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Reaching the Last Mile: Tilonia Home of the Barefoot College and its People

I was in Pushkar for our team's review in the first week of August 2023 and it was decided to visit the Barefoot College in Tilonia, Rajasthan, to understand and see the years of incredible work done by the founder Mr. Bunker Roy and his community people. I traveled via a bus and I was with a group of 10-12 office colleagues. The entire voyage felt like a school trip as there were songs, laughter, and games.

When I reached the college, it was humongous and had a plethora of programs running such as education for children, solar mama, renewable energy, recycling, and water conservation. Two colleges are set up to empower and strengthen the rural communities by making them self-sufficient. I met a person on campus who gave the complete tour of the grand premises. He shared with me that he has dedicated 50 years of his life working for the Barefoot Movement. It truly showed his sheer commitment and passion to devote his time for various social causes in different sectors. At times, I wonder what ignites and motivates such people to commit their whole life to an undying cause that is close to their heart.

One of the brief interactions I had was with the enthusiastic women enrolled in the Solar Mama Program. The women learn to make solar lanterns to introduce electricity in isolated areas and their own villages, too. These women are a beacon of inspiration and they mustered courage to come to the center, stay there for 6 months, some of them stay with their children, to become self-reliant and with a substantial purpose of disseminating light to rural areas. I met a woman with a child and I asked her did your family support you in coming here? She readily said yes. I was content to know that her family, especially her husband, supports her in doing what she loves. She dreams of her daughter studying and achieving big goals in life. Another woman, who was the head of the program, I asked her the same question and her response was the same. I could decipher the change in the mindset of families and husbands in letting women move outside their houses to pursue their dreams and financially support their families. Initially, the program trained both men and women, however; it was observed that after training men tend to migrate to other cities to establish themselves. While women stick to their communities to bolster, elevate, and transform them. This is the enthralling logic behind merely involving women in the program.

At first, I could not believe that these women were learning how to connect wires, understanding the concepts of AC (Alternating Current), DC (Direct Current) and whatnot. The interesting part was that some of these women were illiterate and I was dumbfounded. One of the core values of the Barefoot College is not to differentiate between literate and illiterate. If you have the curiosity and the will to make a change in communities, the college will happily condone you. Furthermore, when I saw their notebooks filled with the basic concepts of Physics, my mind went back to the memory of myself in class 11th studying Physics. It was a refreshing feeling!

The campus had a couple of dogs and how I can shy away from petting them. I even made two dog friends who just wanted love and cuddling throughout the tour. Another belief that grabbed my attention was, while interacting with the doctors in the medical section, one of them mentioned that to resolve any problem you first must live through it to find a solution. It kind of stuck with me and pushed me to deep dive into it.

From visiting the children's classroom to speaking with community members to interacting with the members of the medical and botanical sections, the college had it all. The people of Tilonia have built a family within the campus that trusts and respects each other. This trip made me realize that I must break the barriers and fears that I have been holding onto for a long time and besides, it is imperative to support

organizations who are doing bona fide work to uplift the underprivileged communities and striving towards the betterment of society.

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