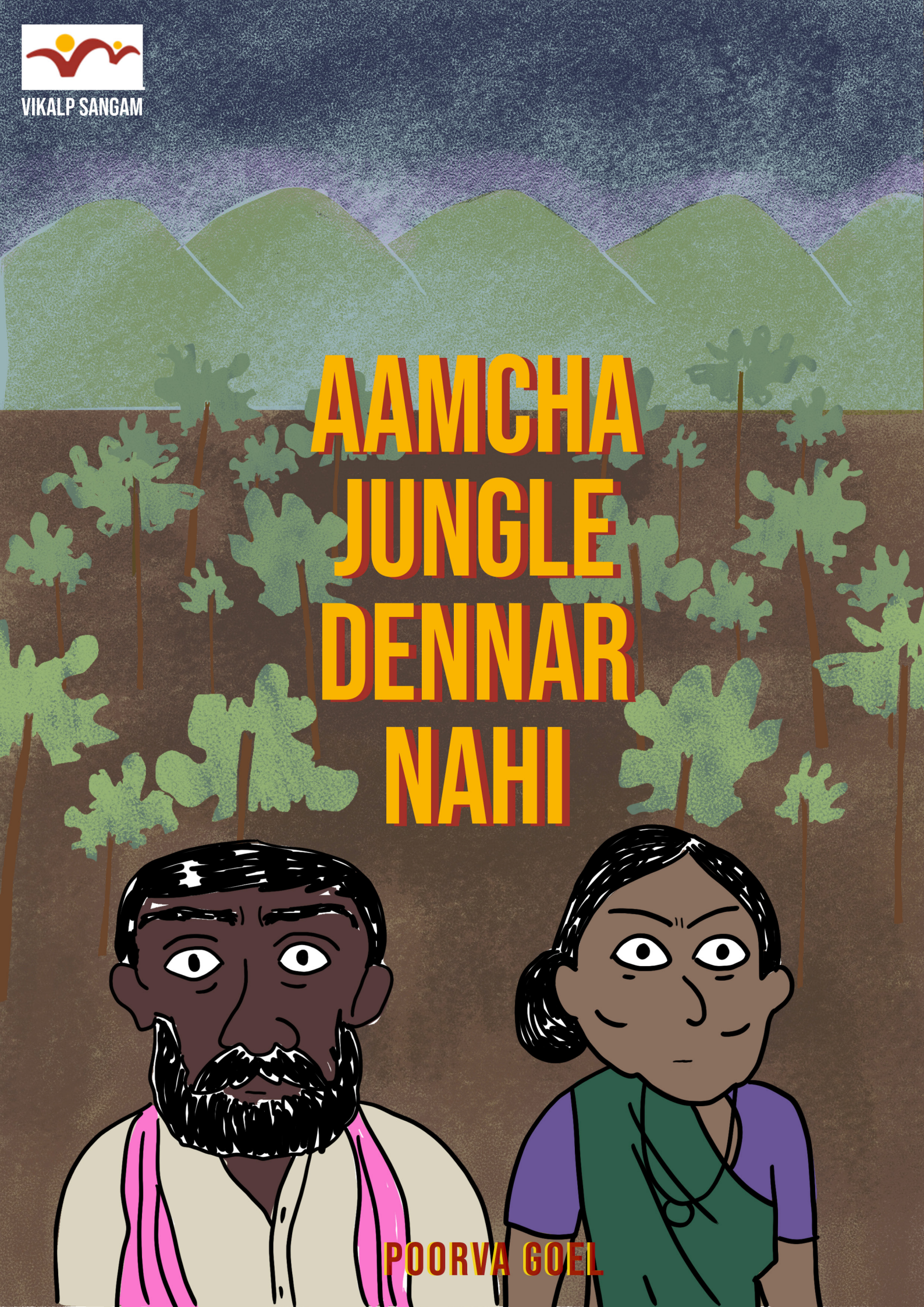
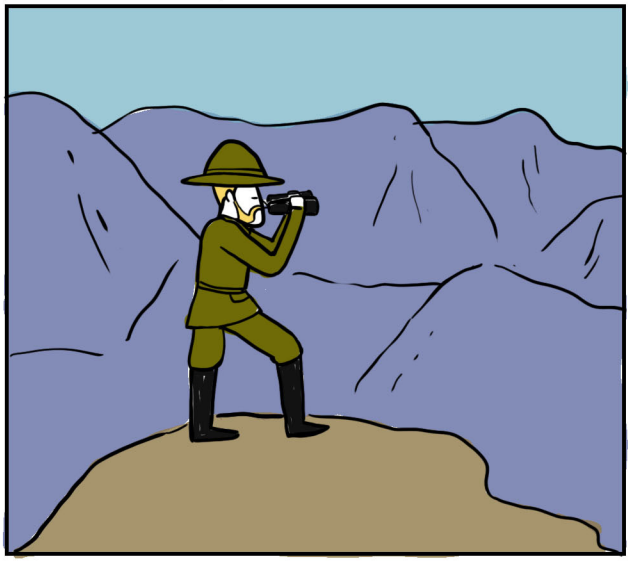
VIKALP SANGAM

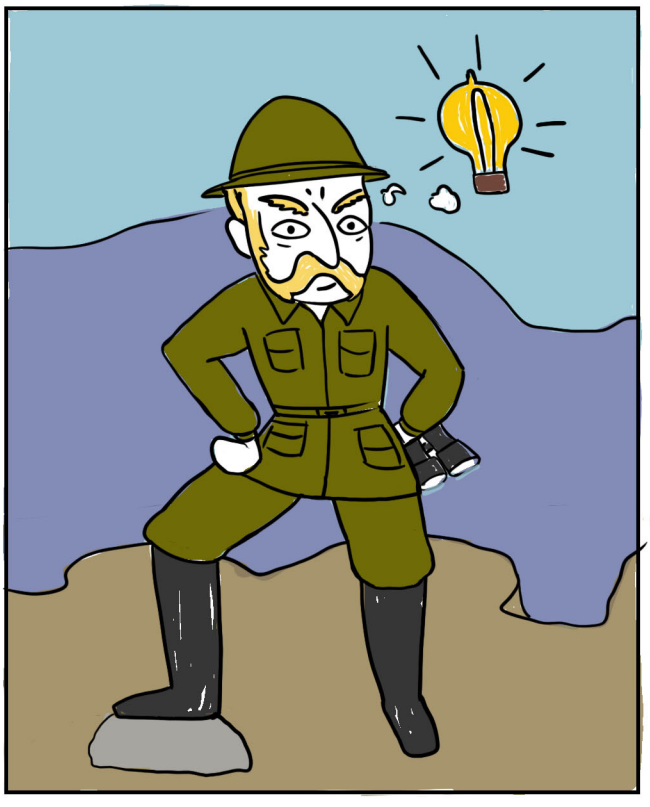
AAMCHA JUNGLE DENNAR NAHI

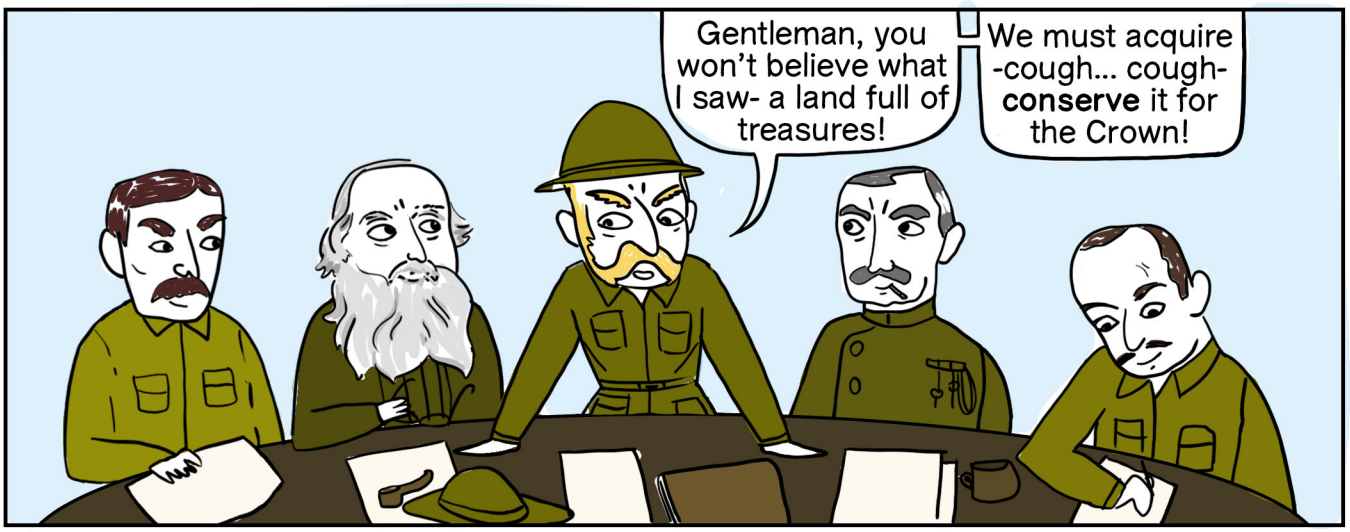


POORVA GOEL

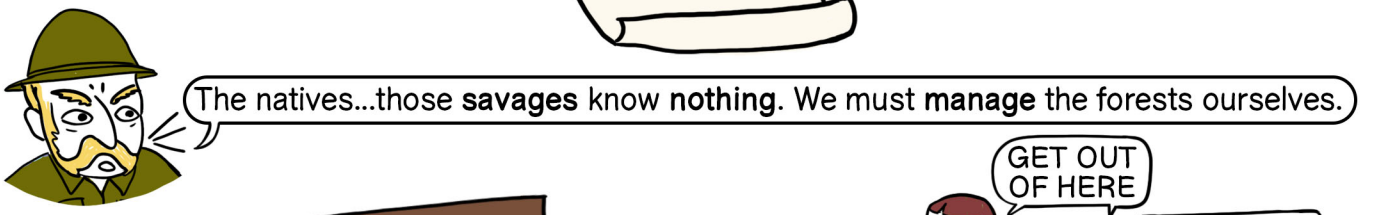
1861
Colonial India



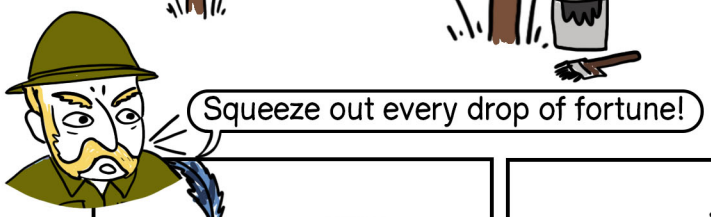



Gentleman, you won't believe what I saw- a land full of treasures!
We must acquire -cough... cough- **conserve** it for the Crown!

Indian Forest Act


The natives...those **savages** know **nothing**. We must **manage** the forests ourselves.

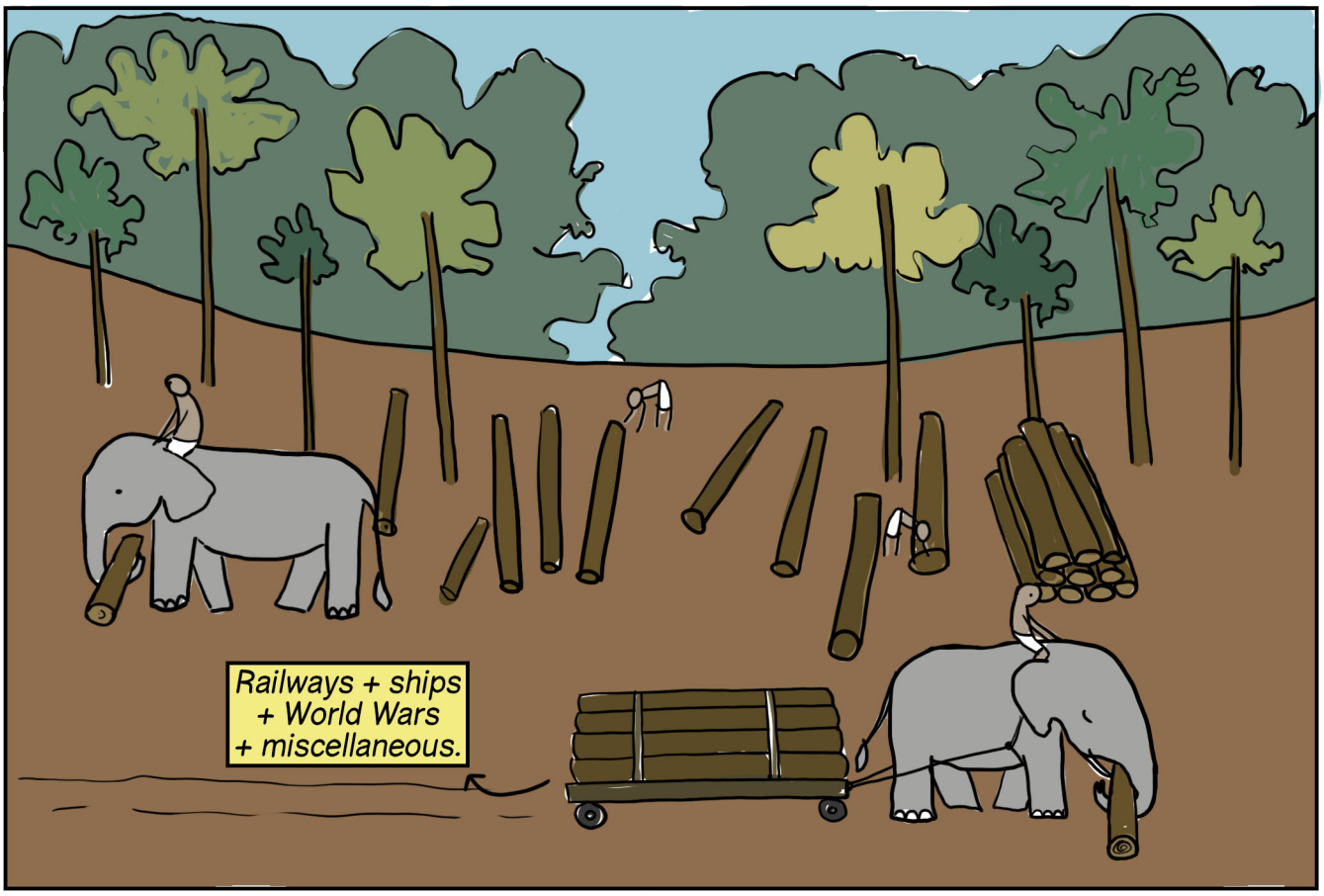
RESERVE FOREST
GET OUT OF HERE
These forests are reserved...
...for the Crown!
HAH AHA HAHA


Squeeze out every drop of fortune!

Sorry birdie, that belongs to the Queen.

And-

- so do you!



My Dear Miss M.,

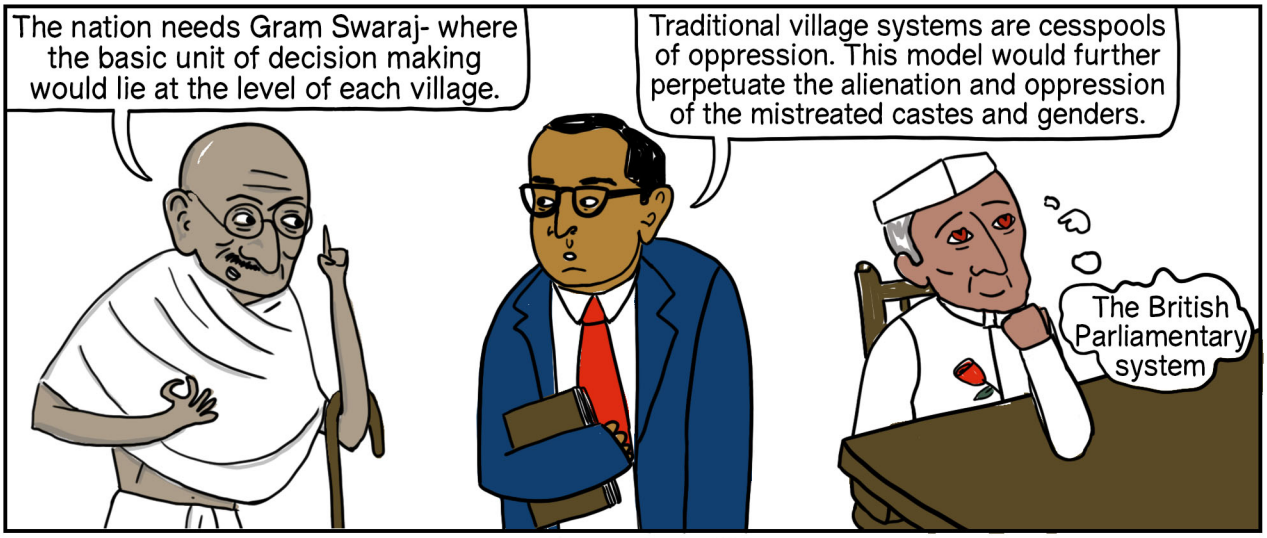
The big factory in India has been set up. I am boarding the next ship back home. At last, I will see you, my dear.

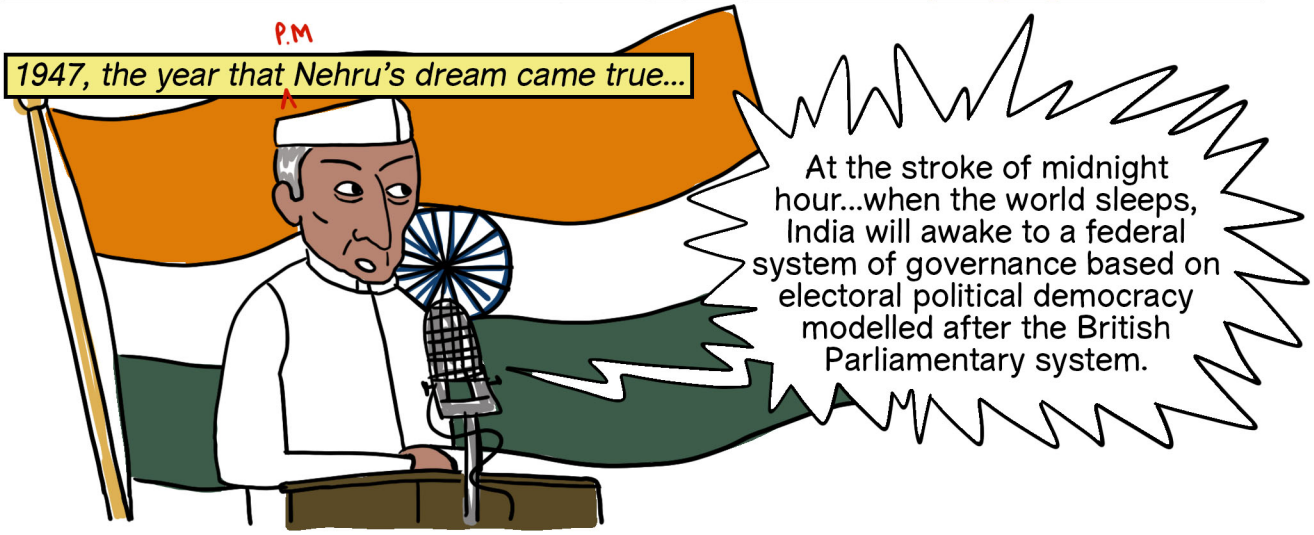
Ever your most affection
U

London, 1870.
He's back...
He's back...
Knock Knock
Hmph
My lady, sorry for keeping you waiting.
Look... I brought you the fruits of India's Jungles.

Seventy-five years later

An intense debate took place in the country regarding the form of democratic governance to be adopted after Independence.

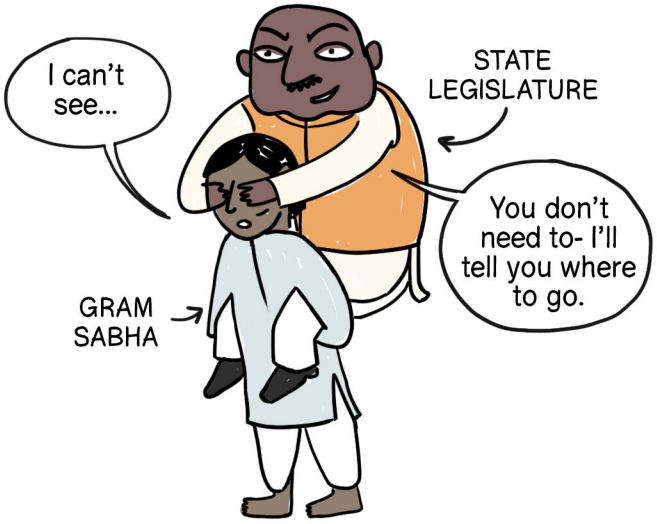




Panchayati Raj System

In 1957, based on the recommendations of a government committee, democratic decentralization in the form of a three-tier Panchayati Raj System (PRS) was envisioned. Within the state the first level of decision-making would be a gram panchayat (village council).

Intended as a means to achieve direct democracy, panchayats have been reduced to an extension of political parties, fuelled by nepotism and patriarchy in society and further fuelling it to enhance their own power and control.



Historically alienated, the adivasis continued to face oppression.

In the late 1970s, tribals of Gadhchiroli district came together to resist a dam project, proposed by the government, that would lead to their displacement and the destruction of large stretches of forest.

(Save the Forest, Save the People)

The Jungle Bachao Manav Bachao Andolan (Save Forest, Save Humanity Movement), a very strong movement towards self-rule, began.

Faced with stiff resistance, the dam project was finally shelved.

Strong grassroots movements across the country led to radical shifts in the legal environment:

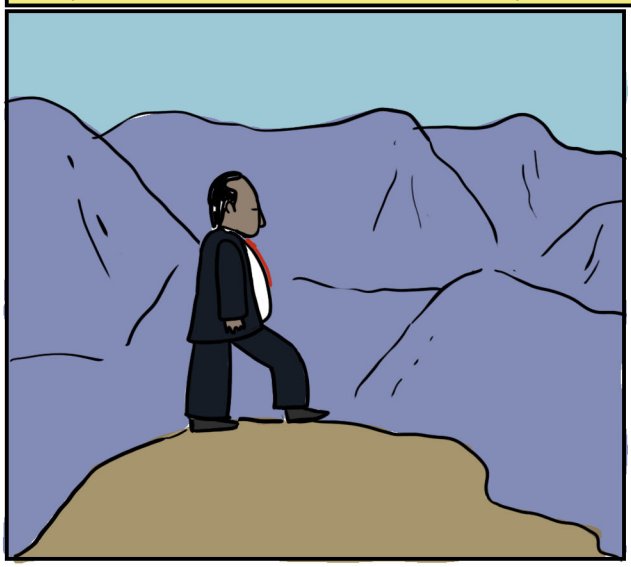
Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996

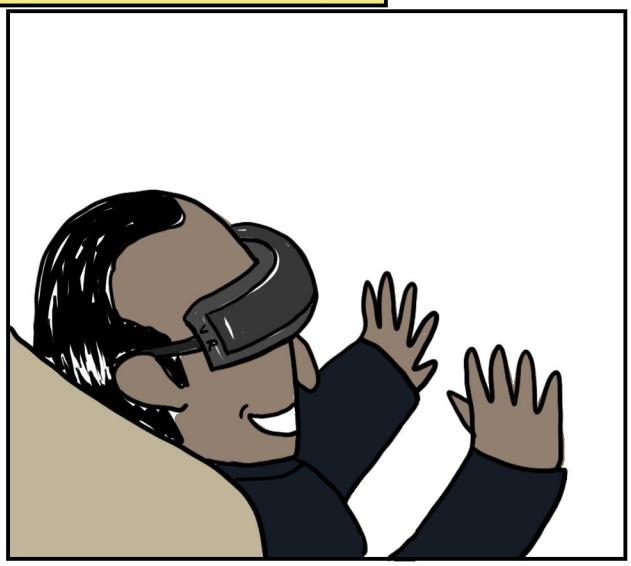
In 1996, the government extended the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the PRS to adivasi areas by providing for special powers and functions suitable to adivasi communities.

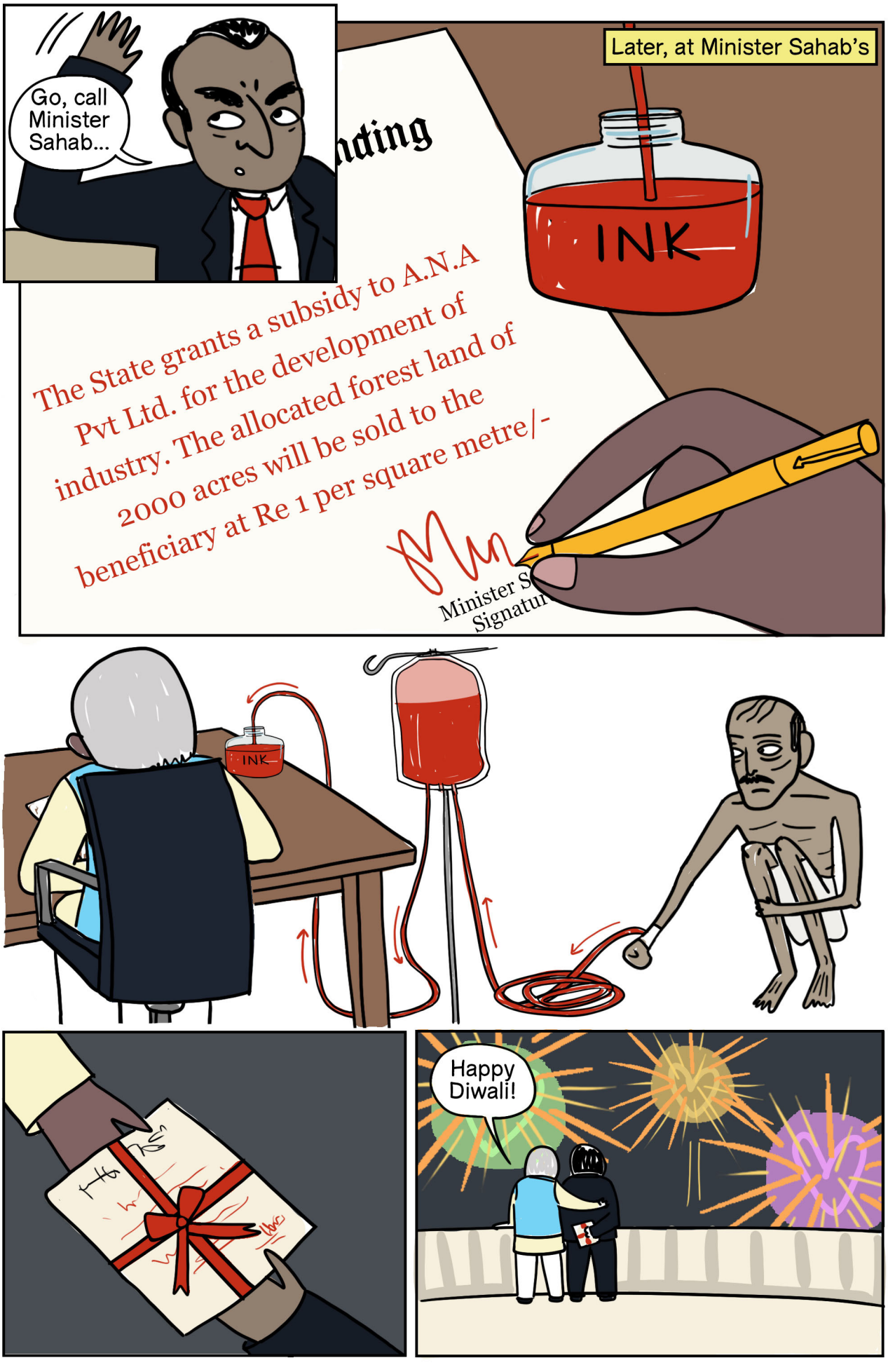
Forest Rights Act 2006

This law, for the first time in the history of Independent India, acknowledged the historic injustice committed against adivasi and forest-dwelling communities in India and recognised their rights to govern, use and conserve their traditional forests.

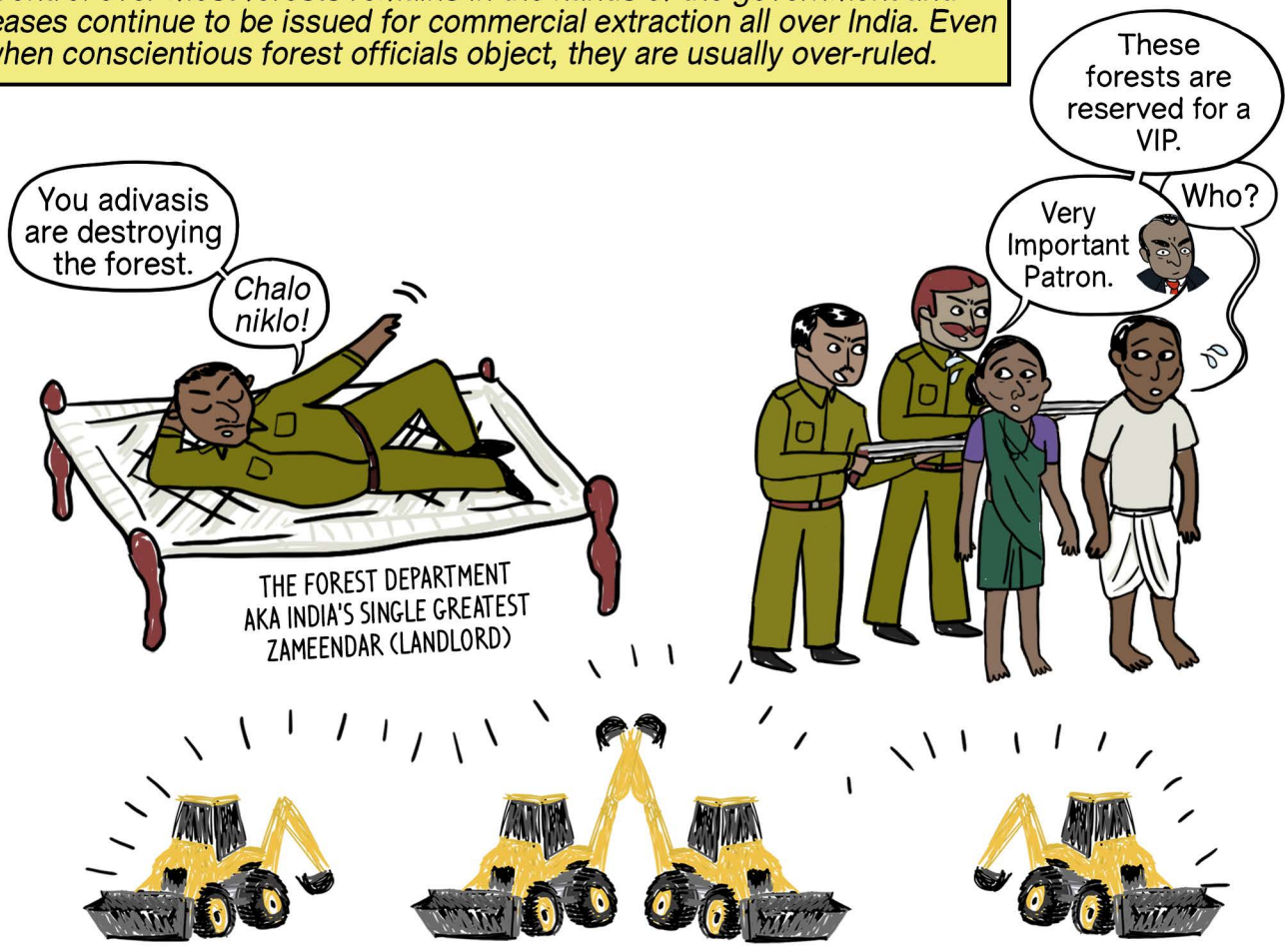
Despite these new laws since Independence, not much has changed.

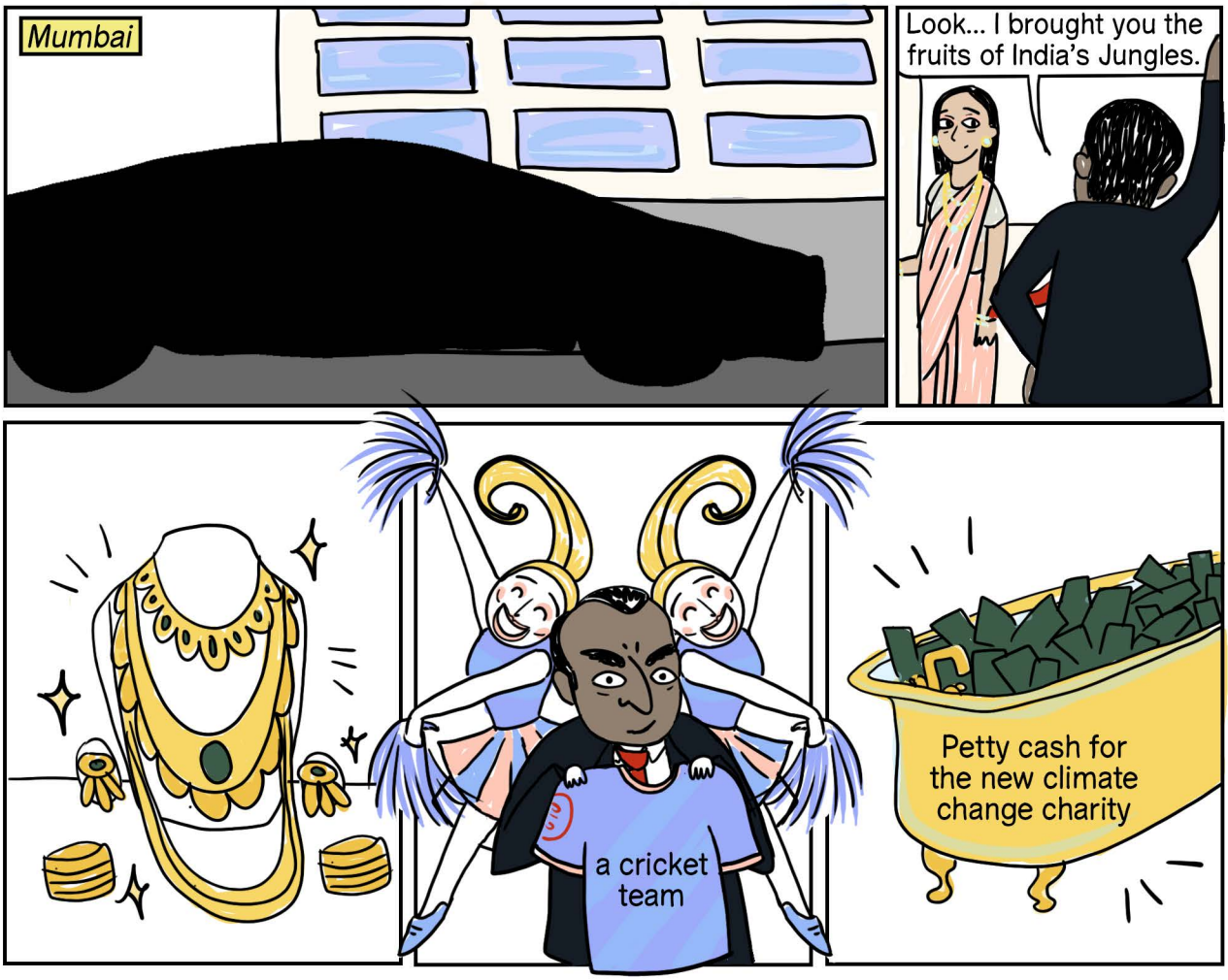





Go, call Minister Sahab...
Later, at Minister Sahab's
INK
The State grants a subsidy to A.N.A Pvt Ltd. for the development of industry. The allocated forest land of 2000 acres will be sold to the beneficiary at Re 1 per square metre/-
Minister S
Signatur
INK
Happy Diwali!

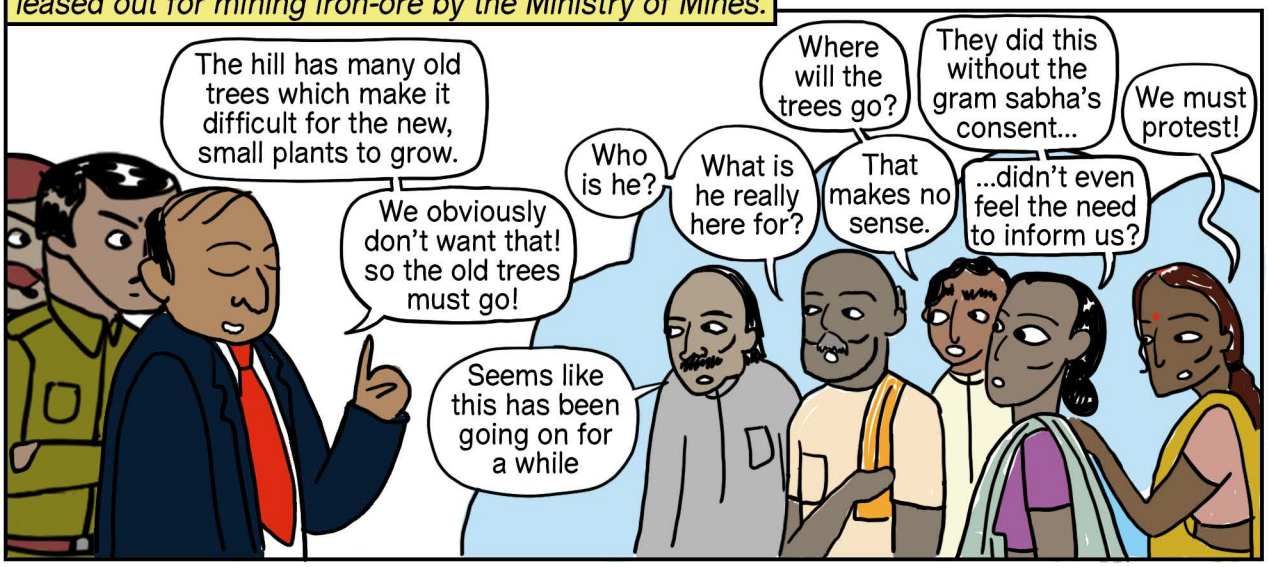
Control over most forests remains in the hands of the government and leases continue to be issued for commercial extraction all over India. Even when conscientious forest officials object, they are usually over-ruled.





And the struggle continues...
Gadchiroli, Maharashtra
Something's fishy.
What's going on here?
Ajanta Minerals Ltd. is at work.
Hum upar se aaye hain...
?
?
?
?!
We mean...we're here with the Ajanta Minerals officials.

It'd become apparent that the forests had already been leased out for mining iron-ore by the Ministry of Mines.



It is the day for filing nominations for zilla parishad (district council) elections. But not a single soul has turned up. The residents are protesting against the proposed iron-ore mining project.

PESA Rules for the state of Maharashtra were finally drafted in 2014 which meant that village gram sabhas, rather than panchayats, became the first level of decision-making.

The local social leaders used this opportunity to initiate village and taluka level discussions.

Korchi (Gadchiroli), 2016

We don't have guns, we only have laws that can save us and our forests.

Earlier people used to refer to the forest as 'sarkari' property.

Since FRA and PESA, they have started calling it 'Aamcha jungle'.

We thought that once we had held rallies and boycotted the elections, these proposals won't come back.

But they did.

We were cheated.

Individual gram sabhas by themselves are not strong enough to prevent exploitation by outsiders.

We should form a Maha Gramsabha, a federation, that can strengthen our collective struggle.

It will also play the role of a pressure group.

A federation of 90 gram sabhas, the Maha Gram Sabha, was established. It would be more inclusive, fair and transparent than any existing traditional taluka-level body.

Women should have the right to speak too!

At least 50% seats should be women represented in the Sabha.

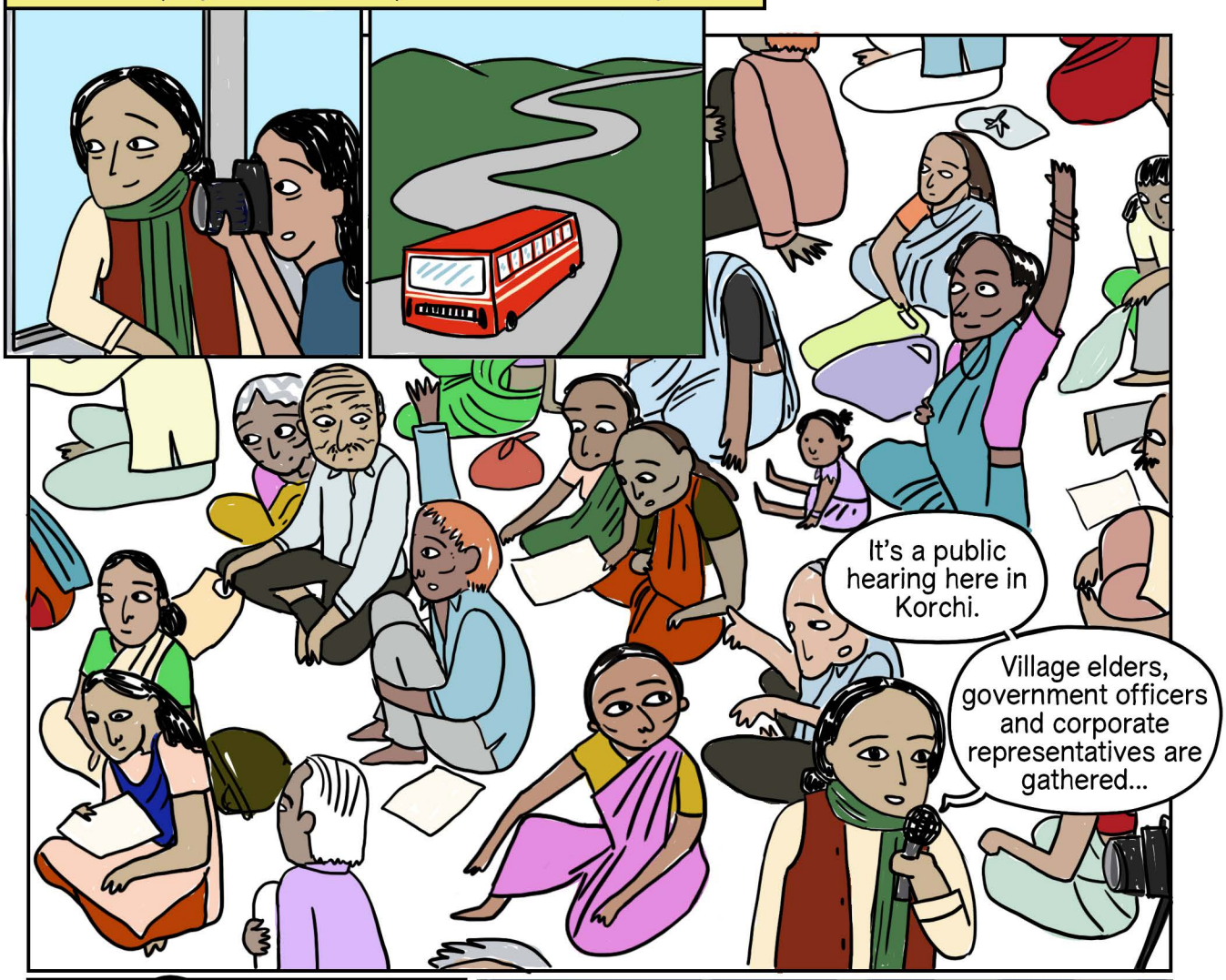
We men also don't let women speak.

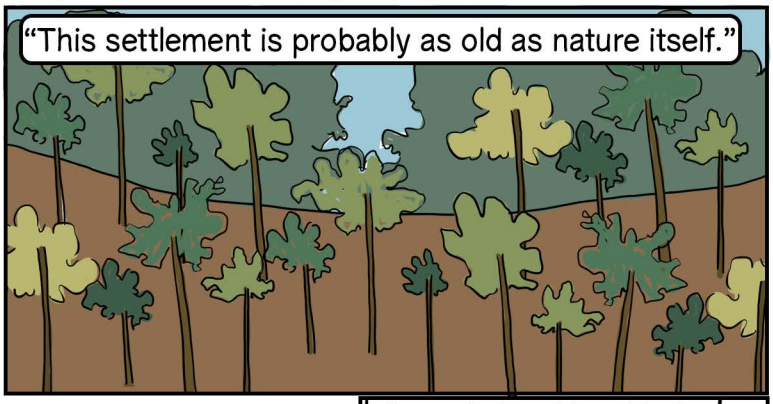
Let's create spaces where women feel free to express themselves.

The villagers agreed, and now the Maha Gramsabha consists of two women and two men from each Gram Sabha.

The larger fight against oppressive forest policies and development began decades ago, when the first mining companies came to this region. And it's the women who have always been at the forefront of the resistance movement.

Shilpa, along with cameraperson Zia, is on her way to Korchi. It's her first project as a field reporter at Bharat Today.





They want to mine our sacred hill for iron oxide.

"If the project gets a green flag, we will have to leave the forest. But where will our forest deities go?"

"Remember what Parek Kupar* Lingo had taught us?

...To not worship that which is not visible,...

To live with each other...

...to worship that which we can see and that which keeps us alive.

Jal, Jungle, Zameen!"

"We visit our sacred hill only once a year for a religious ceremony."

Instead of clearing our forests, the government should work on the unemployment problem in the village.

We need vikas. But what is vikas?

Vikas has to be sustainable, it can't be at the cost of cutting jungle, mining mountains, damming rivers.

Money is not vikas. Roads are not vikas.

We are poor, and we need livelihoods, food, shelter, clothes, basic education, basic health and peace.

zitna lagta hai utna hi lagna chaiye.

See, for example, we do need a road to make our lives a little convenient in this village but...

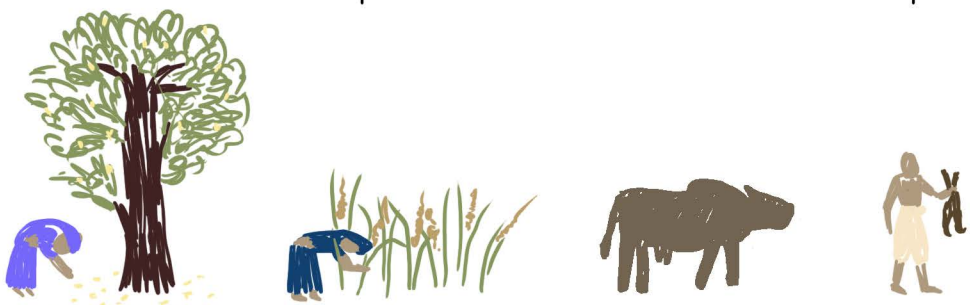
*a philosopher. While most people consider him God, the Gonds think of him as a great human just like Buddha or Baba Saheb. He created the concept of 'totem'.

...if someone says that we need two-three roads or a flyover at the cost of our environment., that would be wrong.

We need to differentiate between need and greed.

Those raw materials are used by outsiders, how will it benefit us? A few of us might get jobs but once the project is over we will lose those jobs. Our land will also be destroyed.

"The plants, the flowers, our land, the things grown here keeps us alive. The animals who work with us on the farms keep us alive. The wild animals we hunt keep us alive."



"Nature protects us and we protect Nature. Our development will happen here."

This independent system is our development.

If this forest is given to some outside person then we'll lose our independence.

Our culture will be destroyed.

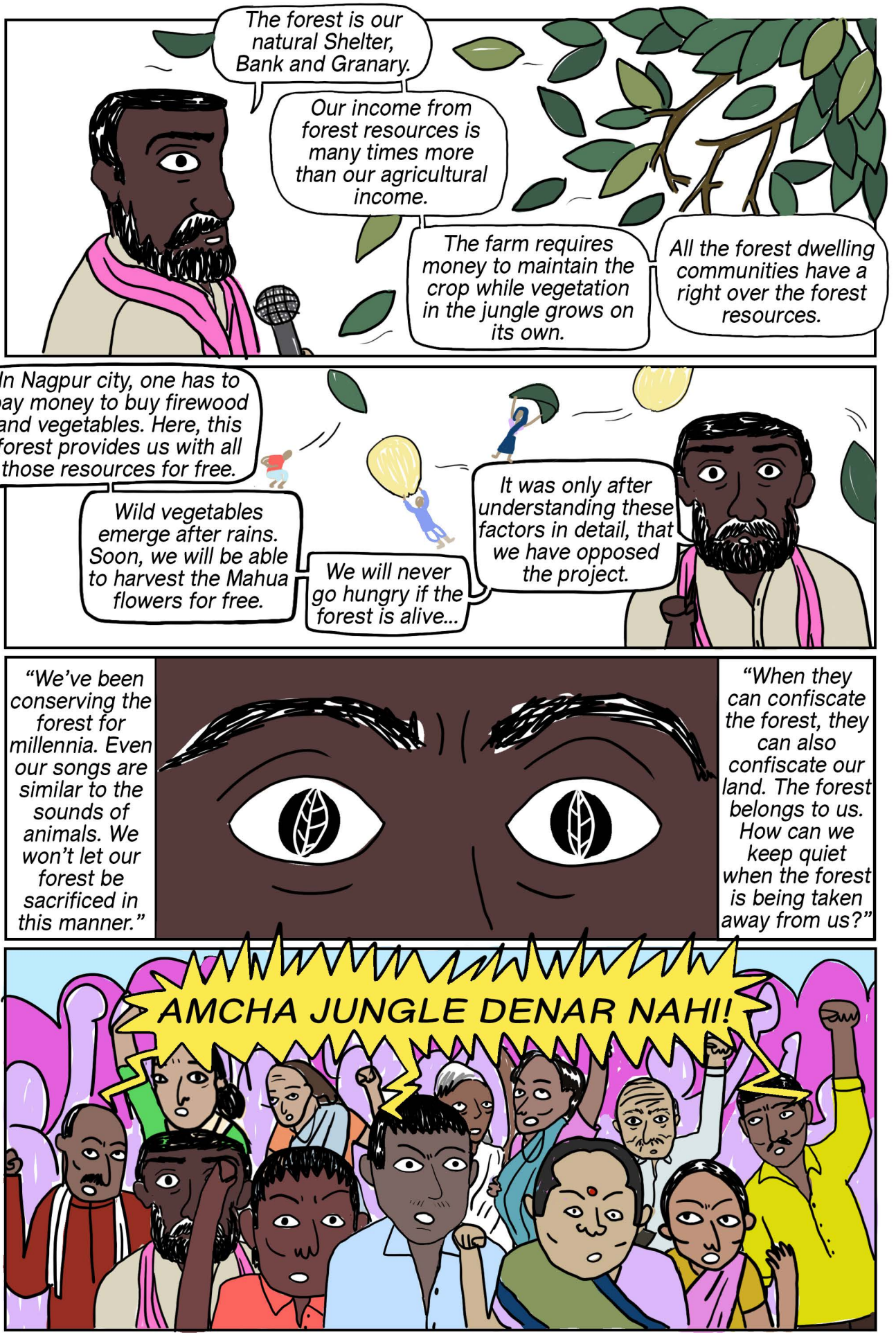
They will start owning these resources and make us dependent on them for basic needs like education, food, health.

"I have lived here all my life. Life here is now under threat, including mine. It is hence my responsibility to ensure that others also understand this and we collectively work towards protecting this life."

There is an old saying in Gondi language-'To do good work, everyone needs to be aware of one's own responsibility'.

If everyone does their part, the Gram Sabha & the villagers can develop the village on their own.

There is no need for any external agency to develop the village then.


The forest is our natural Shelter, Bank and Granary.
Our income from forest resources is many times more than our agricultural income.
The farm requires money to maintain the crop while vegetation in the jungle grows on its own.
All the forest dwelling communities have a right over the forest resources.
In Nagpur city, one has to pay money to buy firewood and vegetables. Here, this forest provides us with all those resources for free.
Wild vegetables emerge after rains. Soon, we will be able to harvest the Mahua flowers for free.
We will never go hungry if the forest is alive...
It was only after understanding these factors in detail, that we have opposed the project.
"We've been conserving the forest for millennia. Even our songs are similar to the sounds of animals. We won't let our forest be sacrificed in this manner."
"When they can confiscate the forest, they can also confiscate our land. The forest belongs to us. How can we keep quiet when the forest is being taken away from us?"
AMCHA JUNGLE DENAR NAHI!

Back at the Bharat Today office
WHAT IS THIS NONSENSE?!
You were supposed to show how the mining project will bring **development** in the region and how these **naxalites** are spreading **terrorism** in the forests.
Instead, you brought back anti-development, naxalite propaganda?!
You expect us to broadcast this?!
You're fired!
IF A TREE FALLS IN A FOREST AND NO ONE IS AROUND TO HEAR IT, DOES IT MAKE A SOUND?

And the struggle continues...

This graphic novel is created by Poorva Goel.

Inputs for this work were given by Ashish Kothari and Shrishtee Bajpai, Kalpavriksh and Vikalp Sangam.

The book is based on the following works:

Women come out of the woods: collectivisation in rural Maharashtra- Shrishtee Bajpai

On the Cusp: Reframing Democracy and Well-Being in Korchi, India
by Neema Pathak Broome, Shrishtee Bajpai and Mukesh Shende

Ecology and Equity - Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha

Zendepar Yatra- an annual pilgrimage of resistance and hope- Shrishtee Bajpai

Consolidated notes on worldviews: conversations with community members conducted between 2016-2019. (Izam Bhau, Mahesh, Kalpana, Siyaram, Lalsu, Chamaru Kalo, Kumari Tai, Sunil Ukau Hodi, Satish Gogulwar, Shubdha Deshmukh.)

Abbreviations

CFR: Community Forest Resource Rights or the Right to use, conserve and sustainably manage forests over which rights were granted under the FRA 2006

FPIC: Free, Prior and Informed Consent

FRA: Forest Rights Act, also called the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006

GS: Gram sabhas or village assemblies

MGS: Maha Gramsabha or federation of gram sabhas in Korchi

NTFP: Non-Timber Forest Product

PESA: Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996

PRS: Panchayati Raj System

SHG: Self-Help Group

Glossary

Gram panchayat: The elected village executive committee forming the smallest unit of decision-making within India's PRS. A panchayat could cover one or more villages.

Gram Sabha: A body comprising of all adults of a village or a group of villages. The gram panchayat is accountable to it.

Gram swaraj: Village self-rule (or village republic)

Panchayat samiti/Mandal parishad/Block samiti: The PRS has three levels, gram panchayat at village level, with Panchayat samiti/Mandal parishad/Block samiti, which constitutes a cluster of villages.

Panchayati Raj System: System of governance adopted by India in which the gram panchayats are the basic unit of local administration and governance.

Sarpanch: Elected head of a panchayat

Taluka: An administrative unit at the level of multiple villages

Zila parishad: This is the third tier of the PRS. This tier covers a district, which constitutes multiple Talukas/Blocks. Multiple districts constitute the state.