

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

\$36.25m. raised for humanitarian causes

Visual impairment is no handicap for this full-time volunteer

By J.V. LAKSHMANA RAO

Chicago: There are many stalwarts with humanitarian bent of mind among the Non-Resident Indians, who immigrated to the US in 1960s and 1970s. They faced many challenges and made their mark by contributing to the progress of this country – their *karmabhoomi*. While doing so, they have not forgotten their responsibility as products of Bharat – their *matrubhoomi* – to help thousands of poor and underprivileged people living there.

One such stalwart is Dr. Vinod Prakash, head of India Development and Relief Fund, INC (IDRF), a Maryland-based Public Charity. An octogenarian with visual impairment, who is affectionately called by his friends and colleagues as Vinodji, has been diligently running this service organization, which helps the causes like education, health, Swachh Bharat Abhayan, 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, which served its purpose in helping the thousands of sufferers because of the imposition of a state of Emergency in Bharat during 1975-77. IDRF, 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 dedicate himself as volunteer to meet the demands of the humanitarian work of the IDRF. His wife, Sarla, and children had fully supported him.

Vinodji has been interviewed via telephone 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 Gandhian thoughts and delivered news-flyers during

the freedom movement. I have vivid memories of the 1942 Quit-India Movement, when six members of my immediate family, including my mother, were incarcerated for *Satyagraha*. That experience also led me to embrace Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of "*Nar Seva, Narayan Seva*."

In my early teens, I attended



Dr. Vinod and Sarla Prakash.

the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh shakas. These schools were later banned by Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru in the wake of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. On January 1, 1949, I offered *Satyagraha* and courted arrest for protesting the ban on RSS and I was imprisoned for two months.

As a brilliant student, I completed 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 in Statistics degree. Impressed by my research papers, my Professor P.C. Mahalanobis recommended me to the newly-formed Government of independent India for place in the Planning Commission. India's Perspective Planning endeavor 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.

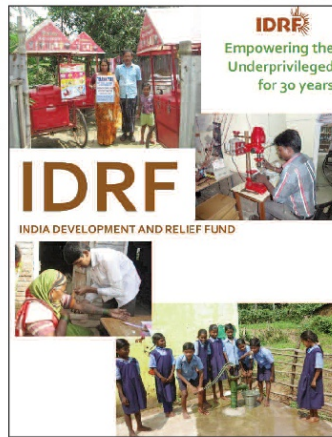
Q: What was the inspiration that made you to take up the work of India Relief Fund and continue it as India Development and Relief Fund?

A: During the state of Emergency in India from

1975 to 1977, several activists, started the India Relief Fund (IRF), as a public charity in the United States, whose initial objective was to aid the families of political prisoners arrested during the period.

Once the Emergency was revoked, I, guided by my development experience gained while working at the

Fund (IDRF), and it received a 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



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 point, India Relief Fund's focus shifted to disaster relief programs for the underprivileged in India.

In 1987, after ten years of volunteering with the India Relief Fund, I realized that continuing in my time-consuming, high-pressure position at the World Bank was not conducive to raising necessary 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 running of the Fund. This change significantly altered the family'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 significance of my humanitarian impulse to provide developmental opportunities to the marginalized in India as the responsibility 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 villages in the remote and needy regions of India.

In November 1987, the organization was legally incorporated in Maryland as the India Development and Relief

in 1975 was the progenitor of IDRF, its goals were narrow in scope and I closed it down in order to establish IDRF to realign its vision to fit my own sense of social reform.

Q: Please let us hear more about work of IDRF.

A: IDRF (www.idrf.org) offers a platform to NRIs to fulfill their dream of: *Giving back to "the Land of our Ancestors - India."* It works with NGOs spanning from Jammu & Kashmir to Tamil Nadu and Arunachal to Gujarat that have established track records and are approved to receive funds from overseas under Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), Government of India. **IDRF's goal is to put power, not charity, into the hands of India's impoverished, through multifaceted development programs implemented by reliable, local NGOs.**

Over the past 30 years, IDRF has raised \$36.25 million of which \$6.05 million has been disbursed for disaster relief and rehab programs and \$27.64 million for sustainable development grants to empower downtrodden people. By studiously holding IDRF's administrative and fundraising costs below 4 percent, I have ensured that 96 cents of every dollar are directly sent to deserving NGOs. Such a low-overhead is a rarity in the USA. IDRF has a high standard of compliance and fully vet the reputation and reliability of a NGO

before extending a helping hand and making it a partner in sustainable development projects.

Being a development economist, I realized that India's developmental challenges are multi-dimensional, so have to be the solutions. Hence, IDRF Programs can be classified in six focus areas — Education, Health, Women Empowerment, 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 333 villages of Haryana, Maharashtra and West Bengal;
- 10,000 women farmers from Maharashtra and other states trained;
- 2,500 private toilets constructed for rural poor in Gujarat, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu;
- 14,000 patients cared annually through Mobile Clinics in North-East India;
- 105 villages in Gujarat prevented migration by constructing 127 check dams/ponds; 147 wells and improved education, health and economic sustainability of 240,000 people;
- 10,000 students helped in schools/affection homes in nine states across India;
- Thousands of *Ekal Vidyalayas* (one-teacher schools) supported across India;
- IDRF's tribal girls' hostel every year accommodates 100 tribal girls belonging to Northeastern states for free holistic education with lodging and boarding;
- 303 (71 girls) youths provided skill training of whom 245 (51 girls) placed in jobs;
- 225 special needs children education supported in Gujarat, Punjab and Telangana;
- 27,000 students in 400 schools trained to be responsible citizens across 12 cities in India;
- 48 Gram Panchayats in 10 districts of Bihar and Jharkhand trained to access government programs and combat corruption; and
- 1.84 million citizens complaints raised through mobile app "I change My City."

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CONTINUATIONS

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

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26,691 had got bail. In Palakkad district, which witnessed the worst violence, 4,946 cases had been registered. Kozhikode accounted for 3,763 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.

Bombs were thrown at several places, including at the houses of CPI(M) lawmaker AN Shamseer in Madapeddikayil, BJP leader and Rajya Sabha member V Muraleedharan at Vadiyil Peedikia and former Kannur district secretary of CPI(M) P Sasi at Thalassery 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.S. Sreedharan 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 Chennithala 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 Chennithala.

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 Woke, 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 shoes/boots named Ganesha on its website with prices ranging from \$44.99 to \$69.99, and carrying images of Lord Ganesha. These include varieties of Nonslip 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 *Jawani Diwani*. As a screenwriter, Kader Khan frequently collaborated with Manmohan Desai and Prakash Mehra.

Some of his most memorable films as a comedian-character actor are: *Daag, Adalat, Bairaag, Parvarish, Muqaddar Ka Sikandar, Shalimar, Mr. Natwarlal, Suhaag, Dhan Daulat, Qurbani, Juwalamukhi, Abdullah, Naseeb, Ahista Ahista, Yaarana, Zamaane Ko Dikhana Hai, Satte Pe Satta, Raaz, Desh Premee, Sanam Teri Kasam, Mehndi Rang Layegi, Himmatwala, Coolie, Ghar Ek Mandir, John Jaani Janardhan, Taraaif, Loha, Jawab Hum Denge, Shahenshah, Pyar Ka Mandir, Khoon Bhari Maang, Vardi, Baap Numbri, Beta Dus Numbri, Pyar Ka Devta, Saajan, Bol Radha Bol, Meherbaan, Aankhen, Eena Meena Deeka, Coolie No.1, Saajan Chale Sasural, Judaai, Dulhe Raja, Aunti No.1 and Sooryavansham.*

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Q: IDRF is doing several seva and humanitarian activities; the relief and rehabilitation works have been noteworthy during natural calamities. What is your vision going forward with IDRF during the years to come?

A: IDRF has been integral in rebuilding communities in the aftermath of various disasters. Some of these calamities devastated communities that were already living in extreme poverty and deprivation. Rather than focusing on transitional relief, IDRF gives priority to long-term rehabilitation, with the goal of turning disasters into opportunities for new sustainable development.

IDRF has supported disaster relief and rehab programs for India Floods (2017), Siachen Glacier avalanche (2016), Nepal Earthquake (2015), Chennai Floods (2015), Tsunami (2004), Gujarat Earthquake (2001), Odisha Super Cyclone (1999), Kargil War (1999), Latur Earthquake (1993), etc.

Q: Here is a very personal and sensitive question. Despite your disability – loss of vision – for the past eight years, you have been doing remarkable service to the humanity through IDRF. How do you cope with it and yet manage such a huge task?

A: Undaunted by my visual impairment since June 2010, I have sustained my vigor and have succeeded in taking IDRF to new heights. Now,

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 *Guide Star* and is 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 perseverance by the local NGOs as well as the ultimate beneficiaries.

We are blessed by God's grace to dedicate our lives towards the empowerment 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

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 Ministerial 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, as his party did not allow him to occupy the top post," he said.

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

"A Bengali 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 Rahul Sinha, when contacted by IANS, refused to speak on the issue "at this moment."

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