

Prologue: The Storyteller's Fire

On cold nights when the stars hid behind thick clouds, the villagers of Borpukhuri gathered close around Aaita's flickering fire. Children huddled near her worn hands, their eyes wide and restless. The old woman's voice was gravelly, soaked through years of smoke and whispered secrets.

"In the elder days," she began, "there was no village here—only the hills and the sky. Long ago, they say the earth was torn by a great battle between Dangoria Kesa-Pahar, the guardian deity of these hills, and something darker—an *akhura*, a devourer born from forgotten fears.

The fight left a wound on the land, a scar of water we call the pukhuri—the pond. It holds memories no one dares name, and something waits beneath its black glass. They say the *akhura* will only leave when someone remembers—remembers the prayers, the names, the red *suta* threading through time.

But beware, children. Forgetting is dangerous. If we forget... the eater comes back."

She sprinkled a pinch of black salt into the fire. The flames hissed and spat, shadows twisting like unseen things. From the edge of the clearing, the bamboo whispered in the night wind, and something unseen watched.



Chapter One: Arrival

The morning sun had barely dared to peek above the horizon when Borpukhuri stirred awake, caught in the green embrace of distant hills and shifting veins of mist. It was an awakening both slow and deep—first the breathless flutter of a crow’s wings high above, next the patient rustle of bamboo leaves as an early breeze wove among the homes. Villagers emerged like cautious shadows, their feet silent on dew-soaked earth, crossing from sleep into the waiting day.

By the time the rooster’s crow reverberated through thatched rooftops, Borpukhuri already hummed with life’s gentle music: chickens clucking as they scavenged, goats bleating near homesteads, and women’s voices overlapping as they swept courtyards with straw brooms. The scent of crushed betel and woodsmoke braided through the air, mixing with the bold bite of chili being ground in old mortars. Under the banyan’s heavy shade, old men squatted on folded mats, rolling leaf-wrapped morsels and trading low, knowing glances as they watched the mist drift lazily over the pukhuri—the pond.

Children bounded down narrow lanes—laughing, jostling, daring each other closer to that mysterious water at the village’s center. Their thin limbs flashed in the mottled sunlight as a girl called, “Come, let’s go to the pond before the sun gets too hot!” There was an undercurrent to their games—exuberance tinged with the electric thrill of possible magic.

To the outsider, the pond might appear a simple thing: a pool of black, unmoving water cradled among the bamboo. But for those born here, it was a restless presence: a mirror both deep and unpredictable, holding stories, warnings, and unspoken threats. It was the pulse beneath the ordinary—a boundary, a memory, a hunger that watched.

At the village’s edge, Ramen Hazarika’s hut hunched beside thickets of wild ginger and neem. The air around his door hung heavy with the scents of dried herbs, turmeric, and old clay—odors so dense and ancient they seemed almost sentient. Inside, Ramen’s hands moved with worn practice, sorting roots and leaves, tying small bundles with twine. Yet his mind drifted—caught on thin threads of old fables, on the memory of his mother’s warning glances, and the lingering emptiness left by his grandfather, vanished on a night when the pond was full of broken moonlight.

Amidst these quiet rituals, the background thrum of village life faded, replaced by subtler current: rumors drifting from door to door, a missing goat, footprints near the pond at dawn, a shiver in the midday sun that made people pause, unsettled. Everywhere, villagers tugged at the red thread circling their wrists, touched iron keys above their doors, whispering habitual prayers to the Bura Deo—protector-spirit of places just like this one.

Then, without warning, a mechanical growl shattered the hush—a motorcycle bursting out of the mist, scattering chickens, carrying with it a note of disruption. Dust billowed in the rider's wake as he slowed, boots crunching on gravel beside the pond's glassy edge.

Curiosity rippled through Borpukhuri. Men straightened their backs. Women watched from doorways, palms stilling mid-sweep.

The rider dismounted: a young man carrying a battered backpack and the easy confidence of an outsider. Gautam Goswami paused, taking in the scene—the pond, the pale houses, the villagers watching like a jury. He slid a small camera from his bag, capturing the gold dapples on the black water, the tangle of wildflowers beneath the banyan.

A small boy sidled up, clutching a packet of cough syrup, his voice shy but insistent. “Dada, aru dei loi jaa, eta gora khan lage,” he said, brows drawn with hope.

Gautam knelt, his smile warm. “Moi try karim, bonuguru,” he replied gently.

Word spread swift as rising smoke—“New healer's here.” By midday, the curious gathered under the banyan, basket in hand, children at their sides. Gautam laid out his capsules and ointments, listening to a flood of worries: old aches, new fevers, wounds that healed slow in the humid air. The crowd buzzed with uncertainty—some drawn by his modern ways, others holding to tradition, all unable to look away.

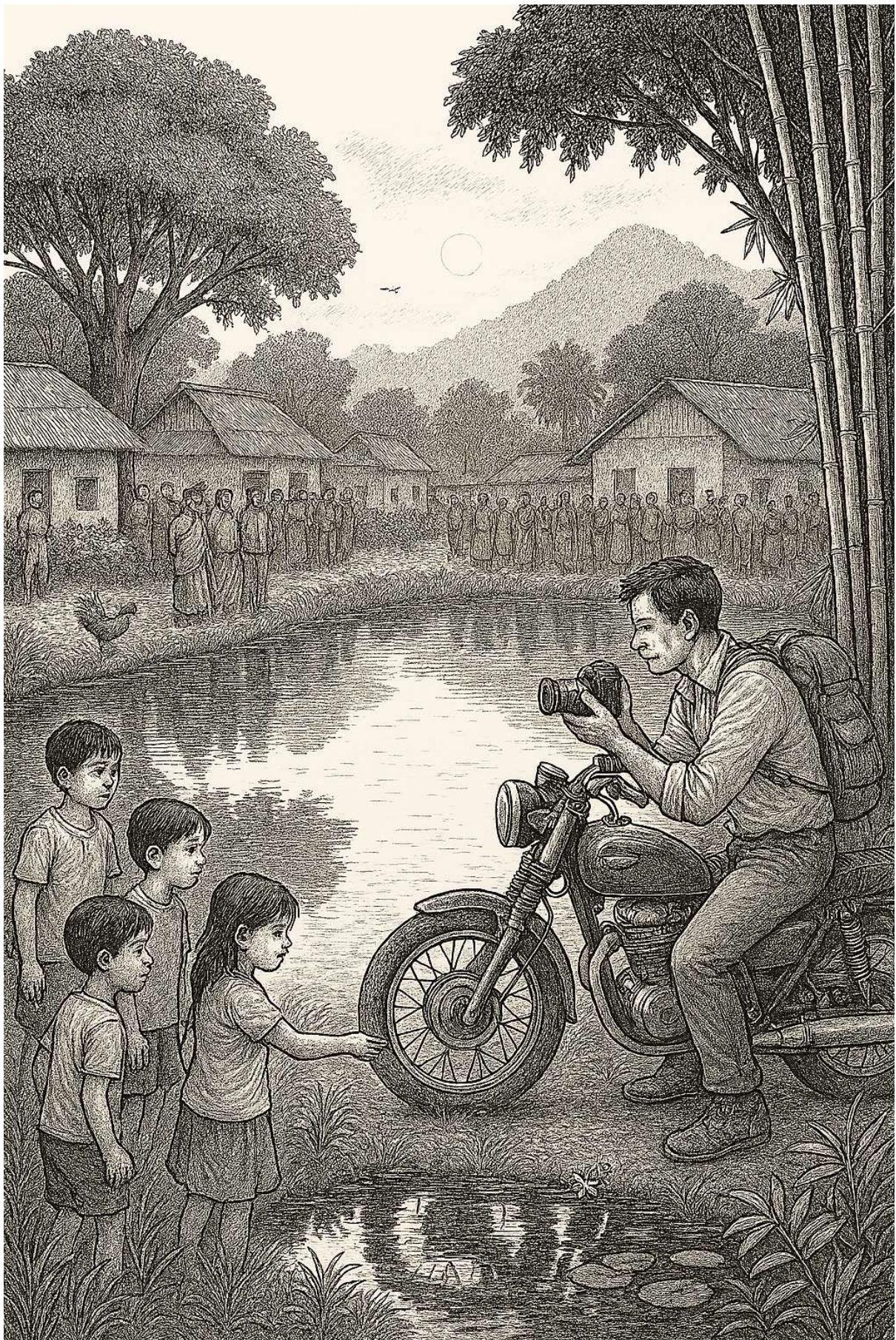
From his doorway, Ramen watched. Behind narrowed eyes, a storm churned—resentment at this stranger's seamless ease, concern for the old rhythms now upturned, and a deeper, darker suspicion: that things long quiet beneath the water might stir again.

Above his roof, a lone crow perched, feathers slick as oil, eyes bright and unwavering—a secret observer, as if it too suspected the wind had shifted.

As dusk crept in, the women tied red thread—*lal suta*—onto their children's wrists, hung iron keys above the thresholds, and whispered tomorrow's fears to the wind. The pond swallowed the last blue of sky, reflecting faces filled with longing and unease.

From somewhere in the gathering dark, a voice warned, “Don't linger too close after sundown. The pukhuri listens.”

Beneath the mirror of water, secrets waited, patient and hungry as ever.



Chapter Two: The Unnamed Pond

Before sunrise, the village lay shrouded in a soft quilt of mist that curled over fields and settled on rooftops like whispered secrets. The pond at Borpukhuri's heart was still—too still. Its surface was an enigma, black and smooth as polished obsidian, catching the faintest flicker of early dawn without disturbing a single ripple. To a careless eye, it might have looked ordinary. But to those who lived with it, the pond was a silent force, watching and waiting, the village's steady pulse beneath the everyday.

On this mist-heavy morning, Ramen Hazarika moved through the narrow lane toward his herbs, his steps muffled by the thick wet earth. His breath came out in white clouds even as the air grew heavier with the scent of moist bamboo and wild ginger. The low croak of a frog, the distant crow of a kukura, and the faint rustle of leaves were the only sound breaking the hush.

At the pond's edge, the tall bamboo swayed softly, their long leaves whispering as if carrying long-forgotten stories. Ramen's eyes swept across the black water, as if searching for the missing piece in the quiet that had settled in since Gautam's arrival.

A sudden splash broke the mirror—but it was only a fish jumping. Yet the slight disturbance was enough to make Ramen's heart quicken, a reminder that beneath the dark surface, the pond never truly rested.

Nearby, a group of village girls gathered around the pond's rim, tossing stones and daring one another to look deeper.

"Dada, what if the pukhuri is angry?" asked a young girl, her voice trembling as she clutched a thin piece of iron chain tied around her wrist.

One girl replied with a nervous laugh, "Aaita says the pond listens. If it doesn't like your face, it won't show yours back." Their laughter faltered as they glanced into the water, where faint ripples briefly formed shapes—almost faces fading before recognition.

Ramen made his way back to his hut, where the air was thick with the scent of drying neem leaves and incense smoke. His thoughts drifted to old stories his mother told him about the pond—the way it was not merely a body of water but a boundary, a veil between what was seen and what was hidden. A place where forgotten names lingered and where the dead sometimes whispered their truths.

Inside his hut, the faint buzz of his phone surprised him. He swiped the screen, but the display showed nothing but static. It was a reminder of how strange the pond made even the modern world feel.

At midday, Gautam was in the village square, handing out herbal poultices while chatting with curious pairs of eyes. Some villagers accepted his help eagerly, others eyed him with cautious distance. But no one ignored the group gathered silently by the pond—eyes fixed on the water, speaking in hushed tones about the disappearances, the strange reflections, and the shadow they said had settled over Borpukhuri.

Later that afternoon, the milkman, Dwijen, had still not shown up at his usual stops. His empty tin was found abandoned by the pukhuri's bank. Rumors sparked in whispers as the villagers pieced together what little had happened — footprints that vanished at water's edge, the echo of a lone voice calling in the fog.

That evening, beneath the banyan tree, the elders met quietly. Rupa Aaita, her voice hoarse but determined, said, "Jodi pukhuri nixobda nai, gaonot xanti nohoi — if the pond is not silent, peace will not return to our village."

Ramen listened through the shadows, his eyes narrowed. He could feel the edges of the ordinary tearing, the thin veil around Borpukhuri thinning further every day.

As twilight folded into night, the village women lit lamps of mustard oil, tying red thread tightly around their children's wrists.

Mira stood at her doorway, staring out past the iron keys hung on every threshold toward the black water, as a breeze carried a faint but distinct whisper.

"Pukhuri huney," she breathed—the pond listens.

And somewhere beneath the water's dark skin, the pond seemed to pulse



Chapter Three: The Missing Milkman

Dawn broke heavy and strange over Borpukhuri. Night lamps still smoldered on doorstep altars. Smoke curled above the banyan like wandering spirits, and the pond's black surface, undisturbed, reflected nothing but a low sky and the uncertain faces of those gathered nearby.

Word had spread before sunrise—Dwijen, the milkman, was gone.

Villagers grouped in uneasy clusters beside the great tree, wool shawls drawn tight, eyes shifting quickly from neighbor to mist and back again. Rupa Aaita's voice carried in low tones as she circled the boys clustered at her knees, her palms leaving a faint tinge of turmeric on their hair.

"No one goes to the pukhuri after dark," she said, voice crackling. "*Moromor sala, moi xodhay bulilu—if the pond is not sleeping, neither should you be wandering.*"

Ramen kept to the edge of the crowd, half in shadow, half out. He watched silence deepen with every nervous glance shared over Dwijen's empty milk tin and the iron chain now coiled neatly at the reedy bank—tokens of a routine violently interrupted.

He remembered seeing Dwijen just hours before—alive, ribbing him over herbal cures versus the city doctor's bitter pills. Ramen had laughed, "Don't forget your iron chain tonight, Dwijen-bhai. *Aaji rati pukhurir hori pati ase*—there's a chill about the pond tonight." Dwijen's answering grin had been crooked but confident. He had always said the pond couldn't take a man who knew his own way home.

Now, not even footprints remained to mark his passing into the mist.

Gautam arrived, his footsteps brisk, breaking the tension. He said, "We should organize a search. Someone may have seen—"

Several elders recoiled. Rupa Aaita shook her head, fierce despite her trembling hands. "We do not cross the water's edge at night, *bapu*. That's when the old world stirs." She lowered her voice and pressed her hand to her grandson's head, murmuring a prayer Ramen half-remembered from childhood.

Murmurs spread. Some villagers whispered blame, their eyes flicking sideways toward Ramen—old fears tangled with guilt, suspicion stretching like threads across the crowd.

A sudden chill swept over the gathering. A dog barked once, sharp and afraid, its hackles raised at a patch of ground shimmering by the water's rim. The pond itself seemed to pulse.

Ramen swallowed. Images pressed in on the edge of memory—his grandfather standing in the same mist, red thread at his wrist and iron key at his belt, leading villagers in a chant on another dark morning when someone had vanished. He remembered the hush after, thicker than fog, and his mother's hands pulling him close: "Never turn your back on the pukhuri, son. Never let it speak your name."

Now he felt the urge to do something, anything, to restore order—but the hush of his childhood nightmare wrapped itself around his chest. He reached for logic, for herbal wisdom or reason, but the pond watched and he felt hollowed out by its silence.

As the crowd quieted, Gautam suggested, "Let's light lamps for Dwijen. Old or new, a little light can't hurt."

Ramen handed over his extra wick, and soon, villagers clustered by the bank, setting small clay bowls afloat upon the black water's edge. Each lamp burned golden-bright, its flame trembling in the morning air, casting wild flickers against the huddled faces.

Ramen knelt and murmured, "*Dwijen, your name is remembered. Find your way home.*"

Behind him, an old chant began—soft, rising in fearful unison:

*"Pukhuri hune, pukhuri jane,
Naam buli jaa ne, pahora mon ghure ahe."*
(The pond hears, the pond knows,
What is forgotten circles back in dreams.)

The lamps drifted outwards, their reflections pooling and splitting on the glass-like surface, as if the pond itself was making choices about what to hold and what to erase.

Mira stepped to Ramen's side, clutching her drawing book. "*Dada*," she whispered, "I saw Dwijen last night, by the water. His shadow was longer than his body. It stretched inside the pond, not across it."

Ramen's heart thudded in his chest. "Shadows do strange things near old water," he said, voice rough. But even as he spoke, an icy shiver crept up his spine—because he remembered, too, his grandfather's disappearance, the missing footprints, and the pond's surface going suddenly clouded as if swallowing something whole.

The pond was still now. Too still. The hush around it had changed; it no longer felt like peace but like the pause before something important breaks.

As the last lamp flickered out, the villagers stood motionless, staring at the water. Somewhere, deep beneath the pond's face, a current shifted, unseen.

And silently, Borpukhuri wondered what else the pond would demand, and when it might speak a new name.

