

This is a story I would like to share with my friends, wherever they are in the diverse regions of our country, and whatever language they are reading this in.

My name is Suni. I am a young girl of 12 living in Kagal village on the west coast of Karnataka. I go to the local government school. Earlier, life just went along endlessly like the waves in the sea, till one day two women came to our school to start a nature group. I joined up, and loved all the activities we did. Each week there was something new to think about. It made me feel alive and energetic, like never before.

Last December weekend, we had a nature camp on our village beach. We had just finished exams and gaily ran along the water's edge towards the *gudda* (hill) that we were going to hike up. Over, on the other side, was a grand view of the river Aganashini.

'Something is happening' shouted my classmate Arun, spotting a crowd of fishermen. We pushed our way through them and what I saw made me almost faint and fall back. It was a huge black-grey mass of flesh, and it was gently heaving! Part of some animal, no doubt – but where was the beginning and the end?

"Thimmingala," I heard someone say.

"Oh! A whale!" By now I had reached the crowd's innermost circle and saw the most magnificent creature stretched out on the sand. I quickly counted 36 people standing alongside it, which made it perhaps 50 feet in length. The whale was so high, I could not see over it. Some of the elders said it must have swum into the shallow waters of the sea, got washed on to the beach, and stranded there. The problem now was how to get the whale return to the ocean. Some young men were pouring buckets of sea water all over it. Lakshmi Akka, our nature club teacher, explained that the whale's skin had to be kept moist, so it did not dry out under the harsh sun.

Already, ropes were being tied to its flippers and teams were forming to try and drag it out into the sea. Our villagers are very strong, as they are used to dragging boats in and out. But no one realized just how heavy a whale would be, and it would not move an inch. More and more people started streaming in and there was a lot of noise. The whale was like a gentle giant hardly moving, not resisting, and its eyes looked so kind.

At least one and a half hours passed this way, and people began saying that there was no hope – this whale would die!

Someone from the Fisheries Department also came and took



THE WHALE KAGAL VILL

Whales, the world over, are a highly endangered species of marine mammals. Considered to be commercially important, they are hunted the world over. No part of the whale is wasted; even the bones, after the extraction of oil, are made into fertilizers. They are also threatened by seawater pollution.. Whales getting stranded on the beach most often get dehydrated and die. The Blue Whale, the Finner Whale or Common Rorqual, and the Sperm Whale are known to occur in the Indian seas.

some measurements. All this while, no amount of effort could get the whale slide down to the water.

“If only we could put something slippery along its side, like oil,” someone said. But then we would need a truckload of oil! I had started getting desperate – after months of nature club activities, here was a real life problem, and we found ourselves helpless.

I began willing my mind to work.... something slippery, sliding... Then I slapped my forehead. But, of course!

“Lakshmi Akka,” I shouted, “why don’t we get everyone to make a paste of *Baslay Soppu* (Malabar spinach which is grown in most home gardens) and hibiscus (shoe flower leaves)? It is so slippery, we can pour it under the whale and pull!”

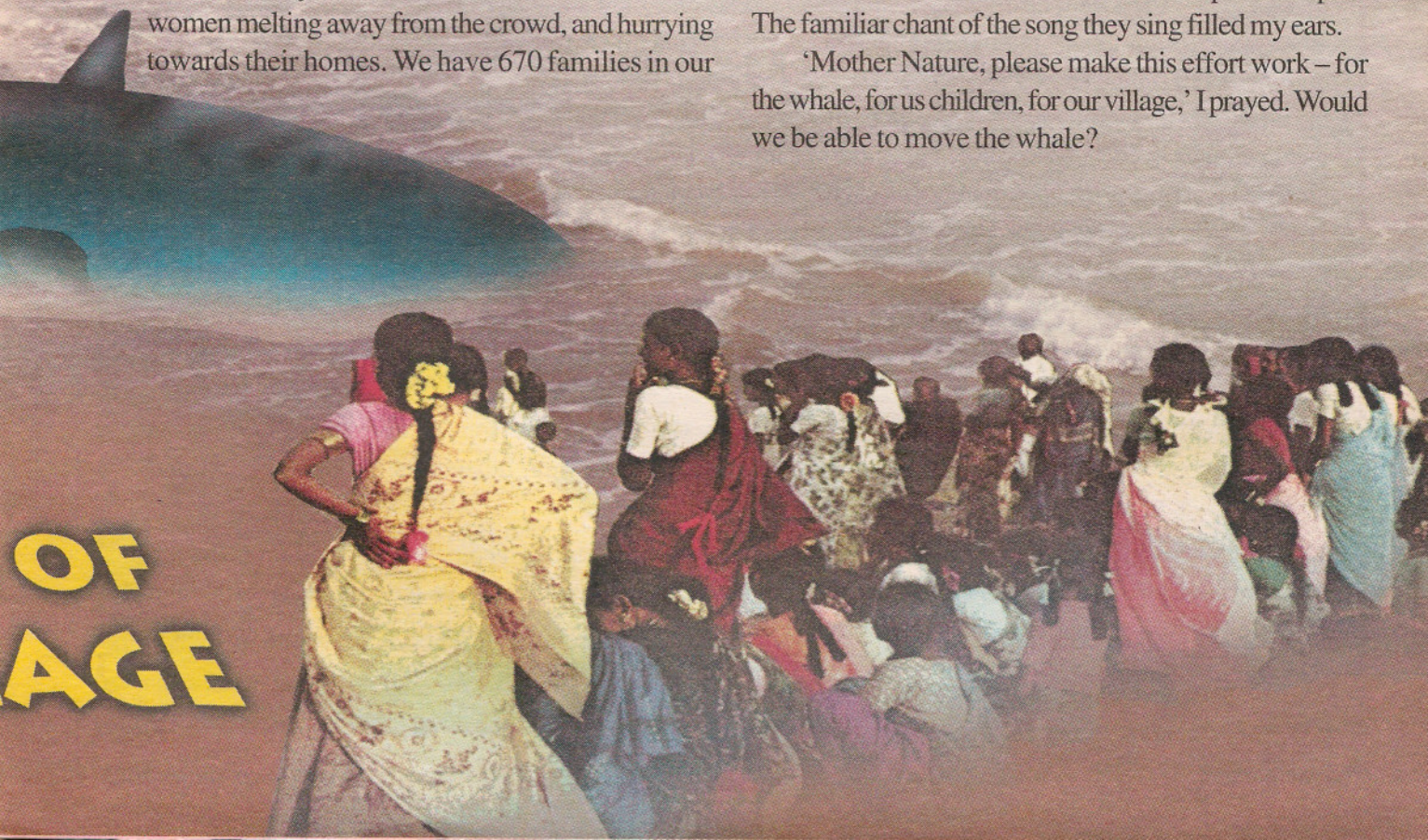
It was a crazy idea. But I was amazed to see the women melting away from the crowd, and hurrying towards their homes. We have 670 families in our

village. I ran to my mother and we both plucked all the *soppu* we had and began grinding it. I remembered we also had a lot of *lolaysara* (Aloe vera leaves) and that the gel from the plant is not just slippery but is also supposed to heal cuts and wounds. So I added that in.

We soon had five buckets of slime ready. We heaved out – my father helped. Crowds were coming with buckets, old tins, and cans filled with the slippery soup. Some persons with cycles and motorbikes had loaded drums with *baslay soppu* soap and were going to the whale. What a parade it was!! I had never seen the village so united in a cause. Normally, there are petty fights happening all the time, and a lot of local politics.

Everyone was sweating now, but began carefully pouring the green slime all along the length of the whale; at the same time the fishermen heaved to push and pull. The familiar chant of the song they sing filled my ears.

‘Mother Nature, please make this effort work – for the whale, for us children, for our village,’ I prayed. Would we be able to move the whale?



OF
AGE

I truly believe that there was magic in the humble green slime that came from our hearts and homes that day. Because the whale began to slide along! To the water, half way into it, and then in it! The men were straining and sweating but kept up the tugging. Then the ropes were handed over to the small fishing boats in the water and they began to pull the whale towards the deeper waters.

Once it was in, the whale began to help by attempting to swim. Further and further the boats went as we stood

and watched. Finally, I saw the boatsmen roll up the ropes. The whale was on its own! The boatsmen stayed there watching and we peered from the shore. The last thing I remember seeing was a line of our boats, and then a giant spout of water from the whale as she swam off into the blue depths of its familiar territory. Could our hearts be fuller than this?

- Sunita Rao

Courtesy: Kalpavriksh and the National Biodiversity and Strategic Action Plan

Meet the...

Durrani of Afghanistan

How would you like to have two homes - one in the cool mountains for the summer, and the other in the warm plains for the winter? Sounds great, doesn't it? Well, that's exactly how the Durrani tribals of Afghanistan spend their lives!

The Durrani can be described as semi-nomads, who live at least a part of the year in tents. Being members of traditional herds and farmers, they spend a greater part of the year in the winter quarters, known as *watan* or 'home'. Their cattle comprise mainly sheep and goats. The winter quarters are villages near a water source - a river, spring or underground channel. At the end of April, the cattle-owners leave for their summer quarters, while the landowners stay on. To reach the traditional summer pasture, the nomads have to travel through rough country, and the trip takes anything from ten days to a month. They remain in their summer camp for two months, and this is a busy period for the whole family. The sheep thrive on the strong mountain grass and produce milk, which is turned into yoghurt and cheese. The sheep are shorn and the wool is pressed into felt. At the end of July, the caravans are ready to make the return journey to the *watan*. On their way, they pick the seasonal fruits, including apricots, grapes and melons.

When they reach home by the end of August, the grain would have been harvested and is ready for use. With the major tasks having got out of the way, autumn is a time of ease and comparative plenty.

We are reminded of the temporary shifting of the capital from Delhi to Shimla during summer when the Britishers were ruling India. The entire administrative machinery would leave for the hills early in April and return by June end. A similar exercise still goes on in Jammu & Kashmir, when the State administration packs off for Jammu during winter.

