

## REALISING A PIPE DREAM

*Waterlife cleanses and purifies drinking water at an economical cost*

*Tapash Talukdar*

BY A humble estimate, over 50,000 people in more than 250 villages of West Bengal last year were saved from falling prey to arsenicosis, a contaminated water-borne disease that may cause skin cancer. These villagers had adopted Waterlife, a water solution device that cleanses and purifies drinking water.

"We provide clean drinking water at Rs 3 for 10 litre and Rs 5 for 20 litre," says Indranil Das, 37, co-founder of the start-up who manages East-India operations of the Hyderabad-based initiative. Founded a year ago by Sudesh Menon, Mohan Ranbaore and Das, Waterlife installs purification plants in villages, operates and maintains the structure for five to six years and charges nominal, albeit sustainable, rates from the community users. According to CEO Menon, their team first evaluates and then installs the plant customised to suit an individual or a group of families or the entire village. The group also ensures the feasibility of water and regular service of the plant. And their area of operation is expanding by leaps and bounds.

Menon left behind an offer to head Singapore operations of General Electric to become an entrepreneur. Ditto with Das and Ranbaore, who quit their high-profile jobs at Xerox. The three first met while working at WaterHealth, a subsidiary of US-based WaterHealth International, where Menon was heading as CEO. "Though we worked for this company, our missions were bigger and so we stepped out to create our own," recalls Das. Hailing from different states, their mission remains to integrate Bharat with India. To this effect, providing affordable water solutions is a noble beginning for them. Waterlife began its journey from Sukantanagar, near Kolkata. "Initially, it was tough to convince the rural people and sell water but we took help of a few local literate persons who influenced our model, and it worked," says Das. In six months, it covered over 150 villages in the state.

"We want to cover 2,000 villages across the country in the next two years," says Menon, beaming with confidence. Menon and his team's confidence come from the response to his ideas. What started with less than Rs 1 crore has touched Rs 5-crore turnover in one year. But, complacency hasn't set in. Waterlife has on its radar 6 lakh villages, 1.2 lakh government-licensed hospitals, 1 lakh schools and 65,000 restaurants as their prospective users. The system purifies excessive amount of nitrate and fluoride from tailor-made plants, imported largely from the US and Europe. "Our prices are almost three-fourth of any other private operator in this sector," says Menon, who believes higher volumes are better than higher profits in such business efforts.

"This firm has big strategies," says Vineet Rai, CEO of Aavishkar Fund, which picked up 10% equity in Waterlife six months ago for Rs 5 crore. "We expect it to do business of Rs 400–500 crore in the next three years as water sector has huge potential." So what's next? Waterlife plans to move to Indonesia and Bangladesh by next year and replicate its success on foreign shores.

Waterlife's growth paradigm is interlocked with sensible use of natural resources. The group has been drawing up plans to minimise its input cost by using green technology and by water harvesting. "We are discussing the

terms with a few major water purifier manufacturers in the West to help us in saving energy and excessive waste water," says Menon. For water harvesting, the trio goes out to villages and trains the locals in setting up rainwater harvesting systems. "It is important to make them learn the usage and storage of water with sustainable means," says Das.

What is more commendable is the initiative to pass on the baton to new generation. Waterlife provides free-of-cost potable water to several schools where the material resources are minimal while their staff nurtures the value of social entrepreneurship among the schoolchildren. "You never know, tomorrow some of them might create something for their own village," says Menon.

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EACH DROP COUNTS: Sudesh Menon, Mohan Ranbaore & Indranil Das

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