

# The Young Guardians

**A**long the narrow path that crawled through the forest, Prabhu ran as fast as his nine-year-old legs could carry him, towards the village. His lungs were screaming for more air, but he couldn't afford to wait. The words that Manjunath had said rang harshly in his ears over and over again. "The whole village is in trouble now because of you!" As Prabhu ran, he thought about the day it had all started...

It was just two months back. It had been a holiday because of the meeting the adults were having in their village that day. Adavimallapura is a small, remote village situated in Karnataka. The village has no roads, electricity or telephone. The villagers have to walk four miles to the nearest bus stop.

The people were very poor, and the only wealth they have was the forest that stood by the village. In spite of all this, Prabhu loved Adavimallapura. The meeting that day was to discuss how to use various government schemes to improve the conditions of Adavimallapura village.

The meeting was being held in Prabhu's school. The children in the village were shooed away from the meeting.

"What will you understand? You'll just get bored," his mother had told him.

"Not fair!" Prabhu shouted, as he kicked a stone in the field near the forest. It was a hot afternoon and nobody was outside. So, no one heard him except Manjunath. Manjunath was Prabhu's classmate and best friend.

"I would like to know what plans they make for our village at the meeting. After all, this is my village, too!" Prabhu complained.

"Oh, Prabhu, you know these elders. They think we are small children. What can we do to prove otherwise?" Manjunath said as

a matter of fact. Prabhu opened his mouth to argue but froze at what he saw.

Four bullock carts piled with wood were moving stealthily from their forest towards the neighbouring village. "They are stealing wood from our forest... they... they have cut our trees!" Manjunath whispered to Prabhu as they looked on.

Prabhu was furious. "*This is outrageous. These men have to be stopped. What can just the two of us do?*" Prabhu thought. He suddenly had an idea. He turned towards Manjunath and said, "Go get the elders, quick!" Manjunath looked at Prabhu for a brief second. He then sped towards the village.

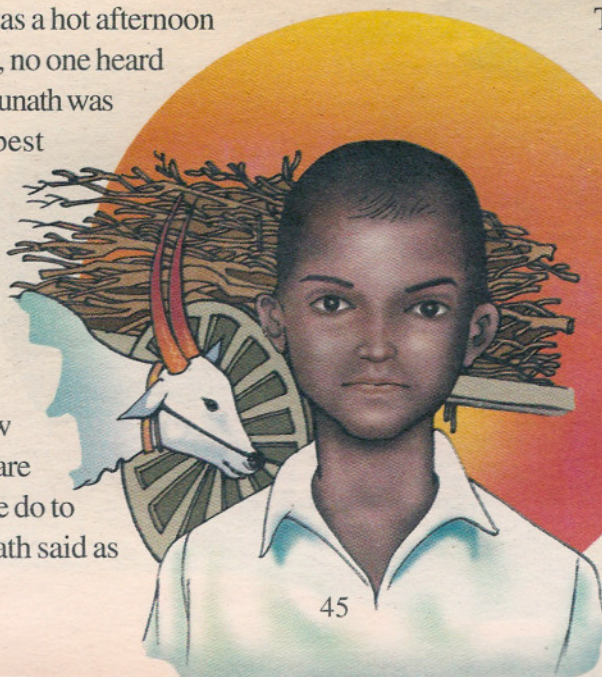
Prabhu was scared as he walked up to the bullock carts. With a stern voice he said, "Hey, cutting trees is wrong. Besides, those trees are very precious to us. I'll get you arrested for this... I won't let you take them."

The thieves started laughing at the little boy. Prabhu was prepared. He sat on the ground, in front of the bullock carts. "Very well, if you want to take the wood, you can take it over me!"

The men suddenly stopped laughing. They did not know what to do. And before they could even think of a way out, the angry villagers came running. Things happened very fast after that.

The thieves were tied up and the wood confiscated. The police were called and the culprits were handed over to them. Prabhu suddenly became a hero in the village. There was great celebration in the village that day...

But the happiness of the Adavimallapur villagers was short lived. The neighbouring villagers were rich and influential people. They had the police officers on their side. They





This is a true incident which took place in Adavimallapur, a small village in North Karnataka. Prabhu is 12 years old now and is in the 6th Standard. He wants to become a government officer and serve his village and country. He has set an example for all the other children in the village. Most villages have a forest nearby. These forests support the villagers with non-timber forest produce, like firewood, honey, fruits, medicinal herbs, and so on. Like in Adavimallapur, many villagers are now aware of their duties and rights towards the village forest. They protect and manage their village forest on their own and make sure that their forest is being conserved and not exploited by outsiders.

got the thieves released and together planned for revenge. They registered a false complaint with the police that the Adavimallapura villagers were cutting trees from the forest illegally!

One day, Prabhu had been to the forest to water a few plants that he had planted when Manjunath came running to him. He told him that the forest officers had arrived in the village. They had seen the wood that had been confiscated from the thieves and were now accusing the Adavimallapura villagers of cutting those trees!

Prabhu didn't wait to hear more. He ran towards the village. *'Why are my people being punished? Is it my fault? What went wrong? Not fair!'* he fumed.

He heard strange angry voices as he neared the village temple. He then saw officers threatening the villagers with arrest for cutting the trees. The officers were taking the wood with them.

Everybody knew that the wood would go back to the neighbouring villagers and that it was all according to the plans made by the neighbouring villagers and the thieves. They also knew that the police was with them and that the investigation was all a hoax. But no one was protesting. Prabhu stared helplessly. *What could he do?* He looked at all the women who were standing together by the side.

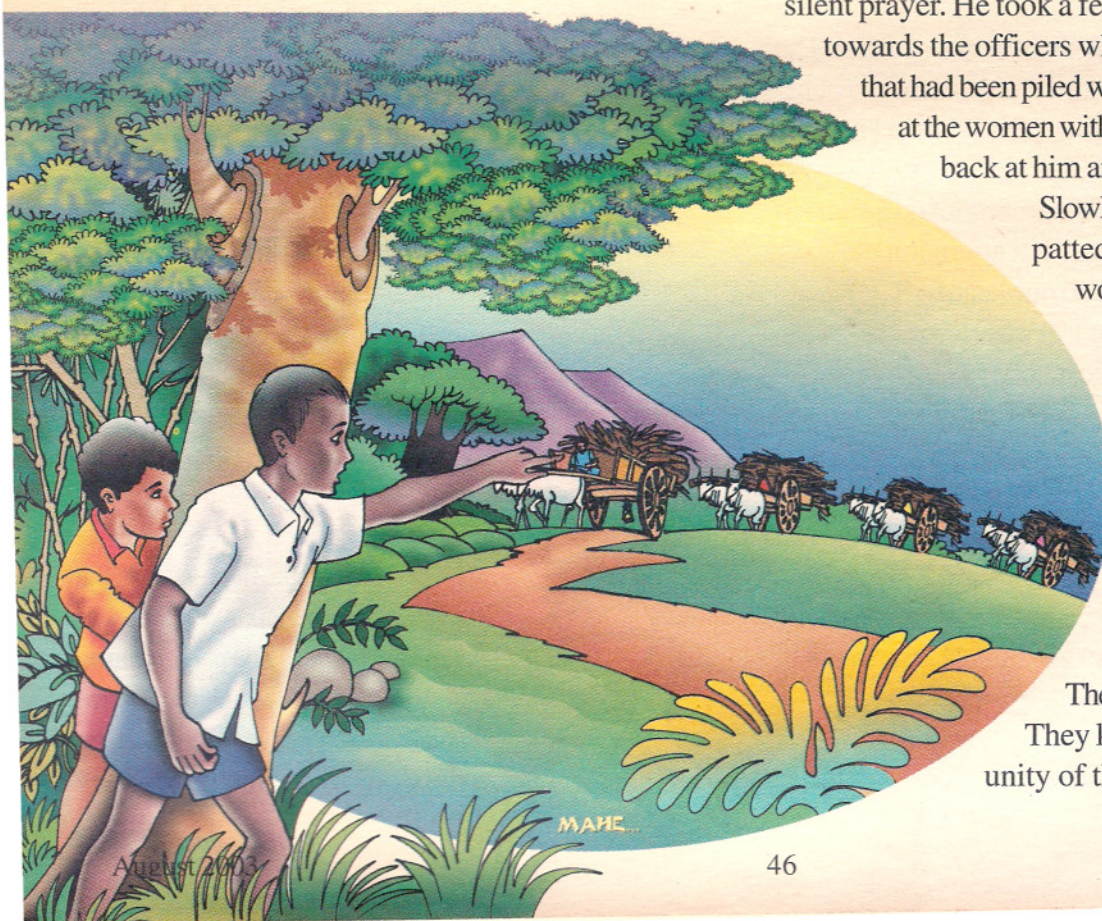
He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and made a silent prayer. He took a few steps forward and looked towards the officers who were starting the tractors that had been piled with the wood. He then looked at the women with tears in his eyes. They stared back at him and then looked at each other.

Slowly an elderly aunt came to him, patted his head and said, "Don't worry!"

Then as if by a silent mutual agreement they all formed neat rows and sat in front of the tractors. "You can't take our wood!" they all said, calmly but sternly.

Soon the whole village joined them. The officers looked shocked and scared.

There was nothing they could do. They knew that the simplicity and unity of these villagers had defeated





them. They left the village ashamed and did not trouble them again.

The joy of the people knew no bounds that day. The villagers had learnt a lesson. Every child has its own role to play in conserving nature and should always be encouraged.

Prabhu, along with the other children in the village, took a vow to protect and conserve their forest. The children of Adavimallapur have since been participating

in the village meetings, planting saplings, watering, watching, and guarding the forest as a group.

Now, when one goes to the village of Adavimallapur, the first thing one would see is the enthusiasm and love the children have towards their village and forest. They are now better known as the ‘young guardians’ of the forest!

**- Preethi Herman**

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