



2021-22 THEME ADDRESS

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RI President-elect
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Namaste. Hello, the movers and shakers of Rotary around the world. You, the DGEs, are the movers, and I am Shekhar.

Today you are taking a very important step in your journey of service and leadership. The forthcoming 17 months will be the most amazing, fruitful months in your life. You can turn this period into the most satisfying period of your life. During this period, I urge you to dream big, guided by our shared vision for Rotary. You will plan and set goals, inspire and motivate Rotarians to reach goals — goals to expand the reach of our organization by increasing membership, and goals to increase the impact of Rotary by serving the world. And in this journey, you will play a stellar role as you share your goals with Rotarians and Rotaractors in your district and inspire them to “do more and grow more.” Friends, this will be our guiding mantra. “Do more” as in bigger and impactful service projects, and “grow more” as in increasing our membership and expanding the participation.

Membership, friends, continues to be our biggest challenge. For the last 17-plus years, our membership has been at 1.2 million. Together let us change that over the next 17 months. My dear change-maker governors, here is your opportunity to make the biggest change in Rotary history as far as membership is concerned. What we have not accomplished in the last 17 years, I challenge you to accomplish in 17 months.

But that’s too big a dream, you may say. Well, if I ask you to dream big, I have to lead from the front. One of my inspirations comes from what George Bernard Shaw said. He said, “You see things; and you say ‘why?’ But I dream things that never were; and I say ‘Why not?’ ”

So, friends, the dream is to increase our membership to 1.3 million by 1 July 2022! How can we reach that incredible goal? The answer is each one, bring one — ask each Rotarian to bring one member to Rotary in the next 17 months. Just one member in 17 months is all you need to ask of *every* Rotarian in your district. You can ensure this by leading by example and having your club presidents lead by example as well. As Rotarians in every club do this, they too will become change-makers, as they will change for good the lives of each person that they make a Rotarian.

Governors-elect, we need to *grow more to do more*. I have always hugely been inspired by the motto of Rotary — Service Above Self. It has taught me to care for others and share with others. Service, to me, is about thinking of others even before I think of myself. On thinking about others, let me share one of my Rotary moments.

I had just joined my Rotary club, and the club organized a limb camp. Here we were, distributing calipers, artificial limbs, and hand cycles. Every member was given some responsibility and so was I. I was to check if the beneficiary of the hand cycle had enough strength in his hand to ride the tricycle by his hands. And I was to do this by asking the beneficiary to pull my hand, so that I could fathom the strength in his hands. As I stood in my designated spot, waiting for the beneficiary to come, I saw him crawling towards me. He had no legs, so he had to crawl towards me. I stretched my hands to hold his, and I'll be honest, in that moment, I was thinking about me and not about him. I was thinking about my cleanliness, my health. I did not want to hold his hand. But I did it and kept thinking of myself for the second and third set of hands. But suddenly after the sixth, seventh set of hands, my empathy towards their plight grew and soon enough I could feel their pain, their challenges, and I was thinking more about them than I was thinking of myself. It was at that moment, friends, when from being just a member of my Rotary club, I became a Rotarian.

Soon I started attending more club projects. As a Rotarian, when I had first gone out to the rural areas of India 35 years back, I truly understood the plight of my brethren. They had no toilets in their homes, the water they drank was from the same pond that they bathed in, the schools were in the shade of a tree, and the black painted wall was the only blackboard in the school. The nearest health center was a few miles away with basic facilities. And then, through my Rotary club, we helped set up toilets, provided clean drinking water, enhanced the education system, and set up world-class health facilities, not just in my community or my city, but in my country.

Rotary kindled the spark within me to look beyond myself and embrace humanity. Service became a way of life for me, and my life's guiding philosophy became, "Service is the rent I pay for the space I occupy on this earth." And I want to be a good tenant of this earth. I am sure each of you also has found your opportunity to serve. You too may have provided eyesight to the blind, food to the hungry, homes to the homeless. They may have been small opportunities for service or large projects. More than just the size, it is the attitude that defines service.

Gandhi was once getting up on a train. Even as he was getting up on the train, the train started moving, and one of his slippers fell off. Gandhi's immediate reaction was to throw his other slipper to where the previous one had fallen. His friend was traveling with him and asked him, "Why did you do that?" Gandhi said, "Someone will find that slipper. What good will be one slipper to him? So I threw the other." Friends, it was a small act of service, but I think it was a big attitude of service. Are we also ready to think of others before we think of ourselves? As Rotarians, we can do just that.

Why else have Rotarians spent billions of dollars and volunteer hours over the last 35-plus years to eradicate polio and serve mankind? Why else have we set up thousands of schools, hundreds of hospitals, provided water in parched villages, brought dignity to people by providing toilets in their homes, given the gift of life to tens of thousands of children by doing their heart surgeries? Rotarians keep serving because we want to change lives. One project in Nepal changes the lives of a few thousand people, the family health program in Africa has served millions of people, a water project in Haiti has changed the lives of more than 10 million people. Back home in India, the T-E-A-C-H program of literacy and education has impacted the lives of millions of children.

Many of you have been an important part of similar service projects, and you have changed the lives of people. There was a need to serve, and you served. Today the need to serve has become even more necessary and apparent. So, my dear change-maker governors, in the coming Rotary year, I request you, urge you, cajole you to serve people and help to change their lives. So, my dear governors, our theme for the year 2021-22 is *Serve to Change Lives*.

I urge you to lead by example and inspire Rotarians and Rotaractors to participate in projects that have a sustained impact. Join hands with other Rotarians, other organizations, corporations, and do projects that impact your community, your city – projects that can change lives of people across the country and around the world. At the end of your term as district governor, you should feel that because of your leadership, because of your inspiration to the Rotarians and Rotaractors, the world has changed for better because of the service done by them during the year.

As we all serve, we change the lives of not only others; we change our lives, too. Vivekananda, one of India's greatest philosophers, said, "When you help someone, do not think that you are obliging him or her. In fact, it is he or she who is obliging you by giving you an opportunity to give back something to this world from where we have received so much." Also, he added beautifully, "In life, take the position of the donor or the server, and yet be so humble in giving and serving that let the donor or server kneel down and ask: 'May I give? May I serve?'"

Friends, to live for others, to care for others, to serve others and change their lives is the best way to live our own lives. Just as Albert Einstein said, "Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile."

And friends, as we go about our service initiatives, our special focus this year will be on empowering girls. One of Rotary's core values is diversity. We have a public statement that outlines our belief in DEI – diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is important that we empower the girl as we all find that more often than not, the girl is disadvantaged. We will serve all children, but our focus will be specially on the girl. There are many issues that girls face in different parts of the world, and you as leaders will ensure that we try and mitigate the disadvantage of the girl that they may have.

Friends, to *do* more and *grow* more, we have designed some presidential initiatives.

There will be seven presidential conferences across the world focusing on the seven areas of focus. And for every Rotary and Rotaract club to be able to organize and engage Rotarians and Rotaractors, and the public at large, we will have Rotary Days of Service. Do participate in the presidential conference closest to home, and do encourage every club to participate in a Rotary Day of Service. Let them join Rotaractors and Interactors. Let us showcase our work the world over through thousands of Rotary Days of Service by Rotary clubs.

Dear change-maker governors, ending polio, fighting COVID, working on large impactful projects, and increasing our membership to a never-before 1.3 million — the task ahead is challenging. And that should excite you. Rotarians love challenges. A ship is safe in the harbor, but that is not what ships are meant for. They need to go out in the high seas. Life, my dear change-makers, is about adventure and not maintenance.

Let me end with what I have penned for our theme:

The biggest gift we are given
Is the power to touch a life
To change,
To make a difference
In the circle of life.
If we can reach out
With our hands, heart, and soul
The magic will begin to happen
As the wheel begins to roll ...
Let's turn the wheel together
So all humanity thrives
We have the power and the magic
To serve ... to change lives ...

At this moment, I urge you, wherever you are seated, to put your hand on your heart and *pledge* with me:

**WE HAVE THE POWER AND THE MAGIC
TO SERVE TO CHANGE LIVES**

So, my dear change-makers, are you ready? Are you ready for the big challenges? Are you ready to serve? Are you ready to change lives?

I am, and I'm sure you are too. Together, let us *Serve to Change Lives*.