

Newsletter December 2017

1. Introduction

This newsletter is about a trip to India by Magi and Duncan Finlayson. Since 2016 we had planned a visit to see students funded by The Children of Sikkim and the Dutch Trust, to take place in the autumn of 2017. But then we had to put the trip on hold because strikes and other unrest in Darjeeling District meant that Dr Graham's Homes school sent pupils home in June. In the second week of October we were delighted to hear that the school had just reopened. We were able to reinstate the trip over the period from the 26th October to the 6th November, but it was a scramble to organise everything in time!

Before we set out we described the geography on our website news using the maps below:



Our itinerary was to visit Samygor at university in Delhi and Hissey at college in Bangalore, then travel to Sikkim. In Sikkim we arranged to see Nedup and Nimphuti in Gangtok, then Dichhen and Leemit in Namchi. We also visited Mayel Lyang Academy at Passingdang in Dzongu, where we stayed with Sangdup who is the liaison with Dr Graham's. We met Loden in Gangtok, who founded Mayel Layang Academy, and he travelled with us to Passingdang.

On the way out of Sikkim we will spent two days at Dr Graham's, and found that all thirteen of "our" children were back at school after the shutdown. Then we travelled on to Kolkata to meet Kinzangit and Rha Tschering. Both are at college there.

This newsletter describes each leg of the trip.

over/.....

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2. Delhi and Samjyor



Outside Sikkim House

In Delhi on 26 October we met Samjyor who is the most successful student to date. He is now in his second year of a Law degree at Delhi University, having already gained a degree in Political Science. He has recently completed an internship working for a Delhi lawyer at the Supreme Court, which he really enjoyed. His domestic life is settled in shared digs with three other students and a maid. It seems that the maid and Samjyor share the cooking!

We met Samjyor in the diplomatic quarter, after we had had an exciting time trying to draw on the rupee currency transfers we had made, and discovering through use of Uber that our roaming cost for data was horrendous and we quickly ran up to our credit limit. Later we found out that we could buy an Indian pay as you go SIM very cheaply. In the photo Samjyor is with Magi in front of Sikkim House, where we went to arrange Inner Line Permits so we could enter Sikkim.

We then took an Auto (motorised rickshaw) to the Delhi Metro. The Metro is very hectic but can save a lot of time, Delhi traffic being what it is. Magi and Samjyor last met in 2012 when he was a student at Dr Graham's in Kalimpong, so there was plenty of catching up to do. During coffee then lunch at Connaught Place we shared some memories of his early schooling. At the age of 8, he wanted to be a Bollywood star! That was in his first year as a sponsored child at Sikkim Himalayan Academy.



Samjyor in 2003 and 2018

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The Law Faculty is located in Kingsway, the historic administrative centre of New Delhi. In the twilight we walked a short distance from the college to the President's Palace (Rashtrapati Bhavan), formerly the Viceroy's House. The night lights were on and the sunset bird chorus at maximum volume. Very magical!



The President's Palace in twilight

Samjyor is not sure there would be enough work for him to go back to Sikkim when he graduates, but he is keen to help people from his area start organic farming and understand their legal rights.

We wished him well in his upcoming exams.

3. Bangalore and Hissey

A 4am start to get to Delhi airport saw us arrive at the hotel in Bangalore by 10 am to meet Hissey. She started at Mount Carmel college at the beginning of July, where she is reading political science, economics and journalism. She was supposed to start at the end of June, but was delayed by strikes and road closures in Kalimpong District, which meant she could not reach Bagdogra airport.

This has caused her some problems as she missed the Fresher's event and was not able to sign up for clubs and sports teams. She likes basketball especially. However she has been working hard - when we arrived the college had just shut for a three week break after exams. We expect to know the results in December.

She also does regular community service as organised by the college.



Duncan and Magi have sponsored Hissey since she moved from Sikkim Himalayan Academy to start secondary school at Dr Graham's Homes. She comes from Tashiding, home to the famous [Tashiding Monastery](#). Her father is a farmer and her family is large. The step she has made to college in Bangalore is much more than just the 2500 km distance.



Hissey in March 2005

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We had a look round the College with Hissey and her friend Nitisha from Dr Graham's. They started at Mount Carmel together, and share a room in a paying guest house (always called PG). Here they not only lodge but their "Auntie" gives them breakfast and dinner. This year they were too late applying to go into one of the college halls of residence, but will probably try next year. We had biriani lunch all together in a small diner, then said goodbye, as we had another very early start the next morning to fly via Delhi to Bagdogra, followed by several hours jeep ride to Gangtok - capital of Sikkim state.



Hissey and Nitisha

We were very glad to see Hissey well settled.

4. Gangtok, Dzongu and Miksim

Another 4 am start to get to Bangalore Airport was followed by a connection so short at Delhi that we were bussed directly from one plane to the other. At Bagdogra we were met by Rinchen Lepcha, who owns a tourist jeep and was contracted for us by Sangdup Lepcha, who is the "local Guardian" for the children at Dr Graham's Homes and lives in the Dzongu area of North Sikkim. Despite the same second name they are not near relatives - Lepcha is a tribal name in Sikkim, the other common ones being Sherpa and Bhutia. We also have Gurung, Rai and Limboo amongst our sponsored children and students.



Loden and Nimkit with Magi

Bagdogra is quite hot even in October, but this changes quickly after crossing the Siliguri plain to enter Kalimpong District where the foothills of the Himalaya start. By the time we reached Gangtok at around 7 in the evening, we were at over 1500m (this is higher than Ben Nevis!) and the temperature had dropped to 10 degC. Gangtok is best described as precipitous - parallel streets arranged like a staircase either side of MG Marg which is the main pedestrian area, where that evening we met Loden and his wife Nimkit. Loden set up the school Mayal Lyang Academy in Passingdang, in the Dzongu district of North Sikkim, which the trusts have also supported.

The next day we travelled to Passingdang. The plan was to go via Mangan, where we would pick up a Restricted Area permit which is needed to visit Dzongu. However the road to Mangan was blocked because Public Works were repairing landslide damage to the only road, so we slipped into Dzongu by another route. Our permits were obtained in

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absentia by sending documents from a road side cafe to a contact in Mangan by WhatsApp. The documents were then brought to Passingdang the following day - showing how it is that everyday use of Social Media flourishes where ordinary communications are dire!

Road travel is difficult pretty well everywhere in Sikkim for two reasons: first, travelling 30 km as the crow flies can mean a road more than twice that length, which drops 1000m and then climbs back up; secondly the rainy season wreaks havoc because of landslides. These are cleared away as they happen, but then the road is left as earth and rocks, quickly degenerates into potholes, and it may be months or years before it is resurfaced. Thus in our case, it took four and a half hours to travel what is only 25 km as the crow flies from Gangtok to Passingdang.

Our reason for visiting Mayal Lyang was to meet Miksim and her relatives. Miksim is now at the end of year 10, and we felt that she should attend Dr Graham's Homes in Kalimpong for Year 11 and 12 (the equivalent of sixth form in UK), so that she has the best chance of going to university. Miksim is very bright, and good at science, especially biology. Her English is excellent. Maybe she will become a doctor? Her parents are dead, so we met two of her older sisters, who were both extremely supportive. By the end of our trip we had arranged for her to attend a refresher college in Gangtok from December through to February, in advance of taking her Year 10 exams in March. We also obtained entry forms when we reached Dr Graham's and sent them to Gangtok with Rinchen.



Miksim

Overnight we stayed at Sangdup's Homestay, a traditional Lepcha home, built out of wood, up at about 4000m - except that you can book a stay on Airbnb and Booking.com! He trades as Lingthem Lyang Homestay. It has good views of Kanchenjunga. For us it was a bit cloudy but [the Lingthem Layang website](#) has some great views.

According to Wikipedia, Kangchenjunga is the third highest mountain in the world, and the second highest of the Himalaya. It is called Five Treasures of Snow after its five high peaks, and has always been worshipped by the people of Darjeeling and Sikkim. Kangchenjunga was first climbed on 25 May 1955 by Joe Brown and George Band, who were part of a British expedition. They stopped short of the summit in accordance with the promise given to the Chogyal that the top of the mountain would remain inviolate. Every climber or climbing group that has reached the summit has followed this tradition.

Next morning we visited the school again, then travelled back to Gangtok.

5. Gangtok with Nedup and Nimphuti

By this point during six days in India we had travelled perhaps 5000 km by plane and jeep, and stayed in five hotels. Now we were back in Gangtok and due to spend two nights at the [Bamboo Grove Retreat](#), giving us a chance to catch breath.

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We had lunch with Loden in his flat. He and his wife Nimkit house a group of former pupils at Mayal Lyang Academy who are now going to state schools or college in Gangtok. Magi counted 14 toothbrushes in the bathroom - this in a place with two rooms and a kitchen! The children seem very well, well fed and happy. Everybody pulls together. The point is that these children have access to free state education, but their families who live in remote areas such as Passingdang are too poor to support their living costs away from home. Therefore without sponsorship they would not get an education. We understand that this will gradually change, because at least one state school in Gangtok is planning to open boarding facilities. But for now and into the future, the need for support remains.

Two students Kinsang and Laden walked us back to our hotel. Kinsang wants to go on to study law, and Laden to be a Lepcha teacher.

That evening we were able to meet Nedup and Nimphuti. Magi last saw them both in 2012 when they were still at Dr Graham's Homes. We had a job to find them because it was dark, and MG Marg was crammed because of a Youth Festival running singing and dancing events on a stage at one end. Much noise!

Nedup is studying sociology, and will sit the civil service exam in due course, so his options may be to enter the civil service or become a social worker. He is planning to do an internship in Kolkata over Christmas, where he will stay with Rha Tschering (see section 8).



Nimphuti, Magi and Nedup

Nim is studying nursing in Bangalore and is in her 3rd year. However she want to do two further years so she can qualify as a state registered nurse, which will give her more opportunities. During the college holiday she has been staying with her family in Dentam, West Sikkim. This is 6 hours jeep ride away, so she had spent 12 hours in a jeep to come and see us.

We showed them some old photos from when they were pupils at Sikkim Himalayan Academy. We have included them below together with the pics we took that night - not great quality but a great story!



Nedup and Nimphuti in 2004 and 2017

It was wonderful to meet these young adults making their way in life. They are such nice people.

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Next day 1 Nov was a day off! We visited the Handicraft and Handloom Centre, then did some shopping, including picking up a two-week SIM with unlimited data for INR 500 (£6). That night we ate in a first-floor restaurant in MG Marg - £10 for a lovely meal; tomorrow, another jeep ride to Namchi.

6. Namchi with Dichhen and Leemit

By now we are in Namchi, which is our last stop in Sikkim. We arrived after another long and bumpy jeep ride winding down precipitous valley sides, then back up again to reach the town.



Temi Tea Estate

On the way, we passed through the Temi Tea Estate.

We are here because Dichhen and Leemit are both at Namchi College. Leemit is in her 3rd year studying journalism, and Dichhen is in his first term of a Sociology honours course.

We met Dichhen first for lunch, then joined up with Leemit to go and visit the college. It was shut because of state elections in Sikkim. We were able to get a sense of modern buildings, although the student hostels were not in use

because of a problem with water supplies. This is quite a problem locally - Leemit has water at her lodgings only every other day. Another local issue is the intermittent nature of the mobile phone signal, which gives us continual problems communicating, especially with Dichhen.

We had, of course, brought some old photos - Leemit looking very serious when she was young. Dichhen then left us to go and stay for a long weekend with his mother. She lives in Damthang which is only 13 km away, a journey which is nevertheless not practicable for daily travel. We had a walk round Namchi with Leemit before heading back to the hotel.



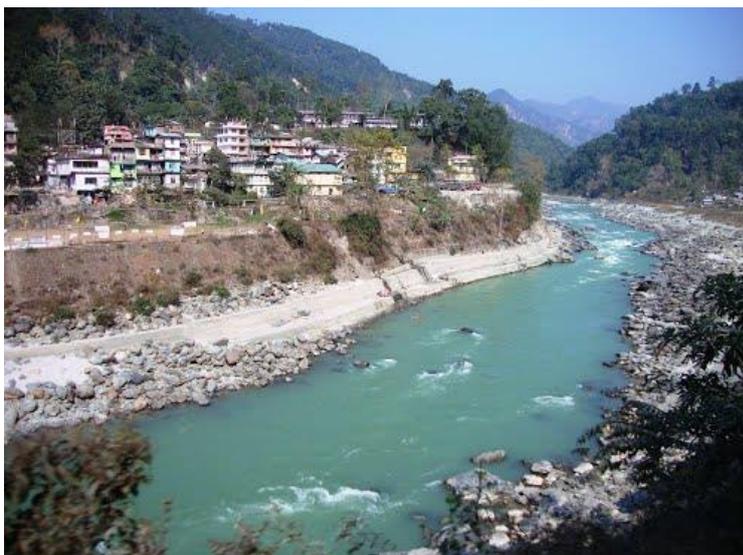
Namchi College

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Leemit and Dichhen, then and now

7. Kalimpong and Dr Graham's Homes school



The Teesta River at Melli

Another incredible spine-jolting jeep ride beginning with 1000m drops at every bend took us from Namchi (1675m elevation), leaving Sikkim at the Melli crossing of the Teesta River (100m) and then up to Kalimpong in north West Bengal (1247m).

An early start meant we arrived at the Deki Lodge which was our stay for 2 nights in time for lunch, and after a quick bite we went to meet the Headmaster of Dr Graham's Homes school. This was an important stop for us, as together with the Dutch Trust we support 13 Sikkimese children boarding at the

school. From England we had tried to arrange an intensive day and half visit, but we had no idea how well this had worked. The Ghorka unrest in Kalimpong District had shut the school from the end of June until the beginning of October. Its sudden re-opening meant that we arranged our visit at very short notice, and the school was now under great pressure to try and reorganise to make up for the lost three months.



Dr Graham's Homes school

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In fact, the school staff were extremely gracious and helpful. The headmaster Neil Monteiro met us on arrival and laid out a schedule which met all our needs. These were: to talk to class teachers and get feedback on the children's behaviour and aptitudes; to visit the various Cottages where the children live and meet the cottage parents; to meet the staff from the Sponsor Office who have a special remit for the sponsored children; and to talk to each child individually. We also wanted to have some fun with them, so we had arranged a lunch for 15 at the Deki Lodge for the following day. Mr Monteiro was occupied for the rest of that day, and in Darjeeling at a conference the next day. Nevertheless he promised to find us when he got back in the early evening - which he did and we were able to go over our visit with him at his home on campus.

So we started off with the class teachers, who came in a group to meet us with the Superintendent, Mr Ganga Raja Tamang. It was explained to us that the Superintendent is the senior representative on Campus of the Dr Graham's Homes (DGH) Board who are based in Kolkata, an essential link between them and the Headmaster. It turns out Mr Raja Tamang is an OGB. This seems to be quite a characteristic of the place - Neil Monteiro is an OGB as is Nichola Pereira, the Sponsor Officer. OGB? - means Old Girl or Boy. We met another OGB in a security queue at Bagdogra airport on our way to Kolkata - it seems to be a badge of honour.

After that we were able to get together with all of the children, who were by then free from class. We gave them letters from sponsors and cards we had brought from Bath. They were all very delighted!



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Magi gave them the challenge of writing a letter that night to their sponsors. Somehow they begged and borrowed something with which and on which to write, and everyone produced them the next day. Phurba produced three!



The next day Nichola Pereira the Sponsor Officer took us off to meet the Cottage Parents. The children call them Auntie and Uncle. This is a feature of Nepalese/Sikkimese culture, that responsible adults are named like this. Naming also goes across the extended family, so if a child says she has been helped by a brother, it may in fact be a cousin several times removed - which can be confusing. The cottage parents were very positive about the children (even noisy teenage girls!), and the children in turn seem very happy.

Then - school's out! The older girls begged to be allowed to change out of school clothes (conceded). DGH provided a school bus to drive us all down to Deki Lodge for lunch, where they had provided plenty for all. After lunch Magi brought out her iPad with lots of photos from DGH and Sikkim Himalayan Academy going back to 2010.



However, all good things come to an end, so then it was back to school where we interviewed each child separately about their academic likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, health and happiness, aspirations for the future and any particular problems. Finally, after a long afternoon Mr Monteiro appeared and invited us back to his home where we briefly met his wife and daughter (and dog), then spent a little while going over what we had found. This winter will be very difficult for the

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school because normally they shut in December, until the new academic year starts in February. In 2017/2018 however they will close for only a few days and then run through to early February in an attempt to make up the lost time. January and February are cold and the school has no heating. The logistics still have to be worked out.

We thanked the Headmaster for the attention he had paid to our visit and the help given by his staff. We wish the school well and feel sure they will cope - after all, in their 117 years history they have weathered many storms.

8. Kolkata with Rha Schering and Kinzangkit

Our final stop was Kolkata. But first we had to get there! Rinschen was very nervous about traffic around Siliguri, because recently some clients of his missed a flight at Bagdogra because of hours of traffic delay. In addition, Jet Airways said we have to allow 2 hrs for security. So we left at 5 am for a midday flight; somebodies' law then dictated there should be no serious traffic so we arrived at 8:30, where we said goodbye to Rinshen who had provided superb service and been a good travelling companion. Despite the warnings there were no serious check-in delays, so we were able to have a nice breakfast. Then the trouble started - our flight was delayed several times and we finally left after 4 pm, having been nearly 8 hours at the airport.



Rinshen and his jeep

Next day we had the morning free, so visited the Belur Math, a religious mission on the west bank of the Hooley River. The temple has architecture dedicated to all the main religions. However no photography allowed! Then at lunchtime we met Rha Tshering and Kinzangkit with her friend KC. Nobody wanted to travel far so we found a local mall near the hotel in Salt Lake City, which offered everything from pizza to Thai chicken through different outlets.



Lunch – Rha, KC, Kinzang and

Magi first met both Rha and Kinzang in 2004, 13 years ago. Now they are at college, although not the same one. Kinzangkit is reading political science honours and is in her second year.

Rha is in his last year of a B.Com in accounting and finance . Next year he plans to do his masters (M.Com) and will then sit the civil service exam. In the winter holidays he is hoping to do an internship in Kolkata with his old friend Nedup, see section 5 about Gangtok. We had brought some

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old photos so there was indeed some reminiscing, but we also talked about prospects for the future, which seem very positive. Rha told us about the 10k run he was planning in support of education.

When she was 8 years old Kinzang wanted to be a teacher, and still thinks that may be an option. Kinsang and KC were very sweet and had bought us some gifts, which was quite unexpected. They had also made and signed a card for us. Exams were looming so we really appreciated the time they took out to see us.



Rha Tshering and Kinzangkit, then and now

We parted early evening so that we could get ready for our morning flight the next day from Kolkata to Delhi and then a change of plane for the last leg to London. From Kolkata to home was to take us 21 hours but we were prepared for that, and it felt like a small price for the opportunity to meet all these children and young adults from Sikkim who are supported through the Dutch and UK trusts.

We must also thank the individuals and companies who give generously so as to make possible an education which would otherwise be denied.

End: