

# A Giver and His Grudge Against Fellow Givers

He's committed ₹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 has come to practise it, reports Saumya Bhattacharya

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People with water-borne diseases occupy more than 50% of hospital beds across the world. Does the answer lie in building more hospitals? Really, what is needed is to give them clean water," argues NRI billionaire and philanthropist Manoj Bhargava. On a recent visit to New Delhi, in the backdrop of a ₹500 crore commitment to develop villages in Uttarakhand, Bhargava is passionately holding forth on how philanthropists, in the way they practise their giving, are falling short for themselves, their billions and the lives they want to uplift.

Framing his reasoning in the hospital bed-water analogy, Bhargava says, even some of the biggest philanthropists in the world are not thinking through what people need. "Without it, it's like building a business without a product," he adds. About the latter, he knows a thing or two. In 2004, his US-based company, Living Essentials, launched an energy drink, 5-Hour Energy, and its resultant success has helped him amass a net worth of reportedly \$4 billion.

It's a number that means little to Bhargava in how much it is, but means a lot in what it can do. Bhargava is one of four Indians to have signed The Giving Pledge. Conceived by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, and formally announced in 2010, The Giving Pledge is a commitment by the world's wealthiest individuals to give away most of their wealth to philanthropy.

Bhargava does all his philanthropy in India. In five years, The Hans Foundation has given away ₹300 crore to about 151 non-profits towards 406 completed or ongoing projects in healthcare, education, disability, livelihoods, water and sanitation. "Charity is very difficult to do it right, way more difficult than doing business" he says.

Bhargava recalls a dinner hosted by The Giving Pledge last year, where he was a speaker. "53 billionaires showed up, yet very few understood philanthropy," he says. "Everybody has this misconception that this is all about money. That the more money you give, the more things happen. Governments love to think like that. That's nonsense."

Dhaval Udani, CEO of GiveIndia, an online giving platform, agrees with Bhargava's view that people wrongly believe philanthropy to be all about money. "You have to be involved in identifying the right cause, right organisation," says Udani. "There is no one right way to do it. It depends on learning along the way. Also, it is about what matters to you individually."



## Bhargava's Philanthropy...

**THE HANS FOUNDATION:** In five years, it has given grants to 151 non-profits for 406 projects in healthcare, education, disability, livelihoods, water and sanitation. Commitment: ₹300 cr  
**UTTARAKHAND 2020:** Village development project with focus on education, healthcare and forest regeneration in Uttarakhand. Commitment: ₹500 cr

## ...And His Approach

The foundation uses technology as a catalyst. Some innovations: **BICYCLE-DRIVEN SYSTEM:** Generates clean water. Costs \$700 and can last 45 years (Picture on left)

## SMOKELESS STOVE

**CONSIDERING:** A liquid technology that, if evenly spread over a rainwater harvesting reservoir, reduces evaporation rates by 50%; injection wells that recharge groundwater tables quickly; machine that makes interlocking bricks from dirt and cement

## Problem Solving

For Bhargava, philanthropy is about understanding people and communities in a heterogeneous manner and with context, and finding common-sense solutions to their problems. He's tried to embed this as a principle in his foundation, which actively uses technology to solve local problems. But technology is a response, not the starting point. The problem is the starting point. So, for example, to provide clean water to villages, it's devised a bicycle-driven water-filtering system. It costs \$700 (about ₹42,000) and can last for 45 years.

In the last five years, Bhargava has been visiting India regularly, interacting closely with partner NGOs. He feels recruiting, and not funding, is the biggest challenge in philanthropy. "Recruiting is the hardest part of any business, but in charity, it is 10 times harder." As a space, it does not allow a person to help the poor as well as build a career. "It's like saying, I will take a left turn and a right turn," he says. "One always collides with the other, and the career always wins. And, if that is the case, you are 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 refuses to give money to the educational institutions he went to. "I am sorry I don't give to the rich," he says. "If you don't improve the lives of the poor, it's not charity. How is putting your name on a building charity?"

## Father To Son

In Bhargava's blueprint, charity has no place at home either. The opening 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 90% plus to charity. Not much of a choice." It's a choice his 24-year-old son Shaan agrees with. "He is doing the right thing with his money," he says. "I don't understand how millions of dollars fit into someone's personal lives."

A finance graduate from Michigan State University, Shaan took up a corporate job in 2012 but gave it up because he "did not find it interesting". Shaan joined the foundation, and is currently director, special projects. He divides his time between the US, where he builds relationships and draws learnings from large foundations, and India, where he oversees the foundation's work.

The day-to-day functioning of the foundation is handled by Sweta Rawat, its chairperson and co-founder, and her team. Rawat recalls the foundation was conceived as a monitoring and evaluation agency. "Once we started those roles, we decided we wanted to look at development too," she adds.

The Uttarakhand project, which focuses on education, health and forest regeneration, could take that development work to another level. Shaan is closely involved. "The villages are progressive and there are only one or two things holding them back," he says. "We do our best to get them these."

These include innovations sourced from across the world that aim to improve lives. The foundation has distributed solar lanterns and drip-irrigation systems, found innovative ways to plant high-yielding vegetable gardens at low prices. Or, local problems, tailored solutions.

saumya.bhattacharya@timesgroup.com

Manoj Bhargava (left) and son Shaan Bhargava



Photo: ASHWANI NAGPAL