

US Students Visit Watershed Village; Donate \$3,700

May 18, 2009 was an unforgettable day for 20 junior college students and two professors from Allegheny College, Pennsylvania. Ever since they signed up for a 21-day cross-cultural experience tour to India and saw pictures of Baste village, the new Balwadi and the club's Watershed Area Development Project at Baste and Potkhal village, they spontaneously thought of a fund-raising drive to do something for the village community. They were led in this initiative by their Communications professor (PP Arrow Sinha Roy's daughter, Ishita). The students split into four groups, arranging a 'Bollywood Dance Night', designing and selling a special India motif T-shirt, getting parents to buy special 'exam-time kits' they sourced and passing the hat around to everyone – including the Dean. This effort raised around \$3,700 for Baste village and its children.

After a brief stop at Potkhal, the students arrived at Baste to a rousing reception. The throng of excited villagers, all decked up in their best, showed the students around the new Balwadi, in its last phase of completion, and its amenities. The students were also invited to local homes to see how villagers lived, where they slept and their kitchens still fueled by wood fire. The group gathered for a long interaction session with villagers where they were treated to special welcome dances (the students ended up teaching the villagers a few American grooves), impromptu acts by individuals and a long questioning of the ways of life. The experience was an emotional one for the students as villagers of all ages showered them with love and blessings. The Allegheny fund-raising team leaders handed over 50 sets each of five basic textbooks as well as 30 sets each of slates and chalk for the students of the four Balwadis of Potkhal and Baste. Through our service partner NGO, NIRID, they donated Rs. 66,000 for a new water supply pipe scheme for Baste *pada* that will benefit about 300 households and save women hours of long, arduous walking to get water. "We walk in the dark of the night to a far-off well, because that is when water gathers at the well bottom. We have to brave snakes and scorpions on our way, as we cannot afford torches," said one housewife. The Allegheny team is consulting our Watershed Project Rotarians

to decide how exactly the balance amount can be spent for the welfare of the community.

A special 'Home Beautification' contest was organised and winners were judged on the best Rāngoli designs put up by each hut. The students donated Rs. 1,000 for the prizes.

As the day came to an end, a tinge of sadness crept over party. In just a few hours, people who lived across continents had become like family to the villagers of Baste and vice versa. As the coach left for Mumbai, the villagers bid a fond farewell to the students, shouting their good wishes in return for their generosity. The students are determined to create a foundation when they get back, so as to continue making an annual contribution for Baste and its inhabitants.

(Article & photos by PP Arrow Sinha Roy)



A general view of the interactive session



A welcome dance performed by Baste villagers