

Why I started a nonprofit to provide clean water for students in India

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(Photo: Special to the Register)

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When I was a little kid in school, we learned about the malnutrition in Africa and the infectious diseases of South America. But for some reason, I always thought of India as just another country.

It took me 13 years until I learned that India was far from “just another country.”

I am a 17-year-old boy of Southeast Indian origin, born in the Midwest and raised in the great city of Des Moines. Today, I want to tell a story about my relationship with India.

One day, my sister Nithya and I were sitting with our parents when they started talking about the growing humanitarian problems of India. Namely, the drought in rural India and how it severely hindered the education of school children. My sister was nine and I was 13.

This shocked both of us — our perception of India was shattered. I visited India multiple times as a young child, but I only visited relatives in the large cities. These cities were far from representative of the rural majority of India.

Schools offer little to no clean drinking water to the students. The kids run home from school for clean drinking water early in the day and do not return. Girls have it even worse — during puberty, they are uncomfortable using unsanitary bathrooms that don't even have properly functioning toilets. They also go home for the day.

Tardiness and absenteeism are common problems in rural Indian schools. Students drop out, and without an education they cannot work skilled jobs when they are older. Instead, they are forced to help their parents with grueling field work and house chores. They get married very young and the cycle continues with their children. Their futures are cemented before they even know it. The children are smart and eager to learn but their circumstances don't facilitate education so much as survival.

I decided I wanted to do something about the problem. I reached out to as many people as I could, confident that they would recognize the severity of the cause. After weeks of fundraising, I amassed \$3,000 in donations.

I contacted a family friend, Jay Sehgal, who linked me with his organization, Sehgal Foundation that works to empower rural India. They matched the \$3,000 I had collected 1-to-1, bringing the total sum to \$6,000: enough to construct a rainwater harvesting system in a rural Indian school. This would provide clean drinking water and functioning toilets for about 300 Indian schoolchildren. I knew that it wasn't enough to transform India, but I felt happy knowing that at least some children were getting clean drinking water at school. I knew that it would improve their attendance and ultimately lead to a better education. It was a start.

I repeated the same process the next three years. Three more rainwater harvesting systems in three more rural Indian schools. In total, I was able to raise more than \$24,000, and more than 1,500 students now benefit from the generous donations of people who care about underprivileged children.

I thought I was making a big difference until I traveled to India with my mother, grandmother and sister — only to find out that the money I'd raised wasn't even close to enough. I was fortunate to be able to see my projects in person, and I was ecstatic to see the difference I had made so far. When I traveled to the school in a small village named Lafuri (the school where my first project was implemented four years ago), I was overjoyed to see how well the water system was maintained. I could see that the community really cared about improving the education of the students. I drank from the water tank, and I

was happy to taste water as clean as bottled water. I also had a chance to drink from the old water pump the school used before the rainwater harvesting system was implemented. This water was as salty as ocean water.



Varun Myneni (Photo: Special to the Register)

I found out that the problem wasn't a lack of water; rather, it was an abundance of dehydrating salty groundwater that these children were forced to drink. When I traveled to the other schools where my projects had been implemented, I found the same problem with the saltwater. A healthy amount of sodium in drinking water is below 200 parts per million, and these children were drinking groundwater with levels exceeding 10,000 ppm.

If more people here in the United States could physically experience the conditions that the children of rural India are forced to live and learn in every day, I know that they would be instantly compelled to donate to such an important cause.

I converted my initiative into a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the Water for Success Foundation, making it easier for people to find out about and donate to the cause. We work with the Sehgal Foundation, which matches our funds and implements our projects.

Please check our website at waterforsuccess.org and Sehgal Foundation's at smsfoundation.org. Maybe one day we will make India "just another country."

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