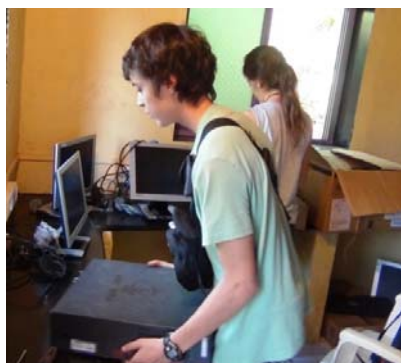


## VILLAGE PROJECT REPORT

Living in a city like Mumbai and studying in a school like the Dhirubhai Ambani International School gives you a really good idea how far we, as a country, have progressed in so many ways; we have the best of technology, infrastructure and most available conveniences. In full knowledge of this fact, the Village Project, through its aim of 'Empowering Rural India' has worked tirelessly to try and provide to the marginalised members of rural society those basic facilities and amenities that we have the luxury of taking for granted. This year, we continue our work in the two villages; Hassachipatti, located at the base of the hills of Matheran and Kumbharghar, an Adivasi wadi a few kilometres away from Patalganga.



In Hassachipatti, we were finally able to declare the computer lab (that we had built from scratch the year before) fully functional. The computers have been installed and are up and running. The students of the village now have an opportunity to further their learning and access resources previously unavailable to them. The Village Project is built on three pillars; Infrastructure, Education and Empowerment. This computer lab is a perfect example of Infrastructure and Education in practice.

Under the Infrastructure pillar, we are also continuing our work on the access road to the village. In order to access the village, we need to descend 500 feet, down a steep path, over rainwater streams and goat tracks, all made of rough stone and mud. The villagers are able to get up and down quite nimbly, though the path can be quite hazardous during the monsoon season, where the top layer gets washed away due to the heavy rainfall. This is why we've made the decision to make it safer by creating a series of concreted steps all the way to the village. To do this, we dig into the hillside to create the step, secure it with a wooden frame and finish the step with a layer of freshly-mixed cement. It requires a significant amount of strength to cut into the rock face using pickaxes and shovels, but the motivation to improve the living conditions of the people in the village keeps us going, even in the relentless heat.



Our work at Kumbharghar is also ticking on at a blistering pace. The toilet block we built last year is being utilised, and finally the village has the beginnings of a sanitation system. We're moving forward under the Education and Infrastructure pillars, building a school for the children of the village. Not only will we building the physical structure of the school, but we're also designing the curriculum that will be implemented here. In addition, we're trying a different model with this structure. For the toilet block we constructed the year before, we used bricks which we made ourselves. These were composed of a mix of sand and cement.

The sand was dredged from a nearby rainwater stream by the villagers themselves. The sand was then mixed with an appropriate proportion of cement and pounded into blocks, which were then cured with water.

However, this time, we thought we should try an approach that was economical, sustainable and which, could in time, provide a source of income to the villagers. We decided to use mud architecture for the walls of the school. We had tried mud architecture with some success when we built a mud house in the village. With the school, we're looking to refine the process by making stabilized mud blocks to build the school.

Mud architecture involves making mud bricks, but it's not as straightforward as one may assume. In order to create a brick that can withstand the vagaries of the weather, one needs to have a perfect mix of mud, clay, stone and a small percentage of cement to stabilize the block. Given the low cost of the method, once the school is built, the villagers can continue to make and sell these bricks as a source of income.

At this point, the school is still in its nascence; we're only just building the foundation. But given the speed at which we are able to work, it's only a matter of time before we get started on the walls. Building the foundation involved digging three foot deep trenches around the perimeter of the school. It was no mean feat; the school will have three classrooms and a balcony area, so our trenches had to be fifty feet long on the length of the structure and twenty on the breadth. The trenches were filled in with large rocks with cement poured over them to form the walls. The resulting pits were filled in with a mixture of mud and stone which we sourced ourselves by breaking down a nearby hillock.



We have also made significant progress with regard to the Empowerment aspect of the project. We have taught the women in the village to produce bags made out of **non-woven fabric** that can be sold at various outlets or markets to replace plastic bags. **A driving force behind this project is the idea of environmental conservation; many countries struggle with an excess of waste plastic and there exist numerous initiatives to reduce consumption, such as banning plastic bags altogether. It is a matter of pride for the villagers to lead the charge, through the production of durable, reusable and indeed, weatherproof bags. So far, they have produced over four thousand bags in the short span of a month!**

**A second 'Empowerment' initiative is a micro-finance project that we're setting up in the village. Celebrations in India tend to be loud, colourful and full of dancing. DJs are in heavy demand. Our initiative involves micro-financing a DJ console for the village that can be hired out (with one of our villagers as the DJ) for the various functions and weddings in the vicinity, thereby generating more income for the village.**

**It's a matter of great joy and satisfaction that we had so much help with The Village Project throughout the year. In the early months of July and August, the students of Grade 12 came on site and worked on the school in Kumbharghar. We were fortunate to have exchange trips from across Europe; Bavaria, Spain, France & the Czech Republic. Each and every one of the students on the trip did such a great job in both villages, in spite of the unique challenges a project like this presents. Though unaccustomed to the work and weather, each one really gave of themselves for the duration of their time in the villages. It was inspirational to see the way they threw themselves wholeheartedly into the Project, despite not having any prior involvement with the people whose lives they were working so hard to change. It is by watching all these various cultures and communities come together for a greater cause that we truly understand the purpose of social service. We are extremely grateful for all the help and support we've received through the year. It reminds us of the value of the work we're doing. We're really charged up to take the project forward and can't wait for the next trip to the villages!**

