



May – Jun 2014

News from the ant

Like the rest of rain-starved India, our area too saw very scanty rains this year. While districts in Upper Assam are experiencing floods, our farmers in Chirang are still to finish sowing, two months later than usual. Like the farmers, for us ants, the months of June -July are busy ones. With schools in Assam closed in July for Summer Holidays, it is the time our children and Youth team are at their busiest best. Getting children and youth for fun learning camps.

Summer Fun Camps for Children !

38 staff and volunteers got busy organizing 16 camps in which 673 children from our village level children's groups took part in fun learning activities through the Summer holidays. The children played games, sang, did art and craft, even as they learnt more about their village and carried out Census of both people & their livestock. This is perhaps the only time of the year the children from our village groups get to take part in learning that is also fun! Each camp also had the children discussing issues such as child labour, water, environment, alcohol dependence, early marriage, peace and unity etc. Some of the camps ended with campaigns and rallies by the children on social issues in their own villages.



Summer Folk Music & Dance Workshop for Youth

With the easy availability of digital music now made easier with mobile phones, youth in our villages cannot play the traditional drums, flute and violin anymore. With that, traditional music and dance is fast disappearing and along with it, an important part of the external identity of a tribe. In dialogue with the youth we work with, during the Summer holidays, we got trainers from a neighbouring district and trained a group of boys to play their traditional kham (long drum), the serja (4 stringed instrument) and the siphung (flute). It was quite a struggle for some of them as they had never before even held the instruments! Girls from our Rowmari cluster later joined in and together, the group can now perform 6 classical Bodo dances. It was a proud moment for us to see them performing for the villagers in the villages where the camps were held.



Starting a Legal Aid Centre

Justice and peace are two sides of the same coin. On the 1st June 2014, we started a weekly **Legal Aid Centre** on our campus to offer free legal advice and help to the community. As of now, a team of two lawyers and a paralegal is present every Sunday to take up different types of cases. This is in partnership with CSJ (*Centre for Social Justice*), Ahmedabad and we hope this small initiative develops into a full-fledged programme to strengthen access to justice and law in our areas.



Youth Peace Builders

We are taking the *Youth Peace Drama* which we started last year, a step further. This time, we got together youth in the age group 16-25 from 3 communities and put them through a 5 day long workshop in which they had to grapple with concepts of identity, conflict and non-violent conflict resolution etc. The group created a 45 minutes street play which deals with these questions. It is wonderful watching young men and women from communities which are in conflict, perform side by side, getting the audience to think about non-violent ways of solving conflicts. We are going to work with this group of young people and take them through a year long process of peace building through drama and also other activities to bring communities together.



Expanding IDeA's work through partners :

IDeA (the Institute of Development Action) was formed by the ~~ant~~ to strengthen and support voluntary sector efforts in the Northeast region. It has trained various NGO personnel over the years and has a network of partner organisations all over Assam with whom they engage.

a. Bettering Nutrition in the tea gardens

Through IDeA and its partners, we had carried out a study in 2013 on the status of nutrition in various Districts of Assam. We found poor height (stunting) and low weight among women tea garden workers and their children. Improving nutritional status of adults requires long term multi-pronged work at many levels. Hence we felt we could try and tackle "Under 2" malnutrition issues since children below 2 years do not reach their potential in height and weight as adults if they do not get the required quantity and quality of food below they turn 2. Through IDeA's partners, Prastuti and Rural Development Organization (RDO), we are promoting better feeding practices among mothers of 20,000 Under -2 years old children among tea garden communities in Dibrugarh District .

b. Support to other NGOs

The Northeast Chapter of Caring Friends is going on full steam! As part of this, we have reached out support to NGOs in Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and Assam. Apart from small grants to support the work of organisations there, individual fellowships have been given to help motivated people to do the work they are doing. One of the grants we made helped an NGO in Nagaland construct a bridge which will cut down 50 kms and save 2-3 hours travel time, helping villagers connect to the highway from where they can go to Assam to sell their oranges.

Shanti Yatra by NGOs

In May this year, suddenly the situation in the Lower Assam Districts took a turn for the worse when Bengali Muslim villagers were killed in Baksa & Kokrajhar Districts. With elections round the corner, fear and uncertainty mounted. There were rumors that the situation will explode after the election results and this started causing panic among Bengali Muslims. With political parties exploiting the situation and the situation being potentially explosive, as NGOs we felt that we needed to get out and provide a “sane and caring voice” to counter the insanity of violence that was threatening all of us and the communities we work with. Those who could afford, contributed vehicles and others joined in..... 70-80 of us Shanti Yatris from all communities and religions travelled together for 3 days through violence affected areas of Kokrajhar and Chirang appealing for people to maintain calm and not to believe in or spread rumours.



Deosri Development Project

Deosri, 50 km from the ant's campus and bang on the Bhutan border is not just physically inaccessible but is also one of the poorest. We have been carrying out a range of activities in the area and have managed to spread hope in the midst of despair. The efforts have been largely supported by individual donations.

Thus, we are happy that Arpan Foundation, USA has stepped forward to support our work in Deosri and take it to a more intensive level. We will be working to improve education, nutrition and women's status in the area.

Current Community Based work of the ant and areas where we seek support and partnerships

- i. **Empowerment of Women & Girls** – Women's groups & federations; cycle bank; Girl's Scholarships; girls' football etc. *Future Direction* : Build women's leadership for change; District level Girls Football team; empowering young girls; expand women's cycle bank
- ii. **Building a Healthy Society** – Treatment to mentally ill and epileptic patients; Community Mental Health Programme; Monitoring of Government Health Services by women's groups & federations. *Future Direction* : Communitise Mental Health; Adolescent Health programme; Improving Malnutrition; reduce maternal & child deaths
- ii. **Child & Youth Development** : Children and youth groups; Non -formal education for government School children; Mobile Science Van; motivating youth to preserve traditional art forms. *Future Direction* : Start vocational training centre in ant's Rowmari campus for youth; engage college youth for social change; support vulnerable youth in villages; organise adolescent girl's forums in villages
- v. **Remote Areas Development Programme** – Deosri Project for Development of Forest Dwellers and internally displaced persons. *Future Direction* : Expand work to Kuklung, Panbari and other remote forest areas in Chiirang and other Districts.
- v. **Peace Building** – Youth Peace Leaders project; Legal Aid Centre for free legal help; promote “conflict resolution forums” among warring villages; support people to fight for their entitlements. *Future Direction* : Paralegals programme;
- vi. **Sustainable Livelihoods** – small farmers support; microcredit for micro-businesses. *Future Direction* : Natural Resource Management - Irrigation & Watershed; livestock management; forest conservation

We welcome any feedback. Please do get in touch. Our contact is : the ant, Rowmari, P.O Khagrabari, Dist Chirang via Bongaigaon, Assam – 783380; Ph: 9859978991 email: jenny@theant.org ; www.theant.org
(Donations to the ant are exempt from Income Tax as per rules under Sec 80G of the Income Tax Act)