

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

Lone Poulsen, Praestehusene 6, 2620 Albertslund, DK Denmark

Telephone +45 43 96 13 71 – e-mail: lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk

Bank Account IBAN no: DK0330000003141861

Lakshmi Ashram's homepage: <http://lakshmiashram.dk>

**NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM
SANCHAR 112**

August 2011

Dear friends,

This time the newsletter brings:

- A Year in the Hills by Leonie H., volunteer in Lakshmi Ashram
- My Experiences in Lakshmi Ashram by Pooran Pande
- Nature's Blessings by Basanti Behn
- Minutes from the General Meeting 3rd April 2011

Neema Behn has now got a long leave from the Ashram for her PhD, and Basanti Behn will take her place as a secretary of the Ashram. She is interested to do her research on Gandhi's Nai Talim [Basic Education], and Lakshmi Ashram will be a part of her research. Her main aim is to do some study on the Ashram's education in the point of view of Basic Education. So finally it will be a benefit for the Ashram. She will be keeping coming to the Ashram in between.

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. 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

A Year in the Hills

By Leonie H, volunteer in Lakshmi Ashram from August 2010 – July 2011

Arriving in India on a rainy monsoon day in August of last year felt a little like jumping into the air and landing in a swirl of bright colours, sounds and the smells of spices, exhaust gases, people, food and rain.

In Germany, where I come from, I had finished high school a few weeks before and now came to India to do a one year voluntary service with the intention to learn about a different culture and a different way of life on the one hand, and to contribute with my own skills and time on the other hand. The financial support of the German NGO “KURVE Wustrow” as well as that of the German government enabled me to spend a year in Lakshmi Ashram.

What I noticed first, when I walked up the small footpath towards Lakshmi Ashram after a long and noisy journey was the quietness. There was no sound apart from the twittering of some birds, the chirping of the crickets and the faraway sound of flowing water. I opened the small, red painted gate of the Ashram – curious about what kind of place expected me and what the year would be like that lay ahead of me.

The peaceful atmosphere of the Ashram, the beautiful nature that it is surrounded by, and the way I was welcomed made me soon realize that this was going to be a good year.

In the beginning I mainly joined in the daily activities like working in the garden or collecting wood from the forest, figuring out the routine, trying to understand some Hindi and coping with daily adventures such as buying a pencil in Kausani – and many other things that seemed just so different from what I had known from where I had grown up. After some weeks, when my language skills had improved, I started contributing to the academic classes – over many months I taught English and Art to the younger classes and also gave lessons in Computer skills for class nine. Teaching was for me a nice as well as a challenging experience – and I could never be sure what exactly was going to happen after I entered the classroom. Sometimes the girls would get their English books, sit down attentively and we would then nicely do the small practices, games and whatever I had anticipated for that lesson.

On the other hand it might happen that Priti is holding a plate in front of her face insisting on it being her book, Neha comes running to the front, opens her mouth and won't close it until I have admired her loose tooth, Diya and Gitanjali are fighting over a particular place both want to sit in, while ink is running out of Kavita's laughing mouth, because she was chewing her pen.

Over the year, I also initiated a number of projects with the girls. For instance we crafted things from paper and other materials and we practiced songs, whose lyrics I had translated into Hindi, or for which I had created Hindi texts for popular European melodies. So if you should ever visit the Ashram and hear the girls singing something sounding like the tune of “Greensleeves” – then it is our song “Basant Aya”, meaning “Spring has come”!



The girls and also I very much enjoyed rehearsing three small theatre plays for which I had written Hindi scripts based on commonly known European stories – like Hans Christian Andersen’s tale “The Emperors New Clothes”.

For me, this year was of course not always easy, but it was wonderful. The experiences I made are very precious to me. I learned to live a life in simplicity - showering from a bucket instead of a shower head, wrapping a blanket around the shoulders instead of heating the whole house in winter – and to very much cherish this way of living. And I could experience, how important it is for me to have a balance between manual and intellectual work.

Now I am going to leave the Ashram soon. Just as I couldn’t be sure of how I would react to the unexpectable a year ago, I now don’t know how I will react to everything so well known back in Europe.

Especially during the last months, when my life was totally interwoven with the lives of the other residents of the Ashram and when I felt quite secure in the language, Lakshmi Ashram felt very much like a home for me.

I got to know the women and girls who live here so well, I can sing the prayers and I know all the work – I learned how to cut grass with a sickle, so many things about agriculture and how to prepare food the Indian way – even though my chapattis are still hardly ever quite as round as those of the girls.

To leave this place and not to hear the girls call “Shubh ratri, Leo Didi” every evening before I go to sleep – “Good Night” in Hindi – is hard to imagine.

Living together with the people from the Ashram who work with all their time and energy for a change in their society and spending so much time with the cheerful girls was an inspiring experience, which I will take with me - together with many, many memories and new thoughts that will make this year in the hills stay alive in my heart.



Transplanting of rice

My Experiences in Lakshmi Ashram

By Pooran Pande

My name is Pooran Pande and I have worked in many capacities in Lakshmi Ashram for more than eighteen years. Lakshmi Ashram was founded by an English woman called Catherine Mary Heilemann, better known in India as Sarala Behn. Sarala Behn was a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, just as Mira Behn was, only she is lesser known because she worked in the remote Kumaun region.

Lakshmi Ashram was founded to help and educate unfortunate young village girls, who came from deprived and unhappy backgrounds. Sarala Behn had made use of Gandhiji's ideas of NAI TALIM, and planned to give these women a practical and result-orientated academic education, that would make them more effective and competent members of society. Largely, we have been able to achieve this over the years.



I came under the influence of Radha Bhatt (Bari Didi), a leading disciple of Sarala Behn. Radha Didi is presently the chairperson of the Ashram and is the main influence on Ashram activities. I joined the ashram eighteen years ago, and I act as an estate manager by taking care of all the technical aspects of maintenance and repair. Sometimes I even work as a driver and a mechanic. At other times I teach science, psychology and maths to the senior students. The ashram and Gandhiji's Nai Talim has taught me to work in any capacity that is required, and at any time that I am required to do a job. There is no caste or class system in Lakshmi Ashram.

It has been my good fortune to meet many local, national and international leaders, professionals, teachers, students and activists through the activities of the Ashram. I have learned from all these people, and my world today is much bigger than I ever thought possible when I was a boy. For all these new ideas and inputs I have to thank all the didis, teachers and students of Lakshmi Ashram, especially Radha Didi, who has taught me to find new ways to solve local problems.

I have learned about and participated in activities to conserve nature and protect rivers on a local level, and I have learned about Global Warming and the melting of the polar ice on the global level. I have learned from Chandi Prasad Bhattji and Sunderlal Bahugunaji on the local activists' level, and I have heard of Al Gore and Rajendra Pachauri's views on the global level. I have learned that we have only one planet and that the actions of every individual affect every other individual.

I want to give my time and energy to bringing Lakshmi Ashram's ideology to fulfilment. I believe that a new kind of woman can influence and change for the better the society of Uttarakhand. I have seen how the former students of Lakshmi Ashram have been able to bring a new light in their villages. This may be a small beginning, but all big things have a small beginning.

Nature's Blessings

By Basanti Behn

(This article was written by Basanti Behn for the July 2011 issue of the ashram's handwritten magazine "Suryodaya".)

There are twelve months in the year. During the four winter months it is very cold. Snow falls on the Himalayan ranges, and sometimes also on the lower hills. The winter is followed by the four summer months, when it gets very warm and fires break out in the surrounding forests, smoke spreading all around, so that sometimes it is difficult to see across the valley. The village springs and small mountain streams dry up, and even the larger rivers have very little flowing water. Then follow the four months of the wet season when all around is lush and green. Water is rushing everywhere – the mountain torrents cascade down the steep hillsides, the village springs are once again revived, while the river is bursting at its banks.

The warmest months are in May and June. In those days it is neither easy to find drinking water, nor is there any greenery around. Almost all the springs and water courses dry up. During those days those farmers who work on the land are really worried. Looking towards the sky they pray to the Almighty, "O Lord, please send us rain. May our potato crop be plentiful and please ensure that we will have adequate water to transplant our rice."



At that time the local newspapers carry news every day about the troubles the local people are facing because of a lack of water. There is news of women carrying water on their heads from four kilometres away, while in some areas water is being provided by tankers.

Last year there was a great shortage of water in our ashram also. Every evening our children fetched water from Pooran's home. Because of the shortage of water we had also built temporary trench toilets in the ashram.

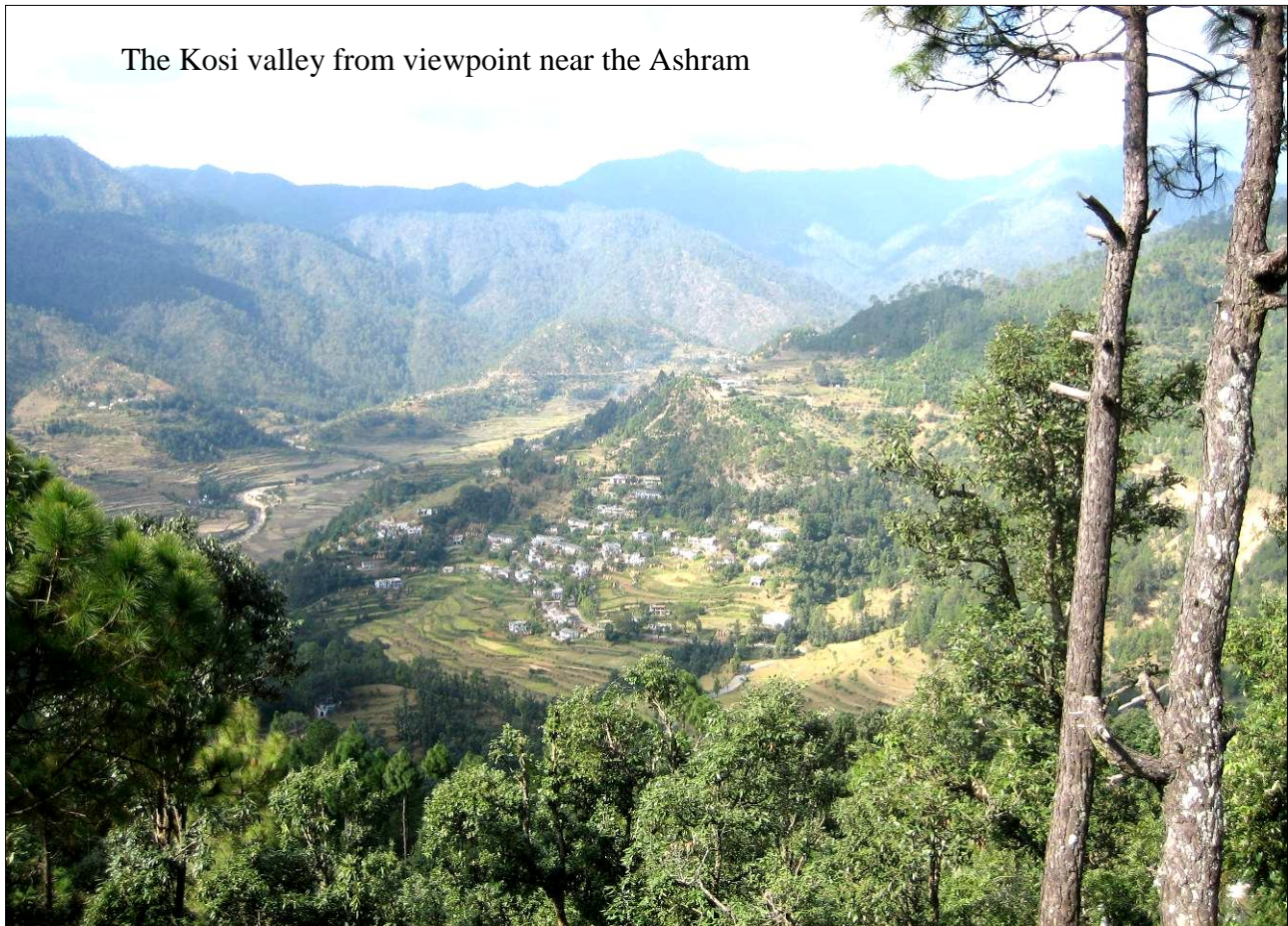
As the rains did not arrive on time last year the seedlings in our tulsi (*basil*) nursery shrivelled up, and we had to prepare a new nursery after marking the death anniversary of Sarala Behn on 8 July, and we were transplanting the seedlings even at the beginning of August. As the rains had not come on time the production last year was greatly reduced.

The villagers too faced similar problems. Despite all the hard work that the farmers put in, they had a very lean harvest. They also faced the problems of increasing numbers of wild animals – wild pigs, rhesus monkeys and langurs, who caused a great deal of damage to their standing crops. All these difficulties make the farmers want to give up farming and move away from their villages. Nobody works harder than the hill farmers, yet all their hard work was in vain.

This year though Mother Nature has showered her compassion on the farmers, as if the Almighty had heard the prayers of the people, and we were blessed with good rains in May. A green cover returned to the forests all around us. This year there were no fires in the forests, while the local villagers did not have to face any problems of water. All the springs and mountain streams quickly

revived after the winter. It feels as if all of us living in the lap of Nature – humans, animals and birds - are living lives full of joy.

These days it is a joy to see the forests all around, while the Kosi River is happily flowing along between its banks, tumbling over the rocks. The animals are gleefully calling out, the birds are singing softly. Their sweet sounds wake us up at dawn. All of us have to think deeply and understand that the more care and protection that we take of Mother Nature, the happier and more rewarding our own lives will be. We have to spread this message to one and all, but first we have to practice it ourselves. If we are happy, think and speak positively and work hard, then others seeing us will likewise act and behave well, and all around society will become good.



During the Save the Kosi River Campaign we have learned all of this from the local women, who did such commendable work in saving their forests, even when they faced opposition from fellow villagers, who accused them of not wanting to work any more but just to wander here and there. They were told that they were bent on ruining their homes, that if they did not cut the forests then how they would prepare their food. There was no end to the criticism that these women faced, however they told their men folk in no uncertain terms that they could say and think what they liked, but for them there was no going back.

They told their men folk that now they too would have to lend their support, that if the forests can be saved then the water would be retained, and that if the water is there then the Kosi River would stay alive. If the Kosi flows then their fields will flourish and will feed their families and society, so that they might all live happy and prosperous lives. This struggle is for the whole area, indeed for the whole country!

“If there is water in abundance then all living creatures will flourish – this struggle is not just yours and mine. It is a struggle for life in the entire country. We all have to join together in this fight. This is not one individual’s work; rather it is everyone’s work. There is no alternative than all of us joining together in this fight.”

“The Kosi River is our Mother. Together we must protect her. Water is the foundation of life. Together we must save the forests from being cut and burnt.” This is our slogan!

Now the men in this area too are saying that the resolve that the local women took not to cut the forests and to save the Kosi River is now bearing fruit through their hard work, and the various initiatives that they have undertaken. This year has brought such good weather that we have faced no problems. The hotel owners did not have to come and take water from anywhere. The farmers faced no problems in their fields, and not so much effort was required. There was fresh and nutritious green fodder for the livestock much earlier than usual. Now all the men and women are saying how good it has been this year –there were neither fires in the forest, nor was there a shortage of water, nor were there difficulties or trouble in the fields.

All of this is the blessing of Mother Nature. We have taken good care of her, and she has fulfilled all our wants. If we undertake any work diligently, then we know that we will definitely be assured the fruits of our efforts. If we have the right attitude in our thinking, then assuredly we will reap success. This we have all seen and heard. Whatever we are blessed with is the gift of Mother Nature!

Basanti Behn is a senior worker in Lakshmi Ashram who first came in 1980 for training in spinning and weaving. Immediately after her training was over she was deputed by Radha Didi to go to Dhauladevi block to be one of our first balwari teachers. She very quickly assumed responsibility for the entire balwari programme and for thirty years has been actively working at the grassroots level in the rural communities. For the past seven years she has been in the ashram and has been working actively among the communities of the Kosi valley. She has recently taken on the responsibility of being the secretary of Lakshmi Ashram, thus allowing Neema to pursue her PhD at Gujarat Vidyapeeth in Ahmedabad.

Minutes from the General Meeting on 3rd April 2011

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 2010 we sent out three Sanchars (no. 108, 109 and 110). Twice a year (February and August) we send money to the Ashram. The money bank transfer works out very fine now, after the bank has been digitalised. It only takes a few days, before the money is in the account of Lakshmi Ashram.

In 2010 we were 73 members in Friends of Lakshmi Ashram – in 2009: 89 members. The fall in the number of members is a bit worrying, but we hope that it is accidental. Anyway we feel it is more difficult now to get support than earlier. Since last time the chairman has given two lectures about Lakshmi Ashram. The fee has been put into the Ashram Account.

News from Lakshmi Ashram

Lakshmi Ashram got nine new students, and one student did not return after the long winter holiday. Luckily this happens very seldom. The cause was some family problems. Also this year there has been a German trainee in the Ashram – see the article in this Sanchar. Lakshmi Ashram uses more and more visiting teachers, who can give them inspiration and knowledge. This year the visiting teacher came via Indian Government, and 30 students participated in a needlework and woodwork course. It is difficult for the Ashram to get textbooks to the different subject. The Government is not especially sympathetic towards private schools.

Lakshmi Ashram is still working actively in the villages, e.g. with the project of saving the rivers 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, is in better health now, but she is much overburdened with work. Her great wish is to start a PhD study (see the letter in this Sanchar).

Sarala Behn's autobiography, which is written in Hindi, has now come in an English edition – translated by David Hopkins. It was the English rough draft that was the background of Marie Thoege's Danish book about Sarala Behn.

The minutes were approved.

The Account

The account of 2010 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.

Lakshmi Ashram wants the special account for the inheritance money sent to India, and they will open a special account for a pension fund. They can get a rather higher interest in India than we can in Denmark. The interest shall be used for workers who retire.

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

Election of auditor and substitute

Revisor: Claus Broskov Soerensen, Bavneaaen 79, 2640 Hedehusene

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

All the elections were re-elections.

During a.o.b. somebody asked: "Can we do anything to get more members?" Nobody could answer this question, but here is **a request to everybody: Try all of you to find new interested people!**

03.04.2011 Hanne Stenager & Lone Poulsen