

The greater adjutant stork is one of the largest and most rare storks



CONSERVATION IS ABOUT CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS

Award-winning wildlife biologist, Dr Purnima Devi Barman, has changed the perception of the *hargila* from a scavenger to a beloved cultural icon

words by **Punita Malhotra**

What shaped your perception of the *hargila*?

I had a childhood fascination with the *hargila* (greater adjutant stork) thanks to my grandmother who linked the bird to sacred stories of Lord Krishna and Radha. We had a massive cotton tree at our home in Assam, where the storks nested. I played beneath it, enchanted by

the soft cotton seeds that carpeted the ground. That was my first perception of *hargila*—woven with warmth, wonder, and a sense of divine presence. One day, I returned from school to find that my uncle had cut down the tree because he felt the storks made our home unhygienic. I couldn't understand how something so beautiful

could be seen as a problem. That moment stayed with me.

Later, during my Master's programme, I learned that the *hargila* was endangered. But the turning point was when I saw a man cutting down a nesting tree. Nine nests fell to the ground, baby birds struggling helplessly. When I held one of them, I could feel



Dr Barman made it to
TIME magazine's Women
of the Year 2025 list



**NOW WHEN I WALK
THROUGH VILLAGES, I HEAR
PEOPLE SAY, 'HARGILA IS
OUR DAUGHTER. WE MUST
PROTECT HER.' THAT'S THE
BIGGEST SUCCESS.**

its heartbeat. Something ignited within me. How could such innocent creatures be a curse? I had to act.

How did you challenge the negative perceptions of the bird?

I realised I couldn't do it alone. So, in 2007, I started the Hargila Army, enlisting women. I knew if people didn't feel emotionally connected, they wouldn't commit to protecting it. The solution was to make the bird a part of our tradition and identity.

Slowly, I encouraged them to see the bird as something to be celebrated, not feared. Often feasting on garbage piles, the *hargila*, meaning "bone-swallower", was considered a bad omen. So, it wasn't easy. Slowly, through awareness campaigns and cultural integration, the *hargila* became a symbol of pride. Once a bird of misfortune, it is now honoured in temples, sung about in festivals, and protected with a fervour once reserved for rhinos.

Why did you focus on women as key change-makers?

Women are the backbone of every household. They shape traditions, pass down stories, and educate the next generation. I also felt safer working with them, and found they were open to new ideas. Once they connected with the *hargila's* story, they became its most passionate protectors. They started teaching their children and convinced their families not to cut down nesting trees. By empowering them, we empowered the community.

How did cultural celebrations help bring about a change?

When I first invited women to meetings, they wouldn't come.

BACK FROM THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

In 2007, the *hargila* (one of the rarest species of storks in the world) faced imminent extinction in Assam, with fewer than 450 remaining. But thanks to the groundbreaking conservation effort of Dr Barman and her Hargila Army, the number crossed 1,800 in 2023, prompting the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to reclassify the bird from 'Endangered' to 'Near Threatened' in December 2023. This earned Dr Barman the Whitley Gold Award in 2024, also known as the Green Oscar.



Women of the Hargila Army dancing after a hargila baby shower

That's when I thought about our tradition of celebrating Bihu with *pithas* and laddoos. I started organising *pitha*-making competitions. Women came for the food but stayed for the conversation. We talked about the *hargila* and its role in protecting nature. I introduced the "Web of Life" game, helping them understand how every species plays

a role in the ecosystem. They did not see themselves as conservationists but realised they already were.

How has the mindset changed?

I started inviting women to temples to offer *horai* (*prasad*) for the bird and created wedding songs to sing during its breeding season. One of the most powerful moments was when I introduced *hargila* baby

showers. While we celebrate a mother-to-be, in the animal world, the mother *hargila* suffered as people cut the trees, destroying their eggs. When I proposed the idea, women laughed but soon, something changed. They saw the *hargila* as a mother, like them. Now, the bird has found its way into weddings, school competitions, and even government initiatives.