A Giver and His Grudge Against Fellow Givers

He's committed to $500 crore of his personal wealth to develop villages in Uttarakhand. Much as he believes in philanthropy, Manoj Bhargava has an issue with how his ilk have come to practise it, reports Saumya Bhattacharya

Manoj Bhargava (left) and son Shaan Bhargava

Bhargava's Philanthropy...
The Hans Foundation has given grants to 151 non-profits for projects in healthcare, education, disability/water, and sanitation. Commitment: $500,000

Uttarakhand 2022: Village development project with focus on education, healthcare and forest regeneration. Commitment: $100,000

Problem Solving

For Bhargava, philanthropy is about understanding people and communities in a heterogeneous manner and with context, and finding common solutions to their problems. He's termed this a principle in his foundation, which actively uses technology to solve local problems. But technology is a tool, not the starting point. The point is starting the point. So, for example, to provide clean water to villages, it's devised a bicycle-driven water-filtration system. It costs $300 (about $250) and can last for 45 years.

In the last five years, Bhargava has been visiting India regularly, interacting closely with partners. He feels recruiting and not funding is the biggest challenge in philanthropy. "Recruiting is the hardest part of any business, but in charity, it's 10 times harder," he says. "A space does not allow people to help the poor as well as build a career. It's like being a part of a startup. You're always against the clock, and the career wins. And I'm just the case. You're the wrong guy, at least for us."

Bhargava's contrarian views may not go down well with members of his ilk, but he's unapologetic. This Princeton dropout, he notes, was rejected by educational institutions he went to. "I am sorry I didn't go to Princeton," he says. "You don't have to be perfect to be great. If I'm putting your name on a building for charity?"

Father To Son

In Bhargava's blueprint, charity has no place at home either. The open sentence of Bhargava's letter to The Giving Pledge in 2012 reads: "My choice was to ruin my son's life by giving him money or giving him the opportunity to lead a life of choice. It's his choice. He's my 24-year-old son. Shaan's choice. "He's doing the right thing with his father's money, but he too has to make a conscious choice. He's going to be worth the $10 billion in one way or another," Bhargava says, adding: "If I can get him away from the $500 billion, that's great. If he's happy, I'm happy." Bhargava's son Shaan is currently helping to raise funds for the Hans foundation.

Bhargava dedicates $500 million each year to the foundation and is also in charge of projects in healthcare, education, and water sanitation. His not-for-profit organization, called The Hans Foundation, has given grants to over 150 organizations in India. Over 1,000 NGOs and foundations have benefited from Bhargava's philanthropic efforts.

Shaun Bhargava, who is currently helping to raise funds for the Hans Foundation, states: "When I was younger, my mother used to tell me that if I need anything, you can have it. Now I understand that it's not the way to go." Bhargava believes that the most important thing is education, and he's working hard to ensure that children have access to quality education. He's also an active investor in technology and has invested in several startups.

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