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WATER POWER

SUBHASH SETHI, CHAIRMAN OF SPML INFRA,
TALKS EMPOWERMENT, SUCCESS AND HIS
CHANCE TO CHANGE LIVES FOREVER

JUST ADD WATER

WATCHING VILLAGERS STRUGGLE TO FETCH WATER IN THE ROLLING TERRAIN OF NORTH-EAST INDIA, **SUBHASH SETHI** NOT ONLY SAW AN OPPORTUNITY FOR BUSINESS, BUT A CHANCE TO CHANGE LIVES FOREVER.

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A dogged commitment to provide access to water and electricity to the world's second largest population requires more than dedication. It requires passion. Personal passion. And lots of it.

Spearheading SPML Infra, one of India's leading infrastructure development companies, its Chairman Subhash Sethi has the required dedication in bucketloads and is using it to tackle his country's water and power challenges, one village at a time. While travelling in rural areas three decades ago,

Subhash was quick to recognise a huge business opportunity in water supply, but it was his motivation to provide essential services to villagers that drove him to succeed.

His vision was simple. To make life more comfortable for people by providing what many of us take for granted: water and power.

Today, millions of people in different states of the country are far more comfortable thanks to SPML's projects, which provide solutions for various multidisciplinary engineering and infrastructure services, from conceptualisation to maintenance in water, power, environment and infrastructure.

While SPML's primary focus is on water and power, infrastructure developments include construction, trading, waste »



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“NOBODY HAD THOUGHT OF WATER AS A BUSINESS, AND IT WAS SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE, BUT WE STARTED WITH SMALL PROJECTS, WORKING RELENTLESSLY TO GROW THE COMPANY AND IMPROVE PEOPLE’S LIVES.”

management and utility management. The company offers integrated water sourcing and management solutions; undertakes power transmission and distribution projects, including the construction and operation of hydro/thermal power plants; and provides rural electrification, load management and integrated energy management solutions. It also delivers civil engineering works to support its projects including bridges, flyovers, industrial infrastructure, tunnels, special economic zones, industrial/business/technology parks, airports, seaports, bus terminals, automated car parking facilities, toll express roads/highways, terminal markets, and

“SPML Infra is among our most valuable clients. We have been supplying electrical cables for their power transmission and distribution projects across India. We are proud to partner with them in their mission to provide electricity for all.” – Ajay Jaisinghani, Director, Polycab Wires Pvt Ltd

tourism and leisure facilities. In addition, the company provides integrated end-to-end waste management solutions, such as collection, segregation, transportation, treatment, reusability, processing and scientific disposal of waste.

It also manufactures pre-stressed concrete, mild steel and Hume steel pipes, plain and reinforced cement concrete poles, as well as cement mortar lining of steel pipes and fittings.

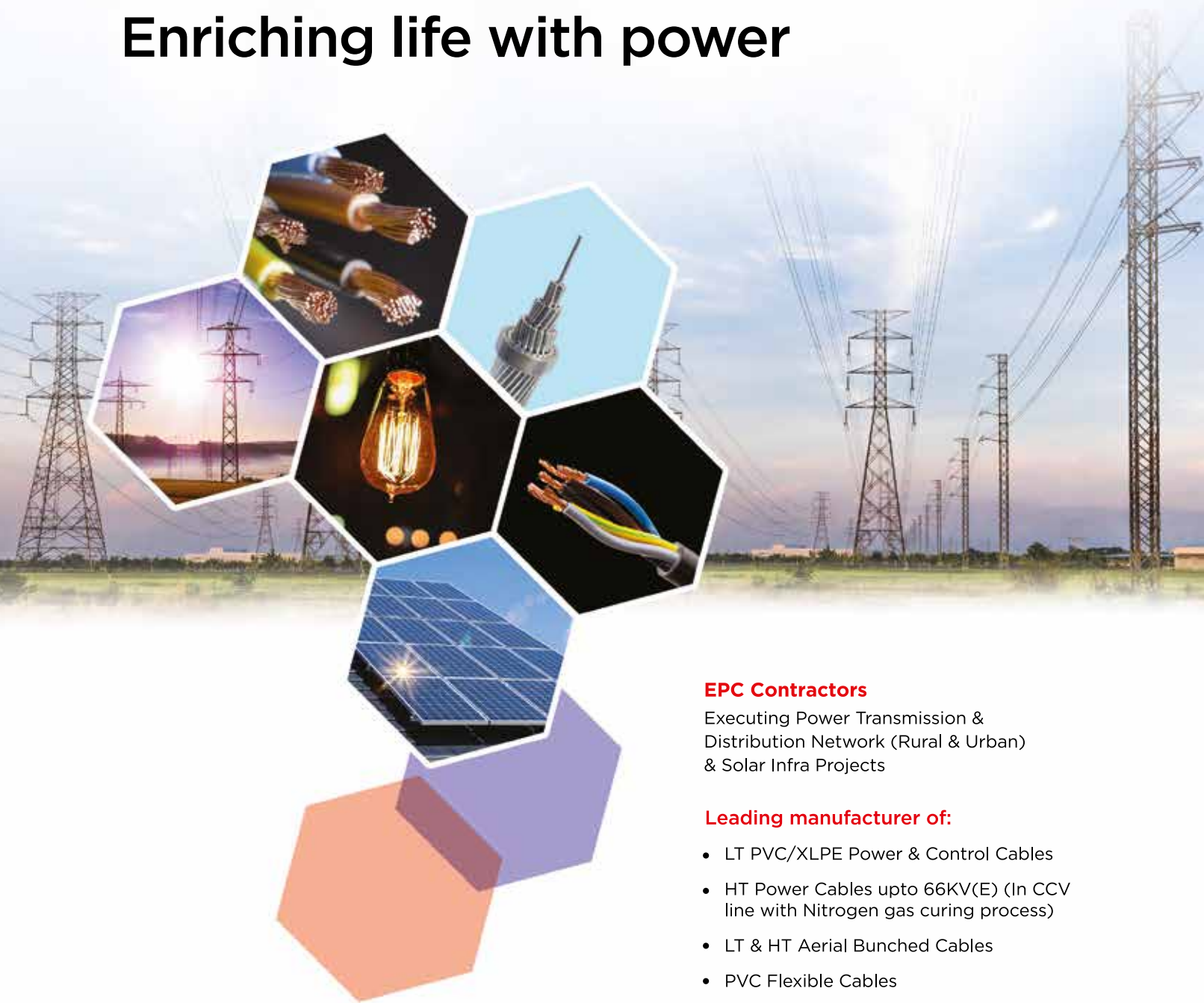
Subhash's crusade to light up and water a country with a population of 1.3 billion, began in 1972 in his own corner of the world, north-east India, an area covering seven states and 45 million people.

Fresh from college, he joined his father's water pumps agency in Guwahati, the largest city in the state of Assam. It was a time when water, while unregulated and freely available, was not easily accessible throughout the countryside and it was during offsite trips with his father that Subhash recognised the need for improvement.

“I observed the villagers' struggle to get water,” he remembers. “I saw many opportunities to remedy that with water supply projects, and I asked my father why we couldn't be the ones to supply these villages with water. Nobody had thought of water as a business, and it was seemingly impossible, but we started with small projects, working relentlessly to grow the company and improve people's lives.”

One of the first steps was to convince the government to grant us engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) contracts, rather than separate contracts for different »

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services such as supply, products and construction. “We were the first to request an EPC contract,” Subhash reveals. “We approached the government, asking to be contracted for the entire water supply system, including its operation and maintenance. But this was in 1973 and the government was yet to be convinced that one company could complete the whole project. Somehow, we convinced them, and were given turnkey contracts for various cities. We were successful in our execution and the government was happy.”

In 1979, with the Assam Movement beginning to emerge as thousands of the state’s students demonstrated against illegal immigrants, Subhash and his two brothers decided to expand the business, creating offices in Delhi, Bengaluru and Kolkata. Subhash Projects and Marketing Limited was founded in 1981, with its headquarters in Kolkata. The company changed its name to SPML Infra Limited in April 2010.

However, as a private player in a largely public infrastructure domain, the brothers faced enormous adversity, hamstrung by delays in funding and a lack of resources and manpower.

Precision planning was required, from processing technology to scheduling the enormous deployment of resources, and SPML was forced to think more creatively and develop its own resources and set new benchmarks in business.

“While it was difficult, it was a strategic decision,” Subhash says. “But our chief focus was always on the overall development and modernisation of the nation. Slowly, we started penetrating markets in different areas and, today, we are one of the leaders, executing very large projects and providing water supply systems throughout the country.”

Nearly four decades on and more than 600 water projects later, SPML has helped deliver clean drinking water to around 40 million people. Its turnkey water management solutions have included canals, irrigation networks, hydrology, reservoirs, storage facilities and distribution, supported by weirs, pumps and thousands of kilometres of pipelines and purpose-built roads.

The company has an annual growth of 10–15 per cent, and last year received global recognition when it was named one of the World’s Top 50 Private Water Companies by Global Water Intelligence, London. For the past six years, SPML has been featured in biannual surveys of international water companies.

However, supporting 16 per cent of the world’s population with just four per cent of fresh water is a formidable task, with rapidly increasing urbanisation exacerbating the problem.

Nearly 80 per cent of India’s surface water and 60 per cent of groundwater reserves are contaminated by pollutants, and the Central Pollution Control Board has recorded 18 of India’s major rivers unfit for domestic and industrial water usage. »

“WE ARE FOCUSED ON CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AND, TO ACHIEVE THAT, WE NEED EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT.”

“Water supply is my passion,” Subhash admits. “In all of my visits outside India, I visit villages in that country and always investigate their water supply, to see how we can develop it and make it better. In fact, wherever I go, even when I’m visiting a city as a tourist, I look at what kind of water supply they have. I want to know what I can learn from them.”

While demand for water is paramount, India is also starved of electricity, despite being the third largest producer of electricity in the world, behind China and the US. For SPML, lighting up the country is just as important as providing water, and the company has made considerable inroads into this sector since India launched its rural electrification program in 2004.

Now recognised as one of the leading power transmission and distribution companies in India, SPML has completed more than 20 rural projects, connecting more than 20,000 villages with electricity and successfully providing more than two million

India’s electricity production grew massively from a meagre 1,362 MW after independence in 1947 to reach 343.90 GW by the end of June 2018. It also recorded a phenomenal growth of 34% over the seven years to 2017. Since 2005, India has launched many rural electrification schemes, but the Saubhagya Scheme, launched in September last year, aims to achieve complete household electrification by April next year. To achieve the target, 2.03 million households have to be connected every month. By September this year, 92 per cent of rural households were electrified.

households with access to power. SPML was part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s village electrification scheme, which pledged to achieve 100 per cent electrification in 18,452 villages in less than 1,000 days between August 2015 and April this year.

The goal was met, albeit loosely. The government deemed a village electrified if power cables from the grid reached a transformer in each village, connecting 10 per cent of its households, including public places such as schools and health centres. While SPML electrified around 4,000 of these villages in the Patna and Gaya districts of Bihar in this duration, Subhash admits millions of households remain in the dark.

“Yes, there are still many areas where there is no access to electricity, and millions of households are still not connected even if their villages are. We definitely want to change that,” he says. “It’s why we confine our focus to water and power.” While Subhash is aware of the likelihood of competition he’s also confident that SPML has a sound



challenge. The same cutting-edge technology used to find engineering solutions to provide access to water and power was required to ensure SPML’s labour force could work safely and efficiently.

The company invested in SAP (systems, applications and products) enterprise resource planning software, to automate the management and processing of its 2,000 employees. Using SAP SuccessFactors – with capabilities including the four pillars of talent management: recruiting, learning and development, performance management, and compensation management – SPML could automate and fine-tune HR.

Subhash concedes that while there were challenges

implementing the data management programs, he is convinced the investment in the revolutionary software has paid off.

“It took us nine months to implement it and we struggled initially because nobody was used to working like this,” he explains. “But it was necessary. It showed us the anomalies of our previous performance appraisals, which were often based more on personalities than performance. For example, some people who have excellent rapport with their bosses are actually average workers. But they were often rated as excellent. On the other hand, more reserved workers, who just got on with their jobs, were rated poorly. Now with SAP SuccessFactors, we have automated the entire labour force, from processing through to training and mentoring. This has made an enormous difference to our operations. Without going to the boss, our employees can now set their own targets by tapping into their own data and see how they are performing in relation to their targets.

“There is no human intervention.

Every detail about that employee – their achievements, performance, appraisals, even promotions – is automated. Everything is in the system.”

It doesn’t take a system though for Subhash to recognise the efforts of his main executives. He’s particularly generous with praise for his management team comprising his brother, MD Sushil, and nephew, non-executive director Deepak, his two sons, Harshvardhan and Abhinandan, as well as MK Chakraborty, Amitava Basu and DP Mukherjee.

“We are focused on customer orientation and, to achieve that, we need employee empowerment. Our systems and processes ensure we develop teamwork within the company, along with innovation and a proactive mindset. That is the key to our success.” ■

BP’S ENERGY OUTLOOK PREDICTS THAT:

- By 2020, renewables will become the second largest source of domestic energy production, overtaking gas and then oil.
- By the late 2020s, India will overtake China as the largest growth market for energy.
- By 2040, India’s energy consumption will grow by 4.2% p.a., faster than all major economies in the world, with coal contributing most to meet the demand.

reputation for delivering. He knows it can take up to 15 years to successfully enter the water and power sectors in India, and even to be considered for a government tender requires companies meeting three stringent criteria.

“You must have completed similar work in the past five years. You must not have been blacklisted anywhere, and you must not have abandoned any project,” he explains. “If you lack any one of those three things, you will be rejected straight off. Then, you have to meet other technical, financial and managerial specifications. In fact, there are about 23 stages you have to go through. It’s not easy.”

While laying thousands of kilometres of pipelines and lighting up India can be a logistical nightmare, it’s manpower that Subhash covets. He recognises SPML employees as the company’s biggest asset and training them as its biggest

“SPML Infra is one of our most valued customers and EIUL are honoured to have been associated with them for the past 15 years. What sets them apart from the rest is their unmatched vision and dedication.” – Surendra Gupta, Director-Marketing, East India Udyog Ltd

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