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THE DRIVING FORCE

A repatriate engineer, Anil Rajvanshi has become a messiah in rural Maharashtra through his eco-friendly innovations

"My father called me an idiot because

I refused the Green Card to the US!" Anil Rajvanshi's conversations are punctuated with anecdotes that combine wit and wisdom. Even as he conjures up a joke, he amuses, inspires and motivates all at the same time. He claims he has attained this state of mental peace—*"man ki shanti"*, as he calls it—after several turbulent life experiences. The repatriate has been working tirelessly towards giving Maharashtra's rural residents a better life than their privileged urban-half by spearheading sustainable development projects and innovations in and around Phaltan in Satara district.

Born and raised in Lucknow, Rajvanshi went to S T Francis School and later completed his B Tech and M Tech degrees from IIT-Kanpur. His quest for knowledge took him to the US where, at the University of Florida, he pursued his doctorate in mechanical engineering, specialising in solar energy. It was during these days that he met Nandini Nimbkar, who he later married. "I went to the same university exactly six months after him and within a few months we were friends," she recalls. "It was surprising to see how much we had in common."

Developing an interest in imparting knowledge, he stayed back at the University of Florida to teach for two-and-a-half years before an inner voice goaded him to return to India. "I gave it all up to come back and work for rural development. My arrogance and belief that I could change my country brought me back," says the 62 year-old, as he goes down memory lane.

However, it was not an easy homecoming. To begin with, he had to face the negative response of his family, as he had "chosen to decline fast-track citizenship in the US". "Why

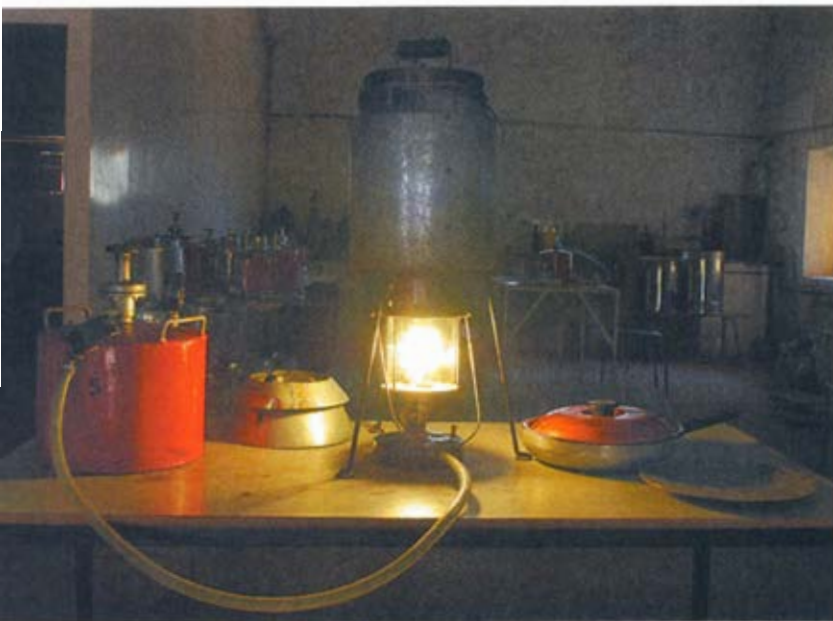
should I be a citizen of another country when the country I was born in is good enough?" asks Rajvanshi, filled with pride, for the sake of which he and Nandini even refused to have children in the US. Today, blessed with two daughters Noorie and Madhura, Rajvanshi says, "I wanted my kids to be Indians." In 1981, he bid adieu to the US and landed here to join hands with Nimbkar Agricultural Research Institute (NARI), which was founded by his in-laws in Phaltan in 1968. "I supported him...I had the same plans as well. We both understood each other. This being my hometown, it was much easier for me to adjust but he took a while," says Nandini.

The whole family is dedicated to the cause. While Rajvanshi heads the institute, Nandini is the president and his sister-in-law oversees the animal husbandry department. "We are a bunch of mad people," jokes Rajvanshi. NARI has been a major stepping stone for Rajvanshi as it gave him an outlet for his dreams. This non-profit research and development institute was established by B V Nimbkar, his father-in-law, who was the first president of NARI till Nandini took over. Since its establishment, NARI has been involved in agricultural research, sustainable development, renewable energy and animal husbandry. With a recent Globe Sustainability Research Award from Sweden to its credit, the institute is touching new heights. Vijendra Singh, who has been working with NARI since 1991 and is a witness to Rajvanshi's journey, says, "He is a great person; his main aim is to support the poor. He genuinely loves the people here and is always supportive of new ideas and gets into the minutest details of each and every project."

To prove the adage 'change begins at home', Rajvanshi conceptualised and designed an

RAJVANSHI RECENTLY INVENTED LANSTOVE, A LANTERN-CUM-STOVE THAT COOKS WHILE SERVING AS A LANTERN. ACCORDING TO HIM, THIS IS, BY FAR, HIS BEST INVENTION. "WHY SHOULDN'T THESE PEOPLE GET THE LUXURIES LIKE PEOPLE FROM THE CITIES? WE ALL SHOULD HAVE EQUAL LIVES." THESE ETHANOL LANTERNS HAVE BEEN DISTRIBUTED TO LOCALS AT A PRICE OF RS 20 ON A TRIAL BASIS

environment-friendly house for himself in 1984. The 16-inch walls keep the house cool during summers and warm during winters. The house is additionally cooled by laying gunny sacks on the roof and spraying them with water, a simple application of science



and thermal energy. "We don't need air-conditioning in our house," he boasts. The house is surrounded by acres of greenery and has been widely used for his research work.

Calling for more and more people to work towards green ideas, Rajvanshi believes that today's youth have a very important role to play. He is dismayed at what they term as success. "A car, a big house and a huge salary are not successes according to me. Youngsters should stop thinking on these lines. This shallow thinking will only make them fret over clothes and bags. I had just two shirts and two pants but I thought I was the king of the world." Another thought that bothers him is the lack of good role models for developing minds. To guide tomorrow's leaders, Rajvanshi meets them regularly. "Speaking to youth is my passion; shaping their lives means shaping the future of the country."

Uplift at the grassroots is another cause close to his heart. Just like his father who quit his professorial job at Allahabad University to fight against the British during the struggle for freedom, the desire to bring about a change has remained in Rajvanshi's genes. He recently invented Lanstove, a lantern-cum-stove that cooks while serving as a lantern. According to him, this is, by far, his best invention. "Why shouldn't these people get the luxuries like people from the cities? We all should have equal lives." These ethanol-based lanterns have been distributed to locals at a price of Rs 20 on a trial basis. Hoping for a positive response, Rajvanshi says, "Lanstove promises light in homes that have been in the dark for 50-60 years." The innovation received a Globe Forum Award in Sweden recently.

Another feather in his cap is the biomass gasifier that utilises agricultural waste from sugarcane factories in and around Phaltan. Earlier, this waste was burnt, causing air pollution and production of greenhouse gases. With this patented innovation, the entire natural residue gets turned into heat and is being used for rural business. Another of Rajvanshi's



inventions is an electric rickshaw—ELEC-SHA—which has gained a lot of popularity among locals as an eco-friendly substitute to pedal-pushed rickshaws. To help pedal easily on roads and slopes, ELECSHA runs for about two hours or up to 60 km with a single battery charge.

As we are left wondering if he is a geek, Rajvanshi slowly unfolds his spiritual side. He has written extensively on topics like mental happiness, technology and spirituality as well as personal evolution on his blog *speakingtree.com*. “We must do what makes us happy but be considerate to others as well,” he says. His last book, *Nature of Human Thought* (2010), presents a unique perspective on human thought and its production through modern science. So who is he really—a scientist or a saint? He laughs this off and proclaims, “I am just a zoo animal!”

While Rajvanshi’s innovations and ideals are improving people’s lifestyles in the surround-

ing rural areas, he still reminisces about the days when there was no school nearby for his daughters. “My wife started the first school in Phaltan. With my daughters, grew the grades in school.” So it didn’t come as a surprise when their younger daughter Madhura showed an interest in giving up her botany education to become a teacher in the same school. Indeed, Phaltan has this family to thank for many of its firsts. “When I moved here in 1981, I had to walk for miles to go to another city to make an international call,” recalls Rajvanshi. He kept writing letters to the government asking for a telephone booth in the area and didn’t rest till one was set up in his village.

With so much to his credit, it doesn’t come as a surprise that he is an ardent fan of Einstein and many other great inventors. “It’s a boon to be able to change people’s lives,” he says, sounding like Shah Rukh Khan in *Swades* and Aamir Khan in *3 Idiots* and reinforcing the fact that our films are, in fact, based on reality.