

FEMALE AEGIS OF THE FOREST

An account of the female rangers in Assam

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When we think of women, the typical visual that comes in our mind is grace and beauty. We often do not associate women with strength but resilience. Not with pain, but tolerance. Not with knowledge but wisdom. But, women throughout generations have proven to be great negotiators, fighters, legislators and most importantly, leaders. Now I encourage you to think about forests. A lush gigantic green forest, beaming equally with life and danger. Every corner hiding something- rare beauty or a gruesome death. Now, I ask of you to picture a woman in a forest. No, not a willowy, delicate women collecting flowers or sitting beside a waterfall looking ethereal. I want you to imagine a woman cadet in a camo uniform, scars in her face and a gun on her shoulders, badge on her chest and hair tied in a bun and eyes scouting for dangers from animals and humans alike. That is where our subconscious is questioned. And let us address that discord today.

The world has seen a swift rise in women's involvement in different fields and cultures of life. An increasing number of female frontline rangers has become a common sight as greater number of girls and women opt a life in the jungles. What compelled me to initially write the article was the fact that no one I worked with knew about the Female Ranger's Day, and there is a chance you might not know it too. 2021 marks the first ever year to celebrate June 23 as "World Female Ranger Day" with the tag: **"To be a ranger, you must first believe in yourself. If they can do it, so can you"**. Studies have suggested that the global women task force is somewhere between 3-11%, which is suggestively low. The Chitwan Declaration during the World Ranger Congress in 2019 was a crucial moment in the history of female rangers getting recognition and addressed subjects like equalizing gender in work-force, reinforcing equal pay and providing support, protection and promotion to female rangers. This made me curious about the female rangers of our Assam. To

explore more about this, I travelled to Kaziranga National Park (KNP) to talk the women in protection there. KNP boasts of around 40 female rangers which includes Range Officers, Forest guards, Forester 1s, Constables and Staff under deputation. This National Park and World Heritage Site has 5 major ranges- Burhapahar, Bagori, Kohora, Agoratoli and Biswanath. From Forest guards to Range officers, women have become a crucial part of Kaziranga's forest protection team. I hoped this trip would help me get a clear understanding of their life, aspirations and motivations and subsequently hurdles they face from others as well as from themselves.

Burhapahar, the western-most range of the Park hosts a special team of women under the banner of State Rhino Protection Force (SRPF). The group comprises of 74 men and 8 women, patrolling every day to protect the vulnerable Greater One-horned rhinoceros. 5 of those women are currently in Burhapahar, the group I wanted to meet. Upon arrival to the Range Office, I see them for the first time and they are just a regular group of early 20s women, smiling and talking amongst each other, dressed in camo with rifles hung from their shoulders. I observe them as I sit down and take off my face-mask. Their nails are painted but their fingers are tightly wrapped around the comb of the SLRs (Self Loading Rifles). Their hands are adorned with bangles, along with water-proof watches. Their hair is tied in beautiful compact waterfall braids, but neatly tucked inside the cap of the forces. The sun-burnt skin, freckled cheeks and curious eyes belong to Jonti Sarkar, Bhagyawati Gwala, Beauty Pegu and Sumala Doley who joined together as SRPF in 2016 and since have become family. To the untrained eye and unacquainted mind, they look innocuous. "But, don't get fooled", says Jukti Bora, Forester 1 of Burhapahar range of Kaziranga National Park, as I walk into the room, **"They are our pride"**. I smile and proceed to sit down with them, take out my notebooks and pen, aware of their eyes on me. With a big breath, we start talking.

Duty and deference:

Talking about their duties, they said it transcends day and night, over land and water, particularly in times of monsoon when Kaziranga famously floods. Patrolling in Burhapahar and parts



of Bagori, they are trained in river patrolling, night false fire drills, handling of arms and highland duties to deter poachers. **"I have not left a single stone upturned in training these girls"**, says Pradip Goswami, current Range officer of Burhapahar range of Kaziranga National Park. He has seen very inconsequential differences in their performances and say sometimes, because these girls have *"junoon"* (craze), they end up doing better than the guys. During joint patrolling with the Police, they end up being the first line of defense. The police trust them more to shoot in reflex and keep the group safe rather than them doing it. Beauty Pegu fondly comments "Our police brothers depend on our SLRs (self-loading rifles) and we depend on them for encouragement."

Recalling their recruitment, the girls gush how there were around 2000 women who applied for the job and they ended up getting it. Bhagyawati Gwala exclaims "I was over the moon! I couldn't believe our luck,". They went on and on about their training and how tough it was on their bodies. But not once, did I see a hint or reminiscence of any injuries in their eyes. The spark in their eyes tell me that with the right motivation and success, **a women's dedication can be stronger than a man's will**. Sumala Doley, says "Every day I put on my bangles, put on my *bindi* (a colored mark on the forehead), pick up my gun and march to the heart of Kaziranga. I will not have my life any other way...I was born to do this." Beauty, affirms how understanding the department is when they aren't feeling much better health-wise. "Our seniors and us have some sort of an unspoken bond of understanding... when they see us not in the best shape, they purposefully change routes of patrols to accommodate us and our health which motivates us to no bounds. We, in turn, end up doing the patrol with more mental focus." I couldn't help but feel sometimes, mental gratitude overshadows physical grief. Talking about which training they loved the most, Sumala mentions how firing training has been crucial in her character development. "Once the bullet is out of the trigger, no one can bring it back", she says, **"Much like in life...it is an unforgivable mistake-so we have to be very careful. Firing discipline has changed my life..."**, she says with fondness. Jonti Sarkar, smiles and said she loved the physical training which built up her strength. "I tell my guy friends- 'Punch me all you want, I feel no pain'!", a common joke when they go out, she laughs.

Family- a source of support... or not?

Talking about family, Bhagyawati calls herself a rebel. She is from a very financially weak, Adivasi family from Biwanath Chariali. Being the youngest of her siblings, she opted to join the protection force as an act of revolt. When she expressed her will to join the force, people around her including her family, were terrified and argued- "How will you ever stay safe since you are not a boy? How will you





keep yourself safe from people and animal alike?”. She says it was the body-shaming that really enraged her. Being always thin and lean, she willed herself to run, exercise, swim to a point when she became stronger than her brother! She went ahead, joined the force and is now her family’s and village’s pride. **“Everyone calls me the Protector of Kaziranga back in my village! They are so proud of me”**, she says with a smile. In terms of education, turns out none of them were from the background of either wildlife or forestry- most of them are either graduates or simply high-school pass-outs. They tell me protecting the great one-horned rhino is the biggest degree they can get. What I was also curious is if the presence of such an area- in this case, KNP, influences how communities around it become sensitive and open to the idea of their children working for the forest department. Almost all the people I talked to have never attended any wildlife/forest meeting, webinars, conferences, workshops or fests to be sensitized to it.

They have grown up seeing it, they have breathed its fresh air while running under the shades of the century-old towering trees. They have seen the majestic creatures from their windows and heard their calls in their sleep. It is inbred into them. I later found that it is a social phenomenon extensively studied in sociology called the Supra-individual factor development. The most natural way they get into forest duties is by continuous exposure to wildlife. **“They become experts at a very young age”**, says Ramesh Gogoi, Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), Kaziranga National Park. “Almost on a daily basis, they encounter those animals and the opportunity to witness behaviors of those animals. This makes them sensitive to the complexities of the animals, and some of those people decide their destiny is to protect them.”

The community has also been a catalyst in the protection of KNP. Bibha Sonowal, Forester 1, Kohora, KNP tells me no matter how poor, the fringe communities support education and profession in forest, wildlife and enforcement. She tells me she will send her two sons in a heartbeat if they ever express their will to join the forces. She is married with two kids and have been serving as a part of Assam Police Battalion in the Central Range of KNP for many years.

What does marriage bring?

Another very common approach to hiring male staff in areas of protection and enforcement is the perceived uncertainty of how marriage or children might affect a women’s life. Bibha here is a prime example. Growing up as the only girl child of her family and the only one among her brothers to carry on their father’s forest duty legacy, and then subsequently getting married to a Muslim guy- she recalls no one batted an eye when she opted to work in forest. Her two sons are incredibly proud of her, and so are her in-laws. “There is nothing I cannot do. I love my sons, my husband, my

family and similarly the forest. Hence, I look after all of them. **I cannot exist without the other.**”, she says with a twinkle in her eyes.

Analyzing the historical social prejudices of the purpose of marrying off girls as soon as they reach their 20s, what I have think, is merely to work and not stay idle at home. But, the catch is society dictated precisely *where* we allow the women to work. They might not be allowed to work in a school, but they have to slog from sunrise to sunset at their in-laws. Society didn't believe in paying women wages for work, because why does she need her own money for doing something that is simply her duty? Her husband will provide, won't he? But thankfully, we have come a long way since then.

Sometimes, it is also not uncommon to fall in love while working in the same line of work. The women in Burhapahar laugh at the question and tell me that is exactly the case with Sumala! Sumala blushes and tells me her husband is currently also in the defense. She tells that he understands how crucial it is for both of them to have a job because every day they gamble on their life. The male-dominated aspects also arise a lot of taboo in the small hamlets they come from as well. Consistent berating questions about 'who they're patrolling with' becomes a bigger concern rather than what the risks might be. Jonti dismisses the misogyny and quotes, "If there is an emergency in my village, most of the time the men don't come to help. Here, if we are even in a tiny bit of danger, our team brothers do not think for a second before jumping to rescue. That's what I tell my mom. Men here are better than our village!" The support from family is crucial as their colleague, Pallavi left in the early days of training because she was not supported in this line of work. "We might have lost a talented and capable cadre", Bhagyawati says. This is a stark reminder to us, that amongst happy times- stories like that still prevail. Sumala got married while she was in training and then joined after her wedding. The day after she got married, she was back in duty, she says as a matter of fact. Her soft yet stern voice almost made me think how she spent a day dressed as a beautiful bride and the very next day, put on her camo uniform. How her shy smile was replaced by determined eyes. How easily she managed to carry a dupatta one day and carrying a rifle the next. My eyes welled up multiple times during my conversation with



them- but yeah, let's get back to the story.

Support v/s struggle:

The Government and Forest Department of Kaziranga National Park has been crucial to building this system. Jonti says she is incredibly grateful for the government who played a crucial part in providing an opportunity for girls and women whose dream is to work in forests and realize their dream of becoming front-line rangers. The Government has already put a lot of provisions regarding women in various workforces but provision must be followed by participation. Participation has to come from the acceptance from society. Society will change with individuals. "The day, parents will open savings account for their daughters with both education and marriage, is when we know society has changed", Jonti asserts. **"Money is not everything, but money, in the end is everything to a deprived household. Girls need to be motivated to earn their own."** It doesn't take much time to completely give up on a system when cases of discrimination, sexism, prejudice and patriarchy comes into play. But these women have moved past that with much grace and gratitude and it left me utterly I was fascinated. Bibha tells me, how by encouraging her sons, she is doing a duty for the future. "My sons see me put on my uniform every day and are always in admiration. I am glad that while protecting the forest, I am also making sure I extend the future protection through my kids.", a poignant statement of a mother. "I urge all mothers to support their girls to follow their dreams. Children need to know their mothers believe in them", says Sumala. **"We are here because my mother believed in me"**, Bhagyawati somberly articulates. I couldn't help but agree. I, too am here because my mother believed in me.

Inspiration to many:

Sometimes, it just takes one girl to change the tradition of generations. "These girls have opened the door of possibilities to not only girls and boys in their villages, but also parents and children all over the state. From tourists to officials- everyone is astounded to see them working so diligently. **Their**

presence has inspired many and will continue to do so, I'm sure", says Jukti Bora, Forest 1 of Burhapahar. Presence of women in enforcement has a lot of positives as well as necessities, especially comes in handy with raids. Many a times, operations cannot be followed precisely due to absence of women in the team. According to the DFO, Kaziranga National Park the women here perform at par with the men.

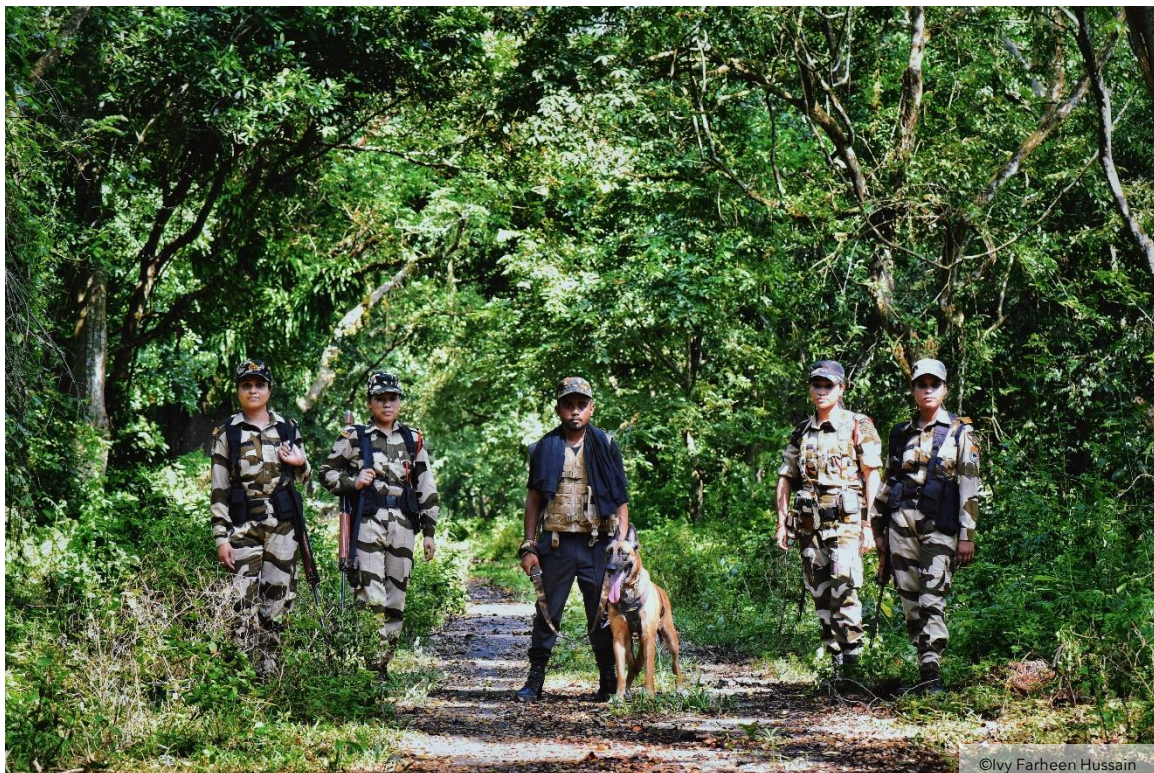


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Their understanding levels mostly outweigh that of men. “They are as good in management as in command,” says Ramesh Gogoi. Historically, there are many instances of women being efficient planners, skilled strategists and trade experts. Battles have been won with a women’s mind behind it. It has been quoted how a man might win a war, but a woman might save more lives and still win the war. Many a times, people don’t comprehend the assets of those women and end up not fully grasping their potential contribution to the field. While travelling back and forth the ranges, I came across more groups of other women in enforcement who, I later learnt, were in deputation duty from Assam Police. “These women patrol the highways here in KNP so efficiently in the blistering sun and rains. However, where they work full-time, they are mostly given filing duties in the offices. This is a big waste of their potential. They are more than capable, but societal values are not easy to break”, says Gogoi. I want to urge everyone, not only the forest department, to give the women a chance to perform. **I have given them a chance, and I have not once regretted it**, emphasizes Ramesh Gogoi. **“I am sure, they won’t too.”**

Equality v/s equity: How exclusiveness can sometimes be counteractive

Considering equal pay, equal participation and upliftment of women in the ranger force, we still have a long way to go to address things in terms of gender-based work violence, sexual



harassment and above all, exclusivity. These changes won’t come easy. “The field rangers have been masqueraded as this exclusive macho boys club. Gender balance will take a lot of work and interventions.”, says Rohit Singh, Director, Wildlife Enforcement and Zero Poaching, WWF Wildlife Crime ACAI and who also serves as President, Ranger Federation of Asia. For example, the Akashingas of Zimbabwe, Black Mambas of Africa and the Special Rhino Protection Force of Assam- all are almost strutted to create an atmosphere of upliftment and inspiration. But this can also be counter-productive. **“This gives rise to elitism in the force,”** explains Singh. Within Kaziranga itself,

there are many women who work in different enforcement agencies like police, SSB and Army. So, emphasis to one group might create situations of inferiority complexes and demotivation. By trying to uplift women, we end up isolating other women. “We need to celebrate women rangers under the current umbrella of Rangers without having to create another day for them”, Singh states. He has a point, this might in the long run become an issue of inter-gender discrimination. “We don’t need to create additional problems when we already have many unsolved ones!”, he opines. He fondly recalls how the first female forest guard from Rajasthan, stood up in a forum and responded to a question of how can women be made to feel comfortable in the ranger workforce. She said one impactful line- **“Apne jaise man lo! (Take us as your equal!)”**. That might be one of the best things I’ve heard in a while. We don’t need privilege; we just want the same things.

Miles to go before we preach:

This is just the beginning. A lot has been done. But a lot remains, as well. This entire journey clarified my vision of how, on a daily basis, century-old perceptions are being changed. The work these women all over the world is paving the way of unimaginable prospects. Networks of social changes like this affects groups of individuals, rather than individuals. The mere visualizations of women working in previously un-common workspaces, can have far-reaching changes. We need to change the structure of every workspace and eventually societies where the individuals are embedded. If we can change the structure of the society, we can change the individuals. Women front-line forest rangers in India have come a long way. From the sweltering deserts of Desert National Park in Jaisalmer in Rajasthan, to the dry and parched Gir National Park in Gujarat, to the wet, humid and inundated Kaziranga National Park in Assam, these women are trail-blazing through the patriarchy in India.

Now, all that is left for all women to is decide what they want to wield- a pen to write, a rifle to protect or a baby to nourish. And you best believe she’ll do a damn good job while she is at it.