

More News

The joy of giving

Rakesh Sharma meets noted philanthropist Babubhai Shah

With his amazing energy and clarity of thought, Babubhai Shah is quite unlike any other philanthropist that you have met. He abounds with love for his fellow human beings. He has earned a lot of money and has lived his life well. Now, he wants to give back whatever he can to his fellow beings. And give back, he has. With more than a crore rupees in donations to various institutions and individuals, he has become a well-known and loved name in philanthropic circles.

From his humble beginnings as a student who had to subsist on charity from his relatives to get through college, he has indeed come a long way. After doing a host of odd jobs after college (including a stint in the military during the Second World War), he hit upon the idea of being a bookseller.

The story of how he hit upon the idea is quite interesting like the man himself. Readers Digest was looking for subscribers in India. And this young man introduced a whole set of his friends to the magazine. The commission (33 per cent) made him realise the potential of the industry. The rest is history, as they say.

He started supplying technical journals and newspapers and his company (Charles Lambert & co) grew from strength to strength. He travelled extensively around the world to learn and understand it better. And on the way, he also met and fell in love with his wife, Kumudben.

In fact, it was her death in 1994, which triggered the philanthropist. For even today, there is a tenderness in his voice, when he speaks about her. "Even when I was in



Ordinarily Extraordinary

business, I gave away quite a lot. However, yes, I have given away a lot more after my wife's death."

In fact, he got into trouble with one of his publishers for the very same reason. However, that is history now.

With the glut of charitable institutions, it is quite surprising to find that he has been quite indiscriminate in his choice of them. From the Indian Red Cross and Lilavati hospital to the Gayatri Vikas Mandal, Bharuch, he has contributed generously to all. So, does he exercise any caution in dealing with them? "Definitely yes," comes the emphatic reply. "I have made personal visits to all the institutes that I have donated to and have made sure that they really need the money." But then, there are bound to be frauds or cases where he must have felt let down? "Yes, there have been cases, but then I'd rather not talk about them. Let by-

gones be bygones," he says, wistfully.

What is the criterion that he employs to flourish his pen on the chequebook? "Only that they should be deserving and sincere", comes the automatic reply. So, does he go searching for them or do they come of their own accord? "Well, it's mainly through word of mouth that they hear about me and contact me. But there have been cases where I have taken the initiative".

Does he have any donations that he feels happy about? "I feel happy about every single paise of money that is well used in the welfare of others. So, you could say that all of them have made me happy," he says.

Strangely enough, here is one philanthropist who does not ascribe his philanthropy to strong religious roots. "I remember Him in my mind daily but I am not rigid regarding formal worship. Also, my spirit of giving may possibly be due to the spirit of renunciation in Jainism. My wife, though was a devout Parsi."

What is it that drives him? He laughs. And then explains. "God has given me more than I desire. When I needed help, people came to my rescue. Now, it's time for me to give it back since I have the resources. I am 82 now and can take a walk to Sagar Vihar every day (he stays at Sharan). What more could I want?" he says with a smile.