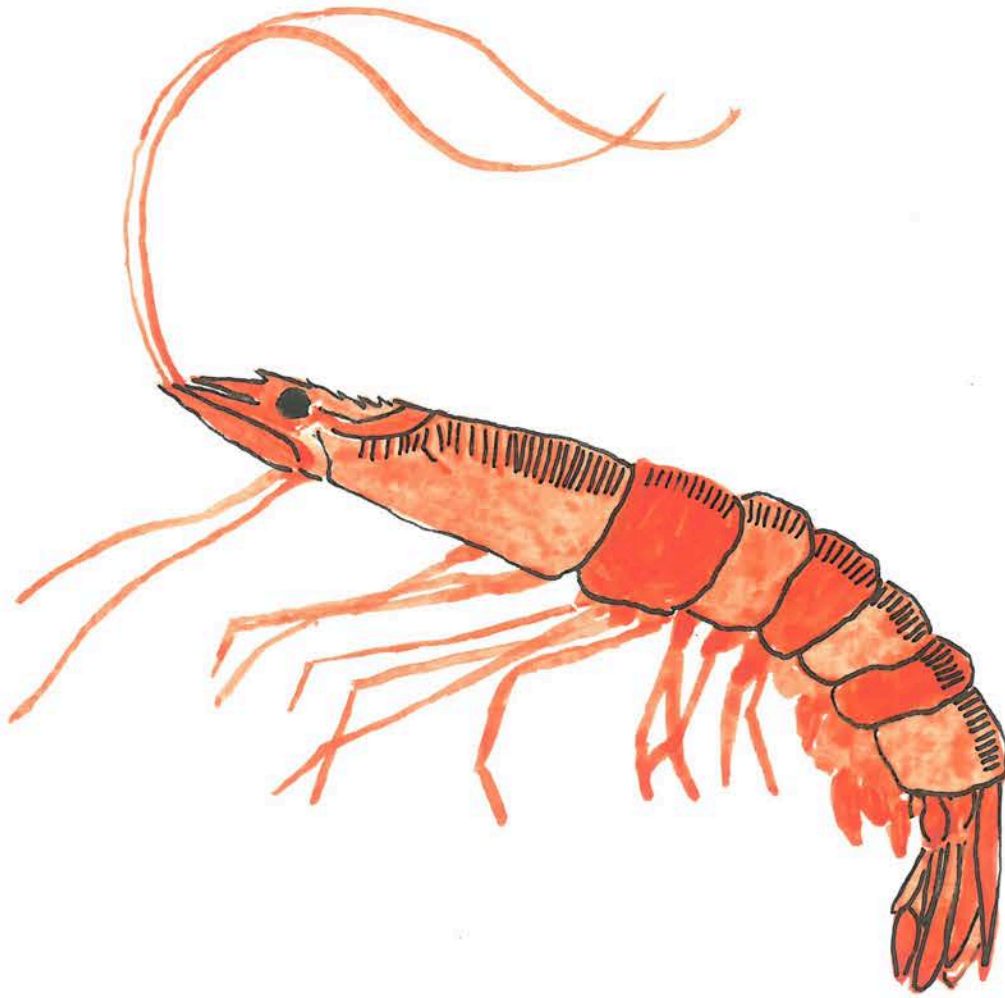


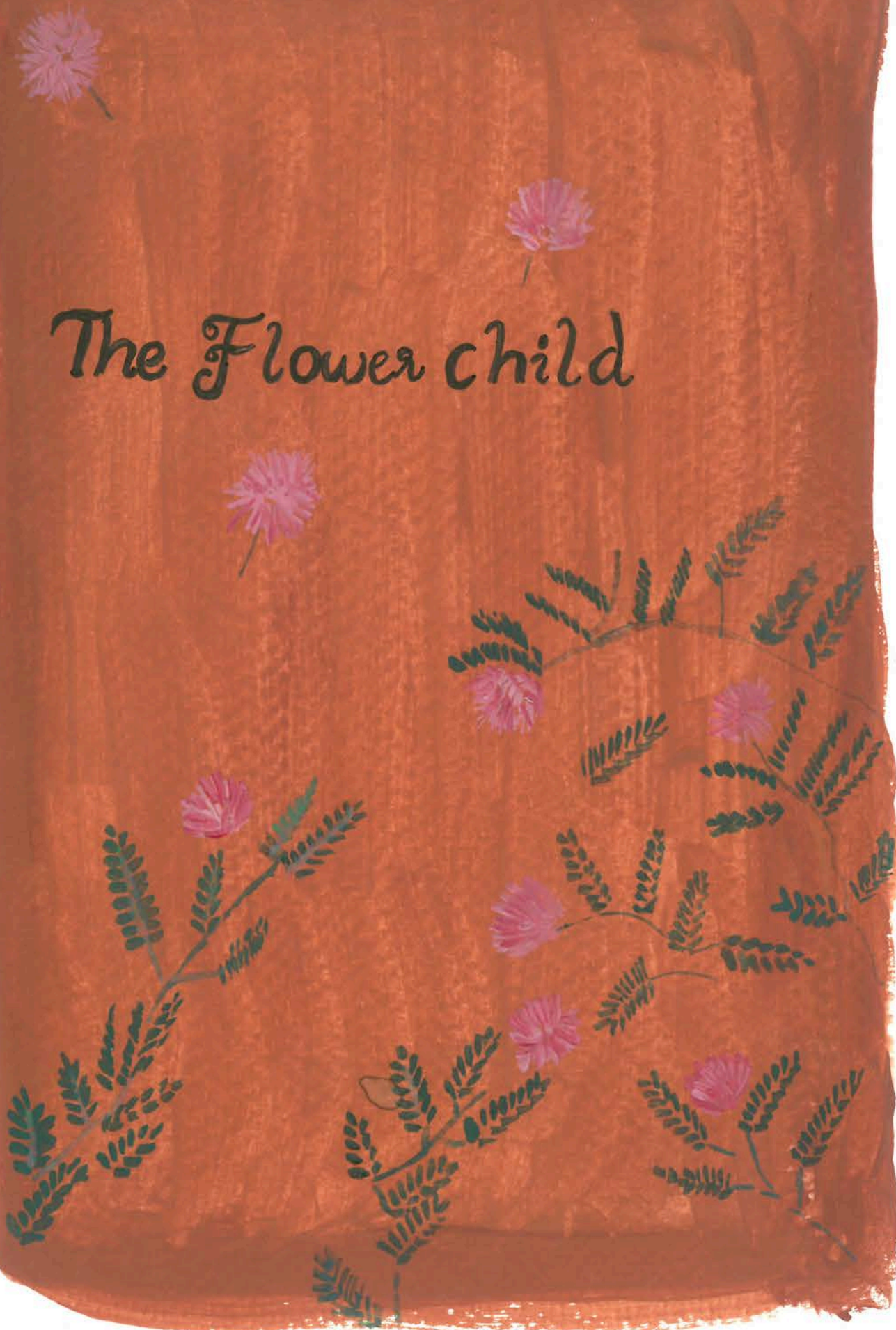
Defining Herself

smells and struggles



Written & Illustrated By
Nimmis

The Flower child





Kunjumini was full of life. she had thick locks of curly hair, wide berry eyes and skin that glowed like chocolate in the Sun. she looked at the world with boundless enthusiasm and love, gasping at the beauty of flowers, sky and trees.



They whispered back
their love in a tender
breeze:

"A tiny heart and a
smile so pure!"

They might have wondered:
How could someone
smile like this
despite all her hardships?



Mini was born into an 'Ezhava' family, a backward caste in Kerala, as the elder daughter of Madhavan and chellamma. Madhavan toiled as a labourer for the upper castes in the village. He was a coconut husker. chellamma earned a living by peeling shrimp. Mini also had a younger brother.



Despite being illiterate and poor,
they managed to send both their
children to school.



Mini began working in the shrimp peeling shed alongside her mother as a child. It was never perceived as child labour, instead it was seen as a necessity to support the family. The work started very early in the morning, before dawn. Mini had to head to the shrimp peeling centre before attending school every day. Some days she had to go back to work after school.



Being the only girl child in the family, Mini had additional responsibilities and restrictions at home, unlike her brother.

But when she shares stories from her childhood, she always highlights the joyful memories rather than the hardships. She fondly reminisces about the lively chitchat at the shrimp peeling centre between the women.



How they used to go together
for late night screenings of
old Malayalam movies at
the nearby theatre.



The games she played with friends while cutting grass for the cows and goats

How she loved plucking
flowers to make 'pookkalam'
for the 'Onam' festival
and watching
'Kaikottikali' during
that time.





How she beat her
cousin brothers
in a swim race!

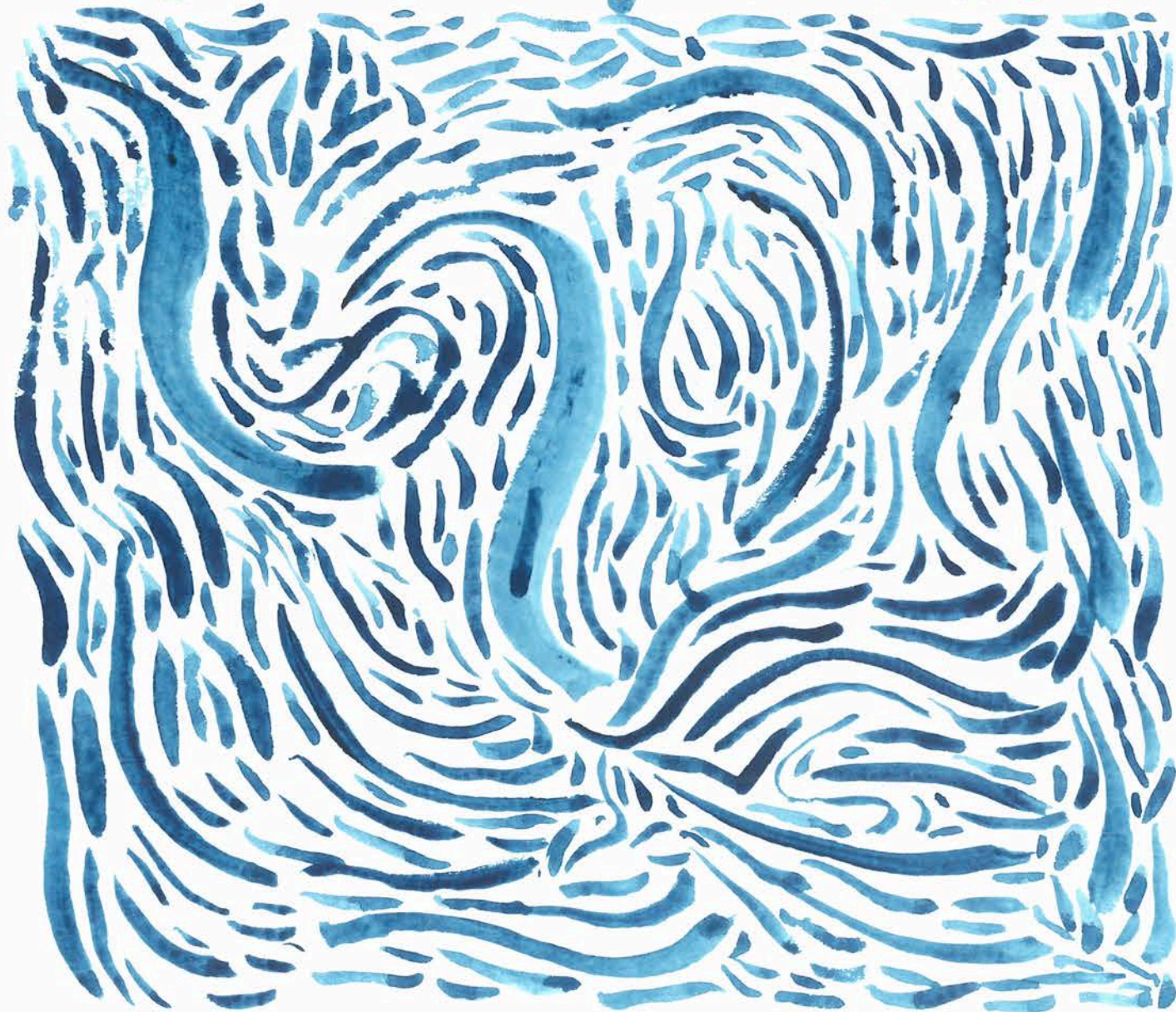
Preserving these small
moments of content is her
strength, and perhaps that's
how she thrives.

"Joy as survival,
Joy as resistance,
Joy as the fuel of her
very being!!"





Memoria of an ink





There was a weathered grey bag in our house which contained some torn old papers and random neglected stuff. One day, I found a letter inside



It was an inland letter, which had a drawing of a beautiful rose beside the address

bar. An old letter addressed to my mom.

My mother, a lover of flowers, especially roses and hibiscuses, cherished the sender, her cousin sister who worked as a Nurse in a government medical college.



There was so much warmth in the letter, I felt like their friendship was more profound than the family tie. I don't know where that letter disappeared. But I still remember the flower, the warmth of the words filled in blue and how my mother kept it dear. Amma loved and respected that woman. But her voice became sad whenever she talked about her.



Amma also wanted to become a 'Nurse'. But, she couldn't afford that childhood dream. For much of her life, she toiled as a shrimp-peeler, her sole income until the age of 40. She never got time to invest in her studies, but she was the only one in the locality who cleared the SSLC (10th Board exam) in her first attempt.



The surprising news spread in no time. How an 'Ezhava' girl, who barely got enough time to sleep, who worked as a shrimp peeler, day and night to feed her family, cleared this exam, while privileged kids of caste and class failed.

A woman even came to her workplace to curse at her because her only son, who went for a paid coaching class failed the exam. she said,

"If a girl from this filth of prawn shells passes this exam, there is something wrong with it!"



My mother was a 'First-generation learner - one of the first women from her community in the village to attend college. She joined the pre-degree course at 'Sree Narayana college, cheethala, a half hour bus ride away. Her mornings were a whirlwind of shrimp peeling, household chores and a bus journey to college.

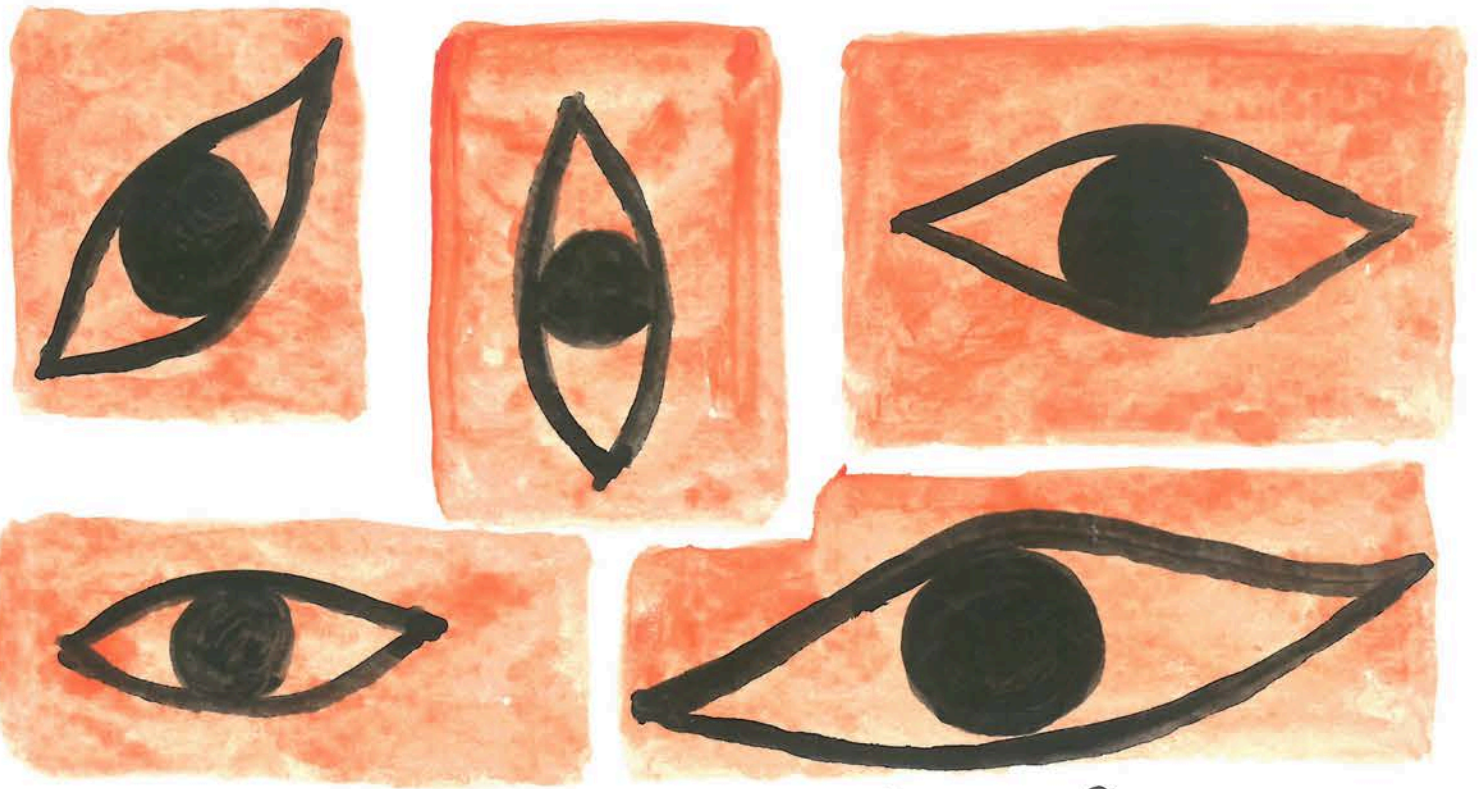


There is a beautiful story she shares about her time in college. She had a best friend called Ajitha. They used to travel in the same bus. Before entering the college gate, Ajitha would gently take Amma's hand, sniff it and check whether the smell of prawn still lingers. She scolds Amma for using washing soap instead of bathing soap and used to bring talcum powder from home for Amma.

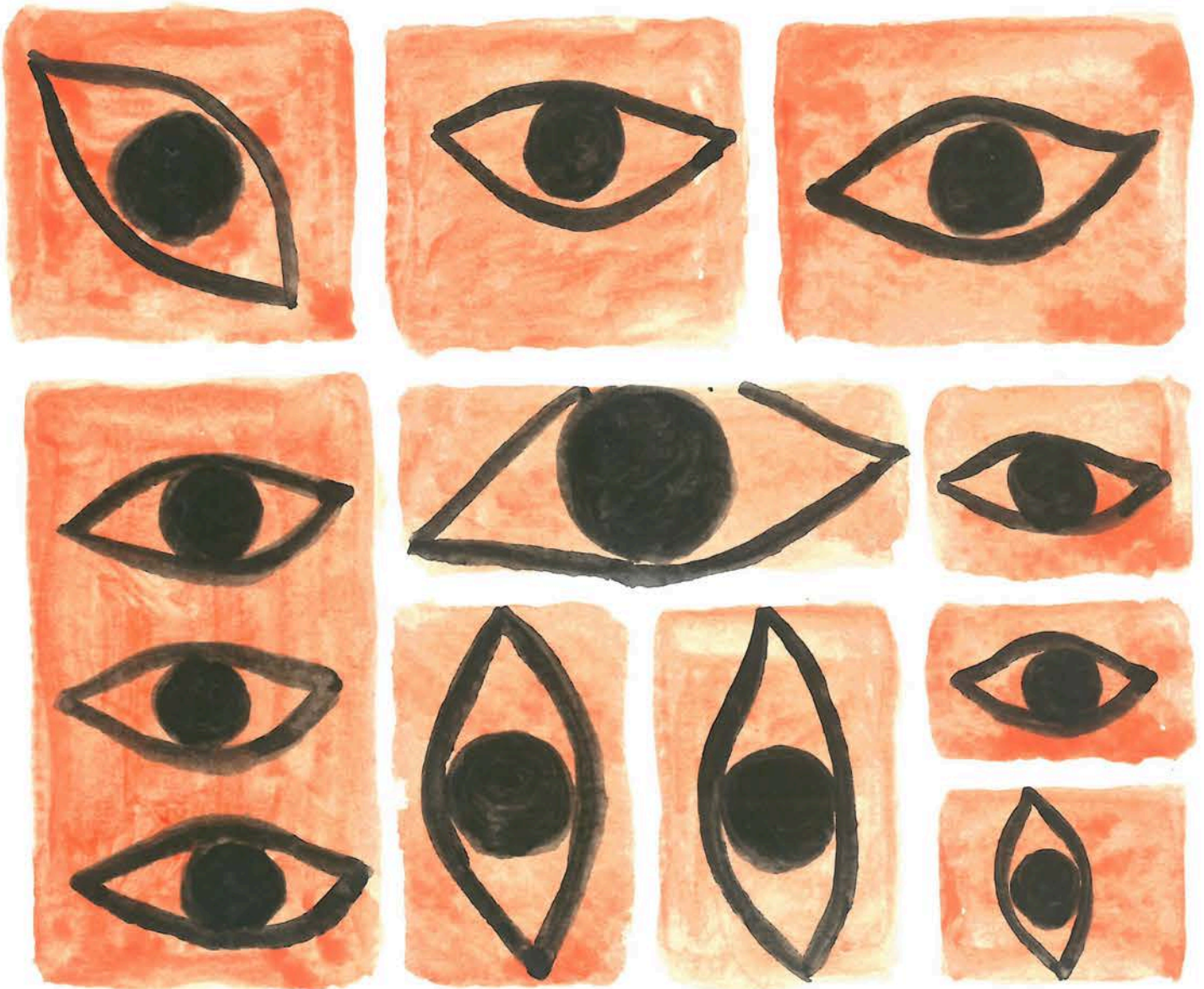


Amma says, "Nobody ever held my hand like that." Everybody was disgusted by the smell of shrimp and by the person who bore that smell. Ajitha used to take Amma's hand as a ritual every day, without causing her any humiliation, giving only empathy and love. Amma never met Ajitha again after college. She doesn't know where she is now, whom she is married to, or how many kids she has.

she gets a lump in the throat whenever she talks about Ajitha. That is the fate of female friendships, right? They fade over time while the women are enslaved to the system.



staring at the stigma





When she married at the age of 22,
My mother didn't have many expectations
or hopes apart from living in less poverty.
Anyway she didn't have a choice other
than to marry the man her parents chose
for her.



The conditions at her in-law's house were even worse than at her own home. My father's erratic income forced my mother to return to shrimp peeling. After having two of us, two girls, it was very difficult for her to bring us up



My Achan was ashamed that his wife was employed in a lowly job. At the same time, he could not provide for us. Amma would go to work fustively. There were fights between Amma and Achan every day. still Achan didn't look for any way to lift his family out of poverty. He didn't find a way to raise his kids, to feed and educate them. My mother was the sole earner of the family.

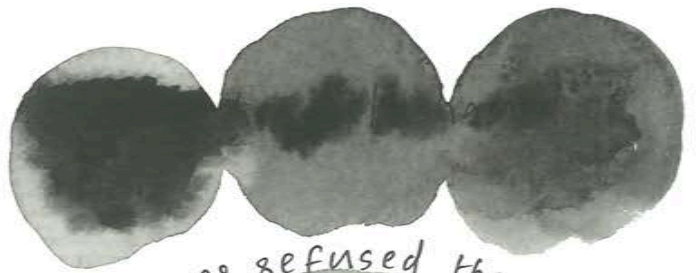


she had arthritis and joint pain. Her working environment involved sitting in a very cold room filled with huge blocks of ice. This aggravated her condition. The women who came to the peeling sheds were very poor. But Amma was the poorest. They wouldn't go for lunch: first, because they didn't have enough money to buy lunch and second, so that they could work a little more in that time to earn a few extra rupees.

Every Friday Amma got her wages according to the tokens she had earned. Peeling one basin of shrimp earned her one token, worth very little money. she always says,

"I don't have speed, if I had speed I could have earned more". on that day, she would pay off the debts at the grocery shop for the week, buy us some snacks, and give the rest of the money to my father.





He never refused the money
But he never acknowledged
her efforts and work. And she
never kept her money either. She
was so conditioned in the patriarchal
set-up that she believed she didn't have
the right to spend her money, even if it
was hard earned by her. That right fell
to the man in the family. He made her ashamed
of herself. So much so that even we, her children
were ashamed. If we passed shrimp peeling women
on our way to school, we would pinch our noses
in disgust.

The smell was very fierce.
It would persist even after
my mother had a bath
after work. The smell
persisted in her saree,

in her curly hair,
in her touch...

we were ashamed of
owning her reality. of
owning her as she was
and acknowledging how,
her smell was the smell of
our own survival!





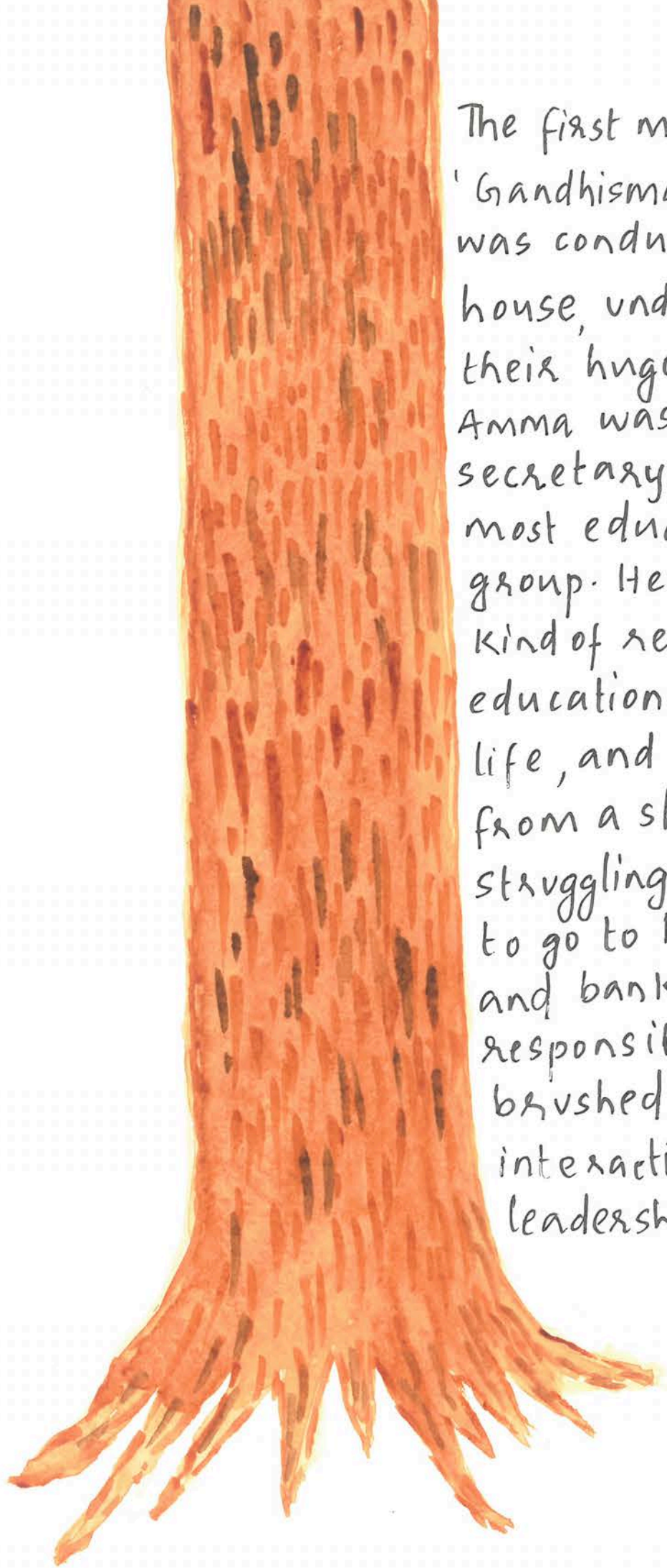
Mountains that merge



There is a saying in Malayalam: "Nalu mala cheyannalum, Nalu mular-
cheyilla" which means it is easier for mountains to merge than
it is for two pairs of breasts. Implies, It is impossible to make
a collective of women.



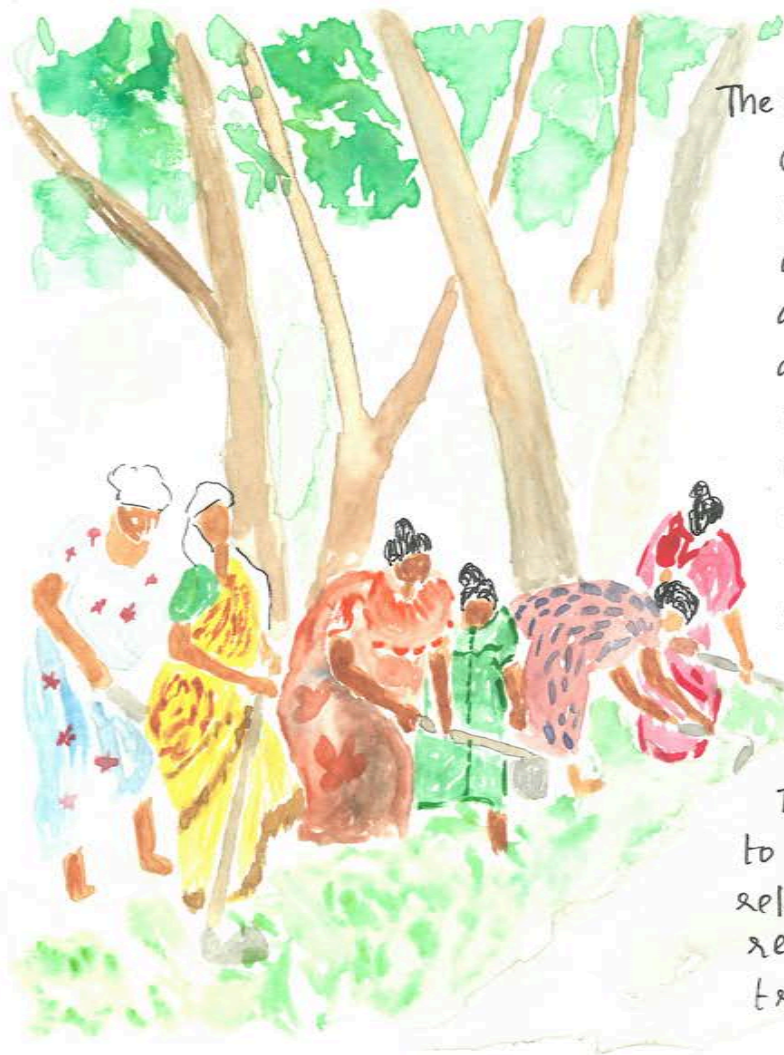
Kerala introduced 'Kudumbashree' a poverty eradication mission, in 1998. It is one of the largest networks of women in the world. It has a three tier structure with neighbourhood groups (NHGs) known as 'Ayalkootam' in Kerala.



The first meeting of 'Grandhismarakam' Ayalkoottam was conducted at vsha chechi's house, under the shade of their huge teak tree. Amma was elected as its secretary as she was the most educated one in the group. Here, finally was a kind of recognition of the education, she got later in life, and an identity separate from a shrimp peeler and struggling mother. she had to go to panchayats, meetings and banks with this responsibility and this brushed up her social-interactive skills and leadership quality.

'Ayalkoottam' meetings happened every Sunday. Men mocked this meeting as a waste of time and just an occasion for women to get together to gossip. However, most of the men in the family pressured women to take loans from this self help group. So, most of the time, it was the woman who was repaying the debt. They took loans for home renovation, marriage, everything. Still all they heard was: 'what have you done for the family?'

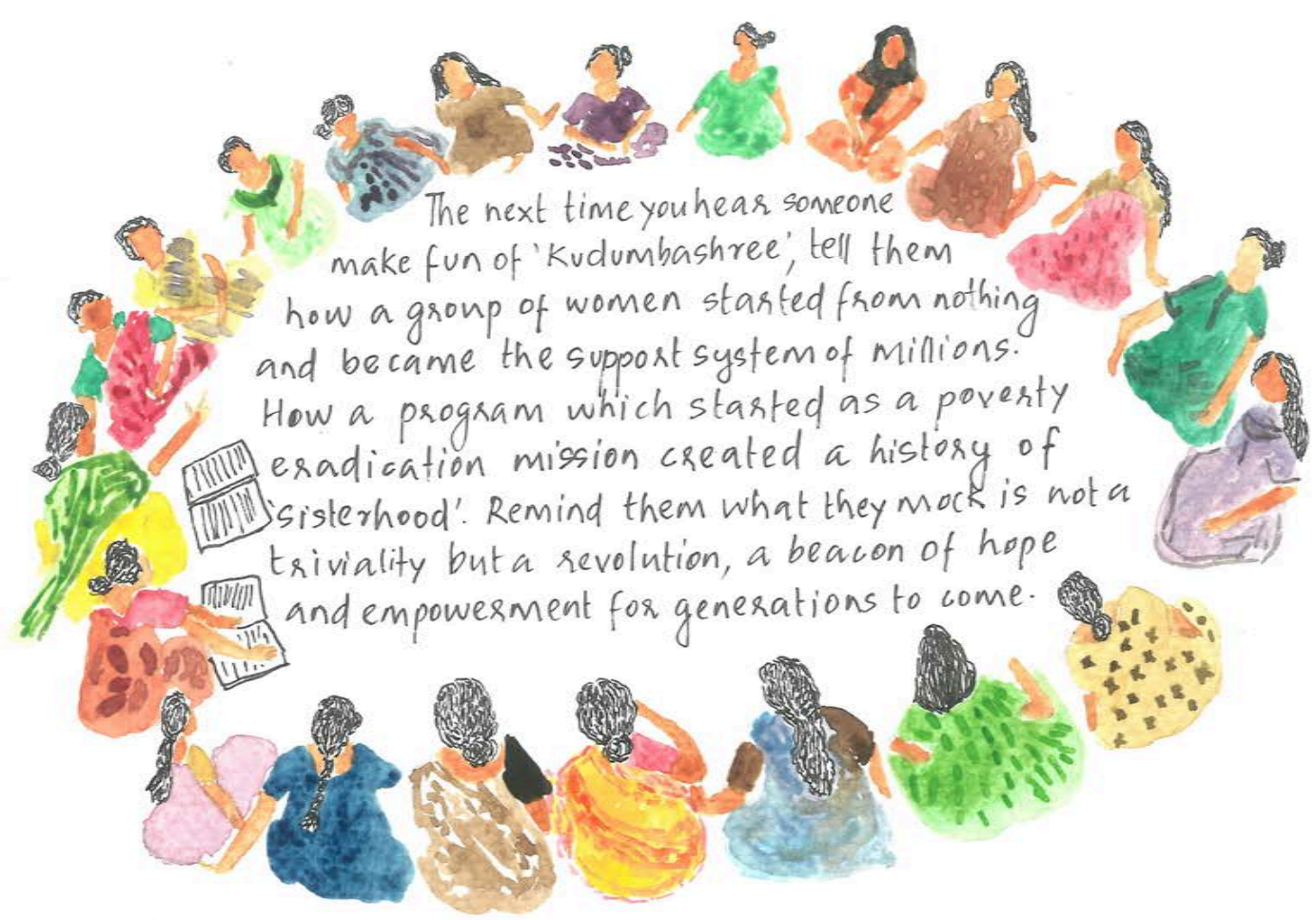




The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was passed in 2005. My mother's health was not good at that time. The working environment at the shrimp peeling centre was affecting her arthritis very seriously. MGNREGA opened an opportunity to work in our locality itself, which greatly enabled accessibility. The women employed under MGNREGA (known as 'Thozhilurappu in Kerala') were often mocked that they were looting the Government's money without doing any work. The men also did not like women to enjoy any kind of leisure or relaxation. If MGNREGA employees rested for a minute, it would be treated like a crime.



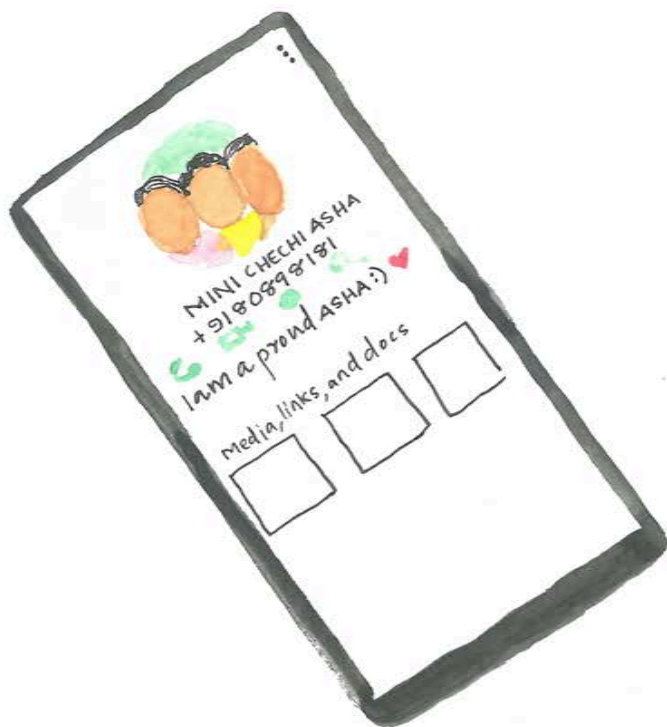
The women in the NHG were housewives or daily wage labourers. Most of them were illiterate—they could not even sign the minutes book. But these women were creating one of the largest collective of women in the world. Kudumbashree now owns a network of hotels & businesses, and different initiatives are led under this program. Many Kudumbashree members participate in elections. They even donated 11.2 crore rupees to the chief minister's disaster relief fund during the floods in Kerala (2018)



The next time you hear someone make fun of 'Kudumbashree', tell them how a group of women started from nothing and became the support system of millions. How a program which started as a poverty eradication mission created a history of 'sisterhood'. Remind them what they mock is not a triviality but a revolution, a beacon of hope and empowerment for generations to come.

WHERE IS THE HONOUR?

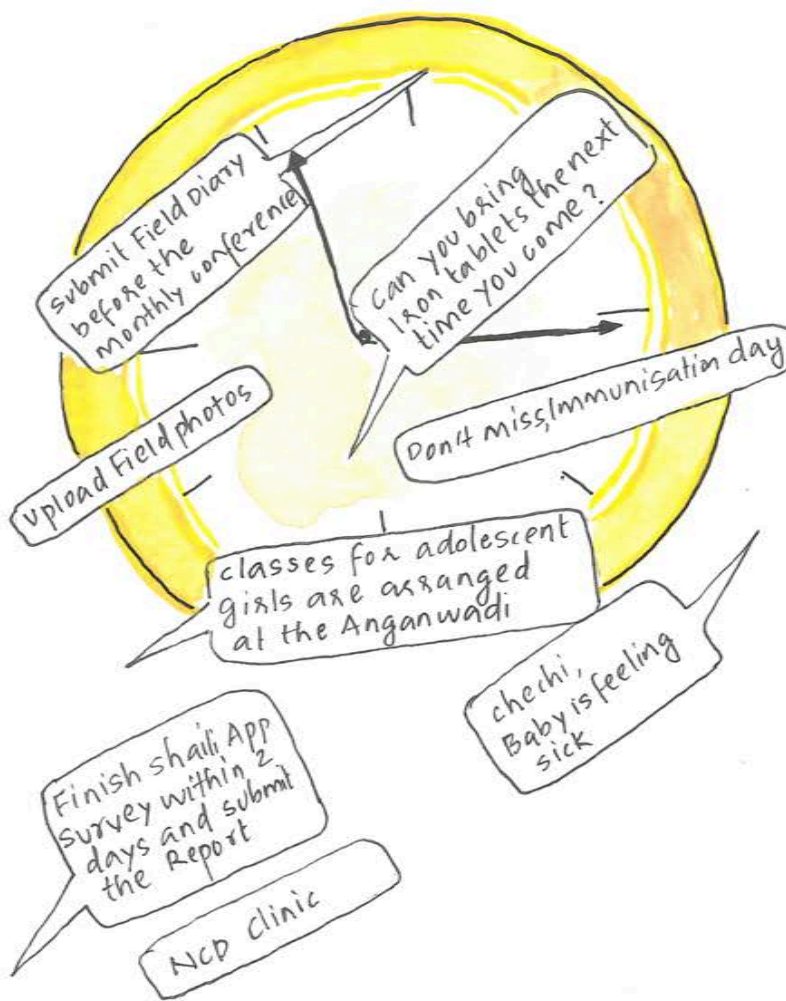




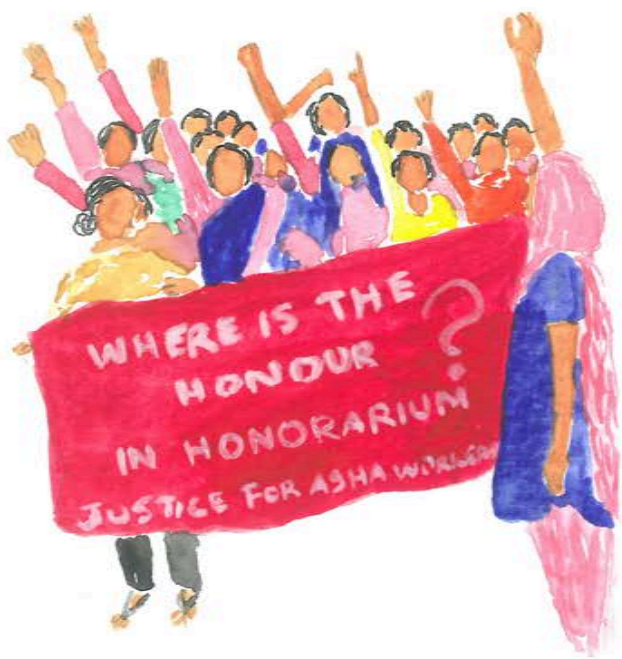
Amma's WhatsApp bio says, she is a 'proud ASHA worker'. It's been 15 years since she was selected as an ASHA worker in our ward. Even though she couldn't fulfill her childhood dream of becoming a nurse, the chance to work as a health worker made her happy. Numerous training sessions and workshops included in the ASHA worker's training module, made her confident and boosted her self worth.



Accredited social Health Activists, commonly known as ASHA workers, are trained female community health activists. Launched in 2005 under the National Health Mission, the initiative aimed to have ASHA workers in every village in India, for a population of 1000-2500 people. Currently, it stands as one of the world's largest networks of female community Health workers.



We tease Amma by calling her, the 'Busy Prime Minister' as she is always occupied with work. ASHA workers don't have fixed working hours. Their phones buzz constantly, and people complain if they don't answer. They don't receive a proper salary; Instead they get an 'honorarium', which fails to meet even the minimum wage requirement. This gets delayed often too.



ASHA workers throughout the country protest for better wages and working conditions, but their voices are not heard. The government seems to take them for granted. They gained global recognition and appreciation for their tireless effort to fight the covid pandemic in India as frontline workers. They risked their lives to save others, even having to attend cremations of people who died of covid when family members were hesitant to be present.



Sobhana Sudhakaran, Omana KT, Shyla Beevi...
these are some of the names of women
memorialised in the ASHA worker's field diary
in Kerala. These women sacrificed their lives
while serving as frontline workers during
the covid pandemic. officially, over 150 ASHA
workers have lost their lives in this cause,
but this number is arguably higher.



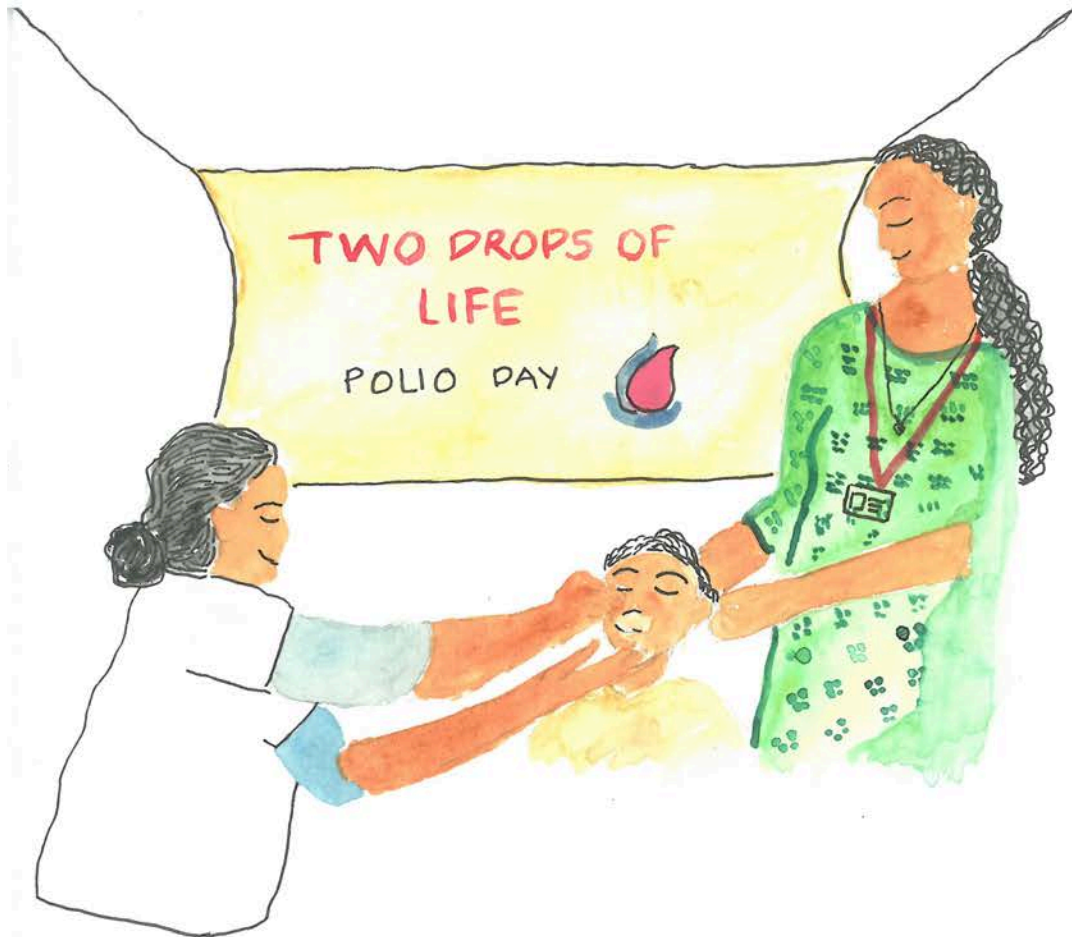
But what do they get for being the backbone of the public health system in India? Words of appreciation disappear when they demand better wages, recognition as government employees and associated benefits.



Although the National Health Mission (NHM) emphasizes that ASHA worker's job should be limited to 2-3 hours a day without affecting their quality of life and primary livelihood, as they have to work more than 12 hours a day, even on weekends and are discouraged from engaging in other employment. Amma always works late into the night to write reports and fill forms.



ASHA workers now need smartphones for work. They receive all information from higher officials via WhatsApp and have to take photos in the field, collect data and conduct surveys using smartphones. Amma struggled to learn how to use a smartphone, and many middle aged women like her also struggled. When their work demanded a smartphone, nobody asked if they could afford one. A full month's honorarium is not enough to buy a phone, but they had to buy it with their own money.



In the midst of balancing household chores and fieldwork, I have often seen Amma skipping meals and rushing around. She is always in a hurry, never relaxed. I have never seen Amma taking time off for herself. Sometimes, a long bath is a luxury for her. The unpaid labours at home and the underpaid overwork as an ASHA worker have affected her mental health and well-being.



Why don't they quit? why do they suffer so much silently? Amma runs the family with the crumbs of money she receives. Even though she is underpaid, she can't give up this job. It is not just about the money for her, It is her identity. I wish she and countless other women would consider themselves as much as they serve others. I wish society recognized how much it owes these women.



When I told Amma my proposal to create a visual biography of her had been chosen to receive a contract from CREA, she burst into tears. "Why me?" she asked, "I am not special!" I always wanted to tell your stories to the world, Amme. I wanted you to see how special you are. To my storyteller, the flower child!