

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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**NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM
SANCHAR 113**

November 2011

Dear friends,

Even if it is a bit early I will wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Thank you for your support to Lakshmi Ashram.

This time the newsletter brings

The Annual Report of Activities 2010-11

written by David Hopkins and shortened by Lone Poulsen.

Neema Behn has now started her PhD 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. As I told last time, 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***

About 50 members have accepted this.

Best wishes,

Lone Poulsen

KASTURBA MAHILA UTTHAN MANDAL

Annual Report of Activities: 2010-2011

This past year will be long remembered for the devastating monsoon rains, which brought widespread death and destruction throughout the hills of Uttarakhand. Lakshmi Ashram has maintained daily records of rainfall for the past 25 years, but we experienced by far the heaviest monsoon rains in 2010, despite the monsoon rains arriving late.

On 18 August a landslide took the lives of eighteen innocent children in a privately run primary school in the small village of Sumgarh in the valley of the Saryu river, opposite the home of Priya Joshi, who is studying in Lakshmi Ashram in class six. A young sister of another of our young students, Himani Joshi, was one of the small children whose short life was cut short that dreadful morning, while a second sister was injured.

On 20 August our new volunteer from KURVE, Leonie Harsch, reached Haldwani on the overnight train from Delhi, and set off from there by bus for Kausani. However a phone call informed us that she had been forced to return to Haldwani because torrential rains around Bhawali had swept away several bridges. Luckily she reached Kausani safely the following afternoon, by an alternative but little used road between Bhawali and Almora.

Then torrential and widespread rains on 17-18 September caused widespread damage throughout the Kumaun Hills. Landslides in villages close to Almora took several dozen lives,



**Lakshmi Ashram's workshop.
Half of the road has fallen down.**

while closer to Kausani standing crops in the valley of the Mansa Nali were devastated by raging floods. Numerous people lost their homes, especially those from the poorer levels of society whose simply built homes could not stand up to nature's naked fury.

Lakshmi Ashram has entered its sixty-fifth year serving the rural communities of the Kumaun Hills, working especially for creating a sustainable society through the education of girls.

Lakshmi Ashram

The residential school for rural girls, commonly known as Lakshmi Ashram, has been the core activity of the institution ever since its founding in 1946 by Sarala Behn. She left Britain in January 1932, never to return, and dedicated her life to the people of Uttarakhand ever since she first came to nearby Chanauda in the monsoon of 1941. While residing in Sevagram Ashram in the late thirties she had been actively involved in the activities of developing the ideas of Gandhiji on education, his vision of which is often referred to as Basic Education¹.

In 1946, at the insistence of fellow freedom fighters, Sarala Behn established a small residential school for girls, incorporating the ideals of Basic Education. This very quickly grew, and the present structure of Lakshmi Ashram and the daily round of activities have changed little from those initiated by Sarala Behn. As she would say, in Lakshmi Ashram equal value is given to the sickle and the pen. The guiding principle is to give equal value and importance to Head, Heart and Hands – the intellectual, spiritual and physical aspects of holistic learning.

At the beginning of the year there were 48 students in Lakshmi Ashram, while in March 2011 there were 50 students in all. Nine new students joined Lakshmi Ashram in May 2010. Several of them have relatives in the Ashram, either other students or workers.

This year was the second year that our students have sat for the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) high school examinations. There were five students appearing this year. Unfortunately none managed to pass all their subjects, and will re-sit those subjects that they had failed in. The two students who sat NIOS intermediate exams were more successful. It is a challenge for both the teachers and the students to prepare for outside examinations, as the daily programme only allows for three hours of formal study. The positive side is that the classes are small, so the students can receive more personal attention during classes.

Lakshmi Ashram still continues to seek to follow the basic tenets of Gandhi's Basic Education. The Ashram community, from senior workers to the youngest new students, works together throughout the day in every aspect of daily life. The underlying philosophy of Lakshmi Ashram ever since its inception has been that of self-reliance, indeed the founding of the ashram is celebrated every year on 5 December as Self-reliance day. While this objective might be difficult to achieve in practice, nevertheless it has always been the guiding principle of each and every activity in Lakshmi Ashram.

On joining the ashram, each new student joins one of eight teams. Each team has a leader and an assistant leader. These teams are responsible for much of the daily activities. After morning prayers and meditation the teams take responsibility to clean one area of the ashram, the responsibility rotating every week on Monday. The teams are also responsible for preparing the midday lunch and evening supper, under the supervision of the 'house mother', each team preparing a specific meal for one week. The teams also share the responsibility of cleaning the kitchen and dining hall after meals and washing the cooking vessels.

¹ Basic Education – equal value of work by mind and hand. The goal is to give people self-reliance and self-respect, at the same time as they learn to be self-sufficient and self-governing.

Another important aspect of the 'self government' of the ashram is the 'cabinet of ministers', some eight in all, with the eight ministers selecting one of their number as 'prime minister'. Elections for the cabinet of ministers take place roughly every month, the ministers being elected from one of the higher classes. There are eight portfolios including among them agriculture, kitchen, guests, health and culture.

The terraced vegetable gardens and the dairy play an integral part in the ashram life and its goal of self-reliance. All the teachers and students work together in the vegetable garden, and we endeavour to meet as much of our vegetable needs in the kitchen from our own efforts. During the monsoon rains and into the autumn we usually have a good production of vegetables, but it is more difficult to obtain a good harvest during the winter cold and the dry spring. There is one worker who is in overall responsibility for the garden – at present one of our younger workers, Lalita Rana, and it is a challenge for one so young. Some of the fields are directly managed by her, while others are managed by individual classes under the direction of their class teachers.

This year production of vegetables was seriously affected by the very dry summer, the late onset of the monsoon rains and then the devastating rains through from mid July to late September. We had a slight decline in vegetable production over the previous year, although under the guidance of one of our senior workers, Hansi Behn, there was a good production of some of our summer vegetables, especially aubergines, tomatoes and capsicums. However the dry early summer drastically reduced our harvest of French beans.

An important aspect of aspiring towards self-sufficiency in agriculture is production of seeds. The quantity of seed production is determined by various factors, including the weather and the expertise of the young workers. This year though we did manage to save a small amount of pea seed, in addition to other vegetables. The excessive monsoon rains meant that we were not able to save lauki and pumpkin seed as in previous years

The ashram dairy is managed by one of our senior workers, Indira Behn, but she is assisted by other workers and students. One of the biggest challenges facing the dairy is the adequate provision of fodder. As I write during the height of the monsoon rains, there is no lack of green fodder. All around there is lush green grass. However by the end of November this has dried up and during the winter and early spring the cattle are largely fed by dry hay and the leaves of fodder trees. After the rains finish then in October all the older girls and workers leave aside all their other responsibilities and are busy from dawn to dusk, slowly working across the steep hillside above the ashram, cutting the tall green grass with small sickles. This is left to dry in the strong sunshine for at least one day, and is then bound into sheaves and carried down the hillside to be built up into haystacks. We produce enough hay to provide dry fodder to the dairy right through until the following monsoon.

This year we lost one cow, and only had one cow, Sarala, regularly providing milk. Thus there was a sharp decline in milk production, forcing us to have to purchase packaged milk from the market in Kausani. Sarala has now given birth to a calf, while two other cows are in calf, so we are optimistic that this year the milk yields will increase.

Besides providing vegetables to the ashram kitchen, the ashram fields are also used for the production of tulsi (*sweet basil*) and turmeric, both for use in the ashram and for local sales. The tulsi is dried and packed into 100 gram packets, and sold for use as a herbal tea. This is recognized to have excellent therapeutic qualities. During the past year we did not harvest any turmeric, but have recently increased the number of fields under turmeric, so there should be a good harvest during this current year.

The lack of early rains prevented the transplanting of the seedlings of tulsi, and then the growing plants were adversely affected by the subsequent extremely heavy rains. Thus we did not have a surplus for selling wholesale, but instead kept the entire stock for use in the ashram community and for local retail sales.

A further important aspect of striving for self-reliance is in clothing. The ashram believes wholeheartedly in Gandhi's concept of Khadi², and all the students and workers wear khadi cloth. In the hills there is no tradition of working in cotton, so there is no production of cotton khadi in the Ashram. The cotton cloth for the students' clothing is purchased, but all the students from the youngest upwards learn to spin wool on the spindle, while the older students learn to spin on the Bageshwari charkha. There were difficulties in obtaining carded Tibetan wool this year, but eventually we were able to obtain 20 kilos.



'Suryodaya' and 'Vijay'

An integral part of the education in Lakshmi Ashram is the handwritten magazines that are regularly produced by the workers and students. Early bound copies going back more than fifty years are still kept in the ashram, and give a vivid insight into the thinking of the workers and students in those days, and the particular issues that deeply concerned them. These early bound copies even include articles by Sarala Behn and Radha Behn (*then a young*

² Khadi – manually spun and woven cloth. Symbol of the Gandhi Movement.

ashram worker). Two magazines are brought out regularly, ‘**Suryodaya**’ that has contributions from the older students and the workers, and ‘**Vijay**’ which contains contributions from the younger students. ‘Suryodaya’ is edited by Tara Koranga, an enthusiastic young teacher, while ‘Vijay’ is edited by one of the students who is the ‘Minister for Culture’. Everyone is encouraged to contribute something – an essay, story or poem, or else a picture. The editor takes responsibility for designing a fine cover page, preparing the list of contents and writing an editorial.

Festivals through the Year

India is renowned for its festivals, and the Kumaun Hills are no exception. Every season brings with it specific festivals, some being specifically local festivals while others such as Holi and Deepawali are celebrated across large parts of India. Many of these festivals give plenty of opportunity for everyone to work together in celebrating them.

(These festivals have been described in some Sanchars, so the report will be left out here.)

Study Tours

We endeavour that the students and workers have the opportunity every year to take part in a study tour. In recent years these have been organised after the haymaking has been completed, at the end of October and in November.

On 22 October Bimla Behn, assisted by two young workers, Indira and Daya, took a group of nine girls from class five to the south of Almora, to the village of Jainti. An organization here has been actively promoting Sarvodaya³ ideals in the surrounding area. They are very active in khadi, and have a number of production centres. Jainti was a centre of resistance to British rule in the Quit India movement of 1942, and a memorial marks the spot where a number of martyrs lost their lives. On their return the children stopped a night at Dol Ashram, and also had time for sightseeing in Almora.

Basanti Behn took time off from her responsibilities, working among the communities of the Kosi valley, to take the students of class nine to Danya, leaving on 26 October. Basanti Behn had worked herself for many years in the Danya area, and so is very familiar with the work going on in that area, and the many achievements over the past decades. On their way to Danya the students visited Mirtola Ashram, which shows the potential for hill agriculture and dairying. In Danya the students stayed for three nights, and then during the day visited nearby villages to see some of the achievements in pre-school education and natural resource management. On their return they visited the ancient temple complex at Jageshwar.

Afterwards eight students of class VI left via Bageshwar for Sarala Behn’s cottage, ‘Himdarshan Kutir’, accompanied by Durga Behn, Shobha Behn and Nirmala. Sarala Behn had spent her last years in Dharamghar, but before that, back in the 1950s the nearby Bongar valley had been the focus of revolutionary grassroots village uplift work by young ashram workers, including Radha Behn. The students had the opportunity to see that area and learn something of what Lakshmi Ashram had achieved. They also visited the centre of Berinag Gram Swarajya Mandal, which had been established by Radha Behn, and they took time to visit the well-known caves at Patal Bhuwaneshwar and the Kalika temple.

The next group left on 8 November, Tara Koranga accompanying her eleven students of class VII to visit the activities of Grassroots and Mahila Umang Samiti in Kalika (Ranikhet), and also the work of HOPE, an NGO active in the area to the west of Ranikhet. Indira Behn,

³ Sarvodaya – means welfare for everybody. Sarvodaya work is carried out by women and men, who help and support people. Gandhi’s goal was that there should be a Sarvodaya worker in every village.

who manages the ashram dairy, also accompanied her. Grassroots have done a lot of work on environmental and livelihood issues. Mahila Umang Samiti grew out of their work, and is now an independent organisation, totally managed by local women, that involves hundreds of women in productive activities. Lakshmi Ashram has worked with Grassroots in installing biogas plants and latrines in villages in the Kosi valley.

Kalavati Behn and one of our young workers, Lalita Rana, set off on 11 November, taking eight students from class X to visit two professional NGOs, Chirag and Aarohi, that are working at the grassroots level in the Mukteshwar area to the south of Almora. The students were able to see at first hand some of the interventions that these two organisations have made at the community level – in education, health, agriculture, livelihoods, etc.

On 15 November the last group of students, six girls from class XII, left with Neema Behn, Basant Pandey, Shanti Behn and our young German volunteer, Leonie, to trek to the Sunderdhunga Glacier. (*There was an article about this tour in Sanchar 111*). It was a great achievement for each and every one of them – they had all discovered within themselves new strengths and capabilities, they had all tested themselves to the limit.

Training Programme in Gandhian Thought (Sadhana Programme)

It had been proposed to commence the latest training programme in Gandhian Thought in July 2010, but a sufficient number of students were not available. However as I write in August 2011 a new course is successfully under way, with five girls from outside the ashram, and two ashram students, Godavari and Hema, who have just successfully passed their class twelve NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling) intermediate examinations.

Death Anniversary of Sarala Behn

Sarala Behn, the founder of Lakshmi Ashram and the leading inspiration for the Sarvodaya movement in the hills of Uttarakhand, had passed away after a prolonged struggle with ill health, on 8 July 1982, and her final rites took place according to Hindu tradition on the hillside immediately above the cottage of Lakshmi Ashram.

Every year since then the anniversary of her death has been celebrated with a gathering of Sarvodaya workers and members of the local community. In the early morning 'havan' is performed at her Samadhi, and then after breakfast there is a day-long meeting focusing on a particular topic. This year a three day meeting was called, especially of the youth who are actively involved with the Uttarakhand Save the Rivers Campaign. Together they discussed in depth issues concerning the future of Uttarakhand, and especially those problems particularly affecting the youth, such as high unemployment of the educated youth along with the perceived lack of livelihood opportunities in the villages, resulting in high levels of outward migration. The outcome of the three days of deliberation was the formal setting up of Yuva Biradari, a loosely knit organisation of young people, both young men and women. A number of these young people are already showing the way forward, successfully earning their livelihoods especially in agriculture and horticulture, and they are living examples of what the young people can achieve, even when staying back in their villages on their family land.

Uttarakhand Save the Rivers Campaign

The campaign has continued through the past year, under the overall guidance of Radha Behn who, despite her other responsibilities as chairperson of the Gandhi Peace Foundation and more recently as chairperson of the Sarva Seva Sangh, has managed to find time to devote to the campaign. Shri Basant Pandey has continued to coordinate the activities of the campaign, and to liaise with other people and organisations actively engaged in raising

awareness on river issues or campaigning on specific issues. A newsletter is circulated from time to time by post and through e-mail.

The rivers of Uttarakhand can be broadly classified into two groups – those that rise in the high Himalaya and are snow fed, and those smaller rivers of the mid Himalaya, such as the Kosi River, that rise from springs in the forest covered ridges. The biggest threat to the former



The Kosi River

are the numerous hydro-electric power schemes proposed, with some already under construction. Those dams being built on the Bhagirathi upstream from Uttarakashi towards Gangotri have attracted attention at the national level, particularly as a result of the fasts undertaken by Dr. G.D. Agarwal, and the central government has stopped all dam construction. However in other river valleys construction is ongoing. On 30 January Sushila Bhandari and a fellow activist were arrested in the Mandakini valley. They have been actively organizing the local rural community for peaceful opposition to dam construction that is impacting negatively on their way of life. Cracks have appeared in homes as a result of blasting and construction of underground tunnels, agricultural land has been lost, and natural

springs and water sources have dried up. The campaign was actively involved in seeking the release of the two activists, but it was well over a month before they were eventually released from jail.

With timely rains during the past twelve months the flow of spring-fed rivers such as the Kosi has been less of a concern for the community. Indeed the unprecedented rains of September 2010 saw the Kosi River bring death and destruction along its entire course. The success of the campaign can be clearly seen in the fact that water policy issues, concerning both rivers in particular and water resources in general, are now being seriously discussed both at state and central government level.

Volunteer Programme with KURVE, Germany

It is now ten years since the first young German volunteer, came to Lakshmi Ashram for a six-month volunteer placement. We have been fortunate over the past three years in that each volunteer has been able to obtain a one-year visa, and has had the opportunity to contribute actively to the ashram over a full twelve months.

The volunteers have all been nineteen year old school leavers, taking a 'gap year' to widen their experiences before going on to higher education. Leonie Harsch arrived on 21 August 2010 for a twelve month placement. As told on page 2 she faced difficulties in getting here because of the torrential monsoon rains. However the following day she went to Kausani by bus that took an alternative route to Almora.

Leonie has an amazingly positive attitude to life – life never presented her with any problems, rather she took everything as a challenge! She very quickly began to learn spoken Hindi, and within a few months was confident enough to try writing also in Hindi. Like all the previous volunteers she joins in all the daily activities of the ashram, right from being present in morning prayers at six o'clock. She has especially contributed to teaching English, and also in teaching the girls new songs and small plays that she has prepared herself in Hindi.

Activities in the Udyog Mandir

The Udyog Mandir is situated alongside the Anasakti Ashram on the other side of Kausani. It houses the Ashram's workshop (*see photo on page 2*) where the long-running programme, Appropriate Technology for Hill Life, actively pursues its work in research and development of improved tools for hill agriculture, as well as for the spinning and weaving of wool.

The past year has seen renewed work on the development and production of hand-operated carding machines. These allow the artisans to be able to card their wool efficiently at home, rather than having to depend upon the few large carding machines run by large institutions. Three improved carding machines have been produced during the year and made available to local institutions and individuals. The workshop has also produced upgraded spinning wheels, a total of 54 spinning wheels.

The workshop has also continued its production of improved agricultural implements. During the past year a total of 100 winnowing fans have been produced. These are portable and can easily be carried to the fields at the time of harvest of rice and wheat. They make the task of separating the grain from the chaff much easier. Some 55 hand rakes were also produced. These are particularly in demand for raking in the pine needles in the forest, which are then used as bedding in the cattle sheds.

The Udyog Mandir also houses Kasturba Pustakalaya, the ashram's public library and reading room. This continues to be well used by local students, as well as people in government service in Kausani, such as teachers. It is well managed by an ashram worker, Parvati Kaira, who goes over every afternoon to open it for two hours.

Sarala Behn Memorial Museum

On 2 September 2006 the then Horticulture Minister Shri Govind Singh Kunjwal, representing the Chief Minister at a function at the Shri Gandhi Ashram in Chanauda to mark Martyrs Day, announced Rs.20 lakh for the construction of a Sarala Behn Memorial Museum in Kausani.

In 2008 the Cultural Directorate of the Government of Uttarakhand sanctioned Rs.22.36 lakh for the construction of the Sarala Behn Memorial Museum. However the first instalment was not released until November 2009. Subsequently there were also delays in the release of the second instalment of funds to the district authorities, which caused further delay in the pace of construction. However the purpose built building that will house the museum has now been finally completed, and was formally handed over to the Ashram in March 2011.

It has been constructed on part of the site of the Udyog Mandir – some of the original construction had to be levelled to allow it to be built. Being by the roadside and close to the hotels it is in a good position to attract visitors once it has been fitted out as a museum that will tell people of the life and ideals of Sarala Behn. Lakshmi Ashram has from the very beginning of this project been liaising with Shri Zafar Khan of Indore who has professional experience of designing museums. He has visited Kausani several times and has taken the responsibility of designing the layout of the display.

Community Activities in the Kosi Valley

Basanti Behn continues to be active in working among the communities of the Kosi valley from the first village of Kantali downstream to Someshwar, and also in the two side valleys of the Mansa Nali and Sai River, that both converge with the Kosi River in Someshwar.

Basanti Behn had begun her activities in these valleys in working to organise the women at village level into community groups to work together on environmental and social issues in particular, and out of these activities emerged the Save the Kosi River campaign. For the past three years Basanti Behn and her team of four field organisers have been working with some 150 elected women representatives from 51 Gram Panchayats (*Village Councils*) in these valleys. The project is supported by The Hunger Project in New Delhi and seeks to empower these women so that they have a true understanding of their responsibilities, and can actively work for the all-round development of their villages.

These women have greatly gained in self-confidence, coming out from the confines of their homes, and a good number have already made positive contributions to the wellbeing of their villages, no longer being simply rubber-stamps for their husbands or other male relatives.

Disaster Relief Work in the Kosi Valley

The unprecedented rains of 17-18 September caused death and destruction throughout the hills of Uttarakhand. Here in Lakshmi Ashram we recorded some 225 mm of rain in forty-eight hours, the highest in twenty five years of daily observations. Although the upper reaches of the Kosi valley were spared loss of life, there was a lot of damage to property, the socially and economically depressed sections of society suffering disproportionately. Immediately the rains had ceased Lakshmi Ashram undertook a survey of affected families, and then put out an appeal for assistance to undertake relief work. A total of Rs.1,98,700/- was received.

Until 31 March 2011 most of the money had been utilised in relief work, assisting a total of 23 families, mostly in the upper reaches of the Kosi valley. The bulk of the funds utilised went on the purchase of 239 tin sheets that were distributed to 18 families. In addition one

family was provided with ten bags of cement for repairing their house, while four families were provided with roofing slates to repair the roofs of their homes.

Village Level Activities in Dhauladevi Block

Two ashram workers, Pushpa Behn and Meena Behn, continue to manage the Gram Seva Kendra (*women's meeting centre*) in the hamlet of Chalmorigara, close to Danya, that was established in the nineties as a centre for ashram activities in Dhauladevi block, where Lakshmi Ashram has been active over the past thirty years. Lakshmi Ashram continues to run a pre-school programme of balwaris in the remoter villages of the area, through a sister organisation. Because of a decrease in funding by the Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi the number of balwaris has decreased. At the beginning of the year there were 20 balwaris, but two closed during the year.

The Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi is also supporting a programme for work among the teenage girls, and there are 'Kishori Mandals' (*teenage groups*) in some 20 villages. Meanwhile the long established Mahila Mangal Dals (*women's groups*) continue to be active. Support has been made available to establish a tree nursery. The support is from a revolving fund, so it will be repaid, so as to allow support to another interested individual.

Lakshmi Ashram Weather Station

Lakshmi Ashram has maintained daily records of rainfall since 1987 and of maximum and minimum temperatures along with relative humidity since 1988. Various government departments, especially the Forest Department and the army cantonment, have occasionally approached us for weather related statistics.

However it was only in December 2009 that we began to formally collaborate with any outside agency. The geography department of the Kumaun University's Almora campus, under the direction of Dr J.S. Rawat, is undertaking a hydrological study of the Kosi catchment area, the project supported by the Department of Science and Technology. The department has supplied some additional meteorological instruments including an anemometer, bucket rain gauge and evaporimeter, and we have since been making regular monthly returns. After the September 2010 rains we provided specific information on the daily rainfall, and also forwarded photographs of the devastation caused by flash floods in the valley of the Mansa Nali, close to Someshwar. These were used in high level discussions between Dr Rawat and representatives of the state and central government.

The rainfall recorded during the monsoon was the highest recorded in 25 years, and the monthly totals of rainfall for July and September broke previous records.

Visitors to Lakshmi Ashram

Lakshmi Ashram has very good contacts with numerous people and institutions, in both Uttarakhand and in other parts of India, and also overseas. As a result we get a good number of visitors to the ashram, and this year was no exception.

All our visitors are a living symbol of 'The World is One Family'.

(Space does not give the possibility to mention all these visitors.)

Other News

Our chairperson, Sushri Radha Behn Bhatt, continues to be active at the national level in the Sarvodaya movement. She is the chairperson of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, and has recently been unanimously chosen to be the chairperson of the Sarva Seva Sangh. She is also still closely involved in the activities of the Kasturba Gandhi Rashtriya Smarak Trust. All these

responsibilities mean that she is continuously travelling the length and breadth of the country, but everyone anxiously anticipates her occasional visits to Kausani.

A local centre of the Gandhi Peace Foundation has been established two years ago in Kausani. The main objective of the GPF Kendra is spreading Gandhian Thought among the younger generation. It is managed by Basant Pandey of Lakshmi Ashram and Girish Tiwari of the Himalaya Trust's Garur centre.

There is a growing debate at the national level on the role of Gandhi's Basic Education in the context of India in the 21st century. On 22-23 April 2010 Neema Behn took part in a two-day national level conference in New Delhi organised by the National Council of Rural Institutes, while David Bhai travelled to West Bengal to participate in another national level conference, "Nai Talim-Challenges and Task Ahead", organised on 12-13 February 2011 at the Mujjihira National Basic Educational Institution. This institution, one of the very first centres for Basic Education, had been founded in 1940 in a remote tribal area of what was then Manbhum district of Bihar. After the reorganization of states in 1956, it came under the newly created district of Purulia in West Bengal. While most of the participants in the conference were from West Bengal, there was a large contingent from Gujarat also, as well as grassroots workers in basic education from other parts of India. While Gandhi's concepts of basic education have an enduring relevance, nevertheless the challenge facing us is to relate them to the rapidly changing world.

In October 2010 David Bhai and Pooran Pandey had travelled to Hazaribag in Jharkhand to take part in a four day Action Village India Forum (AVI Forum). The meeting focused on work being done with people with disabilities, in particular an AVI supported programme seeking to empower people with disabilities, to make them aware of the People with Disabilities Act, and to actively work for implementation by the administration of the rights guaranteed under this act. Although Lakshmi Ashram is not directly involved in working with the handicapped, nevertheless both Pooran and David learned a great deal from participating in this forum, and in observing the praiseworthy work being carried out in this field. They were particularly impressed by the Self-Help Groups of disabled people and how they had become empowered to speak out for their rights through block level federations.

In her twenty years as secretary of Lakshmi Ashram Sarala Behn was very active in inspiring the local grassroots Sarvodaya organisations/institutions throughout Uttarakhand, and there was a very active Uttarakhand Sarvodaya Mandal (*Group*) bringing together all the Sarvodaya workers of Kumaun and Garhwal. Sadly though, after Sarala Behn left the hills, the different institutions largely went their own separate ways. However in recent years efforts have been made by two senior Sarvodaya workers from Pauri Garhwal to revive the Uttarakhand Sarvodaya Mandal. As part of these efforts a state level meeting was organised at Lakshmi Ashram on 8 November. Emphasis was laid on strengthening district level units, and Basanti Behn of Lakshmi Ashram was nominated to head the Almora district unit. A subsequent state level meeting was organised later on at Nanak Mata in Udham Singh Nagar district. With Radha Behn now the chairperson of Sarva Seva Sangh there is a cautious optimism that the state and district Sarvodaya Mandals might get a new lease of life and become active once again.

Kausani, District Almora
for Kasturba Mahila Utthan Mandal
23 August 2011
David Hopkins