

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Barefoot College, Tilonia: Interview with Teja Ram

By Gregor Lang-Wojtasik, September 2013

The Barefoot College, Tilonia, or Social Work Research Centre, was founded in 1972 by young academics around Bunker Roy and continues today. These academics in the 70s were interested to learn from people in dry and down-trodden villages of rural Rajasthan (North-Western part of India) and exchange knowledge on sustainable challenges of society.

The work at the college starts at the grassroots of society. It focuses on the belief of existing talents and the potential of people in the villages to solve various problems for themselves.

The main activities encompass solar energy to support appropriate ways of self-reliance, community health to reduce child and maternal mortality, water harvesting to redevelop the main basis of life, women's upliftment to support gender-equality, rural handicraft to promote traditional structures of rural survival and value beauty as well as communication especially through puppetry, which is useful to raise consciousness about social change.

One of the most prominent aspects of The Barefoot College is its holistic, democratic and participatory approach concerning education and society. Night-schools and Bal Sansad (children's parliament) are models for alternative approaches in learning processes and offer chances of education to children out of school due to various reasons.

Gregor Lang-Wojtasik used the example of SWRC night-schools and Bal Sansad in his paper presented last year at the European Union Democratic Education Conference (EUDEC). He has been acquainted with this NGO since 1997, when he included it in his research sample for his PhD on non-formal education in India and Bangladesh (Lang-Wojtasik 2001).

He has maintained contact with the college for the last 16 years and took the chance during his last visit to India in September 2013 to have an interview with Teja Ram, age 47, a member of the Education section at SWRC and the founder of Mantan ('purity'), an NGO working in a very

salty area of the state of Rajasthan, being part of the big SWRC-network.



Teja Ram

Gregor Lang-Wojtasik (GLW): You are running an organization called Mantan. That means to find purity. Purity of life?

Teja Ram (TR): Yes... everything. Purity in the whole development, purity in lifestyle, and how we live or think. We believe that it's important to sit together, discuss and then find a direction of work which doesn't hamper with beliefs.

GLW: Tilonia is already a very drought-ridden area, but now you are working even in a salted area. That means the ground water is salted and you need to find ways to solve the water problems in a different way.

TR: Yes, since 1997 I worked with the children. In the beginning there was only 6 to 10 percent literacy in those villages of Silora Block. So Bunker Roy said that we should focus on this area for education and we should start offering resources here for education for the governmental school, for the night schools at Barefoot College, for the children's parliament, everything.

But you know, when we reached there and I used to go to villages, had a meeting and talked about the education, people said "Education is ok, but what do you think about the water and there is no water, but we stay in the villages. What will we do? So think about the water." One of the first actions of Barefoot College was to deal with the challenge of salty water. The area is near to one of the biggest salt lakes of Asia and ground water is totally salty. People had to bring the drinking-water from 8 to 10 kilometers away.

GLW: So dealing with this was their main issue?

TR: Yes, then we started to work on the traditional things to do with water harvesting that are to be built in the school. So the children can survive and they can stay in the school. Otherwise the teacher would have said "Ok, there's no water, please go home."

So we started building water stations at the schools together with the community and we are also working with the individual families. So that the old people and the young girls can use the water for health and survival. We also collect the surface

water for animals and ground water recharge. We were making big tanks to collect the rain water and we also used to set up reverse osmosis plant in some villages. So we reverted the salty water to the sweet water. That means we work for the education as well as water.

GLW: For me it sounds very much like a Freirean approach then concerning generative themes. That means water is the problem as you said and you start with the water and then combine the education.

TR: Yes.

GLW: That means you try to implement the idea of Barefoot College, Tilonia into the new region, but with very different issues. I remember my first visit to Tilonia when even it was difficult to handle. But the area in which you were working was more difficult?

TR: Yes, because that area is 200 kilometers from Jaipur and 100 kilometers from Ajmer. In the beginning there were no roads and no one liked to go to these villages. So now the trend is slightly shifting as there are roads and the area is developing.

GLW: We met personally the last time in 1997. Now it is 2013, many years have passed. What would you say are really the main developments concerning Barefoot College? Is there any change or is it just constant work?

TR: The biggest change to Barefoot College is that its work on the solar and water is extended to all over India, and even beyond to Bhutan and African countries. Because Tilonia is

now known as a technical centre by the Indian government. So people come from all over the world. Women can come here, stay for six months. They can get the training and go back to their villages and develop electrical capacity [through solar power].

GLW: I remember that before 1997 in Tilonia, government schools were handed over to SWRC. Is this still the case?

TR: No, at that time they were Shiksha Karmi schools but now the government has taken over Shiksha Karmi schools. At present we are running night schools at different places and a day school in Tilonia campus. In Mandan campus we are running day-school only for the girls.

GLW: And would you say, I mean night schools have been running already for a long time. Is it still a successful model in the villages?

TR: Sure, yes. Because there are many villages that have no children at school, no staff for the school. So children go to another village. In some hamlets people are not familiar with the schools and then we start there.

After two, three years they might become familiar with the idea of a school and we push the government to start a school there. Then they open the governmental school and we start the night school somewhere else. So night schools are not just a learning or teaching centre for the children, but they are also making a good environment for education to evolve as a social idea.

Children, government teachers and the parents are involved in the

education system. Night schools are to put the education in the centre of the society. Within society through night school people can monitor the education in an ordinary school. Thus, they can evaluate the school and feel the importance of education.

GLW: At a conference in the Netherlands on democratic schools, where I used the example by showing a short movie of the Barefoot College to show the global impact of alternative ways in education, people were very impressed to see the Bal Sansad in action and they even saw one of the prime ministers [a young woman] speaking. They said “how is it possible that pupils, women, girls in that age are able to talk like adults, especially in the Indian community?” Do you have an answer to that?

TR: Yes, if you give a chance and a space to children and listen carefully, politely, then they can speak. But if you block yourself and you never create a space for children, they can’t.

In the Barefoot College of Tilonia if there is something written from the children’s parliament, to the adults like Bunker Roy, all of this is taken seriously. A letter from Bal Sansad’s prime minister will get the same importance as a letter from Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister of India. So they get equal status and because of that it is possible.

GLW: So would you say then it’s really a question of the attitude of adults in interaction with children that allows them to learn from them?

TR: Sure, because everywhere in the world the children are very fair and talk truly, but it depends on the adults.

How you look at them. If you say “Oh, just children, what will they do?” But if you listen carefully and take their issues seriously then it will be a good process towards learning.

GLW: The world is changing rapidly and I remember that Barefoot College, Tilonia was also present at the Expo in Hannover, where the world showed up to discuss about solutions for upcoming world-challenges. That’s already 13 years ago. Remembering this, what would you say today: Tilonia has a very constant model always being able to reform itself. What can the world learn from Tilonia concerning education?

TR: Ok, there are two important things we can learn from Tilonia. In the field of education the main thing is that we are learning things not just from the books and teachers. There are many, many things that happened in the past and in the community which constitute very good knowledge. So we should not reject our traditional knowledge. It doesn’t matter if it is written in the books or somewhere else; we should be open in the way that traditions come always from inside.

And second thing is that, if we really want to educate people, we shouldn’t go with the books. You should sit together and talk. This is the real educational process—to teach each other. Only through books or through the black board, or through the school? It is not possible. Yes you can give information and something, but not really education.

So firstly, we promote learning from traditional knowledge and being

open and not rejecting anybody in the world. No. If given a chance, he (sic) gives his best, then maybe he will be a good teacher. He doesn't have any kind of degree, but he has good knowledge and experience. He also has practical knowledge. And if you have a space for this kind of person in your institution, in your school, in your house—there is no need of any other institution for a special education.

So everybody in the villages have knowledge. Every society has big knowledge systems and also the process of transferring it from one generation to another. The Barefoot College follows the traditional thing, because just like in the salty area where I work now, there are many persons from the technological syndicate. They say "Ok, we can do it with this machine, we can do it with that machine." But we should see that 1000 years ago, people were already living there and were surviving. We should go and search and talk to people with traditional skills. They know very powerful things, sustainable things and very unique things. So there are two, three things that we can learn from the Barefoot College, Tilonia.

GLW: That's good to know to go to an older generation and also to learn from the past. You say water is really the main challenge. That is, I think, very clear, and even people would talk now about wars, because of water. Take Israel, Palestine, take other African countries like Sudan or Egypt and what I understand is really that

you should listen to what is the tradition, how they are managed for generations, then just think afresh and put this traditional knowledge in the actual situation of now.

TR: Yes, sure. And you should not reject anybody, because I have my way of doing things and you have yours and I respect and can learn from them. We both are very useful for the community. The biggest challenge of this time is school education. School education is a very challenging thing in the world, because school education is just focusing on passing exams.

Because of that, the children, the boys and girls, are cut from the labour things of the house. They just say "I am going to school. I don't want to touch a cow, don't want to make my hands dirty in the farm. I am learning for my school. And my learning from school is good for me. But what is happening in my village? What is happening in my field? What is happening nearby me? It is not important for me. But my classroom, my books, my teacher is important for me."

So it's a very challenging thing! Question is: How we can link our own field, village, plantation, animal, and everything else to our school? Yes, books are very important, but your tree, your animal, your field are as important as your books. Your father is a farmer, you say that he is illiterate, but he is highly educated person. But you never give the importance to the farmer, but just to the teacher, who only knows that

2+2=4. Your father as a farmer knows how to produce 100 kilos of grain. He is a very important person.

So, how we can link these things, school and the practical life or real life? Right now, School life and your real life are totally different. So we connect the both. School life without your real life is totally empty and vice versa. It should be together, it should be linked.

GLW: You have been to foreign countries and you have been to Germany for example! You have seen also the village side in Germany! What would you say is a generative theme in Germany? What could it be?

TR: I visited some places of farmers and there I found that the government of Germany is a very respectful, very polite for the farmer. They don't want to destroy anything from the farmer. They just promote or justify the sale, just to protect the farmer—if I understand that right.

So this is very different In India. Farmers just grow from the field and they will give something to you. You are in the professional world like a scientist or something. You are sitting here on your own, but you can't take milk from the meadow, not meat from the meadow, not onion—nothing. It just comes from the field. And we should protect that person. And in Germany, if I understand rightly, it is protected. And so the farmer or the village person they are very, very linked with the other educated persons. They are sitting in the office, they are sitting somewhere else in the cities, but they are very respectful, because they are really careful to the

farmer. So the farmer will respect them. In India it is not like that. Farmers are dependent on the market and government policies which are not in favour of farmers. This is discouraging for farming as a profession

GLW: We are talking about farmers, so that means we listen or we read about the farmers especially in South East India committing suicide, because of big problems. Does that happen also in Rajasthan?

TR: No, but sometimes the farmers face difficulties. Because sometimes like now there are very huge crops to grow. And the stock market exchange rate is very low. So they will be in loss. Government should make a standard rates, so that they can survive. When I spent 10,000 rupees for something and now I get only 5000 rupees from market, I lose 5000 rupees. Right now the government should take action. Ok, if you spent 10,000 rupees, your crop shouldn't be below 11,000 rupees, to get at least 1000 profit.

GLW: In Tilonia I see constant shipments, exporting out of the state of Rajasthan, running worldwide maybe. Because the idea is just from the grassroots—starting from what people know, starting from what they have and trying to give them an opening of the horizon, including the whole community to come forward in a way; in a way the community can decide the speed for themselves. Comparing the situation now with the 1990s I understand that the style of work is remaining and it's not changing.

TR: Yes, because though Tilonia is now “going global,” it is still deep rooted in the villages. The night school with the midwives, hand-pump mechanics, with the small farmer, water harvesting, statues for the children, with the handicrafts, the rural artisans. These still are important things for the Barefoot College though we are working also in the African and American countries, Afghanistan, Pakistan and somewhere else, but rooted still here. And one more point is that change is a long journey. It takes time.

GLW: Puppetry is also going on? Joachim Cha-Cha giving lectures?

TR: Yes.

GLW: I have one more question concerning the Bal Sansad. You are now working at another place. Is there a special Bal Sansad in that area or is it still the whole Tilonia block all together?

TR: All together. There is a children’s parliament covering the whole of Rajasthan. The prime minister is still elected for two and a half years and still a girl is the prime minister. Bunker Roy is the president of the parliament and I’m the secretary of the prime minister. All ministers have a secretary. For example the health minister has Dr. Battacharya as secretary and so on.

GLW: Thank you for your time and the exchange.

More information: <http://www.barefootcollege.org/>

Interviewer details:

Dr. Gregor Lang-Wojtasik, Prof. of Educational Science (Education of Difference) at University of Education, Weingarten, has visited India for the last 26 years, being interested in alternative approaches of basic education and social change in the tradition of M.K. Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave. Address: Studiendekan der Fakultät I, PH Weingarten/University of Education, Kirchplatz 2 - D-88250 Weingarten, Germany. Email: langwojtasik@ph-weingarten.de



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