

Transforming Lives in India

Sanjit Roy got his nickname, Bunker, growing up in India's West Bengal province. It was the custom there for siblings to be given rhyming names, and his brother's name was Shanker, so he became Bunker. His family made sure that Bunker attended the finest schools in India -- schools where the curriculum prepared students for a prestigious vocation and a life of privilege. A talented athlete, he was the Indian national squash champion for three years. His family proudly looked forward to his brilliant, if conventional, career in medicine, government, or foreign service. Later, he described his education as "the most snobbish, exclusive education any Indian could have had the misfortune to have."

When he was 20 years old, Bunker Roy departed for a trip that changed his life -- and it's no exaggeration to say that it transformed the lives of legions of his countrymen and women, as well as countless people in far-flung corners of Africa and Asia. Roy had decided he wanted to see what life in a small village was like, and so he departed for India's Bihar province.

It was 1965, and Bihar was enduring a terrible famine; Roy witnessed starvation and suffering that so horrified him that he decided to dedicate his life to helping the poor. It was a major departure from the vocation that was expected of him; until then, everyone including Roy assumed he would pursue a conventional course. His mother was so upset by his decision that she refused to speak to him for two years.

But Roy was determined to try to improve lives of the poor. In India, many people lived in remote villages that had never installed paved



roads, sewers, plumbing, electrical systems, or telephones. Transportation and communication were difficult, and villagers got their food from nearby farms. Roy knew that reliable access to water was a vital issue for these poor villagers.

Water was necessary for drinking and bathing, but it was often contaminated, which meant that it could carry diseases. Parts of India were subject to drought -- long periods of no rainfall. Without water, crops failed, and the transportation system was too primitive and the people too poor to import food. In times of drought, there was not enough water for crops, animals, or people. Drought transformed the landscape into a picture of famine and death.

Roy knew the importance of water, and he told his mother he wanted to spend five years digging

wells and installing pumps in poor villages. As it turned out, he did much more. One of his first projects was a survey of areas within India that were subject to drought. He met others who were engaged in similar efforts to help the poor. In 1969, he began to work with a missionary group, and through it he gained valuable experience in working with diverse communities. It was there too that he met a man named Rambaba.

Rambaba was a member of India's lowest caste. For centuries, Indian society was divided at birth into social classes, or rankings, called castes. The higher castes automatically had access to excellent education and jobs that enabled them to live privileged lives. The lower castes had fewer opportunities and were desperately poor. The lowest caste had the dirtiest, lowest-paying jobs, and it was customary for the other castes to shun them.

Like many in the lowest caste, Rambaba did not believe that people deserved to be treated in this way. His beliefs represented a major departure from those of most Indians. Rambaba was impressed by Roy's interest in clean water for the poor. Roy was impressed by Rambaba's belief in the dignity of all people, regardless of caste. In 1971, Rambaba invited Roy to come to the village of Tilonia, in the Indian province of Rajasthan, to work on a reliable, clean water supply for the people there.

Roy's first project there was, as he had envisioned, a well. But when he saw the great needs of the villagers, he joined forces with groups of people who also wanted to help. Together they set up an organization in Tilonia called the Social Work and Research Centre. Their goal was to address rural poverty by combining modern technical know-how with the villagers' age-old customs and skills. Among the problems they tackled were health and sanitation, electricity and power, unemployment, sustainment of the ecosystem, and education for women.

In time, this organization came to be known as Barefoot College. The name was inspired

by a program in China that trained healthcare technicians in remote villages so they could minister to their neighbors. It was a perfect name for Roy's organization, which operated on a similar premise of training villagers to help other villagers. And it reflected the reality of the villagers' lives: most had no shoes.

Barefoot College soon extended its curriculum beyond water and began to develop programs that trained people as technicians in other fields. These technicians specialized in installing and maintaining solar-powered electrical devices to produce light, hot water, power, and heat for cooking. The College curriculum also included other kinds of vocational training and general education. Today, it offers a wide range of vocational training programs that can help transform the lives not just of the trainees, but also of entire villages.

Since 1989, the Barefoot College curriculum has focused on harnessing the energy of the sun to transform the lives of the rural poor, village by village. Solar lighting has been one of the college's priorities. When the people of a remote village express interest in solar electrification, the college helps them form a committee. The committee meets with the households that will participate and all -- even the poorest -- must pay a small fee to join. This gives them a feeling of ownership in the project and also pays for materials needed for the village's solar installations.

The committee selects one or more members of the community to travel to the college for six months of vocational training to become solar technicians. The technical education they receive is highly unconventional, as most of the adult students cannot read. Nor do they all speak the same language. India's population speaks many different languages, and in recent years, Barefoot students have come from other countries, bringing still more languages to campus. But Barefoot College teachers have found a way to deliver vocational instruction through a combination of sign language and demonstration. For some classes, puppets are used.

When the students return to their villages, they install the necessary equipment and have a new vocation as solar technicians. Imagine the delight of the villagers who can turn on their solar-powered lights at night and instantly transform the darkness! What a departure from their customary reliance on smoky, smelly kerosene stoves and wood fires that require hours of back-breaking labor to find scarce wood! And too, imagine the transformation of the village's air quality!

Since 2000, the college has added other programs to its solar curriculum, which focus on solar cookers, solar water heaters, and solar desalinization systems. (Desalinization is the process of removing salt from water, which makes it drinkable.) And this is just the beginning of the college's efforts to transform the lives of the rural poor. Because clean water is a vital but often scarce commodity, Barefoot College has come up with many unconventional solutions to the problem. Besides training village technicians to install wells, water pumps, and solar-powered desalinization equipment, it has also taught them to use rainwater harvesting tanks, dams, and ponds. These preserve precious rainwater when it falls.

Just about every subject in the Barefoot curriculum serves a dual purpose, helping entire villages achieve a modern lifestyle and helping individuals to earn a living. Electrification, access to clean water, and other programs transform entire villages; the people who train as technicians and return to their villages to install and maintain equipment earn much-needed income.

Enabling people to work and earn income in their home villages addresses yet another major problem in India. For decades, poor villagers who could not find work at home departed for the cities. There, instead of finding work, they joined thousands of poor people living in desperate poverty. Barefoot College's village improvements provide work opportunities that enable people to stay at home and earn extra income. To create more opportunities for villagers to earn a living

at home, Barefoot College has created many other programs that train health care workers, teachers, craftspeople, communicators, computer technicians, and many more vocations.

One thing that has set Barefoot College apart is its great respect for the people it serves. Roy and others involved in Barefoot College had been profoundly influenced by Mohandas Gandhi, the great leader of the movement for civil rights and freedom for India in the first half of the twentieth century. Gandhi taught that all people are worthy of respect, regardless of social caste or sex. (Customarily, in India, women did not have equal rights with men.) He taught that the poor should be partners in efforts to lift themselves out of poverty and transform India into a modern country. He did not want them to simply receive help from outsiders who might then be tempted to exploit them. He believed that traditional wisdom could be tapped to improve the lives of the poor just as much as modern technology.

Roy and his colleagues built on Gandhi's philosophy in setting up Barefoot College. Rambaba developed five non-negotiable values: equality, collective decision making, decentralization, self-reliance, and austerity. At Barefoot College, everyone is equally important and everyone deserves respect, regardless of caste, sex, physical disability, or background.

In a departure from the traditional customs of the Indian upper classes, everyone eats meals together sitting on the floor. No one earns more than \$150 per month. There is no one person or group that makes all the decisions for the school. Instead, decisions are made collectively, which, besides being fair, has generated some great brainstorming because all participants can express their thoughts.

Barefoot College was first installed in a group of buildings that dates to the days when Great Britain ruled India. These buildings were originally used as a hospital for people with tuberculosis, but they were abandoned long ago. Barefoot College transformed them to suit the needs of

its varied curriculum. In the updated campus, students could get vocational training to be solar engineering technicians and study other curriculum offerings such as craft making, equipment shipping, and ironworks.

These original buildings are now known as Barefoot College's Old Campus, because in the 1980s, a new set of buildings was constructed. In keeping with the college's custom of self-reliance, the New Campus was built entirely by illiterate local villagers, who combined their modern solar training with traditional building methods. Working without engineers or blueprints was unconventional, but it resulted in a campus that is completely powered by non-polluting solar installations.

The unconventional solar installations provide enough power for light, computers, a healthcare center, a craft shop, a phone booth, and other amenities. The New Campus buildings also blend modern technology with time-honored customs. For example, they are waterproofed according to a formula that has been passed down through generations of rural Indian women.

While Barefoot College honors past generations, it shows equal concern for future generations. A variety of programs serve children aged six months to 14 years. The littlest -- ages six months to five years -- go to day-care centers called "balwadis" so their parents can work and they can participate in cultural activities. When they graduate from the balwadi, children may attend school, but because most work during the day tending animals and doing other jobs, the college developed Night Schools for them. It is not a

conventional or customary approach to educating children, but it is well suited to those who live in poor villages. Since they began, more than 75,000 children have attended Barefoot College Night Schools.

One of the college's principles is that students don't need to be literate in order to get vocational training. Its technical programs have shown that hands-on, practical education gives immediate benefits to the students and their fellow villagers. But the Night Schools for children do offer schooling in conventional subjects such as math, social studies, Hindi (the language of India), and English. These are taught using practical examples that will be meaningful to rural village life.

The Night School curriculum also teaches students about traditional culture and civic institutions through visits from village leaders, artisans, and medical and government workers. Night School students learn about democracy and all of the Barefoot College's values. These too are taught in practical terms by means of a Children's Parliament. The children vote on issues involving the management of their school and learn about democracy by living it. Barefoot College also offers intensive classes called Bridge Courses for children who want to go on to regular schools and day schools for those who can study by day.

Bunker Roy and Barefoot College have come far. Who would have believed what the college would accomplish in a little more than 40 years? But when faced with skeptics, Roy likes to quote Gandhi: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

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