

2011

Feedback on long-term volunteering



Volunteer: Alexandra Pisonova

Company: Deloitte Central Europe

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Brontosauři
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Status quo

Location

Spring Dales Public School (SDPS) is located in Ladakh, India in the village named Mulbekh near by the Kargil city (40km). The village is located on the main highway of Ladakh NH1 Leh – Kargil – Srinagar. It is accessible thru two main ports:

Leh – accessible via airplane or road thru Manali. Distance Leh Mulbekh is about 160km, the duration strongly depends on the road conditions and current construction work but can vary from 8 to 10 hours by bus (approximate cost 300 Rps) , 6 – 8 by taxi (approximate cost 700 Rps). The bus commutes on a daily basis; the availability of the share car depends on the current tourist flow.

Srinagar – accessible via airplane or road thru Jammu. Distance Srinagar – Kargil is about 160 km, Kargil – Mulbekh 40km. There are daily buses from Srinagar to Kargil (approximate cost 400 Rps) and local share cars (approximate cost 500 – 700 Rps). The duration varies depending on the road conditions from 5 to 7 hours. From Kargil to Mulbekh the local buses depart from 14.30 to 15.30 for the cost of 30 Rps. The bus drive takes about 2-3 hours.

Both Leh and Srinagar airports are served by the major India airlines. More information on timetable and prices can be found on e.g. www.yatra.com.



Mulbekh is one of the frequent tourist stops on the road Leh Srinagar with several tourist attractions the main being the statue of Chamba (Maitreya) carved in the rock with a small monastery built below it. Other attraction is the former castle overlooking the village, currently with a monastery in its place. The nearby villages Shargol and Gyal are known for its in rock built in monasteries captured in the movie Samsara. The Mulbekh valley is dominated by the green fields and trees along the Wakha River topped by high rocky mountains reaching up to 5000m. The altitude of the city itself is approximately 3500m.

The school is located in the center of the village above the main road, about 15 minute walking distance from the Chamba statue. The school facility consists of several buildings: pre-primary block with offices on second floor (first picture), classroom block (second picture), assembly hall (third picture), library, former classroom building currently serving the ongoing construction of a hostel/classroom building (fourth picture). The current status of the construction – the base is done and walls of ground floor are being built. In the future this building can serve for the purposes of accommodation of the volunteers however this will not happen sooner than in scholar year 2013.

There is a bathroom/toilet available for the staff and guests (no running water, pump and bucket have to be used) and a separate toilet for the children (Ladakhi compost toilet). In the office area there is a small kitchen to be used and one common room with a room attached reserved for Rinpoche or other high lamas including H.H. Dalai Lama. In the assembly hall there is a separate kitchen for preparing lunch as well as storage room/chemical laboratory. The outside ground includes the heliport for convenience of His Holiness visit.



The social equipment of the area is limited to several stores located around the Chamba statue, mostly selling biscuits, snacks, and sodas. The fruit and vegetable is usually limited to potatoes and tomatoes, occasionally bananas. Bread, flour, coffee, dairy products, toilet paper are not available, stationary is limited to pens, some notebooks, glue. In the nearby village Wakha (4km) is a bakery, some more seasonal fruit and vegetable, additional stationary is available. For the rest anything else is available in Kargil.

School curriculum

The school has about 150 children and 14 teachers including the principle. The subjects are English, Hindi, Bhoti, Math, Social, Science, IT. Social includes geography, history and social studies and

science includes chemistry, biology and physics. Both social and science have one book including different sections. More information on the details of each subject are available in a separate document Appendix A.

The biggest number of children is attending the kindergarten; overall 50 children are divided into two classes: lower kindergarten (LKG) and upper kindergarten. The age varies from 3 to 7 years. For the remaining classes the number of students varies from 8 to 16. 1st, 2nd and 6th class are the most frequented (around 16 children) on contrary class 5 has only 6 children.

The scholar year starts in March and ends in December with a short summer break starting 20 July. The year is broken into 3 semesters with one week of exams at the end of each trimester. During the exams week children write test each day one subject from 10.00 till 12.00 then they go home and teachers evaluate the tests. The tests are being written by all classes including LKG, UKG except for 10th class which follows a separate routine due to the state exams in October.

School starts every day except for Sunday (free day) at 10.00 with the morning assembly where the children sing school songs and other chants. Below is an overview of the school schedule:

10.00-10.30	10.30-11.10	11.10 – 11.50	11.50-12.00	12.00-12.40	12.40-13.20	13.20-14.00	14.00-14.40	14.40-15.20	15.20-16.00
Morning assembly	Subject	Subject	Tea break	Subject	Subject	Lunch break	Subject	Subject	Subject

This means that all subjects are taught every day and for some classes there are free classes. For science and social it is up to the teacher whether he will teach the different areas in sequence or distribute it e.g. Monday + Wednesday chemistry; Tuesday + Thursday biology etc. On Saturdays the activities vary. We have been told that there are various activities performed such as debate, quiz, sports however we haven't seen it. For the presence of the volunteers either the free activities were organized by the volunteers or there was a regular schedule. Some of the Saturdays (second Saturday in the month) are free so it is worth always verifying upfront to confirm. The same goes for holidays. There is a number of school holidays – national, local, religious etc. however they have a strong tendency to “move”. Either they are canceled or rescheduled for other day. It is necessary to confirm this several times and even if other schools have a holiday it doesn't necessarily mean that SDPS has one. During the breaks tea and lunch (rice and some vegetables) is being served for the teachers for the cost of 25Rps per day. Children bring their own food from home, there is no school canteen. Regarding water supplies there are several water taps on the school ground all of them providing good quality of drinking water (we haven't been using any form of sanitation).

All subjects except for Hindi and Bothi are being taught in English however that doesn't mean that the level of English both of the teacher and student correspond to the level of book. Children are rather memorizing the whole sentences or even articles than understanding particular expressions.

School etiquette



Children wear uniforms every day unless specially instructed for Saturday activities. The uniforms consist of grey pants, shirt, tie, red sweater and a blue cap with school logos. The school plans to provide casual uniforms for Saturday however this did not happen during the scholar year 2011. The teachers wear casual clothes mostly local dress (kurta and pants) for women or jeans with some appropriate top.

General rules applicable in the entire Ladakh regarding clothing go also here – no bare shoulders or legs, no tight clothes or otherwise provocative attire.

In general there is a strong discipline within the school starting with the morning assembly where the children queue aligned in rows by class almost with military discipline marching with straight arms to the classrooms once finished. The teachers are highly respect by the children as well as the entire community. ‘Good morning’ or ‘Good afternoon Madame/Sir’ are being used as greetings when teacher enters the classroom and ‘Thank you Madame/Sir’ when the teacher is exiting the classroom. For children to enter the classroom they stand by the door and request ‘May I come in Madame/Sir?’ The children have a habit of leaving the classroom for toilet and drinking water so it is very common that someone will stand up with folded hands and ask ‘May I get drinking water?’ This happens often even in upper classes 3rd – 4th even when the class is over in five minutes.

The discipline within the class varies depending on the personality and authority of the teacher. We have seen classes where the children were nicely sitting on their place and paying attention and constructively responding to the teacher however we have also observed classes where the children were running around with the teacher chasing them, even running outside the classroom. For children this was seen as fun. We have also seen some children being rude to teachers e.g. throwing chalks in their back. On the other side some teachers have natural authority and children have no problem following their instructions without any high pitch voice and some other teachers were using sticks to hit the children or use it as sort of a threat. No rigorous physical punishments have been observed. In general if the children want to ask something they just simple say ‘Mam’ repeating it several times until the teacher responds. This can be rather disturbing especially when several children do it simultaneously and teacher cannot respond all of them at one time.

During the breaks and free classes there is no oversight from the teacher in the classroom (with exception of LKG/UKG) however in general the children do not misbehave. If they are provided with some sports equipment or aloud to enter the library they can entertain themselves.

School equipment

The best equipped is the pre-primary section. The children have two classrooms and one play room. The classrooms are decorated with related posters e.g. alphabets, numbers, words and colors. There is a carpet on the floor, children take off their shoes and sit on the floor with little desks for each of them to write on. For the teacher there is a white board available. Each child has its own book, a notebook (called copy book) where they practice writing, pencil, sharpener and a rubber. Color pencils were brought by the volunteers and are on a share basis for all classes. In the play room there are beautiful story paintings on the wall and number of toys.

The 1st class and 6th to 10th class are located in the main classroom building on two floors. Each classroom is equipped with a blackboard and chalks. Children sit in their desks however the first class prefers to sit on the floor when copying from the board. Each child has its own book and set of pencil, sharpener and rubber. It was observed that the teachers do not have their own books and borrow one from a child during the class. For the upper classes the other tools expected for education e.g. ruler or trammels for Mathematics are rather limited.

Classes 2 to 5 do not have their own classroom and all of them are currently located in the assembly hall. Each class sits in one corner of the assembly hall however there are no visual or acoustic barriers. The number of blackboards is limited. Children are sitting on the carpets and do not have any desks for writing.

There are no specialized classrooms except for the computer room. There are 4 new HP laptops, 4-5 older laptops and several desktops. All the computers are networked with central disk storage separately for children and teachers (teacher profiles are only on the HP laptops). All computers are equipped with the basic software including MS Office. There is also an HP Laser Jet printer available included in the network. There is a number of other printers, copy machines and scanners however their availability is limited due to various reasons (lack of ink, not being installed etc.). The computer room is also set up for a WiFi however it can happen that the internet connectivity is limited.

In the computer room there is also a library of different school books including some samples of the books used by the children. Microscopes, mathematic tools, stationary and some art and sports equipment are also stored there.

The storage room in the assembly hall next to the kitchen serves as chemical laboratory with limited chemical class and some chemicals. There are also some biology samples in hydrochloride (in bad condition). There are also some games for children in the room and sometimes food for lunch is located there as well. This should be given a consideration from the health and security perception.

The communal electricity supply starts from dusk and lasts for 3 hours. The exact time varies depending on the time of the year, during summer it is usually from 20.00 slowly decreasing towards winter (October 18.30). Additional supply is being provided from 3.00 to 5.00. School is equipped with two kerosene power generators; one of them being used for the construction and one for the educational premises; however no reliance should be put on this supply and an alternative activity

should be always prepared for backup solution. Currently a solar energy plant is being constructed with the goal of being completed by the end of calendar year 2011. This should provide all day electricity supply. Regarding other electric equipment the school has a digital projector available as well as a sound system for the assembly hall including a microphone.

Educational system

The current system of education is mostly based on memorizing rather than applying the practical knowledge. The subject matter is often repeating each year for example topic on dresses is repeated in social studies each year from 1st till 4th class with very little variance. The books currently used are quite challenging and contain a lot of information that sometimes isn't properly understood even by the teacher. On top of that the books require quite a high speed of lecturing if the whole book and each exercise should be performed and due to this the children are often lacking basics and even thou the teacher takes on another topic. This can create future difficulties e.g. children cannot cumulate and multiply and they are learning advanced mathematic studies. For the English books currently used (Cambridge) they are English native speaker literature books with advanced articles, limited grammar and exercises (there is a working book with all the exercise but the children don't have it). The type of exercise usually repeats e.g. True/False whereas the children actually do not understand the statements but have memorized the sequence of 'True' and 'False' so if the order of statements is alternated they are not able to answer. The reading in classroom is based on one child pre-reading a word and then the rest of the class repeats. This is performed with a strong melody and some children even 'dance' when pre-reading. This creates a strong accent in the children and they lose the content of the article read especially in classes 2 and above. The science book contains quite a number of practical experiments but only limited number of them is performed by the students due to limited equipment available with the exception of microscopy. Art and sports are not part of the standard education. According to the schedule these should be performed as part of the Saturday activities.

The teachers are not selective regarding the content of the book and majority of them do not prepare their own activities. Not having their own copy of the book they often improvise during the class as they are not prepared. This can be a problem for the English classes as the books often contain words that would require a dictionary for proper understanding.

The parents and family are often not involved in the school life and we have not seen the parents spending time with the children and learning with them.

Children often skip the school due to bad weather as they commute quite far so it can be expected that much smaller number of children will appear in case of heavy rain. During August the whole school is influenced by the ongoing harvesting. There can be limited attendance both from children and teachers as well as the children spend less time preparing for the school as they work in the fields in the afternoon and morning (applicable for upper classes).

Overall it has been observed that the children are lacking imagination and creativity even though some of them are very talented. Examples:

- If asked to make a picture, they couldn't create their own picture. An example is needed and then the children copy exactly the same, with high quality though. Very few of them, maybe 10%, can do their own composition and interpretation.
- If the children are told beginning of a story, for example a fairy tale they don't know, they cannot use their imagination and come up with various endings of the story.

However children love to sing, dance, do sports and perform fine arts and welcome any activity of this type.

Feedback from volunteers

Living in Mulbekh

As part of the volunteering there were two options for accommodation.

1. Homestay with families

This is a great form of getting to know the people, local culture and how people actually live. We have stayed in several families usually on a short term basis (4-5 days). The families were very open to this and some of them had volunteers in previous years. In general you are treated as a guest, staying in a guest room and being served by the family. We were successful in some families to change this point of view and become closer member of the family and participate in the standard daily life including cooking and working in the fields or participating at weddings and other ceremonies.

The houses are traditional Ladakhi houses mostly with two floors and a typical flat roof. Kitchen and some rooms for cattle are located at the ground floor. The kitchen is one of the most important rooms in the house as that is usually the room where the family gathers. The center of the kitchen is a stove. The family gathers in the kitchen for meals and socializing. Sitting on the floor tea and meals are being served. The guestroom is usually on the second floor with some mattresses for sitting and small tables. There is a prayer room in most of the houses with some holy texts, pictures and statues. There is a "shoes off" policy in the rooms. Toilet is a simple room on the first floor with a hole in the floor. There some dirt on the side with shovel to use for preventing bad smells. The bathroom is a simple room with mirror, bucket of water. There is a small hole in the flooring/wall to drain the water out. The sources of water are rather remote from the house, the distance varies, but water should be used economically.

The day in the family starts around 5.30 am with morning prayers, household chores and work around the cattle. Breakfast is rather fast and simple; chapatti or some other sort of bread with

hot milk or tea, eventually some leftovers from dinner. Children take some food also for school. The lunchbox usually contains some rice and vegetables or chapatti. Lassi or milk is also very common. The children are learning and doing homework in the morning before school. After the school the children and the family spend some time in the fields and around the house. As a guest you are seated in a room and first served sweet tea then hot milk then salt tea. Dinner is served rather late between 9.00 pm and 10.00 pm. Most of the families were vegetarian but sometimes meat was being served (mostly mouton). Straight after dinner you go to bed. In most of the houses there were no switches so the light was kept on and switched off with the electricity shut down. When the generator was turned on around 3.00 am again the light was back.

The families have various animals, cow, goat, hen, cat were the most common. There are very good relationships in the neighborhood and there were many opportunities for socializing. Small presents for the family especially games are welcome and it is a good opportunity for spending time. Pictures from Europe were also good opportunity to compare the two cultures.

2. Staying at campus

We were provided one classroom in the pre-primary block for housing. There was some isolation at the flooring and carpets. Sleeping bags and some mats had to be brought from home. In the school campus there is a kitchen that can be used for cooking or tea/coffee. The water is available from 3 wells. We were drinking the water without any further sanitation and no health problems were reported. The bathroom was simple but clean. There was no shower, buckets had to be used. With some appropriate timing water could be heated in the kitchen. The same goes for laundry (we recommend to use local detergent available in the store). The hygienic standards were good however many people reported sleeping bugs bites (homeopathic was good prevention).

Both option had its pros and cons. While staying in families there were a lot of opportunities to familiarize with the culture, get in closer relationship with the children. However on the other side it was rather tiring in long-term perspective as there has been lack of privacy and the volunteers spent most of their time socializing and playing with the children rather than resting. Being at the campus more free time was available for preparation for next day and some private activities. On the other side there was lack of experience of the local life and low involvement in the village.

The people in the village were very warm and welcoming. Hitchhiking has been often used for transportation. The security was very good. The only risk could be lack of healthcare on the spot. Fortunately we didn't need it and brought medicaments were sufficient however in case of some injury this could be an issue. The nutrition is rather one sided therefore I would recommend to bring some supplements such as vitamins and minerals.

Teaching in Mulbekh

Overall as part of the volunteering we have not tried to change the entire system however for some classes in particular (classes with more and younger children e.g. 2nd class) new classroom rules were introduced with the effort to improve the quality of the education. The following rules and explanation was used so that the children can better understand and accept:

1. *During the class I sit on my place.* This means no toilet, no drinking water, no running around. If someone leaves the classroom we have to stop the game and wait for him. The children are mature enough to understand that they need to use the break wisely rather than just running around and playing and then during the class leaving for water. For younger children exceptions were made especially in regards of toilet.
2. *If I want to say something I raise my hand.* The teacher wants to hear what each if you want to say and if you are yelling all at one time he/she cannot. If you raise your hand the teacher will come and listen to each of you individually. This was very helpful especially when children were elaborating some work papers that needed to be corrected by the teacher and more of them finished at the same time however teacher didn't have the capacity to respond to all of them immediately, so rather than yelling 'Mam, mam' they were sitting and waiting.
3. *No fighting. We are all friends and we don't fight.* Teacher doesn't fight with the children and the children shouldn't fight amongst each other. Especially within boys there is quite some rivalry and fighting involved so this helped it at least during the classes.
4. *If all rules above are kept there is a game at the end of the class.* This was a motivational rule applying to the teacher basically and the game at the end of the class was related to the subject anyway so the education continued however for the children it was seen as a reward.

The rules were very well accepted by the children and the teachers. It was not necessary to watch the children by the teacher; they were reminding each other of the rules when some of it got broken as all of them wanted the game at the end of the class. In addition for some classes the seating order has been changed so that the some less patient children are mixed in between the other kids or sitting closer to the teacher.

Children like any activity and they do not mind to repeat the same activity over and over. Games of any type were very welcome. The guidance to the game and rules have to be carefully explained and instructions provided before and material is handed over – as soon as the material is in the hands of the children they lose the attention.

School management

The school management is very basic. Mostly the school is run by the principal who has a lot of experience and good management skills. The only issue is that he is very busy as he has a lot of responsibilities. There are some other teachers and representatives of the community involved in the school management however their involvement is rather in early stage.

The best form of cooperation with the school management was when there was a representative selected from the volunteers who was in charge of communication with the management to represent the volunteers. I would strongly recommend to prepare meeting minutes after each meeting together with a 'to do' list for both parties. The school was always very cooperative in any regard.

For the future also volunteers helping with the school management as such should be considered. Additional IT related topics and best practice in respect of HR, finance could be developed

Personal feedback

I had no particular expectations going to Mulbekh but now I know it was one of the best decisions I have made. Staying long term at one location gave me the opportunity to become part of the society and it was truly and honestly my home for the couple of months. There is sufficient time for traveling around the Ladakh in between the school holiday or when agreed with the principal. The children are very smart and the work with them is very motivating. I have made a lot of friends. There is plenty of room for personal development – studying books, visiting monastery, trekking, traveling.

The preparation at home was very useful. A well thought and prepared approach is essential. The introductory weekend meetings with Brontosaurus were also useful. It was easier to cooperate with the team of volunteers when we already knew each other and we all had the same goal and followed it.

I'm still in touch with my family in Mulbekh and I hope to spend the next summer there as well, if not as volunteer than as a tourist for sure.