



HEADLINERS

BIG BUCKS, BIG DREAMS

Manoj Bhargava, a billionaire with a heart

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NRI BILLIONAIRE ENTREPRENEUR MANOJ BHARGAVA IS ALL SET TO ANNOUNCE A DONATION OF ₹500 CRORE TOWARDS A DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN UTTARAKHAND

BILLIONAIRE GIVES IT ALL

• NANDINI D. TRIPATHY

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 stereotype associated with the average billionaire. "Someone had once asked me how many houses I have. I said look, 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 ₹500 crore towards a development programme in Uttarakhand.

"Our target is to make Uttarakhand a model state. We're looking at water, electricity, schools... and more needs 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 more 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 inane accomplishments in the world has himself donned 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 resort to 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 a responsibility on my part that I should use it for something worthwhile. I don't live in India but I *am* an Indian. My heart is here. That's why we thought that we would do something for India. This was how we started The Hans Foundation," he recalls.

Quite like his beginnings in entrepreneurship, his beginnings 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 knew that there would 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 'strategy' 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, feeds his family and lives a better, happier life. Isn't that what we all want, as human beings? Another fashionable word is 'sustainability'. Would you ever say to your children that you can't give them dinner today because you'll have to give them dinner again tomorrow? We work on providing people with things that are fundamental needs. After that, you can avoid assuming that they are incapable of taking care of themselves. 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," he concludes.

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PHOTO: BUNNY SMITH

