

Towards a green pathway

Green Award winners cast light on the renewable energy sector



Winning ways: Norti Bai and Bhagwat Nandan, solar engineers from Barefoot College

While environment experts complain about the tardiness that afflicts the launch of India's Solar Mission, three Indian NGOs brought sunshine by winning the Sierra Club's first ever Green Energy and Green Livelihoods Achievement Award last month. They included the well-known ones, as well as the not so well-known. Elaben Bhatt's SEWA, Ahmedabad, founded in 1972, has done steady, stellar work, improving the lives of underprivileged women. Bunker Roy's Barefoot College, Tilonia, Rajasthan, the only fully solar-electrified institution in the country, has, over the past 35 years, trained the rural poor and unemployed to be 'barefoot professionals'. From solar engineers to water drillers, architects and computer programmers, these people have gone from dependence to dignity.

Not so well known was Ecosphere Spiti's work in Spiti, part of the Lahaul & Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh. The organisation has, since 2002, striven to reduce the use of fuel wood by making houses solar-passive in 10 villages, promote tourism and encourage livelihoods based on local produce, such as the highly nutritious Seabuckthorn.

The Green Award, instituted last year by "the largest, oldest and the most influential environmental organ-

isation in the world," as Carl Pope, executive director, Sierra Club, said, is "intended to help focus public attention on successful community organisations that are helping India leapfrog to clean energy technologies, while also creating green livelihoods." The Club members see the 21st century's environmental future in India's hands, "but just like you can't make an Indian curry with just one ingredient – you need the jeera, methi, pyaaz, dhania – so you can't build a future with just one leader or set of ideas", says the feisty, Hindi-speaking environmentalist. The Sierra Club wanted to find exemplary people to honour and bring together, so they may learn from each other.

Making it scalable

The work had to be a grassroots, bottom-up effort that would create green jobs and it had to be replicable and scalable in 1,000 villages. A recommendation board, consisting of intellectuals, businessmen, media-persons and social workers, helped locate the winners. "Even I wasn't aware of the work being done at Spiti, though the other organisations are known for creating jobs," says Darryl D'Monte, chair, Forum of Environmental Journalists, and one of the board members.

There are obvious uses to an award

such as this: the money (Rs20 lakh each to Ecosphere Spiti and Barefoot College and Rs10 lakh to SEWA) helps scale up the work. Ecosphere Spiti's work in the areas of livelihood creation, renewable energy and conservation in the Spiti valley has involved convincing village leaders since the past two years, to go in for a benefit-sharing system in building solar-passive homes, whereby they provide the labour and low-cost materials, like mud, and "we put in the more expensive ones, like wood and technology," says Ishita Khanna, president.

The Seabuckthorn was being routinely cut for use as fencing – which was stopped when it was found it prevented soil erosion in Spiti's mountainous terrain – and for its berry; the villagers were encouraged to retail its jams and crushes and use the revenue for development work.

Considering that green livelihoods still remain outside the mainstream, Reema Nanavaty, director, SEWA, says that as a follow-up to the award, they are partnering Sierra Club to set up a Centre for Excellence in Green Livelihoods in Mumbai, "to evolve a way of setting benchmarks and standards of cost-effectiveness, disseminate information about nationwide possibilities and forge links with FIIs, the private sector and academia."

Even without such links, solar engineers from Barefoot College have installed solar units in 10,000 households, covering 574 villages across 16 states. "Can we create a context for collaboration?" says Pope, referring to the fragmented nature of India's NGO sector. "If India provides the social infrastructure (and that's where SEWA and Barefoot College come in), and the technology would be globally developed, it can have its own solar power industry, that could compete with the coal power industry, which could cater to the bigger users. But solar power could serve 300,000 villages that only need light."

The picture sounds fine in theory, says D'Monte, but the trade element in the exchange remains hazy. What seems clear, though, is that a Green Award casts the spotlight where it ought to – building a green pathway.

♦ NANDINI BHASKARAN