COVER STORY

Aakash Piplani- SBI fellow at Barefoot College,Tilonia

Tell us something about yourself.

I am basically an average north Indian guy from Lucknow. I did my graduation in Economics, worked with Zomato for 2 months and then joined as an SBI fellow here. SBI pays us a fellowship to work with Barefoot College under their CSR programme.

What made you leave the corporate world soon after entering it?

You see our whole life is a race. Race to get good marks, and then race to get a good college and a good job. Those who are at the top will get the best positions.

I don't like being part of these races and so instead of criticising the race while being part of it, I decided that I'll quit the race and start my own race. I quit my job to challenge myself and see what I can do here.

I know of many young people who would like to work in the social sector but they say that the pay is not enough. Isn't pay a problem for you?

Yes what you said is absolutely true. If you have responsibilities and need to support your family with at least a middle class standard of living, it's very difficult to work in the social sector. So in such kind of situations it's better to have a full time job, support your family and then spend your free time in the social sector by joining in CSR programmes or as short time volunteers. You can't give your 100% anywhere if issues at home are bogging you down.

How's your experience so far at Barefoot college?

It's been wonderful to be here. I got to learn so much and met many inspiring people. Throughout our school and college life, we kept reading in books that the remote areas or the rural areas have problems. Most of us would just read and move on. It means so much for me to be actually involved in the field level and doing something meaningful for the underprivileged children at night schools and being involved with projects like RAAG at the bridge school at Singla.

Water

As we all know, water is the elixir of life. Life cannot survive without it. But a very big problem with water is that its distribution is not uniform and in places like Rajasthan, there is very less rainfall compared to say West Bengal, making each drop of rain and each water source extremely precious.

So Barefoot college embarked on the mission of providing the rural people a mix of traditional and modern solutions to combat their

Young people and school children in the rural areas have been trained to collect water samples and test them for their portability (whether they are drinkable or not) through mobile kits supplied by Barefoot, thus creating responsible and conscious citizens. Information thus gathered is fed into a software called JALCHITRA so that Barefoot has an idea of the water quality, quantity, sources, etc., at both the individual, village and cluster level. Villagers have been trained to use this software and update data.

Rainwater harvesting

water woes.

Handpump mechanics

Is it possible to imagine a rural area without hand pumps? No. That's because they are the main source of drinking water apart from the wells. But the problem with handpumps is that sometimes they get repaired or sometimes they go dry. What happens in such cases? The government engineer is called to set it right. But this may sometimes take days, given the nature of government officials.

So Barefoot challenged this with the idea that it doesn't take an engineering degree to repair a handpump and so hundreds of villagers were trained to repair the handpumps on their own without engineers thus saving both time and money and empowering the local people.

Quality testing

Rainwater harvesting

In dry areas, saving the precious drops of rain is very important and Barefoot College has been involved in rainwater harvesting both in the campus and in other villages of the region. Ram Karan*ji*, a lawyer (he is working in a college where a majority have not finished their schooling) is incharge of all the rainwater harvesting systems in and around the campus and has been associated with the college since 1975.

The rainwater harvesting system consists of carefully designed pipes carrying the rooftop rainwater to an underground storage called a "Tanka". Surface water from the nearby hills is guided by trenches and drains to stop for sometime and flow into an open well. The overflow is guided into another well.

Rooftop rainwater is used to provide for drinking water, while other rainwater is used to recharge the ground water.

In summers, even if the hand pumps of surrounding areas go dry, there will always be water in the campus.

Open wells which have gone dry, due to the water table receding to extremely low depths are also recharged by diverting the rainwater collected at other places into them.

Barefoot has a storage capacity of 1 million litres of rainwater and the main tank has a capacity of 4,00,000 litres. Above this tank an open air amphitheatre has been built to seat around a 1000 people.

Rural industries &

handicrafts

There is a huge variety of handicrafts in India, given the enormous diversity that we have in our cultures. Every handicraft is unique and has a story to tell. Tilonia handicrafts are one among them and Barefoot encourages the local artisans to produce them for sale in the outside markets, thus earning a decent income for themselves. Most of the artisans are women. The main works done here are applique work, embroidery, block printing, garments, wooden toys, leather work, etc. Vegetable dyes are used in

Communication Section

This section is responsible for making the rural people of Tilonia and its surroundings conscious about their rights and duties as citizens and also spread information among them regarding government schemes like MGNREGA, minimum wages, RTI, etc., through both the traditional and modern mediums such as street plays (something like the Jatras in Bengal), puppetry, films, photographs, radio, etc.

Satyanarayan (22), Communication Section

Please explain the work that you do in the communication section.

We use street theatre as a medium to spread awareness among the children and the villagers regarding social issues and government schemes. For this we also make use of various kinds of puppets - rod puppet, glove puppet and finger puppet. Ram Niwas*ji* is our leader.

Why do you need to use puppets?

As our audience consists of people of all ages including children, we need to keep the attention of the viewers intact and children need something to focus on so that they do not get bored or disturb others. And that's where our puppet shows fit in. We give out our message through the movements of the puppets. So much so that more than the performer or the dramatist, our puppet Jokim Chacha is well known for his good advice and information.

From where do you get these puppets?

Above: Rajesh with Satyanarayan; Left: Jokim Chacha

We make these puppets on our own from materials like old cloth, newspapers, paper mache, etc. Puppet making is also taught to the children.

On the whole, how has your experience been here?

It has been awesome and I want to continue working here amongst the villagers and do meaningful stuff which I enjoy.

Aren't wages any constraint?

Yes of course; they could have been higher but I am quite content with what I am getting and would like to be doing this wonderful job as the environment here is unparalleled.

most cases in order to make the production as environment friendly as possible. Newcomers are trained by the experienced ones to carry the craft forward.

A shop called the HATHELI SANSTHAN has been set up on the campus for visitors to browse through and purchase. Online purchase can be done through **Tilonia.com**. The items are even exported to foreign countries.
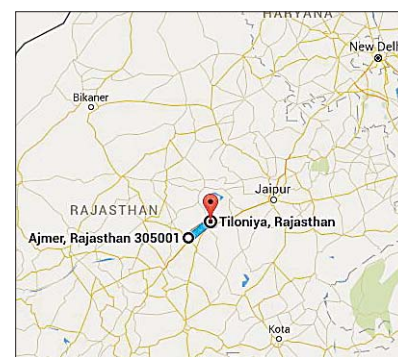
According to the 2009-10 data, out of the 157 artisans working there, 131 were women and the earnings was Rs 67 lakhs.

Best from waste section

All of us know the 3R's. One of them is Recycle and that is exactly what the 'Kabad se jugad' section does. Many physically challenged people are involved here and they make wonderful toys out of discarded toothpaste tubes, broken chappals, etc., which are used to teach children in science classes. Old newspapers is the main item used to make puppets of the communication section.

Community health care & social welfare

For any society to be happy, health and social welfare are most important. And keeping this in mind, Barefoot College has been working to improve the health and day to day lives of the people. The message spread by the college has led to respectable treatment of the physically challenged people and at present some of them are working at the Tilonia centre running the mini-telephone exchange, computers, etc., and some are even involved in the making of toys at the Wealth from Waste division.

Close involvement and partnership with the locals through the women's groups, creches and night schools in the villages of the Silora block in which Barefoot is located, has helped to improve the community health in a

Tilonia is a village in Ajmer district in Rajasthan, India. It is the home of the NGO, Barefoot College, founded by renowned social worker Bunker Roy. Since it was founded, this village has become a model for all remote villages for economic and social development.

very cost effective way. Availability of clean drinking water, training of traditional midwives, health workers, barefoot lab technicians, traditional medicine (extracted from plants grown in the nurseries of the college), programmes for immunisation, nutrition of women and children, spraying of disinfectants, building of toilets and many other such steps have a long way in improving the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) (number of deaths of children under the age of 1 per 1000 live births) from 81 in 1992-93 to 52 in 2002-03 while the national figure was 71 and the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) from 167 in 1992-93 to 70 in 2002-03.

A dental unit was set up in 2009 and few grandmothers were trained to become Barefoot Dentists under the guidance of a qualified dentist.

Rajesh would like to convey his heartfelt thanks to the Barefoot college staff, Aakash Piplani, Lawrence Miglialo and Ashish Navalakha, the volunteers at Barefoot College for showing him around and extending every possible help in making this cover story.

Pictures: S Rajesh, Lawrence Miglialo- photographer at Barefoot and some from the Barefoot website.

S. Rajesh, Tiger Reporter