

A Report on our visit to St Anne's Charity School, Kalimpong on 6th April 2024

On mentioning to our good friend Stuart Appleton that my husband and I were planning a trip to India in March and April 2024 which would end with a week in the far north east of the country in a town called Kalimpong, we were informed about the wonderful work being done by a group of people in Chiddingly, East Sussex, to help support a charity school there.

Thus began our interest in an amazing project started by Praveena Agarwal to start a school and offer an education to young disadvantaged children in the Kalimpong district who would otherwise have little or no chance of improving their life chances.

We took the decision to sponsor a child throughout their education, and our close friends from Germany, Cilia and Rainer Butting, who were accompanying us on the trip, also offered their support by sponsoring a second child and sharing the sponsorship of a third with us. As our big India trip approached, arrangements were made by Praveena for all of us to visit the school whilst in Kalimpong.

After an amazing tour of Rajasthan followed by a week in Sikkim, we finally arrived in Kalimpong for the final two nights of our stay before returning to Delhi for our flight home. Praveena met us in the hotel the night before our scheduled visit to the school. It was unfortunate that our only possible time for the school visit fell on a Saturday, but Praveena had gone to great lengths to arrange for all the children to come in specially and for a packed lunch to be provided.

The school is built on a hillside, accessible by a maze of small streets and then a steep ascent up winding steps. Suddenly we found ourselves in front of the school building receiving the warmest of welcomes and greetings from an array of teachers, assistants and older students who had returned to the school eager to share with us their individual stories.

We were incredibly moved and felt quite emotional that our visit was so important to them. It hadn't quite dawned on us that the very fact that we had managed to make the journey to their school to show our support meant the world to them, and they were so happy to be able to show their appreciation. We felt extremely humbled at the effort that had been made by all of them, led of course by the amazing Praveena, and were very aware that our visit represented not only our support but that of all the sponsors back home who were not able to make the journey and see first hand how their help is making such a difference for all these wonderful children.

We were led into two small classrooms where the very little ones were sitting patiently having been prepared for our visit. They all stood up and gave the most enchanting renditions of several songs and rhymes complete with actions. Many wore the green uniforms and black shoes which sponsorship money helps to buy. It's worth noting that these are probably the first proper shoes many of the children have worn. Some of the children were still in their normal clothes as they had only recently found sponsors or were still seeking them.

We were then shown the small kitchen with very limited resources where a lovely lady cooks lunch for all the children on a simple calor gas stove. All the children receive a good staple meal of dhal and rice every day. It's important for us to understand that without this the majority of children would have a very meagre daily diet, so this is extremely important sustenance for them and will enable them to learn and play and stay healthy.

Chairs were then laid out on the small patio in front of the classrooms and we were invited to sit, before being presented with the traditional silk scarves by some of the older children as a sign of respect and welcome. This was followed by a speech from my husband John, telling the children a bit about our background and how touched and honoured we all felt to be there. There was then a series of performances and speeches by the older children and Praveena herself. An older girl who has had great success with her studies, came and spoke to us about her educational journey made possible by sponsors; another girl gave a charming dance performance, and Praveena singled out the children we are sponsoring personally, plus those who have already been receiving sponsorship through FOSAK. Finally, another small group of 5 or 6 young children were also assembled. They are currently without sponsors and facing an uncertain future, highlighting the continuous need for our help and support.

We were then asked to assist with handing out the packed lunches which were gratefully received and wolfed down by the little ones. We received a very welcome cup of tea at this point!

Before our departure, many of the mothers (and an elderly grandfather who had travelled from his far away village to meet us), asked to be photographed with us. We were so touched by their appreciation and gratitude. Education means everything to them. Their children will be given the chance to learn good English, to read and write, to learn through play, socialisation and fun, all in a structured and safe environment. They do not take any of this for granted. Our own society has a lot to learn from these dignified and humble people.

We left the school feeling elated and very emotional. It was the highlight of our trip, and we are very grateful to Stuart and Praveena for this chance to help in a small way with something so worthwhile and rewarding.

Sara and John Dunster ; Cilia and Rainer Butting