

## 'Sub Brabar Hein!'



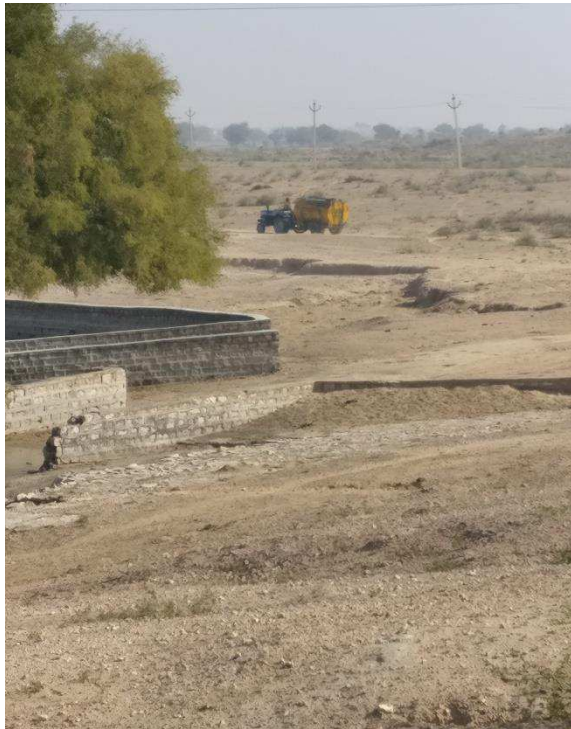
These words may be familiar to you if you speak a local dialect of Hindi. They may be more familiar still if you have been a visitor to the International Women's Day website because *sub brabar hein!* is a close translation into Hindi of their 2020 campaign theme #EachforEqual. And what better place to be shouting this at the top of my voice with 200 women and girls than in the Thar desert of Rajasthan – of course!

The Thar is the most densely populated desert in the world – a place I first visited in 2003 following 7 years of drought – the images on that visit stayed with me and I am drawn back each year to encourage the peoples in their daily struggle for survival. I'm sure they are not aware that they inspire and encourage me more than I ever can them.

But I'm going to let my daughter in law Vicki take up this particular story ....

***"We have a request – a crazy idea – but we have to ask!"***

Those words, sent to me in a text message towards the end of January this year, were the catalyst for one of the most incredible journeys I've ever been on.



At the time Jean, my mother in law and author of that text message, and Denis, her husband, were in India carrying out one of their annual inspection visits to two charity projects in the Thar desert of Rajasthan that are funded by the St. Clare and St. Frances Trust, of which Jean and Denis are Trustee and Project Advisor respectively. The projects, delivered by the charity Gravis, <https://www.gravis.org.in> focus on two key areas; the provision of Water Security in one of the most barren landscapes on earth (receiving less than 200ml of rainfall per year and suffering prolonged periods of drought), and the education and empowerment of women and girls who might well otherwise remain unable to read and write, leaving them trapped in a cycle of extreme poverty and isolation.

So what was the crazy idea? Well, Shashi Tyagi who founded Gravis with her late husband Mr. Tyagi, and Shashi's son, Dr. Prakash Tyagi, had been telling Jean and Denis about their plans for International Women's Day 2020. They would be hosting events at all of the field centres, bringing hundreds of women and their daughters together to share inspiring songs, dances, performances and speeches celebrating how far they have come on their journey to empowerment, and putting plans in place for future growth.

Even more excitingly, the charity would be using this as an opportunity to hand out bicycles to 31 girls and certificates to all girls who have completed the skills training programme, funded by the St. Clare and St. Francis Trust, providing them not only with a vital means of transport but also a sense of ownership, responsibility and most importantly, freedom. Jean and Denis made the decision almost immediately that if they could, they should return for the event, and having spoken to me about the Skills Centre previously, and knowing that I would want to help in any way I could, they thought it would be great if I could attend, too. The bond



between mother and daughter in law in India is very important, with girls often moving away from their own families to move in with their husband's family when they marry, sometimes whilst they are still only teenagers. With Jean and I being so close, it would hopefully be a relationship that those women and girls could relate to.

I replied to Jean's message with an enthusiastic "yes", and just over 6 weeks and three plane flights later we landed in Jodhpur! I had never been to India before and was instantly taken by its vibrancy, and its rawness – in one sweeping glance you'll find joy, pain, power and poverty side by side, hand in hand.

As Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2020 came around I, along with Shashi, Jean, Denis, and a young volunteer from Gravis named Ana Shanti Kaistha, travelled to the Skills Centre for girls in Gagadi to meet the students and their mothers, and a number of male allies. Overall there were 198 people in attendance from the local villages, plus around 30 small children not captured on the official register.

It was particularly important to have men and boys in attendance smiling and at ease with the theme of the day, as I had been hearing from Shashi on the journey to the Centre that over the years of her incredible activism for equality it was common for her to see men forbid their daughters to attend school, often with threats of physical violence. On one occasion a young man had even arrived at a meeting of women that his mother was attending to demand that she leave, otherwise he would kill himself. These men and boys have had the monopoly of power in the household and villages for so long, amplified by the forced submission of the women due to lack of education and support, that the implications of disrupting that status quo can seem unthinkable. Therefore, it is important that whilst we empower women, we must also bring men along with us on the journey, educating them on the benefits of providing these opportunities for their daughters and wives.



Then we all met in the main hall of the centre, the room packed with chatter and excitement in anticipation of the event and the energy was palpable. The walls were adorned with pictures of inspirational Indian women such as astronaut and engineer Kalpana Chawla, Olympic sprinter Dutee Chand, former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and many female heroes from the Skills Centre itself that spend their

time working with the students, or tirelessly meeting with parents in the local villages to encourage them to allow their girls access to the education on offer.

Shashi Tyagi reiterated why we were all there, breaking occasionally for the women to clap and cheer, visibly moved by the opportunities being presented to them. Then me, Jean and Shanti each took a turn on the podium to talk about our careers, our life journeys and provide some words of inspiration. Both Jean and I come from career or vocational pathways in which women are significantly under-represented, (I work in construction, and she is a priest) and both of our stories echoed the same sentiments – that being kind and caring is not a sign of weakness but rather a sign of confidence and power, and that authority is best achieved by identifying where your personal strengths lie and working to them. Of all of the presentations I've delivered in my career, across many events in many countries, this felt like it had the most impact. Despite the language barrier, and the need to break every few words for Shashi to interpret, the instant and positive feedback from the room was extremely humbling, and to see the girls chatter excitedly when I explained that I also had to travel to school by bike at their age made me realise how important it is for them to have role models that they can relate to, even if it's only in a very subtle way.

Then it was the students turn to present, and they delivered something extremely special! Girls from the age of 11 to 17 stood up in front of a packed room to sing, dance and give speeches demanding that they be allowed independence and education, and pleading for their families support in their journey towards empowerment. For me personally the highlight was Pooja, one of the youngest in the room. She was diminutive in stature and dressed in a beautiful pink tutu dress and flower headband, yet her presence was that of a warrior woman as she proclaimed loudly, "Beti beta eksamaan!" (Son and daughter are equal!), proving that being feminine doesn't mean that you can't also be strong and powerful.



After the presentations were finished all of us adopted the arm signal for International Women's Day 2020 by placing one arm parallel to the other horizontally across our bodies, and repeated loudly, "Each for Equal" in Hindi. One woman from the middle of the room spontaneously rose to her feet and rallied us all to get louder and louder, to almost riotous levels of energy, and we laughed, smiled and hugged together.

We then went outside and students, mothers and visitors joined in with some games, and the donated bikes were presented to 31 hugely excited and appreciative girls, which perfectly rounded off the beautiful and celebratory event.



As we drove away and I watched the Skills Centre disappear into the distance, I was flooded with emotion. I was proud of Gravis and the St. Clare and St. Francis Trust for everything they have achieved with their projects, and I was in absolute awe of Shashi and her family for the years of hard work, pain and love they had poured in to improving the lives of thousands of people across India. But I also felt extremely sad and guilty to be leaving when there was still so much more to be done, especially now that I had bonded with these girls and women and experienced first-hand their resilience, ingenuity, strength and humour. A broken piece of my heart had been left there in the desert, having seen the suffering that is still taking place, and knowing that there were still 21 girls and their mothers that never made it to the celebration that day... they had been disallowed to attend by their families, and were for that reason, also likely to be the ones most in need of help.

Then, just at that moment, at least ten kilometres from the Skills Centre, we saw one of the girls who had been presented with a bike that afternoon cycling down the road, smiling and waving as she saw us. She was a perfectly timed reminder that whilst we have to constantly look forward at what still needs to be resolved, it's also just as important to appreciate those small successes along the way, because those incremental wins are what ultimately add up to robust and sustainable long term change for the better.

Two days later and here I am. The whirlwind is over, and I am back in my living room in London. I reflect on the work that Gravis do, supported by the St. Clare and St. Francis Trust, and how fundamentally critical it is for the improvement in quality of life for hundreds of families across India. I am immensely proud that I was able to be a part of it, even in a small way, and I cannot wait to see how else I can assist in the future.

**'Sub Brabar Hein!'**

*Jean Boulton-Reynolds with her daughter in law (of less than a year!) Vicki Reynolds  
March 2020*