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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

SANCHAR 119

November 2013

Dear friends,

Sanchar 119 is ready, and I think, it brings some very interesting articles. I hope you will enjoy reading them:

- A Life Sketch of Pant Ji – by Deepa Rana
- Facts about Sumitranandan Pant
- We All Smile and Laugh in the Same Language – by Megan Pociengel with editorial assistance from Lisa Anderson, USA
- A New Milestone in our Activities in Dhauladevi Block – by David Hopkins
- Winds of Change in the Udyog Mandir – by David Hopkins

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.

Special THANKS to Lions Club Hvidovre in Denmark for their donation to mark their 50th anniversary. We received 10.000 Danish Kroner (about 1.330 Euro).

Best wishes,

Lone Poulsen

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

SANCHAR 119

A Life Sketch of Pant Ji

Deepa Rana

Deepa joined Lakshmi Ashram as a student five years ago and is now studying for her BA at the Kumaun University. From this year she has become a trainee worker.



Sumitranandan Pant was born on Sunday 20 May 1900 in the beautiful hill village of Kausani in Almora district. His father's name was Ganga Datt Pant, while his mother's name was Saraswati Devi. His birth that Sunday was a time of extreme joy for his father. However just seven hours after his birth his mother died, leaving his father suffering in great grief. His father's sister took responsibility for raising the young child. His father was the manager of the tea estate in Kausani. His primary education was in the village school in Kausani. After passing class four at the age of ten he was sent to Almora to continue his education at the Government High School. When he was studying in class six, he saw a picture of the French dictator Napoleon and was very much influenced by his long hair, so much so that he thought that he too would grow his hair long. He always liked to be very smartly dressed. He was a beautiful poet of Nature, and wrote numerous anthologies of poetry, including 'Veena', 'Pallava', 'Gunjan' and 'Uttara'. All these works deeply reflect his personal life.

Every year on 20 May, we celebrate the anniversary of his birth. I have been in Lakshmi Ashram for the past five years. All of us ashram girls together put on a programme of dances, plays and other items based on his life in front of the public in the Sumitranandan Pant Museum, and I also have taken part every year in the drama about his life, something that I enjoy very much. We begin our rehearsals a week before the programme. This time I played the part of Sumitranandan Pant's paternal aunt. A good number of local poets as well as the general public also come to participate in this programme. Recalling the life of Sumitranandan Pant, the chief guest lit the traditional wick lamp to inaugurate the programme. This was followed by the small girls of the ashram presenting a welcoming dance, while the girls of the Government Inter-College sang the *Saraswati Vandana* in homage to Goddess Saraswati (the patroness of the Arts).

We then presented the first scene of our drama, in which Priti played the role of Gusain, as Sumitranandan was known as a small boy, while Manisha played the part of his brother. In this scene there is a dialogue between the two brothers related to Nature. The next two scenes presented glimpses into his education, the parts played by Priti, Manisha and Jyotsana. Then the drama portrayed Sumitranandan Pant as he grew up, continuing his studies and at the same time composing poems, and how his friends behaved towards him. Monu played the leading role in this scene into which she put a great deal of effort, and everyone enjoyed her performance very much. After this a number of local poets read out their poems to the audience, who enjoyed very much listening to them. Finally prizes were awarded to those students who had done best in the essay competition organised by the Sumitranandan Pant Museum. All in all this year's programme went off very well.

Facts about Sumitranandan Pant

Sumitranandan Pant (May 20, 1900 – December 28, 1977) was one of the most famous modern Hindi poets. He is considered one of the major poets of the *Chhayavaadi* school of Hindi literature. Pant mostly wrote in Sanskritized Hindi. Pant authored twenty-eight published works including poetry, verse plays and essays.

Pant was born at Kausani village of Bageshwar, in the hills of Kumaon. His mother died within a few hours of his birth. He was given the name Gosain Dutt. His initial schooling took place in Almora. After matriculation he moved to Kalakankar near Prayag. He did not like his name so he gave himself a new name "Sumitranandan Pant".

Apart from *Chhayavaadi* poems, Pant also wrote progressive, philosophical (influenced by Sri Aurobindo), socialist and humanist poems.

Pant was the first Hindi poet to receive the Jnanpith Award, in 1968. He did so for a collection of his most famous poems, titled *Chidambara*. He was awarded the *Nehru Peace Prize* by the Soviet Union for *Lokayatan*. Pant received "Sahitya Kala Academy" award for "Kala Aur Budhdha Chand". Indian Government honored him with 'Padmavibhushan'.



Pant's childhood house, in Kausani, has been converted into a museum. This museum displays his daily use articles, drafts of his poems, letters, his awards etc.

We All Smile and Laugh in the Same Language

Megan Pociengel with editorial assistance from Lisa Anderson, USA

In the summer month of June 2013, seventeen women along with class professors from St. Catherine University traveled across the globe from the state of Minnesota to Northern India. Upon arrival in the small village of Kausani in Uttarakhand, the long awaited portion of the trip to see the girls and women at Lakshmi Ashram had finally arrived! Though the uphill path to Lakshmi Ashram initially proved to be a struggle, our anticipation grew as we hiked upward and saw the welcoming signs. We were very fortunate to meet Radha Bhatt and learn of the legacy of how educating girls at Lakshmi Ashram over the last half of the century has radiated outwards through the graduates to create a cultural shift cultivating the literacy of girls across India.



As we came to visit the next day, we were equally curious about the girls as they were us. The classroom walls were covered with student artwork, maps, exercises, a photograph of Gandhi, and other various study materials. We were able to observe as the girls showed us how they effortlessly spin wool. As we joined them, they smiled and giggled at our own clumsy attempts. They invited our class to share a wholesome lunch with them that was deliciously filling. The community, warmth, and affection of the Ashram students were felt by all and smiles were contagious.

Throughout the week, our class was able to join the Lakshmi Ashram girls in daily chores, such as peeling potatoes, weeding in the garden, and raking pine needles in the dense Himalayan forest surrounding the Ashram. Personally, I joined one group into the forest to rake pine needles, and was charmed when they sang Bollywood songs along with a fellow classmate. On the way back, some of the girls filled their water bottles from a water cache on the mountainside. What struck me most was the how their way of life is sustainable and lives in harmony with earth. The Gandhian



traditions and values we have come to learn were lived daily through their every action.

As the week came to a close, there was a much anticipated community gathering where we expressed our gratitude as guests at Lakshmi Ashram by singing a few well-known American songs and offered classroom supplies as part of our thanks for such gracious hospitality. The girls then performed unique dances and songs were strikingly beautiful as they told us traditional stories in movement to music. We realized through our visit that we all smile and laugh in the same language. We shall be forever grateful for this opportunity to visit Lakshmi Ashram.

A New Milestone in our Activities in Dhauladevi Block

David Hopkins



Dawn on Monday 16 September was damp and misty, but everyone was optimistic that the mist would clear quickly and we would enjoy the warmth of the sun. Neema and I had arrived in the hamlet of Chalmorigara close to Danya the previous afternoon so that we might be present to witness the start of a new challenge for Lakshmi Ashram, in particular our field team in Danya, the opening of a cooperative dairy.

Over the past many years our local team, under the leadership of Ms. Chandra Pant, had gained a lot of experience in the implementation of

projects focusing on Natural Resource Management, and in 2004 Lakshmi Ashram had been selected as one of the implementing organizations for a programme being funded by the Sir Ratan Tata Trust in Mumbai. This programme, named *Himotthan Pariyojna*, (Him + Utthan = Uplift of the Himalayas, Pariyojna = Project) also focused on Natural Resource Management. As far as possible the planning was at the village level, seeking to meet the perceived priorities of the local communities. For example one village, Parai, said that one of the main problems that they faced was that of drinking water. They suggested that a drinking water scheme for their village be included within the programme, and this was agreed to. An important aspect is that the community is expected to contribute either in labour or money to every included activity. Thus the villagers of Parai carried down all the necessary construction materials from the road to their village, and also contributed labour for the laying of the pipeline and the building of tanks for water storage.

Following the successful implementation of this programme, Lakshmi Ashram has now been selected to implement the second phase of the *Himotthan Pariyojna*. During 2011-12 they prepared a detailed project report to be implemented over three years from 2012-15, and the implementation stage has now commenced. The title is 'Natural Resource based Livelihood Project', and this presents new challenges for the field team. The livelihood programme that has been initially selected is a women's dairy. The project will offer support to the dairy during the initial period but the long-term goal is for the creation and formal registration of a women producers' cooperative, which will then function autonomously. The managing committee has already been selected by village-level women's self-help groups, and the formal registration, the name given to their cooperative by the members, will take place within the next six months.

During the last nine months the field team has been actively interacting with the local community to motivate them to undertake this challenge, whose underlying objective is to raise the economic level of the participants. Some of the villages in the area are new to the team, so our team has had to work hard to win over the confidence of the villagers. Besides the livelihood aspect of the project, there are also initiatives that will seek to develop the natural resource base for animal husbandry, including propagation of fodder grasses and trees, improvement of local breeds, holding of animal health camps, and demonstration of improved feeding techniques.

The dairy programme envisages the collection of milk from local farmers at four centres, which will then be brought to Danya where it will be sold directly to the consumer through the cooperative

dairy. Studies undertaken suggest that the minimum break-even point will be 100 litres per day, but rising costs might mean that over time the break-even point will increase.

We were all up early that Monday morning, for the dairy was to be formally inaugurated at eight o'clock. The previous three weeks had been extremely hectic ones for the local team and the staff of the Himotthan Society in Almora. Orders had been placed for equipment for the dairy, our team member Shiv Datt Pande had personally gone to Jaipur to take delivery of a Lactoscan to determine the quality of the milk and then, after returning from Jaipur, had set off for Ambala with Adeel Rijvi of Himotthan Society to take delivery of most of the other necessary equipment, including milk churns and testing equipment, returning via Dehradun where a deep freeze for the dairy was purchased. He was busy until late on Sunday fitting up the dairy.

The team had also undertaken training that weekend, including how to make *paneer* (cottage cheese) and *dahi* (yoghurt). At seven o'clock Chandra and I set off to walk to the dairy, Chandra carrying a large steel vessel containing *dahi*. Neema followed a little later. We reached the dairy to find it already open, and it was not long before several girls arrived, bringing containers to take away milk, even before the first milk had arrived! A good number of people quickly gathered at the dairy, including office bearers of the new cooperative – the chairperson, the treasurer and the secretary. The first milk churns arrived from the collection points and a red ribbon was placed across the entrance to the dairy. It was cut by a leading livestock farmer of the area to officially declare the dairy open, and Chandra Pant gave a brief word of thanks to everyone. A local pandit, Mohan Chandra Joshi, performed a traditional Ganesh Puja to bless the enterprise. Meanwhile numerous customers came to purchase fresh milk, as well as *paneer* and *dahi*.

The dairy is well equipped with testing equipment. A small sample of each farmer's milk is taken daily at the collection point, and this is then analysed in the dairy to determine the fat content of the milk. The farmers will be paid per litre on the basis of the fat content of the milk.

Our field team faces numerous challenges to make this new venture a success. They clearly do not lack customers, but to maintain the confidence of their customers they will need to continually ensure high quality of their milk. Likewise the maintaining of daily accounts will demand their full attention. At present our field team will take most of the responsibility for the daily running of the dairy, a local young man has been appointed as salesman and the project will support the expenses of a cooperative manager, but slowly the cooperative's women members themselves will assume responsibilities. It is envisaged that the cooperative will also develop other livelihood activities, such as selling local agricultural produce directly to the local community through a sales centre adjacent to the dairy.

There is great enthusiasm among the local women for this venture, and we strongly believe that, with back-up support from Lakshmi Ashram's field team and training inputs from Himotthan Society, the coming months and years will see this new initiative flourish. Certainly similar ventures started elsewhere in Uttarakhand are proving very successful, and will surely serve as an inspiration to the members of our new cooperative.



Winds of Change in the Udyog Mandir

David Hopkins

The Udyog Mandir (*Temple of Work*) has been an integral part of the activities of Lakshmi Ashram since the nineteen-seventies. On the opposite side of Kausani to Lakshmi Ashram is the Anasakti Ashram, where in the summer of 1929 Mahatma Gandhi had spent some ten days. After independence the bungalow where he had stayed was transferred by the government to the Uttar Pradesh Gandhi Memorial Fund, who continues to manage it to this day.

In the seventies they transferred a plot of land adjacent to the Anasakti Ashram to Lakshmi Ashram, and a small workshop was constructed where a project, jointly managed by Intermediate Technology Development Group of the UK and Appropriate Technology Development Association, worked on developing an improved spinning wheel. When this project was completed then, with generous support from Friends of Lakshmi Ashram, in the early eighties the Udyog Mandir building was greatly expanded. A flour mill and oil press on the ground floor served the local community and, when the uppermost floor was completed, the Lakshmi Ashram library was transferred to here and opened as a public library. Meanwhile under Anand Bhai's guidance the workshop activities were rapidly expanded, focusing initially on developing improved implements for the local artisans actively engaged in spinning and weaving. Later on the focus of the workshop shifted more towards the design and development of improved agricultural tools.

The Udyog Mandir also housed the central store for our stocks of khadi cloth and readymade clothes that were sold through our three khadi bhandars, in Kausani, Danya and Panuwanaula. Thus it used to be a hub of activity with ashram workers managing the khadi store, ensuring that supplies were made available to our three sales centres, and also managing the flour mill and oil press. However lack of availability of mustard seed closed the oil press, and then the flour mill was transferred to Lakshmi Ashram, where it continues to serve the local people. Declining demand for khadi clothes along with the increasing paperwork involved led us to close our sales centres one by one, the last centre in Kausani closing in March 2008.

We had become very concerned about the long-term future of the Udyog Mandir, for now only the workshop and library were actively functioning and much of the building was not being utilised. However the first big change came when the Uttarakhand state government decided to build a museum to promote the life and work of Sarala Behn. Construction of this building was undertaken by a district level government department, and the completed building was handed over to Lakshmi Ashram in March 2011. The museum was constructed by first demolishing one side of the Udyog Mandir, and was formally inaugurated this year on 5 June (see Sanchar 118). It contains a fine display of photos of Sarala Behn's life, as well as some of her personal possessions, and efforts are on-going to increase the collection. It is already proving popular with visitors to Kausani.

In 2011 we were approached by a local NGO, CHIRAG (Central Himalayan Rural Action Group), with whom we already had close connections, who introduced us to a social enterprise company, B2R Technologies (Business to Rural), who had already established several BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) centres in remote parts of Nainital district to provide employment to local youth. I had personally seen the first of their centres, in Orakhan, close to CHIRAG's head office, and was very impressed. Dhiraj Dolwani, the co-founder of B2R, first met with us in September 2011 to discuss possible collaboration, and we discussed the possibilities of making available part of the Udyog Mandir for the establishing of a rural BPO. However not much progress was made following that initial meeting. A year or more passed by before Dhiraj Dolwani and his

team again made contact with us, and we finally decided that we would make the library floor available.

In January this year a public meeting was organized in the Anasakti Ashram, and B2R introduced themselves to the young people present. They gave a presentation on their existing centres in Kumaon and described their plans to open a centre in Kausani in collaboration with Lakshmi Ashram. Applications were taken from the local youth and two young women were selected, who have undergone training and are at present working in one of the existing B2R centres. They will return to the Kausani centre as soon as it becomes operational.

In April an agreement was drawn up between B2R and Lakshmi Ashram, and work immediately begun on renovating the Udyog Mandir. The decision was taken that it would be more viable to completely rebuild the top floor that at present housed the library, rather than trying to simply renovate it. It took several weeks to demolish the top floor, but most of the original building materials – bricks, wood, reinforcing iron and glass - have been recycled in the new structure. In May the building work was hampered by a lack of water, while in June the unprecedented rains caused problems, with excessive seeping through the roof into the workshop below. However by the end of July a fine open hall had been created in place of the previous structure, measuring some 18 metres by 9 metres. Now, at the end of September, B2R have begun the process of recruitment for the new centre, aiming initially to take on a staff of around sixty local people. Now we are all eagerly anticipating the day when the centre will formally open and provide much needed opportunities for employment to the local unemployed youth, allowing them to live at home rather than going to the plains in search of work.

Welcome song from the new Kausani team at the opening of the BPO centre on 2nd November 2013



While B2R have been carrying out the finishing work on the hall, including electrical fittings and floor tiling, Pooran has turned his attention to the floor below and at the time of writing, by removing some internal walls, he has created a large open room that will now house Lakshmi Ashram's public library. Now all that remains is to set up the bookcases in an organized manner, Hindi language books and children's books in one section, English language books and our special environmental collection separately.

Lakshmi Ashram is extremely grateful to the generous support received from the Farum scouts and forwarded through Friends of Lakshmi Ashram, as well as that received from Raj Bhatt and Ajay Bhatt in London, which has made it possible for Lakshmi Ashram to have undertaken the restoration and reconstruction work of the Udyog Mandir during the past six months.

This work could not possibly have been carried out without the tireless efforts of Pooran who has been busy from morning to evening without a break, hiring the labour, purchasing the necessary building materials and using his insight and imagination to envisage what could be done to revitalize the Udyog Mandir, so that it might continue in the coming decades to serve the local community.