



Dr. Abraham George at Shanti Bhavan



Actress Reshma Shetty, third from left, with Shanti Bhavan team.



IN SEARCH OF THE POOR, WITH HIS OWN MONEY

After achieving success in his career in the US, Abraham M. George did what others deemed unthinkable. In 1995, he moved back to India. The purpose was to improve the lives of the poorest of the poor -- the untouchables -- in a village in Tamil Nadu bordering Karnataka.

Dr George founded Shanti Bhavan, a boarding school to house and educate children from kindergarten to the graduate level, a commitment for a period spanning 17-18 years.

Recently, three of the students

came to New York to attend the 20th anniversary of Shanti Bhavan. They told their stories in a documentary 'Daughters of Destiny.'

One of them is Shilpa Raj. When Shanti Bhavan approached her family asking them to send their four-year-old Shilpa to the school, her mother did not approve. Fortunately, her father agreed to it.

Shilpa still remembers the pain she felt when her parents returned home after leaving her at Shanti Bhavan.

'Shilpa and her classmates were in many ways fortunate. Abra-

ham George, the founder of Shanti Bhavan and recently his son Ajit and their dedicated staff dealt carefully and with understanding -- if sometimes sternly -- with the children in their care...' Barbara Crossette wrote in The New York Times recently.

After 20 years of the school's operations, the first four batches have graduated from college and have found employment at global companies such as Mercedes Benz, Goldman Sachs, Ernst & Young and others.

Dr George wanted to establish and run the school entirely with his

own money. "In the initial 12 years I did not seek any financial support from others as I wanted to demonstrate what can be accomplished by individual effort," he said. "Following the global financial crisis in 2008, when I lost much of my investments in the US, I decided to seek broader support."

His son, Ajit, joined him in raising money. Today, most of the school's financial needs are met with contributions from others. "Shanti Bhavan is now 20 years old, and we are now embarked on starting a second Shanti Bhavan," he says.

George, founder of The George Foundation (TGF), is recognized as one of the world's leading social entrepreneurs.

He is also one of the earliest immigrants to the US with a varied experience having started his career in the Indian Army.

He founded the prestigious Indian Institute of Journalism & New Media, a graduate school in Bangalore. He also pioneered the successful effort to remove lead content from gasoline in India in April 2000 and was instrumental in the creation of the National Referral Centre for Lead Poisoning in India. Baldev Medical & Community Centre run by his foundation offers outpatient care

to 17 villages near Shanti Bhavan, and has built quality homes in seven villages. George pioneered a major women's empowerment project that employed over 150 poor families in a banana farm on 200 plus acres.

George is also an adjunct professor at Stern School of Business, New York University.

After completing high school, he joined the National Defense Academy at Kharkvasla, near Pune, and subsequently the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun to become an officer in the artillery. "I served in the Himalayas during the late 1960s at Sela Pass, 14,000 feet above sea level, through which the Chinese had invaded during the conflict with India earlier. I am credited with being the first officer to deploy medium heavy guns at such an altitude anywhere," he says. After 12 months of service at Sela, he was posted in the Jammu-Pathankot sector close to the India-Pakistan border where he served for two years. In two quick field promotions, he rose to the rank of Captain and was appointed as the Adjutant of the regiment.

He was injured in a dynamite explosion and suffered a hearing disability that would continue for the rest of his life. It required specialized surgery, which was not available in

India at that time.

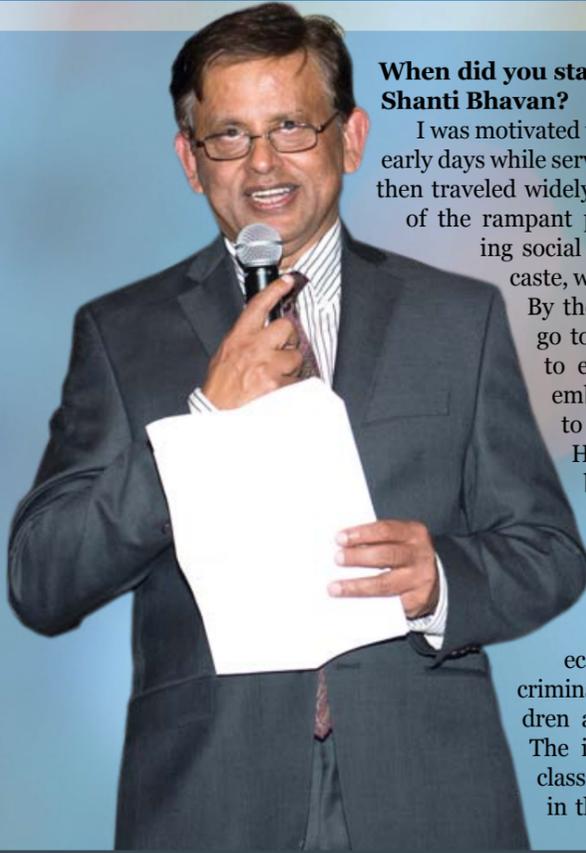
He moved to the US in 1969 to join his mother, who was already in the United States teaching physics and working for NASA as a research scientist.

His father, Mathew George, was the principal of Trivandrum Law College in the 1950s and early 1960, and his mother Dr. Aleyamma George was a professor in physics at the Women's College and later in University College.

In the early 1960s, Aleyamma George joined New York University as a post-doctoral research fellow and later moved to the National Bureau of Standards in Washington DC. In the late 1960s, she was a research fellow at NASA-- the first Indian woman to be employed there. She was also the first Indian woman to receive a PhD in physics in the early 1950s with her thesis evaluated in three western countries as Kerala then did not have a doctoral program in physics.

"Later she went on to teach and do research in solid state physics at several universities in the U.S. My father joined her in late 1969, and taught law and political science at several universities in the US," he said.

Abraham George joined his moth-



When did you start thinking of starting Shanti Bhavan?

I was motivated to serve the poor from my early days while serving in the army. I had by then traveled widely in India and was aware of the rampant poverty and the prevailing social discrimination based on caste, which appalled me greatly. By the time I left the army to go to America, I had decided to earn sufficient money to embark on a social venture to deal with these issues. However, it took 25 years before I could make sufficient money to start my social initiatives in India.

I was convinced that the best way to deal with economic and social discrimination was to educate children and bring them up well. The idea was to offer world-class education to the poorest in the society and to prepare

them with social skills and good values. This required caring for children from an early age (4 years old) in a boarding environment, and educating them for the next 17-18 years until they complete their college and get their first jobs. Today, over 75 of Shanti Bhavan's college graduates are employed in top firms like Goldman Sachs, Amazon, Ernst & Young, Mercedes Benz, among others, transforming the status of their families and helping others.

How were early days of Shanti Bhavan. Who helped you the most?

Shanti Bhavan was established in a remote village bordering Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states. I was a total stranger to the area, but organized my efforts employing locals.

What are your future plans regarding Shanti Bhavan?

I had hoped in the early years that I myself would one day create 100 Shanti Bhavans to transform the status of untouchables in India. Now I believe this ideal will be accomplished by the foundation well after my time, and by the graduates of Shanti Bhavan who have a desire to help others.

How is the Institute of Journalism doing?

I am passionate about journalism as I believe the press is the guardian of democracy and good governance in the country. The Indian Institute of Journalism & New Media (IJJNM) was established in 2000, and today over 750 (students) have graduated with a post-graduate diploma in one of the fields – print, broadcast or multimedia journalism. These graduates are employed in many media organizations in India, and my hope is that they will slowly improve the quality of the press in the country. IJJNM is now ranked by many as the top journalism college in India.

What is your opinion about the standards of journalism in India?

Journalism has a long way to go in becoming a strong, independent and quality institution of democracy in India. Until the profession is able to examine and openly critique the policies and practices of the government and businesses, India will not achieve a fair, progressive society offering equal opportunity to all.

How did you find out the place to start the bhavan 20 years ago?

I was looking for a poor rural village bordering Karnataka, but in Tamil Nadu as agricultural land conversion in Karnataka costs too much in fees. I found a broker who was familiar with border villages. I went with him in a rented car and he took me to the remote village of Baliganapalli where

poverty was rampant, female infanticide was prevalent, and government schools were of very poor quality. I found a 30 acre parcel of land that was rolling hill terrain, by the side of a lake. It attracted me.

Did you have trouble living there after being in the US for many years?

A place is only as good as the people you are with. There is no place better than with children. The poor people in the neighboring villages are very appreciative of the work we do. Besides Shanti Bhavan, we provide medical care through a clinic we run, build houses for poor families, drill bore-wells for them, feed old poor people in the villages, and run savings programs for single women with 60% contribution by the Trust, provide computers and other supplies for village schools, and offer other support.

What do you count among your major achievements in your professional life?

MCM was probably the first to offer computerized solutions to corporations in the field of foreign exchange and interest rate risk management. In 20 years, MCM became the market leader in the field with offices in the US, London and Brussels, serving over 200 of the world's leading corporations.

In the field of consulting, I was the first Indian-American to form a joint venture with a global investment bank and serve as a managing director

er in Alabama during the heyday of the segregationist governor, George Wallace. He found the transition to be overwhelming, later writing of it: "I felt I had gone to another world, not simply another country."

He added: "I was the only student of Indian origin in the entire university at that time, and encountered several minor discriminatory incidents during my 18 months there." After receiving an MBA, he left for New York to work at Standards & Poor's for a short period before joining NYU-Stern. He received an MS and a PhD from New York University, specializing in international finance and banking. He joined Chemical Bank, now JP Morgan, as a junior officer and worked for 2 1/2 years before starting his own company, Multinational Computer Models, in 1976 to offer computerized applications to multinational companies in the area of foreign exchange.

Later his company formed a joint venture with Credit Suisse First Boston, a global investment bank, where

he served as a managing director in a newly formed department that offered consulting services to multinational companies in the field of inter-

national financial risks.

MCM was sold to SunGard, a Fortune 500 company, in 1997 where he served for two years as a vice-chair-



Dr. Abraham George, right, with actress and TV personality Padma Lakshmi, second from right his son Ajit, left at the 20th anniversary gala of Shanti Bhavan in New York, recently. Others are the students from Shanti Bhavan, who were featured in the documentary Daughters of Destiny.

man of a newly formed division.

He was a pioneer in the international finance arena, authoring several books on the topic.

Since becoming a full-time philanthropist, George has published two books: India Untouched: The Forgotten Face of Rural Poverty, - A description of Dr. George's initial 10 years of social work in rural India; Lead Poisoning Prevention and Treatment: Implementing a National Program in Developing Countries --distributed by the World Bank to governments of developing countries in 2001 for policy implementation.

His wife, Mariam, is a vice-president in the US operations of a Spanish insurance company. They have two sons – Ajit and Vivek. "Ajit joined me 10 years ago, and now he is the Director of Operations in the trust. Vivek is trying to establish his own company engaged in a smart phone application. He holds an MBA from NYU-Stern.

Toward the end of her book, Shilpa takes stock: "I had entered the world in a haunted hut in a village in South India bound to centuries of tradition, one that didn't smile upon the likes of me. Yet, I was spared a spot at the edge of the woods where baby girls like me were poisoned and buried, never to be spoken of again.

"Today I can aspire to be a writer, to travel the world and learn about other cultures...I want to be a voice for the poor and the deprived, and a catalyst for change."

Excerpts from an interview with Dr George.

