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*Blossom Bus Riders in Class*



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## **Blossom Bus**

### ***Annual Report to the Forix Foundation***

### **2015**

The following is the 2015-2016 Annual Report for the Blossom Bus Program, which has continued its marked success creating education opportunities for young girls and developing young agents of change in Mewat, India. On behalf all those served in our programs, LO wishes to thank the Forix Foundation for its tremendous support over the years.

## Progress Report

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

- Provide needy families on the outer limits of poverty in Mewat, India with a girls-only bus to safely deliver girls to secondary school, thereby inspiring young pioneers to become vocal, passionate advocates for girls' education in their district.
- 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.

Thus far in 2015, Lotus Outreach has built upon the historic success of the Blossom Bus program. Blossom Bus is providing regular weekday transport to and from school for 254 girls currently studying in grades 9 to 12 in Haryana and Rajasthan, and another 20 young women attending college in Palwal, for a total of 274 regular bus riders. 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.

### *Grade Level Distribution of 2015-2016 Blossom Riders*

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 <sup>st</sup> Year)	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>274</b>

The girls come from eight separate villages of Haryana, and from seven villages in Rajasthan. Each village represented has extremely high drop-out rates among school-age girls, especially when transitioning from primary to Lower Secondary (LS) to High School. Local secondary schools are not available, and in the absence of a safe transport, parents are often not willing to let teenagers walk to distant villages for school. There is a 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 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 as busy as ever over the academic year thus far ensuring an education previously out of reach for these girl students. Without Blossom Bus, many of the girls would have little other option than joining their less fortunate peers, dropping out of school after eighth grade, marrying, and even having children in their early teens.



## Blossom to University

We couldn't be more proud of our 20 Blossom University scholars. All come from backgrounds on the outer limits of poverty, and have shown a tremendous dedication to their own educations and futures, many riding with Blossom Bus since secondary school. The majority are the very first in their family to pass grade 10.

## Staffing

The Blossom Bus Project staff has remained the same: our 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, and Umesh Kumar—all trusted members of the Mewat community.



*Two Blossom University students off to school!*

## 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 5<sup>th</sup> grade) to upper primary schools, which goes through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and consequently we lost approximately 26 riders.

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 change 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. 20 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.

Community-wide prejudices are steadily being disproven as well. 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 for a long time to come. Many of the young girls who do not have the chance to join the Blossom Bus continue to drop out because of the great safety risks 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, but our resources prevent us from taking on any more riders at this time.



*Blossom University students en route to class*

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 the dropping out of at least 75% of the secondary school girls. We have tried to motivate parents to contribute to the project in some way, but many families are extremely poor and have very little to offer towards the program.

*Lotus Outreach's Blossom Bus service was recently featured by Gov't of Haryana at a presentation of best practices in Education to the Indian Ministry of Human Resources and Development (MHRD). The program was credited with addressing the lack of safe transport for young women to get to school, one of the root causes of poor attendance and high drop-out rates for young girls across the country.*

### Case Studies: *Khushboo Wants to Become a Doctor*

Khushboo started riding the Blossom Bus after finishing the fifth grade in her village Bhanguri, and beginning her time at the Girls High School in Aharwan. Now a proud 9<sup>th</sup> grader, Khushboo has traveled on the Blossom Bus to school for the last four years. The eldest of five children, Khushboo helps look after her three sisters and young second grader brother. Her family has struggled to make ends meet, and when we originally met Khushboo her mother told us that it was not possible for her to send her daughter to a school four kilometers away from the village because they have never had the resources to send their children to a secondary school. Her father has struggled with unemployment and alcohol abuse. Her mother was recently able to find a job as a village health worker, but the pay is unfortunately poor. Blossom Bus is exactly the kind of gift that Khushboo needed, as she was very keen to continue her studies and has deep concerns about providing for her siblings as she gets older.



*Khushboo, a determined young Blossom Bus student*

As a student, Khushboo is very confident, disciplined, and gets good grades as a result. When asked why she is so serious about her education, she hardly gave a second before replying “*I will become a Doctor*”. She wants to become a doctor so that she can help her family in their fight with the poverty and give back to her community, she says. Her teacher also appreciated Khushboo for her keen interest in the studies, and commended the Bus for supporting the girls by providing transport.



*Khushboo in class, first row, second from the aisle*

Girls High School in Arhawan also informed us that the number of girls in this High School has increased from 180 in

2008 to 340 this year, largely because of availability of Blossom Bus which is bringing 100 girls from different villages to this school. We couldn't be happier for our students!



### *Case Study: Pooja and Her Family Work Towards Graduation*



*Pooja, in front of the bus she rides to school each day*

Blossom Bus rider and twelfth-grader Pooja is very excited that she is set to graduate next year. After finishing secondary school, Pooja says she will pursue a college degree in education en route to becoming a teacher. She rides the Blossom Bus to school each day with her sister by her side who is also in the twelfth grade.

Pooja comes from a family with strong desire for their young girls to have an education, but were unable to send their eldest daughter to college despite her good grades because the school was more than ten kilometers from the village and safe public transport was unavailable. Her eldest sister is now a primary school teacher with a small salary; she was only able to complete Junior Basic Training because of the lack of transport.

Pooja's family has no land and no regular income. They keep goats and sheep and sell them for their living. The family is dependent on the income from selling the animals and the small salary of their eldest daughter.

As expenses are rather high with 3 children in school, Pooja told us that her family is going through a very tough phase. Both parents eagerly await the completion of their children's education, and free



transport provided by Lotus Outreach is an immense support.

### ***In Their Own Words: Stories from our Blossom Bus University/Blossoms to College Students***

Among our 274 riders this year, there were 20 young women who rode the Blossom Bus in our University program. Now in their 20s, these young women have graduated high school and now attend colleges some 10 kilometers from their homes. This tremendous feat adds to the long list of firsts these girls and the program have achieved. Here are some segments from interviews with them, including a discussion one of their fathers.

**“My name is Sapna, daughter of Sukhbir. I**

wish to say that the Blossom Bus being

provided by Lotus Outreach is very useful for us. We are able to save a lot of time which was wasted earlier waiting for autos and we were not able to reach college on time. This time we can utilize for our studies. We used to reach late at college without the Bus and the teachers refused to mark our attendance. Our parents also were worried when we used to come home late due to unavailability of public transport. Because of the bus now our parents are happy and feel comfortable with us going to school. We are able to continue our studies due to Blossom Bus and request that the service be continued in the interest of girls who are prone to drop out in absence of a safe transport!”

- Sapna, 19, 1<sup>st</sup> year college student, Durgapur village

**“My name is Sarita, daughter of Birbal,** resident of village Bhanguri. I passed grade 12 three years ago and could not go to college as there was no safe public transport available from the village. The buses between Bhanguri and Palwal were badly crowded and came at irregular times. My parents were not satisfied with the situation and I was forced to sit at home, though I wanted badly to go to college. Last year, after my younger sister Babita passed her



*From left to right: Sarita, Babita, Sapna and Ritu. Sarita, Sapna, and Ritu are all Blossom Bus University riders, Babita (purple) is one of their classmates.*

grade 12 exam, we were told that there is a safe bus being made available by Lotus Outreach to transport girls to college for free. We both then enrolled in Saraswati Girls College in Palwal and now we both in school! Therefore, we request that this facility may be continued and even enhanced to accommodate more girls as there are many more girls who have dropped out after passing high-school and are willing to attend college for further studies but are sitting at home as there is no bus facility available to cater to the demand.”

- Sarita, 19, 1<sup>st</sup> year college student, Bhanguri village

**“My name is Birbal**, resident of Bhanguri and father of Sarita. I am a poor man and earn my livelihood through working as laborer doing odd jobs in Palwal village. I am very excited because both my daughters are now studying in college. I could not have sent my daughters to college because of my meager earnings and my elder daughter dropped out after passing school. She could enroll in the college after losing one year only because the Blossom Bus. Blossom Bus encouraged me to get both my daughters enrolled in the college and they are now studying together and are happy. I would like to allow my daughters to even study for Masters Degree if the Blossom Bus will be available to them in future also.”

- Birbal, Father of Sarita, Blossom Bus University Rider







### A Note from Program Manager Suraj Kumar

Back at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year, Lotus Outreach learned of the alarming scarcity of young girls in local high schools in Haryana and Rajasthan. After investigating further, many of the parents we spoke to told us a similar story: they were willing to send their daughters to school, but were concerned about their safety and security while traveling in an unsafe private bus, auto rickshaw or even on foot to school, which is generally three to ten kilometers away from villages. Generally, it is understood in India that only 10% of the children who enroll in the first grade reach grade twelve. This sad statistic holds true for both boys and girls, but girls drop out due to safety reasons significantly more than boys. Girls of lower castes and minorities are more vulnerable to harassment and abuse while they walk to school or travel in public transport.

Most of the villages have middle schools, but high schools are much less common. After the age of 13 or 14, when girls pass grade eight, they are not allowed to walk to a high school far from the village, and are often forced to stay at home. Girls in these villages are typically married by 16.

We are providing Blossom Bus to 270 girls, including 20 in university, but there are hundreds more who are deprived of school education due to unavailability of safe mode of transport to school. We are proud that not a single girl past the sixth grade this year has dropped out. Many of these girls are the first to reach grade 10 or 12 in their villages. One Blossom Bus rider from Jarali Village was married by her parents, along with her elder sister, to save on expenses while she was studying in grade 10. She insisted on completing her schooling and her parents-in-law happily agreed. She was allowed to stay back at her parent's house until she completed her schooling.



White Lotus Trust has been selected to be a part of the Women's Empowerment Track of the Harvard University South Asia Institute and Tata Trusts Project on Social Entrepreneurship and Livelihood Creation in India. The workshop was conducted the 28<sup>th</sup> through the 30<sup>th</sup> of January at Mumbai. The objective of the training was to provide a platform for social development professionals to share stories

and receive counsel from both national and international experts on how to improve our respective interventions and continue to work to make it sustainable.

Blossom Bus was also shown in an official documentary film produced by the Haryana Government which was shown to the Ministry of Human Resources Development of the Government of India. Our program was appreciated by the officials who saw the film! Great discussion ensued its screening.

Since the workshop, we have been developing research tools to better assess the outcomes of Blossom Bus on girls and their families with a focus on Lotus Outreach's broader "Girl's Access to Education" initiative. Subsequent reports will describe the continuing scenarios for girls education in these provinces as we work to make girls' education available for the young women of these provinces.

### Budget

Independent Contractors	Location Served	Cost per Month (11 Months*)	Annual Total (Indian rupees)	Annual Total (At ₹62 rps = \$1 USD)
Balbir Singh	Haryana	80,000 (\$1,290) X 11	880,000	\$14,193.54
Yashpal	Haryana	80,000 (\$1,290) X 11	880,000	\$14,193.54
Subhash Chand	Rajasthan	40,000 (\$645) X 11	440,000	\$7,096.77
Umesh Kumar	Haryana, including University students	20,000 (\$302) X 11	220,000	\$3548.39
Project Coordinator Salary, Transport, Office and Communications.	Haryana + Rajasthan	25,000 (\$403) x 11	275,000	\$4,435.48
<b>Total</b>		<b>₹245,000 (\$39,51.61)</b>	<b>₹2,695,000</b>	<b>\$43,467.74</b>

\*\* Please note that the administrative costs and program officer salary were covered in 2015 by our affiliates. This budget table reflects the direct costs of the program, primarily the transportation agents required to run Blossom Bus.



## Thank You!!

On behalf of all the girls that depend on Blossom Bus each day for their education and chance at a bright future, Lotus Outreach wishes to thank the Forix Foundation for your support of this vital program and your consideration of our proposal for further partnership. For any further inquiries or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact Harry at [harry@lotusoutreach.org](mailto:harry@lotusoutreach.org). Thank you!