

the green academy

Tucked away in Madhya Pradesh's Jhabua district, the Bhil Academy is teaching its students life's biggest lesson - living sustainably and ecologically. Green Life gets the heartening details from Nyamat Bindra, the Director of Education, Real Medicine Foundation.

words by **Isha Singh Sawhney**





In the spring of 2010, the Bhil Academy began its journey towards eco-awareness and self-sustainability. This residential school in the hinterlands of tribal Southwest Madhya Pradesh, in the Jhabua district with over 300 students, has given local children a fighting chance to break out of the cycle of poverty their parents are stuck in. A fighting chance deeply embedded in a strong ethos of ecologically responsible lifestyles. Renewable green energy provides children with light during electricity-less nights, organic kitchen gardens feed them with fresh, pesticide-free food and strict composting keeps the soil continually nourished.

Working in MP's Jhabua district with the highest percentage of tribal population in Central India, in one of the country's poorest regions hasn't been easy. Illiteracy, disease outbreaks, drought, soil erosion and overpopulation resulting in migration, make this district one of the most challenging regions for development work. The Bhil tribe is a proud and ancient ethnic group inhabiting the Western part of Central India with the highest concentration in Jhabua district of MP. Yet, their colourful communal lives face the challenge of living in a hostile environment ravaged by drought and outbreaks of diseases. Poor infrastructure, unplanned development, aggressive capitalism and lack of academic institutions further aggravate their situation.

In 2006, Real Medicine Foundation partnered with local NGO BHILS to open Bhil Academy. The LA based NGO, RMF works on a module, inspired from work with the Asian Tsunami relief efforts, that looks at moving beyond traditional humanitarian aid programs by creating long-term solutions to health care and poverty. Founded in May 2005, RMF creates long-term sustainable solutions to health care and related issues, by focusing on sustainable development and capacity building.



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In Jhabua, the Bhil Academy is spread over a lush green two-acre canvas complete with dormitories. "Children are taught in English; a language essential to be able to work in any services industries or continue university studies in nursing, medicine, engineering and agriculture. After studying at the Academy from kindergarten to the eighth grade, students from the most rural parts of MP are fluent in English, Hindi, and their native Bhili, prepped with a multitude of skills and are superbly confident. Children play sports, create theater, sing their traditional songs, dance to Bollywood music, learn handicrafts, go on picnics, and even watch BBC News (English) every night via satellite TV," reveals Bindra, director of education at Real Medicine Foundation.

Green Energy at the Bhil Academy
Little by little, renewable green energy has become a part of the Bhil Academy. With the hard work and dedication of donors, volunteers, and partners, the school is becoming greener in every way.

Organic Kitchen Garden and Composting Bins
Founded to combat injustices in rural communities around the globe, Project REV (Revitalising and Empowering Villages) was founded by Phil Ebner and Vince Patin, from Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, in the spring of 2010. Their first project focused in Jhabua. Ebner, 21, and Patin, 22, contacted Dr. Martina Fuchs CEO, Real Medicine Foundation to see how they could help in Jhabua, with sustainable projects. Despite an initial rejection for \$10,000 scholarship from the Strauss Foundation, Ebner and Patin didn't give up. They raised money from grants from their school, LAMB Energy and even by selling t-shirts and having a garage sale. The \$10,000 raised went towards airfare, preparation, supplies, and the actual implementation of the project at the Bhil Academy.

Along with realising the children's most popular desire for a kitchen garden, Project REV also developed an idea for compost tumblers, to create organic waste for the garden. "We wanted to create sustainable solutions for the school," said Ebiner, "We realised the kids weren't eating a healthy variety of food, clearly lacking colorful vegetables. Having a garden would solve this dilemma." During its 3 weeks, Project REV, also completely installed solar ovens, had the plumbing, white-walling and floor-polishing done, mosquito-proofed the windows, bought over \$1000 of medical supplies and built a divider at the new Health Center.

With steady donations from Project REV and local volunteers, the school was soon able to grow their own crops, and provide a valuable learning activity for the children. After levelling the plot of land, building a fence to keep the cows, goats and dogs out, the school bought nutrient-rich soil, watering-pipes and seeds. Soon, lentils, pumpkins, eggplants, spinach, cucumbers, tomatoes, radishes, cabbages, and lady-fingers will all be a part of the garden, and the children's diets.

Post feeding 320 children everyday, there is bound to be food left over. So, to teach children conservationism and recycling, organic waste is collected in compost drums and after decomposing, used to enrich the soil of the garden.

Renewable Energy

In Jhabua, electricity is scarce and typically only available for a few hours a day. After the sun went down, the children could do little but go to sleep: children could not study at night or even walk to the toilets because of the darkness. On 26 January 2011, eV Renewables enterprise from Hyderabad installed solar panels at the Bhil Academy.



After a brief introduction of how to maintain the panels by the staff of eV Renewables, the 9th class children are now responsible for the maintenance of the solar panels and the supply of solar electricity to the school.



Bindra explains how with donations from Alok Brara and India Infrastructure and the team of eV Renewables, their students finally have light at night. "The solar panels are able to provide the entire school with at least six hours of steady electricity. In addition to the solar panels, Loop Environmental Solutions supplied the school with portable lanterns. These lanterns not only light up the girls hostel, but also provide essential portable lights for the children to walk between buildings in case of an emergency."

After a brief introduction of how to maintain the panels by the staff of eV Renewables, the 9th class children are now responsible for the maintenance of the solar panels and the supply of solar electricity to the school. Paving the way for the workings of a true democratic society. Future Plans for further sustainability include rainwater harvesting and a project to plant 377 saplings by the children as a boundary wall.