

**REPORT OF THE STUDY TEAM ON WORKING OF**

# **PROJECT PRAHARI**

**A COMMUNITY POLICING INITIATIVE TOWARDS  
MITIGATING SOCIAL EVILS**



Evaluation Study Conducted by  
OKD INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL  
CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT



Study Instituted by  
ASSAM POLICE

## A FEW WORDS

After almost 15 years of the launching of community policing initiative called “Project Prahari” by Assam Police in August, 2001, it was felt imperative that an evaluation of the project should be carried out by an independent organization examining the various issues including its success and failures so that one could take appropriate steps for the time to come.

It is hoped that the report submitted by the OKDISCD would provide an independent evaluation of the Project Prahari and its working so as take to it forward for better result. For any suggestion/ comments, the Nodal Officer of Project Prahari, Kuladhar Saikia, IPS may be contacted at e-mail [kulasaikia@yahoo.com](mailto:kulasaikia@yahoo.com).

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## FOREWORD

In order to understand the extent of reaching out to the marginal community members of the state through Project Prahari since its inception, it was felt necessary that an independent research study was carried out. It was expected that such a study would help the Assam Police personnel and other stake holders of the project to have an objective balance sheet of the post intervention outcomes in villages where the Project was initiated. Accordingly Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development (OKDISCD) was entrusted with the evaluation study of the Project Prahari.

We hope that the report submitted by the institute would be of immense help in taking the project forward with better and effective strategies in coming days.

(Kuladhar Saikia, IPS)

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## PREFACE

The State of Assam has been witnessing sporadic incidences where some people are being branded as witches and subjected to humiliation, torture, and social ostracisation. This report is about the post intervention outcomes in villages where 'Project Prahari', an Assam Police initiative since 2001 to prevent such type of offences of witchcraft and social prejudices has been operational. The report is an outcome of a study conducted by Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, at the behest of the Assam Police.

The study highlights how the community policing activities under the Project Prahari could bring in changes in the mindsets of the people residing in several villages prone to witch hunting and related crimes. It was revealed that Prahari initiatives could provide a platform to launch a proactive strategy against social prejudices through collective campaigns, which was reflected in reduction of witch hunting cases in the Prahari villages. The study is based on extensive fieldwork.

We earnestly hope that the research study to evaluate the working of Prahari would benefit the police investigators, and law enforcement agencies, community campaigners, policy makers and researchers, which will help in elimination of witch-hunting.

Indranee Dutta, PhD  
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## INTRODUCTION

The policeman, who is the most visible contact for the citizens representing the government, is entrusted with a very crucial and complicated role to maintain law and order. Functions of police often are highly prohibitive and regulatory in nature, making people hold them in awe, making them feel that they interfere with life, liberty and dignity of common people. At the same time they are the ones to turn to when someone is faced with danger, crisis and difficulty, for support. This unique position places the Police Station as a unit and the policeman as an individual in a very complex and contradictory stance. Police in this part of the country has to function within extremely difficult situations fraught with militancy and have to deal with marginalized people living in backward and remotely located areas, where one could see some instances of superstitions and beliefs in witchcraft etc. Also militancy related violence in these areas are not unfamiliar. All these create law and order situations. It is true that police is trained to handle insurgency and militancy cases, following certain set procedures and strategies, but there are no such specific mechanisms for dealing with witch-hunting cases, even though few in numbers.

Thus, naturally for those with the responsibility of maintaining law and order and to protect the general public from harm, witch-hunting cases have come as a big challenge. This challenge is compounded in absence of an instrument to deal with such instances<sup>1</sup>, which are something more than mere law and order situation, having much deeper implications, both for the individual victim as well as for the society. However, in most cases witch hunting related cases are regarded as private family related issues and deaths as usual murder cases. At times, it becomes difficult for the police to have any clue about the death of a person under such circumstances as villagers are mostly tightlipped about the case. Usually, the entire village gets entangled with the crimes, which they perceive as legitimate acts on their part. Thus, witch hunting cases remain un-

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<sup>1</sup> Currently however, the Government of Assam has passed a bill called Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2015, to deal with the growing menace of witch hunting in the State. With the passage of this Act, it now recognizes all cases of witch-hunting as non-bailable, cognizable and non-compoundable offence.

reported or under reported, camouflaged as normal cases of violence, torture or death. It was Sri Kuladhar Saikia, an officer of Indian Police Service, who as Deputy Inspector General of Police, in the Western Range, and posted in Kokrajhar in 2001, a district notoriously fraught with both insurgency and witch-hunting, thought deeply and made a critical and objective analysis of both the phenomena, and thought out a strategy to counteract the both.

His whole idea was to treat these incidences not merely as cases of law and order, but to consider them as social maladies requiring differential approach. He approached the situation from the perspective of Community Policing, which would hit at the root cause of the social affliction, by allowing the law enforcing agency to play a major role in preventing recurrence of such incidents. This idea of Shri Saikia led to the birth of the project '*Prahari*' in August 2001, as a people friendly policing project of Assam Police to deal with the twin problems of insurgency and witch-hunting. By placing police as a potential problem solver, he tried to secure community trust with police-driven partnership based on community needs in development activities. Through increasing daily friendly contacts with the people and to getting them to take part in collaborative development activities of the society with police, ultimately the aim was to hit at their collective mental arena and changing their mindset regarding insurgency or belief in witchcraft. This was the innate objective of Prahari. Currently, the project Prahari is operational in more than eighty odd villages of Assam. The project, which has sustained for the last fifteen years, has created renewed interest within and outside the State among the law enforcing bodies.

**In this study an attempt has been made to ascertain the effectiveness of the Project to reach out to the marginal groups as a community policing initiative through an independent and objectively carried out researched evaluation work.**

Before going into the details of the analysis, it would be worthwhile to give a description of the Project Prahari.

## **Background of the Project Prahari**

What happened on that night in the remote Thraigarguri village, located at a distance of about 50 km from Kokrajhar town was indeed something beyond ordinary. On this fateful night five innocent villagers were brutally killed on suspicion of being witches. Presided over by the Gaon Burha (village headman) Samarendra Narzary the nighttime meeting of the senior villagers

decided the fate of these victims. Their crime was decreed by the priestess who declared that the number of unusual deaths that the village experienced in the recent past was nothing but the handiwork of five witches, four men and a woman, belonging to the village. The village court led by the Gaon Burha Narzary uttered death sentence to all. This pronouncement was enough to incite the frenzied mob to lynch the five persons to death. No regret. No remorse. Everything was being done for the sake of the community's greater good, at the expense of the lesser good.

The incident in Thaugarguri stirred the conscience of 'Police' as the law enforcing agency, at their apparent helplessness in preventing such happenings rooted in social systems among certain sections of people. Their predicaments were made ever complex by heightened terrorist activities and difficult terrain of the Kokrajhar district. Idea of a different approach to traditional policing was triggered by this specific incident of witch-hunting that occurred in the Thaugarguri village in the night of 25<sup>th</sup> May 2000 and the ongoing militancy in the area suffering from isolation and underdevelopment. The out of box thinking by the new Deputy Inspector General of Police Shri Kuladhar Saikia who had just joined as the new incumbent to the post in mid 2001 led to the birth of a unique initiative named Project Prahari to root out the twin problem of social delinquency and insurgency. The term 'Prahari' stands for 'People for Progress' in local language, and which also literally mean 'watchman' in Assamese, is essentially a mission. With the initial success at Kokrajhar, the Project also entered other areas when the then Director General of Police of Assam Police Shri Harekrishna Deka, IPS, declared it to be a state level initiative.

The initial persons associated with the management of the Project were a set of devoted and sensitive police personnel, whose relentless efforts saw the growth and development of Prahari. The responsibility of state level Nodal officer was placed on Shri Saikia under the Chairmanship of DGP, Assam and all the Deputy Inspectors General (Ranges) acted as Range Nodal Officers, and the District Superintendents of Police acted as District Nodal officer while the Officers in charge of Police stations were made the Police Station level Nodal officers in the state.

## **Major objectives of Project Prahari**

Basically, the aim of Prahari was to inspire healthy and cooperative police public interface to build the bridge of friendship between law enforcement agencies and community members and

to ensure community participation in development activities leading to peaceful living conditions. Some of the specific objectives of the Project are:

- Prevention of social conflict, delinquencies and eradication of superstitions and prejudices like witch hunting, black magic etc.
- Empowerment, knowledge accessibility and capacity building for vertical mobility.
- Social participation, decision making, development and management of community development.
- Foster community ownership of development.
- Bottom up strategy in contrast to the 'trickle down effect'.
- Reconnecting the individuals with community and communities with the government and economy.
- A face to the uniform.

In other words, the whole idea is to transform community strength to socially meaningful activities for prevention of social delinquency and militancy. The basic philosophy guiding the project was to have the community as the prime mover of developmental activities in the locality, with police by their side. This called for getting the community to participate in decision making process so as to give them the sense of ownership of development in their areas. As an approach it was inclusive, reconnecting the individuals with communities and communities with the government machinery especially the law enforcing agency.

It was clear to the sensitive police personnel in the State that crimes and terrorist violence occur as a result of acute poverty and backwardness, locational disadvantages and general ignorance of people residing in the remote areas, which are severely disadvantaged and suffer from lack of exposure to the wider world. This also affects the daily policing activities. Project Prahari's requirement for frequent interactions with the community members in a most positive way, helped in establishing a kind of bridge of friendship and mutual cooperation between police and the community. From this, a two way benefits is expected. While it would bring about more accountability of the law enforcing agency to the public, it would help police immensely by the intelligence inputs coming from the community. Thus, it is expected to lead to the reduction and prevention of crime and terrorist violence, social tensions and ethnic conflicts.



The Project is planned in a collaborative mode, where the local police would play the most crucial role in networking with community partners engaged in developmental activities in the villages. These community partners could be different development agencies like NGOs, village institutions, self-help groups, youth and women groups etc.

Thus, the police would act as a *change agent* in this process of people friendly policing. These acts are aimed at making people confident about their own capability, infusing in them a sense of self worth, which got crushed because of poverty and other disadvantages giving rise to a feeling of helplessness. The Project also aims at being self sustaining in using local resources in generating activities linked to their day to day living.

### **Criteria for inclusion of a village into the Prahari fold**

Guided basically by the concerns for people and their existential realities, any of the three situations make a village suitable for initiation of the Project.

1. Backward and isolated village with predominance of socially under privileged classes with superstitious beliefs and prejudices affecting their community life .
2. A criminal or terrorist prone area;
3. Community sensitive pockets in the State;

### **How does the Project proceed?**

As mentioned above, the local police play the role of a catalyst in the entire process. Police, after making several trips to the locality try to understand the psyche of the local people and also try to understand the potentiality of the site. Then Community Management Groups (CMGs) are formed by the people with encouragement of police. They draw up plans for their own activities in the village and prepare a kind of action plan. This is then brought to the notice of the Governmental agencies, NGOs, social activists, financial institutions so that an integrated approach to sustainable development is achieved by using facilitating work by infrastructural and manpower resources of the police and the community.

## Objective of the present study

The basic purpose of this study is to make an assessment of the effectiveness of the *'Project Prahari'* initiatives in fulfilling the avowed objectives with which it was initiated. Essentially it tries to understand the outcomes of interventions made by the initiatives of the Project Prahari, to prevent recurrence of social delinquencies like witchcraft related incidences. **The study would examine to what extent Prahari was able to transform the community energy and strong bond of these marginal groups into some purposeful community activities rather than putting community decisions into committing offenses of social prejudices and ill practices of witch hunting and black magic.**

## Methodology

The nature of the study requires a comprehensive understanding of the innateness of the Project Prahari. Therefore, the study followed the methodology used in qualitative evaluation. Samples were purposely selected to represent information rich cases, for study in depth. Villages where Prahari worked and would illuminate the questions under study were included for detailed analysis. As is the case with qualitative inquiry, this study typically focuses in depth on relatively small sample villages. However, secondary sources were also used in the study to supplement the field findings. A wide range of police personnel who were directly involved at the inception of the project, as well as those who implemented the concept at later stage and are currently engaged, were interviewed. Through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with villagers, personal interviews with the village leaders, prominent individuals and technical persons who were involved with the project, valuable information could be gleaned about Prahari. Besides, a number of persons from the NGO sector, who worked closely with Prahari were also consulted for better understanding of the Project. Altogether six villages were visited where Prahari has been active and also ten other villages where incidences of witch hunting are currently taking place. A set of detailed open ended questions guided data collection from each of the sources<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Questions are provided at the end of the report.

## **Study Results and findings**

The findings of the study are tried to be thematically organized taking the objectives of Prahari in view, although the themes are often overlapping. The findings have been grouped under five different heads, viz, 1. Social participation, decision making, and management of community development; 2. Empowerment, knowledge accessibility and capacity building for vertical mobility; 3. Prevention of social conflict and delinquencies; 4. A face to the uniform and 5. Campaigns against witch-hunting. The narratives also tries to reflect Prahari's hidden objective to change the mindset of the people so far as the superstitious beliefs are concerned. What follows is an analysis of the activities of Project Prahari after one and a half decades of its birth.

### **1. Social participation, decision making and management of community development**

Several activities enabled the villagers to get engaged in community activities and to take decisions for their own development and well being, which also helped them to change some of their unfounded beliefs in witchcraft etc.

#### **1.1 Thaigarguri: A village transformed**

Thaigarguri village, after fifteen years of that ghastly murder, looks serene. Scattered thatched and tin-roofed semi-*kucha* houses surrounded by trees and bamboo grooves, fairly good motorable roads, lush green hues of the paddy fields in mid August, give away a typical rural scene of lower Assam. Yet, a walk through the village reflects poverty and rudimentary existence as is the case with most of the rural denizens in Assam. There are 75 households in the village. Samarendra Basumatary, the village headman, who has life experience of at least more than six decades in the same village, could recollect his association with the project *Prahari* quite vividly and with much fervor. As a President of the project along with Dipali Basumatary as Secretary, both worked with the villagers relentlessly to bring normalcy to the village after the horrifying incident of May, 25 of year 2000, through collaborative activities with the police on different economic and developmental activities.

As a protagonist of witch-hunt and a strong believer of existence of witchcraft in the village, Samarendra played the most vital role in accusing the five dead persons, the victims of witch-hunt

in 2000. On the charge of this crime he along with 17 others were arrested the next day and were released on bail after being jailed for three months. But for Samarendra it was a victory and he was a proud man, because he could free the village from the 'seize' of witches. So were the others. However, the beginning of Prahari led to the beginning of a new era of belief, away from superstitious 'spell'!

As mentioned above, entry of Prahari in 2001 into the village was at this historic moment, when the villagers were steeped in superstitions, believing any adversary in the village to be handiwork of some supernatural powers. After a detailed analysis of the situation prevailing in the village at that point of time, the then Deputy Inspector of General of Police, (WR), identified mainly two basic reasons for this state of affairs- poverty, illiteracy and lack of awareness of modern health care system. He assumed that encouraging them to transform their community energy and strong bond into meaningful activities affecting their own lives might do some good. So, as part of the project, local people were encouraged to identify their own problems themselves and assured all kinds of police support to overcome their tribulations. Samarendra recalled how he along with ten or twelve persons went to Kokrajhar for a discussion with the police officer in charge of the Project Prahari. Samarendra spoke highly about the support that they received from police. *'I loved to be a part of the project. I travelled to so many places, met so many people. I insisted if women should take part in the project. I told them let us forget what had happened in the fateful night of the year 2000. Now we are to put our community strength for bringing in change in the community; let us use them for our own progress'*. He said that, it was for the first time that they had anything positive to do with the police and for that matter with the government. Three other persons joined the discussion with Samarendra and Dipali Basumatary. One of them was a middle aged person who resided in the first house at the village entrance and who accompanied us to the Headman Samarendra's house; a neighbor, and Dipali's husband. The other two men acknowledging the presence of Prahari as something good in the past wished that it should spread to other areas with same vigor. Dipali recalled the kind words of the then DIG, Commandant, SP,A. Phukan, Sub Divisional Police Officer Manabendra Rai and other police personnel of the district and was full of appreciations. Dipali quipped, *'we the women of the village along with the men worked so hard in the plantation site.'* They planted Som trees in 20 bighas of community land and maintained sericultural nurseries, with the help of police. They could rear eri silk cocoon and produce beautiful cloths, having good market value. They could make some profit out of it, although they

kept no record of their profit. The village was also provided with an electrical spinning machine and a generator to run the same. But unfortunately, the machine could not be run for longer time as supporting staff was not there, nor anyone to repair it. The generator is still being used for renting during marriage and other ceremonies in the village, which earns per day Rs. 500-600 to the community. Since it is very heavy, it cannot be transported to faraway places.

Prahari brought in a new era of participatory development and community policing, giving people a sense of responsibility for betterment of their own lives. The Project intended to educate people to appreciate a sense of empowerment, utilization of community potentials for socially meaningful purposes like creation, ownership and management of community assets, building a common platform for people's resistance against the menace of militancy and social violence. Perhaps, the Project could fulfill at least to some extent these objectives and there should have been more intense follow up by the local police. Above all, no case of witch hunt ever occurred in the village after the entry of Prahari.

## **1.2 Wooden bridge over river Kujia**

Construction of the historic bridge connecting village Betbari with village Sarabari over the river Kujia in Bongaigaon district is one of the landmark achievements of Project Prahari. Betbari village, although located not very far from Bongaigaon town, had no proper connectivity with the town. This village is mainly inhabited by Koch Rajbonshi community and houses 150 households with a population of around 800. Located towards east of Betbari by the side of hills, separated by river Kujia, Sarabari village is also equally disadvantaged. This is comparatively a smaller village with 45 households with a population of around 300. The village is inhabited by people from Boro, Rabha, Koch Rajbonshi, Bengali and Nepali communities. Both these villages have an L.P. School but no U.P. School within the village. Children have to walk a distance of 3 km to old Bongaigaon to attend U.P. School or a High school. The College is located at a distance of 10-12 km away. In both these villages health sub centers exist, but without adequate facilities. During monsoon the communications between these villages remain completely snapped. This bridge, made of wood donated by villagers and some corporate entities under CSR activities and by volunteering labour by police and community, has become a boon for these two villages. This was a very unique and successful joint venture of police and community. The then SP of Bongaigaon district was closely

associated with Project Prahari and assisted in several activities in the district through engaged community participation. Because of bad communication system, it was easy for the extremists to take shelter there. Crossing the river was a serious problem without a proper bridge. School going children suffered the most during the monsoon days. There were even cases of children falling from the bridge and dying. During flood the two sides of the river joining two villages Sarabari and Betbari remain detached, leading to unaccountable sufferings of people.

Given the mandate of Prahari it was easy to think of constructing a bridge over that river. The then SP during our interview told how the villagers were overjoyed and actively cooperated with the equally enthusiastic police officers and constables to construct the wooden bridge. The design of the bridge was earnestly prepared by junior engineer of Bongaigaon Refinery and Petrochemical Ltd. Police rendered all their energy with much passion, where villagers added their part, in carrying out the construction activities. In two months time the strong and beautiful 200 ft long bridge was ready. It was incredible even to the police. It was so much help to the community that till now they acknowledge this. For police the greatest benefit was that the communication being smooth, extremists' hideout was broken forever.

Interaction with the villagers of Betbari and Sarabari revealed that these two villages at that time were totally backward. Taking advantage of this, from around the year 2000 insurgent groups started taking shelter in both the villages. They related how at that point of time the DGP of Assam Police along with other police officials of the district, visited their village and held a big meeting with the people from the two villages under prahari. After that meeting with such senior police officials, villagers reported that they felt encouraged and also became closer to police and their fear for police disappeared to a great extent. The construction of the wooden bridge was a big thing for the villagers, which brought in a lot of changes in the two villages in terms of social beliefs, and conflict resolution. It was inaugurated by the DGP, Shri H.K. Deka, IPS himself on 4<sup>th</sup> June, 2002. According to them it was a very strong bridge, and even after 13 years, the bridge stands erect, though a little weak. Villagers have made some minor repairs, but it badly needs more attention as the railings have fallen off at some portions.

Community ownership of development was visible in other areas of the district as well. Bongaigaon soil is somewhat sandy and because of which was not conducive for natural vegetation. Bongaigaon College for example did not have any tree. The police involving community

under this Project planted trees surrounding the college. It was a pet project for the young police recruits. With all their might they planted trees not only within the college premise, but also all around the town at different spots. Community too extended their willing hands.

Regarding the relevance of Project Prahari for today, the then SP Shri A. Borgohain, IPS said, *“Why not? It is very relevant today and most importantly it is the collective mind of the law enforcing body, which actually determines Prahari’s relevance.”*

## **2. Empowerment, knowledge accessibility and capacity building for vertical mobility**

Communities through their association with Prahari, had different types of exposures and information, which they could use for betterment of their community lives. They were able to take advantage of the government schemes, learn advance technologies for up gradation of their skills and be a part of larger networks for assessing the market.

### **2.1. Linking villagers with government schemes**

Project Prahari also facilitated the community to undertake activities which otherwise would have been inconceivable. It connected the villagers with some of the government schemes, which not only brought about economic betterment but also made them confident of their capability. For instance, in Betbari and Sarabari villages, the governmental initiative to teach people to produce hybrid banana by a simple technology of combining two varieties of banana trees, yielded good results. Similarly, they were provided with improved variety of black pepper, betel nuts, paan leaf, coconut etc, which were also successful and life changing initiatives. Villagers report that most of them are still continuing black pepper cultivation, which is giving them good dividends. In the whole process the local police played the role of a change agent.

Women from Betbari village said that a women’s group was formed under the aegis of Project Prahari and around 15-20 weaving loom were given to them. They used to weave different types of clothes and arranged for selling them in Pragjytica, a handloom and handicraft marketing outlet in Guwahati and police liased with the administration to facilitate the work.. Weavers agreed that they were greatly benefitted as they could earn some money. Now some of the looms have decayed or lying unused.

Besides, villagers were supplied with advance variety of pigs, which grow fast and resistant to disease. This could lead the villagers to perceptible improvement in their household income.

## **2.2 Community Weaving Centers- Kalabari and Islampur**

Kalabari village is located at a distance of 42 k.m. from Kokrajhar town. With 80 households and approximately 330 populations, the village is primarily inhabited by people from Koch community. However, they are identified as Rabha people by the outsiders, as reported by Dhrubajyoti Koch, who is the President of Rabha Sahitya Sabha of Kokrajhar district. There are LP and UP schools within the village and a high school and a college at a distance of two k.m. Currently there are 23 graduates; around ten of them are unemployed. There are also five or six school teachers. Kalabari is a beautiful village with lush green paddy fields dotting the village. Basically an agrarian community, people in Kalabari depends upon rain water for cultivation. Villagers lamented how lack of irrigation affects their overall farm productivity.

Project Prahari had come as a boon to the community, when it was initiated in 2001, said Kartik Koch, a Primary School teacher. As is well known, women of Rabha and Boro community are fine weavers. Prahari here began with setting up of a Community Weaving Center (CWC) with ten weaving looms. Initially women were engaged in community weaving and brought out beautiful clothes. Lilaboti Koch and Menoka Koch, the two expert weavers who were closely associated with the CWC, related how enthusiastically they took up the project and produced beautiful garments worn by Rabha and Boro women. All these could fetch them good amount of cash. They acknowledged the support and guidance they received from police during those days. According to them the Project really helped them to come out and work together in the Center. They could sell their goods in Kokrajhar town also. Menoka shared with us proudly that someone from Guwahati visited the weaving centre to show them improved designs, who actually commented that *"there is indeed nothing to teach, you are such fine weavers! Your designs are simply superb!"*. Prahari also facilitated them to join in the exhibition that took place in NEDFI Hut and also take part in the Brahmaputra Beach Festival held in Guwahati in 2005. However, they found it not worth going to Guwahati as it involves lot of money. A Cooperative Marketing agency was attempted at the behest of the Project, but could not make much headway. Villagers were of the opinion that they could get the police fully involved in the Project because the police at that



time was very kind and really guided them to take up community work. *“It was a general belief that police has come forward to do something means it must be something good”* quipped one of the participants in the FGD, which was held in Kalabari L P School on August 9, 2015.

Prahari also made it possible to dig up a dead canal named Longa Canal, which is of around 5 kilometer long. This was a joint effort of the police officials viz SP, Shri Rami Shetty, IPS, DY.SP, Tapan Das and others along with youths of the village. It is still being used for irrigation, although it had decayed to some extent. Prahari did contribute in diversifying their products to produce more creatively items other than simple garments. Now they produce other items like bags, table mats, mufflers, runners and so on having market demands. This, they admit that they are doing because of the exposure received from Prahari.

In a similar vein in 2001, another CWC was opened in Islampur with 10 looms. With the help of police the villagers constructed a half wall house for the weaving center, which still exists. Weavers used to do weaving and produce clothes. Prahari introduced the weavers to the Cooperative Marketing Society at Guwahati, which helped them to take their products to different exhibitions in Guwahati and Kokrajhar. The weaving center also received a solar lighting arrangement from Project Prahari. Now the looms are being used by the individual weavers in their own homes. Although they stopped the collective venture, the weavers in the village are still weaving cloths and selling them locally as well as in the exhibitions. The Mahila Society, opened by Prahari is still functional. Weavers are continuing to deposit a percentage of the sell proceeds in the account of the society and distribute some amount among the members at the end of the year. They never lend money as it is difficult to get back the amount. The villagers reported that under Project Prahari they were also taken to Guwahati to see the mushroom cultivation. According to Shri Nagesh Chapar, a school teacher from Islampur village, a few of them learnt the techniques of mushroom cultivation, which they tried at individual level, but never ventured it for business purpose.

### **2.3 Assorted empowering activities**

In Bokahola village of Dibrugarh district Prahari got itself involved with all most all the important activities of rural economy. It started with community cultivation of rice applying modern techniques in 50 bighas of land; community cultivation of pumpkins along the abandoned

Brahmaputra river beach; two fisheries and a horticultural nursery were setup, which were exclusively operated by women members; and school buildings and the connecting roads were repaired jointly by police and public.

In Samaguri, Baniagaon and Majuli of Jorhat district activities included, construction of residential houses for the homeless through developmental agencies; setting up of fisheries by clearing ponds and rebuilding of roads connecting to neighbouring areas. In Golaghat district, in the village Da-Singimari, two community fisheries along with duckeries were also started. Plantations were also made around the fisheries to be managed by the community. A 100mt. lift irrigation system was launched by digging channel through the Baragharia, Bebezia, Rajapukhuri, Singmari and Panjan villages in the same district.

In village Nilakh in Dhemaji district, activities included soil conservation measures, reclamation of degraded land for community plantation and engagement of youths in the anti-flood measures in this flood and erosion affected district. In Tengapathar village in North Lakhimpur a Library cum Community was constructed with the joint effort of police and public.

The villagers and the police in Bhetapara village in Sonitpur district jointly constructed community wells for drinking water and also did plantation on community land for commercial purpose. Similarly, in Hariamukh village in Nagaon district, drinking water facilities were created with the help of the villagers; plantation of fruit trees and creation of community fisheries were two other economy generating activities which were undertaken jointly. In addition reconstruction works on village road and school building were also done as per the peoples' needs.

In Morigaon district, activities were mainly focused on women and youths. In Kamarkuchi village of Morigaon, unemployed women were given training in tailoring and embroidery and by-cycle repairing to the youths. Weaving looms were distributed to the women through NGOs and weavers were linked to the police cooperative for buying back their handloom products. They were also helped in formation of women self-help groups for self employment. Moreover, joint farm management of degraded forest area for rubber plantation with the forest officials was also initiated.

Reservoirs were built in Muolhoi village in N.C. Hills for harnessing of natural water resources to meet water scarcity in the district. In Borkola Bagicha village in Darrang district, youths were engaged in Fishery, Duckery and Poultry farms. Besides, plantation of valuable trees

was done in the village, micro-credit through self help group was initiated and a local school building was reconstructed to a pucca building.

Building of a community fishery; training and cultivation of mushroom; implementation of golden cow scheme through State bodies; distribution of spinning machines and construction of a community loom center were some of the activities carried out in Deulkuchi in Kamrup district. Lakhipur in Nalbari district got the benefit of formation of a weaver society, which was linked to police consumer cooperative society for sale of their products. Besides, repairing of school buildings and roads were also undertaken and educational tours for the students were also organized.

A music school was rebuilt and also a bridge was constructed in the Madhu Soulmari village in Dhubri district. Villagers here were also trained in eco-conservation processes and reading materials were distributed among poor students. In Naribheta and Rangapani villages of the same district, lower primary schools were rebuilt.

In Basdhar Part-I village in Hailakandi district, the riot victims of 1990 communal clash were rehabilitated through employment generating schemes linking them to the NGOs and government agencies. Introduction of low cost sanitary system was another activity there. Besides, surrendered criminals were also motivated for participation in the community development activities. Similarly, in Khagail village in Karimganj as mentioned elsewhere, a number of active dacoits surrendered and got them engaged in community development works. Besides, a horticultural garden was also setup here and a number of house allotments were made under Indira Awas Yojana. A CWC was also setup at Dariduri village in Goalpara district, where several witch hunting cases occurred.

Among all the districts where the Project Prahari had been active, maximum activities have been carried out in Kokrajhar. The Project's engagements in Thaigarguri, Kolabari and Islampur villages have already figured in this report. Like these villages in Demdama village also CWCs were setup and artisans were engaged in loom making. Besides, in Lauripara, women groups were trained in tailoring and embroidery and hand pumps were setup for providing potable water to the villagers. Here a 3km long road was also constructed to connect the village to the nearby town. Similarly, in Nayakgaon, a wooden bridge was rebuilt to facilitate inter district road connectivity. In Debargaon, Kalaigaon and Kulguri, an earthen dam was erected to facilitate management of natural water resources for irrigation purposes. Likewise, a 5km long canal was

constructed through Athaiabari, Sinsilibari, Sarfanguri (East) and Chikut villages for harnessing water for agricultural purposes and also an improvised traditional irrigation system was made through bunding. A 100mts main road connecting Sialmari, Padmabil, Balaphunga, Nepalpara, Nausaili and Lungsung, which was washed away by flood was reconstructed. In fact, this road was the lifeline of these villages connecting to the National Highway. Villagers were very happy at this as this has opened new avenues for the villagers in terms of trade and commerce, social interaction and economic opportunities etc.

In Tinsukia, two villages Tai Faneng and Ning Gam saw a lot of activities. In Tai Faneng, activities like the construction of 4 km gravel road and a bamboo bridge; training in modern agricultural and horticultural technique and utilization of Kishan Gredit Card; training in food preservation techniques to the villagers; training on mushroom production and cultivation of citrus fruits for commercial purposes, were carried out. In Ning Gam village, the connecting road to the village from the town was repaired jointly by police and villagers; steps were taken with the help of the Project in land settlement. Most importantly, a campaign was launched against opium addiction and treatment of the addicts with the help of NGOs as assisted by then SP AJ Baruah, IPS.

## **2.4 Collaboration for technology transfer**

While working and interacting with the people at the grass roots level, the law enforcing body with an eye to rural development realized the need for the use of technology in different sectors of village economy. As such the Project Prahari entered into tie up with IIT-Guwahati, for transfer of appropriate technology to the remote villages of the State covered under the Project. It was an ambitious project. Several prominent persons on behalf of IIT took part in the planning process with the key persons of Prahari. Included among them were the Director, Deputy Director and faculty members of the Departments of Mechanical Engineering, Design, etc. Former Vice-Chancellor of the Gauhati University, Dr N.K Choudhury, who is a member of the Board of Governors of the IIT, coordinated the interactions between the Police and IIT. Dr. Sachin Kakati of the Department of Mechanical Engineering of the IIT was appointed as the nodal officer to coordinate between the Assam Police and IIT for implementation of the projects.

Three key sectors were identified for technology transfer, viz., designing of bamboo furniture for schools and primary health centres, improving the traditional irrigation system used

by different ethnic groups of the State and improving the efficiency of the looms by using mechanised system without using power. Under the leadership of Dr. Sachin Kakaty in February 2005, a team of the faculty members and students of the IIT visited the villages for an assessment of the technological need of the villagers with a view to provide technology for modernizing the traditional tools used for cultivation. There was also plan for setting up bio- gas projects in the villages in a phased manner.

The team had a detailed discussion with the villagers of Thaigarguri, Islampur and Kalabari, where Prahari was fully operational. A report of the visiting team revealed that in Thaigarguri out of a total of 13 spinning spindles at the Community Center, six were performing well and others had some simple mechanical problems. The visiting team taught them how to maintain the DG set, which was donated to Thaigarguri village, to be used when electricity was not available. They also instructed how to maintain the spinning units and to mend the simple snags. The team found the weavers very enthusiastic and receptive of the ideas. Prof. A.K. Das from the department of Design in IIT had a session with the weavers and he suggested many a tips for improvement of quality of the products and also for higher productivity. Dr. Kakoty briefed about the utility and production of Biogas and Vermicompost to a group of about hundred villagers. Mr. M.C. Bora, Project Engineer, TBU of KVIC, IIT explained the procedure of construction of vermicompost plants, practically drawing the entire design on a black board. The villagers expressed their willingness to develop biogas and vermicompost plants. The SDPO Kokrajhar, assured support in carrying out such activities.

In fact, a good beginning was made following the visit by construction of a biogas and vermicompost plant at Thaigarguri village at the initiative of the villagers. Expert masons were sent from IIT-Guwahati as promised, the materials being arranged by the villagers. But unfortunately it did not sustain.

The team reported their experience in Kalabari and Islampur, especially with that of the weavers from '*Talam Temmi Boa-Kota Samity*', who were making good progress and was able to sell their products outside their districts. The weavers there reported that they even visited Darrang to train other weavers on weaving traditional garments. As in the village Thaigarguri, Prof. Das spoke to the weavers about importance of quality and value addition to the woven cloths for better marketability. He also told them about the improvised loin loom developed by IIT-G and its advantages. He also agreed to give training to the group, if they showed interest. The weavers

expressed their keenness to take training at IIT. It appeared that the Project Prahari was taken very seriously by the women, as they came forward to request the then IGP who accompanied the group, to help them repair the Community Center, where their weaving activities were on. However, unfortunately though, the advance training on loom could not be imparted because of certain changed situation in the village due to election and also transfer among the law enforcing agency.

## **2.5 Value addition to local level skills**

Prahari offered ample scope for the community to help police to think along with them as to what exactly was needed for them to raise the quality of their lives. After prolonged interactions with different groups of people in a number of Prahari villages, it became clear to the police that the villagers lacked the required exposure to modern styles of production of the same goods that they are producing at the local level. Moreover, police also realized that the villagers have admirable skills and indigenous knowledge, which if properly channelized could fetch them worthwhile economic value. In absence of such value additions, villagers were losing out on the opportunities in this market driven economy. Therefore, efforts were made to facilitate the villagers to increase their capacity to utilize local resources, their knowledge and skills and develop market driven strategies. Villagers of Thaigarguri, Islampur, Kolabari, Demdema along with seven other villages in Kokrajhar were trained in sericulture occupation, weaving products, and use of modern agriculture techniques through multi agency approach. For instance, experts from the National School of Design, Ahmedabad met the weavers of these villages and acquainted them with the latest and trendy designs that have high market value. Some elements of it could be traced in the Kolabari village, where weavers are currently engaged in several interesting handloom products including trendy bags, mufflers and other household items, which normally villagers do not produce. From the recent visit to the village in the month of August 2015, it became evident that Prahari although no longer operative at the moment had left an impact upon the weavers as they have become more entrepreneurial in using their skills, which once they used merely to meet their simple household needs alone. Similarly, apiculture had become a popular means of earning money in Betbari village of Bongaigaon district, during the initial period. A number of youths from the same village and from Shipansila and Sarapara villages of the same

districts received advanced training in bamboo crafts and making of blinds and other products having good market value by the Cane and Bamboo Technology Center (UNIDO). However, both apiculture and production of cane and bamboo crafts could not make much head way. According to some of the youths who received training, the machines as promised for advanced bamboo and cane crafts, did not arrive and so they could not make use of their skills. However, the 18 youths of Taiphaneng village in the district of Tinsukia, who were given driving lessons by the police drivers, enabled several of them to take up driving as a profession.

## **2.6 Giving voice to women**

One strong realization for the law enforcing body under the umbrella of Prahari was the potentiality of women in contributing to the overall development process of the society and especially eradicating evil practices including witch hunting. Prahari saw larger participation of women in the Community Management Groups (CMGs) in the villages, under the Project. It was encouraged that women should hold important offices in Prahari vilages, so that this normally silent partners could have voice and take active part in preparing the action plans and also manage the community accounts. Dipali Basumatary the Secretary of CMG of Thaigarguri village confidently told this researcher how actively she and her friends took part in the activities under the Project starting from plantation activities to keeping accounts. Although no new activities under Project Prahari are taking place there, women continue to work on weaving etc. by forming Mahila Samiti and SHGs. But currently, they have not been able to make much progress because of dearth of fund. As mentioned before, the villagers had to pay heavily as penalty for the witch hunting cases for getting bails for the arrested persons. This has indeed crippled the villagers, affecting the activities of the women as well. Another impact of Prahari was giving them the much needed knowledge about maternal and reproductive health, which they gratefully acknowledge.

## **2.7 Creation of forward linkages, networking and exposure**

For sustainability of the activities, Prahari tried to provide a marketing network as well. It was possible to establish such linkages with agencies for reaching to the marketable consumers in towns and cities. Their products could make way to the trade fairs and Brahamaputra Beach Festival and NEDFI haat etc. Connecting the weavers to the Cooperative Marketing Society was a

big boost to the villagers, as marketing the products is a major hurdle in rural areas for any entrepreneur. This fulfilled a long standing demand. In some villages like Islampur, this association is paying dividend till now as they reportedly continue to use the sources for selling their products. Such linkages between Police Consumer Cooperative and the village weavers' society were established in Betbari and Sarabari villages of Bongaigaon, Lakhipur village in Nalbari district for marketing of their products.

Moreover, participation of villagers covered by Project Prahari at a Conference on 'Development and Community Policing' held at Guwahati in the prestigious Kala Khetra in 2003 enabled unique opportunity to have the much needed experience with other agencies working for the rural people and also to create some kind of networks. In the open house session during the Conference, members of different NGOs working in the field, social activists and experts on developmental studies interacted with the villagers and provided valuable instructions and other inputs to them. Magsaysay award winner Sandeep Pandey and some of the executives of Lizzat Papad group among others shared their views with the villagers. A visit to the Horticultural Research Station, Pachauli nursery and mushroom production centre etc exposed them to new avenues of economic opportunities.

### **3. Prevention of social conflict and delinquencies**

Engagement of the law enforcing agency in the developmental activities of the backward areas had many positive impacts including the reduction of both the unlawful and criminal activities and insurgency related cases among the community. It is well known that different situations in the lives of people push them to engage in criminal and wrongful activities. The overall underdevelopments, deprivations, lack of avenues for gainful economic activities, meaningful engagement of the youths, are some of the obvious reasons that make fertile grounds for emergence of such activities. Other important factors that lead to rise of a militant or terror groups are ethnicity, religious and cultural assertions etc, which have much deeper roots. The police operating in the State have to face all these critical challenges in protecting the lives of people. The fact that Prahari facilitated police to tackle some of these problems became evident in several cases.



Interactions with the villagers in Betbari revealed that the activities brought them closer to police and were immensely benefitted from the Project Prahari initiatives. One major advantage according to them was that- a better understanding with police helped them deal with the insurgent groups and harassment. Villagers expressed how their general fear for police gave way to confidence, making police approachable for them. Prahari helped them to cooperate with the police in combating insurgency in their locality, by helping them to identify the culprit, while protecting the innocent. This gave a lot of confidence in the minds of the villagers that Prahari can get them justice, which is more often denied to the poor and the voiceless.

Prahari not only helped tackle the insurgency related issues, but also affected the general criminal tendencies in those areas. With coming of Prahari into the villages, not only made it difficult for the extremists to operate but also reduced the overall criminal and antisocial activities. For instance, eleven dreaded dacoits of Khagail village of Karimganj district gave up their arms and illegal activities and came forward to participate in community projects and embraced the goodwill of the community. Indeed, the former dacoits are now actually serving as village policemen and helping the people combat crime at the grassroots level. There were 28 number of dacoity cases in 2000 in Khagail and after the launch of Prahari incidents came down to 11 in 2002 and that until writing of the above report, there were none such cases there in 2003.

The same source also revealed that the rate of insurgency-related crime had also declined in eight villages under Kochugaon police station of Kokrajhar district. Before Project Prahari was launched, nine persons had been killed or injured in these eight villages in 2001. Project Prahari entered Kochugaon one-and-a-half years ago and immediately succeeded in lowering the crime rate. In 2002, only three persons were killed or injured in the area. In 2003, till the month of April only one such incident had been reported and not a single abduction had taken place since the previous year. The write up in Telegraph also left a very important message that “in Kokrajhar, the public response to Project Prahari has compelled Bodo militants to leave the Kochugaon area. The militants could not stop the project because it was the catalyst for development of these remote villages, which had long been neglected by government agencies.”

Similarly, in Basdhar village of Hailakandi district, a number of fugitives surrendered before the police with promise to work for peace and prosperity for the community. Moreover, CMGs had become a meeting point for all kinds of conflict resolutions and ethnic disputes and disharmony Boro areas.

#### **4. Face to the uniform**

Most people can identify a police man by the official police uniform. It has psychological impact both for the people and the police. From everyday experiences of people they tend to form stereotype of what police represent and associate certain characteristics with the uniform. Although this internalization may differ from person to person, depending on their social standing and the nature of interactions with police, but one thing is probably common in all cases is that uniform of the police officer conveys power and authority. Once in uniform, the police officer is definitely perceived in a very different light by the public. Especially in the areas where people are negotiating with insurgency and other criminal activities in their day to day living, police assume a very dreaded demeanor accentuated by their uniform. Thus, police and their uniform come to represent something fearful. This is probably true even for the police. Donned with the official police uniform he or she becomes psychologically and emotionally ready for the role of the law enforcing agent. In both cases, public and the police alike, the human face becomes fuzzy.

Project Prahari helped the police, especially those in the lowest rung to go through a kind of attitudinal changes, which brought about paradigm shift in police-public relationship. All these led to greater and more open interactions between the community and law enforcing agency manifested in higher sensitivity and mutual trusts, never seen earlier. A villager in Betbari village of Bongaigaon district made a significant statement in this regard. He said that *“Prior to that (meaning Project Prahari) we did hardly trust police and had fear for them. But through Project Prahari, we came closer to the police and understood that they are not bad and that they work for the good of people”*.

#### **5. Campaigns against witch hunting**

The genesis of Prahari is based on the witch hunting cases of Thaigarguri village in the year 2000. Obviously, this was the most important implicit objective of the Project. Thus, Prahari played a major role in collaborating with other NGOs and activist groups in spreading the awareness about the unfounded beliefs in the witchcraft or dainibidya, subjecting people to cruelest of torture, killings and banishment from villages. Campaigns against supposed witchcraft

are one major activity of Project Prahari, which are being continued ceaselessly till this date, without disruptions. Few notable campaigns will be mentioned here.

One of the most successful campaigns during the initial period was held at Baida in Goalpara district. The meeting was held in Baida College on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2001. The then SP and other police officials and the then Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district took a lot of initiatives. Letters of invitation to the meeting was jointly signed by the SP on behalf of Project Prahari and the District Project Coordinator (DPC) of Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMMS). The local police from Lakhipur Police Station, general people, a few victims of witch hunting and their family members were all present. This joint activity for eradication of superstitious belief of dainibidya was a hugely successful one. Victim Jonaki Rabha ( name changed), who was chased out of the village, and was separated from her husband for 15 years, could be resettled in her family. Mamoni Saikia the DPC of AMMS in Goalpara, told emphatically *“The meeting had a big effect upon the people and it was only with our joint effort that it was possible for Jonaki to go back to her house and stay with her husband”*.

Joint campaign was also held in Lakhipur in 2006, when another victim Pratibha Rabha( name changed) was killed on charges of practicing dainibidya in Lakhipur. *“Our joint effort was very useful. It was easy for us to settle the cases with the help of police. Project Prahari used to form joint committee with Mahila Samata to take forward the campaign”* said Mamoni. Mamoni also mentioned one important aspect of the campaigns. It helped them to identify in the villages, potential persons with sensitivity and understanding and with somewhat different outlook, who could be tapped for spreading of positive ideas among the rural mass.

In a bid to make people aware about the superstitious beliefs in witchcraft and the resultant miseries upon the victims and the society at large, a meeting was held on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2014 under Project Prahari at a thickly populated tribal village Jyoti Gaon under Dhupdhara circle of Goalpara district. The SP of Goalpara district, OC of Dhupdhara PS and several other police officials attended the meeting and discussed such issues in detail. In this meeting the villagers took part very actively including the President of the village Panchayat Shri Jadav Khaklari. Some of the affected districts in terms of witch hunting in upper Assam are Jorhat, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, especially the Tea Garden areas and the Mishing dominated areas of those districts. Project Prahari came as a big savior and campaigner against witch hunting in these areas.

Several higher level police officers took special interests to help curb this menace, looking at it as something beyond law and order situations.

Discussion with the DIG Police, Shri Satyen Gogoi,IPS, Jorhat district made it amply clear about the dedicated involvement of police officials under portion in trying to restrain this menace of witch hunting in upper Assam. He explained how witch hunting cases occurred in the Tea Garden areas among the Adivasi population and also among the Mishing community. He also mentioned about the deep-rooted beliefs among these communities about existence of some supernatural elements that can cause harm to individual and groups of people in society. These beliefs drive people almost crazy shunning them of any logic and reasoned thinking. Therefore, campaigns under Project Prahari are frequently being held in different vulnerable localities in the worst affected districts of Jorhat, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Golaghat in upper Assam area.

In November 2014 campaign against witch hunting was carried out in Sibsagar district in Aadabari Handique village under Simaluguri Police Station. Another campaign in the same district was held at Demou Police Station. In the same month a campaign was held at Towkok TE under Namtola Police Station in Dibrugarh district. In this meeting the members of team of Birubala Rabha, another well known campaigner who had been collaborating with Prahari campaigns, also took active part, besides others. Members of the Mission dealt in length how an innocent person is made witch without any basis merely on suspicion guided by erroneous beliefs. During that month some ghastly incidents occurred in the Diamooli and Khum Chang Tea Estates. At Line no 3 of Deemoolie TE under Baghjan PS of Doomdooma circle in Tinsukia district on November 2<sup>nd</sup> police rescued two persons namely, Dipu Panika and Bulbuli Tanti from the hands of the irate public. Dipu was reportedly a devotee of goddess Kali and Mangala and he along with his sister and her husband, who are also engaged in helping Dipu in performing the rituals, were accused of practicing witchcraft. A lady ojha, after performing a 'gram puja' pointed at these three persons as responsible for death of two persons who recently died in that village. At this the public started inhuman torture on this trio, with the intention of putting an end to their lives. It was only a fortnight back that a similar incident of witch hunting occurred in Khum Chang TE, barely 18 k.m away from this garden.

Therefore, under the Project Prahari very effective campaign was held in these two Tea gardens involving not only the leading citizens and others, but also the members of Assam Chah

Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) and other members of the tea community. In December 2014, another campaign was held in Chabua TE in Dibrugarh district. The campaign involved prominent social workers and many other civil and administrative personnel and a large number of tea garden workers.

On December 13, 2014, another campaign meeting was held at Kalakhowa Miripathar High School under Borbarua Police Station in Jorhat district. The meeting was chaired by the Head Master of the School. Several prominent personalities including the Principal of Borbarua Jamira College, DC of Dibrugarh district, Dibrugarh SP, and also many other educationists and leading citizens were present at the meeting. Around five hundred people from the locality attended the meeting. It was assured to the people that Project Prahari has been spreading these messages against witch hunting in areas covered by each police outpost, and will continue to do so in future. Before the start of the meeting a health check camp was also organized by Borbarua police outpost, where more than a thousand patients were treated and also distributed free medicines.

During November and December 2014, a series of campaign against witch hunting were held in all the Police Stations in the Jorhat districts. In Borhola under Pulibor Police Station which is located bordering Majuli, several cases of witch hunting occurred and therefore, especial efforts were made to hold more number of meetings with the villagers to spread awareness about the evil practice of witch hunting.

According to the DIG of Jorhat district currently three to four cases of witch hunting are pending in Sibsagar, Tinsukia, Soikhowa Ghat in Sadiya and investigations are on. Compared to the earlier times, cases are coming down steadily. Project Prahari campaigns against witch hunting had its effect in controlling such offenses. Moreover, awareness among the people is increasing day by day. Police is also taking fast and strict actions against the erring persons, restraining activities to some extent. The DIG expressed in an interview with him by the research team.

During interview with the present SP of Biswanath Chariali, Manabendra Rai who has been actively associated with Project Prahari, ever since its inception, it was revealed that he was serving as SDPO, Kokrajhar district, when the ghastly act of killing several persons in one night occurred in Thaigarguri. He took active part in implementing the plans of the Project in the 'Prahari villages'. He personally visited several remote villages and had interactions with the villagers affected by the twin assault of insurgency and witch hunting cases. He could feel that economic uplift is one major aspect which could make situations better for the rural mass.

Therefore, when he was posted in Golaghat, he took up several innovative activities under Prahari in the villages prone to social delinquencies. This yielded positive results.

The terrible incident of killing that occurred very recently in Bhimajuli in Biswanath Chariali on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2015, led under Prahari a big campaign against witch hunting in the nearby Phulbari village, few days after the incident, where DGP, Shri Khagen Sarma, IPS was present along with other leading citizens including doctors. In that meeting besides discussing the ill founded beliefs about witch and its ill effects, economic programs were initiated like roads were built standing together with the villagers, SHGs were formed for taking forward their economic activities. Under Project Prahari several other organizations were involved to carry out more such campaigns and also hold health camps in those areas. *"We should take up such schemes under the Project so that we can help the villagers improve their economic conditions. In every village there should be committees to remain alert for such incidences and to inform Project Prahari people immediately through whatsApp etc. Health personnel in each district should also be made part of this Project so that they can render their help when the need arise"* said SP in an interview with him. Elsewhere in Kamrup district, in a detailed conversation with the SP Kamrup, Smti. Indrani Baruah revealed her experience with the Project Prahari. She said that in later part of 2014 there was an attempt to kill a mother and daughter by the villagers on suspicion of practicing witchcraft in Kukurmara in Kamrup district. Police apart from taking legal actions got them rehabilitated.. Police realized the urgency of carrying out awareness campaign in those localities.

Accordingly, on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2015 police under the banner of the Project Prahari held a general awareness campaign, where a number of senior police officials including the DGP Shri Khagan Sharma and ADGP Kuladhar Saikia, RM Singh, DC, Local MLA were present. A number of NGOs, civil society groups, local police officials and general villagers attended the meeting. Health camps were held where health check up of around 500 villagers was done. It was categorically explained to them that if any health problem occurs to people it is never because someone has done some evil magic on them, rather there are some definite illness of the body which could be cured by doctor's advice and medicines. Dr Jayanta Das, a psychiatrist of repute addressed the big gathering giving the phenomenon of witch hunting a mental health perspective as stated by him. More often than not, branding someone as witch acts as a psychological scapegoat, blaming someone else for their miseries.

During March and April 2015 street plays were organized under Project Prahari in Palashbari and Boko in Kamrup district to sensitize the villagers about futility of beliefs on witchcraft and the great harm that such beliefs bring to people's lives. The SP of Kamrup district is convinced that the activities under Project Prahari are very effective. According to her there should be more of such activities, as she feels that superstitions are increasing in society. She also referred to the visuals shown in local electronic media about a case in Sualkuchi, where a woman was shown to have been afflicted by ghost. There is a need to look at such instances seriously, so that no wrong messages passed on to people. Doctors' involvement is needed in such cases. Project Prahari initiatives are very much needed in the society to carry out not only such campaigns but also to enable other concerned organizations to collaborate with police, said SP Kamrup.

### **5.1 Can community policing act as deterrent to witch-hunt?**

Community policing is widely regarded as one of the most significant developments in policing around the world as a modern way to deal with crime and community problems. In simple terms it means police working in the community and in partnership with communities to identify and solve problems. Like many other social institutions, responding to the rapid social changes and emerging problems, police as a ubiquitous body also was led to rethinking their strategies. This approach differs from the conventional policing strategies which are basically characterized by reactive to incidents, authoritative style and narrowly conceived to meet the immediate demands to contain violence and crime. The essence of community policing is to minimize the gap between policemen and citizen so that the policemen becomes the integral part of the community. Community policing is a broad term that includes the processes by which police engages with the community in finding local solutions to local problems.

Although it is difficult to determine people's attitude towards police as a result of community policing, unless especially designed ethnographic research is conducted, yet evidences in the village Thaingarguri showed distinct positive results in case of prevention of witch hunting cases, which has emerged as a menacing problem in the State. As a part of the Project, awareness programmes against social evils like witch-hunt were undertaken, which had encouraging

impacts. The villagers were also connected to other NGOs working in the field through the Project, which allowed cross fertilization of progressive ideas. Samarendra, the village headman spoke how he attended meetings organised under Birubala mission and other NGOs against witch hunting. Both Samarendra and Dipali spoke quite confidently that they no longer believe in witchcraft and that not a single case of witch hunting ever happened after 2000. This was confirmed with other villagers as well as with the police. So much so that two years since the witch hunting incident occurred in the village, Samarendra along with twenty men and women went to Guabari village of Bongaigaon district to campaign against such acts where another incident of killing by frenzied mob on charges of witchcraft took place. He along with the others went from home to home in Guabari to tell the villagers that in reality, witches do not exist on earth. And that if anybody dies in the families it is because of disease, and not because of black magic power of the witches. He urged the people to take the sick person to hospital and to consult the doctors. Definitely, one must admit that Project Prahari could bring in such changes in the people's perspectives towards witch hunting, which is indeed no mean contribution.

In the absence of a legal piece to deal with witch hunting cases, and the overall reluctance of police to intervene in cases of witch hunting, because of several reasons including vested interests, police personnels' own innate belief in the existence of witchcraft, it became difficult either to prevent witch-hunt or to protect the victims. At times non availability of adequate number of police personnel also hinders in taking prompt steps to contain such incidences. With the introduction of the Project Prahari, it was possible for the police to make meaningful interventions.

We can take the case of Duli Daimary ( name changed) of Latapara village in Goalpara district. In 2011, mother of five grownup children, Dukhuli was branded as a witch and sent out of the village. At this very instant, the nodal officer of Project Prahari intervened and a briefing to the OC of Dudhnoi Police Station, made it possible for Dukhuli to go back to her home, after an year of homelessness and desperation. Similarly, many a lives were saved through prompt and appropriate actions of police, who are sensitized through the Project.



## **6. Prahari: Some possibilities and challenges**

The former DGP of Assam Shri Hare Krishna Deka , while speaking about the project, who was one of the two key persons in fielding Prahari, said that he was happy with the concept of the project put forwarded by the then DIG Police Shri Kuladhar Saikia. He added that the basic fact is that there is no sense of security among the villagers and there is a feeling of frustration and helplessness. It is important to make them feel self confident and to make them aware of their own strengths and capabilities and this applies especially to the women. Here the police can become catalyst by working together with the villagers in seeking solutions to their problems. Police, by becoming nearer to the community can prevent crime and social evils. For instance, the witch hunting or the daini cases could be effectively contained by the police as is evident in the Thaugarguri village, which was the result of direct intervention of project Prahari. According to him the ghastly acts like witch hunting occur because of low level of education and traditional beliefs based on superstitions, lack of health awareness and health facilities etc. Police can play a role in spreading messages while engaging in community activities. Referring to the wooden bridge over river Kujia, he said it not only helped the villagers in numerous ways by replacing a precarious bamboo foot bridge, but also helped police in combating insurgency.

Currently, Prahari has diversified its activities. Under this Project, a workshop was organized on 'Crime against women', in collaboration with CID and National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development(NIPCCD) where DGP, Shri J. N. Choudhury, IPS and other senior police officers and , NGOs, media personnel and experts in the field participated. Trainings were also imparted to the field level police officers. Prahari also worked closely with the State Women's Commission on women related issues. Senior officials of police also have been visiting other states to spread the messages of Project Prahari in different forums including internationally known management and other research institutes. Recognizing the worth of Prahari, Bureau Of Police Research and Development (Govt. of India) has accepted it as a good governance project for replicating it in other states while National Police Academy has included this in the compendium of good practices.

It must be admitted that Prahari, has a lot of potential in combating social evils like witch hunting, crime and militancy. It is true there is a general dissatisfaction among the public with the traditional law enforcement practices, because of varied reasons, including their overall attitude

towards public and corruptions prevalent in the system. Prahari initiatives manifested better acceptance of the law enforcement agency at the field level. Advocates of community policing talk of three types of advantages<sup>3</sup>, viz., community-specific advantages, police-specific benefits and shared benefits. The community benefits because of empowerment of communities to identify and respond to concerns leading to improved local physical and social environment and increase in positive attitude towards police. From the police point of view, it leads to improved police-community relationship; improved community perception of police 'legitimacy' and also an increase in officer satisfaction with their work. Shared benefits are achieved in decreased potential for police-citizen conflict; reduction in crime rates; better flow of information between the police and community; better implementation of crime prevention and crime control activities, as a result of both parties working towards shared goals. Surely, some of the above advantages could be realized through Prahari.

However, community policing as in the case of Prahari is not an easy job. There could be many pitfalls and challenges. There can be challenges with the police system and also within the community. For instance, in absence of strong leadership at the district and field level having commitment to the community policing philosophy, the strategy may suffer. This was evident in many prahari villages, where Prahari could not sustain, despite a good beginning, giving results. It may also come into conflict with the perception of the constables, who have direct contact with the community that this is not the real police work. Three genuine problems that beset the law enforcement agencies are (1) with changing social scenario, crime rates have gone up manifold, leaving less time for the police for engagement in the community policing activities which are time consuming and difficult to achieve immediate results; (2) there is shortage of man power in the police department and (3) policing has become much more complex in contemporary times requiring police to deal with varied societal problems, including duties with the VIPs and VVIPs. Community policing is sure to suffer, when other urgencies of more serious nature surface. Within the community there could be reluctance also to get engaged with the police, as people normally wish to keep them at a distance from the law enforcing body. It was indeed a great achievement for the police to have established a relationship of confidence to combat insurgency in several

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<sup>3</sup> Segrave M. and J. Ratcliffe (2004) Community Policing: A Descriptive Overview, Australian Institute of Criminology.

Prahari villages. Police faced a lot of challenges in tackling witch hunting cases in several villages; they even had to face the mob fury for interfering with the community beliefs.

Moreover, such efforts would require a lot of patience. It is not easy for the police to help change the age old ways of thinking of the people, even if with the help of other agencies. More difficult is to sustain the spirit both at their level and also at the community level. It really needs creativity and perseverance, which for a law enforcing body is truly demanding.

Despite all the pitfalls Prahari initiatives indeed help bring in betterment in rural society in several ways, including reduction in witch- hunting cases in those villages. In final analysis it must be recognized that Prahari has been a tool, a tactic used to accomplish the main objective of changing the mindset of the people.

## **7. In conclusion: 'Prahari' needs support**

It begun with a lot of promises, they produced results and then in the midway some of the initiatives were left uncared for, while some initiatives are still vibrant and some are getting renewed energy. Prahari is a policing experiment with community suffering multiple disadvantages in terms of remoteness of location, poverty, lack of developmental avenues and modern amenities that force people to live a kind of ghettoized lives, full of frustrations and helplessness. These conditions also make it fertile grounds for breeding of insurgency and baseless beliefs like that of witch hunting.

Obviously, as a law enforcing body the police cannot take responsibility of correcting each and every situation that arises under the above mentioned state of affairs. But as the study revealed police can become catalyst to many of the social changes that can be brought in by the community themselves with a little initiative from the police under a specific scheme of things as in the case of Project Prahari. One major lacunae of this Project was that it could not sustain the momentum with which it was started. Discussion with the police officials who spearheaded the Project highlighted several difficulties. Police as a law enforcement agency has gamut of responsibilities that take the main part of their time and energy. Tasks become compounded especially in the areas which are infested with militancy. When the police officials who understood the philosophy and got organically connected with the Project and through that with the rural

community get transferred, the ethos wean out, both for the police and for the community. Moreover, a lot depends on the perceptions about the entire concept of Prahari and attitude towards community policing at the highest levels of the police cadre, for sustenance of the Project.

It must be admitted that in many instances Prahari has fulfilled its unstated aim of bringing in attitudinal changes, giving way to a sense of capability in place of learned helplessness. Getting involved in preparing an action plan as members of CMGs that give them the scope to think about their own lives to actually getting things done by themselves through community decision making is really self enhancing. For instance, getting oneself engaged in repairing a school building or constructing a road as a community only reinforced the normal community values and a sense of community ownership of assets. Through the joint activities with police and coming into contacts with the outside world, there also arose appreciation for education and the need for literacy. Similarly, through health camps and discussion on health and hygiene, and especially on reproductive health was highly beneficial. Being able to express their existing natural talents in weaving and handloom sector through further value addition facilitated by Prahari has been real benefits to the weavers. Getting access to market was another benefit that the villagers acknowledged. Without doubt, Prahari initiatives in providing a platform to launch a proactive strategy against social prejudices through collective campaigns had definite positive impact on people's overall attitudes towards superstitious belief systems. This was reflected in reduction of witch hunting cases in the Prahari villages. According to an informal police source, Prahari villages also saw reduction in recruitment of youths in insurgent groups.

The villagers having experience with the Project Prahari express their keenness to continue with their community activities. Clearly, for all practical purposes, a law enforcing body cannot possibly get involved with the activities once started for all times to come. It must also be recognized that public support is crucial for police effectiveness, for which the momentum once started must be retained. Therefore, it must become the governmental responsibility to help the rural mass to sustain the projects initiated by the community with the help of police. Thus, Prahari can act as a catalyst and an interface between community and the government, provided timely and appropriate follow-up support is received from the State.

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## **APPENDIX**

### ***Questions to guide the discussions with the police personnel***

1. How were you associated with Project Prahari?
2. Could you please tell us something about Project Prahari?
3. Do you think Prahari to be a successful project? If yes why do you think so and if not why not?
4. Could you please share with us your experience with Prahari?
5. Do you think Prahari to be a sustainable project?
6. What would be your suggestions to make it a successful community policing project?

### ***Questions to guide FGDs***

1. When was Project Prahari started in your village?
2. How was it started?
3. What kinds of activities were taken up under the Project? Who took initiatives?
4. How do you think the community benefitted from the project?
5. What were the community feelings for the police prior to the initiation of the project?
6. Was there any change after the project being implemented?
7. Do you think that the project has affected the insurgency and witch hunting related incidences in your village?
8. Do you think that people's beliefs about witch hunting changed because of the project?
9. Would you like to have more of Prahari activities in your village or to spread it to other villages?
10. What drawbacks do you observe in Project Prahari?

### ***Questions to guide the interviews with village leaders***

1. When and how the Project Prahari started in your village?
2. How were you associated with it?
3. What role did you play to make the project successful? How did you motivate the people?
4. Did you face any difficulty to motivate the people to work in collaboration with police?
5. How do you think the community benefitted from the project?
6. What were the community feelings for the police prior to the initiation of the project?
7. Was there any change after the project being implemented?
8. Do you think that the project has affected the insurgency and witch hunting related incidences in your village?
9. Do you think that people's beliefs about witch hunting changed because of the project?
10. Would you like to have more of Prahari activities in your village or to spread it to other villages?
11. What drawbacks do you observe in Project Prahari?

### ***Questions to guide the interviews with other persons/NGOs associated with Prahari***

1. How were/are you associated with Project Prahari?
2. Could you please tell us about your special involvements/ activities with Prahari?
3. Do you consider Prahari to be a successful venture to combat witch-hunting related cases?
4. Could you please tell us some incidences where Prahari supplemented your work; especially helped resolve witch hunting cases under your jurisdiction?
5. What further role do you think Prahari can play in weeding out witch-hunting from villages so affected?