

CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

Project Location: Bylakuppe, Karnataka, India

Institution Name: Tibetan Rights and Freedom Restoration Committee

Dates of Project: 26/07/09-29/08/09

Approx Amount of Teaching: 17 Students, 5 hours per day

Bylakuppe is a sizeable settlement for exiled Tibetans in the southern state of Karnataka. The agricultural setting and flat landscape are ideal for visitors, providing a beautiful and cool setting. As tourists require a PAP form to visit the area, few Westerners come here. Thus, though PAP forms were tedious to organise, they have the advantage of creating an untouched area where tourists are welcomed and made to feel part of the community.

Teaching in Bylakuppe was a pleasure. The students were enthusiastic, hardworking and most appreciative of the effort the teachers put in. I taught 4 young girls in the mornings and then went to the monastery in the afternoons to teach a class of 13 monks. The first lesson itself was, unsurprisingly, daunting as it is difficult to gauge the abilities of the students and their understanding due to their shy and polite nature. However, as time went on and they became more comfortable with us, they became more willing to participate vocally in the lessons. It also took a few days for registers to fall into place with students becoming more regular and timings set. The students were especially keen to pick up English pronunciation as they had real difficulty in differentiating between the “v” and “w” sounds. As well as grammar, pronunciation and spelling lessons were widened to suit our students and I conducted many debates with my classes as well as helping them plan out their CVs. The closing ceremony held for us was a touching gesture with all our students present and speeches from various participants. Seeing the relationships we had built and the progress made was most rewarding.

Bylakuppe, as a town, too was wonderful to settle in. The various people we interacted with, from the cafe owners to shopkeepers, were all unbelievably kind. The Tibetans are the most gentle and kind people I have ever met and their stories of struggle and exile were humbling. The 4 monasteries in the area were also beautiful to visit and we were generously offered tours and talks at Sera, where we taught.

I greatly enjoyed my trip to Bylakuppe and this has to be attributed to the people we encountered. The hardworking students, the gentle townspeople and the inspiring monks all made this an amazing experience I would recommend to anyone who has the chance to visit. I truly hope our students gained even a fraction of what I gained from this experience.

CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

Project Location: Bylakuppe, Karnataka, South India

Institution Name: ELST English Workshop 2009

Dates of Project: 25/07/09-27/08/09

Approx Amount of Teaching: 12 Students, 4-5 hours per day

The land in which Bylakuppe is situated was gifted to the Tibetans by the Indian government in the 1960s. Originally jungle, Bylakuppe has now been cleared for farmland, and is the largest Tibetan settlement outside Tibet. Bylakuppe comprises a number of different camps, the largest of which is First Camp where we were based during our stay. Our workshop was primarily organized by Tsewang, a local businessman, or “jack of all trades” as his niece once described him in a homework assignment!

In the mornings we taught a group of adults of mixed abilities and ages for two and a half to three hours. There were ten regular students who formed the core of this workshop, with others joining later or coming when they could. Our lessons began in the community hall which had very few facilities – not even chairs or tables – so after about ten days we relocated to the hall in the Cooperative Society Guesthouse, where we were staying. Whilst the Cooperative Society hall was by far the better location, the confusion about changing locations meant that a couple of my lessons were held, at my pupils’ insistence, in their own homes. Over the course of the workshop I had four pupils who spoke a little English, one of whom, Sangay, was learning from scratch. Sangay attended every lesson, wrote copious amounts of homework, and made enormous progress. From my point of view, as a beginner who is now confident with basic English conversation, she was the workshop’s greatest, or most gratifying, success story.

In the afternoons I taught a group of sixteen- and seventeen-year-old students, who wrote and understood English very well, but who lacked confidence when speaking. We did a lot of work on speaking and pronunciation, even reading some Shakespearean speeches and the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (of which they are avid fans) in English! Again, I had a core group of about seven students who made fantastic progress. In addition to these lessons, Tsewang also organized a special lunchtime lesson for me, teaching a friend of his, a celebrated Tibetan journalist who knows little English. These lessons were hugely enjoyable for me as I’m very interested in writing, though they were cut short when my pupil went to visit a newly arrived Tibetan friend in Delhi.

Living and working in Bylakuppe was the most fantastic experience. Everyone we met was overwhelmingly kind, generous and eager to make us feel at home. It was a huge privilege to be able to actively participate in this community, and one which was hugely rewarding for me and (I hope) my students. Thank you so much for enabling it to happen.



Our morning class



Bylakuppe main street (monks & flags!)



ELST volunteers with Tsewang

CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

Project Location: Bylakuppe, Karnataka State, India

Institution Name:

Dates of Project: 24/07/09-26/08/09

Approx Amount of Teaching: 19 Students, 4-6 hours per day

The Tibetan Settlement of Bylakuppe is set in the lush greenery of Karnataka State and close to the vibrant city of Mysore. The settlement is one of the largest – if not the largest- Tibetan exile settlement in South India. It is divided into camps which are small residential areas of varying sizes. Some of the camps are also home to fantastically beautiful Buddhist Monasteries, including the Sera and Namdroling Monasteries.

Our teaching in Bylakuppe was not restricted to one particular organisation, but coordinated by one of the local Tibetans called Tsewang. He arranged for us to teach lay students from a number of the local camps, as well as Monks from the Sera Monastery. Tsewang was extremely kind in advertising the teaching to the Community in Bylakuppe and arranging venues for our lessons to take place. For those of us teaching lay students, lessons took place in a large hall in our guest house and at the nearby Community Hall. The volunteers teaching large groups of monks taught at the Sera Monastery itself. I also taught one individual lesson with a monk from Sera in Tsewang's office.

The lessons were arranged so that we taught groups of different ages and varying levels of English. Due to the varying levels of ability, our targets for the students over the period of teaching were different according to the group. In the morning I taught young adults (around 20 years old) who had left school with good English, but who were looking to improve their grammar and practice applying English to useful situations, such as writing CVs and formal letters. We practiced English reading, writing and conversation. I think that the most successful aspect of our lessons was probably the improvement in their speaking and pronunciation. I also hope the work we did on grammar was useful, although it was very difficult to teach as the pupils seemed to have picked up certain bad habits (often relating to word order) that were now difficult to correct. For this reason I think the students found the writing more difficult, but I was pleased with the progress that was made and took particular satisfaction in being able to help them in writing letters with appropriate tone and formality.

At lunchtimes I taught a monk from the Sera Monastery who is one of the key figures in the 'Tibetan Freedom and Rights Restoration Committee'. He was extremely eager to pick up some of the basics of English while we were in Bylakuppe with the hope that he could continue learning once we left. His main motivation behind this was to be able to communicate the issue of the crisis in Tibet to a much, much wider audience and so support the Committee in its drive to raise awareness of the Tibetan issue.

In the afternoons I taught a class of 10-11 year old children alongside another volunteer. The children had a good level of English that they had learnt at school, although we soon found that their grammar was substantially worse than their vocabulary. This is what we then focused the lessons on, although I would have to admit that we often struggled to stop the children being excitable so that we could get through what we had planned for the lesson!

The experience I had in Bylakuppe is incomparable to anything I have ever done in my life. I met some of the most fascinating, kind, selfless and modest people I have ever known. We were truly welcomed into the settlement – both by the lay Tibetans and the Buddhist Monks. I very much hope that we have been of help to

the community through our English teaching. I would be delighted to think that we have given something back to the Tibetans since I have taken so much away from the whole experience. Thank you very much for making this trip possible.

CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

Project Location: Bylakuppe, Karnataka, India

Dates of Project: 27/07/09-28/08/09

Approx Amount of Teaching: 15 Students, 4-6 hours per day

Bylakuppe is located 85km west of Mysore and is one of the largest Tibetan settlements in India, home to around 15,000 people. Of this around 10,000 are monks and the rest of the population are the 'lay community' which comprises people of all ages. The settlement is split into around 17 'camps' (which contain schools, shops, houses, etc.) and there are 4 main monasteries.

We were a group of 5 ELST volunteers and between us we taught schoolchildren, young adults (aged 20-25) and adults from the lay community, as well as some monks from the Sera Jey monastery. We taught English primarily as this was most valuable to them, but also some CV and associated skills where necessary. Personally, I taught around 5 to 7 students aged 20-25 from the lay community in my morning lessons (including Miss Tibet for one week only!), and then about the same number of monks in my afternoon lessons at the Sera Jey monastery.

We all made strong bonds with our students and enjoyed teaching them and exchanging stories about our lives, despite it often being quite saddening to hear stories of the Tibetan plight. Personally, the experience of teaching English to Buddhist monks within the monasteries was particularly memorable, and being able to spend time talking to the monks was incomparable.

The settlement was truly an amazing place to spend 6 weeks; it was very peaceful compared to the surrounding Indian towns and the inhabitants were incredibly hospitable. Bylakuppe has a very strong sense of community and makes for an extremely rewarding experience. For example, we made friends with the owners of a local cafe who cooked very nice vegetarian Indian food just for us every day (as aside from this Tibetan food can be slightly monotonous!). Moreover, our host and his family, made our stay very comfortable and really engaged with us, inviting us to their house for tea and conversation frequently.

I thoroughly enjoyed my 6 weeks in Bylakuppe, which is a unique haven in South India. The Tibetan community is remarkably hospitable and welcoming, and teaching English was a very rewarding experience. I thank ELST for giving me this opportunity.



CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

Project Location: Bylakuppe, Karnataka, India

Institution Name: Tibetan Rights and Freedom Restoration Committee

Dates of Project: 15/07/09-28/08/09

Approx Amount of Teaching: 15 students, 4.5 hours per day

Granted to Tibetan refugees by the Indian government in the 1950s, Bylakuppe has grown into a thriving, steadfastly Tibetan community amid surrounding Indian communities. The Cooperative Society Guesthouse where we stayed lies only a mile from the archway which separates Bylakuppe from the rest of India. Yet we were entirely immersed in Tibetan culture.

All of my students, both children and adults, taught me an incredible amount about Tibet. In turn, I spent my time in Bylakuppe focusing on improving their spoken English, holding a morning class of three or four adults, an afternoon class of ten eleven year olds and lastly a shorter class for a boy from the SOS Children's Village. Although I did teach grammar, vocabulary and writing, the majority of my lessons focussed on communication, such as conversations, role-plays and debates. I found that the children had difficulty expressing themselves in English, whilst their vocabulary and spelling were very good. So I planned interactive lessons; encouraging the children to practise conversations in groups and playing games, which they loved! Most rewarding was seeing the children gradually become more confident in expressing themselves in complete sentences. The best lessons I had with the adults were those in which we conducted debates; I learnt about their point of view, and they practised English speaking skills.

To get to Bylakuppe, I travelled from hectic Delhi through the ruined temple city of Hampi and the culture-rich city of Mysore. But what most affected me was the incredible cohesion of the Tibetan community and the strength of feeling they have about their homeland. Despite travelling thousands of hard miles from Tibet, they went on to turn a jungle into a flourishing settlement with an extremely generous and kind community. My best experiences were the most simple: talking and getting to know shopkeepers and restaurant staff, making momos with Tsewang's family and watching our students perform dances at school. I am very grateful to ELST for giving me the opportunity to be part of that community for a short time and enabling me to do what I could to help teach its members English.