



# Indian Women's Stories and Art

Women's struggle for equality, recognition and respect is universal—in this collection of visual stories, women artists from different regions of India paint and talk about their experiences, dreams and future aspirations. What unites them is a quiet assertion of their own voice, as they observe and capture the world around them.

Many of the indigenous art traditions have their origins in the decorative designs that women create to beautify their homes. Over time, these have evolved into distinct art styles, each particular to a region. The women artists of these books have embraced the traditional form to tell their own stories. Speaking for oneself is a radical act in a context where women are always spoken for. Each book in this curated list explores particular themes in its own distinctive way:

- *Sita's Ramayana* retells the classic Indian epic of Ramayana from the perspective of the captured and banished queen Sita. Both the art and the story draw on the living traditions of the Patuas of West Bengal. The book explores themes of women's forbearance and dignity in the brutal context of war; where women can become pawns in the territorial moves of men. **Ages 14 and above**
- *Sultana's Dream* is a hundred-year-old utopian novella, imagining an upside-down world where women rule the outside world and men are shut away. This version is illustrated by a brilliant woman artist from the Gond tribe of Central India. It explores the theme of women's emancipation in a way that continues to inspire and stay relevant even today. **Ages 14 and above**

- *Hope is a Girl Selling Fruit* is about a young woman finding her voice, as an artist and as an independent young person. The young artist of the book steers her essentially female tradition of Mithila art away from the domesticity of its origin to question the traditional confines of women's lives. Ideal reading for young people, grappling with issues of adolescence, identity and freedom. **Ages 14 and above**
- *Following My Paint Brush* is about the incredible journey of Dulari Devi, a domestic helper who went on to become a renowned artist. The Mithila art tradition that gives voice to her inner artist also helps her beat the odds and find an identity beyond what was expected of her through oppressive societal norms. Perfect for young readers who can find inspiration following their dreams. **Ages 8 and above**
- *Drawing from the City* is about the life of Tejubehan, a migrant worker-turned-artist as she reflects on her journey from poverty into who she is today. The book explores the theme of liberation through the self-taught art of a woman who has lived in culture of limiting social expectations. In imagining her women of the city—cycling, driving, flying—she is imagining a world where women are free to move and just be. **Ages 14 and above**

Educators or parents are invited to delve deep into the different themes through the worlds of these books—with ideas, talking points and activities. Literary tropes, elements of design and the language of art have been explored in the Activity Sheets with the aim of making such readings more accessible.

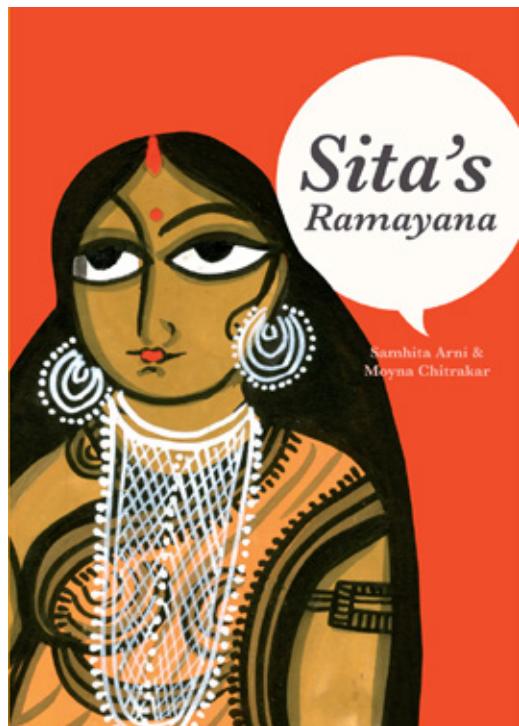


illustration: MOYNA CHITRAKAR

text: SAMHITA ARNI

The *Ramayana* is an epic poem by the Hindu sage Valmiki, written in ancient Sanskrit sometime after 300 BC. It is an allegorical story that contains important Hindu teachings, and it has had great influence on Indian life and culture over the centuries. This version of *The Ramayana* is told from the perspective of Sita, the queen.

Events that are not given as much importance in the better-known versions—such as Sita's banishment—are explored here from her point of view. Her perspective of the epic may be less well-known but has, in fact, long been a part of women's oral tradition in the different regions of India, including among the Patuas. Songs of her suffering are sung by women working both at home and outside. Epics such as *The Ramayana* are part of a collective consciousness for many people in the country and the figure of Sita is held up to be the ideal wife. Yet, it is not her qualities as a wife but her suffering at the hand of territorial men that women continue to identify with.

Moyna Chitrakar, the artist, drew from Patua traditions of scroll painting to create the art for the book. These scroll paintings are a living tradition from Bengal, where performance, storytelling and art meet. The story is recited or sung as the narrator holds up a painted scroll pointing to the image that goes with words. *The Ramayana* is one of the most popular stories performed by them. For this book, the artwork was painted before the text was written. After it was painted, Samhita Arni, a young feminist writer with an interest in epics gave words to it. Finally, all these aspects were woven together by the book designer to form the final graphic novel.

Here are some talking points, questions and activities to explore the book with students and to discover how the different elements came to form one book.

### Talk about the story

- Epics are typically long poems narrated in a grand scale about the heroic deeds and adventures of a legendary figure or the past history of a nation. There are wars, divine elements and larger-than-life heroes and villains. The Ramayana is one such epic. Are there any clear heroes and villains in this version of the epic?
- Find out more about the most famous version of *The Ramayana* written by Valmiki.
- This book is the epic from Sita's perspective. How has the story changed because of this? How would the story change if another character narrated the story? Which character and why?
- Sita empathises deeply with the people who are affected by the war. She feels for the pain and sufferings of their families. War and violence remains an important part of our present day life, as well. How is this relevant to us?
- Which is your favourite scene to do with war or suffering from the book, and why?

### Talk about the art

- Look up other examples of the Patua art. For a performance of a Ramayana scroll by the artist of the book, Moyna Chitrakar, visit <http://bit.ly/1Y3M2Mf>. Refer to The Patua Pinocchio, I See The Promised Land, The Enduring Ark, etc. for more examples of this style.
- The Patua art tradition is an extremely stylised one. The less a work of art resembles something in the physical world, the more stylised it is. The figures are not as they appear in real life, and you can see this in how their faces are drawn, which features are emphasised and which are left out. Notice how they are almost always shown front facing and how the arms and legs, angled. Even though only a few features are picked up to depict the different figures, they are all easily recognisable. Look at the different species such as the humans, the rakshasas and the vanaras. They have some features in common but they are clearly different. Discuss how they are differentiated.
- The Bengal Patuas specialise in the drawing of birds and animals. Some of these creatures are a part of the story and some of them are just part of the landscape. Look through the pages and pick out which play an active role. What role do the others play?

## Talk about the Graphic Novel

- Graphic novels can be compared to comic books because they too use pictures, which follow one another in a sequence to tell a story. Have you read any comic books or graphic novels and what do you think about them? Are they different, if so how?
- Graphic novels use different panels to convey movement of time and distance. Keeping this in mind, look at pages 48-49. Notice how the distance is showed by the different panels of the see show the long distance covered by Hanuman. Now look at about pages 56-57. Is it distance that is being covered in these panels? Or is it something else?
- 'Panels' are the boxes that contain a single scene. Look at some of the interesting ways a single image has been repeated in different panels to bring forward the story. Go to page 116-117. A single image has been cut up and used several times, creating a cinematic close up for dramatic effect. Now look at page 127 and 129. What is going on here?
- 'Gutters' are the spaces between the panels. Flip through the book and look at the different colours being used for the gutters. Look at pages 72-109, where the gutters are all black, for example. What does this represent? Are there other such instances? What could those mean?

## Activities

- Choose a character from the story who is neither Rama nor Sita. Then, choose a scene from *The Ramayana* and write it from their perspective. How does the story change, with the major events remaining the same?
- Sita hears the parts of the story that she isn't present in through Hanuman, Trijatha and Vibhasana. How else could she have learnt about it? Choose one scene in the book where Sita is not present in and re-imagine the scene on how she learns about it. (Hints: Maybe she sees it in a dream? Do little birds come and tell her? Does she have a telescope to watch what happens?)
- Patua scroll art is used to narrate a variety of stories—such as stories from village life, epics such as *The Ramayana* and even modern day news. Choose a classmate to collaborate. One of you can do the drawing and one can make up the story, or both can do both. Make your own Patua scroll. It can be a story you know, news you have heard, or something completely new. This has to be told in 8 panels. After these panels are done, you can either point and narrate the story like the traditional Patua artists or paste the panels and create a book—with captions placed to explain the story.

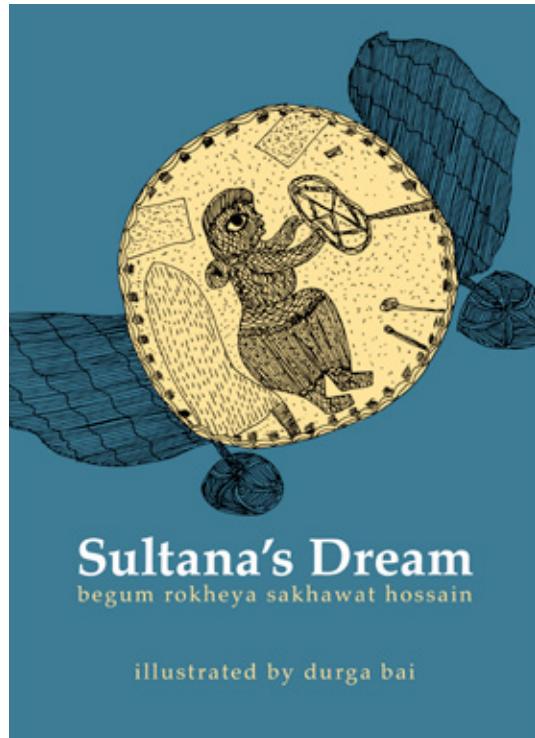


illustration: **DURGA BAI**  
text: **BEGUM ROKHEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN**

*Sultana's Dream* is an utopian novella written by Begum Rokheya Sakhawat Hossain, a pioneer of Muslim feminist thought and writing, championing women's right to education and freedom. This first appeared in 1905, when the purdah system of female seclusion was very prevalent.

Begum Rokheya in her life, brought certain parts of Ladyland to life. She founded a girl's school called Sakhawat Memorial Girl's School in Calcutta, which flourishes there till date. Her belief in a universalist society, where women are determined to better their lot by concrete social action and organising, remains an inspiration even today.

This edition of a feminist classic is a conversation across time; Durga Bai, a brilliant woman artist from the Gond tribe of Central India, brings her own vision to take on a Muslim woman's radical tale. The Gonds are one of the largest indigenous groups in India, with a culture that dates back a thousand years. It is a community art form, created and enjoyed by the entire village. It is traditionally painted on the mud walls of their houses. The dream city of Ladyland where peace-loving women overpower aggressive men through the power of their brains captured Durga Bai's imagination and she has given a fresh layer of meaning to a story written more than a hundred years ago.

Here are some ideas, questions and activities to explore the book with students and discover how the book remains relevant and important today.

### Talk about the story

- An utopia is an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect. In this book, Ladyland is such an utopia where there is no war and there are gardens everywhere. Women work only two hours a day and spend the rest of the time in creative pursuits, while men are locked up in murdanas. What does this say about the person who imagined this utopia?
- Why are the men locked up? Would you call such a place utopia?
- In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokheya Hossain attacks the institution of female seclusion. This is still practised in places around the world. Women are secluded from public observation by wearing concealing clothing from head to toe and by the use of high walls, curtains, and screens erected within the home. In many other places, gender segregation is prevalent. Gender segregation is when men and women have separate access to public spaces. Some of these work to the practical advantage of the gender concerned, such as ladies' compartments on trains. But there are other instances of segregation that can inhibit mobility and foreclose options—are such instances more to do with men or women? Why do you think this is so? Are things better for today's women than for say someone in your grandparents' generation?
- *Sultana's Dream* is Begum Rokheya's reaction to the unequal status of women in society. What methods are the women in the book using to beat the injustice?
- Durga Bai is an artist separated from Rokheya Hossain by both time and space. Yet this story resonated with her strongly. Do you think this was so easy because she is a woman? Why does this story remain relevant to us in our present day?

### Talk about the art

- Look up more Gond artists and their work. Refer to books such as *The Night Life of Trees*, *Signature: Patterns in Gond Art*, *Alone in the Forest*, for more examples.
- Gond patterning involves decorative fillers that have been handed down from the ancient tradition of body tattooing in the tribal societies. These designs are varied and unique to the artist, like a signature. Look at how the artist has used patterns to fill in the figures, the clothes, the hair, etc. Identify a set of 5 different patterns that are used repetitively in the book. Based on this, discuss if there is a logic to the use of patterns.
- Look carefully at how men and women are drawn here. They are very similar and yet you can tell a woman from a man. Their differences are not exaggerated. This is usually not the case for other representations of men and women. Keeping this in mind, discuss how men and women are shown in advertising and other media.

## Activities

- Write down your own utopia. Make a list of all the things that you dislike about the present world. Then, write a description of a world where the exact opposite exists. Give this world a name. Write about what a day in the life in this world is like.
- Before the next activity, here is a fun riddle. Can you figure it out?  
A father and son are in a horrible car crash that kills the dad. The son is rushed to the hospital; just as he's about to go under the knife, the surgeon says, "I can't operate—that boy is my son!" How? Answer: at the end.
- A gender stereotype is a set of codes dictating what types of behaviours are generally expected or desirable for a person based on the gender. For example, girls are supposed to like pink things and boys are supposed to like blue things. This, and any version of "girls are like this and boys are like that" refers to gender stereotypes. These stereotypes are used to put diverse people and their different personalities into only two boxes. This becomes a problem especially when people do not fit in to these roles

defined for them. Keeping this in mind, create two columns with the headings 'Girls' and 'Boys'. Under these headings, write down 5 things each that are commonly held ideas of stereotypes. Discuss if you fit in to the stereotypes that both you and your classmates have written down. What happens if you don't?

- Durga Bai is an artist who delights in showing women do things that break down gender stereotypes. This is what drew her to the fantastical elements of Ladyland in *Sultana's Dream*. Taking inspiration from this spirit, imagine and draw a picture of a girl doing an unconventional thing.

(Answer: The surgeon was his mother. This is a riddle from a Boston University study and only 15 % of the people surveyed got the answer. Gender stereotypes are all pervasive and often very harmful when they refer beyond what girls and boys may like, but talk about how they are, innately.)

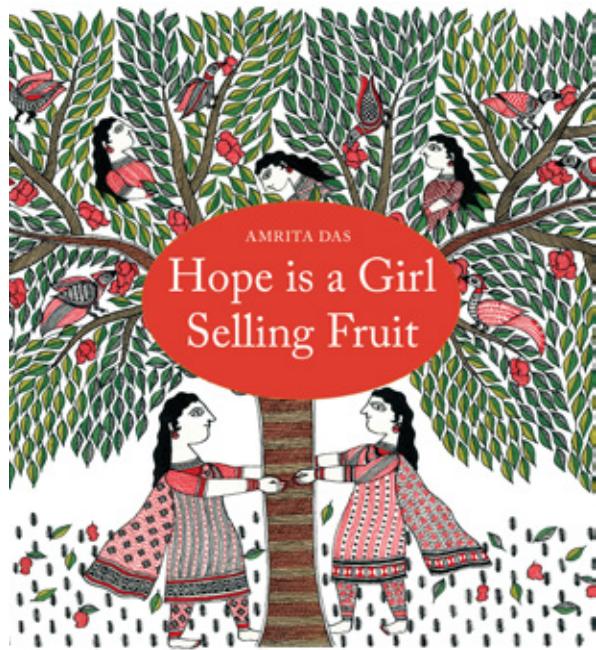


illustration & narration: **AMRITA DAS**

*Hope is a Girl Selling Fruit* is a reflective account of a young woman's thoughts and feelings as she comes into contact with the larger world. This enlightening visual tale is gentle yet resolute, treading a fine balance between tradition and innovation.

Mithila painting or Madhubani painting has a long history dating back to at least the 14th century. Women in the Mithila region of Bihar in north India have painted colourful auspicious images on the interior walls of their homes on the occasion of domestic rituals. This ancient tradition, especially elaborated for weddings, continues to this day. However, in 1960s, in the midst of a severe drought, a few women began to paint on paper for sale, as a new source of family income. At first, they simply transferred onto paper the traditional images—gods and goddesses and symbolic icons—from the wall paintings. Since then, however, they have also explored and experimented with new subjects, including local, national, and international events: floods, terrorism, global warming, and most recently, feminist issues such as patriarchy, dowry, female infanticide, etc.

Amrita Das was born into a community where the lives of girls and women are defined and oppressed by males, who hold the primary power. She has always been interested in portraying the realities of a woman's life. Her story offers a fresh perspective on Indian women's mobility where she uses the traditions of Mithila art to question the traditional confines of women's lives.

**Below are a few talking points and exercises to explore with the students some of the complex ideas brought to light in this book.**

### Talk about the story

- The idea of movement is everywhere in the book. There are trains, scooters, cars, train tracks. Compare and contrast how the three girls of the book are moving. Where to and where from? Why?
- “I knew at that moment, how I was going to tell my story. It is her story too!” Right in the beginning, the author explains how her story was the story of the girl on the train as well. What are the qualities that unites the author, the girl on the train and the girl selling fruit?
- “If you dream for a moment, you’re asked why you’re twiddling your thumbs.” What does this mean for the author? Look through the book and look for instances of what she may be dreaming about and what her reality is.
- “Freedom. What does that word mean to us? Going to school? Learning? And then? Marriage? Does that set you free?”  
The ideas of ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’ are explored by the author. Discuss if the girls of the book are ‘independent’ or ‘free’. Are these the same thing? Make a list of 10 words or phrases that mean the opposite of ‘freedom’, ‘independence’ and ‘dreams’.
- Epiphany is the point in a work of literature where a character has a sudden insight or realisation that changes his or her understanding. Epiphanies can be found throughout the book. Take the second image, for example, of two girls playing under a tree. At the end of the page, she asks, “But was my childhood really like that? Was this the truth?” This is an epiphany where she realises that she was not being real about her childhood and shows its reality in the next page. Find any two other epiphanies in the book and discuss it.

### Talk about the art

- Look up other examples of Mithila or Madhubani art. Refer to *Following My Paint Brush* and *Waterlife* for more examples of this style.
- Amrita Das has used the traditional form of Madhubani to portray very modern items. There are scooters, ATMs, and people wearing modern clothing. Look through the book and find at least 10 other objects she has drawn this way.
- The borders are of special importance to the Mithila style. All of these patterns in the borders, represent something important to the art form. See how these decorative borders are used to denote a difference in space. The artist has drawn these around doors and windows, even separating different train compartments.
- Look at the last painting. The large lotus motif is an auspicious one used especially during wedding and childbirth rituals in the Mithila tradition. Why has she used these symbols here?

## Activities

- Think about your last long distance journey. How did you travel? What did you do? Did you eat, sleep, read, play games, talk to other passengers? What kind of life do you think a stranger observing you would imagine of you? Have you ever met a stranger on such a journey who has left an impression on you? Has someone made you think, made you happy, made you angry? Write about such an encounter.
- This book is a good introduction to explore the concept of privilege. All the three girls in the story are 'underprivileged'. It is important to understand what that means. Privilege is a special right or advantage available only to a particular person or group of people - this is not something a person has earned, but something that he or she enjoys because they belong to a social group that is powerful and considers itself superior to all others. There are many such groups around us - and their power and sense of superiority may come from belonging to a particular race, religion, caste or simply because they are wealthy. There is also another sort of privilege - this has to do with being male. Within any social group, even those that are not privileged, men are more privileged than women. They are usually better educated, work at better-paid jobs, are more mobile and possess the power and authority to decide things not only for themselves but for women and children.

Young people have an innate sense of justice and fairness and so it is important to help them understand the idea of privilege and how it is one of the chief causes of inequality. Here are a set of questions to help unpack the idea of privilege or the lack of it in our own lives.

1. Who was the first in your family to get school education? You, your parents, your grandparents?
2. What is the highest level of education that your mother has received? What is the highest level of education that your father has received?
3. Would you or brothers or sisters be able to study subjects of your choice, later in your life? If so, why, if not, why not?
4. Are you able to do all that your brother or sister does? Are you allowed to do all that your brother or sister does? If so, why, if not, why not?
5. Do you assist with housework at home? Who else does housework?

These questions could be used to focus on how privilege - with regard to gender and education - produces inequality.

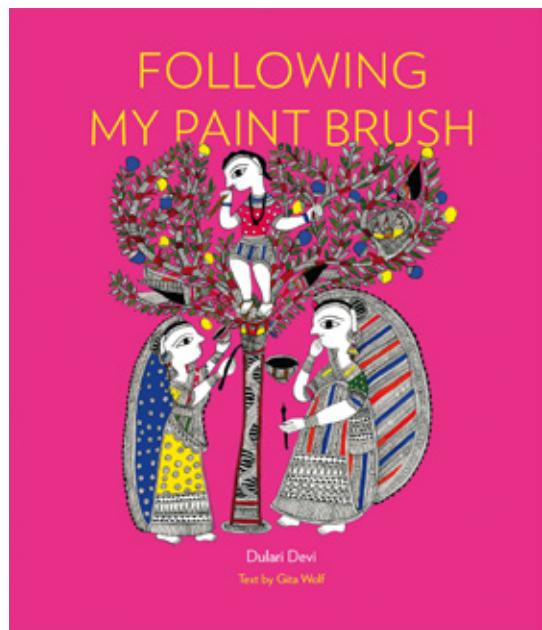


illustration: **DULARI DEVI**  
text: **GITA WOLF**

*Following My Paint Brush* is the story of Dulari Devi, a domestic helper who went on to become an artist in the Mithila style of folk painting from Bihar, eastern India. Dulari is from a community of fisherfolk whose occupation is river-fishing. Used to a life of hard and relentless labour, she discovered painting while working as a domestic helper in an artist's house.

The Mithila tradition of folk art originates from the women living in rural communities in the state of Bihar. The practice in its original form—using traditional designs and shamanic symbols painted on the walls and floors of village homes—continues to flourish even today, especially during festivals and weddings. Dulari Devi trained under another great Mithila artist Mahasundari Devi, whose house she worked in. Dulari's art has since gained prominence in her own right and now she is a full-time artist. Her art is innovative in the ways it embraced and reinvented the traditional form to tell heartwarming stories of her own community.

Here are some questions and ideas to explore the book more deeply.

### Talk about the art

- Look up other examples of Mithila or Madhubani art. You can look at *Hope is a Girl Selling Fruit* and *Waterlife* for more examples of this style.
- The third page is filled with pots and pans arranged around the page. Look at how the different patterns are used to decorate and colour them. Careful patterning is a very important part of the Mithila tradition.
- In traditional Mithila art, there are two major ways of filling in objects. One is called kachhni where patterns such as wavy lines and straight lines and dots are used to fill in the subject. The other is called bharni style where the objects are coloured in. You can see this difference in the painting where Dulari Devi learns to paint for the first time and paints fish from her childhood. See how the woman on the left has intricate patterns on her clothes in the kachhni style and how the woman on the right has coloured in clothes in the bharni style. Now, look through the other paintings in the book and see if you can tell the difference.
- Traditionally, Mithila uses five major colours; red, yellow, green, black and orange. Look for any other colours that Dulari Devi may have used.

### Talk about the story

- Look at what activities the little girls and boys are doing in the book. Are they doing the same things? Or are they sometimes doing different things?
- Why is the woman crying in the third painting?
- Look at the fourth painting of children playing. Can you recognise what game they're playing? If not, make up the rules of the brand new game you imagine them to be playing!
- Did you notice any sign that Dulari Devi was thinking about being an artist while she was still a child?
- Can you identify the moment when Dulari Devi starts to create things that are in her mind with her own hand?
- "I am not just a 'cleaner woman'. I am an artist." Discuss why being an artist is so much more important for her than being a 'cleaner woman'?

### Activities

- Dulari Devi found joy in the little things. She loved to watch children play, to create pictures in her mind, drawing fishes, arranging pots in order. Make a list of small things that make you happy. (Hint: A nice long bath? NO bath? Getting to sleep for 10 more minutes in the morning?)
- Draw the outlines of the 5 most commonly used utensils at home, (Hint: Cup? Plate? Pan?) Now, look at any page and how Dulari Devi has used patterns and colours to fill in details. Fill in the utensils you have drawn with patterns of your own.
- Almost all the pages have either a bird or fish hidden in the details. Can you find them? Count the number of fishes, snakes and birds in this book.

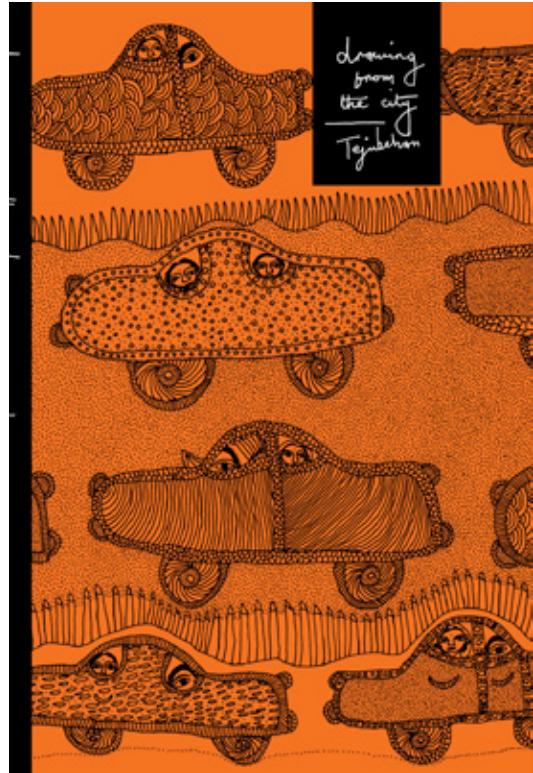


illustration & narration: **TEJUBEHAN**

This stunning autobiographical book recounts self-taught artist Tejubehan's journey from an impoverished childhood in rural India, through her family's efforts to improve their lot in a tent city in Mumbai, and into her adulthood, when she lived as a singer and artist with her husband.

Born in Rajasthan and to music, Teju and her husband Ganesh Jogi, belonged to a community that wandered the streets, singing devotional songs. In return, the singers were given grain, clothes and some money. Soon, this was no longer a viable occupation. Ganesh Jogi, like others in his community, had to make other livelihood choices. For a while he did whatever work came his way, but some years proved harsher than others. His fortune changed when he met the incredible artist Haku Shah in Ahmedabad, who encouraged him to draw. In his generous and unusual way, Ganesh then nurtured Teju's talent, disregarding what was considered appropriate for women in the community to do.

This hand screen-printed illustrations bring to life Teju's characteristic line work and patterns of dots. This is both a celebration of Tejubehan's life and a vision of women going places, dreaming up a world where women are free to just be.

**Here are some questions and ideas for students to understand the story and explore the world in this book.**

### Talk about the story

- Tejubehan has been moving from place to place all her life. Make note of where from and where to. Why did she move? Did she want to, or was moving a necessity?
- When rural people move to the city, the shift is not easy, especially for the poor. The homes they build and live in are very unlike 'typical' city homes. Looking at the painting of her arrival to the city and the painting of her tent city, talk about how these lives are different.
- What comes to mind when you think of 'cities'. Can these elements be found in this book? Can Tejubehan's city be your city?
- "There are always two women in my cars. One drives and the other looks out of the window. I want to be both of those women." What does it mean for a woman to be driving a car herself? What does it mean to sit back and go where you wish? Both of these are women. Why is this important? Why does she want to be both?

### Talk about the art

- You can touch and feel the print of the book. This is a book which is hand silkscreen-printed on handmade paper. Look up what silkscreen-printing is. Watch this: [vimeo.com/tarabooks/handmade](https://vimeo.com/tarabooks/handmade) to see how these are made.
- Look at the drawing of the women driving around in cars. See how Tejubehan has used dots and lines to show different things such as road, grass, cars, etc. thereby 'colouring' these pictures with patterns.
- Look at the first drawing where Teju is a young child in her village. Can you spot her? List all the activities that are going on in different parts of the paintings. Now look at the painting of Teju living in the tent cities. Can you spot her here? What are the activities going on here? Are there any similarities between the two scenes? Have these activities been rendered differently in each of these two scenes?

### Activities

- Draw five outlines of transport vehicles with five different women in them. (Hints: Young woman, old woman, poor woman, rich woman, etc.) Fill your drawing in with different patterns of your choice. Who are these people? Where are they going? Where are they coming from? Write 5 lines about each of the five vehicles.
- Tejubehan draws women who float down, in air through parachutes. At the time of drawing this, she watched a programme on TV about Sunita Williams, the woman astronaut of Indian origin. Imagine and draw other alternatives to these women flying. (Hints: Mechanical wings? Paragliding?)