

Something Happened

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If you ask my judgement the adults spoke sincerely. However, it was when the children spoke, when terror overtook their faces and they were on the verge of tears... I wouldn't have believed it... But in Dharmapur of Dinajpur's Biral Upazila, surely enough, something happened...

To find any scrap of Bangladeshi countryside that's unpleasing to the eye would be difficult. Dharmapur is particularly charming. The road winds alongside a brook, passing in and out of stands of sal – the archipelagic edges of the Dharmapur Forest that nudges the Indian border.

Being in the tea shop game, entrepreneur Shyama Barman can scarcely miss any goings on in Dharmapur. Her stall should win an award for its minimalist architecture. The mud stove is matched by neat, mud benches – a rarity nowadays; a strategically stretched cloth covers the sun's glare and the open walls invite any breeze. Meanwhile the laidback lattice along one side serves to define the cosy space. It's uncommon to find a tea stall as beautiful.

"Of course I was scared," she says, remembering last May, "but the shop stayed open."

The day is bright. Farmer Mohammed Anwar is, for the moment, Shyama's customer – and her tea is equally award-worthy. "They went to school as usual," he says, "Then suddenly they felt delirious. It was like that for about a month. It's never happened before."

Dharmapur Government Primary is not a hundred yards from Shyama's stylish village enterprise. It's an ordinary two-storey building – particularly clean and decorated with painted illustrations of English and Bangla letters, of fish and jackfruit, of portraits of Tagore and other inspirational folk. It has four teachers for the 300 students studying in classes one to five.

In front of the main gate is a small temple. It's empty now. The gate is locked. Since May only the side gate is used.

"There are big trees in the forest," offers Anwar as he finishes his tea. "People hardly go to the deepest places." He speculates that the *bhoot* in question, the



Class 5 student Dilara Khatun with her father Mohammad Dulal. At first he did not believe his daughter saw a *bhoot* in the room. But after some time...



Dharmapur Government Primary School principal, Madhab Chandra Barman, had to go to every house to convince parents to re-send their children to school after the *bhoot* finally left, last May.

supernatural spirit believed to have haunted the school, may have lived in an old tree, as *bhoots* are often thought to do.

"Or it was living in the temple," suggests Shyama.

In the school's office, it's teacher Mosammad Akhija Sultana who greets us. "The students used to relieve themselves at the side of the temple," she soon explains. "We think something happened."

The principal, who arrives shortly, is Madhab Chandra Barman, a youthful 42-year-old eager to share his experience. "It was early morning when it started," he says, "There was a World Vision programme before school. I was at home, still getting ready when I got a message to come quickly. Within two minutes I was here."

He found 11-year-old class 5 student Mosammad Dilara Khatun in a state. She was complaining someone was beating her on the cheeks. She said



It's unusual to find a tea stall as beautiful in its simplicity as Shyama Barman's stall in Dharmapur of Dinajpur's Biral Upazila.



Dharmapur Government Primary School. Clean and tidy, it's a place of learning that's not the least bit spooky.

she'd seen an old man in white *dhoti* walking towards her, and after he sat beside her he started the beating. "She was in the classroom," says principal Madhab, "Nobody was beating her."

Dilara was inconsolable. Not knowing what to do Madhab called 81-year-old Toroni Barman. In Dharmapur it's *dhoti*-wearing Toroni who, like his father and grandfather before him, is known to specialise in exorcisms. "I've treated many," Toroni says, "but never at a school."

With a sprinkling of *panipora* holy water, with the smoke of incense and mantra recitation, Dilara's state returned to normal, at least temporarily.

"The next day," says the principal, "Rebekah was affected. Then Masuma. Then Rita. Then Lija. Then Firoz." Over several days, eight class 5 students displayed the same symptoms. "They all saw the man in *dhoti*," says the principal. "As he left them another saw his approach."

Each day Toroni exorcised. Each day one student's symptoms dissipated. Only Dilara would suffer, sporadically, throughout.

"Firoz is very strong," the principal thinks to add. "When he was affected he was beating himself. He was shouting, 'Somebody is beating me!' Ten to twelve students with the teachers couldn't control him."

Then the principal lowers his voice – it's as if he's unsure whether to say the next part, for fear of its meeting disbelief. "It's strange but when the girls were saying they were being beaten, afterwards we could see finger imprints on their cheeks."

The principal called the Education Department. "There's no such thing as a *bhoot*," his seniors said. They sought to arrange a counsellor but the problem wouldn't wait.

"A *bhoot* is a creature of the air," says Toroni. "It's difficult to understand where they'll go, where they move. There was a *bhoot* roaming here."

On the last day of the anomalies it was Sree Aapon Chandra Barman who was affected – but his symptoms were different. In the first-floor classroom, quite suddenly he raised his hands behind his head in the shape of a cobra's hood. He started swaying, snake-like.

Toroni was called. "What do you want?" he demanded of Aapon.

"The children are relieving themselves on me," twelve-year-old Aapon replied. "It has to stop!" With these words Aapon ran to the balcony and, in front of all, he jumped!

Uninjured, Aapon ran across the yard to the main gate, to the temple outside – and beside it he fell down, losing consciousness.

This time Toroni exorcised not only Aapon but the entire school grounds. The front gate was locked. Nobody passed the temple anymore. Everything, finally, returned to normal.

"The *bhoot* isn't here now," says Toroni. "It went somewhere – it's difficult to say where. But I doubt it'll return."

As word spread most students had stopped attending school. "The area was in panic," says Madhab. "Parents worried what might happen to their children. I had to go house to house to convince each family – it wasn't easy – that the situation was normal again."

Dilara, Lija, Aapon. I shouldn't have asked, I shouldn't have asked! One by one, as they recount what they can, fear takes hold. "I saw a man in *dhoti*..." says Lija. "He caught me and took me to the temple," says Aapon, who doesn't remember jumping. "He was slapping my cheeks," says Dilara.

Unlike the others, the *bhoot* also attacked Dilara at home. "We've always lived here," says farmer Mohammad Dulal, her father. "We've never had a problem so when she first said there was an old man in the room I got angry. I didn't believe her. But after some time... I saw her fear. It was real. She really was seeing something..."