

# President in mind and spirit



## For Kalyan Banerjee, leading Rotary is as much a calling as it is a job.

On some days, when you pass his office on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor of One Rotary Centre in Evanston, Illinois, USA, you will see Kalyan Banerjee seated at a large, round table with nothing on it, save for a few sheets of paper on which he is intently writing in longhand. Backlit by huge windows that offer a panoramic view of Chicago, and with his head down, Banerjee often appears to be in deep concentration, a man with a singular and urgent task.

He has been marshalling his energies for Rotary since 1972, when he joined the fledgling club in his hometown of Vapi, India. Around the same time, the young chemical engineer was starting up a small company to produce red phosphorous, an essential ingredient in fertilizer. Under Banerjee's leadership, United Phosphorous Limited blossomed into the largest agrochemical manufacturer in India. And Vapi, aided by the concerted effort of the local Rotary clubs, has been transformed from a sleepy village into a major industrial centre in Gujarat State.

Over the last four decades, Banerjee has served Rotary as a District Governor, president's representative, committee and task force chair, Rotary Foundation Trustee, and RI Director. He also has been a member of the International PolioPlus Committee, heading up initiatives that have spurred Rotary's polio eradication efforts in India.

Now, almost to his own amazement, Banerjee is the organisation's 101<sup>st</sup> president and the third from India.

On this day in his office, next to the papers on his round table, is a copy of Martin Meredith's 3-inch-thick volume *The Fate of Africa*. Reading is a passion of Banerjee's, and over the last year, he has had more opportunity to indulge in it while travelling around the world in preparation to take over the presidency from Ray Klingensmith, of Missouri.

Banerjee says that his well-worn briefcase usually contains at least two books and his two favourite magazines: *Time*, which he has read nearly every week since 1961, and the *Economist*. "I like reading about people who have done well and have led their country

**“ I like reading about people who have done well and have led their country to great heights.”**

to great heights,” he says. Apropos of that, the briefcase presently holds a biography of Nelson Mandela.

Banerjee seems relaxed today, possibly because his wife, Binota, is beside him. Together, they are relating what a typical day is like for them.

They estimate that during the past year, they have spent about half of their time in Vapi, a third at their apartment in Mumbai, where United

Phosphorous has its main office, and the remaining time travelling and taking care of Rotary business.

Regardless of where his day begins, Banerjee says, it usually starts around 5:30 a.m., and always begins with yoga — no surprise for someone who has chosen the RI theme *Reach Within to Embrace Humanity*.

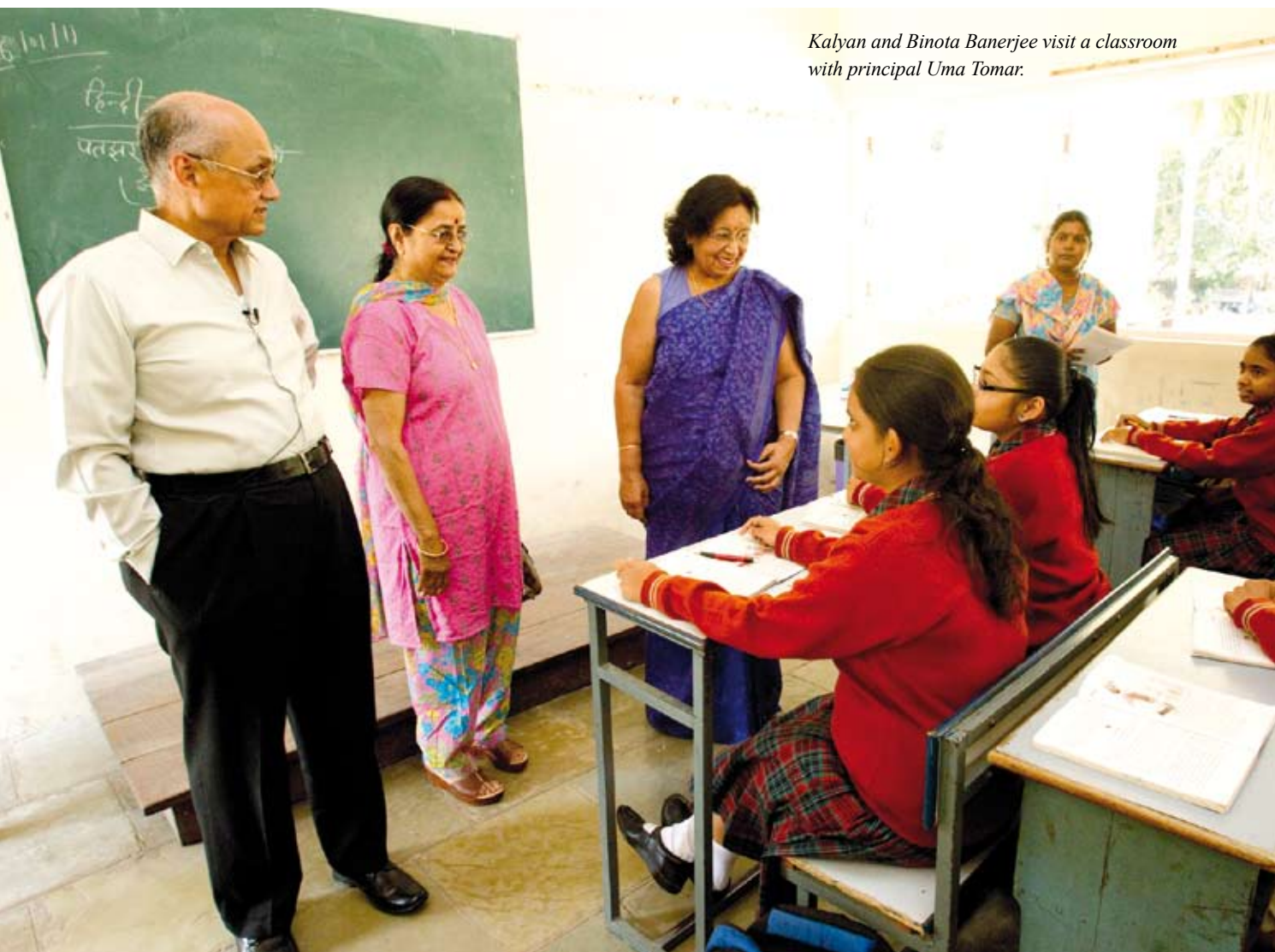
“I do yoga for anywhere between half an hour and 45 minutes every morning,” he says. “When we’re in Vapi, I usually work with a yoga teacher who comes to my house. I love doing that with him — it is better than doing it alone. Then I go for a walk or a workout at the company gym, which is just about five minutes from where we live.”

In Vapi, Binota says, “our home is an open house. Anybody — everybody — comes and goes. At breakfast, I never put just two plates on the table. It’s

always six plates, because people come to meet with Kalyan, and early morning is a good time. At dinner, it is the same thing. I put out two extra plates, and sometimes that is not enough.”

She says, and her husband readily admits, that he frequently forgets whom he has invited. It’s a habit that she has no trouble forgiving, because, she explains, “it’s very easy to make chapatis” — the delicious flatbread that’s a staple of their daily diet.

Banerjee says the parade of visitors does not necessarily thin out after dinner. “It can go on very late,” he explains, “particularly nowadays, because we are homeless often, so people come to share whatever thoughts, ideas and plans they have — or to discuss problems. We run a lot of Rotary projects — schools, colleges, hospitals — so there are many issues to go over: issues with teachers and



*Kalyan and Binota Banerjee visit a classroom with principal Uma Tomar.*



students, issues with buildings, issues about the future of the institution. It is busy throughout the day.”

When possible, he says, he likes to squeeze in a mid-afternoon “power nap,” followed by a cup of tea. “I like to work late at night; I do my best work then. Everything seems peaceful and kind of fits in when I’m alone.”

But late-night work opportunities are not abundant at the Banerjees’ home in Vapi. With five bedrooms and only the two of them living there, they say, overnight guests are commonplace and often take a seat at the breakfast table. Two spots used to be reserved for the Banerjees’ children, but they are now adults — a son who lives in Australia and a daughter in Canada. Each of them has two children, who get to visit their grandparents at least twice a year, despite the distance.

A nurse and social worker, Binota takes a certain pleasure in recounting the birth of her second grandchild, in Toronto. She took her daughter to the hospital at around 1 a.m., all but certain that she was nearly ready to deliver. The obstetrical nurse at the hospital insisted that she was not even close to being ready and advised them to go back home in the middle of the night. No sooner had the nurse walked away than Binota’s daughter went into labour. “The delivery took place within half an hour from when we arrived at

*The morning walk.*

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the hospital,” says Binota, laughing. “I know myself, I know my family.”

Increasingly, she and her husband say, Rotary has become their family. “Rotarians are the people we connect most and best with,” says Banerjee. “Over time, Rotary has steadily gained importance in our lives.”

Although he has been a Rotarian for nearly 40 years, Banerjee says he has learned a lot about the organisation over the last year in particular. “I’ve learned that Rotary is very well organised and has a strong system. It’s up to me to use it to maximum advantage for the organisation,” he says. “A club is as good as its president, as good as its leader. A good leader makes a good club; an indifferent leader makes an indifferent club. Helping the leadership is what I would consider my job as president. I think my real function is to inspire and motivate and help people to do their work for Rotary.”

Banerjee says he is “very much looking forward” to working with John Hewko, Rotary’s new General

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Secretary. “I see him as a person who has had a lot of experience in big organisations and business, and a lot of international exposure — different countries and cultures, systems and methods,” he says. “I think he is a very corporate-oriented person, and I think Rotary needs that, for the sake of efficiency and to be more current. At the same time, Rotary is an organisation of service and fellowship. We don’t







*Above: For the wall behind their garden in Vapi, the Banerjees commissioned a mural painted by members of the local Warli tribe. The 30 × 6 foot work is an extraordinary example of tribal painting and a detailed depiction of Warli life.*

*Facing page: Binota confers with medical superintendent Dr. S.S. Singh at Vapi's Haria L.G. Hospital.*

want to lose that touch. It will be an exciting challenge to bring both of these elements together — the efficiency and systems and methods of a tight, modern organisation, coupled with the fact that Rotary is a universal blend of all kinds of cultures, countries, thought processes and perspectives.”

He says the special challenge of being president of Rotary International is that, “in a sense, you are leading equals. When I say ‘equals,’ I am really trying to say those who are better than

you, or more capable, in doing whatever they are especially good at. A person can come to a Rotary meeting feeling certain about his views on a subject. But when you sit around that table and hear the views of others, you realise that they’re equally valid, important and relevant — so much so, you may completely change your mind. It’s a very humbling experience, and yet the respect with which they treat you is amazing.”

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Because of the quality of the people within the organisation, he says, “I don’t know that I necessarily need to provide leadership. I think it’s more a case of being able to provide direction.”

Whatever the case, it’s clear that Banerjee, because of his origins and experience, has gained an understanding of Rotary at many levels, as he mentioned in his acceptance speech at last year’s RI Convention in Montréal. “In a way, some parts of India still exemplify a developing country, and this gives me perhaps a different perspective on Rotary’s international service,” he said. “I have seen the impact that our simplest projects can have. I have seen firsthand our work in literacy, in health, in hunger, in providing safe water — and I have seen the difference it makes to each village, each family and each individual human life.”

*John Rezek*

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