

In February 2010 I went to India for 6 months with no idea what to expect. I lived in a village near Darjeeling called Takdah for four months, teaching in a primary school (Tiny Angels) and also in a Buddhist medical school (Chagpori) for Tibetan Refugees. Despite being 10 minutes apart these were totally different environments. Teaching primary school children was very energy consuming but definitely very rewarding. The other teachers were very strict with them and so the children knew that as 'gappies' we were far more of a soft touch. This meant we often faced twenty hyperactive eight year olds trying their very best to be as naughty as possible. However, boundaries were established and trust was built up, and it felt liberating to be able to use music and art in a curriculum normally based around rote learning. We also grew close to the other teachers, and spent a lot of time talking to the headmaster, Mr Lama and his wife. Mr Lama is also a Gorkhaland politician and it was interesting to hear first-hand the viewpoints of someone involved in the process of history, and to hear how the Nepalese people of Darjeeling see themselves as inherently different to the rest of India in culture and values.

Teaching at Chagpori was very different from the noise and energy of Tiny Angels. A ten minute walk up the hill, my journey between the two often felt ridiculously beautiful as I passed by banana trees and waterfalls, with the backdrop the tea plantations of the Darjeeling hills. At Chagpori I taught English to Buddhist Tibetan medical students who were mainly in their twenties. This was a totally different teaching experience and instead of using art and music to aid their learning, I used poetry and extracts from novels. The students were initially very reserved and at first their shyness was daunting but, as with teaching the children at Tiny Angels, a sense of trust was built up and they began to contribute more and to make jokes in class. Listening to a Buddhist interpretation of literature I had studied at school was a very interesting way of gaining insight into the religion and I have already felt this knowledge has helped me in my Theology degree at Cambridge. I had also initially thought that as I was younger than the people I was teaching this might be a problem as they might not be able to take me seriously but in fact, the people of Takdah and Darjeeling (and indeed in all the places I visited in India) automatically see white westerners as respectable figures who deserve the most polite and hospitable treatment possible. This realisation that simply being British automatically gave me status at first made me uncomfortable but I realised that it simply meant that I had to act as an ambassador for my roots by returning their politeness. Whilst aspects of everyday life in Takdah were totally alien, it was also interesting to see that there are fundamental similarities between people across the world, perhaps most evident in the sharing of jokes. Becoming part of the community of Takdah was probably the most stimulating and exciting experience of my life and one that may not have been realistically possible without the help of the Royal Caledonian Schools Trust.