

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

January 2003

Dear friends,

First of all both Lakshmi Ashram and I will wish you a happy New Year, and now I send news again from the Ashram - **SANCHAR 91**, which contains the following:

- Thoughtful Work Alone Is Meaningful – by Neema Vaishnava
- Efforts for Diversification in Income-generating Activities – by Parvati Goswami
- Swawalamban Divas – by Nandi Bisht, Class 9
- My story – by Sarawati Koranga, Class 10
- Lakshmi Ashram Gaushala – A Brief Glimpse – by Bimla Pandey

David Hopkins has sent some photos from Lakshmi Ashram – taken in November 2002, and some of them are used in this Sanchar.

David writes that they are having installed a computer in Lakshmi Ashram, so maybe we one day will communicate with the Ashram by e-mail. Anyway David has an e-mail address, and he can read his mail down in the village of Kausani. Lakshmi Ashram takes part in an international programme over the Internet called MetLinkInternational 2003, organised by the Educational wing of the Royal Meteorological Society in the UK. They are going to send basic weather data daily through the Internet.

Thank you for all the money for sponsorships and other contributions. I still 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.

You can send money to the following account:
**0270-3141861, BG Bank, Glostrup Afdeling, Hovedvejen 126, 2600 Glostrup, DK-Denmark
att. Lakshmi Ashrams Venner, Lone Poulsen**

With love,

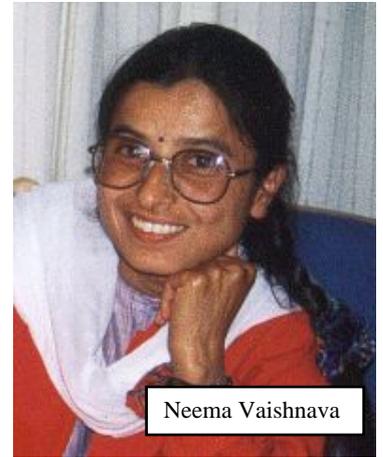
Sanchar 91

Thoughtful Work Alone Is Meaningful

By Neema Vaishnava

At the end of October 2001, quite unexpectedly, I suddenly found myself with the responsibility of being the secretary of Lakshmi Ashram. I was completely unprepared for this, for in no way whatsoever did I see myself suitable to assume this responsibility. Even though I had no desire at all, because of the difficult situation we faced then I had to assume this moral responsibility.

I cannot deny that I was very agitated and frightened in my mind at the thought of assuming the role of the principle individual in such a long established, large and well known institution. However there was also in my mind a desire, dedication and enthusiasm to do some substantial work with the help and guidance of my colleagues and other experienced and thinking individuals. Thus in the end, on the basis of my own experience and thinking, and with the cooperation and guidance of everyone else, a start was made and now a whole year has passed.



Neema Vaishnava

During this past one year I have made a concerted effort to know and understand the basic objectives of the institution, their form and our resources, as well as seeking to appreciate and evaluate them in depth.

At the same time I am continually thinking over in my mind what should be the true direction of our work, and I will present to you some of the understandings that I have reached.

Lakshmi Ashram is an old established institution that has gained international recognition. Because of its thoughts and activities the institution is very firmly established. Its activities continually run effortlessly, for a firm framework has long been established which allows many activities to run themselves without the need for much mental or scientific input. This institution is still today in existence because it is firmly grounded in Gandhian Thought. The fact that it runs itself to a great degree is evidence of its firm foundation in thought.

Even so, when I come to personally evaluate this I feel that, even if the foundation of thought is strong and steady, that in no way means that the ongoing activities are being thoughtfully carried out. There is a great difference between activities being continually carried out within a fixed framework, and working constantly in a thoughtful manner. I see a danger in allowing activities just to continue in an unthinking humdrum manner. In fact lifelessness creeps in, by which I mean undertaking work in the absence of thought, without involving the mind and the intellect. By the mind and the intellect I imply the action carried out after careful deliberation and understanding, action ever grounded in thought. As human beings it is essential that we work in the above manner, for when our activities are based on thought and awareness they have an effect and influence. Likewise unthinking activities too have their own effect and influence. Recognising this we should

endeavour that every activity is grounded in thought, for their effect and influence are both significant.

Thus wherever the activities have begun to lack life, a brake should be put on them so as to allow space for introspection and to once more ground them in thought before starting them again. We must continually be undertaking efforts to bring maturity to our thinking and understanding. The latter becomes sounder and more substantial when it has a comprehensive structure on which it is based. The structure of thought can vary according to the country, time and conditions; that is to say that change is in its very nature.

I firmly believe that, in the totality of present day context, we must reconsider in depth the objectives of our institution's activities, its direction and its resources in depth. For this we have to truly understand the appropriateness of Gandhian Thought. In doing so we will become aware of the needs of present day. While in today's context it is a challenge to keep alive Gandhi's view of life and lifestyle, yet except for this path no other strong way comes in sight.

Efforts for Diversification in Income-generating Activities

By Parvati Goswami



Parvati Goswami

Our Ashram is a special kind of school where, alongside academic studies, handicrafts are also taught. For teaching these handicrafts we have a small workshop – Udyogshala, where our students learn through practical work these new skills.

Objectives for 2002:

Our prime objective during this year was that through various new training programmes we might be able to generate some income for the Ashram. With this in mind we have during the past year, besides our traditional ongoing programmes of spinning and weaving, included programmes in sewing, typing, making of agarbatti (incense sticks) and greeting cards, and selling turmeric.

Achievements:

1. Agarbatti.

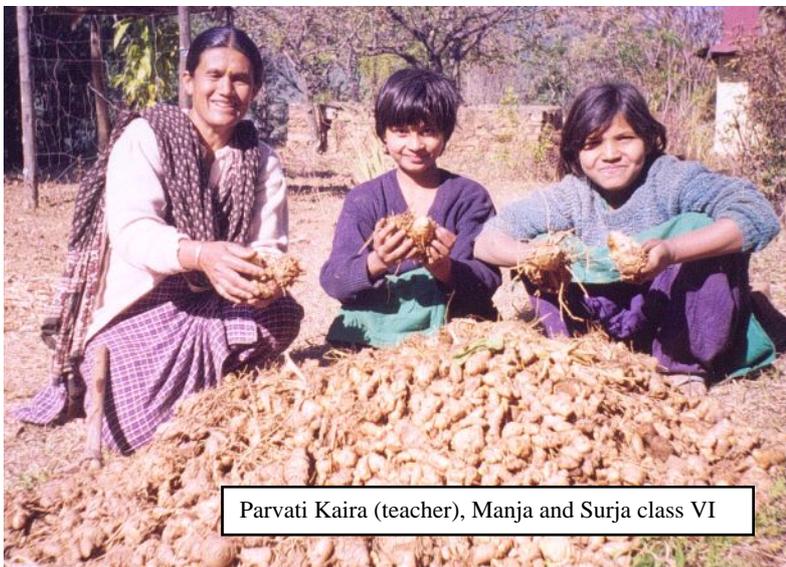
The students took very enthusiastically to making agarbatti – incense sticks, and for them it was something completely new, and thus they were full of interest. To begin this activity we purchased Rupees 1,300/- of raw materials, and so far the children have through their efforts produced agarbatti valued Rupees 3,000/-. They have put a great deal of effort into this work, which is done entirely by hand, each stick of agarbatti being rolled separately.



Urmila Bisht

2. Turmeric.

This year saw a lot of hard work being done in the terraced fields to grow turmeric, and all our efforts paid off to the extent that, after providing the Ashram mess with their annual demand for turmeric, we had a surplus of some 50 kg that was sold, providing an income of Rupees 3,000/-. Together the teachers and students showed a lot of enthusiasm and interest in this work. The children came to a fuller understanding of the relationships between Man and Nature, they came to understand how it is Nature alone that can give us economic strength.



Parvati Kaira (teacher), Manja and Surja class VI

3. Sewing.

This year we have arranged for our older students to take a month's special training in sewing and tailoring. They participated enthusiastically and were able to cut and sew their own clothes.

4. Typing.

Several older girls had learned through their own interest how to type.

5. Spinning and weaving.

In our traditional crafts of spinning and weaving we made some new efforts this year. We set a target that everybody would take part in group spinning classes, and that each one would try to spin enough yarn for at least one sweater that they themselves would knit. We achieved a lot of success in this, and at the same time it brought a freshness and novelty to the classes.

A great deal of time, devotion and hard work was necessary to plan all these activities. A lot of discussions and preparations had taken place the previous year.

We have a lot of ideas in our mind for the Udyogshala in the coming year. While continuing the ongoing programmes we are also giving serious thought to preparing spices for the market using locally grown plants such as ginger, and also starting a bakery, inspired by the success of such ventures by SIDH in Mussoorie, where a former Ashram student, Sushma, has a leading responsibility. We plan to benefit from their experience and guidance and will use the funds allocated by Friends of Lakshmi Ashram for the required inputs such as grinders for the spices. We are also keen to purchase some new looms to replace the existing ones which have been in use for some thirty years and which are now beyond the state of being able to be repaired.

The following essay, written by Nandi Bisht, a student of class IX, tells of the celebration of 5th December to mark the founding of Lakshmi Ashram by Sarala Behn of 5th December 1946. The Hindi word “Swawalamban” means “Self-Sufficiency”, not just in the economic sense, but also equally in the context of beliefs and attitudes.

“Swawalamban” Divas

By Nandi Bisht

“Swawalamban” is both a sacred and a very great word whose meaning is: “To be in every possible sense self-dependent, self-sufficient, to utilise those things that have been produced by oneself, to produce through ones own efforts ones daily needs.” This is what we mean by “Swawalamban”.

“Swawalamban” must not be simply restricted to words only, how can we realise it practically in our lives. In an effort to put it into practice the late Sarala Behn founded Lakshmi Ashram (Kasturba Mahila Utthan Mandal) on 5th December 1946. She gave the name of “Swawalamban Divas” to this day. And since then up to the present day we are celebrating this day. This year too all of us together celebrated this day. Compared to previous years this year there were some special features. All the students together decided how to celebrate the day, what to do on this occasion, and together prepared a programme.

This year all the students together prepared magazines, each class producing its own magazine, each having a different name.

Everyone expressed their own thoughts, everyone making a great deal of effort, decorating their magazines with beautiful pictures. We enjoyed doing this very much, and at the same time we increased our knowledge, awakened our self-confidence.

Besides this all of us together put on an exhibition of items produced in the Ashram, including fruits and vegetables from our garden: carpets, rugs, sweaters and woollen yarn and raw wool from our Udyogshala (workshop). There were frocks sewn by our students. All of us, big and small, took part, thus we all enjoyed it immensely. Some guests were also present, which made the programmed all the more splendid.

This year, thanks to everybody’s tireless efforts, “Swawalamban Divas” was successfully celebrated.

“A Hundred Respectful Greetings to Our Honoured Sarala Behn Ji!”



Nandi at the weather station

Saraswati is one of our older students, now studying in class X, a bright student who has been here since her mother brought her here at a young age. For several years her mother made no contact, and we did not have any idea where she had come from or where she was now living. Then suddenly one day she arrived in Kausani and found her way to the Ashram. She was living with a family near Mukteswar where she was raising her son. Now at last Saraswati was reunited with her mother and again had a home to go to during the long winter holidays that she had for several years passed in the Ashram.

My Story

By Saraswati Koranga – class X

I do not know who told my mother about the Ashram. However one day she brought me here. I noticed that the Ashram was different from other schools. All the girls lived here and also studied here. From that day I started to live my new life. From morning to evening I helped my older sisters in whatever little jobs I was able to do. When I was small then I was very naughty, I used to run behind someone and make trouble for them. At the same time I commenced my studies, and in this way my development has continually progressed. I take part in all the work in the Ashram and am continuing to learn more and more. I like it here very much. At present I am studying in class X, and so far I have not failed in my studies.

In the future I want to live here and work. I think that just as we have – along with our studies – learned many other activities, in the same way we should teach the coming generation similarly, both academic and practical, so that they too might be able to stand on their own two feet and, wherever they might go, work well and make for themselves a future full of happiness. That is what I think about the future.

As in the villages of rural Kumaon, also in Lakshmi Ashram the Gaushala (dairy/cowshed) plays a pivotal role in agriculture. Indeed many people believe that agriculture is impossible in the hills without the inputs of animal manure provided by the cattle. In Lakshmi Ashram it is not different - the fertility of our land is only maintained by the compost produced from the bedding in the cattle sheds mixed with the manure.

Yet so far the activities of our gaushala have rarely if ever been described in "Sanchar". These days two workers are responsible for the gaushala, Indira Behn and Bimla Pandey. Indira came in the early eighties to Lakshmi Ashram and since becoming a worker has mostly assumed responsibility for the gaushala. She has recently been joined by a young worker, Bimla Pandey, who came to the Ashram after having married at young age and then been deserted by her husband. Both are dedicated to managing as efficient a gaushala as possible.

In her article Bimla has described all the work associated with the gaushala. She was so happy to be asked to make this contribution to "Sanchar".

Lakshmi Ashram Gaushala - a brief glimpse

By Bimla Pandey

There are two of us young women working in the gaushala, Indira Didi and myself, Bimla. At five o'clock we both get up and at a quarter to six we go to milk the cows. At present we have eleven head of livestock in the gaushala, including three cows that have just given birth. The cows give us

twelve litres of milk in the morning and nine litres in the evening, thus a total of 21 litres is provided to the Ashram kitchen. The students help us throughout the day, for example two students in the morning clean out the cattle sheds, one girl mixes cattle dung in the bio-gas plant, five students cut grass while two more go with the cattle to the forest. Those cleaning out the cattle sheds, cutting grass and taking dung to the bio-gas plant work until eleven o'clock, while the girls going to the forest return in time for lunch at twelve o'clock.



Then in the evenings after working in the fields, one team leader comes along with her team to give drinking water to the cattle and to clean the forecourt of the gaushala. Five girls, one from each of the classes, cut fresh grass for the animals. The students give us a great deal of help in every aspect of work in the gaushala. As already mentioned we are two workers working in the gaushala as well as managing the grassland within our boundary and that in a new area of forestland recently acquired, and the latter keeps us busy all day. There is a great deal of love between us, something I like very much.

I feel that our grassland could provide us with all our yearly requirements of fodder, providing it is managed properly, cutting back the thorny bushes, removing the useless plants, raking the pine needles. We have made efforts in this direction but still we faced a lack of fodder. We either order wheat straw or else buy hay from the village. This year in particular we faced great problems in fodder and had to purchase hay to the value of Rupees 1.080/- as well as ordering four big sacks of wheat straw. We also had to cut a lot of branches from our oak trees to obtain green leaves for fodder.

Close to the ashram and on our grassland we also have fodder species of trees, including Timil, Bhukul, Banj (Oak), Kweral, as well as banana leaves. However these trees are mostly few in numbers whereas our gaushala has a large number of cattle. Thus we need more fodder species of trees.

I do not see any difference in raising the young of the cattle or in raising young children, because both require a great deal of effort. We are busy from dawn to dusk, as well as caring for our grassland. When we began our efforts on the grassland the younger girls as well as the older workers gave us a lot of help. This year we made special efforts on the new area of land in the forest. We have planted Oak seedlings, along with Rambans (Sisal), Bamboo, Kaner, Aprilia, etc., all working together in a collective effort. We have enclosed the new area on all four sides with wire, cleared away much of the undergrowth. Dug fields and cleared them of grass. The labourers have been working since 15th of August in the new enclosure, but without too much to show for their efforts - it is difficult to say how much work they have done, how much rest they have taken! Maybe less work and more rest!!

This year our annual haymaking yielded us fourteen haystacks. What can I say about the future? Whatever guidance and direction I receive, I will put it into practice to the best of my ability.