“Come down Panchami, come down,” pleaded Mithun. The sea-gulls in the distance called out once again. As the sound faded, it was answered by a single loud shriek. Panchami had made up her mind.

“You can’t tame a migratory bird like the sea-gull,” Asman Hawk, the bird-man, had said. But Panchami had been with Mithun for a year........
Would she come back?
THE STORY OF PANCHAMI

By Abhijit Sengupta
Illustrations by Subir Roy
The Story of Panchami by Abhijit Sengupta
won the second prize in the Competition for
Writers of Children’s Books held by Children’s
Book Trust. This is Mr. Sengupta’s second
full-length fiction. The first being The Man
From Sundarbans.

The Mysterious House

It was Basant Panchami—the festival that marks the
arrival of spring in India. People everywhere were happy
to shed their woollens and lap up the brilliant sunshine.
The blue sky was filled with red, green and yellow kites.
Children ran helter-skelter challenging each other to fly
their kites higher and higher.

Ruma stood gazing at these kites. Like shooting stars
they would appear and disappear as the wind played
hide and seek with them.

Mithun, Ruma’s elder brother was also flying one. But
his was no ordinary kite. It was a red box like kite with
two sides open. Cane strings fastened to two corners
vibrated as the kite flew in the air making a humming
sound, like an aeroplane.

Mithun’s kite was just above some palm trees when
Ruma shouted.
“Dada, kite, a big kite!”

A big blue kite with a white tail, circled Mithun’s red one, almost like a bird of prey. One moment it would swoop down on the red kite. The next moment it would pull back.

Ruma’s heart beat fast. What if this strange kite cut their dear red one?

“Dada, wind the string quick,” warned Ruma.

“Don’t shout,” said Mithun who was all concentration.

Ruma kept quiet. She had a lot of faith in her brother. After all he had made such a fantastic kite.

Suddenly, the blue kite nose-dived on the red one.

“Bho-o-n katta the string is cut”, cried Ruma, at the top of her voice.

Boys and girls of different sizes were running towards the falling kite with long bamboo sticks.

“Hey,” shouted Ruma. “That’s our kite. We’ve cut it.”

“Dada, run,” she said as she picked up a stick and followed the crowd. Mithun waited a while. Then he started running too.

They ran for what seemed like ages. The kite would fly away from them, then stop, then fly towards them again. Finally it landed on a large deserted house that was surrounded by high brick walls.

The sun had set and most of the children had given up the chase. Only Ruma and Mithun, were there.

As the kite dropped over the roof, they stood gazing not at the kite but at the house.

“Mad-house. That’s the mad-house,” whispered Mithun.

They had been told that a strange man lived alone in a deserted house near the village.
Ruma shuddered. ‘Is it the same house?’ she wondered.

“Dada, let’s go. That man will catch us,” she said aloud and broke into a run.

But Mithun just kept standing there. How could he return empty handed? It would be a disgrace.

Ruma stopped and watched her brother from a distance.

A deep silence prevailed. Suddenly it was shattered by an awful sound from the house.

“Ko-an-ko-an-aan!”

It sounded as though somebody was being done to death.

Ruma and Mithun froze as they stared, wide-eyed at each other.

When the sound stopped they had to shake themselves back to reality. Then they literally ran for their lives.

A Strange Bird

When they reached home it was dark. They tip-toed into their room and sat at their writing table, pretending to study.

After dinner, when it was time to go to bed, Ruma whispered to Mithun, “Where’s our kite?”

“Kite?” Mithun was still dazed, “Oh! I forgot all about it.”

After a while, when everyone was asleep Mithun sneaked out into the garden. The humming sound could still be heard. Mithun’s heart went out to his kite. Even on this dark winter night it was obeying its master’s command.

As Mithun wound the string, the kite came closer to him and the humming grew louder. Suddenly he heard a loud flapping sound. It came from the box.

Mithun stood still for a moment. Then he ran in to call Ruma.

Ruma brought a lamp with her and what they saw in the dim light was a strange sight. A bird, trapped in the box, was flapping its wings vigorously. Its mouth was open and it was breathing heavily. Every few minutes it would stretch its neck and look around.

The children were afraid. They didn’t know what bird it was. They had heard about vultures who had sharp beaks.

“Let me call Papa,” whispered Ruma. “He will catch it.”

“No,” said Mithun, “I’ll catch it.” Slowly he moved towards the bird. He was about to touch it when the bird screamed. Mithun leapt back, his knees almost giving way.

Ruma shuddered. The noise would wake up her parents.

The bird flapped its wings some more and suddenly it broke free. It tried to fly away but fell flat on the ground instead.

“Its wing is broken most probably,” said Mithun.

“Oh, poor thing,” said Ruma and rushed towards it.

It was the most beautiful bird she had ever seen. Its feathers and wings were light grey but its neck and belly were white as milk. The most fascinating thing about it were the two dark spots near its eyes. It seemed almost as though the bird had applied eye-liner, like a young girl.

“I think it’s some kind of a pigeon, Dada,” whispered Ruma. “Look at its head and neck.”

“No, it’s a duck,” said Mithun, “look at its feet.”
Sure enough its feet were webbed. 'It looks like a pigeon, its feet are like a duck's and its voice is like a kite's. What kind of a bird is it anyway?' thought Ruma.

Mithun was also lost in thought, when Ruma exclaimed "pigeon" loudly. "I say it is a pigeon. Look at this paper here. Only pigeons carry letters, so there," she said regaining her confidence.

Mithun clapped his hands and the bird flew across the lawn and dashed into a wall. The paper fell.

Mithun ran and picked it up. It turned out to be a plastic piece and not a paper. It read:

"Please return the bird to Asman Hawk, Ornithologist, Village—Akrampur.........................
"O-r-n-i-t-h-o-l-o-g-i-s-t!" said Ruma, "what does it mean?"

But before she could say anymore the bird started beating its wings against the ground.

"I think it’s hungry", said Ruma. "I’ll get it some rice."

"It'll only eat snails and fish," said Mithun. "It is a duck, I tell you."

But Ruma was not prepared to listen to her brother. She got some rice and scattered it before the bird. It pecked at a grain or two but was not satisfied. It started flying again. This time it flew with so much force that it managed to go into their room.

Mithun was scared it might hit its head against the wall. Quickly he grabbed a big bamboo basket and threw it over the bird. Then he put a stone on the basket so it couldn’t be overturned.

"Finally," said Mithun and Ruma heaving a sigh of relief as they climbed into their beds.

A Strange Man

Mithun, however, could not sleep. He kept thinking about the beautiful bird which had come to them almost like a gift from heaven.

'But who is this Asman Hawk?' he wondered. 'The name sounds familiar. Why?'

Then, in a flash, it came to him.

It was exactly two years ago in the summer holidays, when Mithun had gone to a mango orchard in search of raw, juicy, mangoes. Except for the birds the place was deserted. Parrots circled the trees and herons formed a garland and flew against the cloudy sky. Suddenly a shrill cry rent the air. Mithun turned and saw an old man, tall and thin, with bushy eyebrows and a grey beard, tiptoeing towards him. He had a long bamboo pole in his hand and a sack strung across his shoulder. He wore a deep violet shirt and trousers. A leather box hung round his neck.

Mithun almost burst out laughing. 'Fancy an old man, dressed like that, coming here to steal mangoes,' he thought.

The old man took out an earthen pot from his sack. This contained a gum like solution which he applied to the tip of the bamboo pole. Then he suddenly thrust the pole into the dense foliage of a tree. Birds of all kinds screamed as they flew out. The man brought the pole down with a beautiful yellow oriole on the tip. It was flapping its wings but could not fly because it was stuck to the pole like a piece of paper. The man then gently freed the bird from the pole, tied its wings with a string and put it in the sack.

Mithun was intrigued by the whole operation. The man took out a pair of binoculars and started looking at
the distant trees. Then he walked towards Mithun. His eyes sharp and bright like a hawk’s.

He stared hard at Mithun and asked in a deep, husky voice—“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Mithun was so scared, he could not speak.

“I see. You’ve come here to see what I do. Ha! Ha! Good. That’s very good,” the man said and burst out laughing like a mad man. Then he stopped and flew into a rage.

“Why have you come here dressed like that?”

Mithun could not understand what was wrong with his clothes. He was wearing a red shirt and black trousers.

The old man continued shouting. “Don’t you know that birds cannot see violet. This is the time they come back to their nests. But when they see you they will get scared. Go. Get out from here. Don’t disturb the birds.”

Mithun was about to turn round and run when he saw something written on the sack—‘Asman Hawk’.

Now the mystery was solved. Obviously this bird belonged to the same man.

“Hey Ruma,” he said shaking his sister. “I’ve got it. Ornithologists are people who catch birds.

“So we are also ornithologists,” said Ruma giggling.

The Name

The next morning Mithun jumped out of bed and ran to the basket. In the daylight the bird looked more beautiful.

The rice grains lay scattered at its feet. Mithun now felt really sorry for the poor creature.

Just then their father walked in. “What’s all this?” he asked, pointing to the bird and the basket.
Mithun narrated the whole story to him and was surprised that his father did not react unfavourably to it.

"Maybe it is a bird from a distant country that has wandered here. What do you want to do with it anyway?" he asked.

"And what is that in your hand?" he continued.

Mithun was forced to show the piece of plastic to his father.

"Asman Hawk! The same man!" said his father.

"Who is this man, Papa? Do you know him?" asked Mithun.

"He is a strange man. Very few people have seen him. The ones who have, say that he has long hair, bushy eyebrows and a grey beard. He can walk as silently as a fox and is always dressed in deep violet. God knows why?"

"Because birds cannot see that colour."

"How do you know?" asked his father, taken aback.

"I read it somewhere."

"Well, this man is an ornithologist."

"Ornithologists are those who catch birds," said Ruma.

"No, my dear," said their father, laughing. "Ornithologists do not catch birds, but they study their behaviour. According to the villagers this man does not like to see any human beings near his house. He only wants to see birds. Once he chased some boys who were shooting birds. Had he caught them he would have broken their heads."

"Then he's definitely the same man," thought Mithun. But what was that frightening sound he had heard?

"You go and return the bird to him," said his father.

"No, Papa," said Mithun almost in tears. "It's mine now. I will tame it."

"But you know nothing about birds. Taming a bird isn't as easy as flying a kite you know. You must know its eating habits, the climate most suitable for it and so on. It might just die otherwise."

Mithun was quiet. In just one night he had grown so fond of the bird that he didn't have the heart to send it away. He looked at Ruma. Simultaneously they said—

"No, Papa."

"I will not let it die Papa, you wait and see," continued Mithun.

"Well. That's good."

Mithun lifted the basket and gently touched the bird. It was a queer sensation. It felt like a lump of cotton wool.

Pushy, their pet cat, was keenly watching Mithun. She prowled about the room waiting to pounce on the bird.

Mithun and Ruma felt it would be safer to keep the bird in the attic.

Taming the Bird

Soon the neighbourhood was talking about this strange bird that Ruma and Mithun had. They did not know, of course that it belonged to the madman.

Meanwhile, Mithun and Ruma decided to name the bird Panchami—as they had found it on Basant Panchami day. Besides, they were sure it was a female bird because its eyes seemed to be outlined with kajal or eyeliner.

Mithun made a huge bamboo cage for Panchami so she could spread her wings and walk easily in it. Every day he would take the cage to the garden so that Panchami could see the other birds.
But Panchami, they realized soon, was an aggressive bird. One afternoon, Pushy the cat crawled up to Panchami’s cage which was on the tree. She put her paw inside but Panchami pecked so hard that Pushy had to leave timidly. Panchami flapped her wings and gave a shrill cry as though in triumph. Mithun felt quite victorious himself because he did not like Pushy all that much.

On another occasion Panchami managed to drive away a couple of drongoes. Most birds are afraid of drongoes. But Panchami just pounced on them when they came near her and beat her wings so vigorously that they were forced to go away.

As the days went by Panchami grew impatient. Ruma and Mithun tried their best to tame her but she did not respond. She would not eat anything either. All day she would peck at the sticks of the cage as though she wanted to break it to pieces.

They changed her diet from time to time. They gave her gram but she did not touch it. They gave her fruit, cakes, biscuits and even puddings but it was all in vain.

“Oh God! Save my children from the clutches of that wicked bird,” muttered their mother. “All our money will now be spent on feeding this creature.”

“I warned you,” said their father. “It is difficult to tame an unknown bird. We do not know what she wants. She might die in despair. So why don’t you return her to her owner?”

“Give us another chance, Papa,” pleaded Mithun. And once more their father gave in.

It is Not ill

The next day a strange thing happened. Ruma placed a bowl of water in Panchami’s cage, as usual. But
Panchami did not drink the water. Instead, she perched on the edge of the bowl and overturned it. Ruma filled it and kept it back. But Panchami did the same thing again. Ruma then tried to force her to drink the water. She touched Panchami and immediately withdrew her hand.

"Dada," she screamed "come here quick. Panchami has fever."

Mithun touched Panchami. "I’ll get a thermometer," he said.

But where did one put the thermometer to check a bird’s temperature? Ruma lifted Panchami’s plumage and told Mithun to place it there.

"Chia-a-a-an! Chi-a-a-a-n!" screamed Panchami. But Mithun held her firmly.

The thermometer showed 110°F. Mithun could not believe his eyes.

"That’s why she was craving for water. She wanted to bring her temperature down. What a clever bird she is," said Mithun.

But Ruma was almost in tears. "She will not live Dada," she said.

"We’ll put ice-bag on her head. Or, why don’t we go to Roy uncle first?"

Uncle Roy was a doctor in the local veterinary hospital. When he saw Panchami he patted her and asked, "What is wrong with you?"

Panchami answered with a "Chian, chan-chaan....". She did not seem to like being patted by the vet.

"Her name is Panchami," Ruma informed him.

"Panchami’s been running a temperature for the past few days, Roy uncle," Mithun added.

"Fever?" Dr. Roy was surprised. "How do you know that?"
"It's very simple Uncle. I put the thermometer under her wing and it read a hundred and ten degrees."

Uncle Roy laughed loudly but then sobered down immediately. "What do you propose we should do?" he asked seriously.

"I think if we put an ice-bag on her head and protect her from the cold she will be all right," said Mithun.

"I think it will be better if you put the ice-bag on your own head," replied Uncle Roy calmly.

Mithun's feelings were hurt. Why was Uncle cutting such cruel jokes? Panchami was still screeching chian chaan, chaan—couldn't he see how much she was suffering.

"See how offended she feels, to be called a patient," Roy uncle said kindly.

"Doesn't she have fever then, Uncle?"

"No, my boy. Hundred and ten degrees is the normal body temperature of birds. So go home and stop worrying about her."

Ruma and Mithun went home relieved but a bit disappointed. If Panchami was not ill, why was she behaving like this?

In the Madhouse

The next day Mithun decided to visit the madhouse. Only that queer man in the violet shirt and pant could tell them what was troubling Panchami, and how best they could look after her.

"Will you really go there, Dada?" Ruma asked frightened.

"Of course!"

"But what if he doesn't let you come back?"

"Why? I'm not a bird, am I?" Mithun asked. "Why don't you come with me?" He was thinking—'if there's danger—she could be of help.'

"Oh come on don't be afraid," Mithun encouraged Ruma when he saw her hesitating—"I'll be with you."

The gate was open, when they reached the madhouse.

Mithun and Ruma crept in. They were surprised to see a garden full of birds. Birds of different shapes and colours. Mithun and Ruma were speechless with wonder—birds were twittering, cooing, dancing and flying in and out of a small pool.


Ruma looked up and saw the bird-man feeding a bird with a long colourful tail and a red crown. He too saw them and walked up to the children. "What do you want?" he asked in his deep husky voice.

"We came to see the birds," Mithun replied bravely, clutching Ruma's hand.

There was a brief silence before the man said thoughtfully, "Good. Very good. People don't seem to be interested in seeing birds these days. They only seem to be interested in eating them.........You can go round and see the birds now—but don't scare them. Understand?"

"Yes," Mithun nodded.

"Birds are very lovable creatures," said the ornithologist almost to himself. "I don't like boys and girls who pelt them with stones."

"Oh no," protested Mithun, "we don't do that, we have a white bird whom we love very much. We call her Panchami."

"It must be a pigeon then. Pigeons are very domesticated and like boys and girls."
“Oh yes,” said Ruma eagerly, “it must be a pigeon, because tied to her leg.”

Ruma could not finish what she was going to say because Mithun had pinched her hard.

“What did you find in the bird’s legs?” asked the bird watch sharply.

“Er...nothing. Its legs were covered with plumage,” said Mithun casually.

“I thought its feet were webbed like a duck’s,” suggested Asman Hawk.

Mithun suppressed his excitement, and pretending to be ignorant asked, “Is there a bird like that, Sir?”

“Yes, my boy there is. It is a beautiful bird. It looks like a pigeon but it can swim like a duck. Its wings are grey and there are dark spots near its eyes.”

“What is it called?”

“Sea-gull!”

“Sea-gull?” whistled Mithun. He could not believe his ears. He had read so many stories about sea-gulls and now he himself had one in his possession.

“Sea-gulls live on the sea coast. One minute they are riding the crest of waves like paper-boats and the next they are flying in great flocks after ships picking up the refuse dropped from them. Sea-gulls are a comforting sight for sailors, especially when they are lost at sea. For, spotting a sea-gull means there is land nearby. Sailors never harm them. Sea-gulls are absolute masters of the air. Because they have long and powerful wings, they can survive the fiercest storm at sea.”

Mithun listened spellbound but Ruma could not contain her excitement. “But, but when the sea is so far away, how could a sea-gull come here?”

Before Ruma could finish, the ornithologist had pounced on her like a bulldog and clasped her shoulders in his bony fingers. He shook her and asked, “Where? Where did you find that bird?”

Ruma’s eyes were popping out in fear. But he reassured her. “Don’t be afraid. Tell me where you’ve seen that bird.”

Mithun came to his sister’s rescue. “We’ve seen such a bird sitting on a tree, Sir, in the jungle nearby.”

“Tree? Sea-gulls do not perch on trees! You’re telling a lie!”

“Oh no, then it’s probably some other bird....” Mithun tried desperately to cover up.

It seemed to satisfy the bird watch for he said, “You know, there are many birds which travel long distances every year. They are known as migratory birds. They fly at a stretch over high mountains or endless seas, deserts or forests—from one continent to another. The tern travels from the North Pole to the South pole...Isn’t that simply wonderful?”

The children were too overawed to speak.

“So you see,” continued the ornithologist, “the sea-gull is also a migratory bird. Sea-gulls in India migrate every year to Ladakh in the Himalayas.

“The Himalayas?” Mithun asked round-eyed with surprise.

“Yes, that is their home. In winter when there is snow everywhere and the clear blue water of the lakes start freezing, they know it is time to fly southwards....

“Then when winter is over and the sea becomes rough and the cuckoo starts calling in the Gulmohar trees, they remember their cool mountain home. Without further delay, they start flying back to the Himalayas in great flocks”.... “This I am sure”, said the bird-man looking up at the clear blue sky, “is the route they take every year.”
After a brief pause Mithun asked, “How can you be sure the sea-gulls take this route?”

“I am positive,” replied Asman Hawk firmly, “because last year I fastened a plastic ring to a sea-gull’s leg and I am sure this winter, when they return anybody who sees or catches that gull will bring it to me.....”

“What...... what if somebody does catch the bird?” asked Mithun hesitantly...... “tames it and does not return it to you?”

“Ha ha ha......” laughed the bird-man. “Don’t you know, boy, that a sea-gull cannot be tamed ? Besides nobody in this area would be able to keep that gull with them for long—for once I know of its whereabouts, Garud will catch him.”

“Garud ?” asked Mithun in surprise. “Want to meet him ?” Asman Hawk did not wait for an answer. Putting a thumb and finger in his mouth he let out such a piercing whistle that Mithun and Ruma were startled.

Immediately there was a hissing sound. A big brown bird was circling overhead. As soon as Asman Hawk put out his hand, the bird came and settled on his forearm. The bird had a hooked beak and sharp beady eyes that looked vigilant.

“This is Garud—An African Hawk. He is a Hawk and so am I,” guffawed the bird-man loudly. “He is as swift as the wind, and as ferocious as a lion...... no bird could escape his clutches”.

Walking up to a parrot’s cage, Asman Hawk opened the door.

Overjoyed at this unexpected freedom the parrot took off into the sky. A few minutes later—Asman Hawk released the hawk with a wave of his hand, “Go Garud, catch him...”

The hawk soared up to a great height and began
gliding. Then like a streak of lightning it swooped down, onto the parrot that was trying to fly to a perch on the tree. When he looked up again, Mithun saw the parrot clutched firmly in the hawk’s talons.

Asman Hawk whistled again and the hawk dropped down like a helicopter. While the parrot shivered with fear, the hawk sat proudly on Asman Hawk’s hand. He rubbed his beak on his master’s sleeve and looked at Ruma and Mithun triumphantly.

“You see now why the sea-gull cannot escape me?” asked Asman Hawk sternly. Then abruptly he said, “Go home, both of you. It’s getting dark and my birds want to rest now.”

As Mithun and Ruma went into the garden, they heard a frightening cry. “Koaa, koaaan, koaaan . . . . . .” it sounded like a death cry. Mithun and Ruma were inclined to run for their lives but they saw it was a big, ugly bird that was making a sound. Mithun recognized it immediately—it was a Hornbill.

**She Alighted On Water**

The next morning, Panchami began behaving madly. She kept screeching and pecking at the cage. The other birds that visited the garden like the sparrows, babblers, robins, crows and even the two drongoes thronged the cage and loudly sympathised with the imprisoned Panchami.

Mithun felt guilty, but what could he do? It was his kite that gave him a bright idea. He tied one end of the string to Panchami’s leg and opened the cage door wide. For a moment Panchami could not believe her good luck. Then she soared into the open sky. Mithun kept loosening the string, as though he was flying a kite.

Panchami circled the skies, then stopped almost vertically over a small stream flowing nearby. She watched the ducks swimming in the stream for some time, then flapping her wings alighted on the water.

Panchami did not swim in the water like the ducks which looked ugly in comparison. She merely drifted along the current, floating gleefully. Mithun watched her childlike enjoyment of the water for some time before he pulled on the string to draw her out. But Panchami protested loudly refusing to return to her cage till it was almost dark.

**The Battle**

It was a month since Mithun had caught Panchami. She had grown quieter and more sociable ever since he had allowed her to swim about in the stream every day. The other birds visited her cage, and Panchami’s shrill calls would mingle with their friendly chatter. Pushy, their cat had realized Panchami was a strong bird with a sharp beak, and he always walked past her cage with a bowed head. Panchami had become friendlier with the birds but she still did not like Mithun picking her up.

It seemed as though Panchami was getting used to her restricted lifestyle, but she often tried to escape.

Then, Mithun could not take her to the stream for a swim for a few days because a storm had been brewing. The skies were overcast, and Mithun and Ruma could hear the raindrops pitter patter on the tin roof and glass panes. Panchami’s cage was suspended from a beam in the verandah. Mithun and Ruma could watch it swinging in the storm, with Panchami screeching to be taken to
the stream. The breeze blew harder and Panchami’s cage swung round and round madly. And then, even as Ruma and Mithun were watching, the cage fell into the courtyard and the door was thrown open. Panchami tried to stand still against the storm. Her plumage ruffled, she stood for a moment bewildered by her freedom. Then with a loud cry, she spread her wings and flew into the sky to battle with the storm. To Mithun and Ruma it seemed an unequal battle. But even as Ruma said “\textit{Dada} she will never come back,” Mithun saw that Panchami had won—she was flying majestically now.

Suddenly Ruma shouted, “\textit{Dada} look.” Mithun turned to look where Ruma was pointing, and saw another bird dotting the sky. ‘Why has that bird left its nest in this storm?’ wondered Mithun to himself. The bird had drawn close to them and Mithun recognised its brown wings and white neck.

“\textit{Garud},” he exclaimed loudly. “That is definitely \textit{Garud}. That Asman Hawk has sent \textit{Garud} to catch our Panchami.”

Panchami, unaware of the approaching danger was flying happily. But Mithun saw \textit{Garud} fly straight as an arrow towards the sea-gull. Panchami sensed her enemy only when he was quite close. Surrendering totally to the storm she was carried away by the wind—out of \textit{Garud}’s reach.

\textit{Garud} cried out in despair—a long drawn out screech. But he flew up again and circled the sea-gull.

“\textit{Panchami} flies better than \textit{Garud},” Mithun noted happily. “Look, how she controls the hostile wind. In fact when she gets to the more violent part of the storm she flies better than \textit{Garud}.”

Panchami was making sure she did not fly off too far away from the house. ‘Too late,’ thought Mithun, ‘she’s realised only now that she belongs here!’ He couldn’t restrain himself—he ran out shouting “Come back Panchami, come back at once…….”

For the first time Panchami seemed to hear and understand her master’s voice. She forgot about her enemy, and the hawk grabbed the chance. Like a great rock falling from a height he swooped down on the gull. The stormy sky was rent by the sea-gull’s cry. Mithun ran frantically on the ground below shouting “fight Panchami, fight, or he’ll kill you.”

\textit{Panchami} fought tooth and nail. \textit{Garud} had never had to deal with such a prey before. The sea-gulls plumage was so thick he had not been able to sink his talons in. The gull was fighting so hard, that soon she was free—but she had no control over her flight now. ‘Oh God,’ wept Mithun, ‘her damaged wing is broken again !’ He was watching helplessly when he saw \textit{Garud} swoop on the injured Panchami again.

“\textit{SHOOOOOOOOO}” shrieked Mithun so loudly that \textit{Garud}, confused by the noise left Panchami alone. Panchami shivering violently fell straight into Mithun’s lap.

\textit{Garud} screeching at a high-pitch flew off into the distance in utter despair.

\textbf{She Was Tamed}

They took her to Roy uncle again. This time he gave his patient some medicines. Mithun and Ruma nursed Panchami day and night like a baby.

Slowly, gradually, Panchami was fit enough to fly again.
Mithun opened the cage door, impatient to see if her wing had healed.

"Don't do that, Dada, she'll fly away again," protested Ruma. Panchami had stood still for a moment, but the next, in one flying leap she had dashed against the window pane, mistaking it for open space. Even now she was pushing against it, trying to get out. Seeing her impatience, Mithun took a snap decision. He opened the door wide and stood aside. Panchami raced out of the door and immediately flew to the stream. Ruma stalked her from behind on tiptoe but Mithun stopped her.

"Don't scare her, let's see what she does."

Panchami spent the whole day by the stream, floating on the water or walking beside it. But she did not go far from the stream. A few hours later she was screeching loudly. "She's hungry," exclaimed Mithun. He brought a handful of soaked gram and paddy and offering it to her from his hands called "Come, Panchami, come." Panchami watched the ducks go eagerly upto Mithun for the grain and made up her mind. She flew over their heads and perched on Mithun's arm. Then she started pecking at the grain.

Mithun almost wept with joy. The wild, untamed sea-gull was eating off his palm, like any hen or duck!

Still a Sea-gull

Mithun stopped caging Panchami. When he whistled or she heard him call she would fly straight to him and perch on his head.

"Don't ever fly off again, okay Panchami? That evil Garud is waiting for you," he would warn her.


"See," Mithun told his father, "not only did I not let her die—but on the contrary I've civilised her."

Their father agreed, but Mithun's mother said, "You are mad. A wild bird can never be tamed."

And she was right, for in some respects Panchami was wilder than ever.

Mithun's mother used to cut and clean fish in the garden. On these occasions Panchami would circle overhead, crying shrilly. She would dare not alight because Pushy would sit close to Mithun's mother, on guard. But when their mother went to the stream to wash the fish, Panchami would swoop down and grab a piece.

If she picked up a fairly large-sized piece, Mother would chase her with a stick—then run to Mithun and scold him.

"Oh Mummy," Mithun would try to explain. "You know Panchami is a sea bird. How can you expect her to forget her natural habits so soon?"

The Incident In The School

One day Panchami picked up a big piece of hilsa fish from his mother's basket. Mithun's mother was so angry, she chased Panchami all morning with a large stick.

Mithun, getting ready for school was worried. 'How could I leave Panchami at home with Mother so angry?' Removing his books from the school bag, he stuffed Panchami inside.

For the children in school it was a memorable day. It was not often that they got to see a bird in a bag. Mithun felt very important. "Don't come near," he ordered.

"She is a bird of the sea—she won't like crowds." The
boys leapt backwards—who knew what such a bird might do.

Panditmasai, their Sanskrit teacher entered the classroom and flourishing his stick ordered. “Repeat, Nara-a, narau-u, naraaa-a.”

“Chian- chaan, chaan,” came the reply loud and clear before the boys could begin.


The more Mithun tried to quieten Panchami by patting her—the noisier she became. Panditmasai soon made out where the sound was coming from. Brandishing his stick, he glared at Mithun, “So it’s you making that sound.”

“Not I, Sir,”

“Then who, Sir?” mocked Panditmasai. “It’s her, Sir,” Mithun picked up his bag and put it on his desk.

Panchami was frightened. She had come to fear people with sticks in their hands. Crying out sharply she flew straight to Panditmasai’s head.

Panditmasai raced all over the classroom, “Oh God, Oh god, this devil is eating me up,” he screamed.

The noise and confusion upset Panchami so much she flew out of the window.

Panditmasai, recovering from the shock shouted, “You bad boy, frightening me like that. I’ll see you and your bird are punished.” He marched to the Headmaster’s room to complain.

The Headmaster came and asked in great anger, “How did you dare to bring a pigeon to school? This is a school not a zoo—or didn’t you know that?”

“It wasn’t a pigeon Sir, it was a sea-gull,” replied Mithun, quite offended.
“Pigeon or sea-gull—the rules are the same,” shouted the Headmaster. “Come on boys—anybody who catches the bird, will get a prize.”

There was an uproar as the boys ran out of the classroom.

Panchami was circling the sky, trying to look for Mithun. After a while she flew down and alighted on a sand heap in one corner of the school. The boys grabbed the chance and tiptoed behind her. But Panchami smelled danger and flew off again. Circling overhead for a few moments, she took off into the distant trees.

The Headmaster looked triumphantly at Mithun. “Serves you right,” he said. “I hope she never comes back.”

School was over. Mithun was returning with a heavy heart. ‘Will Panchami come back?’ What a fool he had been to take her to school.

“Dada,” Ruma came running out, startling Mithun out of his thoughts, “Dada, she’s gone mad,” she said anxiously.

“Who,” asked Mithun absently.

“Panchami.”

“Panchami?” cried Mithun wild with joy. “Where is she?”

“There,” Ruma pointed to the sky. “All day long she’s been circling the skies and crying in despair. Not once did she go near her favourite place by the stream.”

“Pancha-a-mi,” Mithun called out. “Panchami.”

Panchami, flying with her head lowered as though searching for somebody, let out a joyous scream.

The sound vibrated in the still afternoon sky.

A series of “Panchami,” and “chian-chaan-chaan” followed.

The Journey

The faint, sweet fragrance of the lemon flowers blooming began to fill the night air. It was late winter, a year since Mithun had caught Panchami. She was now a member of the family. Mithun’s mother had got used to saving a portion of fish as Panchami’s ration.

One day their father returned from office and asked Mithun and Ruma, “How would you like to go to the sea?”

“The sea?” Mithun danced with joy. “Yes, you know the island of Sagar on the mouth of the Ganga. People come from different parts of the country to take a dip in the holy waters of the confluence. Some people from our village intend going there—I thought we could join them.”

Mithun clapped and shouted with joy. He was to see the sea—at last!

The next day Mithun, Ruma and their father boarded the bus chartered by the pilgrims. Mithun and Ruma sat in the front seat so they would not miss anything. They were absorbed in the colourful scene they could see outside the bus window, of mustard fields, in full bloom. Suddenly Ruma felt something move near her feet. She gasped when she looked down. It was Panchami!

“Dada,” she exclaimed, “You’ve brought her along!”

“Shhhhh,” Mithun warned her. “Don’t say anything.”

Then Panchami alighted on Mithun’s arm. Humbly, softly, and most unlike a sea-gull she made a “tian-tan-taan” sound.

Mithun was amazed. What a way the wild sea-gull with her harsh chian-chaan-chaan, had found of expressing her affection.
Turn round and see who's sitting there.”

“Who?”

“That man!”

Ruma turned and saw to her utter bewilderment a man in violet shirt and violet pants sitting in the last seat. It was the bird-man.

“He's following us,” Ruma whispered in fear.

“Hm. We'll soon know,” replied Mithun. Every time the bus stopped for a rest however, the children would find Asman Hawk totally absorbed in observing the green fields through his binoculars.

The other passengers looked at him curiously—but he ignored them.

The journey to the sea was a long one. Only the next day at noon did they reach Kakdweep. They crossed the river by boat to get to Sagar. From there they took another bus to their destination.

Mithun kept Panchami on his lap, hidden in his clothes so that the bird-man wouldn't see her. But though he was with them throughout the journey, Asman Hawk seemed to be interested only in observing the world through his binoculars.

At the confluence, their father like the other pilgrims went to the temple of Kapila to take a dip and to offer holy water. But Mithun was not interested in bathing. He walked away looking for a lonely spot.

“Don't go too far away Mithun,” warned his father. “You'll get lost.”

“No, I won't, Papa,” Mithun replied as he ran on, with Ruma following closely. They stopped in a cool deserted place in a grove of casuarina trees. Sand dunes covered with a green creeper growing all over, made the place attractive.

But where was the sea? Mithun and Ruma climbed a sand-dune to try and look for it.

Mithun stared at a grey mass of cloud that seemed to be frozen at one end. He looked again and realized it was not a mass of grey cloud but an expanse of grey water.

“It's the sea, it's the sea,” he shouted at the top of his voice.

“Yes, it's the sea,” said a deep voice from behind. It's beautiful isn't it?"

'So he was really following us,' thought Mithun. He turned quickly so that Asman Hawk would not see Panchami. But Asman Hawk was not looking at them. He was looking at the sea. "So you have come to see the sea? Good, very good.”

"Why have you come here?” asked Mithun sternly. He was angry. "Wasn't this the man who had set his hawk on Panchami?"

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed Asman Hawk. "You children want to know everything. I've come to see the birds. There are large varieties which feed on fish... Like herons, snipes, sand-pipers and many kinds of kingfishers that you would not otherwise see." He looked round keenly and then dropping his voice to a mere whisper, he said "Look, look there, under that bush."

Mithun turned to where he was pointing and laughed to see such a curious sight. Four small birds, dark brown in colour, were resting on their backs, their feet pointing upwards Asman Hawk began clapping and immediately the birds, rolled themselves on the ground like rubber balls and then took off into the sky calling “hatti-ti, hatti-ti.”

Mithun and Ruma burst out laughing at the comical performance by the four birds. But Asman Hawk was serious. "Hatti-ti, hatti-ti," he muttered to himself. "I had been looking for this bird for so long and now I've found
“Strange bird, and stranger man.” Mithun commented. Now that Asman Hawk had disappeared, there was nothing to be afraid of... He took Panchami out of his coat.

**She Vanished Into The Blue**

Crossing another sand dune, they saw one more fascinating aspect of the sea side. In the distance there were boats sailing in the creek. On the sand, fishermen were drying fish. Nearby were men repairing nets, packing ice on wooden boxes, weighing fish and marking boxes.

Mithun saw a flock of white birds circling the boats and the dried fish. Like paper boats some of them floated on the water. Mithun went to take a closer look at them. He was not at all surprised to discover that they all had white wings with dark bands, greyish bodies and black spots near their eyes. ‘So, they are all seagulls, close relatives of Panchami! But so many of them?’ wondered Mithun.

He asked an old man repairing his nets, “Where do all these birds come from, Baba?”

“Nobody knows,” replied the old man. “But far away from here there is a big sandy island named Haribanga Char. Fishermen say the birds come from there and when winter is over, they go back to it. This is probably the last flock to fly off.”

“Then, it’s not true that they come from Ladakh?”

“Ladakh?” the man looked blank. “Is it a new island in the sea?”

Mithun was amazed at his ignorance. “No, Ladakh is up there, in the high mountains,” he pointed to the north.
A loud cry from the birds startled them and Mithun looked up to see a bird flying with a fish in its beak. Mithun, absorbed in the scene, had not noticed Panchami stirring restlessly in his arms, till she cried out sharply.

The old man gasped in surprise. “You’ve caught that bird? Let it go—It’s not good to catch this bird.”

“Why?” asked Mithun.

“They are friends of fishermen. They show lost fishermen the way to the coast. You’d better free it.”

“No, I won’t,” replied Mithun stubbornly. “I have tamed her.”

“Tamed a sea-gull?” the man exploded.

“Yes, of course!” See, I’ll set her free and you see how she comes back to me when I call her.”

Panchami had grown so restless that, when Mithun released her, she took off with a joyful shriek and mingled with the flock. Mithun could not tell her apart from the other birds. The entire flock flew round, circling, gliding, crying out and quarrelling or floating on water. Mithun gazed at the sight completely lost in thought.

“Dada, Dada,” Ruma shook him. “It’s getting dark. Papa will be looking for us.”

It really was getting dark. The fishing boats were coming in from the sea.

Mithun called out loudly, “Panchami! Come back Panchami—Panchami—Panchami!”

One of the birds flew away from the flock, circled overhead a few times and went back to join the others. Was it Panchami? Mithun could not make out. He called again.

“Panchami! Panchami!”

“Panchami!” Mithun shouted again and again fran-
tically. Before the sound of his voice died away, there was a loud flapping of wings. With one accord the birds floating on the water rose into the sky forming a beautiful garland. "Panchami! Panchami! Don't go, Panchami!" Mithun cried in despair.

Once again a bird left the flock and circled overhead. It was Panchami!

"Come down, Panchami! Come down," Mithun pleaded.

Panchami flew overhead uncertainly, as though she could not make up her mind. Just then, the other birds in the distance called out once again. As the sound faded it was answered by a single loud shriek. It was Panchami. She had made up her mind.

"Come my boy—that's the last batch to fly to Ladakh, almost fifteen hundred kilometres from the Bay of Bengal. You knew, didn't you, my boy, that you can't tame a migratory bird like the sea-gull?" said Asman Hawk, and, walking away fast, vanished into the forest from where he had come.

"What's the matter? What are you doing here?" asked their father when he saw them. He had been looking for them.

"Papa, Panchami has left us. She'll never come back."

Their father was silent for a moment.

"You knew it would happen, didn't you Mithun and Ruma? It's the law of nature. She's gone back to where she belongs. You might feel sorry now, but I'm sure you'll be happy, Mithun, to know that Panchami has joined her own kind at last. You've lost her, but you've learned much from her. Come now, the bus is waiting...."

"Yes," whispered Mithun, "Panchami has given me so much. Let's go home, Papa."