

AUORE: small steps towards a big change

By Alan Herbert

The typical electricity scenario in India is that of a deficient supply leading to frequent power-cuts. Those who can afford to do so purchase diesel or petrol-powered generators to provide back-up power; the poor go for cheaper options (which are, relatively, still expensive: many poor families spend up to 30% of their gross income on energy) or simply endure the power-cuts and the consequences they have in terms of reduced employment and educational opportunities.



Solar pumping in the Punjab – A clean and reliable water supply

Traditionally, poverty-alleviation has been linked to schemes offering food, clothing and shelter. There is a growing understanding, however, that poverty can also be alleviated or even eradicated by providing better and more dependable energy, specifically energy provided from renewable sources. Renewable energy (RE) systems in India tend to be expensive, not widely available and, where basic maintenance is neglected, often unreliable. Nevertheless, a growing number of people are convinced that renewable energy is the way not only for the future but also for the present: that not only is it by far the best option environmentally, but also that it can be a powerful tool for social uplift if creative ways can be found to provide it reliably and relatively cheaply to disadvantaged sectors of the population. As RE systems tend to be gender-friendly—as easy to operate by women as by men—they also contribute to female empowerment.

Aurore, which is based in Auroville, South India, is a community-owned commercial enterprise which was founded in 1998. The promoters passionately believed that renewable energy represents the future. Over the years the team and its collaborators came to understand that one of the best ways of disseminating RE more widely was for them to become an Energy Service Provider which promotes and networks with locally-based RE enterprises. Some of the advantages of local energy production over traditional centralized power generation is that it provides employment to people from the local community while being sensitive to their specific needs for power.

Aurore sees itself as the hub of a networked organization with its various partners as the nodes. At present it has four partners and it has executed, or assisted in the execution of, RE projects in twelve Indian States. Specifically, Aurore has developed expertise in procuring RE systems and optimizing their integration, promoting and incubating new enterprises and obtaining subsidies, credit and soft loans for end-users at both micro-credit and institutional levels.



SunMin solar in Chennai – Bringing portable solar lights to the people

The projects it has been involved with, either directly or in a support capacity, include the installation of over 1,025 solar PV pumping systems in 11 states of India working with network partners Sahjeevan and SELCO and suppliers like Tata-BP Solar and BHEL, project coordination for installation of 8,700 solar home systems and the distribution of 6,000 solar lanterns in Ladakh for Tata-BP Solar, a leading solar company in India, and the hiring out of solar-powered lanterns to small tradespeople with SunMin, an enterprise promoted on Chennai beach. The latter is a good example of how an RE project can generate both profit and employment. The tradespeople benefit because they pay less for their power now, because it is more reliable and the better quality of light provided attracts more customers, while the hiring out and maintenance of the lanterns generates employment for five youngsters who are also stake-holders in the company.

Another project where an innovative approach has brought the benefits of RE systems to the disadvantaged is based in rural Gujarat. Here people living on scattered communities have to pay up to Rs150 a month just to obtain drinking water, while the local farmers were barely able to eke out a living. Working with a local NGO Sahjeevan, Aurore helped to provide technical and management support obtain the financing to install solar PV street lights, home-lighting kits and pumps. The solar pumps were hired out to the farmers at less than 30% of the annual cost they incurred for running their diesel pump-sets. The result is that the community now has an assured supply of good drinking water, small farming has become viable again because of the saving in costs, and better home lighting has resulted in extended working hours leading to a richer cultural life and increased income opportunities.

“It’s clear that India and the world need to take big steps to effect a radical change in energy use,” remarks Hemant Lamba, the executive of Aurore. “Our way of contributing to this is by taking many small steps—like the setting up local energy enterprises—which will increase the penetration of RE in India and prepare it for the big change. After only six years, we are already seeing the fruits of such an approach.”



Jamyangling schoolhostel in Zaskar – Solar energy providing light to study at night

Hemant moved to the international community of Auroville in 1991 from Delhi. He had completed graduate studies in economics and entrepreneurship & Small Business from Delhi University, but what drew him to the community was the wish to “participate in an adventure.” In those days he knew little about renewable energy, but the first enterprise he worked with in the community was designing and assembling RE system components. “The biggest motivation for me to get involved in promoting renewable energy is not only just good ecological and scientific reasons for doing so but that there are deep spiritual reasons for changing our energy use. The founder of Auroville, the Mother, pointed out that the present form of energy, which is drawn from beneath the Earth, is not an elevated form of energy, and that the future lies in drawing energy from above. This remains my guiding belief.”



Ladakhi grandmother - Happy with solar light ☺