

**FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM**

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## **NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM SANCHAR 104**

September 2008

Dear friends,

This time the newsletter brings the following articles

- Save the Kosi River Campaign
- Two Day Workshop in Appreciative Inquiry
- An Ashram Wedding
- Minutes from the general meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2008
- The Chipko Movement

It has not been be more expensive to be a sponsor, i.e. a sponsorship is 1725 Danish kroner and the subscription 75 Danish kroner (about 230 Euro and 10 Euro) = 1800 Danish kroner. Some people send money once a year for a sponsorship, and others divide the amount during the year. Therefore we will put 75 kroner in the administration account first time in the year, when we receive money from someone. This also applies if you send amounts that are not earmarked. So all will pay the same amount a year to be a member and receive the Sanchar. The administration money pays postage, printing of the Sanchar, bank charges etc.

Unless otherwise instructed I assume one membership per household, club, society etc. As you can see in the minutes of the general meeting, it could help if e.g. a married couple signs for two memberships. As we have done before we will of course send a surplus that may arise from the administration account to Lakshmi Ashram.

Thank you for all the money for sponsorships and other contributions. Any amount of money will be received with pleasure. Contributions that are not earmarked are also very good. The money will be used for educational material, study tours, education of the teachers, projects in the villages etc.

You can send money by a crossed cheque or by bank transfer to:

Danske Bank – Glostrup Afdeling, Hovedvejen 109, 2600 Glostrup, DK – Denmark

Bank account no: 0270 – 4748312242, SWIFT-BIC: DABADKKK

Lakshmi Ashrams Venner

Lone Poulsen, Praestehusene 6, 2620 Albertslund, DK – Denmark

Best wishes,

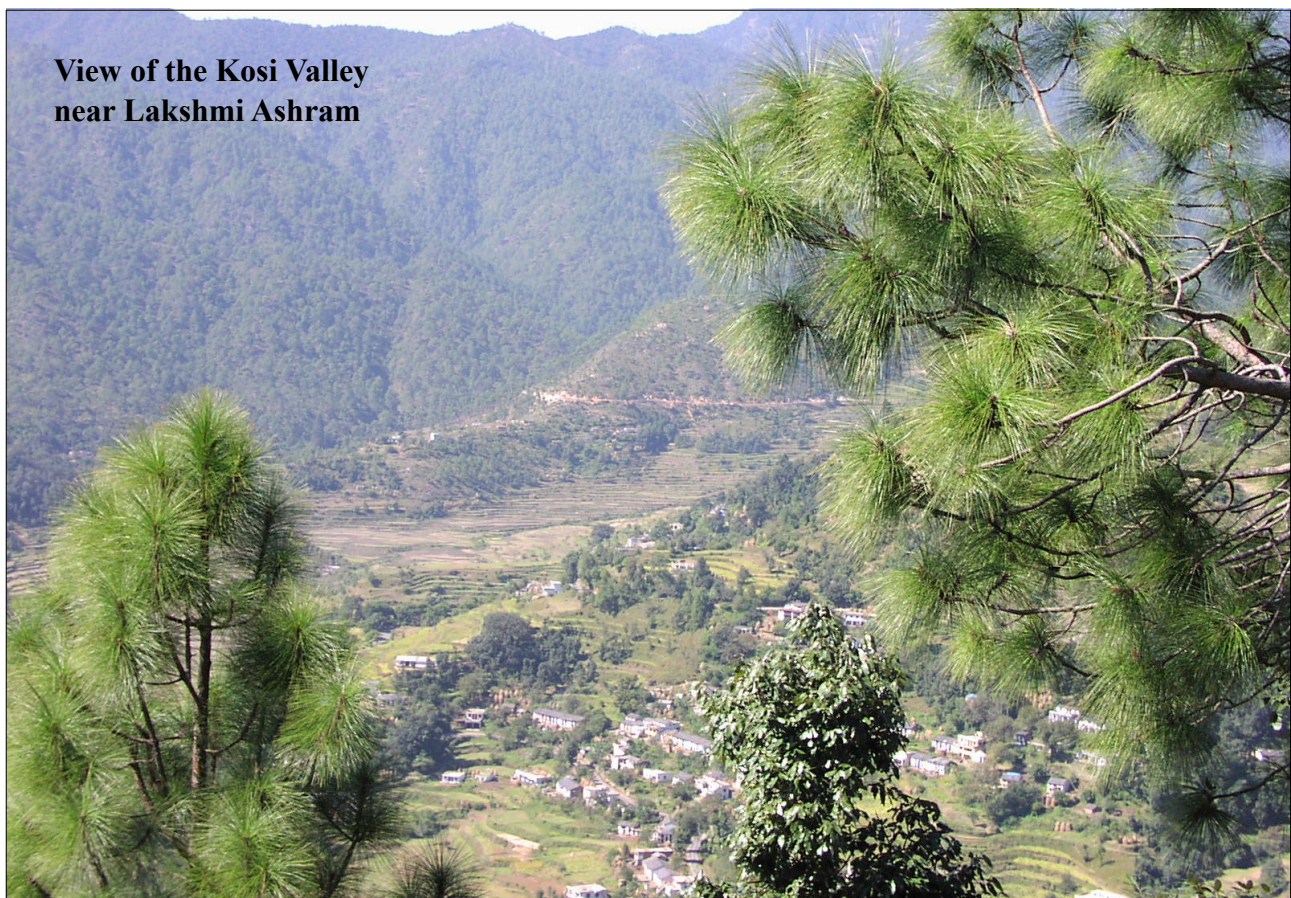
Lone Poulsen

## Save the Kosi River Campaign

*Surja Thapa & Munni Goswami, Class 12*

Throughout the world everyone is aware of the effects of environmental imbalance that are facing us. The Himalayan glaciers are melting and the rivers that once flowed throughout the year are changing into seasonal rivers. A change has come too in the weather cycle, unseasonable rains and dry spells are having an adverse effect on basic activities such as agricultural output, upon which the whole of human life depends. These adverse conditions can be seen to be increasing day by day in Uttarakhand also. Besides global environmental influences on the environment, manmade problems too are assuming terrible proportions.

There are two kinds of rivers here in Uttarakhand that form the basis of life here, those that rise from the Himalayan glaciers and those that rise from natural springs at lower altitudes.



Following meetings in which Radha Didi and numerous other concerned citizens participated, it was decided that throughout 2008 there would be a Save the Rivers Campaign. This campaign is ongoing under the leadership of Radha Didi who is making efforts to find solutions for a number of problems, who always resolutely faces up to whatever difficulties arise, and moves steadfast towards her goals. In the first fortnight of January padyatras (foot marches) were organised in some fifteen river valleys throughout Uttarakhand. In each of these padyatras everyone had some part to play. We too took part in the Kosi River padyatra. The Kosi River rises from springs on the slopes of Pinath.

In the rural areas of the hills there was good dense forest giving rise to plenty of springs. The women are hardworking and very environmentally aware. We also had the chance to see the urban areas, where we found that the state of the forests was not good. There is nobody to look after the forests there. Where the forests have been cut, then naturally the water becomes less. We found in

the towns that the men were only concerned with themselves, and paid no attention to the rivers, water and forests.

In the beginning of our journey we were all full of enthusiasm, for these were our neighbouring villages where Basanti Behn is actively working, and as a result in each of the first few days we were as many as 100-150 people. On reaching Ramnagar there followed a two-day meeting, where the programme for the months ahead was decided upon. At the end of the meeting water from all fifteen rivers was poured into a pot, which then was taken on foot by the participants to be immersed in the Kosi.

Thus our padyatra came to an end. Radha Didi continues to work today on the problems facing the rivers of Garhwal. A great enthusiasm was generated as a result of the support received from all those working in those valleys, and together they are enthusiastically working for this noble cause, never thinking of it as a burden. As a result the flow of water in these rivers is increasing, and day by day the people are becoming more conscious and aware.

## **More about Save the Kosi River Campaign**

*Lalita Rana*

On New Years Day, 1 January 2008, the Save the Kosi River padyatra (foot marches) began from Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani, Radha Didi and Basanti Didi being the two people largely responsible. Well known people from various parts of Uttarakhand, working in the social field, came to take part in this padyatra.

There were ten students from Lakshmi Ashram, and it was an important part of our training. Each of the fifteen days of the padyatra brought different experiences for us. People from 18 years to 75 years took part in this. During the padyatra we made great efforts to learn, and to develop our understanding. We saw the conditions in each village, what sort of problems there were that brought suffering for the villagers, be it an individual problem, a family problem or one faced by the whole village. We had the opportunity to study these problems in depth, and learned to face each and every situation. We went to every village along our route and by means of plays, songs and slogans we spread our message on the water crisis facing us, and also spent a little time talking with the people before we had to set off for the next village. The villagers too took part in our padyatra, accompanying us as far as the edge of the next village.

We enjoyed very much observing the community spirit and the awareness in the villages. It seemed that these people were protecting their water, forests and land very well.

We observed the state of the river in each village. We saw that uncontrolled mining was taking place on the river bed, that gravel and sand were being excavated for building bridges, causing the flow of the river to go even lower. Some of the villagers have stopped taking part in this activity, but some people remain actively involved in this work because the government awards contracts to a few of them.

The village women have been protecting their forests for the past five years and have undertaken planting also. Now their forest is looking beautiful, lush and green. As we proceeded on our padyatra we organised meetings in each village. The villagers told of their problems that they faced, and also said what activities they had undertaken. Each of the leaders of the women's groups (Mahila Mangal Dal) spoke and described their plan for their village. In this way, gaining rich experiences of the villages along the way, we reached Ramnagar on 15 January, where a meeting was organised on 16-17 January, for at this time simultaneous padyatras had been taking place in almost all the



river valleys of Uttarakhand, some fifteen in all – Mandakini, Ganga, Jamuna, Jalkul, Tons, Garur Ganga, Gomti, Saryu, Bhilangana, Kosi, Panar, Alaknanda, etc.

All those people who had participated in these padyatras gathered in Ramnagar for the meeting, where they related the conditions of their villages, and also told of the activities they had undertaken in their respective areas regarding the water crisis. The worst conditions were to be found in Garhwal. Even today many people there have not received all the compensation due to them. The families have all been resettled in different places. Their gaushalas (cowshed) are often 1-2 km from their homes. The people there are suffering a great deal.

One woman from Reni village (*the village where the Chipko movement began – read page 10*) said that when an HEP project on their river was under construction they had themselves protested, but the company people had simply ignored them. Outsiders came to look at the area, the villagers had no idea what was going on, and when the villagers asked they were told they had just come for a walk, yet they come with a prepared plan and construction begins. The women from there said, “We are ready to die, but we are not ready to hand over our forest.”

## **Two Day Workshop in Appreciative Inquiry**

### *Tara Koranga*

Workshop Participants:

Radha Didi, Kanti Didi, Neema Didi, Bimla Didi, Hansi Didi, Kalavati Didi, Basanti Didi, Archana Didi, Nandi Didi, Parvati Didi, Indira Didi, Durga Didi, Urmila Didi, Shoba Didi, Daya, Gauri, Tara, Hema, Jyoti Pant and Jyoti Joshi,

Resource Persons (Facilitators): Lone Didi and Ruth Didi.

Hindi Translator: Guruji (David Bhai)



23-24 March 2008 we had two days of talks in the form of a dialogue with Lone Didi and Ruth Didi, our chief focus of discussion being ‘Appreciative Inquiry’. In these two days we had the opportunity to learn how we can share with others our hopes and expectations for the present and fu-



ture and how, as well as recognising our own strengths, we can also appreciate the potential energy of our own individual powers. This recognition can only happen through the practice of personal inquiry and study.

We all want to recognise our good qualities. In our daily life we are often discussing a particular subject among ourselves, asking questions of one another. During such interpersonal dialogue it is very important to always be aware of the positive and negative ways of expressing ourselves, and to always seek to be positive in our speech. Even when adopting a positive approach to our discussion, we can by going around the subject come to also become aware of the negative aspects.

Then, as a practice in listening, we divided into groups of two each. Before doing so, we discussed how we can listen appreciatively to both our plus and minus points. Our main topic in our groups of two was how our place of work might be made better, and how we should act with an attitude of respect towards one another.

I was paired with Jyoti Pant. We were to listen to one other alone, and then to relate our conversation to the whole group. This we did, both of us listening to the other, and then relating the essence of our conversation to the group. We can talk between ourselves about 'What is right?' or 'What is wrong?' with regard to the topic under discussion. I learned how by appropriate questioning we can acquire knowledge from another, and in turn put it across properly to others. It is very necessary to be positive, so that we do not hurt the feelings of the person concerned.

In the afternoon of 23 March we again divided up into groups, this time into four groups of five each, each group drawing pictures depicting a positive dream, and then presenting it to the whole workshop. Taking Lakshmi Ashram as our central theme we each prepared our picture, in which we depicted our positive feelings. In this way the separate groups each expressed their thoughts and feelings on the given theme pictorially. A representative of each group then explained the ideas expressed in their particular picture to all the others present. Each of the groups had expressed differing thoughts.

On the following morning, again taking up the theme of how ideal learning situations should be, the groups, keeping in mind the positive dreams depicted through their pictures, together discussed and composed ideal slogans. My group created six slogans, and the other three groups too each composed a number of slogans. Then the groups each presented the slogans based on their ideal learning situations and their positive dreams, an enthusiastic discussion on them followed, and at the end the four most suitable slogans were selected.

'Khud ko sambhālo, pariwār sambhālo; Pās paraus aur gaon sudhāro.'

'Look after ourselves, look after the family; seek for positive change in our neighbours and our village.'

'Socho socho mānav socho; Samajhdārī se jīnā sīkho.'

'Think, think, Mankind, think! Learn how to live with Understanding.'

'Antarsambandh samajh vikās; Bauddhik evam vyavahārik kāry.'

'Develop an understanding of the inter-relations of intellectual and practical activity.'

'Bachchon kī ichchā jānnā.'

'Understand the wishes of the children.'

We raised these above four slogans loudly and with great enthusiasm, then Lone Didi played a game with us that developed the concentration of our minds. Our two days of discussions concluded with a group song.

## **An Ashram Wedding**

*Kanti Behn*

All of you will be very happy to know that on 2 May 2008 the wedding of one of Lakshmi Ashram's former students, Saraswati Koranga, with Jagdish, the youngest brother of Bimla Behn, one of our senior workers, was performed by Swami Gurukulanand Kachchahari in a very simple yet meaningful ceremony.

Such marriages had already taken place in Lakshmi Ashram some 9-10 times in the past. The Ashram wants that, instead of the very traditional, extremely expensive and ostentatious weddings at present in vogue in society, people would adopt this kind of simple wedding ceremony, so that they are not troubled by problems of dowry, and the bride's parents do not find themselves burdened with debt, and avoid unnecessary expense and ostentatious display. We should put aside all boundaries of caste, and only the weddings of boys and girls of a suitable age should be performed.

Saraswati came to Lakshmi Ashram when she was only eight years old, and was a student here until class twelve, successfully passing all her exams with good marks, and she also learned with great dexterity all the various practical activities of the Ashram. She makes a great impression on everybody with her talents in various crafts and her melodious singing.

After completing her education at Lakshmi Ashram, with the objective of giving her life a firm foundation and preparing her to serve society, Saraswati left for Kasturbagram near Indore to take a two year training course in nursing, and she has recently successfully came first in her final exams.



Everybody in the Ashram enthusiastically joined in the preparations for the wedding, and warmly welcomed all the guests. Jagdish's father, his brothers and sisters-in-law and their children, along with other friends all reached here the day before the wedding. Likewise Saraswati's mother and brother, along with some close friends, also arrived here the same day. There was a very happy atmosphere.

The next morning the bride and groom got ready for the wedding, and they first performed the five offerings – planting of a tree, serving the cow, sweeping and spinning, finally reciting the twelfth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita together with all the Ashram family in the Ashram courtyard, where the wedding was to take place,. Following this recitation, the wedding rites were commenced by Swami Gurukulanand Kachchahari.

The family members of the bride and groom, the workers and students of the ashram, along with men and women from Kausani sat on all four sides, below the canopy specially erected for the



marriage ceremony in the courtyard. Everyone listened with great interest, their faces full of joy, to the amusing stories and tales, each carrying a very pertinent teaching, which Swami Gorukulanand interspersed with the traditional Vedic wedding rituals.

The wedding rituals lasted about an hour and a half, and then everyone enjoyed a very tasty meal, before bidding a tearful farewell to the newly married couple. They received the blessings bestowed upon them, and everyone offered the couple their very best wishes.



Photo from the wedding ceremony.  
You can see Radha Didi, the priest and the bride and the bridegroom.



## **Minutes from the general meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2008**

**Election of a chairman:** David David

**Election of a keeper of the minutes:** Henning Poulsen

### **The committee's report**

One committee meeting has been held during the past year, and otherwise the contact between the committee members has passed off by mail or telephone. There is a close contact to Lakshmi Ashram by mail, so all the time we are well informed about what is going on in the ashram. In 2007 we sent out two Sanchars (no. 100 and 101) in springtime. No. 102 came out in January 2008 with an annual report for the year of 2006/07. Twice a year (February and August/September) we send money to the ashram.

Marie Thøger's book: "Sarala Devi – the woman of the mountains" has been sent out free to the members in Denmark. It has been printed for private money with a little contribution from the inheritance, that is Danish kroner 2000 (about 270 Euro) to a graphic designer, who gave the money to Lakshmi Ashram. As agreed with Lakshmi Ashram there will also be given an amount from the inheritance to a new Danish folder and maybe some show material.

Friends of Lakshmi Ashram is now a society, and it gives us one day the possibility to apply to the Danish tax authorities about allowance to deduct the amount given to the society on one's tax return. There are different rules that shall be kept, before we can apply, among other things "the number of the persons that gives money must surpass 100 on average for a year for a period of 3 years". In 2007 we had 67 persons who gave money = 67 members. In the general meeting we agreed to try to get more members. We can e.g. do this if a married couple signs for two memberships instead of one. It will not be more expensive, we will just put Danish kroner 150 (about 20 Euro) in the administration account instead of Danish kroner 75 (about 10 Euro). Profit from the administration account will of course be sent to Lakshmi Ashram.

### **News from the ashram**

Ruth Sillemann and I visited Lakshmi Ashram in March 2008, and a very relevant subject was discussed at that time, because the government in the state of Uttaranchal has decided that they won't allow students from private schools to have their exams in the government schools. Of course this becomes very important for the students in Lakshmi Ashram, because they have exactly had their exams in the public schools, as the ashram is not entitled to give their own exams. The staff of workers is now finding out, if it is possible to be a member of National Institute of Open Schooling - NIOS. It is an All-India institution that is entitled to give exams. That means that the ashram students could have their exams from here. At the same time they discuss, how the academic teaching can be improved, and maybe this is the start of a new era.

Just now it has implied that some of the oldest students in the ashram have gone home to finish their schooling in the local schools. They arranged a parents' meeting about this, while we were there. It was a great experience, and all the parents wanted that their children would stay in the ashram, because their view was, that the teaching in Lakshmi Ashram is much better than the teaching in the government schools. There are many young enthusiastic workers, so they have to aim at education of these.

Ruth and I carried out a workshop "Appreciative Inquiry" for all the workers in Lakshmi Ashram. The theme of the workshop was "the good learning situation", and it took place during two days,

and it was an extremely positive experience. Everybody (20 persons) participated very actively in the programme, and we think that we have contributed to start something. Ruth distributed material about "Appreciative Inquiry" at the meeting.

The old historical building – this very Lakshmi Ashram – is now rebuilt. It is a very beautiful and functional building. Just now they have started to prepare the place for a new kitchen building. It has been a very heavy work to carve out in the rock wall to make room for the building and at same time take care of the possibility for natural light in the building. Above the kitchen they will build a room for computer education.

Lakshmi Ashram is also very active in a project "Save the River", which means to protect and preserve the rivers. By now it is a big problem with water in the mountains.

Radha Bhatt reaches 75 years on 16 October 2008, and on that occasion they will arrange different festivity. Among other things they are working with organizing youth camps during the year in the name of Radha Didi.

The report was adopted.

### **The account**

The account of 2007 was presented and adopted.

A special contribution from Lions Club in Soelleroed has been used to the start of the new kitchen building. In January we have opened a new account for the inheritance money to keep them separated from the account of Friends of Lakshmi Ashram. We have sent money from the inheritance in April to the kitchen and computer building. They are discussing to use most of the inheritance for some kind of pension scheme for the elder workers, but of course it demands that everything is considered thoroughly.

The expenses have been modest in 2007. It is a result of help from Vestervangskolen in Glostrup to print the sanchar, and at the same time I have received free envelopes from a friend.

**Subscription:** The subscription is kept on Danish kroner 75 (about 10 Euro) yearly per member. The subscription was adopted.

### **Election of the committee and substitute**

The following persons were elected:

Lone Poulsen, Praestehusene 6, 2620 Albertslund

Hanne Stenager, Jonstruphøj 23, 3500 Værløse

Ruth Sillemann, Gl. Kongevej 109, 2.tv., 1850 Frederiksberg C

Substitute: Peter Kristensen, Jonstruphøj 23, 3500 Værløse

### **Election of auditor and substitute**

Revisor: Claus Broskov Soerensen, Bavneaaen 79, 2640 Hedehusene

Substitute: David David, Bredebovej 35, 1.mf., 2800 Lyngby

The meeting was ended with slides from Ruth and Lone's visit in Lakshmi Ashram in March 2008.

04.02.07 Henning and Lone Poulsen

# The Chipko-movement

The women in the Himalayan villages have since the beginning of time  
felt related to the vulnerable and manifold ecology of the mountains.  
They are in their daily work depended on trees and water.  
They feel a deep respect for the nature and call the nature "Mother".

The women have fought against the exploitation of the forest of Himalaya  
and the mining damage of the earth. "Chipko" means  
to hug or protect with your body.

With their bodies the Chipko movement women – and  
men – have protected the trees against being felled and the earth against  
being spoilt by mining. One of Chipko's songs says:

*What gifts do the forest provide?  
Soil, water and air.  
Keep the earth alive  
all that she gives us!*

The above is the back page text of Radha Bhatt and Marie Thoege's book: "Keep the Earth Alive – about the Chipko movement in Himalaya". Chipko received in 1987 an alternative peace prize.

The mentioned below is a slightly shortened passage from "Keep the Earth Alive".

The Chipko movement is often associated with an event in the village of Reni in 1974, where a group of women seriously gave battle against a gang of men, who should fell some trees. They were sent out by a big sport company from the lowlands. The men in the village had applied for allowance to fell a few trees for making agricultural tools. It was denied, even if these tools were necessary for their existence. Shortly afterwards a manufacturer, who made sports equipment, was allowed to fell a much bigger number of ash trees in the same forest. Of course the men got angry and came up with furious protests that nobody considered. Shortly afterwards they were all ordered to attend a meeting in the prefect's office in the district city. But when the men had left Reni, then the women saw a number of unknown men, who with their axes and saws moved up towards the forest. They were the manufacturer's men.

The women ran as fast as they could towards the forest. At first they asked the wood-cutters to postpone felling the trees, until the men had returned. But the manufacturer's plan was exactly that the work should be done, while nobody was at home to resist. The workers just laughed, when the women placed themselves protectively in front of the trees – determined to protect them with their own bodies.



The peasant woman Gaura Devi was the leader of the women. One of the wood-cutters had a firearm. He moved towards her. It seemed as if he had been drinking. The situation was alarming. But suddenly Gaura Devi stepped forward. She tore her blouse and bared her breast, as she said, "Shoot now!" The man became embarrassed drew back. The others followed him, and all the men slinked away towards the valley. As soon as they had left, the women destroyed a part of the path by breaking up big stones and roll them into the precipice. If the wood-cutters would have got second thoughts about it and return, it would be impossible for them to come back to the forest. The women won. The trees were allowed to be there.

After that time the name Chipko was associated with the ecology movement in Himalaya. Chipko means to hug or protect with your own body. The rumour of Gaura Devi and the women in Reni ran like a forest fire through villages. And soon the word Chipko was known all over India with the new symbolic meaning – to protect and preserve the nature.