Rinchen Zangpo Society
For Spiti Development

Educational Newsletter No. 27 Issue: Winter 2020/21

Lieutenant Lobsang Yeshay

First Ever Indian Army Officer from Spiti

A proud Lieutenant Lobsang Yeshay (centre) standing at ease with Ven. Tashi Namgyal (left) and Lt. Yeshay's mother (right)

On 12th December, Lobsang Yeshay received his promotion from cadet to lieutenant at the passing out parade of the 2020 batch at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun. He was amongst the 322 Indians and 70 cadets from friendly foreign countries graduating this year and is the very first Spitian to achieve the distinction of being an Indian Army officer. He hails from the village of Kibber (altitude 4270 m, 14,200 ft) and received his education through the Rinchen Zangpo Society for Spiti Development.

Lt. Yeshay and Ven. Tashi Namgyal in Dehradun

Congratulations, Lieutenant Yeshay, and we wish you all the best in your career!

Local Impact Due to Covid Pandemic

India has of course been severely affected by the corona virus pandemic. However, deaths per million of the population stand at 101 which compares very well with Russia 268, the USA 813 and the UK 874 (Wikipedia, 28 Nov 2020). Spiti being so remote in the mountains, with a population so scattered, and thanks no doubt to the vigilance of local officials, its people have not experienced significant levels of Covid-19 infection. (Total active cases in Spiti, 7th December 2020, 27. Total overall deaths, 2, from a population of +10,000.) Nevertheless economic disruption has been severe for a region that had become so popular with tourists seeking the high Himalayan experience and prolonged school closures have, as elsewhere, been a major feature of the social disruption the virus has caused.

Social-distancing in action, last summer at our Kaza Public School

Educational Efforts During Covid Confinement

With Dr. Rana's digital communications expertise Munsel-ling School was able to try online schooling but many villages have no internet connection, there are many homes without computers, and many parents without much knowledge of how to help their children in such matters. Offline teachings have been somewhat more successful. Prepared by teachers in the staff room and recorded at the school, or else filmed in the home of the teacher, whether inside or outside Spiti, and sent via social media to the school, these lessons have been hand delivered on pen drives to most villages in Spiti and Upper Kinnaur where there are Munsel-ling children living.

More effective still have been the lessons taught by older, graduate ex-students of Munsel-ling who, like the present school pupils, were waiting out lockdown in their home villages with time on their hands. For instance, there is Tenzin Yangzom who is teaching Munsel-ling students in her home village of Chicham. There is also Tashi Tsomo who did her Bachelors in Mathematics from Mirinda House, Delhi. She has been teaching our students in her village of Rangrik. She is taking a keen interest in teaching and expressed her gratitude to TRAS for helping with her education. Both of these young ladies' college level education has only been made possible with funding by TRAS, the Trans-Himalayan Aid Society of Canada. Heartening to see them giving something back to their communities at this time of improvisation.

Help From Our Local Teachers and Readers

Some of our Munsel-ling graduates obliged to stay back in Spiti were excellently well qualified. Their Munsel-ling schooling, followed by cramming for demanding entrance examinations afterwards, was sufficient for them to win places at some of India's most prestigious higher education institutions. These more highly qualified ex-students we drafted in to help also. There is Tashi Namgyal, MTech from IIT Madras, Lobsang Namgyal from Lalung, MTech from IIT, Kharagpur, Pema Dolker with a Masters in Sociology from JNU, New Delhi and Kelsang Norzome, pursuing an MPhil in English from Punjab University, Chandigarh.

They helped with unofficial 'backdoor' schooling in the Munsel-ling boarding hostels for our senior students in their final years of secondary school, who face external examinations of course. The main school campus remains deserted but older students have lived and studied spread out through the boarding hostels. Also teaching them were those staff who were on hand in the valley and other teachers were able to conduct online classes from homes further away, outside Spiti.

These are the ways in which we have been trying to further students' education despite the pandemic. We will keep on trying other ways to do the best for the young people in our care.

On the Covid Front Line

No less than four Rinchen Zangpo Society alumni are government appointed doctors in Spiti, Dr. Jampa Kelsang (TRAS sponsored), Dr. Chhuldim Giachho (TRAS sponsored), Dr. Tsewang Tobgye (TRAS sponsored), and the most senior of them, Dr. Tenzin Angmo, (AfHE sponsored). They form a formidable foursome, Spiti's front line against the Covid virus. Incidentally they occupy posts that in the past the state government health service was often unable to fill, there being no doctors from within Spiti until the Rinchen Zangpo Society's education programme started up, and few takers amongst well-qualified health professionals from outside for Spiti's lack of amenities and extreme winter weather.

Dr. Tenzin Angmo, supporting our community response to the Covid pandemic

Our Homegrown Doctors from Rinchen Zangpo Society

Dr. Jampa Kelsang

Dr. Chhuldim Giachho

Dr. Tsewang Tobgye (left)

Supercharged Academic Performance

In simpler days, earlier in the year, before confinement began, the students of class 10 (age ~17) did their Board examinations with marvellous results. Batch 2018-19 had a 98 % pass rate. Five students out of fifty-one appearing scored more than 90 %, while our three toppers of the year are Tenzin Lhadon (94.4 %), Tenzin Zangmo (94.1 %) and Pema Khando (92.8 %). The first two are highly talented twins. The second of them, Tenzin Zangmo secured 100/100 in Maths.

In October Kaza Public School (day school) managed to conduct examinations for the junior classes maintaining social distancing and providing masks and hand sanitizers.

Tenzin Lhadon, grade 94.4 % ...

... Tenzin Zangmo, 94.1 % ...

... and Karma Pema Khandro, 92.8 %

Winter Preparations

Migrant workers, skilled and unskilled, were not allowed in to Spiti this spring, as a Covid precaution of course, so we could not carry out any of our planned programme of construction and repairs to the school infrastructure at all. Children did not return after their winter holiday because lockdown was already in force by the date for the reopening of Munsel-ling School. The main campus has remained silent all year.

In contrast to most of the rest of India, in Spiti winter is the time of the long holiday of the school year because it is so cold but, if the government permits schools to reopen during the winter, we have made all the necessary preparations to reopen too, in order to catch up on what the students have missed. Access to Spiti can be very difficult during the winter so we have stockpiled a three month reserve of all materials such as food supplies, liquid fuel and fuel wood, plus extra winter bedding, ready to use. The buildings that can be insulated using our ultra economical and very effective method of laying plastic sheet on a wooden frame over the south facing side have also been readied for winter use in that way.

Passive solar heating with plastic sheets is inexpensive and very effective

Empty beds ready for students at our Munsel-ling Hostel

Sidhbari

New science labs at our Sidhbari Hostel

When rooms are empty, it's time to paint!

The brightest new feature at our educational facilities at Sidhbari is the science laboratory. It will be especially beneficial for the students who migrate from Spiti to Sidhbari (near Dharamshala) for a winter session of extra coaching every year (a two or three day bus journey). There they benefit from the easier climate, the availability of well-qualified teacher talent in the Dharamshala area and the chance to see the world outside Spiti, including Dharamshala itself, residence of the Dalai Lama. The science lab was completed last year and is functional but unfortunately this winter there will be no influx of students from Spiti as a Covid-19 precaution. We thank Mr. Jerome Ardissone of France whose generosity made the laboratory possible.

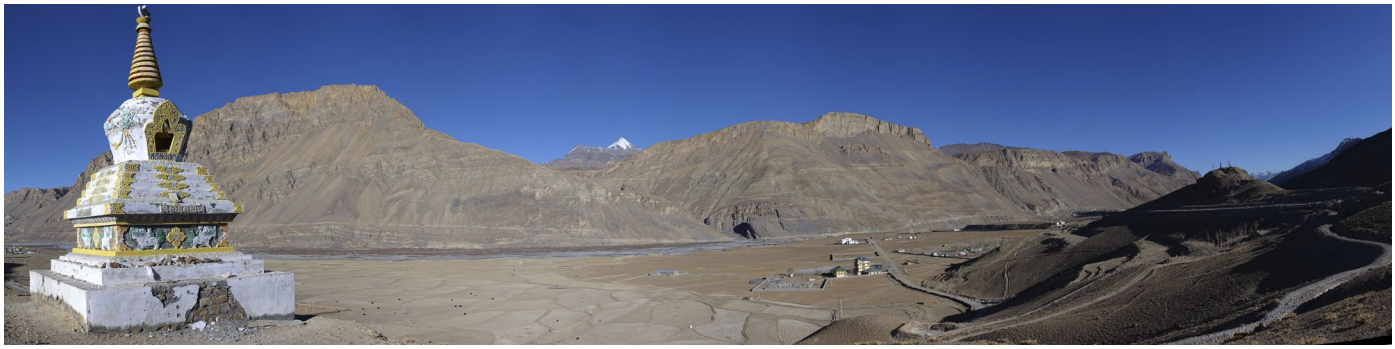
The hostels at Sidhbari have been empty for much of the year. We took the opportunity to repaint the girls block, to do tiling work in the boys block and to repair broken furniture. Again, Mr. Jerome Ardissone covered the costs of the repainting and redecorating.

We are also extremely grateful to German Aid for Tibet (GAT) for their help with significant improvements to the educational facilities at Sidhbari. The computer lab, completed last year, was entirely due to their generosity. Next, on top of the library, itself constructed with GAT funds, we will make a pleasant, open, private study place, roofed and with railings. This year we have put in place the pillars to support the roof. GAT has again kindly financed the project.

Our friends from German Aid for Tibet have provided a computer lab ...

... and the second floor to our Library building (work in progress)

Thank You!



From the hills above Munsel-ling School in Spiti you can see Shila Peak (centre, distant white mountain) which marks the highest point in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh

Thanks to everyone who contributed to our education programme this year. Great apologies to anyone forgotten. We thank in particular:

Tibethilfe Austria—Rewa School
Dr. Klauss Rouff
TRAS, Canada—student sponsorship (college goers)
Michel and friends, France—sponsorship
Jacqueline, France—sponsorship
Jerome Ardissone, France
Zoe Maogany, France

Aid for Himalayan Education, UK
Upper Chapel, Sheffield, UK
Reifenberg Trust, UK—renovations, Sidhbari
Nantwich Buddhist Group, UK
Joe Amos and friends, UK
Diya and Shaun, UK—sponsorship
Earl Stefanyshen, Canada

Benti, Netherlands—kitchen and dining room utensils

This newsletter was prepared on behalf of the Rinchen Zangpo Society for Spiti Development by Aid for Himalayan Education, UK and friends.

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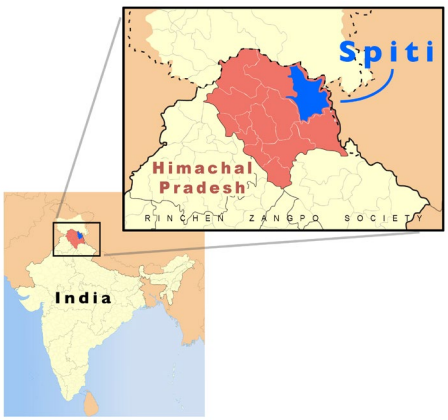
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