

# THIRD EYE EDITION

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**Kuladhar Saikia**

It was then that Kuladhar Saikia, an official of the Indian Police Service, who had just joined in August 2001 as Deputy Inspector General of Police in the Western range after concluding almost a year long study in the USA as a prestigious Fulbright Fellow, closely observed the phenomena and explored the possibility of preventing such macabre crimes not merely by hauling up the accused with the long arm of the law, but by attempting to change the very mindset of a people still in the grip of age old fears and superstitions. Out of Saikia's vision was born the initiative called Project PRAHARI, the acronym for the People for Progress in local parlance. This experiment of community policing, after its initial success in Kokrajhar district, spread across other villages after Sri Harekrishna Deka, former DGP, Assam Police declared it to be a State level initiative. Now, every police district under this project selects a village which may be either crime infested, communally sensitive, terrorist prone or socially underprivileged.

Project PRAHARI's concept was novel and pathbreaking in the sense that the popular perception of the police as tough, brutal enforcers of law and order is now turned on its head. Saikia sees the police force as capable of acting as a change agent in the new mode of people friendly policing. The force would build a sense of empowerment among the people to solve conflict situations through community discussions. The people would also be inspired and guided to mobilise local resources to achieve sustainable development.

"You see", explains Saikia, "The whole idea came from this basic premise. If the people of an entire village can come together as a single entity to murder a fellow villager suspected of being a witch, can't we not tap their unity, their single-minded intent and carefully co-ordinated capacity for planning and executing a diabolic plan – for something positive, something that will benefit the community as a whole, and lift them from the morass of ignorance and poverty?"

But the genesis of this unique initiative began much earlier, when Saikia was SP, Guwahati. On July 3, 1996, he organised the first Nagarik Committee in Pan Bazar PS. It began as a joint platform of the police and the public on a common crusade to make the area crimefree. It was a significant milestone in urban community policing and the effort paid off when several

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dacoits were apprehended. Then, when Saikia was DIG, CID, he conceived and set up a CID gallery in 2002 at the Ulubari Police headquarters. Visitors, including school children, had a first hand initiation into the intricacies of forensics, finger printing, making plaster casts of footprints, crime scene examination procedure, tools and weapons used during burglaries, familiarisation with drugs like heroin and cocaine and exhibits of explosives like RDX.

But it was Project PRAHARI that posed as Saikia's greatest challenge. A writer by inclination, a man in uniform by profession and an economist by education, he strived hard to combine all three to wean the gullible, poverty stricken villages from their violent, irrational ways towards a common resolve to better their lives with sustainable livelihood and pooling resources to solve local problems. It was certainly not easy. Saikia and his police force had to reach remote villages. Many bridges had been burnt down by insurgents. Villagers attending the first meetings were wary, non-committal. It was only when a young boy burst into tears, saying his father had been a good man, but that he and the other villagers had killed him, that a beginning was made. Saikia, who was also a consultant at the World Bank in Washington, was determined that the law enforcer can also be an effective change agent. Local police, he envisaged, would play a pivotal role in the network of Community Partners involving different development agencies, NGOs, village institutions, providers of credit facilities and existing youth clubs and women organisations.

There have been inspiring success stories. Villagers from Surfangguri, Kolabari, Chilslibari and Kharbhujia overcame their mutual hostility and united to dig up, clean and repair a five kilometre long canal. This was done within 25 days without money, labour or equipment from elsewhere. Now the repaired canal allows them to sow two crops a year. Another such effort saw success at Dohsingimari under Golaghat district. Villagers of Thagarguri, Islampur, Kolabari, Demdema along with others in Kokrajhar District were trained in sericulture occupation, weaving and modern agriculture techniques. Experts from the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad exposed the weavers to the latest trends in fabrics. Youths of Taiphaneng are given driving lessons by police drivers. Artisans have received advanced training in bamboo craft, making of venetian blinds, etc. As a part of the mission, women are encouraged to take active part in the community affairs and are given guidance on maternity and reproductive health. Whether it is facilitating the setting up of a rural library, planting of trees or harnessing excess water to irrigate the lands, Project PRAHARI is committed to proving that India's rural poor are capable of collaborative action to better their lives. No wonder then, that this novel experiment is being replicated elsewhere in the country. The Assam Police, and Kula Saikia, who dreamed of and initiated this unique mission, have proved that the long arm of the law does not just reach out to catch an offender, but can build bridges of friendship too.