



*The***NORTHEAST**

Voluntary Action and Vision



Dedicated to Sri Rabindra Bhai (1923 -2010),
A quintessential Gandhian.

At the behest of Sri Jai Prakash Narain, Rabindra Bhai, a native of UP located himself in Northeast in 1962. He dedicated his life to building peace and self governance (Swaraj) in the region. His approach to building a better society was through constructive work and self critical deliberation.

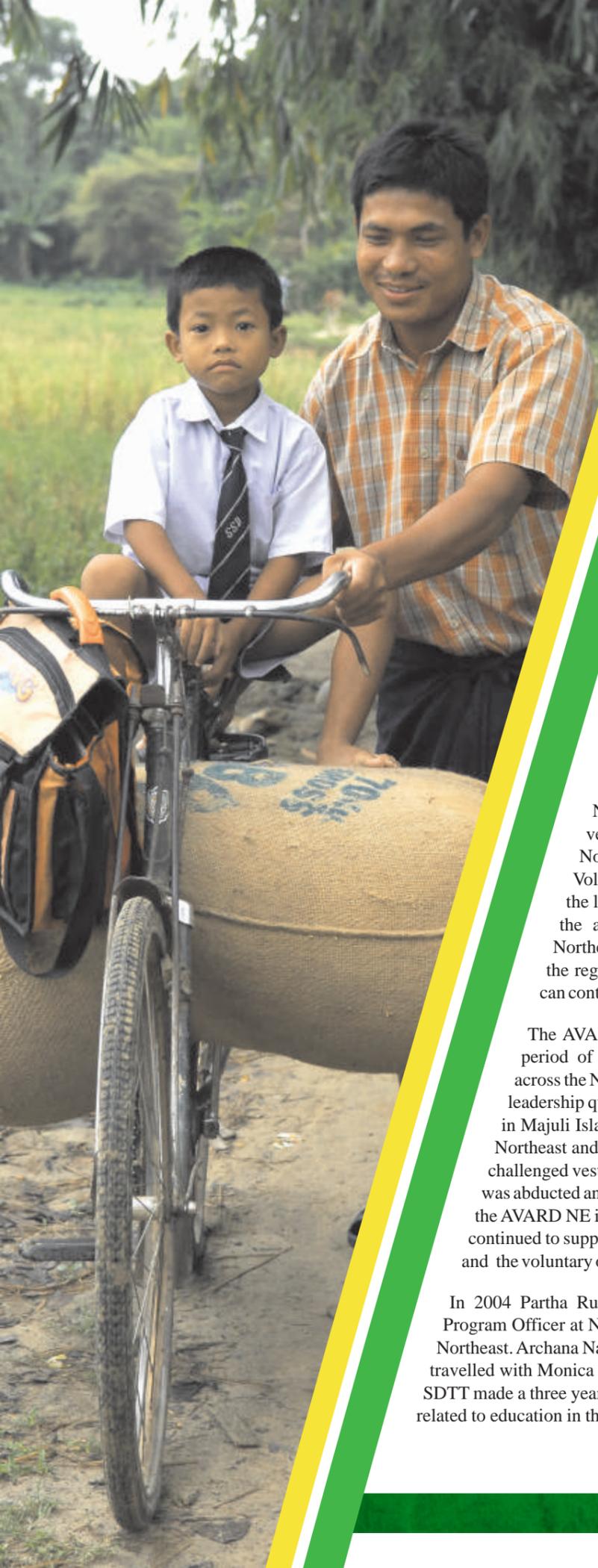
NFI had the privilege to work with him and the organization he founded, Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangh, located in Baksa, Assam from 2001 onwards

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IdEA, the ant, Assam



Foreword

Ajay S Mehta
Executive Director, NFI

NFI's engagement with India's Northeast goes back to its very inception. The founding trustees in their mission statement had wanted NFI to work in areas of conflict and create pathways to peace. This vision was made operational under the guidance of Shri Shankar Ghose, NFI's Executive Director from 1996 to 2001. A special vehicle was created to carry out grant making in the Northeast. Under this arrangement AVARD, Association of Voluntary Organizations for Rural Development started by the late Shri Jai Prakash Narain was given a block grant and the autonomy to support voluntary organizations in the Northeast. One of their mandates was to bring people across the region to meet and deliberate on how civil society groups can contribute to making the region peaceful and just.

The AVARD-NE had at its helm Sanjoy Ghose. Within a short period of time Sanjoy made the AVARD-NE initiative known across the Northeast. Sanjoy was a charismatic personality, with rare leadership qualities. He assembled a team of outstanding individuals in Majuli Island, a place that symbolized the rich biodiversity of the Northeast and also its syncretic culture and religious heritage. Sanjoy challenged vested interests and endemic corruption in public works. He was abducted and killed by criminals in July of 1997. NFI had to abandon the AVARD NE initiative, but it did not abort its work in the Northeast. It continued to support the building of local leadership of youth and women and the voluntary organizations.

In 2004 Partha Rudra, Program Director and Monica Banerjee, Senior Program Officer at NFI convinced the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust to work in the Northeast. Archana Nambiar, Program Officer handling education, in the trust, travelled with Monica to the Northeast and visited our partners. Subsequently, SDTT made a three year grant to NFI amounting to rupees 1.65 Crores for work related to education in the Northeast. The support from SDTT gave each grantee

freedom to work according to their distinct vision and capacities. Giving the grantees autonomy to work to their own visions was to have a catalytic effect on their self-confidence to learn from their experience on the ground.

As a grant making institution it has been our privilege to work with the grantees documented in this report. Each one of their journeys has epic qualities and provides guidance on how the larger collectivities in the region can work towards building peace and justice in the region.

NFI's journey in this project has been a difficult one. Numerous hurdles were encountered. There were large cost overruns, closure of schools because of local politics and organizational constraints and occasions where the excess enthusiasm of grantees had to be reigned in keeping in mind budgetary constraints.

But for Monica Banerjee, who was handling the Northeast portfolio the project would not have succeeded to the extent it has. Her deep empathy and belief in the grantees and the cause gave her strength to see the project through to its end. Despite setbacks she retained the confidence of the donors in NFI, while assiduously protecting the autonomy of the grantees. Moon Dutt, Senior Finance Manager, R.K. Banerjee, Accounts Officer and Partha Rudra gave Monica the technical and moral support to journey on.

These projects have given NFI the confidence that constructive work in the Northeast has a major role to play in bringing about changes in social and power relationships at the grassroots level and in so doing informing the larger policy debates on how to build an inclusive and humane society.

We are most grateful to Chitra Ahanthem and Bonnie Konyak for having written this report. They appreciated the deeper aspects of the work of the grantees. They felt and have conveyed the enriching impact of the project on the lives of ordinary people. The report in question has been edited by Mandira Kalaan and Kandala Singh. We are grateful to them

No words of gratitude are adequate to the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust for having given NFI the support to carry forward its work in the Northeast. We are grateful to Sanjiv Phansalkar, Program Leader, at SDTT and Ratna Mathur, Program Head in Delhi for their support and encouragement. The project overall has generated profound insights about the leadership and wisdom of ordinary people and also the web of social and power relationships that impede development programs from having the desired effect.

NFI's engagement with the Northeast continues even after the support from the trust has come to an end. The progress made so far has given NFI the conviction that it must continue to support initiatives there and help disseminate the insights of its partners to other civil society groups and ordinary people given to building a better society.



The Northeast and NFI

Monica Banerjee
Sr. Programme Officer, NFI

National Foundation for India's relationship with the Northeast has been a profound one and meaningful one. As a team, we at NFI felt the need to reach out to certain groups in the region, who have worked constructively over the years, despite an adverse political climate and extreme mis-governance. To groups that give the most deprived and marginalized a sense of hope and desire to better their lot. To groups that have made services like education, health and livelihoods a reality even in the most remote and inaccessible villages. To groups that have bestowed on the "othered" community and victims of conflict, a chance to pick up the pieces of their broken lives and start anew with dignity. In so doing, they have also mended fissures by bringing conflicting communities together for peace, preceded by justice in the form of service delivery.

Over the last 15 years, NFI has worked with over 40 voluntary organizations in the region. Some of them offer spectacular lessons, both for NFI and the world. In addition, NFI has also been able to build a cadre of media fellows in the region who pursue development journalism with sensitivity and passion. Looking back, we feel content to have created a base of voluntary action and development journalism that strives to expand the space for social democracy and justice in the region. By constructive work voluntary organizations, in particular, have demonstrated the possibility of creating a civil society that is inclusive and not given to tendencies of polarization otherwise so common in this land of political and violence.

NFI has crossed several milestones on its journey as a co-traveler with its partners in these years. Each of these journeys has revealed a diverse set of lessons. Lessons of hope emerging out of hopelessness; of successes emerging out of repeated failures; and understanding how superficial success can eventually lead to failure. After traveling this road for up to eight years with some voluntary organizations, we thought it was time to document their rich experiences.

NFI was helped in this endeavour by Chitra Ahanthem and Bonnie Konyak, journalists based in Manipur and Nagaland respectively, who were NFI media fellows a few years ago. Together, they bring to the world a myriad struggles to survive amidst a range of difficult circumstances - how *suvjit* being a Manipuri in Meghalaya affects him and his work, to create opportunities for Khasi shepherd children to learn about the world in a manner that does not compromise their association with their surroundings, their village lifestyles, their homes, their farm fields and their free spirited nature.

Since 2002, NFI has partnered with Synroplang for Social Transformation (SST). It has made *Surjit's* struggles its own, and wants to continue to do so with the same zeal even though the only component that has intensified in this partnership is the plethora of challenges. Challenges such as, trying to penetrate the provisions of an archaic constitutional schedule that protects traditional customs, renders a harsh blow to any democratic process and legitimizes the rule of the landed few. Bridging rural urban divides among staff is another challenge. The most recent challenge is the confused interpretation of the



Right to Education (RTE) Act that seems to curb all 'private' schools that do not possess infrastructural norms as laid down by the Act. On the ground, realities are removed from a rights-based framework. So impoverished and inaccessible are some communities and villages that fall in the more deprived "othered" category in conflict zones like the Northeast, that doling rights out by themselves might not bring any services to the deprived. They haven't so far because these communities cannot, repeat cannot, demand their rights as they don't have the space or the means to do so. Very often, they live in relief camps having fled gruesome riots, in jungles cleared off for habitation and passed off as villages. As someone who constantly engages with communities such as these, in Arunachal or in Bodoland, it worries NFI that RTE might well be used as a weapon by state against minorities. To reiterate, the state might not even want to start an institution of education or other services for their minorities. The same is true for some members of the existing civil society, whose power-layered movements is often tilted along ethnic lines and promulgates exclusivity rather than inclusiveness. Whether these movements, that often trespass what is civil and put virtues of civility and non-violence on hold, would really fall within the ambit of civil society is a separate debate. In the current form of RTE, these organisations are handed an axe to strike down whatever little is happening in the name of education thanks to secular and voluntary efforts.

SNEHA's is a voluntary effort in education. The narratives in the following pages illustrate the Chakma community's travails. But they also depict the sheer grit and determination of its youth leaders to overcome fear and alienation and more importantly, to overcome the overwhelming and all-pervasive tendency for violent retaliation so common in the Northeast. Instead, these Chakma youth in Arunachal use their energies to create a base for a dignified existence. Their school is not just a school. It is perhaps the only institution that the 60,000-odd Chakmas with 15% adult literacy can legitimately call their own. For many Chakmas today, their dreams and aspirations revolve around this institution, and the sense of loss that they have experienced for years is giving way to a sense of inclusiveness. Attracted by the dedication of the teachers and the remarkable quality of the school, today children from other tribes, many of them natives who are opposed to citizenship rights for Chakmas, are coming to SNEHA's School. On its part, SNEHA accepts these children with open arms. They know that their school cannot fully become an abode of learning till it is a harbinger of peace. By having multi-ethnic classmates, around 500 children are learning to love their co-tribes and not harbor feelings of hatred for being 'othered'.

If Action Northeast Trust (*the ant*) today has evolved into an institution at the regional level for promoting development with equity and social justice, it is thanks to their clarity of vision, courage and determination to succeed against all odds. In 1997, when NFI's main partner in the Northeast, the Sanjoy Ghose led AVARD-NE was asked to wind up its operations by the insurgent group ULFA, neither the AVARD team nor NFI had any clue as to how all of us would tread ahead or if at all we would resume our work in the region. But AVARD team members, Sunil Kaul and Jennifer Liang proved to themselves and to

the world that compassion and honest work need not wait too long. Return they did to the region in 2000; and in 10 years *the ant* has established itself as the leading organization that promotes socially transformative livelihoods and health. It holds the torch up for innumerable voluntary organizations, big and small, in the region and trains them to be rightly spirited for voluntary action. NFI, as their first and continuing donor since 2001, perhaps helped them to accelerate their pace and leverage their capacities for excellent human resources. We also aligned with their idea of a Northeast based Development School. A one-of-its-kind institution in the region since the latter part of 2008. Today the Institute for Development Action or IDeA has catered to more than 1000 development workers of the region, by handholding them in their quest to find solutions to problems of under or no development and social inequity.

It is a great privilege for NFI to present SST, SNEHA and *the ant* to readers. This has been possible because of the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust. Along with our partners, we were crawling till 2006. SDTT gave us wings to fly. SNEHA, SST and *the ant's* IDeA haven't looked back since.



Surjit S Thokchom, Synroplang for Social transformation (SST)

Surjit, 46, was born in a small village called Athokpam in Thoubal District of Manipur. He experienced acute poverty in early life. Despite many difficulties in acquiring an education, Surjit gained recognition as a budding scientist and represented his state in many scientific events and exhibitions at the national level. His higher education was in Shillong where he also taught in a secondary school and conducted research on the teaching of mathematics.

The Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha's (BJVJ) Lokshala Movement spread to the Northeast under his leadership. This movement later led to the creation of Synroplang for Social transformation (SST) in 2003 to carry out action research for an alternative curriculum that would make every child a creator of knowledge and a visionary for justice.

Surjit is a member of National Focus Group of NCERT. He is also a member of All India Forum for Right to education. He lives with his wife and two children in Shillong.



Susanta Chakma and Arindam Chakma, Sneha

Susanta Chakma grew up in Arunachal Pradesh. He was fortunate enough to attend high school, where he became aware of the acute lack of schooling in his community. Chakmas, because of their refugee status were plagued by acute poverty, but that apart they also could not provide an education to their children because schools tended to deny them admission out of prejudice.

As a student in Delhi University he along with friends created an organization "Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh". The young students deliberated on the abject conditions in which their people were placed and sought ways to address the injustice of being denied citizenship and access to basic services. Eschewing the path of violence, they decided to fight legally for their rights to Indian citizenship and to provide education. They started SNEHA in 2002 with the help of eminent human rights activist late Dr. Yash Pal Chibbar, Prof. D.L. Sheth and Shri Surendra Mohan, a well known political leader and Gandhian to achieve these goals.

Arindam a close college friend, joined him. He is now the headmaster of the school. He like Susanta, opined that rather than pick up guns one would pursue the path of justice through peaceful means. Arindam has been able to inspire his teachers to create a school where each child is seen as special and worthy of love.

Both Susanta and Arindam have through Sneha, shown that it is possible to overcome prejudice and injustice through unremitting hard work and faith in their cause.



Jennifer Liang and Sunil Kaul, Action Northeast Trust (the ant)

Jennifer Liang and Sunil Kaul are a couple that founded *the ant* (The Action Northeast Trust) in 2000. Earlier they had worked in Majuli with Sanjoy Ghose. In 1997, they had to close down their work in Assam as part of an unsuccessful ransom deal made with militants to save Sanjoy's life. Jennifer Liang, 38 years, has specialised in research methodology after her Masters in Social Work from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She has been associated with the rural development sector for the past 15 years and is currently the Managing Trustee cum Executive Director of . Sunil Kaul, 48 years, is a medical doctor and has a Masters in Public Health. He is associated with the development sector since the year 1991. He left his job as an army doctor in 1994 to work full time in the voluntary sector.

The ant (www.theant.org) is headquartered in Chirang district of the Bodoland Territorial Council where it is known for its work on community health, income generation, work with women and its peace building efforts by engaging the youth. As part of their vision to strengthen the voluntary sector in the Northeast they started IDEa or the Institute for Development Action.



Synroplang for Social Transformation (SST)

Chitra Ahanthem and Bonnie Konyak

Empowering
transformation
of lives



Background

Its 6:30 A.M. And there's an argument going on at the Durbar Hall of Mawlali village in East Khasi Hills. A passionate but disciplined debate on which member of their families works harder, has the children fully engrossed in this class on 'Family Organization'. This is a normal day of class in the Kyndon Jingnagnud School (KJA) School in Mawlali village which is conducted every morning from 6:00 to 9:00 AM. Here every student will have to contribute to the day's debate and though there are no prizes distributed, these children leave school with a greater awareness of the contribution made by each member of their family.

Hidden away from the rest of the world, this KJA School is the physical evidence of the silent but determined battle being waged in the serene pastures of Mawkynrew Block of East Khasi Hills District in Meghalaya. According to statistics, 71% of the population in Mawkynrew Block lives under the poverty line (a total of 24,000 people out of a total population of 34,133 live under the poverty line). The villages of Rangmudi, Pingwait, Umsning and Mawlali are located in the remote interior of the block, which are poorly connected and have inadequate transport services.

In these remote interiors, a small and stubborn group of believers have taken on the fight to overthrow the traditional class hierarchies that exist in a typical Khasi village and to bring about social transformation by providing alternative education for the most marginalized

section of this society. The Synroplang for Social Transformation (SST) [or the People's Aspiration for Social Transformation] has therefore been focusing on providing meaningful, life skills based education to the most deprived section of the rural Khasis for the last many years in order to empower the people against elite exploitation, religious politics and a regressive traditional system.

It has not been an easy journey for the SST. They encountered intense resistance at every step they took to provide alternative education to the deprived section of Khasi society. The rural elite, recognized that education could be a tool to emancipate the underprivileged and resisted SST's noble endeavor. It was against such a backdrop that the first KJA School was started in Nongjrong village in the early part of 2005. After intense interaction and negotiation with the village leaders, a night school for 60 shepherd children in the existing primary school of Nongjrong was started. The radical teachings at the school about the need to abolish social inequality and class discrimination made the powerful rural elites intensely uncomfortable. They made several attempts to close-down the school; they finally succeeded in November 2006 with the forced declaration of holiday by village leaders on account of the Revival Movement of the Presbyterian Church.

Taking valuable lessons from the Nongjrong KJA, SST moved on with greater dedication to negotiate and later establish four more KJAs at Mawlali, Pingwait, Rangmudi and Umsning villages.



Mawlali

The KJA School of Mawlali was started on March 8, 2008 and has two teachers and 22 students of the age group between 4 and 14 years. Most of these students are children from the lowest economic and social group of the village, belonging to families of landless farmers. A number of these children are also drop-outs from the other formal schools after repeated failure in the same class.

In the course of their interactions with the various village stakeholders, SST realized that besides the class structure of the villages, the faulty teaching pedagogy in the formal schools system was also responsible for the enormous drop-out rates (80.93% according to 2002-2003 survey). Taking this into account, SST set out to not only teach the children how to read and write but to provide a meaningful form of alternative education which will be significant to their existence and help eliminate the destructive mindset implanted by their social upbringing.

According to KJA teacher, Mardaline Nongspong, it is this approach of teaching that is responsible for the pert reply of her 12 year old student Ailistina who says that she wants to grow up to be a farmer. "Because they give us life" Ailistina clarifies when further quizzed about her unusual ambition. This 12 year old believes that farmers are the backbone of any society and without them no society would be able to survive.

Besides the three R's (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic), KJA schools teach subjects like Family, Society, Science and Life Skills. The entire village is considered the classroom and the students are encouraged to take their learning process outside the four walls of the class room and into their daily lives. Mardalin says that this method of teaching has not only changed the students' attitude but also altered her perspective on the children. "I used to think that children were dim-witted and needed to be taught to think intelligently but now I know differently" she says. She goes on to add how during the course of discussion on cultivation, which is the main occupation of the village, the children concluded on their own that 'Soil gives us blood'. "I never thought of it this way but they did, they are more intelligent than we perceive", she says.

KJA has earned itself a decent reputation in the village due to which the Village Durbar, the traditional yet legitimate local agency for governance, has contributed a plot of land for constructing the KJA school building. The Sardar of the Mawlali Village Durbar, Krispin Mawthoh, whose own son studies in the KJA school says that his son comes home with a lot of questions everyday. "They are taught about the village, environment, leadership etc. The whole village has enormous expectations from the KJA School", the Sardar says

Umsning

The KJA School at Umsning is another such school which struggles everyday to provide quality education to the eight children who are presently enrolled here. Though the subjects taught and methods of teaching are the same as Mawlali KJA, the school at Umsning suffers a different set of problems resulting from economic difficulty. Since the village is situated in one of the most far-flung areas with hardly any fertile soil, most residents are daily wage earners who work away from the village for the most part of the year, in stone quarries, limestone, bitumen and coal mines.

The students of the Umsning KJA School mostly consist of children who live in other people's houses since their parents work away from the village and return a few times every year. In the absence of their parents, these children usually end up engaging in manual labour to contribute towards their daily needs for food, leaving them little time for education. This is one of the reasons the Umsning KJA School has seen a lot of fluctuations in the number of its students. This school which began in July 25, 2007 with nine children increased its enrolment to 28 children with its revolutionary teachings. However, the economic and social difficulties faced by the students drastically reduced the number to eight children in the last few months. Nevertheless, the school retains the trust of the village Durbar and it has been offered a small plot of land which is presently being used by the KJA School students to carry out demonstrations on agriculture.

Rangmudi

Rangmudi is a small village comprising of 12 families. Only three houses have electricity while access to the village is only after a steep trek of two and half hours downhill from Molyngnot. This pathway would be about one metre in its breadth and comprises of stones. The villagers clean the fungi and mosses off so that commuters on the trek do not fall down. Villagers trek this route to bring in supplies from the outside world.

To reach Rangmudi village, one must travel to Smit, the cultural center of the Khasi Hills which is situated 11 km away from the capital city of Meghalaya, Shillong on the Shillong Jowai Road. Buses and taxis then ply from Smit to Mawlyngnot but the cheaper options of buses are not a regular feature and it is often the norm for 12 people to cram inside Maruti cars that serve as taxis. From Mawlyngnot, one must then trek down on a one metre broad steep path made of stones lined one after the other. The villagers who are habituated take less than an hour to go down the steep path but for first timers, it takes anywhere from two and a half to three hours.

Most of the villagers are farmers, working in the field. It is common for parents to have more than five children. The elder ones help in the field while the smaller ones look after the infants in the house. Parents are illiterate and are not resolute on having their children educated. Rather, education is looked upon as something that will keep their children away from contributing as an extra

Children singing

Inside the bamboo thatched one room structure that the Durbar has given for the KJA school in Rangmudi, the children are singing:

*Simpyllieng Khwai doh kha
Ai u khwai ngaan, Khwai manga*

It is a repetitive refrain, one that means "The rains will stop, the rainbow will come on and we can go sailing"

It is a song that brings on many giggles that end in laughter when they are asked if they will indeed go sailing on the steep hills surrounding their village.





Students at KJA

14 year old Arimon says she comes to the KJA school because, "it is near." Her mother, illiterate and a mother of five children at 36 yrs says that the KJA class timings was the only thing that convinced her to send her daughter. "the early classes mean that she can look after her one and a half year old younger sister when I go to work in the fields," she says.

10 year old Phirititsha works in the field with her parents during the day time and is the eldest of five children. "Only two of us go to school at KJA," she says. Asked about her aim in life, she says, "I want to be a farmer" and says that the learning she gets from the KJA initiative will help her assist her parents while calculating money that get exchanged during the sale of their agricultural produce. But she isn't sure how long her parents will allow her to go to the school. Her parents are non committal on the issue and say that as long as the KJA School is there, she can go for her morning classes.

Teachers at KJA

23 year old Marybon Kshair teaches the 12 children. She underwent a 6 month long training given by SST in 2007 and has been running the KJA at her village since the past one year. Her own journey reflects the state of education that exists in her village. She studied till IVth standard in the private run Roman Catholic Lower Primary school but had to walk to another village (Jongksha) to study till her Xth class. "After passing class IVth standard, I used to sit at home and cry everyday saying that I wanted to go to school." She also adds that she is lucky her family has their own fields to cultivate which provided enough to bring up a family made of her parents and a total of 8 siblings. Marybon eventually completed her higher secondary education by staying in hostel at Shillong, but her own siblings who are both elder and younger to her work in the fields along with her parents and do not go to other schools or the one run by the KJA.

pair of hands in the field. Farming is the sole means of earning and those who have their own farms are considered better off than those who work in the fields for other people. The main agricultural products of the village are cucumber, jackfruits, pineapples and broomstick plants. The villagers do not have access to the markets directly: rather, their produce is bought by middlemen at rates that they fix for the farmers, who in turn cannot sell their produce to the markets directly. Supplies for the village are either carried by villagers themselves on the narrow and steep track or are put on an overhead cable carrier. Often, families eat cucumber and jackfruit so they won't have to buy extra supplies of food. Khasi houses are spick and span in their neatness but the acute poverty also means that people do not possess many sets of clothes. The most telling aspect can be seen among the children, who wear worn out clothes, which often smell of urine. It is because there are no spare or additional sets of clothes. The education of children seems to be a distant thought since existence is centered on agricultural produce. Also, existing education systems are scarce.

The KJA started by SST in the village has 12 children who are clubbed together despite the difference in their ages. Thus, a four year old is imparted the same lessons as a 14 year old. School timings are from 6 am to 9 am since

the parents want the children to stay at home in their absence while they go for work in their fields. Sticks and stones are used to impart learning to the children: an innovative method that uses freely available material from the immediate surroundings of the children. The children are given exercise books by SST, but use the stick and stone method on a daily basis to write alphabets and numerals, their names etc.

With little support from the parents compounded by the lack of educational facilities, the children have little ambition. 14 year old Michael has been studying in the KJA since the past one year. Like other boys of his age, Michael is a gregarious teen who loves being the center of attention and hence, he looks out of place among younger children who have longer attention spans than him. Asked about why he comes to the school, Michael simply says, "I want to learn English. Then I can talk with the people who come to buy things from my parents after the harvest." During the stick and stones lessons, Michael is often the one who does not want to use them to spell his name or write his age. He is bored by the fact that he is learning the same things as the smaller children.





Pingwait

The village of Pingwait is situated about 60 kms away from Shillong. As one travels farther from Shillong, it is normal to see young children tending cattle in the pastures surrounding the highways. One is told that the shoulder cloth bags that these boys carry often contain tobacco, which is consumed by them during the course of the day. Bus services to Pingwait are irregular, though overloaded Sumo vehicles ply at regular intervals. The village has educational institutions upto the Secondary level, while one has to go to adjoining villages for further education. It is not surprising then that the village of Pingwait has only 7 graduates.

The KJA School here has just 5 students, out of which three are present during my visit. Two of the three boys have been school drop-outs after reaching standard IV, but the attention to detail in their lessons can be gauged from their grasp of problem solving. 18 year old Iaishahbok had a two year gap as a school drop out after he passed his IVth standard, but can now solve mathematical problems of the level of a VIth standard student. 15 year old Libernin was about to discontinue his schooling due to lack of finances but joined the KJA and has subsequently progressed from the level of a standard IV student to a standard VIth student. Babu Fair, who teaches the young boys says that there are other parents who want to send their children to him as well. "But I was firm that I would only accept children who are in the age group of 12-16, since I wanted these boys to reach their Xth Board examinations," he says, adding that he has set himself and the five children around four years for appearing for the Xth Board examinations. Babu Fair is also an Executive Member of the village Durbar.

Durbars are strong institutions in the state of Meghalaya not only in terms of decision making but in social spheres of life: all decisions have to be vetted by this body. In fact, the KJA initiative started by SST has been possible only through a slow and gradual process of engaging with these durbars in all the present five schools being run. The KJA school at Nongjrong that incidentally had the

maximum number of students had to be discontinued because the durbar decided that strengthening the Church was more important than educating young children. Yet, according to Surjit Thokchom of SST, "No KJA is permanent since the core idea is to link the children to formal education systems." But given the present circumstance where parents are not open to the idea of sending their children to school during day hours and the fact that there are not too many formal means of education available, perhaps there is more hope in SST's plans to engage with Durbars and through this institution, to sit down with the parents of the children and encourage more openness towards educating their children. "We need to have a non stop engagement not only with the children, but extend that interaction towards the parents, Church and the Durbar as part of our future plans," says Surjit. He also concedes that grouping children of different ages in the same class is a setback but says that it was important to generate the idea of education at some point. "Even the teachers at the KJA themselves have faced difficult situations in availing an education. We need to build on this path towards making children literate and in the process, gradually build a ground for their education," according to Surjit. The various meetings with the children at Rangmudi and Pingwait, their parents and Durbar members validate the needs of the children on the one hand and the lack of support due to external environments in the form of scarce educational institutions and parents wanting their children to work in the fields on the other.

While the three children present in the Pingwait KJA work on mathematical sums that are designed to relate to their daily lives, one begins to see the window of hope that has been opened for these young boys on the threshold of becoming men. As 16 year old Sikrotsing, a school drop out after his IVth standard sums it, "my parents could not put me in school after my IVth standard and I stopped my studies for one year, but I have been able to catch up this year alone. I want to study till my Xth class at least. Maybe, my parents will be happy when I pass with good marks and send me to the next village to pursue higher classes," he says with quiet confidence.

Conclusion

After years of negotiating, convincing and at times even fighting, the four KJA schools are finally established and running despite all the problems involved. These schools are not just a means of providing education for the deprived children, but have become symbols of hope for the villages and the SST activists who are members of this 'class-distinction' riddled society. In the words of Baiamonlang Shylla, who is a single mother working with the SST, "mere education does not make people become true human beings," but its absence becomes a disadvantage, especially in these Khasi Hills. She goes on to explain that the children in the Khasi villages usually drop out after they reach high school because of the faulty education system which is unable to teach the children well enough to get them through to the next class. After 'wasting' several years by attending these formal schools, the children do not want to work in the field since they are not taught agricultural practices in their schools. Neither are they able to land 'government' jobs since their education is by no means complete. "They are neither here nor there, unable to stand on their own feet, so they start drinking alcohol" she says.

This single mother, who was abandoned by her husband, along with her differently-abled daughter in 1997 and discouraged to marry again due to the rigid social system,

said that before SST's work with the people of East Khasi Hills, 'even I did not realize the gender exploitation that I was going through'. But now, Baiamonlang speaks out that the present system of formal education only iterates the bias among the people widening the existing gap between the rich and the poor and also makes the people lazy. She recalls that earlier, when the village roads needed to be fixed, the whole community would come together and repair it but now they wait for the government. "They have become like beggars" she says, adding that SST's work among her people was to wake the people's consciousness regarding not just the harmful practices in the society but also to help revive its age-old nature of self-reliance.

Thus, while the number of children currently engaged through the KJA initiatives is less than 50, it has made inroads into changing the values of society. It has been able to instill confidence among the poor towards learning and in so doing it has made a significant difference to the lives of children. According to Surjit, "We know that we have just started out. When we talk about how much change we have been able to bring about in the lives of the children living in the villages, it is limited as one needs to follow the rules of the land. Our endeavour is to create space for increasing criticism towards inbuilt social systems such as the Durbar and the institutional mechanisms of the state."

Emidao's dream

Nine-year old Emidao Nongspung has been in Mawlali KJA for a little over one year, but he is definitely not the same boy he was before. Emidao joined KJA after having failed class B in the village's Roman Catholic Lower Primary School (RCLP), because he 'just couldn't understand or study' what was taught there due to difficulties with the English language. "Teachers used to scold me everyday" says the naturally mischievous boy with a grin. According to villagers, when Emi was in RCLP, every morning his mother would beat him and drag him crying to school. But now, Emi is one of the first to arrive, always with a smile and a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. When he first came to KJA School, Emidao did not even know how to write his name, but now, through the sticks and stone method, Emidao has learnt how to write and is proud to display his skill. However, he confides that English is still the most challenging subject for him.

Emi's father has passed away and he now has his mother, an elder brother and grandmother. His elder brother is seldom home as he works in a construction site outside the village and his mother feeds the family by selling vegetables in Shillong. Everyday she leaves early in the morning to return late at night, so Emi and his grandmother are the only ones at home. After the few hours of school, Emi goes to the fields with his grandmother to help her cultivate the field.

Emi can never really own land in the village because property is passed through the female child, but the clan may allow him to cultivate in its land if he stays in the village. However, Emidao's wants to grow up to be a mechanic in Shillong and return every weekend to the village so that the clan will allow him to cultivate in his grandmother's land. His greatest dream is to one day own a car but hastily adds to the delighted laughter of his grandmother that he will buy a car only after his grandmother dies. "Because there is no one to look after her" and so while she is alive, Emi wants to spend every penny he earns looking after his beloved grandmother. SST, with its vision to empower the people in the rural areas so that they will voluntarily and naturally take a step towards social justice, equality and meaningful knowledge, is fighting to make Emidao's future surpass his dream.

Education for Inclusion and Peace



'I definitely want to study computer engineering. I have read about the advances taking place in the field of communication technology and want to use the medium to tell the world about our community,' Suma Chakma (14 years old)

Background¹

The Chakmas belong to a tribal group that has inhabited the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh for centuries. Despite the fact that most of the inhabitants of the CHT are either Buddhist or Hindu, the region became a part of Pakistan with the partition of India in 1947. In 1964, communal violence and the construction of the Kaptai hydro-electric dam displaced nearly 100,000 Chakmas, out of which a large number sought refuge in India.

Approximately 35,000 of these Chakmas were given valid migration certificates and settled in what was then the North East Frontier Agency, today the Arunachalese districts of Lohit, Changlang, and Papumpare. These migration certificates indicated legal entry into India and the willingness of the Government to accept the Chakmas as future citizens, much like the migrants from Pakistan following Partition. Nearly 1,000 members of the Hajong tribe, a Hindu group from the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh, were also settled in these areas and granted migration certificates. In the years since then, the Chakmas and Hajongs have built villages, developed the land granted to them, and established strong ties to the

region. Today, they have become a part of the social fabric of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. However, they have also faced severe social discrimination.

In Arunachal's Lohit district, primary schools were closed and Chakma students were denied access to all of the area's secondary schools. At Chakma Basti, a school serving more than 350 students was abruptly closed and its teachers transferred to other districts in September 1994. During the same month, the Chakma students studying at the Chowkham Government Higher Secondary School and the Namasai Government Higher Secondary School were arbitrarily expelled. The Chakmas of this area now lack access to educational facilities.

In the district of Changlang (formerly known as Tirap), more violent means were employed in order to deprive the Chakmas and Hajongs of their right to education. The Diyun Secondary School, a school constructed by the Chakmas on a self-help basis, was burned to the ground in November 1994. This was the only school serving a student population of more than 1,200. Chakma students were compelled to travel to Miao because there was no secondary school in the Chakma area, despite the fact that the Chakma population numbers nearly 40,000.

In Miao, the only secondary school available to the Chakmas is the Miao Higher Secondary School. On 29 September 1994, the 80 Chakma students attending the school were forcibly assembled and physically abused, according to the CCRCAP². A Class XI student named

¹ The historical annotation/reference is from this link: http://www.hrhc.net/sahrdc/resources/stateless_chakmas.htm

² stands for Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh, a body formed in 1991 to demand for citizenship rights of the Chakmas and Hajongs of Arunachal Pradesh



Bhaskar Chakma subsequently died from the beatings which he received at the hands of the school officials. The next day, a primary school, the Chakma Boys Hostel, was burnt to the ground.

The Bijoypur Middle School in Changlang district also faced a similar fate. Like the school at Diyun, the Bijoypur school was constructed by the Chakmas through contributions of money and labor by the local community. Nonetheless, this school was closed and locked up by the State authorities, and more than 600 Chakma students were now denied access to the very buildings which their parents constructed. Additionally, many Chakma villages of substantial size lack primary schools. In the Changlang district, for example, Udaipur (500 families), Bijoypur-II (180 families), and Bijoypur-III (240 families) are all without primary schools.

It was in these political and economic circumstances that SNEHA, the school at Avoipur at Diyun Circle was set up to address the educational needs of the Chakmas. SNEHA as an institutional organization was set up in 2002 by Susanta Chakma in association with some renowned social workers of India like Dr. Chhibbar, Prof. D.L. Sheth, and Surendra Mohan, Shefali Agarwal an IIT-Delhi student and some Chakma associates of Susanta Chakma. Dr. Y.P Chhibbar, a renowned human rights activist and former Reader of Economics at the University of Delhi and the (All India) General Secretary of the Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties (P.U.C.L) was the Chairman of SNEHA from its inception till December 2008, when he passed away.

At present, SNEHA maintains a modest office at Shakarpur, in New Delhi. Apart from NFI, the organization receives support from some other organizations, which reflects the value of its educational initiative. While personal initiatives by people to raise funds for the schools are ongoing, HDFC Ltd has provided financial support for purchasing tin sheets to cover the school.

The SNEHA School

When the school started in 2003, it was a small thatched bamboo structure and the 109 students that came to the school were mainly Chakma and Hajong children. Now, the school structure remains the same though additional classes have been added, but, a mosaic of multi cultural and ethnic hues make up the background of the 438 students enrolled in the SNEHA school.

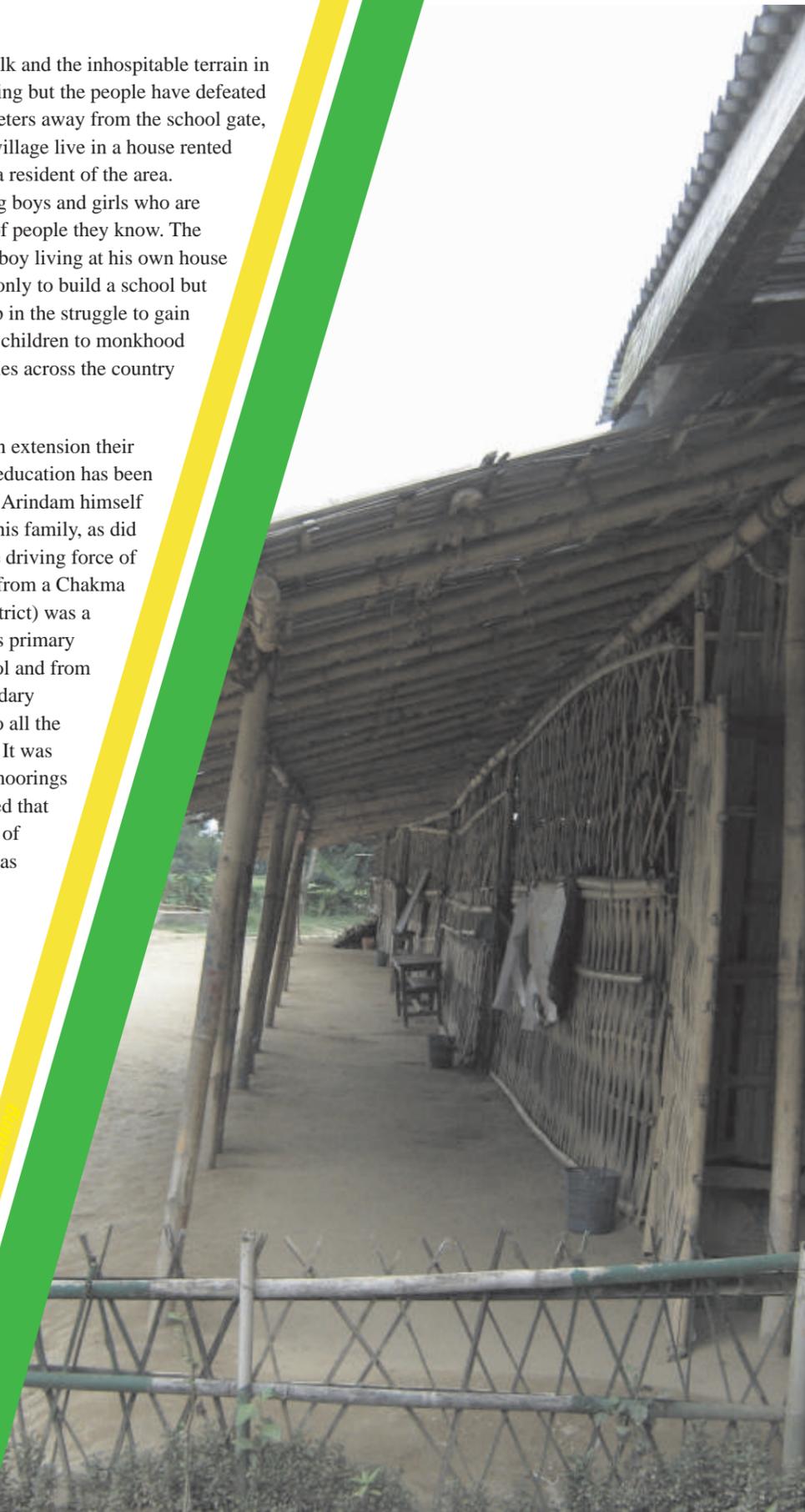
The school serves the area of Diyun circle, which consists of about 35 villages, out of which 25 are Chakma and Hajong villages. Many of the parents are illiterate farmers but have a strong understanding of the need for education to address the social inequalities that exist in their daily lives. Electricity is yet to be a reality for most homes and there are no tarmac roads in Diyun circle except for the main road. The existing main road is in dire need of repairs and the lack of transportation facilities make cycles the most important mode of transport for villagers. Yet, the state of the roads compounded by heavy rainfall often means that villagers have to walk long stretches to

go about their daily life. The same goes for students who often take their shoes and socks in hand to negotiate long muddy stretches on their way to school from home and back. The lack of regular transport facilities also means that most of students trek for long stretches in dense foliage to commute daily.

The distances that students have to walk and the inhospitable terrain in the absence of regular roads are daunting but the people have defeated the odds that come in the way. Five meters away from the school gate, two students belonging to a far away village live in a house rented out to them at a very minimal rate by a resident of the area. Elsewhere, people have taken in young boys and girls who are either related to them or are children of people they know. The headmaster of the school has a young boy living at his own house and has this to add, "Our effort is not only to build a school but to foster support systems that will help in the struggle to gain education.. Most parents give up their children to monkhood and they are sent to Buddhist monasteries across the country to seek spiritual education."

Yet, the issues faced by students and in extension their parents in their journey to get quality education has been faced by an earlier generation as well. Arindam himself is an example of this: he had to leave his family, as did most of the teachers at the school. The driving force of SNEHA, Susanta Chakma, who hails from a Chakma village in Chowkham circle (Lohit district) was a first generation school goer. He did his primary education at the village Primary School and from middle to intermediate at Govt. Secondary School, Chowkham and then had to go all the way to Delhi for his higher education. It was during the course of finding his own moorings in the larger world that Susanta realized that education alone would open the doors of opportunity for his community to live as equals.

"While continuing education and working for citizenship rights I often used to discuss with some of my close friends about the need for good schools to provide quality education to the Chakma children," he says. When his father gave a sum of Rs. 5,000/- to enroll for a membership in the Bar Council of India, Susanta utilized it towards building up SNEHA. NFI's support for the SNEHA school then came about in 2003.





What Parents Aspire

14 year old Suma Chakma is currently studying in the IXth standard at SNEHA School and aspires to be a Computer Engineer. She is one of the luckier ones since her parents are well-to-do traders who run a provision store, while she has extended family members based in cities across the country. Suma's elder sister studies in the same standard in another school and rues the fact that she is too shy to join her younger sister in the same class. "Suma's school has more extra curricular activities like karate classes, music etc. They have better English speaking skills," she says, going on to add that more than a hundred students are cramped into each class in her school. The girls' parents are literate but did not have the opportunity to go for further education. While their mother studied only till class I, their father went on to study till his IXth standard. "We belonged to a different generation. This generation will only get going on account of knowledge and for that, education is necessary," says their father. He goes on to add that he will support higher education for both daughters, whom he plans to send out of Namsai for further studies later, depending on their academic performances. Asked what they aspire to be in life, Suma has her sights higher than her sister who wants to become an air-hostess. "I definitely want to study computer engineering. I have read about the advances taking place in the field of communication technology and want to use the medium to tell the world about our community," says Suma confidently.

Further along the road, there is another family that shares the same sentiment, regardless of the fact that economic situations are drastically different. Vikramjit Chakma is a farmer who studied only till the VIIIth standard but he says with a quiet confidence that "without education, man is nothing. All I want is to study and go out into the world." His wife is in her early 30's but is already a grand-mother since their elder daughter married early. Parents of 5 children, they say that they sent their daughter Guribi (13 years) to SNEHA school since it was less expensive. "We sent the rest to other schools but now we

have realized the differences in the level of growth among them," says the father. In another house, 40 year old Sushma Chakma says that her daughter who is studying in the IXth standard is luckier than her. "I was the eldest of 10 siblings and in our time, it was impossible for us to complete our education. I married young and once that happened, everything took a back seat. I will see to it that my daughter is not pushed into an early marriage. I will work hard and ensure that she does not have to worry about the costs of her education," she says.

At Kamakhyapur Village, which is about 7 kms away from the school, Sunita Chakma and many others work in their own fields and are illiterate. But speaking on behalf of all the other parents, she says, "It is only education that will bring change and progress among Chakmas. Once you get the knowledge about what is due to you, then he/she will also find ways of addressing those needs." This innate sense of belief in education as an opportunity for social equality is often repeated by the various parents that one gets to meet in village after village, enhanced in value by the core methods of social integration that the school authorities use in SNEHA. For instance, cinemas that talk about nationhood are shown to the children (Gandhi) while special screenings were held for the students to imbibe a sense of "each one is unique" (Tare Zameen Par). 10 year old Seema Chakma, a student in the VIth standard says, "All of us loved the film. We loved the teacher for his guidance and support of the child in the film." Her opinion is extended by her class mate, Rajen Chakma who says, "But what I liked is the message of the film that says that each of us have special qualities." Asked what he wants to do in life, he says "become a scientist." His inspiration is Thomas Alva Edison, "he was poor and faced great difficulties in life. But he still fought on," adds Rajen.

And for every rendition of the way lives have been changed because of the school and the education that is being imbibed, there are exemplary stories of courage like that of Bishwanath Chakma, all of 6 years old. Hailing from Kamakhyapur village, he sets off from his house at 6.30 in the morning on foot so that he reaches his school in time for the school assembly at 8.30 a.m. Once in a while, he has a parent walking him half way to school but more often than not, his parents are unable to accompany him to the school since they set out earlier than him for the fields. Bishwanath often ends up having a very early brunch before he sets out for his school. In winters, he sets out one hour earlier than his usual time, since walking through the thick enveloping mist takes more time. For parents of children like Bishwanath who live in areas far from the school, there are practical problems at hand, like the matter of food being carried as tiffin getting stale. According to Arindam Dewan, "some of the parents bring tiffins for their children during the school recess time after taking a break from their daily work." The school received some funding last year to provide mid day food items like bananas for the students which was much appreciated by the parents. School recess time often sees many parents anxiously watching whether younger children have settled in to the school pattern and Dewan says that it would be worthwhile to explore avenues for starting an adult education initiative for them. "Most of them are illiterate and maybe we can work on their presence in the school and see if they can pick up alphabets and numerals at least."





A better stretch of the main road

The backbone of the school is the teachers: young people who faced great difficulties to get an education have come back to their villages to teach. As Robin Chakma says, "Most of us had to move out from the village which was the only world we knew. Only the distances and the names of the place that we went to differed but at the end of it, what matters is how many of us were ready to come back and make a difference in the lives of our people." Robin did his graduation from far away Kurukshetra University, a world entirely different from the one he had grown up and got used to. "The more I saw the way education would open doors of opportunity, the more determined I was that my own community should not lag behind." It was this determination that brought Robin Chakma and the other 18 teachers to the school. Most of the teachers are graduates or are yet to be graduates, which in a sense mirrors the hardships faced by the community to have opportunities to study more. What one can assume as lack of educational qualification is made up by dedication and diligence. There are 12 classes going on at the same time (pre-nursery to IXth standard, with two sections each for IVth and VIth standard) and each teacher gets only one free period in a day. Sometimes, the headmaster also chips in by taking classes and when one or more teacher go for exposure trainings or other engagements, the remaining teachers often do not have any free periods in their busy schedule. Yet, each goes on daily without fatigue or complaint. Slow learners are given extra attention in subjects that they lag behind and students are not failed except in cases where there have been repeated failures to clear examinations over

two years at a stretch. "We don't have marking systems for the students till their 2nd standard, but give grades," says Arindam.

Apart from the many salient features of the SNEHA school, its greatest success perhaps lies in the fact that the school has been recognized as an educational institution that caters to all communities. There has been a gradual realization by non Chakma and non Hajong communities that the school maintains a high standard of education. Asked what makes a Marwari small trader send his son to this school, Manoj Bhushan simply says, "The school building may not be good, but I have heard from many people that what they teach and how they teach is what makes the difference." It is this recognition by people, which cuts across communities that has made parents contribute towards the upkeep of the school. This, despite being told by school authorities that transfer certificates issued by the school would not be treated as valid papers as the school is not yet registered. According to Arindam Dewan, Headmaster of SNEHA school, "Over the years, we have had the parents pool in financial resources

towards buying materials for the upkeep of the school. Those who could not contribute financially, assisted us physically in roofing, erecting walls and fences for the school."

The school is currently pursuing recognition and reorganization status by the Arunachal Pradesh State Education Board. "Once our school is recognized, we will not only be able to issue valid transfer certificates to

children whose parents have to move with them to other areas due to their occupation, but also have our students appearing for State Board examinations. Our efforts have a greater sense of urgency now since we have students in IXth standard," says Arindam, who is hoping that the official recognition comes through. SNEHA has taken up various advocacy strategies to convince Government officials, such as inviting senior Government officials like Shri C.C. Singpho, Minister for Civil Supplies and Food, Health & Family Welfare, Govt of Arunachal Pradesh to lay the foundation stone for additional structures of the school building in 2008. "Since we invited a senior Minister, many other government officials also turned up at the stone foundation ceremony and we took that opportunity to highlight the initiatives in the school," adds Arindam. Students of the school not only take part in Circle level observations like march past competitions so as to be able to enhance their visibility, but also have friendly sports competitions with other schools.

As preparation towards getting due recognition from the appropriate Government bodies, the school has already got various certificates that are needed like a Health and Hygiene Certificate from the Senior Medical Officer, Diyun Circle; a Fire and Safety Certificate from the local Police Station; a No Objection certificate from the nearest Government school, Diyun and a Letter from the Deputy Director of School Education, Changlang to expedite processes. SNEHA authorities have also put a back up plan in case the recognition of the school does not come through in time. According to Arindam Dewan, the Bodhicharya School, run by the SKS Trust in Kolkata will facilitate SNEHA students to appear as students of the school for their Xth Board Examinations. This has come about following consultations and exchange meetings facilitated between the two schools. Also, exposure visits, supported by NFI, to Loreto Day School in Kolkata, have facilitated the teachers of SNEHA School to incorporate modern teaching-learning processes.

In the classrooms, the students in the higher classes do not sit in conventional rows of benches and desks but around bigger tables. This enables the students to see each other and interact with one another. Each group is broken up into new groups every week so that every student gets to sit at different tables and with every student in the class during the course of an academic session. In the lower classes, students rotate on a daily basis so that no particular group gets to monopolize the last row seats and thereby stay aloof from interactions in the classrooms.

It is evident that the SNEHA school has fostered a sense of community apart from imparting education to its students, they in their turn have imbibed confidence in their interactions with the world around them. A IXth standard child puts it, "In our science text books, they have sections for practical classes and we hope that when the younger students reach class IX, they will have the facilities to have science practical classes going for them."

Conclusion

SNEHA hopes to strengthen the existing school at Diyun by taking in trained teachers belonging to different communities and also to start another school at Vijoypur, Changlang. These are ambitious plans, for the existing school at Diyun doesn't even have proper fencing yet. Nevertheless, apart from the slow but steady ground that the school has been able to cover in terms of infrastructure, the enterprise of the initiative and the value that it has added to the lives of the community will surely prevail. It is the students of the school that sum this up best: as Soma (IXth standard) puts it, "We don't mind the bamboo thatches and walls. We can pull through the rainy season even when it is muddy but we want that the school continues to go from strength to strength." Thus, over the years, SNEHA school has not only meant a physical or infrastructural setup for imparting education, but has become a process for building relationships, strengthening partnerships and forging ahead for social change.



Students sitting in a classroom



Clank! Clank! Clank! The beat from the weavers' looms at the Action Northeast Trust (*the ant*) campus in Chirang, Bodoland, Assam is constant and reassuring, in perfect harmony with its tranquil surroundings. Strand by strand, the harmoniously arranged rows of threads on the loom are woven lovingly by giggling and colorful Bodo women into beautiful patterns of hope. Though Assam is known to the rest of the world for its violence and political turmoil, *ANT* is determined to weave harmony, dignity and pride into this troubled land.

Background

The Action Northeast Trust (*the ant*) is a voluntary organization registered as a public charitable trust since 2000 and based in Chirang District of the Bodoland Territorial Areas Districts (BTAD) of Assam. With its vision to work towards sustainable and holistic development for rural and marginalized communities in the Northeast, *the ant* like its namesake has been unstoppable so far in its dedication towards achieving its goals. Operating in an extremely challenging region, *the ant* has given itself tirelessly towards improving the lives of the most marginalized by bringing about sustainable rural development. Armed with the core values of ahimsa, truth, honesty, humility, trust and love, it has managed to penetrate the community and is working in about 90 villages on issues of livelihood, women's empowerment, health and increasing awareness on people's rights.

One of the first activities of *the ant* in this region was the setting up of its weaving program known as Aagor, which

was started for poor women from the Bodo tribe in 2002. Capitalizing on weaving skills that are customary amongst women in this area, *the ant* began to organize them through the weaving program, providing professional design support so that their skills could be marketed and become an income generation opportunity for women. This weaving program was a huge success, resulting in the formation of a weavers' organization called Aagor Daagra Afad that managed to distribute several lakhs of rupees among the poorest weavers in 2007-08.

Udangshri Dera (UD), or Freedom Camp started by *the ant* is a centre for the rehabilitation of poor women working in other people's homes for minimum wages. These Bodo women, who are born weavers, are brought together in groups of 20 per batch and put up at the ant campus for a period of four months, during which they are given an opportunity to earn a fair wage through their weaving skills. During this time, the women can expect to earn between Rs. 8000-14,000, which they can use to start a small livelihood project or repay their debts.

The ant's livelihood sector has also developed a vocational skills development program through which it hopes to create awareness on the need to acquire vocational skills. *The Ant* team conducts vocational skills training camps like cycle repairing and papad making, and sends out youth to other institutions to learn skills like mobile repairing, motorbike repairing, cutting and tailoring, bamboo crafts and furniture making etc.



Jagruti Dals (Enlightenment groups) began as self-help groups for women, but soon mutated into sites for activism on issues of gender discrimination. In a society where women are neglected at best and tormented at worst, spreading awareness on the violation of women's rights was not an easy task. However, over the years, Jagruti Dals in different villages have gone on to intervene in and solve cases of domestic violence, child marriage, alcoholism and other issues affecting women in their society.

A unique project of the Jagruti Group is the Jagruti Cycle Bank or 'Freedom on Wheels', as termed by *the ant*. The Cycle Bank began with the initial support of one lakh rupees from the Columbus Chapter of Association for India's Development. In this project, women are given bicycles on loan, which is eventually paid back as they begin to earn more income through the added mobility of the bicycles. First, cycle camps are organized, complete with music played on loudspeakers, during which the beneficiaries of the cycle loan are taught how to ride bicycles. These cycles provide mobility to women who work as far as 10 kilometers from their homes, thus enabling these daily wage earners to work longer hours and come and go more easily. It also prevents their families from going hungry during the frequent bandhs when buses stop plying in their area.

Road to Freedom

32 year old Amiron Nessa rode a cycle for the first time in her life at the first cycle learning camp for Muslim women in November 2008. She was one of the six women inspired by the carnival-like atmosphere of the camp and within two days, Amiron was cycling confidently.

Having studied till class 2, Amiron lives with her mother after being deserted by her husband soon after her marriage. She is the first Muslim woman to take a cycle loan from the Jagruti Cycle Bank. Today, Amiron cycles 15 kilometers to and from her home at Simlabari village to Bongaigaon town to work at construction sites. She manages to earn over Rs. 3000 a month, thanks to her newly found 'Freedom on Wheels'.

A Life Transformed

Busy hands are working good-naturedly along the rows of hand looms that line the shed housing the Udangshri Dera (UD) camp at *the ant* Campus in Chirang. The sound of the looms becomes one with the friendly chatter of the women who are making magic by creating beautiful designs with traditional motifs. Equally beautiful is the friendly face of Risimi Basumathari who is staring out from across the loom with open curiosity, a question forever on her lips. This 24 year old girl did not always have the same sparkle in her eyes. Her entire life changed when she was selected for the Udangshri Dera (UD) program by the Action North East Trust (*the ant*).

Risimi is lucky: she was rescued from a vicious cycle of poverty, debt and pain through the intervention of this UD camp. Until recently she had very little to laugh and smile about as one of seven children in a family which is financially dependent on a father who drinks. Risimi always found herself struggling for survival; "We were always under pressure economically and I too had to share the burden and do my bit."

It was for this reason that Risimi dropped out of school with thoughts of supporting her family through the only skill that she possessed - weaving. However, instead of working for someone else, Risimi decided to work for her married sister who was settled in Bongaigaon. It was here that the Risimi came to hear about Aagor's UD program and was selected for it.

But Risimi's trial was far from over. Within a few weeks of her joining the UD camp, Risimi's mother was diagnosed with gall bladder stones and had to be operated. The family sold their cattle and leased their betel nut garden for several years to pay for their mother's medical expenses but they were still short of money. *the ant* came forward with the required support for the operation and Risimi is now back in the UD camp, weaving, earning and smiling to her heart's content.

For Risimi, it is not just the opportunity to earn an income but the interaction with the other girls in the program has changed her life. "Earlier I only interacted with my family and close relatives but now I have come in contact with so many people. This has really changed my character and perspective" she says. She talks about learning to help others and declares that she has never seen so much love anywhere else and that's why she "really likes it here". After she leaves Aagor, Risimi knows that she will have to find work to help repay her family's debt but she is now more confident and knows that with her new attitude and improved skills, the future can't be too bad.





Faculty at IDeA

The IDeA faculty is made up of a small yet dedicated team of professionals who remain constantly busy between field work and running their courses at IDeA.

Jennifer Liang

One of the IDeA faculty members is Jennifer Liang, Managing Trustee and Director of *the ant*. Jennifer is a post graduate in Social Work from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and specialized in social research methods. She has worked directly on health and women's issues in Assam and has been elected to the Governing Board of Bosco Reach Out, arguably the largest NGO in the North East in terms of geographical spread. As a founder trustee, Jennifer trains the IDeA faculty and also leads the flagship course in IDeA.

Sunil Kaul

Founding trustee Sunil Kaul is another faculty leading the health related courses at IDeA. Sunil worked as a medical doctor in the army for some years, and then left his job to work for primary health care in rural Rajasthan and Assam. An Eisenhower Fellow, he is interested in community health especially with respect to malaria and T.B, and also works as a faculty member at IDeA. Sunil has also trained barefoot doctors and village pharmacists in Meghalaya and Manipur. Sunil is in the National steering committee of Right to Food Campaign and also in the Coalition of Maternal-Neonatal Health and Safe Abortion. He is also a Trustee of LOCOST, a generic drug manufacturing Trust, whose depot in Guwahati is administratively under *the ant*.

Raju Narzary

Raju Narzary is an MSW from TISS who left his job at the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) to work at IDeA as a faculty member. As part of his field training, Raju works part time with an NGO called NERSWN which he founded a few years ago in the neighbouring district of Kokrajhar. He leads most of the training modules on Rights Based Approach due to his activist background from his days with the Students Union. Raju also does advocacy work with the All Bodo Students Union for their Quality Education Campaign, Entrepreneurship Development and Peace Building Initiatives. Raju and his NGO have also been in the forefront of challenging the widespread abuse of the NREGA money and he is also one of the key promoters of the People's Rights Forum.

Manish Kumar

Manish Kumar is another member of the IDeA faculty who came to *the ant* as a Fellow of NCAS, Pune and then left to enroll at Guwahati University for a Masters Degree in Political Science. He joined IDeA's core faculty after his degree and immersed himself into the Right to food Campaign. Manish helps with the Rights programmes and also spends time in Deosri, the most difficult area of *the ant*, where he supports the staff working with internally displaced victims of ethnic riots.



Institute for Development Action (IDeA)

Armed with the knowledge it has acquired of people living in the conflict-riddled North East Region, *the ant* realized that NGOs seeking to work in the region should be sensitized to ground realities. Such NGOs and voluntary organizations require a good amount of specialized support that can help them solve the problems they face, along with advice about anticipated problems. A new, different and 'specifically designed for North East' approach needed to be woven together to help struggling NGOs deal with this socio-economically and politically unique region. This thought sowed the seed for the Institute of Development Action (IDeA), which would reach out to NGOs and voluntary organizations (VOs) working in the region by offering support through training programs, information dissemination and knowledge resource sharing. Intensive consultation with other NGOs across the Northeast provided enthusiastic endorsement for the idea Sir Dorabjee Tata Trust, through the National Foundation for India came forward to fund the IDeA. Thus, IDeA was launched in 2007.

Set against a picturesque rural backdrop, amidst the constant bustle of weavers and other branches of *the ant's* field teams, the IDeA Campus provides an unforgettable atmosphere of Gandhian simplicity and industry. The IDeA faculty, comprising of young people armed mostly with Social Work Degrees, are expected to "Read the Field" by spending at least 10 days in the field each

month. This helps them remain aware of the practical aspects of the community problems and keeps them abreast of the changing development scenario. The practical experience gathered from their field visits helps the faculty to bring greater animation into the courses they teach.

IDeA offers short courses on specific topics at the lowest possible cost. The rates of training are about Rs. 500 per day including food, stay and some course material. Till date, the institute has conducted over 84 training programs on various topics like "Basic Program in Development Studies", which is its flagship course and other courses like "Using the Rights Based Approach", "Proposal Development", "Health Politics and Health Rights" etc. Huge efforts go into designing these courses which are tailor-made to meet the needs of NGOs in the North East Region of India. Besides conducting in-house trainings, the IDeA team goes out to conduct outreach trainings with NGOs in other parts of Assam as well as other states in the Northeast.

In the span of two years, IDeA has managed to establish itself. Hard work, dedication and innovation is the hall mark of IDeA and the *ant's* work culture. However, there still remain issues and problems that need to be overcome. As a fairly new institute, IDeA needs to build its network further among the NGOs, especially those from the more far flung states. Another problem that IDeA struggles with is that most NGOs in the Northeast are unable to afford even the minimal course fee and the



excessive travel cost that arises due to the unique topography of the region. Yet, the NGOs who have attended the IDeA trainings have lauded it with feedbacks like - "It was exactly what we needed". Another participant commented that in addition to the training, the environment of the IDeA campus where these trainings are hosted has left a deep impact on their minds.

The Institute for Development Action has great plans to improve and increase its services through facilities in the coming years, like the building of a team to lend advice over phone or e-mail, a well-stocked library with books, periodicals and CDs to read and review, professionals to design projects for NGOs and carry out research etc. But even now, young as it is, IDeA, like its parent organization *the ant* has begun to make its mark in the lives of the much talked about, yet little changed, grassroots people of the North East Region of the Indian Union.

Sir Dorabji Tata Trust piloted its Northeast initiative by entering into a strategic partnership with National Foundation for India from 2006 to 2009. With SDTT's support, NFI made grants with the following purpose,

- To **SST**, a grant of Rs 27,73,400 for running alternative schools and developing curriculum for children who are systematically excluded from attending formal schools in villages of Meghalaya
- To **SNEHA**, a grant of Rs 32,92,240 for running a primary school largely for the Chakma children in Arunachal Pradesh
- To **the ant**, a grant of Rs 65,31,380 for setting up a development school in Assam that could cater to the training needs of voluntary workers of Northeast region.

NFI is a national fund raising and grant making organization working to help disadvantaged communities improve their lives. It was established in 1992 at the initiative of Late Shri C Subramaniam, Late Dr Kamla Chowdhury and Dr M.S. Swaminathan.

National Foundation for India believes in accelerating the social and economic development of India by supporting private voluntary initiatives which awaken and release the energies of the Indian people.

BE A PART OF NFI'S WORK TOWARDS HELPING PEOPLE IMPROVE THEIR OWN LIVES

You can make a difference by strengthening our ability to work with disempowered and disadvantaged communities across the country. Support our work and become a partner in work towards reducing poverty and creating a just and equitable society. Contributions made will be used to strengthen our programs and help us work more effectively with disadvantaged communities across the country.

It is you, who can make the difference. Your generous financial support will help build a humane society. Please make your cheque /demand drafts in favour of National foundation for India, payable in New Delhi.

All donations to NFI are eligible for tax relief under Section 80G of the income Tax Act.

We are happy to provide any information or assistance that will help you plan your contribution.

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