

# THE HOMECOMING

The handsome man in the taxi was about thirty. His coloured hair, fashionable suit, and perfume gave him away as someone from the city. He was on his way to Sneh-ka-Mala, a tiny village in the Aravalli hills of Rajasthan. He was Arvind Gujjar, who had left the village as a starving boy of fourteen after the drought had claimed his father.

Memories rushed through Arvind's mind like a kaleidoscope—the burning sensation of hunger and thirst, his journey to an unknown city alone to find work and food, his mother so thin and yet so beautiful with her colourful blouse and red *pallu*, his barren village, the dry river bed, Mayee, his favourite buffalo, and her calf being turned loose as there was no fodder to feed them, his dear friend Gopal with the lovely smile... soon, he fell into a drowsy heat induced stupor.

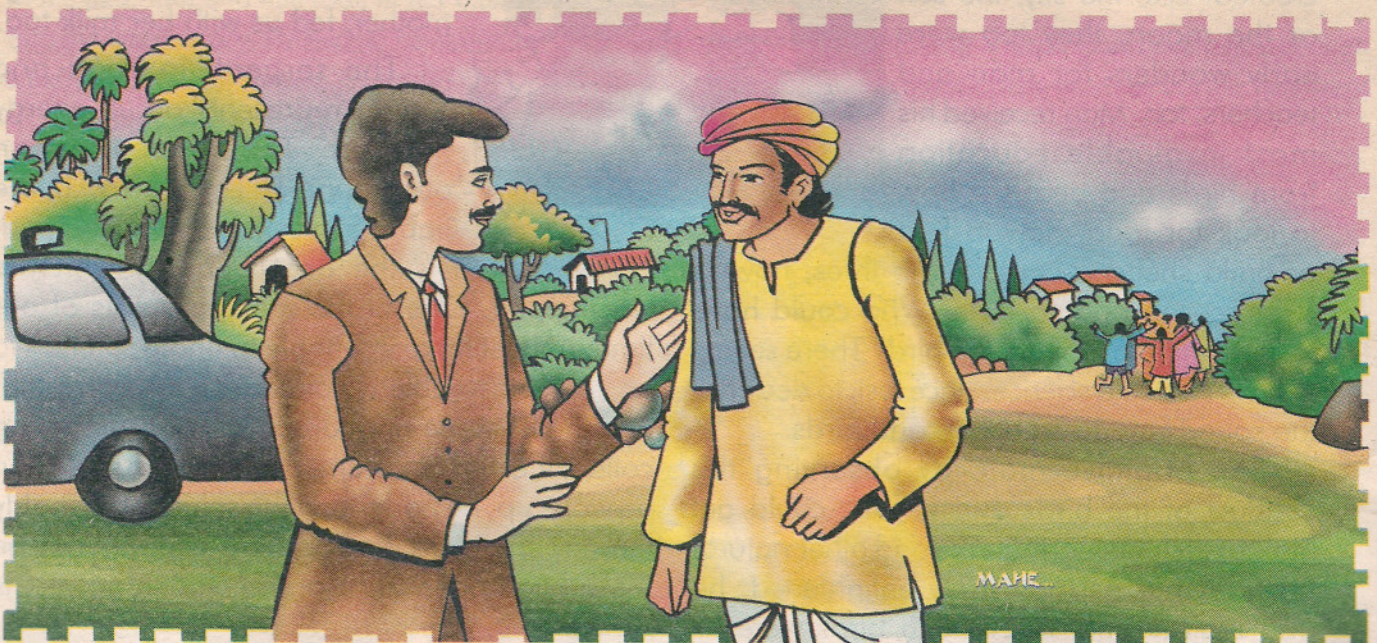
"We have reached," said the driver. Arvind awoke and was surprised to see a lush green area. This was certainly not his dry village. He was about to protest, when he checked himself on hearing music. The tune reminded him of the way his mother sang before the drought had come. Later the singing had stopped and all

his mother did was walk for miles in the scorching heat, looking for a pitcher of water and a few twigs to cook their measly meals!

Soon Arvind noticed a procession approaching. He waited for the procession under the shade of a nearby tree. The people appeared in a whirl of colours. The children were gaily dressed. Little boys in sparkling white clothes and little girls in little red *ghagras* ran ahead of the group, closely followed by the adults. They were singing a song, thanking the river Ruparel for her bounty. The whole group looked radiant, happy and well fed.

A man from the group came towards Arvind and asked, "Where are you headed, brother?" "Can you tell me the way to Sneh-ka-Mala, my friend?" asked Arvind. "You've reached, brother, and I'm the *Sarpanch* of the village," answered the man as he smiled a heart-warming smile. Arvind recognised the smile. "Gopal! Gopu, is that you? I'm Arvind, your friend Avu. Don't you remember me?" The two men hugged each other with tears in their eyes. "Your mother will be so happy," was all that the *Sarpanch* could say.

The procession had moved ahead. There was so





much to talk about, but Arvind had to see his mother first. He looked helplessly around at all the lush greenery. Gopal pointed in the direction of Arvind's house and rushed to join the procession.

Teethlibai, Arvind's mother, was sitting under the shade of a tree. Words cannot explain the happiness that lit up the old lady's eyes, as she hugged her long lost son. In the mean time, Gopal informed the villagers that Arvind had returned. Many of them came to meet Arvind. Some wondered about his new looks, but the villagers had seen stranger transformations; they had seen a river reborn, they had also seen acres and acres of burnt brown land turn green!

All along Arvind had been waiting to be alone with his mother and friend. He was desperately wanting to ask about this wonderful transformation that had come over the village. The happiness and prosperity reflected in the eyes of all whom he had met in the village had made him extremely curious to know the reason. He pounced at the opportunity as soon as the last guest had left his house. Soon Gopal was telling Arvind all that had happened in the sixteen years that he was away.

“Do you remember the stories about our forefathers trapping the little rainfall that fell, by making *johads* (a semi circular water pond built with the help of mud walls, along the contour of hill slopes to store rain water) and *bandhs* (small dams)? The stories of *shramdaan*, where everybody would spend the day doing community work and then follow it up with a picnic at the spot? The story

Ruparel means 'full of beauty'. The Ruparel flows mostly through Alwar district in Northeast Rajasthan. In the 1950s, due to the neglect of traditional water harvesting systems like the *johads* and *bandhs* and the depletion of surrounding forests, the water tables fell and by 1970, the Ruparel was no longer a perennial river. The droughts started in the 1980s. However, the concerted efforts of the villagers and organisations like the Tarun Bharat Sangh and others have brought the river back to life again. Today, the people of the valley are returning to a prosperous and happy life.

about the river Ruparel flowing throughout the year and the land being green and fertile? How we laughed at those funny stories when hunger was gnawing at our stomachs!”

“Soon after you left,” Gopal continued, “some well-wishers came to the village. They were young, educated social workers, who wanted to help our village to come out of the drought situation. They kept asking the elders about the old johads and bandhs. Grandmother told them what she had told us so often. They explained to us how our traditional systems of trapping rain water by building johads and bandhs were the best examples of how to harvest rain water and that reviving those methods was the best way to bring back the fertility of the region. They urged the elders in the village to share their invaluable knowledge with them to help restore the old and broken down johads and bandhs in the village.”

“Soon the men and women joined the team of social workers,” Gopal continued, “in their effort to restore the old dams. The johads were repaired and they could trap water once again. The underground water tables came up and the land became green again. Initially, the water was barely sufficient. But then one summer the river just refused to dry up. The crops were sown. Some of the

men came back from the cities and picked up the plough, the animals came back, and even the surrounding forests grew back.

“Today we barely walk for five to ten minutes to get fresh water. The land yields so much of food that we have enough to feed our families and sell the extra in the market. The cattle have multiplied and yield so much of milk that we consume all of it; the extra is converted as ghee and sold in the market. I can go on, but the most important change of all is that we know our own worth and the worth of our traditional johads and bandhs. We have re-learned our old knowledge. Nobody can fool us anymore or take away what belongs to the whole community.”

‘The answers were always here with us; how unnecessary was our suffering’, thought Arvind and his eyes filled with tears. Arvind had actually planned to take Gopu away to the city, where he too could find a job and live comfortably. But his friend had turned their village into a heaven, and now there was no need to go anywhere else. He smelt the cool fresh air, and felt it was good to be back home.

*-Erica Taraporewala*

*Courtesy: Kalpavriksh and the National Biodiversity and Strategic Action Plan*

## Meet the...

The Gurungs inhabiting the Himalayan ranges of Nepal are a tribe of sturdy hillsmen who have become famous for their martial prowess and their stamina, which make them invaluable assets to the army. As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they were fighting as mercenaries for Hindu chieftains. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British began recruiting them into the Indian army, and the Gurkha regiments were established - starting a tradition that continues to this day. Today, many Gurung soldiers serve in hilly areas in the north-eastern regions such as Nagaland and Assam. Their familiarity with the terrain gives them a great advantage over other soldiers.



## Gurungs of Nepal

The Gurungs are Mongoloids and their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group. Most of them are also fluent in Nepali. They are concentrated mostly in western Nepal. With the exception of those serving in the army and the police, most Gurungs depend on agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihood.

In some villages, more than 50 per cent of the men between 19 and 45 are away serving in one of the British or Indian Gurkha regiments. In the army, Gurungs are exposed to the influence of Hinduism. However, most of them have retained an ideology rooted in an ancient tribal religion, interspersed with some elements of Tibetan Buddhism.