

Rotary Club of Kolkatta  
Dec 21, 2004  
Meeting notes written by a staff of Rotary club

**MAKE AN APPOINTMENT TO VISIT A VILLAGE**  
**Sri Ram Krishnan**

*He obtained a degree from IIT Madras in 1968 and went to America seeking a good life. After working in the US for 35 years, he wanted to improve the lives of people who live in a different India called Bharat. He traveled in India extensively for about 3 years, to rediscover the other India. He met great pioneers in India such as Rajinder Singh (Water Harvesting), Prof Swaminathan (Agriculture), Dr Parameshwara Rao (Education), Dr Abhay Bang (Medicine), Anna Hazare (Village development) and others. In his visits in 2004, he entered the room in Gandhiji's ashram in Sabarmati, Gujarat & later in Sewagram, Wardha, where he prayed and worked on the charka. He is the convener of the organization of NRIs in USA called "NRI Home-Coming", involved in the rural development in India.*

Rural India is true India and it is this that we must work to develop. That certainly does not ask us to restrict ourselves to the villages though. Still our responsibility towards them cannot be neglected. Thus said the speaker - well parted black hair with a perfect contrast of grey strands, addressing the audience on 21-Dec-2004 on the need for rural development in India.

To work on this segment, Krishnan first asked us to actually see what the villagers are doing, how their lifestyle was and what kind of problems they face. "We are all aware of the problems in rural India, thanks to statistics", he said, "but what are we to do thereafter... after reading the statistics?"

"We need to actually come face to face with the villagers", he said. India's rural condition is not very impressive. Just a few kilometers down from a metropolis, the lifestyle of the people is contradictory. Though the change is sparse, yet it is not impressive. " Just look at the people who drive autos and rickshaws in Kolkata. They live in shanties and have a very different approach to life", said Krishnan. Walk further away into the heart of the country. Agriculture is the only source of income, while the coastal areas have another option in fishing. Still, their development is very limited.

If we move more into the interiors the problems of basic necessities start becoming prominent. Lack of pure drinking water takes the center stage. There are innumerable villages all across the country that has to fight this problem of drinking water. At some places one has to walk for miles to get the water. The choice for that job falls on women, who are burdened with this extra pressure.

This in turn affects her other household duties, in the relations between the husband and wife, family feuds, problems with the neighbors, with the society at large, to the extent of even riots between villages. All for one thing, water. At every corner of the India we hear the mantra, "pani nahin, naukri nahin".

Elaborating, Krishnan took up the case of Ramanadhapuram district in South India and the role of the DHAN Foundation. "Ramanadhapuram is in the coastal areas and predominantly agro based with other professions like fishing, shipping, cattle raising. This is a talk about a remote village in this district called Hirandaykuram.

This village had a oorani and tank that used to support their water needs. However, due to continuous neglect of the people and the government, both the sources of fresh water slowly fell away. The government took up the cause by installing three hand pumps and a few overhead tanks but even they could not solve the problem.

One day I asked a family if they have had food. "Yes", they said. "What did you have", I persisted they smiled. Obviously, these are people who are too polite to say they are starving. For food to them is a once-in-a-day episode and that often they have to be satisfied with liquids. They readily came to the DHAN Foundation which helped them in building an Oorani", narrated Krishnan.

Taking us through a virtual tour of rural India, Krishnan was particular in underlining the helplessness of these people. He told us how he, along with some other NRIs were working for the cause of rural development. "We are not an organization, but a group who want to do something. We are not taking money from the government, but investing ourselves", he said.

Krishnan had one appeal to make, "make an appointment to visit the village. Go see them, understand them - and I am pretty confident that you will do something for them".

## **VILLAGES HAVE SO MUCH TO OFFER US**

**Dr. Bibek Roy**

*Bibek was born in village Gohaldanga, West Midnapore and was educated in the Calcutta, Madras & Minnesota. He left India for the USA in 1965. Worked as a faculty member at North Carolina State University and University of Wyoming. He retired in 2002, now professor emeritus, set up the Gohaldanga Ramkrishna - Sarada-Vivekanand Sevakendra in 1995.*

*Since 2002, Bibek along with his wife Poornima spends six months every year in the village with an objective to improve education, health, ethics and economics in and around Gohaldanga.*

EVEN AFTER 40 YEARS INDIAN VILLAGES HAVE NOT CHANGED PSYCHOLOGICALLY Adding to what Krishna said, Dr Bibek Roy went in depth with his speech that sorted out how their group was actually working. "After 40 years when I visited the Indian villages again, I found that psychologically they have not changed at all", said Dr Roy. "Villages have so much to offer us in term of their tradition, living, food and culture. Isn't it time we offered them some service in return", he asked.

Roy without being too ecstatic, went straight into a case study, a story of their work in a village about 15 km from Kolaghat. It is called Gohaldanga which has a population of about 25000, both Hindus and Muslims and a few Christians. The group is working here since 1998 and the kind of work they are doing is commendable. With a major focus on improving irrigation, healthcare and education, they have organized some worthwhile projects.

Some of their initiatives have been:

- Non conventional training for personality development.
- Search for potential youth resource and provide them a worthy platform.
- Intensive coaching programmes.

- Workshops on music, dance, gymnastics and such forth.
- Establish low cost clinic and health care centers.
- Special programmes for mothers.
- Provide for job opportunities.
- Work for social upliftment.

Nobody says that there has been a paradigm shift, but as Dr Roy says, "I am here to say that if you have a desire please come and visit us. See our achievements. See what we are doing and work out ways in which you can add to the cause".