

LIGHTING UP LIVES

Harish Hande, 43, who was one of the Magsaysay Awardees for this year, is a rare commodity in India—a true champion of the underprivileged, and of solar lighting. The Solar Electric Light Company or ‘Selco’ that Hande co-founded is now synonymous with solar-powered lighting in Karnataka, parts of Gujarat and parts of Kerala.

Hande co-founded Selco with Neville Williams in 1995, and came face-to-face with many a prophet of doom telling him about the futility of the effort. Driven more by ideals and less by finances, Hande ignored them and decided to leverage the model of micro-finance and rural banking to sell solar lighting to villagers.

“We started with ₹1,000 because that is all the money we had,” Hande had told *Business Standard* earlier. With his model of social enterprise he wants to prove that one can make profits while trying to meet social objectives. He decided to follow an open source model and has refused to hold the Intellectual Property for his solar powered lights, hoping, in fact, that people will copy it.

Hande is known for his simple ways. Those close to him say that he is someone who can easily get lost in a crowd. “He never talks of what he has achieved over the last 17 years,” said a member of his team at Selco.

The seeds of Selco were planted on a trip to the Dominican Republic while Hande was pursuing his studies in energy engineering at the



Center for Sustainable Energy at the University of Massachusetts. He saw the poor there using solar lighting.

Soon, Hande was in touch with Neville Williams, who had founded an NGO, Solar Electric Light Fund, or SELF, to promote solar energy in developing countries. In 1993, SELF received \$40,000 from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund to install solar lights in 100 rural Indian houses. It asked Hande, still studying, to run the project.

But Hande was concerned about the servicing of the lights in the long-run, which only a company could ensure. A sustainable supply chain was an issue.

For over two-and-a-half years, Hande travelled the length and breadth of Karnataka, explaining how solar lighting worked and installing it in homes of wealthy farmers who could afford the ₹10,000 system. He convinced rural banks to lend to poor families who wanted to buy the lights. All this,

while he was on, as he puts it, “a subsidised living”; he lived with friends and relatives while travelling and even worked as a day-labourer at a bus station once so he could buy his ticket home.

After Hande had installed some 400 solar light systems, Selco received \$128,000 from USAID, through its partner Winrock, to finance the first three rural service centres that sold, installed and serviced solar lights. With this, he took his first step towards building a sustainable rural delivery system. “This can succeed if you provide service and financing at the doorstep,” he says.

As of now, the company aims to reach over 200,000 homes from the current 125,000, and is focusing on providing service to those in the income levels of ₹2,000-5,000 per month—something that very few in India would want to, or are able to do. That’s Hande for you.

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