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**NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM
SANCHAR 138**

August 2020

Dear friends,

Here is news again from Lakshmi Ashram.

This Sanchar tells about the corona situation in India and in Lakshmi Ashram.

The students were sent home to their villages in April and May, when India locked down. They came back to the Ashram in July. Two of the eldest girls tell about their experiences from the two and a half months at home.

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 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 138

Coronavirus in India

By Neema Behn

COVID 19 had not had much impact in India until the second week of March. In India COVID 19 first made itself felt at the end of January in Kerala, when a student returning from China tested positive. Then nationwide discussions began to take place on how to protect the nation from the virus, and the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, declared a Citizens' Curfew on 22 March. Even though the Citizens' Curfew was called by the Prime Minister, yet in a way it was the beginning of a people based movement of self-discipline, which was nurtured in all honesty by citizens throughout the country. At that time for most people it also became a slogan. As the virus had not spread very much at that time there was little sense of fear in the public at large, but slowly the virus came to dominate the media and people came to be aware of the symptoms of this new disease, and how they could protect themselves from it.



On the evening of 24 March at eight o'clock the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, declared that a nationwide lockdown would commence from midnight, and that everyone should stay where they were and not venture out of their homes. This strict order was continually conveyed through the media to the public. India has a long tradition of protest movements, and in these struggles strikes and lockdowns have often played a part, with the closing of public institutions, markets, transport, etc. This was a national lockdown, and moreover was suddenly declared at such short notice. People could not understand what was going on. Under this lockdown the operations of public institutions such as educational institutions, hostels, companies, hotels and restaurants, government and non-government offices, etc. were all closed. In such a huge country as India it took some time for the citizens to understand the process of the lockdown and to adapt themselves to it. The government administration, in particular the police, sought to politely explain to the public how to observe the lockdown, and where necessary had to deal very harshly with them. Most people accepted the difficulties and obeyed the lockdown by staying at home.

To increase people's awareness the media continually gave prominence to news of the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time false news and rumours about the coronavirus began to circulate widely. Such a situation was not good, either for people's minds or bodies. However the public prepared themselves to follow the rules imposed by the government. In the midst of this atmosphere full of fear some people continued to lend support to those in the community in need. In order to prevent the spread of the virus, the government prohibited the public from helping those in need and instead took responsibility themselves for relief work. In this situation it became almost impossible for citizens to directly extend help. Instead the public gave financial support through contributing generously to various relief funds. In this way the public and the government joined hands to help those directly impacted by the coronavirus to the best of their ability. Likewise the public lent their active support to the government's efforts to halt the spread of the virus.

In April during the second phase of the lockdown the state governments took action to distribute essentials to those in need wherever they were. However there were many shortcomings in this distribution of food, not enough being available to meet the needs. Facing a shortage of food and water people's physical and mental health were affected. Hundreds of thousands of daily wage earners and those employed in small companies found themselves in economic difficulties, when they found themselves lacking savings to purchase food or pay for their rent, etc. They then began to plead for help from the government to be able to return home. The desire of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers to return home became a deep matter of concern for the government also. Whatever arrangements the government made for their return home was inadequate. As a result most workers made their own personal arrangements to return home, and tens of thousands were compelled to set off on foot to walk hundreds of kilometres home, a number sadly dying on the way.

Those people working in large cities such as Mumbai, Delhi and Ahmedabad and living in cramped quarters, after travelling back together to their villages then very often the virus spread among the community. This resulted in the coronavirus spreading to parts of the country that had previously been unaffected through people within the country. The virus also spread through migrant workers returning from abroad. All this meant that the entire country had come in the grip of the virus. An extreme fear increased in the public as a result of the virus, and this fear also led to qualities of kindness and compassion being lost. People looked upon the illness and the sick person as one, failing to discriminate between the two. This often led to callous treatment of the people infected. Knowingly or unknowingly a very big oversight of the government was that they delayed for a long time in allowing those millions of labourers and small business people working in India's big cities to return to their homes. If these people had been allowed to return home at the onset of the pandemic there would not have been so much harm.

At the present time the virus is spreading very quickly. The figures show that more than twenty thousand positive cases are now being reported daily. At the same time the statistics also show that since the onset of the pandemic the numbers of those recovering are also very high. It is reported that at this time the death rate nationwide is about 4%. The reasons for the low death rate can be looked at as follows:

1. Although at present there is no drug to prevent coronavirus, yet in India the medical experts are continually making efforts in research and testing of drugs. People have recovered through courage and strength of heart.
2. It has also been observed that in India the people have a greater resistance. Those living a natural lifestyle have a greater capacity to resist diseases.
3. The third reason has been observed that there is less fear among the ordinary person towards the virus, for fear itself is a big disease, which can even cause death. Despite the media continually repeating how dangerous the virus is, many people are still not frightened by it.
4. Also by following all the necessary precautions this virus has not proved deadly for many people.

These days the lockdown is being relaxed, yet the pace of life still seems very quiet. Now slowly the labourers are being called back for essential work. The question of earning their daily bread is facing millions of workers in the unorganised sector. In the present situation many young people and their families are beginning to consider the possibilities of finding a livelihood in their own locality and thus not having to return to the city. If these migrant workers get support and help from the government then they may be able to remain in their villages.

It is the young people and children who are being most affected by this coronavirus pandemic. Young employed people and those students on training programmes or studying are these days unable to pursue their studies or training. As a result online education is going on, but not everybody has the means to access this. Then there are numerous technical shortcomings in what is available. Thirdly people are experiencing that people, especially the children, are finding these online facilities very dull and boring.

In India and indeed throughout the world viruses have come and gone from time to time, and people have suffered the ill effects. Tens of millions of lives have also been lost. In the past this was because the lack of mass communications meant that people were not kept informed with the latest news and were not even aware of the numbers of lives being lost. In the past people lived very simply and in their native places. However these days see people migrating for economic reasons. The majority of people leave their native places to find work elsewhere. This movement goes on continually, either within the country or else by going abroad. This constant movement of people and goods facilitates the spread of the virus. Viruses continually come and go, be they good or bad. In these days for various reasons people's natural capacity for resistance has decreased. Living a natural way of life there is the strength to combat illness, but these days people are eating foodstuffs purchased from the market, for the taste and to save time, which are very unnatural, and the whole way of life is also based on an unnatural system. People have become increasingly aware of this during this pandemic, and people will also certainly learn from this awareness. At some time a vaccination against coronavirus or COVID 19 will certainly be produced, however it is vital that people change their present lifestyle, so that their body and mind can fight against illnesses. Indeed fear is the biggest illness for mankind, and on the other side a major cause of fear is weakness and illness of the body.

This pandemic has very badly affected countless people; many have lost their lives and many others have lost their jobs. As a result many people are in a state of depression, with some even committing suicide. It is vital at this time to sensitively help people in various ways – economically, ideologically etc.

Impact of COVID19 and the National Lockdown on Life in Lakshmi Ashram

By Hansi Behn



Following the end of the winter holidays all the students and workers returned by the first week of February, and the ashram's busy daily programme was resumed in earnest. In January reading the newspapers we had learned that in the city of Wuhan in China people were dying from coronavirus, and every day we learned that more and more people were falling victim to the virus. At that time we did not take this news too seriously, and thought that this has just spread in one city of China. However within weeks this began to spread like wildfire in Europe and the United States, and then it arrived in India. The virus was first detected in Indian students returning from Wuhan to Kerala. There were large numbers of Indian students in Wuhan, and Air India planes were sent to bring them all back safely to their country.

The virus was perhaps initially spread by the students in Kerala and thus the virus began to gain a foothold in the country. The WHO declared COVID19 to be a pandemic. In India seeing the virus slowly spread, especially in the big cities, orders were given to close all educational institutions, and travel between China and India was stopped. However in the ashram our activities were going on as ever. The class IX and class XI exams were held in February in the government inter-college in Kausani, and then the examination centre for the class X high school exams and class XII intermediate exams was to be in Bantoli government inter-college in the Garur valley. These exams were scheduled from 3 March to 23 March and arrangements for our students were made for them to live in the family home of one

of our senior workers. Our students sat their exams until 21 March, and the mathematics paper for the high school students was to take place on 23 March. However on 22 March we learned that this exam would not now take place and that to stop the spread of the coronavirus a nationwide lockdown would be imposed.

In March orders had been given for all educational institutions across the country to be closed indefinitely. At that time here in Lakshmi Ashram we had initially paid no thought at all to this. However, paying attention to the current situation, in the end it was thought that here in the ashram large numbers of students are living together, and that we too should take steps to send our students to their homes. We contacted the parents of our students who came to take their children home. A full lockdown was declared from midnight on 24 March, public transport came to a halt, and some ashram students who lived at a distance were unable to get home.

Some 11-12 students along with our workers then together decided how they would run their daily programme. Radha Didi suggested that during these days, along with the physical work, there should also be some educational and entertaining activities, so that nobody would be weighed down with the physical activities and also they would not be bored. Thus in the mornings everyone undertook some physical work, and then after lunch from 2-3.30pm various activities were arranged in our meeting hall, Shanti Bhavan, including *kirtan* (singing of devotional songs), reciting of self-composed poems, indoor games, and telling of stories. Besides this, during these 1½ hours sometimes an educational film was shown and then discussed.

Then the remaining eight students left in two groups. The district authorities arranged for four students from Almora district to be taken home towards the end of April, and then on 7 May Pooran Pandey drove the four remaining students from Champawat district to their homes in the ashram vehicle, having first gained the necessary authorisation from the district authorities to cross from Almora into Champawat district. Their documents were checked from time to time on the journey, and when they entered Champawat then all their details were recorded and the vehicle was sanitised. Because of the lockdown no restaurants or teashops were open along the way, but the students had brought food for the journey from the ashram. On reaching their villages all four students – Kavita, Rakhi, Neha and Deepa - were put into home quarantine for a fortnight. Meanwhile Pooran had to sleep in the car on his way back for the distance was too far for him to return to Kausani the same day.

Since then only Dipika Pandey remained, along with the workers, but she has finally been able to join her mother in Delhi in mid-June. Then Khushbu returned with her mother Saraswati in mid May. With the departure of the students our afternoon programme was changed. From 2-3.30pm we have been watching the very popular TV adaptation the Shri Ram Charit Manas, first screened in 1987-88, and now through popular demand being reshown on Indian TV during the lockdown. Watching this has given us all the opportunity to understand the characters of the various personalities who have a part in the long saga of the Ramayan. After we had seen the entire series of films we have since been watching another series of films, again originally produced for the TV, on the life of the Buddha, giving us all the opportunity to understand in depth his life and teachings. Then for one hour until half past four all of us work in the garden or elsewhere.

After the evening prayers at half past six, together we discuss some relevant topic in the news, very often the latest news on the pandemic as it affects India. Every day the local newspaper is full of news. The increasing rise in the number of cases is very worrying. Sometimes Radha Did has shared some of her life's experiences – during lockdown she has been busy writing her memories from early childhood to the present day.

Until 24 March less than 600 people had tested positive for COVID19 in India, and only nine people had lost their lives. Yet today reading of the numbers of deaths in countries across the world it seems that there is no end. Seeing the ongoing situation in late March we too took the decision to send our students home, and as far as it was possible made arrangements to see that they got home. Our workers then took full responsibility for managing the activities of the ashram. All our activities except for the afternoon classes are going on as ever. The most important areas of work are caring for our cattle in the *gaushala* and managing

our vegetable garden. There is plenty of work every day in the *gaushala* - grass has to be cut for fodder, the cattle have to be given water and taken to graze for some time, the cattle sheds have to be cleaned out every morning and the waste taken to the compost pit. In the garden there were seeds to be sown for the summer crops, saplings of aubergines and tomatoes had to be planted out, so that in the coming months we would have an assured supply of fresh vegetables. Without the children the ashram seems sadly quiet, yet we have to accept the current situation in the country.

Looking at the ongoing lockdown it does not seem that it had brought any benefits. The distressing situation of the tens of millions of migrant labourers and their families who have been walking hundreds of kilometres to reach their homes after finding themselves out of work and often without a roof over their heads, could easily have been averted if they had been given the opportunity to return to their native villages before the lockdown was imposed with just four hours notice. At that time the virus had not begun to spread very much. However the situation now is that migrant labourers returning to their home states are bringing the virus from the metropolitan cities, where they were often living in overcrowded conditions where the virus had spread rapidly. In a country with such a large population as India it seems very difficult to control the spread of the virus.

These days our students are all in their homes, but we cannot help wondering how they are feeling being at home for so long. Some girls have kept in contact by phone. They are beginning to feel bored at home. The question before us is when we will call the girls back to the ashram, which classes we should call first. So far the examination results for those children who had sat for exams in February and March have not been declared. The central government has said that there is no question of educational institutions opening before 15 August at the earliest – will we have to go along with that or should we call our students at the earliest? If we do call them, then the biggest problem is that of transport. The local buses and shared taxis continue to be off the road, and the only option is to hire a taxi at exorbitant rates. Thus the question arises, even if we call the girls how will they come? So far the situation in the country is far from normal. Those few of us still here in the ashram are abiding by all the rules. We are following social distancing. When the children return we would continue to follow the rules, but their return depends on the possibility of transport.

Many young people in the surrounding villages have returned in recent weeks from the big cities, where they worked in restaurants, shopping malls and shops, and for small companies. With their return there is a great deal of renewed activity in the villages, however they face the long-term question of employment, so that they might continue to make use of their skills and expertise, and earn a living. Many of these young people are saying that if the government can implement employment programmes so that they might earn a livelihood, then they would never return again to the cities. There are others though who say that as soon as the situation returns to normal, they want to return to the cities to work as before. Almost every day the newspapers are carrying news of government programmes. However the reality remains as to how successful such programmes will be and how long will it take for them to yield results. For now it is impossible to say.

Our field workers in the ongoing project in collaboration with People's Science Institute that seeks to revive the traditional springs in the villages have been asked to contact those young people returning to their villages, and discuss with them what they are thinking at the present time, and what kind of support we might be able to extend to them. Our two leading field workers, Veena and Maya, are making regular contact with those young people who have returned to their villages, so as to have a better understanding of their expectations for the immediate future.

We are all very much aware and can see for ourselves how this pandemic has impacted on the world economy, even the most powerful countries being badly affected, and this raises many questions about the future.

As far as staying safe goes, then here in the ashram we are very safe. Maintaining cleanliness and following all the rules, giving importance to physical labour, then we will stay safe and healthy. This is the means of keeping ourselves safe from such a disease as coronavirus. The surrounding environment also contributes to us remaining safe and secure. Taking all preventive measures our daily programme is being maintained, as I have sought to briefly describe.

Experiences of the Students while at home during the Lockdown

Most of the ashram students returned home to their villages immediately before the nationwide lockdown was declared as from 25 March. The following months are terribly busy ones in the agricultural cycle, harvesting the winter crops and preparing the fields for the sowing of the monsoon crops. For our students it was a great learning experience to be able to work alongside their mothers at this season. Below are two descriptions from our older students of their experiences while at home. Both Kajal and Rakhi had completed their class twelve board examinations immediately before the lockdown began. Both live at a distance from Kausani, and it was only on 6 May that they were eventually able to return home to join their families.



My Experiences at Home during the Lockdown-1 Kajal Mahra

These days the country is struggling against the Coronavirus pandemic, as a result of which the country is suffering under lockdown. In the cities this virus has spread so quickly that it is difficult to express in words.

This year after lockdown was imposed it was only on 6 May that I was able to return home from the ashram. I was able to spend two months and fourteen days at home. In the village too there was a lot of activity during these days because, as a result of the coronavirus, many people were returning to their homes and villages on foot. On returning to my village I experienced with my own eyes how these migrant workers, leaving behind their villages, had abandoned their fields which had become barren. However on returning to their village these people were now once again identifying with the hills and bringing their abandoned fields back into productive use. They had dug their fields and now new crops were flourishing. All around people could be seen busy working in their fields. There was an exuberant atmosphere in the village.

During this lockdown I had the opportunity to do a number of jobs with my mother and father. Our land was already very productive. We have always been very active in farming. During these two months I did a wide range of work. Working with my mother we dug up the potatoes, harvested the wheat, and I learned how to prepare the fields for sowing local varieties of millet—and also rice. I also kept myself busy with other work in the home. I was pleased that as a result of the lockdown I could enjoy a longer holiday at home. At this season there is more work on the land. My mother got a lot of help from me. In the past I had never had the opportunity to do these various farming activities. This time I was able to learn so much with my mother, and at the same time found time for my studies. I gave of my best in all the work I did, and two months and fourteen days passed by before I knew it. These two months were very inspiring for me.

My Experiences at Home during the Lockdown-2

Rakhi Arya

This year, 2020, the illness, that has become famous by the name of coronavirus, is still affecting countries across the world. Coronavirus has shaken the entire world to its roots. To prevent the spread of this pandemic the ashram too declared holidays from late March, and all the students left for their homes so as to strictly follow the lockdown. I too left for my village. I now want to share with you my experiences of the two and a half months spent at home.

On reaching home I too had to first spend eleven days in home quarantine, because my village falls in Champawat district. This year has proved to be a very difficult one for everyone. While at home I helped my mother in all the activities. We sowed *maduwā*, lentils, maize and other crops, and then after some time it was necessary to weed the fields. I had no experience of weeding, and in the beginning I could not distinguish between the *maduwā* and the grass, but my mother taught me how to weed both the *maduwā* and the rice. After a gap of five years circumstances were such that I was able to again have the opportunity to do all these related farming activities. If I speak honestly then this year I learned just how much work occurs in these three to four months. There is a great deal of work but this year the lockdown afforded me the chance both to learn and to help my mother.

Because of the lockdown this year everyone returned to the village. On arrival they had to spend fourteen days in institutional quarantine, followed by a check-up from the doctor. Only then were they able to join their families at home. This procedure was not just in my village but was implemented in every state across India. Many people had migrated from the village in search of employment, but many of them are now saying that they do not wish to return to the cities, rather that their responsibility lies in bringing back into cultivation all the fields lying barren. They have dug all the uncultivated fields and sowed *maduwā*, lentils and vegetables. This year, 2020, has seen people's hearts moved to do this important work.

As a result of the holidays brought about by the lockdown, an important experience has been that with spread of coronavirus people's minds have become ready to make the fields lying waste in the hills productive once again; the residents of the village understand that their duty lies in making their desolate hills rich once again. I was really pleased to see this. My holiday as a result of the lockdown was really interesting and inspiring.