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How Green Are the Hills?
Bertha G. Dkhar

It is a two-hour journey to Shillong from Guwahati by road, a journey I have undertaken countless times, as a child on my mother's knee, as a daydreaming teen discovering magic in meandering streams, as a mother scolding her boys for poking their elbows out of the car windows. It has always been a journey of hope, of anticipation and renewal. As the highway winds its way up the hill, time past, present, and future coalesce into a single gleaming entity. Range upon range of hills are outlined against a sky awash with a shifting panorama of clouds—ash grey or pearl-tinted. There are tiny tea stalls and in their dark interiors you see gleaming teapots, tumblers, and bottles of biscuits, with a rosy-cheeked, *jensem* (Khasi female attire)-wearing Khasi lass perched in attendance. Hugging the slopes are tin-roofed cottages, poetic in their utter poverty, and on the front are little children in rags, waving at the car, the older ones always carrying the younger siblings tied to a shawl on their backs. Then you pass through small villages and cross stone quarries, cement factories, yellow earth-cutters looking like monster insects, terraced fields on the hill slopes, straggly fences surrendering to wilderness, trucks parked by the roadside, a church, a school, shops selling provisions, firewood, plums, pineapples, strawberries, and jars of bamboo shoot pickled in oil.

Before you know it, the first pine trees appear in view, the temperature drops a little. You are climbing steadily, the sun disappears behind a bank of clouds. There is a sprinkle of raindrops on your windscreen. Then, to your left appears the Umiam Lake, a flat silvery sheet of glass, blue, green, and looking placid, awakening memories of long ago picnics by its banks, of lost friends whom we have not seen for decades, and ghost stories of lovers rising from its secret depths on moonlit nights. The temperature drops even as you cross the dam and shift gears to climb higher. The pines flanking the road are nodding in the breeze. Here and there you spot a forlorn cross in memory of some unfortunate soul borne away by some accident. You lose sight of the lake and then it appears again in a gap between the nodding trees. It's still beauty never fails to move you to the point of tears, pushing you to a yearning for time to stand still, for the unfolding vista of water and hills and trees to be yours forever. Your eyes take in the rolling expanse before you . . . the hills farthest away are blue, almost obscured by fog, then nearer, are the darker green, full of impenetrable forests, and the nearest are an emerald green, sloping down to the white sands, skirting the lake. In no time at all, the car turns a bend on the road, and Shillong is upon you, its twisting streets choked with cars, hunks of fresh beef hanging from hooks in a Mawlai meat shop, uniformed children hopping and skipping along the pavements, taxis crammed with passengers, old landmarks changed, and enormous billboards making promises. In front of a glass-fronted shop with stylish mannequins, a wizened old man in patched trousers and shabby coat roasts corn cobs on a brazier.

There is a special reason why I have taken pains to describe all that I have seen on this journey. There is more, much more to this than what appears to be sentimental scribbling to while away idleness, for this is a journey undertaken to meet a stranger and hear her story, her version of the events that have shaped her destiny and made her what she is. Her name is Bertha Gyndykes Dkhar, a 52-year-old Khasi woman, a pillar of the society and a Padmashri

award winner. Bertha has traveled from Shillong to Guwahati much more than I have. But it does not matter to her how the clouds drift among the blue hills or the waters shimmer on the Umiam lake. She does not notice the wild spring cascading down the ancient rocks or the valley spread hundreds of feet below. For Bertha cannot see. Hers is a world of irredeemable darkness, and she has to fashion her reality with sounds, voices, and what her hands can feel. I have to come to hear from her how this tragedy befell her and how she turned around the bleak circumstances of her life into a triumphant saga of service to others. Afflicted by a rare condition called retinitis pigmentosa, a progressive degeneration of the retina, Bertha became totally blind when she was pursuing her postgraduate studies in Bangalore. Forced to relocate to her hometown Shillong, she desperately searched for a teacher's job, but was turned down on the assumption that her condition would prevent her from carrying out her duties. This was the unfortunate case of a young woman who had till recently been pursuing her Master in Social Work and dreaming of rendering service in the field of psychiatry and who suddenly found herself at a dead end. For a time, desperate to earn a living, she even took to selling jams and pickles. She could not help feeling demeaned and worthless.

Then, in 1998, a door opened, and light shone through. Bethany Society, an NGO, appointed her as the headmistress of the Jyoti Sroat School for the visually impaired. From having nothing to do and feeling bitter as dreams crumbled to dust, Bertha moved to a life of responsibility and order. She felt deeply the affliction of her visually disabled charges and experienced the driving need to dispel their darkness with the light of knowledge and enlightenment. But straightaway she ran into a roadblock. There was no Braille in the Khasi script. All students have to pass the mandatory Khasi paper in their board exams. There had to be a way, and soon Bertha had it figured out. In order to help herself, and the children, she would have to learn Braille in English first.

In order to truly appreciate Bertha Dkhar's remarkable work, it is necessary to understand what Braille is. The Wikipedia describes Braille as a writing system used by the blind and the visually impaired that is used for books, menus, signs, elevator buttons, and currency. Users can write Braille with the original slate and stylus or type it in a Braille writer, such as a portable Braille note taker, or on a computer that prints with a Braille embosser.

Braille is named after its creator. Frenchman Louis Braille, who went blind following a childhood accident. At the age of 15, Louis developed his code for the French alphabet in 1824 as an improvement on night writing. He published this system, which subsequently contained musical notations, in 1829. The second revision, published in 1837, was the first digital (binary) form of writing.

Bertha painstakingly learnt English Braille. That was only the first step. Two years later, after intense effort and innovation, she invented the Braille code for the Khasi language. The effort demanded a lot from her, and she soldiered on, drawing on her reserves of patience and limitless capacity for hard work. After the initial shock of descending into a pitch-dark world, she slowly, painfully forced herself to avoid self-pity and look on her tragedy as a challenge and opportunity to see things for herself.

Creating a Braille script in Khasi was a God-send for her visually disabled students. Now able to study the Khasi paper, they began to dream of a better future, one in which they would be empowered to look after themselves and live a life of dignity.

But the struggle was far from over. The Jyoti Sroat School for the visually impaired had 100 blind students and another 50 who were sighted. The school provided free education to its students. There was a perennial shortage of funds, and many good teachers were leaving as they were not getting a decent salary. Even after two decades of its existence, the school has not received any funds from the state government. Bertha is filled with love and concern for her charges. The world was callous and insensitive toward them. But rather than sequestering them from the outside world,

Bertha carried out her mission for inclusive schooling. Her school, therefore, has sighted as well as visually impaired students, and there is a constant effort to sensitize and integrate the two. As she says, "Having separate schools for the blind is not the answer. We need to accommodate them in regular schools to assimilate them in the mainstream. I will continue to fight every day of my life to ensure that one day we have inclusive education."

The angst and desperation of the early years, when her young life was blighted by the curse of darkness, have given way to mellow grace and faith in her destiny. As she said so herself in an interview, "I am proud to be a woman because my Creator believes that the work I am doing can be done best by a female heart and I am proud to work for that belief."

Quietly, in this remote corner of the country, Bertha was scripting an inspirational saga of grace under fire, a living embodiment of adversity turning into a blessing. She caught the attention of the entire nation, when, on March 24, 2012, she was honored with the CNN IBN and Reliance Foundations Real Heroes award. The award celebrates the undying spirit of ordinary people who have rendered extraordinary service and expanded the realm of humanity. The award carried a sum of ₹500,000, which Bertha promptly invested in her school. One of her prized possessions is the letter given to her by the awards committee. It read, "Your exceptional support for the well-being of others in our country has contributed in numerous ways. We take this opportunity to thank you for your selfless contribution in reflecting the spirit of a true Indian." More important, recognition has come from the government, and she was awarded the Padmashri in 2010.

I meet Bertha on a bright, sunny May morning. The road in Shillong is flanked by trees aflame with lavender blossoms. The Shillong correspondent of *The Assam Tribune*, Raju Das, accompanies me to the Jyoti Sroat School. It is like any other school, with a sprawling campus. There are color swings, banana slides, and roundabouts. Uniformed children sit in the classroom drawing,

listening, fidgeting in their chairs, nudging each other, whispering, just the way all children do. I am led to Bertha's room by a teacher. The woman who smiles at me is petite, with cropped hair, a round face with fine lines, large, intense eyes, and a hesitant smile. She shakes my hand in greeting, and we sit down to go through her life and the unexpected turns it has taken. Her voice is pleasant and her sentences crisp, understated. When she wants to make a point she leans forward. She often picks up her phone from the table in front of her and clasps it, before putting it down again. She speaks with quiet authority, her dark eyes fixed unseeingly on me.

"My father was the late S.R. Gyndykes, and my mother is Alma G. Gyndykes. I am the eldest of four children. My sisters are Erratha and Flovrette. My mother named my baby brother Homer Richie. Like his namesake, the Greek poet Homer, he too is blind—and writes poetry."

"Strangely enough, my name Bertha means bright. We are Grand Evangelists by faith, and my parents were well-educated people. My mother was a sub-inspector of schools. The four of us were brought up to respect authority, do our duty, and understand the value of discipline in our daily life. Nothing in our household was unplanned. Our mother always laid out healthy, nutritious food on the table—oats, toast, and porridge for breakfast and soups and boiled vegetables for lunch and dinner. My mother was for a time headmistress of the Khasi Janitia Presley Girls School. She taught English and played the piano beautifully. My mom and dad made sure that we stuck to a schedule, with fixed times for meals, study, household work, and play. Once I carelessly threw my school uniform on the floor. My dad made me pick it up 10 times. He was the sectional officer of the Intelligence Bureau and was often away on work. But when he was home he cooked us breakfast and pottered about in the garden."

"As we grew up, we began to resent our parents' strict rules. I, for one, began to rebel and challenged their authority. I hated being dictated to. Even now, I find it hard to say yes easily."

"But then, there was a much more serious problem that consumed me and caused all of us so much heartbreak. At five years of age I was attending St. Joseph School. In the classroom I could hardly make out what the teacher was writing on the blackboard. The faces of my fellow students seemed to be just a blur. At night, my family noticed that I often bumped against the furniture and fall down, hurting myself."

"The eye specialist at Shillong told my parents I was severely short-sighted. Heavy myopia was the word he used. By now I could not see at all with my left eye. My parents, desperate to restore my eyesight, took me to hospitals all over the country every winter. My dad's job at the Intelligence Bureau (IB) helped us to do that. I remember we even went to the famous Sitapur Eye Hospital in Uttar Pradesh, which was set up in 1926. Everywhere they said I had myopia. The power in my glasses kept changing. I felt myself unattractive. I did not have my sister Erratha's beauty, and on top of that, I wore powerful glasses that magnified my eyes. I was also not tall enough to be attractive. I became the butt of jokes. I was named Bottle Specs because my glasses looked like the bottoms of glass bottles. They also called me cow's eyes, because the spectacles, as I have said before, magnified my eyes. I was hurting inside, hurting and raging as shapes, faces, everything slowly began to waver and blur. Unable to blend in with my peers, smarting at the sting of their cruel barbs, I clung to my books, studying diligently. It paid off. I was now on top of my class. I got a double promotion twice and when they wanted to promote me once more, my mother refused, saying that I would be under too much pressure. So there I was, studying with girls two years older than me. My favorite subjects were English and Geography. But I could see only with the greatest difficulty. I began to walk in a zigzag manner, playing the piano became a torture, as I could not follow the notations on the sheet music. Doing sums was also very tough. But I loved to read; Enid Blyton and Ernest Hemingway

were my favorites. Like Hemingway's old man battling the whale, I wasn't one to give up easily."

"At that time we did not realize that blindness was waiting for me. I passed my matriculation and enrolled in St. Mary's College with honors in English. But my teachers advised me to take Education instead, as I would have to read extensively in English honors, something that would be too much for my weakening eyesight. At this time of my life, the principal of St. Mary's College, Mother Ann, had a profound impact. She refused to make allowances for me because of my eyesight. I remember going to her, beaming because I had done very well in my Class XII (then known as pre-university) exams. I expected words of praise and a pat on the back. Instead, she told me gently, but firmly, 'You can still do better than this.' Though her response disappointed me at that moment, looking back, I realize how crucial her comment was in pushing myself to excel and not giving into self-pity."

"Let me tell you, however, that life wasn't entirely dark for me. I went through a wild phase—wearing short dresses, reading racy novels, and buying music records. That was also the time the Khasi Students Union started. The idea of youth power excited me. I was elated by the idea of gaining acceptance by belonging to such a body. I remember how Mother Ann closed the college gates to prevent a demonstration in the college camp. I even remember climbing over the gates once."

"Meanwhile, it was time to know more what was wrong about my eyesight. Dr Jennifer Basaiawmoit, who had been a student of my mother's, finally made the correct diagnosis. I had retinitis pigmentosa, which had damaged my retina. We consulted an eye specialist in Kolkata for a second opinion. He made the same diagnosis, saying it was a very rare condition and heredity played a part in it. Imagine how I, a young woman, would have felt when I was told that I could pass on the disease if I married. So there I was, not only faced with growing blindness but also having to make the decision to remain single for the rest of my life."

"But I was in denial. On a visit to Bangalore, I fell in love with the vast, leafy gardens of Lal Bagh and Cubbon's park and begged my parents to let me study there. They gave in and I enrolled for Masters in Social Work, a two-year course. I was able to write my notes, but very often a classmate had to read texts and notes aloud to me. By now I could barely see. I was as if I was running out of time."

"Then I got involved in community development work at Mairang in West Khasi Hills. I had to sit for an exam held by the Social Welfare Department of Meghalaya. I was interviewed by an IAS officer, and I told him about my condition. He gave me a posting in Shillong. But it was far from easy. I faced opposition from all sides. The world was not mine after all. But how I wanted to be a part of this world, if only they would let me!"

"Then the Central Board of Social Work appointed me as a counselor. There was not much paper work involved and that was a blessing, I thought. The chairperson asked me to appear for an interview. I was grilled by a panel of eight people. One of them cruelly asked, 'How can you work if you cannot see?'"

"It was as if I had hit rock bottom. All my years of struggle seemed futile. Nobody wanted to give me a chance to prove myself. I became bitter, pessimistic, and angry. I lashed out against my family and friends, hurting all with my rages. I stopped going out and stopped taking care of my appearance. There was no pleasure in the normal activities of daily life. It was as if I had reached a dead end."

In order to understand Bertha's predication, one has to understand, at least in rudimentary form, the nature of her condition. What then is retinitis pigmentosa? Simply put, it is an inherited degenerative eye disease that causes severe vision impairment or blindness. The progress into blindness may not be uniform. The later the onset, the more rapid is the loss. It is caused by abnormalities of the photoreceptors. Till date there is no known cure, and patients have to cope with deteriorating vision. The mode of

inheritance is determined by family history. Though there is no cure, treatments are available in some countries.

Visually unpaired people suffer many trials and tribulations in India. Going by the latest data available, there are 37 million blind people world-wide. Out of that a staggering 15 million are Indians, making the country home to the world's largest number of blind people. Tragically, 75 percent cases of blindness are avoidable. The country needs 40,000 optometrists, whereas there are only 8,000 of them. We need 2.5 lakh donated eyes every year. But the country's 109 eye banks collect just 25,000 eyes, 30 percent of which are not fit to be used.

Continues Bertha, "I did not realize it then, but I was causing my family a lot of suffering. At this period my mother, through prayer and reflection, had a spiritual epiphany. She established a personal relationship with Christ. She even got in touch with faith healers from America to restore my sight. But I felt betrayed by God, by fate. I no longer believed in going to church and saying my prayers. My mother appeared strong, perhaps that strength came from her faith. We often had loud and bitter arguments over my growing distance from my faith."

"I had too much pride to depend on others for my needs. So I sought the job of a substitute teacher when there was a vacancy in a local school in Shillong. But the headmistress doubted if I could be a good teacher. After all, I kept bumping into furniture, doors, and walls. I could not see if my students were paying attention to me. The children laughed at my clumsiness. But it was a time when I was desperate to earn a living. My father by then was a heart patient. I could not bear it that my mother was having to struggle all alone to support our family."

"It was then that I went to the US. On my return, a ray of light entered my embittered heart. I realized I could not struggle alone anymore. Faith in God would give me the strength to go on." Bertha found solace in Jesus Calls, a ministry dedicated to prayer for the suffering, irrespective of caste, creed, and religion.

It was started by late Brother D.G.S. Dhinakaran to serve the people through the love and compassion of Jesus Christ. Brother D.G.S. Dhinakaran (founder) and M. Paul Dhinakaran (co-founder and president) have made Jesus Calls a worldwide spiritual movement. Dr Paul Dhinakaran has established 37 prayer lovers in India and 11 others throughout the world, where prayers are offered for people in distress. Today millions are blessed through prayers and receive comforting messages of the Dhinakaran through their public meetings, TV programs, Letter Ministry, and personal prayers."

Today, Bertha looks back for her long and turbulent life and finds meaning and purpose in it. She describes to me her daily routine. "My day starts early and I wake up at 4:30 a.m. and have my meditation and prayers till 6:00 a.m. Sometimes I do light exercises and then have my breakfast. Then I start off from home early in the morning at 7:30 a.m. when the school bus picks me up and I am at my school office at 8:30 a.m."

"In the office the routine is not fixed, but there is the usual work."

"I return home at around 5:30 a.m. This is the time I relax at home, but at times I also help with the cooking. I love to bake cakes, make pizzas and cookies. I can make Chinese Indian and continental food. Though I rarely listen to music these days, I enjoy singing a lot. On Sundays I go to church at the Full Gospel Fellowship in Nongrim hills, and there we sing and dance to our hearts' content. I play the piano and it truly relaxes me. I believe and am guided by the Biblical principles on the role of nun and women and that is a man is the head of the family and a woman binds the family together."

"Have I found peace in my life? Yes, I have. When I lost my eyesight things became very difficult, and I slowly learnt to accept my fate after many storms. It was a long and slow process, but today I am at peace. I turned to spiritualism and that gave me the answers to questions that haunted me. I have learnt to be positive in whatever I do."

"I have many wonderful memories in my life. In 1999 I was made headmistress of the Jyoti Sroat School without appearing for an interview! This event and the responsibility it brought with it totally turned my life around. I was chosen in spite of my disability, and I became determined to prove myself. Every day I gave myself 100 percent to this faith reposed on me. I would also like to write a book."

"In the end, blindness does not limit the imagination. I read in Braille the books of Jane Austen and am transported to the beautiful English countryside. The mind is always free and can win over all troubles and sufferings."