

Video Review

The Barefoot College: Knowledge Demystified

Co-produced by UNESCO and Opeongo Line

Director and Founder of Barefoot College: Sanjit (Bunker) Roy

Ben Lomond, CA: The Video Project:

Media for a Safe & Sustainable World, 44 min.

www.videoproject.org

Reviewed by Anne Ehrlich

For centuries in villages around the world people have lived sustainably. They have taken only what they need from the earth. Modernization has often led us on a less sustainable path. Traditional ways of living have rarely been married wisely with modern appropriate technology. People everywhere are now exploring new and old ways of working which will rebuild a sense of community and greater self-reliance.

– Sanjit Roy

Terms such as sustainable community development used by those involved in international and community health are often considered buzzwords by sceptical professionals, academics, and others who are accustomed to seeing projects with these labels fail. However, the approach of the Barefoot College in Tilonia, Rajasthan, India, gives real meaning to such terms and in particular, calls upon viewers from "the north," to see its relevance to sustainable local and global development. This video uses interviews with "barefoot" midwives, doctors, chemists, solar engineers, structural engineers, and hand-pump mechanics trained at the college to describe this educational approach, which has been employed successfully in 13 Indian states.

Similar to the development initiatives of many international organizations, the Barefoot College was originally envisaged as an organization that would attract young urban professionals to go and work with local residents. However, the founders did not anticipate the wealth of knowledge that already existed within the communities themselves. This discovery led to a transformation of the organization, based on a deep respect for the indigenous knowledge and culture, its oral traditions, and its own informal approaches to learning. Hence the Barefoot College is founded on non-traditional educational methods that focus on hands-on learning, limited use of textbooks, and subjects that contribute directly to the development of the local community.

Successful sustainable development is exemplified by projects such as the design and construction, in 1989, of the new Barefoot College campus. The plans were drafted in the sand by Bhawer, a person with no formal education, who then supervised 60 masons in the construction of the campus based on the ideals of environmental regeneration and protection. Local materials were used throughout. Solar panels supply the power for the entire campus, including the computers. A bio-gas plant, run on decomposed leaves gathered in the area, provides additional energy for the sterilization of medical equipment.

Rainwater harvesting, a centuries-old technology, provides the water for the irrigation system. This system, which employs local artisans, resulted in the collection of 9 million litres of water in 1 year alone. The video compares this system to the use of high-tech drilling rigs, which exploits groundwater, uses non-renewable resources, and in this instance would have cost 9 million rupees.

Throughout the 44-minute video, the vibrancy, colour, and sounds of life within the college and in the villages provide a rich backdrop for the narrative descriptions of the many programs offered at the Barefoot College. The programs range from water technology, organic farming, and reforestation, to communications, health, and women in development, to support to local artisans, to a children's parliament aimed at increasing political awareness and participation.

In the college's community health section, the training of barefoot doctors and traditional midwives has led to what one community member describes as "an awakening to health, hygiene, and...collective rights." Family planning workshops and immunization clinics are held as part of the training and services offered by the college. Similarly, training and service to the community are integrated in the outpatient department situated on the main campus.

Principles of health education and promotion underlie the activities of the communications section of the Barefoot College, which organizes events to celebrate and sustain local culture and traditions. Puppet shows and street theatre entertain while also conveying messages that ultimately contribute to community action. For example, Jokum Cha Cha is a puppet character whose dialogue with the audience encourages audience members to laugh at themselves while also stimulating discussion on controversial topics such as alcoholism, women's issues, and environmental degradation.

The Barefoot College: Knowledge Demystified is highly recommended for educators, community health professionals, students, and anyone

else interested in international health, primary health care, and sustainable development. The powerful messages of director and founder Sanjit Roy, as well as the many stories and the music, dance, and theatre performances by community members, provide excellent visual examples of adult education, participatory development, and global issues in general. Although not stated explicitly, the college's respect for, and inclusion of, the knowledge inherent in the community challenges researchers and evaluators to use study designs and methods that are consistent with these values.

The video concludes with statements on the impact of the Barefoot College's innovative programs on local, state, and national policies regarding education and community development. *The Barefoot College* inspires the viewer to want to see and hear more about this 20-year initiative. One shortcoming, however, is that it lacks information on the problems that must, inevitably, have been experienced, and how these were overcome.

The language level suggested in the video is Grade 10 or higher. The narrator speaks slowly and clearly. It may therefore be appropriate for audiences who have difficulty with English if it is shown by a facilitator who can answer questions and guide the discussion. The above website offers information about obtaining the video as well as a wide selection of other resources for anyone interested in sustainable community development.

Sanjit Roy points out that the Barefoot College model is applicable wherever there is a need for the development of self-reliance and self-esteem. From his perspective, this means virtually anywhere in the world. Roy encourages viewers to think about applying the principles of equality, collective decision-making, decentralized planning, self-reliance, and a simple lifestyle to their own lives:

...anyone living in a village in Africa or a village in Asia or a village in America.... And this is the only sustainable way out. Increase your dependency on each other rather than on outsiders. First see what you have within. What you have within is so rich, it is so deep, it is so profound that you don't really need to go outside.

These words challenge the very essence of being for many international health and community development workers, providing a strong foundation for discussion, reflection, debate, and practice in educational and community settings.

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