

NERSWN

(2004 – 2014)

Looking back on a decade long journey of work



And with that, we finish a decade! That's right friends, it has been ten years since we began this wonderful venture of ours on 23rd December 2004, boldly stepping into the unknown, armed with very little but our idealism and the good wishes of those who stood by us. It is indeed hard to believe that the dream with which a few starry-eyed group of youth called BRANSTHU began this effort to

bring change in society, has lasted ten whole years and borne some fruits.

But before we go on to celebrate our achievements, it is important to mention that the final innings of this challenging last decade has been especially trying. So much so, that we found ourselves too overwhelmed to put out our annual newsletter, even though there was plenty to say.

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

And with that, we finish a decade! That's right friends, it has been ten years since we began this wonderful venture of ours on 23rd of December 2014, boldly stepping into the unknown, armed with very little but our idealism and the good wishes of those who stood by us. It is indeed hard to believe that the dream with which a few starry-eyed youth began this effort to bring change in society, has lasted ten whole years and borne fruit.

But before we go on to celebrate our achievements, it is important to mention that the final innings of this challenging last decade has been especially trying. So much so, that we found ourselves too overwhelmed to put out our annual newsletter, even though there was plenty to say. Some of us, within NERSWN, may even have gone into a bit of a slump, and experienced a crisis of faith, what with the sort of madness that has played out in our neighbourhoods.

The ethnic clashes of 2012 marked a sort of turning point for us. It may have effectively marked the end of our age of innocence. Until then, we had spent seven years working in and for a society that we felt we knew well, whose scars were in the knowable past, which we perhaps naively felt we could heal with committed work in the foreseeable future. But the disturbances over the past two years changed all that. We realised we had to come to grips with problems that were mostly beyond our grasp.

We had to learn on the job, what grand sounding terms like conflict-resolution and peace-building effectively meant on the ground. Every day posed a new challenge. Supporter and partners came forward to nudge us into uncharted territory and we bravely forged ahead, albeit with a huge amount of self-doubt. And in those times it was each other, and you, who have supported us all along, who we turned to for comfort.

So this year's decadal anniversary newsletter is dedicated to all those who stood by us through these trying times. It was a trial by fire, but we think we made it.

CHAIRPERSON-CUM-DIRECTOR'S NOTE.....

10 Years!!!! Yes friends, it is indeed true that we have crossed the milestone of a decade in trying to reach out to most vulnerable section of society with social endeavours. At this juncture, I am personally a bit nostalgic by recalling the youthful days that we have spent madly, trying to contribute in making our surrounding more peaceful, just and dignified.

On the day of 23rd of December 2004, none of us in BRANSTHU; had the idea where we were headed in life by setting out the journey with NERSWN, but today with the little confidence that we have gained over 10 years of existence, we can humbly say, all wanderers are not made.

Last ten years; surely would not have been possible at all, without the support of our esteemed generous partners such as National Foundation for India, New Delhi, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, Mumbai, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, UK, DKA Austria, UNICEF, Guwahati, Navajbai Ratan Tata Trust, Mumbai, Association for India's Development, Terre Des Hommes, Germany, Oxfam India, Caring Friends, Mumbai, Meljol, Mumbai, Action-Aid Guwahati, the ant, MIVA Austria, Aus-Aid, NABARD, NRHM and many individuals well wishers. We are really indebted to all of you and thank you so much for believing in us.

All my committed esteemed colleagues at NERSWN, congratulation and thank you so much, it is all of you; who, made it possible to journey 10 long years. Let us all be prepared to face the challenges ahead.

Birphung Narzary
Chairperson-Cum-Director
NERSWN, Kokrajhar.

GENESIS OF NERSWN

NERSWN, as we know it today, traces its roots to another group called BRANSTHU, which was formed when a group of educated youngsters, with zero expertise in everything, came together in 1999. The gathering aimed at learning from each other and growing together while simultaneously contributing to the development of literature, language, culture, economy, etc. The members of BRANSTHU, since its birth, have met once in a month, and the tradition continues till today. The group used to publish a collection of short stories authored by its members annually called, “Sundo Soloni Bidang”.

With time, the members had to choose different paths in pursuit of higher education. They went into fields as diverse as social work, management and health studies in various parts of India. In the course of their studies, they became acquainted with the world of NGOs, and slowly, the idea took root among the member of BRANSTHU of starting something of one's own. That idea eventually germinated into the North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN), an organisation works for the betterment of marginalised and deprived sections of society. With its head office in Kokrajhar, NERSWN has been working tirelessly towards creating an peaceful, just and dignified society.



YEARLY LANDMARKS

2005 - 06

Bringing Malaria control to the doorstep

Kokrajhar and Chirang were known to have high incidence of Malaria in Assam. The forest cover of these two districts made them especially vulnerable and the lack of modern healthcare facilities made the situation worse. NERSWN decided to fill that gap by bringing anti-malarial services to the doorsteps of the masses, with financial support from the BTC government. The project was a huge success covering 325 villages, detecting over 3000 cases, and absorbing 41 unemployed youth.



Guiding youth toward the right path

Though it may seem that career options are endless these days, new opportunities are mostly confined to cities. Populations like the ones in Bodoland, who reside largely in rural areas often get left behind due to lack of awareness. In conflict ridden areas such as this youth go astray and the society's troubles increase. NERSWN held career counselling workshops and even started a telephonic helpline to guide the youth.

Silken weave

Women of the Bodo tribe are known for their aesthetic sensibility and their skill with weaving. Sensing an opportunity to preserve the community's crafts traditions and simultaneously develop another livelihood option, NERSWN implemented a cluster development project on Indi and Muga sericulture. Women were trained in rearing cocoons, reeling yarn, and weaving beautiful designs and also organised into self help groups (SHGs) and encouraged to cultivate a habit of saving.



Testing the waters

Long years of unrest have taken a toll not just on the people and culture of the BTC area, but also on its commerce and industry. The North East Industrial & Technical Consultancy Organisation asked NERSWN to do a study on the feasibility of investment in different sectors. We sent out investigators with questionnaires who collected data within two months which was then turned into a thorough report mapping out the prospects and deficiencies of the studied area.



Power to the ladies

Since its inception NERSWN has been sensitive to women's issues and has taken small but decisive and progressive steps. Empowering & Enhancing Women Vendors Occupation has been one of our most successful and joyous programmes to date. Started with modest financial support from the BTC government, followed by a three years grant from Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, Mumbai, the project thereby facilitates small internal credits at lowest possible interest to cash strapped vendors. The programme has helped women, such as those who sell country liquor under hazardous conditions and face threat of violence, to seek alternative livelihoods.



Health matters

NERSWN continues to build over the foundation that was laid in its first year with the Malaria control programme. Its trained youth volunteers ensured zero malarial mortality in their coverage area and enjoyed widespread support from villagers and beneficiaries. We also helped set up well equipped Community Laboratory cum Pharmacy centres (CLPs) in inaccessible areas, stocked with cost generic medicines which not only provided healthcare to the masses but also served as a link to higher functionaries of the health department.

2008 – 09

Hand in hand with NRHM

NERSWN got involved with the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) to launch a seven-week awareness campaign to herald important immunization weeks, health melas, World TB Day, etc. We organised interactions with health personnel so that community members could freely seek information about TB, Malaria, STI, RTI, etc. in which women were especially active participants. Our staff took on the people's demand for health on a war footing to drive home the message that the system had a responsibility to its people.



Training personnel

While our staff has extensive knowledge of their field by default, there might be shortcomings in theoretical knowhow. This is where training and upgrading skills from time to time is crucial, and NERSWN staff is trained in RBA, development action, community health, gender and livelihood. Some of us are also trained in NGO management, accounting, resource mobilization and conflict resolution. Needless to say, these have been precious lessons that have come to our aid on the field.



Keeper's of community's health

In tandem with empowering communities to claim health as their right, NERSWN has worked actively with Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), the most effective innovation in the NRHM. While we emphasise their role as community appointed health activists, we have made earnest efforts to train them as the last rank cadre of the health system. With these views we have trained over 100 ASHAs on primary health care, health rights, community mobilization and leadership.



Wheeling into empowerment



NERSWN started a Women's Cycle Bank to reduce women vendors' dependence on men and to give them the freedom of mobility. The bank provides vendors a loan to purchase a bicycle, which they get to repay in monthly instalments. The true inspiration for this project has been the joy it brought to the first few women vendors who tried it, which is surprising in this age when bicycles have become the least preferred mode of transport.

2010 – 11

Skills for life

NERSWN has been seriously engaged with activities that would help out their target groups meet their livelihood needs. Agriculture held the key for most communities and some of our volunteers proved especially skilled at cultivation. Farmers were trained in systems of rice intensification (SRI) with new techniques being introduced and certified seeds, weeders other support being provided by the agricultural department. Adivasi groups displaced by conflict were linked with banks for credit, taught to form SHGs to develop piggery and grow cash crops.



Transforming lives with microcredit

Two women's business associations (GAFA and KAFA) were formed in Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon in the previous year, and they looked to NERSWN for support, which we offered without hesitation. While it began as an advocacy body for the betterment of women vendors GAFA now manages the credit system among members with the guidance of our staff. The loans have benefitted the women in bettering their businesses and mitigating the financial constraints of their families.



2011 – 12

Bringing back smiles

The AFLATOUN Child Social & Financial Education programme (CSFE) developed on the principles of the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child, is being run by NERSWN with considerable success since 2010. The programme brought the joy back to learning as children began to learn by doing. It also inculcates the crucial habit of saving amongst children while teaching them the values and pleasures of togetherness. In three years NERSWN has been able to produce 42 trainers and 192 teachers reaching out to 8795 children.



Mending minds

Monthly mental health camps organised by NERSWN along with regular home visits to follow up on the recovery of people with mental illnesses have been a blessing in terms of creating awareness and ensuring care to those in need. Family members and other caregivers are sensitised to the needs of those dependent on them through interactions and this has also helped deepen our understanding of family conditions and problems. Nearly a thousand people with mental illnesses have attended the camps, out of which over 300 are new cases.

2012 – 13

The loss of innocence

There had been conflict and disturbances before in western Assam, and we had learnt to deal with them as a people. But as social workers, we were unprepared, and out of our element during the clashes of late 2012 when tensions between Bodos and Bengali Muslims reached a peak and stray incidents sparked the largest displacement of people, within our nation's borders, in recent history.

The situation made us think on our feet, and learn on the job. Work in mental health, women and children's welfare and livelihoods, which we had been perfecting year by year, not took on an urgency and significance and we learnt to innovate new strategies to help victims cope with what was happening around them.



would be stay with us for a while.

Relief work was something we were new to. But we were overwhelmed by the sort of support we received from civil society organisations and funding bodies, namely National Foundation for India, New Delhi, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, UK, DKA-Austria, Terre Des Homes-Germany, Action Aid India, Association for India's Development (AID) and many others who were generous not only with their funds, but also with their insights, ideas and guidance. But it was clear to us that the present troubles wouldn't go away easily, and that the implications of what had happened

2013 – 14

Picking up the pieces

We had gone through a trial by fire and emerged nearly scathed, but wisened. We realised that we had to forge on, and that communities that we had come to support over the years, needed us now more than ever. Communities that used to live in a precarious peace had now plunged into the abyss of mutual suspicion and blame. But there was hope, as always in children. And we understood this was the group we needed to work with if we wanted to mend society in the long term and have hope for the future.

We focussed on programmes to resume children's education which had been disrupted by conflict and displacement, worked toward building community based safeguards against trafficking, and to engender leadership skills within them. We take special pride in our school in Jawarbhil, which couldn't have been the success it is without the support of the villagers, enthusiastic teachers and most importantly, the children who are eager to learn and play.



Rebuilding

Peace building, conflict resolution, reconciliation – all wonderful sounding words, but very hard and often troubling processes on the ground. When neighbours turn on one another and traumatic memories still haunt, it becomes very difficult for estranged communities to come together again. At best, it takes time. And with the passing of a couple of years, people did start to peep over their walls to see if their old friends were ready to extend a hand. NERSWN decided to facilitate that process in every way it could.

One of the most effective methods we found was to propose a clean-up of the village by its residents, regardless of which community they hail from.



And the response has been heart rending. Men and women from both sides – Bodo and Bengali Muslim – who were at loggerheads a couple of years ago, now come together with machetes, scythes, and baskets to cut away weeds and overgrowth from village paths, embankments and fences. We hope that this cleaning up of exteriors will shine a light on our interiors and people see their shared humanity once again.



MY EXPERIENCE WITH NERSWN

I have seen NERSWN grow as an organization from a tiny sapling to a healthy tree with robust branches, spreading its activities towards numerous sectors. I have been closely associated with NERSWN from the very beginning, from the time of its inception and seen Birphung and Raju Narzary bravely take challenges in their stride amidst many difficulties to make NERSWN one of the most reputed organizations in lower Assam.

NERSWN has consistently coordinated with concerned departments, individuals and organizations to bring administration up to speed in a society ridden with extreme poverty, negligence and backwardness. Its contribution has been note-worthy in areas such as women's issues, child rights, health, education, livelihood programmes, skill-development of youth and peace-building among communities with which the organization works closely.

As a current member of the governing body of NERSWN I have been able to observe closely the crucial role of civil society in spearheading all round development. The noble venture of working for the welfare of marginalized women vendors has especially captured my heart and has led me to deepen my association well beyond that of mere a member of the governing body of NERSWN. Their hard work has resulted in the formation of a more organized women's business namely in the form of Kokrajhar Aijw Falangi Afat & Gossaigaon Aijw Falangi Afat at Kokrajhar and Gossiagaon respectively.

Today, I am immensely happy that NERSWN, under the guidance of Birphung, and able leadership of Raju has traversed paths with trials and tribulations and overcome stiff challenges by considering them as opportunities more than hindrances. Yet, I would add that, though NERSWN has crossed many milestones in instituting many revolutionary programmes and bringing them into action, it still has miles to go to bring about much needed, radical changes in a down-trodden tribal society like ours.

Pratibha Brahma, Member-Governing Board, NERSWN.

Field Notes

Working at the grassroots is a hard job and one that comes with a unique set of challenges. Recent unfortunate events, such as the kidnapping of social workers by extremist groups, have made it clear that we will have to tread very carefully even as we go out intending to help communities. In the course of our jobs we have learnt to deal with many of the challenges that come our way, but certain problems are recurrent and worth mentioning here.

The primary challenge we face is the lack of unity among community members. During our interactions in villages we found the actions of individuals, though aimed at developing their villages, dispersed and lacking coordination. Everyone had their own opinions and frequently suffered from petty jealousies, blaming one another of cornering village development schemes.



A logical progression of this tendency is party politics creeping into daily affairs in a village. Each one swears allegiance to a separate party and in the ensuing climate of mutual suspicion everyone contradicts one another and no decisions are arrived at on crucial matters concerning community development.



The migration of educated and aware people out of the village has also skewed the balance away from sensible decision making and fighting for one's rights peacefully through petitions, instead of the gun. Roads, schools and hospitals, as we have seen in many parts of this country, have to be demanded for by those who are educated and aware.

Apathy, negligence and downright corrupt practices on the part of service providers such as teachers, ICDSs, ASHAs, ANMs, VCDCs, etc. is a major factor leading to irregularities and worthlessness of the village LP Schools, medical sub centres and developmental schemes.

In such a situation remote parts of our northern districts have become hunting grounds for a slew of extremist groups, preying on unemployed and disenchanted youth. Social workers such as myself have never before faces a situation where those who set out to do good and work for society are targeted by malevolent elements. But today, we have descended to such a state of affairs.



But we are not without hope. There is a lot that we have learnt from this job. I personally have gained in confidence and knowledge from my travels and constant interaction with officials and ordinary people. It has made me more sensitive to localised thinking and the importance of context specific interventions. But most of all it has taught me the value of true democracy and the need for working with one another, no matter what the hurdles. In a society that sees so much of violence, seeing people cooperate with one another, if encouraged, has convinced me that the way of the gun is no way for a sane and peaceful society.

Feroz Brahma, NERSWN Worker.

As we step into the New Year and a new decade of our work, we announce with pride and happiness, the founding of our new campus. We hope to have room for all of you to come join us in our work, stay and get inspired to start new experiments to better our society.



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