

# News from an Assam ant Hill

## the ant's newsletter (January – April 2012)



### Who are we?

- *the ant* is an NGO based in Rowmari Village in Bodoland, Assam
- In 150 village hamlets within 50 km of Rowmari, we organize women into groups and federations, farmers for sustainable agriculture, organizing children & youth for a better future and the mentally ill and also the poor for health and other services.
- We also train and help build up NGOs in the northeast for a dynamic voluntary sector.

## 1. Our Girls kick up a Storm

Boys play while girls watch! That has been the dictum in our villages for a long, long time. But girls too wanted a slice of the action. Inspired by the movie "Bend it Like Beckham", a couple of months ago we started promoting foot ball for girls.



*Girls from the Patabri Cluster pose proudly with their new uniforms and football!*

Playing barefoot, sharing the only 2 sets of uniforms we got and knowing the rules only vaguely, their enthusiasm more than makes up for their lack of technique! In the Youth Mela we had recently, 5 teams of girls played in the "tournament". While all 22 players chased after the ball together, the cheering from the crowd at any goal by any team was genuine!

We plan to organizing coaching camps for our girls (and also boys) soon. In fact, in the years to come, we plan to focus more and more on sports and culture as the two means to organize children and youth from government schools in our villages. Like sports, we have started organizing cultural groups of youth in villages – whereas with a bit of support, they are able to preserve their quickly fading traditional music and dances.



## 2. Tapping the Energy of Children & Youth

Ever since we started working with children 3 years ago, we have formed 50 children's groups and 20 youth groups and now have almost weekly programmes with over 1200 children and adolescents. Our Summer camps and other programmes sees the involvement of many more from the community. We have also started monitoring the quality of education in the government schools. In February, we organized SMC (School Management Committee) Sanmelans along with other CBOs to bring up the highlight the need for taking provisions under the *Right to Education* Act seriously. The SMC of one of the middle schools in our area started shutting the school gate at exactly 9 a.m, shutting out both teachers and students who come late!



*Government School Teachers from our Deosri Cluster at a tree plantation programme with children in schools we work in. We use events and celebrations as "safe spaces" to bring together communities in conflict.*



*Our Youth groups take out a rally for better quality of education in their*



*Children from our villages taken to the Science Centre in Guwahati on 30 January 2012. The thrill of the first time out-of-village, first time train journey, and many other "first times" was a joy to behold!*

### 3. For Women by Women : Empowerment Not Just Phrase

Small in number but huge in enthusiasm. That sums up our women's Jagruti groups. We have been organizing all our women's Jagruti groups into federations for the past 3 years. And the federations did us proud in March this year. Without as much as single paise from the ant, our 4 women's federations mobilized support from among themselves and the community and celebrated International Women's Day – some for 2 days and some for one. For the past three years we had been supporting and preparing the women to take charge. This year the 4 federations mobilized at least Rs.1.5 lakh in cash and kind. Over 2300 women took part in the 4 programmes the federations planned and organized in our different work clusters. The success has been heady and with their new found confidence, most of these women's federations are ready to play an even larger role in making their societies a safer and better place for women.



*Women from our various Clusters celebrate Mahila Divas in March 2012. Over 2300 women took part in 4 programmes planned, organized, mobilized and funded by the women themselves. A Non-Funded programme, we now need support to strengthen the Jagruti Women's federations to develop and take on a larger social change role in their villages and in society at large. They already act in cases of domestic violence, in rapes against girls, polygamy etc. If supported, they can be force of change that is needed in societies under transition.*

### 4. Cloth For Work Programme in Deosri

Winter was severely cold in January 2012 in the Bhutan foothills of



***"Family pack" of ten clothes packed into bundles and ready to be distributed after the work is done.***

Desori where we work. Chilly winds would keep the impoverished families living in makeshift plastic and bamboo huts – many with no walls - shivering through the night. Hoping to bring some relief to the Internally Displaced and also families living in forest areas, we partnered with Goonj (Delhi) to implement the Cloth for Work programme

in Deosri. Families had to gather and do some needed and productive work for their village. In exchange for the labour they put in, each family would get a packet of used clothes for them to wear. In this programme, we reached out to 1400 families in 22 villages in the Deosri area.



***Villagers in Korabari Village clean the jungle path to their village in exchange for clothes. 1400 families in 22 villages worked and got clothes this year under this programme.***

We would like to have the Cloth for Work programme again this year too. Given a bit more advance planning, we will be able to do an even better job and be of help to many more families when they need it.



## 5. Support to Mental Patients

There are no facilities for treating mentally ill patients in our area. Most families with mentally ill patients are not even aware of treatment outside that of village medicine men and traditional "ojhas". Others have taken treatment in mental hospitals outside but because medicines are not available in our Districts, they have again lapsed back into a mentally ill state. Hence, mental illness treatment is a huge gap which we are struggling to plug.

We started seeing 35 patients in our monthly treatment camps less than 5 years ago. In March 2012, we had almost 650 patients. Every month, almost a 100 new patients come to the camp, not just from our district but even from neighbouring and nearby towns! Many hire vehicles and come from even 100 kilometres away! It is a struggle to cater to so many patients and we are trying

to figure ways to press on the government to provide the much needed treatment services for the mentally ill. Till then, we struggle to find out ways to service what seems to be an infinite number of patients in our camps!



*Patients and their families collect their medicines at our monthly Mental Illness Treatment Camps. 647 patients attended the camp on 25 March 2012!*

## 6. Helping NGOs for Change

It is not enough that we **ants** do our microscopic village level work and then magically wait for huge social change to happen. But like us, we will need many thousand organisations and a strong voluntary sector to really start feeling a difference. Thus, apart from our own village level work, we have set ourselves a mandate of supporting and building up the voluntary sector in the northeast. Our training institute IDeA has been set up just for that. This year alone, we trained over 800 trainees from various organizations in Assam and also other parts of the northeast. Apart from short courses of 3-5 days on various topics, we run Long Courses for selected partner NGOs.



We now have 24 partner NGOs from various parts of Assam whom we have taken through an intensive 8 - 9 months training (classes are held in short phases with hand holding support in the field by our faculty). These organizations will hopefully grow to be more planned, independent, accountable and effective organizations. Hopefully they will be stronger for doing the community change work that is so much needed in marginalized societies where they work.

## Building a Multipurpose Centre

After many years of postponing, we had to finally tear down our bamboo and tin structure this year. This was our very first "building" and every year we would prop up the rotting beams with a few bamboos and keep using it. But there was every danger of it collapsing on our heads this monsoon. We are now trying to build a 2 storied *pucca* building in its place - which will house a training centre for training women children, farmers and others from the community. It will double up as a patient waiting hall for our mental patients and the project offices will be cubicles for the doctors during the mental camp days. Dormitory accommodation will also be available for the community as well as the ant staff during meetings. We have raised some money for it and even started building but still desperately short of the amount we need.

*We need help and welcome any support, any donation towards this.*



*Tearing down our bamboo and tin shed which for 8 years was our meeting cum training hall, project offices, doctor's room, dormitory as well as computer training room for youth!*

**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)**