

VOLUNTEER SERVICE FOR HUMAN INTEGRATION – THE CASE OF HEARTFULNESS INSTITUTE’S APPROACH TO VOLUNTEER WORK

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Abstract

The study of volunteer service brings out the multidisciplinary dimensions of the concept. Volunteer service has been very relevant in times of disaster and emergency and was also observed during the current Covid -19 pandemic situations. When service is rendered for no compensation or for nothing in return for the service done, it opens a number of facets of human behaviour, qualities and values. Further, when volunteer service has shown to have a number of benefits for example, it reduces stress, keeps depression at bay, and makes the other more important than the self through values of compassion and empathy, it is important to study it for the benefit of society. Such inculcation is best to start right from childhood. The benefits are overwhelming as children who do volunteer service grow up to become responsible citizens and more aware of social issues. Spiritually, volunteer service develops qualities and values in youth fostering their holistic development. It has benefits for society at large. An example of the volunteer service included in the Heartfulness training of youth is significant and gives an understanding of the philosophy of service. Through volunteer service the help rendered and the help received and the benefits to society clearly indicate the role of volunteer service in human integration is an important one.

Key Words: Volunteer Service, Human Integration, Heartfulness Youth Training, Philosophy of Service, Benefits of Volunteer Service

INTRODUCTION

The study of volunteer service assumes a multidisciplinary approach as many aspects - social, psychological, health, education, spirituality and values - are intricately woven and connected in it. Many benefits of volunteer service and its wide implications are revealed in the literature on the subject. It is relevant in present times as seen in the times of the covid 19 pandemic. The case study of Heartfulness Institute and its emphasis on volunteer service enables the understanding of its importance in education, spirituality and development particularly of the youth.

The role of volunteer service can mean much for humanity. Both the giver and receiver benefit from the work thus rendered. The giver is happy to give something to make the other comfortable or safe or pain and anxiety-free. The receiver feels the help has come at an opportune time to get them to safety.

Disaster management reveals the place that volunteer work has to help suffering humanity. Whether in floods, in cyclones or hurricanes, during earthquakes or in a pandemic the volunteers contribute their service for the benefit of fellow human beings. During the current Covid-19 scenario, the volunteers have played a critical part as Covid warriors along with other medical professionals.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to understand the concept and role of volunteer service. The importance of service can be observed in the volunteers and in the persons or organizations that receive the benefit of the service. The study of volunteer work has been studied in the context of Heartfulness training. The Heartfulness Institute is a spiritual organization that works for the purposes of human development from many angles. Besides teaching the Heartfulness meditation and organising seminars on small and large scales for delegates to participate, it is the venue of volunteer service of a unique type. It is interesting to study and observe volunteer service as part of daily life in the Heartfulness Centre's campus in Kanha Shanthi Vanam in Hyderabad.

VOLUNTEER SERVICE

Volunteer work is service done to help others. Service is thus rendered to another person, group or organization which benefits from it. There is no monetary or financial compensation received for such service. Volunteer work has usually been associated with medical, education or emergency rescue situations, based on skills one has. In the late 19th Century, for example in the United States of America, secondary data and literature shows that volunteer work was done by school girls and boys like community service, or service in the neighbourhood. The students were guided and advised in their schools about what volunteer work was to be done in the community. Of course sometimes or many times it happened that when they arrived in the community or neighbourhood to do volunteer work, they were allocated work which they had to accept. Volunteer work for the community and the neighbourhood was common, and students always had opportunities and experience of doing such volunteer work.

EXPERIENCE OF VOLUNTEER WORK

Experience of volunteer work has many benefits and many studies were observed to examine different types of volunteer service done and its impact on

the volunteer and on the community. Studies that have been done on the impact of volunteer work were wide ranging. Volunteer work itself brings a person in contact with others and thus provides the volunteer an opportunity to meet new people and thus develop social contacts in the process. One of the consequences of doing volunteer work has been that it leads to reduced levels of stress in the volunteer as she may for a while forget about problems of the self. Volunteer service could also be associated with enhanced self-esteem, and might give feelings of satisfaction for the volunteer. Helping others, and to be able to help others especially in need also gives a state of satisfaction and contentment. Volunteers also play an important role for professional societies as they help them by being brand ambassadors for their product. Volunteers' role for professional societies can also be seen by their helping in advertisement and in fundraising for the organization. (Nesbit,R. And Gazley, B., 2012). Earlier, volunteers were participants in youth clubs, and recreational activities, while nowadays, volunteers participate in environmental protection or ecological related conservation activities. Volunteers thus play a crucial role wherever the need of the hour is, as that highlights something significant.

VOLUNTEER WORK OPPORTUNITIES

Governments and international organizations like the United Nations, encourage youth service orientation through opportunities for youth participation in different activities. The Government of India has a separate department of youth affairs and government schemes like National Service Scheme or National Literacy Scheme or tree planting schemes that have elaborate provisions for youth volunteer service. Due to deforestation and climate change issues, there has been greater realisation for planting trees and preserving the local ecology. Youth come in large numbers to facilitate such government and NGO (Non-government organizations) initiatives through volunteer service. National Service Scheme is for volunteer service among the youth. School and college students avail of this opportunity as part of their extra-curricular activities. It helps youth volunteers to engage in various types of volunteer service and understand the spirit of volunteer work. It helps a great deal in their attitude and character formation (Government of India, 2019).

BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE

Volunteerism in fact comes through an altruistic work spirit and a selfless service approach. Through volunteer work, an individual is able to develop empathy and concern for others. They work for change in their neighbourhood and in the community. Volunteer service can bring change by improving many situations around. Such change can be a source of joy and satisfaction to the volunteers. Service and volunteer work enables a person to forget oneself and immerse in working for helping others and thus contributes in removing stress and strain; thinking of others' needs works towards removing mental depression, and when one has the habit of worrying too much about and thinking of oneself. In some ways it is therefore a cure for many psychological problems faced by people.

Volunteer service started at a young age has added benefits. As the youth grow older, studies show they are more responsible citizens and concerned about social causes and committed to many social issues. Therefore as adults also their volunteering service attitude grows, and their concern for others and social problems gives them better understanding as more balanced adults. As balanced adults, with experience of volunteer work in their growing years, they also become an asset to their community. They become dependable in times of need and crisis and socially they are respected for their work and contribution to the society. (Marzana, D. Et al., 2015).

Human beings are mostly looking for happiness and well-being. They search for joy and happiness in everything they do. It is observed that the educational system, giving emphasis on percentage and marks obtained, getting better positions in competitive environments of classrooms and carrying it to work in organizations, there is bound to be despair when that success in cut throat competitions is not achieved. Happiness remains ephemeral. However, service without expecting anything in return is what gives value to work. Those who volunteer work provide service that gives them satisfaction. The volunteer gets nothing in return but the joy and happiness derived from seeing others – the people in need receive that service and express their gratitude; they are full of sorrow or pain and hurt feelings and the timely help rendered to them changes their life; they feel sometimes that God had sent the volunteer to wipe out their tears and they brim with gratitude and thankfulness. For the volunteer seeing

this drastic change on the face of humanity is like a miracle and they too rejoice in the whole phenomenon of service. Helping someone in need gives satisfaction to the volunteer. Happiness and joy emanate from the cheer that volunteer work brings to humanity. Volunteer service by removing or mitigating stress also improves health. Increased sense of well being is a significant result. (Thoits, P.A. and Hewitt, L.N., 2001).

DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND VOLUNTEER SERVICE

When disasters strike volunteers play a crucial role. In emergency situations many more people come forward for volunteer work since needs of people may be severe and rescue work would be required. Helping old people who cannot manage without help, or the sick, or those injured in an earthquake situation or even in the present lockdown situation during COVID 19. Often, at the site of the floods or earthquake for instance, the person who sees a victim under the rubble crying for help is moved and rushes to help. Often along with rescuers who come to the disaster spot, locals or standbys jump into the team to facilitate rescue work. Rescue, relief and rehabilitation attract a number of volunteers who wish to serve suffering humanity.

In these critical times when COVID-19 is a pandemic and affecting all countries globally, the issue of poverty and needy people and how to help them is important. The governments are fully seized of the problem and are doing their part. NGOs, and even families and individuals, corporate, celebrities, and many more are also doing their bit. Seeing the pathetic situation of migrant workers returning home and/or stranded, or slum dwellers, or the poor, many volunteered to serve food and shelter. The pain had overwhelmed everyone. Automatically, the natural instinct, in most people as to 'how can I help' in this situation became the foremost thought. Volunteer work, willingly, for no monetary compensation came to the fore. We find someone is organizing free food for the poor in a nearby village; the gurudwaras are serving food for displaced persons who could not reach their homes; still other NGOs are accepting donations to serve in specific localities. The Govt also has opened channels for receiving donations from people in PM CARES Fund, to address medical needs and related issues on problems arising from the pandemic of COVID 19.

VOLUNTEER SERVICE IN HEARTFULNESS CENTRE

At the Heartfulness (HFN) centre in Hyderabad, meditation is the fulcrum around which are woven a number of activities. The spiritual values and ideals are taught in a practical way. It was observed that many members come to HFN Centre to do volunteer work. Some volunteered in construction activities like meditation hall and buildings coming up in the HFN Centre. Many volunteers with skills in organic farming initiated the plan of starting an organic farm. Food and Dining work including cleaning in the large kitchens catering to delegates coming for seminars in large gatherings attracted volunteers in large numbers. The spirit of the Heartfulness centre revolved around the idea of service. Heartfulness meditation practise precisely helped the practicant to shed off his self orientation and develop service attitude which meant look to others needs first and developing an attitude of helping others through volunteer work.

The youth coming to HFN Centre in Hyderabad undergo training for a week and get an opportunity to meditate, live in a community and offer volunteer service of their choice. Sometimes youth who even volunteer to come for the training program have some volunteer work experience. While participation in service becomes more of fun and joyful activities for the youth, the impact of service in the HFN centre helps the youth to understand values associated with volunteer work.

During the pandemic when migrant labour was on the move back home towards the rural areas from the metros and big cities, the role of volunteer service expanded. Experienced volunteers in HFN Centre of Hyderabad contributed their mite in the overall needs of their city. Along with the Postal department the HFN centre was able to provide food packets hygienically prepared and neatly packed to the moving migrant labour, sometimes on the highways as they walked on their long on foot journeys to their homes.

VALUES

It is pertinent to observe and note the values that are behind the concept of volunteer work. It is done willingly. Therefore one likes to do it. Many have skills in that area or willing to develop skills in any area of interest. It involves helping other persons, and the feelings of empathy, consideration for others are evoked. Values of compassion and empathy are possible only if there is a generosity of heart, there is a joy in giving, whether something for the needy, or just a smile or

a donation for a good cause. Volunteers embody qualities of kindness, appreciation and understanding of other's needs; there is a concern for the good of others, there are feelings of caring, and sharing what one has with others; there is patience and a helpful attitude. In a way this brings out certain characteristics about the values that are part of a volunteer and these qualities are based on values of honesty, truthfulness, humility, being accommodative, tolerance, forgiveness, love, cooperation, unity, togetherness, promoting sense of belonging, selflessness without which the idea of helping or sharing as a volunteer would not arise. Therefore volunteer work promotes brotherhood, eschews greed and avariciousness, creates an atmosphere of respect for others' feelings, needs etc. Volunteers therefore value human life, welfare of others. They eschew hatred, anger, jealousy, selfishness, or even a hoarding attitude as they are more willing to even part with what is their own. In fact the volunteers do work to help others because it gives them satisfaction that they are able to serve.

An interesting Heartfulness meditation webinar brought out many aspects of human approach to volunteer work. Serve to deserve shows the highest levels to which volunteer work contributes to human achievements, that by giving one receives, as the famous words of Saint Francis of Assisi resonates. In volunteer work to help others in need, there is a sensitivity that is there in the service offered, awareness of the needs of others. In reducing the self and caring for others, there is also the possibility of forgetting oneself and all problems, physical illness, mental stresses in life that one faces, psychological feelings of shyness, or simply a closed attitude, can all evaporate.

Volunteering also helps to change the attitude of other people when they see volunteers doing work selflessly and with joy. Volunteering can be contagious, in a sense. As a result, others who watch volunteers also adopt same habits of contributing and doing volunteer work.

PHILOSOPHY OF SERVICE

The faculties and resources at the command of a person are to be utilised for service according to Ram Chandra of Shahjahanpur. Service is to be taken as a step in the direction of devotion. Both the physical body and mind can be used by an individual for service. The physical body does the service because the mind propels them to do it. The feelings of sympathy and love make the service as right action. Its absence only implies a sense of mere formality and associated

with selfish intentions and motives and cannot be counted as service. Motives if honest and sincere can be considered service in the real sense. Therefore service can be considered as part of one's duty and it should be done with love (Ram Chandra, 1992). In fact the service one renders should be spontaneous.

SERVICE FOR HUMAN INTEGRATION

Volunteer service brings together humanity. The needy people attract the attention of the volunteers who then serve them. Different groups, individuals and organizations may need volunteers for different reasons at different times. The coming together of those who need and those who serve bridges the gap and reduces the sufferings of humanity. It shows concern for the human race. It exhibits humanity, the heartfelt approach to human beings. It is the basic human instinct and must be preserved for humanity to survive the natural disasters and man-made disasters that threaten the world and planet earth. All challenges that human beings face can be addressed through the spirit of volunteer service. Thus humanity can work as an integrated unit to protect itself and all creation on earth and thus live with respect and dignity to one and all. Human integration can be achieved with this form of give and take and sharing between human beings that can help in the understanding and growth of the human race.

CONCLUSION

Volunteer work is service rendered to others in society, voluntarily for a cause, without any monetary remuneration for the service. An individual volunteer derives many benefits from it. The values that a volunteer possesses and values that a volunteer learns and imbibes through such service make for a balanced person. They then become more responsible persons and can contribute to a harmonious society. Volunteer service as part of disaster management is no doubt crucial but during normal times also can be useful to society and can promote well-being in the community. It is of great value to overcome the problems being faced by society in modern times, in terms of both physical and mental health. It would be an asset to the individual and the community and society at large if it becomes part of one's everyday life.

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