

**Rina Singh** is an award-winning children's book author and spoken word coach. She has an MFA in creative writing and has written many critically acclaimed books for children. As a writer, she is drawn to real life stories about social justice and the environment. Her books have been translated into multiple languages and have received many starred reviews. Her book "Grandmother School" won the Christie Harris Children's Literature Prize, and "111 Trees" was featured in "The New York Times". A lover of poetry, photography, beautiful books, trees, and monks, she lives with her husband and Japanese koi in a blue house in Toronto.

**Ishita Jain** is an illustrator from Delhi, India, though she is now based in New York. She is an alumna of the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, India, and the MFA Illustration as Visual Essay Program at the School of Visual Arts, New York. Ishita loves to draw on location and enjoys documenting the people, places, and stories that surround her. Her work is inspired by day-to-day moments and the wonder that comes from being around nature. Her work can be seen at [www.ishitajain.in](http://www.ishitajain.in) and Instagram @ishitajain24.

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Let there be trees!

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The Forest Keeper

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# The Forest Keeper

The true story of Jadav Payeng

by Rina Singh  
illustrated by Ishita Jain

**North  
South**

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When a boy in northeast India named Jadav discovers that his mighty river has swept away all the plants and left hundreds of river snakes dead, he rushes to the island elders and forest department begging them to plant trees to hold the earth. It's not possible, they say. Trees don't grow on sandbars. Go plant them yourself!

With just a bag of bamboo seedlings, a stick, and unwavering determination, Jadav sets off on an impossible task—spanning time and monsoons. Could it be that Jadav's singular vision would open possibilities for people and animals beyond expectations?

This true story of one young man's mission to grow a forest is both timely and inspiring. Award-winning author Rina Singh and debut illustrator Ishita Jain have created a gem—lyrical words and exquisite illustrations capturing the spirit of Jadav's profound achievements.

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In the northeast of India flows a river so mighty that people who live on its many islands call it a moving ocean. During the monsoon season, the glaciers and the rains feed it more water than it can hold, and the river goes wild. It chews off big chunks of its own islands, strips all vegetation from the remaining land, and sweeps away the soil, destroying property and sometimes lives of people and animals. And when the waters recede, the river renews the earth with its rich silt deposits. The river is both a curse and a blessing.

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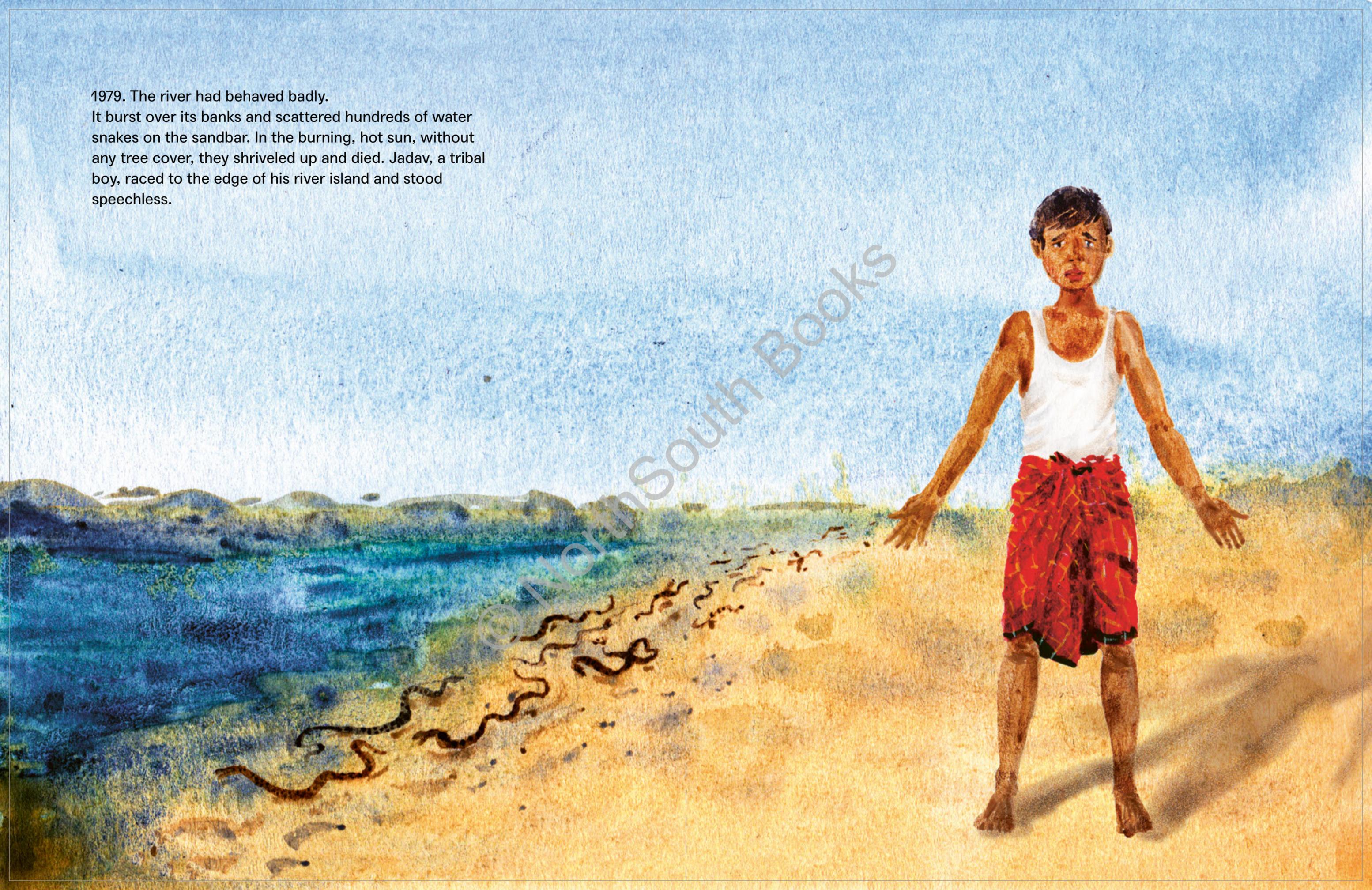
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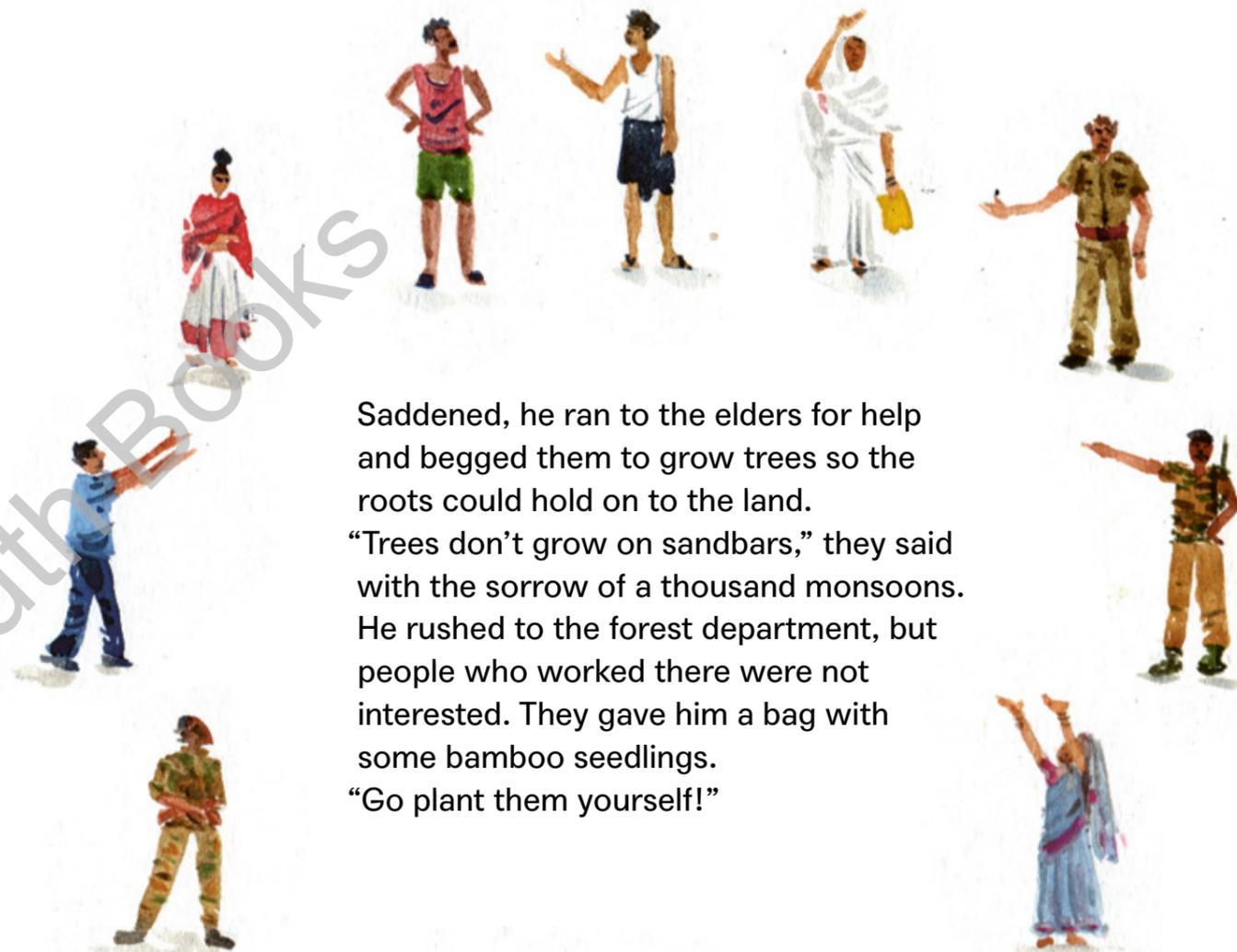
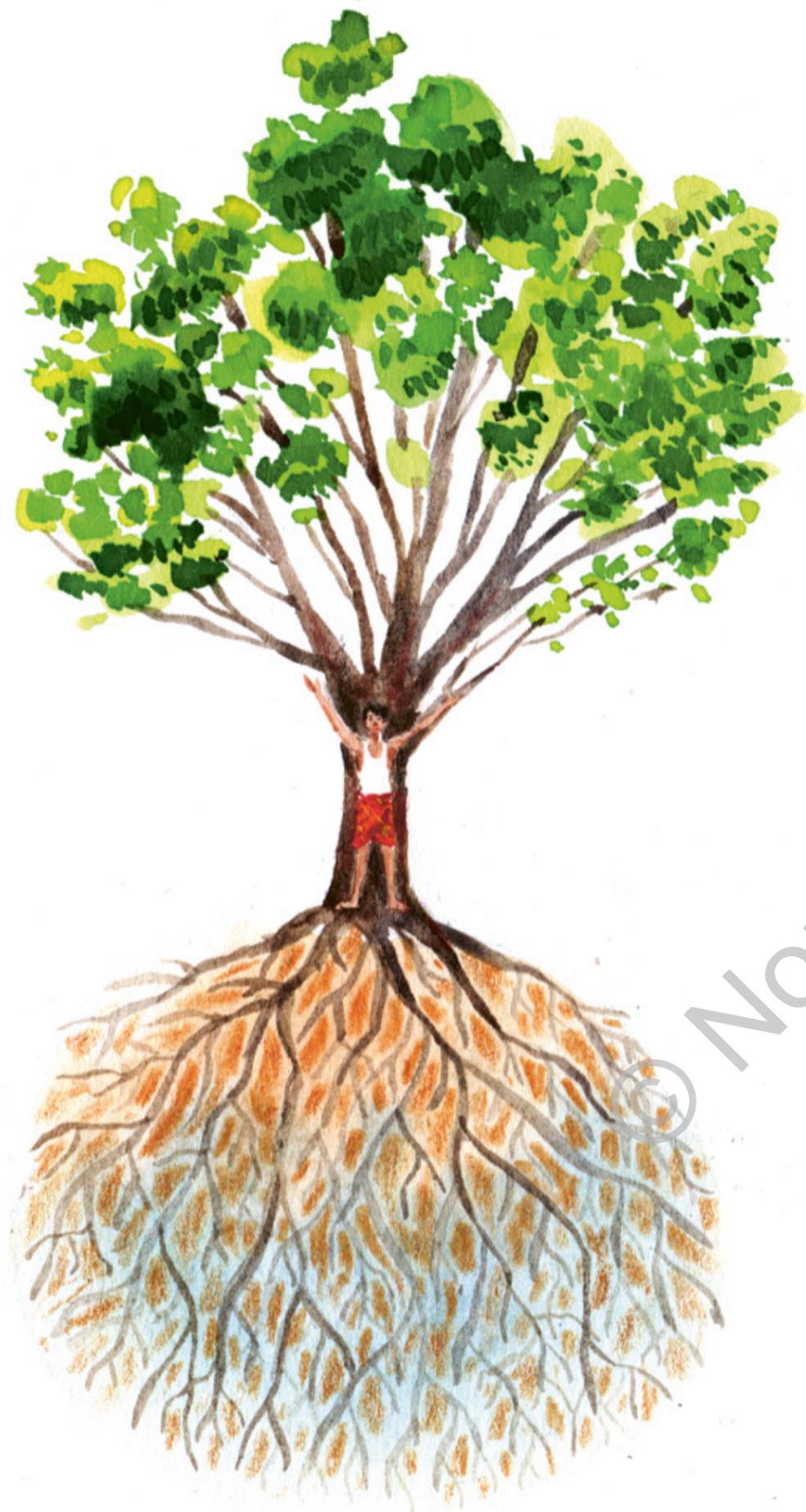
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illustrated by Ishita Jain



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1979. The river had behaved badly.  
It burst over its banks and scattered hundreds of water  
snakes on the sandbar. In the burning, hot sun, without  
any tree cover, they shriveled up and died. Jadav, a tribal  
boy, raced to the edge of his river island and stood  
speechless.





Saddened, he ran to the elders for help and begged them to grow trees so the roots could hold on to the land. "Trees don't grow on sandbars," they said with the sorrow of a thousand monsoons. He rushed to the forest department, but people who worked there were not interested. They gave him a bag with some bamboo seedlings. "Go plant them yourself!"





Jadav hugged the bag and traveled to the river's many little islands and chose an abandoned one to grow the seedlings. He was sixteen years old when he planted his first bamboo.

Every day he took the bamboo seedlings, a stick, and a bucket and rode his bike to the river.



Then he took a boat to cross the river to reach the island.



Thud! Thud! Thud!

All day long he dug holes in the sandy soil and planted the seedlings. His hands bruised and his shoulders ached, but he dug, and he planted. He made hundreds of trips to the river to bring water to tend the growing seedlings. It wasn't easy. In fact, it was an impossible task. But he was not one to give up.



Jadav thought of another way to water them. He built a bamboo platform above each sapling. He placed on it an earthen pot pierced with tiny holes and filled it with water. The drip from the holes watered the saplings slowly. This gave him time to plant more.



Day after day. Month after month. Year after year. In time the bamboo shoots grew tall and turned into a huge thicket.



Jadav began to plant trees of many species.



arjun



gulmohur



tamarind



banana



neem



cottonwood



star fruit

Monsoons came and went.  
The wind and the river helped disperse seeds to other parts of the island.  
And a forest was born.





The forest came alive the day  
the birds came.  
Pelicans and thrushes.  
Woodpeckers and peacocks.  
Eagles and vultures.

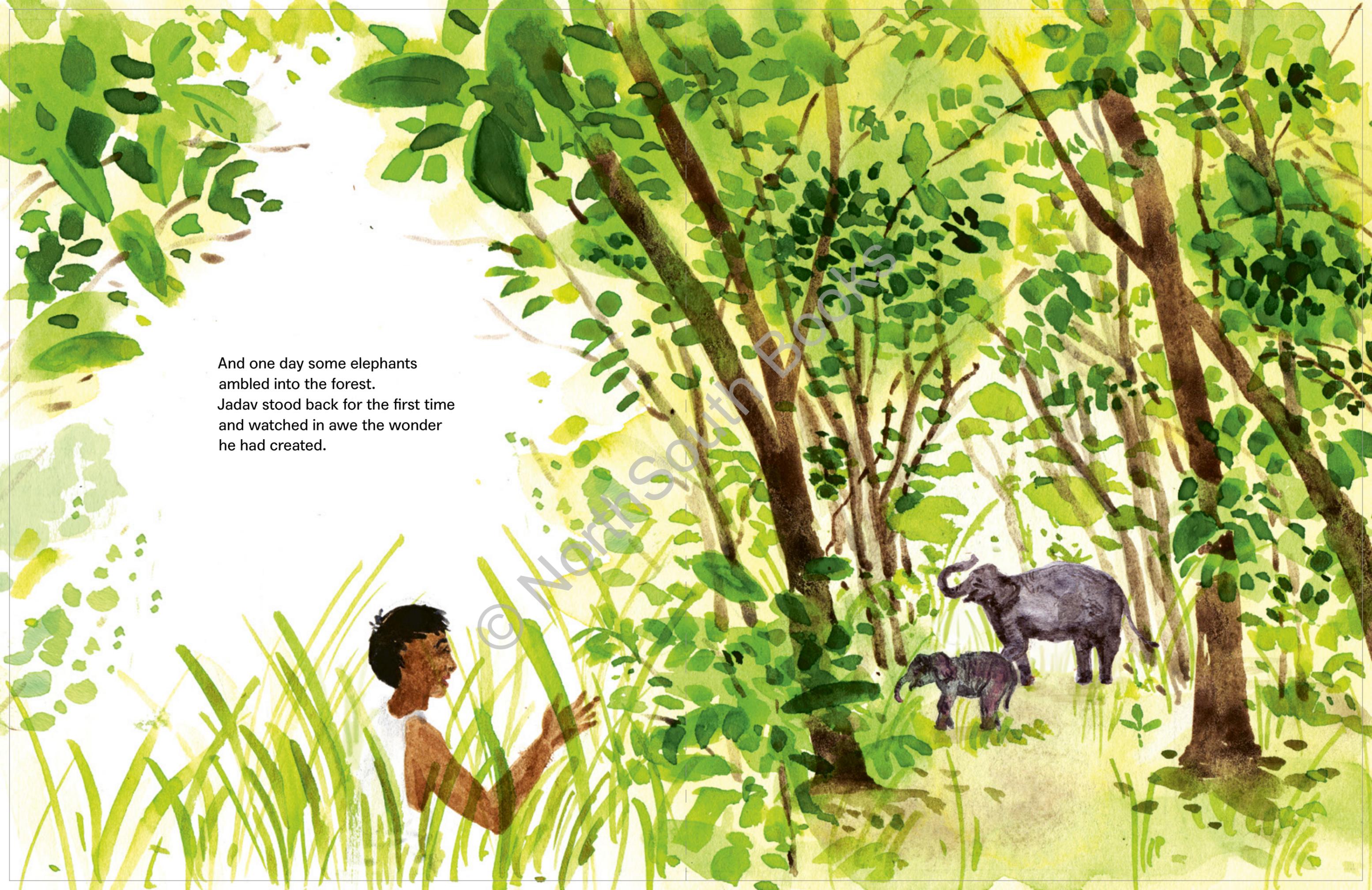
Then the animals crossed the river and wandered in,  
looking for a home.



Wild boar and deer.  
Rabbits and foxes.  
Rhinos and tigers.



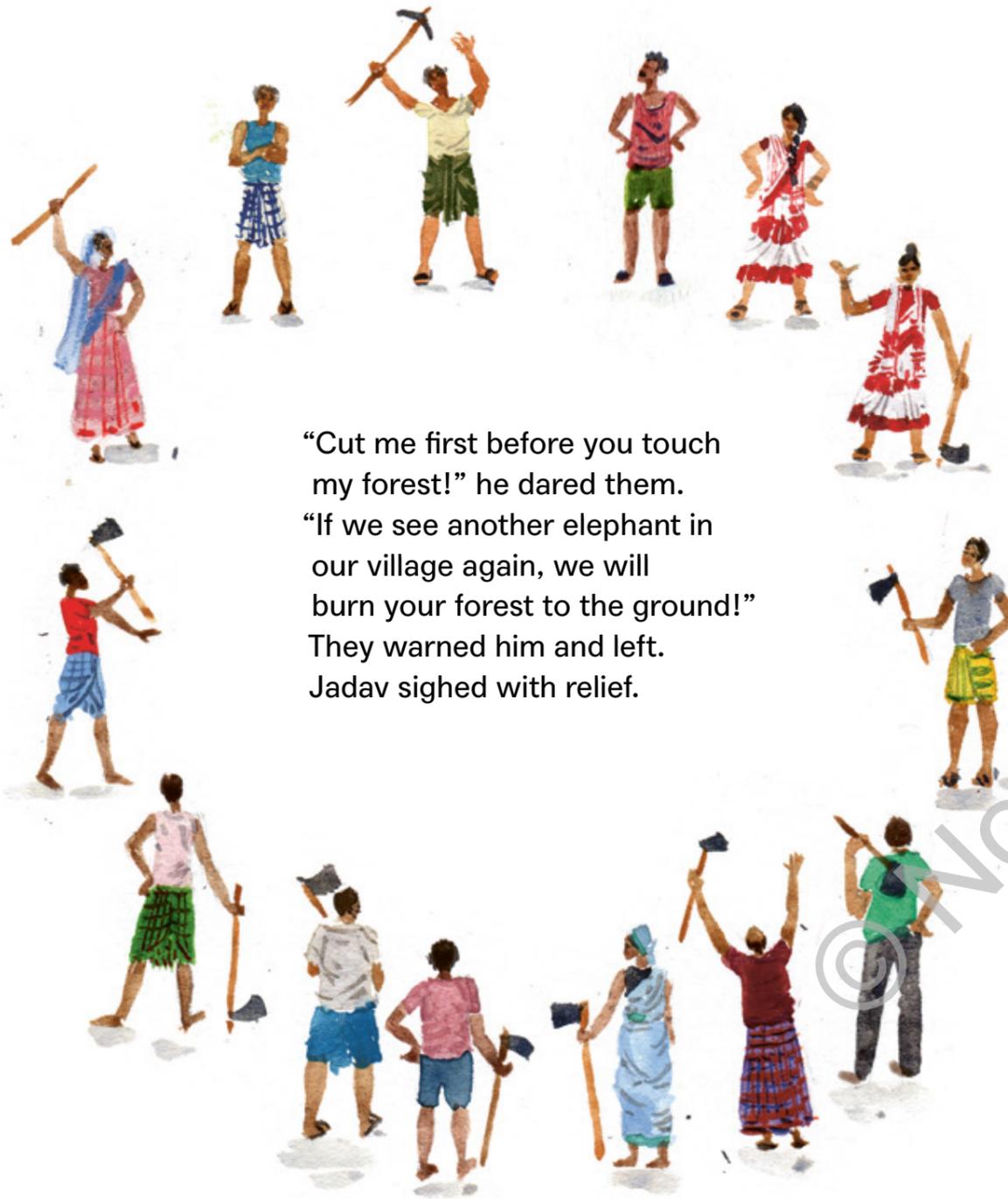
And one day some elephants  
ambled into the forest.  
Jadav stood back for the first time  
and watched in awe the wonder  
he had created.



But one night some hungry elephants, desperate for food, strayed from his forest into a neighboring village and smashed into huts. The villagers ran and screamed.



The next day the villagers came armed with axes, threatening to cut down the forest.



“Cut me first before you touch my forest!” he dared them.  
“If we see another elephant in our village again, we will burn your forest to the ground!”  
They warned him and left.  
Jadav sighed with relief.

When the elephants migrated, he wondered and worried if they would return to his forest again.



To his pride and joy, they did.  
Every year.

He made sure his forest was filled  
with fruit trees and enough grass  
so the elephants wouldn't wander  
off into villages, looking for food.  
Looking for trouble.

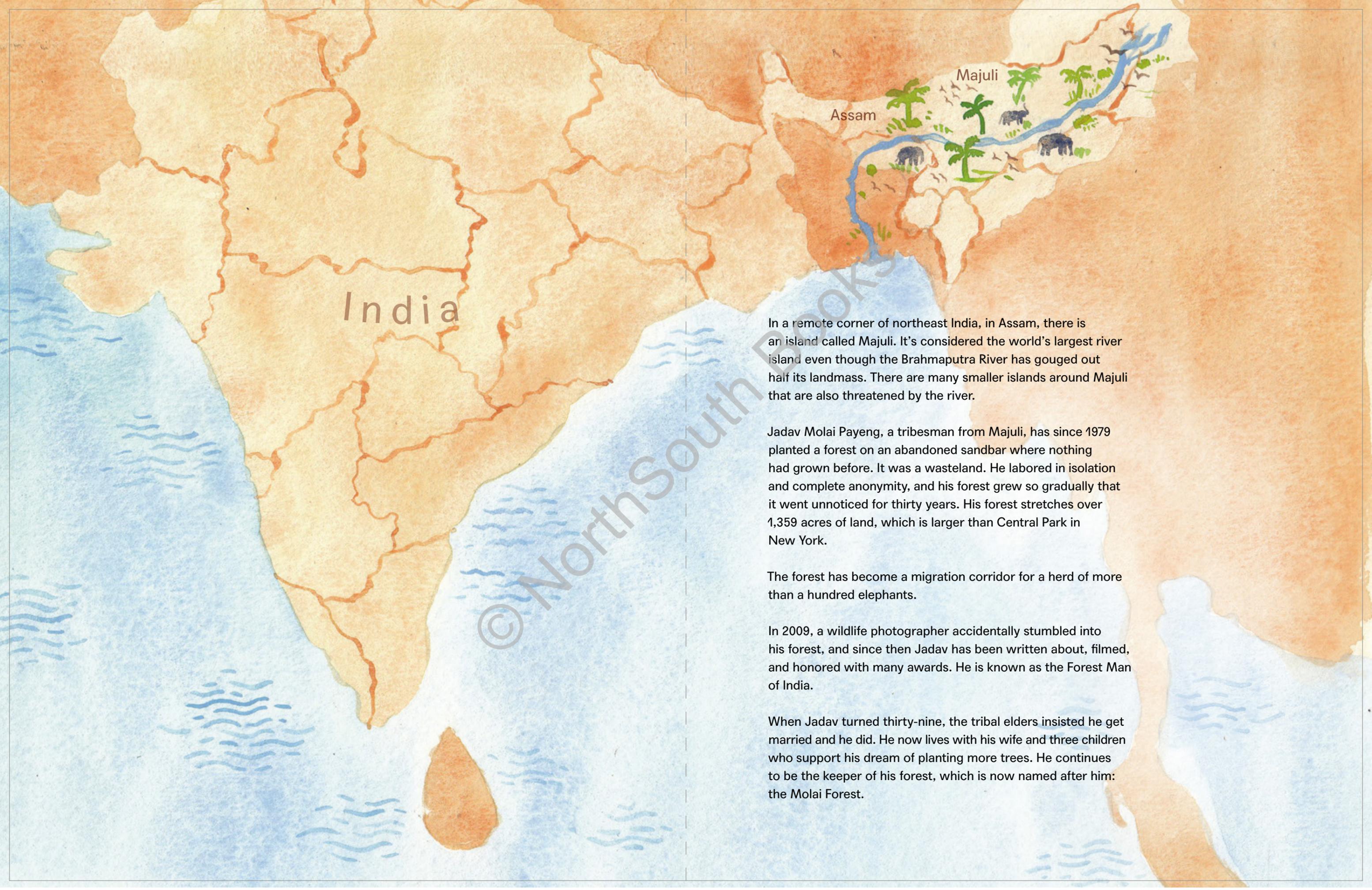




Thirty years passed.  
Jadav and the world forgot about  
each other. The river watched  
the tribal boy become a forest man.  
Whenever he stood in his forest  
and looked, he saw creatures creeping,  
crawling, jumping, and flying.  
He listened to the humming of insects,  
the songs of birds, and the distant  
roar of tigers.  
From the floor to the tops of the tallest  
trees, Jadav's forest buzzed with life.  
It still does.

The river floods from time to time, but Jadav's trees stand tall and guard the island.





India

In a remote corner of northeast India, in Assam, there is an island called Majuli. It's considered the world's largest river island even though the Brahmaputra River has gouged out half its landmass. There are many smaller islands around Majuli that are also threatened by the river.

Jadav Molai Payeng, a tribesman from Majuli, has since 1979 planted a forest on an abandoned sandbar where nothing had grown before. It was a wasteland. He labored in isolation and complete anonymity, and his forest grew so gradually that it went unnoticed for thirty years. His forest stretches over 1,359 acres of land, which is larger than Central Park in New York.

The forest has become a migration corridor for a herd of more than a hundred elephants.

In 2009, a wildlife photographer accidentally stumbled into his forest, and since then Jadav has been written about, filmed, and honored with many awards. He is known as the Forest Man of India.

When Jadav turned thirty-nine, the tribal elders insisted he get married and he did. He now lives with his wife and three children who support his dream of planting more trees. He continues to be the keeper of his forest, which is now named after him: the Molai Forest.



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