

In a reversal of roles, Chair-elect of The Rotary Foundation 2010–11, PRIP Bill Boyd poses questions to TRF Trustee Ashok Mahajan.

Bill Boyd: This must be a unique time with India having four senior leaders in 2011–2012. How do Rotarians in their clubs feel about this? Do they share our excitement?

Ashok Mahajan : Yes! It is a unique occasion for us to see four of our senior leaders in the position of such importance. We all are very proud, very excited and at the same time we expect all of them to make us proud. Rotary is a religion with most of us and we pray that our leaders so involved with the welfare of Rotary, make Rotary a stronger, more vibrant and more effective organisation.

Bill Boyd: Why is India doing so well at increasing Rotary membership? Is the growth mainly in the cities or the country side? Are the older clubs holding their membership? Are you attracting younger Rotarians? Are you getting many TRF alumni joining Rotary?

Ashok Mahajan: India has such a wide scope for service that we find it easier to motivate good, kind and relatively affluent men and women to join us in our crusade. The growth of Rotary is equally strong in smaller cities and smaller towns. Bigger cities have a more stressful and busier life and this may hamper us a little in attracting new members — especially younger members. Old clubs have, in general maintained their membership strength in spite of newer clubs being established in the metropolis. Newer clubs have more young members because they feel more comfortable with men and women who are not senior citizens.

As far as The Rotary Foundation Alumni are concerned, efforts are made to attract them to Rotary. At one stage, nobody was asking them to join

Rotary. Today, this is not the case and we always get quality members and more involved members when we tap this source.

Bill Boyd: No doubt the increasing membership is a reason for the increased support for our Rotary Foundation. But are there other factors?

Ashok Mahajan: Majority of our supporters as far as contributions are concerned are not new Rotarians. It takes a little time to convince newly recruited Rotarians to support The Rotary Foundation — but the trend today is to tap all resources and our relatively senior Rotarians are available for increasing support.

Bill Boyd: How is the TRF Future Vision Plan viewed within India?

Ashok Mahajan: Indian Rotarians are fully supportive of the plan and are ready to implement the plan sincerely. It is felt that the plan goes in the right direction and will succeed in making The Rotary Foundation more relevant, more effective and more meaningful. Seven districts in India have been chosen for the pilot programme under the Future Vision Plan.

Bill Boyd: Lorna and I are always impressed by the wonderful projects we see when we visit India. How do you achieve so much support from the communities so that you can tackle such large projects?

Ashok Mahajan: We have so many “needs” and so many “needy” projects that when a Rotary club approaches a community with a proposal to be of help to them, they readily co-operate. By experience, they have realised that Rotary has no axe to grind, no selfish motives and no hidden expectations. When Rotary goes to a community, it

tries to establish a rapport which promotes future co-operation. We have realised that without the co-operation of the communities Rotary is non-effective and almost non-existent.

Bill Boyd: We are seeing more and more international projects being undertaken by Indian clubs and districts. Is this a result of an understanding of Rotary's place in the wider world?

Ashok Mahajan: Many of our international projects are because of the support of The Rotary Foundation. Grants act as a motivating force and help clubs collect funds from generous donors. India is a developing country with restricted resources but when some resources from international sources are available, Indian Rotarians feel it an obligation to raise enough resources to match the needs.

Bill Boyd: Paul Harris often spoke of the importance of tolerance. You probably have more ethnic groups than almost any other country. How do all the different people come together in Rotary?

Ashok Mahajan: Teaching of tolerance is a religious edict. It is because of the fact that there are many ethnic groups in India, we have learnt to live with each other and this needs tolerance. When needs are common, when services are needed by communities that consist of different religions, castes and creeds, people come together.

Bill Boyd: When we come to India we are reminded of the competition for Rotary positions. Why is it so important to be a District Governor in India?

Ashok Mahajan: There may appear to be a keen competition for "positions" and the post of the District Governor seems to be one of the most coveted one.

Rotarians who get involved intimately in multiple service activities at club level and who seem to be gaining confidence, management skills, oratorical power and increased interaction with a multitude of Rotarians and non-Rotarians, want to reach a higher plateau and when they work successfully as district officers, they are enchanted by the work of a District Governor.

Of course there is no financial gain. On the contrary, there may be some financial loss too — but the idea of being a leader amongst leaders captivates them.

Bill Boyd: How strong are Rotaract and Interact in India?

Ashok Mahajan: Rotaract and Interact are very strong in India. In fact, India leads in the number of Interact Clubs world-wide.



Rotary clubs have leaders who can think, plan and guide but when Rotary needs helping hands, Rotaractors and Interactors are a very potent source of such help. We also believe that future Rotary leaders can come from Rotaract and Interact.

Bill Boyd: One light-hearted question. We were in Mumbai when there was torrential rain and traffic stopped and it became a very big traffic jam. How will you cope when you have thousands of Nanos on the roads?

Ashok Mahajan: When there is a traffic jam due to too many cars coupled with some natural fury, we may curse or may become excited — but in lighter vein, we realise that it cannot get worse and therefore, it will get better. A few thousand more Nanos cannot make it worse. We will find solutions to the problem. I promise, we will.

Bill Boyd: Why are clubs reluctant or not so enthused to induct women in Rotary?

Ashok Mahajan: In India, women are mainly home makers. Even when they are out in offices, business arenas or self employed, they have the responsibility of running their homes efficiently. We are not reluctant — but women are.

Another fact of membership of women is the fact that in a club of say 40 members, there are only two or three women. They feel a little uncomfortable, a little hampered, a little reluctant. In smaller towns and cities, classifications are not easily available for them and women in general, are not easily convinced to join Rotary.

Bill Boyd: What is the general view on Membership Retention? We are not growing as much as we want to because of the “loss” of members.

Ashok Mahajan: Alas! Membership Retention is the least attractive facet of Rotary. Recognition, rewards and appreciation comes when Rotarians introduce new members. However, to keep them in and also to keep some

of the senior Rotarians in is a thankless job and in addition, needs special efforts.

We often induct “unsuitable” new members who are not wedded to the concept of service. We often neglect them. Once they are in, we often forget about them in a few years. Early involvement is a solid force to keep them in. Once a Rotarian is involved in the arena of service that has so many facets that some of these will always attract a Rotarian, then he will stay with Rotary. The onus of keeping the Rotarian in Rotary is on the whole club in general, and on the club leadership in particular.

Bill Boyd: In the recently concluded COL there were 14 legislations proposed from districts in India. Out of these 13 were enactments pertaining to elections and only one resolution. Is there a dearth of ideas?

Ashok Mahajan: Indian Rotarians have been in the forefront now in supporting the programmes of RI and contributing to TRF. Actually till April 2010 they have contributed nearly US \$5.4 million to TRF including US \$1.14 million to the PolioPlus Fund. I would interpret the statistics of COL as an attempt to streamline administrative issues relating to elections which have taken considerable time. Most of the programmes the clubs do in other parts of the world are already being done here for a considerable period of time and so the clubs may not feel that a resolution is needed to request the RI Board to take up a new programme. But I do agree that more emphasis seems to be on electoral reforms.

Bill Boyd: I have been an ardent admirer of the *Rotary News* magazine that is published from India. What has contributed to its success among the Rotarians in India and also with other Rotary leaders worldwide?

Ashok Mahajan: The magazine has succeeded in reaching out to every member of the Rotary family. The strong editorial board has been guiding

the staff and is receptive to new ideas from the subscribers. A wide variety of topics feature in the magazine and hence breaks the monotony of heavy Rotary subjects. The Editor has been constantly introducing innovative designs in layout and the entire team at the *Rotary News* office, which you have visited, is always enthusiastic to take bold decisions and make the magazine more reader friendly. All the past General Officers from India are advisors to the magazine and their inputs have been valuable.

Bill Boyd: I am amazed at the variety of news that is gathered from around India. How do they do this?

Ashok Mahajan: All the 31 RI Districts in India are in constant touch with the editorial team. There is a good balance in giving coverage and I understand that the editorial team reads every GML and club bulletin that is received and clubs are contacted for news.

Bill Boyd: Has the public in India recognised the role of Rotary in polio eradication programme?

Ashok Mahajan: Yes and No. The new generation is just coming to know about what happened two decades ago. The earlier generation has seen the terrible effects of polio and how the Government took the help of Rotary in procuring vaccines and setting up cold chains. If you talk of mass publicity, that has not happened largely due to the fact that Rotary’s hard earned funds have been used mainly for vaccines and supporting the partner agencies. Advocacy has been a door to door programme and not in a national media. Probably, TRF can set aside a sizeable amount during 2010–2011 for media publicity in India. I am sure that this will help to bring more donations and also rope in new members.

Bill Boyd: How did you break the resistance of the minority community to vaccines?

Ashok Mahajan: Once we realised that most or nearly all of them were not informed properly, the INPPC

joined hands with the Muslim leaders and formed what is called as Ulema Committees. This was formed in Uttar Pradesh and then in Bihar. These leaders understood the genuine concerns of Rotary in helping the children of the Muslim community and took upon themselves to talk about the benefits of administering polio vaccines after the prayers in the mosques. The results are there for all to see.

Bill Boyd: Can polio be eliminated from India next year?

Ashok Mahajan: The polio endemic areas in India are now restricted to just 107 small areas in two States, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The INPPC and the entire senior leadership of Rotary in India hope that this small area can be effectively immunised. We have excellent relationship with the State Governments of these two States and the Government of India. Our partners, WHO and UNICEF are working closely with us in these areas. This year India has reported only 21 cases up to May 2010 and this proves that the advocacy and the steps taken by Rotary clubs along with the partners is effective. IPPC Chair Bob Scott who has been visiting India regularly is closely

monitoring the situation and has expressed his satisfaction on the efforts we have taken. PRIP Rajendra K Saboo and RIPN Kalyan Banerjee have been constantly visiting all the areas along with me and the INPPC National Committee Chairman PDG Deepak Kapur. We are definitely going to eradicate polio and hope that this will happen before RIPN Kalyan Banerjee assumes office as RI President in 2011. We are fully aware that the entire Rotary world is looking at us and how we are working towards achieving this goal.

Bill Boyd: What will be the focus of the two RI Directors from India during their tenure?

Ashok Mahajan: I am sure that they will support the programmes and policies of RI and TRF in every part of the zone. They know that during 2011–2012 there will be a leader from India who will not brook delay or take an excuse lying down. They will continue to focus on membership development and I am sure that they will assist RIPN Kalyan Banerjee to achieve his target. They will also strive to break all previous records by encouraging a registration of over 50,000 at the RI Convention at Bangkok.

Bill Boyd: What will be your personal wish for TRF in India?

Ashok Mahajan: I would continue to support every programme of TRF as outlined by the consecutive Chairmen and it will be my dream to make India achieve the number 2 position as a donor to TRF in the next two years.

Bill Boyd: Finally, is India positioning itself as a dominant player in the Rotary world?

Ashok Mahajan: India never tries to dominate any democratic institution. I am sure that the service projects that we have undertaken over the years will become better known during the years. I am confident that the rest of the Rotary world will wake up to see India as a major donor and not just a receiver of funds. Our service teams in the field of health care have constantly crossed borders to work in Africa and other developing countries. All these have been possible only by having leaders who can guide and motivate over 1,00,000 Rotarians. Such leaders will surely be able to lead the Rotary worldwide with the same sense of love, affection, dedication and ethical values when such demands are put on them.