

In Assam, This Programme Is Attempting to Mitigate ‘Conflict’ Through Sports

thewire.in/sport/assam-colouring-the-rainbow-the-ant



This is the third story in a three-part series. Read [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

In areas marred by persistent conflict, forming social skills among children and the youth is an integral part of the peace-building programme undertaken by different social organisations. It also helps in the holistic personality development of the child in crucial learning ages. Lack of proper education and training restricts communities living in remote areas from opportunities they can pursue self-advancement and upward socio-economic mobility.

Assam, a state of diverse cultures, rich traditions and exotic tapestry, is home to many tribal communities like Bodo, Kachari, Karbi, Garos, Tiwas, Rabha, etc. However, with prevalent disruptions to political order, increased conflict, and militarisation of the area over the past decades, there have been periods of historical isolation observed in the region that adversely impacted the learning and personality development of children from different communities.



Children listen to Trainer Abdul before the ultimate frisbee game at Manikpur village, Chirang district, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

Our Centre for New Economics Studies' Visual Storyboards team, during the time spent at the campus residence of the ant, an organisation based in the Chirang district of Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD), studied the nature of interventions brought in the community through one of its projects: Colouring the Rainbow (CTR) or the Ultimate Frisbee initiative aimed at the holistic development of the child-youth living across villages.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/r-tyi9LPjuo>



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/qhnKh7p7I2U>

The Colouring the Rainbow (CTR) project, one of the ant's many other development projects, is a cheerful and enthusiastic game-based programme for kids and youth development.

It is a continuation of the Sports for Development (S4D) project, which was launched in 2015. The goal of the project is to help young people gain confidence and practical life skills. When children play in an open setting without formal supervision and without fear of being judged, they learn deeply, which cannot be achieved by merely sitting in a closed classroom.

Sports have proven to be a useful tool in supporting conflict resolution and peacebuilding and have a positive impact on community welfare. It is also a powerful tool for uniting people, crossing boundaries, and developing tolerance, respect, and social inclusion.

Based on the same premise, the project attempts to get people to play together to promote social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. The idea of the CTR project is to provide repeated life experiences where they play and live shoulder-to-shoulder with children and youths from other communities and persons with disabilities.



Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/FSh5-Oq_ow4

The Ultimate Frisbee initiative as part of the CTR project has now become an internationally recognised programme and in the context of the ant, used for building peace among the children of conflict zones. Coupled with the rapid social change which often precedes or accompanies armed interventions, conflict leads to a breakdown in the family support systems, which is very essential to a child's survival and development.

The members of the organisation have tried different measures to formulate activities that would provide holistic development. In one of many such attempts, the ultimate frisbee programme idea was brought forth by an ant intern playing with the children in the Deosari region. As it quickly caught the eye of the organisers, the game was adopted as something that resonated deeply with the ant's aim.



Players shake hands post Frisbee game at Deosiri village, Chirang district. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

Using sports as a medium, especially a sport which is regarded as gender-neutral has given these children a unique platform to express their identities while being respectful of others by playing a group game on a field without a referee.

When children get together to play with other children from their age group, they learn about each other's backgrounds and associate with them as fellow players against the socially constructed ideas of religion, caste, gender etc. They learn to communicate their needs and ideas, develop their leadership skills by taking charge of a conflict-led situation and form bonds across social boundaries. With over 4,300 youth and children involved in the programme, the initiative lets them make amends and correct their mistakes on their own, without any judgement.

The organisers rapidly realised the need for inclusion when the programme was implemented in several districts and centres over time. As there lacked a suitable initiative that incorporated the lived experiences of disabled children, the simple sport of ultimate frisbee was then converted into the 'Colouring the Rainbow' (CTR) project. This not only served as sensitisation for the children involved but also for the teachers that are a part of the programme. Regular sensitisation sessions, awareness and training sessions on the rights of persons with disability and celebrations of occasions like world disability day have impacted the perception of children enrolled in the programme and the families of the disabled persons.



CTR players along with Project coordinators Rwmwi Basumatary and Noni Bhagat at Deosiri village, Chiang district. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

Employing ‘sports’ as a method of ‘education’ and ‘conflict resolution’

The ultimate frisbee initiative, as an internationally recognised instrument incorporates components from various games like rugby, basketball etc. But what resonated with the developers of CTR was the no-touch, no-foul, and no-aggression rule of the game.

As a game of frisbee requires no referee to control the operations of the game, each child is a referee of their own, as well as their opponents which enable the values of self-check and self-control from within. The game has also posed a special focus on the gendered ratio of the teams. While each team has about twenty members, only seven are supposed to play at a given point of time. However, each time it is ensured that the composition of the team on the ground remains proportional between the girl and boy players.

Moreover, the most essential condition of this game is to follow the celebrated principle of the ‘spirit of the game’. Not just an ethical practice, the participants are awarded points on their gameplay determined by parameters based on the spirit of the game. This way, each participant learns to approach the game with the right attitude and self-control.

The ant staff reported that initially, the players used to get into fights about scores and about personal space that each player has on the field. There would be reflections of aggression, lack of sympathy and unwillingness to play with children from other communities and genders.

However, the programme coordinators have continued to push a value-based approach even in the face of extreme cultural differences. The programme eventually included parent sessions to inform them of the protocols, techniques, and safety precautions used when conducting Sports for Development programmes. The traditional attitude of restricting a woman's role at home changed as parents observed their children, particularly girl children, acquire leadership qualities, become team captains, and develop aspirations to be self-reliant and educated.

Challenges and outcomes

The Colouring the Rainbow programme includes three components; the Sports for Development Programme, Manoranjan Sessions and Rainbow Sessions. Through weekly sessions for the Sports for Development programme, students have learned to negotiate with the other gender, understand infections and illnesses and the importance of washing hands, the necessity of school attendance regularity and awareness of the availability of government-provided schemes under the Right To Education Act.

A major initial challenge to the programme was resistance from the community regarding the participation of girl children in sports. According to a recent UNICEF report, major educational and social disparities exist between boys and girls in BTR; with lower school enrolment and fewer girls passing exams. Project coordinator Noni Bhagat noted that due to restrictive gender norms within the community, girls were often relegated to the household, with many in the community holding the view that 'girls belong at home.'

Parents were apprehensive about sending their daughters to Ultimate Frisbee sessions, with common concerns including the necessity of girls playing sports, and interacting with boys from different communities. A major success of the programme, however, has been the large-scale participation of girls in the programme.



Noni Bhagat, CTR project coordinator discusses with players before the frisbee game at Deosiri village, Chirang district. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

Parents' apprehension regarding the programme was overcome gradually through numerous Community and Parent sessions, wherein field facilitators explained the benefits of the game, as well as the absence of body contact during the game through live demonstrations. Through play, the fear of interacting with the other gender has been reduced significantly.

Project coordinators noted that earlier, girls and boys used to stand separately in groups during circle time and were reluctant to hold hands of the opposite gender during the game. Now, they interact freely with each other and help each other during sessions. Additionally, more girls are acquiring leadership skills and becoming team captains. By changing the mindset of the community; the programme aims to systematically tackle gender-based educational and social inequities.



A parent grabs the Frisbee disc during the parents' session at Basugaon village, Chirang district, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

Furthermore, social cohesion has improved through the Rainbow sessions, which ensures that a team comprises players from three religions, three mother tongues and three castes. The religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity of these teams provides a platform for students to interact with members of different communities. Even for all formal tournaments in the ant, only those teams are allowed to compete who have players of not just both genders but also if there are players of 3 mother tongues and 3 religions! the ant project coordinator Noni Bhagat noted that the programme provides a unique means of resolving conflict since it's about "understanding your own mistakes, and improving together." In this context, the game has made valuable contributions to reconciliation and intercultural learning within the region.



Activity during the parents' session at Basugaon village, Chirang district, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

Regular sensitisation meetings, campaigns, and sessions have helped in spreading awareness of child marriage and substance abuse. There has been a documented increase in the reporting of child marriage and child abuse cases.

Despite these significant improvements, however, deep-rooted educational inequalities continue to remain in the region (as we have discussed in the earlier parts of this article series). Mitigating these challenges was complicated further with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region, wherein children and youth were particularly hard hit, as educational institutions were closed, families lost their livelihoods, and mental and physical health suffered.

The functioning of CTR was severely affected. Due to COVID-19 regulations, the ant facilitators were restricted from entering certain villages and planned activities and campaigns had to be delayed. But, amongst all other projects, CTR was the only programme – due to its emphasis on sports in open field areas – which could restart immediately after the upliftment of lockdown restrictions. As post COVID normalcy ensues, more children and youth from different communities across villages are engaged with the programme now to be part of its integrated learning and personality development goals.

This study is part of a Visual Storyboard project undertaken by Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, OP Jindal Global University in collaboration with the ant. All photographs and video essays are documented by Jignesh Mistry. Video essays can be accessed here.

The authors would like to especially thank the entire ant staff, its founders, the campus team, and the field outreach team for making this project possible. Field studies would not have been possible without the mentorship, guidance and support offered by Sunil Kaul, Jennifer Liang, Rhondeni Kikon, and the project leads of LEAP, CTR and Aagor Weaves at the ant. Special mention to Samrat Sinha, professor at Jindal Global Law School, OP Jindal Global University for introducing the CNES team to the ant and guiding the researchers along. To support the ant's work, please visit their website [here](#).

We also thank The Wire's editorial team: Jahnavi Sen, M.K. Venu, Seema Chishti and Soumashree Sarkar for their undistilled faith in the Visual Storyboard team of CNES and their support in taking the students' work forward.