

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM

February 2004

Dear friends,

It is time for sending the next newsletter, so here is **SANCHAR 94**, which contains many interesting articles:

- "Lakshmi Ashram – A Force for Social Change and Women's Empowerment" by Pushpa Joshi
- "Grassroots Initiatives for Mobilisation of People's Power" by Basanti Behn
- "Efforts for Water Resource Management" by David Hopkins
- "My Ashram Experiences" by Babita Joshi
- "My story" by Garima Pant
- "Jawan Pinath" by Sarita Pant

I hope that you will enjoy reading this Sanchar, and in this you get a real impression of many of the different activities that are going on in and around Lakshmi Ashram. 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 94

Pushpa Joshi first came to Lakshmi Ashram over thirty years ago as a high school student from a nearby village to participate in a youth camp. As a small child a fire accident in her home meant that she lost her right arm, and this disability gave her a lack of self confidence. However the experience of the youth camp gave her a whole new vision of life, and she decided to try to join the Ashram. Here she completed her academic studies and in time became a senior worker. She has spent much of her time in the field, and in the following essay she describes some of her experiences working over the years in the Danya area.

Lakshmi Ashram - A Force for Social Change and Women's Empowerment **By Pushpa Joshi**

Around 1978 Lakshmi Ashram began working in the Danya area, some fifty kilometres from Almora, for the integrated development of women.. The initial activities were in khadi¹, and a kadhi sales centre was opened. Earlier the people here used to have to bring kadhi from Almora, which proved very expensive, so only a very few people purchased it.

At the same time Lakshmi Ashram began an adult education programme which ran for two years in some twenty villages. During this programme contact was made with the women, and we used to have some good conversations with them and got to know their families too. During this time some women said, 'Didi, what will you gain by teaching us? Our futures have already been determined, but if you could teach our children then that would be good. You see, some of our children are going to school but others are not. The primary school is far from the village, so we are always worried about sending our small children.' Likewise the women told us of a number of other difficulties that they faced.

Some times passed and Lakshmi Ashram, deeply concerned with what the women had said, considered the matter in depth. In 1980 I came to Danya and, in running the khadi sales centre, continually came into contact with the women. I once had the chance to express my thoughts in the village of Gauli and, after discussions with the villagers, Lakshmi Ashram opened a balwari² there. Two young teachers from nearby villages were appointed, and the villagers selected a dharamshala³ close to the temple in the centre of the village as the balwari. The balwari teachers were very hard-working. Through their skills and dedication, they soon won not only the hearts of the children, but also the villagers.

Seeing the benefits of this first balwari, people from other nearby villages began to request balwaris. I was very pleased that people were realising their value. The villagers took personal responsibility for selecting the teacher, as well as the building. In this way within 2-3 years our balwari activities were being run in some ten villages. This work was being run very efficiently. It pleased me very much when the villagers came themselves to tell me of the progress of their balwari, and if they felt there were any shortcomings they would also inform me of these, and also suggest how these might be put right. Then I would go to the village concerned and together we would seek a solution to the problem.

¹ Cloth spun and woven by hand

² kindergarten, pre-school centre

³ building for worshippers or pilgrims

Active Participation of Women

The time had now arrived to take the first steps towards that concept of integrated development that we had in mind. We began to organise meetings in those villages where we were working. We observed that the women participated enthusiastically in the meetings, and talked of the benefits that the balwaris had brought them. “We are getting lots of benefits from the balwaris. We can get on with our work freely and without any worry. We are no longer worried about our children.” Yet at the same time they did not forget to tell us all about their problems – such as poverty, an alcoholic husband or son, etc. Hearing all these tales of sorrow we were deeply moved in our hearts.

In an attempt to at least reduce a little the economic difficulties they faced, we started spinning and weaving activities, in which the women, showing great interest, worked skilfully, and did experience some relief financially. This activity went on very well for some 6-7 years but then, because of the changing tastes of the market, falling demand meant that we had to cut down this work.

Coming together with us through the above two activities, the villagers came to understand the manner of working of Lakshmi Ashram well, and slowly began to join together in social action. In those days an alcoholic drink was being sold in Danya bazaar, where two shopkeepers had obtained licenses to sell it. The men, busy all day in labouring, on their way home never forgot to go to these shops. Instead of taking home necessities, they took home a bottle of liquor, started quarrelling and brawling, and thereby causing a disturbance. In the daytime too, openly drinking liquor, they would wander around the bazaar. The women from respectable families could not go alone to the market or elsewhere. In such an atmosphere the balwari teachers became a great responsibility for us, for that was at a time when parents did not want their adolescent daughters to be out of their sight for even one moment. Having faith in our small endeavour, they had allowed their daughters to join us. We continued to make wholehearted efforts to maintain this confidence.

In those days I also came to know that for a long time the Ram Lila⁴ had not been held in Danya. The reason for this was also liquor. Everybody knows just how much interest the women take in the Ram Lila. Forgetting how tired they might have been during the day, in the evenings they would make a real effort to come and see the drama. The women talked about this to us. Understanding the difficulties of the women, we thought that at special festivals such as Diwali⁵, Holi⁶ and other fairs held once a year in the market in Danya, we should take out anti-liquor demonstrations one or two days beforehand. We also placed this matter before the women in their meetings. They were extremely happy and said, “Didi, we will certainly join you” and, on the dates decided, they took part in large numbers, in the beginning a little diffident to be sure, but slowly they became more self-assured, and slowly they began to lose their shyness.

In this way, seeing the solidarity of the women and their participation in social activities, the idea came that these village women ought to have their own organisations. Thus, along with the balwaris, the work of building up such village level women’s groups also began. We found that it was extremely easy to get women’s groups started in those villages where there were balwaris,



Pushpa Behn

⁴ Ten day drama of life of Lord Rama performed by the local community

⁵ Autumn festival of light, falling on New Moon in October-November

⁶ Spring festival of colours, falling on full Moon in February-March

because the women were already personally very close, showing great enthusiasm for the balwaris, and taking responsibility for bringing improvements, such as upkeep of the Bal Bhavans⁷.

Coming together through their groups and undertaking voluntary labour, the women built Bal Bhavans, Lakshmi Ashram assisting by providing tin sheeting for the roof. In this way in a number of villages, under leadership of the women, the men and women together had Bal Bhavans constructed. A community spirit developed in the women, and at the same time they also took up the cleaning and improvement of the springs and footpaths in their villages. Meanwhile the role of Lakshmi Ashram remained only to awaken the women's inherent strength and to assist them in finding solutions to difficult problems.

The biggest problem found in and around Danya was and is that of water. In the very beginning I had observed that the daughter-of-law in the family with whom I was living, fetched water from two in the night, so that by morning she had filled an entire drum. I asked her, "Why are you fetching water in the middle of the night?" In reply she explained me that there was just one tap in the market from where water was available during the day, and from where everybody fetched water. "If I was to go after five in the morning I could just fill one container during the whole day!" This one drum of water fully met the needs of the ten members of the family for drinking and cooking, bathing and washing clothes, as well as for giving to the cows and buffaloes.

Lakshmi Ashram, along with its local workers, organised padyatras⁸ in the villages. During these padyatras the women talked with us in particular about water and liquor. They would say that if there was drinking water and if their men gave up drinking liquor, then their lives would be bliss! It was suggested that if the monsoon rains could be stored, then the problem of water could be solved to a degree. To do this a tank could be constructed, and the rainwater from the roof could be stored. This would give some relief at least. Lakshmi Ashram is therefore working in this field too.

Thus, while giving their attention to a number of issues in the changing social environment, the women did not forget to pay attention to their own interests. They are ever ready to participate in any beneficial work. They are in the forefront for issues of water, forests and children's education, as the following example shows.

ur balwari had been running for a long time in a particular village, but a time came when there was a fall in the number of children attending, and we took the decision to close the balwari, and told the villagers also, but they were not ready to accept. However we did what we felt was right at that time. The balwari remained closed for two months, but the villagers were still not ready to accept, and said to us, "Don't do us an injustice. Maybe the numbers of children are fewer these days, however these few children too have a future. Therefore please reopen the balwari!" Meanwhile an official from the government "anganwari"⁹ programme had also visited the village, but they did not allow him to open an "anganwari" centre there, continuing rather to wait for us. Thus in the end we reopened our balwari. Is this way there are any number of examples relating to various activities that show how the women know what is good and what is bad for them, and how they understand which activities are going to be of benefit for them. We have also seen how much the inner strength of the balwari teachers has increased through this work. If after their marriages they go to their in-laws, they prove themselves there to be good daughters-in-law and good mothers.

⁷ Building where the balwari is run

⁸ Journey on foot from village to village to raise awareness on specific issues

⁹ This programme is for children of pre-school age, with a focus on health and nutrition, as well as elementary education.



Basanti Behn & Radha Bhatt

Sarala Behn arrived in India in 1932 and worked until 1936 in the Udaipur in Rajasthan, but her real calling was to be with Gandhi. From 1936 until 1941 she spent most of her time in Wardha and Sevagram, working for an All-India organisation promoting Gandhi's ideals of basic education. The climate there did not suit her, and she became prone to attacks of malaria. Gandhi advised her to leave, but the problem was to where? Quite by chance she came to the woollen production centre of the Gandhi Ashram in Chanauda, in the fertile Kosi valley a few kilometres below Kausani. A little later she was given the cottage that was to be the base for Lakshmi Ashram,

which she ran for twenty years until 1966. From the very beginning her main centre of activity was among the people living in the villages in the Kosi valley, and many of the older people remember Sarala Behn with great affection even today.

Over time these direct connections became less, and the Ashram has often faced criticism from the local villagers because of its lack of active involvement in villages. Lakshmi Ashram is very much aware of this criticism, and in the past few years has once again being renewing contacts, beginning with the educational institutions. Now one of our senior field workers, Basanti Behn, who until recently had been based in Danya, is working here. She has been active making contacts with many of the nearby villages, arranging meetings for the people, getting them to lay the foundation for active organisations within their villages, organising community cleaning of the villages, discussing issues relating to natural resources, etc. Here she tells about her activities within the historical perspective of the coming of Sarala Behn to these hills and the establishing of Lakshmi Ashram.

Grassroots Initiatives for Mobilisation of People's Power by Basanti Behn

Sarala Behn came to India as a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, hearing that he was serving the people. Taking inspiration from him, she came to the Gandhi Ashram in Chanauda with the idea that she could serve the community. She liked Kausani very much. In those days the freedom movement was going on. During the struggle men from the villages were in jail. Their land had been confiscated by the government, and there was no food for the women and children left at home. Sarala Behn went from village to village collecting donations, and took grain and cash to assist these people. She came to realise just how strong the hill women were. The women did all the agricultural and domestic work. At the same time the women were not receiving an education, but if they were to get an education, then they could escape the domination of the men, and the abuses and injustice that they suffered. If they were educated they could become self-reliant. The hill women were the backbone of society, it was essential that their mental faculties too be developed.

With this objective in view, Sarala Behn founded Lakshmi Ashram in 1946. Initially starting with just four girls various activities such as spinning and weaving, sewing, agriculture and animal husbandry, along with academic studies were begun. As time went by the activities increased, as did the number of girls. In those days, through productive activities, the educational activities were largely self-supporting. The Ashram participated in Bhoodan¹⁰, Gramdan¹¹ and other movements through padyatras organised both locally and elsewhere in the country to raise people's awareness.

¹⁰ Bhoodan: Movement started by Vinoba Bhave. Rich landowners gave land to poor farmers without land.

¹¹ Gramdan: Derived from Bhoodan. The village works together and owns the land together.

Slowly changes came in society. The most important symbol of education became the examination certificate. Girls educated in Lakshmi Ashram found that there were special circumstances when they could not get work without certificates. With this in mind the Ashram girls were registered in the government school, so that they might sit for exams and obtain certificates. This introduced a kind of restraint on the Ashram's activities, with time and attention being totally given to this education. The time given to ongoing movements nearby grew less. Instead the Ashram's area of activities became centred in Danya, where there was a great necessity of work. The public there themselves called upon the Ashram to initiate activities. These includes grassroots organising of the women, children's pre-school education through balwaris and environmental awareness, all of which are going on very well.

Under ongoing World Bank schemes the government has not given the villagers any rights over water, forest and land, rather they have taken all the power into their hands. While the villagers protect the forest, the right to fell trees lies with the government. If a man cuts a tree for his own needs, he runs the risk of having to go to jail and being fined. The same is true for water. The springs rise in our fields and forests, yet there are no arrangements for drinking water or irrigation in the villages. However the government enters into contracts with foreign companies for the construction of large dams. This is not undertaken by the state government of Uttaranchal, rather entirely by the central government. It is the same with land. The unsurveyed land is the property of the government. Nobody in the village can buy or sell this land. The government can make this land available to speculators for constructing hotels or factories, and the villagers can do nothing whatsoever. Everything is done by the signed orders of the government. The simple, straightforward people of the villages remain mute observers. Seeing for themselves the arbitrary decisions of the government, the villagers have likewise begun to do as they wished. No longer considering the water, forests and land as their own, they have been misusing these natural resources. Now though NGOs throughout Uttaranchal are working through village level organisations that are recognising water, forests and land to be theirs, are doing good work.

Now the Ashram has come to think that they and the surrounding villages should work together as one family. There are some fifteen or twenty villages and hamlets in the Kosi valley between Kausani, Chanauda and Khirakot, and at the same time we have also made contacts with villages towards Bageshwar in the Garur valley. In all of these villages we are forming village level groups, of the men and women, boys and girls. Our first objective has been to bring about unity in the village community, and to this end community cleaning of the villages has been organised. Open discussions are being initiated among the villagers on several issues. What kind of education are their children receiving, and what kind of education is necessary? How is the health of the women and the children? What are the causes of ill-health and what improvements need to be brought in? How might the villages become self-sufficient? We sit together with the villagers to discuss all these issues and to think over possible future programmes.

There is a need for the women to have some kind of work in their hands, so that they do not continually go to the forests, but rather stay at home and occupy themselves. For this there is a need for self-employment programmes. There is a special need to give attention to the children and to their health, to bring the villages and the Ashram together as one, to share one another's joys and sorrows. We need to stop the flight of people from the villages, and bring peace and harmony to them. The villages need to have control over their own land, their own forest, their own water. The amenities found outside need to be available also in the villages.

Our dream is of the self-governing villages. Planting trees in the surroundings, protecting the forests, saving every drop of water, these will be among our initial activities.

Efforts for Water Resource Management

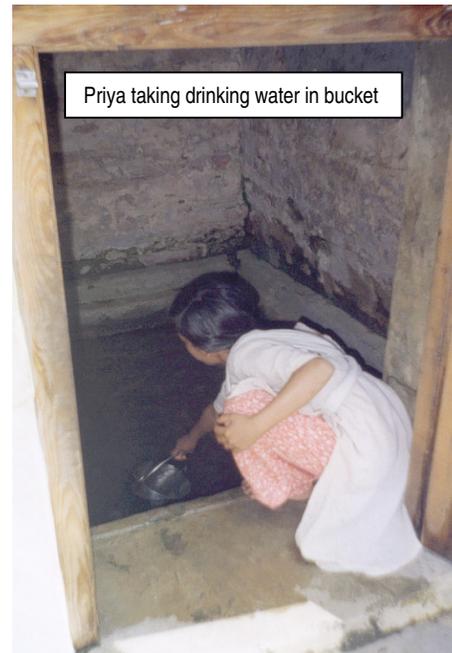
By David Hopkins

In the hills of Uttarakhand water is the basis of life. The deciding factor in the situation of most hill villages has been the availability of water, the source usually being a covered spring or “naula” often very beautifully designed, made out of local stone. Only in recent decades government schemes are bringing piped water to villages, otherwise the people have, from time immemorial, been entirely dependent upon nearby natural sources of water. These days the villagers are increasingly facing difficulties in obtaining water for drinking and domestic use. Many springs that once provided a guaranteed supply of water throughout the year are now only seasonal, others have completely dried up. A recent report in the local newspaper talked of villages in Almora district where the population were having to migrate away from the ancestral villages, because their traditional water sources had totally failed them.

Lakshmi Ashram is by and large dependent upon natural sources of water, although since the seventies the Ashram has been connected to the Water Board supply, a scheme that pumps water up from the Kosi river below. This scheme however only gives an erratic supply, so even today we mostly rely on spring water. The latter meets all the Ashram’s needs for drinking water, domestic uses and irrigation. The water sources within the Ashram take various forms. Close to the bathing area is an open water tank fed by a spring, whose water is utilised for bathing and washing clothes. The waste water is then led by a small channel to a pond in the middle of the terraced gardens, and used for watering the lower fields. Alongside this tank is a well whose water is particularly made use of when the level of water in the tank becomes very low.

Water from the open tank is also carried through a pipe to two tanks closer to the hostel buildings, one largely used for washing utensils after meals, the second providing water for the toilet block. Waste water from the former is collected and used in the nearby fields and greenhouse. A covered spring in the garden provides the community with water for drinking and cooking. Water is taken from this spring – naula - using steel buckets, which are kept for this purpose only. Water from small springs behind the naula is channelled to a large open tank in the lowest part of the garden, and there used for watering the terraced fields and a second greenhouse. Outflow increases from these springs during the monsoon, and following prolonged heavy rains other springs also become active.

A second important source of water, and one whose value is being increasingly understood at a national level, is rainwater. The Ashram has long recognised the value of this source of water, and rainwater from several roofs within the Ashram campus is collected, to be used for purposes other than drinking. During the monsoon we are able to meet all our domestic water requirements through rainwater harvesting. However, like people throughout Uttarakhand, the Ashram too is facing a growing problem of water. The levels of water in the tank and naula are not as high as they once were many years back, and at times in the summer months, if there are prolonged dry spells, then we have to be extremely careful in how we make use of water.



Thus it is that in recent years we have approached ‘Friends of Lakshmi Ashram’ with proposals for making more efficient use of our available water resources. In March 2000 the SAS Fund for Developing Countries had donated 7.400 Danish kroner for a roof-water harvesting project, and then in September 2003 a woman in Denmark donated 7.000 Danish kroner for the construction of an infiltration well, as well as the installation of two hand pumps, one for the existing well, the second for the newly dug infiltration well. Both of these of these projects have been successfully implemented. The water-harvesting project, carried out three years ago, collects the rainwater from our large workshop roof in an existing large tank, as well as a newly constructed circular tank close to our cattle byre. It has proved very effective in collecting water, however repairs need to be carried out on the old tank so as to make it fully leak-proof.



Hand pump in use for the first time

This past summer was exceptionally dry, even the major rivers in the area had almost completely dried up, and even towns such as Almora were facing a serious water crisis. In the Ashram too we were seriously short of water, and thus our attention turned to the possibility of searching for new sources of water. We took the advice of a local young man who for a good number of years had worked with the Kassar Trust, whose main area of activity is in the installation of hand pumps in the hills, and who was now working independently. He selected a site close to our existing naula, and Nepali labourers began to dig. At a depth of a little more than two metres they encountered water, but this only made their task more difficult, for as they dug deeper so the side of the excavation from where water was seeping repeatedly collapsed. However eventually they had dug deep enough for the infiltration tank to be constructed, joined to the surface by a pipe. The pit was then filled in, and the hand pump fitted at ground level to the pipe.

Our existing well, which many years back had been fitted with a hand pump long since out of use, was also fitted with a new hand pump, and the opening to the well closed. This means both that the water remains free from pollution, also that it is far safer than it had been. There was always the fear that a small child might fall in, as it was they were regularly letting their buckets fall into the well while trying to draw up water. Fears had been expressed that the new well might adversely affect the level of water in the existing naula alongside, but this does not seem to be the case. Both hand pumps are in continuous use and are proving very beneficial. However the real test is always the hot summer months, especially if there is deficient rainfall. It is the irregular distribution of rainfall in the monsoon climate, with over 70% of annual rainfall during the monsoon months, that poses the biggest challenge to management of water resources, a challenge that almost the entire nation faces, not just Lakshmi Ashram and the villages of Uttarakhand.

The very existence of the Ashram depends on the continued availability of water to meet the daily requirements of the Ashram community, and we are continually faced with the challenge of how to ensure that together we manage all available water resources optimally. It is a challenge that, with the generous support of ‘Friends of Lakshmi Ashram’, we have taken up in the past few years, but there is potential for still further initiatives to be undertaken, especially in the area of rainwater harvesting.

Babita was introduced to Lakshmi Ashram by her father, a science teacher in the nearby Mahatma Gandhi Inter-College in Chanauda. She took part in a workshop in June 2002 organised in Lakshmi Ashram, and conducted by one from the Gandhi Peace Foundation, on Mahatma Gandhi's "Hind Swaraj" - a short essay that points out Gandhi's thinking. As her essay shows, she has in a very short time imbibed the core values of Lakshmi Ashram, and is a very motivated and earnest young worker.

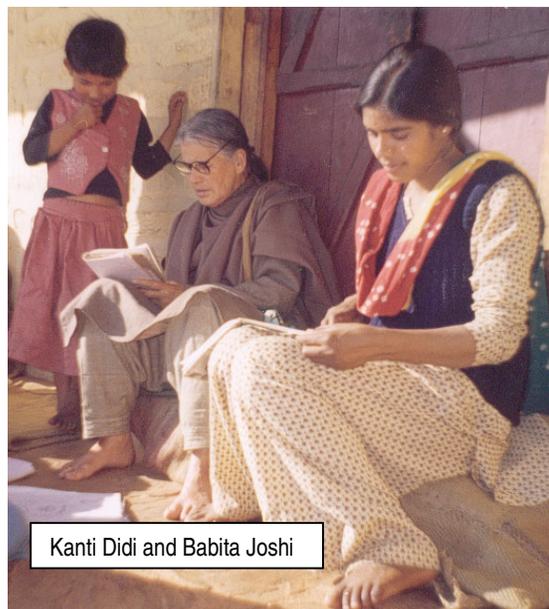
My Ashram experiences

By Babita Joshi

Lakshmi Ashram was established in 1946 by an English disciple of Gandhi, Sarala Behn, originally Miss Catherine Mary Heilemann. The objective of the institution is, through Gandhi's philosophy of basic education, to make the women of the hills self-reliant through their all round development. Here education and training are provided to young girls from the age of eight, up to young women of twenty-five. Through the various activities of basic education e.g. agriculture, dairying, literacy, cloth-production and housekeeping, the girls become self-dependant.

For the past fifty seven years or so, the girls of Uttarakhand have been lucky to have this opportunity for learning. Uninterruptedly this institution has been carrying out its work. From here young women with strong personalities emerge. They are seen all around the Ashram, working in the fields and in the forest, and they are also active in campaign movements. The Ashram educates the children from class one to class ten. Arrangements have been made for the students to have exams in the nearby government schools. We have to teach the set syllabus, but we continually try to make the syllabus more practical and closer to real life. For the past nine years a training programme in "Practical Gandhian thought" has been run. It ran regularly from 1994 to 2002. In 2003 the senior workers took the decision not to run it for a year, so they might fully evaluate the course. In the future, this programme will again be run in an even better form. Apart from that, we also regularly have training in spinning and weaving.

In 2002 I came here to take a six months training course in "Practical Gandhian Thought". During the training programme, I learned to spin on the spindle and the spinning wheel, to make incense sticks and weave rugs and small mats. I also learned to sew, to do typing and other skills. Drama, dance and song also found place in this course. During the afternoons we studied Gandhian literature, trying to understand it through thought and reflection. In the period following the completion of the training, Lakshmi Ashram arranged for me to take part in a five month long teachers' training programme organised by "SIDH" in Mussoorie. I completed this training with great interest and enthusiasm. I am now putting the activities I was introduced to into practice with the children: I dictate a passage and then I get the children to check their own work among themselves. This allows them to become more alert and responsible. In order to strengthen their command over Hindi, I discuss various topics as much as possible. For example, choosing as a theme their own local society and village life. We talk about their traditions and religious customs and the children show a lot of interest and enthusiasm. I am teaching classes one to four. I sometimes talk with the pupils in their local language rather than Hindi. In that way, I allow the children to get a



Kanti Didi and Babita Joshi

better chance to express their true personal selves. With the small number of children in the class, I have the chance to give personal attention to each child. I give greater importance to speaking and listening. Although reading and writing has its place too, I believe the real foundation is in speaking and listening.

From time to time guests both from India and abroad, e.g. from England, Germany and Denmark come to the Ashram to teach and learn. This gives the children a fine opportunity to learn their language, and vice-versa. Even if English is not given top priority here, the children are enthusiastic about English and eager to learn. And as the visitors work with the children there is a lively exchange of languages, the visitors picking up a little Hindi too. We also have visitors from other parts of India, and the children also show an interest in learning regional languages. We recite prayers from all religious faiths, and sing religious hymns in a number of regional languages. In this way an effort is made to give all languages equal value and importance. In math' s, we try to give the children knowledge of numbers through seeing and touching things available at hand, such as stones, tree leaves, pieces of paper and wood, etc. The teachers prepare their lessons before teaching, so that various methods can be used. Then they will have a better understanding. Learning through doing, is what we emphasise. Viewing education in this integrated way, all the practical work in the Ashram gets meaningful. Various methods are adapted to keep alive the traditional songs, drama, dances and festivals. We get the chance to learn how to live happily with as few so-called material comforts as possible.

The hoe, sickle and other tools have as much importance as the pen. In this way, recognising the value of each and every thing, we attempt to put our beliefs into practice. While teaching the children I too, learn various things. Living here, I have realised that our personal development comes through living and interacting with one another. There is a growing sense of responsibility within me, as a result of which I am going to understand a lot of things. Truly understanding something oneself, and then getting the children in class to understand it, is no small task. I am getting the opportunity here to understand the true value of time, and my own worth. Ashram life has for me been a wonder in itself. It is such a vibrant example of living so rooted in life.

The workers here who are involved in teaching, believe that teaching is a process of giving and taking, not one of simply imposing on the children. Living together one with one another, as sisters, with relationships based on love and respect, in this way the process of understanding goes on. Here there are no feelings of superiority or inferiority, nor differences of caste. All this strengthens my own, personal feelings. The Ashram's main objective is the building of a non-violent society. Today this Ashram is running entirely through the strength and energy of the girls taught here. In the Danya area, our workers have run programs to awaken peoples' awareness. These programs have run during the past twenty years. Now some forty balwaris (kindergartens) are being run by Lakshmi Ashram. Along with this environment related activities are being run.

Two magazines are published in the Ashram. Magazines in which the children include poems and essays written by themselves, together with drawings and paintings they have made. Among us there is a hardworking worker, David Bhai. Although originally from England, he has been working here for over twenty years, and has immersed himself in the Indian culture. He is full of the spirit of Swadeshi (our duty to serve immediate neighbours). It is a source of inspiration to us all. Now I too, have found an opportunity of understanding who I really am, and creating my own individuality.

We owe a lot to Sarala Behn. Blessed today is it, that Behnji who here in this lap of beautiful nature, has dedicated her body and soul to the service of the development of the women in society.



Friends of Lakshmi Ashram will recall that Garima came to the Ashram in 1992. She came through our contacts with Himdarshan Kutir, where Sarala Behn had retired to in 1975. Garima had crippled feet and, when her uncle heard about Lakshmi Ashram, he felt that his young niece could benefit from coming here. In 1997 we were able to have both of Garima's feet operated on freely, in a charitable hospital of Ahmedabad, where she was accompanied by Bimla Behn, who cared for her during the weeks they spent in the heat there. Garima returned there the following year, again accompanied by Bimla Behn, to have one foot operated for a second time. She studied in Lakshmi Ashram until class eight, her education being sponsored by a Danish married couple, and then studied in the inter-college in Berinag, close to her village, passing her intermediate examination this year. She has grown up into a tall, self-confident young woman, and recently has spent some time here in the Ashram, when she wrote this short essay for "Sanchar".

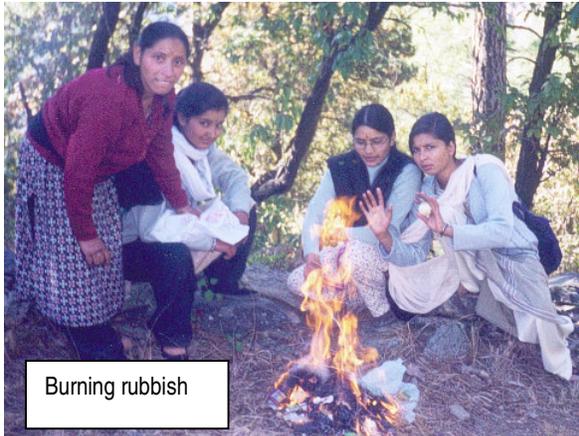
Billedeme: Garima i 1994 og i 2003

My Story - By Garima Pant

My name is Garima, and my home is in the village of Bhattigaon in Pithoragarh district. In my early childhood I studied in the village, but I could not go to school myself. I had difficulties in going to school because my feet gave me pain. My uncle worked in an institution in Dharamghar, where he had heard about Lakshmi Ashram. He brought me to Lakshmi Ashram. When I came I was very small. In the beginning I found it difficult to settle down, but later I began to like it very much and I hardly ever thought of home. However, I used to feel very unhappy when I looked at myself. I was sad at heart. I always used to think to myself, "Why is it that my feet are as they are". I always used to feel ashamed of going out in public. I felt shy about what people might be thinking. I used to consider myself very weak and inferior. When I was studying in class seven, my feet were operated. I was very happy. There was a lot of pain, but I suffered all of this thinking that, if I could bear the pain now, then one day I would be well. With these thoughts in my mind I had both feet operated. In the beginning there was a lot of pain in moving, and I could not walk. However slowly, slowly, I began to walk well.

Now I am very happy. It is as if I have been given a new life. I consider myself so lucky. For those who did so much for me, who, looking upon me as their own, gave up so much time and made so much effort for me, I remember all of them in my mind, and I am very thankful. I think to myself that if I had not come to this Ashram, then I would neither have received a new life, nor would I have been able to study so far as I have done, go to and from in society, and be receiving respect and recognition. Before, if people would have any thoughts of me, it would only be of pity and sadness. Even today, musing over the past, I think how much my life was changed. I want to complete my education, and in the future I want to do social work. Whenever I have free time, or when I have holidays, I want to come to the Ashram. When I get time I do come. I like it very much here, because it was here that I learned a lot and was given a new life. It is like my home here, indeed, I like it even more than my home. I want to become a skilled and capable women.





Sarita Pant came to the Ashram in 1995 and had then studied to class X. After completing the training programme in Gandhian Thought, Sarita continued with her studies and assumed responsibilities in the Ashram. She suffered from very impaired vision, but has been fortunate in having both eyes operated on and lenses inserted, so that now she does not need to wear glasses. She is leaving the Ashram to get married, but will be nearby in Almora, so she will be able to maintain close contact with the Ashram.

Pinath is a high hill to the west of Kausani, dominating the western skyline, and the temple of

Jawan Pinath is situated on a ridge running east from the summit at about 2400 metres. Every year on the occasion of the full moon following the festival of Diwali, a fair is held there, but we were saddened to discover after going there that there was so much rubbish strewn around that, in the words of one of our students, it did not feel at all as if this was a temple, a sacred place. Thus a couple of weeks later a group of our workers and students went to the temple with the prime objective of cleaning up the temple precincts so that it might once more look and feel like a temple.

Jawan Pinath by Sarita Pant

I had one more opportunity to climb to the top of the high mountains, along the footpaths with my friends, when I climbed to the top of Pinath. There were five of us in all – Archana, Parvati Tiwari, Deepa Pandey, Gauri Rathor and myself – who set off. I was rather nervous at the start that I might not be able to complete the climb, and would then make trouble for everyone, but that was not to be the case. As we went ahead, where we left the road, and eventually found ourselves passing along paths through the forests, there was a feeling of immeasurable joy, and Mother Nature's enchanting splendour was so appealing that I was inspired to go ever further and further on. Whenever the body felt a little tired, then sitting in the shade of a tree, we would rest and enjoy a light snack of peanuts and oranges. We felt confident that we were getting near to Jawan Pinath, for some days earlier class X, accompanied by David Bhai, had come this way, and he had drawn a rough sketch map of the route. This kept us on the right way, and now we were beginning to find plastic wrappings of various items strewn alongside the path. We gathered this rubbish together in several places and burned it. As we approached the temple then on one hand there was a wonderful nature. On the walls on the temple were beautiful stone carvings, a living witness to the long history of art revealed there before our eyes, their beauty captivating the mind. But on the other hand man's materialistic attitudes had so spoiled its appearance that one could not feel that one was in such a sacred place as a temple. It was David Bhai's inspiration and suggestion that we go there and once more restore to this sacred place its true nature. For a full two hours we cleaned within the precincts of the temple. Because of the fair that had recently taken place, there was plastic strewn around in vast amounts. It gave us great satisfaction to gather all this together and burn it, and to worship at the temple and to observe the beautiful splendours of Mother Nature gave an even deeper joy.

There was an immeasurable sense of satisfaction in completing the cleaning of the temple compound, an important task that we considered to be our duty. Late in the afternoon we prepared to return, enjoying the views of nature all around, and came back to Kausani through the army camp. The experiences of this walk will remain unforgettable. This walk will be the final stage on my Ashram journey. The opportunities afforded to me here have been invaluable steps in making me what I am today. I can never pay back the kindness and support of the Ashram to me.