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'Karnataka a role model for solar technology'

Solar Light Private Limited (SELCO-India), a Bangalore-based solar service company has been awarded the prestigious Tech Museum Award' of the United States. The Tech Museum rewards outstanding and innovative projects, which leverage new and existing technologies to benefit mankind and solve some of the planet's most basic problems.

Dr H Harish Hande is the Managing Director of SELCO, also the winner of the Ashden Awards for Sustainable Energy', popularly known as the 'Green Oscars' for the year 2007.

It has also won Karnataka government's award for the maximum number of solar lighting systems sold in the state between 1996 to 2004. It holds the record for the largest number of solar water heating systems installed for a single customer in India and has installed approximately 200,000 Litres of solar water heaters for the Manipal Academy of Higher Education in Manipal and Mangalore.

A doctorate in solar energy from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dr Hande has also been the recipient of "Social Entrepreneurship

Award" for 2007 from the Swiss based Schwab Foundation. He spoke to **K N Reddy** and **Bhavya Bolar** of *Deccan Herald*.

Excerpts:

Q: Where does the solar technology stand now? Is it still facing society-wide barrier to its adoption?

Dr Hande (H): Karnataka has really crossed the barrier. The awareness has caught up very well here. But in other parts of the country, there is still a long way to go. All partners-private companies, financial institutions, service institutions-have done well. Karnataka in a way is model not only in the country, but in the entire world.

We have been able to take solar technology to the rural people. This is not the case in many parts of the world such as Latin America, Africa etc, where the good network of financial institutions is lacking. In case of solar energy only when there is right combination of technology plus finance, we can reach out to the rural masses.

Q: What has been the role played by state government in taking solar technology to the people?

H: The State government has not



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DR HARISH H HANDE
MD, SELCO

done much; it is mostly the Union Ministry of Renewable Energy that does the work of providing subsidy etc. But unfortunately the ministry has tied itself up with this task of giving subsidy only, it has not done much to take the technology to the people.

It is bound by the "March 31 Mentality" which in other word means spending the available funds before the year end.

Over the years I feel the one agency which can bring about real changes in the lives of rural people is NABARD. Instead of giving subsidy on the products, the Government of India should transfer its funds to NABARD to use it

as working capital for entrepreneurs as well as the end users. Because subsidy kills innovation as well as entrepreneurship. Moreover Gol's policy sounds absurd; on one hand it gives subsidy, but on other hand it levies 4 per cent tax.

Further at present the solar sector is swept under the power sector in the country; we need to pull out and make it stand erect on its feet.

Q: The solar products were perceived to be very costly because the initial investments were very high. What has happened over the years?

H: There is a wrong perception that the solar energy is expensive. Look at a street vendor; he is burning kerosene worth Rs 15 daily and his monthly expenses come to around Rs 450. He is paying more than what some of us spend on our monthly electricity charges. Let us break it out.

There is a need for intervention by all stakeholders involved. We can't depend merely on government alone. But I am little cynical of the whole non-profit making sector.

We need patience; a lot of innovations are taking place round the world

and it will result in reduction in cost in next five to ten years. But even now the cost is not very high.

Q: What are the developments happening in the solar sector around the world?

H: During the last five years, the solar industry has seen a big boom. As Germany, Italy and Spain have announced big subsidy programmes, people are doubling their production of solar module.

Today there is a shortage of solar modules; but this is driven by the developed world. In India 70-80 per cent of solar module manufactured is exported. In fact there is a big shortage of raw materials now.

In terms of technology we are shoulder to shoulder with the developed world.

Q: Why SELCO is concentrating on rural masses?

H: I have done my masters and PhD on rural world. I strongly feel that value change that you can bring about through technology in rural areas is much higher than what you can achieve through it in the urban areas.

Money wise urban area is fine. But

we look at things from financial, environmental and also social aspects, in this case rural sector is the best.

Q: Tell us about the activities of SELCO.

A: SELCO today has about 85,000 clients. In Karnataka we have our service available in 23 districts, but our presence is just the tip of an ice berg. Recently we entered Gujarat where we have tied up with SEWA. We don't sell product in areas where we have no service centre. We have a very young innovation department. Besides we have technology collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Colorado University, UAS.

They come up with low cost prototypes which are of use to the common man. Now 10 students from MIT are working on different projects in Gujarat under us. Moreover on January 15, about 25 students from Minniapolis are arriving here to take up various projects. During the last 10 years, more than 250 students from USA have worked here; of these regrettably only five are Indian students. We are not spending anything on them, but it is win-win situation for both of us.