

the ant

the action northeast trust

As we complete 17 years of existence, the pressures and excitement of transitioning into adulthood have kept us on our toes. This year, the ant's mantra has been 'sustainability' with more and more projects designed to cater increased government-NGO-community collaboration and we hope to increase our footprints across Assam. Though challenging, we are taking steady steps in this direction, as we seek your continued support in this slow but essential direction.



the ant
Annual Report
2017 – 2018

ALL OUT WAR ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Our work with women dates to our initial years, starting 2001, when we focused on forming Self Help Groups, which we called Jagriti Groups and hoped to build them up to talk and move about social issues while they saved money and shared money. We worked with them for many years, brought mobility to them through cycles and worked with them on creating Suvidha or Convenience Banks that gave pressure cookers and gas stoves on small instalments. All these years, not a single month had gone by without the news of a horrendous case of domestic violence faced by some women in the villages reaching our ears. Exasperated, we would proceed with helping the survivor in all possible ways, all along worrying about the helplessness in tackling this rampant issue that we should actually be calling a crime! In 2017, it was time to take matters in hand. With a 3-year project funded by Aziz Premji Philanthropic Initiatives, we unveiled Project Avahan (an Assamese/Hindi term for a Call for Action and an acronym for “Against Violence at Home – ACT NOW!”) in May. The project will take advantage of our headstart with the women and will involve 250 SHG groups. It aims at reducing the incidence of domestic violence significantly in around 100 villages of Chirang district. The team has been training these SHGs, their village organisations and their federations on various topics on a modular basis. Training on one module out of the two is already over, which deals with gender inequality and patriarchal power dynamics. The trainings have already reached 20 women federations, which constitute 2500 women in the first year! Even as we go to press, the second module is being prepared on Protection of Women from Domestic Violence and on counselling skills.



It is almost a year now since we started, and below are some of the significant events in the journey against domestic violence.

a. WHEN THE POLICE GOT TRAINED

According to the National Family Health Survey – 4 carried out in 2015-16, almost 42% of women face some form of domestic violence, and yet very little of this gets reported to the authorities. In the villages, reporting rates are even more abysmal due to the support of society to the issue as a patriarchal tradition and also because of a lack of systems. One of the important reasons behind the lack of reporting is the lack of response or ignorance of police personnel to deal with such cases. In our efforts to build strong legal systems, Gender Sensitization workshops were held for police personnel of Chirang district. We have run workshops in all 7 police stations across the district where more than 150 participants from various ranks like OC, Inspector, SI, ASI and constable participated in the interactive workshops. Even





CRPF officers and personnel assisting them attended in some places. As the policemen – a few policewomen too! – learnt from flashcards, PPTs and videos, they participated in the activities on gender roles and discussed the intensity of different types of domestic abuse. The workshop marked an important milestone in our efforts to reduce the incidence of domestic violence in the area, and the positive response from them surprised even the best optimists in the team!

b. CAMPAIGN AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Every year, come November and we get super busy to gear up for the 16-day campaign to mark 'International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women' from November 25 to December 10. This year the campaign had all the reason to be intense, since our journey to end this vicious wife-beating had already begun. Moving on from regular workshops and lectures, this year the campaign was



Involving men in our campaigns: "If you support our fight, paste a Bindi to the poster" as men voted for this with Dot-mocracy!"

more participatory, focused, and oriented with the central theme of the campaign – 'Leave no one behind'. To get the pulse of the people, especially of men and young boys, we had opinion polls and poster exhibitions. In some cases, the women spared no man passing the bazaar from taking notice of posters picturing about domestic violence, thereby starting conversations openly around the topic.



Left: Open meetings facilitated by our dynamic team. Right: Women speaking out during the meeting.

c. **TAKING THE MESSAGE TO THE STREETS**

Street plays are not new for us. With the onset of project Avahan, taking the message of the evilness of domestic violence to every nook and corner became a daily task. Help came in the form of Ms. Jaya Iyer, a trained theatre artist and activist based in Delhi, who had trained and incubated the newly formed team





on essential techniques of street play and Theatre Of The Oppressed (TOTO). Taking cue, the team performed its first street play in Kishan Bazaar before a audience of 30 people. Since then, the team has performed in many bazaars and even in schools. The street plays had even seeped into the fortnightly campaign, this time performed not by the staff but by women from the Self Help Groups!

d. WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATIONS

For all of us, especially for the women's team, March 8 was not just a day called International Women's Day but it was time to rejoice their power and celebrate womanhood. One day was too short a time for the women from more than 150 Self Help Groups to organize and celebrate. So, during the entire second week of March, Chirang district witnessed women coming out in pockets to celebrate what we call here 'Mahila Divas' in big fashion. From songs to dance and outdoor games like Tug of War and running a race, it was time for women in the villages to let their hair down and enjoy. In certain new project areas, few men weren't convinced about women going all out and playing and tried to hamper the event. But the women latched on to the idea of celebration, stood their ground against their own kinsmen and showed them the door.

DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EDUCATION



2.1 PROJECT SHIKSHA

Shiksha is one of the dear projects for ~~the ant~~, since it was our first intervention in the realm of education in the region. While finding good schools in the villages close to the city limits in itself is a rarity, to look for even basic literacy in the interior forest villages was a far cry. So a few years ago, we started with our meagre intervention of setting up after-school centres, so that we create spaces where children can come and study for some time. Over the years, these spaces have evolved to what are now called Child Development Centres (CDC) where our focus has shifted from just studies to total enrichment of education through mix of academics, sports and extra-curricular activities. The project has grown to include education for middle school children through MESCs (Middle Education Study Centres). These MESCs mainly focus on students for those in Classes 6th to 8th. The project also allocates “supplementary teachers” from our side to single teacher schools or schools which have teachers only on paper!

The project which is primarily funded by individual donors through Arpan Foundation and Caring Friends, encompasses 29 CDCs and 4 MESCs mainly concentrated in hamlets in the Kuklung and Deosiri clusters. This year when the project coordinator suddenly had to leave the organization, the others pitched in with their might. They didn’t allow the spirit in the team to go down! A repeat round of Annual Status of Education Report or ASER tests (pioneered by Pratham Foundation) that we carried out on the young students from class 3rd to the 5th and beyond, displayed results that have given us the



From drop-out to a topper – Story of Ransai

When Ransai Basumatary joined the CDC (Child Development Centre) under project Shiksha in 2014, he was a nightmare for the teachers as well as for his parents. Disinterested in studies, Ransai was on the verge of dropping out. Little did we know that three years later he would emerge a topper in the Challenge Test conducted in 17 villages around Kuklung cluster. Studying in Class 6, he managed to get a total of 818 out of 1000 marks, making all of us proud!

(In the picture, Ransai on the right)



much needed confidence and assurance that the chosen path has proven us right!

a. Aser Test Results

While results of the previous year were shared with you readers in the previous edition of our annual report, we also conducted a post-test to assess if there is any change in the learning levels of children in one year of our meagre efforts. Simply put, to check if our after-school centres through projects like Shiksha (and project Dolphin too!) have had any impact at all. With fingers crossed, we analysed the results. Let's look at the table for the comparison of results:

- During last year's ASER report from our CDCs in Deosiri cluster we found that only 6% of children were able to properly read a paragraph. This year the figure has jumped to 24%, which is a huge leap. In case of mathematical skills, in the previous year around 20% were not even able to identify numbers. This year, it has reduced to 8%.
- Percentage of children who can perform multiplication has gone up to 57% from 31% in the previous year
- While analyzing the performance of Bodo and Assamese medium students separately, we usually see a dip in the performance of Assamese medium students which continued this year. However there is a considerable increase in the number of students who were able to read a paragraph in Assamese language, up from last year's 1% to this year's 11%.

b. Summer Camps and All the Fun

Though the schools were officially shut down for summer holidays, few schools in Kuklung, Deosiri and Bengtol cluster villages were alive with laughter and fun. Apart from the usual camp

Reading Levels of Std III,IV,V from Deosiri CDCs		
	2017	2018
Nothing	25%	11%
Alphabet	41%	28%
Word	18%	19%
Sentence	10%	18%
Para	6%	24%

Maths Levels of Std II, III, IV, V from Deosiri CDCs		
	N	2018
Nothing	20%	8%
Identify numbers	21%	7%
Addition	19%	17%
Subtraction	10%	10%
Multiplication	24%	26%
Division	7%	31%





activities like painting and crafts, it was also time to introduce the values of gender equality and the perils of patriarchy to the kids. A gender-neutral game like Ultimate Frisbee came handy but there were also open conversations on gender roles that are generally accepted by all of us. It was quite interesting when an activity picture like driving was shown and almost all children accepted that it is a man's role. But when they got to see a middle-aged

woman (one of the ant staff) swirling the wheels of a bike with much confidence, amidst the oohs and aahs, we could also hear many mental barriers shattered!

2.2 PROJECT BIGYAN



Our years of effort to improve the quality of education especially of science, so that certain superstitions and especially witch-hunting go out of the window gave birth to 'Science-On-Wheels' project in the year 2013. Three years later 'Science on Wheels' which meant a vehicle going around middle schools with our teachers to teach science through practical demonstrations, gave birth last year to Project Bigyan, this time funded by Child Aid Network, Germany. Bigyan was to try and give our efforts much better chances of sustaining beyond the project duration. Last year, we began to train the government school teachers on alternate teaching methods and practical ways of science education. In that way, Bigyan was one of the foremost projects of **the ant** that began collaborating with the government and directly involved stakeholders on a large scale who would then own the training and discipline and take it forward!

This year too, the project continued to train the government school teachers through trainings and exposure visits. The significant innovation however, was that of creating Graphic manuals and video



tutorials of the science experiments for Classes 6,7 and 8, so that the teachers were also equipped to conduct the science experiments even without the presence of project facilitators. We are thankful to Mr. Tarun Bhartiya, a friend (who is also the recipient of the Royal Television Society Award) who took time to come here and held a 9-day workshop on videography and film editing for the project staff. As we go to print, the video tutorials have been released on the YouTube in Bodo as an open source information for anyone in Bodoland to access. With internet now an indispensable commodity in the hands of villagers, these tutorials would help those curious children try science experiments even at their homes besides helping teachers rehearse demonstration sessions before they go to school. The team is also planning to buy science practical materials like test tubes and fix them in the schools making the equipment easily available to students. These efforts, we believe would truly make quality science education in the region an attainable dream!

a. Time for Teachers to Learn

Whenever we stumble upon poor performance in studies by children especially those ones studying in Assamese medium schools, we also come across the unfortunate quality of teaching that is practised. We try to address this grave concern by periodic capacity-building of teachers through alternative methods of teaching using various forms of Teaching Learning Materials. Last year, as part of our Project Bigyan project, a team of science teachers from government schools of our district along with our project facilitators went on an exposure visit to Agastya International Foundation in Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh. The idea is to expose the government teachers directly to effective science teaching pedagogy and techniques, thereby sustaining the efforts for the long haul. Low-cost model-making was the focus of the training, so that our students in Government schools can understand concepts by working on the science models developed by their teachers. We hope this gives the much awaited boost to the morale of government science teachers in the coming years

b. District Level Bigyan Mela

115 students and 20 teachers from 23 government schools came together for a big mela or fair of a different kind . . . a Mela of Science was on! The stage was set for the display of good quality, working models selected from the 23 schools where Project Bigyan is functioning. From hydraulic lifts to grass cutters to vacuum cleaners and robotic cars, the students were enthralled the judges and audience alike with their innovation and razor-





sharp answers. The event was also an opportunity to display what quality teaching of science can do to students to the government, which saw the Director of Education, Bodoland Territorial Council and the School Inspector (also acting as the District Elementary Education Officer) of District Chirang gracing the occasion. Not very long ago, children here used to drop out from schools fearing science subjects. From then to science models, the students sure have come a long way along with us in the quest for quality education, even though we know that our journey has only started!

2.3 SPORTS 4 DEVELOPMENT

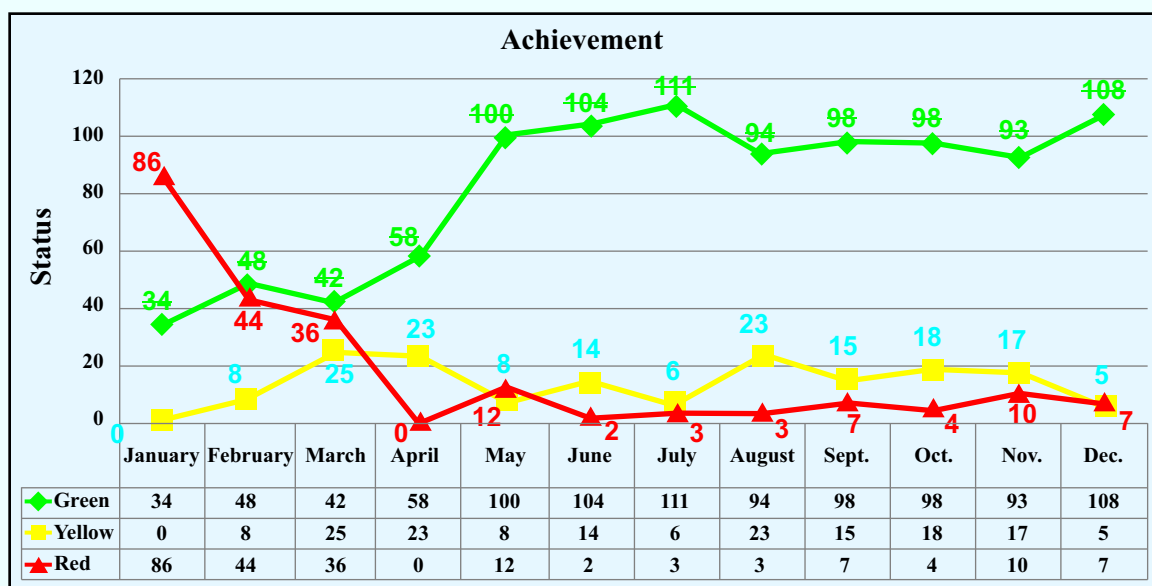
While designing an education project, it usually involves teaching children inside the conventional classrooms with a period of refreshment or sports in between. In 2015, when we planned to introduce social education to the children from poverty-hit regions, we decided to take sports as 'not one of the tools', but as the 'only tool' to achieve this, and hence began the Sports 4 Development project. Funded by DKA Austria, the project aims to build behavioural improvement in the areas of education, health and gender sensitivity through a sports/games-based curriculum. Previously, we had tried to engage the youth from the community called Community Youth Leaders (CYLs) to impart this education thereby creating a 'big sister big brother' type mentorship to the children. Unfortunately, expecting the youth to volunteer week after every week was an expectation too many and there was little chance for the young children to have sessions enough to learn. Therefore from April 2017, the project appointed part time Community

Youth Mentors (CYMs) as paid staff who were trained by our experienced full time staff designated as Youth Facilitators, one for each cluster of 5 CYMs. The CYMs are still helped by volunteer youth leaders, but these volunteers are not held responsible for ensuring the number and quality of the sessions.

Partnering with Magic Bus Foundation, Mumbai for technical expertise, the project has reached around 3181 children from 96 villages of Chirang district in Assam. To monitor and improve the quality of sessions in 120 groups, we started colour-coding some evaluation parameters during each session, using some specific parameters which are closely related to the session. These parameters are-

- Children Attendance
- Number of Sessions
- Parents Involvement
- Session Records (which includes preparation for the session, length of the session, pre and post session recordkeeping, captain nomination record, complaint record, extra session record and first usage record)

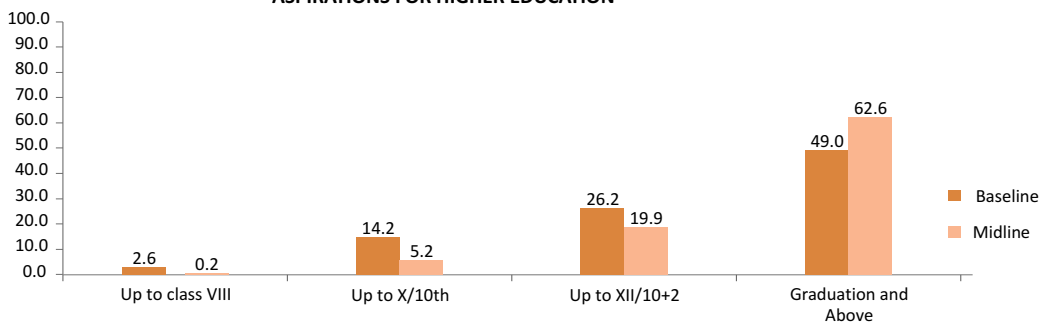
Following are some colour coding indicators to see the progress of the sessions:



a. Midline Survey

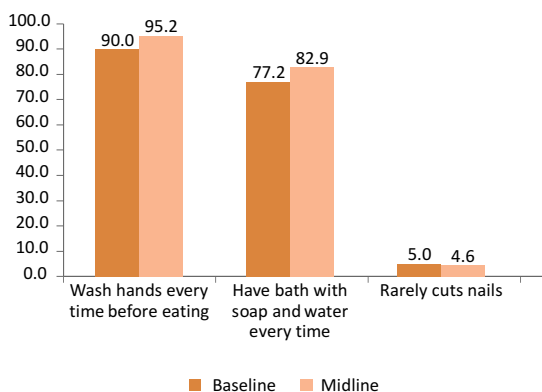
We also conducted a mid-line survey to assess where we stand and the impact of this activity based curriculum on the children. We shall let the data speak for itself:

ASPIRATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION



HEALTH

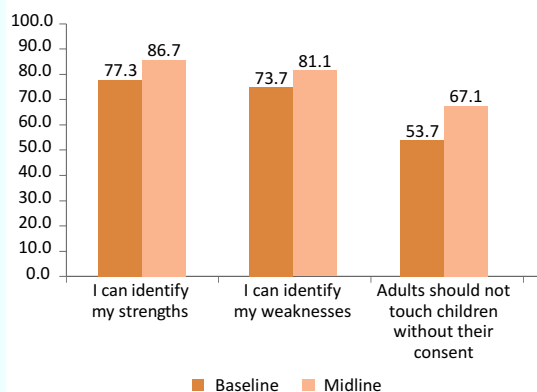
Practice of Personal Cleanliness and Hygiene



- A greater number of children are practicing healthy habits like using soap while washing hands or having a bath
- A slight drop was seen in the practice of cutting nails which will need to be focused on

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

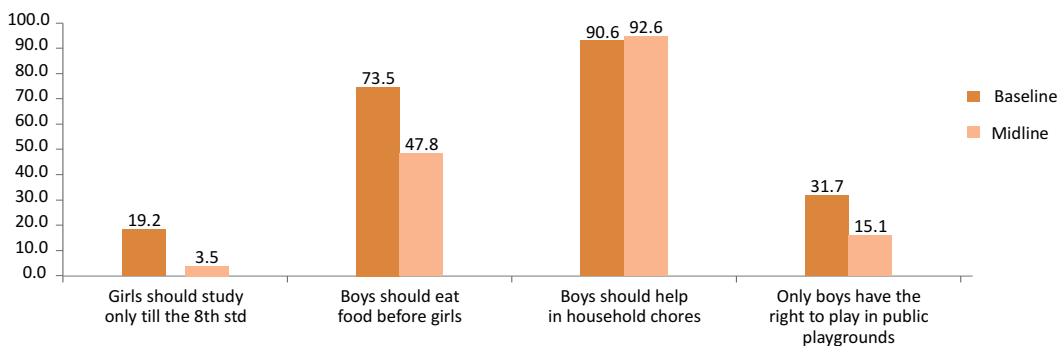
Self-Awareness and Management



- There was an increase in the number of children who could identify strengths and weaknesses from baseline to midline
- The number of children who understood the meaning of consent increased by 13.4%

GENDER

Attitudes towards Gender Stereotypes



- A decrease in gendered beliefs with regards to education, nutrition and play were observed across the two evaluations
- A 2% increase in the number of children who believe that boys must help with household chores

Education

- A greater number of children have realized the benefits of pursuing higher education.
- 13.6% more children wish to complete degrees up to graduation and above, as compared to the baseline.

b. It's time to Play Ultimate with UPAI

Ultimate Frisbee has always been our go-to game when we want to teach our kids certain social skills. Every quality of the game from compulsory mixed- gender teams to no-referee matches, this game proves to be THE Ultimate one in teaching our kids the necessary values. However, for more than 2 years, the kids had only been playing among themselves, in their own groups or sometimes among projects. We had been feeling a sense of stagnation in exposure and opportunities. That is when we came to know that the India's governing body of Ultimate Frisbee had visited one of our IDEa partner NGOs and had been looking to spread the game in the north-east. Before we could even wish, Manickam the sprightly president of UIPAI and his group of interns from 'Ultimate Players Association of India – UPAI' reached ~~the ant~~ to explore Ultimate Frisbee options in the northeast, last November. UPAI, with 4000 registered members hadn't expected to see more than 3000 kids and youth from this corner of Assam already playing the game for a few years. While the members shared some clever hacks with the children and youth, the children shared their dreams of participating in bigger tournaments. Even as we go to print, arrangements are going on to conduct the first Cluster Level Ultimate Frisbee tournament here in





We say 'Stop Child marriage'!

If adults don't listen to us, we will make them sit up and notice us. Such was the spirit when around 250 children from various hamlets around Kuklung village went on a rally against child marriage. The long march which spanned at least 4 kms, saw the children sending out a single strong message "STOP CHILD MARRIAGE", a phenomenon which we have seen increasing in the past few years. Traditionally we used to blame parents for it, but the new phenomenon is more consensual amongst the older children and hence the need for them to take action themselves!

Rowmari, for which Manickam will also fly down to guide the proceedings. The tournament will witness children and adolescents from across projects, competing and judged on UPAI standards. We can't wait to see our children displaying their skills before packed audience!

2.4. PROJECT DOLPHIN



This project funded by Terre des Hommes, Germany is our attempt at making a potpourri of sorts, or a khichdi project (Khichdi, a nutritious semi-solid mix of rice, lentils and all veggies), as it works around not one model, but brings an assortment of successful models from all our previous children's projects. Like playful dolphins, we wanted to bring joy and fun into the learning experience of children in government schools. Project Dolphin was thus started in 2017 with a pilot phase in 12 village hamlets around Bengtol area in Chirang district, where we hadn't worked before. 'Joyful Learning Centres' have been set up in schools to provide spaces for enriched learning of science, maths, reading and writing and are similar to the CDCs from Project Shiksha. In order to inculcate an understanding of rights and democratic values in children, their parliaments are organised where the children democratically elect their leaders for different activities like sports, health, education, etc. We also tried to address the problem of a high drop-out rate in the middle schools owing to poor performance in science exams. An interactive science program with the use of attractive science kits and experiments was adapted from our Project Bigyan and is underway in one Middle School of the project area. This project being in a fragile conflict-

affected area, also aims at building social integration between different ethnic communities and reducing conflicts by uniting different communities to work for quality education.

While children are the prime focus of our work, we understand that the adolescent kids are at a greater risk of exploitation, especially in sensitive areas like these. Taking cue from our Sports 4 Development project, we have tried to form youth groups where teenagers belonging to different ethnic communities get together, discuss about current problems and develop action plans for themselves. The project works to form what are called Village Level Child Protection Committees (VLCPCs), where the community comes together and discusses child rights. Some of the things that our young team is doing are:

a. Right to Play for Every Child

Most often parents feel that it is a waste of time for their kids to play. But it is while playing that children learn best about teamwork, communication, and also strengthen their physical body. That is why almost all our education projects constitute sports as an important activity of instruction. This gave us more reason to celebrate 'World Play Day' on 28th May in schools of Bengtol area. The occasion couldn't have been any better to introduce our coveted 'Ultimate Frisbee' in these new project schools. We left no stone unturned to form teams with mixed gender and mixed community composition, so that the ground rules are always clearly in alignment with our vision of a peaceful world.

b. Beginning of a Swachh Toilet Cleaning Campaign

Bengtol MV School is one of the five schools that was taken up by Project Dolphin. While the project limits itself only to impart education in this school, as an organization we were interested to know how clean is the school for the students. While we could see that the classrooms weren't that bad, the toilets were in a pathetic condition. Even those structures which were designed only as a urinal were full of faeces and the sight of it could make anyone puke. A year back, when the team went to consult the concerned authorities, we could see the irritation among the teachers, who dismissed the matters as it was unimaginable to clean the toilets. That is when we decided to show what a collective action can do to bring about cleanliness even at the filthiest of places. One fine Saturday, two of the staff from the project entered the toilets and started cleaning them. It was a rude shock to the students as well as to the school authorities including the Principal, who had all surrounded the entrance to see the cleaning process. But even then none came forward to help the staff. Despite insistence by the teaching staff to stop cleaning, our project staff went on and made the place specklessly clean. What was surprising however was when the project team visited the school the next Saturday - to find one of the school teachers cleaning the toilets all by herself and the next Saturday even the children had joined in and started cleaning. Now, the children clean not just their toilets, but also clean their compound and de-weed the grass every Saturday.



All this is done with zero compulsion from the teachers to do so, for the learning happened not in a conventional way but organically. As the Principal of the school says, "Initially, when they were asked to clean, some students would remain disobedient. Looking at the reaction, immediately the teachers would go in and start cleaning. This demonstration really changed them in a way they felt ashamed that if their teachers can do, why not them!" While the project took steps on maintaining cleanliness, the school later received directives from the Education department to keep the compound clean, which has also helped in making the efforts sustainable. Keeping this as a model, we are now introducing 'toilet cleaning activity' in all our upcoming projects, as a small step towards the giant leap towards Swachh India.



Ms. Rumi Kujur, of our Dolphin team is an MBA who took the lead in cleaning the toilets.

LET'S TALK ABOUT RIGHTS



a. A Year of Caring 4 Rights

Two years ago, it was unthinkable to bring people together who were otherwise scarred by repeated ethnic conflicts against each other. Little did we know that the 'Caring 4 Rights' project would become a single uniting force in fighting for rights, whose seeds have now sprouted in places far, far away from where they were sown. Funded by UNICEF, the project started in January of last year and focused on making village level co-operative platforms called Sahayak Manch, a forum of people from various (previously conflicting!) communities who would sit down and discuss on important issues like the implementation of government schemes like MGNREGA (Rural Employment programme), Right to Education and the functioning of ICDS Centres (Anganwadis) in the village.

As a next step people in the Sahayak Manch would file an RTI (Right To Information) application to know details about how these schemes functioned. And they would take action based on the 'new truth' that was elicited from the RTI applications. Until this stage the project was running quite on expected lines. But when the amount of corruption that the RTIs brought out as a written record landed in the hands of the common people, it antagonized those in power who had seen themselves unaccountable to

Sahayak Manch meetings



anyone before this. Threats and fights ensued between the power abusers and common men. One of our own staff also had to lose a tooth as a price to pay for questioning the powerful. While all these mishaps happened and our own doubts on security issues hit the roof, one phenomenon came out in all its glory – the persistence of the spirit of the common man. Village after village, people stood together, refusing to back down in their demand for rights, filing even more complaints and even staging dharnas. That is when we realized that the people's Care For Rights had truly begun.

Formation of District Monitoring Committee

Every project when set up, comes up with a list of activities charted down to achieve expected outcomes. When we decided to start the 'Caring 4 Rights' project, based on our previously formed co-operative forum groups, the idea was to form such groups called Sahayak Manch in 60 target villages. The Manch members who were previously talking about Disaster mitigation, were now expected to talk about rights especially those pertaining to children and also to demand these through Right To Information petitions and complaints. 6 months later into the project, we were fascinated to find that the people bought into the idea so much that the Manch's activities had spread far beyond these 60 villages. The unexpected happened when different Manches came together and set up a 'District Monitoring Committee' christened so by themselves. It was time to take matters not just at their own village level but to take a collective action at the District level. The District Level MC thus formed even had members from villages out of the project's scope, covering not 60 villages but from almost 100 villages from 30 VDCs.



Dharna conducted by the members of District Monitoring Committee in front of District Commissioner's Office demanding proper implementation of various schemes



b. District Consultation Meeting

We drew curtains for the pilot phase of 'Caring 4 Rights' project by December 2017. For about a year, the project managed to build active citizenry in conflict affected villages. On 23rd December, we conducted a consultation meeting to present our findings and gaps in various schemes like MNREGA, RTE to the concerned government officials. Though the NRC (ascertaining citizenship of all the residents of Assam by verifying their entry into the National Registry of Citizens) process played havoc in our attempts to get many officials to the meeting, we were happy to present our findings at least to the District's Deputy Commissioner. As a blessing for our efforts, two officials from the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan attended the meeting at the last minute. From then on, the meeting took a pleasant turn, as the officials were directly answering to the queries put forth by the Manch members. We do hope to see some government action soon, as we renew the efforts through an extension of the UNICEF project!

c. Surprise Survey in Schools

Beginning this New Year, our Caring 4 Rights team became watchdogs of the schools and Anganwadi Centres in the region. The team undertook a surprise survey that aimed at deciphering the functionality of schools and ICDS (Anganwadi) centres in the region. The survey was undertaken in 146 Lower Primary schools, 20 Middle schools, one high and higher secondary school and 91 ICDS centres. Overall, schools and ICDS centres from 168 villages covering 28 VDCs (Panchayats) were surveyed. The survey revealed depressing results for the ICDS centres, where only 38 out of 91 centres were found

open. Among them only 16 centres had both the Anganwadi helper and workers present. None had the supplementary nutrition for many weeks. However, the schools showed encouraging signs, with about 52% of schools starting classes by the correct 9 am schedule and 82% of schools starting latest by 9.30 a.m. The survey results were then submitted to concerned government officials for further action.



Right top: Assembly going on in one of the many schools where the surveys were conducted.

Right: The idea was to check whether the classes began by 9 a.m. – a rarity until a few years ago!)



Illegal quarrying of sand along the river beds was a common phenomenon in many villages here. While many preferred to remain silent on the issue, Mr. Lokicharan Brahma, one of the village headmen from the Amguri cluster and also one of the active members of our Sahayak Manch, decided that unity can bring about change. He had by then discussed the issue with the other SM members and had chalked out a strategy. He went on a mission to spread the word across 8 villages, bringing people together and rallied against illegal quarrying. Inspired by him, many youngsters have taken up the task of stopping trucks that come for quarrying. Thanks to his efforts, illegal quarrying of sand has completely stopped in his area.

MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME

the ant's core thrust at one time was to improve the health conditions in the region and hence our initial efforts included building Barefoot Doctors and Lab Technicians and later training the ASHA health workers etc. In 2008, with the National Rural Health Mission having taken root, we left the government to do its job and sidelined ourselves so that we don't duplicate their efforts. However mental health was still a burning problem and no government scheme has been implemented on those lines till now. Since 2007, we began conducting mental health camps on our own campus and gradually started some outreach camps in the villages nearby. Currently, we have approximately around 1000 patients from villages in Chirang and nearby districts on our rolls.

The Mental Health Project, started with a collaboration with Ashadeep, which pioneered such services in Assam, was funded by Tata Trusts from the year 2014 for a community centred component which came to an end by March 2017. Luckily, because the project didn't allow for free treatment for the patients, we had started charging patients for some part of the service and this was subsidized by Caring Friends, Mumbai. We gradually worked out the economics of it and realized that this model at a flat fee of Rs 10 per day or Rs 300 a month would allow us not only to have our central camp at our Rowmari campus but we could also send an outreach team with a doctor once a month to 7 PHCs to reduce costs incurred by patients and their guardians on their travel. Our rolls show a count of 924 patients currently

Monthly camp-based services for mental illnesses



taking medication as in March 2018 and we are sure that we are breaking even after paying for the doctors, the monthly pack of medicines, the staff and the travel and camp costs! However we face a big crunch in the availability of trained mental health personnel who would be willing to work in these remotest villages.

MITA (Mental Illness Treatment in Assam)



According to the 2016 National Mental Health Survey conducted by NIMHANS and supported by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, it is reported that 10.6% population of the country is suffering from various mental illnesses, a figure that counts to almost 71 million people. Stigma around the illness and the shortage of proper psychiatrists has created a treatment gap of approximately 85%. Over the years, we have learnt that even smaller outreach treatment clinics can be made financially sustainable so as to continue providing basic services for treating mentally ill patients in remote needy places. Combining both the facts, we decided to replicate our own mental illness treatment camps in various pockets of Assam, by training and supporting our known partner NGOs. Thus MITA (Mental Illness Treatment in Assam) was born. The first phase of the project saw us partnering with 4 NGOs from districts of Dhemaji (SEDO), Chabua (JivanShiksha), Udalguri (Aastha) and Baksa (UBSSB). The support offered includes training on conducting awareness programmes, patient management, networking with various stakeholders, etc. As we know that the camp approach can break-even financially at 100 patients, our aim is to try and reach this number within 6 months and help set up the protocols based on which one of the local psychiatrists will take over the treatment and follow-up. The project also sees a good trend of active volunteer involvement with college students conducting house visits to identify mentally ill patients and coaxing the family members to attend these camps. In all we have around 280 patients totally attending these camps until March, which is not so bad for new project areas with fresh teams starting off only since December 2017. We hope to see MITA getting replicated across north-east in the coming years, fingers crossed!

LAMP

The LAMP (Learning and Mentoring of Projects) Cell of ~~the ant~~ came into being 2 years ago and the reason to form such a department was to light up our projects, literally. The cell which comes directly under the supervision of Executive Director, works across all projects to assist the Executive Director in setting up information management systems, monitoring and evaluation systems to measure outcomes of projects, and to contribute to the quality of programmes through evidence-based documentation. The cell also helps in framing proposals to ensure sound strategy, outcome-orientation and project management to drive effective implementation. Developing an online presence using web-hosting, social media and keeping donors, relevant stakeholders and well-wishers informed through periodic



Outreach camp at Panbari, Chirang

organizational reports such as newsletters and annual reports was also tasked to the LAMP Cell.

Although each project had charted down their outcomes in the proposal, many a times we felt that midway, the project team lost track of their work, became disoriented and sometimes even felt defeated. This is quite normal, when one works for social change and that is exactly where the M&E pitches in. The LAMP cell in consultation with Executive Director and Programme Coordinator works with the Project coordinator and the team members to decide on setting up of detailed implementation plans and set up M&E systems to evaluate on a monthly, quarterly and annual basis, so that the quality of work is easily measured and any desired changes required are immediately communicated and acted upon. Having systems in place has helped us in delivering quality and improved reporting to the respective funders also. This has been a good organizational learning in involving the project team to take ownership in participatory monitoring and evaluation. In order to ensure that our M&E systems and processes are in tune with the ground realities we shall continuously strive to involve the project team and also involve communities in measuring project outcomes.

While one side of LAMP lit projects, the other side worked to strengthen communications of **the ant** with the outside world. This year we launched a fresh-looking website with much better design for clutter free browsing (visit www.theant.org to know what we are talking about). We have also made a conscious effort to tell our stories of change to the world outside as much as possible and thus tried to actively use social media like Facebook and LinkedIn to disseminate the same.

IDEA 2.0

After a lull of a couple of years, IDeA version 2.0 is back. Even as this report goes to print, we have new leadership, a new office in Guwahati, a new strategic plan, and quite literally, IDeA is buzzing with new ideas. Through all this, we remain committed to doing our bit to build a stronger voluntary sector voice in the Northeast Region.



The upwards climb started in 2017 – we supported 11 smaller NGOs (largely in Assam but also in Meghalaya and Manipur) with small amounts of funds but more importantly, with inputs and ideas. Some of them are poised to grow their work and their organisations into credible institutions. The partners together reach out directly to at least 4050 beneficiaries – largely to children & farmers - through different interventions.

A GLIMPSE OF THE WORK OF IDEA'S PARTNERS IN 2017

SEDO (Socio-Economic Development Organisation) in Dhemaji District of Assam is reviving Moina Parijats which are traditional children's collectives in villages of Assam.



Inside-Ne in Saikhul, Manipur runs a project called Guns to Pens to create a positive environment for development of children & youth of the Kuki tribe in militancy & conflict torn area.



Faith Foundation (Shillong) works to prevent child sexual abuse & creating protective environment for children and young women in Meghalaya



UBSSB (Baksa District, Assam) was supported to create a women's weavers cooperative in their field area with over 150 women weavers.



FVSA: IDeA's NGO partners are also networked to each other through the self-organized FVSA (Forum for the Voluntary Sector of Assam). They support each other with technical help, knowledge, empathy and in times of crisis, share from the meagre financial resources most of the members themselves have. When one of the FVSA members met with a bad accident, all the FVSA NGO heads contributed whatever they could from their own personal funds towards his treatment with **the ant** also chipping in to help.

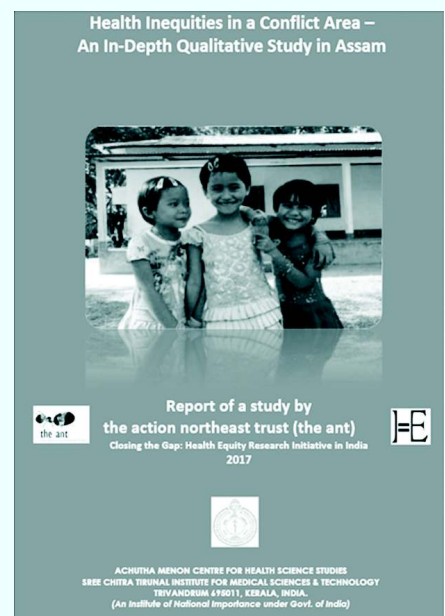
Recently in 2017, early rains caused bad floods in Hailakandi District in Assam affecting the work area of one of the FVSA NGO members. Again, not only did the FVSA members contribute in cash and kind, but some of the members even travelled all the way to Silchar and helped in the actual relief work.



OTHER WORK OF IDeA

a. Study on Health Inequities Arising Out of Conflict

September 2017 also saw IDeA complete the one and half year long qualitative research on 'Health Inequities and Conflict'. With support from the Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies in Trivandrum, the study was a rare one for the depth it could get into, to show how long-drawn and repeated violence affects the lives and well-being of not just the affected people but also the public health system. The study was very well-received for the way it highlights the very complex, deep and multi-layered vulnerabilities suffered by families forcibly displaced by conflict. We are using the findings of the study to advocate with both government and non-government agencies for long-term and multi-agency, deep interventions to reduce vulnerabilities of the affected people – especially of women & children.



b. CSO Mapping for IDeA Future Strategy

With IDeA having completed 10 years, we wanted to revisit the strategy and craft a future roadmap for IDeA work to be relevant and truly contribute in lifting the sector in the NER. To do this, we decided to first map the current development status of the northeast and study the gaps therein. Using secondary data, we first looked at the status of development across the region and also differences between the



states. We studied the economic status, education, health, women's status, etc. and created 'heat maps' for each of them. Using this as the base, we then had in-depth interviews with various stakeholders in development such as government, NGO leaders, representatives of UN agencies etc. The study will be completed by June end. In mid-July, the IDeA team and the core leadership of **the ant** will sit to look at the findings and craft the next strategic roadmap of IDeA.

c. Study on Women's Leadership in the Northeast Region

Another study that we are doing is to map traditional and non-traditional spaces of women's leadership in some of the Northeast states. Supported with a small fellowship grant from the South Asian Women's Fund, this study will hopefully point out to the status and the gaps and help build a long-term strategy for women's leadership development in the northeast region. We hope to complete this by the first quarter of 2019.

THE ROAD AHEAD FOR IDEA

There are many opportunities coming in for collaborations for consultancy services to other NGOs and for explorations for partnerships to do cutting-edge meaningful research. Recently, we have taken up an office in Guwahati and are putting in place a team to take the work further. With Enakshi and Jenny providing leadership to IDeA version 2.0, IDeA is poised for exciting years of work ahead.

HAPPENINGS BEYOND PROJECTS!

Guide Star Certification: Guide Star, one of India's largest online information repository with 7600 NGOs, has recognized us with its highest Platinum level certification. This means **the ant** has joined the handsome pool of credible NGOs after undergoing a rigorous due diligence process. The certification also indicates that comprehensive transparency, accountability and good governance procedures are adopted by the organisation with exemplary level of public disclosure. We would like to thank Guide Star for the recognition and all our supporters and friends who have been with us all through these years.



17th Birthday in Lucknow: On October 13, 2000, **the ant** came into being, with a mandate to bring about holistic development in the area and in the northeast. 17 years later, we have grown into a 100+ team, facing various challenges on a daily basis. Following our anniversary traditions of going out on a reflection retreat every year, this year we retreated to the city of Nawabs – Lucknow. Apart from





celebration, it was time to reflect on ourselves, as individual ants. When reflections seemed to die down, inspiration came in the form of few fiery activists. Our morning dose came from the women of Vanangana, who showed us what 'women empowerment' means in the drought-ridden lanes of villages in UP. In the evening, Arundhati Dhuru from Hamsafar and Magsaysay Award-winner Sandeep Pandey of Asha Foundation, both based in Lucknow shared with us their motivational journey of social activism. From how Arundhati started her social life with Narmada Bachao Andolan movement to her present-day involvement with the Right to Food and the National Alliance of People's Movements, and Sandeep's journey from engineering to campaigning for quality education and against nuclear proliferation, it was an enthralling evening for all of us. Later, the day ended with a sumptuous dinner hosted by Sanarkada, a beautiful crafts shop entirely run by women who have been partners of Aagor, our handloom subsidiary.

Volunteers this year: Our old friend Suja introduced **the ant** to her friends Vinod Lobo and family, who were here in the month of December. A communication professional from Infosys, Vinod Lobo came with lot of positivity. During his time here, he gave spoken English classes to our S4D kids, not through the chalk-board method but through music. His guitar made speaking the language so easy that the kids couldn't have enough of him and are still looking forward to his next visit here. We hope he makes one soon.

Anne Pinto Rodrigues, a writer from Mumbai and now based in Amsterdam came here to know more about Aagor, once **the ant's** project but now a separate entity for handlooms. This was part of her article that she intended to write for a magazine essaying arts and crafts of north-east. But she also went ahead and wrote about us and of course about Aagor to few other media outlets including *The Better India*. (To see the article, go to <https://www.thebetterindia.com/135223/assam-bodoland-lakme-women-weavers/>) Thank you Anne for your sweet gesture!

Other happenings in the ant :

- UNICEF funded 'Caring 4 Rights' project gets another year of go-ahead. This time the focus is on building VCDC level (Panchayat level) Sahayak Manch, with special attention to the working of District level Monitoring Committee.
- Child Aid Network has agreed to support the LEAP (Learning Ecosystem and Augmentation Project)' formerly known as Bigyan project. The new project is designed to improve learning outcomes by stressing on 4Rs (reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, and recreation) in 120 Lower Primary Schools and to improve Science, Maths and Education and to build Conscious Citizenry in 15 Middle Schools besides working with the headmasters and the School Management Committee in a hub and spoke model!
- Top officials from UNICEF, Guwahati stayed with **the ant**, visited the remote villages and discussed ways to collaborate for better designing of projects pertaining to children.



Photographs on pages 1, 3, 8, 12, 15, 18 (top), 23, 25, 28 and 31 – courtesy Arjun Krishna.

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IDeA – Jennifer Liang

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Udangsri Dera, Village Rowmari, PO Khagrabari
District Chirang via Bongaigaon, BTAD 783380
Assam, India. Ph: 084720 10563
Email: mail@theant.org Web: www.theant.org