
NEWS FROM THE FABINDIA SCHOOL

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Dear Friends of Fabindia School: This newsletter contains enthusiastic reports from two American educators who visited the school in March 2004. In another article, a young Canadian, who was a volunteer teacher there last year, describes the excitement and transformation in the lives of the girls she taught. Jayant Biswas, Principal of the Fabindia School, reports on his meetings with Americans from Vermont to California during his visit to the U.S. in May and June.

We hope you find this newsletter interesting and that you will communicate any comments or questions to us using the e-mail or postal addresses at the end of the newsletter. This comes with sincere thanks for your interest in and support of the Fabindia School and the John Bissell Scholars Fund.

—Sincerely, Charley Todd and Marie Prentice

SURPASSING EXPECTATIONS

by Aylette Jenness

Retired Director of The Multicultural Program of The Boston Children's Museum

What did I expect on my first visit to the Fabindia School? Formal classrooms? Shy boys and girls with downcast eyes? Minimal English? Students struggling to communicate with a visiting American? Not at all!

I was blown away by the experience, and this after a lifetime of teaching and observation in schools from Alaska to Nigeria, from Boston to Los Angeles. To me, these kids exemplified the very best in education. Between classes, outdoors, they approached me full of thoughtful questions, carefully articulated. They listened to my answers. They answered my questions with a palpable sense of self-respect and pride in their lives, their families and especially their school. In class, they were alert and engaged. They took turns responding to their teachers' discussion questions. I thought about other classrooms I'd observed where students were bored and zoned out; where the time spent on discipline exceeded the time spent on fruitful teaching. There was none of that at the Fabindia School.

The school itself? You drive up to a cluster of buildings, modest in scale, open, wonderfully welcoming, designed by the well-known architect, Ravi Kaimal. The architecture leads

you into the classrooms and into the open spaces between them, which invite socialization, projects, sports, collaboration. There are play spaces, fields, and welcome shade trees.

This is a setting in which learning can, and does, take place. I look forward to knowing, as do all of you who read this, what Fabindia School graduates will do in the future. I have great faith in them.

REPORT ON U.S. TRIP

by Jayant Biswas, Principal of the Fabindia School

I undertook a trip to the U.S. in May-June 2004 to meet people in different parts of the country, and to tell them about how the Fabindia School is creating opportunities for young people in rural India. My goal was to strengthen the endowment that supports scholarships for girls at the school.

Various relatives and friends of the Bissell family hosted the meetings: Arthur and Barbara Powell in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Marie and Tim Prentice in Cornwall, Connecticut; Dan Dwyer and Jim Montanari in Salisbury, Connecticut; Hector and Erica Prud'homme in New York City; Kathy Sreedhar in Washington, D.C.; Jeff Shumlin and Evie Lovett in Putney, Vermont; Cely Arndt in Los Angeles, California; and Carole Rafferty in Palo Alto, California. As a result, more than \$30,000 has been added to the endowment. I also visited partner schools and had meetings with prospective funders, including the Horvitz family of



Jayant Biswas,
Principal, and
William Bissell,
founder of
Fabindia School



Cleveland, Ohio, who pledged \$5000 for construction of a new building.

At each meeting, I showed a video about Manisha, a 7th-grade student from a rural environment, the first female in her family to go to school. Her father, the only literate family member, says he is proud to be able to send her to an English-medium school, and sees her growing up to be a better citizen. Her mother, an ordinary village woman, walks several miles daily to fetch water and firewood, and is happy that her daughter will have a much different future from her own.

Manisha herself is happy that she has this wonderful opportunity, and dreams of going to a university to become an engineer. She plans to build canal systems for her drought-stricken village.

Those who saw the video were visibly moved by the story and had many questions to ask at the end of each session. They wanted to know how they could help transform the lives of other girls in rural India.

The trip was a great learning experience for me, particularly since this was the first time I had ever done such a thing. I learned how much these Americans care about development in other countries, in contrast to the image of politically motivated Americans and their multinational corporations. Many guests at our meetings shared their unhappiness about U.S. government attempts to play the role of international policeman. They spoke of their visits to India, and of the importance of education in building a better future. On my return, I described my experiences to our teachers and students, and they were particularly interested in my videos of America and the people I met there.

I am deeply grateful to all the hosts for organizing the meetings, providing good food and drinks, and welcoming me into their homes. On behalf of the students, teachers and staff of Fabindia School, we deeply appreciate all that they have done for this worthy cause.

BOSTON-FABINDIA PEN PALS

By Barbara S. Powell

Educational Consultant, currently working on a curriculum on international humanitarian law for high school students

"Dear Sanjoli," writes Maya from Boston, "My country also fought for their freedom and won. The USA fought England. Who did India fight against? I like the USA a lot," she continues. "There are so many kinds of people here. There are so many cultures, and so much good food from all over the world. That's what I love about Boston and the USA, how diverse it is."

Maya, a sixth grader from the Advent School in Boston, is learning about Sanjoli through a pen pal exchange with the Fabindia School in Bali. The letters, hand carried by Fabindia's Principal, Mr. Jayant Biswas, on a visit to the U.S. in May, touch on history, religion, food and family.

"I am sorry I was unable to send you a picture," says Annie to Meena, "but your headmaster filmed me, so you can see me then." She explains what she is learning: "At my school, we are studying Civil Rights. We are learning about the events in South Africa and America. We are learning about how the blacks were treated by the whites."

Martin writes, "I am really interested in Hinduism, and I

have a picture of Vishnu on the front." His letter is covered with post-it notes with hand-drawn pictures of Ganesh and Brahma. "Please tell me anything I need to know. Namaste."

The Advent students were stunned by the careful, elaborate, creative artwork the Fabindia students sent with their letters. "You are a great artist," Maya tells Sanjoli; "so is everyone else in your class." Inspired, the Advent children send drawings of Boston skyscrapers and collages because they do not think they can come anywhere near the exquisite Fabindia student drawings.

In response to queries from their Indian pen pals, the American students tell the names of everyone in their family, explain that "KFC, stands for Kentucky Fried Chicken," and describe their favorite sports. Curious and candid, they speak from the heart: "I am so sorry about your grandma," Abby writes to Ashvini. "My uncle died of cancer at 18. The world will miss your kind, loving and generous grandma."

The eleven-year-old Americans all carefully include their home addresses and reassure their pen pals in India that they will soon have a picture of them when their Principal shows his Boston videos. "Did you know that your Principal came to our school?" writes one Advent student. "I think he is pretty cool."

By Vanessa Redditt

She runs through the dust, arms outstretched, brown eyes shining, and calls "Didi" ("Teacher")! In a burst of light, so I am greeted in the morning.

Namaste, little one. You are entering a special time. Do you hear the wind stirring in the neem tree? It whispers of change. You are flying to places your mother and grandmother have never known. Unfold your wings and let your song flood the blue sky opening up to you. Perhaps not today, or even tomorrow, but the wind brings the message that dreams can come true. New colours are being stitched into the social fabric of your life.

Along with two other volunteers from Germany and Sweden, I came to Bali, India, in January of 2004 to teach English for four months at the Fabindia School. Before coming to India, I studied at the Red Cross Nordic United World College (UWC) in Norway. This is one of ten international UWC secondary schools that teach peace through international understanding, political awareness, social justice and humanitarian action. UWC encourages students to live its values through worldwide voluntary service. One of my teachers had read about the Fabindia School and its mission to empower girls through education. He inquired about the possibility of student volunteers, and I seized the opportunity. Deeply intrigued about going to India, a social, cultural, economic and environmental context so different from my own, I felt excited about contributing to the school's aim.

In a region where females are largely marginalized and bound to traditional roles, I wanted to demonstrate solidarity with them and become an education advocate. I taught three English classes, assisted pre-primary teachers and organized extra-curricular activities, delighting in all these roles. Since I also lived with a wonderful local family, I had an intimate glimpse into the culture, traditions and lifestyle of this community.

The children were an absolute joy. Their love and energy seemed boundless. Even on the hottest days, they entered the school like gusts of fresh air, sparkling and eager to absorb their lessons. With limitless imagination, boys and girls shared their hopes of becoming doctors, teachers, advocates, politicians, police.

The girls studied devotedly and dreamed constantly. They poured over library books and begged for extras to read on Sunday. Many thrived on math and science, not at all shy about learning alongside male peers. Others delighted in making coloured drawings, taking special pride in their art. A favourite pastime was exploring the world map and pondering borders, people and places beyond their village.

Girls stood in assemblies to read poems, do theater, and tell

jokes. They sang and danced, their faces lifted in confidence and enthusiasm, in contrast to the bowed heads often seen in town. Pre-adolescent girls adamantly demanded equal standards in the community, at work and in relationships. In heated discussions, some girls even rejected marriage if it would hold them back. They showed an understanding of the limits placed on them by a male-dominated culture and spoke of their right to make choices.

Freedom may not be granted overnight to these young girls. Daunting obstacles remain, but they are part of a transition that, balancing tradition and progress, may create important changes for the women of India. During my time at Fabindia School, I could see that education and the resulting advance of girls were slowly making dents in firmly held social traditions and harmful attitudes. It was deeply enriching to observe such change, and play a role in it.

Embraced so warmly by this community, I cherish my days in Bali and am grateful to everyone involved. The children lie nestled in my heart, their smiles and laughter never to be forgotten. I was called a teacher, but felt like a student.

But concerns remain. My experience was eye-opening, and continues to unfold as I reflect upon it. I had known India only from words and pictures. Now its complex reality has added a new dimension to my long-term plans. I am currently studying International Development and Pathology at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. My dream is to become a doctor and join humanitarian organizations, like Medecins Sans Frontieres, to provide medical care and human rights advocacy where most needed.

I hope to return to Bali some day. My students may have stories to tell.



Vanessa with third grade class

By Barbara S. Powell

On a three-day visit to the Fabindia School in March, we asked an eighth-grade class about their school. They were at recess, sitting in white uniforms in the shade on the dirt playground. And they had a lot to say.

When asked what they liked most about the school, they really liked "the environment because there are so many trees and plants and so many grasses." "When I sit in the shadow of the tree, I like cool air," Khushbu said. As Sheetal put it, "I like the place where the school is situated in the forest because here is silence, no disturbances by traffic. We can get free air from nature."

Other students mentioned the emphasis on educating girls. "Women were always suppressed in the past," commented one, "so they should be empowered." Most of the eighth graders also liked the fact that Fabindia School was an "English medium school, and English is an important language." Their English speaking, and their perspectives are broadened immensely by volunteers from overseas because "we can become fluent in English" and have interactions with people from all around the world."

Regarding instruction, students commented on particular characteristics of their teachers, such as fairness, friendliness, personal interest and what they termed "the ways of teaching." "I like the teachers because they always help students who are poor and unintelligent. They do not do partiality in their ways of teaching," said Shraddha. The best class for one student was "history class because we were learning about the Indian national struggle for freedom. It was interesting because our teacher was telling some incidents which were not in the book. He told about a bomb thrown on a governor general in Delhi." They loved hearing "stories that were



not in the book" and "reading about Mughal history and architecture."

Like students all over the world, Fabindia students want improvements such as more shelves "so we have a place to store things;" "better exam facilities;" "a big science lab for students to do experiments;" reduction in fees; and more sports. "There should be more buses, because we don't get seats for sitting," said one. "There should be a water source in the school, like a tube well," recommended another.

Although a very few students felt that students should not be forced to speak English only, most wanted to speak more English. In fact, several recommended that English should be compulsory: "Most students speak in Hindi and Marwari; I think this should not be allowed."

As the students discussed their school, they dreamed about the future with "a student parliament," "more trained teachers," "a chance to have meetings between the Board and students often," "easier and better books," "more library periods", "good computers", "a reduced distance between teachers and students" and one said, "Have art and architecture taught in each class." They did, indeed, have a lot to say.

THE FABINDIA SCHOOL

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.

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Contributions to the fund are tax deductible and should be written to the

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