

Children of the Forest

Shraddha Prabhu





# Children of the Forest

A visual documentation  
on the Halakki tribe

by  
Shraddha Prabhu









08<sup>th</sup> March

Sunday

"Putti, go pack your bag quickly. We have to leave in an hour!" shouted Avvi as soon as she ended the call and threw her phone on the couch.

"Where are we going Avvi?" I asked my mother.

"I'll explain on the way. We don't have much time now. We are leaving as soon as Appa reaches home. I have to pack and take care of many things," she rushed to the kitchen.

Confused, I ran to my room and pulled out my bag. I packed a few clothes and some stationery.

"Putti, hurry up! Appa is here. Don't forget to pack your toothbrush," Avvi said while Appa went to shower.

There we were, the three of us ready with our bags, in the shortest time possible! Appa handed out the masks & gloves and we left our apartment.

"Do not touch anything Putti, they are everywhere!" said my father. We went to the bus stop, got on the bus, and found our sleeper berths. Avvi put a blanket over the mattress. We removed the gloves and sanitized our hands.



YAY!

"Appa, why are we leaving in such a rush right now? Couldn't we wait till tomorrow?" I asked.

"There's a chance that the entire nation will be locked down soon. The situation is getting out of control in the city. Since your school has declared temporary holidays and I can work from home, we think we'll be safe at Ajji's home for n..."

"Yay!" I screamed with excitement before he could finish his sentence, "Are we really going to Kumta? How long are we staying there?"

"Maybe for a week, until the number of cases is under control," Avvi replied. Appa went to his berth after we ate dinner that we had brought from home.

We haven't been to Kumta for a long time due to my parents' busy schedules. I loved spending my summer holidays there as a kid. And, I missed Ajji a lot. Now the COVID-19 pandemic has given me a chance to go there again! Appa says the coronavirus is everywhere, so we have to be extra careful.

Still,

*I am excited!!!*



09<sup>th</sup> March

The fresh breeze through the bus window woke me up. I couldn't take my eyes off the lush green forests and rivers. We had almost reached Kumta. I woke Avvi up to watch the sunrise. As the conductor screamed "Kumta Kumta Kumta," we were ready to get down. We got an auto to Ajji mane.

Amidst areca nut and coconut plantation, I could see the earthen house with thatched roof and walls decorated with drawings. I saw my beloved Ajji in her unique saree, sitting on the jagali having kavala, eagerly waiting for us. The Tulasi katte in the front yard freshly daubed with cow dung caught my eyes. The chicken coop made of packed earth on areca nut poles and the cowshed in the background brought back memories of chasing chickens in the front yard when I was little.

Kumta

Ajji mane ಅಜ್ಜಿ ಮನೆ grandmother's house  
Jagali ಜಗಲಿ sit-out  
Kavala ಕವಳ raw areca nut with betel leaves  
Tulasi katte ತುಳಸಿ ಕಟ್ಟೆ holy basil pot

When we reached the house, Appa didn't even let me greet Ajji. We had to take bath first, because of COVID :(





We sat together on the shiny red floor of the living room while Chikki served us a cup of ragi ambali each. "You should finish it all Putti, it'll make you stronger and healthier," she said. Now I know how she gets all that strength to work in paddy the fields, morning to evening.

I was curiously staring at the drawings on the mud walls when Ajji asked, "Isn't it pretty Putti?" "Did you draw it Ajji? How is it made?" I asked her. "Yes!! I drew it last year during Appachchi & Chikki's wedding, with the help of other women from our koppa. We call it Hali. You like drawing too, don't you?" "I love to draw! But I have never made something like this before. Will you teach me how to draw Hali?" "Putti, it's Suggi tomorrow. We will be decorating our front yard to welcome the Suggi dancers. Why don't you help tomorrow?" I was thrilled! Suggi is the biggest and most expensive festival of our tribe. We couldn't have come here at a better time, I thought!

## Hali

*Ragi ambali ರಾಗಿ ಅಂಬಲಿ a nutritious millet drink*  
*Koppa ಕೊಪ್ಪು a group of Halakki huts forming a community*





10<sup>th</sup> March



While having lunch I asked, “Why are we having kotte idli and bellada payasa today?”

“Did you forget that today is Suggi? These are the specialties for this auspicious day. That’s why we have not eaten fish for five days,” said Aiji which reminded me that I would learn how to draw Hali today. I ate my lunch quickly and ran to the front yard.

*Suggi*

“Okay, let me make the shedi mixture,” Chikki said while she mixed the locally available white clay with water. Aiji and Avvi started drawing diagrammatic figures against our blackish-brown front yard. After watching them for some time, I made a few drawings too!!

“Wow Putti! You got the hang of it so quickly. Now, let’s try something different,” said Chikki. She crushed a few clay tiles and added them to the mixture along with turmeric and jasmine leaves, which created a deep maroon color. We drew a few more drawings and decorated the front yard, listening to Aiji sing songs about it.

Aiji said, “Do you know why do we draw Hali? It’ll help us ward off evil during auspicious events. We draw different Hali for different occasions like festivals, weddings, etc. Let’s go in and get ready before the Suggi dancers arrive.”



*Kotte idli ಕೊಟ್ಟೆ ಇಡ್ಲಿ rice cake steamed in jackfruit leaves  
Bellada payasa ಬೆಲ್ಲದ ಪಾಯಸ a pudding made of jaggery*



Ajji got ready in her new saree meant for special occasions. She draped the 7.25 m long cotton fabric in a unique way without a blouse. I have not seen my mother or aunt drape their saree this way.



Loads of beaded necklaces, a bold red bindi, glass bangles, gold earrings and a nose ring completed her attire, along with german silver armpieces. She rolled her center-parted, oiled, shiny black hair into a bun and adorned it with a garland made out of abbalige.



*Abbalige-ಅಬ್ಬಲಿಗ್ಗೆ locally available orange colored flower*





By then, a team of 12 people arrived, 8 of them in distinctive attire and turayi.

*Turayi ತುರಾಯಿ* colorful headgear made of softwood, decorated with carved birds and flowers



They danced holding kolu in right hand and kuncha in left, uttering 'O... O.. Hocho' repeatedly to the rhythm of instruments like jagate, gumte and tala. The master of the ceremonies controlled their rhythmic steps and songs.



Appa took a break from his work-from-home schedule to watch Suggi Kunita. We took a lot of pictures and made videos. Chikki honored the tired dancers by offering refreshments and coins. I followed them to the neighbors' houses and watched them dance a few more times.

After a while, another group arrived at our house and I rushed back to watch their performance. They even had thief & police and yakshagana themed characters such as Hanuman, who danced to a devotional song.

O... O.. Hocho

"Why do they dance on Suggi?" I questioned to which Chikki replied, "We grow our own food and make a living out of it. Agriculture is our main source of income. During the harvest season, our men visit other villages and dance in their houses to bring rain and fulfill the wishes of people. They spend the nights at temples. After three to four days' tour, they return to our village on the full moon day and finish the event by worshipping Kari Devaru, to pay their gratitude for last year's harvest and to pray for a good harvest in the coming year."

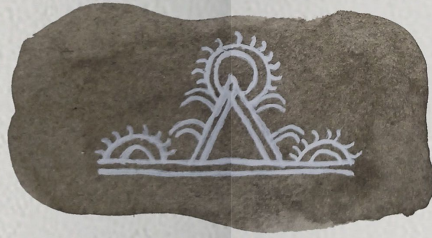


*Kolu ಕೋಲು stick*  
*kuncha ಕುಂಚಿ brush made of peacock feathers*  
*Jagate ಜಾಗಟೆ beating disc*  
*Gumte ಗುಮಟೆ drum*  
*Tala ತಾಳ cymbals*  
*Suggi Kunita ಸುಗ್ಗಿ ಕುಣಿತ harvest dance*  
*Yakshagana ಯಕ್ಷಗಾನ traditional dance form of coastal Karnataka*  
*Kari Devaru ಕರಿ ದೇವರು a form of Shiva worshipped by Halakkis*



Ajji began to tell another one of her stories, "Once upon a time in Kailash, the children of Gauri and Ganga had a desire to learn a new form of art. Shiva sends them to a teacher to fulfill their wishes. When asked to learn various games like chennemane, hani & chendaata, they refuse, saying that those games are played by cattle rearers. They say that Kolata is performed by the Harijanas, Saangabaalya by Siddhas, and Yakshagaana by Haigas. The children insist that he teaches them Suggi Kunita. After having learned, they visit different houses and perform the dance. Seeing this, Shiva gets angry and says it does not suit those like us. He curses the children because of which their Kolu and Kuncha fall on the ground. At that moment, a Halakki boy picks them up. Because of the bad omen during their first performance, the children give everything to the Halakki boy. The guru obliges him to renounce meat for five days and worship God which continued to be practiced as Suggi Kunita."

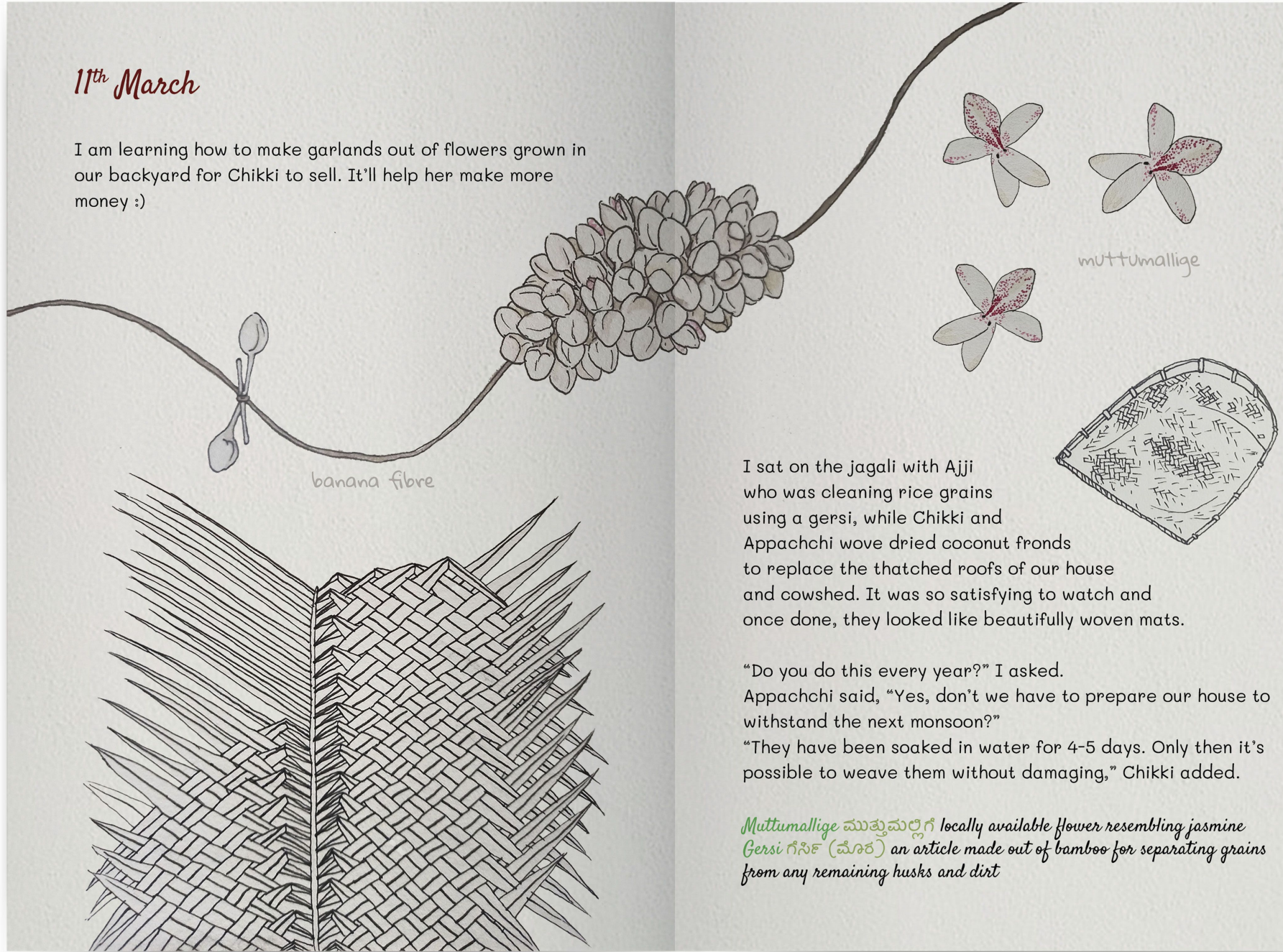
I enjoyed learning a new form of art today! Drawing with Ajji, Avvi and Chikki was a lot of fun. Even though Appa was busy all day working from home, he joined us to watch Suggi Kunita. I cannot wait to show the videos to my friends when I go back home.





11<sup>th</sup> March

I am learning how to make garlands out of flowers grown in our backyard for Chikki to sell. It'll help her make more money :)



banana fibre

muttumallige

I sat on the jagali with Aiji who was cleaning rice grains using a gersi, while Chikki and Appachchi wove dried coconut fronds to replace the thatched roofs of our house and cowshed. It was so satisfying to watch and once done, they looked like beautifully woven mats.

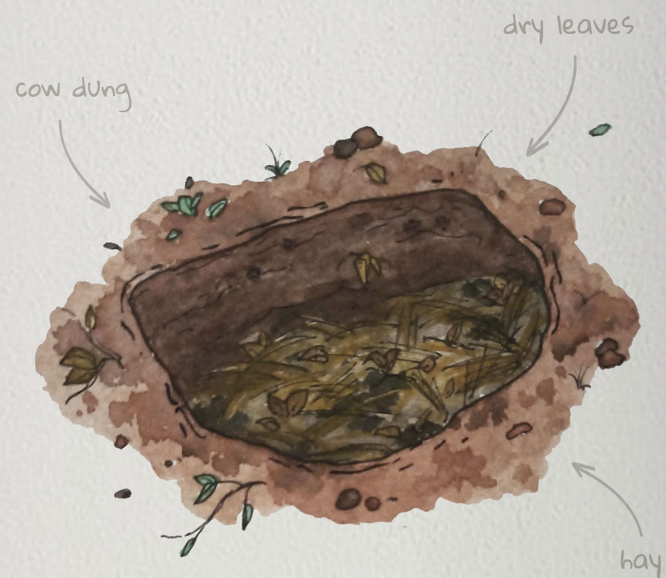
“Do you do this every year?” I asked. Appachchi said, “Yes, don’t we have to prepare our house to withstand the next monsoon?” “They have been soaked in water for 4-5 days. Only then it’s possible to weave them without damaging,” Chikki added.

*Muttumallige ಮುತ್ತುಮಲ್ಲಿಗೆ* locally available flower resembling jasmine  
*Gersi ಗೆಸೆ (ಮೊರೆ)* an article made out of bamboo for separating grains from any remaining husks and dirt



12<sup>th</sup> March

Today, one of our cows, gave birth. Chikki asked me to name it. I named the female calf Asha, in a hope that the COVID situation gets better soon.



I have observed for a few days that Chikki collects cow dung while coming home from work which she throws into a pit in the ground in our backyard along with cow dung from our cowshed, hay and fallen leaves. She said that they decompose to form 'savayava gobbara' over time, which she then uses as an organic manure for her plants.

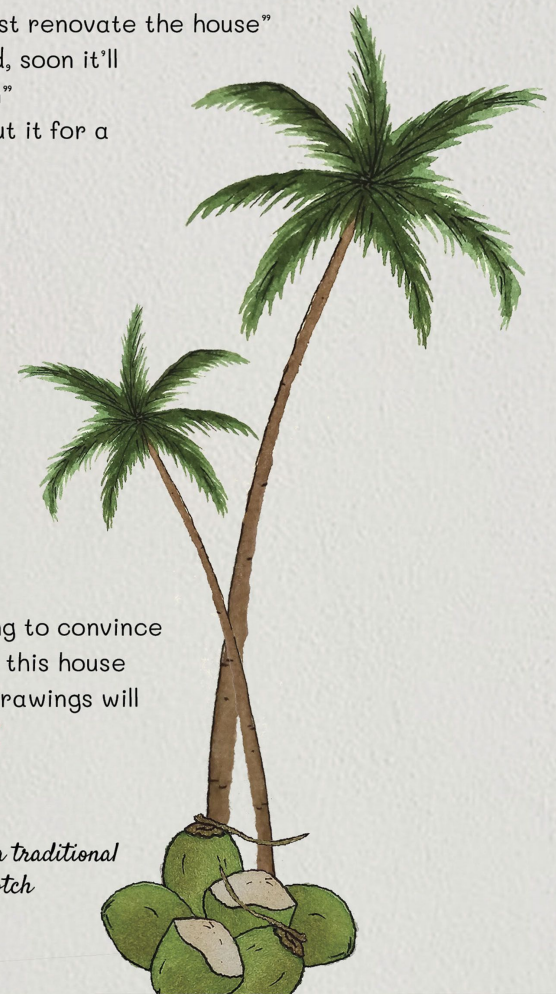
13<sup>th</sup> March

I was playing kuntubille in our front yard with neighbors. I went inside the house to drink water, just when I overheard the adults talking,

"We have to at least renovate the house"  
"It's become so old, soon it'll be unsafe to live in"  
"I am thinking about it for a long time too"

Everyone was trying to convince Aiji. I felt sad that this house with its beautiful drawings will be gone, forever :(

*Kuntubille ಕುಂತುಬಿಲ್ಲೆ* a traditional game similar to hopscotch





14<sup>th</sup> March

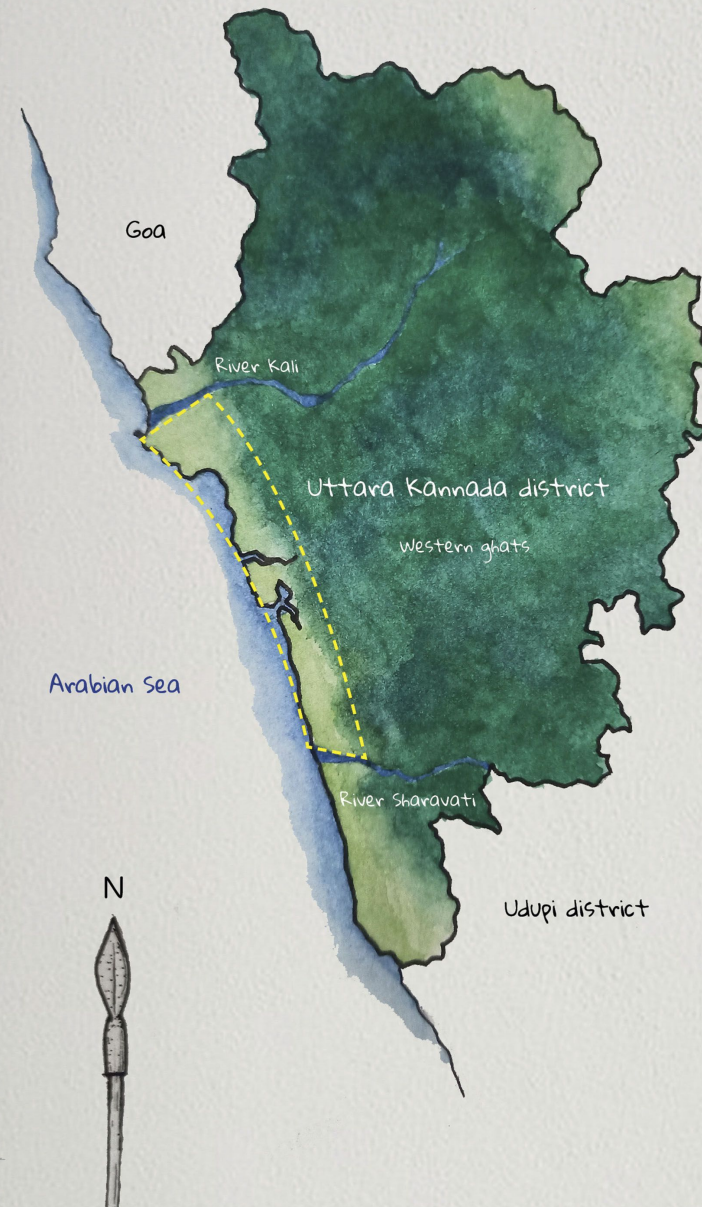
Last night I could not sleep. What happens if this house is not there anymore? Ajja & Ajji must have so many memories of living here. Is Ajji sad too? I kept thinking.

In the evening when Ajji was engulfed in her own world, sitting on the jagali singing loudly, while making garlands out of muttumallige flowers, I decided to talk to her about it, "Ajji, who built this house?"

"We have lived in this house for a very long time. Maybe your grandfather's father or his grandfather or great grandfather..." She said.

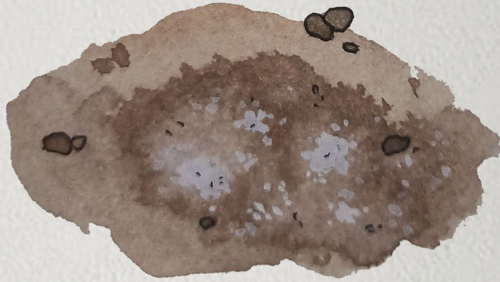
"Have all of them always lived in this house? Where did my great great great grandfather come from?" I was curious.

Ajji said, "We are the children of the forest, Putti. Nature is our cradle. Earlier, we lived in the forest, on the slopes of the hills. We used to hunt for food and depended on the Kumbri system of agriculture, where we clear a patch of forest and burn the plants & trees to provide natural manure for our ragi crop. When the British government banned Kumbri agriculture, we gradually migrated to riverbanks, seashores, and flatlands of Uttara Kannada district. We started working for landlords where we cultivated the rice. Some of us own pieces of land after 'tiller is the owner' legislation was passed."





Then where did my great great great grandfather and grandmother come from?" I questioned, which Aiji answered with yet another story.



"Once, when Shiva was plowing the field, Parvathi was carrying food for him. She tripped and all the rice and milk fell on the ground. Parvathi made one male and one female doll out of that mud and returned home to get food for Shiva again. When hungry Shiva went in search of Parvathi, he saw the dolls. He touched them, and they came to life!"  
"What happened then?" I asked.



Aiji continued, "The dolls asked, you have given us life, now what should we do for a living? Shiva said you were born when I was plowing the field so you can continue my work. Therefore agriculture became our main occupation. And, since we were born out of a mixture of rice and milk, we got the name Halakki."



ಹಾಲಕ್ಕಿ

I was surprised to hear such interesting details about our background.  
I love Aiji's stories!

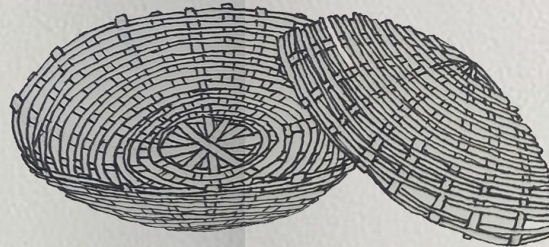
Halakki ಹಾಲಕ್ಕಿ milk (ಹಾಲ) + rice (ಅಕ್ಕಿ)



15<sup>th</sup> March

## Sunday Fun day!!!

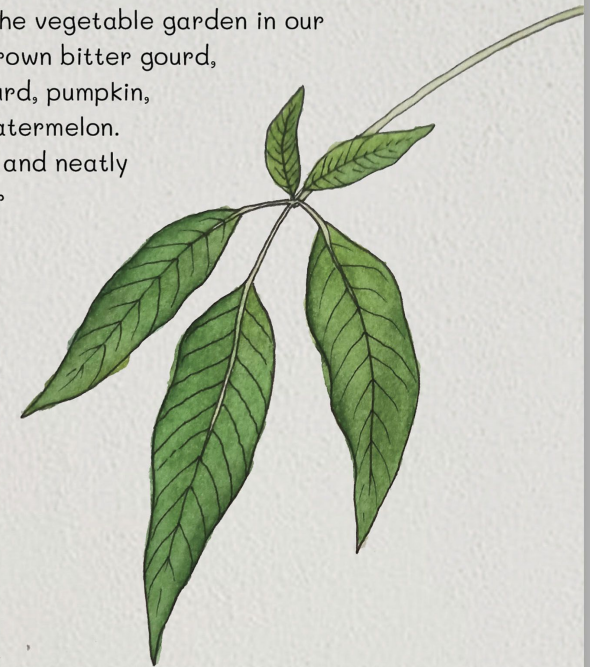
Appa took me to the beach today. We collected a variety of seashells. I wrote my name on the sand and watched the waves wash it away several times, just like I did as a kid. As the sun disappeared into the ocean, we bought some toore and returned home.



Toore ತೋರೆ sardines (one of the fish most loved by the Halakkis)

16<sup>th</sup> March

I followed Chikki to the vegetable garden in our backyard. She had grown bitter gourd, ash gourd, bottle gourd, pumpkin, ladies' finger, and watermelon. She harvested a few and neatly arranged them in her basket to sell, from house to house.



In the evening, I helped Aiji and Avvi hang some plant twigs from the door frame.

"Why are we decorating the house? Is there another festival tomorrow?" I asked.

Aiji chuckled and said, "No silly, this is lukke soppu. It gives out a distinct smell which acts as a mosquito repellent."

"And, it's chemical-free too," Chikki added as she came home with fish which Avvi cooked for dinner.



17<sup>th</sup> March

Ajja came home with surprises for me in the evening. He was wearing a langoti and a folded rumalu on his head, his mouth red with kavala. He handed me his rumalu and gestured that I open it.

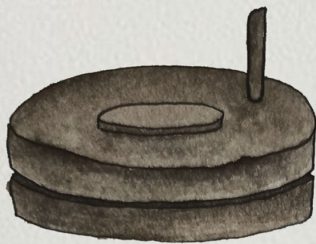
“Remember? You loved these when you were little,” he said.

There were different types of forest fruits wrapped in his rumalu - geru, nerale hannu, and tiny pearl-like fruits which he called mullannu.

They were so yummy!

“Do you like it so much? I’ll bring more tomorrow,” he smiled and went to the cowshed. I shared the fresh fruits with Avvi who was grinding grains using beesukallu.

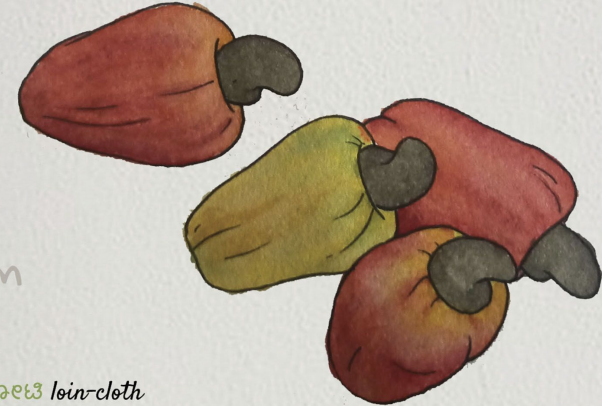
I think she loves them too!



Yummy



Yum



Yum

Langoti ಲಂಗೋಟಿ loincloth  
Rumalu ರುಮಾಲು a cotton towel  
Geru hannu ಗೇರು cashew fruit  
Nerale hannu ನೇರಳೆ ಹಣ್ಣು jamun  
Mullannu ಮುಳ್ಳಣ್ಣು zunna berry  
Beesukallu ಬೀಸುಕಲ್ಲು A stone equipment used to grind grains



18<sup>th</sup> March

I went to the hill with my friends to collect fruits. The sun was setting and we were running down the hill to reach home before it was dark. I stumbled upon a rock and fell. I somehow reached home, limping, with a bruised knee and scratched palms.

Sitting on the jagali making garlands as usual, Aiji stopped singing and rushed towards me.

“Putti, what happened, how did you injure your knee?” she asked.

“I tripped and fell, Aiji, it hurts so bad...” I replied, trying not to cry.

She helped me sit on the jagali and cleaned my wound with water. She plucked some leaves from my favorite plant, nachikemullu which grows everywhere in our backyard. She crushed them with her palms and applied the herbs on my wound, and said, “Don’t worry Putti, the bleeding will stop now and you’ll start feeling better. You should be more careful.”

I asked her curiously, “Whenever I get hurt you dab some leaves on the wound and it heals faster. Even when I had fever or digestion issues as a kid, you treated me at home. Are you a doctor Aiji? But you didn’t go to school. How do you know all this?”

*Nachikemullu ನಾಚಿಕೆ ಮುಳ್ಳು (ಮುಟ್ಟಿದರೆ ಮುನಿ) touch me not plant*



Aiji explained to me, “As I have told you, we are the children of the forest.

Do you think our ancestors who lived in the forest had access to hospitals? For decades, they have explored the forests and have found natural remedies for all their ailments using the plants and trees available around them. My Avvi learned these methods from my Aiji and taught me. You should also learn these as you grow up. Then you won’t need to rush to a hospital for trivial issues.”

I asked her, “What should I have done if there were no nachikemullu around me?”

She answered, “Well, you can also apply the ash-like layer found on the midrib of a coconut fond, or tea powder which is commonly available in the kitchen.”



## 19<sup>th</sup> March

Since I was always curious to know, I asked, “Why do you dress differently than Avvi and Chikki? Why do you wear so many necklaces Ajjji?”

“When I was a little girl, I used to drape my Avvi’s saree around my waist as a skirt. When a girl reaches 12-13 years of age, we perform a ritual called ghetge kattuvudu. On that day my Atti draped this special type of saree on me, which is unique to our Halakki community. My Avvi gave me one of her manisara. Then, all the women in our koppa also gave me one necklace each. This is how we bless a girl when she stands at the threshold of womanhood.

We don’t wear these beads for beautification. In the olden days, when there was no stitching, a large number of manisara were worn in place of a blouse to protect us from perverse eyes. They also help in providing support while we do physical work. Wearing the ankle-length cotton saree with beads from our relatives and community members makes me happy and is very comfortable while working in fields in the hot sun,” her eyes turned moist with nostalgia.

*Manisara ಮಣಿಸರ beaded necklace*





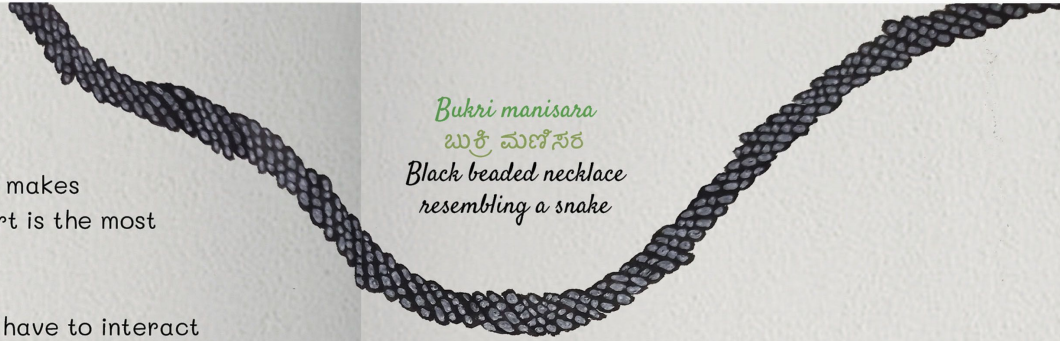
After a moment she continued,  
“And yes, your Avvi and Chikki dress differently because the way they dress makes them feel comfortable. After all, comfort is the most important thing isn't it Putti?”

Avvi added, “Unlike olden days, now we have to interact with the rest of our society on a daily basis. Many of them think going out in public without a blouse is inappropriate. Sending young girls out in the world without a blouse didn't seem safe too. Sometimes we feel the need to blend in with the society, rather than to stand out.”

“Then why don't we wear it for special occasions which we celebrate within our communities?” I asked.

“That's an amazing idea Putti!” Ajji was thrilled. Chikki replied, “Yes! Let's dress up in our traditional outfit for coming Ugadi. I'll let all the women of our koppa know.”

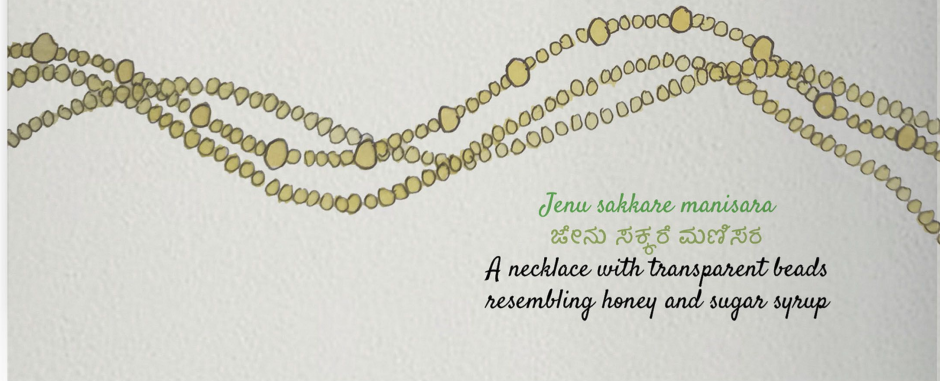
Wow... I can't wait for that day!



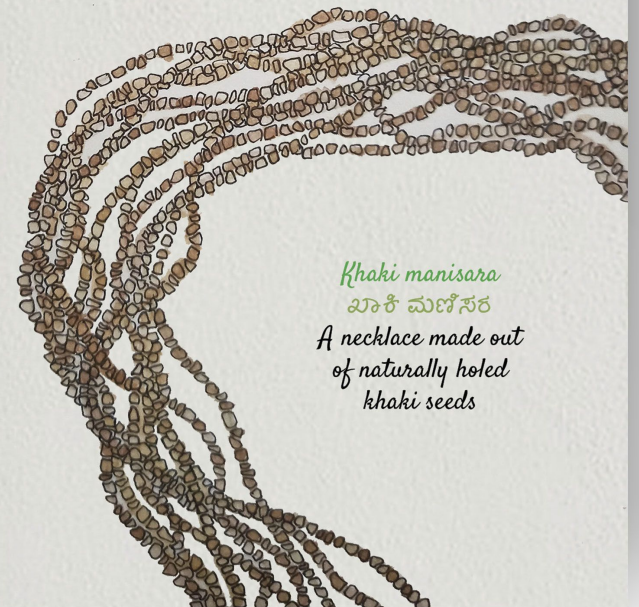
*Bukri manisara*  
ಬುಕ್ರಿ ಮಣಿಸರ  
Black beaded necklace  
resembling a snake



*Ditti (drishti) manisara*  
ದಿಟ್ಟಿ (ದೃಷ್ಟಿ) ಮಣಿಸರ  
A necklace for protection against evil eyes containing  
pendants representing male and female genitalia  
(usually worn by younger children)



*Jenu sakhare manisara*  
ಜೇನು ಸಕ್ಕರೆ ಮಣಿಸರ  
A necklace with transparent beads  
resembling honey and sugar syrup



*Khaki manisara*  
ಖಾಕಿ ಮಣಿಸರ  
A necklace made out  
of naturally holed  
khaki seeds



20<sup>th</sup> March

I wonder, why does Ajji always sing? She sings as loud as she can, about everything from festivals and rituals to events in day-to-day life. She sings even without realizing that she's doing it. The other day, I heard her sing about the Anjugana hakki, explaining how life was formed -

When there was nothing in the universe, a bird appeared, named Anjuga. Anjuga laid a few eggs and one of them broke. Its contents formed the universe. The water in the egg became the sea, the egg white formed the sky and the remaining solid part formed the earth.



I asked her, "Ajji, since you like singing so much, can you sing me a special song? I want to write it down in my diary."

She replied, "Oh, I know many many songs. Which one should I sing? Let's see.."

Ajji thought for a minute and said, "You know... after we have sown the seeds, if monsoon doesn't arrive on time, all the women from our koppa gather at dusk and sing this song together to persuade the skies."

ಚಣ್ಣಮೊಳೆ ಹೊಯ್ಯಲೆ ಚಣ್ಣ ಕೆರೆ ತುಂಬಲೆ

ಕಯಡಿಗಳೆಲ್ಲ ಹಯನಾಗಲೆ

ದೊಡ್ಡ ಮೊಳೆ ಹೊಯ್ಯಲೆ ದೊಡ್ಡ ಕೆರೆ ತುಂಬಲೆ

ಗವಿಯೆಗಳೆಲ್ಲ ಹಯನಾಗಲೆ

ಹೊಯ್ಯೆಹೊಯ್ಯೆ ಮೊಳೆಯೆ ನಮ್ಮೂರಿಗೆ

ನಮ್ಮೂರ ಮಕ್ಕಿ ಕತ್ತಿ ಹೊದೊ

ನಮ್ಮೂರ ಗದ್ದೆ ಸುಟ್ಟಿ ಹೊದೊ

ಹೊಯ್ಯೆ ಹೊಯ್ಯೆ

*Let it drizzle, let the small lake fill*

*Let the fields prosper*

*Let it rain heavily, let the big lake fill*

*Let the habitats of birds and animals cool*

*Pour, pour oh rain, in our town*

*The dams of our town are dried*

*The fields of our town are burnt*

*Pour pour*





“The Halakkis in Ankola do tarle kunita too while singing this song together as a group,” Avvi added since she belongs to Ankola seeme.

*Tarle kunita ತರ್ಲೆ ಕುನಿತಾ a rain dance  
Seeme ಸೀಮೆ geographical divisions within the tribe (Chandavara, Harita,  
Nashikote, Gokarna, Kumbaragadde, Ankola, Kadavada)*



21<sup>st</sup> March



I played the whole day with neighbors. Though I have made new friends here including an adorable rooster, I am missing my friends from school.

I overheard Appa discussing with Ajja and Appachchi about how and where they should build the new house. He said, "This hullu mane is too old. It will not withstand more than two or three monsoons. I will convince Avvi. You make arrangements for building a new home." Ajja and Appachchi seemed to agree with him. I wonder what Ajji will say..

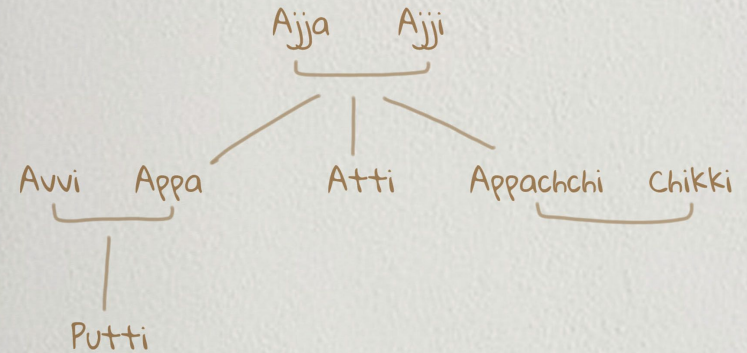
*Hullu Mane* ಹುಲ್ಲು ಮನೆ thatched house

22<sup>nd</sup> March

Sunday



Awakened by the rooster crowing, I got ready early to help Chikki make moggekayyi uppinakayyi. Since she has harvested a lot of moggekaayi, she said we can preserve them this way for future use. We should never waste food, she always says.



*Moggekayyi* ಮೊಗ್ಗಕಾಯಿ yellow cucumber  
*Uppinakayyi* ಉಪ್ಪಿನಕಾಯಿ pickle



## 23<sup>rd</sup> March

I went for a hike in the forest with Aiji. She knew the names of all the plants and trees. She said that each living thing has its own identity. Some plants may be used by us for food or medicine, and some others may be useful for birds or animals. She showed me which fruits I can eat and which I should never even touch.

On the way, we met a few women of our koppa carrying firewood from the forest. Interestingly, they were singing a song too, the rhythm matching their footsteps! Just like Aiji, they were engulfed in their own world. Singing seems to be their way of enjoying the chores. I bet it helps them forget their exhaustion from working hard all day..



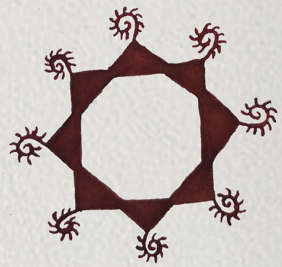


*24<sup>th</sup> March*

Today, a complete lockdown of the entire nation was called for 21 days as an effort to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. We cannot get out of the house, or come in contact with others unless it's an emergency. Though the number of cases is very less in Kumta, we all are following the social distancing protocols. Since we grow a variety of veggies in our backyard, we are good for now. And, I'll get a few more days to stay here with my Aiji and listen to more of her stories. Maybe I'll get to learn a few of her songs too :)







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This work is an illustrated documentation of the Halakki tribe of Uttara Kannada district, intended to help young readers visualize the culture and traditions of Halakki Vokkaligas by bringing light on their rich heritage.

Uttara Kannada is a coastal district of Karnataka with the Arabian Sea on one side and western ghats on the other. Most of the district is covered with lush green forests and rivers. Halakki Vokkaligas are one of the indigenous communities residing in many parts of the district. Their way of life, food habits, clothing, occupation, culture and tradition show a very strong inclination towards nature.

Since childhood, I have interacted with this community on several occasions, which sparked an interest in me to undertake this documentation. The information collected through background study and ethnographic research is presented in the form of a visual diary of the protagonist Putti, as a collection of new experiences each day at her native place. Throughout her stay, Putti learns about the lifestyle, culture and values of the Halakki tribe and writes her experiences in her diary.

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