

THE HISTORY OF JUNBESI HIGH SCHOOL

By Master Kazi Sherpa, retired Schoolmaster of Junbesi

The history of modern education in the Sherpas of Solukhumbu and their destiny, brought to the present condition goes side by side after Sir Edmund Hillary started to build schools in major villages of Sherpas settlements.

Until 1980, Solukhumbu was unexplored by the rest of the world except for the expedition team who could be seen occasionally. It took at least two weeks to reach the capital city, Kathmandu walking 12 hours daily from Namche carrying food for the whole trip, cooking utensils in a back pack with clothes and blanket to Lamsangu where one could get a bus to Kathmandu. The people of entire Solukhumbu had a tough time during those years.

It is of course the Sherpas who contributed the mountaineering service to Sir Ed Hillary during the 1953 Mt. Everest Expedition. Upon the conquer of Mt. Everest, he became famous all over the world. He continued coming to Solukhumbu with many other expeditions once almost every year after this success. His continuous visit to sherpaland gradually heightened the relation with Sherpas. Consequently, as a token of gratitude he built the first pre-fabricated aluminum school house at Khumjung in 1961 which had been brought all the way from NewZealand. This was the first formal educational institution for the Sherpas of entire Solu, Pharak and Khumbu region.

In February 1967, I was first appointed as a Hillary School teacher for this School at Khumjung, which is a small Sherpa village situated above Namche bazar .The school played a significant role in discoursing basic primary and lower secondary education not only to children but also for many adults, generally 18 years and above who were still keen to educate themselves. It had children from Khumjung, Khunde, Namche bazar, Thami and also from villages such as Chaurikharka, Lukla, Phakding, Monjo, Jorsalle etc. When I was in Khumjung, Hillary had already built few basic primary schools in Namche, Thame, Pangboche and Chaurikharka that had one teacher commissioned who were educated in Darjeeling. Forche Basic Primary School was established in 1969 and a local student who had completed grade five from Khumjung primary school was appointed for this school.

The wave of consciousness for education and the demand for opening schools in Sherpa villages flowed throughout Khumbu, Pharak and Solu region. Every year when Sir Ed. Hillary visited SoluKhumbu, local people waited on the main trail to welcome him with 'khada' (White scarf), 'Sherpa beer' and to submit the petition written in Nepali for the construction of a new school for their children. In between 1967 and 1971, Himalayan Trust built and reconstructed many basic primary schools in Upper Solu region. Among them were Bakanche, Goli-Gyapchuka, Loding, Manidingma, Kharikhola and Pangkongma. Before the Trust took the responsibility of Beni, Loding and Kharikhola schools, they were receiving a small financial subsidy from the District Education Office which was 1200 Rs. per annum. This amount was hardly enough only for the teachers' salary. The schoolhouse at Beni School, which was established in 1965, was built by the local initiative. The Himalayan trust helped replacing its old roof of rotten wooden singles with corrugated iron sheet (C.I. Sheet) and sky light later in 1975/76. Its interior

parts such as, classroom partition and floors were also repaired with Trusts' financial assistance. Junbesi School was built earlier in 1964, three years after the Khumjung School was established. Mr. Ang Ngima lama donated the land for the school.

Normally, the size of the new schoolhouse constructed by the Himalayan Trust was 40 feet long and 20 feet wide. During 70's and 80's, Sir Ed. also eagerly took part in construction work of the school and local carpenters and masons accompanied him. Sometimes there would be few carpenters from New Zealand when he had to build more than one schoolhouse within a short period of time. But in big projects such as Kunde and Phaplu hospitals, he brought some technicians and carpenters from New Zealand.

The increasing demand for new primary schools, especially in the upper Solu and Khumbu region made Himalayan trust more responsible. It had already built more than 20 schools within Solu, Pharak and Khumbu. This was a huge number. In order to handle this, Sir Ed. felt an urgent necessity of personnel for supervising the school system on regular basis in order to support them. Finally, he chose me as a supervisor for Upper Solu schools while I was teaching and supervising at Forche and Pangmoche Schools in 1970. Then he transferred me to Junbesi in February 1971.

When I came to Junbesi, Junbesi School was known as Moonlight Primary School, comprising of two buildings, 80ft by 20ft in area, which was divided by a single wooden partition. The classes also had similar type of partition, which is still same except few renovations over exterior parts. It also had a small sloppy land, which was used as playground. The school had managed to provide a low desk for a group of four to five students. I still remember students using piece of animal skin locally known as "Pyakok" as a seat in classroom.

Under my supervision were Moonlight Primary school (Junbesi), ChandraJyoti Primary School (Bakanche), Gyepchuka Primary School (Goli), PK Primary School (Loding), Beni Primary school (Beni), Manidingma primary school (Nunthala), Kharikhola Primary school (Kharikhola) and Pangkongma primary school (Pangkongma). As a duty, I had to visit all these schools every month, examine the condition, discuss with the school committee, distribute teachers' salary and submit a report for each visit to Khunde Hospital, where doctors from New Zealand were working. At the same time Late Shyam Krishna Pradhan, the headmaster of Khumjung High School was supervising the Khumbu and Pharak schools.

Most of the schools under my supervision only had classes upto three. Upon completion of class three, students either went to Junbesi or Khumjung school for further education, which were the only full Primary schools with classes upto five. The students who could be supported financially by their parents would continue their high school education at Salleri High School at Salleri, the District headquarter, which was also in poor condition. For instance, I still remember a S.L.C. passed teacher being the headmaster of that school. Due to the pity state of the school, Himalayan Trust sent few scholarship students to Jiri High school, which is a four days walk from Junbesi, for couple of years until the management of this school was improved. The Salleri School Committee appointed a new headmaster with better qualifications and he was fully paid by Himalayan Trust. The provision of salary for rest of the teachers was made with the money collected from

students' fee, local donations and financial subsidy provided by District Education Office, which was equivalent to 5400 Rs. per annum.

During those years of teaching, we experienced dropouts of many students, as they couldn't afford to study in High schools. This serious problem urged us to upgrade the primary school into Junior High school (upto grade 7). After long correspondence with the government since 1971, finally in 1972, we got permission to manage Junior High school in the name of Junbesi Middle School, which had five teachers inclusive of me. This school became very important among all Upper Solu Hillary schools. At the same time Khumjung School was also converted into Khumjung Middle School and played a vital role for Pharak and Khumbu schools while rest of the Hillary schools were upgraded into full primary schools.

None of the school taught according to the curriculum as prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Due to this, all the schools over the nation had various types of textbooks. However everyone had to follow the same core curriculum in grade 10 so as to appear for the School Leaving Certificate Examination (S.L.C), where the question papers were set alike for all the schools. To control this kind of dissimilar education system and to unify it, in 1975, the government implemented a New Education System Plan under which all schools of the country were nationalized.

Until 1975, Himalayan Trust had been responsible for the extension of the school buildings, maintenance, supply of textbooks and stationeries, arrangements for salaries etc. After nationalization, these schools were no more under the direct control of Himalayan Trust. However, it still continued to support with education materials and extra allowances for teachers in order to maintain the standards. But it wasn't effective as before. Besides that, Sir Edmund Hillary did not pay regular visit to each of these schools like he used to do during the past years although he did visit Junbesi sometimes.

In 1975, I was appointed as the headmaster for Junbesi Lower Secondary school by the District Education office, Salleri. Since then, this school has become an important portion of my life and a powerful horizon for disbursing knowledge in my community.

Junbesi Lower Secondary School played a leading role among the Himalayan Trust built primary schools in Upper Solu from 1972 till 1984. It not only had students from near villages and but also covered students from Salleri, Garma, Nele, Mukli, etc. The number of students attending the school from faraway places was increasing every year. In 1971, there were not more than 60 students in total and slowly in following years, the number of students increased unexpectedly. Until 1980, there were 200 students attending the school. So, it became very important for us to provide another building to manage higher classes and a hostel for students. The school didn't have extra land at that time but there was a Panchayat Bhavan (Local Govt. Office) built for Junbesi Panchayat within the school compound. The District Panchayat of that time had merged panchayats of two villages (i.e. Junbesi and Loding) together, so, the office was going to be shifted to Salabesi. After democracy the Panchayat was known as Beni Village Development Committee. We bought the house and requested Sir Ed to get some fund to renovate the interior part of the house, to make beds and a separate kitchen house for 25 students. Before we bought the Panchayat House, we had rented a private house to accommodate students coming from far places. Although the old house was very uncomfortable with

leakage everywhere during monsoon and insufficient light for the students to study, we somehow managed it until the hostel was built in the school compound. We also requested the landowner Late Sugyalzen Lama to donate the 40ft by 20ft area of land, which was attached to the school building. After continuous request, he donated the land for the school. This land was arranged before the arrival of Sir Edmund Hillary. He then helped to construct the building with the help of locals, teachers and the students' labor donation.

Every year Himalayan Trust had provided scholarships to the three bright students of Junbesi School for high school education at Salleri and five scholarships for Khumjung School students. This was offered from 1975 onwards after the new school buildings were constructed by the Himalayan Trust outside Salleri bazaar. Salleri High School became a focal point for all lower secondary schools in the district. During 1972-1978, there wasn't any high school in Solukhumbu except in Salleri.

The school building, which was in very bad condition, was situated just above the road leading to bazaar. Due to this, there was no space for extension and also, it was highly disturbed by the noisy bazaar. Because of this, Sir Ed Hillary supported to construct a new school building with separate classrooms for grade six to ten, a separate office and staff rooms. In years later, Salleri School accomplished the extension of additional buildings for Science Lab, Library rooms and so on. Being the only high school for the entire district, significant changes were brought about after the implementation of new education plan. Therefore Sir Ed Hillary preferred to give scholarship to the best students from Junbesi and Khumjung to study at Salleri School for their high school education rather than sending them to expensive schools in Kathmandu. Himalayan Trust offered scholarship quota for Junbesi and Khumjung school students to pursue further college education in Kathmandu after high school, which is still provided by the Trust. Within 1972 and 1983, hundreds of students completed the lower secondary education from Junbesi and Khumjung. But among them, only 20 to 25% of the students availed the opportunity to continue their high school education at Salleri, either with help from their parents or with scholarship awarded by the Trust. It was very upsetting for us to see many students staying at home helping their parents with the household work such as digging and preparing potato field; sowing wheat and reaping the harvest or grazing their cattle on the high pastures, despite of our continual effort to make education more effective. Up to this time there was no sign of trekking business in Nepal. Thus, most of these students were stuck at home without any specific job. Keeping in view of these students' worthless life at home, we thought of making a high school in Junbesi as early as possible. Time took so long that we had become hopeless. But in 1983, during Hindus Deepawali Festival or "Light Festival", we formed a cultural group which was accompanied by the school chairman, teachers and adult students from grade six and seven; then visited every local household and requested them for donation to build a high school in Junbesi. During this festival, we sang and danced in each house in traditional Nepali and Sherpa songs. We visited most of the villages of Beni and also Salleri and Dorphu bazaar. We were totally tired after three days of long journey and sleepless nights. Remarkably, we had already collected Rs.60000.

It encouraged everyone to support our proposal to start a private high school at Junbesi.

Therefore, as an initiation we kept a fixed deposit of Rs 45000 in the name of proposed Junbesi High School. We also made necessary furniture, desks and benches; then fulfilled all formalities as per education rules and regulation and finally applied for permission to the Regional Educational Directorate at Dhankuta to begin a high school from the academic year 1984. This process was accomplished with the recommendation of the District Education Office, Salleri.

There was still many things left to do, in order to manage the high school after year 1983. First of all, we did not have buildings for starting a high school. However, we managed a classroom for grade eight in the library room, 15 ft by 20 ft in area, which was separately built in 1978 with the funds collected from locals and expedition teams who went through Junbesi. It was attached with the main Hillary school and is still being used as classroom. We moved all the books to the office, repaired the floors, and coated walls with mud; then arranged new desks and benches. Unwillingly, we also decided to collapse the hostel, which was arranged in the old Panchayat house and asked the students to rent a room in local houses. In years later, we had our 9 and 10 classrooms in that house.

On 1st Chaitra 2040, according to Nepali Year, (I can't exactly remember the date in English but it was around March 15,1984) we inaugurated Junbesi High School from Mr. Ang Dorji Lama, who was the President of District Panchayat of SoluKhumbu. There was a large gathering of local people at the school compound. We had also invited some important district officials and politicians from Salleri with the view that it might help us to get a permanent recognition from the Government after running a private high school with the local initiative. We had been running the high school with funds collected from various sources. If the government had recognized our high school, they would provide qualified teachers for every subject and pay their salaries. Not only that, they would also grant administrative expenses.

But to the contrary, the concerned authority did not accept Junbesi as an important school because they thought Junbesi is very close to Salleri High School. We faced lots of financial problem, as we had to collect funds for the academic management every year. Due to this, I personally requested Himalayan Trust to provide full funds for teacher's salary. But the trust also did not fulfill all of our financial necessity. Upon my personnel request to Sir Ed. during his visit to Junbesi, the school received Rs. 50000 after starting grade 9 and this amount was increased to Rs.100, 000 per year for teacher's salary after the commencement of grade 10. But it was also insufficient for arranging teachers for every subject.

In the meantime, as soon as we were allowed to start a private high school, the district government made a new policy for distributing high school quota. According to the policy, the schools must have applied for running high school and fulfilled the criteria as per the education rules and regulation. Within this policy, they divided 34 Village Panchayats of SoluKhumbu district into nine major areas. Each area would have only one high school. Therefore, any lower secondary schools could apply for a high school in areas where there was no high schools. For example: Salleri, Tamankhani (Loding), Beni and Taksindu were kept in Area # 1. Likewise Goli-Gyapchuka and Bakanche in Area # 2; Khumjung, Namche and Chaurikharka in Area # 3 and so on. Since Junbesi school was

in the same area where Salleri High School was already there, we did not get the opportunity to be recognized as a government high school. Whereas Khumjung school easily became a recognized High School within 3 years. But we never ended our hope, as we were aware that one-day we would succeed. We took every chance to submit the petition to the Regional Education Directorate every year.

Time seemed to pass more slowly than usual. Hard times don't come alone, but it comes simultaneously. This proved true for Junbesi School as in year 1989, a devastating earthquake destroyed more than half of the school building which was constructed with our years of hard effort. The classrooms at Panchyat house were turned into rubbles. Walls of the classrooms and office rooms built by the Trust were cracked and it could fall down anytime. Luckily, there were no casualties, as it took place early in the morning. The same earthquake killed more than 2000 people in eastern part of Nepal. We continued the teaching and learning activities at school despite of the danger. Sensibly, we applied for financial aid to the District Panchyat Office at Salleri for reconstruction of school buildings. Thankfully, they allocated Rs. 50000 for the construction work. As soon as the fund was released, we started rebuilding the Panchyat house, which was much better than before.

At the same time my meeting with Mr. Roelof Swart from Netherlands, who had come to our Lodge at Junbesi (Ang Chokpa Lodge), seemed very important for the School. Within a week stay, he seemed to be quite friendly and helpful. I explained him my future plans and the condition of the school buildings, which was not of uniform shape and size. After examining the condition, he promised to raise funds for the school. After returning, he succeeded in collecting funds for this project. Then, he started sending money to Junbesi School's bank account.

With that money, we constructed a L-shaped school building by joining three buildings i.e. two Hillary buildings and Panchyat building which were located separately. In this way, the number of classroom increased. Besides that a Library Room, Storage Room and Extra Room for Optional Classes were also allocated. This was a great contribution by Mr. Roelof for Junbesi School.

As per the agreement of Himalayan Trust with the Government, Junbesi School and its feeder schools were still getting the privilege of education materials. Every year during the winter vacation, late Shyam Krishna Pradhan (headmaster of Khumjung School) and I came to Kathmandu to buy the educational materials for Upper Solu and Khumbu schools. All these school materials were distributed from Junbesi and Khumjung to their feeder schools. Until this time, the feeder schools in Solu area such as Bakhanje, Beni, Takshindu and Loding had been upgraded upto lower secondary. Due to this the number of students attending at Junbesi School had reached more than 350 out of which nearly 200 were outsiders. It was a very large number. Due to this, some students requested the school to make arrangements for hostel. Although we were conscious about this, we were in lack of fund and land. So every year when Sir Ed visited Solu, we requested him to

have a hostel built for Junbesi School. He didn't pay attention at the beginning but years later he agreed to do so.

As for initiation, we arranged a land near school where Ed Hillary agreed to build the hostel. We exchanged the land with a Hillary clinic building built by Trust. The new clinic had been shifted to Edingma, which is within 15-min walking distance from Junbesi. It was built with contributions of people from Junbesi and Mopung. Disappointedly, the hostel project was shifted by the Trust for couple of years after Ed. Hillary changed his mind as he felt that the land was too small for building a hostel.

After the 1989 earthquake, Government launched a special project for schools that would build anti earthquake blocks, provided they arrange the land and 25% of the total labor cost from locals. Within this program, many schools in Solukhumbu received anti earthquake building materials and tin-roof from the district government. Himalayan Trust schools such as Bakhanje, Beni, Loding, Taksindu, Kharikhola and including Junbesi School also erected the new blocks. We managed to construct twin blocks near school, where Himalayan Trust had previously proposed to build the hostel.

From the very beginning since we started our junior high school in Junbesi, there would be problem for extending classrooms due to the limited space. When establishing the primary school, local people did not think about how the school could develop in near future. Their idea of education was limited just to recognizing the alphabets. As for illustration, people thought their children were educated even if they were capable of reading and writing letters for family or neighbors. Besides this, there was immense discrimination between genders. Parents would give the first priority to their sons because of which the number of girls was insignificant.

Due to the congested idea, we found it very difficult to convince the people and landowner even when we needed land to extend the school. Since we had no budget at school for buying the expensive land, we had to make special request to the landowner. We offered them " Khada " and Sherpa Beer "Chyang" and explained them about the importance of their land for our School. Sometimes this issue even led to huge arguments with the landowners across the school ground. Besides this toilet was another problem. We had built a small toilet on someone's field temporarily, but shame to say, even up to now there is no particular toilet for girls.

In 1994, when I was in England at Nottingham University, George Lowe (Chairman of U.K Himalayan Trust) told me that Ed Hillary found donors in Switzerland who was going to donate two prefabricated school buildings to Hillary schools in Nepal. He also said that Ed Hillary asked him if I was willing to accept one of the buildings as a hostel for Junbesi School. It was surprising news for me. I immediately responded George Lowe about the necessity of a hostel for our students. After returning from England in October 1994, I thought about expanding the school compound elsewhere, as it was impossible to accommodate the proposed new hostel in Junbesi.

As a child when I studied in Darjeeling, schools used to be a place where one could develop various extra curricular skills besides knowledge. Taking this into account I made a new concept of Junbesi School, which would be more like a school rather than just classrooms. The school would have sufficient playgrounds for various sports such as football, badminton, volleyball, and track and field besides classrooms. It would be at peaceful area in between forests, far from hustle bustles of Junbesi. Moreover, I wanted to create a good environment for learning.

In the mean time, I was looking for a land for the proposed hostel and conceptual school. Coincidentally, I met Mr. Ngima Tenzing Lama who was willing to sell a large area of land (nearly half-square km area) at Cheding, which is a 20 minutes walk from Junbesi. The landowner decided to sell the land to school for a sum of 150,000Rs. We decided to buy the land, as it was considerably cheap compared to the land in Junbesi. But problems arose again. We only had 50,000 Rs. that was saved from the collected fees from students. So I immediately informed Himalayan Trust and requested 100,000 for buying the land. Within a month or so Himalayan Trust gave us the money and finally, we had the land registered for Junbesi School.

In 1995, Ed. Hillary was invited by one of the Wood Engineering Schools in Switzerland for a felicitation ceremony in which they were going to donate the two pre-fabricated houses for Junbesi and Khumjung School. I heard an interesting fact about this ceremony that nearly 800 carpenters worked together the whole day to construct two houses in presence of Ed. Hillary. Later on these houses were disassembled and transported through ship to Calcutta in India, then by Lorry to Kathmandu through Birgunj where it remained for nearly two months for custom clearance. Finally, trucks brought these houses to Jiri, from where they were transferred to Junbesi and Khumjung by chartered Russian helicopters. Since the Junbesi Helipad was far from Cheding, it took more than a week for 40 porters to transfer these houses. By the time Swiss technicians arrived, we had already prepared the foundation ground for the hostel. It was reassembled within 4 days and inaugurated in March 1996 by Sir Edmund Hillary in the presence of large number of local community. He again sanctioned some money for making compound walls and a separate kitchen house. The Swiss hostel is a open hall without compartments containing bunks, desks and chairs. One teacher was kept in hostel for its management and to supervise the students.

The main drawback of the Swiss hostel is the lack of ventilation. Students staying at hostel preferred using kerosene lamps to candles, as they could not afford to buy everyday. The smoke from kerosene lamps formed suffocative air inside the hall, which is harmful for health. Besides this, it was not suitable for teachers and students to share the same hall. Fifteen years had passed since we first applied for the government recognition. Finally in 1996, government made the provision of salary for three teachers of grade 8, 9 and 10. As a result, we had saved a considerable amount of money, which was sufficient to build a separate house near the Swiss hostel. The construction of this house completed in 1997. Previously, I had planned to accommodate both students and teachers in the newly built three storied Sherpa house and to use the Swiss house as study

hall. The new house has separate rooms, which can accommodate both girls and boys. But Ed. Hillary did not like my idea and instead forced me to restore the students in the Swiss hostel. He also threatened to shift the hostel elsewhere if I didn't do so.

After some controversies we decided to build a One-Kilowatt mini hydro electricity, the cost of which was estimated to be about 160,000 Rs. We succeeded in constructing the hydropower for hostel in 1997 after the District Agricultural Development Bank at Salleri offered 100,000 Rs. as loan and 60000 Rs. as grant money.

District Education Council hosted a sports competition every year, which was either organized by Salleri High School or Nele High School (a day walks from Junbesi). When Salleri High School organized the competition, Phaplu airport would be the playground for various athletics whereas Nele School has its own playground. Our athletes also took part in various sports such as volleyball, track and field etc. But our players did not show satisfactory results in every competition. We were conscious of the fact that the school was devoid of proper playground. In order to improve the extra curricular activities in succeeding years, we decided to make a large playground near the hostel. At first, the school received 150,000Rs from the Beni Village Development Committee after I convinced the committee about the importance of extra curricular activities. With this money we initiated the construction of the playground. But this amount was not sufficient for completing the construction as the land was sloppy and we had to make it uniform. This project would cost a lot of money.

One of my old friends Christopher Giercke from Germany, who visited Junbesi frequently, showed interest in completing the playground project. He had been helping Junbesi School for Sherpa language classes after I explained him its importance. He promised to raise funds for the completion of the playground. Within a couple of years, he helped the school with more than 300,000 Rs. We nearly completed 75% of the construction of playground in year 2000. But there is still some work for labeling the ground. Besides being the headmaster of Junbesi School, I was also working as a coordinator for the rehabilitation project of Junbesi Monastery, which was supported by Christopher Giercke. It was January 21, 2001 a chilly winter afternoon. Usually during winter holidays I came to Kathmandu, but this year I had to coordinate this project. I was completely wet and tired after mending the water pipeline, which was frozen due to the cold weather. I was just about to change my clothes when suddenly a group of people's army or the so-called "Maobadi" with guns in their hands came into my house. One of them seemed to be the leader. In a harsh voice he said, "Where is Kazi? I want him now. He is to be punished by the people's army, We'll evaluate him" and so on. At first I was surprised to see them being brutal, as I had only requested them to reevaluate the donation amount of 100,000 Rs that they had fixed for me. Since this was a huge amount I had asked them to reevaluate and to deduct the amount. All of a sudden they attacked me and placed the pistol on my forehead. I continuously pleaded for my life and finally they forced me to donate the money, which I had to borrow from the neighbors to make it 100,000 Rs. They also threatened to take away my life if I didn't arrange another 100,000 Rs. within three months, which was impossible. Within few days, my wife and I came to Kathmandu to live with our children.

Since then I have never returned to Junbesi. Unwillingly, I retired after few years, as I couldn't visit the school. I hear sometimes about the school. These days Himalayan Trust does not provide any kind of support except supplying the educational materials and awarding scholarships. It is being managed only with the government subsidy. I don't know the condition of the playground. Who is going to build and when will the children be able to play? I had dreamt of a Junbesi Technical School where one could develop practical skills such as carpentry, electrician, painting, computer, woodcarving, and knitting and tailoring. This could certainly help the students for utilizing their education even if they do not join the college. But now this is limited only up to dream. Junbesi School needs to be saved from being worse from bad.

I hope that my concept of Junbesi School will be a reality. Somewhere deep inside I strongly feel that one-day, Junbesi School will lead to glory of Nepal.