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INDIA TODAY

SPECIAL ISSUE

SPIRIT OF INDIA

50

PIONEERS OF CHANGE



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Every day, all of us in the news business find ourselves surrounded by bad news: war, terrorism, natural disasters, national tragedies, economic crises. Yet, in a world full of adversity and hardship, we also know that people everywhere, respond and respond with great positivity to the smallest stories of human endeavour. In a world of bad news, it is as if these stories

about change for the better, about small acts of goodness enable people to renew their own faith in the future.

It is with this in mind, that INDIA TODAY has decided to launch a series of special issues in 2008 celebrating the Spirit of India. We want to recognise and celebrate perseverance, optimism and unsung achievements that are to be found in plenty in this country.

This issue, the first in a series of four Spirit of India specials, highlights a most remarkable breed of Indians, whom we refer to as the Can-do Generation. For these Indians, generation refers to a mindset rather than an age, as each of them has made a difference to the lives of people around them through an idea, an innovation and even an unusual business.

As Oprah Winfrey would say, these men and women believe in living their best lives. They don't believe in the hypotheticals of 'could,' 'would' or 'should'. They don't wait for the world to help them but commit their energies to doing what they can do themselves. Some set up organisations which have outlived them, others are at the cutting edge of transforming India through scientific innovation and social revolution, some work for sheer altruism, others for profit.

These gurus of self-help range from a mechanic stricken by polio who has adapted cars for the disabled to a high school dropout who has devised a coconut-tree climbing machine. From a spiritual Sikh leader who is spearheading a movement to clean a sacred river to a former government employee who withdrew money from his own pension fund to develop women's hockey in Jharkhand.

The Spirit of India issue sent our correspondents countrywide to the most remote corners of their regions to find people who dreamt big and

did even bigger. Principal Correspondent Amitabh Srivastava in Patna covered over a thousand kilometres in Bihar and Jharkhand, returning to his home base humbled by the knowledge that India had many more such people living anonymous lives but contributing to their world in meaningful ways. Assistant Editor Elora Sen travelled across the North-east to find an unusual innovator in rain-soaked Meghalaya and a doctor in Assam who has trained Bodo locals to create and run their own health centres in their endless battle against malaria.

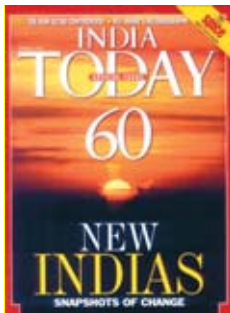
These extraordinary Indians have proved that research and development is not the monopoly of those who work in air-conditioned offices, and a people's movement is not the sole preserve of those who sit in Parliament. Their passions may be different—a clean environment for some, total education for others—but the spirit that drives them is the same.

It is a spirit our most distinguished guest columnist former President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam calls the Great Need. It is a spirit that another guest columnist Medha Patkar says should be part of a Can-Do Manifesto, which urges Indians to stand up and deliver. As I read their stories of energy and enterprise, these Indians struck me as the living embodiment of John F. Kennedy's famous words: they did not ask what the country could do for them, but asked and answered the question about what they could do for their country.

Separated by geography and language, all these men and women are united by a conviction and a belief that drove the most famous of all can-do Indians into shaping a nation. After all, Mahatma Gandhi always said—long before Barack Obama did—"You must be the change you wish to see in this world."

(Aroon Purie)

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY: JUPITER IMAGES

■ By Swagata Sen

Fourteen years ago, he was the kind of student multinational companies would swoop down on in campus interviews. There was nothing in his background to even suggest that he wouldn't oblige them after his degree. Armed with a B.Tech from IIT Kharagpur, and pursuing a Ph.D in sustainable energy from the University

of Massachusetts, USA, H. Harish Hande hailed from the pampered environs of the Rourkela Steel Plant, where his father worked as a senior officer.

Only, while writing his Ph.D, Hande realised that he had never had any first-hand experience of what it might be to live without electricity. He decided to come back to India, and live in the villages in Karnataka (his state of origin) and Sri Lanka. After two years of living without electricity, he knew what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to provide solar power to those who had never seen bulbs light up in their homes. Today, his company, Selco Solar Lights, has provided customised solar lighting solutions to about 95,000 households in the villages of Karnataka and Gujarat, and he now hopes to reach twice the number of households by 2011.

Hande calls his company an experiment that aims at breaking the myth that sustainable energy is expensive and therefore only for the rich. He operates his company on a zero-subsidy basis—if his clients, who mostly belong to the below the poverty

line group, want to light up their homes, they have to pay for it. Around 44 per cent of Karnataka's population doesn't have access to conventional electricity. But what Selco does here is more than just providing solar panels. If a man has three rooms but can afford light only in one, the technicians of the company will make a hole near the ceiling and place the light in such a way that all three rooms are lit perfectly. Selco has also convinced rural banks to provide loans for light connections. A single point connection costs Rs 5,000 and a four-point connection comes at Rs 18,000. These are just one-time costs. If, in a case, the customer is unable to pay his down payment, the company acts a guarantor to the customer for a year while he repays the bank in instalments. Hande proudly talks of one of his customers, a woman who lives in a hut made of twigs but has a connection, and pays Rs 5 a day to the bank.

It wasn't really easy to convince his customers that electricity would change their lives. In 1994, an American acquaint-

let there BE LIGHT

✱ H. Harish Hande, 40

Project Selco, a company that provides customised solar lighting solutions

Can-do Icon Mahatma Gandhi, for he talked of decentralisation and self-sustenance, which fits into Selco's philosophy

Solar energy is 0.5 per cent of the total energy produced in India



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The solutions to poverty lie in sustainable energy. The NGO culture has completely spoiled the chances of self-reliance in our country.

H. HARISH HANDE, Founder, Selco

”



ATUL PRATAP CHAUHAN

tance of his, Neville Williams, who ran a non-profit solar lighting organisation in the US, asked him if he would like to start a project in India to light up 100 homes with solar lights. Hande, who hadn't completed his Ph.D then, decided to come back to India again. With the \$5,000, he decided to develop five or six demonstrations, and gave himself a salary of Rs 1,000 a month. But the demonstrations didn't work with his audience, who weren't convinced that solar lighting was a great idea. So he and his technician zeroed in on a somewhat hostile betel nut farmer. One day, when the farmer went out to work, Hande installed a four-point system in his house with a small television set. He went back a week later and the farmer was so happy with the system that he paid for the installation. Hande bought another system with the money and lit up another home.

There was a time when one of his customers said he couldn't give them money for lighting his house. At the same time Hande and his two technicians also realised that they had no money for bus fare back to Mangalore, where he lived with his aunt then. His technicians worked as coolies for a few hours at the bus station to raise money for the fare. That is when he realised that to make his project commercially viable, he had to get local funding agencies interested. He spoke to grameen banks and rural financial institutions, who gradually agreed to give loans to his customers. He got schools to give out "light scholarships" where a school would install a system in a poor student's house if he or she did well in studies.

Right now, Hande's company sees an annual turnover of Rs 13.5 crore, and he hopes to take it to Rs 40 crore by the turn of the decade. His five-member management team and he still meet 500 customers each every year. He currently has a staff of 142, excluding many "technical associates" in the villages who work on commission basis. He has tied up with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to develop more sustainable energy products such as better cooking stoves and vendor carts. His own innovation team is constantly coming up with new products, like miner's caps fitted with solar panels and lights to help midwives and farmers. Hande himself, despite a wife and daughter living in the US for the last 12 years, continues to travel across rural Karnataka, because he feels he's on a mission to bring light to people's lives. ■