

Shantha was very excited. Her mother woke her up with the good news that they were going to Kerala for the summer holidays. That's when she remembered that *Vishu* – one of the most important festivals of Malayalees – occurred during the summer holidays. “Mummy, would we be in Kerala for *Vishu*?” she asked. Her mother smiled and replied, “Yes, we shall celebrate *Vishu* this time with your grandparents.”

A long train journey and there they were! Shantha ran into her grandma's open arms, bubbling with excitement and joy. “Grandma, when is *Vishu*?” she burst out. It was her grandpa who replied. “Tomorrow is *Vishu*. But come in, first...!”

When grandpa called out to Chinnan and Kannan, the old farm hands, to gather all the items required for the *Vishu kani*, Shantha insisted on going along with them.

She walked with Chinnan into their home garden, while Kannan bustled off somewhere on his own. “Where's he going, all by himself?” she asked Chinnan.

“He'll join us soon,” was all that he would say.

On the way, she saw the mango tree on which grandfather had tied a swing for her during her last holiday. Ripe mangoes dangled from its branches. Chinnan plucked a dozen of these and put them into his cane basket. She sniffed at them. They smelt much better than the ones in the Mumbai markets!

“What next?” Shantha asked Chinnan.

“Come on and see for yourself!” he replied.

Soon they were at the thorny fence that bounded their garden. And lo! A breathtaking sight met her eyes there. This was a tall laburnum tree with magnificent golden yellow flowers hanging from the branches.

In the setting sun, the blossoms gleamed and sparkled like masses of glittering gold coins.

These will be used for decorating the idol of the deity tomorrow, Chinnan explained. She watched him climb the tree and carefully break off some yellow blooms and pass them on to her. She put them in the basket.

“Is that all?” she asked.

“Oh no! There's more!” he replied as he led her back towards the house, near which was a jack tree.



They stopped near the tree. Shantha was surprised to see jackfruits hanging from the main trunk of the tree, almost touching the ground. And there were so many that she lost count.

Chinnan carefully cut the stem of the lowermost jackfruit and put it aside to allow the latex to dry off. "I shall come later and take this home!" he said.

He sat down beside the basket that contained the mangoes and flowers. "Why, Chinnan?" asked Shantha.

"Kannan will take you from here," he said. Kannan was there soon. "Come, let's go," he told her. Leaving Chinnan to carry the basket back to the house, Shantha and Kannan went towards the backyard. "This is where your grandma grows all the vegetables. Chinnan and I help her with the sowing of seeds, watering, and harvesting," he explained.

"And what shall we do there?" she asked. "We shall pluck some vegetables for the *Vishu kani*," he said. Vegetables for worship? Shantha wondered but she followed him silently. He led her to a patch of creepers that had spread all along the ground like snakes. Some of these creepers had full-grown cucumbers. Shantha played among the creepers for some time, delighting in discovering some fully grown and some half grown cucumbers among the maze of leafy creepers. Kannan plucked some for their use. Then they returned home. After supper, she watched her grandpa arrange the *Vishu kani*. Shantha couldn't wait for the morrow and *Vishu* to come.

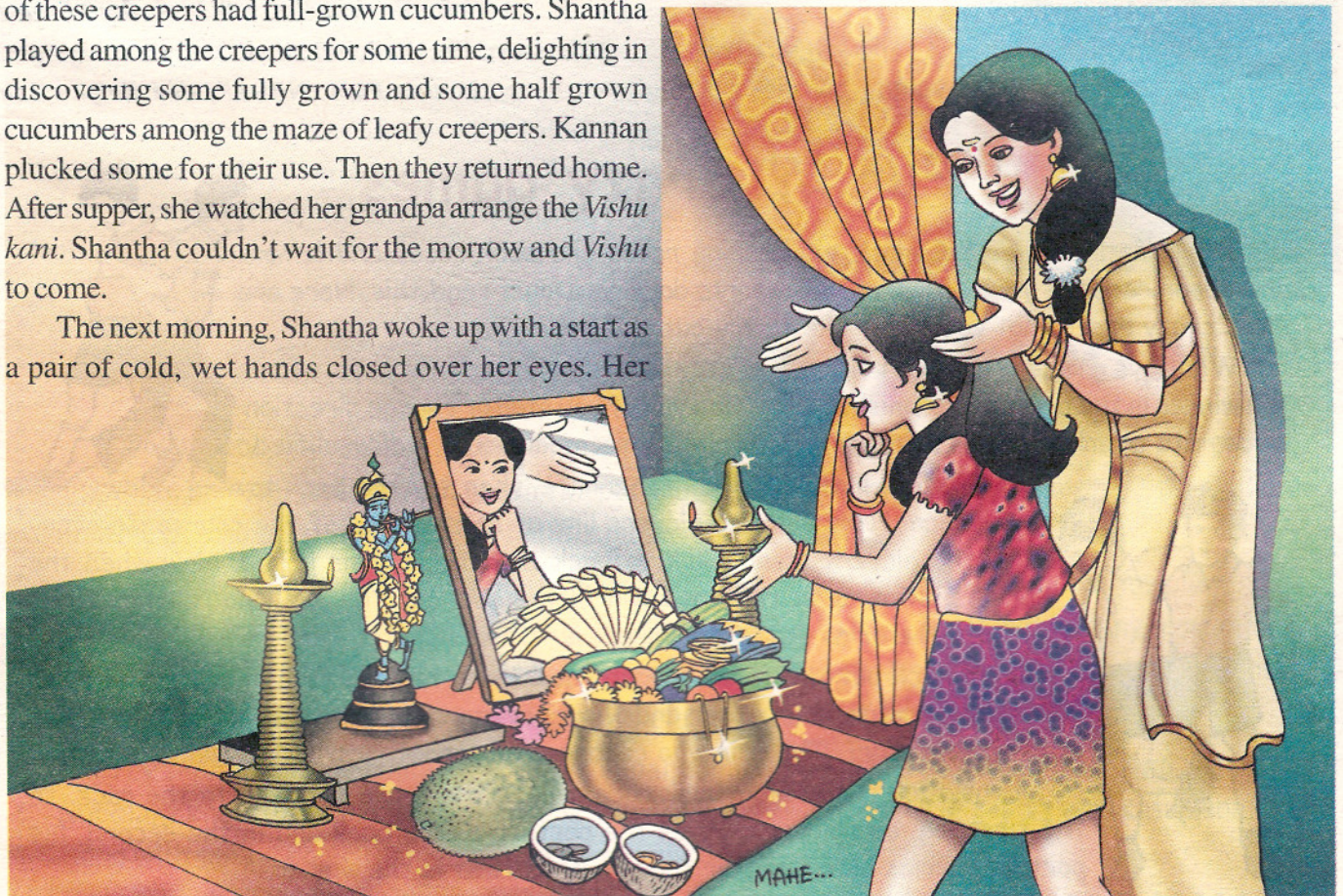
The next morning, Shantha woke up with a start as a pair of cold, wet hands closed over her eyes. Her

mother's voice greeted her: "It's *Vishu*, dear. Wake up! Now don't open your eyes till I tell you to!" said her mother. She led Shantha to the *pooja* room. "Now open your eyes," said her mother.

Shantha opened her eyes. What was this in front of her? The idol of Lord Krishna decorated with the lovely golden laburnum flowers. Two lamps glowed on either side of the idol. In front of the idol was a large, flat bronze *uruli* (vessel). Rice, green gram, butter beans, various fruits and vegetables including mango and banana from their garden, and a large cucumber had been placed in the *uruli*. Next to it was a coconut broken into two halves, both of which contained silver coins. Gold ornaments had been tucked inside a folded hand-woven shawl, on the other side of the *uruli*.

A copper-plated mirror stood there and Shantha saw herself in it, in the midst of the *uruli*, the flowers, fruits, vegetables, gold and coconuts. What does this mean? Why are we doing this? So many questions arose in her mind.

After a bath, she ran to her grandpa to shoot all her



questions to him. "Wait!" said grandpa with a smile. He pressed a betel leaf with arecanut and a one-rupee coin into her hands. "What's this, grandpa?" was her first question.

He explained that since *Vishu* marked the beginning of the new year, it is believed that giving and receiving money on that day would ensure prosperity all through the year. "Do you know why we see the *Vishu kani* the first thing on this day?" asked grandpa.

"No! Why?" asked Shantha. Wasn't this the question that was topmost in her mind?

"On most festivals, we celebrate the new crop and harvest," explained grandpa. "*Vishu* is no different. We use the laburnum that blossoms only in this season. We also use vegetables, fruits and other items that grow during this time of the year. When we see ourselves in the mirror surrounded by all the fruits, vegetables and crops of the season, besides jewels, coins and other signs of prosperity, we only remind ourselves that we are a part of the nature that includes plants, animals and the whole of creation. The *Vishu kani* tries to help us to see ourselves as part of a whole!"

That afternoon Shantha gorged herself on a feast. The highlight of the lunch was a yummy porridge made

Vishu is the New Year for most Malayalees. It heralds the paddy-sowing season and it is considered a good omen to see nature's bounty at first sight on the first day of the Malayalam calendar. The fruits, vegetables, rice, pulses and metals form part of mother earth along with mankind. Most festivals in India remind us of the importance of the various forms of life on which mankind is dependent for its survival.

out of the rice and pulses that Shantha had seen in the *Vishu kani*. It was accompanied by a mixed vegetable curry. Dessert was a fresh jackfruit that was plucked especially for the occasion.

After the feast, Shantha joined other village children at the swing. She felt a strange joy inside her. She knew now the significance of *Vishu*. How wise and important it was to celebrate these festivals. They taught you so much! She felt comfortable: Mother Nature would take care of her!

- By *Roshni Kutty & Malathy Mohan*

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

Fun 'n' Crazy games

If you're bored of the same old running races and sack races and lemon-and-spoon races at your school or club sports days, you must read this. Here are some crazy races that you might like to try out this year.

Who says a race is all about finishing first? There's the tortoise race, where the winner is the person who finishes last. Mind you, if you stop or change direction or deviate from the route or move away from the set goal, you are disqualified.

If you'd like to pair up for a race, then try the back to back race. Here pairs of players line up at the head of the course. In every pair, the players stand back to back with their arms linked. Now when the signal is given, all pairs race down to the goal and the one who reaches first, without the arms getting unlinked, is the winner.

Check out the three-legged race. Here too you race in pairs. The pairs stand next to each other and the right leg of one is tied to the left of the other with a scarf. The pair who reaches the target first is the winner.

A variation is the piggyback race, where there are two legs to the race. In the first leg, one player carries the partner on his back and in the second, his partner carries him. The pair that finishes first is the winner.

