

Embracing the power of the sun

Part five of our series showcasing people who believe in the idea of India. Presenting social entrepreneur Harish Hande, co-founder Selco-India, that is electrifying rural India with solar power. Hande seeks to make solar power available for the poor everywhere

Shruti Goutam

While travelling through the Dominican Republic in the early 1990s, solar energy expert Dr H Harish Hande noticed that large swathes of the Latin American country was lit up using solar energy. Not just that, he was surprised to find that poor people were willing to pay for it. For Hande, the path was clear: he wanted to replicate this in India. Today, the innovator, winner of a slew of awards for work in sustainable energy solutions and often named among Indian pioneers of change, wants to make solar power available to the poor everywhere.

Hande co-founded the Solar Electric Light Company (Selco-India) along with Neville Williams, a pioneer in solar energy, in 1995. The idea was to electrify India's large countryside, reeling under almost complete darkness. Today, Selco has installed solar lighting systems in over 85,000 households in rural Karnataka and Gujarat, the two states in which it has established networks.

Born in Bangalore, Hande grew up in Rourkela, Orissa's steel city. After an undergraduate degree in energy engineering from IIT-Kharagpur, Hande left for the University of Massachusetts, Lowell for an MS in the same subject. While working on his doctorate there, he did extensive field-



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—Anantha Subramanyam K

work in India and Sri Lanka. Hande's experience in these countries influenced him so much that he changed his thesis from a thoroughly technical one to that which put socio-economics at the forefront. "I veered from pure technology and considered starting a social enterprise," says Hande.

Power to the poor

Selco is a for-profit enterprise with a double mandate — fi-

nancial and social responsibility. In its 16th year, its mission is to make solar energy the primary source of power for the poor, Hande explains. The way forward for the company is not geographical expansion but the penetration of solar power lower down the economic strata, wherever that might be. "Selco is an open source programme and we want like-minded people to start similar ventures," he says.

India's social sector

According to Hande, frustration is good because "frustration motivates one to find better solutions". In businesses that operate within the social sector, such as Hande's, the biggest challenge is to find people who are passionate. "Money being the dominant factor in people's lives, it's hard to find people committed to a cause," he says.

The Indian bureaucracy

Why Bangalore?

Initially, Hande was torn between two choices: Karnataka, his native state, and Orissa where he grew up.

Since his parents were from Karnataka, he had relatives spread all over the state, so finally the prospect of "subsidised living" compelled him to set up shop in this state.

Owing to the well-established banking sector, Mangalore was where Selco began its operations. Eventually, owing to logistical reasons (colleagues who lived in Bangalore and availability of solar panels), Selco shifted base to Bangalore.

and the many roadblocks created by it is a given. "When we approach the government for appropriate policies, there are many glitches," he says. Ironically, he has noticed that it's easier for bigger industries to get policies that work in their favour, while enterprises in the social sector find it much tougher. Elaborating on that, Hande says, "The IT sector, which books huge profits and caters to the rich, gets land

subsidies and tax rebates but a social enterprise that makes lesser profit gets no concession on the tax front."

Destination India

"There are broadly two types of people returning to India," says Hande while admitting that he's slightly cynical about this trend. "One bunch has returned post-recession after being laid-off. For them, considering the fact that today's India is able to provide them with a certain quality of life, coming back made sense," he says.

But there are others who have returned with a genuine passion to bring in change. Interestingly, many of them have been influenced by their foreigner friends who come to India to work in the social sector. "Last year, Selco received nearly 300 applications for internship, out of which 80% were from foreigners. People like them come and live here and narrate their experiences to their Indian friends abroad. Indian students realise that they know a lot less about rural India than their American/British counterparts. And that brings them here," says Hande.

So, according to Hande, the credit must go to professors in the West who know so much more about India and students, who have visited India, for generating awareness about opportunities in rural India.

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