

BUNIYAAD

**Photographs by
Trevor Appleson and
Jodi Bieber ArRum**

HSi was invited to the fund raising opening of BUNIYAAD, a photographic exhibition celebrating the work of Learning for Life which supports an education programme in Pakistan and India in particular those of Afghan refugees, girls and the disabled. The variety of photographic images in the exhibition captured not only the spirit of the project, but also beauty, dignity and laughter, a celebration of life. Jodi Bieber was photographing in remote Pakistani villages. A photograph of a small girl dressed for a village wedding becomes a painterly portrait with its picturesque abstract background. This is contrasted with an interior shot of a Mother and Daughter from one of the remotest areas of Pakistan. While one young woman sits quietly in her sari the other modestly hides her face, a photograph full of resonance.

Trevor Appleson photographed for the project in India again in remote country areas. In Water a barefoot village girl gathers water from a nearby spring holding her water container she gazes at the camera bathed in golden light. In Sari a man tries to sell a woman naan bread distracting her gaze from the camera.

The exhibition also includes images taken by the village children with disposable cameras and portrays an extraordinary insight into their daily lives. HSi interviewed the South African photographer Trevor Appleson about the project.

Jean Wainwright. How did you get involved in Learning for life?

Trevor Appleson. I was commissioned by Learning for Life with Jodi Bieber (also

South African) Learning for life had seen my book Gods Children on the lives of children with mental disabilities in two centres in Johannesburg. The thought was, that by making images of the areas where the project operates in Pakistan and India, it would raise awareness and also culminate in a book. I was in India and Jodi was in Pakistan and we were both out there for six weeks.

J.W. In that time you gathered a great deal of material in often extremely remote areas.

T.A. Yes they were very remote. Learning for Life fund educational projects in these areas, so these projects put us up and took care of us. We had guides who were respected people in the community. It was, in a way, the most ideal way to travel and get into the country because we were not tourists. Any one that I wanted to photograph it was set up for me and any village I want to go to was possible.

J.W. How familiar were the villagers and children that you came into contact with with cameras.

T.A. Not very familiar at all but more familiar than the people that Jodi photographed, Generally they loved movies and posing, they would go into a static pose when you point the camera at them though, but then very few people had been photographed before. What made the work special for me was they were so willing to pose. In Africa In my experience they tend to mob you or run away.

J.W. What kind of camera did you use.

T.A. A Hasselblad medium format with a tripod and an additional light source.

J.W. In 'Water' the light is extraordinary.

T.A. That was shot in the late

evening light which very warm in tone. What I try to do is to work early in the morning or late in the afternoon when the quality of the light is very good.

J.W. One thing that emerges very strongly in the exhibition was the variety of images and the dignity of the people that you photographed.

T.A. The thing about Indian women, no matter how poor they are, they will have their Sari on. In 'Sari' the women in the picture are extremely poor but they look very regal and stylish.

J.W. One of them is turning away.

T.A. Someone has caught her attention by trying to sell her some naan bread and that made for a good picture.

J.W. Were there any images that you thought were special or unusual.

T.A. Quite a few, but the one for me that epitomises the project is of all the children sitting in the temple, and it has been the first to sell from the set of images. Photographically for me it is a beautiful composition.

Occasionally as a photographer you put the tripod down and snap and it all falls into place. It was that kind of the picture and in terms of the educational nature of the project that kind of sums it up for me.

J.W. Could you also talk about the disposable camera project?

T.A. I had seen a book of disposable camera images from street kids in Nairobi and I thought that it was absolutely amazing. I thought why not take a whole lot of disposable cameras and give them to to the kids and get them to document a day in their life. Then you will get another whole element and when kids are taking pictures they are

very free and not self conscious at all. Most of my photography was exteriors they went inside. The disposable worked very well and I think that the images are like gold dust.

J.W. In the six weeks that you were there, did the experience affect you in any particular way. You were working on social documentary, did you find that different from the way that you normally work.

T.A. I found it quite similar because I had shot a lot in South Africa. In Cape Town there were a lot of violent gangs, but India is very safe. But it was an eye opener for me in terms of the poverty. The shoot was only four weeks the rest was travelling and apart from feeling utterly exhausted I was humbled by meeting so many positive people who had nothing. Also their unreserved hospitality, refusing to take payment, and these were people who could have used the money. Also how the issues of globalisation is affecting the culture and learning about the culture

J.W. One photograph that struck me was of a disabled child.

T.A. Children grow up if they are disabled with no stigma. In one school there were a lot of disabled people and when you ask people about disability they don't know why you are talking about it.

J.W. Is there any image that is special for you.

T.A. The image of the migrant workers. They were this amazing close vibrant family who have nothing. The father mortgaged his land as a dowry to marry the three daughters and then he died and they lost their land. They were inspiring for me in their attitude to life.