

Post-Trip Activities

Reports, Reviews, Travelogues & Etc

by Team Vidyalay, Project Sikkim 2010



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Overseas Community Involvement Project Borong Polok, Sikkim, India December 2010

In this 3rd installment of Project Sikkim from 3rd to 19th December 2010, Datacraft-Asia continued to spearhead the educational efforts in the village of Borong Polok in Sikkim, India.

The team from Datacraft-Asia brings with them a diverse breadth of knowledge and skills, including engineering, graphic design, education, and information technology. The gift of knowledge sharing with the less privileged has been the primary aim of Datacraft-Asia's continued efforts in this project. Datacraft-Asia believes strongly that with knowledge as the key foundation, the villagers would be exposed and encouraged to pursue new opportunities. The team is especially motivated by young sparks in the village school, such as nine-year-old Anmol from the Sangam Academy who shared with the team, "My dream is to be a doctor, so that I can help people in my village."

The villagers of Borong Polok has benefited tremendously from Datacraft-Asia's contributions. Through interactive learning and play with materials brought up from Singapore, the children were exposed to new knowledge and insights of the world outside their village, and were encouraged to be more environmentally conscious. Basic computer applications were also taught to older children to help them be better prepared for higher education.

At the Paper-Making Unit – a locally setup and managed business venture, transference of design knowledge and product innovations continued to empower the community enterprise to be self-sustainable and competitive.



The Infinite Supply Of & Beads Workshop @Telok Blangah CC's Open House

Review by Michelle Lim & Angie Wong, *Project Sikkim (Team Vidyalay)*

Saturday, 15th April 2011



Youths Hands-On was launched at VivoCity with a blast. Members from Team Vidyalay, under the banner of the Telok Blangah Community Centre's Youth Club (YEC), participated in the largest palm formation in Singapore with a huge crowd of youths, successfully breaking the previous year's record with a turnout of about 1000!

Recycled Paper Bead-making Workshop for Kids



The main aim of the workshop is to bring workshops conducted in Borong Polok Paper Making Unit over to the Singapore's community on TBCC's premises, as well as to promote the Argali Paper. Making use of recycled materials to create paper beads, it the 3 Rs: Reuse, Reduce and Recycle. This workshop demonstrates the potential of what is considered to be waste transformed into beautiful wearable products.



One young boy was overheard asking, "Can I teach?" when a newcomer stepped into class, and repeated instructions as accurately as he could, showing enthusiasm in his little project.

The Infinite Supply Of Exhibition



The Infinite Supply Of, a travelogue exhibition inspired by a recent volunteer expedition to a village on the South Sikkim Himalayas.

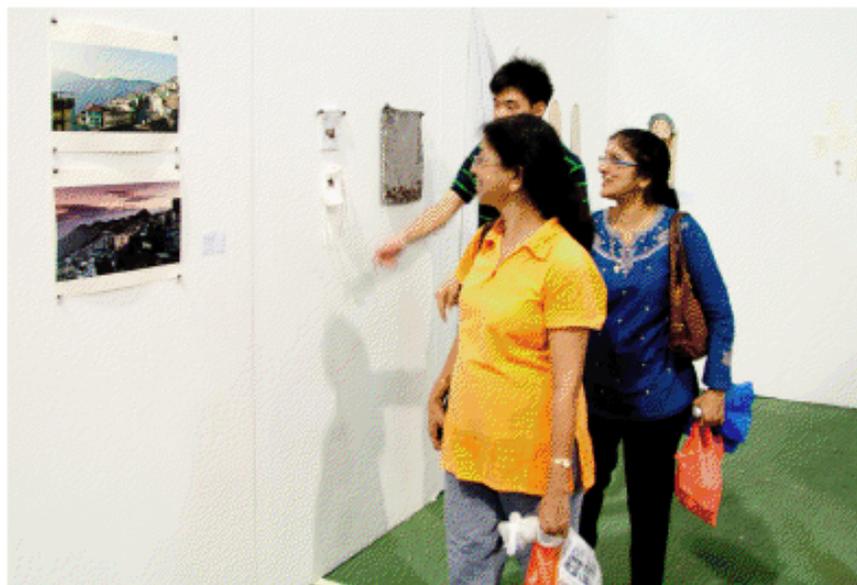
In two weeks, the artists, affiliated to LASALLE, found themselves soaked in the harsh beauty of the natural surroundings, tasting the rugged tenacity and warmth of village life. Coming back, they shared their experiences from the expedition in an artwork showcase, engaging visitors with simulated encounters set in a series of artworks that preserved cherished memoirs from the journey– a small and finite slice of the infinite largeness they were privileged to experience.



This is the second installment of The Infinite Supply Of travelogue exhibition and this time, it also featured a series of digital prints by two avid amateur photographers from SMU.



All in all, the artists saw many developments in the recent works. Frankly, they came across as very positive artworks that were light-hearted and full of joy. The intense feelings of happiness from the village of Borong Polok were contagious, and we hope it will continue to infect everyone with high spirits as the memories of Sikkim still linger.



The Minister for Trade and Industry, Minister Lim Hng Kiang, arrived at about 6.45pm to view The Infinite Supply Of exhibition at TBCC and took home a copy of the exhibition zine and donated generously to aid the PMU.

Acknowledgements



An impromptu bead-making workshop was conducted again to anyone who wanted to participate together with the Youth Executive Committee, and it was very well received, even though it started at 8pm!

It was about 9pm when we packed up, with help from the members of the Youth Executive Committee of TBCC's Youth Club. WE enjoyed it thoroughly, especially when the guests and participants left with a smile on their faces.

We would like to thank the visitors for their undivided support, the installing & de-installing crew, exhibition sitters, and LASALLE College of the arts for kindly lending us the wall partitions for the exhibition. We would also like to thank Telok Blangah Community Centre for the opportunity to showcase the exhibition and contribute to the society with the workshop.

links

TBCC The Infinite Supply Of Exhibition and Beads Workshop Documentary:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS22U0iQ7Ie>

More images on the event in our blog:

<http://theinfiniteupplyof.weebly.com/1/post/2011/04/youths-hands-on-launch-the-infinite-supply-of-ii.html>

LA SALLE The Infinite Supply Of Exhibition Opening Documentary:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zLs8gGkRb4>

Aug 4-13 2010

EDGEWORTHIA GARDNERI

What we can learn from LASALLE artists/students

by Lin Weijian



I have been working for over a year with students and lecturers from LASALLE College of the Arts on various projects, from an art workshop for autistic children, to the *Edgeworthia gardneri* paper exhibition held in August 2010, to an overseas community service expedition to Sikkim in December 2010, which resulted in a travelogue exhibition, *The Infinite Supply Of* in mid-February 2011.

I must say that it was by fate and not by chance that Singapore Management University (SMU) students were linked up with LASALLE lecturers through Ms Shirley Soh, an ex-student of LASALLE and ex-staff member of SMU. She brilliantly fostered the linkage between our school community project to Sikkim, northeast India, and the artists at LASALLE. The Sikkim community project's focus was on the local village's handmade paper-making unit, which made organic paper from the barks of the Argali plant (*Edgeworthia gardneri*). The first SMU team went up in December 2007. In the 2007 project, before the collaboration, SMU students were going up simply to see how they could contribute to the village. Learning from that first project, SMU students could only contribute their business knowledge they had learned to the small village factory, but were pretty much helpless when it came to improving the actual paper products which were being made and sold, such as notebooks and paper bags. Hence, knowing that the students lacked knowledge about both art and the material, Ms Soh pulled the two institutions together and planted the seed that nobody imagined could blossom into the huge tree that it is

today, bearing fruits and providing shelter for various people in Singapore and Sikkim.

Our first collaboration was an art workshop with autistic children. With the expertise of LASALLE students Bridget Tay, Ashley Yeo and their friends, we co-conducted a workshop sharing the love and joy of art and craft and bringing out the creativity of the children. The workshop ran seamlessly, and the parents were very impressed by both the way it was conducted and the final art products made. One parent went to the extent of asking if she could replicate the materials at home so that her son could play with them. I was amazed at the simplicity of creating beautiful products from simple materials and bringing joy to others in the process.

The next collaboration was a big one, the *Edgeworthia gardneri* exhibition at Praxis Space in August 2010. Lecturers and students used the Argali paper we brought back from the village from the 2009 Sikkim expedition and created beautiful pieces of art, bringing out the essence of a basic material that most of us take for granted. Words alone cannot do justice to the amazing art



pieces that the LASALLE artists made, because of the whole range of creativity and skill that went into the creation process. I will let the pictures of the artwork do the talking.

After the successful week-long exhibition, new works of art were created for another exhibition at SMU in October 2010, *The Sustainable Shop*. The concept behind the shop was to sell sustainable and interesting products related to a community like Sikkim and channel the funds raised back to the community. Fresh paper was flown in from Sikkim and LASALLE artists got cracking again, demonstrating their creativity and passion for art and paper through the artworks and products. Paper was transformed into many shapes, sizes and applications such as sling bags, Wallets, and boxes, and attracted a lot of attention and sales from visitors, raising a substantial amount for the village in Sikkim.

By this time, we had also started to recruit members for the December 2010 Sikkim expedition, and we knew we had to get LASALLE artists on board to add more value to the paper-making unit and share the love for art and craft with the school children. These students and lecturers were very supportive and integrated well as a team as we worked on the pre-trip administrative details and planning meetings for the expedition. On the trip itself, they shared their knowledge of art and paper with the paper-making unit, exchanging information, creating new art forms, and improving the product lines which the manager Mr. Jaganath Sharma, was very thankful for.





Today, we have evangelists for the paper-making unit and Sikkim in the form of passionate LASALLE students and teachers, and through their own initiative, they shared their stories with us at the recent travelogue exhibition, *The Infinite Supply Of*, showcasing their experiences and feelings in Sikkim.

The whole experience of liaising and working with LASALLE artists got me to reflect on certain special traits and lessons that I felt everyone can learn from and I would like to share them here:

1) Passion

The courage to pursue something which they strongly believe in is one of the first things you can feel when you interact with LASALLE students. Passion exuded from every word and action when you talked to them about their art and lives. Not many of us have the courage to live passionately, and I believe that if everyone were to live their passions, there would be no sad people in this world. I really admire this special trait of theirs.

2) Awareness

Awareness of self, of the raw material and of the world. Be a master of yourself and you are the master of the world. LASALLE artists that I talk to have a huge awareness of themselves as human beings in this world they come into contact with. Some of my peers rush through life busying themselves with everything and anything, never stopping to take a break to find their true selves- something that I too am guilty of. I think it is very important to learn to stop and reflect every once in a while so that one can really live with purpose and lead a meaningful life.

3) Creativity

Often, when we are confronted with a problem, we sometimes shirk and think of using solutions which are already tried and tested. LASALLE artists taught me not to only think within the box, but out of the box too to explore unique solutions that might solve the problem. A perfect example was the problem of raising funds for the expedition. In the discussions, many original ideas were suggested by LASALLE artists, and I learned that we need to think of possibilities rather and then work within the constraints to make things happen. That is truly creativity as espoused by many great artists.

In conclusion, within the short span of a year, I have been humbled and inspired through my various interactions with LASALLE artists, and I am very thankful for the lessons they have taught me. Collaborating on various projects was a joy, and I certainly hope more can happen in the future. I now know myself better and try to reflect these traits in my life through my conduct, and I must say that it has made me a better person. I hope they do the same for you too. Thank you LASALLE.



The Infinite Supply Of

16th February – 25th February 2011
Praxis Space, LASALLE College of the Arts

Exhibition Review by Michelle Lim

“One travels to taste the unknown in the pursuit of meanings, but often the traveler returns as a witness of life’s abundance.”



Passersby who came close to LASALLE’s faux green on the evening of 16th February 2011 would have noticed the transformation of the usually pallid Praxis Space into a colorfully decorated gallery, with rectangular flags installed high up the longitudinal side in a rather haphazard manner. And then nearing the entrance, there was a hint of dramatic music of an unfamiliar language resonating through the glass windows and the opened door. Any curious individual would have been drawn to the space, to be instantly converted into one of the many guests greeted by a humble reception, with a wooden box filled with a selection of teabags and an electric kettle to fill your cup.

Was there a festivity going on?

The scene was neither a tea tasting session, nor was it a fiesta. Those flags were actually replicas of Tibetan prayer flags (without the Buddhist sutras) hung to spread goodwill and compassion to the visitors, the sounds came from Hindi-Nepali origin, and the *chai*, a rich mix of the essences of India. In fact, that very evening marked the opening of ***The Infinite Supply Of***, a travelogue exhibition inspired by a recent trip to a village on the South Sikkim Himalayas. A set of 5 jackets worn by the artists-turned-adventurers, accompanied by *Khadas* received during the trip, neatly hung under the hand painted “***The Infinite Supply Of***” exhibition title, seen from the entrance, marked their presence.

The team of artists, which consisted of lecturer Betty Susiarjo, an alumna, Michelle Lim, and three Undergraduate students, Ashley Yeo, Mandy Tan and Weixin Chong, from LASALLE’s Faculty of Fine Arts, set off to Borong Polok village in December 2010 to work with the local Handmade Papermaking Unit. They found themselves soaked in the harsh beauty of the natural surroundings, and tasted the rugged tenacity and warmth of village life for two weeks, along with their peers who were affiliated with the Singapore Management University.

A travel to a remote place like such prepares them to live in modesty and scarcity, yet the magic of the place made these travelers, eyewitnesses of life’s richness. Now that the quintet are finally back, they jointly planned the event to share about their 16-day volunteer expedition, engaging visitors from the Lion City with simulated encounters set in a homely Sikkimese flavor, as well as a series of artworks that preserved cherished memoirs from the journey– a small and finite slice of the infinite largeness they were privileged to experience.



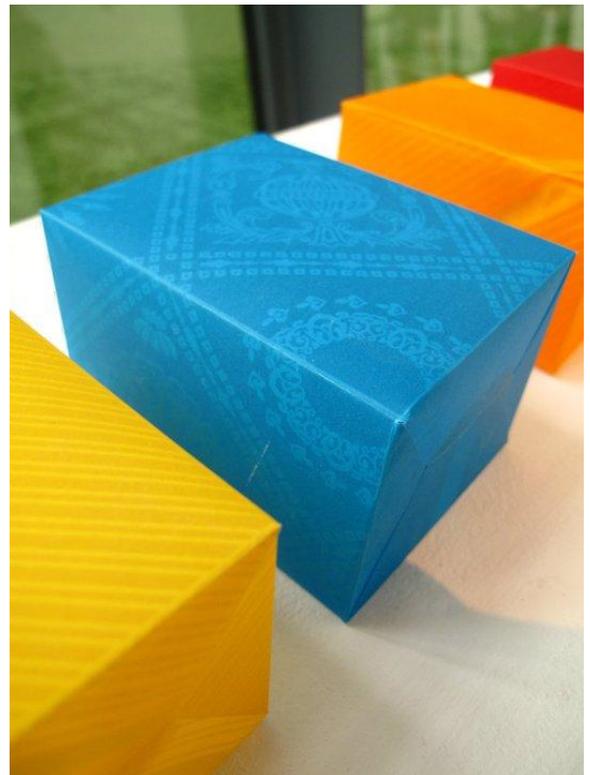
Without a doubt, the travelogue opening was an intimate affair. The curators had effectively used the lively atmosphere of the event to place the viewer in an environment that imitated that of a wedding party they had attended during the trip, enhancing the entire experience with the songs that had entertained them on the long jeep rides up and down the precarious land. At the corner of the space a video loop containing photographs that informed the viewer of the expedition's location and activities was being played. In addition to the sights and sounds, a whiff of aroma from takeaway boxes drew hungry horses for a treat! The curators had specially ordered *Momos*, homemade traditional Nepalese dumplings, and this time, an exhibition was really also about the food.

7 Days A Week

The *Momos* being served during the opening complemented Weixin's artworks perfectly, as she displayed ceramic dumplings packed in some of the self-made take out boxes, reminiscent of the lovely friends from Borong who had taken the trouble to make the dish from scratch, in a place where the environment was harsh.

7 Days A Week, the most colourful from her body of works, reflected the daily encounters of one residing in the village. You could buy *Momos* as well as local pastries, packed in patterned paper boxes there, which possesses a different aesthetic compared to the packaging of food in the more developed regions in the world.

There was something reassuring and friendly about the earthy handmade look that many items had and Weixin tried to interpret that in her series, which embodied the hospitality of the things that seem familiar yet different at the same time. Being fascinated by such patterns on the pastry boxes, **7 Days A Week** was modeled from coloured tracing paper with the designs silk-screened on them, which spoke of the personal element that underscores every exchange, regardless of technology or time.



Sketches and Pressed Flowers from Borong Polok

The exhibit of dried flora amongst journal pages pinned on the walls is vast but do not overwhelm the viewer. Instead, these entries by Ashley quietly invite one to take a step closer to sieve through the tiny writings that accompany quick sketches in loose strokes.

These sketchbook extracts recorded conversations at its instant, capturing those memories without technology, but with the mighty pen. As you peer through the diary pages like a voyeur, unspoken words amidst these sketches made on site allows you to piece together the world that Ashley was part of in the fortnight in December.

Incidents such as the "**Curse of the Strawberry Socks**" (where she illustrated her belief that wearing her favourite pair of socks, was the main reason why 2 pairs of slippers snapped in consecutive episodes) and a self-portrait, which indicated a list of borrowed garments from different team mates used as part of her daily wear, conveyed a curiosity in human responses and her gratitude towards all things great and small. They reflected an intrinsic side of Ashley, which is seldom seen in her more well-known melancholic mix-media artworks that deal with fantastical characters portrayed in a secret chaos; this time, Ashley was engaging with real people.



The Protection Series

A comfort object provides psychological comfort, especially in times of stress and a travel away from home. Walking through the exhibition, a security blanket is spotted, made from a combination of Sikkimese printed silk sewn between muslin. Upon closer inspection, **Betty Muslin Blanket** was also embellished with ceramic buttons at one of its ends, custom made for **The Protection Series**. These irregular buttons resembled unpolished rocks in earthy tones, emulating the landscape of the rough mountainous region, and were stitched on the other comfort objects in the series.

During the period of travel, Betty had noticed that her travel companions sought comfort in different objects taken from home, and established a cause in safeguarding these items.

This brought about the an interesting idea of creating handmade cases and covers for these comfort objects which interestingly enough include **Mandy Torch and Vitamin-C Case, Ashley Cosmetic Bag, Michelle Crystal Bag and Weixin Chickpea Bag**, each personalized and named after her respective roommates.



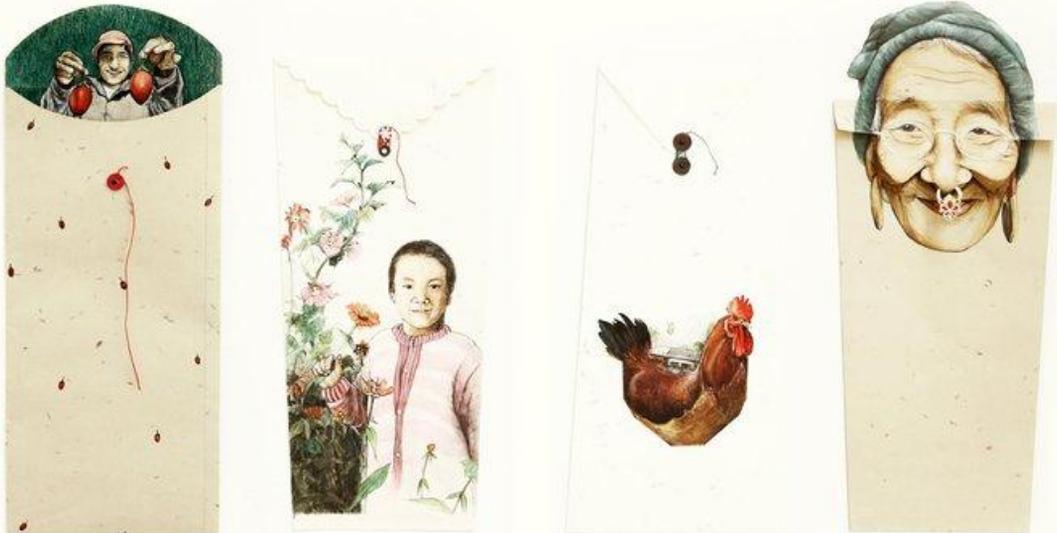
Dancing Men & Pocketful of Sunshine

Coming back to a busy Singaporean lifestyle, the recollections of the simple life urged Mandy and me to imagine an escape back to where we had been.

This trip has certainly strengthened the willpower of an individual, and Mandy's longing to return was evident in her framed drawings, as they lie frozen in time on the wooden shelves. It also brought about an affirmative change, and the courage to take on a new approach in creating artworks as seen in *Dancing Men* where Mandy had created designs around the subject using pyrography.



Both of us translated our emotions in a set of whimsical drawings of the beings that intrigued us. In *Pocketful of Sunshine*, instead of articulating an idea, the portraits that I had drawn expressed the tender feelings I felt in Sikkim and above all, my growing fondness for the strangers who have now become great friends.



The envelopes were created with the thought that it will demand more than a regular sized envelope to contain the never-ending letters I will write to my new friends. These drawings were illustrated on handmade envelopes of unusual designs, with hidden quirks; *Pocketful of Sunshine #7: Hajur! I Want To Grow Old Like Amai* was an envelope that revealed the head of an elderly Sikkimese lady with a discreet septum ring (common in Sikkim), and in #2 of the series, *Mr Jaganathan & The Freshly-picked Turmates*, I had depicted on the inside of the folder the drawing of the manager of the local Paper Making Unit holding up bright red fruits when opened.

I chose to use a palette of warm colour for this body of work as contrasted with the usual darker nature of my other self-exploratory works, and Mandy's series of works were also reflective of her self discovery during her time up in the Himalayas.



All in all, we saw many developments in our recent works. Frankly, I felt the works came across as very positive artworks that were light-hearted and full of joy. The intense feelings of happiness from the village of Borong-Polok were contagious, and I hope it will continue to infect everyone with high spirits as the memories of Sikkim still linger.

Artworks showcased in *The Infinite Supply Of* are archived here <http://theinfinitesupplyof.weebly.com>

Video Documentary of the exhibition opening created by Shah Rizzal can be seen here, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zLs8qGkRb4>

Exhibition catalog available with a kind donation which will contribute to the Borong Polok PMU.





SIKKIM

BY MICHELLE LIM

MALAI SIKKIM MAANPARCHA

27.33°N 88.62°E

As I write, it has been four months since my return to the land of concrete jungles, but the memories of the village of Borong Polok still haunt me till today in both my thoughts and dreams; I am definitely still having the Sikkim Withdrawal Syndrome.

Here is an account of our volunteer trip that lasted a fortnight, in aid of the Borong Polok Handmade Paper Unit (PMU), based in a humble village nestling on the slopes of the Sikkim Himalayas (North-east India).

SINGAPORE—KOLKATA—BAGDOGRA—SIKKIM

Sikkim is the second smallest state in India, which lies between the borders of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan. Coined as India's "Last Shangri-la", Sikkim opened her doors only in the recent years to welcome more visitors to this otherwise inaccessible landlocked region. There are plans for an airport to be built in the state, but before this happens, traveling to our destination was not short of some hassles in between, for it took more than a day to get to our destination.

The team departed Singapore on the evening of Friday, 3rd of December, to transit the next afternoon from Kolkata on a two hour flight to Bagdogra Airport. It was from there that our hosts received us, secured our backpacks on the top of our respective jeeps (the main mode of transport) and then set off on a five hour-long journey.

The scenery changed as we hit the road from Bagdogra — it transitioned from the flat, dusty dirt roads in daylight, to another realm of heights and endless views of plunging cliffs while we ascended the slopes in a long and winding corkscrew fashion. Here, the sun kissed us goodbye by 5pm and suddenly I felt transported to a Jurassic Park-like adventure, minus the prehistoric beasts.

Those with kinetosis popped a pill and snoozed through the bumpy ride, missing out on the panoramic magnificence of the clear night sky. Up here, the canopy of night stars spangled endlessly and became one with the silhouette of the mountain slopes, transforming the lit homes in the distance as one of the heavenly bodies. We passed through several small towns, and



caught a glimpse of the houses by the side of the road through the headlights. It was queer, for they resembled small English cottages with flowerpots of Marigold hanging from the verandas and well-kept gardens. I thought to myself, "This doesn't look like the India I had envisioned", and recalled a quote: To travel is to discover that everyone is wrong about other countries.

The temperature dropped drastically as we reached the higher altitudes and it was freezing by the time we finally arrived at Sangam Academy (SA), a junior school in Borong Polok village with tiny classrooms converted to our dorms. We unloaded our backpacks with chattering teeth, carrying them down a meandering flight of stone steps whilst trying to keep our balance and fighting the cold, then headed to our makeshift kitchen for dinner.

PRABHAT (MORNING)

I woke up on the Sunday at 5.30am. Since breakfast would only be served later at 8.30am, I went for a solitary stroll to explore and to better navigate myself around the village. The villagers had warmly welcomed us with a banner that says "SIKKIM VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME 2010 CONDUCTED BY TEAM VIDYALAY'S SINGAPORE", which we had missed the night before.

Orientation started after joining the rest of the team to the nearby waterfall, followed by breakfast. It began in the office, where our hosts, Nir and Anand introduced us to our cooks. It is customary in Sikkim, as the only state in India that had an ethnic Nepalese majority with strong Buddhist influence, that visitors are presented with welcome gifts in the form of a traditional ceremonial scarf called the Khada, which symbolizes purity of intention and the beginning of relationships.

After lunch, we visited the local monastery, a 15-minute hike from the main road. It was under construction, and in the process of being painted with colorful Tibetan patterns. We went higher up and finally arriving at a resort right above the monastery, where we took a rest in the sitting area where hot tea was served.

RAATRI (NIGHT)

Dusk comes to Sikkim prior to 5pm, and despite the diminishing light, we managed to make our way back for dinner before it turned pitch-dark. Power shortages occurred often and it made time pass more slowly than ever. Without electricity, our activities were limited but the 'inconveniences' might just be a blessing in disguise, turning the situation into excellent times for us to just unwind from our typical Singaporean workaholic lifestyle, and engage in light-hearted chitchat with our newly

acquaintances snuggling around a bonfire built by the locals.

I had learnt that village life is not designed to be comfortable, but instead, to experience what it is like to be out of my comfort zone and live like them. Most of us were not suited for the cold; even Nir and Anand told us they were not prepared for the precipitous weather change in Borong. Previously, they were able to cope with just short-sleeve cotton t-shirts during the winter, but it has since changed due to the ill effects of global warming. We too were experiencing the harsh and unpredictably cold winter season as they were.

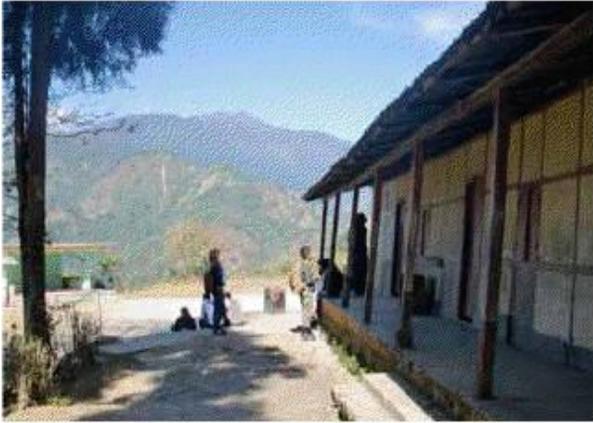
The chilly weather took some getting used to. Being unfamiliar to the temperature plunge to 4°C at nighttime, the seven layers I had on the first night proved to be insufficient. What made it worse was that we did not have a heating system, and the walls of the classrooms were not insulated so the draft could slip through the tiny gaps of the rattan woven walls and through the slit under the wooden door.

BORONG POLOK HANDMADE PAPERMAKING UNIT

Paper has traditionally been made in Sikkim from the bark of the Argali (*Edgeworthia gardneri*) shrub; an abundantly occurring shrub and can be easily propagated. The strength and durability of the Argali paper makes it particularly suitable for monastic scriptures, governmental land records as well as decorative purposes in the form of lampshades and souvenirs. To meet this growing demand, Sikkim Development Foundation (SF) set up Borong Polok Papermaking Unit, a self-sustaining unit which would also generate local employment and supplement income for the community.

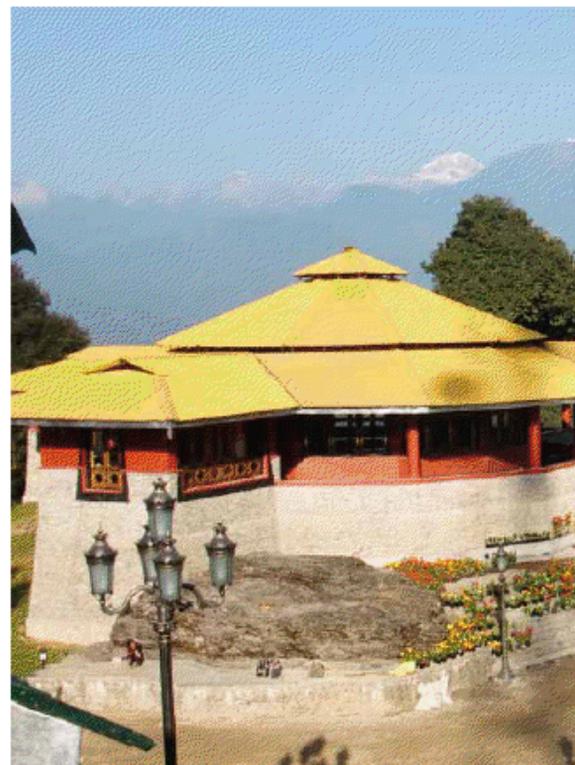
The purpose of us, as LASALLE representatives, was to facilitate the workforce at the PMU with the exchange of knowledge and technical skills that will contribute to the sustainable development of the products produced. This was achieved in the five main workshops we conducted: Silkscreen Frame Building, Silkscreen Printing, Pulp Bead making, Paper Bead making and Book Binding Workshops.

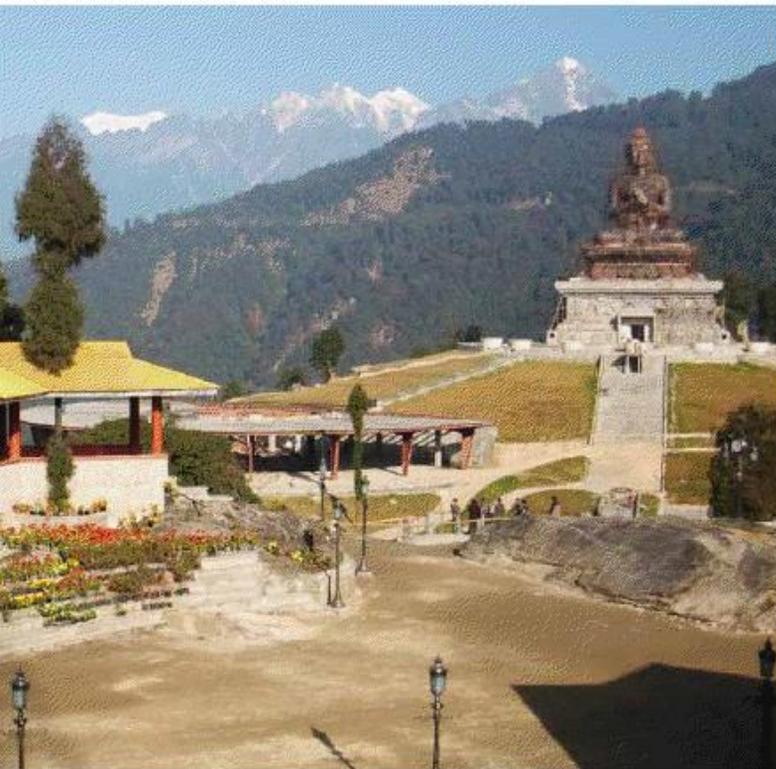
We were privileged to work alongside the six employees at the PMU (all ladies except for Mr. Jagan) in its natural setting, getting to know them, as well as how the PMU operated. The ladies were shy and hardly spoke to us, as they were not fluent in the English language, however they would try to converse with us through gestures, and participated earnestly during the hands-on sessions we had. When there was time to spare, we shared our knowledge in other additional activities such as a woodblock printing session and a paper beads-making kids workshop at SA. As we interacted with Mr. Jagan, we also shared photographs of the *Edgeworthia gardneri* & The Sustainable Shop exhibitions



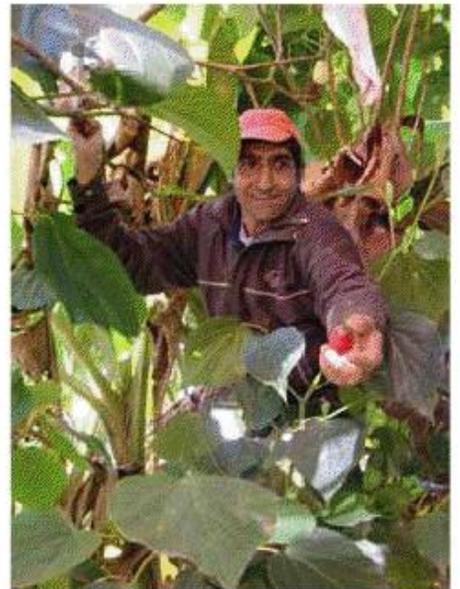


“The ladies were shy and hardly spoke to us, as they were not fluent in the English language, however they would try to converse with us through gestures, and participated earnestly during the hands-on sessions we had.”





Sikkim is the only state in India that has an ethnic Nepalese majority with strong Buddhist influence.



"This Sikkim trip was a wonderful cultural exchange experience as we went regularly for house visits, and even crashed a wedding!"

held in Singapore in 2010, to inform Mr. Jagan about the success of his handmade paper amongst Singaporean artists, who had created artworks from his Argali Paper.

As our work progressed at the PMU, so did the Edu Team at SA. Morning exercise preceded lesson time, both of which were conducted on the courtyard with a chalkboard and three wooden benches. The volunteer tutors corrected and strengthened the childrens' foundation in basic English and Mathematics, taught them about other cultures and tried to raise their awareness of conserving their environment through creative activities and songs. These sessions often ended with running games to keep the children warm.

Sikkim and Singapore are both peaceful countries to grow up in, however, in my view, this 'peace' is varied in the context of the respective locality. Singaporean children might seem to be much better off being sheltered in solid foundations with a conducive learning environment fed with technology. Then again, who is to say the Borong children are not lucky when they are kept away from urbanized society, growing up in the company of nature, which encourages these Sikkimese kids to take their own time to discover and nurturing them to become independent adults of fine, good-natured temperaments. This, I find, is a wonderful value that is missing in a competitive and meritocratic society like ours. Unlike the Sikkimese, Singaporeans rush too much and sometimes fail to fully understand or appreciate what we have, resulting perhaps to a sense of complacency and taking things for granted.

MR. JAGANNATH KOIRALA SHARMA

What kept me going throughout the trip was working with Mr. Jagan; he was a 'joker' in his own way and can be unpredictable with the surprises he springs on people. As we worked closely with Mr. Jagan at the PMU, we learnt more about the humble family person that he is, his love for nature and his passion of running his factory.

On a particular day just after the bead workshop, Mr. Jagan was feeling inspired by Ashley's bumblebee beads and instantaneously made a flower paper cut and sprinkled some sawdust on the flower to create a pollen-like bead. You could say that Mr. Jagan was truly a creative innovator, as he also continued to experiment with ways that he could make more beads at the shortest time with his idiosyncratic techniques.

At times, Mr. Jagan would abruptly leave ongoing conversations to pluck berries, hunt for flowers and twigs in order to better illustrate his intentions as he found it difficult to translate them from Nepalese. Once, he startled Betty and I when we were hiking up the path from PMU, as he suddenly leapt onto a tree

from the side of the slope, gathered some red fruits and threw them to us. Apparently, he had spotted some ripe fruits, called Turmate and simply just wanted us to have a taste of the fruit.

He also has a good knowledge of the medicinal plants of Sikkim, for he is the proud owner of the lesser-known local Wild Flower Retreat, the only 'hotel' you can book to stay at Borong Polok. This 'hotel' comprised of six cottages — log cabins that are nestled amidst a beautiful garden of herbs and flowers. Ayurvedic treatment is very popular in Borong, as the nearest hospital is approximately three hour drive away. Sometimes the locals would pluck leaves, such as the Tittay Patti (Nepali for Common Wormwood) and put it to our noses as an instant cure to morning sinus and the flu. When Sachita found out that I was having a sore throat, she recommended shredded ginger and salt with boiling water, and it actually tasted really delicious like chicken soup!

Mr. Jagan, I discovered, is also a relentless and determined person. Over tea at his home, I found out from his wife that she had sleepless nights and no appetite when her husband risked his life in an excruciating nine hour ordeal on foot, to the nearest post office in town to deliver an Argali paper order to Singapore. She explained that no jeeps would take him down to the capital as it was the monsoon season where increasing possibilities of landslides made transportation extremely perilous, so the roads had to be closed. He went anyway, carrying the 30kg load on his back, covered with only a huge plastic sheet, even though everyone in the village told him not to. The delivery left Mr. Jagan hospitalized for three days as his both legs swelled due to water retention and the pressure exerted on them. When we found out that this particular delivery was made especially for us in Singapore for the purpose of The Sustainable Shop exhibition, I felt so guilty and broke down. Sometimes now when he comes to mind again, tears still well up in my eyes.

NAMASTE!

In the "happy homeland" (Sikkim is derived from a local dialect, "Sukh-im"), we were always greeted with smiling people, most who are still innocent and unspoiled by the ways of modern life. We were puzzled at how people in Borong could remain so cheery all the time, and wondered if they ever got angry at anyone. We got our answer from Mr. Jagan who quipped that "seldom people get angry in Borong but if they do, they will be happy again between one to four hours".

This Sikkim trip was a wonderful cultural exchange experience as we went regularly for house visits, and even crashed a wedding! On some evenings, we were invited to students' homes. We were shown to their sitting rooms, where they served us tea, biscuits and home made crackers, and the ladies had henna designs





applied by candlelight.

The Sikkimese are always enthusiastic to strike up conversations, and also as eager to share what they have. Once I was alone exploring when I met a farmer of the pea plantation nearby SA. Even though he could not speak English well, he tried to ask me how I was doing in Sikkim and offered me a bunch of peas freshly plucked from his crop. It was a simple gesture, but it goes a long way and I fondly remember that incident until to day.

Living in Borong heals the soul, and I was rejuvenated. But now that I am back here, I am greeted by either stern stares, or we pass neighbours without looking at each other at all. People in cosmopolitan cities keep to themselves, which makes me miss meeting friendly strangers everyday in Borong who appreciates life and in turn appreciated my existence.

JAAM (LET'S GO) HAPPINESS

A thought came to mind on a train ride home, and I asked myself how and what makes me love a place. This trip was different from my other wanderlusts. Upon reflection, I realised it was the strong bonds forged with these people that make one feel different about a place. The love for the people I have met and encountered on this trip are etched in my memory and difficult to erase.

In just two weeks, a strange bond was forged with the villagers — it was a warm and indescribable feeling I have never experienced in my life. I came back to the fast paced Singapore feeling recharged, exceptionally happy and missing everyone from Borong.

I hope that some of the climatic problems and issues of road blockages during the season of landslides will be resolved soon. I am also confident that at the rate that Mr Jagan is working at, always on the ball with having many ideas, the PMU will be more successful than now. Only time will tell, with patience and determination. We just need to continue to be positive and support the worthy cause of promoting the PMU in whatever way we can. And I will pray on our side, that this year will be a good year for everyone, and for the years to come.

Malai Sikkim Manparche (I love Sikkim)! It is certain that I am saving up for my plane ticket back.

This article first appeared in the Fifth Edition of PRAXIS PRESS in May 2011.

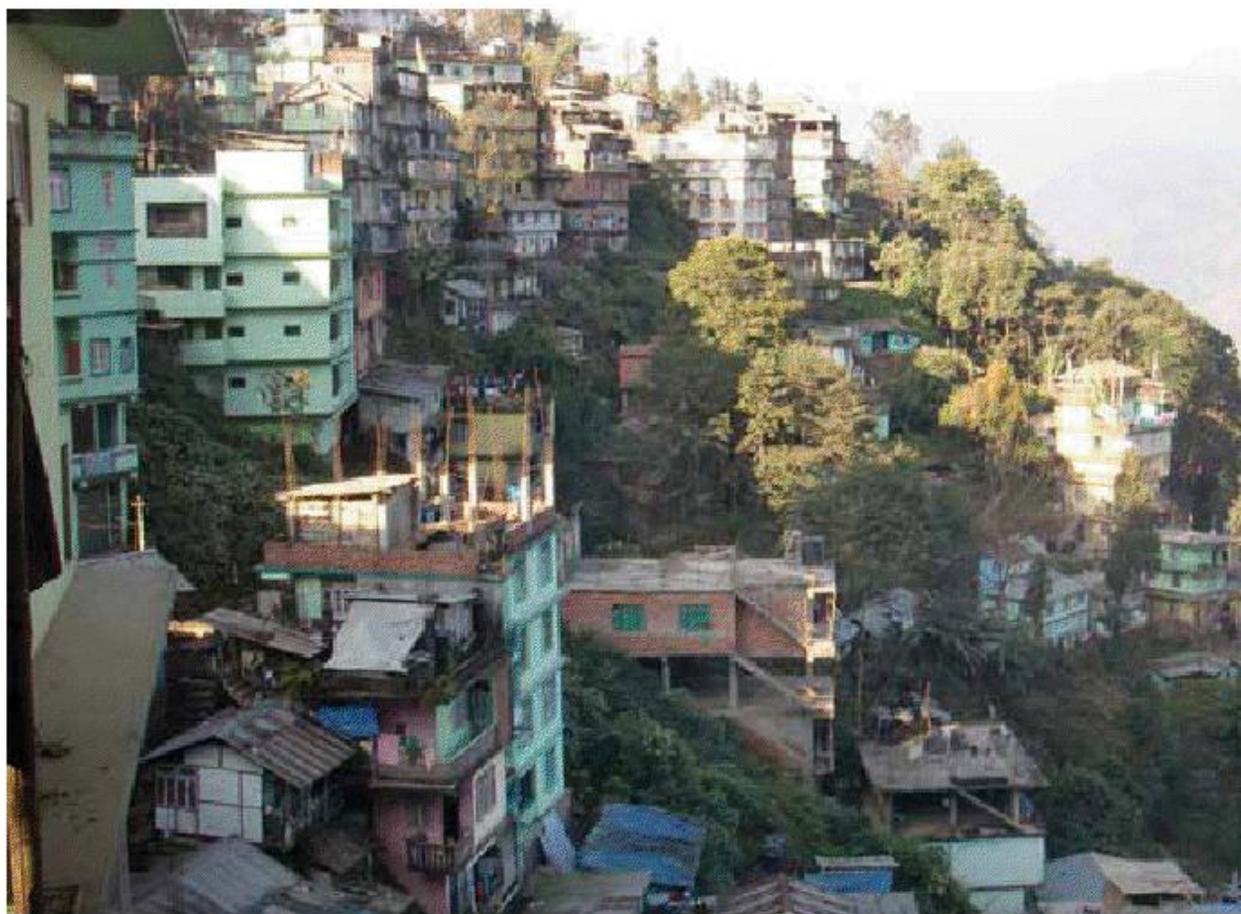
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If you have any ideas/ suggestions to improve/aid the Borong Polok Paper-Making Unit, please write to theinfinitesupplyof@gmail.com





"We were always greeted with smiling people, most who are still innocent and unspoiled by the ways of modern life."





“To travel is to discover that everyone is wrong
about other countries.”

— Aldous Huxley

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