

Trading two ways

Hemant Shah is steering the trade winds between India and Canada. Nandini Raghavendra meets the first Asian in the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce

ABAGFUL of laurels are not news for a non-resident Indian. Nor is the zest for work and the yearning 'to do something' for India. The same goes for Hemant Shah, from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

However, what is new for this man, the first Asian to be invited on the Board of Directors at the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce (WCC) is his equanimity, his own personality and his sincere acknowledgment of Canada's tolerance and fairness in allowing it to be so.

"I would not have been able to do anything if I did not get moral support from the Winnipeg business community and the politicians," he says.

A trading background coupled with experience via the family business, and Hemant knew when he flew in to join his brother in Canada in '78 what he wanted to do and where the market was in Winnipeg. Which is how he got 15,000 tonnes of green peas exported from Canada into India.

"The WCC was the first chamber to export dried peas (green and yellow) into India. Prior to Manitoba, USA is the largest exporter of peas to India," said Hemant who exposed Manitoba and its capital Winnipeg to the trade possibilities with India.

The result so far? Since Hemant joined the WCC in '86, he has managed to do trade worth US\$20-25 million per annum via the WCC as well as enlarge the roster of Indians in the WCC.

"There were only two members when I joined," said Hemant, adding that the roster reads 25 today, emphasising that in a total of over 3,000 it is not much to boast about.

Though Hemant has been steering the WCC Indo-Canadian trade growth chart, he has been careful to weigh Winnipeg's pros and cons. With the distinct advantage of a trading background, coupled with experience, Hemant has laid emphasis on the small and medium sector of business.

"We (Winnipeg) are not yet ready for large projects so it is better to focus on SME sector which has smaller gestations periods too," said the man who has pipped 21 contestants to win the 'Immigrant Entrepreneur Award' for this astuteness in '93.

Having steered this two-way trade for over a decade, Hemant sees a huge untapped potential and trade figures rising in the next five years.

"Winnipeg's strength lies in 5-6 sectors, which we should explore," explained Hemant.

Leading this is municipal equipment, like sewerage cleaning systems, sweep-ing systems, followed by architectural services. "Setting up companies is not cost effective, so we can lend our hand at the services end," said Hemant.

Along with the two sectors, mining and construction, agro food industry and environmental consulting also hold potential for Winnipeg.

Leading trade fairs to and from India, hob-nobbing with politicians both Indian as well as in Canada, signing MoU's with Chambers and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) across India, networking with Hemant is confident that though much needs to be done, India will "will be an Asian tiger" by 2020.

The only note of caution, comes into Hemant's voice when he talks of his dream project, a senior people home which he along with two other partners would like to set up in India.

"The land (15-20 acres) has been identified in Pune and the feasibility has also been done which shows there is a market for a niche product like this, but it is the nitty-gritties and pros and cons stage which has to be paid attention to," according to Hemant.

His idea is to have two homes, one a retirement home and second a medical home, the residents graduating from the first to the

next. The target market for this US\$9-10 million project is of course the NRIs settled abroad with their old parents in India and the plan based on outright purchase of the home.

Asian tiger and trade apart, Hemant Shah straddles both the cultural worlds, Canadian and Indian comfortably whether it is playing ice hockey with his children or getting old, forgotten. Gujarati poets their due recognition or ticking off the Gujarat government on not taking the first UN address given by in any language (this occasion being Gujarati) except a national language seriously.

"Gujarat and Gujaratis are the hidden jewels of India and to my knowledge, neither Gujarat nor Gujarati is being promoted very well abroad, nor has the Non-Resident Gujarati (NRG) understood his responsibility or hidden potential," ends Hemant.

