

**CHILDREN OF SIKKIM  
NEWSLETTER FEBRUARY-MARCH 2011  
VISIT JANNIE AND MIEKE**

**Our stay**



We enjoyed our stay. The weather this time of the year (the end of the winter) was mostly sunny and warm during the day but – especially the first two weeks – quite cold at the night. We found it too cold in the class rooms and introduced electric heaters in the school. They are still a marvel to the children who have never seen – or felt! – such a thing before. After we bought them, we realised that at home the family huddles around a fire in the middle of the kitchen.

We talked at length with the new principal, G.S. Gurung, and the other members of staff, especially GS' wife Maree, about all matters concerning the school. They seem to be coping well.

We also spent a lot of time with the kids: playing memory and Uno (a card game with instant success and till now unknown to them) and taking them for walks. There is a new walking path in Bariakhop that takes you to a hanging bridge. On a (relatively hot) day we walked the path and stopped at a stream where the children took a bath in the ice cold water.



We bought the children new clothes: especially sweaters as some of them had none, despite the cold (we also knitted two ourselves), and pyjama's and trousers. The problem with clothes is that often the children leave for home in the holidays with all their (nice) clothes and return to school in rags. Of course they are asked not to leave their clothes at home, but we also understand their problem: they have lots of brothers and sisters who have nothing to wear.

Going home for the children for the holidays is not always a joy. There are always a few heartbreaking stories to tell. Buddha Maya (class 2) returned five days late for school after the winter holiday as her father resents letting her go, even though we pay her jeep fare (she provides cheap labour ...). Padam (class 2) doesn't really like to go home in the holidays to his father who is quite old and always drunk. And when he returns to school, they have to scrub him twice to clean the dirt from his body after which his feet turn out to have open wounds because they are so dry. PhuNorbu (class 3) is one of triplets. His father died in a bus accident before the children were born. His brother and sister stay in an orphanage. His mother has a government job cutting stones along the road (terrible

hard work) six days a week for 100 rupees (approx. 1.50 euro) per day. PhuNorbu stays with his mother during the holidays.

We changed the system for heating water in the bathroom; we replaced the dangerous heating coil that was used for heating water for the children's bath by two six liter electric water cookers.

We met with the owner of the land adjacent to our current location (for which we signed a purchase agreement in 2009 but cannot acquire yet for several reasons – see elsewhere in this newsletter) and offered to pay a year's interest because of the delay. The owner accepted this, as he did last year.

## Staff

At the end of last year, one of our founding fathers and principal, Jamyang Buthia, left SHA. In his place we have appointed G.S. Gurung as principal. G.S. is a teacher who has been with us for seven years. Two new teachers joined the team, both from Bariakhop: Rubina (who last year worked as a volunteer for SHA) and Rabin (the brother of Bhirka, about whom you can read elsewhere in this newsletter). Rabin joined on a trial basis. He looks after sports (he is a marathon runner himself) and seems a most agreeable person. Rubina teaches mostly in nursery.



The other teachers who have



been with SHA now for a considerable period of time are Maree, the wife of G.S. and future mother of twins (!), Lopen, our monk teacher, Sumitra and Anamika.

Upon our return in Amsterdam, we were informed that Anamika will be leaving us. She has found a teaching job in a government school. Sumitra will cover for G.S, when he is absent, which will – we fear – be the case regularly as there is still a battle going on with Indian bureaucracy (see elsewhere in this newsletter). All teachers also have their hostel duties. This means that during the week they stay at the school day and night and are responsible for the welfare of the children and everything that is going on in the hostel (bedwetting for instance ...).

The last weekend of February, all of the teachers – except G.S., Lopen and Sumitra – went to Gangtok to sit admission exams which, if they pass, will allow them to follow a correspondence course to obtain a higher teaching degree (that Sumitra already has). They will have to wait for months for the results.

We still have the same two cooks: Hasta ("Uncle") and Tularam (left in the picture), who prepare three tasteful and healthy meals a day and – with some guidance – keep their renovated kitchen clean and organised.

Generally, two to four volunteers from abroad work at SHA to support the teaching staff. During our stay, two fantastic Dutch girls who had just finished their training as a teacher



(Montessori) were doing a great job: Beau and Eeke. Towards the end of our visit Elisabeth from the United States arrived.

### Student changes

Because of a shortage in class rooms (and the small number of students), we decided that there would not be a class 5 this year. We still hope (expect ...) to be able to start the construction of a new school building and hostel in a year or so, but this year the few class 5 students who were left are attending the local government school. Topden is the only one of them who stays in the hostel. Sonam (class 6) and Samten (class 7) also stay in the hostel. These two boys went to a sports academy in Rangpo last year. This seemed a great opportunity for them – training to become a professional cricket player while attending a regular school, all paid for by the Cricket Association ... However, it turned out a nightmare. When we picked them up to return “home”, they turned out to be the only two cricket-players-to-be left; we found them with their sparse belongings sitting on a huge empty cricket field. They seem happy to be back and we are happy to have them back, especially because Rinchen, who has been looking after the about 10 younger boys in the boys hostel in the past few years, hopes to be leaving for a better school in Soreng where science – his interest – is the main subject and taught at a higher level. He is now sitting his class 10 exams and if he has good results he will be accepted in this school. There is a fair chance he will make it as he was first in his class last year ...

Both Nitesh (class 5) and Lakhpa (class 5) have a grandfather in Bariakhop who required them to stay home to help. This is sad, especially for Nitesh as we had found a way to help him with his dyslexia and he was at SHA from the very beginning in 2003. Lakpha we would have loved to offer a place in the hostel as he is a bright student and could have profited from studying under guidance.

Sangay (class 3) left as his parents wanted him home – he is an only child.

The good news is that we also have 13 new students: 11 in nursery and two in class 1. They are a happy bunch!



### Dr. Grahams Homes

It started four years ago with four bright but shy boys: Samjor, Rha Tsering, Nedup and Chezang. They all do extremely well at this prestigious school. Last year they were among the top 5 students of their class and they have become a lot more outgoing!



This year Samjor sat his class 10 exams. He passed with results of 85% on average and is now continuing school in the science stream to prepare for (the equivalent of) his A-levels. Unfortunately, Chezang decided to leave because he wishes to opt for a government grant for junior engineer studies for which only the five top students from Sikkim are selected. He felt that the social pressure he experienced at Dr. Grahams and the many strikes in the area around Kalimpong that make travelling back and forth to Dr. Grahams sometimes

impossible, did not allow him to focus fully on his studies. He now attends the New Light Academy in Namchi (Sikkim).

Since last year also three girls study at Dr. Grahams: Hissey, Lemit and Nim Phuti. Lemit and Nim Phuti only joined the school in the course of the year but managed to get promoted to the next class nevertheless. We are pleased that we are able to give the same opportunities now to both boys and girls to further their studies and we are grateful to their sponsors who make this possible.

This year two more students from SHA, Dichen (a boy) and Pemkit (a girl), have started to study at Dr. Grahams.

As SHA only provides education up to class 5, we try to find appropriate schools for all students who have finished class 5 to further their studies. A number of students attend the local government school, but this cannot be considered a good school by any standard. A few students (Tshering Dorjee started this year) go to a tribal school near Tashiding, a school with a similar status as SHA. This year our new principal, G.S., will investigate other schools where we can send our students, some of which recommended by the Rotary Club in Gangtok. We are looking for good quality schools, preferably also schools where technical skills or other more practical skills can be learned as – not surprisingly – not all students of SHA are of academic level.



Dr. Grahams Homes is an excellent school (ranking 21 among the top boarding schools in India), but expensive and not suitable for all.

### **Formalities and the Smile Foundation**

As reported in previous newsletters, any organisation in India which receives funds from abroad requires registration with the FRCA. Since 2007 (!) we have tried to obtain this registration ourselves. It turned out to be impossible. Fortunately, however, we have found a local partner, the Smile Foundation. The Smile Foundation is an Indian NGO, incorporated in 2003, with goals that are quite similar to ours: providing education to the underprivileged children of India. The Smile Foundation is registered with the FCRA and in the future the money for SHA will be transferred by the Dutch foundation “Children of Sikkim” to the Smile Foundation who will then transfer the funds to the bank account of SHA. The Smile Foundation will be able to help us in other respects as well, for instance with the supervision of the construction of the new school building and hostel and can advise us on the long term sustainability of our project. We were introduced to the Smile Foundation by Veronica Uhl (who used to work for Ned4Kids, an NGO in the Netherlands). We paid a visit to Santanu Mishra, one of the founding fathers of the Smile Foundation and still one of its trustees, in



Delhi, and were quite impressed by the Smile Foundation's mission and activities. You can read more about the Smile Foundation on [www.smilefoundation.org](http://www.smilefoundation.org). During our stay at SHA, Partha Roy, the director of the Smile Foundation for North



India, came to SHA for an assessment. He seemed quite pleased with our small but well run school and eager to take us on: ours will be the first project supported by the Smile Foundation in Sikkim. On our way back, we met again with Santanu and his lawyer, Pratap Ray, and his assistant, Meena Batra. On 30 April 2011, the board of the Smile Foundation has formally approved the association with our project SHA.

Once we can transfer money to Sikkim in a legal manner, we should also finally be able to acquire the land. However, we need to have a solid local legal entity (NGO) to acquire the land (as only Sikkimese nationals can acquire land in Sikkim) and our lawyer in Gangtok, Bhaskar Pradhan, whom we met during our stay, advised us that it will take at least one year to get a local NGO registered ... Due to Indian bureaucracy and a very busy Minister of Law who has not only his political and governmental business to attend to but, according to Bhaskar, is also a very religious man and hence also has lots of religious functions to attend ...

Bhaskar will also – together with G.S.– make sure SHA will be properly registered as a school. Until now we only had a temporary registration. Again, this will take time and a lot of visits to the Ministry of Education in Gangtok for which G.S. will have to travel to the capital – five hours each way. We also paid a visit to the Rotary Club in Gangtok. We will keep the contacts warm as the members of the Rotary are all respected members of the local society and may be able to help us in various ways. They have given us names of reputable schools for further education of our SHA students.

### **Staff meeting**

In the last week of our visit we had a meeting with the staff: teachers and cooks. We informed them about the status of the registration of the school and the Smile Foundation. We also suggested that a monthly visit by the village nurse be arranged. To visit the nurse one now has to climb 40 minutes up the mountain while the clinic used to be 10 minutes down the road. The nurse may also be able to perform regular eye sight checks. Upon our return home, we received an e-mail from GS that regular visits by the nurse to SHA had been arranged.

The principal also asked us whether some of the teachers could follow a first aid course. An idea which we support wholeheartedly.

We once more encouraged the teachers to speak English with the volunteers and to use the computer to develop their computer skills.

### **Dzongu**

As usual we also paid a visit to the Mayel Lyang Academy in Dzongu (North Sikkim). In Dzongu a volunteer from Hungary, Eszter, was helping the staff out for a period of one month. In Dzongu we met the twenty children sponsored by us. They all stay in the hostel and the younger children attend the Mayel Lyang Academy set up by Loden. Approximately 10 of the children now go to the local government school. Two of "our" boys, Rapgay and Dawa, are currently school captain and vice school captain. Pema (who skipped a class last year) and Ponalmit are excellent students and we will have to find a better school for them. Loden will investigate the possibilities, together with G.S.

For most of the children we brought letters from their sponsors, a gesture that was much appreciated. All children wrote letters back. We bought all of them nice warm hooded sweaters.

There is a new principal, Sandeep, while Pim Phuti looks after the hostel and seemed more in charge to us than Sandeep during our visit ...

The cow we bought for the school last year was paid for but has not yet arrived. Three new toilets and a washroom (much needed) are under construction. The second and last day of our visit we were guests of honour when the children of the school performed traditional dances, songs and one modern Hindu disco dance.



### Success stories

Two of our former students from the very first beginning, Enjay and Sangdup, are finishing their studies. This year, Enjay will obtain a BA in Agriculture from a university in Dehradun and she will return to Dzongu to find a job, unless she succeeds a science test in April and receives a government grant to study on for her Masters.

Sangdup is studying for an MA in Commerce in Mumbai and has one more year to go.

Both have promised to help other children with their education once they have found a well paid job.



### Bhirka

Bhirka crossed our path a few years ago when he had to sell his last possession, a cow, to pay his medical bills. He was paralysed after a karate fight and we found him sitting in a bed in a house high up the mountain. His family takes care of him. Bhirka is only 35 years old. We suggested he take up his studies again and although progress is slow, this year he will sit exams for his final three class 10 subjects. Surprisingly he is a very happy person who is always in a good mood and grateful for our visits and everything else: a bit of money to pay for his exams, a new sweater and vitamin pills.



### Cultural programme

Last but not least: as always the staff and students of SHA prepared a cultural programme in honour of our visit. It is obvious that they enjoy doing it and we enjoy watching it – as do the local parents; for them it is the main event of the year in Bariakhop where nothing much is going on. One of the stars of the programme was Dimphuti, a girl who had joined SHA only this year.

And a few days before our departure Lakhi, a new Lepcha girl, arrived who seemed to be quite happy to be with us from day one. The story goes on: there are always new children who need a place where they can study and live and they find a new home at SHA in Bariakhop.

[www.sikkimhimalayanacademy.org](http://www.sikkimhimalayanacademy.org)