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Bharat Nirman Maps a Pragmatic Agenda for Multi-Level Development

It was early in 1980. Mrs. Indira Gandhi had returned to power filled with ideas for improving India. Politics wasn't her main concern. She was equally interested in the country's culture, its heritage and traditions based on human values. It was then that an old acquaintance, M.C. Bhandari, met her in Delhi. Bhandari had been in polities but was now tired of it. He was looking for an opportunity to do something "real," something "constructive" for the people. Both Mrs. Gandhi and Bhandari were on the same talked about, therefore, centered on India's social and economic conditions, its rich cultural and spiritual heritage-and its backwardness. "Why not do something for the preservation and promotion of our cultural and spiritual values?" Mrs. Gandhi asked Bhandari.

"The question was such that I instantly found the answer to my long search for a week for a work I should take up," said Bhandari in an interview with HINDUISM TODAY in Delhi. Having found what he wanted, he made a promise to Mrs. Gandhi to dedicate himself to the task of creating among the people an awareness of these values. Once this decision had been made, the Bharat Nirman, an organization through which he has performed this work to the present day, soon manifested.

Bharat Nirman, which literally means "build India," was founded in 1980. Working as a congressman of some reputation and creditability, M.C. Bhandari had visited almost all parts of the country and found that there was too much influence of the Western ideas. This made him want to do something to check the impact the West

was making on the new generation of Indians. Politics, however, did not give him enough time to fulfill his desire.

He was comparatively free when Mrs. Gandhi lost control over the government following the 1977 Lok Sabha elections. He found he now had time to do something other than organize or address political meetings. Still he was not able to sit with close friends and formulate his ideas. His firm of chartered accountants in Calcutta demanded his attention, and the Janata party government, then going through turmoil, forcibly kept him at the center of political responsibilities. Only when Mrs. Gandhi came back into power in 1980 was Bhandari free to listen to his conscience and act on its promoting.

Bharat Nirman did not take long to make its presence felt. Soon after it was registered June of 1980, its field of activity were very clearly identified. They were: rural development, better employment, economic growth, social development and cultural and spiritual upliftment of the country.

The Bharat Nirman opened its impressive record of work with a cultural/spiritual camp at Mt. Abu in Rajasthan from May 8 to 12, 1980. It was a camp with a difference. Those who attended were given an opportunity to go through the experience of practicing any one of a number of methods of meditation, also including Transcendental Meditation, Vipasana, Naam Kirtan, Preksha, Kundalini Dhyan and Rajayoga. Most participants found this experience exhilarating and uplifting. Bhandari discovered that the idea behind the camp was inspiring for the participants, because it filled a void they all intuitively felt.

A spate of original programs followed the camp at Mt. Abu. They included "Saints of India," "Quami Ekta Diwas," 'Krishna Leela," "Ras Leela," "Classical Dance Performance," discourses on "Indian Art and Cultural," "What is God" and recitations of the Gita and the Ramayan. These programs were aimed at achieving a cultural and national and international seminars and conferences organized to focus attention on basic issues before the country. The subjects included "The Role of Non-resident Indians (NRI) in India's Development," "astrology," "Rural Development," "National Health and Indigenous System," "Daughters of India-Victims of Dowry," "Para Vidya," "Ekata ke Swar," "Educational Reforms," "Spiritual Renaissance," "Spiritual Unity for National Integration," "Science and Spirituality" and "Drug Addiction."

Bharat Nirman thus became involved in Multifarious activities and touched almost all aspects of life: social, national and personal. These seminars and conferences were attended not only by experts and specialists but also by senior ministers and officials. They were of great interest equally to lay men and women.

Bhandari collected the written observations of accomplished and distinguished participants and published them in book form. Copies were then distributed to all those who attended or participated. These books are well worth preserving.

What distinguishes Bharat Nirman from other similar organizations is the fact that it works on the principle that the people should try to solve their problems themselves instead of always looking up to the government to do it for them.

"Public cooperation and participation are equally important in all work for building up the nation," says M.C. Bhandari. He has found that, because of the bad living conditions in village in India, their inhabitants leave their ancestral homes at the first opportunity and go to neighboring towns for jobs. This worsens the situation in the villages where there is already an acute shortage of work. Because of increasing population in towns with limited space and housing, more and more slums are multiplying. They have become a breeding ground for crime. A tragic aspect of these circumstances is that the values Indians have cherished for ages cannot be practised today because of increasing urbanization, another unfortunate by-product of Western civilization.

The plight of the common man becomes worse when he begins expecting the government to help solve his problems. Bhandari believes - and Bharat Nirman projects this belief - that if 10,000 large companies in India decide to work with 40,000 small ones, and thousands of organizations like Rotary Clubs, Jaycees, Giants International, Bharat Scouts, religious and philanthropic bodies, trusts and voluntary agencies together decide to work for remedying the situation with necessary government support, it will produce results nothing short of miraculous.

"How can the government alone reach 700,000 villages in India and provide the infra-structure each one of them provide the infra-structure each one of them needs?" asks Bhandari. He himself provides the answer: "The very dimension of the problem makes it difficult for the government to accomplish this task."

Bhandari thinks is a need to create groups of villages with one village in a group serving as a master village. Each group would then be adopted by an organization to take up development work by setting agricultural consultancy cum input assistance cells, dairy development units, crafts and services centers, handloom or small industries and culture promotion parties. "These steps assisted by the government will transform every village," claims Bhandari.

Looking back, Bhandari is satisfied with what Bharat Nirman has done in eight years of its existence. "We have made a dent in the spiritual field," he says. Dressed in spotless white khadi and kurta and wearing glasses, he gives the look of one who still wants to proceed regardless of the distance he must traverse. He knows the task that he accepted in 1980 is not an easy one.

The problem he saw years ago are still there, but he at least has the satisfaction of having contributed toward his work and make Bharat Nirman even more important. Business houses have already been persuaded to adopt 500 villages and help them develop along modern lines. A short film titled India of My Dreams, showing how villages can develop on their own, has been created to be distributed among small villages and towns. Campaigns have been launched against the dowry which claims at least a dozen lives every month. A program was held in Miranda House, a girl's collage in Delhi, where a number of boys and girls took a vow not to offer or accept dowry in their marriages.

Bhandari is now busy planning the establishment of the headquarters of Bharat Bhawan in Palam, a suburb of Delhi. A land parcel of about 20 acres is needed for this. He is sure to get it soon. It will be bought, not received as a gift from the government. The complex he visualizes today will become a center for all forms of "Bharatiya Sanskriti." It will have schools of all religions and philosophies of India. "It will be a great center of Indology," says Bhandari. He hopes the construction of this complex will begin by March, 1990.

A primary source of funds for Bharat Nirman is charitable contributions. They implore the financial assistance of government, private institutions and wealthy individuals, especially those living abroad. But Bharat Nirman doesn't function from gifts alone. They also produce economic investment opportunities offering lucrative rewards. Indeed, their success is due in large measure to their ability to attract investment in this way. In this step-by-step manner founded on a far-sighted vision, they are able to secure for India's underprivileged citizens not only money but

trades and skills that they can use to feed and uplift themselves.

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Power of the Mind

Bharat Nirman is noted for the diversity of its activities - especially since its 1989 international conference on "Inner Realms of Mind." This conference, one of the organization's most significant religious contributions, was a break away from may of its other enterprises which are mostly pragmatic. It explored loftier ground. Here are some notable quotes from some of its speakers.

"Mind is a powerful instrument which God has made. It should be used for the welfare of the whole mankind. Science may seem to have given us everything, but we may forget that it is the mind that has given us science."

Chintamani Panigrahi, Union Minister of State for Defense Production

"Mind is the instrument which motivates action. When emotions are there, they bring further reactions and this circle goes on. So mind should be controlled as perverted mind and emotions can do great harm."

Romesh Bhandari, Lt. Governor of Delhi

"Mankind has been suffering from mind for long. The Indian system of yoga was designed to control the mind. Tremendous research has been done on mind, but it has not yet been caught by science. By proper meditation only, mind can be understood and used for universal good."

Veer Raghavan, Secretary of Culture, Governor of India.

"Mind has infinite possibilities which should be explored in action. Mind can bring harmony if properly use. Indian Yogis like Ramakrishna are examples. By even seeing them, one gets peace."

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