

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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**NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM
SANCHAR 136**

November 2019

Dear friends,

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

- Fleeting Moments of Five Days by Diya Pande – Class XII
- Village Libraries by Radha Bhatt
- Our Raulyana Initiative – More than just a Library! By David Bhai
- Summary of General Assembly for Friends of Lakshmi Ashram April 7th 2019 by Ruth Sillemann.

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. 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. 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 donations. 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 136

Fleeting Moments of Five Days

Diya Pande – Class XII



Innovative ways for our all-round development are continually made available to those of us fortunate enough to live the ashram way of life. This year too we have found some new programmes offered to us which we have fully benefitted from. A small theatre group called Sangwari Cultural and Theatre team came from Delhi and spent time with us. The meaning of this Chhattisgarhi word 'Sangwari' is 'friend'. This group came to us in June and taught those of us in classes X-XII, along with some of our teachers, various aspects of theatre drama. Before they arrived we knew no more than that we would be learning acting, but on 22 June we came to learn that this training would involve a great deal of practice! The training programme lasted for five days, from 22-26 June, and what we learned will prove to be of great value to us.

On the first day of the training we learned how to express emotions and feelings, conveyed in particular through our gestures. This is an essential part of our artistic expression.

On 23 June we were kept on our feet from morning to evening. The physical tiredness that we usually experience from doing manual work, we found ourselves feeling after today's training! We learned how to express ourselves through postures, and also how to walk to the beat of the *daphali*, a tambourine. Besides this we made good use of our time in learning some new songs.

On 24 June we played some interesting games and then divided into several teams, each team having five or six persons. Today we learned how, through mime and postures, to express a story, and some of us learned how to tell the story. All of us in our groups then mimed the letters of the alphabet, truly expressing the individual letters. In our groups we were all asked to prepare five postures that would be used in acting out incidents from the life of Gandhi.

On 25 June we learned how the format of a drama is created. Now we were beginning to have a clear understanding of the individual responsibilities of each actor. First and foremost it was emphasised how we must give particular importance to honesty, diligence and physical strength. Today began with us playing a game which revealed how honest we were. We played with great energy and self-confidence. We then presented the various postures that each of our groups had prepared, that illustrated various incidents from Gandhi's life. We learned more about postures, dialogue and expression of feelings.

During these few days we had both learned a great deal and increased our understanding. Our previous understanding of what constituted theatre and drama had been completely different.



During this training we had not only learned how to present a play, but also how to express feelings and dialogue through postures. All in all we had learned a great deal from the theatre group.

On 26 June we, or rather our acting teams, were to present their plays. Today proved to be a very important day. We presented the plays that we had painstakingly worked on during the past four days in front of everyone. During the past four days we had been trainees but on this final day we became artists. In this way one more new experiment in the ashram was completed, one in which all the trainees emerged successfully.



Village Libraries

Radha Behn

Public libraries have been a permanent activity of Lakshmi Ashram since its earliest years. In the fifties and sixties I managed and ran this public library. Coming from the village of Kausani entailed a steep climb up the hillside to reach the ashram where our public library was situated. Even so in those days booklovers from Kausani would climb up the steep footpath to come and borrow books from our library. Even if there were not a large number of regular users of the library, even so they were not few in number,

and three or four times in a week someone or the other would come to borrow books, and often they would discuss with me the books that they had been reading.

In the early eighties Lakshmi Ashram had constructed a building close to the Anasakti Ashram, which is known as the Udyog Mandir. In 1983 the public library was transferred from the ashram to a large hall on the top floor of this building, so that more people from the local community might make use of it.

In Kausani there is a primary school, a girls' junior high school and an inter-college. A good number of students of these schools began to make regular use of the library, as well as a good number of older people, especially those in government postings in Kausani. In those days David Bhai was responsible for running the library. Even today from time to time people greet him and recall how in the eighties when they were young students at the local schools they would make use of the library.

In these days people have lost the habit of reading books. In their hands are smart phones, while at home they have television, and some even have access to computers and the Internet. These gadgets keep them busy. Even so our public library in Kausani is still functioning, even if with a smaller number of regular users. Bachi Giri Goswami is responsible for running both the public library and the Sarala Behn Museum, also situated in the Udyog Mandir.

These days it is commonly observed that in the villages too the children give a lot of time to their mobile phones and the television and have little interest in reading anything other than their school textbooks. We felt that we should take our library to these children, and so some three years ago we opened a small library in the village of Chanoli in the Lod valley, a tributary valley of the Kosi. Children from some 3-4 nearby villages and the students of the nearby schools have welcomed the presence of the library very enthusiastically. They have enjoyed reading our books and have started asking for more books. We have recently received a donation specifically for this purpose, and in the coming days we will provide the library with more books. Not only the local children but also local teachers and men in the village are borrowing books from this library.

This year in May we have opened a library in the village of Raulyana, in the upper reaches of the Kosi valley. A good number of children from Raulyana and 3-4 nearby villages are making good use of the library, with some 30-50 children coming there every day. After studying at school during the day, immediately after reaching home they come straight to the library, which also serves as a reading room. Sitting down they are busy reading books, while those children too small to read are listening



to stories and learning songs. The library has become a small centre for the local children. The older people in the village are also reading the books available in the library, and they are very happy to see the children reading there.

We will shortly be purchasing more books for this library, which at present has three bookshelves provided by the ashram. We will also be providing mats and seats to both libraries for the girls running them.



We are planning to open another two or three similar libraries in other villages in the Kosi valley, so that the older children in the entire valley can benefit- the libraries can be a positive factor in the character development of the youth. In this year when we are celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and his wife Kasturba, we in the ashram are also very enthusiastic about this new initiative.

Our Raulyana Initiative – More than just a Library!

David Bhai

It was at the end of May that a small library was opened in the village of Raulyana, especially for the children of that village. The elected village head, the gram pradhan Kamla Goswami, agreed to make the village Panchayat Bhavan (village community centre) available to Lakshmi Ashram. Lakshmi Ashram provided two bookcases, a selection of children’s books, and matting for the floor.



Lakshmi Ashram’s senior community worker, Basanti Behn, was to be responsible for the daily running of the library, but when she started the initiative Champa Joshi very kindly came to Kausani for a month and worked with Basanti to give a strong foundation to the activities of the library. Champa had been one of our initial Balwari teachers in the early eighties in Danya, and then joined the Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi as a trainer when they began to support a programme of balwaris throughout Uttarakhand. She has decades of rich experience in working with the young people.

The first challenge for Basanti and Champa was to make the Panchayat Bhavan fit for use. It had sadly been neglected by the village, and needed a thorough clean out before it could be used.

The land immediately around it needed to be cleared of undergrowth – in doing so they found large numbers of empty liquor bottles, many broken. The spot had obviously been a meeting spot for those men in the village addicted to the bottle!

Contact was made with the families in the village and very quickly a good number of children of all ages began to come daily to the library. They had their summer holidays through most of June and so were free. However when the schools reopened then they continued to come to the library after they finished school – in the summer months the schools are open from 8am to 1pm, so by half past one the children, boys and girls of all ages, would come to the library.



On 12 September Champa came from Almora to spend four days with Basanti in the centre, and I decided to accompany them that day. It would be an opportunity to see at first hand the activities of the library and to take some photographs. Raulyana village, which lies on a low ridge lying above a bend of the Kosi River, is now reachable by road from Kausani, the road skirting the ridge just below the village. The three of us took a shared taxi from Kausani to below Raulyana, walking a short distance up from the road along the old bridle path to the village.

Before going to the library we paid a courtesy call to the gram pradhan, Kamla Goswami, and her family, and were given a very warm welcome. Three generations live in a traditional stone built house with a slate roof and a large courtyard in front. The head of the family, Shri Pan Giri Goswami, is now in his mid eighties, one of the oldest people in the area. He came outside to receive us and shared his memories of Sarala Behn, how she would come to the primary school in Kausani where he studied as a young boy, and also how she would also come to his village and with the ashram girls would teach the community by example how they should keep their village clean. His daughter-in-law was the village gram pradhan – when the elections for the gram Panchayat (village council) had last taken place in 2014 then the position of gram pradhan in Raulyana was reserved for women.

Leaving their home it was a short walk over the ridge, dropping down a little on the other side until we came to a short path on our right that took us up to the library. A good number of children were already gathered inside the centre along with Manju, a local girl from Raulyana who is assisting Basanti in running the library.

We plan for Manju to be well trained, so that when necessary she will assume the full responsibility for running the centre. The children proudly showed us the pictures they had drawn that were pasted on the walls of the library. The daily programme of the centre then began and I very quickly realised that this was much more than just a library – I suggested that the centre could be known as a Bal Milan Kendra (Children’s Meeting Centre/ Children’s Community Centre).



We started with everyone sitting round in a circle and reciting a prayer. This was followed by a range of activities, including songs, stories, dancing, indoor games, physical exercises, chanting environmental slogans, etc. One game was 'Pyari Billi' = 'Dear Pussy', and later on Radha Behn told me that Sarala Behn used to play this game with the children. Only maybe half an hour was given to reading books, the children selecting books of their choice from the bookcases.

There was a very cheerful atmosphere, the children very obviously enjoying themselves no end. Some forty children were present throughout the afternoon. In the past they would perhaps have stayed at home or else wandered in the village. Now though they come together and develop their social skills. Basanti relates how she discovered that one or two girls studying in class seven at the local government school sadly lacked basic literacy skills. However since the library opened they have quickly made very good progress in reading and writing.

The centre is a means of entering the village community, winning hearts and minds, and together working towards real social change at the grassroots level. An excellent foundation has already been made, and now the challenge is to build upon that, to reach out not just to the children but to their parents, and to work together to face the issues that confront the village in this time of unparalleled social change.

Summary of General Assembly for Friends of Lakshmi Ashram

April 7th 2019

As the meeting started Lone took us all back to India:

We were shown a poetic film about Lakshmi Ashram, created by a Mexican couple, who visited the ashram in 2018. Then the General Assembly started.

Agenda and summary

1. Election of moderator and note taker

Helle: Moderator, Ruth: Note taker

2. Report from the board

This year Lone has 25 years jubilee having been in charge of Friends of Lakshmi Ashram! She took over from Inge Marie who has been in charge since 1967. During this period Lone has visited the ashram 11-12 times and she has edited 67 editions of Sanchar. She is so happy to work together with David Hopkins. He translates the newsletter from Hindi to English and Lone is in contact with him regularly, so she can have a good idea of what is going on in the Ashram. While Lone has been in charge, Lakshmi Ashram has become an association. Twelve years ago Inge Marie and Svend Otto Sørensen left Lakshmi Ashram 400.000 Danish kroner. The money would have been taxed if an association had not been established, so therefore it was a wise decision to take.

Thanks to mail and telephone contact the board can be in regular contact with the ashram, and Lone is competently handling it all, operating the transfer of money and editing Sanchar.

3. News from Lakshmi Ashram

We saw different pictures from the daily life and the different celebrations in Lakshmi Ashram: The World Environment Day of 5th of July 2018. Pictures of reading aloud from the newly printed ashrams newspaper, pictures from the Sadhana course, Sarala Behns birthday, Raksha Bhandan, the Hindu friendship celebration, pictures of Radhas visit to Denmark in 2018, pictures of Radha's visit at Gladsaxe College in Denmark, before the students would all visit the ashram, pictures from Sarala Behns museum and also pictures of grass cutting and the garlic harvest.

After that we were told about the new girls from the sixth grade.

4. Approval of accounts

The accounts were approved.

5. Membership fee

The membership fee is still a yearly amount of 75 Danish kroner.

6. Received proposals

There were none.

7. Election of board members and alternate board member

Lene Rasmussen is not interested in re-election. We thank her for good work. Lone Poulsen, Hanne Stenager og Ruth Sillemann were re-elected

Helle Poulsen was re-elected as an alternate member of the board.

8. Election of auditor and alternate auditor

Claus Broskov Sørensen was re-elected as an auditor and Marin Huusfeldt was re-elected as an alternate auditor.

9. There were no further points.

Summary: Ruth Sillemann 7/4-2019