



# *the ant is 8 now!*

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Out of carefree babyhood, but not yet evolved to be on its own, being eight is a matter of pride for us. While the child in us yearns for opportunities to learn and explore, the adult self of the ant has set its eye on sustaining work — perpetually juggling between different models of efficient delivery. Meanwhile, we continue to grow — in size, in areas within our reach, and in addressing compelling issues.

Our biggest shift in the past one-and-a-half years has been the construction of a campus situated squarely among villages. Presently, we are engaged in working intensively in 85 hamlets across four work-clusters. Besides training people to become village organizers, our vision is to create a body of team leaders who will lead their communities in the years ahead.



# I. On mobilizing women

## JAGRUTI DALs

### From 'Self-Help' to 'Help Self and Others'

Our very first intervention in the field with the self-help groups, which we named Jagruti (or Enlightenment) Groups, holds a special place in our hearts. Women from our Jagruti Groups have stood by us like rocks. With some help from us, the groups were able to earn and save. We opined that financial gain would lead the women to have some control over their lives. But in most cases this turned out to be wishful thinking. Most women from our Jagruti Groups continue to have no voice in their village fora. They face domestic violence, die during child-birth (for lack of health care

and watch helpless as their daughters drop out of school.

As most members of the self-help groups were focussed on earning (more) and saving (more), they could not take time out for other activities aimed at their welfare. The *jagruti* that we sought for our women continued to elude us. Gradually, we have gone beyond income-generation, to form women's collectives, named Jagruti Dals, whose goal is to take action when something untoward happens, especially against women and girls.

Unlike a traditional self-help group of income generating activities, a Jagruti Dal is meant to help solve general problems in their village. Women are to

### Women take Control in Deosri Cluster

Our Jagruti Mahila Dals in Deosri Cluster are doing us proud. It was a chance to start afresh when we decided to work there two years ago. A complete break from our self help group model, we focussed solely on forming women's collectives which would take up women's oppression and other social issues.

We now have 13 Mahila dals there. **Debon Sikim** Mahila Dal of Nakkedara village has solved 2 cases of child marriage, 3 cases of domestic violence and was called on to even settle disputes over cattle!

Other dals are solving issues related to alcoholism and many groups are called to solve child marriage problems.



become a help to themselves and others. Though the Jagruti Dals are still in their infancy, their work has been quite cheering. The Dals have intervened in cases of domestic violence, child marriage, desertion by husbands, and alcoholism. The last affects both women and men.

### Freedom on Wheels — the Cycle Bank

Our Jagruti Cycle Bank continues to raise our spirits. We started with 60 cycles; but by now been given over 150 cycles on loan to women. With the recovery of loans, we keep the 'cycle' going. Seeing



#### Amiron Nessa of Simlabari Village

32 years old Amiron Nessa rode a cycle for the first time in her life during our first cycle learning camp for Muslim women, in November 2008. She was one of six women so inspired by the carnival like atmosphere of the camp, complete with music from loudspeakers, that she was cycling confidently within two days.

Schooled till Class 2, Amiron lives with her mother, as she was deserted by her husband not long after marriage. She is the first Muslim woman to take a cycle on loan from the Jagruti cycle bank. She now cycles 15 kms to and from Simlabari village to Bongaigaon town, to work on a construction site. She now earns over Rs 3,000 a month. Amiron has been encouraging her friend, like her — a construction worker — to take a cycle on loan, to save travel time. But her friend is worried about what the *samaj* (society) would say.

women hitch up their sarees and *dokbonas* to get onto a cycle for the first time in their lives, desperately balancing with half a dozen women supporting, grinning sheepishly when they fall, tottering around with shaking handle bars and then the triumph of finally not falling off and peddling away . . . gives us a high every time.

#### Wheels of Freedom in the Deosri Cluster

The first chapter of the Cycle Bank unfolded in our Deosri cluster. Inmates of the Deosri Relief Camp (set up for victims of the 1996 ethnic violence) and those from the surrounding villages, either walk or travel by bus daily to the Bhutan border (10 kilometres) for work. As buses do not ply during the frequent 'bandhs' which generally last for more than 24 hours, daily wage earners have to go hungry on such days.

With support from the Mumbai Group of Friends (MGoF), we opened a chapter of our Cycle Bank there. The women of the community chose to call it Wheels of Freedom, hoping to bring

freedom from hunger for some of the miserably poor families in Deosri. Knowing the wretchedness of their condition, we were not sure if the cycle loans would ever be returned. But with hunger writ large on their faces, our conscience pushed us to give it a try. We are glad that we listened to that tiny voice inside us. Backing us in this endeavour was the Karuna Charitable Trust. It was willing to risk its money even if the

loans were not returned! Today, the Wheels of Freedom has proved it once again — that the poor are sincere in paying back their loans. The 45 cycles lent till date, have had a 100% recovery rate!

The committee for disbursement of cycle loans has its sittings on the 4th of every month. Application for loans are processed, the EMIs are collected and accounts maintained. The seriousness with which the



borrowers return their loans is heartening. Those who have a problem paying their EMIs any month, come and apologize and ask for more time from the women managers of the Wheels of Freedom. We insist on leasing 'ladies' cycles' only, as this allows women and young girls of the household to access these cycles for work.

We held the first 'cycle training camp' in Deosri in March 2009. The excitement was palpable. Thirty-seven women attended the camp and tried their limbs at cycling. Deosri has a history of ethnic violence among its communities and even now an undercurrent of ethnic tension prevails. We felt buoyant watching women from one community learning to ride on the cycle while women from other communities helped them keep the balance! If nothing else, this alone would count as a huge achievement. With no dearth of women desirous of learning, our biggest problem during the camps is the shortage of cycles to practise on.

### **Celebrating Mahila Divas four times over!**

We at **the ant** can safely lay claim to having introduced the celebration of Women's Day (Mahila Divas) in the entire area on 8th March. For seven years now, we have had different formats for it — sometimes for one day and at other times, over two days. Sometimes coupled with a rally, and another time with a leadership



award. The objective each time has been to improvise.

Probably something to do with our coming of age, we outdid previous celebrations. We decided to hold not one, but F-O-U-R Mahila Divas celebrations — one across each cluster! We felt that more women would be able to get involved if we took it closer to the women. It was to be spread over 7th to 9th March 2009, in different clusters.

**the ant** team's decision was not free from either worry or fear of being able to pull it off. The budget allocated for one event had to be divided into four, with the additional challenge of holding a meaningful celebration with minimal resources. Would we be able to raise further resources from the community to meet the expenses? Do we have enough leaders within the organization? Are we spreading the expense and effort too thin? Are the clusters motivated enough to plan and carry off such a big event?



Maybe we should have worried less. Maybe it was the intense worry that made the clusters work that much harder. Whatever it was, the four events were a huge success. A *coup d'etat*, so to speak. Women, along with the cluster teams, decided what the celebration should be like, its duration, the venue, the budgets, how they would mobilize the resources and who would shoulder which responsibility. Everything did not happen as planned but the experience, and the lessons learnt, have been invaluable and enriching.

## ***Mahila Divas . . . Experiences Galore!***

Even as women celebrated through games, sports, speeches, open sessions and cultural events, important lessons were learnt.

### **ROWMARI CLUSTER**

For Rowmari Cluster, the entire process has made women from our groups realise that next time, they need to take entire responsibility. They are preparing themselves from now itself by forming a larger body, like a federation. They are already thinking of ways to increase the amount of Rs 7000, what remained unspent from this year's contribution, to better manage the event in the coming years.



### **KOILA MOILA CLUSTER**

The people of this area, in the Bhutan foothills, saw Women's Day being celebrated for the first time. Some male leaders of the area were a trifle wary, fearing that we would mislead their women. But it was a pleasant surprise when, in the middle of the second day's programme, a few leaders came up and apologized, besides making a small donation to the programme! They also felt that such programmes were important for their women.



### **MONGOLIAN CLUSTER**

Though we have worked for many years in the villages of the Mongolian Cluster, this was the first time that so many women were engaged in the Mahila Divas event. Earlier, groups used to send representatives, as it was too far for women, especially those with small children, to travel. But this year, they went headlong into the work leaving behind the worry of the two-three hours walk back home.



### **DEOSRI CLUSTER**

Deosri is our latest and perhaps the most complex cluster. A forest area, inhabited by diverse ethnic groups, it has witnessed internecine violence among some of the communities. At the best of times, the different groups keep to themselves, with few opportunities to interact. The first ever Mahila Divas in the area broke all barriers. Nepalis, Bodos, Santhalis and Rajbongshis — worked, played, laughed, danced and ate together! Codes and conflict were put behind the gender bind. Out of all the four clusters, the Deosri Cluster turned out to be the 'star of the pack'! Not just women, but men, teachers, Bodo, Adivasi and Nepali students' unions, the SSB (the paramilitary troupe stationed there) and even the militant groups on ceasefire, came forward to help and partake! In all, over 2000 people took part in the one-day event. Kudos to the team there!

## *II. An asset 'little' realized*

Children have been omnipresent in all our village work. They have been around in our self-help group meetings, village meetings, farmers' training, cycle camps with women, during PRA exercises and even when we have taken to the streets in rallies and dharnas! But in our work, children have mostly remained bystanders (albeit very enthusiastic ones!) and we had never really engaged with them. This year, we made amends. Their interest, excitement and enthusiasm won us over. Our Village Organizers (VOs) have been forming children's groups in

the villages not as part of any project but of their own initiative. In just one year, over 25 children's groups and two adolescent groups have been formed in different villages.

The VOs meet the groups regularly and engage the children in different fun and creative activities. Group Captains are responsible for gathering the children on the appointed days and follow up with action. For the first time in the history of the government schools in this area, children got to celebrate Children's Day. The thrill and excitement on

the children's faces was a joy to behold. We realized how little it actually takes to make rural children happy. Our happiness was however tinged by the sadness at the little done to brighten up the lives of these children. Their schools are schools in name only, where minds are deadened rather than enlightened, where most teachers inspire fear and produce boredom. So-called libraries here are actually a community meeting place — in most cases a thatch roof with no walls — with no room for books! Where are the development



opportunities for poorer children from areas such as ours? We were struggling with these thoughts and so, were more than happy when we got a chance to partner with the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi.

### **NMML – the ant partnership**

In an effort to bring back children to Nehru's Teen Murti Bhawan, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) has started a Children's Resource Centre in Delhi. When we were invited to be a part of the consultation, we knew the Children's Centre could be an ideal opportunity for our children. The first partnership in February 2009 was thrilling, to say the least. NMML sponsored 25 children from different government schools from our area, for a workshop and a trip to New Delhi and Agra. Girls and boys and two teachers from different communities were chosen from across our clusters in Chirang District.

For most this was their first time visit beyond Bongaigaon town; also, the first experience of a long train journey. Needless to say, it was the trip of a lifetime! The Taj Mahal and the Qutub Minar loomed large over their memories. But nothing could compare with the love showered on them by the NMML staff and their families.

The session which they found special was the visit to a mosque, a temple, a Gurudwara and a church, all in one day. It oriented them to each other's religions.



### **Follow-up of the NMML Delhi Workshop**

Jaya Iyer of NMML came March-end this year, for a two-day follow-up meeting cum training of the children who had been to Delhi. It was an exciting time for the children to catch up with their friends. **the ant** field staff joined in the two-day meeting, and the chance it gave to learn, share and plan together with the children was stimulating. We also held a small public function in a nearby village, in which we felicitated the NMML Delhi-mela children. This concluded with a screening of *Iqbal* — a film that celebrates the potential of the disabled, which stirred young and old alike! The response made us keen to start a film club to screen cheering films for our village children.

The two days threw up several ideas for future action. We are now working towards holding Summer Camps for school children to keep them fruitfully engaged during their summer break. The team is



excited as Jaya has agreed to help develop the skills of the facilitators before the camp. The VOs are thrilled with the bag of sports kits, craft, art and other facilitation materials they received from NMML as part of the training.

**the ant** team envisions a steady improvement in the quality of life here. In the next few years, our commitment will be to impart quality education. Creating self-development skills and improved access to food, is also on the anvil.

# III. Working to increase food security

'Unless people have food in their stomachs, it is tough to get them organized for development', is an age-old universal axiom. We ants have selected two ways to ensure increase food security. The first is to offer viable opportunities to earn money and the second is to organize people to assert their rights, under the various anti-poverty schemes of the government.

## **a. aagor: weaving livelihoods**

**the ant's** three-year old weaving programme, aagor had perhaps the toughest time this year for the young enterprise. If setting up sound production systems had been the main challenge of the past years, this year it was marketing.

aagor sold over Rs 80 lakhs worth of clothes in 2007-08 and gave over Rs 33 lakhs as wages. But it has not been easy in 2008-09. For the first time since we started the weaving programme, our regular 130 weavers went without work for over three months. Our nightmare of being over-dependent on huge orders from one customer came true. Earlier orders we had got were so huge (for us) that we had put in all our efforts, resources and time into just completing that and it sucked us

dry. We suffered because we neglected building our own brand. It was torturous for us to see our weavers without work. We moved into emergency action and managed to get orders once again pushing aagor into the recovery mode. But it has been at a cost. Down on our knees, we had to accept prices that have pushed us into the red for the first time in five years.

After having doubled our sales almost every year, it was disheartening to see our sales fall to just Rs 57 lakhs in 2008-09. Part of that fall has been due to the finished goods. But out of the gloomy experience, many things were positive. The aagor team did not break up but has emerged stronger and more committed to its work. For years we have been urging our weavers not to take things for granted and to take their weaving more seriously but it needed a jolt like this to drive the point home. The executive committee of the weavers has also realized the importance of its role in keeping an eye on every function of the organization. And most important, aagor realized the importance of having tight systems and controls. Since all this came before the economic melt-down, it was good in the sense that it has

prepared us to squarely face the downswing in the economy! aagor still has many challenges ahead of it.

## **b. UD rehabilitating maidservants**

Udangshri Dera (UD) or 'freedom camp' was envisaged as a place where young girls who had for years stayed as house-maids on frugal salaries, would get an opportunity to earn and stand on their feet. In batches of 20 each, they come to stay and weave on our campus for four months, earn a lumpsum and then move on, making way for a new batch. Around 240 *ruwathis* or maidservants have passed through the programme which is now in its

### **A New Hostel**

The hostel of bamboo mat walls and mud floor served us well for some years. But its life was over. We built a new hostel for our ruwathi weavers this year. It was the first building on campus to be entirely designed by us and the unique shape, bright and very functional rooms bring cheer. The hostel also houses the first T.V. and dish antennae on campus, donated by our local Punjab National Bank. It helps connect us to the rest of the world.



13th batch. We estimate that around 70 per cent of the *ruwathis* who go through this four months' training do not go back to being maidservants again but a new study needs to be done to ascertain this. aagor is now in charge of the programme which is streamlined into their production system.

While the *ruwathis* are here with us, we try to build up their confidence and help them explore earning avenues when they go back home. They learn cycling, reading and writing, take classes in animal husbandry, *papad* making, growing mushrooms, etc. They even go for exploratory trips to open up their world-view a little bit. The constant *tbak-tbak* sounds of their looms have become soothing background music for us on the campus.

### **c. EDP — creating entrepreneurs**

After three years of trial and error, we seem to have finally got our work of supporting micro-businesses in place. Till date, our Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP) has disbursed loans to 95 individuals (including 30 women) and 42 groups to start business enterprises. From vegetable vending and grocery shops to tea shops, footwear shops, tailoring units and piggery farms, these units are providing vital means of sustenance to the entrepreneur and her family.

Careful screening, hand-holding, mentoring and training



have ensured that the new loans given are coming back. But we are yet to realize dated loans, and bigger loans we have given. Historical mistakes are indeed hard to correct!

Gramin Vikas Samiti, a body made up of local people whom we want to promote and take over the micro-finance work, is slowly taking shape. Though the members are able to give very limited time due to their own preoccupations, they have shown keen interest. An exposure to some NGOs in the neighbouring districts involved in large scale micro-finance helped open their eyes. They are enthusiastic to expand the EDP work though yes, a lot more needs to be done before we can take it to the next level.

### **d. Vocational training — skills for a livelihood**

We find that one of the biggest anxieties of young people is whether they would be gainfully employed in the future. They worry if they would be able to

earn, get some work, maintain themselves and their families. To address this concern, we started the vocational skills development programme this year. In this programme, we have been creating awareness in villages and in schools about the need for learning some vocational skill. We had over 24 such awareness camps in the villages and schools.

Depending on the need for such enterprises in the area, we hold different vocational skills camps such as cycle repairing, gas stove repairing, *papad* making, metal sheet works, etc. Even a camp for increasing skills like Spoken English was also held. Seven camps were held this year and we hope this would increase their chances of getting employed.

This year, we also sent 20 youth to other institutions for acquiring skills such as mobile-phone and motorbike repairing, driver's training, teacher's training, cutting and tailoring, bamboo craft and furniture making. The youth also contribute to the course

fees and upkeep. Fifteen youth have taken small loans from us to start their business enterprises after their training. We will follow up and see how they do.

### **e. Of agriculture and animal husbandry**

Over 80 per cent of the people in the villages we work in, are farmers. Farming is the backbone of food security for most families. Without focussing on agriculture, the claim of empowering the poor become food secure, sounds a bit

hollow. Lacking technical skills and trained staff, but convinced about the need to concentrate on farming, we jumped into the fray with some support from the Ford Foundation.

Our instincts proved right. We realized that farmers lacked reliable information and support systems. For some years now, companies like Monsanto have been distributing free seeds of hybrid maize and other crops to our farmers. Government departments which pushed

### **THIS DEPARTMENT MOVES**

The biggest success of the livestock support programme has been the introduction of mass cattle vaccination in the area. Though the Government Veterinary Department is supposed to hold annual camps and vaccinate cattle, it had not done so. At our behest, they held camps at Rowmari, Mongolian Bazaar and Besorbari Area; while we mobilized the people, the government provided the personnel and the vaccines. Over 5000 heads of cattle were vaccinated. We hope this will become a routine as the government veterinary department has promised to hold the camps on their own every year. To get a government department moving to do what it was supposed to do anyway — was heady!



chemical fertilizers for decades have now suddenly begun to talk ‘organic’. Climate change is playing havoc with the crops. Farmers are suddenly overwhelmed by all this and do not know what to do.

Over the past year and a half, Farmers’ Resource Centres (FRCs) have been formed in three of our clusters. These centres have imparted training to farmers, besides organising exposure visits for them. We have begun promoting chemical-free farming, the SRI (System of Rice Intensification) method of paddy cultivation and also scientific but organic cultivation of seasonal vegetables. The FRCs also promote

dialogue between the government agriculture departments and the farmers. The FRCs are also trying to lend more credit from the banks, for farmers. We have given loans to groups of farmers associated with the FRCs to initiate 'support services' for other small farmers. For example, one group took loans to prepare organic manure through vermicomposting.

One of our major challenges lies in getting young people into farming. Education seems to be completely alienating young people from agricultural work. Yet, that same education does not

ensure a job or work for livelihood. Recently, we have started Young Farmers' Clubs, hoping to keep the interest in farming alive among the youth. We hope that this venture assumes a concrete shape as without youth taking to farming, the future of Food for All appears bleak!

Similar to our intervention in agriculture is the move to promote **animal husbandry** among households. Cattle is essential for ploughing while money from selling small livestock can save a poor family in times of emergency. Moreover, many a times it is money obtained from selling the

chicken, goats and pigs that keeps children from dropping out of school! Promoting animal husbandry and ensuring livestock survival is the motto of the livestock support programme.

Ever since we kick-started this programme a year ago, we have conducted four training programmes on livestock disease control, feed preparation and farm management. After their training, 30 farmers have begun to keep livestock scientifically, and on a large scale.

Special feed for the animals makes up a large part of the expense in animal husbandry. One group in our Mongolian Cluster — we call them the livestock support group — was provided with training backed up by loans, to set up a feed production unit to prepare poultry feed locally. This initiative cut down costs and the chicken started growing faster and were healthier! But due to non-availability of corn, feed production this season has grinded to a halt. The group now gets the poultry feed in bulk from the town, retailing it to small farmers, thereby saving time and money for all.

If they could buy and stock more corn during the harvest season, feed production could go on through the year. The same feed could then be used by pigs and, with some modification, even by cattle. This would boost livestock farming in the area.



#### KANTHALGURI'S PIGS

Swrang was an "almost gone" case. Alcoholic and abusive, he was driving his family over the edge. On a request from his family, we sent him for a three-month rural entrepreneurs' development course run by another NGO. He returned altered. Along with a partner, he took a loan two years ago to start a piggery farm.

With things they learnt at the training, they built a sty and bought 5 piglets for Rs.8,000. Today, the family of pigs has grown. After selling 22 piglets at Rs 1,000 each, they still have pigs worth Rs 25,000. What's more, they have been paying back the loans. The pigs keep Swrang busy and away from alcohol. He has been alcohol free for one year now.

# IV. *Nudging the health system to deliver*

## a. **MONITORING THE NRHM PROGRAMME**

The gross neglect of health services for the poor has been horrifying us for some years now. We felt helpless as we watched our pleas, letters, *dharnas* and rallies failing to evoke any response from the government.

When the central government launched the National Rural Health Mission programme, we dared ourselves to hope. For the first time, the government was talking about guaranteeing health service. We hoped that this would bring some relief to the poor in our area and perhaps save lives of women bleeding to death during deliveries. Though much is still desired, we have seen improvements in leaps and bounds — buildings for new health centres, some health personnel put in place and reviving non-existent services. We now need to ensure its continuance and see every lacuna filled. The most challenging aspect of this changed system is to ensure that it will not fall apart when the NRHM programme is discontinued after 2012.

With this in mind, we took on the task of setting up monitoring systems of the NRHM programme. Ours was one of the three pilot



districts in Assam where this programme was launched by the NRHM. We had to monitor three State dispensaries (or Primary Health Centres), five health sub-centres, and form Village Health and Sanitation Committees in 15 villages. The health committee in the village is taught how to mark the various facilities and give it a report card. They are supposed to do it once every three months and see if the grades in the health centre improve. If not, the community is supposed to complain and take action.

We were enthusiastic as it was a great chance to reach out to a large number of people and tell them about the NRHM health guarantees. We organized public dialogues and for the first time, the public got the chance to voice their grievances before health officials. Things have not changed dramatically but we are still hopeful. After all, even if an elephant wills, it does take time to turn around.



The NRHM pilot programme wound up in six months but the government has yet to decide whether to continue or not. However, we felt that since there was still much to be done, it should not be given up. With help from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, UK, we are continuing the programme. We have expanded the programme to cover two districts of Chirang and Kokrajhar, and to work in 60 villages. We will review the programme to see what shape it should assume.

### **Hope in the Ashas**

The Accredited Social Health Activists or Ashas are supposed to be the lynchpin in the NRHM. In theory, they are supposed to be catalysts in getting the community to demand that services which are guaranteed, be provided.

But in reality, the Ashas are at the bottom of the ladder. The work that is supposed to be done by diverse village extension workers

with salaries — is dumped on an Asha. And, if she lodges a protest against doctors or others in the government hospital for illegally charging for services, she gets shunned.

For over a year now we are organizing the Ashas to become assertive. If the Ashas are strong enough, they can do a lot for patient rights. We were the first to start an Asha Association in the State. This has now become an accepted part of the Asha programme. They have been organised into various chapters and we try to attend the meetings of the different chapters and share ideas.

Recently, we started giving them technical training in deliveries, women's health, care of new born, children's health, malaria etc. To equip them to play the role that they are expected, but ill-trained, to perform.

## **b. MENTAL HEALTH**

7% of our population is said to suffer from mental illness, including depression, severe anxiety etc and 3% of these need treatment and medication. As it is, our country suffers from an acute shortage of trained mental health personnel and psychiatrists. So, small towns and villages stand no

chance of accessing quality mental health care. In five to six districts of Lower Assam, i.e. in a population of over 10 lakh people, we have just one government psychiatrist in Goalpara hospital, around 2½ hours' bus ride from our place. Mental patients, and their families are left with no choice but to suffer mutely.

We thus jumped at the opportunity when Ashadeep, an NGO working with the mentally ill in Guwahati, asked if we would partner with them for treatment camps, as part of their outreach programme. For the past year and a half, the Ashadeep team has been coming once a month complete with psychiatrists, pharmacists, etc. ~~the ant~~ team provides all the back-end and also logistic support for the camps. We have done 13 camps till date and every camp sees an average of 50-60 mental patients and the numbers are increasing. Last month, 87 patients turned up, some from as far as a 100 kilometres away, hiring vehicles to bring their loved ones for treatment! After 12 camps, Ashadeep has withdrawn its financial support to the camps and the medicines and psychiatrists are being supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. We are now

worried that the increasing number of patients will far exceed our budget and we may not be able to supply medicines to the patients.

Even as we try to fill the gap in the service, we know that this is but a temporary measure. As an NGO dependent on funding from others, we cannot go on providing services forever. The government will have to take over. Our job is to show the community that mentally ill people can get well and to create a demand for services. On the other hand, we need to get the government to take responsibility for mental patients too. Not that we have not been trying.

For the past one year now we have been badgering the NRHM and health authorities at every forum both at district and even at the state level to look at mentally ill patients. If not that, to begin by just supplying the medicines to the camp and we will take care of the other expenses. But this has drawn a blank! They keep passing the buck from district to state. But we have not given up, we cannot afford to. The State has to accept responsibility for the most marginalised! And unless they do that, we will keep knocking.



# V. *The Bangalore store: crafting traditions*

Our 'flagship' store in Bangalore is a mosaic of many dreams. The dream to bring a slice of the best in northeast craft to South India, the dream to be the connecting bridge between the northeast and Bangalore, and the dream to form a positive image of the northeastern region. Our dreams were lofty but our means, meagre. With a Rs 30 lakhs loan from the Millipede Foundation (Hong Kong) and another 10 lakhs from NABARD, we finally took the plunge and launched the shop on 15th December 2008. The rent was **H-U-G-E** but as the economy was booming then, and our idea was viable, we rode high on hope.

A year and a half down the line, fortunes of the Bangalore outlet can be seen as roller-coaster of excitement and despair — excitement about new things, new events, new challenges, and despair at the downturn in economy, no money for advertisements, and receding footfalls. Our designers and now store managers, Smitha and Pradeep, have been struggling to keep their heads above water. Constant innovation, trying out new ways of marketing, and willingness to take risks, is slowly turning things around. **the ant** café which opened a few months ago,



is fast becoming a popular hang-out zone with regular clients. And the good news is that we have just started breaking even and covering our running costs. Yes, wiping out our previous losses and the return of loans, remain challenges still to be met.



# VI. Working with other NGOs

## a. IDeA

The most recent acquisition of the



ant, IDeA (Institute of Development Action) is our attempt to reach out to other NGOs and strengthen the voluntary sector in the northeast region. IDeA's role is to offer support through training programmes, disseminating information and sharing knowledge resources. Through National Foundation for India, New Delhi, we received support from Sir Dorabjee Tata Trust, Mumbai to formalize and take forward this work.

This support also helped us build some infrastructure to house the faculty members and the main building currently doubles up as the IDeA training centre. We can now house 20 trainees comfortably. Beholding this structure on the campus, brick by brick, gives us both relief and immense satisfaction.

The effort, however, emptied us of the ant's corpus money as construction prices sky-rocketed mid-way, thanks in part to the Beijing Olympics! But the three-storey building with its sloping thatch roofs and red brick walls, looks attractive and feels even cooler with its 'natural AC'.

IDeA has conducted over 15 in-house courses ever since we moved into the training centre last September. We also conduct out-reach programmes where our faculty go as resource persons to other NGOs. Our flagship courses on building a development perspective and using the rights based approach have been well received. The feedback keeps us on our toes and energizes us to deliver better.

## b. LOWER ASSAM NGO FORUM

Most NGOs work in solitary splendour, oblivious to the existence of the NGO next door. It dawned on us that organisations

need to work in tandem if we aim to bring a pervasive change. We also learnt that some NGOs were eager to come together to share and care for each other, if provided with a platform.

We took on the mantle to initiate such a forum two years ago. It has been a very interesting journey. Every two months, the 'sharing meetings' travel to different organisations in and around Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar and Chirang Districts, turn by turn. We get to visit the different NGOs and see their work and we all contribute towards the food so that even smaller NGOs can host the meeting. Around 12-15 NGOs are involved in this very informal exchange and it has brought many of us closer, working together in real partnership on certain issues. The forum has even planned a joint seminar in July 2009 to orient the government and the public, to the crucial role played by the voluntary sector in development.





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apart from working day and night to design other things for us). Thanks also to Kadey Soren for his months with us. Special thanks to Sharang Tickoo and to all students who chose to come to us for their field placements.

## Looking ahead

- Building up a strong **ant** field team with skills to work with people effectively but more importantly with a strong sense of purpose.
- We will need to pray, wish, hope and yes, work hard to make **the ant**'s Bangalore store click and stand on its feet!
- Respond effectively to market challenges so that Aagor can keep giving work to more weavers. Guide Aagor to become a truly caring organization — sensitive towards its weavers, customers and staff too.
- Build IDEa become a beacon for the voluntary sector in the region.



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