

Social Work & Research Centre (The Barefoot College) Tilonia, Rajasthan

Background

The Barefoot College, also known as the 'Social Work & Research Centre' is located in a remote village called Tilonia at the outskirts of Ajmer district in Rajasthan. This is a voluntary organization which began in the year 1972 under the leadership of Mr Bunker Roy. At the outset it was initiated mainly on the issues of drinking water in a block called Kishengarh. Shri Bunker Roy was physically moved by the appalling conditions arising out of the famine that hit Bihar. It is then that he decided to do something for the people at the grass root level. On the other hand the draught hit Rajasthan faced a major crisis due to a lack of drinking water. This posed as a major threat for the village community. It was then that Roy, a product of St Stephens College in Delhi, came to Rajasthan as a dealer in long haul drilling. The village community appealed to him to do something to relieve them from their plight and he took it upon himself to bring drinking water to the entire village community of Tilonia. With innovation as his dictum, Roy took the village community along with in designing, constructing and implementing the carefully planned policies. It was the local people who decided and identified what the issues were and how they could be resolved. So the project began on the note, 'by the people, for the people and of the people'. Once the issues got identified, the village community involved the state and the national government for a contribution.

The project is widely spread all over the village of Tilonia. Starting with a humble beginning from the old building which was a sanatorium for the Tuberculosis patients, it is now spread over two main campuses and the project is also operated from the several field centres with each centre catering to a number of villages. The campus has been designed and built by a villager who is almost illiterate but has already traveled far and wide with his expertise. The approach road to the project meanders through a dusty and kucha road. By the time one reaches the main campus, one is filled with dust all over unless the glasses of the vehicle is pulled up and tightly shut. Thankfully the dusty part of the road is not very long and suddenly one finds the road dashed and dotted with thorny short desert shrubs. It is rare not to find huge vehicles parked outside the campus belonging to various international organization, schools or that of tourists who come to see the much talked about 'Barefoot College' situated in the remote village of 'Tilonia'.

What is most astounding is that the entire campus has no electricity but has been electrified with the help of solar energy by a priest belonging to a nearby village. All facilities and gadgets in the campus are run by solar power. The library, office computers, soil testing labs, primary health centres, water heaters, cookers,

schools, electrical workshops, puppetry, handicrafts, etc are all operated with the help of solar energy.

With 150 volunteers, 450 part time workers, 160 full time workers, and 5000 honorary village workers, it almost looks like a big convocation during meal times. The project also trains women who have hardly any education to become solar engineers and doctors without any formal paper degree and diplomas being showered upon them. The Barefoot college is a model which displays that the pre-conceived notions, objectives and prescription policies imported from outside is no solution to bring about human development. It takes into consideration years of experience, local culture, traditions, commitment and dedication, its sheer capacity of survival and full participation for achieving people's development. Ideas generated from the community have taken shape through the planning process of the Barefoot College. The organization has truly demonstrated and adopted a methodology which minimizes waste and maximizes effectiveness touching the lives of the poorest of the poor bringing about a transformation. This project demonstrates that agents of change should necessarily be endogenous in nature.

The entire project involves around several activities. Some of the activities include Education, Health, Agriculture, Eco-Volunteerism, Women's empowerment, and so on. Their activities especially catering to Solar Technology and water harvesting have been a total success. It has implemented a 15 KW solar power transmitter and has no shortage of drinking water supply. The project has expanded to cover more than 14 states of India and several countries from abroad through education workshops for improvising knowledge and income. Their night schools have been a boon in disguise for the women of the region who are 80% illiterate. Over the years the Barefoot College have produced several Barefoot engineers, Barefoot doctors, Barefoot teachers and the like.

Objectives

The major objectives of the project are to:

Mainstream the marginalized section of the society.

Create awareness about their rights and duties.

Bring about a transformation in the lives of the village community through education and improvised health facilities.

Bring about a change in the attitude and the mindset of the people.

Improvise the economic resources by implementing the NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act).

Educate the people about conservation and maximum utilization of water.

Inculcate a belief in ethics, values and honesty through transparency and accountability for binding the community together.

Area of Study

Lying in a strictly dusty, semi-arid zone, with pollution being non-existent, the project covers an area of 500 sq kms with field centres scattered among 35 villages and covering almost a total population of more than one lakh within the catchment area. The economy earlier was dependent upon agriculture but now it has shifted their focus of production due to lack of water. Dairy farming is currently getting popular. More than 80% of the people depend upon animal resources while some are still dependent on agriculture. There is also a veterinary hospital in Tilonia. The only Government secondary school is available in the village and is called the Rajkiya Madhyamik Vidyalaya. In addition it also has a few primary schools. But the region does not have any high school. The nearest hospital is located around 30 kms away from Kishengarh block and another one is located about 50 kms from Ajmer. There is a cremation ground located around 3 kms away from the campus of the Barefoot College. There also exists a primary health centre located 5 kms away with 1 doctor, and one nursing maid.

The people of Tilonia depend mostly upon hand pumps, and a few on the underground small tanks as their sources of drinking water. The village has electricity lines but there is no power supply. (Upon enquiring from the Ajmer Vidyut Board,



Barefoot College- Main Campus

it was stated that this area's work was under progress). In certain parts of the village there is power supply for 3 to 4 hours only. Earlier there used to be 4 buses that would ply from and to the village but this is no longer in operation. The rail linkage has one incoming and one outgoing train so far. Mainly handled by the locals, language seems to be no barrier. Some of the leaders do speak English for the international delegates. The vulnerable population consisting of women Dalits, tribals and other backward classes are given extra attention but at the same time it does cater to the entire population.

Most of the people in the region are the working class, laborers, marginal and landless farmers who depend on their daily wages for survival. Most of the people actively involved with the project activities belong to the five districts of Ajmer, Jaipur, Barmer, Sikar and Baran. In addition, there are people from 120 villages within the immediate vicinity who work independently but are affiliated with the project.

Reaching the Destination

The Barefoot College, located in Tilonia of Ajmer district can be approached by road via Madanganj-Kishengarh road. The project has conveyance and on prior information, arrangement could be made to get picked up from a certain point.

Rationale

The project has created awareness among the community in the sleepy remote village of Tilonia. The capacity for survival in difficult times and participation of locals in planning, designing and implementing has addressed issues in the right perspective. Problems such as water scarcity, energy demand and skill training has been dealt with successfully. Most important is the innovative measures adopted by the project to achieve the desired results with minimum investment, dedication and commitment.

Problem Addressed

Once the issues get identified they are deliberated upon through dialogues with state bodies in order to avoid duplication. Their schools are not a mere duplication of the existing government schools nor do they pose any competition for them. Instead these cater to children who are either below the average standard, drop outs or have no access to education. Internships, organizing learning/teaching training programmes on behalf of NCERT and other sponsors are also held occasionally. The programme on women sponsored by TRISON where sewing machines were provided is not in operation any longer.

The basic problems of the society are also deliberated through child parliaments consisting of 14 child ministers one for each of the activities identified by the Barefoot College. The child parliament even has the right to expose a corrupt official and throw out a non-functioning teacher. The 150 night schools in the 5 districts mentioned earlier caters to classes I to V.

Participation of Local People

The participatory approach cannot be more appropriately displayed. There are innumerable activities all carried out at the same time. Nearly 99% are the local people ready to run the 'Barefoot College' today. Funds are sent to the villages where these are utilized for the women's programme, youth clubs, Children's parliament, puppet shows and so on for imparting empowerment. Most important is the rural artisans who are given vocational training. They are then helped to open their own workshop in their villages. Most of them are self-employed and are responsible for the entire process from production to marketing. Only the training and the bank guarantee are the lookout of the Barefoot College.



Village Women for Undertaking Training Programme.

The field centres have 4 tractors at their disposal. Whenever they are free the local people take turns to use them and these are given on loans to the farmers. Perhaps community participation has been the mantra behind the successful implementation of the policies at the 'Barefoot College'. Kamla, the barefoot engineer is only a fifth class literate and yet she has been trained to construct solar lighting. She maintains the connection and tends to all the faults promptly in the villages. The Barefoot doctors are able to cater to emergency at any time until help can be reached. The barefoot teachers and skill trainers are the former trained people from Tilonia

Accountability

The needs of the society are of utmost importance for the project. On many occasions 'the Barefoot College' has refused to work according to the funder's wish keeping the needs of the society in mind and as a result they have been compelled to return the funds back. Despite the resource crunch the project has been a success. Shri Kanaram told us that there have been occasions where they have refused prizes and honors. The village architect, who had designed the Barefoot College, refused the prize he was offered in Syria as this was to be shared by another person who had not contributed towards the architecture and designing of the barefoot college campus. The village architect refused to budge

from his stand. Issues are identified with a bottom-up approach where focus is drawn towards concerns raised by the local population. These reach the field centres and further to the group meetings in Barefoot College to the concerned quarters. All contributions and funds received are monitored and coordinated by the Village Development Authority who spends the money on village developmental activities. Even small funds sent by NREGA, are spent by the Village Development Authority.

Speed & Ease of Service Delivery

A hierarchy of service delivery centres has been demarcated through which the feedback mechanism works. At the lowest level, the field centres are scattered in the villages with easy access for the local people to come and register their ideas and grievances. These are covered by sub-centres at the regional level where the feedback mechanism gets activated. The women community is trained in various activities like solar engineering, water harvesting, teaching and so on. They in turn implement the lessons into action in their respective villages with the help of men. The women are responsible to implement, and maintain the system in the villages. At the international level the Barefoot College trains women to enhance their livelihood opportunities and in this context the contribution has been a tremendous one. Countries like Sierra Leone, Mali, Cameroon, Bolivia, and Bhutan and others have all been beneficiaries. Almost more than 100 villages in Afghanistan and 15 villages in Ethiopia have been electrified through solar energy. Regular meeting of women's groups, self-help groups and setting up of Parliament of the children, puppet shows and awareness programmes has created a furor among the village communities. In addition several volunteer groups are there to supervise the public distribution system in the region.

Installation of more than 1300 hand pumps has been a major outcome of the Barefoot College to the locals in addition to several in Orissa and Laddakh. "Life is much better now with solar electricity and water", according to a group of women from Tilonia who had come to take the training programme.

A group of 15 young women from Bhutan looked apprehensive as they had just arrived for their 6-months training programme to become Solar engineers. The moment Shri Kanaram spoke to them in his usual carefree and fatherly tone, the women all opened up and expressed that they were looking forward to finishing their training and going back to implement it in their own country where both electricity and water were a major problem. They were the third group visiting India for this purpose. The success of the previous two groups enabled them to get permission from their government easily. Another major outcome has been the women's empowerment programme. 'Sati' had once again been practiced in 1997 at Devrala and it was the women who participated actively against this. The Teachers training and Women's Development programme all had their genesis at

the Barefoot College. One major achievement under the women's Development Programme was the changing of the policy after the famine. The policy got changed from 100% wages to 50% - food and 50% - wages.

Social Well Being

The best gift of the project to the society has been uplifting the self-esteem of the village community. Everyone is totally involved and all participate actively in the project. There is no hierarchy within the society. The 'Barefoot College' has produced innumerable engineers, doctors, teachers, ecovolunteers and the like. Most of them have been illiterate. Kamala – the solar engineer has been responsible in bringing light to the villages but is hardly educated. There are other young men and women who are well trained in computers. There are men who look after the audio-visual equipments while others are engaged in installing the solar transmitters.



Barefoot College is central in the village and everyone feels a sense of belonging. People have become aware and appreciate the importance of good health, cleanliness and hygiene. Women no longer shy away from speaking up. Children come regularly to the school. There are always people hanging around the library waiting to read the regional newspapers in Hindi. Shri Ram Niwas and Shri Ram Karan have been accountants before they became coordinators of other sectors and puppet shows. What a transformation the society has undergone is visible during the mealtimes.

There is a very big gathering of workers and volunteers. It seems as if the whole village is assembled in one place. It is believed that this is not only on certain days but is a routine matter. This clearly depicts the degree of involvement of the people. There were people from the neighboring villages as well.

While talking to the village women who had come for their training it was reassuring to note that many of them were sent to the Barefoot College by their husbands and even their fathers-in-law. This shows that there is a change in the attitude among the men as well. Some women had small children to look after and they were being taken care of by their fathers-

inlaw. The night schools were undertaken for the women and other village community who could not attend schools in the day. Skill training was imparted

for sewing, weaving, crafts, puppetry, recycling, Tie & dye, bee keeping etc. In September 1985, nearly 1000 women assembled in Tilonia village to identify and understand issues related to rural working class women. Besides Rajasthan there were women representatives from all over India.

Based on the series of discussions held with all the stakeholders one point was loud and clear! The social well being has emerged out of social traditions. The women struggle even at their own cost but are united and protest through non-violent agitation. The society is divided into issue based groups. Each group has their own agenda and pursues their goals within the larger framework. The society seemed porous enough for the trickling down effects to reach the grass root level effectively. Once the basic indicators of development are firmly placed in appropriate positions, such a society is bound to develop in leaps and bounds!

Transparency

Way back in 1984, Mr Bunker Roy as an advisor of NGOs to the Planning Commission, had suggested a code of conduct for better transparency but this was objected to by others and not agreed upon. In order to bring in transparency, in 1997, the Barefoot College decided to put all their salary register, bill vouchers and all other documents before the community members, media officials, and all stakeholders. The 'Right to Information Act' was started even before it could be conceived by the government. It involved all the sub centres and field centres. A collective decision was taken with suggestions originating from the village community. Every ordinary worker was held at par to a renowned one. All were ordinary workers. And there was no difference in wages. The transparency of every action was on the basis of values like equality of religion and caste. It was aimed to bring in total transparency in funds policies and action. A complete decentralization process was initiated and put into action. Proper registers are maintained with records of dates, days and cost of each activity which one can see as and when one wants to.

The 1997 meet, revealed that the percentage of administrative expenditure to the total cost formed only 8 percent. This meant that out of every rupee spent only 8 paise go towards administrative expenditure. The Barefoot College states that this is in stark contrast to the government administrative expenditure where 86 paise in every rupee goes towards administrative expenditure. However whether these figures are right or wrong, the mere fact that a public organization has fulfilled a social responsibility is an achievement in itself.

Replicability

The Barefoot College is a model which could be replicated in other parts of the country and also abroad. The model has already been replicated partially or in

full among 12 states of India. These include the states of Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Tamilnadu, Kerala, Gujarat and Rajasthan. There is a network meeting held four times a year. In addition the project has been replicated internationally in 7 countries, namely, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Mali, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Bolivia and Bhutan. The representatives of their people have come to Barefoot College and tried to interact through their website as well. The training of people is done here and they return back to implement the lessons learnt in their villages.



SOLAR COOKER

A prior assessment is necessary to be undertaken of the area such as the geography, social background and economic conditions. It is important to study the issues and problems that exist in the region. It is always advisable to start

with small issues in order to achieve bonding of the community. The puppet shows for example depicts characters which are quickly acceptable by the society. For example the character of 'Jokim Chacha' talking on selected social themes is very popular among the people. Earlier it was believed that professional people were more powerful and were indispensable but the Barefoot College has proved otherwise.

Nevertheless experience is necessary. So there is a constant exchange programme taking place. The tried lot leaves only to send fresh lots. The smokeless Chulha (Oven) has been replicated in Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

Replication of a project takes time at the initial stages but now its been spreading widely. After the training, its only to be implemented. Earning the trust and belief is a long drawn process especially among the local, state and central government officials. Shri Kanaram was proud of the fact that their project already has achieved this milestone.

Cost-Benefit Assessment

The funding of the project can be split into three distinct parts according to the Deputy Director, Mr Srinivasan. Although the exact figures were not made available during the visit but a discussion suggests that 40 percent of their total expenditure comes from the government. Another 30 percent comes from the non-governmental funding and foreign funding. The remaining 30 percent is generated by the organization through training programmes, selling of handicrafts, awards, consultancy and other sources of income in cash and kind. During the last 2 to 3 years the Scholl Foundation had supported the model to be replicated in 9 countries through online marketing (www.Tilonia.com).

Support has been obtained from international agencies such as Plan International which was completed last year. The UNDP also supported the project last year. The German Agro Action is currently supporting the project for the night school children till Dec 2007 and has now been extended till Dec 2008. The governmental funding has been from the Ministry of Non-Conventional Energy, Ministry of Textile, Ministry of Health and KAPART. The Ministry of Water Resource funded the project for three years to the tune of R ea.

Partnership

In Rajasthan the project can be replicated without any partnership but in other states it does need the support of local people or the government depending upon the programme to be implemented.

Sustainability

Given the background of the country's socio-economic conditions, the project's potential for achieving sustainability seems promising. It is of even greater importance due to the era of globalization where the advantages are as strong as the disadvantages. The present section analyzes the prospects of sustainability of the project with the help of SWOT analysis.

Strengths

People Centric - Involvement of Mass in a big way with community Participation in every sector of the project.

Use of Technology- Simple and kept in league with local demands.

Costs Effective – Costs are efficient and effective with only 8 percent of the costs being utilized as administrative expenditure. The rest 92 percent are for the developmental activities.

Maximum Utilization of resources keeping the carrying capacity of the region in mind

Transformation of mindset and attitude of the people.

Pooling of Human Resources for qualitative improvement.

Concepts and Ideas are innovative and original.

Disadvantages such as illiteracy, language barriers, lack of infrastructural facilities have been converted into advantage.

People at the grass root level have been made aware about their rights and duties.

Women have come out in a big way as doctors, engineers, teachers, etc who are now socially active implying that the next generation will have the advantage of such mothers.

The project avoids duplication of activities bringing in innovation and originality.

Values and Ethics are in the right place bringing in honesty, transparency and accountability through social audit workshops.

It does not encourage technology that deprives the people of their livelihood.

The organization lives and works in close proximity with the rural community bringing in bonding among the community members.

The organization practices a collective decision making process.

It ensures gender equity within the organization.

Laws are made for the local people which they can clearly understand Weaknesses.

Wage fixation is based on objectivity through self – assessment and

points given by the community rather being based upon market rates. Such a methodology to take a living wage may prove harmful in the long run and potential people from the community with experience and knowledge may leave for greener pastures which may be detrimental for the organization.

Opportunities

Replication is gathering momentum not only in India but also abroad opening up new vistas.

It is a great opportunity for the rural women to learn and get recognized in the society, despite the fact that they do not possess any paper qualifications.

The project will promote the rural artisans and the small scale handicrafts.

The child parliament will give a better understanding of the issues concerning the society which would go along way in strengthening the village Panchayat towards pressing issues of the region.

Threats

Strong Mobilization of manpower and resources are a constant need of the day. The project still is dependent for 70 percent of its resources from the outside

world. There is a constant threat of a fall back unless the project becomes self-sufficient and independent in all its action.

Most of the funding have phased out especially for night school. With a living wage the honorary workers and volunteers will soon be exhausted.

The international replication has its own set of problems. With the Passport/Visa clearance getting more and more complicated and cumbersome, this could become a serious bottleneck in the future depending upon the existing international foreign relations with the concerned countries.

Women from abroad may find it difficult to adjust and settle down and undertake training all within a period of six months.

Lessons Learnt

Community participation, strong bonding, responsibility are the buzz words for Barefoot College.

Living and working in close proximity with the rural community.

The worth of people is to be judged not by their paper qualifications but by their willingness and ability to learn.

The organization must have respect for collective traditional knowledge, beliefs, wisdom and practices of the community.

Party Politics must not take a place in the organization.

Drive away technology that deprives people of their livelihood.