

'Mixing It Up'

By Sarah Murray

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CEO perspective: Ajay Goel, Tata Power Solar

After returning to his native India in 2012 to take on a job at Tata Power Solar, one of the first things Ajay Goel did was to head out of the office. As chief executive of a company with a more than 20-year history in solar power, he wanted to meet his customers – and many of them were the villagers of rural India. Goel, who spent 20 years working in the US in IT, consulting and solar power, was hired by the company to oversee its expansion after Tata Power acquired its remaining stake from BP.

Among the company's goals was broadening its range of affordable products for people living off the electricity grid. And on moving back to India, Goel wanted to find out what was driving demand for power in the communities in which Tata Power Solar's products were sold. "One of the things I found was when I got to this company was that over the past few years they'd lost touch with what was actually happening with the villages," he says. So he set off on a series of trips across the country. There, he found that the drivers of power consumption were sometimes unexpected.

The first insight was that the mobile phone was at the heart of life in rural areas – and that demanded a power supply. "They may not have a landline or running hot water, but everyone in villages has a mobile phone," he says. "So charging a phone has become a fundamental need." Secondly, he found that, because of the rapid spread of satellite broadcasting, television had become an all-pervasive part of rural life in India.

"So people want access to electricity to charge their phones and to watch TV," he says. "This is the kind of stuff that's hard to think of when you're sitting in your office." Thirdly, demand for education was pushing up demand for power. "I left India when most people were content in their hereditary business – if your father was a farmer, you were OK being a farmer," Goel explains. "Today everyone wants education and mobility, so families want electricity to help their kids study – that's a big driver." Finally, as Goel visited states such as Rajasthan in north-west India, he saw that solar irrigation pumps could help farmers move beyond inefficient traditional irrigation techniques. In a country where vast numbers of people lack access to electricity, Goel argues that distributed energy will be a catalyst for economic growth – but not by following US or European models of development. He believes the evolution of the country's power infrastructure needs to mirror that of telecoms in India, where landlines were bypassed as the market moved directly to mobile technology. "India will similarly leapfrog from traditional centralised generation to distributed generation using solar," says Goel. "It seems pretty obvious that in three years' time distributed generation will take off in a huge way in India."

The company's products reflect this view. Tata Power Solar products range from solar home lighting systems and streetlights to solar irrigation pumps and products such as Tata Dynamo, an eight-hour backup power pack that combines solar panels, an inverter and a battery. Of course, if Goel's prediction is accurate, it's not only the residents of rural India who stand to benefit – so does his company's bottom line.

THE GOOD STUFF

Here, I invite my interviewees to name a favourite charity and – in the spirit of Mixing It Up – a favourite cocktail.

Charity: Action For Autism

Cocktail: gin and tonic

URL: <http://www.sarahmurray.info/blog/ceo-perspective-ajay-goel-tata-power-solar/>