

“Mama, he also has a right!”

THERE IS a wonderful mango tree in the backyard of our house. In fact, it is tethering inches outside our house edging towards the by-lane facing the road but we took it under our shelter soon after we shifted to this house. Since then, we have been protecting it as if it belonged to us alone and laying full claim on its fruit. Dr Goel, the previous occupant of this house, had told us in advance. “Mrs M, you really have to take care of this tree. It yields a rich crop of fruit every alternate year and is a hybrid of *Dussehri* and *Chausa* varieties. You have to eat it to know its worth.”

Dr Goel, a professor in the Punjab Engineering College, had once gone to the extent of employing a *chowkidar* to protect it and wasn't even allowed a wink of sleep during the hot afternoons. The *chowkidar* stood outside, with a *danda* in his hand, carefully thwarting the attempts of the children who pelted stones at the tempting and dangling mangoes and keeping the groups of monkeys at bay who tried to raid it at every opportunity. The result must have been a stupendous pile of mouth-watering mangoes every alternate year.

The Goels enjoyed this bounty of nature for 27 years till the professor retired from service and had to leave the house, of course, with a tinge of remorse. All these years, they ate mangoes, drank mangoes and probably even slept with the aroma of mangoes through the house in the literal sense. The raw mangoes, which dropped down due to vagaries of weather, were utilised in making pickles, *chutneys*, *panna*, etc. The carefully guarded ones, on reaching the stage of fruition, were neatly plucked, wrapped in newspapers and kept in wooden *petis* along with the *masala* to hasten the ripening process. They ate as much as possible and on reach-

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ing the point of saturation, even distributed them among the neighbours to taste and envy the king of the summer fruits. This luscious and juicy fruit has made us famous all over the neighbourhood and I am referred to as “*Wo! Aam wale memsaab...*” Passers-by cannot help admire its size and sometimes even the quantity when the tree is laden with them. The children too have a nice time cooking up all excuses and mustering their silly pranks in an attempt to get at them somehow.

We were having our cup of tea on a Sunday morning when a group of monkeys suddenly attacked our mango tree. Their hungry look, collective efforts had come in full motion on seeing the rich crop. I almost yelled at my husband to get a few sticks with which to scare them off. Hearing the commotion, my ten-year old son, Vikram, came out on the terrace, still rubbing his eyes. He said nonchalantly, “Mama don't scare them away. They must be hungry. After all, they also have a right to this tree! And where else will they go for food? In fact the tree first belongs to them.”

I sat non-plussed, looking at his innocent face. How right he was! It is we, the human beings, who have divided everything into segments and denied others their fair share. Nature has provided for all but only the man has acquired hoarding tendencies because of his “superior” intellect.

I promised that I would never scare off the monkeys ever as long as there were mangoes on the tree. Since then, a lone monkey is seen, perched listlessly, on the tree. (God knows where the gang has gone!) He picks up the best mango, peels it, eats it properly and goes away only to come back again when he is hungry. I have yet to see him taking a single mango along with him! He is proving my son right.