

GOOD LIFE / PUBLICATION

## Designing A Good Life in Rural Rajasthan

By Ellen Fish

Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed. –Mahatma Gandhi

### Executive Summary

For more than 40 years, the “Barefoot College” has been working to improve the quality of life for the poorest of the poor in rural India. The college addresses basic human needs with a “learning by doing,” community-based strategy that promotes environmental and economic sustainability. This approach combines traditional rural knowledge with demystified modern technology to create lasting impact and fundamental change in impoverished communities. Since 2003, the Barefoot College has been operating [www.tilonia.com](http://www.tilonia.com) in partnership with US-based, Friends of Tilonia, Inc., for the sale and marketing of the Tilonia product line of handcrafted, artisan-produced home textiles, women’s accessories and gifts. Operated and maintained by Barefoot business managers in India, this e-commerce platform has opened up new income opportunities for the more than 400 artisans it supports.

Tilonia is a small village in the desert regions of Rajasthan, India. It is home of the Barefoot College (the College), which for nearly 40 years has been working to improve the quality of life for the poorest of the poor in rural India.



### Design Opportunity: Being Illiterate and Poor is no Barrier

Ordinary people written off by society because they are labeled as poor, primitive, backward and impoverished are achieving extraordinary results. What the Barefoot College (the “College”) so effectively demonstrates is how the combination of traditional knowledge and demystified modern technology can bring lasting impact and fundamental change to impoverished communities when the tools are in the control and ownership of those they aim to benefit.

Designed around Gandhian principles of mutual respect and equality, the College addresses basic human needs through a community-based strategy. The College trains illiterate and semi-

literate women and men who earn less than \$1 per day as Barefoot professionals.

The College was designed to provide an alternative to charity and to enable communities to help themselves. Because literacy and paper qualifications are not required, their model is being replicated outside of India in countries such as Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bolivia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda and others. Illiterate and semi-literate students, elected by their communities, come to the College to learn the skills necessary to bring environmentally and economically sustainable change to their villages.

Barefoot professionals trained by the College work within their communities to:

- Build and maintain rainwater harvesting systems for clean drinking water, and solar
- power systems for lighting and cooking;

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- Provide preventive health services to tackle malaria, tuberculosis, AIDS and water-borne diseases;
- Construct geodesic domes for housing, night schools and community centers;
- Create opportunities for employment
- by marketing and selling artisan-made products;
- Empower illiterate women by training them to become Barefoot solar and water engineers;
- Educate the working children of the rural poor by running night schools staffed by Barefoot teachers and managed by the children's parliament and village education committees; and
- Protect the environment by reducing the need for fossil fuels, conserving rainwater, recharging groundwater and reclaiming wasteland.
- Living conditions at the College are simple, creating a sense of ownership and ease. Working relationships depend upon mutual trust, tolerance and generosity. By applying the traditional knowledge and skills the semi-literate rural poor already possess for the development of their own communities, they live and work with self-respect and dignity.

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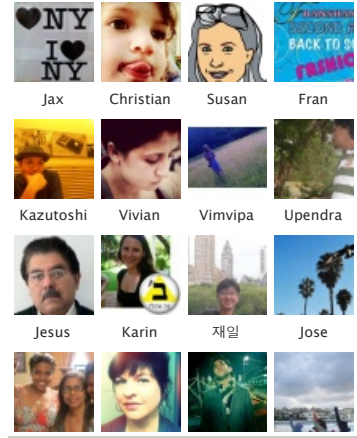
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## » Strategy In Action

**Empower** communities to help themselves

**Demystify** modern technology and respect indigenous knowledge to create lasting impact and change

**Educate** through “learning-by-doing” and ignore paper qualifications

**Create** opportunities for employment through marketing and sale of artisan-made products

**Protect** the environment

**Design** a life of quality, dignity and mutual respect

## Paper Qualifications are not Required

The Barefoot College believes the very poor have every right to control, manage and own the most sophisticated of technologies to improve their own lives. Just because they cannot read and write, there is no reason that the very poor cannot be water and solar engineers, designers, communicators, teachers, midwives, dentists, architects and e-commerce entrepreneurs.

“Learning by doing” — a familiar practice in design — is the philosophy used in training. Practical demonstrations, “hands-on” experience and regular repetition over many months help trainees get familiar with terms, tools, equipment and components used in any of the sophisticated technologies which have been “de-mystified” and “de-centralized” in the Barefoot approach to design, learning and community development.

The approach challenges an assumption associated with technology and learning. It proves that “paper qualifications” are not required to become a Barefoot professional – whether a solar or water engineer, mid-wife, dentist, teacher, designer or business manager. This approach also eliminates the dependency on outside aid or assistance as Barefoot professionals working within their communities are self-sufficient and community supported.

“The approach challenges an assumption associated with technology and learning.”





## Managing an Online, Artisan Enterprise from an Indian Village

Since 2003, in partnership with the US-based, Friends of Tilonia, Inc., the Barefoot College has operated the online enterprise, [www.Tilonia.com](http://www.Tilonia.com), for the sale and marketing of the Tilonia product line of handcrafted, artisan-produced home textiles, women's accessories and gifts.

More than 400 artisans, most of them women, earn supplemental income through sewing, needlework, embroidery, tie-dying, block printing and weaving. Designs and production methods draw on Indian craft traditions that are centuries old – but create modern, and otherwise unavailable, opportunities for these illiterate and semi-literate women.

The women of Tilonia tell their stories of breaking with traditional practices of purdah (the practice of concealing women from men) and child marriages. They are “open” and do not cover their faces with a veil while working on the College campus. They send their daughters, as well as their sons, to school. Kailesh Kanwar, one of the women working on the Barefoot College campus, smiles proudly when she tells of traveling to major Indian cities, like Delhi, Mumbai or Bangalore, for Tilonia Bazaars to sell Tilonian products to urban markets. The courage of these women in the face of initial opposition from their families has created economic opportunities for them and the women in their villages who work together, regardless of caste.

*“The approach  
challenges an assumption associated  
with technology and learning.”*

The business management team for [Tilonia.com](http://www.Tilonia.com) is all “graduates” of the night schools the Barefoot College operates for the benefit of children who work during the day tending animals, fetching water or managing other household chores.

Pokhar Mal comes from a tiny hamlet ten kilometers from the main road. His father herds goats. Pokhar manages the online sales and customer service for [Tilonia.com](http://www.Tilonia.com). He learned English and how to use computers while working at the Barefoot College.

Badri is the business manager for the rural industries section of the College. He manages a production team, warehouse staff and field center production teams which produce the Tilonia line of home furnishings, gift and décor items, clothing and accessories. He too, is a “graduate” of the College's night schools and is proud of the work and opportunities that the College facilitates. He organizes the sales events in the small shop on campus as well as exhibition sales held in major Indian cities.





# A Life of Dignity and Mutual Respect

None of the business management team for Tilonia.com has ever been to a government school, and thus none of them have the school certificate necessary for a government job. They come from rural communities of shepherds and subsistence farmers in Rajasthan where the only option for livelihood during years of drought would be to migrate to the slums in overcrowded cities looking for work as common laborers.

In Tilonia, their life and work have been completely different. It has been one designed to encourage and support learning, opportunity — and more importantly, a life of dignity and mutual respect.

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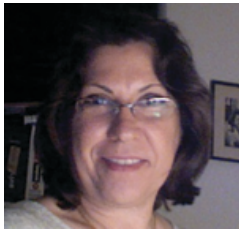
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Barefoot College videos on YouTube:  
[www.youtube.com/barefootcollege](http://www.youtube.com/barefootcollege)

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## Contributor Biography



### Ellen Fish

Executive Director  
of Friends of Tilonia

Ellen is founder and director of Friends of Tilonia, Inc. which takes its name from Tilonia, a small village in India that is home to the Barefoot College.

Working with the Barefoot College, Ellen and a team of Barefoot e-commerce managers

have developed an online enterprise, Tilonia.com, to market artisan products directly to international buyers. With a direct-to-buyer model, these artisan producers earn a greater percent of product sales than through traditional export channels and are empowered to build and manage their own enterprises, creating value in owning their brand and distribution channels.

Ellen has over 20 years experience in developing new businesses. Ellen held a number of business roles with Standard & Poor's and other financial information firms managing product launches generating more than \$35 million in new product revenues.

Ellen is a member of Investors' Circle, a network of impact investors, and mentors start-ups at Pratt Design Incubator and NYU's Stern School of Business.

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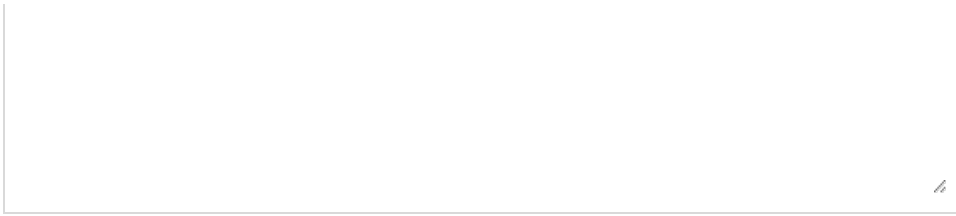
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