

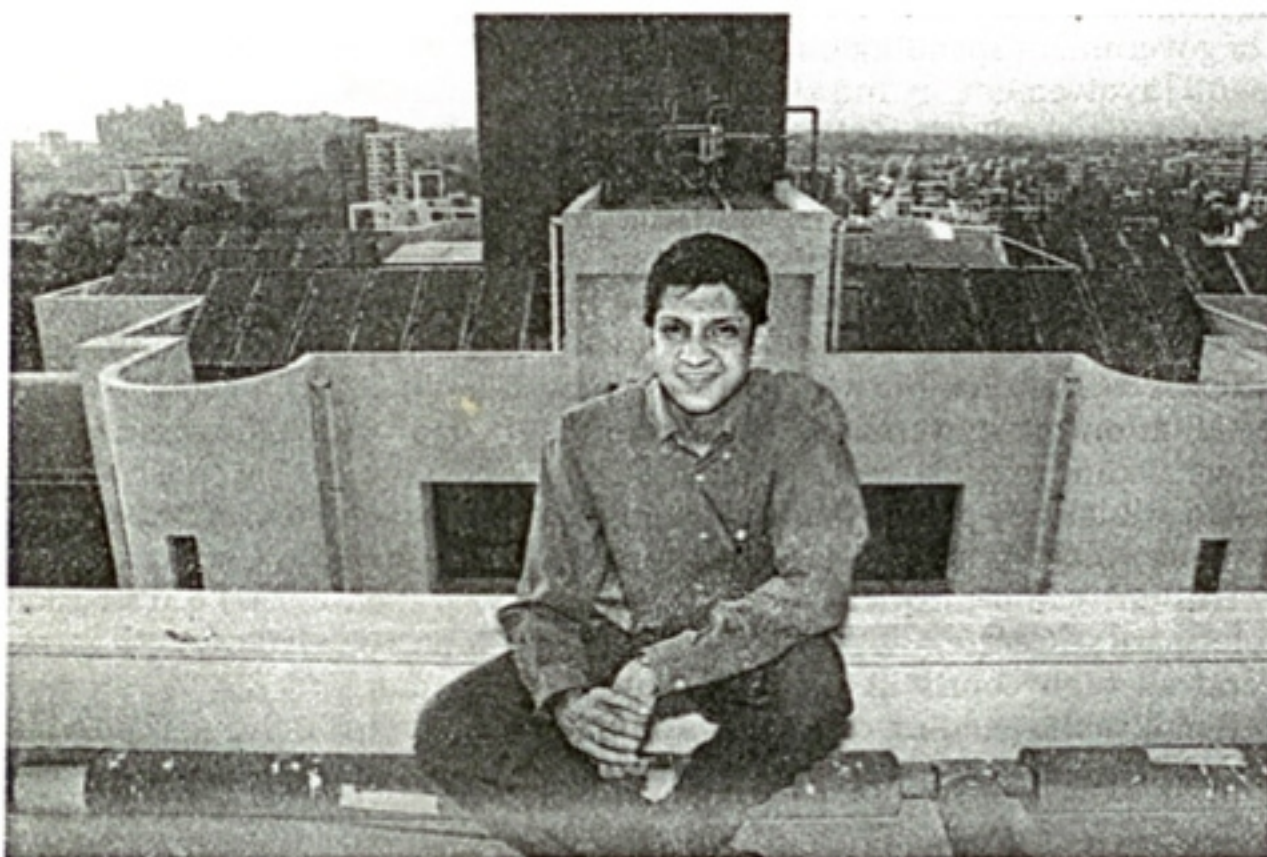
O sol mio

This Pune-based company is making waves with its corporate, hotel, and home installations

Ravi Pittie believes in solar energy with the intensity of the sun that charges the systems he sells. Beginning business a decade ago with Pittie Solar Pvt Ltd, he now has another company, Agni Solar Systems Pvt Ltd, which he set up on the advice of chartered accountancy firm Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu to market other products besides his own — like swimming pool heating systems imported from the US.

“Solar energy is still at a nascent

“Switch on the Sun” its advertisements say, — Pittie expects all the big boys in electrical equipment, including the home-grown Bajaj Electrical and Crompton Greaves, to jump into the market within a couple of years. Even Reliance is reported to be interested. As it is, he points out, there are about 100 players in Pune alone, while the Bangalore marketplace is even bigger, with 150-plus units offering solar heating installations. After



Pittie is turning on the power of the sun

stage,” says Pittie, who believes that the government’s well-meaning efforts at promoting it by offering subsidies has had the negative effect of stunting research and development (R&D) to develop appropriate, commercially viable technologies. It is only now that it is beginning to make economic sense even without grants and subsidies — which is why even multinationals like Merloni TermoSanitari (MTS) have also got into the field.

While MTS India managing director A.K. Rathi has declared his company’s intention of expanding its solar business next year onwards —

some false starts including free solar-powered lighting for the Pune University campus — which he removed because the latter let them fall into disrepair — Pittie has chalked up business of Rs5 crore a year between his two firms. “We have captured a large part of the market by focusing on highest-quality products and systems backed by efficient and quality service,” he claims. His client list is impressive: government bodies, Bajaj Auto and Venkateshwara Hatcheries, Park and Talera Hotels, various housing projects, schools, colleges, hospitals, and others. The March 2003 agreement between the Maharashtra

State Electricity Board and the Promoters & Builders Association of Pune to offer solar water heating in all new constructions is another big boost.

Sanjiv Bajaj, vice-president (finance) at Bajaj Auto, where Pittie has installed a 5,000-litre system for the canteen in one of its plants, says Pittie was the most cost-efficient among three tenderers. “Our payback based on consumption of electricity works out to less than three years,” he says. Talera group chairman Suresh Talera adds: “We decided to go for solar because of rising electricity and fuel costs, and also because of the environmental problems related to wood-fired boilers. We chose Agni after studying the products of almost 10 other solar companies, because of their overall quality, workmanship, service, and attitude, besides the price.” His payback period too was initially three years, but the reduced system price and increased electricity rates have brought it down to under two years, he says. And yes, the Taleras have already started the planning process to install solar systems at some of their other hotels following the positive experience with the existing ones. R. Vasudevan, chairman and managing director of Vascon Engineers, has also voted with his chequebook for Pittie. “We have used them 100 per cent for both our projects in Pune,” he says. “We have had a relationship over a period,” he says. “We did try others earlier, but found them wanting in both service, and knowledge.”

Pittie is now concentrating on improving his R&D to make photovoltaics commercially viable, and to offer appropriate technology. “I surveyed the emergency lantern market and found that it is possible to adapt these gadgets for dual charging,” he says. Enter the Agni mini solar emergency light, priced at Rs1,500, which can be charged both from a regular plug point and a solar panel. “We sold 600 in the first three months!” he says. Next on his agenda is an inverter which can be charged from the sun as well as the electric supply. The power of the sun, as he points out, is truly phenomenal. And if it builds business, too, he isn’t complaining!

♦ SEKHAR SESHAN