

# GOOD NATURED EP 5

## PURNIMA DEVI BARMAN



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NATURED**  
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CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

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### INTRO

**Julia:** The Good Natured podcast comes to you from Conservation Optimism and its Founding Partners, Synchronicity Earth and the University of Oxford.

**Sofia:** Welcome to Good Natured, a podcast where you can join us for uplifting chats that shine a light on conservation challenges. In each episode, we interview an inspiring conservationist. Our fascinating guests come from many backgrounds: artists, scientists, activists, and many more. I'm Sofia, a PhD student focusing on marine conservation. I love doing science and telling stories through film, writing, improvised comedy and now podcasts.

**Julia:** And I'm Julia, a science communicator, and journalist. I'm passionate about sharing what people are doing to make the world a better place. We know these are quite hard times and that everyone needs to have a bit of a pick me up. So we're hoping that this conversation will inspire you.

**Julia:** Hey Sofia!

**Sofia:** Hi Julia.

**Julia:** Today we're super excited to have Purnima Devi Barman, who is a conservation biologist from India, working with the NGO, Aaranyak in Assam. Purnima is known for her conservation movement to protect the highly endangered greater adjutant stork. She was also the winner of the prestigious Whitley Award in 2017. If you've never heard of the Whitley Awards, it's usually called the green Oscars and it's a very prestigious prize.

**Sofia:** She works on this species called the greater adjutant stork, also known as the hargila and her nickname is hargila baido, or the bone swallows' sister. So just to give you an idea of what the hargila looks like, so that you can really visualise them as we're talking about them through the episode. They are quite big birds, so they're very tall,

between a meter and a meter and a half tall. They have these very light piercing, blue eyes. They have bald heads and they also have a big droopy pouch on their necks. They have a big pointy beak, which looks almost like a wedge. And apparently when they're on the ground, they walk a bit slowly and stiffly so they look almost like a member of the military shuffling over the ground, which is how they got their name in English because adjutant is a military term for an assistant to a senior officer.

**Julia:** I think another interesting thing about Purnima's work as well is the diversity of what she does. You often think of conservation as protecting species but she also does a lot of awareness and education. She gives talks in schools. She is seeking legal protection for wetlands, and that's really inspiring to just see someone tackling the issues that the storks are facing in so many different ways. And I think one aspect of Purnima's work that we're really excited to hear about is the baby showers that she does for the storks. And so we can't wait to hear a bit more about what that entails, because that sounds amazing.

**Sofia:** I think she's been very creative in her approach for the conservation of this stork, really thinking about the local context and the best way to conserve it. One thing that I love about talking to Purnima is that she just gets so excited and passionate about the stork. She loves this stork so much, and it's a stork that has faced some reputational problems in India, I would say, because it's a scavenger and so apparently it like doesn't smell that great and it can just be like a little bit unpleasant to have in your backyard, maybe.

The nickname, bone swallower tells you a little bit about their diet but she just has such a sense of their value and of their importance in the ecosystem and she really puts that across. I think in conservation, something that comes up a lot, is this the idea of charismatic species. The way that people are already obsessed with species that are like cute or furry or exciting. And the Hargila has many, many benefits as we will learn from Purnima but it isn't immediately what you might think of as a very charismatic species.

Julia: Okay! So without further ado, we're going to have Purnima telling us all about storks and her project in Assam.

## **THE INTERVIEW**

**Sofia:** Thank you so much for joining us Purnima, we're so excited to chat with you and to hear more about all of the work that you've done. To get us started, why do hargilas have a bad reputation in India?

**Purnima:** Hargila is the local name, which is a combination of two words: har plus gila. Har means bone and gila means swallows so hargila means bone swallows so they are scavenger birds. Actually, people treat them as bad omen because they're scavengers which feed on garbage and on carcasses. In India, we are always obsessed by mega-species, charismatic species, like rhinos, tigers so species like hargila and other lesser known species they don't steal the show most of the time. But I'm very glad that thanks to the Whitley Award, the hargila got some attention. It could finally steal the show for the policy makers but we still have to do a lot for this species.

They are pretty amazing! They are huge birds, so beautiful, I think the most beautiful bird in the world, which inspires me a lot.

**Julia: So actually I have a follow-up question that is quite linked to what you just said. You've been nicknamed as hargila baido, the bone swallows' sister, because of all the conservation work you have done with them. But what exactly triggered your personal love for that specific species?**

Purnima: Actually I have been obsessed about birds since my childhood. I was growing up with my grandma and she inspired me to love nature, to plant trees and to love birds. I don't know how much she knew that nature was so important but she tried to tell me about the importance of nature and since then I've been obsessed.

Then when I grew up, I didn't see hargila birds in my locality. They were totally disappearing. Not only them, but other species of bird also. I didn't see them! So that was always a question I had but I never knew that I would work on this species one day.

During my Masters, I considered geology, ecology, and wildlife biology. I started volunteering at that time and actually, my parents didn't want me to. They had a very different dream for me. And I just kept trying to convince them that this was just for two months, please allow me two months. I kept on going and then decided to do my PhD.

Then I thought: 'everyone is obsessed with rhinos and tigers' but we read about the web of life, where every species is important. And one day one of my teachers told me he was in the restaurant and the meat of a hargila was given as a chicken meat. He told me the story and then it hit me so I started to do the data collection for my PhD. I decided to work on hargilas for my PhD.

One day, I got a call from a villager and he called me and said: 'Purnima you would get lots of data here about the bird you are working on for your PhD! Please come.' And I hired an auto and I went there. After one and a half hour I reached a place and already one man had cut down a huge tree, [00:08:00] nine baby birds failed down. Some are big and some are small. And it was really very scary for me!

I tried to speak to that person. I was very naive at the time but I was trying to speak to that person. I asked: 'why are you doing this? Don't you know that this bird is so important for our environment? That's why I'm doing my PhD.' And this man was reacting on me, he got very angry on me and all the neighborhoods joined him and they started mocking me. I was alone, I felt very embarrassed, and I asked them: 'Please, please, let's rescue the birds!'

Actually on that day, when I was on the way to my home, I was very restless and I was very embarrassed and truly until that moment I was thinking that I was going to do only a PhD. The PhD was the ultimate goal for me. But species are declining, species are losing their habitat and people are not aware! And these men, these people, we cannot blame them. They're totally unaware. It's not their fault at all. It is our responsibility to educate them and since that day, my mission started! I wanted to bring this bird into the minds and hearts of the people.

The very next day in the morning. I went to the village. I started motivating people. I started speaking to them first, making friends with them, and I realised that people loved me. There might had been an incident but from a next day when I went back, people started loving me. And so that's how actually my journey started with this bird!

**Julia:** How amazing, what an incredible story!

**Sofia:** Why was it important to you to work with women specifically and to engage them in this project?

**Purnima:** To make their projects successful I request every conservationists to involve women. In India, women have a big role in their home and women have a big role in their society. Since my childhood I always felt about women empowerment, when I saw my mother, my aunt, my grandma, I always realised about women empowerment. And when I got this opportunity, I also realised that these women could only connect the bird into their tradition.

But at the same time, I'd like to mention that we are working with men. At the same time, we're working equally with men because the Hargila Army [composed of women] meetings take place the commitment includes that men will be our partners so women have to motivate our men. The Hargila Army means her family, her husband, her children, her brother, everyone. So this way we're working with men also.

Rural women are always there. They have so many problems. They are always excluded from conservation and they even don't know what is conservation. They don't know the priorities and this is actually why we lose lots of biodiversity from the rural areas because women can make a big difference. So I request taking this as an

opportunity. I request the government, all the policy makers and everyone who are related to conservation, please involve rural women in your conservation agenda!

**Sofia: A key part of your work has been changing perceptions of Hargila within local communities, almost like giving them a kind of image makeover. What strategies did you try to get people to relate to the Hargila differently and what worked or didn't work?**

**Purnima:** Accommodating the bird into their traditions, society, and religious festivals. This helped us a lot to change the image of the species. And for this, we had to work on the same things repeatedly. It was a restless campaign and one of the strategies was also to involve the women as we formed the Hargila Army Women. In Assamese society women can make a big difference, they can commit to anything with tradition actually, because in traditional or religious festivals women take a big part. So actually what happened when I started visiting door to door is that the women liked me a lot but they didn't want to join the meeting.

When we organised meetings only a few women and a few men came. Women numbers were always less. And when I asked them why they didn't come, they kept telling me that they had different reasons not to come. They have to cook for their husbands, cook for their children. They have lots of duties at home and their main job is cooking. So they need to cook so they can't come. That's why I started isolating some localities and everyday we started organizing cooking competitions for them. And these were traditional cooking competitions which attracted them a lot.

When things are related to tradition, it becomes very sacred, it becomes very respectful for them, and so these women came! And then I started making friendships with them and started playing with them the Web of Life and [other] environmental education games. And they cooked and participated in the cooking competitions and at the same time, we spoke about Hargila, the importance of the birds, the importance of the nesting trees. This started giving them a voice and that's how the Hargila Army started.

Then again, this idea came to connect the bird into tradition. I started inviting them to the birds' breeding season in March. Initially when the birds are in the breeding season laying eggs, people would actually cut down the trees or hit them with stones. So what I started doing is that I started inviting them to the Hargila baby showers in the prayer hall. And I organised it exactly the same way as we do for the Assamese expecting mothers. And the women at first they laughed: 'What?! Baby showers for birds?!' but they loved it! They came and now the thing is that it doesn't feel like a seminar or meetings [anymore]. They feel like it is their own ceremony, own programme.

After all these additional things, we do the slide shows and all talking about why the Hargila is important mentioning the baby shower programme and they get so connected and now we don't need to tell them to not cut down the trees. They go and they motivate their husbands and family members!

**Sofia: That sounds really interesting. I've seen a couple of pictures from the baby showers and I saw that you were wearing these head dresses that looked like the stork. How does the ceremony work? What does it look?**

We organise it in October two times in the village. We have all these masks like head dress. I'm very proud to mention that we have now 400 rural women in the Hargila Army and our programme has attracted many other women. Our women, they give a voice to the bird. They wear these head dresses which are like big masks representing Hargila and they become so beautiful. We have dramas, we have dance like the traditional ritual dance with music.

**Julia: I mean, that sounds amazing. I'm so impressed to see how driven you were about this project and how you've managed to create all these traditions to get people involved. It's really inspiring! I wanted to ask you a question about the fact that the Hargila is an evolutionary distinct and globally endangered species, which are also known as EDGE species. Could you tell us a bit more about why it's really important to protect EDGE species?**

**Purnima:** Hargila is an EDGE species out of a hundred species, which is mentioned by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL). And it is very important to give priority to the EDGE species is because EDGE means something between survival and extinction. It is a scale between survival and extinction so they are in the brink of extinction. That's why it's very important for every conservationist to give much concentration and much priority to the EDGE species so that we will not lose them.

**Sofia: That makes a lot of sense. What makes you optimistic about the future of nature and why?**

**Purnima:** Thanks a lot for this question. First of all, the young children! I keep going to the schools for environmental education and environmental education is my passion! When I go to the schools and when I see these young children there, when I speak to them, I become myself so optimistic. Because the way they speak and the way they react when we do a PowerPoint presentation or a game, the way they feel about nature reminds me that we have still hope. We have to protect whatever remaining things we have!

I'm also a mother and being a mother will always remind me [about] the future. We have to work for the future, for nature. We have to work for the environment because of them.

All this makes me very optimistic and at the same time, all these Hargila Army women, they are always with me for every question! When you see the rural women giving a voice to the Hargila. If you go to the villages, every woman from the houses will come outside and they will seat with you and tell you about the bird and about nature. They think that they are the representatives of the bird. So this makes me cry, you know? It gives me goosebumps.

On World Environment Day, because it is currently a lockdown we cannot organise meetings, we organised a Hug A Tree campaign. [Telling people] please hug a tree and send us a photo. Oh my God! All the women, their photos and their stories were so amazing!

**Sofia:** I think it's true that having company from people that you like and care about and whose goals are aligned with yours can make conservation really inspiring and just make the future seem a lot brighter.

**Julia:** If you could pick one species or organism to make a case for, to protect, would it be the Hargila or would you have another species that you'd like to make a case for?

**Purnima:** Actually we have so many things to work on with the Hargila. We still have to increase the population so I want to be very focused on the Hargila til my last breath!

**Julia:** That's such a wonderful way to end this episode Punima. It's amazing to hear about how driven you are and how focused you are on, on this species specifically. And it's been wonderful to hear all about your work. So thank you so much for taking part in the podcast.

**Purnima:** Thank you so much! Bye Julia. Bye Sofia.

**Sofia:** Thank you so much. It was lovely to chat with you!

## **OUTRO**

**Julia:** That was such an amazing conversation with Punima. I feel like we've learned so much about the stork and the different ways that she's really engaged with communities. And one thing that for me resonated is the importance of using belief systems again, which is something that we've touched on our episode with Caleb Ofori-Boateng. If you've not checked it out, you should go and listen to it, it's really good.

But that fact of just building in traditions and making the stork an integral part of people's lives, I think was super powerful and doing that through lots of different ways, be it the baby showers or all the other tools that she's described, I thought was really quite interesting.

**Sofia:** I found the descriptions of those baby showers amazing. The fact that they were using this very traditional format for the celebration and so acting the same way that they would when a woman was going to have a baby and using that and transposing it in order to make people care about the stork I thought was really cool.

And it's also funny how these traditions kind of overlap because I don't know if this is the same case in India, but in the UK, a stork signifies a baby arriving and in Mexico as well, where I grew up, people will talk about the stork arriving when a baby is born.

**Julia:** Actually that's something that we have in France too! When I was a kid, I was told that the stork was bringing my baby sister so it's definitely across the board!

Sofia: I also loved her laser focus on the stork because with our other guests, quite often, people have brought up a different animal when we've asked them to make a case for an animal. And she's just so set and so focused and knows exactly what she wants to do that I really admired her just saying: 'No, it's just the Hargila. That's what I care about. That's my focus, that's my goal.' I think that having that clarity can be really powerful.

**Julia:** But also one thing that I really enjoyed during the conversation with Punima was the very strong focus she has on women and women empowerment. And that really came through as well I think in, in a way of when she said that every conservationist should really involve women in their projects and explaining how in the specific context that she is in in Assam, women are often staying at home and cooking and they didn't get the chance to come to the meetings. And she really had to find ways to involve them in a way that fitted that system as well, which I felt was quite ingenious.

**Sofia:** Absolutely! The last thing for me was just seeing how persistent she is. The fact that when she showed up and even when everyone had a different opinion from her, even when everyone maybe in some ways were against what she was trying to do or when what she was trying to do was inconvenient to people's lives, she just didn't give up. And she kept thinking about it, kept trying to think of different ways to make these storks relevant to people and to make people care about what happened to the Hargila.

**Julia:** That's true but in a way as well as she's also very forgiving. She was describing this event when people really turned on her and were really mocking her and she was still able to say: 'Well it's not people's fault, they just don't know about the stork. They



don't know why it's important. You have to work with them still until they get it.' And. I just felt that was quite wonderful, being able to see that situation, which must have been so stressful, and then turning it into still having that positive vision of the local community or the people who were there at that time.

Also on this episode we're super excited to you have received a few voice notes from listeners who shared with us their experience of wildlife encounters and why they were meaningful to them.

**Sofia:** This is kind of a perfect episode to have these voice notes on because having heard about Purnima's journey with the Hargila and just the way that she came to care about them and defend them and love them in so many ways. I think it's really nice to hear from other people about the other wildlife encounters that they've had and how those encounters have maybe shaped their world views.

**Julia:** So on the podcast today, we've got Emiel who is going to tell us a bit more about an encounter he had with hedgehogs and we also have a voice notes from Hollie.

**Emiel:** I grew up in the center of a really big city but one day as a kid, two little hedgehogs found their way into our tiny little garden. And from that day onwards, I just started looking at the city in a different way and I realised how important every little patch of green was for animals as habitat and how it was all connected together.

**Hollie:** Hey, I'm Hollie and one of the coolest nature experiences I've ever had is when I was scuba diving in Tanzania. And as we were taking the boat out to the dive site, a pod of dolphins came along and were swimming beside the boat. And so the boat captain stopped the boat and said that we could jump in the water to swim with dolphins if we wanted to. And I was particularly excited and enthusiastic, and I got my mask and snorkel on and I was the first person to jump into the water.

I think because I was on my own the dolphins were not particularly scared and also intrigued and I ended up having this amazing moment where I had a one dolphin that was swimming around me in circles, maybe just one and a half or two meters away from me and sort of looking at me and flapping its fins. I felt like it was saying: 'Hey, who are you? Come and play with me.' And I was just squealing in the water with delight. I felt like the dolphin and I really connected and it was absolutely incredible.

**Julia:** And if you'd like to share an encounter that you've had or why you're optimistic about the future of nature, please send us your voice note. You can reach us at [podcast@conservationoptimism.org](mailto:podcast@conservationoptimism.org), or you can just post on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram using the [#conservationoptimism](https://twitter.com/conservationoptimism).

**Sofia:** We would love to hear from you!

**Julia:** And I think that's it for this episode. Thank you for listening. This episode was funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Grant through the University of Oxford. Original theme music composed and produced by Matthew Kemp.