

HOW I GOT INTO PHILANTHROPY

By R. M. Lala

Words have a strange way of changing their original meaning. For example the word 'Wealth' is derived from the old English word 'weal' which means well being, happiness, prosperity, welfare.

In its larger context it embraces "the welfare of a country or a community; the general good" (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary). The English expression 'the commonweal or public weal' had its counter part in the Latin "*bonum publicum*" or in the French "le bien publique". Sadly today people associate the word wealth with the making of money.

In the same way the word "philanthropy" has altered meaning. It is derived from the Greek word *fil-anthra-pi* which in Greek means "love of mankind." It does not mean giving away just money which is commonly known as charity. Love can be expressed through giving company to anybody, or just even listening to what he has got to say and try to help in his or her personal life, or even a helping hand to a blind person to cross the road. Today we associate Philanthropy mainly with donating money to projects or those in need, or with the long term aim of constructive Philanthropy to start schools, institutions, homes, etc. A manifestation of this development is the establishment of big



foundations that have come into being for a little over the last 100 years.

From 1963 till 1975 I was immersed in full time voluntary work both with MRA and with

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Himmat Weekly which I established as a Trust in 1964 with Rajmohan Gandhi and a few friends. In a two-year sabbatical in England I wrote my first book, "In Search of Leadership" On return to India I had two financially difficult year. I started free lancing as a journalist as well as participating in voluntary work with MRA.

Just then I was asked by my friend Mr. S. A. Sabavala whether I would like to write a book, on the house of Tatas, 'The Creation of Wealth'.

In 1982 after I finished another book called 'The Heartbeat of a Trust – The story of the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust' I was offered a senior position in Tata's in the same Trust. I was very torn whether or not to accept it. My first love was my voluntary work with comrades who were close to me for a couple of decades.

Should I accept the offer or decline it? At that moment of decision making I turned for help to a dear friend of mine Rev. Father M. M. Balaguer, S.J., who was President of the Eurcharastic Congress when Pope Paul VI visited India. As soon as we got into the cab to go for tea I told the Father about my dilemma and how torn I was. In a flash Father Balaguer said, "Russi, if you accept the job you will have within you the power to do good." The moment he used the words "the power to do good" the penny dropped. I had found the answer. I was 53 then and I never dreamt that I would have an innings of 20 years before I laid down the office. For 18 of years I was Director of the Foundation. The Trust had a glorious tradition behind it. In the

opening page of *The Heartbeat of a Trust* are these lines:

“One way to take injustice out of riches is to dedicate riches to the service of the people and of the nation. The entire possessions of Sir Dorabji Tata were placed in a trust.” They included shares, landed estates and jewellery valued in all at Rs.10 million in 1932, the

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equivalent of Rs.100 crores of today. It included the 245-carat Jubilee Diamond, twice as large as the Koh-i-noor. It was an honour and a privilege to have served alongside such fine people as Mr. JRD Tata, Mr. J.J. Bhabha and Prof. Rustom Choksi.

Prof. Choksi was a fascinating man who set the tone and gave leadership to the trust for almost 40 years before I came on the scene. He exercised a deep and beneficial influence on the organization. He was a very popular Professor of English at the Wilson College when JRD Tata invited him to join Tatas. He always dressed in a white khadi suit with a khadi tie and an unusually large knot which was always hanging an inch below his collar. His clothes gave an appearance of studied casualness. Widely read in English Literature he has instilled the best ethics from literature to his students. Dr. Usha Mehta, Professor of Politics from the Bombay University and a

renowned Gandhian, recalled how he quoted from Milton's *Paradise Lost* “who overcomes force with force hath overcome but half his foe.”

Usha Mehta continued “These words (spoken during India's non-violent independence struggle) reverberated in our ears and made us understand the value of liberty as also of Gandhi's message of conquering hatred by love and brute force by soul force.”

The Professor impressed upon me that trust work was “a service” and inculcated in me his own respectful approach to all those who came to us for funds. Though he was free from sentimentality his approach was always compassionate and his words soothing. When in doubt about a small grant he would say “On compassionate grounds let us give it.”

Mr. J.J. Bhabha who had succeeded him as Managing Trustee was a man with a quick temper, but with a compassionate heart. It was a privilege for me to work under both these outstanding figures in the routine working of the Trust. I came across some of the most dedicated people in my work who came for grants. And also outstanding personalities like Dr. M. S. Swaminathan and Dr. Ramalingamswami who gave me their advice, trust and friendship.

Large American Foundations have some times become models for Indian Foundations. Some of them restrict themselves to 4 or 5 areas and focus their funds in those

fields. I was under pressure from one of my colleagues to adopt the same practice for our Trust. The conditions in India are different from America. We are a developing country with little or no social security. When the Delhi representative of one of the largest American Foundations (which was restricted to five areas of operations) came to see me I told him how we spent a lot of time and energy in giving individual health grants to people because there was hardly any social security net for our people. As I was talking I could see his eyes turning red with a thin film on it. I couldn't understand. When I finished he uttered the words; “We are bloodless.”

It is fashionable now for Indian Foundations to have strategy papers written and then the Trustees accept it. I am not against having such reports but a Trust should not be a captive of this strategy business. It gives the heart

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For example, I forwarded to a friend's Trust the appeal of an institution that picked up mentally ill and disheveled people from the

streets, housed, treated and resettled them, mentally restored to their families. Their own social

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workers took them to homes often in other districts and towns as far as Patna. The CEO of the Trust wrote a heart warming letter to me, sent an official who gave a positive report. As this was going on, a strategy paper was adopted which did not feature mental health. The appeal was rejected. Philanthropy is 'love for fellowmen' not 'love for rules'.

The head Swami of the headquarters of the Ramkrishna Mission at Calcutta came to see me. Others had told him that Foundations give grants only for projects. He began with the words that he had got three projects for our consideration. I could however notice as he was sitting down that he was a novice and quite uncomfortable about the whole business. I said "Swamiji, forget

the projects. What is it that is most on your heart and what do you need the funds for." He immediately relaxed and said that what he felt most about was Swamijis who had served humanity for 35-40 years. They had retired to his ashram and he didn't have the funds for their medical expenses. We gave a generous corpus grant for that purpose.

Where the human cry is heard, funds should be made available. Otherwise the soul is taken out of Philanthropy. The time I spent in the Trust was God's gift to me. It also enabled me to serve on the Governing Council of pioneering institutions the Tatas founded like the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, The Tata Memorial Hospital and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

May I take a quote from Turgeneff's 'Poems in Prose' to illustrate philanthropy at the height of a Russian winter:

"I was walking in the street; a beggar stopped me – a frail old man. His tearful eyes, blue lips, rough rags, disgusting sores, - oh,

how horribly poverty had disfigured the unhappy creature! He stretched out to me his red, swollen, filthy hand; he groaned and whimpered for alms. I felt in all my pockets. No purse, watch or handkerchief did I find. I had left them all at home. The beggar waited, and his outstretched hand twitched and trembled slightly. Embarrassed and confused, I seized his dirty hand and pressed it: 'Don't be vexed with me, brother! I have nothing with me, brother.' The beggar raised his bloodshot eyes to mine, his blue lips smiled, and he returned the pressure of my chilled fingers. 'Never mind,

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brother,' stammered he; 'I thank you for this; this too was a gift, brother.' I felt that I too had received a gift from my brother." The brotherly word was holiest alms. ■

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the Shirdi Sai temple of Maharashtra has precious metal assets worth 320 million rupees (nearly \$7.1 million). It's investments total 420.17 crore rupees (nearly \$9.3 million).

Open to adherents and devotees of all faiths, creeds and religions, the Shirdi Saibaba Temple pays tribute to Shri Sai Baba. In the early 18th Century, he showed up in the

Shirdi Village and lived in a mosque. As time passed, his simple expression and abilities of dealing with problems won over villagers. The village became a destination for pilgrims. He did not keep gifts bestowed to him but instead gave them to those in need.

Gold is among the ornaments and jewelry, which are valued at 24.41 crore rupees (nearly

\$540,000). Silver at the shrine totals 3.26 crore rupees (more than \$72,000). The temple holds silver coins worth 612,317 rupees (\$15,536), gold coins worth 1.288 crore rupees (\$28,477) and gold pendants worth 1.123 crore rupees (\$24,833). ■