

Poor Kid From India Builds Life of Glamour and Charity

By Maria Di Mento



VINCE BUCCI PHOTOGRAPHY

REMEMBERING HIS ROOTS: Mani Bhaumik (center), shown at a recent UCLA fundraising event, has given generously to his alma maters in the United States and India and to a foundation that helps poor students attend college for free.

Mani Bhaumik was an impoverished teenager in the 1940s when he spent a week in Mahatma Gandhi's compound. Mr. Bhaumik's father had abandoned a subsistence-level teaching job to join the fight for India's freedom from British rule and had brought his son to visit Gandhi's camp.

Today, the 85-year-old Indian-American physicist and philanthropist says he will never forget the lessons he learned. "I was surprised to see how humble, simple, and human he was, but behind that was a steely determination," he says.

Mr. Bhaumik had no intention of replicating the spiritual leader's ascetic lifestyle, though. He used education and the levers of American capitalism to climb out of poverty and transport himself to a life that included hobnobbing with the rich and famous in Hollywood.

Today he calls education "the golden key to opening up the door to prosperity," and it is where he focuses his giving. He launched the Bhaumik Educational Foundation in 2000 to help poor students from rural villages in West Bengal, India, attend college for free.

Mr. Bhaumik has put about \$2 million toward the effort so far, and the foundation pays all the expenses of roughly 75 students a year. He sees his philanthropy as a way to honor those who redirected the trajectory of his life.

"I wouldn't be where I am today unless my predecessors had paved the way for me," he says.

A Life Transformed

Growing up in the Midnapore district of West Bengal, Mr. Bhaumik was the oldest of six children. His father was usually away, and the family lived on about \$5 a month. Often there wasn't enough food. He credits his mother and grandmother with shepherding him safely through a hardscrabble childhood.

He flourished in college and became the first person to earn a Ph.D. from the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, where he specialized in quantum physics and supported himself by tutoring other students.

A Sloan Foundation fellowship in 1959 brought him to the University of California at Los Angeles for postdoctoral studies. Passionate about science, he considered an academic career but pursued another path.

"I came here with \$3 in my pocket, and I wanted to get rid of my poverty," he says. "I knew I couldn't do that in academia."

He parlayed his UCLA research into jobs at Xerox Electro-Optical Systems and Northrop Grumman, where he helped in the development of Lasik eye surgery.

Cash from Northrup stock options allowed him to invest in California's booming real-estate market, and he slowly built a fortune.

Passionate About Research

Mr. Bhaumik has been particularly generous to UCLA, where he still conducts research. He endowed a professorship in theoretical physics and supports research there. He recently gave the university \$11 million to launch the Mani L. Bhaumik Institute for Theoretical Physics, aiming to further build the track record of technological breakthroughs in a field he considers underfunded.

"The quantum physics that started with Einstein and Max Planck, the transistor, the cellphone, the computer, the internet — everything that changed our lives started with a theory, and most people don't see that because it takes some time," he says. "But being involved with this intimately, I see that."

Mr. Bhaumik hopes the institute will become a top center for theoretical physics and produce a Nobel laureate someday.

In India, he donated 15 acres of land in Kolkata to the Indian Institute of Technology and is working with officials to build a center for advanced research on the site.

Lost and Found

Some of Mr. Bhaumik's life pursuits veered away from his philanthropy. In the 1980s he threw lavish parties at his mansion in Los Angeles's tony Bel Air neighborhood. He hung out with famous Hollywood types. He dated the actress Eva Gabor and other stars.

"For a while I gave James Bond a run for his money," he says, describing those days as "exciting and intoxicating." But something was missing, he says, and Gandhi's lessons about the sources of true happiness stuck with him.

"I enjoyed it, but at the end I hadn't accomplished anything, really," says Mr. Bhaumik. "It was kind of an empty feeling; there was a hole in my heart."

He returned to his spiritual roots and addressed a nagging desire to flex his creative muscles. He wrote two books, one of which was *Code Name: God*, a bestselling memoir in which he argues for bridging the gap between science and spirituality. And he created the animated series *Cosmic Quantum Ray*, featuring a dimension-traveling teenager who helps a superhero fight villains.

He also created an annual \$10,000 prize at UCLA's Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology for scientists studying the role of the brain and the conscious mind in healing.

Today, Mr. Bhaumik is focused on furthering his ideas that quantum physics and modern-day cosmology contain important elements of spirituality. He hopes to support programs that will meld science and consciousness, but he admits not all scientists accept his ideas.

"Consciousness is the window through which you get all this knowledge," he says. "Yet we have no place for it in science."

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