



# Critical Stories of Change

## Transformations In Tuensang Chang Nagas And The Cycle Of Learning

**By Pamela Philipose**

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## Glossary

AA	ActionAid India	NEFA	North East Frontier Agency
BPL	Below Poverty Line	NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
CBO	Community Based Organisation	NSCN-IM	Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak and Muivah)
CSP	Country Strategy Paper	PDS	Public Distribution System
DM	District Magistrate	PIL	Public Interest Litigation
DT	Dolen Thangjam (platform of village based institutions)	PLWHA	People Living with HIV/AIDS
ECS	Eleutheros Christian Society	PTA	Parents Teachers Association
FRA	Forest Rights Act	RTE	Right To Education
GP	Gram Panchayat	RTI	Right To Information
GUM	Gram Unnayan Manch	SHG	Self Help Groups
HIV/AIDS	Human Immuno deficiency Virus/ Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome	SC/ST	Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes
ICAR	Indian Council of Agricultural Research	SSA	Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (Govt. led National Campaign on Education)
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme	VCB	Village Community Board
MDM	Mid Day Meal	VCD	Village Development Board
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act	VEC	Village Education Committee
MPLADS	Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme	WST	Wesido Soudak Thangjam (Informal Education Board)

*Cover image: These children seen inside a sochum of a Tuensang village had just performed a play based on an old Naga folk tale. Their warden, Nukshilemla, said she wanted her wards to be familiar with their traditions.*

*Photographs: Pamela Philipose / Avinash Kumar -ActionAid*

## Foreword

Dear reader,

What you would find in the pages that follow, is a rare attempt to stop for a moment, take a breath and understand in some depth are “efforts” of social change that we are all engaged in, and see how it has affected the communities lives, as they are lived.

There are hundreds of partner social organisations we are collaborating with at present, and many more who have done us the honour of making us part of real, substantial and sustained change in favour of the marginalized and the excluded. At ActionAid India, we derive our inspiration and strength from the ability of the impoverished and excluded people to lead the change, working in partnership with formations of community based organisations and other social movements in their struggles for justice, equality and a life of dignity.

There is, as you may imagine a plethora of amazing stories of perseverance, courage and ingenuity of individuals, groups, villages and urban poor communities, challenging the complex structures of exclusions, poverty and patriarchy. We try our best to get many of them reported in our various publications and platforms, yet the big picture of the journey through time, often escapes us all. While data, log frames and reports contain within them ideas of ups and downs of change, very often the collective narratives of the roads less travelled are not put in one place, nor are failures, despair, fear and backlashes put on record in a “success story” driven world.

The ‘Critical Stories of Change’ is an attempt to address this and put forth a learning record of peoples’ journeys of change. They are ‘critical’ because they try to locate the critical factors which made change possible and ‘critical’ because they do not try to gloss over the difficult and painful parts. In an attempt to document the struggles and experiences of such undaunted and unfazed communities; their leaders –

women and men, who worked against all odds to challenge the unjust and inequitable structures, it seeks as much to document the failures, strife and discordant notes, along the way. 'Critical Stories' also recognise changing political factors and actors outside of us who directly or indirectly contribute to the transformative potential of such change processes

We hope that these documented experiences will provide a real picture and give worthy insights for all of us. We also hope that the stories will inspire all readers to strengthen their commitment to a just and equitable society.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Women Feature Services for agreeing to support us in this learning initiative. We owe a special thanks to Ms Pamela Philipose for so wonderfully recounting this story, **Transformations In Tuensang Chang Nagas And The Cycle Of Learning.**

Happy Reading!

Sandeep Chachra,  
*Executive Director, ActionAid India*

# Background

## Critical stories of change

Critical stories of change is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid International plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. But in their openness, self-criticism, detailed analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are far removed from self-congratulatory 'good practice case studies'. Critical stories of change are full of life, and are intended to impart the insights, advice and confidences of a friend.

ActionAid International often makes claims for its work and achievements. Yet, in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is often one of many players. What ActionAid rarely gets to know is the significant nature of its contribution and the factors (both internal and external) that contributed to the outcomes.

The stories are the product of a facilitated learning process and aim to explore how change (both negative and positive) happens from the perspectives of different stakeholders. These are stories that explicitly link ActionAid and its partners' grassroots work to a rights agenda and hopefully capture the full complexity of ActionAid's development interventions. The documented lessons and experiences will hopefully provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

## Acknowledgements

The road from Jorhat was circuitous and often was little more than a stony track cleaving to the hillside. Both Avinash Singh, Programme Officer at ActionAid's head office in Delhi, and Joshi Tuisum, Programme Officer at the Regional Office in Guwahati, being better travellers than myself, could therefore keep a track of route details, which was reassuring. Besides Avinash had his camera, and that meant good pictures even if I goofed! Tuisum, who is originally from Tripura, had a special connection with Tuensang, our destination: his wife comes from here and that made him a sort of son-in-law of the district! Five hours after



a seemingly endless journey, we reached Tuensang town at the height of its afternoon torpor and presented ourselves at the Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS) office to meet its lively team – Thungtimongko Chang, Tochi, Bendangsonla Chang, Toshila Chang, Haku Chang and Akum Chang. It was only later that we could meet Chingmak Kejong, the man behind ECS and a legend in his own right. On the last day of our stay at Tuensang, we also caught up with two other ECS members, Chongshen Chang and Chollen Chang. The conversations we had with Kejong and his colleagues were rich in detail and insights on an important and unique partnership between ECS and ActionAid (AA). Later, I caught up with Mrinal Gohain, AA regional manager at Guwahati, who as a close observer of the ECS-AA intervention, understood well its proximate impacts. A special word of thanks, also, for all the residents and elders of Chingmei and Konya villages, the Sochum (traditional youth hostel) wardens and their bright-eyed wards. For me, understanding their circle of learning has proved to be a learning in itself.

Pamela Philipose  
*New Delhi*

### ***About the author***

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## Transformations In Tuensang

*Chang Nagas And The Cycle Of Learning*



*Elders of Chingmei village*

*“About four years into the programme, we decided that our children needed to have a better education and must have access to a computer. We came together to ensure this.”*

– Elders of Chingmei village

*“It took us time to convince AA to support us for a long term intervention. It had to come round to understanding poverty with Nagaland characteristics.”*

–Chingmak Kejong, founder and secretary,  
Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS)

## Introduction

*After a journey of about four hours from Tuensang town, we reached Chingmei, an old village settlement of the Chang tribe in Noklak block. Over six decades ago, when Mildred Archer, as the wife of a senior British official, had visited this same village, she had noticed that houses there were “hung with numbers of animal skulls; mithan (a bovine species very valued in these parts), pigs, deer and antelope. ...In the porches were strings of basket-balls with wooden heads beneath - the tallies of the heads a man has taken and the raids he has taken part in”. When we reached Chingmei, we also noticed homes in Chingmei that had their outer walls decorated with the heads of mithun – harking back to age-old customs. Over a cup of freshly brewed cup of local tea, we asked two village representatives, Nabammongba Chang and Nokching Chang, how old the village was. They estimated that it went back seven-and-a-half generations going by oral accounts and could be much older than that but there was no way of knowing since no records existed. Their words were an instant introduction to the oral traditions of the Nagas. According to a local folk tale, the Nagas did have their own script but it was written on animal skin and a dog ate it up leaving the community dependent on the oral tradition. But whatever the myths may be, there can be no denying that here was a society that was deeply traditional even as it displayed a remarkable ability to embrace modernity and change. Today, the fact that many Naga tribes, including the Changs, have adopted the Roman script to write in their language is only evidence of this. One of the strengths of the Eleutherus Christian Society (ECS)-AA intervention – that straddled the entire first decade of the 21st century – was that it could find a fine balance between tradition and modernity....*

Nagaland's eastern most district of Tuensang wears its forest wealth proudly in the myriad shades of green that clad its undulating hills. The trees on the winding road to Tuensang town range from broadleaved tropical species like the teak, alder and oak to varieties of pines as one climbs higher up these Naga Hills. Everywhere, lush ferns

tumble on to the roadside, as also jungle vines and innumerable varieties of bamboo. As its hills stretch on, fold upon endless fold, the eye can also glean large swathes of hillside shorn of all vegetation as if with a celestial razor, as well as patches of darkened earth and charred tree stumps – signs of jhum, the most common form of farming in these parts.







*'Morung', a kind of bachelor's dormitory for the village youth and fulfilled a variety of functions. It served as a place where human and animal skulls were kept as relics, as a guardhouse where the village braves kept their Daos, spears and shields and it was also a meeting place where important decisions relating to war and peace were taken.*

Tuensang town, the district headquarters, which lies 1371.60m above sea level, was founded in 1947 to administer a region that was then known as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). It lies just 25 kilometres from the Myanmar/Burma border. In fact Tuensang district shares a winding, porous 180

kilometre border with that country and merging into this border is the state's tallest peak, Mount Saramati, dwarfing the surrounding peaks at a majestic 3,840 metres.

Although its borders have shrunk over the years with the districts of Mon, Kiphire and Longleng carved out of its territory, Tuensang still remains Nagaland's geographically largest district, accounting for about 26 per cent of the state's land mass. Its density, however, is markedly lower – the district, with a population of 1.9 lakh according to the 2011 census, accounts for just 10 per cent of Nagaland's population. While central Tuensang has been considered the traditional area of the Changs over the ages, the district is also home to several other tribes including the Sangtams, Yimchunger, as well as the Khamniungans, Aos and Semas.

## Tuensang's Marginalisation

That Tuensang district was difficult to reach went without saying. It was also one of the most marginalised in Nagaland and, incidentally, figured as one of India's 250 most backward districts, with a literacy level that is among the lowest in Nagaland. Many factors have contributed to this.

First, there was the issue of its location on the very fringes of the state, with policy makers having little time for it. The British raj focused its attention on urban centres like Kohima and the Tuensang region was regarded as a distant sprawl inhabited by ungovernable, headhunting tribals. Mildred



Archer, a colonial officer, wrote in her diary “As they were finishing, there was a bloodcurdling cry, the cat-call of the successful warrior returning with a head. It is a cry that sends shudders down one’s spine. Then a long line of boys (135) entered the camp, the leader flourishing a dao and old Churungchu bringing up the rear. He was in full ceremonial dress with a crimson spear and it was he who was uttering the cries which must have brought back memories of many raids.” Celebrated Anthropologist Verrier Elwin, commenting later on the governing structures of traditional Naga society, highlighted how a combination of “near-dictatorship” and “extreme democracy” made up Naga society, with most tribes having their own system of hereditary chieftainship. This included the Changs of Tuensang.

After independence, the Indian constitution recognised Tuensang’s status as an autonomous region. It was granted a special provision under which any law passed by the Parliament on the religious and social practices of the Nagas or on land transfers would not apply to Tuensang. However, it was bound by the laws passed in the Nagaland assembly. Unfortunately, it remained largely excluded from decision making in that august assembly. A distance of 200 kilometres of

extremely difficult terrain separated Tuensang town from the Nagaland capital of Kohima, where all state policies were made. Tuensang, with no air nor rail connectivity and poorly maintained roads, was easy to overlook.

A second factor for this district’s marginalisation was that it had been the site of long drawn low intensity conflicts – whether it was the insurgency waged by the two factions of the NSCN or the inter-tribal tensions that sometimes flared up into bloody confrontations. In August 1990, for instance, clashes between the Changs, the Konyaks and Yimchungers, left many dead and the fear of such skirmishes recurring had greatly undermined the confidence and well-being of the local communities here.

The third major reality of Tuensang – and one that marked the early social activism of ECS – was the fact that because of the porosity of its borders with Burma/Myanmar, it remained vulnerable to the activities of the transcontinental drug mafia.

*A distance of 200 kilometres of extremely difficult terrain separated Tuensang town from the Nagaland capital of Kohima, where all state policies were made*



Chingmak Kejong, the man who set up ECS (See box - A Leader For Tough Times and Terrains) pointed out that with the Sri Lankan hostilities spiking in the 1980s, the new route favoured by the drug mafia was the Burmese one and this made the inhabitants of the Tuensang area feel they were living in a “city without walls”. With the flow of drugs going up, the rising incidence of HIV/AIDS, too sapped the community, especially the youth, destroying their capacity to lead full, productive lives. The district had gained notoriety for having the highest concentration of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in the country. Joshi Tuisum, who had happened to visit Tuensang in the late nineties as a young student, provided a telling snapshot of those days. “I noticed young people loitering on the streets. Some of them were clearly

drunk or spaced out, as if on drugs. What struck me was that they had nothing to do, nothing to keep them engaged. There was no source of employment for them, it seemed, nor was there a future.”

A fourth aspect that contributed to the impoverishment of the district was the fact that the people here had no adequate source of a sustainable livelihood. There were no large or medium industrial units in existence and only a few local enterprises. People, therefore, continued to be dependent on subsistence jhum farming in a region where yields were minimal because of widespread soil erosion and large tracts of land lying in the rain shadow.

## Genesis of a Partnership

The year 1999 was important for Nagaland. In the May of that year, leaders of NSCN (I-M), Isaac Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah visited Nagaland after 33 years in exile abroad. A few months later, they concluded an agreement extending the decade-long ceasefire between the Government of India and the

NSCN (I-M). This deepened the prospects of peace in the region, despite simmering tensions between this faction and the NSCN-K led by S.S. Khaplang.

It was in 1999, too, that ActionAid India first started working with ECS in the short-term mode.





*Office of the Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS) in Tuensang.*

The ECS, which expands to Eleutheros Christian Society or ECS, was set up in 1992 by an idealistic Baptist pastor, Chingmak Kejong, with the able assistance of his dynamic wife, Phutoli – both of whom were in their twenties. The effort was to evolve holistic solutions to local problems based on the idea of liberation from all situations of bondage and drawing very much from the word ‘eleutheros’, which figured in its name and which translated as ‘freed ones’ in Greek. The ECS vision was to create a “free, fair and a just society where everyone is able to live with honour and dignity”. In order to achieve this, the ECS decided to focus on empowering

the poorest and most oppressed in society, with a special focus on children.

Meanwhile ActionAid India, in its Country Strategy Paper I that had come out in the Nineties, had committed itself to working in the near invisible states of the Northeast by entering into partnerships with credible organisations located there to fight poverty. It set up of a field office in Shillong in 1998 as a step in this direction. Kejong visited the Shillong office in December 1998 and invited AA representatives to visit Tuensang and gauge the level of its marginalisation for themselves. The invitation was taken seriously. The region was in dire need of support and ECS was reputed to be doing good work there. After AA representatives visited the rural parts of the district and held initial conversations with ECS staff members in Tuensang town, a short term partnership was forged between the two organisations to address local problems. This spelt the start of what would be a pioneering social initiative in Nagaland.

According to Avinash Singh, it was clear that AA at that point had recognised the grassroots work that ECS was doing for a completely isolated community that was not even on the government’s priority list.



“AA always looked for partners who followed the bottom up approach and who were innovative. ECS clearly fitted the bill,” noted Singh.

With better understanding of each other and of the realities on the ground, talk of a long term intervention began. Recalled Kejong, “It took us time to convince AA to support us for a long term intervention. AA tended to perceive poverty through the prism of the impoverishment prevailing in northern India. It had to understand poverty with Nagaland characteristics. Here a child may be wearing clothes, but her family could still be deeply impoverished.”

There was also the Christian identity of ECS to be reckoned with, given the strongly secular values to which AA adhered to at all times. Observed Kejong, “The role of the church was looked upon with a degree of suspicion, and we could understand that. It was only when it came to be realised that in Nagaland even the drunkard on the street was a Christian, that there was no getting away from the ubiquitous presence of Christianity in the state. Besides this, awareness also grew about ways in which the church as a platform could be used in order to gain the confidence of the community that

was divided by multiple tribal subdivisions – and that there was nothing ideological about doing this.”

Mrinal Gohain, ActionAid’s Regional Manager at Guwahati, agreed that these were indeed sticky points initially, “For many in AA it was difficult to accept the role of the church in this programme – and there could be no getting away from the name of the organisation which had the word Christian embedded in it. It was not that we didn’t have a critique of what the church often represented, but the fact remained that Baptist Christianity was the predominant religion in Nagaland and the issue needed to be perceived in a more nuanced manner. There were the positives to consider as well. The communal tensions that you saw in other parts of the country were just not there. Besides, church platforms did prove extremely useful in building the confidence of the community cutting across tribal affiliations in this programme.”

***Although there was no doubt that such a programme was needed because the people here were isolated, it also meant that AA would need to understand the complexities of Naga life***

Gohain iterated that for AA it was a learning process. Although there was no doubt that such a programme was needed because the people here were isolated, it also meant that AA would need to understand the complexities of Naga life. “Remember, in Tseunsang there were incidents of headhunting reported even as late as in the 1990s. So we realised that it was not useful to assess local realities using the parameters of the mainland and that communities living here had a very unique geopolitical environment. This demanded

that interventions here needed to be properly contextualised. Above all a programme of this kind required to be founded on mutual trust and confidence.”

It was in this spirit of mutual trust and confidence that AA – a little over a year after it first began to work with ECS – went ahead and agreed to support a long term intervention to work towards ending poverty, social marginalisation and the denial of rights.

## Grassroots Realities

The programme initially focused on 15 villages of the Chang tribe located in the two blocks of Tuensang district, Sangsangyo and Noklak – with another village that was initially reluctant to sign on, joining in after seeing the beneficial impacts of the intervention. The focus of ECS work had thus far been largely on HIV/AIDS and drug abuse, which in turn has arisen from a situation of widespread poverty and lack of literacy. The learnings from the work with People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) went into informing the action plan envisaged in the new ECS/AAI intervention.



Poster for awareness generation on HIV-AIDS



As often happens in efforts that seek to enter unchartered waters, there was an initial tendency to enthusiastically take on a great deal. The objectives drawn up first were broad, ranging from vocational training, poverty eradication and gender equality to primary education, institution building and advocacy.

Senior ECS representative, Chongshen Chang, who had joined the organisation in 2003, recalled the early days. “ECS office comprised a couple of rooms. Apart from an old Mahindra jeep, there was hardly any means of transportation although the programme villages were far flung. This meant that we had to walk a lot in very difficult terrain – and we did,” said Chongshen. When a motorbike costing Rs 47,284 arrived a couple of years into the programme, it came as a huge relief. “We really made use of that bike,” he said, laughing. The funds available were modest – around Rs 20 lakh for all the project villages – and every paise had to be used with care. Later a fund of Rs 10,000 was earmarked expressly for the travel of programme staff.

According to local accounts, in the early days people in Tuensang’s villages lived in close proximity with the animals they reared. There were no sanitation facilities and open defecation was the norm.

Epidemics broke out with regularity and child mortality levels were tragically high given that even primary healthcare facilities were almost non-existent.

“Personal hygiene and public cleanliness figured high on the list of our priorities in the very first days. And we took this extremely seriously,” Chongshen emphasised. The initial measures adopted were basic and more in the service delivery mode than the rights based approach that came to mark the intervention later. Community resolutions were passed to the effect that villagers who let their pigs and other livestock stray, would be in danger of losing them since they could be labeled as vermin and killed. The community often kept their animals in their own living quarters and now efforts were made to raise awareness about the importance of separating living areas from spaces where animals were housed. The ECS staff also went from home to home to inquire into the hygiene practices being followed by local families, whether hands were being washed before meals, and so on. To encourage the building of toilet facilities in those pre-MGNREGA days, ECS provided the prevailing minimum wage for four days to every family which built its own toilet.



“These may have been rough and ready methods, but our intention was to cultivate new habits of sanitation and hygiene. And we did meet with success. Today, as a result of those initial efforts, every home in our villages has its own functioning toilet, and if the pit overflows the family digs another on their own,” remarked Chongshen.

Nothing came easy. People shaped by centuries old tribal traditions were not easily won over. According to Chongshen, their attitudes to the programme interventions ranged from reticence to outright hostility. “When we went from house to house, trying to explain its objectives, we were met by a range of attitudes - mostly negative. At first, the community even suspected that we were there to propagate a new religion!”

Such treatment was something ECS was familiar with, given its experiences in reaching out to drug addicts and PLWHA. Sentila Chang, president of Grace Chapel, Tuensang’s largest network of people living with HIV/AIDS, which is being anchored by ECS, shared how people would bang shut the doors of their homes on their faces at first. “It was only after we made the local communities understand this disease better and the need to fight the stigma,

did people have the confidence to disclose their status and we could make headway,” she said.

Ultimately, whether it was about ending discrimination against those living with HIV/AIDS or ensuring personal hygiene and sanitation, nothing could happen without the community’s support. “We realised that such change does not happen overnight and that we needed to keep our own confidence levels up before we could build up the confidence of the community in our programme!” remarked Chongshen.

Attitudes did change, but at a protracted pace. Over the years, from being hostile and suspicious, people became more receptive, and their receptivity led in turn to a sense of ownership. The first clear



*Toilets on the roadside*





indication of this was when the residents of a village which had earlier refused to be part the programme, decided to join in after observing the gains made. Now the total number of programme villages rose to 16.

One of these villages was Chingmei. Initially, villagers here resisted the idea of people from outside trying to influence their patterns of life.

But as the villagers of Chingmei put it, “About four years into the programme, we decided that our children needed to have a better education and must have access to a computer.” It was then decided that each family in Chingmei would donate a tin of maize (a tin contains about 15 kilograms of grain) and the maize collected in this way would then be sold to raise funds for that much desired computer!

## Early Strategies

The first activities were conceived in the nature of “people’s plans” which were evolved through interactions between the ECS, the AA regional office in Guwahati, and the community.

In order to facilitate such interactions, it was decided to strengthen the Village Community Boards (VCBs) that were created by the state under the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act, 1978. That law had mandated that every village should have its own village development council for a five year term to represent the interests of the local community. VCBs were composed of people elected or chosen by the villagers and usually had two representatives from the tribe,

known as ‘gaon bura’; two women and a youth. AA made available a small, one-time grant to each VCB in the programme villages to strengthen its presence. VCBs had two primary responsibilities – to monitor the progress achieved through the ECS/AA programme at the village level and make representations before the Village Development Boards (VDBs), statutory bodies meant to usher in development at the grassroots.

The initial ‘to do’ list the programme set for itself was ambitious, ranging from strengthening VCBs to creating strong women’s organisations in every village. Among the steps proposed was the inclusion of people with disability in income generation



activities, the closer involvement of the community in running schools, and the generation of 3500 person-days of community work to assist those who needed support to keep their families going, especially impoverished jhum farmers who were at starvation's door because of declining harvests.

While the emphasis was on helping the community to help themselves, the skill upgradation of ECS staffers was also prioritised. They were trained to manage the new infotech systems that were emerging at that point. Raising their awareness about best practices on development prevailing in other regions was also a felt need at that juncture and study tours were organised.

Review exercises conducted subsequently concluded that the programme was spread too thin to achieve any lasting change. Looking back, Kejong agreed with that assessment. "The programme was indeed too broad based at first and covered too large an area. We attempted to combine livelihood and health and education – each of which had their own specific challenges," said Kejong. It was only after a revision exercise conducted in 2003 and further reviews subsequently, that the programme assumed more manageable proportions and an internal coherence. The focus now narrowed down

to school education, women's rights and livelihood generation – and only among the Chang tribal community.

But Kejong did not perceive those initial exertions as wasted effort. "At no point did we adopt the approach of doling out largesse to the community. Our attempt was to encourage the people to themselves take ownership of the intervention. It was our work in those early years that had inspired then chief secretary of Nagaland, R.S. Pandey. He had come here to observe ECS activities and went on to anchor the Communitisation of Public Institutions and Service Act 2002 for the state of Nagaland, which mandated a stake for the local community in the functioning of state run institutions like schools and healthcare centres." Under this new law, village communities were given a stake in the management of schools through the institution of the Village Education Committees (VECs), which were invested with financial and regulatory powers to run schools.

The early steps taken, whether in terms of creating the community's stake in school education, strengthening women self help groups, enhancing the fertility of fields exhausted by extensive jhum cultivation, or exploring the possibilities of viable



horticulture, were all seeds that were sown in that early period. The reaping of the harvest in the three broad areas of schooling, women's empowerment

and livelihood generation, would have to wait for a few years more."

## A Shot At Schooling

"We knew the education of our children was central to our effort to usher in larger change, but the prevailing school system in Tuensang was dismal, a decade and a half ago. The district had one of the lowest levels of literacy in Nagaland and it seemed as if we could do little about it," remarked Chingmak Kejong.

If the parents did not see the value of sending their children to the classroom, teachers remained supremely apathetic about their responsibilities and would barely cover a fraction of the badly designed syllabus, year upon year. Parents would barge into classrooms and leave their toddlers with their older children if they happened to be in class. Children would come late to school with their work baskets in their hands and run away to the fields as soon as they could escape. Their parents would complain bitterly about how schooling was depriving them of an additional pair of hands in the fields. Being largely illiterate themselves, they did not see the

value of schooling and kept accusing the teachers of doing nothing that was meaningful.

Meanwhile, the teachers had their share of complaints. Not only had they to travel long distances to teach in these village schools, they believed their efforts were being completely wasted since neither the students nor their parents displayed any interest in learning. This in turn was often used by them an excuse to attend to their duties perfunctorily, and even absent themselves.

Bendangsonla, an ECS staffer, was not with the organisation in the very early days of the ECS/AA programme but she said she had heard accounts of how the children would come to school with their faces unwashed, their hair disheveled and their homework not done.

When we asked Mesung Chang of Chingmei village whether this was the case, he was more than frank,



“Cows slept in the classrooms, there was manure on the floors and the children sat on these very floors. If the requirement was to finish 20 chapters in a year, teachers would get through one chapter with difficulty. Often, while people’s pigs and goats would be roaming free in the school premises, their children -- who were supposed to be in school -- would be wandering here and there outside,” he related. According to him, it was not surprising at all that children were not getting even a minimum standard of education and most dropped out at the primary school level itself because they knew they would never be able to cope with high school.

Since the new ECS/AA programme had children’s education as a key priority, a lot of thinking went into how a schooling system on the verge of collapse could be rescued. One of the first challenges was to get the community to take ownership of the process. Said Chongshen, “So we got the parents, teachers and community members to sit together and talk about this problem. We asked them how was it that while the churches in their villages were spic and span, their schools were not.”

A blame game followed, with parents accusing teachers of poor performance and teachers berating

parents for their lack of interest in their children’s schooling. But there was some impact nevertheless. The community began to display early signs of ownership. Fencing, for instance, would come up around schools and in some villages the local community even undertook to build residential quarters for the teachers so that they could stay in the village rather than commute from distant places. Care was even taken to provide a small sty for pigs in these dwellings, because the villagers knew that teachers often supplemented their earnings by rearing livestock.

What was being proposed here was precisely what the ECS/AA programme had been attempting to do – build synergy between community and the school system even while creating more accountability among teachers since their salaries were now routed through the VEC. According to Kejong, one of the more conspicuous developments that took place after this law came into force was that teachers began to come to school more regularly and the community was more involved in supervising the running of schools.

The quality of teaching, however, continued to remain a huge concern. To help improve the





*Children of another Sochum, performing cultural program.*

situation the ECS/AA programme intervened both at the level of the parents and that of the teachers. A Parent Teacher Forum was set up in all the programme villages to expedite the functioning of the VECs. All these years, the community was discouraged by the educational system from getting involved in any decision making with regard to schooling, now with communitisation having been being mainstreamed, the effort was to reverse that trend and create opportunities for parents to get directly involved in ensuring their children's educational progress.

Coming to the teachers, a number of training sessions for them were organised under the programme, anchored by resource persons from outside the state. At the same time, teachers and

community leaders were sent on exposure visits to Guwahati and Nainital to understand how other communities had handled similar issues.

Said Haku Chang, an ECS staff member, "The idea here was to create a new pedagogy and usher in fresh methods of teaching. One of the reasons cited by the teaching community was staff shortage, and to address it the programme coming up in 2004 with the idea of the 'education volunteer' to assist teachers in every school in the programme villages."

Meanwhile the Chang Students' Union had taken the initiative to bring a group of civil society organisations in Tuensang to improve the abysmal levels of schooling by setting up an informal education board called the Wesido Soudak Thangjam that would monitor the performance of teachers and the examination process. The ECS/AA programme supported this initiative, perceiving it as an important step in pedagogical renewal. Such an informal educational board changed the power equation within the education system. Not only did it put pressure on the schools and teachers to perform, it provided the local community with an much important tool to assess the quality of teaching and check of the everyday corruption that had entered the system. Whether it was the timely



supply of textbooks, or the maintenance of school infrastructure, the school authorities were now put on notice. The WST also took charge of formulating syllabi and conducting graduation examinations for Class IV through a common evaluation system. This was a felt need because if the children from Tuensang's villages had to study beyond primary school, they would need to measure up to standards set in other parts of the state.

The move had several immediate and positive impacts which Thungtimongko Chang of ECS underlined, "We drew up, in consultation with teachers, minimum targets expected to be covered in every school year. Teachers were forced to complete the minimum syllabus set because their students would now be sitting for an examination that would be held on one day after which results of all 16 villages would be compiled on one sheet."

The move had an immediate impact. One village even came to ECS with the request that the board examination be postponed by a few days for their students, because the portions were yet to be completed. Recalled Chongshen, "That request was acceded to, and the students from 15 schools in the programme area sat on the same day for

their examinations, while a new set of questions was prepared for the 16th school, which took the examination a little later."

According to him, this was ultimately about empowering people to assert their right to education, "Change was being introduced at two levels. Internally within the village and externally with the school administration, that was forced to respond. Without ECS having to give a single paisa from the programme, teachers came to our villages to invigilate during these examinations!"

**Sochums, incubators of change:** The various initiatives that had been taken to shore up schooling in the programme villages had one major outcome: parents now perceived the link between better schooling and the future of their children and the community understood that the effort was vital for the general progress of all. However, the gains made were patchy. Observed Toshila Chang of ECS, "Some of these steps failed in the long term. For instance, the programme had appointed 16 education volunteers, who were paid a modest Rs 700 a month. It was soon realised that the government teachers were only exploiting this group and giving all the work to them without



themselves teaching very much. Within a couple of years, therefore, we were forced to give up on this idea.”

The consensus was thus growing that unless there was a paradigm shift in approach, even the gains made thus far could come to nothing. Mrinal Gohain of the AA’s regional office at Guwahati, recalled that search was on for a definitive big idea. He himself, in his earlier job as a government servant had heard about the youth dormitories of Tuensang – “the morung”, which in the Chang tribal community also were referred to as the ‘sochum’. Children entered these sochums – there was one for every “khel”, or a cluster of clans -- when they reached puberty and learnt everything they needed to know about adult life in these institutions, from medicinal plants to local oral traditions. This was knowledge that was needed to keep the community alive and which had been passed on from generation to generation.

Although the morung/sochum had fallen into disuse, he had thought that if it could be infused with modern pedagogy, it would be a good entry point for the ECS/AA programme looking to energise its schooling interventions.

“The possibility of an ancient community institution being revived and adapted for a modern purpose, using existing school infrastructure, was an exciting idea, and that is where the beauty of interacting closely with local people comes in,” remarked Kejong. When the idea came up in discussions with the community, the enthusiasm with which they responded to it was striking. While the formal school system had found no value in sochums and regarded it as an appendage of the past, the concept had obviously remained in the collective memory of the community as a valuable institution of learning and a repository of traditional practices that were under the threat of being forgotten.



*Children assembly in Sochum*



If the community was enthusiastic about the idea of the sochum, many others were not. “We did have our initial challenges in putting the model forward. The church, for instance, initially saw things differently,” said Kejong. The critics had to be convinced about the contemporary relevance of the move and that is what the ECS/AA programme set out to do through extensive interactions with the community and educational authorities.

The fact that such dormitories would help the beleaguered farming community in Tuensang was beyond doubt going by discussions with parents. B. Nasetmongko, a Chingmei farmer and father of four children, revealed when we met him that most parents at that point had very little time to care for their growing children, much less supervise their studies. “Sometimes, because of my busy life, I would hardly see my children. As a farmer I have to leave for my fields very early and I come back home late in the evening. Also, because of my own lack of literacy it was difficult to take my children’s teachers to task because I had no idea of what they had to learn and what they were being taught.” Teachers meanwhile revealed how their students hardly did their homework and just could not keep up with what was being taught in class.

With such realities kept in mind, the ECS/AA programme conceived of its sochum as a dormitory to accommodate children studying in primary school – from around 6 to around 12 years of age – and provide them with both an understanding of community traditions as well as their school lessons. The effort was not to replace the school system but complement it and address its inadequacies.



*Sochum warden with children*

The plan began to get rolled out, but on a strictly voluntary basis. It was left to the local community to decide whether they wanted to invest material and energy in building the infrastructure for these sochums. Similarly, the children and parents also had to understand what it entailed and





understandably there were families which were reluctant to be so separated and took time to come around. By 2006, there were 16 sochums in all the programme villages. While existing school infrastructure was converted into sochums in some village, in others – and Chingmei was an example – the community came forward to construct an additional structure that conformed to the old pattern, with separate dormitories for girls and boys opening into a connecting room for common activities. Local women’s SHGs pitched in with assistance and some villages convinced their MPs and MLAs to use their development funds for building this infrastructure. The ECS/AA programme, itself, provided a small fund for the construction of the sochum in each village, for material support like lamps, classroom boards, play equipment and learning kits.

A broadly common regimen was adopted in all these sochums with the intention of imparting both traditional knowledge and facilitating the completion of homework and parts of the syllabus left uncovered. After attending school, the children would return home for their meal of the evening and come to the sochum around 5 pm. The evening hours were spent on extracurricular activities including craft, sports and games, followed by study

and prayers. After this the children whose sochums did not have facilities for overnight accommodation would return home, while the rest turned in for the night. Mornings began early in the sochum – 4.30 am to 5 am was wash-up time, followed by an hour of lessons from 5 am to 6 am. The children would then return to their homes for their morning meal, and prepare for school.

The idea of the Sochum became so popular that over 30 villages outside the programme area also took the initiative to set up such institutions.

**Wardens As Crucial Link:** The smooth running of the sochum was crucially dependent on the warden, or the ‘sochum lombou’, who in the old scheme of things was a community elder who performed a role that combined that of teacher, guardian and caregiver. It was, of course, a tall order to identify a person of some basic qualifications and an understanding of the Chang way of life, who at the same time was willing to live in an isolated village and supervise a large number of children. Initially, some of the education volunteers were drafted to play this role, with the guidance of village elders and the help of special training sessions and exposure visits.



Women came on board as wardens too, in sharp contrast to past traditions where it was a male elder who performed this function. To help wardens in the discharge of their duties, it was also decided to form committees of students who were then put in charge of the various aspects of the day-to-day functioning, whether it was the maintenance of discipline or cleanliness.

School teachers were also encouraged to assist the wardens when they requested help in clearing the doubts of their wards about the homework, or something they could not follow in class. In Konya village, we met up with the teacher of a government school who had voluntarily undertaken to get the girls in the local sochum to learn knitting. In general, it was seen as important to maintain the synergy



*Sochum warden displaying the chart of activities and schedule of Sochum.*

between the sochum and the formal schooling system at all times.

Explained Haku Chang of ECS, “The post of warden was advertised and interviews with the respondents conducted. Initially, the honorarium paid was very modest and dependant on the local community’s capacity to pay. But a high attrition rate meant that the community had to meet the larger sums expected – in one village, for instance, they are paying Rs 5000 to the warden presently. While their boarding is free, they would have to make their own arrangements for their food and other needs.”

Most sochum wardens we met had completed their school graduation, but one young woman had just

DAILY ROUTINE FOR SOCHUM			
Days	Morning shift	Program	Evening shift
Sunday	06:30-08:00 am	Wakeup & Wash up	06:30-08:00 am
	08:00-09:00 am	Breakfast	08:00-09:00 am
Monday	06:30-08:00 am	Wakeup & Wash up	06:30-08:00 am
	08:00-09:00 am	Breakfast	08:00-09:00 am
Tuesday	06:30-08:00 am	Wakeup & Wash up	06:30-08:00 am
	08:00-09:00 am	Breakfast	08:00-09:00 am
Wednesday	06:30-08:00 am	Wakeup & Wash up	06:30-08:00 am
	08:00-09:00 am	Breakfast	08:00-09:00 am
Thursday	06:30-08:00 am	Wakeup & Wash up	06:30-08:00 am
	08:00-09:00 am	Breakfast	08:00-09:00 am
Friday	06:30-08:00 am	Wakeup & Wash up	06:30-08:00 am
	08:00-09:00 am	Breakfast	08:00-09:00 am
Saturday	06:30-08:00 am	Wakeup & Wash up	06:30-08:00 am
	08:00-09:00 am	Breakfast	08:00-09:00 am

\* The subjects' boarding for students should and be compensated.  
For Art and Culture, community program wardens should engage 10000.

*Daily Routine of a Sochum*



finished her college graduation. They were all in their early 20s and clearly regarded this experience of being warden as a short term one that would help them eventually to become school teachers. Many appeared very sincere about the responsibility and coped with it as best as they could. We caught up with young Benjonglemla, the newly appointed warden at the sochum in Konya village. There were 63 children in her sochum of whom 35 were girls. Her emphasis, she said, was in getting her wards to become more fluent in English because that is what the villagers of Konya wanted. “I find reading practice in English useful and make students read passages, turn by turn. This is to familiarise themselves with English since they don’t have the opportunity to speak it at home.”

Many of the traditional crafts taught in the sochums have been on the verge of extinction. In the Konya sochum, young boys demonstrated their ability to weave a basket within 20 minutes before the proud elders of the community. While their school curriculum had no space for such learning, here this ancient Naga craft was being given a new lease of life. Similarly, there were efforts to teach the sochum children weaving and beading.

It was not just the crafts, the performing arts of the Nagas were also made relevant to modern contexts. An interesting woman warden who went by the name of Nukshilemla and was preparing for her civil service examinations had taken up this assignment to supplement her income. She had got her sochum children to prepare a play based on an old Naga folk tale that was performed for us. “Through this play, not only have we introduced old Naga dances, songs and the playing of the kongkhin, or the bamboo flute, but also highlighted old tribal values of helping each other in times of distress,” she explained.

**Inside The Sochum:** Twenty-three-year-old S.H. Chingmak was the warden in charge of the large sochum in Chingmei village, built in 2009 within the premises of the school and housed 126 children, of whom 80 are boys. “From childhood, I liked to spend time with kids. I learnt a lot of the community’s practices from my grandfather. He told me so much about the Chang people. Today I want my charges in the sochum to become proper representatives of the Chang people,” said this serious young man.





*Informative painting on Sochum wall*

The interior of the common room in the Chingmei sochum was educative. On one wall were representations of the various clans that made up the Chang tribe, while on the other were images of traditional objects of the community, like the ‘saohou’, or neckpiece decorated with the beaks of the hornbill, or the ‘shap’, or axe, used to chop down trees – each neatly titled in the roman script.



*Informative painting on Sochum wall*

Chingmak’s young charges were like regular kids anywhere, with dreams similar to their counterparts elsewhere in India. Beshang Aullen, 12, said he loved football passionately and wanted to be a professional goalkeeper, while 10-year-olds, Anti Mongsen and Sochen Lemla, shyly revealed that they hoped to become women pastors when they rew up.

We asked the warden how he managed so many children and his reply was striking, “I try to share my joy, not my anger with them. If the children continue to be distracted, I tell them to go home. There is no question of using corporal punishment. Also, if I cannot answer their queries about their schoolwork, I call their teachers to come to the sochum and explain things to them.”

A consultant with ECS, Akum Chang, believed that the sochum has taught children democratic values and a greater social awareness. “They have student councils, and the role of the chairperson is rotated among both boys and girls in order to develop leadership qualities. In one village there were frequent power cuts. The warden took the children to the neighbourhood so that they could see for themselves that branches falling on wires was a



major reason for power failures. A student then asked why the linesman didn't stay in the village. It is precisely such analytical attitudes and capacities for divergent thinking and problem solving that we wanted to encourage."

Kejong saw the sochum as a place of experimentation. "Slowly even the church realised that providing quality time for children to learn and play would help build children's capacities. We also had role playing, with boys playing the role of girls so that they could realise for themselves the hard work the women in the community were doing."

Conversations with the villagers of Chingmei indicated their deep involvement with the idea of the sochum. Said Nasetmongko Chang, the



chairperson of the Parents Teachers Forum, "Even after the ECS/AA project was in its withdrawal stage, we constructed the sochum building. There are 178 parents in this forum and each one of us has seen how our children have progressed with help from the sochum. Earlier our children would drop out at Class Four, now we have many students in Class Ten and Class Twelve, studying in Tuensang town. Earlier our children could not take part in social gatherings, now they do so easily. I never heard our children speak English before but now they speak in English. Last year, Chingmei sochum emerged as champions in an inter-sochum competition and we were really proud."

What Nasetmongko's words expressed were the new ambitions of a community stoked by the institution



*Girls are learning knitting and other skills*



*Conversations with the villagers of Chingmei indicated their deep involvement with the idea of the sochum. Said Nasetmongko Chang, the chairperson of the Parents Teachers Forum, “Even after the ECS/AA project was in its withdrawal stage, we constructed the sochum building.”*

of the sochum. Whether this will create its own hierarchies, with more prosperous families taking their children out of the relatively egalitarian space of the sochum and placing them in privatised, cash-driven enclaves of learning, only the future will tell. If that happens, the potential of this institution to ensure a sustainable education for every child in the village would be considerably undermined as the elite would no longer have a stake in it.

There could be no denying, however, that the sochum had emerged as an important model, acknowledged not just by the local community but the state administration. Evidence of this came when the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan authorities contacted ECS in order to replicate the sochum model for children who had dropped out of school in the Chang villages, so that they could get a second chance to re-enter the school system.

This signalled the fact that state authorities were impressed by the potential of the initiative. When we spoke to Chuba Wati Chang, an additional deputy commissioner in the adjoining district of Mokokchuk, he was unconditional in his endorsement of the initiative, “It is an innovative idea and ECS has put a lot of effort into realising it. We find the results encouraging.”

## Women’s Empowerment

That the ECS/AA programme had made a decisive impact in the field of education was beyond doubt. But for a multi-layered programme that set out to transform lives in a marginalised swathe of a marginalised state, the dimensions of gender

empowerment and livelihood generation were also critical.

According to the 2011 Census, the child sex ratio in Nagaland stood at 943, considerably higher than



the all-India level of 914. Did that mean that women and girls had a higher status in Nagaland than in the rest of the country? The answer was both yes and no. The state did not, for instance, have the high levels of maternal mortality and anaemia seen elsewhere in India and the Naga women have much greater freedom of movement. At the same time, there could be no denying the innate patriarchy that had dominated Naga tribal society over the ages and continued to do so.



*A woman on the way to Jhum field with kids*

Dowry is not practised in Naga society. It is the bridegroom who has to incur the expenses entailed for a wedding, which includes the bride price and the cost of livestock slaughtered for the wedding feast, which could include several pigs

and the prized mithun cow of the region – costing anything above Rs 30,000. But the absence of dowry not necessarily reflect the higher status of the bride. Daughters drew their social identity from their fathers and their husbands, and enjoyed no independent rights of inheritance. They also never had a role in community decision making, so their near negligible political participation in Nagaland today has a long history.

Mrinal Gohain, commenting on this admixture of positives and negatives, put it this way, “It is true that Naga society allowed more mobility to women than many other communities in India. Also, although marriages remained within the tribe, women were free to choose their partners and could have multiple partners before settling down with one individual. At the same time, it could not be forgotten that women here are attacked by drunken husbands just as they were elsewhere in the country and that women and children were the worst victims of the situation of conflict that prevailed in the region.”

Explained Kejong, “Within Tuensang’s Changs, women had many privileges, but when it came to rights it was another story. They had also never





traditionally been part of formal social structures and institutions. The ECS/AA intervention sought to change this.”

Among the thrust areas envisaged initially in the programme was the emergence of a strong women’s organisation in each villages, with gender as a cross-cutting concern in every initiative undertaken.

Sustained effort went into enrolling girls into school; when it came to choosing sochum wardens, women were often chosen; teaching material that perpetuated patriarchal values were replaced or critiqued; and teacher training interventions focused on gender sensitivity. It was an acknowledged principle that, as far as possible, every meeting and activity organised under the programme would have the equal representation of women.

Early health projects under the ECS/AA intervention also emphasised the gender dimension. Among the first of these was an attempt to form health committees in all the programme villages, with specially identified health volunteers who would work in coordination with the district health authorities. A special corps was also provided by

AA as a “health emergency fund” for children who needed medical attention.

**The SHG army:** Some of these early attempts could not be sustained in the long run. What did get consolidated, however, were women’s self help groups. The ECS had set up such groups from the late 1990s, but the process got traction under the ECS/AA programme. By 2003, there were 140 Self Help Groups spread across the programme villages. Each of them was sanctioned a small fund to grow autonomously and address the priorities its members had set. The idea was that the women who made up these groups would represent a strong, collective voice that could speak out on issues that concerned women directly. For instance, under the Nagaland Village Development Board (VDB) Act, 25 per cent of the village development fund was earmarked for women but was generally never released because the men who controlled the fund invariably resisted doing so. It was hoped, therefore, that the women of the SHGs could leverage their collective strengths and wrest such entitlements.

Given the hard work and entrepreneurship of Tuensang’s women, the SHGs did thrive, helping





immeasurably to buttress family income (See Box: Tuensang's Women Learn To Help Themselves). In Konya village which we visited one bright afternoon, the SHG women giggled as they revealed that they now had a healthy balance of Rs 1.3 lakh and that they have even be able to distribute a sum of Rs 3,000 to each member. As one woman explained, "What we women earn, we spend on our children, on their food and education so that they can live better, healthier lives than we did."

By the time the ECS/AA programme wound down at the end of the decade, the SHGs had a record of 100 per cent recovery of loans given. They had come together as a federation and started what were termed as 'Edou Banks' (in the Chang language, 'edou' signifies a collectivity of people working together). These banks, around 12 in number at that point, made available larger sums to SHGs seeking to expand their income generation capacities. The formal banking sector also stepped in with assistance. The ECS/AA programme contributed in training the women to run their Edou Banks with

the expectation was they would evolve into formal banks operating in Tuensang's villages, which had always been disadvantaged by being outside the banking system.

This microcredit success story undoubtedly testified to the hard work and enterprise of the women of Tuensang. But they have been rather less successful in defending their rights – within their families and communities. Consequently, gender equality in the programme villages has remained largely unrealised.

Kejong counselled patience on this score. "Gender equality will take time in a state like Nagaland where there is still stigma attached to being a woman. Even something like government mandated 33 per cent reservations for women in local bodies has hit a road block in the state." But he draws hope from the fact that SHGs have given women money. "I believe that money will soon start talking," he said."



## Livelihood Generation

Fighting poverty, marginalisation and the denial of rights was a foundational objective of the ECS/AA programme when it began in 2001, but understanding poverty with in Nagaland context – that Kejong had talked of – was the first challenge. What became clearer as time went by was that this region was in a state of transition. Practices that had stood the community in good stead for generations were slowly failing to deliver.

Jhum farming – the main source of livelihood in Tuensang district given its almost non-existent industrial base – was a good example of this. Because of the increased pressure on land brought on by a variety of factors, the cycle of jhum cultivation was shrinking and this was, in turn, affecting the regenerative capacity of the soil leading to lower yields. As I. Nokching, a Chingmei village representative explained, “Earlier the population within a village was small and was composed of nine or ten families. They would have divided the land they were entitled to equally amongst themselves and grown crops like maize, rice and millet in the traditional sequence. But today, with the population growing and less land to distribute, jhum cycles are shrinking.”

This reality notwithstanding, it would have been completely misplaced for the programme to demand that jhum farming be discontinued forthwith, given the sensitivities that were attached to this ancient way of life (See Box: ‘For Us, Jhum Is A Way Of Life’). There were also many strengths about jhum farming that needed to be realised. It was, after all, because of this system that there was no fragmentation of holdings in Tuensang and little or no alienation of land. In fact it had given farmer the surety of access to cultivable land.

However, the fact remained that the harvests that came in could not support families for more than a few months. Once those supplies ended, the poor would try and earn by selling wood. Some got trapped in a cycle of debt, forced into doing unpaid labour as a means of repayment and being increasingly driven to starvation’s door.

To address this, an early idea put forward under the programme was the generation of “utility oriented community work” for those identified as being in dire need of additional income. The programme would pay them the prevailing minimum wage for this community work, which could range from



enhancing the fertility of the jhum fields by planting nitrogen fixing alder trees and building village roads to constructing useful structures within the village itself like latrines, cattle sheds and pigsties.

Encouraging crop diversification and the adoption of more modern methods of farming that could bring in better harvests was a key strategy adopted under the programme, but one of the major hurdles that the ECS had to deal with was the community's blind adherence to traditional practices. Explained Chollen Chang, who was part of the ECS/AA programme from 2006-2010, "We could not, of course, advocate the discarding of jhum farming but we realised that it was badly in need of a rejig. Many farmers were resistant to shifting to other crops because among the Changs there is this firm belief that those who harvested paddy enjoyed a higher social status." However some villagers were more open to the idea than others. Chendang village, for instance, did adopt crop diversification techniques under the programme and emerged as a winner (*See box, 'How Chendang Became A Vegetable Village'*).

Such breakthroughs had their own multiplier effects. Today the residents of the programme villagers are much more open to crop

diversification. When we went to Konya – another programme village – residents told us that they had been growing potatoes and bananas but were now considering apple cultivation seriously. They had also introduced bee hives in the village – with each hive yielding an income of Rs 1000 a year. "We would like to scale this up of course, but the bees seem to be choosy and don't come!" remarked one Konya resident wryly.

**The rights framework:** For the community to perceive the issue of livelihood through the framework of rights took time. It was only when several years of activism had brought about a greater degree of self-awareness and empowerment, did the assertions for rights and entitlements take place. What helped this process significantly was the emergence in 2005-06 of the



*Food storage in a village*



Dolen Thangjam (DT), conceived as a platform for village level institutions, local churches and the community to work for common interests. Like the WST, it acted as a consensus builder and pressure group, but it was also a forum to discuss and reflect upon social concerns of crucial importance to the community. The ECS/AA programme helped to provide direction to the various DTs and ensured that issues like patriarchy and good governance also got discussed. One of its first moves in this direction, in fact, was to ensure that there was at least some representation of women within the DT itself. These structured conversations led, in turn, to raise awareness about rights within the community.

In 2007, the ECS/AA programme anchored a meeting for DT members on the various rights-based laws that had already been enacted nationally. Not only were the Right to Information

Act, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act<sup>1</sup> and the Right to food campaign<sup>2</sup>, but state level laws like the one on communitisation were also discussed. For many villagers, this was their first briefing on legislations that could, potentially, transform their lives.

In 2008, the DTs were vested with the responsibility of monitoring the implementation of two key but corruption-prone government initiatives, the MGNREGA and PDS. That was not all. The DTs and ECS went on to lead the Right to Food Campaign in Nagaland, with Chingmak Kejong appointed as an advisor to the Special Commissioner to the Supreme Court's monitoring of Right to Food. The campaign received immediate support from the Nagaland Baptist Church Council, and the state association of Baptist churches, which helped anchor a major survey on the food security status of all villages and hamlets of Nagaland.

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1. National rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was passed by the parliament in 2005 as Right to Employment. Later its name changed to MGNREGA.
  2. Right to Food campaign started with a writ petition submitted to the Supreme Court in 2011 by People's Union for Civil Liberties, Rajasthan. In 2013, Govt. of India passed the National Food Security Act which brings under one umbrella several existing and new entitlements aimed at providing food security.



## Could some issues have been handled better?

Mrinal Gohain of AA saw the DT as crucial for the future sustainability of the various programme initiatives, “How long can an organisation carry on overseeing these various institutions? Even for the ECS, how long can it afford to pay salaries and keep things going? At some point the community would need to take charge. The DTs can perform this role.”

“The Tuensang intervention is perhaps one of the most complex projects that AA has ever participated in, especially because it demanded a new imagination of engagement. Such an imagination could not be plucked out of thin air.



*Local cereal*

It demanded an understanding of the historical background, a reading of a distinct geopolitical context, and empathy for a community that had been marginalised in innumerable ways. While the decade-long ECS/AA partnership displayed all of this in ample measure, it was perhaps because of these factors that some outcomes, which would have been considered non-negotiable in similar interventions conducted in a mainland Indian setting, proved somewhat elusive in the 16 programme villages and its population of 7,592 men, women and children.

Among the main strategic objectives set out were the following: the building of the organisations and alliances of the poor and marginalised; facilitating just and democratic governance; and enforcement of rights of women and girls. Generally speaking, all three objectives were met – but gaps remained.

We could not but feel, for instance, that the ECS/AA programme came short in terms of delivering on the commitment for empowerment of Tuensang’s wonderfully animated, energetic women in a



holistic manner. Sure, the SHGs – each one of them – were admirable examples of entrepreneurial energy. It was also true that money did get saved and helped to lift many families out of poverty and illiteracy. But success in managing microcredit activities did not, and cannot, create gender equality. This is all the more so in a community where the brute force of tradition had deprived women of the most basic of rights, including the right of inheritance. There were casual references made to domestic violence, but the programme did not focus specifically on the issue. While it took a lot of trouble to make the community understand the importance of the right to information, or the rural employment guarantee act, similar attention did not seem to go into talking about the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act or the Women’s Reservation Bill. The initial idea was to get the women in the SHGs more conscientised on such issues, but this remained largely unrealised and was, to my mind, a missed opportunity.”

There was a similar timorousness when it came to the advocacy of more enlightened farming strategies. It is entirely understandable that because jhum farming was a sensitive issue in the region, its inadequacies had to be approached in nuanced

manner. But the existence of the ‘Vegetable Village’ of Chendang indicated that people here had the capacity to be receptive to innovative agricultural ideas. The ECS/AA programme saw one Chendang emerge in the decade of activism. It should have seen a few more.

Many of the initial expectations of the programme – the focus on disability or the development of a tier of health volunteers – also did not appear to fructify. Without doubt it was in the field of schooling that the major dividends had emerged. But sustainability issues could be discerned even during the brief visit we made to Tuensang. Wardens – a post central to existence of the sochum – came from extremely varying backgrounds.



*Village elders are in a meeting to discuss local issues*



Keeping this cadre going, given the high attrition rates among the wardens, could prove increasingly difficult in the years ahead. There were also severe limitations in terms of sochum infrastructure, which would only grow as the local population increased. The sochums, even today, cannot accommodate all the families who want their children to attend them, and the problem between supply and demand could short-circuit the system, or allow discretionary action and the consequent corruption to seep in.

However, the major issue with regard to education undoubtedly is ensuring a level of quality which is in sync with the rest of the state and country. Reviewers of the programme have pointed out that expectations that the village community would be able to ensure that the schools and sochums functioned smoothly would be misplaced. The system needs a proper oversight machinery, and this is where DTs and WST, as well as the state educational authorities, could play a role.”

## Endings Give Way to Beginnings

Change is a difficult thing but it has been achieved in Tuensang against great odds. The 16 villages under the programme have come a long way over the last one and a half decades. Although Kohima is still a difficult journey away and despite the fact that all the important decisions continue to be taken there. Meanwhile, ECS itself has evolved and is now well known in the state. The office, once housed in a couple of cramped rooms, is now a small cluster of buildings, with spacious interiors. Its staff has expanded as well and now number around a hundred.

Mrinal Gohain, more than anyone else from outside Tuensang, has been a close witness to the developments of the last few years. Said he, “I personally felt a little sad when the programme came to an end in 2010. There was also the feeling that perhaps more could have been done. But when I went back in 2012, it was gratifying to see how Chingmak and his colleagues were able to take things forward and how the community was holding on to the gains made under the programme and extending them. **When we left there were 16 sochums, today there are around 50 of**



**them. This is not an easy thing to achieve in a region like Nagaland with its long history of conflict.”**



*Sochum girls are playing 'Kongkin' a musical instrument made up of bamboo*

What struck Avinash Singh from AA's head office was the fact that this intervention had begun at a point when AA was transitioning from service delivery to the rights based paradigm. "It started

when AA was in the former mode, but the rights based approach was adopted at the midway point. I believe it was ECS's capacity for innovation and its ability to mobilise people for a cause that enthused AA. It is also rare to see programmes of this kind build lasting assets. In 2010, there were five pucca sochum buildings, today there are 21– an increase of 16 such facilities within four years. This says something about what this intervention has been able to do.”

While ECS has handed over all the 50-odd sochums currently being run in Tuensang to the community, the organisation was still involved in re-imagining them to address new requirements. Approaches now being considered include the possibility of reaching out to pre-schoolers by combing the anganwadi and sochum models.

Revealed Akum Chang, “We conducted a survey of 1139 sochum children in the 6 to 14 age group. According to our findings, while their confidence levels were uniformly good, the foundational aspects of their education needed strengthening. This is why we now want to bring pre-schooling, along the lines of the Montessori model, into sochums. The community also wants more focus on

***By 2014, both the road and bridge had taken shape and patients, who had once had to spend three hours to access the hospital, can now hope to reach it within half an hour. All thanks to a people's bridge reflecting the power of community mobilisation***



Maths and Science. English, of course, continues to be crucial -- not only is it the state language, it is important if children here want to take part in competitive examinations.”

Many other initiatives taken under the programme continue to flourish. Chendang continues to scale new heights as a vegetable village, and has now got itself a greenhouse where it is trying to experiment with new crops. The Dolen Thangjams across the 50-odd Chang villages are being organised into cluster federations, which will meet, discuss and initiate collective actions.

In 2012, after villagers had complained that the lack of a bridge over the River Yijung was inconveniencing them greatly, especially since a hospital was on the other side of the river, ECS



*A bridge made by people's contribution and effort*

helped to convey their problem to the government. To hasten matters, the villagers decided to raise their own funds in order to expedite the building of a community link road of six kilometers and a bridge about 45 feet long. The VDCs of seven villages on both the sides of the river then met and resolved to donate stones, boulders, timber and logs for the bridge construction, as well as earmarked 10 days of MGNREGA work for road construction. By 2014, both the road and bridge had taken shape and patients, who had once had to spend three hours to access the hospital, can now hope to reach it within half an hour. All thanks to a people's bridge reflecting the power of community mobilisation. At its best, the ECS/AA programme can also be seen as a bridge – linking Tuensang's past with its future.

*Under the harsh summer sun on a makeshift stage made of leaves, this young student of the Chingmei village school pulled out her finely crafted kongkin – a local bamboo flute – and put it to her lips. As its fine reedy notes rose in the summer heat, it embodied both a community and the traditions that kept it alive. Her face, a picture of concentration, bore the markings of her tribe and clan, and the white feathers in her*



*elaborately mounted earrings fluttered as she played. Meanwhile*

*her classmate waited for her turn on centre stage. It was the sochum at Chingmei that had incubated their musical prowess. Will institutions such as*

*these be able to keep the Chang way of life alive in the foreseeable future even as they bring in the promise of modernity? That brief tune played by the young girl musician may hold a possible answer.*





DUNG SAO



LAKBŪ  
KHŪK PŪP



LAUGHTER IS INNER JOGGING.



Case  
Studies

# A Leader For Tough Times and Terrains

*It would have been very easy for a man like Chingmak Kejong, now in his mid-forties, to sit back and enjoy what a life of privilege had to offer. He was born into a well connected family of the Chang tribe and his father had been elected to the state assembly three times. That Chingmak Kejong chose instead to invest his energies and ideas in what could be considered a backwater called Tuensang district, revealed something about his commitment to the land of his ancestors and a hardy capacity to take risks. It is said that his father wanted him to be a man of God. In time, Chingmak did join a seminary and was ordained a pastor. But his calling lay beyond the doors of a church.*

*Encouraged and assisted by his wife, Phutoli, he set up the Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS) in 1993 – the story goes that the couple even sold some of their wedding gifts to keep the organisation going. While the ECS set out to help the local community in multi-faceted manner, its initial focus was on a problem with no name. Nobody in the state wanted to talk about HIV/AIDS at that point, even while a pandemic was staring Nagaland in the face. Recalled Kejong, “As an organisation we faced a difficult situation.*

*The drug trade route had shifted because of the hostilities in Sri Lanka and the new route favoured by the drug mafia was the Burmese one. For a district that shared a common border with Burma, this had huge implications. We felt like a city without walls.”*

*For Kejong it was more than just an academic issue, it was a wrenching family tragedy – he lost two of his brothers to this disease. But tackling such a sensitive issue within a conservative society divided by tribal affiliations would have fazed most people. Kejong and Phutoli took up the challenge – including getting a church network, that had been in denial on the issue, to come on board.*



Chingmak Kejong- Founder of Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS)

*Kejong saw the problem of HIV/AIDS in a holistic way. He could perceive the various factors that went into creating it, including large-scale poverty, poor educational levels and rampant drug trafficking. "Poverty and illiteracy made us particularly vulnerable. Anything new could come and we would succumb to it," he remarked.*

*There was, clearly, not a minute to waste. By 2003, Tuensang's Baptist association had set up a drop-in centre for counselling drug addicts. A year later, a HIV testing centre came up. In 2005, the ECS began running Grace Chapel, a supportive network for people living with HIV. A hospice for HIV patients was built in 2010. Many aver that if it were not for the concerted efforts of the Kejongs, over a period of two decades, the health profile of Tuensang would have been very different today.*

*It was a similar energy that Chingmak Kejong brought to education as well. "We discovered many things that were going wrong in our district. For one, Tuensang district had the lowest literacy for women among all the districts in Nagaland. It was clear, that if things were to change, an effective school education was central but it had no meaning for most families," he recalled.*

*Kejong averred that the ActionAid intervention was central to the success the ECS was able to achieve in terms of school education. "Our emphasis from the beginning of the intervention was on the local community taking ownership*

*of school education," he remarked. Ultimately, according to Kejong, it was all about values, "For the Chang tribals, relationship values are very strong and we leveraged that characteristic. The chief secretary of the state, R.S. Pandey, observed our work and evolved the Nagaland Communitisation of Public Institutions and Services Act, which was passed in the Assembly in 2002, giving local communities a direct say in how local institutions, including schools, were to be run. It was also in the period of the ActionAid intervention that the idea of the sochum emerged," he added.*

*Today, Kejong has come to be recognised as an important agent of change in the region. For him, the awards and international recognition that has followed in the wake of the ECS's focused social activism of over a quarter of a century, were just incidental to a single-minded pursuit of the idea of social transformation.*

*As Mrinal Gohain, ActionAid's Regional Manager at Guwahati, commented, "The ActionAid intervention ended in 2010. When I went back in 2012, it was gratifying to see how Chingmak and his colleagues had been able to take things forward. The community had hung on to the gains made under that intervention and extended them greatly. It is a very special set of people who can take an idea to the community and a very special set of circumstances that can see the idea germinate."*



## How Chendang Became A 'Vegetable Village'

*We first caught a glimpse of Chendang village from a vantage point high above the valley where it lay. There it was, one among the eight villages that fall in Tuensang district's Sangsangnyu block, a small, unassuming cluster of houses sprawled out on top of a low hill, accommodating an estimated 170 families. It was an extraordinary story of enterprise that shaped Chendang village and gave it the title of 'Vegetable Village' that it wears today by virtue of producing over 20 tons of farm produce every year. Such an outcome was the result of hard work and an intimate understanding of how the distinct agro-ecological characteristics of the region could be utilised.*

*The Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS) had a relationship with the village that went back to the late 1990s when a few Self Help Groups had been set up there. Chongsen, a senior ECS representative, remembered doing a baseline survey of the village in 2004. It had 121 households at that point and the harvest could hardly sustain the community beyond two or three months in a year. For the rest of the time, the villagers survived largely on money made by cutting down trees and selling timber.*

*The question of ensuring sustainable livelihoods for the villagers of Chendang became crucial and this was one of the central objectives of the ECS-ActionAid intervention as well. The possibility of cultivating vegetables slowly began to be explored. Remembered Chongsen, who was part of brainstorming sessions with the community, "During one of our early meetings at Chendang when we were urging the villagers to cultivate vegetables, an elderly man stood up and asked mockingly, 'Can vegetables replace rice?'"*

*This was a significant question because, according to Naga tradition, cultivators of rice had always enjoyed a higher social status within the community. In 2005, the state's Horticulture Department asked the ECS to adopt a village and develop its farming potential. Chendang was chosen. Slowly, a village that would grow only paddy and maize was encouraged to grow vegetables and other produce.*

*Take the humble potato. It was not actually foreign to the region – Tuensang had always cultivated the tuber – but yields from local varieties were low. At the same time, procuring quality seed tubers from distant locations was prohibitively expensive. Over time, and with the*



*ECS liaising with agencies such as Krishi Vigyan Kendra and the Department of Agriculture Nagaland, challenges like these were overcome. With seed tubers from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, reaching its farmers, the average annual production of potatoes shot up dramatically bringing in handsome profits.*

*It was a similar story with other vegetables. Chendang's cabbages, cauliflowers and carrots soon began to flood the local markets. Besides the ubiquitous onion, radish and brinjal, it grew high-end produce like capsicum and broccoli as well. The learning curve also meant understanding pricing mechanisms. Initially, the large capsicums produced here were sold for one fifth of their cost until the actual rates for the vegetable in markets elsewhere became known.*

*ActionAid assisted this process of giving Chendang its identity as a farming model by supporting it in building water tanks, storage facilities for seeds, and the acquisition of farming implements. In 2006, the village got its own bus to transport produce, again with AA's help.*

*Chendang went on to be officially acknowledged as one of Department of Agriculture Nagaland's 52 'Vegetable Villages' that produced a variety of vegetables through community farming. In February 2014, one of its farmers, Asangla Chang, represented the village at Krishi Vasant 2014, the biggest ever congregation of farmers from across the country, held at Nagpur in Maharashtra and inaugurated by President Pranab Mukherjee.*

*By 2013, the village was earning Rs 12 lakh from the sale of potato alone. But this was not just about rising income. Profits from vegetable cultivation went on to change the face of the village in innumerable ways. A village that had no toilets, and had pigs running everywhere, was totally transformed, not least in the area of school education. According to Chongsen, while most of the village children became school dropouts after Class IV in the earlier days, today 250 children from this village were studying in the higher classes in Tuensang and other towns, even while the students in Chendang's own school classrooms rose from 30 to around 750.*

*We caught up with Bambou, a village elder from Chendang, as he worked on a potato field, and realised how driven the vegetable farmers had become. Said Bambou, "We are experimenting all the time and now we have a demonstration greenhouse, where we are trying to grow new vegetables, and even flowers like marigold." He also touched upon the fact that farmers here used chemical fertilisers and pesticides minimally, which meant that Chendang can potentially leverage the new consumer demand for organic produce and get better returns for their produce in days to come.*

*The potential of Tuensang as a honey producing region has also been recognised by the Nagaland Beekeeping and Honey Mission. According to the Mission, traditional beekeeping practices have been in existence in the district for centuries and the region has innumerable species of bees.*

*Chendang also benefited from beekeeping and produces an estimated 2.50 metric tonnes of pure organic honey every year.*

*It is the impact of growing vegetables that has led to this efflorescence in a small Naga village. Chongsen smiled as he recalled the old man who*

*had questioned the shift to vegetable farming so many years ago, “In 2006, when we went back for an impact assessment, that same person made it a point to come up and tell me, ‘Yes, vegetables can replace rice.’” This, in brief, was how Chendang could emerge as a symbol of farming enterprise.*



## Tuensang's Women Learn To Help Themselves



*Over the centuries village women in Tuensang have displayed admirable qualities of survival. Just watching them farm on vertiginous hill slopes fills one with admiration for their innate grit and resilience. Yet, they are also extremely shy and perhaps wary of outsiders. If one moves to talk to them, they just smile and duck under a tree or a shop counter, quick as a flash.*

*Life in this part of the world was not kind. No free lunches were doled out to anyone, man or woman. But women were clearly dealt the short end of the stick. Mountain winds chaffed their faces, heavy loads of timber bent their backs; farm implements turned the skin of their palms into sandpaper and the smoke in their kitchen squeezed out the air from their lungs. But, perhaps most disturbing of all were the age-old traditions of the community that had conspired to consign them to a strictly secondary social status. There was no question of women inheriting property, no possibility of them participating in political decision-making, and a drunken, abusive husband was as common here as it was in the rest of the country. Yet, they kept going, these women, weaving incredibly lovely shawls on age-old looms, or stringing together beads in striking patterns that talk about tribal allegiance.*

*The ECS began to encourage the setting up of Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the areas it worked in Tuensang district because it was clear that too many women there had too little cash in hand. Phutoli Kejong revealed how women in the late 1990s would come to her and beg for loans of as little as two or three rupees, just to feed their children an evening meal. This convinced her about the need to set up SHGs, which would allow these village women the financial support they clearly needed. That was how, before long, some 37 SHGs emerged.*

*ActionAid, when it forged the long-term partnership with the ECS in 2001, viewed women's empowerment in terms of assertion of rights and had reservations about whether gender justice could be achieved through microcredit generation. Slowly, through a process of discussion, the ECS-ActionAid intervention came up with a strategy to empower women financially for social action. By 2004, there were over 140 SHGs in the 16 villages under the intervention, and AA made available a lump sum grant of Rs 800 to each of them so that they could focus on their entrepreneurial activities, access their entitlements, including the 25 per cent of the grants made available to*

*Village Development Boards that was statutorily earmarked for women and, most importantly, collectively raise their voices on issues that affected them.*

*A decade later, women like Thonti Naro, a woman farmer of Chingmei village, were reaping the benefits of that early mobilisation. She told me that, just the day before, she had earned Rs 2,000 within two hours by selling produce from her farm. This village had seven SHGs, each classified alphabetically. Naro belongs to Group C. “The best thing about being a member of an SHG is that we can do things together and draw strength from each other’s presence. I would have found it difficult to go to town by myself to sell vegetables and interact with strangers. So what we women now do is to go in twos to the market.”*

*This has been the pattern adopted by most SHGs because it made sound financial sense. Toshila of the ECS, explained. “Two is a good number. The two women can help each other load and unload their wares. If more women went then more money would have to be spent on bus fares, and this would cut into their SHG earnings.”*

*In the same village we met up with Maro, Mongshai and Anti, who were part of a nine-member SHG set up in 2010. Each of the women in the group invested Rs 2,000, and their SHG now had a corpus of*

*Rs 45,000. Anti described the evolution of her group with great clarity, “We began lending money within the group, charging only a nominal interest of two per cent. To people outside the*

*group we charged an interest of three per cent. Then we decided to scale up our activities. We would take the bus that came at 6 am and go to Tuensang to buy supplies that we brought back by the return bus. This we would sell to people in Chingmei for a small profit.” Later, the group decided that they would make the most of this trip to town by taking the produce they grew, whether it was cabbage, ginger or chilli, and sell it at better rates. Then they would shop for sugar, milk, tea leaves, even clothes, and bus it back to the village. Earnings were thus doubled.*

*There was money to be made, but a price to be paid as well. “Fortunately, we are used to carrying heavy loads on our backs, but sometimes our necks would hurt, no doubt about that,” admitted Anti. But what kept these groups together? For one, all the women were from the Chang tribe, although from different clans. For another, there was generally a spirit of collective functioning. “We know that we will gain if we all stand together. Any misunderstandings are*



*quickly sorted out through mutual discussions. We do not allow small things to become big,” Naro said.*

*Besides, everyone realised the value of the extra money. There is this story that a middle-aged woman from Hakchang, another village in Tuensang district, once related. When her first two children came along, she could not spend anything on their education because she had no money of her own – in fact, she was dependent on her father-in-law for even a bar of soap to wash clothes. By the time her three younger children arrived, she had joined an SHG, and could actually send them to a private school. The difference in the quality of schooling that her first two children received in comparison to the*

*youngest three was the difference that her SHG had made to her family.*

*Here, then, was a collectivity that had almost created itself and which carried on despite the occasional hiccup because everybody got something out of it. Earlier husbands, particularly, greatly resented the time the women spent out of their homes in SHG meetings and activities. When the money started coming in, however, attitudes began to change. Besides, there was more – and better quality – food available at home.*

*Naro’s husband now makes it a point to help her load the vegetables on to the bus for Tuensang town – and for good reason.*









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