

Where are the teachers?

By MARIANNE HEREDGE

For over a month the search has been on. WANTED: a degree-qualified teacher of science to teach up to class ten in a rural government school. Funding is from private sources from the UK at 9,000 rupees a month with a bonus of 22,000 rupees payable on satisfactory completion of one year's service.

We are looking for a teacher who can make a difference at a school where the normal problems of apathy and lack of resources mean that the children get a poor education. Sadly an all too typical story in Nepal, especially in the more remote districts. And of course, the snag is that the village is in the foothills of the Everest area, in the lower part of Solukhumbu, off the tourist trails and very remote. Beautiful, fertile and with a very agreeable climate, there is no electricity, it's two hours to the nearest telephone and five hours to the small airstrip at Phaphlu. Deusa village is about 4 days' walk from the nearest roadhead at Jiri.

Seven candidates submit their applications by the deadline. Most of them have already called a friend in Kathmandu originally from the village who knows the school and can fill the applicants in on some of the details of the place. All are contacted and asked to come for interview.

On the day, only four applicants show up. The other three don't call to say they won't be there. One candidate stands out above the rest and is offered the job within an hour of finishing the interviews. We arrange to meet the following day to sign a contract and make arrangements for when to start. The next morning, Candidate 1 calls to say that he's sorry, but he's been offered another job in Kathmandu. After agreeing to make an offer to the second choice candidate, Candidate 2 is contacted and he meets us to sign the contract. He seems all set to go. The next day he telephones to say that his wife does not want to go with their baby to such a remote place. The other two candidates who had been interviewed are dismissed: one seeming unsuitable in his manner; the other making a poor attempt at answering some science questions asked at the interview.

But all is not lost, a look in the GPO box reveals an application that is sent over a week past the deadline, but looks promising. Immediately contacting this late Candidate 3 to meet for an interview, he again seems very suitable and keen - that is, until the last ten minutes of the interview when he starts to haggle over his board and lodging, requesting that this should be free on top of his salary. We gently try to persuade him that living in the village would be much cheaper than living in Kathmandu (his lodging would be free) and that with a bonus at the end of the year, he would be unlikely to find a better opportunity to save money. Candidate 3, like the others, has only just graduated and has not much experience. He leaves saying that he would call back in a couple of days. He never does.

The day after his interview, Candidate 4 calls to ask whether he could be considered for interview, despite his very late response. Delighted to have another chance, we meet immediately. Again he seems very suitable, maybe even more suitable than most of the others, since he has just spent the last two years teaching science in a government in a village in Lamjung. Married just three months before, he asks whether there might be any work for his wife in the village. We cannot promise anything at that moment, but we assure him that this is very likely and that we would be able to help her find something. He is on his way to visit his parents for a few days in Chitwan, so he promises to give a final confirmation in three days.

After four days and no call, I ask my friend to call Candidate 4 to check whether he is interested in accepting the job. He is staying a couple of extra days in Chitwan, he says. He would call the following day when he returns to Kathmandu to arrange to meet us. (No word one way or the other to confirm whether he wants to take up the appointment though).

But maybe hopeful. After all, it is very easy to say no on the telephone with the benefit of distance, so maybe he is serious. He knows that we are keen for a quick response, as the new term is starting in a matter of days.

Still no call and the New Year weekend passes. So again I ask my friend to contact Candidate 4 to see what's up. Again he raises whether it would be possible to give his wife a job. Since we cannot guarantee this, he is still hesitating. He doesn't turn the offer down, but leaves it ambiguous, saying

that maybe we should continue to look for a better candidate. However, he will maybe meet us when he gets back to Kathmandu.

So as last resort, we go back to the candidate who answered questions poorly at the first interview, but seemed like a nice guy. Candidate 5 understandably is guarded in his response. We interviewed two weeks before. He says that he needs to consult his parents. Unmarried and seemingly desperate for a job, Candidate 5 at first seems a hopeful - until he calls to say that his parents have reminded him that he still has to complete his dissertation which will take three to five months and that he should not go.

So five offers to candidates that all seem keen at first and who have all been informed about where the village is and the poor state of the school. But - maybe with the exception of Candidate One, who was open about his search for jobs, no one is really ready to take up the job when it is offered.

So what is left to do? Maybe a visit to the university to find a recent graduate from the area who is fed up with Kathmandu and would welcome the opportunity for experience and a good salary in Deusa. Maybe broadcasting on Solu FM might attract a local teacher, who would no doubt jump at the opportunity.