



April 2011

The Magic of Kalimpong: In this Indian school, borders and boundaries are dissolved

Tarini Manchanda
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>




Part of the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Manchanda, Tarini (2011) "The Magic of Kalimpong: In this Indian school, borders and boundaries are dissolved," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 100 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol100/iss1/8>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.



in this indian school, borders and boundaries are dissolved

the magic of kalimpong

Humans create borders; borders create divisions; sometimes borders are hard to cross. And yet crossing geographical, cultural, or psychological borders can lead to an awakening.

When I was asked to video document Colby's Jan Plan in Kalimpong, India, I realized it would be a trans-border experience.

In my sophomore year at Colby, Ratul Bhattacharyya '09 mentioned the idea of a Jan Plan at the Gandhi Ashram school in eastern India, between Nepal and Bhutan. Ratul spent a summer teaching at this school near his grandmother's home in the Himalayas. After a series of events and coincidences, and driven by people who worked hard to make it happen, the Gandhi Ashram School is now a regular feature in Colby's remarkable list of January opportunities.

I am from New Delhi, India, but was at Colby when the program was begun. Frankly, I was nervous about Colby students teaching in my home country—a foreign country to them. I was so worried that I asked a Colby professor if it was okay to feel this way.

Five years later, in January 2011, I was holding onto the insides of a pickup truck as it flew through the mountains of Kalimpong. Accompanied by a photographer friend, I was off to film Colby's Jan Plan. People in the truck spoke to each other in Nepali, and a little boy perched on the side of the truck claimed to be a monkey. Tall trees and homes that fit into the picturesque landscape whizzed by. I was overcome by a wellspring of calm energy. The Gandhi Ashram School is at "6th Mile."

by tarini manchanda '09

We were in a truck because “the strikes” were going on. A local resident explained: “Darjeeling district is not only famous for its tea, but also for political strikes. The Gurkhas are fighting for statehood within the state of West Bengal, India.” This January the strikes went on for a long time. In turn there was no public transport and the shops and commercial establishments remained closed. My friend Vidyun Sabhaney and I, “the film crew,” were welcomed by ashram alums and Colby student Aaron Kaye ’11. We arrived late in the evening and ate a lovely meal. Then the electricity went away for an hour, and in the darkness I watched Colby students and professors practice orchestra with headlamps.

The Colby students live in a dormitory at the ashram. Each day begins with morning assembly in a big hall with walls that are covered in images of Kalimpong’s mountains. Through the day the room is alive with a symphony of violins. Playing the violin is intrinsic to the Gandhi Ashram students’ education. The school is for children from economically underprivileged backgrounds, and the education is completely free.

Colby students teach a winter camp in January, which is otherwise a holiday month for the ashram students. Each year they teach storytelling, a cappella, singing the blues or Broadway musicals, math, English, science. The ashram is alive with creative energy and a spirit of exchange all day. Teaching is hard work for the Colby students, and it carries into the night, when they plan their lessons for the next day.

While at 6th Mile, I found it difficult to hold onto my larger questions and concerns about the validity of the exchange taking place between the ashram and Colby students. I have come to understand my nervousness about Americans teaching in my country; I fear that, while the ashram students and Kalimpong have so much to offer, having Americans teach here is an unequal exchange. “American” is often seen as inherently better in postcolonial India, and this is perpetuated by teaching-based study-abroad programs.

Looking through the lens of my video camera I realized that life in the mountains of Kalimpong is not one of scarcity or underdevelopment, as it is often labeled. Families

have plenty and are generous with their spirit, food, dance, music, and time. Due to the strikes, Colby students spent their free time visiting families of Gandhi Ashram students instead of going into the town.

The home visits are integral to the exchange, as they create time when students of Gandhi Ashram are truly themselves. People in Kalimpong take pride in hosting Colby students and sharing their way of life. On the home visits part of me wanted to do away with the camera and jump right into the experience. Another part of me was happy to come to terms with my nervousness, still simmering from a few years ago, and I did that by witnessing the strong sense of self in the people I met in Kalimpong. As Professor Steven Nuss, a founder of the Kalimpong Jan Plan, explained, “Something magical takes place here every year.” This idea resonated with me as it does with students on both sides of the exchange.

Teary goodbyes reveal the profound impact of the ashram family on Colby’s students and faculty. Here is the magic. The teaching is an excuse for a larger exchange where Colby students get to experience a completely different life. Everyone is learning.

I was able to cross my own borders in Kalimpong, because I

was not participating in the exchange but observing from behind the camera.

The ashram students belong to a place with a long history. Darjeeling was central to the British Empire in India. Christianity and Buddhism are the dominant religions, though neither is indigenous. Despite a history of outside influence, people in Kalimpong are self-sufficient. The strikes were on while I was there, public transport was not running, and yet we had plenty of food and amenities.

The Colby students are not only teaching ashram students, but they learn from them a culture of resilience, of living within one’s means, and also of generosity. They get to witness this rare way of life that, in other parts of the world, has been replaced by dependence, higher consumption, and wastefulness.

While it would take a true social scientist to quantify the impact of this exchange, as a videographer I can say this: Through my camera lens, I watched some truly magical stuff. ©

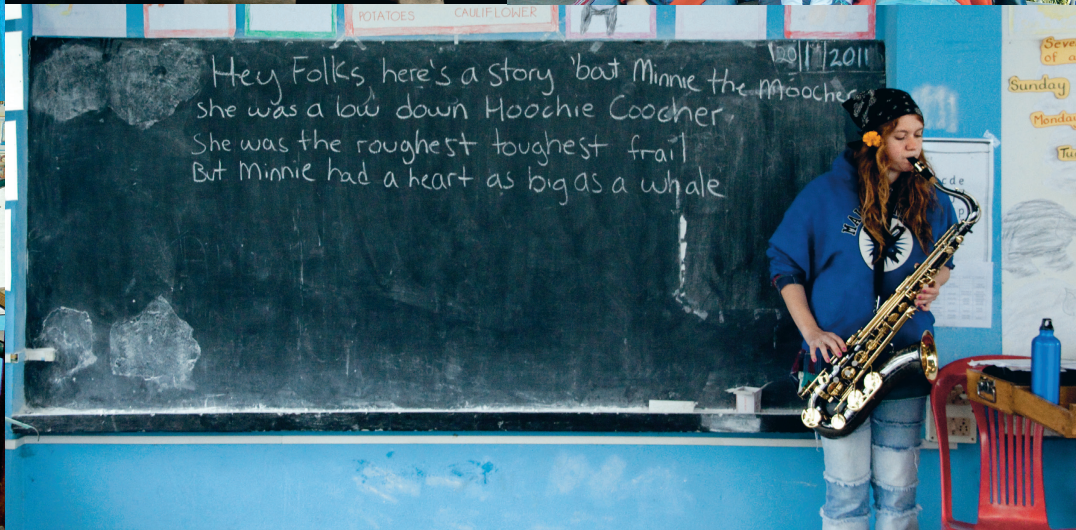
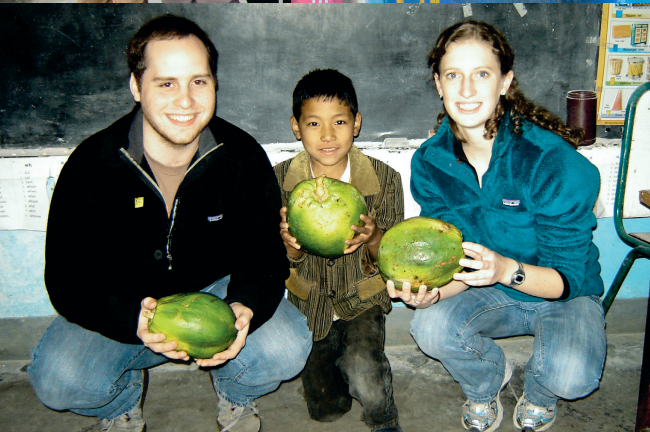


WATCH THE VIDEO

jan plan in india

www.colby.edu/mag

Keyword: India-video



Clockwise from upper left: a view of Kalimpong (the Gandhi Ashram School is three miles outside of the town); Dash Wasserman '12 teaching an English class; Gandhi Ashram students in a cappella class; the Colby Jan Plan students; Rhiannon Ledwell '12 teaches the blues; the ashram orchestra practices; student teachers Wasserman and Lindsay Dale '12 with gifts they received from students at the beginning of each school day, including these papayas from Abishek Rai; Caitlin Hewett '12 directs her violin students.