4

Silencing the Whispers: Birubala Rabha

Darkness had long fallen over the hills, forests, and fields surrounding the village of Thakurvila in Goalpara, on the Assam–Meghalaya border. The cattle had been led to their sheds, and the women had cooked supper over smoky wood fires. The men had sat in their courtyards, wrapped in coarse shawls, smoking *bidi*s (Indian cigarette), and talking about the harvest to come. Then, one by one, the huts fell dark as families retired for the night. Only one woman was awake. And as the curs howled at the sickle moon that hung from a starry sky, Birubala Rabha quietly slipped out of her house, a silent shadow. She walked swiftly, almost running, lifting her *dokhona* (Bodo female attire) up to her ankles, her brow furrowed. The bamboo copse creaked and shivered as she crossed it, and an owl hooted from its depths. She moved past fields, climbing hillocks, wading across shallow streams, panting with exertion, knowing how each moment counted and how on her depended the life of another.

She had known Sunila Rabha for five years. Sunila had come as a bride to the next village, setting up home with Bireswar, a poor wage-earner. Something about Sunila's shy, trusting nature and easy smile had endeared her to Birubala. They often met in the weekly market, where Sunila sat behind neat heaps of fresh

carrots, tomatoes, and greens grown on her tiny plot of land. Her three-year-old Sumbi played by her side. The two women talked of flower designs that they were planning to weave, the difficulty in getting kerosene from the fair price shop, and the fishing festival they would all take part in, wading into the river, tossing the nets, pulling in the catch.

Then, unknown to them, a dark cloud hovered over young Sunila. There were whispers about her in the village. Men and women stood talking in low, urgent voices, throwing malevolent glances in her direction. They stopped talking to her or buying her greens. Sunila was puzzled, hurt, and then alarmed. What had she done? What were they saying about her? Then, on his way home from work, Bireswar was stopped by a village elder.

"Son, we have nothing against you. But this cannot go on. Every man, women, and child is in danger. Your neighbor Sonaram's girl is dying. The *ojha* cannot cure her fever. It is unlike any illness we have seen around here. Your woman is the evil one, the *daini* (witch). She has cast a spell on the poor girl. Tomorrow we will meet at the *Gaonbura*'s house. Bring your woman there; the villagers will decide what is to be done."

Without losing a moment Bireswar cycled to Thakurvila, his mouth dry and heart racing. He had to save the life of his gentle, sweet-natured Sunila. What madness had gripped his people to suspect her as a witch . . . Sunila, who would never utter a harsh word to anyone?

Two hours later, he was at Birubala Rabha's house. "Help us, sister," he pleaded. "Only you can save her. They are meeting tonight and have asked me to take her there."

He covered his face with his hands, weeping, kneeling down in front of Birubala. She passed her hand gently over his head and made her promise. "Your wife is a good woman. Go home, Bireswar. I will do what I have to."

By now Birubala had been walking for two hours. Beads of sweat stood on her brow. On a nearby hill side, foxes had started their

eerie howling. Far across the paddy field, she saw a bright orange glow, rising above the tops of betel-nut trees. Birubala stared at it for a moment and felt her heart grow heavy with sorrow. It was her worst fear to come true. She could not keep her promise to Bireswar. That was his house that the villagers had set fire. By now she was running across the field, stumbling, falling, picking herself up. Then she was in the midst of a restless crowd gathered around Sunila. The young woman lay sprawled on the ground, her clothes torn away from her, her arms crossing her bare breasts. She was keening like a wild bird caught in a trap. The people took turns to pull her long hair, kick and pummel her soft body, spit on her. Thirty feet away, the ramshackle hut that had been the couple's home was up in flames. Birubala took in the scene and a while hot rage coursed through her. She had seen this macabre drama played out in village after village, all through her life. It was bad enough that they were poor and unlettered and helpless in the face of disease and starvation. It was bad enough that the marvels of modern life were denied to them. But what were these beliefs that brought out the devil in them, which made them prey on their neighbor with such hatred and cruelty?

Birubala pushed through the crowd to where Sunila lay on the ground. She took off her worn shawl and covered the almost unconscious woman, cradling her in her arms, murmuring words of consolation.

"What are you doing, woman?" demanded a village elder. "She must die. We have found out she is a *daini*."

"Enough!" Birubala's voice cracked like a whip. Then she began to speak.

***

The history of witch-hunting goes back far into time and is as old as the hills. In Europe, thousands of innocent men, women, and children were burnt at the stake by the public in the Middle Ages, suspecting them of casting evil spells.

In India, countless instances of witch-hunting have been reported from Rajasthan, Gujarat, West Bengal, Bihar, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Orissa. A report says 2,556 women were killed across the country between 1987 and 2003. Bihar alone registered 522 cases of witch-hunt between 1991 and 2000.

In Assam and the Northeast, such beliefs continue to prevail in this 21st century, and gory murders of hapless women often take up newspaper space. Mayong in Morigaon district was once known as the citadel of black magic in Assam and people came from faraway places to master the dark arts. Assamese folk tales are replete with stories of grisly human sacrifices and macabre practices. Even today belief in witchcraft is widespread among many communities and tribes all across the Brahmaputra valley. *Oja*s (a traditional medicine man) or *bez* (exorcist) are those who master the black arts and are treated with awe and fear. Interestingly, such *oja*s are supposed to have ghost servants called *beera* (poltergeist) who do all their mischief for them. There has been a disturbing upward trend in witch-hunting in Assam over the years. A staggering number of 500 lives have been lost and 116 official cases of witch-hunting have been registered in the past five years. But few cases are resolved, mainly due to the lack of witnesses.

In this day and age of revolutionary technological progress, spread of education, dissemination of information, it seems incredible that people could still hold on to such superstitions. But in a region torn apart by insurgency and besieged by floods, backwardness, poverty, and disease, the blessings of modernity have passed people by. This very vulnerability is taken advantage of by quacks and, even more dangerously, by people who have an axe to grind. Lack of access to modern health care means that people try to treat cholera, malaria and so on through medicines prepared by *oja*s, who all too often are quacks. When the patient is unable to recover, these medicine-men are at risk of being beaten up and even killed. So they are quick to lay the blame at somebody's door. A new trend of using witch-hunting as a means of grabbing land

belonging to the victim has also been noticed. Rampant alcoholism among the rural populace also triggers irrational and irresponsible behavior.

Witch-hunt cases were reported in recent years from Kokrajhar, Udalguri, and Sonitpur districts. It is also widespread in Kamrup (rural), Goalpara, Chirang, Baksa, Lakhimpur, and Karbi Anglong districts. It is practiced by Bodos, Rabhas, Mishings, and the tea tribe community. Illiteracy is rampant, and lack of roads and bridges makes these places inaccessible. There is no health care, schools, sanitation, or potable water. Entire families have been chased from their homes, stoned to death, chopped into pieces, and even buried alive. Groups of people, often entire villages, act in unison, thus ensuring that no one reports to the law-enforcing agencies.

***

On that moonlit night, surrounded by a ring of hostile faces, Birubala held Sunila against her breast and began to speak.

"Shame on you!" she cried, pointing a finger. "Can you see her now? If she is a witch, why does she bleed? Why has she lost her senses? You fool, Sunila is one of you. She feels the hunger that you do. She feels the cold, the heat, sadness, and joy. Look at her clothes. Are they not shabby like yours? Look at her house . . . you turned it to ashes. But what was it? A hut of cane and straw, with a mud floor. Why did she not use her power for a better life? Why did she not go to a better place instead of being poor and hungry here? Did the *oja* tell you she is a *daini*? Do you believe everything that he tells you? Then you are no better than sheep. Use your reason."

"Listen to what happened to me. My 15-year-old son Dharmeswar became mad. He kept wandering here and there, acted strangely, even beat me up. I did not know what to do. So I went to the *deodhani* (Deodhani), the medicine man far away, to make my son sane again. Do you know what the *deodhani* said to

me? 'Birubala, there is no hope for your son. He has married a fairy and the fairy is with child. When that child is born, your son will die in three days. There is nothing more to do.'"

She drew a deep breath and continued. "My son did not die. He is alive, in a place far from here. The *deodhani* was wrong. And I lost faith in all the mumbo jumbo. And do you know what the villagers wanted for my poor mad son? Death. They wanted to kill him. I sent him far away and he lives there still."

The crowd melted away. A woman came forward with a rag and a bowl of water to wash Sunila's wounds. Her husband and child came to her, weeping. Birubala gathered her shawl around her and began her long trek to the village.

Hailing from a poor family, wife of a farmer in remote Thakurvila of Goalpara district, bordering Meghalaya, little about Birubala's earlier life explained her emergence as a gutsy crusader well beyond middle age. Orphaned at the age of six years, Birubala tackled domestic chores and homework with her trademark diligence but could study only up to Class V. She, however, more than made up for that with her skills in cooking, embroidery, weaving, poultry rearing, and other useful activities. By the time she was 16, she was setting up her new life with husband Chandreswar Rabha and quickly became the mother of three sons and a daughter—Dharmeswar, the oldest, followed by Bishnu Prabhat, and the youngest son, Doyalu and daughter Kumoli. Life was tough and they had just enough to keep body and soul together. The even tenor of their quiet lives was interrupted when the eldest son, Dharmeswar, then 15 years of age, began to change. He muttered to himself, stayed away from home for days, feared imaginary foes, and even hit his mother. In desperation, his father visited an *oja* for help. The *oja* had an explanation that was stranger than Dharmeswar's ailment. It seems that the boy had married a fairy who was going to be the mother of his child. As soon as the baby was born, the *oja* warned, Dharmeswar's life on earth would end. Dharmeswar would live for just three more days. The little household waited

for death, already grieving for poor Dharmeswar. Days came and went, and the boy remained alive. Birubala's fear turned to relief and then, indignation. How dare the *oja* make such wrong predictions? With her innate sense of justice and fair-play, Birubala realized that other villagers, her community, needed to be taught about the importance of being reasonable, shedding superstitions, and breaking free from the stranglehold of wily medicine-men who preyed on their fears, ignorance, and helplessness.

Inheriting a love for social work from her mother Sagarbala, Birubala formed the Thakurvila Mahila Samiti. It was from this platform that she raised public awareness against witch-hunting and other social ills. Then she became the secretary of the Greater Borjhara Mahila Samiti. In 1999, she became a member of the Assam Mahila Samata Society. Soon, as she spoke passionately in more and more meetings, it became a rousing cry against the darkness of ignorance and shackles of tradition. That was not all. At great personal risk, she saved 35 people, both men and women, from certain death at the hands of hostile villagers who had accused them of causing illness, death, or some misfortune. She sheltered another victim in her own home and narrowly escaped being killed herself. Slowly, over two decades, the story of Birubala and her gutsy crusade began to be reported by the media. She became the talking point among the chattering classes. Feminists were eager to call her one of their own. The simple woman, clad in her hand-woven clothes, looking thin, wiry, and outspoken, became the poster girl of a new campaign for change and modernity. Awards started to pour in. In September 2012, social activists launched Project Birubala, a novel mission to reach out to witch-hunt victims and bring about changes in the outlook of communities cut off from modernity. The mission has been launched in Goalpara and Kamrup at present, but plans are afoot to spread the campaign to other districts. Birubala emphasizes that merely saving victims is not enough and the victims must be repatriated with their families or given shelter and taught a livelihood. Assam Police, through its

innovative Project Prahari, initiated by IPS officer Sri Kula Saikia, has joined hands with the State Women's Commission to activate community policy against witch-hunting. The commission has prepared and submitted to the government a draft law on witch-hunting, so that a strong law can be used against offenders, just as it is being done in Bihar and Jharkhand.

Both Birubala and Assam Mahila Samata Society, an NGO, have been fortunate to work with each other. While the society found in her a tireless crusader with access to the masses in Assam's remote countryside, Birubala felt a sense of belonging in becoming its member, and the organization was able to intervene in many sensitive cases that came to her knowledge.

The Assam State Women's Commission has made certain recommendations. There must be trauma counseling and retreat shelters for victims. Provisions must be made for women's court at *panchayat* (village courts) level or village development council level. There is a pressing need to enact laws to ban witch-hunting. A state policy to root out this social evil must be formulated. Adequate study of customary laws and sensitization on this issue has also been recommended.

What is the tripping point when a simple villager becomes a source of evil, a witch? "Every village has an *oja*, a medicine man and astrologer. He is the one who reads our fortunes," begins Birubala earnestly. "And if he mentions someone as a witch, everybody believes him. There is another way people find out about a witch. If a villager falls ill and no medicine seems to work, he is covered from head to toe with a net. People then prod his body with sharp sticks. He screams and cries in agony, but the villagers want him or her to name the evil one. Very often, just to escape these attacks, the poor person utters someone's name, calling him or her a witch."

"What happens then?" I asked. She explained: "The woman named as a witch will be ordered to appear before the whole village. Her crime is related to her and she is either chased away or

trapped in a net and tortured by prodding with the sharp point of a spear. When such a woman is killed, her body is hacked to pieces and buried in separate places to prevent her rebirth. When such a person is chased away or killed, the land and other assets are seized from them. Family members are often too terror-struck to object, in case they meet with the same fate."

Witch-hunting cannot just be dismissed as a social evil in a backward region. It is a flagrant violation of human rights. According to Mamoni Saikia, District Program Coordinator, Assam Mahila Samata Society, Goalpara, "In Assam several women's groups spearheaded by Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) have now turned their attention to the problem of witch-hunting. We have been pressing for a law or policy to bring an end to this practice. The greatest problem we face when uncovering such instances is the lack of witnesses. Everyone is afraid of antagonizing the majority. And how are we to give protection to witnesses if they come forward?"

In Assam's remote countryside, a region cut off from progress and development, people live in a time warp. Ignorant, unlettered, and poor, they are easy victims of quacks and people who want to settle personal scores. The so-called witches are isolated, displaced, tortured, and robbed of belongings. Social boycott and forced regulation lead to tragic suicides. Married women branded as witches are abandoned by husbands, who marry again. Families break up and mothers are separated from their children. There is loss not only of property but also of livelihood. Children of alleged witches drop out of school. Displaced women and children are at risk of falling into the hands of human traffickers.

Bihar was the first state in India to pass the prevention of Witch (*dayan*) Practices Act of 1999. Jharkhand followed with an Anti Witchcraft Act in 2001 along with the 2005/2006 Chandigarh and Rajasthan laws. Shockingly, there is no such law in Assam. Except for a Project Prahari by Assam Police, there is no legal measure to punish offenders.

Life has come a long way for Birubala. In 2005, the Northeast Network nominated her for the Nobel Peace Prize. That same year, she was felicitated by Reliance Industries Limited in Mumbai under their third edition of Real Heroes—ordinary people, extraordinary service—and she has found mention in Switzerland's 1,000 Women Peace Project, which has honored 1,000 female peace workers from ISO countries around the world.

In 1985, she became the secretary of the Thakurvilla Mahila Samiti, and she moved from village to village in rain or shine, speaking out against these barbarous practices, winning admiration, making enemies, scolding, persuading, inspiring, holding out hope to victims, and arousing fear in the perpetrators. Then she was made the secretary of the greater Borjhara Mahila Samiti in 1991. In 2006, she began her association with the Assam Mahila Samata Society. At this time, she had begun to speak out against rape, kidnappings, and dowry-related cases as well.

In spite of all the honor and adulation heaped on this feisty woman, her life remains simple, even harsh. The day before she came to meet me in Guwahati from her village, she had worked the whole day at a road-repairing site under National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) with her job card. Some city-based organizations invite her to speak or to honor her, and all that is given to her is the bus fare. Birubala, of course, is too proud to open up about her needs, and the stories of her privation remain cloaked in silence. Rather than being disheartened by her poverty, she continues to dream of her pet project, a shelter home for victims of witch-hunts, where doctors would help them cope with trauma of torture, a place where they would be safe, fed, clothed, taught a trade, given the courage to fight back, and reclaim a dignified life.

In 2000 Birubala attended a meeting organized by the AMSS to raise awareness about witch-hunting and its evils. Women from several villages flocked to the gathering, and the society activists began by asking the gathering, "Do you believe in witches?" There

was pin-drop silence. The woman looked at one another. No, they were not going to say something that would get them in trouble with the menfolk later. In fact, hadn't they all had to take permission from their husbands to come here? Then, suddenly, Birubala stood up and spoke out in a clear, loud voice. "I do not believe in witches. There are no witches, only people believe they are so." The women huddled together and refused to echo Birubala. She then spoke about her son and how the *oja*'s prophecy was false. There was an uneasy murmur among the crowd. "The men and women we chase away or kill are our brothers and sisters," she stated. She asked, "Who gives us the right to destroy their lives?" The AMSS at once warmed up to Birubala. Here was a simple village woman with a message that would strike at the very heart of this vexed issue. They saw in her the spark with which to bring about a transformation. But Birubala was to pay dearly for her crusading zeal. Barely three days later, she was summoned to a meeting by the village elders of Thakurvila. She was attacked with a barrage of questions: What had she said at the meeting? Who did she think she was? Why was she trying to be their enemy? Why had she said there are no witches? Who had given her the right to speak on their behalf? Cruel words of abuse were hurled at her. The whole village had turned up, each man and woman ready to thrash her with bamboo poles. She was ordered to sign a piece of paper taking back the words she uttered at the meet. She would not only have to acknowledge the presence of witches in the community but also support the people's decision to root them out. Birubala's mouth hardened into a thin line. She stood there head unbowed, staring straight at the enraged crowd, refusing to take back her words and sign the paper. Then she was removed from the post of secretary of the Thakurvila Village Samiti, the body she had herself created. All the registers and seals were taken away from her. Then the village decided to boycott her for three years. Nobody was to visit her home and fines would be imposed on anyone who dared to break this rule. Birubala listened to all this, taking it all in, defiant,

unrelenting. For the next couple of years the villagers shunned her and her family. Birubala continued her work, this time as secretary of the Borjhara Mahila Samiti. Now her canvas was much larger. Besides raising awareness on this evil, she developed contacts with the police and the district administration, lobbying for good roads, potable water, health care, education, and funds for development works. She was her usual blunt self before top government functionaries, including the Deputy Commissioner, and she was very often the catalyst of change in the way things functioned.

In a twist of fate, it was not long before the villagers of Thakurvila changed their attitude toward her. Over the long years of insurgency, many village youth were hauled off for questioning by the police and the army. Many were arrested on suspicion of being terrorists. Countless families spent sleepless nights wondering how to get their loved ones back home. It was at this juncture they figured things out. Birubala had valuable contacts with the police. Perhaps she could help? Swallowing their pride, they desperately appealed to her for help. Birubala was not one to hold a grudge. Besides, precious young lives were at stake. So she promptly strode off to the nearest police station and said, "Eh, why have you taken so and so into custody? I have known him since he played on his mother's lap. He is no terrorist. Release him at once." Such was Birubala's integrity that very often the police took her on her word and grateful families welcomed their sons back. The tide had turned for Birubala. The villagers who had humiliated and shunned her now embraced her as one of their own and a savior who brought light into their lives.

This plain-speaking women with the dust of country roads on her feet, her hair tied back in a tight bun, her hands calloused by years of hard labor, sat before me in her best *dokhona*, green and yellow with gold threads running through it, one that she had woven at her own loom. She waited patiently for my questions and allowed associates, a young Krishak activist, and Usha, her relative, to answer many of the questions. She spoke forcefully and

artlessly, making frequent hand gestures. All through the meeting, she held a magazine covered with old, yellowing newspaper. It was the strangest magazine I have ever got my hands on—a book of witches. Brought out by the Assam Mahila Samata Society, it contained photographs and stories of the hapless women targeted as witches in villages spread across lower Assam, Jonali Rabha, Sabitri Hajowari, Lauchon Rabha, Anita Rabha, Khedai Bala Rabha, Charonia Rabha, and each had a harrowing tale to narrate. Many of them owed their lives to Birubala. But this savior has no time to look back on her success and the many triumphs of her two-decade-long crusade. Because she knows that every day, somewhere far away, in some sleepy hamlet lost in time, someone is being singled out for that midnight knock. And she, Birubala, would have to stop the wheel of fate.