

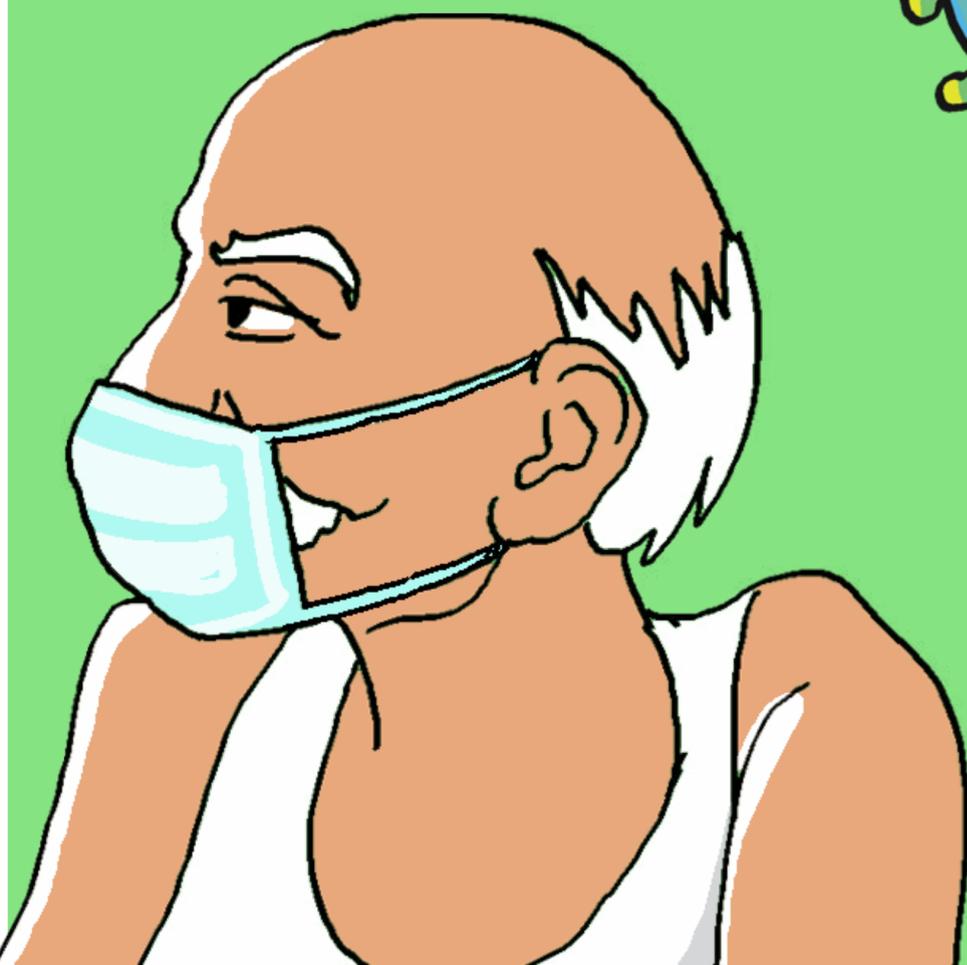
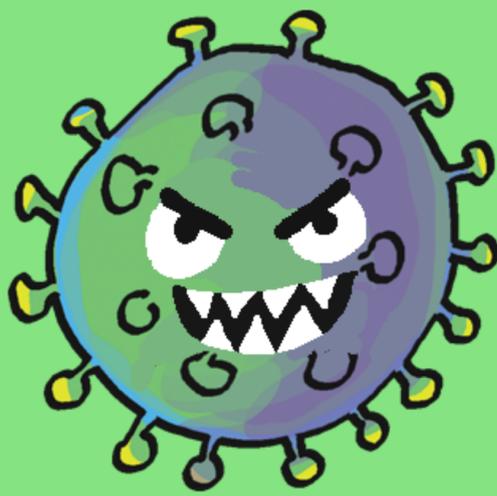
Selvi the Caregiver

   IndiSciCovid

by Indian Scientists Response to Covid

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Illustrations by: Reshma Barve



Indian
Scientists'
Response to
COVID-19

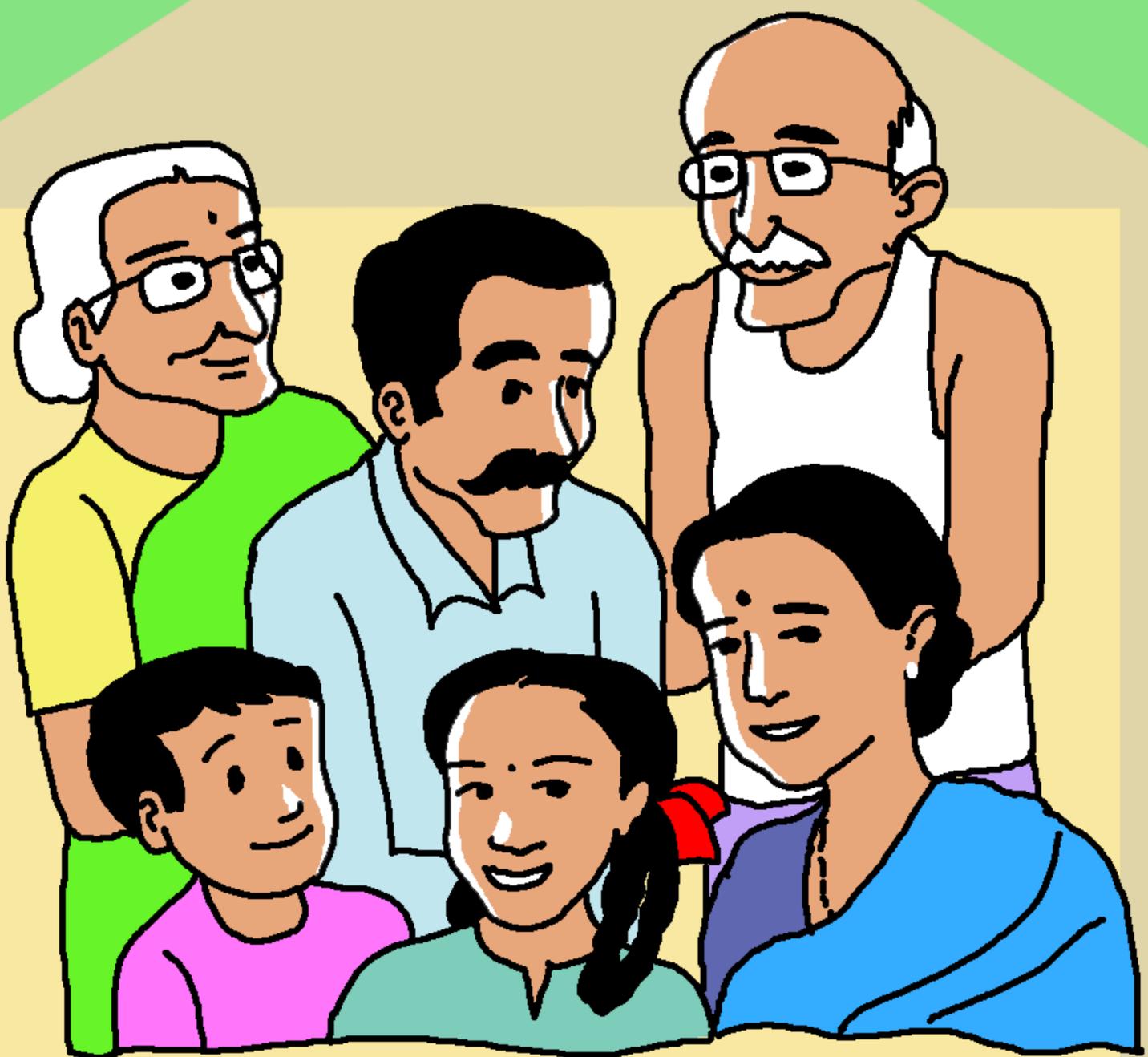
Selvi is worried about her father-in-law. He has been running high temperature and coughing hard enough for everyone in the family to feel his pain.

Her daughter Sumathi has been taking the temperature regularly using the clinical thermometer they bought recently. Manickam had not been keen on buying such fancy things unnecessarily, putting one's hand on the forehead and feeling the person's pulse are good enough techniques, he had said. Sumathi had insisted: "In these troubled times, a thermometer is good expenditure, to know not just whether we have fever, but also the exact temperature we are running. When we talk to the doctor we should be able to say in how many hours, how much the temperature increased". Her younger brother Ganesh had teased Sumathi about how she was talking to doctors all the time, such a big shot as she was. Selvi had been proud of her daughter, all of 16 years old, and acting so responsibly.



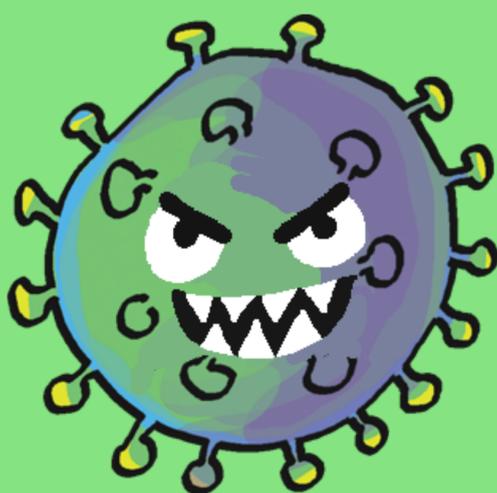
Selvi has heard enough from everywhere to know that the old man is probably infected by “that corona” which has brought their lives to such a standstill. Selvi works as a domestic servant, Manickam as a tailor in a clothes shop. They have been barely able to support themselves, their children and Manickam’s elderly parents, all six huddled in that little house with one single large room, a small room in front overlooking the street, a kitchen behind, bathing and washing area and a single toilet farther, all arranged in a narrow rectangle from street to lavatory, behind which lies the Buckingham Canal. One cannot say it flows, it is mostly stagnant and breeds mosquitoes. But Selvi is thankful, they have their own toilet; her brother’s family shares a toilet with three other families.

Now their earnings are on hold, their bare minimum savings evaporating quickly, and there are six mouths to feed. The old man is sick and who knows how much medicines for corona will cost. What if he needs to be hospitalised? The Government hospital charges no fees but only those who keep going there know what all other expenses keep coming up.



How will they even go to the hospital? They say the ambulance will come and take you, but will ambulances come for poor folks like us, she worries. One of the families she works for (worked for?) has an old lady about whom that family is worried; surely the ambulance would come for her. Even if the old man gets taken in an ambulance, how will Selvi take food so many times a day to him, when there are no buses? Can she trust the Government to give him food regularly? What she has seen of the hospital does not inspire confidence in her. Thankfully it is not her mother-in-law who is sick, she is fussy and would never touch the kind of food she'd get from that hospital canteen.

Selvi shakes off these thoughts. The old man may have corona, but right now he seems ok, fever and cough are ailments they all have many times a year. The fever is just above 100. She has carefully kept that nice Dr Sundari's phone number, whom she calls now. Dr Sundari listens patiently and says that her father-in-law should be tested for Covid (same as corona!)



But hospitals are extremely rushed for tests, there is no need to rush to hospital right now, she can wait a day and check. Dr Sundari says that two things are urgent, find out who he

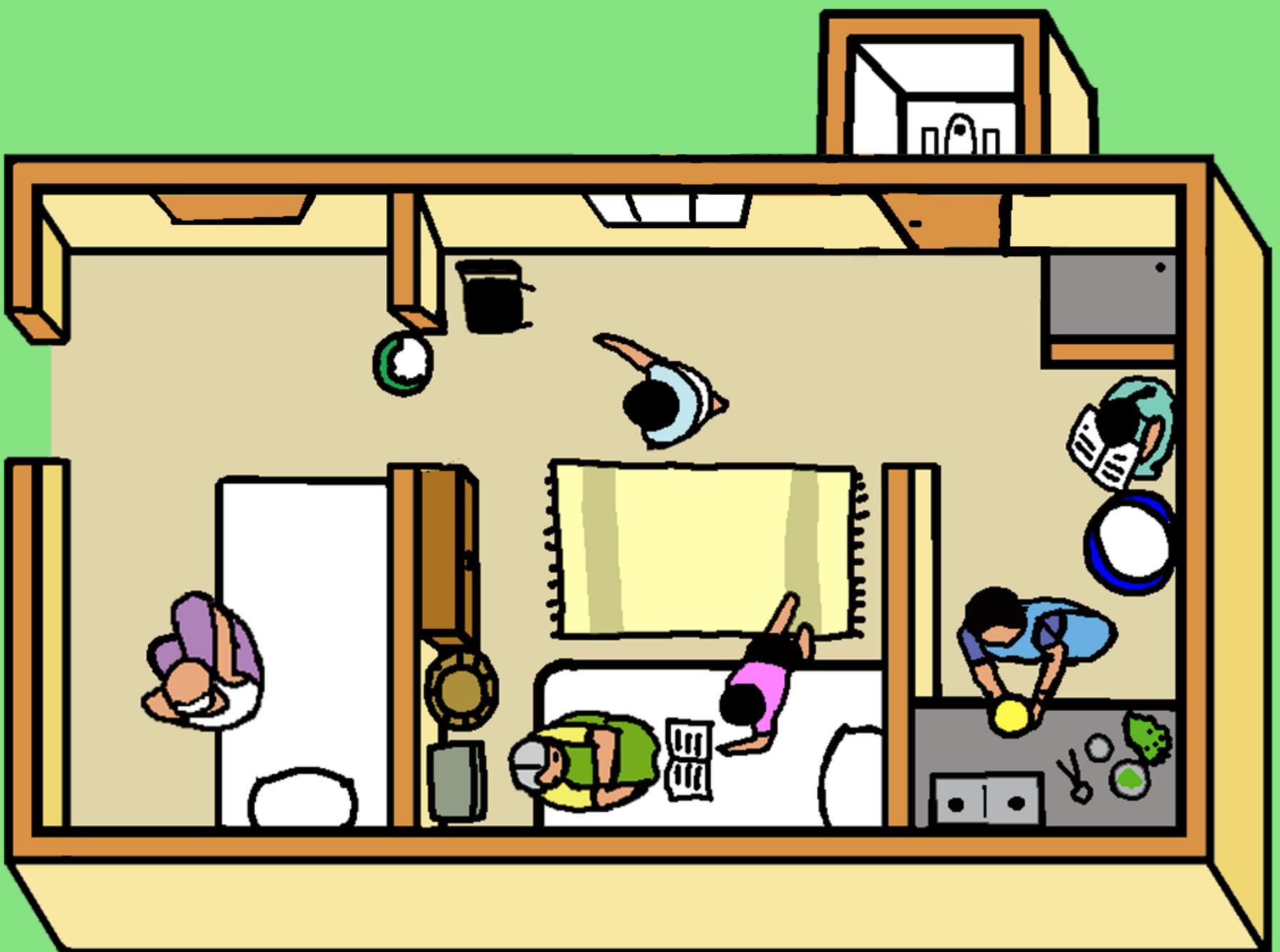
might have got the disease from and tell me, and father-in-law must be put into HOME ISOLATION.

It takes some time for Selvi to understand what isolation means but now she is clear, and talks to Sumathi about it, who prepares clear instructions on a sheet. Selvi enlists the support of her mother-in-law in implementing these instructions. It is not clear how much she understands them, but the old lady has strong memories of smallpox from her youth and what an afflicted household did to prevent contagion, and appreciates what is going on.



Manickam is charged with being the single contact person for his father. Only one person is to get close to Grandfather. Selvi is in contact with too many people in the household from oiling and combing Sumathi's hair to giving Grandmother her medicines to cooking for everyone in the house. She can't take on the job of being the caregiver! Anyway, Manickam might as well help out, it's his father after all! Selvi, with Sumathi's help, gets down to it and however much Manickam and the old man grumble, the little house is transformed.

1. Grandfather is moved into the front little room. This was Manickam and Ganesh's domain, they have no choice. A pot with soap and water and wet cloth in it has been kept in the small room for wiping surfaces. This is in Manickam's charge. The old man has been instructed to use only elbows in opening doors and windows. Every place he touches is also wiped with soap and water afterwards by Manickam.



2. Grandfather remains in the isolation room, only coming out to go to the toilet. Manikam takes over Sumathis job of taking Grandfathers temperature regularly. When he does that everyone else keeps a safe distance from him. Ganesh has drawn chalk lines on the floor for Grandfather's passage and circles for who should be where. Selvi knows they will last only till tomorrow when they mop the floor next but it is still worth the effort, they will have all of today to get used to it.

3. Manickam has had a detailed and very embarrassing discussion with his father on what all he is likely to touch when he visits the toilet and makes him give those places a clean wipe before he comes out. Manickam then cleans the toilet again and wipes those surfaces.

These are meant to portray typical scenarios and contextualise the information we provide. Necessarily this simplifies the content. Please make sure that you go through the accompanying documents on the website for scientific accuracy.

