

# The Quarterly BITSian

BY ANURADHA GUPTA ('86 MMS), K JOSEPH ('74 ECON) AND SHANKAR ANANTHANARAYANAN ('81)

## THE QUARTERLY BITSIAN BITSUNAMI TEAM

Our response to one of nature's biggest calamities – The South Asian Tsunami of December 2004. Our attempt to make a difference in the lives of people in two hard-hit Indian villages.

A lot of people have forgotten the horror of the tsunami but the BITSunami team has been toiling away – even before we chose them as Quarterly BITSians, they have managed to get a lot of media attention including our own cover story in the last issue. Venkat, the Project Coordinator, put it rather succinctly, "Our actions speak for themselves. The extensive media coverage that the project has received in newspapers like the Hindu, Indian Express, I-Newswire and various websites is doing us (BITSians and Alumni) proud."

### WHAT IS BITSUNAMI?

BITSunami is a BITSAA project that aims at the long-term rehabilitation of two villages, *Naaluvadhpathy* and *Pushpavanam* in the *Nagapattinam* District of Tamil Nadu, India.

After the disastrous tsunami of

December 26, 2004, some members of the BITSAA Chennai chapter met at the office of **Sudeep Jain, IAS** (former collector of *Nagapattinam*, the district worst hit by the tsunami in India, and a BITS alumnus himself) in Chennai.

"Will we be able to raise funds to adopt a few villages? I can take the responsibility of executing the rehabilitation measures, restricted to constructing houses and providing for means of livelihood, like catamarans, fishing nets, etc. Each village will require roughly Rs. 20 lakhs for this basic help." This was the introspective *modus operandi* proposed to the BITS alumni on the Jan 4<sup>th</sup> 2005 meeting, and the seeds of BITSunami were sown.

The enthusiasm of the BITSAA Chennai chapter and Sudeep's personal commitment to raise local funds and steer the initiative through the

bureaucracy led to the creation of a project report. Funding support emerged from the top corporate organizations including Wipro, HP, WeP, and Infineon. The government formally approved the BITSunami initiative in this development effort. What started as

### The BITSunami Team



**Visionary:** Sudeep Jain IAS ('86 EEE)

#### Trustees:

S C Babu ('73 ME Chemical)  
Ravin Kurian ('81)  
A Shankar ('81)  
K Srikanth ('88 Chemical)  
Joseph Antony K ('74)

#### Executive Committee

Rauf Ali ('72)  
PP Narendran ('85)  
M Subramanian (Civil)  
Rajesh Bhaskar ('90 MMS)  
Bhasker Ayer ('77 MMS)  
Dilip D'Souza ('76 EEE)

#### Project Co-ordinator:

K S Venkateshwaran ('80 Mech/MMS)

#### Advisory Committee

R Nagarajan ('64 Telecomm)  
R Parthasarthy ('86 EEE)

a desire to collect clothes, in the words of **S C Basu**, moved from relief to rehabilitation to sustainable development, and



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Boats built with the fishermen's involvement

The members meet once a week to review the progress of the BITSunami Integrated Development program and to chalk out future plans. Several visits have been made to villages to get a first hand report on the progress.

It was also observed that the girl students invariably dropped out of schools from 8<sup>th</sup> standard onwards due to the lack of

**The 2,54,464 trees planted by the BITSunami trust created a new Guinness World Record for the most trees planted on a single day.**

lead to the formation of the BITSunami Trust.

Galvanized by these efforts, **Vice-Chancellor Dr. Venkateshwaran** urged that the effort be spread over a longer period to facilitate "integrated transformation" of the two villages. He gave real impetus to the initiative by making *Nagapattinam* a Practice School station and BITS, Pilani extended wholehearted support.

## PLAN OF ACTION

BITSunami has charted development plans for every sector of the village economy, starting with sanitation and water supply, and extending to agriculture, fishing, education, et al. These plans will be implemented over a five-year period.

Though BITSunami's formal style of functioning is still emerging, it operates at three levels: Trustees, Executive Committee and Advisory Committee. The Executive Committee is led by **Venkat**, the (outgoing) Project Coordinator (Venkat is leaving for the US after doing some excellent work on this Project and we wish him luck). **Srikanth** tells us that the Committee is working out a model through which it will be able to tap the resources of the alumni as and when they can contribute with their skill-sets.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

For the nine months ending October 2005, the BITSunami team has made considerable progress on a series of fronts and contributed to the overall development of the adopted villages.

1. **Land Reclamation:** 125 acres of agricultural land at Pushpavanam, which were rendered unusable due to the sea muck layer brought in by the *tsunami*, have been cleaned up. This feat was accomplished in less than a fortnight's duration to avoid the onset of showers that would have rendered the entire land unusable.
2. **Boats:** 10 fiber reinforced plastic boats were manufactured by setting up a boat-manufacturing unit at the fishermen's colony at *Pushpavanam*.
3. **Education:** The infrastructure at schools in the two villages was grossly inadequate. The BITSunami project handed over one new school building at *Pushpavanam*, and 39 more classrooms at the other schools are under construction. Desks were arranged for the approximately 1800 students in the 12 schools. Tanks have been constructed, and linked to water sources in all 12 schools.

proper toilet facilities. Toilet Blocks for girl students were constructed in each of the 12 schools in both the villages, while ones for boy students are on their way.

4. **Housing:** Many villagers living along the coast had lost their houses to the fury of the *tsunami*. The BITSunami Trust is constructing 37 houses of 300 square feet each in the village of *Naluvadapathy*.

5. **Plantations:** To decrease the impact of future *tsunamis* thousands of tree saplings were planted in the two villages on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2005. The 2,54,464 trees planted by the BITSunami trust created a new Guinness World Record for the most trees planted on a single



Endowments and scholarships created to motivate students and teachers

day.

## ROAD AHEAD

With most of the activity relating to restoration of livelihood having been completed, the BITSunami team is already marching ahead. On the anvil are Village Knowledge

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Centers for both villages that will disseminate valuable information to the villagers. The team is also planning Dairy Farm Units, designed to be alternate livelihood means for the agriculture dependent villagers at the villages. Ideas for the formation of self help groups, creation and management of knowledge centers, institution of scholarships and endowments are been looked at.

### IMPACT

The achievements of the BITSunami team speak for themselves. Wipro, a corporate sponsor, which initially promised 100 lakhs, has now committed 250 lakhs to the initiative. The response of the villagers is overwhelming. Even the BITS Pilani PS program has been transformed forever. Probably for the first time, BITSians are now involving themselves in social sector projects right from their PS days.

According to **R Nagarajan**, a BITSAA Sydney member on the team, "The secret of this excellent progress is the contagious enthusiasm of the core BITSunami team. While visualizing the project and its team I had never dreamt that they would meet every Saturday

without fail for more than 2 hours. Hats off to them!"

**Rauf Ali**, the Yoda of the team with his experience in rural development jokes, "For somebody who has been involved with NGOs for decades, the interesting part is working with a bunch of techie businessmen who come into this world with no background. The perspectives are new and refreshing. Sometimes they cannot understand why biological systems do not respond to management fundas! But BITSunami is a start to something big."

**Dilip D'Souza** and **Anuradha Gupta** are now on the team. Dilip sums up very touchingly, "I don't know of any other alumni effort like this one. This really is a measure of how much the tsunami affected these Chennai folks, how much they wanted to 'do something'. But most of all, how carefully they thought through what it means to 'do something'. Not band aids and then go home but take up the challenge of the long term.



BITS PA 1 Students in a Women's Development Center

Take the building of clean, usable separate toilets for girls, it has a huge pay-off; you keep girls in school longer. Or getting a boat builder to actually set up shop in Pushpavanam right on the beach, and produce the boats and to modify the design to the specs his actual customers wanted."

The BITSunami team is a bunch of perfectly ordinary middle-class urban Indians, much like us, and yet in some ways they are doing their best to understand their country. Not necessarily thinking about it that way, but doing it anyway. There is something about ordinary people doing extraordinary things. And who am I kidding. This also touches me because of the BITS bond.



## BITSAA East Coast Event raises \$4000 for BITSunami

The BITSAA East Coast Event on 29th October 2005 at New Jersey raised \$4000 for the BITSunami project. This included \$2300 that were raised by Pavilionshop.com by the auction of elegantly framed score sheet of the India vs Pakistan 2nd Test in 1999 in which Anil Kumble took all 10 wickets in a single innings - autographed by Anil Kumble himself. The organizers were Venu Palaparathi and Renchy Thomas; the auction commenced at \$101 with Paddy Padmanabhan and Venu Palaparathi priming the interested parties ahead of the auction. As the bids climbed beyond \$2000, the people that remained in the fray were Satish Paul, Neetu Nehra, and Pragati Panday. In the end, Satish Paul of Wissen Inc. became the proud owner of the memorabilia and also the biggest contributor on the day towards BITSunami with his winning bid of \$2300. Renchy's presentation about the BITSunami Project and Paddy's repeated requests helped raise an additional \$2000.

**There is still a shortfall of Rs 8M. To contribute, please visit [www.bitsunami.in](http://www.bitsunami.in)**