

The Indian Cowboy's Dilemma

Kisan was a gowari (cowboy). He was 10 years old. Today, as usual Kisan sat on his buffalo, Bhondu, and played the tune of his favourite song on his bamboo flute, the one that he had made for himself a few days ago:

"In every forest, mother nature provides all our needs

The kingfisher is so pretty,

The koel fills the air with good sound

The teetar and the wild boar are so tasty,

The plant gulvel is nectar

And the neck of the tortoise can cure many things!"

Kisan lived in Kinwat taluk of Nanded district in Maharashtra, a region that has scrub and thorn forests.

Kisan sang, played his flute, and ran after the buffaloes and cows, scolding them when they did not listen. His herd

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strayed through the forest and crossed the stream.

After crossing the stream, the cattle settled down for grazing in the moist grasslands they came upon. This was a daily routine. While the cattle grazed, Kisan would sit under a tree with his bamboo flute and his packed lunch.

But today he had come with a mission: he was searching for the *bhui amla*. Kisan looked around the moist grasslands searching for the plant, which was a miniature of the *amla* (*Phyllanthus Officinalis*) tree. The plant is called *bhui amla*, which means the *amla* that grows along the ground. This herb bears small round fruits on the rear side of its leaf

stem. His mother had asked him to collect some of these fresh fruits for his grandmother who was suffering from jaundice, which this fruit can cure.

The *bhui amla* was known to be available in plenty, but today Kisan could simply not find any. He wandered into the clumps of trees and bushes that fringed the grasslands in search of the fruits.

"Ouch!" a piercing pain in his right foot caused Kisan to stop suddenly and cry out. A thorn of the *babul* tree had got deep into his foot as he skipped along the soft black soil of the grasslands. Kisan was not perturbed because he knew of the magic plant *ark*, which can pull out the thorn. The plant grew everywhere. Ah, there it was! Kisan hopped up to it, plucked a leaf and carefully applied the white milk that oozed out of its node to the area where the thorn had gone in. As he applied the latex, he remembered his mother's warning: "Son, be careful with the *ark* leaf!" she had once warned him.



"The milk that oozes out of it is like fire. If even a drop of it touches your eyes, it can burn out the eyes and blind you." In Sanskrit, *ark* means 'the sun'.

Then he plonked down on the ground and waited. Fifteen minutes later the thorn came up to the surface of the skin! He got up and limped his way on, his eyes darting keenly from plant to plant in search of the elusive *bhui amla*.

Soon the sun was high in the sky and it was approaching noon. Kisan was sweating profusely. He had strayed far from his cattle. He was hungry and irritated.

"Are you looking for something?" A loud voice boomed in his ears, and he nearly jumped out of his skin. It was his friend Goma, who usually grazed his family goats alongside him. Goma was late today. As Kisan straightened up to chat with his friend, he noticed that Goma's face was all puffed up. "What's the matter with your face?" he asked him.

Goma explained that he had by mistake slept under the *bhallatak* tree the previous night. Everyone knows that it is good to sleep under the *neem* tree but not under a *bhallatak* or a tamarind tree because these trees give out heat. In fact, the black oil of the *bhallatak* seed, which the washermen use for marking clothes, is so repulsive to insects and pests that farmers smear the

Chandamama



oil on the walls of bamboo bins in which grain is stored so that no insects attack the precious foodgrain.

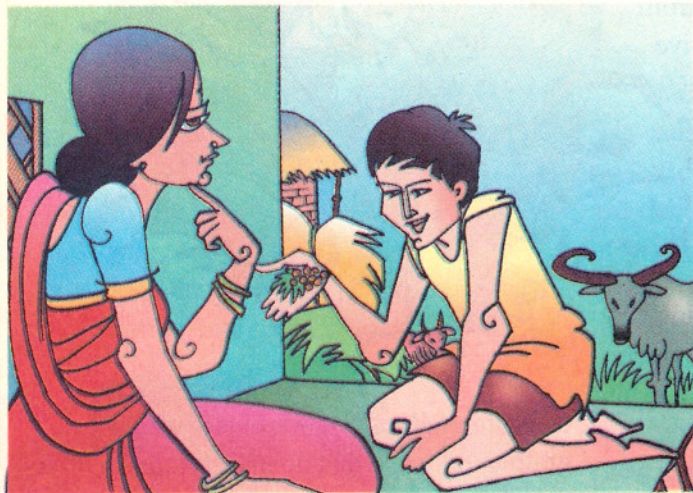
Soon Kisan had poured out his woes to his friend. "I wish grandmother would just go to the doctor and take some pills, instead!" grumbled Kisan. "I'm tired of searching for *bhui amla*."

"Don't worry," said Goma. "I'll help you collect the fruits. Come, let's search together." The two friends ran here and there, calling out to each other in cheerful banter. They came back to the stream for a quick gulp of cool water and later plunged into the search. It was Goma who saw it first. "Kisan! Come, here it is." Kisan joined him in a jiffy and soon

the two friends had gathered all the fruits they could carry!

Late afternoon, the two turned homewards with their herds. Kisan reached home as the sun was setting. The cows had grazed well and were happy. As he filled his mother's lap with the fruits, he said: "Do you know how

and trouble you took to find this herb for her, you're after all doing this for *your* grandmother. Wouldn't you be happy to find her hale and healthy soon? Pills are fine when you don't have options, but what better medicines than the ones Mother Nature has given you!"



Of course, both of them were unaware that an American Nobel Prize winner had been granted a "patent" for the use of *bhui amla* for the treatment of Hepatitis B.

Kisan ran away to the yard. As he tied the cattle in the shed, he hummed away:

*"In every forest, mother nature provides all our needs
The kingfisher is so pretty,*

The koel fills the air with

magic sound
The teeter and wildboar are so
tasty,
The plant gulvel is nectar
And the neck of the tortoise can
cure many things!"

much time it took me to locate the plants? Why didn't you just take grandma to the doctor for pills?"

His mother laughed. "My child, the doctor says there are no pills for jaundice. But Mother Nature has been kind enough to give us this herb as a cure for this illness. And as for the time

The koel fills the air with

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The teeter and wildboar are so
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The plant gulvel is nectar
And the neck of the tortoise can
cure many things!"

And this time he meant it!

-Darshan Shankar

An estimated 8,000 species of medicinal plants have been known to the people of India. These plants are distributed across the diverse ecosystems, from the trans-Himalayas to the coastal plains. There are around 50,000 herbal formulations for a wide range of health conditions that are documented in Ayurvedic medical texts.