

BY SUKANYA AND A SHANKAR

PS-II AT BITSUNAMI AND THE LATEST ON OUR PROUD INITIATIVE

What was PS-II at BITSunami like, on the eve of the first anniversary of the tsunami, the project takes stock

Practice School II – that famed system at BITS, Pilani, where in engineering and science students go out into the world to apply knowledge gathered on campus, to real-life problems. PS II at BITSunami, an NGO formed towards long term rehabilitation of the two tsunami hit villages two of Nagapattinam seemed a strange prospect.

All initial doubts about whether we'd be involved in social work and what 'projects' an NGO could possibly offer engineering students were dispelled during a splendid 4-day orientation, held by BITS alumni actively involved in tsunami rehabilitation.

BITSunami is not merely an NGO. It's the platform for the wedding of three systems – a university, the society and administrative organs – where technical knowledge can be applied to nascent and hitherto

unsolved problems of rural India to produce scalable and viable solutions. The thrust areas - GIS based technical mapping of resources of the villages of Naluvadapathy and Pushpavanam, bridging the urban-rural digital divide, creating viable sanitation plans for use in rural India – were exciting.

Desk research, preliminary tours of the villages, interaction with villagers and the women's self-help groups, scouring through huge records at the collectorate and meeting the 'village elders'... it was a field worker's delight, an engineer's ideal launch pad. But more than ever, even before the end of my first module, my role in the



The 2005 Record Guinness Plantation – 2,54,464 in 24 hours

big picture became clear.

I was doing my bit towards putting rural India on the road to technological development, I was convinced that my work was quite a big drop in the slowly growing pool of contributions and I was finally gaining the satisfaction of having worked on a project that could help change the lives of faceless people, rather than on a faceless project that could get tossed into the bin later.

Listening to the tales of BITSians who chose to steer from the beaten track and take roads less traveled always left me surprised and awed. Though I had heard of computer scientists who had turned wildlife photographers and chemical engineers who had chosen to grow orchids for a living, for the first time I had the opportunity to interact with such people in flesh and blood at BITSunami.



PS-II Students conducting GIS Mapping



Dr J Radhakrishnan, Collector Nagapattinam inaugurating a new Village Computer Centre

I proudly listened to the story of how well-networked alumni had reacted to the havoc wreaked by the tsunami and come together to help the tsunami-affected with whatever financial help, timely care and know-how they could share, despite hectic professional lives.

And all through PS, I kept meeting or hearing about BITSians, who had unhesitatingly shed corporate skins and their well-founded sense of security, to help marginalized and needy sections of the society.

My project was a conglomerate one. The status of development of the villages was to be identified. I collected and collated information obtained from the collectorate, the state statistics division and the local people. I moved on to the identifying of Development indicators, which are monitoring tools in developmental programs, and their adaptation to the rural Indian context. Further, indicators were narrowed

down to help in community-specific areas like the villages, to help monitor the growth of the villages over the period of BITSunami's Integrated Development Program. Later, I studied the potential of Village Knowledge Centers as an effective rural communication tool and a proposal for a VKC in the villages and its structure and content was made.

My Project Guide was Mr. Joseph Antony and BITS appointed the BITSunami Project Manager, Mr. K S Venkateswaran, the PS faculty.

Understandably, my work took me to and from Nagapattinam very often. I was always welcome anywhere, anytime – at the collector's office, the sub-collector's office, the BDO, etc. and I was instantly recognized there as the BITSunami girl!

And I made adventures out of every trip – whether it was trekking with my PSmates from Pondicherry till Rauf Ali's FERAL field office with my PSmates, taking the bone-rattler two-hour journey to the villages from central Nagapattinam, trying to gain access to government records or being temporarily grounded in Nagapattinam when the river was in spate and communication lines were zapped...

On one of my trips, I stayed an iron-willed woman, a professional non-commercial-film maker called Revathi. She had given up her career, to help in the rehabilitation of an extremely marginalized community called the 'nari-koravars'.

These people had scrambled away from their habitat during the tsunami and did not return for a week, failing to register themselves with the officers enumerating affected people. Revathi and some of her friends came to know of them. They ensured allocation of temporary shelters, are aiding their livelihood rehabilitation, and running a school for the surviving kids.

A tryst with the local women's self-help groups, to help out PS I students in their surveys [which were aimed at collecting information to help them establish small community businesses] revealed their zeal in





starting off cottage businesses, that empowered them and asserted their importance in society. The women were skilled in mat weaving, basket weaving, making coir products and in milk production and distribution.

Probably the biggest learning experience for me was the tree-

plantation drive that BITSunami undertook in October, and which later became a world record for the highest number of trees planted in 24 hours. I was in Nagapattinam for a week. Other than interacting with the team there, I

got to learn the customs and ideologies of the village people. The paper work, liaison with the government officials and charge of the control room on the two days of the event enhanced my leadership abilities! A very inspiring BITSian I met during the course of PS is **Chandra Anil** who has been profiled in our cover story.

I met Chandra at the AID-Chennai office to learn about the primary education scene in Tamil Nadu in general; she is a veteran in this area. Her observations about attrition in middle school levels and when girls drop out in the period of puberty, with the reasons thereof were revelations and helpful in BITSunami's fledgling education programs.

As I look back at my apprehensions about my PS-II, I am more than grateful that I had this unparalleled experience that has helped me grow, as an individual and enhanced a facet of mine that I did not know existed in such great measure.



On Schedule

By A. Shankar

As this edition of *Sandpaper* goes online, BITSunami announces the completion of the first year of operations.

Taking rehabilitation well beyond ad hoc relief activities in *Pushpavanam* and *Naluvadapathy*, BITSunami has stuck to the schedule.

What started as an impromptu response by a few alumni to a call for rehabilitation rather than a mere "donation" for ad hoc relief efforts mounted by various entities in the country, has now transformed into a five-year, million-dollar project to address the rural-urban divide with a multi-disciplinary approach.

The commitment of BITSunami, along with the partner corporates, includes providing coastal defense mechanisms, reclaiming agricultural land, supplying boats and nets, establishing self-help groups, building a network of IT-enabled village knowledge centers and a host of other activities

Initiatives in Education

Our Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Venkateswaran's advice to go for an integrated transformation of the two villages, sparked this initiative. Last year, our Practice School students conducted surveys and did a GIS (Geographical Information System)-based resource mapping for the village, designed sanitation and water resource plans and studied benchmarks for monitoring development. Both PS-1 and PS-2 students are taking an active part in the measures to accelerate the transformation efforts in the villages.

The Trust marked one year of its fruitful existence with a function in Naluvadapathy on February 9 when District Collector J. Radhakrishnan handed over three school buildings, launched a computer centre and distributed science kits and Tamil learning kits to all the schools.

APPEAL TO ALUMNI... BITSunami needs the support and guidance from everyone who feels the need to contribute - in any manner. Write to K. Srikanth, Trustee, email: bitsaach@yahoo.com or get in touch with any of the local bitsaa chapter heads.