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**Sudhakar Prabhu Is A Partner Of A
Top Consulting Engineering Firm In
The UK. How Did He Get There?**

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ML: What has been your most challenging project so far?

Prabhu: I would say it is not far from here. Bombay High was among the fastest projects in the world to bring oil from offshore to onshore. Another challenging project was a \$ 70 billion industrial development project in Saudi Arabia along with Bechtel in 1976. We did all the structures, utilities, roads, communications, water, hospitals etc. We did design, planning and supervision of construction. Recently, we got involved in re-building of Iraq despite the bombs falling all around. I remember talking to one of our managers in charge there, Robin Jones. I said, 'Robin, you seem to be disturbed. What is the problem?' He said 'Well, there are missiles going out.' I asked "Are you in a room?' He said, 'I am in a room but not in the front room. The front room has just been bombed. We have moved back.' Our people worked through all this to rebuild courts and police stations. We have been called back to do more work but we are thinking about it.

a lot more and make friends. He worked for five years in the US after passing out of Harvard before joining us. He has now started getting work for our firm from the US.

ML: What do you feel about the opportunities in India for today's youth?

Prabhu: Opportunities are far greater in this part of the world than anywhere else. I suggest do your education here, then go abroad to work and get as much work experience as possible. Widen your horizon and then come back. You will not get this kind of growth opportunity in the next 15-20 years anywhere in the world.

And sure enough, lot of people are coming back. There used to be a one-way drain. Now all eyes are focused on the East. India will be the jewel in the crown.

ML: How do you manage far-flung projects from a central location?

Prabhu: We pick the best and strongest person and send him out whether it is to Nigeria, Saudi Arabia or

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Things are not very stable there and we have the families of our people to think about. We are looking at Kurdistan which is a slightly more peaceful area.

ML: Do you get a lot of repeat orders?

Prabhu: Yes, we do. We have framework agreements with Railways, Water authority and London Development Agency. For instance, we are checking 4000 Railway bridges. England has a beautiful past but many structures are very old. Our work involves checking, rechecking and strengthening structures. It is an ongoing contract.

ML: Your son has followed your footsteps...

Prabhu: Tushar passed out from Cambridge and went to Harvard. He was a Fullbright scholar. I said, dont take the scholarship because it does not allow you to work. You will learn a lot of things at the University but it is extremely important to work in order to learn

Jamaica -- where we have done an expressway. Since the best person is going there, communication and decision making becomes easier. Then we follow it up with one of the senior-most people making occasional visits to ensure things go smoothly. We sent our managing director from London to oversee the Middle East operations.

ML: Do you have a large operation here?

Prabhu: Yes, we do a lot of outsourced work from here. Outsourcing is fashionable today. We started it almost 10 years ago. We are connected to our head office in London through a direct, instant connection of voice, data and images. We regularly send people in batches from here to England. They come back and share their experiences with other people. It is a great experience for all of us as work and talent go round the world.



We worked as service managers on The Bank of England and it gave us our first opportunity to see the building inside out. At that time the firm was approaching its 60th year. We were changing a certain room in the building and requested the Bank of England to let us hold our 60th year party there. Bank of England's directors approved

that we had taken over a company and looked after it well. So, they wanted to be acquired by us. Milton Keynes is one of the largest towns in the UK. So, from roads we moved into township development and then we acquired a partnership with a water company. In 1989-90 we could buy from the government a company with 3000 people, which was responsible for maintenance of buildings of defence establishments, Home Offices, the palace etc. Suddenly we had become a company of 4000 people. Money was flowing in and we restored the old salaries and also gave the staff a raise. I am proud to say that 30-35% of our people are with us for 20 years or more. We are not the hire-and-fire kind of employers. Meanwhile, because I come

from India, whenever I got a chance I did some work here like the Bombay High, Jeejeebhoy Towers and even Wankhede Stadium.

ML: You also have a company in India called Frischmann Prabhu. When did you start that?

Prabhu: We started the Indian firm in March 1995. We have done lots of work in India in the last 10 years. We worked on the Mumbai Pune Expressway; the golden quadrilateral and we are working on projects in Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and many other states. We are also working on the modernisation of Delhi airport and a large number of smaller airports as well – almost 11. We are in transportation in a big way. We are also working on Delhi Metro project for their nine new stations and have an office there.

ML: How big is the Indian operation in the context of your global operations?

Prabhu: The Indian operation is about 20% by volume. By value of work, it will be about 8-10% or even less.

ML: What are the other major global projects you are working on?

Prabhu: We are working in the Middle East in a major way. Everyone has heard about and seen pictures of the The Palm - it is a palm leaf shaped artificial island in the sea, off Dubai. We are working on a luxury hotel project for The Palm called Atlantis – a 2000-bed hotel which will be partly under water. We worked on the New Dubai Airport. We also worked on the concept design of one of the largest projects in Middle East - a 6.2 million square feet complex in Abu Dhabi called the Gold Souk. We worked on a heritage project of 10 km by 2 km called Al Samalia island at Abu Dhabi on the planning, engineering, architecture - the whole lot. We worked in the Gulf during the last boom and are working there again.

ML: What would you say are the major milestones in your journey?

Prabhu: Well, we worked as service managers on The Bank of England and it gave us our first opportunity to see the building inside out. At that time the firm was approaching its 60th year. We were changing a certain room in the building and requested the Bank of England to let us hold our 60th year party there. Bank of England's directors approved. We had 350 of our employees, some clients and friends attending that party in a huge room inside the Bank of England. Our 80th birthday party is coming soon. It also happens to be the Queen's 80th birthday. In 2006 we got the prestigious Queen's award which is given for excellence and export earnings over three years.

“ You will not get this kind of growth opportunity in the next 15-20 years anywhere in the world ”



Frischmann Prabhu - announces a small board at the start of a dirty lane in Prabhadevi in Mumbai, flanked by tightly-huddled hutments. Down the uneven lane is a massive 16,000 square feet of refurbished godown, with minimal decoration and a plain jute mat to cover uneven, cracked floors. The low-cost operation is deceptive. This office of 300 people is perpetually connected to the London office and acts as a tech-savvy back-end of Pell Frischmann, an 80-year old elite English firm of consulting engineers. One of the two partners of PF is Sudhakar Prabhu, who went to England in 1957 and carved a niche for himself in England. MoneyLIFE editors Sucheta Dalal and Debashis Basu spent time with Prabhu when he was down here from London in mid-August. Excerpts from the story of Prabhu's unusual career in a foreign land.

adjusted. In 1974 when the inflation shot up to as high as 17% he suggested we should pay him inflation-adjusted pension. We agreed.

Pell Frischmann remains one of the few large privately owned companies left in UK, in our sector. When I joined the firm, it was 35-strong. Now we have a 1000 people in the company and are among the top 20 companies in UK's engineering sector.

ML: Did you do some projects in India too?

Prabhu: In 1973 December, when oil prices shot up, India faced a serious problem because we were short of foreign exchange and dependent on oil imports. Indira Gandhi was very keen that oil production at Bombay High, which was 50 miles away in the sea, should be brought onshore at Uran, near Bombay in two years. We were chosen from the UK and Pipeline Technologies was chosen from Houston, Texas to execute this project. Mrs Gandhi wanted oil to come in before May 31 - before the monsoon starts. We are proud to say that we finished the work a week before time.

ML: What other interesting projects did you do at that time?

Prabhu: In the 70s I did a very interesting project which is the stock exchange building in Mumbai. This was a replica of one of our UK buildings. We changed the form slightly. It was a 400-foot construction, which went up in something like 50 days. The core, which houses the services - staircases and lifts etc - went up first and then we came back and added the floors later. The stock exchange building was located in one of the most expensive areas and it was important that there were no huge columns that waste space. We wanted smaller columns without sacrificing strength. How do you achieve that? We packed the columns with solid steel billets, to concentrate strength in a small area, rather than concrete, which takes more space. It was the first time this was done in India.

ML: How did you get the project? Did the exchange go to UK to hire you?

Prabhu: Someone showed us the plan and asked us what we thought of it. I said it is nice; why don't we use the techniques that we used in UK for similar buildings. Then we met Mr (Pheroze) Jeejeebhoy (then President of the Bombay Stock Exchange). We got on extremely well. I used to come to meet my parents 5-6 times a year because we were doing some major projects in the Middle East. I told Mr Jeejeebhoy, 'I come to India anyway, you don't have to pay my airfare'. I also told him 'you don't have to pay me fancy fees. I will help you through my Bombay office'. I told him



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we will follow the technique of using solid steel billets for the centre that we used for Drapers Garden in London. He liked the idea.

Meanwhile, we were expanding in the UK, as part of a conscious decision. Pell Frishmann was into buildings. But when the recession hit the UK in the 80s, we went through tough times. We had 180 people at that time and we felt responsible for them.

The times were so bad that we had to consider whether to reduce the salaries or ask people to leave. The second option was worse of the two. We called all our people and we explained the situation. We said, 'this is the dilemma, what should we do?' They voted for a voluntary pay cut of 20%. Simultaneously, we decided to broaden the base of our firm to get in different streams of revenues. Around 1982, we acquired a small unit from the government connected with roads and transportation, then we went on to acquire Milton Keynes Development Corporation. They had heard

ML: Would you tell us a little about your childhood and early life?

Prabhu: I was born in Mumbai, went to King George school and studied at Elphinstone college, which was very famous at that time. After my college I joined Victoria Jubilee Technical Institute (VJTI) where I did my engineering and stood first in the university. Unfortunately, in the maths exam, the students walked out because they felt it was too tough. So, even though I stood first, I did not get the gold medal. It was a con-

I had a fantastic landlady in London, an Indian. One day I was writing to my father that it is a sad end to the story because I haven't found a job yet. I had tears in my eyes. The landlady was standing behind me. She said: 'Don't pay now. Pay later. Things will change for you'

expensive and foreign exchange was not easily available...wasn't it?

Prabhu: Yes, it was not easy. I think my father felt that since I had done well in exams, I should be allowed to make this trip. I did not fly. I went by a boat, MV Victoria, arriving in Genoa, Italy. From Genoa to Paris to London was an experience. I made the trip by train one weekend in August when there were bank holidays. In August people come back from Italy to France. The train was full and I stood the whole night



doned success. I did not want to appear for the exam again; once was hard enough. Thereafter, I sat for an examination called Indian Service of Engineers. But before I joined the engineering service, I thought this was the time for me to see a bit of the world. I managed to convince my father that he should allow me to make a trip to the UK for six months.

ML: What did your father do?

Prabhu: My father started as a farmer, he worked very hard to get educated and became a very successful lawyer doing rating of properties. But he was hard of hearing and so he gave up law and joined an export and import firm as a partner. He also spent a lot of time trying to improve education levels, especially for the poor.

My family was deficient in doctors and so they wanted me to join medicine. But I liked mathematics and science. During my Inter-science I did opt for biology despite not liking medicine; but I found the smell of formalin unbearable. The sight of blood made me sick. I said to myself, 'if this is the beginning, let me end it right here.' A month later, I had changed my combination of subjects with the aim of doing engineering. As I was saying earlier, before joining the engineering service, I persuaded my father to allow me to go abroad and see a bit of the world.

ML: Going abroad was difficult those days, it was

in a concertina-type space, which connected two compartments along with several other people. I could not even move. One French lady standing next to me was carrying olive oil that dripped on me and my suit was covered with olive oil by the time I arrived in Paris. I wore the same stained suit as I entered the UK; besides, I was also unshaven. When we reached Victoria station in London, I noticed someone unable to reach out to his luggage. As I helped to get it down for him, I heard a lady saying, 'we have already paid the porter, we don't have to pay him again.'

Three friends of mine were there to receive me. One was Kumar Chitre who was later with Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, the other was Jayant Narlikar (both were studying in Cambridge at that time). The third was Baiju Benjamin. I went to the UK with the idea of returning after six months. I landed there with just 13 pounds in my pocket. When I went for my job interviews and was asked whether I would continue with this job, I honestly said, 'this is only a stop-gap for me. If I get a good job in my own line I will leave'. I didn't get hired and in the first month I often starved. I seemed to be going nowhere and was about to give up. I had a fantastic landlady, an Indian. One day I was writing to my father that it is a sad end to the story because I haven't found a job yet. I had tears in my eyes. The landlady was standing behind me. She

said: 'Don't pay now. Pay later. Things will change for you.' There was also a Sikh gentleman in the same place who gave me 20 pounds. It was a huge amount of money those days. Most of my expenses were on writing pads and stamps. I was not paying the landlady and spent only a nominal amount on food. I would get up late so that I could fill myself up with cornflakes and milk. And around 3 p.m. just before the restaurant closed, I would have dal and rice which filled me up until next morning. In between I would walk several miles to see the newspapers, post job applications, appear for interviews and what have you.

ML: As an Indian in the U.K. how did the interviews go; any unusual experiences?

Prabhu: I went to all kinds of interviews. They would ask me if I have experience of working in this country. When I said no, they were unwilling to hire me. It was very difficult to get a job in a foreign country without experience. Then suddenly, of the 20 places I sent my applications to, I had five interviews and all five offered me a job. My luck had changed, I guess. One of the firms was in Manchester, Lancashire and they asked me 'when can you start?' Those words still ring in my ears. I packed my things and went to Manchester. I played a bit of cricket, which I liked very much, in the Lancashire league. I had every intention to come back to India. But I liked the lifestyle, and I



said to myself, maybe I should do some further studies here.

At that time, Benjamin was studying at Imperial College. He suggested that I consider joining it. It was and still is a prestigious place and not too easy to get in. I got admission into Imperial College on a telephone interview from Manchester to London. My father had once told me, if you want to study anywhere in the world, you have my support. I took him

up on those words and asked for financial assistance. He sent me 125 pounds, which I quickly went through. I had to look for part-time jobs to earn extra money. I worked as a postman during the Christmas vacation; I also worked as a waiter in a restaurant and in a nuclear power station in engineering and design. I passed out from the Imperial College in 1960 and thereafter got a job in a small engineering design firm owned by Mr. Cecil Pell. Mr Pell and I got on very well. There was another chap in the firm called Bill Frischmann who is now the chairman of the company called Pell Frischmann. He and I got on very well too. Bill Frischmann was a refugee from Hungary living in London. He shared a flat with another Hungarian, George Soros, those days. Cecil Pell, the structural design firm was my first serious job in my line of expertise. I became a salaried partner in 1967. I came back to India in 1970 to work for a couple of years and went back to the UK in 1972, and became an equity partner.

ML: You have remained with this firm all your life. Were you not tempted to leave, at least in the early years?

Prabhu: After a few years of working in Pell, I got an offer to work in New York for 5,500 pounds tax-free, when I was earning just 1000 pounds. This was a huge sum and Mr Pell himself was not making that much. I

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was very tempted but Bill Frischmann said don't go. He was determined that I should not leave. He took me out for a discussion over coffee and would not give up until I changed my mind. He argued that the firm is small and we had a chance to really make it big if we stuck around. He managed to convince me and I stayed on. We started growing. Years later, Mr Pell retired and we became the owners of the firm. We arranged a pension for him, but it wasn't inflation

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