

College to Village and Village to College: The Founding Stone of St. Xavier's College, Raghavpur (A Live Teaching Case)

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History of St. Xavier's College Raghavpur Campus:

A host of seven Belgian Jesuits arrived at Calcutta in November 1859, under the leadership of Father H Depelchin, S.J. (Rector: 1860-1871), the founding Father of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. They started St. Xavier's at the Sans Souci Theatre in Park Street in January 1860, which is now the honest home of learned professors and zealous students.

The Raghavpur campus of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata was started under the visionary zeal and leadership of Rev.Father Dr. John Felix Raj, S.J., the then Principal of the St. Xavier's College in 2014. Father Raj was the President of the Managing Committee of St. Paul's School, Raghavpur.

On one of the occasions, a teacher of the school, Dr. Sadhana Koral, who is presently the Principal of the school, made a request to Father Raj to start a branch of St. Xavier's College at Raghavpur for the benefit of the local youth. During that time, there were limited scope of higher studies for the female students as there were no colleges in those areas and their parents had several constraints for sending their wards outside for higher studies. Father Raj was deeply touched by her suggestion. He carried the proposal to the Jesuit community of the St. Xavier's College and decided to start a campus of the college in Raghavpur.

At the initial stage, teachers from the Park Street campus, after finishing their classes there, went to Raghavpur campus daily to teach. This rural campus in the Raghavpur area has opened a new path for the rural youth to become the first generation learners. What began in a small scale, today it has become a huge campus with about 800 students. The Park Street campus of the college offers subsidy to students' fees and pays the remuneration of the teachers there.

It is sprawled around 7 acres of land surrounded by ponds that has given an added natural beauty of the area. It is the home for different species of birds in the vicinity. Under the leadership of the present Principal of the college, Father Dr. Dominic Savio, S.J., the campus has steadily grown. Infrastructure has been enhanced. The Raghavpur campus has two large spacious academic buildings, covering 1,05,000 sq. ft which provide all modern-day facilities to the students.

The first Vice-Principal was Father Joseph Raj, S.J. and the present Vice-Principal is Father Johnson Padiyara, S.J. Raghavpur campus is the rural face of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. The journey that began in 2014, continues imparting quality education to the rural students. The campus offers undergraduate programme in Bengali, History, Political Science, Commerce, and a general course. It also offers two years postgraduation programme in Bengali. This project is keeping in line with the Jesuit option for the poor and the marginalised.

Though some professors still visit from main campus of St. Xavier's College, the Raghavpur campus has also its own faculty members and support staff. The mission of the Jesuits to form men and women for others is being concretely realized in the rural belt of South 24 Parganas district in the spirit of the Magis and Nihil Ultra (Nothing Beyond). The campus has changed the face of the district also. The future is always bright, and the campus has become a centre of academic activities and quality education.

To ensure that the rural students developed a desire to continue their higher education, Project Prayas – 'College to Village, Village to College', was launched in 2006. College students, under NSS, visited villages surrounding

Raghavpur and spent time with the children conducting study sessions, co-curricular activities, camps, and the like. In turn, these children would attend camps organised by the College students in the College campus thereby exposing them to the College atmosphere. This resulted in a close bond between the College students and the rural children. The desired outcome of motivating the rural students to continue their higher education was thus realised. In addition, this project also resulted in positive transformation of the College students who got a first-hand experience of rural life and the struggles of rural community.

PRAYAS - The Fruit Bearing Tree: College to Village - Village to College:

Prayas is an effort aimed at bringing about the overall development of the students, both in the college and in the villages. The primary objective of this movement is to provide continuous support and assistance to rural children, both academically and economically, thereby motivating them to pursue higher education.

This project was initiated by Rev. Fr. Dr. J. Felix Raj, SJ, Former Principal, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, and presently Vice Chancellor of St. Xavier's University, in January 2006. This simple effort has metamorphosed into a movement and continues to bridge the socio-economic gap between the college and the villages adopted by the college. This effort acts as a catalyst to bridge the socio-economic gap prevailing between the village children and the college students. Its mission is to cross the four walls of college, to reach out to the villages and to find a broader purpose of education, true to the motto of the College.

As the college and village come together there is an overall development of both. On one hand this project helps college students in discovering the true India, in being more aware of the ground realities and in transforming their outlooks. For every student it is a challenge to study better and develop a sense of service. On the other hand the village students are given an exposure to wider realities and motivation to continue their education. The village undergoes a transformation and there is growth in literacy. It is the progress of this project that makes one believe that someday, every child from a village would go to college and if every college reaches out to at least one village 100 percent literacy can become a reality.

The pedagogy of Prayas works on Three Stages. The college along with its Management, Faculty and Family is the **'temple of wisdom'**. The village along with its administration, village partners and family are the **'temple of prosperity'**. Stage I is the Planning stage.

A collaboration of both leads to Stage II which is the implementation stage. Here the college students go to the villages and work with the children. They conduct classes and extracurricular activities, surveys, camps etc. They also provide financial assistance to the very needy children to continue their education. Twice a year the village children are brought to the college. They are taken for city tours, college campus tour, etc. College students conduct educational sessions, sports, and other activities for the children.

Stage III is the outcome of the Prayas. College students and the village children, both benefit from this project. As the college and village come together there is an overall development of both.

SXC Raghavpur Campus: Towards Progress:

"Ami biswash korte parchi na je ami o St. Xavier's College e porte parbo" (I can't believe that I too can study at St. Xavier's College), exclaimed 16-year-old Sarika Pailan who studies in class 11 and has been coming regularly for all Sunday visits organized by college students at Shalpur (a neighbouring village of Raghavpur) since she was in class 9.

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 Madhyamik examinations and was elated to learn that St. Xavier's College is beginning its extension center at Raghavpur. Like her, there are many students in the surrounding villages who now see their dream coming true. This is a clear outcome of the "College to Village, Village to College" project, popularly known as PRAYAS. Also known as the "one rupee revolution," it is an ongoing effort to bring about overall development of the students both in the college and in the villages. Every student collects one rupee every day and at the end of every month, they contribute Rs. 30/- each, which takes care of educational requirements of the rural children in these villages. With nine Bengal villages (Debipur, Shalpur, 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.

Prayas has turned out to be a remarkably successful endeavor - the primary objective being the provision of continuous support and assistance to the less fortunate children, both academically and materially. Since its inception, the number of villages under Prayas increased rapidly. Initially there were only two villages, Gurap

and Pandua in Hooghly district. However, from 2007 onwards there was no looking back. Within a span of eight years, we have spread our work to nine villages of which six are situated in South 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 Raghavpur because of the Prayas initiative. I am particularly happy because I had worked at Raghavpur as part of the Prayas initiative. Our small efforts are bearing fruit", replied Asad Rauf of Comp. Sc, 04-07 batch, when asked to share his thoughts on the Raghavpur 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 2013, there were 48 'college to village' camps held where almost 800 college students participated. From 2007 to 2013, 12 'village to college' camps were held wherein more than 600 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 perhaps, to one day call themselves a Xaverian. The 'dadas' and 'didis' became their role models. Till today the college students spend their Sundays in these villages teaching and sharing their life. In fact, these villages are called "our extended families."

With the Raghavpur campus, many such dreams will be fulfilled. Ropena Naskar, a 15 year old girl from Ghostomath 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 50 parents from four villages who were recently interviewed regarding this initiative were extremely optimistic. Debjani Dolui, a parent from Nurshidarchowk said, *"Ami khub khushi je ekhon amader gramer chele-meyera St. Xavier's College e pore bhalo chakri pabey.* (I'm very happy that now our village children will get good jobs after studying in St. Xavier's College). Others spoke about how they would not hesitate to send their daughters to college for further studies.

When Prayas began in Debipur village, it was found that children, especially girls, dropped out of school after the 6th or 7th standard. In stark contrast, today we find students who have completed M.A. and are pursuing B.Ed. 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. For them, St. Xavier's college at Raghavpur will prove to be a blessing. As Fr. Dejus of Baruipur Diocese rightly 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 Raghavpur will certainly bring about positive change in the people of the area. It will provide an opportunity to village children to realize their academic aspirations.

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 Raghavpur campus and this is what she had to say, *"Ami Father Felix Raj ke dhonobad ditechai je uni ei gramer unnotir jonno gramer chelemeider bhalo porashorar babosta korchen. St. Xavier's College e pore gramer jubok ebon jubikara/ ekta bhalo pothe cholte shikbe"*. (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 SXC campus at Raghavpur began its academic session in July 2014. In the last nine years, it has grown structurally and otherwise. Though the medium of instruction is Bengali, special classes in English are held for the students. Co-curricular activities like NCC, NSS and others, have added more life to this rural campus. Active participation in all these activities by the students is very encouraging.

A dedicated group of faculty members set out every morning from their Park Street campus and head for this rural college, while enjoying a 45 minutes' drive in a white scorpio and greenery on either side as they travel. With their enthusiasm still in place the faculty members including the ones from the Park Street campus, have kept up the rich academic atmosphere in Raghavpur.

So many dreams.....so many aspirations....so many expectations.....being fulfilled. All this was possible only because of a person who dared to dream and pursued the dream till it became a reality.

PRAYAS – Some Elemental Standpoints in the words of Rev. Father Dr. J. Felix Raj, SJ:

Prayas is an effort to take college to village and bring village to college. I envisage a cordial meeting between these two. This meeting will generate growth and quality among both college students and village children. If colleges and villages meet, there will be a knowledge revolution leading to total development. And this is what I hope for.

In a country where you have large percentage of dropouts, where gross enrolment in higher education is 12 to 15 percent, we need to promote access and opportunity for education. The system is such that children are coming to school. Now the school needs to go to the children and meet them in their homes. Colleges are centres of higher education; centres of knowledge and villages are centres of prosperity and meeting of the two will help the country to grow. Prayas is thought of in the context of our country.

Students and colleges like St. Xavier's are generous and open to projects like this because such projects challenge the students and make their learning more meaningful. Every college student whether rich or poor, is part of the large Indian family. So his/her formation must be contextual. The purpose of his/her education must be collective. Through this project the college aims to give a holistic perspective of education and if every student is made to understand this, he/she will be able to opt for it.

College students have been regularly visiting the villages. We have adopted 8 villages and there are around 1000 children benefiting from our visits and our coaching classes. Though our students stay in villages only for three or four days at a time, their contacts with the children leave an unforgettable image in their minds. The children look up at our students as role models. And this is the motivational exercise. If this is done regularly, the children take a liking to studies and get motivated.

We bring the village children to the College and to Kolkata. They have enjoyed these visits, stayed in the college campus and benefited from the classes conducted by college students.

The perspective of college students has changed, and the quality of village children has improved. The people of the village are very happy with the outcome. It has tremendous amount of impact on both college students and village children and on both units – college and villages. The contacts have created a lot of concern for the rural people. Many students have told me that they went to the camps to fulfil the credit requirements but returned with love and transformation of their hearts.

The future of Prayas is in the hands of our students. I am confident it will continue. As one student mentioned in one of our sharing sessions, "Prayas is not a project, but a movement". A project like this must be carried out by every college. There are about 30,000 colleges in our country. If every college adopts one village it will be a tremendous contribution to nation building. Yes, we are doing good work out of love and concern. It is God's work and so it will continue.

Every reader is a participant in this project and must promote this project wherever it is possible. All of us have a role to play as human beings and as Indian citizens in the development of this country so that all of us may live in peace and harmony. We are born in an unjust society, and we should be determined not to leave it as we have found it. The world is divided. But let us put our hearts and minds together and stretch out hands to heal the wounds and bridge the divisions to build a united world.

Leading Questions for Effective Classroom Teaching:

1. How was the St. Xavier's Raghavpur project conceived?
2. What were the primary thrust areas of the project?
3. Is community development essential for fostering economic development in the long run?
4. What has been the role of Prayas in this project?
5. Why does the project refer to College to Village and Village to College?
6. Comment on the nature of Leadership of the pioneer personality in setting up this project.
7. What is your take on the Leadership Factor towards building of this project?
8. What can be the relevant long-run goals of such a project.

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