



## Changing lives

The Phochudumra Monastic School is near the majestic Punakha Dzong (Fortress) in West Bhutan. The school, built in 2003, houses more than 70 students and 3 'lopens' (teachers). The children are taught *Dzongkha*, the national language and *Chhoeke* (religious script) and the scriptures and rituals.

Yeshey is an 8-year old monk at the monastery. "I have many friends and the food is good. However, the study routine is strict, but we have lots of time to play and have fun."

He keeps scratching himself as he talks, and a closer look reveals that he has ringworm infection on his arms. Yeshey does not remember when he got the rashes but is sure he got it from his friends.

"My friends and I play a lot with stray dogs. We hug and pet them and maybe we all got it from them," he said. "But it's getting better now as we use medicine. We have also been taught to wash our hands after toilet and before food, and keep ourselves clean so that we don't fall sick anymore," he said.

With over 100 people, both adults and children living in the monastery, hygiene and sanitation were serious problems due to inadequate water and toilet facilities. Students were frequently falling sick with diarrhea and skin infections.

"The toilets were very dirty. We didn't even feel like going there and many times we used to relieve ourselves outside," said Yeshey and his friends.

Today, the students are proud to have modern water and sanitation facilities, with 7 bath houses and 8 toilets. About 9 students share a toilet and take turns to clean it.

Yeshey said he did not mind cleaning the toilets if his friends helped him. "And it is a good thing because then our toilets don't smell bad. And I'm happy with the bath houses as Punakha is very hot and I love playing with water. Before we did not have a bath house, and we had to walk all the way to the river to bathe and wash our clothes. We were dirty by the time we came back."

The provision of a simple water tap and a toilet with health and hygiene education has changed the lives of Yeshey and thousands like him across the Kingdom. This

change is one of the biggest achievements of the Religion and Health Project in the last 15 years. The project which is run by the Central Monastic Body collaborates with UNICEF Bhutan to provide basic water and sanitation facilities and services to child monks and nuns in religious schools across Bhutan.

"Just building toilets and bath houses does not improve children's health," says Lopen Tashi Gelay, Project Manager of the Religion and Health Project.

Being a monk himself, and having studied in a similar institution, he believes that training and teaching children safe and healthy practices is crucial. "We have to help them understand the importance of washing hands and staying clean, so that they make the best use of these facilities. First we have to start leading healthy and hygienic lives ourselves before preaching the same to local people around us."

As we leave the monastic school, Yeshey and his friends shout "bye-bye" from a distance and have a good laugh at the visitors who came to their school just to look at their toilets.