

Making a BIG difference in a small place or in a small way?

by Tsering Yangchen

In the hills of West Bengal, Tibetan monks with the untiring effort of Venerable D.G. Khochhen Rinpoche of Mindrolling monastery, Dehradun, and his wellwishers successfully run a modern school for the local villagers. The example described here by Tsering Yangchen shows how Tibetan refugees and their descendants begin to play a role in India, which many of them in a while regard as their home country.



It is generally agreed that education is one of the best means of improving the lot of the underprivileged. One thing of prime importance is whether we are able to provide the equal opportunity to the financially deprived children, when we talk of "Education for all".

Children living in Gonpadara Region are an example of such deprived children who are not able to get the equal education opportunity. The few government-established schools in the locality take a child to walk at least an hour to reach there. Only few toddlers who can afford a peggy ride on their mothers' back can make it to the school. Due to this reason many start school at a later age.

Owing to these difficulties, D.G. Khochhen Rinpoche, a Tibetan lama of Dehradun, started Munselling school at Gonpadara in 2005 at the request of the village community.

The school is situated in the northeastern part of India, in the state of West-Bengal. Gibdaling village where the school is precisely situated is about 1 hr 15 minutes uphill ride from a hill town known as Kalimpong. This region is populated with a variety of people with different ethnicities such as the sherpas, tamang, Bhutias, Sikkimese and so forth. Predominant religions are Hindu and Buddhist, but we also have Muslims and Christians.

The school aims at giving equal education to all. The medium of instruction of the teachers of the school is English with Nepali the local dialect as the second language. Apart from English, Nepali and mathematics, children above class I learn Environmental Studies, Tibetan Language and Basic Computer applications.

Most of these kids come from weak family backgrounds where family problems are not an unusual thing. Large numbers of them are financially weak whereas others are weak in family relations, either of the two parents has not been able to raise their kids well enough due to the problem in their own relations. Resulting in the kid getting extremely timid in school.

Munselling was established on the 3rd of March 2007, with

the first batch of registered 80 students. As for now, the school has classes Nursery to VI and there are 154 children getting educated here. Children's age range 3 yrs to 14 yrs. For Khochhen Rinpoche it is essential that the school aims at giving free and quality education to all the children of Gonpadara and also from other villages far and near.

The school provides mid-day meal to the students. The meal is prepared in our kitchen. It consists of a set of rice, daal (lentil or pulse commonly used in north India) or any seasonal vegetables available in the village. The mid-day meal is free of charge for the students.

The school building consists of 8 classrooms, one teachers' office, one school office cum stationery store, library room and a hall for various co-curricular activities. Behind the school building there are 7 individual cubicles for boys and some urinals. 10 washrooms for girls.

Sometimes heavy rains or thunderstorms destroy parts of our buildings or the road to the school. During the monsoon, landslides wash roads and field paths away so that it is too dangerous for the students to walk to school. For instance, in 2008, we had to repair our school wall and in May 2009 our water pipeline was damaged and we had to repair it.

The school has more than 200 working days in a year with a two months long winter break. We do not have a summer break, instead we have a monsoon break when there is continuous rainfall for days. There are other holidays followed according to the Indian Government calendar. Sunday is a holiday and every Saturday is a half holiday when the students leave school after 12.10. On all other days the school usually starts at 8.30 in the morning and ends at 3.15 in noon.

Special features

We have a special feature in our school which is rare in other day schools. This is the tuition period after class hours which is within the school hour and does not extend beyond. This is the time when children either do their home assignment or discuss their problems related to any subject with the concerned teacher. And till now, this has proved to be very

effective.

On Saturdays, the kids do gardening in the small flower beds allotted to each class. Since the gardens get graded by the teacher in charge of the cleanliness, there is a lot of enthusiasm among the students. Students get locally grown plants from their home to be planted here.

The students above class 2 take turns to hold the morning assembly activity. Students of the class read out something from a story book, or from an essay they have written, sing a song, ask question to other students etc.

In 2008, when we went for the first school trip to Kalimpong town, we came to know that most of these kids had never been to a town before, never seen a train or an airplane before. We couldn't show them a train or an airplane this time but the children were really very excited! In 2009 again we organized a trip for the 3rd and 4th grade kids to a newly opened science center in Kalimpong town. The kids saw and touched many displays related to science and they were even more excited. Since then to this day, every year we have been organizing educative trips or a school picnic. A day of excitement and fun for the children.

School's Extracurricular activities and Four HOUSES

The School organizes a lot of extra-curricular activities. These activities are held as a competition within the four inter-year groups known as HOUSES. These four Houses are; Guru House, Buddha House, Dharma House and Sangha House. All the four houses are represented by the colours White, Yellow, Green and Red respectively. The student from class UKG to Class 6 all belong to a house.

The school organizes a fancy dress competition, spelling competition, Quiz competition, football tournament, cultural competition etc. The children who win get some gift individually and score points for the house they represent.

4 local teachers

We have 10 teachers among whom 4 are locals of Gopadara, so that the school is also employing the people of this region. We have a staff-quarter building to accommodate those teachers who come from other regions. Among the 10, we have appointed one as the teacher in charge.

Chronology:

19.08.2005	construction of school begins
15.10.2006	shell of school building is finished
03.03.2007	school starts with 80 children, classes KG to grade 3
Sep 2007	kitchen and dining hall are finished
Feb 2008	walls and fences around the premises are finished
Apr 2008	due to heavy rain large stretches of the wall around the premises collapse. Teachers' quarters finished
13.11.2008	first graduates pass out of school
2010	class V installed
2011	class VI installed
2013	the individual scholarship starts

All teachers have been given the responsibility of a class so he or she is the so called "class teacher" of that class. He or she maintains the class attendance register and also has to maintain the class in general.

After every test the teachers call parents of the kids to school and sit down and discuss matter with them. This action is done to get the parents involved in the matters related to the kid and to inform them of their kids' performance in the school. Initially when we started off, for some parents it was not matter of much concern, so they did not turn up at the school despite of our repeatedly informing them. But now this has changed and attendance of parents during these meetings is 100 percent.

School library

The school library is integral to the teaching and learning process. The Munselling school library holds about 5000 books now which include story books, encyclopedias, picture dictionaries, children's magazines, games, puzzles, picture post cards. We always welcome people donating books to our library. The children above class 4 are allowed to borrow books from the library.

Munselling School Hostel

We also have a separate boarding facility for 14 students who have come from far off places to study in our school. The boarding is supervised by one of the teachers and also by a cook and a caretaker for the children. The children learn a great deal of things while living in the hostel. They learn how to take care of themselves and of their belongings, and how to live as a community. Hence they learn to become more self-reliant in their own small way.



Munselling School Individual Scholarship

After much discussion with our main sponsor Sonnenstrahl Kinderfonds Foundation of Munich we have been able to start sponsoring individual students to further continue their studies at a better school after they graduate from our school. Or else most of the students after completing studies at our school have to continue their further studies in government secondary schools where poor quality of education and overly packed classes are a major issue. This sponsorship is provided under merit basis and also keeping the financial condition of the child's family in mind.

As of 2016, we have 8 students continuing their studies in non-government secondary schools in Kalimpong and Darjeeling. And all of them are doing very well. Most of them have been class position holders in those schools.

Every year this number is going to increase and we hope that in future these children do well and are able to come back to their community and give back whatever they have learnt to uplift their community in every aspect.

Achievements and Impact

Before the establishment of our school although the parents wished to send their children to school it was not available in the neighbouring area and kids had to walk long distances to attend a school. The nearest primary school from this village

is about an hour walk in the hilly terrain. And the nearest government secondary school is more than an hour's walk. Due to lack of money parents are not able to send them to private schools and hence depend on the government schools for education.

Since the establishment of the school parents have also evermore realised the importance of quality education which we have been providing here.

In India national tests are conducted only from Class 8. So the schools have to prepare tests individually based on the books used to teach. Therefore Munselling School has not

participated in National Tests as a school but students passing out from our school are getting easily admitted to any Secondary school of this region and many of them even produce excellent academic results in those schools. Some of our children have been able to participate in district and state level quiz competitions representing those schools.

The village has also taken advantage of the school. New shops (including sweet shops, unfortunately) have come up and some households have accommodated children from remote places for a small rent.

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