

**FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM**

Lone Poulsen, Praestehusene 6, 2620 Albertslund, DK Denmark

Telephone +45 43961371 – e-mail: [lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk](mailto:lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk)

Bank Account IBAN no: DK0330000003141861 – SWIFT-BIC: DABADKKK

Bank reg. no: 4434 – account no: 0003141861

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

## **NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM SANCHAR 135**

March 2019

Dear friends,

Here is news again from Lakshmi Ashram. This Sanchar brings the following articles:

- From Shjyamavan to Kedarnath – My Experiences by Kajal Mahra – Class XII
- Swawalamban Divas – Founder's Day by Tanuja Negi – Class IX
- Poem about Sarala Behn – composed by Rakhi and Priyanka – Class XI
- Christmas Celebrations in Lakshmi Ashram by David Hopkins
- The account of 2018

**Our yearly general meeting is held on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2019.**

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](mailto:lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk)

## SANCHAR 135

### From Shyamavan to Kedarnath – My Experiences

Kajal Mahra – Class XII

*With the active support of Lakshmi Ashram Venner study tours are arranged every year for the students of Lakshmi Ashram. This year six students of class VIII, along with three students of class XII and three workers, Saraswati, Asha and Prema, travelled to Garhwal. They left Kausani on 21 October for Space for Nurturing Creativity (Shyamawan), an alternative school in the valley of the Mandakini River in Rudraprayag district of Garhwal. This school is run by a former Ashram worker, Archana Bahuguna. From Shyamawan the group had the opportunity to visit two famous shrines high in the mountains, Tungnath and Kedarnath.*

On 23 October 2018 our group was ready to set off for *darshan* of the renowned temple of Kedarnath, a popular destination for pilgrims. After taking breakfast we set off at six o'clock with those older girls from Shyamavan who were accompanying us. We were to travel from Shyamavan to the end of the road at Gaurikund by vehicle. When we reached the road we took our seats and set off for the 47 km journey to Gaurikund. I felt a real joy in looking out of the window on the surrounding nature and the Himalayan peaks. Capped with snow it was as if the peaks were covered in a white shawl, and they were made even more appealing as the rays of the sun fell upon them. In many places waterfalls fell from on high, and likewise brought joy to the mind.

On the way to Gaurikund we stopped in Sonprayag where we had to alight from the vehicle and register. This was compulsory for all pilgrims going to Kedarnath. We received a card from the shop where we registered, on which was written our name below the heading, Char Dham Yatra (Pilgrimage to four sacred temples). Having completed this formality we continued our journey to Gaurikund, from where we were to begin the long climb on foot to Kedarnath temple, a distance of some 22 kilometres. Following the disaster in 2013 Gaurikund had been totally destroyed, huge landslides scarring the mountainside.

The path was very wide. A large number of pilgrims had gathered to make the ascent, and on our way the footpath never once appeared empty. The majority of those going for *darshan* of Kedarnath were elderly, and most of them were making the return journey on horseback. The 22 km climb was a little difficult for these older people and so they chose to ride. All along the path one would see horses.

Sometimes climbing and sometimes descending, we had covered some 4-5 km and we were feeling hungry, so we found a place to sit and enjoyed our lunch, after which we continued slowly on our way. At various places people were busy sweeping the path, clearing the dung left by the horses. However despite their efforts the stench of the horse dung was such that it was sometimes difficult to breathe. The hard steep climb meant that our breathing was getting heavy, and on top of this the smell of the horse dung made me feel terrible.

We had climbed a long way when we found that it had started to snow higher up, which made me feel very happy. From afar this view was very enchanting. It began to feel colder, and the wind began to blow stronger. At many places along the path there were small shops, but the items on offer were expensive. We sat for a short while in one shop, and Neha Didi and Jaya Didi (both

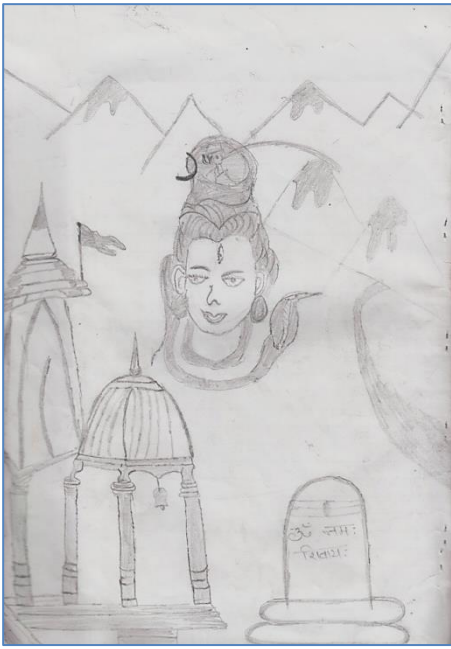
teachers in Shyamavan) bought raincoats for us. Putting these on, we continued our walk. As we climbed Jaya occasionally gave us something to eat. I was feeling so cold that I had little desire to eat. My hands and feet, my nose and mouth had turned red with the cold. I was not even able to move my hands.



A good number of pilgrims having had *darshan* of Kedarnath temple were making the descent. Seeing them I too was considering turning back half way and going down! From time to time we asked Jaya and Neha how much further it was. I was beginning to think that it would be difficult for me to reach the temple for the weather was so bad and it was so bitterly cold. Climbing and climbing eventually we could see the temple from a distance, and I regained a little courage. There were so many helicopters flying above our heads, that I was thinking that I should call one and go straight to Kedarnath! We took a good number of photos of us all in the snow. Now we had climbed very high up and the Himalayan peaks began to look very close at hand. Now I was beginning to feel a little happy that we might soon arrive. All of us were together, except for Rashmi and Vidya who were a long way ahead of us. Talking among ourselves we found that we had finally reached the temple, and for a little while we took in the view around us. We decided that we would visit the temple the following morning. For now we would go to our room and enjoy a good rest. All of us went to our hotel rooms and rested. The bedding was as cold as ice, but with nine of us beneath it our body heat slowly warmed it up. How I was recalling the ashram, because here I was shivering with the cold. I was so cold that I found it difficult to sleep. After a short while Asha Didi brought us



warm food, and the hotel owner also came to our room to feed us. I was woken up to eat, but I was so cold that I was not ready to get up. After taking supper everyone slept and the next morning we woke up at seven o'clock. After our morning ablutions everyone quickly got ready for we were going to the temple.



A priest came to us and said that before we left Kedarnath we should take the offering of *kheer* (rice pudding) that had been prepared by his group. We quickly carried on towards the temple. Before having darshan of the temple Saraswati Didi and Asha Didi bought material for offering worship in temple, including ghee and incense. They also bought a small round pot (*lotā*) in which we would make offerings of water. All of us entered the temple and joined the long line of worshippers. We waited in anticipation of when we would reach that spot where worship was being offered to the vehicle (*vāhan*) of Lord Shiva. A holy man (*bābā*) had told us that whoever makes the pilgrimage to Kedarnath, bows down before the *vāhan*, worships the Lord and places ghee on the stone image. Inside this temple were images of the Pandava princes on which pilgrims were also applying ghee. The holy men were telling us that all those having *darshan* of this temple would have their desires met, and would be relieved of all their sufferings. This

is the biggest test of God. What more can we do for Him? We too touched the back of Nandi, the vehicle of Shiva, bowed down before the image touching the ground with our heads, and then received the offering of *prasād*. Coming outside we ate the offering of *kheer* that the priest had offered us earlier on. He explained to us that this *kheer* had been prepared on the occasion of *Sharad Purnimā*, the autumn full moon, and so he was offering all of us this *kheer*. The priest was very pleased to see all of us and said that we were blessed in having taken *darshan* of Kedarnath at such a young age.

After we had eaten our offering of *kheer* a second priest told us of the destruction caused by the tragedy in June 2013. He said that some seven thousand people, including holy men and pilgrims had been swept away and lost their lives. Even now, from time to time when digging, skeletons are found. Because of the disaster many buildings were swept away yet the temple was totally unscathed. It was unbelievable that there was total destruction on all sides yet the temple remained untouched. Even now a lot of reconstruction is going on.

Jaya Didi warned us that it was now ten o'clock and that it was time to make a move. Before setting off, bowing my head, I offered my respects to Kedarnath temple. Today too as we descended we met many people climbing up to have *darshan* of the temple. Coming downhill we often found ourselves running. We had heard that there was a hot spring, but learned that this was in Gaurikund. It had been rebuilt, for the original hot spring (*kund*) had been swept away in the disaster of 2013. A good number of people were bathing in this hot spring as we passed by. We reached the road and Jaya and Neha then made arrangements for transport to take us safely back to Shyamavan.

## What was Garhwal like?

I had often heard the name of Garhwal, but it was really a place worth seeing. All the customs were different from Kumaun – their food, their way of life, their homes and their dress, their dialect were all so different. They still wear their traditional dress and speak their local language. The peaks there are really high, but when natural disasters strike then they quickly suffer landslides. Garhwal

is famed for these high peaks. My eyes got tired from looking at them. The people here continue to follow their traditional family occupations, which have been forgotten by our people. They give importance to the livelihoods handed down to them by their forefathers. I observed that the younger generation too was raising horses, and every day they made the 22 km ascent to Kedarnath, taking pilgrims up and down. Those who were not keeping horses were carrying pilgrims up in *dokas*, light seats made from bamboo and carried on the back. For us it was a great effort to make the 22 km climb, yet for these people it is nothing, for every day they make the climb with their horses. This is their traditional way of life, and this provides them with their livelihood and the income to raise their families. I personally felt that they had not forgotten their culture and were not likely to ever do so. The people I saw there always looked very happy. Many things in Garhwal that I saw were new to me and an enriching experience.

## Swawalamban Divas – Founder’s Day

### Tanuja Negi – Class IX

As is the tradition every year, this year too we celebrated the founding of the ashram. We celebrate this day as Swawalamban Divas (Self-Sufficiency Day), and as in other years this year too we presented our cultural programme, which was related to the ashram’s philosophy. This year we celebrated Swawalamban Divas in the Sarala Behn Museum. This was the first time that we had celebrated it there. Together we presented a good number of items in the cultural programme.



Tanuja Negi as the soldier



Welcoming dance by students of class VIII

My class, class IX, presented the play, “Pahli Roti”, or “The First Roti”. Mother Earth plays an important role in our lives. All of us must understand the importance of Mother Earth. Mother Earth has nourished us all, it is because of her only that we are alive. The trees and other plants are supported by her, and it is they who provide us air which allows us to breathe and thus are living. Mother Earth allows the grain to grow that we eat and thus live. The person who grows the cereals that we all depend upon is the farmer.

“Pahli Roti” shows us that the most important person is the farmer. Mother Earth behaves the same with everyone; all of us are her sons and daughters. In this play the political leader, the money lender, the doctor, the soldier and the weaver, all come before Mother Earth to claim the first roti, and in exchange present Mother Earth with gold and silver. However Mother Earth gives the first roti to the farmer - he labours honestly to grow the grain for the roti, and therefore has the first right to it. This play is very important for us all. In this play I played the role of the soldier, and enjoyed it very much.



Another play presented the theme of the equality of all faiths. All those taking part in this play mimed their roles. In this play the people of different faiths shaped an image as per their particular religion. The Hindu shaped the image in the form of Krishna, the Muslim then made the image in the form of Mohammed, then the Christian broke it and formed it in the image of Christ. Then they all started fighting amongst themselves.

In the end a person of true understanding shaped the image in the form of Gandhi. Gandhi believed passionately in the equality of all faiths, for him all faiths were equal. He gave importance to the values found in all religions – truth, love and compassion. He did not believe in the outward display of rituals. Thus the name of this play was “Sarvadharmha Sambhava”, or the equality of all faiths.

A third play presented was on an incident in the life of Sarala Behn. In this play it relates how Sarala Behn had opened a ‘Van Shala’ (a forest school). How the British authorities misheard and thought that she had opened a ‘Bomb Shala’! Therefore the authorities came to arrest Sarala Behn. Sarala Behn explained to them with great love that she had not opened a ‘Bomb Shala’ but rather a ‘Van Shala’, and politely requested them to leave. On hearing her words they did return.

The ashram has been in existence from 1946 until 2018, that is to say 72 years. As in previous years we enjoyed very much enthusiastically celebrating the founding of the ashram. All the programmes presented were very interesting and full of inspiration. As I had said the programme took place in the Sarala Behn Museum, which had a direct connection with the programme. A large number of local people were also present and benefitted from this educational programme.

The entire programme had a direct connection with people’s lives, and the local villagers very enthusiastically watched it and were very inspired.



It was the last month of 46,  
A new path for Bahinji.  
Starting with five girls,  
Having gone from door to door making contact.

There was a special daily programme,  
Nobody felt disappointed.  
When she had come to India,  
She had left behind her European dress.

In the deep darkness of night,  
Finding refuge in the jails,  
Not afraid of facing death,  
Steadfast in her fearlessness.

Taking the name of Gandhi,  
Immersed herself in the school.  
Opened a 'forest school' in the jungle,  
Gossip spread of a 'bomb school'.

Following the path of Gandhi,  
Bringing the desire for self-sufficiency.  
Spreading the concept of non-violence,  
Giving courage to women's power.

Giving that great teaching of self-denial,  
Yet dedicating herself to service and love,  
How blessed and fortunate we are,  
Finding love and knowledge in her support.

Bringing the teachings of Basic Education,  
Bringing the knowledge of simplicity.  
Celebrating all religious faiths,  
Extending her support to others every step of the way.

Filling ten books with knowledge,  
And becoming a lover of the environment.  
Spreading light on this path,  
Giving attention to us children.

Spending a long time in India,  
Keeping a spinning wheel and spindle with her.  
For this hallowed land of Kausani,  
Always having love.

In the year of 1982,  
When she had fallen ill,  
She had been brought to Almora.  
She took her last breath in Almora,  
Cradled in Radha Didi's lap.  
This mother who loved Nature  
Was gathered up in the lap of Nature.

On this auspicious day,  
We pay our respects to her soul,  
And express our homage to her.  
We will endeavour to go ahead,  
Along the path she has taught us,  
Along the path she has taught us.

## Poem about Sarala Behn Composed by Rakhi and Priyanka – Class XI



Rakhi and Priyanka read their poem on  
December 5th in the Sarala Behn Museum.  
Sarala can be seen on the photo in the  
background.

## Christmas Celebrations in Lakshmi Ashram

David Hopkins

The morning and evening prayers in the ashram always conclude with the recitation of Mahatma Gandhi's eleven vows. These begin with Non-violence and Truth, and include among the remaining nine vows, '*Sarvadharmā Samānatwa*' or the equality of all faiths. This was an integral part of Gandhi's personal philosophy of life. While he was a Hindu by birth, yet during his life, from the time that he was in London as a young man training to be a lawyer, and during his long time in South Africa working as a lawyer and becoming a leader of the Indian community, he always had very close friendships with people of other faiths, and firmly believed in the essential oneness of all faiths.

Thus in Lakshmi Ashram too, there is an open respect for other religious traditions. From the time of Sarala Behn the ashram family has always celebrated Christmas.

In recent years the ashram had welcomed young German volunteers from a small organisation called Kurve, young women taking a gap year between school and university. They had introduced the tradition of marking Advent by lighting a candle every evening at prayers from 1<sup>st</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> December, and also of preparing cards to be opened each evening. Although the volunteers are no longer coming, the ashram students have adopted this custom and this year was no exception. Every evening after prayers two girls opened the cards for that day.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, in the school assembly before afternoon classes, the children are read stories about the birth and childhood of Christ, so all become familiar with the main incidents of his early life.

In the days before Christmas the students are busy rehearsing their scenes for the nativity play that they traditionally present on the afternoon of Christmas Day. The weather is normally sunny and so the play is staged on the verandah of the hostel, the audience sitting out in the sun in the paved courtyard. A good number of our neighbours, especially the women and children, also join us on this occasion.



The scenes of the play are very similar to those that children perform at school in Europe – opening with the appearance of the angel before Mary announcing that she would give birth to a child, then the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and the birth of Christ in the manger. Then follow the scenes of the shepherds coming to see the young Christ and the three Wise Men following the star from the east, meeting with King Herod, before going to Bethlehem to present their gifts and returning by a different route. The play concludes with a couple of scenes from Christ's adult life, including his healing of the lepers. By the time that the play has finished the sun is going down and everyone is more than ready for the hot herbal tea and snacks that are then served.

In the morning a Christmas tree has been placed in the corner of our meeting hall, Shanti Bhavan, and this is then beautifully decorated by the girls, making the atmosphere very much as one would find in a home in Europe. Christmas cards are hung between the roof beams around the tree.

For the children the real highlight of Christmas is undoubtedly the coming of Father Christmas in the evening after supper. Everyone gathers in Shanti Bhavan, the Christmas tree all lit up, in eager anticipation of the arrival of '*Christmas Dada*'. He eventually arrives, to the great excitement of the girls, especially the new girls who are seeing him for the very first time, accompanied by a



Hansi Didi reads the letters

comical character who has helped him bring up all the gifts to the ashram. The children have written letters to Father Christmas, often very amusing, and these are read out. The contents of the letters often having the children laughing out loud! Then finally one by one everyone comes up to receive their small gifts in person from Father Christmas.

It has been a long day, the girls are by now very tired and ready to go to sleep, knowing that the following day they will be going home to their families for the long winter holiday. After all the excitement of Christmas the following day the ashram falls very quiet, only those girls in classes X and XII remaining who have board examinations in a couple of months. Thus another year draws to a close.

# FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

## STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2018

### ORDINARY PROFIT AND LOSS ACCOUNT

#### Income

Contributions received	108.748,42 DKK
Subscription: 55 members à 75 DDK	4.125,00 DKK
<b>Total income</b>	<b>112.873,42 DKK</b>

#### Expenses

Administration	2.222,90 DKK
Paid to Lakshmi Ashram	119.644,01 DKK
<b>Total expenses</b>	<b>121.866,01 DKK</b>

Net result of ordinary account	- 8.992,59 DKK
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### BALANCE SHEET at 31.12.2018

#### Assets

Total bank deposits – account no: 3141861	<b>51.217,34 DKK</b>
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#### Liabilities

Ordinary net capital, beginning 2018	60.209,93 DKK	
Net result	- 8.992,59 DKK	
<b>Net capital, end 2017</b>	<b>51.217,34 DKK</b>	

March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019

The accounts have been audited.

Lone Poulsen

Claus Broskov Sørensen

In addition we have got 30.000,00 DKK from the Scouts in Farum earmarked for the sister organisation Mahila Haat. The money is used for education of widows, single and expelled women in Kumaon.