

Magi Finlayson's trip Oct/Nov 2010

Hello everyone or should I say Nameste!

I arrived in Delhi without too much trouble, Delhi has made a lot of effort to beautify the city, probably because of the Commonwealth games, but it is a bit like when a small child puts on her mother's makeup, not quite successful! Although I must say they have done a good job on the airports. Since my first visit here 8 years ago there have been huge changes, some of them are even in the right direction. Still, when you hit the streets there is the same colourful, noise and clamour, sadly also the same squalor. Traffic always amazes me by the speed and closeness that they drive, it is more like being in dodgem car with horns when at any moment you might be surprised by an elephant.

I did have quite a few problems when I got to Siliguri and my plans were put in disarray. Still, arriving at the school was lovely and the next morning the scenery and the welcome by the children was touching. The children are all well apart from the usual coughs and colds. At the moment they are all revising for their end of year exams. The exams start on the 22 November. While you in UK were all busy celebrating Guy Fawkes we were celebrating Divali. In fact there was a four day holiday and quite a few children went home for the celebrations. In school we played games and went to a village show where various groups performed colourful regional dances and songs, each group were rewarded with a little brown envelope with money which had previously been collected from the local big wigs who were invited upon the podium and served tea and snacks. The teachers from SHA were all treated as big wigs! There were also lots of fireworks, but Indian style, which meant that they were completely disorganized and frankly rather dangerous. Still we all survived.

The next night we had a bonfire and sang songs. Saturday was Children's Day. This is all over India and means that they get spoilt and have lots of fun. The day started with a special breakfast of roti, subji (cooked spicy vegetables) and pakora. Then we organized lots of different team games where they inevitably got very excited and made lots of noise cheering on their team. Then followed tea and biscuits. Next the teachers performed for them. I told a story with puppets I had made and the women teachers sang two traditional songs and then one did a beautiful dance. The highlight for the children was when the two Uncles (cooks) and the male teacher did a break dance. This was closely followed by lunch which they ate outside all together. It consisted of subji, boiled egg rolled in something and fried, panneer and peas and popadom. Believe it or not they still had room for second helpings, chocolate biscuits, lollies and fruit. The rest of the day was quiet.

The weather here at the moment is quite cold, especially at night, hence all the hats you see in the pictures. It has mostly been sunny during the day but also some heavy rain. My time has been taken up with meetings although I have also been teaching, getting to know the new children since I last came and making friends with all the old pupils. It is also good to reacquaint myself with all the staff. I have a big room this time, it has two beds, wooden with pads for a mattress and an arm chair and coffee table, luxury. The toilet is still a hole in the ground in a shed in the garden though. The family I live with are early risers, probably because of the cock whose alarm is set for 5, still bedtime is early too as once it is dark and the children are in bed there is not much to do and it is warm in bed. They keep chickens who have been free range until recently but now they are contained in a bamboo run, except the one with tiny chicks. This does make me wonder what the old grandma will do with her days as her primary task had been to shoo the chickens away from the house and kitchen. Next week I am going to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, to renew my permit, see our lawyer and Government Education department on school business, and go up to North Sikkim to visit the other school we support.

After the exams there is a weekend when we have a Cultural Display put on by the children and I have some visitors coming from Dr Graham's School in Kalimpong where seven of our older and brighter children have moved to. It is a boarding school with a very good reputation and we have been lucky to find seven sponsors for these children.

At school there are, of course, lessons, mealtimes, prayer times, private study times and play times. The kids wear school uniform which is washed once a week, then out of school they have play clothes which are also washed once a week after they have had their weekly bath. You can imagine how much time all this washing and bathing takes and it is all done by the teachers. It is often wet and drying clothes is quite a problem. The children also like to go out for walks and if they can forage for fruit and nuts so much the better, they eat some very dubious things with no visible ill effects. The local communities are very poor, mostly small time farmers who farm the land they can terrace from the mountain side. The lucky farmers plough with cows but others do it all by hand. One cash crop they grow here is cardamom. The houses are made mostly of wood or woven bamboo and they have metal roofs. There are some buildings made from brick and concrete. The houses have no heating inside and kitchens are in little outside shacks. Toilets and wash rooms are in shacks too and there is no running hot water. If you want to travel you go by shared jeep or there is a bus once a day. Jeeps are always crowded and slow and they take a long time to get anywhere as the roads are very bad and they zig zag up and down the mountain sides.





