

Jacques Vigne awarded the prize for education by the state of Uttarakhand

Dehradun, November 11, 2016 at the annual celebration of the founding of the State of Uttarakhand

Events have a way of surprising us in life, for example, at the end of October, I was tranquilly, so to speak, leading a group of 40 French visitors through southern India when I received an unexpected bit of news from Lakhpat, who is the director of a school for 500 children, one of the projects we have been supporting since it was founded in 2004 at Guptakashi, a name which means “secret Benares” designating this little town, very remote from the areas that can easily be reached from the plains. Today it has become the main passageway along the road leading to the source of the Ganges at Kedarnath, 3400m. Guptakashi is indeed situated much lower down at 900 meters. However, the view from the school looking to the northeast opens onto 4 peaks over 7000 meters high; the massif of Chaukhamba. The town is only about 40 kilometers from the Tibetan border. The news received was that Harish Rawat, Prime Minister of the state of Uttarakhand, had suddenly made a visit to our school, whereas he doesn’t usually visit private schools. Lakhpat and the principal of the school explained to him that they had gone through a serious financial crisis at the beginning of the year and that I had sold my apartment in April to pay off part of the capital of the debt contracted by the school, to keep it from closing its doors due to a repossession of its buildings by the bank. The crisis situation was brought about by the fact that the school charges its students very modest fees, in keeping with the social service philosophy that is part of its mission. The Chief Minister quickly understood the situation, immediately suggesting that I be receiving the prize for education awarded each year by the state of Uttarakhand, on the anniversary of the founding of the state the 9th of November, this year being the 16th celebration. All this came as a complete surprise and may be the answer to the fervent prayers of the young director of the school, Lakhpat, who had gone to a remote sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Kali, located 70 km away up in the mountains, saying to the Goddess: “Doctor Jacques does so much for us and we can’t give him anything in return. Please do it in our place!”

This is precisely what was done by the Chief Minister of the State. I then asked my travel group, with which I was to spend 3 weeks, to allow me to leave them 3 days before the end of the trip which they would finish with the Indian guides we provided: they agreed to the arrangement. So from one day to the next I set off from the foot of the sacred mountain Arunachala and arrived at the foot of the Himalayas in Dehradun, the capital of the state of Uttarakhand, the “northern parts” which the locals respectfully call *Devbhumi* in Hindi, the “dwelling place of the gods”. There were moments of stress; the night train scheduled to arrive at 8:25 a.m., which would enable me to spend the morning with the Minister was 3 hours late. Fortunately, in the end the meeting took place at 1 p.m. so we arrived in time. Various prizes were awarded in disciplines such as literature, including a place for the oral traditions also, economics, sports, agriculture, traditional craftsmanship, etc. I think that if Harish Rawat, former Minister in the central government in Delhi, decided to award me, a foreigner, the prize in education, it is because he wanted to send a clear message to his fellow citizens. Education is the responsibility not only of government or of the private business sector, nor of missionary efforts in view of converting people or at least diminishing the resistance of a country towards a foreign religion. Education is above all a gift from one generation to the next. This gift is a particularly precious one in remote areas cut off from larger cities. The Chief Minister’s decision is also a direct message to religious organizations which raise money all over the world for the poor in India and end up giving them only the crumbs of what they have gathered. It is a large scale scam of which we must be aware, especially among gurus claiming to be the incarnation of universal love.

I have an old friend who worked for years as a teacher in charity schools in India, in particular with the Gandhi movement in Bihar and the Christian one in Calcutta, with ties to Father Lambert who was a source of inspiration for one of the characters in Dominique Lapierre’s book, *La Cité de la joie*. I grew better acquainted with her when she came to live for several years in the ashram of Ma Anadamayi in Kankhal, where from the start she was drawn to the presence of Swami Vijayananda. She brought to my attention at that time, a

frequent tendency among charity schools: at the start they are open to the poorest children, but since the prevailing atmosphere there is better and the ethics loftier than in ordinary schools, they tend to attract more affluent parents who are ready to pay more in order to improve all sorts of things related to the school, which ends up being a model institution----but only for the more affluent. We are aware of this tendency with Lakshpat and Sunita who run our establishment in Guptakashi, and we are careful to avoid that pitfall. Receiving this award for education also calls to mind an ironic remark by Swami Vijayananda. "Politicians like those who work in the social field since they do the work that the government should be doing itself." Even if there is a certain amount of truth in this statement, we should do what we can to help people out and not wait until the world is in good order and everyone is doing what needs to be done. Otherwise, we can be prepared to wait for a long time.

I cannot close without thanks to all the French people who have supported the school in Guptakashi, to begin with, François Marie-Lanoë who first set up the association around 2006 and recruited students in Political Science and graduate schools in Paris to teach English in the valley of Kedarnath. This was his "good karma" as they say in India, because in spite of a career he began in the commercial sector after finishing Political Science in the area of international affairs, he turned to teaching, and finished first place in the French competitive exam, l' "Aggregation" in Geography in 2006 and now teaches in the Paris area. We wish him every success in his new career in this new vocation. Let me add here that the invitation for western teachers at the Guptakashi School is always open, and one member of our November southern tour group told me she was interested for the summer of 2018, when the children go back to school at the beginning of July. More details can be found as well as photos of the awards ceremony at Dehradun on Lakshpat Singh Rana's Facebook page and concerning the school on www.jvn.in.

For those who wish to contribute to the work I carry on in India, the following list provides information. We are an association registered under the 1901 law in France. Our address: Humanitaire Himalaya, 25 rue Jussieu, 75005 Paris.