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# NEWS FROM THE FABINDIA SCHOOL

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Dear Friends of Fabindia School: This newsletter comes with our sincere thanks for your interest and support for the Fabindia School and the John Bissell Scholars Fund. This issue includes Charley Todd's report on his visit to the school in December. His experience as a head of an independent school in the USA for 27 years has been a valued addition to the school's board of trustees.

We also bring you a featured article by Pritha Ghosh, the new educational consultant to the school. Pritha brings broad experience in inventive education in India, and great enthusiasm for her work with faculty, students, administration and parents. Jayant Biswas, principal of the school, has contributed a profile of a young girl whose life is being changed by her experience at the school. We hope you find this report interesting and hope you will communicate any comments or questions to us via the e-mail or postal addresses which appear at the end of the newsletter.

*Sincerely, Charley Todd and Marie Prentice*

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## NOTES FROM A WEEK'S VISIT TO THE FABINDIA SCHOOL

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*By Charley Todd*

I stayed at William and Anjali Bissell's wonderful farm on the outskirts of Bali in Rajasthan. We lived blessedly without electricity or phone but with attentive staff, superb meals and unforgettable views of the Thar Desert and the Aravali Mountains. I think I am right in saying that William would be glad to host any supporters of the John Bissell Scholars Fund at the farm which he and John discovered and fell in love with a decade ago. My last few days at the farm I was joined by William, Anjali, and other trustees. We had a board meeting under a neem tree. In its shade, with a sense of history around us, we were inspired to what we imagined to be wise discourse, with occasional slips into the ridiculous, just to be sure it seemed like a real trustee meeting.

A high point of the meeting was the report that the John Bissell Scholars endowment, now at \$37,750, has increased the school's total endowment by nearly 50% in two years and the number of girls whose tuition is supported by scholarship grew to nearly 60 this year.

Here are some of the things I saw and learned during my days of visiting the school:

The fun began on the way to school the first day. I was being driven from the Bissell farm in William's old army jeep when we came upon a car with a flat tire containing about 15 children of all ages who were being transported to Fabindia School. They all piled into the jeep which already had three passengers. A terrified small girl was tossed into my lap in the front seat by the larger boys crammed in the back, and we all bumped along the road together amidst much merriment.

There are many children attending the school from farther, often quite poor parts of Rajasthan, thanks to housing provided by a family who are committed to the Fabindia School. Pritha Ghosh also stays there during her one week a month at the school. As you would guess, this is one of the ways she learns most about the school. I enjoyed several visits and learned first hand how important an opportunity Fabindia School is in the lives of these kids.

I also visited the beautiful new Ankur School built in nearby Ghanerao and run by Fabindia School through the generous gift of a donor. The school was designed by architect and trustee Ravi Kaimal who designed the parent school in Bali as well. The new school, already enrolling 52 students during its first year, is situated in a spectacular landscape. Its school yard includes traditional playground equipment as well as vegetable gardens where the students participate in an appreciation of horticulture and good environmental practices.

I was again able to observe how central a role the girls play in the Fabindia School, and what an equal role they have with the boys - so untypical in rural India. I also observed what a wide range of students the school enrolls, from children of local business leaders and larger landholders to tribal children from 'scheduled' castes attending on full scholarship. The wearing of uniforms, standard in most Indian schools, was a little hard for me to adjust to, coming from a school with little dress code, but this seems a good way to help level the playing field. Although in this part of the world the students are all very aware of the caste and economic status of classmates, the faculty do a good job of fostering equality of opportunity within the school.

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## SONI BAI TAKES A JOB AT THE FABINDIA SCHOOL

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*This article was written by Pritha Ghosh, educational consultant to the Fabindia School. She chose Soni Bai for this project because she is a young woman from a poor local family who is dedicating herself to the school to give her siblings an education and the promise of a brighter future.*

Soni Bai's connection with the school began with the construction of the new Ankur school (managed by the parent Fabindia School in Bali). The new school is for younger children in Ghanerao so they can begin a Fabindia education without the longer commute by bus that older children make. An old local retainer, Tej Singh, was put in charge of construction and he spread the word in the village that he needed people to work on the site. Many were willing since there had been several years of severe drought and people were running out of money. For the first time women were working on large construction projects although this was hard for everyone to accept since even the poorest have strict codes of conduct.

Soni Bai's father is a shepherd with a large stock of goat and sheep. Because of the drought he had to travel many more miles to find grazing land for his animals. By the third year of drought the situation was desperate and it was clear to Soni Bai that she had to help support the family. At eighteen, she is the eldest of three children. She had had no education or job experience but in construction work she could use some skills she had learned at home and some of it was just the basic labor of loading and carrying.

Undaunted by the fact that no woman in her family had ever worked outside the house before, Soni Bai labored hard



at her new job and her boss, Tej Singh, noticed her sincerity. When the construction was complete he asked her if she would like to work at the school permanently. They needed an industrious person who would come in before school hours and stay till after to keep the place clean and help with odd jobs. Soni immediately accepted the offer.

### *Making a difficult decision. . .*

Her acceptance may have seemed quick but when I asked her about it, it was clear that she had a long struggle to justify her decision over and over again. She knew that she would continue working outside the house to support her family. She knew that her only other option was to work in construction and that it might take her away from home. Here was an offer to work in a safe place, doing work that was not heavy and near her home.

Although her mother understood Soni's point of view, it took her awhile to reconcile herself to the decision. She worried about her child going to work every morning all alone until the teachers and students came in, then being alone again after they left. It was only when Tej Singh's family moved into their home on the campus and his wife started teaching at the school that her mother was reassured. Her father did not understand for a long time. To take a job in construction was bad enough and it was done only when absolutely necessary.

### *Her father's attitude changes*

When I spoke to Soni's father he was asking why should any of his women work at a permanent job? Why should his own daughter take a job as if she had to be a bread-earner like himself? He spoke like a man humbled by circumstance. He admitted that they did need the money. There was awe in the way he spoke of his earning daughter. Because of the tradition of thought that lived in him, he was surprised at his daughter's abilities when we extolled them, but this did not keep him from sounding bashfully proud as he thanked us for our support to her. Even a year after she has been working at the school, almost everyone the family knows still scorns the idea of a young girl working regularly in an institution to help support her family. But the family withstands this criticism, shrugging it off as idle gossip.

As it often does, the mood changed as soon as Soni's father left the women's section of the house to go back to the fields, and there were only women in the room. Her mother and grandmother and aunt instantly grew less formal. Her mother, who is an outspoken woman and obviously used to speaking her mind even in the presence of her husband albeit peeping out from behind a wall, added that she was really glad Soni had this job and was going to be better off than herself. As is the custom with many Rajasthani girls, Soni had

been married young but had not yet gone to live with her husband. Her mother knew that Soni's husband, who had a low-paying job, would need her help to support the family.

### *Soni's work at the school*

In a year's time Soni is an integral part of the school. Her direct gaze and always smiling countenance add to the open and friendly atmosphere that the school strives to maintain. Her daily routine is daunting. She rises at dawn to hunt the area around her home for scarce new leaves to feed the animals. She arrives before everyone at the school, cleans the schoolhouse and does the same when school is out. Though she sometimes seems shy, she has shown determination in acquiring skills that were not counted on when she was hired as an extra hand, skills she has taught herself or learned from the teachers. These now qualify her to assist teachers in the classrooms. They include her helping the children focus on their work while they are in class. She uses her knowledge of the local dialect to work with children who do not understand the teacher. She now completely understands the teacher's instructions in both English and Hindi, and reinforces them by making sure every child is doing what they are supposed to do. She knows which books the children work on every day and makes sure they can pick them out. She knows the schedule so well that she is able to provide the



teacher with all the support she needs with materials. For three pre-primary classes, that can be a lot. She helps the children play when they are in the playground.

Her younger brother and sister are doing well at school. Although Soni never had the opportunity they have, she is receiving the equivalent of a formal education with full scholarship, vocational training and the means to partially support her family. Perhaps most important of all is the encouragement received to her innate determination and will to alter her quality of life. She is a compassionate human being and an exemplary woman.

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## SIMRAN SONI - A STUDENT PROFILE

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*by Jayant Biswas, Principal*

Simran Soni, one of the John Bissell Scholars this year, is a six year old, soft-spoken girl who has been at Fabindia School for three years. She has just completed Grade 1 scoring an overall A. Simran travels daily in the school's bright yellow bus, a distance of 15 km. from her home village, Sevari, population 10,000. This poor agricultural village, in a remote area of Rajasthan, could be the set for a film about rural Indian poverty in a traditional agrarian society. Here, opportunity is especially limited for women, some of whom still cover their faces in public.

Simran's father and grandfather are traditional gold and silver craftsmen. This has been their ancestral occupation, and their average annual income would be not more than \$1500. They are literate but with no formal schooling beyond Grade 4. Simran's mother is also literate but she has had no schooling. It is the grandfather's dream that his granddaughter should be the first college graduate in her family, and he sees Fabindia School as the pathway to that dream.

Simran lives in her village home with her 3-year-old brother, mother, father, and grandparents. Both father and grandfather are proud of being able to send her to an English medium school, though the financial burden is great despite

receiving a generous scholarship. Their only worry is that the child has to travel so far, leaving home at seven in the morning and returning in the late afternoon. However, Simran does not seem to mind it at all. She enjoys getting to play with so many other kids her age, and has access to many resources at school, unheard of in other schools in the area. She says she loves drawing and playing ball games. She thrives at learning new poems and songs.

Her teacher says that over these three years Simran has become quite confident and far less shy. She has started to mix with her friends and shares her things with them. Her grandfather feels that sending her to Fabindia School has taught her many good things, including spoken English,



*Simran Soni and her brother*

*Simran Soni cont'd*

manners and etiquette. He says she has become more graceful. The family all feel proud of her progress.

When asked about her future plans, Simran replied, without a doubt in her voice, that she wants to be a teacher inspired by those who have brought so much into her own life. It seems she has made a promising start toward her ambition and the opportunity such a profession will offer her and her community.

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#### VEENA CHOUDHURY - SUCCESS STORY

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You may remember Charley Todd's article about a Fabindia student, Veena Choudhury, which was published last winter in Outlook Magazine, the Indian equivalent of Newsweek. Veena, a young woman from an illiterate rural family, recently received the highest grade among the Fabindia students who took the All India Board exam. She wants to be an engineer and intends to continue preparation for university although it will mean a commute of 80 kilometers to the nearest qualified school. Veena will make this daily commute (of two hours each way) because she is determined to have the education no one in her family has had and she is inspired by her years at Fabindia School to undertake a career path that few women in this part of India dare imagine.

#### THE JOHN BISSELL SCHOLARS FUND

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#### THE FABINDIA SCHOOL

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The Fabindia School was established by William and John Bissell who saw the need for a model school to empower young people in rural Rajasthan where literacy rates are extremely low, especially among women. From the beginning the school has been committed to encouraging education for girls in a region where most parents who can afford an English medium school would send only their sons. To attract girls the school subsidizes their tuition. Starting in 1992 with 11 pupils, the school now has over 250, plus another 50 young pupils in the new school in nearby Ghanerao. The John Bissell Scholars Fund was established in 2000 in memory of John Bissell. Its purpose is to support scholarships for female students who now comprise nearly half the student body.

For comments or further information about the fund, contact Marie Prentice at [mariepre@optonline.net](mailto:mariepre@optonline.net) or Charley Todd at [Chartodd@aol.com](mailto:Chartodd@aol.com) or write to the following address:

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