

the ant's Annual Report 2014-2015

15 years into the ant's journey . . . We thank each one of you for being a part of our journey. With leadership transition and other changes taking place within *the ant*, we ask for your blessings for the next 15 years ahead. We hope that as we mature, *the ant* becomes even more responsive and responsible an organisation, fulfilling its destiny of being catalysts of social change in the Northeast.



I. Direct Village Intervention

We currently work directly in 240 village hamlets with 87,500 population in Chirang District covering around 15,000 households. Our interventions include those with women, children, youth, men farmers and also conflict induced displaced populations.

- a. CHILD & YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
- **b**. COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME
 - c. PEACE BUILDING & ACCESS TO JUSTICE
 - d. POWER TO WOMEN AND GIRLS
 - e. PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS
- **f**. REMOTE AREAS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME



a. Child & Youth Development

Keeping pace with the children and youth, our work with them has grown and developed too. Though our focus remains on supporting poorer, government-school-going children in our villages, our methods of working with them have been evolving according to the needs of the children. A large chunk of our work with children includes supplementary and non-formal methods of education. Under the larger theme of Child and Youth development, we have a Science-on-Wheels Project, a Children's Development Project, and also a Youth Development Project.

i. Science on Wheels Project: Science is supposed to encourage curiosity, rationality and thinking among children. But with no opportunity of carrying out practical experimentation in government schools, questioning minds are an obvious casualty. Most of our children in the villages end up not just failing in the subject but also never get a chance to experience wonder and amazement that the discovery of science can throw up. The Science-on-Wheels Project is designed to make the learning of science fun and exciting for children of partner schools. As much as possible, we tried to base the sessions on the syllabus of the particular class and this year we could reach out to 1101 children from Classes 6-8 from nine partner schools through 130 sessions. In a special exam we conducted to check if our science classes were making any difference or not, we found almost 80% of our students from partner schools cleared the exam compared to 50% in non-partner schools where we do not hold classes.

The training and exposure which our team and some teachers got from Agastya Foundation (Kuppam) was a huge help in pushing up the quality. Besides, we do carry out 4-5 hour long science workshops with Class 10 students in 4 partner schools once a month, and also held 16 science exhibitions for 1852 students of hard-to-reach schools in which we reached. Science awareness workshops are also conducted with our women's federations and the community in general to bring about rational thinking and to counter superstitious beliefs. Recently, Nucleus Software Foundation has stepped in to support this programme for a year. We are dreaming of

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Scientists or Magicians?

People in our villages are highly superstitious and fearful of "unnatural" happenings. One of the aims of the Science Van Team is to promote rationality among the masses. The team is trained to do "magic tricks" in public places. The crowds get so mesmerized that some actually come up and ask our "magicians" to tell them their future or ask for protective "taabeez" or amulets! After our team reveals the science behind the magic, many of them rue the fact that they have even sold a lot of their land to pay for "magic cures" by the local 'ojha' or medicine man!



starting a *Science Resource Centre* in our area to cater to the huge need of training science teachers and facilitators in Assam and indeed, for the entire northeast! We would also love to work on Math and English some day!

ii. **Children's Development:** We worked with 55 children's groups this year and apart from the weekly extra-curricular activities in the village, our team facilitated events among the children like Group Exchange Programmes, Celebrations & Social Campaigns and also Summer and Winter Camps during the vacations. 3386 children and 214 volunteers took part in the 58 events through the year.

Summer Activity Camps: 38 staff members and volunteers got busy in organizing 16 camps in which 673 children from our village level children's groups took part in fun learning activities through the summer vacations. The children played games, sang, did art and craft work 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 camps ended with campaigns and rallies by the children on social issues in their own villages.

iii. **Youth Development:** The children we started working with some years ago have turned youth and most of them are first generation college goers. They have only recently started getting out of school and attending colleges. With all the colleges located in the nearby towns, many of our youth travel long distances from their villages or if they can afford it, they stay in rented lodgings in the town. Hence, this year we found it something of a challenge to organize youth into regular youth groups as they are not to be found in the

Smart Kids Do More

In a research we carried out, we found that:

- 16.7% of our children's group members got A Grade in their exams compared to 5.9% non-group members; 47% of children themselves feel that they have improved in their studies after being a group member.
- Parents see increase in selfconfidence as the biggest change in their children after being a part of the ant's children's groups.
- Teachers and parents also feel that group members tend to exercise more selfdiscipline and follow a routine.
- Girls and boys in our groups tend to play together more often than non-group members.

village. We could only work with a handful of youth in the Youth Parliaments across various clusters. The 30-40 youth in each of the 6 Parliaments in the 6 clusters are active but we feel that we are missing out on working with a large chunk of youth in the cluster — especially the more vulnerable and needy youth of the village. So, while the Youth Parliaments continue their activities, we reviewed our youth strategy and tried to evolve a more participatory and responsive youth programme which we have just started rolling out. Over the next 3 years, at the village level, we hope to be working with over 150 selected *Community Youth Leaders* (CYLs) who will be a key part of our strategy in the Sports For Development Programme.

Preserve & Promoting Identity: With the easy availability of digital music now made easier with mobile phones, traditional music and dance is fast disappearing and along with it, an important part of the external



visible identity of a tribe. Youth in the villages can no longer play the traditional drums, violins or flutes. After consulting the youth we work with, we got trainers from a neighbouring district during the summer holidays, 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 even held the instruments earlier! 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.

iv. Unnati Skills Centre started on the ant's campus: In collaboration with Unnati of Bangalore, we started our youth vocational training centre on the 15th December 2014. The new Multi -Purpose Training Centre welcomed the first batch of 10 trainees to 2 trades – retails sales (for matric passed youth) and admin assistant (for graduates). All students are taught Basic Spoken English and computer, values and also a trade. Unfortunately, even as this goes to print, we have had to temporarily stop the vocational skills training for youth. We could not find jobs which paid enough to sustain the youth in nearby areas. We are looking at new partnerships and models that make sense to young people from our area.





Starting S4D

In partnership with Magic Bus Foundation of Mumbai, we have just started a 3 year long *Sports For Development* (S4D) programme. Using a structured curriculum of games and sports, we hope to address issues of health, education, gender, peace etc. with over 3000 children from our villages. As we report, we have just completed the first phase of the master trainer's training. Along with the

community, they are now selecting youth volunteers (called *Community Youth Leaders*) who will volunteer 2 hours a week to carry out the sports sessions with the children in their own villages. We are really excited about the possibility of pushing sports and games to address the development needs of children as well as sensitizing them to social issues.





b. Community Mental Health Programme

The Community Mental Health Project supported by the Tata Trusts is now called the Jan Man Swasthya Programe (JMSP). The programme is now well embedded into the ant's work. Currently, we are covering 68,000 population in 156 villages and aiming to reach up to one lakh population in the next few months. It is challenging but an interesting transition to move from a camp based bio-medical approach of treating mental illnesses to a more holistic community centred approach to mental health. Community Health Workers have been trained to identify patients of severe and common mental disorders, counsel and support patients and their family members and also help reduce stigma about mental illness through awareness programmes. Every month we also run 4 out-reach treatment camps inside the government PHCs where patients are treated and counseled. We are also advocating with the government to start taking responsibility for treatment of mental patients in our District. This project is supported by the Jamshetjee Tata Trust and is part of a larger multi-partner initiative on community mental health in India. Our intervention is but a small drop in the ocean and the needs of the mentally ill remain a hugely unaddressed problem in the Northeast (as well as all over India). We feel that there is an urgent need to grow and expand the community mental health programme at least to other parts of Assam because the need is there.





Top: Mental Health week being celebrated to spread awareness regarding mental illness. Bottom: Patients in our Mental Health Outreach Camp in the Amguri PHC

c. Peace Building & Access to Justice

Legal Aid Centre: Justice and peace are two sides of the same coin. Seeing how poor the state of law and order is and how many are denied justice, we have been feeling the need to start a *Legal Aid Centre*. Finally in June 2014 we finally took the plunge and began a weekly *legal aid centre* with the purpose of giving legal aid and advice to people who need it. A lawyer and a paralegal worker act together, and though this is just the beginning, we have been successful in taking up 27 cases of which 14 have been solved. These cases include those of domestic violence, maintenance cases, land disputes, access to relief compensation, etc. We are working to build this small initiative into a full-fledged programme for the poor not just to access legal justice but also to get their many rights and entitlements. Our team is building up village level forums with members cutting across ethnic (and many a times warring) communities. They are encouraging them to move from fighting each other to fighting together for a common cause, i.e. for their rights and entitlements.

ii. **Peace Building Efforts – Youth Peace Leaders:** We took the *Youth Peace Drama* which we started last year, a step further. This time, we got together youth in the age group of 16 to 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 was

heartening to watch young men and women from 3 communities in conflict, performing side by side, getting the audience to think about non-violent ways of solving conflicts. This group was taken through 3 phases of training, interspersed with performances in the community and the youth carrying out small peace events and activities to bring about cross-community interactions. 1938 children, youth, men and women took part in the various peace events like sports tournaments, celebrating festivals together,



Peace-Justice Programme – Youth talk through drama of non-violent ways of solving conflicts

cleanliness drives, etc. For the first time in the history of the area, both Bodos and Koch Rajbongshis attended an Eid-Sanmilan as a group and partook of food in the homes of Bengali Muslims and joined in the festivities. That's some more space opened up. In fact, we have taken our peace building role of building bridges between communities, so seriously that we are introducing cross-community interaction as one of the criteria by which we will be measuring the performance and impact of all our projects and programmes within the ant.

iii. **Relief and Rehabilitation:** Violence and trouble also broke out in our area after militants gunned down Adivasis in 2 other districts on Christmas Eve 2014. We were suddenly faced with thousands of people – both



An old Woman in Deosri relief camp



Top: Holding a meeting with Relief Camp inmates in Deosri and also various local organisations to discuss camp management issues. Three Adivasi relief camps with 10,000 population come up on 24th December 2014, next to our field office in Deosri. Food is a crisis with the government having stopped all rations and health care to force people back to their homes despite poor security. Bottom left: Father-son in relief camp in Shantipur. Bottom right: Relief Materials being packed for victims of the riots. 175 sets of cooking utensils were distributed to families – both Bodos and Adivasis – whose houses were either burnt or looted.

Adivasis and Bodos - fleeing their villages in our Deosri cluster. Since we had been working in the area for years, many of the people who fled to live in relief camps were known to us. They were either women from our groups or children in our evening study centres or farmers whom we had worked with. Thinking of the thousands sleeping in the open in the severe December cold gave us sleepless nights. Thanks to donations from *Caring Friends*, we could give relief to thousands of families. Supplementing inadequate government supplies, we distributed blankets; tarpaulin sheets; soaps; masala packets to over 2500 families in relief camps.

Floods in Goalpara District

Flash floods hit many districts of Assam in the middle of September 2014. Of the many districts affected, flood waters displaced thousands of families in our neighboring Goalpara District. Many had not got relief. With support from Caring friends, through partner NGOs in Goalpara — Assam Mahila Samata Society & Agajar Social Service — we could feed over 10,000 people with khichdi as they had no firewood to cook with; we also helped over 1000 families with blankets + mosquito nets and 6000 families with bleaching powder and candle packets.

d. Power to Women and Girls

i. Women's Collectives (Jagruti Groups) With the government programme of NRLM (National Rural Livelihoods Mission) aggressively pushing formation of SHGs and federations, we consulted our women's groups about what the ant's role should be *and if there should be a role at all or not?* We all felt good that the government was finally waking up to the power of women's collectives. But at the same time we are worried that the anti-Midas touch of the government should not destroy the strong spirit of self-help laboriously built up in our groups. Like most government programmes rolled out hurriedly to the masses, even the NRLM is great in intention but abysmal in implementation. It took us time and a lot of soul-searching but we decided that however trying the process be, at least the intent was there. And so, instead of working at cross purposes, we have decided to get our groups aligned to the government's programme. At present, our team is doing that. Even as we help the groups re-align to the NRLM norms, we are exploring ways of helping groups grow their income. And we are also looking at ways to strengthen the women's rights perspectives and not let that get lost in the maze of a government run SHG programme.

Women's Right to Play: Women's right to games and sports is not often spoken about. Once married, these small pleasures seem of a long, forgotten girlhood! Inspired by the high-glamour Indian kabbadi league on the television, some of our women too decided to learn to play kabbadi "properly". On 27th September, 12 teams gathered in Rowmari from our various village clusters for a day of kabbadi tournament. With much giggling, shyness but also excitement, they changed into their "uniforms" (football jerseys borrowed from the football teams) and salwars (which some of the federations were inspired to stitch!). We even had official children's referees from the District Sports Association and the women found it a real challenge to stick to the strict rules! It was quite an eye-opener for us that women asked us to give them medals and trophies and not the more functional kitchenware and utensils that we normally give them as prizes! They said, "even we want to feel what it is like to wear a medal or to hold high a trophy cup!" The grins on their faces with the gleaming medals around their necks said it all! The women are now demanding that we organize a kabbadi coaching camp next year so they play even better but we are even more ambitious, we are dreaming of holding a full-fledged sports meet exclusively for married women!



Women Peace-Makers

In our Deosri Cluster, 8th March (International Women's Day) was not just about women. Tension was still thick following the ethnic violence between Bodos and Adivasis in December 2014. People of both the communities were still wary of each other and many were still living in relief camps out of fear. The women used the occasion to try and bridge this divide. Urging people to forget their differences, they got Adivasi, Nepali, Bodo and Rajbongshi men, women and children to laugh, talk, play, sing and dance together, again. This went a long way is helping at least some of the violence affected families gain enough confidence to move out of the relief camps back to their villages.

ii. **Support to Girl's Education:** After completing their middle school, girls are at a higher risk to drop out of school. With help of a Caring Friend from the U.S., we have launched a programme to strengthen girls' education. Along with the students' unions and other community based organisations, we have started 40 evening study centres and 8 coaching camps for girls (and some boys who need it). Hopefully, girls will get support to do better in their studies and better their position in life itself.

e. Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods

i. **Study on Commons:** Common land, water and forest resources are getting privatized and disappearing fast. Many communities are already facing a crisis as grazing land has become scarce. There are few common ponds

left for water, and getting firewood is a huge daily struggle. Unfortunately, not enough attention is given to the issue which is threatening the existence of communities. Seva Mandir, Udaipur has been working on the issues of protecting commons for many decades now. Using their experience in the issue, they carried out a multi-centric study across 15 districts in India to measure the extent of loss of common land and also study best practices by which communities are managing their common property resources. In Assam, the ant was one of the partners in this study. Apart from opening our eyes to the severity of the problem and the need to do something about it, it has given us an entry point to start interventions with forest communities in the Kuklung Forest range.

f. Remote Areas Development Programme

We have adopted 2 areas on the India- Bhutan border under this programme. Being inaccessible, poorly governed, militancy affected, ethnically divided and ecologically fragile, we feel that these areas need special focus and more resources.

Top: Research on Common Property Resources to see how communities are managing the fast disappearing common land resources Bottom: Helping communities map and manage the fast disappearing common land resources







i. Deosri Development Project: This year we got support from Arpan Foundation, USA to start a focused intervention in Deosri. The community is highly appreciative of the 10 evening study centres where 350 students gather every evening for group study. This has created an atmosphere of study in the village since parents are unable to guide their wards. We are now introducing frisbee as a sport to the children of the evening study centres. Through this sport, we will be addressing issues of their development.

Then, Class 10 (matric) exam candidates displaced by the December violence in Deosri were in deep trouble. Many of them could not bring their books with them when they suddenly had to flee in terror from their homes. Living in crowded tents in tension

was no atmosphere to

study. They were worried about losing a year. We stepped in to support residential coaching camps for such students. Along with the All Adivasi Students' Association and the All Bodo Students' Union, we ran residential study camps for the students. The community contributed rice and other commodities. We await the results to see how many students end up passing. At least there is a hope now. Without this intervention in Deosri and Shantipur, many students would have certainly lost a year.

We have also been promoting kitchen gardens and horticulture among Adivasi families of Deosri. This we hope would lead to better nutrition and also some supplementary income among displaced families who after having lived in crowded relief camps for so many years, seem to have lost the culture of keeping kitchen gardens. Ironically, the same target group was again living in relief camps during the main vegetable growing season. We had to wait till they went back to their homes in order to start kitchen gardens and hence, lost time. But we are now helping them grow some summer vegetables and 60 families have started kitchen gardens while another 30 have planted fruit trees. We hope that after seeing them, more families would get into this activity.

Whether it is our work with women, farmers, children or of bettering quality of education, the cooperation and appreciation of the community is palpable and this is what drives us on.

ii. Kuklung Development

Following the study on Common Property, we started some small livelihoods based work in Kuklung under our Remote Areas Development Programme. We feel that people of the forest fringe villages must have livelihoods and income if they are to be weaned away from felling trees for selling as firewood whenever there is a cash shortage. We have already entered 11 villages with 731 households and started helping the families cultivate kitchen gardens systematically so that they get nutrition and also some supplementary income through the year. We have started a dialogue with the community and will be starting a one-acre demo farm in the area. As schools in this part of Manas Forest Research are of really poor quality, we have started 8 evening study centres and 2 coaching classes, mainly to strengthen girl's education.

The Teachers Arrive

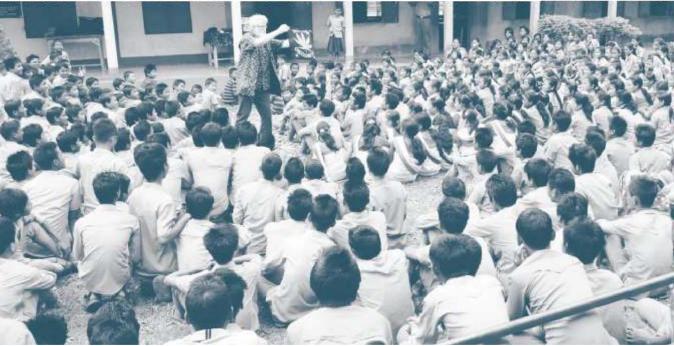
For years now, a single teacher has been forced to teach almost 200 students enrolled in 353 No. Deosri LP School. Despite many petitions and requests, no other teacher was appointed here. Absenteeism among students was high since a single teacher obviously could not teach so many classes and so many children. We complained to the ASCPCR (Assam State Commissioner for Protection of Child Rights) that the provisions under the Right to Education (RTE) were being violated. In the meantime, we helped pay for two extra teachers to teach children in the school. It took us almost a year of running around but finally, we got two new TET passed teachers posted in the school.

Magicians Without Borders

The wonderful magicians Tom Verner and Chris Yerlig from Magicians without Borders, a non-profit based in the U.S. were here with us. They flew straight from the U.S. into Assam and did a 5-days Magic and Mime workshop on the ant's campus from 24th to the 28th of April 2015. When we first learnt that these magicians use Magic for bringing joy, laughter and healing in war torn areas across the world, we could not help but invite them over. To our utter joy,













they immediately accepted to come to Assam and train a team of 16 of us to use magic in our work with communities. While Tom unraveled for us the magic behind the magic, Chris taught us to use mime to enhance our performance. All the trainees put up a one-hour long much-appreciated performance on our campus at the end of the training. The wonder, laughter and joy in the eyes of our audience matched the thrill in the hearts of the new performers. Thank you Tom. Thank you Chris. Thank you Caring Friends, for bringing magic into our lives!

II. IDeA

IDeA (the Institute of Development Action) was formed by the ant to strengthen and support the voluntary sector 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 it engages. We are currently carrying out an action-research project in Dibrugarh District.

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) a common indicator of chronic malnutrition and low weight among children. We believe that though malnutrition occurring before the age of 2 years becomes irreversible, not just for attaining the potential height and weight but also for intellectual development. And, as children's malnutrition starts after six months of breastfeeding and worsens by the day after the beginning of weaning, we decided to train community youth volunteers to focus on weaning babies between 6 and 11 months to prevent malnutrition. We are working with two of IDeA's partners, Prastuti and Rural Development Organization (RDO). By teaching them low-cost, healthy ways of improving their child's nutrition, we are bettering feeding practices of mothers of 6 to 11 month old babies at the best window period we have — during weaning. The action project is supported by NFI, New Delhi.



b. Forum of Voluntary Organizations of Assam

Partner NGOs whom we had trained through IDeA came together all on their own to form a support group. Called the 'Forum for Voluntary Sector of Assam' (FVSA), they have been active in extending knowledge, skills and most important moral support to their fellow travellers in their struggle of carrying out values-based voluntary work in very challenging and resource poor settings. They have formed a core team and among themselves, they have taken responsibility to help strengthen and support their fellow organisations in the Forum. It is indeed inspiring for us to see them willing to share and reach out even with the very little which they have. With a bit of help from Caring Friends, we partially support the costs of the forum members meeting twice a year and also the travel of some of the core members to support others in the group.

c. Extending the care 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!



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the ant's LOCAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Executive Director: Ms Jennifer Liang

Our Funders

- DKA, Austria for inspiring us beyond the funding role.
- Tata Trusts, Mumbai for guiding us towards Community
 Mental Health
- Arpan Foundation, for coming forward to support our work in Deosri
- NFI for supporting the action to better nutrition in the tea gardens.
- Nucleus Software Foundation for starting a partnership with us
- And to every single individual volunteer and and also every donor of Caring Friends! Your unwavering trust in us is humbling!

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Do check out the ant's new website at www.theant.org. Thanks to Pranjal & Team at SSISM, Indore for helping us give it a new look!

Donations made to the ant are exempt from Income Tax under Section 80G of the IT Act. Cheque / DD in the name of "the ant", payable at Bongaigaon may be sent to the ant, Udangshree Dera, Village Rowmari, PO Khagrabari, District Chirang via Bongaigaon, BTAD, Assam 783 380 India. For RTGS / online transfer of donations / endowments by Indian citizens and corporate entities to our Punjab National Bank account number 1201000100106170, please use the IFSC Code of PUNB0120100. We are eligible to receive foreign contributions but foreign citizens and organisations including Indians with foreign citizenship and Indian registered companies with more than 50% share capital from abroad may please write to us before donating to us to comply with Government of India procedures.





the ant the action northeast trust

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