

**Children of Sikkim
Newsletter March 2012
Visit Jannie and Mieke**

Website: www.sikkim-himalayan-academy.co.uk

Introduction

Later than usual this is the newsletter with the report of our visit to Sikkim in March of this year. Our mission this time: to finalise the registration of our school in Bariakhop, to find a way to get money inside the country in a legal manner and to solve the problem of volunteers (three volunteers were sent away last October because Indian law does not allow



them to work as a volunteer on a tourist visa, while this had been allowed for years). Once we got back home quite a few (of these) matters were still unsolved or unclear and that is why we waited with this newsletter. As always, it was good to be there. To see all the children with their happy faces, the older children who develop into "human beings", the teachers and other members of staff who dedicate their lives to make our projects a success. And also – for the first time – a number of

members of the new school committee of SHA that has been installed among other reasons to enable the definite registration of the school. The people we met seem capable and dedicated; they see SHA as their school and feel responsible.

More and more we get the feeling that our projects – supported by local people and (local) authorities – are useful and contribute to improving the education of the underprivileged children of Sikkim. But the battle with Indian bureaucracy is not easy and ongoing. But we are determined to win!

Unfortunately it turned out that after the winter holidays a number of children did not return to SHA. For most of them (apart from Ongchuk, see later in this newsletter) there seemed to be a good reason, but it is always sad if children disappear from our lives.



Smile Foundation



We started in Delhi with a visit to Smile Foundation. The first day of our stay in Delhi was the Holi Festival. As people throw paint at each other during the festivities, we decided to spend the day in the garden and on a terrace of a nice hotel in Delhi. The next day we met our contacts of Smile Foundation. Prior to our talks we visited one of Smile's projects near Delhi, a free school with 500 children, 250 in the morning and 250 in the afternoon, to make good use of the building. We

spoke with the principal and two members of the school committee – old army men – and it

was interesting to exchange experiences for the first time with people who run a similar project as ours. We came to the conclusion that we are not doing too badly (the manner in which we select our students, the salaries we pay, etc.). In the afternoon we discussed at length the way in which our association with Smile Foundation would take shape. In the meantime it has become clear that for the time being we will cooperate with Jupiter Academy, an associated partner of Smile Foundation and also an Indian NGO. Among other things Jupiter Academy runs a school in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, for 1,100 rural and slum children (70% girls and 30% boys). The money for SHA will be transferred through the FCRA-account of Jupiter Academy and as a result will enter the country in a legal manner.

Sikkim Himalayan Academy (SHA)



The children, just a few

We hear about a boy of five years of age who came with his father from the mountain opposite the school, a two hours walk. When the father heard there was no place for his son Thandup, he burst into tears. His wife had moved in with the neighbor and had left the couples' children – Thandup and a baby of 10 months – with him. In a hut with a leaking roof. The poor man is a day labourer (earns max. euro 1.50 a day) and does not own any land or cattle. When we heard that one of the new children got promoted to LKG we decided there was a place for Thandup after all and got message to his father. When father and son arrived the father was all smiles and had done his utmost to dress his son properly, with brand new sport shoes. Until the moment he arrived at SHA, Thandup barely had had any contact with other children, but after one day only, he was dictating the rules at school with his sweet smile and tantrums! As an exception to the rule we gave the father some money to repair the roof.



Nisha is a girl from the village in class 4. Her father died three months ago. He went to work in the coal mines of Assam and came back with malaria. He died three days later. Just like that. Leaving behind a wife with one boy and three daughters. Apart from the milk of one cow she does not have any income. How will she cope we ask? Apparently she started drinking. Alcohol abuse is a big problem in Sikkim. We suggest taking Nisha into the hostel to relieve the mother of one mouth to feed but there is no room. The hostel is too crowded already. In the end Maree and the staff decide to take her in as the situation at home will also be bad for her studies. But she has to sleep on the floor. Nisha is very happy.

Then one evening the father of Pratiksha arrived. She is a girl who stayed at our school for several years and now attends class 5 of the local government school. The father claimed that the former principal had promised him that Pratiksha could go to Dr. Grahams. He did not believe G.S., the new principal, when he denied that such a promise had been made - he wanted to hear from us. We explained that not everyone can go to Dr. Grahams as first of all this school is not suitable for each child and moreover we need a separate sponsor for each child. That is clear but the real reason why he has come to see us is the following. He got notice from the local government that he has to leave his rented house at the marketplace. This means the family has to move back from where they came from, Burmek, where Pratiksha can't go to school as the school year has already started (an Indian rule is that you can't swap schools during the year). As a result she may lose a whole year. Can't we take her in? That is really impossible but we start thinking of solutions. Grandparents maybe? Both are drunks. No other relatives. Renting a room in the village? Too dangerous for a young girl. Still pending, but the problem might be solved when Phurkit moves to Soreng. And so far they have not been evicted from their house ...



Phurkit is now doing her class 10 exams and would like to continue her studies at the government school in Soreng, which is much better than the one in Bariakhop. She will only know the results of her exams in June, but she is making plans. She will need good marks to get admitted to the school in Soreng. If her marks are not good enough, she will return to SHA and continue her studies from there.

Healthcare

Last year we asked to arrange for the village nurse to pass by every month for a check up. This was impossible for various reasons but instead the whole school was seen by the nurse three times last year when she passed by the government school in Bariakhop. When the children are down with something more serious than a simple cold, they are taken to a private doctor in Sombaria (a village nearby) or, if necessary, the child doctor in the hospital in Namchi (more than three hours in a shared jeep). When we arrived in Bariakhop, Sonam Palden turned out to have jaundice. Because this is rather infectious, he was sent home (fortunately his family is not too bad off). Upon our return in the Netherlands we learned that more cases of jaundice had been discovered. The child doctor in Namchi had advised G.S. to send all the children home for a period of at least 10 days to stop the disease from spreading further. Since the end of April all children are back at school.

School committee

We already mentioned that SHA now has a school committee. The committee exists of 10 members, among whom G.S. and the other members of the teaching staff who were born in Sikkim. The school committee is responsible for all school affairs. We met a number of them. With two of the members we spoke some more. Both of them are contractors who built the



local government school. A building that survived last year's earthquake without a scratch. Together with the two of them and a local builder (who came recommended by an Australian who had a school built near Kalimpong) we had a look at the land where our new buildings will arise and also at the drawings that our previous principal had made by an architect. The two contractors appear to be rather professional and we have faith that they will be able to

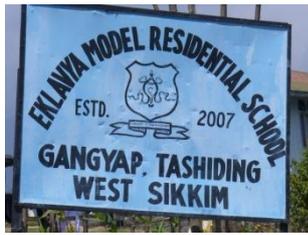
supervise the construction activities – that should be able to commence in the not too distant future – in a good manner.

Cultural programme – 'mask dance'

Of course – as each year – the students of SHA had prepared a cultural programme for us, which was performed on an afternoon for us as guests and the parents who live in the village and other local people. The special even this year was the 'mask dance' ('muhukula dance'), taught by Lopen, our monk teacher and accompanied by a small orchestra of monks from the monastery on the hill behind the school. In this dance the positive beats the negative.



The Tribal School – Eklavya Model Residential School



As from this year five students from SHA are studying in this school and as we had not seen the two girls who went there four years ago since, we decided it was a nice idea to visit. So far we had not done so as the journey is long and there are no shared jeeps to the school. Other reasons to go to Gyangyap where the school is located are Chezang and Ongchuk. Chezang is a drop-out from

Dr. Grahams and one of the brightest students, Ongchuk is a young boy who simply did not come back after the winter holidays. When we stopped at Chezang's place a younger brother told us that he had left for the hospital in Tashiding where his father or grandfather had been taken. By means of a shortcut it is a 1 ½ hours walk so maybe we can catch him on our way back. The girls who are studying at the Tribal School, Kunsongkit and Kunzangkit, look great.



Kursongkit is now doing class 10 exams, has chosen bioscience for her class 11 and 12 and wants to study medicine after college. She is first in class and the pride of the school.

Kunzangkit is younger and doing fine in class 9. The principal tells us he is extremely happy



with our children as they all count as the brightest. The three boys will arrive later that week but on our way back we see Tshering Dorjee, together with his guardian who happens to be the principal of a brand new girls school, that will be set up 10 km from Tashiding. Free of costs like the Tribal School. Good to know as some of our girls could be eligible, next year (e.g. Bawana and Benita). The parents of one of our students, Sonamki, who run a shop near the school, invited us for lunch

and we sit nicely in the sun, eating momo's. We also met the fathers of Lemit (who is studying at Dr. Grahams) and Karma who give us large bags of sweets for the school. Very touching as we know they are very poor. Just in case we miss Chezang on the way back, we leave a note and money for a jeep with the principal who promises to contact him. And indeed, when we stop again at his house, he now seems to have gone to the hospital in Geyzing where his (grand)father has been transferred to. He certainly won't be back that day. Then we stop at Ongchuk's place, very far down the valley. Ongchuk is miserable and does not want to come with us, for unclear reasons. His father recently died and his mother has left him with some old relatives. There also is a brother but not present. We hope he can convince Ongchuk to return to Buriakop. Also because of an unattended broken ankle that seems to grow in the wrong direction ...

Dzongu - Mayel Lyang Academy

The Mayel Lyang Academy is a school in North-Sikkim where 21 children are sponsored by us. Jannie receives a warm welcome by the children when she arrives. Not many foreigners pass by as for this part of Sikkim one needs yet another permit, one that lasts only five days. The only ones who visited recently are Eszter, a Hungarian volunteer and Kerry, an



Australian anthropologist. Kerry has sponsored two children whose parents lost their houses during the earthquake and Eszter introduced birthday parties and making cakes, with real icing. The kitchen that is being built looks impressive and Loden explains that it is going to have two floors. So far he only has got half the money needed. The money is donated by one of our sponsors, Sjoke, but as usual he is very optimistic. For now the builders (among whom also a woman) are very happy with my arrival as I bring part of the money. The children look fine and are, as usual, very happy with the new clothes that I bought for them. The principal is not around as his father is in hospital in Gangtok but still they manage to stage a cultural event. Currently there are 49 children at school (28 of whom in the hostel). When asked, Loden promises to admit more children once the building is finished.



Dr. Grahams Homes



While Jannie was in Dzongu, I (Mieke) paid a visit to the children who study at Dr. Grahams Homes. I arrived on Saturday together with G.S. That day we were able to see the children for a while, but there was hardly any staff around as it was a holiday. The next day I would be able to meet the principal. On Sunday I attended the weekly church service (which was held under a temporary roof in the open air as the church – like many other buildings – was damaged by the earthquake last year). It was an experience! After the service I met Mrs. Hilda Peacock (an Indian lady of about 60 years of age, dressed in a sari) – I loved her. I spoke with her mainly about the future studies of Samjor who is doing his class 12 exams next year and who will be the first SHA-student who will go to college and university. A milestone for us – and of course for him. He will go to college in Delhi to do a Bsc. Hon. Mrs. Peacock promised me that she will help him to get admitted to the right college for him. Samjor actually wanted to be a *chef* but I felt he could do better after having studied at this good and rather expensive school with great marks and, in Mrs.



Peacock's words: "I also enjoy cooking, but you can do that at home, when entertaining friends" (not easy for Samjor, whose family lives in a bamboo hut, to picture, but I agree).

Infrastructure Development Minority Institutions (IDMI)

On a Friday afternoon in Gangtok we were introduced by Loden to Sonam Lepcha, a civil servant who manages and distributes funds to build schools. The money has been made available to the central government in Delhi by Unicef and is called the IDMI scheme. Large grants can be obtained and if we manage to obtain a grant we will only have to raise 25% of the budget for our new school and hostel in Bariakhop (SHA) ourselves. According to Sonam Lepcha we are eligible for a grant because of the "good work" (his words) we do for the tribal children. A condition is that application for the grant is made through a Sikkimese NGO or other charitable organization. Jupiter Academy and Smile Foundation do not qualify as such as they are not Sikkimese NGOs. We do not expect it be a problem to find an organisation that will be prepared to make the application on our behalf. Loden is also making an application for a grant and G.S. has made contact with *inter alia* the organisation that is making the application for Loden. Sonam Lepcha supports G.S. with the preparations and the application itself.

We also cherish our contacts with the Rotary in Gangtok. We attended again their weekly meeting at the Norkhill Hotel. When we asked for support a number of their members – among this year for the first time also a woman! – respond that beds and school furniture and a contribution for sanitation would definitely be possible.

Birkha



Our paralysed friend, who was introduced to you in previous newsletters, got into a worse predicament due to the earthquake of 18 October last year. His brother Rabin (who is one of our teachers) tried to carry him out of his humble house and in doing so, damaged Birkha's back. Now Birkha can only lie down, flat on his back. He could not see a doctor right away as all the roads were blocked and it did not become clear to us what was the matter with him. Dr. Eddy in Gangtok had advised him to rest, but it was unclear for how long. When we visited him he was still happy and smiling as usual but also a little desperate. During the long day he was all alone, except for lunch time when a niece cooked him some food. And when possible the family of his elder brother who lives close by, popped in to see if he was ok. His only distraction is the TV but the television set belongs to his elder brother who wants it back. We decide to buy him one and promise to think of a better solution. Moving him down near the school would be great for contacts but he needs someone during the night to stay with him. Just before we left, Rabin had decided to take him down and two nephews help to take care of him. The new TV has been installed, with a disk and subscription and Birkha happy as a child. He started playing the guitar again in his bed!