

# Q&A

*with PRID Kalyan Banerjee  
by RI Director Ashok Mahajan*

## **What is health of Rotary, worldwide?**

I think, Rotary is in very good health, worldwide. At a time when most other service clubs are losing membership and even declining, the fact that Rotary's membership has remained almost constant, is a sign of good health to me. I have felt that a lot of young people are now joining Rotary, not only in India where 50 percent of many club memberships seem to be in the 35 to 40 age group, but even worldwide, Rotary is 'greening' rather than 'graying,' if I may put it that way. Even in the International Assembly in San Diego over the past couple of years, comparatively younger people — more in the age group of 45 to 65, seem to be taking over charge of Districts. And if young people are getting interested in Rotary, I would say, Rotary is healthy. But we need to ensure that it stays that way, getting in younger people, inviting more women — I believe, if we keep doing that, that is the way to go.

## **What are the major challenges Rotarians will have to face in the coming years?**

Eradicating polio has to be the challenge that will engage Rotary. It is tantalizingly close and yet, we are not there. Delays mean the necessity of finding funds to keep the effort going. So getting the job done and helping to raise resources are surely some of the biggest immediate challenges. That, and keeping the focus on membership growth, not letting up, energising and motivating the new younger Rotarians to bring in their friends and acquaintances — will constitute our major challenges.

## **Will we conquer Polio in the next 3 years?**

If by conquering you mean, will polio virus transmission be interrupted worldwide in the next 3 years, my answer is YES. Current trends in India raise hopes that this will happen. If it does, I feel confident that Pakistan and Afghanistan will follow suit soon. And WHO feels Nigeria is no longer the looming threat that it was.

## **What can Rotary do to stop membership attrition? Why have we stopped growing?**

I have already suggested that getting younger members and getting them involved, should help. My own club, started in 1972, has 80 members. It has got a group of about 50 percent

senior Rotarians — more than 15 years in Rotary and about 50 percent who are comparatively new. Four years ago, we started a new Club, with younger members, sons and daughters of Rotarians close friends, former Rotaractors and new GSE team members and so on. The average age was around 40. The Club has grown today to 50 plus members. They have enhanced the level of service in our community and have been twice declared the best club (top 5) in the district in this short time. I believe these youngsters already had imbibed Rotary. They needed the space and the freedom to make their mark. They have done so admirably. And the younger generation daughters-in-law are happy to get away from their joint family homes and their mothers-in-law even if briefly and participate fully with their new friends in all



the pleasure that Rotary provides. So, it is the new generation family club.

**Energy and water may be our next target areas. Has Rotary armed itself with a weapon to combat these problems?**

The Water and Sanitation Rotarian Action Group is doing great work just as the Task Forces and Water Management have done internationally for the past 4 to 5 years. Water, indeed has been a prime focus area and emphasis of Rotary in the past few years. Work is being done in Africa and the other water scarcity areas of the world. So, internationally, we are into the water management thrust in a big way. Energy has been much less an area of focus. The energy concerns perhaps have not been as emphatically addressed because it is seen as less of a concern. I would like to see Rotary clubs to take up energy projects to create awareness of global warming and come up with activities to address these concerns. That surely needs our urgent attention. I am aware of some clubs in India working at bio-diesel generation and working with plantations of trees whose seeds produce bio-diesel. I believe, we will see increasing involvement in these areas.



**Youth is our major hope for the future. Do you envisage any major thrust by Rotary to spread Rotary ideals in the youth?**

Well, apart from getting younger people into Rotary, Rotary Clubs are increasingly engaging pre-interact children through Early Act Clubs in some parts of USA. This could be a trend that catches on. In fact, I believe it will. Rotarians have always loved working with the youth. And I sense that the involvement is growing. Again, clubs are getting involved in activities with youth who have grown out of Rotaract but are not yet engaged with Rotary, formally. This too is a trend I am seeing more of. At the same time, Rotaract and Interact are going through a revival though not necessarily everywhere. But it is happening though, different places may be more focused on one or the other of these activities and not necessarily both. Rotary's engagement with youth is on the upsurge. And that is great. There can be no more exhilarating way to bond and strengthen the family and make the community a better place.

**Does Rotary need any special emphasis on Membership retention? Have we failed in stopping the leakage of Rotarians who leave Rotary for avoidable reasons?**

I believe so, yes. The world today is changing rapidly. Communications, lifestyles and priorities today, are different. The media (or the medium. Remember Marshall McLuhan — The Medium is the Message) have a huge role. I believe we need to take this into account while we look for ways to retain our members. For instance, breakfast clubs, e-clubs, committee meetings through video conferencing — are all happening. We need to keep pace with the times. Sure, we stand steadfast with our core values. But change, I believe, is still eminently possible. After all, did not Paul Harris say: This is a changing world and Rotary must change with it?

**Will the Rotary Foundation evolve new strategies to promote Peace?**

TRF will always evolve new strategies for Peace. Actually, it is the Rotarians who will evolve new strategies. TRF will put it into practice. That is what TRF is all about - working for Peace. What these new strategies will be, are for us to work on. But certainly, TRF will be looking forward and working more intensely for peace.

**Will Rotary remain “relevant” two decades from now? Will we be active and strong at the end of our second century?**

I believe so. All the problems of the world are unlikely to be solved in the next two decades or indeed in the next 10 decades. Peace remains elusive today. I believe the search for Peace will continue (because war begins in the minds of men) and Rotary will be at its vanguard. I believe, Rotary will become one of the leading, most respected and

best recognised NGOs in the world in the decades to come because, in the words of late Jim Grant, Director General, UNICEF, Rotary has the strength of a government and the tenderness of a parent. That, I believe, is true and this will always make a difference.

**Is Rotary geared to promote ethics? In today's world of dwindling values can Rotary overcome the stiff challenge posed?**

I believe we are uniquely geared to promote ethics. Starting with the vocational avenue of service, leading up to our 4-way test, our codes for business, Rotary is very, very special. Rotary and Rotarians are uniquely positioned to stand up to the challenges of unethical behaviours. They may not always win but they will be right up there, standing up for what is moral and ethical. To me, this is Rotary's core strength.

**Does Rotary have any plans to make "Rotary families" stronger and more effective?**

I am not sure, I understand the question. If by families you mean Rotary wives and children, the answer is yes. I believe

they are already fully engaged and effective. This bonding needs to be strengthened. If by family you refer to Interact, Rotaract, RCC and so on, as being part of Rotary's family, my answer would be: I don't know if Rotary has any plan to make it more effective as you ask. I certainly hope so. The stronger the family, the better served will be our communities.

**If more women are to join Rotary, has R.I. any plans to relax classification rules for the housewives?**

Surely, this is a question for the RI Board and the Council on Legislation. Personally, perhaps some kind of 'family membership' involving Rotary sponsors could be adopted by the COL.

**What message you would like to give to the Rotarians of this part of the world?**

Strive harder to finish off polio. In all that you do, in your home, with your friends, in your Clubs and in your Districts, live by the spirit of Rotary.

*Rtn. Ashok Mahajan,  
RI Director 2007-09*

## Rotary Service starts at the Club Level

Dear Club President,

Service is the prerogative of Rotarians and no service to the community is possible if this does not start at the Club level. The hands that perform any service belong to the individual Rotarians who are members of a Rotary Club that is led by one person — the Club President.

It is therefore inevitable that all pleas, requests, suggestions, ideas and blueprints of service are first placed before the Club Leadership. You are therefore, in a position of great strength and only you can do what Rotary wants you to do.

The problems that face the communities are Herculean in nature and cannot be overcome by a handful of volunteers within a short space of time and with limited resources. This, however, should not prevent you from taking the first step.

One area of concern is the widespread incidence of such preventable diseases like AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, sexually transmitted diseases and such. I know, the problem is gigantic, but still a little manageable in a small community. You may identify doctors who are members of your Club who can show you some ways in which Rotary can help. Awareness can be created by ingenious

steps, you can evolve and this can go a long way towards helping the target group.

Lack of drinking water and poor underground water table can be an area of your concern. Rain water harvesting and promoting enrichment of the underground water layer can be a method of improving water scarcity. Environment specialists are crying out loud to promote healthy environs and enough of data is available mostly through your District Governor and advisors who can help you do something about this problem.

One problem that India faces is growing population. Needless to say that there are many services at your command that can assist you in addressing this problem.

I know that there are too many needs and too few resources – human and financial. However, we can always ponder over the needs and select those areas that we may be able to attend to.

The ball is in your court. Let us play the game and make the community feel that Rotary Shares!

*Rtn. Ashok Mahajan,  
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