



Annual Letter

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Urja-Energy

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Making an impact on society requires persistence and dedication. It is a slow and tedious process with many roadblocks. Nevertheless, since Urja's founding six years ago, we have had a fair share of small victories, and see the results of longer-term projects in our efforts to empower people in the most rural regions of India.

The entirely woman-run sanitary pad facilities we support and train produce 9000 pads per month, giving women in the region access to affordable care products and breaking a taboo. As each pad is heavier than cheaper pads, they can soak 100ml of water and remain dry. Further enhancements include better packaging containing health advice, and bio-degradable pads so they can be discarded in a more private manner.

The introduction of computer classes attracts over fifty students from nearby villages, who regularly attend to improve their computer literacy. Besides the benefits of being able to function in an ever digital world, the courses combat the stigma that computers are only for men as half the students are women, and also help reduce the mass exodus of younger people from villages to larger cities and Arab countries. At a job fair in Gorakhpur we were able to solicit for 40 placements of the students.

Urja's venture into organic rice farming helps maintain larger rural populations in general. Our resurrection of an almost extinct regional rice variety, "Kala Namak", has taught farmers modern practices in rice cultivation by giving them training from experts. Through donations we have been able to make large fields available for cultivation. The harvest happens collectively, with a bespoke brand for the organic rice so, as a team, we and the farmers get the best possible exposure and price for the rice. During the floods our rice was the only one left standing after the waters receded due to our organic farming practices.

Our initial 2014 efforts in solar panels have expanded to three units, of which 2 are containerized supporting 5kWh of power each. One unit provides all the needs for the Centre in Siswa. One containerized unit provides electricity to 25 small shops in the remote village of Raipur. One unit in Gorakhpur runs our sanitary pad unit. Our solar panels of 2014 are still running and providing electricity to stall holders around the Siswa Bazaar station.

Finally, we continue to empower children by simply trying to give them better lives. Where in past years we funded and helped build school libraries, this year we built a playground for the children of Reshma school, and girls' toilets in seven schools. We also support children with small monthly funds based on extreme need.

The following pages go into more detail on the work we have done in the past year. While we continue to empower and support people in rural India, our donors continue to empower and support us in our efforts. Your donations and kind words of encouragement mean the world to us and help us immensely in the sometimes rather difficult work we do.

Thank you for your continued support.

Raka Singh

Founder and President

Sanitary Pad Production

The sanitary pad production facility opened its doors at the end of June 2017 when the first pad producing machine was acquired from the famous “Pad Man”, Arunachalam Muruganatham. Urja is the first endeavor in Purvanchal — the region in which Urja is active — to purchase one of the machines from Muruganatham that made pad production affordable.

The production facility, consisting of nine employees and one supervisor, is run entirely by women. The women are trained to use the machine and in best practices on maximizing hygiene for the pads, while cultivating a professional work environment. Regretfully, some employees have not been regularly attending work during Dushera and Diwali periods, nor during the wedding season, revealing that there is still work to be done in terms of teaching professionalism. In these cases, pay is reduced for the worst offenders of absenteeism.

To make the women more financially independent, bank accounts were opened for all who work at the facility. This initially proved to be a challenge as the women were convinced the bank would simply take and keep their money or would give it to other people (including their husbands). We also needed to explain that they have a right to secrecy, not needing to tell anyone how much money they have in their account, and that bank services include loans. By better managing their finances, combined with a steady income, the lives of these 10 women are improving and looking towards a brighter future.

Today the facility produces 9000 pads per month that are combined in packages of 6 pads per pack. These packs are sold in the neighbourhood and at local shops, almost achieving the facility’s goal of being self-sustaining. Sales, while initially slow, are now starting to pick up. We have even attracted the attention of foreign companies that are now competing directly with our product by introducing their products on the market.



FIGURE 1, A FINAL PACK OF SANITARY PADS

While we still strive to empower women through employment and financial independence, empowerment through good health is equally important. Therefore in a sense it is a good thing that competition has opened up and women have more access to sanitary pads. Regretfully we have found that the quality of these competing products leave a lot to be desired when it comes to hygiene. The choices of materials we use in our products, the way our employees are trained, and the product packaging, even down to how our products will be stocked and sold in rural shops, have all been set up with hygiene as a core feature. In a blind test where we purchased packets of a competing brand that sold their product at a cheaper price than ours, we found that 9 out of 12 packets purchased contained a

type of fungus. Naturally, using a product of such intimate nature with fungus on can lead to serious health complications, which is why we continue to maintain our high health standards.

In addition to the health benefits, our products are bio-degradable and produced using environmentally friendly products and processes. When one considers that women in rural India tend to toss used pads off the road or in a field, the bio-degradable aspect becomes much more pertinent. It takes approximately six months for a pad to completely disintegrate. Competing products often remain intact for years, and decades in some cases.

Highlighting the benefits of a cleaner, safer, and environmentally sound sanitary pad becomes secondary when competing products are sold at 15 rupees per pack, 10 rupees less than our packs. In 2020 we're aiming to reduce our price to match those of the competition by subsidizing the cost of the packs through donations. We are also looking into options to reduce the overall production cost for a more long-term solution while maintaining our goal of hygienic and environmentally friendly pads.

Education projects

Computer Classes

To stop the mass migration of young people to larger cities and Arab countries we have started offering computer classes at the centre in Siswa Bazaar. People come from the surrounding villages to attend one of two classes, each with 25 students, and learn computer basics, such as how to use an operating system, use software such as Word, and browse the internet. This basic computer literacy already gives them a big advantage when looking for employment.

Amongst the class attendees are young married women, illustrating a definite change in society of this region in parents allowing their daughters and daughters-in-law to study alongside boys, and go outside the home in general.

Every 6 months these students are provided a certificate of completion from the Prime Minister's skilling programme. They also participated and attended the job fair in Gorakhpur and 40 of our students were able to find placements.



FIGURE 2, (LEFT) SIGN AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE CENTRE, AND (RIGHT) STUDENTS TAKING A COMPUTER CLASS AT THE CENTRE

Playground

In 2019 we built a playground for the children of Reshma school. The playground was realised thanks to the help of a private sponsor.



FIGURE 3, (TOP AND BOTTOM) CHILDREN PLAYING IN THE NEW PLAYGROUND



FIGURE 4, SCHOOLCHILDREN LINE UP ON THE NEW PLAYGROUND



FIGURE 5, THE NEW URJA SPONSORED TOILET SPECIFICALLY FOR GIRLS



FIGURE 6, GIRLS STANDING ALONG THE GREEN PATH LEADING TO THE TOILETS



FIGURE 7, SIGN AT THE SCHOOL LIBRARY WHICH WAS SPONSORED BY URJA IN 2018



FIGURE 8, TWO GIRLS RECEIVING A MONTHLY STIPEND FOR THE UPKEEP AND MAINTENANCE OF THE LIBRARY, AS WELL AS KEEPING IT OPEN FOR OTHER CHILDREN

Sewing classes

In the new year we will continue our project to start sewing classes for women, giving them an opportunity to become professional at a skill so they can start a career. This will be our second sewing school in co-operation with USHA Silai School - a highly reputed organization.



FIGURE 9, WOMEN AT THE SEWING SCHOOL



FIGURE 10, FINISHED CLOTHES AT THE SEWING SCHOOL



FIGURE 11, STUDENTS AT WORK

Kala Namak Rice

Kala Namak is said to have been the rice that Buddha himself ate, as grains like our strand were found from excavation sites at Aligarhwa (Siddharthnagar, UP), the region where Buddha grew up. The rice with a black husk (hence the word “kala” or “black” in Hindi) was traditionally grown in an organic fashion, using no herbicide nor pesticide. Today Urja has brought the rice back to its native region and is training farmers in the cultivation and harvesting of the rice.

From an initial 12kg of seeds the first crop of rice was harvested in 2017. From its initial success and promise of help in both education of modern organic farming practices as well as a steady sales path, farmers have agreed to work with Urja to cultivate the rice. In return, they must use our organic rice production processes. From each harvest we not only gain the rice, but also seed for subsequent growths.



FIGURE 12, IN THE RICE FIELDS

In 2019 more than 6 acres of rice were cultivated, yielding 52 quintals of rice. Today the rice is sold at markets in neighbouring towns and bigger cities, like Delhi and Lucknow. Despite set-backs from certain retailers not coming through on their promises, we continue to look for a steady channel to sell the rice through. Our pricing is slightly higher than other rice varieties, reflecting the labour, natural products (like neem oil, mustard seed cakes and worming compost which are used as fertilisers) involved in cultivating an organic rice, and fair pay for the farmers. We are holding onto the fair price.

To better brand the product, extra effort was spent on appropriate packaging. Design of the rice packaging was done by URJA staff and the packaging material was sourced from another NGO working for women's empowerment, just like us. As yet we are only selling in the neighbouring towns and bigger cities like Delhi and Lucknow.



FIGURE 13, KALA NAMAK PACKAGED WITH URJA BRANDING, READY FOR SALE

Solar panel project

Six years into our solar panel endeavour our initial site of 10 solar panels are still running successfully, giving power to households and stores in Siswa Bazaar. The initial goal of the project, in that beside providing people with power it would also be self-sustainable, has also succeeded in that the people of the village are able to keep and maintain the infrastructure themselves. This unit is completely self-sustaining.

In total Urja now has three containerised solutions outputting 5 kW each. These power the Urja centre in Siswa Bazaar, the sanitary pad unit mentioned earlier, and households and stores.

We are also happy to report that in the meanwhile the government has improved service to remote villages. Where villages would experience blackouts for large periods of time as power was being diverted to factories and areas that were more densely populated, today the blackouts have reduced. Despite this we continue our efforts for villages to install solar panels as a green alternative to power in the region that is generated from fossil fuels.



FIGURE 14, A CONTAINERISED SOLAR SOLUTION PROVIDING OFF-GRID POWER TO PEOPLE AT SISWA BAZAAR



FIGURE 15, SPONSORS VISITING THE SOLAR PANEL CONTAINER

Plans for 2020

We will continue to be a social project attempting to raise awareness of hygiene, women's empowerment and sustainable development. Our second sewing school soon to start will provide many with the right certificates to look elsewhere for employment or even start their own. Believing that children should have a chance to grow in a healthy nurturing environment we are hoping to start with some organised team games like baseball, which has already proved a success near Mumbai.

We strive to better in each of our products and to be self- sustaining in all our projects.

Our sincere and grateful thanks to all our supporters.

