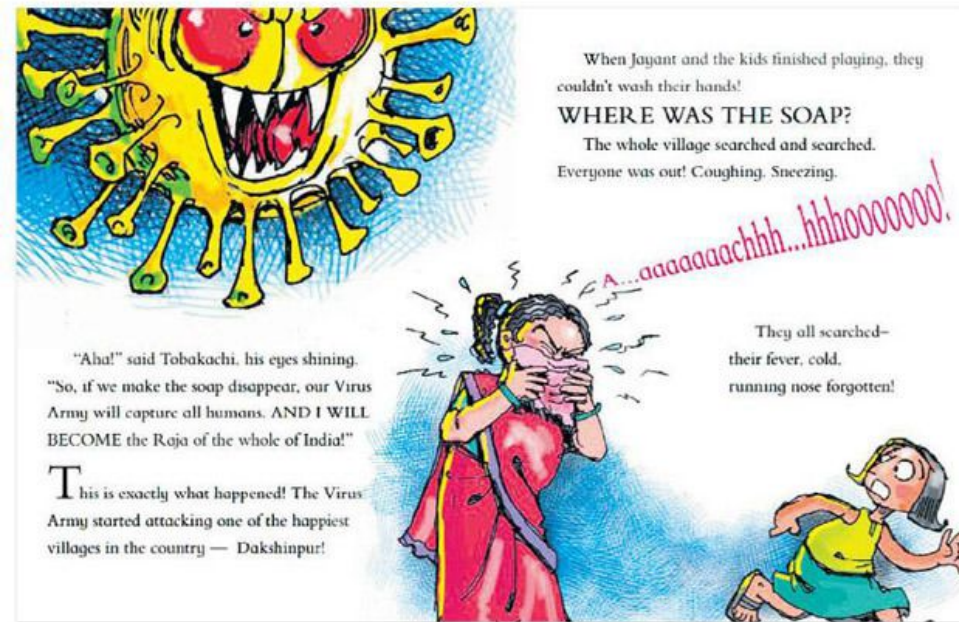


A lather good story

A new e-book for children focuses on the importance of hygiene through a mystery



When Jayant and the kids finished playing, they couldn't wash their hands!

WHERE WAS THE SOAP?

The whole village searched and searched. Everyone was out! Coughing. Sneezing.

A...aaaaaacchhh...hhhhoooooo!

They all searched—their fever, cold, running nose forgotten!

"Aha!" said Tobakachi, his eyes shining. "So, if we make the soap disappear, our Virus Army will capture all humans. AND I WILL BECOME the Raja of the whole of India!"

This is exactly what happened! The Virus Army started attacking one of the happiest villages in the country — Dakshinpur!

HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN SOAP

By T.R. Vivek

1. Take 20 reetha berries and remove the seeds.



2. Soak the shells in a litre of water for a couple of hours.

You must boil it till the reetha is really soft. If you have a pressure cooker, you can pressure cook it to three whistles.



3. When the reetha are soft to the touch, boil them in the same water for 30 minutes. Alternatively you can pressure cook it to three whistles.

You can throw in some lemon or orange rind into the pot (optional).

4. When cooled, beat up the rind at high speed in a mixer. If you don't have a mixie, boil for a longer time. Cool it down. Mash the boiled nuts by hand.



5. Filter the pulp using a sieve and a little bit of water. Squeeze until you extract every bit of the soapy foam (a bit like extracting tamarind pulp when cooking).



SUKANYA DATTA

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WHEN the Katha team visited a school in Maharashtra during a survey, the members found that there was a soap stuck on the wall, on which children would rub their hands, before washing it off. The soap turned black over time, but the kids still kept using it. That instance stayed with me," says Geeta Dharmarajan, founder and president of the publishing house, adding that when COVID-19 struck, it worried her that so many kids do not have access to something as basic as soap. This was what prompted Dharmarajan to bring back some of her old characters — Tamasha, the big elephant; Jayant, the kind sarpanch; and Tobakachi, the evil Asura — to create The Mystery of the Missing Soap, in collaboration with visual artists Charbak Dipta and Suddhasattwa Basu.

The e-book spins the tale of how Dakshinpur was invaded by the Coronavirus Army, led by Tobakachi, who hatched a plan to make all soaps disappear. Worried about everyone falling sick, the children of Dakshinpur then made their own soaps to defeat this new army with their clean hands. "As the child is the communicator in families living in poverty, we wanted to create a narrative for them. The book was written in seven days. While Charbak brought in the germs com-

ponent, Suddhasattwa gave life to the village setting," shares the Padma Shri recipient.

The story comes at a time when parents have been struggling to explain the pandemic to their kids. Speaking about the importance of visual aid for children, Dipta says, "Images are always more helpful than plain text. I tried to visualise the book in sync with the characters. Tobakachi and the virus army are evil so I've drawn them in lower angle lightings, but given them

a colourful persona to make the book child-friendly." While there is a lot of talk about making sanitisers, the e-book, available for free, features a manual on making soaps from reetha

berries, an age-old practice in India. Dharmarajan explains that the idea was to promote self-sustainability. "While a child in a well-to-do family may not require this, someone from an underprivileged family stands to benefit from it as they are the first victims of tragedies." The author adds that as the book is a mystery, it helps children figure out the right path themselves. "We're not directly talking to them about hygiene or soaps. We're telling them what can happen if the soap is not there," she says, adding that as the e-book is available on the ubiquitous mobile phone, it is accessible to most people.



Charbak Dipta



Geeta Dharmarajan

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