

The Journey to Light a Village

The light above my head flickers and switches off. I step out of the hut to see the whole village in darkness. There is never enough electricity for us. I step back into my hut and light the kerosene lamp beside me. As I complete the last of my math homework my mind wanders. Why is it that there is never enough light for us? What can I do? Surely Baba will have answers, he always does.

“Baba, why do our lights always go off? Far on the other side of town, I always see the lights gleam.”

“Priya, India is a huge country. We are just a small part. There is a limited supply of energy in our world. So, distribution isn't always fair. Do you understand?”

“But in class, Ashoka Ma'am said that energy isn't limited! Apparently, we can get energy from the sun and the water and even the wind. Baba, none of those things are limited.”

“Those are concepts of foreign and rich lands beta. We do not have the money to create solar plants, hydropower plants or wind turbines. The lights have come back now, so go back to your desk.”

“Ok Baba”

I drag my feet across the floor and sit at my desk as I ponder. The easiest thing to do is to just use less electricity; and so I open my notebook and begin to write. Before long I have a list of things I can do. I stick the list up on the wall as a constant reminder that I have to do my part in helping to reduce electricity consumption. But still, I wonder, what more can I do- more than just the bare minimum? I want to rescue our village. But if only I knew how.

19 Jun
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How to save Electricity:

1. Don't leave the tap running
2. Switch the lights off when you leave
3. Turn the fan off when you don't need it
4. Avoid using air conditioning
5. Don't leave plug-points on
6. Air-dry clothes, don't use dryers
7. Use natural light when possible
8. Take shorter showers

A week later Ramesh Uncle comes home. He is a rich city man with big outreach. Surely he will have more answers for me. His entry through our doorstep is followed by a glimmer of hope, maybe I will finally have answers.

“Ramesh Uncle! Ramesh Uncle!” I yell, making my way to the doorstep.

“Yes, Priya.”

“I have questions to ask you”

He chuckles lightly and replies, “I’m sure I have answers”

“Uncle, where does our energy come from? Why is it limited? Can’t we just make more?”

“Priya, our energy comes from burning coal and fossil fuels. Our supply is limited simply because we have a limited supply of coal and fossil fuels. We cannot keep burning them forever.”

“Ashoka Ma’am told us it’s bad to burn fossil fuels and coal. Why?”

“I suppose you would understand better if I showed you. Come with me.”

He takes me outside and points out a puff of smoke in a far distance.

“That, Priya, is a coal-fired power plant. The smoke coming out from it pollutes our environment. You remember Reetu auntie’s husband who passed away last summer?”

I nod.

“Well, he died of a lung disease caused by that pollution.”

“What? That’s horrible! But why do they keep using fossil fuels and coal then? Why can’t they find alternatives?”

“India is a large but poor country. We need cheap ways to source large amounts of energy. Sadly, fossil fuels are the most used source of energy for us because of that.”

We walk back inside and Ramesh Uncle looks around our home. I don’t understand how he is so unfazed by the death of people. I don’t understand how he seems to have accepted things the way they are. I just don’t understand.

“Priya!” He calls for me from the other side of the hut. I walk over. “Did you write this list?” he asks, pointing at everything I had noted down that I could do to save electricity.

“Yes Uncle” I reply.

“I am impressed. You know, some of this may seem like common sense. But it will surprise you how many people need a reminder to do these things every now and then. You should print these and post them around the village and maybe even town. Advocacy is essential after all.”

“That sounds great. But, we don’t have the money to print copies nor do we have a printer.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it. There’s no harm in using my money if it’s for a good cause. I like to think of it as an investment in our country’s future.”

A couple of days later the morning’s wake up call from the rooster is accompanied by the arrival of a package at the doorstep. 500 copies of the list I created, decorated slightly- to attract attention.

Today, when I tell Baba I'm leaving to go to Nisha's house, I take his bike and ride to the other side of town; where all the rich and fancy people live. I roam around posting the posters as I go with Ramesh uncle's words circling in my head. *Advocacy is essential. Advocacy is essential.*

By sundown I am done. All 500 copies are scattered across town. My feet can barely withstand cycling anymore. I hear somebody run up to me. "Hey, you one the bike!" a woman yells. I stop.

"Hi" I say, nervous that I've done something wrong. I'm in the city now, sometimes I forget it's different from the suburbs and the rural areas.

"Tell me, are you the one who put up these posters across town?" She says.

"Uh, yes."

"Oh. I'm Chhaya, I work with an energy company. I really do appreciate how much you care about conserving energy. That's all I wanted to say"

Then it occurs to me: maybe Chhaya knows what more I can do to help save energy and maybe even use renewable energy sources. "I'm from the other side of town, we don't always have energy there. One of my uncles was telling me about how bad coal is and that we use coal. What can I do? I want to help"

She smiles and says "You're rambling. But, I admire how much you care and I really do want to help you. So, come back here on Thursday at 3pm and meet me here. I'll take you to my office. I have a feeling you'll really like everything you learn there."

If Baba was here I know he would tell me not to trust strangers. In fact, I can imagine him telling me that right now. But sometimes curiosity and care are just too strong. "I'll be here on Thursday, thank you so much!" I blurt before I ride back home.

Finally, Thursday was here and of course I was riding my bike to the other side of town.

"Chhaya!" I yell. "I'm here!"

"Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be"

Chhaya takes me about a minute's walk away and I see a huge sign that reads '*Desh ki Bijlee*'. As soon as we walk in I see infographics; tens of them, maybe even hundreds. There are so many signs about energy sources I didn't even know existed. I find a sheet of paper and start writing. I write every single thing I understand. As I write about different sources of energy the thought that maybe one of these will work in my village spins at the back of my mind.

"Chhaya, would solar energy work in the village?" I ask.

"No, too costly."

"How about wind energy?"

"The mountains block wind. It's rarely windy"

“Hydroelectric energy?”

“Building dams is costly”

“Geothermal?”

“Highly costly”

“Wait. I think I’ve got it. Wouldn’t biogas be perfect? In the village we have access to animal manure, plants, and waste from the agro industry. I think we’d be able to set it up.”

“Priya, that's a really good idea. Do you want to talk to the company executives about it?”

“Yes... but only if you come and help me”

Chhaya leads me to the executives and lets me explain why I think biogas can be used in our village. She explains the details with finances, expenditure and how it would work. To my surprise, the executives are actually interested in my solution. It takes a while, but eventually we have a sketch laid out- explaining exactly how the concept of biogas as an energy source would work. It creates more jobs for locals, uses resources that are found easily in the area and is better for the environment than fossil fuels. The project is out of my hands now; and I know it will be months or maybe even years before I can see the plan in action. But, for now, I find satisfaction in knowing that in a way I contributed to the creation of a blueprint for a better future.

As I ride home, I think about the future. Maybe someday the world will realise all the things we can do for our energy crisis: personal correction, advocacy and ideas for large-scale change.