



Level 4

# Grace: One engineer's fight to make science education accessible for all

**Author:** Sayantan Datta  
**Illustrator:** Priya Dali



Sembattai wondered,

Why did Nagajyoti and she have to sit outside  
the classroom where everybody left their slippers?  
Why did her classmates who sat inside not speak or  
play with them?  
Why did these upper-caste students inside the  
classroom live in a certain locality of the village?

*Are they different from us?*  
she asked herself.

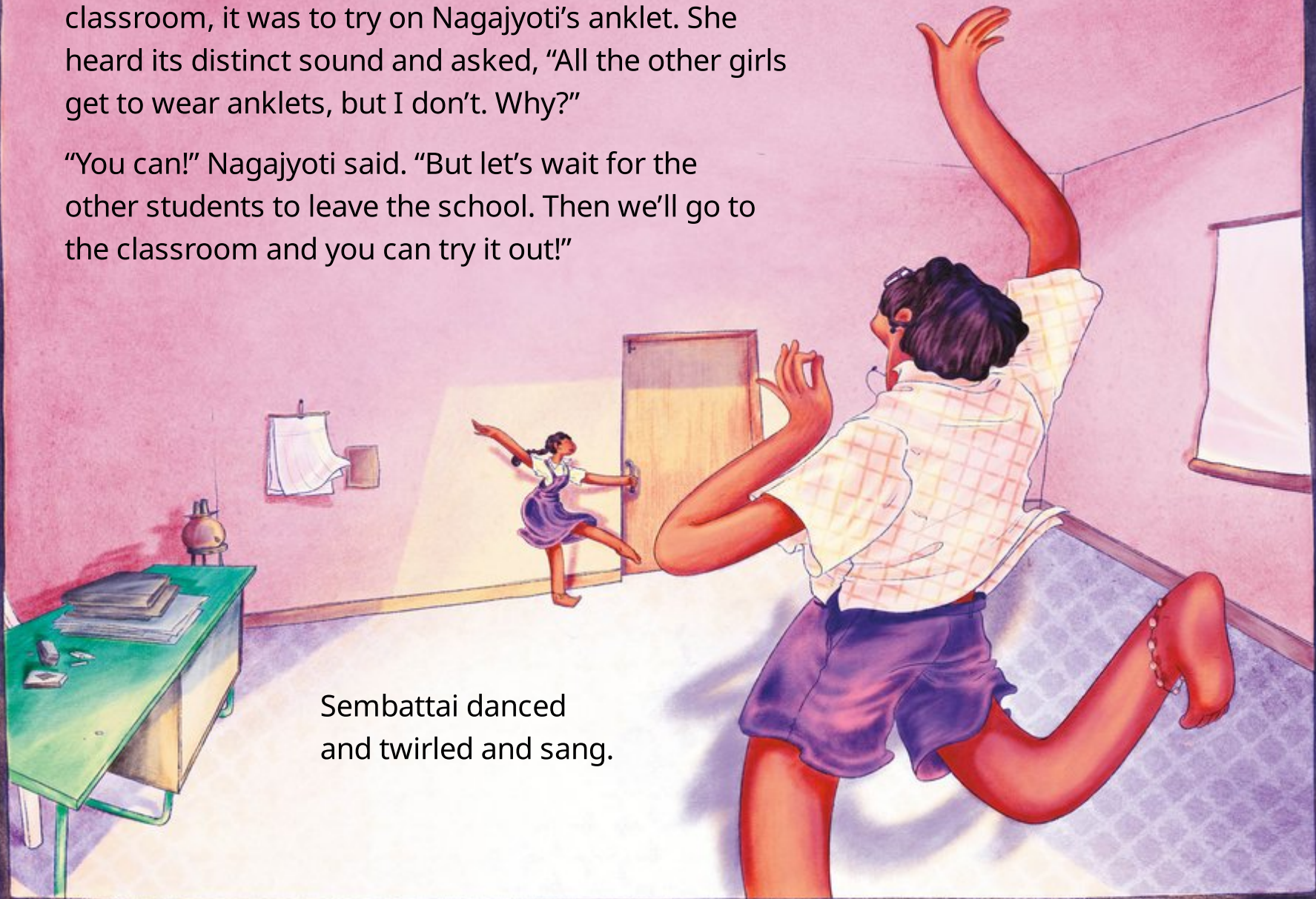




The first time Sembattai saw the inside of her classroom, it was to try on Nagajyoti's anklet. She heard its distinct sound and asked, "All the other girls get to wear anklets, but I don't. Why?"

"You can!" Nagajyoti said. "But let's wait for the other students to leave the school. Then we'll go to the classroom and you can try it out!"

Sembattai danced  
and twirled and sang.



When her family moved to Thoothukudi, Sembattai's father put her in an all-boys school.  
Everyone thought she was a boy, but she knew she was not.



She wondered,

Why did she have to wear pants instead of a dress?  
Why did she have to crop her beautiful brown hair short  
just because all her classmates did?

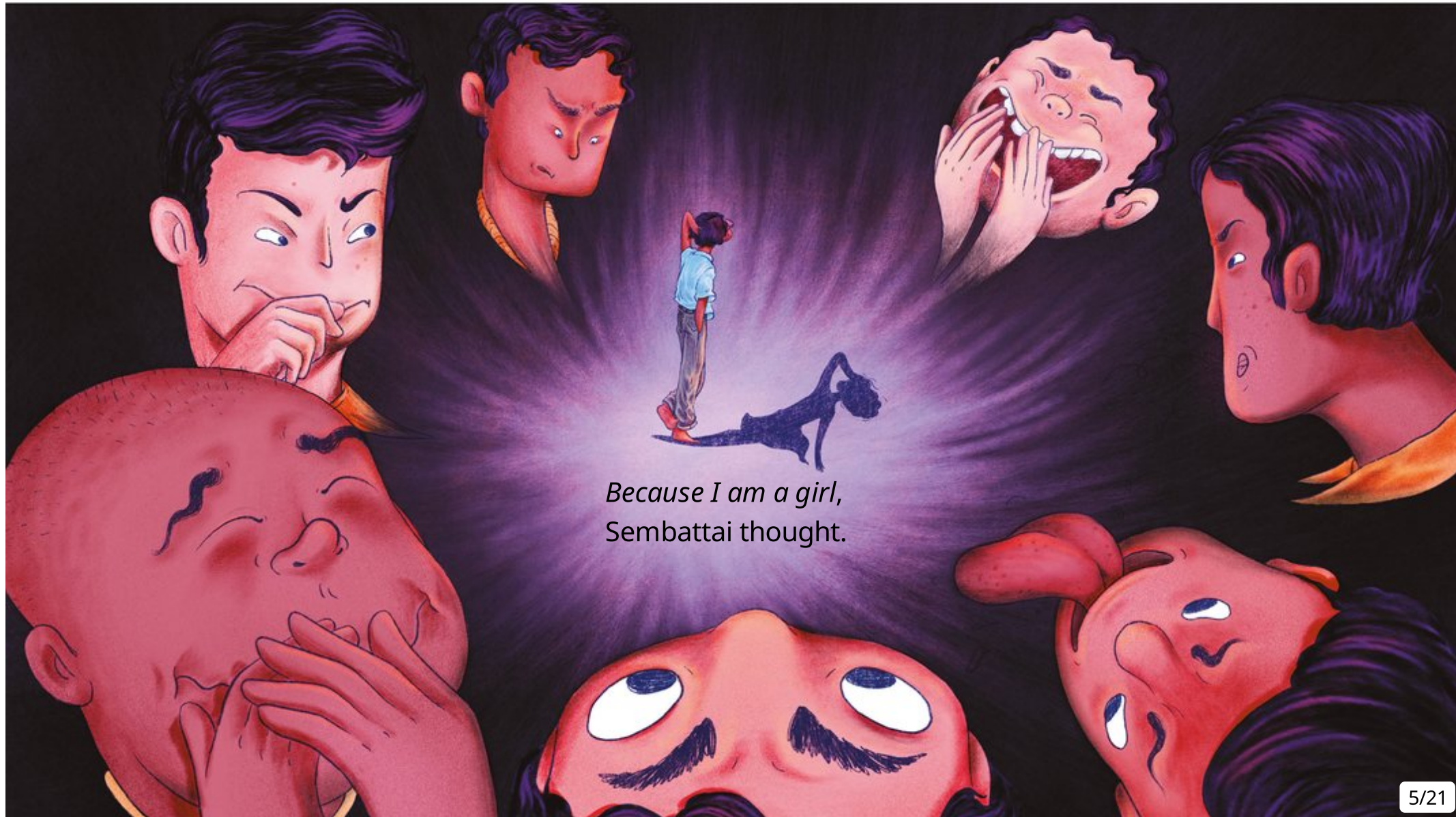


The boys asked her strange questions.

“Why do you walk  
like a girl?”

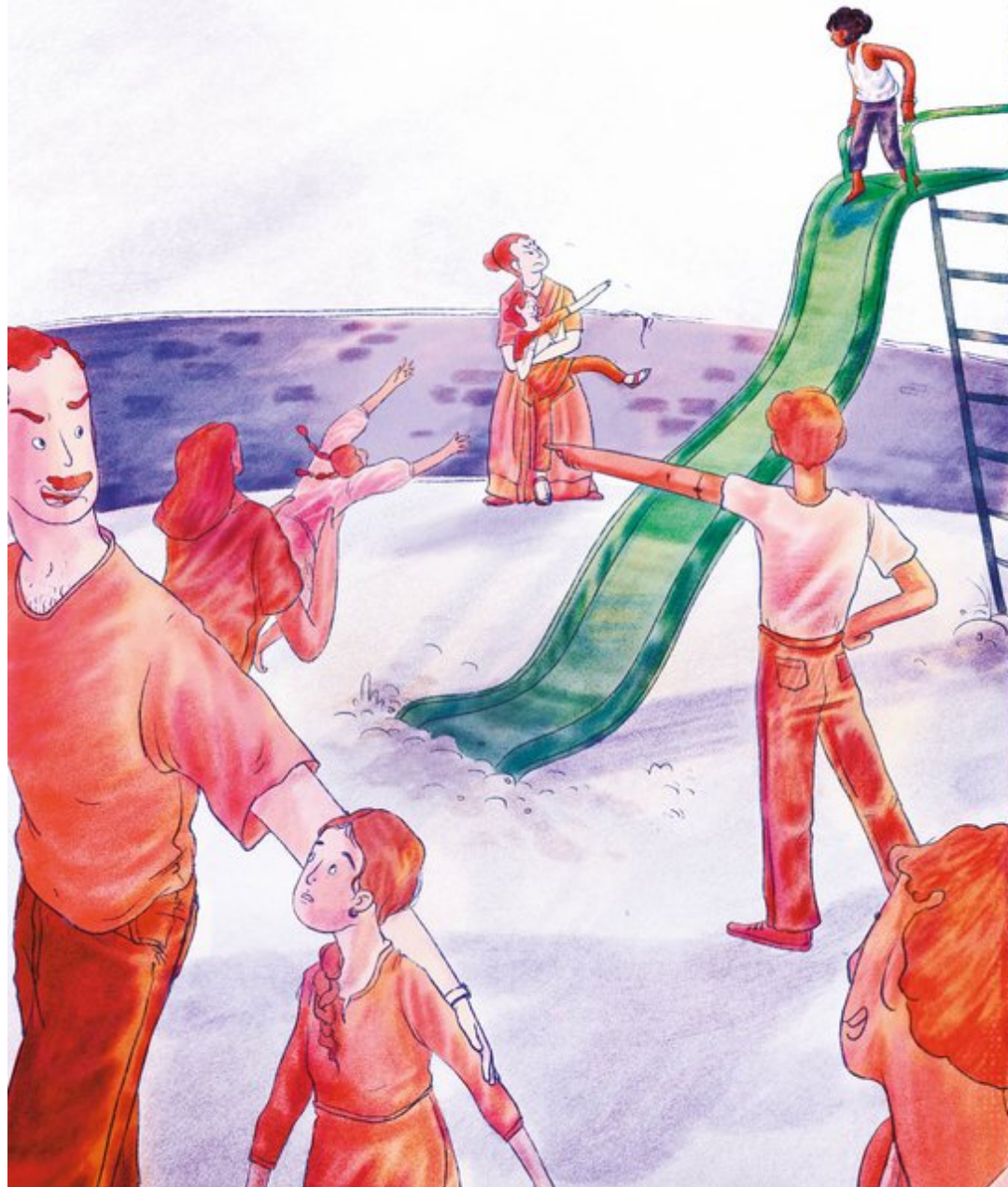
“Why do you talk  
like a girl?”

“Why do you only  
play hopscotch?”

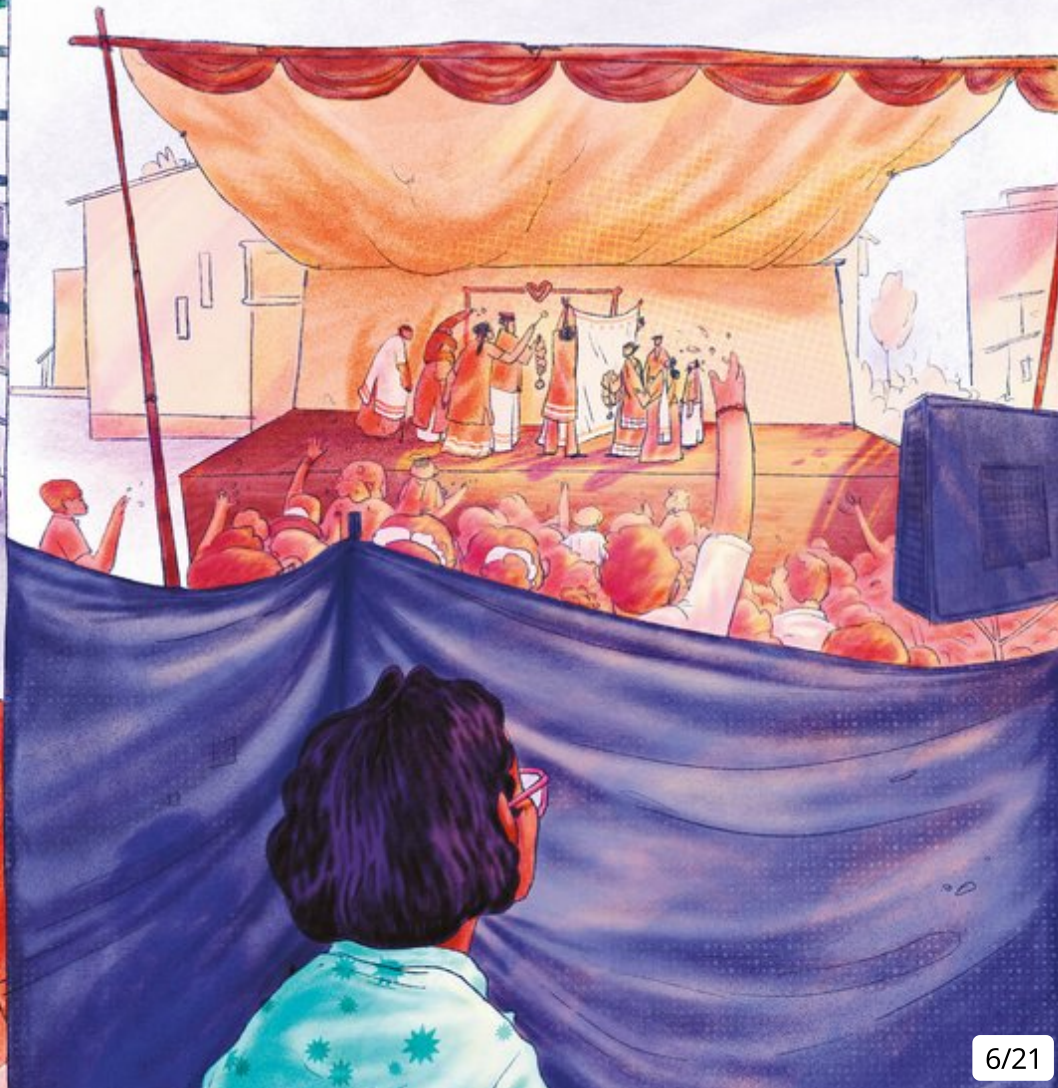




*Why does nobody understand me?*

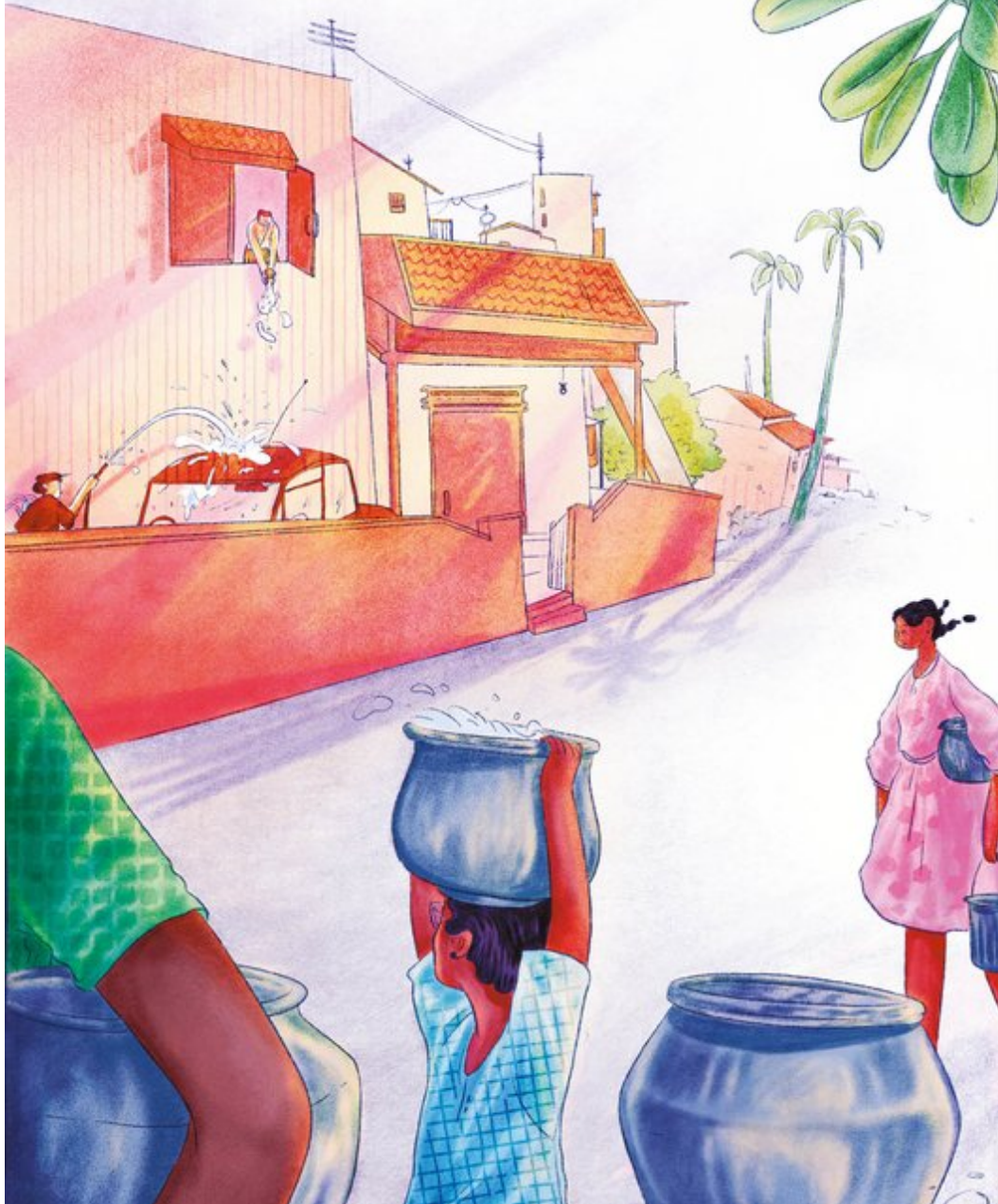


*Why must I be like everyone else?*

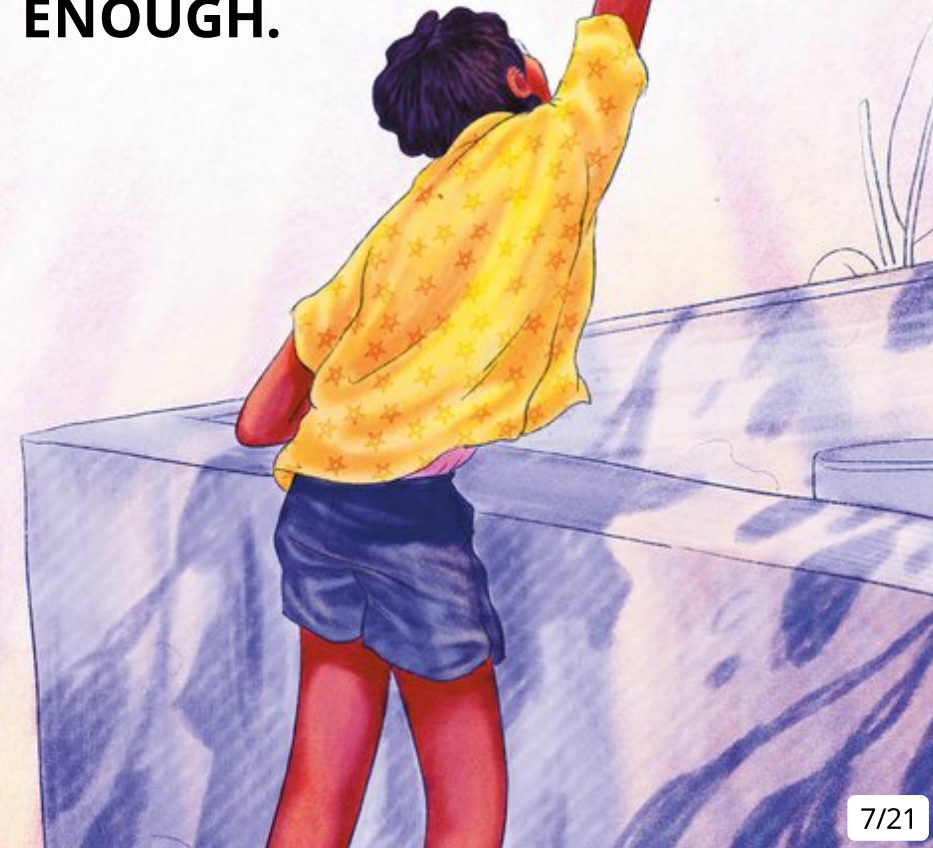




She thought and thought and  
thought.



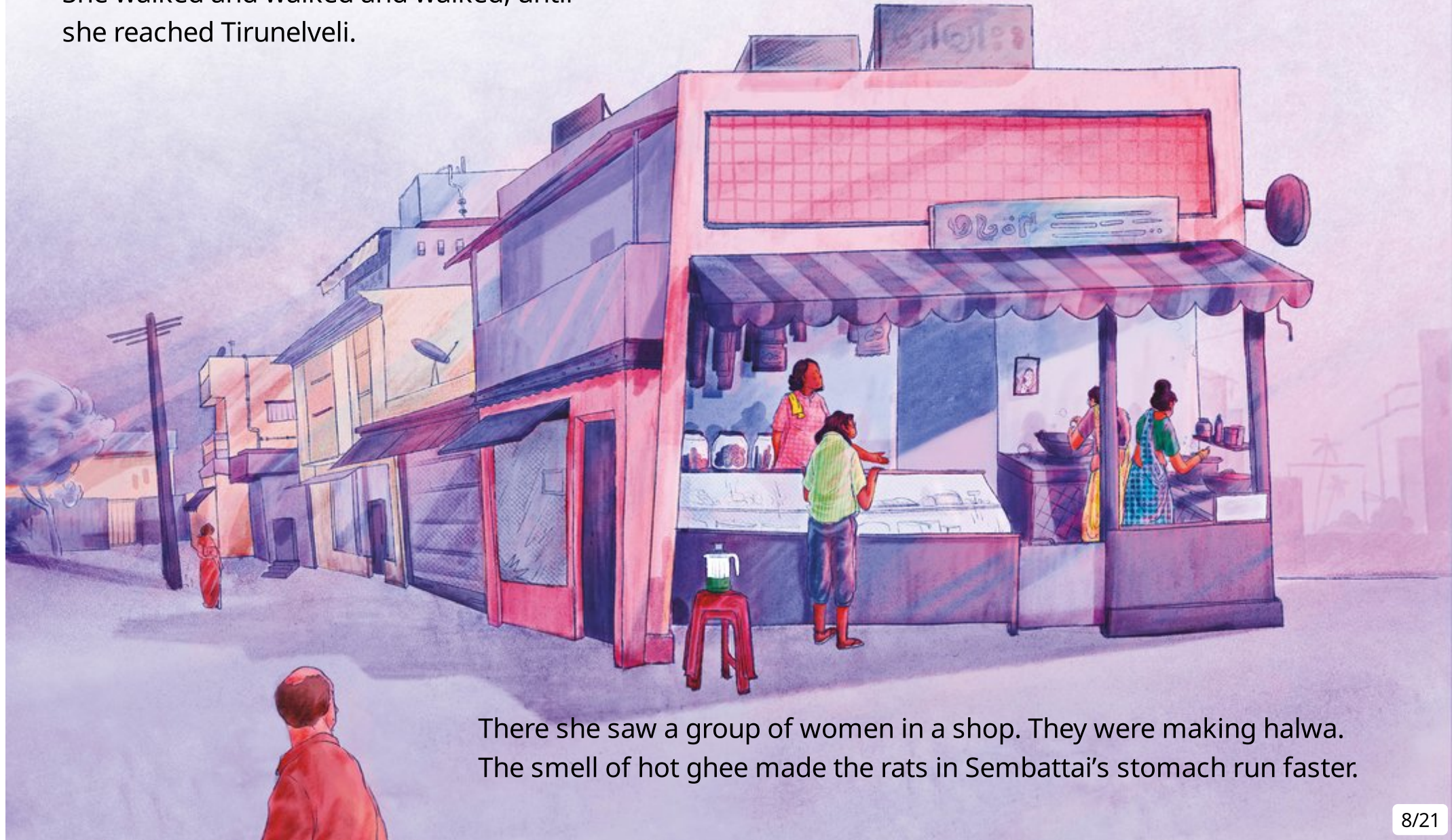
**ENOUGH.**





If her parents, her school and her classmates could not accept her for who she was, she would find people who would. One day, as the sun began to rise, 16-year-old Sembattai left her home.

She walked and walked and walked, until she reached Tirunelveli.



There she saw a group of women in a shop. They were making halwa. The smell of hot ghee made the rats in Sembattai's stomach run faster.



Munna Nayak asked her, "Why do you look worried?"

"Amma, I have left home," she said. Munnamma gave Sembattai a big hug.



"Aiyo! Where will you roam around all this while?" she said. "Why don't you come live with us, Grace? We are *Thirunangai* — transgender women."



Just like that, Grace knew  
who she was. With  
Munnamma, she could wear  
sarees, anklets, bindis,  
anything she wanted — she  
could live her life as herself.

When Grace went to sleep  
at night, she felt loved.





One day, Grace spoke to Munnamma. "Amma, I want to be a doctor."

Munnamma shed a tear of joy. "You should study and make us all proud," she said. It was not often that Thirunangais could study.





Grace had always wanted to be a doctor. But, she had never finished school. So, she decided to get a diploma in computer science engineering. She knew she had to study harder than everybody else. For one, she had never used a computer before.



Also, by now, Grace knew she wasn't just a transgender woman. She was also a Dalit woman — someone from a historically oppressed caste.



Society still saw her as Dalit and transgender — not as somebody who could study and make a life for herself. She had to prove them wrong.

After she graduated, Grace got a job making software for computers. But she wanted to study some more. She wanted to pursue electrical and electronic engineering.

When she went to fill out the application form, there were only two boxes.

GENDER: ☐ MALE  
☐ FEMALE

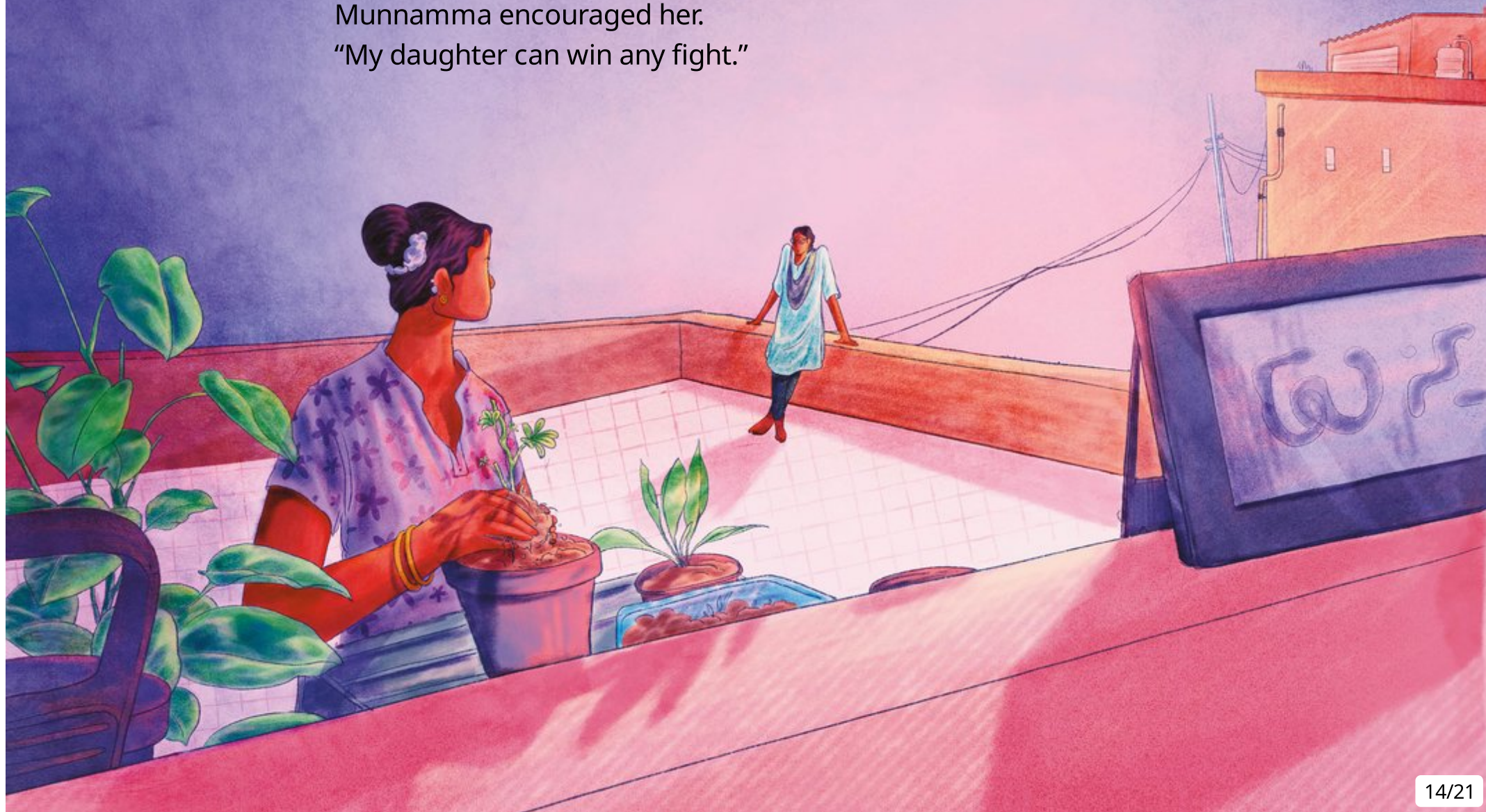


*What about us Thirunangais?*  
She applied nonetheless.



But her application was denied.  
Thirunangais could not study engineering, it seemed.  
“Hmmp!” It was time for a fight.

Munnamma encouraged her.  
“My daughter can win any fight.”

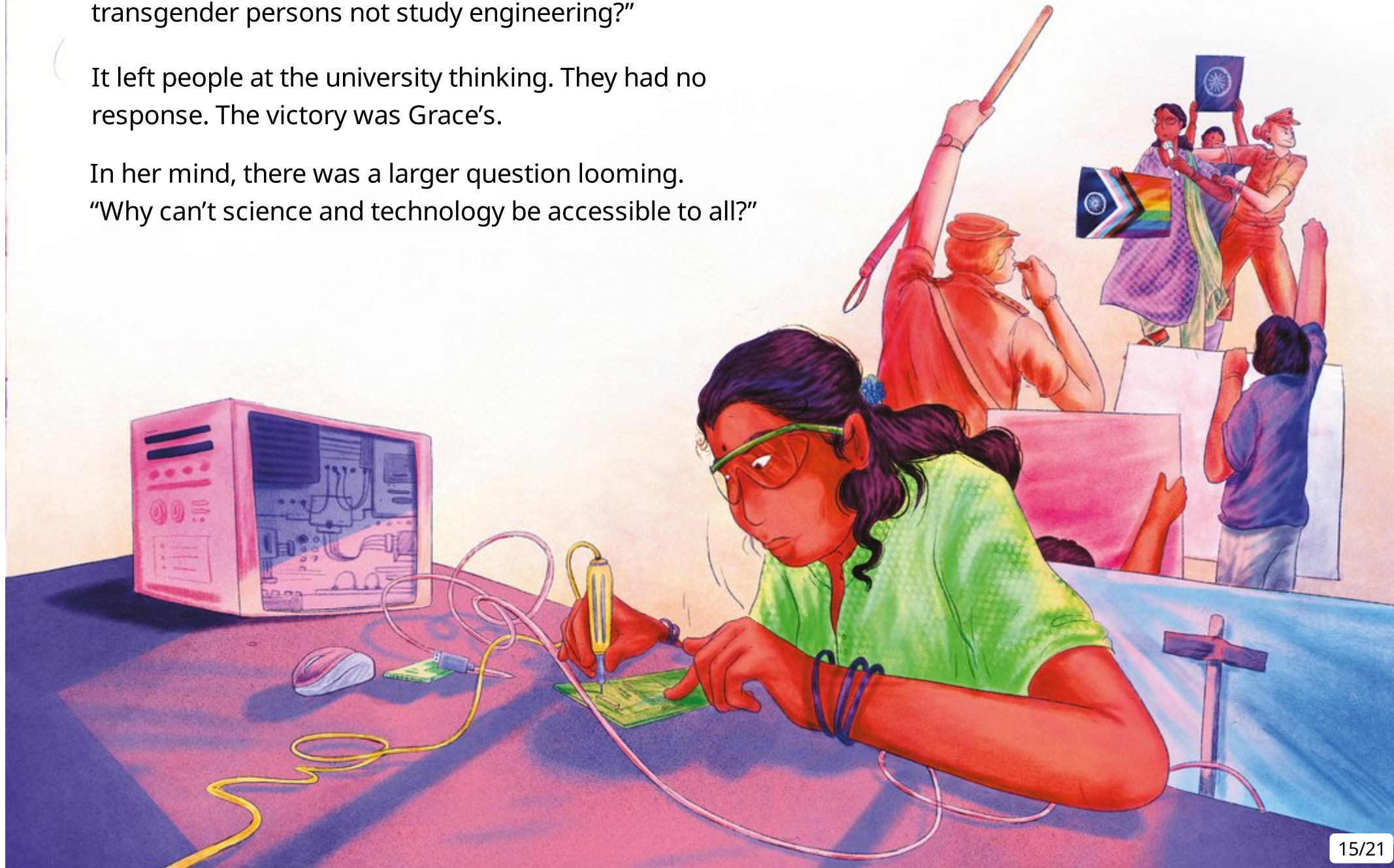




With help from a lawyer named Sanjeev Kumar, Grace asked the university one simple question. "Why can transgender persons not study engineering?"

It left people at the university thinking. They had no response. The victory was Grace's.

In her mind, there was a larger question looming. "Why can't science and technology be accessible to all?"





While Grace was fighting her own battle, she had adopted Tharika, a young transgender woman. Grace was committed to passing on the love and encouragement she had received from Munnamma.

When her daughter went to sleep, she could dream of a beautiful future now. Tharika dreamt of being a doctor, just as Grace once had.





It was Tharika's turn to apply to university. The application form still had only two boxes: Male and Female.

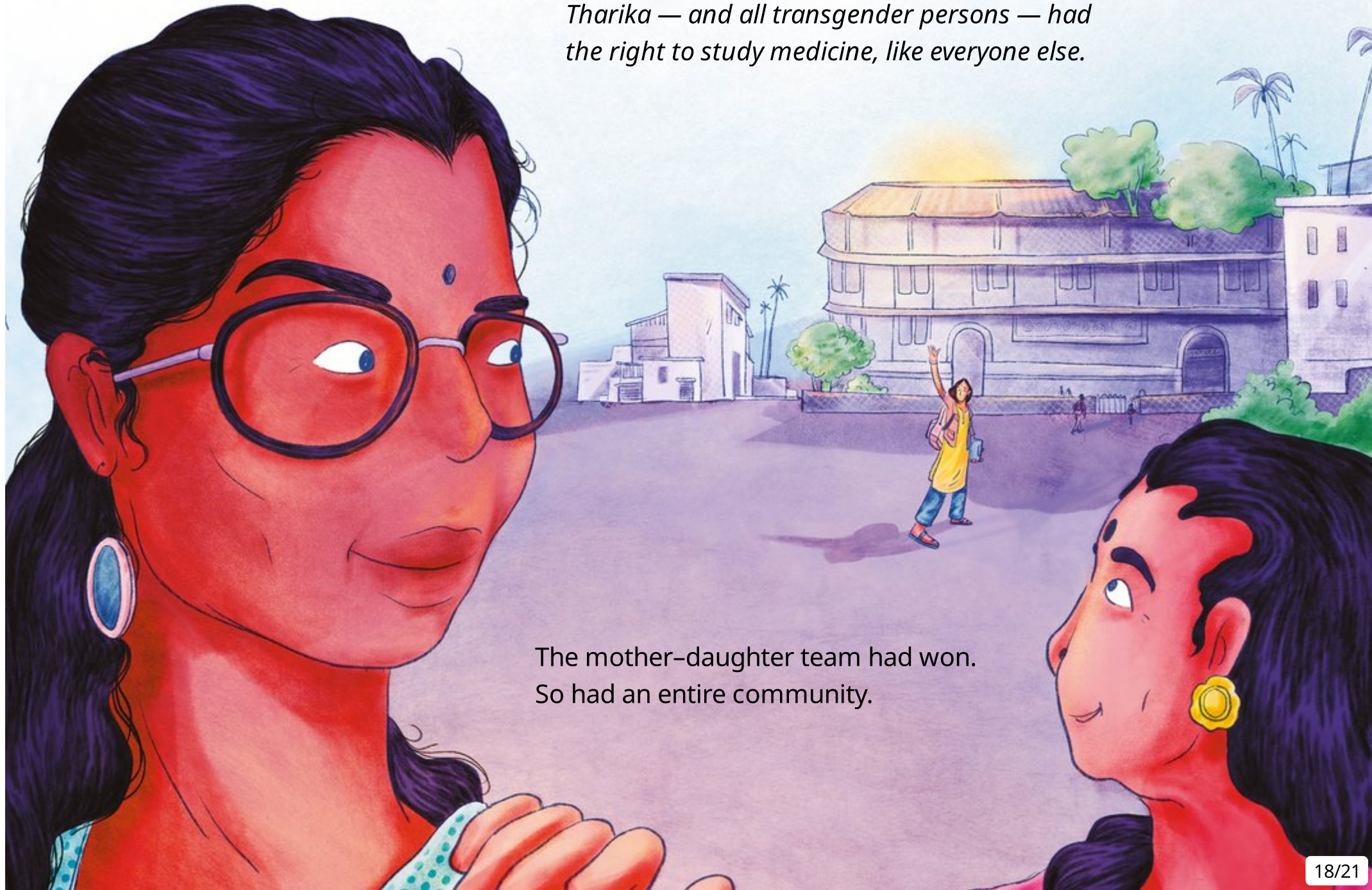
Grace decided she wouldn't fight just for Tharika. This time, she would fight so that all transgender persons could pursue whatever education they choose, without having to hide their identity.



Tharika and Grace filed a case in the Madras High Court.



The High Court judgement was clear.  
*Tharika — and all transgender persons — had  
the right to study medicine, like everyone else.*



The mother-daughter team had won.  
So had an entire community.



Today Grace continues to fight for the rights of transgender persons and persons from marginalised caste backgrounds to science education and employment.



"Gone are the times when science was done by upper-caste men alone," she says.



As Grace confronts every challenge that society  
throws at her, Munnamma's voice rings in her head.  
*My daughter can win any fight!*





## Meet Grace Banu

Grace Banu is an electronics and electrical engineer, and an anti-caste and transgender-rights activist. She was born in 1989 in Pudurpandiyapuram, a village near Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu. Grace has been recognised for her work in making science and technology education accessible to people from marginalised backgrounds.

The judiciary has the power to ensure justice for communities who historically have been deprived of equitable access to education and employment.

Grace has decided to make the best use of the judiciary to win the rights of transgender persons and people from marginalised-caste backgrounds. She also trains them for entrance examinations for science institutions and universities.

Science and technology education must be accessible to all.





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# Grace: One engineer's fight to make science education accessible for all

(English)

Grace had many questions. Why did she have to sit outside her classroom? Why did she have to wear pants instead of a dress? Why could transgender persons not study engineering? She wondered why science and technology education was not accepting of differences in people. And she decided to find answers in the courtroom. This is the story of Grace Banu, who is working towards making science and technology education more accessible for all.

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