



Progress Report

Project: **Blossom Bus**

Project Reporting Dates: From : **March, 2015**

To: **April, 2016.**

Project Leader: **Lotus Outreach. Director of Field Operations: Glenn Fawcett. Program Coordinator: Suraj Kumar.**

Summarize Project

Lotus Outreach has run Blossom Bus since 2009 with two central objectives.

- 1) Provide needy families on the outer limits of poverty in Mewat, India with a girls-only bus to safely deliver up to 300 girls to secondary school thereby inspiring young pioneers to become vocal, passionate advocates for girls' education in their district.
- 2) Support girls in all villages until wider access to secondary school is available. Establish female education as the norm rather than an anomaly; mitigate gender imbalances; bolster individual self-esteem and foster a greater, more active role for women in Indian society.

Blossom Bus is administered by Lotus Outreach's Director of Field Operations Glenn Fawcett, with project management provided by India Program Coordinator Suraj Kumar.

Progress

Lotus Outreach is providing transport to 254 girls currently studying in grade 9 to 12, and another 20 young women who are attending college in Palwal. 200 of the girls are attending two schools in Aharwan village, Girls High School and Senior Secondary School in the Hathin block of Palwal district, and 50 girls are attending school in Satpura, in the Kaman block of the Bharatpur district in Rajasthan.

The girls come from eight separate villages of Haryana, and from seven villages in Rajasthan. All of the villages have exceptionally high drop out rates among high school girls. Local secondary schools are not available and the parents are often not willing to let teenagers walk to distant villages for school in the absence of a safe transport. There is a sadly prevalent myth in these districts and even more broadly throughout India that Muslim parents do not want to educate their female children. Muslim parents in Mewat are intent on debunking this fallacy, but remain concerned about the safety of their young daughters walking a distance of two to four, but sometimes even ten kilometers each day to and from school, passing through fields and villages where women are all too often harassed verbally and violently.



Blossom Bus has been busy as ever over the academic thus far ensuring the educations previously out of reach for these girl students. Without Blossom Bus, many would have little other option than joining their less fortunate peers in the village, dropping out of school after eighth grade, marrying, and even having children in their early teens. A breakdown of the 274 girls riding the bus this year is as follows:

Grade Level	Number of Girls
Sixth Grade	23
Seventh Grade	29
Eighth Grade	27
Ninth Grade	62
Tenth Grade	60
Eleventh Grade	37
Twelfth Grade	16
University (1 st Year)	20
Total	274

We couldn't be more proud of our 20 Blossom University scholars, all from backgrounds on the outer limits of poverty, many of whom rode with Blossom Bus to secondary school. The majority of these girls are the first in their family to pass grade 10.

Staffing

The Blossom Bus Project Coordinator is Suraj Kumar, Director of Field Operations is Glenn Fawcett, and the Independent Contractors (Bus Drivers) employed by the program include Balbir Singh, Yashpal, Subhash Chand, Umesh Kumar

Other Funding

Lotus Outreach is currently in a scheduled "dark year" with one the primary Foundation supporters of Blossom Bus, Impact Giving, who contributed \$30,000 towards the Blossom Bus last year. We are currently seeking funding from a wide network of Foundations and supporters as a substitute, including the Fred and June McMurray Foundation who have pledged \$15,000 towards the program.

Milestones Current

There are currently four buses deployed serving 204 girls in Haryana and two vans serving 50 girls in Rajasthan.

Up until March we were providing transport to a combined 300 secondary school girls in Haryana and Rajasthan. At the beginning of new academic session in April 2015, however, several local schools were



upgraded from primary school (through 5th grade) to upper primary schools, which goes through 8th grade, and consequently we lost a few riders.

Currently, there are more girls seeking the bus in some districts that can fit onto it, and occasionally our drivers will report that some girls not affiliated with the program are riding Blossom Bus to school. Blossom Bus maintains monthly school attendance records of its riders, which have not been impacted by these additional riders on the bus. However, for the well being and safety of everyone on Blossom Bus, we have been working with drivers on strategies to keep only program participants on the bus for the rest of the academic year.

Milestones Future

The Blossom Bus has not only rerouted the lives of its girl students, but also has worked to drastically changed the mindset of the girls' parents. Many have approached the program requesting that we increase the number of seats available to young girls, especially in Rajasthan where more schools have recently been closed due to a controversial government policy change. We are considering the possibility of increasing the number of seats available, but only first upon an expansion of resources.

We are tremendously excited about the academic progress of some of our riders. The girls from Mewat who had never considered attending college, who became the first women in their villages to reach grade 10 or 12, now are enrolled in university at Palwal, and openly talk about a career and a better future. They are powerful examples of the capabilities of the Blossom Bus, and represent a broader goal for the bus' activities.

Budget

The transportation agents (drivers) are paid at Rs. 800 per girl per month, and Rs. 20,000 for 20 girls to college. The total paid from January to July (save for June, a school holiday which we do not pay for), six months is:

1. Balbir Singh = $80,000 \times 6 = 480,000$ (Haryana) **(US\$8,000)**
2. Yashpal = $80,000 \times 6 = 480,000$ (Haryana) **(US\$8,000)**
3. Subhash Chand = $60,000 \times 3$ and $40,000 \times 3 = 400,000$ (Jan to March and April to July) including Rajasthan **(US\$6,666)**
4. Umesh Kumar = $55,000 \times 3$ and $20,000 \times 3 = 225,000$ (Haryana including college) **(\$3,750)**

Opinion

In Mewat, widespread religious prejudice is sadly very common. Many poor Muslim parents were looked down upon in the wider Mewat community, and in India more broadly, for not educating their daughters, and the prevailing myth is that Muslim parents are not committed to raising their daughters with a proper education. Now, with Blossom Bus in its sixth year in Mewat, Lotus Outreach is steadily working to provide many Muslim families with the chance to send their daughters safely and reliably to school each morning, and community-wide prejudice is being disproven. Many parents in the area are extraordinarily grateful for the ease and facility of this transport, without which their children would be deprived of the means to secondary education.

Unfortunately, it seems that the difficulties of transportation for young women seeking a high school education will remain a problem for a very long time. Many girls who do not have the chance to join our Blossom Bus riders continue to drop out because of the great safety risk inherent to the long walking distance to and from school each day. Blossom Bus is constantly being approached by parents in Haryana and Rajasthan to increase the number of buses for their children's educations.

The need for a safe transport will remain in Mewat for many years to come, and our project coordinator Suraj Kumar has estimated that the withdrawal of the Bus for any reason would result in a drop out of at least 75% of the girls. We have tried to motivate parents to contribute to the project in some way, but nothing substantial has come of these efforts. Many families are extremely poor, and have very little to offer towards the program.

Case Study from August, 2015:

**Sarita, Devi and Sangeeta:
*Haryana 9th Graders Share Their Experience as Blossom Bus Riders***



"Before Blossom Bus came to our village we had to bear harassment from boys of other villages and miss school regularly due to harsh summers and monsoon rains. Having a bus service ensures we now attend school everyday, safe!"

Earlier this year, the headmaster of a village upper primary school approached Aharwan High School to ask for help on behalf of girls from his village. He had recently heard about the free Lotus Outreach provided Blossom Bus service to nearby village girls to get to secondary school. Luckily, the program had some room due to graduations in the previous year, and we soon came to agreement to help transport his village girls.

Soon after, Lotus Outreach Director of Field Operations Glenn Fawcett and other Blossom team members travelled to the remote village of Rajolaka to meet Sarita, Devi and Sangeeta, three of the new group of eight girls that have joined the Blossom Bus from this village, and track the progress of these new Bus Riders.

Upon arrival, the team was invited into a typical Haryana home comprised of a single adobe room with a couple of rope beds (charpoy), an old black and white TV, and a water cooler. The village is electrified, but we are told that the current only runs for a couple of hours in a day.

Inside the team met the three young Bus Riders, and their respective families. Sarita is one of six girls in her family. Her father, Sohan Pal, was outspoken about his appreciation for the bus. "I am not a wealthy man," he said. "I am aware of the importance of education and want my girls to be educated. The bus is helping me to ensure I can send Sarita to school, without which she would surely have dropped out."



Sarita, Devi, and Sangeeta read from their school books

Sarita told us, "We three somehow managed to complete grade nine without the bus, but in the most difficult circumstances. We had to walk a kilometer outside the safety of their own village to a larger road and then take a public tempo for 7-8 kilometers to the main town. During raining season we couldn't go to school, as our clothes would become drenched. In the summer it's very hot and very difficult, but we had to manage in all seasons in order to remain in school."

Bus rider and village 9th grader Devi adds, "Our parents are happy for us to continue our educations due to having the bus service. Now they won't stop us from going to school for safety reasons and other things they are not comfortable with."

Manisha, the third of the 9th graders, pipes in, "It's a safe transport and saves us from the bad weather and harassment from boys on the road!"

We then asked the parents and the girls about the importance of education to them and what they will do once educated. Manisha quickly replies: "Education is important as we can get a job and support our families."

Devi remarks further, "Not having education is a curse and we want to get away from that."

The team asks, "Why is not having an education a curse?" Sangeeta tells us, "Without education we are not aware of our rights and duties, only through education can we learn correct behavior and which we learn from our parents and teachers."

Devi goes on, “We all want to finish year 12 and go to college. If we finish our education we can work and earn and do something for our families.

Playing the devils advocate we then asked, “But how as girls will you be able to leave your villages and go out to work?” They told us without hesitation that once educated and a little more grown up, they will acquire the confidence and ability to travel to cities using public transportation, or even can migrate to cities for work. Educated girls can also be married into educated families, often in the cities, and they can find work more easily.

All the parents and villagers present agreed with these sentiments, and the team was left with great hope for village social development in this area, which has long been known, even very recently, as extremely backwards when it comes to gender issues. Lotus Outreach and the Blossom Bus know that education for these girls has the power to break the walls and ceilings limiting their aspirations and dreams. We continue to be inspired by their determination, enabled and further fueled by the Blossom Bus service.

Sadly, there are many countless thousands of girls from villages like this one across swathes of rural India



Devi and Sarita in Class, 2nd row from back, middle two girls

that are not attending school for the same reasons as these girls: the long distance of the closest available school, and no choice but to walk up to ten kilometers along a hazard-laden and dangerous route or not go to school.

All the families of the three girls we met thanked Lotus Outreach, and the team left with promises and the hope we would see them again soon.

Thank You

Lotus Outreach wishes to thank The Forix Foundation for their generous support of the Blossom Bus Program, without which these girls would be left without access to the educations and the chance reroute their own futures. Please do not hesitate to contact Harry Bartle at harry@lotusoutreach.org