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Indian Projects Win \$50K Top Tech Awards

By LISA TSERING
indiawest.com

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SAN JOSE, Calif. — Projects changing the lives of millions of people in India took four of the top five prizes at the 2008 Tech Awards, presented at a black-tie gala at the San Jose Convention Center Nov. 12. Each award comes with a \$50,000 cash prize.

"Big changes can come from simple and uncomplicated solutions," said Peter Friess, president of the Tech Museum, which has administered the prizes for the past eight years. "These winners have all seen a difference in their lives, careers and how they've been perceived afterwards."



A well-heeled crowd of 1,450 filled a convention center ballroom (the awards have outgrown their former venue in the Tech Museum down the street) and got the chance to peruse exhibits detailing the work of the 25 finalists, or Tech Laureates.

Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladesh-born founder of the Grameen Bank and the winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, was on hand to receive another prestigious honor — the James C. Morgan Global Humanitarian Award.

"It's exciting to see what's happening," Yunus told India-West before the ceremony as he strolled from exhibit to exhibit during a VIP reception. "Everyone here is trying to overcome problems. [The Tech Awards] are a chance to get their message to many more people."

Out of hundreds of nominations from 68 countries, 25 Tech Laureates were announced in September. Each of their projects and founders were invited to come to San Jose to compete for Tech Awards in five categories.

The winners were:

- SKG Sangha (Katherine M. Swanson Equality Award). This nonprofit, headquartered in Kolar, Karnataka, took the award for its unique system that enables rural women to become entrepreneurs using biogas and composting technologies. Women are trained how to convert waste into biogas (which is used for cooking fuel), and the byproduct of the biogas is easily converted into organic fertilizer, which the women sell for profit. "We combine both technologies — energy and agriculture — to provide solutions for rural areas," SKG Sangha founder Vidya Sagar Devabhaktuni told India-West.

- DESI Power: Decentralised Energy Systems India (Accenture Economic Development Award). Dr. Harendra Nath Sharan's idea helps poor villages in Bihar build local power plants using biomass gasification; the power generated by the plants can be sold to power water pumps and charge batteries. "Electricity production is not our main goal," explained Sharan, who spent 10 years developing the program. "We do microenterprise along with it. I used to build large power stations around the world, and I realized that these villages would never get power [otherwise]. DESI Power has a viable, profitable social impact, and it also mitigates the risk of climate change."

- Digital StudyHall (Microsoft Education Award). Based in Lucknow and cofounded by Randolph Wang, who jokes that he doesn't speak a word of Hindi, Digital StudyHall is like "Netflix for poor kids," Wang told India-West. Simply put, the program films high-quality classroom lectures in Indian languages and loans out DVDs (and DVD players with televisions) in urban slums and villages. "Kids are being taught by two teachers, and the teachers learn something as well," said Wang. Since the local teachers are in complete control of how much content is played and

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when, they don't resent sharing the stage with the "virtual teacher" onscreen, he added. [X Co.](#)
Performance levels in languages and math have improved as much as 300 percent after using Digital StudyHall.

- Star Syringe (Fogarty Institute for Innovation Health Award). This U.K.-based nonprofit designs and manufactures non-reusable syringes designed to stop the medical transmission of blood-borne diseases. The nonprofit has just launched a huge initiative in India to coincide with Children's Day events there, said Star Syringe director Robin Bullock, who showed India-West a wrenching Hindi-language video about the transmission of HIV through infected needles that were reused by doctors in India.

Muhammad Yunus, whose influential Grameen Bank has virtually made him a household name in South Asia and throughout the world, gave a warm-spirited talk after receiving the James C. Morgan Global Humanitarian Award. Yunus, an economics professor, had a profound idea in 1976 to loan \$27 to 42 destitute basketweavers, who went into business and promptly repaid the loans. The Grameen Bank, born in 1983, has now grown to include a vast network of home loan agencies, food and textile manufacturers, fisheries and cellular phone providers operating under the Grameen model. Today, the Grameen "bankers to the poor" system is used in 100 countries, serving millions of people who would otherwise be too poor to qualify for conventional loans.

"Standing here in the Silicon Valley, it's important, because the Silicon Valley represents something to the world," said Yunus. "It is a great honor to receive an award from you, who are changing the world."

Yunus joked about the current financial crisis now affecting world markets, saying that when he gave out those first 42 loans, people thought he was crazy. "People told me, 'Poor people are not credit-worthy. Thirty-two years later, as luck would have it, the poor turned out to be more credit-worthy! I'm one of the few bankers who is actually at peace!"

"... We've given out more than 700,000 housing loans, and we've never had a subprime crisis," he said.

"Poverty is created by the system that we built," continued Yunus. "Poverty is not created by poor people ... We can create a world without poverty."

For more information on the Tech Awards, or to nominate an innovation for the 2009 Tech Awards, visit www.techawards.org.

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