

SANJIT (BUNKER) ROY

was a young postgraduate from Delhi University in 1965 when he went to spend a summer in the drought affected Palamu district of Jharkhand.

This was a life changing experience for him as he had been brought up in an urban elitist background and did not know the abject

The Beginning of Barefoot College

poverty and inequalities that prevailed in the rural areas. He decided that he had to fight against this and thus the Social Work and Research Center (SWRC) at Tilonia was set up in 1972 along with

like-minded individuals such as geologists, economists, doctors, medical professionals, social workers, chartered accountants, graduates and post graduates from universities, who were out to serve in the villages with the help of Meghraj, a farmer from Tilonia. Bunker Roy's wife Aruna Roy, an IAS officer and three former students of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Manya Jayaram, Shukla Kanungo and Yogavalli Rao also played key

roles in the foundation years. The idea of barefoot professionals came to Bunker Roy from Mao's barefoot doctors in the villages of China. Their aim was to combine urban knowledge with rural wisdom to find solutions to the problems of the rural areas by relying on the rural people itself. The training given here is practical - on the job training without any formal structure.

The first building was an abandoned tuberculosis sanatorium. The rest of the campus was designed and constructed by a team of rural barefoot architects, masons, blacksmiths, farmers, etc., with nobody having any qualification beyond class X. The main blueprint was made by Bhanwar Jat, an illiterate farmer from Tilonia.

Till date there has been no roof leakage and in 2001, the Barefoot College won a \$50,000 award from the Aga Khan Foundation for its architecture. Bunker Roy says that this is the only college built by the poor, for the poor and for the past 40 years, managed, controlled and owned by the poor.



BAREFOOT COLLEGE

Barefoot College is a unique initiative to use the skills and creativity of the rural people in order to improve the quality of life of villagers and achieve sustainable development in the rural areas. It works to fulfil the vision of Gandhiji who

wanted India to be a republic with thousands of self-sustaining and self-administering villages and is perhaps the only college in the world which is working on these lines.

The working of the college is based on the fact that rural people may have poverty in terms of money but not necessarily poverty of mind and thus villagers with no formal education or even illiterates are doing what the educated urban elite are doing after years of formal education. The hidden talents and creativity of the rural people is brought out.

What the rural people need is a little bit of training and support, even in cases of failure. This approach of Barefoot has led to Bhagvatnandan, a village priest becoming a solar engineer responsible for the installation

and maintenance of the rooftop solar panels that light up the campus. It has also produced people like Bhanwari Devi, a grandmother who couldn't read or write but is now the dentist of the campus.

Barefoot College's work is not limited to Tilonia and its training programmes, field centres and associated centres are spread all over Rajasthan and in some other states of the

country. The model has been replicated and at present there are around 700 night schools and 600 solar electrified villages outside Rajasthan. Solar engineers are also trained from as far away as Manipur, Afghanistan, Latin America and the least developed countries of Africa. And when

these formerly unskilled and unlettered solar engineers return home, they are able to solar electrify their villages, thus beating the government which hasn't been able to do that in ages.

Barefoot Solutions to rural problems are in the following sectors: Solar Energy, Communication, Water, Education, Health Care and Rural Handicrafts. **TTIS Tiger Reporter S. Rajesh reports about Barefoot College**



Education

Education is very important as it is something that liberates us from the bondage of ignorance and helps us to think for ourselves and be aware of our rights and duties. But unfortunately, there are many children and adults in our country who do not have the opportunity of get educated and some are not even literate. So, Barefoot started Shiksha Niketan, a school within the campus upto Class VIII for the children of Tilonia who are not going to government schools.

But at the same time, it was understood that there are many other working children in far-off hamlets of the Silora Block who can't come to school or have dropped out and then started working. Something had to be done for them and thus the concept of night schools, bridge school and vocational training came into being.

The main idea behind all these educational initiatives is that poverty should not be a reason for somebody being deprived of education.

Night Schools

There are many underprivileged or poor children who are not able to attend even the government schools as they are busy earning to support their family during the day by grazing animals such as goats, cows, sheep, etc.

Barefoot College started a night school for them, from 7pm to 9pm daily. Teachers are from the community and more than their educational qualification, it is their motivation that counts. Even 8th pass is enough to be a teacher in the night school. Being from the same community, they are able to teach children through the Rajasthani dialect and also tackle local issues.

The subjects taught are Hindi, basic English, basic Math (addition, multiplication, subtraction and division), Environment, government schemes, social issues, cattle rearing, sewing, carpentry, etc.

The purpose is to impart enough knowledge

My visit to a Night School

On the day I visited the night school, there were some other visitors from states like Delhi, Uttarakhand and Kerala. The children of the hamlet of Govardhanpura, tucked away amidst the babool trees and vast fields, away from the urban chaos. They did not have any idea of any place beyond their state of Rajasthan. They had to be told about Gujarat, Kerala, etc., so that they could understand properly where we had come from.

So that day, we made the children learn what is a village, a town, a district, a state and then at last we explained to them that India has 29 states and Rajasthan is just one of them. Gujarat is below Rajasthan, Kerala is at the bottom of India. They learned the names and locations in about 15 minutes. A rough map was drawn on the blackboard to show them the relative locations.

The result was wonderful. In half an hour the children started asking us about the language, climate, etc.

It was a very thrilling experience for me and I returned to the Barefoot College happy to have made a difference. I also realised how difficult it can be for urban guys like me to come down to their level and make them understand through simple examples.

so that they can enter the government schools if they wish to or else at least be aware of their surroundings and not be cheated when they grow up.

Monitoring

The functioning of the school is monitored



Children's parliament or Baal Sansad

by the children's parliament or Baal Sansad and also a committee of the parents. Once every two years, elections are held between the 'Light' and the 'Shepherd' parties. The Prime Minister and various other ministers are elected and there is also an opposition to keep it in check.

It is very common for a guy to be grazing goats during the day and switch over to being the Prime Minister in the evening!

The functions of the Baal Sansad include getting involved in the proper functioning of the night schools, bringing out the shortcomings and motivating more children to attend the night schools.

Teachers are



A classroom at Singla



Children at RAAG

selected by the committee of the parents. Children also learn the ways and means of democracy at a young age and lose the fear of expressing themselves in front of others at a young age.

Residential Bridge School-Singla

It is a fully residential programme for children who have dropped out of school.

They stay at the bridge school for a year or two where their knowledge is brought up from where they left off, so that after completing their bridge school they can join the mainstream education, i.e. government schools.

Children who dropped out at 5th class may actually have knowledge of a 3rd standard child, so they must be brought up to the level of the 5th standard.

Students are taken in with an entrance test, to determine their level of learning, irrespective of the class from which they drop out.

RAAG

This programme has been initiated to allow children to explore their hidden talents and express their creativity so that their stay at the Bridge School is not only about studies.

Continued on Page 13