



Rinchen Zangpo Society For Spiti Development

Educational Newsletter No. 21

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New Branch School at Rongtong



The new Rongtong Campus located south-east of our flagship school, Munsel-ling... Expanding our schools to meet our ever-expanding student population

The Rinchen Zangpo Society for Spiti Development will open a major new residential branch primary school in 2015, target date 3rd July. Situated at Rongtong, halfway between Munsel-ling School and Kaza, the Spiti HQ, it has been built according to the simplest, low-cost, one-storey design. Rinchen Zangpo Society's schools are extremely popular with parents because academic standards are high and the local identity of Spiti's minority culture is to the fore. Spiti children educated here can face the future not just as well-educated Indians, but as Spitians nourished by Spiti values and traditions. So our present two schools, in Rangrik and Kaza, have been operating beyond capacity and are creaking at the seams. To remedy the situation in Kaza we have started building our own modern school to replace the present rented facility. We have been invited to resubmit our funding proposal to a major potential donor for that construction programme. Overcrowding is especially a problem in Munsel-ling School where there are many young children from distant villages boarding at the school. Their health may be compromised by not enough space in the hostels, where cosy becomes cramped.

Branch School at Rongtong (Cont'd)

A chief purpose of the new school at Rongtong therefore is to reduce overcrowding. We also want to give more opportunities to girls, especially those from poor backgrounds. The impetus and financial backing for the new construction comes from a small Austrian charity, Tibethilfe Niederosterreich, founder Siegfried Nasko. We are extremely grateful for their magnanimity and look forward to the long-term task of building up a first class primary school in partnership with them. The charity backs educational and social projects in India and Nepal, especially for Tibetan refugees and those areas like Spiti which are in the zone of Tibetan cultural influence. They have made very clear their primary interest in girls' education and uplift of the weakest social sections. They have financed the building of a six-classroom, four-dormitory school, complete with kitchen, dining room, toilets and bathrooms. It is basically complete except for interior finishing and exterior landscaping. Deep thanks also go to Raffael Sterkl and Gerlinde for being so supportive and showing great dedication from the beginning till the completion of the building.

The maximum enrolments for the Rinchen Zangpo Society's Spiti schools in the future are planned as 400 at Munsel-ling, 300 in Kaza (nearly all day students) and 200 at



The Rongtong Campus is one kilometre away from Munsel-ling School, located in a spacious flatland area that's suitable for expansion

Rongtong. (At present there are 557 at Munsel-ling and 221 at Kaza.) Some central government funding for running costs at the new school has been secured but as inflation continues in India, grants in aid are far below the actual costs of food, teachers' salaries and so forth, and they are paid well in arrears. Your help as ever in sponsoring a child with a regular monthly/annual contribution will be most welcome. Visit <http://rinchenzangpo.org/sponsor-a-child.html> for more details.

Cricket Fever is Catching!

Munsel-ling students have been given the chance to hone their already exemplary cricketing skills thanks to the generosity of British donor Vivienne Hodges. New cricket equipment purchased in Manali Bazaar with her funds has reached the school, giving the children access to high quality cricket bats, balls, wickets, helmets, keeping gloves and batting gloves. The smaller children have not been forgotten – two footballs along with a few smaller cricket bats and balls have been bought especially for them.

Vivienne's generous support has resulted in the children looking very smart in their new cricket clothes too! These have been colour-coded according to the four school houses, named after flowers in the local Bhoti language – Gamber, Pangen, Lukri and Serchen. Resplendent in their yellow, green, blue and white tops and track suit bottoms, Munsel-ling children played several matches in their school teams, much to the enjoyment of and encouragement from fellow students.

"The children look so bright and cheerful playing cricket! I hope this builds their self-esteem and creates a sense of belonging," mused Vivienne.



Winter Water Supply

Our society has a well-established partnership with the University of British Columbia (Canada)'s Global Health Initiative. They have systematically introduced better health facilities here over a number of years. UBC students have set up a chlorinated water treatment plant at Munsel-ling, with header reservoir, distribution pipes and drinking and hand-washing stations located across the school. (See last year's newsletter.) These are now popular



Water, water everywhere... Students now enjoy more watering stations and better access to the precious stuff

places for the children to have fun with each other during break times as well as drink clean water!

We are extremely grateful once again to the UBC Global Health Initiative, this time for implementing an improved winter water supply system. Rangrik village's springs still flow in winter but water does not reach the school reservoir tank. All is frozen. It simply spills in layers of thickening ice. In winter water for the school comes solely from our underground source. The hand pump on the tube well has now been replaced by an electric one. The capricious government electricity supply (from hydro), dwindles and dwindles in winter so there is a dedicated diesel generator in place for the pump.

A pipe insulated from the cold by being buried four feet underground takes the water to the main supply points inside the kitchen and dining room.

For the children there are hand and dishwashing areas. This winter will be a test of how well the system performs at very low temperatures. (Minus 35° C is possible in a cold snap.) The underground water is not contaminated and does not require chlorination. Children are encouraged to drink hot boiled water in winter as this is better for their health in living conditions without much internal space heating.

In collaboration with other volunteers and teachers, the UBC students also organized an awareness-raising programme for Munsel-ling children on safe and unsafe drinking water sources this year. An art competition was held, and the best posters highlighting the means of obtaining safe drinking water were exhibited across the school. There are certainly some budding artists at Munsel-ling! For more on UBC's multi-faceted efforts in Spiti see here, <http://globalhealth.med.ubc.ca/service/student-groups/global-health-initiative/ghi-india-spiti-health-project/> .

Visit by Virbhadra Singh, Chief Minister, Himachal Pradesh

On June 17th staff and students welcomed Virbhadra Singh, Chief Minister of our state, Himachal Pradesh. He has taken a personal interest in our pioneering educational experiment in Himachal's mountainous tribal belt ever since his first visit in 1997. His personal supervision had swiftly secured us the land in Rongtong for our new school, overcoming many layers of bureaucratic delay. He also promised funding for another toilet block at Munsel-ling and a portion of the boundary wall that that school yet needs, to keep village livestock out and ensure the safety of the school children.



Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, Virbhadra Singh, speaks with Ven. Tashi Namgyal at Munsel-ling School

Sanitation and Hygiene

Now that piped water is becoming available in different parts of the campus, the most urgent priority is better toilets. Jamyang Buddhist Centre, London, is financing the building of an innovative toilet block combining six Indian style flush toilets, with septic tank, for use in warmer weather and six traditional Spiti drop toilets for use in freezing weather. This block will be for the private use of the senior girls (approximately 80 students). The finished building will include a hand washing station and four bathrooms with solar panels to provide hot water, putting the ample sunshine in Spiti to good use!



A new washing station on the Munsel-ling Campus

The traditional Spiti drop toilet is quite adequate in the family home but not so easy to manage in a heavy-use institutional environment like school hostels. Flush toilets will be easier to keep clean, fly free and hygienic. There should be less passing on of infections when there is an immediately adjacent hand-washing station and children are trained to use it, understanding how good hand-washing habits will result in lower diarrhoeal rates and prevent the spread of disease.

Up to 18 more toilets of this combined wet and dry type have been assured funding from the Himachal Pradesh government and a further eight similar toilets for primary children have received support from an online fundraising campaign run by volunteers Shaun Holmes and Diya Gupta, which has raised over INR 1,98,000, or £2,000.



The new dual function toilets being built at Munsel-ling are both water-septic and composting

Technology and Creativity: Unlocking Doors For the Children of Spiti

On 5th September 2014 Assistant District Commissioner Suneel Sharma visited Munsel-ling to open our new computer room and art room. They had been in use since earlier in the year but this was the official inauguration. They are on a floor specially built above the Physics, Chemistry and Biology laboratories. Light, airy and spacious, these rooms rank among the best in the school at present and are ideal for communal use.

The beautiful new art room has been the brainchild of French artist and volunteer Zoe Maogany, who raised support from friends and family for the project, and worked with the school administration to ensure that the painting studio is a relaxed and creative space where students can work together to discover their inner talents.



Suneel Sharma, ADC, attending the opening ceremony of Munsel-ling's new computer room and art room

Zoe has brought to Munsel-ling a method of teaching from the Tibetan Children's Village schools in Dharamsala that represents a complete break from the standard style of teaching experienced by children in Spiti. There are few rules in these art classes. Students are able to unleash their creativity by painting whatever

it is they most want to represent on paper. No one's painting is classified as 'better' than someone else's. And there are many paintings now pinned to the walls of the studio that show small white houses with prayer flags flying high, next to a river, with big brown mountains in the distance!



Suneel Sharma, ADC, getting a tour of our new computer lab

Volunteers

Diya and Shaun came out from the UK for six months as volunteer teachers. Shaun's creative

physics experiments astonished many students and the science textbooks he composed specially for the higher classes to supplement the official tracts are a valuable legacy. David Kirkwood, head of Maths in a Glasgow secondary school, brought invaluable skills and teaching techniques to the school. Thanks also to his wife Katherine who put her nursing skills to use in the school clinic.

Volunteers (Cont'd)

Not only did Zoe Maogany from France engage the children in lots of art creativity in the four or five months she was here but she gathered further funds to equip our dining room with sturdy tables and chairs, enough for four hundred young people to eat together! In a traditional Spiti home you leave your shoes at the door and take your food sitting much nearer the floor around the yak dung stove and very comfortable too, but with four hundred children thronging in and out and always very dusty outside, your meal in the school dining room is really much safer and hygienic up there on a table.

Volunteer, Diya Gupta writes:

“Six months in Spiti was life-changing! I would recommend it to anyone who wishes to understand the unique culture of this Himalayan community, and to help out where you are really needed. I know that I have formed friendships with teachers and bonds with the children that will last forever.”

David Kirkwood writes:

“I was very privileged to be given the opportunity to work in Munsel-ling school for a few weeks in the summer. My thanks to Principal Ratnakar and Mr Raju for welcoming me into Class 10 and Class 9 respectively. It was a very

rewarding experience. The children were very hard working and enthusiastic. Language did not seem to be a problem – despite my heavy Scottish accent.

“Getting to know the children in such a short timescale was always going to be difficult, but my biggest challenge was the Mathematics syllabus. I found this, in general, to be more advanced and more detailed than the equivalent year groups in Scotland. Having said that, I found some really bright, capable students in both year groups who, I am sure, with the commitment of both Principal Ratnakar and Mr Raju will go on to great achievements in Mathematics.

“I was very impressed by the ethos, commitment and

enthusiasm shown by the pupils and teachers and still remember many of the pupils with great fondness. I wish them all every success and happiness in the future. I look forward to returning in a year or two.”

And from Shaun Holmes:

“I’m grateful to the Rinchen Zangpo Society and Munsel-Ling School for giving me the opportunity to have fun with Science in a way that was hopefully useful to Spitian students. It was fantastic to work this way within an interesting and stimulating culture and environment, making many new friends along the way.”

You can read more about Shaun and Diya’s experiences in Spiti here: <http://www.diyagupta.co.uk/spitiblog/spitiblog.php>



Ven Tashi Namgyal enjoying lunch with Suneel Sharma, Shaun Holmes and Diya Gupta



Principal Ratnakar presents an award of appreciation to French volunteer, Zoe Maogany

More Must Mentions

Flying the flag for the Rinchen Zangpo Society's academic achievements this year is Pasang Dolma. In the 10th class government examinations she scored 91% overall, the first time a wholly Munsel-ling educated pupil has scored over 90%. All credit to our teachers there. They include a vigorous team of about nine young Tibetan teachers. They



have made a good contribution this year. We now have a promising batch of four girls and one boy, a little older than Pasang Dolma, being coached in Delhi for medical school entrance examinations next year. Delhi being the capital of India of course, supporting these students is a strain on our finances.

The Swedish charity SPARKE (Supporting Positive Alternatives for Raising Kindness in Education), dedicated to eliminating all forms of violence and disharmony in schools, this year hosted a final, general conference in Dehra Dun with

Students at Munsel-ling participating in Swachh Bharat, India's nation-wide clean up day

representatives of 27 schools attending. Our Principal Mr Ratnakar, school captain and vice-captain all attended.

We were very honoured to receive a visit from Ram Swarup Sharma. Spiti district forms a huge portion geographically and the scattered people of Spiti a very small fraction of the people of the constituency he represents as MP in the Indian national parliament.

Great donations from Nadia of Alliance Turquoise, France, and from Sheena Burns in Ireland. Thank you

We are very grateful for a repeat visit by the Australian dental team sent by Dr Bob as usual.

Children's' Day, Teachers' Day, Cultural Night, Ladarcha Fair in Kaza, Gyuto Festival at Key Monastery, Spiti New Year, Saka Dawa, School Anniversary Day and picnics at Ladarcha Ground

and Tashi Gang: on all these occasions our students performed song and dance or commemorated, celebrated, prayed, or simply enjoyed themselves with play and good food.



Class 7 students attending the Nature Conservation Camp at the remote village of Kibber in Upper Spiti Valley

Sidbhari

We are extremely grateful to the Dalai Lama Trust for financing the construction of fourth-floor rooms on the boys' block. These are quarters for visiting teachers with two classrooms also. The roofs of the boys' hostel proper and the girls' hostel were made safe for use by the erection of iron railings all round. These flats roofs are important spaces for quiet study, sunshine, clothes drying and admiring the refreshing view. We thank the Amitabh Buddhist Society of Nantwich, UK for this further instance of their generosity.



New roof top railings at our Students' Hostel in Sidbhari

Once again this winter older students have migrated down to our Sidbhari facility from the cold heights of Spiti. This year we have brought down classes 8, 9 and 10. Class 10 face national examinations in March. Sidbhari is an ideal place for them to prepare and indeed take the exams. This influx of approximately a hundred pupils and staff means plenty of extra bedding is required. Money for approximately a hundred sets of mattress, quilt, bed sheets and pillows was very kindly raised by the as ever efficient Klaus Rouff through his contacts and associates in the German Aid for Tibetans Organisation.



Geshe Thubten Tenzin, a monk from Dankhar Monastery in Spiti, had the honour of being appointed Umze (Chant master) of Gyuto Tantric Monastery by His Holiness the Dalai Lama recently. Progress through a series of high offices usually follows from this appointment. Gyuto Monastery-in-exile is next door to our Sidbhari hostel so we were able offer felicitations to Geshe Thubten Tenzin at an evening gathering following his installation ceremony at the monastery.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to our education programme this year. Deep apologies to anyone we have forgotten to mention.

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