



## **Walking the Hills of Sikkim & Darjeeling - November 2024**

**Nov 15, 2024 - Nov 29, 2024**

### **Group tour with Saurabh Bhandekar & Kabir Pradhan**

Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills are lands of soaring Himalayan peaks and stunning views, quaint farming villages and lively market towns. Unusually for India, population density is low and protected forest coverage is high. This makes it something of an outlier in a country which is seeing rapid population growth and urban development.

Accompanied by Saurabh Bhandekar and guided by North East India native Kabir Pradhan, we explore this unique region on foot, with full day walks through a variety of landscapes including forests, pastoral land and farming hamlets. Each night we return to comfortable accommodation, ranging from heritage hotels to farmstays and tea planters' bungalows. Along the way we learn about the numerous ethnic groups who call this region of India home, including Tibetans, Nepalis, Bengalis, Lepchas and Bhotias.

We travel in November, when flowers are in full bloom, the air is clearest and mountain views at their best. With favourable conditions we are afforded regular views of the main Himalayan range, including of Khangchendzonga, the third highest mountain in the world (as above, seen from Darjeeling). As is always the case with our hosted tours, there is good food, unique accommodation and the company of like-minded travellers. The tour runs for 15 days and is limited to 12 people.

## Trip Summary

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### **November 15 - Day 1: Arrive Kolkata**

Kolkata

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### **November 16 - Day 2: Kolkata**

Introduction to Kolkata

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### **November 17 - Day 3: Kolkata**

Exploring Kolkata

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### **November 18 - Day 4: Kolkata - Bagdogra - Kalimpong**

Flight and drive to Kalimpong

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### **November 19 - Day 5: Kalimpong**

Exploring Kalimpong surrounds on foot

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### **November 20 - Day 6: Kalimpong**

Exploring Kalimpong on foot

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### **November 21 - Day 7: Kalimpong – Rinchenpong**

Travel day - drive to Rinchenpong

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### **November 22 - Day 8: Rinchenpong**

Walk to Rinchenpong monastery

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### **November 23 - Day 9: Rinchenpong - Uttarey - Rinchenpong**

Day walk in Uttarey

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### **November 24 - Day 10: Rinchenpong – Turuk**

Travel day - drive to Turuk

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### **November 25 - Day 11: Turuk**

Walk to Tarey Bhir

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### **November 26 - Day 12: Turuk - Darjeeling**

Travel day - drive to Darjeeling

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### **November 27 - Day 13: Darjeeling - Glenburn**

Exploring Darjeeling

Glenburn Tea Estate

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### **November 28 - Day 14: Glenburn**

Walking from Glenburn

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### **November 29 - Day 15: Darjeeling - Kolkata**

Travel day - drive and flight to Kolkata, departure

## November 15 - Day 1: Arrive Kolkata



### Kolkata

Arrive Kolkata in the evening. You'll be met on arrival and transferred to Fairlawn, our accommodation for the next three nights.

Known as a centre for culture and learning, Calcutta (now Kolkata) was the capital of India during the British Raj when it was a leading centre for commerce and a port of call for east bound ships. Patronised by wealthy art connoisseurs, who nourished writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, philosophers and scientists, it became the social and cultural capital of India. With its rich colonial heritage as well as wonderful mosques, temples, universities and museums, this city has an overwhelming wealth of sights and experiences to offer visitors.



### The Elgin Fairlawn

Located at the heart of the most lively and historic part of the city, The Elgin Fairlawn is an award-winning heritage hotel in a colonial-era building circa 1783. Popular landmarks like Indian Museum, Victoria Memorial and the charming Park Street are within walking distance from the hotel.

The spacious rooms have an en suite and some delightful luxury flourishes. It also houses a Garden Cafe and a Lobby Lounge which has been a Sudder Street landmark for many years.

<https://www.elginhotels.com/hotels-in-kolkata-elgin-fairlawn-heritage-hotel-since-1783/>



## November 16 - Day 2: Kolkata



### Introduction to Kolkata

We attempt to have a reasonably low-key introduction to Kolkata today. Keeping the breaks on the group's enthusiasm is tricky because Kolkata is such an amazing city, with both a significant past and an intriguing, ever-evolving present. We'll visit the flower market, walk the Howrah bridge, take a ferry on the Hooghly River, walk through Kumartuli (filled with clay idol workshops) and finish with the Victoria Memorial, with a stop for a local lunch along the way.



## November 17 - Day 3: Kolkata



### Exploring Kolkata

Today we have a full day of exploring Kolkata. Though rapidly modernising, the city retains a manual 'hand-powered' aspect that's fascinating to the visitor. Hand-pulled carts, street book stalls and buildings of the colonial age vie with towering apartment blocks and advertising hoardings for attention - a microcosm of a larger tension playing out across India.

We begin the day with a walking tour run by 'Calcutta Walks'. Their walks aim to bring to life aspects of the city which are mostly missed or misunderstood by the casual observer. The walk takes place in 'the natives' area', Sovabazar, an ever-vital hub of traditional Bengali culture. It contains a fascinating blend of the seemingly incongruous architectural forms from Islamic to Baroque, from Victorian to Bengali, which made up the old world dwellings of the city's wealthier Bengalis. Unchanged for several decades, this is a good place to observe the Bengali way of life - rituals, customs, cultural practices and so on and the manual, slow pace of life that Kolkata is known for.

In the afternoon we change gears and visit Mother's House - the home and now memorial of Mother Theresa - and finish the day with a visit to a beautiful Jain temple.

Meals: B, D



## November 18 - Day 4: Kolkata - Bagdogra - Kalimpong



### Flight and drive to Kalimpong

We fly to Bagdogra this morning. Bagdogra sits in the Siliguri Corridor or so called 'Chickens Neck of India', a 20 km wide stretch of India sandwiched between Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal which connects the seven states of northeast India to the rest of India. Here we meet Kabir and drive for approximately 4 hours to Kalimpong, where we spend the next three nights.

Kalimpong sits on a ridge overlooking the Teesta River and the Himalayas. Located at an average elevation of 1,250 metres, it is well known for its horticulture (particularly its wide array of orchids and gladioli) and spectacular views.

Up to the early 1700s, the Kalimpong area was part of the Sikkim raja's domain. In the early 18th century, the Bhutan king took it over. In 1865, following the Anglo-Bhutan War, it was annexed to Darjeeling. Scottish missionaries came here in the late 1800s and the town thrived as a wool-trading centre with Tibet until the 1950s. Until recently Kalimpong was a quiet hill town, but has become busier as plains' people have rediscovered its comfortable climate and scenic beauty.

On arrival check into our hotel, if there is time and energy we can head out for a look around and stretch of the legs. Being his home town, Kabir will be keen to showcase Kalimpong to us.



#### Mayfair Himalayan Resort, Kalimpong

The Mayfair Himalayan Resort has several wings and sections spread across an impressive expanse of hill land which on clear days affords panoramic views of the main Himalayan range. The hotel has a rich and fascinating history with guests ranging from world leaders to the first mountaineering pioneers to climb Mt Everest.

<https://www.mayfairhotels.com/mayfair-kalimpong/>

Meals: B, D

## November 19 - Day 5: Kalimpong



### Exploring Kalimpong surrounds on foot

We head out of town for our first countryside walk.

Today's walk will focus on gaining an understanding of the rural lifestyle in the villages of Kalimpong. This is Kabir's home territory and thus fertile ground for exploring and learning. The walk takes us through agricultural lands and some forest patches. As Kalimpong is mainly an agriculture town, you will also get an opportunity to learn about the techniques of terrace farming practiced in the hills. In the villages, we can interact with local community members, learning about the area, culture and heritage through their tales. We wind up at Kabir's farm for lunch, prepared by Kabir's wife Ahana.

*Trail notes: Our first two days of walks are a good gentle introduction to walking in the hills - it will ease us into 'Nepalese flat' ie undulating terrain which is the norm in the region. The paths today are a mix of village pathways and tarmac roads in some sections. Total distance is around 9 kms. We'll be out for the best part of the day.*

Meals: B, L, D



## November 20 - Day 6: Kalimpong



### Exploring Kalimpong on foot

Kalimpong has a regular haat (or local market). It is a visual treat to see the cornucopia of items sold and a wonderful introduction to the local way of life. On sale could be anything from seeds, seasonal vegetables and fruits, to flowers, spices, livestock, clothes and much more. This morning we will visit the haat.

Afterwards we continue walking uphill through villages, with a stop at Dr Graham's Homes (DGH), a 116 year old missionary school. On a clear day, you get stunning views of the majestic Himalayan peaks whilst on this trail. The trail then descends back to the main road where we visit a private home to learn the basics of preparing a Nepali dish – Nepali being one of the dominant ethnic communities of the area. The cooking demonstration will be followed by lunch. (The cooking demonstration is very casual; if you prefer to eat rather than cook you can relax with a glass of plum wine instead!)

Afterwards we visit an amazing nursery where literally hundreds of species of plants are cultivated. In the late afternoon there is the option to explore town or return to the hotel for a rest, before dinner at the hotel.

*Once again the distance is 8 - 10 kms. After walking through town and the haat we climb up to Dr Graham's Homes on made road through the outskirts of Kalimpong, and then descend to the lunch spot on a small village path.*

Meals: B, L, D



## November 21 - Day 7: Kalimpong – Rinchenpong



### Travel day - drive to Rinchenpong

This morning we depart Kalimpong, dropping back down to the Teesta River and crossing over into Sikkim. We stop at the state border to obtain an 'Inner Line Permit', the special permission required for all foreign visitors to Sikkim. (Sikkim was an independent country until 1975, and retains a number of measures and controls relating to government, bureaucracy, taxation and policing most usually associated with a sovereign state - one of the many fascinating aspects of the region and something we will learn more about as we travel). We continue driving for around 3 hours to Rinchenpong, and check in to Yangsum Heritage Farm. We'll stop for lunch en route (direct payment).

The heritage farmhouse, Yangsum, was built in 1833 and re-modelled in 1966. The homestay is run by Thendup Tashi and his wife, Pema, who manage the 44-acre mountain farm consisting of open mixed forest of pine, Himalayan alder, schima, chestnut, magnolia, rhododendrons, cherry and others. The farmhouse is tucked away far from the crowds, in an idyllic countryside, with a backdrop of the Khangchendzonga group of peaks.

Yangsum Farm is a rustic lodge, simpler than our other accommodations. It is a chance to experience a more personal Sikkimese hospitality, and an ideal place to access remote west Sikkim.

The afternoon is a chance to settle in, meet our hosts and enjoy this unique spot.

Meals: B, D



## November 22 - Day 8: Rinchenpong



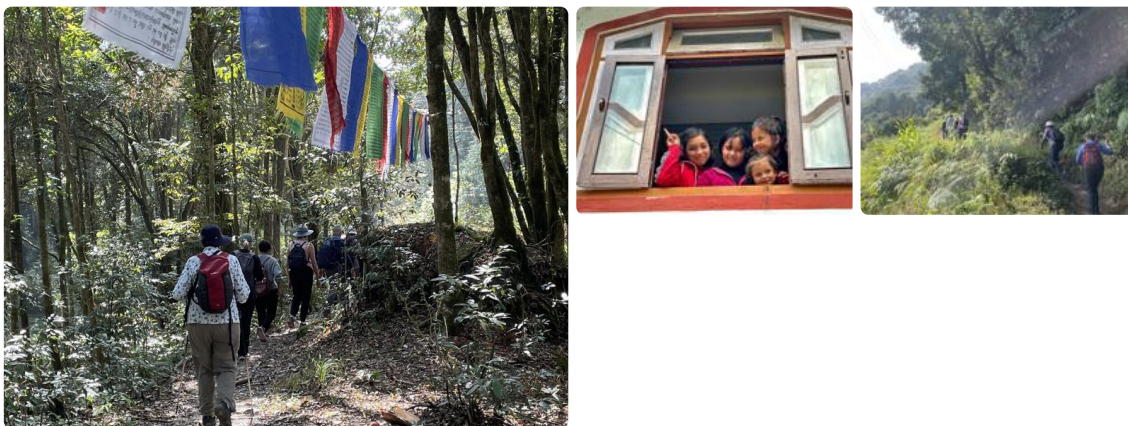
### Walk to Rinchenpong monastery

After breakfast, we hike to the Rinchenpong monastery and an old Lepcha heritage house. The walk takes us through both forested patches and small farming hamlets.

The humble Rinchenpong monastery, built in 1739, belongs to the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism. There is also an active monastic school for young monks, who number around 100. After visiting the monastery, we continue to climb for another 30 minutes, leading to the hill top where an old Gompa, a Tibetan Buddhist place of learning, is located. Further on we'll stop for a simple picnic lunch in the yard of a Lepcha heritage house (Lepchas are considered to be the indigenous people of Sikkim). Thereafter we make our way back to our farmstay.

*Trail notes: Today's walk is predominantly through forest, with occasional patches of agricultural land and a few village hamlets. Elevation gain/loss is greater today than the walks around Kalimpong. We'll be out for the best part of the day.*

Meals: B, L, D



## November 23 - Day 9: Rinchenpong - Uttarey - Rinchenpong



### Day walk in Uttarey

Today we drive westerly for around 2 hours to Uttarey, which was a thriving business hub until 1970s for Indo-Nepal trade. Materials such as ayurvedic herbs, animal skins, dairy products, local distilleries' produce and cattle were bartered for salt, flour and rice. It is also believed to be the route via which the much-revered Guru Padmasambhava walked into Sikkim.

We explore the surrounding area and villages, with a mix of uphill and downhill terrain, passing through small farms and forested areas. Being a border region to Nepal, you can see Nepalese influence in the villages – in how they build their houses, what they wear and even the dialect they speak. Lunch will be at a village home.

*Trail notes: The walk is once again Nepalese flat terrain, on village walking paths and country roads.*

In the late afternoon drive back to Rinchenpong and overnight Yangsum Farm.

Meals: B, L, D



## November 24 - Day 10: Rinchenpong – Turuk



### Travel day - drive to Turuk

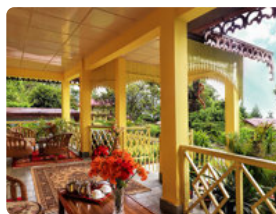


After a leisurely breakfast, we drive to Turuk (3.5 hours), located in south Sikkim, and check in to Turuk Kothi. En route, conditions permitting, we take a short walk down to a small but important Buddhist shrine located on the banks of the River Rungeet.

Turuk Kothi, built in 1848, is an old mountain estate - now home to the fifth generation of the Pradhan family. Turuk Kothi was home to the first minter of Sikkim, Laxmi Das Pradhan and also served as the District Headquarters for many years. Even after over 160 years, the descendants of Laxmi Das Pradhan continue to live in the same house. (Kabir is related to the family who owns and runs Turuk Kothi, so it will be a homecoming of sorts!)

We have lunch on arrival, and later in the afternoon there is the option to walk along the quiet hill roads that run in either direction from the property.

Meals: B, L, D



## November 25 - Day 11: Turuk



### Walk to Tarey Bhir

After breakfast, we walk in the surrounding region. Passing through small villages we reach Tarey Bhir. The word 'Bhir' means cliff in the local Nepali dialect and this Bhir has a 3,500 feet abrupt drop.

On reaching Tarey Bhir, we can continue to walk further down on the ridge to a viewpoint from where you can catch a glimpse of the confluence of the River Teesta and River Rangeet and the boundless expanse of blue hills of the Eastern Himalayas. Afterwards we return to Turuk Kothi for a late lunch and the afternoon at leisure - a good chance to catch up on some reading and later migrate to the fire for a glass of wine.

*Trail notes: The walk starts out with an uphill climb on quiet tarmac roads and farming paths, eventually reaching Tarey Bhir. From here there is a pathway along a pronounced ridge - the bhir - though thankfully on a well-made footpath with a sturdy handrail. The views along here are stunning. The total distance today is less than previous days, however the gradient is greater.*

Meals: B, L, D



## November 26 - Day 12: Turuk - Darjeeling



### Travel day - drive to Darjeeling

This morning we leave Turuk and south Sikkim, crossing back over the Teesta River and into West Bengal. From here it's a steep climb up through tea plantations to the famed hill station of Darjeeling. The total drive is around 4 hours, though a lot depends on the traffic in Darjeeling.

Darjeeling has been a popular hill station since the British established it as a rest and recreation centre for officials of the East India Company in the mid-1800s. Situated at an altitude of 2100m Darjeeling is surrounded by tea plantations from all sides. Outside the monsoon season and on clear days, the views over the mountains to the snowy peaks of Khangchendzonga are some of the best in the region.

This afternoon there is the option to explore Darjeeling at your own pace, which will have a 'big city' feel after our time in the countryside. The main bazaar is a riot of shops selling everything from daily needs to knick knacks to Tibetan rugs.

#### Windamere Hotel

Windamere is situated on Observatory Hill, a Darjeeling landmark. Established in the 19th century as a cosy boarding house for bachelor English and Scottish tea planters, it was converted into a hotel just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Today it is well known for its ambience and charm. Its uniquely decorated, vintage-style rooms are named after historical figures who have stayed in them. The location of the hotel is the best of any in Darjeeling, perfect for stepping out into the thick of the action.

<http://www.windamerehotel.com/>

Meals: B, D



## November 27 - Day 13: Darjeeling - Glenburn



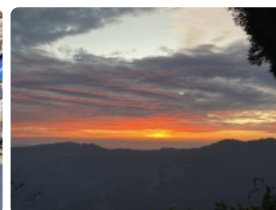
### Exploring Darjeeling

For the early-risers there's a fabulous sunrise view of the main range to be had from the Mall Rd just behind the hotel.

This morning we visit the main bazaar, crisscrossing town on narrow laneways and steep stairways to take in everyday life in this regional centre, as well as some of the historical points of interest. Towards the end of the morning we'll stop for a light lunch (direct payment).

After lunch, we walk to Darjeeling Station to see the engineering marvel of the DHR – the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. We take a joy ride to Ghum, the highest railway station in India. From here we have a drive of 90 mins to Glenburn Tea Estate, our accommodation for the next two nights.

Meals: B, D



### Glenburn Tea Estate

Glenburn Tea Estate was started by a Scottish tea company in 1859, eventually passing into the hands of one of India's pioneering tea planting families – the Prakash family. Today, the property is managed by the third and fourth generation of the family who carry almost a century of tea knowledge in their inheritance. With over 400 hectares of private forest and two rivers running through the estate, this is a delightfully peaceful place to stay and explore.

<http://www.glenburnteaestate.com/>



## November 28 - Day 14: Glenburn



### Walking from Glenburn

Today, after bed-tea and breakfast, we walk down to the Glenburn Campsite, situated on the banks of the River Rungeet. The Glenburn guide/naturalist will lead the way, taking us through extensive tea plantations and several small villages, past streams and waterfalls, and finally the Simbong forest to the Rungeet itself. Along the way there are views across the valley to Sikkim and to Kalimpong. The forests contain a rich diversity of birds, butterflies, flora and animals typical to this habitat. We'll have a picnic lunch by the river. Afterwards you have the option for further walking along the river, or to return to the main bungalow to enjoy the final afternoon in the hills.

Meals: B, L, D



## November 29 - Day 15: Darjeeling - Kolkata



### Travel day - drive and flight to Kolkata, departure

We farewell the hills and Kabir today. Transfer to Bagdogra airport (3.5 hours) and fly to Kolkata, where we connect with international or domestic flights, or transfer to accommodation for those extending their stay in Kolkata. (Please get in touch if you would like to stay on in Kolkata or would like to continue travelling in India with tailor-made private travel arrangements - see [www.indiaunbound.com.au](http://www.indiaunbound.com.au) for suggested itineraries or contact Lincoln for personalised suggestions based on your interests and requirements).

Meals: B

## Information & Documents



### Pricing and inclusions

**\$8940 per person** twin share

**\$10,815 per person** in a single room\*

#### Included:

- 14 nights' accommodation
- All breakfasts and dinners, lunches as outlined
- Services of English-speaking accompanying guides and local guides in Sikkim and Kolkata

- All activities and sightseeing as mentioned in the itinerary, including entrance fees
- Transfers/touring by mini-van in Kolkata and Toyota Innovas in Sikkim
- Internal flights: Kolkata - Bagdogra - Kolkata in economy class^
- Transfers and assistance on arrival and departure at airports
- Snacks and bottled water in the vehicle
- All land and vehicle taxes
- E-tourist visa for India
- Tips for guides and drivers

**Not included:**

- International flights (we can assist/advise on suitable flights)
- Meals, excursions or activities other than those specifically mentioned in the itinerary
- Drinks, laundry and personal expenses
- Camera fees (rarely applicable)

\* Due to limited room inventory at several hotels we can only accept two single bookings for the tour, on a first served basis.

^Domestic flights in India have a 15 kg checked luggage limit, plus 7 kg of carry on. We can purchase additional check-in luggage for you at \$60 per 5 kg per flight.



## About your hosts

Kabir Pradhan

With a passion for travel along with over 15 years experience in the travel industry, the outdoors has always been my calling. Belonging to the Himalayas has contributed to a natural inclination to the mountains, and I greatly enjoy sharing my understanding and knowledge of local history, culture, music, cuisine, sustainable living and ecotourism.



Saurabh Bhandekar

For close to a decade I have been helping visitors to India go beyond the usual tourist sights and experiences, including the last couple years at India Unbound as a tour coordinator and host. I am passionate about facilitating genuine human connections and sharing the tales of everyday life from my country. When I'm off duty, I unwind with a home-cooked meal and strumming the guitar.



## Preparation, transport and on-tour support

### Preparation

We provide extensive information to enable you to prepare well for the trip. This includes practical information about weather, suggested/required gear, food and health, physical preparation/fitness, money etc. We will conduct a video briefing with the group around 45 days prior. In addition I am available any time to answer questions in the lead up.

### Transport

While in the hills we travel by Toyota Innova cars, rather than bus or mini-van. This has several advantages - the Innovas are more comfortable and a smoother ride and most importantly, more maneuverable around the mountain roads. We will be three or four people to a vehicle, travelling in convoy with communication between the vehicles allowing us to stop as necessary.

### On-tour support and safety

There is phone coverage in most places we visit and walk. We carry comprehensive first-aid kits and Kabir has completed mountain guide training at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling, in addition to extensive experience leading groups in the region and at high altitudes. Kabir has a wide personal and professional network of contacts across Sikkim and can call on assistance and support as necessary.

### Walks and flexibility

We've given an indication of walking distances, terrain and track condition, however this is meant to be indicative rather than definitive. The walks can be modified (ie shortened or lengthened) to some degree (within practical and logistical constraints). In some cases we will have a third (local) guide with us, in which case we can split into two parties, giving greater scope to modify walks.

In general this sort of trip is more rewarding when approached with an open mind and a willingness to be flexible - the most interesting experiences in India are often the unplanned ones - and these experiences can only occur when we open up time for them.

## Sikkim & West Bengal Map

## Fundraising for Wonderkids School

For each tour participant, India Unbound will contribute \$500 to social enterprise The Dignity Project, supporting education and women's health in rural India. Currently the project is supporting Wonderkids School in Khajuraho and a sanitary pad distribution program in the area. India Unbound has had a long association with Wonderkids. Over Covid, India Unbound become the major sponsor of the school, including regular visits by staff and supporters to support the school to implement programs aimed at encouraging students to return to school post-Covid. These programs include establishing a computer lab, a breakfast program and renovating the classrooms. With the support of The Dignity Project the school is shifting to a larger premises in 2024 and expanding to middle school.



