

## CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

**Project Location:** Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India

**Institution Name:** Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh

**Dates of Project:** 03/08/2009-17/09/2009

**Approx Amount of Teaching:** 4 to 6 hours per day

For six weeks during the summer vacation, I served as a volunteer in a school called SECMOL (Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh), along with two companions from Cambridge. First of all, a word about the purpose of the school. Founded in 1988 in response to the poor state of Ladakh's secondary education, SECMOL admits students who have finished school *without* reasonable qualifications, and aims to prepare them successfully to re-sit their examinations after the following year.

The campus is located in Phey, 18 km short of Ladakh's capital city, Leh. It has the sense of being a kind of haven, located as it is in the midst of sprawling, mountainous desert. On a typical day, the students rise with the sun, and run a formidable assault course of exercise, meditation, assembly talk, and reading, all before breakfast. Following this are English classes, led alternately by the school's two regular teachers. Whereas, during the morning lessons, our role was rather ancillary, the afternoon gave us a fuller lease of responsibility to plan our own lessons and to devise our own worksheets. The classes are interspersed throughout the day by tea breaks, meals, 'duties', and periods of free time.

There were always, on average, 8 or 9 resident volunteers at any time, and so, unfortunately, our work was sometimes spread thinly. (As a result, my two colleagues were exported to a nearby government school.) However, I surpassed the minimum expectation by giving one-to-one tutorials in English to the advanced students. These were perhaps the most rewarding sessions for me, since the students' progress was so evident. As well as occasionally stepping in as 'supply teacher', I additionally taught lessons of beginners' piano and elementary music theory. Among the notable school trips were apricot-picking, attending a speech given by H. H. Dalai Lama, and lending a hand with the harvest at some students' houses. All in all, my experience at SECMOL was an enjoyable and fascinating one, and I am grateful for the support from ELST and various bursaries to carry it out.

## CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

**Project Location:** Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India

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

**Dates of Project:** 03/08/09-21/09/09

**Approx Amount of Teaching:** 40 Students, ~4 hours per day plus further helping out e.g. cooking.

The mountainous region of Ladakh (sometimes called 'Little Tibet' due to the Tibetan cultural influences) is one of the most sparsely populated regions in the Northern state of Jammu & Kashmir, being home to around 270,000 people over an area of 87,000km<sup>2</sup>. It lies between the two ranges of the Great Himalayas and the Kunlun Mountains and contains part of the Indus River which marks the fault line from the collision of India with the rest of Asia. Its population is largely Buddhist and Ladakh boasts many ancient and physically impressive monasteries as well as numerous Chortens, Mani walls and other religious devotions. Many Ladakhi people still survive from small scale agriculture (barley and wheat being the main staples) but there is a growing number who make their living from tourism, the region being home to some of the most spectacular trekking routes in the world.

The education system in Ladakh leaves around three quarters of students unable to progress to higher education after failing their exams at age 16 (tenth class). The system does not allow student to retake tenth class but does allow them to retake their tenth class exams which they must pass all of to achieve an overall 'pass'. SECMOL offers an opportunity for around 40 students to have an intensive year of study and to then retake their exams, giving them a second chance. It is a great place for the students to come and experience an education system which is different, and far more thorough and rounded, than the government schools that they have come from. The government schools encourage learning by heart and do little to aid an understanding, and therefore a real appreciation, of a subject whilst SECMOL aims for the students to really get to grips with their studies as well as gaining useful skills such as learning to manage a small shop or milking a cow (just two of the many responsibilities the students take part in).

I mainly helped with the English conversation classes at SECMOL as, during the volunteer abundant summer, they like to make the most of the chance to have native speakers for the students to have contact with. The classes consisted of small groups of students with one volunteer per group who would guide the conversation about particular topics. It was always very thought provoking hearing the cultural differences when discussing such topics as village life or schooling. Alongside the conversation classes I also helped out with: the English movie classes where we would work through a film over a week or so, learning new phrases and vocabulary; the English grammar classes; afternoon activities, which varied from playing games on the playing field to practicing multiplication with the flash cards we made during our time at SECMOL and cooking in the kitchen, typically spending 2-4 hours each day helping to cater for the 40 students, the volunteers and staff. During my time at SECMOL I also helped to make twenty sets of fraction pie pieces, which would be used to help the students visualise fractions more readily, and gave individual Chemistry tuition to a student who had approaching exams.

As there was a large number of volunteers at SECMOL, myself and one other volunteer spent one week at a government high school where we put together a week of Science, English, Maths and Computing lessons for students ranging from age ten to sixteen. We also spent time making flashcards for the students to use, teaching one of the teachers English and probability and encouraging use of the library.

My time in Ladakh was thought provoking and it was refreshing to see such a willingness to learn and take part. I felt that the students were really benefiting from their time at SECMOL and it was encouraging that they could escape school beatings and exam failure by being part of the SECMOL community. Thank you for all the support and for making the placement possible.

## CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

**Project Location:** Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India

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

**Dates of Project:** 03/08/09-20/09/09

**Approx Amount of Teaching:** 35 Students, 4-6 hours per day

Ladakh, the most northerly state in India, is a breathtakingly beautiful part of the world. A land of snowy peaks and mountain rivers, this Buddhist kingdom, often called 'Little Tibet', attracts visitors from all over the world despite its remoteness and harshness. Major changes have taken place since Ladakh was opened up to tourists in 1974, with the traditional farming-based ways of life replaced by more modern values. However the education system is still extremely archaic: poorly-written textbooks, sub-standard learning materials, inadequate teaching and outdated attitudes all mean that only a small proportion of students succeed in their Xth class exams. The majority who fail (72% in 2008) are unable to carry on to higher education. The Students' Educational and cultural movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) aims to address this through campaigning for educational reform, publishing new educational materials and through its campus programmes. These include a summer school and the 'foundation year', based at the Phey campus, 18km from Leh. As boarders here, children have access to a well-stocked library, computer facilities and tuition from foreign volunteers. For students who fail their exams, this is a chance to learn in an encouraging environment; many who attend pass second time round and continue to higher education and further success.

It was quite an experience joining in with such a multicultural group of volunteers: our group of three Cambridge students worked with young people from Canada, the USA, Germany, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Denmark, the UK and Singapore. Over the 6 weeks I was at SECMOL we helped with English conversation and movie classes, educational afternoon activities and took English lessons. Additionally, I ran a singing workshop which was greatly enjoyed by the students. As well as this, we felt it important to leave a lasting impact and so spent time creating resources for teaching English and Maths. Volunteers make themselves very much part of the community at SECMOL by helping out round the campus, for instance in the kitchen; we enjoyed getting to know the students better whilst doing our bit to keep things in order.

Towards the end of our time in India we also had the chance to teach for a week in a government school. This was very different from the work we'd done before, and involved long days, sometimes not returning to home to our host family until 7pm! It was difficult to get stuck in when staying such a short time, but we ran an enjoyable science programme for Xth class with experiments and hands-on activities. We also ran extra conversation classes before school and IT classes afterwards.

Life in Ladakh is often difficult, yet the people there are some of the most genuinely happy and fulfilled I've ever met, with warm smiles and a real sense of community. It was very rewarding to work with such enthusiastic students and I feel privileged to have had the opportunity. Many thanks for your part in making that possible.

## CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

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

**Institution Name:** Jamyang Foundation

**Dates of Project:** 21/07/09-19/08/09

**Approx Amount of Teaching:** 10-15 Students, 3-4 hours per day

Zanskar is a subdistrict of the Kargil district, which lies in the eastern half of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The administrative centre is Padum. Zanskar, together with the neighbouring region of Ladakh, was briefly a part of the kingdom of Guge in Western Tibet. Jamyang Foundation is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization founded to promote education among women, especially women in the Indian Himalayan border region. Jamyang Foundation began in Dharamsala in 1987 as a literacy program for eight nuns who had recently walked out of Tibet.

Since then, this educational initiative has grown into a network of full-time teacher training programs for women over a vast range of the Indian Himalayas, a variety of outreach programs in the Himalayas.

It takes about 3 hours of walk from Karsha to Padum, which is the regional capital. There are several restaurants and internet cafes in the town. A bus goes from Karsha to Padum once a day, and hitchhiking is definitely something one gets used to. The scenery is mesmerizing and the people are incredibly open and welcoming.

Unfortunately, when we arrived at the Karsha nunnery, we found out that the nuns didn't have time to learn English. During the summer they have to work for their families at the fields in order to store food for the winter, which is very long and cold in Zanskar.

Luckily, we found a school in the village, where there were some very enthusiastic kids, who came to our lessons. Although they had holidays, they visited our classes and showed interest in English language and general geographical and cultural knowledge.

Although the children had to help their families a lot, by finding time to come and learn English they showed how important it was for them. It was really rewarding to work with these kids. Very shy in the beginning, after some time they became more open and enthusiastic. We learned a lot from them, for they loved telling us about their country. Both teachers and students would really appreciate if more volunteers came and stayed at the school (which we weren't able to do because we arranged to stay at the nunnery). I enjoyed staying in Zanskar very much. The only thing I regret is that the initial placement didn't work out and we couldn't teach as much as we wanted. However, there are quite a few schools and NGO's working in Zanskar, so it should be possible to find different placements where help is needed and appreciated.



## CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

**Project Location:** Zanskar, Jammu & Kashmir, India

**Institution Name:** Jamyang Foudation

**Dates of Project:** 19/07/09-21/09/09

**Approx Amount of Teaching:** 10-20 Students, approx 2 hours per day

Zanskar is 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. Consequently, the few months of summer are dedicated to working in the fields and building up supplies of food, clothes and cow dung (for heat) for the next winter. The society is almost entirely rural, and the level of education is extremely low, if not inexistant – apart from monks, the richest and most powerful strata of this society. The nuns are particularly poor due to their low position in the social hierarchy. The Jamyang Foundation was set up to counter this phenomenon by helping Zanskari nunneries financially, to make sure that their basic needs were covered, but also by sending volunteer teachers there as often as possible.

The problem is that, as the region is completely isolated eight months of the year, Zanskari students forget everything that volunteers have taught them over the summer; the only volunteers who have been able to make a true difference are those who have stayed there continuously for at least a year. This is also due to the fact that education is not considered to be very important in this society – at least so long as there are basic needs such as food, water and shelter to be met – and that the teaching methods are so different. Zanskari schools still use the English teaching model of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which consists of repeating and learning by heart, rather than the modern approach of understanding and analysing.

Nonetheless, despite the hardships of living in this region, the nuns carry out every task with a smile and laughter. They were extremely welcoming and attentive to our needs. Therefore, although the facilities were extremely basic, it did not seem so much so at the time, as the nuns put a lot of efforts into making us comfortable. The nunnery is a strong community of independant, hard-working women, and although it is a shame that they were not willing to improve their education, living with them for a few weeks was a wonderful human experience. Finally, I can only hope that the classes we gave in the nunnery school will give this new generation a better incentive to learn.



Anna and I with some of the nuns and of our students.

## **CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009**

**Project Location:** Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India

**Institution Name:** Dechen Choling Institute

**Dates of Project:** 20/07/09-29/08/09

**Approx Amount of Teaching:** 12 students, 1-2 hours per day

The Spiti Valley is in the far north of India, in the region of Himachal Pradesh, high in the Himalayas. It is a strange combination of desert and mountain, a combination which gives it its unique lunar appearance – barren mountains, huge rocky cliffs and dramatic snow-capped peaks. Dechen Choling monastery is home to a small order of nuns, and lies just outside the village of Kungri, on top of a small hill reached by a steep path. The nuns who live here are terribly welcoming and kind to outsiders, and immediately made me feel relaxed and strangely at home, even given how extraordinarily alien the area was to me. They were friendly, considerate and funny, and I enjoyed spending time walking, sitting and doing chores with them. They were also very enthusiastic about English, and seemed to really enjoy the lessons we had. The six weeks I spent in Spiti were very happy. As the nuns only had time for 1-2 hours of English class a day, I spent a lot of time walking, reading, writing, and spending time with the nuns. I also spent quite a lot of time at Kungri, the neighbouring men's monastery, where I often drank tea with the monks, or watched them doing endless hours of puja. My experience in Spiti was fascinating and exciting, and I am very grateful to ELST for facilitating it. I hope I was able to be of some use to the nuns, and I am also grateful to them for the wonderful experience I had in their home.