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FIVE QUESTIONS FOR BUNKER ROY

Bunker Roy, founder and director of the multi-award-winning Barefoot College in India, shares his views on rural development, paper qualifications and foreign experts

1 What is the Barefoot College's greatest achievement?

To identify hundreds of men and women who are illiterate and semi-literate drop-outs, cop-outs and wash-outs from the most remote and inaccessible villages in India and train them at their own pace into 'barefoot' water and solar engineers, architects, teachers, communicators, pathologists, midwives, computer literates, accountants, marketing managers – just showing how it is possible to develop the written-off people with both dignity and self respect.

2 What is the philosophy behind the Barefoot College?

For the last 34 years the Barefoot College has believed and indeed demonstrated that illiteracy is not a barrier to the rural poor developing themselves. Mark Twain very rightly said: "Never let school interfere with your education." Just because someone cannot read or write does not mean he/she is uneducated. The worth, value and relevance of any person is not judged by the qualifications, degrees and diplomas they hold or the amount of money they have made.

The Barefoot College believes they are the real barriers and obstacles to development. The Barefoot College is the only college in India built by the rural poor for the rural poor. The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi is reflected in the work style and lifestyle of the college. Everyone eats, sleeps and works on the floor. No one can receive more than \$100 per month. Traditional knowledge, village skills and practical wisdom are given more importance and greater respect than

any paper qualification. What makes the Barefoot College so different and so far ahead of its time is the philosophy of demystifying technology and decentralising control, management and ownership of technical and professional skills right down to the village level – thus making people less dependent on 'outside' skills.

3 Is the barefoot approach a viable large-scale developmental model for rural areas?

The barefoot approach identifies the indigenous knowledge and vastly under-utilised practical wisdom of the poor, upgrades their basic skills, builds up their confidence (they already have the capacity) and applies it for their own development. The barefoot approach rejects any experts with paper qualifications. This model of taking the illiterate rural poor into confidence from the very beginning is the only model that can work in a remote rural area. If it has worked in Sierra Leone, Senegal, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Tanzania and Ghana, then it can work in any village in the world.

The biggest obstacle to this approach is the mindset of the literate expert who cannot think beyond the box. Einstein's definition of insanity: "Endlessly repeating the same process hoping for a different result."

4 Is there an over-reliance on foreign assistance in development projects?

We believe any assistance, financial or technical, is foreign if it comes from outside the village. The dependence on outside technical assistance is unhealthy, and what

is even more dangerous is that we still have not learnt from our past mistakes. The series of 'successful' failures with massive foreign assistance should have initiated some soul searching and at least started an unlearning process. But foreign consultants who have no idea of rural realities in India dictating and influencing policies affecting the lives of millions is really a sorry reflection on our own insecurity and lack of confidence.

In the Barefoot College I will not allow any World Bank or UN so-called paper-qualified expert to come and pontificate, because they have nothing to contribute that the rural poor do not know already. The dependence on urban skills, on alien models brought into the country by 'foreigners', is the biggest threat to the development of the rural poor in India. Indeed, I speak for the developing countries of the world.

5 You've campaigned for greater transparency in NGOs. What's your view of the situation today?

There is so much money today in the voluntary sector (not 'NGOs' – what a negative way of defining positive constructive grass root action: to compare it with government!) that transparency and accountability to the rural poor in whose name they are receiving the funds in the first place is the first casualty. Today it should be mandatory for every voluntary agency/NGO to hold a social audit and share information with the people on how the funds have been spent in their organisation in an open public hearing. It is not enough to publish audited statements of account and annual reports. **ADR**