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**NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM  
SANCHAR 125**

November 2015

Dear friends,

Even if it is a bit early I will wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

This Sanchar brings the following articles:

- My Experiences in Lakshmi Ashram – June 2015 – Julika Schultheiss, age 29, from Germany  
*In Sanchar 124 the first part of Julika's article was published, but not the rest. I don't know how I could miss the rest. Therefore I bring the whole article here. I have only shortened it a little. It is interesting to hear a foreigner's experiences. Lone Poulsen)*
- Environmental Activities in the Danya Area – A Twenty-Five Year Journey – 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, we receive money from someone. This also applies if you send amounts that are not earmarked. So all will pay the same amount in subscription and receive the Sanchar.

We use very little money for administration, *but in the future it will be more expensive to copy the Sanchar. Until now I have copied it free, but I can't do it anymore, so please send me your email address if possible.* 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 is received with pleasure. Contributions that are not earmarked are also very welcome. 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***

# SANCHAR 125

## My Experiences in Lakshmi Ashram – June 2015

**Julika Schultheiss, age 29, from Germany**

First of all, I want to mention that whatever I write, it will be from my very subjective perspective and only a small image of the whole picture that was generated within four months, which is of course a very limited time. Furthermore, my experiences have been so vast, that every try of writing about them will only reflect a small part.

I want to thank all the sisters and brothers in Lakshmi Ashram for giving me the possibility to live in their world. It has been an intense and an enriching period in my life. To a certain extent, living a simple life in the nature and spending so much time outside made me feel more balanced. I realized how little you need to be happy in life - looking from a materialistic perspective.

My motivation to volunteer in Lakshmi Ashram on one hand was to learn something, to see and experience Indian culture, to learn a bit of Hindi and about Gandhian philosophy. On the other hand, I also had the expectation and the deep wish to contribute something, to do something useful, to share a part of knowledge or experience with the inhabitants of Lakshmi Ashram which could improve their system a small bit somehow.

I have been working as a school psychologist in Germany for the last four years and therefore seen many schools – systems – from inside. I found it interesting to look into a system like the Ashram, with very fixed rules and a long history. And also to think about the rules and development of this system. Each school has different implicit and explicit rules, and in my job I experienced that a lot depends on the principal. I feel deep gratitude that the inhabitants of Lakshmi Ashram let me into their system and welcomed me as a sister.

I want to share my daily experiences. The life in the Ashram is organized through a very tight schedule, starting with the morning prayer and yoga lessons at 6am. Thereafter, drinking tulsi tea together and about one hour of cleaning in groups. At 8am having tasty breakfast sitting on the floor with folded legs. Afterwards working in the garden, carrying wood, cleaning the cowshed etc. for 90 minutes. I was surprised how hard the girls worked, carrying heavy loads on their heads. I often felt like a spoiled girl, as when I tried to work as hard as they did, I felt exhausted easily.



Lunch was already at 11.30am, followed by a short time to rest and prayer at 1pm. Until 2pm, the girls were either spinning wool or learning new songs. From 2pm-5pm the girls were taught in the school. Three times a week, the time after school was free for games and playing. The other days, the girls were working in the garden again.

At 7pm was evening prayer. Afterwards, Ashram assembly was taking place: Girls were reporting about their classes or group work, were showing dance and acting performances.

Sometimes Didis<sup>1</sup> (big sister; a woman who lives in Ashram) expressed their disappointments about things that haven't gone right during the day. With the girls sitting in rows and not being allowed to look backwards, where most of the complaining Didis were sitting, it felt like a strict hierarchy. Maybe changing the sitting position into a circle, which allows everyone to have eye contact could support equal conversation. We had dinner altogether afterwards, at about 7.45 pm. For the girls, the day used to end with some time for homework or playing in their rooms.



I tried to be useful by teaching English in two classes. I visited one of the English lessons to get an impression of how it was being taught. The teacher opened the book and every girl had to recite the poem. It was far too difficult for the girls to understand. Then teacher asked me to continue and went away. An observation that led me to think that some of the Didis are not qualified as teachers or social workers. From that day on, I was highly motivated to create lessons that would be more fitting for the girls, awake their interest in the language and teach them basic conversation sentences that they could use when a visitor comes to the Ashram.

Another of my everyday experiences was the following: One day, I was helping in the kitchen and really wanted to learn how to make rotis (Indian flat bread). The girls could make the rotis very fast and perfectly round and thin. I tried my luck but often needed to start again, as my roti rather looked like a map than a round roti. One time, I was taking a bit more time to make it and was very happy when my result was a not perfect, but almost round thing that looked like a roti. One of the girls seemed to think differently, though. She laughed, took the roti and broke it. Then she told me to make the small balls out of the pastry instead of rolling out the dough. But I had already done this work many times and therefore wanted to practice the rolling out. I tried to explain – with my poor Hindi – that everyone has to start at one point and practice a lot before being perfect and that I just wanted to make some roti to practice. When she wouldn't let me try again, I chose to leave the kitchen. It felt like running against a wall, no possibility of doing things in a slightly different way. The next morning, a girl from my class asked me about the incident. She had not been in the kitchen that time, but a friend of her had been there and had observed the whole scene quite attentively. One of the examples how attentive, aware, sensitive and pure most of the girls are. She told me that her group will make the roti in the kitchen the next day and that I could join them and practice and they would not destroy my tries. I found it so sweet of her and felt like she really made my day.

The Ashram has many resources. Most important of all, the girls. In Germany, I am often being consulted by teachers when they face violence among students, bullying or disturbances during

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional Indian society puts great emphasis on hierarchy, apparent even in language and how you address someone. If she is older than you, you must say 'Didi', while if she is the same age or smaller then she is 'Behn'. David Hopkins.

the lessons. I have not seen such a thing in between the girls during the four months. The girls are living with each other like sisters, the older ones caring for the younger and taking a lot of responsibility already. For example, the older girls are group leaders during the cleaning time and have to make sure that each member of the group is working in a proper way. They laugh a lot with each other and help each other. They really impressed me, being warm-hearted and disciplined. Girls who seemed different in a way, like being very emotional from time to time, were accepted by the community and not considered as outsiders.

I think it is great that the girls have the opportunity to sing, dance and act in front of others. Even the otherwise shy girls would open up when performing and I could tell that it is a great contribution for developing their personalities and gaining self-confidence.



The youngest girls presenting their self-made butterflies

Furthermore, I was impressed by the Ashram's thoughtful way of using resources. They have solar cells for warm water, rain is being caught in water tanks, dung is used for gas in the kitchen, ash serves for cleaning dishes and everything is very clean. In fact, this was the first and last place in India which I have seen where no waste is being thrown

in the environment. I thought it would be a good idea to make a kind of 'day of open door' in the Ashram once a year so that other Indians can take the Ashram as a model and experience how much more comfortable you feel in a clean environment. The time table provides stable and secure feeling to the girls, as everyday routine is something very reliable. When asking the girls how they feel about living in the Ashram, all of them replied that they like being here very much. On the other hand, such a strictly-regulated environment has the danger that one follows the rules blindly and creativity is being inhibited.

After some weeks, I started to wonder if anyone is interested in my ideas and my view on the girls. I had some interesting conversations with Neema about it, but she also was outside the Ashram often to work for her PhD. As I got to know in the end, one of the reasons for the lack of questions about my perspective might be that the Ashram had not looked out for volunteers in the beginning, and was rather having the attitude of doing a favour for the foreigners instead of having the idea that they, too, could gain something from it. We know that we often get "blinded" for the problems, mechanism and rules of a system when living within it. A stranger, entering the system from outside and leaving it again after some time, sees things from a different angle and can create some new ideas. Therefore I think a system like the Ashram could profit a lot from volunteers.



The younger girls during a dance performance

As I experienced a lack of openness to new ways sometimes, I started wondering how a change is brought in a system like the Ashram which has existed for decades. And, even more interestingly, whose leaders have been socialized within the system as students themselves. In my opinion, the main purpose of a school is to prepare the students for their future and make them strong and independent. Thus it is important to encourage them to make up their own opinion on things, to question things the way they are and to create new ideas of their own. Most of them will return to different systems with different rules after their time in the Ashram, so flexible behaviour should be an important skill to

learn. Once the girls learn to reflect critically they will become even stronger women who can give an important contribution to Indian society and its development. The school lessons could for example be more practical, using Gandhian concepts to connect education with nature and agriculture, encouraging the girls to explore their environment carefully.

As the world is changing, so are the difficulties that the girls encounter in their lives. Therefore change is unavoidable for the Ashram, too. One time, two men of the Human Foundation were coming to the Ashram, as they had some projects in Kausani. They went into the schools and talked about menstruation and the use of sanitary napkins. Their organization had found out that uterus cancer is spread widely in India, as many girls use newspaper and know little about personal hygiene during the periods. The men of the NGO proposed to educate the girls of the Ashram, too, but were not yet allowed to do so, as the Ashram was not prepared for it. I am sure there were good reasons for this decision and I am not in the position to question it. Still, I had a feeling that this incident too, could be connected to a certain fear of change within the system.

From researches which focused on how changes can happen in systems like schools, we know that change always creates resistance of the members first. The leader of a system, in schools the principal, has to moderate and withstand this resistance in order to establish changes. He or she has to point out the development possibilities for the members and the organization and have a strong and clear attitude in favour of the focused change. The second permission requirement to make organizational learning (= change) successful is that the members can participate in creating aims and goals for the organization. When members are involved, changes are more accepted. Considering this point, I felt that the Ashram could profit from asking workers what they want the Ashram to be in a couple of years. From the little I saw, I got the impression that it is important for the staff to reflect about Gandhian concepts like non-violence first and defining for themselves – e.g. what does non-violence mean to me? The second step could be a conversation with the whole team of teachers and workers, moderated by a neutral person, to find a joint vision of how they want the Ashram to be in future, what are the aims for further development of the Ashram and which steps have to be undertaken to reach these aims.

The Ashram is an important place for the girls, where they gain values and develop their personalities. Therefore, all workers of the Ashram have a huge responsibility and should get the support of the leader to reflect their behaviour and develop their own personalities.



Neema and I  
celebrating Holi

I wish all the best to the inhabitants of Lakshmi Ashram. May a way be found to create a future vision of this place and enhance development within the system without losing the essence of its spirit. I could see already good steps towards this goal, as Neema's idea to write the PhD is to evaluate the work of the Ashram and to think about which concepts should be kept, and which concepts should be changed. Her work will be very important for the further development of the Ashram.

And I really hope that future volunteers' ideas can be used for the benefit of the Ashram. When people decide to volunteer, they want to learn something, but they also want to contribute something and leave a small footprint. The ideal would be mutual learning. All in all, my time there was wonderful and I hope the Ashram will benefit from this report.

## **Environmental Activities in the Danya Area – A Twenty-Five Year Journey David Hopkins**

As our longstanding friends know, Lakshmi Ashram had started working in the Dhauladevi block of Almora district in the late nineteen seventies, initially supported by the Lions Club in Glostrup. An early intervention had been a state government supported adult education programme, but in discussions with the local communities they expressed a deep need for a pre-school educational programme for the children of these isolated communities. Thus it was that in the spring of 1982, with grant support from SIDA the unique environmentally focused balwari (kindergarten) programme was begun in the villages around Danya, an important market centre, and also around Sahkande, an isolated village where we had been working for several years.

Although the balwari programme had been designed from the outset to develop an environmental awareness in the young children, it was only around 1990 that Lakshmi Ashram began to implement specific environmental programmes. At that time contacts were established with the Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development (SPWD), a national organisation with its head office in New Delhi.

In the early years the programmes were small-scale but this allowed the local team to slowly build up their skills. The activities included the encouragement of growing of fruit trees, especially citrus fruits. This both improved the nutrition of the villagers and offered the chance for income generation. Another early activity was to protect and regenerate the community forests. There were programmes to encourage agricultural infrastructure, for example the construction of compost pits and water storage tanks.



By the late nineties SPWD were ready to support more intensive programmes at the micro-watershed level, and the area adjoining our village service centre in the hamlet of Chalmorigara, close to Danya, was selected. Under this programme initiatives were undertaken to seek to improve water resources, agricultural land, forests and community pasture, always working closely with the community who contributed with labour to many of the activities. One of the most impressive successes was the revival of the community forest in the village of Phalyant. What had been an extremely degraded forest is now a dense mixed forest that provides fodder to the community, and which continues to be well managed by the village forest committee. A spring that had dried up on the

lower edge of the forest now has water throughout the year.

Our collaboration with SPWD finished around 2003, but not too long afterwards we were invited to be a partner organisation in the first phase of a large programme known as the Himotthan Pariyojna. This was to be funded by the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, managed by one of the largest business houses in India, and was to be implemented through eight organisations in different parts of Kumaun. This programme was on a larger scale and involved the preparation first of an in-depth detailed project proposal, something new for our Danya team, and the establishment of women's Self Help Groups in each of the villages in the project area. All the interventions at the community level would be made through the respective women's groups. This programme was successfully implemented from 2005-08.

There was a two year gap in funded programmes, although the team continued to be active. Then in 2010 we were selected to be a partner in the implementation of the second phase of the Himotthan Pariyojna. This was to be more of a challenge for the field team, for the programme was now termed as a "Natural Resource based Livelihoods" programme. There would still be components of the programme that sought to improve the natural resources, especially focusing on growing of fodder grasses and trees on private and community land, as well as improving the agricultural infrastructure, for example through the construction of irrigation channels to bring more land under irrigation. However in this second phase a key component of the project would be the establishment of a cooperative.

The local women have been motivated to establish a cooperative, which has now been formally registered. One of its main activities is the management of a small dairy (described in Sanchar 119). Milk is collected from villages in the project area and brought to Danya where it is sold through the dairy. The cooperative is also managing what is known as a Common Facility Centre (CFC). This is a retail centre where local farmers are able to sell their agricultural produce, and also where items benefitting the farmer are also stocked, for example seed and agricultural tools. Any profits from the dairy and the CFC go to the cooperative, which aims to be a model for improving the livelihoods of the local community.

In addition inputs from the project seek to encourage farmers to be able to increase their on-farm income, so that they will be less motivated to leave their villages for employment on the plains. Polyhouses allow the farmers to produce off-season vegetables and also to raise vegetable

seedlings to supply local farmers. Farmers are being encouraged to grow turmeric and ginger for spices. An advantage of these two crops is that they do not attract monkeys and wild boar, which are an ever increasing menace for local farmers. Other farmers have started to rear small dairy herds, that bring them an assured income through the sale of milk and milk based products.

On 24 October two outside consultants, Mr K. C. Sharma and Girish Bharajwaj, visited the project area to carry out an impact assessment of the programme, now that its implementation period of three years is almost over. They first met members of the cooperative in our centre, and were impressed by their commitment to the long-term success of the cooperative. Then after lunch the two consultants, accompanied by the local field team and staff members of the Himotthan Society, visited the field. Time restricted how much they could see, however we first visited a grass plot on private land belonging to Daya Kishan Pandey, where fodder grasses had been planted over a large area of hillside below the main road. The team then continued to the village of Chaunsala where the project has worked with a number of families. We met with one farmer, Gopal Bhatt, who had benefitted from a gohar gas plant, which provides cooking gas for much of the year, thus saving the family from purchasing gas cylinders or collecting firewood from distant forests. Gopal Bhatt had also made a good income from growing and selling ginger. However when he was questioned by Girish Bharadwaj we learned that he had still returned to the plains where for many years he has worked in restaurants. Girish asked him very pointedly how much he would need to earn per month from his land, so that he would not leave his home for employment!



Another local farmer, who had been working in Delhi, had returned home and had built up a small herd of five cows that are now providing him with a good income, although he still has to repay a loan that he had taken for their purchase.

Shiv Datt Pande, one of our field team, was making good use of his two polyhouses to produce vegetables. In the summer he had an excellent crop of tomatoes, and he has recently sown onion seed, and when the seedlings are ready in a few weeks he will sell these to local farmers.

The last site that the field team visited, as the sun was setting, was a protected hillside, common land of the community, which has been protected for fodder. The entire hillside was covered in grass. Plantation of fodder grass and trees had been undertaken on this hillside, and the trees were doing well. However the entire hillside will need protection for a few more years before they will be mature enough to not be damaged by grazing animals.

All in all the Impact Assessment went off very well – the consultants were very impressed by the fodder grass programme, however in the long term the question remains as to how one can promote the economic conditions that will persuade the local community not to migrate from their village. The decision to migrate is a personal one based on various factors, not least these days being the desire to give their children a good education and to have access to good health facilities, plus of course the lure of urban life and the prospect of a higher income.