

GRANNIES LIGHT UP LIVES

In India only Barefoot College in Tilonia imparts training in solar energy under the programme

Anindo Dey | TNN

Tilonia (Ajmer): Mint Siddi Mohamed can barely utter a word of English. But she finds everything 'achcha.' "Khana achha, rehna achcha, sab achcha," she rattles away without pausing for any more questions.

A farmer from the remote village of Kussen Mauritania in Africa, she can barely communicate with anyone, save one, of the 20 other women with whom she has been living and working for the past four months far away from home. But there is reason for her enthusiasm.

In about two more months she would qualify as a solar engineer from the Barefoot College in Tilonia, Ajmer, and go back home to light up her village. And so would the others after their 6-month stint comes to an end.

At a time when the world is finding it hard to grapple with climate change, this could be the best gift from India.

It's a virtual grandma's brigade being geared for the fight ahead at this 8,000 sq feet global village, a brainchild of



noted social worker Bunker Roy. Hailing from about 21 African countries the current lot of 21 women would complete the three figure mark who have so far 'graduated' as solar engineers, since its inception in 2008, when they go back home to light their village in March.

The programme is supported by Indian Technical and Economic Co-operation (ITEC) and the ministry of ex-

ternal affairs. In India only Barefoot College, Tilonia imparts training in solar energy under the programme.

"They are a hand-picked lot and have to be eligible to join the training. First they have to be grandmothers, second they should not have attended school and finally they must be from a village that is at least 10 km away from the main grid," says Bunker Roy, a believer of non-formal education.

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Once inside the college a local person first teaches them the colour code used in manufacture of various resistors, transistors, diodes or six pins and then through practical demonstration the women pick up the trade.

"By the end of two months they are all geared up and spend the remaining four months in making lamps," says the trainer.

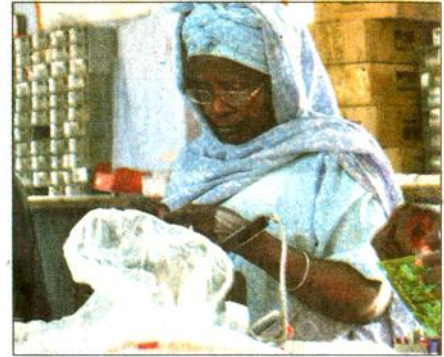
And though most of these women have never stepped out of their village here they stay together eating vegetar-

ian food for six months before taking the flight home.

"When they come here they do not know anything and being from different countries they can hardly communicate even amongst themselves," adds Roy.

Six months later they are equipped in fabrication, installation, usage, repair and maintenance of sophisticated solar lighting units in an indigenously designed circuit board, 10,000 pieces of which are given to them to set up solar lights there.

But there is a small price in the form of an agreement that these women have to give, promising to go back to their villages and lighting up households with solar lighting units and assume the responsibility of repairing and maintaining them for a minimum of 5 years in a workshop the space for which is provided by the village. "It's environment friendly, cheap and is perhaps the best solution in today's world. At exorbitant prices being demanded by others for creating a friendly environment, I can train 100 grandmothers in 100 households to light up 100 villages," says Roy.



Pics: Wrickle Angrish