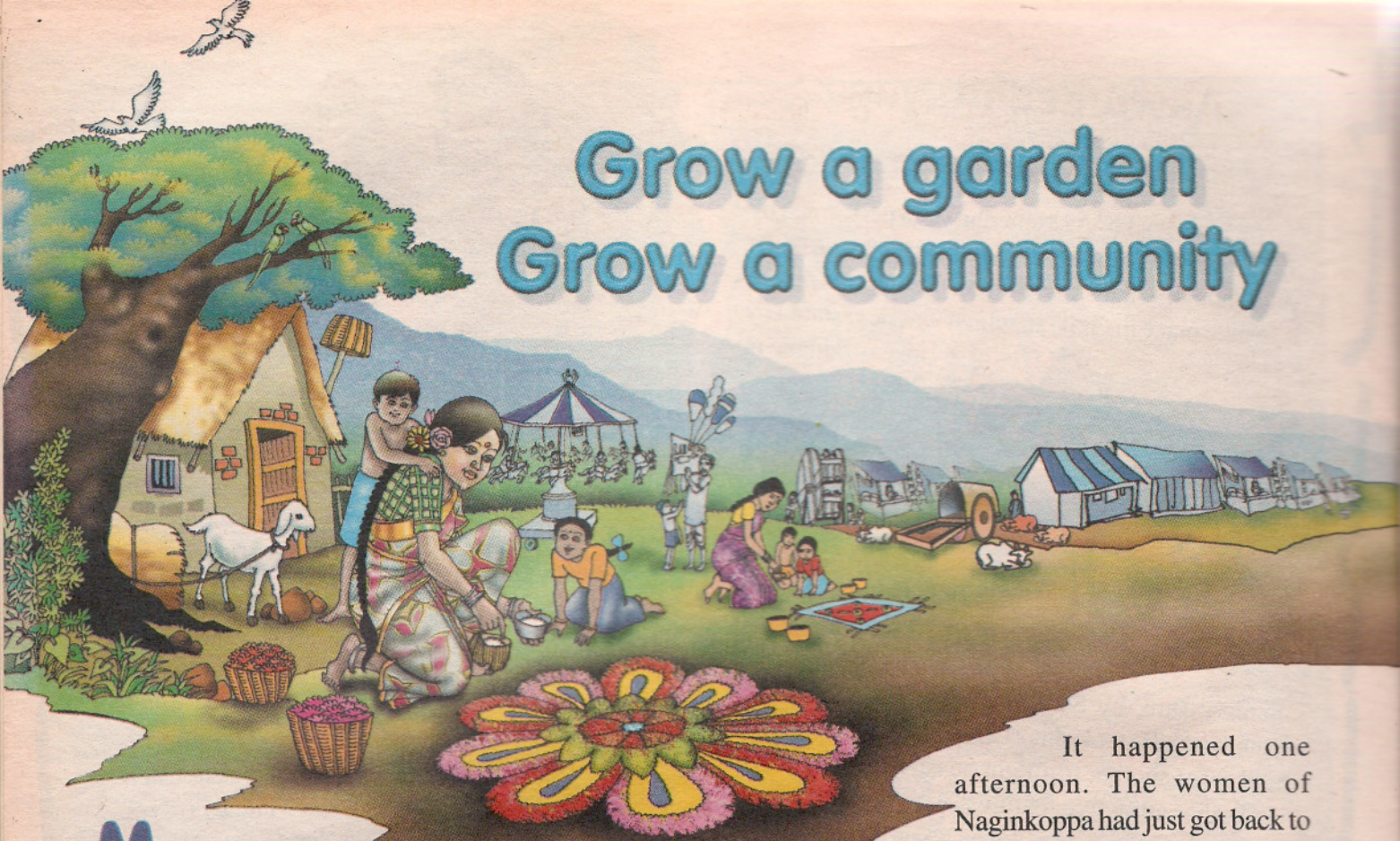


# Grow a garden Grow a community



**M**anjula Siddi pressed down the folds of her sari and patted the profusion of flowers in her hair. Dahlias, roses, jasmine – what a riot of colours, making her look prettier than ever.

She quickly got down to work on her floral *rangoli*, drawing the baskets of flowers close to her. Her daughter had just brought them from their garden, in time for the first ever flower *rangoli* contest in their village. It was the evening of the unique seed festival that their village, Naginkoppa, nestling among the Western Ghats in Karnataka, was hosting. And the floral *rangoli* contest was the last item on the day's programme.

Manjula loved growing flowers. She grew a wide variety and today her loving care was being put to good use: As she briskly filled her *rangoli* with flowers, she wordlessly thanked Bakul, the cheerful woman from the town, who had first sown the seeds of enthusiasm among the village women. It was she who had organised the seed festival.

Manjula remembered how it all began.....

It happened one afternoon. The women of Naginkoppa had just got back to the village after a long morning's work, harvesting paddy under the hot sun.

Manjula was among them. They had gathered to relax for a little while together. Nearby, the ancient sugarcane extractor had been set up. The bullocks were patiently going round and round. The workers were feeding in plump sugarcane, and the juice was led into huge cauldrons.

The juice would later be boiled down to molasses and stored in tins. Children loved this rich brown liquid, and when it was being prepared, they would buzz around, just like the *dammar* bees, which swarmed the area! The children would hold out little cups made of *peepul* leaves and beg to be given some of the liquid to drink.

The villagers of Naginkoppa grew all the older varieties of sugarcane, which were too soft for producing sugar in the mills. But, oh, what heavenly jaggery could be made from them! Sometime back, a woman from a nearby town had even come to Naginkoppa in search of these varieties of sugarcane. She had said, they were much better than the hybrid ones that needed more





fertilizers and water. Besides, eating jaggery is healthier than using the refined white sugar.

As the women sat around talking about sugarcane varieties, they saw Bakul heading towards them. Bakul went from village to village encouraging people to grow and save the older native varieties of crops that were slowly being replaced by newer hybrid ones.

This was her second visit to Naginkoppa. During her first trip, she had promised to show them slides of seeds and crops that grew in their region. Manjula could see that she carried a packet with her. Yes, they were the slides!

The slides were projected on a wall, and Manjula and her friends watched enthralled. They showed the crops that people in the Western Ghats grew in their home gardens. A delicious dazzling array of herbs, tubers, vegetables, flowers, and fruits. The women were excited: a lot of what they saw was similar to their own home gardens.

“Ayyo, *ishwara*! I never thought I’d see a *gubbi hagalkai* ever again!” exclaimed old Gangamma. “I thought it had disappeared.” She was referring to a picture of a bitter gourd - a variety that was as pert and tiny as a sparrow’s head.

Did you know that pepper, that popular spice used all over the world, originated in India? N.I. Vavilov, a Russian scientist who lived in the early twentieth century and travelled all over the world, discovered where our cereals, pulses, vegetables and spices originally came from. Vavilov and his group of dedicated scientists built up a large collection of seeds of all kinds in their laboratory. When political forces turned against them and forced them to hide in their offices, these scientists chose to die, rather than feed on their precious seed collection. Such was their unflinching devotion to the grain bank.

Bakul said the vegetable was very much alive and its seeds were available too! “Oh, get me some... they taste so good when roasted!” sighed Gangamma.

Bakul asked them to name all the varieties of bitter gourd they could think of. After a lot of excited chattering, the little group of animated women came up with eight kinds!

“Think of the hundreds of varieties of things that you





grow and have around you,” Bakul had said. She said home gardens were generally taken for granted and nobody realised that they could yield a wide variety of foods for the house. “If you save seeds from your gardens, and a variety of them, you save the money that you would spend on buying seeds and food from outside. And who knows, you might even be able to earn extra money by selling surpluses.”

Soon the women were excitedly discussing seeds, gardens, recipes, and home remedies! Manjula had been inspired by the slide show. Yes, we must cling to all the varieties that nature has bestowed, she thought. Bakul was pleased with their enthusiasm. Raising her voice to be heard above the chatter, she said, “Would you like to form an informal seed exchange group? What a variety of seeds you would then have access to!”

“Yes, yes,” everyone had chirped.

Then Manjula had had a brainwave. “Akka, will you help us organise a seed festival? Women from all the nearby villages can come with their seeds. We shall exchange seeds so that our home gardens can see more varieties of flowers, fruits and vegetables next season. Also we can set up food stalls, have games, songs, dances, and a flower *rangoli* contest!”

Bakul’s eyes had sparkled. “Yes, yes! That sounds wonderful.” All the women in the group had agreed. Even old Gangamma was excited: “I shall bring all the varieties of seeds that I’ve collected,” she said. “And all of you

must bring your children. They must learn about seeds and the power that these little specks have in them – a few grains will put forth enough to feed a family; a fistful can feed the whole community.”

... That was how the seed festival had happened. Everyone had enjoyed it. The old women who, after many years, were seeing seeds of some crop varieties that had disappeared from their village and had been even wiped out from their memories, loved the festival. The children wondered at nature’s bounty and enjoyed the food and the fun.

Manjula got up and surveyed her *rangoli*. All the contestants had finished. Then Gangamma and Bakul came up. They were the judges. They walked down the rows of *rangolis*. Manjula watched with bated breath. They stopped for a few moments pondering each *rangoli*. At last the results were announced. “The winner of the competition is... Manjula Siddi!” announced Bakul, beaming. Thrilled beyond words, Manjula walked up to claim her prize, pushing her way through her friends who closed in on her, gushing with pride and pleasure.

Later, as she clutched her prize and walked home with her children, Manjula silently thanked her lovely little flower garden, with its many colourful beds of flowers. She realised that Nature rewarded those who loved her.

- By Sunita Rao

Courtesy: The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) and Kalpavriksh



What kind of shoes are made from banana skins?



Where do elephants store their clothes?



What belongs to you but others use it more than you do?



What did the letter say to the stamp?



Which band doesn't make music?

Answers :  
Stick with me  
and we'll go places  
Rubber band

Your name  
Slippers  
Trunks