

THE BAREFOOT PROFESSIONALS OF TILONIA

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Abstract

Barefoot College is an institution located in Tilonia village of Rajasthan, India and is based on the ideology and lifestyle of Mahatma Gandhi. The ideology of Barefoot College has four key components: alternative education, valuing traditional knowledge and skills, learning for self-reliance, and dissemination of knowledge and technology. The institution trains rural poor, especially women and youth, to function as professionals in rural community without the conventional degree certificates of the formal educational system. These barefoot professionals are successfully engaged in several technical, health and educational fields of the rural community. The major rural development activities of Barefoot College can be broadly categorised into: (i) empowerment of rural women, (ii) dissemination of solar technology; (iii) community services of education, health and drinking water, (iv) economic programmes of mechanical fabrication workshop, vocational training, and production and sale of craft items, (v) development of the physically challenged, and (vi) knowledge dissemination through development of rural communication and library service. Over the last four decades, Barefoot College has established itself as an innovative institution for the development of the rural poor through self-reliance.

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INTRODUCTION

Empowering the rural poor means developing their capacity. It means developing their skills so that they become competent decision-makers with confidence to act on their choices. Thus far, conventional approaches to such empowerment have failed. The approach that big donors and Western-conditioned experts have taken to reach the poor—forget about allowing the poor to develop themselves—has been patronising, top-down, insensitive and expensive. It excludes the marginalised, the exploited and the very poor, and keeps them away from making decisions on their own. Thus it disempowers them, leaving them dependent and hopelessly ill prepared to improve their lives. Moreover, these “patrons,” however well intentioned, have refused to learn from their mistakes. They are stuck in a rut that wastes money on a process that simply has not worked.

Enough research has been done. There is strong evidence to show that the poor are becoming poorer around the world because we have been tackling rural problems by thrusting urban solutions on the poor. That is not what they need. On the basis of overpowering documentation, what is the need of the hour is implementation. Fundamental change only comes out of conflict of ideas, approaches and methods. There are indeed many ways of empowering the poor. The “barefoot approach” is one such way.

It starts with giving the poor the right to decide for themselves how they want to improve their quality of life. They must have the right to choose whether they want the urban experts to come into their villages with “modern” ideas. They must have access to information and knowledge, and the right to decide whether they would like to be independent of advice and skills from outside when they already have such incredible technical, human and even financial resources within their own communities. They can even decide whether some knowledge would be useful if they could adapt it to serve their needs. What they need is the opportunity and space to develop themselves.

When provided with that mental and physical space, the poor can achieve wonders without any outside professional interference or advice. The trouble is that, even though established approaches have failed to achieve

sustainable improvements, people are reluctant to turn the top-down process on its head and start from the bottom up. Few operational models provide a contrast that demonstrates the alternatives. But outside the usual box are other more cost effective approaches that draw more on the grassroots. There are ways to build on local knowledge and skills. And these approaches can be replicated on a large scale.

ORIGINS OF THE BAREFOOT IDEA

In 1971, I went to live and work in the rural village of Tilonia in Rajasthan, India, after receiving the most elitist, expensive, snobbish private education that any Indian could possibly receive. When I arrived, I remember being shaken by the questions the elders asked me: Are you running from the police? Did you fail in your examinations? Didn't you manage to get a government job? Is there something wrong with you? Why are you here? Why have you come from the city to this village? There is no one here but the very old, the women and the very young. The youth have left.

The youth had left to look for jobs—any job that would take them away from the village—because the predominant value system denigrated rural life, skills and traditions, and offered little hope of improved incomes or quality of life. They had certificates in their hands from uninspiring mediocre technical institutes and colleges located in small towns producing “graduates” by the thousands with high expectations. These youths thought that they were going to get well-paid, secure jobs in the cities. Instead, they swelled the ranks of the educated unemployables living on the pavements and in the slums in the metropolitan cities of India.

They were unemployable, because their paper degrees had no value. The certified doctors, teachers and engineers, produced by thousands every year, are paper experts without any practical experience. They are caught up in a system that is not accountable to the people it is supposed to serve, and produces insufficient jobs to absorb the number of job seekers. Civil engineers build roads that do not last; water engineers build tanks that collapse or crack and cannot be used; doctors focus on curative approaches and know little about preventive health. So in the absence of jobs but still hopping for any job, they live an inhuman existence in appalling urban slums.

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The humiliation and scorn they would face on returning to the village prevent them from going back. Anyone going back to the village is considered a failure and the shame is shared by the whole family.

When the youth fled, they took with them the dying hopes of their parents—weavers, blacksmiths, potters, builders, carpenters, farmers—to pass on the traditional skills to the next generation. They left behind not only their families but also the knowledge their elders had collected over the generations to adapt to local conditions. This was knowledge that no formal educational system valued, but was critical for developing a community with dignity and self-respect. The formal educational system had made them look down on their own roots.

For me, living and working in the villages for five years as an unskilled labourer digging and blasting wells and meeting with very ordinary poor people was an extraordinary experience. Between 1967 and 1971, I went through an “unlearning” process that provided the seeds for the humble beginning of Barefoot College. Over the last 40 years, what we have “unlearned” is our gross underestimation of people’s infinite capacity to identify and solve their own problems with their own creativity and skills, and to depend on each other in tackling problems. What I learned is that empowerment of the marginalised rural poor is about developing that capacity to solve problems, to make choices, and to have the confidence to act on them.

On a different front, the college understood the specific real needs of the rural poor. These people needed to assert their identity and demonstrate that their knowledge and skills were not outdated, second-rate or irrelevant. They needed a college dedicated to their specific and special circumstances, and one located in a remote rural area. They needed a place where they could feel a sense of ownership, where their self-respect and self-esteem could be developed gradually over the years. Barefoot College acts as a counterpoint both to the incredible ignorance and arrogance the formal system displays and to its belief that it makes an indispensable contribution to tackling poverty. In reality that approach of the formal system is counterproductive, even dangerous.

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WHAT IS BAREFOOT COLLEGE?

As an organisation, Barefoot College is the only college in India that follows the lifestyle and work style of Mahatma Gandhi. It is the only college built by the poor, for the poor, and for the last 40 years, managed, controlled, and owned by the poor. Underlying the “barefoot” approach is a firm belief in the knowledge, creativity, practical wisdom, and survival skills of the marginalised poor—possibly the only answer to making communities self-reliant and sustainable. For an unemployed and employable semi-literate rural youth to be providing vital services in a village, replacing an urban, paper-qualified doctor, teacher, or water engineer is a totally revolutionary idea. And yet, this is what happens at Barefoot College every day. It is the only college where paper degrees, diplomas, and doctorates are a disqualification because people are judged not according to their degree of literacy or academic distinction, but by their attributes: honesty, integrity, compassion, practical skills, creativity, adaptability, willingness to listen and learn, and ability to work with all sorts of people without discriminating.

The term “barefoot” is both symbolic and literal. Those who work, teach, learn and “unlearn,” and provide a technical skill without a paper degree issued by Barefoot College go barefoot and remain so after they return to their own villages. Their goal is not to change their lifestyle but to gain the basic skills they need to provide to their own communities a vital service, one that urban professionals are currently trying to provide, most often unsuccessfully. Meanwhile they are maintaining a healthy and sustainable lifestyle for themselves and their community.

Barefoot College is a radical departure from the traditional concept of a “college” because it encourages a hands-on learning-by-doing process of gaining practical knowledge and skills rather than written tests and paper-based qualifications. It promotes and strengthens the kind of education one absorbs from family, community and personal experience. It deliberately confers no degrees, with a view to reversing migration. If one can improve the quality of life in one’s community by providing a vital service, why would anyone in her/his right mind want to live an unspeakably miserable existence in the urban slums? In any case, because barefoot professionals do not have paper certificates, no one in the urban areas, sadly, will seriously value their

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skills. The ideology of Barefoot College has four key components: alternative education, valuing traditional knowledge and skills, learning for self-reliance, and dissemination.

Alternative Education

First, Barefoot College demystifies education, taking Mark Twain to heart: “Never let School interfere with your Education.” Mahatma Gandhi believed that giving more importance, value and relevance to practical skills, and applying traditional knowledge to solving day-to-day problems were essential for the development of rural India. Gandhi’s thoughts live on in Barefoot College.

Valuing Traditional Knowledge and Skills

Second, Barefoot College gives priority to the ideas, thoughts and wishes of the rural poor. The college respects and emphasises the importance of traditional knowledge, skills and practical wisdom. It values keeping the oral tradition alive from parents to children. This type of education is deeply rooted in the long experience of facing the challenges of living in particular circumstances and can never be replaced. The focus of the college is to make the young men, women and children living in the villages aware of this precious resource so that eventually they will stay in their villages and not migrate to cities to end up living in a slum.

This is a major reason why the college places no importance on urban experts with paper degrees and qualifications who want to participate in it. In fact, people may be disqualified if they have too many paper qualifications. Sadly, decades of exposure and experience in rural India has taught us that most people with high-level paper qualifications are unfit (and misfits) when it comes to living and working in remote rural areas. They do not have the patience, humility, listening skills, open minds, tolerance or capacity to show respect for traditional knowledge and skills.

Learning for Self-Reliance

Third, Barefoot College enhances the self-confidence and competence of the poorest of the poor by providing them access to learning

that enhances their ability to serve their own community, thus making them more confidently self-reliant. Over the last 40 years, thousands of unemployed and unemployable rural poor have been selected and trained as barefoot educators and technologists. The criteria for selection are simple. We select only those village youth—both men and women—who are illiterate, semi-literate or barely literate and who have no hope of getting the lowest government job. They have been trained as barefoot educators, doctors, teachers, engineers, architects, designers, communicators, hand pump mechanics and accountants. They have demonstrated that “experts” from the urban areas with paper qualifications are not really required to make villages self-sufficient and sustainable, because these trained barefoot experts can do the work themselves.

Dissemination

Fourth, Barefoot College is committed to the dissemination of knowledge, skills and technology to the rural poor so that they find opportunities of livelihood within their own rural community. Several educational programmes and vocational training outside the formal educational system are provided to the rural poor, especially women and youth. An important programme of technology dissemination is that of solar energy.

Barefoot Philosophy

In keeping with the barefoot philosophy, each training programme operates independently, defining its own curriculum but keeping a few non-negotiable tenets at the core of their operations, viz. equality, austerity and collective decision-making. (i) *Equality*: All people in the college are equal regardless of gender, caste, ethnicity, age and schooling. In practical terms, this means that the college has no hierarchy. The founder and director of the college have the same say and status as the new barefoot accountant who has just joined it, and the physically challenged barefoot operator who answers the phone. (ii) *Austerity*: Living conditions for everyone are simple and down to earth (literally!). Everyone sits, eats, and works on the floor. Everyone in the college receives a living wage, not a market wage. No one can receive a salary of over Rs.4000 a month. Living conditions focus on basic needs and are designed to minimise waste. (iii) *Collective decision-making*:

Decisions are made collectively, not by individuals in isolation. For example, the salary each person receives is decided by everyone in the organisation; the process is based on a point system in which each person evaluates herself/himself and everyone else according to several criteria.

ACTIVITIES OF BAREFOOT COLLEGE

In pursuit of its ideology and philosophy, Barefoot College has been engaged in several kinds of activities of rural development. They can be broadly categorised into: (i) empowerment of rural women, (ii) dissemination of solar technology, (iii) community services of education, health and drinking water, (iv) economic programmes, (v) development of the physically challenged, and (vi) knowledge dissemination through development of rural communication and library service.

1. Empowering Rural Women

An important focus of the programmes of Barefoot College is for the empowerment of rural women. Only in the late 1980s did Barefoot College begin to recognise the potential of illiterate and semi-literate women to succeed in non-traditional areas. As we have implemented this approach over the last 25 years, the women we have worked with have shown an awesome capacity and confidence to provide services to their communities and to destroy stereotyped images and roles in the process.

Today many women in non-traditional roles are serving their own communities. Barefoot women are working as night school teachers, hand-pump mechanics, solar engineers, water engineers, architects, masons and fabricators of solar cookers. Illiteracy has never been considered a barrier to women developing themselves as barefoot professionals. Illiterate women are handling computers and training unemployed youth in feeding technical, health, and literacy data of our organisation. Some programmes cover areas such as water and education, where women have traditionally been very active. But their role in spreading solar technology is totally new for them, although it does build on their traditional responsibility of maintaining supply of kerosene for lighting and fuel for cooking.

It is remarkable that for the first time sophisticated solar technology has been demystified, and simple village women have demonstrated how effectively they can manage and control it to improve their quality of life. They now have the opportunity to develop their competence and confidence to handle technology, providing services to their own community that give them a new level of acceptance and the respect they deserve.

For the past several years, Barefoot College has been training semi-literate and illiterate rural women to assemble, install, repair and maintain solar photovoltaic systems. Once selected by their village to undergo training in solar technology for six months at Barefoot College, the women come to Tilonia and acquire the competence and confidence to fabricate, install, repair and maintain sophisticated solar energy units. They then return to their communities to install solar systems in each house in the village, thus establishing their credibility in the eyes of each family that pays a monthly contribution to them for repairing and maintaining the units.

What is innovative is involving the whole community in selecting semi-literate women as engineers to provide a vital and non-traditional technical service in a field that is not generally associated with rural women. It also requires them to develop systematic leadership skills, persuading the community to pay a monthly contribution for the repair and maintenance of the solar systems they have installed in each house in their own village. Where this system was first adopted, the household contributions have been coming in regularly.

Beyond the shores of India, women of several developing countries have been empowered as per the barefoot model. The demystified and decentralised barefoot approach of solar electrifying villages primarily in the developing countries of the southern hemisphere would not have been possible without PARTNERSHIPS. Under a unique scheme of the Government of India providing financial support called India Technical Economic Cooperation (TTEC), over 200 illiterate grandmothers from nearly 30 less developed countries (LDCs) have been trained at the Barefoot College. The hardware (solar equipment) has been provided under a global agreement with the Global Environment Facility (GEF) of the Small Grants

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Programme of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) covering Uganda, Niger, Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Kenya.

Several ordinary women of these countries have been enabled to assume the role of solar energy technicians. Never in the history of Afghanistan has an illiterate woman left her house, her village, and her country for six months to train as a solar engineer in India; but that is exactly what the 26-year-old Gul Zaman from the village of Katasang in Daikundi province of Afghanistan did in 2005. She and her 30-year-old husband Mohammed Jan came to Tilonia for six months. They have a small plot of land and have to feed 10 people, and work as day labourers for over 200 days each year. Together the couple gently created history by solar electrifying their own village of some 50 houses, and the units have continued functioning since September 2005.

Electrifying houses provides additional income and a new level of confidence and leadership to the women who train in Tilonia as solar engineers and then serve as role models for young women in their villages. It also opens up other income generating opportunities for all women, who can then use their evening hours to manufacture handicrafts and other goods for sale.

Women's Groups

In order to facilitate the programme of empowerment, women groups have been formed in the villages. In 2010-11 Barefoot College had a network of 68 rural women's groups from an equal number of villages forming a total membership of 3000 women. The women members meet every month in their respective villages. Decisions taken at the monthly meetings at the village and field-centre levels provide the basis to visualise, plan, implement and evaluate community-managed initiatives at the level of Barefoot College.

In addition to the monthly meetings, training sessions, workshops and conferences are organised by the women groups. Issues discussed in

such events include: women's legal literacy, right to information, transparency of ward and *gram sabhas*, social audit, drought and water, food grain and fodder, employment and employment guarantee act, workers' rights and minimum wages, women's rights and atrocities on women, women's health, public distribution system, developmental schemes of the government, communal harmony, and democracy and electoral process.

2. Dissemination of Solar Technology

A notable activity of Barefoot College is dissemination of the technology in solar energy. The Barefoot College's Solar Energy Unit has a team of 15 master trainer barefoot solar engineers (BSEs) and 10 additional BSEs for imparting training in solar energy. The team includes women also. This critical 25 member team has been responsible for training rural women from the LDCs of Asia, Africa and Latin America as women barefoot solar engineers (WBSEs). During 2010-11 the team has trained 60 WBSEs from Himachal Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir within the country as well as from the other countries of Kenya, Zambia, Namibia, Sierra Leone, Chad, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Jordan, Palestine, Guatemala and Congo.

It may also be mentioned that Barefoot College is the only fully solar-electrified college based in a village in India. Starting in 1989, barefoot solar engineers installed a total of 40 kilowatts of solar panels and 5 battery banks, each containing 136 deep-cycle batteries. The solar components (inverters, charge controllers, battery boxes and stands) were all fabricated in the college itself.

Solar Cookers

Solar cookers are extensively used by Barefoot College. At present the college maintains 18 solar cookers in its various units. Women are specially trained in setting up and maintaining solar cookers. The Women's Barefoot Solar Cooker Engineers' Association (WBSCCEA) in Tilonia promotes this activity. Several activities related to solar cooker are undertaken by the association. The activities of the WBSCCEA during 2010-11 included meetings

for dissemination of knowledge about solar cooker among rural women, conducting exhibition of solar cooker, and construction and repair of solar cooker.

3. Community Services

Barefoot College has been providing several community services in the villages around. The main community services undertaken by the college are for education, health and drinking water. The educational services of Barefoot College have been outside the formal system. The main programmes under this activity have been pre-school education and night schools for the rural poor.

Pre-School Education

Since 1975 Barefoot College has been co-ordinating rural *balwadis* or crèches, which are pre-school education centres, for very young children of the age-group of 1-5 years. They prepare the young children for learning readiness while supplementary nutrition in the form of a balanced meal including milk is also provided. Parents of the children contribute towards this provision by helping out giving their time and energy.

Children attending the *balwadis* are also provided health check-up and as part of it, coloured arm bands are worn by the children. Red colour arm band indicates severe malnourishment and yellow, marginally above malnourishment, while green stands for normal physical growth of the child. Barefoot College presently co-ordinates 71 pre-school education centres in Jaipur, Ajmer and Barmer districts of Rajasthan. A total of 855 boys and 1088 girls were enrolled in these centres during the year 2010-11. There were 9 boys and 21 girls who were with red bands in the category of the severely malnourished. Children with yellow bands (marginally above malnourishment) accounted for 68 boys and 110 girls. The programme of *balwadi* is expected to get the children enrolled for further education. A total of 563 children (243 boys and 320 girls), after attending the pre-school education centre, entered the formal educational mainstream in the government primary school during the year 2010-11.

Night School

A non-formal education programme conducted by Barefoot College for children outside the formal system is that of night schools. During the year 2010-11, Barefoot College has been co-ordinating 120 night schools in four states in India - Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarhand and Rajasthan. More than 1000 boys and 2000 girls attend these night schools. Teachers of night schools are provided special training. Regular training programmes are organised for them during the year. Teaching-learning materials are distributed to teachers and learners. The barefoot doctors of the college conduct health check-up of night school children and treat minor ailments like diarrhoea, scabies, fever and cold.

There are interesting cases of night schools and teachers. One such case is that of Lalaram and the night schools run by him. Lalaram is a resident of village Paner in the district of Ajmer and has been a night school teacher for the past 10 years. In his night school there were 18 children belonging to the Kalbelias, a nomadic community in the year 2010-11. Considering the fact that this community has had no tradition of schooling, it has been a commendable effort on the part of Lalaram in convincing the parents of the children to change their attitude in favour of education of their children and send the children to his night school. Children of this community have been traditionally used to the practice of folk music and dance. Barefoot College's community radio has made its contribution in encouraging and nurturing the inherent cultural talents of these children.

Another interesting case is that of the night school for children of sex-workers. This was again at the initiative of Lalaram. The school for this group of children was set up in the village Saityon-ki-dhani in the district of Ajmer. Children who have had to face the stigma in other villages could now attend the night school and many of them have joined the formal mainstream education after attending the night school. No teacher was prepared to go to this small hamlet for teaching its children. Lalaram arrived as the teacher in this community.

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Community Health

An important programme of the Barefoot College is that of community health. The college has an outpatient dispensary. The total number of patients who visited the dispensary in the year 2010-11 was 2434. Barefoot College runs a pathological laboratory which does blood and other tests related to different kinds of diseases. Several activities are carried out under community health. The activity of "mother and child welfare" attends to the care of expectant mothers and delivery cases. "Family welfare" programme provides services of sterilisation and other forms of contraceptives. Another activity is the treatment of tuberculosis patients. Immunisation of children is yet another health activity of Barefoot College. Camps for check up of general health, and eye and dental care are regularly organised in pre-school centres, night schools and in other locations in different villages.

Drinking Water

One of the basic needs of the rural population is safe drinking water. Barefoot College has been involved in this service to the rural poor. The main activities undertaken in this regard are rain water harvesting (RWH) and knowledge dissemination in matters related to safe drinking water in rural areas.

The main activity in RWH is construction of water tanks to collect and store water from rooftops. During the year 2010-11 Barefoot College was able to construct and complete 19 RWH tanks in the night school buildings, pre-school education centres and training cum community centres. The tanks have a total capacity of collecting 337000 litres of rain water from roof tops annually. The tanks have been constructed in the districts of Ajmer, Jaipur and Barmer in Rajasthan and Champawat in Uttarhand. More than 4100 persons in 19 villages are able to access drinking water from the tanks. In addition, the tanks have generated employment opportunities and provided gainful wages to 371 persons.

Village surveys for RWH tanks have been conducted in field centres/ sub-centres of Barefoot College in Rajasthan. Meetings, workshops

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and training camps on drinking water, transparency and social audit have been organised at the village, decentralised field-centre and Tilonia levels. Altogether 160 meetings and 55 workshops as well as trainings camps were organised during the year 2010-11. More than 5000 men and women participated in these events during the year.

As part of knowledge dissemination in the availability of potable water, a web-based water portal, *Nee Jal* has been collecting data on existing water resources in Sitora (Ajmer district) and Dudu (Jaipur district) blocks in Rajasthan. Data collected from these two blocks pertain to 1000 drinking water sources in 200 villages. The water sources include 736 hand pumps, 88 wells and 176 tanks. Also, a team of barefoot chemists regularly collect water samples from existing water sources for testing.

4. Economic Programmes

Barefoot College has been involved in activities directed to livelihood of the rural poor. They include capacity building for employment and schemes of employment generation. Important among them are the mechanical fabrication workshop, the craft section for production and vocational training, and the *hatheli* organisation of the rural artisans.

Mechanical Fabrication Workshop

Barefoot College established its mechanical fabrication workshop in 1990. Its main objective is to use scrap iron for fabricating items of hardware for the needs of the organisation's own building as well as those of the rural communities, and thereby replace wood for construction purposes. The other important objective of this initiative is to promote traditional knowledge of black smithy into metal-craft. The mechanical fabrication workshop therefore fabricates iron girders, gates, trolleys, windows, doors and other hardware items for meeting the needs of Barefoot College as well as the villagers.

During year 2010–11 the workshop fabricated 15 doors, 4 tables, 42 stools, 3675 solar panel stands, 41 pot stands and 4 solar water heaters.

During the same year the workshop trained six barefoot engineers who could fabricate solar water heaters. The annual income generated by the workshop during 2010-11 has been Rs.1272800.

Craft Section

The Barefoot College has a craft section engaged in production and sale of craft items. The design, colour-combination as well as the base fabric used in the production of the craft items have been designed by friends and well-wishers of Tilonia for over 30 years. New designs have been added by others who have voluntarily suggested them. Another activity of the craft section of Barefoot College is vocational training. During year 2010-11 training in sewing skills was organised for girls attending night schools. The programme was organised in eight night schools and 83 girls benefited from the programme.

Hatheli Sansthan

Hatheli is an organisation formed by the craft section of Barefoot College for promoting production and sale of craft items. It is a registered society of artisans. In 2010-11 there were 176 artisans working with *Hatheli*, of whom as many as 164 were women. The main crafts they have been engaged in are patchwork, sewing, block printing, dyeing, embroidery, quilt making, leather craft, wooden toy making and *bell totas* (coloured fabric birds with a small metal bell).

Hatheli exports as well as sells within the country craft items produced at Barefoot College. During the year 2010-11 items worth Rs.1412095 were exported. Within the country the craft items are sold mainly through agency clientele, the craft shop of the college and exhibitions organised in different parts of the country. During 2010-11 exhibitions were organised in six locations: Bhim in Rajasthan, Delhi, Mumbai, Pushkar (Rajasthan), Tuljapur (Maharashtra) and Jaipur (Rajasthan). Craft items worth Rs.476077 were sold at these exhibitions. The craft shop accounted for the sale amount of Rs.1408160. In 2010-11 a total amount of Rs.7840423 was realised from the sale of craft items through the different outlets.

5. Development of the Physically Challenged

Barefoot College in its own way has been attending to the development of the physically challenged persons in the rural areas. Presently it has three vocational programmes: carpentry workshop, toys out of waste and sanitary napkin making.

Carpentry Workshop

A group of six rural youth consisting of physically challenged persons have been involved in a process of wood craft in order to make science toys for night schools and other wooden items. This is also an informal training programme of residential nature for these youth. They make wooden toys, windows, doors, tables, racks, chairs, cabinets, lockers, and folding chairs and tables for the night schools. As part of the training process, the youth have made science toys used in 120 night schools and 71 crèches during the year 2010-11.

Toys out of Waste

Barefoot College has set up the *kabad-se-jugad* unit which trains physically challenged youth in making toys out of waste. A team of six physically challenged persons are presently engaged in it. The youth are trained in making different types of caps out of used newspaper, science toys out of waste ballpoint pen refills, battery cells, bulbs and toothpaste tubes. The youth also make exercise notebooks, candles, chalk and blackboards. The *kabad-se-jugad* unit also organises one-day training programmes in making toys out of recycled waste at night schools, crèches, training camps, workshops and meetings.

Sanitary Napkin Making

A new programme has been introduced in Barefoot College with the setting up of a unit for making sanitary napkins in the year 2010-11. It is also a programme for the physically challenged. Seven physically challenged women are involved in making the sanitary napkins.

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6. Knowledge Dissemination

Barefoot College has been using the traditional and modern media of communication in its various programmes of dissemination. The traditional medium of puppetry has been in use since 1984. The college also encourages the use of puppetry by the rural population, and gives training in the production and use of puppets. During the year 2010-11, the team at Barefoot College trained 71 barefoot communicators in puppet making and puppetry, as well as in devising plays.

The audio-visual unit of Barefoot College documents all activities of the college and organises video-screenings in night schools and villages. During 2010-11 the unit screened films in villages reaching out to a total audience of 9645 persons including 2429 men and 7216 women. In the same year the unit digitally recorded 1000 hours of community managed activities taken up by Barefoot College as well as the public events organised.

Community Radio

Barefoot College works in an area of 500 square kilometres, and in over 110 villages and hamlets of Sitora block of Ajmer in Rajasthan. In order to reach the people of this area a community radio has been established by Barefoot College. The community radio started functioning in 2010 and has an out-reach of 30 villages wherein Barefoot College's night schools are located and other community-managed activities undertaken. During 2010-11, the community radio has been able to cover training camps, public events, fairs, *padayatras* and other rallies, demonstrations, and street plays and puppet shows. Interviews with all the important and eminent visitors at Barefoot College from both within India and abroad have been broadcasted on community radio.

Library Service

Popularising reading habit among the rural population is another service provided by Barefoot College in the rural areas. The college has a library at its campus at Tilonia. A large number of novels and books have been donated by friends of Barefoot College to its library. At the last count,

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the number of books in the library was 30000. The library has 400 reader-members from the surrounding villages. In addition, two rural library-cum-reading rooms have been established in the villages of Nalu and Koldi; they have a collective membership of 250 persons and contain 5000 books.

An innovation in library service was introduced during year 2010-11 with the starting of a mobile library. It has been visiting villages and distributing books to popularise reading habit amongst children as well as adult members of the rural community. In the inaugural year it has distributed a total of 9000 books to night school children, their teachers and rural youth.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

What is pioneering and innovative about the barefoot approach is the emphasis and respect it gives to applying the knowledge, skills, and practical wisdom of the rural poor, which may be the only way to make communities self-reliant and sustainable. With roots in the village community and a deep-rooted respect for the proper and wise use of water, air, earth and the sun, barefoot educators have set an example of how NOT to waste or overexploit nature resources. They are a living testimony to Mahatma Gandhi's famous saying: "The world has enough for every man's need but not for one man's greed." The approach has had considerable impact in changing the mindset of urban "experts" and influencing their attitudes toward the idea of leaving the poor to identify and solve their own problems. Development with dignity means development with less dependence on urban skills and more self-respect. The barefoot approach has worked. The results are there for everyone to see and feel.

Promoting a Different Vision of Development

The first challenge of Barefoot College has been to convince people that a different vision of development is possible. Throughout its brief lifetime, the college has worked hard to convince urban people that semi-literate men and women from any village in India—indeed, any remote village in the world—can competently provide professional services to their own communities. While the results of the college's work speak for themselves,

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this task continues to be a daunting one since it involves changing long-held stereotypes, mindsets and attitudes towards the poor. Still, a great many people, including those who hold important positions, have learned about its activities and have travelled to Tilonia to witness its work first-hand. We make progress with each new person who comes to the campus, as he/she absorbs the spirit of the approach and is inspired to help disseminate and expand it within his/her own spheres of influence.

Dealing with Success

The second challenge has been dealing with success. The college has demonstrated that semi-literate rural women can solar-electrify remote villages and look after solar units more competently than paper-qualified solar engineers. In so doing, it has turned established perceptions upside down, and debunked the basic assumption that formal education is required for development work. Unfortunately, in challenging established thinking on development, the college has generated hostility and jealousy, and has made many enemies.

Those most hostile to the barefoot approach are people who have invested a great deal in acquiring an education through the official system and then applying that misguided "expertise." The very idea of semi-literate women being able to manage and control initiatives at the village level undermines those hard-earned credentials and credibility, and even threatens the existence of their jobs. Indeed, one result of the barefoot approach in India, where it is most widely replicated, has been the replacement of cost-intensive initiatives and jobs with low-cost and intensive initiatives, providing gainful employment within the villages.

Learning from Failure

The third major challenge has been to learn from successful failures. Taking risks, trying new ideas, failing and trying again are parts of a process that is respected in Barefoot College because we recognise that we should learn as much from failure as from success. But the formal education system has no room for failure. In that system, failure is considered a matter for

shame and regret. Barefoot College gives everyone involved the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. Any organisation worth its salt has to go through crises. Crises can either break the organisation into little splinters or eventually make it stronger. In the early 1980s, as decision-making power within the college gradually shifted from the urban professionals to the rural youth, many of the former left to join other organisations or opted back into the system. That was a crisis that led to uncertainty and insecurity. But the college learned two important lessons that have since guided and influenced future decisions.

1. *Do not depend on urban professionals because they will not stay there all their lives.* In a world dominated by materialism, they may be tempted to use the college as a stepping-stone to secure better-paying jobs. The answer has been to develop the capacity, confidence, and competence of the rural poor to provide their own services. After all, they have the knowledge and the skills that have stood the test of generations before the urban-trained doctor, teacher, and engineer turned up on the scene. Why not, as a policy, move in that direction? That is what we have done and it has been a key to our success.

2. *You do your best work when you are insecure.* When your back is against the wall and you have nowhere to run and no one to turn to, you have no choice but to face the consequences. When a crisis arises and could possibly lead to violence, urban professionals normally do not have the staying power. Because they have somewhere to run to, they are not prepared to see the crisis through.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, Barefoot College is a microcosm of a more just and creative world. Special emphasis is placed on giving the physically and mentally challenged the same opportunities to work and belong to society as the physically and mentally able. People who need medication but cannot afford to pay the market price are charged 10 per cent of that price by the health centre; if they are really struggling they are given the medication free of charge. Waste paper from offices is recycled to make bags, pencil holders,

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toys of the Japanese art of origami and teaching aids—which are in turn supplied to local night schools. Office equipment, fans and lights are powered by solar panels on the roofs of office buildings; living quarters are similarly supplied with solar energy. Drinking water and sanitation needs are met by a combination of rooftop RWH and local hand pumps; and the local environment is strengthened by a network of troughs that harvest rainwater and feed it into a large open well used to recharge the water table. Discarded intravenous drip bottles and tubes are disinfected and used to irrigate plants on the campus in this semi-desert area.

Barefoot College has been putting into practice an idea first espoused by Mahatma Gandhi: that the resources required to develop poor communities lie within the bounds of those communities. Human, technical and financial resources need not come from outside in order for a community to bring about fundamental change and improve its quality of life. Too often, community resources are neglected, looked down upon, and considered inferior just because they have not conformed to the requirements of the formal educational system.

However, just as important, the college has demonstrated to the villagers themselves that any one of them, man or woman, with little or no educational qualifications, can learn to provide basic services to their own community. To be able to change the mindset of poor rural people, who had been made to feel that they could not do it themselves, is an enormous contribution. Less developed countries would benefit immensely from adopting this barefoot approach. It can eventually transform the outlook not only of development officials, but, most importantly, of the rural poor themselves, instilling in them a “can do” attitude to improving their own lives, and replacing the apathy and hopelessness they may feel after so many years of encounter against an irresponsible system that does not respect their abilities. “*First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, and then you win*”—Mahatma Gandhi.