

**Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi**

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The Moving "Red Bindi"

I was strolling along a path near Sahasthradhara. The incessant rainfall had resulted in rivulets of water flowing along the road. As I walked along the track, I noticed how the fast flowing water had gouged out its own path in the mud track. As I observed the swirling muddy waters, I noticed a small red coloured object near my foot. At first glance, I thought it was a women's "*bindi*", that had been washed onto the road with the water. Imagine my surprise when the "*bindi*" began to move!

A closer look revealed that the "red object" was alive-it was a red velvet mite! The red velvet mite is an arachnid, which means it belongs to the same group of creatures as spiders, scorpions and ticks. Unlike insects, which have six legs, most arachnids have eight legs. As a child, the red velvet mite was one of the creatures that provided me with great pleasure-its bright red colour, smooth velvet-like body was stuff that should have only been seen in fairy tales-not in real life!



The red velvet mite seen is found throughout the country, but the one seen in northern India is a species called *Trombidium grandissimum*. As is to be expected, a creature as pretty as this has many interesting names, tales and stories behind it! To begin with, its red colour seems to suggest that it is distasteful to predators. On touching the mite, it does not emit any foul smell, but just tucks its legs under its body and rolls

up. If you leave it alone for a few minutes, it uncurls itself and is on the move again!

The red velvet mite has many interesting local names. In Hindi, it is known as Rani Keeda (Queen insect), while Bir Bahuti and Velvet Boochi are other commonly used vernacular names. It is believed that the mite's oil has medicinal value and is useful to cause paralysis. In fact, some people refer to it as the Indian Viagra!

The red velvet mite is very seasonal and appears only during the onset of the monsoon. For this reason, people also call it the "rain mite". Red velvet mites play an important role in our eco-system. They devour smaller creatures and their eggs under the soil, and are known as soil arthropods for their role in the ground's eco-system.

As a child, unknowingly, I used to collect red velvet mites in match boxes or bottles. Invariably, the mites did not survive. Now I know better, and ensure that I do not take any action that will impact these creatures. So should you-so the next time you see a moving "red bindi", don't harm or collect it-watch it move gracefully on the ground, performing its role in our eco-system.

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: Its important to teach young children to respect nature at an early age. On many occasions I have children that come up to me to show me a bird's nest, a butterfly or a caterpillar. While helping them observe these creatures, I always make it a point to tell them that we should observe nature and its inhabitants without harming them.

Photograph caption: Red velvet mite

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