

■ By Ramesh Vinayak

No research journal at the library since 1991, dingy lecture theatres, sub-human living conditions at the hostels, a demoralised faculty, even an imminent de-recognition by the Medical Council of India. This was not the Government Medical College (GMC) that Satwant Singh knew. This was not the century-old institution that propelled him to Cincinnati. This was certainly not the place they once called the Harvard of India.

When US resident Satwant Singh flew to Punjab in the second week of March, revamping the GMC was his mission. The 62-year-old professor of medicine spent a week working out details of implementation of the "Amritsar Project" conceived by a 900-member-strong Amritsar Medical and Dental Alumni Association of North America (AMDAANA) at its annual get-together at Niagara Falls last year. In the first phase, AMDAANA has committed to refurbish the five lecture theatres with state-of-the-art audio-visual aids by the end of this year.

AMDAANA is not an exception. Examples of affluent NRIs making cash contributions to their alma maters or schools and colleges at their native places are not uncommon in the state, as is evident from Toronto-based dentist Harvansh Singh Judge's recent gesture of willing Rs 8 crore to his alma mater Panjab University to establish a dental college in his name.

With a 7,000-strong NRI base of medical professionals, Punjab's oldest colleges—the Christian Medical College (CMC) at Ludhiana, and the government-run colleges at Amritsar and Patiala—may well get the facelift of a lifetime. "There is a strong desire among the rich alumni to help their alma maters," says Kiranjeet Kaur, principal of the GMC at Patiala. Her address at an alumni meeting at Baltimore four years ago prompted instant offers of donations.

But what has seemingly spurred the new-found "let-us-pay-back" credo is the trailblazing story of the CMC's expatriate alumni. Faced with a financial crunch, the CMC was gasping for breath. Bed occupancy in the hospital had dwindled to less than 30 per cent and the losses had mounted to an extent that

RAJESH BHAMB



## FOR OLD TIME'S SAKE

NRI alumni of medical colleges of Punjab are infusing health into their alma maters by donating time and money

The NRI alumni directly pitched in, taking over the CMC's management. "To me, it was like God calling," says Silas Charles, a 1974 graduate and an Ohio-based radiation oncologist, who was appointed director. The strategy has clicked. Not only did the NRI alumni infuse half a million dollars, Charles tapped more than \$2.5 million of charity grants from abroad and from local industrialists to rebuild the institution.

The NRI alumni have been taking

There are 34 NRI alumni on the visiting faculty programme who lent their expertise to build super specialities in neurology and orthopedics. "For the past five years, the CMC has been my only vacation," says Charles. Another alumnus, Sewa Singh Legha, a Houston-based oncologist, has been engaged in building the academic and research faculties.

Adds Medical Superintendent Rajiv Kapoor: "We pegged the revival efforts to a corporate approach without losing



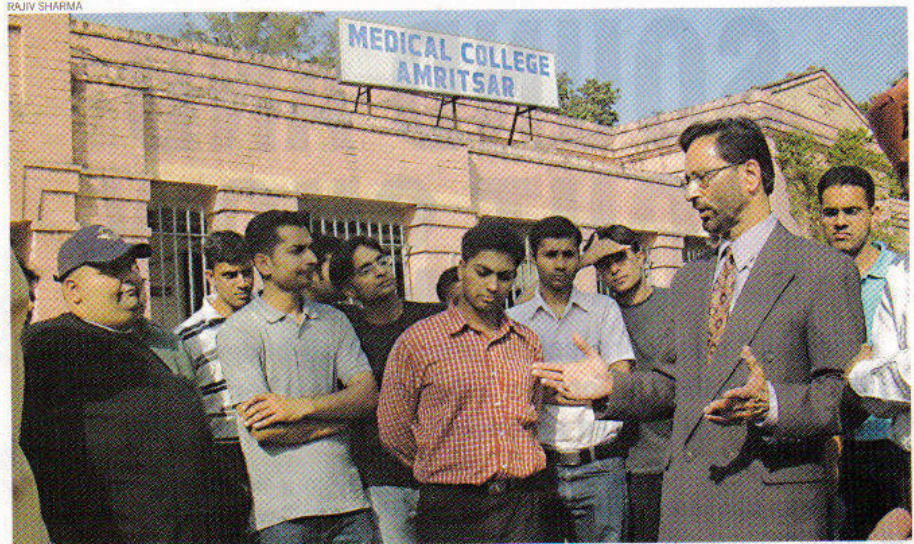


▲ **S. CHARLES (right):** Alumnus of CMC, Ludhiana, and US-based oncologist, who raised more than \$2.5 m for his alma mater, seen with members of CMC's mobike ambulance service.

has risen to 70 per cent, income has tripled to Rs 62 crore and "we are swinging", says Charles. Alumni donations have helped them set up a state-of-the-art trauma centre and a Rs 40-lakh Mobike Ambulance Retrieval Service. Charles' next plan: to raise Rs 8 crore from the alumni, with a dollar-for-rupee matching contribution, for an auditorium and a pediatric hospital.

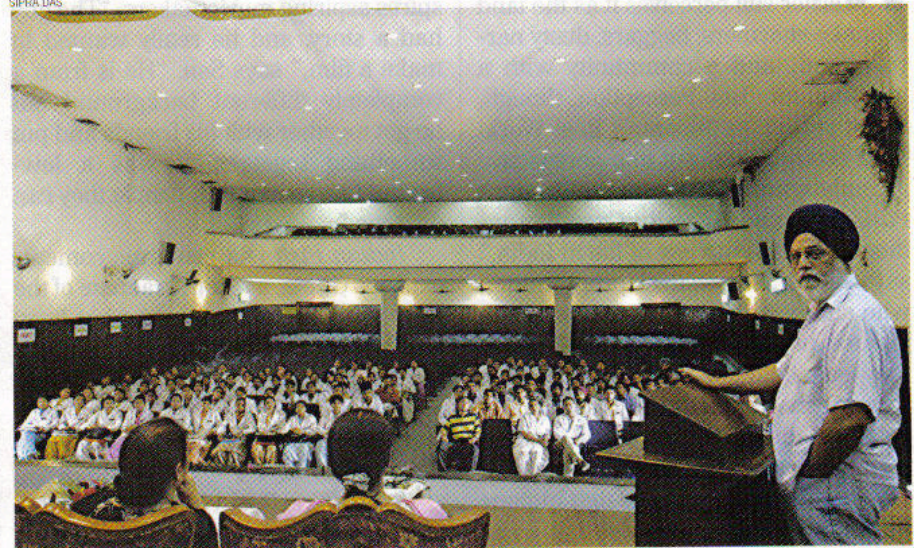
While the overseas alumni of the state-run medical colleges are keen to take a leaf out of the CMC model, there are hurdles. They are wary of routing their donations of cash or equipment through government channels. They expect the state Government to establish "checks and balances" and are also asking for "administrative control" of

RAJIV SHARMA



▲ **S. SINGH:** The US-based professor of medicine interacts with students of his alma mater, GMC, Amritsar, during a recent visit aimed at revamping the institution.

SIPRA DAS



▲ **R. SINGH (right):** Head of the Indian chapter of the GMC alumni association, addresses students in the auditorium which was renovated using NRI donations.

the infrastructure to be funded by them.

At Patiala, for instance, the GMC Alumni Association (GOMCO) has undertaken to set up a Rs 6-crore trauma centre. The proposal, approved by the alumni at their meeting in New York in 2001, has since been hanging fire because the Government is not willing to hand over control to the alumni. "The rules have no such provision," says Satish Chandra, secretary, medical education and research.

**T**he alumni abroad nurture a deep mistrust of the Government's ability to run the facility funded by them, says Ravinder Singh, former principal of the GMC at Patiala and president of the Indian chapter of GOMCO. The US chap-

ter of GOMCO has floated a Patiala Health Welfare Organisation to widen the scope of fund-raising. In the last two years, it has set up a seed money of Rs 50 lakh to meet the alma mater's requirements. Of this, Rs 20 lakh has been spent on renovation of the auditorium and seminar rooms and buying equipment for the operation theatre.

The urge to pay back is getting stronger by the day. AMDAANA, for instance, had long been focusing only on fostering camaraderie and networking. It was at its last meeting that it decided to take seriously the task of coming to the rescue of its sick alma mater.

No wonder, when Satwant Singh left for India, he was already deluged by cheques from donors. ■