

**FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM**

Lone Poulsen, Praestehusene 6, 2620 Albertslund, DK Denmark

Telephone +45 43961371 – e-mail: 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 141**

August 2021

Dear friends,

Here is news again from Lakshmi Ashram.

This Sanchar has the following articles:

- In Memory of Marie Thøger (25 July 1923 - 1 August 2021)
- Sarala Behn – A Paragon of Selfless Service to Humanity (5 April 1901 - 8 July 1982)  
by David Bhai
- Sarala Behn – An Embodiment of Humanity by Beena Mehra
- Art in my Life by Meenakshi Mehra

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

# SANCHAR 141

## In Memory of Marie Thøger (25 July 1923 -1 August 2021) by Friends of Lakshmi Ashram



Marie Thøger died 1st August 2021 after a long and exciting life. She was born 1923 in a farm in Himmerland in Denmark. After 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and after having finished her teacher's exam Marie Thøger went on working camps in Europe e.g. in Norway, Germany and Finland with a Danish NGO. In the beginning of the 1950's Marie travelled to Mysore in South India with UNESCO. Here she for the first time visited Mahatma Gandhi's ashram in Sevagram, and that was the start of a lifelong connection with the Gandhian work and non-violence. India became her second homeland. She was in contact with Sarala Behn in Lakshmi Ashram, where she since 1972 has worked with and for the ashram.

She has had a great importance for Friends of Lakshmi Ashram, which she has supported during all the years. Ruth Sillemann and I visited her home for many years every six weeks for an Indian meeting, where we were discussing activities, ideas, problems etc. in the Ashram. We really miss her.

All honour to her memory.

## In Memory of Marie Thøger by Lakshmi Ashram

We received the sad news of the passing away of Marie Thøger (Marie Didi) late on 1 August, and the following evening all of us gathered for our evening prayers in Shanti Bhavan and recalled her lifetime commitment to Lakshmi Ashram and all that it stands for.

Radha Didi recalled her long association with Marie, from the time that she first went to Denmark in 1966, and described several incidents that illustrated her incredibly strong personality.

When they had last met in Denmark a few years ago, then Marie had given Radha two candles and told her that these were to be lit in her memory when she passed away. Radha had kept these carefully, along with the small bag that they had been in.

Before Radha talked about the life of Marie and their enduring friendship, she first lit the two candles, and these are lit every evening at prayers.

We concluded with a minute's silence in her memory.



OM SHANTI, SHANTI, SHANTI

## Sarala Behn – A Paragon of Selfless Service to Humanity

5 April 1901 - 8 July 1982

David Bhai

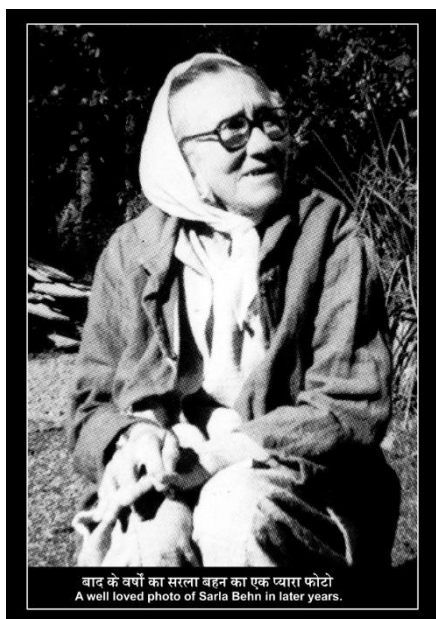
All of us in Lakshmi Ashram are deeply indebted to Sarala Behn who in 1946, as Indian independence loomed on the horizon, had founded Lakshmi Ashram with the intention of empowering the local girls of the Kumaun Hills through an education based on Gandhi's principles of Basic Education. This envisaged the holistic development of the student – head, hands and heart as the expression goes. Sarala Behn was to run Lakshmi Ashram for twenty years until 1966, when she found herself having to leave the hills of Uttarakhand. She was not to return permanently to live in the hills until 1974, when a cottage was built for her on a high ridge looking out to the Himalayan peaks, set in the midst of dense oak (*Banj*) forest.



Who was Sarala Behn, how did she come to India and eventually to the Kumaun Hills?

Sarala Behn was born in Shepherds Bush in West London, and she was baptised Catherine Mary Heileman. Her paternal grandmother was from the Black Forest but had left Germany for Switzerland where Catherine's father was born. They came through France and eventually settled in London, where in time Catherine's father married an English woman.

Catherine's education was in local schools, but when she was in high school the First World War broke out. Her father lacked personal documents and he was declared to be a German and was interned during the war, while young Catherine was looked upon as a 'daughter of the enemy' and was denied a scholarship to continue her studies. From a very young age she had a very strong sense of right and wrong, and showed no hesitation in expressing her views. She was very critical of the



बाद के वर्षों का सरला बहन का एक प्यारा फोटो  
A well loved photo of Sarla Behn in later years.

materialist society that she grew up in, but it was only after coming into contact in the twenties with Indian students that she learned of the struggle for Indian independence, and the leadership and philosophy provided by Mahatma Gandhi. From then on, for the rest of her life, Gandhi was to be her lodestone. Catherine then devoted her energies to going to India, despite her close friends trying their best to dissuade her from the idea. She wrote to Gandhi but he too advised her against thinking of coming to India. However she was to receive a letter from Dr. Mohan Singh Mehta, who was starting a progressive school in Udaipur, then a princely state. He invited her to join him in this project, Catherine readily accepted his invitation, and on 4 January 1932 she boarded a passenger liner in Liverpool and set sail for Bombay (now Mumbai), never to return west again. For the coming fifty years she was to selflessly serve the people of India.

Catherine was to work with Dr Mehta in his school, Vidya Bhavan, for five years, and it was here that she came to be called Sarala Behn, the name that she is known by today. Sarala did not feel at ease in the school in Udaipur, for the students were all boys from the middle classes, their fathers mostly

working in the state administration. Sarala from the outset wanted to work with the downtrodden masses of India, to be a part of Gandhi's constructive programme for the inclusive uplift of Indian's villages. However it was only during the autumn of 1935 during the Dussehra holidays that she first had the opportunity to visit Gandhi in his ashram in Wardha, to meet personally with Gandhi, and to experience working with his closest associates. This was a big turning point in her life, now she was not ready to continue working in Vidya Bhavan, and the following year she left Udaipur and joined Gandhi in his newly established ashram in Sevagram, right in the heart of India. This was the centre for both the ongoing political struggle for independence and Gandhi's eighteen point constructive programme. The following link is a book by Gandhi on his programme: <https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/construct.pdf> (Page 17 describes Gandhi's programme of New or Basic Education.)

Sarala was to be actively involved for five years in the work of *Hindustani Talimi Sangh*, (Indian Educational Association), both in the basic school for local children that was running in Sevagram Ashram as a model for the proposed national programme, and also in its office where there was continuous ongoing correspondence with the central government and the state governments. The objective was for the state governments to implement the concept and practice of basic education, with its roots in village life, as a replacement for the colonial model of education.

While Sarala was living and working in Sevagram Ashram she was continually beset by ill health, especially dysentery and malaria, the latter in particular being a cause for concern. Gandhi strongly felt that Sarala Behn should move somewhere where the climate was cooler and more amenable for her. But the question was, 'Where could she go?' In a chance conversation between a colleague and a visitor in the office of the Hindustani Talimi Sangh, Sarala Behn heard mention of the Shri Gandhi Ashram's centre for production of woollen khadi in Chanauda, asked whether it might be possible for her to relocate to Chanauda, and when Gandhi gave his assent she left Sevagram for this unknown destination, albeit very heavy in heart, for she did not to leave Gandhi. In the first week of September 1941 she arrived in Chanauda, a small village on the banks of the Kosi River, just a few kilometres south of Kausani. The following year a small four-roomed cottage above Kausani, looking out to the Himalayan peaks, was made available to her. Even then she had the vision of beginning a school along Gandhi's ideals of Basic Education, but this was not to come into being until the end of 1946.

Meanwhile on 8 August 1942 Gandhi gave the call for the final active phase of the struggle for Indian independence, known as the Quit India Movement. This inspired people the length and breadth of India, and the Kumaun Hills were no exception. Many men were arrested and thrown into jail, leaving their wives to having to fend for themselves. Sarala Behn fearlessly collected money and food supplies and went from family to family giving the women material and emotional support. Eventually she was placed under house arrest by the colonial authorities, but she refused to obey this order, and continued to support in every way possible the families of the imprisoned freedom fighters. She was eventually arrested and sentenced to three months in Almora jail. Upon release she continued to defy the British authorities and went from village to village assisting families. She was again arrested, this time given a much longer sentence, initially in Almora jail, but then in the heat of the summer of 1945 she was transferred to Lucknow jail.

It was only after her release from jail in 1945 after the Japanese had surrendered, that she was able to turn her attention to commencing the activities of Lakshmi Ashram. Numerous fellow freedom fighter associates were keen for their daughters to have the opportunity to receive an education, and towards the end of 1946 Sarala Behn formally started the work of Lakshmi Ashram from the small cottage that she was living in. As the numbers of students rapidly increased, so funds were gathered nationwide and in the early fifties the present hostel buildings were constructed. For



twenty years Sarala Behn guided the activities of the ashram and inspired a good number of her students to devote their lives to serving the community along Gandhian ideals. The ashram was also very active in social issues throughout Uttarakhand, in particular inspiring the anti-liquor movement with the hill women spearheading the struggle at the local level. Sarala Behn also gave a lot of time and energy to the Bhoodan Movement (The Land Gift movement) inspired and led by Gandhi's leading follower, Vinoba Bhave, and some of her young team also played a very active role in this movement, especially in the state of Bihar. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhoodan\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhoodan_movement) )

Sarala Behn was the inspiration and mother figure for a whole generation of Gandhian activists through the hills of Uttarakhand, and her later deep awareness of environmental issues, reflected in her two books, 'Revive Our Dying Planet' in English and 'Sanrakshan Ya Vinash' in Hindi, gave inspiration and direction to the world renowned Chipko Movement:

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chipko\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chipko_movement).)

Sarala Behn passed away in Almora early on 8 July 1982 and her final rites were performed according to Hindu tradition on the hillside above Lakshmi Ashram, in the shade of her beloved *Banj* trees. It is the responsibility of all of us to seek to honour her life's ideals and work unselfishly together to continue to make Lakshmi Ashram a beacon of inspiration in this rapidly changing world, and to remain true to her deepest values.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarla\\_Behn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarla_Behn) - A brief summary of the life of Sarala Behn)

## Sarala Behn –An Embodiment of Humanity

Beena Mehra



As in previous years, so also in this hallowed Lakshmi Ashram, all of us living in the ashram offered our respectful and deeply felt homage to Sarala Behn on the occasion of her 39<sup>th</sup> death anniversary, and renewed our commitment to follow in her footsteps, inspired by her actions, faith, love, tolerance and ideals.

I regard myself as being very fortunate that I have been given the opportunity to live in this place of penance, where at each and every moment I have the opportunity to learn or understand something new.

This year 8 July was a special day for me because Sarala Behn, residing in my inner self, is the embodiment of God. I never personally had the opportunity to meet Sarala Behn in person, but I am continually aware of the pricelessness of her work.

We began 8 July by holding our morning prayers and conducting *havan* (fire worship) at her *Samadhi* (memorial), surrounded by the rich vegetation, animals, birds and all the unseen living beings present in Nature. I cannot express in words how during the *havan* the surrounding Nature became so fragrant, a silent witness; also how my heart rose above all its joys and sorrows and was filled with an indescribable Peace.

Following this, all of us were filled with an exceptional enthusiasm in our minds and bodies. After taking breakfast all of us, from the smallest girl to the oldest members of the ashram, men and women, joined in with the tree planting as had been planned earlier. Sarala Behn had a very deep attachment to Nature and she always gave particular importance to environmental protection. Today all around us in the ashram are countless trees of various species, including *Banj* (Himalayan Oak), *Buransh* (Rhododendron), *Chir* (Three-needled Indian Pine) and *Deodar* (Himalayan Cedar), and a great variety of vegetation that provide us with free air and water, fruits and flowers. These trees include some that Sarala Behn had planted with her own hands. The water collected by these trees and plants provides water to our springs and tanks.

At the present time when Nature is continually becoming so polluted, a matter of great concern for the entire world, all of mankind should seek to plant as many trees as possible in their immediate surroundings. With this objective in mind all of us girls, along with Dr. Ramesh Pant and David Bhai, joined together in the planting. We planted out two types of plants, *Ringal* (a local species of bamboo) and Black Cardamom, both very important commercially. *Ringal* is a special kind of plant which from time immemorial has been used by the rural communities, especially in the higher parts of the Himalayas, to make various items such as *Tokri* (Baskets), *Mosta* (Large mats), *Soop* (Winnowing Baskets), etc., all commonly used in daily life.



This handicraft was an important means of livelihood for many people. However these hand-made items have slowly become outmoded, replaced to a great extent by mass produced items. However, once again people's minds are turning towards these traditional activities. The Black Cardamom, which we planted in particularly damp ground, besides its commercial value, is a food item very beneficial for health.

After completing this very important activity we took our midday meal, and then all of us, big and small, along with our guests, gathered in Shanti Bhavan (our meeting hall) for a special programme organised by the students. Everyone expressed their thoughts on Sarala Behn, and the present students of the ashram highlighted some very important aspects about her – especially Basic Education, environmental protection and women's empowerment. These were important issues which Sarala Behn always emphasised. She made tireless efforts for the uplift of women, the main example being our Lakshmi Ashram, which she founded with the intention that the girls studying in the ashram, wherever they wanted to go ahead in life, be it in domestic life or in serving society, would be powerful physically, mentally and intellectually, ready to face each and every struggle, and make their contribution for the good of society. Where today the world is moving continuously towards modernity, and the majority of people feel a sense of loneliness within, both physically and

mentally, then at the same time, like Lakshmi Ashram, there are other institutions seeking to give a true direction to life.

At the end of the programme Radha Behn through her precious words concluded the meeting. For all of us it is very moving that Radha Behn knew Sarala Behn personally, lived under her care and protection and, continuing her ideals, has kept the ashram alive until today. Now it is the responsibility of all of us living in the ashram to all work together in all the ashram activities and, as human beings, manifest within ourselves love, compassion, kindness and a spirit of service.

## **Art in my Life**

Meenakshi Mehra

The famous Hindi poet, Maithilisharan Gupta, recognising Art as a means of self-expression, had said, "Art is a powerful force for expression." Art in all its myriad forms is a means of expressing our imagination.

Ever since my childhood I have had a deep interest not only in art, but in other means of self-expression such as music and drama. Of these art forms music and painting in particular have become an inseparable and important aspect of my life. Whenever I find that I have no desire to study or do other work, or when I feel a little down in my mind, then I turn my attention to painting. I then immediately feel a deep sense of peace in my mind. It feels as if that I have left the real world behind me, and have found myself far away in the world of my imagination. I become very still within myself and, along with a special feeling of peace, I experience the deepest joy.

During my time of my school education Art was one of the subjects in our curriculum, but was only taught up to class X. I had a great interest in this subject and took all the benefit that I could from the art lessons. Slowly my interest in painting and drawing increased, but after class X we were no longer taught Art. However in my spare time I continued to develop my skills in art, and would take part in the painting activities in the school. At present I am working as a teacher in the ashram school and teach art to all the students. The children are very happy and full of enthusiasm when painting and drawing. They are always very keen to express themselves through the medium of colour on blank paper.

Art can take any form, indeed our entire life is an expression of Art. To link ones imagination to each and every activity that we undertake, and to express it in as strong a way as possible, is in itself Art. In doing so, our activities carry more weight and influence, which in turn brings joy to us.





Living in the ashram we seek to link each and every activity to our imagination, and in doing so we try to achieve the highest degree of order possible.

I will always continue with my painting and drawing for this brings with it an increase in concentration in my mind, and art offers me the means to maintain this level of concentration and to bring a perpetual freshness to my imagination.

