



Mini and the sacred grove

Mini was woken up by the shout of “*chaaya, chaaya...*!” She peeped through the window and was surprised to see the yellow board that read ‘Palakkad Junction’. The train was two hours late, but Mini was not bothered. She had always wanted to see the river Bharathapuzha in the morning light as it snaked through the green paddy fields and coconut plantations. As the train began to move, Mini woke up her elder sister Moni and both of them sat by the window, entranced by the natural beauty.

‘Everything looks so beautiful in the rays of the rising sun,’ thought Mini.

The 10-year-old eagerly looked forward to this annual trip to her grandparents’ home in Thrissur, Kerala, every summer. For Moni, who was slightly older than Mini, it was just a welcome change from Mumbai and school. But for Mini, it was one month of total bliss. The annual holiday was like one extended picnic: one day to the paddy fields with grandpa, the next day to the cashew orchards, another day to the coconut plantation with Uncle, visits to the village pond, temple, and other interesting places.

During these trips Mini observed in fascination how the water from the canal flowed into every field through tiny inlets, how effortlessly Mooppan climbed one

coconut tree after the other, how young boys and girls trapped fish in their towels at the pond...

But she always went back to Mumbai with a feeling of regret: that she had not visited the *kaavu* or the sacred grove adjoining the temple in her village. Today as she thought of the *kaavu*, she recollected a conversation with her father and Moni a few months back. Father had said that the government had declared certain areas as Reserved Forests, Sanctuaries, and National Parks to protect the environment. But, he explained, more important than the government’s efforts were the local traditions that helped to protect patches or even vast areas of natural vegetation. He had explained that Indians believed nature to be sacred. And so, people in rural areas had marked out sacred groves for protection. These groves, called *kaavu* in Malayalam, were generally dedicated to a deity. It was sacrilege to disturb plants that grew there or kill the animals that lived there. “The sacred groves are the most effective way of preserving biodiversity at minimum expense, with the local people tending to them and protecting them,” Father had commented.

‘We must visit the *kaavu* this time. I shall ask Uncle to take us there one day,’ Mini thought as the train chugged along.

Soon they were at Thrissur. Once they were comfortably seated in Uncle’s car, Mini announced, “I want to see the *kaavu*.” No one seemed to have heard her.

“I asked whether I could visit the *kaavu* this vacation,” she repeated.

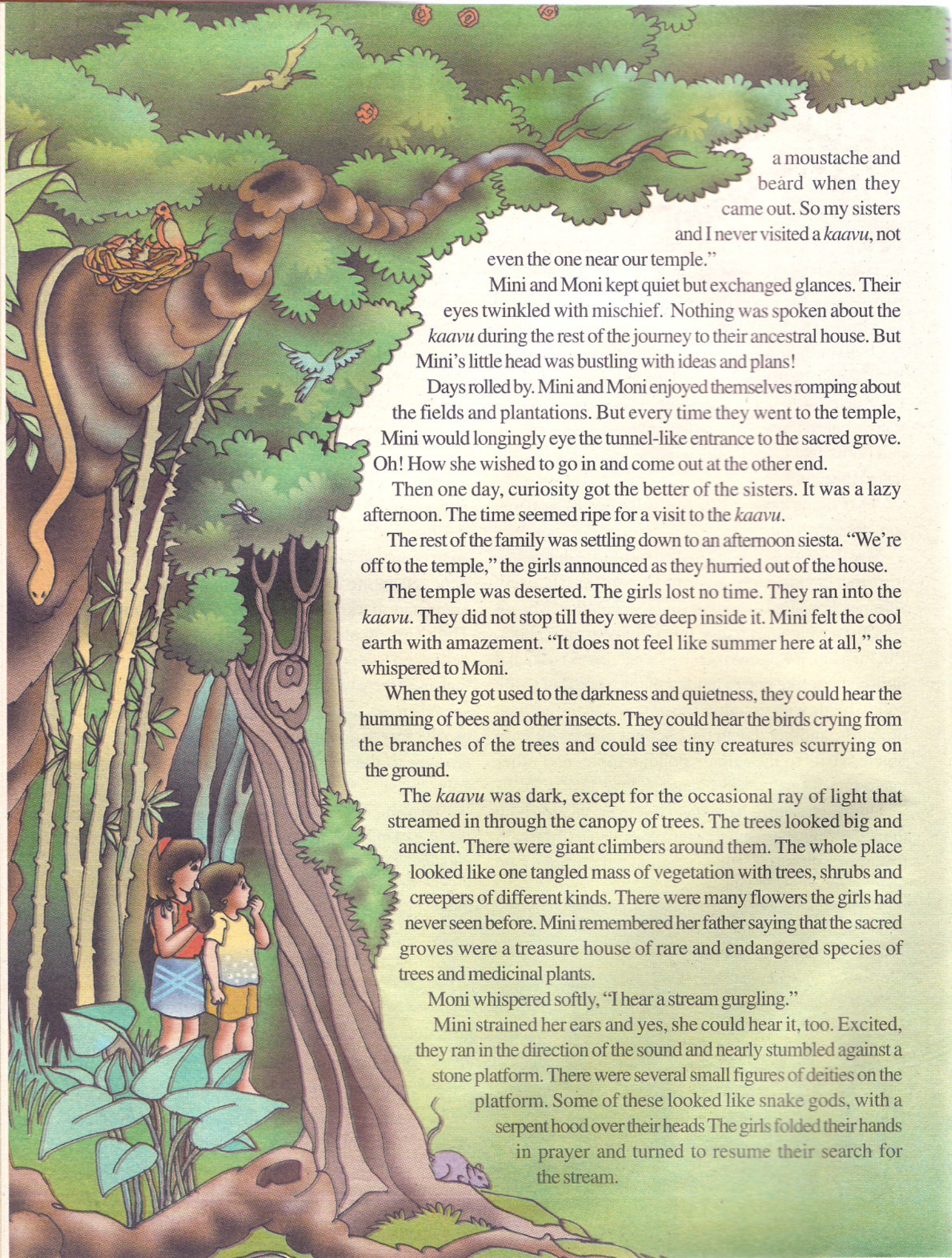
“Why? Do you want to grow a moustache?” Mother demanded.

“Who said so?” Mini was defiant.

Her Uncle and Father, who had been talking, fell silent. They, too, wanted to know.

“Well, that’s what my grandmother used to say. Children who dared to enter the *kaavu* grew





a moustache and beard when they came out. So my sisters and I never visited a *kaavu*, not

even the one near our temple."

Mini and Moni kept quiet but exchanged glances. Their eyes twinkled with mischief. Nothing was spoken about the *kaavu* during the rest of the journey to their ancestral house. But Mini's little head was bustling with ideas and plans!

Days rolled by. Mini and Moni enjoyed themselves romping about the fields and plantations. But every time they went to the temple, Mini would longingly eye the tunnel-like entrance to the sacred grove. Oh! How she wished to go in and come out at the other end.

Then one day, curiosity got the better of the sisters. It was a lazy afternoon. The time seemed ripe for a visit to the *kaavu*.

The rest of the family was settling down to an afternoon siesta. "We're off to the temple," the girls announced as they hurried out of the house.

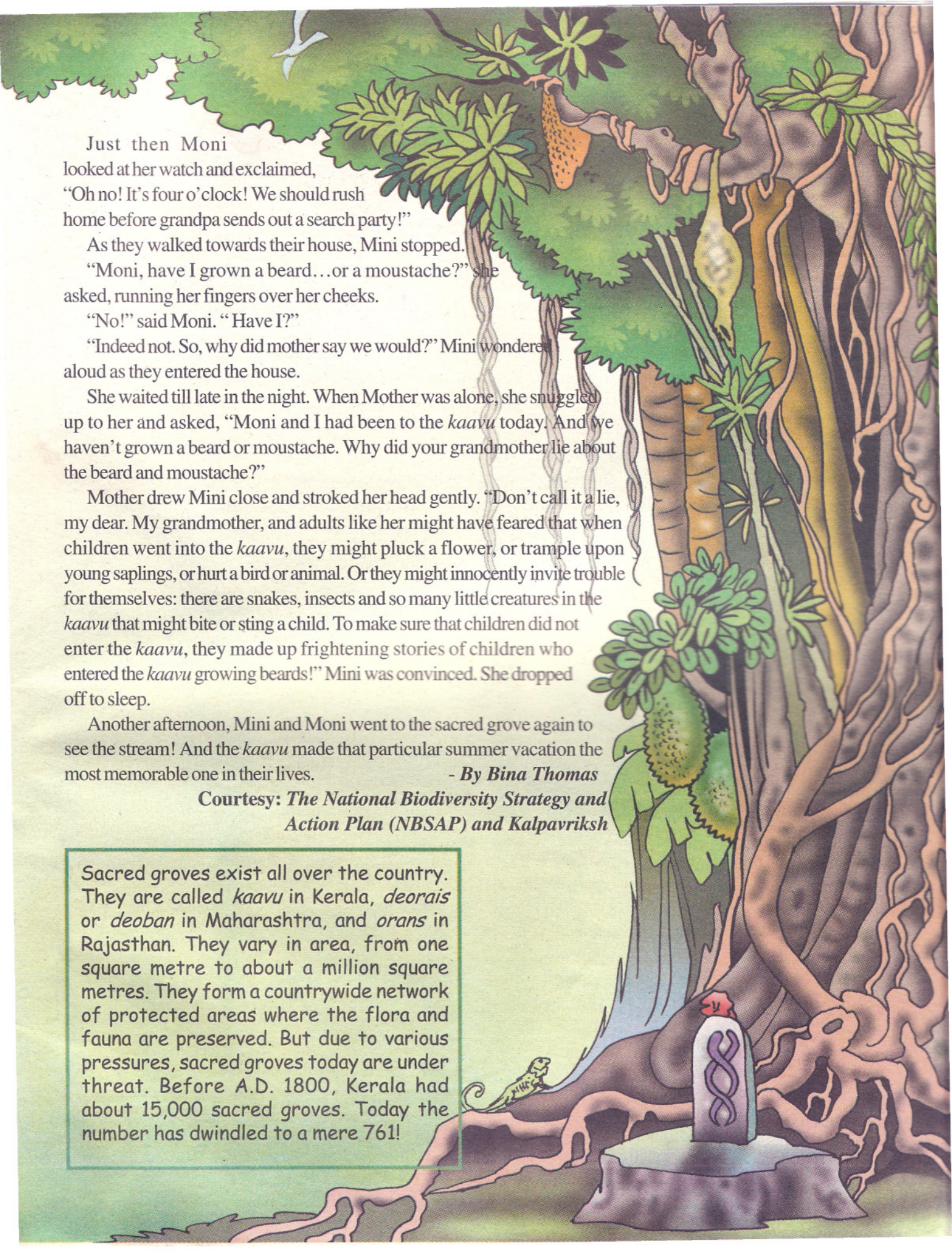
The temple was deserted. The girls lost no time. They ran into the *kaavu*. They did not stop till they were deep inside it. Mini felt the cool earth with amazement. "It does not feel like summer here at all," she whispered to Moni.

When they got used to the darkness and quietness, they could hear the humming of bees and other insects. They could hear the birds crying from the branches of the trees and could see tiny creatures scurrying on the ground.

The *kaavu* was dark, except for the occasional ray of light that streamed in through the canopy of trees. The trees looked big and ancient. There were giant climbers around them. The whole place looked like one tangled mass of vegetation with trees, shrubs and creepers of different kinds. There were many flowers the girls had never seen before. Mini remembered her father saying that the sacred groves were a treasure house of rare and endangered species of trees and medicinal plants.

Moni whispered softly, "I hear a stream gurgling."

Mini strained her ears and yes, she could hear it, too. Excited, they ran in the direction of the sound and nearly stumbled against a stone platform. There were several small figures of deities on the platform. Some of these looked like snake gods, with a serpent hood over their heads. The girls folded their hands in prayer and turned to resume their search for the stream.



Just then Moni looked at her watch and exclaimed, "Oh no! It's four o'clock! We should rush home before grandpa sends out a search party!"

As they walked towards their house, Mini stopped.

"Moni, have I grown a beard...or a moustache?" she asked, running her fingers over her cheeks.

"No!" said Moni. "Have I?"

"Indeed not. So, why did mother say we would?" Mini wondered aloud as they entered the house.

She waited till late in the night. When Mother was alone, she snuggled up to her and asked, "Moni and I had been to the *kaavu* today. And we haven't grown a beard or moustache. Why did your grandmother lie about the beard and moustache?"

Mother drew Mini close and stroked her head gently. "Don't call it a lie, my dear. My grandmother, and adults like her might have feared that when children went into the *kaavu*, they might pluck a flower, or trample upon young saplings, or hurt a bird or animal. Or they might innocently invite trouble for themselves: there are snakes, insects and so many little creatures in the *kaavu* that might bite or sting a child. To make sure that children did not enter the *kaavu*, they made up frightening stories of children who entered the *kaavu* growing beards!" Mini was convinced. She dropped off to sleep.

Another afternoon, Mini and Moni went to the sacred grove again to see the stream! And the *kaavu* made that particular summer vacation the most memorable one in their lives.

- By Bina Thomas

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

Sacred groves exist all over the country. They are called *kaavu* in Kerala, *deorais* or *deoban* in Maharashtra, and *orans* in Rajasthan. They vary in area, from one square metre to about a million square metres. They form a countrywide network of protected areas where the flora and fauna are preserved. But due to various pressures, sacred groves today are under threat. Before A.D. 1800, Kerala had about 15,000 sacred groves. Today the number has dwindled to a mere 761!