

Volunteering to be different

More and more young Indians are working for causes close to their heart. The fact that it improves their job prospects doesn't hurt either

Divya A & Aparna Bansal | TNN

What's good for the soul should be good for the CV. Armed with this certainty, India's Gen Next is volunteering with a vengeance — because it helps “build character”, “looks nice on the CV”, “gets appreciation from friends and family” and is “great exposure” to boot (see box).

Whatever the reason, NGOs and voluntary agencies are finding more volunteers than they can possibly accommodate. In fact, demand outstrips opportunities in this sector, says Rakhi Sarkar, country director (India) at Voluntary Service Overseas, a leading international development charity. “One of the key reasons for this is that the children of India's emerging middle class are more secure and feel they have the space and time to be engaged in the country's development process,” she says. Also fuelling this trend is the growth of the NGO sector and the increasing importance of CSR (corporate social responsibility) in India Inc.

This year marks the completion of the first decade since the UN declared 2001 as the International Year of Volunteering. The last 10 years have seen the work acquire greater recognition, partly due to the NGO sector's mo-

bilization efforts. Once seen as the preserve of ‘jholawalas’, volunteering is now ‘in’ with young Indians who are becoming increasingly active in “doing their bit” for country and society.

Crucially, they help their own cause as well. Shalabh Sahai, director and co-founder

call ‘community work experience’. “In the US, for example, a student can claim credits if he/she has engaged with accredited organizations. Besides, volunteering experience can also help strengthen a student's statement of purpose which is critical towards gaining admissions,” he says.

gain from this infusion of young blood? Uma Tuli, founder and manager of the Delhi-based Amar Jyoti Charitable Trust, says young people are of “greater help” for certain projects because they add a “lot of value” through their sheer “creativity and enthusiasm”. Her trust gets students from institutes such as the Delhi School of Social Work where fieldwork is part of the curriculum.

So is it a win-win situation for everyone all around? Not quite. Many working in the social sector say volunteering is still not seen as a mainstream activity in India. “Since there is no structural support to professional volunteering, for many youngsters who would have otherwise made a huge contribution to the sector, it becomes more of a timepass or formality that either helps them through their semester break or get through to a university abroad,” says Renu Kakkar of Apeejay Surrendra Group, which recently instituted India's first national awards for volunteering.

Sahai also believes volunteering needs to become more broad-based in India. “Reputed international universities have valued volunteering for quite long. The trend needs to catch on in India and perhaps an initiative like having awards for volunteering will help spread the word,” he says.



DOING THEIR BIT: A young volunteer during Anna Hazare's fast at Rajghat recently

of iVolunteer, an organization which acts as a bridge between volunteers and NGOs, says volunteering has become “really popular” in India as it gives youngsters an “extra edge” over their peers when it comes to professional and academic opportunities. He says almost all international universities and institutes give importance to what they

There are other advantages too. Sahai says that “besides adding to the CV, it also adds to the personal development of a student, particularly soft skills such as working with people and developing solutions to practical problems. Such skills are important to any sector that one chooses to pursue.”

How does the social sector



You get appreciation from friends and family for the work you are doing. After being with an NGO for a few years, you can go in for further studies...It's great exposure

Neha Jayna | WORKS ON THE GRANT TEAM FOR SAVE THE CHILDREN



Volunteering in India helps build character; you learn to be flexible and understanding. I'd definitely want to volunteer here

again after graduation
Birx Allen | UNDERGRADUATE FROM US, VOLUNTEERING WITH PRAVAH



Initially, I just tagged along with friends but the experience has been quite good. It has helped me figure out what I

want to do in the future
Abhinav Kapoor | UNDERGRADUATE, INTERN WITH CRY