

CU ELST Volunteer Reports 2010-10-21

In the summer of 2010 Cambridge University English Language Studies ofr Tibetans organised 19 teaching placements for Cambridge University students in India and Nepal. The project was generously supported by the Cambridge ELST charity and the Cambridge Active Community Grant among others.

The following placements took place between June and September of the year 2010:

Kathmandu, Nepal: 4 volunteers
Helambu, Nepal: 3 volunteers
Zanskar, North India: 3 volunteers
Dolanji, North India: 1 volunteer
Spiti, North India: 1 volunteer
McLeod Ganj, North India: 3 volunteers
Bylakuppe, South India: 4 Volunteers

The individual reports for these placements form the remainder of this document. We the ELST Volunteers of 2010 would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all who supported us through these extraordinary experiences. We hope you enjoy reading our accounts of the same.



Nepal

Project Location: Boudhanath, Kathmandu, Nepal

Institution Name: The Manasarovar Academy

Dates of Project: 17th July 2010 – 22nd August 2010

Approx Amount of Teaching: 3 classes (between 20-37 students), 5 days a week and play rehearsals in the evening (1.5 hrs approx).

In July and August this year, a friend and I had the opportunity to teach at the Manasarovar Academy in Boudhanath, a Tibetan suburb 11km outside Kathmandu. It is a fascinating place, as it is the site of Nepal's largest Buddhist stupa and contains a multitude of monasteries and temples.

Eleven years ago, three women started the primary school at which we taught with a handful of eight pupils because they believed that the children of the Tibetan community in exile deserved the right to a good standard of education. Their aims are to maintain knowledge of cultural heritage and traditions among the next generation of Tibetans, while at the same encouraging them to have a broad world view: the students are taught thirteen subjects, including Maths, Science and literature and language in Tibetan, Nepali and English. The student body now numbers 323 pupils and they range in age from 2 – 14 years old; some of them are boarders and many of them are sponsored by Tibetan and foreign benefactors.

During our time as teachers at the school, we took Classes III, IV and V for one English lesson daily, Monday to Friday. Prior to our teaching, I remember being unsure as to how fluent our children would be and was amazed to find that their speaking, in all classes, was of quite a high level. We tried to focus on interactive methods of teaching with all the students because we realised that if we wanted them to listen to us, classes would have to be fun. We gave Classes III and IV the chance to actively participate by writing answers on the board themselves and by asking a lot of questions so that they would speak in lessons. For instance, when we looked at words to describe speech with Class III, such as "He said", "He laughed", "He shouted", we got them to say the sentence "I like bananas" in the different ways, so that they would understand the difference between "said", "laughed" and "shouted". Surprisingly, although their spoken English was good, they often made grammatical mistakes in writing and we found that repeating exercises meant that they understood language rules much better. As their end-of-term examinations approached, we revised more difficult grammar, including verb tenses, prepositions and uncommon punctuation. We wanted them to carry out extended writing to improve their skills of description; sometimes they would write a passage based around a picture of a busy scene and with Class IV we were even able to look at short stories, during which time they tried planning and writing their own. It was hard work to keep all students interested all the time but when they understood something, it was a great feeling.

With Class V, we felt that standard grammar wouldn't challenge them enough and found ourselves devising more creative projects for them. We began with poetry and poetic devices and asked them to pick a topic from a hat about which to write a poem. Some of their work was beautiful and extremely mature. We moved on to newspaper articles, letter writing, advertisements and persuasive devices and scary stories so that they could practice reading and writing in various textual styles. Additionally, Class V made up the main cast for the production of the Wizard of Oz, while members of Class IV danced and sang. They worked extremely hard to learn their lines, the dances and songs within three

weeks and performed two shows to their parents, teachers and younger students. It was really lovely to see how excited they were at rehearsals and to get all of them to do a big project together.

Apart from teaching and rehearsals, we spent quite a lot of our day marking books, marking homework we had set, helping teachers to write and correct the termly exam papers and writing letters for the school concerning sponsorship. It was incredible to see the dedication that Miss Tsultrim and Mrs. Bijaya, the current principals, not to mention all the teachers and school helpers, put in to their students' education because they truly believe in their potential. Moreover, the children had a passion for education and actually loved being at school and learning because they don't take it for granted.

In our second week in Boudha, we found that we wouldn't be able to teach at school in our fourth week due to exams. This was disappointing but to make up for it, we started teaching two monks at a local monastery who had vastly different levels of English. We tried to fit in 3-4 hours of teaching for each of them every week and with one of them, Choe Nam, we looked at very basic grammar. His spelling and memory were very sharp and he was able to pick up information quite rapidly; even though he sometimes struggled with certain ideas he worked hard to grasp them and over the course of a lesson would become increasingly comfortable with speaking in English. The second monk, Rabten, was very fluent and wanted to practice his speaking. It was an education talking to him because his English meant that we learned quite a lot about how monasteries work and how monks live! He wanted us to correct his speaking mistakes and we set him homework to help him with grammar he was unsure of, such as definite and indefinite articles.

I will always have the fondest memories of this project because it was hard going to a foreign country and learning how to teach but my students, the people I was able to meet and the chance to see Nepal more than made it worth it. I would definitely go back and would recommend this placement to anyone who is lucky enough to go – for longer than I did if possible - and am enormously grateful to ELST for making it possible.

Project Location: Boudhanath in Kathmandu, Nepal

Institution Name: Manasarovar Academy

Dates of Project: 16/7/10 – 15/8/10

Approx Amount of Teaching: 20-40 students, ~5 hours per day, 5 days per week

The Manasarovar Academy was founded in 1999 by three women (two of whom continue to manage the school today) with the aim of educating children from families of Tibetan refugees. During the last decade the school has grown exponentially so that at present, 324 children are educated at Manasarovar, most of whom live in Boudha, the Tibetan quarter of Kathmandu.

Each day another volunteer and I would arrive at the school at 9am and teach one lesson to each of Class 3, 4 and 5, the oldest and most able children in the school. As the children were already almost fluent in English we were able to cover a range of topics including punctuation, prepositions, story writing, poetry, advertisements and newspaper articles. Our style of teaching differed somewhat from what the children were accustomed to: usually the children would learn by rote and repeating spellings in unison as a class was common practice. However, we tried to encourage more



Articulate with Class 5

individual thinking, group activities, learning games and competitions which the children responded really well to: I was incredibly impressed with the high-standard of entries we received when we ran a poetry-writing competition with Class 5.



Performance of The Wizard of Oz

After the lessons had finished each day, we ran rehearsals for a production of *The Wizard of Oz*. The school receives two volunteers each year through CU-ELST and it is only when these volunteers are at the school that the children have the opportunity to put on a play. This was both one of the most difficult tasks I undertook during placement, yet it was also one of my most enjoyable experiences.

Organising twenty energetic children whilst trying to determine the best means of staging the play and practicing each scene meant that the hour and a half rehearsals were quite demanding. Furthermore, my friend and I spent many hours in the evening editing the script and making costumes with the limited resources we had access to. Despite how hard we had to work and how tiring organising the play could be at times, I loved every minute of it as it was clear how much the children enjoyed rehearsals for the production. When the final performance eventually arrived, the children gave such a good performance that I felt so proud of them all for working so hard.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Nepal where I learnt so much about Tibetan culture and met some wonderful, kind-hearted people who I hope to stay in contact with in the future. I am incredibly grateful to CU-ELST for a truly memorable experience.

Himalayan Society for Youth and Women Empowerment, Boudha, Kathmandu
06/07/2010 – 13/08/2010

Our placement was located in Boudha, a peaceful suburb of Kathmandu which is well connected to the city and other parts of the Kathmandu valley. HSYWE is an organisation, which was established in 2006 with the aims of educating local underprivileged people, predominantly Tibetans. It helps to preserve Tibetan tradition through Buddhist teachings and Tibetan lessons, but also aims to reduce rising unemployment in the Tibetan community. It also runs awareness programs for local people on a number of topics ranging from sexual health right through to peace of mind. Doma, a member of the Tibetan Government in exile, runs it. She is an inspiring woman – both professional and caring, and working for her was a pleasure.

We taught classes Basic I and II. These courses aim to take students from no knowledge of our alphabet to having a range of functional spoken and written English. Our Basic I class had been learning English for around two weeks when we arrived so we were definitely still at the stage of learning the alphabet!

As the weeks progressed we began to see real progress in our classes, particularly Basic I who seemed to have really taken to our way of teaching. Since we could speak no Tibetan or Nepali, and they could speak no English, we had to be entirely interactive in our approach. We used many methods to try and get every single member of the class involved – board games, worksheets, flashcards, singing, shouting, or just generally making fools of ourselves for the benefit of our students. Of course the aspirations of the individuals in our classes varied hugely. Some would like to have been able to copy English words accurately, others get to the point where they could quiz us on our families, our country and, most persistently, our marital status! It was a definite bonus that we were both teaching the same classes at the same times, as some of the students required one-on-one attention, and so the teaching on the board could be divided between the two of us.

As the end of our stay approached it had become obvious how lucky we had been to be able to base ourselves in just one place for so long, and that Boudha had become a home-from-home for us. It had allowed us to get a small insight into the Tibetan way of life and to sample their food and drink, and to try and understand their religion. In much the same way we had become so fond of the women that we taught and every day enjoyed their enthusiasm and incredible sense of humour. On our final day we brought in biscuits for our classes but were thoroughly outdone, as each and every one of our students had brought in kata (a traditional Tibetan scarf) for us and other personal gifts to show their gratitude. I hope that we were able to show our own gratitude for being such brilliant hosts to us, even if we were unable to tell them due to the ever so slightly decreased language barrier!



Project Location: Helambu Region, Nepal and Kathmandu, Nepal

Institution Names and Approx Amount of Teaching:

- 1) Shree Pema Choling Primary School, Nakote Village (3 hours in the afternoon due to exams)
- 2) Tibetan Centre, Boudha, Kathmandu (1.5 hours of teaching, mornings)
- 3) Alkapuri High School, Bishalnagar, Kathmandu (6 hours of teaching, later morning-afternoon)

Dates of Project: 30/06/10-5/08/10

The Helambu area is just a few days away from the Kathmandu Valley rim situated directly north east of Kathmandu in the Central Himalayan Region. There are many Buddhist Monasteries amidst a rich and enchanting landscape as well as dense forest and local traditional culture. A well known trekking circuit runs around the region, and in the tourist season provides additional income to the peoples of this area. Nonetheless, Helambu is remote and the landscape harsh. Because it is so remote, however, it is the perfect place to teach, and the local scenery is truly breathtaking (there was a huge waterfall directly behind the school where I taught!).



I taught at the school in Nakote Village, living with a local family which was a fantastic experience. Because they had four daughters who spoke relatively good English, it was easy to communicate, whilst also teaching them whilst just being around the house. It is definitely the best way to teach in the Village because it helps integrate with the local Community and it also meant I got to try the delicious local cuisine all day long! The teachers at the school also speak good English, and I became good friends with one teacher in particular.

The teaching style however, focused very much on textbook and rote learning so I was primarily focussed on playing games, and teaching the children how to use practical English skills. I went during their examinations period, so I only taught for a few hours in the afternoon, although those were some very fun times! Normally a couple of hours of teaching would be followed by a friendly football game, or a game of tag. Taking inspiration from the World Cup that was going on at the time, I organised the schools very own 'Nakote Cup' where the different House Teams competed for chocolates and sweets. My placement was organised through a contact in Nepal, and we are hopeful that more volunteers will take on this rural placement in the future.

I then moved back to Kathmandu, because the village school had monsoon holidays. In the mornings I taught at a Tibetan Centre in the Boudha district. The Centre runs classes all morning, and also in the afternoons, free of charge, for people who want to come and learn English. I taught at the beginner level, playing games and doing activities centred around the pronunciation of words and phonetics. I would then take the microbus from Boudha to Bishalnagar, where I taught at Alkapuri High School. Being on one of those buses really makes you feel like a real Nepali going to work! It was a very funny experience to be teaching adults how to say their ABC's and then travelling to Alkapuri High School and teaching the children how to improve their English!

This school was another fantastic institution and another new school where CUELST volunteers have not taught before. I taught students from class 1 all the way up to class 10, and it was a very rewarding experience, especially because the school is primarily for underprivileged children. The older years were very chatty, and this made it a brilliant experience. Like the other schools where I taught, I played games and did various interactive activities to help the



students learn how to use English properly, as opposed to rote learning from textbooks. The school is run very well, with a really dedicated management, and they all made me feel really welcome- they even cooked lunch for me every day! The kids are a brilliant bunch, and they are always asking questions, curious about the outside world. Their willingness to learn was what struck me the most, and made my experience all the more enjoyable. I actually got attached to the children at this school, more than at any other place, and leaving was a pretty sad experience. Even then, they threw me a huge party, and performed songs and dances, and by the end, I left covered in Tika powder after they decided to cover me in it!

I am truly grateful to CUELST for making this project possible, and providing the initial support necessary for my wonderful trip to Nepal. Although I was sad to leave, I know that I will definitely go back. I hope that my time with these schools will encourage others to consider them when they undertake their projects in the future, and to contact me if further information is required.

Project Location: Tartong, Helambu, Sindupalchowk, Nepal **Institution Name:** Shree Deurali Primary School, working with Helambu Education Livelihood Project (HELP)
Dates of Project: 26/08/10 - 17/09/10
Approx Amount of Teaching: 10-20 Students, 5-6 hours per day

Tartong is a remote village located at 2,200m in the foothills of the Nepal Himalayas, around 110km to the north of Kathmandu. It is only accessible by a steep two hour uphill walk, after a 4-7 hour (depending on road conditions) bus journey, and consists of 23 traditional Nepali houses dispersed across a wide area of hillside. The school is located just outside the village, and has around 70 pupils, in classes 0 – 5, aged between 4 and 17, and serves many small villages.

Helambu Education Livelihood Project (HELP) is an organisation set up a few years ago by Jimmy Lama, working to improve education at the many small and remote village schools in the Helambu valley region, and, through this, increasing development in the area, by way of infrastructure, services, education, and people's awareness of opportunities, whilst maintaining local communities' traditional lifestyles and their unique blend of Tibetan and Nepali culture.

Whilst volunteering for HELP my role was twofold. I was the first volunteer ever received by Tartong school. My primary job was to teach English to students in classes 2 – 5, and I also was asked for my suggestions on how I thought the school could be improved, in terms of its physical structure (e.g. new classrooms, landslide prevention measures), the nature of the teaching (e.g. making more lessons independent from the text books), the general running of the school (e.g. introducing a house system to promote cohesion and competition within the school), and interaction and relations between the school and the local community. I was also fortunate enough to be taken to visit four other schools being supported by HELP in the region, so was able to compare and contrast them to the one at Tartong and increase my awareness of broader educational issues in the region as a whole.

I found the children a pleasure to teach. There were significant communication barriers as the English standards of even the oldest children and most of the teachers was very poor. However, I found it possible to overcome these through more interactive teaching methods, enabling me to hopefully deliver both fun and educational lessons. The children were very willing to participate and interact, and were always keen to learn. It was a pleasure and a rewarding experience to introduce them to a teaching methodology different to that which they are used to, where there is little interaction and lesson variation. In the first week of my placement the school had exams, so I was restricted to two hours of actual teaching each day, though I was able to help a little with exams and play playground games. However, after this, amongst the many Nepali national holidays, I had a full schedule of teaching of 6 hours per day, consisting of four 45 minute periods. I taught on my own, with the occasional help of another teacher, and the small class sizes

(10-20) and good behaviour of the children meant that the lack of verbal communication possible between myself and the children was not too much of a problem. I focused more on pronunciation and reading than writing, to try to increase the confidence of the children in using their own English.

Living in the Tibetan community was a fantastic experience, and one which I'll always remember. I was living with a young couple who were both teachers at the school, both employed by HELP. They lived in a very nice traditional Nepali house, as does every



other inhabitant of Tartong, and cooked a variety of wonderful traditional Nepali food, the food on the trip was one ongoing highlight! I was fortunate enough to be taken to visit many other houses in the village and was struck immediately by the extraordinary community cohesion and generosity of people towards each other and myself in particular. Their lifestyle has changed little over the generations and it was good to see the HELP organisation keen to preserve this unique culture whilst improving the level of services available and finding solutions to issues such as the widespread emigration of the most educated young people.



Project Location: Nakote, Helambu, Nepal

Institution Name: Shree Pema Choling Primary and Lower Secondary School

Contact: Jimmy Lama, jimmylama@gmail.com

Dates of Project: 29/08/2010 -18/09/10

Teaching: 6 hours per day, 6 days per week, 4-30 students per class (70-80 students in school), ages 2-16, English and other subjects

Nakote is a very small village located at 2000m in the Helambu valley of the Himalayan foothills. The people in Nakote are of Yolmo ethnicity, originating from the Tibetan Plateau. They are all followers of Buddhism and have a unique way of life, influenced by Nepali and Tibetan cultures. Nakote has a total population of around 400 when everyone is present in the village, though young men are often away, working in Kathmandu and abroad. Nakote is very remote, reached by a six-hour, slow, bumpy bus journey from Kathmandu, followed by a five-hour trek uphill (although the road is planned to extend further up the valley). There is one school in the village, which currently has a Kindergarten and Nursery, and Classes 1 to 7. When all of the teachers are present (which is quite rare), there are seven teachers. New school buildings were built quite recently, with financial support from the British charity, the Mondo Foundation. The schools in this area are receiving support and coordination from the Nepalese charity, 'HELP' (Helambu Education and Livelihood Project). This charity was set up by Jimmy Lama, who comes from the area, and Nakote was the first school to receive support. Jimmy coordinated the placements with the schools, and was an invaluable source of help, inspiration and information before, during and after the placement. This year was the first time that ELST volunteers have been to the area, but Nakote has had several foreign volunteers in the past, and is an ideal place for future volunteers to go.

I volunteered in Nakote at the same time as another Cambridge student. We stayed with Jimmy's mother, who lives just five minutes walk from the school in a traditional Yolmo house. Living arrangements were simple but very comfortable, and gave us a real insight into the Yolmo way of life. Jimmy's mother cooked us three delicious meals each day, introducing us to many new Yolmo, Tibetan and Nepalese recipes. It was wonderful to live in the centre of the village with a local host, as children from neighbouring houses visited almost everyday. We were able to get to know them better outside of the school context, and their English probably saw the biggest improvement during our stay.

School begins at 9.30am with a thirty-minute assembly where the children do stretches in lines and one of the classes does a performance or quiz. There are then four forty-minute

lessons, an hour's lunch-break, followed by a further three forty-minute lessons. Each class has a regular time-table including the subjects of English, Maths, Science, Grammar, Health and Physical Education, Social Studies, Nepali and Environmental studies. All subjects are taught in the English medium except Nepali, so we were able to teach whichever we wanted or whichever the teacher was absent for. We also taught first aid to the older classes and did a presentation of a scenario in front of the entire school, because we discovered that knowledge of basic first aid was severely lacking in the village, and we had both just completed a wilderness first aid qualification in Cambridge.

There is a comprehensive range of text-books for all the subjects and all students own a full set of these. However, this presented a problem to a certain extent, because all of the teachers relied heavily upon the text-books. They made no attempt to vary lessons beyond reading out of the text book, followed by answering the (simple and unimaginative) text-book questions. Additionally, students were actively discouraged from coming up with original ideas or opinions. We attempted to give the teachers some ideas of new teaching methods, and introduced the idea that each child learns differently. The teachers were eager to hear these new ideas and the children were generally extremely enthusiastic to learn in different ways, using posters, presentations, group work, stories, songs and games, along with other more interactive methods, going beyond the rote learning they were accustomed to. We left a long letter for the teachers to keep, detailing our ideas, and they all took our email addresses to be able to keep in contact.

The English pronunciation of teachers and children improved enormously over the time we were in Nakote; but I feel that the most important impact we had in the long-term was in encouraging more varied teaching methods. I also feel that the first aid we taught will be invaluable, although this will soon need revising. Overall, Nakote is a wonderful place to volunteer and Jimmy, the children, teachers, host and other people are some of the kindest, most inspiring people I have ever met. During our time in Helambu we also visited other schools and villages in the region which may be suitable for future volunteers. Additionally, Jimmy is planning new combined opportunities to volunteer and trek. We finished our stay with a spectacular ten-day trek starting straight from the village, which was a very special way to end our time there. The volunteering was hard work at times, but a thoroughly rewarding and unforgettable experience, and it was wonderful to feel that I was giving some positive contributions to the school and the wider community. I will forever be grateful to ELST for enabling me to have such an unforgettable experience in Nepal and I hope that the school of Nakote will continue to improve and see future volunteers from Cambridge.

North India

Project Location: Kargyak village, Zanskar valley, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Institution Name: Surya Sun School

Dates of Project: 21/06/10-17/08/10

Approx Amount of Teaching: 42 Students, 5 hours per day

Zanskar is one of the highest inhabited regions of the world and one of the most isolated regions on earth; situated in the Himalayan region of North India (west of Ladakh), it is cut off from the rest of the world from the end of May until September, due to snow. The local people of this region, the Zanskaries, are struggling to preserve their own Tibetan culture and language.

Kargyak is an isolated village situated in the Zanskar valley in the altitude of 4200 m above sea level and only 20 villagers from the total of 200 are semi-literate and they used to be forced to send their children to distant boarding schools for even the most basic, primary education. Once gone, children rarely returned, straining family relationships and eroding community values.

In 2006 the Czech NGO Surya started a project of the Sun School for Kargyak. The construction of the school was finished in 2007 and since then the school has provided year round education for primary school students from Kargyak and the surrounding villages.

The construction of the school respects local architecture and the traditional local material and its uses sophisticated solar and wind energy in order to heat the building of the school - it is a "passive" building.

The school is staffed by local and foreign volunteer teachers, who provide exceptionally good education for the students in the given geographical and social context. The students are schooled from age 2 in the nursery class and continue their education through classes 1 to 5. At present, there are 42 registered students, who follow the official syllabi set by the Jammu and Kashmir Board of School Education.

I had fantastic time teaching my students – I taught English, Mathematics, Social Sciences, Computers and I led several after school activities and sports. Of course, as a law student I tried to educate my students about basic rights and obligations as citizens of their country and I hope the fruits of my teaching will appear sometime in the future, when they will be able to vote and speak for themselves.



Project Location: Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, India
Institution Name: Bon Menri Monastery
Dates of Project: 09/08/2010 – 12/09/2010
Approx Amount of Teaching: 10-15 Students daily

“Hello madam.” “Good day, madam.” “It is a pleasure to see you, madam.” The burgundy-robed monks filed in one after another, each taking a seat at a little wooden desk with a little wooden chair. There were fifteen of them in all. The numbers dwindled on days with *pujas*, or thankful prayer ceremonies. But on average, there were fifteen: thirteen monks and two painfully shy nuns. So began our lessons.

Each day, for at least one hour, I would stand at the blackboard and practice English with the monks of Menri Monastery. The lessons were simple, catering to the wide range of abilities in my class. Some students could read and speak quite well, others struggled with the simplest of phrases. So we practiced grammar and pronunciation, practical skills like letter writing, simple things like when to use ‘a’ or ‘the’ or ‘some.’ Then I would send the monks off with homework, assignments they quickly copied down before rushing out of the class and back into their busy day.

The monks were part of the Menri Monastery, a small Bon monastery located in Dolanji, India. Dolanji itself is a little town composed of around 800 people. Most of these people are involved in some way in the monastery, either through the orphanage, the nunnery, the Dialectic school, the temple, or the monastery itself. Almost all are Tibetan refugees.

As a result, Dolanji is a sleepy, quiet place. The sound of chants and mooing cows (“We make our chai with their milk. All organic!” A monk told me once) fills the air. There is no traffic; only one bus runs from Dolanji to the neighboring larger town of Solan, arriving at a general hour in the morning and returning at some point in the afternoon. It’s also a far cry from a tourist destination. Foreigners tend to be researching at the Menri library, or serious devotees of the Bon faith embarking on a spiritual retreat.

That’s not to say the monks knew nothing of the outside world. Many of my students were serious academics, studying everything from biology to the integration of Buddhism and Bon faiths. They knew about TV, watching perhaps an hour each week of some educational show. They liked music (Lady Gaga, surprisingly, was a favorite, as was Akon) and were endlessly amused by English slang. “Cool! Awesome! It’s cool!” Became a highly popular statement among the older monks after a lesson where I taught casual introductions.

Overall, I think the monks learned a lot. I wish I had more time with them, but monks at Menri were painfully busy. The time they gave me (the set hour for lessons, the random hours throughout the day) was during their breaks for meals or naps. This lack of time was perhaps the greatest hindrance to my lessons.

I also learned a lot. Menri is a Tibetan refugee center, meaning most of the monks worked hard, desperately hard, to get to the monastery. One still had scars across his feet from where the twine on his homemade shoes sliced into his flesh while he was fleeing across the Himalayas to come into India.

“We are not citizens. We cannot vote. We have no country,” one monk explained to me. “But we are thankful for India.” It was through these conversations I began to appreciate my

citizenship in an entirely new way. Never have I had to fight for my political freedom. For most of the monks at Menri, this fight has always been very much a reality.

The monks also taught me about simplicity. Life at the monastery was basic. I showered in a bucket. I washed my clothes in a bucket. Meals were usually some combination of rice, dahl, bread, broth, Thukpa (a Tibetan soup), and Tingmo (a Tibetan steamed bread). In the classroom, lacking textbooks and computers, I wrote assignments by hand on the board.

In this simplicity, the monks found peace and a sort of endless joy. They were often happy, often smiling, never gossiping. We sat together in the evenings and had informal English lessons under the stars (while avoiding endless streams of mosquitoes). Together we would talk and laugh and watch the sky while sipping chai tea.

Menri is a beautiful place. The Bon faith is fascinating and complex, and the monks (and nuns) that I met were astounding people. I am so fortunate to have had this opportunity. I am grateful for the chance to explore a new culture, to meet a new world. Thank you.



Project Location: Karsha, Zanskar Valley, Ladakh, State of Jammu and Kashmir, North India

Institution Name: Karsha Government School

Dates of Project: 22 July – 4th Sept

Approx Amount of Teaching: During Summer Holidays: 3-4 hrs per day (15-25 pupils per class). During Term: 6 hours per day (3-25 pupils per class)

Karsha Government School is one of many schools in the Zanskar Valley. The valley lies 3500m above sea level in the beautiful Himalayas and its landscape consists of dry, rocky desert plains which may from time to time support coarse meadows and fields of barley and wheat. Growth in the region relies on the Zanskar river and on smaller streams which flow past Karsha from melting glaciers in the mountains. Across the valley, small villages are spread and across the river opposite Karsha lies the town of Padum, approximately 2km away. Set slightly above the villages are many beautiful Buddhist complexes, including Karsha's own Monastery and Nunnery.

Our teaching in Karsha was co-ordinated by Sonam Tsering who organised the summer vacation school (Indian vacations are announced at very short notice and cannot always be avoided), provided lifts to Padum and helped us to arrange our travel. We taught a short programme for the ten days of vacation before actual school began and this gave us a chance to get to know our students. Once full school had begun we were extremely busy as a large number of teachers had been either conscripted for government census duty or had become stranded as a result of a tragic and unprecedented flash flood which occurred in Leh in the first two weeks of our stay. We observed assemblies and taught seven 40 minute English lessons per day, sometimes combining classes where children were left without a teacher. With classes 7 upwards (and most especially with 9 and 10) we were provided with a basic syllabus which helped us to plan lessons and to teach the kinds of vocabulary and grammar which might come up in October examinations.

While we experienced an atypical level of disorganisation within the school and though the level of English was weak in some classes, we ultimately found teaching in Karsha immensely rewarding. We contributed to and opened, and ran the library which was an absolute success, we received positive feedback from the headmaster and our fellow teachers and we felt that students' willingness to speak English and their general confidence had definitely improved by the end of our stay. Above all, our students were a pleasure to teach.

We will never forget our time in Ladakh or in India. We were welcomed and treated with warmth and kindness by everyone at Karsha school and by everyone we met in the valley. Our hosts not only accepted us into their home but made us feel a valued part of their family life and we will never forget their beautiful children, Rinchen, Nawang Tundup and Stanzin Yangsum. This experience is without comparison and will be treasured always. Thankyou, ELST, for providing us with an incredible opportunity and I hope that, by being the first volunteers to contact Karsha school directly, we have initiated a connection which will be continued and enriched by many volunteers to come.



Project Location: Karsha, Zanskar, Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Institution Name: Karsha Government High School

Dates of Project: 26-08-10 → 25-09-10

Approx Amount of Teaching: 3 classes, 4 hours per day during holidays; 4 ½ hours during term time.

Zanskar is a beautiful and very remote region of north India located within the state of Jammu & Kashmir. Karsha, a small village, is set into the face of snow-capped mountains at some 3500 metres above sea level, with a raging river fed by melting snow cutting through its centre. Although summer brings fairly hot temperatures, winter is extreme with temperatures falling as low as -30°C, accompanied by large amounts of snow, leaving the valley effectively cut off for several months of the year (unless you are prepared to trek along a frozen river). Zanskar is predominantly Buddhist, so many villages have their own beautiful monastery with a community of monks resident there. Currently, few Western tourists visit the area; this may however, be set to change when a new all-year road into the valley is completed.

Travelling to Zanskar is in itself an adventure and an achievement, although things seemed to fall into place without too much effort. From Delhi I flew internally to Srinagar and then took a 12 hour bus ride to Kargil. This was followed (after a five hour sleep) by a 15 hour taxi drive on a very bumpy, sometimes barely existent road to Padum - this is the nearest town to Karsha (about a 14km trip by road).

I taught at Karsha Government School for a little over four weeks. The government perplexingly announces school holidays at very late notice, which they had done just before my arrival. The students were clearly keen to learn English as a good number attended “summer school” held during the week before school recommenced. However, when school resumed several teachers were absent, some due to the terrible flooding in Leh which had blocked the only road into the valley. Others were absent as the government had put teachers on 40-day census duty. Whilst this situation is unlikely to reproduce itself in subsequent years, teachers are allowed to take around ten days leave per year, so there is always certain to be a great need for volunteers! Because of the severe (although temporary) staffing problem I really felt that my time in Karsha made a significant impact. Otherwise, classes would have been left entirely without a teacher.

With regards to what we taught, with the lower classes we were given carte blanche. I covered topics such as weather, prepositions and jobs. Class X however, had an important exam in October, the results of which would determine whether they could continue with their education at a higher school. To aid with their preparation, I was given the task of teaching the English grammar section of the exam, which was quite daunting but nonetheless very enjoyable. The children were however very shy, which made speaking activities rather difficult - certainly there were no significant discipline problems! Overall, I was impressed by the standard of English the students already had and in most cases I was attempting to build on a fairly sturdy base. A firm grip of English is important for success across the curriculum as other subjects such as Science and Social Sciences are also taught in English. A few years ago Urdu was the main medium used, so the change to English has disadvantaged students in higher classes who have had to adapt quickly.

During the time spent in Karsha I stayed with a family in the neighbouring village of Ulang. The parents were incredibly welcoming and hospitable and it was great fun listening to their children read in the evening and playing games with them. With the family I attended

a local wedding and a baby's hair cutting party which was a really nice opportunity to experience local culture and traditions. There were some fairly well-stocked shops in the villages but Padum satisfied my needs as far as freshly-baked biscuits and whiteboard pens went. School also took place on a Saturday so we made the most of Sunday to explore the local area, making visits to impressive monasteries in the neighbouring villages of Pipiting and Sani. Karsha also has its own monastery and nunnery, perched strikingly further up the mountains.

The trip concluded with an organised tour of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, providing a very striking contrast to where I'd been living for the last five weeks.

Hopefully our presence in Zanskar will help the students of Karsha achieve greater success in their English studies. I really hope volunteers will continue to travel to Karsha to teach as there is enormous potential to make a significant positive impact on the lives of the Zanskari people. The opportunity to plan this placement from scratch was one I relished and ELST really is unique in the autonomy it gives to its volunteers. Hopefully volunteers will continue to be sent for many years to come, for it is truly a reciprocally beneficial scheme.



Project Location: Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India

Institution Name: Yangchen Choling Institute

Dates of Project: 04/08/10-12/09/10

Approx Amount of Teaching: 27 students across two classes, 1-2 hours per day

Spiti Valley is one of the remotest regions of the North Indian State of Himachal Pradesh right at the Tibetan border. The landscape is so unique with green fields contrasting against stone desert, and small white washed houses below snow capped mountains. I taught at Yangchen Choling Monastery in Pangmo Village about an hour from Kaza, the main village of the region. The monastery houses 27 nuns ranging from the ages of 12 to 48 all of them eager to learn English.

From the moment I arrived the nuns did everything to make me feel at home. I taught about one to two hours a day giving me a lot of free time, yet somehow it was never boring. I would go for walks, read, write and most often just spend time with the nuns, helping with their daily chores. These ranged from ordinary cooking to working on the fields or helping to build the green house. As time progressed I became friends with the nuns which was probably one of the most rewarding parts of my placement. The nuns have such a different background compared to my own, leading to fascinating and enriching conversations that broadened my horizon.

Overall the trip was one of the most rewarding I have ever done! I am deeply indebted to the ELST trust as well as the Newton trust for community related projects which enabled me to travel to and stay at the nunnery in Spiti Valley for six weeks. To the Murray Edwards College & BP Centenary Travel Scholarship I am also deeply indebted as it allowed me to fly to and from India as well as enabling me to do some travelling around the North of India after my placement in Spiti. I also have to thank the nuns of Yangchen Choling who opened their home and hearts during my stay, revealing to me a completely different view on life. Thank you to all who made this trip possible!



Project Location: Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Institution Name: Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL)

Dates of Project: 05/08/10 - 14/09/10

Approx Amount of Teaching: 40 Students, 3-4 hours per day

As the most northerly state in India, Ladakh is situated high up in the Himalayas; a stark yet beautiful high altitude desert. The town of Leh was for centuries sited on an important trade route between India and Tibet, thus Tibetan influence in the area is strong.

Unfortunately the region's educational system is afflicted with the same issues present in much of India – poor-quality books and teaching materials, along with inadequate teaching based upon rote learning. SECMOL attempts to redress this by offering a more holistic education to children who have failed their 10th Class exams. A heavy influence is placed on learning English, and this is where volunteers are invaluable.

I intended to arrive in SECMOL's Phey campus, about 18km from Leh, in early July and spend six weeks there. However my journey up from Manali, in Himāchal Pradesh, was beset by troubles from the very start. The formidable 480km road, which traverses some of the highest mountain passes in the world, should have taken two days, but after a nine-day nightmare I finally arrived back in Manali, relieved to be unharmed.

The problem had been an unexpected bout of flash flooding that caused devastation in and around Leh, leaving 233 dead and sweeping away over a thousand buildings. Thankfully, due to landslides and floods covering the road, I had only made it as far as the village of Pang when the worst of the floods hit, and was hence relatively safe. However, the road surface had washed away both behind and in front of me, forcing me to spend four nights in an army transit camp, before being subjected to a terrifying two-day bus journey back to Manali along the partially repaired road.

After this it seemed imprudent to attempt further travel to Leh, so I decided to head to McLeod Ganj, where I spent 2 weeks assisting with conversational English and pronunciation at the Tibetan Hope Centre. This institution caters for newly arrived Tibetan exiles, many of whom come with harrowing stories of brutality at the hands of the Chinese authorities. However, the centre didn't appear suitable for a long-term project, as opportunities for classroom teaching were fairly minimal (2-3 hours per week). Also, judging by the frequent recycling of topics, the daily conversation classes were targeted more at backpackers on short visits, who were able to introduce the Tibetans to a wide variety of foreign dialects. Thus, upon hearing that the SECMOL campus was safe and unaffected by the flooding, and that other volunteers were arriving, I decided to fly to Leh and pursue my original project.

Over the next two weeks, I taught two English classes per day, covering parts of speech and various tenses, as well as assisting with conversational English, movie and computer classes. The institute was still under-staffed due to the flooding, which had caused many volunteers to alter their plans, so I was always kept busy! The students' spoken English was generally good, but it was unfortunately not matched by their writing, which usually contained copious grammatical errors and required frequent correction. However, they were extremely keen and receptive in class, and despite my severely shortened stay I really felt a sense of achievement upon my departure.



The steady stream of foreigners that pass through SECMOL as both volunteers and visitors meant that the children were immediately comfortable with my presence, and I was able to quickly settle in the campus community. Students and staff eat all meals together, and these frequent interactions were a real delight.

Even after only two weeks at SECMOL, I felt that I had made some genuine friends, among both the students and the staff, and I only wish that I could have spent the full six weeks there.

Project Location: McLeod Ganj, Dharamshala, India

Institution Name: Tibet Hope Center and Rogpa Baby-Care Center

Dates of Project: 30/07/10-18/09/10

Approx Amount of Teaching: Adult teaching two hours per day with either three or ten students, three hours at baby-care center with twenty-three babies

Originally we had organised to teach English at SECMOL in Leh in the Himalayas. However, our plans were obstructed by a flood in Leh which injured and killed a great number of people. At the time of the disaster we were in the mountains on our way to Leh and we ended up spending a week in an Indian military camp before the road was safe enough for us to return down south. We then had to think of alternatives and decided to go to McLeod Ganj where we found the Tibet Hope Center and the Rogpa Baby-Care Center.

McLeod Ganj is a colony for Tibetan refugees in the Dhauladhar mountains. It is a very comfortable place to live with a relaxed atmosphere and it is also the place of residence of the Dalai Lama. The Tibet Hope Center organises English teaching for adult Tibetans and hosts a conversation class each afternoon which everyone is welcome to join. The Tibetans who attend the conversation class is then paired with the English speaking tourists who have turned up and each group is given a topic which they are supposed to discuss for one hour. While I sometimes felt that the same amount of time could have been spent better in a classroom doing actual teaching, these classes also seemed to be enjoyable to the Tibetans who used them as an opportunity to tell us about their culture and home country and often shared extremely interesting stories about their backgrounds.

Besides participating in the conversation classes, I taught two other classes: one basic level with ten students and one one on one class at intermediate level. Especially the one on one class worked well as I could really feel that my student responded well to the teaching and improved a great deal. In both of the classes my students were very enthusiastic and appreciative of the teaching.

Since the Tibet Hope Center only needed me for teaching in the afternoon, I arranged to volunteer at the Rogpa Baby-Care Center for three hours each morning. The kids were around three years old and we did normal day care activities with them such as singing, playing with toys and changing nappies. Although I was not teaching English this way, working at the Rogpa Baby-Care Center was probably one of the most rewarding things about my stay in McLeod Ganj since it allowed me to approach Tibetan culture from a different angle. All in all, the trip was a great experience. Thanks for enabling us to make it happen.

Project Location: Mcleod Ganj
Institution name: Tibet Hope Centre
Dates of project: 13/08/10 - 10/09/10
Approx amount of teaching: 4 hours/day

Mcleod Ganj, a busy suburb of Dharamsala, is the home of the Tibetan government-in-exile, headed by Tenzin Gyatso or His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama. For this reason it is often referred to as 'Little Lhasa', and is the home to numerous exiled Tibetans. Surrounded by many monasteries the town is also frequented by many monks and nuns who supplement their own studies with English language lessons provided by one of many excellent charities in the area.

We volunteered at one such charity, the Tibet Hope Centre, whose campus consisted of a small building with an office and 2 small classrooms, and a larger sheltered area outside, where many activities and lessons took place. The Hope Centre sees many students, about half of which are monks or nuns. There is also a small proportion of non-Tibetan students, most of whom came from Myanmar.

Twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays, I would teach a Beginners class, about 25 students who had been studying English for less than a year. Most of these classes were either centred around pronunciation of new words, of which I would introduce a few of each week, making simple sentences, or practising basic conversation.

In the afternoons I would then do small group and individual lessons with students who were at a more advance level. Most of these lessons were spent either working through examples and exercises in one of two grammar textbooks, depending on the level of the student, or reading a text in order to practise pronunciation. On a normal afternoon I would teach three of these classes, each lasting between an hour and an hour and a half.

The latter classes would require more preparation, and in general were more difficult to prepare for. In particular explaining some of the concepts in the grammar textbook would often require several concrete examples to make the rules clear. The beginners class would also present its own challenges; the language barrier between me and the students often made it difficult for me to explain what I meant or the meaning of a word, and frequently I would have to resort to pictures and diagrams, or rely on the more advanced students in the class to explain some ideas to their peers.

Everyday the Hope Centre would run a conversation class which we would take part in. This was an opportunity for local students of all different levels to engage in simple conversation in English. The class would be split into many small groups, each with two to four students and one volunteer, and given a chosen topic to discuss. At the end of an hour the class would come together and the groups would present their ideas to the whole class. Conversation classes were particularly good for those students whose English was at an intermediate level as they could properly understand and discuss the topic and had the confidence to stand up in front of the class and present their opinions.

Overall, it was a very fulfilling and challenging experience, however full time volunteering opportunities are not always abundant in the area and at the beginning of our project we found that there was only a limited amount of teaching to be done.

South India

Project Location: Bylakuppe, Karnataka, India

Institution Name: Tibetan Rights and Freedom Restoration Committee

Dates of Project: 26/07/10-1/09/10

Approx amount of teaching: 3 hours a day, 36 students (3 classes)

Bylakuppe is the largest camp for Tibetan exiles in India. Located in Karnataka, it is a few hours from Mysore (just how long depending on how good your bus driver is!) which is definitely worth a visit on an off day. Despite being incredibly lush and beautiful (we found it a welcome relief from the dust and dirt of most Indian towns) there are few Western visitors due to the necessity of PAP forms for overnight stays meaning it remains un-touristy whilst having all the necessary tourist amenities (restaurants, internet cafe, tourism office etc) easily available. Mr Tsewang, a local business man, helped to co-ordinate the organisation of classes to begin with although due to his commitments helping organise the Dalai Lama's visit we saw less of him later on in the project. The monks of the Tibet Rights and Freedom Restoration Committee, particularly Jampa-la, were also responsible for the organisation of classes, helping with PAP's etc and were incredibly helpful.

I taught three classes. First an afternoon class with another volunteer with Class ten of Sera Jey Monastic Secondary school with around sixteen students aged around 18, although due to their exams from the second week of the placement the numbers were more erratic. After that I took a class of ten intermediate adult monks also from Sera Jey. Lastly in the late afternoon I took a mixed gender class of ten children in first camp most aged between 11-13. What I taught depended on the class; Class 10 were fairly advanced and we focused mostly on speaking practise, as well as some written practise for their exams on request involving writing formal and non-formal letters. We also had groups presenting a news report, interviews and even an American Presidential Election! The intermediate class needed more grammatical work as theirs was patchier; however they had a great sense of humour and memorably willing to and good at acting various roles in role plays and games! The children's class enjoyed speaking role-plays, discussions, games (hangman was a particular favourite) and especially more creative work such as writing their own fairy-tale. All the classes were keen on speaking practise, particularly pronunciation practise (tongue-twisters proved useful). The monks wanted to learn English predominantly to be able to spread information about the political situation in Tibet and to help explain the

principles of Tibetan Buddhism to Western visitors, whilst the children wanted more every-day practising of English such as going to the shops. Whilst there was a wide spectrum of abilities, I enjoyed teaching such a wide variety of students.

Whilst learning resources were comparatively limited compared to teaching in the West (the intermediate class had the luxury of a whiteboard- I had to alternate the use of the blackboard with another teacher taking a different class in the afternoon for a little while!)

the students were all incredibly enthusiastic, dedicated and a real pleasure to teach. As well as being much appreciated by the students, the classes were also a lot of fun for me and



there was a lot of laughing! Internet resources and Xerox were available but due to the intermittent electricity supply only for a limited amount of time. However as I had the mornings free planning was not generally stressful.

We were fortunate enough whilst staying in Bylakuppe to be present during the general meeting of the Tibetan Government in Exile. As a result we were able to talk to many Tibetan politicians, journalists and political activists from all around the world just being in first camp as well as being able to see H.H the Dalai Lama arrive and attend one of his teachings which was an amazing experience. Our hosts were unfailingly helpful in organising introductions to Tibetan Buddhism, meetings with important members in Tibetan politics and showing us DVD's and lending us books about the situation in Tibet as well as talking about their own experiences. Showing an interest in definitely rewarded! The Tibetan community were welcoming and we all felt accepted. From being invited to join in discussions at the chai stall outside the internet cafe to watching rehearsals for Tibetan dance and opera to communal singing sessions (with which we had to join in!) We were welcomed as far more than guests. One of the highlights of our trip was simply having tea and chatting in the evenings with Jampa and Tashi in Sera. I felt incredibly humbled and grateful to be able to serve the Tibetan community and wish them all the best with their volunteer projects in the future. Thank you so much ELST for giving me this opportunity.

Project location: Bylakuppe settlement near Mysore, Karnataka State, South India

Organisation name: Tibetan Rights and Freedom Restoration Committee

Dates of project: 26/07/2010 – 03/09/2010

Amount of teaching: Approx 4 hours per day

Bylakuppe is a large Tibetan settlement near Mysore, in Karnataka, South India. The land was given to the Tibetan refugees, who fled Tibet after 1959, by the Indian Government. Originally jungle, there are now several residential camps, extensive areas of farmland, and a number of monasteries.

We stayed in Lugsum Samdupling, or 'Old Camp' as it is known locally, for the first four weeks of our stay; after this we moved to stay with a monk called Tashi, in Sera Jey monastery.

Our classes were organised by the Tibetan Rights and Freedom Restoration Committee, mainly co-ordinated by a monk called Jampa Gyaltzen. We had several classes in Old Camp for lay people – advanced and beginners adult classes in the mornings, and for school children after school, as well as a class for the staff of the local hospital in the evenings. The lay people wanted to learn English to improve their job prospects or help with school lessons, and to use when talking to Indians outside of Bylakuppe, so we tried to include a lot of 'useful' vocabulary, such as booking a train, reading a newspaper or writing a job application. There was a big range in abilities, but we were able to split classes fairly effectively between the four of us.

We also had several classes of monks in Sera Jey and Tashi Lhunpo monasteries. Our students were of grades 7 to 10 (aged from 15 to early 20's) as well as a class of adults in the monastic university. The standard of English was very high, and the monks were very well informed about politics and current world affairs. We had lots of fascinating lessons debating the symbolism behind flags, great world leaders, and child labour, to name but a few!

Most of our students had studied, or were studying, English at school (some of the monks had some of their science lessons taught in English) so had a good knowledge of vocabulary and of the theory of grammar; however, in practice there were a lot of common grammar mistakes, and their spoken English was far behind the level of their written work. We tried to re-teach grammar correctly and practice using it in context, as well as lots of speaking and pronunciation practice. All our pupils were incredibly keen to learn and make the most of the time we were there (even taking time out from their revision to attend our classes!) and it was very rewarding to see the great improvements they made, especially in confidence and fluency when speaking.

Everyone we met in Bylakuppe was incredibly welcoming and friendly. I really enjoyed getting to know people in the community, and was surprised by how easily we could relate to people who, at first glance, live such a different life to us. I really admired the Tibetans' attitude – they are incredibly happy and contented, despite having faced so many difficulties, and maintain a sense of humour in every situation!

We were very lucky that the end of our placement co-incided with both a visit from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the First Tibetan National General Meeting. It was a fascinating time to be in Bylakuppe - we joined the people lining the streets to greet His Holiness, and listened to him addressing a crowd in one of the monasteries. We also learnt a great deal about the current situation for Tibetans, both inside Tibet and in exile, and met many interesting and inspiring people.

I had an unforgettable time in Bylakuppe, and I would like to thank ELST for helping to organise this placement. I am grateful for the opportunity to help the community in Bylakuppe, and hope the project continues for many years to come.

Project Location: Bylakuppe, Karnataka, South India

Institution Name: Tibetan Rights and Freedom Restoration Committee

Dates of Project: 26/07/2010-03/09/2010

Approx Amount of Teaching: 35 students split between 4/5 classes per day

Bylakuppe is a Tibetan refugee settlement situated 83km west of Mysore in Karnataka state. It was one of the earliest refugee camps to be set up following the exile of the Dalai Lama in 1959, and is consequently one of the largest camps out of approximately 20 in India and Nepal. Its population consists of about 10,000 monks and nuns in several different institutions, the most famous of which are Sera monastery and Tashi Lhunpo monastery (the seat of the Panchen Lama). There are also several thousand lay people living in about 17 camps within the settlement. The settlement was a very beautiful place to spend our summer – the agricultural lifestyle of the Tibetans meant that the surrounding scenery was very green and lush. Even though it is only a mile away from the nearest Indian town, we were entirely immersed in Tibetan culture due to the restricted access of foreigners to the settlement.

Before our placement we travelled in India for two weeks, mainly by train. Some highlights of our travel included visiting the stunning Taj Mahal in Agra, watching pilgrims at the ghats by the Ganges in Varanasi, as well as the ruined temples in Hampi. I also really enjoyed the time we spent in Mysore both sight-seeing and shopping at the famous market. However, I enjoyed our placement much more than the travelling due to the immensely peaceful and serene atmosphere in the settlement. Bylakuppe has a tightly-knit community which was very welcoming to us.



Right: Teaching my class in Tashi Lhunpo monastery

Four teachers from ELST went to Bylakuppe this year.

Between us we taught over 100 students, and on average had about 4 classes per day. We taught a range of demographic groups – both secondary school and adult monks from Sera monastery, secondary school monks from Tashi Lhunpo, lay children from the local secondary school, young adults from First Camp and finally the doctors and nurses from one of the NGO hospitals. We also gave some individual lessons to a doctor hoping to take his IELTS immigration test, and a local journalist interested in political issues. People varied in their reasons for wanting to learn English. It is very useful as a common language with which to communicate with the Indians who they live alongside. In addition, many monks and journalists want to communicate news of the Tibetan struggle to a Western audience. So to cater for these needs we organised lessons based around practical conversation topics in groups, as well as organising debates with our monk classes which they really enjoyed! I was particularly impressed with the dedication shown by my lay adult class. They were all beginners and some of them could speak very little English. But with intensive daily classes, they all made huge improvements and increased their confidence in speaking. I hope that volunteers from ELST will continue to go to Bylakuppe in the future in order to keep up the good work!

Our accommodation changed quite frequently because many of the rooms were booked up as Bylakuppe was hosting the first Tibetan National Congress. We stayed in the Cooperative Society Guesthouse, the Yakar Hotel, and finally a monk's own house! I

enjoyed this last experience most of all because of the incredibly generous and welcoming nature of the monks who hosted us. We ate at different restaurants in First camp, including lots of traditional Tibetan food. In the evenings, we planned lessons together or spent time at local houses. Mr. Tsewang Dorjee, a local businessman, was kind enough to host us for dinner, where his family taught us to make momos! We had one day off a week and used this to explore the beautiful temples in Bylakuppe, including the famous Golden Temple in Fourth camp, as well as taking trips to Kushalnagar and Mysore.



Left: Visiting the Golden Temple in Fourth Camp

We spent much of our free time talking with both students and other members of the community about their personal experiences of exile. These were often stories of immense bravery and inner personal strength. The residents of Bylakuppe have had their families split apart many times, firstly by exile into India and Nepal, and then again as more of the younger generation move away to improve their future prospects in bigger Indian

cities like Bangalore or Delhi. The future of Tibetan culture is very uncertain as the Dalai Lama ages and more of the younger generation becomes assimilated into the cultures of their host countries. Despite this, there is still a pervading sense of Tibetan identity even in Tibetans who have never lived in Tibet.

We were immensely privileged to come to Bylakuppe at this time. Not only did we experience incredible warmth and generosity from the local people, but Bylakuppe was hosting the very first Tibetan National General Meeting in the history of Tibetan democracy. Hundreds of politicians, dignitaries and journalists descended on Bylakuppe to discuss pressing issues facing Tibetans in areas such as health, education, politics, and Tibetans-in-exile. We were able to talk to many of the participants which was very exciting and educational for us, including Tenzin Tsundue, a famous Tibetan activist and writer. Finally, the meeting was concluded by a speech from the Dalai Lama. We joined the welcoming party lining the roads of the settlement, waiting for hours for his arrival. The next day he gave a long speech at a special ceremony which almost everyone in Bylakuppe and the surrounding settlements attended (we managed to find someone to translate for us). He talked in a very engaging way about different aspects of Buddhism and Tibetan culture. I was very impressed by his interest in science and rational thought, which he urged Tibetans to take an interest in. I was also amazed by his continually compassionate attitude to the Chinese occupation of his country.

Right: Buddhist prayer flags and welcome banners for the Dalai Lama covered the settlement.

I would like to thank all of my sponsors for their generous support, without which I would not have been able to take part in this fantastic experience.

