

FOLK TALES OF ASSAM IN MANUSCRIPT PAINTING: A GENDERED RETELLING

—

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project, I make a humble attempt to present what I have learnt from my teachers and what I have seen in the remarkably beautiful paintings that have been created for centuries.

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PREFACE

This project consists of a graphic narration of three folk stories, originally compiled by the celebrated Assamese author Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1868-1938). These stories are found in two different collections of folk tales – *Burhi Air Sadhu* (Grandma's Tales), first published in Assamese in 1911, and *Koka-deuta aaru Naati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandson), first published in Assamese in 1913. All three stories have a different context and plot but were selected on the basis of a common thread—they directly or subtly reflect a gendered approach, making readers, especially children, consciously or unconsciously aware about various aspects of gender. In some cases, they also highlight atrocities that exist in the realm of gender. Either the protagonist or one of the primary characters in these tales is a woman. Further, these stories bring out the centrality of women in different aspects of life and interpersonal relationships. They reflect women's negotiation skills when violence or ill treatment is meted out to them or others, and also show how justice is served in the end.

Though based in Assam's context, the selected stories depict universal emotions and complexities that exist in interpersonal

relationships. While these tales have been designed for young readers, especially children in the age group of eight to ten years, they resonate with the experiences of people of every age. The folk tales have been translated from Assamese into English. The overall narrative structure has not been changed, to keep the essence of the stories intact. However, some sections have been re-told to suit current debates on women's agency within the realm of family and social life. At times, they have also been changed to bring out the difficult situations that women sometimes find themselves in, and how they find ingenious solutions to these problems. Their roles, usually overlooked in many folk stories, are highlighted in some sections of these stories.

The three stories are visually represented through a hybrid medium of illustrations. The illustrations were hand-painted and are inspired by the traditional art form of Assam's manuscript painting. The paintings done for this project are a humble attempt at keeping this tradition alive. However, they are nowhere close to the beautiful illustrations and compositions that were created in the manuscripts of earlier centuries.

INTRODUCTION

‘Every tale here is only one telling, held down in writing for nonce till you or someone else reads it, brings it to life, and changes it by re-telling it. These stories were handed down to me, and in selecting, arranging, and adapting, I’ve inevitably reworked them somewhat. So consider me the latest teller and yourself the latest listener, who in turn will re-tell the tale. Like a proverb, a story gains meaning in context; in the context of this book, the meanings are made between us now.’

A. K. Ramanujan (2009: Preface)

Folk stories are a reflection of society and a highly effective medium for generating curiosity and awareness about various elements of life. Stories of any group form the basis of its culture, and today, despite our increasingly technologically literate society, the use of traditional literature is still recognised as an important teaching and cultural tool that assists in the process of development, communication, and construction of identity and education.

Stories and folk tales also have the capacity to leave an impression and help shape attitudes, especially among children and young adults.

It is therefore imperative that these stories are written and narrated with responsibility. Stories can have a negative impact and build prejudiced attitudes among readers. Helms (1987: 1) states, 'As traditional folk/fairy tales appeared in published collections, the compilers (men) selected and interpreted the tales to reflect the male biases towards female behaviour. The language used to describe female characters, prescribed female behaviour. The heroines in the tales functioned as paradigms for female readers.' Beauvoir (1953: 126) feels that tales like *Cinderella*, *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* 'Still encourage the young girl to expect fortune and happiness from some Prince Charming rather than to attempt by herself their difficult and uncertain conquest.' Some folk stories, however, have a different purpose and impact on readers. Scholars like A.K. Ramanujan (2009: 53) point out that narratives with 'women at the centre of action' can present an alternative way of looking at things where 'the world of women is not the world of men'. Despite male domination of one type or another, women are often '...very much in control of themselves and their worlds, and a sense of real power is communicated by their folklore' (ibid.). Therefore, attitudes towards the representation of women in folk narratives have been varied; they reinforce gender stereotypes but also create spaces which allow for an alternate depiction of reality. (Goswami 2009: 3).

Stories are therefore vivid and capable of generating different kinds of emotions and attitudes among readers. It is with this interest in stories that I started working on this project and wanted to study and analyse a few stories in greater depth and represent them in a new light. I also wanted to depict these stories in a hybrid medium to make them more appealing to the present generation of children. Young adults and children currently operate in a world where they are surrounded by interesting and vibrant visual media. I decided that the best way to represent some of these folk stories was through the traditional medium of manuscript painting that has been an innate part of Assamese culture for centuries. Representation of the three

stories using a traditional medium—attempted for the first time for the folk tales of Assam—was also a visual translation of another kind.

I decided to select some stories written by the well-known Assamese writer Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1868-1938). Besides writing a number of historical works, poems, biographies, plays, humorous sketches, and essays, Bezbaroa also wrote many folk stories and children's books. In the preface to *Burhi Air Sadhu*, Bezbaroa (1999: Preface) says that to know the unwritten history of people, folklore is as important as philology and mythology. While studying Bezbaroa's stories, I discovered that even as a male writer many of his stories had female characters as protagonists, with a representation of their experiences and points of view. This prompted me to look further into his work. It seemed as though Bezbaroa's stories were a reflection of the actual circumstances in society, including gender issues. In fact, the stories that Bezbaroa compiled were actually folk tales that had been passed orally from one generation to the next. In the first publication of his compilation of children's folk stories *Burhi Air Sadhu*, Bezbaroa claims to have collected most of the stories from the common people of Assam, whose names are mentioned by him in the original publication. Maheswar Neog (2015: 156) opines that Lakshminath was an excellent and charming storyteller who re-told many old fairy tales, and narrated new ones to reflect the tempo of life in Assam's towns and villages.

However, it cannot be said that Lakshminath Bezbaroa as a person and a writer was free from prejudices and patriarchal attitudes towards women. Goswami (2009: 14) says, 'It is surprising to note that in his preface, Lakshminath Bezbaroa only acknowledges the male informants, thereby giving substance to one of the most oft repeated reservations held by feminist scholars against early collections that when a collector had a choice between a story told by a man or as told by a woman, the man's version was chosen.' Even though his most popular collection of folk stories is titled *Burhi Air Sadhu*, which literally means Grandma's Tales, the narrators of these tales, whose names are acknowledged in the first publication, were all men.

The next phase of my project involved a careful study of all the folk stories written by Lakshminath Bezbaroa and the selection of a few stories that were best suited for this project. The three stories shortlisted for this project were: ‘The Old Couple and the Foxes’ (originally titled ‘Burha Buri aaru Xiyal’ from *Burhi Air Sadhu*), ‘The Story of Two Brothers’ (originally titled ‘Kon aaru Mon’ from his collection *Koka-deuta aaru Nati Lora*), and ‘The Story of a Saint’ (originally titled ‘Ek Sanyasir Kotha’ published in *Koka-deuta aaru Nati Lora*).

While selecting the stories for this project, certain aspects were kept in mind. Firstly, all the stories had to depict female characters that played an important role in the development of the plot and in bringing out the essence of the story. I made modifications to the stories’ narration in areas where I felt that the roles of female characters needed to be stressed upon, and their actions and experiences, though present, needed to be highlighted. The three stories represent complexities both inside and outside family life across age groups. Women’s wisdom and intelligence are portrayed in all the three stories, as is their resilience, and physical and mental strength to take quick action. These stories portray the pain and weaknesses that common women feel because of the circumstances they are sometimes put in. The stories, in many ways, present stereotypical notions of women that are prevalent in folk stories. I tried to alter some of those sections to help form a balanced and liberal attitude in the minds of young readers without changing the overall narrative structure.

While translating the stories, I initially tried to stick to a literal translation of the text. However, as the work progressed and as I received relevant feedback, I realised that it was important to make modifications to some sections, to reflect current notions of women’s agency and the present cultural context. This is why I decided to re-tell certain sections of these stories. I have also tried to keep the language as plain and simple and close to the original text as possible.

As mentioned earlier, the style of illustrations used in this project was inspired by the traditional manuscript paintings of Assam. Assam

has a vibrant but lesser-known heritage of manuscript painting and calligraphy that flourished from the 16th century onwards during the rise of Neo-Vaishnavism and the Bhakti movement in the state initiated by Sankaradeva (1449-1569 AD). These paintings occupy an important place in the tradition of Indian folk art and miniature paintings but have not received due recognition.

Original manuscript paintings created centuries ago and some created by a few artists even today are done in traditional colours made from natural materials and minerals like indigo, *hengul* (mercury sulphide), and *hiatal* (arsenic sulphide). Making these colours is a highly time-consuming process. Folios used for manuscript painting are also made from two natural materials: the thicker variety known as *sanchipat* made from the bark of the *sanchi* tree, aloe wood or *Aquilaria agallocha*, and *tulapat* leaves made by pressing cotton. Preparing the paper entails a laborious process of curing, seasoning, and polishing the raw slices before the folios can be made to retain the ink.

Primary, contrasting, and vibrant red, blue, and yellow colours are used along with other colours like mauve, pink, muted green, olive green, and grey in manuscript paintings. The pictorial format in such paintings is usually of horizontal progression instead of rectangular isolation. Khanikars, who created these paintings, were traditional carvers associated with woodcraft and the traditional theatre craft *Anka*, where they worked as make-up men (Kalita 2009:8). These craftsmen were well versed with the colour and form of traditional theatre (ibid.). It is this familiarity that inspired them to create pictorial forms representative of *Anka* in the folios of the manuscript paintings (ibid.). A characteristic feature of these paintings was their emphasis on contours (Kalita 2009: 11-12).

In terms of visual elements, I have tried to stick to the traditional colour palette of the manuscript painting of Assam, but have used water colours on paper instead of traditional colours and handmade paper. The format is horizontal like traditional paintings, but is not as wide as it was in the paintings created on traditional paper. The beauty of such paintings lies in the use of contrasting, vibrant colours that are

used for depicting a scene together with the use of arches, borders, and contour lines. I have retained those characteristics in my work. This painting form has a stylised version of elements like water, flora, fauna, and human figures that can be found in the illustrations done for this project too. Manuscripts with decorative floral and geometrical borders are known as *lata-kata puthis*. The cover of the book has been decorated with a similar floral border.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE THREE FOLK STORIES

THE OLD COUPLE AND THE FOXES

This story, originally titled 'Burha Buri aaru Xiyal', is about an old couple and their life and encounters with foxes that live in a forest close to the couple's village. The story starts with a conversation between the old man and some of the foxes. The foxes are cunning. They plan to trick the old man and eat the vegetables planted in his garden. The foxes' plan turns out to be a success, and they eat the vegetables late at night. When the truth unfolds, the old man decides to avenge the foxes' action. The story presents many other such occasions and incidents where there are encounters and acts of trickery and revenge between the old couple and the foxes.

In the original story, the idea of wanting to take revenge on the foxes is the old man's idea, and the old woman is shown merely to accept her husband's orders and go ahead with his plans. The old woman's silence and her will to obey her partner's wishes is an accepted behaviour in any patriarchal society and is also the case among many

communities in Assam. This part of the story reinforces this aspect. In my translation and adaptation of the tale, I have modified this section by making the old woman more vocal. She questions her husband about his intentions to teach the foxes a lesson and insists that, by doing so, the couple will get into more trouble. The overall narration of the story has also been changed in such a manner that stress is laid upon the idea that revenge ultimately leads to greater troubles and more violence.

As the original story progresses, the woman is seen to be more assertive. Because of the man's acts of violence towards the foxes, the couple is forbidden to step out of their house; they fear that the foxes might get back at them some day. The woman feels frustrated by this. Finally, she decides to step out on her own and meet her daughter in another village. The man seems to be cowardly when he simply warns her about the foxes but does not offer to go with her. He prefers to be safe at home instead.

As expected, the woman meets the foxes while going to her daughter's place through the forest. She uses her wit and intelligence and manages to save herself from the foxes' attack. When returning from her daughter's house, both the mother and the daughter come up with ideas to help the old woman reach home safely. Unfortunately, the foxes catch hold of the old woman and come close to attacking and killing her. Even in such a desperate situation the woman is quick-witted and gets herself out of it on her own. She does not seek her husband's help to save herself from the foxes. Thus, in the original story, while the woman is seen adhering to patriarchal norms at times, her agency and intelligence help her to take prompt action in others. These aspects are evident in many communities of Assam as well, where women are seen following patriarchal norms at home and outside and simultaneously being assertive and strong. History is replete with examples of women at the forefront of many political and social movements in Assam.

Towards the end, I have added a section where I highlight the mistakes and decisions that the old man made out of anger. Because of

his actions, his wife was on the verge of losing her life. The old man is shown to realise his mistakes and to vow to listen to his wife's opinions and suggestions in the future.

It is interesting to note that in many traditional Assamese stories, like the one discussed here, women in the family are the ones who resolve issues with their intelligence and wit, while men often end up being troublemakers. There is a cultural expectation in most communities in Assam for a woman to accept and treat her partner with obedience and reverence and never to speak against him, no matter how good or bad his conduct is. The origin of the word husband is derived from Old Norse that means 'master of a house' or 'occupier and tiller of the soil'. Assam is no different in this regard; in rural Assam, many wives still address their husbands as *malik*, which literally means 'owner'.

At the same time, wise Assamese *buris* or elderly women are often a part of many folk tales of Assam. Such women's political and social acumen is quite clearly visible in these simple stories. This aspect no doubt signifies that, in reality, elderly women in Assamese communities were an important part of family and society. Very often it was these old women who were the tellers of such tales, and they played a great role in carrying the tales forward from one generation to another. This is also evident in the fact that one collection of stories by Lakshminath Bezbaroa was called *Burhi Air Sadhu*, which, as mentioned earlier, literally means grandma's tales.

There is also a high possibility that the presence of wise old women in folk stories is an outlet that women used to voice their own opinions. The narrators of the tales gradually become a part of the narrative itself. Appadurai (1991) argues that the text and performance of folklore projects alternative voices against dominant ones—feminine against masculine or lower caste against upper caste. He says, '... women's personal narrative may be seen to share the general function of recapitulation in fictional narratives; the construct of the self, and in the South Asian context, tales and personal narratives tend to overlap to combine fantasy and reality; what one must draw from this is how

through these very fictional narratives women sometimes incorporate their own tales and represent themselves (Devi 2006:7).

THE STORY OF TWO BROTHERS

Originally titled ‘Kon aaru Mon’, this story has been named after the two brothers depicted in it. The story starts with an interaction between the two brothers—the elder one is more cunning by nature while the younger one is simple at heart. The main point of discussion between them is how they will distribute household assets and chores in their ancestral home.

The elder brother, Kon, takes advantage of his younger brother Mon’s gullible nature and makes sure that he gets to use all the good things and facilities available in the house. At the same time, he also cunningly distributes work and assets in such a manner that the younger brother ends up suffering and is compelled to do most of the work at home.

A third character is introduced a little later in the story—an old woman who is their neighbour, and who plays a very vital role in improving the relationship between the two brothers. The woman witnesses the plight of the younger brother and helps him by providing smart suggestions to counter his elder brother’s actions.

I have modified parts of the story to emphasise the important role the old woman plays in it. Interactions between Mon and the old woman are elaborated to highlight her role. The old woman explains to Mon that one must not allow others to take advantage just because they are related by familial bonds. In the end, I introduce a section where Mon realises many things about his own family and thanks the old woman for helping him resolve the difficult situation at home.

Visually, I have tried to introduce the old woman in the story in a gradual manner with the help of illustrations. Even though the old woman does not say anything in the early parts of the story, she is

shown to witness the actions of the two brothers as a silent spectator. In the original story, the introduction of the woman is sudden and abrupt.

The story is interesting because it shows how familial bonds and relationships can be complicated and are not always happy. Every family has a lot of politics. According to Bhasin (2003: 27) the term ‘politics’ refers to power plays in any relationship ... people are assigned differing amounts of power, authority, and control (over other people, resources, decision making) ...’. This differing amount of power and control is beautifully portrayed with the help of this simple story. In many ways, this tale also shows that relationships outside the family can be beneficial and that it is not realistic to oversimplify familial love. Members of the same household do not have the same access to resources, services, and opportunities. Based on these inequalities, several social scientists see the family as a place of bargaining and contestation, where power is negotiated. The cooperation and conflict model idea, proposed by Sen (1995: 140-175 cited in Bhasin 2003: 28-29) and developed by Agarwal (1996: 51 cited *ibid.*) points out the complexity of negotiated relationships within the household unit which are impacted by age old traditions, as well as gender, age and other relationship dynamics.

The titles of some of these stories, like the one discussed here, do not portray or highlight the presence of women characters, even though they play an important role in the development of the story. The story is looked at from the perspective of a patriarchal society where a woman’s role, though important, is taken for granted and often not acknowledged.

THE STORY OF A SAINT

‘The Story of a Saint’ was originally titled ‘Ek Sanyasir Kotha’ and is from the collection *Koka-deuta aaru Naati-lora* (Grandfather and

Grandson). This story has two main characters—an old saint and a young woman. The saint happens to visit a family for a few days. The household comprises of two women who are married to the same man.

The story goes smoothly in the initial phases with the family, particularly the two women, being good hosts. They take care of the saint and his daily needs. In the original story, it is merely stated that the two women cook and take great care of their guest. In the re-told version of the story, I have highlighted the fact that most of the household chores are the responsibility of the two women. When there is additional household work because of the guest, it invariably falls on the two women. The decision to welcome the saint at home was taken by the husband, but the consequences of his decisions are borne by the two women. Women in a patriarchal society are expected to obediently carry out the duties generally assigned to them by men.

The man's decision and the resultant presence of a guest is also an infringement on the private space of the family, especially the two women. The saint takes advantage of the situation and starts eyeing the second wife, who is the youngest in the household. In the original story, when the husband has to travel to another place for work for a few days, he entrusts the responsibility of looking after the household to the saint. This shows the patriarchal assumption that women are not capable of taking care of themselves and always need men to look after them. Such ideas are internalised in the minds of young children through such stories. I have, therefore, removed such statements from the re-told version of the story.

In the absence of the husband, the so-called saint gradually reveals his true character, and the story takes a different turn from then on. He makes undesirable advances towards the young woman and wishes to take her away with him. It is interesting to note that the saint does not pay heed to what the woman wants or thinks. The saint only has the courage to make such advances towards the woman when her partner is away, and it is the husband's opinion that the saint is concerned about. Such narratives in children's stories also influence children to think that such actions are acceptable. Young children

are thus socialised into these beliefs. However, the saint's actions are important to retain the overall narrative structure of the story, and therefore this section has not been modified in the re-told version.

The woman denies the saint's offer politely but does not have the courage to complain about him to the other wife. She is reluctant because both women had promised that they would look after the saint well in their husband's absence and believe that they must not deviate from their 'duties'. After his unsuccessful attempts at persuading the young woman, the saint thinks of a plan to trick and trap her. He takes full advantage of his powers and privileges as a god man, and compels the young woman to carry out certain rituals. This results in exploitation of the young woman's body and her modesty. The woman is caught in the situation and, unable to think of a solution, is compelled to give in to the saint's demands.

This sheds light on the powerlessness that women feel as an outcome of living in a patriarchal society. Bhasin (2003: 21) emphasises this further by pointing out that patriarchy is embedded in most gender relations within society and this patriarchal control manifests itself in many areas of women's lives, such as control over their labour, sexuality, reproduction, property and other economic resources to name a few. One can see an apt representation of this in this story. The young woman seems to be caught in the situation and cannot think of a way to get out of it. Though there is no explanation in the story for why she gets caught in this situation, the underlying reasons for such a situation lie in patriarchal control. The woman has been instructed by her husband to follow certain duties at home, which is how he exercises control over her productivity and labour. At the same time, the woman's family and society control her mobility, and it is considered socially 'indecent' for a married woman to move out of her husband's house and reside in another place on her own. Moreover, she does not have control over resources and does not have economic freedom to be able to get out of the situation. Such options were not available to women of that era, and even at present remain far-fetched for most women in many societies; this is also the case in

Assam. Such freedom is possible only among a small percentage of economically independent women who live in urban areas.

Such a story during that era could also possibly be a reflection of the presence of exploitative god men in Assam. Even during current times, one witnesses many crimes committed by many so-called holy people in different societies in India and Assam.

The young woman is, therefore, compelled to carry out the rituals because she is caught in that situation. A 'revered' holy man will not accept opposition from a woman, as she will then be defying religious duties 'bestowed' upon her. On the husband's return, the saint puts the second part of his plan into action, and informs and persuades the husband that his wife is actually a witch. He mentions that he witnessed the young woman perform certain rituals that only witches could perform. The husband trusts the saint, as his narrative seems to more believable to him than his own wife's version. There is a general tendency among people to trust the words of saints, priests, and powerful men, especially in the area of witches and their ways. Women are often victimised as being witches, instead of being trusted. This is commonly seen in rural Assam even today. The husband then narrates the incident to his first wife, who is also convinced that the young woman is a witch, and asks her husband to immediately push her out of the house.

An interesting point mentioned in the original story is about the first wife feeling happy that the young woman is a witch. The first wife has been sad since her husband got married to another woman. This point emphasises how women tend to support and perpetuate patriarchy by acting as agents that control and train fellow women in the unwritten norms of the patriarchal setup. Most women tend to internalise patriarchal values and often base their decisions along these lines at the cost of other women (Bhasin 2003: 23). It must also be recognised that such decisions are made with the intent to retain their privileges. An instance of this is how mothers-in-laws tend to exercise authority over their daughters-in-laws. What is interesting is how the fault of men in enabling such situations is overlooked (*ibid.*).

In the original story, it is mentioned that the first wife is happy to push the young woman out of the house, as she would then have her husband all to herself. I have tried to re-write this section of the story by adding a point where I highlight that it was the husband who decided to marry the second woman. Yet, the first wife has nothing against her husband but hates the young woman instead.

The second wife is pulled out of the house and taken to the bank of a river and forcefully tied to a boat. The husband allows the boat to sail away hoping that the young woman will die of hunger and thirst. Here, I have highlighted the pain and isolation that the woman goes through when she is alone on the boat. Towards the end of the story, the young woman meets a king on the banks of the river and is rescued by him. The original story ends with the king proposing marriage to the woman, which she agrees to, and 'lives happily ever after'. In the re-told version of the story, the woman politely declines the offer of marriage and expresses a wish to live on her own without being involved in a new marital relationship. The king is shown to be an understanding person, and he agrees to take back his proposal.

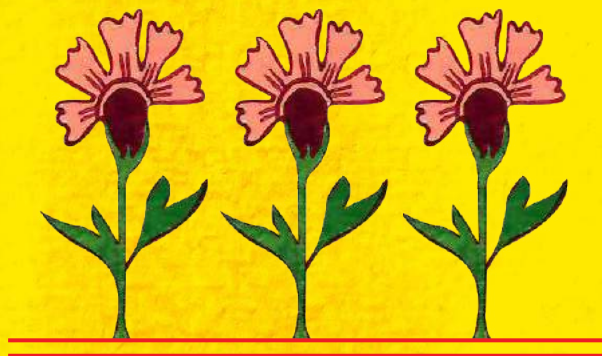
The story presents privileges that men enjoy in various roles, irrespective of whether their actions are just or morally right or wrong—the husband does not trust his wife but is not shown in a bad light or feeling remorse. The saint is a trickster, and yet the family chooses to trust him more than their own family members. The king has the privilege to ask the woman to marry him just because he helps in rescuing her from the boat. Women's choices are mediated through the patriarchal system, and, even at the end, the woman has to be taken by the king to have a 'happy ending'.

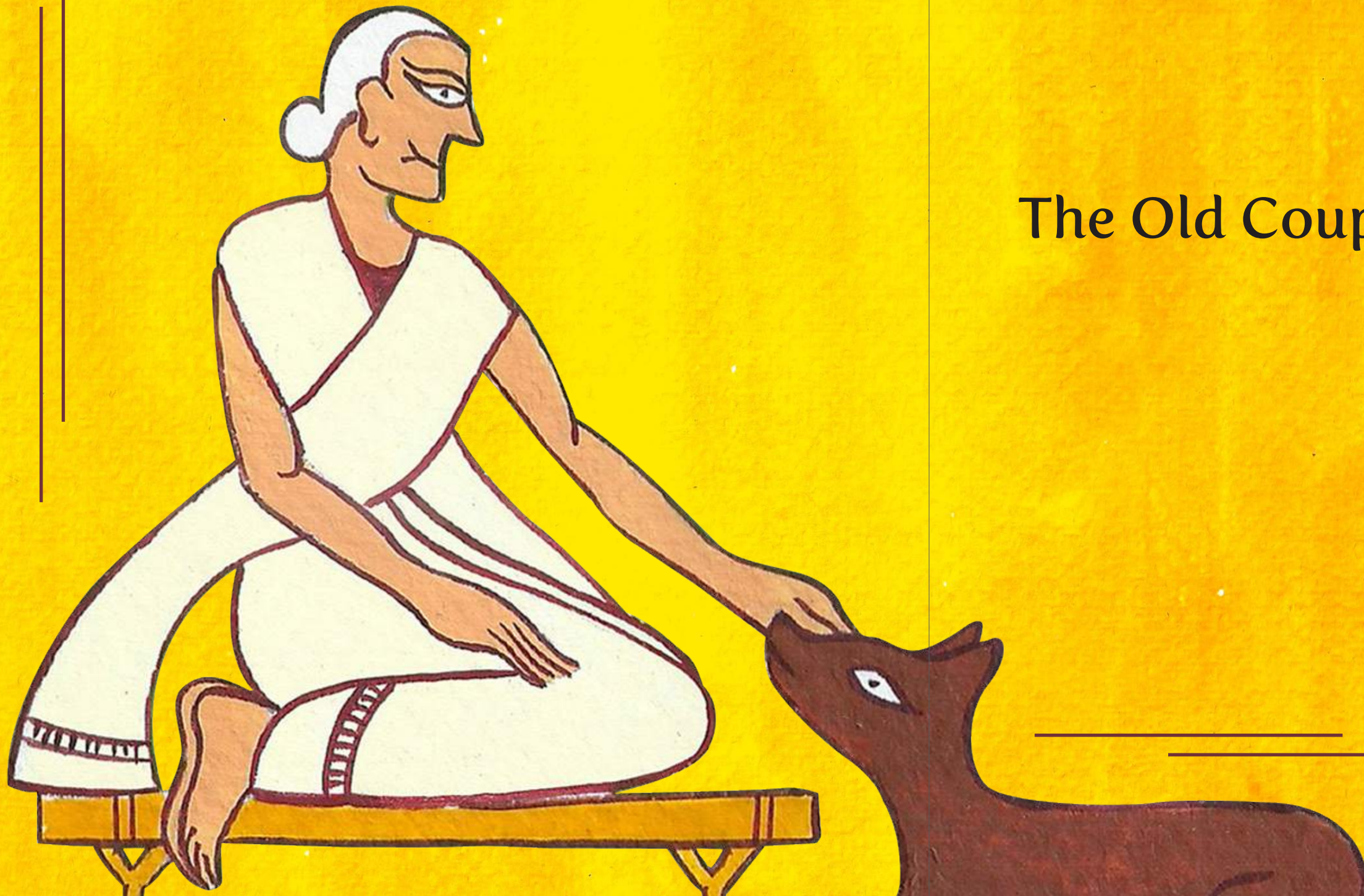
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Folktales of Assam by Lakshminath Bezbaroa

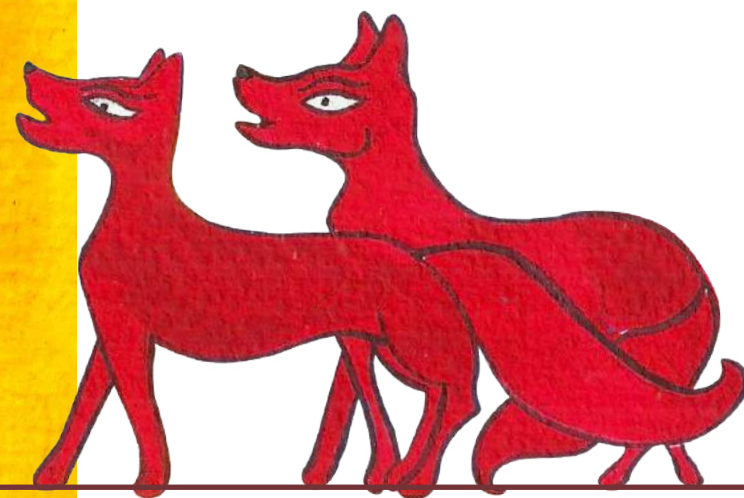
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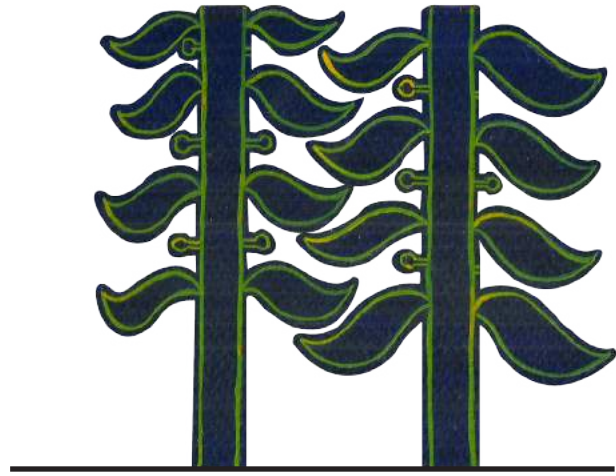




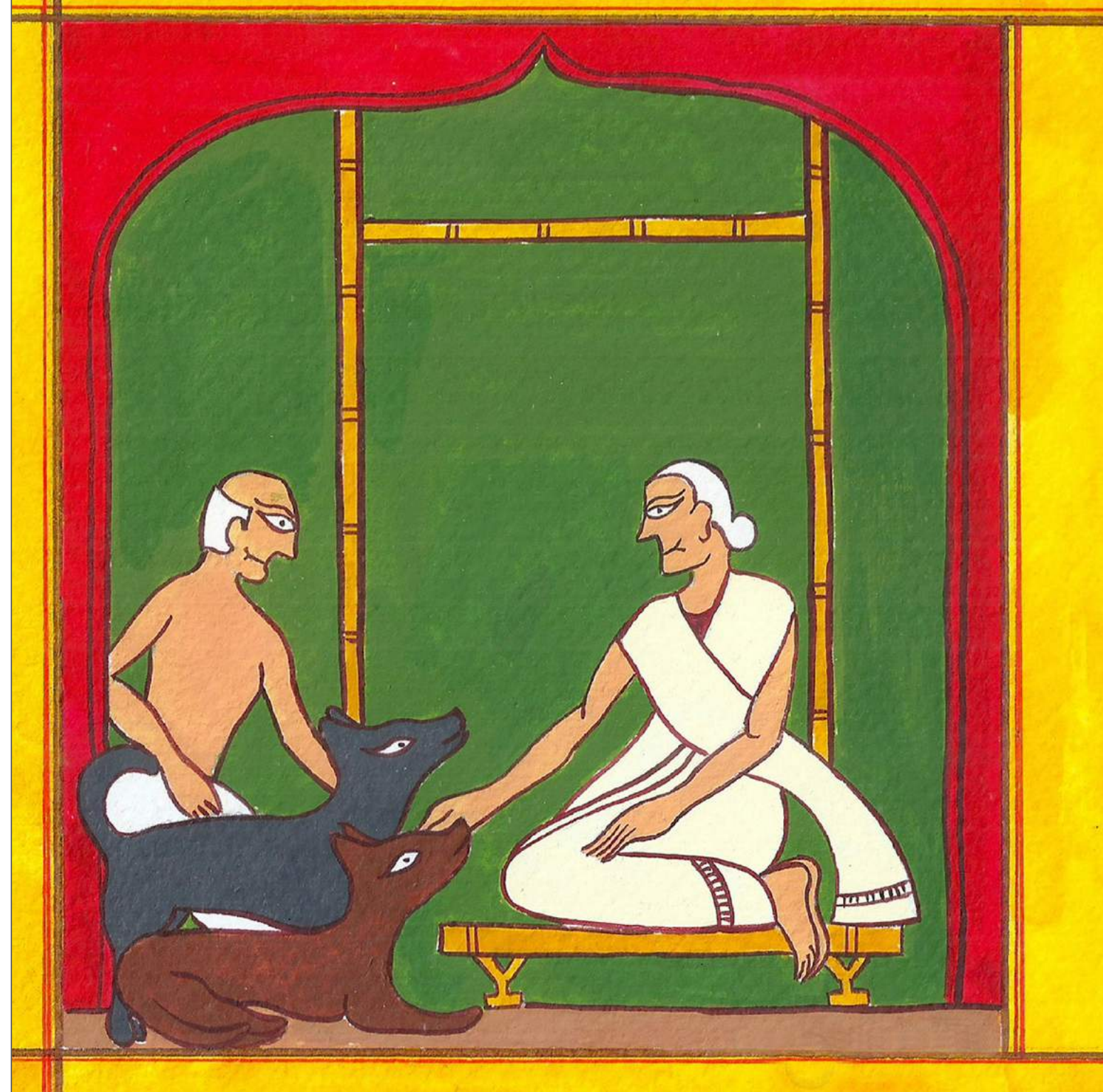
The Old Couple and the Foxes

1





An old couple lived in a village near a forest in Assam with their two faithful dogs named Ronga and Kola.





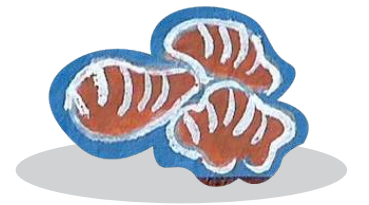
One day, the old man was taking some colocasia roots to his farm to plant them. Just then, some foxes came close to him and said,

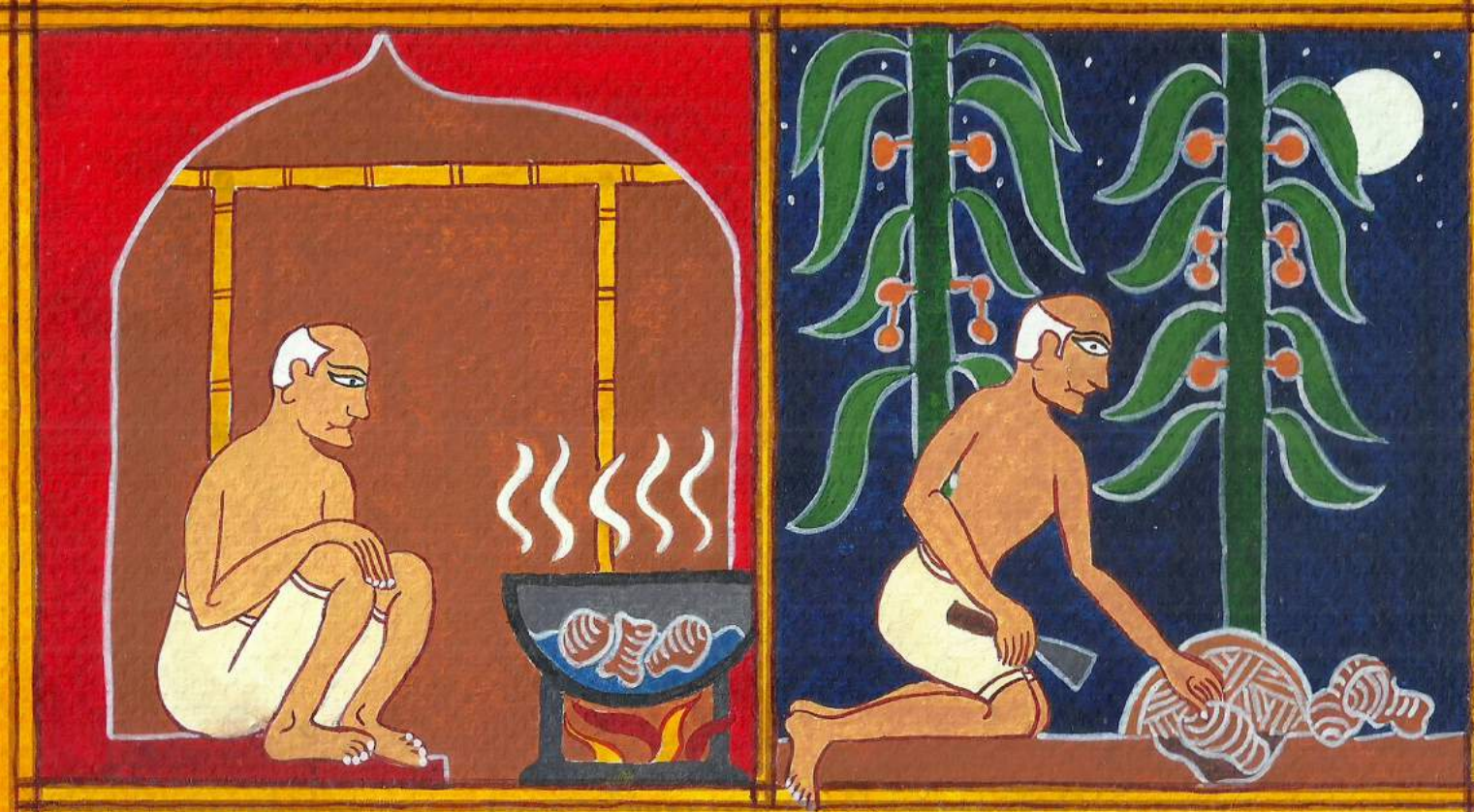
‘Grandpa, are you planting the colocasia after boiling them, or are they raw?’

‘I am planting them raw.’

‘But Grandpa, you should boil the colocasia before planting, and then cover them with something. This way the plants will grow big by the next morning.’

The ignorant old man was tempted by this idea.

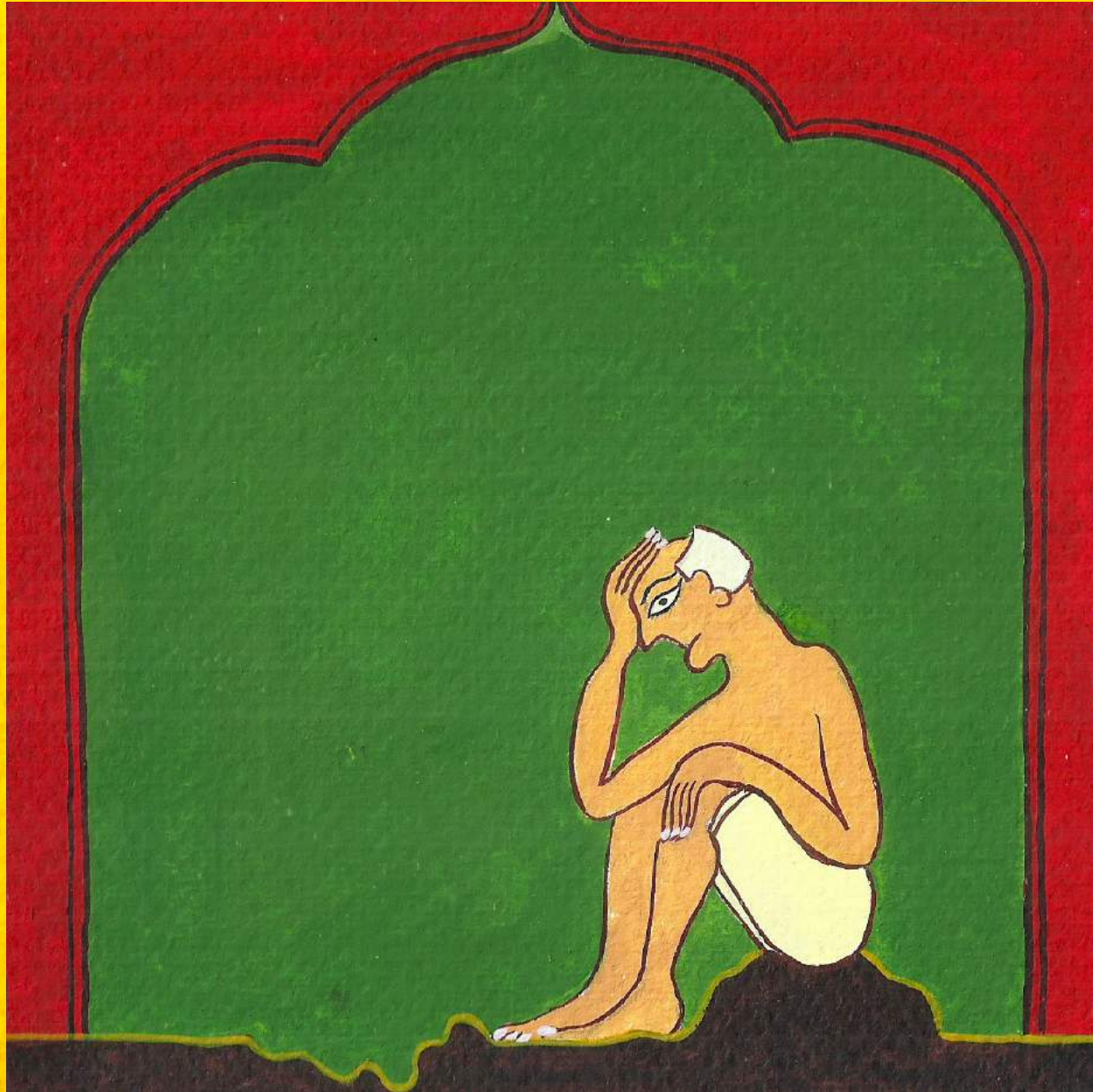




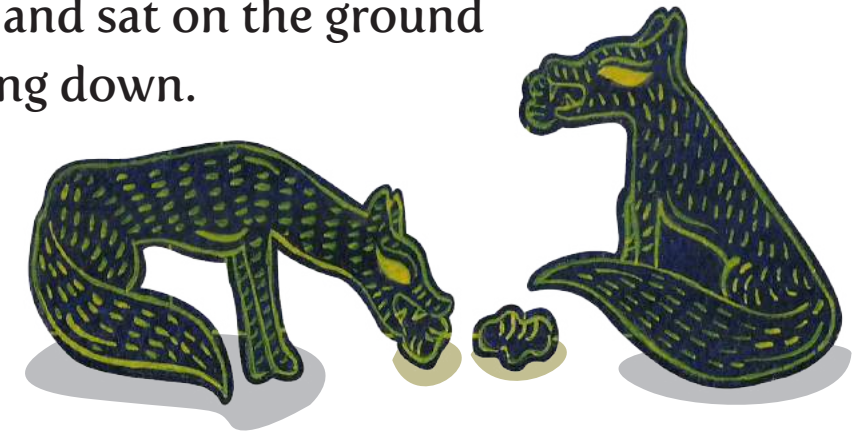
So he boiled, planted, and covered the colocasia with leaves to mark them.

Late at night, the sly foxes came to the farm and ate up all the colocasia.



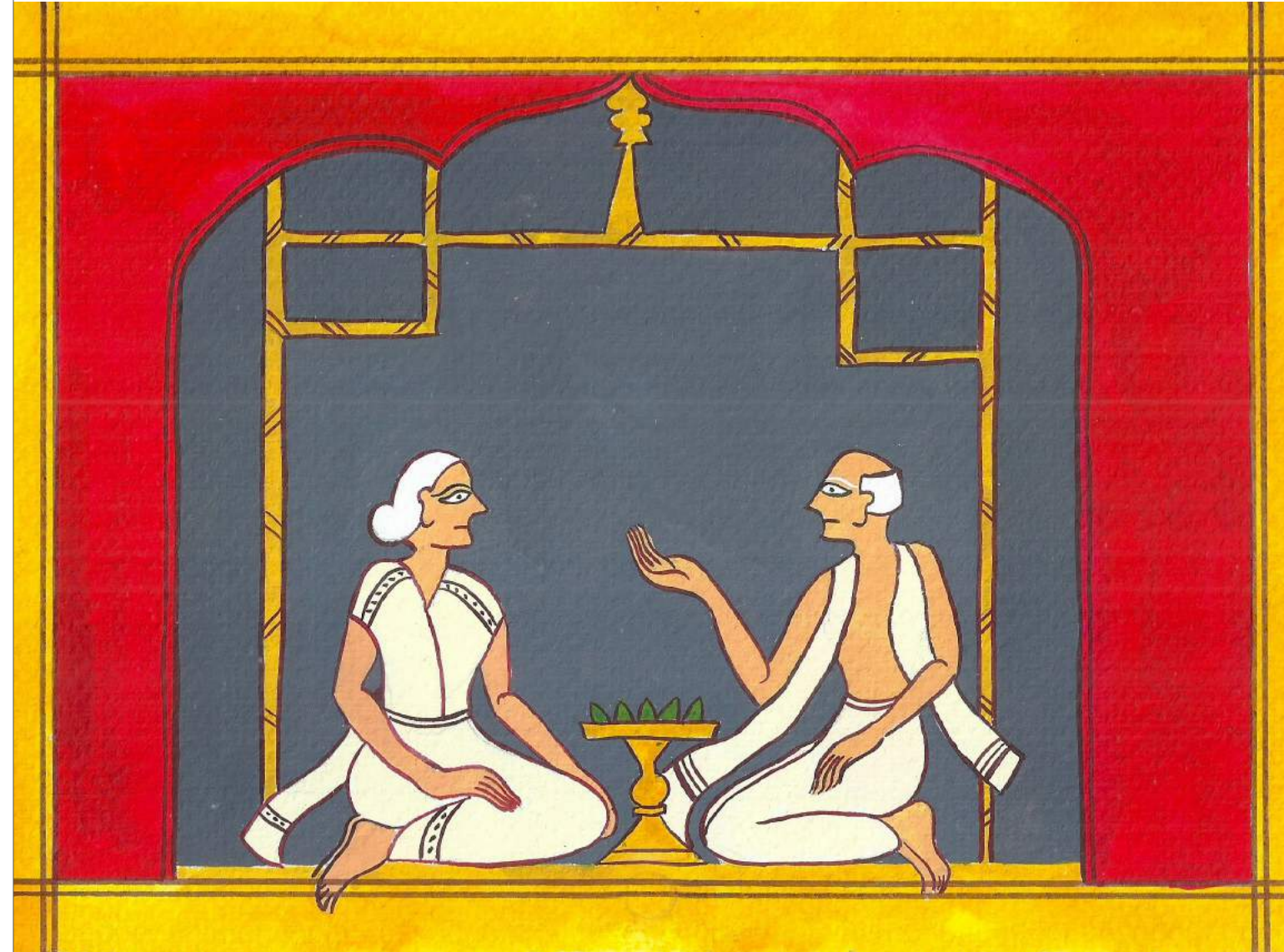


The next morning, the old man went to his farm and did not find any colocasia. He was shocked and understood that the foxes had tricked him. He felt ashamed of himself and sat on the ground with his head hanging down.



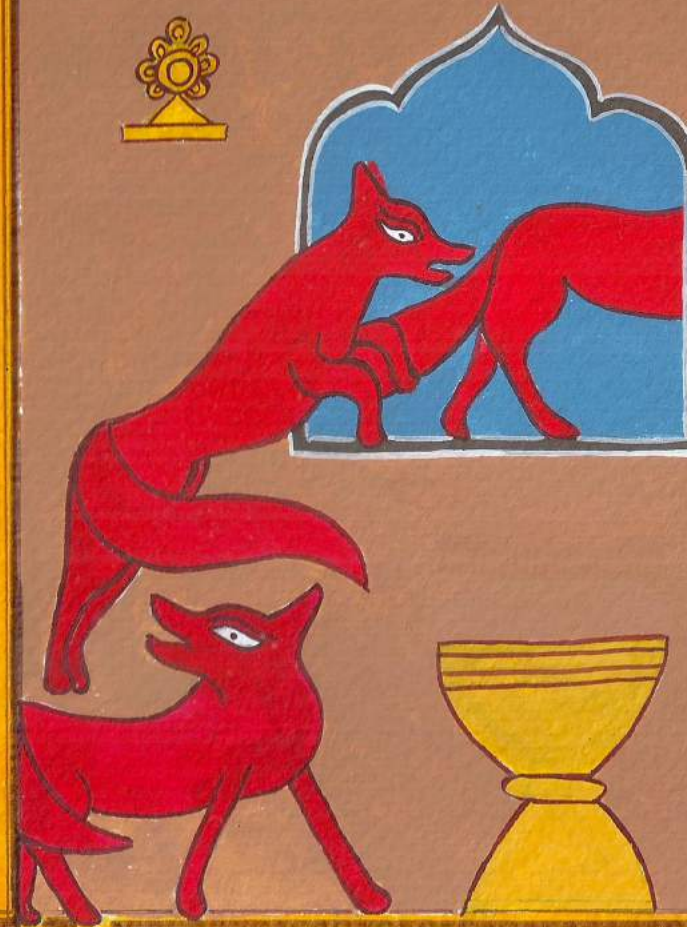
The old man thought of a way to teach the foxes a lesson, and spoke to his wife, 'My dear, let us carry out a plan today. Smear some molten jaggery on my body so that it attracts flies. I will then lie on the bed and pretend that I have died. Keep a big stick next to my bed too. Once this is done, you must go out and put on an act by crying, and declare to the foxes that I have died. Ask them to take my body and eat me up. When the foxes enter our house, quietly close the door. I will beat the foxes black and blue for the trick they played on me.'

The old woman asked her husband, 'Are you not asking for more trouble? Let the foxes be.' The old man interrupted, 'No, the foxes need to be punished so that they do not harass us in future.' The old woman wasn't convinced but decided to go with her husband's suggestion.





She carried out the plan, and as expected, the foxes met her and agreed to take the old man's body with them.



When the foxes entered the house, the old man swiftly rose and started beating them black and blue with the big stick. The foxes were badly hurt and bruised. They endured a great deal of suffering but somehow managed to escape.



Although the couple had taught the foxes a lesson, they feared that the cunning animals might get back at them some day. Therefore, the old man and woman avoided going out of their house.

The old woman was annoyed with her husband's decision to avenge the foxes as his actions forced them to stay indoors. A few days later she told the old man, 'I have not gone out for many days. I am feeling sad and am longing to meet my daughter.'

'If you go out now, the foxes might attack you,' he said 'I told you not to beat them up in the first place. I am tired of sitting at home, and I need to meet my daughter. I have decided to visit her. Even if the foxes attack me, I will manage to escape.'



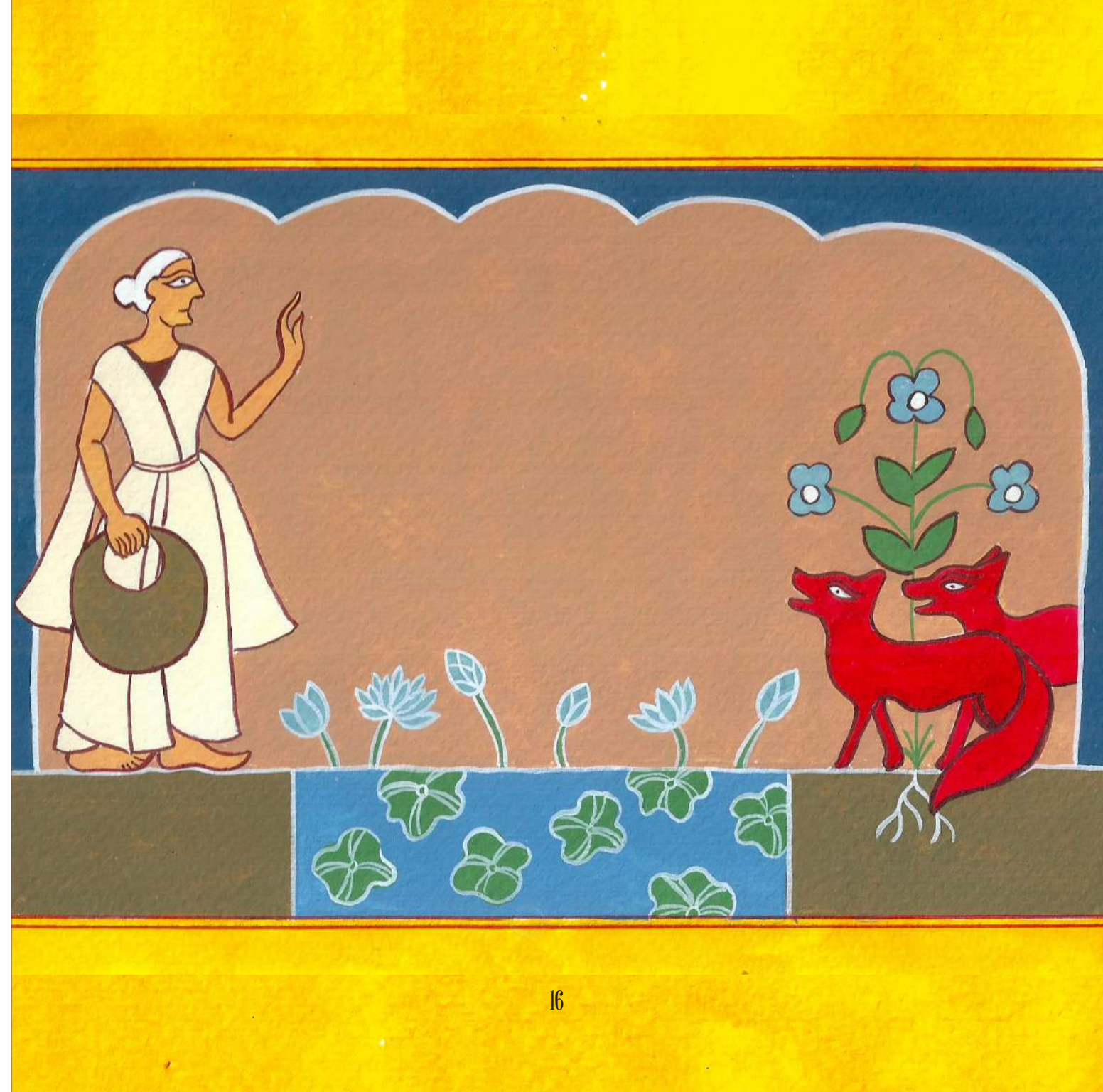
The old woman then set out for her daughter's home. She encountered the foxes on the way there, and they immediately surrounded her and said, 'Old woman, we will not let you go today. We will eat you up!'

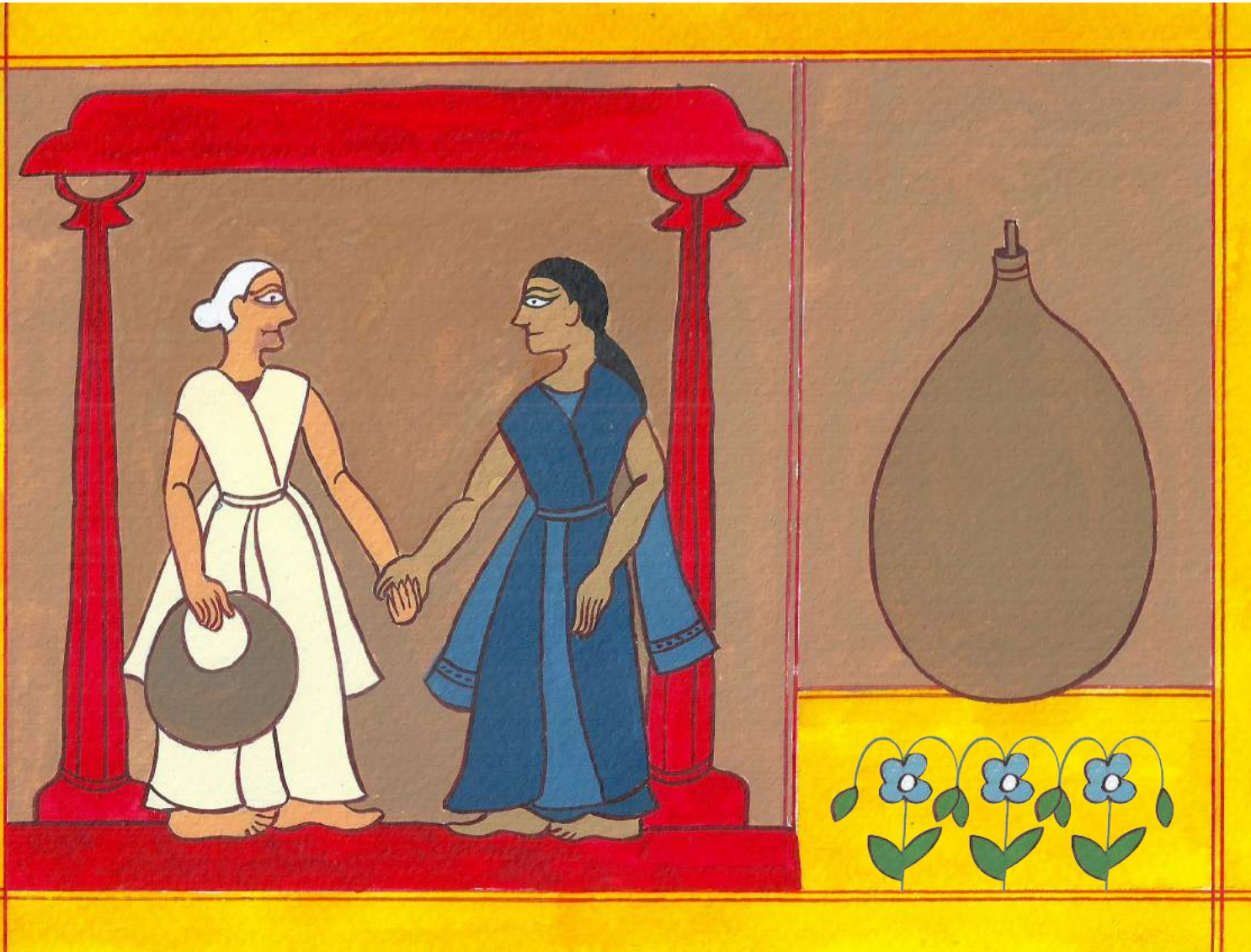
'I cannot stop you from killing me, but I have not met my daughter for many days. Please let me meet her once before dying. When I come back from her house, you can surely eat me,' she said.

'What if you don't return?'

'How can I leave the old man alone? I promise that I will pass by this road while returning,'

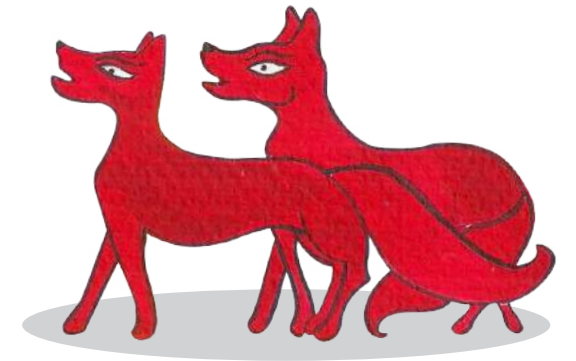
The foxes finally let her go.





The woman safely reached her daughter's house.

She stayed with her daughter for a few days, and before returning home, told her about the experiences she and her husband had had with the foxes. On hearing her mother's story, the daughter said, 'Mother, we have a huge dried-up bottle gourd shell at home. You can get inside the shell and roll down the road. The foxes will not know that you are inside it.'



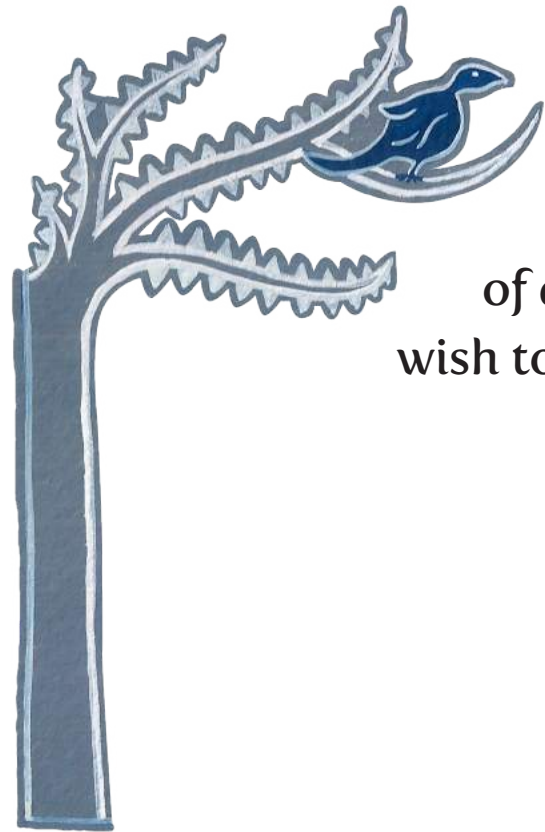


The old woman agreed and sat inside the bottle gourd shell, and rolled down the road.



When the old woman was about to reach her home, the foxes saw the gourd shell. They started talking amongst themselves, 'How is the shell rolling down on it's own? There surely is something inside it.' The foxes got hold of the gourd and kicked it hard. They broke open the shell and found the old woman hiding in it.

When they saw the woman, they were elated and started howling and barking in excitement, '*Khek-khek, Ow-wow-wow!* Old woman, you wanted to hide from us and escape! We will gobble you up today!'



The old woman had to think of a quick plan. She said, 'I have learned a particular kind of dance at my daughter's house. I wish to dance once before you kill me.'





The foxes were tempted to see the old woman's dance, so they let her perform. She started twisting her body and sang aloud, 'Ronga come, Kola come, Ronga come, Kola come!' The ignorant foxes enthusiastically joined her in the performance.

Her two dogs named Ronga and Kola heard their mistress singing and calling them.





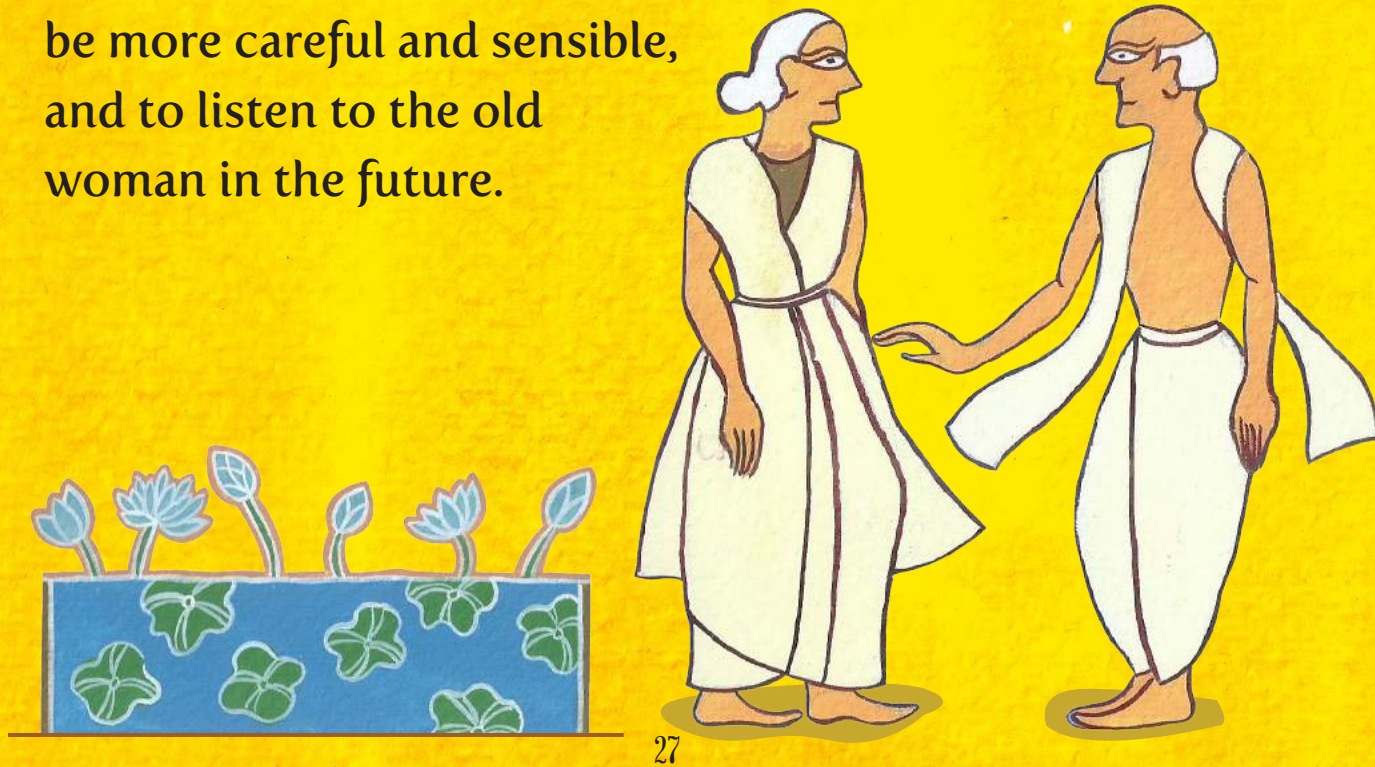
They rushed to her rescue.

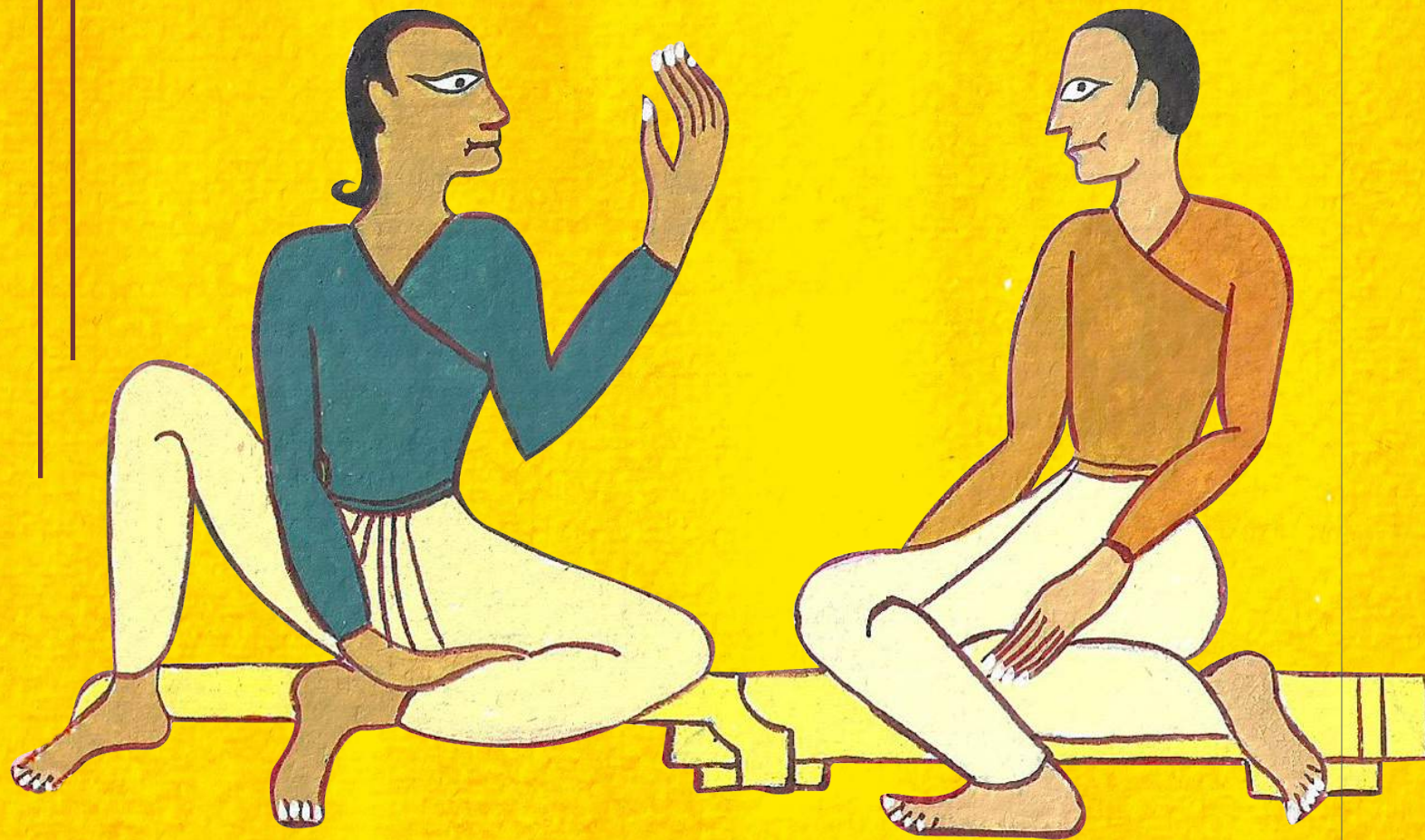


When the foxes heard the dogs barking and running wildly towards them, they ran off in different directions. The old woman's trick worked, and she safely walked back home with the dogs to meet her husband.

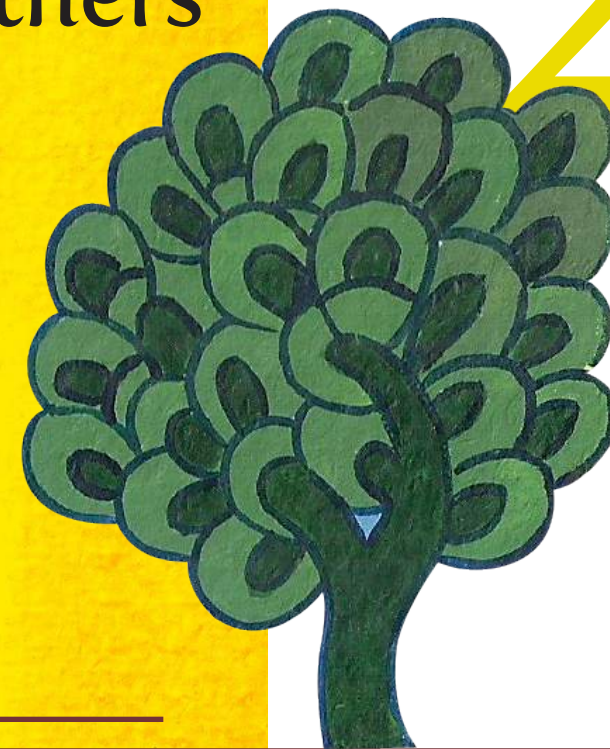
When she reached home, the old woman told her husband about her encounters with the foxes.

The aged couple had had to face a lot of trouble because of the acts of violence and revenge that they had carried out against the foxes. The old man realised his faults and resolved in front of his wife to be more careful and sensible, and to listen to the old woman in the future.

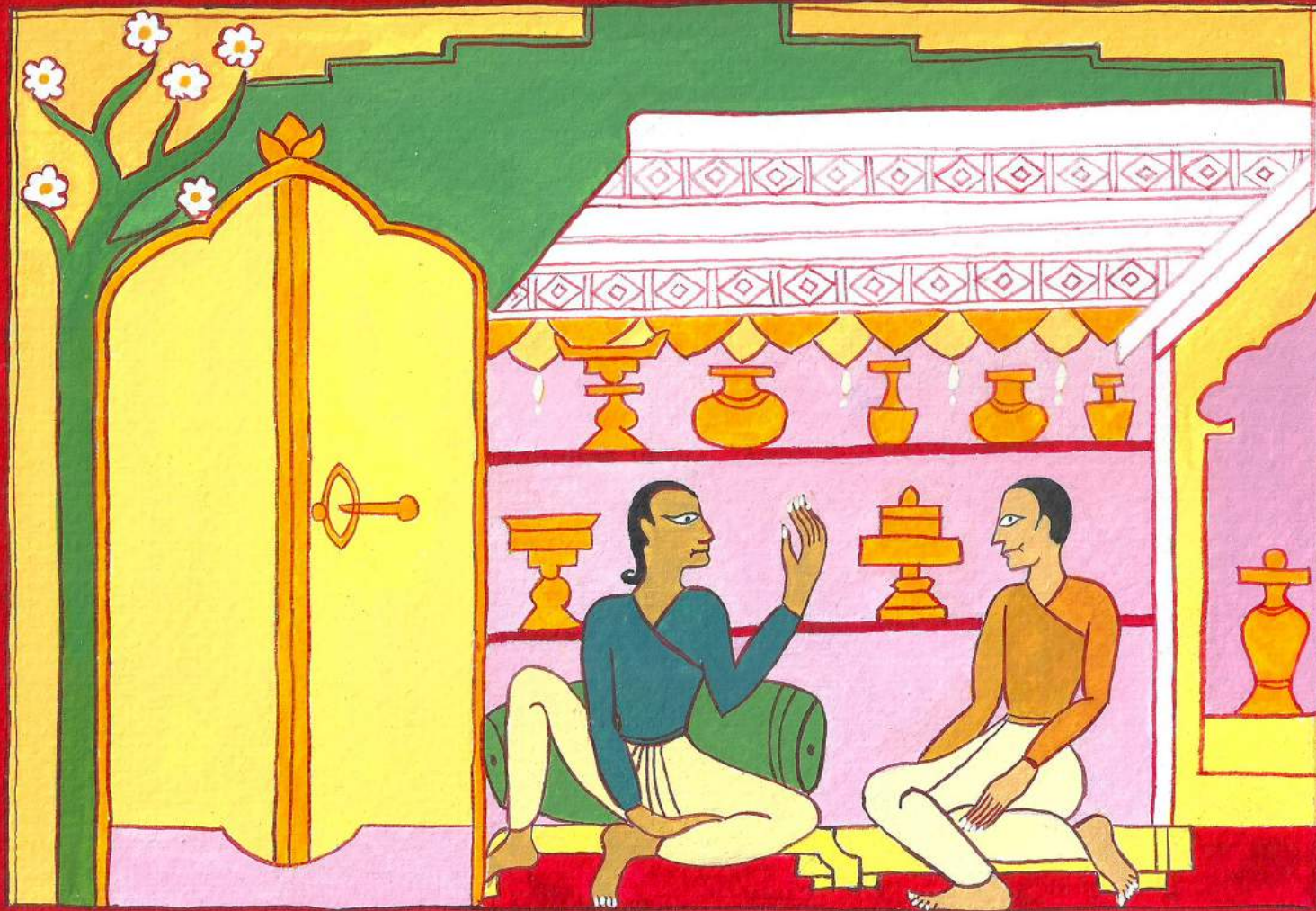




The Story of Two Brothers



2



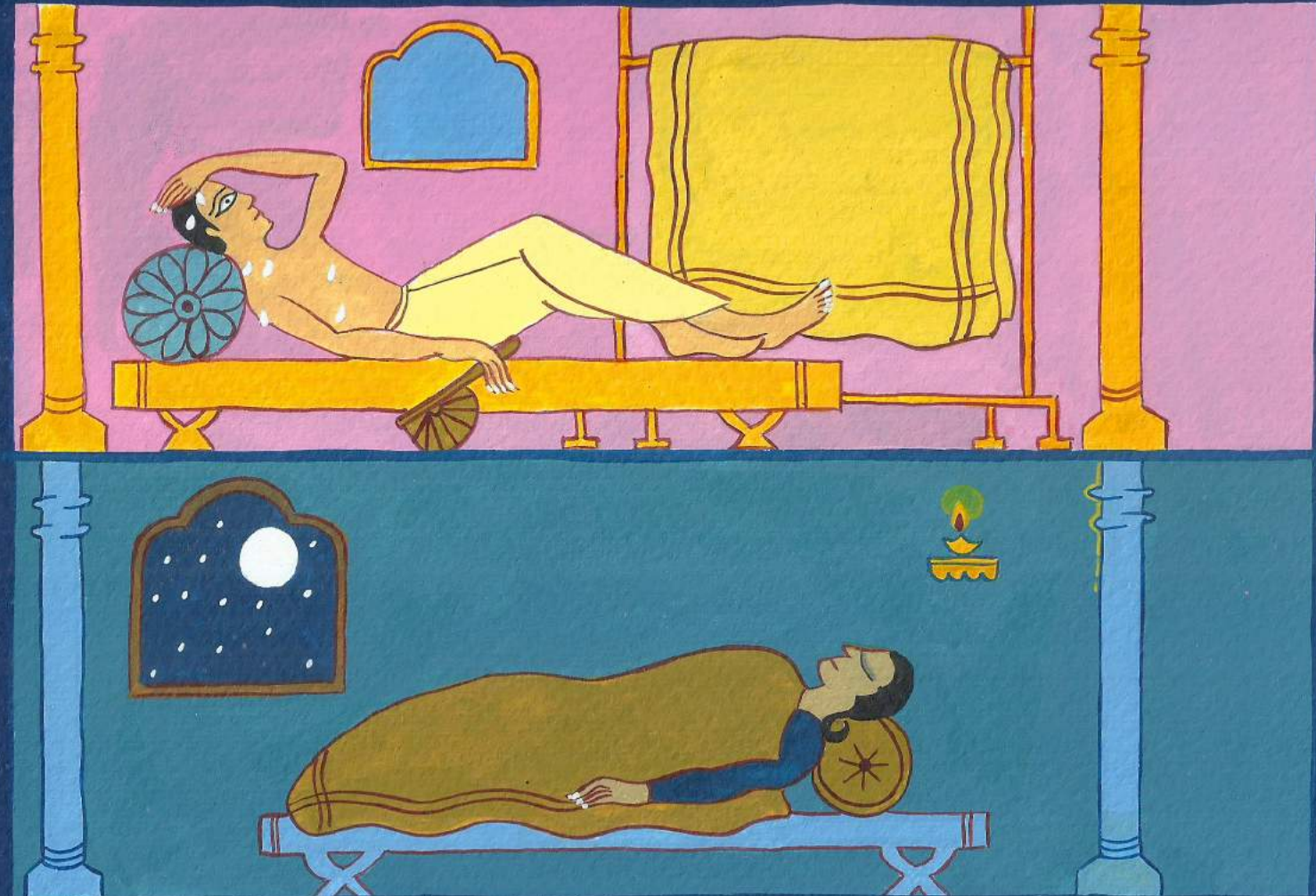
Once upon a time in a small town in Assam, two brothers named Kon and Mon lived together in their ancestral home. Kon was the elder brother and was cunning by nature while the younger brother Mon was a docile simpleton.

One day Kon said to Mon, 'Mon, we have inherited many things from our ancestors. Let us use them one by one.' 'You're right. What use are these things if we only store them? We must use them,' Mon replied.



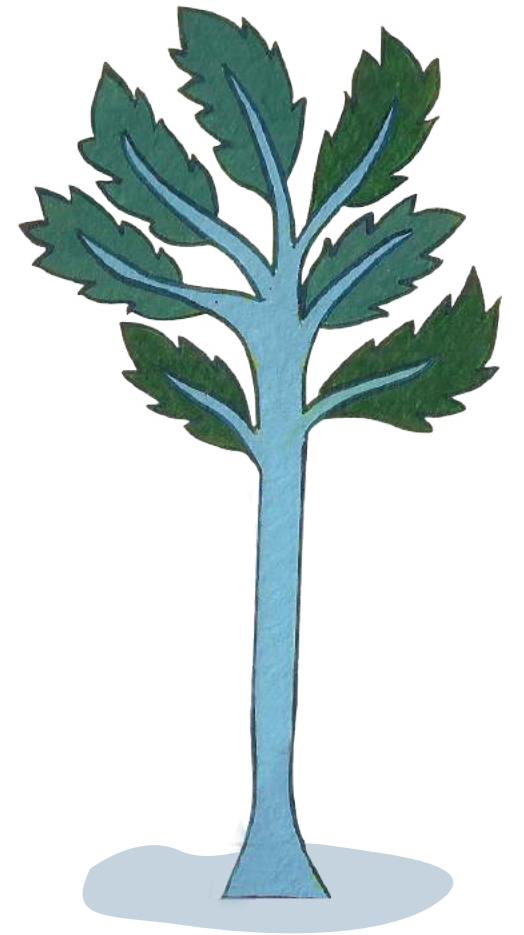
'Let us first use this old quilt,' Kon suggested, 'I will use it at night, and you can use the same quilt during the day.' Mon agreed and started covering himself with the quilt during daytime. However, since it was hot and sunny, he would often keep the quilt aside. After a few days, Mon stopped covering himself with the quilt completely as he realised that the quilt was of no use when the sun was out.

On the other hand, Kon wrapped himself up in the quilt at night and slept peacefully while Mon ended up having cold and sleepless nights with nothing to keep him warm.





After a few days, Kon came up with another idea, 'Mon, all the fruit-bearing trees and shrubs we have in our garden should be taken care of by us together. Your job will be to look after the roots and lower section of the trees, and I will take care of the upper portion of the trees.' Mon had had a bitter experience with his brother's suggestion earlier. Still, he hesitantly agreed.



From that day onwards, Mon started nurturing the garden by cleaning, weeding, and watering the trees, and soon they started bearing fruits.



Kon was to look after the upper section of the trees. This meant he could also eat the fruits that the trees bore. Therefore, he happily collected the fruits and gobbled them all on his own without sharing a single one with his brother.

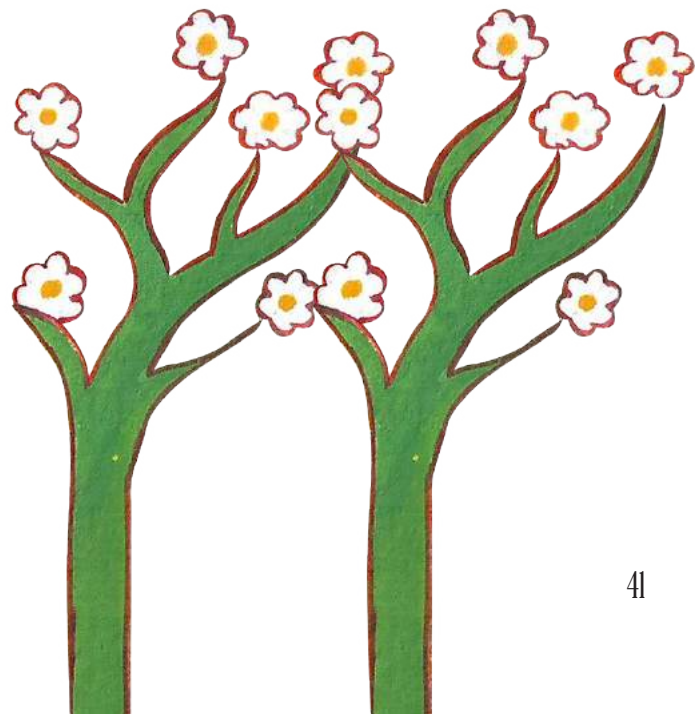


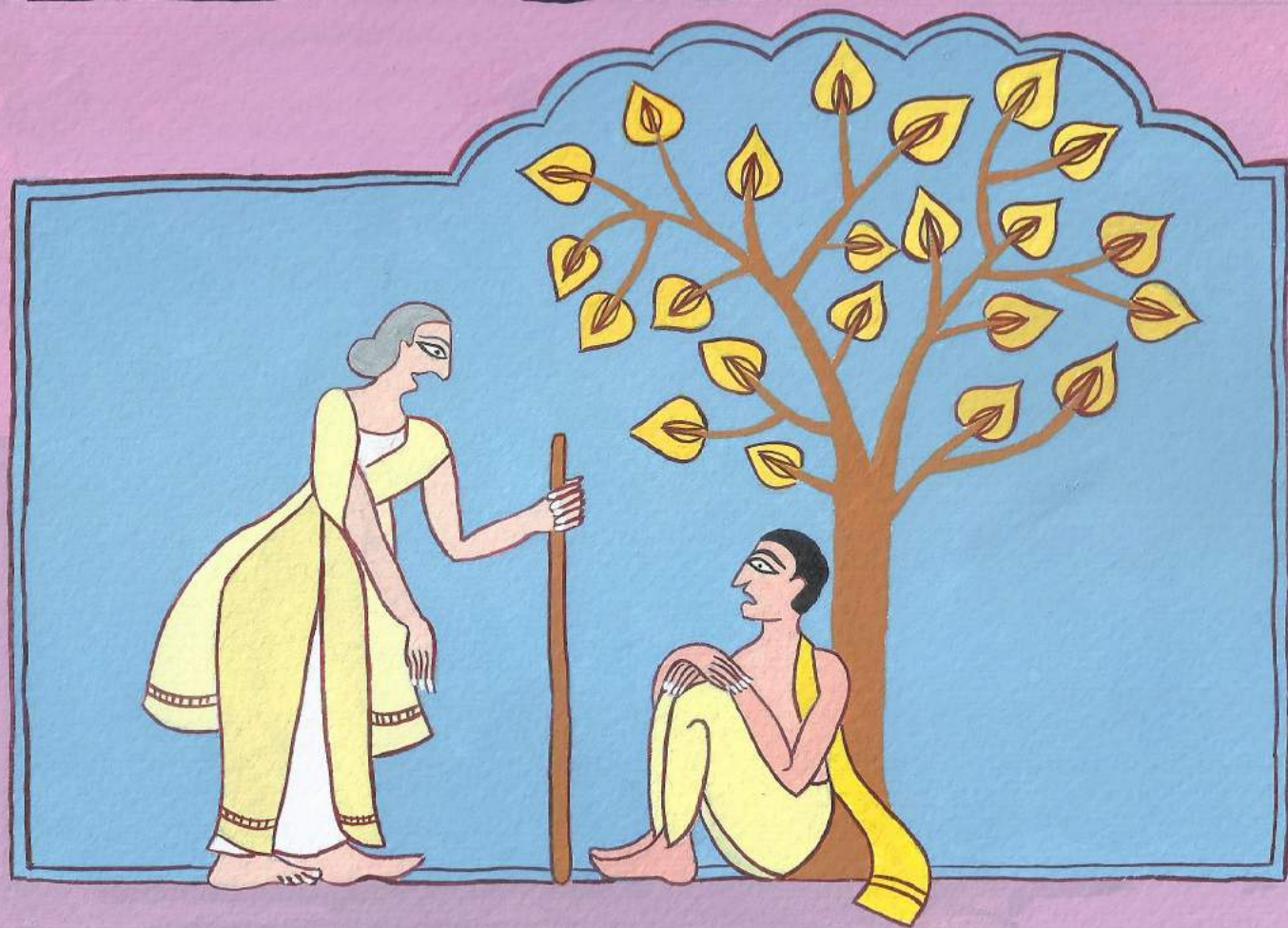


On another occasion, Kon once again advised his brother, 'Mon, we must now take care of our black cow. You take care of the front half of her body while I will tend to the rear half.'
'Brother, I have never disagreed with what you tell me to do. You do what you think is best,' Mon replied sadly.



So Mon started taking care of the cow. He fed her with good fodder and made sure that she was tied to a proper spot in the shed. Since Kon was to take care of the rear half of the cow, he milked her and drank the entire pot of milk on his own without leaving a single drop for his brother.





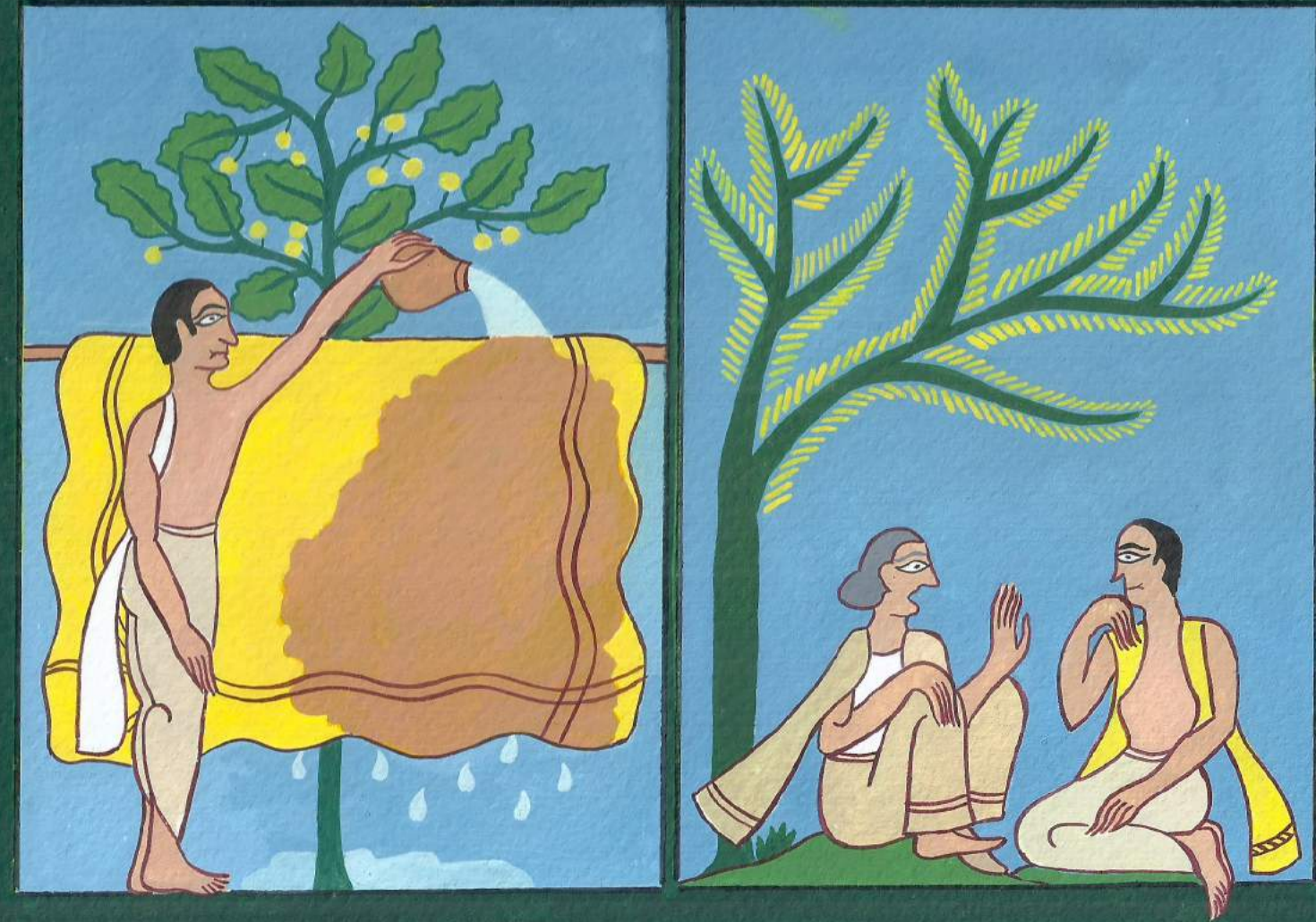
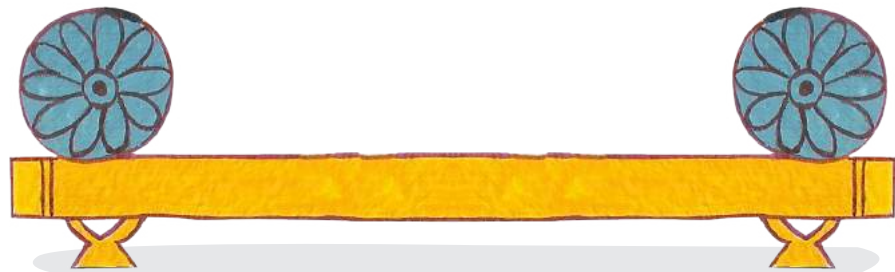
An old woman, who was Kon and Mon's neighbour, had been observing what was going on between the brothers.

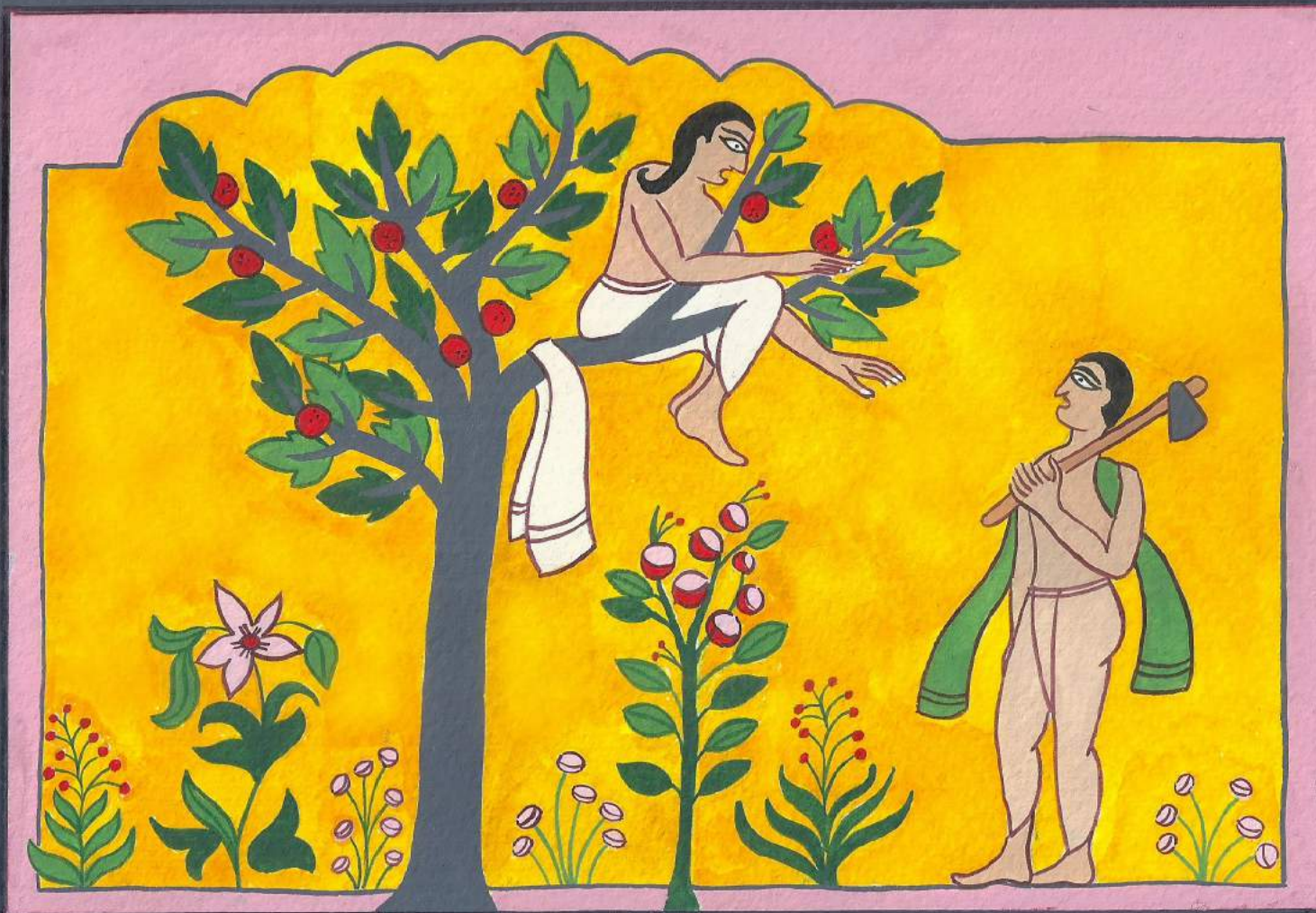
One day, she approached Mon and asked him, 'Son, I have been noticing you and your brother for a few days. Why are you wilfully suffering so much?'

'Granny, I am bound to listen to what Kon tells me to do because he is my elder brother and I love and respect him,' Mon said with a sullen face.

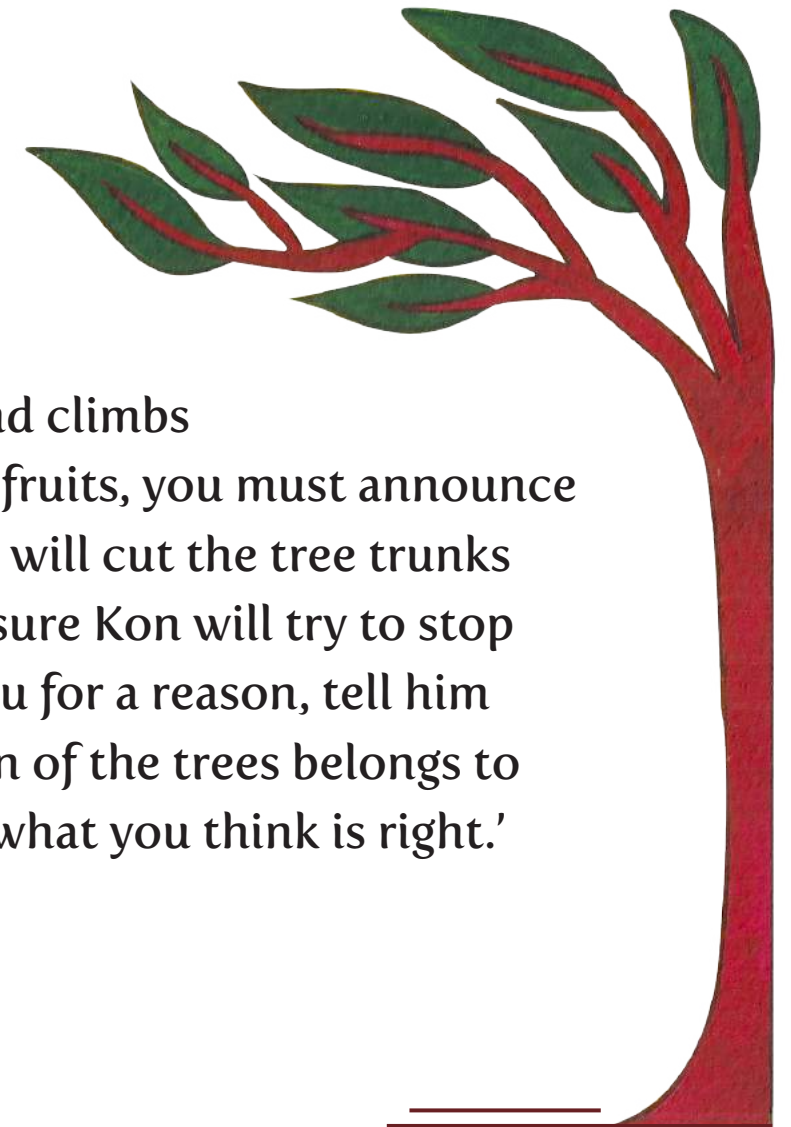
Realising that Mon was a docile and nice person, the old woman tried to help him out. She said, 'Son, you should not agree to whatever Kon tells you just because he is your brother. If he loves you, he will want you to be happy as well and not just think about his own comfort. Let us try to find a solution to this problem.'

‘Try to do what I tell you,’ said the old woman. ‘Firstly, when you have the quilt with you during daytime, soak it in water. The quilt will remain wet even at night, and Kon will not be able to use it. Like you, he will also suffer at night. If Kon questions you about your actions, you must tell him that the quilt belongs to you during the day, and you can do what you want with it.’





The old lady then suggested how to resolve the second problem, 'When Kon goes to the garden and climbs up the trees to pluck fruits, you must announce and pretend that you will cut the tree trunks then and there. I am sure Kon will try to stop you, and if he asks you for a reason, tell him that the lower section of the trees belongs to you, and you can do what you think is right.'





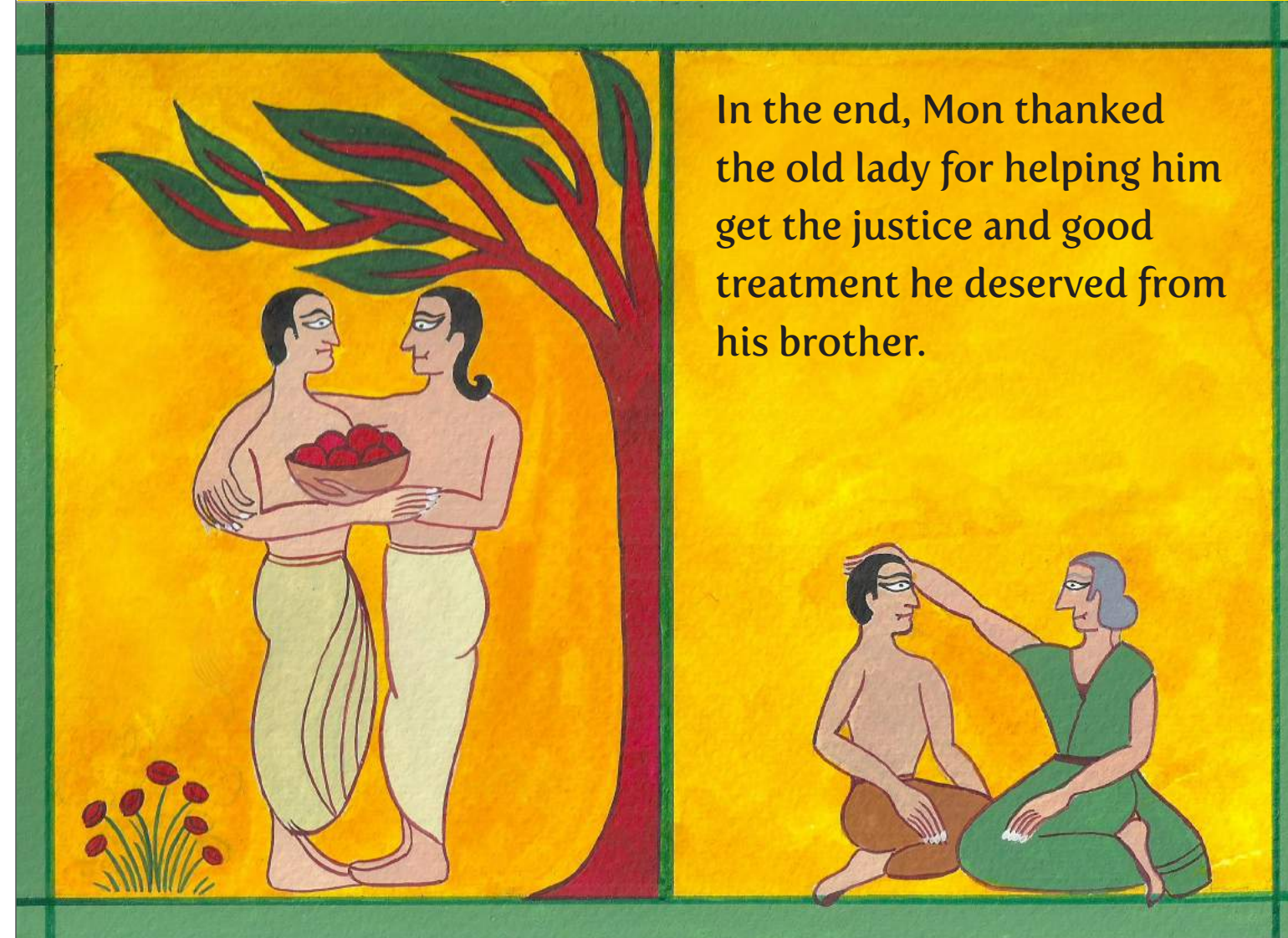
Finally, the old woman whispered, 'When Kon begins to milk the cow, you should start pulling the cow's string that is tied to its face. This will disturb the cow, and Kon will find it difficult to milk her. If Kon stops you, then you must tell him that you are supposed to look after the front part of the cow's body, and you must do what is required to look after the cow well.'

The old lady further said, 'Try to carry out these steps so that Kon understands that it is not nice to be mean to others. Kon will then hopefully be fair with you and be nice to you in the future.'

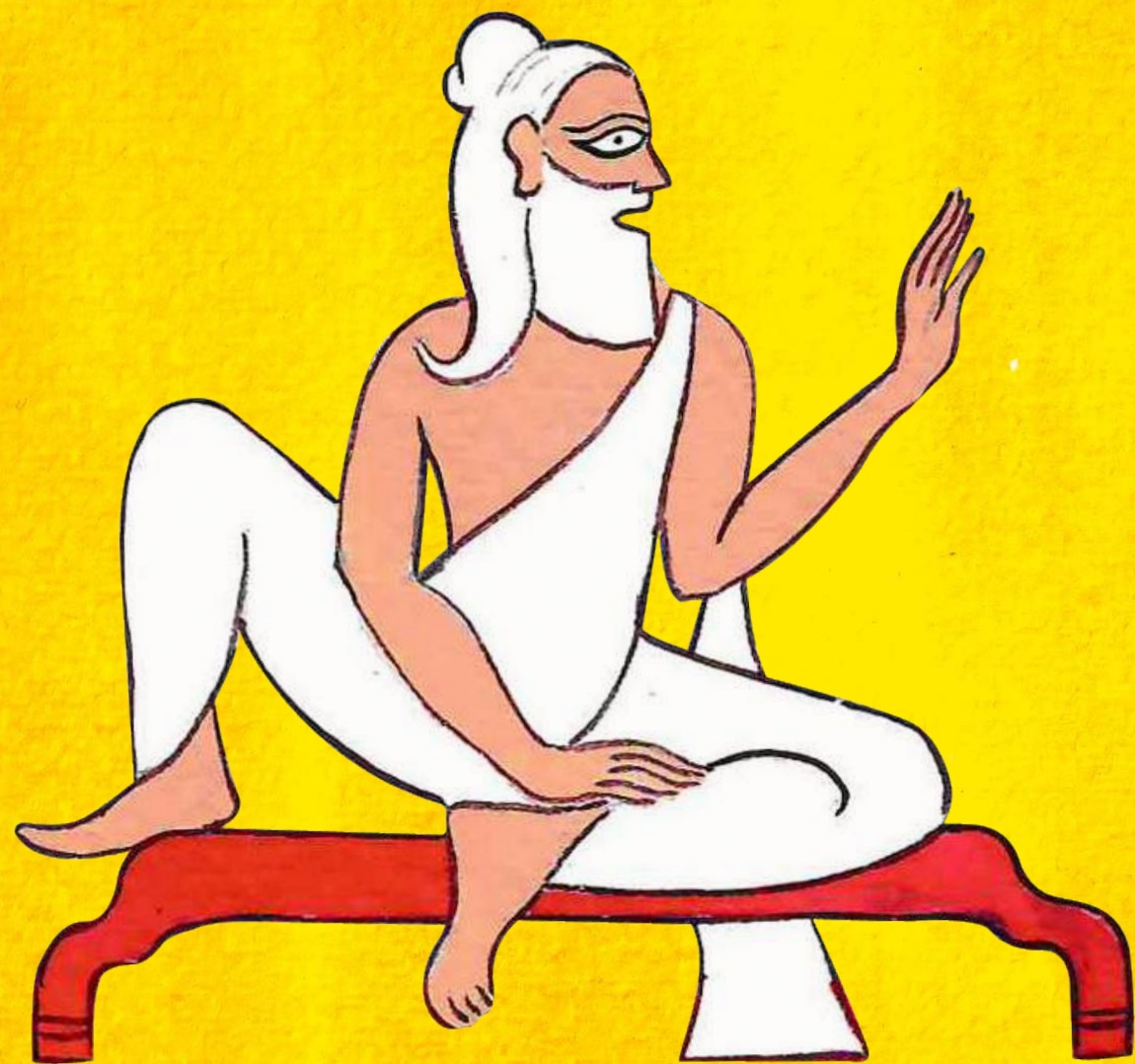


Mon followed the old lady's advice and did what she had suggested. Mon's actions gradually led to a change in Kon's behaviour as he realised that Mon did not like his behaviour and he was tactfully resisting Kon. Kon gradually started being nice to Mon and started sharing household chores and their belongings fairly. From then on, both Kon and Mon lived peacefully together.

Mon understood that family members can also sometimes be unfair, and it is important to question such actions and thoughts. He also realised that at times friendships and bonds outside the family can also help in difficult situations.



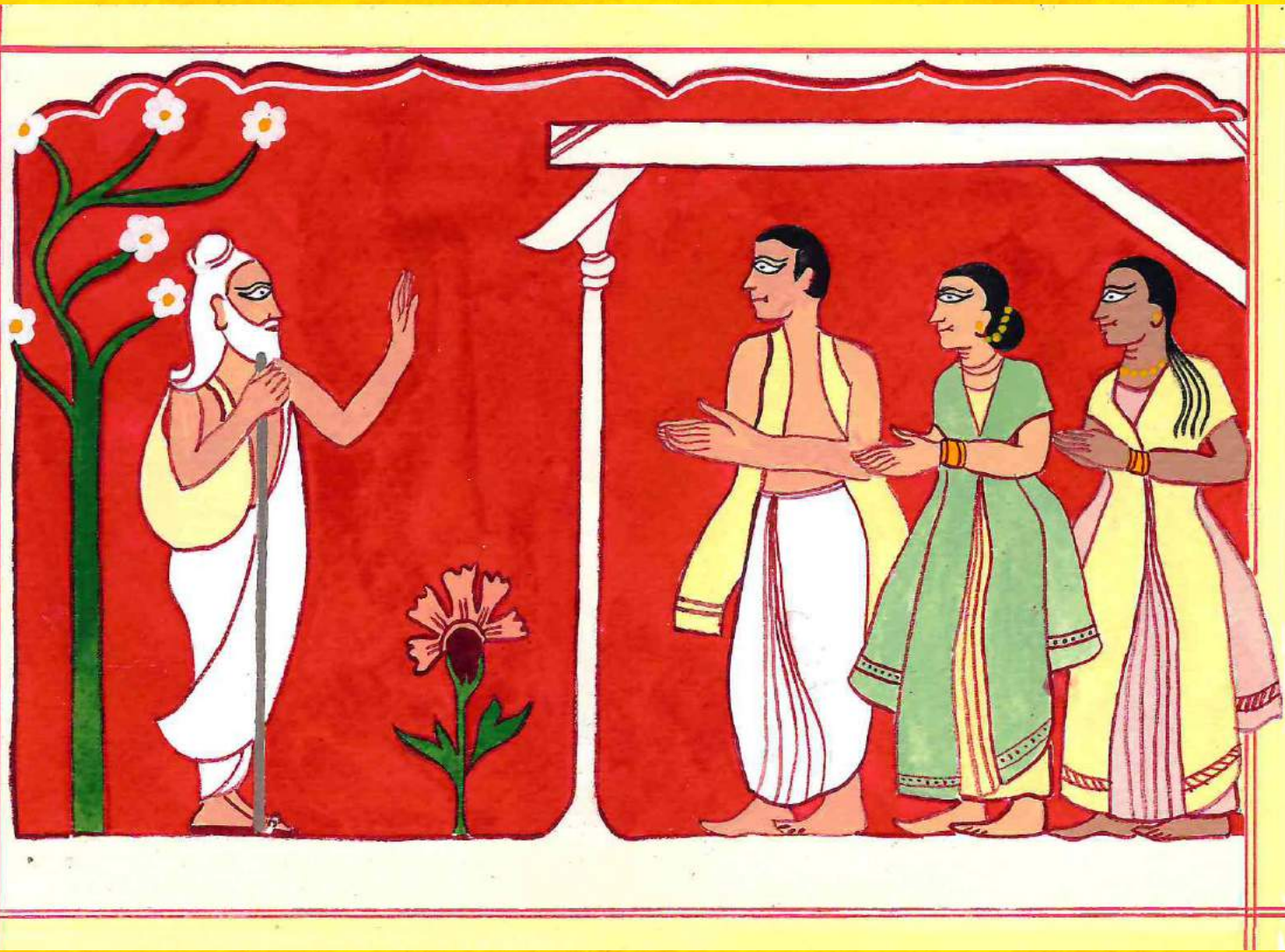
In the end, Mon thanked the old lady for helping him get the justice and good treatment he deserved from his brother.



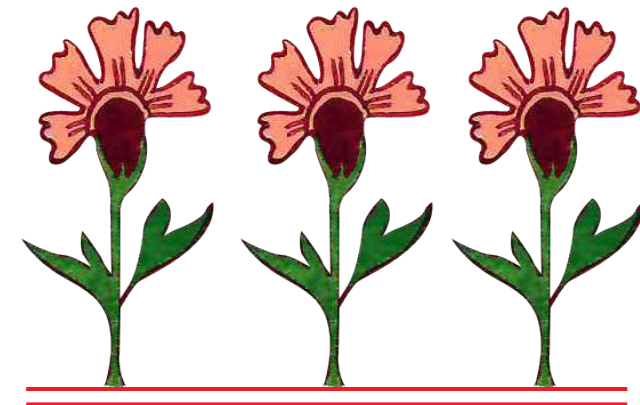
The Story of a Saint

3





Once upon a time, a man lived with his two wives in a remote village in Assam. One day, a saint visited this family. When the husband met and spoke to the saint, he felt that this visitor was a truly holy person. The man therefore requested him to grace their home by staying with his family for a few days.



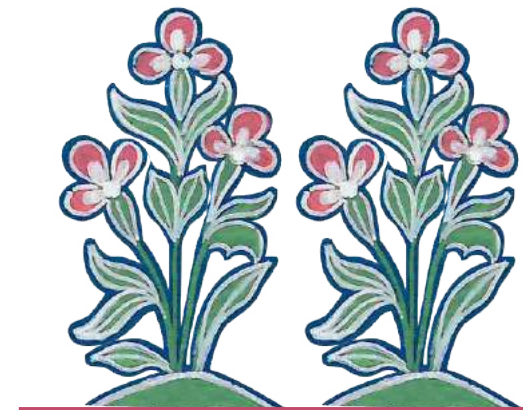
The saint agreed and, as time passed, the religious teachings and good moral behaviour of the saint led the man to have a lot of faith in and respect for him.

Both the wives also began to take good care of the holy person. They cooked for him and looked after his other daily needs. There were extra chores and religious tasks that had to be carried out at home to please the saint. As it generally happens, the duty of these extra domestic rituals and care-giving fell on both the women.





During the saint's stay with the family, the man of the household had to travel to another place for work for a month. The husband asked his wives to take good care of the holy man and try their best to fulfill all his needs.



The second wife was a young woman. The saint had secretly had his eye on her from the very first day of his visit. Now that the husband was away, the saint had a chance to try his luck with her.



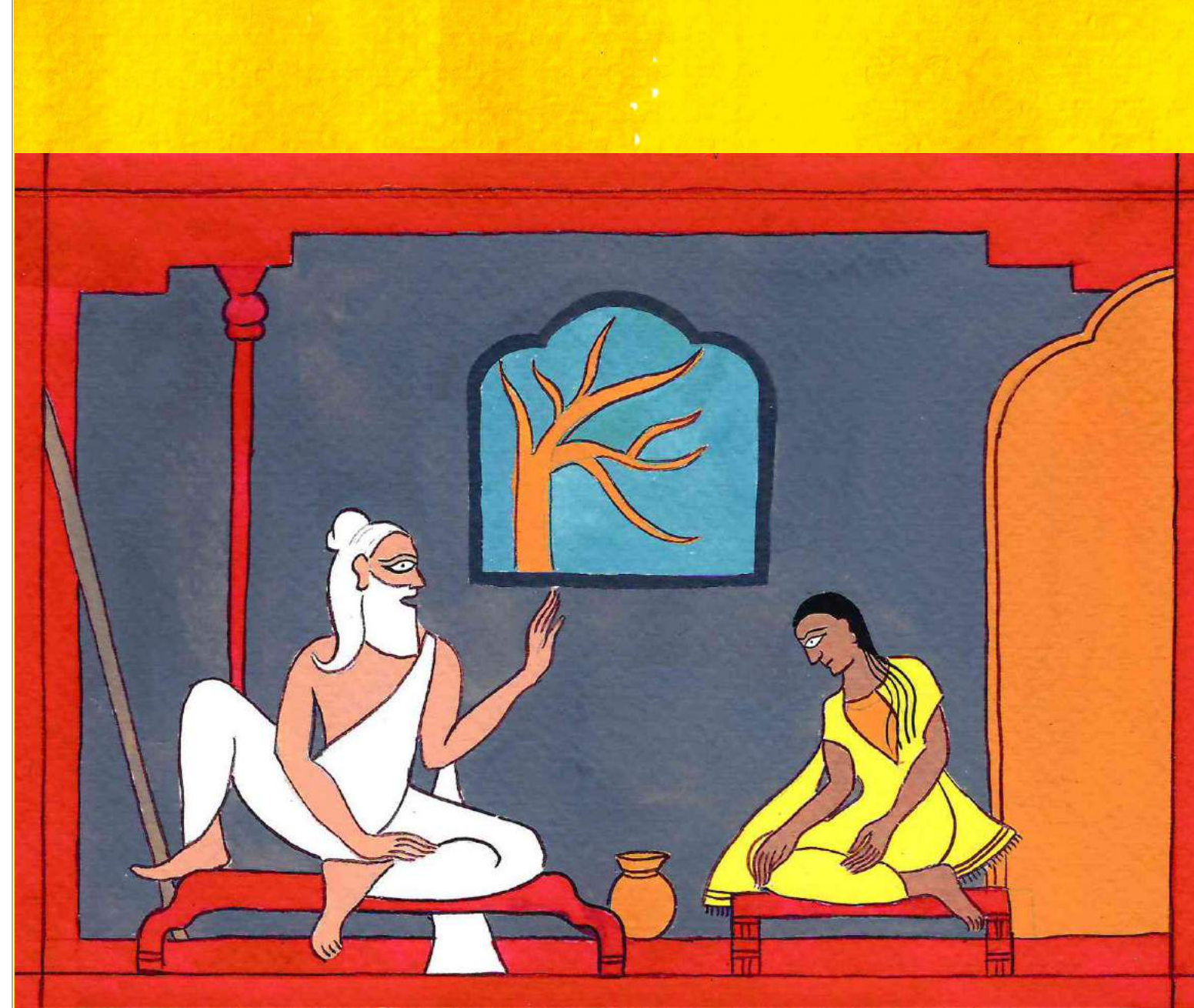
One day, when the saint found the young woman alone, he slowly went close to her and said, 'I wish someday I can take you away with me.' The woman was taken aback and with a bowed head and folded hands she said, 'My lord, you are our teacher and a holy person. Such thoughts do not suit you.'



When the woman declined the saint's proposal, he got scared. He did not want his true nature to be revealed. He called the woman to his room the next day and said,

'I was only trying to test you. Never think what I said yesterday is true.'

The saint had another plan in mind to trick the young woman. He said, 'I need to carry out a ritual to worship the goddess. For this custom, I will need some soil from the crematorium, collected and brought every night by a devoted young woman. The devotee also needs to remove all her clothes while this work is being done. As such, this task has to be done by you.'



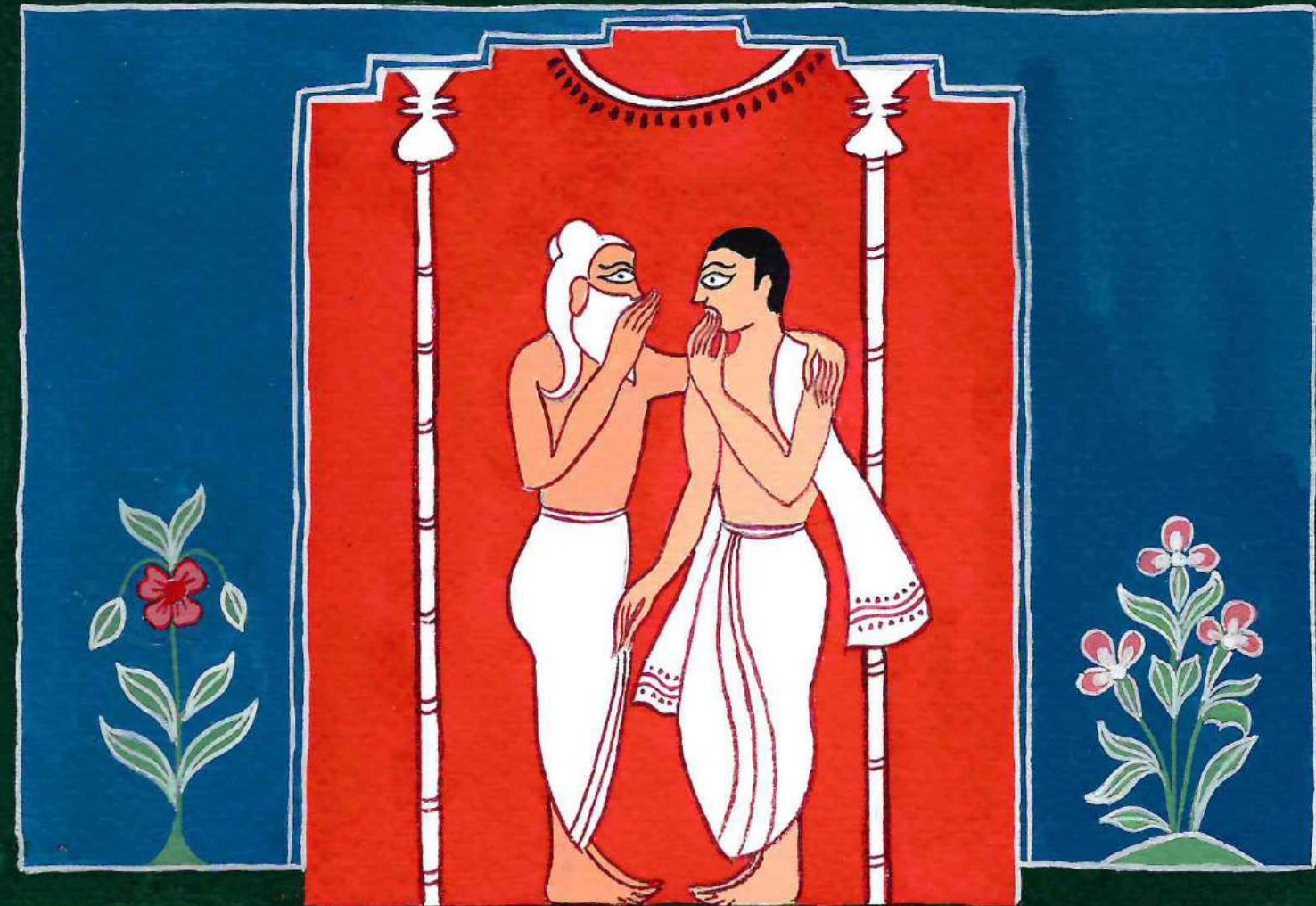


The woman felt scared and angry because of the saint's orders. At the same time, she remembered that her husband had asked both the wives to look after the saint well. She was caught between her husband's demands and the saint's, and felt miserable. Not able to think of a solution, she was forced to carry out this task for the ritual every night.



After a month of this misery, the woman's husband finally came back home. In the evening, the saint met the husband and spoke to him. While talking, he slyly told the man that he had discovered that his second wife was actually a witch! He said that he thought this because he had seen the young woman take off her clothes and visit the crematorium every night. At the crematorium, he saw her digging soil and dancing merrily.

The husband was upset and shocked and he asked the holy man, 'Are you telling me the truth?' 'If you do not believe me, I can show you what she actually does tonight. You can see everything with your own eyes. Do not tell your wife anything yet,' the saint replied.

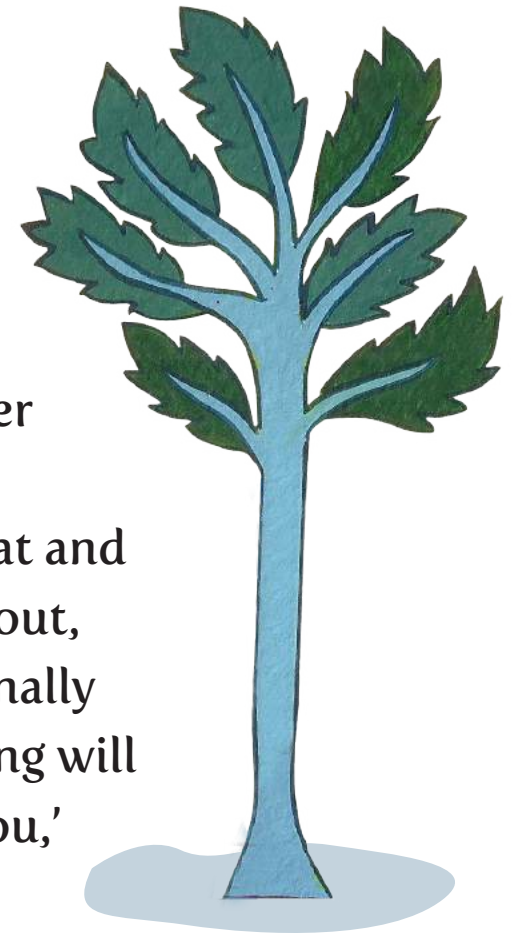


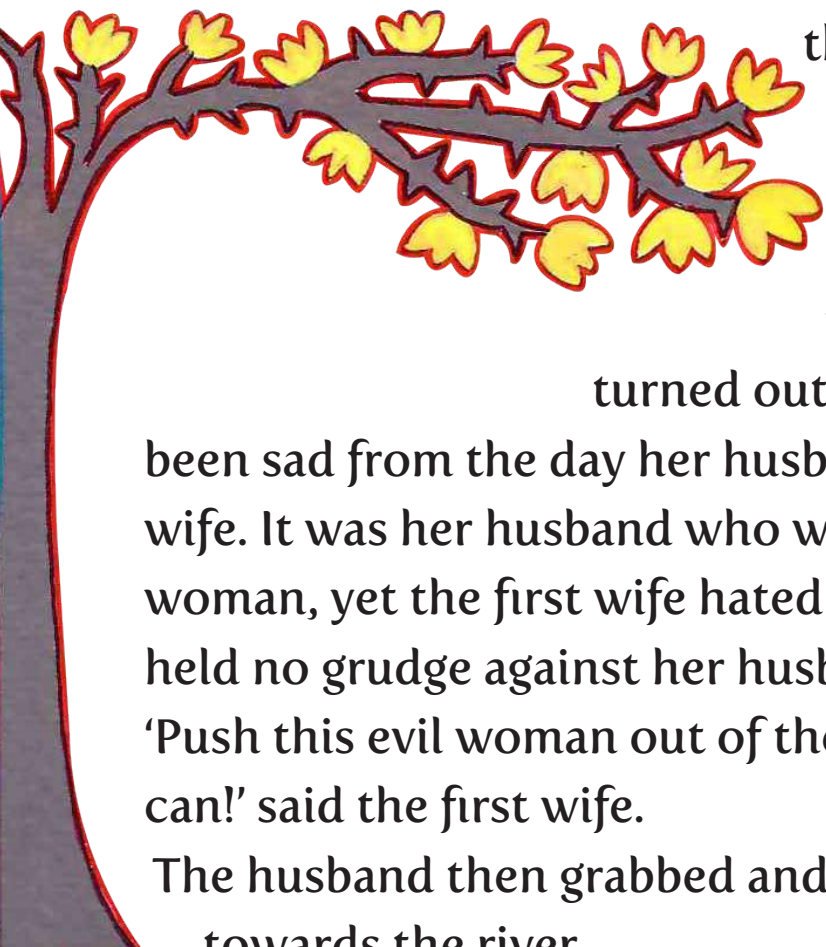


At night, the saint and the husband hid in one corner of the crematorium and quietly waited for the woman to arrive. The young woman visited the crematorium as usual and carried out her tasks, not knowing what was going on behind her back. The husband saw everything and was utterly shocked.

‘What I saw just now is unbelievable! What shall I do with her now? Do I need to kill her?’

‘Instead of killing her, tie her to a boat and let her sail on the river. She will tire out, suffer from hunger and thirst, and finally die on her own. If you kill her, the king will punish you and society will blame you,’ said the saint.





The husband decided to follow the saint's advice and spoke about the matter with his first wife. The first wife was happy that the young woman had turned out to be a witch. She had been sad from the day her husband had taken another wife. It was her husband who willingly married the other woman, yet the first wife hated the young woman but held no grudge against her husband. 'Push this evil woman out of the house as soon as you can!' said the first wife. The husband then grabbed and dragged his young wife towards the river.





The husband tied his wife's hands and legs to a boat. He then placed her under the roof of the boat and let the boat sail away. The young woman howled, cried, and pleaded with her husband not to leave her in such a state. However, no one trusted her or paid heed to her pleas. 'You are an evil person, and I have seen you at night with my own eyes. There is no point in listening to you anymore,' the husband shouted.



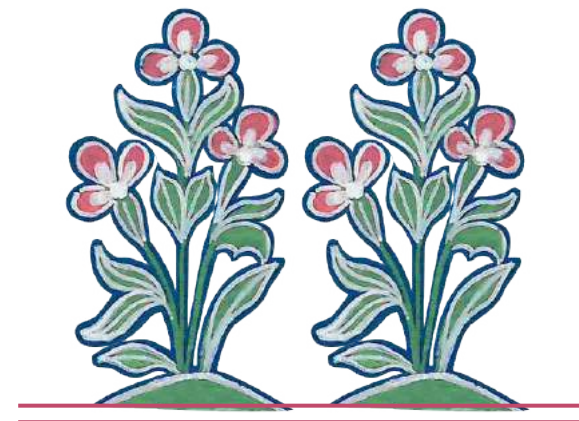


The young woman sailed across the river with tied hands and feet, and was extremely thirsty and hungry. Her body was in pain and she was deeply hurt. Her family had not listened to her pleas but trusted a stranger instead, and they had known the saint only for a few months.





The next day, the saint told the husband and the first wife that it was time for him to go on a pilgrimage and left the couple's house. The saint then walked towards the river for days and waited patiently at the riverbank for the boat to arrive. He thought, 'The moment I see the boat, I will untie her and take her away with me!'

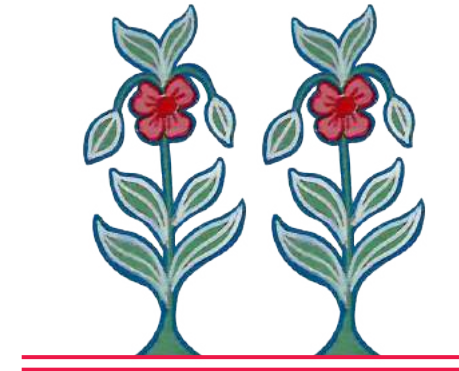


Luckily, the boat reached a bank that belonged to a king's territory. On the same day, the king happened to be out on a deer hunting expedition, and was present at the spot on the riverbank where the boat had arrived. The king could not find any deer that day, but found an old bear and brought it with him alive.





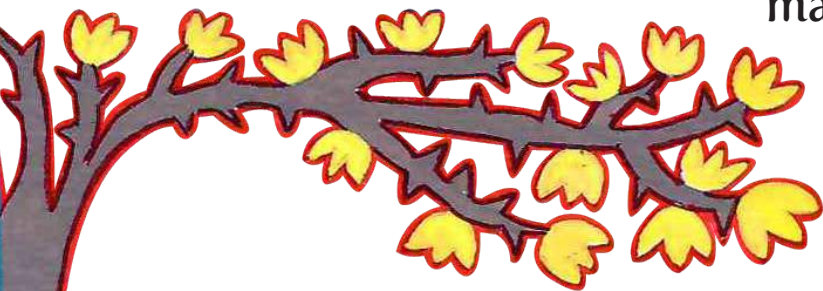
When the king saw the boat on the bank, he was curious to know what was inside. He looked into the boat only to discover the young woman tied to it. The king then untied her and asked her what had happened to her. When the woman narrated her terrible experiences to him, the king understood the wickedness of the saint. He then pulled the woman out from the boat and put the old bear inside, and let the boat sail away.





The boat reached the bank of the river where the saint was waiting eagerly for the woman. He was elated to see the boat and quickly pulled it towards him. Finally, he would get what he wanted. When the saint peeped inside the boat, the bear pounced and killed him. That was the end of the wicked saint.





After a few days, the king proposed marriage to the young woman. The woman had already faced a lot of hardship at the hands of the saint and her own family. She did not want to suffer again and was finally free from any other person's control! She wished to lead life on her own. She thanked the king for his help and politely asked him to take back his proposal. The kind king agreed to her request. He, however, offered that she could stay at his kingdom as a guest as long as she wished. The young woman agreed and lived a peaceful life thereafter.

