Sending 1,00,000 children to school might sound daunting; but every Rotarian sending one child to school is doable.

The magic and power of Rotary were amply evident at the mega event that saw 1,250 people come together to endorse a dream that only “mad and crazy people” can dare to dream ... to make India, and the rest of South Asia, totally literate by 2017.

Thanking senior Rotary leaders such as PRIP Kalyan Banerjee, who has driven the ‘total literacy mission,’ Rotary India Literacy Mission (RILM) Chairman and Convenor of the South Asia Literacy Summit (SALS) Shekhar Mehta said he was overwhelmed at the “faith, commitment, enthusiasm and sincerity” fellow Rotarians had shown in this project over the years. The ambition to send 1,00,000 children back to schools...
seemed gigantic, “but if each Rotarian decides to send one child back to school, it seems doable.”

Banerjee told the closing session that this was the only Rotary event he remembered where all 34 Indian Rotary Districts were represented, along with Pakistan’s 3271 and 3272; with 3271, which has Karachi, sending over 50 people. “As for Bangladesh, there are so many of you ... as also from Nepal. The way literacy has brought together all of South Asia is amazing.”

Keep your focus all the time on the Rotary literacy goals.
- RIDE Manoj Desai

The ‘crazy’ josh for literacy began with orientation sessions where senior Rotary leaders, particularly RIDE Manoj Desai, charged up DGs, PDGs, DGEs and other Rotarians to commit their clubs to send so many children to schools, build so many toilets, happy schools etc. Urging them to put their hearts, minds and souls into ensuring that Rotary’s Total Literacy Mission gets off to a “fantastic and effective” journey, he said, “Keep your focus all the time on the Rotary literacy goals, captured so beautifully in the acronym TEACH, which include teacher support, e-learning, adult literacy, child development and happy schools. The beauty of this programme is that each of the five elements come together wonderfully to give the gift of total literacy to India. With your hard work and dedication, this can and will be done.”

Desai added that celebrity endorsements were pouring in. One
Amitabh Bachchan was enough, but “we also have Mary Kom, Farhan Akhtar, Anna Hazare, Sonakshi Sinha, Juhi Chawla; hardly any organisation can boast such a line-up of celebrity endorsements.” Rotary was closely working with the Government of India and major corporates to banish the clouds of illiteracy from India, and the whole of South Asia, he added.

Addressing the inaugural session, Mehta said, “The last eight months have been epoch-making, and we can't believe so much happened at such a frenetic pace.” RILM now has a CEO in Anupam Dasgupta, a former Secretary to the GoI, who brought with him “knowledge, expertise and excellent connections.”

**Blockbusters**

Mehta said Jan 31 was a special day when RILM “raised money to sponsor 1,000 children’s education. The next day was even more special; on Feb 1, we met HRD Min- ister Smriti Irani and did a lot of business. She invited us to send back to school 1,00,000 children, and helped us raise Rs 75 lakh at the District 3140 conference, where Ajay Gupta is the Governor.”

As the packed hall cheered him on, Mehta pulled out more goodies from his literacy bag. “All this was certainly good, but the bonus was yet to come.” This was mega star Amitabh Bachchan agreeing to endorse Rotary's literacy mission, and even make one or two films, pointing to celebrated director R Balki standing nearby! But Ajay Gupta was a man in a hurry; he ensured that on the spot, by putting a steep fee of Rs 11 lakh for every handshake with Senior Bachchan, RILM raised megabucks. “Amitabh was hesitant, till I told him, ‘Imagine Sir, one handshake will take back so many girls to schools.’ And friends, in no time we raised another Rs 77 lakh.” But, added the RILM Chairman, each new day brought new challenges and adventures, but solutions were found too. “A few days back we signed an MoU with Nishta to send back 1,500 children back to school.” Another MoU with another NGO will ensure children accompanying parents to brick kilns will get quality education. “These children can’t go to schools because there are no schools around the brick kilns. So we will take schools to them.”

India has the dubious distinction of having 800 million cell phones, but only 80 million toilets.
Best brains drive literacy

Multiple committees at the national, district and club levels were working tirelessly. The ideation and fund collection happened at the national level, but execution had to be done by the clubs. “We’ve had 30–40 meetings of various committees, over 105 PDGs are involved; just imagine, some of the best brains in India are now ensuring that every Indian child becomes literate.” An excellent communication system and optimum use of social media quickly sent out “turf knowledge from Kolkata, Delhi or Mumbai” to the remotest corner of India within minutes. And we now have a world class website.”

The programme had truly matured; thousands of teachers were being trained across the country, and a few thousand Rotary e-learning centres set up. “We want to send 1,00,000 children to schools and seated in front of me is the Ramon Magsasay award winner Shantha Sinha, through whom we want to send 20,000 children back to schools.”

Mehta said that by the year-end RILM wanted to complete 1,000 Happy Schools, but now with the Inner Wheel already doing 514 as stated by Dr Bina Vyas, “maybe we’ll touch the 1,500 mark. Our mission over the next five years is to send every child to a school, a school where the teachers are well trained, and the teaching methodology is modern.” Schools with compound walls, well-aired and lighted classrooms, clean toilets with adequate water. But at the same time Rotary could not leave out “the millions of adult illiterates that we have; they are our backlog and we will clear it,” he pledged.

He announced that three Rotary programmes had got GoI approval. “In WinS (WASH in Schools) we’ve signed an MoU with the Government under the Swachh Bharat programme. The HRD Minister has invited us to have an MoU in child development and in the adult literacy programme, a Joint Secretary of GoI is coming here to partner us.”

“Why not?” he asked. “The clouds of illiteracy are dark but TEACH is the silver lining. Whatever be...
the challenges, we shall overcome. Our mission is total literacy and I am sure we will achieve it.” With those words Mehta urged the audience to raise their hands to form the symbol of total literacy, and profusely thanked Summit Chair PDG Mahesh Kotbagi for his relentless work in “putting together this awesome event.” Host District 3131 DG Vivek Aranha was also thanked and recognised.

Ready Engineer

Warren Harris, CEO and MD of Tata Technologies, US, signed a $500,000 MoU with RILM for e-learning centres in Pune. To help manufacturing companies create better products, “we rely on the creativity and innovation of thousands of engineers, designers and technologists.” Five years ago, facing a “fundamental sustainability challenge as the need for qualified engineering graduates was exploding and Indian schools were hardly keeping pace with the demand, we created the ‘ready engineer’ programme,” and had trained 500 engineers under this in three years.

RI Director P T Prabhakar said while the US had over 95 per cent literacy, and Sri Lanka and Maldives 94.2 and 97 per cent respectively, India had only 74.4 and Pakistan 58 per cent. “After conquering polio, our next priority is total literacy, and we need to achieve that by sending our children to schools that have, along with good classrooms and well-trained teachers, proper toilets with adequate water.”

India had the “dubious distinction of having 800 million cell phones, but only 80 million toilets,” and our ranking on the UN Human Development Index was deplorable. “Even countries like Egypt and Guyana are better than us on parameters such as infant mortality, per capita income and literacy,” he added.

But if Rotary could conquer polio in India, it could certainly defeat illiteracy, Prabhakar said, relating the story of unsung heroes like Harakhchand Savla’s service to cancer patients in Mumbai (see First Thoughts for details).

WASH in Schools

Making a statistics-studded presentation on WinS (WASH in Schools), TRF Trustee Sushil Gupta said in June 2014, TRF Chair John Kenny had said, “I will give you an additional responsibility. Knowing your interest in water it will relate to water, and then he asked me to chair a sub-committee on WASH in Schools!”

He said recently Rotary India had given a commitment to the GoI for building toilet blocks in 10,000 schools a year, for two years — a total of 20,000 toilet blocks. While this involved a lot of work, it would also be a considerable PR exercise for Rotary’s image.

Reiterating Rotary’s commitment to projects involving water, sanitation and hygiene, Gupta asked Rotarians to remember that almost 46 per cent of global matching grants in Rotary were available for this area of work. “We Rotarians have a strong competence in implementing these kind of
activities,” he said, reminding them that building wayside conveniences in Chicago was a primary Rotary project in its earliest years.

Gupta said after a few meetings with the Government, Rotary had committed to play a big role in this aspect of Swachh Bharat. If a child was given a clean toilet with water facilities in his school and was educated and sensitised to wash her hands with soap before every meal, it would soon become a habit and he/she would insist on doing the same first in the family and then in the larger community, and thus “become an agent of change.”

The other important fallout would be Rotary contributing to gender equity, as separate toilet for girls with adequate water facilities would prevent the dropout from schools of 30–40 per cent girls, as was happening now.

Showcasing the phenomenal work being done by Round Table India, its President-elect Suman Voora said they had presence in 95 Indian cities and were “working towards the goal of freedom to education.” He added that in 2010, their education venture got a “big leap” with Procter & Gamble partnering Round Table, and contributing Rs 12 crore.

“We are a zero overheads organisation and every rupee donated is used for charity and construction of schools.”

PRID Sagarshan Agarwal, former Governor of Uttarakhand and Sikkim, and founder of Him Jyoti school for underprivileged girls, urged Rotarians to replicate such schools offering top quality education. Many of its students had got into prestigious colleges in India and overseas and a few had even visited US, Ireland, etc.

He read out a moving letter from Shalini, a student, while leaving for higher education in Bangladesh. “I feel so fortunate to see my cherished dream come alive. This is not just a piece of writing but my heart thanking you for the good changes you’ve brought in my life.”

“These children can’t go to school because there are no schools around the brick kilns. So we’ll take schools to them.”

“We are a zero overheads organization and every rupee donated is used for charity and construction of schools.”
So many dreams

PRIP Rajendra K. Saboo, in an emotional speech, urged Rotarians to go beyond just taking the Swachh Bharat pledge, as they had done at the Chennai Institute in December 2014. After this pledge, which said they would devote 100 hours a year — two hours a week — to clean India, he asked how many Rotarians had actually dirtied their hands, admitting that he hadn’t managed to do so himself. His intent was to involve the chief of many companies around his office where there was a lot of dirt, but “I have been so busy going to Rotary events to talk and profess what we need to do, that I haven’t had the time to actually do it!”

Whether it was the Rotarian he saw in Chennai spitting into a decorative flower vase in the star hotel where he had taken a Swachh Bharat pledge barely a few hours earlier (“I know who it was”), or those who see dirty toilets in aircraft and curse either the passenger who had used it before him, or the cabin staff for its status, a lot of self-introspection was required. “The person who goes after you (to the toilet) will think what an uncultured person you must be. And if you are wearing a Rotary pin, just imagine the consequences.”

Similarly on literacy, charity began at home ... with their domestic or office staff, drivers, etc. Saboo reminded the 1,200 odd delegates at the Summit that he was totally with them on this quest. But he also cautioned them, as he always does at Rotary meetings, not to be complacent about polio “which is knocking at your door. So much needs to be done to keep India polio-free and achieve a polio-free world as well.”

But he was confident in their ability to do so and while asking for their help and support, prepared to work along with them. “I am prepared to dirty my hands and will continue to work as if I’ve got to live forever in this world. Because I have a dream of a polio-free world, a dream of India as Swachh Bharat, and a dream of India becoming totally literate. I want that dream to be realised before I go. And then new dreams will start coming. That is Rotary.”

Expectedly, Saboo got a standing ovation for his stirring speech.

- Rasheeda Bhagat, Editor, Rotary News, Chennai. Reprinted from Rotary News