

DR. BABU STEPHEN

A skipper extraordinaire

• BY GINSMON ZACHARIA

The bugle of change has been sounded in the Federation of Kerala Associations in North America (Fokana) with the announcement of Dr. Babu Stephen's candidacy to run for president 2022-2024. The earlier indications were that Fokana's woman leader Lee-la Maret will be elected unopposed. Lee-la, who lost in the last two presidential elections, had support from all quarters this time, even from those who contested against her earlier. But any member can qualify as a candidate and pose a challenger in a truly democratic organization. And Babu Stephen's arrival to the fray has changed the scene altogether.

An accomplished organizer, outstanding businessman, journalist and political activist, Babu Stephen is a leading businessman and media entrepreneur based in Washington DC. He is quite well-known among the Indian American community for his social volunteering activities and organizational abilities. For some time, many member organizations of Fokana – especially the ones from DC, have expressed opinion that Babu Stephen at the helm can take the federation to an entirely different level. It has been obvious to them that Fokana, at this juncture, needs a skipper who can assert the Malayali community's place in American society and they feel the role best suits Babu Stephen. What works in his favour is that they feel Fokana stands to benefit more from his presidency than any advantage the post can bring to Babu Stephen, who has enough affluence politically and financially. As someone who has personal connections with most of the top leaders in Kerala politics from Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan onwards, Babu Stephen certainly doesn't need Fokana to build him a reputation in his native land. Neither does he need it in American national politics. There seems to be no other American Malayalee businessman who has been so closely associated

with the White House for decades, maintaining such warm relations with several Presidents, Vice Presidents, Senators, Secretaries of various departments, and Ambassadors. One can't think of Babu Stephen getting any financial benefit by holding a Fokana post as the Malayalee community per se has no impact on his business. As for fame, he has enough clout as someone close to media circles, being the owner of two DC-based newspapers and one of the founding directors of Kairali TV.

Babu Stephen has now cleared the air by stating his motives for contesting as president of Fokana. Foremost among them is his conviction that he can do a lot of things for American Malayalees, as well as for Keralites through Fokana, an organization he has been associated with for a long time in various capacities. He has served on the Board of Directors for the past two terms and also been doing a commendable job as the Vice President of Washington DC region. Unsurprisingly, five of Fokana's member organisations in DC were the first to suggest Babu Stephen as president. Their firsthand knowledge of his leadership capabilities and financial resources has convinced them that under Babu Stephen, Fokana will regain its former glory. After all, he has stood firmly with Fokana when it was riddled with conflicts and many left it to join other organizations after a split. He has openly spoken about his appreciation for those member organizations that steadfastly supported and considered Fokana as the original organization of American Malayalees. "They are the reason for my unwavering support for Fokana when it faced an existential crisis," says Babu Stephen.

According to him, sadly no significant change was visible in the functional style of Fokana even after the split, leading to the formation of Fomaa. Other than some member organisations leaving Fokana and joining the newly formed Fomaa, both umbrella organisations



Babu Stephen with Barack Obama



continued with their staid operations – organizing a few conventions and events in Kerala as well as in the US. However, it is noteworthy that despite the decrease in the number of member organisations due to the split, Fokana has been able to maintain its position as 'the' federation of American Malayali groups. Still, the regret remained that Fokana is not keen on changing its ways or reinventing its role, he says. The turning point happened recently; rather, he noticed a positive change in Fokana in the last four years when he started working closely with the organization. Babu Stephen identifies the increasing involvement of the youth in leadership roles and through them innovative ideas being implemented as the biggest change taking place in Fokana. He saw them implementing many initiatives he envisaged for years in the organization, and he says it has motivated him

to contest as president so that he can be a catalyst in the activities of these young leaders.

After taking office, the last two governing bodies have seen discussions not about the next convention, instead about what can be done in the next two years for the common good of the society and the follow-up discussions to implement those plans. In brief, Fokana started showing signs of change. Although the convention was abandoned due to the Covid pandemic, the previous governing body was able to help Kerala during the devastating floods and the pandemic, and to build many houses for the homeless in Kerala. It could be the result of such positive actions that more young people and member organizations have begun to flock to Fokana since the current board took charge. "The current governing body came to power at a time when the



Babu Stephen with Mr and Mrs Clinton

Covid pandemic was at its peak. The fact that I could still come up with more than 100 action plans makes me very proud," says Babu Stephen. He said the enthusiasm of the current committee that has devised and implemented a number of projects, both virtually and directly, even with the restraints of the pandemic has convinced him that it's time he took up the leadership role in Fokana. The realization that this was the right time to implement the projects he had dreamed of and envisioned brought him closer to the electoral arena.

He well articulated what makes him think that a businessman can lead Fokana. "A good businessman can lead an organization like Fokana better as he has the money, influence, professionalism in planning and implementing projects, and the capability to find more financial resources and ensure participation of member organizations." Holding conventions or social events and posing for photos is not what organizational work means. One needs to recognize what people need and work accordingly, he said. "There is no doubt, conventions should be conducted beautifully; but is there a need to devote two whole years on organizing one," he asks. The current committee started the preparations for the convention only at the beginning of the second year. The rest of the time was set aside for other charitable activities. This is an exemplary model, he asserts.

Fokana is now treading on the right path; there is still a long way to go. He is

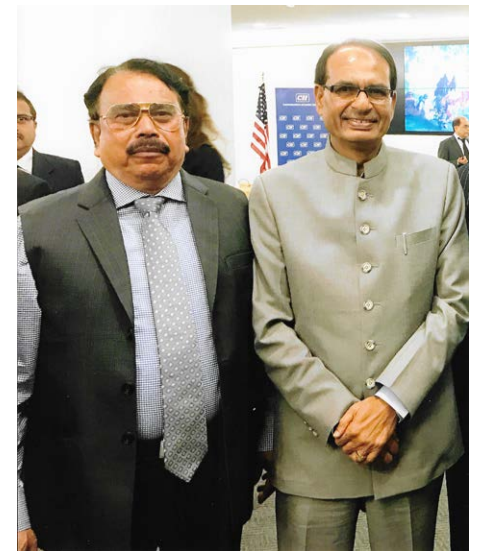
confident that he will be able to lead the journey, Babu Stephen assures. "Becoming Fokana president is not my life's dream. If the delegates decide that I should lead, then the next two years I will strive to make Fokana an active international organization. If they decide against me, I would accept it and look for other avenues to serve." He expressed confidence that the delegates who believe that Fokana and others will benefit if he takes the lead, will elect him. He refuted the criticisms on his decision to contest against Leela. "I believe healthy competition makes an election more valid. I will accept whatever the delegates decide," Babu Stephen made his position clear.

If he wins Fokana presidency, convention registration will not cost more than \$500. Scholarships will also be provided to 500 students, he promises. He said that instead of conventions, he would focus on gaining influence and power in the American political arena for the Malayalee community. Although regular events and charitable activities will continue, the emphasis will be on activities that will strengthen the Malayalee community and bring it into the mainstream. Plans will be made to strengthen Fokana at all levels and to gain more public participation.

His main promise is to create a new image for Fokana through activities oriented towards the welfare of the Malayalee community. "We have no idea what is going on in politics or how to get our people involved in politics. Today, more than 190 Indians from other Indian states

hold high positions in Washington, but Malayalees are nominal. This needs to change. At the federal level, it is possible for Malayalees to reach the post of a Deputy Secretary," he says. Babu Stephen, who arrived in the US in 1978 as a student, says there was no one to guide him in the initial years. He was not even aware of the significance of social security number. Today's issues could be different, he added. He pointed out that people have no idea about education and opportunities here. "Although the Indian dental degree is not recognized in the US, there are institutions here that offer a year of study leading to recognition; not many know this," he cited an example.

If he becomes the president of Fokana, he plans to build 25 houses in Kerala in the first year. He has land in Amburi,



Babu Stephen with Shivraj Singh Chouhan



Babu Stephen with family

Thiruvananthapuram and many other places. More houses will be built if there are more sponsors. Babu Stephen says he has never hesitated to help people and sponsored job visas for many people from Kerala. His tireless efforts to bring many in the community into the mainstream have received considerable support and encouragement. The energy from this, the support from all quarters and the sense that he still has a lot to do positively for the Indian community motivated him to run for Fokana's presidency, he says.

Babu Stephen is the CEO of DC Healthcare Inc. and the President of SM Realty LLC. One of the founding members of Kairali TV, Babu Stephen started two newspapers for Indians in the United States, Express India and India This Week. He was the producer of Summer in America, a popular series directed by Shaji M and aired on Kairali TV in 88 episodes. He is also the founding producer of Darshan TV in Washington DC.

He has held many leadership positions in the Indian American community. He served as President of the Indian Cultural Coordinating Committee for two years and was a member of the United States Congressional Advisory Council and Regional Vice President of the Federation of Indians in America. He has also served as President of the Association of Indians in America. He was also the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Indo Ameri-

can Press Club and has chaired two international conventions.

Having made his mark in business, media and politics, Babu Stephen was also honored by the Washington DC Mayor. He was part of the Mayor's delegation to China, which comprised the best business entrepreneurs in the US. This Thiruvananthapuram native has created such deep relationships among Americans, but was never interested in holding official positions as he felt it would affect his business. Now that he has entrusted professionals to run his business empire that includes sixteen nursing homes and a construction company that has subleased 62 buildings, he wants to spend the rest of his life being more involved in social work. He has been running a voluntary organization, The Stephen Foundation, for the past few years. Every year a good portion of his profits is set aside for the welfare of the poor and needy around the world. The Stephen Foundation donated crores of rupees to the Kerala state government during the last floods and Covid pandemic.

Babu Stephen holds an MBA in Hospital Administration from George Washington University, and received a PhD in 2006. His wife Gracie Stephen is from Punalur. His daughter Dr. Sindhu Stephen is a gastroenterologist. She is married to Jim George and they have three children.



Babu Stephen with CPM leader Sitaram Yechury