

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE, BUT...

Hari had only a momentary glimpse, but it left him enthralled. It was a double high for him. This was his first aeroplane ride and his destination was Port Blair, the capital town of the famed Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. The Captain of their flight had just announced that they were nearing Port Blair and the islands were now visible below them.

Hari strained his neck to look down and the sight took his breath away: deep blue waters of the ocean leading into the light, emerald greens of the shallow coastal waters, strips of white sparkling beaches and then the thick forests that the Andamans are so famous for. Hari had not seen such lush green forests before.

What beauty! He exclaimed to himself. "What greenery, Daddy!" he turned to his father who was also straining his neck over Hari's little head to get whatever view he could. "This place must be so pleasant and cool," Hari said, "and I'm sure there are no problems here like we have back home in Chennai." His father merely nodded his head. He was himself so captivated with the blues and greens below that he hardly heard what Hari was saying.

Getting to these far away islands was a dream come true for Hari. They were going there as tourists but with a little difference: their destination was the Institute for Island Ecology (IIE), where scientists had been studying the rich ecological wealth (birds, snakes, plants, sea turtles and also the coral reefs) of the islands for about a decade.

In the next few minutes the plane landed and soon they drove to

'Hotel Blue Islands' where their accommodation had been arranged. Hari was keen on a bath as he had not taken one at home in Chennai. The departure time of their flight was 5.30 a.m. A bath was simply not possible, though that was the only time in the day when their taps had water.

Water did not appear to be a problem in this forest rich land. A nice warm bath was followed by a good breakfast and the father-son duo were ready to leave for the IIE campus located some 20 km from Port Blair. They were soon in the outskirts and the first thing that Hari noticed was that everything was not as green as he had seen from above. There were large brown patches: a number of small hillocks were all barren and there were many fields along the roadside lying fallow.

Immediately something else also caught his eye. In five places, at least, he saw long queues of pots and large blue drums, starting from under a small tap along the road. No people at the taps; only pots and drums waiting for water.

He had to ask, and the answer came from the driver Mutthu. "Water in these taps only for 30 minutes late in the afternoon, sir," he said. "We've a serious water problem in and around Port Blair."

Water problem in an island with tropical rainforests? Hari refused to believe it. "But there was no problem in our hotel," he protested. "I had a good, long bath there."

Mutthu's response hit Hari hard. "That is one of the main problems, sir. The tourists are getting priority. A large part of Port Blair's limited



water supply gets diverted to the hotels and the citizens are badly affected. During March to May, we have water in our taps for only one hour every three days.”

Hari could not believe his ears. “Once in three days!” he exclaimed. “It’s better than this even in Chennai, and this is supposed to be a tropical island system, with heavy rainfall.”

Mutthu nodded his head. “We do have a lot of rain,” he responded, “but the period from November to May is rather dry. This is also the tourist season and the pressure increases with every passing year.”

Hari fell silent for a while. He was upset with himself. “I spent ten minutes in the shower today,” he confessed to his father, “and people here don’t have water to drink! Why is it so?”

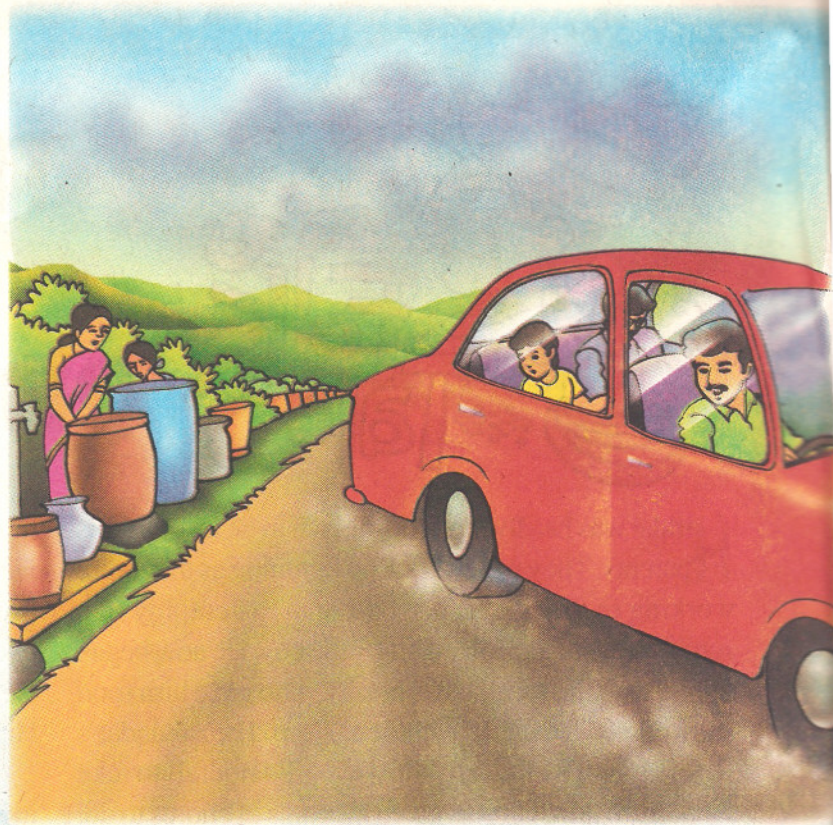
His father was himself a little clueless, and taken by surprise at what Mutthu had just told them. “Maybe,” he told Hari, “someone at IIE might have the answer.”

Just then Mutthu brought the car to an abrupt halt. They had reached the beautiful wooded campus of the IIE and Hari was all keen and worked up to get some answers about water in these islands. It was the first question he put to John, a senior scientist at the IIE, when they sat down to chat. “Our driver Mutthu told us there is a serious water problem in Port Blair because of tourists,” he asked. “Is that true?”

John replied in his deep voice and slow tone. “There is a water problem prevailing here and the tourism industry has only made it worse. For many decades now,” he added, “there has been large scale tree felling for the timber industry, and this has affected the islands in a very negative way.” That was exactly the thought which had crossed Hari’s mind when he saw the barren hillocks earlier in the morning. “Also,” John continued, “in 1960 the total population in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands was about 60,000. Large scale migration from mainland India has since then resulted in this figure going up to nearly five lakhs today.”

Hari made a quick calculation. “That’s an increase of nearly 800 per cent in just four decades!” he exclaimed.

“You’re right,” said John, “and while people and their demands have increased, mother Nature cannot necessarily keep up the supply.”



Things became rather simple and straight forward for Hari now. “We shouldn’t have come to this beautiful place, Daddy,” he said with remorse in his voice. “We’re making things only worse and more difficult for the local people and the islands.”

“That’s not a solution,” John said emphatically, almost as if he was scolding Hari. “We, in fact, need more sensitive young people like you, who are able to identify the problem. There are a number of solutions, beginning with careful use of water. If more tourists were careful and minimised their use of water and other resources, the first steps in the right direction will have been taken.”

Hari was still not feeling great, but what John told him made him feel much better. “From now on my bath will be restricted to one bucket of water,” he said. “No more showers for me, not in Port Blair, and not in Chennai.”

“Come, let me show you around the campus,” said John, trying to cheer up Hari. “And tomorrow, when we go to Rutland Island, you’ll see many wonderful aspects of these unique islands.”

A smile returned to Hari’s face and there was a spring in his step as they started their walk around the beautiful campus.

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