



The Barefoot Approach Beyond India

First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you and then you win.
- Mahatma Gandhi

The Barefoot College of Tilonia, India demonstrates that illiteracy is not a barrier to poor communities developing themselves and that the most sophisticated of technologies can be disseminated by poor rural men and women who can barely read and write. The Barefoot College strongly believes that it is a myth that the development of poor rural communities requires people with formal degrees and qualifications. The Barefoot College has extended its informal training programs to empower a growing number of female solar power engineers, and the Barefoot approach to development has spread across India and around the world.

The Barefoot College is a radical departure from the traditional concept of a “college.” The lifestyle and workstyle is very Gandhian. Rather than reading, writing, and formal degrees, the Barefoot College promotes the kind of education one absorbs from family, community, and practical experience. The College confers no degrees and all members, regardless of class, education, or caste, are considered equal. For the drop-out children who cannot afford to go to school in the day because they have to look after their animals in the fields, classes take place at night in the villages. The education is entirely practical — many of the children who pass through Night School become health workers, engineers, accountants, and teachers AND serve their own communities.

Unlike the paper-qualified urban experts sent to help them, Barefoot-educated professionals focus on local decision-making and grassroots development. As one Barefoot College staff member explains, “It is Gandhian -- like Mahatma Gandhi we do believe power resides in the poor. They have dignity but do not have opportunities. We are harnessing human potential.” By giving the rural poor access to practical knowledge, the Barefoot College demystifies technology and puts it in the hands of villagers themselves.

To date, Barefoot professionals have helped bring solar electricity to over 200 remote villages in seven states across India, fulfilling such basic needs as lighting and heating. In this capacity alone, the Barefoot College has improved the quality of life of more than 80,000 people.

The philosophies of the College have done more than bring practical technological advancements; they also empower villagers, especially women. As one female Barefoot engineer explained, her husband and in-laws were first unhappy with her pursuit of education and grassroots activism, but they soon came to respect her work: “My husband will never say it, but I know he’s very proud of me. Now he asks me to maintain his accounts for him!” Another female scholar explains, “I now look back at my childhood when I always dreamed of doing something big for my society. My mother used to laugh

at me. Today my family, my neighbors, and even the village elders respect me and value my contribution. It feels wonderful.”

The Barefoot approach to the solar-electrification of rural communities has been adopted by the Asian Development Bank in Afghanistan and in 2007 will be adopted in 25 villages in Bhutan. Similar initiatives are developing in Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Mali, Bolivia, Cameroon, Tanzania, Senegal, Mauritania, Malawi, Kenya and Ethiopia. Both the UNDP and Skoll Foundation have provided funds for training 34 Barefoot solar and water engineers from Ethiopia. In six months during 2006, 19 inaccessible villages in Ethiopia were solar electrified by Barefoot solar engineers trained by the Barefoot College in Tilonia.

Skoll Foundation has provided financial support to replicate the Barefoot approach in solar electrification and roof top rainwater harvesting for drinking water and sanitation in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Cameroon and Bolivia. The Barefoot College's \$1 million Alcan Prize for Sustainability will be used to replicate the Barefoot model in even more villages in these countries.

Barefoot College founder Bunker Roy said: “It is the only College in India built by the poor for the poor and for the last 34 years managed and controlled and owned by the poor following the life-style and work-style of Gandhi. It is based on very simple living, eating, living, and working on the floor where people come for the challenge rather than the money. No one in the college can earn more than \$100 a month.”

“It's the only college where paper degrees, diplomas and doctorates are a disqualification because the worth of the person is judged by his or her honesty, integrity, compassion, practical skills, creativity and their ability to work with people without discrimination.”

The Barefoot College, formally known as the Social Work Research Centre, was established in 1972 in Tilonia, a small village in the semi-arid regions of Rajasthan, India. The College's founder, Bunker Roy, has lived and worked in this village since the College was established 35 years ago.

The College was designed by a semi-literate Barefoot architect and was built by a team of Barefoot architects, Barefoot solar engineers, and Barefoot water engineers. The College collects rainwater from the roofs of the campus and stores 400,000 liters of water in an underground tank built under a community stage. The open-air theater can seat an audience of 5,000 for performances. The College is fully solar electrified and powers its computers, photocopying machines, media center, pathology lab, and 700 lights and fans of its administrative offices, classrooms and living spaces with sunlight.

A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.

Mahatma Gandhi

www.barefootcollege.org
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