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REMMP IMPACT STORIES

RENEWABLE ENERGY MICROFINANCE AND MICROENTERPRISE PROGRAM

LIGHTING LIVES IN RURAL INDIA: MALA'S STORY

Mala Devi

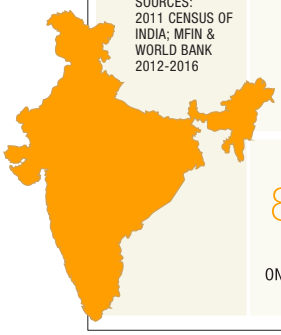
"At night, we used to sit in the darkness or just sleep," says Mala Devi, "but now we meet with our neighbors and family after nightfall and we can use the fan when we sleep. Life is so different now. It's hard for us to remember how hard life was before."

Mala Devi lives in Gram Nagala Sukkha Post-Ruheri Tehsil Shasani, a small village of 400 people about 40 kilometers outside Hathras city in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in northern India. Mala is 45, and lives with her husband and their four children (three grown up, one still a teenager). Their home is typical of a village in UP – it has a paved area in front of the house that opens onto the dusty and narrow unpaved street, where rickety carts and motorbikes are the main traffic – cars are seldom seen here. Barefoot children run from house to house, near the buffaloes and goats which are the main livestock owned by the villagers.

Dung is sold in briquette form in front of Mala's home. She, and most of the other women in the village, rely on dung as the main source of cooking fuel. Power lines chaotically crisscross the tops of houses and alleys. The intermittent electricity grid reaches people that have an official connection as well as those who have tapped into it "unofficially."

Mala's home is typical too – if larger and a bit more substantial than those of some of her neighbors. The whole family sleeps in one large room, which adjoins the other room in her immaculately kept house. "Our house is small, but I'm proud of it," she says, as she offers refreshments to neighbors and guests, beckoning them to take more as they sit on plastic chairs brought in from the neighbor's home. The room has interesting domestic touches: paintings; miscellaneous books stacked nearly on a shelf; a small and ancient television. A traditional mud stove crackles and smokes at the entrance, on which tea and rice is cooked several times a day, fueled by wood and the dung briquettes.

Context: India



SOURCES: 2011 CENSUS OF INDIA; MFIN & WORLD BANK 2012-2016

POPULATION
1.3 BILLION

277 MILLION
PEOPLE WITHOUT ACCESS TO ELECTRICITY

841 MILLION
PEOPLE DEPENDING ON SOLID COOKING FUELS

35.8 MILLION
ACTIVE MICROFINANCE CLIENTS

But in this otherwise traditional home, built using the same method and layout as people have done for centuries, there are glimmers of modernity. Outside the entrance leans an old motorbike, used by her bus driver husband and sons as they go to and from Hathras city for work. The room itself is virtually windowless, and without artificial light would be dark even in the middle of the day. But Mala has solar lights and they make the world of difference.

Mala's family and guests are bathed in a blazing white light from the LED globe attached to the center of the ceiling. This is one of two in the family's home and it is powered by a solar home system that Mala and her husband bought from Simpa Networks, a partner organization under USAID's Renewable Energy Microfinance and Microenterprise Program (REMMP), implemented by Arc Finance, which sells solar lighting and fans to villagers all over Uttar Pradesh. A solar panel sits on the roof, powering the lights, and a fan that was bundled with the solar system provides some respite in the stifling summer heat. Mala and her husband were able to afford the system because it was made available through installment financing by Simpa.

Mala sits next to her husband and tells her guests about how they came to have indoor lighting, after sitting after dark in the gloaming of kerosene lamps and candles for the first four decades of their lives. "We have a connection to the grid, but it often does not work at all," Mala explains. "Sometimes it comes on and we have it for the evening which is good, but sometimes it only works for an hour then turns off, and it is much worse when it is hot outside. So most of the time we used kerosene or candles to light the room, and we only used the electric light when the grid was connected, which was infrequently," Mala recalls.

"Two years ago we talked to an agent from Simpa who told us about the solar system. We had seen some other houses with solar panels on the roof, and we knew that these people had lighting whenever they wanted, even if there was no grid electricity at all. For us, this would be like a dream, to be able to have light whenever we want it … so we can watch television, so our son can do his homework, so we can sleep under a fan, or so I can do sewing," she says, referring to her informal business of buying saris or textiles from Hathras to make clothes, and repairing clothes for other women in the village.

According to Mala, the solar home system, which the family bought two years ago and which she and her husband finished paying for a few months ago, has changed their quality of life in every way. "We used to sit in the darkness or just try to sleep in the heat," she recalls. "But now we can socialize after nightfall--my husband likes to welcome guests to our house. I can sew in the evenings to make a little more money to spend on food, or we save it for the future. Our son studies for longer because the solar light is bright and doesn't hurt his eyes like kerosene or candle light."

"Life is so much better now."

Mala's village

This impact story is a core offering under the Renewable Energy Microfinance and Microenterprise Program (REMMP), which is implemented by Arc Finance and funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The central goal of REMMP is to increase access of underserved populations to clean energy products to improve livelihoods and quality of life, while minimizing climate-damaging emissions.