

The B Factor

'Banish polio from the face of the earth'— this has been the war cry for Rotary and Governments all over the world for over two decades. Every country that eradicated polio earlier used strategies that suited their local conditions. In all these efforts communication was the key word.

In a country such as India, most of the rural population never had access to good educational facilities. Even today, we see Rotary clubs applying for Matching Grants for supply of tables and chairs for classrooms. In the remote areas, there were no schools and teachers did not find it lucrative to go to these places. In fact, many of these villages lacked proper drinking water and sanitation facilities, not to talk about schools, hospitals and markets.

However, amidst all this backwardness, the one thing that flourished was the cinema. Most of us have seen films in 'touring talkies.' Every matinee idol was immensely popular and villagers used to walk few kilometres to see their favourite stars on the silver screen. The task to communicate with a vast majority of population that was immersed in their own beliefs about modern medicine was not simple. Before the first drop of polio vaccine could be poured into a child's mouth, the health workers had to answer several questions and dispel myths. In some places, the hostile community just drove away the vaccinators with their kits.

It was in this scenario that UNICEF, which is a partner of Rotary in the mission to eradicate polio, decided to utilise the services of mega film stars who had mass appeal. The search for one such person ended with the selection of the 'Angry young man,' the mega Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan. He proved to be the most effective goodwill ambassador for UNICEF and Rotary. "I have worked tirelessly for the eradication of polio in certain distinct parts of our country,



namely Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The UN authorities had come over to meet and discuss how they could extend the appointment further and how we could work together for the benefit of children," Amitabh posted on his blog.

On December 15, 2011, UNICEF launched another phase of the polio eradication communication campaign with Amitabh Bachchan. The event, needless to say, attracted the media and the 'Big B' pledged his unstinted support to the campaign. The meeting which was attended by the officials from the Government of Maharashtra and WHO was a memorable event for Rotary's effort to take the campaign forward during the final phase of the polio eradication programme.

I thanked Mr. Amitabh Bachchan for lending support to the 'We are This Close' campaign and he gladly accepted the End Polio Now lapel pin on his jacket. Rotary International's letter nominating him as the recipient of the Polio Eradication Champion Award was given to him and very soon a suitable date and venue will be finalised where this will be given to him.

Immunising six children during the occasion, Amitabh Bachchan said that

he would don the role of the angry young man again in the next polio eradication communication campaign of UNICEF and Rotary. His wife Jaya, daughter-in-law Aishwarya Rai and cricket star Sachin Tendulkar have also campaigned with him. But clearly, Amitabh is the one who scores in India's vast rural countryside and urban settlements. Mr. Amitabh Bachchan has made it possible for Rotary and its partners to reach the people faster. His movie commitments and other activities keeps him busy, but Big B takes out time to work for the deprived and try to facilitate them with their basic fundamental rights. No wonder age cannot diminish the charm of the Big B. No one can undermine the B factor when a message has to be delivered to masses and its impact measured in a short time.



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