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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM SANCHAR 107

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Dear friends,

This time the newsletter brings three different articles written by young workers in the ashram and an article about daily life in the ashram by David Hopkins:

- “Celebrating Shri Krishna Janmashtami -A Unique Experience” by Nirmala Ruwali
- “Arina – an inspiration for us all” by Tara Koranga
- “An Introduction to Puppets and Masks in Drama” by Manju Joshi
- “Notes from the Hills – Glimpses of Life in Lakshmi Ashram” by David Hopkins

It still costs the same to be a sponsor, i.e. a sponsorship is 1725 Danish kroner and the subscription 75 Danish kroner (about 230 Euro and 10 Euro) = 1800 Danish kroner. Some people send money once a year for a sponsorship, and others divide the amount during the year. Therefore we will put 75 kroner in the administration account first time in the year, when we receive money from someone. This also applies if you send amounts that are not earmarked. So all will pay the same amount a year to be a member and receive the Sanchar.

I assume one membership per household, club, society etc., unless otherwise instructed. The surplus from the administration account will of course be sent to Lakshmi Ashram.

Thank you for all the money for sponsorships and other contributions. Any amount of money will be received with pleasure. Contributions that are not earmarked are also very good. The money will be used for educational material, study tours, education of the teachers, projects in the villages etc. You can send money by a crossed cheque or by bank transfer – the IBAN account number can be seen on top of this letter.

Friends of Lakshmi Ashram can save money, if some of you would be satisfied just to receive a mail telling that you can read the Sanchar in the homepage. Because of the photos the Sanchar is often too big to send directly by mail. If you want to get the message in a mail instead of receiving a letter, then please send me your e-mail address to: *lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk*

Best wishes,

Lone Poulsen

Celebrating Shri Krishna Janmashtami -A Unique Experience

By Nirmala Ruwali

Nirmala, whose elder sister Khashti had taken the Gandhian Thoughts training programme a number of years ago, has recently joined Lakshmi Ashram as a teacher. She had previously been running a small school in her own community. This year she experienced for the first time how the festival of Shri Krishna Janmashtami, marking the birth of Lord Krishna, is celebrated in a unique way in Lakshmi Ashram.

Many kinds of festivals are celebrated in our country, in different ways in different places. They come at every season of the year, each reflecting the unique diversity of India. There is one festival, Janmashtami, which is celebrated with great enthusiasm during the rainy season.

As the word 'janma = birth' suggests, this festival is celebrated to mark someone's birth. That is indeed the case for Janmashtami is celebrated on the occasion of the birth of Lord Krishna. Here in Lakshmi Ashram the festival of Janmashtami is celebrated in a very big way. The ashram children and their teachers had begun their preparations a month earlier and when Janmashtami finally arrives then the children are all very happy. The children put on a performance of Shri Krishna Lila, a song and dance drama that presents the events leading up to the birth of Lord Krishna, as well as incidents from his childhood and youth. All the acting is done by the ashram children, big and small. Everyone takes part, full of enthusiasm and joy. When the children are on the stage, then it does not feel that they are acting, but rather that one is witnessing the reality. There is no feeling that this drama is being performed by ordinary actors.

The festival of Shri Krishna Janmashtami has been celebrated in Lakshmi Ashram almost ever since the ashram was founded. In the early days it was staged in the ashram itself in the prayer hall, Shanti Bhavan, but when slowly year by year the numbers of spectators coming to watch the Krishna Lila increased, then it was apparent that there was not enough space to seat everybody. It was then put on in the large hall in the Udyogshala (the Ashram workshop). That in turn proved to be too small to accommodate the ever increasing numbers who were coming to enjoy the Krishna Lila, in an age when there were not, as nowadays, television, videos and other means of entertainment. In those days such dramas provided them with both entertainment and a means to increase their knowledge, and they would enthusiastically come to watch them. When the Udyogshala hall became too small, then arrangements to present the drama were made on a meadow below the ashram.

From the very beginning, all the parts in the Krishna Lila, which besides depicting scenes from Lord Krishna's childhood also has scenes from the great Indian epic, Mahabharata, have been played by the ashram girls. Everybody, both those living nearby and those from further away, contribute a great deal to its success.

In the present day, despite there being so many forms of entertainment, the public continue to attach the same importance as ever to the Ashram's festival as they did sixty years ago. By and large in these days of mass entertainment people attach less importance to such small dramas. Then again people's lives have become so busy that they find little time to be attracted to this kind of programme. Thus it was amazing to find that here even today one finds the same enthusiasm and joy as sixty years back. Today too the meadow was packed full of spectators, who had come from far and wide to see this drama, as the actors performed their roles on the stage. Sitting quietly, men, women and children were all enjoying the Krishna Lila. Looking at the crowd one felt that today too their sole means of entertainment was the drama being played out before them on the stage. They were watching the Krishna Lila as if it was the very first time that they were seeing it. Some women were praising

Krishna's exploits while condemning the evil king, Kansa. When Kansa was killed then everyone was so happy, as if Kansa's death had truly taken place before their very eyes. Everyone was overflowing with joy, so enchanted as they sat entranced that they were quite unaware of time passing. When the drama was over, then they exclaimed, "How great it would be if it went on for five hours rather than just four hours!"

Thus it is that Lakshmi Ashram's celebration of Shri Krishna Janmashtami brings such great pleasure and joy to so many people.

The crowds of spectators seen gathered here, the enthusiasm and joy that they expressed, is something that in the present day would be perhaps hard to find anywhere else.



Spectators enjoy the Krishna Lila

Krishna is one of the most beloved of all Hindu gods. For his worshippers he embodies divine beauty, joy and love. As a child Krishna was playful and mischievous. Innocent and obedient in his mother's presence, he missed no opportunity for mischief when her back was turned.

As a youth Krishna enchanted and intoxicated the cowherd women with his flute playing. He teased them and made love to them. His favourite was the beautiful Radha, who took many risks to meet him.

Arina – an inspiration for us all

By Tara Koranga



Tara came to the ashram from a remote village some six years ago, joined class eight, and is now a young teacher.

She takes her responsibilities very seriously. She is continuing her studies and this year she has passed her first year BA examinations.

Every year young women from Germany, Denmark, England, USA and other countries, sometimes in groups and sometimes individually or with a friend, come to Lakshmi Ashram to gain new experiences before going on to enter university. Living in Lakshmi Ashram they learn the art of simple living from us students, and they also have an opportunity to increase their basic skills of life, for the small children around them in Lakshmi Ashram are always trying their best to imbibe the teachings of self-reliance in their own daily life. A person unfamiliar with the Indian way of life, by coming to live in the ashram, can come to understand the Indian culture and at the same time become acquainted with the Kumauni culture.

Last year on 5th September Arina Theel from Kiel in Germany arrived to live among us for one year. Even before arriving here, she had told us by e-mail how she wished to use her time with the ashram children. She was filled with enthusiasm with the prospect of coming to live in the ashram. Right from the very beginning Arina began to understand the daily life of the ashram and, coming punctually everywhere, quickly began to participate in all the activities. When she arrived, Arina did not know one letter of the Hindi alphabet. In the beginning, when Arina met with the smaller children and the older girls and workers, you could see just how happy she was. From her very first day Arina started to participate in each and every activity, joining the children in their daily team work – she helped a lot in cleaning and mopping, and preparing food in the kitchen. Arina always joined in very enthusiastically in each and every activity.

In October the haymaking programme takes place, to provide winter fodder for the cattle. It is regarded as an integral part of our holistic education, providing a true glimpse of the essence of self-sufficiency. During this time Arina too learned how to cut grass, and also taught the smaller girls a number of games.

During October we celebrated the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi on 2nd October, Radha Didi's 75th birthday on 16th October, and then celebrated the festival of Diwali from 28-30th October. Arina too joined in all these programmes very enthusiastically. Likewise she also joined in the Ashram's birthday celebrations on 5th December, which we celebrate as Self-Sufficiency Day. By now she had learned some Hindi and would talk with all the children in Hindi, so that they all came to know her much better.

Arina taught these small children art and also taught them different kinds of games. Slowly Arina decided that she would also take English classes with the smaller girls along with art. When she started taking one particular class, then all the other classes were equally keen that Arina would take lessons with them also. Arina got her family in Germany to send paper, colours and other material so that she might fulfil the eagerness of the children.

In November Arina accompanied us on study tour, and on Sundays sometimes joined a class of children and their teachers on going for a walk nearby. Also in November, with one class at a time, she prepared an Advent calendar, each student designing the card for one day. Then from the beginning of December up to Christmas Eve at evening prayers, the children happily took turns in opening up one day at a time. This was something very special for us, preparing us for the coming of Christmas. Seeing the pictures on the calendar the older girls felt very proud of this demonstration of their artistic abilities. On 25th December, Christmas Day, Arina's parents were also with us, and we were all so very happy to see their programme. Arina's father played the role of Father Christmas to perfection!

On 26th and 27th December all the children except the girls of class ten left to spend their winter holidays at home. The girls of class ten managed the daily work of the ashram and prepared for their coming High School exams. Some of the teachers stayed on to take their classes. On 8th February the children returned from home with their parents, and from 10th February they began their new daily timetable in their new teams. In March, after the board exams were over, Arina taught the smaller girls how to prepare collages, and also taught everyone, students and teachers alike, how to take pictures using the digital camera. While taking photos, Arina drew the children's attention to some very basic rules – how it was necessary to hold the camera straight and include the whole subject in the frame. When all the girls in each group had taken photos of ashram activities and scenes of the campus, then each girl selected her favourite photograph for an exhibition, which was then mounted in the prayer hall, Shanti Bhavan. Arina also presented each of the students and workers with prints of the photos that they had taken. She also took part in all the festivals this year, such as Holi and Janmashtami, where she had a short role in the Krishna Lila as an elephant!

Arina lived here as an ashram student and was always very happy to help in each and every way with the children and older teachers and workers.

The German culture is very different from our culture, yet despite coming from so far away and at such a young age, Arina in living alongside us learned a great deal. If sometimes she quarreled with the children, the children happily said "Arina Didi, Arina Didi, please forgive us." By now Arina was speaking very good Hindi, and if any guest from the west came in our midst, then she would translate for us into Hindi. When Arina was counting the days until she was to leave the ashram on 19th August to begin her journey back to Germany, she sometimes started crying a lot, and sometimes did not take her meals. All the children and workers admired her a great deal. In this way Arina passed a whole year with us.

While living in Lakshmi Ashram Arina spared no effort to adapt in every way to ashram life, be it in food or dress, or in language and, telling everybody that she was a member of Lakshmi Ashram, she made quite a name for herself both in the bazaar in Kausani and in the surrounding villages.

I was greatly inspired by Arina's remarkable outlook on life, something that I am unable to fully express in words.

An Introduction to Puppets and Masks in Drama

By Manju Joshi

Manju came to the ashram as a small girl and has received all her education here. She left to work with other local organisations before returning here last year to teach. She is also responsible at present for running the newly rebuilt kitchen.

Lakshmi Ashram is ever making active efforts to work towards achieving its educational objectives, and often organises various kinds of programmes for the all-round development of the students.

The ashram is an institution where we seek to nurture every aspect of the student's personality – intellectual, physical and ideological. Cultural programmes take place regularly, and at the same time people are invited from outside to impart various kinds of knowledge to our students, so as to strengthen our basic capacities. Some people also offer their time voluntarily to come and teach us.

In this way this year on 29-30th August Megan Campisi and Emily Epstein came to share with us the world of puppetry. Megan goes to various places throughout the world, teaching how to present drama through the medium of puppets, as well as through the use of masks. She teaches very well both how to construct and operate the puppets. Because of her skills in puppetry she receives many invitations, so that others too might learn this art. This year Megan offered some of her precious time to us so that we too might learn how to entertain and perform through the medium of puppets. She had personally expressed her desire to share this art with us, something that had made us all very happy.



**Kavita and Aarti
with a puppet**

Because there were a large number of us, we were divided into three groups so that all of us might have a good opportunity to learn, Megan taking each group for a two hour class on both Saturday and Sunday. Megan first got us to all sit in a circle and introduce ourselves through gestures. After everyone had introduced themselves in this way, she took the puppets and first told us how we should look upon them as people. In the same way as people get up, sit down, talk and perform other actions, we must try to control the puppets so that they too move just like people. She first taught us how to get the puppets to sit down, walk and make other movements. In the same way as when we are talking to our elders we show certain emotions, we must operate the puppets so that they too show similar emotions. She demonstrated to us how we could get the puppets to express every kind of action through speaking, acting and dancing.

Megan also taught us how we could act through masks and by wearing masks. By wearing masks when acting, the importance of the actor becomes even more enhanced. The actor when acting wearing a mask expresses all of his or her emotions and feelings through the voice and through movement. By wearing a mask before the audience, the actor expresses his or her role all the more clearly.

Our girls learned how to present very good plays and dances using the medium of puppets, and they made every effort to express the feelings and emotions of the play through puppets. This was the first experience in my life when I had the opportunity to act using puppets to express my feelings to others. It was the first time that I had seen such fine gestures expressed through puppets. I really enjoyed it. It was the first time in the ashram that such a programme had been arranged. I would want us to have the chance again and again to learn puppetry or other kinds of art, so that we might gain new and different kinds of knowledge. This two day programme in the art of puppetry went off really well.



Small girls and Megan

Notes from the Hills – Glimpses of Life in Lakshmi Ashram *by David Hopkins*

At last autumn has arrived, there is a chill in the air in the mornings before the sun rises over the hills. The skies are clear - bright sunshine by day and starry nights. This is one of the busiest times of the year, for it is the annual haymaking. All the older girls are working hard on the hillside above the Ashram, slowly cutting the grass with small sickles and then, when it is dry, tying the grass into sheaves and carrying them down the hillside to build up into haystacks. These will provide much needed fodder for the cattle during the winter and spring when green grass is scarce.

We at last have a new addition to the Ashram gaushala, a milk cow and her calf that we recently brought from a local temple. This cow was much needed for we only had two cows giving milk and were having to also buy milk from the market. We are on the lookout for one more cow to bring the numbers back up to four.

Besides the haymaking, some of the girls under Basanti Behn's guidance are busy harvesting the tulsi (basil), cutting it and then drying it in the sun. This is in great demand as a nourishing herbal tea with good medicinal properties, and this year we have even more land under tulsi than before. Last year we had even sold some 65 kilos to a local organic concern.

As you may have read in your papers, this year the monsoon rains came very late to India. Here too in the hills of Uttarakhand there was a marked lack of rain. The local farmers faced great difficulties in planting out their rice seedlings for the rivers were very low. Then while the rice harvest was in full swing last week, we experienced unseasonably heavy rains. Our vegetable garden too suffered from the lack of rain, so yields were not as good as they usually are during the monsoon.

Besides her responsibility for the tulsi production, Basanti Behn continues to be actively working in the villages in the Kosi valley below Kausani. Lakshmi Ashram is working with The Hunger Project in an ongoing project among elected women representatives (both ward members and village heads) in the village councils (gram sabhas), seeking to empower the women to realize their innate strengths and work in a constructive way for the upliftment of their villages. There are four young local women working with her in this project. In August a three day workshop for local women representatives was held in the Anasakti Ashram here in Kausani, with a two-day follow-up meeting at the beginning of September.

From July a new session of our Sadhana (Gandhian Studies) training programme for young women began, after a gap of one year. In the present course there are eight girls taking part, two Ashram students and six girls from nearby villages new to Ashram life. The course got off to a very firm start when Shobhan Negi, a student in the very first such course, came to take their classes for fifteen days.

14 November, the birth anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru, is celebrated as Children's Day in India. On 10 October the girls of class five, along with Bimla Behn, went to the studios of the All India Radio centre in Almora, to record songs for a special programme to be broadcast on Children's Day. They had thought that it would take little more than an hour, but in the end the recording went on for over three hours!

Radha Behn continues to be as active as ever. As I write she is participating in a padyatra in the hills of Nainital District with local youth, carrying the message of the Save the Rivers Campaign to the remote villages of that area. However she will find time to celebrate her birthday with us on 16 October and Diwali the following day, something that everyone is eagerly looking forward to.