



Campus calling

Bucolic settings and guileless village folks are beckoning the diligent students of Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Gandhinagar, thanks to the novel initiative of their Board of Governors called *Gram Fellowship*.

Under the programme the students are expected to spend three to eight weeks either during the winter or summer break in a village of their choice. It could be either an individual or a group of two to three.

The idea behind the initiative was to help students

have a feel for the rural India, its culture and realize the concerns of the villagers and thereby seek to bridge the rural-urban divide to an extent.

In essence, it breaks free from the straitjacket of a project as it is an experience centering on empathy.

Says Prof. Jaison Manjaly, Dean of student affairs at IIT, Gandhinagar,

“Many of the students are rarely exposed to rural life, economy, practices and ethos, despite calls by policy makers, since independence. And IIT Gandhinagar aspires to address this concern by expos-

ing its students to rural India. Through *Gram Fellowship*, we aim to encourage students to immerse themselves in the experience of what it is like to live in a village.”

Prof. Jaison wants the students to realize how people in the villages live happily even without sufficient resources. At the same time he also expects them to address the concerns of the community.

It is also expected that, during the fellowship, the students offer some social service, to the villagers. The students stay with the families.



Turtuk Village in Leh visited by Arya Adityan

During the stay the students are also expected to find whether there are possibilities of any intervention that could better the lives of the villagers.

“We would like the students to appreciate the problems at grassroots level and address their concerns. Through this, we want them to grow into good, caring human beings out of merely the individuals,” explained Ms. Vandana Yadav, Media officer.

As for the expenses, the institute reimburses return fare and nominal living expenses to the students. The students are expected to travel by non-A/c train or bus and air travel is not allowed.

Interestingly, if any student desires to take up any rural development project on their return, the institute sanctions Rs.25,000 per fellow. The institute would okay the project weighing its merits.

Upon return, the students are expected to make a presentation to the IITGN faculty and share their experiences with others on the campus.

Arya Adityan visited Turtuk in Leh for a couple of weeks. She found that although the weather was bitterly cold, the people were quite hospitable and warm to her.

Reminisces Arya, “I stayed with a Muslim family but they cooked vegetarian food separately for me as I am a vegetarian. They also gave me everything to keep warm in harsh winter.”

Arya wonders how, despite fewer resources, people there are leading a contented life and played ideal hosts to her.

She saw children carrying firewood and working like adults to keep warm.

“It was saddening to see such things,” she says.

Ms Piyusha Verma, another student visited Charida

village in Puruliya district of West Bengal and stayed there for 20 days. She lived in a local primary school run by an NGO.

The families she visited in the village were quite welcoming.

“They were inquisitive about my work and ensured comfort for me in a place far from Gujarat,” she says.

Priyusha found the job of a postman there most interesting.

“They identify with the individuals and families,” she felt.

It was an enriching experience for her as she was in the midst of people who lacked modern facilities and yet took life as it is.

“Staying with them helped me know people in the rural India,” she says.

Pankaj Tiwari, a student of Society and Culture visited Leh and Turtuk for about 21 days.

“It’s an arduous life the people are living as the temperature dips quite low and the region is quite hilly. Life though is quite without the hustle and bustle of an urban life,” feels Pankaj.

For Subodh Kumar a B.Tech. student, the journey to rural India offered an opportunity to have a slice of rural India and even a window to new career avenues.

This initiative is exclusively that of IIT, Gandhinagar and if emulated by other academic institutions, it would go a long way in shaping the rural India for the better.