3

Born Free: Parbati Barua

I am about to meet a woman—elusive, mysterious, and a living legend—known as perhaps the only female mahout (a person who rides an elephant) in the world. Books have been written on her, films have captured her daring exploits, and her life has been one long love affair with the gentle beast. She has spent years among them, talking to them, feeding them, bathing them in the river, issuing commands, even singing to them. I have wanted to meet this larger-than-life character, this splendid, brave, and free spirit of womanhood for years. And then, amazingly, I discover that she lives with her sister when in Guwahati, only a short distance from my home. On a muggy monsoon evening, with frogs croaking in the dense and dripping undergrowth, I unlatch her gate, and I am at once greeted by the furious barking of a dog inside. The pet having been safely tied up, Parbati Barua answers the door herself. Slim and of medium height, she holds herself very erect. Her frame is spare, angular, and her bespectacled face looks at me with some wariness. I introduce myself and she ushers me in. The living room is a large hall with a coffee-brown upholstered sofa set, a sideboard filled with tiny knick knacks and large framed photographs of her father, Prakritish Barua, also known as Lalji, of the royal family of Gauripur, and her older sister, the celebrated singer of Goalpariya

folk songs, Pratima Barua Pandey. I explain how I want to travel deep into her life and reveal to readers the amazing world she has inhabited. I wish to take her through the years she has spent loving and caring for the great beast. She listens, her hands folded on her lap. She is wearing a crisp cotton sari. Her hair is tied back in a severe bun. Her dark eyes behind those glinting spectacles are watchful, giving away nothing. It is tough-going for me, more so because the room is dark, lit up only by a small bulb placed over an aquarium. Even the fish darting around in the greenish water seem a little sinister. I try out a spur-of-the-moment ploy, a desperate gambit to win over this somewhat unlikely prima donna.

"I'm so glad you left the room dark," I say ingratiatingly. "It makes it much easier to imagine a forest, doesn't it?"

That does it. A smile appears on that wintry visage. She becomes a little more animated, opening up, revealing how she would rather read a book than listen to silly women gossiping, how most of her days are spent traveling, and how she has rice three times a day without fail. By the time my visit comes to an end, Parbati Barua has given her tacit approval for the project, but she warns me that I am not to dig into controversies. I promise to provide her a questionnaire at the earliest.

There is a catch, though. My background research on this legend would remain flimsy without a thorough reading of Mark Shand, the British author of *Travels on My Elephant, River Dog*, and other books, as a BBC conservationist and travel writer, authored *Queen of the Elephants*, which was published in 1995, and the corresponding BBC documentary of the same title released in the same year. The book is a modern classic on Indian wildlife, combining Kiplingesque ambience with Durrellesque humor. *Queen of the Elephants* won the Thomas Cook Travel Book of the Year Award in 1998. But returning to the catch, this book is nowhere to be found by My Girl Friday, Nandita. She and I ransack all the book stores in the city and contacted umpteen book-loving friends. The irony is, Parbati Barua grimly holds onto her own

copy, refusing to part with it even for a couple of days. Weeks pass by and then, finally, there is a glimmer of light. Journalist Roopam Barua, related to Parbati, not only has the book but is cheerfully willing to lend it, that too without a time limit. Better still, he has a vast knowledge of Parbati's life in the wilderness and gives me access to extensive published material on her, most of which he had himself penned. I finish the book in a few days, totally riveted by Parbati and her daring exploits. Mark and Parbati journey through the jungles of Assam and West Bengal, along the foothills of Bhutan, finally resting on the banks of the Brahmaputra, just in time for Magh Bihu, the auspicious harvest festival. Goalpariya folk music fill the air as Pratima Pandey joins them, singing songs of hopes and aspirations of the humble rural folk—farmers, boatmen, mahouts, and artisans. Parbati shares the wealth of her knowledge about the great beast with Mark. The pair shares their concerns for its future. Besides the journeys along the forests, there are trips to the magnificent Mal Bazar elephant squad and to Parbati's ancestral home—the Motiabagh palace. One of Parbati's most famous quotes is strikingly graphic. "It is not from books that you learn about these animals. It is from here—she struck her forehead and then slapped the left side of her chest—and from here."

When you learn of Parbati's life in the jungles, which makes her vulnerable to the elements, the heat of the summer sun to the biting cold of winter, pelting rain, and fog, and the attendant troubles—living with the most basic of amenities and subjecting the body to cruel privations—you feel a great respect for her, more so because of the fact that she was born the daughter of a zamindar and could have led a life of indolence, even extravagance, filling her days with frivolous amusements. To understand her, you have to know where she comes from.

The history of Gauripur's zamindar family finds ample mention in the noted historian and sociologist Nagendranath Basu's three-volume work, *The Social History of Kamrup.* According to him, Parbati's paternal grandfather, Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua, was

the adopted son of Pratap Chandra Barua, who belonged to the lineage of Govinda Bhuyan. It was in 1856 that Pratap Chandra Barua settled in Gauripur, moving in from Rangamati. Her maternal grandmother, Sarojbala, followed the Vaishnava faith of the Saint Sankaradeva. The ideals of love and compassion for all living beings can be traced to her. Returning from Delhi after attending Lord Curzon's Delhi Durbar, Sarojbala discovered that she was pregnant. Pramathesh Barua was born on October 3, 1903. Four other children followed—Niharbala, Nilima, Prakritish, and Pranakesh. Pramathesh Barua immersed himself in amateur dramatics from a very early age, starting the Gauripur Young Men's Association (GYMA) club in Gauripur. He staged plays like *Chandragupta*, *Europe*, and *Rani*, directing, acting, arranging music, and lighting for them. He had a pet elephant called Jungabahadur and was a skilled and fearless hunter. He shot an astonishing 52 Royal Bengal tigers, besides cheetahs, bears, deer, wild buffaloes, rhinos, and birds. After his education at Presidency College, Calcutta, Pramathesh Barua moved to the world of cinema. He learned modern techniques of movie lighting in Europe. He made a silent film *Aparadhi* in 1930 and produced it himself. That same year, he was elected to the Assam Bidhan Parishad. He successfully produced several films, including the magnum opus *Devdas*.

Pramathesh Barua's brother Prakritish Barua was renowned the world over for his legendary expertise and knowledge on elephants.

The family history dates back to the 8th century. Sometime in the 15th century Narahari Rai, one of their ancestors, who was a minister at the royal court of Mithila, came back to Kamrup after an altercation with the king and was installed as an administrator in the royal court of Cooch Behar. In 1620 Mughal Emperor Jahangir gave the title of king to Kabi Shekhar, a descendent of Narahari Rai.

Gauripur lies in a forgotten corner of India, a small town on the western side of the district headquarter, Dhubri. The Gadadhar flows gently by the main town on its eastern flanks. There is a lake

on the northwest named Laokhowa beel and on the northeast, by the river bank, is a small hilltop called Motiabagh on which the Hawakhana palace is located. This is where Parbati's life began.

"Do you know the story of how Gauripur got its name?" she asks me on her next visit. "My ancestor Raja Pratap Chandra Barua was the zamindar of Rangamati. One day, he went out to the forest to hunt. There he saw a frog swallowing a snake. It was an unusual sight and he believed it was a supernatural sign. He was a devotee of Goddess Mahamaya. He then built a temple in the name of the Goddess and named the place as Gauri, Gauri being one of the names of Maa Durga."

"I was named Parbati, the mother of Ganesh, the elephant-headed God. When I was only 1 month and 17 days old, our father broke journey from Shillong to Gauripur and halted at an elephant camp in Damra. That was only the beginning. All through our childhood years, father took us to stay in these camps, seven to eight months a year. We all went along—my father had four wives, we took with us 70 servants, including cooks, a doctor, a barber, and a tailor. A tutor accompanied us so that our studies were not interrupted. We lived with these gentle giants and their handlers in a kind of paradise. We rose at dawn and helped in preparing fodder for the elephants. We keenly observed all the activities at the camp. Well-trained elephants called Kunkies (koonkies) drove away wild rogue elephants and this saved the villagers. The men in the camp shifted troublesome wild elephants to other areas to avoid overcrowding, tamed elephants to uproot lantana creepers, and removed fallen trees on the roads. The elephants were even lent to timber merchants for logging operations. My father loved elephants more than his life, and he paid close attention to every aspect of their well-being, including massages, bathing in the river, treating of ailments, and their diet. They were fed green gram, digestive mixtures, herbal potions, salt, jaggery, besides plantain and grass. We saw how the handlers trained new elephants with treats and light taps on the legs and head to make them understand

the instructions. The leg chain, bedi or collar, and the neck chain were tested to see that the elephants were not hurt. In the evenings, we would sit with father and the mahouts. There would be long discussions on matters related to the camp. We were expected to listen attentively and pick up tips. Many wonderful stories about elephants were also narrated. In this way nature became our university, and I, its most ardent pupil."

And that she certainly was. As a toddler, she experienced her first adrenaline rush on being able to make a tame elephant move by standing on its head. Riding behind her father, she went hunting in the forests. A wild boar suddenly shot under the elephants' belly and escaped to the other side. The elephant jolted in panic, and Parbati went off flying to the nearest thicket. Lalji calmly proceeded to go after the boar. Her father's matter-of-fact reaction signaled to the young girl that though she was bruised and every bone of her body ached, she was not to be a crybaby. And little Parbati bravely pursed her lips and kept quiet.

It was no surprise, therefore, that at age 14, she caught her first wild adult tusker. How could a mere child achieve this? "Catching an elephant is not a matter of brute strength," she explained. "It's all in the mind and some amount of luck." She caught this pachyderm in the Kachugaon forests in Kokrajhar district. Till date she treasures the two words her father joyfully uttered after her brave feat, "Shabbash beti!"

That was only the beginning. Parbati chose to live and work in the midst of her beloved elephant family. It takes a lot of patience, perseverance, and dedication to tame elephants. Catching a wild elephant is an extremely risky job. They are captured by throwing a lasso around their heads. The process of training is very slow. It takes about six months of gentle coaxing to win the beast over. Parbati's three pachyderm daughters are Lakshmimala, Aloka, and Kanchanmala. The trio and a team of coworkers lead an unusual and adventurous life. Different states like Bihar, West Bengal, and Assam request her help in tackling rogue tuskers or tend to those

who are injured/ailing. She is consulted on elephant management policies, in controlling capturing wild herds, driving out wild herds from urban areas, and training mahouts. "In my job, there are no retakes," she states grimly. "Every time I go to the forests, I think of it as my last trip. But as a mahout, I can never retire."

When she is not working, Parbati loves to dress up decorously in *mekhela chador* (Assamese female attire) or sari. But the time for action sees her radically transformed. She is then togged out in faded jeans, combat jacket with shiny brass buttons, a solar topee, and sunglasses to shield her eyes. Tucked in her waistband is a *khukri*. She even chews a bit of tobacco. Appearance is important for her beloved pachyderms too. She tenderly decorates their foreheads with chalk. Going by her attire, it is not hard to discern that Parbati is a die-hard fan of westerns. Her heroes are rugged men like Charles Bronson and John Wayne. She also loves to watch war movies. Her favorite movies are *The Magnificent Seven*, *High Noon*, and *How the West Was Won.* Her life in the wild is bereft of modern conveniences. She uses ash instead of toothpaste, sleeps inside a tent, on a threadbare mattress, that too without any pillows. She keeps by her bedside a sepia-tinted photo of her father Lalji in his youth. And all around her are ropes, chains, *khukri*s (a sharp knife), stirrups—the tools of her trade.

"There are many rituals in our work," she explains. "These have been handed down for generations. Every journey begins with a puja to Goddess Kali, Ganesh, Saatshikari—the patron goddess of forests and Muslim saint Mahout Pir."

I told her I am curious to know about the mela shikar. Parbati's eyes glint with excitement. "It used to be an elaborate affair. First, a camp would be set up in the jungle. Then the men would scatter all around to watch the movements of elephant herds. All food items were carried on bamboo tubes or sacks. We did not carry any metal, so as to avoid noise. When we were out to catch elephants, the mahouts and *phandi*s (elephant catcher) even smeared themselves with elephant dung and urine. Elephants are short-sighted

and hardly look up. Usually we chose smaller elephants to catch. The *phandi* (capture of elephant), seated on a tame elephant, throws the lasso over the wild elephant's head. It requires perfect timing and great skill and balance. It has to be isolated from the herd and led back to the camp for training. After training, they are sold to merchants and zamindars as well as royal families. My father supplied elephants to the royal families of Bhutan and Cooch Behar."

In her early years, from 1975 to 1978, Parbati's area of work covered western Assam, North Bengal, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling. The West Bengal government sought her help in 1980. She caught and trained no less than 12 elephants. A dramatic incident took place in 1987–1988. A herd of wild elephants moved from Dalma forest in Bihar to the wilds of West Bengal. They did this every year and returned after grazing. However, human population had begun to increase and panicking due to the shouts of villagers, the herd lost its way and wandered about disoriented in the forest. In this way they crossed Kangsabati River and entered the jungles of Medinipur. They wandered among the sal and eucalyptus forests, gave birth to calves, and became restless as winter ended. They attacked nearby villages and three people were killed. There was widespread terror. Forest personnel were unable to take the herd back to Dalma. At that time Parbati used to rent out her own trained elephants to the West Bengal Wildlife Department. The government requested her help. Parbati, seated on her elephant, led the herd back to their home in Dalma, achieving in two weeks what the forest department had failed for three months. This amazing feat led to media frenzy, and she became an international icon. The grateful villagers bestowed on her the title of Hati Devi. BBC made a film on her titled, *Jungle Jumboorie*. She was honored in 1989 for welfare and management of both wild and captive elephants. The Government of Assam conferred on her Honorary Chief Elephant Warden of Assam for her lifetime achievements. Mark Shand wrote not only a marvelous book but

also an eponymous film for Discovery Channel. She is the only woman elephant catcher and practioner of mela shikar in Asia and, probably, the world.

Parbati returns to the person who had shaped her for this destiny. "I hero-worship my father and owe everything to him. He felt he was far from society, in tune with the ways of the wild. He discovered wisdom in animals. He was an MLA, but his heart was not in it. He was a widely traveled and sophisticated man but chose a very different life. He loved his elephant Pratap Singh so much that when it died, he stabbed himself in grief. There is a stone mausoleum of Pratap Singh in the grounds of Motiabagh palace. Instead of living in the lap of luxury, he chose to be a *mahaldar*—catcher and seller of elephants, courting danger at every step, roaming freely under an open sky."

Parbati, however, has had her share of brickbats, along with the bouquets. In 2003, Green Oscar award winner Mike Pandey captured on film the torture inflicted on a young elephant caught by Parbati in Chhattisgarh. The elephant died after 18 days and the footage was widely screened for the media. This created a big furor. "The elephant was declared a rogue before the Chhattisgarh government called me to tackle it," she says impatiently. "Rogue elephants are dangerous and of course they have to be tied with ropes. The film avoids showing how we tried to take care of the animal after we caught it. Isn't this selective filming?" That was not all. A few years later Parbati was again in the eye of a storm, when the animal rights group, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and Maneka Gandhi's People for Animals raised a hue and cry over the alleged torture of elephants during preparations for the just-concluded centenary celebrations of the Kaziranga National Park. Parbati had trained elephants for an exhibition football match, but it was abruptly cancelled. "People make an issue over nothing just for publicity," she says. "Can they love elephants more than one who has spent her entire life among elephants? Have they seen elephants carrying tourists in 45ºC heat

in Delhi and Jaipur, how they are made to walk over hot melting tar on the roads?"

India is home of between 50 percent and 60 percent of all of Asia's wild elephants and about 20 percent of the domesticated elephants. Wild elephants are facing many problems, most of which pertain to habitat loss and man–elephant conflict. Population explosion and clearing of forests for development have posed problems for these giant beasts. With this in mind, the Government of India initiated Project Elephant in 1992. Its aim was to preserve their habitat and establish elephant corridors, in order to maintain the traditional migration patterns of the elephants. Resolving man–elephant conflict issues and taking note of domestic elephants were also a part of its agenda. The project presided over the establishment of 25 elephant reserves and covered an area of 58,000 km. It has also established the Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) program of Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild flora and fauna (CITES). There has been a significant increase in poaching of bull tuskers for ivory and this has led to an imbalance in the sex ratio.

Domestic elephants have their own set of problems. Maintaining an elephant is an expensive affair. Many owners and mahouts exploit the public reverence for the animals by using them to beg in the streets. Prevailing conditions for upkeep of elephants in the cities are deplorable. Elephants used for tourist rides are overworked and underfed. There are rules to protect these animals, but they are rarely enforced.

Little is discussed about the economic aspects of the Barua family's bond with elephants. Tim McGirk of *The Independent* has it that the Baruas paid annual taxes to the Mughals in the form of six war elephants. But after India's independence, the State stripped the maharajas and princes of their wealth and land. A great blow was struck with the abolition of the privy purses in 1970, which greatly reduced the wealth and power of royal families who bought elephants from the Baruas. Lalji was then owner of the Motiabagh

palace and a stable of 40 elephants. How would he maintain them? His solution lay in the forests that had sheltered him. Together with his fearless and resourceful daughter, he got into the business of capturing wild elephants, taming them, and selling them to private parties or the Sonapur fair. But even this came to an end in 1977, when the Indian government banned the capture of elephants for commercial purpose. The ailing and impoverished Lalji, a shadow of his former self, did not live long. Parbati took part in the funeral rites and then vanished to the jungle to grieve alone, with only her elephants for company.

Fortunately, not long after, she found a purpose in life—to mediate in the man–elephant conflict. In India's countryside, hundreds of wild elephants were killed by angry villagers into whose territory they strayed. They were also hunted for ivory. As she says, "My work was to rescue man from the elephants and to keep the elephants safe from man. All the elephant wants is peace and safety. If a man is killed millions are there to replace him. But if just one elephant is killed, the species draws closer to extinction."

Elephants, pushed against the wall by the reduced green cover, poaching, man's aggression, are starting to attack humans more frequently. This has been validated by S. Deb Roy, former Conservator of Assam's forests. Previously solitary bulls attacked humans but now females are also easily enraged. As many as 200 Indians are killed by elephants each year, and most incidents take place in West Bengal's Jalpaiguri district where they are hemmed in by rice fields, tea gardens, and villages. This is where Parbati has had to intervene with her knowledge and expertise most frequently. Elephants that kill without provocation are declared rogues. But it is found that even rogues have some injuries inflicted by man to cause it to go berserk. Parbati and her elephants are then called to coax these beasts back to the jungle.

For a long time Parbati has lived in a modest house near Subansiri tea estate on the Bhutan foothills, renting out her elephants. She has been married twice, first to a banker, but life within the four

walls is clearly not far her. Her first marriage, to a man chosen by her father, lasted barely a year, and even Lalji had to concede there was no future in it. Instead of cooking, embroidery, and tending to children, she craves for the heart-thumping, pulse-racing moments of pitting her wits against the wild elephants she struggles to tame. In those moments, she even forgets her name. Instead of the normal 30, she can make the beasts obey 42 commands. She has in-depth knowledge of the herbs elephants find for themselves when they are sick or wounded. She loves to sing soulful love songs to soothe her beloved beasts.

What does Parbati feel about her belonging to the zamindar family of Gauripur? What was it like growing up in a palace? Surely her childhood was exotic? "We children never felt we were privileged. It was the people around us who put us on a pedestal. Our parents gave us freedom instead of luxury. We were encouraged to mix and get along with all sorts of people. However, befitting our station, we were waited on hand and foot. Our every need was anticipated by those tending to us. However, my father, who was a scout and had even gone abroad for a jamboree, dinned into us the importance of being self-sufficient."

"As a little girl I hated playing with dolls; I found it a very boring pastime. I liked to play outdoor games and hang around among the elephants and horses. During the rainy season, we would have great fun running around the vast wooden verandah of Motiabagh palace." She describes to me the ornate balustrades of wrought iron; the gallery of trophy heads; her father's Sanskrit texts, diaries, and notebooks; and the framed pictures of hunting expeditions. The palace reverberated with music. Bejeweled *khukri*s glittered on walls. Outside, the elephants rumbled.

"It was not that suddenly one day I decided to become a mahout. Tending to elephants was something I had done from a very tender age. My father and other mahouts had passed all their wisdom and experience to me. Because I was educated—I have a graduate degree from Handique Girls College, Guwahati—I was able to

process this in a rational way. For example, we were told to avoid doing some things on moonless nights or full moon nights. I learnt from books about lunar influence. Emotionally too, I was geared for this life; I was happiest in the company of these beasts. I understood their generosity, their nobility and loyalty. Humans cannot match up to them. It is true that sometimes elephants kill man, but only when they are provoked. Let me tell you a story. A herd of elephants suddenly appeared before some villagers working in the fields. Screaming in alarm, the villagers ran away. A woman even abandoned her own baby. And do you know what happened? One of the elephants gently picked up the baby with its trunk and took it to the village, placing it on the front porch of a house.

Parbati has spent a lifetime among elephant-catchers, also known as *phandi*s. But their fate causes her to feel despondent. The once thriving art of elephant capture met with a sudden death following the inclusion of the elephant in the Scheduled List of Species in 1977 under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Deprived of their livelihood, these men have been reduced to abject penury. Equally significant, their expertise in this art will soon be lost in oblivion.

Parbati intimately knows the kind of life they have led and feels deeply their despair. Doing that kind of work calls for tremendous courage and nerves of steel. As she says, "Every time I enter a jungle, I think it will be the last time around. And that my death is round the corner. An encounter with a rogue elephant and the attempt to put it on the leash is a gamble between life and death. An elephant can understand 40–50 commands. But to make them obey, one has to have a full grasp of their psychology and deal with their extraordinary intelligence and memory. One must also have the stamina to handle their strength. If you can do all this, sitting on elephant back is as safe as sitting in your bedroom."

This is a woman who has had a life unlike that of any other. Her fame as the first female mahout in recent recorded history has traveled much beyond the shores of her native country. Today Parbati lives in Guwahati with her sister in a spacious home in the

shadow of the Sarania Hill. She often travels to destinations she does not disclose. She is shy, even awkward, in company. She leads a spartan life. She dreams of the bejeweled midnight sky over some vast, whispering forest, the hoot of the owl, and the soft rumbling sounds of her beloved elephants. It is a world that is vanishing fast and the sadness of that realization is clear in her dark eyes.