

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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**NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM
SANCHAR 121**

August 2014

Dear friends,

Sanchar 121 is ready with the following articles:

- Minutes of the General Meeting on 6th April 2014 for Friends of Lakshmi Ashram
- A Letter from Radha Didi
- My Experiences as a Volunteer in Lakshmi Ashram by Linea Sagasser
- Notes from the Udyog Mandir (the workshop) by Bachi Giri Goswami
- The Indian National Flag

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 and receive the Sanchar.

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 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***

Minutes of the General Meeting on 6th April 2014 for Friends of Lakshmi Ashram

Chairman: Helle Poulsen. **Keeper of the minutes:** Ruth Sillemann.

The Committee's Report

Lone told about everyday life in Lakshmi Ashram and gave other information. The board meeting on 1st March was cancelled, and the communication was handled by mail. Lone had given a talk to the Soroptimist Club in Glostrup and the Lions Club in Hvidovre. On 26th October 2013 she visited Lions Club in Hvidovre once again on the occasion of the Club's 50 years' anniversary. They gave a donation of 10.000 DDK (about 1.335 Euro) for Lakshmi Ashram.

Lone showed photos from the Sarala Behn Museum, from Radha and Kanti's visit in Denmark and from B2R's (Business to Rural – an NGO that works to establish jobs in the rural areas) opening in the workshop in November, from the library and the celebration of Christmas.

The monsoon rain has caused violent damages, and the year of 2013 was very bad. The organisation Mahila Haat and Lakshmi Ashram find the very poor people, whom the government does not reach, and help them. In connection with Radha and Kanti's visit we succeeded in collecting 26.000 DDK (about 3.470 Euro) in three weeks. Mahila Haat and Lakshmi Ashram got about half of the money each.

We saw more photos from the Ashram and heard about the life down there and the new girls and the girls from class X, who in Sanchar 120 told about their dreams and visions. In this connexion Lone told that the German Arina (who had stayed in Lakshmi Ashram for one year) goes to Lakshmi Ashram in May. She will try through a German NGO to collect education scholarships to the young girls, who leave the Ashram. Is this something that we could contribute to and how? We discussed this, and Lone suggested that we maybe could join this work. But first Lakshmi Ashram should find out, if they think it is a good idea. Afterwards they have to make criteria of getting scholarships.

Number of Members in 2013: 68 members – same number as in 2012.

The Account and the Subscription

The account was approved. The subscription is still 75 DDK (about 10 Euro) yearly per member.

Proposals Received: No proposals were received.

Elections

The committee was re-elected and consists 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 photos from Kumaon and everyday life in the ashram.

Ruth Sillemann

Sanchar 121

A Letter from Radha Didi

This is the first time for many years that I have been able to put aside as long as 51 days to stay in Lakshmi Ashram. I have been here since 19 May 2014, and I will be leaving for Delhi on 10 July 2014. During this period I have had a good opportunity to sit with the teachers and workers of the Ashram and we enjoyed an intensive dialogue on teaching methods that directly relate to the life of the students and society at large. We discussed how the education becomes more enjoyable if it is child centered, and most of the teachers found these sittings useful for their class lessons with the Ashram girls. As a continuation of this theme I also talked with the non-teaching workers whom we consider as informal teachers. They work with and guide the girls in the garden, kitchen, cowshed, workshop etc. We talked about child psychology in practice and what is the holistic picture of Lakshmi Ashram, looking back over its history as well as considering in depth its widespread area of activities in the present day.



I participated in the workers' meetings for planning the running of the Ashram activities, in both the present and the future. However I have not been able to visit the villages in the Kosi valley where Lakshmi Ashram is working with people for conservation of their natural resources such as the forests, water sources and the rivers, and also for village self-governance. A group of young

village women under the leadership of Basanti Behn are actively working for the empowerment of the women representatives of the *gram panchayats* (village councils) in the Kosi valley.

These village women are not only aware of the need for their active participation in the smooth running of the panchayats, but they have also become vigilant in saving their rivers, forest and pasturelands. A few months back, without consulting the people, the state government of Uttarakhand had proposed a cement plant to be started in the catchment area of the Mansa Nala, a beautiful tributary of the Kosi River, the life line of the valley. This cement plant was not only going to damage the common pastureland and good forest of a number of villages, but also would have exploited the water of their small river, the main source of irrigation to the paddy fields of those small farmers. Lakshmi Ashram's village team informed the people about the proposed cement plant by contacting each and every one in the whole valley.

The village people become determined to save their pastureland, river, forest and their paddy fields by protesting against the cement plant.

One day, as soon as they heard that company officials had arrived in their valley to carry out the demarcation of the plant area, the village people rushed together to stop them. The women in particular walked ahead to stop the company cars and sent them back without them being able to do any demarcation of the land.

We also sent letters to the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand, who listened to our demand and the village people's protest and announced the cancellation of the cement plant. The people become overjoyed after saving their self-reliant lifestyle from this threat.

I could not go to Danya to see the other project of Lakshmi Ashram because of a bad knee which I have been suffering from in recent weeks. However the young women and men who are running the project and also a small local organisation called 'Ushma' will come to the Ashram tomorrow, Monday 7 July, and we will talk about the progress of the project in detail.

I am planning to pay more time to Lakshmi Ashram in future as I have finished my term of office with Sarva Seva Sangh (an apex body of Sarvodaya organizations in the country) at the end of March 2014. I hope that I would be able to visit the village work in the Kosi valley and in the Danya area next time.

I feel very proud and happy to see that the Ashram is now mostly run by those young women who long back had entered as small girls in the Ashram to do their studies. Similarly other former students have also sent their daughters this year to study in the Ashram. One of their mothers addressed the Ashram family after the evening prayer and said, "*We received such values for our lives from Lakshmi Ashram, the like of which no other place can provide to anyone*". Her words were a fine inspiration to our present girls and teachers. Part of the credit for her inspiring words also goes to you all, our friends in Denmark and other countries.

My Experiences as a Volunteer in Lakshmi Ashram

Linea Sagasser – a German volunteer

What to say about a year which simply started as a year of social service and turned out to be one of the most important experiences of my life?

It would take me another year to find a satisfying answer. Anyhow I tried to gather together some impressions that reflect my thoughts and feelings.

The beginning was, to be quite honest, a very hard time. I had left school and directly rushed to India and to the Ashram, having a lot of worries and doubts in my mind, even though if I was really looking forward to be confronted with the biggest challenge that I had ever taken in my life. Without a word of Hindi I started sharing the everyday life with the girls, working in the garden, making food, gathering fire wood and much, much more. The small children especially took me by their hand and I experienced a lot of love and patience. After a few weeks I started taking art classes which made my ambition to learn Hindi grow even more, because I realized what an important role language plays. I remember the first lesson that I had with the small children. To describe the scene just one word is needed - a mess! I was very concerned then about preparing the 4 lessons I would take in a week.

But things finally turned out fine, and during my final months in the Ashram I have managed to take as many as 18 lessons a week, I could really enjoy being a teacher and learning from the children at the same time. After some frustrating English lessons with the children I had to deal a lot with what it means to be a good teacher, and with different kinds of alternate teaching methods. Doing almost every kind of work, my strength, capabilities and capacities grew in the same way.



Priyanka and Mana
working on art project

I experienced the different seasons of the Kumaon area, providing different vegetables and opportunities of work and life. I'll always remember the months of winter without any heating possibilities and snowy days which were not that easy to deal for me, because I tend to fall sick. In spring the mountains were covered with wild flowers and during the monsoon the valleys were hidden by clouds. The beauty of nature and the clean atmosphere has certainly had a big influence on my development and thinking. Indeed I became even more aware of environmental pollution, destruction of the forests and livelihoods.

Since my Hindi has improved I saw the Ashram in a different light. On the one hand, I could understand difficulties and problems and on the other hand the principles and ideas, but still my image of the Ashram is not complete.

I am going to leave the Ashram in another three weeks and the thought feels like a pricking needle, because I have got so used to the lifestyle, appreciated the simplicity I found, and have really got close to the children. I will remember the trips we took to ancient temples, walking till our feet hurt just because we wanted to see a little more, sleeping with the children in their class rooms and being woken up at 4 o'clock in the morning, secretly eating fruits instead of continuing digging the fields and much more. The first months of feeling a little bit lost and alone were definitely worth it, and definitely more so were worth the wonderful moments that came afterwards.



Notes from the Udyog Mandir

Bachi Giri Goswami

Bachi Giri Goswami had worked for many years in the Udyog Mandir workshop. Since the opening of the museum he has assumed responsibility for its management, and also for the Kasturba Library, which opens for several hours every afternoon. He is also a well-known local poet.

Sarala Behn Museum

The opening of the Sarala Behn Museum in Kausani has led to Kausani's character gaining a new dimension and becoming more prestigious. The museum has presented the younger generation with a vision of a new and true way to live their lives. Now no visitor to Kausani, Indian or foreign, misses the opportunity to see the Sarala Behn Museum. Likewise, after visiting the museum, there has been an increase among the local people too in their enthusiasm and a desire to understand the life of Sarala Behn and her activities.

Since the opening of the museum on 5 June 2013 until now some three thousand Indian and foreign tourists, parties of school and university students, as well as local people, have visited the Sarala Behn Museum, through which the message of Sarala Behn's thinking and activities is being conveyed to home and abroad.

My experience has been that firstly the museum is proving a great attraction to everyone, and secondly that after seeing the museum the buds of humanity are blossoming forth. In today's modern mentality the essence of humanity is fast disappearing. At such a time this museum can show people the true way.

Visitors to the museum have expressed their thoughts both orally and in writing. Some of the written observations are as follows:

- The atmosphere of the museum is a very uplifting one
- Just as Sarala Behn lived a life devoted to society and close to nature, we too need to follow her example
- Coming to the museum I found spiritual and mental peace of mind. Sarala Behn's life is an inspiration for me
- The highest human emotions find an ideal refuge in the museum
- Sarala Behn's vision of life was one of sacrifice, and this institution (Lakshmi Ashram) is a major source of inspiration for those persons serving society and the nation.



Kasturba Pustakalay

On the floor above the museum is the Kasturba Library and Reading Room. Following the construction of the museum, a beautifully well-organised hall has also now been constructed for the library. This library houses literature of leading writers both from India across the world, Gandhian literature and literature of various other thinkers, also religious and spiritual books, as well a wide range of children's books. After their board examinations the ashram students worked very hard in putting the library collection into good order, and also took the opportunity to study a wide range of books. This was a very fine experience for the students.

This year with the support of Friends of Lakshmi Ashram the library has also acquired a lot of new literature. Slowly the number of members of the library is increasing. Tourists visiting Kausani are also coming to the library for study.

Udyog Mandir Workshop

The workshop continues to produce agricultural tools, along with spinning and weaving equipment. Recently the workshop has also been undertaking construction of materials for building construction, such as iron doors, windows, grills, door frames, skylights, etc. The workshop has also occasionally made iron gates and signboards, and efforts are ongoing to make solar cookers.

The Indian National flag

The Indian national flag was designed as a symbol of freedom. The late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru called it "a flag not only of freedom for ourselves, but a symbol of freedom to all people."



The flag of India (affectionately called तिरंगा meaning 'tricolour') has three equal horizontal bands - the top panel is India saffron (Kesari), the bottom panel is India green and white middle band bearing at its centre the design of Ashoka Chakra in navy blue colour with 24 equally spaced spokes. The ratio of the width to the length of the flag is 2:3.

It was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on 22 July 1947, when it became the official flag of the Dominion of India. The flag was subsequently retained as that of the Republic of India. The flag is based on the Swaraj flag, a flag of the Indian National Congress designed by Pingali Venkayya.

Saffron stands for renunciation, disinterestedness, courage and sacrifice

White symbolizes truth, peace and purity

Green represents prosperity, vibrance and life.

The Ashok Chakra (wheel) represents the righteousness, progress and perpetuity. The 24 spokes of the wheel represents the 24 hours of a day



The Indian flag, by law, is to be made of khadi (a type of hand-spun cloth).

The Ashoka chakra on Indian flag was taken from the Lion capital of Ashoka. The Lion capital of Ashoka is a sculpture of four "Indian lions" standing back to back that was originally placed atop the Aśoka pillar at Sarnath by Emperor Ashoka.