The damsels who dared

Three mothers have created a book packed with real-life stories of women to inspire children

:: ANUSUA MUKHERJEE

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who longed to become a scientist. People around her were appalled, how can a girl have such a dream! On top of that, she was from a backward caste. When the girl grew up and actually became a botanist, her male colleagues refused to work with her. But Janaki Ammal (1897-1994) was unaffected and went on to breed a sweeter variety of sugarcane better suited to Indian weather. So whenever we sigh in contentment over a cup of sweet, hot tea, we should remember Ammal, who made our sugar sweeter.

Inspiring stories such as this make up the lavishly illustrated children’s book, *The Dot That Went for a Walk...* It features real-life stories of 51 women from India who excelled in their chosen professions. So we have, Cornelia Sorabji (lawyer), Amrita Sher-Gil (artist), Aruna Roy (IAS officer), Tessy Thomas (scientist), and so on. The creators of the book, Sarada Akkineni, Reema Gupta and Lakshmi Nambiar, describe themselves, first and foremost, as “mothers of daughters.”

This is the thread uniting the three from diverse professions - Akkineni is an engineer, Gupta heads the Women’s Excellence Initiative at Indian School of Business while Nambiar is an investment banker.

Last year, they set up the Hyderabad-based publishing house, Caterpillar Wings, to “create stories about role models for young children”. For this book, their first, they brought together nine writers and 51 artists to create illustrated narratives. When asked about the genesis of *The Dot...*, they say, “We were tired of the traditional fairy tales where princesses are damsels in distress asking to be rescued. We wanted to change the narrative of storytelling and so switched from fairy tales to stories of real women.”

The 51 women in the book are real indeed - they battle society, parents, colleagues, to become who they really want to be. Ironically, many of them are dismis- sed as being ‘man-like’ as they try out things that women are prevented from doing. For instance, people frown when the young Ismat Chughtai plays football, hockey or gilli danda instead of sewing or cooking. Usha Uthup is ridiculed for sounding like a man, Mary Kom’s father was upset with his daughter for choosing a profession, that, he thought, would spoil her face and lower her chances of marriage. To the writers’ credit, they do not gloss over unhappy episodes such as separation or divorce in the women’s personal lives, as most inspirational children’s stories tend to.

Some of the writers are young girls themselves (yes, all the writers and illustrators are women). The creators say, “We felt children would connect better with stories written by young writers. In fact, the adult writers took a cue from their writing.” However, the most attractive feature of the book is the illustrations, which are reproductions of original artworks in varied mediums by established and aspiring artists. The book has been curated by Shrishti Art Gallery, which was set up by Nambiar’s mother.

Another heartening aspect of *The Dot...* is the fact that it celebrates not just well-known figures. There are chapters, for instance, on Lakshmiikutty Amma from Kerala, who is a healer specialising in herbal medicine; on Nanammal, the “Yoga Grammy” from Coimbatore, whose favourite pose, even at the age of 100, is the headstand.