SOMETHING'S STUCK
AROUND the DUCK

Written by Katie Pyle

Illustrated by Jemma Jose

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It was Saturday and Kavitha and Nandini wanted to do something fun.

"I've got a new ball!" said Kavitha, full of excitement. "Let's go to the park."

At the park, they noticed a large pile of garbage next to their favourite patch of grass.

"Yuck!" said Kavitha. "There's all sorts of things here—rotten food, old wrappers and plastic bags!"

"It stinks! How can that duck sleep next to all this garbage?" Nandini wondered, pointing at it.
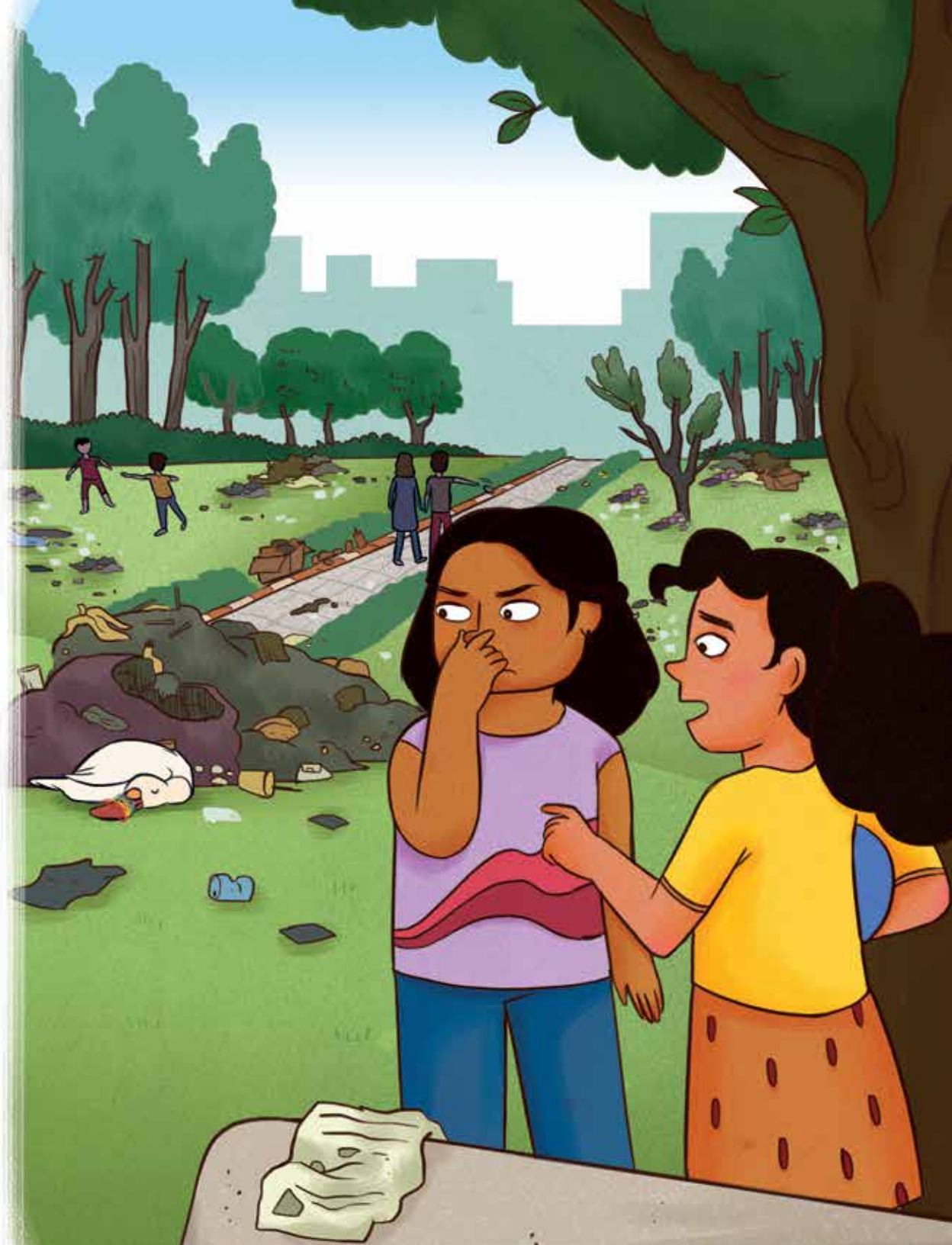
The girls moved a little distance away from the smelly garbage.

Kavitha threw the ball high into the air and Nandini just managed to catch it.

"Whoosh!" shouted Nandini, as she tried her best to throw the ball just as high back to her friend.

But Kavitha let the ball slip through her fingers and it rolled away.

"Oh no," cried Kavitha, "my new ball has rolled into the stinky rubbish!"

She ran quickly towards to the mound of rotten waste. Suddenly, she stopped.

"Nandini, come quickly!" Kavitha shouted to Nandini, waving for her to come at once.

The duck they had seen earlier was not actually sleeping. It was lying very still and looked uncomfortable!

Without getting too close, the girls saw that there was something wrapped around the duck's beak.

"I think she's tried to eat some of the garbage that is lying here."

"It looks like something plastic, let's try and get it off," suggested Nandini. "She looks like she needs help. Right away. She can hardly open her beak!"

Nodding, Kavitha moved closer to the duck. As she closed in with a final step, the duck flapped its wings, squealed and moved quickly away.

This time, Nandini tried but the duck seemed even more frantic.

"We are scaring her," said Kavitha. "She should stay still. She can't breathe properly because of the plastic thing around her beak and we are making it worse."

The girls looked around anxiously to see if they could find someone in the park to help them.

"How can we catch the duck?" Nandini asked the lady who was walking past them.

"I don't know," said the lady.

"Who looks after the ducks in this park?" Kavitha asked the man sitting on the bench.
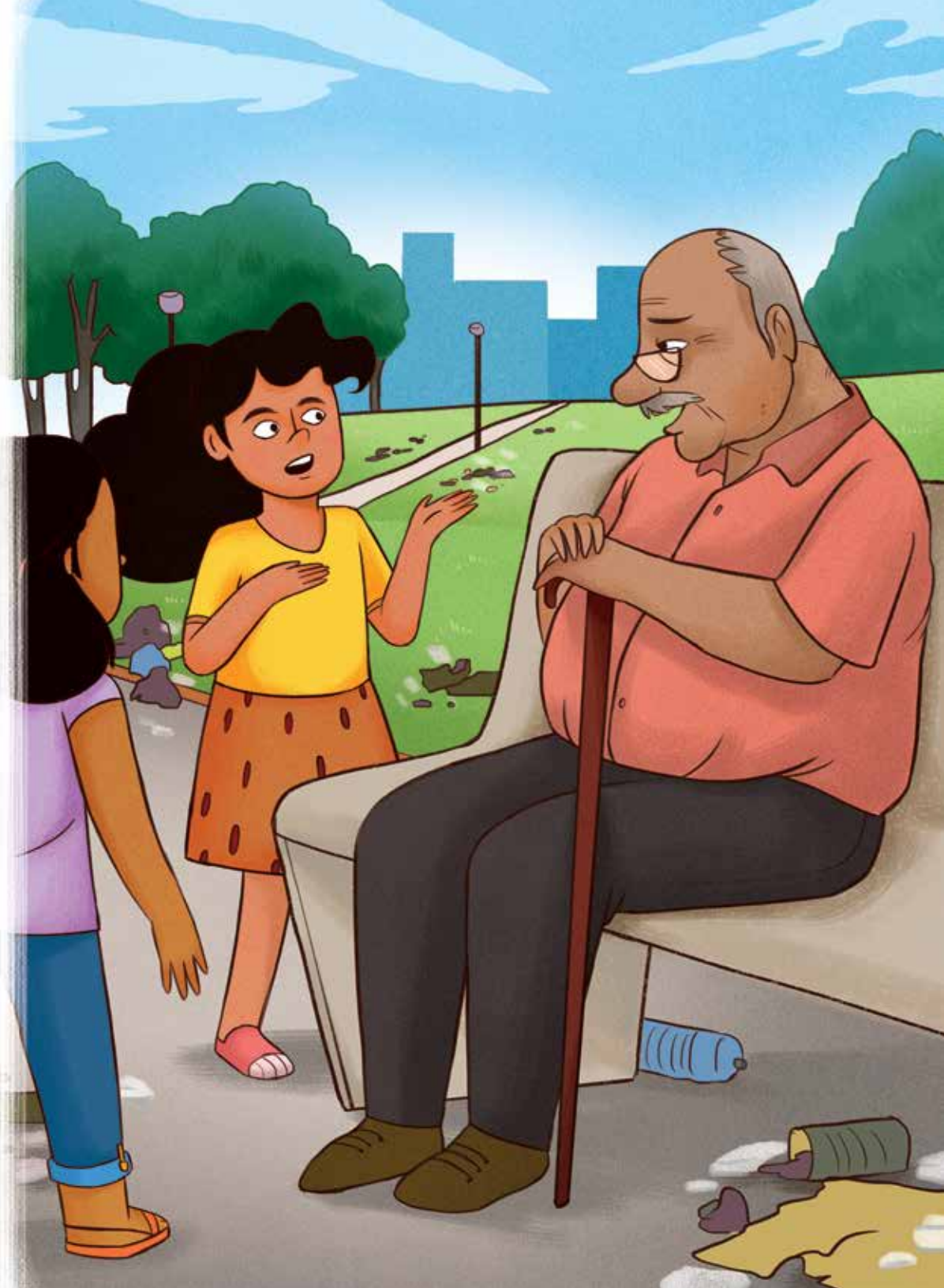
"I don't know," said the man.

"Who cleans up the garbage here?" they asked the other children playing in the park.

"We don't know," said the children.

"How can we help the duck?" Nandini wondered.

"Nobody knows," Kavitha sighed.

How could it be that no one knew what to do?

"If we don't help, then who will?" Nandini asked, tearfully.

"We will help the duck, Nandini, don't worry!" Kavitha jumped up. "My neighbour, Bhavna aunty is a vet. She'll know what to do!"

The girls found that Bhavna aunty was not home. They would have to wait until she was back from work.

They went to Kavitha's house in the meantime.

"Why are you back so soon, girls?" asked Kavitha's dad. "Are you bored with your new ball already?"

"My ball! Oh no!" groaned Kavitha. In all the panic, they had left the ball behind.

Nandini explained what had happened with the duck.

The girls were quiet, waiting anxiously for Bhavna aunty to come and help.

Kavitha's dad heated up some milk for the girls to drink while they waited.
He agreed it would be best to let Bhavna aunty handle the duck.

"Dad, why is there so much garbage in the park?" Kavitha asked.

Kavitha's dad stopped. He had not really thought about it much.

"I suppose it is because the government hasn't put up any bins. People dump their garbage everywhere. What else can people do? And, even when there is a bin, it overflows with garbage because no one empties it."

The girls listened carefully. Kavitha's dad poured the milk. "Also, lots of materials like plastic take a long time to decompose so they end up lying around for a long time," he added.

Nandini wanted to ask what 'decompose' meant but suddenly there was a knock at the door.

It was Bhavna aunty.

"I hear there's a duck in trouble. Let's go to the park, quickly!" she said briskly.

They found the duck almost exactly where they had left her. The plastic thing was still wrapped around her beak.

"Every time we tried to go near her, the duck…," Nandini didn't have a chance to finish her sentence before Bhavna aunty grabbed hold of the duck just below the neck with one swift move.

"Don't worry girls, this is how you handle a duck," said Bhavna aunty, seeing the alarm on the girls' faces. She tucked her other hand under the duck's body and cradled her gently.

Moving her hand carefully, Bhavna aunty untangled the plastic from around the duck's beak. The duck looked up at her. She could breathe properly again! Bhavna aunty put her down and the duck scurried away quickly.

 "It's not the first time I've seen an animal suffer because of plastic rubbish lying around on the streets and in parks," Bhavna aunty said as she held up the curling plastic that had been tangled around the duck's beak.

"I wonder what this is. I've never seen anything like this before," Kavitha observed. "Let's take it home and show my dad."

At home, Kavitha's dad was shocked.

"This is a slinky. It's a toy just like one I used to play with when I was a child almost thirty years ago! You can't buy these any more, not these small ones anyway. I wonder how it has lasted so long! It looks brand new."

"Is this what you meant when you said earlier that plastic takes a long time to decompose, uncle?" Nandini asked curiously.

"Yes, I suppose so. I just didn't think it would take so long!"

"I wonder just how long this toy will stay like this?" Kavitha said, switching on her computer.

Together with Kavitha's dad, the girls looked online to find out more about plastic.

"Wow, it says here that plastic takes about 450 years to decompose." Nandini was stunned.

"Even when plastic does decompose, it releases harmful materials which can hurt animals according to this website," added Kavitha.

"Apparently chewing gum is made of plastic! Ewww!" Nandini exclaimed.

The girls realised that many things they had were made of plastic. Many of their toys, the bottles they drank out of, the bags used for shopping...it was a very long list!

"So many bits of plastic and other garbage are just lying around in the park where we play. Other animals could get hurt too," said Nandini.

"If we don't do something about this, then who will?" Kavitha said, feeling unhappy.

"You're right, Kavitha," said Nandini. "So…why don't we clean the park ourselves?"

"That's a great idea. Perhaps we can ask the local corporator for help," Kavitha's dad added, thoughtfully.

"The local corporator looks after the needs of our local area. They are part of the local government, called the Municipal Corporation," Kavitha's dad explained.

Nandini, Kavitha and her dad went to speak to the local corporator and told her the story of what happened to the duck.

The local corporator agreed to help them to clean the park. She organised for the garbage to be cleared up and taken away. She also made sure that bins were put up around the park and emptied every Friday.

"Let's also make signs to tell people to throw their garbage in the bins," said Nandini, excitedly.

Three weeks later, when Kavitha and Nandini went back to the park, it looked like a different place altogether.

"The park is so clean! And many more people come here now," Kavitha said, looking around. "I just wish we'd found my ball when we cleaned up the park," she sighed.

"It is clean, but have you noticed something?" Nandini asked.

KEEP OUR PARK CLEAN

THROW TRASH IN BINS
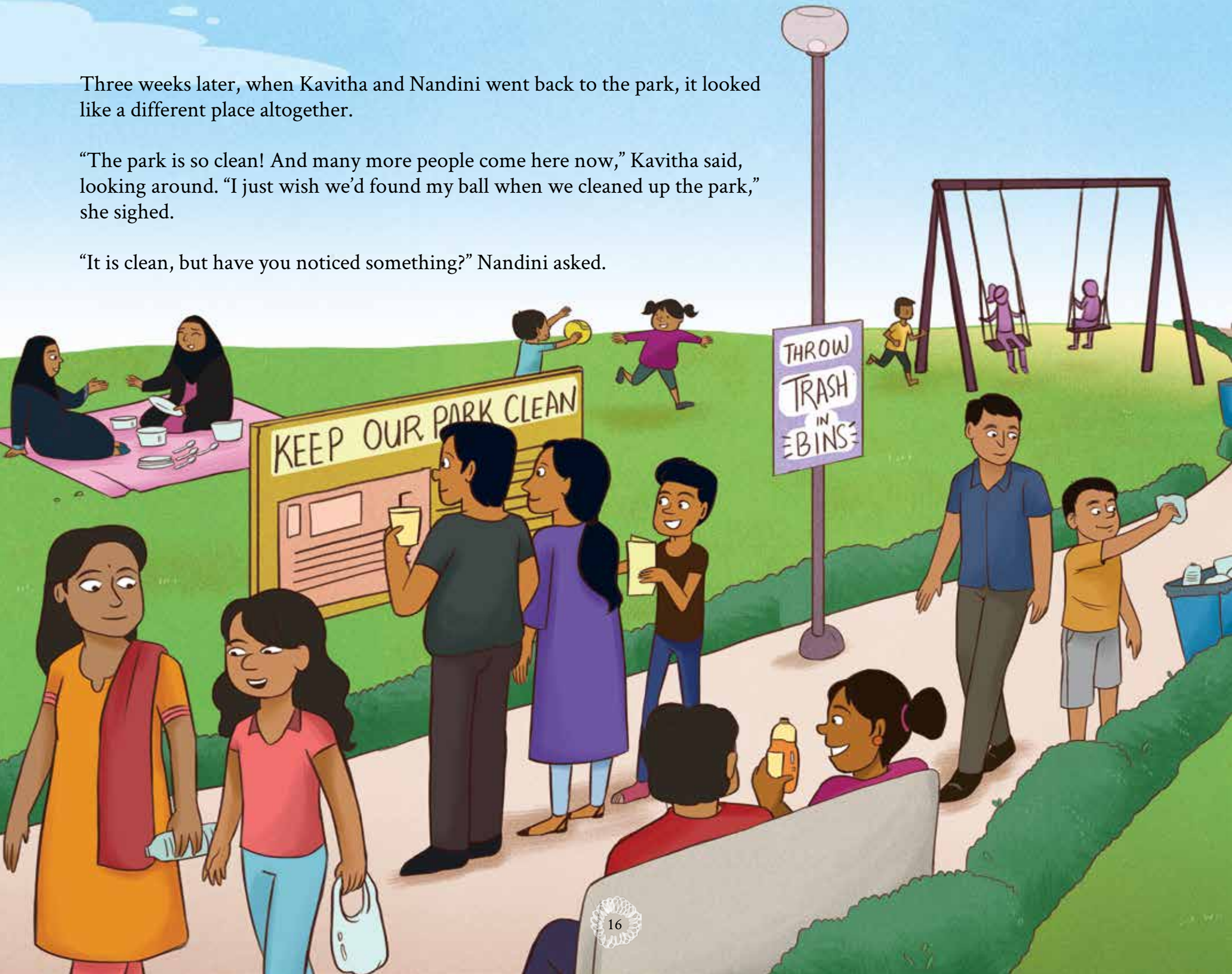
"Noticed what?"

"The park is clean but look at what that girl is drinking from, a plastic water bottle. And that woman is carrying her shopping in a plastic bag."

"You're right!" exclaimed Kavitha. "Even that man is using a plastic straw."

The park was clean. People were throwing everything away in the bins. But what would happen to all those plastic things in the bin, the girls wondered. Where did they end up?

At school the next day, they asked their teacher.

"Most garbage goes to landfills," their teacher explained. "These are large spaces where garbage is dumped. It stays there until it decomposes."

"But plastic takes so long to decompose! Does it not just blow away?" Nandini asked.

"That's exactly what happens sometimes. Lots of plastic ends up in rivers and oceans this way or in other places," their teacher explained. "It can harm animals, and even humans."

"We all need to stop using so much plastic," Kavitha said.

"Yes!" agreed Nandini, "and we should tell people why and what they can do instead."

"Because if we don't do it, who will?" cried the girls together.
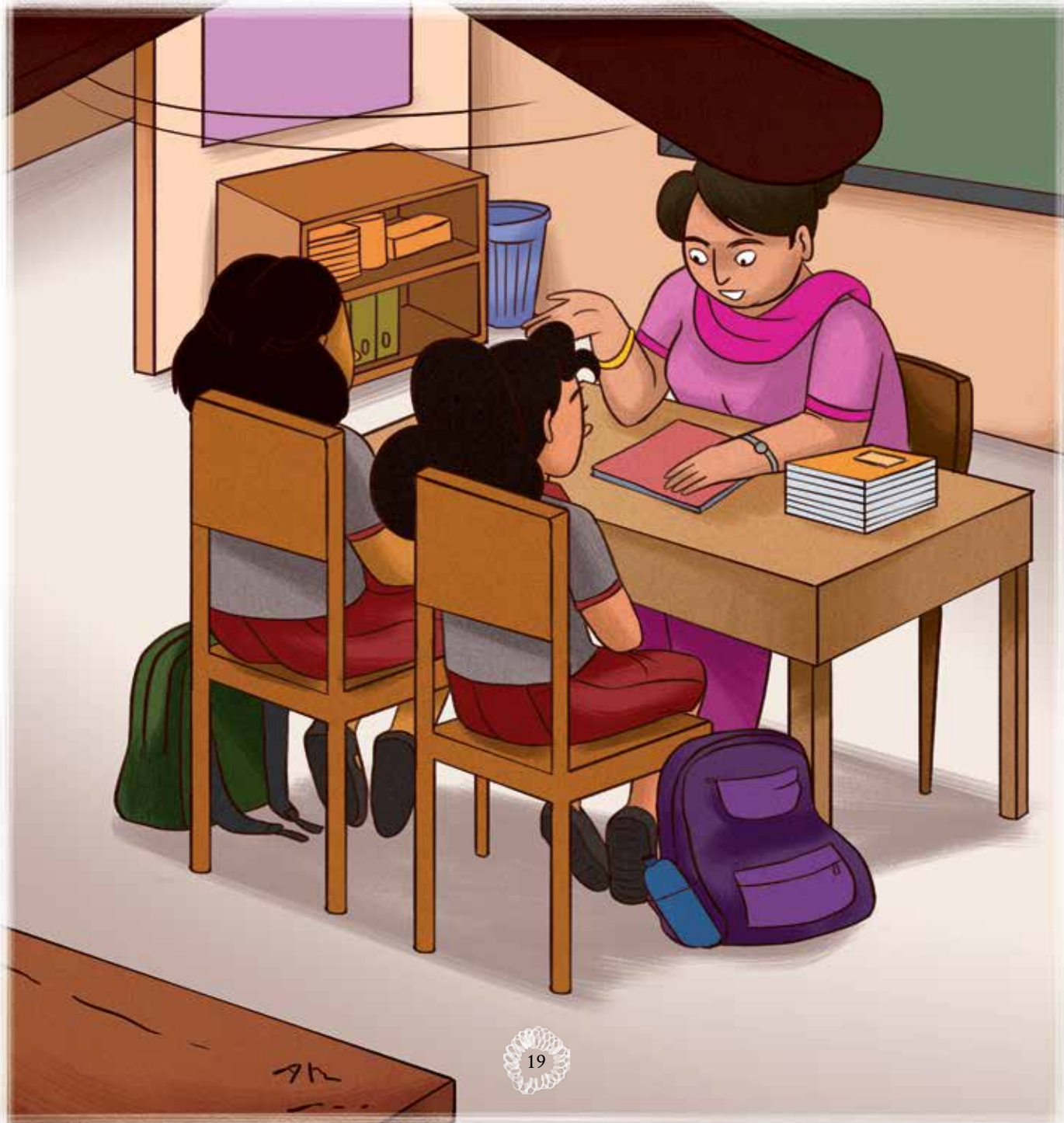
A few days later the girls made a presentation in the park to people from their local community.

"There is around 5.6 million tonnes of plastic waste in India every year. That's the same as the weight of 5.6 million elephants!" Nandini explained. "Most of this plastic goes into landfill sites, oceans or other places. We don't reuse it."

"Animals, especially ones that live in the sea sometimes think this plastic is food. They try and eat it. But this makes the animals very sick because it gets stuck in their stomachs. This can even cause them to die!" Kavitha continued.
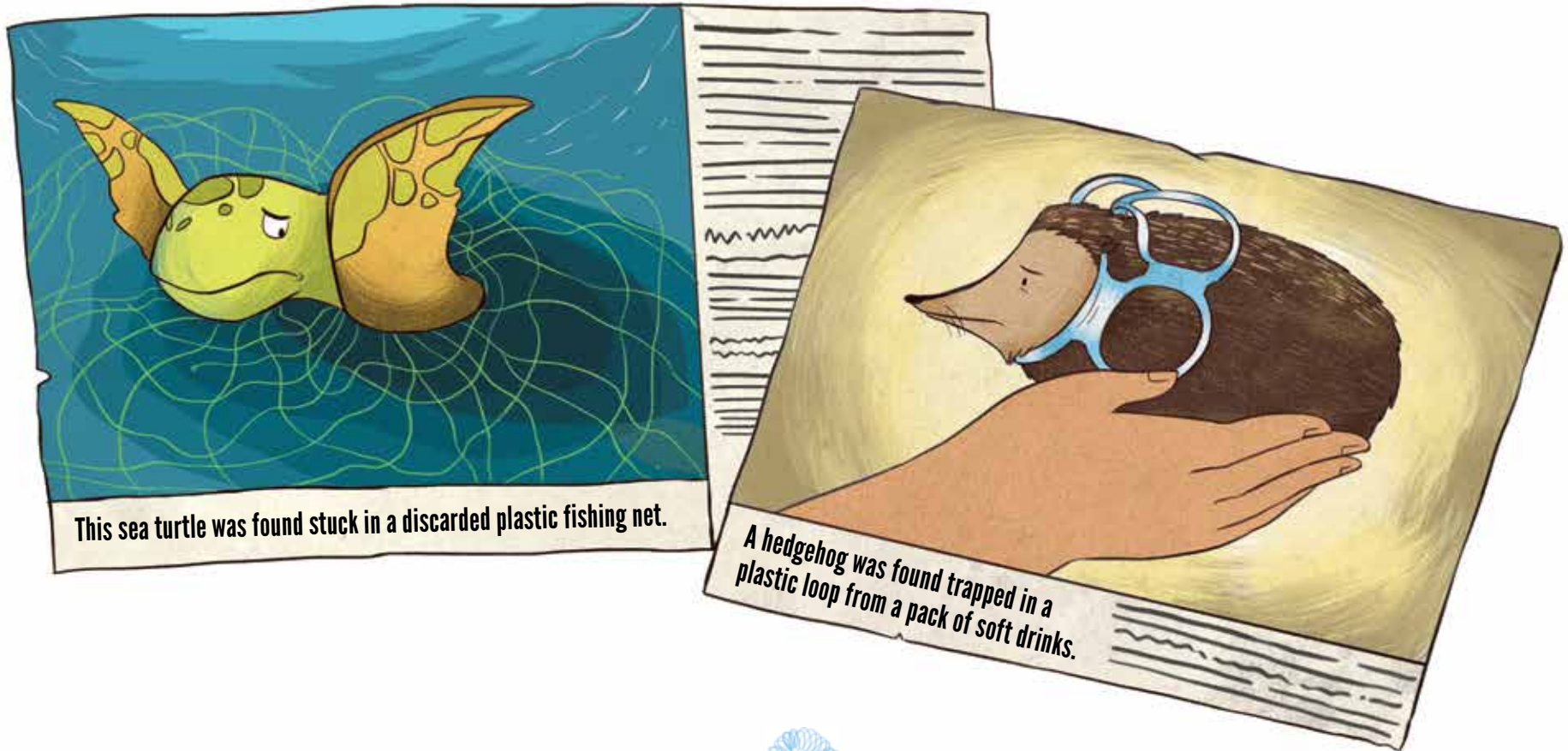
"In Indonesia, a whale washed up on the shore and was found to have 1000 pieces of plastic inside its stomach!"

"When plastic is left in landfill sites, bad chemicals seep into the groundwater. This then flows into lakes and oceans. This also hurts sea animals," Nandini highlighted.

"When humans eat seafood, the plastic and chemicals end up inside us. This can make us very sick too," Kavitha expanded.

"On average, one person eats 70,000 tiny pieces of plastic (called microplastics) every year!"

"Animals can also get tangled up in plastic things and they get badly hurt or die," Nandini added.

This sea turtle was found stuck in a discarded plastic fishing net.

A hedgehog was found trapped in a plastic loop from a pack of soft drinks.

"Thank you so much for bringing this to our attention," said an elderly man who had been listening attentively. "But plastic is in so many things that we need, like bottles and bags. How can we use less plastic?"

"It's not hard," explained Nandini, eagerly. She pointed to the table beside her. "We brought these things to show you. Stainless steel bottles and glasses are better than plastic, and you can reuse them many times. You even get steel straws these days!"

People came forward to look at the things the girls had brought.

"So, really, we need to make better choices about what we use," said one young woman, holding up a paper straw.

"I could use the same cloth bag every time I go grocery shopping, rather than a new plastic bag from the shop each time?" suggested a man.

"Exactly!" cried the girls.

As the meeting came to a close, everyone in the park was busy chatting about what they could do differently. Nandini overheard some children saying they would ask for second-hand toys, rather than buy more plastic ones. "What a great idea," thought Nandini, smiling.

Kavitha and Nandini were really pleased. "I think we've made a real difference," Nandini beamed.
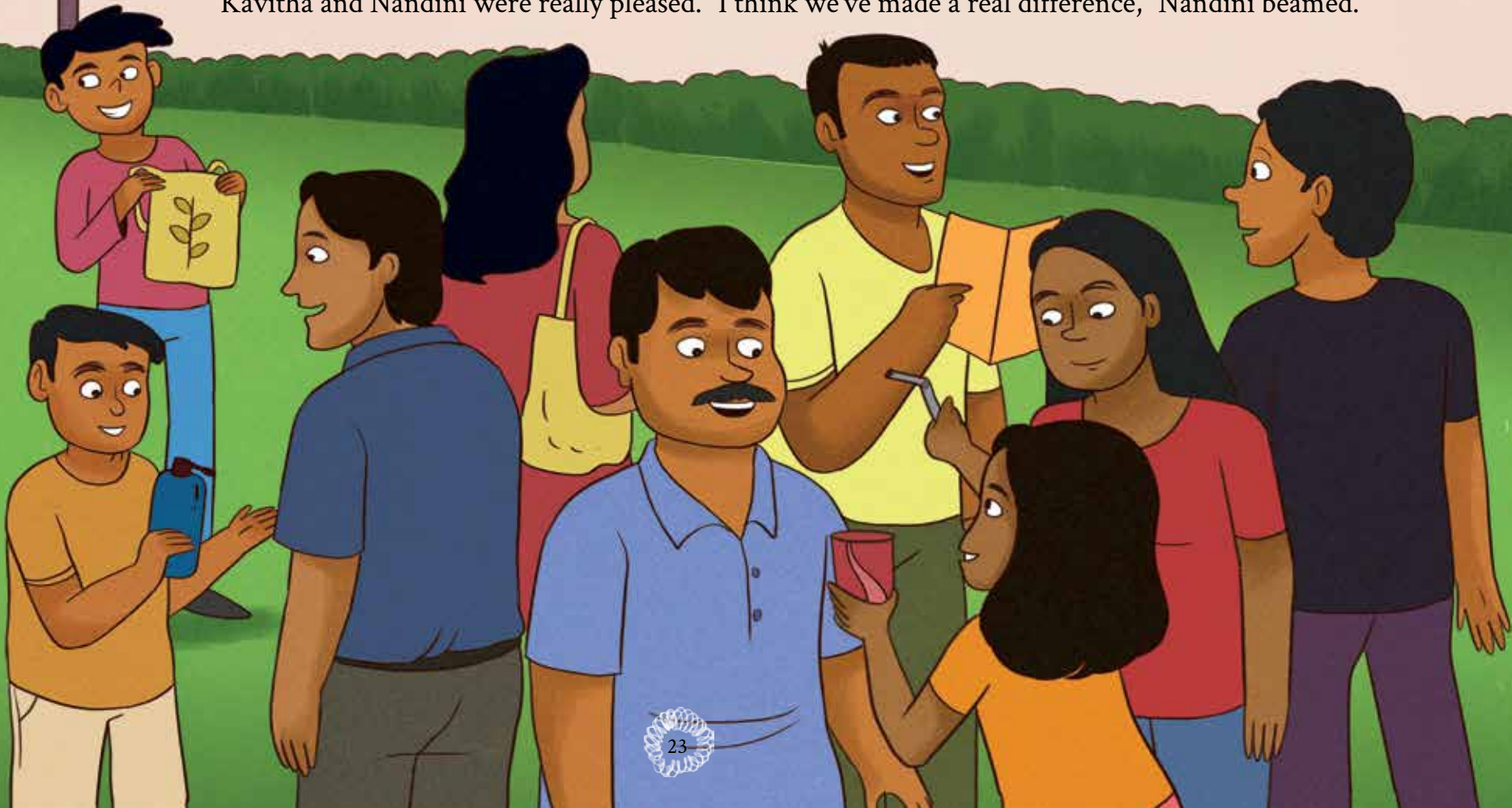
The girls were playing in the park the next day.

Suddenly, they heard a loud 'quacking' sound. It was the duck! And she wasn't alone. Waddling behind her were eight little ducklings!

"Wow!" cried Nandini, but not as loudly as Kavitha who had spotted her lost ball rolling next to the ducks!

Grinning with happiness, the girls walked home from the park.

Suddenly, without warning, Nandini lost her balance on a loose paving stone and fell onto her knees.

"Ouch" she cried, "I've scraped my knee."

"Don't worry, we'll clean it up at home," said Kavitha, "…and then let's see if we can talk to the local corporator at the Municipal Corporation about these loose paving stones."

Kavitha and Nandini were active citizens in their community. They took responsibility for issues in their local community and helped to resolve them.

Kavitha and Nandini saved the duck and worked with the Municipal Corporation to clean up the park. They also then educated other people (citizens) in their community about the problems with using plastic.

They brought about a positive change in their community.

There are many ways you can be an active citizen.
Below is a pledge you can take to show your commitment to being an active citizen.

I .... take the Active Citizenship Pledge.

I am a citizen of India.

I care about my responsibilities and my rights. I care about my friends, family and my community.

I respect the rules of my city and my country.

I pledge to:
• Take care of my school, parks, playgrounds and other public spaces.
• Treat everyone with respect.
• Save water and electricity at home, school and wherever I go.
• Follow road safety and traffic rules.
• Segregate waste and always throw garbage in the dustbin.
• Use public transport.
• Minimise use of plastic materials.

About Janaagraha

Janaagraha (www.janaagraha.org) was founded by Swati Ramanathan and Ramesh Ramanathan in December 2001. It is registered under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882. Janaagraha's mission is to transform quality of life in India's cities and towns and it defines quality of life as comprising quality of infrastructure and services and quality of citizenship. We work with citizens to catalyze active citizenship in city neighbourhoods and with governments to institute reforms to city governance (what we call "city-systems"). Civic Learning, Civic Participation and Advocacy and Reforms are Janaagraha's three major strands of work to accomplish its mission.

Quality of Citizenship is an integral component of Quality of Life and therefore, Janaagraha's Civic Learning Program is aimed at catalyzing Active Citizenship in our cites. We firmly believe that systematic Civic Learning is a prerequisite for large-scale civic participation in our cities, whereby citizens will take ownership of their neighborhoods and cities and work constructively with each other and their governments to solve civic problems. Good citizenship is about what citizens do, rather than who they are. As citizens, we can make our cities a better place to live in and improve our quality of life. In this process we become responsible, engaged and active citizens.

ichangemycity

IChangeMyCity is a Janaagraha initiative

When Nandini and Kavitha go to the park, they find a lot of garbage lying around.
A duck has tried to eat a piece of plastic but now it is stuck around her beak.
Can the girls help save the duck and clean up the park for good?

Read on to find out!