

# **COVERAGE REPORT**

**MR. KALYAN BANERJEE**  
**ELECTED ROTARY INTERNATIONAL**  
**PRESIDENT**

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# We need to go from grey to green

Kalyan Banerjee, only the third Indian to have been designated president of Rotary International, has big plans for the organisation, including bringing the youth back into it

**JOEANNA REBELLO FERNANDES**  
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**D**o they call Rotary a gentlemen's club because gentlemen prefer bonds? Rotarians like to think so. Their club was designed in 1905 by the Chicago attorney Paul P Harris to be a fellowship of businessmen and professionals who would apply themselves to the service of community and commit to a higher code of ethics at work. What Rotary obviously envisaged was the making of a new social and business order—and a unique, universal brotherhood.

Over the century, the service club has grown to be one of the largest and most influential in the world with 1.3 million members in 34,000 units around 200 countries. It's a complex body with a prominent head—the president of Rotary sits at the summit, conferring with heads of state on matters of global development, steering international aid and pushing humanitarian policies. The post is more conferral than appointment, it comes once in a lifetime, and it only lasts a year—the official term of presidential office. Only two Indians have made it this far since India was first 'Rotarised' in 1920. The first was Nitish Chandra Laharry, first president from Asia (1962-63), the second was businessman Rajendra Saboo (1991-92). Now we have a third.

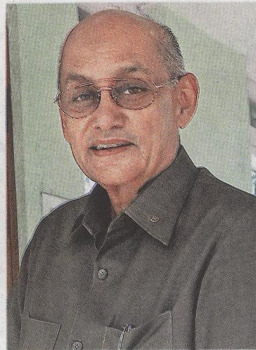
Kalyan Banerjee, director of United Phosphorus Limited and Chairman of United Phosphorus Bangladesh Limited, the agrochemical colossus, is already on the job, although the 'job' officially begins on July 1. In a way, Banerjee got to work 39 years ago when in 1972 he joined the Rotary Club of Vapi.

In the late '60s, the Gujarat government sold

Vapi, a wasteland on its southern edge, as the paradigm for industrial cluster development. In '72, Banerjee arrived here on that early wave of industry. A chemical engineer from IIT Kharagpur, he brought his minions over to supervise the progress of United Phosphorous. "It was a time where there was nothing but factories here," he says. In the dispiriting absence of civic infrastructure, the only civilising agency in that city was the local Rotary Club erected in 1971, which comprised mainly businessmen and professionals who had recently migrated to this new steel empire.

Banerjee earnestly took part in the club's primary occupation—imagining and creating sound social scaffolding for the city. They started with healthcare and education. It was by his design that the city received its first CBSE high school, its first low-cost general hospital, subsidised colleges of commerce, arts, science, including speciality colleges of pharmacy and business management and student hostels. In fact, many of these institutions owe their stones to hefty contributions made by Banerjee, his Rotary brethren and also to their industrialist peers from that city.

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**MAN ON A MISSION:** Banerjee believes that a mixture of physical and virtual meetings is the future of clubs

With an impressive social resume, Banerjee worked his way to the presidency of the local chapter, and over the next decades scaled higher to positions of local and, eventually, global stardom. In 1997-98 he was elected General Coordinator of the Poverty & Hunger Alleviation Task Force which initiated Rotary's outreach in the area of low-cost housing. He was also a key actor on Rotary's Reach Out to Africa Initiative; he was past Chair of the Southeast Asia Regional PolioPlus Committee and later a member of the International PolioPlus Committee, where

he helped innovate practicable solutions to polio eradication in India.

"The job's not yet done," he admits. "Today, polio officially exists in four countries — Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and India." Banerjee was one of the frontrunners of the initial immunisation campaigns in India in 1988-89.

Polio eradication has been one of Rotary's long-standing commitments. And being president of the organisation gives Banerjee more than just a panoramic view of the mission. It scores him appointments with world leaders, with whom he hashes out remedial strategies. Earlier this month the Rotarian met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to evaluate ongoing efforts to bring the polio count in India to zero, and next month, he is to meet President Zardari to brief him about Rotary's polio eradication programme for Pakistan. The country reported 100 cases of polio this year.

But Banerjee's eye is fixed equally on his organisation's other big goals: literacy, health and safe drinking water around the world. A parallel matter on his mind is the 'numbers' poser. Banerjee claims Rotary's chief asset is not only its numbers, contributing more volunteers to its diverse programmes, but equally in their type. "The business and professional acumen, networks and experience of this specialised group brings a 'corporate' edge and professionalism to social projects that governments or NGOs are often hard-pressed to provide," he says. This is why the problem of declining membership has Banerjee concerned.

"Membership may have risen in India (115,000 members in 2011) and Japan (well over 90,000), but it has fallen on an average around the world," the 69-year-old admits. "In

America, figures are stagnant. It has come to be viewed there as an old men's club."

To improve the count, Banerjee believes Rotary has to re-educate young people about itself and its kind of professional volunteerism. He put it picturesquely in his address to the International Rotary convention in New Orleans this May when he said, "We need to change from our pallor of grey and go green." Banerjee believes Rotary also needs to soften its intractable rules of membership and attendance. "I believe a mixture of physical and virtual meetings is the future of clubs," he augurs. To that end, Rotary will be investing up to \$1 million over the next two years to develop its own social network.

"We've also started 50 e-clubs to increase membership—a mix of social networking and meeting occasionally in real time and space," he says.

It may still not help Rotary break into communist countries like China, where the club is presently barred, but it's a beginning to the process of change. Change or motion is the fundamental function of the wheel, Rotary's symbol. It happens to be on Banerjee's three-point agenda alongside continuity (of humanitarian work), and (nurturing) family. In New Orleans Banerjee said, "If we wish to see a world that is more joyous, we first have to make sure that the families of the world are more joyous, that they have the things they need to be happy, to thrive, and move forward. So we have to look at housing, at clean water and sanitation, at health care, at all the issues affecting mothers and children."

Every president chooses a theme, a compound of his vision for Rotary that year. Kalyan Banerjee, the 101st president, has picked this line: 'Reach Within to Embrace Humanity'. Because, he believes, change can only come inside out. ■

