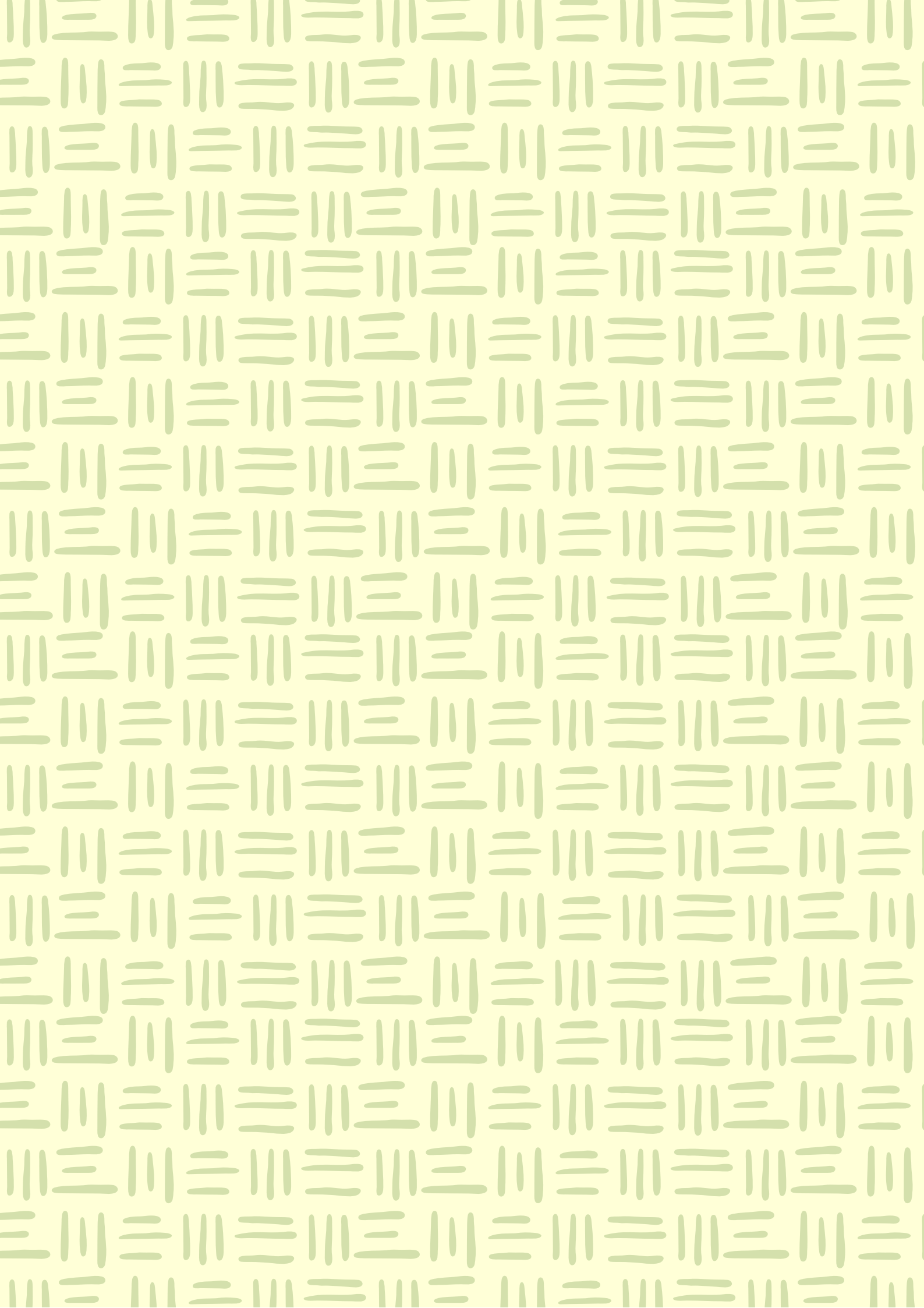


# Manini Learns About Mangroves



Arjun Khullar



The year was 2075. Manini sat by her window, reading a book of poetry gifted to her by her mother on her birthday, occasionally looking up to gaze at the mangroves in the distance.

Turning the page, she came across a poem titled “My Grandmother’s House”. As the poem talked about the sense of warmth that old houses gave, that made one feel a part of something larger than oneself, Manini realized that she couldn’t relate to it.

She didn’t know what it meant to live in an old house.

As far as she could tell, her house was recently constructed. There were no antique furniture and artifacts in her home, unlike the several objects described in the poem that the poet had inherited from her grandmother. Further, all of the photographs of her grandparents and even her parents in their youth featured a different house.



The longer she thought about it, she realized that in fact all of the houses in her village – which lay in a coastal area near Mumbai – were recent constructions. This felt odd to her. “Why are there no old houses here? What was here before they built these houses? Did anyone live here before?” she wondered.

“More importantly, where did my parents live before this?” Manini decided she wanted some answers.

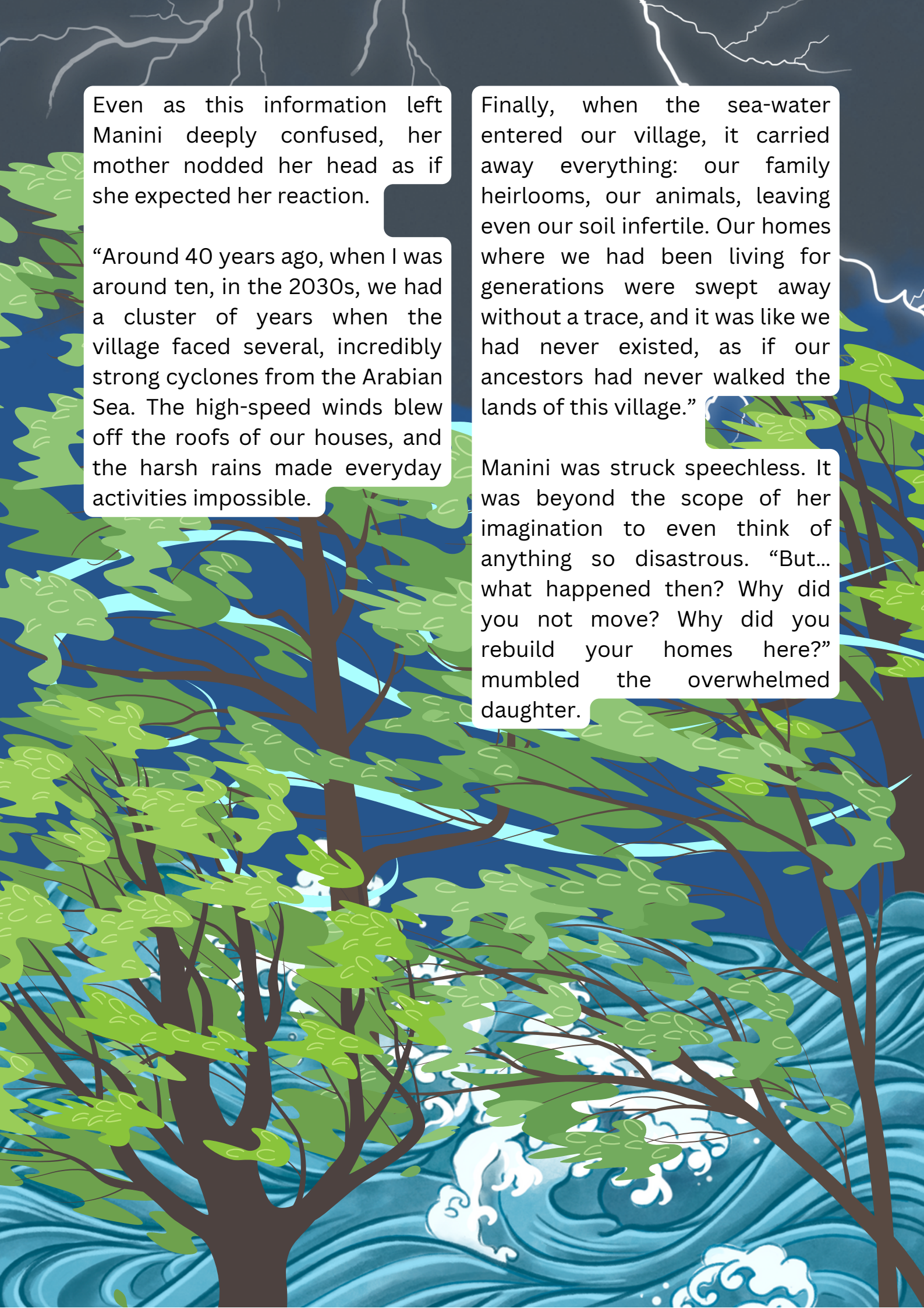
“MUM!” she called out at the top of her voice, excited as she was by these questions that loomed in her head. “MUMMY! I want to ask something of you!”



As soon as her mother entered her room, Manini breathlessly shot a series of questions, one after the other: “Why do we not live in our ancestral house, Mummy? Do we even have one? What happened to it? Where did you and Papa live before this?”

“Wow! That’s a lot of questions. Calm down! I’m surprised you’re old enough to even have noticed this,” replied her mother in a voice that indicated that she was processing many emotions at once. “We have always lived here, right in this very village!” continued her mother, after a pause.






Even as this information left Manini deeply confused, her mother nodded her head as if she expected her reaction.

“Around 40 years ago, when I was around ten, in the 2030s, we had a cluster of years when the village faced several, incredibly strong cyclones from the Arabian Sea. The high-speed winds blew off the roofs of our houses, and the harsh rains made everyday activities impossible.

Finally, when the sea-water entered our village, it carried away everything: our family heirlooms, our animals, leaving even our soil infertile. Our homes where we had been living for generations were swept away without a trace, and it was like we had never existed, as if our ancestors had never walked the lands of this village.”

Manini was struck speechless. It was beyond the scope of her imagination to even think of anything so disastrous. “But... what happened then? Why did you not move? Why did you rebuild your homes here?” mumbled the overwhelmed daughter.

An illustration of two women standing in the rain. The woman on the left has short, wavy grey hair and is wearing a pink top. The woman on the right has dark hair pulled back and is wearing a green top. They are both looking at each other. In the background, there are colorful buildings with windows and balconies, and rain is falling around them.

“We did relocate, at least temporarily,” answered her mother. “We had to go uphill to escape when the floods were at their worst, and had to set up temporary camps.”

“Dear child, you can’t even imagine the heartbreak it caused my parents to see the entirety of their lives being swept away in front of their eyes.

But the one thing that my parents’ generation resolved they would not be was being helpless. You see, when disaster strikes, it has the potential to create stronger bonds: people forget their own individual self-interests to come together for the larger cause of the community. And so did they! All of them pooled in food resources, medicines, blankets and sanitation kits.”

The description of the relief efforts mobilized by the community seemed to uplift Manini's hearts a little, and thus she began mulling over her mother's narration in her head. And then, she blurted, "But mum, why did this happen?"

"You remember your geography lessons?" replied her mother, appreciating her daughter's curiosity. "We live surrounded by a patch of mangrove plantations - which act as a defensive barrier in areas that are the worst affected by cyclones. And as cities expanded, the mangrove swamps grew smaller, and we were left with less of a shield against storm-tides."

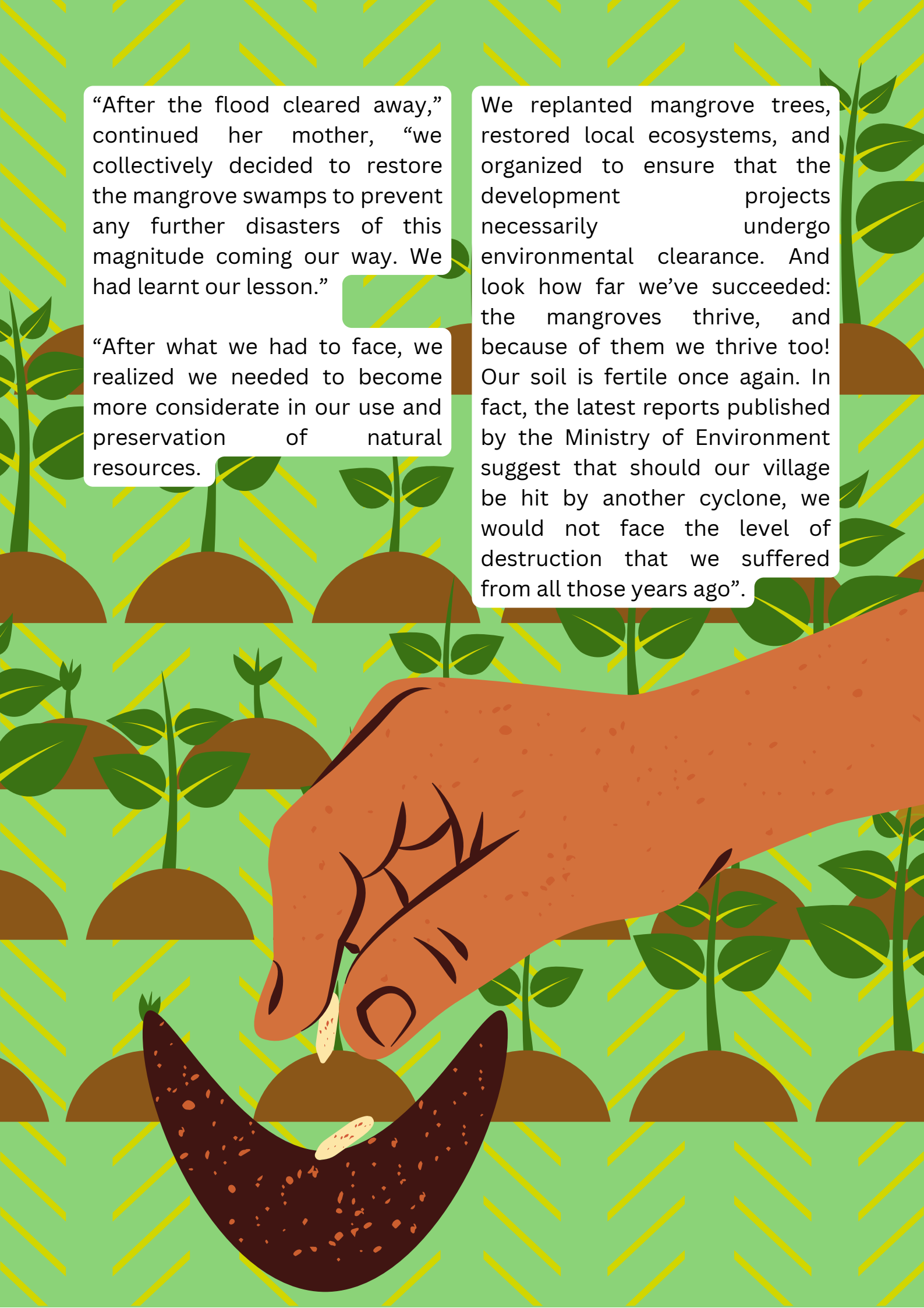


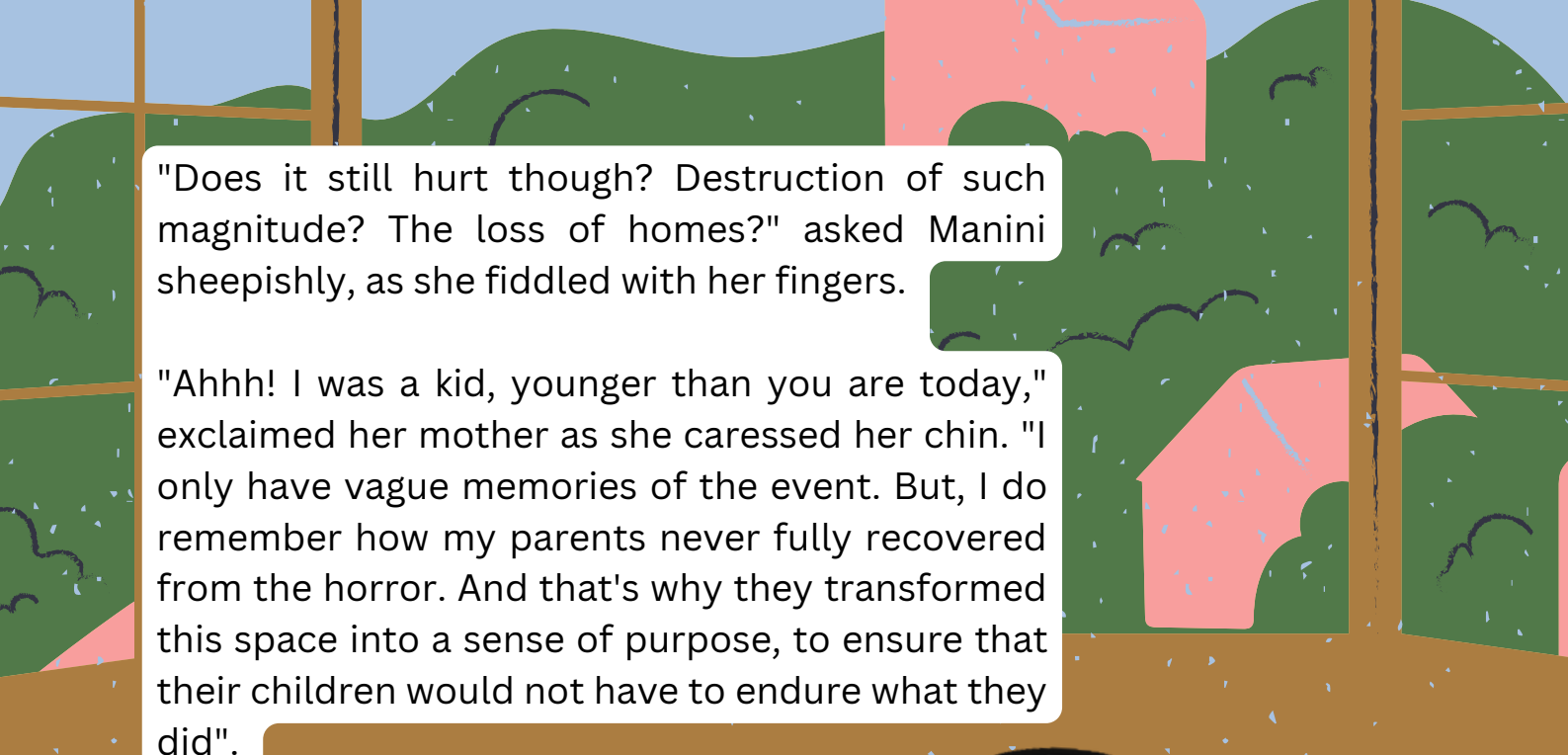


“After the flood cleared away,” continued her mother, “we collectively decided to restore the mangrove swamps to prevent any further disasters of this magnitude coming our way. We had learnt our lesson.”

“After what we had to face, we realized we needed to become more considerate in our use and preservation of natural resources.”

We replanted mangrove trees, restored local ecosystems, and organized to ensure that the development projects necessarily undergo environmental clearance. And look how far we’ve succeeded: the mangroves thrive, and because of them we thrive too! Our soil is fertile once again. In fact, the latest reports published by the Ministry of Environment suggest that should our village be hit by another cyclone, we would not face the level of destruction that we suffered from all those years ago”.






"Does it still hurt though? Destruction of such magnitude? The loss of homes?" asked Manini sheepishly, as she fiddled with her fingers.

"Ahhh! I was a kid, younger than you are today," exclaimed her mother as she caressed her chin. "I only have vague memories of the event. But, I do remember how my parents never fully recovered from the horror. And that's why they transformed this space into a sense of purpose, to ensure that their children would not have to endure what they did".



An illustration of a village scene. In the foreground, a woman with dark, curly hair and a green dress stands with her arm around a younger girl with grey, curly hair wearing a purple shirt. They are looking towards the right. In the background, there are colorful buildings with balconies, a large tree with prominent roots, and a body of water with lily pads. Two birds are flying in the sky.

Rising up to embrace her daughter, the mother continued, “Thus even though we do not have any physical objects left with us that tether us to this place, our relationship with this land remains very much alive, revived as it is in our memories, and now in yours too! And each day that we live here renews this connection.”

And having said that, her mother held Manini’s hand, as they went to take a stroll in their village, admiring the resilience of the place, in which these newly built houses stood as an undeniable statement.



Arjun Khullar