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City-born Connecticut prof raises funds for Sangli, Pune public toilets

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Pune, March 30 To all those who feel that non-resident Indians talk more than they end up doing for their country, Sunil Bhatia should come as a pleasant exception to the rule. Last month, this Pune born and bred academician, who is currently an associate professor of human development at Connecticut College in the US, raised \$14500 from a fund raiser at Brown University in Providence, Rhode island to be used for construction of toilets in slum areas in Pune and around. His aim though is to raise a total of \$ 20,000 that would then be handed over by Bhatia to Shelter Associates that works in the field of community sanitation. This is in addition to the \$32,000 the academician raised a year ago that went towards the sponsorship of 150 toilet blocks in the Sangli.



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"When I use to go to school from Pudemjee Compound in Pune on my bicycle I would pass by two slums near Bhawani Peth and Salisbury Park. The images of families defecating in the open have remained embedded in my mind and in 2005, on a visit to Pune, I decided to take action. Lack of access to proper toilets is a human rights issue. There are many women who only defecate before sunrise or after sunset to avoid harassment from men," said Bhatia who then set about trying to get more information on the issue and zeroed in on Shelter Associates after reading about the exemplary work being done by them. "I got in touch with Pratima Joshi and in 2006 I decided to start a chapter of Friends of Shelter Associates (FSA) at Connecticut College," said Bhatia.

The inaugural fund raiser was held at Connecticut College in 2007, New London. A total of \$32, 000 was raised to sponsor 150 toilets. A similar fundraiser was organised at Brown University last month where FSA raised about \$14,500. Besides a moving documentary video by Shelter Associates, the event consisted of several performances by student groups and talks by other board members of the local organisation.

In 2007 Tista Nayak, a Connecticut College student did an internship at Shelter Associates and interviewed the families in Sangli that received toilets. Amongst them was Suman Kamble who has a hand missing and is battling AIDS, Prakash Babu who is blind and Sharada Gaikwad an anganwadi employee who requested a toilet after several children died in accidents. "Our aim is to reach out to the poorest of poor and collect enough to build about 1,000 toilets in the slums of Pune, Miraj and Sangli," added Bhatia. Pratima Joshi, director, Shelter Associates commended the efforts of the FSA. "They are very effective and concerned mediators between the organisation and charity-minded NRIs," said Joshi.

Bhatia, 41 and his wife Anajli Ram are both alumni of the University of Pune. Also the director of Holleran Center for Public Policy and Community Action in Connecticut, Bhatia is presently working on his second book about the impact of globalisation on youth culture in India and plans to visit Pune this year for research.

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