

The Wonder Berry

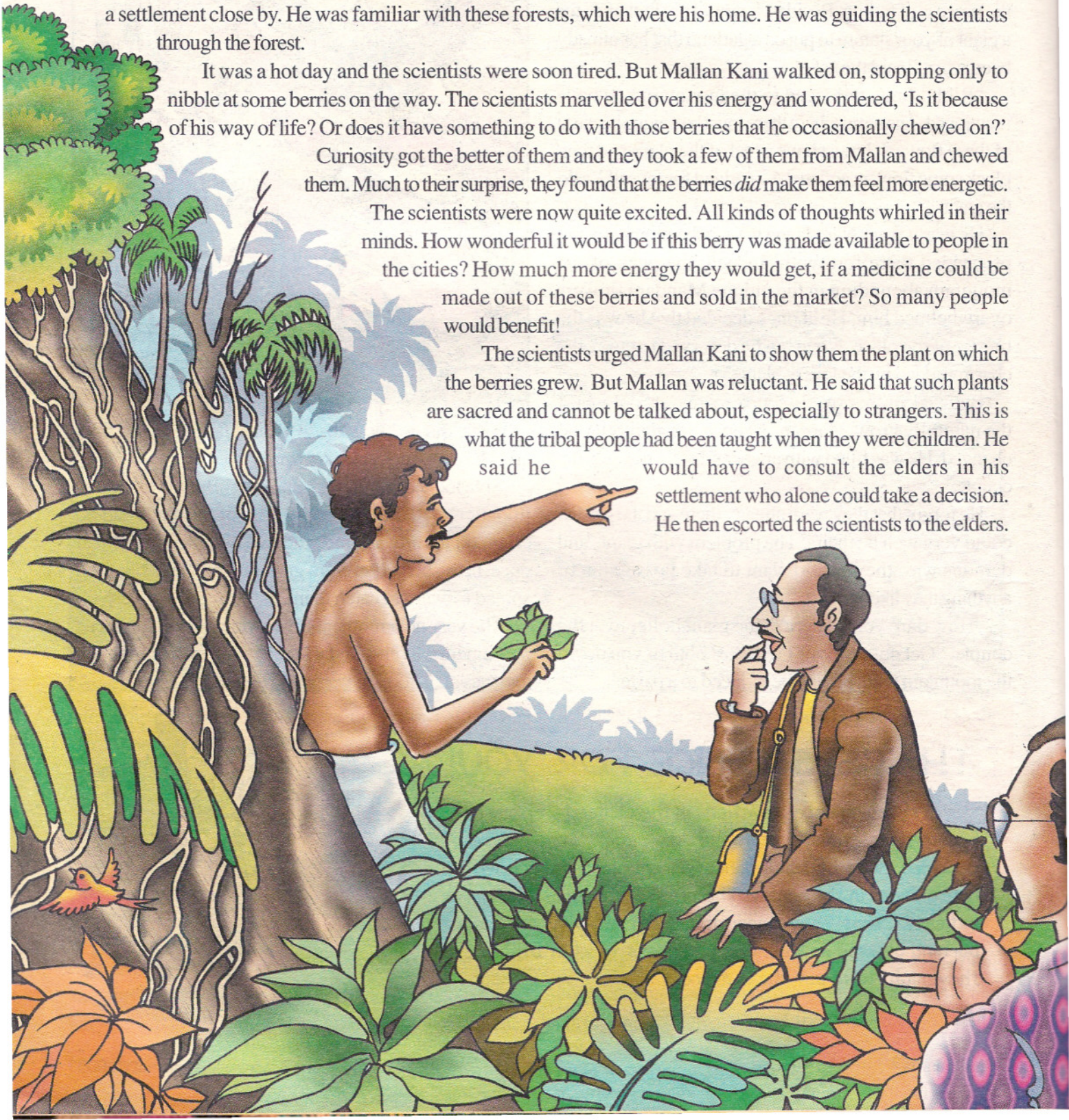
A few years ago, two scientists were walking through the forests on the Agasthya hills in Kerala. They were on an expedition looking for rare plants and were accompanied by Mallan Kani. He belonged to the Kani tribe and lived in a settlement close by. He was familiar with these forests, which were his home. He was guiding the scientists through the forest.

It was a hot day and the scientists were soon tired. But Mallan Kani walked on, stopping only to nibble at some berries on the way. The scientists marvelled over his energy and wondered, 'Is it because of his way of life? Or does it have something to do with those berries that he occasionally chewed on?'

Curiosity got the better of them and they took a few of them from Mallan and chewed them. Much to their surprise, they found that the berries *did* make them feel more energetic.

The scientists were now quite excited. All kinds of thoughts whirled in their minds. How wonderful it would be if this berry was made available to people in the cities? How much more energy they would get, if a medicine could be made out of these berries and sold in the market? So many people would benefit!

The scientists urged Mallan Kani to show them the plant on which the berries grew. But Mallan was reluctant. He said that such plants are sacred and cannot be talked about, especially to strangers. This is what the tribal people had been taught when they were children. He said he would have to consult the elders in his settlement who alone could take a decision. He then escorted the scientists to the elders.



This was the first time the people from whom the knowledge was obtained have benefited from such an arrangement. This knowledge is a small drop in the vast ocean of knowledge that tribal cultures all over the world have.

Over 119 chemical substances used in modern medicine come from plants. There are many more such plants waiting to be discovered. The cure for dreaded diseases, like cancer, may lie in the secret world of plants and in many people who live in and around forests and who have used these plants for a long long time. However, what is important is, these people who are the keepers of this knowledge are remembered and given due recognition if their knowledge is being used for manufacturing life saving medicines.

A meeting of all the community members was called. The issue was discussed. Many elders felt that if they were to reveal the name of the plant, it would bring them bad luck. The scientists did their best to convince them that revealing the information would not harm the Kanis.

On the contrary, if the plant did have medicinal properties and could be used in the manufacture of a drug, it would bring money to the community.

After long deliberations, the elders decided to disclose the name and location of the plant to the scientists. Mallan Kani was asked to take the scientists to the place where the plant grew. Another trek in the forests led them to a small shrub. Mallan called the plant *aarogyappacha*.

That day, the scientists took a few samples of the plant to their institute and studied them in the laboratory for its chemical properties. The studies showed that it *does* have certain chemicals that helped overcome



Mallan Kani with the aarogyappacha

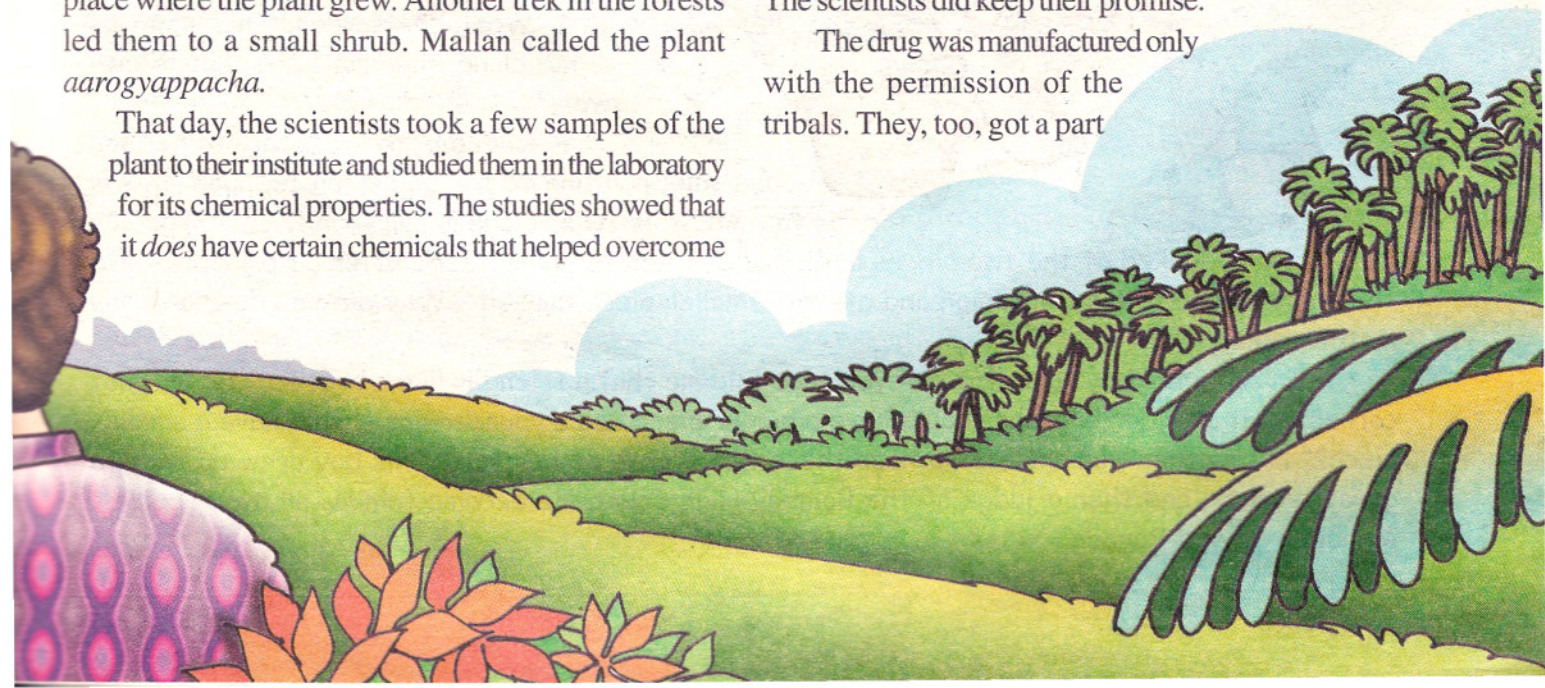
tiredness. The plant was identified. Its scientific name was *Trichopus zeylanicus travancoricus*. Investigations revealed that this particular plant was found only in that region of Kerala and certain parts of Tamil Nadu, and nowhere else in the world.

After a lot of research and many years later, a medicine was made out of the plant. The scientists' dream did come true. The medicine was commercially produced and used for overcoming fatigue.

But you must be wondering what happened to the Kani tribals and the promise made to them? Not to worry!

The scientists did keep their promise.

The drug was manufactured only with the permission of the tribals. They, too, got a part



of the income that came from the sale of the drug. The Kanis themselves came together and formed a trust to look after their welfare, and to help document their knowledge.

Incidentally, the forests where the plant grows are managed by the Forest Department. As per the rules, the tribals cannot pluck the berry for commercial use.

Now, the Kanis had to seek permission from the Forest officials, who initially hesitated as they felt that large-scale plucking might destroy the forest.

Ultimately, the Kanis were given permission to cultivate this plant on forestland.

The Kanis, like many other tribal communities, have a wealth of knowledge. From their experience with *Arogyapaccha*, the Kanis learnt how valuable this traditional knowledge is, and how beneficial it could be if put to good use.

It taught them the importance of safeguarding their knowledge and making sure it was used for their own benefit. It also taught them how not to let themselves be exploited by outsiders.

- By Seema Bhatt

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