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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

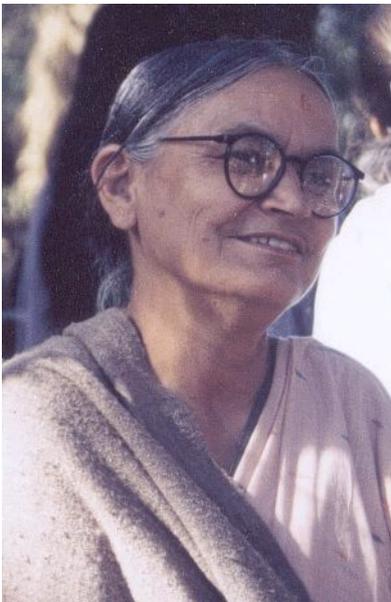
August 2002

Dear friends,

It is time for news from Lakshmi Ashram, and I send **SANCHAR 90**, which contains the following:

Experiences by two Students from Class XII
Prema Behn Tells about a New Project – Moving the Classroom out into the Village
Students from Class VI Write about the Project
A Little Report about the Workshop by Anand Bhai
A Flier with the New Tools

As you can see, they try to find new ways in the education in Lakshmi Ashram, and at the same time both the students and teachers work together with the workers in the workshop about an information programme for the new tools.



Radha Bhatt comes to Denmark in August/September, and therefore I will arrange a meeting for the Friends of Lakshmi Ashram in the end of September.

First Radha is going to visit her sister in Bergen for some weeks, and after that she will study Free Schools in Denmark. We have got great help from a High School here, and one of the teachers has made a programme for her. She is also going to different meetings and shall of course visit 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. Contributions that are not earmarked are also very good. 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 still working on having it also in English and Hindi.

With love,

Sanchar 90

Experiences by two Students from Class XII

Gayatri Goswami

I came to Lakshmi Ashram in July 1994 - eight years old. I have studied in the Ashram since class IV, and by always seeking to understand each and every activity in depth I have gone ahead. I am very much attached to this place, for we live here with the love and support of our elder sisters. Each year I go for two months to my home where I also work along with my mother and father.

Last year in the spring I sat my High School examinations, and after passing I took the seven months Practical Training Programme in Gandhian Thought, through which I got an opportunity to understand Gandhi. His life was one of completeness, something that one does not find in the lives of other thinkers and philosophers. He both thought deeply and put his thoughts into action in every sphere of human life. He undertook every activity as part of his search for Truth, and the path that he followed was that of Non-Violence. Through his life I gained an education in Truth and Non-Violence, tolerance and totality. I had the chance to meet many people and learning their thinking on life at first hand, a living example for me of the power of individual thinking.

My childhood had offered me numerous opportunities, and my desire was to work here in the Ashram. Just as our elder sisters had made so much effort to develop our inner abilities, I too wanted to make such an effort to help in someone else's development. These days I am maintaining the accounts of the Ashram store, managing the cultural activities and conducting both morning and evening prayers. In all these activities I am conscious of my moral duty and responsibility. I believe that in developing an ideal form of self-sufficiency we can teach people the art of living, and by making people independent and self-sufficient we are continuing the past 55 years of work. The foundations of the institution continue to be strong even today and will continue to be. I express my deepest gratitude to all those elder sisters who have helped in my development.

Manju Joshi

I came to Lakshmi Ashram when I was six years old as a result of my elder sister already being here. I grew up in the Ashram, and in the spring of last year passed my High School examinations. Afterwards I took the Training Programme in Gandhian Thought. I already had a deep desire to learn in depth about the life of Gandhi, the reason being that from my early childhood that I have been receiving in Lakshmi Ashram an education in self-sufficiency based on his thoughts, a holistic education for building our lives in their totality. During this training I worked on coming to know and understand in depth Gandhi's basic concepts of Truth and Non-Violence. A deep belief and faith in these thoughts and way of life arose within me.

Nowadays I am studying for the Intermediate examinations. I am teaching the children spinning, teaching the younger children and thus helping in their development, and in the office learning to type and manage the postal department. I get a lot of joy out of doing all this work. I had felt from the beginning that I must work in the Ashram, so that its roots might become even stronger. I felt that just as our elder sisters had helped so much in my development, I am today having the opportunity to participate in this work. We too must prepare the coming generation and see that this objective is made even stronger, so that the next generation might fully benefit from this Ashram and in their turn make the foundations of the Ashram even stronger, so that as many people as possible might improve their futures. I want that the institution itself becomes self-supporting, so that people's futures might become full of light.

Moving the Classroom out into the Village

By Prema Behn



I believe that any school in which teaching is imported only through textbooks is giving an incomplete education. Where there is no place for activities relating to the realities of real life, there the children's behavioural development remains incomplete.

Our experience is that it is the Art of Behaviour that influences each and every area of life. There is constructiveness in practical work, the children find themselves confronted with reality, whereas often what is presented through the textbooks does not agree with the children's lives.

In June 2001 Hansi Behn and I went to participate in a ten days training programme being organised by SIDH (Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas) in their Kempton Falls training centre close to Mussoorie. During these ten days we learned how we could teach Hindi, mathematics, geography, science and history through interacting closely with our immediate surroundings, our village and the older generation.

SIDH had undertaken such experiments with the students of classes III to V in their own primary schools and given their experiments the title of "Pariyojna" which can be translated to "Integrated Project". Selecting a particular subject the young students talked with the old people in their villages, gathered information and with the assistance of their teachers and others having in-depth local knowledge, came eventually to a deep understanding of their chosen subject.

On our return to Kausani it was agreed that the girls in class VI would undertake this project activity, and from August we started to go with these children into some of the nearby villages. In our preparations we had together drawn up lots of questions for our coming visits, so that everyone of our students might fully understand what was meant by "Pariyojna". Our Ashram girls only go for some forty days holiday in the year, thus their links with village life are somewhat restricted. To begin with they were a little hesitant and lacking in confidence and it was necessary to build up their self-confidence, so that they might freely talk with the villagers and openly discuss their chosen subject. This was done by going to the primary schools and junior high schools in the selected villages, meeting with the students and teachers, talking with them, so that slowly our students' inhibitions got less and they themselves began taking part.

Our activities in this "Pariyojna" took us to the following villages: Chhani, Lweshal, Bijoriya, Kumana and Kausani, where we met with numerous people known to us, talked together on various subjects and gathered information. Now our girls fully understood what the "Pariyojna" involved, they had gained in self-confidence, and I was ready to give them our project subject: "Crops, Vegetables and Fruits". All the class joined together in gathering information, their shyness and inhibitions had now largely gone, and instead their enthusiasm was growing by leaps and bounds. Our underlying objectives in taking up this "Pariyojna" were for the children to increase their

understanding of their surroundings, increase their inner respect for the older generation and to come to understand the storehouse of knowledge that the latter had within them, and to appreciate and understand the differences between the past and present day life in the villages.

Our old people have an immense storehouse of practical knowledge; they know the art of living life. However with changing times their knowledge has no perceived value, and they find themselves put to one side. Today's children watch television rather than listening to their grandparents' stories. They can tell you all sorts of things from home and abroad, yet if you ask them something about their immediate surroundings they will not be able to tell you correctly. Today's children are not getting any moral education – the guidance that they used to get in the family from the older people, what they used to imbibe in their grandmothers' laps about our culture and tradition, this is getting less and less nowadays. It is all being forgotten by the people.

Our children had great fun in the villages carrying out the project work, and during this time got a comprehensive picture of village life as summarised below:

- The present-day conditions of our villages
- The family structure past and present
- The participation of women in agriculture
- Out-migration of young people from the hills
- Decline in agricultural productivity
- Increasing use of chemical fertilisers in growing cereals, fruits and vegetables
- The switchover from village self-sufficiency to a dependence on the market system
- A decline in the proportion animal husbandry
- A high level of education for girls
- A decline in respect for physical labour
- An increased role for allopathic medicines in place of traditional local medicinal herbs
- An improvement in the attitudes of villagers towards cleanliness and hygiene in the village
- A decline in village unity and simple living
- Two kinds of mentality present among the people of the village – one giving importance to labour, the second giving importance to money rather than labour
- Indifferent feelings towards their surroundings
- Widespread use and abuse of alcohol, numerous families in dire economic straits as a result
- A continual decline in natural resources, some to the point of extinction
- A movement away from their culture and traditions
- A decline in morality in the lives of the young with the spread of television

In this way our children saw and heard for themselves about various problems facing society these days, and I enjoyed very much going with the children to the villages. Over and above their daily responsibilities within the Ashram, for them it was a new activity, especially as it was outside the Ashram campus. Thus it was quite natural that they would be very excited. During this time they came to understand village life at very close quarters.

In the first week of May the children wrote up the information that they had gathered along with their individual experiences. Sitting altogether we discussed all that we had done and put it down in writing, the girls learning the technique of how best to present the accumulated material. I thought that it would be nice to present the findings in the form of a book, and they liked the idea. Thus the work that they had done was typed and then printed out on the computer, coming finally into our hands in the form of a book. The children were very happy indeed to see the book, and one afternoon before classes in the daily meeting, they made a presentation about the Project to the other students and teachers, and told individually of their experiences. All the children enjoyed

hearing about the project very much, and expressed their desire too to undertake such project activities. Thus it was agreed that all the class teachers would organise projects on various activities within the Ashram itself, and through this novel means impart education.



During the time that we were undertaking the project work we had another programme, this one on behalf of the workshop. When we were going into the villages we would also take along with us agricultural tools made in the workshop and introduced these new technologies to the people. For the schools we brought with us a question paper for a “Local General Knowledge” competition from the workshop team as well. The schoolchildren would answer the questions set and then as prizes either received a tool made in the workshop or else sweets. This programme proved itself a good means of establishing contacts between our children and those children in the village schools, who then talked about us at home so that when we went to their villages the people welcomed us with great love and affection.

The workshop programme aimed on one hand to provide improved agricultural implements for hill agriculture and on the other to arouse an interest in the village children for knowledge of their own area to develop within them a feeling that making an effort brings with it rewards. Emphasis was placed on developing in these children the qualities of making hard efforts in their lives so that they might become fully self-confident. This workshop programme received a warm welcome and was a great help to our project activity.

I found a number of new ideas arising within me as a result of the project work. A voice within me repeated told me that I was already familiar with this way of working, and I sought to understand what it was within the “Pariyojna” that was so familiar to me. Then I realised that the basic concept of this programme and the way in which children were taught Hindi, mathematics, history, science, geography and language was the very same method that I had experienced in my childhood in Lakshmi Ashram.

This programme has provided a real opportunity to Lakshmi Ashram to make itself known once again. Any number of old men and women in the villages shared with us their sweet memories of Sarala Behn and the Ashram. Time and time again they reminded us:

“Nowadays you people do not come as often as you used to in our village. Please do keep on coming to our village.”

I liked very much the feeling conveyed in these words.

Through this project we directly observed the problems of the villages, we also saw how widows and deserted women are living, and the troubles that poor families go through in struggling to educate their children. An attractive aspect was that in every village that we made contact with, we ensured that improved agricultural tools produced in our workshop also were taken with us and publicised. Through these combined programmes a new impression of Lakshmi Ashram was created in the minds of the people.

Our Student’s Personal Experiences of the Project.

Niru Bora

I enjoyed the project work very much. My shyness was completely dispelled and I can discuss openly any subject whatsoever. By going into the villages I increased my knowledge, and I discovered the wealth of knowledge that the old people have. In the old days the people put a lot of effort into agriculture and animal husbandry. Until now I had never asked anyone about the old days in such an entertaining way. I met many people and learned about the problems of the villages.

Lalita Rana

I enjoyed the project work. I can now talk openly without any feeling of shyness. The mothers in the villages have a great deal of work and cannot give all their time to their children. The joint family no longer exists as before, thus life is not so organised. We were welcomed with much love by the people in the villages. I liked their simple lives very much.

Munni Goswami

To begin with I did not understand what the project was all about, however on going to the villages and talking with the people I came to understand what we were aiming to do. I went to talk with the members of a joint family, from whom I learned that in the past people did not have money, yet there was a lot of love between them. Even today women are not able to take any decision by themselves.

Lata Dosad

My mother is farming. My father died when I was small. I see how my mother is working with great courage. She has a wealth of knowledge about farming. My own knowledge and courage grew as a result of this project.

Himani Joshi

I enjoyed very much going to the villages. People here told me that in the past people used to go to the traditional “Vandya” for treatment of illnesses, and people were cured by using medical plants and herbs. Nowadays they go running to the hospital and take allopathic medicines. Nowadays people’s bodies are not as strong as in the past. Nowadays the youth are leaving the hills for the towns, which is not good.

Jyoti Joshi

Slowly I came to understand what “Pariyojna” meant. I met one woman who particularly liked farming. She was working in her fields. She said that the village girls are very self-conscious and shy, while the Ashram girls are not, and they are able to express themselves very well. I enjoyed the project, my enthusiasm grew as did my knowledge, and I got a lot of joy in going to the villages.

The Workshop Programme

Extract from Anand Bhai's report from 01.04.01 to 31.03.02



One of the main activities in our plan of work for the year just past was an intensive publicity programme of our new research among the farmers and artisans in the villages. For the past three-four years we have been paying special attention to publicising our new tools and equipment. This year we have continued this work.

Until now a good number of tools and equipment for use in spinning and weaving have been developed in the workshop. A large number of people have benefited in a very satisfying way from them. However there remains a deep-felt need for an intensive and balanced publicity programme. It is extremely difficult to carry out a publicity programme for items produced by a service-orientated social institution in comparison with those produced by a commercial enterprise.

After a deep thinking we had the idea of joining the schoolchildren in this programme. We organised a competition between the children of different local schools on traditional local knowledge. The students got a question paper based on subjects relating to themselves and their locality. The students prepared the answers at home, and when their answers were ready, returned the question papers to us. After that we were sitting in the classroom to reply the same questions, so that they really understood what they had been doing. Both the children and the teachers found it very good. As a reward we presented each of the students with a new agricultural tool produced in our workshop. The next three-four months the students should write a report on the experiences of their parents or anyone else using the tool. They will be presented with one more tool for their effort. This stage too will benefit our development activities for agricultural tools, and at the same time the students will have the opportunity to write a new kind of essay.

Through this programme a vibrant relationship is being established with our society around. One extremely tough condition of this programme is that the cooperation and support of the teachers and students of our Ashram is absolutely vital. Therefore the project work of class six was very good. (Read Prema Behn's article). We think that this survey has given positive results, and that the children in the villages have got an interest in learning. The Ashram-girls helped the village children to complete the questionnaire, while they were busy filling in their own question papers.

As before we have also this year taken the help of other avenues of publicity. Among other things we have participated in some farmer's Fairs in different places.

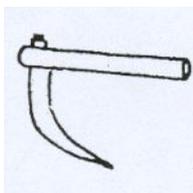
Planned Activities for the Year 2002-2003

We will still give paramount attention to our publicity programme and of course complete those activities that were not finished in 2001-2002. There is a vital need in Uttaranchal for development of appropriate industries. I have given an account on this while reporting on our spinning and weaving related activities. This kind of possibilities is present in the fields of spinning and weaving.

On the next page you can see the publicity flier for the agricultural tools, which we give to the farmers. It is of course better that the tool is used by the farmers.

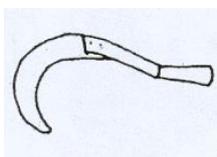
The Speciality of the Agricultural Tools Made by Lakshmi Ashram

1. Kutli



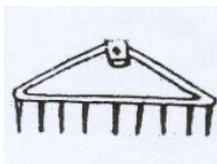
This saves wood in the environmental view. We have used a pipe made by iron thin sheets. To connect the hoe with the pipe we have used a nut. We can open it easily and go to the blacksmith to sharpen it.

2. New Sickle



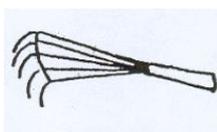
This sickle is not ordinary iron. The blade of the sickle is made of very good iron. One does not need to go to the blacksmith to sharpen it. People can sharpen it at home with a hard stone. If after many times of sharpening it is finished, then people can undo these rivets and put on another blade.

3. Rake



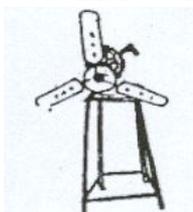
We have used a very good angle and good iron. It is very durable. Farmers like it very much.

4. Pine Needle Rake



It is made of GI iron wire. Mostly women use it to collect pine-needles from the forest. People also use it in their garden to collect leaves.

5. Harvesting Fan



This fan separates the straw from the grain. It gives very good air, is hand-operated, very light and very easy to bring to any field. It saves time and labour. It is very popular between mountain farmers.

Note

All these equipments are made from an environmental viewpoint. We have saved wood and tried to use iron.

This information flier was originally written in Hindi and given to the villagers. The girls from Lakshmi Ashram bring it to the villages, when they go out there to talk to the villagers.