



SPRING 2002

Letter from the President:

A Spring of Hope

It has been an encouraging semester as we look back at a series of successful efforts in the past year. AID has broken new ground in terms of visibility and collaboration. We are glad to have joined hands with other Penn State student organizations in the past year. First, AID co-sponsored a PeaceWorks-led rally after 9/11/2001. We also sponsored a bone-marrow donor registration drive at the suggestion of one of our supporters. This was important because finding donors for ethnic minority patients is very difficult. We joined other student organizations at a HUB Late-Night fundraising event, where we sold Indian handicrafts donated by AID volunteers. We became official supporters of the Penn State Dance Marathon. At our January concert, we helped publicize the Vedic Society's upcoming talk and a Center for Performing Arts event featuring dancers from Nrityagram. Collaborating pays off: Erica Antonson of PeaceWorks helped us find drums for the concert (many thanks to her, and to Pete Macchiarolo, for the loan of the drums), saving us the sizeable cost of renting them. In March, AID also became a member of the International Student Council. With these efforts, we have increased AID's visibility on campus, as well as spread awareness about development issues. It is important that AID should function as a part of the campus community, and not simply as an organization of Indian volunteers.

During this period, we did not neglect AID's core business. We have been working, along with other AID chapters in the US, on rebuilding Gujarat in the year since the devastating earthquake of January 2001. AID is modest-sized organization and raised only

\$300,000 nationwide, which we are glad to report is being put to productive use.

Our chapter has been in touch with two organizations: Disha and Saraswatam. The latter contacted us through a former PSU graduate, while the former was recommended by Gautam Desai, an AIDER from North Carolina, who spent months in Gujarat after the quake. While the review for Saraswatam is still under way, funding for Disha has been approved jointly by us and two other chapters. The \$65,000 that will eventually be disbursed through Disha will help rebuild livelihoods of shoemakers, salt workers, and weavers. All together, \$216,000 has been allocated to 10 organizations covering much of the earthquake-affected area. Further details can be found at www.aidindia.org/gujarat.

Inside:

Prayer meeting report, AID-India conference report, Spandan concert pictures, and more!

Our chapter now faces many challenges. We need to raise money for our HBP (Hundred Block Plan) commitment next year. We would like to support more projects, and take up more fundraising activities. Our ranks have grown in the past 3-4 months, but we need more volunteers. We are particularly constrained in the face of tragedies like the Gujarat riots. Over Spring Break, AID held a well-attended interfaith prayer for peace. But riot victims need more than prayers – fearful and grieving families are coping with the loss of livelihoods and homes, with medical bills, and with disability.

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

<http://www.aidindia.org>

Come AND FIND out what we are all about!

AID needs every bit of support it can get. If you are not already involved, please consider getting in touch with us. We value the diversity of backgrounds and talents among AID volunteers, and salute the volunteering spirit of the Indian community of State College. We hope you will join us soon.

- Uma Asher (uxa100@psu.edu)

An inter-faith prayer meeting

An inter-faith prayer meeting was organized at 6 p.m. March 7, 2002 at 209 Hammond building, Penn State University Park campus. AID volunteer Vamsi Veeramachaneni coordinated this meeting. Although it was spring break, there were about 25 attendees. The meeting commenced with a minute's silence to mourn for the victims of the recent communal riots in Gujarat, India.

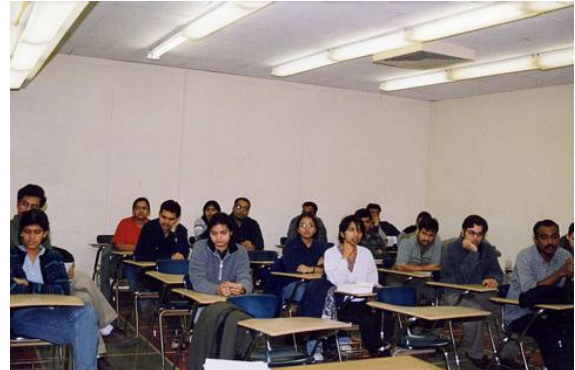


Narasinh Mehta's "*Vaishnava Janato*" poem was recited by Prachi Shroff. This poem, a favorite of Mahatma Gandhi, illustrates the virtues of the people who are dear to the Almighty. This invocation was followed by another of Mahatma Gandhi's favorite "*Raghupathy Raghava Raja Ram*". Most attendees joined in the chorus to sing this popular *bhajan*.

All religions of the world preach the same principles of love and non-violence. This was evident when the verses from the sacred texts of Bahai, Christianity, Hindu and Islam

faiths were read out. Cynthia Coleman, representing the Bahai faith, read the teachings of Prophet Baha'ullah. Nitish Mathew expressed the concepts of social justice from the Holy Bible. Hema Swaminathan represented the Islam faith and read verses from Surah-1 (Al Fatihah). Mandhar Deo chanted a few *slokas* from the Holy Vedas which exhort the virtues of self-discipline and tolerance.

After the prayers, Vamsi welcomed discussion on the subject of recent communal violence incidents. The attendees expressed their opinions about the causes and effects of such riots. A need to get the secular-minded intellectuals to be pro-actively involved was discussed as the best solution to eliminate religious fanaticism. An e-forum to discuss the current situation in India and to promote communal harmony is set-up. The e-group link http://groups.yahoo.com/group/india_think/ is devoted for constructive dialogue on eliminating the evils of communalism in India.



Kavitha Nellore handed out a petition that AID is planning to send to the Govt. of India on behalf of the Indians in State College, PA. This petition expresses our concern for the victims of the Gujarat riots and demands swift action to restore peace in the region. This petition is available at <http://www.indiatogether.org/petitions/gujarat/riots.htm>

- Malati Raghunath (malati@psu.edu)

AID: A way to make new friends...

AID-India Conference

When we (Vamsi and I) heard about the AID –India conference to be held around New Year’s eve in Vizhakatnam, the prospect of meeting all the AID saathi’s, and the opportunity to visit the villages in Srikakulam, where saathi’s Ravi and Aravinda had been working, was very appealing.

I rode a train from Hyderabad to Vizag, and Vamsi was supposed to join me at Vijaywada. I was sleeping when the train arrived at Vijaywada, and when I woke up I saw a group of people getting into our compartment. I thought I recognized one of them, but I wasn’t too sure. Then I heard Ravi calling out my name, and I realized that the person who had looked familiar was one of our saathis, Balaji. Vamsi, who had forgotten the compartment number and was frantically searching for me, then got in and was greeted by a big group of people. It was a pleasant surprise, and all of us chatted for a while, before getting some sleep.

When we reached Vizag, we went to one of my relatives place for breakfast, and then headed for the conference. The first session of the conference was focused on the efforts by AID-India chapters in Bangalore, Pune, Mumbai, etc. It was decided that a biannual newsletter will be published and sent out to all AID contacts in India. In addition, we decided that each chapter in the US would collect addresses of member’s parents and interested relatives in India, so that a database of “AID supporters” can be established for subsequent use. The task of putting together the newsletter was delegated to the volunteers from Bangalore. The conference also highlighted the need for more active fund raising in India, especially to help those groups that cannot accept foreign funds.

After this discussion, Ravi started discussing the idea of AID volunteers learning how to make soap at home. The

idea was to then spread the know-how to villages, so that they can be self-reliant instead of depending on outside sources for something that can be manufactured at home.

The rest of the morning was dedicated to discussing the ECAAL (Elimination of Corruption At All Levels) campaign. 10,000 hot-off-the-press ZERO RUPEE notes with a promise to "Neither give nor take" were distributed, for display in offices and homes. The difficulties encountered by common people when they try to get around corruption were discussed. How does one tackle such a prevalent social problem in practical terms? While it is easier for those of us living in the US to pledge our support to the battle against corruption, how can someone who has virtual constant encounters with this problem combat corruption? The ECAAL campaign has as its vision a long-term and sustained battle against corruption.

Lunch break provided an opportunity to relax for a while and we enjoyed the excellent meal arranged by Kiran and his team. We then proceeded to go to Kailash giri, a beautiful mountain-top place overlooking a beach. The natural beauty made us reluctant to begin a serious discussion for a while, but eventually we became engrossed in a discussion of the dowry issue and methods to combat the problem.

By the time we got back to Ravi and Aravinda’s home, Priya Ranjan, an active volunteer from AID-Maryland had arrived, and the next morning found us all sharing the long bus ride to Srikakulam. The first village we went to was Tholapi, and here we met Suryanarayana and Varalakshmi, who coordinate most of the Srikakulam-based activities of GRASS (Grass Roots Action for Service Society). Suryanarayana has donated a 1.5 acres field to GRASS and we discussed potential uses for the field such as organic farming, experimenting with water conservation methods, etc.

AID: A way to learn...

A jeep ride transported us to the next village called Rapaka, where we met members of the Bibi Fatima savings group. The villagers here weave jute and produce beautiful bags and table mats. We discussed a way of increasing the meager hourly wages (Rs. 24/day) of the weavers, based on increasing the profit margin from products sold in cities.

We then went to Appalagraharam village to visit the children's libraries. Our spirits were high, and we were singing various AID songs on the way to the village. At the village, the children showed off all their books and also indicated that they would like to start reading a Telugu newspaper. Ravi asked for monthly donations from some of the villagers, and we promised supplementary money, to subscribe to the Eenadu newspaper. Some of us held discussions with the village elders regarding the possibility of the villagers learning how to make soap and jute products, in order to supplement their income. We demonstrated soap-making to them, while Ashok from Vidyan Vahini

demonstrated some science experiments (that looked more like magic) to the kids.

We returned to Vizag in time to celebrate the New Year. The next day, we heard from full time social workers about their experiences. This session provided invaluable information to others thinking about starting similar projects. We also had an intensive session about the project review process in AID-USA and how to improve upon it. The feedback provided to us by NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) and the Saathi's has provided us with a clearer picture of where the improvements need to be targeted.

We were really glad to have attended the conference, and we felt rejuvenated like we always do when we attend an AID conference in the US. We really hope more volunteers from State College can attend the conference in future years.

- Kavitha Nellore
(kavitha_nellore@yahoo.com)

HOW CAN I HELP, YOU ASK?

WE CAN HELP YOU WITH THAT!

- **Become an AID-Penn State volunteer**
 - **Help us make newsletters, posters, flyers, etc.**
 - **Donate Indian handicrafts**
 - **Volunteer to help out with AID-organized events such as the food festival, selling food at Beaver stadium, etc.**
 - **Design websites**
 - **And more!**
- **YOU decide the level of commitment you feel comfortable with. We welcome volunteers at all levels!**

AID: A way to have fun...

Editorial

AID-Penn State has now been around for more than four years. We have learnt a lot during these four years: we have learnt how to productively interact with the local Indian community and to evolve as a resource for incoming Indian students and the university at large, while preserving our primary purpose of fund-raising to support development projects in rural India.

Fund-raising occupies most of our attention and energy and we have had to be very creative and diligent to maintain a steady source of "revenue." Recently, we have been exploring a new way to enhance our fund-raising activities. The idea spawned from discussions of how we could streamline, as well as increase, funds collection. A team, led by Jayashree, and including Namita, Hemant, Malati, Srin and

Preetham, has been working to put into place an Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) system for AID-Penn State. When operational, EFT will allow automatic monthly funds transfer from "subscribers" bank accounts to the AID-Penn State chapter account.

Automated fund-raising would allow AID volunteers to devote more time to other activities such as recruiting new volunteers, increasing awareness for AID-related issues, and project reviews.

We continue to learn from new ideas contributed by our volunteers, and through interaction with AID Saathi's working in India. A steady supply of new ideas and new volunteers will be important to ensure our growth.

- Ram Dixit (rwd10@psu.edu)

Treasury Update

Malati Raghunath

Spandan Concert Net profit raised = \$ 450

Upcoming AID-related events:

- AID-USA conference at Stanford University during the Memorial Day weekend. For more information, please visit <http://www.aidsfbay.org/conf2002/index.php>
- Possible visit by AID Saathi's Aravinda and Ravi during the summer.

AID: A way to make a difference!

Spandan Concert
January 26, 2002

No, No.
I need a much
longer piece of
tape!



To sit,
Or not to sit...



Must maintain
balance!



Hmm...
I wonder if they
are doing a "V"
behind my head.