



text: **GITA WOLF AND V. GEETHA**

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The Bhil people of central India are among the country's oldest indigenous communities. They have an intimate and playful relationship with the natural world of plants, animals, trees and forests. To them, these are spaces that sustain them — they work, play and offer worship to their gods in this environment. Therefore, their sense of the natural world is deeply intuitive — they possess a wisdom that comes out of everyday interaction and dependence on this world.

Tree Matters is an introduction to this ecological wisdom, brought alive through vivid art and lively description. It may be used in a range of ways: in middle-school classroom discussions on the environment and the many ways of relating to it; as a model for thinking about human relationship to trees; and as a context for learning about art that is closely linked to everyday life as well as the imagination.



TALK ABOUT

- The term **'indigenous' people**; who are they and why do we call them that. Focus discussions on **what does it mean** to be the 'oldest' inhabitants of a place — does it make for a special relationship with and understanding of the natural world?
- The **setting** for this book: is it set in **the present or the past**? Is it about how things are now, or about how things were? Point to how indigenous communities have to negotiate their memory of a different way of living in a context where they cannot quite live that way anymore, but still find it valuable to refer to it. It may also be that **some of them still try to live that way**, even while accommodating to the future. **Identify sections** of the text that help you anchor this discussion as well **draw on examples** from other parts of the world, including the choices that confront the Masai in Kenya and certain forest communities in the Amazon region in Brazil.
- The difference between **'lived'** ecological knowledge and **'learnt'** ecological knowledge — drawing on examples from the book.
- The importance of **beliefs about forest spirits** for those who live close to the natural world — what do these stories and beliefs tell us about the way people relate to the forest?
- **The art and what it does for the reader**: how does it communicate across space and culture? Is it through its use of colours and simplified shapes, both of the natural world and human beings?

ACTIVITY

- Encourage students to take a **walk around the neighbourhood** of their school or homes, accompanied by either an adult who knows about trees or older children that do. Ask them to **take a tree 'census'** — the number of trees on the road, their names, the most popular trees in people's homes and their names etc.
 - Once this is done, **ask them to find out more** about specific trees: are they native to the landscape? Do they yield edible trees or fruits? Are there other uses for these trees?
 - Suggest that they **draw trees they find attractive**; once they do, **ask them if drawing a tree helped them understand** things about it that are not evident when they are only looking at it or photographing it.
 - Get children to make a list of **things from their daily diet that come off trees**: encourage them to start a classroom discussion or a group discussion on when and if children today pluck and eat things straight off trees and plants: if so, where is that still possible?
 - Ask children to form groups of 3-4 students. Each group can then be asked to identify a poem, a short story and painting on the **different ways that human communities across the world relate to trees**. Get groups to make presentations on their collection.
 - Get children to read the section, 'Trees for Every Occasion' from the book. Can they think or imagine **specific uses for the trees** that they see around them?
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