

Sanchar 89

Thoughts on the Future Direction of Educational Activities in Lakshmi Ashram

By Neema Vaishnava



For some time now discussions have been ongoing as to how we might make the education more alive and how we might link it more to the surrounding life of people, in other words how to make it more rooted in the local environment. At the beginning of February 2002, under the guidance and direction of Radha Didi, we had some very positive discussions on this topic. It was agreed that some steps would be taken so as to make the education come more alive and be more rooted in the immediate surroundings:

Study and research would be made into various methods and techniques for teaching different subjects, the primary base for which would be the daily activities, e.g. kitchen, garden, dairy.

To achieve this we would seek the guidance of those individuals who are actively involved in alternative education. Study material would be collected, and at the same time study tours would be made to such places where experiments in alternative education are being made, so that through direct observation and participation a deeper understanding might be achieved.

Each and every activity in Lakshmi Ashram has as its core purpose education, thus there is a need to make this connect more alive and give an emphasis to imparting education through these activities, e.g. nutritional values through the kitchen, mathematics through the accounting for production of fruit, milk and vegetables.

Work should be undertaken to gather and collate knowledge on local history, geography and culture. Through such activities the students will gain a greater awareness of themselves, and at the same time a respect and an affection will be aroused in them for their own surroundings.

Ways need to be sought for increasing a child's inner sensitivity and love.

For developing the child's ability to know themselves camps and self-evaluation will be encouraged.

Training in Gandhian Thought.

Discussions also focussed on how we might make the present training programme in Gandhian Thought stronger in its format. It was agreed to make the following steps so that the training programme, both theoretically and practically, might have a more positive structure:

Theory:

The training period would be increased from seven months to one year, for it is felt that seven months is far too short a period to both complete the syllabus and test it in practice. An attempt should be made to test Gandhi's constructive ideas in the village setting and to try to inspire villagers to adopt these ideas in practice.

A syllabus will also be prepared on Panchayati Raj (decentralised local government structures) and Gram Swarajya (Gandhi's vision of the decentralised village republic). More time should be made available to the students for educational study. Accounting should also be incorporated in the syllabus.

Practical:

This will include spinning and weaving/knitting of wool for rugs, blankets and sweaters, sewing, typing etc.

Training for Self-Sufficiency.

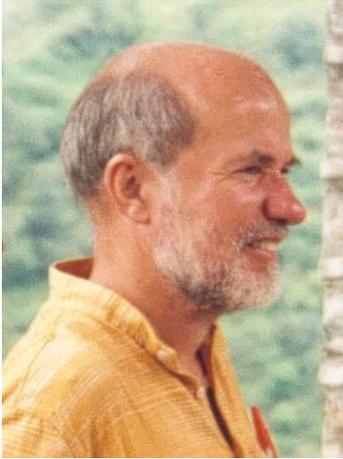
This training programme is particular for those less educated older girls and women, including those women who have been deserted by their husbands, or who are widowed, or otherwise have no means of support. Our experience has been that such women need both intellectual and practical training so as to increase their personal self-confidence and to raise their self-respect. Their training programme should run for one year, and for their intellectual development should include two hours of classes and study every day. During the rest of the time they should learn the following: sewing, spinning, weaving and knitting, incense making, etc. An important aspect of their training would focus on how to live a communitive life, be it in the context of the Ashram or in the village.

Training of Workers.

Having completed their school studies, an effort will be made to impart training to the students not only for their personal development but also in the direction of service to the society and social change. Such a training programme would include the following: classes, private study, study tours, self-evaluation, participation in camps and seminars. They would also be given responsibility for practical activities.

In order to make all the above first and foremost it is necessary to create the right environment. While preserving the family atmosphere of the Ashram, there is also a felt need to create a more academic structure in which though values of social and family life will be maintained and will not decrease.

**Efforts for Village-Level Water Resource Management
By David Hopkins**



As many of our friends are aware, besides the educational activities of Lakshmi Ashram centred on our residential school in Kausani, we have also been active for some twenty-five years in Dhauladevi Development Block of Almora district. The very first activities that we had been involved in had been those of adult literacy and income-generating activities especially in spinning of wool and knitting of sweaters. Then, of the request of the local people who perceived it as their most important need, we started preschool centres known as “Balwaris” around Danya and also our village centre in the remote village of Sakhande. This programme is still thriving today and was the inspiration for a balwari programme that is today operating all over Kumaon and Garhwal.

For the past twelve years we have been working in the environmental field around Danya with assistance from a Delhi-based national organisation, Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development (SPWD), and three years ago we initiated a five-year watershed management programme in the deep valley overlooked by our village service centre in Chalmorigara hamlet near Danya. In Sanchar 86 Basanti Behn had presented her report on the activities ongoing in Danya.

The watershed programme has as one of its prime objectives the optimum sustainable use of natural resources through the active participation of the local communities. For this to be successful one of the key components of the project has been to encourage the women of each small hamlet within the project area to organise themselves into Self-Help Groups. These groups aim to meet once a month. The members pay contributions that are deposited into a Common Fund. Almost every group has opened accounts in the local bank or post office for this purpose. This money is then utilised for community items, for instance cooking vessels that can be made available at occasions such as weddings. Each and every activity undertaken with the local communities is initiated through these groups.

In the past year two very successful interventions have been made in the field of water management, whose stories I would like to present to you here.



Restoration of Village Spring by Community Efforts in Parai.

In the year 2000 the villagers of Parai approached our field team, requesting that their village too be included in the ongoing project. Meetings were held in the village that lies on the ridge separating the project watershed from the next valley and the team explained their methods of working, and what assistance might be made available to the village community. The latter were adamant that their biggest problem was water, and insisted that before any other activities were undertaken efforts should be made to find solutions to their problems of water.

Lying below the village of Parai had once been the traditional village spring that served the people of Parai. However several decades ago landslips had destroyed this spring, and now the water just ran away over the ground. Some ten-fifteen years back a village headman had at great cost had a collection tank built, but low-quality materials and shoddy workmanship had meant that this structure did not last.

Several meetings were held with the villagers of Parai, and it was decided what responsibilities would be met by the villagers and what contribution the project would make. Everyone was in agreement, and during the winter of 2000/01 the construction work was undertaken. The Ashram provided the building materials – bricks, cement, sand and reinforcing rods, and brought them to the road head. The villagers assumed responsibility for carrying down the building materials to their village, and then when needed to the site of the spring. The villagers also assumed the responsibility for levelling the area where the storage tank would be constructed and building a retaining wall, while the Ashram met the labour costs of the mason who constructed the tank and drinking trough. The spring water is diverted into a small tank where any sediment can settle, and then into the last round storage tank, the overflow from which flows into a long drinking trough for the village livestock. With the contribution in labour by the villagers, all this was achieved for little more than ten thousand rupees. Before the work began and estimates of costs were made there were people in the

village who did not believe that it could be achieved for so little. After all some seventy thousand rupees had been spent on the previous failed effort!

After the renovation work had been completed and the tank became functional, an informal village committee was established to manage the tank and its surroundings, and rules for its use acceptable to everybody were drawn up. During 2001 some necessary work was undertaken in the gully above the spring to prevent the possibility of further landslips damaging the restored spring and tank, soil conservation structures being built to divert any possible flash floods away from the spring site.

It is a very rewarding sight to see the tank and animal drinking trough overflowing with water, cattle drinking there, water buffalo being washed down at one side while on the other side women are washing clothes or fetching water. With the active participation of the villagers the well should be there for the innovations to be well cared for and maintained for many years to come.

Construction of Infiltration Well by Community Efforts in Nali.

Nali is a small Harijan (low caste) hamlet that lies on the upper slopes of the watershed area immediately below the main road about a kilometre before our village service centre. Like all the other hamlets situated on the higher slopes of the valley, the most pressing problem facing the residents in Nali is that of water. Many of the springs on the higher slopes, not just in this particular area but throughout the hills, are completely drying up or else becoming seasonal. One key-influencing factor must be the great decrease in tree cover. Prakash Joshi, one of our field workers, recalls that when he was a small boy the land above the road close to Nali was covered with oak forest, but that much of it was then cut for firewood for the market in Danya, in particular for the restaurants.

The project has been active in Nali for several years. In the winter of 2000/01 they had contributed their labour to build retaining walls on both sides of a steep gully alongside their village, where previous flash floods had caused damage to the adjacent fields, destroying standing crops. The one spring that served their small hamlet had in recent years been given water less and less regularly. However it was felt that there was potential for the digging of an infiltration well. Advice was taken from one Jagdish Bhandari who has had experience in constructing more than one hundred such wells in the hills, even though wells are not traditional structures in most parts of Kumaon. He felt that a site immediately below the present spring had good potential.

On this basis a number of meetings were held with the residents of Nali in the autumn. It was agreed that the villagers would all contribute in labour to the digging of the well. One or two men who had contracts for building work offered to give money instead of labour. It was also agreed that if the digging was successful and water was found, that the men would break stones for the infilling, while the women would carry the raw materials the short distance from the road to the site of the well. Construction began in mid December with the digging of the well, Jagdish Bhandari having arranged for one skilled mason and one labourer, both experienced in this work, to come from near Mukteshwar. Every day two men from Nali assisted them in digging. By late December they had dug six metres and there were signs of water, another two metres or a little more and they had dug deep enough for a collection tank. The handpump and associated pipe were purchased from Haldwani. Cement, sand and stone were obtained locally, and by the end of January the construction was complete, the storage tank at depth into which water infiltrates being connected to the surface by a pipe through which water can be pumped up. The space around the pipe and above the collection tank has been infilled, so that at the surface all that is now visible is the pump.

The villagers are already making daily use of the pump to meet much of their daily needs. If successful in the long term it will be a fine example to other communities in the higher ridges. We believe both the structure in Parai and the infiltration well in Nali to be easily replicable in other parts of the hills, and to be fine examples of what can be achieved by the collective will of the community with only limited assistance and direction from outside institutions. In both examples the communities have a vested interest in the upkeep of structures that they have personally contributed to with active participation from beginning to end.

Our Holiday Experiences **Compiled by Prema Behn**

As in past years, on 27th December 2001 most of our students and workers left for their annual holidays to return on 8th February 2002. The following few days were very wet, so one afternoon we all sat together in one of the classrooms and shared our holiday experiences. These we would now like to share with all our friends in Denmark and elsewhere.



BINITA – class III:

When I went home for my holidays, then everyone at home was very happy. I met everybody, which I greatly enjoyed. At home I went with my grandmother to the forest to fetch firewood and pine needles. I also gave water to the cows and buffaloes. I played with my brother, also taught him some songs. I remembered what I had been told in the Ashram. How much I used to remember my Ashram friends also. Every day I practised my reading and writing.

SONIYA – class III:

I spent my holidays with my aunt (mother's brother's wife) in Dunagiri, where my mother came to meet us and stayed for twelve days. I did some homework every day and also wrote my diary. I would go with my aunt to cut oak leaves and bring them home, and also fetched firewood. I used to give water to the cows. I went on two days to the temple. My auntie has a daughter, so we bought sweets, ate them ourselves and also shared them with others. My mother and aunt told me that I should be a good girl in the Ashram and study hard, do what I was told. I like it in the Ashram. Even at home I used to remember the Ashram. This year there was snow in Dunagiri, we lit a fire and sitting around it we gossiped and told stories.



KAVITA – class III:

I went home for my holidays with my father. At home I used to fetch water from the spring and gave water to the cows to drink. I talked to my elder sisters about the Ashram. I played with the children in my village and also brought wood from the forest. I spent some time every day reading and writing. I liked being at home. My mother would tell me, "Work well in the Ashram and live together with everyone there in a loving way."

DIWA – class III:

I reached home on 26th with my father, where I met everybody. They were all very happy. The children, young girls and women of the village came to meet me. I told them all about the Ashram and sang them songs that I had learned there.

Every day I studied and fetched wood from the forest and water from the spring, used to give water to the bullocks and goats and help in cleaning the house. Between five and six o'clock in the evenings I organised games for the children in my village. On 26th of January (Republic Day) I sang a song in the school and received two pencils as a prize. I used to remember the Ashram a lot.

BASANTI – class III:

I was one day going late on my holidays because my father was late in coming to the Ashram. We reached home on night of 28th. My mother had made the evening meal and had already eaten. I used to wash my brothers' and sisters' hands and faces, also went with the cattle to graze them in the forest and pounded rice. I practised my reading and writing every day, and would teach my small brother his alphabet. My mother told me when I was coming back, "Pay attention to your studies and do whatever you are told. Work hard at whatever you do." I like it very much in the Ashram.

ASHA – class III:

I reached home on 26th for my holidays. My grandmother threw her arms around my neck and was so happy. I was so happy to meet with everybody. People in the village used to ask me about the Ashram and I was very happy to tell them. I used to pound the rice, fetch water, and in the evenings cut vegetables. Every day I did my homework. I drank buffalo milk. At home we have four goats. At mealtimes I also used to say the grace. My father showed me photos of Jageshwar. I played with the children in the village. I was ill for a few days.

NEERU BORA – class VI:

I went home for my holidays on 26th December. From 27th December until 2nd February I set out in the early morning cold to take three litres of milk to a shop, walking four kilometres in each direction. We sold our milk for twelve rupees a litre, from which we met our household expenses.

I used to go every day with an older girl from our village. One day we were going along, my companion was wearing imitation jewellery in her ears, a thief took them to be gold and in a lonely place some distance from the village jumped out on her. She told him that they were not gold, the thief looked closely at them and let her go. I was very frightened and ran away shouting. I was so frightened that I had no idea what was going on.

At home I went with the cattle grazing, fetched green firewood from the forest. My uncle's house is being built at present (late father's younger brother). My elder sister and I fetched bricks from the roadside and also carried stones from the forest on our heads. I had studied in my village school until class three. I taught the children there dances and songs. On 26th of January I performed a dance in the school and received an exercise book and pencil as a prize.

I stayed for four days at my maternal grandmother's home where I helped my grandmother and aunt plant out potatoes and also fetched water as well as looking after my little cousin. I also went to my father's sister's home in Kashipur on the plains beyond Nainital, a large industrial and market centre. I liked it very much there. I also did a lot of reading and writing at home. My mother told me that this time I had changed a lot. "You have come back home a very good girl." My mother was very happy. I had the chance to see the videos of my elder brother's and my uncle's weddings and also saw the video of the film "Santoshi Ma". I enjoyed my holidays very much this time and came back to the Ashram on the right day, 8th of February.

Gandhian Thought Programme

By Shashi Pandey



I came to Lakshmi Ashram thinking that alongside my formal education I could also learn some activities that would be of use to me in my daily life. Before I had a desire, like so many others, of getting government employment. However on coming to the Ashram, a change took place in me that is unforgettable. I was thinking over in my mind that whatever I might learn, I would try to make use of it and pursue that particular path in my life. Reaching there I was to find such an atmosphere that would allow me to recognise a meaningful and successful life. Now my objective is that

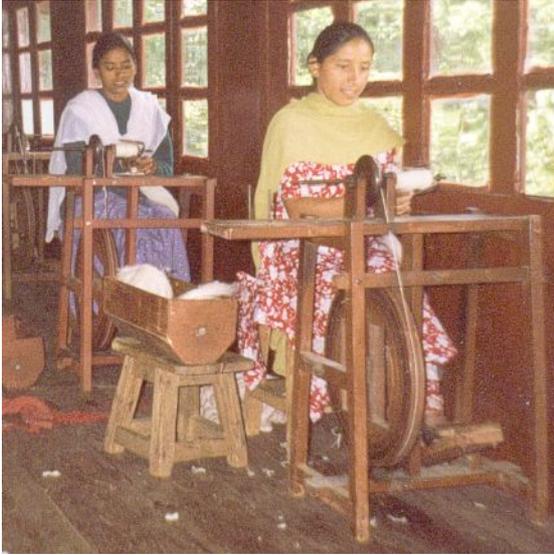
in whatever position of life I might find myself, I will live as a totally committed individual, do whatever I have to do with total commitment.

Experiences during my Eight Month's Training.

It is said that wherever one goes one has to lose something in order to gain. If I observe my coming to the Ashram from a positive point of view, I can say that I gained a lot, but it is difficult to describe those things that impact on ones own mind. Even if there were some depressing experiences they were nothing against the happy and memorable times.

I enjoyed the daily round of activities and tried my very best to follow the daily discipline, and where I made mistakes I took every opportunity to learn from them, else it would have been very difficult to make progress. Every morning we sat for meditation for half an hour seeking to control our ever-restless minds. Then until six o'clock we had private study, during which our minds were filled with a resolution to pass the day in a spirit of enthusiasm. At six o'clock we would sit for community prayers, and a feeling of new self-confidence arose. After that we joined in the cleaning and later breakfast. There was a great joy in working alongside the children.

From eight till ten o'clock we worked in the workshop to learn some basic skills that are essential for a life of self-sufficiency. We first learned to spin on the spindle, the first and most basic step in learning to knit sweaters. We had seen Gandhi in photos spinning in this way, and that encouraged us very much. When we mastered the spindle, we learned to spin on the spinning wheel. To begin with I could not get the right balance. Whenever I paid attention to my hands then my feet stopped working! However with practise I learned to spin very well. We were ever so pleased when we had knitted small sweaters for the young children from the wool that we had spun. Then we learned to weave carpets, two girls to a carpet, which turned out very well.



I already had a great liking for music, and in the Ashram I found surroundings where music was given a very special place. Music was taken very seriously, and we learned songs in several languages and also learned dances. Music gives our lives charm and joy. I came across a lot of improvements in the field of education. There is a great deal of difference between the education in the schools in the outside world and that imparted in Lakshmi Ashram. The biggest difference is that in the Ashram there is a family-like relationship between the teacher and the student, so that the student has no hesitation in asking questions to her teacher. Earlier I had never read anything at all about Gandhi, something we felt very ashamed of, for in our country we look upon Gandhi as a God. Our classes were taken by Neema Behn, Kanti Didi and

Aniruddh Bhai, from whom we had a chance to learn a lot to increase our knowledge. We were told about Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and Sarala Behn. The hope is that we will be capable of adapting in our lives what we have learned from Gandhi.

I learned how to celebrate all the festivals such as Christmas (Christian), Dipawali (Hindu) and Eid (Muslim) in a spirit of peace and friendship. I had the opportunity to see a number of temples new to me. My interest was awakened into how they were established, the culture and traditions associated with them, the ancient epics and legends linked to each of them. Having the chance to see so many temples and learn about them, a deep faith in God was aroused, which will always remain steadfast. Living in the Ashram also gave me an opportunity to meet with overseas visitors and to chat with them. A desire was aroused in me to travel both in my own country and abroad, so that I might broaden my knowledge.

Great importance is given to physical labour. I had never done any physical work before, but I experienced an inner feeling of contentment and joy while doing this sort of work. Every activity was aimed at bringing self-sufficiency, and if we put this knowledge into practise we will definitely achieve success.

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

Albertslund, April 27th 2002

Dear friends,

It is time for news from Lakshmi Ashram, and I send **SANCHAR 89**, which contains the following:

Thoughts on the Future Direction of Educational Activities by Neema Vaishnava.
Efforts for Village-Level Water Resource Management by David Hopkins.
Our Holiday Experiences told to Prema Behn.
Gandhian Thought Programme by Shashi Pandey.

As you can read there are other activities than the daily classes and doings in the Ashram. Many efforts and some money are used in the villages to the benefit to the people of the mountains in a big area. The teaching also faces big changes these years. The workers of the Ashram are very conscious of keeping up with the development and all the time to improve classes.

I have enclosed the statement of accounts for the year 2001. I have got a little less money than in the year 2000, but I think it is accidentally. About 97.000 Danish kroner (about 11.150 US dollars) were sent to the Ashram, and in March 2002 I have sent 45.000 Danish kroner (about 5.300 US dollars). The administration expenses were low, because I bought stamps in the first days of January this year. It costs about 120 US dollars to send a Sanchar to the friends.

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. As you can see in this newsletter it is very good also to send unconditioned contributions. The money will be used for educational material, study tours, projects in the villages etc. As last time I ask you to send extra money because of increase of the daily expenses. Thanks for your cooperation.

The website of Lakshmi Ashram has the following address: **<http://lakshmi.adr.dk>**

I regret that it is still only in Danish, but we are working on having it also in English and Hindi. We cooperate with an American anthropologist, who stayed in Kumaon for a long time some years ago.

The next Sanchar will probably be sent in August. We expect that Radha Bhatt will visit Denmark in the autumn this year, so we are looking forward to seeing her.

With love,

Lone Poulsen