



# LET THERE BE LIGHT!

We chat with Sabah Vig, CEO of NGO Project Chirag, to learn how solar electrification is transforming India's villages and ensuring a better tomorrow for the country's rural population.

By PRATISHTHA RANA

Women artisans in Barmer, Rajasthan, are a shining vision as they hold portable solar lamps.

LET'S REWIND TO JUST OVER A DECADE ago. The students at H.R. College of Commerce and Economics in Mumbai were presented with a rather thought-provoking project: raising funds to bring electricity to a village comprising 111 households in Maharashtra. Initial research revealed a requirement of around ₹4 lakh for the lighting equipment. Not to be defeated, the students, along with the then-principal Indu Shukani, devised an innovative crowdfunding plan. The electricity in the public spaces of the entire campus was briefly switched off during peak operating hours. And posters that read '₹10 for light' were put up all around. In a span of three days, the students raised close to ₹6 lakh—a truly electrifying result! And this is, possibly, when the determination to continue lighting up rural India was born. In 2010, on the grounds of the same college, Project Chirag came to life as a youth-driven,

non-profit initiative of the Chirag Rural Development Foundation. Read on to see how a bright idea transformed into an organisation that, literally, lights up the lives of India's rural population.

### MATTERS OF ACCESSIBILITY

The essence of initiatives driven by social change is that they are not about a single



Villagers inspect the solar-powered water system installed in Gumbadpada, Maharashtra.

moment of conversion, but rather about lifetime impact and the establishment of a solid base for future generations. As Sabah Vig, CEO of Project Chirag, recalls, "The foundation was started by our current Founder-Director Pratibha Pal. Her idea was to sensitise students to the needs of underprivileged communities and give them access to what it's like to create social impact."

Ujaini, the afore-mentioned village in Maharashtra, was Project Chirag's first outpost to be illuminated by harnessing solar energy. Before this, the village dwellers did all that was needed between dawn and dusk. "Once a kid kicked over a kerosene lamp and this village was razed to the ground," says Vig. From then on, the villagers were terrified to use kerosene for light. With no other alternative, they worked and moved around during day light hours. As evening fell, the surroundings were enveloped in complete darkness.

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Solar panels set up at Samara village in Vakramgan Taluka in Palghar, Maharashtra.

This is when the NGO intervened and solar-electricified the homes of Ujaini, changing the life of every single person in that village.

According to Vig, access to electricity is not a privilege, but a basic requirement. As the NGO manoeuvres through the underdeveloped dynamics of rural landscapes, what stands out is the ways in which the urgent potential of solar power, a renewable source of energy, can transform every facet of people's subsistence—sanitation, safe shelter, education, and income, amongst others.

### A SOLAR PLAYGROUND

Since those early days, the Samaritans at the NGO have progressed from using solar power solely to light up homes to using the resource to foster inclusive, sustainable development at the village level across India. A stellar example of the transformative power of this energy was showcased in 2018, when it became a catalyst for bringing drinking water to Maharashtra's Gumbadpada, a tribal village that had never seen a tap before! "The idea was born from the fact that a woman from the village would spend up to four hours walking to the nearest source to fetch water at the crack of dawn. Its cyclical effect is that the mother is mostly not able to feed her kids, and since she may not be able to carry so

many *handias* (pitchers), she would take her daughter along. Which means the daughter is either not attending school at all or she is going in late," laments Vig. With solar power-pumped drinking water available right in the centre of the village, they were able to condense the hours taken for the chore to just 10-20 minutes a day.

Project Chirag has also extended its work to educational institutions. While television sets are mandated by the government for e-learning, they often lack a consistent power source. To combat this, the foundation has started equipping schools with the required energy at a larger level, focusing on solar-generated electricity for smart TVs, lights, fans, and computer labs.

### A DEEP IMPACT

The ultimate aim is self-sustenance. And sometimes, it takes a while for beneficiaries to get accustomed to a new concept. As Vig tells us, "When we give water filters to the villages, it takes them time to accept that it will filter impurities. So, for a long time, they continue to use the handpump before finally returning to the filter."

Regarding existing impact, over 600 villages and 24,000 households have been illuminated so far. In 2018, the Integrated Village Development Model was envisioned to push for



School children who have benefited from the NGO's work in Postera, Maharashtra.



Happy students whose classrooms have been provided solar-covered electricity by Project Chirag.

### PLAY FOR A CAUSE

US-based student Aadit Vinayak organised a fundraising volleyball match in New Jersey a few months ago and raised US \$4,000 to light up five anganwadis in Paighar, Maharashtra.

holistic solar electrification and fight poverty, migration, and joblessness. But simply installing solar panels isn't where the work starts or ends. The behavioural change of the villagers holds great relevance. "Every village presents a unique challenge. Hence, our narrative revolves around the beneficiaries, more than the actual programme or the donors' mandates," says Vig.

Till date, Project Chirag's footprint has reached 11 states, including Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Assam, Uttarakhand, Meghalaya, and Maharashtra. This year, they plan to expand to states like Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan. And we can't wait to see where else this solar magic will spread! ☺