

## THE TIBETAN CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

### Jetsun Pema

Mrs. Jetsun Pema was born in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, in 1940 and is the youngest sister of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In June 1964, when her elder sister (the founder) passed away, she was directed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to take over the responsibility of running the Tibetan Children's Village, Dharamsala. Ever since, she has been the moving force and mother of hundreds of thousands of destitute and orphaned Tibetan children. The story of the Tibetan Children's Villages is very much a part of Mrs. Jetsun Pema's life. Today, TCV projects include: 5 children's villages with schools attached, 7 residential schools, 7 day schools, 10 day care centres, 4 vocational training centres, 4 youth hostels, 4 old people's homes and an outreach program for over 2,000 children in exile. All in all, TVC looks after over 15,000 children and young people. Her autobiography, 'Tibet: My Story' was published in 1996. It is now available in 10 different languages. Her second book called, 'Pour Que Refleurisse Le Monde', written with Irene Frain, was published in France in March 2002.



Jetsun Pema was unable to attend the Congress. Her paper was presented by Tenzin Choegyal.

### Tenzin Choegyal

For the greater part of his formative years, Tenzin grew up thinking of Jetsun Pema as a second mother. For 12 years, Tenzin was a student and border at the Tibetan Children's Village school in Dharamsala, India, separated from his mother and siblings. Jetsun Pema gave Tenzin more than just a solid education, she inspired him to believe in himself, to strive for excellence and to never give up hope. Tenzin took her advice to heart and has carved out a new life for himself in Australia as a successful musician with quite a following in the world music scene. He was honored to present Jetsun Pema's paper and hopes the congress inspires more educators to be such a light in their student's lives.



### Early years:

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama moved to Dharamsala in early 1960, it was apparent that one of the most critical needs of the refugees was to care for the many children who were orphaned or separated from their families during the arduous escape from their homeland. He recognized that the future of Tibet and its people depended on the younger generation. With this in mind and out of concern for the miserable conditions under which most children were suffering, His Holiness at once assigned his officials the task of bringing these children to Dharamsala from the road construction camps, where many refugees were working in different parts of the mountain regions of India.

Initially, the children were looked after by some of the officials. But as more and more children came from the road construction camps in the Kulu Valley, in Jammu and Kashmir and other places, the officials could not accommodate all of them. Therefore, His Holiness entrusted the first batch of 51 children to my elder sister, the late Mrs. Tsering Dolma Taklha. The Government of India was requested to assist us with housing facilities for the children. The government kindly provided an old English bungalow called Egerton Hall, which was perfect at the time.

The early days were marked by acute shortage of practically everything – food, clothing, medicine, accommodation and staff. Accommodation was our greatest concern. Children kept pouring in from the road construction camps and places where the Tibetans had initially settled. Soon news about the work of the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children spread among the International aid agencies notably: Swiss Aid to Tibetans, Save the Children Fund (U.K.), Norwegian Refugee Council, Deutsche Tibethilfe, Deutsche Welthungerhilfe and the Catholic Relief Services. And, of course, without the assistance of the Government of India and her great people, it would have been impossible for us to look after the thousands of children desperately in need of care and education.

Working against all odds, my sister directed the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children with inspired determination. Along with a team of co-workers, she overcame all limitations and worked passionately for its success until her untimely demise in 1964 when His Holiness asked me to take up this responsibility.

The Nursery efforts in the early years were mostly directed at feeding the sick and undernourished children and then sending them to various residential Tibetan schools set up with the aid of the Indian government. But the time came when these residential schools could not accept any more children. The only solution for the Nursery was to widen its scope and make provisions for school education.

### **The Nursery into TCV:**

Plans were at once formulated to reshape the Nursery into a truly integrated community where the children under its care could receive not only the warmth and security of a home and a mother to share with brothers and sister, but also a good education. To fulfill these aims and objectives the Nursery was in 1972 formally registered as a charitable organization under the Indian Societies Act of 1860 as the **Tibetan Children's Villages (TCV)**. In the same year, it also became a full-fledged member of the SOS Kinderdorf International, Vienna.

The mission that emerged for the TCV and which continues to inspire us is:

To look after the physical, mental and spiritual needs of the children

To impart the best of modern education along with a deep understanding of the rich cultural heritage of Tibet.

To develop a sense of national pride and identity that will enable the children to share the hopes and aspirations of the Tibetan people to return to Tibet

To help our boys and girls become self-reliant, contributing members of our society and the larger human community

TCV has come a long way in achieving its aims of creating a fully integrated community. Today the Tibetan Children's Village family consists of:

- 5 Children's Villages with schools.
  - 7 Residential Schools
  - 6 Day Schools
  - 9 Day Care Centres
  - 5 Vocational Training Centres
  - 5 Youth Hostels.
- In total we are taking care of 15,610 children.

### **Montessori Education System:**

In the mid sixties, I was convinced that a solid foundation was key to a child's sound education in school. At that time we had no particular method of education to speak of. We were in search of a suitable system, which would meet the social, physical and the psychological needs of our children. At this critical period Miss Unadevi, a Polish lady who had lived in India for a few decades told me about the Montessori method. I thought that this would be a system, which would certainly suit our children. We were also most fortunate to find two trained Indian teachers in the Montessori method to come and assist us in setting up a Montessori school for our little ones.

This method proved most beneficial and the children learned with joy. Within the holding environment of the classroom coupled with the space and freedom that the Montessori method provided, the children flowered. The teachers learned to be flexible and open in caring for the children and they carried out the various class activities - always mindful of giving freedom and choice in their learning. Over time, we gained experience and the system became well established in the TCV schools.

Today this method of education is followed in all the Tibetan schools as well. TCV also trains Montessori teachers for other Tibetan schools and for the Tibetan settlements where there are small schools catering to pre-primary children. We have our own Tibetan Montessori Teacher Training courses and over the past 36 years we have trained 271 teachers who are at present working in the TCV schools or other Tibetan schools in India.

To further strengthen the system, we have established the TCV Montessori Center at TCV, Dharamsala to coordinate and guide all the Tibetan schools in the Montessori method. We have adapted the system in the Tibetan language and quite a large number of Montessori equipment are now being designed and produced from our Montessori Center for distribution and sale to all Tibetan schools in India. In fact, it has become such a successful endeavor that the new Tibetan Education Policy has adopted the same at the pre-primary level school education.

### **Growth and Expansion:**

TCV grew out of sheer necessity. As the need to take care of orphans and destitute children in exile increased, it was impossible to absorb all of them in the TCV, Dharamsala. What is more, the problem of over-crowding worsened in the early 1980s. When there was a comparatively less oppressive policy in Tibet, families and relatives in Tibet smuggled thousands of children into exile for better educational opportunities. In order to absorb this ever-increasing exodus of children, TCV had to expand beyond Dharamsala by starting new children's villages, youth hostels and technical and vocational training centers in various parts of India.

### **Vocational and Technical education:**

Given the large number of children in our care, we realized early on that many of our children are not born academic but have other skills and talents. The importance of catering to the various needs of our children so that they become self-reliant and contributing members of the community was foremost in our mind. In the early 1970s, we started Traditional Handicraft Centres, in Dharamsala and Ladakh, where the children could learn the arts and crafts of Tibet. Over the years, these centers have played a crucial role not only in producing skilled craftsmen and women but also in preserving the traditional arts and crafts of Tibet.

The need for vocational training centers – both traditional and modern – increased with ever more children opting for vocational streams. Since there are financial and other problems in admitting our children into Indian technical institutions, we had to come up with a plan of starting our own technical training center. We purchased land near Dehra Dun, capital of the new state of Uttaranchal in North India. After completion of the construction, the TCV Vocational Training Centre, Dehra Dun started functioning in August 2000. SOS Kinderdorf International financed this project.

Today, the training center is an exciting place for our children to learn a skill, which will give them a base for life. Currently, we have 130 students in the center and they are training to become welders, turners, motor mechanics, drivers, cooks, computer experts, office secretaries, hotel managers and beauticians. We plan to add more vocations in the years to come as the training center has a capacity for 300 students. We are very hopeful that it will play a key role in training

our youths for the future. We are now in the process of getting the center affiliated to the Indian Technical Institute (ITI) in that region.

### **TCV philosophy: Parental responsibility:**

Since most of the children under our care are orphans, semi-orphans, destitute and those smuggled from Tibet, right from the beginning we have taken a parental responsibility for our children. Therefore, our support to the children does not end when a child leaves a village or school. Our purpose is to ensure that every child is able to stand on his/her own feet and contribute to the community when the time comes. Given this purpose, we setup an Educational Reserve Fund in the early 1970s to take care of the further education and training of our students when they leave school. Today, we have 1302 students under this program, who are attending different colleges and training institutes in India and a range of career courses, depending on their abilities and aptitudes. We have a list of 106 different courses for our students to choose from.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has mentioned time and time again that the children are the future seeds of Tibet and therefore a holistic education is vital for them. Hence our top priority has always been that the holders of Tibet's destiny are equipped with a meaningful education in all professional fields to contribute to the development of future Tibet.

As we reflect on the work of TCV, we are happy to see so many of our educated youths doing some outstanding work within our exile community in various services – ranging from doctors, engineers, teachers, civil servants to health workers, farmers, artisans etc. And of course, many of them have become responsible parents, capable of bringing up their own children as Tibetans and good human beings. I am proud to say that many have returned to work in TCV projects. Out of the total strength of 1,317 TCV co-workers, 65 percent are now ex-TCVians. To date 28,135 children have gone through the TCV villages and schools. Wherever we go, we meet ex-TCVians. This gives us renewed strength and impetus to continue our work with an ever-increasing sense of dedication.

### **Placement Cell in Delhi:**

Success breeds its own problems. This is the case with TCV as well. With growing number of school and college graduates from various training backgrounds returning to the community, there is now a problem of finding suitable jobs for them. The exile community infrastructure and services have not kept up with the increase of educated youths. Therefore, the time has come for them to look for jobs elsewhere. This demands the ability to compete in the job market and the psychological capacity to adjust in any social setting.

To ease this crushing search for jobs and to lead a meaningful life, we have now initiated a placement cell within the TCV organization. For reasons of accessibility and easy communications, we have located the placement cell in the Tibet Youth Hostel, Delhi. As we gain experience and exposure, we are hopeful that this cell will be able to assist the youths in finding employment within and outside the exile community.

### **Outreach Programmes:**

Inspired by our motto – Others-Before-Self – TCV has always reached out where the need is greatest in our community. This is amply manifested in our Outreach Programmes. We have established day-care centers in the settlements, started hostels where needed, helped the old and sick and provided support to children with parents in the form of stipends.

Though we receive many requests for the admission of children into our villages and schools, we realize the pivotal importance of child-care and love that only parents can give. Therefore, it is

crucial to support the parents of children by way of paying stipends to them and encouraging them to keep their children with them. This is working very well. Today, under this programme, we are assisting 2,258 children who live with their parents in the different settlements and Tibetan communities in India, Nepal and Bhutan. Just like living in our various villages and schools, all these children are also sponsored and we make sure that there is a good relationship between the sponsors and their sponsored child. We are planning to strengthen this stipend programme in the years to come so that children learn Tibetan family values besides getting an education.

### **The situation in Tibet and the New Arrivals**

The situation in Tibet as far as children's education is concerned is bleak, to say the least. Lack of access to proper health and education; indoctrination through the medium of instruction (Chinese) and content of the curriculum; forced to learn just Chinese history, politics and culture; discrimination in the form of having to study in inferior schools or having to pay higher fees, or no access to schools – are some of the examples. It all boils down to a cruel choice for the children: give up the right to education or abandon your Tibetan identity.

Therefore, thousands of children continue to flee the persecution and lack of opportunities in their homeland. Parents risk everything to have their children, including tiny toddlers, brought to India in the hope they will receive a good education and will be brought up as Tibetans. Since the early 1990s, well over 7,000 children have risked everything to journey across the Himalayas in the hope that they will receive in exile what they have been denied back home: health and education and a sense of security and well being. Surely, so many children would not have taken such a high risk for the sake of an education if the opportunities and facilities existed in Tibet. Many children escaping across the Himalayan were unaccompanied minors. The UNHCR office in Katmandu has registered many such minors in the past few years. The children we received are indeed the lucky ones as many have been reported missing along the escape route. During their arduous journey, many children were afflicted with frostbites, others drowned trying to cross swift rivers and yet others have only succeeded after several tortuous attempts.

TCV has to care for the children and young adults fleeing from Tibet, as they cannot be sent to the Indian government aided schools. The flow of children and youths from Tibet continues unabated. In the main village in Dharamsala alone, we had to admit over 3,500 children from Tibet. The village is bursting at the seams trying to accommodate them. The homes were initially built for 25 children are now accommodating 40 – 45 children. The overcrowding problems are pressing in all our villages and schools because of this flow of new arrivals. Moreover, there is the constant need to assist the needy children of the Tibetan refugees who are settled in India, Nepal and Bhutan – making our work that much more urgent and necessary.

### **The Situation in Exile**

Today TCV is educating the third generation of Tibetans born in exile. These children have not seen their country. They might not even have heard about Tibet at first hand from their grandparents, as they are no longer alive. Furthermore, many of our people out of necessity live a kind of nomadic life.

Due to financial compulsions they have to live in different places where they go into the sweater trade or any other petty business. The children are the most vulnerable and they suffer the most. They are exposed to unhealthy habits quite alien to our way of life and values. This is having a detrimental effect in their growth and formation of values.

We are greatly concerned by this exposure and influence. And we are trying our best in our villages and schools to counteract this influence. Of course, the best way is to give them a sound education while they are with us - an education rooted in our rich cultural heritage coupled with



modern education - so that when the children leave the portals of our villages and schools, they will have the necessary skills to understand the outside world and make sound judgments on their own. Given our situation in exile and what is happening back home, we have no choice but to safeguard what is being destroyed in Tibet by the Chinese occupation of our country.

## **Education**

In the field of education, our schools are affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), New Delhi, the Indian national examining body. At the secondary and senior secondary levels, our children follow the curriculum set by the CBSE and sit for the All India National Examinations because they need these certificates to gain entry into Indian training centers, colleges and universities.

Nevertheless, we use the freedom available at the primary and middle school levels to design our own curriculum to suit our needs. Right from the late 60s His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been emphasizing the importance of educating the children in our mother tongue, but we were not able to do anything to follow his guidance until the early 80s when we started to translate a few books into Tibetan. However, we soon realized that translating textbooks was not serving our purpose. Therefore, we set up a center to work on designing and producing suitable textbooks for the primary children with a strong orientation in our own culture. We called this center the TCV Educational Development and Resource Center (EDRC)

## **Educational Development and Resource Centre (EDRC)**

The pioneering tasks of re-structuring the primary education and introducing significant changes in the middle school level in order to meet our goals started in 1985 when we established our Educational Development and Resource Center at TCV, Dharamsala. The primary focus of the re-structuring was to change the medium of instruction from English to Tibetan, to design our own curriculum, to produce all textbooks and teaching aids in Tibetan, and to start our own teacher training center for the primary level. This is fully in keeping with the Government of India's policy that every child should receive primary education in his/her mother tongue, and this also resonates with the UNESCO declaration of 1951 that the best medium of teaching a child is the mother tongue. This is based on strong psychological and educational reasoning.

We also realized that as we are now educating the second and third generation of Tibetans born in exile, the need to enrich and strengthen our education on the basis of our language and culture is crucial. (Changes introduced with the teaching of social sciences at the middle school level – where the content is all Tibetan history – is an example) At the same time, during the formative years, it is vital for the children to experience its language, folklore, literature, music, customs, history, geography and festivals so that they grow up knowing more about their homeland and its rich cultural traditions. We try to ensure that through this focus on our own language and culture, we are able to give a proper education to our children. The objectives worked out in this re-structuring are:

To lay the foundation for an effective Tibetan educational system in the future  
To develop a new curriculum for the primary school classes in Tibetan language and to produce text books in all the subjects  
To integrate Tibetan culture, history, geography, arts etc. in the curriculum  
Strengthen interest and love for the Tibetan language and culture.

## **Teacher Training Centre**

Along with the publication work, we realized the importance of training the teachers to implement the project successfully in the classrooms. Initially, we organized orientation programmes and in-service trainings to change the mind-set of our teachers and to orient them to the new system.

We came to realize that these short-term measures were not enough. The need for a more comprehensive approach was felt, and so we came up with the idea of having our own Teacher Training Centre and established it in 1994. Over the years, many teachers have attended the two and half years intensive training programme, and we are proud to say that all our teachers at the primary level are now trained and fully qualified to teach the textbooks that are being published by us at the EDRC.

### **Mother Training Programme**

Once the Teacher Training Centre was established, we used the facilities to provide training for the mothers. In our children's villages mothers have a really significant role. They are central to the growth and well being of our children. In fact they are the first teachers of the children. We give them a 3-month intensive training course in child psychology, health and hygiene, nutrition, home management and environmental awareness. Functional literacy and arithmetic are taught to the mothers who have had no schooling. A course on Buddhism and Tibetan culture is also incorporated in the training programme. To date, all the TCV mothers have gone through the training and this has proved most beneficial to our work of caring for the children.

The EDRC project with its allied services mentioned above has been a resounding success. So much so that now other Tibetan schools, including the Tibetan schools managed by the Indian Government are also switching to Tibetan as the medium of instruction at the primary level using the textbooks published by the EDRC.

### **Conclusion**

Organisations go through life cycles. So does TCV. As the years in exile go by, we are convinced that the work of TCV is ever more important. In the beginning of our refugee years, TCV was a place for the orphaned and destitute children to take shelter and regain their health and confidence. These were the formative years - hard and trying years - with our people living in makeshift tents and moving from place to place for shelter and work. Then came the years of concentrated work to expand and add services due to the large flow of children from settlements coupled with the flux of children who came from Tibet since the early 80s. Now, we have been in exile for well over 45 years and our people are more settled and do realize the importance of education for their children. Today, besides a sharper focus on the quality of education, there is the added responsibility of finding placements for our school and college graduates within and outside the community.

So though we do not have our own country, and we remain in exile, yet, due to the far-sightedness and compassion of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, education has been and is, even today, the top priority. With the changes and innovations initiated by him to democratize the community in exile, there is even more reason for our younger generation to be educated so that they will be able to function and take responsibility for the future destiny of the Tibetan people. The TCV has played a crucial role in this endeavour and of course, we will continue to serve in this respect as long as our children need our services.

Today, Tibetan education in exile has reached a point where our focus is not only to provide basic educational opportunities but also to strive to create an atmosphere where learning can be made meaningful and socially productive. The emphasis is on specialization in both traditional and modern fields of education. We cannot remain complacent with what we have achieved. We have the dual task of providing a modern scientific education and to keep the Tibetan language and

culture alive and relevant. It will be our endeavor to achieve these objectives, and to face any challenge as we forge ahead and look forward to the day when we can return to Tibet to live in consonance with our culture and way of life in a genuine atmosphere and environment of self-rule.

Finally, I would like to add that we all – humans and other sentient beings – share one world. Unfortunately, today the world is confronted with many problems, foremost of which is lack of peace. We firmly believe that the only way we can change the world to be more harmonious and peaceful is to educate our children about our interdependence and the necessity of living in peace and harmony with each other. We in TCV, teach our children the nature of interdependence and the importance of resolving differences and conflicts through dialogue and reconciliation.

One fine example of interdependence that we try to teach our children is through our **zone of peace** that we have set up in our villages and schools. The **zone of peace** within each village and school campus provides the space and freedom to experience peace within and resonance in relationships. The peace zones serve several emotional and intellectual purposes. It provides the space and leisure for an individual – child or co-worker – to be alone to reflect and ponder on the deeper realities of life. It provides the soothing environment for the children and co-workers to resolve conflicts and differences. The peace zone is one area in the campus to overcome one's stress because it has a calming effect on the mind. And there is a pervasive understanding in our villages and schools that when one enters the zone of peace, there is no shouting, there is no fighting and that the serenity of the peace zone is maintained at all times. Lastly, the peace zone is a joyful place to be in the campus. Tashi Delek!

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