

FRIENDS OF LAKSHMI ASHRAM

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**NEWS FROM LAKSHMI ASHRAM
SANCHAR 123**

February 2015

Dear friends,

Yet another year has passed, and we will soon gather for the yearly general meeting, a nice afternoon with news from the Ashram.

Sanchar 123 brings an extract from Marie Thøger's diary from her visit in Lakshmi Ashram in March 2014. This is a good introduction to the meeting.

The general meeting takes place on **Sunday 15th March 2015 at 2 pm. in Glostrup.**

The account of 2014 is attached to this Sanchar. It looks fine because of big donations from the Scouts in Farum and the Electrician Union in Copenhagen. But it could be very nice if some more private persons would like to support Lakshmi Ashram. They are absolutely still doing a very good and important work.

It still costs 1725 Danish kroner and the subscription 75 Danish kroner to be a sponsor (about 230 Euro and 10 Euro) = 1800 Danish kroner. Some people send money once a year, and others divide the amount during the year. Therefore we will put 75 kroner into the administration account the first time of the year, when we receive money from someone. This also applies if you send amounts that are not earmarked. So all will pay the same amount in subscription and receive the Sanchar.

We use very little money for administration, and the money is sent directly from our bank to the Ashram's bank in Kausani, so no money will be lost – only bank charges. The surplus from the administration account will of course be sent to Lakshmi Ashram.

Thank you for all the money. Any amount of money is received with pleasure. Contributions that are not earmarked are also very welcome. The money will be used for educational material, study tours, education of the teachers, etc. You can send money by a crossed cheque or by bank transfer – the IBAN account number can be seen on top of this letter.

Best wishes,

Lone Poulsen

Friends of Lakshmi Ashram can save money, if you would be satisfied to receive a mail with the Sanchar. You can also see the Sanchar in the homepage. If you want to get a mail instead of receiving a letter, then please send your e-mail address to: ***lone-poulsen@comxnet.dk***

SANCHAR 123

From Marie Thøger's Diary

In March 2014 Marie Thøger travelled to India together with Anne Thøger and Ane Smith. After visiting Dharamsala – Dalai Lama's residence – the trip went on to Lakshmi Ashram.

We are driving through Garur to Kausani. There are small changes with the shops in the main street, but the grocer is sitting in his usual place and says hello. The path up is blocked by a big truck. It is impossible to park. Our driver is skeptical. Have we gone wrong? But then the truck leaves, and Neema comes at full speed down the path. From the opposite side a group of the big girls from the ashram appears. Then there is Namaste and Welcome all along the line. The driver is confused and amazed, but still begins to empty the car. Most of it ends up in the middle of the road, even if there is some traffic. I try to bring the most vulnerable into safety and sees at the same time Ane heading quickly to the shop that sells mineral water. She is at home!

Then the climb starts. It is not at all difficult to persuade me to let others take my luggage, I only hold on to my umbrella. The well-known wet steps round the first house corner are fine. Why does the water run here? Then the dry path comes, where it is good to stick to the wall in front of the big house with the flowers. The only problem is, if you meet a cow that also prefers to stick to the wall. Shortly afterwards you shall go a sharp left upwards without steps or branches to catch. It demands balance, especially if you are tired. Then it is important to reach the place where you keep right towards the house that now belongs to Pooran and Rekha. Just there you can see the snow. In this place it could be nice to sit down for a while, but how do you get up again? At last the path is horizontal and without problems.

The first children's voices are heard already from the courtyard in front of the school buildings, and there in the familiar world Hansi comes – "the big lady" – quickly towards us. Then the final stage up to the old ashram comes. The steps and the path are absolutely okay, but there is only a banister just round the house for the older members. It looks easy, but now it is important not to overestimate your own balance. Here you can fall deeply, and no accident should happen. Luckily there are supporting hands all the time.

At last – there is Sarala's ashram – newly built, as it looked like since Radha's 75 years birthday in October 2008. They have decided to give me Radha's room, as it is with bed, carpets, family photos and a door to the bathroom. She herself is in Rajasthan, so we will hardly see each other on this trip. There is also a door to Basanti's room, from where you can go into the office. Anne and Ane get the guestroom with exit to the veranda facing the Kosi valley. Kanti lives under us. In the guesthouse two Danish girls stay just now.

Saturday 5th April. It is Sarala's¹ birthday, and as usual Kanti is up and about before sunrise, but smoke from the firewood as in the past is not felt. The hot water for bathing comes from the solar power plant on the roof of the guesthouse, and water for my black coffee I get from a reliable electric kettle, which is placed on the low table besides my bed. The outline of the mountains is seen dimly through the mist to the north, while the light is growing and spreading from the sun that gets up behind the pine trees on the mountain

¹ Sarala Behn – Lakshmi Ashram's founder – 5/4 1901 – 8/7 1982

ridge in the east. We have agreed on meeting at seven o'clock at Sarala's Samadi (memorial), which is placed on a terrace higher up the hillside. They have already decorated it with flowers on the square cement base, which bears the epitaph for Sarala. Teachers, workers and the oldest students appear and gather in silence on the little plateau. Most of them have flowers in their hands, and the cement is soon totally covered in the raw morning.



On the ground in front of the memorial plaque carpets and mats are placed, and as soon as everybody has found a place, the song and the morning prayer pass off as usual. When all is quiet again, Kanti gets up, and with her gentle voice she sets out Sarala's life and work here on the hillside and other places in India. She finishes with many good wishes for the ashram and asks all to work hard, so that Gandhi's ideas about development of women in the whole country can be carried through. As soon as the sun reaches over the pine trees in the east, we feel that it will be a nice warm spring day with unhindered view of the snow of the Himalaya. A real Lakshmi Ashram day.

In the afternoon we are together with students and workers in the big hall with song, dance and stories about how the life in the ashram was at Sarala's time. Later we go with Neema up to the old workshop building to see the new bakery, which is arranged in an empty house nearby. It was really an experience to see the oven, which looks like the one I remember from my childhood, when grandma was baking for Christmas. It is a stone oven, which is heated with wood. When the stone walls have the right temperature, the fire is damped down, and the wood is swept out to the sides to give room for bread and buns. After that the door of the oven is closed. You have to have experience and at the same time exercise great caution, for the bread to get the right colour and a crisp surface. It is a young man from Sarkande, who is

now being educated as a baker. Apparently he is skilful. His buns were outstanding, and we got some with us for our coffee next morning.

Sunday 6th April. It is a delight to wake up this morning. The sky is without clouds, and the mist covers the valley. Towards north the first beam of the sun has hit the top tip of Trisul, and the outline of the unbroken sharp ridge of snow mountains towards west is quite clear. The trees in the boundary line down towards Anand's site still grow bigger and snatch by now some of the view. Maybe you can see a bigger part of Trisul from the roof of the guesthouse that is higher up. I feel that everybody else long ago has left the ashram to go down for the morning prayer with the children. So I climb on bare feet down the steps from the veranda, walks without my stick through the gravel to the steps of the guesthouse, which has a solid banister and reach without difficulty up on the roof. Yes, the view is much better here! Now all three peaks of Trisul are lit. The snow is pink in the beginning. This daily morning phenomenon demands my whole attention. All sense of time disappears, until I see that the trees in the boundary line are still standing in one's way. The mountains below the peaks are hidden behind a bank of close green treetops, but the bank of leaves has a weak point just where the mountain is highest. Maybe there is a dead tree, which ought to be removed! Then you could see Trisul in all its might in a frame of green.

While this picture grows in my consciousness, Kanti appears on the roof. I wonder if her eyes catches Trisul's peaks in the way as mine in a protecting frame of tree tops? Yes, and Kanti describes Sarala's way to refer to the forest: as the green cloak of the mountains. Do you cut down the forest, the mountains will die. It is like peeling off the skin of a human being! Trees must be planted and not cut down. Do you remove the cloak, erosion will come! True enough! I have heard that before. Sarala has also lectured me! But the tree that stands in the way for the whole view to the snow, it is already dead. It does not destroy the cloak to remove it. Everybody knows that Sarala in her last years felt the view to the snow rather as a vital necessity. Kanti accepts this, but who owns the tree? Has it got the roots in the ashram's ground? Can the girls cut it down? Kanti does not doubt who is able to manage the problems. All this Pooran will find out! And as she of course has got her mobile phone with her, she calls Pooran, who lives in the terrace below. That matter is now in good hands.

The morning prayer is over and gathered together round us on the roof Anne, Ane, Neema, a German girl and the two Danish girls are standing. I am still on bare feet. The cement is ice-cold, but there is sun-warmed water in the drains, so now I have to get down the steps quickly to revitalize the toes. It does not take long, before black coffee and nearly new baked buns are ready on my veranda. The rest of the morning I use for my bath in sun-warmed water in the old bathroom below the steps. It is more familiar to me than the new bathroom near Radha's room, and there is plenty of water just outside the door. I wash my hair and my clothes, hang it on the string and tidy my room. Basanti and Kanti come and go. At lunch time I have a supporting hand to go down to eat together with the children. Durga is there and will wash my thali. I am talking a little with the girls in the courtyard and then I go up to the office. Here is Sunday quietness. David is sitting in his usual place at the window with the sun in his back. He is writing by hand. I find a place at the wall with a view through the open door to the terrace above the steps. To the left Hansi is normally sitting, and to the right Neema normally sits. I think I am not getting in anybody's way and might feel like hearing about the new programmes, but David looks very busy. Then Hansi comes as usual in flying speed and falls down on the cushions to the left. She asks, if I need an extra cushion! Neema follows her – more controlled and with a hint of smile.

I venture a question about the dairy project in Dania. Am not really aware of, if it is a normal working day, or it is time for Sunday talking? Ask then gently about the area out there, where the wool work was going on, where the balwaris (kindergartens) started, about the sales in Panaunaula and Sarkande, about Krishna's work in the same area with Mahila Haat, and what problems that arise. How does everything hang together, after Pushpa was brought home from out there? Then the talk is starting. The air is thick with words – Hindi and English at random. As I know quite a lot of the story from articles in Sanchars, I am able to keep up with it. David collects his papers and goes away to the room behind the curtain, where he has a computer. Now and then there comes a remark from within. It seems that they agree that my time now is too short for a trip to Dania! Maybe it is not so important anyway. I know the area and the villages and can easily imagine, what it means for a peasant woman to be able to earn her own money and in this way to get a grip in the economy of the family. Then Hansi tells a story, which began some ten years ago, when the Tata Concern as a sponsor participated in the movement, which is known as "A Lift to Himalaya". At that time the point was to get drinking water to the villages. Now the focus is different. They try to get women to work together in self-helps-groups. Quite naturally Lakshmi Ashram has participated in this work, which has now developed into a movement that helps the village women to set up co-operative dairies. Because of a several years' knowledge of the Dhauladevi Block, where Dania is the main village a team from Lakshmi Ashram has participated out there, and on 16th September 2013 Neema and David participated in the opening of the first dairy in the area. The project will in all stages be run by women. Women in the small villages will collect and deliver the milk and also receive and administrate the money. The produced products will be fresh milk, cottage cheese and yoghurt for sale in Dania, and everything will be done in a co-operative way. It reminds me about the work with the co-operative dairy in my childhood's village in Himmerland, and here it will be run by women! Just imagine if the idea of a co-operative as a movement among women could give the lift that the women in the mountains really need.

But what has happened in Kausani, the tourist village below during the latest one and a half year? Of course the opening of the new museum for Sarala is a great event, because it is placed centrally in the middle of the tourist stream. But maybe I am even more interested in the problem child, the old workshop building below Anasakti Ashram! Can I myself venture down the path to the grocer! Neema declares rather excited no, absolutely no. My visit in Kausani has been planned carefully until departure. Nobody imagines that I shall walk down on my own!

Precisely at two o'clock pm. there is a workers' meeting in the computer room. I collect cushions and pile them up in a corner high enough, so I can sit down without folding my knees needlessly up. It is practical to be able to get up again without help. The minutes pass away, while the ring grows round in the room. Nearly on time we are eighteen women and one man – David. Neema makes a report, and then there is talking and discussion across the room for three and a half hour without any break, without tulsj, without coffee! Only David leaves now and then, maybe to get a glass of water. Of course I do not understand details, but it does not seem very difficult to understand the main points: hardwood, forest, nature, water, school, kitchen, erosion, women, village, education, office!



Each person has her own responsibility, and most of them have at the same time an opinion about the whole picture. Nobody is lounging.

The sun is seen to the west, when the meeting is over, and together with Neema, Pushpa, Kanti, Basanti and Hansi I walk towards LA. In the yard we meet Anne and Ane, who have come home from Kausani. We go together up the steps and are invited in, when we reach the house for the older members. It is Pushpa, who is the hostess. Her joy in being able to welcome us in her new home is overwhelming. Neema and Basanti vanish at once into the kitchen, and then they serve black coffee, tulsı and biscuits in the living room. There are seats on the bed and other places. There are family photos on the walls and built-in cupboards with shelves for clothes. There is a door to a fine toilet and washing room, and from a broad terrace outside there is a view to the east, where the Gurka castle is lying, and to the west to the Kosi valley. Neema lives in an equivalent flat in the house. It is very practical for her to be near the office, the dormitories and the children day and night. The building seems really solid and practically built. By all accounts by the help of Pooran.

As far as I am concerned the day ends with Anne and Ane accompanying me up to Lakshmi Ashram. After that they walk down again for the evening prayer and dinner. At that occasion they distributed some small solar lamps², which they had brought from Denmark. The yellow suns have a beautiful design, and a part of the cost price goes to a developing work in Africa. They give an unexpectedly strong and constant light. Of course they caused a great curiosity and enthusiasm with all grownups and children in the ashram. I hope they will bring permanent good.

Monday 7th April. You can't see any real sunrise. The clouds are lying close round the mountains. The weather is lurking! Then a single lightning is coming, which draws branches in the sky. A few minutes later you can hear a distant rumble. Unfortunately we cannot expect a real thunderstorm in the first week of April. Normally the monsoon should come here in the beginning of June, but maybe the weather is just as unusual in the Himalaya as in other places on the planet! It is raining. The drops are heard on the roof above the veranda, but the shower is short. It is time for black coffee and buns. Morning coffee and soft bread in Sarala's Ashram, who could have imagined that in 1960! I wonder if the students will accept the bread, if they have to eat it instead of chapati? Possibly it can be a popular sales article.

This morning I have an appointment with Basanti. She will tell me about the work she carries out with the women in the villages. In India the law now says that women shall be represented in the government of the villages on equal terms with men. It demands of course a certain knowledge or education to participate in a



² The lamp is produced by Olaf Eliasson and Frederik Ottesen

reasonable way in the work. The women must be informed of their rights, but they must first and foremost be inspired to get courage and confidence to stand up in public, and it is a difficult task. The teaching of the students in Lakshmi Ashram has daily undertakings, which will give them self-confidence, but the women in the villages, of whom many cannot read enough to understand a headline in a newspaper or write the address on an envelope, they are clearly in a lower position. They need help and support to get courage and self-confidence enough to take part in the problems of the village. Basanti, who herself has come from a village, has a great experience of the daily life and thinking of the women. Throughout the years she has accompanied Radha in many walks along the rivers to remote villages, where women have lived all their lives completely isolated from the rest of the world and any development. She knows how she gets their confidence, and she has the strength to get them listening to new ideas.

It is a lively morning in Sarala's veranda. Basanti tells with help from Kanti about organising groups, about walking from village to village with posters, while shouting slogans and use chorus to draw the attention to the fact that something new is coming. She has an overall which on the back has a painted a slogan in glaring colours, which is about preserving the nature, and she brings paper rolls on a stick that show the importance of preserving the trees. This can be used if she is together with a group, who wants to help her to bring out the message. But the daily work is different. Every morning she goes out to see a village. If there is a group of women, who is waiting, she can gather them about a subject, she has prepared, but if they maybe against their own will have been busy with duties in the family, she must give up and postpone! It means long useless walks. If she is lucky to find a woman in the village, who has before been in touch with school education, it can on the other hand be a great help to start a work there. Maybe she can form a group. Women in the mountains need one another. Imagine if there in every village was a woman who was educated from Lakshmi Ashram. That would give a lift to Himalaya, but this is a dream. Everyday life is different. Every morning at sunrise Basanti walks to the village, and hardly ever she comes home before it darkens.

It is lunch time. We pack up in the veranda. I laze and talk a little with Neema about the day tomorrow. As so often before I use the afternoon to ponder on the place of the Gandhi Movement in modern India. I don't participate in the evening song. It is too difficult, up and down the steps without a bannister. Sarala's veranda is a safer place. Moreover Basanti has forced from me a promise that it should be from the courtyard that I will leave the ashram tomorrow. That is the place where you say goodbye before a long travel.

Tuesday 8th April. It is the last day in Lakshmi Ashram. Kanti is leaving early together with her class to visit one of the school's friends in the military camp on the opposite hillside. It is a walk for more than one hour. I am forced to do my packing. My luggage should be ready to be brought down at nine o'clock. It has been a nice and interesting stay, and it will be sad and difficult to say goodbye to all of them in the courtyard.

It is a fine morning, where the whole Himalaya range is visible. On the opposite side of the valley Anasakti Ashram is placed, as it was at Sarala's time. There Gandhi spent ten days in 1929, before Sarala had met him, and over ten years passed before he sent her to the mountains for health reasons. After the liberation both Anasakti Ashram and the ground where it is placed were handed over to the state's memorial fund for Gandhi. This fund gave 40 years ago a site to Lakshmi Ashram. It was useful, because the site was placed at a carriage road and gave possibilities for activities, which Sarala on her mountain top never had been able to make use of. At that time Radha had taken over the work up here, and after many considerations they

decided that Lakshmi Ashram should build a smaller workshop down at the road. The building activity was possible, because a private group in England showed an interest in an experiment to develop a better spinning wheel than the traditional Gandhi Charka, but the experiment ran into difficulties, and Lakshmi Ashram decided to find other possibilities to help the villages.

Through Puraskar, Radha's brother-in-law, they got friends in Denmark. These friends Inger Marie and Svend Otto started the group that got the name: Friends of Lakshmi Ashram. An autumn evening in the beginning of the seventies Inger Marie drummed together a group of Lions Clubs in Farum to a photo lecture about the girls' school there high up in Himalaya. The workshop at the carriage road in Kausani was tremendously extended in the coming years, with economical support from Lions Clubs in Denmark together with an enormous effort from workers and students in Lakshmi Ashram. The building grew high by budding. When new ideas demanded room they built without any carefully prepared plan. For several years the rooms buzzed with activity, which is described in many Sanchars, latest very fully by David Hopkins in Sanchar 119. Unfortunately for the last years many of the rooms have been unused, because the present has new needs. It is necessary with new ideas, therefore I look forward to seeing, what has happened with the old workshop building down at the carriage road.

Towards ten o'clock I wave goodbye at the gate and close it carefully behind me. Anne and Ane are in front. Neema is walking beside me and watches closely if I am walking safely on the path. Well, it is not necessary. I do know the places, where you can stumble, and where you can slip. At the foot of the steps Pooran is ready with the car. To drive up through Kausani takes only a few minutes, then we turn sharply to the left towards Anasakti Ashram, and there is the new museum placed.

Sarala Devi Museum. It is printed with sharp black letters on a chalk-white wall. The door is open, and we enter a big, friendly and light room. There you can see Sarala's life in photos carefully placed on the walls in a correct order round the room. It gives a clear description about how Katharine Mary Heilemann during 50 years in India became Sarala Devi, freedom fighter and one of Mahatma Gandhi's best friends and workers.



I can easily imagine what it has cost Neema of time and efforts to collect all this material from England and from distant places in India. Neema follows me silently all the way round with a little smile that says: It has turned out well, I think. The explanation is self-evident! More words are unnecessary, and I must admit that she is right. She has reached her purpose: Let Sarala Devi be known as an inspiration to modern Indians. The door is open, when they nowadays come here to see the snow. The door is open!

The new museum clings to the part of the old workshop building which is still in use. The connection is a new external flight of steps. It is quite regular, so I can get up to the terrace without any help, from where there is a view across Kausani village to Lakshmi Ashram. Here big things have happened. Lakshmi Ashram co-operates with an NGO that works in the area around Nainital, and a group of socially interested people

who works to create centers, which will find "Employment to the Rural Districts", the name is B2R. Lakshmi Ashram hopes in that way to bring life to the old workshop building. There has been many and long negotiations, which can be difficult to understand, but David Hopkins has explained very well the whole development in Sanchar 119.

The result we see here. The whole upper floor of the old building has been turned into a big light and airy room, which at the moment is full of a group of young people from the area round Kausani. They are sitting at tables with each a computer and are working keenly. The instructor is a modern looking possible middle-aged woman, who comes from Hyderabad in the lowland. She is employed by B2R and lives in Kausani, as long as she is working here. The new room belongs to Lakshmi Ashram, who has carried out the renovation. I am very happy to hear that it is The Scouts in Farum, who has taken part economically in making the renovation possible. Maybe the B2R center will attract new activities, so that the old workshop building again will hum with life, while the young people of the area will gather here to get training. Maybe also some girls from Lakshmi Ashram could continue here, instead of necessarily seeking to the lowland for further training.

We are still looking forward to seeing the room downstairs, where the conditions of the library are considerably improved. Many inside walls have been removed, so now there is a big open room, which really give space for people from a whole village. To get the books placed in a right way is the point. The old philosophical books from Sarala's time, children's books old and new ones. Books in Hindi and books in English. The books about the forests and the rivers. The new environment books, but also books about culture. We meet a librarian from Bageshwar, who is going to be employed in the library, while shelves, cupboards, tables, benches, all the equipment are under the orders of Pooran. He is the absolute ideas man.

For me this visit in Lakshmi Ashram is memorable. It is difficult to explain, but I feel a humming pulse from the yard up there and far about into the villages.

It is lunch time. Neema offers food in a tourist restaurant under a thatched roof with a view to the snow. The food is fine. It took some time to prepare it. A couple of hours later Pooran takes us by car towards Simkholi. Neema goes with us.