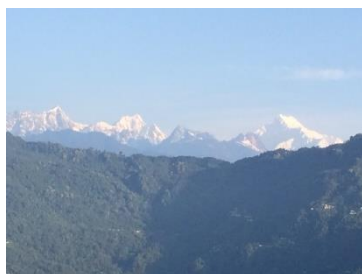


Newsletter Children of Sikkim - June 2016

Mieke and Jannie's visit to India (April/May 2016)



After an absence of three years, we finally went back to India in April. The goal of this trip was to visit former SHA students who are following a secondary education with the help of the foundation or who are already in college. And of course, we also wanted to visit the children in Dzongu. We have managed to do all that.

We visited students in several cities in India and also went to Dr Grahams Homes, where by now 15 of 'our' children attend school.

Delhi- Samjyor

Delhi is the first stop and it's the city of Samjyor who is studying Political Science at Deshbandu College (part of Delhi University) in this city with ten million inhabitants. He is currently taking exams for his Bachelor's Degree. We arrive at night, as flights to and from Delhi usually don't have the best schedules, and it is still 35 degrees when we arrive. During the day the temperature rises to 45 degrees.

The next morning we have a happy reunion at breakfast in our hotel on Connaught Place. Samjyor should be studying, but he took the day off to show us his College and the place where he's living. The latter we do by metro, and even though you don't see much, we do discover how nice and cool it is down there. The room Samjyor is living in is too sad for words: tiny, no windows, no shower, no toilet, no desk or table to study at and a mattress on the floor. When we come back outside, he has to cry a little.

For us it's a good thing he is showing his emotions. We are a little upset.

Out of all the children attending college, we know him best and now it appears that the contribution we pay him monthly is in fact not enough, but that he was afraid to tell us. It will happen more often during our trip: stories about too little money, or having no clue how to deal with money because they haven't learned from their parents, which leads to dry rice at the end of the month.



We strongly urge Samjyor to find something else after his exams, if possible somewhere on campus, but at least closer to where he is studying. In the evening we have agreed to a meeting with Anand Pradhan, an elder gentleman we met through one of our sponsors and who manages Samjyor's money and if necessary gives him advice over his studies. It's a very pleasant conversation, but the sad living conditions are also a surprise for him. In the afternoon, Mieke had already bought a pair of (genuine) Adidas sneakers and a good mobile phone for Samjyor, as he desperately needed both.

One World, One Family

In the meantime the students started the WhatsApp group 'One World, One Family', where all students we are visiting subscribe to and where they keep in touch with each other and with us. This is how we know that Nedup, who graduated (ISC Exam, Class 12) this year, is looking for a laptop and is considering his options about the cities where he might want to attend college. Until he knows how he did on the exam, this is not really possible yet, as most colleges have entrance requirements (just as in the US and the UK) and often, there is also an entrance exam students have to take. At the moment he stays with Rha Tsering in Calcutta. We promised him money for the laptop, but the day we're in Calcutta the store is closed, and the thing also has to be ordered. Indian logistics for a laptop.

Bangalore – Nimphuti and Sarda

From Delhi we first fly to Bangalore, where Nimphuti and Sarda are attending a prestigious Nursing College, both with a scholarship from the Sikkim Government. The only thing they have to pay for themselves, are exam fees, a uniform and a stethoscope, etc. This costs approximately 500 EUR per year.

After our arrival, we first have a meeting with James Ambat, the man behind Building Blocks, the NGO that 'adopted' SHA three years ago. As we mentioned in our September 2015 News Letter, this collaboration unfortunately ended. Building Blocks has six little schools for toddlers in the slums of Bangalore and James would like to show us at least one of them. We are very impressed, everything is clean, has beautiful colours and they have excellent teaching materials. We also receive explanation about the school's programme and finally the teachers perform a dance for us. Everything is awfully kind. In the evening we have dinner with James and his wife Hilda to thank him for all the work that he, voluntarily, did for SHA.



The next morning we leave for the Karnataka Nursing College, which is located a decent distance from the city. Our reunion with the girls is a happy one, and they have also arranged for a meeting with the principal for us. The principal is professor Bharati, a woman who has also studied in the US. She impresses us and she is very satisfied with our girls. Afterwards we visit the hostel where the girls are staying. The room is shared by three girls (all from Sikkim), it's clean and they have their own little bathroom. They have gotten the whole day off, so we take them for lunch. They want to go to a western shopping mall a few kilometres away. This appears to be their monthly getaway, where six of them share a medium pizza and one coke. A genuine party. Especially if they can each pick a piece of clothing.

Nimphuti chooses a cheerful blouse and Sarda chooses jeans. Later we read in the group app that Nimphuti had the best day of her life ... They also tell us that they go home once a year, during the holiday. Going home for them means two and a half day on the train, followed by another five hours in a jeep. This year they are going back in October and November. Sarda is following a Bachelor's Degree in Nursing and Nimphuti is doing a three year Diplom Course (comparable to higher vocational training), because she did not graduate in the Science Stream. After that she can get her Bachelor's Degree in another two years. Nimphuti is Class Representative for her class with 80 students.

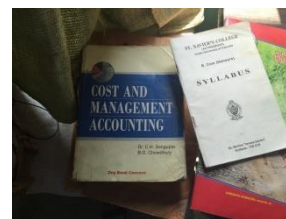
Calcutta – Rha Tsering

At 5 am the next morning the taxi waits for us to take us to our flight to Calcutta.

In the evening we are meeting Rha and Nedup. They have picked the restaurant: Bar-B-Q, a popular spot where we are the only foreigners. Nedup has visited a commercial counselling agency to get advice about his future studies. They recommended Tourism or Political Sciences for him. That's not so strange, as he has always wanted to do the first and for the latter he gets high grades. This kind of agency is therefore quite useless. We don't think Tourism is such a good idea, as the country is crawling with people who are trying to make a living with it and what does that kind of study entail? By now we know he passed his exam with 78 points, so he should have many possibilities. He wants to study Sociology and has applied for colleges in Delhi and Calcutta. Rha would prefer him to study in Calcutta, but Samjyor also recommends Delhi.



The next morning we're going to Rha's College, St. Xavier, one of the most prestigious colleges in India. He is studying Commerce. It's a Sunday, and the college is closed, but we can take a look at the courtyard. After that, we have been invited for lunch by the parents of Deblina, a woman who used to volunteer at SHA and who mentors a few of the students. She lives in Hong Kong or Singapore herself, but she is also in Calcutta a few months per year. Rha lives with her parents and has a great room, with private bathroom. We think he has been well taken care of, but might be living a bit sheltered.



Into the Mountains: Kalimpong – Dr Grahams Homes

In the evening, Nedup picks us up to take us to the station. We're taking the night train up North (the Darjeeling Mail), where we will go to Kalimpong and Dr Grahams Homes in the morning. This is an important part of our trip, as there are by now 15 of our children.

Our Tibetan host at Hotel Deki Lodge is very kind in his welcoming. He remembers us from previous trips or at least he pretends to. Both are fine with us. We have two rooms on the top floor overlooking Kalimpong, and the most important thing: a very agreeable temperature. We totally understand now why the English went here during the summer! Nedup sleeps with 'his best friend', who later turns out to be a girl ... Through 'One World, One Family' we hear that Samjyor has won two KLM tickets Delhi-Amsterdam in an online quiz of the Dutch embassy for King's Day. He can accept his prize in the residence on May 5th during a reception where all Dutch enterprises in India will also be present. Later we hear that Samjyor had a great time there, and we drink a glass of Indian wine to celebrate.



The next morning we have meetings at Dr Grahams, first with colonel Thapa (the superintendent) and later the recently appointed headmaster Neil Monteiro joins us. Especially Mr Monteiro (himself a graduate of Dr Grahams) impresses us a lot. He responds adequately to all our questions and remarks. He appears to be aware of some shortcomings and very willing to make changes in that regard. Obviously, we are most concerned about the treatment of the sponsored children and know from the graduated boys and girls what is wrong.

The children are entitled to everything, but they have to request it or deal with an enormous amount of red tape. We learned that the children have to make school projects starting from 7th grade. They need computers (internet), photocopies, special paper, coloured markers, etc. for this. These school projects are made until 12th grade and cost about 20 EUR on a yearly basis. The children don't have that, so sometimes they have to beg and scrape some stuff together. The worst thing is that these school projects count for 20 % of their final exam. By now, and for as long as this has not been taken care of, we provide our children with (extra) money, but outside our little group, there are another 200 sponsored children in the same situation, so there has to come a structural solution. We had the impression Mr Monteiro also realises this, so we are hopeful and will continue to remind him. The distribution of uniforms and toiletries, which are officially all included in the sponsored amount, is also not going very smoothly. We have placed an extensive report of our meeting with colonel Thapa and Mr Monteiro on our website:

http://www.sikkim.nl/home/files/dr_grahams_34_mei_2016.pdf.

During our meeting, we are also shown the children's reports and it appears that two of them did not do well enough to go on to the next grade, Karina and Rekchen. But since it's forbidden by law to do a grade twice, they were promoted to the next grade. We question whether this was the right decision. Nedup repeated a grade once, and this was very good for him. We ask if it's possible to discuss this with us in the future (normally, this is discussed with the parents, but that's usually not really helpful for 'our' children, as the parents are usually illiterate and don't have to pay the costs). Rekchen is now in 9th grade and has been 'condemned' to the Arts Stream (only languages, etc.) which reduces his options for later studies. The headmaster promises us that we can talk to the teachers involved the next day.

Sangdup – Local representative



Sangdup arrives in the afternoon (right on the picture, Nedup is on the left). He is one of the first who graduated through our foundation. Unfortunately, he does not have a good job yet, but now it's a good thing, as we need someone who can represent the foundation locally, and he has time. He will stay in touch with Dr Grahams and pick up and return the children twice a year for their holidays. It's also quite useful he already knows a few children and especially their background. He will also visit the former SHA students who are attending other secondary schools. For his work, we will pay him 2500 rupees (approximately 30 EUR) per month.

The next morning, we not only meet Karina's and Rekchen's class teachers, but also their science and mathematics teachers. This is a pleasant surprise, especially since the teachers appear to know the students well and show a great involvement (remarkable at a school with 1500 students). This is very nice to notice. Rekchen's class teacher is a very nice young woman. She has trouble keeping him motivated and asks us if we can make it clear to him that it's serious. His grades are slowly dropping further and further, while there is nothing wrong with his intelligence. We tell in as nice a way as we can, that if he does not want to study, we prefer to spend the money on someone else. This seems to have an impact. Karina is a whole different story. Last year was her first year at Dr Grahams, and it's more likely she is not succeeding because she has problems adapting. Her teachers are positive and promise to help her whenever they can.

We can take all the children for lunch and can even make use of a school bus. For the new kids, this is the first time after their arrival they are allowed to go off the premises and they are quite excited. We asked the owner of Deki Lodge to prepare us a lunch, and the children are enjoying themselves. They get some extra pocket money, the little ones get a backpack and the older ones, Dichen and Hissey, get money to buy an outfit for the Mayfair Ball. Sangdup writes down the addresses of the parents, so he can make a plan on how to get the children to their parents.



Gangtok – Kursongit, Kinzangit, and Pemkit

The next morning we go with Sangdup to Gangtok, and say goodbye to Nedup, who is going to visit his grandmother. Unfortunately, we cannot visit the Tribal School, as the principal thinks it's too risky in view of previous experiences. Three years ago, after we visited the school, the police (Intelligence) came to visit his school and asked him what those foreigners had been doing there. And a few years before that, his foreign volunteers were sent away. We get more and more the impression that Sikkim is no fan of foreign prying eyes. We are very disappointed, but Sangdup promises us to make a visit and report to us about the five former SHA students who are going to school there.

In the afternoon we're meeting up with Kursongit (left on the picture) and Kinzangit (on the right) in our hotel in Gangtok. Both girls are studying in Calcutta (Kursongit: English, Physical Education, Sociology; Kinzangit: English, General History and Political Science), but happen to be in Sikkim. We ask the girls how they are doing in general and, after we learned from Samjyor that he basically does not have enough money, especially about their financial situation. After a little prodding, it appears that Kursong is also struggling. We tell them that they should draw up a budget, and that we will determine if that is reasonable. We have to increase the amount at any rate, because Kursong is also eating dry rice at the end of the month. Kursong appears to be a little unhappy, she is very insecure and seems a bit depressed. She is now starting her third year and tells us that almost all her friends have quit and that she has trouble making new friends. She is trying very hard, though: she sings in a choir and sometimes acts. She is also suffering from discrimination. Kinzang seems to be a bit stronger.



Kursong wants to work for an NGO (run by a couple that live near her) this summer, just like Samjyor did. The NGO provides education for children in the slums. Kursong can teach the children English. We think it's a great idea. Maybe it is also another possibility to make some friends.

SHA - Arnab

At the end of the afternoon, Arnab pays us a visit. He is working as a teacher at SHA since 2013 (not long after our last visit to SHA) and has followed an education at Teach for India. He tells us that he is an advisor on behalf of Teach for India for a new programme of the Chief Minister of Sikkim ('Equip'), which is geared towards improving the government schools in Sikkim. Through this programme, he came into contact with the founder and CEO of MindTree (an Indian IT company), who has promised him to finance SHA for the next three years (provided Arnab stays and manages the funds). We are very happy with Arnab's enthusiasm and are happy SHA can remain in existence and appears to be in good hands. We refer to the SHA website for an impression on how SHA is doing now:

sikkimhimalayanacademy.org.

The next day, Loden, director of the school in Dzongu where approximately 20 of the children sponsored by the foundation are, has invited us for lunch. He also promises to take me to Dzongu.



Mieke stays in Gangtok and has a meeting with Pemkit. Pemkit is following an education to become a primary school teacher (District Institution of Education). She is currently in her first year. It does not become entirely clear to Mieke how Pemkit is actually doing. We will wait and see if she makes the first year (and will then, in consultation with her sponsor, decide if we can keep supporting her). Mieke also has a meeting with GS (the principal of SHA) and his wife, Maree. This is not an easy conversation, as they would like to hear that we don't blame them and Mieke does not really go into that. It's still good to see them, as we worked together for years.

The next day during lunch we hear how the Dzongu children are doing. Three boys are living at Loden's and attend college in Gangtok and Loden is of a mind to also bring the children who have taken exams for 10th grade to Gangtok. The education is better there and it's good if they can get used to living in a 'city'. It does cost a little more, but he will draw up a budget.

Next, we have a meeting with Rinchen, a former SHA student. For years, he was responsible for the boys' hostel and now he's in Gangtok. He tells us about his problems. After 12th grade, he followed a management course, was able to get a job in South India, but his parents thought that was too far away. Later he could get a job in Dubai, but again he was not allowed. He then landed a job in Gangtok, which he lost because his father ended up in the hospital and he had to take care of him (it remains unclear to us why, wasn't anyone else able to take care of his father?). His sister eloped, so his family doesn't want anything to do with her anymore and his brother is a monk who is living the good life. Rinchen came up with the idea to start a shop with, *inter alia*, school notebooks in his parents' home. Hopefully we convinced him to think a little more about himself, to get a job while he still can and if necessary to support his parents financially and to NEVER start a shop with school notebooks.

Sangdup appears to have a future wife, Dechen (2016 is apparently a bad year to get married, so they have postponed their wedding). A nice and happy girl who works at a bank and counts money. She also has a Master's Degree (we have by now found out that such a degree does not always mean the same as in our Western world). We meet her on the way to yet another dinner, this time with Sangay, a cripple monk we know from our time at DPCA, 12 years ago.



Dzongu

We stop in Mangan in the pouring rain to get the special Dzongu permit. Sangdup also joins, as he wants to show me his homestay under construction. Loden's school has expanded since my last visit, but the problem



of a decreasing number of children is still present. A sad detail is that the ground underneath the school started to sink after the last major renovation. But the children are great. Despite a blackout, I'm treated to singing and dancing, by the light of one candle. The next morning, I'm meeting Enjay, who has also gotten a degree through us, in horticulture.

She does have a job, but it's not within her field. She could get a job in Delhi, but her mother thought that was too scary. She can still get that job, so I try to convince her to talk to her mother about it. If she leaves

without permission, her family will cut all ties and she cannot afford that. What if something would happen to her? It is kind of sad, though. Enjay also has the 'problem' that's she's already 28, and permanent (government) jobs, are only available until you're 35. I'm also visited by a father with two boys who have taken the 10th grade exam and by Solomit, a girl who wants to become a doctor and has changed schools especially for this purpose; she is now attending a school where the science courses are better. Sangdup's homestay is on the top of a mountain and has a spectacular view, if the weather is clear you can see all the way to Kanchendzunga. It will have five rooms and in the garden a septic tank, to make sure the lower houses will still have potable water. In two months it should be ready.

Namchi - Laymit



The day after Dzongu, we leave for Namchi to visit Laymit. We have a look at her college (Namchi Government College) and enjoy a late lunch on the terrace of our hotel. Laymit is doing well. She is cheerful and happy, has a lot of friends and when you walk around the college with her, she knows everyone and everybody knows her. She also appears to do reasonably well in her studies (English, combined with education, journalism & mass communication).

However, we are a little shocked when we hear that she, just like Kursongit and Kinzangit, does not have to read any English books for their studies (English!). They only have to read summaries... Laymit is not really able to say goodbye and asks us if she can come for breakfast the next morning. Of course she can! We meet up with her before we're leaving to Bagdogra Airport for our flight to Delhi. We treat ourselves to another day in Delhi in a luxury hotel at the pool, have dinner with Samjyor and listen to his stories. We have lunch with Anand. The next morning we're flying back to Amsterdam.

Jannie Langbroek, June 2016

Stichting Kinderen van Sikkim

Website: www.sikkim.nl or www.kinderenvansikkim.nl

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