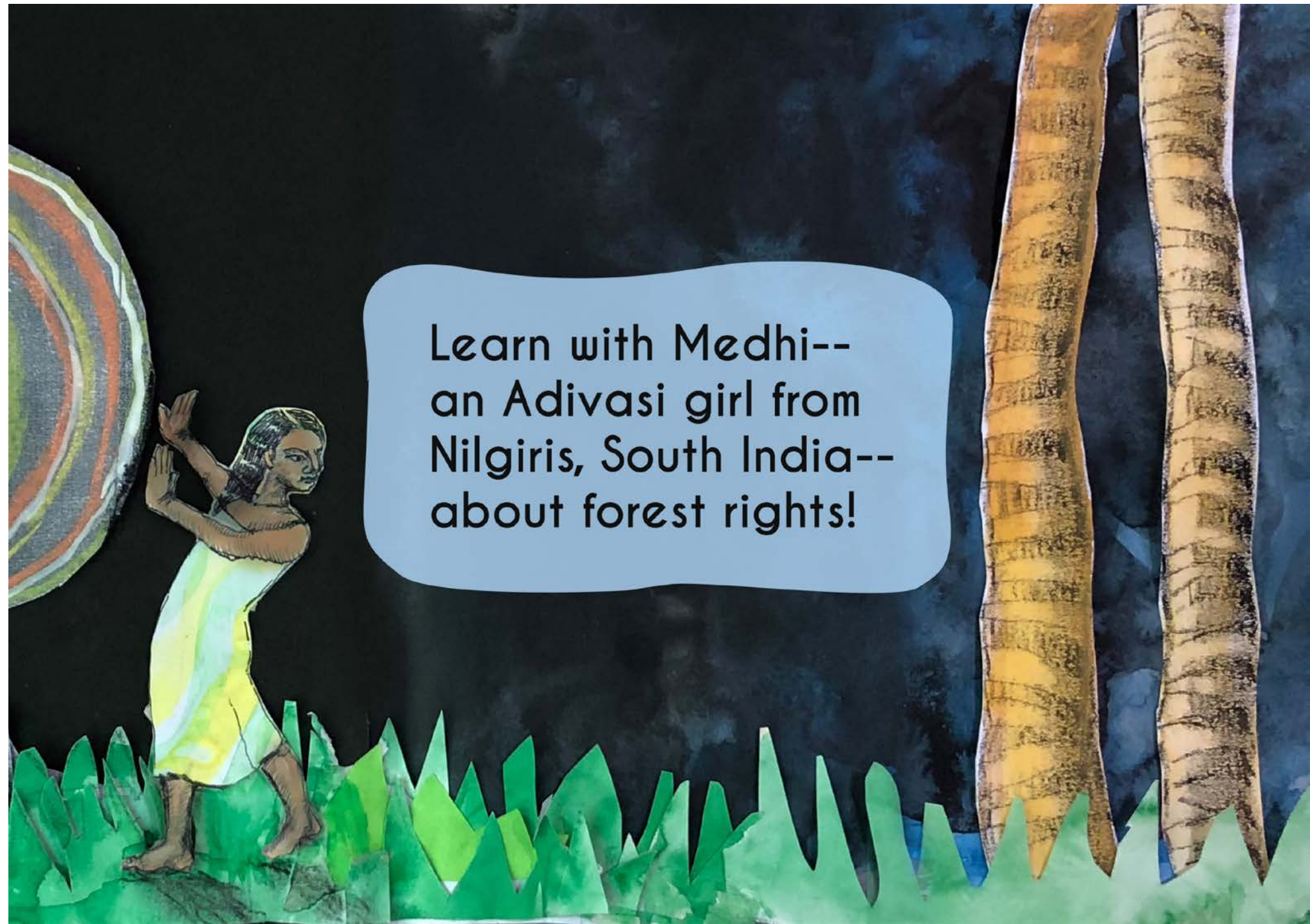




Our Forest Dreams



Learn with Medhi--
an Adivasi girl from
Nilgiris, South India--
about forest rights!

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We welcome translation into any language. Please contact us to coordinate at sobha.sw@gmail.com

<https://www.fra.org.in/>
www.twitter.com/forestrightsact

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Authors' Note

We made this book as a tool primarily for our own communities. We come from the Panniyar, Kattunaikar, Bettakurumbar, Irular, Kota, Jenukurumbar, Alukurumbar, Toda, Kasavar, and Mullakurumbar communities. The story in this book combines history which has been told to us by our elders with new information about the Forest Rights Act (2006).

We also hope that people outside of our communities will be able to use it. The Forest Rights Act (2006) is not just for Adivasis, but for all forest dwellers. And while the stories here take place in the Nilgiris, South India, they are common across the forests of India and other parts of the world.

To make this book, a group of us decided on the story and how to tell it. We made a WhatsApp group to share ideas, photos, and drawings. All the illustrations in this book are based on those exchanges and the text was produced to match them.

We would like to thank the friends and supporters who have helped make this book by translating, editing and designing. We hope readers go on to learn more about the Forest Rights Act and use it to ensure forest rights are finally recognized.

Nilgiris Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups Federation

What are forest rights?

How did we lose our lands?

What is our history?

Where do we start?

How do we get our lands back?

Ajji, Ajji! I just had a beautiful dream!

We were in a forest – lush and green.
There were flying birds, flowing streams,
and no forest guard to be seen!

We gathered mushrooms and
medicines, berries and seeds...

O Ajji, have you seen what I've seen?

O Medhi! Countless times.
So did my Ajji, her Ajji,
and all of our ancestors.

O Medhi! At that time, the forest was shared, not property.
We worked hand in hand with the forest and trees.

The red bananas grew as long as our forearm.
No chemicals or fertilizers — those only cause harm.

We gave care to the crops and the forest.
Every few years, we let the soil rest.

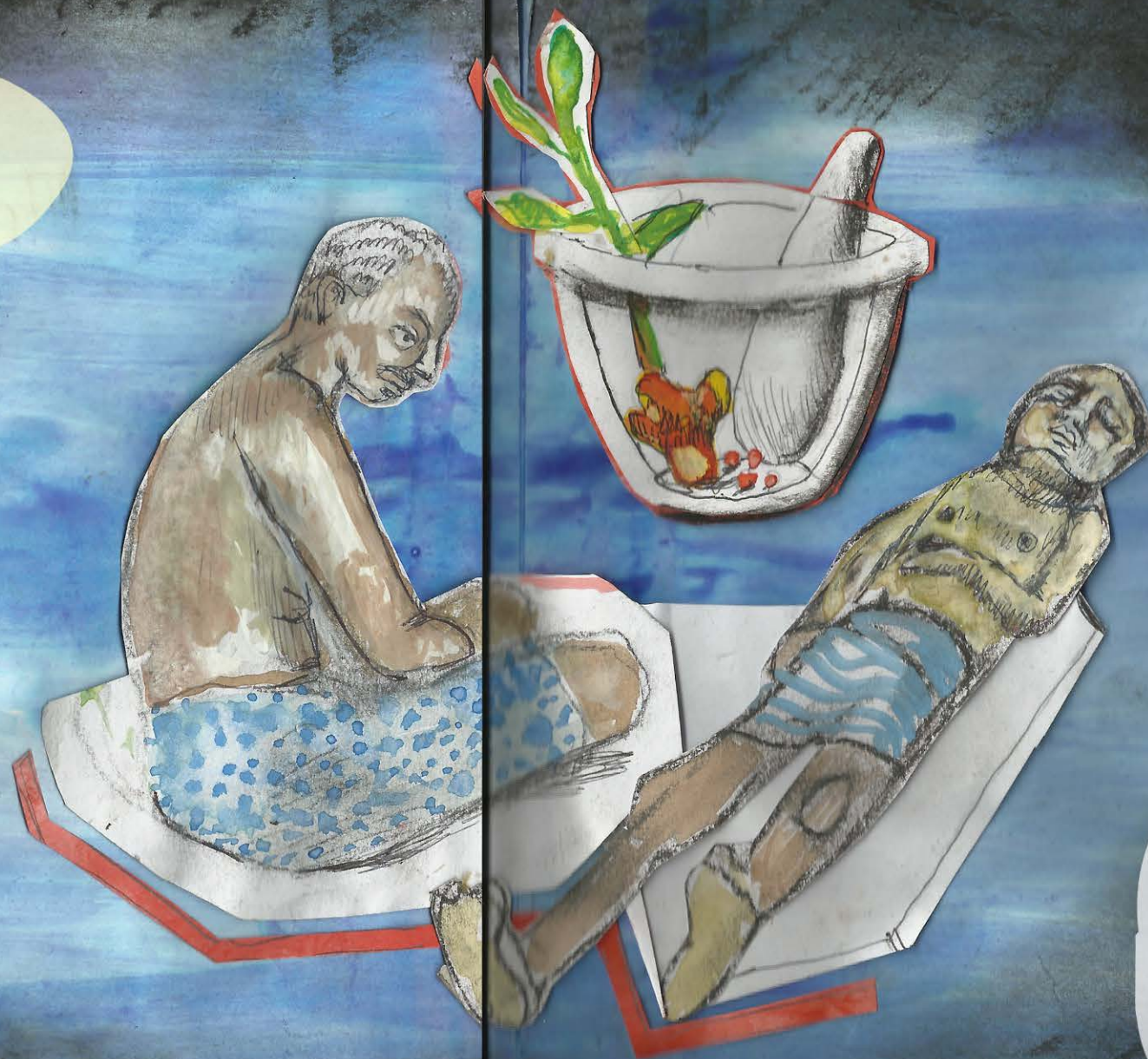
Ajji, was there enough food for everyone?

O Medhi! Plenty.
Enough for animals and birds too!
We took what we needed and we shared in full.



O Aiji, our forest is such a gift!
Will it even help us when someone falls sick?

O Medhi! The forest has cures and answers,
taught to us by our ancestors.
It was in your dream, remember?
Let's walk together, I can show you medicines
for coughs, cuts & fevers!



What else does the forest provide, Aiji?

O Medhi! The words we speak,
the songs we sing, the spirits we revere.
Some like to call it "culture,"
we simply call it "the forest," my dear!

But, Aiji, life is so different now. Please tell me...
why, when, how?

We lived in the forest freely and at peace.
But the British took control
and settlers forced us under their lease.

We saw the forest as our mother,
but they saw only timber.
They only cared to make money.

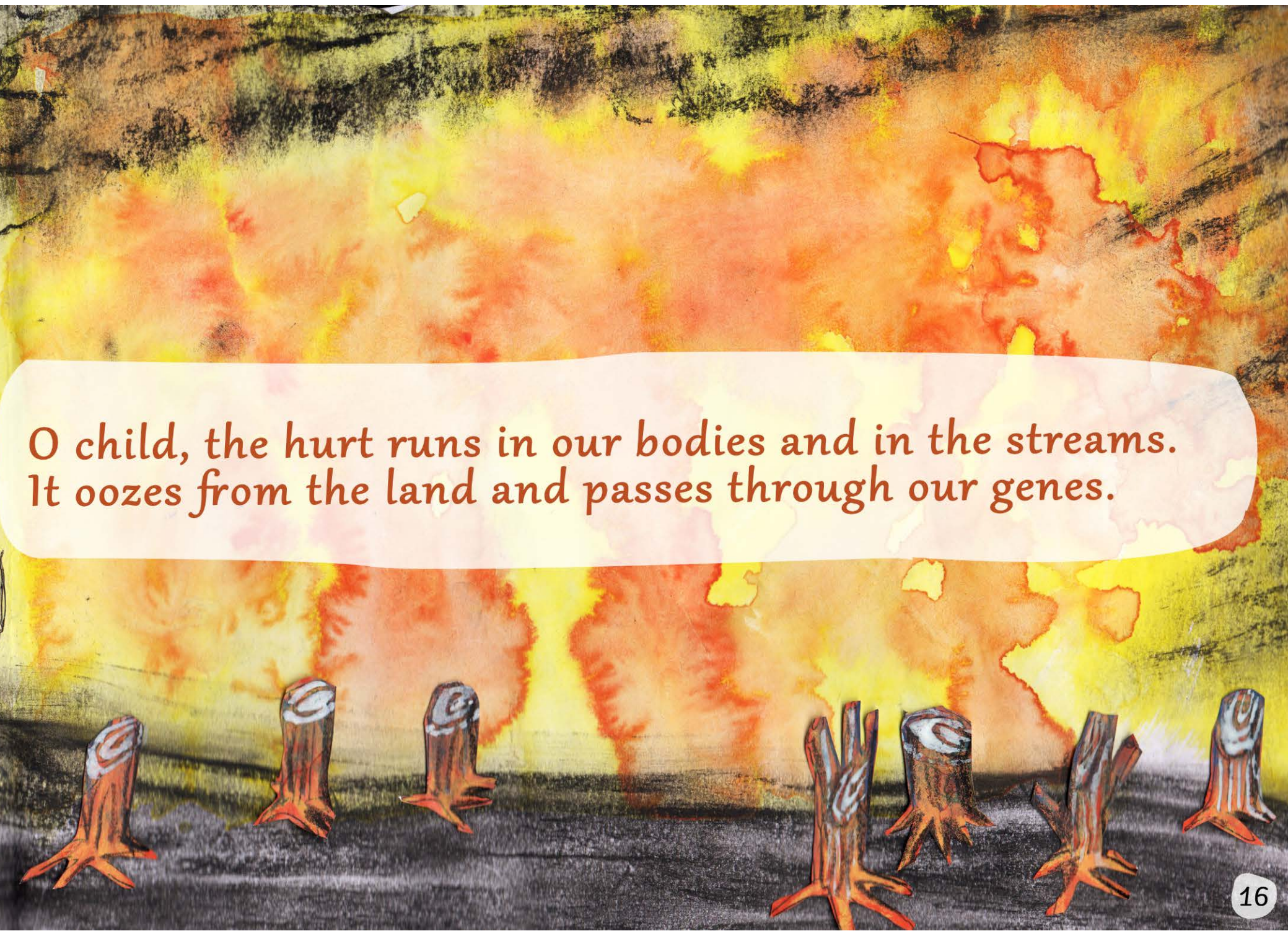


They drew maps, made laws, and slapped taxes, Medhi.
Before we knew it, they claimed our lands as their property.
They cut the forests and planted foreign trees,
created a "Forest Department" and army of guards,
and stopped our access to fuelwood, fruits, and hunting.

The insects cried, the water wept, and so did we.

O, do you feel the pain, Medhi?



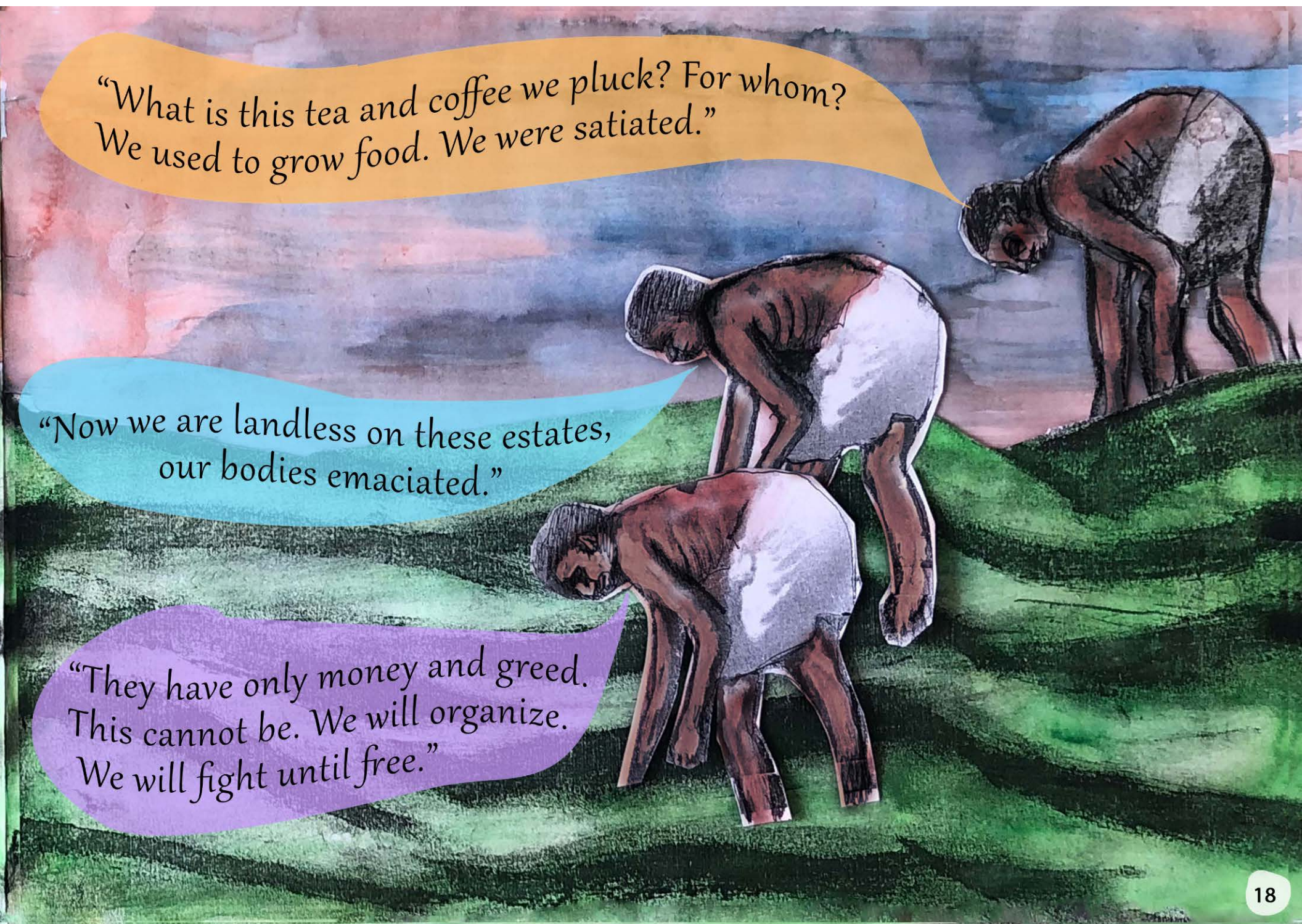


O child, the hurt runs in our bodies and in the streams.
It oozes from the land and passes through our genes.



O Aiji, I do! But we must have fought back!
How can one keep silent under constant attack?

O Medhi, of course!
Adivasis organized rebellions—
one hundred or more.



“What is this tea and coffee we pluck? For whom?
We used to grow food. We were satiated.”

“Now we are landless on these estates,
our bodies emaciated.”

“They have only money and greed.
This cannot be. We will organize.
We will fight until free.”

Ajji, did we get back what was ours, when we started to fight?
Were our demands heard for land and rights?

O Medhi, my dear, we won back some lands fighting courageously with traditional weapons. Called "Scheduled Areas," they stayed in our hands.

Others were declared a new reserve forest. There, as shifting cultivators, we were labeled "criminals" and "lawless".

Our rights denied, they instead offered pity. Outsiders rushed to 'save' us, like missionaries.



Our worlds then transformed as our elders forewarned in the name of schools, hospitals, and charity.

1947

The British left. But the system stayed.
For Adivasis, Independence was no change.
Same Forest Department. Same forest laws.
Yet we know from history what is ours.

O Medhi, were there tigers in your dream?
Now they are few and far between.
Their forest homes cut by industries,
they were left with no choice but to flee.

Next, what did the government propose?
Not a a stop to this madness, no!
They called Adivasis a threat to wildlife.
We too were thrown from our forest homes.

ESTATE

PROTECTED
FOREST

பாதுகாக்கப்பட்ட காடு

CHECK POST

KEEP
OUT

In the name of development, they grabbed even more.
There were dams, mining and land acquisitions.



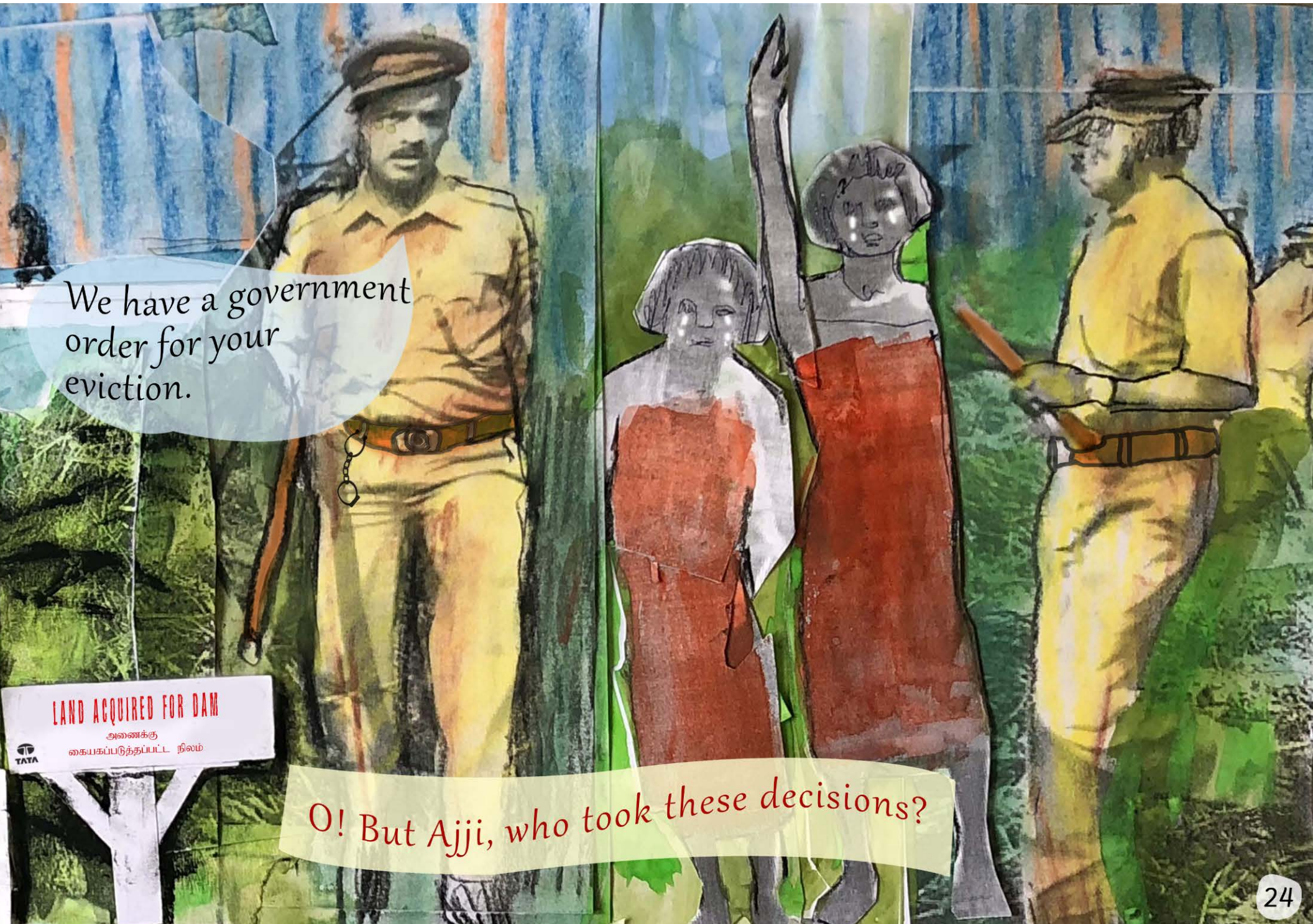
We have a government
order for your
eviction.


LAND ACQUIRED FOR DAM

அனைக்கு
கையகப்படுத்தப்பட்ட நிலம்

TATA:
LAND ACQUIRED FOR MINING
சுரங்கத்திற்காக
கையகப்படுத்தப்பட்ட நிலம்

O! But Ajji, who took these decisions?





“When will we regain access to our lands?”

“Where are our rights and political power?”

“Why are we being excluded in schools, healthcare, and employment?”

O Medhi! When politicians failed to defend us, NGOs joined the cause. Alas, they didn't earn our trust or applause. In spite of their handsome funding pots, even more land was lost.

O, Aji!
When will Adivasis get independence?

O Aiji, how cruel!
We never learn this history in school.
When you were my age,
you learned from Nature.
From your Amma and Aiji
and all of your neighbors.



Aiji, nowadays, we sit inside,
surrounded by concrete.
Maths and History feel incomplete.
We crave to know how to heal and fish!
And follow our own heart's drumbeat!

O but Aiji, can I tell you
what my biggest challenge is?
Managing lessons taught
in non-Adivasi languages.




O Medhi! Yes, language is like the leaf,
and then the roots of it all are our beliefs!
Our Gods and teachers are trees and water,
sun, bees and birds.
We see them all as one — **Mother Earth.**

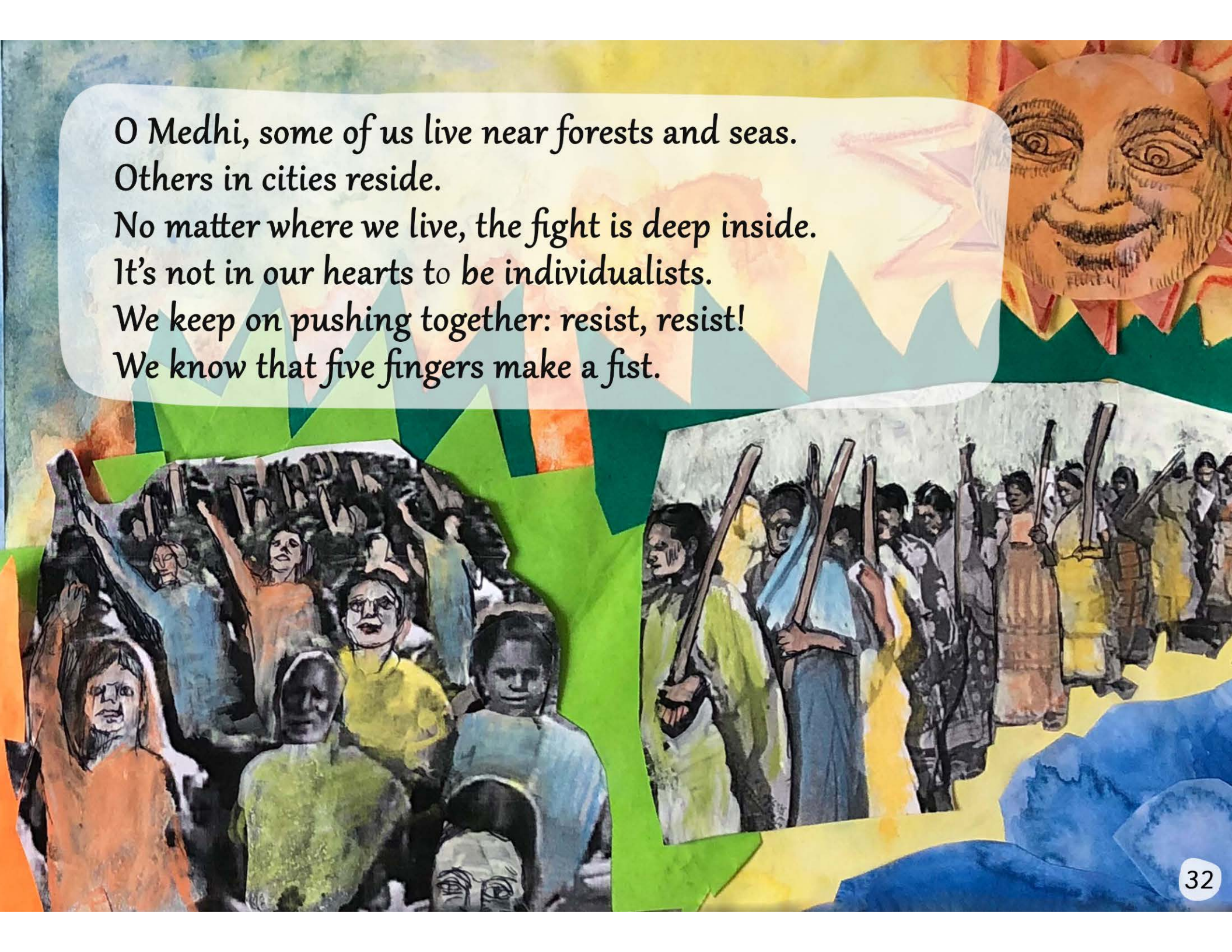
In the caste system, you can't see our faces.
Yet, Brahmin temples are in our sacred places.

Yes, Aiji, why is there a Ganesha temple and Vishnu dome,
and Parvathi and Shiva worshipped near our home?

To not seem different people perform non-Adivasi rituals.
But remember, O Medhi, our practices are original.
Our sacred groves and forests must be protected.
By caring for them we stay interconnected.



O Aiji, how can we make things better?
How do we reclaim our territory from settlers?



O Medhi, some of us live near forests and seas.
Others in cities reside.
No matter where we live, the fight is deep inside.
It's not in our hearts to be individualists.
We keep on pushing together: resist, resist!
We know that five fingers make a fist.

O Medhi, in 2002, mass evictions caused us to unite.
The Ministry of Environment and Forests
ordered forest-dwellers without titles had no rights.

Millions facing hardship, we did not withdraw.
We struggled across India until we had a new law.



What is a law, Aiji?

The Indian Constitution gives equal rights to all citizens. Laws protect us and address violations.

The **Forest Rights Act** protects us forest dwellers. It puts our rights to forest livelihoods before government and settlers.

Except for hunting and trapping, and timber wood all other forest products can form our livelihood.

Oh Aiji, imagine! Fruits and bamboo. Fish, honey, and fuelwood, too. What other products are “non-timber”? Medicinal plants, flowers and ginger!



Forest Rights Act (2006)

O Aiji, Where do we start?
With the Forest Rights Act
can we claim what is ours?

O Medhi, remember the caterpillar?
The FRA process is similar,
for both a community claim and individual.

1- Eggs: First, the Gram Sabha should be convened. This means all the people in the village, of all genders and all ages, should come together. The Gram Sabha receives the claims for land, both for individual plots under occupation and for the community forests. Not just Adivasis but all communities who have lived in the forest for at least 75 years can do this.

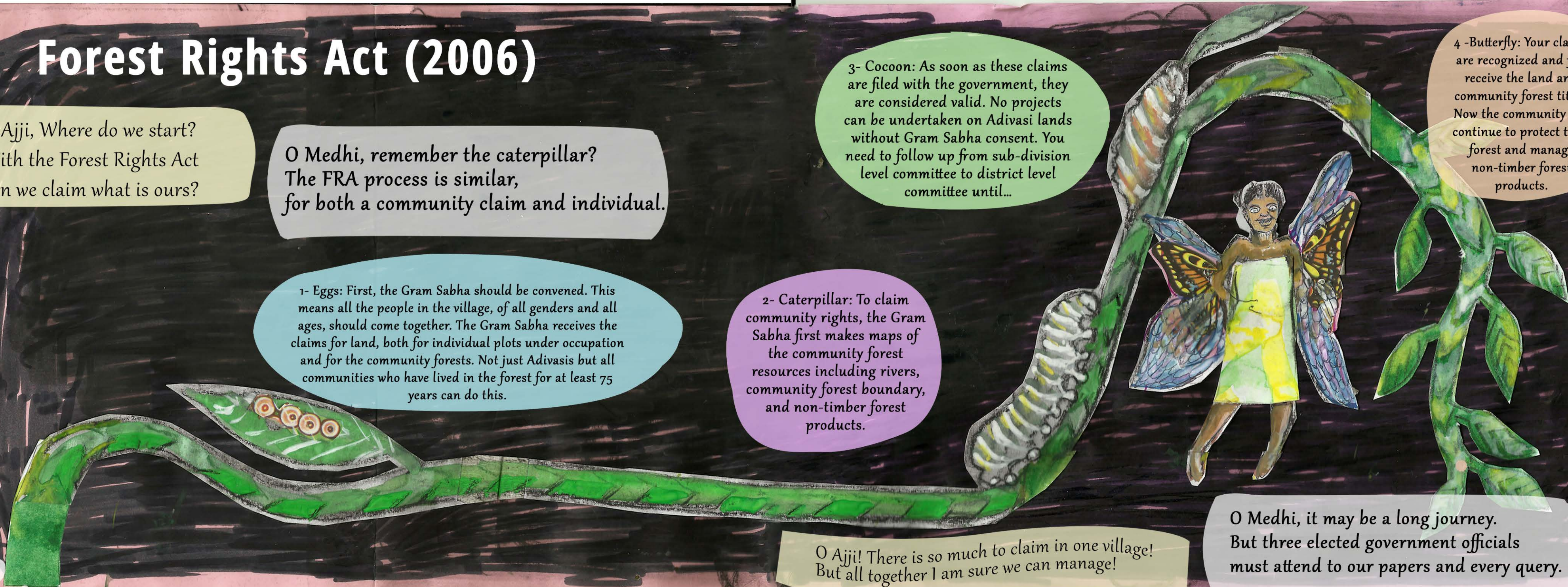
2- Caterpillar: To claim community rights, the Gram Sabha first makes maps of the community forest resources including rivers, community forest boundary, and non-timber forest products.

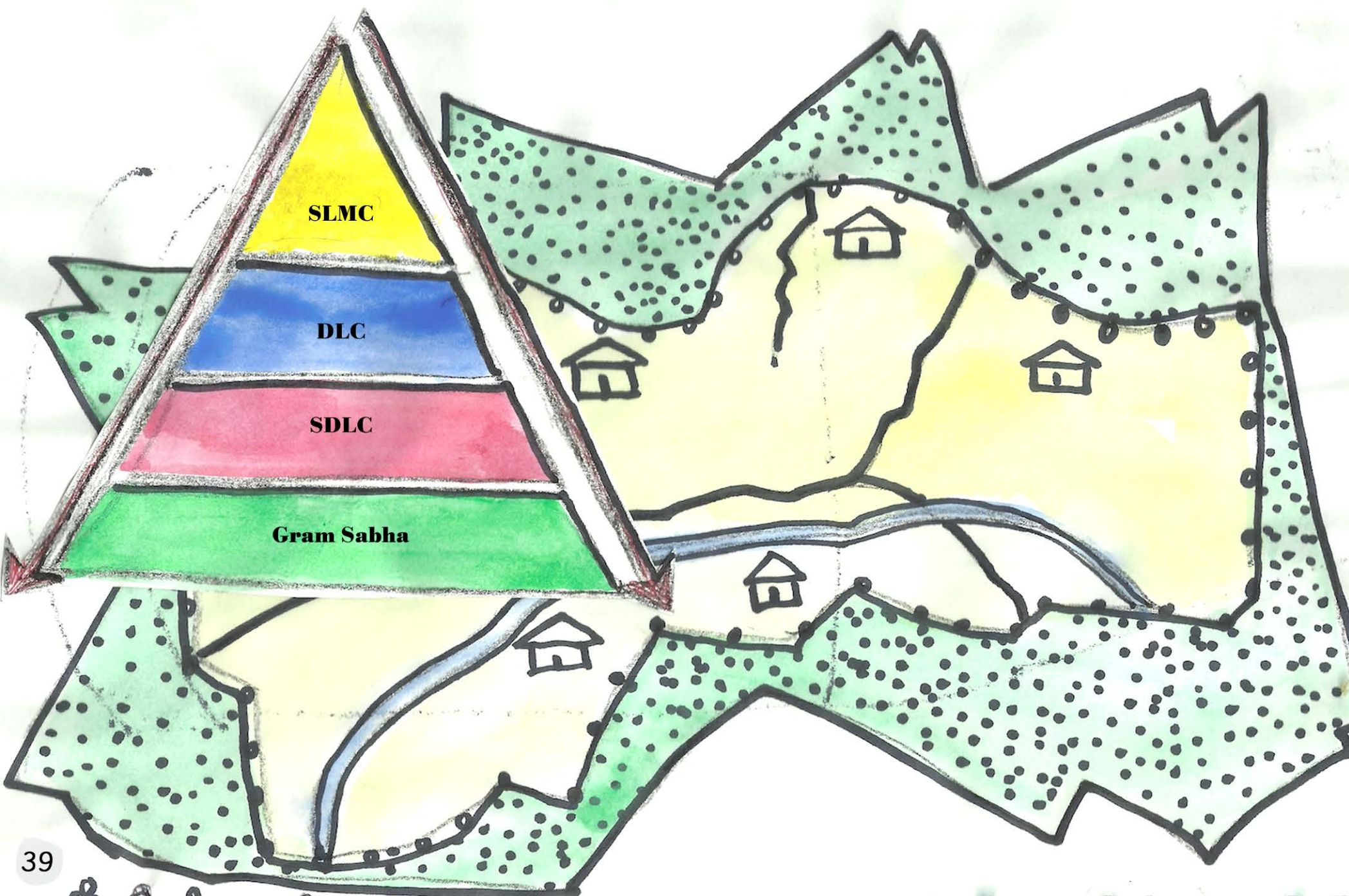
3- Cocoon: As soon as these claims are filed with the government, they are considered valid. No projects can be undertaken on Adivasi lands without Gram Sabha consent. You need to follow up from sub-division level committee to district level committee until...

4 -Butterfly: Your claims are recognized and you receive the land and community forest titles. Now the community can continue to protect their forest and manage non-timber forest products.

O Aiji! There is so much to claim in one village!
But all together I am sure we can manage!

O Medhi, it may be a long journey.
But three elected government officials
must attend to our papers and every query.





How much land can I claim?

An individual family can claim up to 4 hectares (10 acres) of cultivated lands under their occupation in the forest.

Can I sell the land?

No, you cannot sell the land. Individual families can only transfer the lands to their children.

My friend is a forest dweller but not Adivasi, can her family claim land?

Yes, as long as her family has been there for 3 generations or 75 years before 2005.

Which government departments are involved?


The Nodal Ministry for the FRA is the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. In the states, it is the Tribal department. The Forest Department has representation in the SDLC, DLC & the State Level Monitoring Committee together with Tribal Welfare, revenue officials as well as elected representatives.

Do all genders benefit from the FRA?

Definitely. The process is open for all genders. And at least of one-third the committee must be made up of women. Land titles need to be issued jointly in the name of both spouses or in the name of the single head, including individual women.

Can I claim forest rights even if my lands are in the Tiger Reserve?

Yes, even in the Tiger Reserve. "Forest" means all types of forest including unclassified forests, protected forests, reserved forests, revenue forests, sanctuaries, national parks, and tiger reserves.



Your eyes are closed, O Medhi!
Did all those details make you feel sleepy?

O Aiji, I am listening to every word spoken.
Now I can see my dream, even with my eyes open.
Finally, age-old systems have been overturned!
I am going to tell everybody all that I've learned.

O Medhi! You make me so proud
and you shine so bright!
Your generation will lead this fight.