

'Somebody has to tell NRIs, Boss, we need your brains, not your cash'



A life-size poster of a poor family of five lights up the entrance to Harish Hande's office. The husband and wife are beaming — and the reason for the couple's broad smile is there for all to see. A small double tubelight is tied to their hut's thatched roof. For the first time, the family in Puttur in southern Karnataka has seen electricity in its house.

The poster leaves no doubt about 44-year-old Hande's mission in life. All that he seeks to do is bring electricity into the lives of the rural poor.

We are sitting in his chamber on the first floor of a two-storey bungalow, which is also the headquarters of his company, Selco-India, in a busy road in JP Nagar, Bangalore. The chamber itself is well-lit with natural light, and I watch the sun's rays as they dance on the balcony next to it.

Hande was in Manila recently to collect this year's Magsaysay award, but I notice nothing on that — no framed citation, and certainly no news clippings — in his chamber. But then I don't see any evidence of his other awards either — the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship (Switzerland) prize in 2007 or the Ashden Awards for Sustainable Energy that he won in 2005 and 2007, among many others.

The only time the Magsaysay award crops up in the conversation is when I bring it up. "We would basically like to encourage young social entrepreneurs through the award money. We want passionate youngsters who are ready to take risks and we are ready to fund them," he says. And he hopes that the award will open a few doors to the often closed rooms where government policies are made.

Hande, as the citation for the \$50,000 award says, has been "disproving the myth" that the poor cannot afford the best technology, or maintain and use it productively.

"It is exactly that, a myth. The poor are extremely practical, but they have been seen as beneficiaries, not as partners, which is sad," he says, running his fingers through his curly hair. He goes on to recount an incident that occurred 18 years ago and left a lasting impression on him.

"I was touring some villages in southern Karnataka when an old lady, probably in her seventies, touched my feet and said that she wanted to see electricity in her house before she died. Remarkably, she also emphasised that she would pay for it. I didn't know how to react," he recalls with an incredulous smile.

Since then, Hande and his company have brought light to almost 1,25,000 families, mostly in rural Karnataka. Selco-India, with 170 employees, targets rural families that earn Rs 2,000-3,000 a month and spend Rs 100-150 on kerosene and candles for lighting their homes, and an additional Rs 40 to charge their mobile phones.

"We tell them that they could have solar lighting in their houses for a cost, which they can pay in installments to rural banks," he says.

Sometimes, though, the cost of installing solar lights in a poor home can be more than the cost of the dwelling itself. But Hande stresses that the poor are ready to pay for electricity as long as they feel it is viable. "But governments don't get this simple fact," he says.

Governments, he stresses, are good at conceptualising "big" projects. "They throw big money and hope that it works," he says with a flip of his hand. "Why should everything be created in Delhi? Is there a single renewable energy ministry official who has been to a village to understand its real needs," he asks.

Then what is the way forward, I ask. He doesn't answer the question directly. "My director K.L. Chopra at IIT used to say that if information technology and electronics have



Harish Hande, who won the Ramon Magsaysay award recently for his work on bringing solar power to the rural poor, feels that understanding rural needs is the basis of ushering in development.

V. Kumara Swamy meets the man

to succeed in India, the IT departments have to be closed," he says with a wink.

I confront him saying that government-bashers like him criticise without seeming to understand the constraints that bind lawmakers. "We don't criticise them without giving solutions. That's the difference," he shoots back.

Hande has been working on solutions for quite a while, possibly even when he was studying for his undergraduate degree in energy engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology in Kharagpur.

But the engineer does not attach much importance to having studied in an IIT — the dream of thousands of students. "I got into an IIT because a lot of people who are intelligent did not sit for the entrance exam. Let us admit that 600 million people in India are not in competition with the other half. Imagine what will happen if you give the other half enough opportunities," he asks.

But those days, Hande was probably not as vehement. After finishing college, he left India to do his masters degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US in the early Nineties.

His world changed after a study trip to the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean where solar energy was used in the houses of the poor. "I always thought big during my research on solar energy, but after that trip, I began re-evaluating myself and decided to work in India at the level where it mattered, even as I pursued my PhD," he says.

Not that he thinks highly of his "paper degrees" either. "Education makes us more insecure, and it makes us take fewer risks in life," he says. Hande, however, did take risks.

Once back home, he toured Sri Lanka and India extensively. "What I learnt in the rural areas of these two countries became more

important than my masters and PhD — much more important," he says.

Quite like *Swades*, I point out, referring to the 2004 film which had a non-resident Indian (Shah Rukh Khan) on a similar mission.

"I don't fall into the *Swades* model," he replies. "I was very clear even before I left for the US that I would be back in India," he says pointedly. "Films like *Swades* glorify people who come back from the US, but we don't glorify the people who have done so much staying in India."

I realise the subject of non-resident Indians is a prickly one when Hande lets out some more steam. "Why do we glorify them so much when all they do is contribute some money to the IITs or other institutions? Somebody has to tell them, 'Boss, we need your brains not your cash,'" he says.

His own grey cells went into the formation of Selco-India, which he started with Rs 1,000 taken out of his PhD grant. But he is very clear that his company is not a non government organisation. His business, he asserts, has to be responsible in terms of financial, social and environmental sustainability. "All three are equally important for us. Success is not in terms of high profitability. We are highly successful in social impact but our margins are very low. Higher profits are not our motive," he says.

But success is not to be scoffed at either. The company had a turnover of around Rs 14.5 crore this year and hopes to cross Rs 16 crore next year.

Understanding rural needs and innovating products is the main job of the "innovations lab" that Hande has set up at Selco. His team has developed solar-fired headlamps for use in midwifery, flower plucking and silkworm rearing in rural areas and also solar-lit sewing machines and other such innovations. "Understanding individual needs is very important for us to succeed in rural areas. That's what we have been attempting in recent times."

Hande says he is selective when it comes to choosing people for Selco. "Before appointing someone, we ask ourselves, 'Is he or she the Selco-type?' When we like someone, we hire them even when there is no vacancy," he says.

And what exactly is the Selco-type, I ask. "Passion, that's what we need for people in this field," he says punching the air with his fist.

In the last 18 years Hande says that he has "never ever" thought of quitting and taking up something else despite facing several hurdles. "Quitting has never occurred to me. There have been frustrations and plenty of them, but they were not from a personal point of view. I always ask, do we have the time and do we have the solution? That is the motivation. Frustration is also a very big part of motivation," he says. It is for the first time that I notice the east Indian inflection in his accent when he pronounces the word "occurred" as "ochre-ed".

Hande explains that he was born in Bangalore, but grew up in Rourkela in Orissa where his father worked with the Steel Authority of India for 40 long years.

Hande himself is a father now — his son was born just after the Magsaysay Award was announced. His software engineer wife lives in Boston in the US with their eight-year-old daughter and the newborn.

"I have been selfish but my family has sacrificed a lot. There was a time when I used to meet my wife once in two years. It's now once in a few months," he says with a sheepish smile.

But then, let's not forget, he has his family with him too — right there at the entrance of his office. And beaming broadly.

Poet's corner

There was a name on the BBC Radio 4 programme, *Poetry Please*, that rang a bell — Carole Satyamurti.

I looked her up. It said she is a poet and sociologist who lives in London. She won the National Poetry Competition in 1986 and her forthcoming work is a translation from the Mahabharata.

She was obviously an Englishwoman but it was her surname that intrigued me. I asked my younger brother, Sumit, about one of his teachers, the late Prof. Satyamurthy (written slightly differently from Satyamurti), about whom he retained exceedingly fond memories.

Had his teacher ever been married?

Yes, said my brother, Prof. Satyamurthy had been married to a poet.

The name? "Carole — with an 'e'."

It is remarkable how inspirational teachers can make teaching the most noble of professions.

According to my brother, T.V. Satyamurthy, professor of politics at the University of York (UK), was a unique man.

"He was radical and clever and yet modest and humane with an enormous sense of humour," said Sumit. "I first met him as an undergraduate at York University when he was my supervisor during my early phase. He was strict and set high standards. His criticisms were mingled with deep sensitivity. He was amazingly well-read and published on a range of subjects from politics and history to sociology and culture of both the West and the East."

He could remember the man as though yesterday: "His critical, stimulating and encouraging re-

Scramble for loot in Libya



After 9/11 came George W. Bush's war in Iraq, supported by Tony Blair. It was followed by the battle for contracts to rebuild the country's shattered infrastructure.

First you knock it down, then you ask for money to rebuild that which you have knocked down.

Now on the anniversary of 9/11, when the media have been looking back to examine what lessons have been learnt over the past decade — not much, frankly — companies have been positioning themselves for what Shashank Joshi calls a possible "bonanza".

When the BBC went to talk to a Libya expert, the first person they telephone is probably Shashank. When he went back to his old Cambridge College, Gonville and Caius, to collect his MA, the Master, Sir Christopher Hum, joked publicly that Shashank was popping up everywhere.

Shashank was born in Bombay on Oc-



LIBYA GURU: Shashank Joshi

tober 24, 1985, came to London with his parents when he was three, attended Highgate School and then went up to Cambridge where he switched from economics to politics and got a starred First — that is, an exceptionally good First. From his privileged "set" of rooms, Shashank perhaps drew inspiration from observing Professor Stephen Hawking come and go, for the author of *A Brief History of Time* was then a Fellow of Caius.

Today, Shashank's maternal grandfather is following his grandson's relentless rise and rise from his home in Jamshedpur.

A few days ago when Shashank was on BBC Radio 4 to do a programme reviewing the papers, he was in with voices that said: "Now to Shashank Joshi... to Shashank Joshi... to Shashank Joshi... to Shashank Joshi..."

He is meant to be completing his PhD at Harvard on aspects of Indian foreign policy but agrees cheerfully that as Britain's favourite Libya guru, he is not getting much time.

I ask him about the prospect for Indian companies in Libya. Will there be any crumbs left after France, Britain, the US and Italy pick up the lion's share of what's going as an expression of gratitude from the new Libyan government for making possible regime change in Libya?

"The bonanza in Libya is going to lie in reconstruction — I think that's where the money is," says Shashank, who thinks there will be something in it for the Indians, too.

"On the issue of, 'Can they pay for it?', the answer is absolutely yes," he responded.

All that is good news for Indians such as construction magnate H.S. Narula, who had to pull his large workforce out of Libya. And good news, too, for the Jaipur Literary Festival that he sponsors.

sponse to one's presentation, interspersed with roars of infectious laughter, lifted the spirit to new heights and the urge to go on exploring. He would sit by his dimly-lit table, ploughing through his books. He would see through the late nights and the early morning with classical Indian and Western music often accompanied by a glass of whisky. He is sadly missed but his thoughts and human touch will live on for many of us."

My brother still mourns the

passing of his tutor. "His daughter wrote a moving letter to me saying that her father deeply valued my friendship and as a token of his affection she felt I would be the most suitable person to be gifted with his scarf which she enclosed in an envelope."

In memoriam

Friends of Jagmohan Mundhra, who died in Mumbai



JOLLY JAG: Jagmohan Mundhra (right) with Aishwarya Rai Bachchan who played the real life battered wife, Kiranjit Ahluwalia (left), in the film *Provoked*

last week, aged 62, intend holding a memorial service for him.

It could be either in Los Angeles, where he had his main home; London, where the film director enjoyed working for five years; or Mumbai, where he based himself most recently.

Jag was an extraordinarily nice man, who never let on that he had to struggle with a number of ailments, including periods when he suffered from internal bleeding. It was possible to joke with him about his early period in LA when he first made his name with a clutch of erotic thrillers.

For the Jag meeting, I anticipate a large turnout — especially if bits are shown from such works as *Improper Conduct*, *Sexual Malice*, *Night Eyes*, *Tropical Goddess* and *LA Goddess*.

Meanwhile, Mala Sen, author of *Bandit Queen*, who died in Mumbai in May, is gone but not forgotten. Her friends, led by the playwright, Ash Kotak, convened a lunch meeting in London last week "just so that we can talk about her".

People so enjoyed the lunch that they forgot to talk about Mala.

"Mala would have approved," said Ash.

She would also have ordered red wine, gone out from time to time to smoke one of her rolled up cigarettes (smoking inside is no longer allowed) and left the food more or less untouched.

What honour?

Such cases as that of Shafiea Ahmed are not rare in Britain where some immigrants have often brought their ultra ortho-



LOST LIFE: Shafiea Ahmed

dox culture with them.

But have the *desis* taken his bidding one step too far?

Shafiea's decomposed remains were discovered in Cumbria in February 2004 after the 17-year-old disappeared from the family home in September 2003.

South Cumbria coroner Ian Smith later recorded a verdict of unlawful killing, saying he believed the teenager was "probably murdered".

Last week the parents of the suspected "(dis)honour killing" victim, her father Iftikhar, 51, and mother Farzana, 48, of Warrington, Cheshire, were remanded in custody, charged with her murder.

Tittle tattle

When it comes to dealing with top American celebrities, it is the latter who call the shots.

Even a paper as powerful as the *Daily Mail* billed its interview with *Material Girl* by its show biz reporter thus: "Baz Bamigboye is granted a rare audience with Madonna."

Audience? I thought only the Queen could grant an audience.