

**FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM****Lone Poulsen, Praestehusene 6, 2620 Albertslund, DK Denmark****Telefon +45 43 96 13 71 – E-mail: [lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk](mailto:lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk)****Bank Account IBAN no: DK0330000003141861****Lakshmi Ashram's homepage: <http://lakshmiashram.dk>****NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM  
SANCHAR 106**

June 2009

Dear friends,

This time the newsletter brings three different articles written by foreigners and the minutes from the general meeting in March:

- Becoming a Girl of the Mountains
- An Unforgettable Visit in the Mountains
- An Old Dream came true.....Lakshmi Ashram Revisited
- The Minutes from the General Meeting

It still costs the same 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.

As mentioned in the minutes from the general meeting, I assume one membership per household, club, society etc., unless otherwise instructed. The surplus from the administration account will of course be sent 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 – the IBAN account number can be seen on top of this letter.

Friends of Lakshmi Ashram can save money, if some of you would be satisfied just to receive a mail telling that you can read the Sanchar in the homepage. Because of the photos the Sanchar is often too big to send directly by mail. If you want to get the message in a mail instead of receiving a letter, then please send me your e-mail address to: [lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk](mailto:lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk)

Best wishes,

Lone Poulsen

# Becoming a Girl of the Mountains

by Arina Theel

(Volunteer in Lakshmi Ashram September 08 – August 09)

When I arrived last year on 4 September for the first time in India, I was shocked by the dirt and ugliness I saw all around me under the midday sun of Delhi. But just one day later when I arrived in the little world of Lakshmi Ashram I got a totally different impression of India. At this place you can hear the birds singing and the girls laughing. So, I told myself, I can easily stay here for the next twelve months.

My intention to come to India was to do social service for one year in between school and university. I am twenty years old and I have just finished school in Germany. With the financial support of the German Government and the NGO *KURVE Wustrow* I made my way to the Boarding School in the hills.

Now my time here is almost over, and sometimes I am afraid of the last day that will come soon. On the other hand of course I also have to cope with homesickness and with missing friends and family. Some days I really have a lack of energy. All the people here work so hard, and for every little work you need to spend so much energy.

Nevertheless I am always sure of what I am doing here and why I do this work! I want to offer one year of my time to the girls. But what exactly am I doing here?

On the one hand I try to be like one of the students of the Ashram, and to learn as much of their work as I can do. On the other hand I also bring in some of my own skills that I have learned in Germany. I do a lot of arts with the girls like drawing, painting and handicrafts. These days I am also like a formal teacher in the ashram timetable. I teach the 5<sup>th</sup> class in arts and the 6<sup>th</sup> class in Arts and English. In the evenings I sometimes do small projects with the other classes too.



The biggest project I am working on with the girls is a photo project. It is also the favorite one of the girls. I teach them how to take photos with digital cameras. They love to act like a photographer, taking hundreds of pictures of themselves and their environment. All in all we have three cameras donated by different people. We do little trainings in small groups, when we talk about the quality of the photos on a computer.

The girls have the camera with them for one whole day. As a result we are going to have an exhibition in the ashram itself. Each girl chooses her favorite picture while keeping the topic of the exhibition in mind, to show other people from the outside how the ashram is like.



At the end August I will leave India to start university in Germany. Now I start to feel a little like these girls of the mountains because they have taught me so many things and they have opened their hearts for me. I have learned how to cut grass with the sickle, how to clean the cow shed with bare hands, how to make nice round chapattis... But the most important thing is that I learned how easy it is to make the girls happy just with little things like paying attention. Still I do have three months more to improve my skills, for example cutting vegetables in the Indian way, but also just to spend more time with the girls!

Nevertheless some days I find myself thinking, "How will it be without the girls' smiles and the non-stopping calls for Arina Didi?" (*Didi*=big sister). In Germany I have always been an only child...

## An Unforgettable Visit in the Mountains

Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> March 2009. Lakshmi Ashram, Himalaya.

.....we were standing in the doorway of the guesthouse and waited for the girls to come. It was morning, and the sun was already high in the sky. From our veranda we could look out over the Kosi valley encircled by its green mountains, and round about we could hear children singing. Our cupboard groaned with caramels, and the doorstep was decorated with red and white flowers, which is common practise for the festival of flowers in the mountains.



The big girls with a fine harvest of good things



Then at last we could hear the voices very clearly, they were on the way up the little staircase towards our house. Shortly afterwards 4-5 children were standing with metal trays held out to us, singing "phull-deli- phull-phull-deli" or something like that, which means the festival of flowers we think. They were standing in front of us with naked feet and excited eyes. We took out caramels and put them on the tray among flowers, biscuits and sugar that the girls had got already. The children bowed smiling, turned around and started singing again, while they walked on to the next door.

Later in the afternoon children and grown-ups met in the forest above the ashram at the big water tank. Some had brought wood, pots, instruments and costumes. We had brought our instruments, a guitar and a violin. All were sitting in the grass in the shadow of the tall pine trees, and shortly afterwards a beautiful and diversified dancing and drama programme started carried out by the children with the forest as a piece of scenery.

Some were dancing, others were beating the drums and bells and everybody were singing. Later on the children played a play that was about the God of the forest, who was persuaded away from the forest and her friends the animals because of love for a prince. The god of the forest did not find what she looked for outside the forest, but died of unhappy love. Where she fell a flower was growing up.

We also made a little of the entertainment and carried it out with four German girls, who visited the place at the same time as we did. We were playing and singing "I like the flowers" and later on we sang "Oh, Susanne" and asked the children from the ashram to dance together with us. It was really funny and all the girls laughed at the queer and strange dance, which was so very much different than what they used to dance.



Geeta as the God of the forest



All in all it was a fantastic afternoon and the arrangement was finished with homemade snacks, which some of the children had deep-fried, while others were appearing.....

**Nik and Marie to the left  
Arina no. 2 from the right**

This was from our diary from a travel which lasted two and a half months beginning in the middle of January.

We have now been home for nearly two months and are enjoying the Danish springtime. It is the second time we have been together in India, and it is not the last time, we are travelling. Eight years ago we travelled together with our two sons for half a year, and we visited different Gandhi ashrams. Many of these places have like Lakshmi Ashram a children's school attached, and it is these schools that especially had and have our interest, also because the idea of these schools reminds very much of the idea of the free school where we are working.

During the travel we got some contacts and good friends and have also had visitors from India nearly every year. E.g. Radha has visited us twice here in Bjerring, where she came in connection with making a research for a book about the Danish free schools.

When we returned home eight years ago, we knew that we would visit Lakshmi Ashram again. This ashram found a special place in our hearts, and we hurried to be members of Friends of Lakshmi Ashram after homecoming to Denmark. Here was a place, where Gandhi's philosophy was meant seriously, and some people who lived for their call.

We have visited Lakshmi Ashram again, where we stayed for about three weeks. We arrived in the beginning of March, this time without our two boys, who chose to stay at home alone, because they are busy with their own lives.

Again it has been a lovely experience, which we will remember for a long time, and we feel that we are more close to the place and the people, who live there, and we also feel that we have been able to give a little from us of what we stand for as human beings and teachers.

Among others things we had the opportunity to hold a meeting with the teachers, where we told a little about our own free school and the thoughts and the practice that are behind. It was a good experience, where we showed photos and felt a loyal understanding and enjoyed the mutual exchange of ideas (we can absolutely also use many of the things we experienced in Lakshmi Ashram in our own school working day).

Our own music instruments gave opportunity to some good hours together with the girls, where we taught dances and songs. All in all the experiences we have had with the girls in the ashram have been very rewarding for us. Here we experienced not only a relationship between teachers and students about theoretical learning, but also a practical working partnership where all are equal. You can feel that the girls are used to do a necessary work, and that they do it with happiness and pride.

During the time we visited them we were also so lucky to participate in two big festivals. One was Phulldeli, which is mentioned in the extract from the diary and the other one was Holi – the festival of the colours that probably is one of the biggest festivals in India. From this festival we will finish with a little report from our diary:

.....it was the third and the last day of the festival. Down in Kausani you could still hear loud music as well in the morning as in the evening, and when we went for a walk in



Pooja bærer brænde



the morning we were sprayed with coloured water from a bus. That was what you could expect in such festival days, where people were joyful and they teased each other with coloured powder and water.

We were also met like that when we turned up for Holi in the ashram in the evening the same day. Kanti and Bimla gave us colour in the faces and the festival could begin.

During the afternoon the children had carried wood to their fire and placed some of it on a beautiful round decorated place in front of the main building. The fire was lit and a long fine programme began, first with dancing and singing and later on with sketches. Among other things David and Hansi's daughter Dipika had directed some of the smaller children in a homemade sketch of 'Winnie the Pooh', where the children wore animal masks made of cardboard and recited their lines in a loud voice, while they moved both arms and legs.

We did not understand much of what was told, but that was not at all necessary, because the girls played in such a way that all were very amused. The big girls played a sketch, in which Kanti very cleverly played the part as an old man in a long and both serious and funny story about complications in connection with a wedding. Here we were also deeply engaged, because the players were fantastically alive.

The fire blazed and lit up the scene. The scene was placed on a big woollen carpet, on which both we and the other spectators also were sitting. Besides that the fire shone, a big round full moon looked up over the mountain ridge and down on us. The picture was perfect. What an evening! And the last of all the good items was a solo-song recited of one of the big girls. The atmosphere was marvellous and the voice in the song was both sad and beautiful.

When we said goodnight to the girls and their teachers, we were so filled with good experiences that we had quite forgotten ourselves and our item....



**Mary Behn and Nik Bhai to the Holi festival in Lakshmi Ashram**

*Marie Louise og Niels Kristian (Nik) Sloth*

## **An old dream came true....**

### **...Lakshmi Ashram revisited**

In the month of April this year, we went to Lakshmi Ashram to revisit this fabulous place. In short, 26 years had passed since the first time I stepped through the gate to Lakshmi Ashram as an apprentice. This was while I studied at the teachers training college at “Den frie Lærerskole” in Ollerup, Fyn.

The second time was after I had finished my education in 1986 – together with my husband, Jørgen. And now we were here again – in 2009 – for the third time standing in front of that gate, we had dreamt and talked so much about for so many years! With us was Jonathan, our 15 year old son, who was to see all this for the first time – and yet.... he had already met friends from Lakshmi Ashram at home, as we had been so fortunate over the years to receive visits of Prema, the Hopkins: Hansi, David and Dipika – and especially Neema.

Already at the beginning of the trip in Delhi, we felt great changes: Instead of the horrendous nightly bus trip to Almora, which we still remembered clearly, we now boarded a train with “A.C. 2. Class sleeper” and woke up in Kathgodam, from where a taxi brought us hastily directly to Kausani. The hairpin bends were the same - but new, improved standards of living in the villages were certainly visible.

Kausani itself was not easy to recognise, either, and while we sat and had a cup of chai, trying to figure out where the path to Lakshmi Ashram was, help

came along – namely Bimla, who just passed us on her way home, and what a warm welcome! Our thoughts were buzzing in our heads as we tried to find harmony between “old” and new “images” – but not until we walked through the gate and saw the beautiful old main hall, did it all fall into place – and a feeling of being “home” emerged... The warm welcome that met us from familiar faces, we shall never forget!

The days to come were wonderful – routines mixed with small and big events made a great impression on us all:

- The mornings – the morning walks through pine forests with views to the snow-capped Himalayas together with Radha and Neema – while we had intense and wise conversations – are still clear in our minds as some of the most breathtaking and rewarding experiences.
- The late mornings – garden work, sorting the grain, cutting vegetables surrounded by happy, obliging girls, who love to sing songs and also love to learn songs from our part of the world – and in our strange language.
- The afternoon gatherings in the Prayer Room with reading aloud and spinning the Gandhi way – essays, dance and songs performed by the classes in a beautiful, straightforward way.



- The teaching of various subjects – still with a never ending energy, curiosity and some times wonder.
- The evening kitchen team – they go to work early and we are most welcome to help shape and roll out chapattis, patiently guided by Santosi, Indira, Nisha and Suman. Moreover, we kill two birds with one stone – we learn Hindi while we make the chapattis ... the laughter never seems to stop!
- The evening gatherings in the Prayer Room – with prayers in a lovely, quiet atmosphere – so quiet that a girl or two has a tiny nap, but it's also very late in the day for the little ones, who have been up since 5 o'clock.



At the first evening gathering I was asked, what had inspired me to come to Lakshmi Ashram that time in 1983. It was a very good question, which I had to think about for some time. But I know now, that it was a very well written article about the Women of Kumaon, published in A Danish Newspaper "Politiken" on April 23, 1983, by Fleur Asmussen, an artist, who made beautiful woodcuts of women from Kumaon. After I had read the article, I had the feeling that I just HAD to see this place once!

One of the moving ceremonies, we took part in, was the celebration of the birthday of Sarala Devi on April 5. At 7 in the morning, the fine little memorial yard surrounded by a single stonewall and tall trees, was decorated with flowers. Then there was a morning prayer and tales of episodes from the life of Sarala Devi, stressing her importance to the daily life at Lakshmi Ashram, told by both pupils and colleagues.

Another highlight was our all-day walk together with Neema, down through the beautiful valleys to the Bajnath Temple near Garur – with the constant view to the snow-capped Himalayas. The cultivated fields with grains and potatoes in various stages looked like a giant, beautiful patchwork carpet. Again, meeting local people on the tracks was colourful and pleasant – and it was a pleasure to see that living conditions in the villages has improved a lot over the years. There has also been improvements at Lakshmi Ashram over the years, both visible – like the new kitchen, they have just started using – and invisible – new thoughts and ideas about school life. But if, one morning, you stand quietly in the middle of the courtyard and close your eyes, you hear all the well-known sounds like singing girls, chitchats, rattling of pots and the sudden cry "Monkeys" – then it's still the familiar Lakshmi Ashram life unfolding around you – unchanged. Of course, time went far too quickly and suddenly we stood there again – by the gate – with tears in our eyes and said goodbye to the girls and the teachers, full of warm and loving impressions. Impressions of a school life and a way of living, which is so contrary to our own, but once again, it has given food for thoughts and we are still, after several months at home, strongly influenced by it.

Our next visit will be within 23 years, we hope!

Jonathan West Carstensen  
Jørgen Carstensen  
Karen-Lis West Hansen



## **Minutes from the General Meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2009**

**Election of a chairman:** Helle Poulsen

**Election of a keeper of the minutes:** Hanne Stenager

### **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 2008 we sent out three Sanchars (no. 102, 103 and 104). Twice a year (February and August/September) we send money to the ashram. In February 2009 there were problems with transfer of money from Denmark to Lakshmi Ashram. First the Danish bank was making two serious mistakes and later on the amount was returned with a loss of money. The Danish bank covered this loss.

In 2008 we were 105 members in Friends of Lakshmi Ashram. Last year we agreed to try to apply to the Danish tax authorities about allowance to deduct the amount given to the society on one's tax return, but this year the tax system demands 300 member in the society, so we have to give up this idea.

### **News from the ashram**

Lakshmi ashram has now joined 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. The government in the state of Uttaranchal suddenly refused students from private schools to have their exams in the government schools. It implied that some of the oldest students in the ashram have gone home to finish their schooling in the local schools. The numbers of students therefore fell, but now they have enrolled ten new students, and maybe a few more will come.

Lakshmi Ashram is very active in the project "Save the Rivers of Uttarakhand" that aims to protect and preserve the rivers. By now it is a big problem with water in the mountains. Radha Bhatt carries out a great work with this project. One of the big events of 2008 was the celebration of Radha Bhatt's 75 years birthday on 16<sup>th</sup> of October. It was mentioned in Sanchar 105 from February 2009. The new kitchen building is nearly finished. Besides the kitchen you can also find a computer room etc. We sent 60.000 DKK from the inheritance in April to meet the last expenses for the building.

The report was adopted.

### **The account**

The account of 2008 was presented and adopted.

The expenses are still very modest. It is a result of help from Vestervangskolen in Glostrup to print the Sanchar, and at the same time I have again 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 substitutes:**

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 ended with Helle Poulsen's photos from her visit in Kumaon and Lakshmi Ashram in October 2008, and Lone Poulsen told about and showed photos of Mahila Haat, an NGO with close connection to Lakshmi Ashram.

15.03.09 Hanne Stenager and Lone Poulsen



The girls play and dance in the forest behind Lakshmi Ashram

(Nik and Marie's photo)