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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

SANCHAR 118

August 2013

Dear friends,

I think that everyone in Europe is enjoying the summer. July has in Denmark had lots of sunshine, and it has been very warm. But in Uttarakhand heavy rainfalls and widespread landslides have damaged several houses, animals, trees etc. Agriculture fields with crops were fled away. Major and minor roads had been severely damaged, leading to complete disruption of connectivity and life resulting in acute problems in supply of essential commodities like cooking gas, grocery products, vegetables etc. Thousands of people have lost their family members, relatives and friends. Mahila Haat and Lakshmi Ashram try to help the suffered people.

This time the newsletter brings:

- From Marie Thoege's Diary – her visit in Lakshmi Ashram in the Autumn 2012
- The Visit of Anna Ji to Kausani (Anna Hazare) – by Manju Bhatt
- Sarala Behn Museum – by Kanti Behn
- Minutes of the General Meeting on 7th April 2013.

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, and others divide the amount during the year. Therefore we will put 75 kroner into the administration account the first time of 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.

We use very little money for administration, and the money is sent directly from our bank to the Ashram's bank in Kausani, so no money will be lost – only bank charges. The surplus from the administration account will of course be sent to Lakshmi Ashram.

Thank you for all the money. 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.

Best wishes,

Lone Poulsen

Friends of Lakshmi Ashram can save money, if some of you would be satisfied to receive a mail with the Sanchar. You can also read the Sanchar in the homepage. If you want to get a mail instead of receiving a letter, then please send me your e-mail address to: *lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk*

Sanchar 118

In the beginning of October 2012 Marie Thoeger together with Anne Thoeger and Ane Smith travelled to India. After a few days in Delhi they went on to Himalaya. First to the district town of Almora in Uttarakhand and from there to Binsar, where Gopal married to Radha's youngest sister Krishna runs a tourist station for the government in a conservation forest area.

Gopal has together with Krishna also started an attempt with ecotourism on a steep and barren hillside near the village of Simkholi at the road from Almora to Lakshmi Ashram. The first step in the attempt was to find water and set up a traditional well in the area. To establish possibility for overnight stays for tourists and students they have afterwards built a traditional building of stone with four regular rooms and bathrooms for a score of students, who can be housed in tents on a terrace nearby. All work has been carried out by people from the village, where many of them are unemployed. It was the plan to sleep two nights in Simkholi.



From Marie Thoegers Diary

October 16th. It is the last day in Simkholi. We walk the last trip and take the last photos of this magnificent place, which is in keeping with modern India. I wish it will be used to the benefit of the wider development in the mountains. At noon we leave the place. It was a special experience.

The distance to Kausani is only 16 km. We drive through Someshwar, which now is a busy provincial town, and not long after this we stop at the temple, where a big accident happened years back. Here everybody gets blessed and gets a red spot in the forehead after having given a few coins. To the left of the road is a big hotel, which I have never seen before, and at last we stop in front of the grocer at the foot of the path to Lakshmi Ashram. There is Neema and one of the girls.



Now the most problematic moment of the trip comes for me. What I have been afraid of from the very day, when we started the planning. Can I manage to walk up!

It took some time. More than half an hour, but I did come up, and with the help of a solid stick and a firm hand from one of the friends, who all continually was nearby, I walked round to everything several times. Of course I was concerned about if A and A saw and experienced both the work and the atmosphere in Sarala's ashram, but

luckily it was quite amazing that they were wrapped up in everything: The hard beds, the morning trips with Neema, prayer meetings before sunrise, tulsi-tea and the food that they from the

beginning praised to the skies. The daily life in the ashram was of course marked by the fact that all the older students from early morning until late evening were in the mountains to work with the hay harvest. Even the guest minister was away. But Basanti, who normally works in the villages, quickly took over the responsibilities for "the Danish children" and got them to gather in tulsis. However she did not dare to give them the harvest tool, a curved knife, in their hands! Their welfare was very important for her, and if they sometimes preferred tulsis for a good cup of black coffee, she was really happy. Still she reminds me daily to boil water for coffee, so that everybody could get what one wanted.

October 17th. Usually there is something heavy you at the last moment have to put into your luggage from Denmark, when you travel to India. This time we brought a lot of books for the teaching of English, which Lone had got from a former colleague from Glostrup. They weighed a lot, but were placed in A and A's suitcases without protest in Kasturip. At the departure from Binsar they were put into an empty duffel bag that without our assistance went from car to car all the way to Kausani and later up the path to LA. The first morning in the ashram we succeeded with consideration and patience to gather Neema, Pushpa, Hansi and other workers, who were not busy with the hay harvest. Now Lone's find should be handed over to the concerned persons. It took place in the sunshine on the floor in the office. Apparently the selection was well. They talked and discussed, sent greetings to Lone, until Hansi took out the keys to lock it all in. Surely it will be shown and given to the right hands at the next teachers' meeting. Later on we strolled around in the ashram and met Kalavati, who nowadays is responsible for the khadi work and the cowshed. Unluckily they are short of workers who can manage the looms, but Kalavati demonstrated with great skill, how you use a charka (spinning wheel) and a spindle. To card the wool and spin a thread is learned by all the students from the beginning.

For me the week with "the Danish children" was quite special. Hardly ever I have experienced such attentive observations from "new guests", and of course it ended with long talks every evening in the darkness on the balcony. The moon was new this week, and often I remained sitting a little after they had gone downstairs. The questions that revolved in my mind were: Will they come back? When? Why? Is it the silence! Is it the kindness! Is it the peace here or the work that capture their attention!

October 18th. This day we went with Neema to visit Sarala's last residence far north near the snow-capped mountains. LA owns a jeep and Pooran, one of the workers, who is a good driver, took time for the long drive, possible more than 100 km, anyway 3 to 4 hours depending on the road condition. The air was transparently clear, and the road that winds up through the valley runs, so that you have the feeling that by next curvature you run directly into the snow. Directly towards the Trisul and Nanda Devi peaks. Sarala's last residence, Himdarshan Kutir, is nowadays a very neglected museum. One of Radha's contemporaries lives there, but she is, as far as we know just now in hospital with a broken shoulder. We drive through the goldsmiths' town of Garur and past the temples in Baijnath without any stop. Then we follow the river of Gomti towards the district town of Bageshwar and drive through this without any stop. It is noontime, and half an hour later we stop in a village to get a cup of tea together with Neema's puri. Shortly afterwards we are at the drive and we park at the roadside. When we are halfway up the path a dog starts barking. Just in front of the house we see that it is bound and visibly alone at home. All the doors are locked, and the yard is covered with hay laid out for drying. We walk up to the view point, but it is so overgrown that the view is gone both towards the valley and the snow. Here is a long way to any neighbour, and a new

stroll around the house gives no hope to get in, but luckily Lila and a young girl appear in the yard. They have heard the dog and they know who we are. The door is opened to the old room, where



Sarala once lived, and where photos and old press cuttings from the freedom movement now fill up the walls and tables – unfortunately in a quite random order.

While we have been turned over the pages in dusty reports, Lila and the young girl have succeeded in making a solid Kumaoni meal to us: rice, vegetables and chapati. We eat standing in the sun in front of the vegetable garden. The dog has been used to us and has fallen asleep. It is nearly three o'clock now,

and it is high time to start the trip home, if we shall reach LA, before it is getting dark. Now we know the condition of the road, and therefore Pooran thinks that we can make a stop in Bageshwar, where there is a busy bazar and a khadi sale. It is quite exciting, but the parking is so impossible that we can only stop there for a short time. Maybe it will be easier in Garur? But here it is quite impossible, and we just forget the temples in Baijnath. It is dark, when we walk up the path to LA, but the moon is coming. A and A go to the evening prayer, and afterwards we are talking about the prospects of the future for the ashram life in modern India. A and A decide to use the day tomorrow for a visit on the opposite side of the valley, where there is an old well-known ashram, which nowadays is used as a tourist hotel.

October 19th. Anasakti Ashram still has a room with photos of Gandhi and the struggle for freedom, and below the big pines towards north there is a perfect view to the snowcapped mountains, just like when Sarala lived, but the rest is tourism. The event of the day was however lunch with Reka and Pooran on the lawn in front of their house. As the custom is the table is set with clean newspapers and plates of metal. It is the husband who dishes up the food on the plates, but the wife who brings everything in small bowls. Here there was many different dishes, every dish made from their own products, not bought semi-manufactured things, but as far as possible spices grown, dried and grounded in their place. No doubt that Reka has been trained by her mother or her grandmother in the village. The rest of the day A and A helped with teaching in the classes. Regrettably they did not because of the hay harvest see any of the many leisure activities that usually take place in the ashram. The students were too tired.



October 20th. Early in the morning after a cup of tulsi and black coffee Basanti and I waved a temporarily farewell to "the Danish children". Now they should after a carefully made plan by

Gopal be tourists for six days: Jaipur, Fatapur Sikri and Taj Mahal. On Friday 26th October we should meet again in "The Blue Triangle" on Ashoka Road in Delhi.

October 21st. Radha was expected to come to the ashram from Delhi. For once she would go by an early morning train in Delhi to reach Katgodam at noon. Three hours later she could be in Almora, where Pooran planned to fetch her. Neema and I were allowed to join, and for the next three days Radha was in the ashram without any special responsibility. It was quite a new situation, which Neema and Radha daily used for an early morning walk in the mountains, before breakfast at the balcony together with Basanti and other older workers, who came by. It is many years back that I have experienced the ashram like that. Most of them had time for a real good talk of problems and new ideas for the future. Both Neema and Radha are concerned about ideas of how you can use the old workshop. Nowadays it is nearly like an enormous heap of dead cement, and the government has added a new built museum hall, which is still empty and out of use, even if they have had talks with an architect long ago. After the visit in Himdarshan Kutir we all agreed that information about Sarala should be given in Kausani, where she has had her working life, but it is very important that left documents, which tell about her work, are gathered, before they disappear in unnoticed loneliness high up near the snow in her last residence. Of course LA dreams of at the same time to connect developing programs to the museum, but it will demand workers with quite new ideas. The audience for the moment on that hillside is the tourists, not only from Bengal, but from all India.

When Neema took into her head that it was too far for me to walk to Anasakti, Pooran at once wanted to drive, but if I had known, how it is to park on the road, which goes up to all the hotels, I had definitely denied to get into the car. But at first we have to walk down, and after Almora, Binsar, Simkholi and the days in LA I know that I can manage myself again. But they won't allow me to do so. In a way all this sightseeing over the valley was a worth-while experience. The distance is longer, than I have felt before and the pleasure to know that it will never be possible for anybody to construct a carriage road to LA, has grown as the years go by. Have you at last climbed the path up to Sarala's school, there is peace and room for thinking. You can't find many places in the present, where hard work and peace dovetail in this way. Here is room for young and old people.

In LA they are just now building a house for older workers. The money has come from a well-off person, who has lived in Kausani in his childhood, and who therefore knows the principles of the school. He is a businessman and lives now in London, but supports many other social works in Kumaon. Pooran has been the architect of the house, which has four quite big rooms – each of them for two persons. He knows that none of the older workers in the ashram really wants to stay alone. Around the house there is a broad balcony, from where they can see down to the Kosi valley and up to the Gurka castle. With solid banisters alongside the path to the students' area, the dining hall and the kitchen also older workers can be part of the community. The house will be inaugurated one of the last days in November, where the supporter will be visiting.

October 24th. It is the last morning on the balcony in LA. The fog is lying behind the mountain range towards south, and the birds have not yet woke up. A lonely car horn sounds from the Kosi valley. A dog is barking. It all gathers thoughtfully, and then a raindrop hit the sheet metal roof above my head. Rain after three weeks' full sun in the mountains. Yes it is raining quietly and softly, invisibly, but the light is coming, it is six o'clock. A pressure on the switch brings the coffee water to boil during a few minutes. In former times here was smoke from wood. Cones that

crackled, while Kanti walked softly around. Now Basanti is sweeping, and the day starts. In 24 hours I am on my way down the heat.

The morning should be used to show Neema and Radha the slides from old times, which I have brought with me. We succeeded in finding out that David has got a projector, but no one has been allowed to use it, and only Hansi knows, where it is. David is in Katgodam to fetch some guests or in Kausani to show them the place. I am curious if Hansi dares to hand over the projector to us, and if the bulb is okay. Both things succeed, but the sledge for the slides is different than the Danish one, so everything must be done manually, and the slides were seen in wild disorder. Apart from that the performance was absolutely successful. We were laughing and raging and thinking ideas of the new museum! Suddenly it was noon time, and on my way down I saw the inside of the new house for the seniors. After having eaten Kanti appeared, cheerful after her trip to Risikesh. Then we were really talking, and later on in the afternoon I was fetched by Gopal to go to spend the night in Simkholi. Gopal's mother, who had got a bad blood poisoning in her leg, should go to Delhi to get a treatment, and he had to drive down there himself. It would be practical that I went with them.

October 25th. The first part of the trip from the mountains through Almora towards Haldvani was fine, while the road to Moradabad was a nightmare for both car and passengers, because there were very deep holes in the asphalt. First when we reached the new Lucknow-Delhi main road it was bearable, and we felt it as a release, when we at last saw Krishna in the darkness at the foot of the staircase in the suburb of Mayur Vihar.

October 26th. Early in the morning Gopal took his mother to a private hospital nearby, and the first examination luckily told, that the patient could be treated, but they had to expect a long sickbed. A few days later his mother was moved home to Krishna and Gopal to be nursed. A longer stay in a private hospital in India is for many people out of reach economically, and therefore most families chooses to take responsibility for the nursing themselves.

After breakfast and a successful changing of money with Western Union in Mayur Vihar Gopal was ready with the car to drive me to Blue Triangle. Here A and A arrived about three o'clock from Agra. It was time for tea, and we got a nice reception in the restaurant of the hotel from a waiter, who had been in the place for many years. At the moment Delhi is much marked by the new building of the metro that, wherever we went around, worked perfectly, but to change the city requires more. The time in Delhi should be used for purchase.

October 29th. Early departure from Blue Triangle to the airport. There was snow on the fields around Vienna and whining cold in Copenhagen.

The Visit of Anna Ji to Kausani

Manju Bhatt

Manju was introduced to Lakshmi Ashram through a very good friend and benefactor of the ashram, Rajendra Bhatt, and joined the ashram family two years ago. She is teaching the smaller children, and also studying for her BA at the Kumaun University.



For some days leading up to his arrival in Kausani, the conversation all around was that Anna Hazare was coming. I did not know too much about him, but when Bari Didi (Radha Behn) told us about some of the incidents in his life and his contribution to society, I began to want very much to see him in person. At last 21 May came, the day when I would have the opportunity to see him at very close quarters. Bari Didi had arrived in Kausani some days earlier, so that she could prepare for his welcome. It was also her very first opportunity to meet him. This marvelous moment of the meeting of two great inspiring individuals in this sacred place was for the fortunate people of Kausani and for all of us truly a happy and inspiring moment.

Known far and wide as the ‘Switzerland of India’ this sacred place, sanctified by being the birthplace of the Hindi poet Sumitranandan Pant¹, as well as the place where Sarala Behn had dedicated so much of her life’s work, has also always attracted people from both India and overseas by its unique appeal. The Anasakti Ashram, the Sumitranandan Pant Museum, Lakshmi Ashram, the newly established Sarala Behn Museum and other places of historical interest increase fourfold the natural beauty of the lovely valleys that lie below Kausani.



Some thirty people, including his close followers, were accompanying Anna Ji. Before reaching Kausani he had also addressed the public in Garur. Addressing the gathering in the open air in Anasakti Ashram, Anna Ji expressed his thoughts on many important issues. He called upon the people to raise their voices as one in opposition to corruption and to work for the establishing of a truly democratic India. He explained to those who had gathered to hear him that in our constitution the place of the

gram sabha (village council) is even higher and more powerful than the central government and the state legislatures. There is an urgent need today for the gram sabhas to carry out their extremely important role. So long as the villages do not change, the nation cannot change.

These days corruption has increased so much that even the proposed Jan Lokpal (Ombudsman) would not be sufficient. There is a need for all of us to come forward shoulder to shoulder to work together for a total change in the institutions of society. Society needs such leaders whose thinking and actions are pure, and whose lives are untarnished. He said that it was essential for the social workers and activists to bring harmony in their words and deeds. He quoted the couplet of Kabir Das as a guide to achieving this:

*Kathanī mīthī khān kī
Karnī mushkil hoy
Kathanī chhor karnā Karen
To vish kā amrit hoy.*

*It is easy to eat sweet things,
It is difficult to do hard work.
Words alone can achieve nothing,
Yet by action even poison can become nectar.*

¹ In the next Sanchar you can read an article about Sumitranandan Pant.

A book by Swami Vivekananda changed the direction of his life and, strongly influenced also by the thinking of Mahatma Gandhi, in 1975 he retired from the Indian Army. Ever since then he has followed the way of Truth, continuously dedicating his entire life to the service of society and the country.



Anna Ji said that whatever he was saying, these were not just hollow words, but reflected what he had followed in his own life. He said that all of those great men who are forever remembered in this world were just like those seeds of grain that fall on the soil, get buried and then yield thousands of grains.

The first results of his renunciation and his goals in life can be seen in the joy and prosperity of his own once drought stricken village of Ralegan Siddhi. Through Anna Ji's tireless efforts the Right to Information Act was implemented in his own state of Maharashtra in 2002, and throughout the country in 2005. He said that wherever he had observed corruption he had stood up against it. Truly at the present time there is a need for countless empowered social activists such as Anna Ji.

Sarala Behn Museum

Kanti Behn

Today, 5 June, was full of joy, fervour and a deep-felt elation, for today was to see the formal opening of the Sarala Behn Museum. The weather was very pleasant. Close attention had been given to each and every detail, so that there might not be any shortcomings in the opening ceremony. For three days Radha Didi and Neema had been kept very busy, for it was they who bore all the responsibility for the museum.

Some two and a half or three years back the construction of the museum building had begun in our Udyog Mandir, close to the Anasakti Ashram. The construction costs amounting to Rs. 22,36,000 were met by the Cultural Department of the Uttarakhand State government, through the efforts of the present speaker of the state legislature, Shri Govind Singh Kunjwal, while around Rs.1,50,000 out of the support provided by Friends of Lakshmi Ashram has been spent by us in preparing the museum display on the life of Sarala Behn.

It was decided that the part of the Udyog Mandir alongside the bend in the road, which was not being made much use of and was also rather an eyesore, should be demolished so that the museum might be built in its place. The construction of the fine, purpose-built museum building was undertaken by the Rural Engineering Services (RES) Department, Bageshwar District.

Radha Didi, who had been so closely connected with Sarala Behn's life and work, and who understood so very deeply her personality and thought, now began to contemplate the form that the museum should take, and discussed the matter at length with friends and colleagues. Neema, the secretary of Lakshmi Ashram, took an interest in this work and started to assist Radha Didi. David Bhai helped in getting some photographs of places in London associated with Sarala Behn's childhood – her parental home and her school.

Besides this an artist from Indore very well known to Radha Didi, Zafar Khan Bhai, was instrumental in enlarging the photos of Sarala Behn's life, and having captions prepared for them. He also had paintings, drawn from imagination, made depicting Sarala Behn, and also Sarala Behn with Gandhi. He has played a major role in giving this museum such a beautiful appearance. In

addition to the sterling contribution of Zafar Khan and his colleagues, Neema and Pooran Pande, under the tireless efforts and guidance of Radha Behn, have both given a lot of effort to ensure that the exhibits have been finely displayed, thus creating a fine ambiance to the museum.

The photographs of Sarala Behn, Lakshmi Ashram and the working lives of the hill women displayed on the beautiful whitewashed walls present a fine history of Sarala Behn's life.

In today's meeting men and women had gathered from Kausani and the nearby villages, while invited guests had come from Garur, Someshwar, Bageshwar and Almora, and even from Delhi. The commanding officer of the Signals Regiment in Kausani was present along with his family. Radha Didi as the chief guest lit the traditional wick lamp to formally inaugurate the function. She then unveiled a fine painting of Sarala Behn and garlanded it, before unveiling the stone inscription in the gallery and dedicating the museum to the public.



The meeting then began with two ashram students from class ten, Meenakshi and Suman, melodiously singing the devotional song "Mangal Mandir Kholo", enchanting all those present. Radha Didi then talked about Sarala Behn, deeply touching the hearts of all those present with her speech.

The state legislator for Bageshwar, Shri Chandan Ram Das, chaired the function and in his speech promised to extend support for the development of the museum. A number of other friends present also expressed their desire to lend their support.



Man Singh Rawat, Basanti Behn, Shashi Prabha, Neema Behn and others in front of the picture of Sarala Behn

All in all, the dedication programme was celebrated in a very simple and modest way. From the following day, 6 June, the work of the museum commenced. A capable local man, formerly working in our workshop, Bachi Giri Goswami, has been appointed to take care of the museum and to show visitors around. There is still much outstanding work to be done which will be undertaken in the coming months.



Ashram Students and others listening attentively at the opening of the Sarala Behn Museum

Minutes of the General Meeting on 7th April 2013 for Friends of Lakshmi Ashram

Chairman: Hanne Stenager. **Keeper of the Minutes:** Ruth Sillemann.

The Committee's Report

Lone told about everyday life in Lakshmi Ashram. She was in September 2012 to a region meeting with the Soroptimists in Viborg, and in May 2013 she visits the Soroptimists in Glostrup. Both visits to tell about Lakshmi Ashram. Lone told news from Lakshmi Ashram, and we saw photos of the new students. We also talked about members: In 2012 there were 68 members of Friends of Lakshmi Ashram, and we had a short discussion about how we can get new members. There is much competition from other organisations, but we agreed that we must continue to tell about LA in all contexts. We also heard that Radha and Kanti go to Bergen and Denmark this summer in July.

The Account and the Subscription

The account was approved, and the money for Lakshmi Ashram is transferred in February and August as usually. The subscription is still Danish Kroner 75 (about 10 Euro) yearly per member.

Proposals Received: No proposals were received.

Elections

The committee was re-elected and consist of: Lone Poulsen (chairman), Hanne Stenager, Lene Rasmussen and Ruth Sillemann. Substitute: Peter Kristensen. Auditor and substitute were also re-elected: Claus Broskov Soerensen and David W. David.

At last we saw some fine photos from Marie, Anne and Ane's trip to India in the autumn 2012. They had both photos, good stories and news from Krishna's project, Mahila Haat, and from their visit in Lakshmi Ashram.

Ruth Sillemann