

## **Historic New Dawn At “Ekal Abhiyan”**

--- Prakash Waghmare

There is historic new dawn at “Ekal Abhiyan” (‘Ekal Mission’), an umbrella organization for all the ancillary ‘Ekal branchlets’, as ‘Diwali’ festivities approach. After the departure of former CEO of “Ekal Abhiyan”, Bajrang Bagra, to tackle another assignment of national importance, Ramesh Shah, the former President and Chairman of ‘Ekal-USA’ has been unanimously appointed as the new CEO of “Ekal Abhiyan”. What makes this a historic moment is the fact that, he is the first Indian American who rose from a foot-soldier level to this distinctive honor, whose sole focus and establishment is not United States (U.S.) but rural India. Rameshbhai, as he is popularly known, has been a founder member of ‘Ekal-USA’ and credited with building a modest ‘one-teacher-school’ project, 32 years back into a national brand in U.S. for ‘selfless social work’, with over 60 widespread chapters in U.S., Canada and beyond. While endorsing his successor, Bagraji - a highly admired visionary possessing leadership acumen – expressed nothing but confidence and admiration for the new CEO. In a statement he said, “Rameshbhai will improve upon working of Ekal in fields of operational efficiency and organizational growth. He was my guide and supporter for all matters related to foreign chapters. Moreover, his unmatched passion and long experience in serving the community in multiple sectors, including VHP & Ekal, has always been a great asset”. Dr Mahesh Mehta, former Chairman of ‘VHP of America’ commenting on Ekal’s trailblazing success across the continent, communicated that, “I am excited and proud that Rameshbhai fulfilled the task he was entrusted with in such a monumental way.”

Coming from a very humble rural background, Rameshbhai with a degree in Mechanical Engineering and a brief stint as an engineer in an Indian industrial corporation, arrived in U.S. in 1970, with a dream to excel like all immigrants. He subsequently obtained degrees in MBA-Finance and MA in Economics. When the national emergency was declared in India 1975, he actively participated in ‘Indians for Democracy’ and ‘Friends of India Society International’ that demanded the restoration of the Indian constitution. He has been a lifelong ‘Swayamsevak’ (volunteer) of H.S.S. While at ‘V.H.P. of America’, he took the responsibility of floating ‘Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation’ in 1988 and worked tirelessly and diligently to make it a great success. In the initial days of ‘Ekal’ he used to carry box-load of self-prepared information-publicity material to various community events in the hope of getting an opportunity to talk about rural illiteracy. With amicable nature and deep convictions assisting his hard-work, he soon found access wherever he went. Over the years, Rameshbhai, with his dedication and tenacity has brought in numerous donors, volunteers and thinkers to Ekal fold and motivated diverse groups to join hands with Ekal. Besides Ekal, he is responsible for establishing ‘Gujarati Samaj of Houston’ and spearheading countless projects related to ‘eyecare’ in India. During this entire community-centric journey, he was assisted by his soulmate, wife-Kokilaben. They both have been felicitated number of times by the Indian diaspora in U.S.

The high points of Rameshbhai’s community involvement came in 2014 and 2019 when he successfully planned and coordinated public reception for the newly elected Indian PM Modi at huge arena-filled gatherings in New York City and Houston. This was unprecedented in U.S. for any foreign dignitary. For this herculean task, to everyone’s amazement, he ensured that every thread of Indian community was part of it. In January 2017, Rameshbhai was bestowed with the ‘Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award (PBSA)’ by the President of India, Pranab Mukherjee - the highest honor conferred on overseas Indians by the Government of India in recognition of achievements, both in India and abroad. Therefore, it is no

wonder that Bagraji called him 'the most suited candidate to be the CEO of Ekal Abhiyan'. Basically, as CEO, he is going to be the bridge between Ekal-India and Ekal-Global; a point-man for all Ekal activities; an accountability administrator; a success assessor of various rural projects; and the strategic planner for Ekal's future.

Asked about his immediate goal, Rameshbhai, taking inspiration from 'Deen Dayal Upadhyayji, said,"it is twofold - First, I would like to bring in a lot more dedicated, committed young people to Ekal because they are the future of this organization. Secondly, I believe that we have not yet explored the full potentials of all our chapter members. So, collectively, we need to find ways and means to bring their dormant skills to the surface and utilize them for everyone's benefit". The first mega event happening under his watch is going to be "Future of India' gala of November 13 which will be virtual and co-chaired by Kamlesh Shah and Mohan Wanchoo. The distinguished speakers who are lending their eagerly awaited presence to this magnificent event are Renu Khator, Chancellor of University of Houston; Niren Chaudhary, CEO of Panera Bread and Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, Chairperson & Founder of Biocon. Rameshbhai is confident that the funds raised would set a new record for the special-projects.