

The Journey Begins

Fundamental to the work of PestalozziWorld is the selection process. The children we select are from the most disadvantaged levels of society and at the same time have the ability to succeed academically. So along with our national selection teams we include at least one non-national, just to be sure the process is rigorous and fair. In northern India in July, I was that non-national!

From Delhi I caught the Shahabti express to Dehradun, where the Pestalozzi Asian Children's Village is located. The next day saw us departing for Tehri Garhwal district, in the foothills of the Himalayas – 'us' being Village staff Cheme and Uma; Uman, a first-year undergraduate who knows the local language; and myself. Uma has identified this area after discussion with the state government and from personal knowledge – most of the inhabitants are officially BPL (below poverty line). We then work with a number of primary schools in each area, pre-selecting those who are consistently in the top three in their class for two to three years.

After an early start and an eight-hour journey by bus and jeep we arrive at Panya Kholi, a village perched on a hillside. The first thing I notice is that all the hillsides are terraced up to an amazing height, for growing rice, wheat and millet. It's the planting season for rice so each little field is a different shade of green, depending on when planting took place. The women are working knee-deep in the muddy water, constantly bending to plant the rice, while the men shout at the buffaloes as they plough up the next field. It looks exhausting. We are met by the villagers and billeted in houses, in my case in a house belonging to the Principal of the local junior school. Two or three families share the burden of feeding us. There is electrical power to the village but most homes are not hooked up or do not use it because of the cost. One or two (like mine) have solar installations.

Day 2 sees us carrying out selection tests in the school, just outside the village. 20 children turn up, somewhat apprehensive and two clearly suffering from chicken-pox. After a general explanation and some 'warm-up' games, Uma does written English and maths tests while Cheme interviews the parents about their economic circumstances. Then Cheme conducts individual verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests. After a sandwich lunch the children are allowed to go.

On Day 3 we stay in the village to mark the tests and carry out a couple of local home-visits. Cheme and Uman try their hand at planting rice, much to the amusement of the local women. This is subsistence farming and will be followed by wheat. The rains are overdue and people are anxious but from our point of view this is a blessing and it does rain heavily at night.

Days 4 and 5 we spend making home visits to two different areas, each involving nearly seven hours' trekking through beautiful mountain scenery. It occurs to me that people pay good money to experience trekking like this. The aim of these visits is to verify the information given on the socio-economic part of the registration form. All the families we visit are very poor and in one case the grandmother is lying outside clearly



A potential student with his family.



The author prepares for the day.



Cheme conducts warm-up games.



Uma interviews a candidate.

...selection in India and Africa

by Simon Wakely



Uma and Cheme prepare a simple supper.

close to death. US\$1,000 a year is a good income here and many families earn much less.

On Day 6 we say goodbye to the many friends we have made in the village, who reluctantly accept some money for our food and lodging. We return to Dehradun, this time taking the jeep all the way. This gets us back in under seven hours and in time for a late lunch with some of the children back at the Village – and for me the comfort of a warm shower in a nearby guesthouse. The following day the rains start in earnest.

Then the difficult part begins. This was one of three separate selection trips and we have a shortlist of over 100 children – and only 25 places. We also have to ensure an equal balance of nationalities (Indian, Nepalese and Tibetan) and a ratio of two girls for each boy. We all have children and families we met and remember who seem especially deserving. Somehow after two days of meetings, checking test results and weighing socio-economic backgrounds we arrive at a final list of 26, to be approved by the international Trustees.

My conclusions are that the whole selection process is carried out with great scrupulousness and rigour. Cheme and Uma are an excellent team, sensitive but not afraid to ask searching questions.

These 26 children have now arrived at the Village.

The best schools in Dehradun are very demanding and it is important that they spend a few months with us preparing for the entrance exams and in particular ensuring that their English is good enough. The change must be bewildering for them but judging by the current Foundation House children, who are lively, confident and full of questions, they will quickly adapt to their new surroundings.

Selection is also ongoing in **AFRICA**. For the first time, Angolan refugees from the Mayukwayukwa refugee camp in the far West of Zambia have been selected. They began studying at Kasisi in October, learning maths and English in preparation for the primary school system which they join in January. As Tom Butler reported in our previous (March 2009) newsletter, there isn't enough food in the camp to go around; many of the children don't eat every day. Yet even within the context of extreme poverty there are those with less. Children who show potential and whose health is sound enough to allow them to pursue studies are selected based on their economic circumstances.

Zambian students will be selected from the Kaoma District, also in Western Province, and Katete, in Eastern Province, to start in January 2010. Many parents are understandably wary the first time that PestalozziWorld visits an area; child trafficking and witchcraft are very real concerns. By the time the children return for their first holiday, however, with first-hand reports of life in the Pestalozzi Village, everybody wants to send their children to us!



Pictured: pre-selection test warm-up games (top) and students writing tests.