



"Ishar Kaur" in her modest home in the Andamans.

SHE COULD ONLY BE A PUNJABI

BY MANOHAR SINGH GILL

SHE stood there alone like "Ruth amid the alien corn." Behind her was the vastness of a tropical forest, with trees more than a 150 feet high, enmeshed with myriads of creepers that kept out the sunlight and gave the forest a dark and forbidding look. Around her was a small patch of land, still half-reclaimed. Stumps of trees, of a girth that I had never seen before, stuck out from the bits of green that passed for paddy fields.

Her home was a simple hut of corrugated iron sheets. A modest verandah had been added with palm thatch. Under its shade stood a simple string charpai. Nearby a "thaal" held some chillies that had been set out to dry.

There was no other soul in sight. The lady stood outside her hut, an empty "kauli" in her hand watching our procession of jeeps go by. I stopped and walked over to her. "Bibi, Sat Sri Akal", I said.

"Aao Bhaji, baitho, kujh chah paani peeo," she replied.

I could see that she had little to offer in the way of hospitality. But her response was natural and instantaneous. I had visited other groups of settlers from every part of India in the same area and had heard a volley of complaints about their hunger and hardships. A couple of years back 200 ex-servicemen's families had been settled on Great Nicobar Island — the last in the Andamans chains. Their battle with the tropical forest had left them dejected and defeated. They complained bitterly about their suffering.

As it happened, the cribbers had all been non-Punjabis. The lady was the first Punjabi settler that I met, and I stopped to find out how she felt.

Typical of the Punjabi, she offered a smile and hospitality. I politely declined the offer of tea and explained that I only wanted to know how they were getting on, so far away from home.

"Tuhada jee lag gia ke nahin?" I queried.

"Bhaji, je aae han taan iee laana hi payega, wapis thora jaana hai," she answered with the never-say-die spirit of Punjab.

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I could see the hardships they faced. It was almost impossible to clear the tropical forest. Even if one did, the forest came back as quickly. The buffaloes died of mysterious diseases, and the paddy crop of unknown pests. Nevertheless, the Punjabi settlers were cheerful and optimistic. In the true spirit of

frontier men they were willing to face the elements and all odds in order to make a home for themselves. The question of retreat to Punjab did not cross their minds at all. If there was any help wanted, it was for a tractor or new seeds or fertilisers.

I marvelled at the spirit of these men and women, a few hundreds of whom had chosen to settle on this island, barely 90 miles from Indonesia. Punjab, with all its warmth of age-old relationships and friendships, was far away. In their economic conditions they could never hope to visit it for a long time to come. But these people preferred to look forward with hope rather than back in despair.

The lady represented perhaps the best of the pioneering

spirit of Punjab. She had the handsome good looks and fine physique of a Michelangelo beauty. She had the courage and fortitude of a true pioneer. I do not know her name. I never asked her. But I guess it must be Ishar Kaur — the Lioness of God.

It is two years since I met her on that lonely forest road, on an island far away from Punjab, but the face and the memory haunt me still. Even now, when I think of that episode I am suffused with a glow of pride in the people that this land has produced. These pioneers represent the true spirit and enterprise of Punjab, rather than those who have got rich too soon and perhaps too easily, all around us here.

Ishar Kaur wherever you are, may God be with you, and may success attend the endeavours of your husband, to grow two grains where none grew before Ishar Kaur. I salute you, for you represent the best that there is in Punjab.