

Bimla Bissell, 92, Dies; Ambassadors' Guide And Social Hub in India

By PENELOPE GREEN

Bimla Bissell, the indispensable and well-connected social secretary to four American ambassadors to India who was a kind of unofficial ambassador herself, a shrewd local guide to the culture and complexities of a sprawling country, died on Jan. 9 at her home in Delhi. She was 92.

The cause was complications of diabetes, her daughter, Monsoon Bissell, said.

Ms. Bissell's first ambassadorial boss was John Kenneth Galbraith, the erudite liberal economist who forged a deep bond with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India. He was followed by Chester Bowles, the admiral turned civil rights champion.

Both were appointees of John F. Kennedy, and it was Ms. Bissell's job to organize, among many complicated diplomatic extravaganzas, Jacqueline Kennedy's nine-day trip to India in 1962, an event

Her admirers included heads of state, artists, diplomats, journalists and movie directors.

breathlessly covered by the global press. "Mrs. Kennedy Gets a Festive Welcome on Arrival in India" read the front-page headline in The New York Times when first lady landed, accompanied by her sister, Lee Radziwill.

It also fell to Ms. Bissell to gently let Ms. Kennedy know that the gifts she had brought her Indian hosts — leather picture frames stamped with the words "100% American Beef" — would not be appropriate.

When Richard Celeste was hired to be Mr. Bowles's personal assistant and embassy protocol officer in 1963, he was flummoxed by the latter job description. So Ms. Bissell took him in hand.

"She took charge of my education with ease and grace," said Mr. Celeste, who would go on to be a director of the Peace Corps, governor of Ohio and President Bill Clinton's envoy to India. She also scooped him up for dinner every night until his wife arrived with their newborn.

By all accounts, Ms. Bissell was a one-woman social network, a deft saloniste who seemed to know everybody of any significance in every field.

She was discreet and diplomatic, friends and associates said. She was curious, game and gregarious. She read 14 newspapers every morning. She was politically astute, and in her later years she could often predict a local election down to the number of votes. She

had a preternatural capacity for empathy and friendship, and for nurturing and maintaining those friendships.

She counted among her admirers — and they were legion — heads of state, diplomats, policymakers, NGO leaders, journalists, movie directors, authors, artisans, artists and students, all of whom she collected for lavish lunches and dinners at her sprawling stucco house in a leafy development in South Delhi, which was chockablock with crafts and textiles, art and antiques.

She and her husband, John Bissell, were a Delhi institution. He was a lanky, Connecticut-born Yale graduate who in 1958 had traveled to India on a Ford Foundation grant and never left, having fallen in love with the country and his future wife. He founded a company to export Indian crafts, and then a school to educate artisans.

Their household was a kind of North Star, said Marie Brenner, one of many journalists whom Ms. Bissell drew into her circle. Others called it Grand Central East for its open-door policy. "It was always filled with remarkable people," Ms. Brenner said. "The operating energy was this very high level of political and intellectual discourse."

Mr. Celeste said: "John was the dreamer and Bim was the doer. She was extremely well-informed, and her instincts were extremely well-grounded."

At a certain point, Mr. Celeste realized that Ms. Bissell was juggling two jobs. In the mid-1950s she had founded the Playhouse, Delhi's first progressive preschool, which would become a launchpad for generations of Indians and expat children.

"Over time I came to appreciate that Playhouse School served as a magnet for hard-working, aspirational Indian families," Mr. Celeste said. "Bim was building a dynamic set of relationships that, as social secretary, gave her a unique Rolodex."

Senator Michael Bennet of Colorado, a family friend, described Ms. Bissell as an "extraordinary citizen-diplomat for India." (He was born in India; his father, Douglas Bennet, was also an aide to Ambassador Bowles.)

He added, in an email, "For the generations of newcomers she welcomed to Delhi — especially young people, whom she loved and would enchant with stories from her remarkable life — she was a guiding light."

Bimla Nanda, known as Bim, was born Oct. 12, 1932, in Quetta, now part of Pakistan. She was the eldest of three daughters of Sita (Sibal) Nanda and Pran Nath Nanda, a veterinary surgeon who became the first husbandry commissioner of independent India. He was also a table tennis cham-



MITCH EPSTEIN

Bimla Bissell, at home in New Delhi, in 1984. She was an "extraordinary citizen-diplomat for India," said Senator Michael Bennet.



VIA MONSOON BISSELL

Jacqueline Kennedy with Ms. Bissell in New Delhi in 1962. Right, John and Bimla Bissell in 1992. They were a Delhi institution.



VIA MONSOON BISSELL

pion who invented a unique way to hold the paddle, which became known as the "Nanda grip," according to Ms. Bissell.

Bim grew up in Lahore, in the Punjab region, until just after Partition, in 1947, when the family moved to Delhi. She majored in English at the Miranda House College for Women, at the University of Delhi.

Her first marriage, an arranged match with a government aide from a suitable family, was brief and unhappy. Divorce at that time was unthinkable, but Bim left her husband, and India, for the University of Michigan, where she earned a master's degree in education in 1958. When she returned home, she was ostracized, barred from the local gymkhana, the social club that was a leftover from the Raj.

"She broke all the conventions," said her daughter, "but she did it without trying to make a point. She did it because this was the life

she needed to live."

Bim Nanda was working for a government organization promoting traditional crafts when Mr. Bissell arrived on his Ford Foundation grant. He was instantly smitten with her; she thought he was smitten with her country. In any case, they became fast friends while Mr. Bissell wooed her with fervor and great discipline. Over the next five years, as she would tell it, he sent her a note and a red rose every day.

At a certain point Mr. Bissell's mother intervened. "I want to know your feelings toward my son," she told Bim. "He is in love with you."

"He is in love with India," Bim replied.

"I know my son," Ms. Bissell said, "and it's time to fish or cut bait."

They married in 1963 at Mr. Bowles's house.

With his wife's help and connections, Mr. Bissell founded a com-

pany, Fabindia, to sell products — home furnishings, clothing and jewelry — made by Indian artisans using traditional techniques. At first it operated out of a room in his rented apartment. Over the decades it grew into a household name in India, with a thriving export business as well as hundreds of retail stores across the country.

After Mr. Bowles's appointment ended in 1969, Ms. Bissell served his successors, Ambassadors Kenneth B. Keating and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose term ended in 1975.

She then joined the World Bank as its external affairs officer in India, essentially working as a cultural ambassador for the bank and as an all-around fixer, helping the bank's expatriate officials find housing and schools for their children, shopping with their wives,

even setting up their telephone lines. She worked with scores of nongovernmental organizations — and founded one, Udyogini,

with a mission to empower Indian women entrepreneurs.

In addition to her daughter, Ms. Bissell is survived by her son, William, who runs Fabindia, two grandchildren, and a sister, Meena Singh. Mr. Bissell died in 1998.

After leaving the World Bank in 1996, Ms. Bissell worked as a consultant to a number of organizations and continued to be the center of a cross-cultural social whirlwind. She sold her school, the Playhouse, in 2005. Her house remained a hub for a glittering array of politicians, artists and literary figures who, until her death, relied on her for her political acumen and were buoyed by her friendship.

Eric Garcetti, the former mayor of Los Angeles and the departing U.S. ambassador to India, was just as taken with Ms. Bissell as his predecessors had been.

"You are India," he told her. "And India is you."