

Changing the Rural Landscape

In an interview with **Aruna Raghuram, Padma Shri Dr. Anil Rajvanshi** says the mantra for India's development is combining spirituality with technology.



The 'Noorie' lantern

What made Dr. Anil Rajvanshi, now 72 years old, quit his lucrative job in the US and return to serve rural India for the past four decades? "It was madness, some kind of passion I would say, and arrogance. I was too attached to the story of India. An idealist, I believed that since I was born and raised in India and had come to the US only to study, I should return to my motherland. If you want to do something different in life, you have to have a streak of madness. I was arrogant enough to think I could change India, but it's

India that has changed me," says Dr. Rajvanshi, who was awarded the Padma Shri this year.

He has been pioneering rural development work, mainly based on renewable energy. This includes renewable energy-based cooking and lighting, power generation from agricultural residues, renewable fuel production from agriculture, electric cycle rickshaws, water purification and effluent treatment through the use of renewable energy. All this has greatly impacted lives in rural India. He was the first person to promote the use of high technology

for rural development. He is currently the Director and Honorary Secretary of Nimbkar Agricultural Research Institute (NARI), situated in a small town called Phaltan in Maharashtra. His wife, Dr. Nandini Nimbkar, is President of NARI, a non-profit research and development institute set up by her father in 1968.

Nationalist Leanings

Born and raised in Lucknow, Dr. Rajvanshi went to St. Francis School. Somehow, wearing a tie and speaking English symbolised to his young mind 'colonial control' and he started reading

books in Hindi and became an avid reader of Indian folk tales. His father went to jail with Mahatma Gandhi in 1942. This fact and being gifted the autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi, 'My Experiments with Truth', at the tender age of 13, completely changed and shaped his life. "The book had a powerful influence on me. It triggered in me an interest to learn about the Indian spiritual tradition. I would go to a library nearby and read religious texts and ancient epics," he says.

This included the 'Bhagvad Gita', 'Mahabharata', 'Ramayana', 'Koran', 'Bible', 'Rigveda', 'Upanishads' and 'Patanjali Yoga', among other books, when he was just 14 years old. "I started meditating in addition to the reading. Those spiritual experiences helped me think about things very deeply," he adds. Interestingly, it was his fascination for steam engines that motivated him to take up engineering. He completed B Tech and M Tech from IIT, Kanpur. Then he obtained a Government of India scholarship which enabled him to go abroad



Dr. Anil Rajvanshi

to do a PhD. He was in the US from 1974 to 1981.

"I met my wife at the University of Florida. Both of us decided to return and set up base in Phaltan, which is about 250 km from Mumbai. I then started energy and sustainable development work at NARI," Dr. Rajvanshi informs. Phaltan, at that time, was an overgrown village with no facilities. He had to hop on a bus to Pune to make long distance calls! Dr. Rajvanshi feels that life in Phaltan was responsible for "detoxifying him". "Living in rural India taught me humility, sustainability and enhanced my spiritual leanings," he says. It also brought about in his mind a combination of spirituality and technology which he thought he could use for the country's development.

Technology-Spirituality Link

Given that technology and spirituality are not on the same page, what is it that Dr. Rajvanshi means by saying that the combination sparked off new ideas? "I have always felt that when you are looking for higher things in life, your immediate needs must be taken care of by technology. Technology makes your life simple and comfortable. But there is a need to utilise the technology through the wisdom of spirituality for the benefit of mankind. That's why I see a link between spirituality, technology, sustainability and happiness. If we follow this maxim, we will become a holistic society," he explains.

And what drives him to innovate? "When you can deeply observe your surroundings with your eyes and ears, you will find infinite problems that need solutions. To solve problems, one needs to innovate. For instance, the 'Noorie' lantern was made after we saw the large number of homes without any electricity. Again, seeing the plight of poor people, we pioneered the concept

of rural restaurants,” he explains, branding it as the “romance of innovation”. In the late nineties he pioneered the concept of using ethanol as cooking and lighting fuel for rural areas. This strategy has been replicated by institutes like World Bank and the Cooking Stove Alliance of the UN.

His group was the first to initiate a programme of electric rickshaws in the country in the nineties and also developed the multi-fuel ‘Noorie’ lantern and multi-fuel lantern cum stove called the ‘lanstove’. Dr. Rajvanshi pioneered the concept of rural restaurants in 2012. This probably led to the setting up of Amma’s Kitchen in Tamil Nadu and Shiva Bhojan in Maharashtra. NARI was the first institute in the world to develop a 500 kW (thermal) sugarcane leaves’ gasifier in 1995. He also pioneered the development of low-cost solar-based water purifiers. With his belief in sustainability, Dr. Rajvanshi believes in a simple lifestyle since he considers Mahatma Gandhi his role model.

His house in Phaltan is



Receiving the Padma Shri

located on a two-acre plot with trees planted by him, a haven for 40 different types of birds. The house is kept cool by laying old jute gunny sacks on the roof and sprinkling water on them twice a day. This, along with use of only fans and LED lamps, keeps electricity consumption low. He still uses a 20-year-old refrigerator. The practice is to repair rather than discard and purchase new appliances. All kitchen waste is composted and no food is wasted. Rainwater is harvested. Plastic garbage is minimal. The eggs are

mostly from local poultry, milk from cows across the road and vegetables and groceries from their own farm or the local market.

Dr. Rajvanshi mostly wears khadi or cotton spun in cottage industries. Clothes are worn till they get torn. Then, they are converted to cleaning cloths. Similarly, all the papers in the office are used for writing on both the sides and then brought to the house to heat bath water. And despite this grounded lifestyle, his work has attracted global recognition. In 1998, he became the second Indian to be inducted in the US-based Solar Hall of Fame. In 2001, Dr. Rajvanshi received the prestigious Jamnalal Bajaj Award for the use of science and technology in rural India from Dr. Manmohan Singh. His efforts led to NARI getting the FICCI Platinum Jubilee Award in 2002 from Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

His work on ethanol lantern cum stove was given the 2009 Globe Forum Award for sustainability research in Stockholm from HRH Crown Princess Victoria. In 2014, he



The Rajvanshi family



With wife Dr. Nandini Nimbkar

became the first Indian to receive the Distinguished Alumnus Award of University of Florida, USA and is listed as notable alumni of IIT Kanpur. And in 2022, the Government of India honoured him with the Padma Shri. Dr. Rajvanshi has written extensively on his work on spirituality, technology and sustainability. He has more than 230 publications,

seven patents and five books to his credit.

He has given inspirational lectures on his work to almost 10,000 students in IITs, IIMs, NITs and other colleges across the country. Dr. Rajvanshi has two daughters. One is in the US with her husband. His second daughter is a trustee and teacher at Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan School in Phaltan, where she studied

herself. "Leisure time is spent thinking, reading and writing. I am also an expert chef and was a keen traveller before the pandemic," he says. Dr Rajvanshi's biggest contribution is showing the world how a small research institute working with limited resources can pioneer technologies for rural India. And, show the way to not just the rest of India but the world.



"When you are dissatisfied and would like to go back to youth, think of Algebra."

- Will Rogers



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Post-retirement many people would love to travel and see the world. It's a wonderful idea and here are some narratives that will want to make you do so.

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