

Deepa Agarwal's After the Storm:

What do you do, when you feel very troubled about situations around you? Here is what one group of children did.

The storm raged all night. Lightning crackled and the wind howled like a demon. Saruli cowered under the covers and clung to her mother when she heard the thunder. A peculiar crack-crack-SNAP, followed by a tremendous crash, as though a giant had fallen to the ground.

"What is that?" she asked her mother.

"The trees," her mother replied. "The wind is blowing them down."

"The trees!" Saruli was shocked. The wind was strong, very strong. But was it powerful enough to knock down those enormous pines — so straight and tall?

The next morning she saw it for herself. Row upon row of the lofty pines lay stretched helplessly on the ground. Saruli was stunned. Half the jungle seemed bare. Most of the people from the small hill village were there, foraging for branches and dragging them away. But Saruli, a wiry girl of thirteen, stood there stunned.

Gripped with fear Saruli was thinking of the barren hillside across the valley. How desolate it looked! A real contrast to the forest near their village, which was full of fresh grass and shrubs. Suppose... suppose all the trees fell down ... wouldn't the forest disappear? With an effort she dismissed these thoughts and began to collect wood. Fuel was always an important need. Saruli gathered a large bundle. On her way back, she passed Diwan Singh's house. The old man was seated outside. "You want some wood, uncle?" she asked. Without waiting for an answer she dropped part of her bundle in one corner of the paved courtyard.

"So you have been to the forest, girl?" "Yes, uncle, lots of trees fell down last night.

Old Diwan Singh was the headman of her village. "It was to be expected," he said slowly. The trees have been totally hollowed by the resin-tappers." Saruli's brown eyes opened wide. "I wondered how so many trees had fallen down". Diwan Singh said, "First they only made one cut on the trees to tap resin. Now they keep on making gashes till the trees are utterly drained. Even a moderately strong wind can blow them over, they are so dry." "Can't... can't someone stop them?" Saruli asked, horrified. Diwan sighed. "No one can stop them, girl? The contractors are rich, influential people. They pay a lot of money to tap the trees."

Saruli got up go home. As she stood up, she glanced at Diwan Singh's strange nursery. He was growing saplings. Not the baby pines which sprang up themselves in the rains, but shoots of oak and deodar- the native trees of the hills. Diwan Singh told Saruli, "When I was a boy this was a forest of oak and deodar. The British Government cut them down and planted pines."

But, Why?" Saruli had asked.

"Because pine trees can be tapped for resin and resin has many uses. But they forgot that oaks bring rain and trap the water. Pines dry out the land."

It was a holiday for school. Saruli took her cow to graze in the forest. The sight of the fallen trees-trunks was depressing. Many of the other village children were there too, with their goats and cows. "Come and play hide and seek" Jaman called.

But Saruli shook her head. She sat on a rock, thinking and thinking. How could they save their forest?

"What is the matter?" Jaman asked after a while.

"I am scared," she replied, after a short pause. "Suppose another storm comes along and all the trees are blown down. What will we do then?"

"The contractors pay money to the Forest Department to tap the trees. They are allowed to do it," said Jaman in a low voice.

But Saruli was rushing to the nearest pine tree. There she found several gashes which had gone dry. At the end of one, there was a conical tin cup, into which the sticky resin fell, drop by drop. She wrenched off the tin cup and threw it away. "That is what we can do!" She cried triumphantly. Jaman put some clay to seal the gashes.

The other children gathered around curiously. Saruli cried excitedly. "Come on, help to save our forest!"

She raced around pulling the tin cups off the trees. And Jaman followed with the clay. The others joined in enthusiastically.

A week passed. The little group managed to remove the tin containers from a large portion of the jungle. Then, one morning, four men entered the forest to collect resin. Saruli's heart thudded suddenly. The showdown had come. But she had to stay calm. She could hear their muttered exclamations of surprise which turned into anger to find the trees devoid of the resin containers. Finally, they came up to the children who were swarming up around a tree. "Do you know who has done this?" one of the men demanded. Saruli had seen him around. He was called Lai Singh.

The children looked at each other, not knowing what to say. Then Saruli jumped down from the /cafe/ tree. "We did it," she said.

"Wha-at?" the man seemed unable to understand.

"Yes," Saruli said quietly. "We threw away the containers".

"You brats! How dare you!" Lai Singh exploded. His companions swore and muttered angrily. "Now we will have to put them again," Lai Singh continued. "Don't you dare touch the trees now?" exploded: words came out in a loud burst.

He produced a chisel-like tool and began to scrape off the mud plaster the children had applied. "Stop!" Saruli cried, hurling herself at him. He pushed her aside roughly but Jaman and the others joined in too.

"Run, Radha!" Saruli cried. "Get help from the village. We have got to save the forest!"

Radha ran fast. But the taller man caught up quickly. He was about to grab her. Suddenly, a jeep jerked to an abrupt halt. "What is going on?" a voice spoke from inside.

Lai Singh sprang forward eagerly. Jaman followed. Then his eye fell on what was written on the number plate. The D.F.O. Sir" he muttered nervously.

The District Forest Officer jumped out of the jeep. One of the men had Radha by the arm was gesticulating and pointing to the trees. Radha looked terrified!

"What is the meaning of all this?" the D.F.O. asked.

"She is the ring leader," Lai Singh said accusingly.

"Sir we are only trying to save our forest!" Saruli said vehemently.

Taken aback by Saruli's impassioned outburst, the D.F.O. followed her to the edge of the forest. He stared at the fallen tree-trunks and frowned.

we do?

"It is the resin-tapping. Sir," Saruli repeated. "If all the trees fall down, what will happen?"

But the D.F.O. was lost in thought "I shall have to think about it," he said finally. "Our job is to prevent the forests. Tell your contractor to talk to me."

Lai Singh's eyes almost fell out with shock, but the children clapped gleefully. The D.F.O. got into his jeep and drove away.

A month went by. The resin-tappers did not come again and the children continued to remove the containers. They had almost finished when the first monsoon showers came down. That evening when Saruli went home, Diwan Singh called out to her, "Girl, the rains have come. "Let's plant the deodhars."

She smiled happily up at him. Just then, they saw the familiar jeep. "D.F.O. Sir!" said Diwan Singh.

The D.F.O. got off the jeep and smiled at Saruli. "Keep it up/ he patted her back. The resin tappers will not trouble you again."

Thank you, Sir, thank you!" chanted a chorus of voices. The jeep sped down the road. A breeze rustled through the trees making them sound like a distant waterfall. Saruli sighed happily. They would continue to hear that sound. They had achieved their goal. They had saved the forest. Nothing would destroy their forest now.

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