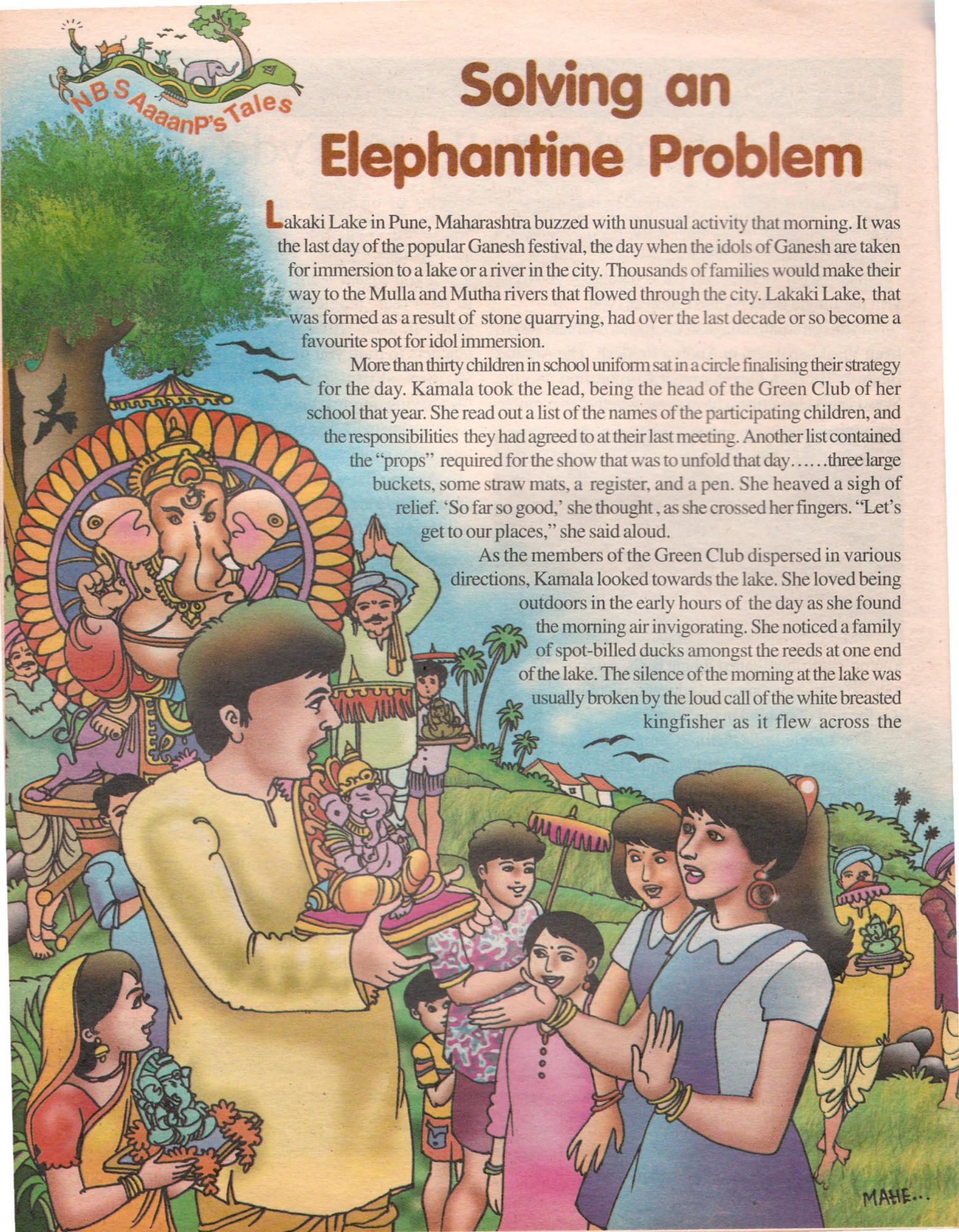


Solving an Elephantine Problem

Lakaki Lake in Pune, Maharashtra buzzed with unusual activity that morning. It was the last day of the popular Ganesh festival, the day when the idols of Ganesh are taken for immersion to a lake or a river in the city. Thousands of families would make their way to the Mulla and Mutha rivers that flowed through the city. Lakaki Lake, that was formed as a result of stone quarrying, had over the last decade or so become a favourite spot for idol immersion.

More than thirty children in school uniform sat in a circle finalising their strategy for the day. Kamala took the lead, being the head of the Green Club of her school that year. She read out a list of the names of the participating children, and the responsibilities they had agreed to at their last meeting. Another list contained the "props" required for the show that was to unfold that day. three large buckets, some straw mats, a register, and a pen. She heaved a sigh of relief. 'So far so good,' she thought, as she crossed her fingers. "Let's get to our places," she said aloud.

As the members of the Green Club dispersed in various directions, Kamala looked towards the lake. She loved being outdoors in the early hours of the day as she found the morning air invigorating. She noticed a family of spot-billed ducks amongst the reeds at one end of the lake. The silence of the morning at the lake was usually broken by the loud call of the white breasted kingfisher as it flew across the



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waters. But today the excited chatter and the clatter of footsteps of the children drowned these calls.

Kamala and her friends had always been keenly interested in the activities of their club. They had joined it two years ago when they entered middle school. In those two years they had been involved in a number of exciting projects, including a study of the Mutha river, the greening of the Fergusson College Hill, and in compiling a list of the species of birds found on their school campus.

The most interesting one, though, had been a green audit of their school that they had done to figure out how environment friendly they were. It had been exciting to share their findings with the whole school at the Monday assembly. This had led to some immediate action. A pit was dug to compost the leaves that were swept from their playground; unused pages from notebooks were collected at the end of the term to be made into pads, and used envelopes were turned inside out to be reused by the office staff.

But the most thrilling moment for the club members came when the children decided to boycott all soft drinks sold in tetrapacks that were served in their canteen. This decision was taken unanimously when they learnt that such packaging was not only wasteful and expensive, but damaging to the environment because it had a layer of aluminium that was non-degradable.

"Hey, Lotus, don't daydream!" yelled Darshini, one of Kamala's best friends in school. They had nicknamed her Lotus after the meaning of her name, when she got increasingly interested in green issues. "Oops, sorry!" said Kamala, and rushed to take her place at the entrance to the lake, where some members were tying a cloth banner between two branches of a tree. The

banner, painstakingly done by some of them, boldly stated: **'Don't Pollute Our Lake.....We Want to Live Too!'** All around this message were sketches of fishes, frogs, and some water birds like the spot-billed duck and the kingfisher.

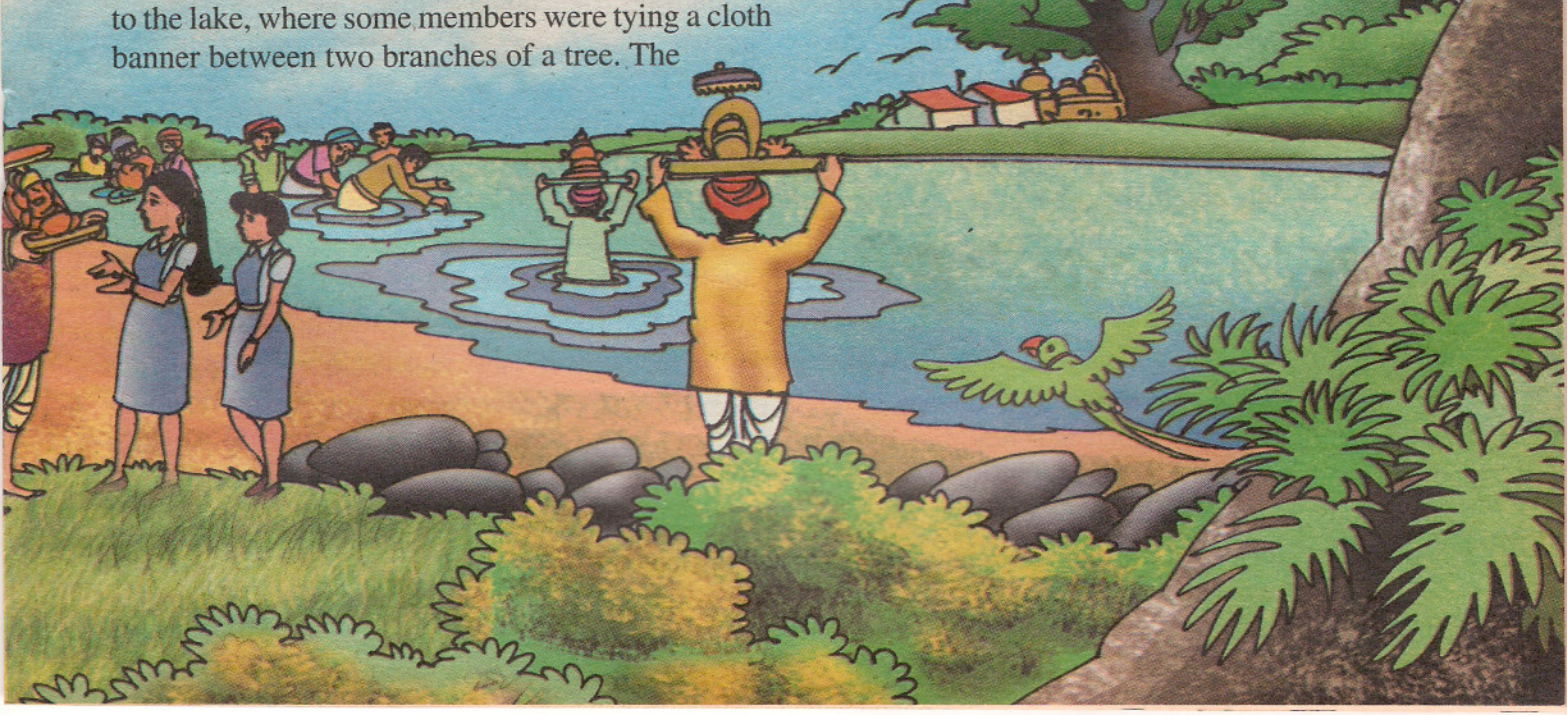
In a short while, an excited murmur ran through the group. All eyes turned towards the little path that led to the entrance to the lake. A small group of people could be seen walking down the path, chanting and praying. Four men amongst them were carrying a large idol of Lord Ganesh. Shibani, who happened to be standing near Kamala, nudged her and whispered, "Here's the first for the day. I hope we're lucky."

As the group neared the entrance, Kamala stepped forward. "We are members of the Green Club of Kendriya Vidyalaya. We are here to request you not to immerse your idol in this lake," she said. And then the members chipped in one by one with their lines, as if they had been rehearsed for the play that was unfolding.

"The paints that are used on the idols these days are all toxic, and they poison our waters," said one.

"Ganesh Puja was once a community affair with many families getting together. That's how it was in my grandparents' time. But these days it is celebrated individually and so, there are so many more idols to be immersed," said another.

"We have read that the lake beds in some places have got silted



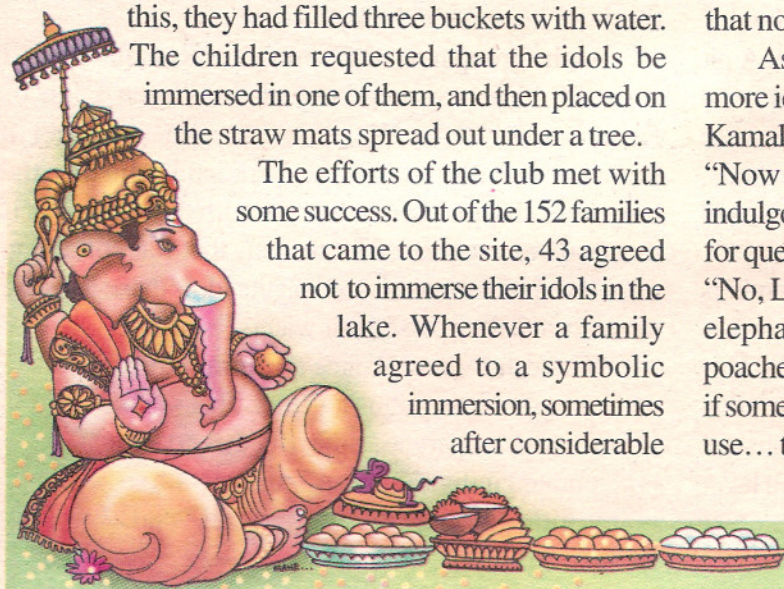
because a large number of idols have been immersed over the years,” added Shibani.

“And, and,” said Leela excitedly, who was the youngest in the club, besides being Kamala’s younger sister, “we feel all this will affect the wildlife in this lake.”

This scene was replayed the entire morning, as many families made their way to the lake with idols of various sizes. The students explained how the lake was the only source of drinking water for many residential areas around and how paints release heavy metals like lead, mercury, manganese, and chromium into the water. They pleaded that the idols be given only a symbolic immersion. For this, they had filled three buckets with water.

The children requested that the idols be immersed in one of them, and then placed on the straw mats spread out under a tree.

The efforts of the club met with some success. Out of the 152 families that came to the site, 43 agreed not to immerse their idols in the lake. Whenever a family agreed to a symbolic immersion, sometimes after considerable



discussion and debate amongst themselves, a spontaneous cheer went up from the students. Leela would run with a register to note down the name and address of the family for their record, and would thank them profusely on behalf of all the fishes and frogs!

At the end of the morning it was a tired but happy group of children who trudged to their homes after sending the idols to the school in their school bus. They would have to decide on what they would do with the idols. Some students suggested that they could find out from a potter if the clay could be reused. Others said the idols could be distributed among homes the following year, so that no new ones need be purchased.

As Kamala and Leela walked back home, they saw more idols of Ganesh being taken away for immersion. Kamala heaved a sigh. Leela looked up at her and asked, “Now what are you worrying about?” Kamala smiled indulgently at her younger sister who always scolded her for questioning the ways of the world too often, and said, “No, Leela, I’m not worrying. Just thinking about the elephants in our country that are getting killed by poachers, speeding trains, and what not. Just wondering if somehow all this human devotion could be put to better use... that’s all. Just wondering.”

- By Sujatha Padmanabhan

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

Festivals are very special occasions, where families get together to celebrate. But over the years, some of the rituals associated with festivals have increasingly caused environmental problems like pollution of air (firecrackers), noise pollution (deafening loudspeakers), and even pollution of water bodies (idol immersion during festivals like *Durga Puja* and *Ganpati Utsav*, or the *tazias* during *Moharram*).

The *Ganpati Utsav*, on which the above story is based, was in the past a social affair with entire communities getting together to celebrate. But with the growth in population especially in cities, it is now celebrated by every nuclear family separately. So the number of idols that get immersed has increased tremendously. When the idols are immersed, the toxic paints used for decorating them pollute the water. When the clay idols dissolve, tonnes of soil get added to the water body. This leads to silting or the accumulation of mud on the bed of the water body. Besides, along with the idols, people also throw the *nirmalya* (the leaves and flowers used in the *puja*) into the water. The increased biodegradable matter in the water (from the *nirmalya*, and the materials used for making the idols, like hay, bamboo, wood, straw, jute, cloth, etc) decomposes and this depletes the amount of oxygen. The water thus becomes unsuitable for organisms to survive.

Today, many groups of individuals, NGOs, and schools in States like Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh are involved in raising awareness about such issues.