

## Barefoot College: Its Experience

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My family saw to it that I received a very expensive education. I went to a very expensive public school called the Dune School. I also went to a college, St. Stephen's College. I was all set to become a doctor or ambassador or minister or some such thing. Then I decided to go to a village for the first time, in 1965. It changed my life because it was the first time I ever saw poverty face to face.

The education I got was very exclusive, very arrogant—just not in touch with reality. I told my mother one day: "I'd like to go to a village, and I'd like to dig wells, go 100 feet below the ground to try to find water." That was in 1967. My mother was horrified; she wouldn't speak to me for six months. She said, "What will the family say? You get the best education in the world and you go dig wells for five years."

But that is when my education started: living with very poor people with absolutely no resources at all. That is where the idea of the Barefoot College started—with the tremendous knowledge and skills and wisdom of very ordinary people living on less than 50 cents a day. I have tremendous respect for these people.

The Barefoot College is the only college in India for the poor. It was built by the poor and only for the poor. What was the first thing that the Barefoot College reflected of their lifestyle and work style? What the poor said was, "Just don't get anyone with degrees and qualifications into the college." They are the biggest threat to development today. As Mark Twain said, "Never let school interfere with your education."

So I listened to them and my learning process started then. I got only people who were dropouts, cop-outs and wash-outs from villages, very remote, in the middle of nowhere. We built the college together. We changed the whole concept of what is an expert. An expert for us is an ordinary man from another town—someone who has a different vision, someone who is practical, someone who is down to earth.

We had a water diviner in our place. I laughed at this man who said, "You hold the stick." So I held the stick and I felt very stupid. He said, "Walk," and I walked. He put his hand on my shoulder. I couldn't stand up like this. He said, "Bring it down, my child." I couldn't bring it down. He said, "Never laugh at things you don't know."

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So after 34 years I have put in 1,500 hand pumps—which today I think is not the right solution—but in any case, in every site I got the water diviner. Lo and behold, 99 percent of the time he was better than my geophysicist. Why is that? What has he got that we don't know already? We have traditional midwives today, delivering babies in villages. Regrettably, half of our members of Parliament are still alive today because of them. So they have knowledge and skills today that cannot be laughed at or looked down upon.

The Barefoot College is the only college that collects water from the roofs. It is also the only college which is fully solar-electrified. There are 45 kilowatts of panels on the roof: for the next 25 years we will have no problems with power. All my computers, my telephone exchange, my electronic mail, my photocopy machine—they all work from solar power. The beauty is that this was installed by someone who has only an 8th Standard Pass from a rural village. He fabricated it, he installed it, and he has been repairing and maintaining it since 1990.

If only we listened to people more! If only we listened to what they have to say, if only we had the patience to hear them! All the problems in the rural areas would be solved, I'll tell you. This is what the Barefoot College has demonstrated: that you really don't need a paper-qualified doctor, teacher or engineer. You have it all in the village. If only we had the capacity to learn how to communicate, all of our problems would be solved. So what did we learn from the Barefoot College? We have a network of Barefoot Colleges all over India, 20 Barefoot Colleges all over India. I think we serve in basic minimum needs over a million people in India. So what did we learn?

First, never let an expert come into your organization. We don't allow anyone from the World Bank, we don't allow any UN types to come into the organization. Because what do they have that you don't know already? What do they have apart from the money? They don't have the humility; they don't have the patience; they are just so arrogant it is unbelievable. So we don't allow any of them. That is one of the successes of the Barefoot College.

Second, it is very Gandhian. We live, eat, work on the floor. No one comes to the Barefoot College for the money. They only come for the challenge and for the job satisfaction. No one in the Barefoot College can get more than \$100 a month, ever. Not even me. They come for the work, the challenge, and the interaction with communities today.

So what is our concept of happiness? If you can get two square meals a day to a person who is hungry, that is his concept of happiness. If you can arrange that women walk less than two kilometres a day for drinking water, and get water access right there, that is their concept of

happiness—for them, not for you and me—because it is so simple. We take everything for granted. But for them it is. If we can make sure that the babies survive, that is their concept of happiness.

How do you make that happen, how do you facilitate that? How do you make sure that it is possible? How do you make happiness into a partnership? How do you make sure that the community lives with you, and you live and work and learn—and unlearn—together? This is the concept of happiness to me.

So what do we do in the Barefoot College? We decentralize. We decentralize right down to the household level. And where it is possible to control, manage and own any processes at the village level, I think we are moving towards a concept of happiness, where there is a partnership involved. That is the first: decentralize.

The second is demystify. How do you demystify the most sophisticated of technologies for semi-literate, illiterate men and women? Today, all along the Himalayas from Ladakh to Sikkim, 300 villages have been solar-electrified by people who are all semi-literate or illiterate, but who are all staying in the village, with roots in the village. And, incidentally, there happens to be a solar engineer who is illiterate but still looks after repairs. So decentralizing and demystifying, I think is the key to happiness, as far as the villages are concerned. Mahatma Gandhi was once asked, “What do you think of western civilization?” He thought for a moment, and said, “It’s a good idea.”

We have traditional societies in India, which are so old, so respected, and we have turned our backs to them. It is time to revive them and turn to those people who have the knowledge and skills to be able to bring development with self-respect, to bring development with dignity. I think this is the way forward.

We have today put a challenge to the global community. We said in six months, you give us any dropout, cop-out, wash-out man or woman, from any village in India, or in the world, and we will make him or her into a barefoot solar engineer. We have done it in Ethiopia, we have done it in Sierra Leone, we have done it in Afghanistan, and we hope to do it in Bhutan one day. It is possible for any person.

To sum up: Gandhi said, “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you...and then you win.”

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