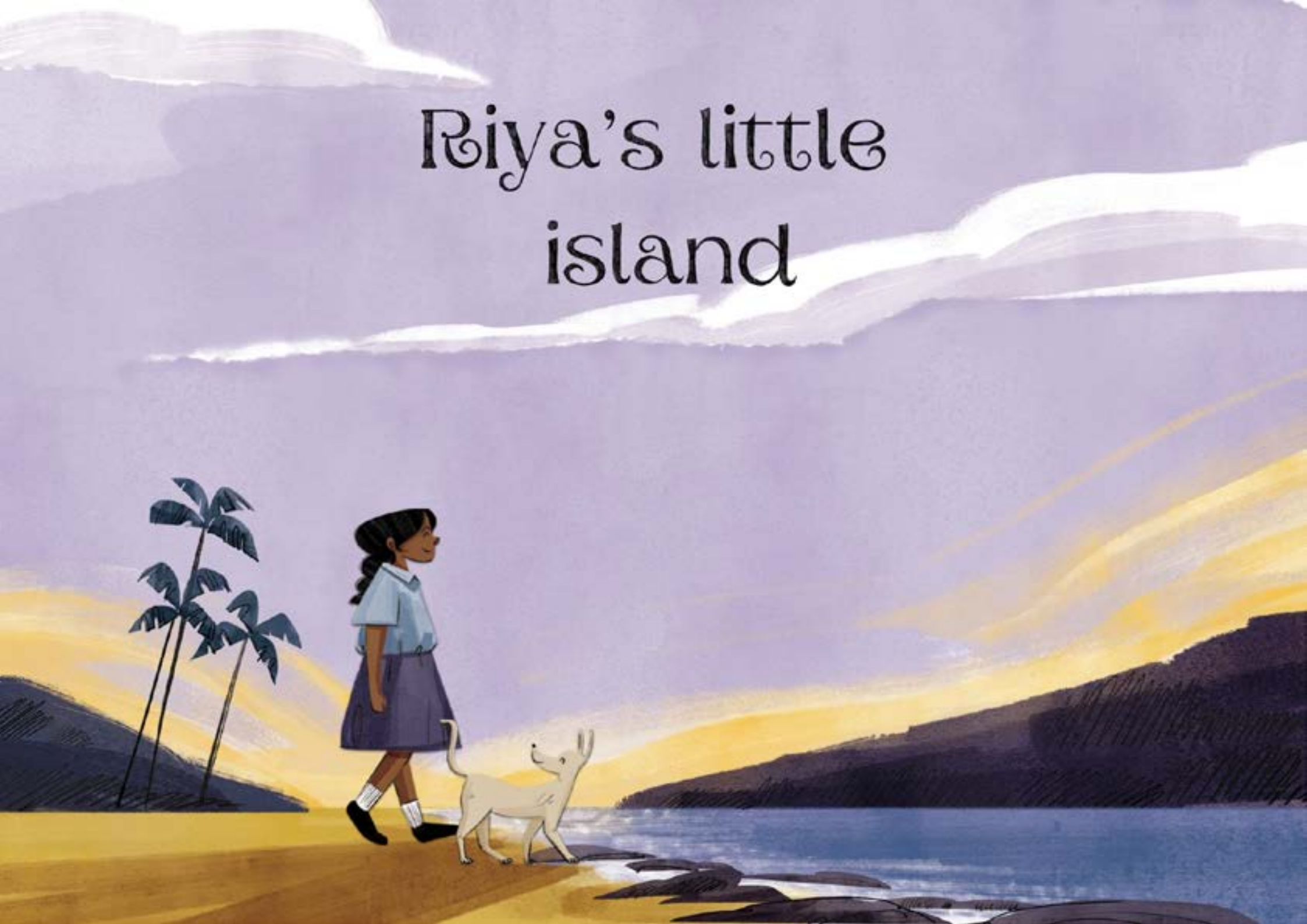


Riya's little island



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Supporting partners: LGT Venture Philanthropy, Rainmatter Foundation and Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies



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Riya's little island

Foreward

Far, far away from the everyday bustle of mainland India lies the quiet life of the Andaman Islands, where stories echo in every corner to anyone who listens. In a corner of these islands lies Junglighat, a bustling neighbourhood by the sea in the heart of Port Blair. Here, life begins before dawn with the hum of boat engines, the chatter of fishers, and the smell of freshly caught fish and crabs wafting through the air.

As a mental health practitioner, I have always been drawn to stories—the ones we tell, the ones we keep, and the ones that quietly weave through our everyday lives. In the pursuit of such stories, we met a group of bright-eyed children, always eager to share their world with us and curious to know more about the world outside. They would speak of their school days, their hobbies, and sometimes, their worries. We would talk about their everyday happiness and some big feelings that consumed them.

It was in these conversations that Aplonia, Lixina and I stumbled upon the character of *Chintamani*—the worried one. *Chintamani* is usually a personification of someone who is always worried only to be re-authored to find skills and tactics to manage it. The embodiment of this worry is called *Ashanthi*, a presence that can make even the most ordinary days feel heavy.

This story emerged from our gatherings with the children of Junglighat—S Yamuna, M Gracy, M Jyotsnavi, B Sirisha, Kavitha, Nandhini, Prasanthi, Geetha, Harika, B. Santosh, K. Mahesh, CH. Vinod, M. Dinesh, and many others. From young ones in Class 2 to college students, they shared their dreams of becoming teachers, wrestlers, soldiers, police officers, and more. They spoke of their love for cricket, yoga, TV, and reading stories.

This story is an invitation to listen deeply, honour diversity, and recognise the extraordinary resilience of young people as they navigate their world that continues to inspire all of us. Through their voices and dreams, this book invites you to explore not just the islands, but the delicate balance between worry and wonder that lives in all of us. The respite of the natural world that surrounds us. It is a celebration of the hidden worlds that children create, the friendships that light our way, and the courage it takes to be ourselves even when Ashanthi looms near.

A special mention to Jehanzeb, who continues to guide us on how to practice with love and hope, and to Kartik, who shows us how to dream the big dream and hold on to our work and these stories.

Pavitra Vasudevan

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Together, she and Sheru would explore the bustling world of boats and fishers. The air was always humming with the sound of engines, people shouting, and waves crashing.

Riya's eyes would gleam as she spotted the freshest catch of the day.

"Look, Sheru! The biggest fish yet!" she would exclaim, pointing at a large, silvery fish flipping in a net. Sheru would bark in agreement, his nose twitching.

Riya lived in a bright blue-and-yellow house right next to the jetty, with her Amma, Tathayya, and her dog Sheru.

Riya was short and full of curiosity, her jet-black hair bouncing as she ran around. Some days she would run to the beach, past the mangroves. She loved everything about the blue, blue ocean—the wiggly fish, playful mudskippers, and hermit crabs that scuttled along the shore.



Now and then, Riya would join some kids playing volleyball. "I'm going to jump so high today!" she would tell Sheru. She practised with all her might, leaping as high as she could, her face determined. "I'll land the perfect serve, you'll see!"

But what Riya loved the most was fish curry, especially when her Tathayya cooked it with the fish he caught on his long fishing trips.

"Tathayya, did you catch Kokari today?"

Riya would ask, her eyes wide with excitement. *"Is it ready yet?"* impatiently, peeking into the kitchen.



As they sat having dinner, Riya would chatter away, narrating her adventures of the day. *"And guess the best part! I have been going to volleyball practice with some girls from school. I like jumping and hitting the ball with all my strength"*. Sheru would rest by her feet, his ears perking up at every word she said.



But lately, Riya hadn't been her usual self, Tathayya had noticed.
"Riya, you are quiet today. Did something happen at school?" he asked one day, as he handed her lunch pack to her.
"Nothing, Tathayya," she mumbled. Then suddenly, she stood up and stormed out of the house with Sheru at her heels.



What Riya couldn't explain was the presence of Ashanthi that had crept into her life lately.



Before she knew it, she was standing at the water's edge on the beach, her heart pounding. She felt like she was going to burst. She wanted to scream—so she did, as loud as she could. The sound scared the mudskippers away and sent the hermit crabs back into their shells. Then, she collapsed onto the sand, sobbing uncontrollably with Sheru by her side.



She could still hear the teasing ringing in her ears. *"Shorty, fatty! You're not fit to play,"* one voice sneered. *"What was that? A serve aimed at a tree instead of the net?"* another laughed. *"You should just live near that beach with your dog. You don't belong in the team"* a third teased.

Riya wiped her tears and whispered to herself, *"Am I that bad? I don't know if I want to go back to school again or play volleyball."* She could hear Ashanthi's voice in her mind.





Then out of nowhere, a boy with muddy hands and a kind smile appeared. Riya had seen him before, climbing trees or catching crabs in the mangroves. He was a bit peculiar, always wandering alone, just like her. The boy didn't say a word. Instead, he gingerly held out a freshly caught mud crab to Riya, his eyes shining with understanding.



Riya blinked through her tears and, without thinking, traded her lunch pack for the crab. It was a strange exchange, but it made Riya feel a little better. As the sky darkened, Riya hurried home, her thoughts still swirling.

The next morning, Riya woke up, but the weight of *Ashanthi* still lingered.

Her whole day felt hazy.

"I don't want to go to school today, Sheru," she murmured.

Finally, the day she dreaded had arrived.

Today was team selection at school, and she could already hear her classmates' taunting voices ringing.



At school, the taunts of *"Shorty!"* echoed in her mind. She tried her best, but she didn't make it into the team. Heartbroken, Riya ran to the beach near the mangroves, tears streaming down her face.

"Why am I not good enough?" she cried, plopping on the sand, her voice swallowed by the sound of the waves.



Just then, the boy reappeared, this time his hands caked with sand and his smile warm. Together, they walked closer to the waves, bending to peer beneath rocks and ledges.



"Look under that rock; something's moving!" Riya exclaimed. The boy leaned closer, whispering, "That's a brittle star!" He pointed toward the glistening rock. "And look—a starfish. And here, a coral!" he said, tracing the coral's edges.

Riya's eyes grew wide as they uncovered a world. Fiddler crabs doing funny little dances and oysters hugging rocks tightly with limpets and chitons clinging along. Snails leaving slimy trails on their path and barnacles decorating the stones. Sandpipers and plovers darting after tiny creatures with their small pointy beaks.

They even stumbled upon a nest of eggs, safely left behind in the sand by a banded sea krait.

The two were so immersed in this hidden world that they didn't hear children approaching with a volleyball. "*Ravi, what are you looking at?*" one of them called. Ravi turned, a grin lighting up his face. "*We are watching some beautiful, unique sea creatures!*" Riya glanced at the group and saw them holding a ball, eyes bright with an invitation.

Riya looked at Sheru in surprise; not expecting this. "*Sheru, are they holding a volleyball?*"



Following the other children, she reached a volleyball court near the beach, where some kids, tall and short, were practising together, laughing and cheering each other on. Riya hesitated at first, feeling a little scared, but the boy's smile reassured her. She joined in, and soon enough, she found herself laughing too. With each game and every passing day, the tight knot in her chest loosened a little bit more, and the overwhelming, unsettling feeling of *Ashanthe* began to fade.



When Tathayya returned from his trip, Riya couldn't wait.
"Tathayya, you won't believe all that has happened while you were away! It's only the most extraordinary thing!"

She told him about being teased by her school friends, running away, befriending the boy at the beach near the mangroves, and how *Ashanthi* had made her feel during the team selections.



*"A lot has happened Riya, but I want you to know that I am proud of how you have found new friends and persevered when *Ashanthi* made you doubt everything"* said Tathayya, compassionately patting Riya.

*"I still see *Ashanthi* sometimes, Tathayya- big and looming or small and feeble making me feel scared and irritated. And sometimes I want to run away"* she said, *"but now I know I can run to play with my friends and Sheru or catch crabs with Ravi."*





Some days, Riya noticed that the other kids had their own *Ashanthis* too. Some were big, some small; some yelled angrily, while others cowered in fear.

But now, she and her friends always catch crabs together walking on the shore, discovering sea creatures. And as they begin discovering a world together, the unease slowly starts to fade away.



Dakshin Foundation's mission is to inform and advocate for conservation and natural resource management while promoting and supporting sustainable livelihoods, social development and environmental justice. We adopt interdisciplinary approaches in our research and interventions to promote ecologically and socially appropriate approaches to conservation and management in coastal, marine and mountain ecosystems in India.

For more information, please visit **www.dakshin.org**.

Welcome to the world of Riya, a curious girl who shares her days with her dog Sheru, Amma, and Tathayya. Her world is filled with adventures on the islands, the excitement of volleyball, and her favourite fish curry.

But lately, Riya has been feeling different. *Ashanthi* has crept into her life, casting shadows over her confidence. When mocking voices at school grow too loud and her volleyball dreams seem too far to reach, Riya discovers an unexpected friendship through a silent exchange of crabs and curiosity.

Join Riya in this tale about finding wonder in hidden places and courage in gentle moments, even when *Ashanthi* tries to convince us otherwise.

