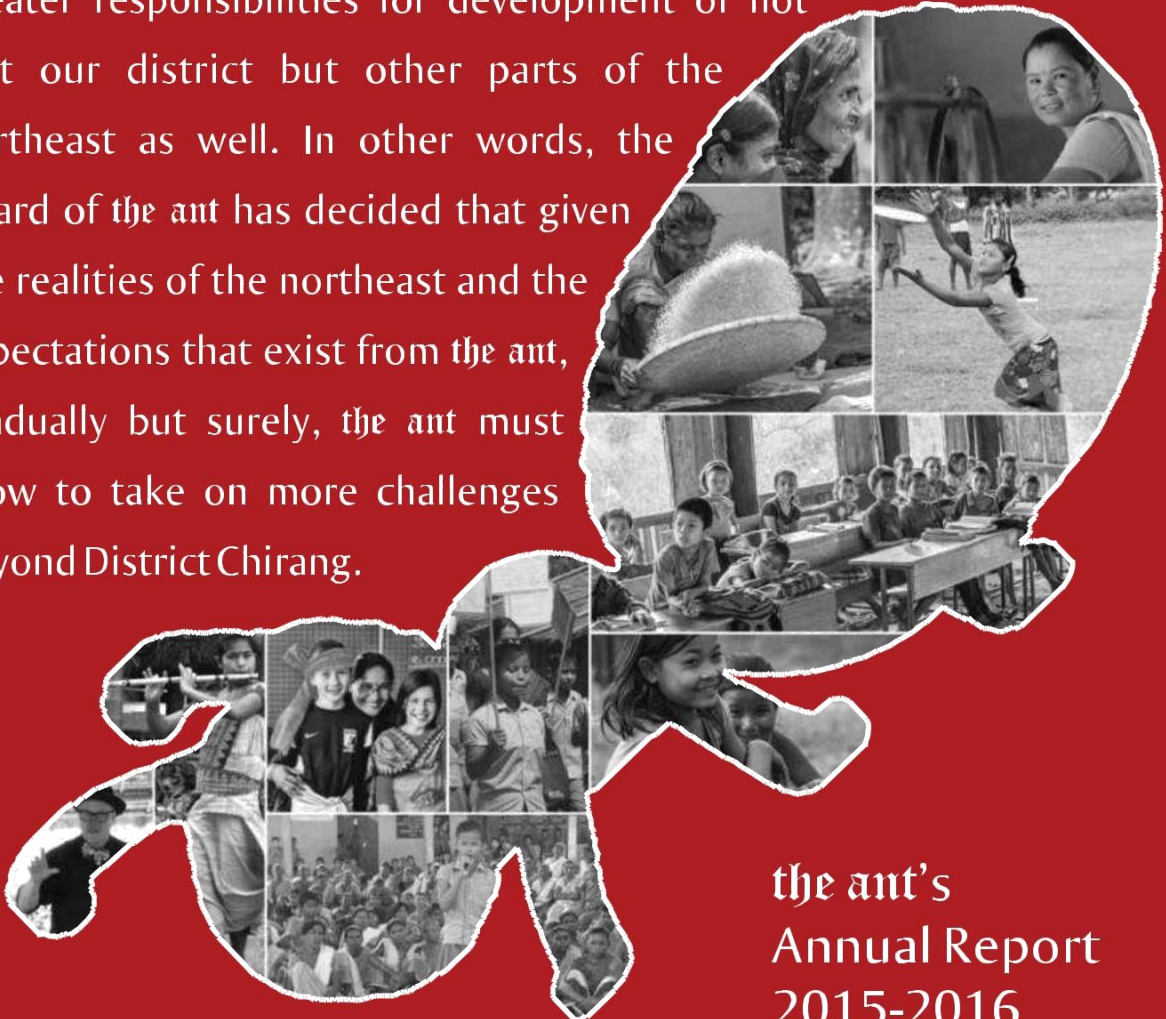




the ant

the action northeast trust

At 16, the ant is now well into teenage years ... with its heady swing of ups and downs, though we are grateful that this year has been more of ups than downs. With new partners, new projects and a bit of restructuring . . . the ant is all set to respond to and shoulder greater responsibilities for development of not just our district but other parts of the northeast as well. In other words, the Board of the ant has decided that given the realities of the northeast and the expectations that exist from the ant, gradually but surely, the ant must grow to take on more challenges beyond District Chirang.



**the ant's
Annual Report
2015-2016**

Direct Village Intervention

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

1. Strength and Power to Women

a. 'Include Women' Campaign

The much awaited announcement came 5 weeks before the elections. Voting for the Assam Assembly elections was to be held on 4th April 2016 in our area. We seized the opportunity! Some of us from civil society groups in Assam had already worked on and prepared a manifesto with women's demands, many of which were very relevant to women in our area too. We just had one month to push for it. With thousands of women now organized into self-help groups, political parties in our area had started wooing women's collectives to swing opinion. So, with International Women's Day round the corner, the ant team, along with women from our SHG groups and federations got into full swing. We launched a campaign to get some of the demands in our Women's Manifesto to be included into the promises various political parties were making to the public.

While the political parties campaigned, our women's groups also took out rallies, put up huge banners in 45 prominent places all over our District, met various party leaders, and handed over hundreds of our manifesto pamphlets at party rallies, besides inviting speakersto speak about it during the Women's day celebrations . . . Almost 3000 women in Chirang took part in the campaign asking the parties to give election tickets to women candidates, asking for ration shops to be run by women, for quality maternal health services, for action to end to violence against women and most important, for women to be included in decision-making and governance (Bodoland is governed under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution where there is no panchayat system and the local bodies are based on nomination by the ruling party with no reservation for women in local governance). The "women's demands" caught the attention of many, both the general public





and political parties! Men discussed it in tea shops, husbands fought with their wives over it, some political parties welcomed it and promised to take up some of the demands in their charter, while others were angry and upset at the cheek of women making demands on them.

The campaign was a huge learning and confidence-building experience for women. Irrespective of communities they belong to or the political party they support, women stood as one – publically demanding their concerns to be included. Over a third of the money for the entire campaign was contributed by women. They got a chance to give voice – and they did it whole-heartedly.

b. 'Stop Violence Against Women' Campaign

15 November – 10 December is the Fortnightly Campaign to 'Stop Violence Against Women' all over the world. Every year, we too use this period as a time to sensitize and call for action to stop Violence Against Women. This year, 30 different programmes were conducted by our women's groups and federations whose biggest concern was continued wife-beating in the community. Over the next few years, we have set ourselves an ambitious target – to stop wife-beating in the homes of all our SHG members and also women in their villages.

c. Saving time and saving trees : The Mahila Suvidha Bank

Our cycle bank successfully increased women's mobility even as it helped create a family asset. Learning from this, we decided to extend it further. With support from Shri Chetan Shah, a donor who has been supporting part of our work with women the past few years, we extended the cycle



LOLITA of Palashguri Village has this to say of her gas stove, "Earlier I cooked food on firewood and we had to go far in the forest in search of firewood. It would take most of our time and energy and we still had to buy firewood from the local sellers which cost a lot, especially in winters. When I heard of Mahila Suvidha Bank, I was keen to buy a stove but I was scared of using a gas stove. But now, it has been 5 months and I am happy to say that this has saved my time, energy and money."

bank into what we call a 'Mahila Suvidha' Bank which gives loans to women for pressure cookers and gas stoves. In a survey we did, almost all of the women in our SHGs use wood stoves with less than 6.5% of them owning either a pressure cooker or a gas stove – conveniences which urban families take for granted but beyond the reach of many village women.

We ran trainings for women to get over their fear of the pressure cooker bursting or getting damaged when cooking on a firewood stove. We trained them in using and also maintaining their gas stove. Today, over 130 women have got gas connections in their homes and over 400 women who never used use pressure cookers earlier now use it. The women's federations run the chapters of the Mahila Suvidha Bank and are revolving the loans for this. We are saving women's time and along with it, saving trees and our environment. And yes, as an added bonus, husbands now volunteer to cook on the new gas stove!

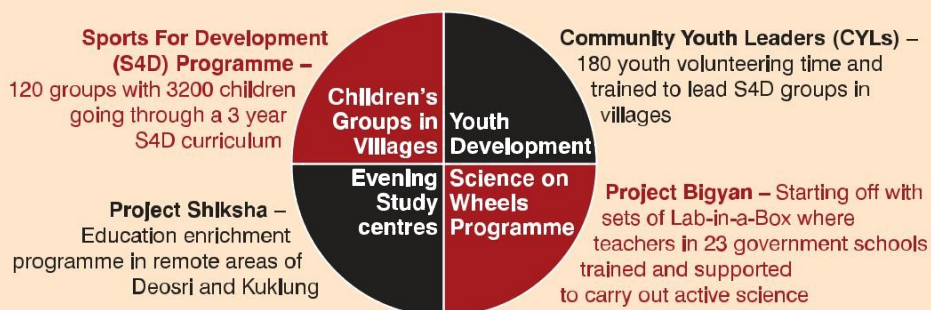


Gender Benders: Girls make Music along with the Boys!

Girls dance while boys are the musicians. That's the way tradition runs. Bijulee (on the siphung or flute) and Daisy (on the khaam or long drum), managed to break that norm. Just 15 days into a traditional music workshop which we supported in July 2015, they have become as good as the boys in playing not just the flute and drum but also the serja which is a 4 stringed traditional violin. The girls are working alongside the boys to protect their musical tradition which is fast vanishing in the world of digital music that is easily available through mobile phones! It was extremely interesting to see the two girls be given pride of place in leading the procession of dancers and musicians in the opening ceremony of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (the highest Bodo Literary body) this year. These photos went viral on Facebook! During the Summer break of 2016, we are planning to have a full-fledged traditional music workshop only for girls, hoping to train over 15 girl musicians. It will be really exciting if we can successfully put together an all-girl traditional music troupe – the first in Bodoland.

2. Child and Youth Development

Our work to develop Children and Youth continued to grow this year too and is slowly becoming the major chunk of our interventions in villages. Small projects which started as pilots have deepened and have been scaled up. The following are the ways in which the children and youth programme has shaped up this year:



a. Sports for Development (S4D)

Though we have been working with children's groups in villages for some years now, the growth and quality has not been completely to our satisfaction. With limited staff, the number of times that groups can be reached out to is highly limited and this has also meant that the number of groups has remained stagnant. Thus, when we heard that Magic Bus Foundation of Mumbai was looking for partners to start some sports for development programmes in the northeast, we jumped at the opportunity. In April 2015 we launched the Sports for Development (S4D) programme in our area where we hire the services of Magic Bus Foundation who are providing us an adapted curriculum and technical inputs and support. Using the sports and games based curriculum, we hope to bring about physical, mental, social and emotional development of over 3000





children in the age group of 8-16 years in 3 years. Every week, 20-25 children in S4D groups meet for 2–3 hours and play – but according to a curriculum. Sessions are designed to address issues of children under domain areas such as better education (improved school attendance and quality), health (better nutrition and hygiene); gender equality; child rights knowledge and also socio-emotional learning (increased confidence, self-discipline, inter-personal skills, handling conflicts etc.). Supported by DKA, Austria, this project is exciting as we hope to see measurable development changes in children while they do what they should do what they love doing, i.e., P-L-A-Y!

Children for Children

In Austria, every year around Christmas, more than 85,000 children accompanied by 30,000 adults go house-to-house singing carols, blessing the homes and collecting money. They collect over 16 million Euros with which they support 500 development projects in 17 countries, largely child and youth development projects. This is their way of showing solidarity with children-in-need in other parts of the world. The ant's work with children and youth is one such project that is supported by the children of Austria through the agency called DKA, Austria. This year a team of 4 members from the ant were selected to go to Austria for 3 weeks in November. Breaking up into teams of 2, they went to different parts of the country doing sessions with children in schools, carol singers in the churches, youth and also . . . sensitising them about India, the Northeast, Assam, lives of children in villages and also about what we do with the money given to our project. It was a wonderful exchange both ways!





b. Youth as Community Youth Leaders (CYLs)

The mainstay of the S4D programme is the cadre of 180+ village youth volunteers called CYLs (*Community Youth Leaders*) who are trained and mentored to run the weekly S4D session for the children's groups. In engaging youth to volunteer 2-3 hours a week for children in their own village, we teach them to extend beyond themselves. But in doing that, they also grow their own leadership potential and learn many skills as they handle different situations while dealing with children. CYLs are far from being mere unpaid "field extension workers" in the S4D programme. They are

young people in their own right – with aspirations and needs. Workshops, trainings and camps on vocational & career guidance, communication skills, etc. are being planned for them. CYLs will also have their own exposure visits and sports tournaments too, much beyond their task of facilitating S4D sessions! *One who reaches a person up a hill, also reaches there!*

Development Discs – Along with the larger Sports for Development Programme, we are also experimenting with and discovering just what a wonderful development tool the game of *Frisbee* is – a plastic disc costing less than 100 rupees and one is pretty much set! Its rules are quite simple, no expensive equipment or gear required; girls and boys always play together and best of all, it promotes self-discipline and



honesty as there are no referees in this sport..... We introduced the game of “Ultimate Frisbee” in our Deosri Evening Study Centres which are supported by Arpan Foundation. Anish Mukherjee, a young and energetic development professional who has now founded the Art of Play Foundation from Kolkata is our guide and trainer. His enthusiasm has been infectious. Not just the kids but also the Evening Study Centre teachers in Deosri are quite taken up by the game. We have 10 teams of around 150 Frisbee players already in Deosri. Using a scale used internationally to measure skills and performance, Anish informs us that our Deosri kids score 5.5 in skills compared to the 7 scored by starter level kids in the U.S who play the game! We are keeping an eye on better school attendance, improvement in marks, higher self-discipline etc. A disc is a disc until it is used as a tool for development!.

c. Project Shiksha

Education for the poor has generally come to mean poor education. And when it comes to the forested villages bordering Bhutan, schools (if at all present) are usually abysmal. What started off as *evening study centres* in remote villages—spaces for young children to gather and do an hour of guided group study—have now grown into a form of education enrichment programme for children from 5-15 years! Through Arpan Foundation, (USA) Sh. Kamal Agarwal has been supporting our education work with children in Deosri and Kuklung for the second year in a row. We run 25 *Children Development Centres* for the 6-10 age group, remedial classes for the older ones in Middle School and residential coaching for girls appearing for the Class 10 matriculation exams. In single teacher schools (and there are even schools with no appointed teachers!), we have given them “extra” teachers—so that even as we fight the long battle for more teachers to be placed by the government – the education of children does not suffer. The education work is much appreciated by the community and we have to look for ways to sustain it.





Don't Mess with Our Education!

A unique rally was taken out in Deosri on 28th September, 2015 by children associated with our evening study centres supported by Arpan Foundation (USA). It was self-organised with the ant playing but a minor role! Children were demanding of adults and especially parents to be more responsible towards their education! 350 primary and middle school children and some of their teachers participated in this rally- raising their voice demanding "books are our best friends, do not separate us". The rally covered many villages along a 7 kilometer route and even the hot September sun did not deter the children from making their voices heard.

Over 150 parents were present in the open meeting following the rally— adults hung their heads in shame and were moved to tears when child after child – especially girls - stood up bravely in front of the big crowd and pleaded with parents to allow them to go to school instead of keeping them behind at home to look after their siblings or sending them to fetch firewood or water.

d. Science on Wheels

There is a severe crisis of science teachers in Assam. Some years ago, in a special Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) for Higher Secondary Schools in Assam, only 2000 of 31,000 candidates who appeared for the exam even attempted the science section of the paper and of these only 128 cleared the paper and an even lesser number joined as Science Teachers! A few years ago, we started the Science-on-Wheels Programme to better the teaching and learning of science in government schools in our area. This year, Nucleus Software Foundation, Delhi gave us a small grant to keep the programme running.



REGULAR SCIENCE CLASSES IN PARTNER SCHOOLS

Reached out regularly to 1761 students from 15 partner government of Assamese and Bodo medium from over 200 villages

PERIODIC SCIENCE EXAMS

In periodic science exams we conducted, students from the partner schools scored 25% more than students from out-reach programme schools with lesser intervention

MONTHLY SCIENCE WORKSHOPS FOR CLASS 10 STUDENTS

18 science workshops with a total of 360 students, of which 189 were girls and 171 boys

SCIENCE OUTREACH PROGRAMMES TO HARD-TO-REACH SCHOOLS

17 programmes in all with a total of 728 participants who registered

COMMUNITY SCIENCE AWARENESS

23 small village level awareness programmes conducted with 1199 people (582 men and 617 women); "Science Stalls" in 2 public events – at least 5000 students and adults visited our stalls.

The Science on Wheels programme has come a long way and is well-appreciated. Principals of the schools who were hesitant to give us even half an hour of class time in a month earlier now invite us to come and take classes every day! They see a good thing happening for the students and for their school. But many challenges lie before us – *how do we withdraw from the partner schools as new students will keep coming every year? How do we reduce dependency on us by the partner schools? How do we get the teachers in the partner schools to start taking responsibility for quality science education? How do we sustain the programme? The need is so huge, how do we move from intervening in a few schools to scaling up our efforts to reach more schools and benefit many more students in different places?*

In trying to answer these questions, we have come up with Project Bigyan. Even as this goes to print – we have got a grant from ChildAid Network (Germany) for this. Agastya Foundation(Bangalore) who has been

most generous in training our team and sharing their expertise these past years will be the Knowledge Consultant and help us put in place a complete system of Lab-In-a-Box. These boxes will have different sets of demonstrations and experiments in biology, chemistry and physics which will be rotated roughly on a fortnightly basis among a cluster of schools (in our area, it would be around 5-7 schools in one geographic area). 2-3 teachers will be trained from each school to use the materials in the box for demonstrations during their regular science classes – at least 2-3 times a week. In each school, we are hoping to institute a “Science Practicals Day” where the school will set aside 3-4 hours for the students to carry out the experiments in small groups. Our Science Facilitators will be present on that particular day to support the school teachers in this. For the first 2-3 years we will also ensure supply of basic materials for students to do the experiments hands-on. This time we plan to keep the government education department involved from Day 1 and by and by, we hope that the government will take on responsibility to help the schools set up basic science labs for the students.

b. Peace and Justice Programme

Building Peace – Piece by Piece! In an area torn by repeated violence, people are wary about talking “peace”. In periods of calm, people are superstitious and scared that they will invite violence – like how one invites the evil eye – if they talk too much about peace! On the other hand, we know that something has to be done about rebuilding relationships, and that lost peace has to be pursued. Confidence building measures go a long way in preventing that next bout of conflict between communities. Our effort has been in finding all kinds of spaces for inter-community interaction without actually mentioning the word “peace”! So, what we have started talking about is “justice”. For example, one of the multi-community groups of Bodos, Bengali Muslims and Rajbongshis rose above their immediate differences to protest the electricity companies putting up power transmission towers and high tension wires on their land without even asking them. 500 people from Chirang and Kokrajhar sat in a dharna in Kokrajhar asking for clarity and proper policy on this and they have now formed a *Chirang Land Protection Committee*. For the past one year now, we have been trying to formalize our efforts of creating spaces of cooperation between communities where hostilities still exist and each of these is called a “Sahayak Manch”. We hope it becomes a space of dialogue and non-violent conflict resolution in the future.



Can Violence be Predicted and Prevented?

Like we now have early warning systems for floods or cyclones, can ethnic violence be predicted and hence, action taken early enough to prevent it?! Working with villages affected by recent ethnic violence and still vulnerable to future conflict, we are trying to answer precisely these questions. In March this year, we started a pilot project of what we are calling “Project Sahayak” in 30 villages with a small support from Unicef, Guwahati. Based on the concept of the Sahayak Manch (Cooperation Forum), it is exciting, ground-breaking work in Disaster Risk Mitigation where “disaster” usually refers to natural disasters. But today, violent conflict is a huge disaster indeed, displacing millions in the world, causing incalculable loss, misery and suffering. It is still early days and we are keeping our fingers crossed for not just helping communities become aware of early ethnic conflict signals but actually doing something to mitigate that risk.



Being Channels of Peace

One year ago, a few days before Christmas 2014, violence broke out after militants gunned down innocent people. A year later in December 2015, with the one year first anniversary approaching, there was fear and tension in the air. Rumours were flying thick and fast and things were starting to get out of hand. Instead of just sitting and watching the situation deteriorate, some of us NGOs in Lower Assam got together and decided to do our bit in defusing the situation.

We took out a joint rally in Kokrajhar town and then in each of our own areas which had experienced violence, we held candle light rallies for peace. In our Deosri area which saw 10,000 displaced last year, the candle-light rally on 23rd December evening helped lift the thick curtain of mistrust and fear and was a huge confidence booster for the communities. We are glad we could act as the channels of peace.

3. Mental Health Programme

Three categories of patients are largely treated by our mental health programme – *Severe Mental Disorders* (Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorders, MDP etc.), *Common Mental Disorders* (Anxiety, Depression, etc.) and also *Seizure Disorders* (mainly Epilepsy). This year saw us treat over 1100 patients every month in the two arms of our work i.e., firstly, the Tata Trust backed *Jan Man Swasthya Programme* (JMSP) that focuses on community mental health and also the *Monthly Mental Health Camp* that which treats any patients who walk in – sometimes people travel from other districts with some coming from as far away as Bengal.

In a rapid survey we did, people in villages from our JMSP area were interviewed randomly and asked for feedback on the JMSP Programme. Over 93% had heard of the programme and of these, 94.2% said that patients got better with our medicines. They were really appreciative of the mental health treatment offered by the ant and are willing to pay a little more for better services. Family Support groups are just about taking off in the area and we hope they will slowly get built up as advocacy groups for rights of mentally ill patients in the future.



Faith Healers Meet Modern Medicine

In our villages – as in many parts of our country – patients with mental illness are taken to traditional faith healers for treatment. Through herbs, prayers, rituals, animal sacrifices, etc. they try to get rid of the “evil spirit” and “cure” the patient. Though we may not always agree with their practices, they are important figures in treating mental illness in our villages.

So, instead of side-lining them and their practice, we decided to build collaboration and have an open knowledge-sharing session with the “ojhas”. It took a lot of mobilising and convincing on the part of our team to get 31 ojhas (both men and women) to come to our campus on the 11th September for a day-long sharing programme. Most of them brought a host of “disciples” to support them and convince us of their healing “skills”. They were really unsure and fearful about what our agenda was. Normally, in public meetings, they are hauled up and scolded and ridiculed for their irrational practices.

But on insisting that we want the best treatment for our patients – and if we could jointly explore together, we won them over. They are now ready to come to our meetings any time and have been requesting more such programmes!

4. Deosri Development Project

Clothes for Work to Combat Cold in Deosri

It has been a harsh year for the violence-hit people of Deosri, near the Bhutan border. Having lived in relief camps for most part of the year after the ethnic riots of December 2014, they lost a lot – their house, livestock, income, savings, home, crops, food and a sense of security. It has been tough to build up life again even if they managed to return to their villages. Though some families did receive help from the government, and from other humanitarian aid agencies, it is not enough to prepare them to battle the cold winter . . . Many of the families are living in roof-less and wall-less “shelters”. With help from “Caring Friends”, we are carrying out a Clothes-for-Work initiative where we are supporting over 500 riot-affected families with 2 blankets and a tarpaulin sheet each in exchange for a day’s labour in which they do some useful community-identified and some useful work.



Riot affected villagers work in building an approach road – in exchange for 2 blankets and a tarpaulin sheet per household which they would use to shelter against the cold Winter. Thank you Caring Friends for supporting this!

5. Kuklung Development

Kuklung, like Deosri, also borders Bhutan and geographically is part of the larger Manas National Park. It is a year since we started intervening in the area. This year, with support from Caring Friends, Mumbai and also Mastek Software Foundation, we started a small initiative to improve nutritional status and also provide supplementary income to 170 households. Of these, 120 households were helped with setting up kitchen gardens and 50 with setting up horticultural plots.

We measured the hemoglobin levels of all the women farmers to create awareness about need for women to have nutritious food. But we also wanted to see if their Hemoglobin levels increase if a variety of vegetables are available to them without having to pay for them. The baseline Hb turned out to be close to 9.5 gm/dL though WHO recommends at least 12 gm/dL for a woman to have normal levels. We shall be measuring their Hb once again at a later date. Most families could add an average income of Rs 4000 per bigha. Each farming household earned an additional average income worth Rs 18,000 in the two seasons just from their vegetable plots. Almost 5000 fruit saplings have been distributed to the 50 farming households, but its fruit shall be delayed!



6. IDeA

IDeA (the Institute of Development Action) was formed by the ant to strengthen and support the 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 it engages. After a three year lull, this year with a fresh mandate from the Board of Trustees, we decided to strengthen our engagement with the NGO sector in the region and specifically with the IDeA NGOs we have trained earlier. With support from Caring Friends, Mumbai, we will be giving small grants to a few selected IDeA partners and some small start-up NGOs with training, mentoring and hand-holding support to help the institutions grow. Apart from that, IDeA has taken up some research studies, from where it learns and also uses the findings to advocate for change. There is a lot of scope for IDeA to grow and expand and through it, for the ant to take its work beyond the immediate borders of Chirang.



the ant's BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Mr. Debojit Brahma, Ms. Enakshi Dutta, Ms. Himalini Verma, Mr. Jyoti Basumatary, Mr. Madhavan V.K., Mr. Netaji Basumatry, Dr. Sunil Kaul

the ant's LOCAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Mr. Bistu Brahma, Mr. Nazrul Islam, Ms. Habiya Khatun, Ms. Nilima Ray, Mr. Jyoti Basumatary, Ms. Mithinga Basumatary, Mr. Munshi Murmu, Mr. Pradip Narzary

We condole the untimely death of Mr. Rabindra Brahma of Khagrabari Village, a member of our Local Advisory Committee who was really active in our early days. We pray his soul rests in peace.

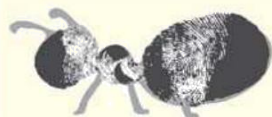
Grant-making organisations helping us in FY 2015-16

Arpan Foundation, USA; Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies, Trivandrum; Bongaigaon Refinery (IOC), Dist. Chirang; DKA, Austria; Mastek Foundation, Mumbai; Nucleus Foundation, New Delhi; National Foundation for India, New Delhi; UNICEF, Assam.

Our Donors in FY 2015 -2016

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Children's Development Programme

Parmeswar Roy, Akadashi Barman, Abdul Hussain Mandal, Swmdwn Basumatary, Sangrang Brahma, Salman Ali, Jarin Wary, Akramul Hoque, Gautam Sutradhar, Rina Rani Brahma, Nasiruddin, Kwmdwn Basumatary, Rwmwi Rwmwi Basumatary, Ranjit Narzary, Nani Bhagat, Ranima Narzary, John Koch, Dinanath Daimary, Nilu Rani Brahma, Samar Basumatary, Hero Basumatary

Mental Health

Daithun Brahma, Parul Baroi, Sonima Basumatary, Dipali Narzary, Abdul Hai, Manoj Narzary, Premnath Brahma, Nabanita Sharmah, Rupala Brahma

NGO Capacity Building Programme

Balawansuk Adreena Lynrah

Remote Area Development Programme – Deosiri

Passang Lama, Rabindra Murmu, Sunil Sutrodhar

Remote Area Development Programme – Kuklung

Sanjib Daimary, Sasti Sangma, Anjali Brahma, Sahida Begum

Science-on-Wheels

Stephan Narzary, Biswanath Brahma, Mungthang Muchahary, Juli Brahma, Dhanjit Brahma, Anjali Basumatary, Rashit Boro, Bhagyashri Brahma

Women's Empowerment

Laxmi Chetri, Damayanti Brahma, Sankar Dev Basumatary, Anil Muchahary, Hasina Khatun

