



Biju Spins Some Magic

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Level 4



It was a hot afternoon in the quiet, dusty village of Jilminda, near Sambalpur, in Odisha. Biju, all of nine years old, sat under a tree waiting for his father. He was going with Bapa on a long journey.

A fly buzzed near his ear. The glare of the sun along with the steady clack-clack of the handlooms from the huts nearby made him feel sleepy. He thought he would doze a bit in the company of the brown dog that had come to share the shade with him, but the dog was panting so loudly in the heat that it kept Biju awake.

Biju, like most of the children in his village, did not go to school. He had wanted to go to school but his parents had said there was no use in him learning things that had nothing to do with their weaving profession. He would get just useless thoughts in his head about working in an office.

So Biju tried to convince himself that school was no fun at all because the boys who did go looked miserable and had to carry heavy bags full of books. A friend's brother had got himself a 'degree' after attending school but it had not helped him get a job. He had gone up and down many stairs in the tall office buildings of Mumbai but had been offered jobs only at teashops, newspaper kiosks and by janitors. He was back at home now, helping his father weave ikat saris, which he took to Mumbai once in a while to sell to a wholesale merchant.



Biju had learned to read and write from Jeji Bapa, his grandfather, who had been taught many things when he had worked for a while in the house of a local teacher.

Jeji Bapa had made mathematics easy for Biju by using skeins of yarn in bunches, sometimes adding all the blue skeins and subtracting the yellow skeins and then doubling the reds and taking away the greens. Biju thought this was fun and temporarily forgot about school.

Jeji Bapa also told Biju stories of how in earlier times wonderful cloths from their village, along with all kinds of other treasures, had travelled on ships headed for Bali, in a far-off country called Indonesia. These voyages were called Bali yatras. Biju loved hearing about all the different kinds of things that were made in those times and wished that he too could travel far and wide carrying the beautiful cloths woven in his village.

Biju's father and grandfather came from a long line of handloom weavers who had perfected the art of tying and dyeing the long yarn threads before they were woven. But it was hard work. Unless Biju, along with his mother, sisters and cousins, helped with the work, Bapa could never finish weaving the lengths of cloth he needed to sell to earn enough money to take care of the entire family.



Biju often sat with his mother and sisters winding the brilliantly coloured silk yarn on to spools, or spinning the fluffy cotton bunches into thread. Biju also helped his father stretch the long lengths of coloured yarn between two poles along the dusty street next to their hut.

Bapa would tie the yarn at uneven intervals according to an ancient pattern. When this yarn was dyed, it looked speckled and smudged with colour. Bapa would take the whole length of dyed yarn inside the small tin shed and fix it to the loom. Then he would begin weaving.



Biju would almost get hypnotized as he watched Bapa fling the long bobbin back and forth between the threads. He would tighten the portion that was already woven with a metal comb, and look constantly at the pattern as it emerged on the other side to make sure there were no flaws.

The bobbin would move back and forth, back and forth, until a wonderful ikat pattern came alive—the main body of the sari with the shimmering borders on both sides and an elaborate pallav at one end.

With his mother and sisters, Biju would roll and press the finished cloth till it became a tight little package to be opened only to display to a customer.

Biju always wondered why Ma never wore these beautiful saris. Every year, she bought two cotton saris printed in the big city mills for Dussehra and never showed any interest in the saris Bapa created for women who lived in faraway cities. He had once asked her, 'Ma, why don't you wear the silk saris that Bapa weaves?'

Ma had smiled. 'I can only do that if you or your father becomes a rich man.'



Biju woke suddenly from his mid-afternoon reverie as Bapa tapped him on the head. He was carrying a small canvas shoulder bag with a zipper and two big cloth bundles. 'Hey, Biju, wake up. Are you ready to go? Have you said goodbye to your mother and Jeji Bapa?'

'Yes, Bapa,' said Biju, suddenly alert, taking one of the bundles.

He felt big and grown up. He was going to Delhi with Bapa, to help him carry their bundles of saris. His father said they might get a better price if they went directly to the ladies who wore them instead of giving them to the traders in Sambalpur or a wholesaler in some big town. It was Biju's first visit to a big city. Jeji Bapa had persuaded Biju's father to take him along to get some experience of travelling, so that maybe one day he could go on a Bali yatra on his own. Biju was very excited and a little nervous.

They walked to the bus stop and waited for forty minutes in the scanty shade till the old, wobbly bus arrived. It took them to Sambalpur town from where they caught the Hirakud Express to Nizamuddin station at New Delhi.



The train journey was thrilling but a bit scary. Biju had to sleep leaning against his father's arm all night, as there was hardly any space in the compartment.

'It will be more comfortable on the way back,' his father assured him. 'We can buy tickets for the reserved seats when we have a little money with us after the saris are sold.'

Biju did not say anything. He was tired and excited and nervous and hungry all at the same time.

Every time Bapa stepped out of the train compartment at a station where the train stopped, he would warn Biju about the bundles—‘Sit on them, lie on them, rest your head on them, but do not take your eyes off them for even a minute. Someone may take them away and then all will be lost for us.’ Biju felt very important guarding the bundles but he was terrified that the train would leave before Bapa returned. What would he do then?

It was only after his father, carrying some hot oily pakoras and *kulladhs* of tea for them, returned to the compartment (usually after the train had started moving) that Biju’s heart would start beating normally again. So most of the time Biju pretended that he wasn’t hungry and didn’t want anything to eat or drink.



When they arrived in Delhi, his father carried the bundles while Biju took charge of their canvas bag. It was not very heavy as it contained only one set of clean clothes for each of them, neem twigs for cleaning their teeth, two small *gamchas* to use as towels, scarves, head cloths or handkerchiefs, and an old address book. Bapa also always put in a small bunch of cotton and a hand-spindle to spin some yarn in case they had to wait anywhere for a while. It was good to be occupied and not waste time doing nothing, Bapa always said.

They took an autorickshaw to where Bhabani Prasad Mehr, Bapa's younger brother, lived. This was on a crowded street next to an area called Malviya Nagar. Some of the lamp posts gave out more light than they had in their entire village, thought Biju.





The beautiful shops with large windows displayed sequined saris, shiny scarves, refrigerators, televisions and all sorts of other box-shaped things that Biju had never seen before.

A television in a shop was turned on. Biju recognized Amitabh Bachchan, the famous actor whose hairstyle was copied by all the older boys in his village. Next to that shop was a stall where skewered tandoori chickens like little shrunken people hung from a wire. They looked a sorry sight but they smelled good.

Biju thought he could perhaps persuade his father to get him a small piece if they sold the saris at a good price. Beside the chicken stall was the mechanic's shop, which belonged to Bhabani dada. Bapa said they were lucky to be able to share his little room above it while they were in Delhi.

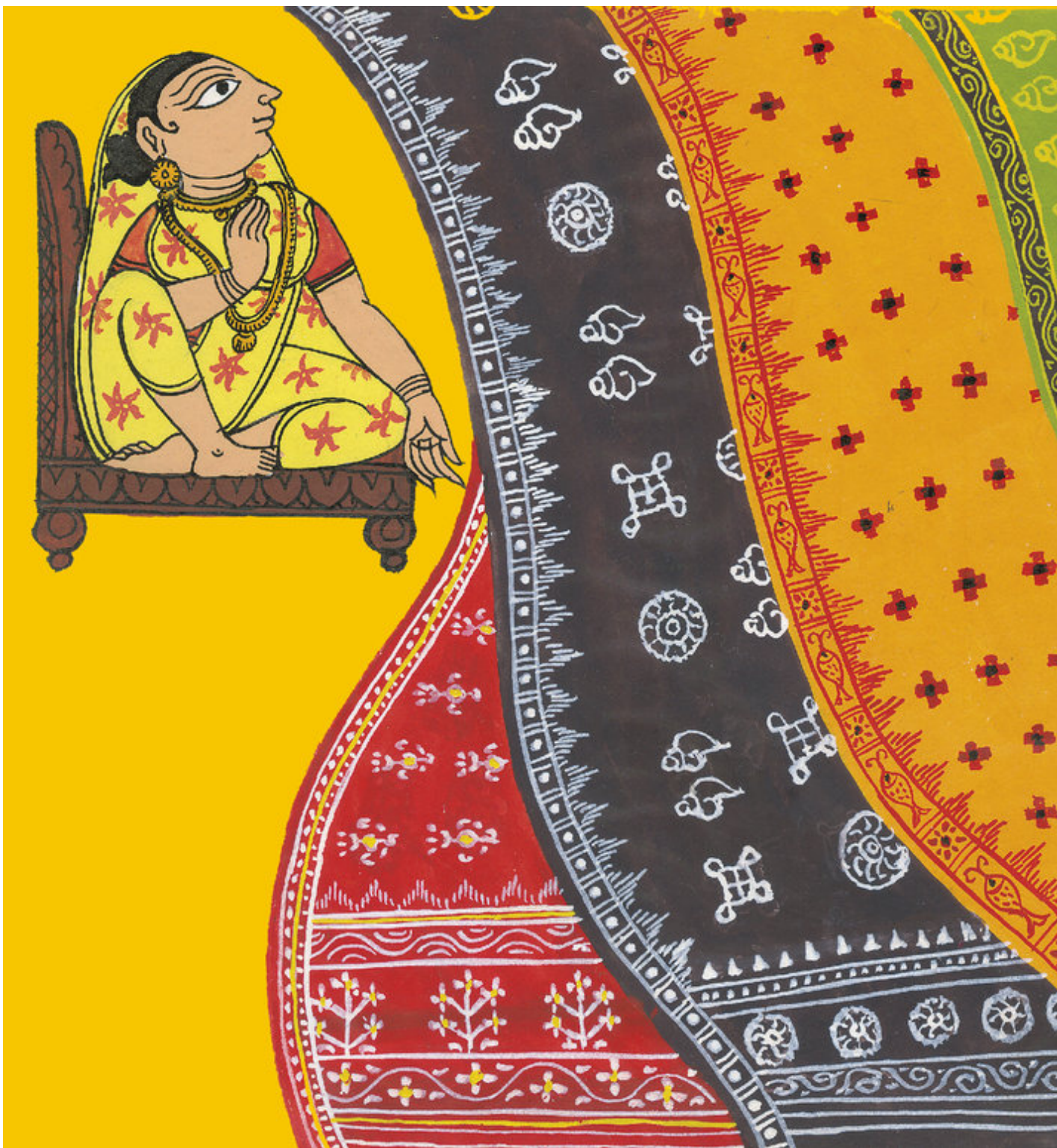
The next morning, Biju woke late. His father and his dada were already discussing where the saris could be sold. His father made a note of the addresses and instructions to find the way to many parts of the huge city. Biju wished he could read the messages on the buses and on the huge hoardings along the road.

They got on to a bus. His father was lost in his own thoughts and did not seem to notice anything around him.



Biju looked at the people on the street and wondered how they could look so important in such a large, noisy and crowded city, and whether he would ever find his way home again if he got lost.

After travelling on the bus for what seemed many hours and then walking more than two kilometres along a shady road, Biju and his father reached a big house. A uniformed man at the gate telephoned someone inside. Finally, they were allowed in and asked to follow another man who took them to 'Bibiji', the lady of the house.



Biju and his father took off their slippers at the door, as they did at home, although the man leading them wore big black shoes. They were asked to sit on the carpet in a room full of big chairs with large cushions.

After a little while, a young boy, a little older than Biju, came in and stared at him. He went out and called his mother. 'Mummy, there's a man here with two bundles for you,' he shouted.

A few minutes later, he came in again, followed by his mother.



Biju helped Bapa to open the bundles, take out the saris one by one, and open them all out. The whole carpet was covered in metres and metres of shining patterned silks and cottons in the brightest of colours. It looked as if a rainbow had fallen into the room and got all tangled up.

'This pallav is a very old traditional pattern ... This has the latest design given by a foreign designer ... This is a pure silk sari ... This sari won a national award' Bapa tried to make the lady see each sari as special.

Biju helped drape each sari over his father's shoulder so that the design was displayed more effectively.

The boy watched his mother look carefully at the saris, but he was soon bored. 'Mummy, can I ask this boy to come and play in my room?' he asked.

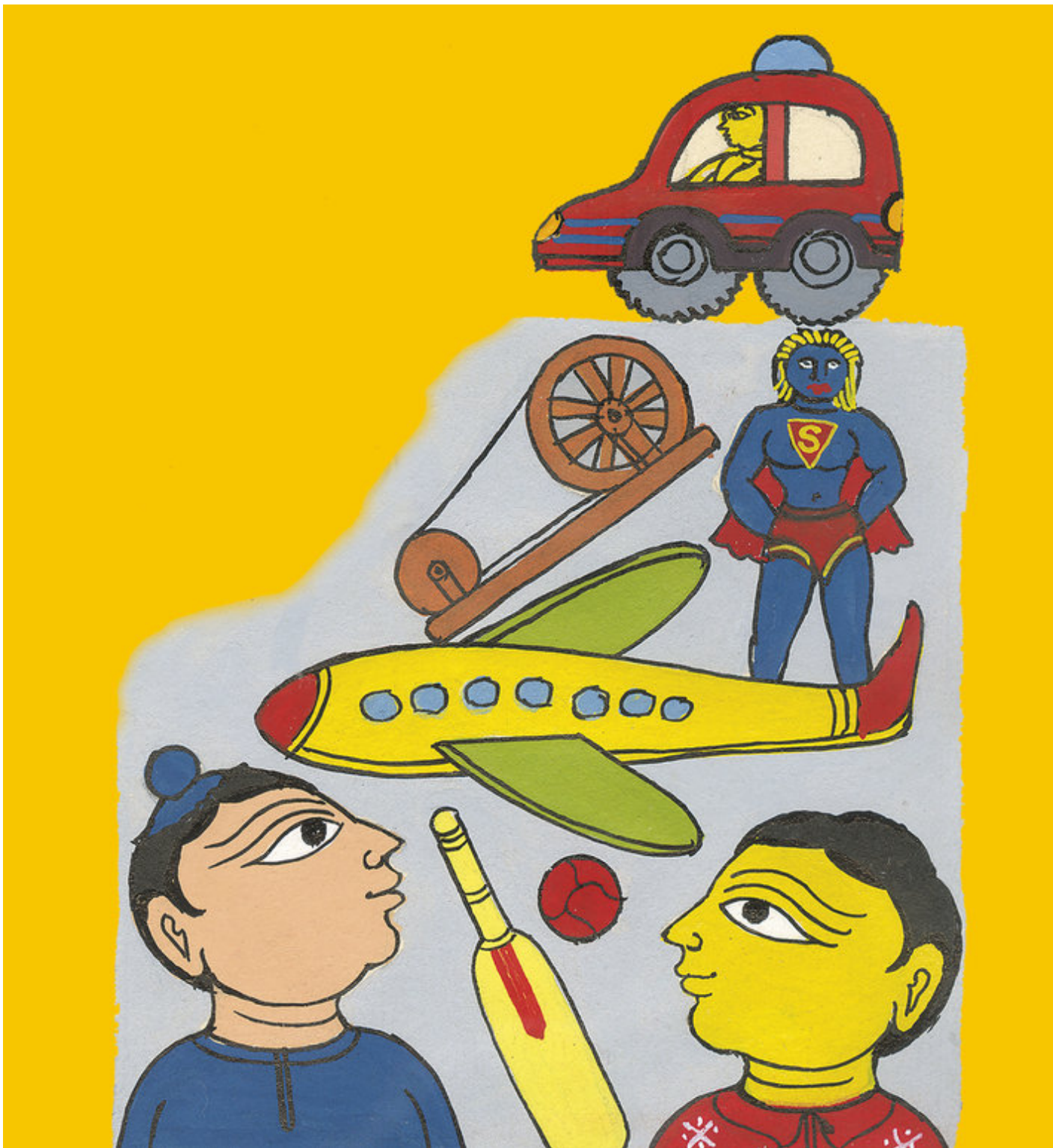
His mother nodded absent-mindedly. Biju wondered whether he should stay with his father to help fold the saris that were spread across the room. Bapa was silent. In the end, Biju was too curious to see the boy's room in the big house in the big city to resist. He got up and followed the boy.

'What is your name?' asked the boy.

'Brijeswar Prasad Mehr,' said Biju very carefully. 'What's yours?'

'Bubbles.'

The boy's room was full of toys and gadgets in bright colours. It was like nothing Biju had ever seen. Bubbles let him touch the huge plastic ball and showed him how to sit on it and bounce across the room. He told him how to wind a key in the stomach of a giant fluffy toy bear so that it squeaked.



He showed him all sorts of games on the computer, which looked like a mini-television set he had seen in the shop window at Malviya Nagar. Bubbles let Biju ring the bell of his cycle but did not let him ride it. All the toys had some mechanical or electronic operating switch. Since Biju's home had no electricity, he could not manage them very well.

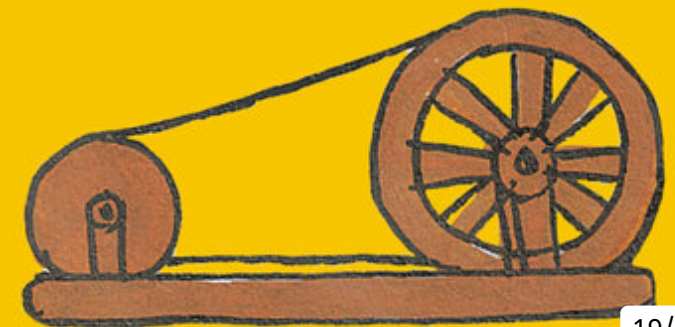
Biju wondered what kind of world he had entered. He was also puzzled that a boy who had so many playthings still wanted to play with him!

Biju didn't know what he could do and how to play properly with Bubbles. He felt shy, clumsy and a little silly.

Suddenly, in one corner, he saw a spinning wheel. Now that looked familiar! Here was something he could work very well, just like his mother and sisters. When Bubbles saw Biju looking at the spinning wheel, he turned it round and asked, 'Do you know how to use this? My uncle brought it from an exhibition at Red Fort. He gave it to me to play with but I don't know what to do with it.'

Biju's shyness and wonder left him. He put on a serious and important air. 'This is a charkha. Do you have some cotton?' he asked. Bubbles did not.

Biju went back to his father and dug deep into the bag lying beside him.



Some yarn, a bunch of cotton fluff and a hand-spindle were in it. 'Ah, I've found it!' he whispered, but his father was busy displaying his saris to the lady and did not hear him.

Biju went back to the boy's room and began twisting the cotton fluff. He attached it to the spinning wheel, moving his fingers deftly, and turned the wheel all the while until the cotton fluff became yarn.

'You can do magic!' shouted Bubbles, amazed. He pushed Biju away from the spinning wheel and sat before it himself.

He tried to do what Biju did but he could not. 'Show me, do it again,' he demanded, determined to learn what Biju could do so easily. He still couldn't.

Biju found a smile spreading across his face. 'Not like that, see here, do it this way,' he said.

About half an hour and many tries later, Biju taught the little boy how to spin. He also told him how his father put the yarn on the loom and how the long beautiful saris his mother was looking at were woven in their village Jilminda, in Sambalpur in faraway Odisha, a long train ride away. The little boy was fascinated and looked at Biju as if he was from a magic world. Biju felt proud and big and very important. Suddenly, he remembered his father might need his help to fold the saris and pack them away.



Biju went back to the big sitting room. His father was smiling. The lady was smiling. Many saris were out of the bundle and lying beside the lady on the sofa. A wad of money lay beside Biju's father, waiting to be wrapped in his small handkerchief.

'Mummy, Mummy, this boy taught me magic!' Bubbles shouted. 'He put cotton fluff into that toy Uncle Gobind gave me and made long strings come out from the other end!'

His mother laughed and said, 'Well, naturally!
His papa is a jadoogar too - a magician weaving
so many beautiful saris for me to show off this winter.
No one else will have any like these. When my friends
ask me where I bought them I shall name some big shop
so that they cannot get the same saris that I have.'





Biju's father looked modestly ahead at no one in particular and said, 'Well, we learn from our fathers and pass on the knowledge to our sons.'

'And I passed it on to Bubbles bhaiya,' said Biju shyly, politely calling his new friend an elder brother, and sharing his father's enjoyment of the morning's sale.

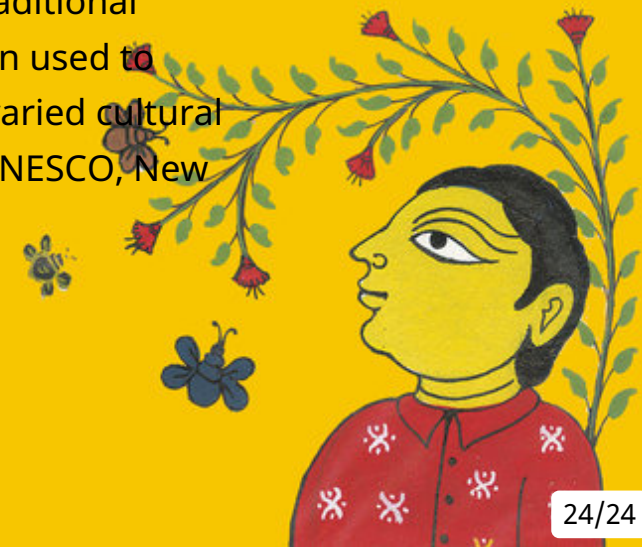
'Yes, Mummy,' said Bubbles with a mischievous smile, 'but when my friends ask me how I learned to spin on my charkha, I shall tell them that a jadoogar from Jilminda village in Sambalpur taught me!'



About the illustrations

Patachitra is the traditional painting of Odisha, India . The artist is called a *patachitrakar*. A *pat* is used as an offering in a temple. It is traditionally painted with stone colours, shell powder and organic lac on paper or cloth stiffened with tamarind seed and chalk powder. Nowadays, paintings are also done on silk and palm leaf. The pictures usually depict the religious epics but the flora and fauna of Odisha decorate the space around the figures of gods, goddesses, kings and queens.

Dastkari Haat Samiti is a large organization of Indian craftspeople, working to improve the social and economic status of people engaged in traditional handicraft skills. Local forms of painting and craftwork have been used to illustrate this series of four stories to encourage the sharing of varied cultural expressions. This work was made possible with the support of UNESCO, New Delhi.



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Biju Spins Some Magic (English)

Biju and his family are weavers in rural Odisha. They create beautiful fabrics to sell in the cities of India and abroad. This is the tale of Biju's adventures when he accompanies his father to Delhi to sell the saris, and in the process impresses a city boy with his skill. Jaya Jaitly's fun-filled story is illustrated by Bhramara Nayak in the patachitra style.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.



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