

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

SANCHAR 131

November 2017

Dear friends,

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

The new Sanchar brings the following articles:

- Celebration of Shri Krishna Bal Lila by Neema Behn
- Celebrating the festival of Diwali by Neha Joshi
- The Necessity for Sensitivity in Development of the Himalayas by Radha Bhatt
- Visit of Students of Gladsaxe Gymnasium by David Bhai

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. The money is transferred 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 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 – see the 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 131

Celebration of Shri Krishna Bal Lila

Neema Behn

The traditional local festivals, the national holidays and the birth anniversaries of great personalities are celebrated in different ways in Lakshmi Ashram. In particular the birth anniversaries of great personalities are celebrated by reading and hearing about their work and activities, and then presenting them on stage through plays.

In many states of India for years gone by, the life of Lord Rama is staged every year in a very simple way over a period of ten days in what is known as the Ram Lila, and the characters were traditionally only played by men. However these days some girls are also playing roles in the Ram Lila, but this is a very recent change. However in the past and even today the life of Shri Krishna is not presented on stage.

Decades ago the idea came to the mind of Sarala Behn, the founder of Lakshmi Ashram,, that the ashram students ought to present a Krishna Lila on stage for the local people, in a similar way to the traditional Ram Lila, and she started to do so. In that time this was truly a revolutionary idea that had come to Sarala Behn, when the idea of girls presenting such a programme was unthinkable, and when they even had very few opportunities to leave their homes. However in the basic education of Lakshmi Ashram there was always a search for possibilities of new ways in which the girls might freely develop every aspect of their personality. Cultural programmes were an inseparable part of the ashram education, and the Shri Krishna Lila was also added.

A long preparation is required for the Krishna Lila, for in presenting on stage the childhood incidents of Lord Krishna's life there are a good number of characters with widely differing personalities – a king, warriors, soldiers, milkmaids (*gopis*), queens, and Lord Krishna in various forms – the child Krishna (*Balkrishna*) and Shri Krishna the teacher.

All the 50-55 ashram students participate collectively in presenting on stage the characters of all these parts. All the students have to be inspired and encouraged to take a role depending on their personality and level of expression. A few students personally select the role of their choice. A lot of effort has to be made to prepare those girls, who are by nature gentle, loving, kind and sensitive, to perform such roles in the drama which are very demanding, such as warriors and the cruel King Kansa, etc. But in this collective effort each and every girl gets the opportunity to express herself.



The local people wait the entire year to see the presentation of the drama on the occasion of the festival of Shri Krishna Janmasthmi¹, which falls in August or September. Lakshmi Ashram had begun this programme long ago when, in the small towns and villages, there were no means of entertainment. In that time the children and the elderly, the young boys and girls, used to come in large numbers to see the programme. The women would quickly complete their household work and with great enthusiasm set off as early as possible in the morning for Lakshmi Ashram, and in their language would say, “We are going to see the programme of Sarala’s girls”.

As the years have passed by awareness of this programme has spread far and wide by word of mouth through the local people to their relatives and family members, and these people too have started to come. This year among the audience for the Krishna Lila was an old woman who had arrived by ten o’clock and was sitting in the meadow in front of the stage. We asked her, “Mother, where have you come from?” She told us that she had come from Bageshwar, and that she had been coming for the past twenty years. We were very surprised to hear this, for we had never imagined that people would also take a bus from 40 kilometres away to come and see this programme. Later on we found that some people even came from beyond Bageshwar.

Our students’ staging of the Shri Krishna Bal Lila² coincides with the first day of the two-day Shri Krishna Janmashtami fair in Kausani. Stall keepers come from far and wide, a market of different kinds of cheap items springs up, and for the children there are different kinds of entertainment available. In recent years this has impacted on our programme a little. In the past the public used to come straight up to first see our programme before going down to enjoy the fair, whereas now many people first spend time in the fair, and only then come up to see our programme – indeed many people do not come at all. Despite this change this year too we have observed that many people have come up to see our programme, and have sat through three hours enjoying every scene of the Shri Krishna Bal Lila presented by our girls. This proves that despite any number of types of entertainment now being available, even today people come to watch this live programme with great interest and enthusiasm. Our ashram children’s parents and friends of Lakshmi Ashram also take great pleasure in watching this programme.

Alongside this the girls of Lakshmi Ashram have also greatly improved and expanded their skills and abilities in performing the different roles. In addition in recent years there have been perfect costumes for all the various parts in the play, along with greatly improved stage decorations and sound arrangements, along with the canopy above the stage. For all these reasons both those taking various parts in the Shri Krishna Lila and the spectators look forward to Shri Krishna Janmasthmi. For some years now the spectators have generously contributed donations and this year we received some Rs. 8,500. These donations have been utilised towards buying stage microphones, canopy and stage costumes. We take pride in the fact that very little time was given to preparing the scenes for staging this big drama. We had made use of the evenings and Sundays, but the children with a keen sense of responsibility sought to well rehearse their scenes in as little time as possible. This programme provides the opportunity to all our students to express themselves very well orally, while at the same time allowing for the development of their inner sense of self-confidence.

¹ The festival of Shri Krishna Janmashtami falls on the eighth day following the full moon in the Hindu lunar calendar month of Bhadrapada. This falls in the second half of August or the first half of September.

² Shri Krishna Bal Lila – *Bal* means child while *Lila* means Play. Thus the Shri Krishna Bal Lila is the drama presenting the incidents leading up to the birth of Lord Krishna along with incidents from his childhood.

Celebrating the festival of Diwali

Neha Joshi

As in previous years I also celebrated Diwali this year along with the ashram family. Behind the celebrating of each and every festival are various religious, cultural and scientific reasons, and there are a number of stories connected to Diwali also.

After our busy three week programme of haymaking all of us, elder sisters and the smaller girls, joined together in having a special cleaning of all the rooms on the campus. (*Pre-Diwali cleaning is very much akin to spring cleaning in Western Europe!*) The walls of the rooms were given a fresh wash of red mud, and each of the classes decorated their rooms in preparation for Diwali.



Clay lamps –
Neha in the
background

This year the Diwali celebrations began on 19 October, earlier in the autumn than usual. The meaning of Diwali is, “A beautiful and orderly line of clay wick lamps”. Recognising this true meaning of Diwali, as dusk fell on the evening of 19th October we put oil and cotton wicks in each of the clay lamps (*diyas*) and lit them one by one. This year we lit a hundred *diyas* and arranged them in the outline of a large lamp. At six o’clock in the evening everyone gathered in the hostel courtyard and sang some songs related to Diwali.

Then each of the students took one *diya* and placed them in lines on the balconies of the hostel and our meeting hall, Shanti Bhavan. To my mind celebrating in this way invoked the true spirit and meaning of Diwali. Getting rid of those negative qualities within us and in their place installing positive qualities, removing darkness and spreading light, these are the teachings that I imbibe from this sacred festival.

However in recent years the nature of this festival has been spoiled. The splendor of the big cities has now reached our villages. Few traditional *diyas* are seen nowadays, instead electric lights dominate. People really enjoy the noise of loud firecrackers and other fireworks that only lead to pollution. During the three days and nights of Diwali there is an awful lot of noise. Despite there being so much pollution even so people continue unthinkingly to set off fireworks.

Set in the lap of nature with trees all around, the ashram has given me a lot of peace, however the unwanted sound from the valley below of unloved fireworks ringing in my ears has greatly disturbed me. This year though, with no fireworks in the ashram whatsoever, we had a really good Diwali.

The following day we celebrated with '*Van Bhoj*' or 'Forest Picnic. In previous years we would always go to the forest and enjoy our midday meal there. However this year because of a lack of water in the forest we took our lunch in the ashram dining hall, and then afterwards went to the forest for a programme of dances and short plays. As the festival of Diwali is associated with the life of Lord Shri Ramchandra, it gives us the teachings of the inspiring qualities of His life – patience, courage, valour, virtuous nature, etc.



Thus this day we had also presented scenes from the Ram Lila depicting incidents in the life of Lord Rama which were very moving. Later on we had pounded *chyura*. This *chyura*, which is prepared from rice soaked for several days and then roasted before being pounded, is also a symbol of our local culture and traditions. Behind everything is linked a mythological story.

The following day sisters bless their brothers with this *chyura* and wish them a long life. Kanti Didi praised all of us with this *chyura* and likewise showered various blessings on us. We learn from such bountiful blessings and they provide us with renewed energy. The three days of Diwali, this festival of Light and Love, passed off very well.

Being a national festival this binds us together as a people, meaning learning how to live in love and brotherhood, free of any sense of discord. This festival teaches us the Vedic knowledge of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* – the world is one family.

We will keep far away from all evils until the next Diwali, will root out ignorance and strive to become wise, this is our steadfast resolve.



The Necessity for Sensitivity in Development of the Himalayas

Radha Didi



Lakshmi Ashram is a school for life. We learn from our community while living together on our campus high in the foothills of the Himalayas, but we also learn from the nature and people when we are away from our campus in the villages of the nearby Kosi valley, or indeed anywhere within our state known as Uttarakhand.

Uttarakhand is geologically very fragile and in a highly sensitive seismic zone, for it is part of the Himalaya which is still slowly being lifted up, with numerous thrust areas. Thus the construction and other activities undertaken in the name of development cannot be implemented on the same vast scale as on the plains of India.

From the time of Sarala Behn Lakshmi Ashram has been continually advocating for a gentle and careful attitude towards the nature of these mountains whenever initiating new development activities in Uttarakhand. Back in the nineteen seventies a blueprint for sustainable development of the Himalayas had been prepared and sent to the planners and leaders of the governments with the signature of Sarala Behn. At first the government did not listen to its recommendations but subsequently they did begin to listen and act accordingly. However, with the passing of time, they have once again forgotten this new concept towards the development of the Himalayas.

At the present time Uttarakhand is facing some particularly destructive development projects. Four-lane highways are being proposed for construction to the four *dhams* (sacred shrines of Hindus) – Yamotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath – which are situated in the high Himalayas

close to the sources of the great rivers of our state, namely the Yamuna, Ganga, Mandakini and Alaknanda respectively.

In the spring of 2017 we undertook a study tour of the valley of the Ganga below Gangotri, where construction of a four-lane highway is already under way. We were saddened and surprised to discover that the only dense forest in this high valley was marked to be felled. Ten thousand of those beautiful, green deodar (cedar) trees that control the temperature of that high valley were marked to be ruthlessly cut down. We also observed the road building work going on at high speed. The heavy blasting of rocks was shaking the entire valley and the mountains themselves. The fear of heavy landslides and floods during the monsoon hangs over the people of the villages and small towns along the banks of the Ganga. On top of all this the boulders and debris from road cutting is being haphazardly dumped on the steep slopes below the road and is falling down to the Ganga River running below.



We personally raised this entire issue with the chief minister of Uttarakhand, and also through the local daily newspapers, seeking that the project of all-weather roads be reconsidered, bearing in mind the necessity for increased sensitivity towards the Himalayan ecology.

We are now planning to collect further money to allow us to undertake a study of the other three high valleys in December 2017 - the Alaknanda in which Badrinath is situated, the Mandakini where Kedarnath is, and the Yamuna where Yamnotri is.

Visit of Students of Gladsaxe Gymnasium

David Bhai

"Thank you so much for letting us into your home and school. It has been a great experience and I loved meeting you all. I'll always remember you girls as my first (very good) impression of India. Take care!"

Mathilde, Denmark – written in Ashram guest book on 02-11-2017

Dusk was falling on the evening of 30th October as twenty four students and three teachers from Gladsaxe Gymnasium arrived in Kausani, having travelled directly from Denmark. I was there to meet the teachers that evening so that we might plan our programme for the coming three days. I tried to imagine how the students must have been feeling for it is always strange to arrive in a new place in the dark, and they had been travelling without a break from Denmark.

However the following morning they were greeted with a view of the Himalayan peaks from their hotel, unfortunately somewhat hazy, and as planned they reached the ashram by half past nine. In the morning we had an opportunity to sit together on the hillside and talk a little together about Lakshmi Ashram, and then before lunch Radha Didi told them much more.

After lunch there was the chance for all of us to meet together and have a cultural programme, with songs and dances from both the ashram girls and our Danish visitors. Then they spent a fun hour with our younger students, playing a word game in groups and then other indoor games. It was a delight to see how everyone was enjoying themselves!

The following day they enjoyed a walk over the hills, through forest and through small villages, before dropping down into the valley below to the ancient temples of Baijnath. Perhaps few of the students had done such a long walk through the mountains but they all coped very well. Fortunately at this time of year it is not too hot!

On the final day of their all too brief visit the students reached the ashram in time to join with our girls in work, the boys going to help dig a compost pit and one of the terraced fields while most of the girls were in two groups with ashram students pulling up *bakaul*, an unwanted weed, on our hillside. They then had the chance to see our store and purchase some products from the ashram, in particular knitted woolen hats and packets of the herbal *tulsi* (basil) tea.

We came together one last time after lunch and both our students and our guests from Denmark were able to ask questions from one another. By then the Danish students had a lot of new experiences that they needed to digest, and so we bid them farewell from the courtyard as they left us to walk down to their hotel, to leave the following morning for Delhi and the second part of their study programme.

Certainly, as Mathilde had written, the experiences of Lakshmi Ashram gave a very special first impression of India. The study tour was a new departure for Gladsaxe Gymnasium and we trust that staff and students alike found the experience invaluable.



The group with David Bhai