

coconuts that he would carry up to where she sat with Grandma and cut them open for her. When she was little, Grandma would carry a small stainless-steel glass and pour in the coconut water for her so she could drink her fill. Now she could hold the *elaneer* shell between her outstretched hands and tilt and drink from it, the way they did out of water bottles filled for school. It contained so much delicious fluid. She never felt greedy enough to ask for another, although Hari was always happy to open more. In Meerut, where they lived, outside the cantonment there were no stretched out fields bordered by the river or coconut trees, just endless little flats overlooking a washed out *maidan* and a few scraggly trees that bordered it.



Grandma rolled out a soft reed mat after lunch and lay down on it in the afternoons, and often Ambujam would sidle up to her and lie down beside her, or sometimes sit and read from her storybooks.

"What are you reading today, Ambai?" asked her grandmother.

"A story about a fox hunt," replied Ambai. Grandma glanced at the story. It had an illustration of light-coloured men on horses, with their dogs around them.

"Who are these men?" asked Grandma.

"I don't quite know," replied Ambujam. "I think some of them are lords and some are squires." Grandma took the book from her and read a longish narrative about dogs chasing the local fox while being followed by riders on horses. "Is this fun?" she asked a nonplussed Ambujam.

"I often wonder if it can be fun for the fox," replied the girl.

"What do they do with the fox, if they catch it alive?" Grandma asked.

"I don't know," said Ambujam. "Anyway, this story is set in England. Do we have foxes at all in India?"

Grandma laughed. "There have been foxes everywhere in Southern India, possibly long before the arrival of humans. Foxes live on the edges of forests, away from humans, on scrub or stretches of uncultivable land, in modest skulks with their vixen and a pup or two. In fact, they even share their holes with other species. Often, foxes are confused with jackals who howled in a pack in the Dwapara Yuga, disturbed by Duryodhana's birth, long before Vishnu Sharma adopted them for roles in the Panchatantra.

"It is quite easy to capture a fox from the same site year after year, since the fox by nature, unlike the fictional creature in Aesop's fables, is a simple, timid animal. India now has laws that forbid the hunting of jackals. There is also a forest community of Neri-Kuravans in Tamil Nadu. They were nomads and hunter-gatherers for whom the golden jackal was one of many foods. The Neri-Kuravans were listed as a criminal tribe in the late 19th century and were denotified only five years after independence, in the year that I was born. Now that the hunting of jackals is forbidden, the impoverished tribe, victims of colonisation and modernity, are being pushed out of the forests which sheltered and sustained them. Your uncle told me over the phone yesterday, that at the haat in New Delhi he met a Neri-Kuravan selling cloth soaked in blood and a bit of fox-claw for good luck along with huge clusters of bead necklaces. Not much luck the poor fox had with its claws while alive! Nor does the good luck of the claws rub off on the Neri-Kuravan. His tribe remains poor, neglected and illiterate."

"So, foxes are hunted in India?" Ambai challenged, not knowing how to respond to the Neri-Kuravan's life issues, never having met anyone from the tribe.

"Not in the manner described in your book," Grandma replied sagely. "Much larger animals live on the sub-continent, such as rhinos, elephants, lions, tigers, and horned deer. Hunting a fox was never a priority amidst the royalty, here in India. The fox was probably part of the food chain of several forest tribes in years long gone by. Do you know what we used to do in the villages around Karnataka, though?"

Ambai put the book away. This was the cue that Grandma was about to tell her something new. Expectantly, she began coaxing her grandmother with a "Tell me, tell me, Paati, I do not know." Grandmother put her arm around Ambai and began to speak.

"At the time of the harvest festival, Pongal, which usually falls in January around Makar Sankranti, we have created a ceremony involving foxes. This is becoming harder and harder to carry out as the years go by, because the foxes are rightly wary of humans and are becoming increasingly difficult to find. Our rituals have probably maimed and killed a lot of foxes. Usually, Hari goes out and tries to trap a pair of foxes, one male and the other female, and always enlists the help of the Kuravans who live in the forests."

"Why do we capture foxes? That doesn't seem a nice thing to do," Ambai remonstrated.

"True," replied Grandma. "I'm sure the foxes feel the same way about it. However, Hari and his father and his father and his father before him, generations of farmhands who worked in our fields believed that if foxes are not propitiated, the harvest will be dogged by poor luck. So they set out with drums and horns and roam the countryside for a couple of days to round up this shy creature that has very few tricks up its sleeve and lives quietly in the ground with a

mate and a few pups. Terrified by the noise of the drums, the foxes rush out of their homes and are captured in nets carried for the purpose. Unfortunately, the fox is a simple creature, unlike the wily Brer Fox we encounter in J.C. Harris's animal stories. It doesn't really know how to evade aggressive humans and can do little to defend itself. Yet, in the mistaken belief that the harvest will increase in proportion to the number of foxes captured, humans prey upon these hapless creatures. They capture terrified foxes in nets and bind their mouths and legs and then place them in an enclosure behind the local temple until the morning of Makar Sankranti. Quite often, villagers tease and prod the animal while it is bound.



"On the morning of Makar Sankranti, they are anointed like gods, adorned with flowers and new cloth strips, sprinkled with water and then released into the forest. However, in many places, firecrackers tied to the tails of the hapless animals are lit before they are freed and there is much cheering as the terrified animals flee, often chased and mauled by the village dogs."

Watching Ambai's face crumple, Grandma nodded sadly. "Yes, it is a cruel, heartless thing to do to an animal that never did any harm. On our farm, we no longer capture and maim foxes. We have got a pair of metal foxes installed in the local temple. Metal foxes make for excellent idols, pretty much in the manner of our metal gods. We had to work hard with the temple priests to persuade all the village folk. Unless we change our mindset and

celebrate life in various forms, we will continue to destroy this teeming world and all of us need to understand this. We need to leave the foxes alone and also engage with the forest people. They must be rescued from the ravages of the past and empowered. Only then can we learn from them the secrets of our forests and live more humane lives."

"Will you take me to meet a Neri-Kuravan?" Ambai asked her grandmother.

"Yes, when he comes around to assist the village in gathering honey from the forest hives, we shall ask him over," said her grandmother. "You should also meet some of the children from the tribe, enrolled in the village school." Ambai sported a wide grin on her face. There were new adventures ahead.



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Ratna Raman highlights themes to do with co-existence, cultural practices and fauna, illustrated through the Neri Kuravasna, a forest community in Tamil Nadu. She emphasises the celebration of life in its various forms and empowerment of forest communities

Grandmother's Tale

Ambujam, who had come to visit, took out her storybook and sat down beside her grandmother. Ambujam lived in the big city, not a very big city really, a two-tier city, sufficiently far away in the north from the wonderful fields that belonged to her grandparents. Every summer her parents returned home for the summer and lived in a large old cottage alongside a row of several other cottages in the village. The road separating them was narrow but clean and there was a small market where one could buy odds and ends from the provisions store and at the tailor's shop Ambujam's school uniform, always large for her when she wore it on the first day of school, was stitched. Walking through the village streets, they passed the empty patch of earth on which the night heron sat unstirring, down to a very quiet section of the river, where

a few shady trees and the village water tank came into view. Often, beside the tank, under the foliage of the tree one could see the odd young woman courting an eager-looking young man, while her sister stood at arm's length, both demure escort and family spy if need be. Ambujam's grandmother made lovely snacks in her kitchen, multi-coloured vegetable akki rotis, kneaded with finely grated vegetables and rice flour, and there was always a home-made jar of sweet and sour mango pickle to eat them with.

They usually walked around the farm, through fields of ragi and banana plants and sat at the shed where the thresher and seed planter were housed and waited for Hari to shimmy up a coconut tree and bring down large green

