



ROWMARI, INDIA

# In India, peace building goes ultimate



PHOTOS BY ANNE PINTO-RODRIGUES

**ATHLETES:** Phungbili Basumatary (left) completes a pass during an ultimate game in Rowmari village, India. She says the sport has allowed her to bond with teammates from different ethnic backgrounds.

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues / Contributor

On a cool Sunday afternoon, a white disc whizzes through the air in Rowmari village, located in the Indian state of Assam. A teenage girl snatches it out of the air, earning applause and supportive whoops from the other players on the field, who all come from different villages.

The American flying disc game officially known as ultimate – or “ultimate Frisbee,” for those not worried about trademark infringement – was virtually unheard of in this part of the world till a few years ago. But it’s rapidly gaining popularity throughout northeast India. That includes Assam’s Chirang district, where over 30 girls and boys gathered in Rowmari village last December for a coaching session organized by the Action Northeast Trust (ant), a rural development nonprofit. They are some of the best players from the hundreds of ultimate teams in and around Chirang. After a warmup, the friendly match begins.

Chirang was not always this idyllic. Starting in the 1980s, the region experienced over two decades of ethno-religious conflict between the majority Bodos, Muslims, and the several other groups. Poverty is rampant, as are gender inequality and child marriage. But ultimate, with its emphasis on self-governance, provides an opportunity to foster peace among Assam’s newest generation.

Today, 3,500 children and youth from nearly 100 villages participate in the ant’s ultimate leagues.

“I’ve observed a substantial transformation in the behavior and attitudes of the young people in communities where the ant’s Frisbee program is active,” says Dr. Deben Bachaspatimayum, a social activist and teacher of peace studies based in Manipur, another

state contending with violence in northeast India. “This bottom-up peace-building approach is helping youth discover a society based on equality and justice. ... I’m sure this work done at the grassroots will impact governance in the long run.”

## A level playing field

The region is largely peaceful now, but as recently as 2014, outbreaks of violence in Chirang and neighboring areas left over 100 dead and thousands homeless.

“After the 2014 conflict, we were looking for something that would bring communities together,” says Jennifer Liang, co-founder of the ant. “Something girls could get involved in. ... We found ultimate Frisbee to have a lot of the values we were looking for.”

It’s a mixed-gender, noncontact, and relatively new sport, meaning everyone in the community would be building their skills from scratch. The game involves two teams of seven players each, who score points by completing passes. There are no referees – instead, players must communicate with each other to call fouls and resolve conflicts.

It’s also a famously easy sport to pick up. “It hardly takes half an hour to learn how to throw and catch,” says Ms. Liang. All this, she and her team surmised, made ultimate the ideal tool for strengthening social cohesion and gender equality in Assam.

So in 2015, the ant introduced a very simple version of the game to a cluster of villages known as Deosri that had been struggling with violence. This program continues today as the Manoranjan league (meaning “entertainment” in Assamese and several other Indian languages). The league recruits young people between the ages of 11 and 14. Team members all come from the same village and, as a result, tend to be from the same ethnic group. The challenge is learning to work with the opposite gender.

“Initially in these villages, the boys were skeptical about being in a mixed-gender team,” says Ms. Liang. “In due course, they realized that the girls are equally

## WHY WE WROTE THIS

### PEACE

Compassion, respect, and communication are all essential for lasting peace. In a conflict-racked area of northeast India, an unfamiliar sport is helping foster these skills.



important.”

At the end of each play session, the community youth mentor engages the players in discussions about fair play, school attendance, and other age-specific topics.

Manoranjani players can graduate to the more competitive Rainbow league, where the ant introduces more rules to promote peace building. Each team must include players from a minimum of three different villages, three different ethnicities, and three different mother tongues.

“It’s so heartening to see friendships developing between players from different communities,” says Ms. Liang. Rainbow sessions end with group discussions on burning social issues like child marriage and suicide.

Since 2018, the ant has partnered with the Ultimate Players Association of India (UPAI) to develop the sport via local and regional tournaments. Former chief operating officer Manickam Narayanan says that you won’t find the most technically impressive players in Chirang – at least not yet – but “the way they conduct themselves and the spirit of the game they exhibit is very inspiring.”

Mr. Narayanan calls out one team from Chirang that participated in the National Championships in late February, noting that the strongest players were the girls. “The boys accept and appreciate the fact that girls are a key part of the team,” he says.

### Ultimate success

Playing with the ant has been particularly transformative for Sonali Ray and Phungbili Basumatary. In 2019, both girls qualified to be part of the national team traveling to the 2020 World Junior Ultimate Championships in Sweden. That tournament was canceled due to COVID-19, but Ms. Ray and Ms. Basumatary had already become role models. In an area where families are often reluctant to enroll their daughters in sports, Ms. Liang says the duo’s success put many parents’ minds at ease.

UPAI expects to send an India team to the 2025 junior championship, and depending on their performance, Ms. Ray and Ms. Basumatary will have a chance to try out for the national team again. In the meantime, the girls continue to play in the ant’s Rainbow league while also attending school.

They coach ultimate, too, and travel to different villages encouraging youth to pick up a flying disc.

Ms. Ray credits the sport with building her confidence and counteracting some of the negative messages she received as a young girl. “Growing up, I used to be very scared,” she says. “In school, if I didn’t understand something, I wouldn’t ask the teacher any questions. ... By playing this sport, I’ve learnt that girls can be as successful as the boys.”

The way they see their neighbors has changed as well.

“The mixed-community team structure has taught me so much,” says Ms. Basumatary, who hails from Assam’s majority-Bodo Thuribari village. “Since we have to self-officiate, I’ve also learnt to say sorry whenever I make a mistake.”

Ms. Ray, who’s part of Durgapur village’s Rajbongshi ethnic group, had a similar journey. Before bringing ultimate to the region, “there were times we would tell children from other communities or religions not to play with us,” she says, with great remorse. “Now I treat everyone equally.”

Although ubiquitous in America, Frisbees and other flying discs are available only in one sporting goods store in Assam’s capital city. Ms. Liang hopes that in the future, discs will become available in every village shop, as easy to come by as a soccer ball.

“My dream is that Frisbee doesn’t remain a nonprofit-led program, but rather something all children can play,” says Ms. Liang. ■



**ROLE MODELS:** Phungbili Basumatary and her parents (photo left) reflect on her ultimate career. A mentor engages Manoranjani players (photo below) in a postgame discussion.

