

**St. Xavier's College (Autonomous) Kolkata
Raghabpur Campus.....in full progress**

"I can't believe that I too can study at St. Xavier's College," ("Ami biswash korte parchi na je ami o St. Xavier's College e porte parbo") exclaimed 16 - year old Sarika Pailan who studies in class 11 and has been coming regularly, since she was in class 9, for all Sunday visits organized by College students at Shalpokur (a neighbouring village of Raghabpur, which is a Jesuit parish situated about 22 km away from the city of Kolkata (Calcutta), the capital of West Bengal, India).

Deepika Korali, an earnest and sincere student from Debipur, another neighbouring village, is currently studying in class 12. A first-generation learner, she passed her class X Board Examinations and was elated to learn that St. Xavier's College is starting its rural campus at Raghabpur. Like her, there are many students in the surrounding villages who now see their dream coming true – a divine destiny arriving.

This is an outcome, one successful culmination of the "College to Village, Village to College" project, popularly known as PRAYAS, initiated in 2006 by Rev. Fr. Dr. J. Felix Raj, SJ, the Principal of St. Xavier's College Kolkata. Also known as the "one rupee revolution," it is a part of the persistent effort to bring about overall development of the students both in the College and in the villages. With nine Bengal villages (Debipur, Shalpokur, Ghostomath, Bolorampur, Nurshidarchowk, Bholakhali, Gurap, Jhantipahari and Mirga) under its ambit, Prayas has gradually metamorphosed from being a project into being a full-fledged movement.

While inaugurating the Raghabpur campus on 7th July 2014, His Grace Bishop S. Lobo of Baruipur Diocese expressed gratitude to the Jesuits, *"The campus is a Jesuit gift to the diocese,"* he said.

"No elite College goes in search of people who are poor and marginalized. A renowned and reputed College like St. Xavier's going to the rural milieu only proves that the Jesuit option for the poor is enhanced and concretized", observed Fr. Joseph Raj, SJ, the Academic Coordinator of the Raghabpur campus.

Prayas has turned out to be a remarkably successful endeavour - the primary objective being the provision of continuous support and assistance, academic and material, to the less fortunate children. Since its inception, the number of villages under Prayas increased rapidly. Initially there were only two villages, Gurap and Pandua in Hooghly district. Within a span of eight years, we have spread our work to more villages of which six are situated in South 24 Parganas and one in North 24 Parganas.

"What differentiates Prayas from many social initiatives is that it has stayed the course. I am delighted that a new campus is being set up at Raghabpur because of the Prayas initiative. I am particularly happy because I had worked at Raghabpur as part of the Prayas. Our small efforts are bearing fruit", stated Asad Rauf a Computer Science student of the College, when asked to share his thoughts on the Raghabpur project.

The foremost component of the movement is the organization of Prayas camps. The camps (College to Village and Village to College) have played a very important role in motivating the village children to pursue higher education. From 2006 to 2014, there were 50 'College to Village' camps held where more than 1500 College students participated. Again from 2007 to 2014, 15 'Village to College' camps were held wherein more than 1000 village children were involved. It was during the latter that village children got an opportunity to remain in the College premises for three days per camp. The College, through the students, provided these young boys and girls from the villages with a dream- a dream to study further, to be well-read and one day call themselves a 'Xaverian'. The 'dadas' (brothers) and 'didis' (sisters) became their role models. Till date

the College students spend their Sundays in these villages teaching and participating actively in the life and living of the village children. In fact, these villages are called ‘our extended Xavierian families.’

With the Raghampur campus, many such dreams will be fulfilled. Ropena Naskar, a 15 year old girl from Ghostomath village wants to be “*an independent and educated woman*”. She now feels that her parents will allow her to receive College education as she will not have to travel far from her home and she will also have the company of her other friends for her security, which is naturally a major concern for parents.

About 100 parents from four villages who were recently interviewed regarding this initiative were extremely optimistic. Debjani Dolui, a parent from Nurshidarchowk said, “*I’m very happy that now our village children will get good jobs after studying in St. Xavier’s College.*” (“Amar khub anando hocche ei bebhe je amader grame chela/meyera St. Xavier’s College theke pass kore bhalo chakri pabe”) Others spoke about how they would not hesitate to send their daughters to College for further studies.

When we began our work in Debipur village initially, we found that children, especially girls, discontinued after the 6th or 7th standard. In stark contrast, today we find students who have completed their Masters and Teachers’ Training course. A good number of students, mostly girls, have completed 12th standard and are presently attending Government Colleges for which they need to travel considerably long distances. Thus, Prayas participates in the promotion of the education of the girl child. For them, St. Xavier’s college at Raghampur will prove to be a blessing. Fr. Dejus of Baruipur Diocese aptly puts it, “*Now these village children will develop well. They will not have the fear of an elite College, its culture, language and environment etc. They would now feel more confident and at home with the environment which will encourage them to study better.*”

The immense commitment with which this work is undertaken reaps its reward in the hope and trust that the village residents bestow on St. Xavier’s College and the activities that the College undertakes on their behalf. The presence of St. Xavier’s College’s rural campus in Raghampur will certainly bring about positive, virtuous changes in the cultural, social and moral life of the people of the area. It will provide an opportunity to village children to realise not only their academic aspirations but also their desire to grow up as quality human beings, eventually as - ‘men and women for others’.

Mrs. Uma Majhi the village animator from Debipur who helped coordinate all the village activities with the College was extremely grateful when she heard about the Raghampur campus and this is what she had to say, “*I want to thank Fr. Felix Raj for making way for the development of the villages and making this arrangement for the village children. After graduating from St. Xavier’s College, our village youth will surely lead a good and successful life. The existence of St. Xavier’s College Raghampur campus has helped Debipur and its surrounding villages as well, especially the poor students. Not just that, the parents are exclaiming with pride that their son/daughter is studying at St. Xavier’s College. The studies are good and classes are held regularly. This College is a blessing to all of us.*” (“Ami Father Felix Raj ke dhonobad ditechai je uni ei gramer unnotir jonno gramer chelemeider bhalo porashonar babosta korchen. St. Xavier’s College e pore gramer cheley o meyera ekta bhalo pothe cholte shikbe”. “St Xavier’s College, Raghampur howae Debipur ebong tar kachakachi gramgulir onek unnoti hoyeche, bishestsoto dushtho chatro chatrira porar sujog peyeche. Sudu tai noi, onek baba ma gorber sathe bolen amar chele/may St Xavier’s college e porche. Ei college e porashona khub bhalo hoe. Niyomito classguli hoye thake. Ei College amarder shokoler kache ekta ashirvad”.)

The St. Xavier’s College campus at Raghampur which began in the academic session in July 2014 is in full progress. The Bengali Honors course has 50 students on the roll. The BA General has 52 students and the

Commerce section has settled with 20 students. The medium of instruction is Bengali. Special classes in English are held to facilitate the students' capability to express themselves in English as well.

The co-curricular activities like National Cadets Corps (NCC), National Service Scheme (NSS), Bengali Literary Society (BSL) has added more life and vigour to this rural campus. Active participation by the students is very encouraging. About 100 students have already joined the NSS, More than 50 have joined NCC and about 90 have joined the BLS. The Feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola on 31st July and the Independence Day celebrations on 15th August 2014 saw enthusiastic involvement among students. 'Sharod 2014', a BLS festival, was inaugurated at the campus on 27th September to encourage students to keep up the rich culture and tradition of Bengal.

A dedicated group of faculty members set out every morning from the Mother Teresa Sarani campus and head for this rural College, enjoying a 45 minutes' drive in a white Scorpio. Greenery on either side welcomes them as they travel towards Raghampur, away from the din and bustle of the City. With their enthusiasm, commitment and energy still in place, the 14 faculty members including the ones from the main campus, ensure that they carry forward the tradition and heritage of the academic culture of St. Xavier's. The two-member team of office clerks under the able leadership of the Academic Coordinator and other workers has set the momentum for increasing the courses offered.

In 2015 session, the Raghampur campus will offer History honours as well. A community College that will offer vocational courses like bakery, health assistant, computer hardware and software, carpentry etc. is one of the future plans for this campus.

So many dreams.....so many aspirations....so many expectations.....on the verge of being fulfilled. All this was possible only because of a person who dared to dream and took it to its present design and destiny. A Jesuit visionary, following the footsteps of two great Saints, Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier, Fr. Felix Raj, SJ with his one dream, has lit up many lives. As Father Raj himself says, "*If it is God's work it will continue*".

A good team of dedicated Jesuits and lay leaders must ensure that we act together to make this rural campus a role model for others to follow, all for the greater glory of God (*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*).

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