In a land like Rajasthan that is parched for 10 months in a year, B P Agrawal’s systematic and sustainable initiative for providing drinking water has ensured that villages across the state can evade drought for a year at a stretch. Akash Ganga or ‘River from Sky’ is a social enterprise under Agrawal’s non-profit corporation, Sustainable Innovations, which operates on the unique model of public-private-community partnership. This method allows the local population as well as social investors to act as stakeholders of the system—families rent the rooftops of their houses so that one half of the water can be channelled to a shared community reservoir while the other half is stored in a private reservoir for personal use.

While the issue of water scarcity is being mitigated with Akash Ganga, Sustainable Innovations’ second initiative, Arogya, has been instrumental in providing healthcare solutions by empowering rural youth—especially women—and employing the best in health information technology. Health kiosks, operated by healthcare workers, have been set up in various villages in Rajasthan. Patients can simply walk into a kiosk without any prior appointment and have a health worker key in the symptoms of their ailment into a computerised medical database. In case of a strong match between the symptoms and a disease, the system generates a treatment plan. If not, additional symptoms are asked for and the data is sent for consultation to a physician at the Indian Institute of Health Management Research.

As Agrawal succinctly puts it, Arogya ensures that if not medical professionals, at least medical knowledge is available to those in need. While he gives a renewed impetus to development in his state, his actions stem from experiences which he holds close to his heart. A native of Chhapoli, a village that is 50 km from Pilani, he reminisces about his childhood trips to the village well with his mother. The long walks under the scorching sun would seem easier to traverse, listening to his mother as she taught him about the importance of nurturing and conserving natural resources. Agrawal’s initiatives are a manifestation of these experiences and the wisdom imbibed thereof.

What is unique about Agrawal is that he makes efficient use of technology in redefining social enterprise. B P Agrawal has given social entrepreneurship an evolved meaning in the desert state of Rajasthan with his thriving initiatives—Akash Ganga and Arogya. We present a pictorial view of his recent visit to India.

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Photographs © Tejas Vijay Singh
B P Agrawal is the recipient of two World Bank awards for his initiatives in Rajasthan as well as the prestigious Lamont-MIT Award for sustainability.

- Akash Ganga aims to reach out to 100,000 individuals by 2015.
- Arogya aims to deliver healthcare facilities to 12,000 children by 2014.
- Arogya has BITS Pilani as its technology partner and Samagra Vikas Sansthan, Jhunjhunu, as its implementation partner.

B P Agrawal, a resident of Marwari, India, has been working on various initiatives to improve the well-being of the rural population. His most notable project, Akash Ganga, aims to reach out to 100,000 individuals by 2015. Another initiative, Arogya, focuses on delivering healthcare facilities to 12,000 children by 2014.

Fittingly, Agrawal has been able to prove that an initiative that thrives on people is not only self-sustaining but long-lasting and inspiring as well.

Rural India and realises that innovations need to be rooted in local culture. Thus, rather than terming his initiatives ‘social enterprise’ which translates to ‘Samajik Udyamita’—a rather mechanical term devoid of empathy—he uses ‘Sewa aur Mewa’, an elegant concept easily understood by the locals. In the same vein, he calls healthcare workers ‘pannas’—after the historic tale of Panna, a governness who sacrificed her son to save the prince of Udaipur—in order to bring in history, culture, empathy and self-esteem into the proceedings.

No wonder then that Agrawal has been able to prove that an initiative that thrives on people is not only self-sustaining but long-lasting and inspiring as well.