

High-powered Delhi hostess and founder of progressive and charitable enterprises who once had lunch with Elvis Presley

The chattering classes of Delhi are renowned for their love of luncheon parties. Fuelled by bountiful spreads of food and alcohol, and lashings of political, cultural and societal gossip, even the most robust guests tend to wind down afterwards with a snooze, while leaving their servants to sort any loose ends. A few months back, one participant had other plans. First, there was a dental appointment, then a lecture at a Delhi think tank, followed by a friend's book launch before dinner for a departing diplomat. That was a typical schedule for Bim Bissell, despite being in her nineties and confined to a wheelchair.

She was the personification of the secular and cosmopolitan aspects of life in Delhi before the advent of the vegetarian, teetotal prime minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist policies. Prior to this, prominent members and leaders of all political persuasions, including the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, attended her Christmas Day breakfasts or her dinner parties.

There was more to her than merely being a high-powered net-worker. She read more than a dozen newspapers daily and was one of the best-informed individuals in Delhi with a vast network of friends and contacts throughout India. For more than 60 years, she had been at the hub of Delhi life and was an indispensable link between the diverse strands of the Indian political and cultural elite with the diplomatic and foreign communities. Her husband, the American-born John Bissell, was a partner in this.

In 1960, he founded Fabindia, arguably the best-known brand in independent India producing and marketing handmade rugs, apparel and other domestic wares. Sir Terence Conran was a family friend who toured the Indian countryside with them, inspecting cottage industry products that were sold for decades in his Habitat stores. Fabindia is still run by their son, William, and now has 350 Indian outlets and 13 internationally. It is estimated that more than 50,000 people in village India contribute to making their various products, which now have an annual turnover of more than ₹125 million. There is also a daughter, Monsoon, who trained as a therapist and lives between Delhi and New York.

In 1958, Bissell established Playhouse, which quickly became the leading progressive nursery school in Delhi and which she managed until it was sold in 2005. Then, from 1961, she worked as social secretary to a string of

American ambassadors, starting with John Kenneth Galbraith under President Kennedy and ending with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, President Nixon's envoy, until 1975. For years, the Bissells would give an annual garden party for the Galbraiths. They would also keep in touch with their friends on their annual trips to the United States. From the mid-Seventies, she spent 20 years as director of communications at the World Bank in Delhi. While at the World Bank, she set up Udyogini, a non-profit charity aimed at helping rural women to start their own enterprises.

After the death of her husband in 1998, she continued her active lifestyle as well as playing bridge and promoting Indian-made fashion based on locally produced cloths and designs. She invariably wore saris from her collection of hundreds, being particularly proud of having a different array of jewellery co-ordinated with whatever was the predominant colour of her sari. Her family house in Panchsheel Park, south Delhi, was virtually a museum of art, antiques, handicrafts and sculpture. More than this, she was constantly connecting friends and offering help and advice to new arrivals and others passing through.

Malvika Singh, a Delhi publisher and writer, encapsulated the role of the Bissell household from the Seventies onwards: "At the Bissells, young and old, poets and writers, political professionals and bureaucrats, musicians and dancers, designers and fabricators, artists and many others from across the world came together to share a meal accompanied with memorable conversations and unforgettable exchanges. It was an extraordinary setting that nurtured learning, debate and discussion — the excitement that comes with exploring the unknown."

Bimla Nanda was born in 1932, in Balochistan, then a province of British India and now part of Pakistan. She was the eldest of three daughters. Her mother was Sita (née Sibal) and her father was Pran Nath Nanda, a veterinary surgeon and member of a prominent Hindu family. He was also an international table tennis champion and famous for introducing a way of holding the racket, known as the "Nanda grip".

In 1935, the Quetta earthquake killed up to 60,000 people, including four of Bim's aunts and an uncle. She and her parents survived only because they were in Lahore for the birth of her younger sister. She attended Kinnaird College in Lahore but after partition in



Bissell with Presley in 1958, when he asked for a photograph of them together

1947, the family left and her father was appointed the first husbandry commissioner of independent India. She completed her university education at Miranda House in Delhi. Her parents pressured her into an arranged marriage with an aide of Jawaharlal Nehru, then prime minister, but she left her husband and went to study in the US.

She graduated in English at the University of Michigan and completed a postgraduate degree in child development at the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute. She stopped off in Hollywood in 1958, and her hosts arranged for the producer Hal Wallis to take her on a tour of Warner Brothers studios and then for a lunch with a young singer — it turned out to be Elvis Presley. He was enamoured of her sari and asked if he could take a picture of them together.

On her return to India, she became one of the first Indian women to divorce her husband, but was ostracised in polite society and banned from the Delhi Gymkhana Club. Later, she was seen by many as a trailblazer for women's rights and received praise and respect from more independent-minded women.

In 1958, she worked at the Central Cottage Industries Corporation, a government-owned company promoting artisanal handicrafts and textiles. In the same year, John Bissell joined the corporation fresh from Yale University on a two-year Ford Foundation fellowship to advise Indian villagers on how to make local handicrafts for export. He failed in his earliest attempts to deepen the relationship, despite sending her

She averted a diplomatic incident involving Jackie Kennedy and US beef

daily notes accompanied by a red rose. By 1960, he had established Fabindia and in 1963 they married. Bissell came from a prominent New England family and their marriage was reported in The New York Times and the New York Herald Tribune. His uncle, Richard Bissell, was the CIA director responsible for the U2 spy plane programme and 1961 Bay of Pigs operation to overthrow the Cuban president Fidel Castro.

The Bissells formed lifelong friendships with all the ambassadors she served, along with some of the prominent American visitors such as Jacqueline Kennedy, whose nine-day tour of India she co-ordinated in 1962. She averted a minor diplomatic incident when she prevented Mrs Kennedy from gifting leatherbound photograph frames, which were embossed "100% American Beef".

More useful advice was given in 1983 to John Kennedy Jr, who had recently graduated from Brown University and was spending his gap year living anonymously in India. He was puzzled when none of the prominent officials he contacted would return his calls. Bissell quickly solved the problem after asking who he said was calling: "Well, I just said 'Hi, this is John from Brown'."

The conversion of Indian palaces and forts into hotels is now widespread but in the Eighties the Bissells were among the first to take over such properties in Rajasthan for parties of guests from Delhi, who would arrive in converted inspectors' train carriages attached to the local express train. Other journeys with friends took place in these carriages, which she had painstakingly redecorated, to far-flung historical towns in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Facilities were available at railway stations for them to be parked in sidings with water and power facilities.

In 2012, she hosted a private dinner for Henry Kissinger, which included, at his request, several critics of his policy towards India and China. The attention to detail in her dinner parties, from the mixture of guests to the tableware, inspired an entire generation of Delhi socialites. It was commonplace for her to arrange three or four dinner parties weekly until ill health prevented it.

In an Instagram post in 2020, she declared: "Tradition to me is the best of our heritage. Central to this is the vision of creating and contributing to sustainable livelihoods for artisans and craftspeople, so that the craft tradition stays alive, inclusive and accessible. Fabrics handwoven, hand printed converted into contemporary items influenced by our tradition is what defines our ethos. As does focusing on cottage industry while the whole world moves to the excesses of mechanisation."

Her last significant charitable act was in 2021, arranging for Fabindia to finance a playground at Sunder Nursery, a restored Mughal-era Garden, which attracts more than half a million children annually. Her ashes are to be sent to Lahore, which she was able to visit only once after partition, in 1988.

Bimla "Bim" Bissell, hostess and philanthropist, was born on October 12, 1932. She died from complications arising from diabetes on January 9, 2025, aged 92