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He slips on a boat-shaped Gandhi cap, tightens his dhoti and hoists a hefty television set onto his greying head. His bare feet ready themselves for the long hard journey across the mountain. Soon he is striding purposefully with his load even as a group of city-dwellers pant empty-handed in his wake.

Shipahi Mama's hut in the hamlet of Mohri squats at an agonising height on a mountain peak in the Sahyadris, about 100 km from Pune. It takes three hours of uphill walking to get to it, but it's worth the climb just to hear its 160-odd residents narrate a tale so reminiscent of the inspiring plot of *Swades* that it makes you wonder whether art has imitated life or vice-versa.

Until a few months ago, most of the residents of Mohri hadn't even seen a bulb or experienced electricity. This, the sarpanch sarcastically jokes, is because even desperate politicians gathering votes have only managed to heave their bulk upto the nearby Velhe taluka. For the last 500 years, kerosene lamps have lit

SHINE A LIGHT

the village after sunset, burning sootily for a few precious hours. So cut off was this hamlet from the rest of the world that villagers look surprised if you ask them who Mahatma Gandhi is. Now, Mohri is a totem of the best kind of modernity—a non-polluting and grassroots one.

Eternal sunshine of the spotless kind

UMA KADAM

Mansi Choksi hikes to a mountain village where aartis are performed to light bulbs



Solar power has changed the face of this village of woodcutters, and it has happened mainly because of the efforts of the aggressive sarpanch. Shivaji Babu Pote is not your standard village head with bushy beard and wracking cough. He is an articulate young man who has studied up to Class XII in Pune and is now determined to develop his native place. So when a Pune-based electrical company called Aar-Em Electronics decided to adopt them a few months ago, he jumped at it.

Aar-Em was equally determined to prove themselves since they had been laughed out by the Maharashtra Energy Development Agency (the government body that looks after the alternative power sector) as being too inexperienced to light up a logistical nightmare like Mohri. "We started out by wanting to show MEDA that we can successfully handle such projects, but the feel-

ing of knowing that we have impacted the lives of so many villagers is much more touching," says Ranjit Mohite, managing director of Aar-Em. The biggest freedom they have bestowed on their rural clients is freedom from kerosene. Since carrying combustible oil on state transport buses is prohibited, villagers with sloshing cans had to trudge up the mountain for seven to eight hours from the foothills to ensure that their dingy huts had some source of light.

With an investment of around Rs 4 lakh, Aar-Em installed streetlights and two solar lamps in each home, one near the cooking and the other in the seating area. Suddenly, it was like Diwali every night. Bhagubai, whose six children study at a boarding school at Velhe, says that the kids now love to come home and study under the clean light. The house is less smoky and it's easier to cook, smiles the 40-year-old woman who has never seen a bulb before.

But while the lights are welcome, what has generated the most excitement is the television installed at a community centre bang in the middle of the village. The massive dish

antenna is an object of awe. "The villagers perform an aarti of the bulbs and television. It's a boon from the gods," says Pote. Ramachewdu Kachre, an old man who has entertained many a child with his grand narrations of Shivaji's valour, was utterly thrilled to see his hero on TV. "He must have

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looked like that only," he says smiling broadly. Since the television has not yet been rigged up completely, the village has to wait for the sarpanch or other educated people to visit the village and operate it before they can enjoy a Marathi film or mythological drama or for that matter a screening of *Swades*.

However, even though environmentalists like Cari Pope of the powerful US environmental lobby Sierra Club say that this village is the perfect example of how a developing country can leap into the fu-

ture by skipping carbon emissions, the journey is not as easy as it sounds. In fact, it's a constant battle against the elements, and Aar-Em's monthly maintenance visits are simply not enough to keep the equipment in order. During the monsoon when the sun is smothered in cloud, the acrid kerosene lamps are brought out again. Recently, the television set got drenched (even though it was in a shed) and is now dysfunctional. At other times, fungi coats the solar cells reducing power generation so drastically that "we get only five to ten minutes of electricity at nights," says Thaukubai, one of the villagers. The number of lights needs to increase—the two lights per house and few street lights are not enough. "But," agrees Thaukubai, "it's much better than before."

The sarpanch's own village, Singapur, has also been solar-empowered by a government agency. When told that his village's name sounds similar to the modern metropolis of Singapore, Pote says proudly, "I know. My dream is that one day, there will be no difference between the two." TNN

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