows that picture books are not just for little kids—they are for anyone who wants to have fun with their imagination.

So next time you see a picture book, don’t ignore it. Pick it up—you might be surprised how much you enjoy it!



## Kavita Tiwari

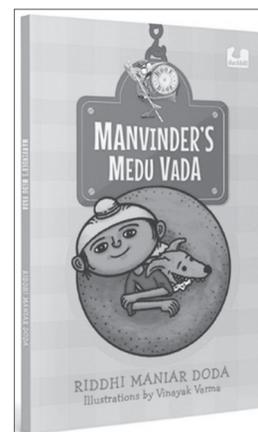
### MANVINDER’S MEDU VADA

By Riddhi Maniar Doda. Illustrated by Vinayak Verma  
Duckbill, 2025, pp. 40, ₹ 250.00

What happens when a Punjabi family sets out to make the perfect south Indian Medu Vada? That’s the heart of this funny and heartwarming story, *Manvinder’s Medu Vada*.

The book follows Manvinder and his family as they experiment with getting the vada ‘just right’—crispy on the outside, soft on the inside, and with the perfect hole in the middle. It’s not just about food, though. It is about family, love, and the joy of sharing small adventures together. And it cleverly shows how food can connect different cultures—in this case, north and south India.

Vinayak Verma’s illustrations make the story even more delightful. With expressive faces and details, the pictures add to the humour of each attempt at the elusive ‘perfect’ medu vada. Children will especially enjoy spotting all the funny versions of vadas along the way.



As part of Duckbill’s Hook Book series, this little book truly ‘hooks’ you. Light, playful, and full of warmth, *Manvinder’s Medu Vada* is a treat for readers of all ages.



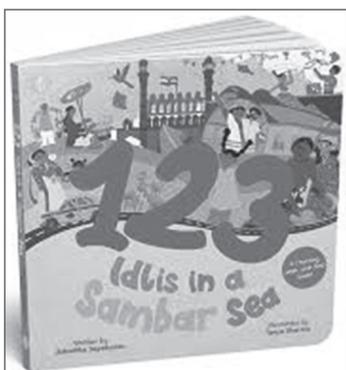
## Seema

### 1, 2, 3: IDLIS IN A SAMBAR SEA (A RHYMING SEEK-AND-FIND BOOK)

Written by Ashwitha Jayakumar. Illustrated by Tanya Sharma

AdiDev Press, 2025, pp. iv+18, ₹ 499.00

Board books take children on a sensory adventure, playfully introducing them to new words and sounds and helping them to identify colours. These are the kind of books that children flip through again and again. Board books are the beginning of a child’s lifelong friendship with books.



*1, 2, 3: Idlis in a Sambar Sea* is one such board book that uses Indian food to teach numbers to toddlers while taking them on a journey across India’s cities. The book features fun activities and introduces children to the diverse culinary culture of India through vibrant illustrations and text. Each page includes a seek-and-find activity, making the reading experience more engaging for young readers. If the page says ‘4 bowls of egg curry’, then the reader has to find four bowls of egg curry that will be scattered and hidden in the illustrations.

The book is not just a culinary treat; it takes us on a journey across the country. Through kebabs and fish, biryani and chaas, we visit Amritsar, Chennai, Kolkata, Jaipur—a new place on every page. Of course, when learning is as sweet as a swirly jalebi from Varanasi, or as spicy as biryani from Hyderabad, can the little reader resist coming back to the book? *1, 2, 3—Idlis in a Sambar Sea* is not a picture story, rather a numerical representation of famous foods across our country. Kudos to the author for coming up with such a creative way to introduce them.

The book needs no words to rely on. The illustrations by Tanya Sharma bring to life the sights, sounds and smells of all the cities we visit. The cities are threaded not just with food, but also with their essence—for example, Hyderabad’s Charminar, Gujarat’s Dandiya, Jaipur’s

Hawa Mahal, and Kerala’s boats. There is ample diversity and inclusivity in the choice of locations.

The last two pages contain special details about the culinary items used throughout the book. For instance, idlis have been part of our cuisine for a thousand years; jalebi is eaten with potato fry or kachori for breakfast in Varanasi; and if the Portuguese hadn’t arrived in India, then there may have been no potatoes in aloo paratha. This information makes the book even more special. Given a political moment that elevates certain foods and regards others as exclusionary, this book provides solace by giving voice to diverse food cultures.

The book is designed for toddlers, appealing to a young age group with its engaging themes of food and travel. The goal of publishing a children’s book is to make it accessible to every child, therefore, the pricing becomes very important here. Even though it’s a great book, ₹ 499 may be too high a price for children to hold the book.



## Mridul Moran

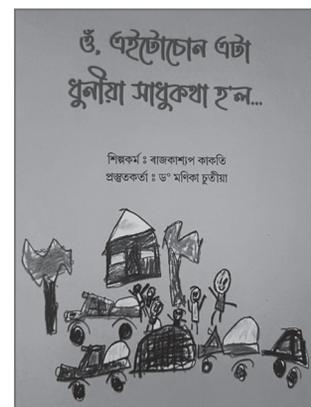
### OH, THAT BECAME A BEAUTIFUL STORY... (O, AEITOSON ETA DHUNIYA XADHUKOTHA HOL...)

By Dr. Monika Chutia. Illustrated by Raajkashyap Kakati  
Purbayon Publication, 2025, pp. 16, ₹ 99.00

The story follows Popo, a five-year-old boy who loves playing with his toy cars and drawing. He is new to school and enjoys his time there with friends and teachers. Popo particularly adores the ‘Storytelling Miss’ at school, as his mother doesn’t tell stories at home.

One day, during story time, the teacher unexpectedly asks Popo to come forward and tell a story. Popo, who is usually talkative, freezes with stage fright, fear, and shyness in front of his peers. Sensing his anxiety, the teacher does not pressurize or dismiss him. Instead, she offers a supportive hand and suggests, ‘Shall I help you tell the story?’

She then ingeniously involves the entire class, turning the moment into a collaborative activity. She begins by asking Popo about his interests, and his friends enthusiastically reveal his love for cars. Guided by the teacher’s gentle prompts and the patience of his classmates, Popo starts narrating a story inspired by his



dream about a big truck and small cars going on a picnic.

The story goes on about a truck helping a small car that gets stuck in a muddy, potholed road. They work together, help each other, and eventually go to enjoy the picnic together. The class loves the story, and Popo is showered with applause and praise from his teacher and friends, making it a memorable and confidence-boosting day for him.

This story is a beautiful and authentic demonstration of effective early childhood education strategies, specifically focused on developing narrative skills. The teacher’s approach is the cornerstone of this success. Instead of creating a high-pressure situation, she normalizes struggle: she immediately offers help, showing that it’s okay not to have all the answers. She also leverages peer support: by involving the whole class in ‘helping Popo’, she transforms the dynamic from one of individual performance to communal storytelling. This prevents potential teasing and builds a classroom culture of collaboration. Lastly, she scaffolds the learning: she provides a structured framework for Popo to succeed. She starts with a simple question (‘What do you like?’), uses the clue from his friends (‘He likes cars,’), and then gives him a specific and familiar topic (‘You can talk about your cars’).

The teacher wisely taps into Popo’s passion—cars. This makes the narrative task relevant and engaging for him. When a child speaks about something they love, the vocabulary, ideas, and enthusiasm flow more naturally, reducing cognitive load and anxiety.

The technique used is a classic and effective educational strategy often called ‘shared writing’ or ‘interactive storytelling’. The teacher acts as a facilitator, guiding the narrative while allowing Popo to be the primary creator. This models the structure of a story (beginning, middle, and end) and empowers the child to be successful.

The conclusion is crucial for developmental psychology. The teacher validates the output: she explicitly praises the story as ‘beautiful’. She engineers success by prompting the class to applaud, providing immediate and powerful positive social reinforcement. She also affirms potential: her final words, telling Popo he has become a good storyteller just like her, make a powerful growth-mindset statement. It labels him not by his initial shyness but by his achieved capability.

The narrative is based on the author Monika Chutia’s real-life child, adding a layer of genuineness and relatability. It reflects true understanding of a child’s emotional world. The most remarkable feature is that the illustrations are by the five-year-old child, Raajkashyap (Popo). Compiled by Koushik Kishalay, this makes the book incredibly unique. It offers readers a pure, unfiltered glimpse into a child’s imagination and visual representation of the world, making it perfectly relatable

for the target audience (ages 3-6). The art is not just for the story; it is the story’s heart.

*Oh, That Became a Beautiful Story...* is more than just a children’s tale. It is a valuable resource that exemplifies best practices in nurturing language development, social-emotional learning, and self-confidence in young children. It serves as an excellent model for educators and parents on how to gently guide a child from apprehension to accomplishment. The combination of a psychologically insightful narrative and authentic child-led artwork makes it a standout and heartfelt piece of children’s literature. It truly celebrates the voice and creativity of a child, supported by the wise scaffolding of caring adults.



## Lonav Ojha

### XUI JUA FESA

Translated by Ayang Trust & The Hummingbird School Family. Pictures by Bhuri Bai. Design by Kanak Shashi Eklavya, Bhopal, 2024, pp. 18, ₹ 180.00

### GEETOR JADU

Translated by Ayang Trust & The Hummingbird School family. Illustrated by Jitendra Thakur Eklavya, Bhopal, 2024, pp. 34, ₹ 240.00

### APPUKUTONOK KENEKOI UJON KORIBO?

Adapted by Indu Harikumar. Illustrated by Indu Harikumar. Translated by Ayang Trust & The Hummingbird School family Eklavya, Bhopal, 2024, pp. 21, ₹ 200.00

### KHISIRI

Retold by Jitendra Kumar. Translated by Ayang Trust & The Hummingbird School family. Illustrated by Durgabai Vyam Eklavya, Bhopal, 2024, pp. 12, ₹ 160.00

Eklavya’s four Big Book titles in Assamese—*Xui Jua Fesa*, *Geetor Jadu*, *Appukutonok Kenekoi Ujon Koribo?* and *Khisiri*—add a new aid in inculcating language in the pre-primary and primary aged children of the region.

Big Books aka oversized picture books designed for sharing, turn reading into a lively communal experience. The enlarged pages enable every child to clearly see the story unfold in words and images. The voice reading them aloud, shifting in pace, tone, and volume, brings the tale to life! The shared





experience, wherever it may be, resembles the warmth of home where folk stories are passed down orally by parents and grandparents.



In *Xui Jua Fesa*, the forest is alive with voices, and an owl is desperate for sleep. All around it, the creatures chatter: the honeybee hums *goon-goon*, the crow shouts *kaa-kaa*, the deer goes *kotaar-kotaar*, and the kingfisher calls *teu-teu*. Just when silence finally descends at night, the owl takes its revenge—crying *niu-niu-niu* and waking the whole forest!

The tale is filled with sounds that children can easily mimic. This provokes them to play with sounds and connect what they speak and hear to the written shapes on the page, which the child may not yet recognize as written speech. The animal sounds, being onomatopoeic and translated from the Hindi, are also faithful to the phonemic and phonotactic rules of Assamese, allowing the child to easily grasp them. Repetition plays a key role in early language acquisition, and given that the story is alluring and witty, children will keep returning to it.

*Geetor Jadu* springs from a Bundelkhandi folktale. It begins with a woman who is sad because she does not have a song to sing. She asks a neighbour where she got her songs from. ‘From the market.’ Taking her words at face value, the woman sends her husband out to the market to buy her one. After failing to find any such thing, he begins to make up songs of his own—singing *khande khorok-khorok* at a rat and *susure sorok-sorok* at a snake. The woman while practising these playful lines, unknowingly scares away a band of robbers! While this story invites the child to invent similar songs from their immediate surroundings, more importantly, it facilitates a handsomely fun sing-along for the entire class.

*Appukutonok Kenekoi Ujon Koribo?* tells the story of a kingdom besieged by an unanswerable question—how do they weigh the prince’s elephant, Appukuttan? While the adults scratch their heads, it is a child named Meenu who thinks differently. The Eureka moment comes with her ingenious idea, leading the elephant into a river and using a clever measurement technique based on the laws of physics. The tale sparks curiosity while encouraging children to think logically, experiment, and discover the joy of scientific problem-solving.

*Khisiri* plays with language just like *Geetor Jadu* and *Xui Jua Fesa*, but while the latter are grounded on the productive, communicative aspect of language, the former folktale utilizes the slipperiness of language to create a hilarious story. Bholu tastes porridge (*khisiri*) at

his maternal home and loves it so much that he wants to eat it again. But on his way back, the word undergoes multiple corruptions after his encounter with a farmer, a hunter, and then a hotel—from *kha sorai* (eat, bird), *ur sorai* (fly, bird), to *boh sorai* (sit, bird). This playful tale shows children how words can bend, slip, and create endless new meanings.

Each of the four books encourages interactivity, especially through recurring phrases that children can echo together. Children can use new words without changing the rhythm of the story. Reading becomes a shared, living experience rather than the slow, isolated task of sounding out letters. These earnestly translated stories will delight and engage the children in the joy of shared reading!



## S Narendra

### ONDU BUCKETNALLI SAMUDRA (SEA IN A BUCKET)

An Avehi-Abacus Story in English. Kannada translation by Kiran Bhatt. Illustrations by Deepa Balsavar  
Bahuroopi Fire Flies, Bangalore and Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, 2025, pp. 24, ₹ 100.00

### CUTPIECE KUMAR

Original story by Indu Harikumar. Kannada translation by Mehboob Mathad  
Bahuroopi Fire Flies, Bangalore and Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, 2025, pp. 28, ₹ 130.00

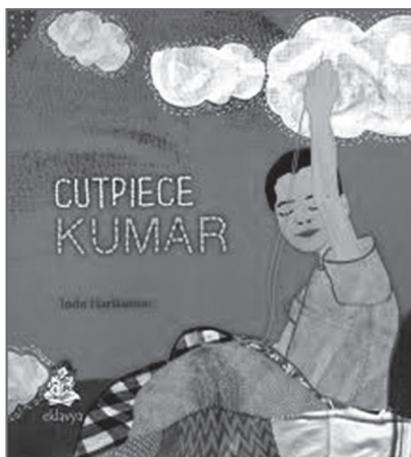
How does one teach a five- or six-year-old that the water taken from a tap into his mini-bucket has travelled all the way from the far away sea? Perhaps even adults using the precious tap water daily may not associate the round tripping of water resulting from the convection process.



*Ondu Bucketnalli Samudra* (*Sea in a Bucket*) attempts to explain this weather science concept in less than 160 simple words. The text is well-supported by imaginative illustrations to achieve twin objectives—cultivation of reading habit and environment literacy addressed imaginatively for young, impressionable minds. A well-designed wall-poster at the end of the book sums up the long story and could go up on the wall of children’s play school.

Such publications deserve to reach wider audiences—a big challenge.

**C**utpiece Kumar is a book aimed at channelling the creative minds of children to take up suitable projects which they could be proud of. This neatly illustrated book very significantly highlights the stitching together of a patch work quilt by a boy, to welcome his soon to be born sister. What is interesting about the story is that the boy, Kumara, is guided by his mother and grandmother to collect small pieces of colourful cloth available at home, such as from an old torn saree and other similar items from a tailor shop's waste paper basket. The boy's imagination gets fired. The family helps him, step by step, to put together a multi-hued baby quilt as a present to his little sister. The book subtly introduces gender sensitivity by making the boy take up stitching. The English version has won an award at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, 2025.



**APPUKUTTANANNU TOOGUVUDU HEEGE? (HOW DO WE WEIGH APPUKUTTAN?)**

Original Story by Indu Harikumar. Kannada translation by Anita Priyakarini Kalle  
Bahuroopi Fire Flies, Bangalore and Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, 2025, pp. 24, ₹ 100.00

**T**he book's title, *How Do You Weigh Appukuttan?* starts as a puzzle, faced by a king and his intelligent people, awaiting a solution. The kingdom was populated by people who were eager and intelligent to find answers to any and every question that came their way. But weighing Appukuttan on a machine was next to impossible. A slip of a girl, Meenu, successfully solves the puzzle. This book, without mentioning Archimedes, introduces his principle to children.



Semeen Ali

**YE KAUVE KAALE-KAALE!**

By Gulzar. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 15, ₹ 100.00

**POONCHH**

By Gulzar. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 27, ₹ 130.00

**OOPATAANG**

By Gulzar. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 21, ₹ 120.00

**DO HI BARAS KE HO...**

By Gulzar. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 27, ₹ 130.00

**GHADI GHADI**

By Gulzar. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 19, ₹ 110.00

**HAKHEEM 'ANTA GAFIL'**

By Gulzar. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 23, ₹ 120.00

**PAHELIYAN**

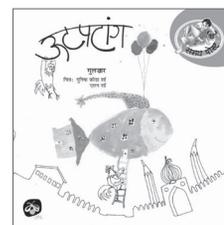
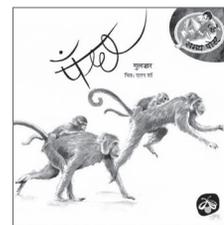
By Gulzar. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 25, ₹ 130.00

**JAB DHOOP BHI HO AUR BAARISH BHI...**

By Gulzar. Illustrated by Priya Kurien  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 19, ₹ 110.00

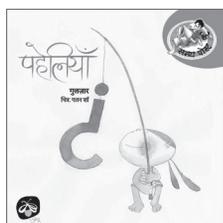
**I**t is always a delight to read Gulzar Sahab's verses. Be it his delicate lines that tug at the heartstrings or the ones that stir up a storm within, the magic lies in his pen; and he wields it with rare mastery. A creator of verses, he has always had a gift for drawing out emotions with effortless ease, regardless of the gender of his intended readers. In this collection of short books for children, he turns that gift towards the young with warmth and tenderness, and the result is writing that seems to breathe with life. The collection brims with both energy and a quietude that only Gulzar sahab can conjure.

To write for children demands a particular kind of sensitivity and,





if I may say so, a childlike spirit. The ability to reach their level without sermonizing; to see the world through their eyes, and resist the pull of adulthood—to write for them is to become them. And that is precisely what makes this collection so remarkable: Gulzar sahab manages to inhabit the world of a child without losing his poetic depth. When I received this batch of books, I felt transported back to a world that I was once familiar with, but am not in touch with any more. It also brought home an important truth—when we were growing up, there were hardly any books, in Hindi or even in English, which felt tailor-made for Indian children. That paucity is finally being undone, and I am heartened to see such independent books now exist; books a child can sit with, wander into, and be utterly lost in.



Of the eight books, seven have been illustrated with care and exuberance by Allen Shaw. Each book carries a distinct style; none repeats patterns or techniques. Yet, all bear the unmistakable mark of his hand. Allen has translated the texts into an engaging world of colour and imagination, and the result is visual splendour. Together,



verses and images combine to create a magical space into which a child can wander and remain immersed. From crows who mimic humans and set up their own court of law (*Ye Kauve Kaale-Kaale!*), to an ode to tails where the poet delights in a variety of them (*Poonchh*), to playful nonsensical verses that are a joy to swim through (*Ootpataang*), to the musings of a two-year-old negotiating the logical, rule-bound world of adults (*Do Hi Baras Ke Ho...*), to reflections on time (*Ghadi Ghadi*), to the appearance of an unforgettable character, a forgetful yet endearing man (*Hakeem 'Anta Gafil'*), and finally to one of my favourites from childhood—riddles (*Paheliyan*), Allen and Gulzar sahab together craft a dazzling, inventive world for children. It is a world so inviting that even I find myself tempted to step into it. These books are a collector's delight, and I cannot imagine parting with them.

Among these, there is one that I suspect will remain closest to my heart: *Jab Dhoop Bhi Ho Aur Barish Bhi...* Here, Gulzar sahab revisits a traditional folk saying: when it rains while the sun shines, the jackals are getting

married. Priya Kurien's brilliant illustrations bring this tale to life. The sun shower—scientifically so baffling—finds in this saying a playful and magical explanation for children. I, for one, grew up hearing it. I remember listening wide-eyed, and whenever the sun showered, I would smile at the thought of jackals celebrating a wedding. Even today, I hold on to that explanation, illogical as it may be, because it is stitched into the fabric of my childhood. Gulzar sahab stirred that memory again, and Priya's inspired illustrations finally gave form to the images I had long carried in my mind.

For what is childhood if not a vast valley of imagination, where the mind gallops like a horse set free?



## Gauri Sharma

### BANTU BATOLEY KI KARAMATI KURSI

By Rajesh Joshi. Illustrated by Bhargav Kulkarni  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 52, ₹ 200.00

### BAGH AUR CHHATA

By Prabhat. Illustrated by Debabrata Ghosh  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2025, pp. 22, ₹ 100.00

### KHUSHBOO KI CHORI: BENGALI STORIES

Translated by Yaayaavar and Shivli Kisku. Illustrated by Rishi Sahany  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 36, ₹ 110.00

Jugnu Prakashan, the publishing imprint of Ekrara Trust, has created excellent work in children's Hindi literature with a diverse set of new titles.

The strength of *Bantu Batoley Ki Karamati Kursi* lies in its simple, captivating premise. The story focuses on Bantu, a boy whose imagination transforms an ordinary chair into a miraculous vehicle. The book doesn't rely on complex plot twists. Instead, it uses the chair as a device to explore the limitless nature of a child's mind. The writing, by Rajesh Joshi, captures the way a child's thoughts jump effortlessly from one grand adventure to the next. The narrative is engaging without being overly dramatic, focusing on the sheer joy of internal exploration. The illustrations by Bhargav Kulkarni are a major part of the book's appeal. The style gives the visuals a sense of immediacy, almost



mirroring a child's own drawings. This choice works well, reinforcing the book's central theme: that the greatest magic is found in daydreams. It's an essential read for young readers, affirming the power of their own curiosity.

*Bagh aur Chhata* is a collection of five folktales that brings the humour and wisdom of rural Indian storytelling to the page. The compilation, put together by Prabhat, is direct and unpretentious—preserving the classic feel and moral clarity of traditional narratives. The stories generally focus on the theme of wit overcoming brute strength. The central figure of the tiger, especially in the title story, is portrayed with a sense of amusing bewilderment, struggling to understand human customs and objects, like the umbrella. This perspective makes the stories humorous and accessible. The pacing is effective, delivering satisfying, concise tales that are ideal for short reading sessions. The visuals by Debabrata Ghosh complement the writing perfectly. This volume is a valuable addition to a home library, offering a crucial link to traditional Indian storytelling.

*Khushboo ki Chori* is a high-quality anthology that serves as an introduction to classic Bengali children's literature for Hindi readers. Its strength lies in sheer quality of the original contributors, which includes celebrated names like Leela Majumdar, Narayana Gangopadhyay, and Sukumar Ray. This lineup guarantees diverse and well-crafted stories. The collection offers a range of literary experiences, moving smoothly from quiet, thoughtful narratives to instances of playful mischief, like the story, '*Aalasi Chor*' (The Lazy Thief). The key success of the book is the translation, which, according to the publisher's note, retains the unique flavour and rhythm of the Bengali language in its Hindi form. This anthology is ideal for readers who enjoy variety and are ready to appreciate different narrative styles. It confirms that core childhood themes—such as loyalty, curiosity, and the thrill of a good secret—are universal. It is a well-curated collection that should be read to introduce children to a broader range of quality Indian storytelling.

This collection stands out for its high-quality production and varied subject matter, offering both original narratives and translated folktales that will appeal to a wide range of young readers.



In Vol XLIX No 10 October 2025, in the review by Jayasrinivasa Rao of *A Teashop in Kamalapuram & Other Classic Kannada Stories*, the translation by Susheela Puneetha has been wrongly printed as from the original Tamil instead of from Kannada. The error is regretted.

## Shagun Tomar

### SAFED GUD

By Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena. Illustrated by Kavita Singh Kale  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 8, ₹ 50.00

*Safed Gud* is a tender story where sweetness glimmers, yet ache quietly lingers. The story is about a boy who longs for white jaggery in a shop. When he gathers the courage to speak, his mother looks at him in silence, her hands busy stitching '*phate kapde*' (torn clothes). That quiet act says more than words can express. White jaggery remains a distant dream in a household where torn clothes must be mended.



Kavita Singh Kale's illustrations are hand-drawn, with visible strokes and layered shading. Their grainy warmth echoes the boy's small, tender world, mosque domes shaded in twilight blues, and eyes brimming with unshed tears. The book gently touches on desire, faith, dignity, and disappointment, leaving silences more eloquent than conclusions. Like jaggery itself, *Safed Gud* is sweet and unforgettable.

### BHALU KA NAKHOON

Written and illustrated by Rishi Sahany  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 28, ₹ 130.00

In *Bhalu ka Nakhoon*, Rishi Sahany writes and paints with rare honesty. Unburdened by what children's books should be, he lets words and images arrive as they will. His plain yet memorable lines and fresh, free illustrations carry the rhythm of a fireside storyteller, drawing us into five distinct tales—tender, mysterious, and full of



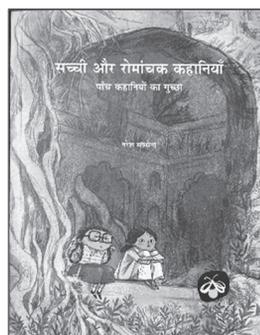
wonder. In one of the stories, we see a shepherd's world guided by a whistle's music until a stranger's haunting tune replaces it with silence. It's a meditation on presence and absence. In another, the finding of a bear's nail turns a simple trek into a tale tinged with dread, balancing the real with the mythical. In the third, a playful young monk's journey to disciplined devotion culminates in a tree of light and life—a parable of patience. The fourth becomes a fable of transformation and acceptance, where a child's metamorphosis is met with love, not fear. And in the last, a boy's longing for friendship finds wonder

in a classmate's tales of prehistoric giants, where the true discovery is friendship. In the end, these stories offer children not just lessons, but the rare gift of wonder and wisdom.

**SACHCHI AUR ROMANCHAK KAHANIYAN**

By Naresh Saxena. Illustrated by various artists  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 48, ₹ 170.00

The illustration on the cover page made by Rajiv Eipe shows two girls surrounded by mystery and nature. The artwork echoes the theme—overcoming fears and challenges with courage and quiet resilience. Naresh Saxena writes with such simplicity and ease that every story feels close, as if a memory we might have carried ourselves.



In 'Woh Chaalees Minute', the suspense is unforgettable, but the deeper lesson is quieter—that strength often comes not from above, but from within. In 'Bachpan ki woh Bhayanak Raat', a storm rises on the banks of the Asan River. A child, alone in rain and darkness, endures fear. Rescue comes with warmth, but the lasting memory is pride in endurance: 'But Papa, I did not cry.' In another story, science and wonder walk side-by-side. From ice cream to Einstein's Museum, relativity is explained so simply that even children can see its lightness. Yet beyond science, kindness, and rescue shine. 'Bhoot Bangle ki woh Raat' recalls a haunted house in Jabalpur. What seems like a ghost story becomes a lesson: the most frightening presences are often the ones we carry in our minds. And in the last story, an unarmed man faces a tiger with wit, patience, and courage. All of these stories are tender lessons in resilience.

**SUNO KAHANI 1**

Cover illustration by Priya Kurian  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 37, ₹ 150.00

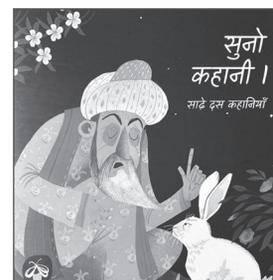
**SUNO KAHANI 2**

Cover illustration by Rajiv Eipe  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 29, ₹ 120.00

*Suno Kahani 1*, edited and illustrated by many voices, unfolds like a series of little lamps lit at bedtime. In 'Mekuri', cats once roared like lions but traded thunder for meow. It is a playful fable of survival and transformation. In 'Julia aur Lund', a little girl climbs to protect her

beloved tree, turning defiance into hope. 'Chalein!' wobbles with affection—a boy and his mother stumble on wheels, but in their tumbles, they learn how to rise. 'Ghonghe aur Kankhajure ki Daud' sparkles with wit, showing that perseverance often beats speed. 'Lara aur Suraj' glows as Lara races the setting sun. 'Tara' holds grief gently, turning loss into a star that shines on, a tale of memory. 'Choocha aur Thaanedar' brims with satire, as a mouse's plea for safety reveals the sly traps of power. 'Darbaan' honours unseen labour, giving dignity and warmth to everyday responsibility. 'Haathi aur Mendhak' bursts with mischief as frogs mistake an elephant for a giant fish—reminding us how limited experience shapes perception. Finally, in 'Kathal Pake', a jackfruit tree becomes a symbol of generosity, community, and the ache of loss. These ten tales glow with laughter, wonder, and reflection.

*Suno Kahani 2* unfolds with 'Badi Hokaar Main Hawaii Jahaaz Banungi' where a mother and daughter turn the everyday into sky-bound play, and imagination acts as both—wings and the destination. In 'Khoya Hua Haathi', an elephant wanders into town—for the crowd it is a spectacle; for the elephant, a lost path back home. 'Rona' holds tears with care. Tinku learns that crying is not weakness but healing, a story that teaches children and reminds adults that emotions are not to be hidden but shared. In 'Naak Bandh', friendship and humour ride along, making even discomfort unforgettable. 'Gaaon ka School' is a playful tale of first times, courage, and the fragile magic of beginnings. 'Do Dost' begins when a mouse discovers barking hidden in the phone's buttons; the device becomes a shield against cats. 'Dalil' brims with reason, as tortoises question a crane's too-perfect promises of a never-ending pond. Their calm logic defeats deception, reminding us that courage can come as much from thought as from strength. 'Ghar' is a story that turns a simple house into a lesson of coexistence, where belonging is never singular but always shared. In 'Sammo aur Baarish', a girl names everything 'rain'—the river, the tap, even water in a glass. Her love for rain brings fever, but also tender care. 'Neend' winks with humour, as Sana's relentless questions chase away her mother's sleep. In her clever persistence, stories multiply, proving curiosity is stronger than yawns. 'Mombatti' is about a candle chasing darkness in an endless game of hide-and-seek. Each illustrator in the *Suno Kahani* books brings a unique style and together, they enrich the tales, making the book a vivid, layered reading experience.



**NAAM HAI USKA PAKHI**

By Udayan Vajpeyi. Illustrated by Taposhi Ghoshal  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2024, pp. 100, ₹ 300.00

Udayan Vajpeyi wrote *Naam Hai Uska Pakhi* during the quiet days of the pandemic, when his newborn granddaughter had just entered the world. Wanting to give her something that would last, he created a story she could carry with her—a gift of imagination. Yet in sharing it, he transformed that private gift into one that now belongs to countless children. The book does not ask its young readers to follow a strict order. Chapters can be read like leaves plucked from a branch. In this playfulness lies the essence of childhood, discovery without boundaries, freedom without rules. The magic deepens through the luminous illustrations of Taposhi Ghoshal. Her art glows with sunlight streaming across beds, fields painted in fiery yellows and reds, and boats gliding gently across seas of clouds. Each image invites children to enter and complete it with their own imagination.



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## Mubashshara Mehfooz

**RAMPUR KI RAMLEELA**

By Neel. Illustrated by Kavita Singh Kaale  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust, 2024,  
pp. 10, ₹ 40.00

**JIRHUL**

By Jacinta Kerketta. Illustrated by Kanupriya Kulshrestha  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara, 2024,  
pp. 21, ₹ 90.00

**SAAT PATTON WALA PED**

By Sushil Shukla, Illustrated by Taposhi Ghoshal  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara, 2024,  
pp. 12, ₹ 55.00

**PED KA PATTA**

By Sushil Shukla. Illustrated by Taposhi Ghoshal  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara, 2025,  
pp. 28, ₹ 100.00

**BIRBAHUTI**

By Prabhat. Illustrated by Prashant Soni  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara, 2024,  
pp. 16, ₹ 80.00

**EK THA RAMU**

By Ashok Seksariya. Illustrated by Neelesh Gahlot  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara, 2024, pp. 16, ₹ 80.00

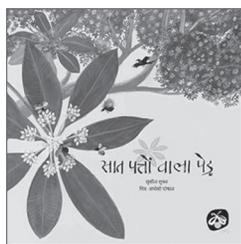
**SIKANDAR KE DUS SAWAL**

By Priyamvad. Illustrated by Priya Kuriyan  
Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara, 2025,  
pp. 52, ₹ 195.00

Seven little books make up seven little worlds. Worlds filled with the colours of childhood fairs, sounds of sobbing after losing a pet, tearful goodbyes to friends, and the earthy perfume of childhood parks where trees held us close and flowers felt like companions. Each of these recent works published by Jugnu Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust (New Delhi), open such worlds of laughter, grief, and gentle lessons—woven together by the voices of their authors and the artistry of their illustrators.

*Rampur ki Ramleela* is a bright little book which celebrates the delicious chaos of a village *Ramleela*. When Ravan falls ill, a villager is unexpectedly chosen to play his role, and Neel builds the humour around this comic

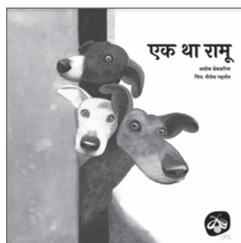
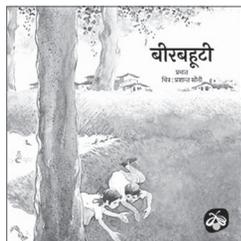




disruption. Kavita Singh Kaale's illustrations—full of reds, yellows, and blues—mirror the clamour of the performance, bold and busy in equal measure. Together, text and image capture the festive energy of the *Ramleela* in a form accessible to children. A lively read-aloud, it may require cultural context for those unfamiliar with the celebration.



Jacinta Kerketta's lyrical text in *Jirbul* introduces flowers of the forest that city children may never encounter. She shows how beauty exists in nature while weaving in a thread of resistance—against commodification, deforestation, and the forces that erode community ties. Her writing sings like poetry, carrying both grace and defiance. Kanupriya Kulshrestha's illustrations bloom across the pages, evoking the richness of spring. The book works well as a read-aloud for younger readers, but its layered themes can provoke meaningful conversations with older children too.



*Saat Patton wala Ped* is a small book which focuses on the milkwood tree, or Saptarni, tracing how different elements of nature work in harmony to sustain flowers and fruits. Sushil Shukla's language is spare, lyrical, and effective, while Taposhi Ghoshal's earthy illustrations reinforce the

book's natural rhythms. Together, they give young readers an accessible introduction to ecological interdependence.

*Ped ka Patta* is a collection of short stories which capture changing human relationship with nature. It warns of how development, pursued at the cost of destruction, unsettles emotions and weakens bonds with the natural world. A single line—'*Hamara ghar chhota tha. Ghar ki imli badi thi*'—encapsulates the nostalgia and loss woven through the text. Shukla's concise sentences make the work accessible yet thought-provoking, while Ghoshal's understated illustrations provide a fitting visual echo.

*Birbahuti* is a story of two class five friends and charts the bittersweet journey from shared afternoons of play to the pain of separation when one changes schools. Prabhat captures the innocence and sorrow of such partings, while Prashant Soni's warm illustrations make the narrative

emotionally accessible. The book will resonate strongly with older children who are beginning to encounter themes of friendship and loss.

*Ek tha Ramu* is a tender tale of human-animal companionship. This book tells of a man's love for a stray dog and the grief that follows its loss. Ashok Seksariya's narrative is simple yet moving, while Neelesh Gahlot's illustrations, though limited in number, add warmth and poignancy. The story introduces children to the intensity of attachment and the inevitability of mortality in a manner both gentle and memorable.

*Sikandar ke Dus Sawal*, an ambitious volume, offers eight stories inspired by figures such as the Buddha, Shah Jahan, and Fanny Parks. Priyamvad blends historical fact with anecdote, presenting the past in a way that is engaging and reflective rather than pedantic. The language is relatively sophisticated, making it well suited to older readers (age 12–16). Priya Kuriyan's illustrations are mature in tone, complementing the text with gravity and depth, and ensuring that history resonates as both narrative and reflection.

Together, these seven books form a rich tapestry of childhood: festivals and friendships, blossoms and separations, pets and history. Each author provides a narrative voice that is tender yet layered, while each illustrator offers a visual world that deepens the child's encounter with the story.

Children's literature is not mere play. These books demonstrate how small volumes can plant the first seeds of empathy, ecological awareness, cultural belonging, and historical curiosity. They remind us that the earliest stories children read—or hear aloud—shape how they see the world, how they cherish it, and how they remember it. In the collaboration between author and illustrator, text and image, lies the essence of this power. These are not just seven little books, but seven vast worlds for young readers.

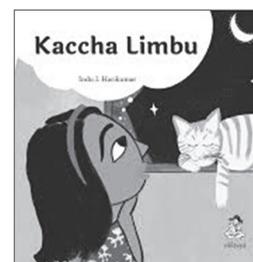


## Shivani

### KACHCHA LIMBU

Story and Illustrations by Indu L. Harikumar  
Eklavya, 2025, pp. 18, ₹ 100.00

'*Kachcha Limbu*' is a term used for someone who is not as strong or as good at a game for instance, as the rest of her peer group. Someone who is included on 'compassionate grounds', so to say, rather than merit.



In this short, eighteen-page children's book, we listen to the innumerable thoughts and questions raised in self-doubt, which race through the mind of a little girl whom her peers refer to as 'Kachcha Limbu'.

Being left-out, alone, hurt, rejected— most of us have felt some or all of these emotions at some time or the other; for a short time or for longish periods as well. The protagonist in this book is a little girl who is constantly trying to be noticed and appreciated by her peers, whether in games or at school, or any other occasion. She feels there is nothing 'good enough' or 'special' about her that will win her their appreciation. 'What should I be, what should I do?', is her constant worry and query. The animals/ birds who frequent her window, reply: 'Be yourself.' Is a quiet part of herself giving her this reply? Does she somewhere know it is best to be herself? One wonders. Do we all hear our inner voice at such times— when we are being pulled down or feeling low?

What adds to this roller coaster of emotions are thoughts like 'what if I fail?', 'what if I disappoint them?', 'what if they shout at me or are angry?' One is forced to question: who are these people whom we hold in awe, admiration and fear? At the end, there is a surprise for the reader. Our protagonist does have friends, best friends, with whom she feels safe and very happy. So clearly, there is a need to win the admiration of those who exclude her. What makes those people so powerful? In a social scenario, exclusion is seen on grounds of caste, religion, gender, sexual identities, physical 'disabilities'— almost any reason the human mind can think of. The idea of exclusion, for whatever reasons, is a theme to be explored with children from a very young age and hence, this book is very important and relevant in the present times. A must-have for any library!



## Simran Sadh

### EE KI MATRA

By Farah Azeez. Illustrated by Rajiv Eipe  
Jugnu Prakashan, 2025, pp. 32, ₹ 160.00

The book cover has all the characters cheekily welcoming the reader to explore the wonderful book together, they are well aware that the reader is in for a surprise.

With an amazing concept and creative as well as colorful illustrations, this picture book is well worthy of all the awards and recognitions coming its way. The illustrations have very innovatively played around with the many words with 'इइ'/'ee' sound in the end. One sets out

to read the story with a certain expectation of word play being involved but Farah Azeez and Rajiv Eipe's collaborative efforts surpass this expectation. The duo moves back and forth between words in both the Hindi and English language.



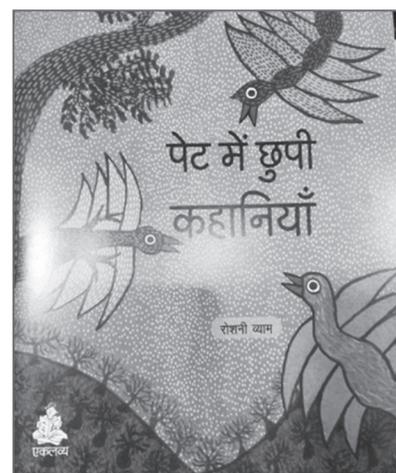
The many mischiefs of 'ee' will have one looking for more such word-plays in their vocabulary. Such explorations allow the reader to break down the constructed perspectives towards language, and aid in building fresh ones— all the while being entertained to their wits' end. The reader will not be able to figure it all out in one reading and will definitely need to pick the book a number of times to get through all the cues.

One of the illustrations has prisoners coming out of a life-sized jelly! This bizarre image makes complete sense after one reads the story. The illustrations are able to carry the story so well that it makes one wonder what the story would have looked like without them. The story and the fun had to end somewhere, tying it all together with the theme of gender-fluidity— which was a bit out of the blue, but might further enhance the scope of engagement with readers around the topic.

### PET MEIN CHHUPI KAHANIYAAN

Written and illustrated by Roshni Vyam  
Eklavya, 2025, pp. 18, ₹ 70.00

What could happen if one keeps stories to themselves? They could turn up against you to plan your doom. Stories are meant to be passed on. Once shared by the teller, they become entities with lives of their own, which feed on other stories. Thus, making up a universe of their own. The lifespan of a story surpasses that of its teller easily, and lives on through its many retellings. Folktales too tend to live on through generations, adapted to suit both their teller and the audience.



The story *Pet Mein Chhupi Kahaniyaan* belongs to the

folktale genre, in which a friend comes to the rescue of another friend— but what is the threat? This story has ‘stories’ as anthropomorphized characters which take on animal forms to seek revenge on their wrongdoer. The consequences of sleeping on a story could be ghastly. But it is also a story of friendship saving the day. The story seems to have been cut from the same fabric from which Teji Grover had created *Akam se Puram Tak*, and it probably is, as they are both publications of Eklavya which boasts of many folktales in its *pitara*. While the story’s illustrations in Gond style stand strong, the styling of the text and its imposition over the illustration often comes in the way of fully experiencing the story and its illustrations. The title of the story does justice by being literal in the plotline, when culturally the phrase ‘stomaching a story’ is used figuratively—used to refer to a person who is of weak stomach, is unable to digest a story and ends up spilling it over.

Well, what would become of stories without these ‘weak-stomached’ tellers of tales?



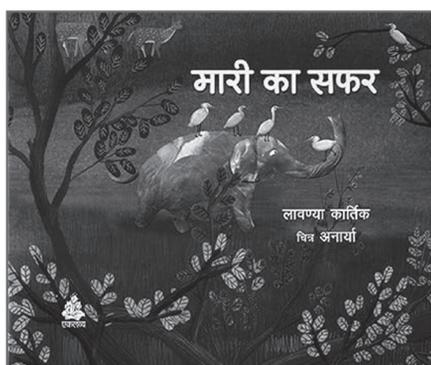
## Radhika Chhaparia

### MARI KA SAFAR

By Lavanya Karthik. Translated by Seema. Illustrated by Anarya  
Eklavya, 2025, pp. 24, ₹ 70.00

*Mari ka Safar* is a picture book about an elephant herd’s migration in search of food and water. However, it’s not just another annual migration. It’s

special because it is the first of many journeys calf Mari would undertake in the years to come. On the way, Mari learns about her matriarch Rani’s survival skills, her remarkable ability to lead the herd year after year, and the extent of habitat degradation the elders in the herd have faced so far. Through Rani’s recollection of her past migration journeys, both Mari and the readers come to understand that this one is forced migration, prolonged by the expansion of human settlements and infrastructure. Predictably, the herd’s unusually long journey ends on a happy note, when they find a bountiful



spot. Nevertheless, poignancy lingers, not hope. Rani, a wise guide, reminds the herd to not only enjoy the food and water they’ve just discovered but also create as many memories as possible; it’s likely that this particular spot may disappear by next year.

Rooted in facts about elephant migration, told from the perspective of elephants, and accessible to readers as young as 6-7 years when read aloud to them, *Mari ka Safar* is thoughtfully crafted. It successfully employs storytelling to create awareness about elephant migration and arouse empathy towards elephants. Additionally, a note at the end of the story explains and emphasizes the need to protect elephant corridors. Surprisingly, Rani, the matriarch emerges as an important character, building curiosity about the matriarch’s role in the elephant herd. Though there’s no depiction of any injury or the death of a calf or adult, the text points to increasing danger for elephants during their annual migration, which could lead to exploration of such unfortunate and now common occurrences. Similarly, a glimpse of a possible retaliation from farmers as the herd progresses deeper towards human settlements is an opportunity to further understand this particular aspect of human-elephant conflict.

The book has the potential to cater to a wide range of children. However, the younger the audience, the greater the responsibility on librarians and teachers to effectively engage them. Though the immediate concern of the book is protection of elephant corridors, the strength of the book lies in providing an entry point, particularly to older children, to raise and discuss ethical questions which arise not only in the context of human-elephant conflict but extend to other living creatures as well. Ultimately, readers must consider questions pertaining to the extent to which human activities are justified when they impact non-human species: ‘Is the world, our planet Earth, at the disposal of humans?’, ‘Which factors must guide our actions?’, and ‘Is sustainable co-existence between humans and other species an important goal for us, why, and how do we work towards achieving it?’



### Book News

### Book News



*Din Bhar Kya Kiya?* By Laltu, illustrated by Tavisha Singh, is a collection of poems for the beginner reader. The illustrations make the poems come alive. The young reader’s imagination will soar to create new worlds of experience.

Eklavya, 2024, pp. 76, ₹ 75.00

## Yusra Khan

### I-CARD

By Paro Anand. Illustrated by Proiti Roy  
Ektara Trust, 2025, pp. 185, ₹ 52.00

### FAMILY TREE

By Proiti Roy  
Ektara Trust, 2025, pp. 20, ₹ 50.00

### JEH KI PANCH ANOOTHU UDANEY

By Nandita Da Cunha. Translated by Varsha Rani.  
Illustrated by Kavita Singh Kale  
Ektara Trust, 2025, pp. 48, ₹ 175.00

### MENDAK BOLA

By Rakesh Ranjan. Illustrated by Rajiv Eipe  
Ektara Trust, 2025, pp. 24, ₹ 90.00

### HARI PATANG PE HARA PATANGA

By Varun Grover. Illustrated by Allen Shaw  
Ektara Trust, 2024, pp. 84, ₹ 150.00

### ATA KA PATA

By Virendra Dubey. Illustrated by Kanak Shashi  
Ektara Trust, 2025, pp. 32, ₹ 80.00

### SA RE GA MA PA-KSHI

By Rishi Sahany  
Ektara Trust, 2025, pp. 52, ₹ 110.00

### THE SONG OF LIFE

By Kavita Singh Kale  
Ektara Trust, 2025, pp. 24, ₹ 65.00

### MUSEUM OF GOA

By Kunal Ray. Illustrated by Subodh Kerkar  
Ektara Trust, 2025, pp. 64, ₹ 215.00

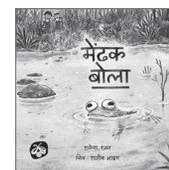
*I-Card*, authored by Paro Anand, is a collection of short stories that paints an immersive picture of innocence being reshaped with the gritty reality of identityhood, contentious notions of belonging, and personal narratives that shape our interactions with the world. *'Dadagiri'* brings to us a young narrator, who is the fourth among his siblings, all elder sisters, peculiar in their own ways. The angsty youth, pampered by an overindulgent family, and ill equipped for the school bullies, is reminiscent of JD Salinger's *Holden*. Without relying on overtly political commentaries, the stories



bring to life the devastating reality of the undercurrent of violence in our society, spilling over into the lives of children and reshaping their sense of self. Anand takes the ordinary—the site of a school bus, the milkman who is a regular in the colony—and infuses it with violence, provoking the young reader to confront the reality of the contemporary times, through the hazy lens of a child trying to make sense of the senseless violence surrounding them. There are other poignant stories that deal with loyalty, change, adaptation, and new found self-worth, among other themes that resonate with the turbulence of adolescence. Proiti Roy's graphics weave together the stories beautifully and provide a luminous canvas of imagination for the young audience. Stories like 'Suvira' and 'Fatima' bring to light the themes of competition, belonging and compassion. In the former, young readers are taught to empathize with the challenges of moving places and leaving behind familiar settings, and the opportunities of growth that are brought to the forefront, along with themes of sporting spirit and its role in self-confidence. The latter is a form of bio-fiction, derived from the life of Fatima Whitbread, and her adoption by her Games teacher, who saw her potential and humanity—laying bare a transformative story that teaches us resilience and hope. Together they blend fiction with a nuanced, humanizing force often missing in children's literature.

*Family Tree*, the brilliant picture book by Proiti Roy, is a sensitive illustrative tale of emotional bonding, the notion of familial bonds beyond blood. The story follows a little girl who shares whatever little food she has with the animals that reach out to her and follow her around. We see her surrounded by cats, dogs, goats, squirrels and cows at the end of story's arc; they form a wordless bond with the girl who shared even when her means were scarce. Through an endearing end, the author-illustrator pictures the girl soundly asleep as her newfound friends keep watch outside her window.

*Jeh Ki Panch Anoothi Udaney (Jeh's Five Fantastic Flights)* by Nandita da Cunha is a beautifully written children's book with dazzling illustrations that bring to life the inspiring story of Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata (JRD Tata), one of India's most visionary industrialists, and the country's first licensed pilot. Kavita Singh Kale's brilliant sketches create an aspirational character who follows his dream, and his 'five' milestones are phased out



to show the many achievements of JRD Tata's life. There are references to historically important characters like Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of Isma'ili Shias, who offered a hefty prize to encourage efforts in Indian aviation; and his friend Nevill Vintcent's idea for using airplanes not merely for passenger flights but to transport mail across countries. Young readers are acquainted with important achievements such as these—in 1932, in India's first airmail flight, Tata flew from Karachi to Bombay. The book traces a pioneer's journey, from his early fascination with the mechanics of flying, to building his own airline and carving a space for himself in the project of nation-building through his monumental empire, all the while retaining the humility that he started out with.

*Mendak Bola* by Rakesh Ranjan is a poetry booklet with an endearing theme that is well-hidden but playfully obvious: the strangeness of others. The constant 'tar-tar-tar' sound evokes harsh words from the teacher in the classroom, but the children are fond of its incoherent, playful presence. Rajiv Eipe's pictures help set the mood, context, and humour—making the poem not just a reading exercise but a more immersive, joyous experience. The illustrations expertly carry the narrative; the little creature holds everyone's attention, but then classes disperse, and the children let him go back to his natural habitat.

*Hari Patang Pe Hara Patanga* by Varun Grover is an eighty-four-page children's poem that runs on a whimsical, exploratory, symbolic rhythm. Illustrated by Allen Shaw, the pictures lend a dream-like, mythical quality to the poem, uplifting and sobering at the same time as it evokes the weight of dreams, the inner longing to flourish and the hard-earned wins that accompany us on the way. The imagery is dense but tightly bound through an imaginative world-building that ranges from animal, insect, myth, to human life, and all the journeys that we undertake to turn into who we want to be.

*Ata ka Pata* by Virendra Dubey is a deeply metaphorical picture story book illustrated by Kanak Shashi, which subtly but beautifully curates together themes of migration, metaphorical meditations around belonging and displacement through atmospheric details through its innovative picturizations. It blends a dream-like quality with mundane, everyday observations through fresh humour and spectacular detail.

*Sa Re Ga Ma Pa-kshi*, authored by Rishi Sahany, is a wordless but vivid picture book which brings together the beauty of music and a little girl's personal growth under her mentor. The narrative follows a young bird, symbolizing the child's voice, which initially struggles to take flight. Through patience and practice, the bird takes flight eventually, embodying the arc of self-expression. Besides being a visual treat, the work also serves as a reminder of failure paving the way towards success. The radiant bird, perched on the little girl's hand on the final

page, demonstrates the value of perseverance, which ultimately leads to genuine self-actualization.

*The Song of Life* by Kavita Singh Kale is a short picture book that derives inspiration from Ladakhi folklore, and analogizes weaving with the unfolding of earthly creation, with all its splendor and beauty. It evokes in the young readers, a sense of interconnectedness, and a recognition of the delicate and ingenious ways in which nature operates. The pictures bring together this profound relation between humanity and the environment; taking us through mountains, hills, meadows and starry nights to remind us of the fact that we are part of nature and don't lie outside of it.

*Museum of Goa*, by Kunal Ray with illustrations from Subodh Kerkar, is an engagement with experimental, scientific, material art installations and the awe-inspiring nature of museums and art in general. He focuses on the illustrator's love for Goa, his creative contributions, and his conversion of art space into a café. Through Kerkar's knowledge of local history, ecology and Konkani identity, Ray extracts the essence of paintings, installations, sculpture and other displays to showcase his deep-rooted, attentive rendering of the State's geography and community. The book promotes a love for immersive art, and explores the artist's own evolving practice.



## Ira Saxena

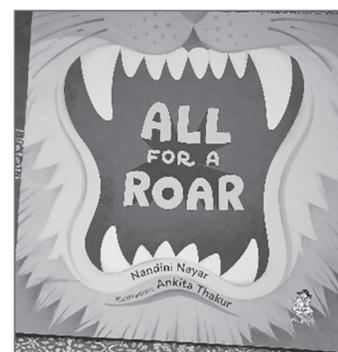
### ALL FOR A ROAR

By Nandini Nayar. Illustrated by Ankita Thakur  
Eklavya, 2024, pp. 20, ₹ 100.00

The title and the eye-catching cover focus on the natural urges of a child in the trajectory of maturation. Every little boy enjoys a phase of showing off his might, very skilfully handled by the author in this story.

The roar of a lion captures a symbolic reference to power and authority in the mind of a young boy. Since a loud command echoes supremacy and hushes peers, it is most desirable just like the roar of a lion. The author successfully utilizes the concept and more in this book.

Here, the main character tries his level best to imitate a lion, but his voice fails its impact. The resulting outcome is weak and unworthy. He visits the zoo to hear the real



lion roar, only to discern later the negative bearing of a roar. It jolts, frightens, trembles, and troubles the other animals, evoking fear and hatred in them. It distresses the boy. The little hero rejects roaring, entirely shifting the child's desperate inclination for authority with a pleasant wave and whistle of the elephant and birds.

The simple current of the tale rolls on highs and lows, stalling on expressions emphasizing, 'All for a Roar', drifting into a tide of speedy actions affected by the roar and finally, the soothing efforts towards a cordial transformation. From the first word to the end, the author, Nandini Nayar, excels in maintaining a velvety flow of words lending a readable quality to the text. Young readers would read aloud the story effortlessly.

Animal characters and the hero blend into the storyline adequately and effortlessly in a realistic scenario. No complicated lessons are drawn, nor does the tale deviate from amusement, fostering an affable impression.

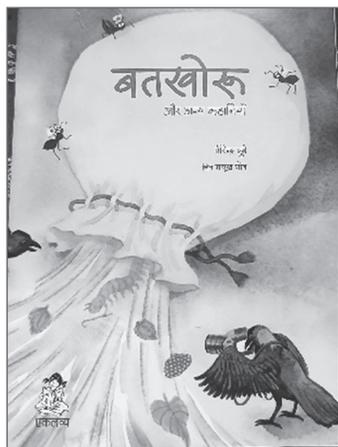
A smooth flow of the pictures as well, is prominent to meet the demands of a picture book. The pictures complement the text efficiently. On each page the illustrator, Anita Thakur, adds features describing the scene: like crowds and passage to the zoo defined by activities of groups of people visiting the zoo, chatting and resting in one frame. Appropriate placement of the backdrop and characters merging well to carry the story forward. Every page forces the readers to dwell upon it longer, reading the illustrations presented in many details enhancing the story element.

In short, it is a child-centric, pleasurable read.

**BAATKHORU AUR ANYA KAHANIYAN**

By Virendra Dubey. Illustrated by Mayukh Ghosh  
Eklavya, 2025, pp. 36, ₹ 80.00

In Hindi, 'Baatkhoru' is a talkative person, just like Babita, the little girl in the story 'Baatkhoru', who talks incessantly to anyone and everyone. She talks even to herself in the mirror asking questions, answering them herself, and is lovingly pampered by her grandmother. Realistically speaking grandmothers, highly respected and beyond all criticism in Indian families, are generally lively family member and loquacious entertainers for their grandchildren. The narrative of short stories in this book follows the free-flowing eloquence of a typical



grandmother.

What marks as the stupendous aspect of 'Baatkhoru' is its unhindered flow of words. A smooth stream of Hindi, reminiscent of a language spoken in small towns, sweet and evidently unimpeded by English intrusions, fulfils the demand of simple tales and situations among a Hindi majority. Certain words, commonly used and charmingly meaningful, sound fascinating in the text due to their strangeness in metros these days, like, 'bolti-batiyati', 'ughare-pughare', and 'itra-phulel'.

In all, there are thirteen stories of animals, people, bees, birds, thieves and disappearing words, some realistic as well as some imaginative. Most of the stories are brief and crisp, dealing with amusing topics—all quaint, intrinsically funny, fantastic and elementary. There are groups of migratory birds enjoying *sangam* waters, community of crows with photography as a hobby, a frog losing its moustache to honey, an utterly chatty girl and a hero, talkative rat. Drawing honey from hives make an interesting event to talk about, similar to the invasion of dacoits upon a bunch of jarring unmelodic musicians. The centipede matron struck with arthritis can never get all the legs treated at the same time by ant nurses; the wonder of frozen lake in summer, the mystery of disappearing words and birthday celebrations of the squeaky village chief account for a collection of hilarious stories. The author, Virendra Dubey, has created a delightful book for young readers.

Likewise, the illustrations by Mayukh Ghosh complete the wonder of these unusual and entertaining tales. The pictures are highly stylized and attractive, competent enough to tickle the funny bone through masterstrokes in the artwork. The illustrations of every story are befitting, thematically and artistically. From the frozen lake to honey-soaked moustache of the frog, the pictures are through and through enchanting.

A fulfilling book such as this one reassures confidence in Eklavya publications and the immaculate quality of their books, which support quality reading material for the young readers.



The Book Review Literary Trust is organizing a seminar, 'Echoes Across Tongues: The Role of Translation in Preserving and Propagating South Indian Literary Heritage', as part of TBR@50 celebrations on 4-5 December, 2025, at the Bangalore International Centre. The event is funded by the Tamil Nadu Text Book Corporation, Chennai. Participants include scholars from all the South Indian States.

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## Contributors

**Aadidev Agarwal** is a seventh grader at The Doon School, Dehradun. He loves reading, stargazing, and history. He is often lost in thought, but never too hard to find.

**Aruna Patel**, former Joint Director, Information & Public Relations, Government of Gujarat, is currently managing Trustee, Media India Centre for Research and Development, New Delhi.

**Aarav Patel** is a sixteen-year eleventh grader at The Doon School, Dehradun.

**Adnan Farooqui** teaches at the Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

**Amol Saghar** is an independent researcher.

**Aniket Chouhan** is an urban practitioner with his areas of focus on caste in urban context, poverty, social protection policy, and migration. He holds an MA (History) from University of Delhi, Delhi, and was awarded Urban Fellow's Program in Indian Institute for Human Settlement (IIHS), 2022-2023.

**Anjana Neira Dev** is Associate Professor of English at Gargi College, University of Delhi, Delhi.

**Anjali Noronha** has a background in Economics and retired in 2020 from Eklavya, Madhya Pradesh, where she worked for nearly four decades on curriculum development, teacher education particularly on Language through children's literature. She has worked on Social Science and National Educational policies and plans with a special focus on inclusion. She can be contacted at noronha.anjali@gmail.com

**Annie Pruthi** is a PhD scholar in the Department of Political Science at the University of Delhi and Research Fellow at PRIDE, Lok Sabha Secretariat, Parliament of India.

**Anuraag Basu** is a tenth-grade student at The Doon School, Dehradun. With a love for books and music, he enjoys fiction with realistic themes, autobiographies, and also pursues the piano and tabla.

**Arish Talwar** studies at The Doon School, Dehradun. He is passionate about Economics, Finance, and International Relations, and enjoys reading classics, political fiction, and thrillers.

**Ashwini Rajpoot** has loved books since before she loved anything else. So, through her work with Parag, she supports those who create books and readers.

**Ashwini Deshpande** is Professor of Economics, Ashoka University, Sonapat, Haryana.

**Bansi** currently works at Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, to bring out books in various Indian languages. Juggling work and people during the day, she thrives in the quiet of the night with a pen or a brush.

**Bhavna Jaisingh** is a development professional. She has worked with both grassroots and global institutions, supporting non-profits committed to feminist rights and youth empowerment, and consulting for the United Nations Development Programme, SEWA Bharat, the World Bank, and India's Ministry of Finance. A keen reader and poetry enthusiast, Bhavna enjoys exploring diverse poetic forms and the performing arts.

**Deepali Shukla** loves delving into a wide range of children's literature. Reading and discussing books with children in the library is also a part of her work. She is involved with libraries and reading, and is connected to the Library Dosti course. She has been associated with Eklavya's publication program for more than a decade.

**Dipavali Debroy Sen**, retired Associate Professor of Economics, Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi, is an academic and writer with a special interest in Indian mythology.

**Eishita Tiwari** is pursuing Master's degree in Political Science at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

**Gauri Sharma** is currently Program Manager for the Delhi Chapter of Social Venture Partners India.

**Ilika Trivedi** is a Senior Research Specialist at Gartner. She has previously worked with The Politics Initiative at Centre for Policy Research and as a Banyan Impact Fellow with American India Foundation.

**Indira Ananthkrishnan** likes to interact with children. She is good at addressing them through the written word as well as the spoken word. Her stories about day-to-day experiences of children as well as historical and scriptural stories have found a good readership; as also biographical sketches, picture books and folk tales.

**Ira Saxena** writes fiction and non-fiction in Hindi and English on themes ranging from computer crime to Gandhian thought. A founding member and Secretary of Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, she promotes Book Therapy, believing in the potential of Literature for healing stress.

**Jane Sahi** has been working in the field of education for 38 years. She is the author of *Education and Peace*, and the Founder of Sita School, an alternative school.

**Jaya Krishnamachari** is a freelance multi-lingual translator.

**Kavita Tiwari** is the Associate Editor of *Chakmak*, a children's magazine published by the Eklavya Foundation. She

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translates and edits children's books as well as science and math articles. She is also a homemaker who enjoys long conversations with her daughter.

**Krithika S** is an independent researcher.

**Kusum Burman** studied English from Miranda House, University of Delhi, Delhi. Before working as a copywriter and Advertising executive. She has authored two best-selling books apart from writing for women's magazines. She spent many years in the tea gardens in Assam; she is a voracious reader and fitness enthusiast as well as a great lover of nature.

**Laila Tyabji** is a designer, craft activist and writer, Chairperson and Founder Member of DASTKAR Society for Crafts & Craftspeople.

**Lakshmi Karunakaran** is an educator and development professional based in Bangalore. She currently works as a consultant with organizations working with children's literature and libraries.

**Lakshmi Subramanian** is former Professor of History, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, and BITS Pilani, Goa. Her recent publications include *India Before the Ambanis* (Penguin, 2024).

**Lonav Ojha** is a writer from Tezpur, Assam. His work has appeared in *The Apollonian*, *Mukoli*, *Writers Resist*, *ASAP Art*, *Agents of Ishq*, *Open Dosa* and *LiveWire*. A graduate of EFLU, Hyderabad, he founded the online journal, *Sagar Square*.

**Manika Kukreja** is an enthusiastic children's book 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.

**Meena Bhargava**, former Associate Professor, Department of History, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi, is a historian of medieval and early modern South Asia.

**Mridul Moran** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Assamese, Dergaon Kamal Dowerah College, Assam, and Research Scholar at the Department of Assamese, Dibrugarh University, Assam.

**Mubashshara Mehfooz** is currently pursuing Master's in Political Science at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

**Namita Ranganathan**, Professor in the Department of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi, is the author of several books. She works extensively on Childhood and Adolescence.

**Neena Jaisingh** delights in discovering new voices in literature. She holds degrees in English Literature, teaching, and journalism, and has worked as an English teacher and with NGOs, producing newsletters.

**Neetu Yadav** lives in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. She is currently part of the Eklavya Foundation's publishing wing and the Library Se Dosti course. She has two published books for children— *Pathroot Ka Lakshya: Who is Lakshman Gaikwad?* (Room to Read) and *Naarm-Garam Dosti* (Muskaan).

**Nita Berry** writes short stories, picture and activity books, historical biographies and full-length non-fiction for children of all ages.

**Paresh Kumar** likes reading and the good life. To sustain these interests, he works as a Project Manager at GE Power.

**Partho Datta** teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

**Phongang Buchem**, sixteen, is a class eleven Humanities student at The Doon School, Dehradun. Along with his academic interests, he is passionate about reading, and also enjoys playing football and the guitar.

**Pinkal Chaudhuri** is Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi.

**Prabir Purkayastha** is writer, journalist and activist based in New Delhi.

**Prathana Pankaj** is sixteen and studies in class eleven at The Doon School, Dehradun.

**Prateek Vatash** is an artist and illustrator based in India. His work involved neon-infused visuals, often combining 3D and 2D mixed media elements. In his personal work, he enjoys playing with the idea of imperfections, bending rules of graphic design, and experimenting with new traditional and digital art techniques.

**Radhika Chhaparia** has obtained an MA in Education from Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. She has also worked at the Center for Learning (CFL) school, near Bengaluru.

**Rafay Habibullah** is an eleventh grader studying at The Doon School in Dehradun. While he mainly studies the life sciences, he is an avid reader and enjoys many genres of literature, spending much of his free time perusing the books available to him and studying for science Olympiads.

**Ragini Lalit** has been working as a teacher and loves exploring using music, children's literature, and writing with her students. Presently, she is pursuing a PhD from Ambedkar University, Delhi.

**Ritika Gour** is a writer, researcher, and filmmaker with an MA in Arts & Aesthetics from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. A recipient of the Dada Saheb Phalke Award, her work explores the intersections of Visual Studies and Art History.

**Ritvik Agrawal** is a class ten student at The Doon School, Dehradun. He writes poetry and reviews for the school magazine, and volunteers in projects to preserve local culture and heritage.

**Rohini Rangachari Karnik** teaches French and holds a law degree. She is interested in art and culture.

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**Ruchi** has set on to an exciting new journey within Eklavya, pursuing her calling in organization system strengthening and well-being of it's members. She is also on the team for a new certificate course offered by Eklavya, on, Education for Dialogue, Maitri and Justice.

**S Narendra**, First Media Cons, is former Information Adviser to Prime Minister, Government of India. He currently resides in Gurgaon, Haryana.

**Samridhi Agarwal** is an incoming MRes student at the Paris School of Economics. She has worked with CEGIS and the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), and is a graduate of the Barcelona School of Economics.

**Seema** is an editor, translator and an avid reader of literature for children's works with Eklavya's Children's Literature editorial team. Her interest lies in challenging existing social norms and stereotypes.

**Semeen Ali** has four books of poetry to her credit. Her works have featured in several national and international journals as well as anthologies. Her new anthology on women's writings will be published this year. Apart from reviewing books, she is also the Fiction and the Poetry editor for the literary journal *Muse India*.

**Shagun Tomar** is a graduate in Political Science from Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, Delhi, and is pursuing her Master's in Political Science at Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi.

**Shailaja Srinivasan** is a Bhopal-based children's book editor and enthusiast. In her spare time, she loves gardening.

**Shazia Salam** works in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Delhi.

**Shiv Narayan Gour** is a writer and an editor. He has been working in the field of publication and education with Eklavya Foundation for over two decades. His area of work includes language, library learning methods, reading pedagogy, children's literature and pedagogical approaches. His appreciation for the world of stories is reflected in his recent book, *Barah Sau Ki Baati aur Any Kisse*.

**Shivani** uses literature to help children widen their understanding and perception of the diversity around them, besides developing their reading, oral and written language skills. A linguist by training, she is at present Advisory Faculty and Mentor with the Library Educators Course team of Parag Initiative (Tata Trusts). She has run a Children's Book Club for eight years, worked with the Primary Education Program of Eklavya, MP and on Adult Literacy with Nirantar, Delhi in the past. Apart from LEC, she also translates and edits for BBB—*Bookworm Beyond Borders*, a quarterly newsletter for Librarians published by Bookworm, Goa.

**Shivani Bajaj** has been engaging with varied realities of Adivasi and Vimukta people in her work in education and human rights. She is part of the publications team at Muskaan, which strives to bring in diversity and unheard voices in children's literature.

**Shivi** a writer, researcher and spoken word artist, works as a PGT at St Thomas's School, Dwarka.

**Simran Chadha** teaches English Literature at Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi, Delhi. She has published extensively on South Asian Literature and Film and taught similar courses at Valparaiso University, Illinois, USA.

**Simran Sadh** likes to take children's literature not only to children but to anyone and everyone. Her interest area lies in early literacy and children's literature. She is currently with the Free Libraries Network.

**Somdatta Mandal**, critic and translator, is former Professor of English at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

**Sonam** currently works with the Shiksha Sahitya team at Eklavya and is also a part of Gender In Classroom and Malwa Mahila Kabir Yatra Team.

**Sucharita Sengupta** teaches at the Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia. She has edited *The Thief's Funeral: The Book Review Anthology of Short Fiction*, along with Chandra Chari and Uma Iyengar.

**Sudhamahi Regunathan** Author and translator, is former Vice Chancellor, Jain Vishwa Bharati Institute (Deemed University).

**Sunat** has just finished her Master's from the Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

**TCA Anant** is former Professor, Delhi School of Economics; former Member, Union Public Service Commission; former Chief Statistician of India (2010-2018).

**Toolika Wadhwa** is Associate Professor, Education, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi.

**Uma Chakravarti** is a feminist historian who taught at Miranda House, University of Delhi, Delhi for more than three decades. She has been associated with the women's movement and the movement for democratic rights since the 1980s. Uma began to make films in 2010 as one way of documenting women's history and has made eight films to date, most of which have been screened with difficulty!

**Uma Krishnaswamy** is a distinguished children's book writer; Faculty Emirata at Vermont College teaching creative writing and a blogger.

**Vian Bawa** is a twelve-year-old student at The Doon School, Dehradun. When he's not out in nature with his camera and binoculars, he's exploring the quiet corners of libraries, hunting for books—especially the ones packed with facts, trivia, and curious knowledge.

**Vikas Baniwal** is Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi.

**Vinita Bhargava** Ph.D. is retired Professor, Department Of Human Development and Childhood Studies, Lady Irwin College, University of Delhi, Delhi.

**Vishesh Unni Raghunathan** is a poet and Chartered Accountant from Chennai.

**Vivek BG** works in areas of children's education and literature, and finds himself always surrounded by books. He considers himself lucky to all-too-often stumble upon some gems of books.

**Vyjayanti Raghavan**, former Professor, Centre for Korean Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, is the author of several books on international relations.

**Yugveer Agarwal** is a thirteen-year-old eighth grader at The Doon School, Dehradun—part bookworm, part sportsman; full-time enthusiast.

**Yusra Khan** is a postgraduate student at the Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi.

**Zorawar Singhal** is fifteen years old; a tenth grader at The Doon School, Dehradun. He spends his time reading and writing.



The Book Review Literary Trust set up in October 1989 to disseminate information about advances in knowledge and books, is a non-political, ideologically non-partisan organization, and seeks to reflect all shades of intellectual opinions and ideas.

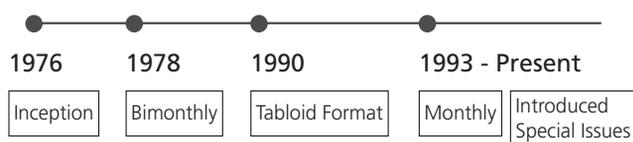
### Objectives

- Publication of the monthly magazine *The Book Review*
- The running of such other magazines/publications;
- Organizing exhibitions of books;
- Organizing seminars on themes of relevance to the objectives of the Trust;
- Providing financial assistance for publishers to publish seminal works in several disciplines at subsidized prices;
- Awarding scholarships, prizes for meritorious research and publication;
- Undertaking publication, sale and distribution of books;
- Running freelance or syndicated columns in newspapers, magazines and the like.

### The Book Review

*The Book Review*, India's first review journal in English, was started in 1976 by Chitra Narayanan, Uma Iyengar and Chandra Chari.

### The Development of the Journal: A Brief Time Line



1. Set up to promote Indian publications and Indian authors, particularly those in the Indian languages;
2. Encourage and develop high-quality translations of works in the Indian languages;
3. Develop a culture of critical in-depth reviews, leveraging the expertise of the best in a given field;
4. Promote awareness of studies in special areas of concern by publishing special issues on Gender, Indian Languages, Children's Books, South Asia, International Relations, Politics, History, Media Studies.

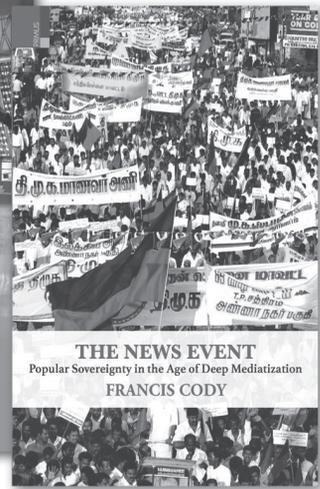
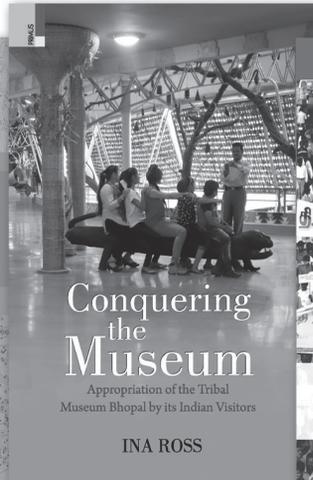
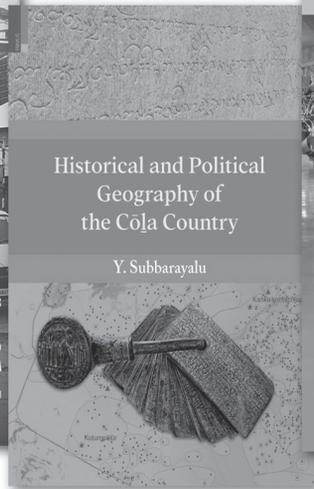
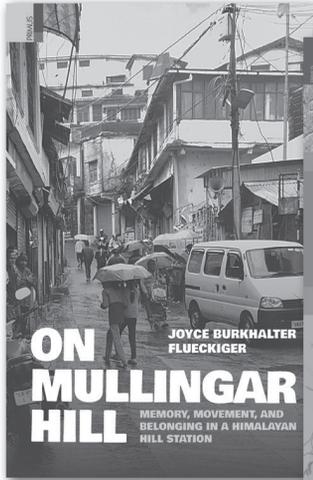
### Seminars

- Big Dams and Displaced People – January 1993
- Women Writing in India: From the 6th Century to the Present – August 1993
- The Role of Critical Reviews: An International Colloquium – February 1995
- Reviewing and the Publishing Industry – February 1996
- Subversive Sites: Women's Engagements with the Law – September 1996
- Anuvaad: Linking Literatures – October 1996
- Role of Critical Reviews: A Dialogue with Robert Silvers & Rea Hederman of *The New York Review of Books* – November 1997
- On Critical Reviewing – in New Delhi, Chennai and the University of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, USA between 1993 and 1997
- International seminar on 'War Peace and Hegemony in a Globalized World' – 2006
- International Colloquium on – 'Superpower Rivalry in the 20th Century: Lessons for the 21st Century' – 2008
- The Role of The Public Intellectual, March 2015
- Questioning Paradigms, Constructing Histories: A Festschrift for Romila Thapar, March 2018

### Lectures

- 1996 *Toward Freedom and Beyond* –Nikhil Chakravartty
- 1996 *A Small Craft Industry: Reflections on Reviewing* – Barbara Epstein
- 1997 *On Biographies and Kings* – Romila Thapar
- 1999 *Development as Freedom* – Amartya Sen (1st Nikhil Charavartty Memorial Lecture)
- 2004 *War Peace and World Hegemony in the 20th Century* – Eric Hobsbawm (2nd Nikhil Chakravartty Memorial Lecture)
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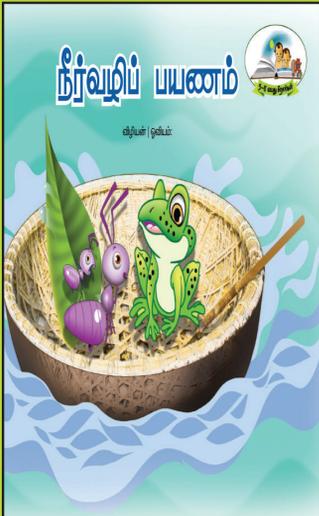
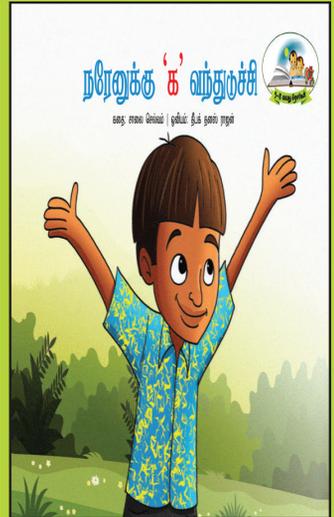
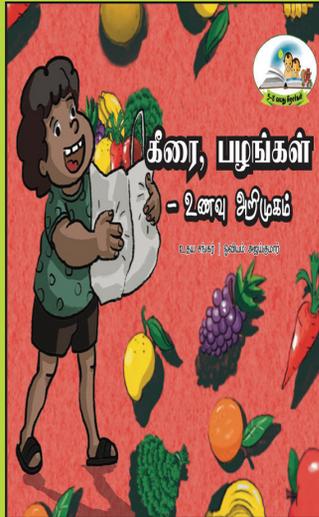
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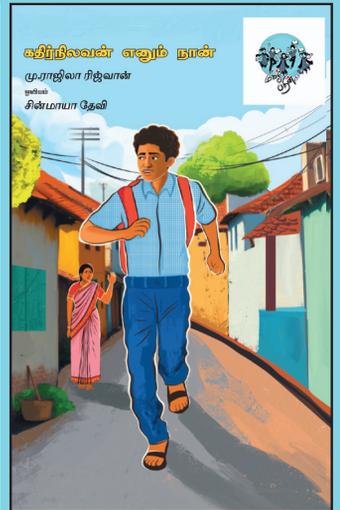
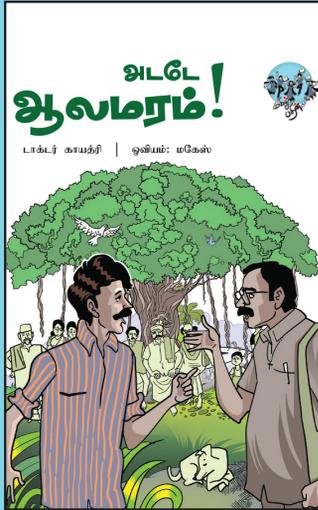
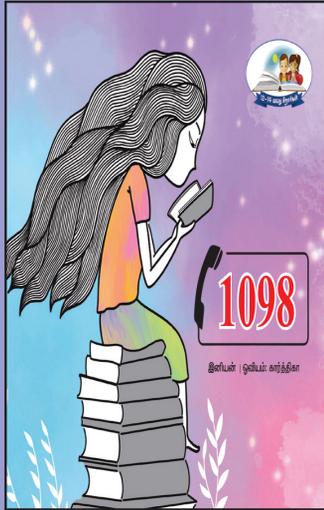
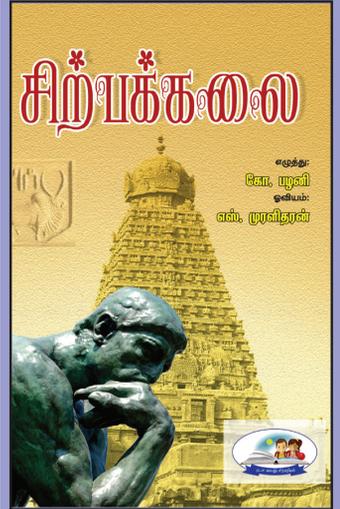
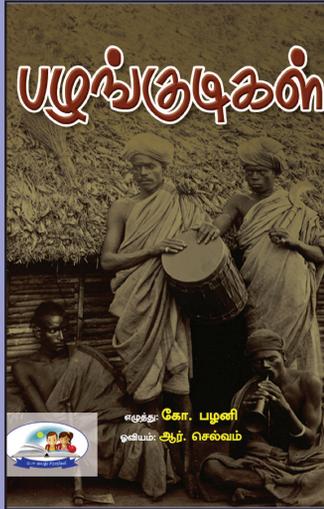
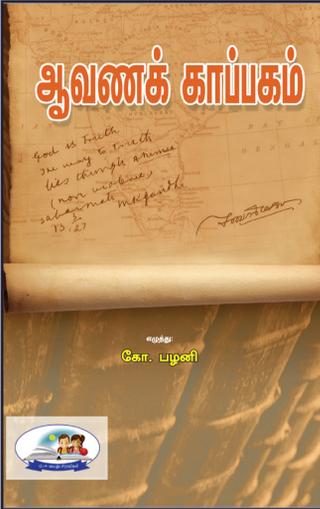
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