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Students flock to NGOs for rural work

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Volunteerism is the 'in thing' in college campuses across the country, as students warm up to the idea of experiencing a bit of realism. And the impetus to this movement of sorts is being provided by NGOs wanting to offer the students a view of life from a different perspective.

If the enrolment figures available with NGOs Volunteer and Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) are to be believed, the number of student volunteers is growing.

Volunteer offered 60 rural fellowships to students all over the country for a period of six weeks. The fellowship offered a volunteer a stipend of Rs 3,000.

Seema Verma, who heads the Delhi office of Volunteer says that the programme had been initiated just three years ago with 20 fellowships offered in Delhi.

Volunteer has tied up with four other NGOs in different states to host the students for six weeks and expose them to the work being done in villages.

Of course, the fact the packaging is being done in an attractive manner helps. For the most part, the trip is packaged as a holiday cum reality

trip, with three of the stations being in Uttarakhand and two in Rajasthan.

CSE has also decided to harness student volunteers. Its inspiration is a teacher: Jean

Dreze and the Right to Food campaign which has always been drawing liberally from student volunteers for its efforts to monitor various government food schemes.

CSE plans to use volunteers from colleges to monitor National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGP) in 160 villages in 10 districts in 10 states

Says Richard Mahapatra coordinator for the NREGP project

in CSE, "We were inspired by Dreze who has used student volunteers so successfully in the Right to Food campaign."

The CSE programme is more long term as it is identifying

a university in each of the 10 districts which will tie up with NREGP permanently as a 'development partner' and send student volunteers every year as changemakers.

Sambalpur University, Jamia, JNU and a few others have already shown an interest, says Mahapatra.

The stipend will be Rs 100 a day for 16 days including a four day training session with

choice with the same stipends.

About six of these have been offered so far and three of the students have subsequently joined NGOs, says Porischa.

NFI is also working with National Service Scheme (NSS) the country's original youth volunteer programme in some places like Pune and Delhi.

The Centre for Science and Environment plans to use volunteers from colleges to monitor NREGP the inspiration being Jean Dreze and the Right to Food campaign

Dreze himself as one of the teachers.

"It has hardly been five days since we put the announcement on our website and we are getting responses from all over, says Mahapatra.

NGO *Pravah* in Delhi has been tapping youth volunteers with a six day stay in rural locations for some time while National Foundation for India (NFI) has been offering two month internships to 60 students in Delhi, Pune and Sambalpur to work with NGOs in the back of the beyond.

Barsha Porischa, the programme coordinator for the NFI fellowships says it has been an amazing journey from 20 internships offered in Delhi in 2005 to 60 internships being offered last year from Delhi, Pune and Sambalpur.

NGO *Patang* in Sambalpur which is NFI's partner there got 20 applicants last year and

25 this year for the 13 seats on offer.

Says Debashish Das of *Patang* "We sent students within and outside Orissa. They go mostly in groups of three or four. One group for instance went to the NGO Agramee in Kalahandi."

The students get a month-

ly stipend of Rs 5000 and three tier sleeper class train fare.

The rural rendezvous does not end here for the students. NFI offers apprenticeships for students to spend six to eight months with an NGO of