Tata Group Releases 'Clean,' Cheap Water Purifier

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MUMBAI, India (AP) — At about two feet tall, it may turn out to be the world's most compact revolution: The Tata Swach, launched Monday, is a water purifier priced for the masses, which India's Tata Group hopes will help save the lives of millions of people who die each year of waterborne diseases.

"This is opening up a complete new market," said R. Mukundan, managing director of Tata Chemicals Ltd.

The Tata Swach — Hindi for "clean" — meets U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standards, doesn't require running water, electricity, or boiling and is priced so that the mass of rural Indian consumers can afford it, executives said.

Group chairman Ratan Tata is scheduled to announce the sale price later Monday.

The water filter grew out of a decade of research and development, led by three different companies in the Tata Group. Tata is one of India's largest conglomerates, making everything from table salt to Jaguar automobiles — as well as the ultra-cheap Nano compact car, which like the Swach filter targets a lower income rural market many companies have ignored.

The dire statistics about the human cost of unsafe water are well known. The Swach, a pet project of Ratan Tata, is the group's bet that the private sector can offer a better, consumer-based solution to one of the world's most persistent health problems than most governments in the developing world can.

Safe water "is a right public policy has sought to fulfill, not very successfully so far. We'd like to make a small contribution to offering that," said Tata Sons executive director R. Gopalakrishnan. Similarly, the Tata Group is working on a computer-based literacy program for adults in India, where a third of adults can't read or write.

The market for the Tata Swach is undeniably huge: Some 894 million people don't have sufficient access to clean water, and 2.2 million in developing countries, most children, die every year from diseases associated with unsafe drinking water and poor sanitation, according to the World Health Organization and the United Nations. In India alone, 380,000 children die each year from diarrhea, according to UNICEF.

Hindustan Unilever has tried to tap that demand with its Pureit filter, which like the Swach doesn't require electricity or running water. The unit retails for 2000 rupees ($42.92), with a replaceable battery kit that costs 365 rupees ($7.80). The cost of the battery kit per liter of purified water is 24 paise ($0.005), cheaper than boiling but more expensive per liter than a 20 liter bottle of branded water, according to Hindustan Unilever's website.

Gita Kavarana, who studies water issues at New Delhi's Centre for Science and Environment, said Tata's product could help reduce water-borne illnesses for people who use surface water, like lakes and rivers, for drinking. She said ground water, used by 80 percent of rural Indians, doesn't usually have bacteriological contamination, but it can have other impurities like arsenic or flouride — which aren't removed by the Tata Swach.

She believes access to clean water shouldn't just be cheap. It should be free.

"The government should guarantee every citizen a certain quantum of clean safe drinking water. If that is available, maybe there's no need for water filters," she said. "You are just putting the burden on the poor."

Each filter for the Tata Swach, which is packaged as a 19-liter, teal and white plastic box, has a lifespan of 3000 liters — about enough to provide a family of five drinking water for a year.

The filter uses paddy husk ash as a matrix, bound with microscopic particles of silver to kill the bacteria that cause 80 percent of waterborne disease, executives said.

Paddy husk ash has long been known for its cleansing properties — it has been used traditionally for tooth washing — and India produces about 20 million tons of it a year.

The filter was created in a Tata Consultancy Services lab, the silver nanotechnology was added on by Tata Chemicals and Titan, Tata's watch subsidiary, made the precision machine tools to manufacture the filter.

The group plans to distribute the purifier using distribution networks of Rallis, Tata's agrochemical subsidiary with over 30,000 retailers in rural India, and Tata Kisan Sansar, a farm services business run by Tata Chemicals, which reaches 2.5 million farmers.

Initial production will be 1 million units a year from a Tata Chemicals plant in Haldia, West Bengal, with a planned ramp-up to 3 million units annually within 5 years.

Executives would not break out research and development costs, but said they plan to invest 1 billion rupees ($21.6 million) in the project over the next 5 years. They hope to eventually export the filter to Africa.

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