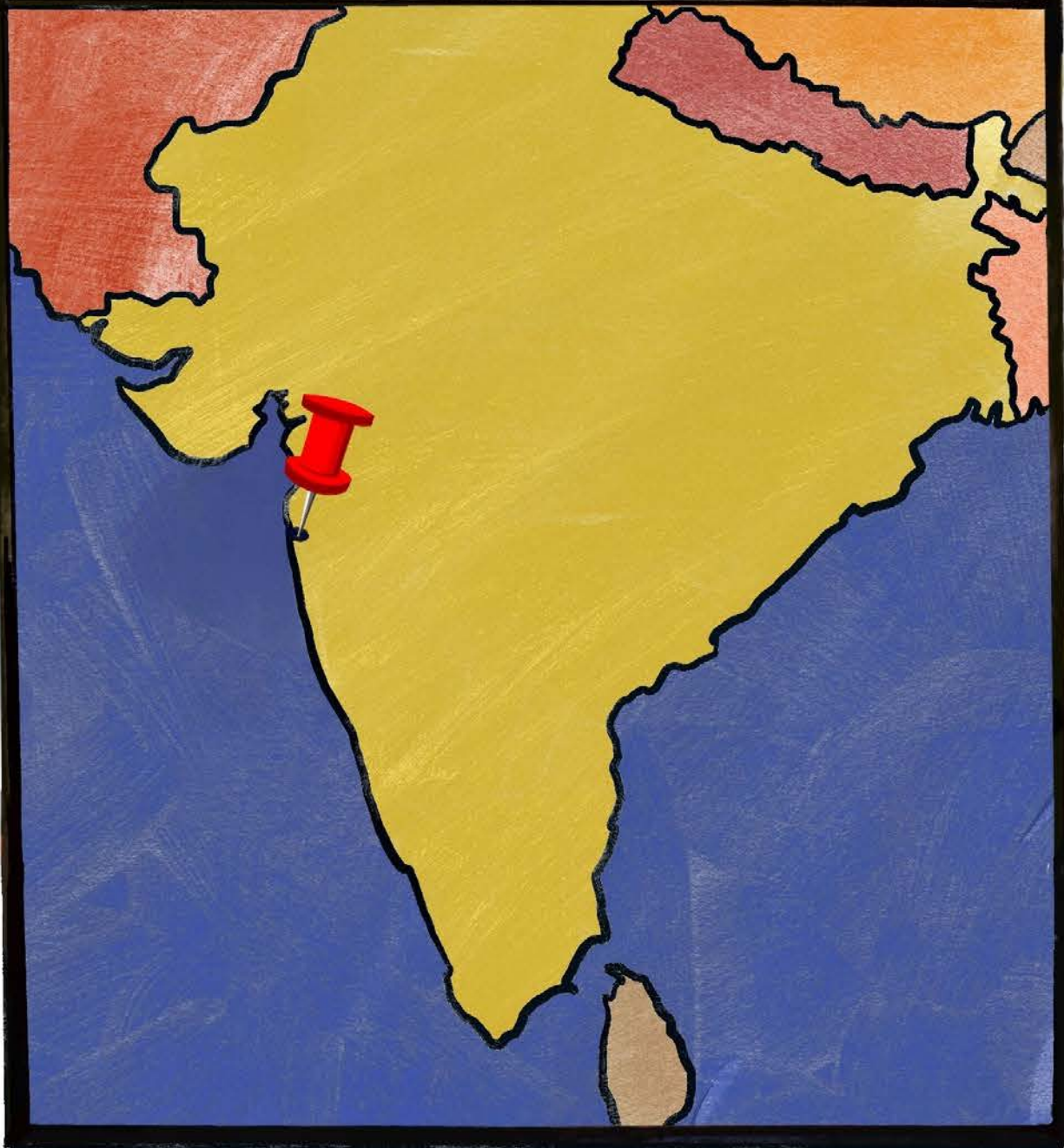
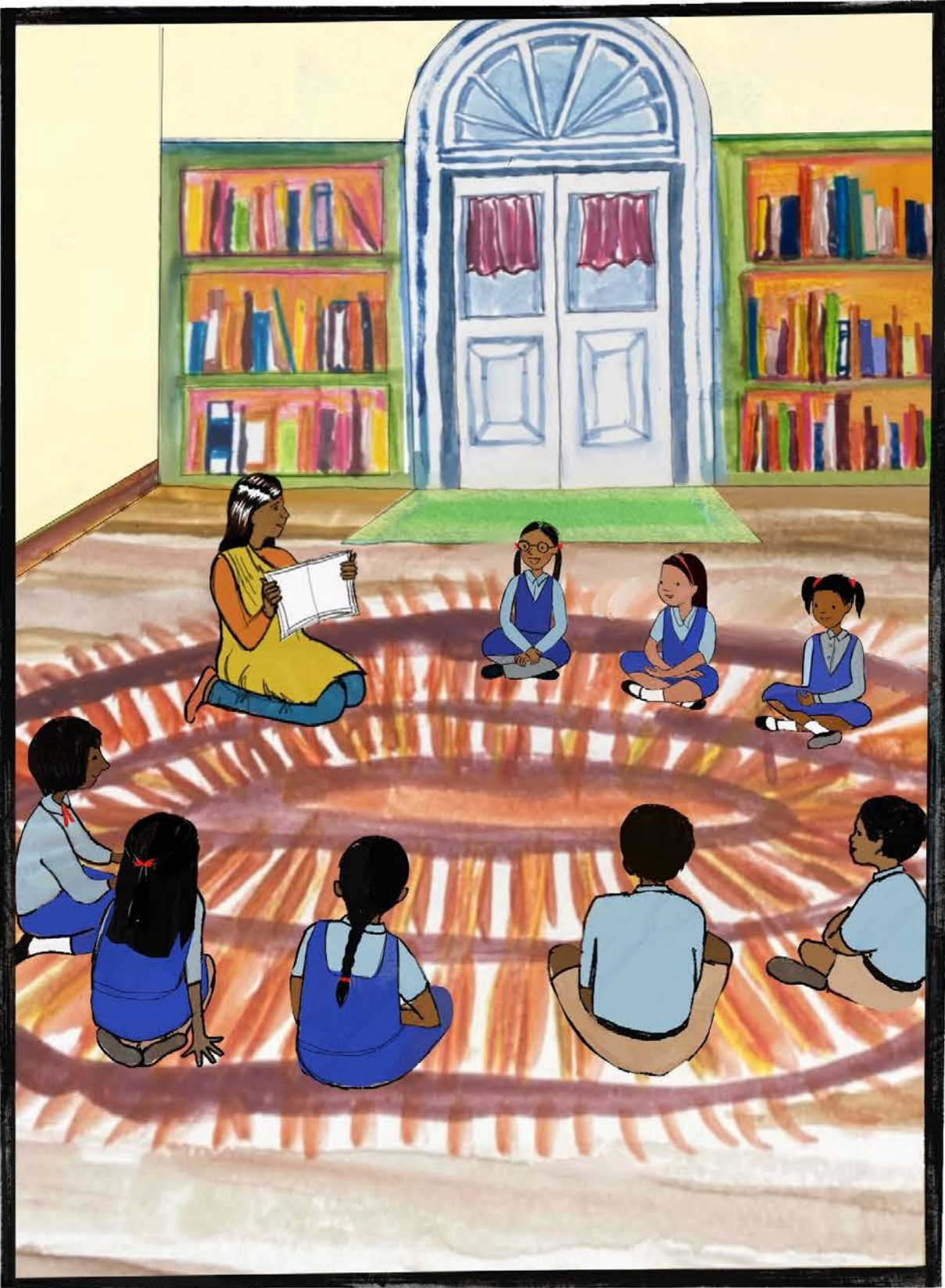


# MUMBAI

INDIA





# MISS LEELA, MUMBAI, INDIA

*“Inclusion, for me, means building my classroom today for the generations of the future.”*

– Miss Leela

By Nomisha Kurian

## ABOUT MISS LEELA

Miss Leela grew up with a younger sister, Sosha. Sosha acquired a visual impairment when she was four. The experience of caregiving for Sosha gave Leela a lifelong commitment to serving the differently-abled. As an Early Years teacher (teaching children from 0-7 years of age) in a government (public) school in Mumbai, Miss Leela now makes a special effort to promote inclusion of learners with disabilities. In her current, co-educational classroom of 15 children, these learners with disabilities are seven year old girls, Mala and Trisha. Mala is visually-impaired, while Trisha struggles with her hearing. Miss Leela is particularly attentive to these girls, aware that their dual identities as female and differently-abled sometimes render them more at risk of being overlooked or bullied. She is also aware of Mala and Trisha’s background as children of migrant workers, and that because of this, they are constantly changing schools. This, and knowing that they were previously bullied due to their disabilities, deepens their need for a safe and nurturing space. Miss Leela does her best to provide emotional stability for the girls, and prevent social exclusion.

## CREATING RELEVANT CURRICULA

Miss Leela prioritizes diversity in her teaching materials, selecting picture books that represent children with additional needs. She regularly asks local booksellers to inform her when books that represent diverse needs or backgrounds come in. She affirms, “I want the kids to learn from a young age that there is no such thing as normal - if anything, difference is what is normal. Throughout their life, they will encounter people who look different from them and I want them to enter each encounter with empathy and kindness.” When she cannot find existing resources, she tries to create them herself. She asks the children to draw what inclusion means to them, or re-imagine how traditional stories and fairytales might look and sound with differently-abled characters. By normalizing disability, Miss Leela aims to create a culture of celebrating differences.

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**

Miss Leela makes an effort to know each student personally, including Mala and Trisha. She boosts their confidence by giving specific praise and sets clear expectations with consistent consequences. For example, when Mala kept chatting to classmates while Miss Leela was teaching, Miss Leela asked her to focus on the lesson using loving affirmations (“I know you can do this”) and without using stigmatizing or shaming language, and inserted 5-minute “Talk Time” breaks within the lesson to allow Mala to have some time to bond with her peers.

Miss Leela faces the challenge of limited resources in accommodating special needs. However, she encourages peer mentoring so that differently-abled learners do not have to be ostracized or isolated. For example, she seats Mala and Trisha with children who seem empathetic or sociable, so that Mala and Trisha are more likely to enjoy healthy friendships and have sources of support close to hand. If she sees children being unkind or making derogatory remarks about Mala and Trisha’s appearance and behavior, Miss Leela firmly intervenes to remind them about the importance of inclusion and make it clear that discrimination is not tolerated in her classroom.

At pick-up time, she gives Mala and Trisha’s parents regular updates on their progress and any concerns. She knows that as migrant workers, these parents face multiple stressors. Within the Indian context, migrant workers are those who routinely move between states and cities in search of employment. Typically originating from rural areas, migrant workers tend to move to urban centers, where labor is in demand. Migrant workers often work in minimum-wage jobs with long hours and little job security. They often live in informal settlements, and the majority of migrant workers and their families struggle to access basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation facilities, and healthcare.

Within this context, Miss Leela aims to help Mala and Trisha’s parents feel well-supported. Maintaining a strengths-based lens, she makes sure to convey the children’s accomplishments: “I like to tell them when their child has done something well, big or small. For example, Mala was patient and waited her turn in the queue today, Trisha helped her classmate find a missing pencil today...the parents’ faces light up hearing that their child has done something right.”

## **ENGAGING IN FUTURE-BUILDING**

Miss Leela strives to stay informed about early childhood education development, but struggles to find time to read. She takes notes on the behavior of children in her class during moments of respite, using them to inform her practice. She has observed that girls with disabilities consistently

face harassment and exhibit distress.

To help prevent this trauma, Miss Leela speaks to parents at pick-up time and in parent-teacher meetings about how it is crucial to address and dismantle cultural stereotypes about gender and disability at an early age, as she has noticed that children as young as two and three start to develop understanding of what it means to be a boy or a girl or to be 'normal'. By age six, they may have already formed biases about boys and girls' intelligence and the rights of those with disabilities.

Miss Leela recognizes the intersectionality of inequalities for girls with disabilities. She notes that female learners may face additional pressure to be compliant and uncomplaining, even when bullied. As they get older, these biases can become even harder to challenge. She encourages parents to recognize and address these issues early on. As a teacher who actively advocates for equality, she calls her classroom the 'cradle of the future'.

**Learn More** about protecting the wellbeing of at-risk children at "[School as a Sanctuary: Trauma-Informed Care to Nurture Child Well-Being in High-Poverty Schools.](#)"