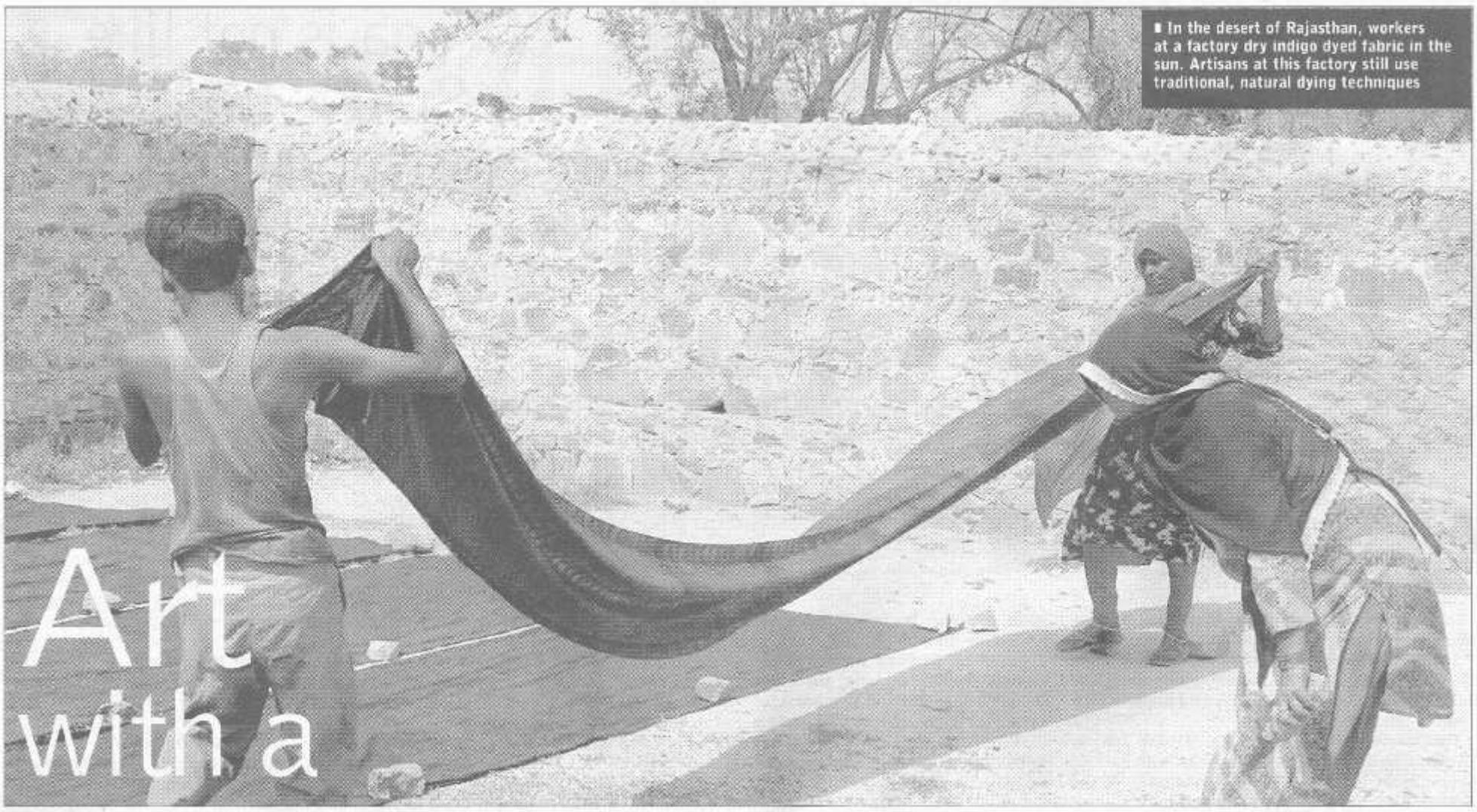
India Abroad magazine

Art with a heart

How Fabindia elevates the humble Indian artisan to creator of cool

RAJESH KARKERA

COVER STORY



In the desert of Rajasthan, workers at a factory dry indigo dyed fabric in the sun. Artisans at this factory still use traditional, natural dying techniques

Art with a heart

Archana Masih reports the story of an American who elevated the Indian artisan from lowly drudge to creator of cool

Photographs: **Rajesh Karkera**

In his penny loafers, Seersucker suit and crew cut, the young Yale graduate looked as American as you could get. Bounding with energy, he breezed into the New Delhi office of the Cottage Emporium, a handicraft store owned by the Indian government, shortly after Independence Day in 1958.

"Don't worry, he won't last long," the young girl who had to vacate the office for him had been told by the manager. But John L Bissell, who had come as a consultant to promote Indian craft overseas, was so fascinated by India and its craft that he relocated to Delhi, and lived in India for the next 40 years.

For a man who came from a privileged background in Connecticut, whose family was solid establishment stock who sent their children to private schools before they graduated to genteel professions like banking, John trod a different path.

Soon after finishing at Yale he toured America, selling Noguchi paper lanterns along the way to make pay his way. It was his first experience as a salesman, and it got him a job as management trainee in the toy department of Macy's New York.

He then joined a Jewish textile trader on 7th Avenue, who got the order for providing costumes for *Anna and the King of Siam*. John was deputed to organize 100 saris from India to make dresses for Siam's queens, and got his first hands-on experience about business in India when, to his dismay, he realized that even after giving precise specification, no two saris looked alike. Later he would find out that the variations in color and design arose because Indian craft was done by hand – and that in this lay its inherent beauty.

John Bissell (extreme right), an American Yale graduate came to India in 1958. A champion of Indian handicraft, he founded Fabindia in 1960

A family affair

John Bissell

John came from a privileged background in Connecticut. He graduated from Yale and got his first experience in salesmanship selling paper lamps while on a road trip in America.

He came to India on a Ford Foundation grant. He was a champion of Indian craft and stayed on in India at the expiration of the grant.

He set up Fabindia, which is now one of India's leading brands, and married Bimla Nanda, a Delhi resident who he met in India. He grew to love India and adopted it as his home, at a time when not many foreigners did so.

His staff remembers him as great teacher, a man of great integrity and a boss who would pick up colleague in his car on the way to work. He gave them opportunities to grow and believed in sharing the company's wealth with the employees, thus setting the core values of Fabindia.

He suffered a stroke in 1993 but continued to come to his store till his death in 1998.

▸ M5

Around this point in time the Indian government, keen on increasing its textile export to America, contacted Macy's for a consultant. Store vice president Leo Martinuzzi asked his son if he would go as consultant to India for two years. Before leaving, Martinuzzi junior went for a holiday to Florida where he fell in love, got married and changed his mind about his upcoming stint in India.

Martinuzzi then thought of the boy from Connecticut who had worked at his store and called him with the offer. 'When can you leave?' he asked. 'My passport is at home in Connecticut, I can go pick it up, and leave day after,' said the plucky lad.

Within a week John Bissell arrived in Delhi, funded by the Ford Foundation.

He traveled extensively within India, meeting weavers and craftsmen whose work was marketed by Cottage Emporium. He listened to their problems and saw first hand the beauty and uniqueness of Indian craft. On the completion of his tenure with the Foundation, he decided to stay on in India, and founded a store that stocked exquisite Indian hand-weaved and printed fabrics, and that he grew to love with a passion.

In a battered Fiat car he traveled through the Indian hinterland, one hand on the wheel, the other holding the car door open to let in the breeze, always on the look-out for craftsmen and for handloom that he could stock in the store. The shop was initially based in his rented apartment in Delhi, where he stocked fabric on the roof and soon had the landlord complaining when cracks developed because of the weight of the bales.

He named the store, which was essentially an export house, Fabindia. It was 1960.

In September this year, Fabindia opened its 89th store. By December 31, it will take that tally up to 100. It has six stores abroad, in Italy and the UAE, and has emerged as one of India's front-running retail players with a target to attain a Rs 1000 crore ($215.5 million approx) turnover. Its projected turnover this year is

COVER STORY

Staff at a Fabindia warehouse. Suppliers and buyers collect fabric and bring finished products, which is then sent to the stores

around 350 crores ($76 million).

What makes Fabindia unique is that it remains solidly rooted in Indian craft, with almost every product having some element of hand crafting done by the thousands of craftspeople across 135 districts of India that sell their craft through the label.

"Fabindia is contemporary yet rooted in India — it is for the global Indian. Kids are wearing our *kurtis* (short tunics) with Levis jeans — we are not just ethnic," says Prableen Sabhaney, head of communications and public affairs, who left her independent consultancy firm to join the company two years ago.

What goes into making some of the products that line its shelves is indeed a fascinating journey. From the scorching sands of the Rajasthan desert, where craftsmen use indigo leaves and traditional methods for dyeing fabric, in pits with water that has not been changed in 16 years, to block-printers using printing blocks that are 200-300 years old, the merchandise is a repository of rare and exquisite Indian craft.

"We started at a time when not very many Indians actually appreciated their own craft. They were not wearing handloom and went in for chiffons, nylons that used to come in as imported fabric. John Bissell not only took it abroad but indeed gave it back to us," says Charu Sharma, chief operating officer and director, who joined the company just out of college in 1979.

Benjamin Singh, a tutor with entrepreneurial skills who taught John Bissell Hindi, was the company's first tailor. Since Bissell only wore handloom shirts, his tutor stitched them for him to make some extra money. The extras found their way into one or two shelves in the flagship store that had opened in 1976 in New Delhi.

"He would bring in about ten shirts a week. I must say that today, we have come a long way. The prints used to be terrible, blotchy, with gaps between blocks. Every time I opened the shirts, I used to say who is going to buy them — and Mr Bissell would say, 'This is what is terrific about it. Look at the character it has; it is the unevenness that makes it nice'," remembers Charu.

The company that started out as an export house dealing with furnishings, and with a handful of employees, recorded a current turnover of Rs 260 crores ($98.1 million approx). It has 800 employees and close to 20,000 artisan-shareholders; and barring the managing director, its top management comprises of a band of women who come to work in beautiful, hand-crafted saris.

From housewives to college interns, women have played a strong role in building Fabindia from its small beginnings, and continue to form the backbone of the store. "With no professional degree, I got a job in a place that was tailor-made for a housewife. I am grateful to the packing staff of Fabindia for what they taught me, including how to load a stapler, and to what I learnt from Mr Bissell," says Shaila Tyagi, an English major and the wife of an Indian Air Force officer whose first job was at Fabindia in the early 90s.

"My father was an ARI — an American Resident in India. There were not many of those in the late 1950s, early 1960s. He found it a very exciting period because some of the people he worked with were real Gandhian stalwarts"
– William Bissell, MD, Fabindia

The company's belief in the entrepreneurial abilities of women has stood the test of time, and women professionals still form the core of the company. Another tenet that has been maintained from John Bissell's philosophy has been the idea of sharing the company's wealth with its employees and artisans.

"We are all learning on the job. People who drive various parts of the business are shareholders. One of our philosophies is to hire smart women. Every head of every department is a woman," says William Bissell, 42, the managing director of Fabindia — a man acutely conscious about improving the lives of the company's artisan base and the mind behind its expansion, having taken it from five stores in 1998 to 89 so far and counting.

William provided a realization of John's dream, feels Bimla 'Bim' Bissell, John's wife. "John never wanted the business to be with the family. He wanted it to be owned by the people of the company," she adds.

As the company grew, employees like Shaila Tyagi who joined as novices on the shop floor, learnt on the job and moved up through various departments. Shaila now heads one of its most successful initiatives, and says her personal growth is nothing but the story of the company's own growth.

Shaila recounts the time when, after spending years at the flagship store, she had refused to move to the new head office in another part of Delhi. She had resisted the move because at the store, she had built a relationship with suppliers and craftsmen who came from far and wide, and to whom she had spoken about handicraft, even carrying this rapport to the point where she was advising them on family planning. The head office, she thought, would have been like a corporate environment with no customers, no racks of clothes – bereft, in fact, of all that she was familiar with and cared about.

So she told William she would not make the move – and his response, she says, was one of his defining qualities as a manager. The next day, William sent her a copy of *Who moved your cheese?*, the best-selling motivational book by Spencer Johnson that is written in the style of a parable, and that spent over five years on the *New York Times* best-seller list. She took the book home, read it and moved to the new head office the following morning. "Since then, I have been moving my cheese," she laughs.

William Bissell got involved in the business when a more liberal wind was blowing through India. The eco-

▸ M6

A family affair

▸ M4

Bimla 'Bim' Bissell

After obtaining a Masters in Education from the University of Michigan, where she also met *India Abroad* founder the late Gopal Raju, Bim returned to India to run Playhouse School in 1958. The school was very successful and its alumni include some eminent Delhi-ites.

She also worked for nine years for the American embassy as social secretary to three US Ambassadors to India – Chester Bowles, John Kenneth Galbraith and Kenneth Keating.

She married John Bissell in 1960. They have two children, William and Monsoon. She is in the process of handing over Playhouse School to younger teachers, and is now involved in development consultancy firm B&B Associates and holds the Emeritus Chair with Udyogini, a non-governmental organization that helps disadvantaged women start micro enterprises.

William Bissell, the managing director of Fabindia, who began large-scale expansion plans, says he has never seen a conflict between business and a larger social benefit

William Bissell

In the jeep given to him by his parents as a graduation present, William Bissell traveled through Rajasthan, meeting craftspersons and artisans. He rented the summer palace of the Raja of Bhadrajun, started the Deserts Artisans Handicrafts and began work as a supplier to Fabindia.

After living and working in Rajasthan for four years, he moved to Delhi, taking on the reins of the Fabindia after the death of his father. As managing director of Fabindia, William Bissell, 42, began the company's large scale expansion plans across India and aims at aggregating the company's artisan community by making them share-

"Capitalism is the way to move people out of poverty, but you have to practice real capitalism. What we've seen is crony or phony capitalism"
– William Bissell

▸ M8

From a small beginning, Fabindia is one of India s best known brands. Its staff takes pride in saying they ve come this far without much advertising

◂ M5

-nomic reforms heralded greater opportunities, a far cry from the closed business environment his father had witnessed in the 1960s and 1970s.

"My father was an ARI — an American Resident in India. There were not many of those in the late 1950s, early 1960s. He found it a very exciting period because some of the people he worked with were real Gandhian stalwarts," William says, over an Indo-Western vegetarian lunch at his office in New Delhi.

Dressed in a trademark Fabindia shirt and *bandh gala*, he traces the ups and lows of India's business environment from the liberal phase of the 1950s to the illiberal 1960s, to the worst decade that was the 1970s.

"What was interesting about my father was that he hung in. A lot of foreigners left in the late 1960s because there was nationalization of business. But he had seen a lot of promise in India, and so in spite of all that he ran a business that he kept small by his own definition.

"My father remained an American, with all its values, and kept his selfhood intact even though he adopted India as his home," remembers John Bissell's daughter Monsoon, who is doing a Masters in psychological counseling at New York's Columbia University. "What was remarkable was that he was very much his own person although the two cultures [*American and Indian*] were so diametrically opposed."

John Bissell had run a tight operation, sharing the slim overheads with the staff by way of dividends or presents like thermos flasks, saris and safari suits. Family and staff say his integrity was exemplary, and he ensured that his business grew organically.

"He used to say if you are good, you'll get there anyway, even if the system is working against you," remembers William, who has spent the last two years writing a book titled *Realizing Gandhi's dreams: a framework for governance in India*.

When William returned to India after graduating from Wesleyan University in Connecticut, the company was heading for trying times. The Sir Terence Conran-owned Habitat, its biggest account in the United Kingdom, had been taken over. John Bissel, unsure of the future of the relationship, was impelled to pull out.

The staff used to call Habitat their 'bread and butter,' but what lay ahead was worse.

A year later, in 1993, John Bissell suffered a paralytic stroke. "We had lost a major account, our MD had suffered a stroke — it was a big blow. There were rumors that Fabindia would be sold or will collapse. But we built relationships with other customers and within a year we were back," remembers Charu Sharma, Fabindia's COO.

For the next five years, John Bissell was confined to his wheelchair. He could not walk, talk or eat. But each day, he would come to his store in New Delhi for a few hours. He had lost vision in an eye – but his love for Indian craft found continued expression in the ikat (a style of weaving that uses the resist-dyeing process that is similar to tie-and-die) eye patches he wore to match his shirts. "The store was his life," remembers his wife Bim.

On the day John Bissell died, a notice was pasted on the downed shutters of the flagship store. It was March 1998, and Fabindia had five stores.

Last year, Fabindia became a Harvard Business School case study focused on its unique success story — on how a company can make profits and provide sustainable development.

"I have never seen a conflict between business and a wider social benefit. As a businessman, you are after all running a business but when your artisans are based in rural India, you have to be sensitive to their needs and merge it with the success of your business," says William Bissell.

From 20,000 artisan shareholders, the company aims to have 100,000 artisan shareholders in the next four years, scattered through the villages of India. "Capitalism is the way to move people out of poverty, but you have to practice real capitalism. What we've seen is crony or phony capitalism," continues William who set up a system of internal share trading to create an asset that the rural poor did not have. The idea, he says, had been his dream.

"In our company, we've created an asset which is highly divisible — you can split your share certificate till you actually come down to one share," he says, explaining his thoughts behind the concept.

There was a time when William had wanted to be a journalist or an environmentalist. He even interned with the BBC's Mark Tully

▪ Anti-clockwise from top: A Fabindia store in New D
Based on Indian handicraft, the shops stock garment
furniture, footwear, jewelry, organic food and beauty
products
▪ Shaila Tyagi, the head of Dilli Karigiri, a supplier re
company that supplies merchandise to Fabindia, at th
office in New Delhi
▪ Charu Sharma, chief operating officer and director,
one of Fabindia's oldest managers

STORY ■

and at the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi, after graduation. His heart, however, took him someplace else.

One day, in the jeep he had received as a graduation gift from his parents, he took off to travel through Rajasthan. He met the Raja of Bhadrajun in a train, and was invited to his village. Among the locals in that small village lived craftsmen who made *durries* (carpets) and *mojris* (ornamented footwear made largely of camel skin) for a living.

William rented the raja's summer palace, his four fields of chilly and a well. He lived there for the next four years, traveled and met local artisans. He got the craftsmen to make *juttis* (handcrafted shoes) of camel leather, and sent 300 pieces to be sold at Fabindia in Delhi. The consignment did not meet the correct size specification and could not be used. "That was his first lesson in marketing, and he never looked back," smiles Bim.

In the early 90s, he moved to Delhi bringing new ideas, slowly ushering change into the company even while his father was alive. A decade and a half later, Fabindia is one of India's best known brands, and its staff takes pride in saying they've come this far without much advertising.

"My father's company was like a sailboat — he was the captain with tremendous integrity, and he had a small crew. William charted the same course, but with a larger vessel and crew. He has not wavered from the initial example, and just as a sailor does, he has gone out into the world with courage, taken risks and held the belief that no matter what, people count on you to steer the course," says Monsoon, who is on the board of directors of the company.

"We started at a time when not very many Indians actually appreciated their own craft. They went in for chiffons and nylons. John Bissell not only took it abroad but indeed gave it back to us."
- Charu Sharma, COO Fabindia

Under William's stewardship, the company took on its expansion plans, opened new stores across India, decentralized its operations, set up regional supplier companies and is now targeting a Rs 1000 crore ($215.5 million) turnover.

"Both John and William have a movement," says Shaila Tyagi, "They take on an idea and infuse it within the realms of the organization."

William says the company treats its customers as intelligent people, and keeps to a certain taste and ideological spectrum. "We would want to get into markets in the USA and UK, because we have a strong connection with the Indian diaspora," he says.

The store recently launched a silver jewelry line with a contemporary design, and the next big plan is to give the sari, that most elegant of Indian attire, a comeback at a time when, in the boardrooms, offices and the streets of resurgent India, the sari has been edged out in favor of the *salwar kurta*, jeans and other Indo-Western combinations.

And it is no pipe dream, for the hope that the sari could be in for resurgence lies in the hands of the same folk who first made the handloom kurta an *uber* cool style statement. ■

From one store to 89

1960

Fabindia starts as an export house founded by John Bissell, an American from Connecticut. Bissell had come to India in 1958 as a consultant for the Ford Foundation to help develop India's export potential in textiles. At the end of his stint, he set up the company which aimed at showcasing the enormous wealth of Indian handloom textile and its rural craft.

One of his earlier experiments was with the Baluchi rugs he found in the trunk of a friend's grandmother. He got weavers to weave similar rugs in different colors.

The company exported furnishings to buyers abroad. Habitat in UK was its biggest customer. The rest went to the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand, the Far East and Japan.

1976

Opens its first store in New Delhi. Sells upholstery, fabrics, dhurries and home linen. By mid 1980s, starts producing garments made from hand woven and block printed fabrics.

1994

Opens its second store, which offers four floors of retail shopping.

1996

Opens its first store outside Delhi, in Bangalore.

1998

John Bissell passes away.

1999

His son William Bissell becomes managing director. Prior to this, after graduating from Wesleyan University, William had set himself in Rajasthan where he started a trust to organize rural artisans, improve their lives and develop them as suppliers for Fabindia.

2000 - 2002

The company begins its thrust into the domestic market.

2004 - 2006

Takes on expansion plans, opening stores across the country; streamlines operations and plans to start Supplier Region Companies to strengthen its supply line.

2007

Starts SRCs, attaches artisans to various SRCs with the aim of aggregating the community and making them shareholders. Currently runs 17 functional SRCs, which give design input and finance, and provides artisans with assured orders for Fabindia.

There are 20,000 artisan shareholders across the SRCs, and Fabindia hopes to take that tally up to 100,000 in the next few years. Three SRCs have already shown profit.

"We wanted to get the benefit of groups working together without setting up a cooperative kind of structure. The answer was a shareholding corporation, where members give the management the right to run the company from AGM to AGM." says William Bissell, Fabindia's MD, explaining the concept.

2008

Starts a silver jewelry line and continues expansion. Currently, Fabindia has 89 stores and 800 employees with plans to open more SRCs and take its tally of stores to 100 by December 2008.

"We treat our customers as intelligent people; we don't sell them a cheap shirt at an outrageous price. We are also clear about our ideology. The day we begin to be everything for everyone, we'll lose our ideology," says William.

Fabindia has six stores overseas in Rome and UAE.

COVER STORY

From rags to kurtas: an artisan's story

Mohammad Yasin is speeding in his Toyota Qualis from the Annual General Meeting of Deserts Artisans Handicraft, where he sat alongside Fabindia MD William Bissell on the stage.

Md Yasin is one of the directors and a leading shareholder in DAH, one of the 17 supplier region companies set up by Fabindia. He has a comfortable home in Pipar City, 60 kms from Jodhpur, where bright bougainvilleas bloom in his garden.

It is a far cry from the small, rented accommodation that he once lived in with his three brothers. That was a time when he would go to school, come back and help his father wash indigo dyed fabrics in the river close by. Belonging to a family of craftspeople and natural indigo-dyers, his hands were permanently stained blue since he was a boy.

'This is the sign of a real craftsmen – hands that are stained in dye,' the lady who had given him some work many years ago had told him. Those were hard days, when he had to drop out of class XI to take on his father's craft after he passed away. Yasin was the eldest of three brothers; the responsibility of providing for the family and continuing the family craft forward lay with him.

In 1988, he heard of William Bissell, who was visiting an area close to where he was. Yasin went and met him, showed him some of his designs and got an order of Rs 48,000. On delivering the order, he received the promised check right then – something that was unheard of that time.

"I didn't know what I was to do with the check. Williams*saab* said encash it at the bank, but I was afraid to take the money back with me to the village that night," he remembers. So the next morning, he came with his mother and cashed the check.

Over the years, he has become one Fabindia's leading suppliers. Recently, he got an order worth Rs 15 lakh and at an average, makes a profit of Rs 30,000 to Rs 40,000 every month. From one loom he has grown to 7, and has 25 craftsmen working for him, for whom he has also bought shares.

Md Yasin may have had to drop out of school but his son is an MBA, interning with Kotak Mahindra, a well known finance company. He will eventually take the family craft-based business ahead.

Md Yasin dropped out of school to provide for the family and continue the traditional craft. He is now a leading shareholder and has 25 craftsmen working for him

Yasin now plans to have a showroom for his products in his factory, and a little museum which will showcase his craft to visitors. "My saris are worn by film stars, and I gifted one to the President of India when she visited Jodhpur," he says with pride.

There is one regret that he carries though – that his parents died before he moved into his double-storey home where the bright bougainvilleas bloom.

A family affair

▸ M5

holders. With this idea in mind, he started Special Regional Companies in 2007.

"I have never seen a conflict between business and a wider social benefit. I think capitalism is the way to move people out of poverty, but it has to be real capitalism, not crony or phony capitalism," he says.

The graduate of Weseleyn University in the US has spent the last two years writing a book titled *Realizing Gandhi's dreams: A framework for governance in India*.

William feels India needs to be unshackle its rural economy and have a mechanism to value its indigenous knowledge, which is an asset.

A keen reader, he was reading books like the *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* at the age of 12.

Monsoon Bissell

The daughter of John and Bimla Bissel, Monsoon is pursuing a Masters in psychological counseling at Columbia University, New York. Before she stopped working actively in films six years ago, she was an assistant director to Mira Nair on *Monsoon Wedding*, and has worked on projects for radio and television.

"Loneliness and isolation are becoming more prevalent in India, and everyday mental health issues are still shrouded in silence," she says of her desire to create self-help programs and establish support groups to create awareness around mental health on her return to India.

She is on the board of Fabindia and was actively involved in setting up their projects in the Middle East.