Before arriving in Bhuriakop I do some shopping in Siliguri: 30 pyjama's, a sewing machine, underwear, mattresses and sweets for the children. Late in the evening I arrive at the school and am welcomed by the staff. The children are since long asleep.

The children A lot to be proud of. The small ones who started last year in nursery now speak enough English to have simple conversations with. Specially during the after dinner walks they talk and tell stories. Also the development of their creative skills show progress – last year they won a competition in which all schools of the area took part, with singing and dancing. During my stay a whole programme is performed, partly for the volunteers but also for the parents of the day students. Main part is formed by Snowwhite and the 7 dwarfs. Despite the rain it is a big success. As for sports, there is a growing tradition to play cricket, on Sundays and against the government school down the road. That is, when there is a ball to play with. Last one was lost in a cornfield.

Samyor and Phurkit

Of last year's class 4 only 2 students were left over. Amosh was a day student and would have gone to the government school 1 year later anyway, Pumjay pursued her deepest wish and became a nun and Tempa was asked to come home – his parents thought he had studied enough and had to work. Sadly enpugh. He now works on the roads ans we can only hope that his years at SHA will enrich his future life. Smyor and Phurkit then were left over and we decided to keep them in the hostel and send them to the government school down the road. It was earlier decided that we would keep some children up to class 12, partly out of fear that the parents would not send them to school after class 5 and also because we will have more space whence the new school is build. Also it will be good for the very young children to have some older ones around. The level of knowledge of Samyor and Phurkit was such that they could skip class 5 and are now in 6. They look terrific in their new uniforms.
Aim is to always have at least 2 but it seems difficult to achieve, for all kinds of understandable reasons. When I arrive there are 5 but Kelly and Jessica will leave one day later. Both have had a fantastic time and spend their last night writing letters for the children. The ones that stay are Karen, Australian and former teacher and James and Lisa, both accountant and from Australia and England. Karen plays the violind and knows all about bookbinding. A week before she has asked the older children to write a story of their own and make illustrations. This has resulted in a pile of home made books and very proud children. I am pleased that the school has enough material to also develop these skills.. Karen also brought a laptop and her computer lessons are very popular.

The monthly staff meeting

Held the end of may and only the second time, still a little uneasy but with a real agenda. Important subjects are raise of salary, the selection of new children and the new school. Also lengthy discussions on the progress of the children and the volunteers are asked suggestions to improve the teaching methods, especially for mathematics. Karen, Lisa and James praise the way the school is run and tell that they enjoyed their stay tremendously. They all will leave a few days later when the summer vacation starts, beginning June.

The woman from Dodak

In the beginning of this year Jamyang, the headmaster, asked if the trust could sponsor 2 children in an orphanage. I asked more details and then heard the story of this woman who did not have any money to raise and feed her 3 daughters. She gave away one already to a passing American couple. I wrote that in this case it made more sense to me to sponsor the mother so that the children could stay with her. Jamyang fell ill and had to stay in Darjeeling and the story moved to the background. When in Bhuriakop I remembered this sad story and asked what happened. Worse than sad. Because we, the trust/school, did not react, the woman had given away also her other 2 daughters. One is in Delhi and the youngest one of 8 is in Siliguri. When asked, nothing more is known and no possibility to undo. No one knows their exact whereabouts and whether the people that took them are o.k. I feel sad and frustrated.

Pala's Pig

Pala is the cook of the school and for Sikkim very old, over 60. Last year he had bought from his savings (he earns 40 euro a month) a small pig to fatten up and sell afterwards. A very good idea because in a kitchen there always are leftovers and now we could feed the pig with them. Pala had promised the school 35 kg of the meat. Unfortunately a virus was around and the pig fell ill. The children prayed a lot but the pig died and was buried. Too sad a story and I ask how much a pig costs. One week later I am in a jeep with Pala and a screeching pig. Halfway we lose a sack of rice and also nearly the sack with pig. Upon arrival and just in front of his new shack, the stressed pig escapes and a wild pursuit follows, through the cornfield of the neighbour. Next year hopefully cutlets…

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Bawana’s mother

A few days before I leave, 2 women arrive at the school, early morning. The mother of Bawana and a woman from the village. They don’t speak any english so I fetch G.S. to ask what they want. Bawana is a small girl at our school and her mother has come to ask for help. Her oldest son wants to leave her with his wife and daughter and he is the only one who brings in money. Her husband has died the year before and has left her with 6 children. She herself works the land of someone else and , as is custom, gets half the crop. Instead of giving money I ask whether we eventually can buy her a piece of land? Her answer to my question makes everybody laugh. What did she say? I prefer a cow. A little incredulous I ask whether she can live on a cow? Yes. From last year’s cow story I know how much they cost (7000 rupees – 140 euro) so that is easy. One hour later they are back, they have found one for
6.500. Come and see.

What had looked like a pleasant outing to inspect the cow, turned out to be another sad story. The seller, Birkha, was a young man paralysed from the waist who needed the money to pay a doctor. He had been told, 15 years before, that he could be operated abroad but ther was no money. He saw as many doctors in India as he could afford but no one could help. He then turned to traditional medicine, witch doctors and shamans who told him not to worry and be patient. Now he seemed to have given up hope. Sitting in more or less the same position for 15 years had made some of his organs twisted and painful. This had to be set right. We discuss some possibilities and I take an x-ray and doctor report to find out in Holland if something still can be done. The legs look like not much life is left and I am pessimistic (justly so, I found out later) Karen who came with me thinks a wheelchair could be of use and promises to buy him one.

Dzongu

Mika is the person through whom the schoolproject in Dzongu has started. He works part time as inspector of health and spends the rest of his time on the development of his country. Dzongu is the area where the original inhabitants of Sikkim, the Lepcha, live and up till now the poorest part of Sikkim. Also because it is very difficult to get a permit, even people from Sikkim itself need one. Mika is trying to change all this and part of his dream is a big private school. The place for this will be in Passingdang, the village where 11 sponsored children go to school. This school is housed in a few traditionally build cottages, on top of a mountain. Of course there also are government schools in the area but, as in the rest of India/Sikkim, the quality of education is mostly very poor. Partly because of huge classes (80 or 90 children are no exception) and partly by the system that teachers after they have been appointed by the government, can be send to any place in the country. Also after 1 or 2 years they can be transferred again. Being appointed to a school in Dzongu is considered a severe punishment: extremely remote, very poor and no infra structure. During a meeting with the school committee the members tell that if we can support them with the building, the village people can contribute for the amount of 2000 euro. As soon as possible a plan will be made and an estimate after which the trust will see what is possible.

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