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Bunker Roy: A Tribute from a 'Ladakhi'

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A personal tribute to Bunker Roy, one of the pioneers of the NGO activism of the 1970s who established what has become the Barefoot College in Tilonia, Rajasthan.

My first memory of meeting Sanjit "Bunker" Roy goes back to 1980, when I was still in high school. My brother had just joined the Social Work and Research Centre (or SWRC, as the Barefoot College was then called) in Tilonia, Ajmer district of Rajasthan, set up by Bunker. We needed farewell gifts for the outgoing students of Class 12. My brother came up with the idea of gifting them Tilonia-made handicrafts. I soon found myself in a small flat in Delhi's Usha Niketan to pick up the presents. Bunker had himself come to the city with this and other material. He was clearly happy and beaming that Tilonia products were being purchased for school farewell presents. I could tell he approved of the idea though I don't remember what he said. The encounter made an impression clearly, as this is one memory which hasn't dimmed with time.

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Over time, I learnt more about this towering figure, about how he left his privileges behind him to carry out the pioneering work of empowering poor people in the villages and never looked back.

Bunker's life was a response to a churn in the 1960s through the 1980s in India, which gave several after him the courage to walk the same path. The churn was everywhere. And you could not remain unaffected by it. There were famines, drought, poverty and unemployment. In poor, ordinary people there was a sense of being cheated-independence from colonial rule had benefitted only a few. The state had not only failed the marginalised, it had shown itself to be the "soulless machine" that the Father of the Nation had warned about.

Among the many young people who wanted to change this dismal state of affairs was Bunker. He felt that constructive action, in the spirit of Gandhi, was the path to this change which had to begin in the remote rural hinterlands of India, where the majority lived.

The Beginning

Bunker was born to privilege and had no reason to walk the path he did. He went to the elite Doon School, and then to St. Stephen's College, Delhi. He was an accomplished sportsperson who had won the National Squash Championship three times. By all accounts, his life was set and he would have moved forward like so many of his contemporaries did. But life had different plans for him. He volunteered to do relief work in Bihar during the drought in 1966-67 and was shaken to the core by what he saw there. So much that he decided to give his life a radical new direction and dedicate himself to serving the poor. By making this extreme choice he defied conventional wisdom. Most people born to such privilege would not make such a choice.



Once Bunker had made up his mind, there was no stopping him. In 1972, he started SWRC in a small, abandoned government building in Tilonia. He was married to Aruna Roy, his batchmate from Delhi University, who joined the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in 1970. In 1974, she made an even more unheard-of choice back then, of quitting the service and joining Bunker full time at the SWRC. Aruna later set up with her comrades, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, which became pivotal in the passage of the Right to Information Act and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

Focus of Work

When he first went to Tilonia, the most urgent task in front of Bunker was to ensure safe drinking water in the villages. He spent time drilling and installing handpumps to create drinking water sources which were safe for the people. Over time, as his involvement deepened, he realised that the area was rich in traditional handicrafts. He organised craftspersons, mostly Dalits and from the minority communities, into an independent organisation, the Hatheli Sansthan, which produced and marketed handicrafts and created employment for artisans. While installation of handpumps was needed, SWRC went on to train rural unemployed youth in repairing and maintaining handpumps as part of its Handpump Mistry Programme. In Bunker's vision, these were barefoot technicians and engineers, empowered to carry out seemingly difficult tasks and serve their communities.

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Over the years, SWRC's work expanded to many states, where Bunker established centres, which were carried forward by people from the area. SWRC morphed into Barefoot College, a knowledge institution, where the poor could come and learn to go back to serve and lead their own communities. Building on the success of the barefoot model, Bunker went on to pioneer the "Solar Mamas" programme, training women who had never been to school, in the design and installation of solar lanterns. This initiative spread across the Global South, providing electricity to thousands of homes in rural areas.

In its early years, SWRC had become a kind of rite of passage for educated urban youth who wanted to do something to change things in the country. They left their homes and headed to Tilonia. Their mostly middle-class parents would worry about their future. But in answering their worries, these youngsters would draw courage from Bunker and Aruna's example. By all accounts, Bunker gave everyone space to do and learn by doing and not worry about making mistakes. Many of this original group of people moved on after a few years, carrying their experience with them inside. Bunker would never forget them, as he always had the softest of spots for those who had been part of the Tilonia story at some point.

People in Charge

As the work of SWRC grew, Bunker increasingly felt that the core of this work would need to be carried forward by the people of the villages themselves. And his work with these same people had shown him how much wisdom they have. It disabused him of any notion of being an educated messiah of sorts. He constantly reinforced this fact with whoever he met, particularly those in government-we need to learn from the people, our role is to help them articulate what they know and support them to take charge of their lives. He was especially exasperated with the bureaucracy who did not understand and perhaps did not want to understand what being poor in India meant. In a film made by some of us for Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART-one of the many institutions which emerged from his vision for rural development articulated in the 7th Five Year Plan [1985-90] of the then Planning Commission), Bunker said it should be made mandatory for all officers of government to spend a few days in a village at regular intervals, not going there as high-ranking officers, or to "teach" villagers, but to learn from them.

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His unwavering belief in the wisdom of the people found expression in the Handpump Mistry Programme pioneered by him at the SWRC. In the early 1980s UNICEF started advocating the use of the India Mark II Handpump as a solution to the drinking water problem in rural India. But while handpumps were being installed, what would happen once they fell into disrepair? The question was answered by a truly transformative idea at that time-local youth should be trained to become handpump mistries (mechanics), who would repair these handpumps and ensure safe drinking water supply in their villages. This idea was simple and brilliant at the same time, replicable at scale and life-saving in its impact for villages.



After a group of us from different parts of the country set up the Samaj Pragati Sahayog in the Adivasi villages of Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh in the early 1990s, amongst our first interventions was to organise training in handpump repair and maintenance at Tilonia for young Adivasi master trainers who came back and, in turn trained 45 adivasi youth, mostly women in the repair of handpumps. Earlier, in our area, due to unsafe drinking water, about 20 to 25 infant deaths were reported every monsoon. The trained mechanics took over the upkeep of handpumps with dramatic results-no infant deaths were reported by the Block Health Officer in 1995.

Even before Samaj Pragati Sahayog was set up, a few of us, fresh out of university, were exploring what to do and met Bunker. At his suggestion, we came up with a plan for water conservation for his new centre at Kargil, Ladakh for the revival of the traditional "khul" system (surface water channels) for irrigation (we became "Ladakhis" for Bunker!). Bunker was always supportive of those he felt had a desire to make a difference and would find a way to help them, even newbies like us.

Mainstreaming Civil Society Work

Bunker understood that his work could only become mainstream if it became part of state policy. He got this opportunity when his Doon School friend, Rajiv Gandhi, became Prime Minister of India. Bunker framed, as part of the 7th Five-Year Plan (1985-90), the key role that voluntary organisations could play in India's fight against poverty. The policy drafted by him and integrated into the Plan, defines a role and framework for recognising the unique contributions made by voluntary organisations and leveraging their strengths to take India's socio-economic goals forward.

Bunker was also active in conceptualising and rolling out the various technology missions that the Government of India had initiated then, particularly on immunisation, literacy, and drinking water, believing that modern technology belonged rightfully in the hands of the people to be understood, used, and leveraged for their own good.

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Integrating the role of non-state players in the state's plan was a huge step, but in the 7th Plan, Bunker also proposed the adoption of a code of conduct for voluntary organisations and strongly supported the idea of a national-level agency which would provide oversight to the sector and recommend good voluntary organisations to the government. There was pushback from his contemporaries as these were seen as attempted solutions which would create even more problems. This led to a rich and vigorous debate across the country and eventually the idea was shelved.

Many of his contemporaries would also disagree with the path he chose-the approach to civil society as "deliverers" of change. Is it a way to depoliticise civil society activism and make them pawns in a larger imperialist plan, as the Left suggests? Could there be genuine change without people's organisations and struggles? Should civil society actors not spend their time pressing the state into action rather than doing things themselves?

Civil society activities/activism and state action do not exist in silos, nor are they mutually exclusive. Each of these approaches represents a unique perspective in a larger moral-ethical universe. It is difficult to say which path is inherently superior. Bunker's role can best be described as someone who opened up the way for others to break the mould; someone who supported those willing to walk this path; and someone who understood clearly and brought to the centre stage of the development debate, poor people and their knowledge, and accorded them the dignity which should always anyway have been theirs.

Remembering Bunker

We "Ladakhis" at SPS always remember Bunker very fondly. Thinking about him invariably brings back images of a person full of energy, deeply impatient to get things done, zipping about on his blue Rajdoot GTS motorcycle, not given to talking much, but with a vibrant sense of humour.

Today, as the world becomes more divided, the spaces for building common ground and narratives shrink and the regulatory environment becomes tighter for civil society action, Bunker's life and work become increasingly important. Constructive action is about surmounting these barriers by coming together, sharing, building internal strength and external solidarity. As the going gets tough, it is important to remember Bunker's mantra-"Bash on regardless".

Pramathesh Ambasta has been active in the civil society space for four decades.