

No Rebirth for Polio

Varanasi, known as Kashi and Benaras, is one of the oldest living cities in the world today. It is a magnificent city, rising from the western bank of the River Ganges. Mark Twain, the English author who was enthralled by the legend and sanctity of Benaras wrote, "Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together." The word 'Kashi' originated from the word 'Kas' which means to shine. Steeped in tradition and mythological legacy, Kashi is the 'original' ground created by the God Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Parvati, upon which they stood at the beginning of time. Varanasi is the living text of Hinduism, a city of traditional classical culture, glorified by myth and legend and sanctified by religion. It has always attracted a large number of pilgrims and worshippers from time immemorial. To be in Varanasi is an experience in itself, an experience in self-discovery, an eternal oneness of the body and soul. It is only in this holy city that you can find lodging houses with the board 'Stay and Die!' It is believed that when you die in this city there is no rebirth, irrespective of the sins one might have committed during this birth. To linger in Varanasi is to linger in another era. Varanasi has always astonished and bewildered visitors from all over India and the world.

Being in Uttar Pradesh this city has always been a challenge for polio eradicators. The heart of Varanasi has few streets wide enough for a two wheeler or bicycle rickshaw and even fewer wide enough for automobile traffic. When there was some news concerning the polio eradication initiative here, I decided to visit the city and take stock. District Governor 3120, Uttam Agarwal, NCM B. N. Singh and Rotarians of the city had organised a meet



District Polio Orientation Workshop, Varanasi.

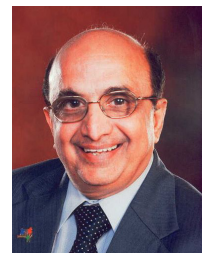
on August 28, 2011, in which the Joint Director of Health Mr. D.M. Sharma and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Gyan Prakash were present.

Representatives from UNICEF and National Polio Surveillance Project (NPSP) were also present. The issue of resistance to the vaccine was discussed and important decisions were taken on how to strengthen routine immunisation programme and the coverage during NIDs. Fortunately this city, in spite of all its unhygienic conditions, has not reported a single case of polio for over two years. One can say it is the belief that a dip even in the most polluted part of Ganges here will not cause any harm.

The Rotary Clubs in Varanasi had also organised a meet where the need to step up efforts for polio eradication was discussed. Rotarians were given a clear picture of what was expected from them in this drive against polio. They also pledged their support to the Gates & Melinda Challenge Grant. Similar meeting was held in Mirzapur which is known for the carpets made there.

The Muslim community in these areas came forward to work with Rotary and eradicate polio. Politicians

and bureaucrats have volunteered to work more vigorously to ensure that the message of immunisation is taken to every house in the district. As I mentioned earlier, death to any form of life in this city will ensure that there is no rebirth for it. As polio has died here we can rest assured that it will not surface again. Even yogis who control their minds may not be liberated in one lifetime; but they are liberated by simply dying in Kashi. It is said that Kashi is simply not attached to the earth. As polio has had its death here it also will not have any attachment to the world anymore! The sounds of the conch from Lord Kashi Viswanath's temple might have drowned the death-knell that Rotary rang for polio here. But what will be audible is the laughter of parents and cries of healthy babies in this district.



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