Billionaire gives it all

Manoj Bhargava, a billionaire with a heart

Considering that Manoj Bhargava ranks among America’s richest Indians, some of his statements are likely to startle anyone who might have expected his life and lifestyle to adhere to any well-accepted code associated with the swaggering billionaire. “Someone had once asked me how many hours I work. I told him, I have one house and I have enough trouble with it anyway, why would I buy any more? The purpose of money isn’t to make you miserable,” he says in a matter-of-fact tone. It is an extension of this thought process, perhaps, that has led him to give his own money purpose of another kind. The NRI entrepreneur whose organisation, The Hans Foundation, has already funded more than 150 charities in India, is set to announce a donation of 750 crores towards a development programme in Uttarakhand.

“Our target is to make Uttarakhand a model state. We’re looking at water, electricity, schools... and more things that we can understand better by going there ourselves, so that we can truly help. India is an enormous country and we’ve picked a small state to start with, which is nevertheless a big entity by world standards. Uttarakhand is twice the size of Ireland, after all. The idea is to work with it as we can and then to apply what we learn along the way to other states thereafter,” Bhargava explains as he talks about the project at hand.

Rewinding a bit along his journey so far, it comes as a bit of a surprise that a man who speaks of making enormous amounts of money as though it were one of the most mundane accomplishments in the world has himself donated a variety of unexpected hats such as that of a construction worker, accounting clerk and even taxi driver! Ask him how his life as an entrepreneur began and he reveals that the first step he took in that direction involved buying a business that was on the edge of bankruptcy. “I had no idea what I was doing and that turned out to be my greatest strength. Most times, when you get educated in something, you think you know what you’re doing when you really don’t. It’s much better to clearly know that you don’t know what you’re doing! Because then you react in common sense, which is what I did and ended up not only fixing that business but actually helping it grow from a small one to one that was worth almost $25 million within a few years,” he shares.

What followed was his assailing the consumer goods market with 5-Hour Energy, an energy shot that went on to become one of the largest consumer products in the world. “At this point, I thought that the fact that I was making a ridiculous amount of money made it my responsibility on my part that I should use it for something worthwhile. I don’t live in India. I am an Indian. My heart is here. That’s why we thought that we would do something for India. This is how we started The Hans Foundation,” he recalls.

Quite like his beginnings in entrepreneurship, his ambitions in charity were characterised by a complete lack of experience and knowledge. “I keep doing things that I have no idea about,” he laughs and continues, “Over the years we have funded over a hundred different charities. Some of them have been really great while some haven’t. The thing with India is that we have some of the greatest people in the world and also some of the worst people in the world. So, we know that there will certainly be a few that we give money to, who won’t pass it on the right way to the right people. It’s like business again, you expect when you start out that there will be some losses too. You just hope that you’ll have more profits than losses. That’s how it works.”

Talking about the scenario of charitable work in India as he has observed it so far, he says that much like other countries, charity here works along “fashionable” patterns. “It’s like the word ‘entrepreneur’ in business and I am yet to figure out what that means. Today’s fashion in charity, for example, is education. What happens is that a large chunk of the funds in India goes towards education while a meagre two per cent goes towards what we found was an even more pressing and fundamental need: Water. We found that if you give a farmer in India clean water, he makes a living, feels his family and lives a better, happier life. Isn’t that what all we want, as human beings? Another fashionable word is ‘sustainability.’ Would you ever say to your children that you can’t give them dinner today? ‘I had no idea what I was doing and that turned out to be my greatest strength. Most times, when you get educated in something, you think you know what you’re doing when you really don’t. It’s much better to clearly know that you don’t know what you’re doing! Because then you react in common sense, which is what I did and ended up not only fixing that business but actually helping it grow from a small one to one that was worth almost $25 million within a few years,” he shares.

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I've truly understood with time that if you have both means and ability, you also have a responsibility towards those who don't have them. I do whatever I do with this principle in mind. — MANOJ BHARGAVA, ENTREPRENEUR

Manoj Bhargava’s organisation, The Hans Foundation, has already funded more than 150 charities in India.