

The Silver Stream

By *Jamal Ara*

In the heart of the Singhbhum forest rises a stream, which later on becomes a river and finally ends its career in the Koel. The major portion of its life is spent in these well-wooded valleys, where through gorges and flats, rocks and sandbanks, it courses merrily all the year round. Proceeding along the forest road, it reveals itself as a silver white ribbon through a green archway of trees, first meandering lazily along, then tumbling in a rapid over a rock fall. It is always cool here, even in the middle of May, with the coolness of dense sal foliage, the coolness of clear ever-flowing water, the coolness of complete calm and peace.

How long will it be cool? How long will it be pretty? How long will it be there to give solace to tortured city eyes, half blinded with the dust of urban areas? How long?

A short fifty years later, my spirit wandered along that self-same road. It had fallen

was hollow—cheeked, large-bellied, a living picture of malnutrition and disease. Where rich soil formerly existed, bare rocks only showed, the landscape cut up with ravines and gullies. In one word it was a badland now. The stream? Alas! a dried Water—Course marked its site, with a few pools of dirty stagnant water scattered here and there. The sand and rock reflected the burning rays of the sun with a fierceness not to be imagined, almost impossible to look on. A perennial supply of clear, cool water was now just a few miserable dirt holes. Owing to constant silting up the railway bridge was in danger, and the engineers were even now busy strengthening it. Ruin, destruction, poverty all round.

As I contemplated it, the spirit of a Forest Officer, who had first brought me here, came and stood by my side. With tears in his eyes he said, "The handi-work of nature perfected over centuries

into disuse and had been abandoned. The stately sal forests had dis-appeared, sacrificed to political expediency and the money-grabbing instinct of pettifogging hucksters. Bareness was the sole legacy all round—a May sun shone with pitiless intensity, every passing gust of wind stirred up the dust. The picturesque villages with their isolated houses and green fields had gone too; the sheltering forests provided by mother nature had in their dis-appearance wiped out those villages. Where hundreds of cattle had grazed, and a large community had a peaceful, comfortable existence, a few goats tried to eke out a bare existence on the few remaining thorny shrubs, the goatherd with them

of ceaseless craftsmanship has become a victim to man's greed. Does man in his insensate blindness ever realise that the mills of nature grind slow but grind exceedingly small? A destructive waste of nature's bounty recoils eventually on his own head, but unfortunately the destroyer himself is never there to feel the full weight. It is posterity that suffers for the misdeeds committed by us. If today those men who first legislated for the destruction of these reserves could come and see the result of their handiwork, such follies would never be committed again. Today the nation is faced with a bill of literally crores to reclaim this area—to grow forests again where they existed plentifully before, but were destroyed. The process will take a long time—very much longer than the time it took to destroy; and yet for immediate, temporary financial gain we create this burden for posterity. If man could realise this simple truth that the tree he cuts down in half an hour took nature 120 years to grow, he would pause and think twice before cutting one down uselessly."

Does the picture appear too fanciful? Dear reader, take a trip first to the Singhbhum forests and then to the Pabbi Hills in the Punjab. You will then agree that it errs rather on the side of understatement.