

Shri Sanjit Roy

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Application of Science and Technology for Rural Development-1985

Shri Sanjit Roy popularly called “Bunker” Roy was born in 1946 in an upper middle-class Bengali family. He was educated at elitist institutions Doon School and St. Stephen's College (Delhi) where he had a distinguished academic career. He was also India's Squash Champion 3 times. Life was thus smooth and comfortable for him with prospects of a promising career ahead. But he renounced it to undertake innovative work of introducing scientific yet simple systems and programmes to change the life of rural people of India. His work in Tilonia and its surrounding areas in Rajasthan has earned him national as well as international recognition.

Sheer curiosity prompted Roy to accompany some College friends who went to Bihar to do relief work during the 1966-67 famine. It was the first time he had seen hunger and death at close quarters. He returned determined to dedicate his life to rural development, a resolve which met with angry protest from his mother. But Sanjit was unmoved.

For a while he worked with Catholic Relief Services and Rajasthan Emergency Water and Agricultural Development Society (REWARDS) on their water development programmes in Rajasthan. During this period he realized that while water was an important problem for the farmers, the real need was to educate farmers and train them in modern agricultural methods, better health care, etc, in the absence of which development was bound to be limited and lopsided. Roy was thus motivated to start a project of his own.

He spent a year and a half traveling all over the country, studying the work of voluntary agencies and formulating his own plans. Finally in 1972, at the age of 26, he established the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) in Tilonia, a village with 1600 population, in one of the eight panchayati samitis of Ajmer the Silora Panchayat Samiti. The SWRC serves as the base for providing services to about 100 villages covering 1300 square kilometers.

The main objectives of the SWRC are : to promote integrated approach to rural development, to make voluntary social work more and more professionalized; to provide basic technical and socio-economic services to villagers from one centre; to train rural youth with a view to transferring skills and knowledge from urban areas thus eventually making village communities self-reliant ; to encourage the rural poor to organize themselves and also to provide institutional support to them so that they become aware of and claim their rights.

The Centre has its central campus of about 45 acres at Tilonia and 5 field centres at Kotri, Chota Narayana, Nalu, Kadamoura and Paranda. There are about 130 workers who devote their full time to the cause of rural uplift. The entire area is mainly desert land, where all sorts of problems and difficulties exist scarcity of water, saline and alkaline soil, lack of transport, electricity, roads, means of communication, etc.

Tilonia's target group is the rural poor. They specifically include scheduled castes, Harijans, landless labourers, small and marginal farmers, rural artisans and rural womenfolk. As for the children, SWRC concentrates more on pre-Primary school going children and drop-out kids. The Centre's activities mostly cater to people below the poverty line, who form more than 40% of the 1 lakh people living in its area of operation.

The SWRC programmes include the following : development of water supply for irrigation and drinking ground water survey, drilling and construction of wells, installation of pumps; development of land allotted to scheduled castes, harijans and landless labourers provision of

technological inputs, credit and marketing services; spread of education, especially for small children and drop-outs; health education and preventive and curative health services; providing self employment for weaker sections and women by starting rural industries; upgrading traditional skills through training, designing help, credit and marketing; promotion of appropriate technology appliances like solar cookers and heaters, bio-gas, windmills; animal husbandry; communication through audio-visual and puppetry media. Separate sections have been set up for these programmes at Tilonia having linkages with field centres, ensuring decentralization as well as coordination.

The beneficiaries of these programmes themselves are involved in planning, implementing and monitoring them, for which they interact with the urban specialists of the Centre. This access to professional services has given them knowledge and confidence, which has put an end to the exploitation to which they were subjected earlier.

What makes Tilonia different is its professional approach to rural development. Over the years it has been able to attract young professionals like doctors, teachers, engineers, geologists, geophysicists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists and trained nurses, social workers, designers and extension workers. Besides, Tilonia itself has trained para-professionals required for the field work. All these functionaries meet once every month for dialogue and coordination of work.

The professionals are brought into closer contact with the reality of rural India, as they have to live and work under difficult physical conditions, without facilities like electricity and running water. This necessity involves inconvenience, but they accept it because it is consistent with the way of life of the villagers.

Another notable aspect of Sanjit Roy's work is the effort to replicate the Tilonia model in other parts of the country. So far such projects have been initiated in 10 more States. For this purpose, workers from these States stayed in Tilonia and were trained in all respects.

Tilonia can thus certainly claim to have shown the way. This has been possible primarily because of Roy's inspiring leadership. When he set out on his mission, many thought that he was thinking too big. But he has proved them wrong.

One should also gratefully remember the contribution which his wife, Aruna Roy, has made to Roy's success. She gave up her post in the IAS and has been whole-heartedly supporting Sanjit in his work. The identity of purpose and harmony which exists between them has sustained the Tilonia experiment.

On his future plans, Sanjit Roy observes: "Gradually we would like to move even further, from providing services to being catalysts for social change. An old proverb puts it well : 'Give me a fish and I eat for a day; teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime'. That's what we are trying to do at Tilonia."

