

India's Tata launches low-cost water filter for rural poor

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Slum residents fill drinking water from a hand pump in Bhopal on December 2. India's giant Tata Group on Monday unveiled a new low-cost water purifier, which it hopes will provide safe drinking water for millions and cut the toll of deadly diseases.

India's giant Tata Group on Monday unveiled a new low-cost water purifier, hoping to do for health what it did for motoring and provide affordable, safe drinking water for millions and cut disease.

The Tata Swach -- named after the Hindi for "clean" -- is designed to be used in poor, rural households that have no electricity or running water, using ash from rice milling to filter out bacteria.

The device, which will cost less than 1,000 rupees (21.5 dollars), also uses tiny silver particles to kill harmful germs that can lead to potentially

deadly water-borne diseases like diarrhoea, cholera and typhoid.

Other cheap purification units are on the market, but Tata Group chairman Ratan Tata -- who this year launched the world's cheapest car the Nano -- said it was "probably the most low-cost water filter" available.

The project, welcomed by charities working in improving water and sanitation, is another example of the way in which private firms in India are helping provide basic services previously under government control.

The salt to luxury cars conglomerate has unveiled plans for low-cost social housing and runs a range of social projects in areas like health, education and energy.

Tata indicated that more low-cost products could be on the way "that were earlier not in the reach of vast numbers of people through innovation and technology, not just stripping down the value of the product," he said.

Tata Chemicals managing director R. Mukundan said the company would eventually look to sell the Swach in sub-Saharan Africa, where the provision of clean water is also a major public health issue.

According to the UN, more than one in six people worldwide -- 894 million -- do not have access to clean water for their basic needs, with diarrhoea the leading cause of illness and death, particularly among children.

Nearly 90 percent of deaths from diarrhoea are due to lack of sanitation, unsafe drinking water and water for hygiene.

In India, 75 percent of the rural population does not have access to safe

drinking water and 1,000 children under five die every day from diarrhoea. Chronic water shortages are also an issue, as the country's population expands.

The UN World Water Development Report published in March said that better water supply, sanitation, hygiene and management of water resources could cut the burden of disease around the world by nearly one tenth.

Tata's device, based on a larger one that was supplied to areas affected by the December 2004 Asian tsunami, has been in development for three years and is aimed at the 85 percent of Indians who do not currently filter their water.

It has a 9.5-litre (2.5 US gallon) capacity and can filter 3,000 litres until the cartridge has to be replaced, which would last an average family of five for 200 days.

Based on the 299 rupees cost of a filter cartridge, one litre of water will cost about 10 paises. The container unit costs either 749 or 999 rupees, depending on the material used.

Its nearest competitor -- Hindustan Unilever's 2,000-rupee Pureit model -- has a nine-litre capacity and can filter up to 1,500 litres. One litre costs 35 paises, including the cartridge price, the company said on its website.

Tata, which also sells the high-end Himalayan brand of mineral water, has invested one billion rupees in the project and aims to sell three million units in the next five years. Sales will begin before the year end.

The filter, which meets the highest US Environmental Protection Agency standards, removing micro-organisms, colour and odour, has

been tested in 600 rural households in four Indian states.

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