



# UNSTOPPABLE

Stories of hearing impaired women and their allies- breaking down barriers and thriving

# UNSTOPPABLE

Stories of hope from hearing-impaired women and their allies.



# Introduction


In 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic triggered governments across the world to instate lockdowns, the lives of children and their families were changed forever.

Young women, especially young hearing-impaired women faced nearly insurmountable obstacles to accessing education. Specialized therapies became a privilege many were denied.

VAANI, Deaf Children's Foundation sprung into action with online classes, teacher and parent training sessions, and covid relief support for families that required it.

Many families were forced to make difficult choices- including whether or not to continue the education of their hearing-impaired daughters.

This book tells the stories of women who utilized every opportunity available to them in order to excel. It is intended to inspire parents, teachers, and hearing-impaired girls to dream big dreams. It is our hope that by harnessing the opportunities that an education provides, our girls can have the lives they envision for themselves.



Created by VAANI, Deaf Children's  
Foundation for our incredible  
parents, teachers, partners,  
children and the world.

# Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible if not for the brave women who agreed to share their life stories with us.

Thank you, Anitha, Payal, Archana. T., Sneha, Archana. G., Pranita, Geetashree, Ashwini, Suma, and Nitya. Our conversations inspired me and I know that they will continue to inspire countless women and girls in the future.

I would also like to thank our partner OnMobile for allowing us full freedom to realize our creative ambitions. It is only with patrons like you that we can bring such stories to the forefront.

Thank you to Jayashree Ramesh for kindly agreeing to write our Foreword and for your continued guidance.

Thank you to our Founder Brinda Crishna, our Chairperson T. V. Ramaswamy, and our board. You laid the foundations for VAANI to blossom and grow.

Nothing would have been possible without our VAANI team, and our immensely committed long-term consultants for breathing life into these stories.

Thank you Dipti Ramesh for finding the words for what we need to say and to Kodhai Narayanan for illustrating these words with color. Thanks to Zak for printing our stories so we can hold them in our hands to share together.

Lastly, thank you to each and every one of you for reading these words today. There is no one more important to us than you.

*Sumedha Joglekar*  
*Director*  
*VAANI Deaf Children's Foundation*

# Table of Contents

4 .....	Foreward
6 .....	Preface
9 .....	Inspiration
11 .....	Story #1 Anitha
19 .....	Story #2 Payal
26 .....	Story #3 Archana Timmaraju
32 .....	Story #4 Sneha Rajan Nagure
41 .....	Story #5 Archana Gokhale
47 .....	Story #6 Pranita
55 .....	Story #7 Geetashree
62 .....	Story #8 Ashwini
71 .....	Story #9 Suma
78 .....	Story #10 Nitya

One child, one teacher, one book,  
and one pen can change the world.  
– *Malala Yousafzai*

# Foreword

Never before in our history has there been a greater need for inclusivity. As the world barrels forward into the age of technology- online hybrid workplaces and gig employment- our institutions need to take a moment to step back and reflect on the importance of making safe spaces for people with disabilities.

The changing tides also create opportunity for our special children. For example, many people with hearing impairment are now better able to work with teams remotely thanks to automated subtitles on Google Meets. Similarly, adults with autism spectrum disorder are able to make inroads working in data entry teams, making use of their immense attention to detail. When given opportunities and supportive structures, people with disabilities can thrive.

The World Health Organization states that around 15 percent of the world's population, or an estimated 1 billion people, live with some form of disability. They are the world's largest minority. In India, the disabled population stands at 2.68 crore, which is approximately 2 percent of the population, according to the National Health Portal of India.

While studies show that half of the disabled population in India is employable, only 34 lakh have been employed across sectors. A UNESCO study notes that 90 percent of children with



with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school. It is here that our journey of change begins. Inclusive school systems are the future. Our schools must grow to be able to support children and their learning needs of all kinds. Studying together can greatly benefit all children by enhancing creativity, and problem-solving skills and creating a more empathetic generation.

Stories of role models can be great catalysts in our drive to bring about meaningful and systemic change. It is only when we- parents, teachers, and special educators- all truly believe in the potential of our special children that we can guide them to realize it. We must not lose hope.

I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate VAANI Deaf Children's Foundation for capturing so beautifully the stories of everyday women. As the familiar saying goes "Here's to strong women. May we know them, may we raise them. May we be them."

*Jayashree Ramesh  
Director ASHA (Academy for Severe Handicaps and Autism)  
Former member of the National Trust Board*

# Preface

Stories work as agents of change, as they have the ability to challenge and broaden our knowledge and understanding of people, and the world around us.

VAANI, Deaf Children's Foundation, vision is 'to eliminate the most fundamental and overlooked problem to do with childhood deafness - the inability of the child to communicate with his or her own parents. We believe that every deaf child is entitled to total and complete access to communication, education, protection and equality in all spheres, and the information and knowledge to reach his or her full potential as an individual and a member of society with respect and dignity. It is our commitment to create an empathetic and enthusiastic environment for every deaf child, and to empower their families to nurture it'. To keep and fulfil this VAANI has developed and shared need based and accurate information in a variety of unique ways.

Sharing positive life stories of young deaf women is yet another way.

In 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic triggered governments across the world to instate lockdowns, our lives changed forever. We all faced often insurmountable challenges. People with disabilities faced these to a greater degree.

For the population we serve, we found that young deaf women carried the heaviest burden in all aspects of life, but especially in trying to gain access to education. Specialized teaching and therapy became a privilege many were denied. Families were forced to make difficult choices - including whether or not to continue the education of their deaf daughters.

Services for deaf people started in the beginning of the last century and have thus been in India over for over 100 years. Christian missionaries brought special education into India, and first school was started in Kolkata in 1883, followed shortly after in Mumbai in 1884. These special schools were taken over by local NGOs and by 1947 undivided India had 32 schools for the blind, 30 for the deaf and 3 for children with learning disabilities.

Services continued to grow and soon small schools began to appear in many of the bigger towns and cities. The impetus of these changes can be traced in part to two significant events:

1. The active involvement of the Government of India in the field of disability and the setting up of the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped (AYJNIHH) in 1983.
2. The impact of awareness focusing on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities from 1981, the year of the disabled.

The 2011 Indian census cites roughly 1.3 million people with "hearing impairment." Contrast that to numbers from India's National Association of the Deaf, which estimates that 18 million people — roughly 1 percent of the Indian population — are deaf.

Adults who are deaf were 4.6 times more likely to report difficulty accessing COVID-19 information than adults who are hearing. Specifically, the participants who are deaf described COVID-19 information as not being available in their language (36.6%), being scary (76.9%), and hard to understand (26%).

We cannot ignore the cultural context of our country, where the girl child is still often seen as inferior and a hindrance, and much more so deaf girl children and women. There is so much still to be done and we believe that by sharing the lives and stories of these amazing women, we will be able to further their message of deserving equality.

*Brinda Crishna*  
*Founder*  
*VAANI Deaf Children's Foundation*

# INSPIRATION

Inspiration is a beautiful word that generates soaring spirits, positive energy, and a feeling of empowerment.

What Inspires us, ...mere desires? Everyone desires the glory of wealth and power. However, the path to achievement is never smooth and easy. This is where the inspiration gives us strength to carry on undeterred, the inspiration is derived from the success of those who overcame challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a horrific challenge for all mankind. Apart from the loss of millions of lives and associated health service problems, it brought to a standstill social life — including production, commerce, employment, and more importantly 'EDUCATION'. This is where the children solely bore the burden. A long pause in educational life is bound to affect a child's personality development. More so for a differently abled girl child, because historically a girls' education always has been on a back seat and facilities for differently abled children are not adequately provided all over.

The COVID-19 pandemic derailed VAANI programs, like everything else. VAANI works with parents and families, mainly focusing on those residing in sparsely distributed rural and tribal locations.

We were not able to meet them personally. The personal touch is so vitally important. VAANI developed online educational techniques suitable for teachers and parents of hearing-impaired children. The vehicle to reach them was our #SheCan campaign which connected us to those numerous mothers who were striving to get their daughters back to school, learning to use a technology that they have never used before by breaking all barriers, and our teachers who were ready to spend odd hours taking online sessions. The sheer resolve of Parents not to give up is what inspired us.

Through the interviews in the #SheCan campaign, we met many inspiring impactful women who created a lasting impression and became our friends. This is our book "UNSTOPPABLE" — a selection from 'Stories of hearing impaired women and their allies breaking down barriers and thriving ahead in life. Through this book, we have the opportunity to tell human stories which are based on real-life experiences, challenges, tears, and laughter.

We believe that this book would be an inspirational start for all women and girls who are faced with barriers, but have a positive attitude to break them and achieve their dreams, are ready to ask for support, build a support system around them, and realize that it's the community which could lead to a desired social change.

*Sumedha Joglekar*  
*Director*  
*VAANI Deaf Children's Foundation*

STORY #1

ANITHA





Anitha was born and raised in Mysore. Though she was born with good hearing, by the time she was ten months old she was diagnosed with severe hearing loss. Doctors believed that her hearing loss was caused by a viral fever or the medications prescribed to treat it.

Anitha and her family consider themselves lucky because they lived in a city with sufficient amenities to help. In Mysore, where they lived, she was able to access the Speech and Hearing Institute.

Speaking with Anitha now- a beautiful young woman with a radiant smile- it's hard to imagine the hardships she has endured. Anitha studied engineering in Mysore, was a lecturer at a Polytechnique and now works as an Executive Engineer stationed at Jog Falls with the Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd.

"I don't know what fear is", she says. "I stay in the jungle with leopards, snakes, and many insects in a house built in the late 60s. I live alone. All parents must teach their children to cultivate an attitude of no fear"

"And no inferiority complex either" pipes in Anitha's mother. She is beaming, full of pride for her daughter. " My husband and I focused on how to make Anitha excel at everything. That became our aim. We focused on making sure she learned at least one language and could become economically independent. Our family encouraged Anitha and supported us because we had a positive attitude."



Anitha's family was a major influence in her life. Aside from her parents, her aunt took a major interest in Anitha's development as a child. Anitha has memories of being a young child and sitting on her aunt's lap. Her aunt would speak and make sounds while holding Anitha's hand to her throat. This was the first time Anitha became aware of resonance. She slowly worked to make the same type of resonance with her voice.

“Communication has been a problem in many instances. For example in school when the teacher would turn around to write on the blackboard or face another direction while speaking it made lip reading very difficult. My mother would sit with me, help me with my notes, meet my teachers after school, and was very involved in my education until the 10th standard. More importantly, though, she taught me the art of self-study. I can learn any subject from reading books about it.”

College was a challenging time for Anitha. The lecturers were less accommodating and her mother was not able to join her classes. They were less receptive to using technology to help her hear better and they would often turn away from her making lip reading more difficult. The classroom sizes were larger and there were more students in the class who required the attention of the lecturers. This is where the art of self-study came in handy. Anitha was well equipped by her mother to read books and lecture notes to keep up with the rest of the class on her own.

Anitha took the CET after graduating from college and ranked 716 in the State (Karnataka)

“There was a software boom when I completed Engineering. Many companies were hiring for all branches of engineering, but I was the one to get rejected in the last stage. They used to tell me to my face that they could not hire me because I had a hearing problem. I would come back home and discuss these issues with my mother. She motivated me to be positive. She would say that they were not lucky enough to have me at their company. This gave me a lot of encouragement.

Once I got my job at the Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd. there was no looking back.”

“In Raichur, where I was posted for the first time, my immediate boss was an expert at our job. I had no practical experience and had just completed my Masters. Though I had a lot of theoretical knowledge and self confidence, I also wanted practical experience.

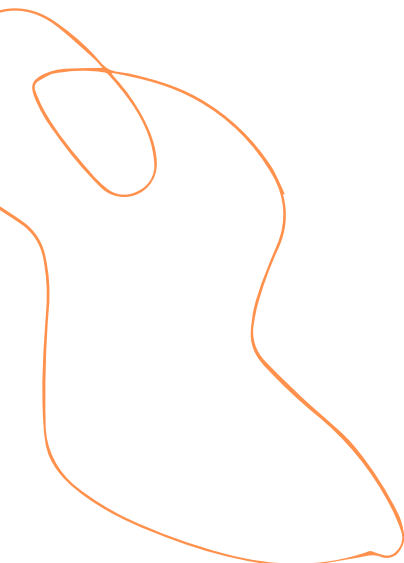
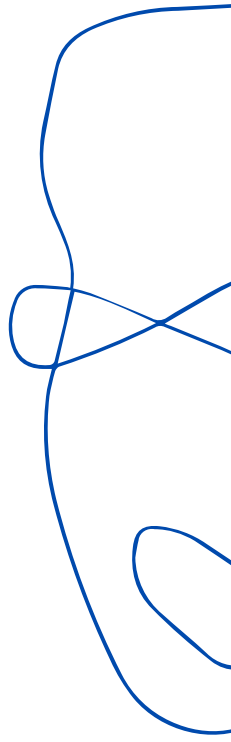
My boss felt that giving me this position was risky. I was required to be on call 24 hours a day. If there was ever a power outage at the thermal power plant I was required to take care of it.

The problem was that I stayed alone with our daughter at the time. My husband hadn't yet received his transfer. I didn't wear my hearing aid while sleeping. My boss was concerned that I would not be able to hear the phone ring in case of an emergency and that even if I did hear it ring, I wouldn't be able to leave my young daughter alone at home in the middle of the night.



He felt that I might be better suited for office work and asked me to request a change of assignment.

It was at this time that a senior colleague advised me to stick to my role. She highlighted that it was a great opportunity to learn and that I shouldn't request a change in my post. If the management felt that I was not suited to my position they would reassign me themselves. She was confident that in some time my boss would recognize my abilities. This advice turned out to be the right move and she became a mentor to me through the rest of my career.



"My boss ignored me for a full year. I made the best use of the time and made friends with the office staff. I read all the available reports. After one year, my boss could not ignore me anymore. He wasn't able to replace me, though he did try. The senior management supported me and he was left with no choice but to take me to the site for me to get practical training.



This is where I was able to prove myself. The work that generally took people seven days to complete, took me just three!

This changed his whole opinion about me and things turned around from there."

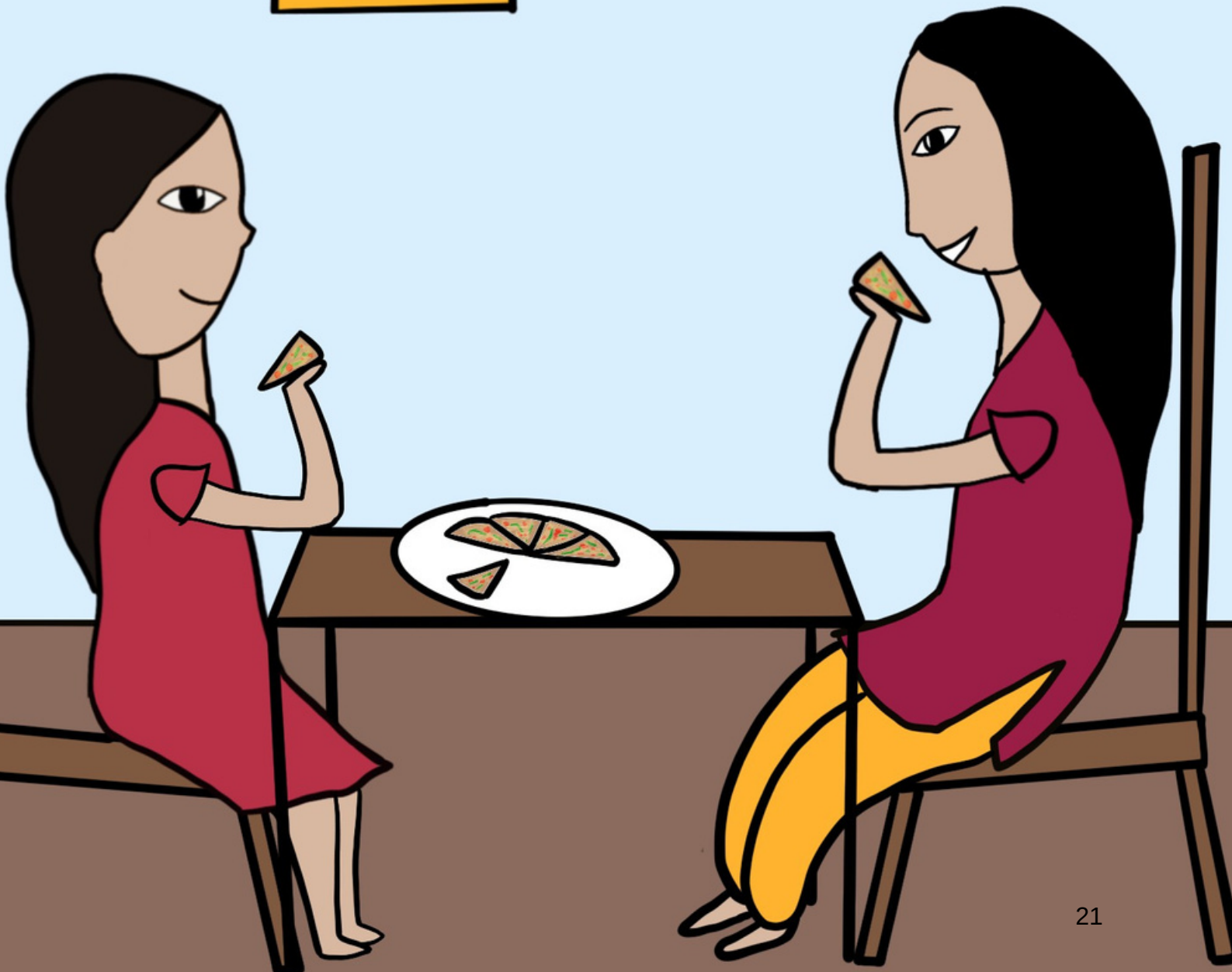
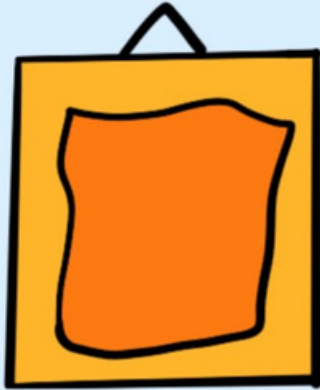
STORY #2

PAYAL





When Payal was a young child her parents didn't know that she was deaf. When they found out that she and her brother were both hearing impaired, they found a hostel for them in Lucknow where they both spent the next few years together. The hostel in Lucknow exclusively taught lip-reading and it wasn't until Payal got married that she learnt sign language to be able to better communicate with others and express herself.

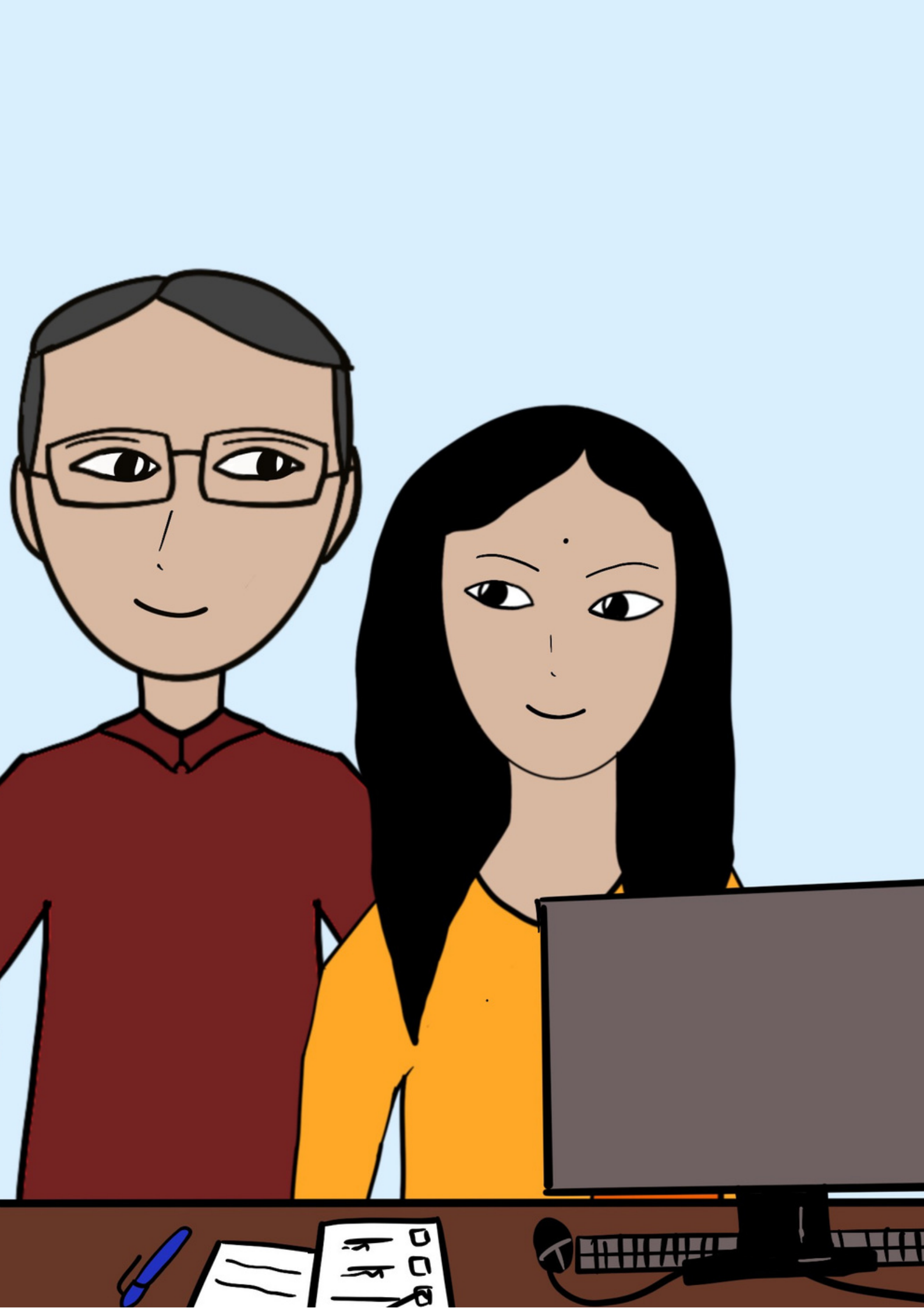


Payal is surrounded by people with hearing impairment. Her nephew and husband are also both deaf and so in their family, it feels normal and safe. Payal and her husband met over sixteen years ago. In the beginning, they were very shy with each other, they didn't try to communicate with each other very much. It took a few days for them to break the ice, just like many other young couples today.

It was easy for Payal to pick up sign language. Her husband was a popular young man with many friends who also spoke sign language. Her exposure grew.

Payal has built a strong support system, the strongest pillar of which is her twelve-year-old daughter, Medha. Her daughter sits beside her during meetings and helps translate for her whenever it's needed. Payal's mom also helps out when Medha is at school.

WhatsApp video calls have been an invaluable tool for Payal and her friends to connect and communicate with each other. Before the WhatsApp video call, Payal and her friends weren't able to keep in touch as much. Sending text messages was tedious and it was difficult to fully express themselves without being able to see each other and connect conveniently.



Payal's husband has been a big driver in her achieving independence. Over the years he has helped her learn about investing in the stock market so that she is able to be economically independent. He was instrumental in teaching her how to choose companies to invest in, over the last fifteen years. They still work on it together every day and bring stability to their family. He also encourages her to spend her free time doing what she loves such as spending time with other ladies in the neighborhood and making various handicraft products.

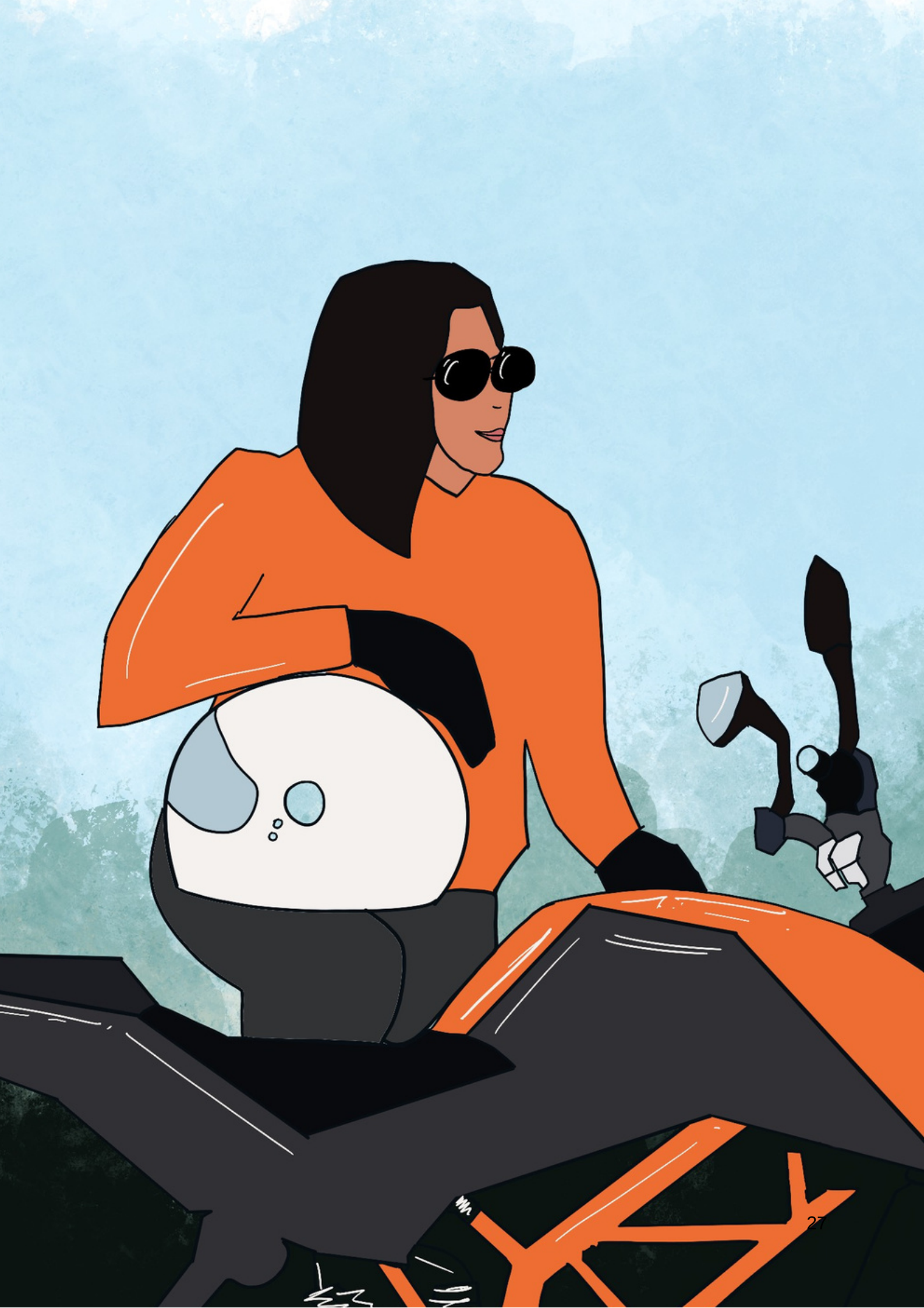
Payal was able to put her natural talent and zeal for learning to good use with program coordination for VAANI. Her husband and she spent over four years working at VAANI. Now Payal has become a small-scale independent entrepreneur. She makes small handicraft products like envelopes, macrame, and diyas for Diwali.

The desperate dearth of role models is apparent. Despite spending ten years at a school for the hearing impaired, she cannot recall a role model that she held dear during that time. Instead, she is now her daughter's role model- pushing her to be kind, empathetic, and patient every day. She's also her daughter's favorite cook making her pizzas and pasta regularly!



STORY #3

ARCHANA  
TIMMARAJU



Archana is a woman with many passions. She is an art teacher at the reputed Mallaya Aditi International School in Bangalore. She loves to spend time with her students. She herself studied art and has a Masters of Visual Arts degree from Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath. It was important to her to also give back to the community and so she founded ArtAble- a space for people with hearing impairment to express themselves through art. They run curated exhibitions and sales to encourage people with hearing impairment to express themselves through art.

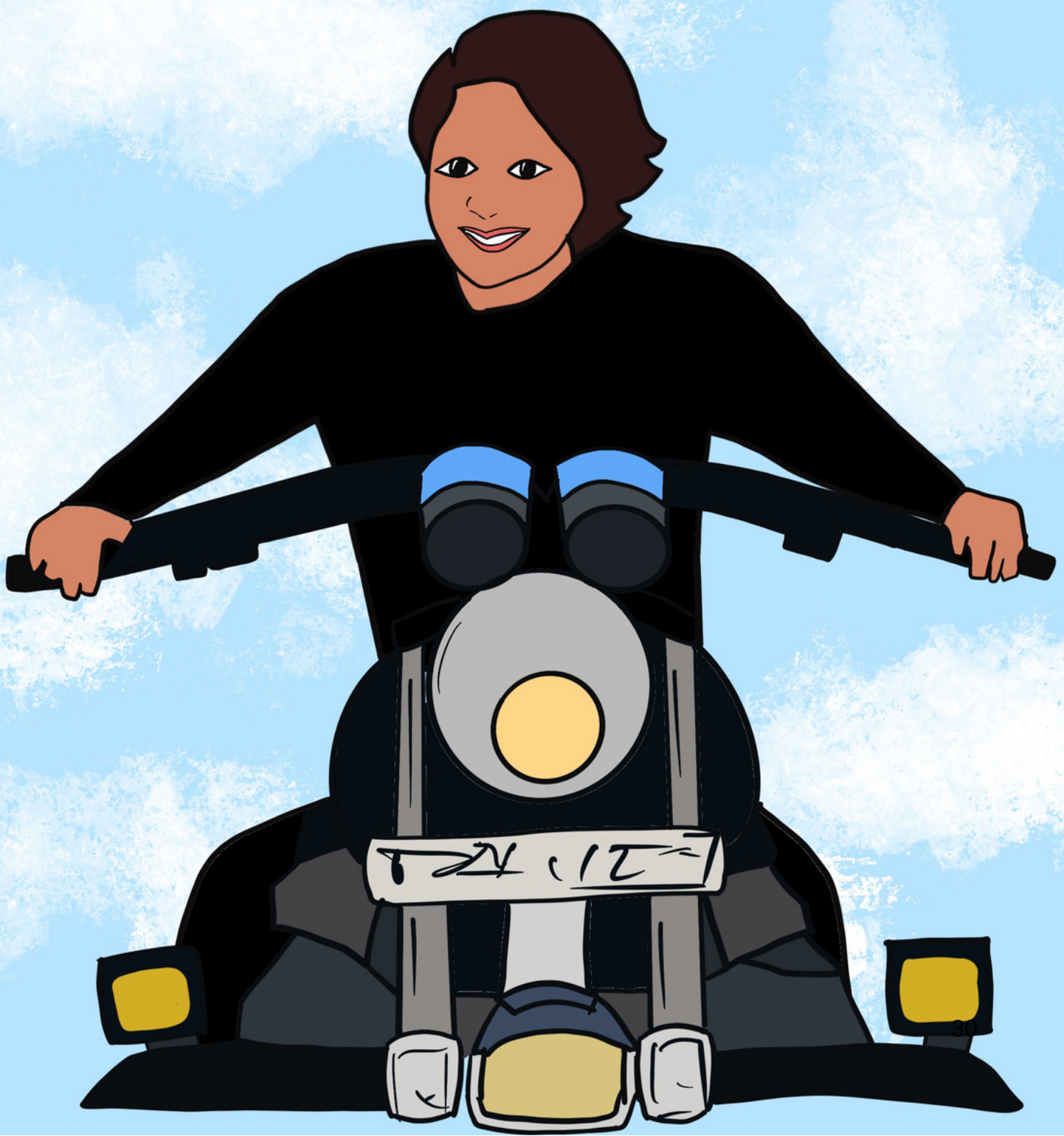




“The Deaf community is very diverse and vibrant,” Archana says. “We count the deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, and deaf people with multiple disabilities (disabilities that are rarely recognized) among our numbers. People have unique and diverse experiences. There are people who are ashamed of sign language because they themselves or their families never thought that being deaf is something one can be proud of. Today I see a change, but by and large, people still look at disability with a different lens. We, the deaf, would prefer to be approached with empathy and not sympathy and we want to be given access to equal opportunities and a life of dignity.”



"I am told that it is a disadvantage to not be able to hear while riding, but I don't know what it is to be able to hear completely, so it doesn't bother me. I may not be able to fully hear the sound of a bike, but I do feel it, and it's amazing! I love to travel, and riding a bike gives me a lot of freedom to do so."



"People sometimes look at me oddly since I am a girl riding a motorbike which is considered a male-dominated passion. Besides this, my disability is met with shock and surprise when people learn about my travel experiences!

Sometimes communication with people, especially when I travel out of my home town Bangalore, is challenging. I am not able to talk well, and others are not able to understand sign language. This is challenging especially when I need to ask for directions or get any general help.

When some people talk, they don't move their mouths too much and it makes it difficult to lip read. I don't understand what they are saying and sometimes I get frustrated. Over time I have learned to just ask them to open their mouth while speaking, then I laugh! Communication with some people is difficult, and it can depend on the language. I only understand English and I need to convince them to speak only English with me. When all else fails, I use Google Translate!

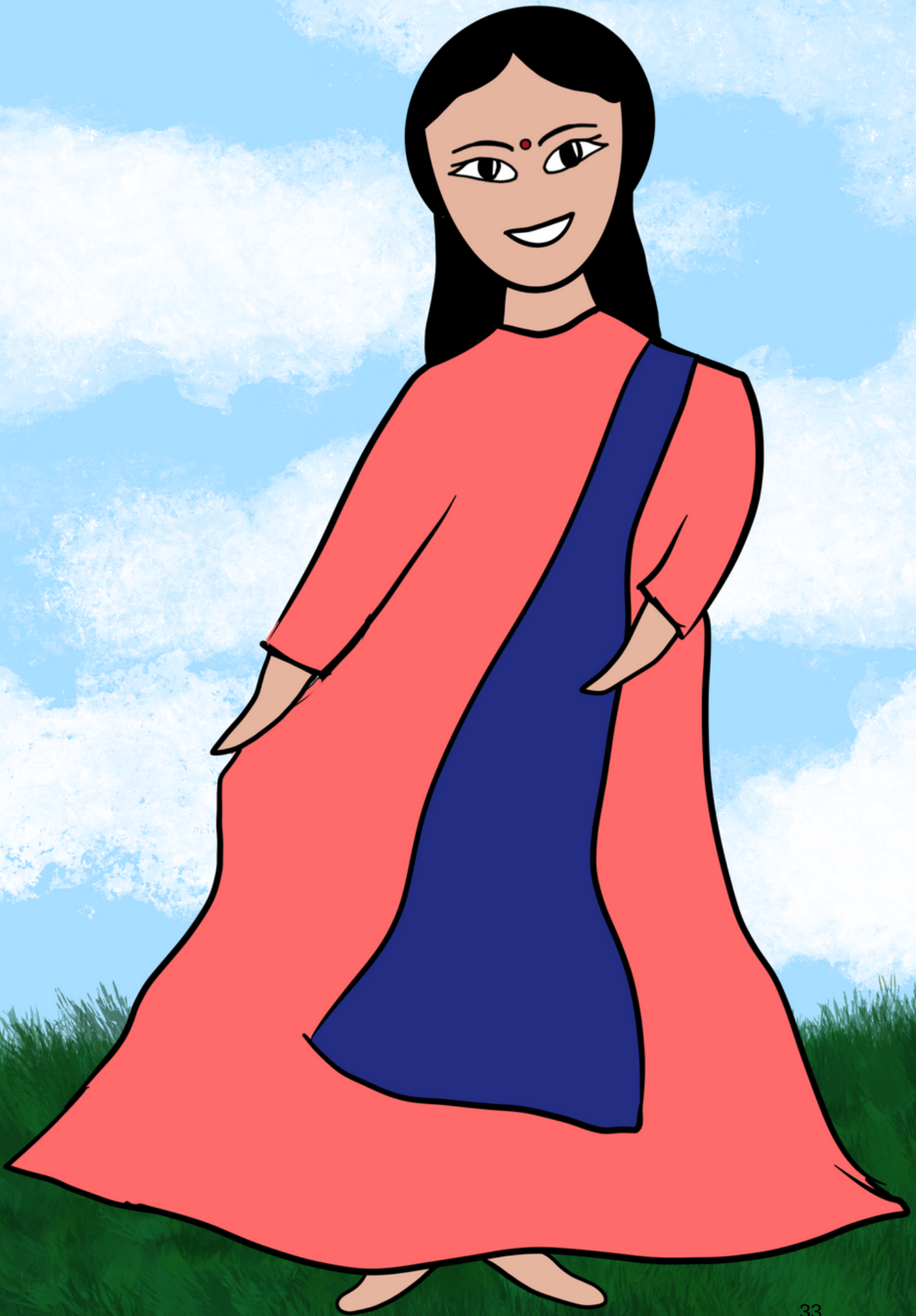
I also consider my own safety when I travel to remote areas. More than my own fear, my family and friends sometimes fear for my safety.

Otherwise, I thoroughly enjoy riding!

I am saddened because at the moment, the government of Karnataka does not give driving and riding licenses to people who are hard of hearing. It is my wish to change this."

STORY #4

SNEHA  
RAJAN  
NAGURE



Sneha Rajan Nagure works with Accenture as a Senior Analyst in Pune. She's been with them for over 9 years. She grew up with her sister, mother, and father. Her father worked at a nationalized bank and is now retired. He first realized that she might be hearing impaired at six months old. He would call out to her, but she showed no signs of knowing. That was the first time that they sought advice from a doctor and were informed that she had a problem.

With this news, her family went back to her native home in Lathur for a few years. This is where she was first enrolled in a school for children with hearing impairment, but by the time she reached the third grade, Sneha was ready for mainstream school. She joined classes with her younger sister Priya. Having her in the same classroom helped Sneha understand her teachers better, make friends, be able to complete their homework, and participate in many extracurricular activities. Sneha loved art, music, and dance but her favorite thing to do at home was to play computer games with her sister. The two of them would spend hours together playing Super Mario, Pac-Man, and all kinds of car racing games.

“My sister taught me how to study. She helped me a lot in school. We are very close, she is barely a year and a half younger than me so we had a lot of fun together at school. I gained a lot of confidence and got various certificates for dance, basketball, drawing, crafts, and others.”



As Sneha grew, she made the choice to study engineering and went on to become an IT Engineer. She studied at the prestigious Cummins Engineering College in Pune. It was a four-year course- and this time she had to navigate it by herself.

Studying in college can be challenging for a person with hearing impairment. Lecturers need to make the effort to speak slowly and clearly, save a designated seat at the front of the class, be sure not to talk with their back turned to class as they write on the board, and be available to clarify doubts at the end of the lecture.

“The most difficult part is when people speak in long sentences. They are difficult to understand. It is much easier when people use short sentences and speak slowly.” Despite the challenges, Sneha made it through with flying colors.

Having completed college, a young Sneha was selected to work at a few Banks. She had taken after her father, after all. In her free time, she also worked with children in a small private school for children with disabilities. She enjoyed being able to give back to her community. Despite doing well and keeping busy, her father had bigger ambitions for Sneha and advised her to look for a role that used her education as an engineer more. He encouraged her to apply to work with Accenture.

One of the reasons that Sneha has been so successful is her avid interest in reading. “Reading is a very important habit. I love to read books. One of my favorite authors is Sudha Murthy. Another of my favorite books is Ek Hota Carver by Veena Gavankar. I also spent some time





reading the biographies of personalities such as Adolf Hitler and Napoleon Bonaparte. I like to read newspapers, magazines and even Facebook.”

Things weren't always smooth sailing for Sneha.

There were many times when being left out of conversations would make her feel lonely. Especially in her younger days at school. “Sometimes I got frustrated that I couldn't understand people or that they would try to tease or bully me, but all along my sister would talk to me and she made me feel comfortable.”

To improve her speech and oral communication, Sneha turns to spirituality and her faith. “One of the things that helped me to improve my speech was reciting the Ram Raksha every day. Practicing “R” sounds helped me a lot to improve my speech and also my confidence in speaking. “

It was this confidence in speaking that helped Sneha find her life partner. “My husband and I met through an arranged marriage. It was fixed by our parents through a matrimony site. He saw my photograph and liked my profile. He liked that I was independent and it turned out that he also lived close by. One day, unknown to me, he visited the bus stop where I would board my bus. I think he liked me then, but later was a little disappointed when he visited my house and heard me speak. I was not deterred. I was confident and I answered all his questions. This put him at ease and he asked me to marry him.”

Since then, Sneha's husband has learned some sign language and also finger spelling. They no longer have trouble communicating, especially face-to-face.



Together, Sneha and her husband now have two sons- they are 5 and 3 years old. “This is a whole new adventure. My children are learning how to communicate with me. Sometimes they call to me when my back is turned but I can’t hear them screaming “Mama, Mama”. They are learning that they need to tap me on the shoulder or stand in front of me when speaking to me.”

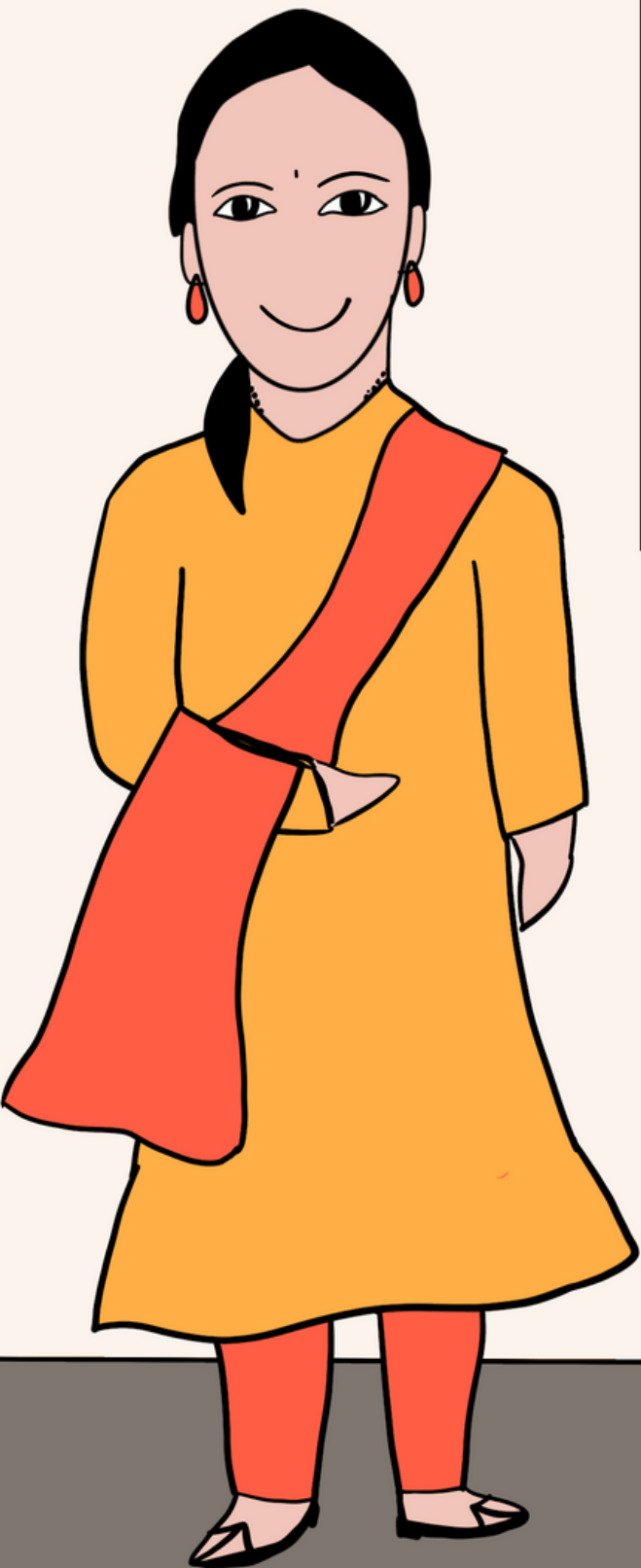
When asked if Sneha has any advice for hearing-impaired people entering the workforce, she smiles.

She owes so much of her success to her family support system. “Some advice that has helped me in my career is to try to maintain a good relationship with all people, regardless of whether they are good or bad. It was a lesson taught to me by my parents through their behavior towards others.” It is a lesson that Sneha reminds herself of even when she feels alone and dejected. She says that being in a crowd can be one of the loneliest places for her because it is hard to lip-read and keep track of conversations when multiple people are talking at once. Places like the cafeteria, usually considered a bonding space, are spaces she likes to avoid. She prefers to eat alone.

She has other ways to reach out and make friends at work. One of them is her long-nurtured interest in classical dance. During the pandemic, when the world was in lockdown and face-to-face communication was difficult, Sneha found new ways to express herself and even shared a short video of her performing Bharathnatayam with her team at the office.

STORY #5

ARCHANA  
GOKHALE



Archana was born to M.Srinivas Apte and Vijaya Apte in July 1983. She was diagnosed with hearing impairment at birth. Her family struggled to get her the best education possible, but Archana kept her head high because of the large community of friends, family, and well-wishers. There were many people in her life who understood her abilities and tried to boost her confidence. It was during her childhood that she first discovered her love for art.

Archana completed SSLC with a resounding "first class" merit in 1999 and continued to pursue art classes at the Ken School of Arts until 2004. "It was a great time to learn what I always loved to do and I became an expert in sketching, portraits, landscapes, and painting."

Soon after, Archana discovered multimedia and thought it would be a great opportunity for her to improve her skills. She was very keen on exploring "techno-arts" and completed a 2D animation course from Arena Multimedia. This certification helped her land her dream job at "Paprika's Animation Studio".

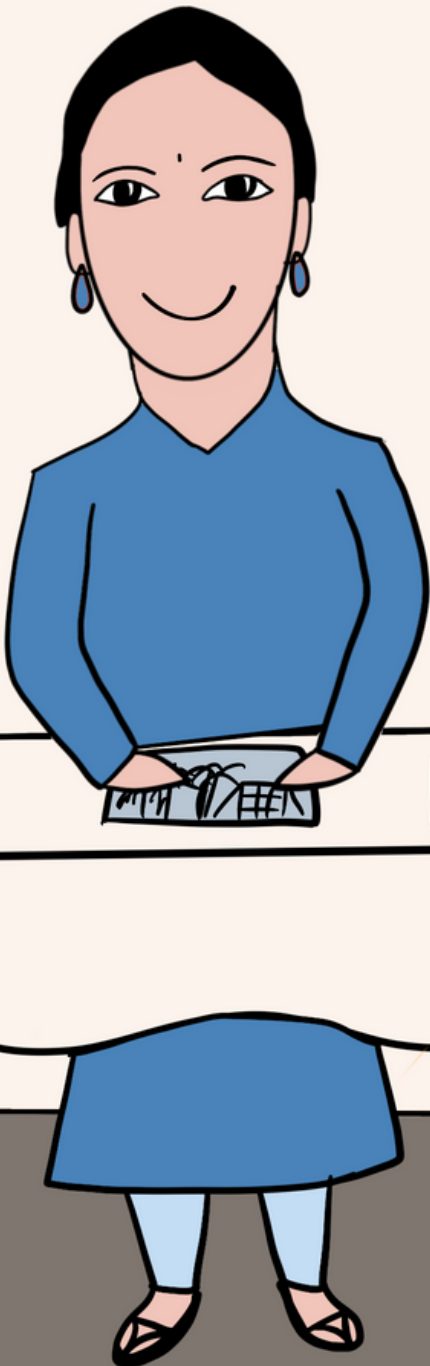
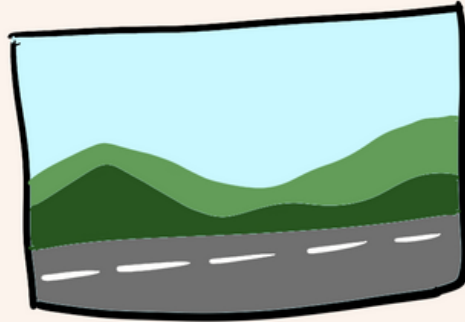
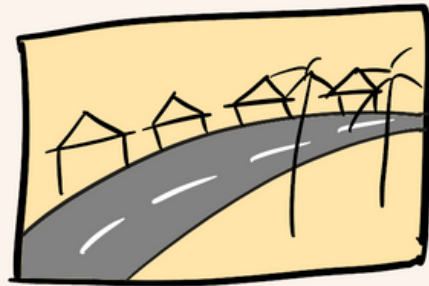
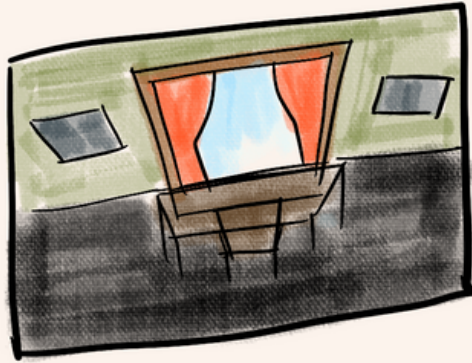
Archana opted to have surgery to implant a hearing aid. She had a positive experience and it greatly enhanced her capacity to hear and communicate with others. "Now I am able to converse with anyone without any problem or hesitation. I made a lot of friends in my own small world and it looks much brighter than earlier times."





Archana married her husband Prashanth in 2008. He encouraged her love for art and she has now hosted many solo art shows including a solo exhibition of paintings at Chitpavana Samaja Brahmin society every year since 2010. Her art has been on display at exhibitions such as Art Shouk, Garuda Mall, Art Abled, and Pragathi Art. She has also taken on corporate projects such as a “Campus sketching” project for G.E. which entailed creating a sketch of the campus of G.E. Bangalore on canvas. The sketch included buildings, pantry areas, parking lots, lounges, and greenery around their buildings.

Archana currently conducts daily classes for children and interested elders at Vidyaranyapura home. These classes keep her busy as well as in touch with what she loves- her art.



STORY #6

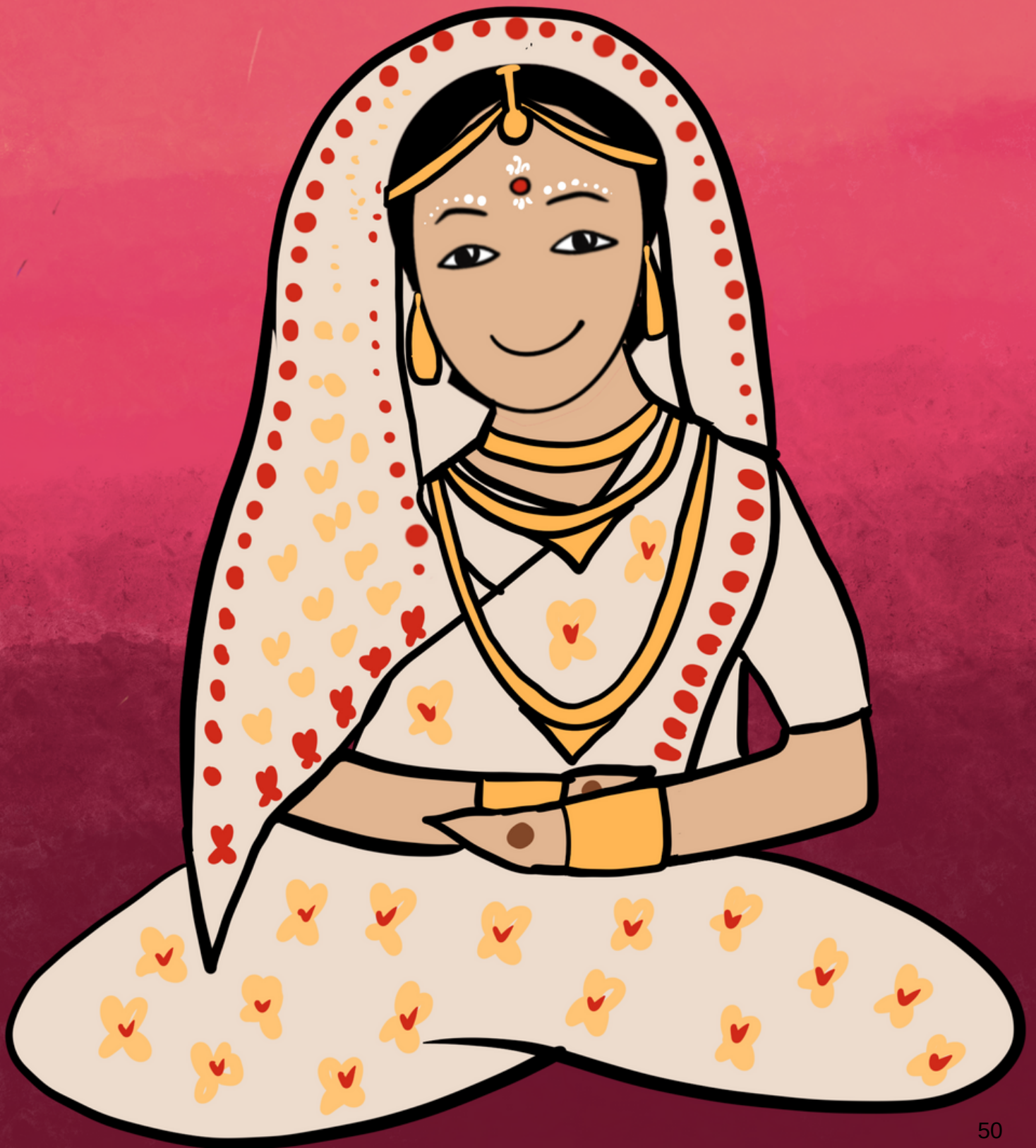
# PRANITA



Pranita is lively with a bright sense of humor. She is extremely emotive and expressive. She's spent her whole life communicating through sign language, she does not usually lip-read. She learnt how to sign at a young age in the residential school where she studied. Pranita is from Assam- she works in the water resources department with the government of Assam.

As a young baby, Pranita was a sickly child. Her parents came from a modest background and tried to treat her illnesses using traditional methods. They didn't know that she was hearing impaired until she first joined the school. In school, her teachers taught her sign language but her parents didn't have the opportunity to learn it, so communication with them remained difficult- especially in childhood. She lived at a hostel so they didn't see each other very often. Her school became her family and her main support system and it was here that she also made some of her closest friends and developed a deep love for sports. Over the years Pranita has won many prizes for running, athletics, and javelin throw and has brought pride and laurels to her school and family alike.

It was friends from this network at school that also helped arrange Pranita's wedding. A mutual friend known to both Pranita and her mother was also friends with the prospective groom's family. The boy at the time was ten years older than her and also hearing impaired but the family thought that it was a good match because he had a good job and would be able to support a family. It turned out to be a blessing for Pranita. Her husband turned out to be very caring and affectionate.



Soon after marriage, she continued to work until the birth of her daughter. After that, her duties at home increased- she had to take care of her in-laws and her young baby as well. Though she had an independent streak and the drive to provide for her family, she put it on the back burner to take care of her family.

After a long break of nearly ten years, Pranita rejoined the workforce going into government service. While she didn't have a singular role model, Pranita has been inspired by many women in her life. She innately had an interest in being independent and supporting her family. Her husband's brother was also very helpful in encouraging her to look for opportunities.

Pranita is well aware of the problems of the system. As a person with trouble communicating, she knows that many people like her with speech and hearing impairment are unable to access government services. On the other hand, working within the government, she has noticed that over the years her team has learnt to communicate with her and she now doesn't have any trouble getting her work done. A few people at the office even learnt sign language.

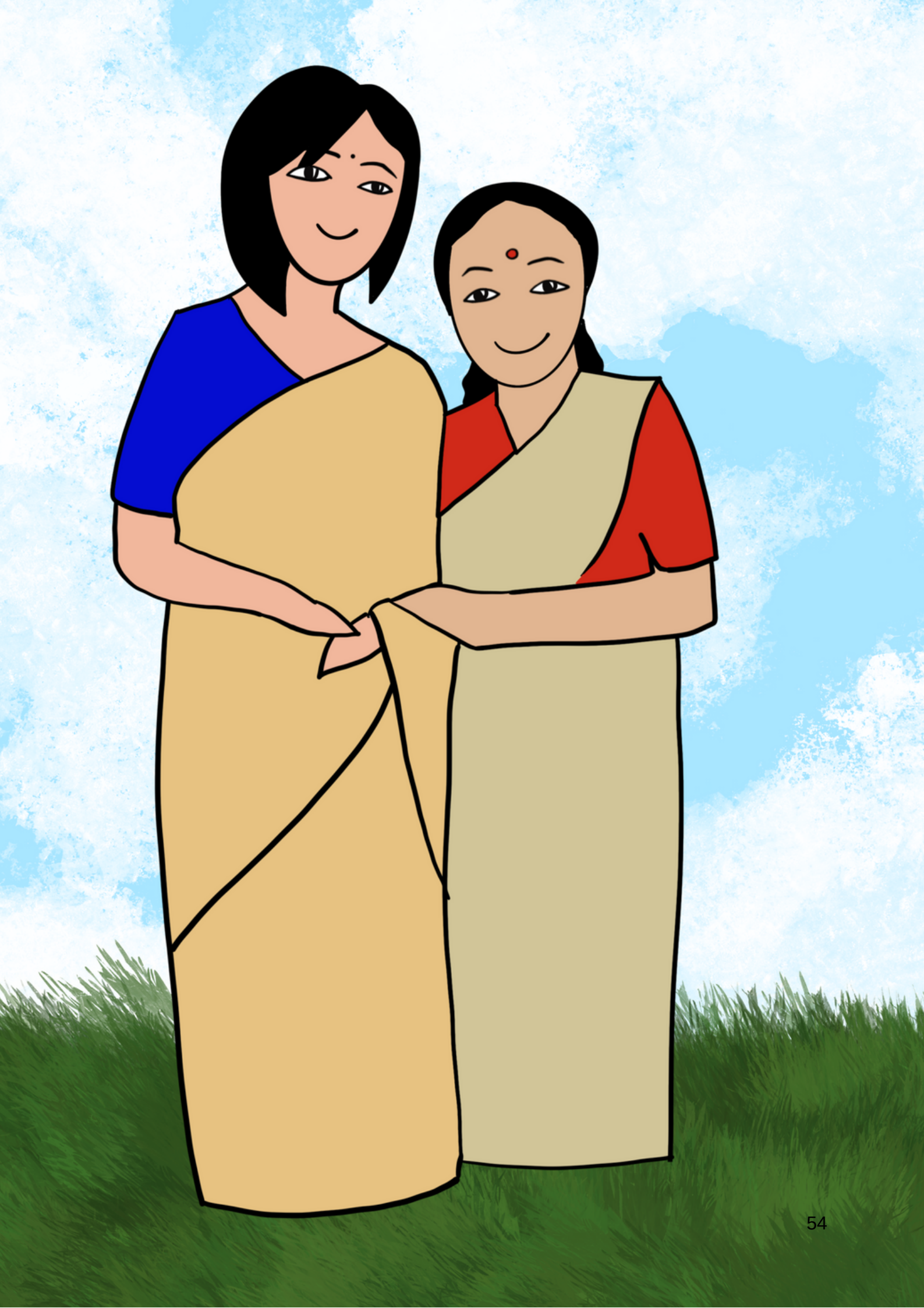
Pranita loves to help people. She helps a local trust that supports children with hearing impairment. She wants to let parents of children with hearing impairment know that they need to send their children to school. They mustn't leave the child alone at home. They need to take an active role in their education.





Pranita recalls moments where she struggled- attending her daughter Geetashree's parent-teacher meetings was one such situation. She was nervous that she might embarrass her daughter and found it awkward when her daughter would have to interpret for both her and the teacher during the meeting. Yet, it was these formative moments that helped both Pranita and later Geetashree to develop deeper and more meaningful bonds.

Today, Geetashree is an ally for people with disabilities and has taken her ability to translate for her mother to the next level. She now translates on television for a well-known news channel.



STORY #7

GEETASHREE



Geetashree has been translating for people with hearing impairments on the news for over two years, but it is something she has been doing her whole life. She remembers going to government offices, NGO's and trusts with her mother, Pranita, doing social work and attending meetings. She was spotted by a few people who knew that she could translate fluently and offered her the opportunity.

Her mom and dad took her to various offices when she was young. They didn't let their hearing impairment hold them back from doing their work and they never treated Geetashree like she was a child. They relied on her for her help and she felt good being able to help her parents. It made her feel proud and independent.

The thing that makes her feel the best about her job is that she makes the news accessible to young people, especially children with hearing impairment. She feels that it is important for everyone to be updated about what is happening in our everyday lives.

There are a few words that are unusual. It takes a few moments for her to translate it and sometimes the translation is crude. A word needs to be broken up into a few different parts and news readers speak quickly so it has to be done very quickly.



NEWS <sup>18</sup>

Her mom is the biggest support. They scour YouTube together trying to find signs for new words. Most recently they had to translate a lot of news related to COVID-19.

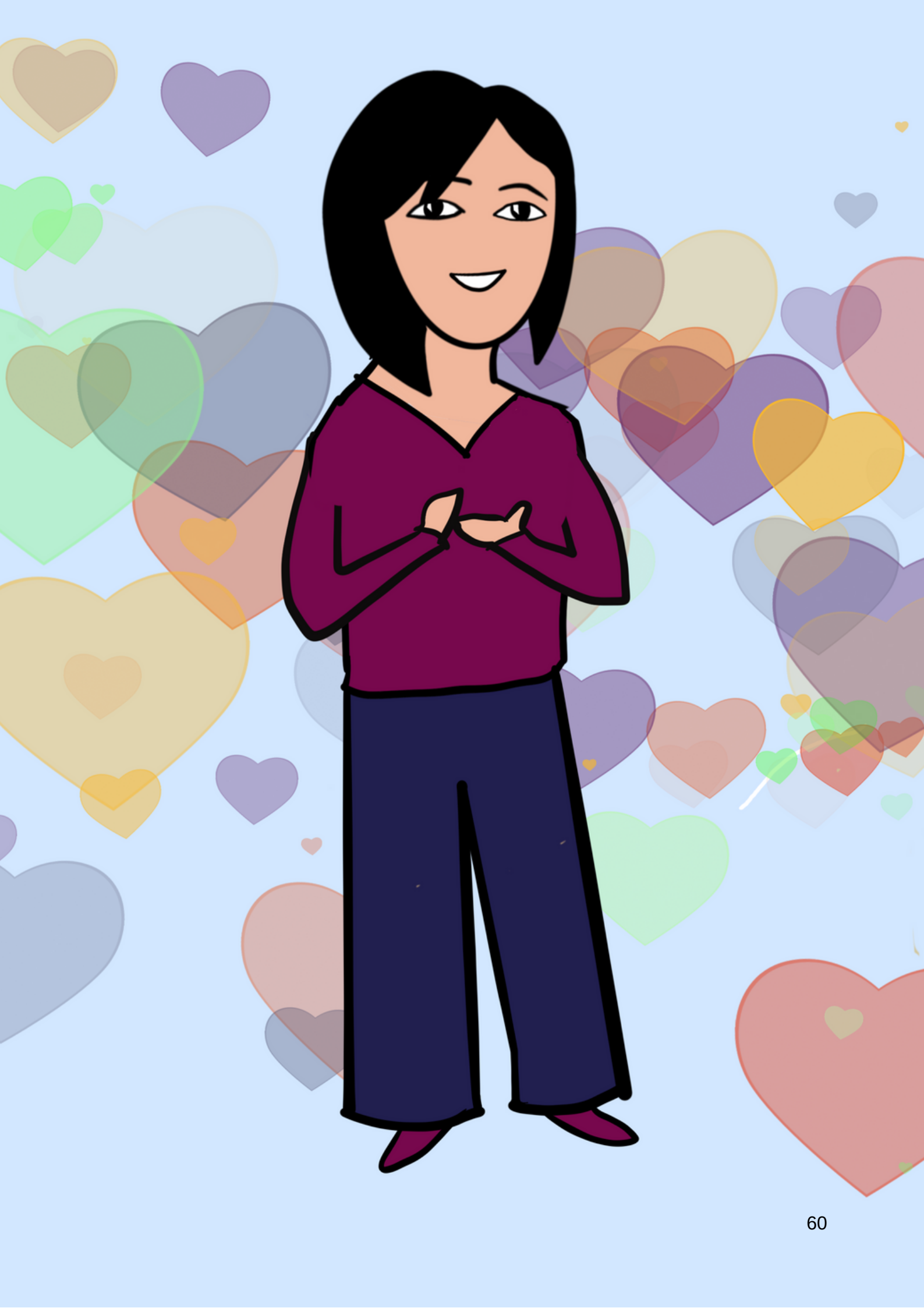
This was a challenge and they went to Facebook and other social media sites to find out how people across the world were translating the news. Company logos also inspire their signs- for example, the sign for WhatsApp relies on its iconic green, round and long logo.

Geetashree likes to watch other interpreters, especially to see if she is making any mistakes. She's always trying to improve her sign communication.

People know what is happening around us, but people with hearing impairment often miss out on local updates because it is either not translated or not accessible to them.

Many of my friends and especially my best friend were very interested in talking to my mom. She took a genuine interest in learning sign language and has now learned a little bit. A few of their mothers also watch Geetashree on the news and pick up a few signs as well.

In the future, Geetashree wants to do something meaningful for children. She grew up with two hearing-impaired parents- but she herself can hear. She wants children to know that they can grow up to be just like her parents- strong and successful members of the community.





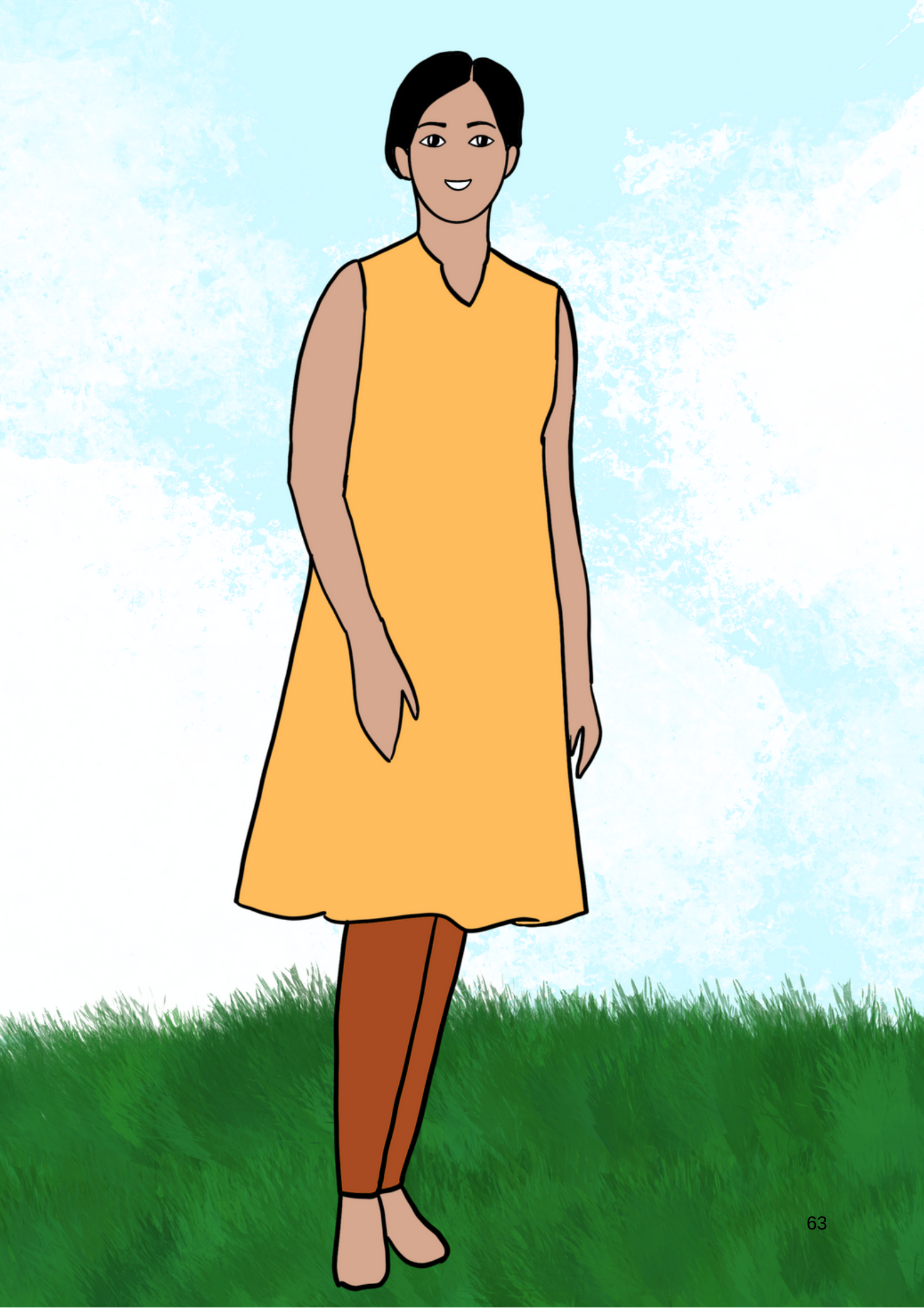
"Children are the future, we need to build their confidence." She says she wants hearing-impaired children to get the same opportunities as typical children. She wants them to go to school, go out to play, study, and have experiences. "They can do everything that anyone else can do. It's just a matter of creating systems that help to include them."

Geetashree, even as a child, had to develop a lot of maturity. She could have been embarrassed by her hearing-impaired parents, but instead, she was proud of them. She made it a point to include them in school activities and to introduce them to her friends.

People often don't know what a disability is. They think it is a sickness, an illness, or that a person is "mad". Awareness is one of the most important things. Geetashree wants schools to begin teaching sign language as a subject at schools. She thinks it can be included in every curriculum as another language option.

STORY #8

# ASHWINI

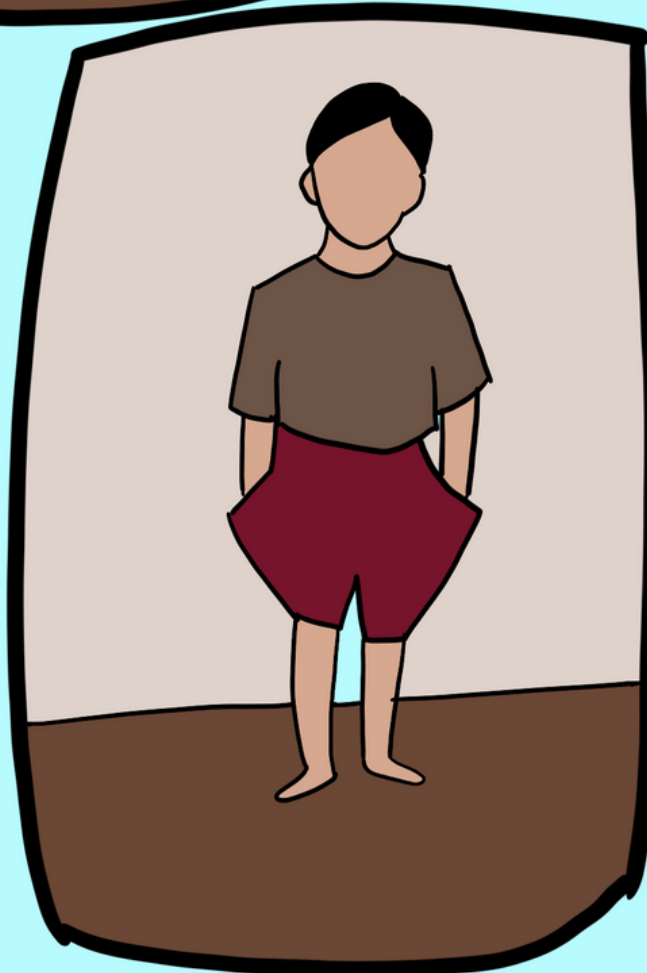
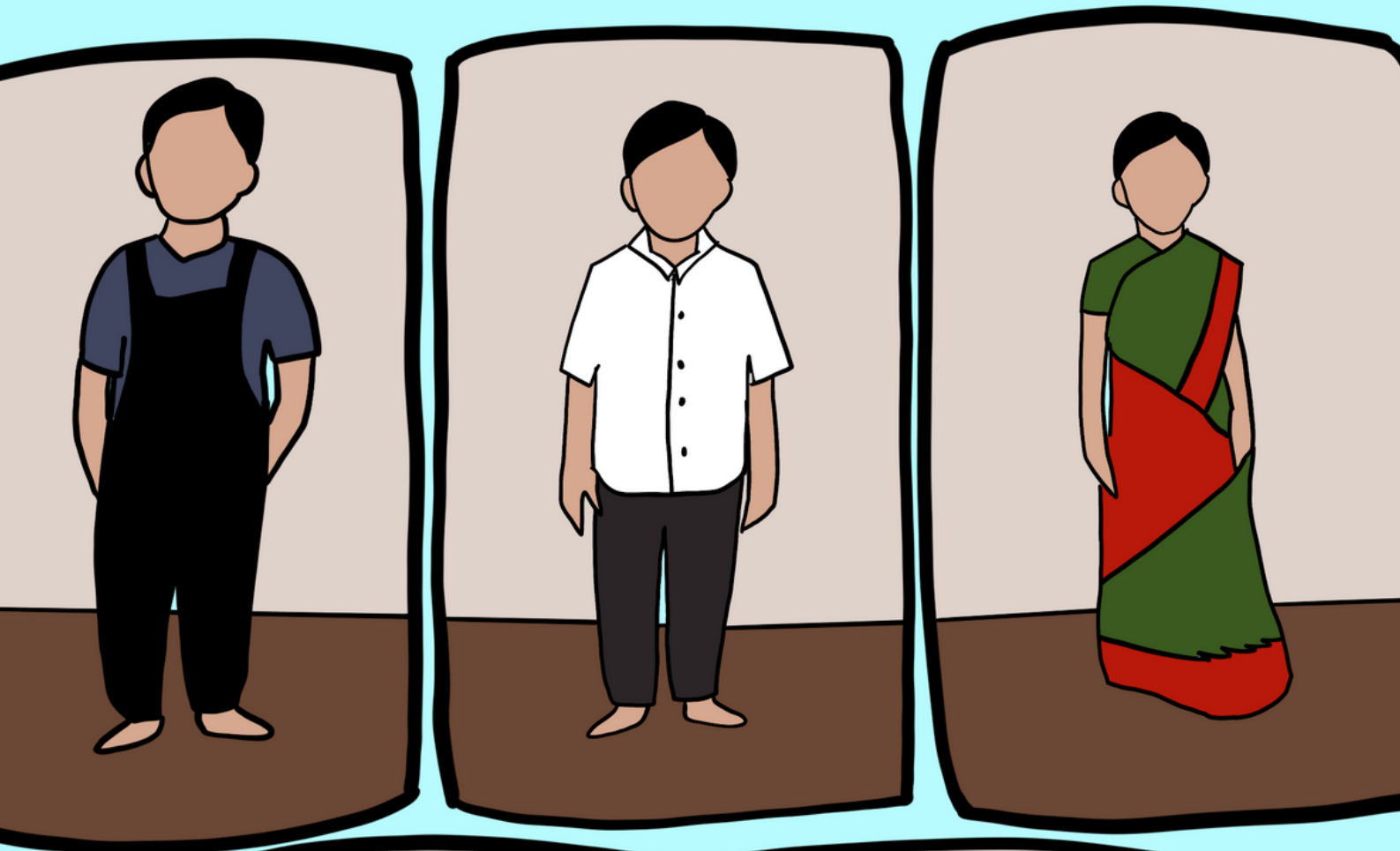


At three years old, during Diwali, an atom bomb Diwali firecracker went off very close to where a young baby Ashwini was sitting. While all the other children reacted, laughing, closing their eyes and ears, Ashwini had no response. It was as though she didn't even notice the bomb going off. This is when her father first suspected that something might be wrong. Upon testing, his suspicion was confirmed. Ashwini was diagnosed with hearing impairment. She has 90% hearing loss, also called profound hearing loss.

What is unique about Ashwini is that she learnt how to lip read naturally, as a young child. Even before her hearing impairment diagnosis, she was able to decipher the words her parents used when they spoke to her. Though she was not yet able to respond, she had already quickly picked up basic language skills.

Speech therapy was useful in enabling Ashwini to be able to respond. Her mother played an active role and took classes along with Ashwini. They learnt together. By the age of four, it was time for Ashwini to go to school. She joined a school called Shishu Griha- a school close to her home. This was the first time that Ashwini noticed that she was slightly different from the other children around her. She understood that some things which come naturally to other children required her to work a little harder. She began to encounter and become aware of her own personal limitations.

“My mom used to take pictures of different clothing so I could understand and learn the names. She did the same for fruits, vegetables, furniture, and so on. She used to create small labels and we would play a game where I had to match the right word to the picture.”



By the fifth standard, Ashwini had to learn how to deal with bullies at school. When she was asked to stand up and read in class, the other children would make fun of her because they found her difficult to understand. Making friends was challenging and she relied heavily on her support system at home. While some teachers made an effort to include her in their classes, others expected her to keep up with the other students and the lessons being taught.

School helped Ashwnini first discover her love for computers. Though she studied PCMB (Physics, Chemistry, Math, Biology), she was extremely driven and completed correspondence courses in computer education as well. Despite being so highly qualified, finding a job was not easy. Ashwini recalls how many potential employers turned her down due to her hearing impairment. During these dark times, her strength was drawn from her parents. She was keen not to let them down and didn't want anyone's sympathy for her condition. As an only child, she wanted to be able to be independent and also be able to support her parents in the future. She stayed motivated to find a role that was the right fit for her.

Nearly two years after college, Ashwnini still hadn't found the job that she was looking for. She spent a lot of time applying for roles while managing her personal life with its own set of ups and downs. Serendipity hit at a job fair for people with disabilities when Ashwini met various recruiters including one from Accenture. It was here that she was advised to continue her studies and get a masters degree.

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"I remember participating in activities like fashion shows at school. That's me in the white dress next to Batman! My mom was always nearby, supporting me."

Though Ashwini was reluctant to keep studying, she understood that the job market was extremely competitive and that she needed to do more to give herself an edge.

Three years later, Ashwini having completed her masters degree was ready for campus placements. She attended various different interviews and tried to do her best to prepare well for every opportunity. Time after time she submitted her resume, dressed in her formal attire and attended placement interviews but with no luck. Nine of the ten companies that were scheduled to come to their campus had come and gone and Ashwini hadn't yet received a call back.

By the last interview, she had lost hope. She decided not to go in prepared, she didn't give her regular responses. Her answers were unscripted, natural and to the point. It turned out that this did the trick! The organization was impressed and a week later she received her first offer letter from Speridian Technologies. Ashwini still works there today as a system analyst, software engineer.

She enjoys her job very much, though she is the only one in her team based in Bangalore. The pandemic and consequent work from home revolution has been a blessing in disguise for Ashwini as technology has improved. 'Google Meets' now has subtitles and they help her connect better with the rest of her team which is based in Kerala. Over the years, Ashwini has grown and has helped train numerous people on her team, adding immense value to the organization.



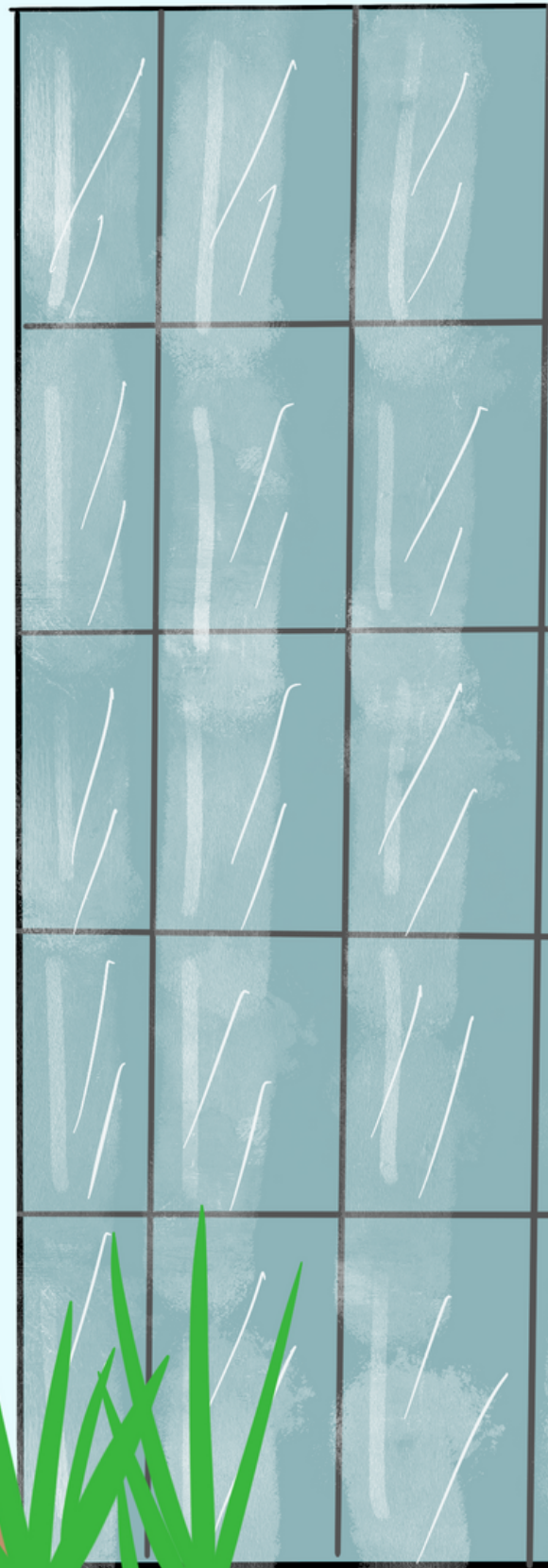
"As a child, I was always curious about telephones. I would often pick them up and try to understand what people would do with them. My parents thought I could hear the ringtone but I could not."



In her free time, Ashwini likes to travel and spend time in the mountains. Ashwini has taken on the duties of managing her home and she even spends time volunteering and meeting other people who help children with hearing impairment.

STORY #9

S U M A

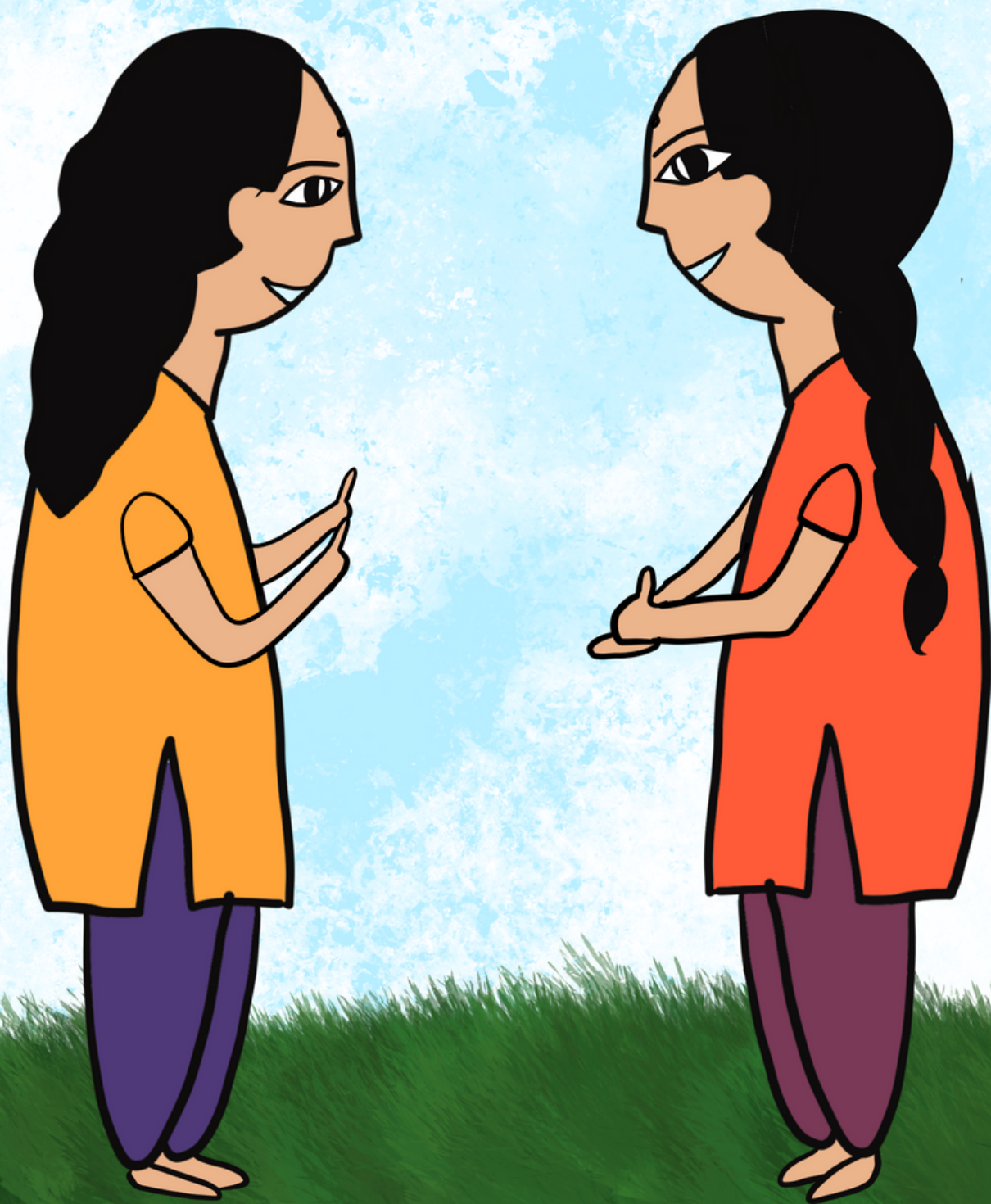


Suma was born to a highly educated and well to do family. Six years later, her sister Mala was born deaf. It took about a year for her parents to notice that something was different about Mala. She had bright blue eyes which was unusual in Suma's family.

Initially Suma's mother thought that perhaps Mala was blind, but upon testing, they learnt that she had 100% hearing loss.

Growing up, Suma and Mala had typical sibling rivalry. Mala was the new, younger, child and was taking up all the family's attention. In order to get better services for Mala, her father took a demotion from college professor to high school head master in order to be able to move from Tumkur to Bangalore. Suma stayed back in Tumkur with her grandmother for a few years, allowing her parents some space to help get Mala the support she needed.

By the time Suma was in the fifth standard, the family was reunited in Bangalore. This was another period of adjustment but it brought the two sisters closer together than ever. In their family, Suma was the only one who learnt sign language to be able to better communicate with Mala. Their conversations were finally able to progress beyond the basics of "Did you eat?" and "Did you sleep well?" to discussions around music and how Suma felt bad that Mala couldn't share in these experiences with her.



It was Mala who opened Suma's eyes to how perspectives can change the way we feel about our circumstances. Mala was never upset that she couldn't listen to music, instead she was happy that she couldn't hear the loud sounds of traffic, that she wasn't distracted by construction noises and that she could live in her own quiet, peaceful world.

Things were not always rosy for Mala either. There was an incident where local children from the neighborhood would bully and tease Mala. They would call her "mugi" meaning "person with no nose" insinuating that she was not able to speak. This enraged Suma and sparked a desire in her to change the way the world viewed her sister.

As her life progressed, Suma got married, moved away to Hyderabad and took a wonderful job at G.E that she loved very much. She was there for twelve years before finally making the decision to move into the social development sector and work for people with disabilities.

"I was moved by how people who have no connection with the deaf and their families, do so much for the community. I felt that since I have a sister and the issue is more personal to me, that I should come forward to contribute my time."

She originally planned to volunteer her time, but those who had seen her work before knew that she was committed and could do more. She tried for a while to teach at a school for the deaf but found the experience emotionally overwhelming<sup>75</sup>





Cheshire Homes was a better fit for her. Today, Suma helps young people with hearing impairment prepare themselves for interviews and the professional world. Over the years, they have done a number of sensitivity training sessions with leading employers such as KFC, Flipkart, Amazon, Cafe Coffee Day, Oracle and Accenture.

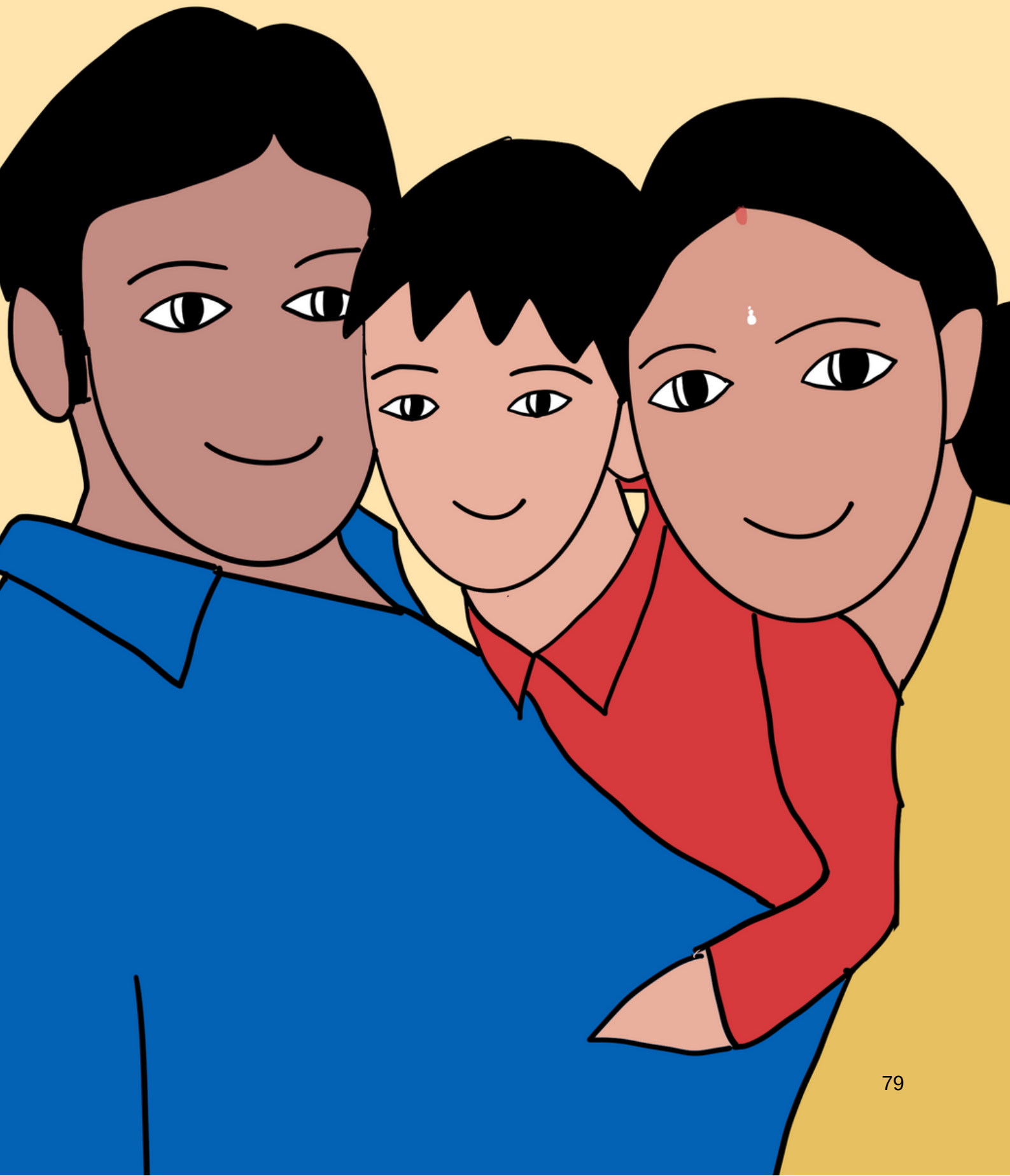
One of the things that Suma notices is that people with hearing impairment often have a smaller vocabulary than their peers who are hearing. This can be a big disadvantage in the corporate world while trying to find a job. It all begins in childhood. Deaf children can often be very angry as they have no mechanism to express themselves. Her sister Mala would often throw tantrums and Suma feels that Mala was probably not very well understood in their younger years.

“Companies don’t hire just because people are deaf. We say that deaf and hearing are the same, but there are gaps. Companies want people with the skills.” This is the gap that Suma and the organization she works with are trying to bridge.

12 years ago when she began her journey, companies would interview 20 people and hire 2. Today that is beginning to change. There is a lot more acceptance and organizations are more willing to be inclusive. Technology has helped make the biggest changes. Voice to text tools, subtitles in real time meetings with apps such as Google Meet are all helping to make the workplace more accessible.

STORY #10

NITYA



Nithya was born with a hearing impairment. Her doctors believe that it was caused due to a high fever her mother ran in her eighth month of pregnancy. She never let this slow her down. Her parents spent a lot of time with her in her youth and ensured that she focused on her education.

From time to time Nitya was bullied, especially at school and by the neighborhood children.

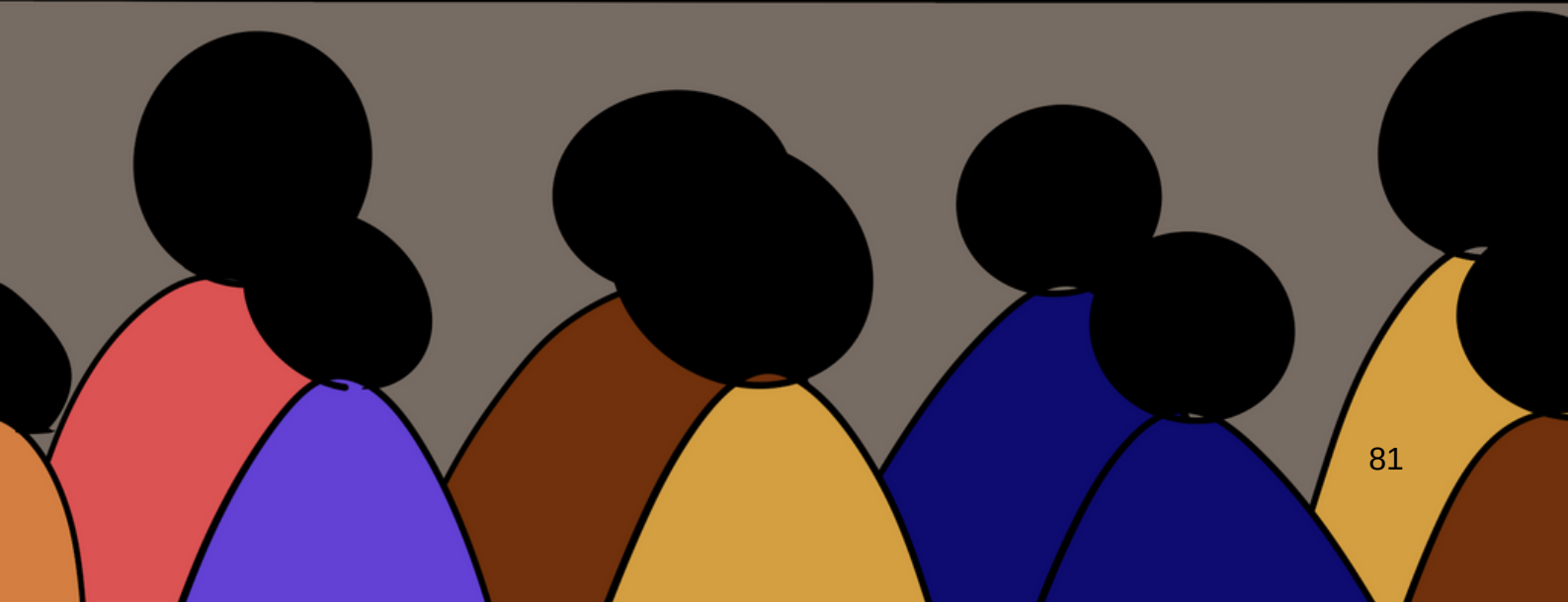
"I never let anyone teasing me bother me. Anyway, I couldn't hear them!" Nitya took a light-hearted approach to dealing with her struggles- something she brings to her day-to-day life at work as well.

A few years ago, Nithya's father found out about VAANI Deaf Children's Foundation and suggested that Nitya connect with the team. He was hoping that she would be able to take up a role at VAANI to help other people with speech and hearing impairments get the services they need in order to live independent and fulfilling lives. It was what Nitya wanted to do as well.

She joined the VAANI team and since then she has never looked back."Being at VAANI in the role of 'Admin and Supporter Service Officer' has given me a lot of confidence. I want to make sure that I support my team and help build cooperation."

Over the years Nitya has taken on responsibilities far outreaching the limitations of her role. She has run workshops on sign language for corporate partners, traveled to various parts of the country, and has made countless videos and digital teaching-learning materials.

Nitya has a never-say-no attitude and pushes herself and her team to find solutions to complex problems. She is VAANI's go-to person for all things sign language and is a true role model for young girls to look up to.







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