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The tech touch

Indian entrepreneur helps developing economies find technological solutions to socioeconomic challenges

By **ARUNA HARJANI** in Jakarta
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

Paresh Ghelani may have moved to the United States at a young age but the successful tech entrepreneur certainly has not forgotten his roots.

A major goal of his is to improve the lives of people in developing countries, including India, where he was born. He seeks to do this through the use of unique technologies and gadgets to solve social and environmental problems.

Ghelani grew up in a low-income family in a small village in the western Indian state of Gujarat. The family relied on his father's income from jewelry sales.

"I lived in a small house with five siblings and two adults. My father tried to give us the best life by sacrificing his needs. Fruit in those days was expensive and he made sure he brought some for us to eat, to comfort us despite our poverty," recalled Ghelani.

The family's prospects were transformed virtually overnight when his uncle, an engineer with the US Air Force, offered the family an opportunity to move to the US to start a new life. Ghelani's father did not hesitate and uprooted the family to Chicago.

"I was in my early teens at that point, and attended high school," Ghelani recalled. "It was a little tough for me because in my village I had a lot of friends and I would go out and play with them daily. In Chicago, I had to make new friends in a cold city and kids don't just step out of the house and play."

When he attended college in Chicago, he worked part-time jobs to fund his education and help support his family, but it was not enough.

"We didn't have much money, but we were happy," he said.

"It reached a point where I needed a more stable job and regular income so that I could become independent, support my family and contribute to the household expenses so that we could move into a larger, three-bedroom apartment. At that time there were seven of us sharing a one-bedroom apartment."

In his third year of college, he was offered a full-time job as a computer operator.

He worked the night shift while he was still in college. After he graduated, Ghelani ran a small company from his bedroom — a bulletin board that enabled users to connect to a networked system using a PC-based program.

"The internet was still in its infancy at this time, so I charged \$20 a month for users to access the bulletin board's services for an X amount of hours. I sold this small business for a decent amount of money and invested it in my next venture."

The move put Ghelani in the fortunate position of being able to make a difference back in India. With the aim of reducing air pollution through alternative energy, he planned to introduce electric vehicles to replace scooters and motorized rickshaws that rely on traditional engines.

"I spent six months in India conducting research by speaking with rickshaw drivers in Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Mumbai and New Delhi to collect my data, such as passenger capacity, distance (and cost of gasoline). The internet was in its early days back then, so this process was very challenging."

Ghelani also faced regulatory hurdles, while Indian drivers did not quite comprehend electric vehicle technology. So he eventually abandoned the project with an inventory of unsold scooters and rickshaws.

"That was my spectacular failure, or maybe a great success, because it offered an opportunity for me to move back to Chicago to embark on a new business venture in technology."

"Spending two-and-a-half years on the electric vehicle project was a turning point in my career. Not only did I lose my savings, but I lost a lot of time. Fortunately I was still young."

Ghelani felt a responsibility to help his father with his jewelry business.

"He would travel to India and bring the jewelry back to the US to sell it. Although the business grew to a decent size, my father had a language barrier and didn't know how to open a shop. I helped him open one and it's been running for 20 years now."

Ghelani's next move was to establish a consulting company. "I set up Rao Consulting as a partnership that offered a platform or delivery model for offshore and onshore technology. Those who wanted to deliver a project using a US company and wanted access to software programming resources in India came to Rao Consulting."

Three years later, in 1999, Rao Consulting's platform was acquired by SBC Technologies. "The company had some decent value but the whole market crashed and the valuation diminished significantly, resulting

in less equity payout. So I decided to take a year off and decide what to do next."

His friend and successful Indian actor Sanjay Dutt told him to never give up, because bigger opportunities lie ahead.

"I went back to work and joined forces with my cousin Haresh and we launched a company called 2020 LLC."

"The workforce grew to 1,200 employees, providing technology services to the government by focusing on the defense, education and healthcare sectors."

After three years, Ghelani sold the company in 2013. This time he made sure it sold at the right time. While executing the electric vehicle project in India, Ghelani met an old friend, Naveen Jain, who introduced him to the board of the XPRIZE Foundation.

The nonprofit organization seeks solutions to major world challenges and offers incentives to encourage the development of new technology.

"(Jain) invited me to join the board of XPRIZE alongside other influential entrepreneurs such as (former chairman of Indian conglomerate Tata Sons) Ratan Tata and (cofounder of Google) Larry Page."

Two India-focused projects were initiated immediately. One was a safety gadget for women in danger to push a button to signal for help. The other used off-the-grid technologies to collect 2,000 liters of clean, drinkable water from the air to help tackle contaminated water in villages.

Ghelani invested in other companies such as DTV Motor Corp, which gave him an opportunity to run the business side of the company. DTV builds robots and off-road, all-terrain, sport utility vehicles.

"This is a recreational vehicle, which will eventually be of exceptional use for the military. Our goal

is to develop machines that can actually detect and disarm bombs to help prevent human casualties."

And these robots are manufactured in China. "We will potentially be affected by the (US-China) trade war by about 6 percent but we are so unique in nature that the impact won't hurt that much."

Ghelani also invested in Moon Express — a privately held US company that aims to mine the moon for natural resources — and Casepoint — a tech company whose cloud-based eDiscovery platform enables legal teams to focus on the basic process of litigation.

Ghelani's latest venture, however, is Viome. The pioneering biodefense technology analyzes the human gut, and was developed for the Los Alamos National Laboratory in the state of New Mexico.

"We are disrupting the healthcare industry and reverting back to the old saying: 'your gut is your health'. All chronic diseases are a result of chronic inflammation caused by an imbalance of the microbiome in your gut. If we bring the gut to a healthier state, then we can reduce these chronic illnesses," he said.

"Using our proprietary technology, we have been able to reduce the test cost from thousands of dollars to \$400. Our goal is to eventually reduce it to under \$100."

Challenges in this kind of industry differ. "Building the right team is the biggest challenge. I am in constant need of people who believe in my vision and who aren't afraid to execute it," Ghelani said.

"I want to be there to help people solve their problems. I want to help Indians and people in developing countries around the world to live a better life. America has given me the luxuries in life, but India touches my soul."



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Bio

Paresh Ghelani

Board member of XPRIZE Foundation, and entrepreneur investor in DTV Motor Corp, Moon Express, Casepoint and Viome

Career milestones

2014-present: Member, board of trustees for XPRIZE Foundation; DTV Motor Corp, Moon Express, Casepoint and Viome

2008-present: Owner of Casepoint, US

2001-12: Owner of 2020 LLC, US

1997-98: Partner, Meghana Jewelers, US

1998-2000: Partner, Rao Consulting, US

1994-96: Avid Technologies — maker of electric scooters and rickshaws

1990-94: GHUB BBS — Bulletin Board System

Quick takes:

What is your advice to the younger generation?

Think big and go for it. The young generation is living in the most exciting times ever because you have all of the resources available. Technology is at your disposal and your limitations are just your imagination. You will never know unless you try. Failure is just the gateway to larger success.

Has there been a defining moment in your life that made you decide to choose a particular direction?

When my mom was forced to go to work to support the family — she never went to school and/or had an education. Therefore she is very naive about the reality of the world. She was forced to wear trousers and a blouse, which was incredibly embarrassing for her, as she had always worn a sari her whole life. I once dropped her off at someone's house and I later realized she was doing weekend cleaning as a job to help feed us. Seeing this made me motivated to become successful and make our journey worthwhile.

What are your hobbies?

Outdoor sports, travel, camping and water sports.

Who is your role model?

My father is a great inspiration for me because he made an honest living despite his low level of education. He was always very positive and optimistic at everything he did.

Of course (Indian actor) Sanjay (Dutt) has been a great mentor and brother to me. He has taught me how to face all the adversities that come my way. He has taught me to keep my head high and remain humble.

(Indian entrepreneur) Ratan Tata is also a great role model in my life.