

reconnections

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Making life better below India's poverty line

M.P.S. "Mini" Puri's antenna went up when the World Bank issued its ominous forecast: Unless India's water practices change soon, it will face a severe water crisis within the next two decades. As a management consultant in sustainable development, Puri is working to prevent that from happening.

"There are two problems with water in India," Puri says. "It is in short supply and what is available is not potable. Unfortunately, bacteria has no color, so people cannot tell the difference between water that is safe and water that is unsafe."

A World Health Organization report underscores the human impact of India's clean-water shortfall. More than 20 percent of communicable diseases in the country are water-related, with diarrhea annually claiming the lives of almost 500,000 children under age five.

A few years ago, Puri's firm, Synergy International, introduced a clean water system called Naïade in India. Developed by the Dutch company Nedap, the system uses ultraviolet light to purify drinking water. When sufficient sunlight isn't available, a car battery mounted inside the unit provides the necessary power.

"The system does not need electricity and uses solar energy, which is available in abundance and free of cost throughout the year," Puri says. "It does not require any special training; local village folks can operate and maintain it. The unit is portable and needs no chemicals, fossil fuel, piping, or wiring. It provides water according to WHO standards."

According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, a Naïade unit can produce an average of 2,000 liters (528 gallons) of high-quality drinking water per day. In 2004, Nedap garnered a European Business Award for the Environment from the European Commission for Naïade's impressive performance.

"Initially, it was not easy for villagers to appreciate what Naïade could do for them," Puri says. "After

educating them about the ill effects of the unsafe water they were consuming and how their health, productivity, and prosperity could improve if they and their children drank safe water, Naïade's popularity started to grow."

A system like Naïade is critical, Puri believes, to helping meet the Indian government's goal of providing safe water to every habitat by 2009. Naïade is also being used in several other countries, including Ghana, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania.

Puri has also helped introduce ecofriendly housing, weatherproof communication, and hazardous-waste-management systems in India. His most important goal, he says, is "to improve the quality of life for people living below the poverty line."

The Rotary Foundation's Group Study Exchange program not only helped Puri define that goal but inspired him to take a major step toward achieving it. In 1995, he spent five weeks on a GSE study tour of Brazil.

"The GSE proved valuable in putting my views about the world in the right perspective," Puri says. "I started to respect and appreciate the social, cultural, and political differences between the two countries rather than considering them an obstacle. It had a very positive impact on my career, as it encouraged me to start my own consulting outfit to promote social, cultural, and

business ties between India and other countries."

Puri created Synergy International that same year. The company designs, develops, and helps access technologies to provide cost-effective and sustainable solutions that enable people in the developing world to fight poverty.

In addition to helping people improve their standard of living, sustainable development, Puri believes, is simply good business.

"Geographical trade borders are being erased, the marketplace is expanding, and new international opportunities are being created every day," reads a statement on his company's Web site (business-consultant-india.com). "In this global economy, no business can afford to overlook international markets, competition, and resources."



A Naïade unit



Puri (left foreground) discusses the Naïade water system with residents in PUNCHKOSI, Punjab, India.



Mini Puri (second from left) meets with Jetsun Pema (center), the Dalai Lama's sister, at a Tibetan refugee camp in India, where a Naïade water unit is being used.