



THE COLOURS ARE NEAR US

"Another boring meeting!" muttered Tara. Suraj and Varsha weren't amused. "This detective club is really useless," grumbled Tara. "What's the point in looking for clues and suspects when there's no mystery to be solved?"

Varsha knew that this made sense. At the same time they wanted to be detectives. Aren't detectives supposed to look for clues and suspects?

"Hmm! Maybe we should do something new," she said, thinking aloud.

"Like what?" asked Suraj. They were sitting on the gnarled roots of a huge *peepal* tree.

"I don't know for sure," replied Varsha.

"Well, it's kind of silly to be suspicious of every new face we see," said Tara. "Remember how we attacked that man with the flowing white beard last month?"

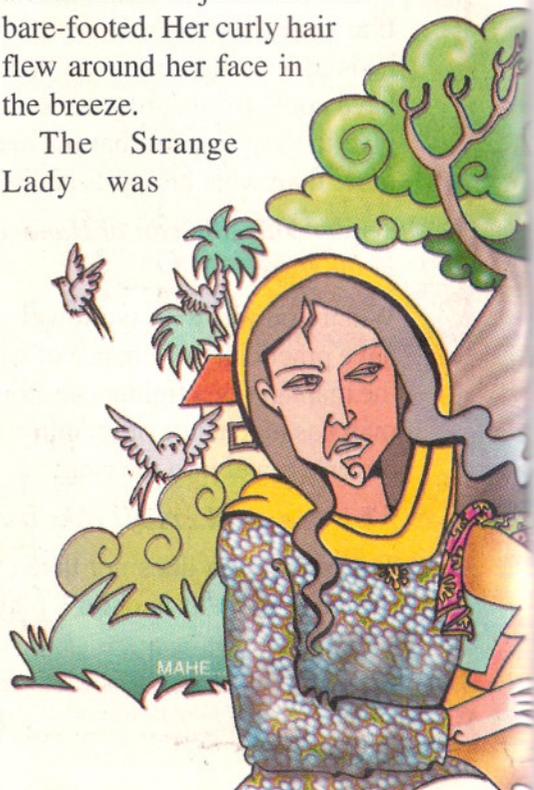
"All because I thought it might have been a disguise!" chuckled Suraj.

"But we can't suspect everyone who looks strange, can we?" asked

Tara, reasonably. There was no reply. She looked up to where her friends were staring. A strange-looking lady had appeared from behind the trees.

They were in an isolated part of the Delhi Ridge. It was late afternoon. Not too many people passed by at that hour. The Strange Lady wore a long, faded *ghagra*. And she was carrying a sack made of jute. She was bare-footed. Her curly hair flew around her face in the breeze.

The Strange Lady was



humming to herself. Unfamiliar words, and an unfamiliar tune. A few birds hopped around her and soon set up a chorus. They sang in tune with her, and then flew away.

The Strange Lady pulled something out of the sack. The children watched curiously. It was a book. Then, she pulled out some old bottles. Varsha recognised a recycled tomato sauce bottle, a jam jar, and a pickle bottle. They were all full of coloured liquids. She then pulled out a large feather from the sack. "She's sketching something," whispered Varsha.

"Birds, I think," Tara whispered back. "And she's also writing something."

Suraj looked a little frightened by the strange things that she was doing. "Come on, let's go," he urged. Coils of multi-coloured cloth popped out of the sack that lay on the ground. "Let's make a dash for the road," Suraj pleaded.

He started running. The other two followed. The sack was in his way and Suraj's feet got entangled in it. He tripped and fell. Varsha and Tara bumped into him, lost their balance and fell.

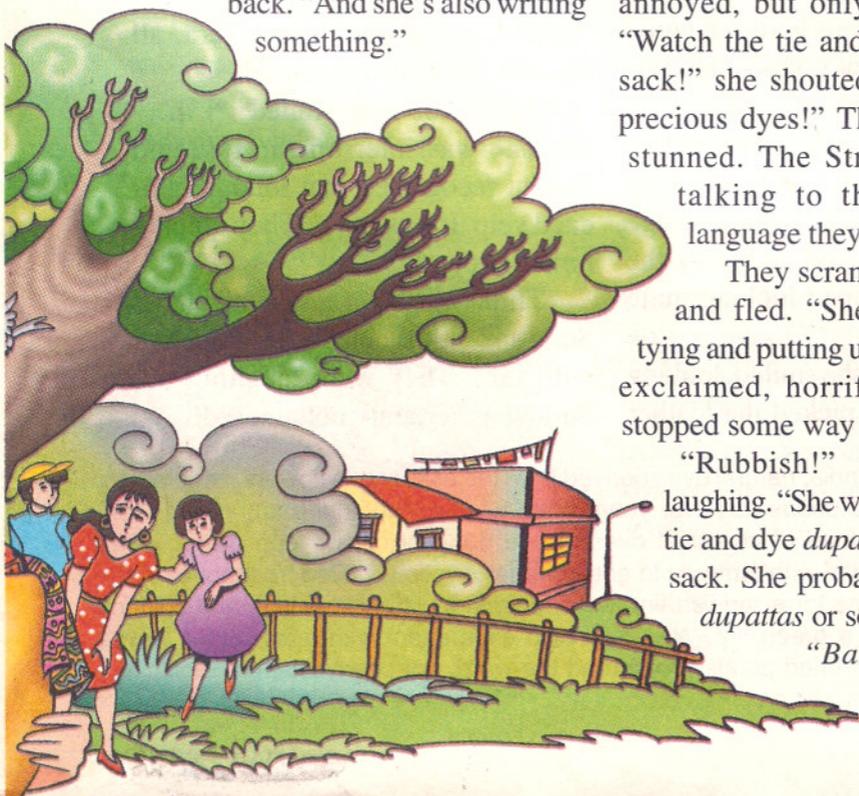
The Strange Lady's bottles were knocked over. Rivulets of green and yellow and pink and blue trickled towards the sack. She looked annoyed, but only for a moment. "Watch the tie and dye stuff in the sack!" she shouted. "There go my precious dyes!" The children were stunned. The Strange Lady was talking to them! And in a language they knew!

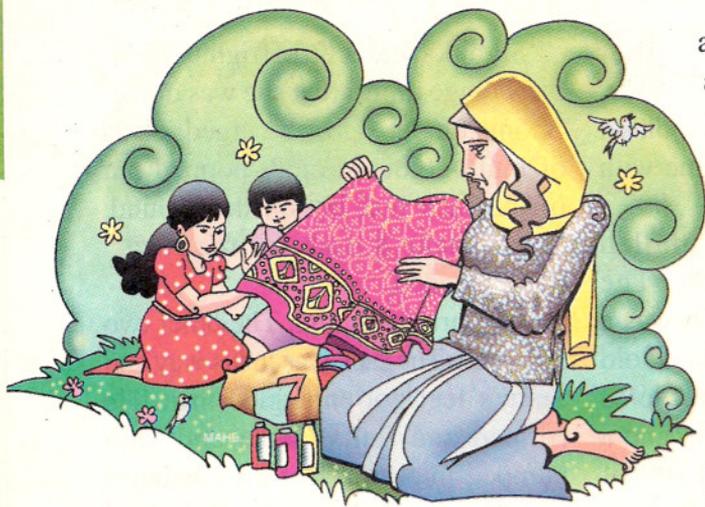
They scrambled to their feet and fled. "She's talking about tying and putting us in a sack!" Suraj exclaimed, horrified, when they stopped some way off.

"Rubbish!" Tara burst out laughing. "She was talking about the tie and dye *dupattas* that are in her sack. She probably sells *bandhni dupattas* or something."

"*Bandhni dupattas!*
I've heard that

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they are very colourful. Let's go back. I want to see them!" said Varsha. She changed track and headed straight back to the Strange Lady. Tara followed, hesitantly.

"You go, I'll wait here for you!" said Suraj in a shaky voice. He just was not convinced.

"Aunty, we're sorry we made a mess of your things!" Varsha was very direct and she looked the Strange Lady in the eye. And suddenly the Strange Lady stopped looking quite so strange.

"That's okay!" she smiled, looking up at them as she picked the feather

and bottles that lay strewn all around.

"May we please see your tie and dye dupattas?" asked Tara.

"Of course!" she replied and began pulling out the most vibrantly coloured material they had ever seen.

"How beautiful!" chorused Tara and Varsha.

"Where do you get such beautiful colours?" asked

Varsha.

"These dyes are all made out of vegetables," the lady explained. "I make them myself. You may make them, too!"

"Oh, is that so?" cried Tara, all excited. "Will you teach us?"

"Sure!" the lady smiled "I'll..." But she was interrupted. Tara and Varsha recognised that loud, frightened yelp. It was Suraj. They quickly turned around.

Three tall boys had surrounded Suraj and they seemed to be grappling with him. They were laughing but Suraj was certainly not amused!

Dyes from nature

In India, natural dyes derived from the essence of flowers, vegetables, and seeds have for years been used for colouring fabric and food. Instead of chemical dyes in use during Holi, we can go for water mixed with turmeric to get a shade of yellow, boiled beetroot or onion skins for a reddish tint, water scented with rose petals, and spinach for a green tint. We could also experiment with many other leaves and dried petals. Do spread the word, not chemicals, this Holi!

“Oh no! It’s the Gang!” cried Varsha.

“Gang?” asked the Strange Lady. “Can you explain that as we run to stop that, whatever it is?”

The three of them started running and Varsha explained, between gasping breaths, that the Gang was a group of boys in their colony who pelted everyone with balloons of water and coloured powder during Holi. They were a terror in the locality. Holi was only tomorrow, but they were active already!

The children liked the festival. It was fun. But the water balloons and chemical colours that strangers threw at people on the roads weren’t fun at all.

They were there at last. The Gang was trampling over the beautiful flowers in the park. The colourful beds of salvia, nasturtium, phlox, and

gulab flowers were crushed beneath the Gang’s spiked shoes.

“Stop!” commanded the Strange Lady, as she wrenched a balloon of coloured water from the hands of one of the gang members. “Horrible chemical colours! Do you know how harmful these are for your skin? Foolish boys!”

The Gang shrank back in fear. They were the kind of people who were terrified of new people or new ideas.

“Do you know what the festival of colours is about?” the Strange Lady asked, in her musical voice, and continued: “It is the celebration of the coming of spring. Look at the delightful hues of the flowers and birds around us. We celebrate the colours of nature and splash water on friends. But attacking people when you’re not expected to! That doesn’t look like any celebration to me! And look at the chemicals you’re using. Haven’t you heard of safe and good vegetable dyes available for use as Holi colours?”

The Gang walked away, feeling foolish and a bit puzzled. The next week, Tara, Varsha and Suraj began learning how to make eco-friendly vegetable dyes.

-V. Shruti Devi

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

