

Socio-economic Empowerment through Human Resource Development HRD: A Case of Barefoot College

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ABSTRACT

Socio-economic change in developing countries such as India hinges upon its human resources and not on just its unskilled masses. Human resource development (HRD) in developing countries has wide scope and applications that go beyond economic interests; it usually encompasses addressing social issues. Moreover, the continuing trend of population growth in the developing world, along with scarce or unavailable resources and infrastructure, has created more challenges. As a result, HRD practitioners in the developing world must become more innovative change agents.

The paper touches and establishes the concept of social entrepreneurship into HRD for ensuring socio-economic empowerment in promoting socio-economic empowerment in the context of developing country like India. A case method was used to showcase the modus operandi of how the various dimensions of HRD can support in the empowerment process. The study follows an interpretive research paradigm is utilized in the paper. A case of Barefoot College; located in Ajmer district of Rajasthan is presented in the paper. The learning from the case will not merely benefit HRD professionals and social entrepreneurs but other stakeholders such as government agencies, NGOs, policy makers, local business organizations and community at large and the individuals getting affected by societal change as well.

Keywords: HRD, Social Entrepreneurship, Socio-economic Empowerment, Barefoot College, Case.

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper demonstrates the offbeat process of socio-economic development and empowerment of illiterate people in Rajasthan. It challenges the existing ways of looking at the HRD principles which predominantly focuses on white collar employees of some corporate in micro perspective and/or well educated people of a nation in macro perspective. Without giving much words as preface to the exemplary ground work at Barefoot College showcasing the innovative ways of HRD for social and economic well being of illiterates.

A Case of Barefoot College

The foundation stone of Barefoot College was laid in 1972, when Bunker Roy and friends collectively registered itself as the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) which is popularly known as Barefoot College. As a non-government organisation that has been continuously providing basic services and solutions to problems in rural communities in India, with the objective of making them self-sufficient and sustainable. These 'Barefoot solutions' can be broadly categorized into more than nine different aspects of solar energy, water, education, health care, rural handicrafts, people's action, communication, women's empowerment and wasteland development. It is based at Tilonia in Rajasthan, with a population of about 2,000 people. It currently serves the population of 125,000 people. It is solar powered school that teaches illiterate women and men from impoverished villages to become doctor, solar engineer architects etc.

It demonstrated the transformative education system which began in a small village

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of Rajasthan and later spread to more than 9 states in India and countries such as South Africa, Afghanistan, Sierra Lion to bring about a change in the lifestyle of marginalized poor habitants and thereby raise their living standard. It further delineates that one size does not fit all and hence the replica of education system prevailing in urban centers can not serve the need of rural destitute.

The founder's philosophy is influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. The policy of the college is to take women from the poorest of villages and teach them to become professionals without requiring them to read or write. The USPs of the college that is fully powered by solar energy and even illiterate people are transformed to become the professionals. They are not necessarily the pen-paper graduate but the skill and competency they own after attending the college makes them self reliant and also creating the chain of social entrepreneurship. It was a sea change in the socio-cultural belief during 1970s and 80s when this college began working on women empowerment and breaking the disparity of caste and creed whereas many cities were not aware of all these. The six core values that drive this college to serve as a catalyst in society are administration, equality, collective decision making, decentralization, selfreliance and austerity.

Transformation into Social Enterprise

It was a breakthrough revolution in the life of habitants of the village- Tiloniya (place where Barefoot College began its functioning in 1972) when an innovative concept of education has emerged and began operating in a customized way for villagers. The pioneer in this transformation process was Mr. Bunker Roy who passionately ushered into the life of rural people of the village. He was determined to empower, educate and alleviate the existing disparities among the rural people.

Meanwhile the retrospection, it has been noticed that the situation of the village was pitiable in terms of socio-economic disparity, where most of the landholdings were subjugated and in the control of few high class landlords, and other social classes were

dependant on them for employment, casteism/racism, suffering from inexorable discrimination for Dalits, severe paucity of potable drinking water since it was an arid region i.e. The Thar Desert in Rajasthan. With such issues of grave concern this village was like any other contemporary village in India with a Pandora's Box of numerous problems. This case is an illustrative study about a humble beginning which is waiting for great voyage ahead as a social enterprise.

Major Accomplishments

Solar Engineering: Bare illiterate women from the marginal class of the village are trained as solar engineer which present benefits like double edged sword, one is it empowers the women to come forward and empower themselves as self dependent professionals. So far more than 472 solar engineers have been trained, in India, other parts of Asia and Africa. By 2009 about 20,000 solar lighting systems and 65 solar water heating systems installed in 753 villages, as well as vegetable driers and spinning wheels. As a part of their program Barefoot college invites rural poor from African countries for training in solar engineering. These trainees are trained at college by trained rural women entrepreneurs from India. It will be further discussed thoroughly in the paper how they went about it and the economies generated thereof. This effort directly or indirectly addresses the following challenges;

- ÷ Community to community exchanges of knowledge and skills
- ÷ Environmental sustainability
- ÷ Empowerment of women
- ÷ Increasing Livelihoods at the bottom of the pyramid
- ÷ Reducing dependency on outside urban skills
- ÷ Reducing migration from rural to urban areas
- ÷ Re-defining professionalism

- ÷ The importance relevance and urgency of partnership models

The major accomplishment of Barefoot is visible in the numbers, as more than 6,000 houses in nearly 100 villages covering 15 of the Least Developed Countries have been solar electrified by nearly 100 mothers and grandmothers demonstrating the first ever fully technically and financially self sufficient villages in the continent of Africa.

Barefoot College meets its energy needs through 50 kilowatt solar module with 5 battery banks with per unit cost is as low as INR 11. So far close to 16000 solar units have been established which contributed in the reduction of carbon emission of 1.86 million ton per annum since its inception. The college has established a Women Barefoot Solar Cooker Engineer Society (WBSCES) in Tilonia. It is the first association of illiterate and semi-literate women of its kind who can fabricate, install, and maintain 2.5 square meter parabolic solar cookers (UNEP). Continuing the series of success, Barefoot set up its first solar powered rivers osmosis aimed water desalination at an NGO named 'Manthan' near Kotri (Rajasthan)

Promotion of Rural Handicrafts: In the early '70s, the lack of employment in the villages of Rajasthan forced many of the rural poor to migrate to cities. The training at Barefoot built the confidence of rural people in capitalizing on their own traditional knowledge and livelihood practices in the village. Today, these rural artisans produce clothing and accessories, decorative home furnishings, furniture, rugs, textiles, handmade paper products, puppets, educational toys, metalwork, and leather goods. The crafts are sold through retail shops and exhibitions held in metropolitan cities of India, Europe, USA and Canada. Direct sales and marketing channels are in function with the college by Friends of Tilonia for these crafts in the U.S.A. To support this effort, FOT has developed an online store-www.tilonia.com that is promoting sales and direct marketing to individuals, wholesalers and distributors on behalf of Barefoot College. It has marked its presence on yahoo store ([www. store. tilonia.com](http://www.store.tilonia.com))

where the customers from various locations across the globe can place their order. Moreover, so as to stay connected with the global customer, the store also ensures its availability in social media such as *facebook* and *twitter*. Some of the country wise locations of these stores are; California, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Canada. These locations are the part of the marketing strategy for the comprehensive coverage of a wide variety of customers to ensure the good experience for the customers across the various touchpoints of its service delivery while making the products made by rural artisan available to global customers.

As a social enterprise it also offers a unique trade affiliate program where anyone and everyone can become the business partner for the promotion of handicraft prepared by rural artisans. These partners should preferably be design partners and those interested in promoting their products. The benefits offered to these affiliates are special trade discounts, seasonal product preview etc.

Health Care; the College, as a social enterprise has been training men and women from the villages so that rural communities are less dependent on external aid. Their involvement in the planning, implementation and supervision of all programmes have not only generated employment within rural communities but also reduced migration.

With all its effort to become a social enterprise, it has been promoting women empowerment who was victimized in the male chauvinist society. All the endeavors of Barefoot college are directed towards strengthening the position of women a society both by educating them to become a professional and by providing them the opportunity to experiment with what they have learned. Various positive impacts of these initiatives by Barefoot College include:

- ÷ Rural electrification
- ÷ Rural employment

- ÷ Building capacity at the village-level
- ÷ Technology (i.e. solar power) transfer
- ÷ Empowerment of women
- ÷ Environmental sustainability.

2. APPROACH

Mahatma Gandhi's central belief was that the knowledge, skills and wisdom found in villages should be used for development before getting skills from outside. He also believed that sophisticated technology should be used in rural India, but it should be in the hands and in control of the poor communities so that they are not dependent or exploited as it leads to replacement- Barefoot College has internalized and implemented this message of Gandhi's since its inception.

The Barefoot College has been pioneering solar electrification in rural, remote, non-electrified villages, since 1989. The College has demystified solar technology and is decentralizing its application by making it available to poor and neglected communities. By 'demystification' of solar technology and 'decentralisation' of its application, we mean placing the fabrication, installation, usage, repair and maintenance of sophisticated solar lighting units in the hands of rural, illiterate and semi-literate men and women.

The Barefoot College believes and has demonstrated that educational qualifications are not needed by people with rural or poor backgrounds to acquire skills that can be of service to their community. In fact, the existence of theoretical paper-based qualifications has been usually found to be a deterrent to development as those that have them tend to come for work or training with mental blocks and superficial expertise.

The methodology applied for rural solar electrification is unique to the Barefoot College. Only villages that are inaccessible, remote and non-electrified are considered for solar electrification. In the initial meeting, members of the community are told about solar lighting and its benefits. If villagers express the need and

wish for solar lighting then a Village Environment Energy Committee (VEEC) is formed. This committee consists of the village elders, both men, and women. The VEEC consults with the entire village community and identifies households which are interested in acquiring eco-friendly solar lighting units. Every family that wants to obtain solar lighting must pay an affordable contribution every month, irrespective of how poor they are. This is so that even the poorest of the poor can feel a sense of ownership towards their unit and take care of it.

As part of the decentralization and demystification process, the College essentially trains a few members of the community to be 'Barefoot Solar Engineers' (BSEs), who will install, repair and maintain solar lighting units for a period of five years at least, as well as set up a 'Rural Electronic Workshop' where components and equipment needed for the repair and maintenance of solar units will be stored.

The village must agree, in writing, to build or donate a building for the Rural Electronic Workshop (REW), select Barefoot solar engineers and allow them to go to India for six months of training, as well as identify the individuals who will be responsible for punctually collecting the monthly household fee. This way the entire rural community can take part in solar electrification and control and manage it together.

While a percentage of the total contribution pays for a monthly stipend to every BSE, the rest covers the costs of components and spare parts like CFL tubes used during repair. The batteries used in solar lighting units need to be replaced every five to ten years. Households that wish to replace their battery through the organization need to pay an amount which will be collectively deposited in a bank as a fixed deposit, where it will gain interest for five to ten years. Once the fixed deposit matures the amount is used to buy new batteries. However, if this amount falls short for the purchase of all the batteries needed then the villagers need to pay the balance amount. The process of solar electrification is not undertaken till the

villagers, who have expressed a desire for solar lighting, agree to pay or collect the nominal monthly fee, to select Barefoot solar engineers for training, as well as to arrange for a REW, in writing. Barefoot College implements this to initiate and ensure complete participation on behalf of the rural community. Therefore, this community managed, controlled and owned approach is innovative and can be replicated in far corners of the world.

Note: The monthly fee to be paid by each electrified household is determined by how much each family spends on kerosene, candles, torch batteries and wood for lighting every month. The VEEC is responsible for making sure that the Barefoot solar engineers install, repair and maintain all the solar units properly and are paid their stipend on time.

Selection and Role of Barefoot solar engineers (BSEs)

Barefoot solar engineering is an employment opportunity for the poorest of poor members in a rural community. It generates an additional source of income for those who do not 'qualify' even for the lowest government job. The College motivates the communities to give this opportunity especially to middle-aged women, such as those who are widows and single mothers with families. It persuades them to choose people who have their roots in the village and will stay and work there for its development rather than migrate to the city soon after training. By being solar engineers they receive an additional source of income as well as continue to be involved with their family and craft, agriculture, animal husbandry and other income generating activities.

If the village is a small and clustered one with about 50 houses, then only one BSE is selected for training. However, if the houses are far from each other or more in number, two or more BSEs are selected. BSEs are collectively and transparently selected by the whole village community. Everyone in the village should be aware of who has been selected. The BSE's family, the committee and all the members of the community have to allow the trainees to travel to India where they will be trained for six

months at the Barefoot College.

BSEs are trained to understand and identify basic electrical terms, components and equipment. They learn to assemble and fabricate circuits and solar lanterns, solar lamps, charge controllers, choke coils and transformers, and learn to correctly connect modules, batteries, lamps and charge controllers. Barefoot College strives to make every trainee capable enough to confidently and independently install, test, repair and maintain fixed solar lighting units, solar lanterns, as well as a REW.

At the end of six months the trainees pass out as Barefoot Solar engineers. As per prior agreements, the 'graduates' go back to their respective villages and electrify the households with solar lighting units and assume the responsibility of repair and maintenance for a minimum of 5 years. Barefoot solar engineers play a key role in sustaining and replicating solar technology in rural communities.

Role of a Rural Electronic Workshop (REW)

REW is a facility set up for Barefoot solar engineers in their villages where they can easily carry out testing, maintenance, repair and production work. A REW acts as a mini-power plant that produces 320W per hour, therefore, it can also be used by the community for educational or social activities like watching television. REWs are important for sustaining solar electrifications in remote rural communities.

A Rural Electronic Workshop comprises of 4 SPV modules (12V, 80W each) with a stand, 1 Charge controller (12V, 40Amp), 1 Inverter (12V, 800VA) and 4 tubular batteries (12V, 75AH each) along with 4mm positive and negative wires and 16mm connectors. Among equipment, 1 digital dual power supply (0 to 30V DC 2Amp), 1 assembly jig, 2 soldering irons with stand, solder wire and spare bits, 1 extension board, 1 personal tool kit for each BSE and spare printed circuit boards and components for repair and production

3. WATER

Preservation and accessibility of water in poor rural communities, has been of primary concern to the Barefoot College since its inception in 1972. This holds true particularly for communities that suffer from the scarcity of water or are drought-prone, as well as those that lack hygienic sanitation and drinking water sources. The College has been reinventing its methods as well as methodology, for providing sustainable community-based water sources, through time and experience. The constant factors in all have been a) decentralisation of water sources, b) replenishment of groundwater tables, c) participation of rural communities in implementation d) to reduce dependency on external aid and e) to reduce the drudgery of women and children, who are the worst affected by water problems like poor hygiene, availability and accessibility. Of all the methods that the College has tried and tested, including long hole drilling, handpumps and piped water supply, it has found methods of rain water harvesting to be the most sustainable and effective. Rain Water Harvesting (RWH) is a low cost method with maximum benefits. It provides sweet water for drinking to not only people but also livestock; both, important criteria for rural communities that depend on agriculture and animal husbandry. RWH helps to replenish or rejuvenate groundwater tables directly as well as indirectly. While some methods of RWH like trenches, anicut, contour bunding, and dug wells recharge groundwater tables, directly, by holding the rains long enough for the soil to absorb, other methods like construction RWH underground water tanks and small ponds, indirectly, help to preserve groundwater by creating alternative sources of water for people and livestock, thus reducing the use of groundwater for at least 4-6 months.

Collection of rain water has been a traditional practice through generations for hundreds of years in remote villages of Colombia in South America, Atlas Mountains in West Africa, Himalayas in Asia, islands in Fiji, as well as deserts of Rajasthan in India. The Barefoot College has embraced and acknowledged the architectural brilliance in

traditional knowledge and skills, of age-old techniques, to collect or 'harvest' rain water in order to meet the needs of drinking water and sanitation in rural schools and communities.

The Barefoot approach draws on the local techniques and materials, to reduce dependency on external aid, because it believes these have competently served the purpose of collecting rain water for generations. There should be no need to replace a technique that has stood the test of time only because it is written off as 'old and outdated'. The College believes that for any village-based development to be successful and sustainable, it has to be community managed and owned. Therefore, it involves all the local people to administer, supervise and contribute to any initiative, to create a sense of community ownership.

Barefoot Approach to Community Management and Ownership for RWH Structures:

Work selection and demand proposal

The Barefoot College first organises a collective meeting with all the members of the community, in which the requirements and needs of the people are discussed. Public places or schools are selected as a site for construction of RWH structures, so that men, women and children can have unrestricted access to the water. The capacity of an RWH tank is determined by the average rainfall in the area, the total size of the rooftop (catchment) area, as well as the number of users in the community. Once the site is unanimously selected, a written proposal is formally submitted by the community and school to the Barefoot College. Village Water Committees

Barefoot College sets up a Village Water Committee (VWC) consisting of 10-15 members of the community with equal representation of women. Members of the committee should be persons who are genuinely interested in well being of the community and are willing to devote their time in the construction of RWH structures. The VWC is responsible for the smooth, effective and transparent implementation of the construction

work, for purchase of good quality raw materials and for paying the wage labourers. The committee must also motivate the people to participate in the construction of the RWH structures.

Selection of the poor as wage labour

Members of the community and the College, collectively draw up a list of wage labourers who will construct the RWH structures. Since it is an income opportunity, poorest of poor people in the village are given preference to earn minimum wages. The VWC ensures that the selection is unbiased.

Bank Account

A bank account is opened for the construction and management of the RWH structures. Barefoot College transfers the needed amount into this VWC bank account. This is done so that only the village has control over the budget and the financial expenditures incurred during implementation. The entire community must be involved to ensure transparency in the whole process. All payments, for expenditures incurred for the RWH structures, must be made only through the Committee's bank account.

Selection of committee members to operate bank accounts All the villagers must collectively select two members of the VWC including one woman, to jointly operate the bank account. In future, if the two members, who are operating the account, need to be changed then it will have to be decided collectively by the VWC and community. Community involvement and their budgetary powers of control

The Barefoot approach requires all members of the community to get together to construct the RWH structures. This contribution is in form of labour and raw materials worth 10% of the total cost of construction. This way the entire community is involved in the implementation of a structure that will be theirs to control, manage and own after it is complete.

Transparency and social audit

All information of the construction

undertaken must be made available to any public citizen. To achieve this, the Barefoot College keeps a record of all financial documents, bills, vouchers, muster rolls and photographs that are relevant to the RWH structure. Photocopies of all these documents can be made available for public scrutiny at any time. After the completion of the work, a social audit meeting is conducted with the community where anyone in the village can raise queries and questions related to the construction or expenses incurred for the structure.

Photography and documentation

Visual documentation for the RWH structure must be undertaken for physical verification and project documentation. This should consist of still photographs of the work site taken from the same angle, for each of these four stages in construction (a) before work is undertaken (b) voluntary labour being provided (c) work in progress and (d) work completion.

Work completion and hand over

After the RWH structure is completed and before it is handed over, the community and school must certify in writing that the structure has satisfactorily been completed and is ready to be used. They must also agree to be responsible for its repair and maintenance in the future.

4. EDUCATION

Mark Twain once said, "Never let school interfere with your education"- The Barefoot College education programme is geared for the overall development of rural children, and literacy is only a part of it. It is viewed as a radical departure from the traditional concept of a 'college' because it encourages hands-on or learning-by-doing process of gaining knowledge and skills, rather than imparting it through formal classroom teachings.

Lessons are focussed on arousing awareness about the environment and the social-economic and political forces that dominate development. Achievement skills that guarantee a sustainable development in rural communities, as well as literacy, are considered important for an individual's development. The aim of the

programme is to equip rural children with the right balance of literacy and education, so that in the long run each child voluntarily chooses to stay in the village and work for its development instead of looking to move out.

Barefoot College draws on the same philosophy when it selects members of the rural community to provide education in its rural schools. This is done to reduce dependency on external aid as well as reduce migration by generating employment within the rural communities. The College gives little importance to urban experts with paper degrees and qualifications because most of them do not have the patience, listening skills, open minds or humility to show respect to traditional knowledge and skills and are unfit to live and work in remote areas. The Barefoot education section has successfully existed as a purely rural programme for children, men and women since 1975. The Barefoot approach has been replicated by 714 Barefoot teachers in 559 day and night schools across 8 states of India including Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, as well as by 510 women *balsevikas* (crèche teachers) in 280 *balwadis* (rural crèches) across four districts in Rajasthan including Ajmer, Sikar, Jaipur and Barmer.

5. HEALTHCARE

The Barefoot College health care section aims to provide basic health services to more than 150 villages in five development blocks of Rajasthan, through a team of Barefoot doctors, health workers, midwives, pathologists and dentists with little or no educational backgrounds.

Since 1973, more than 1,442 rural men and women have gained livelihood through health programmes, both curative as well as preventive in nature. The College has demystified medical technologies and decentralised its uses to equip the grassroot levels with basic health facilities. Through a network of the Barefoot health team, Barefoot communicators and teachers, the Barefoot College has created health awareness among rural men, women and

children on issues such as hygiene, food and nutrition, mother and child care, immunization, oral health, family planning, HIV/ AIDS, midwifery, common ailments etc.

The College has been training men and women from the villages so that rural communities are less dependent on external aid. Their involvement in the planning, implementation and supervision of all programmes have not only generated employment within rural communities but also reduced migration.

Peoples' Action

The Barefoot College was born out of practical experience and people's action. It was not inspired by books or by the theories of academics or practitioners based in urban areas. It was the result of hours of work in the villages, weeks of meeting ordinary people who wanted to get together and live and work in a village. No ideological learnings of any kind, no costly survey to decide what to do, no assistance from the traditional, well-established voluntary movements of India. Whether the Gandhian, the Sarvodaya, the Christian or the Ramakrishna Mission, the Barefoot College wanted to break away from the 'social work tradition' among groups oriented to social action.

Many people who had started projects earlier did not give this non-professional approach much of a chance. The Barefoot College was in fact taking calculated risks on a number of fronts:

It was all oriented towards People's Action. No project plan was designed in advance, no clear time schedule, no detailed programme activities, no organisational and administrative arrangements, project staff or physical inputs. The Barefoot College let the organisation grow as a process where human beings and their development, their confidence and personal growth meant more and mattered more. The investment was more in people than in projects. This has been the first priority. No recruitment through advertisement but by word of mouth and by trial and error.

Financial Resources

Social Work and Research Centre,

popularly known as the Barefoot College, was registered as a Non Government Organisation (NGO) on 5th of February 1972, under the Society Act 1860. The organisation considers a financial year from April 1st of one year to March 31st of the following year. Every year, a financial report is prepared by chartered accountants at the organisation inclusive of details such as:

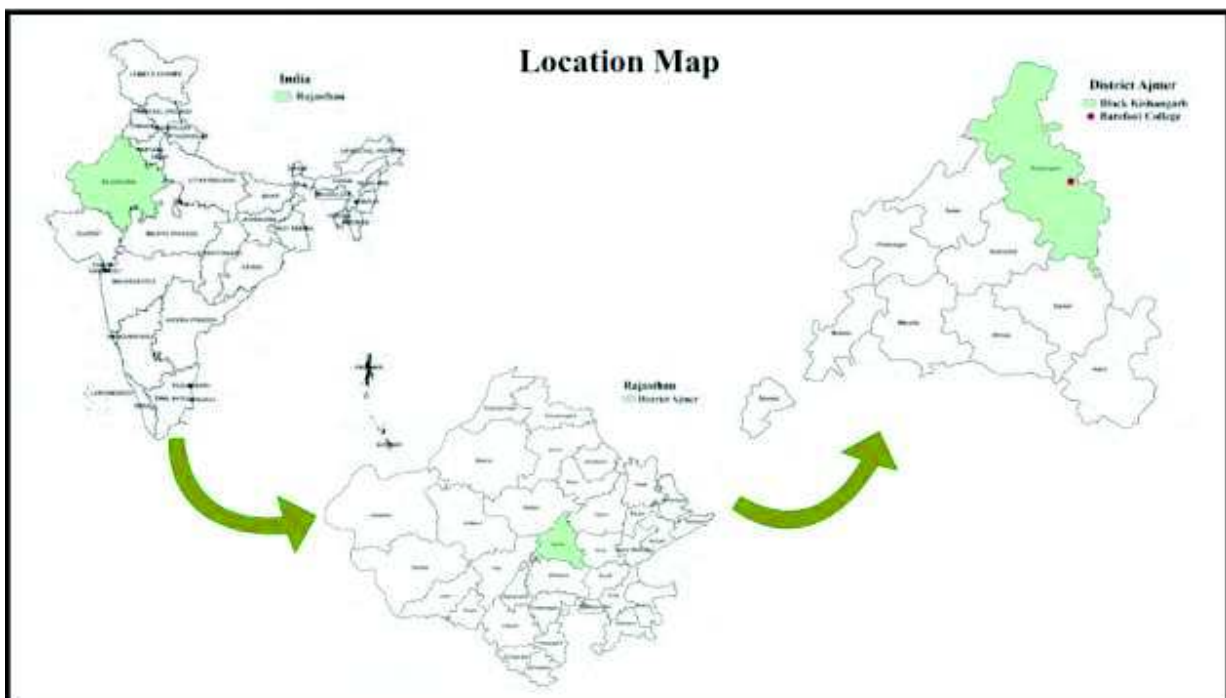
- ÷ Grants and donations received from the Government of India, international funding agencies as well as private foundations.
- ÷ Income generated through own sources, if any
- ÷ Expenditures incurred during the financial year

Since 1972, the organisation has been appointing chartered accountancy firms to audit its accounts and reports for every financial year.

Barefoot Accountants

More than 30 members of the College, who are barely literate, have been trained to keep Barefoot accounts in Tilonia and its sub-centres in Rajasthan, Jammu-Kashmir, Sikkim, Himanchal Pradesh, Kerala and Assam.

Barefoot accountants are responsible for financial planning and transactions and, allocation and maintenance of funds received by the College. It stresses on transparency and accountability and the Barefoot accountants play an essential role in implementing this process. It holds public hearings and shares financial information, usually considered as confidential, with the members of the rural community. Anyone can access the audit statements and ask for information related to sources of funding and, amounts received and spent.



6. LEARNING AND IMPLICATIONS

The case discussed above put forth few path-breaking learning for the scholars in academic fraternity, practitioners and other stakeholders of the society at large. Some

exemplary initiatives taken at Barefoot College for the societal development and empowerment of local clients such as in area of education, health care, handicraft, rural electrification etc. gives impetus to other NGOs, policy makers and government agencies to develop replicate

Barefoot like low cost sustainable solutions for other parts of India where the poor people struggle to make two ends meet. It also teaches us that HRD is not just for developing highly educated and technically sophisticated manpower of a nation but it must orient its endeavour towards illiterate and under privileged masses in the third world that are collectively also known as bottom of the pyramid masses.

Moreover, policy makers should pin pointedly analyze the sustenance of such model of developing human resources as it also backs the vision of present government to enhance the livelihood of rural people. Another social initiative that relates to such vision is Providing Urban Amenities to Rural Areas (PURA) which was coined by the former President of India Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam. However, it still needs the attention of the government for execution.

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