

1. Introduction

It is our objective to visit India every two years. Our last visit was in 2017, so we are glad to be able to say that in October 2019, Duncan and Magi Finlayson were indeed able to travel to India to meet up with young people supported either by The Children of Sikkim or our colleagues in the Dutch trust, Stichting Kinderen van Sikkim. All of these young people had at one time been pupils at Sikkim Himalayan Academy, the primary school set up by Dutch and English volunteers in 2003. The maps show where we visited and explain the geopolitics.

Our itinerary took us to Bangalore (Bengaluru), Kalimpong, Gangtok and Delhi. But before going into the details of the trip, it is worth revisiting where Sikkim is, what makes it special, and why we support education there.



Sikkim is one of the 29 states of India, located in the north east. Before 1975 it was an independent kingdom. Sikkim is the least populous among the Indian states. On the map it forms a northwards projection of India into the Himalaya, bounded to the west by Nepal, to the north by China and to the east by Bhutan.

Sikkim is a creature of its geography. It sits entirely within the Himalayan foothills and the high Himalaya. Northwest Sikkim is dominated by Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain after Everest and K2 at 8586 metres.



The topography is very steep. Gangtok the capital is at 1650m elevation. Deeply incised valleys mean that short distances as the crow flies become long and tortuous journeys on poor roads.

Each monsoon season even the main roads are blocked by landslides, which are cleared by bulldozer as they occur. Because Sikkim is the second smallest and least populous state in India, the GSDP (gross state domestic product) is very small. So the highway authority lacks the resources to carry out full reinstatement, and transport links are poor.

Also geopolitics is important, as shown by the maps. Sikkim sits north of the Siliguri corridor (also known as the chicken's neck), a narrow 22km strip of land which is the only connection between the north eastern states and the rest of India. Wedged between Bangladesh to the south and west and China to the north, the region

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has no access to the sea closer than Kolkata, on the other side of the corridor. Between Sikkim and Bhutan lies the Chumbi Valley, a dagger-like slice of Tibetan territory. A Chinese military advance of less than 130 kilometres (81 mi) would cut off Bhutan, part of West Bengal and all of North-East India, an area containing almost 50 million people. This situation arose during the war between India and China in 1962.

Such strategic importance means that foreigners need a security permit to enter Sikkim, and additional permissions to travel to the north, inhibiting tourism.

How does that affect the people of Sikkim? Wealth is concentrated in the few towns (Gangtok, Mangan, Geyzing, Namchi). Outside of these many exist on subsistence agriculture or labouring. Although state education is free, bad transport links make travelling to school impracticable, and poor families cannot afford to pay for their children to live away from home.

Sikkim Himalayan Academy was set up in 2003 as a residential and day school for the children of these rural families. This was followed by the setting up of the trust, the object of which is to support individual young people through to secondary and higher education. These young people mostly come from four of the tribal ethnicities of Sikkim: Sherpa, Lepcha, Gurung and Bhutia. They are also mostly Buddhist, although various Christian denominations are present in Sikkim.

2. Bengaluru

We started our trip in Bangalore (Bengaluru). We arrived at our hotel early in the morning of the 16th October.

Bengaluru is where Hissey been studying Journalism and Political Science since 2017. We were due to meet her on the 17th, giving us a day to recover from the overnight flight, and jetlag. It was also an opportunity to hunt down an Indian sim card for one of our mobiles, essential in India as roaming charges are horrendous. It took 4 hours to find an Airtel office which could do that. Much bureaucracy later we had the card, but found after activation it didn't work (wrong number entered at the office). Finally, we were up and running.

Hissey is an undergraduate at Mount Carmel College. Mount Carmel ranks number 2 in Karnataka and number 13 in all India for the Arts (India Today, 2018). Now in her final year, Hissey will graduate in March 2020. Her ambition is then to study for and sit the national civil service administration exam, the IAS.

This is possibly the most competitive examination in India, so she will need plenty of determination to succeed. This she does seem to have, planning to self-tutor as she is.



Hissey

3. Dr Graham's Homes, Kalimpong

From Bengaluru we flew 1900 km to Bagdogra in West Bengal, where we were met by Rinchen whose jeep we would be using to get about in West Bengal and Sikkim. With him was Sangdup, who is appointed Guardian of our DGH children by the Dutch and UK Trusts. It took us 4 hours to travel the 80 km to Kalimpong, mostly because of the bad state of the N10 road where it follows the Teesta River: not anywhere blocked, but damaged by landslides in many places during the monsoon season, recently ended.

Dr Graham's Homes (DGH) is on a large site at an elevation of about 1300 metres, overlooking Kalimpong. This compares with Bagdogra at 140 m. Founded in 1900, history is evident everywhere. For a quick overview, visit the [DGH UK Committee site](#).



Ahava



Sports Day Parade

We arrived quite late at Ahava, the DGH guesthouse, built in 1907. Next day we walked up to the main school area, to be surprised to find Sports Day in full swing. Mr Monteiro the Principal explained that because October weather is unpredictable, it has to be called at short notice.

In a way this was fortunate, as we could talk to people we might not otherwise have had time to meet, including:

The Principal, Neil Monteiro

The Headmaster, Pravin Pradhan

The Bursar, Colonel Gogi

Nichola Pereira, Sponsorship Officer

and

We were also very pleased to see GS Gurung, Headmaster of Sikkim Himalayan Academy and his wife Maree (of which more later).

The Principal did us the honour of a public welcome with the Khata, a traditional scarf, adorned with the DGH motif.

In the afternoon we went back to Ahava where it had been arranged we should meet the children. Many thanks to Nichola for making those arrangements.



Magi and khata with
Maree and GS

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Before the children arrived, we had the opportunity to meet two new entrants to DGH from Sikkim Himalayan Academy (SHA). Shown here with Magi, Maree and GS, Mingma is a little girl of six, and Ujal is 5. Both come from rural families with no land, who survive on subsistence labouring.

They are both delightful, and it is good to see SHA continuing to educate disadvantaged children, using Indian volunteers and able to fund itself from within India (we had to withdraw because of problems with visas and the Foreign Contributions Registration Act). Magi helped GS to make the arrangements with DGH.

After GS had left, Maria who manages the guesthouse went into Kalimpong to buy cola, sandwiches and cake so we could have a party! Many thanks to her for that, and for our comfortable stay.



Waiting for the party food to arrive, with girls and boys self-segregating as does happen, Magi showed them a birthday calendar produced by the Dutch Trust at the end of 2018. This has dates but no days of the week. The calendar photographs are of SHA, DGH and young people at college or university, from 2003 through to 2017.

We took the opportunity to give out some extra pocket money, and find out how school is for them. Magi also had the chance to get out the iPad and show pictures of them when they were much younger at SHA – happy times!



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Back row: Sanjay, Rekshan
Middle row: Nima, Tumyang, Nitesh, Phurba, Karena, Pem diki, Sushmita
Front row: Gyurmee, Lakhi, Dawkit, Miksim Inset: Sonem

Of course, we took a group photo! These children are all sponsored by the Trusts or Trust supporters except Nima, who has also been introduced by SHA.

We also made a particular point of talking to Rekshan and Miksim, who are in Year 12, which means that at the end of the year they have to think about further education. Rekshan told us he wants to study Political Science, and Miksim wants to be a nurse. Later in Gangtok we were able to talk to our OGBs (old girls and boys) about their experiences, and they promised to help. Also DGH has links with colleges in Kolkata. Gloria Potter, who is responsible for the children sponsored by Dr Graham's UK Committee, was able to give us details. In addition, after our visit Nichola Pereira ran a two-day careers course for Year XII children. Rekshan then showed interest in Tourism Management.

Because of Sport's Day and the weekend we were not able to engage with teachers the same way we did during our 2017 trip. However we did get general feedback that the girls are maturing and taking studies seriously, whilst some of the boys are being somewhat adolescent, the situation with the girls two years ago! Magi talked to the boys about this in a group, stressing how fortunate they are, and to make the best of it.

On Sunday we were hoping to see Nichola but that was not possible. We took a walk in the school grounds, and met the children again at Ahava; then lunch before heading off for Gangtok with Sangdup in Rinchen's jeep.

4. Gangtok and the students

In Gangtok we stayed at the Bamboo Grove Retreat, which we used in 2017. It is quite close to MG Marg, the main street, but maybe 150 metres higher. The distance by road is some way, but it is possible to take a shortcut via precipitous steps which means it is less than 10 minutes on foot.

Here we said goodbye to Sangdup, who has responsibilities essential to the childrens' education at DGH. At start of term he has to organise them getting together at Jorethang. Some of the children travel some distance to get there, so timing is fraught. Then they hire two jeeps and travel to Kalimpong. At the end of each term – the reverse. He is also the first point of contact if DGH has a problem with a pupil, and he looks after various of their needs.

So our thanks indeed to Sangdup.



Duncan, Sangdup and Magi



The next day, by now the 21 October, we caught up with the students at the Baker's Café on MG Marg.

Magi would have first met these young people in 2004, 15 years previously.

The Hindu festival of Diwali was coming up on Sunday 27 October. Sikkim, although essentially Buddhist, celebrates this like everywhere else. Several students had come back to their families for the holiday, travelling locally to Gangtok to meet up with us.

These students all want to help support their families and communities once they start earning, but they are also keen to help other younger students. So Rha said he would talk to Hissey about tutoring options for the IAS exam. Nimphuti will help Miksim apply for a government grant to attend nursing college.

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Back row: Duncan, Magi
Front row: Nedup, Nimphuti, Leemit, Dichhen and Rha Tschering

Nedup has finished his undergraduate studies in Gangtok and wants to do a Masters. Nimphuti has finished a three-year course in General Nursing and Midwifery in Bengaluru, and wants to go on to do a BSc. Leemit's course is in Mass Media. Dichhen is in his last year studying Sociology at Namchi College. Whilst Rha Tschering is now in a Master's Course in marketing at St Xaviers college in Kolkata. We were also hoping to meet Kinzangkit, but she had to go back to Kolkata.

After a late lunch together at The Dragon Wok, we said our goodbyes outside the Bamboo Grove. In the evening we were invited to visit Loden Lepcha's home in Gangtok. Loden was the director of a small school Mayel Lyang Academy in Dzongu, near Sangdup's homestay, which was also supported by the Trusts before it shut because of a problem with building instability. Miksim, for example, was educated there before she moved to Dr Graham's. It was good to see Loden and his wife Nimkit again - they gave us a great supper with the family.



Loden and his two
younger daughters

5. Delhi

The next day after a long jeep ride, including a period of dead stop through an accident on the mountain road, we reached Bagdogra and flew to Delhi. The plan was to meet Topden Sherpa who was flying into Delhi to meet us. Topden was a pupil at SHA then moved to the tribal school at Tashiding, West Sikkim. He scored 96% in his Year 10 exams, and as a result was sent on a Sikkim government programme to a sixth form college in Bihar state. However that programme was withdrawn at the end of his first year, meaning he had to complete his second year at Sir Tashi Namgyal Senior Secondary School in Gangtok. But there was no government support for living away from home, the cost of which was more than his family could possibly afford. So GS, Principal at Sikkim Himalayan Academy put him in touch with us. We supported him at Secondary School and in preparing for the NEET, a very competitive nationwide exam for scholarship entrance to medical school. He did very well (17th in Sikkim), but did not qualify for the scholarship. However he did achieve a subsidised place at biomedical college study for a BSc in optometry. The college is in Dehradun, capital of Uttarakhand state (formerly Uttaranchal), north of Delhi. For its location see the maps at the beginning of this newsletter.

Topden had exams in two weeks' time, and had missed some college through illness. So he needed to spend the minimum time away, and his plan was to fly down at 7:30 in the evening and back at 11:00 the next morning. His evening flight was delayed so we never did meet that night, but got together for a 6:30 breakfast.

We had three hours together which was enough to re-establish the relationship (Magi last saw Topden in 2008), and iron out many details of how our support was going to work in practice. We were very impressed with this young man. Next time we hope to visit him in Dehradun, where there are apparently two other students from Sikkim.



Uttarakhand state is mostly in the foothills of the Himalaya or the Greater Himalaya, and includes Nanda Devi (25,646 feet - 7,817 metres), which is the second highest peak in India after Kanchenjunga. So one might think it is like Sikkim. However in the far south are some dusty plains, which is where Dehradun sits at 450 m. So Topden is acclimatising to a hot, humid summer but a relatively cold winter. He says the food is terrible (by which he means different, we think).

We were sad to hear from Topden that he suffers from racist comments, because he is one of few students at the university from Sikkim or Darjeeling District, whose facial characteristics are a bit like the Chinese. This is a problem we had heard of on our last visit in 2017, especially from Samjyor, travelling on the Delhi Metro. Also one experienced by the group of students we met in Gangtok. We hope that if more students from Sikkim enter universities across India, the problem might be mitigated in a small way.

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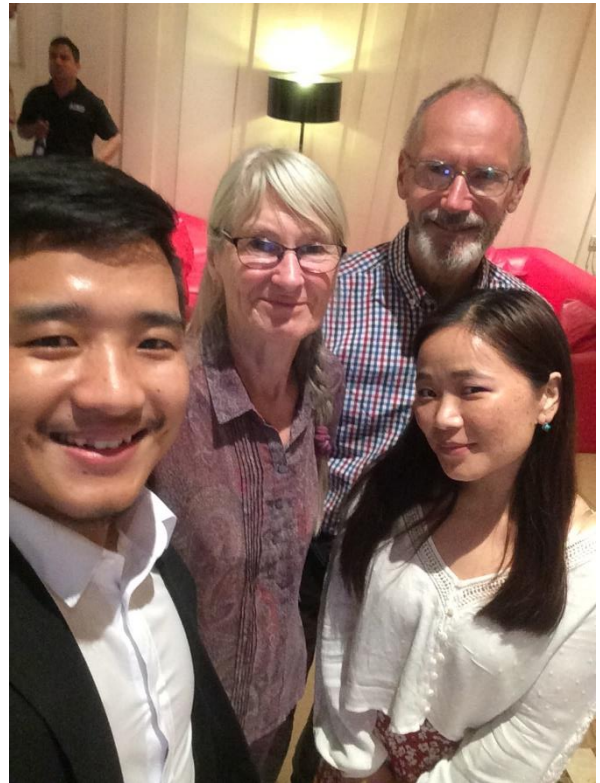


That evening Kursongkit and Samjyor came to our hotel and we were able to take them out for dinner. Samjyor is now working as a lawyer, having finished a law degree in 2018. Kursongkit is in her last year of a Master's in Early Childhood Care and Education at Ambedkar University in Delhi (Faculty of Developmental Psychology). She is now working full time on her final thesis.

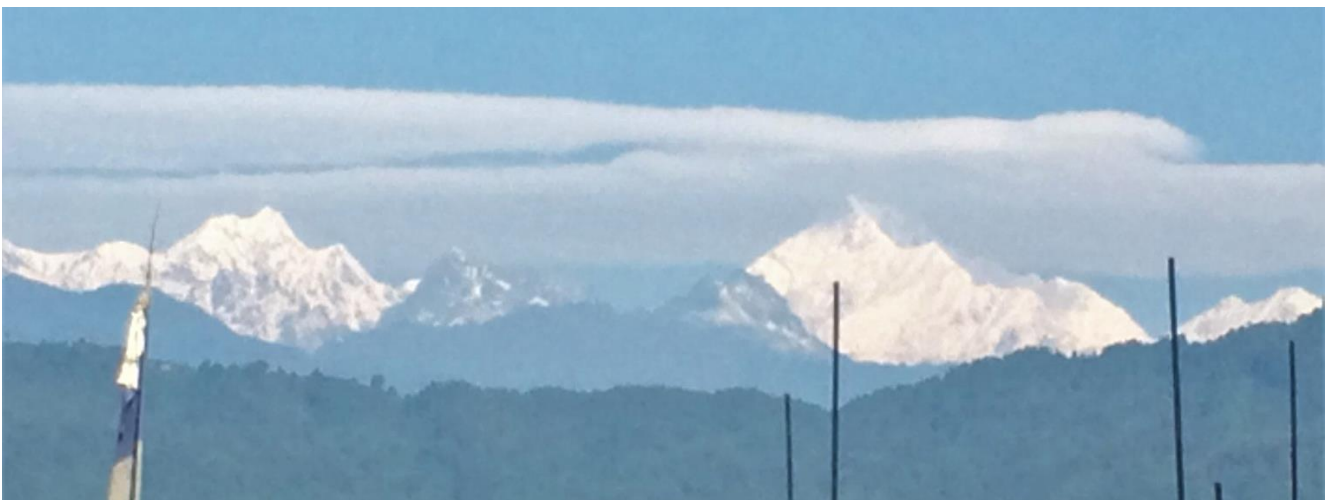
Last time we met Samjyor he was still a student. Now he is working, he has changed a lot, at least outwardly. We gather that he is in some kind of articles, which means working very long hours for not much pay (as it does in the UK).

It turns out that he and Kursongkit are cousins, which we did not know. They are planning to visit the Netherlands in 2020 after Kursongkit has finished her Master's. Perhaps we will have a chance to see them then.

We said goodbye, then packed up and left for our early morning (01:30) flight from Delhi airport to London Heathrow.



A fitting way to end, perhaps, is with this image of Kanchenjunga taken from the Bamboo Grove in Gangtok, which reminds us of what a mysterious place Sikkim is, and how special its people.



Our thanks to everyone who helped us in our visit, especially Nichola from DGH for making arrangements, Rinchen for driving and Sangdup for looking after the DGH children as Guardian. We must also thank the individuals and companies who give generously, so making possible an education which would otherwise be denied. And lastly, our love to all the children and young people we met, and to those we were not able to see on this trip.

End: