

Linda Blunt – GDS Trustee - Visit to Gorkha February /March 2017

I have been involved with GDS since my first visit to Nepal trekking and then volunteering in Gorkha in 1997. Soon after I was made Trustee and Secretary by founder Joy Leighton and am now Co-Chair. Following my stay in Gorkha just prior to the earthquake in 2015, I returned in Feb/March of this year. As usual the reception in Gorkha was warm and welcoming, the committee we work with so helpful and easy to work with, and the families and friends, well, that's what really makes the visits to Gorkha more special each time I return.



I stayed with 3 different members of the committee and their families and had dinners and evenings with so many others. Some with electric, some with lamps and others with candles when load shedding (power cuts) for 2 hours every other night as normal.

Lots of walking up and down the steps and unmade roads, I was able to make many visits in the town and rural area. I was able to see projects we have been involved with, visit children we sponsor in their homes, and also just enjoy the company walking and enjoying the mid hill landscapes of Gorkha. Sadly no Himalayan mountain views at this time of year as heat builds towards monsoons in a month or two. Of course concern of how everyone is coping after the earthquake damage in the Gorkha District was a priority



Shree Mahendra Jyoti School is the main school we have been working with for many years. It is now looking resplendent after repairs have been made from the earthquake damage when the buildings were too unsafe to use. Headmaster Laxman Aryal is such a hardworking man and through Facebook reached out to his former students who are now working overseas. Sadly and frustratingly, thousands of young men leave families to work as an underclass in the Gulf. Through these Laxman was

able to fundraise and repair the school after so much damage from the earthquake. The school has been painted and even plants were displayed and cared for by students. A new build is planned for the disabled children. Part of the main building has been taken down and the temporary classrooms with galvanised sheeting bought by GDS are still in use for classes of younger children.



I was honoured to be present at the school anniversary celebrations at Mahendra Jyoti, watching sport, dancing, drama (based on a schoolgirl being lured away from her family by the gift of a mobile phone from a stranger with ulterior motives), even a student who was a comedic poet. Presentations were made and I collected an award for Mr and Mrs Hook who sponsor 14 children annually, as well receiving an award myself which was very humbling.



In Bal Mandir School, where Sarita works, they still await repairs but at least a lovely new building has been finished for the orphan children after their 'room' was damaged. 17 boys and 3 girls are now looked after at the school and donated clothes were given to them and very welcome and being worn with pride.

We have now agreed to sponsor 50 children in a number of poor Gorkha schools and Laxman will manage the programme.

The rural school of Sansari was completely destroyed. After 18 months of being taught in the freezing make shift shelters with more galvanised roofing supported by GDS, the children are now taught in lovely light semi-permanent rooms with Perspex sides. Again likely to be cold in winter and hot in summer but at least they are much better than they had. I met with the 10 children we sponsor in this school, all of whom lost their homes in the earthquake and one was buried in her house and rescued unharmed after an hour of digging by neighbours. What to say when you meet children who have been through so much devastation in their young lives?



Other schools visited are still in temporary rooms after 2 years with 75% of the schools in the district lost or damaged by the earthquakes.

Elsewhere, Gorkha town may look the same, however there are gaps where familiar buildings once stood. Many homes have been rebuilt but many are temporary shelters made of galvanise or bamboo which have become long term shelters, and who knows when these people will have



a real home again. So much aid and so many large aid agencies have been based in Gorkha, the epicentre of the earthquake, but so many of the people really needing help are still not reached. There is definitely a bitter sweet feel when you talk of overseas aid and big vehicles and reports are mentioned first. GDS is such a tiny charity but was able to respond in little ways and do so much with £10,000 in that first year after the earthquake. It is much respected in the area.

A visit to the hospital with Badri and Perusotum showed the main building still in place but out of use and semi-permanent tents being used as wards. A physiotherapy unit funded with overseas aid has provided help to so many people affected physically and mentally but is about to be closed as funding ends.

In discussion with the Doctors we were able to agree future placements for Medical Elective students and also at a small Private hospital. We are now planning to support the hospital with funds for an oxygen compressor which they have requested costing about £600. Currently they rely on oxygen cylinders but the supplier won't replace until they have all run out! Compressors will replace the cylinders and be more cost effective for the hospital to maintain.

Other fascinating visits were to the Prison! Yes, an idea that Occupational Therapy volunteers may wish to help in the prison was followed up, and we now have permission by the District Officer thanks to Perusotum, and even have a volunteer interested.



30 years ago founder of GDS saw deaf people being taught crafts. Today a school housing 120 deaf children from all over the district, teaching them sign language and the curriculum up to GCSE equivalent is inspirational. Another opportunity awaits for interested volunteers who can sign. Thanks to Bishnu and his Father who have worked tirelessly to develop this wonderful school.

The Gorkha Women's Group (GWA) held a small meeting and potential programmes including women's health and rural sewing classes were discussed. I attended 2 classes of the hygiene programme run through GWA with trainer Sarita and Chair of GWA Kalpana. The small school only 30 mins below Gorkha was so different. Very poor children who have had no introduction to hygiene. Only 2 out of 30 had a toothbrush and ever cleaned their teeth, many had no toilet. They worked as teams to understand how disease was spread and will have a total of 12 sessions attending Friday after school and Saturdays when there is no school (the only free day). They all turn up and its great. Interactive fun teaching making a difference from many of the classes where rote learning is normal practice. After discussion with Sarita, they will now make an inspection visit after a few months to see if there is a real change in the children's hygiene practices such as clean nails, clean appearance etc. we await the results with interest.



Another steep walk with Perusotum to a rural village saw the success of a French funded project but using GDS funded sewing machines, and a group of ladies have had training to make their own clothes. Results were excellent – except maybe that the 'roles' of fabric means everyone has the same colour kurta shalwar (dress and trousers). It is hoped we can partially fund their own machines and to enable this programme to run in another village.

Meetings were held with the Gorkha committee and discussions held to review all the progress made during the visit and to consider priority projects in the near future. Another hygiene programme, sponsorship of children, oxygen at the hospital, and help funding of sewing machines/projects. We are looking forward to a number of project applications that we discussed, will consider in UK before confirming that we agree to release the funds. A simple but efficient and traceable system of project funding is now working brilliantly.



I went to Gorkha with the thought that maybe after 29 years the charity is no longer needed. In many ways Gorkha is different. It looks richer in the high street, is becoming larger and more sprawled as with any town especially where people are moving from rural and even unsafe areas around the earthquake epicentre. But for



most, nothing has changed. As well as helping in small ways through our programmes using 100% of the money we raise, the opportunity for volunteers to be able to interact and learn as much as they teach is I believe, a rich experience for all involved.

Why not try it!

A special thanks to everyone who has supported us in some way, joining our events, donations and just telling others about us. It means a lot to our small team at GDS, but even more to so many that we have been able to support in Gorkha.

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