



TECHONOLOGY RIKIN GANDHI

Life through a Lens

TEXT: ERAM AGHA

A US-born aeronautical engineer's green dream won the hearts of farmers in India

All that Rikin Gandhi required was a vision and a video camera to build Digital Green, a not-for-profit organisation that uses tools of information and communication technology for social change. "I visited India for a bio-diesel venture in 2006 and interacted with rural India for the first time. That's when I realised that farmers don't have an access to right information. I joined Microsoft Research in Bengaluru to figure out how technology interspersed with social organisation can be applied for the betterment of marginal and small farmers," he says. The result is the Bengaluru-based organisation, Digital Green. Over time it has spun off and is now an independent entity of which Gandhi is CEO.

Born and brought up in the US, Gandhi holds a Master's degree in aeronautical and astronautical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US – he is mentioned in the institute's list of innovative thinkers. After completing his course he joined Oracle as a software engineer, but the 29-year-old with a pilot's licence for the US Air Force harboured ambitions of joining the US space programme. However, his visit to India five years ago changed all that. "While growing up I read biographies of astronauts, they would go to space and see the world differently from that formidable height. Questions like, 'What will I do when I come back to Earth?' occurred to them. Some of them became farmers or schoolteachers after coming back to Earth. Digital Green, for me is a step to reconnect with people."

Gandhi's story runs a trajectory similar to that of the character played by Shah Rukh Khan in the Hindi film



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Swades. “No. I am not inspired by that story as I have not seen the film,” Gandhi affirms. All the same like the protagonist in *Swades*, Gandhi too “reverse-migrated” to work with farmers in India. After arriving in India, Gandhi quickly grasped the loopholes of the traditional methods of disseminating knowledge among farmers. He worked out a plan that would make Digital Green different. “There were traditional ways like broadcast TV and radio which were very generic. Some programmes were intensive in their training and work but they were not cost effective. Because there is a need to build trust in any method of knowledge dissemination, our videos carry the names of the farmers and their villages. This adds authenticity. Use of videos makes the system demonstrative!” says Gandhi. The stars of the videos are the farmers themselves. They are shot by hand-held camcorders demonstrating farming techniques, the footage is then checked by partner NGOs for accuracy and then screened in villages using hand-held projectors. Gandhi’s interaction with the farmers has been facilitated by social groups already working with the local community.

The farmers recognise the change Digital Green, which reaches 56,015 farmers, has brought about in their lives. Says Mallappa Pudabangi, 52, a farmer from village Dasanatti, Belgaum in Karnataka: “It is a very useful

platform for us to learn about effective farming techniques. When I saw the film I was motivated to change my way of farming.” His enthusiasm is palpable when he says that the farmers need many more Rikin Gandhis.

In the course of his research, Gandhi discovered that urban Indians are disconnected with food. “In the sense they know what to eat and from where to buy but don’t know anything about agriculture and rural set-up,” says Gandhi. To help the urban population connect with the farming community Digital Green started a game called Wonder Village through which the urban population gets to understand issues of rural development.

So far, the farmers have shot around 1,609 videos. But this is just a beginning. Gandhi’s plans are as big as the fields he works for. “When one of our videos was shown to President Obama on his recent trip to India, there was talk on how India and the US can come together for agricultural development in Africa. Also, we have to work with the Institute of International Agriculture and look at best practices that can be used and shared with the local community. Our goal is to support livelihood of farmers across India and in the world. Problems of health, nutrition, and credit need to be dealt with as well,” says Gandhi. It seems Gandhi’s green dreams are becoming a reality. ■

More on Rikin Gandhi at www.digitalgreen.org