

VARUN KURTKOTI  
BELAKU STUDIO

# FRIENDS AND FOLK



"...and so the astrologer told me, you will have property, children, good wife, peace in life. I was very happy to hear all this. Then it was time to pay him. Now, I didn't have enough money on me, you see." The door opens. A drunk man peers inside the shared taxi stuffed with all of us passengers. The farmer sitting opposite me pauses his story.



"Move a bit, come on. Adjust," says the drunkard as I press against the saffron-clad musician, who pushes against an elderly couple on their way back home from the santi\*. No more space. Even the air, heavy with methi and tomatoes, is struggling to breathe with the stench of alcohol. We now wait patiently for the taxi to start.

"What happened after?" asks the musician. Nodding, the farmer continues to narrate his story. "So I did not have the money to pay the astrologer, poor I as was. I begged and bargained and flirted.



And then?

Finally the astrologer said, 'give me your lungi instead.' It was this beautiful gold laced white lungi...

I just took it off! took the bus, covered my ass with one hand...

So you just took it off and gave it to him?

HAHAHAHAH!-

Hahaha...

"I told my wife that someone stole the lungi when I was sleeping in the bus - "and she believed it?" asked the musician. "Of course," the farmer chuckled. "Stupid woman-"

But it all seems to have worked in your favour in the end, eh?

With 3 tractors, 16 acres of farmland, two houses, three children-

Of whom 2 are boys!

What a lucky guy! A winner, and yet so humble!

Now it's my turn to face questions.

Tourist?

Ah, like those that they play on tractors nowadays.

Ah, traditional music, like mine!

No, I work with folk musicians in Goshenatti, at Belaku Studio -

No, no, the studio produces folk music -

No, not traditional - it's more of creating a platform for singers and musicians who want to explore and create more music...

Everyone looks confused. I sympathise with them. This isn't something usual to the area.



“Are they on YouTube? Show me some of their songs-”

“Of course! Here-”

For those who joined late - Belaku studio started as a recording studio and a platform for folk music forms and its musicians, especially those from lower caste communities. Fakkir and friends started the studio not just to produce and document their music, but also with the intention of developing their music practices.



Not many followers.

No, not yet, but -

"You said you don't do traditional folk, but this is that!"



"Yes, but it's not the only thing we do..."

## ನಮ್ಮ ಎಲುವಿನ ಹಂದರ - Namma Yeluvina Handara - song ft. Basavaraj Hulikottal (...)

678 views 1 yr ago #janapada ...more

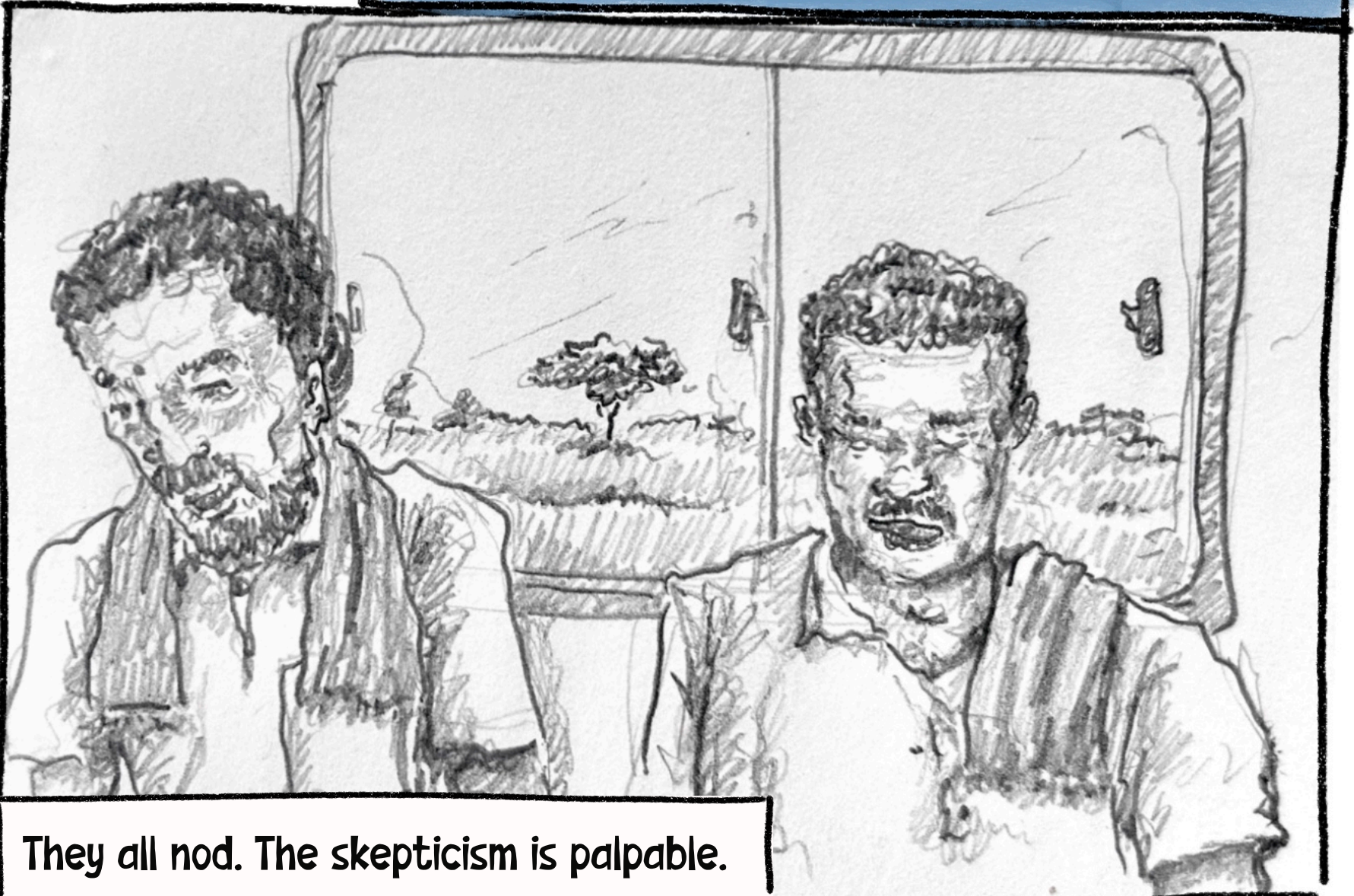


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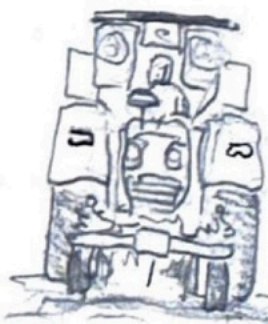
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The studio has a lot of productions lined up, yet to come."



They all nod. The skepticism is palpable.

After a while, the musician pats me on my back and points - a tractor laid with sugarcane approached us, Music booming. "Nowadays, Janapada\* is all about the tractor songs. Have you heard of it?"

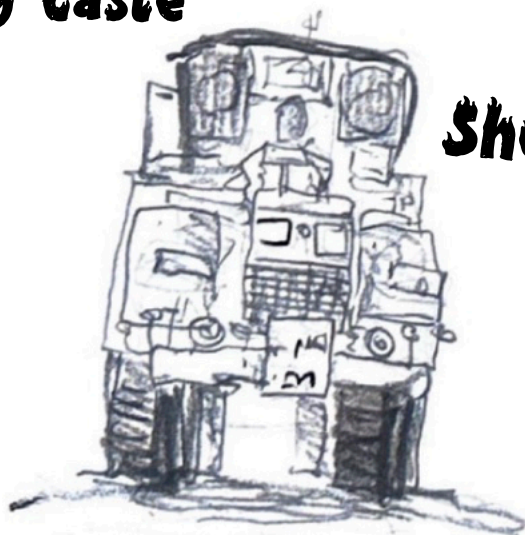


**Don't care if she bites**

**Don't care if she scratches**

**I'll snatch her in front of you all**

**I swear on my caste**



**She is gonna be mine**

**I don't care for no one**

**I get what I want**



Of course I had listened to them. Tractor janapada are contemporary songs that are played loudly on decked-up tractors. These songs are also classified as folk, and mostly are local lyrics fit to karaoke versions of famous songs.

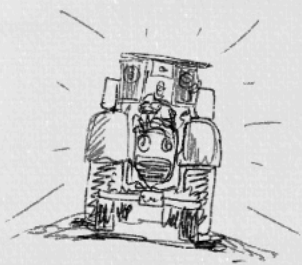
That's all they care about nowadays. Crass, lewd lyrics, posing with sunglasses... ugh.

Janapada should be about Gods, traditions, our culture, dharma....



The cruiser reaches Goshenatti, my stop. Even as I stepped out -

The tractor boomed past us.



That's all they want. Boys have no sense of value nowadays.

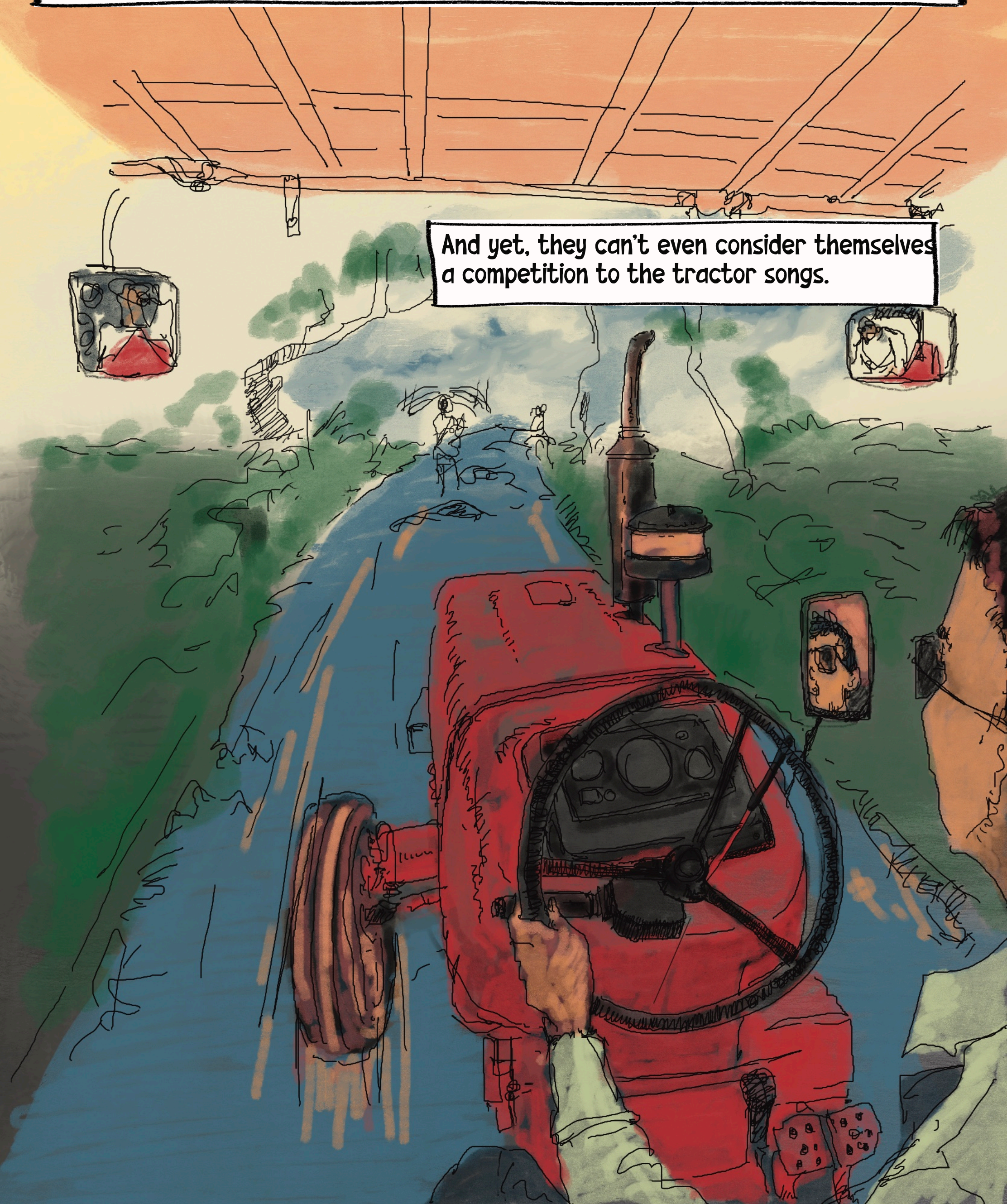
We exchange numbers. Before shutting the door, he quips -

Next time your studio makes a song, share it on Whatsapp with me!



This was not how it was supposed to be, I wanted to tell them. Belaku Studios dreams of doing great things. Their productions should reach the world.

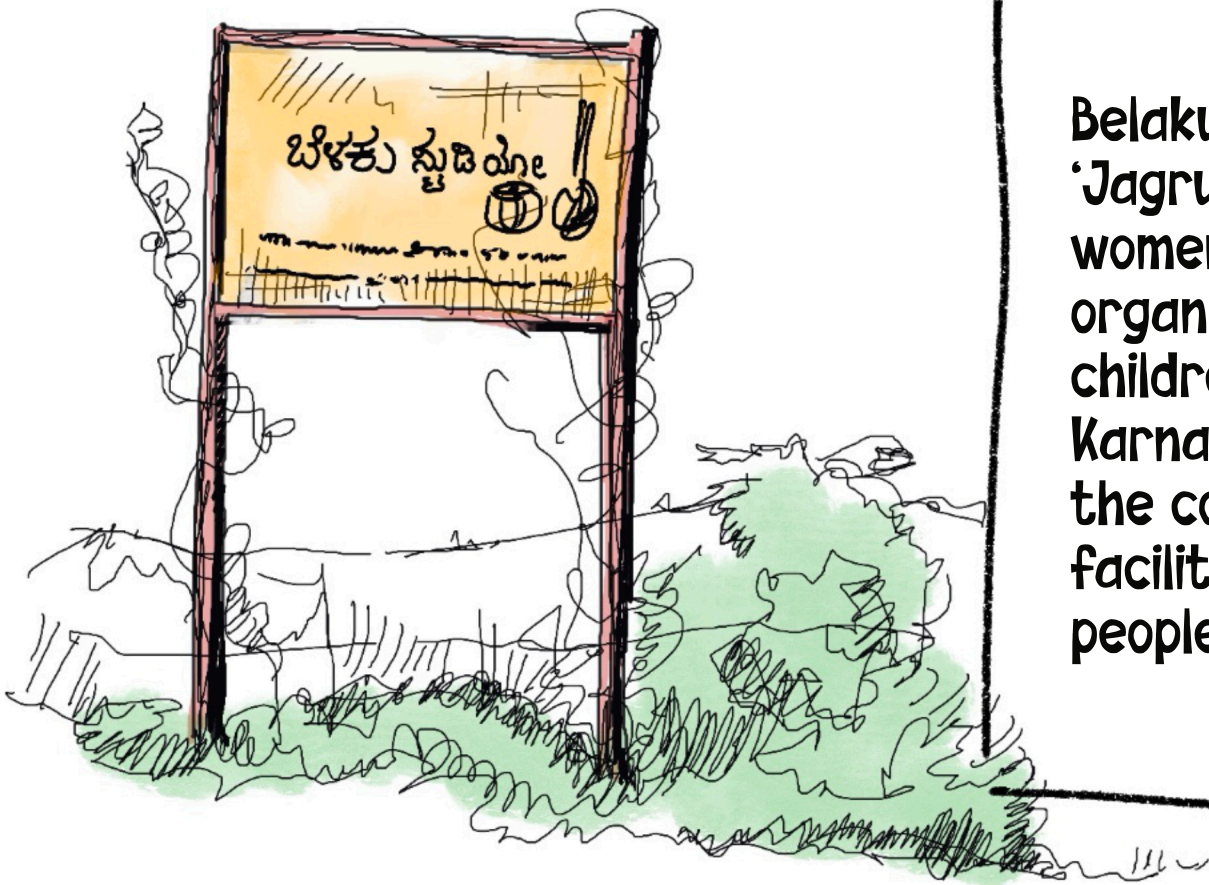
And yet, they can't even consider themselves a competition to the tractor songs.



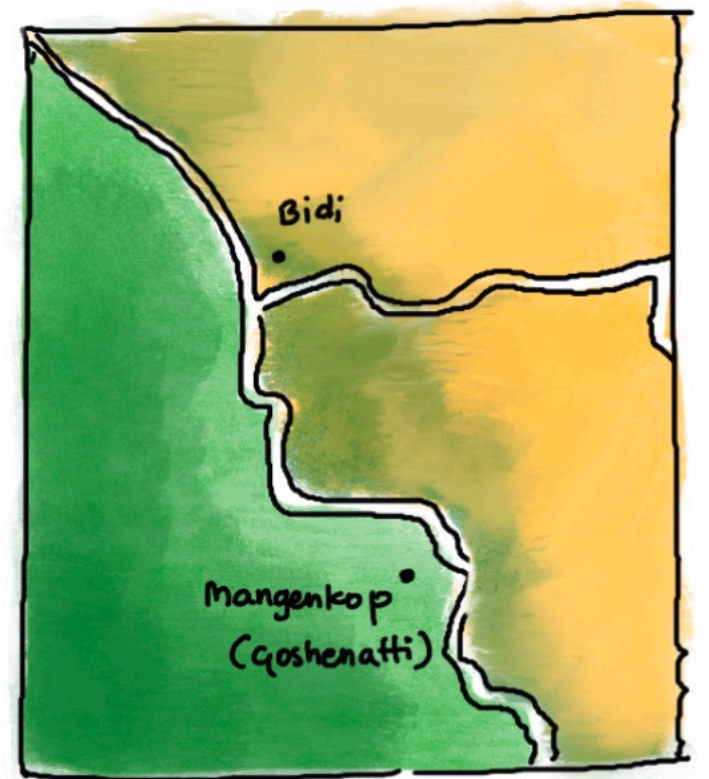
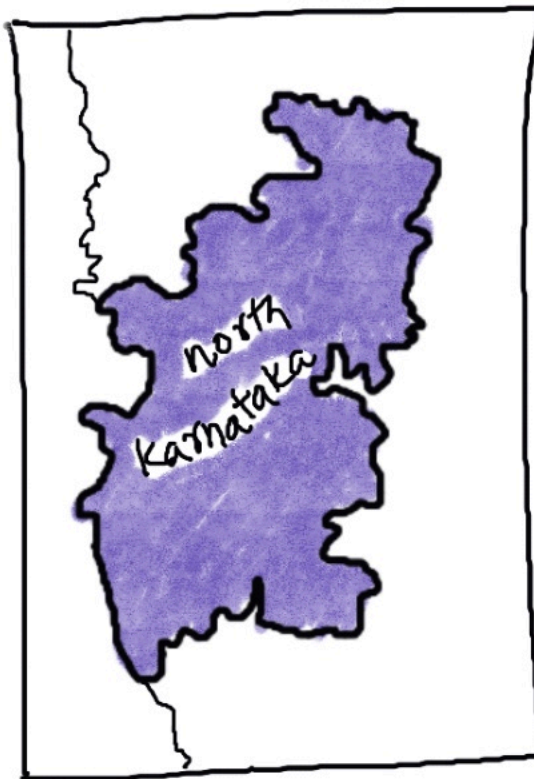
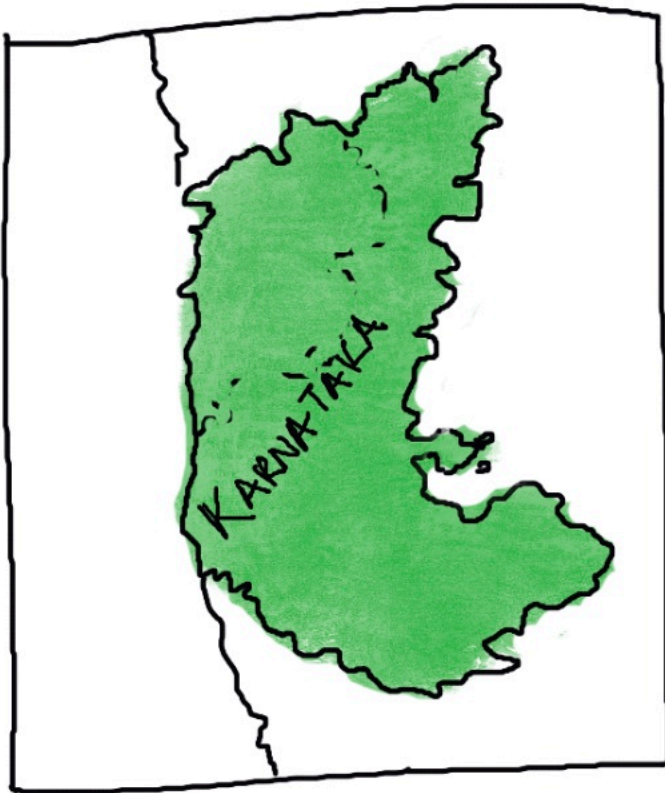
Even the videos that the studio did produce, haven't found much viewership.



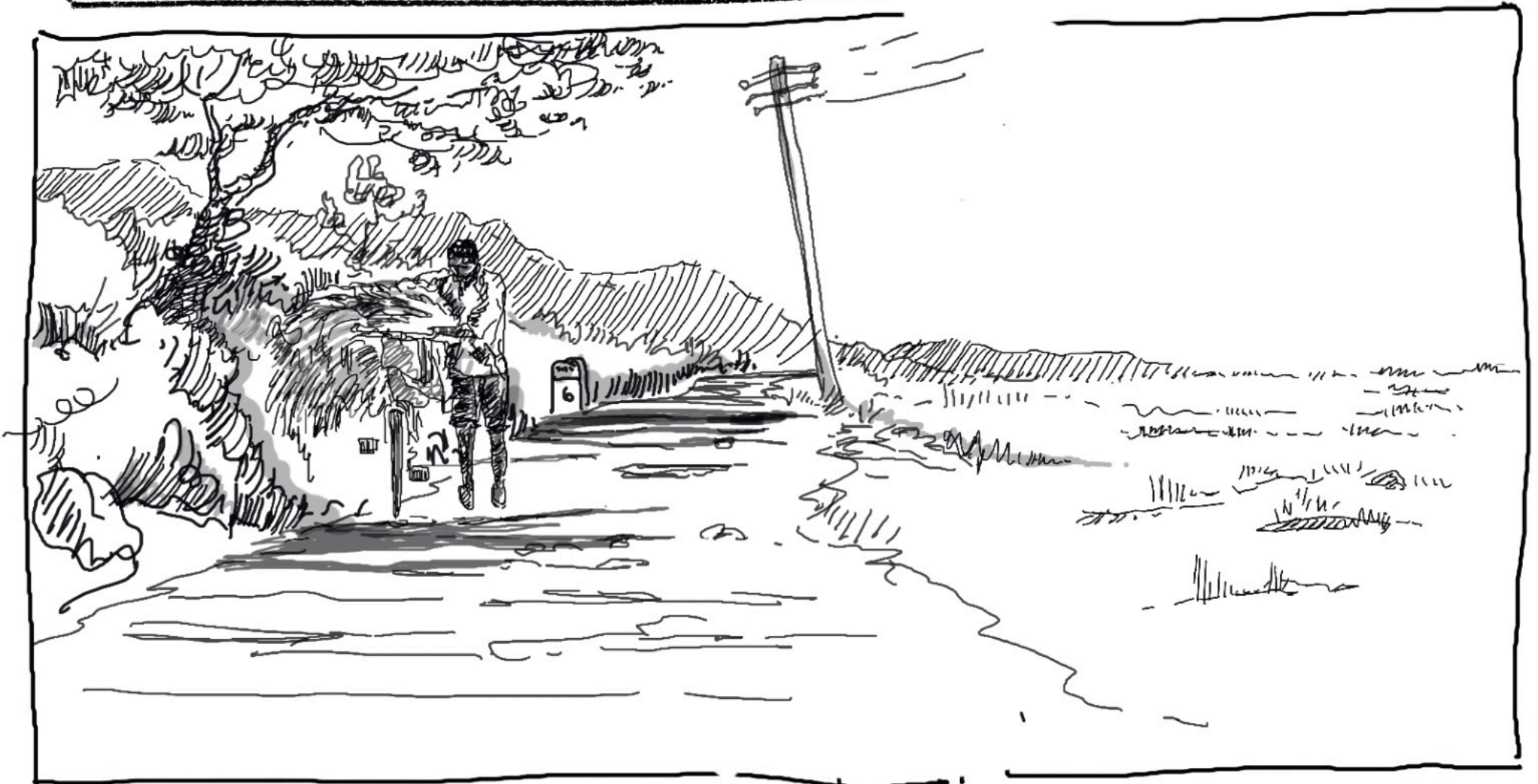
I have reached the studio. We want to record our conversation - It will make good podcast content, I had suggested.



Belaku studios is housed inside 'Jagrut Mahila Okkoota', a grassroots women's collective that works to organise and enable the rural women, children and disabled people of North Karnataka. Fakkir is also a member of the collective. He organises and facilitates soft skills for disabled people across Belgaum district.



The studio is located in Goshenatti village, in Belgaum district of north Karnataka. On one side of this village, it's the start of malnad (Western Ghats). On the other side it is bayalseema (plateau); Forests on one side, grasslands on the other.

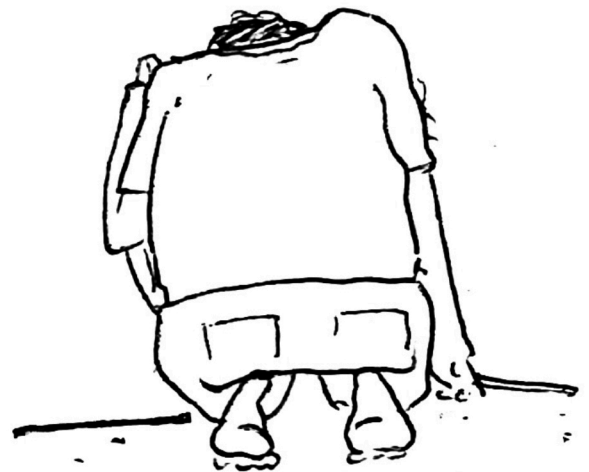


The music of this place is just as complex as its geography: diverse forms of folk music exist, like gee gee pada, bhajanaa pada, chowdki pada, sobaana pada, karbala pada, laali haadu, karadi majalu, hanti pada, Dollina pada, jaggaligi, so on. Most of these forms are performed and practiced by lower caste families.

However, in most of the literature and popular understanding of folk, the contributions made by these families, their lived experiences and their histories are ignored and invisibilised. By calling Folk 'author-less', the musician families are stripped of their ownership from their own cultural practices - just like they were denied land and other property, for all these centuries.



That is where Belaku studio comes into the picture. Or at least, that's what Fakkir thought...



Objective of Belaku Studios: to produce, record and distribute music and videos by artists from marginalised and oppressed communities.

When I enter the studio, Fakkir and Prem are tinkering with the wires.  
....something is wrong.

Fakkir, This mic wont work.

What about the other one, Prem?

I cannot hold it any longer. So I ask: " Fakkir, Why hasn't Belaku studio really produced much work?

And why doesn't it have much viewership? You have all the equipment you need -

... But who knows how to use it??

"-I have been teaching you, haven't I," I ask. For the past one year, I have been teaching audio and video production skills to the studio team. That is how I became friends with them.

You teach, you go. But how do we continue after that? Every time something goes wrong we have to stop and wait for you to come back!



We sometimes record, it doesn't come out right. We don't know what to do after that. Do you know how many recordings we are simply sitting, Not knowing what to do with them? Its frustrating. No one wants to listen to them, and we don't know how to package and sell our art the way the others do, Neither do we want to do it like that.

That is true. So...

... what now?



If you had asked me a few months ago, I would have told you we are disheartened demotivated. But things are different now.

You want to hear our story?


Fakkir continues: "Our team - Prem, Tippanna, Basavaraj, Ramesh, Dyanesh, Aakash, and I - all of us belong to the Madiga community."

"Our community have always been the makers of music, physically and creatively: After picking meat from dead animals, we skin the carcass, and then we cure the leather. Then we make percussion instruments like Halagi from this leather. Then we practise our music on these instruments, teach the art form to our young ones in our family, and perform to large audiences. In fact, most of the older folk compositions you hear around here have been developed, nurtured and practised by landless, Dalit families.



"But ours is a predominantly feudal landscape. We now do not own our cultural skillsets.

Without access to education and resources, we have been bereft of all the advancements in skills and technology and language — meaning even though music evolved, we could not evolve with it."



Folk art forms are the only inherited wealth for our landless families - and yet, we are unable to nurture and grow our wealth, and are now at risk of losing it all.

My hope through this studio was to break this vicious circle by creating studio, a platform where we can make the music we dreamt of. Yet..

It's ironic. The very problem that we want to address through the studio, plagued the development of the studio... without knowledge of computers or English, we could not operate the softwares. And even when we struggled and learnt and produced a few videos....



We wanted to challenge the misogynist, casteist content that's circulating in the name of Janapada these days. We even produced a few songs that tried this. But no viewership! If we want viewers, we need to do what we stand against. What's the point in that?

We were disheartened for a while. But a little later, I started to notice something...



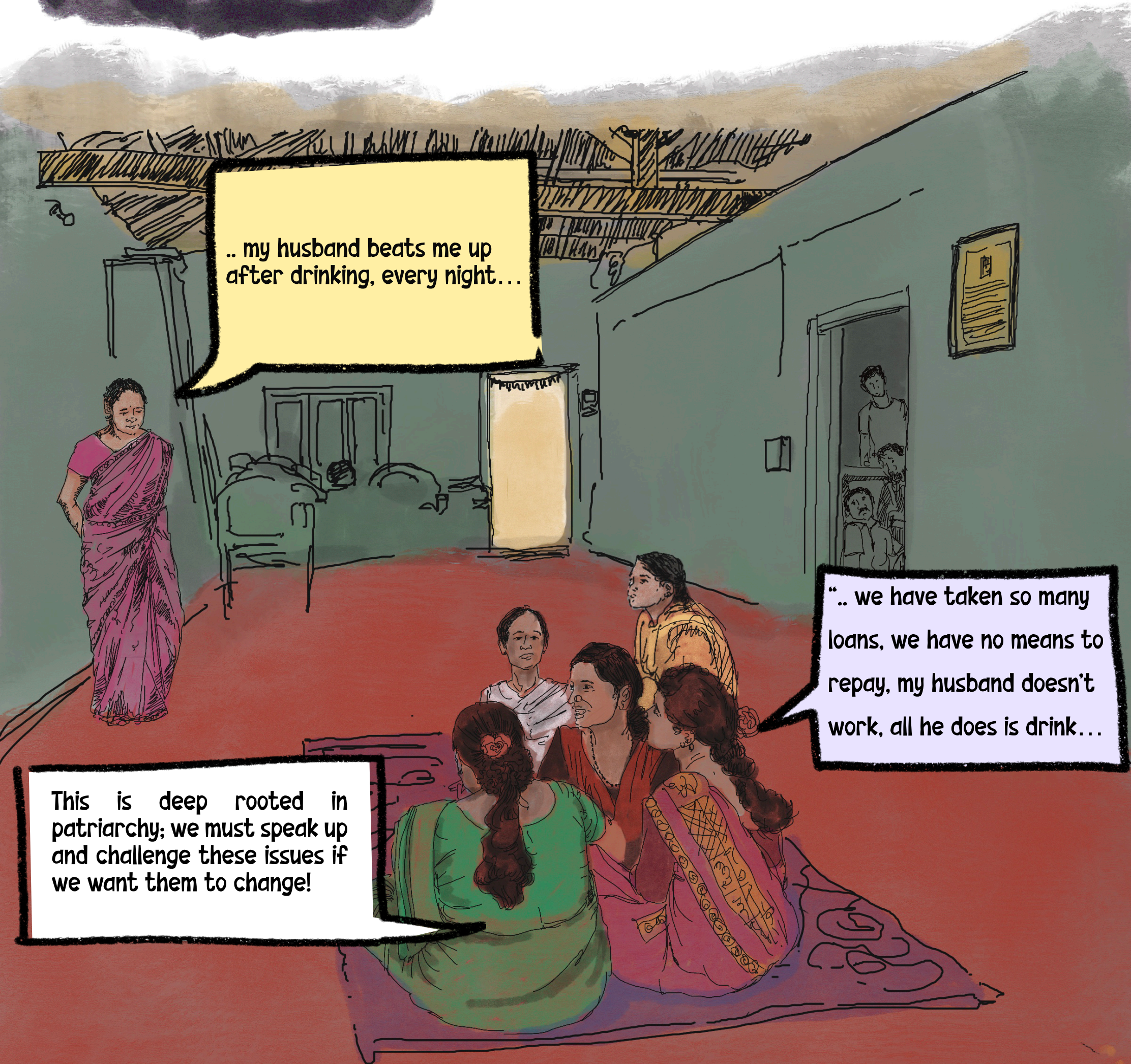


Our studio space is nested inside Jagruti's office space. So when our friends - men, all of them - started coming here to record and experiment in the studio, they inevitably would overhear the women of the collective discuss their issues:

.. my husband beats me up after drinking, every night...

".. we have taken so many loans, we have no means to repay, my husband doesn't work, all he does is drink..."

This is deep rooted in patriarchy; we must speak up and challenge these issues if we want them to change!





We had never heard women talk like this before. That changed the way we looked at music itself. But it also paralysed us:

what do we do now?

How do we do our music?

Maybe that's another reason why we have produced so little...



On one hand, technology. On another hand, social issues, morality, social work values...



Then one day, Prem proposed that we make a song on the issue of debt traps that is plaguing the villages.

We produced the song 'Naa hyanga maadalevva Samsara'. We wrote it, composed it, and even shot its music video. We are still performing the song everywhere, and it's a super-hit. All the children know the lyrics!

We realised that our strength is our ability to perform! We know how to hold an audience, engage with them.



So we started doing the 'samvidhan abhiyan', travelling village to village, singing songs that were about our Constitution, and how it applies to our everyday lives... we spoke of equality, equity, justice, fraternity...



But we arranged and composed them as per our janapada style, so that they are catchy for our audience.



This also meant that we had to face men in whichever village we performed.



We faced old drunkards who simply wanted to disrupt our performance ...



Young drunkards who were upset we weren't playing the usual tractor music ...



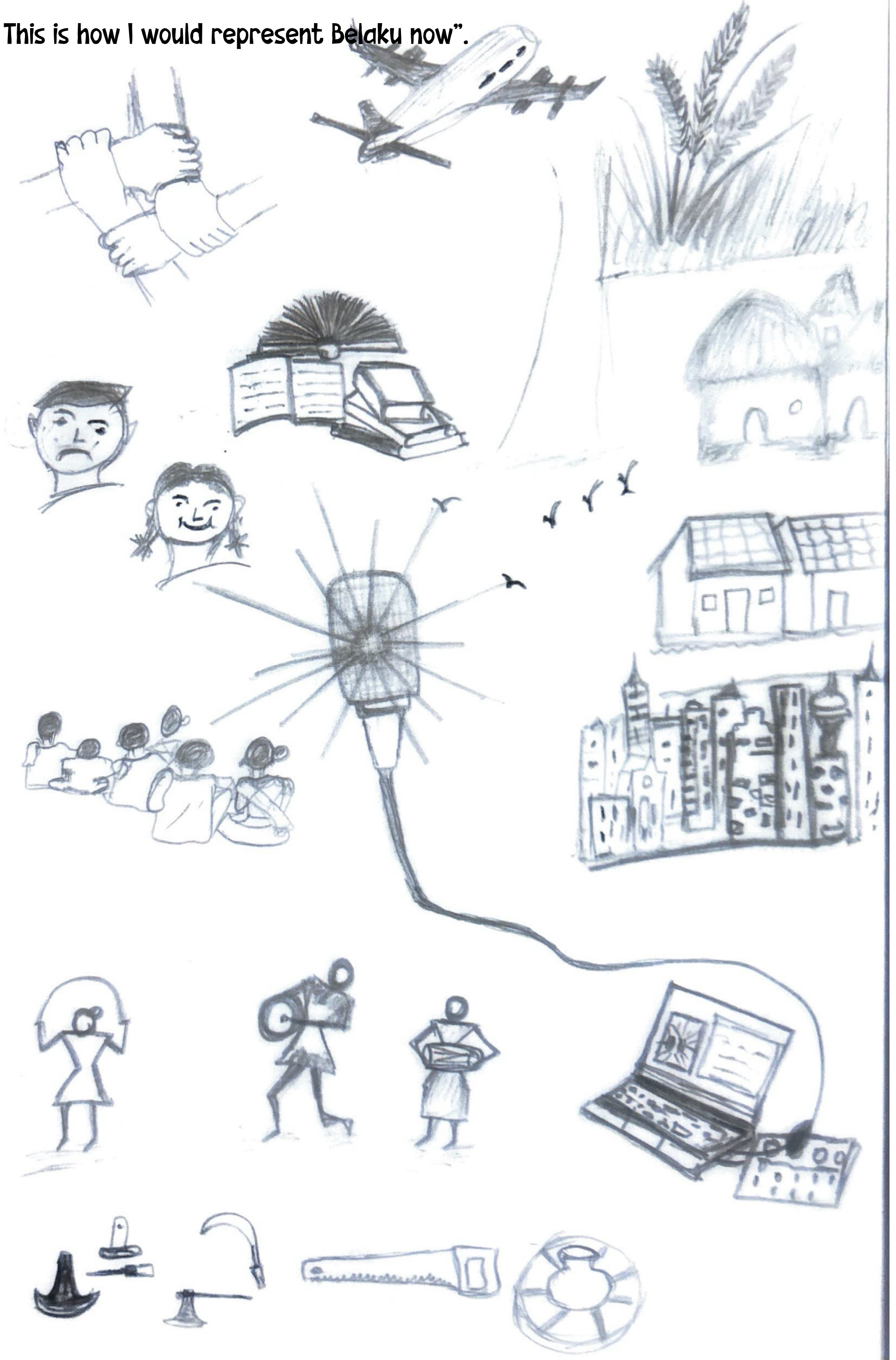
Angry, confused men who were scared of what we sang.



We now have the opportunity to interact and engage with men who otherwise have no exposure or ways to reflect upon their own lives...

...With the help of the women from Jagrut Okkoota, we may now actually be able to change the men of our villages!

"Look! This is how I would represent Belaku now".



But Belaku's success hasn't just been through music and performances. It's also been through an occupying of space... through food!



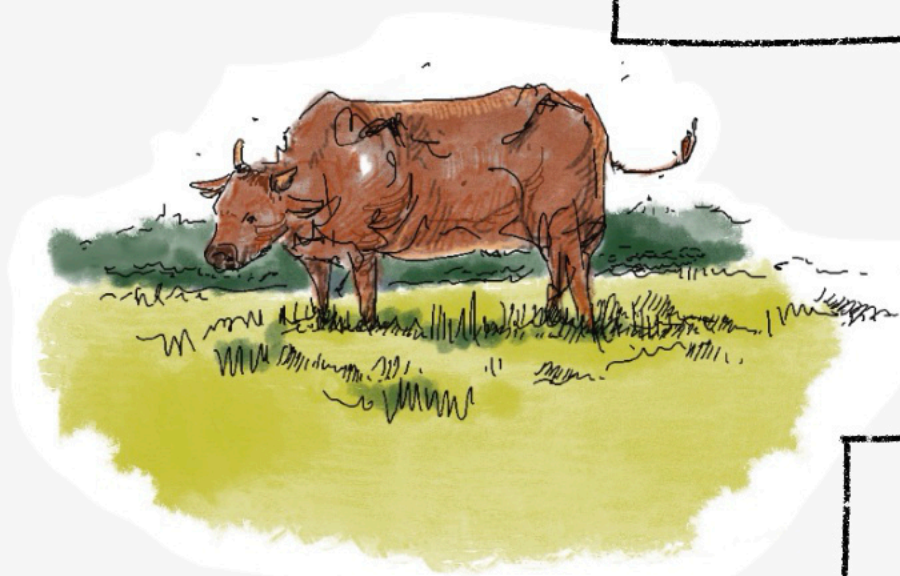
Before we started jamming here, No one ever brought or cooked meat here at the Jagruti office. Just like any typical Gandhian grassroots organisation, vegetarian food had become the unwritten, unsaid staple for all. Don't get me wrong. No one told us not to eat meat! But the police inside our heads is so strong, you see, that none of us from the lower caste ever dared to eat what we really liked, or preferred, here.

But when we started staying at the office space overnight to record, we started cooking meat.

We felt like thieves at first: we'd dispose off the bones and stuff before others walked in...

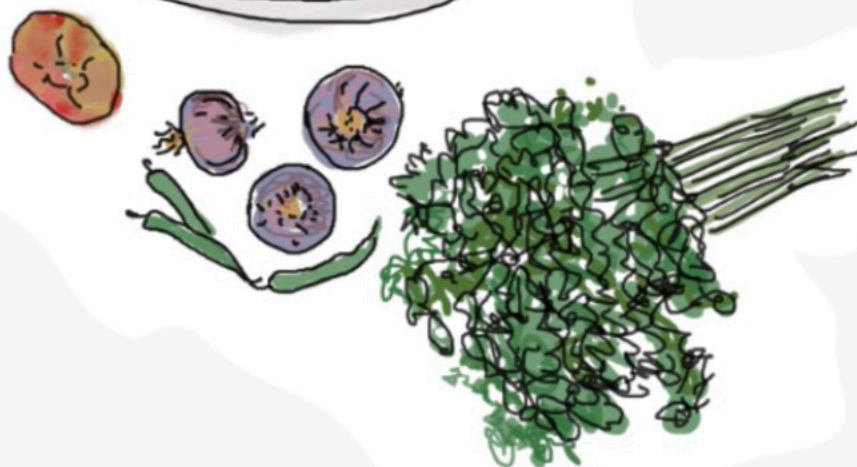
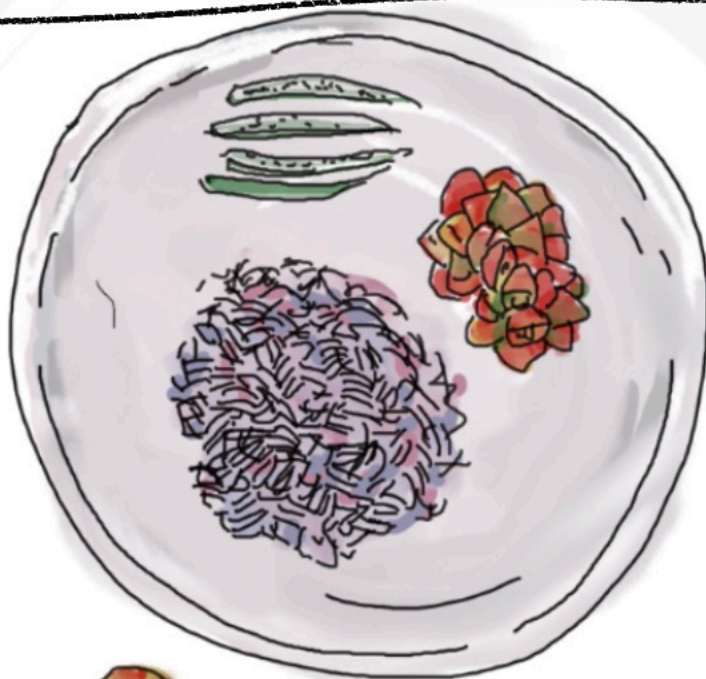
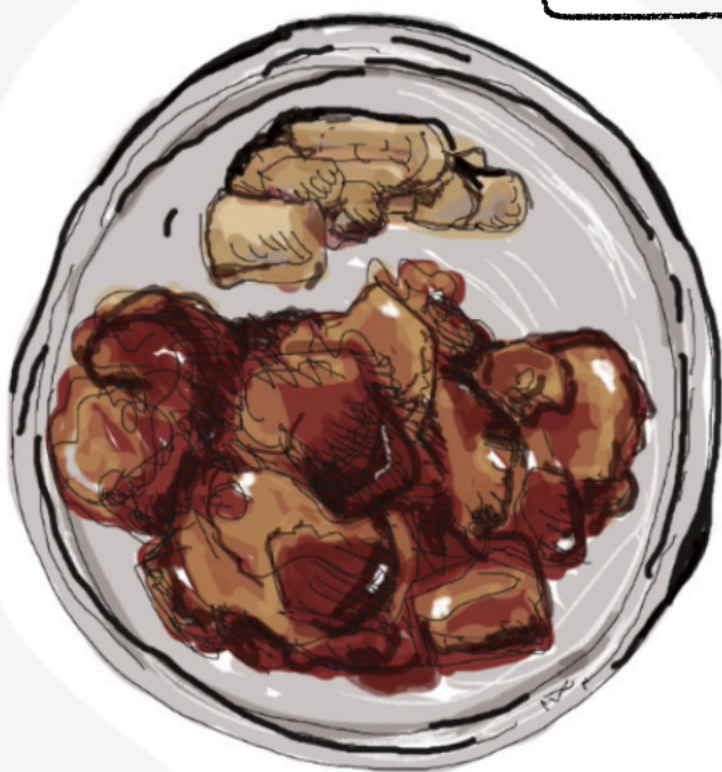


Then we started talking about it openly.



It took us many months.

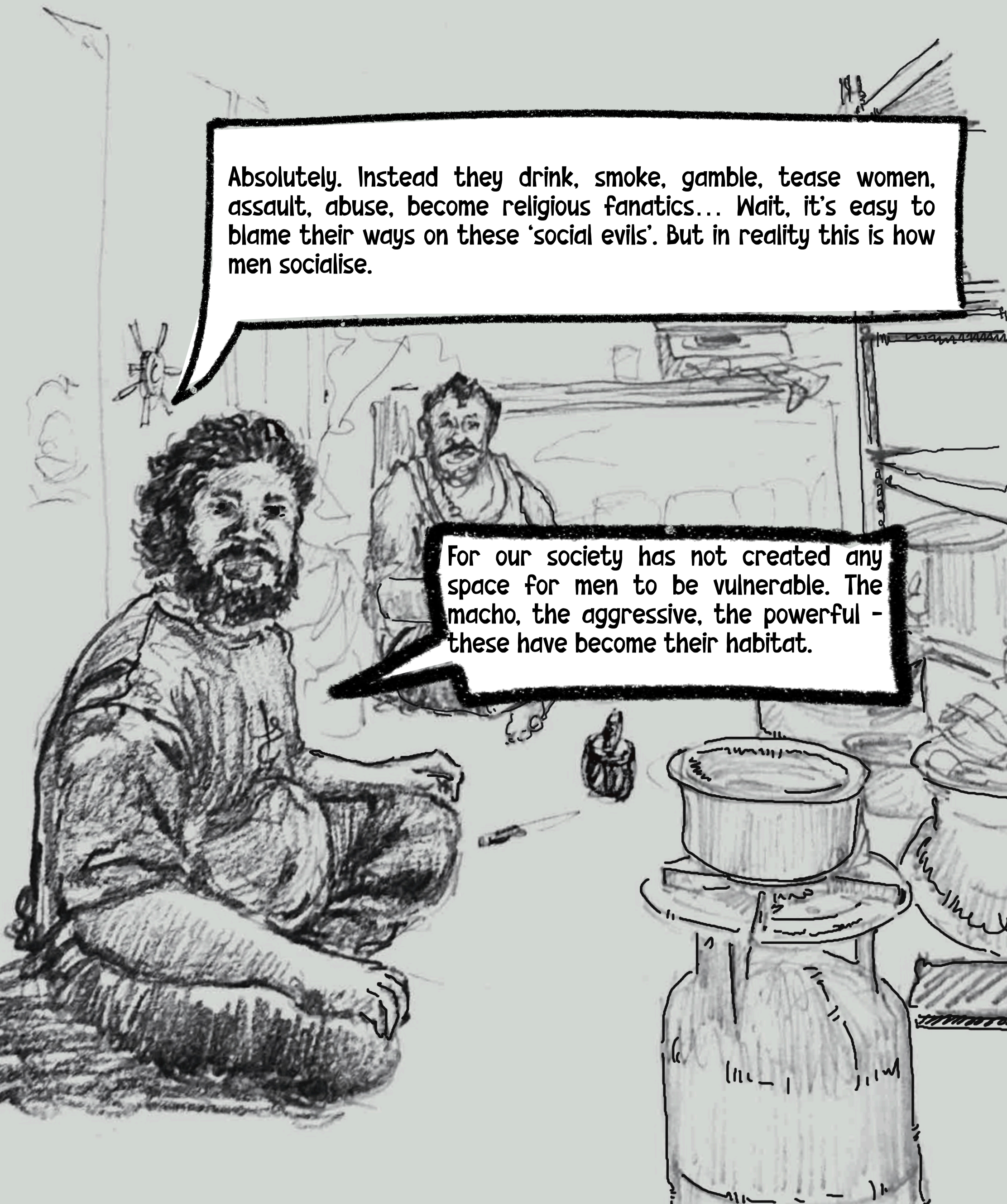
And now? It is beef all the time!

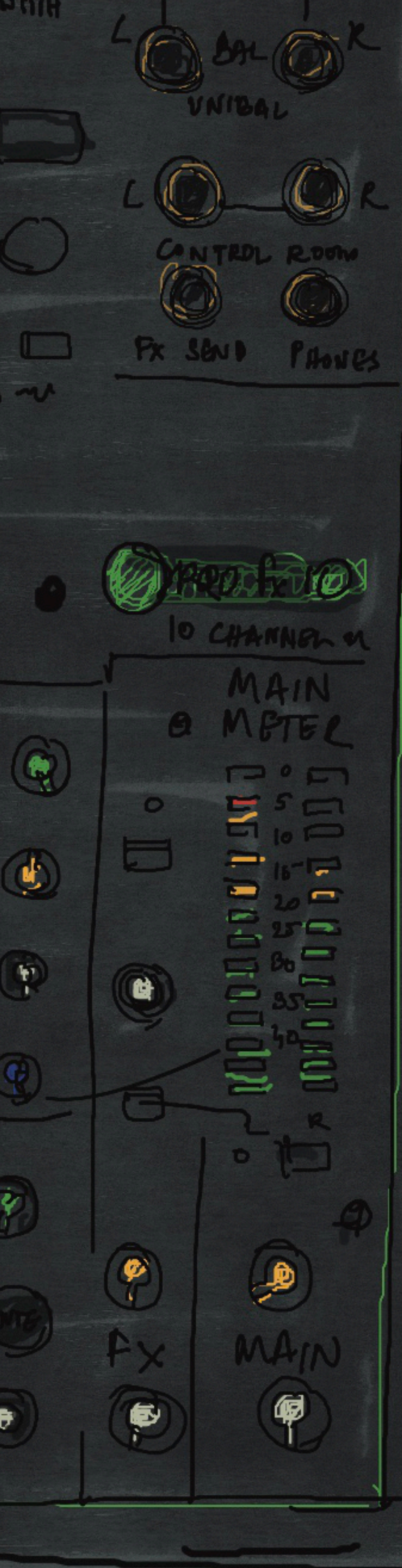


"Fakkir, men here don't seem to have what you all have -"

Absolutely. Instead they drink, smoke, gamble, tease women, assault, abuse, become religious fanatics... Wait, it's easy to blame their ways on these 'social evils'. But in reality this is how men socialise.

For our society has not created any space for men to be vulnerable. The macho, the aggressive, the powerful - these have become their habitat.





For us its all about sharing, caring, and performing together.

You know what? When we started the studio, all this was never on our mind. We just wanted to sing karaoke songs, just make music ... together.

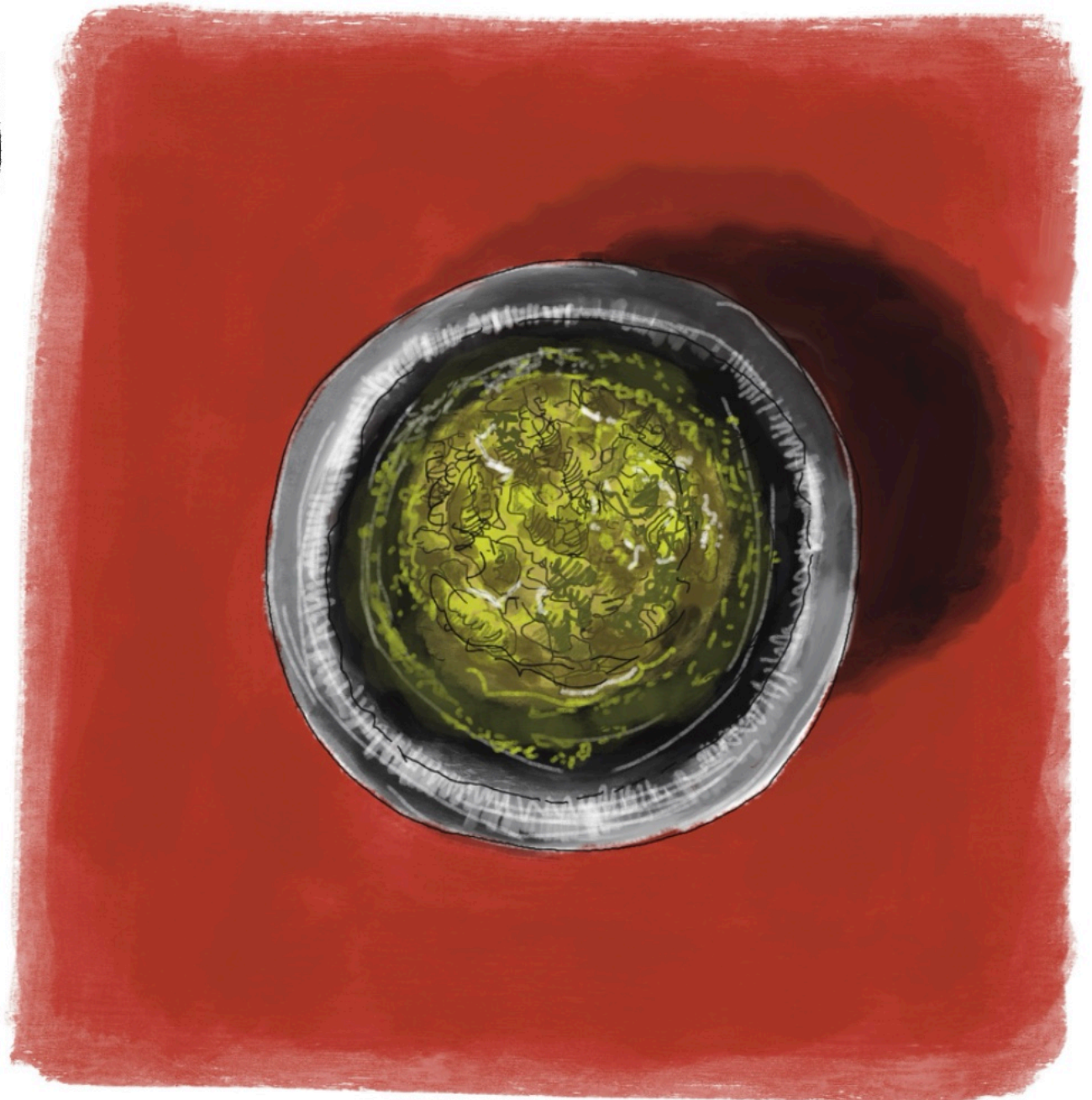
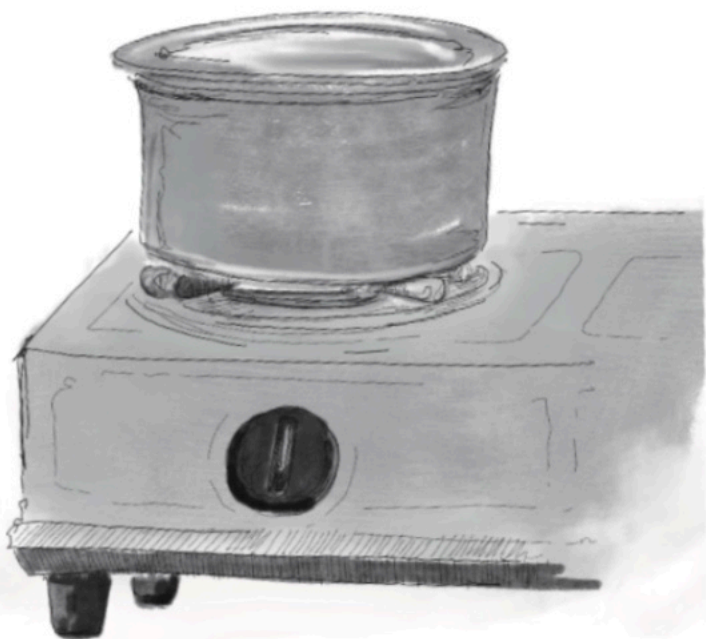


Oh. In fact Prem, Ramesh, Tippanna- they literally are building my house right now. They are dreaming about decorations. It's going to be as much their home as mine.

We are always there for each other.



We cook together...





**We eat together...**



**Would you like  
some beef?**

“How come none of you became like the other men from your villages?”

Music!

Jokes!

Food!

All true... we have strived to share our spaces and interests with each other.



Maybe that's the purpose of Belaku -  
to bring people together with music,  
and offer men a space to be  
vulnerable.



Maybe that is enough.

"Thats what folk is about, no?"







A few weeks later, we went on a trip to Chapoli, a village at the border of Goa and Karnataka, deep inside a biodiversity hotspot of Western Ghats. One of our friends, Kashinath, lives there. We decided to visit a waterfall next to his village. We had to trek for a couple of kilometers, and so we did.

We were all excited. In hindsight, it was quite a foolish and improbable task: It had rained heavily. The waist length grass was dangerously slippery. There were no roads, just a hint of a trail. And most of all...

Fakkir was taking this journey along with us. If I have not mentioned it before, Fakkir is paraplegic. Unlike most of us, he would not be able to walk, let alone hike or trek.

Between the five of us, we lugged Fakkir and his wheelchair through the roadless slippery hills. Not a single soul cast a doubt about Fakkir coming along.



Throughout the journey, Fakkir kept us laughing with his jokes. “Its going to be easier to build me a house here and stay than take me back,” or, “I am more worried about the wheelchair. It doesn't have warranty”.

As Fakkir and the wheelchair bounced through the brambles and rocks and bunds and slippery slopes, he started singing this one vachana\*, Soon, all of us joined in.

\*Vachana is a form of poetry in Kannada, addressing social and spiritual issues.

*Mullu tuludeni yavva*  
*Kanneeralu kanolu*  
*Daari bittu hoguvaaga*  
*Kaari kantiya mullu*

(I have stepped on a thorn,  
I cannot hold back my tears  
I stray off my path,  
The brambles show no mercy)

Indeed, they show no mercy. We are all scratched and bruised now. But upon reaching the waterfall - oh the joy!

That song, that moment: they came together not because of fate, but friendship. Folks willing to carry each other's burdens, being there for each other just so that they can share the moments of joy when they do come, for they are inevitable.



## **CONTRIBUTORS**

### **Belaku Studio team**

Fakkirappa Hulikottal (Fakkir)

Premanand Kolkar (Prem)

Tippanna Kolkar

Ramesh Bagalennavar

Basvaraj Hulikottal

Aakash Metri

Dyanesh

### **Jagrut Mahila Okkoota members**

Mahananda

Mahadevi Hiremath

Rukmini Sutar

Sharada

Suvarna

Shilpa Vante

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Kashinath, for his warmth and kindness and amazing food.

### **About**

Varun Kurtkoti is a filmmaker, community artist and arts educator who divides his time between Bangalore and Dharwad, Karnataka. Varun's practice includes animation, filmmaking, theatre, ethnography and designing arts-based pedagogies. He facilitates arts-based capacity building and community development to precarious workers and young adults across Karnataka in association with various grassroots organisations and educational institutes. Varun has an MA in Community Arts & Applied Anthropology from Goldsmiths University, London, and a Diploma in Art & Design, from Srishti Institute of Art, Design & Technology.