$36.25m. raised for humanitarian causes

Visual impairment is no handicap for this full-time volunteer

By J.V. LAKSHMINA RAO

Chicago: There are many stalwarts with humanitarian bent of mind among the Non-Resident Indians, who immi-
grated to the US in 1960s and 1970s. They faced many chal-
enges and made their mark by contributing to the pro-
gress of this country - their "harmathmus." While doing so,
they have not forgotten their responsibility as products of
Bharat - their "matruhmoths" - to help thousands of poor and
underprivileged people living there.

One such stalwart is Dr. Vinod Prakash, head of India Devel-
opment and Relief Fund, INC (IDRF), a Maryland-based Public
Charity. An organization with visual impairment, who is affectionately called by his friends and colleagues as Vinodji, has been diligently running this service organiza-
tion, which helps those causes like education, health, Sri Krishna
Bharat Abhyan, women empowerment, tribal welfare, poverty alleviation, eco-
friendly development, Good governance, disaster relief and many more social and
economic causes. IDRF is an offshoot of now defunct India Relief Fund (IRF), under the stewardship of Vinodji, has so far raised $36.25 million towards humanitarian and
development causes.

Holding a PhD in economics, Vinodji was a development economist with the World
Bank for more than 15 years. He relinquished the plum World Bank job to fully dedi-
cate himself as volunteer to meet the demands of the humanitarian work of the
IDRF. His wife, Sarla, and children also fully supported him.

Vinodji has been interviewed via telephonic as also through internet e-mail questionnaire. Here are the excerpts:

Question: Vinodji, please tell us about your childhood and education before immigrating
to the US.

Answer: I was born in 1933 in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, in a freedom-fighter's family. As a young man, I was influenced by Gandhi thoughts and
delivered news-letters during

the Rastriva Swarajmukhi Sangh shakas. These schools were later banned by Prime
Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru in the wake of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination. On
January 1, 1948, I offered Satyagraha and courted arrest for protesting the ban on RSS
and I was imprisoned for two months.

As a brilliant student, I com-
pleted my Bachelors and Masters in Mathematics at a college in Meerut after which I
joined the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) in Kolkata and got Masters Statistics
degree. Impressed by my research papers, my Professor FC. Mahalanobis recom-

mended me to the newly-formed Government of inde-
pendent India for place in the Planning Commission. India's Perspective Planning endeavor
or attracted several global experts from countries such as
Australia, Britain and the United States. I worked with all of them and seeing my
potential, they offered me fellowships in their respective
countries. I opted for the Ford Foundation Fellowship at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1960
and left for Boston with my new bride, Sarla.

Q: What was the inspiration that made you to take up the
work of India Relief Fund and continue it as India
Development and Relief Fund?

A: During the state of Emergency in India from
1975 to 1977, several activists, including Swami Vivekananda’s philoso-

phical "Nar Seca, Narayan Seca."

In my early teens, I attended

World Bank, volunteered to
take on a leadership position as President of IRF in 1977, while continuing with my
work at the Bank. At this
time, India Relief Fund's focus shifted to disaster relief programs for the underprivi-
leged in India.

In 1987, after ten years of volunteering with the India Relief Fund, I realized that
continuing in my time-con-
suming, high-pressure posi-
tion at the World Bank was not conducive to raising nec-

essary funds. So I took the
bold step of availing earliest possible retirement from my
job at the World Bank to focus
all my resources to the run-
ning of the Fund. This change

significantly altered the fami-
ly's financial fortunes, and
they knew they would not be able to maintain the same lifestyle that accompanied
my World Bank position.

However, my wife and sons
too understood the signifi-
cance of my humanitarian
impulse to provide develop-
mental opportunities to the marginalized in India as the responsi-

bility of those, who had prospered, to give back to
the society. On our many
trips to India, I and Sarla had taken our sons to visit and investigate service and community
development projects in vil-

lages in the remote and needy
regions of India.

In November 1987, the organization was legally incor-
porated in Maryland as the India Development and Relief
Fund (IDRF), and it received the
501(c)(3) tax-exempt status in the US by Internal Revenue
Service (IRS) effective January 1, 1988 (at which point India
Relief Fund was closed down).

Even though IRF that started
before extending a helping hand and making it a partner in sustainable development
projects.

Being a development econ-

omist, I realized that India's developmental challenges are multi-dimensional, so have to be
the solutions. Hence, IDRF

Programs can be classified in
different areas - Education, Health, Women Empower-
ment, Good Governance,

Eco-friendly Development and Disaster Relief and
Rehabilitation.

A few examples of IDRF's
development work over 30
years have been:

- 2,130 women's Self-Help Groups supported in 533
villages of Haryana, Mahara-
shtra and West Bengal;

- 10,000 women farmers from Mahara-

dhara and other states trained;

- 3,500 private toilets con-
structed for rural poor in
Gujarat, West Bengal and

Tamil Nadu;

- 14,000 patients cared annu-

ally through Mobile Clinics in
North-East India;

- 105 villages in Gujarat
prevented migration by
constructing 127 check
campons; 147 wells and

2.17 km of roads.

Thousands of Ekal

Vidyalayas (one-teacher schools) supported across

India;

IDRF’s tribal girls' hostel
ever year accommodates 100
tribal girls belonging to
Northeastern states for free
holistic education with lodg-
ing and boarding.

- 303 (71 girls) youths

provided skill training of

them 245 (31 girls) placed in

jobs; 225 special needs children

education supported in

Gujarat, Punjab and

Telangana;

- 27,000 students in 400
schools trained to be respon-

sible citizens across 12 cities in

India;

- 48 Gram Panchayats in 10
districts of Bihar and

Jharkhand trained to access

development programs and

combat corruption; and

- 1.84 million citizens com-

plaints raised through mobile

app “I change My City.”

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Hindus urge Hawaii firm to withdraw Lord Ganesha shoes

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Zed further said that such trivialization of Hindu deity was disturbing to the Hindus world over. Hindus were for free artistic expression and speech as much as anybody else if not more. But faith was something sacred and attempts at trivializing it hurt the followers, Zed added.

Maui Wocke, whose tagline is "A State Of Mind," claims to bring "exclusive items to inspire joy and balance in your life." Besides other items, it sells 10 women's shoe/boots named Ganeshas on its website with prices ranging from $44.99 to $69.99, and carrying images of Lord Ganesha. These include varieties of Non Slip Canvas Shoes, High Top Shoes, Lace Up Canvas Boots, Ankle High Boots, Canvas Chukka Boots.

Veteran actor Kadar Khan dies at 81

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Jaya Bachchan's Javanti Devarani. As a screenwriter, Kadar Khan frequently collaborated with Mannoham Desai and Prakash Mehra. Some of his most memorable films as a comedic-character actor are: Daag, Daag, Dard, Aandhi, Pratishthan, Mere Apne, Waqt, Khoon Bhari Maang, Betaab, Swarg, and Dostana.

Mamata number one on the list of potential PM candidate from Bengal: State BJP chief

Kolkata, (IANS): In a surprising statement, West Bengal BJP president Dilip Ghosh on January 5 said Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was the number one on the list as a potential Prime Minister from Bengal, remarking that the state should have one in the top post.

Ghosh made the comment while extending birthday wishes to Banerjee. "I extend birthday wishes to our Chief Minister. I wish her a healthy and long life, because West Bengal's fortunes depend on her success. "I want her to be healthy because she is the number one on the list as a potential Prime Minister from Bengal," he said.

Asked whether any BJP leader from Bengal stood the chance to become the country's Prime Minister, Ghosh said that could come at a later date. "Maybe, we can have someone later. But now as a potential Prime Minister candidate from Bengal, she is number one on the list," he said.

Ghosh referred to the political developments in 1996, when the Communist Party of India-Marxist central committee had twice voted against its politburo member and then state Chief Minister Jyoti Basu taking over as the country's Prime Minister.

"The United Front - a coalition of non-Congress and non-BJP political parties - had pressed hard for Basu to take the crucial chair. However, the CPI-M had argued that with the party's small strength, Basu would not be in a position to deliver as a Prime Minister. "We missed out on Jyoti Basu becoming the Prime Minister, his party did not allow him to occupy the top post," he said.

Ghosh also expressed his happiness about Prafull Mukherjee becoming the first person from the state to become the Prime Minister (from 2012-2017).

"A Bengal should become the Prime Minister now," he added.

Ghosh’s comments have apparently rattled the state BJP leadership, which is locked in an intense fight with the Banerjee-led ruling Trinamool Congress in its mission to put up a strong challenge to her in the coming Lok Sabha polls.

BJP national secretary and former state party President Rabul Sinha, when contacted by IANS, refused to speak on the issue "at this moment."

Bomb blasts were thrown at several places, including at the houses of CPI(M) lawmaker AN Shamsheer in Meadvchedikavali, BJP leader and Rajya Sabha member V Muraleedharan at Vaddy Prudika and former Kamrur district secretary of CPI(M) P Sasi at Thallassery in Kannur district, the police said.

Following the violence, Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh has asked for a detailed report from the Kerala government. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, on January 5 said that the Sangh Parivar forces were purposely trying to create unrest and what was more surprising was that the Congress was silent. "Violence will be dealt with an iron hand," said Vijayan.

State BJP President P Sreekumar Pillai told the media that Vijayan was creating a bad precedent by registering cases and arresting innocent supporters.

Hitting back at Vijayan, Congress leader Ramesh Chemnithala said the Chief Minister need not teach his party anything. "Who does not know that it is Vijayan who is giving all the support to the Sangh Parivar forces and as a result they are creating mayhem in the state. We don't have to learn anything from Vijayan," said Chemnithala.

37,979 people accused, 1,286 cases filed in Sabarimala violence

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2,691 had got bail. In Palakkad district, which witnessed the worst violence, 4,946 cases had been registered. Kozhikode accounted for 3,563 cases.

The shutdown was called by the Sabarimala Karma Samithi (SKS) to protest against the visit of two women to the Sabarimala temple on January 2. It got the support of the BJP and Sangh Parivar outfits. While most violence took place on January 3, the house of CPI-M Thalassery legislator A N Shamsheer came under attack from suspected Sangh Parivar groups. A similar attack place on the house of former Kannur CPI-M district secretary P Sasi.

IDRF has the highest ratings from Charity Navigator (Four Stars) for 5 consecutive years and is also featured in "Top 10 perfect score (100%) charities relying on Private contributions' in 2018. IDRF is also a recipient of Platinum Seal from Great Nonprofits, a Top-rated Charity (5-stars) by Great Nonprofits, based on 100 independent reviews. IDRF runs efficiently with a small paid staff, numerous volunteers and an active Board that is committed to IDRF's values and integrity. My wife has done a great deal for IDRF, especially as reflected in her constant endeavors to interest her friends in IDRF's work. She made sure that her home was always open to IDRF staff and volunteers. Before my blindness, we traveled to India nearly every year to check on the progress of current projects and to scout for new opportunities to serve. We witnessed poverty, ignorance, illiteracy, and also to incredible hospitality, gratitude, and wide acceptance from the local NGOs as well as the ultimate beneficiaries.

We are blessed by God's grace to dedicate our lives to the upliftment of downtrodden in India. In turn, I feel bestowed with immense joy – true happiness. Now, my companions are walking stick, talking wristwatch, small but dedicated IDRF team and Board comprising development experts. For more information, please visit website: www.idrf.org