

THE MAD MANGROVE

A Visual Biography of Kallen Pokkudan
Illustrated by Liju KV





Kallen Pokkudan was an environmental activist from Kannur, Kerala. He was known for his efforts for the protection and proliferation of the mangroves in Kerala. He is called The Mangrove Man of India.

He got many accolades, including State Forest Department's first Vanamithra award, Harithavyakthi award, P V Thampi Environmentalist award and Bhoomi Mithra award. In addition to that, Kannur University has bestowed the Acharya award on him.

Kallen Pokkudan is no more today. Now mangroves are being destroyed drastically. It's high time to make people aware of Kallen Pokkudan's insights and the importance of mangrove.

Kallen Pokkudan wanted him to be called Kandal Pokkudan, where Kandal is the name of mangrove in Malayalam. He dedicated his life to mangrove forestation.

Forty years ago, the mangrove coverage in Kerala was around 400 sq. km. Now it has been drastically reduced to 17 sq km. Alarmingly, more than 80% of the lands are in private hands. With growing real estate demands, these mangrove areas were often soil-filled and transformed into coconut plantations. It has also been used for agriculture, aquaculture, unscientific water regulation, construction and real estate development.





Mangroves make up an ecosystem of incredible biological diversity. It cools the river water near the shore and provides nursery grounds for aquatic life comprising algae, reptiles, birds, fish, shrimps and crabs etc. The offsprings of aquatic lives find haven in the thick roots of mangroves.

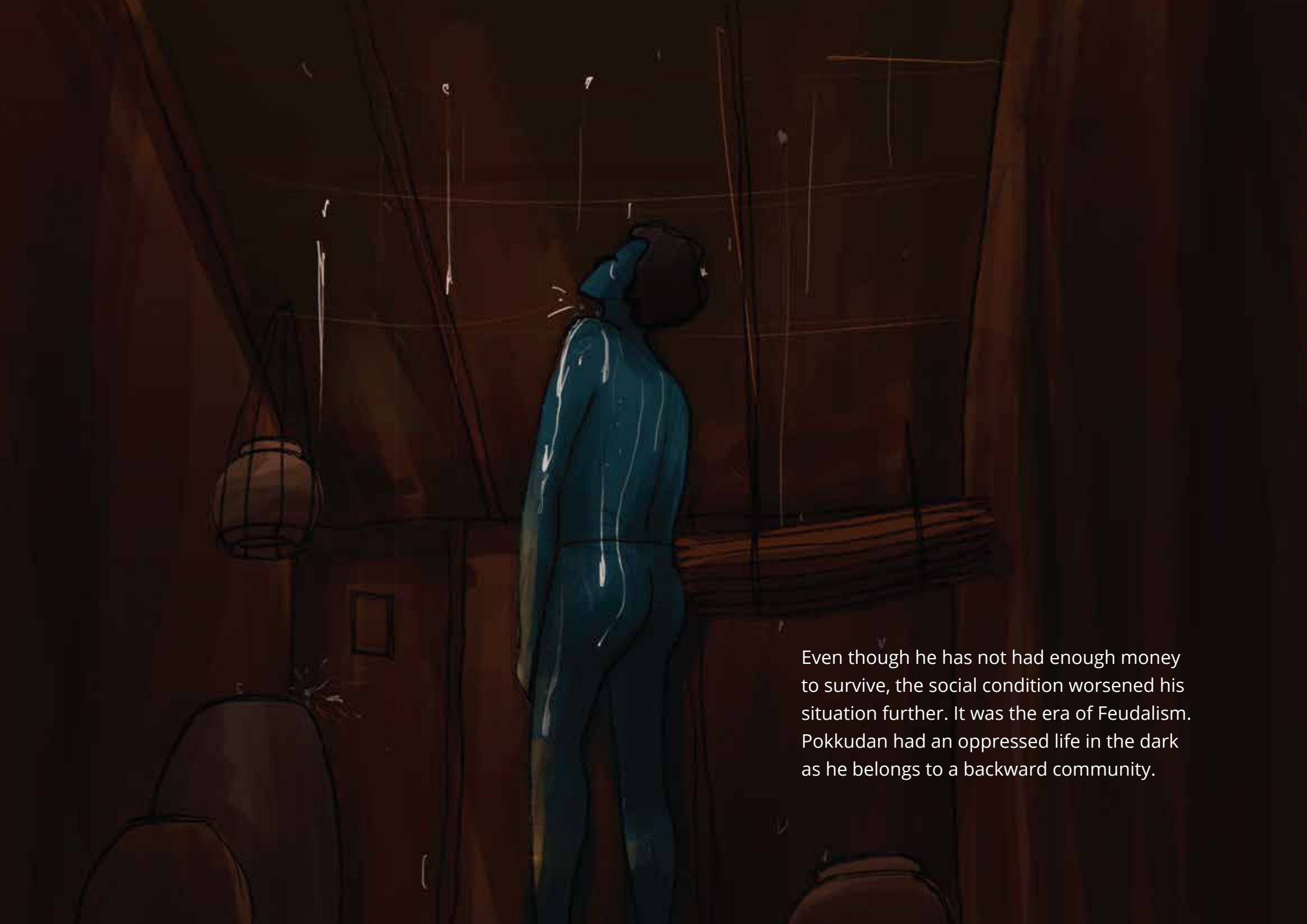


Fish-eating birds like darters, waterhen, yellow bittern and migratory birds, often live inside the mangroves. The mangrove forests are also home to several other animals such as turtles, otters, rodents, wild cats etc. I believe, they all might have been indebted to Pokkudan for nurturing a habitat.

Kallen Pokkudan was born in 1937.

It was a small hut in a paddy field, where his struggle life started. Born into a socially and economically challenged family, Pokkudan had dropped out of school while in Class 2 to work as a farmhand in a remote village Ezome, near Pazhayangadi, in Kannur district.





Even though he has not had enough money to survive, the social condition worsened his situation further. It was the era of Feudalism. Pokkudan had an oppressed life in the dark as he belongs to a backward community.



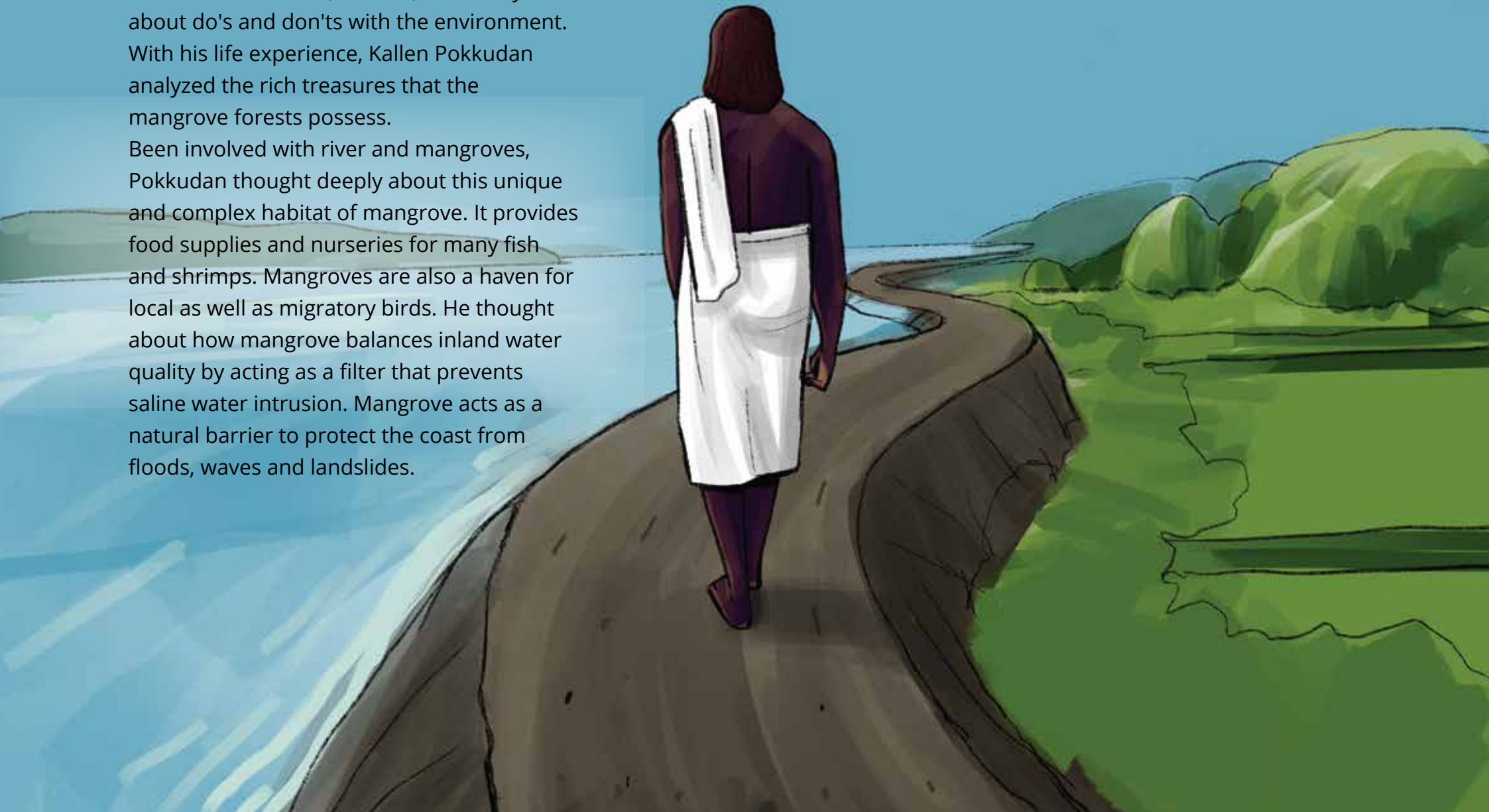
Years flew away. Pokkudan entered adulthood. By then, Pokkudan's village became the cradle of communism in Kerala. Been attracted to left ideology, Pokkudan participated in several agrarian agitations. Youth activism boiled in his blood. Pokkudan was jailed a few times too.



There came a moment when Pokkudan found himself being sidelined in politics. Heartbroken, Pokkudan left active politics in the late 1980s.

When Pokkudan was in solitude, he thought about opting for green politics. Pokkudan, who grew by the lap of rich rivers and estuaries of Ezhome, Kannur, knew very well about do's and don'ts with the environment. With his life experience, Kallen Pokkudan analyzed the rich treasures that the mangrove forests possess.

Been involved with river and mangroves, Pokkudan thought deeply about this unique and complex habitat of mangrove. It provides food supplies and nurseries for many fish and shrimps. Mangroves are also a haven for local as well as migratory birds. He thought about how mangrove balances inland water quality by acting as a filter that prevents saline water intrusion. Mangrove acts as a natural barrier to protect the coast from floods, waves and landslides.





Pokkudan entered into his next phase of life, opting for green politics leaving behind his activities for community and politics.

One day an incident ignited him to take this firm step. Pokkudan saw kids struggling to make their way to school on a river bund, which was almost devastated due to floods and storms. A couple of times, kids fell into the water also. Pokkudan knew that mangroves are proven strong enough to reduce the impacts of storm and wind. He decided to safeguard the bund by planting mangroves and restoring the lifeline of his village.




The incident motivated Kallen Pokkudan to plant mangroves and began his crusade to conserve mangroves in the 1980s. Pokkudan would use his canoe in search of mangrove seeds. Pokkudan launched his historic effort with pure determination and spirit, where he would daily paddle his canoe along the waters to collect seeds of mangroves that he could spot.





He decided to plant a particular mangrove variety (scientifically termed as *Rhizophora Mucronata*) which was locally known as the Pranthan Kandal (literally, the mad mangrove). This mangrove tree has a long cluster of roots growing down from the trunk. The plant produces long stick-like seeds.

An illustration showing a person's legs and hands in a marshy environment. The person is wearing a white shirt and a dark purple dhoti. They are barefoot, with their right foot in the water. Their hands are holding a green mangrove sapling, ready to plant it. The water is light blue, and there are several other saplings already planted in the ground. The background is a solid teal color.

Kallen Pokkudan lived his life on the lap of the river. Pokkudan realized that the socio-economic aspects of his community are intertwined with river ecology. As a dedicated routine, Pokkudan would either go by walk or canoe along the waterlogged marshes to plant mangrove saplings for hours starting from early morning till noon.

He went into the mangrove forest and collected fallen seeds from the swamp. Pokkudan carefully grew these seeds into saplings.



Pokkudan started planting saplings on public ground. The people were not concerned about his intention, instead teased and made fun of him, thinking he had gone mad. The initial days were difficult for Pokkudan. He had to face intense criticism from villagers for spending his time on the marshes, planting saplings that earned nothing beneficial for his living!





Some people showed him aversion and gave him the tag of a mad man. They felt disgusted and referred to him by the moniker 'Pranthan Pokkudan', which translates to 'mad man Pokkudan'.



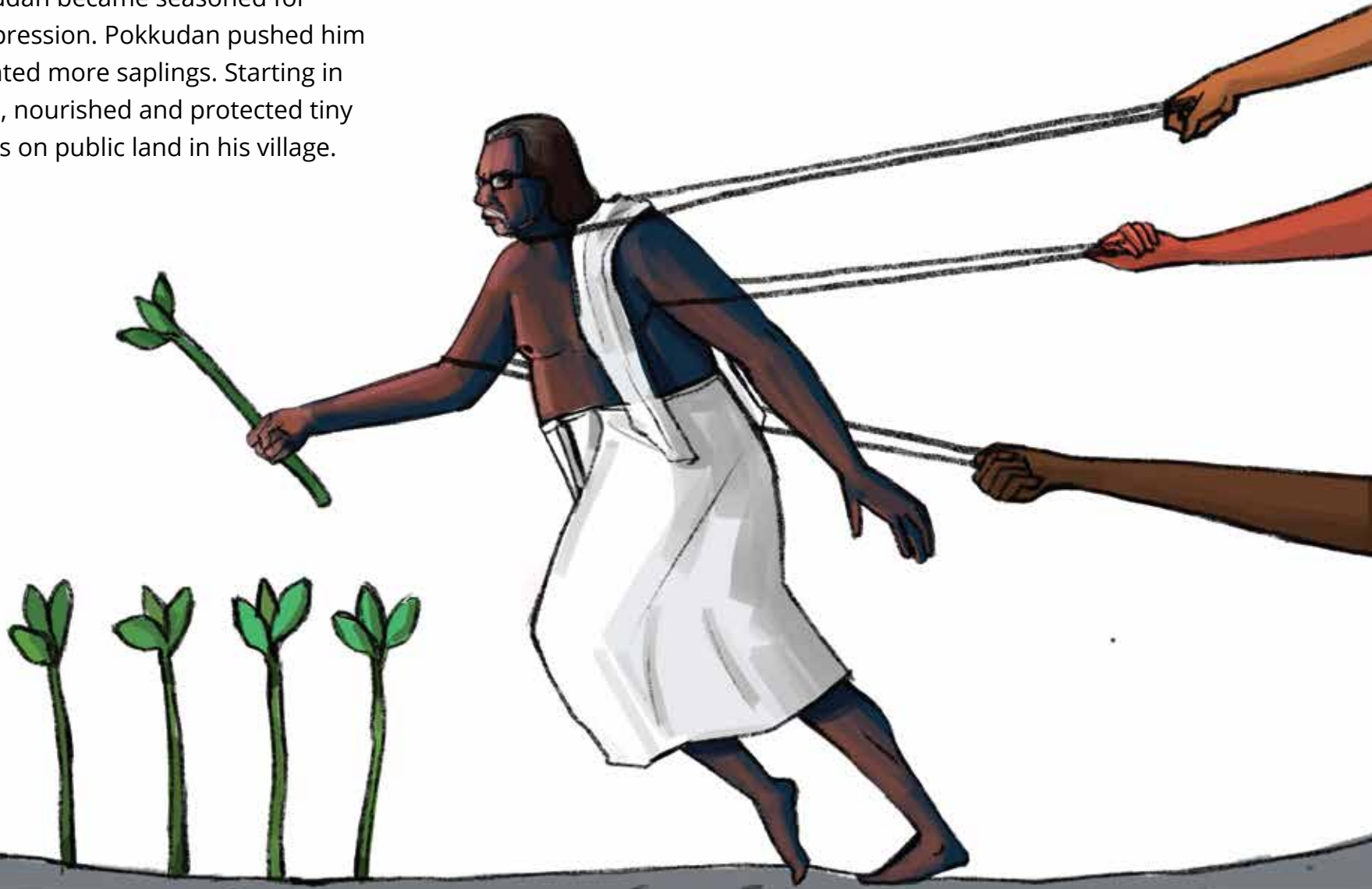
But, the determined Pokkudan carried on with his mission and kept on planting mangrove saplings.



Pokkudan got frustrated when some miscreants destroyed the saplings and belittled his effort. He often had to face threats from the local real estate gangs who were prying on the mangrove lands for business.



Over time, Pokkudan became seasoned for criticism and oppression. Pokkudan pushed him so hard and planted more saplings. Starting in 1989, he planted, nourished and protected tiny mangrove forests on public land in his village.



He planted about 50,000 saplings and managed to plant more saplings across the district. Pokkudan conserved and protected them until they emerged as thick mangrove forests.

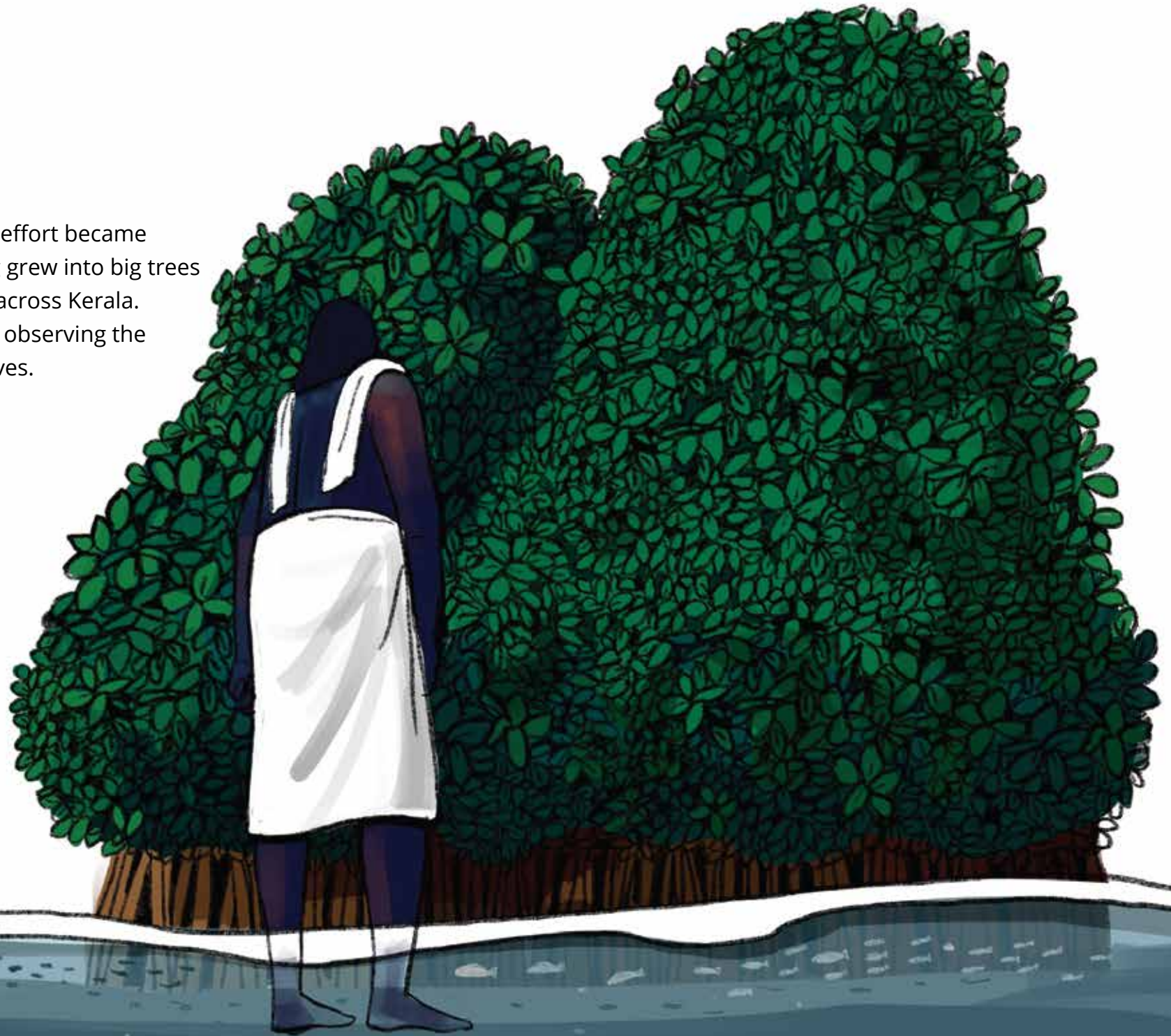
The mangroves supported a diverse ecosystem benefiting crabs, snakes, birds, a wide range of fish, shrimps, otters, tortoise, butterflies, honey bees, and countless other creatures! Even the villagers used the dried branches of the mangroves as firewood and leaves as cattle feed.



Kallen Pokkudan slowly got prominence. A few environmentalists and organizations appreciated him and supported his activities. Finally, ridicule made way for respect and recognition as more environmental activists realized the immense ecological value of Kallen Pokkudan's commitment.

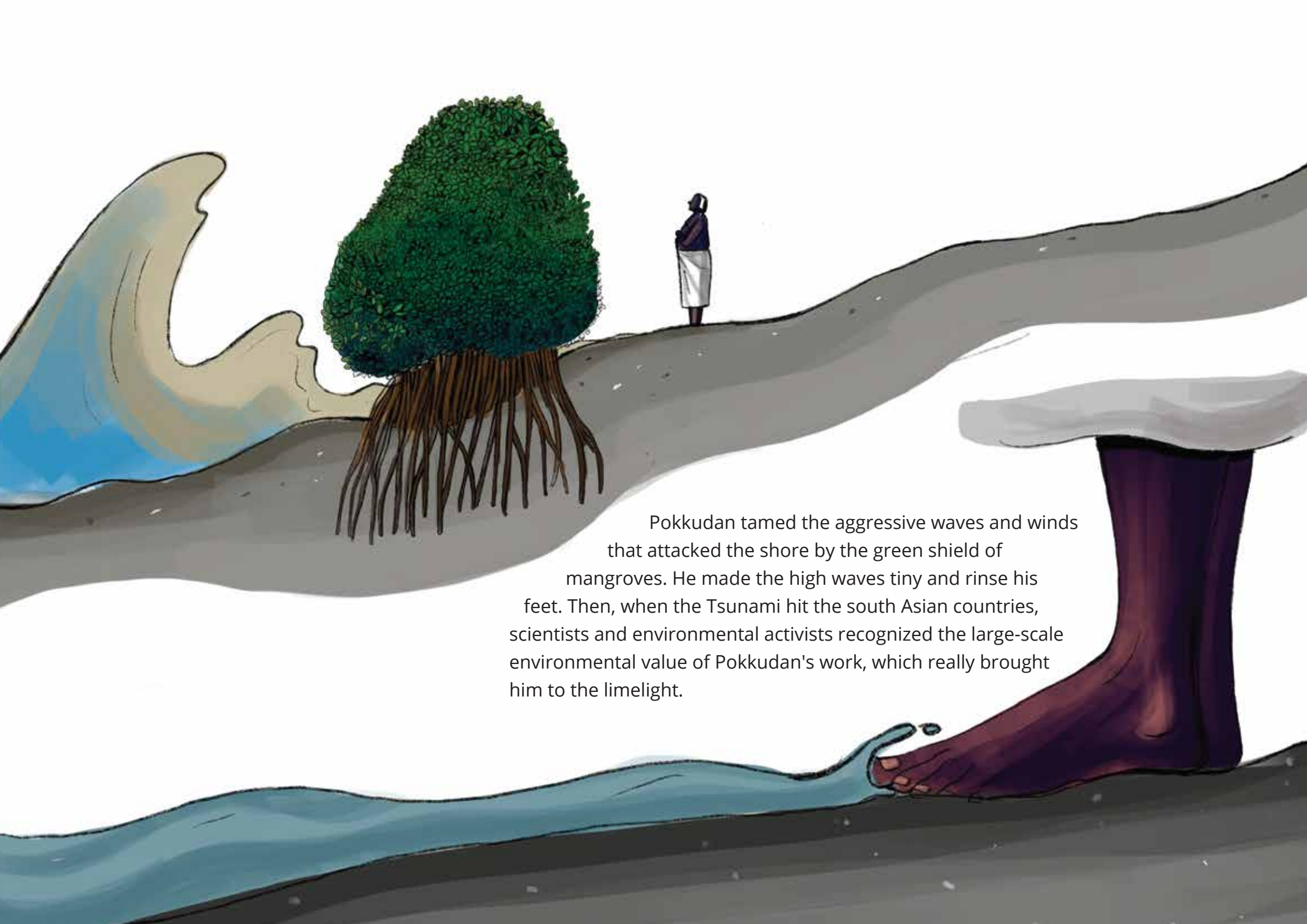


Kallen Pokkudan's effort became fruitful. His sapling grew into big trees at many locations across Kerala. Pokkudan enjoyed observing the growth of mangroves.



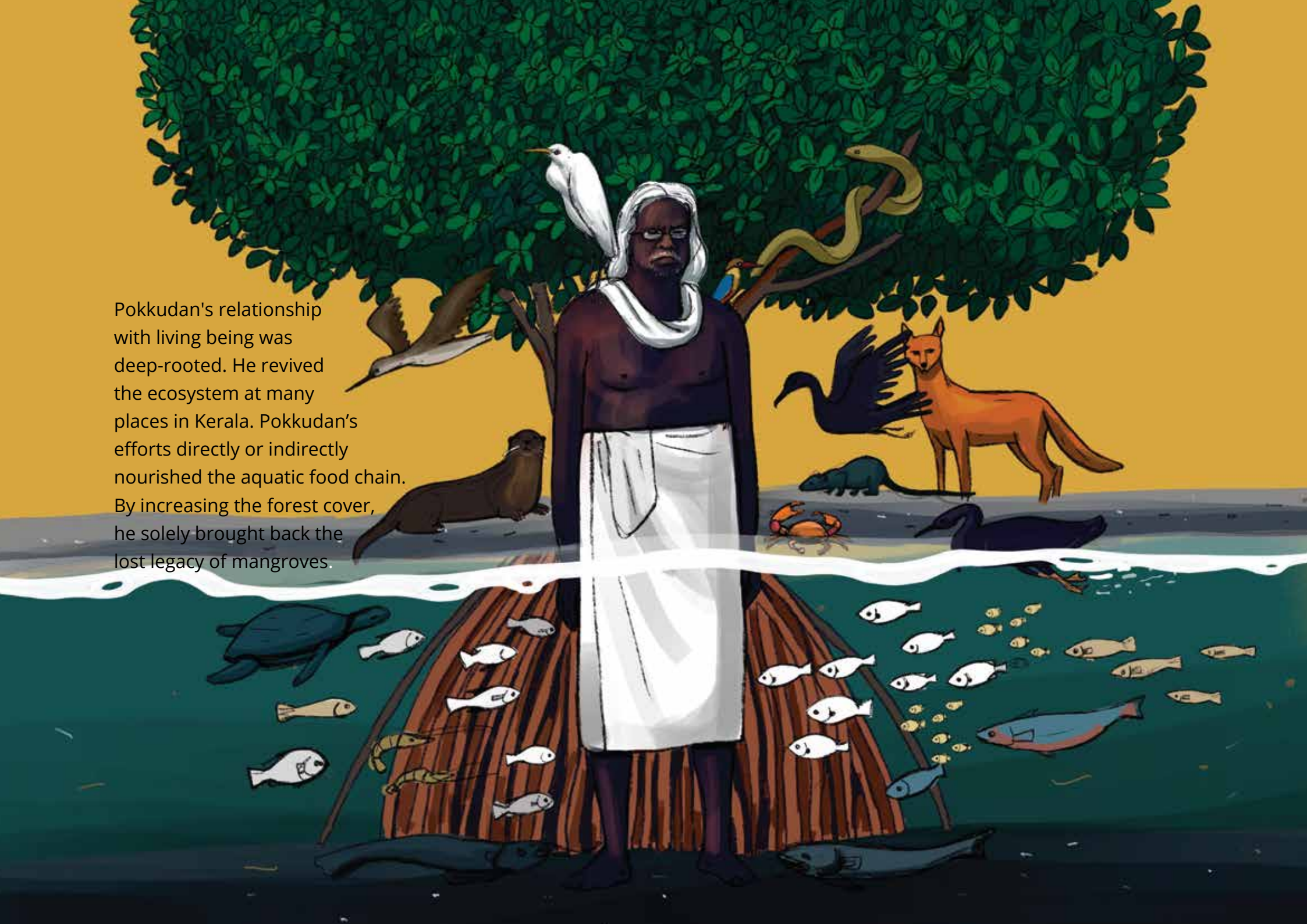


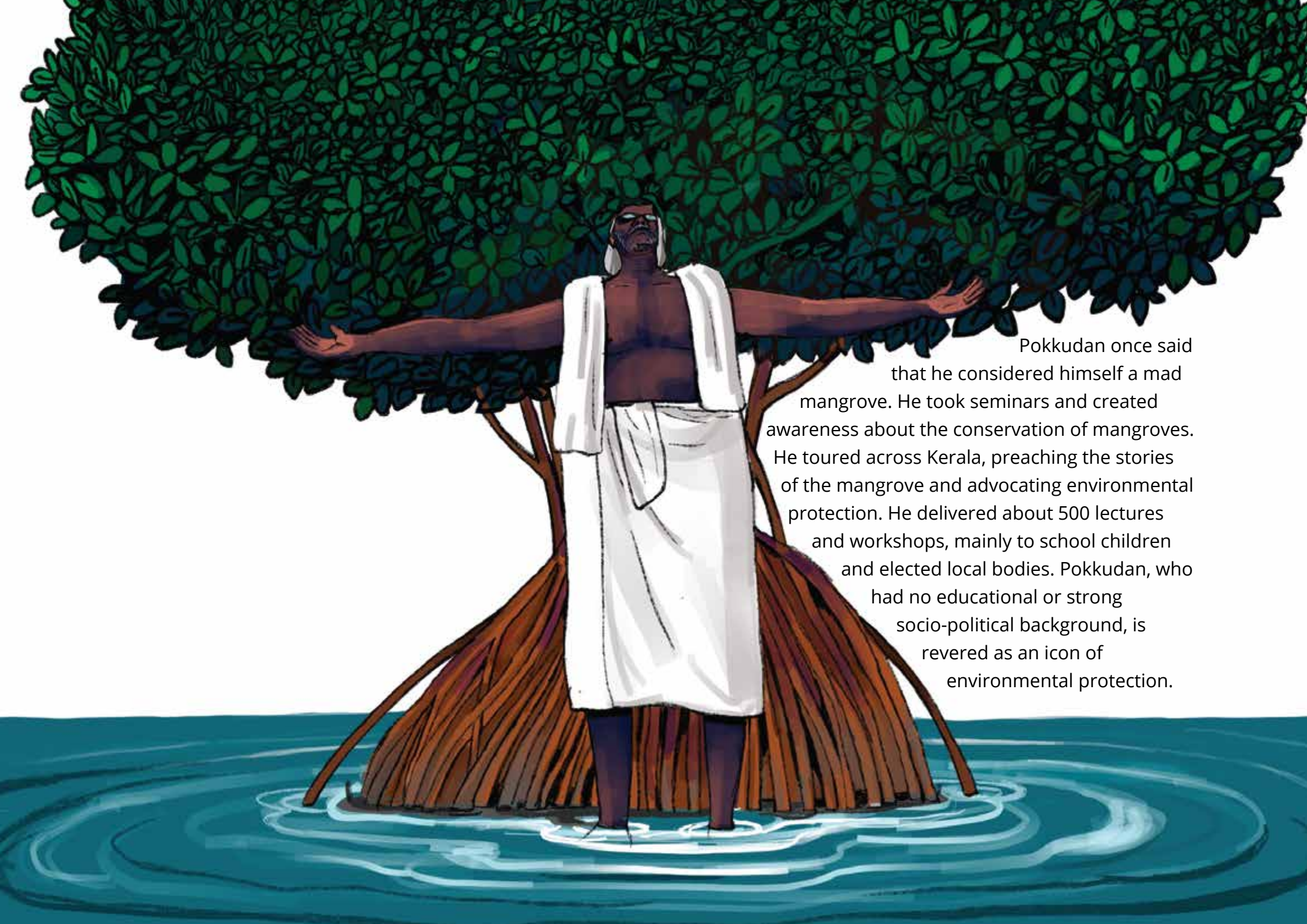
Gradually, the ridicule made way for admiration and respect. Even the public recognized Kallen Pokkudan and encouraged him to plant more saplings. Parallely, Several forest and environmental awards came his way.



Pokkudan tamed the aggressive waves and winds that attacked the shore by the green shield of mangroves. He made the high waves tiny and rinse his feet. Then, when the Tsunami hit the south Asian countries, scientists and environmental activists recognized the large-scale environmental value of Pokkudan's work, which really brought him to the limelight.

Pokkudan's relationship with living being was deep-rooted. He revived the ecosystem at many places in Kerala. Pokkudan's efforts directly or indirectly nourished the aquatic food chain. By increasing the forest cover, he solely brought back the lost legacy of mangroves.





Pokkudan once said that he considered himself a mad mangrove. He took seminars and created awareness about the conservation of mangroves. He toured across Kerala, preaching the stories of the mangrove and advocating environmental protection. He delivered about 500 lectures and workshops, mainly to school children and elected local bodies. Pokkudan, who had no educational or strong socio-political background, is revered as an icon of environmental protection.

Pokkudan is not with us now. He passed away on 27th September 2015. But it is believed that he is still amidst the mangrove and protects the inland. Generations should remember the story of this humble farmhand alongside tales of mangroves.

