

SXC Raghampur Campus

By Cheryl Francis

“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 Raghampur) 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 centre at Raghampur. 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, initiated by Fr. Felix Raj, SJ in 2006. 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. 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.

“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”, said Fr. Joseph Raj, SJ who is presently the Secretary of St. Paul’s HS School, Raghampur.

Prayas has turned out to be a remarkably successful endeavour - 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 Raghampur because of the Prayas initiative. I am particularly happy because I had worked at Raghampur 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 Raghampur 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 Raghampur 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 we began our work in Debipur initially, we 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 Raghampur 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 extension centre in Raghampur will certainly bring about positive change in the people of the area. It will provide an opportunity to village children to realise 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 Raghampur 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 korchon. 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 Raghampur is ready to kick start this academic session beginning July 2014. Bengali Honors, Commerce and B.A. General will be offered initially. Though the medium of instruction will be Bengali, special classes in English will be held for the students. Along with formal education, the college plans to offer vocational training, computer skills, and courses on spoken English, along with co-curricular activities like sports, social service, NCC, dance and music. This would help build their personalities and enhance their prospects in the job market.

So many dreams.....so many aspirations.....so many expectations.....on the verge of being fulfilled. This will be possible only with a dedicated and committed group of faculty, cooperation from the local leaders and persistent support of parents and the village community.