NEWSLETTER OF ASSOCIATION FOR INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT-PENN STATE / STATE COLLEGE CHAPTER

aid Sankalp

FALL 2001

Letter from the President – Uma Asher

AID Penn State is now four years old. And how it has grown! Our fortnightly electronic newsletter, *Samkshep*, reaches around 200 people. Our semesterly newsletter, which you are holding in your hands, reaches even more people. Our annual Spring food festival has become a Penn State tradition. And most important, we are becoming a resource for the campus community. When the terrible earthquake shook Gujarat in January 2001, people contacted us asking how they could help. We have been contacted when people needed speakers or resource persons about South Asia, and for help with diversity or development issues. It is heartening to see AID's growth as an increasingly active and visible diversity resource on campus.

At the same time, it's a challenge to keep AID's efforts focused on its main activity, i.e. raising money for grassroots development efforts in India. Between the overload of graduate school, weddings, births, migrations, graduations, and the occasional financial panic, AID volunteers consistently give their time weekly (sometimes more often) to keep the money coming in.

Since summer 2001, AID has launched two important initiatives in addition to the usual fundraising activities such as selling food/water at football games and the annual food festival. First, we are exploring an arrangement that would enable our regular supporters to have their contributions directly deposited from their bank account into AID's account. This initiative will take time, but when it does occur, it will obviate a lot of time-consuming and labor-intensive paperwork, which our student-based chapter can ill-afford.

Inside...
The AID Retreat, AID Conference Report, articles, pictures and more...

The second major initiative is the film discussion series, which began this semester. It consists of documentary screenings on alternative Sundays. Screenings are open to anyone, and the presence of students from various countries, and from fields as diverse as population studies, geography, public health, and engineering, has greatly enriched our discussions.

This semester, AID also ventured in new directions. One was a fundraising sale of Indian handicrafts as part of the HUB Late Night events. It turned out to be very successful for an impromptu event and it was a lot of fun. The second was participation in a peace rally on campus. The rally was organized in the wake of attacks on Asians after September 11. AID used the opportunity to underscore the belief that grassroots development, such as anti-Taliban organizations secretly engaged in providing basic health care for all and education for girls and women, act as a way of ensuring peace. We believe that protecting the fundamental rights of all should be integral to any peace or nation-building effort.

Over its four years of experience, AID has grown more confident and innovative. We are grateful for the participation of all our student volunteers and for the support of the State College Indian community. It is the vision and energy of our faculty advisor, Jayashree Sonti, that holds us all together. AID has earned a reputation for commitment, thoroughness, and, despite the not-quite-cheery documentaries, fun. We look forward to a bright future for AID Penn State.

http://www.clubs.psu.edu/aid http://www.aidindia.org/

Come and join us.

2001 AID Retreat in State College

The retreat that took place over the last weekend of July, was a result of a conversation we had with AID Saathi, Michael. Kavitha and I were driving Michael from Pittsburgh to Maryland and were complaining how we never seemed to be able to interact with fellow AIDers on a personal level. The only time we met people from other chapters face to face was at the annual conference, where the agenda ensures that the sessions stretch late into the night. Michael remarked how for several years all his friends' (and their families) gather for 5 days each year to share news, participate in some group work and have fun.

The idea appealed to us instantly. We knew that the State College chapter was too small to hold a conference in the near future. But, there were several chapters within reasonable driving distance and there was a good chance that they would welcome the idea of a retreat. We sent out feelers to other chapters and the response was an enthusiastic 'Yes'! We didn't even know of Baltimore chapters' existence until we heard from them! We spent some time surfing the web-sites of all nearby State Parks, wondering if there was any difference between rustic and primitive campgrounds, class A, class B ... We finally settled on the Black Moshannon State Park about 25 miles from State College and were lucky to get the last 2 group camping areas.

We had expected 20-25 people to show up but as the weekend approached, we started getting more and more positive responses and the final count stood at 40. With the Sonti's large basement able to house a fourth of them, we knew that accommodation at least would not be a problem. AIDers from Washington DC, Baltimore, New York and a few others arrived on Friday night. AIDers from Pittsburgh and Boston arrived on Saturday morning directly at the venue for our fortnightly meetings. People from Columbus promised to meet us at the campsite directly as they were running behind schedule.

After the talk we had pizza and left for Black Moshannon State. It is a forested area with a huge lake (and a bog ecosystem!) way up in the mountains. We had reserved two group camping sites - each of which can accommodate around 20-25 people. Groups of people went off hiking, boating or to play ultimate Frisbee. Divas took over the camp fire initiation and monitoring roles. We had apples, bananas and roasted corn - all before the last set of people returned from a long hike. They were starving by the time we got around to baking the potatoes - wrapping them in aluminum foil and placing them in the fire (delicious after you add some salt, pepper and lemon)! With hunger merely allayed but not vanquished we moved on to Anju's delicious lasagna and salad. By the time dinner was over, darkness had set in and everyone gathered around the campfire. At this point we didn't really know what to do - the campfire was blazing along merrily but the circle was so large that you couldn't really see all the people to have a serious discussion. No one seemed to be in the mood for it either - everyone had had too much fun to suddenly shift tracks into AID mode.

The state park has a quiet hour restriction from 9:30 onwards so we had to quiet things down. Earlier in the evening, we had scouted out level patches of ground and set up all the tents. We weren't really sure if there were enough tents for everyone but the next day we heard about at least one person who had a 4-person tent all for himself - so I guess things went OK. And you can forget all that nonsense about quiet wilderness nights. Perhaps because we were close to the edge of the forest, the leaves rustled so loudly that I could have sworn it was raining.

The next morning, we packed up, had bagels and cream cheese for a cholesterol laden breakfast, and returned home. Mora from Boston screened a wonderful documentary by Drishti Media Collective called Patta Patta Akshar Hoga (On every leaf a letter). It described how the adult literacy campaign in Dumka district in South Bihar took a life of its own and led to women's groups, directly elected representatives monitoring development schemes, improved health and a whole lot of other issues. Of course, the collector was very supportive of the campaign, but it was an extremely inspiring, and well-made documentary. We had a small discussion after that and went for lunch to Shalimar. People left directly after lunch and I think the movie was the perfect ending for the weekend - people left refreshed and inspired.

-Vamsi Veeramachaneni (vamsi@psu.edu)

Editorial

Another semester has passed by and brought new experiences for the AID/SC-Penn State chapter. One of them was a visit from AID Saathi Michael Mazgaonkar to Penn State. This was the first time we got a chance to interact with a person who is working at the grass-roots level in India. Many ideas we had about the work that is being done, and specific needs in India, changed, probably for the good, as a result of discussions with Michael. As someone said during Michael's visit, "We are learning more than just asking 'Is this sustainable?' for almost everything we are involved in." Michael's visit also brought up the idea of the AID-retreat that we are planning to organize as a regular summer event.

Also, we had an interesting Beaver Stadium food stand experience. There were times of close calls, desperate last day phone calls, and emails to find enough volunteers. Thankfully we managed to get enough volunteers, and on the particular game day when we expected the least number, seventeen volunteers showed up, a record attendance. It goes to show that people are willing to help, and we have a good volunteer base to continue. Overall, not a bad season, especially since we have been invited to (wo)man a food stall for the next season. Thanks to all the volunteers and special thanks to the stand managers.

As a final note, the editors would like to thank all those who wrote the articles, provided the photographs, and helped in various other ways. Happy holidays to everyone and may the New Year bring joy all around.

- Rushabh, Ram & Divas

Money Raised this fall

Money raised this fall from games :	$1600
Money raised from the HUB late night sale :	$130
Money raised from the wedding (AID volunteers helped with catering and serving):	$500
Net:	**$2230**

Treasurer: Malati Raghunath (malati@psu.edu)

Food Festival 2001

Project Trip Report

During my India trip this summer, I visited a project in Kultali island, situated in the Sunderbans of West Bengal. This was a pre-funding visit on behalf of AID-Austin. The Austin chapter was reviewing a proposal submitted by Baikunthanagar Tarun Sangha (BTS) concerning health care development. So, one muggy morning in August, I set off for BTS accompanied by my friend Swati and Sushantada, who is the secretary of BTS.

The journey from Kolkata took about 6-7 hours, utilizing all modes of transportation. First, we rode the Lakshmikantapur local train from Ballygunge Station to Mathurapur junction. Then we hired an auto to Raidighi from where we used boats to Moipith. The boat ride was very scenic and an interesting experience not to mention smelly because of the fishes! Swati and I were the objects of amusement and unabashed curiosity for the rest of the passengers! Once we landed at Moipith, Sushantada told us that we had about 45 minutes walk to get to Baikunthnagar. However, due to the heavy rain that morning, the road was extremely muddy, and it took us about an hour and 30 minutes to get to Baikunthanagar.

BTS was conceived as a youth club in 1978 with no development issues on their agenda. Its transformation to an NGO took place in 1982, when floods devastated Kultali, and government help was not forthcoming. BTS operates in 6 villages of the Kultali block, and their activities include: childcare, literacy programs, income generation projects, women's credit groups, and farmers' club.

The rain persisted throughout the afternoon, making it impossible for us to go out and meet the villagers. This was unfortunate as I was hoping to interact directly with the villagers/beneficiaries of BTS. Instead, we utilized the time to discuss various issues related to the health care project and general activities of BTS. The BTS volunteers showed us some posters that they use to increase awareness in nutrition, sustainable agriculture, and home gardening. In the evening, we were entertained by a rendition of Rabindrasangeet and Nazrulgeeti by the volunteers! We got to eat authentic Bengali food cooked in *sorse tel* (mustard oil). It was simple but delicious. They thought I was nuts to refuse their fresh *maach* (fish) and my explanations of vegetarianism did not impress them!

Life is incredibly tough in the Sunderbans– the natural beauty does not compensate for the lack of sanitation, hygiene, running water facilities, electricity and all other amenities we take for granted. Despite my relative familiarity with rural India, the poverty of the Sunderbans was a sobering experience. I gathered from my conversations with BTS volunteers that the villagers dream of good schools, improved employment opportunities, and a better life for their children to break the cycle of poverty. Visiting BTS and interacting with the volunteers provided a context to the fund raising and other development activities of our chapter, and of AID as an organization. I feel very lucky to have had opportunity to visit one of our projects. It strengthens my commitment to AID and also the hope that our actions count.

-Hema Swaminathan (hxs186@psu.edu)

2001 AID Conference, College Park - My Experience

I had been with AID for almost a year, and my level of involvement was confined to volunteering at the fund-raising events. I did make it a point to attend the CSH whenever possible, but I was largely ignorant about issues such as the administrative structure within AID, policy, accounting and decision-making procedures, and inter-chapter relations -- in short, the real stuff. Fortunately, I got a wonderful opportunity to attend the all-chapter AID conference held over the Memorial Day weekend in the place where it all started 10 years ago - the College Park campus of the University of Maryland. Kavitha told me that it would be a wonderful chance to get the bigger picture, and I decided to jump in. And so Vamsi, Kavitha, Hema and myself set out for D.C. on a damp and soggy morning. All of us were very excited, the other three about seeing old friends, and myself about making new ones. In the car, I received a crash course on a variety of topics starting with, "What is the administrative difference between AID-Penn State and AID-State College?", and between energetic discussions, I pored over pages of printed matter, like a student preparing for an exam. We proceeded to the house of Hema's friend, who had graciously agreed to accommodate us in his absence.

AID Conference 2001, Group Photo

The next morning, joined by Shailabh and Rashmi, we proceeded to Dr. Bhagat's house, where the conference was supposed to begin with a tree-planting ceremony. But by the time we got there the

leaving for the College Park campus, so we followed them. After registration and a good breakfast, things started pretty much on schedule, with a welcome address. It was an emotional and nostalgic experience for many, to be sitting in the very hall where the first *Community Service Hour* had been held by the founders. This being the 10th year anniversary, the conference was very well attended by chapters from all over the US. At this point I must take my hat off to the organizers who did a fabulous job of organizing the event, given the logistical complexity of managing 200+ people. The first hour was devoted to taking stock of the last 10 years and a look into the future directions of AID. Subsequent talks were more technical and involved, details of which I will not go into. Despite this, the packed audience kept up the enthusiasm. The highlight of the post-lunch session was a moving talk by Mallika Dutt, a women's rights activist, on women's empowerment issues, followed by a talk by Dr. Mohan Bhagat, Professor in the University of Maryland on "incorporating" AID (as in AID Inc.). This talk was followed by the *General Body Meeting*, and updates by individual chapters on their activities.

The schedule was punishing, with as many events crammed into the day as was possible, since there was so much to be discussed and so little time. Inevitably each discussion would spill over to the next slot. By the time everything was over it was 11p.m. We would reach home by midnight, wake up the next morning at 6:30, and head back to the conference. This was the schedule we followed for those 3 days, which whizzed past me in fast forward mode.

Noteworthy talks on the second day were by Venkatesh (ex-Penn State) on "Alternative Technologies" and by Shailabh (also ex-Penn State) on "Returning to India". The afternoon featured a presentation on the *Hundred Block Plan* by Dr. Sunderraman, and the subsequent eagerly awaited discussion on the role of AID in the plan. A consensus could not be formed due to paucity of time. There were also some useful workshops on administration issues, accounting procedures, etc. This was followed by the most riveting talk by P.Sainath, a renowned journalist, on the deplorable conditions of the landless, agricultural laborers in India which has resulted in millions of hungry and malnourished people despite a bumper grain harvest, accentuated by faulty policies of the Government and the corporatised media. The last day of the conference featured among other things, documentaries and discussions on the adverse conclusion that afternoon. We packed our bags, and made our way back to State College later that night after a brief stopover in Baltimore Harbor for some sightseeing.

Dr P Sainath with a houseful audience at midnight

It would be appropriate to say that the conference was an eye-opening experience for me. Those three days of incessant, unrelenting bombardment taught me more about AID than I had ever hoped to learn. It also made me think and realize that we have been conditioned to the extent that we accept majority and prevalent viewpoints as being right. There are compelling arguments and perspectives that seemingly fly in the face of conventional wisdom, and it is important to have an open mind to appreciate them. Watching those documentaries and videos gave me a better idea of who it is that we are selling water for, and humbled me into realizing how fortunate we all are. It is important for us all to constantly remind ourselves of the bigger picture, and not to get bogged down by small frustrations. People have voluntarily and selflessly sacrificed their professional careers in the noble cause that is AID, and seeing them in person was a source of energy and inspiration for me.

It would be unfair to say that the conference was all work and no fun. The great company I had during the trip ensured that we did have our fair share of fun and excitement as well. On the first day, we had a great time at the Smithsonian, spending the afternoon at the Mall, sightseeing and window-shopping. The absorbing discussions with Vamsi and Kavitha in the car about the Sardar Sarovar Project, resulted in our losing our way at Maryland at night without a map, and we had to spend some anxious moments before being rescued by Hema and Shailabh. The visit to Baltimore harbor was memorable. And the word game we played in the car on our way back taught me that the capital of California is Sacramento, not Los Angeles. In short, I came back, enriched by an unforgettable experience.

-Vaidyanathan.S. (vts103@psu.edu)

Adivasis in Maharashtra take control of their future

More than a decade of "development" in the "backward" Raigad district, just outside Mumbai, has brought the local adivasis no drinking water, irrigation, school, or healthcare. Worse, the new Mumbai-Pune expressway, constructed to reduce the four-hour drive by 45 minutes, has displaced several villages. The communities who narrowly escaped displacement aren't waiting for the next round of "development". The local community, along with activists based in Mumbai, has begun taking action that is already yielding phenomenal results.

I visited two villages, with Anish Mokashi (physics, IIT) and Mahendra Singh (graduate, TISS) of the Student Action Committee, and a few AIDers. In Dandwadi--a Katkari village of 54 houses--we met the Katkari activists: Parshuram, Sonyabuwa, and Vishnu.

The next day, they took us to Muthachi Thakurwadi, a nearby village located among the Sahyadri peaks, which is completely inaccessible in anything except sturdy footwear (the locals' agility in Hawai *chappal*s makes the transnational sport-shoe industry seem ridiculous).

In Dandwadi, the villagers had pitched in Rs. 40,000 over five months to organize *morcha*s against local officials. Their demands: an apology from a forest official who had hurled caste abuse at them; a pipeline to provide drinking water; and recognition of their right to the local forest. Besides organizing the *morchas*, the villagers were also establishing a village school.

When I visited Dandwadi, the offending forest officer had been fired, the villagers had won the right to protect a large tract of local forest and were entitled to two-thirds of the forest produce, they were going to receive free saplings of their choice, and their school was in session even before the term had begun.

No Dandwadi resident has studied up to Class 10, but that doesn't disqualify them from running a school. The teachers teach what they know: Katkari, Marathi, and ecology. Anish teaches math. The village pooled in money for Parshuram, the head teacher, to visit Krishnamurti schools in AP (no, not Rishi Valley), which served as a model to improvise on. Parshuram's vision and his passion for the school were truly inspiring. I could not believe it when I heard news that he died of a snakebite. The village now provides for his widow and two toddlers, and she teaches in the school.

In Muthachi Thakurwadi, the 100 families derive their subsistence by farming for Maratha landowners. Yet these mostly-illiterate Thakurs have been practicing watershed management for at least 50 years! They have secured drinking water with no outside help. They are in the middle of another project to secure irrigation for their fields. Irrigation will enable them to phase out their mainstay as alcohol suppliers to the region and turn to agriculture instead for their livelihood. The cooperation, communication, and vision of villages where there is no phone, road, or school truly redefines development.

The Student Action Committee's expenses are Rs. 15,000 per month. It has decided not to become a registered organization to avoid legal harassment by officials who resent its effectiveness. To visit the villages, or to make a personal donation (cash or materials such as books and supplies), please e-mail uxa100@psu.edu.

-Uma Asher (uxa100@psu.edu)

Sankalp [Sanskrit]: A resolution or promise

http://www.clubs.psu.edu/aid/