

Assam where their senior colleague was killed by insurgents, and the group was asked to leave the region. However, their attachment to the Northeast was so strong that after a year they decided to return and work for the development of the simple rural folk.

### Humble Beginning

Sunil directed us to various departmental heads, starting with Rajesh Basumatary. *the ant* is a voluntary organisation registered as a public charitable trust at Rowmari village in Chirang district of Bodoland Territorial Administered Districts of Assam (BTAD). According to Rajesh, its main focus used to be health: to bring succour to the rural population affected by malaria, diarrhoea, and other water-borne diseases. It initially trained the local people in handling 30-35 basic medicines, and laboratory testing of diseases like malaria, diarrhoea, etc. Within a short time, the trainees became so adept in handling medicines and testing that they came to be called as 'Barefoot Doctors'.

Of the 11 barefoot technicians that were trained between



Apart from creating awareness about different issues, *the ant* encourages women to learn cycling as a means to self-reliance. Thereafter, they are given cycles by the Jagruti Cycle Bank. This has increased the mobility of women.

2006 and 2008, eight continue giving excellent treatment for detection of malaria. The National Institute of Malaria Research cross-checked their slides to find 95% correct identification. They all run their independent laboratories.

### Man with a Mission

Dr. Sunil Kaul (48) did his MBBS from Pune's Armed Forces Medical College in 1983, and served as a doctor in the Indian Army for 11 years. While in the army, he came to feel that his medical training could be put to better use if he could work for the rural people in far-flung areas. In 1990, while still with the Army, he started working in the villages of Rajasthan. He later decided to devote his full time to the voluntary services sector. Initially, he worked with Urmul Trust in Rajasthan.

He has been a consultant to national and international NGOs both within the Northeast and outside. He is a recipient of the *Eisenhower Fellowship* from the United States. *the ant*

is also a part of the *People's Rights Forum* that attempts to play a watchdog role on food-related government schemes for the poor in Assam. This followed the appointment of Dr. Kaul as Advisor to the Commissioners appointed by the Supreme Court in response to a public interest litigation.

Sunil gets excellent support from Jennifer (Jenny), an alumnus of *Tata Institute of Social Sciences*, Mumbai, who hails from a Kolkata-based Chinese family. "If I have helped build the house called *the ant*, Jenny is the one who has made it a home," remarked the doctor, adding that Jenny now looks after the day-to-day administration.

### Direct Rural Action

The organisation has many full-time and part-time volunteers. It identifies committed young people interested in working with the village communities, and gets them fellowships to enable them to follow their passion. It promotes sustainable and holistic development of the rural and voiceless communities in this region. It is working directly at the village level in about 100 villages across nine Village Council Development Committees (VCDC, equivalent to a gram panchayat) on issues related to health and awareness, women



*the ant* is also a part of the *People's Rights Forum* that attempts to play a watchdog role on food-related government schemes for the poor in Assam.

empowerment, besides alternative income opportunities through weaving, agriculture, etc.

### Weaving Hope

The weaving work, most common in Bodo homes, resulted in the formation of a weavers' organisation called *Aagor Daagra Afad* (aagor means 'design' in Bodo language) which is selling garments and upholstery through handlooms, retail shops, and exporting a small quantity too. *the ant* participates in exhibitions and also conducts programmes highlighting the traditional crafts of the Northeast.

### Empowering Women

Trying to reach a state of awakening or *Jagruti*, *the ant* has organised women in groups. Apart from creating awareness about different issues, it encourages women to learn cycling as a means to self-reliance. Thereafter, they are given cycles by the Jagruti Cycle Bank. This has increased the mobility of women. One group produces 'desktop' products from the cloth leftover from the weaving programme. Another group buys paddy from its poor members to cushion them from low prevailing rates, sells it at a higher rate in the market.