THE GHOST BUSTER

IN A REMOTE CORNER OF INDIA,
ONE VERY COURAGEOUS MAN PROVOKES
THE WRATH OF THE WORLD'S
HOTTEST PEPPER

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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IN ASSAM, A SLIVER OF northeastern India known for its black tea and one-horned rhinos, lives a squat, baby-faced 32-year-old woman named Anandita Tamuly. In the springtime, sitting in her sparsely furnished cinder-block home, which is adorned with traditional straw hats and a portrait of Ganesh, the Hindu god of good fortune, she produces a binder filled with press clippings and miscellaneous scraps of paper. Among them is a note from Dr. Prabin Bora, an eye surgeon in Jorhat. It reads: "This is to certify that Miss Anandita Dutta [her maiden name] ... has been examined by me regarding any abnormality in her eyes. Her eyes are normal."

THAT THIS WOULD BE THE CASE is astounding when you consider what Tamuly does for a living, which involves rubbing bhut jolokia peppers, the hottest peppers in the world, into her eyes. The eye trick, which is not a trick at all, is just the beginning. Tamuly also scarfs down those same chilis as if they were peanuts—60 in two minutes is her personal record so far—and slathers a purée of them up and down both arms for good measure. It's a strange vocation that has brought her international fame and frequent television appearances. Over tea and cookies, she shows off a DVD reel of her feats on the big color TV in the bedroom they helped her pay for. (Even in this tiny village in rural India, it seems, there's no escaping the allure of reality-show stardom.)

Tamuly's 15 minutes have been made possible by the emerging fever for fiery foods in the West. Hot peppers these days are much more than simple comestibles. For the most obsessive pepper-heads they're tantamount to religion. These adrenaline junkies who put their mouths, if not their lives, on the line are always pushing the limits on how

much heat a human can take, actively antagonizing their bodies with capsaicin (the compound in chilis that causes the burn). Their ardor for the hot stuff has given rise to a multibillion-dollar fiery goods industry. And the bhut jolokia peppers Tamuly inhales are the rarest, most iconically incandescent of all hot peppers—200 hundred times hotter than jalapeños and more than twice as hot as habaneros. Though these little fireballs are relatively new to the international market, in Tokyo, London, Frankfurt, New York they've lately been selling like Big Macs. And they're indigenous to only one place: this sliver of India near the border with Burma. I flew there last spring to see for myself where it all began. Within days, I would be taking a foolishly big bite out of a bhut jolokia.

BEFORE THEY ACHIEVED CULT notoriety for being the key ingredient in hot sauces with names like Pure Death, Satan's Rage, Naga Sabi Bomb and Lethal Ingestion, bhut jolokias (sometimes called ghost peppers) had more practical applications. Though they have long played a part in the local cuisine, mostly among tribal groups, the peppers have more often found use as a folk remedy for stomachaches. They're not only safe (in small doses), some locals believe they're also good for you. As they like to say in Assam, "It hurts going in but not coming out." Moreover, rice farmers have long used the peppers as an elephant repellent, grinding them into paste and smearing it onto fences to ward away marauding pachyderms. And in the old days, before the Brits brought railroads, tea and cricket to Assam, the Ahom kings who had ruled the region since the 13th century would rub bhut jolokias into subjects' eyes as punishment for wrongdoing—which may have been where Tamuly got the idea in the first place.

But it wasn't until recently that the bhut jolokia caught the attention of the rest of the world. In 2003, Indian military scientists in the garrison town of Tezpur, a traditional bulwark against the Chinese Red Army, who last invaded in 1962, began exploring the potential of a weaponized chili—looking to turn it into a crowd control grenade. They knew that the bhut jolokias that grew in the area were hotter than Hades, but nobody knew precisely how hot they were. So they commissioned a test to find out where it ranks on the Scoville

Heat Scale, the global standard for spiciness devised in 1912 by American pharmacist Wilbur Scoville. It scored off the charts, and so they published the findings in the official journal of the Indian Academy of Sciences. The paper caught the attention of the Indian press, and those articles soon crisscrossed the globe on the web, finding their way to Paul Bosland at New Mexico State University, who had gotten some bhut jolokia seeds from a chili fanatic who'd visited Assam. Bosland, who heads the university's nonprofit Chile Pepper Institute, grew a few plants in greenhouse conditions and confirmed those Scoville scores. He submitted his findings to Guinness World Records, which in 2007 declared that the pepper was indeed the hottest on earth, topping the million mark on the Scoville scale (the jalapeño, by comparison, averages about 5,000).

Assam's first and only bhut jolokia exporter began touting the pepper's Guinness status to hot sauce producers in Germany, England, the U.S. and Japan. Soon foreign reporters began appearing in Assam in pursuit of the bhut jolokia. Demand for the peppers rose sharply worldwide. Today the peppers are increasingly crossing into the mainstream in the U.S. and Europe, showing up in chocolates, hard candies and jellies. And last year New York's Brick Lane Curry House unveiled what it claimed was the world's hottest curry, made with 10 dried bhut jolokia pods and accompanied by a certificate for anyone foolhardy enough to tackle a bowl.

The peppers had never been a cash crop in Assam, which is why, since 2007, local supply has fallen far short of global demand. To keep pace, the agricultural authorities in Assam have been urging farmers to try their hands at growing peppers. "The bhut jolokia has saved the local economy," says Ananta Saikia, a professor at Assam Agricultural University who, with his wife Leena, supplies dried pods, powders, pastes and flakes to hot sauce makers worldwide. In the last few years, the wholesale price has gone up some 1,500 percent. Though the supply is woefully short, ghost peppers are now exported by the ton.

GUWAHATI, ASSAM'S MUDDY regional capital, is densely packed with some 800,000 souls. I arrive at the start of the pepper's growing season, which runs till late summer, when torrential monsoons usually wash away the crop. Crossing the state in an Indian-made SUV, along the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra River, I spy crinkly-skinned red chilis in every roadside market, stacked on mats next to the potatoes, eggplants and carrots.

The locals tend to discourage imprudent foreigners eager for a taste. In Jorhat, a tea town six hours east of Guwahati, I meet up with the Saikias, who five years after launching their company, Frontal Agritech, are still Assam's only bhut jolokia exporter. Ananta suggests I try a sliver of fresh pepper with dinner but strongly advises against eating it whole—at least without a physician present. Workers at his processing plant wear gloves and goggles, and the warnings on his packaged products suggest doing the same before starting to use them. "Bhut jolokias are essentially poison," he tells me. "It's dangerous to eat them." But, I reason, if a diminutive woman can eat 51 in one sitting, as Tamuly did for celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay in 2009 (falling short of her televised record), I can certainly handle a single pepper. Can't I?

HOT STUFF Clockwise from left, the bhut jolokia; at home with pepper exporters Leena and Ananta Saikia; a roadside pepper vendor in Guwahati

AND THEN IT HITS ME, SLOWLY AT FIRST, EXPONENTIALLY BUILDING, THE TEARS KICKING IN AFTER TWO MINUTES, THE SIDES OF MY TONGUE THROBBING ***AS IF I'D TRIED TO SWALLOW A RED-HOT POKER***

AFTER I SPEND A FEW DAYS CON- templating the bhut jolokia, my chance comes over dinner at Thengal Manor, the tea plantation turned guesthouse where I've been staying. I consider the little pepper that sits primed on my plate. It is red like the devil, red like a very sore throat. Despite its fearsome appearance, it's harmless when intact. Unlike some of its milder brethren, no fiery oils seep through this pepper's skin. You can touch it, even lick it without repercussions. Its searing heat lies beneath the surface, on a time delay, buried within. While habaneros hit you fast on the taste buds, bhut jolokia's burn comes on very slowly. I witnessed this delayed reaction on an early appearance Tamuly made on a variety show on Indian TV. A scrawny young guy from the audience had volunteered to eat a pepper before she began shoveling them down. Brash, he downed one whole, raising his hands in triumph when he was done. No big deal. Shortly after, though, his face registered something like panic. A minute later, the camera caught him gulping down water, wiping up tears, gasping for relief.

I clutch the pepper by its harmless stem and bite off a little hunk. At first it's more sweet than hot. Not bad, I think. I can handle this. In fact, it's actually pretty tasty. And so I go in for a big bite. And then it hits me, slowly at first, exponentially building, the tears kicking in after two minutes, the sides of my tongue throbbing as if I'd tried to swallow a red-hot poker. I reach for a spoonful of steamed rice, and then for another. Neither rice nor soda deliver any relief. It takes about 10 minutes for the pain to subside. While I certainly won't be challenging any world records, I'd eaten the hottest pepper on Earth and lived to tell the tale.

Back at Tamuly's home, I sit in the front parlor and talk more about chilis, her life's work. She grew up poor without much education, she tells me. Now, newly with child, bhut jolokia might be her ticket out. Before the tsunami she flew to Japan to make a TV appearance, her first overseas trip. Soon she'll be en route to the U.S. to film another show, *Super Humans* on the History Channel. Yet one prize eludes her: recognition from Guinness World Records. A few years back she wrote to inquire about submitting a claim for the record for bhut jolokia eating. She received a letter back informing her that she was welcome to challenge the record-holder for jalapeños, American Alfredo Hernandes, who in 2006 consumed 16 peppers in a minute. She shows me the letter she got from London, and a sheet of paper listing eight rules under the heading "Jalapeño Pepper Eating—Most in One Minute." Tamuly was confused and insulted by it, she said. But though she's never seen or tasted a jalapeño, she's willing to give it a shot if she can get her hands on some. She's pretty sure they'll be no match for her. "I can eat those like candy," she says.

JAY CHESHES, *a New York–based food writer who can hardly bear getting shampoo in his eyes, poses no threat to Anandita Tamuly.*