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# THE ECONOMIC TIMES

## Students daring to explore new territory

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### The need for change

With a Masters in Development Studies from International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, a Masters in Public Policy from Central European University and a post graduate diploma in Rural Management from Institute of Rural Management, Anand, Gujarat, Amrita Sharma, consultant, Resource Centre and Constituency Management, started her career as a policy researcher with **International Water Management Institute** - Tata water policy program [ITP] in Anand, Gujarat and worked there for three years. "I come from a small town called Khagaul near Patna. At present, I divide my time between doing constituency development work for a Member of Parliament from Bihar and an NGO (Aajeevika) working with migrants in the informal sector in western India.

In the constituency development work, there is a large focus on strengthening the existing government development schemes and upscaling the need for good NGO interventions in the region. I also harbour an interest towards strengthening the institutional support systems for seasonal migrants working in the informal sector across India. Low-quality migration under high vulnerability is a large, but unfortunately an unattended issue. My involvement with Aajeevika is a step in this direction," expresses Sharma who chose to work for rural India rather than running after the urban life.

"I see a great value in exchange of innovations and smart ideas across different contexts - rural/urban, private enterprise/NGO sphere, national /international, etc. Given my training and inclination, I see myself facilitating this important exchange," Sharma explains. Talking about how far she thinks she has succeeded towards uplifting rural India, Sharma shares, "I would not claim that I have succeeded in uplifting rural India. It's too big a claim. I am only following my drive to work in a place and a sector where I think I can add good value." She adds that her work demands a lot of her time to be spent in villages which is a huge issue for her. "There are anxieties from the family front. However, I have an extremely supportive family," she asserts. According to Sharma, the main difference between working in a rural area as opposed to an urban one is that the happiness quotient in the former is higher as the impact of one's work is more tangible.

### Education, a necessity

Santosh Choubey, director general, All India Society for Electronics and Computer Technology (AISECT) and chancellor of Dr CV Raman University, is widely recognised as one of the entrepreneurial pioneers in the area of IT education and services dissemination doing exceptional work in the semi-urban and rural areas of India. An electronics and telecommunication engineer, he also got selected into the Indian Engineering Services (1976) and the Indian Civil Services (1981). But, he made the decision of forgoing both, in order to pursue his interest in the areas of science and technology and joined Bharat Electronics Limited (New Delhi). While in New Delhi, he was the founding member of the Delhi Science Forum, a science and technology policy planning NGO. It was around that time that the concept of AISECT began to evolve. "In the post emergency scene, a lot of scientists and engineers were leaving their jobs and venturing into the social work domain. I, too, harboured the idea of taking science and technology to people. I quit my other endeavours and started functioning full-time for the promotion of science and technology in the rural areas," expresses Choubey.

Talking about his decision of going rural, Choubey expresses, "Initially, it was an idealistic decision. When I left the civil services, I thought I would pursue something for the upliftment of the people living in the rural areas. The idea got more clearly defined when we realised that there were a lot of business opportunities too that could be explored. And while the Indian market was focussing on software exports, we thought of the domestic use of software, domestic promotion of IT and empowerment of people through IT. Now, we are a 25-year old organisation and currently, have over 7,000 franchise centres across 27 states and three Union Territories in the country."

Choubey further shares, "We have generated employment for about 25,000 people. The government of India, too, has

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enjoy your work. If you enjoy your work, the rest follows."

### Lighting up lives

A management graduate and a national scholarship holder in graduation, Mandeep Singh, COO, D.Light Energy Pvt. Ltd started his career with Colgate Palmolive wherein he learnt the basics of sales and distribution. "I, later, worked with GCMMF (Amul). Then, I had stints in Bayer, Duncans and Kodak. My last stint was with Reed Exhibitions. Currently, I am with a Silicon Valley start-up, D.Light Energy Inc as their country head - India," he informs, adding, "D.Light is a social enterprise, for profit, focused on eradicating kerosene lanterns globally by providing portable solar lighting products and solutions. We are currently marketing LED (light-emitting diode) based solar lanterns. We have a goal to improve 100 million lives by 2020."

So, after having such a progressive career graph, how did the decision of venturing into the rural and domestic market come around? Singh explains, "As a social enterprise, we are inclined to improve lives of people in rural markets, globally. 1.6 billion people globally do not enjoy the benefits of grid electricity out of which 486 million are in India." Singh adds, "We are focused on improving lives of people. Our mission says it all, 'enable households without reliable electricity to attain same quality of life as those with electricity'. We provide solar lights to get rid of kerosene lights. It results in higher productivity; also, kids can study in better light. And most importantly, extremely low recurring costs are an added advantage."

What about challenges on the way? "Solar lighting, as a category, has not evolved yet. Further, the rural market is highly price sensitive. Many families at BOP (bottom of the pyramid) cannot afford our lights. Also, it takes a lot of time for technology products to build trust with people in the rural markets. Above all, reaching the last mile is tough and an expensive proposition," he shares. Singh concludes with a piece of advice for aspirants, "Stick to the basics, be process-centric and customer focused, keep your feet on the ground and be a constant learner."

For these individuals, the growth of the country is just as important as their personal growth. Not many people display the determination and passion to do something for the lesser-developed areas of their country. However, these individuals are here to contribute immensely towards a new change.

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