

## The Story of Ruipathar

(With sincere thanks and acknowledgements to Maitri-Pune and Melghat, Humanwave Italia, and Sunlit Future, Auroville)

When Mani turned the switch on, it was not just the village street that was illuminated. The faces of all the villagers waiting patiently but eagerly around him for hours-on-end also appeared to be lit up! All around, there was a pandemonium with broad smiles, shouts, and screams of joy in the air! In their excitement and to show their gratitude, the villagers lifted Mani in the air, accidentally bumping his head against the very low ceiling of the tiny switchboard room, fortunately avoiding a serious injury! It looked like a surreal scene, straight from a Bollywood movie! The only difference was that, in this case, rather than watching a movie, I was fortunate enough to witness a truly rare and momentous event, *in person*. The date was March 26, 2011. The place was Ruipathar, a small isolated tribal village of about 250 people in the remote jungles of Melghat, a very hilly and difficult terrain, famous for its tiger-preserve and teak wood, in the Satpura range of mountains in the Amravati District of Maharashtra, India. The event was the electrification of the village using solar energy!



Puru, a friend of mine, and I were in Ruipathar for several days to visit and observe the project site at the invitation of another mutual friend, Rishi Kapoor, who runs a highly successful solar energy commercial unit, Sunlit Future, in Auroville, an international city in-the-making in Tamilnadu, India. Rishi has expertise in both thermal and photovoltaic solar energy applications for heating, lighting and electricity generation. While successfully running his unit on a commercial basis, Rishi's real passion is to apply his tremendous expertise, enthusiasm and energy in projects to bring water and electricity to the truly needy in the hard-to-reach villages located in the remotest corners of India. He has already participated in many such projects for villages in Ladakh, Kargil, Zaskar, Orissa, Sundarban and other places. Rishi usually works with NGOs who have identified and defined such projects in coordination with the villagers and potential agencies and/or private donors who would fund the projects. For any given project, Sunlit Future performs the needed engineering computations, develops the material, equipment and labor requirements, gets the best equipment at highly competitive prices, provides a team of technical people for on-site turn-key installation work and ensures that the projects are completed in a timely fashion within the allocated budget. They do all this and more on a cost basis, without any profit for Sunlit Future!

Sunlit's association with Ruipathar goes back to 2008 when a project for providing water to the village was conceived and completed by providing a bore-well, pipe-line to carry the water, storage tank and a submersible pump run by the solar photovoltaic panels. This project was conceived by an American, Harvey Toub, who sadly passed away last year. He was an amazing man to go to the remotest corners and find a solution to bring water for the villagers and save time and back-breaking work every day for the village women. Maitri, a Pune-based NGO, with a branch in Melghat had coordinated this project with villagers and Sunlit had overseen the solar energy supply and installation part of it. Before this project, women of Ruipathar had to travel daily almost a kilometer on a steep incline to fetch the water. The water project has been a real boon to the villagers and has made Ruipathar the only village in the whole of Melghat (which consists of 322 villages) to have 24-hour continuous running water.



The electrification project for Ruipathar has a history too! Many years back, the government had attempted to electrify the village. Electrical transmission lines were brought from a power grid to

the village and street lights were installed. High-ranking government officials had come for the inauguration ceremony and the village did get electricity for that one day. In the government books, the village was marked as 'electrified' under the Rural Electrification Scheme, but, since that inauguration day, many years back, the electricity was cut off for some mysterious reasons and the village never saw an electric light after that day!

This time around, the electrification project was undertaken by Maitri Melghat in collaboration with the village people. The technical support and project management were provided by Sunlit Future. The necessary funding was by donated by an Italian NGO HUWI (Huamwave Italia) which supports many environmental projects in remote parts of India, Engineers without Borders at Columbia University, New York and a few private donors. The total estimated project cost was about Rs. 10 lakhs (or \$22,000). Melghat Maitri, the local wing of Maitri, deserves tremendous credit for organizing the interaction between Sunlit and the villagers and in overseeing the pump operation, and setting up a mechanism to collect a nominal amount (Rs. 50 a month per household) to defray the on-going maintenance cost for water and electricity. The role of Melghat Maitri in this project has been extremely important and they are the reason why the villagers offered help during both the water and electrification projects. They really trusted and believed in Melghat Maitri. Madhubhai, Rambhai, Rajaram and others of Maitri have provided yeoman's service for both these projects.



Rishi, Puru, and I reached Ruipathar on March 26th, but Sunlit's technical team, consisting of Mani, Shivkumar and Balaji had preceded us by a week, arriving Ruipathar with most of the material and equipment needed for the project. They had laid the foundation of the project with the villagers and obtained their collaboration and help in the actual physical work to implement the project. It was a sight to see when we reached the project site. Ruipathar consists of a total of 55 houses - 28 and 27 houses in a row, on either side of a narrow lane. Practically the whole village had been working with Sunlit's team in digging the trenches and pouring concrete for erecting the electric poles, assisting in the cabling and wiring work and other chores under the supervision of the technical team and the Maitri personnel. It was an amazing collaboration of the technical team who spoke Tamil and some English but hardly any Hindi or Marathi while the village people spoke their native tribal language Kukru (with a vocabulary of 2000 words) and a spattering of Hindi/Marathi. It was also an intriguing site to see two sets of electric poles and cables on either side of the narrow village lane; one set of poles and cables, a relic of the failed government electrification project and the other set for the current solar photovoltaic electrification project.



March 27th was an extremely hot day with clear blue sky, blazing (or burning sun), and extreme dry heat. Still, it was a day of extreme hard work for the technical team and the villagers, finishing the cabling work outside for the street lights, for establishing connections to the solar panels and the switchboard room equipment consisting of storage batteries, inverter and switches, as well as the requisite wiring work in each of the 55 houses which were to be given 2 lights each. The final switchboard connection work took a long time and was completed only at about 10pm when Mani turned the switch on to illuminate the streets. The home lighting part was completed the next day when the villagers gave a dinner in honor of the technical team and felicitated them, bringing the project to a wonderful end.



In the new set-up, the pump will operate from 7am to 12 noon on the battery power to fill up the water tank. Later, during the afternoon hours, the batteries will be recharged through the solar photovoltaic panels. In the late afternoon pump could be run for a couple of hours and from evening on the batteries would supply the power for electricity. Maitri will take care of this operation as well as ensuring the cleanliness and security of the equipment by hiring personnel and paying them from the dues collected from the villagers for water and electricity project maintenance. Thus, Ruipathar has become the only village out of a total of 322 villages of the Melghat region having 24-hour availability of water and nightly availability of electricity.

Much still needs to be done in Ruipathar and the 321 other villages of Melghat in terms of the minimum basic requirements like water, electricity, healthcare, education, nutrition, farming, and employment opportunities as their sources of income are very, very limited. We hear of the progress India is making on many fronts. All of that is true and part of India is indeed 'shining'. But, a significant part of the population (like in Melghat) still remains below the poverty line, struggling for food, water, electricity and a decent dwelling! That should be a cause of concern for us all. Even the whole of Melghat is just a tiny drop in the ocean called India!



We need to do our share to the extent we can. NGOs like Maitri, HUWI and others and units like Sunlit Futures stand ready to do many more projects like the above. But are we ready for them? The main stumbling block in performing projects of this type is of course the funding. If 20 of us were to fund \$1000 each, every year, we could change the face of at least one village! It's a cause worth considering and any help will go a long way to better the life of the village people who have no resources of their own. One thing I can assure you is that any amount donated goes 100% for project work; nothing gets taken away for administrative expenses etc. If anything, each dollar (or rupee) contributed gets multiplied immensely by the selfless and dedicated service and ingenuity of people like, Madhubhai, Rambhai, Rajaram, Mani, Balaji, Shivkumar and Rishi. We truly have to be grateful to them and also to the villagers themselves for their willingness and hard work to better their lot.



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You may also want to check out the following websites:

1. <http://maitripune.net/Home.html>
2. [www.humanwaveitalia.org](http://www.humanwaveitalia.org)
3. <http://www.cuewb.org/>
4. <http://sunlitfuture.in/>

Many thanks for reading this article and for your help.