A Tribute to Bunker Roy: The Man Who Turned Village Grandmothers into Solar Engineers

By Wayne Visser

Sanjit “Bunker” Roy, who taught illiterate grandmothers to become solar engineers, passed away peacefully this morning at his home in Tilonia, Rajasthan, aged 81.[1] I first encountered his work not in India, but in the rain forests of Borneo.

It was October 2016, and as night fell, the surrounding Borneo tropical rain forest had come alive with noise, dominated by the trill of frogs and the rhythmic pulse of cicadas. I was about to embark on the Sabah study tour of the Emerging Leaders Dialogue Asia (ELDA). Over the next two weeks, we would visit timber plantations, mountain communities recovering from a deadly earthquake, and marine parks.

But undoubtedly the highlight for me was discovering the inspiring story of Barefoot College, which trains village grandmothers to be solar engineers. On our first evening, while enjoying a mini feast of banana fritters, pomelo, and langsat (a bit like lychees but more delicious), we were told about the college’s remarkable partnership with the Sabah Women Entrepreneurs and Professionals Association (SWEPA) in Borneo.

Barefoot College was the brainchild of Bunker Roy, and he was an unlikely revolutionary. Born into privilege in Bengal in 1945, he was educated at the Doon School and St Stephen’s College, Delhi—two of India’s most elite institutions—and was a national squash champion. A conventional career beckoned. Then, during the Bihar famine of the mid-1960s, he saw rural poverty firsthand, and his life changed course.[2] When he told his mother he wanted to live and work in a village, he later joked, she “went into a coma” and didn’t speak to him for a long time.[3]

In 1972, Roy settled in Tilonia, a dusty village in Rajasthan, and founded the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC), which later became known as Barefoot College. Its rules turned conventional education on its head. Anyone with a university degree was disqualified from studying there, and no degrees were awarded. In 2011, Roy said that nobody at the college earned more than $100 a month. The campus itself was built in 1986 by a dozen local “barefoot architects” who could not read or write, and it went on to win an Aga Khan Award for Architecture. At the college’s night schools, children aged 6 to 14 elect their own prime minister and cabinet.[4]

Roy’s guiding conviction was simple: “There is no urban solution to a rural problem.”[5] He was awarded the Padma Shri, one of India’s highest civilian honors, in 1986, and named one of Time magazine’s 100 most influential people in 2010.[6] He is survived by his wife, Aruna Roy, the former civil servant who led the grassroots movement behind India’s Right to Information Act.[7]

The positive impact of his work has been immense. By the college’s own count at its 50th anniversary in 2022, it had trained 1,708 illiterate and semi-literate rural women from 96 countries as solar engineers, bringing light to more than a million people in over 75,000

households and saving about 45 million liters of kerosene. Its rainwater harvesting had captured some 70 billion liters and brought safe drinking water to more than 1,650 schools. More than 90,000 working children had studied in its night schools, and its barefoot health workers had treated over 300,000 patients.[8]

During our study tour, SWEPA arranged for us to meet one of Barefoot College's beneficiaries, a so-called solar mama. She was part of the program that takes illiterate grandmothers from poor rural villages and, within six months, trains them at the college in India for their new job. They return to their villages to install and maintain full solar lighting systems. Roy deliberately chose grandmothers because they are rooted in their communities; men and younger people, he found, were more likely to take their new skills and leave for the city.[9] Because the women shared no common language, much of the training was done through sign language and hands-on practice.[10]

Malaysia's first solar mama—very likely the woman I met that evening—was Tarihing Masanim, from Kampung Sonsogon Magandai, near Kota Marudu in Sabah. She completed her training in India in 2015 and returned to bring electricity to around 100 homes in her village.[11] Roy loved to tell stories like hers. One of his favorites was about a 55-year-old Afghan grandmother who electrified 200 houses and set an Afghan engineering department head straight on the difference between AC and DC.[12]

The story of the solar mamas captures many elements of what it means to harness the power of responsibility to create a more inclusive society and economy. So many barriers are being broken through, as these amazing women challenge stereotypes about age, gender, and rural capacity. Barefoot College shows that sustainable development—including adopting sustainable technologies—is an option for people living with low incomes in remote villages. The Barefoot model empowers people to be agents of their own destiny.

Bunker Roy stands out as an inspiring example of inclusive leadership. His impact, which is so strongly evidenced by the solar engineers program, is as much about restoring dignity to those who are traditionally excluded as it is about developing or transferring practical skills. Roy, who said he had "a very elitist, snobbish, expensive education in India" that "almost destroyed" him, explained:

> *"So we started the Barefoot College, and we redefined professionalism. Who is a professional? A professional is someone who has a combination of competence, confidence and belief. A water diviner is a professional. A traditional midwife is a professional. A traditional bone setter is a professional. These are professionals all over the world. You find them in any inaccessible village around the world. And we thought that these people should come into the mainstream and show that the knowledge and skills that they have is universal."*[13]

Roy ended that talk with a line often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, whose principles guided his life's work: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, and then you win."[14] For the solar mamas of Barefoot College, and for the more than a million people whose homes they have lit, Bunker Roy won.

This article draws from content in Wayne Visser's book Thriving: The Breakthrough Movement to Regenerate Nature, Society, and the Economy (New York: Fast Company Press). For more information, see waynevisser.com.

References

1. "Legendary Activist Bunker Roy, Founder of the Barefoot College, Dies at 81," *The Wire*, November 10, 2026, https://m.thewire.in/article/rights/activist-bunker-roy-founder-of-the-barefoot-college-dies-at-81.
2. "Bunker Roy, Who Taught Illiterate Grandmothers to Become Solar Engineers, Dies at 81," *ThePrint*, November 10, 2026, https://theprint.in/feature/bunker-roy-who-taught-illiterate-grandmothers-to-become-solar-engineers-dies-at-81/3094899/.
3. Bunker Roy, "Learning from a Barefoot Movement," TEDGlobal 2011, Edinburgh, July 14, 2011, video, https://www.ted.com/talks/bunker_roy_learning_from_a_barefoot_movement.
4. Roy, "Learning from a Barefoot Movement."
5. "Bunker Roy, Who Taught Illiterate Grandmothers," *ThePrint*.
6. "Legendary Activist Bunker Roy," *The Wire*.
7. "Founder of Barefoot College and 'Man Who Took Gandhi Literally', Bunker Roy Passes Away," *The South First*, November 10, 2026, https://thesouthfirst.com/beyond-south/founder-of-barefoot-college-and-man-who-took-gandhi-literally-bunker-roy-passes-away/.
8. Social Work and Research Centre, *The Barefoot College Tilonia: 50th Year Anniversary* (Tilonia, Rajasthan: SWRC, 2022), https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/1709/7401/files/BarefootCollegeTilonia50th.pdf.
9. "Bunker Roy, Who Taught Illiterate Grandmothers," *ThePrint*.
10. Roy, "Learning from a Barefoot Movement."
11. "The Barefoot Solar Engineer: An Illiterate Grandma's Journey to Save Her Sabah Village," *Malay Mail*, October 4, 2014.
12. Roy, "Learning from a Barefoot Movement."
13. Roy, "Learning from a Barefoot Movement."
14. Roy, "Learning from a Barefoot Movement."

Source:
First published on CleanTechnica, 10 November 2026. Available at:
https://cleantechnica.com/2026/11/10/a-tribute-to-bunker-roy-the-man-who-turned-village-grandmothers-into-solar-engineers/