

Congressmen were not paid for Gujarat trip, says businessman

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In an exclusive conversation with *The Hindu*, Chicago businessman Shalabh "Shalli" Kumar clarified that the trip was not a fundraising event for the Congress members

In his first conversation with the media after reports of his trip leading members of U.S. Congress to meet Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi broke, Chicago businessman Shalabh "Shalli" Kumar explained that the three visiting American leaders and former House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich expressed a strong desire to have Mr. Modi visit the U.S. and pledged to work on getting him a visa.

In an exclusive conversation with *The Hindu*, Mr. Kumar clarified that the trip was not a fundraising event for the Congress members and that the multi-tiered travel options offered — from \$3,000 for economy travel to \$16,000 for a business-class experience — were solely catering to different categories of delegates travelling on the tour and were on a cost-coverage basis only.

"I can categorically state that Congressmen are not paid to do this. Not allowed. It costs them money," Mr. Kumar said, adding the Congressmen's travel was "all in accordance with American laws with every i dotted and t crossed. All I can tell you is there are lots of i's and t's." He, however, said he might be "required by law to keep the paperwork filed and approved confidential."

"Limited to elite group"

Earlier, citing press conference remarks by Mr. Kumar, local publication "Hi India" had said that his political action committee (PAC), National Indian American Public Policy Institute (NIAPPI), put together the multicity trip "limited to [an] elite group of American businesspersons."

The publication further noted that the visit with Mr. Modi on March 28 would be followed by a visit to 'Gandhi Smarak', a stay at the Lake Palace in Udaipur, a visit to Karnataka as guest of the State government, a visit to the Taj Mahal, the tiger reserve at Ranthambore, a night at the Rambhag Palace, a visit to the Golden Temple in Amritsar and a dinner hosted by Punjab Chief

Minister Parkash Singh Badal. A ‘Bollywood Extravaganza’ has also been included for the guests, the report added.

Prior to running the NIAPPI, Mr. Kumar was said to have founded another PAC, Indian Americans for Freedom (IAF), whose website suggests that it was inspired by Ronald Reagan — and Mr. Kumar confirmed to this correspondent that he was personally an admirer of the former U.S. President. The IAF was also a staunch supporter of Republican and former Congressman Joe Walsh, whose campaign “attracted a lot of criticism for its negativity,” and he ultimately lost to Democratic rival and disabled war veteran Tammy Duckworth last November.

One video on the IAF website is allegedly entitled “Joe Walsh will always tell you the Truth. Radical Islam is a threat to All!!” Reports also said that on October 5, 2012, the IAF released advertisements in several ethnic publications supporting Mr. Walsh, with the slogan “If you love [Narendra] Modi, send Walsh back to Congress.”

“Hi India” also said that on August 17, 2012, the National Indian American Coalition (NIAC), another PAC founded by Mr. Kumar, released advertisements in Indian publications on the occasion of India’s Independence Day paying tribute to Joe Walsh calling him the ‘maha-mitra Gujarat’ and ‘maha-mitra India.’

Skype chat

On Friday Mr. Kumar told *The Hindu* that during the interaction between the Republican members of Congress — including Cynthia Wiederspahn, Cathy Rodgers and Aaron Schock — and Mr. Modi, a half-hour Skype chat had taken place between the Chief Minister and Mr. Gingrich.

Mr. Kumar said Mr. Gingrich, a nominee to run on the Republican ticket against President Barack Obama, echoed the sentiments of the visiting members of Congress and indicated that Mr. Modi ought to visit the U.S. to discuss his economic model that had made a growth rate of eight or nine per cent possible in Gujarat. He said it would be desirable for the U.S. to achieve even three per cent growth in this regard.

Asked about Mr. Modi’s alleged links to the Gujarat riots of 2002, Mr. Kumar firmly said that he believed “95 per cent of the charges against him were fabricated,” and media reports on this subject were “a bunch of garbage.” Admitting he had felt “distressed” about reports about his trip with the members of Congress, he asked, “Is the press here anti-India, or are they after me?”

Nevertheless, he said, out of the seven industrialists accompanying the Congress members on the trip, of whom four were Caucasian and three were Indian-American, three had already indicated an interest in setting up manufacturing operations in India, possibly in Gujarat. Bangalore and Punjab were being considered as alternatives, Mr. Kumar added.

The interaction between Mr. Gingrich and Mr. Modi had been positive and “philosophical,” Mr. Kumar explained, saying both men affirmed their belief in the principles of economic liberalism.

‘Red carpet not red tape’

However, when Mr. Gingrich said the U.S. used lower tax rates to attract investments, Mr. Modi said that rather than offer such discounts he believed in “rolling out the red carpet instead of red tape” — and this message had struck a chord with all the delegates. Mr. Modi then went on to cite the example of Tata Motors relocating from Singur, West Bengal to Sanand, Gujarat as a case of his State providing infrastructural support for industrial growth.

Commenting on his personal view of Mr. Modi after their visit, Mr. Kumar said, “There are some people who have a great vision and others who have the ability to execute that vision. Mr. Modi is one of those few people in whom both those skills are combined.”