

**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 108**

March 2010

Dear friends,

Hope this Sanchar will meet you in the beginning of springtime. Here in Denmark we still have snow, but we can see the winter flowers coming up now. It has been a very cold and long winter here. This time the newsletter brings

- The Annual Report of Activities: 2008-2009 (shortened by Lone Poulsen)
- An article about Raising Community Awareness in the Kosi Valley

Normally we have a Lakshmi Ashram general meeting in March/April with the yearly report, annual accounts and election of committee members. This year we will hold the meeting in September, because Krishna and Gopal Bisht perhaps will visit Denmark at that time. Krishna is a committee member in Lakshmi Ashram.

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 the 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.

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)  
Thanks to the members who have accepted this.

Best wishes,

Lone Poulsen

# Sanchar 108

## **KASTURBA MAHILA UTTHAN MANDAL** **From The Annual Report of Activities: 2008-2009** *(shortened by Lone Poulsen)*

### **Introduction**

Lakshmi Ashram celebrated its sixty-second birthday in December 2008. It has been a long journey, but despite the ups and downs that everyone faces in life the Ashram continues its main mission, that of serving the local community and seeking to work quietly for Gandhiji's ideals of Swaraj.

Lakshmi Ashram found itself this year facing a very basic issue, that of which examination board to prepare our students for. Ever since students of Lakshmi Ashram had first started preparing for government examinations in the early nineteen seventies – Sarala Behn had always been strongly opposed to them – our students had sat as private candidates for the state examination board. However when the state government decided at the beginning of 2008 that the provision for private candidates would be withdrawn, Lakshmi Ashram found itself in a dilemma. The decision was taken that our students would in the future prepare for the National Open School examinations, but a good number of our existing students then decided to return home and continue their education in government schools, so that they might appear for state board examinations as regular students.

The year 2008 was declared as Uttarakhand Save the Rivers Year, and the Save the Rivers Campaign under the leadership of Radha Behn was active throughout the year seeking to raise public and government awareness of the threats to their very existence faced by the rivers of Uttarakhand.

This year saw the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of Radha Behn on 16 October 2008 being marked by the release of a fine commemorative volume with contributions from all over India, and from abroad also. The special function on her birthday was preceded by a two day national level conference held in Lakshmi Ashram.

This past year saw the ongoing construction of a fine kitchen for the hostel. This was a very big challenge that first necessitated cutting back into the hillside alongside the existing kitchen and building a high retaining wall, before the actual construction could begin. The construction has also allowed us the opportunity to extend our dining hall, as well as our prayer/meeting hall on the upper floor.

### **Lakshmi Ashram**

Sarala Behn had first come to the Kumaun Hills in 1941 after the extreme heat of Sevagram proved too much for her health. Even while in Sevagram she had been very actively involved with Gandhiji's alternative vision of education. Arriving in the Kumaun Hills, only a few months had passed when she was given the small hillside cottage above Kausani, known as Lakshmi Ashram after the wife of the donor. Her active involvement in the Quit India movement saw her spend several years in jail, to begin with in Almora, and then in Lucknow. Following her release and with independence looming on the horizon, local freedom fighters strongly suggested that she should start a school for the girls of their families, and thus it was that on 5 December 1946 Lakshmi Ashram formally started with just a handful of young girls joining Sarala Behn in her cottage.

The basic pattern of daily life, developed by Sarala Behn in the school community that is Lakshmi Ashram, remains very much the same even today. It seeks the holistic development of the student – head, hands and heart. Sarala Behn always emphasised that the sickle and pen have equal importance in life. Thus the daily programme seeks a balance between manual activities, academic study, and the cultural and spiritual development of the individual.

At the beginning of the year in April 2008 there were 36 students in classes 1-12. In May 2008 three new students joined the Ashram. In February 2009 when the students returned from their winter holidays another new student joined. At the end of the year on 31 March 2009 there were 37 students, 12 in the primary classes, 16 in classes 7 and 8, 8 students in class 10 and 3 in class 12. *(These numbers were to increase the following month when 17 new students joined the Ashram).*



In March 2009 five students appeared for the class 10 high school Uttarakhand Board examinations. When the results came out in June 2009 we learned that all five had passed, four with A division, and the fifth with a good B division. These were possibly the best results that our students have ever achieved in the high school exams. All five have decided to continue their studies outside the Ashram, two from home, while the other three have gone to Allahabad to pursue their studies. This year we had no students appearing for the Uttarakhand Board exams for class 12. Instead six students were to sit for the equivalent exams in the National Open School in April 2009. Five were appearing for the first time, while a young trainee worker was retaking one subject.

We were very pleased with the examination results, for in the busy daily schedule of the ashram community, there are only 2½ hours a day of formal classes. However classes are small and, with the students living alongside their teachers, there is plenty of opportunity for the students to receive guidance in their studies. They are given every encouragement to prepare in earnest for their examinations. Where we felt that they needed extra guidance, in Science and English, we also arranged for local teachers to come and give them additional classes.

The underlying philosophy of Lakshmi Ashram is that of self sufficiency in every aspect of life. From an early age the students participate in every aspect of the ashram community life. Each student is in a team comprising some seven students of different ages, with the oldest student being the leader and the second oldest the assistant leader. Throughout the day there are certain activities that are assigned to each team on a weekly rotation. These include the early morning cleaning of the Ashram and its immediate surroundings, the preparation and cooking of lunch and supper, and the cleaning of the cooking vessels. Working as a team, even the smallest girls have the opportunity of contributing towards the life of the community and assuming responsibilities.

Another aspect of Ashram life that encourages the girls to develop their sense of responsibility towards the community is the system of school government. Every month or six weeks a 'Council of Ministers' is selected by the students. The eight ministers have different responsibilities, for example Agriculture, Health or Sanitation, and after they are elected they select a Prime Minister from among themselves. The 'Council of Ministers' rotates among the

High School classes, that is from VI to X, and at different times the students get the opportunity to take on the responsibilities of different ministries.

In practical terms self sufficiency is sought to be achieved in our agricultural and animal husbandry. The ashram has a fine terraced garden where the students seek to produce as much vegetables as possible for the school kitchen. One of the Ashram workers is responsible overall for the garden, but a good number of fields are managed by the different classes under the guidance of their class teachers. The students decide what they will grow and take care of their fields right through from the sowing to the harvesting. Production varies from year to year depending on various factors such as availability of water, impact of the weather and the experience of the worker in charge of the garden. Although most vegetables showed a fall in production, we had a very good harvest of bottle gourd. Seed production is an integral aspect of self-sufficiency in agriculture, and Lakshmi Ashram attempts to produce as much of its own seed as possible.

Our production of turmeric and tulsi (herbal tea) continued as in previous years. Basanti Behn, in addition to her village level activities in the Kosi valley, took responsibility for the production of tulsi. This year we sold some 65 kilos wholesale to SOS Organics in Chitai, Almora. They were very impressed by the superb quality of the dried tulsi, which contained no detectable impurities whatsoever. This is a credit to the hard work and dedication of our workers under the guidance of Basanti Behn, in particular the attention that they paid to every aspect of the cutting and drying. The production of turmeric is the responsibility of the ashram worker responsible for the management of our garden.

The basis of hill farming is animal husbandry. Without the cattle dung from the cattle sheds that is composted, the fertility of the mountain soil could not be maintained. Thus in the community life of the Ashram, the gaushala (cowshed) has a very important role to play. Although one senior worker, Indira Behn, is responsible for the overall management of the gaushala, all of the Ashram workers and students contribute to its daily running. Every day there is fodder to be cut for the cattle and water to be brought for them, while the cattle sheds and the immediate surroundings have to be cleaned daily, the bedding and cow dung being taken to the compost pits.

The biggest activity of the year though is the annual haymaking that takes place in October following the retreat of the monsoon and the return of dry sunny weather. For several weeks almost all other activities are put aside, and all the older students and their teachers slowly work their way across the steep hillside above the Ashram, cutting the grass that has grown tall during the monsoon, leaving it to dry before binding it into sheaves and bringing it down to build up into haystacks that will provide supplementary dry fodder for the livestock during the lean months of winter and spring, when there is little green fodder available. The haymaking goes on from dawn to dusk, the students and teachers only taking a break during the midday heat. Meanwhile the smaller girls assume responsibility for the cooking and cleaning under the guidance of just one or two older workers.

This year there was a drop in milk production, the main reason being that two cows were sold during the year. This has meant that we have also had to purchase milk from the market to fulfil the requirements of our mess.

In addition to our agriculture and animal husbandry, another important aspect of Ashram life is the emphasis on khadi, that is to say handspun and hand-woven cloth. In the hills there is a long tradition of working in wool. In the Ashram too an emphasis is put upon the spinning of wool, and the spinning class is an integral part of the daily timetable. Even the smallest girls learn to spin upon a hand spindle, while the older students make use of the

Bageshwari charkha, a locally designed spinning wheel. The younger girls learn to spin with Tibetan wool, while the older students who use the spinning wheel also spin wool imported from Australia and purchased from the Shri Gandhi Ashram woollen production centre in nearby Chanauda. It was incidentally to live in this ashram that Sarala Behn first came to these hills in August 1941. Besides the spinning of wool there is some production of woollen khadi, including knitting of various items – sweaters, mufflers, woollen hats and gloves, as well as the weaving of small rugs.

An integral part of community life in the ashram, and a great source of joy for one and all, are the festivals that mark the cycle of the seasons. The students learn to write in their Hindi essays that “India is a land of festivals”. There are those festivals that are celebrated through most of India, such as Holi, Raksha Bandhan and Diwali; then again there are some specifically local festivals which are celebrated equally enthusiastically. In the ashram calendar maybe the most important festival in the year is Shri Krishna Janmashtami (described in Sanchar 107).

As part of the Ashram’s Sarvodaya tradition and in accordance with Gandhi’s philosophy, the students also celebrate the festivals of other faiths, in particular Christmas and Buddha Jayanti. Whereas Buddha Jayanti is marked only within the ashram, Christmas is shared with the local community. On the afternoon of 25 December the Ashram girls perform a nativity play on the birth and childhood of Christ in the courtyard in front of their hostel. A good number of people from nearby, especially the children and their mothers, gather in the winter sunshine. Oranges from the garden are given to all. In the evening after supper everyone gathers in the Ashram meeting hall in anticipation of the arrival of Father Christmas, ‘Christmas Dada’. In the morning the children had helped in decorating the hall. This year we welcomed a very special ‘Christmas Dada’, the father of our young German volunteer, Arina Theel. He and his wife spent several days over Christmas with us, and he had come specially prepared from Germany with a Father Christmas costume! As the ashram girls go on holiday immediately after Christmas a number of their parents were also present that evening to enjoy the fun, and to receive small gifts from ‘Christmas Dada’.

### **‘Suryodaya’ and ‘Vijay’**

It was not too long after the founding of Lakshmi Ashram that Sarala Behn started the tradition of two handwritten magazines, ‘Suryodaya’ and ‘Vijay’. These continue to be brought out several times a year. While one of the teachers is responsible for the editing of ‘Suryodaya’, to which the older students and workers contribute, the ‘culture minister’ in the students’ ‘cabinet of ministers’ has the responsibility of editing ‘Vijay’, which is the mouthpiece for the younger students. In both magazines there are contributions of essays, poetry and pictures. The magazines are bound with a fine painted cover, usually with a picture specific to the issue, and then inside there is a list of contents. These two magazines offer the students and workers the opportunity to express themselves on any subject they wish to in prose or verse, or to contribute a painting or drawing. It is an excellent medium for them to develop their skills of expression.

### **Study Tours**

Every year Lakshmi Ashram organises study tours for the students, either in May and June before the new academic year begins, or else after the haymaking has been completed in October. This year our programme of study tours was arranged in the autumn.

Class IV went along with two of our young workers, to visit Almora and the nearby Golu Devata temple at Chitai. On the way to Chitai they were able to visit the small zoo maintained

by the Forest Department. They also visited some of the historical sights of Almora such as the old bazaar and the Nanda Devi temple, built soon after the founding of Almora by the Chand rajas. They also visited the museum that houses a fine collection of local artifacts.

The girls in class V went a little further afield to visit the ancient temples of Jageshwar, set in a beautiful little valley with dense deodar forest coming down to the edge of the small stream. They were accompanied there by the girls of class XII. On the way they also had darshan of Chitai Mandir.

Class VII went further afield on a four day study tour. On the first day they went via Chitai to the centre of Parvatiya Gram Swarajya Mandal, a long established Sarvodaya centre in the village of Jainti. Jainti had been a centre of the Independence struggle, and the students had the opportunity to see some of the sites associated with those days, as well as the present-day constructive activities of the institution. On the third day of their tour they went from there to the nearby Dol Ashram, spending a night there before returning via Almora to Kausani.

Class VIII, along with four older students, went on a study tour to Nainital district. They first visited Arohi, an NGO active in the district who for some years now have organised a 'Gramin Haat' in October. As in previous years one of our classes participated in this, presenting their cultural programmes in the evening, and interacting with the various organisations who had come to take part in the fair. From here they proceeded to Orakhan and Chirag, another NGO active in the Kumaun Hills. They had the opportunity to be introduced to the various activities of Chirag, saw for themselves the experimental farm that Chirag have developed over the years.

Class X went on a two-day study tour to see the activities of CHEA (Central Himalayan Environmental Association) in the area around Khunt. A former Ashram student and worker has been actively working in this area with CHEA for a good number of years, especially among the women and children. On their return to Kausani they also visited the experimental farm and campus of Vivekananda Parvatiya Krishi Anusandhan Sansthan (VPKAS) in Hawalbag. Lakshmi Ashram has over recent years established good contacts with VPKAS who have extended support to the Ashram's agricultural activities in various ways.

### **Gandhi Vichar Prashikshan (Sadhana Programme)**

In our previous annual report we had described in detail the ongoing training programme that had begun on 8 September 2007. This was successfully concluded on 5 June 2008, World Environment Day, in the presence of Radha Behn Bhatt. Following the conclusion of the training programme Lalita, Munni and Surja continued their studies in Lakshmi Ashram, preparing for the class XII examinations of the National Open School, Deepa joined her family to continue her education at the local Inter College, Parvati and Chandra returned to work with Arpan, the NGO that had deputed them to take the course, while Jaya, Shobha, Yashoda and Poonam went to pursue training and education in Allahabad. A new Sadhana course was not commenced during the year, but has now started from July 2009.

### **Death Anniversary of Sarala Behn**

Sarala Behn, the founder of Lakshmi Ashram and Mother to the Sarvodaya movement in the hills of Uttarakhand, passed away on 8 July 1982 and her final rites were performed as per Hindu tradition on the hillside above the cottage that she had first come to live in shortly after arriving in the Kumaun Hills in 1941, and in which she had started the activities of Lakshmi Ashram in 1946. Since 1982 this day has always been celebrated here in Lakshmi Ashram

with a special function. In the morning before breakfast havan is performed at her samadhi, and then there is a day-long meeting, usually focusing on a particular issue.

As reported in our previous annual report, following last year's meeting and several follow-up meetings, it had been decided to declare 2008 as Uttarakhand Save the Rivers Year. Thus the discussions at this year's meeting, held as last year at the Anasakti Ashram to accommodate the large numbers of participants, focused on the ongoing activities of the campaign. Activists had come from all corners of Uttarakhand, and together shared their grassroots experiences with one another. The opportunity was taken for all those present to discuss among themselves strategies for taking the campaign forward.

### **Uttarakhand Save the Rivers Campaign**

As described in last year's Annual Report the decision had been taken following discussions among all those active in the save the rivers campaign to make it a statewide campaign, focusing on the very real threats to the existence of the rivers of Uttarakhand, both the large rivers that rise from the glaciers and snowfields of the Himalaya as well as those that have their sources in the lower forested ridges of the mid-Himalaya.

During the past year efforts were made from the local level to the state level to raise awareness among the general public as well as the state administration to the threats faced by our rivers, the very lifeline of life in Uttarakhand. In April 2008 a delegation from the campaign met with the Chief Secretary and other high-ranking officers in the state administration.



Radha Behn and Dr Ravi Chopra of the Peoples Science Institute in Dehra Dun, undertook two study tours to see at first hand some of the issues facing the people in the valleys of the major rivers where hydroelectric power projects are proposed or are already under construction. In May 2008 they toured Garhwal, while later on in the year in September they made a tour of Kumaun, where they also visited some of the lower valleys where river levels have fallen markedly in recent years.

As in the previous year numerous padyatras were undertaken in the river valleys of Uttarakhand during the winter. Lakshmi Ashram organised a week-long padyatra in the Kosi

valley from its source close to Kausani down as far as Kosi Bazar below Almora, joined along the way by padyatras taken out in the side valleys. These padyatras were followed by a two day state-level conference in the state capital, Dehradun, following which a memorandum was submitted to the state government, expressing the deep concerns felt by civil society in Uttarakhand over the threats faced by the rivers, and demanding that appropriate action be taken by the government to face these concerns.

### **Seventy Fifth Birthday celebrations for Radha Behn**

Radha Behn first came to Lakshmi Ashram on New Years Day 1951 at the age of seventeen to join Sarala Behn as a young teacher and later co-worker. In 1966 she assumed responsibility for running the activities of Lakshmi Ashram, and has since gone on to be the general secretary of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust in Indore and is at present the chairperson of the Gandhi Peace Foundation in New Delhi.

She celebrated her seventy-fifth birthday on 16<sup>th</sup> October 2008. While Radha Behn herself would not have wanted to personally see this day marked in any special way, nevertheless all her friends and co-workers were of one mind, that this was indeed a milestone in Didi's life that could not be allowed to pass by unnoticed.

*(Described in Sanchar 105).*

### **Visitors to Lakshmi Ashram**

Lakshmi Ashram has a long tradition of welcoming visitors from near and far to share in its daily life. While some visitors come just for one or two days, others stay for a long period. All of them very quickly become part of the Ashram family as they share in the daily activities with the students and workers.

In recent years we have welcomed young German volunteers from KURVE, a German organisation for non-violent social change. In September we welcomed Arina Theel. She was to stay for a year, and she very quickly integrated herself completely into the Ashram family. *(About Arina see Sanchar 106 and 107)*

The Ashram also has a longstanding contact with VIA in Germany. Twice a year groups of students come through VIA to India to participate in a programme organised by the Gandhi Peace Foundation in New Delhi. The group divides into a number of teams, each team visiting a different Sarvodaya institution. During the past year we welcomed groups in September 2008 and March 2009. Each group participates in the daily life of the ashram, sees something of village life at close hand and is introduced to our activities in the local community, and then also visits our Gram Seva Kendra in Danya. On their return to Delhi there is an evaluation programme at GPF.

In June we hosted a group of students from the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota, United States. David Schmit, one of the group leaders, wrote:

*"Many heartfelt thanks for hosting our group of 20 College of St. Catherine students. Your graciousness and hospitality touched us all. Our students will leave with precious memories, powerful insights into Gandhian philosophy, and a deeper appreciation of how a dedicated group of people live out their ideals. And of course there are your delightful students who charmed us with their spontaneity and joie de vie."*

### **Activities in Udyog Mandir**

Situated alongside the Anasakti Ashram, the Ashram's Udyog Mandir houses the workshop dedicated to research and development of appropriate tools for the hill environment, in particular for agriculture and for spinning and weaving. The workshop activities are managed

by the Ashram's senior worker, Shri Anand Bhai, who has a dedicated team of local men working alongside him in the well-equipped workshop.

In recent years their focus has been on improved agricultural tools. Their winnowing fan in particular has proved very popular over the years with local farmers. Production of agricultural implements during 2008-09 was as below:

|                  |            |
|------------------|------------|
| 1. Winnowing Fan | 161 pieces |
| 2. Rake          | 160 pieces |
| 3. Kudal         | 5 pieces   |

In addition the following items for spinning and weaving were produced during the year:

|                           |            |
|---------------------------|------------|
| 1. Spinning wheel bobbins | 200 pieces |
| 2. Weaving Loom           | 1 piece    |

Much of the sales of agricultural equipment have been to ongoing development projects being implemented by the state government at the district level. Every year the workshop team participates in the Uttarayani Mela at nearby Bageshwar, which takes place on the banks of the Saryu River in mid January. Participating in this allows for direct interaction with local farmers and good sales are always achieved.

During the past year the workshop has also developed its already strong links with those working in similar activities in other parts of India, participating in all-India level fairs. This offers the opportunity both for publicity and promotion of the activities of Lakshmi Ashram, and also more importantly the chance to exchange experiences with others working in the field of alternative technologies in India. The Udyog Mandir continues to also house our public library and reading room, which is well used by the local public, in particular the students and those older people posted on government service in Kausani.

During the year the state government has sanctioned the construction of a museum to commemorate the life and work of Sarala Behn and her incalculable contribution to village life in Uttarakhand. In preparation for its construction by a government appointed contractor, part of the Udyog Mandir, including the garage and former khadi store, were leveled in order to provide a suitable area for the construction of the museum. Discussions have already been commenced as to how best to design the museum to achieve its aims.

### **Community Activities in the Kosi Valley**

When Sarala Behn first came to the Kumaun Hills in 1941 she very quickly built up close links with the villages in the Kosi valley immediately below Kausani. In her autobiography she devotes an entire chapter to the freedom fighters of the valley who offered up their lives for the cause of Indian freedom.

During past six years or more one of Lakshmi Ashram's senior workers, Basanti Behn, has been giving her time and energy to working among the communities of the Kosi valley from its source down valley as far as Someshwar, and also in the tributary valleys. These are fertile valleys irrigated by the Kosi River, and with large villages situated along the valley sides. Basanti Behn has been responsible for organising Mahila Mandals in all the villages, allowing the women to realise their inner strengths and work together for social and environmental issues. The communities in the valley are concerned about the declining flow of the Kosi River, the lifeline of the communities on which their agriculture depends, and the women have been inspired to take action to protect the forests from where the Kosi River rises, no longer cutting life wood for fuel or oak leaves for fodder.

Lakshmi Ashram has been active since January 2008 working with the elected women representatives of the area in Panchayati Raj institutions at the village and block level, in a project supported by The Hunger Project. Panchayati Raj elections took place in Uttarakhand

in September 2008, and prior to the elections Basanti Behn and her team of four local young women was busy in the community seeking through meetings and cultural programmes to raise awareness among the community of the role of women in Panchayati Raj institutions. Following the elections the main emphasis has been on working with the newly elected women representatives, seeking to raise their awareness of their powers and responsibilities, so they are not simply rubber stamps for the male members of their families.

### **Village Level Activities in Dhauladevi Block**

It was back in the late seventies that Lakshmi Ashram first started to work at the village level in Dhauladevi block, to begin with in adult literacy programmes. However in discussions with the local community the main demand expressed by the villagers in this relatively remote area was for pre-school education. For almost the past thirty years Lakshmi Ashram has maintained a field office in Danya, and some ten years back following the grant of land by the local gram panchayat a Gram Seva Kendra was established. From the beginning pre-school (balwari) education has been the focal centre of activities. The balwaris provided an entry point into the village, and then efforts were made to organise the women into Mahila Mandals to work together on issues of common concern – social, economic and environmental. These groups have established self-help groups and have built up funds that can be lent to the members whenever there is a need. They are active on social issues such as alcohol abuse, and work together to protect and manage their common grazing lands and forests.

For several years Lakshmi Ashram had been implementing an integrated watershed management project funded by the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, the nodal agency for Kumaun being CHIRAG. This project was finally completed during the past year. The project saw the active participation of the village communities, right from the planning stage through to final implementation.

The Gram Seva Kendra is managed by a senior Ashram worker, Sushri Pushpa Joshi, assisted by Meena, who regularly conducts training programmes in sewing for the local women. The centre has a large meeting hall which is frequently used for community meetings, especially for the women and the local youth.

### **Other News**

Over the years a number of marriages have been solemnized in the courtyard of Lakshmi Ashram. In May 2008 the marriage took place in very simple style of a former student of Lakshmi Ashram, Saraswati, who has completed her nurse's training at Kasturbagram, to the youngest brother, Jagdish, of one of our senior workers, Bimla Behn. Many family and friends of the bridegroom were present on the occasion, and all had the opportunity to experience the simplicity of Ashram life, and the message that it seeks to give to society.

Radha Behn continues to act as chairperson of the Gandhi Peace Foundation with unflagging energy, and also to continue her involvement with the activities of the state units of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust, in particular with the work being undertaken in the NE states for communal harmony. She still manages to find some time to devote to the Ashram activities, in particular in giving her invaluable guidance to the activities being undertaken among the local communities in the Kosi Valley, and acting as the source of inspiration and direction for the Uttarakhand Nadi Bachao Abhiyan.

Place: Kausani, District Almora  
for Kasturba Mahila Utthan Mandal  
Date: 23 January 2010  
David Hopkins

## Raising Community Awareness in the Kosi Valley by David Hopkins

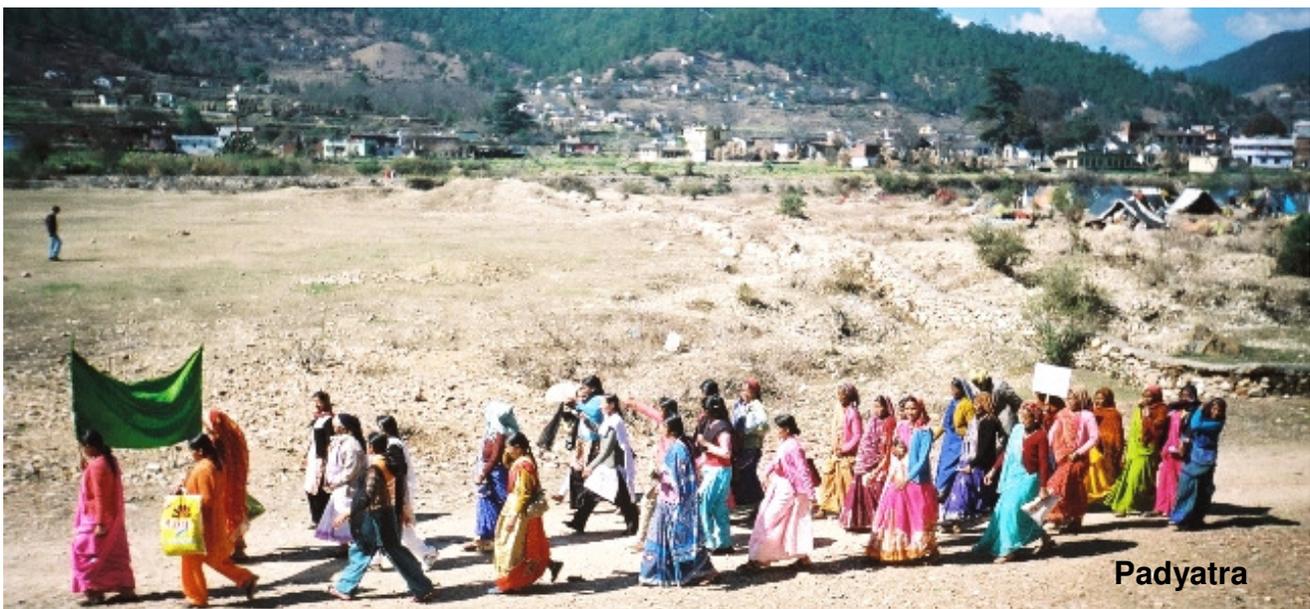
Here among the villages of the Kosi valley below Kausani Sarala Behn first started her work in the early nineteen forties, upon arriving at Shree Gandhi Ashram's Chanauda centre. Concerned by the conditions that she observed in the lives of the rural women, she started her efforts to empower them.

Now, several generations on, similar work is being carried on under the inspiration of Radha Behn and the direction of Basanti Behn. Basanti Behn had first come to Lakshmi Ashram in 1981 and, after having completed her training programme in spinning and weaving, became one of the first balwari teachers in Dhauladevi block. She went on to be the chief coordinator for activities in the Ashram's area of field activities in Dhauladevi block, before working for a year as Indian coordinator for Himvanti, a trans-national organization for women of the Himalaya.

Returning to Lakshmi Ashram in 2003 she began to actively work among the village communities in the valleys of the Kosi and its tributaries. The main focus of her activities has been in organizing the women at the village level into *Mahila Mandals*, so that they might collectively take up social and environmental issues that directly affect them in their daily lives.

With a growing recognition of the declining flow of the Kosi River, the lifeline of the rural communities in this area, and with an understanding of the important role of the forests in maintaining the flow of the rivers, the women in village after village were motivated to stop lopping the leaves of the oak trees – *banj* – for fodder for their cattle, and also not to cut live trees for firewood. They also were ready at any time of the day or night to go out into the forests, should forest fires break out. From 2007 the Save the Kosi Campaign took birth, developing the following year into a state-level Save the Uttarakhand Rivers Campaign.

During the past two years, with support from The Hunger Project, Lakshmi Ashram has also been actively working among the elected women representatives to the village councils, the *Gram Panchayats*. An amendment to the Indian Constitution has allowed for 50% reservation for women in the village councils, but the reality is that usually the men take the



Padyatra

place of the elected women, who have no understanding of their responsibilities as ward members or village heads – *gram pradhans*. The Hunger Project is working with a number of organizations in Kumaun including Lakshmi Ashram, promoting training of the women representatives, so that they might better understand their rights, and then assume full responsibility in their elected posts.

As part of these ongoing activities of organizing the local women, working among the women representatives and raising social and environmental awareness, a week long programme of foot marches – *padyatras* – culminating in a large meeting in Someshwar, was recently concluded. Four separate padyatras were organised from 18-23 February, all four teams reaching Someshwar on the morning of 24<sup>th</sup>. Two padyatras took place in the Kosi valley, one starting from the first village of Kantali and moving slowly down the valley, while a second commenced from Manan and slowly made its way up the valley towards Someshwar. The other two padyatras were organised in two tributary valleys of the Kosi, the Sai and Mansa Nala, that both join the Kosi close to Someshwar. Bhavana, Veena, Tulsi and Pushpa, the four trainers in The Hunger Project programme, played an active role in organizing the padyatras, one in each group. The eight students on our Gandhian Studies Programme also took part in the padyatras, two in each team, for them a very positive practical experience. Basanti Behn and Basant Pandey, the coordinator of the Save the Rivers Campaign, assumed overall responsibility for the planning. One of our young ashram workers, Shobha, joined the padyatra team in the Sai Valley.

For six days the four padyatra teams walked slowly from one village to the next, holding meetings in the villages. A good number of the village representatives and active members of the Mahila Mandals also participated in the padyatras. Among the issues raised were the prevailing gender inequality, and the need to break down discrimination between boys and girls, between men and women, so that all can equally contribute to society. Social evils of liquor abuse and gambling, and their negative impact on family life were also to the fore. The need for community control over the management of natural resources – water, forest and land – was also highlighted. The villagers made arrangements every night for the teams' accommodation.

On the morning of 24 February the Ma Uttarakhand Stadium in Someshwar presented a colourful sight as women converged from all directions to participate in the meeting. One by one the four padyatra teams arrived to the accompaniment of slogans and rousing songs, and took their place also in the meeting. This was chaired by Radha Behn, who had made the long overnight journey from Delhi so that she too might be present. Representatives of the local administration were also present on the dais, and addressed the hundreds of women gathered there. The team leaders told of their experiences during the padyatras, local women told of the problems they face in their daily lives, the efforts they have made through their Mahila Mandals to overcome these, and the successes that they have achieved. The meeting was a vibrant illustration of the strength of the women in the Kosi valley, of how they are coming out of their homes to make their voices heard in the community.