

English version of Newsletter 7 regarding my visit to Sikkim May/June 2005.

The school in Bariakhop.

Meeting the children again is always a feast. On my way up I have memorized all their names (32) knowing how important it is for them that I still remember.

Hedwig is still there and also 2 English volunteers. Victoria is a lawyer and in-between studies and work and Julie is a retired schoolteacher.

As for the moment there are enough teachers, I ask Julie the following morning to sit in on her classes, to learn about teaching myself and to see what progress the children have made in one year. I am not disappointed at all! Later on I will discover that it is possible to have discussions in English with nearly all children and even the new ones in nursery understand some English.

Next door a boy of 15 has died of TB, It makes me sad and angry as this is curable and such a waste. Asked about how and why I hear that the nurse at the health post down the road has done all she could to convince the parents to have him treated, but they didn't.

Very, very sad.

Officially in Buddhist tradition there is a 49-day period of mourning wherein monks pray for the soul to have a nice journey but if you can't afford the feeding and lodging of all these people, you may do it in 7 days as well. Buddhism is very practical.

To my pleasant surprise I find Sangdup in Buriakhop who is helping out with the children, doing homework etc. Sangdup is a former student of DPCA and has studied in Darjeeling for the last 2 years. Three years ago I discussed with Jamyang the possibility of sending - if only one child - to one of the really good schools in Darjeeling as it seemed a waste for really bright kids not to get a good education. We then selected Sangdup and he was admitted at Green Lawns. All of this not easy, least of all for Sangdup as he had to learn an extra language in 2 years. But he made it, did his exams for class 10 and is now admitted for class 11 and 12 at Mount Hermon, one of the really best schools in S.E.Asia, to be compared with Oxford/Cambridge.

The cupboard with first aid material - although modest to our standards - has a great name and fame in the villages around the school. Jamyang grows in his role as physician and recently even had to stitch a wound with one of the surgical kits left behind by volunteers. It was his first and the beginning was the most difficult he said. But then, there was no choice; it was late in the afternoon and no jeep, no doctor. The scar is not bad at all and according to the story, Topden did not cry at all. The only anaesthesia he got was a sip of cognac..

The parents of Dup Shering - one of the new boarders and in nursery - were so poor that when the father got ill they had to sell their only cow to buy medicine. Hedwig mentioned this story in one of her reports last year and Chris, a former DPCA volunteer, offered to buy the family a new cow. How much does a cow cost? 5000 rupees (100 euro) During my stay we regularly have visits from the family. There is a cow, pregnant and from Jersey descent but costs 8.500. Hedwig is strict and says they have to look around more. In the end she proves to be right when another cow is found, as pregnant and as Jersey as the first one and only for 7000. Two men will bring the cow up, in 2 days, as the family lives very high up in the mountains. Later that month, together with Jamyang, I visit them to see if the cow has arrived safely and to verify if they really are as poor as they claimed to be. They are.

Unfortunately there is little progress with the building of a new school as the papers of the Trust are still not ready. Disappointing on one hand but on the other also good as in the meantime a piece of land has been offered for free in Dodak (halfway between Buriakhop and Soreng) The village of Dawa, the boy who last year had an operation to remove his stoma and which was paid for by us. The villagers were so impressed by this that when the owner of this piece of land asked advice what to do with it, as he does not have any heirs, the Panchyat suggested giving it to the school. A fantastic opportunity and another drive for Jamyang to urge the lawyers with the trust. He thinks now that we can start building this winter! The only compensation the Panchyat asked is that we feed the old man till the end of his days. No problem.

At the beginning of this year, Steven, one of the best teachers we had, unfortunately left us. He married and found a government job, which means more money and security. This will always be a risk as we can only guarantee the next 2 years (we take care of having that money in the bank) Also Premkit, the nursery teacher and Lepcha, will leave later this year. For the moment Namita's sister, who is fully qualified, will help out till the end of the year so that there is some extra time to look for replacements. Namita herself will go to England during the winter holidays to study our teaching methods and see if some of them can be useful for Buriakhop. The trust will pay her fare and some pocket money and Magi will find a place for her to stay plus an appropriate school. Namita has promised to stay at least for the coming 2 years.

There is a new project in Dzongu, the north of Sikkim.

The idea was to select 5 children from very poor families in remote areas and to send them to a private school in the village of Passingdang. In the meantime there are 7 children and they are fine and doing well. They even understood some English while most of them so far did not have any education at all.

The place where they lived is separated from the rest of the world by a bamboo bridge across a ravine. Do not ask me why they started to live there in the first place because it seems there is enough space elsewhere. But, the children can only cross this bridge on the back of an adult and only when the weather is not too bad. So the possibility of attending the village school on the other side was very small. When this project with the 7 children works out well (which seems the case) we intend to extend it to more children.

The school in Buriakhop now has 7 classes and next year we will extend it to 8. What happens after that depends a little on the building of the new school. In order to get subsidies from the government a school

has to have at least 100 students and the way we are growing now is by 10 approx. each year. It's something to discuss the coming year.

I am still in contact and helping some of the former DPCA students. Maya, Bhim and Mingma successfully did their class 12 exams. Bhim and Mingma hope to continue with college and will apply for scholarships. Enjay and Aita Moti have done their class 10 exams and now go for 11 and 12.

The last weeks of my stay I took over Julie's timetable and found that I had to teach science to class 4. As I don't know half of what the students know on the subject, I got a book from the library about the Amazon. The subject of reproduction popped up and I asked them if they know where they come from? Chezang thinks from God and Pemkit from eggs. The rest of the lesson they are extremely quiet, only an incidental giggle occurs. I explain how it really works and I see that they are shocked. At the end I can't bring them even to pose any questions. Probably next year.

During the holidays at the end of May some children stayed behind on their own request. They know that their parents can't afford the travel expenses and they prefer to stay with Pala, the cook. Seven of them stayed behind, later 2 more because they were just not picked up. We decided that next year we will have one big summer holiday in August instead of 3 short ones.

Thanks for all your support and if you want to know more, also about volunteers, please visit the websites: www.sikkimacademy.com and www.sikkimhimalayanacademy.org