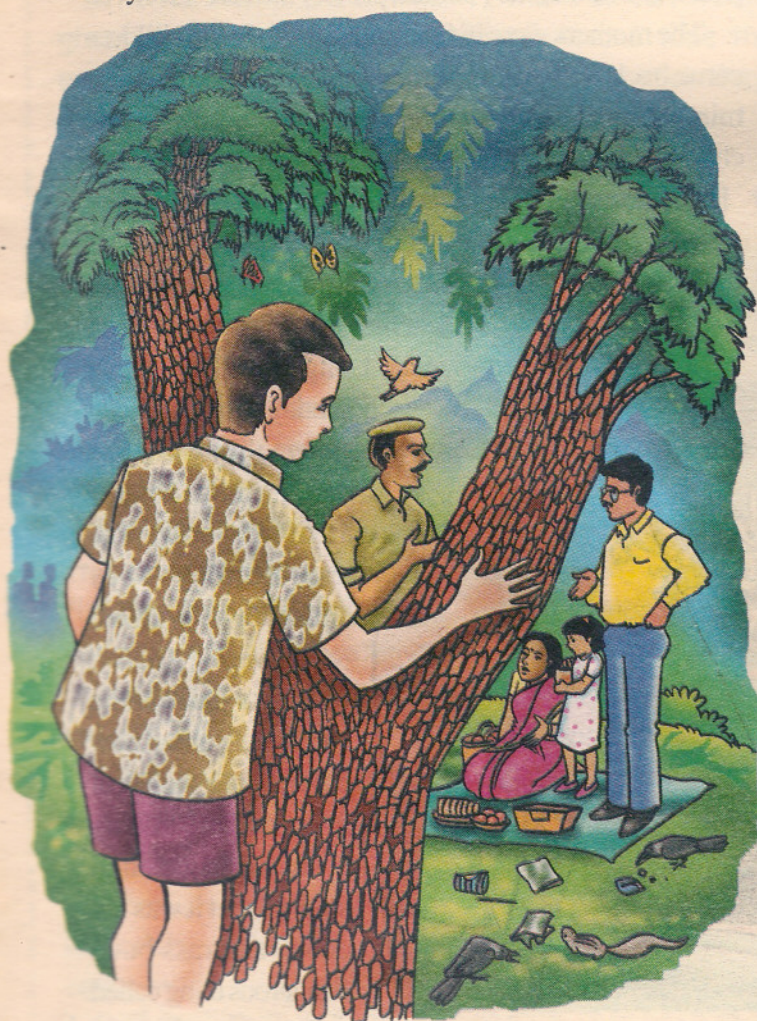




Little Kannagi and Longwood Shola



Kannagi, fondly called Kanna, lived in a beautiful place surrounded by cool hills, with plenty of space to run about and so many fun filled things to do. The summer holidays had started and it was time for her cousins Raju and Chinna to spend their vacation in this beautiful place. Together they would enjoy doing things like playing hide and seek, and making bird calls to fool others! At the end of every summer vacation Raju and Chinna would be very sad that they had to go back to the city where there were very few trees, let alone trees on which they could climb. This time also they were determined to enjoy every bit of their vacation.



One day Raju had gone towards the forest, which was called Longwood Shola. It was a lovely day with a gentle breeze blowing. He heard raised voices. An unfamiliar voice was heard shouting, "This is a free country, why shouldn't I come here for a picnic?"

Raju recognised the village Math teacher's voice shouting, "If we don't protect the Shola trees, our villagers will have no water to drink, our streams will dry up." This was followed by the Forest Guard Uncle's voice explaining that certain forests were so important that they had to be protected. He was saying that such forests called "Reserved Forest" by the Indian government had Forest Guards and other officials to protect the forest and the wildlife in it.

Raju was confused with the chain of conversation he had overheard. Soon he saw some picnickers trooping out. They were the same people who had been shouting at the Forest Guard! He was aghast at the mess that they had created. There were plastic wrappers, glass bottles and food all strewn about. He thought to himself 'Oh! So that explains why there are so many crows here. Uncle Arun was right when he said that these scavenger crows become a menace and raid the nests of other birds to take away young chicks of Bulbul, blackbird, jungle fowl and many others. The glass pieces must be hurting small animals that step on them.'

On the way back home Raju was brooding about eagles and kites and on reaching home he yelled, "Kanna, Chinna! Come here, let me tell you what happened," and told them all that he had seen and heard.

That night Kanna, Chinna and Raju were unusually quiet as they were thinking about the beautiful Longwood

The Sholas are patches of evergreen tropical rainforests in the valleys of Southern and Western Ghats, surrounded by natural grasslands. Longwood Shola is a 116 hectare typical Shola located near Kothagiri town, about 50 km from Coimbatore. It is at an elevated level close to the junction of Eastern and Western Ghats. Sholas are rich in moss, orchids and ferns. Longwood Shola is a Reserved Forest under the control of the Forest Department. In May 1998, a Longwood Shola Watchdog Committee (LSWC) was formed by the local school teachers and social workers. The part about "Children of Longwood" is entirely imaginary, but it could be true!

Shola with its many different kinds of birds, orchids, butterflies and animals. Kanna told them about the leopards that would come to the forest sometime and the barking deer giving an alarm call to alert the rest of the animals making all the animals scurry up back to safe places. They talked about the different bright coloured orchids and butterflies and wondered whether the forest would change. Then the bravest and youngest of the three, little Kanna, went up to her father and asked him "Father, is it true that there is only one person to guard our beautiful Shola? We get so many things like herbs, firewood and fresh air and water from the forest. Why shouldn't all of us take care of it?"

Kanna's father hugged her tight as he understood how much the children loved the forest and wanted to protect it. He thought hard for a while and, instead of giving an answer, asked them how they would protect it. Chinna was the first to say, "We'll tell everybody not to throw waste in the forest. We'll go to every house and explain that plastic waste kills the small animals."

Raju thought and said, "We should also explain that the water streams are so precious that we should not allow waste to choke the streams." Kanna, who understood removing

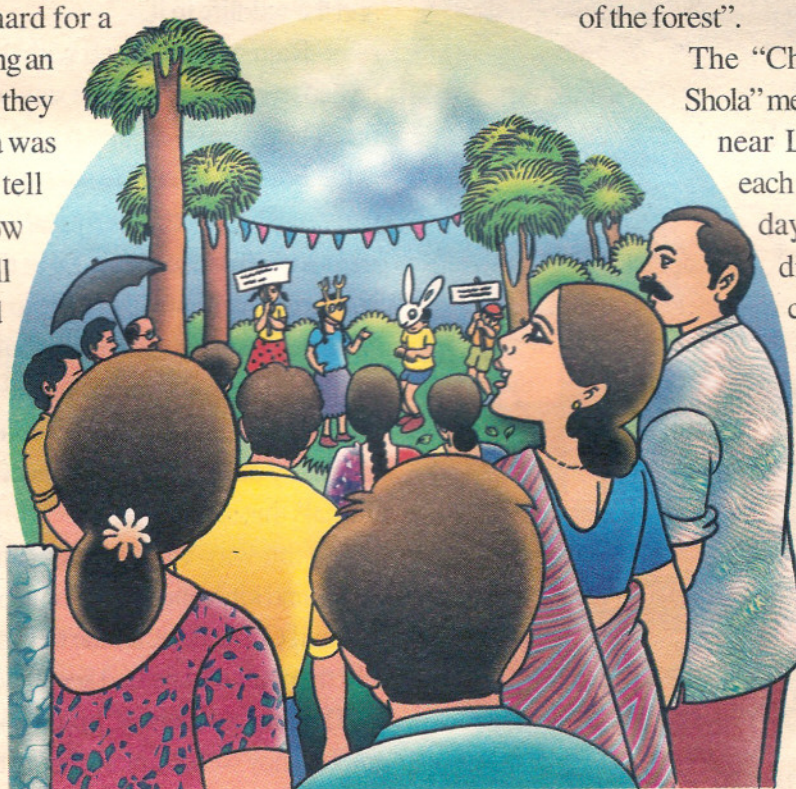
waste was not enough, said, "We should put our heads together and ask all children to fight and protect the Shola."

It was an exciting Sunday. All the children told their mothers they were going to do something important and rushed off, wearing their best clothes and shoes. Soon the children decided they had to make all the adults and children in the village understand that their every action affected the forest sooner or later. Little Kittu, all of five years, added that they should protect the forest forever.

The mothers were in for a surprise when the children came back with a determined look and a plan in their minds. Sapna came running and shouted, "We are the children of the forest and we will take care of the Shola".

Every household rendered the same phrase "Children of the forest".

The "Children of Longwood Shola" met every Sunday morning near Longwood Shola and each Sunday was a fun filled day where they would do different things to take care of the Shola. The first Sunday they enacted a play called "Colours of grass". In this, a Deer and a Rabbit talk about new colours and shapes of grass and are told by a small frightened squirrel that it was not coloured grass but a dangerous thing called



plastic which would kill them slowly by blocking the intestines. At the end of the play, little Kittu announced that the whole village should start by making Longwood Shola safe for the animals and birds. The adults, who were at first amused by this play, soon understood the importance of the "Children of Longwood Shola" and joined them in these Sunday programmes.

Some of the parents gave them more information and helped them understand how Sholas are different from the forests in the plains, how the trees here grow slowly and how the grassland around the Shola is like a sponge that keeps the water and then slowly releases them into little streams all through the year. Uncle Srinivas, who was a photographer, got them pictures of different snakes,

orchids, spiders and birds that were found in this Shola and not in other parts of India.

The children got the people of the surrounding villages also thinking. Subsequently the adults formed a group, which would regularly patrol the area and stop anybody from cutting trees or killing wild animals. The initiative, which was started during that vacation, continued to inspire many more children over the years and each year children from other far away places came to see this protected forest and went back determined to protect wildlife and forests near their own homes.

- By Shantha Bhushan

Courtesy: Kalpavriksh and the National Biodiversity and Strategic Action Plan

Meet the ... Karavas of Sri Lanka

The Karavas are a community that has contributed a great deal to Sri Lanka's economy. At one time they were a group of seafarers and warriors. Later they developed fishing as their main occupation, and grew into a trading community that today occupies a key position in the urban economy of the country. Traditionally they claim to have descended from the Kauravas, who were scattered after their defeat in the Mahabharata war.

Today, the Karavas live over widely separated areas ranging from the southwest of the Southern Province, to the Central and North Central Provinces and to the North Western Province. However, they are still predominantly a coastal population, engaged in fishing. This is done using outrigger canoes known as *oru* or rafts called *catamaran*.

Urban living and involvement in commerce has led to a stratification of Karava society into upper, middle and lower classes. However, class distinctions are not pronounced, and a bond of common social identity and traditional culture unites the Karavas. Another striking feature is that the community includes Buddhists, Hindus and Christians.

During certain festivals, the Karavas perform masked ritual dances known as *Kolam*. The performers, wearing wooden masks painted in resplendent colours, represent gods, demons, and legendary characters. These dances reflect the pagan beliefs of the predominantly Buddhist community.

