



# NEWSLETTER September 2016

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## Assam Foundation of North America

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## Support Fertile Ground and work of Peggy Carswell

Fertile Ground is a non-government organization based of Canada. For the last 18 years, Peggy Carswell who started the organization has been working in Assam, working with small-scale tea-growers, and farmers to develop sustainable organic farming techniques. Peggy who hails from Vancouver Islands, Canada, was out to make a ten-week adventure to India some 18 years ago. It turned out, that this initial adventure was a turning point in her life as well as for all those whose lives she has deeply touched through her compassion and strife. Peggy arrived in Assam at a time when it was wrestling under civic unrest with various insurgency activities, and state sponsored counter terrorism activity. While things have become politically more stable since, Assam continues to be under a general plague of underdevelopment, poverty, and wide spread unrest. Notwithstanding the challenges, Peggy has continued to help train interested constituents of farmers the basics of organic farming, fair trade practices, develop an export network for their products. During this time she was also able to help establish a cooperative for her stakeholders, as well as develop a resource center as a place for coordination of the many activities the agency was leading. Assam is one of the only two places on earth where tea plant is native to the ecology. Since British occupation of Assam, the tea from the state has enjoyed a special status among tea connoisseurs in the world, and yet native Assamese farmers have only controlled a small segment of the tea industry. It is only in the last few decades that small-scale tea farmers have ventured into the market and that is where Peggy's philosophy and vision merged with the emerging possibilities. Peggy's organization started with small-scale donations and volunteer service of people from Assam and Canada, and eventually they were able to partner with Rotary Club, Digboi, Assam.



Peggy Carswell,  
Founder of Fertile ground



Workshop at Fertile  
Ground



These collaborations provided her the opportunity to establish a training and resource center with demonstration gardens. This center, which is called Adarsh Seuj Prakash Organic Demonstration Garden and Training Centre, is located about 540 kms away from the state capital of Assam. The center serves as a place where local stakeholders, men and women receive training on organic farming practices, and develop other skills for sustainable livelihoods. Besides, the training center also has many demonstration gardens and a small retail shop to sell tea, and other products grown in the gardens. Peggy's work has attracted attention and curiosity of visitors from many parts of the world, but more importantly it has touched the core of many people's lives. She has worked diligently with farmers standing side by side as they struggle to develop sustainable farming practices, while simultaneously competing against a brutally competitive and exploitative tea market. Peggy's work encompasses so much more than training farmers, it is about creating synergies of hope and compassion among people who have been traditionally disenfranchised. Her vision has allowed many other opportunities to folks to collaborate and seek opportunities, particularly within the larger ambit of a system that does not deliver to the needs and potential of its people.

It may seem uncanny that a Canadian woman with sparkly eyes and golden hair would find her life's work across so many miles, among people who have become not only part of her work but life. Peggy is an unsung hero, an everyday inspiration whose steady commitment to justice has created transformative opportunities for others; it underscores the need to recognize ordinary people whose extraordinary work makes this world a better place. Peggy and her work capture the essence of being an "Oxomiya" simple, unassuming, relentless, committed, and yet profound. Thank you Peggy, you are one of our own, and we owe you our gratitude.

Visit fertile ground at <http://www.fertile-ground.org/> and find out more about their work and support them!

# The Brahmaputra meets the Mississippi, that is Fertile Ground!

Where the Brahmaputra Meets the Mississippi (WBMM) is an annual fundraiser organized for the last 11 years in the Minneapolis/St.Paul area. Originally started by Milin Dutta, a resident of the twin cities who has roots in Assam, India, this event has eventually found a life of its own and is now run by a dynamic group of volunteers.

The basic goal of the fundraiser is to create cultural and social interface between the local community and the diverse cultural groups residing in the cities. As the name of the event suggests, the event symbolizes a confluence of people, cultures, and ideas. The event is premised on the notion that social interface creates cross-cultural bridges, develops global citizenship, and nurtures the idea of a diverse and dynamic democracy. Minnesota in general is perceived as a state with many liberal values with great outcomes in socio-economic, health, and educational indicators. It is home to many newly arrived immigrants from East Africa, Burma, and has traditionally welcomed immigrants from all around the world. It is home to seventeen of the top Fortune 500 companies, which reflects the robust economic activity in the state. In spite of all the accolades the state bears, it has its set of challenges in reconciling with the endemic struggles of dealing with racism, cultural exclusion, etc. The health disparities outcomes, recent police shootings, racial tension in the community, all exemplify that there is still a long road ahead to establishing justice, of all places even in Minnesota. Our event is a first step toward bringing discrete groups of people from all walks of life together to celebrate diversity, and in establishing an abiding commitment to social justice here in the cities and around the world. With that the fundraiser has helped us support many rural socio-economic development programs in Assam, India. Notable beneficiaries of this event have been, SPADE, RGVN, and Fertile Ground. In the past money generated from the event has helped support the domestic workers program, where young rural women who worked as domestic helps in urban cities were given skills training, job training, and skills to support against abusive employers and work situations. For several years the event supported a rural women's weaver group, by providing them logistical training, skills training, financial literacy training, and marketing and sales training. The women have exceptional traditional weaving skills but were manipulated by third party middlemen for loans, and sale of their wares. We were able to successfully train the women in setting up a microcredit (self help group) as a buffer toward economic exigencies as well as to serve as a support group for the women. In the last three years, the fundraiser has been supporting the Fertile Ground founded by Peggy Carswell, which works on organic farming and sustainable livelihoods in Assam.

## WBMM 2015 event



Cultural program



Bazarat the event

## Dedicated Volunteers at WBMM



**WBMM 2016 Fundraising event** is on **Saturday, September 24 at 5 PM - 9 PM in CDT at Powderhorn Park, South Minneapolis, Minnesota 55407**. If you live around the area please support them by attending. Our dedicated volunteers are working tirelessly to make this event a success. The event details can be found at the Facebook page for the event at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/152089318244150/>. If you cannot attend the event if you still support WBMM by donating at <https://fundrazr.com/campaigns/5meGb>. Your help can make all the difference.

### **Event Schedule for Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

5.00pm to 7.00pm: Bazaar and Silent Auction

6.00pm to 7.00pm: Dinner

7.00pm: Cultural program starts

### **Tickets:**

Performance and Dinner - \$25 (community will cook together Indian meal during the day, please contact us if you like to learn Indian cooking and help us)



# Tree 4 all Autumn Festival on October 15<sup>th</sup> at Bridgewater, NJ

The Bridgewater Township Shade Tree Board (Team Arbor) and the Assam Foundation of North America (AFNA) are hosting "Tree 4 All" Autumn Festival. The free community event will take place on Saturday, 15 October from 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM at Chimney Rock Park. The park is located on Chimney Rock Road, Martinsville in Bridgewater, New Jersey. The event will include a memorial tree dedication, live music and dance, and festival food. The celebration will mark Bridgewater Township's achievement as a recognized Tree City USA community for the 20<sup>th</sup> consecutive year and honors the community for its commitment to effective urban forestry management. There will be activities including job fair, cupcake baking contest and cultural program.

AFNA started this collaboration last year with the township of Bridgewater in NJ and has continued its partnership to celebrate Arbor Day as a yearly event. This will be an opportunity for AFNA to showcase bio-diversity and eco-tourism opportunities in Assam and the work done by AFNA. We planted trees and unveiled a plaque in honor of Forest Man of India, Jadav Payeng in the same event last year. If you are around NJ/Bridgewater on the date, do plan to be a part of this event. For more information about the "Tree 4 All" celebration and vendor participation please feel free to contact Chris O. Poulsen, Township Director of Human Services, by telephone at (908) 725-5750 or by email at [cpoulsen@bridgewaternj.gov](mailto:cpoulsen@bridgewaternj.gov). AFNA is proud of our volunteers in the New Jersey for their dedication to make this event a success.

## Join AFNA's Fall book Club

The Assam Foundation of North America (AFNA) is organizing a book club with support from the New York State Council for the Humanities. The focus will be on five Pulitzer-Prize winning novels that examine the American Dream. The first 15 participants who join will get **free** loaner copies of the novels mailed to them.

The club will meet for five 90-minute sessions this fall, tentatively scheduled for **Thursday evenings from 6-7:30 pm on Sept. 15, Oct. 13, Nov. 17, Dec. 15, and Jan. 12** (location TBD). If you're interested in joining, please contact Loni Bordoloi Pazich at [lbordoloi@gmail.com](mailto:lbordoloi@gmail.com). Here is a list of books the book club will be reading this Fall. AFNA thanks our volunteer Loni Bordoloi Pazich for taking initiative and driving this book club.

<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> by Junot Diaz: Dominican-American Oscar Wao's nerdy fantasies provide a springboard for Diaz to interrogate the multi-generational experiences of one immigrant family.	<i>Interpreter of Maladies</i> by Jhumpa Lahiri: These short stories look at the challenges of Indian-Americans in adapting to life in America while staying true to the culture and traditions of previous generations.
<i>American Pastoral</i> by Philip Roth: Roth's protagonist Swede Levov lives a blessed existence in postwar New Jersey, reflecting all the prosperity of the period. Until, that is, his family has to contend with the changing social and political landscape of the 1960s.	<i>Humboldt's Gift</i> by Saul Bellow: Two writers and friends experience different very different pathways through life in the 20th century, reflecting America's changing relationship to art, commerce, and life.
<i>A Visit from the Goon Squad</i> by Jennifer Egan: Egan's series of linked short stories - featuring overlapping characters and events - follow a group of musicians and music executives as life sends them in directions none could have anticipated.	<i>This Book club is supported by New York State Council for the Humanities</i>



[Donate](#)

### Newsletter team

Editor: Dr. Lipika Deka

### Contributors of articles in order

Support Fertile Ground and work of Peggy Carswell  
by Dr. Ankita Deka

The Brahmaputra meets the Mississippi, that is the fertile ground  
by Dr. Ankita Deka

Tree for All Autumn Festival by Niren Choudhury  
AFNA Fall Book Club by Loni Bordoloi Pazich

### Get Involved:

**Monthly volunteer call:**  
First Sunday, every month,  
10am - 11am PT  
Dial in: 641-7153272  
Access Code - 457920#  
**Volunteer Email DL:**

Subscribes to  
[afna-vols@freelists.org](mailto:afna-vols@freelists.org)  
at  
[freelists.org/list/afna-vols](http://freelists.org/list/afna-vols)