

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM SANCHAR 140

March 2021

Dear friends,

Here is news again from Lakshmi Ashram.

This Sanchar has the following articles:

- Lakshmi Ashram 2020 by Neema Behn
- Our Experiences during the Winter Holidays by Class XII
- Account 2020 from Friends of Lakshmi Ashram

There will be no general meeting this year because of the corona situation, but you will get a fine idea of how life is going on in the ashram by reading Neema Behn's article.

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. **Lakshmi Ashram is short of money these days because of the corona situation. Some people in England and Germany have not been able to transfer money for them, so if it is possible we will be happy to receive a little more from you.**

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 140

Lakshmi Ashram – 2020

Neema Behn



In 2020 Lakshmi Ashram completed 74 years since its founding. It is a big achievement for any institution to have been continuously active for such a long time. We clearly understand that those social activities, which Lakshmi Ashram had taken up the responsibility for, continue to be relevant. The need for our work is felt both at the individual level and also in the broader society. We felt this even more so during 2020 and the Coronavirus pandemic.

At the end of January after the winter holidays all the students and teachers returned safely to the ashram and all our daily activities resumed. This included the girls of classes VI – VIII going daily to the Girls' Junior High School

in Kausani. As always after going in the mornings to the government school for classes, on their return they would have a second opportunity for study during their regular scheduled classes in the ashram.

These students, through the Girls' Junior High School, also had the opportunity of occasionally going to other schools and taking part in sports competitions, cultural programmes and intellectual activities, every time returning with a very encouraging success. Our students were naturally very happy, but the teachers at the Girls' Junior High School were equally happy and satisfied for, thanks to our students, their school earned a good name. The teachers and the school inspector were very pleased by the high level of self-confidence of our students.

In the ashram school regular classes were taking place every afternoon for the students of classes IX-XII, and at the same time all their practical activities were going along fine.

In March the board examinations for classes X and XII were taking place, and by 21 March almost all the papers had been completed. Only the mathematics paper for four students of class X remained, when suddenly, as a result of Coronavirus, on 22 March a one-day People's Curfew was declared, and from midnight on 24 March a strict nationwide lockdown was imposed.

We had also taken the decision that we ought to respect the government's rules, and so we sent all our students home indefinitely, giving them all plenty of homework to focus on while at home. During this time the impact of Coronavirus was slowly spreading in the country, thus there was no immediate likelihood of educational institutions and the like being able to reopen. People were discussing the possibilities of online education. As time passed so our students were increasingly getting bored at home, and they began to express their desire to return to the ashram. Nothing was going on at home, and they were not having the opportunities for studying. Their guardians too began to express their feelings that if possible the ashram should recall the students. We too were very concerned that during these four months there should not be a decline in the students' intellectual capacities or in the ashram's lifestyle. Thus deep in our minds we did not want the girls to continue to remain at home.

Thus in July we called the girls back, and advised the district authorities accordingly. They responded, "You have done well in calling the children back. In order to protect yourselves you should obtain a written acknowledgement from the parents that they have given their consent for their children to return to the ashram." This we accordingly did, and our school began to run as before. From the end of July until December our academic classes went on very well, and along with this the students ran all those activities related to their education in a very lively way. The students of each class brought out their newspapers. These handwritten papers expressed both the depth and breadth of their thinking. In their papers the students published news of the ashram campus, local and national news and international news. They had written really good poems and articles on coronavirus, as well as also expressing in writing their personal thoughts. Besides these papers during these six months the students twice brought out issues of their handwritten magazines, 'Suryoday' and 'Vijay'. These contained the students' writings, showing the great depth of their thinking. Maybe the most important articles were those in which they described their experiences at home during the lockdown, how they had participated and learned so much from working in the home and on the land. Normally the girls get to spend a long time at home during the winter holidays in January, and at that time there are no activities taking place on the land. However during the time of the lockdown there was a great deal of activity on the land. During these 3-4 months the wheat and lentils were cut and harvested, and then in June and July the rice seedlings were transplanted. Thus our students had the opportunity to participate and learn both these activities. For them this was truly a real opportunity for learning, by practically participating in the work on the land with their families. At the same time they lent a good helping hand in all the work at home. Thus they were able to have practical experiences of working on the land at home that they could not have in the ashram, such as planting out the rice seedlings.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic those festivals that we celebrate with the public – the Shree Krishna Janmashtami and Christmas programmes - were this year celebrated only by our students and teachers. Actually for our Christmas programme a few friends did participate, both from India and abroad. They enjoyed the programme very much. After Christmas the girls left for their winter holidays, returning at the end of January. Now their educational activities are once again running as ever. They are all very happy.

In 2020 some ten new students were expected to join the ashram, but because of the pandemic those girls who lived a long way away could not join the ashram, and only four new girls came. Two are in class VI and two in class IX. All of them have very quickly fully adjusted to the life here, and really like it here very much. Their very first reactions to life here are, "The teachers in Lakshmi Ashram teach us very well" – this is what appeals to them most. Then they get the opportunity here to learn and understand everything. We will try to see that those students who could not join us last year can do so this year.

Where the government and private schools have been closed since the lockdown began in March 2020 (as I write the schools are set to reopen for classes VI –XII as from 8 February), the school in Lakshmi Ashram has been open except for the four months from late March to late July when all the students went home. During the pandemic all of us in Lakshmi Ashram went about our daily work without any worries or fear. Because we have such a large campus we felt that we were in a separate world. All the children kept very happy. They said, "We are very lucky that we are in Lakshmi Ashram where we are doing our studies and are active in all our daily activities without any problems. If we were not here then like other children we would be living a burdensome life." During the pandemic children have been imprisoned in their homes and found themselves very worried. During such challenging times the importance of Lakshmi Ashram increases and we too increasingly understand this point.

Handicrafts

In Gandhi's ideals of Basic Education practical activities had equal importance alongside the more purely academic aspects of education, and Lakshmi Ashram places a lot of emphasis on handicrafts.

During this year, as part of our handicrafts programme, the girls from classes IX-XII, along with their teachers, learned how to make a range of items, including gloves, socks, various designs of mufflers, woolen hats, etc., and are becoming very skilled in knitting. Meanwhile many of the students are producing woolen yarn on their spinning spindles, which was then used in knitting the items described above. These were then sold through our store in our workshop (Udyogshala), being very much appreciated by both local tourists and our foreign guests. The knitting skills of our students are increasing day by day.

Dairy and Garden Education

In the ashram education both the raising of cows and agriculture has a very important place. Both these activities are the basis of our life, especially in our traditional hill life. All of our students and teachers work and learn together both in our gaushala (cowshed) and in the garden. During October everyone was busy in the annual haymaking and altogether made some thirty haystacks. The haymaking went off very enthusiastically and was completed in a well organised way. This year the production of milk was satisfactory.

In an effort to protect our vegetable garden from the ravages of wild animals, in particular wild pigs, wire netting was put up to completely enclose the terraced fields.

Earlier in the year in January apple, peach and plum saplings were planted. Our hope is that we can a productive fruit garden.

Sadhana Course Programme

In June 2019 six students, both from the ashram and from outside, joined the Sadhana course (Practical Gandhian Thought) run by the ashram. This, the twenty-fourth Sadhana course, went off very successfully and was concluded on 7 February 2020. One success of this course was that one of the participants, Bina Mehra, expressed her desire to live in the ashram and participate in the social work, and she is now working in the ashram school as a teacher. Some personal reasons had led Bina to feel rather apathetic to life and she was also very nervous. However as a result of the studies, written work and other activities of the Sadhana course, she came to know and understand the value of life, and now she has a very positive and enthusiastic outlook on life.

In June 2020 the twenty-fifth Sadhana course commenced, in which four ashram students who had recently passed their class XII board exams are participating. Two other students from outside did also come but for various personal reasons decided to return home.

The students in this batch had all completed their academic education in the ashram. As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, unlike in previous batches these students have not been able to avail of the opportunity to go to the Gandhian Institute of Studies in Wardha, Maharashtra, and elsewhere, and to both observe and learn from their experiences. However we are still hoping that when things begin to return to normal, that later this year they will have the opportunity both for a study tour programme and also to participate in a ten-day Vipassana Meditation programme.

The Sadhana students have also been very enthusiastically learning sewing with Rekha Behn, who manages our Udyogshala workshop, and have learned how to cut and sew their own clothes. The art of sewing is a very basic need for girls, something that our girls have personally felt very strongly, all the more so for the cost of getting clothes made by a tailor is continually getting more

and more expensive. It has become difficult for those ordinary people who have a limited income, thus the girls want to become skilled enough to make their own clothes. Besides the four Sadhana students, two other girls have learned sewing this year, a total of six in all.

Kasturba Children's Library

During the lockdown the libraries that we are running outside of the ashram campus in two villages proved very important. For some time these libraries too were closed, but then the girls running them began to teach the children who came regularly to the libraries. Because of the schools being closed the children were missing out on their education and this led to a fall in their abilities. Now they are being taught and at the same time both the small children and the youth are enjoying reading the books in the libraries. A third children's library will open shortly.

Water Protection and Conservation Programme

The programme in the Lod Valley for the rejuvenation of the traditional springs and water sources has been going on for the past three years and continued during 2020. The project coordinator and the three field workers were continually interacting with the community, visiting the villages where the communities were undertaking activities. There is a great deal of scope for water conservation activities, for the levels of the springs are continually declining. Thus there is an urgent need to undertake activities that will save the existing water and increase its flow. The three years of the project were completed in December 2020, but seeing the necessity for this programme the funding agency, People's Science Institute, are extending the programme. In September-October 2020 work began in three new villages in the Mansa Nali valley on ten springs, and implementation of this work will continue in 2021.

Efforts for Self-employment of Village Women:

Some twenty women from three villages in the Lod Valley have taken training in knitting through our village service centre there. A number of these women are the wives of unemployed young migrant workers who had returned to their villages during the lockdown. They also have limited agricultural land. A small source of income will open for these women through knitting. With this objective in mind we started this programme from November 2020.



Our Experiences during the Winter Holidays

Class XII

The five students of class XII had each written about their personal experiences during the winter holidays. For all of them it was their second experience of spending the winter holidays here in a small family, sharing responsibilities for all the daily work. This article reproduces Manju's entire article along with excerpts from the other four students.

Manju

This year during the winter holidays I and my classmates in class XII, along with our sisters in class X, spent the winter holidays here in the ashram, because this year we will be sitting for the board examinations. Thus because of our need for extra studies



Manju, Deepa, Guddi, Himani, Binni

all twelve of

us stayed here, along with ten teachers and workers. Throughout the holidays, along with our studies we shared in all the work.

The other students along with some of our teachers went to their homes for the winter holidays, while those students and teachers remaining here ensured that all the daily activities ran efficiently. We students gave especial attention to our studies. For those of us in class XII it was our second experience of spending the winter holidays here, thus we did not feel so bad about the younger students going home. However when 28 December came and all those going home had left, then all around felt very quiet, and we began to wonder how we would pass a whole month here. However, we very quickly got used to the change in the daily routine. The twelve of us students were divided into four teams of three girls each, to take responsibility for various activities.

During the holidays we celebrated the festival of Makar Sankranti, celebrated in the Kumaun as *Ghughutiya*.. On this occasion, during the day we prepared a number of special dishes, including *ghughute*, *khajure*, and several kinds of puri. Early the following morning, as per the local tradition, we called the crows to come and partake of the *ghughute*,

"Kāle Kauwā, ghughutī mālā khāle se pūrā"

– these words echoed all around the ashram early the following morning. This day was especially memorable for all of us, and was an important reflection of our local Kumauni traditions.

Every day afforded us the opportunity to learn something new. There was also a deep feeling of love between all of us in our small family.

In the evenings after prayers we were read letters that Sarala Behn had written to the ashram students in 1967 after she had left the ashram. These letters had been collected and published in a book entitled 'Tumhare Hi Behnji' on the occasion of her birth centenary. Listening to these letters it really felt as if Sarala Behn was present with us today.

All in all these winter holidays were very inspiring and provided us with plenty of learning opportunities. It will be very difficult for me to forget these days.

Deepa

... Every year during the holidays then our teachers and the students work together to gather fodder for the cows, cutting the leaves of the oak trees (*Bānj*). This year we did not have to climb the trees ourselves for Saraswati Didi, responsible for the cattle, had arranged for two village women to come every third day to cut leaves. Then we only had to gather the leaves together and take them to the cattle shed (*gaushālā*).

... Every morning three of us would get up at five o'clock, and go to the kitchen to begin to prepare the morning meal, and lovingly served everyone on time. Despite being few in number we always strived to do our very best. Everyone lived one with the other in a spirit of love and harmony. To tell the truth I always really enjoy living in the ashram family. The experiences of being together through January were also good, and I learned some very inspiring things. Throughout the month my studies went very well. Because of coronavirus the students in other schools have been deprived of their studies. Their schools have been closed and the children were not happy with online learning. Yet here in the ashram every day we had regular classes and throughout the month there was an excellent atmosphere for learning.

Guddi

... We celebrated New Year's Eve, seeing in the New Year and wishing everyone New Year greetings. Immediately after supper we had made gulab jamun and we enjoyed eating these sweets together very much. 1st January was a very special day for all of us. Whenever I celebrate a festival here, then I find that I never miss my family. For me the ashram is just like my family.

.... Before we knew it the month had passed, 31 January came, and those who had spent the holidays at home began to arrive back. We welcomed them by decorating the gateway to the ashram, and in every room pasted posters on the wall with some words of inspiration that all of us can learn from.

Himani

... By 28 December all those going home had left, and I did not like it at all to begin with. However very quickly those of us here were happily passing our time together. For those girls in class X it was the first time that they had the experience of spending the winter holidays in the ashram.

After everyone else had gone home we divided ourselves into four teams, each with three students. We always strived to also care for our younger sisters, making sure that none of them felt homesick. The New Year arrived and the morning of New Year's Day brought the opportunity to make new resolutions and set ourselves new objectives. It was a very joyous day. We had together welcomed in the New Year.

Binni

... During the holidays we celebrated the coming of the New Year, and then on 14 January we celebrated the festival of Makar Sankranti. On this day families perform the ceremony of *Yagyopavit*, the investiture of their sons with the sacred thread. In the ashram we celebrated the festival as Ghughutiya and prepared *ghughute*. Then early in the morning of 15 January we gathered in the hostel courtyard and called the crows to eat the *ghughute*. It was my second opportunity to celebrate this festival in the ashram, all of us celebrating Ghughutiya together. I always feel very enthusiastic celebrating each and every festival.

.... When I was at home during the winter holidays then I took the chance to learn various skills, including the computer and sewing. Here in the ashram I have learned knitting. I enjoy spinning and knitting very much. Since coming to the ashram I have learned how to do each and every work with a spirit of love.

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2020

ORDINARY PROFIT AND LOSS ACCOUNT

Income

Contributions received*	225.140,06 DKK
Subscription: 44 members à 75 DDK	3.525,00 DKK
Total income	228.665,06 DKK

Expenses

Administration	3.090,00 DKK
Paid to Lakshmi Ashram	109.195,27 DKK
Total expenses	112.285,27 DKK

Net result of ordinary account	116.379,79 DKK
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BALANCE SHEET at 31.12.2020

Assets

Total bank deposits – account no: 3141861	165.904,56 DKK
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Liabilities

Ordinary net capital, beginning 2020	49.524,77 DKK
Net result	116.379,79DKK
Net capital, end 2020	165.904,56 DKK

Albertslund, 10th March 2020

Lone Poulsen

*We have received a rather big amount from a friend in Denmark. This amount should be used for special projects later on.