

**FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM**

Lone Poulsen, Praestehusene 6, 2620 Albertslund, DK Denmark

Telephone +45 43961371 – e-mail: lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk

Bank Account IBAN no: DK0330000003141861

Lakshmi Ashram's homepage: <http://lakshmiashram.dk>

**NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM  
SANCHAR 126**

February 2016

Dear friends,

This Sanchar brings the following articles:

- My Study Tour Experiences by Srishti Shukla
- Study Tours of Women's Groups by Basanti Behn
- Radha Bhatt visiting Scandinavia by Lone Poulsen
- The Account of 2015.

The general meeting takes place on **Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016 at 2 pm. in Albertslund.**

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 126

## My Study Tour Experiences

Srishti Shukla

*Srishti, known in the ashram as Anku, came to the ashram in April 2013, along with her sister and two other girls from Champaran in north Bihar. While the others decided at the end of last year to continue their studies at home, Srishti was determined to return in February to Lakshmi Ashram where she is now studying in class IX.*



It was the fourth of November, and the students of classes VIII and IX were to go on a study tour. Poonam Didi, Bapuji (David) and Mima Didi (Jemima), who had come from Germany, were to accompany us on our study tour. However because she was not feeling well, at the last minute Mima Didi could not come with us.

That morning we got up at four o'clock, bathed, and then immediately prepared some food for our journey. We set off at nine for the roadside, reaching there by half past nine. Then I thought that our study tour was going to be really good, and also that everyone would stay well on the way because the journey was not going to be too long. We took our seats in a minibus and set off towards Garur. Leaving Bageshwar behind us and then leaving the forest behind us also, we arrived in Ason. The landscape around Ason too looked very enchanting. The trees were mostly pine and Himalayan oak. Getting down from the bus we had to drop down from the road. Crossing the fields we reached *Dada Ji's home (Dada was our host, a retired teacher, Shri Keshar Singh Mankoti)*. To begin with I thought to myself, 'Where have I come?', but I slowly began to feel at home. I was happy because I had wanted to go to a village. It was my first opportunity to see a mountain village, and the mountains here in Ason were quite different to those around Kausani.



We had reached Dada Ji's home around two o'clock. He welcomed us all very warmly. After washing our hands and face we had a cup of tea and then rested a little. Then in the evening we had prayers and then sang devotional songs and also danced. Then we cooked supper ourselves. The food was very delicious. Later on auntie joined us, we chatted a lot together and then slept.

We got up early the next morning, enjoyed a cup of tea and then swept all around the house and our own room, prepared the morning meal, all the tasks that we would have done in the ashram.

As there was a lack of water in the home we regularly fetched water from the nearby spring and took great care not to waste water in any way. If one has made an effort he personally knows the value of that effort!

That morning we left the home at ten o'clock, and following a path through the fields we reached the Ma Bhagwati Shishu Mandir, (*a private primary school established by our host*) where the students were taking their written tests. When they had completed these they welcomed us with a song, and then we presented our cultural programme. They enjoyed watching it very much, and likewise we too enjoyed being with them. However I personally felt one shortcoming there – where the government should be giving money they are not, and where they should not be giving money they are. The government should give the greatest support to schools, yet the rooms in this school were not good, they were not kept clean, and there were no mats for the students to sit on. The very first requirement is cleanliness, only then can the Goddess Saraswati (*the Goddess of Learning*) impart knowledge, and the students too will be happy in their minds. Thus everyone must work together to resolve all these shortcomings.

We then went to a second school, a government primary school with students from classes I to V. I felt even worse on seeing this school, for as we arrived so Dadaji raised a question with the headmistress and the teachers. Immediately a discussion began on his question as to why there was offensive graffiti on the outside walls, and who had done it. The walls were in a bad condition, and the wall of the toilets was likewise damaged. All in all, the scene touched my heart. Moreover none of the small children were neat and clean. The entire surroundings were dirty. Seeing all this I did not like it at all. We taught the children there a prayer and then, passing through the village, reached home.

The next day we again had a programme. We had thought to go to the Government Inter-College, so we made all our preparations and about eleven o'clock we left home and set off, singing as we went along our way. We reached the Inter-College, which is situated between some villages. The students there come from distant villages to study. I liked it very much there because it was neat and clean all around the school, and the students were also very neat and tidy, and they all got on very well one with the other. I liked everything that I saw.

The students welcomed us, and then we presented our cultural programme, which they enjoyed very much. We too enjoyed it a great deal. Then from there we went to the home of Meenu Didi (*a student in class XI in Lakshmi Ashram*), where we were given food and tea. From there we returned to our home, chatting a lot on the way with Bapuji, joking a lot, and really enjoying ourselves. There was fruit on the trees in Ason – including bananas, guavas, mangoes, papayas, lemons and oranges. In this way we passed the day.

On the final day we got up early and, as on the other days, did a lot of work, got ready to leave, and took some group photos. We were all feeling very sad because we were leaving them. They too – Ammaji, Dadaji, Bhabhiji and Bhim Bhai (*Our host, his wife, daughter-in-law and younger son Bhim*) – were feeling equally sad. We bid them farewell, then went from Ason via Bageshwar and reached Baijnath where we visited the temple, a very ancient temple. The charm of Baijnath has been lost, for the water of the Gomti River flowing there has become very polluted. A dam is being built to create an artificial lake. This work has been going on for ages and is still not completed. Looking at the dam it seemed that millions of rupees had been spent. Seeing all this I felt very upset. Then we continued to Kausani, and after a little while reached the ashram. We had great fun on our study tour with Poonam Didi and Bapuji. Our study tour had been full of fun and at the same time educational.



## Study Tours of Women's Groups

Basanti Behn

Lakshmi Ashram has been actively working for the past decade or more in the Kosi Valley with the village level women's groups and the elected women representatives of the gram panchayats for their empowerment and for managing the protection of their forests. These women are playing an important role for raising public awareness in their valley. In this way a number of other institutions in Uttarakhand are active in their local valleys or at district level in raising awareness on issues concerning the women or the village community. With the objective that the women of the Kosi Valley might see for themselves efforts being undertaken for people's awareness in other parts of the state and have the opportunity to share their experiences a study tour programme was arranged. Between 24 and 27 February 2015, under the leadership of the ashram field workers, three tours were undertaken to three districts of Uttarakhand. These included the Urgan Valley in Joshimath block of Chamoli district in Garhwal; the areas of Kainchi, Nainital and Ramgarh in Nainital district; and the areas of Askot and Dharchula in Pithoragarh district.

The tour to Askot was led by Maya Verma, that to Joshimath by Basanti Behn, while Tulsi Sah led the group to Nainital. Each group travelled in two vehicles.

### Joshimath – Jandesh tour

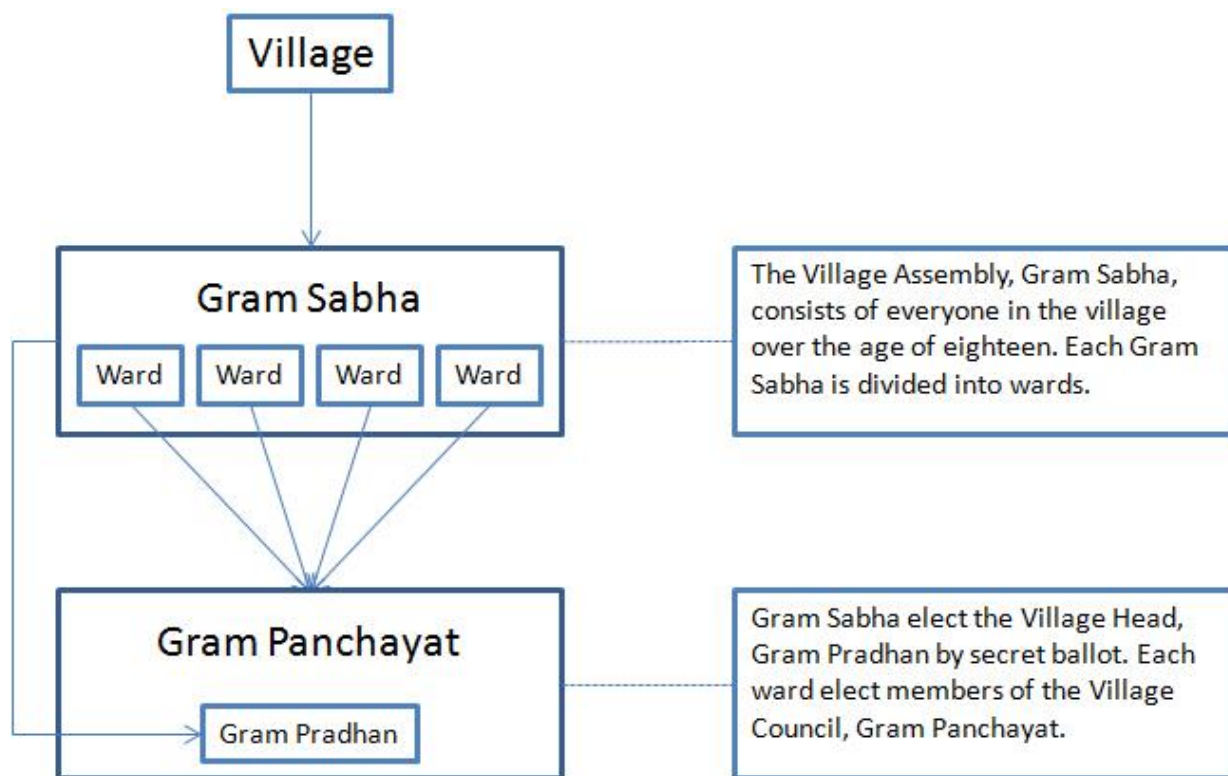
Twenty-two women left Someshwar at half past nine on the morning of 24 February, bound for Joshimath, arriving at half past seven in the evening at the office of Jandesh in the village of Salna, where they spent the night.



It rained continuously the following day, but nevertheless the women were very enthusiastic to explore this new area, and they all set out to visit a renowned temple. On the way back they reached the village of Devgram Kholi, in the area where their host organisation, Jandesh, is working. There they received a warm welcome, and lunch was also arranged for them there. The elected head (*gram pradhan*) of this village is a woman named Purna Devi. She was elected unopposed as gram pradhan, in which the women’s group in the village played an important role.

**A little about the Village Council – from Sanchar 110**

*Women are the backbone of mountain society, busy from early morning to late in the evening caring for their family, their fields and their livestock. While the men have migrated out of the hills in large numbers, the women have remained back, actively working for their water, forests and land. The women have lagged far behind in social and political leadership, and it has not even been felt necessary to seek their advice or viewpoint. The village council (gram panchayat) is responsible for the government of the villages and, in order to increase the participation of the women, backward classes and scheduled castes in the gram panchayats, the government has introduced a reservation policy for these weaker sections of society. In India the villages can be defined in terms of the Village Assembly (Gram Sabha). In the village everyone over the age of eighteen is a member of the Gram Sabha. They select the Village Head (Gram Pradhan) by secret ballot. The Gram Panchayat runs the Gram Sabha. Several wards together form one Gram Sabha. Those members elected from each ward are members of the Gram Panchayat.*



After lunch the members of the village women’s group gathered in the home of the gram pradhan. One of our group was the former chairperson of her village women’s group and at present a member of Pachchisi gram panchayat, who said that she wished to see the women in the village groups come forward to serve in the block level panchayat as well. She added that she would work towards achieving this. The members of this village women’s group were happy to hear this. The members of our group also told of their activities to save the river Kosi, their success in stopping a

proposed cement factory and their agitation against a proposed Beer Bar. They also told of their experiences and their work as elected village representatives. The women of this village women's group have built up savings of Rs. 1,50,000 in their account. These savings are utilised to meet the needs of the women's group and of the village community.

The following day we went to Joshimath where we visited the historic Nrihsingh Temple, and also went to the head office of Jandesh, returning in the evening to their office in Salna, when Basanti Behn asked the women to share their experiences of the visit. They all said how much they had enjoyed the exposure visit. They had never previously had such an opportunity, and they expressed their gratitude to Lakshmi Ashram for making it possible. The following day we came back to Kausani, and the women all reached their homes.

### **Askot and Dharchula – Arpan tour**

The second group of twenty women, led by Maya Verma, set off for Askot in Pithoragarh district. Reaching Arpan, a local institution, in the evening, they established a good rapport with the women workers, having some enthusiastic discussions with them, and then spent the night there.

The following day, accompanied by a worker of Arpan, they went to Jauljibi, where a meeting was organised with the members of the village women's group. Our women had some very good discussions with the women of this village, both groups asking questions to one another. They shared experiences of their work. The local women also related the story that tells the hidden history behind the name of their village, Jauljibi. The women of this village along with those of other villages in the area are associated with the Land Rights Forum, which is actively working for the land rights of the Bhotiya<sup>1</sup> community. The women of the group here contribute ten rupees each per month, which goes to meeting the expenses of the group's activities.

On 25 February the group reached the village of Sugram, close to Dharchula, where the women of the village had gathered together. All of them were linked to the women's group. They said that the police had arrested a man from their village, accusing him of the crime of gathering *Kira Jari*, a medicinal plant, and had put him in jail. He supported his family through collecting *Kira Jari*. Through their collective strength and efforts the women's group of this village had been able to have him released from jail.

The women in this exposure visit were very happy that they had been given such an opportunity. Kamla Goswami, the chairperson of the women's group of Lakhnari village, said that not only had they had the chance to see new places, but that they had also learned from the activities and the method of working of the women's groups that they had interacted with. She said that she too would strengthen her women's group by setting up a Core Committee.

### **Nainital – Saral tour**

The third group, under the leadership of Tulsi Sah set off for Nainital. On the way they stopped to have *darshan* of Kainchi Dham temple and they continued to Nainital. Here Sandeep, one of the workers of Saral, the institution hosting them, had arranged for the group to stay in the Sah Dharmshala in the lower part of Nainital known as Tallital.

---

<sup>1</sup> The **Bhotiya-people** lives in the Himalaya valleys in Kumaon and Garhwal in Uttarakhand. Their name comes from the word Bod that is a classical Tibetan name for Tibet.





The following day the group went to the village of Gaha, some ten kilometers from Nainital, where one of the workers of Saral took the women on a tour of the village. She arranged for the group to meet the women associated with the women's group and also the panchayat members. The experiences of Manisha Arya, who has been the gram pradhan for the past twenty years, were remarkable. She described the challenges that face the women and how they can be faced. The group also shared their experiences on protecting their forests and the strength

in unity of their group. The state legislator (MLA) for Nainital was also present in the meeting. She advised the group to continually present petitions on social issues to their local MLA.

The following day the exposure visit group reached the institution of Chirag, which has set up a group to promote employment for women, these days producing animal feed which is sold in the local markets. This group is registered as a society. The group saw the processes involved in making animal feed, using sugar, oilcake, soya bean, *bhatt* (a local variety of black soya bean) etc. The women also collect medical plants – leaves and roots – from the forest to prepare traditional medicines. They have also established an orchard in which are almond, apricot, peach and mango trees. After taking lunch in the canteen at Chirag, they discussed issues relating to women's groups with the staff of Chirag, returning in the evening to Nainital.

On the morning of 27 February the group visited the temple of Naini Devi, and had the chance to go boating on Naini Tal, before setting off for the return journey. They took tea and snacks in Garampani and had lunch in Kosi before reaching their homes by evening. The women all reached home feeling very happy, having experienced and learned a great deal. They too want to set up some small scale enterprise such as they had seen when visiting Chirag.

## Radha Bhatt Visiting Scandinavia

### Lone Poulsen

On 20th November 2015 Radha Bhatt landed in Copenhagen Airport. Radha was invited by the Peace Movement (Fredsrörelsen) of Orust<sup>2</sup> in Sweden to receive on behalf of Mahatma Gandhi The People's Peace Prize in memory of the Testament of Alfred Nobel. Radha stayed ten days in Denmark, ten days in Sweden, ten days in Norway with her sister and about three weeks in Mexico before going back to India on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2016.

On 1<sup>st</sup> December Radha went to Orust in Sweden. Orust is a big island about 100 km North of Gothenburg. She was going to stay with Erni and Ola Friholt, who are the moving spirit in the Peace Movement. Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> December was the day, where it should take place. There was a programme arranged for the whole day. Hanne Stenager, Ruth Sillemann and I (all from the board of Friends of Lakshmi Ashram) went over there to participate in the seminar. We went by bus from

---

<sup>2</sup> [www.fredsrörelsen-pa-orust.se](http://www.fredsrörelsen-pa-orust.se)

Copenhagen to Gothenburg, and there we bought tickets for bus and train to go on, but the storm called Helga totally changed our plans, because both buses and trains were cancelled because of fallen trees etc. What should we do? We had to get there, because someone was waiting for us at a bus station on the island. He should drive us the last kilometres. The end of it was that we went by taxi, and luckily we get some of our money from the Swedish transport company. The bridge to Orust had just been opened before we reached it. We were invited to have a warm soup with Erni and Ola and were brought to the place, where we should stay for two nights.

On Saturday the rough weather continued with storm and rain. The seminar started at 10 am with coffee and welcome. Radha told about the Indian Gandhi Movement and her own work in India and internationally. After lunch Mr. S. Upadhyay ("Jaya"), the founder of a village development project in Jarkhand – Jagriti Vihara<sup>3</sup>, told about his project – inspired by Gandhi and the Scandinavian folk high school. The activist and peace research worker Jørgen Johansen gave a talk about "Gandhi and the Truth". At the end of the afternoon there was arranged a torchlight procession, but it was quite impossible because of the weather, so it ended with driving to the house, where we were staying, and here they served something to drink and eat. Our host, the violinist Helga Hussels played for the whole group. In the meantime they arranged the conference room for the evening party with a vegetarian Nobel supper.



During the dinner The People's Peace Prize was going to be given to Radha Bhatt. The Tagore Choir from Lund entertained, and Ola Friholt made the speech about the motivation of the prize. Martin Weber (Ola's son) had engraved the stone and presented it to Radha. Radha gave to The Peace Movement of Orust a statue of Gandhi, where he is walking in the Salt March (can be seen on the picture). Here is a very little extract from Radha's speech of thanks:

*"It is a momentous day of my life. I am grateful to the affectionate common people of Orust for presenting me the prestigious award on behalf of a great son of the world, Mahatma Gandhi, who worked, thought and served the cause of the last man, the common people.....This award assumes a special dimension because it is not from any Government, business magnet or big organisation, but it is from common people who have understood the importance of Mahatma Gandhi's value system of peace and harmony for the present day world."*

We were a little curious to know how we could return to Denmark, but a Swedish woman gave us her car. She was staying with a friend on the island that night, and then we could fetch her on our way to Gothenburg, where she lived. We drove with the bus to Denmark in a terrible rainy and stormy weather. The Sound Bridge was the last obstacle, and it was rough. Our experienced driver said that he had never before had such a terrible experience.

<sup>3</sup> [www.jvv.se](http://www.jvv.se)