

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

SANCHAR 110

November/December 2010

Dear friends,

First of all I want to wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. The winter in Denmark is coming nearer and nearer, and sometimes it is rather dark outside. The first snow has just come.

This time the newsletter brings:

- Personal Experiences in the Garden by Lalita Rana
- Yoga Exercises and Team Games in the Daily Life by Tara Koranga
- Efforts to strengthen Village-level Government through the Participation of Women in the Village Councils by Basanti Behn and Basant Pande
- The Minutes from the General Meeting

In October I had the opportunity to visit the Ashram again together with a Danish group of seven persons – among these one of the committee members and our auditor. We had some very nice days in Kausani. The weather was fine, the mountains were very clear and beautiful, and the students were absolute very nice and obliging. They performed such a brilliant cultural programme for us.

It still costs 1725 Danish kroner and the subscription 75 Danish kroner to be a sponsor (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, 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

Thanks to the members who have accepted this.

Best wishes,

Lone Poulsen

Personal Experiences in the Garden

Lalita Rana

Lalita has studied in Lakshmi Ashram from class one, and is now a trainee worker, while at the same time studying privately for her BA examinations through the Kumaon University.

Her first responsibility as an Ashram worker has been to manage the terraced vegetable gardens of the Ashram that provide us with fresh vegetables.

I have been working in our Ashram garden for the past two years, along with my fellow workers and students, to produce vegetables and fruits for our Ashram community. I get much enjoyment from this work. I receive a great deal of help and encouragement from everyone, especially from the more senior workers, in developing and expanding this activity. In the beginning I had very little experience of gardening, but now I can work very well on the land, and my self-confidence has greatly increased.

I feel a deep personal bond with the trees and plants in the garden – just as a mother gives great attention to raising her children, watching them laugh and play in front of her and growing older by the day, likewise I have a deep love for every one of the plants, and I feel as if I am personally nurturing each and every one of them. I meet all of their needs for compost, water and air. The plants gently swaying and quivering in the light breeze, sadly sometimes withering, grow day by day before my eyes. In meeting all their needs I too in a way am playing the role of a mother.



**Vegetables from the garden.
Lalita in the orange/brown
cardigan**

In the middle of our garden there are a hand pump, a spring and a rainwater tank, all three of which we make use of to water our fields. This year we worked harder than before in raising vegetables, different vegetables being raised in different seasons. We also have constructed two polyhouses, inside which we sow seed and raise seedlings before transplanting them outside in the fields. In undertaking all these activities my understanding of science and geography has also increased.

Alongside learning the different aspects of managing the vegetable garden, I have also developed my skills in other ashram activities. I have very slowly learned all the garden related skills, strengthening my personal understanding, and in turn I am now teaching the other girls.

This past year we have prepared some seed ourselves, including barley (12 kilos), *lai* (a traditional winter green), cucumber, pumpkin, garlic, coriander etc., but we also have to purchase other seeds that we need in larger quantities from the horticultural department.

This year we produced larger amounts of vegetables than in recent years, as detailed below:

S.No.	Vegetable	Production kilos	S.No.	Vegetable	Production kilos
1	Pumpkin	172.0	7	Lai	72.0
2	White Radish	144.0	8	Cabbage	60.0
3	Aubergine	136.0	9	Onion	58.0
4	Tomato	115.0	10	Garlic	48.0
5	Chaulai (Amaranth)	83.0	11	Lauki (Bottle Gourd)	25.0
6	Capsicum	80.0			

Besides the above vegetables we have also grown carrots, peas, *bakula* (a local variety of broad beans), marrow, coriander, fenugreek, spinach, cucumber and mint. A lot of effort is required to nurture and grow all these different vegetables.

Before carrying out any activity I prepare a plan in my mind, and based on that my work slowly proceeds step by step. I have a plan in my mind to grow potatoes, but our efforts have not brought success so far because of wild animals. Our consumption of potatoes also is very high, and it would be impossible to meet anything like our annual demand.

In addition to my responsibility for managing the garden, I have also observed a marked qualitative improvement in my other responsibilities within the Ashram community.



The girls made some fine drawings during our visit in Lakshmi Ashram in October 2010. (Lone Poulsen)

Two Articles by Tara Koranga



Tara Koranga came to the ashram as a student in class eight. She had studied to class five in the primary school in her remote village, but as the nearest high school was at some distance her father was not prepared to send her there to continue her education. However Tara was very determined, and eventually, despite her young age, she started to work in a balwari run by Shobha Behn who lives in Sarala Behn's cottage of Himdarshan Kutir close to Dharamghar. It was Shobha Behn who arranged for Tara to come to Lakshmi Ashram.

Tara is now studying as a private student for her third year of her B.A., having successfully completed the first two years. She is a very able young worker and teacher, and has responsibility for much of the running of the ashram school.

In the morning after prayers she leads the students in yoga, while in the evenings three times a week she is responsible for the children's games. Tara has written on these two aspects of ashram life for the latest issue of Sanchar.

Yoga Exercises

Good health is a priceless gift for man. Someone has rightly said that the supreme joy in life is a healthy body. Each and every pleasure of this world can only be enjoyed through a fit body. Man's life is incomplete in the absence of a healthy body.

It is only possible for a healthy mind to find a home in a healthy body and therefore physical exercise is essential to keep this body healthy, active and full of energy.

Exercise can take numerous forms, such as taking an early morning walk, running, swimming, playing different kinds of games, yoga exercises, etc.

The type of exercise taken depends on the age of the individual. Most exercise is taken by people when they are students. In practicing yoga exercises there are several rules that should be observed:

1. Yoga exercises should be practised on an empty stomach.
2. Yoga exercises should not just be practised at will, but under the guidance of an instructor.
3. They should be practised in a clean and peaceful environment.
4. Yoga exercises should be practised according to the capability of the body.



In the ashram life the activities performed during the course of the day make up an integral part of a well-balanced lifestyle, and by and large all of us are physically active throughout the day. However performing yoga exercises in the beautiful stillness of the early morning paves the way for a healthy life. Bearing in mind the rules detailed above, the ashram students and some of the older workers perform yoga exercises together every morning for some fifteen to twenty minutes.

We start with '*Sukhasan*', an exercise that relaxes the whole body, and then practice various yoga exercises in turn, in a sitting posture, lying on our backs, on our stomachs, on our right side and left side, standing up and in a bending posture, so that the entire body is exercised. One very important exercise is known as '*Surya Namaskar*' or 'Salutations to the Sun'. This incorporates several different yoga asanas that together exercise the entire body. Everybody especially enjoys practicing '*Surya Namaskar*'. Another yoga exercise, '*Chetasan*', relaxes the entire body and, at the same time giving total attention to one's natural breathing in and out, the mind too easily becomes totally concentrated.

By practicing yoga exercises there is a great increase, not only in an awareness of the body but also in concentration of the mind, and our lives are bestowed with great joy.

Team Games in the Daily Life of Lakshmi Ashram

The very word 'Play' or 'Game' – in Hindi '*Khel*', is one that makes everyone feel very enthusiastic. In our lives, just as eating, drinking, moving, talking etc. are all important, in the same way community games also contribute to our all-round education, and are an integral part of life.

In the Ashram life it is not only the small children who enjoy playing team games; the older girls too are equally enthusiastic. During this past year we have regularly on three evenings a week from six to seven o'clock devoted valuable time to games.

The game most enjoyed by everybody is '*Simaintayi*'. To begin with a 'King' and 'Queen' are selected. Then the children go in pairs before the king and queen, and after asking a question one of them joins the king, the other the queen. Thus two equally matched teams are made. In playing this game there is no shouting, rather the enjoyment comes from the running and honestly following the complex rules of the game. Both the smaller and older girls have great fun playing this game.

The most important games that we play on the playing field besides '*Simaintayi*' include:

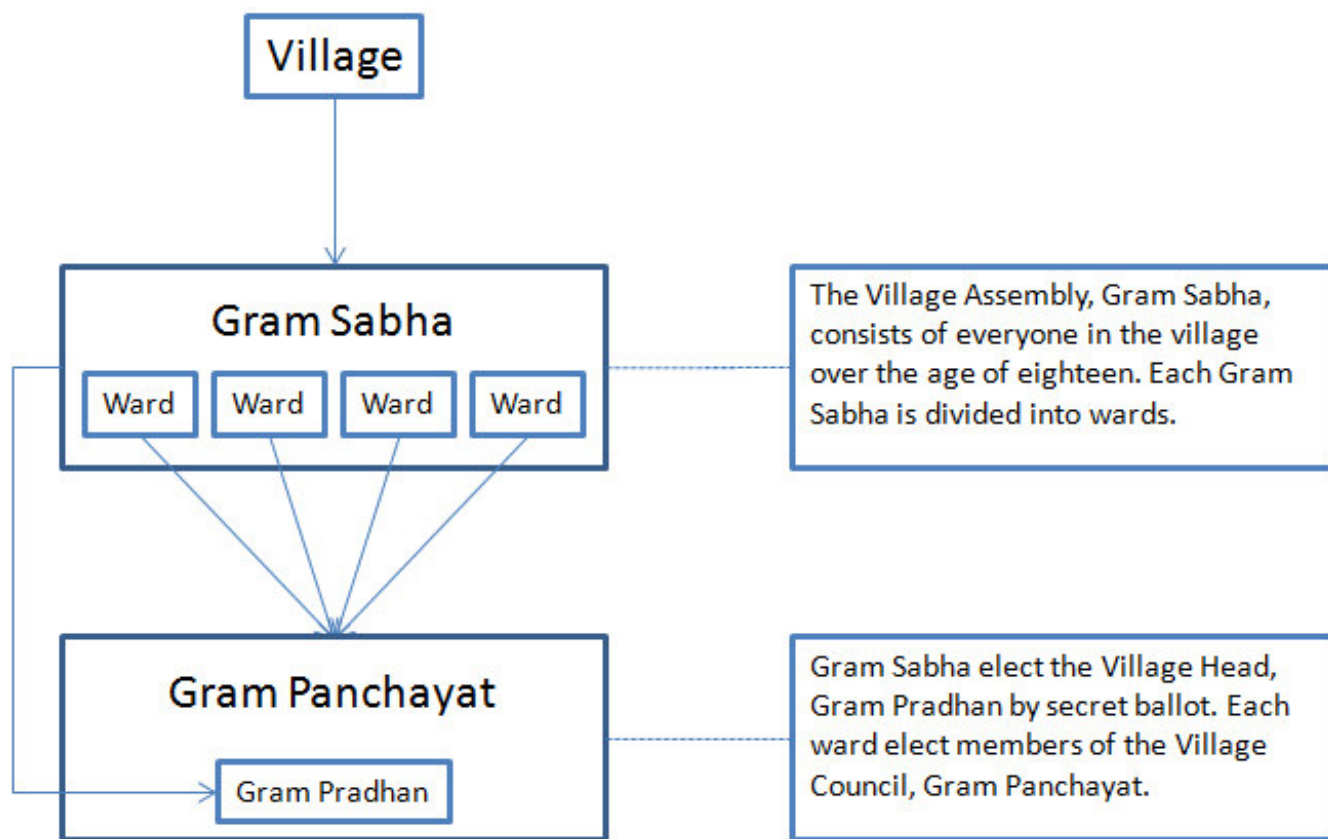
1. *Kursi Daur*, a form of musical chairs but without the chairs
2. *Chuha-Chuha Bhag Ja* (Oh Mouse, run away!) where the cat is trying to catch the mouse
3. *Uncha Nicha ka Papra* where the girls stand in a circle, a rhyme is recited and one by one all the girls except one are eliminated who then chases the others. They can save themselves by going to somewhere high
4. *Kho-Kho*, a very popular local team game especially for girls, often played between schools;
5. *Kabaddi*, India's national game
6. *Chor* (Thief), in which one by one the girls are eliminated by a counting rhyme, and the one left tries to catch the others and send them to jail
7. *Baraf Pani* (Ice and Water), in which when touched the child has to freeze (Ice) but then can be released by the other players (Water);
8. *Tum Kis Mausam Men Ate Ho?* (What season have you come in?), where accompanied by a rhyme one team asks for a girl from the other team. The two girls requested then try to pull one another over a line
9. Badminton
10. Football
11. Skipping, etc.

Those who might be feeling a little tired, or else not so well, enjoy sitting at the edge of the field watching all that is going on. The school children living nearby also come to our playing field, and sometimes start playing just where we are. Then we very patiently move somewhere nearby. The number of those enjoying games is growing by the day. In the future when we have yet more equipment the numbers will grow even more!

Efforts to strengthen Village-level Government through the Participation of Women in the Village Councils

Basanti Behn and Basant Pande

Women are the backbone of mountain society, busy from early morning to late in the evening caring for their family, their fields and their livestock. While the men have migrated out of the hills in large numbers, the women have remained back, actively working for their water, forests and land. Despite being naturally so hardworking, the women have lagged far behind in social and political leadership, and it has not even been felt necessary to seek their advice or viewpoint. The village council (gram panchayat) is responsible for the government of the villages and, in order to increase the participation of the women, backward classes and scheduled castes in the gram panchayats, the government has introduced a reservation policy for these weaker sections of society.



In India the villages can be defined in terms of the Village Assembly (Gram Sabha). In the village everyone over the age of eighteen is a member of the Gram Sabha. They select the Village Head (Gram Pradhan) by secret ballot. The Gram Panchayat runs the Gram Sabha. Several wards together form one Gram Sabha. Those members elected from each ward are members of the Gram Panchayat. The work

of the Gram Panchayats includes the managing of development activities – health care, education, care of the children, overlooking the property of the Gram Sabha, making efforts for the uplift of the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, the scheduled castes and the backward classes, etc.

As in other parts of the state of Uttarakhand, so also in the Kosi valley despite reservation for women their leadership in the Gram Panchayats is not seen to be coming to the fore. In 2008 the government had decided to give 50% reservation to women in the Panchayat elections. Previously there had been 33% reservation for women but only very exceptionally were women assuming a leadership role in the Panchayats. Now 50% reservation had been declared, but this was still not enough to ensure true leadership of women in the Panchayats. Even today in the hills there are obstacles in the way of women being able to get outside their homes, because of social and family customs and the burden of domestic responsibilities.

Lakshmi Ashram has been making efforts since 2003 for the organizing of the women at the grassroots, through the formation of some 200 Mahila Mandals (Women's Committees) at the village level that are actively working for the protection and conservation of their forest and water resources. The message of the work that these Mahila Mandals have done for saving their forests has spread throughout Uttarakhand and indeed the entire country. Along with community organisations the government too has been taking initiatives for water conservation. The government has taken a special interest for water conservation in the valley of the Kosi River, undertaking various initiatives including regeneration of forests and construction of percolation ponds.



The women of this valley have been able to escape the confines of their homes through the activities of the Mahila Mandals, and on a number of occasions have taken to the streets to raise their voices on current social issues besides those of forests and water, have confronted the government and contractors, and taken the message of Save Our Forests, Save Our Rivers from one valley to another through padyatras (walking from one village to another). All these successes have increased the spirit and resolve of the women, and have given rise to a self-confidence that they can provide a strong leadership in the Gram Panchayat for the organizing and running of the Gram Sabha. Seeing this, the workers of Lakshmi Ashram has sought in every way to provide them with knowledge and give them encouragement.

Now 50% women have been selected as ward members and Gram Pradhans, but they need to establish a place for themselves in their respective Panchayats through their work and efforts. The biggest challenges facing these newly elected representatives were their lack of general knowledge of the world around them, no understanding of the activities and procedures of the Panchayat and Gram Sabha, and being less educated.

With support from The Hunger Project in New Delhi, Lakshmi Ashram has selected fifty- one Gram Sabhas in the Kosi valley and began the task of increasing the capacity and understanding of the women in their role as Panchayat representatives. Besides this they have sought to develop a dialogue between the elected women representatives so that they might increase their collective power. The women's Gram Panchayat leadership empowerment programme has focused on 28 Gram Pradhans and 122 deputy Gram Pradhans and ward members from 51 Gram Sabhas. In 2009 workshops were arranged for these 150 representatives. Basanti Behn from Lakshmi Ashram and four local young women are continually visiting the villages to strengthen this work. They have come to know the problems facing the elected women representatives in their Panchayat related work and have found ways to resolve them.

The situation today is that the women, armed with the power of knowledge and self-confidence, are fighting for their rights. They are sharing their knowledge and experience one with the other, and are making all-out efforts to successfully carry out their responsibilities within the Gram Sabha.

Even today though there is no lack of challenges facing them. All around is corruption – taking 'kickbacks' and development activities have become two sides of the one coin. The women have to rise to face this challenge if they are to achieve better work. If the women representative raises her voice alone then nobody listens, rather the opposite occurs and she becomes the focus of contempt for the Panchayat staff and officers. Thus there is a need for the elected women representatives to join together to raise a united voice.

Now during 2010 we are making efforts to bring the women representatives together on one platform. Discussions are going on with the women representatives of these 51 Gram Sabhas towards creating a block level federation. Lakshmi Ashram is continually active with the hope that each and every one of these hardworking hill women through their collective power in the panchayats will achieve the recognition that they deserve in society.

Minutes from the General Meeting on 12th September 2010

Election of a chairman: Helle Poulsen

Election of a keeper of the minutes: Hanne Stenager

The Committee's Report

There has been no committee meeting during the past year, but the contact between the committee members has passed off by mail or telephone or at meetings in other places. 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 2009 we sent out three Sanchars (no. 105, 106 and 107). Twice a year (February and August) we send money to the Ashram. The latest bank transfer was sent directly to Lakshmi Ashram's bank in Kausani. The bank has been digitalised, so it seems that we will have no more problems by sending money in the future.

In 2009 we were 89 members in Friends of Lakshmi Ashram – in 2008: 105 members. The fall in the number of members has happened, because we have not so many double memberships like before,

when we tried to get the number of members increased to get some tax advantage, but nowadays the tax authorities demand 300 members in the society, so we have to give up this idea. Therefore we assume one membership per household, club or society, unless we have been told differently. Since last time the chairman has given three lectures about Lakshmi Ashram. The fee has been put into the Ashram Account.

News from Lakshmi Ashram

Lakshmi Ashram has now joined National Institute of Open Schooling – NIOS. It is an All-India institution that is entitled to give exams. Last year we told that the Uttarakhand government 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 went home to finish their schooling in the local schools. The numbers of students therefore fell, but now they have enrolled many new girls, so that the numbers of students again is about 50. The examination results were very good this year.

There have been some Danish visits in the Ashram – both old friends and new young girls. Nearly every year there is a German trainee in the Ashram often for one whole year. At the general meeting we showed pictures from a photo project that one of the young Germans, Arina, was responsible for. The girls learnt to use a digital camera, and they chose some of the photos, which told about life in the Ashram.

Lakshmi Ashram uses more and more visiting teachers, who can give them inspiration and knowledge. Among others there have been a drama teacher, who worked with dolls and masks, and a mathematician, who also taught the older students in using the computer.

Lakshmi Ashram is still working in the villages, with the project “Save the Rivers of Uttarakhand” and in forming women’s groups and teaching the women, who have been elected for the village committees (panchayats). Neema, the secretary of the Ashram, was on leave for about 5 months because of health problems. She visited an ayurvedic doctor near Bangalore a couple of months and visited friends and institutions to get new energy for her great and responsible job.

The minutes were approved.

The Account

The account of 2009 was presented and approved.

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. Quite a lot of members nowadays get a mail to tell that they can see the new Sanchar in the home page. That saves money for postage.

Subscription:

The subscription is kept on Danish kroner 75 (about 10 Euro) yearly per member.

The subscription was approved.

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



Lone



Hanne



Ruth

Election of auditor and substitute

Revisor: Claus Broskov Soerensen, Bayneaasen 79, 2640 Hedehusene

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

Krishna and Gopal Bisht visited the meeting. They were in Denmark – invited by an organisation in Jutland (Naya Jiwan = New Life) and Friends of Lakshmi Ashram. Danida (the Danish Foreign Ministry) paid for the flight tickets. Krishna and Gopal gave lectures during their stay, and they ended their visit at the general meeting.

Krishna has been a student in Lakshmi Ashram and is now in the board. She is the leader of Mahila Haat – an NGO with close connection to Lakshmi Ashram.

Krishna and Gopal told about life in the mountains and a little from the Ashram.

13.09.2010 Hanne Stenager and Lone Poulsen



Krishna and Gopal during the meeting