

Goethals HIMALAYAN HOPE & WELFARE SOCIETY

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March 2011 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

Last week I went to Tumling, a remote village perched 2735 Meters (8973 feet) up on the India-Nepal border. How did I end up there? For years, my friend Scott Herrington had been taking groups of students to Tumling on short hiking trips. Last November Scott made that trip again. This time accompanied by his two sons, our friend Chris Bake with his son and daughter and a friend's daughter and Rob Swan, the well-known Polar Traveller. They stayed overnight at Shikhar Lodge, run by a lady named Nila. Both Scott and Chris were really impressed with Nila. She is very hard working, committed to improving the local environment and always ready to try out new ideas to improve her own life as well as of the villagers. As much as my friends enjoyed the hiking and the breathtaking view of the world famous peaks like Mt Everest and Kanchendzonga, they were equally heartbroken to see hundreds of acres of denuded hillsides. Nila is very concerned about the situation and over the years she has planted thousands of saplings on her own initiative. But her effort has not borne any fruit. The practice of letting cows and goats loose for grazing freely on the mountainsides makes it impossible for the saplings to survive. Nila has tried putting up a crude fence made with bamboo strips but animals still found their way to the tender saplings. Nila decided it was useless to continue planting saplings unless there was a more permanent fence to keep the saplings safe from the animals. Chris offered to pay for the fence around the area where Nila would like to do the planting. Chris and Scott wanted me to meet Nila and guide her with the fencing project and also execute the reforestation program. The fencing work is well on its way. Nila has employed the poor villagers to put up the fence but her several cousins who live in Tumling and other neighboring villages have also offered to make a contribution to the project by giving her free labour. At the rate the fencing work is going, Nila should be able to complete the work by the end of April which means the first batch of trees could be planted in mid-May to take advantage of the monsoon, which is vital for the survival of the saplings. Getting a forest back is not like picking up a cup of instant coffee, it will take time. But with people like Nila and friends like you supporting us, we have no doubt we can turn a grey, treeless mountainside into lush green forest.



I took these two pictures standing on the same spot. On the left are the Nepali hills with absolutely no trees and on the right are the heavily forested hills of India. Our goal is to have these barren hills covered with different varieties of indigenous trees, medicinal plants and flowering trees like rhododendrons and magnolias.



Nila making sure all the angles are painted properly to prevent them from getting rusted in the heavy monsoon rains. Nila's cousins are contributing to the project by helping her with painting job and also making the pits into which the angles go. The whole village has assured us of their active support in the reforestation program. We also discussed the problem of letting the animals loose for grazing and the threat it would pose to the reforestation program. One of the farmers suggested that we allocate an area where the animals could graze and have people cultivate fast-growing fodder grasses for the animals. I should try to find out what is available in the line of fodder seeds.



(L)Richard explains to Sashi, Patrick and Diwakar how the solar coil works. (R) Nila, Sudhir & the solar coil.

There are so many ordinary people who are willing to help us in our effort to help the poor. Richard is a 'Jack of all trades and master of none' kind of person. But because he is so talented, he gets little out of focus sometimes and loses his way. Getting involved with Himalayan Hope will help him channelize his talents and energy for a good cause. Richard did all the electrical wiring in Chris Niwas. He helps us take care of our flowers. He takes care of our plumbing. He built the beautiful altar around which we pray for you every day. This time he helped us build the simple water heating solar coil which we took to Tumling for Nila. Richard himself went with me to Tumling to install the solar coil. In half an hour, the solar coil gave us 18 litres of very hot water. It cost us 2000 rupees (\$47) to make one coil. Even if Nila can only use the solar coil for six months of the year, think of the number of trees that will be saved over the years just by spending that much. I would like to see at least one coil on the roof of every villager in Tumling so that when we do eventually have the forest back, the villagers will not go into the forest to cut wood to heat the water.



(L)A farmer clears the land to make room for a mini greenhouse. (R) Farmers put up the greenhouse with help from Diwakar.

When we started training the villagers on the SMVG method back in the early 90's, we used to ask the farmers to give us their worst and most unproductive piece of land and we would turn it into the most productive and profitable piece of land. I said the same to Nila knowing little that she would take my word literally and show me a piece of land, which gave me the goose bumps. But with the help of Diwakar and Richard and the villagers, I was able to clear the land, level it, construct a mini-greenhouse, spread compost and give the 12 farmers a demonstration of Square Meter Gardening technique. We made ten Square Meter beds and planted ten different vegetables. One of the things the farmers realized instantly is how much seed they were wasting in the traditional terrace farming. I asked them how much spinach seed they would have used in one square meter of land in the traditional system. They said about four fistfuls (and their fists are huge!!!), which I calculated to be around 5000 seeds. We planted 400 spinach seeds in one Sq. Meter bed and will probably get the same amount of harvest with much less work. Of course the other two big advantages of the SMVG system is how much easier the actual work is. The system eliminates hours of backbreaking digging. It also allows 12 months of growing time rather than just five or six. When I was in Tumling, most of the terraces were empty. On asking the farmers how long the terraces had been empty since the last harvest, they said for more than three months. In Square Meter system, you can take two harvests of coriander or spinach or lettuce in three months. I think we have enough farmers excited for me to keep going back to Tumling for quite some time. We spent 7400 rupees (\$176) for training the 12 farmers including the cost of the greenhouse and seeds and our going and coming back.



(L) Diwakar and Sudhir look as the farmers sow the seeds in Sq. Meter bed. The farmers took some time to get used to planting the seeds one at a time in the Sq. Meter bed rather than throwing fistfuls of them in their terraces. (R) I fell in love with Pragma. She is 7 years old. I was amazed at how much this little one contributes to the family work. Before she goes to school, Pragma feeds the family's three cows and nine goats, takes them for grazing, washes the utensils, cleans the kitchen. And those chores are repeated again when she comes back from school in the afternoon. She looked so proud taking me to the barn and telling me the names of her animals. I felt sorry that Pragma had to do all that work at this age when she is supposed to be playing with kids like herself. And yet I felt happy that even at this age she knew what her responsibilities were and that she did them all with a smile on her face. I cannot wait to go back to Tumling to see little Pragma again!!!

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NEWS FROM CHRIS NIWAS

If you heard loud Nepali music and the sound of children dancing, it was because there was a celebration at Chris Niwas yesterday. What was the occasion, if you ask!!! We were welcoming Jane Davidson and Julie Franke who are visiting us from Canada. Having Jane visit Chris Niwas is very special as she is among some of my very special friends who have always dreamed that someday Sashi and I would have a home of our own. Thank you Jane and Julie for making the effort to come and visit us. We would also like to thank all our friends who have conveyed their love to us in various forms that we received with great joy from Jane and Julie.



Sashi puts 'teeka' on Jane & Julie as a sign of blessing and children performing for the special guests



Children sang Nepali, Hindi & English songs for the guests



Happy children before leaving for school!!!

Love from all of us at Chris Niwas!!!

Sudhir, Sashi, Apeksha, Andrew, Anushree, Abhinoy Punam, Subani, Priyanka, Namita, Patrick, Sujan, Diwakar, Karan, Kiran, Marina, Simon, Raymond.