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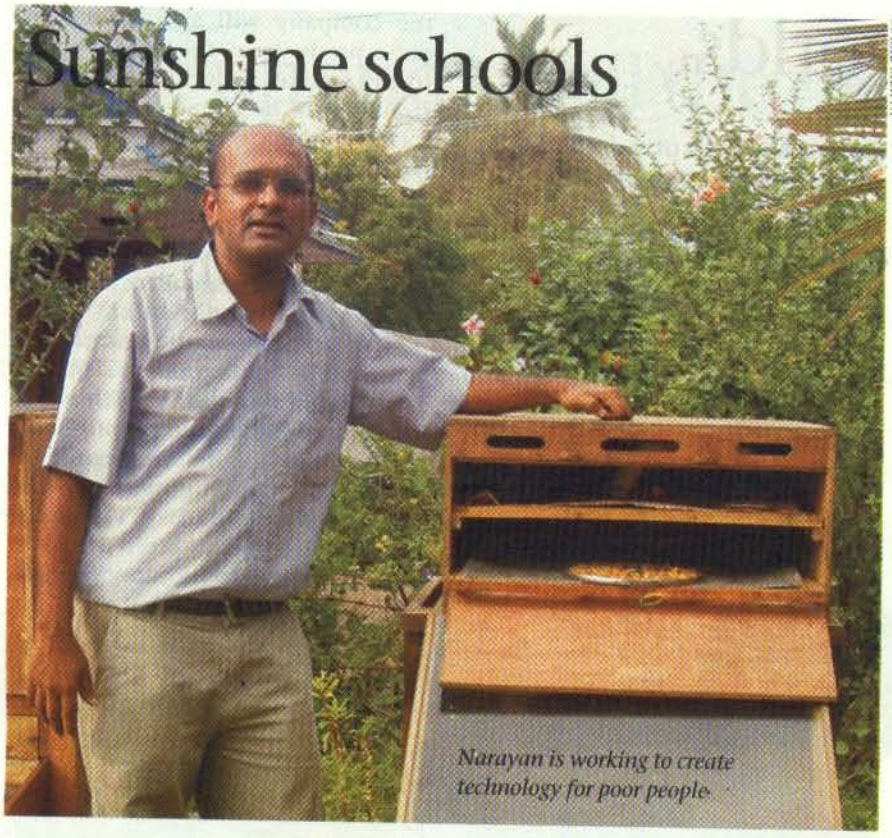
Growth tonic

Armed with new products and packaging, Dabur is gearing up for a global play

Amit Burman, VC
Anand Burman, Chairman
Sunil Duggal, CEO

Sunshine schools



SORAB MEHTA

Narayan is working to create technology for poor people

A small team is harnessing the sun to improve school attendance

Jagadish Rao Katkar has a vision – and it's lit up by solar power. Katkar, assistant manager – innovations at the Bangalore-based Selco Solar Light Pvt Ltd, has come up with an idea that he hopes will give as much of a boost to attendance at rural schools as the mid-day meal scheme. "Sixty per cent of the cost of solar lighting is the panel," he points out. "Obviously, very few villagers can afford to install one on their homes." Ergo, centralised charging – a panel on top of the village school, where the children can take their battery units every morning and plug them in for a day-long charge. When they go back home in the evening, they can study without the smoke of the usual kerosene lanterns.

The solar battery, the size of a small tiffin box, has two points: one for a study lamp and the other to connect an extension lamp in the kitchen. "This will make the mother encourage her child to go to school and spend all day there, so that she can cook in comfort," Katkar explains. The cost per unit: Rs600, against about Rs2,000 for one with its own panel. And the communal panel, which costs Rs15,000 to Rs20,000, will be installed by local donors or an NGO. "That is not a stumbling block," says Anand Narayan, head of Selco's incubation lab at Ujire, a small town, six hours' drive from Bangalore. The lab has, in fact, already partnered with a local NGO, Srikrshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development Programme (SKDRDP), to conduct field tests in unelectrified villages in Karnataka's Coorg district.

"The experiment seems to be working well so far," says Manjunath L.H., executive director, SKDRDP, which put up a panel in the beginning of 2010 at a school in a 'not easily accessed' village in Bagamandala taluk of Coorg district, in a forest reserve about 150 km from Ujire. "Fifteen boys bring their units for charging every day."

Narayan and his team have also come up with a number of other solar-powered gadgets, including an electrified fence to keep animals out of farms. The next big thing this US-returned engineer and MBA, who wants to create for "people who don't have a lot of money to spare", is looking at is a solar drier for fruits and vegetables. Having met Selco founder and managing director H. Harish Hande when he was looking for a solar electrical system for his farm at Ujire, Narayan decided to join hands with him in doing "what big business and academics won't do".

The drier is a simple device: a slanting metal sheet in a wooden box, with a glass front and holes at the bottom to let in the sun and air, respectively. The air gets heated, rises and goes out through an aperture at the top – where there are trays with sliced bananas, or gooseberries, or other fruits or vegetables. "Half the produce in this country goes waste because there is no system to store and transport it properly without letting it rot," says Nimit Arora, manager of the incubation lab, munching on a handful of dried banana slices that look like dates and taste sweeter. "This will help the growers to preserve some of it, at least."

At the women's co-operative Sewa Bank in faraway Gujarat, Pinal Shah, energy in charge, says, "Selco has a customised energy system, strong service infrastructure and affordable solar products, which it designs according to our members' need." Adds Bijal Bhatt, co-ordinator, Mahila Housing, Sewa Trust, "We have always appreciated that being a profit-making company, Selco also uses technologies to improve the quality of life of the poor."

Ananth Aravamudan is another engineer who quit the private sector – he was heading the medical electronics division in MindTree R&D Services – to join Selco and pursue his passion of "making technology work for social change". In the next five years, he says, the incubation labs should have internally developed at least five rural-focussed products, which are actively sold through Selco's sales network.

The challenge, Hande says, is to create marketing partners for loan linkages, as well as a market to ramp up production. "People need to understand the difference between a want and a need," he says. "Scaling up is not enough; it can even be detrimental – it scares me!" Meanwhile, he and his boys continue to aim for the sun.

• SEKHAR SESHAN