

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

**Lone Poulsen,
Praestehusene 6,
2620 Albertslund
DK - Denmark.
Telephone 45+ 43 96 13 71
E-mail: lone-poulsen@mail.tele.dk
Homepage: <http://lakshmi.adr.dk>**

NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

September 2003

Dear friends,

It is time for sending the next newsletter, so here is **SANCHAR 93**, which contains the following:

- "A Trek to the Pindari Glacier" by Khashti Shah (teacher)
- "Pindari Glacier Study Tour" by Manju Joshi (Class IX)
- "My Story" by Durga Bora (worker)
- "Why is it so?" and "The Future of My Country" poems by Manju Joshi (trainee worker)
- "Experiments on Our New Plot of Land" by Parvati Goswami (worker)

I hope that you will enjoy reading this Sanchar, and as you can see, they are still very active in the Ashram, and I am looking forward to hearing more about the new plot of land. They are also planning to make a bakery, and they have just finished a water project with new tanks and a new pump. All this is only possible because many of you are still supporting them.

So 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 before I ask you to send extra money because of the increase of the daily expenses. Thanks for your co-operation.

You can send money to me by cheque or 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 93

A Trek to the Pindari Glacier

By Khashti Sah

It was 21st June 2003 when thirteen of us, students and teachers, set off on our study tour. Between Garur and Bageshwar the valley was really beautiful. The mango trees were laden down with fruit that we were very much tempted to pick. As our bus went lower and lower down the valley, so the heat increased. For me the Kapkot-Bharari area was completely new, and it was very hot. I had always imagined that beyond Bageshwar there was a real lack of facilities, yet as far up as Saung there was a surfaced road for the buses, and nothing was lacking at all. The houses of the people too was well constructed.

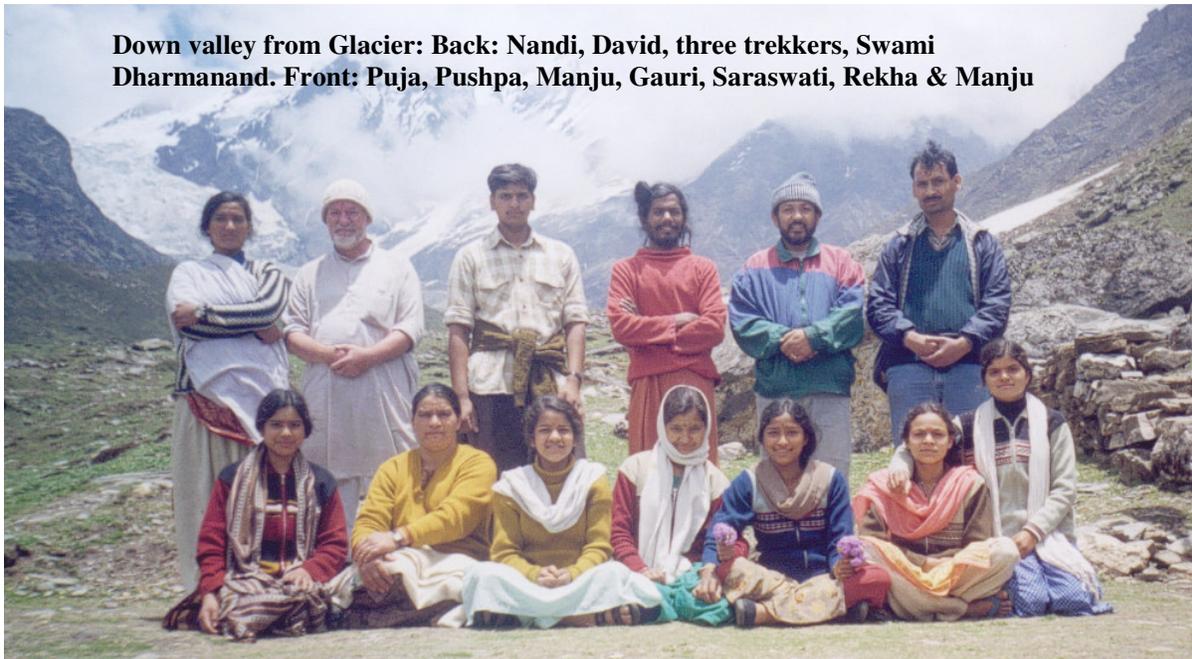
We rested for the night in Saung, and then the next day, our minds full of limitless imagination as to what lay ahead, we set off on the climb towards Loharkhet. Some people asked us where was the older person accompanying us. We just looked at one another and laughed! Still at the beginning of the path the men accompanying the packhorses were able to point out the correct way to us. When we entered the forests above Loharkhet I seemed to feel that I had seen such mixed forest before. Then I recalled that there was a time, when there was similar dense forest close to my own village, so dense that a standing man just a few metres away was totally invisible. Yet slowly, slowly, without one even being aware of it, that forest was cut down.

It was a long climb to Dhakuri (the pass at about 2900 metres). All the time we were wondering how we would ever reach Khati. After a short while there was a change in the weather, just what we had feared, yet we were resolute in our minds that nothing would deter us from seeing the glacier. Half an hour of steady rain really had us worried; the Sun God tested our patience but eventually the rain cleared away. Dhakuri was really beautiful, the Dak Bungalow situated in the middle of a green meadow, surrounded on all sides by pine forest, so attractive that I did not want to carry on. The rain had made the path difficult. On the way down we met students from all parts of India.

After a night's rest in Khati we set off to Dwali, the weather in our favour as we went along the valley of the Pindar River. On the way we came to the first bridge, which I felt must be the dangerous one that I had heard all about. The noise of the Pindar River was deafening. Looking at the river made one wonder just where all this water went. Having first quenched everyone's thirst, it then washes away the sins of all those who bath in the Ganga and Yamuna. Yet how polluted have the waters become where all these small rivers meet. If one has to absolve oneself of one's sins, then far better to go to the pristine, sacred places of the Himalaya. Where, on the one side, man has created artificial waterfalls to attract people, here Nature has naturally let the waters fall from the mountain ridges to below, at no cost whatsoever. Nowadays people are much more attracted by the shining lights, by all the glitters. However I was let to contemplate just how much joy there is living in the hills, with pure air and water, no noise, just the warbling and chirping of the birds. The true happiness and joy found in the midst of living nature is the supreme joy.

The next morning saw us all set off at four in the morning from Phurkiya for Zero Point. All around us was at peace. It seemed as if Mother Earth was in a deep sleep, dreaming sweet dreams. The sky above, looking down on nature, was playing various games. The twinkling stars were spreading their light on one and all, yet the rain too was busy at work. However if the rain was ever to stop its work, what would happen to Man and all those living beings that quench their thirst with water? As

each step took us ever nearer our goal, so the feelings of joy got ever stronger. But at the same time the air began to give us less support, the higher we go the less trees and vegetation there are, the wind blows less and thus it gets more difficult to breathe. Walking along most footpaths in the hills the kilometres seem very long, yet here deep among the Himalaya my experience was quite different. I was overjoyed today to see the Himalayan peaks face to face. I had learned in geography that in parts of Rajasthan strong winds cause sand dunes to be created. Seeing the big banks of snow around me, it crossed my mind that maybe the sand dunes look like this. Just then the sun revealed itself, spreading its vermilion rays across the peaks before me.



In one's mind one was climbing these peaks and then descending from them. The beauty of it all filled one's mind with a wonderful peace. It seemed that if we were birds we could just fly up and touch the snow peaks. Close to the cottage of Swami Dharamananda there were shepherds along with their flocks of sheep. We tried to touch the sheep but they always ran away before we could get near. Our eyes were restless to gaze upon that spot from where the Pindar River had its source. How would it look, that long-awaited view? We had heard that the source of the Pindar River was very attractive and appealing, however because of the glacier rapidly retreating and the landscape consequently being eroded year by year, so its beauty is getting ever less and less.

There was though a great joy in gazing upon the Himalayan peaks from afar. For a while we played in the snow. Of all the places that I have ever travelled to, I liked the Pindari Glacier the most of all, and I did not want at all to return back. As far as Supi village I was forever turning round to look behind, praying to God that I would quickly return once more to this pure and sacred place.

The Pindari Glacier is three km long and nearly half a km wide and is at an altitude of 3350 metres. This popular trek passes pine forests, fern glades and tumbling waterfalls. From mid-May to mid-June there are many wildflowers, while from mid-September to mid-October the air is exceptional clear. The trek from Saung through Loharkhet and up to the Dhakuri Pass is a long, hard uphill slog.

Quotation from "Lonely Planet – Travel Survival Kit – India"

Pindari Glacier Study Tour

By Manju Joshi, Class IX

As part of this year's programme of study tours I, along with some of my friends, was blessed with the chance to go to the Pindari Glacier. To begin with the thought came to me that I would get very painful feet to go there, but then I thought that, by taking the name of Lord Shiva with a pure heart, I would certainly reach Zero Point overlooking the Pindari Glacier. This resolve - that I would achieve my objective whatever might happen - became the essence of my thinking.

The forest between Dwali and Phurkiya made me feel very frightened, yet how beautiful it looked from afar. Wild animals such as leopards surely made their homes there. The snow on the high peaks was melting and cascading down through the forest as waterfalls. I imagined going to the foot of these cascades and drinking their water. However between these waterfalls and myself was the rushing water of the Pindar River, thus I could not achieve my wish.

Above Khati (the last village) there were some massive landslides. Looking at the mountainsides opposite a fear arose within me. The grass there was tall and green. I imagined that if anyone was to go there to cut the grass and his or her feet were to slip, they would fall straight into the Pindar River and die. Later I was to learn that nobody ever ventured onto these slopes across the river. Beyond Dwali snow falling on the crags above the way had been carried down onto the path. The



Back: Manju, Pushpa, local master, Manju.
Front: Puja, Gauri, Saraswati, Nandi, Rehka

The snow was hard packed; below it water was flowing, while above it was covered with soil. The snow was neither fit to eat nor to throw at one another. We also met a lot of sheep along the way to the Pindari Glacier. While their shepherd could shelter below overhanging rocks, the sheep were living in the open. When it started to rain, all the sheep sat down and huddled together. They were black and white in colour. In places the valley was covered with banks of snow, beneath which the Pindar River was rushing down. In one place cracks in the snow seemed to be just a map of India.

When we reached Zero Point then first of all we had a view of the glacier from which the Pindar River begins. As the glacier was melting in the sun, so the river was flowing on its way. At one point where we had to cross the river, as I stepped onto the bridge so the waves of the water below danced in my eyes. Above and below the path the rhododendron trees whose flowers (unlike the red ones we have in the Ashram) were white. Because these trees are covered by snow for some six months in the year, most of these rhododendron trees had spread out close to the ground.

Most of the people in this area up to the last village of Khati had sown potatoes and ‘ugal’ in their fields. The people here eat rotis (chapaties) made from the grain of the ‘ugal’. The dress and dialect of the people was very different from ours. Because schools were few and far between, it appeared that the people were not so educated, however they were happy and prosperous.

What I have written expresses my feelings along the way. Throughout the whole week there was always something new to see, something new to learn. I was happy all the time and returned to Kausani full of joy. May we continue through our lives to enjoy such tours!

* * * * *

One of the stalwarts of Lakshmi Ashram, who nevertheless tends to remain in the background, is Durga Behn. She comes from Garur Valley, below Kausani to the north, and she first came to the Ashram as a young girl. She has been persuaded to write her story for "Sanchar":

My story

By Durga Bora

I was born in an ordinary family. I have three brothers, all younger than myself. I am their only sister. My father had only studied to class five in the local primary school. He wanted that I got an education to be able to stand on my own two feet. With this in mind, he sent me to Lakshmi Ashram, where I studied until class ten.

The Ashram is so run that after completing their education, the girls can work in the Ashram and through their labour meet their expenses. That means they will not burden their parents economically. Doing this, I have over the years assumed the following responsibilities:

Work and education

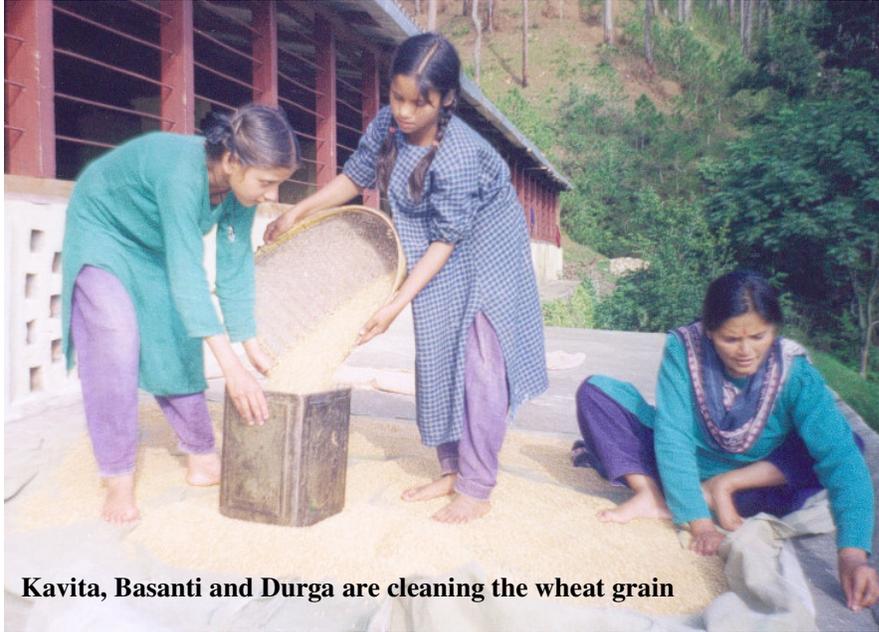
I have been working in the wool production store. This involved organising of production by the local women, maintaining the stock of raw wool and woollen yarn, maintaining accounts, dyeing of yarn and finished items, sending finished items for sale, etc. My work in the ration store involved maintaining rations for some eighty people living in the Ashram, ordering stock and keeping the store in good order. I have been "Didi" to small girls, that means I took care of the smallest of the girls in the Ashram, making continuous efforts for improving their personal development. I have also been doing agricultural work. In the Ashram we produce vegetables and fruits, and for some time I had overall responsibility for the management of the gardens.

To improve my skills, the Ashram decided to send me for ten months to Kasturbagram, Indore in Madhya Pradesh for the Balwari Workers' training programme. Within the Ashram I took a years training as a Khadi worker, that means that I worked in the shop in the village. I undertook all the above-mentioned responsibilities to the best of my ability. Throughout this period, there has been a great growth in the range of my experiences. Even though I am physically disadvantaged, I have mentally increased in strength, living happily alongside everybody else, doing my work.

My work at present

At present one of my chief responsibilities is sewing. When Vijaya Didi left (to return to her native Madhya Pradesh), I took charge of the sewing department. I was interested in sewing, but at that time I was not very competent in cutting the cloth. Luckily Hansi Didi then helped me cutting the cloth for the hostel. Now I enjoy very much cutting the cloth and stitching the clothes for the hostel.

When I took on this responsibility, Daya (now training as a nurse in Kasturbagram and Bimla (now married and with an infant son in Jaipur) helped me a lot. I taught Anita (then in class ten) the basics of sewing and made sure that all the children got their clothes on time. This coming year the older students will take turns to learn to sew. All are very keen to learn it, however I have observed that the girls get bored, if they have to work on the sewing machines over too long a period. Besides the above I have the responsibility for the class eight students' room, and I am their class "Didi". I have to ensure that they keep their room in good order, and as their class Didi I sleep in the same room with them. If I didn't do that, they would not be able to obey another Didi as they should, and would take everything as a joke.



Kavita, Basanti and Durga are cleaning the wheat grain

I continue to enjoy gardening and have my own field, where I raise a good amount of vegetables. I have no problem in managing the work associated with the flour mill - this includes getting the wheat cleaned and dried, according to the present need. Flour has to be provided on time to the kitchen. All the Didis and the younger girls help in cleaning the wheat. The biggest help comes from Pooran Bhai in maintaining the

flour milling machine. Regularly I have to prepare the accounts for the office. Some nearby villagers also come to grind their wheat, and they are very happy to see the quality of their flour. Thus I remain alert to every aspect of my work, even if there may still be some shortcomings. However I will always strive to be even more responsible for all my work.

* * * * *

In Kumauni society, indeed in Indian society as a whole, poetry is a very common and accepted mode of self expression. In Lakshmi Ashram many of our workers and students enjoy expressing their thoughts through poetry, keeping personal exercise books in which they write their compositions. One such student is Manju Joshi, who has just passed her intermediate examinations and now has responsibilities in the office, as well as taking classes with some of the youngest children. She and her elder sister, Shanti, have received all their education here in Lakshmi Ashram. Now Shanti is taking a training programme as a health in Kasturbagram, Indore, along with a number of other former Ashram students.

While Manju writes her poems in Hindi, we have attempted here to give an approximate translation in English. The first poem reflects on the state of the girl child in traditional rural society, while the second poem in just a couple of lines reflects deeply on the extremes in society, poverty and deep despair contrasted with the dream of the future.

By Manji Joshi

Why Is It So?

Society, Government, you and I all say,
Boys and Girls, both are equal.

Then why is it that in this world
The birth of a girl is looked down upon?

The boys are sent to school
While the girls suffer.

Why is it that the girls receive an incomplete education,
Because of the burden of work in the home and fields?

Simply because of the poverty of their parents,
Why do girls get married off to widowers and old men?

Looking upon them as a burden their parents marry them off,
Even though the girls may remain sad all their lives.

Their parents look upon them as items to be brought and sold,
Wherever they find themselves the girls are roughly treated.

Although in the eyes of family and society they are full of flaws,
Nevertheless they become an object of selling.

If they take a step forward in society,
Then girls are looked upon malevolently.

Whenever they try to assert their rights,
Then they are pushed down, are girls.

Along with honour, dignity and security,
Now we girls demand our rights.

The Future of Our Country

At the side of the road I saw
A woman sitting in the darkness,
Passing away a winter's night.

A rag, I don't know why,
She repeatedly stretched across her breast.

Out of restlessness my eyes, filled with tears,
Were looking on.

A child wrapped in rags,
Who knows how his future will be,
A future which is part of the future of our country.

Experiments on Our New Plot of Land.

By Parvati Goswami



The new land in the forest

Some 5-6 years ago we came into possession of a plot of land in the forest, immediately adjacent to the Ashram's existing land. Since last year we have made continuous efforts on this new enclosure – planting out seedlings of the Himalayan oak (Banj), also willow, 'kaner', 'aprilea' and 'rambanj' (sisal) both last year and this year, in an attempt to create over time a 'living' green boundary. Those saplings and cuttings planted out last year have taken very well. This year we planted more than five baskets of rambanj seedlings.

The work of maintaining the enclosure is a continuous job, ongoing throughout the year. This year we have prepared two large fields in which we have sown maize and rice, also two local kinds of millets for fodder for the cattle. Mooli (white radish) and 'ugal' (a nutritious green vegetable) have been grown as vegetables for the kitchen.

Everybody has worked hard together and most enthusiastically to develop this plot. We have repaired the wire fencing enclosing the

area, and we have delegated one young worker, Bimla, to take full responsibility for its management. She is making great efforts to ensure the success of this work. We have dug an earthen tank, measuring 12x8x4 feet, to store the runoff during the monsoon.

Thoughts for the Future

Regarding the use of this land we are thinking that in the immediate future we will undertake the cultivation of medical plants, from which we will prepare herbal medicines for the use in the Ashram itself. We contemplate collecting some of the fast disappearing Himalayan medicinal plants, and cultivating them so that they might be protected and conserved.

Illnesses are growing by the day, people are getting disillusioned with modern drugs, and people's faith in the traditional Ayurvedic treatments is increasing. In such a situation Lakshmi Ashram has thought that it must strengthen its medicinal plant programme. This new plot of land is ideal for this work, for the belief is the north-facing slopes of the Himalayas are best, and this land is facing north. We are facing some difficulties in the beginning in working this land, however we are firmly committed to slowly taking this work forward.