

## FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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## NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

Albertslund, January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2002

Dear friends,

It is time for news from Lakshmi Ashram, and I send **SANCHAR 88**, which contains the following:

Article on celebration of one of the many festivals in India by Nandi Bisht from class VIII.  
Reflections on Gandhian Thoughts Training Programme by Archana Bahuguna – one of the young people who has come from outside the Ashram to participate in the course.  
Self Help Education – a description of Anand Bhai's work by Lone Poulsen.  
The School in Himalaya – a travel letter from Martin Huusfeldt.

**First of all I will take the opportunity to wish all friends of Lakshmi Ashram a Happy New Year, and I have received greetings from the Ashram which I pass on to you.**

Since last time there has been changes in the leader team of Lakshmi Ashram. Pushpa Joshi, who since 1989 has been the secretary of the Ashram, has withdrawn because of illness. Thank you to her for many years' good work! Neema Vaishnava has accepted to take over the task of great responsibility, and Parvati Goswami is looking for the day-to-day programme. All the other workers back up Neema and support her. Neema belongs to the young generation, and she has done with a long education. She visited Denmark in the spring of 1997, and when she returned to India, she studied for one year in a Gandhi University. We wish good luck to Neema and the Ashram.

Thank you for all the money for sponsorships and other contributions. Again I will ask you to support Lakshmi Ashram. Any amount of money will be received with pleasure. I have seen the account of the year 2000/01 from the Ashram and can see for myself that the daily expenses have increased. Therefore I ask you to pay more money for the sponsorships, if it is possible. The amount for sponsorships has been the same for many years. Thanks for your cooperation.

The homepage of Lakshmi Ashram in the Internet has the following address:  
<http://go.to/lakshmiashram> - I regret that it is still only in Danish.

With love,

# Sanchar 88

## Raksha Bandhan

by Nandi Bisht - Class VIII

A great many festivals are celebrated in India, for example Holi, Diwali and Uttarayani, all national festivals, and Harela, a local festival of Kumaun. One of these many festivals is Raksha Bandhan. The festival of Raksha Bandhan is especially a festival of brothers and sisters. It is also rooted in our history. It is said that the Queen Karmavati sent a \*rakhi to the Emperor Humayun for her protection, and ever since then the festival of Raksha Bandhan has been celebrated.

*\*The "Rakhi" is a protective talisman, a piece of thread often brightly decorated, which a sister ties around the wrist of her brother as a symbol of the protection that he gives her.*

Here too in the Ashram we celebrate this sacred festival. We not only tie the "rakhis" on the wrists of our brothers but also on our sisters' wrists. In Lakshmi Ashram we celebrate Raksha Bandhan in this way. One particular class has the responsibility for cooking lunch and also for making the preparations to celebrate the festival. This year it was the turn of our class to assume this responsibility. Therefore for many days I have been thinking over this, how we might make this year's celebrations something special.

Early in the morning we did the preparations for lunch, and at the same time decorated the prayer hall. We gathered together all the rakhis made by the different classes and displayed them in the hall. After this was all completed we had breakfast, and then our class prepared the lunch. Then we enthusiastically prepared for the cultural programme. All the Ashram brothers and sisters gathered in Shanti Bhavan. The programme began with the formal lighting of the wick lamps, followed with the tying of rakhis on the wrists of those brothers present, and then the sisters tied rakhis on one another. When this was completed it was time to begin the cultural programme. It was commenced with the small children singing the opening invocation. Their sweet voices were very pleasing. The invocation was followed by a dance presented by the students of class five. It was then the turn of class six, but as we had still some cooking to do to complete the lunch we presented our play. I had composed the play myself, therefore I was feeling very enthusiastic inside.

The play depicted one brother who had not been to his home for five years. This time he wanted to go home to celebrate Raksha Bandhan, but he could not get leave so he was sitting sadly alone. Then his friend came in and was surprised to see him looking so sad. He came up behind him and, putting his hands upon his shoulders, asked him what the matter was. Surprised by his friend coming upon him suddenly, he cheered up. In his mind he still kept thinking of home, and he told what was on his mind. But his friend had no sister, and being reminded of Raksha Bandhan he in turn became sad. He told his friend that he should request leave and go home. On hearing this, the first one suggests to his friend that he should come too. At this suggestion the friend asked what he would do there, and in reply he was told that he too could tie a rakhi on the first friend's sister's wrist. The friend was agreeable and took permission for leave for the two of them. Meanwhile at home the sister was waiting for her brother. On his arrival Raksha Bandhan was celebrated with great happiness. Thus our drama was concluded.

Following our drama other classes presented their items. One brother from Gujarat was also present, and he performed a Gujarati folk dance. After the programme everybody took lunch together.

In this way we celebrated the festival of Raksha Bandhan. The community celebration of Raksha Bandhan in the Ashram has a special importance of its own.



Some of the girls in front of The Hostel one morning.

*As Nandi has described, Raksha Bandhan is a festival especially highlighting the bond between brother and sister. The “Rakhi” is a protective talisman, a piece of thread often brightly decorated, that a sister ties around the wrist of her brother as a symbol of the protection that he gives her. The festival falls on the full moon of the Hindu month of Sravan that falls in August. It has become very commercialised and the markets before the festival are full of rakhis for sale. However the girls in the Ashram take out cotton threads from old cloth and then use these to make simple yet appealing rakhis.*

*In the last couple of years it has been celebrated in a more organised way and this year class eight took the full responsibility for how it would be celebrated. It was the first time that the cultural programme was arranged entirely by the inspiration of the students. It is only during the last couple of years that everyone has gathered in Shanti Bhavan and rakhis have been tied on one another’s wrists in such a way that nobody misses out and everyone gets equal treatment.*

# **Some Personal Reflections on Gandhian Thoughts Training Programme**

by Archana Bahuguna

Some time back I found myself pondering over what I would do after my final school examinations, the Intermediate exams. I had no desire to go on to college, but I had no idea what else I could do. Then suddenly it was suggested to me, *“Would you like to go to Lakshmi Ashram? They run a training programme there in Practical Gandhian Thought.”*

Trapped as I was in the terrible deception of Modernity and thus having no sense of reverence for Gandhi, I felt some difficulty in accepting this opportunity to study Gandhi. However I made up my mind that I would accept this chance to gain new experiences, and decided that I would indeed go to Kausani.

For some days after arriving in Kausani I found myself thinking, *“What will I learn here? What work will I do here?”* I was feeling very low, yet imbibed with faith, determination and a desire for intellectual understanding I commenced the training. Immediately I found that the darkness that I had so far been living in was dispersed. My eyes were opened to the light. Through taking part wholeheartedly in the studies in class and in the other practical activities, it seemed as if only now my education was truly commencing. I became aware of just how we are immersed in darkness, of what a terrible state our educational system is in. Only now I was becoming aware of just what we were being taught, and what we ought to be learning.

To put it in a nutshell the training in Practical Gandhian Thought totally changed my outlook on life, my way of thinking. I came to truly understand what ultimately is the nature of reality. Trapped as I had been in the snare of modernity I had been looking upon “Development” and “Backward-ness” in quite a different way. I too had been part of that competitive rat race. Sometimes I used to think that I would like to do some more social work, but then questions would arise – what kind of work? And by what means?

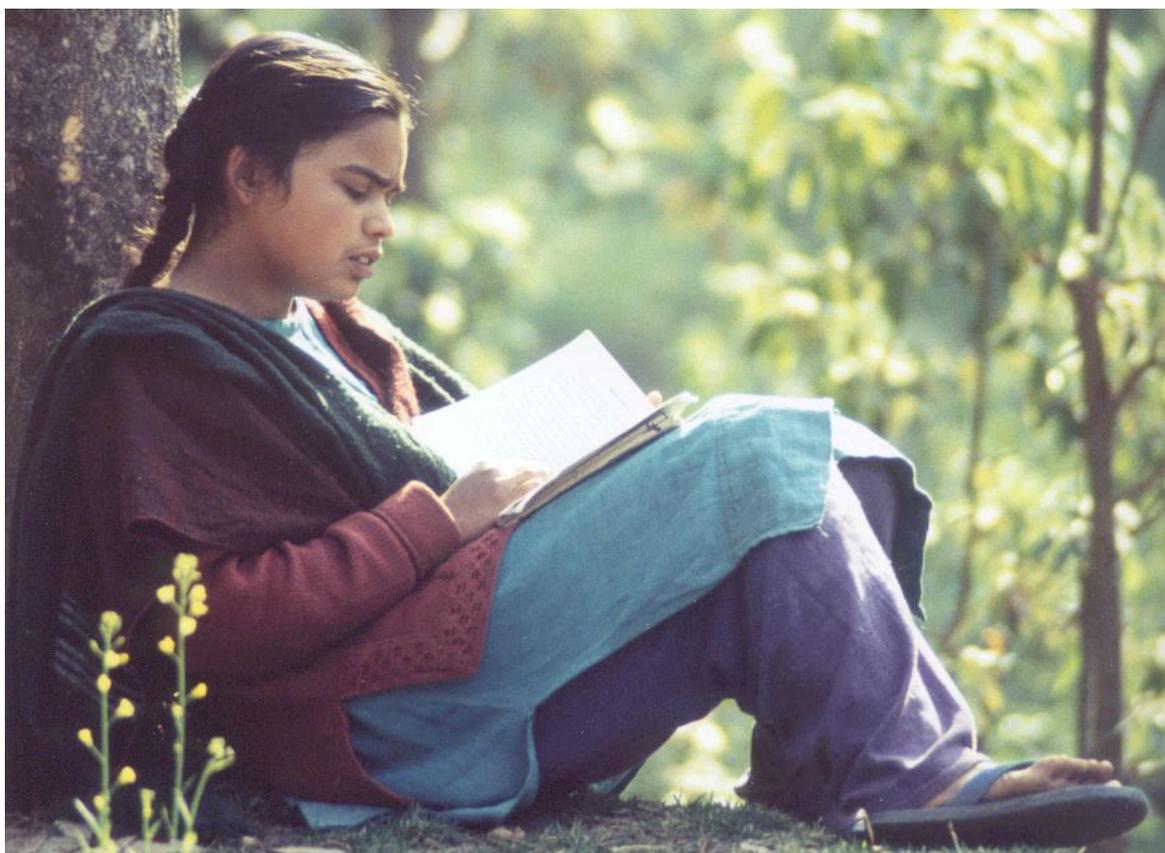
But this training programme, steeped as it was in a spirit of dedication, opened a new way for me, which I am trying to follow. I feel that whoever takes this training programme will find that they will reject sooner or later the old ways, for nobody ultimately wishes to be trapped in the snares of this illusory world. This realisation is the true objective of life.

After completing this training nobody will find themselves restless or troubled in their minds. While for a while one might wander aimlessly in this materialistic world, but a path to purify the mind has opened itself, and provided that one has wholeheartedly accepted the teachings the time will come that one will not be troubled.

Now having returned to my home I have no feelings whatsoever of inferiority or immaturity. I only feel a certain incompleteness in that I have only just started to acquire this knowledge, and now I earnestly desire that in some way or the other I will receive more and more of this education. I do not feel dispirited in any way for I have complete faith that I will get all the help and guidance that I need from my teachers and other people. These eight months of training have provided me with a

true outlook on understanding Truth. In this is found my true happiness that is that we can find satisfaction in whatever we do.

*Achana is now working under the guidance of her uncle, Devendra Bhai in the Mandakini Valley of the newly created Rudrapryag District. She returned here for a month recently to improve her skills in weaving under the guidance of Parvati Goswami. Her younger sister, Jaya, is one of the students on the ongoing training programme in Gandhian Thoughts.*



One of the eldest girls is studying in the afternoon in the Ashram.

## **Self Help Education** **– a description of Anand Bhai's newest idea.** by Lone Poulsen

During my visit in Lakshmi Ashram in April 2001 Marie Thøger and I often discussed with Anand Bhai about his different projects and doings. He was still working with his publicity project about developing new equipments for mountain life for the people in the villages in Kumaon. It is a matter of Self Help Education, because he believes that only sustainable development could bring appropriate change in the society, and in this connection self help is necessary. The project has been supported by the Danish Electrician Union for the last few years. Lakshmi Ashram has always attached importance to develop the independence of people and has not usually given away equipments, but has asked for a manageable price for the tools.

In the autumn of 2000 they carried through a publicity campaign that was divided in three steps:

1. In the first step Anand went together with some workers and girls from the Ashram through the valley to the villages by the roadside with a wheelbarrow with new tools. The girls sang, proclaimed slogans and distributed small informative folders about the products. The villagers could buy the tools, and the sale was satisfactory.
2. The next step was walking tours by the paths up to the many small villages off the road. Children and workers from the Ashram walked in small groups to the most out-of-the-way areas to draw the villagers' attention to the project. Even in the most remote areas people got to know Lakshmi Ashram.
3. During the publicity campaign they met social workers from other organisations, and it was arranged that these workers should bring folders and tools to "their" villages in return for getting 7% of the sale. In that way it was possible to reach even more villages.

A fourth step in the publicity and training campaign was to be started when we were in the Ashram. We have not got any news about this step yet, but in short the idea is as described here:

#### **First month.**

Anand and some workers will try to make schoolchildren in the villages they know best interested in helping with the project. In six chosen villages they will ask students in class V and VI to answer 11 questions in a questionnaire about their domestic surroundings. They will get one month for the answering, and of course their parents, family and friends may help them. Such a request to observe and think for themselves is quite unknown in the schools there.

#### **Second month.**

When the children return the questionnaire, they will receive a piece of tool, which they can bring home to give to their mother or someone else who is responsible for or takes part in the fieldwork. During the next month the children are going to write an essay about their experience with the tool. All these stories will be gathered, and the family is allowed to keep the tool. Such a practise in writing an essay the children have never been confronted with in the village schools there. Anand thinks that it will promote the capacity of thinking.

#### **Third month.**

Time will be used for analysing the stories and find out the mother's / family's experience and opinion of the tool, and after that they will find out and develop improvements of the tools.



As mentioned in the latest Sanchar we travelled together with one of the electricians from the Danish Electrician Union, Martin Huusfeldt, to Lakshmi Ashram. Here we will bring his travel letter, which has been published in an electrician journal in Copenhagen.

## **The School in Himalaya A Travel Letter from Martin Huusfeldt**

After one hour's delay the plane took off on Tuesday April 3<sup>rd</sup> towards Delhi. The travel to Lakshmi Ashram had started. In India time is not the same as in Denmark, so it was ok to start in the airport with some waiting time. We arrived in Delhi Wednesday morning – at 11.30 a.m. local time and 8 o'clock a.m. in Denmark. After filling in various papers and changing of money we met India. The noise, the smell and the fantastic crowd of people answered exactly to the pictures I have seen from the big country. Krishna, a woman from one of the organisations in the mountains, received us, and after packing a car we took off towards the first stop – the city of Almora. First we should drive out of Delhi. It took about one hour, and the weather forecast for the town was as nearly every day "a little overcast" (smog). They are driving in the left side of the road, but we drove most of the time in the middle of the road, and the horn was often used, and most cars bear also the following text painted in bright colours: "Horn, please".

After a long and eventful drive we arrived in Almora about nine o'clock in the evening. Now it was time for my first real Indian meal, before we went to bed after a long and tiring travel. The purpose of the trip as far as I am concerned was to check up and examine the need for electricity in the school and in the belonging buildings. Lakshmi Ashram is for the present the solidarity project of the electrician Branch in Copenhagen, and that I was able to visit the place, was the result of obligingness from the Union and the Branch. My travelling companions were Lone and Henning Poulsen and Marie Thøger – all three good friends of the Ashram, so I could not have got better travel guides in connection with the project.

On the first day we visited the memorial ground for the founder of Lakshmi Ashram in Himdarshan Kutir – three-four hours' drive from Almora. We were welcomed with great pleasure and were presented for the big crowd who was gathered to celebrate the centenary of the founder. Former and present students of the Ashram sang and made speeches, and we saw the memorial for the founder Sarala Behn, and as it is a custom in India we took off our shoes when we were standing in the memorial place.



After one more overnight stay we went on to Kausani, and a quarter of an hour's walk up the mountain slope brought us to Lakshmi Ashram. The school hummed with life and activities for the next three days on the occasion of the centenary. There were arranged exhibitions, workshops and meetings, and the all-important theme was the future and system of education of the school. Many guests and former students had come from far and near. There is a great respect of the work they are doing in Lakshmi Ashram and of the great social work they carry out to the benefit of the villagers in Kumaon.

Especially one exhibition had my interest. It showed improved agriculture tools from Anand Bhai's workshop. Hoes, sickles, rakes, spinning tools and a corn fan were some of the things they showed. The profit from the event of May 1<sup>st</sup> in the Branch goes on the workshop, and they are starting a project, where children can get a tool to use in their home. They are going to write an essay about ideas of possible improvements.

I visited Anand's workshop, which is placed on a slope on the other side of the village. It is working very well, even if the electrician installations are not worth describing! I asked Anand about who had made these. He pointed to the sky and said, "My spirit."

After the school was in its daily rhythm again, and all the guests had gone home, I set about inspecting the electrician installations. They are very faulty and will not at all meet the Danish demands, but anyway it is in India. I made a total surveying of the school and the other buildings and used at the same time insulating tape and terminal strips. The fact that the installations have not been burnt down is due to the very low consumption of electricity. There is not enough light in the classrooms, meeting- and eating-rooms, outside light at the washing place and toilets and light and ventilation in the kitchen, where the food is made on an open fireplace.

I am not afraid for the future, because the girls in Lakshmi Ashram are strong girls. We electricians in the Copenhagen Branch could maybe together with others provide to them a new and up-to-date installation, which could lighten their daily life and in that way raise the quality of life in Himalaya. Finally I want to thank the members of the Branch for the effort that has been done to the benefit of people on the other side of the earth.

Love from  
Martin Huusfeldt



On Friday November 16<sup>th</sup> 2001 there was a café arrangement in the Electrician Union, The Copenhagen Branch.

Three times in a row from 1999 to 2001 the evening was inspired by India to support Lakshmi Ashram.

The programme started with Indian music. Two Danish musicians played Indian instruments. Morten Grunnet played his sarod (a stringed instrument) and Frank Juul played on tabla (drums). They were very good. After that they served Indian food from a restaurant in Copenhagen, and while they were drinking a cup of coffee Martin Huusfeldt showed slides from his visit in Lakshmi Ashram. At last winners of small Indian gifts were drawn in a solidarity lottery.

Morten Grunnet plays his sarod.