

Concerns about the health of Apple's chief Steve Jobs have not dimmed — he appeared dramatically thinner during his last public appearance. The reason for the concern: Apple has no succession plan in place.

German software maker SAP AG said it will shut down TomorrowNow, a subsidiary that provided support for Oracle Corp.



Through a project called Read & Go, a new device allows users to download newspaper content over France Télécom's wireless network. Seven French publications have joined for a test of this electronic newspaper.



Mobile device company i-mate has announced the availability of its smart phone 'Ultimate 9502' in India. Priced at Rs 39,660, the device combines advanced functionality with a new form factor.

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Manthan solution

RETAIL ANALYTICS provider Manthan Systems on Monday unveiled the latest edition of its retail performance management solution, ARC 5.8. The solution is positioned to deliver the latest in advanced retail decision-making capability. ARC 5.8 features external market and competition data integration to a retailer's own data sources. With this, merchandise planners can benchmark their product performance with that of other markets and regions.

IMobile Honour

INDIAN PROVIDER of value-added services to global mobile telecom operators and content owners, IMobile, announced selection by Always On as one of the 'AO Global 250 Winners'. The 6th annual list from the US firm recognises top companies demonstrating significant market traction and developing disruptive technology. IMobile's inclusion comes after impressive global growth over the last year. The firm was selected on the set of five criteria: innovation, market potential, commercialisation, stakeholder value and media buzz.

YASH expansion

US-BASED YASH Technologies, a provider of enterprise business and technology solutions, inaugurated its new development facility in Bengaluru on Monday. This is the company's fifth development centre in India. The firm is growing its presence in the domestic market and intends to tap into the talent pool available in different regions across the country.

BoI to use 3i software

SOFTWARE PRODUCT firm 3i Infotech on Monday announced that Bank of India has signed an agreement to implement AMLOCKT, its anti money laundering software. As part of the agreement, the company will undertake complete system integration — procurement and installation of hardware including storage, database, middleware, report writer.



MADE IN INDIA

By S. RAGHOTAM

July 21: Conventional economics and economists may continue to complain that solar energy technology is still not economical, especially for the poor, but there are now a few unconventional thinkers in every corner of the world who are out to challenge that notion and break what they see as mere myths.

In current parlance, they are called 'Social Entrepreneurs'. Dr. Harish Hande, in Bengaluru, is one such. He has brought light into over 100,000 rural homes in Karnataka and elsewhere through solar energy technologies.

Dr. Hande, a Mangalorean brought up in Rourkela, Orissa, where his father worked at the Steel Authority of India (SAIL), started his solar lighting solutions company Selco in 1994 after obtaining a B.Tech in Energy Engineering from IIT-Kharagpur and a Master's and PhD degree from the University of Massachusetts' Center for Sustainable Energy. Indeed, his PhD thesis on whether solar energy made sense for India and Sri Lanka laid the foundation for Selco.

But doctoral candidates usually make every effort to convert their thesis into a popular book or into a series of journal articles and then use that to get a comfortable academic job. What happened in Dr. Hande's case that he turned into an entrepreneur, and an unconventional one at that?

"It was a chance meeting with anti-war, pro-environment activist Neville Williams, who was running a non-profit in the US. Once we got to know each other, he asked me if I wanted to do a sustainable energy project in India. At first, I said yes, but within a week I went back to him and said that I wouldn't be interested in a project because that's just a one-time affair. I would rather start a company. He said yes."

Dr. Hande then came back to India and worked on the company he would start for three-four years. "We decided to look at how to create processes to implement need-based technologies that would generate incomes. We wanted to promote sustainable technology for poor people to

destroy the myth that the poor cannot afford technology, that they would always depend on aid, grants, subsidies. So, the company had to be one that promoted sustainable technology, but in a sustainable manner for itself. That is, it had to be a commercial company, making profit. It also combined sustainable technology with poverty reduction on a long-term basis," Dr. Hande explains.

It turns out that he has managed to build a commercial company that has done over a 100,000 solar lighting installations and employs 140 people in 25 centres throughout Karnataka, but all its investors are non-profit organisations.

"The non-profits have discovered that rather than putting money into NGOs, investing into companies such as ours makes more sense, but with conditions such as that profits should be re-invested in the endeavour. We make 20-26 per cent margins, which is enough to meet overheads and commission structures for business associates. We also run interest discount schemes from this money, wherein if the bank charges 12.5 per cent interest, our customer pays 7.5 per cent and we pay five per cent."

But it has not been smooth

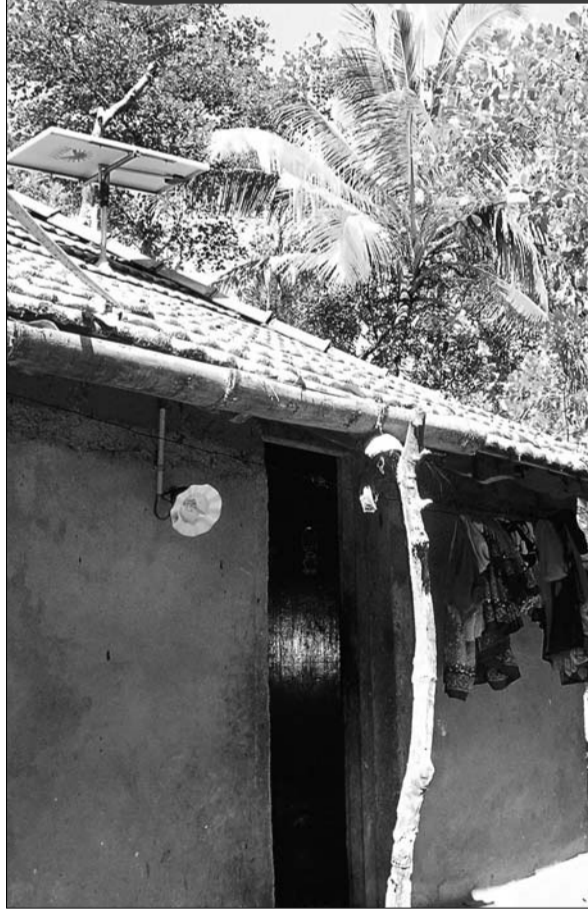
Solar tech lights up rural homes

A social entrepreneur manages to build an unconventional firm through funding from non-profit organisations



We wanted to destroy the myth that poor people cannot afford technology

Dr Harish Hande



sailing all along. In fact, it has not even been a straightforward case of taking readymade solar panels and lights and selling it to customers and making profits. The journey has been one of learning and social engineering.

"We discovered that home lighting systems by themselves were not complete products. You might have a brilliant light, but it has to be combined with flexible financing to make it a complete product."

But when he went to the local financial institutions initially, he was told solar lighting was not related to earning. They were geared towards agri-financing only. "It took us four-five years to convince them."

Once that was done, then Dr. Hande found out that conventional financing assumes that those taking loans are monthly income earners.

But his target group included daily wagers, weekly earners and farmers who earned only once in a

yearly cycle. They needed flexible financing.

"So, most of our time went into social engineering. When interacting with customers, again, we need to perceive their 'needs' as against their 'wants'. There is a clear distinction between needs and wants. Wants can be standardised — things such as iPods; but needs are very specific, very individual. They demand customised solutions. For instance, someone working on a sewing machine needs a focused light while a vegetable seller needs lighting that shines on his entire shop. For midwives in rural areas, we designed a variant of a miner's cap, wearable and powered by a small nickel-cadmium battery."

But lest somebody should think that custom solutions are necessarily more expensive than standardised, mass produced ones, as most Western management thinking suggests, Dr. Hande breaks that myth too.

"Our solutions are customised, but they are not difficult, nor expensive. Our technicians are trained to ask common sense questions and reduce cost for the customer. They act as consultants. For instance, we suggest to customers who require multiple lights that they buy fewer lights but whitewash the walls because reflection would give them better value for solar lighting"

So, surging ahead on common sense and customisation, Dr. Hande aims to double the number of installations to 200,000 rural homes. He also has set eyes on one more application in the rural home — cooking.

As he says, "In the last one year, we have started to see the rural house as a black box. We have added cooking technologies. The rural kitchen is still in the stone-age with the three-stone cooker. These kitchens are small, badly ventilated. We want to change that. We have the supply chain, we have the customer base, and the technology to effect that change."

Smaller computers cause worry for industry

By MATT RICHTER

SAN FRANCISCO

July 21: The personal computer industry is poised to sell tens of millions of small, energy-efficient Internet-centric devices. Curiously, some of the biggest companies in the business consider this bad news.

In a tale of sales success breeding resentment, computer companies are wary of the new breed of computers because their low price could threaten PC makers' already thin profit margins.

The new computers, often called netbooks, have scant

onboard memory. They use energy-sipping computer chips. They are intended largely for surfing Web sites and checking e-mail. The price is small too, with some selling for as little as \$300.

Hewlett-Packard, the world's biggest PC maker, recently sidled into the market with a hybrid of a notebook and netbook that it calls the Mini-Note.

Several makers are taking the low-powered PCs one step further. In the coming months, they are expected to introduce "net-tops," low-cost versions of desktop computers intended for

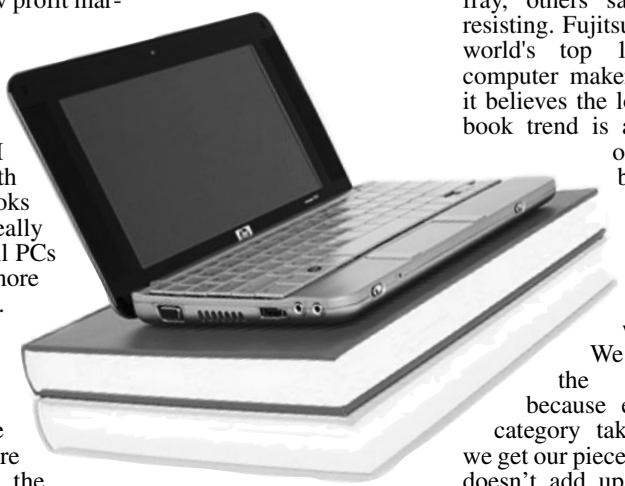
Internet access. A Silicon Valley start-up called CherryPal says it will challenge the idea that big onboard power is required to allow basic computing functions in the Internet age. On Monday it plans to introduce a \$300 desktop PC that is the size of a paperback and uses two watts of power compared with the 100 watts of some desktops.

Some of the big computer companies put a positive spin on the low-cost machines, saying they welcome new categories. But they would just as soon this niche did not take off, given

the relatively low profit margins.

"When I talk to PC vendors, the No. 1 question I get is, how do I compete with these netbooks when what we really want to do is sell PCs that cost a lot more money?" said J. P. Gownder, an analyst with Forrester Research.

Even as some PC vendors are jumping into the



fray, others say they are resisting. Fujitsu, one of the world's top 10 personal computer makers, said that it believes the low-cost netbook trend is a dangerous one for the bottom line.

"We're sitting on the sidelines not because we're lazy. We're sitting on the sidelines because even if this category takes off, and we get our piece of the pie, it doesn't add up," said Paul

Moore, senior director of mobile product management for Fujitsu. "It's a product with little margin."

Stan Glasgow, chief executive of Sony Electronics, said the company is investigating what consumers want in a second PC.

It is a market that caught the major computer companies — both hardware and software — by surprise after Asus, entered the market last year with the \$300 Eee PC. The company thought the device would essentially appeal to the education market, or as a starter laptop for adolescents, but the interest

has turned out to be broader.

With an emphasis not in on-board applications (like word processing), but Internet-based ones like Google Docs, the Linux-based Eee PC sold out its 350,000 global inventory. It has been in short supply ever since.

The sales are a veritable drop in the bucket compared with the 271 million desktop and laptop PCs shipped globally last year. But there is an intensifying debate about how big the category can become, and what segment of the market finds these computers appealing.