

# The Jungle Spirit

An ecological fable from Maharashtra (India),  
retold by Muriel Kakani.

Once upon a time, in a Warli village tucked in the Sahyadri Mountains of Maharashtra lived two farmers, Janiya and Ladku.

It was summer and the time to collect honey had come. On a bright and sunny afternoon, Janiya and Ladku set out from their village with their rope ladder to roam the forest in search of honeycombs.

In the village, few men were interested in hunting honey. It was an activity that involved far too many dangers. While hiking through the dense jungle, there was always a risk of stumbling upon a ferocious tiger, a bold leopard or an ill-tempered sloth bear. Moreover to get to the hives that hung from cliff overhangs or tall trees was never an easy task. And once you got close to those monstrous beehives, some measuring nearly 2metres long, the wild giant honeybees waited, ready to sting any intruder.

Janiya and Ladku had been walking all through the afternoon. At last a distant overwhelming hum of bees drew their attention. They craned their neck to scan the forest canopy.



"I can see something over there," Ladku shouted excitedly, pointing to an immense dark mass perched high in a gigantic teak tree.

"Baap re! Such a huge one! So full! It is going to give us no less than 20 kilos of delicious honey to sell in the market," cried out Janiya.

"We are going to be rich," chorused the two of them.

Ladku examined the tree. It had a tall straight trunk topped by a spreading crown. As it was summer, the teak tree looked very ugly as its huge insect-eaten leaves had dried and were falling to the ground to form a crispy carpet.

"It is going to be an arduous climb," remarked Ladku.

"But it is worth it," replied Janiya, throwing the rope ladder to secure it on the top branch.

Soon both friends were dangling from their rope ladder, dangerously close to the honeycomb, using smoking fires to drive out and subdue the bees.

Painstakingly they brought the honeycomb down and were soon on their way back home.

"We forgot to make an offering of honey to the jungle spirit," said Ladku worriedly.

"Why should we leave something for the jungle spirit?" argued Janiya. "We took the risks. We did the hard work."

"Yes, I know," said Ladku hesitantly, "but the jungle spirit should be thanked. It is always done."

“Nonsense,” shouted Janiya. “Have you ever seen a spirit?”

“No,”

“Then why thank somebody you have never seen,” Janiya said with growing confidence.

“I guess you are right,” replied Ladku.

The two friends were reaching their village when unexpectedly, out of a tangle of bushes and undergrowth, appeared a creature covered in long black hair, with an elongated muzzle and sharp sickle shaped claws. It was the grumpy and greedy sloth bear.

The jungle spirit had decided to teach the two friends a lesson by sending the irascible and excitable bear after them.

“Help! Help!” screamed Janiya, dropping the honeycomb.

“Help! Help!” cried Ladku, abusing his friend.

Both frightened men took to their heels with the sloth bear chasing after them.

It was a good lesson for Janiya and Ladku, and for the whole village. Ever since then the Warlis never forget to thank the jungle spirit whenever they harvest honey from the forest. Ever since then the Warlis never forget to thank Mother Nature for her kindness and generosity.