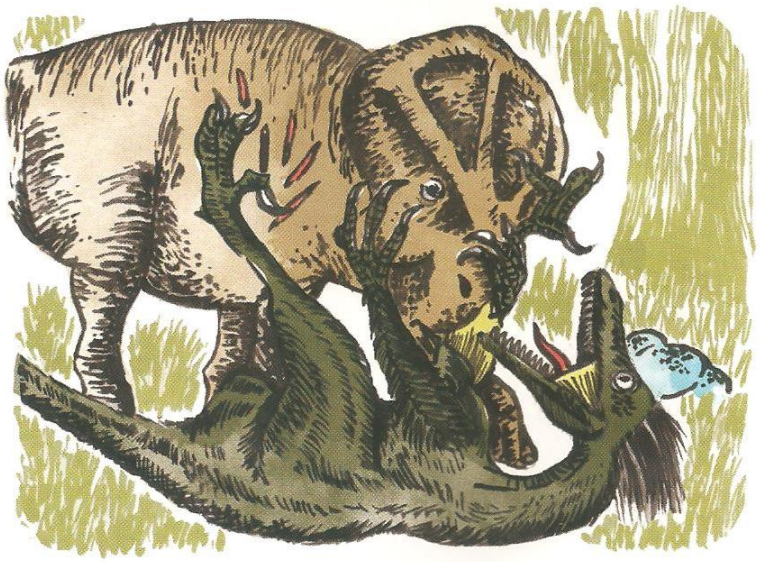
by **Veena Prasad**

# Fly Dino, Fly!

*An epic story of warring dinosaurs, meteor strikes and fossil hunters*



Artwork: Anuranjini Singh

The Velociraptor was well-camouflaged[G] behind the ferns. He was stealthily moving towards his prey, a large unsuspecting Protoceratops. She was guarding her eggs from those sneaky Oviraptors – "egg thieves", she called them. Just turn away for a second and they would dip their ugly snouts into the nest and break open the eggs. She relaxed for a bit. No Oviraptors around today. She wondered what had scared them away.

The answer was now five feet behind her, preparing to aim a powerful kick that would incapacitate her. The Protoceratops turned around just in time. The kick caught her pelvis and the Velociraptor's sharp claw tore through her flesh. Luckily for her, the claws didn't sink in. She charged at her enemy taking him head-on. Just as she made a courageous lunge, the Velociraptor lashed out, digging his deadly claws into her neck. The Protoceratops still had a bit of fight left in her. She twisted painfully and bit the Velociraptor's arm off.

The fighters were bleeding profusely, but neither let go. With a mighty crash they fell, still holding each other in tight grip.

"And that is how the fossils were found – Velociraptor locked with the Protoceratops – 80 million years after this epic battle took place," explained Ravi to his audience comprising a stuffed monkey and assorted cars.

Ravi was travelling to a place called Rahioli, where scientists had found the fossilised remains of a

dinosaur that they called *Rajasaurus narmadensis*. Ravi was excited. He had been dreaming of becoming the youngest discoverer of a new species of dinosaur.

At the site, Ravi and his parents joined Professor Dharam, a palaeontologist. The professor was passing sand through a sieve. Ravi watched as all the sand passed through, and nothing of interest remained. The professor put more sand on the sieve. Still nothing. Ravi watched him do this five times before he got bored. He walked over to another scientist who was dusting off an interesting looking object. "Oh! He's found a fossil," thought Ravi excitedly. After ten minutes of delicate dusting, the scientist ruefully looked at Ravi and said, "Just a stone, I'm afraid. No fossil." He shrugged and started digging again with a small pickaxe.

Prof. Dharam smiled. "Finding dinosaurs needs a lot of hard work and patience. Rajasaurus took twenty years to piece together!" he remarked.

Ravi learnt that just two years ago, palaeontologists had discovered a new species of dinosaur at this site, called Rahiolisaurus. "Oh! Someone beat me to it," he grumbled. "Don't lose heart, there's still a lot of discovering to do," said Prof. Dharam cheerfully. "*If* you have the patience to keep looking!"

"Why aren't there any dinosaurs roaming around today?" asked Ravi.

"Scientists believe that a giant meteor[6] hit the Earth 65 million years ago, causing an enormous explosion. A huge cloud of dust and ash covered the planet for years, blocking out the Sun completely. The

Earth became a cold and dark place. Most of the plants and animals died. Large animals that needed tons of food everyday simply could not find any, and they died too," the professor explained.

"But mammals and birds and crocodiles survived, right?"

"A few of them, yes. But most of them died along with the dinosaurs. About 70% of all life on Earth was gone! Animals that lived in freshwater, such as crocodiles and turtles, survived. So did the birds. Scientists are still trying to find out how."

"Some say the dinosaurs became birds and flew away," ventured Ravi doubtfully. Prof. Dharam chuckled. "Well, they didn't turn into birds overnight. Small feathered dinosaurs may have evolved into birds over thousands of years. They probably had bigger brains than the other dinosaurs, which helped them find food in clever ways and survive."

Ravi let this sink in. "Could another meteor hit us anytime soon?"

Prof. Dharam shrugged. "No one knows! We can't control whizzing objects in space, and so yes, it's possible. But before that happens, I intend to find out everything I can about what's buried in here!" he declared, pointing to the dig.

Ravi looked into the sand and saw something sharp glint. He bent down for a closer look. Could it really be a dinosaur claw? ■