



A brighter future for children and young people in Darjeeling



Christmas and New Year brought a welcome influx of tourists to Darjeeling, but the Omicron covid variant means that lockdown has continued to cause disruption in Darjeeling. Winter is now at its peak and Darjeeling has experienced several snowfalls, which are an unusual sight in the town. The future is always uncertain but I'm delighted to report that schools have finally re-opened this week; older children are preparing for Class 10 and 12 exams (GCSE and A-level equivalent) which will take place in March.

Despite the challenges of covid, DCT has been active in Darjeeling in recent months. We are very excited to have taken on a new employee in Darjeeling, Aashwin Pradhan, who is working hard alongside our India-based Trustee Pasang Wangdi to deliver our projects and help us understand the needs of the children and young people. Aashwin has provided the photographs in this newsletter and has also written a lovely description of his recent visit to the Ging Monastery. You can read more about Aashwin and his visit [below](#).



Our new team member in Darjeeling, Aashwin Pradhan

Despite the challenges of covid and the winter weather, the last few months have seen some great successes for DCT. When an autumn lockdown meant that exams needed to be moved online at short notice, we provided 16 students with mobile phones to allow them to take the tests on a reliable device.



Our Trustee in Darjeeling, Major Wangdi, distributes mobile phones to students taking exams online.

In October, we heard about a number of children in a village called Ramlaldhura, on the edge of Darjeeling, who needed financial support to allow them to continue attending school. The tea estate village is very poor, and reached by a difficult road which is often subject to landslides. With the help of community leaders Aashwin met the children and their families; DCT has now funded school fees, and provided other essentials such as umbrellas and basic PPE supplies.



Aashwin (right) meets new students on a visit to Ramlaldhura village

We are pleased that while schools were closed we have been able to fund additional maths lessons for the children at the Kripasaran Children's Home. Mr Nabin Gurung is an experienced teacher, and his lessons are engaging and interactive.



Nabin Gurung teaches maths to some of the young people living at the Kripasaran Children's Home.

We have been supporting children to access education for nearly 15 years now and it's always a joy to see them grow into successful young people. You can read about all about Anup, one of our very first sponsored children who has recently graduated from University, [here](#).

Last summer three young women completed their Beautician training and went on to use this useful skill to find work. In the autumn we supported three more candidates to start the course. We also supported 10 new students to take up vocational training in November at the Food Craft Institute (FCI) in Darjeeling. This is double the number of students we usually fund, to make up for the fact that covid closed the college and prevented any new students joining the course last year. Meanwhile, the 5 previous students who had completed their classroom-based learning before the pandemic were finally able to take up their work placements. We have partnered with the FCI for a number of years now, and seen how effective their training can be in enabling students to find stable, interesting and well paid work in Darjeeling, across wider India and even further afield.



Work on the final phases of construction at the Kripasaran Children's Home has been delayed over the winter by covid, but has now restarted. Just this week, work has started to dismantle the old prayer hall. You can read about what the next few months have in store [here](#).

And finally, as more children return to the Kripasaran Home we are putting in place a range of healthcare initiatives to ensure their health and wellbeing needs – both mental and physical – are met. This includes a new schedule of visits from a doctor and health visitors, ensuring regular access to hot water for personal hygiene, and weekly yoga classes. You can read more about these initiatives [below](#).

2022 will be an exciting year for the Trust; we are hopeful that this will be the year when some normality returns to Darjeeling, and we expect to launch some

exciting new projects in the coming months. As always, we remain hugely grateful to all our supporters for enabling all this activity and allowing us to help the children and young people of Darjeeling.

Best wishes,

Katie Carr
Chair, Darjeeling Children's Trust

A visit to Ging Monastery

by Aashwin Pradhan

The wind seems to be colder than yesterday. As I wake up, my intuitions have led me to take action. I knew that I had to visit the monastery situated at Ging, Lebong. I had made up my mind to visit the monastery today as I knew that it was a new moon day. Yesterday, I bought two blue khadas and fruits (apples, grapes and oranges).

I started my motorcycle and I could feel my hands covered with thick gloves freeze; but the excitement of the journey had already set a warmth of happiness in me. The blue rays of the sun guided my path. As I crossed Lebong and reached Phoobsering tea estate I saw a board clipped on the pine tree that said - 'Way towards Ging LamaHatta Monastery'. I followed the 'katcha' road and soon I was in the realm of the pine trees. The row of white Buddhist flags fluttered and it was a scene to embrace. I rode further and in the next turn I could see the maroon red colour of the Monastery playing hide and seek with the tall pine trees. I encountered one of the oldest monasteries and soon I knew that I had stepped in the lands of Sikkim in Darjeeling.

I halted to ask a smiling young gentleman whether the monastery was open. He cried to his friend who was working in the next building "Santosh is the monastery open?". Santosh replied that the monastery was closed and the Lamas had gone to Sikkim. I smiled at the young gentleman and he showed me the entrance of the monastery. I parked my motorcycle and started to observe the area.

At the entrance on the left side there was the residence of the Lamas and also a hall to support the ceremonies at the monastery. It was locked. It had 2 boards with detailed information - one that was maintained by West Bengal Bhutia Board and the other that was maintained by Sikkim. As I entered the gate I noticed a path that surrounded the monastery. Besides the Monastery an old magnolia tree with orchids that grew in its branches caught my eye. A white stupa with borders surrounded with chains and a deteriorated wooden house

accompanied the maroon monastery in the centre. I took a round and each angle of the monastery fascinated my eyes to halt and appreciate its beauty. The Lungta (prayer flags) fluttered beside the entrance and the closed windows of the monastery had a remarkable design of the 1700s. I touched one of the pillars of the monastery and embraced the silence accompanied by the chirping of the birds.

The main door was locked. Through a curtain that swung like a gentle pendulum by the wind, I noticed the diyas were lit inside the monastery. There was also a 'chang' lit in the verandah and the water from the tank had been used recently. There was no sign of a human and a dog with brown eyes that wagged its tail had watched me since I was here.

I explored the houses below the monastery thinking that someone would have the keys to open it. I went downhill and there was a beautiful small house with flowers that greeted me. I was astonished by the thick bamboo and at one point I found a place that I thought would be a perfect place to meditate, surrounded by trees, silence and the chirping of birds. I was happy to see the first glance of a human being and I approached him. I said that I had come here to visit the monastery. He asked a few people that were now passing by and confirmed to me that the monks were conducting a Pooja in one of the village houses. I informed him that I had come from Hermitage in Darjeeling. He said that he would accompany me and began to show me his village.

He said, "The land still belongs to the Sikkim Government. The Monastery was constructed in the 1800s." We went back to the monastery and he gently began to describe his place. The old wooden house beside the monastery used to be a kitchen. The backside of the monastery had a small house whose space was occupied by 'maney'. We went outside the entrance gate of the monastery.

We went down a small lane and along the way as we were having conversations about the beautiful plants that grew in this area I asked his name. His name was Tek Bahadur. He used to work in Windamere hotel in Darjeeling and had learnt English while he was working there. He was very kind to show me around his village, the village school, the old cottages of the retired Major, abandoned homestays and he humbly told me that his village is blessed to be peaceful and all the people here are helpful. He mentioned that the area has three villages named - Qazi hatta, Lama hatta and Ladenla's area.

Along the way we were greeted by many people who decided to help me in finding the key to the monastery. We went up the hill and there were beautiful pine trees and most of the cremation rituals were done here and ages ago the English used to cremate the bodies in this area and there were the remnants of the old cremation ground. The entire place seemed to be blessed by nature and the vibrations of the historic monastery.

He told me that from this place both sunset and sunrise are witnessed with the view of Mt. Kanchenjunga. He stood on an open point and remarked that on a clear day the view from here is spectacular. We went back to the monastery and sat on the benches. I thought that I would visit again when the monastery opened and I shared my phone number with him so that I could be informed beforehand.

He lived with his family and I told him that I had bought some fruits for the monastery and since the monastery is closed I requested him to take the fruits to his home for his children. He refused and said that it is offered to the Gods and he could not accept it. He assured me that when the monastery opens he shall offer it to the monks. I handed the fruits to him and I decided to tie a khada in one of the poles of the fluttering flags.

One of the houses was very close to the entrance of the monastery and he said that he would leave the fruits there and he told me to follow him. By fate the man in that house had the keys of the monastery. Tek Bahadur looked at me in awe and said that the Gods are welcoming you. I smiled and thanked him. A small boy accompanied us to open the entrance of the monastery. The keys dangled in his hands and we approached the door of the monastery. I opened my shoes and I was asked to wash my hands by the small boy. Tek Bahadur stood outside and approached me to go forward.

The man with the jolly smile, the small boy and myself, entered the monastery. The small boy turned on the lights and the statues decorated with ornaments shined inwards like the thousand suns shining all at once. The small boy directed me to offer the khadas and the fruits. I could recognise the Gods in the Thanka, the statues of Buddha, the saint - Gyalwa lhatsun Chenpo and Guru Padmasambhava with the Dakinins. These states still stood tall in the sands of time from the 1700s. The man with the jolly smile had prepped for me a lamp to be lit. I lit the one lamp with all my heart and soul. I asked his permission to take photographs and videos. He allowed me to do so although it was prohibited. I wanted to capture this moment so that I could go back and feel the divine presence and also to share it with my loved ones.

I knelt down and took out a prayer that I had prepared last night.

I read it in my mind :

I come to you to receive your divine blessing,
I ask you nothing from the earth,
In this nothingness,
I surrender myself to you.

As I seek for your presence,
I shall embrace the darkness,
For I know :
I am your light bearer,
Like the sun during the day,
Like the moon during the night,
&
Like the Venus shining bright.

You have shown me my mortal timeline,
May the future be guided by you,
May the past be healed,
&
In this present moment,
May I always find you.

I am fascinated by the stories of Buddhism and Guru Padmasambhava and to see them in front of me - ignited my senses. It was not slow, nor fast. I was in their divine presence and could not think of anything else. A sense of void was there and I was aware and happy that I had prepared a prayer beforehand. I inserted a small amount of money in the donation box and the small boy was very happy as I gave him some money to buy sweets.

Tek Bahadur was still there outside the door waiting for us. I thanked each and every one of them for their warm presence. I interacted with the small boy. His name was Yugal Bhutia. He studied in St. Joseph's School in Class 4 and I was amazed to see his dedication towards the monastery. The three bid me farewell and I sat there alone embracing the beauty of this historical monument.

I shall come back again on a sunny day to meet the lamas. It is a new moon day and I noticed that it is the Chinese New Year too. Somehow, I followed my intuition to visit the monastery exactly on this day.

I am here standing in front of the monastery and I feel that the light inside me is now rejuvenated and will continue to burn brightly even in the darkest of hours.



[Anup Kumar Ram](#)

We first met Anup Kumar Ram in 2008. He lived with his family in terrible conditions underneath an external staircase attached to a building, suffered from a disability in one of his hands and had lost his father at a young age. His prospects, and those of his family, looked very poor. DCT sponsored him to attend school, and over the intervening years he has overcome the adversity of his background to focus on his studies, finally graduating from University with a degree in business studies at the end of 2021.

Following discussions we facilitated with a local careers advisor, Anup has now enrolled for the West Bengal coaching exams. This is a government qualification which leads, for those who succeed, to a career as a civil servant. Anup will have to pass three phases of exams: first Preliminaries, which test reasoning, maths, English and vernacular languages; then the main exams; and finally an interview. This is known as a valuable qualification to achieve and candidates often sit the exams multiple times. We will continue to support Anup to succeed on this course, and set up a secure career for the benefit of himself and his wider family. The photos below show his transformation from a young boy in 2008 to a university graduate.



Construction restarts at the Kripasaran Children's Home

It is lovely to see how much the young people are enjoying their new accommodation at the Children's Home and making use of the extra space and light. However, there are a few critical steps still to complete, including the new kitchen and store room, a water harvesting system to capture rain water for washing clothes, the accommodation and office for Pema Bhante the Chief Monk, and the landscape works to create sitting out and play areas.

Works were held in abeyance in 2021, partly because of Covid and also because of the necessity to comply with new Indian Government Regulations which were introduced in early 2021, concerning the transfer of money. However, with the latter issue now resolved and the Covid situation improving, works are replanned to start in early February. To free the land for the new buildings, the first step will be to dismantle the old Prayer Room shown at the top of the aerial shot below. Material from the demolition process, which is mostly done by hand, will need to be removed from the site. Without vehicle access, the waste is taken up the hundred or so steep steps to a waiting vehicle on the road by porters, an arduous task. This step will be followed by construction of new retaining walls on the steep slope, a process which will involve critical input from the Structural Engineer given the unconsolidated nature of the land and its location in an earthquake zone.



Good luck to everyone who is involved in this exciting new stage, and we look forward in the future to sharing news of how they are getting on.



Improving health at the KBM home

Darjeeling Children's Trust (DCT) has provided healthcare support to the Kripasaran Buddhist Mission (KBM) since 2009. This has been in the form of two nurses who support the children living there by visiting weekly and DCT providing essential toiletries. We have now looked at further ideas for improving the health and well-being of children we support in Darjeeling. It is proposed to test out a healthcare model in KBM and then assess whether aspects of this could be expanded to other children and young people in the area. This is in line with recommendations made in our current local needs assessment. We are developing a healthcare framework which incorporates

- Health education/promotion
- Screening for illness
- Diagnosis and treatment

We are delighted we have appointed Dr Shreya Chettri who will help us develop a health programme for the children. She started in February and we are very excited as to how she will make a difference to their healthcare. She completed her MBBA in 2019 and is currently working as a Resident Medical Officer at the Planters Hospital in Darjeeling.



Dr Shreya Chettri, who will be making regular visits to the children at the KBM home

We have kicked 2022 off with a health promotion programme for the boys and girls which seems to be popular. This includes yoga classes, menstruation knowledge sessions (breaking taboos) and teenage appropriate books on health. Art sessions (to aid mental health also) will start shortly. We will develop further classes and screening programmes with input from the children, healthcare staff and Pema Bhante. We hope for a healthy 2022!

We improve the lives of children and young people in Darjeeling through education, training and better living conditions. We put children and young people at the heart of all we do. We work responsively via partnership with local people in Darjeeling to minimise our overheads and maximise our impact.

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