

Youth and Civic Engagement in India: A Case Study of National Service Scheme of India

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Abstract- *Acquiring behaviour and attitudes that express youth's will to get involved in their community in accordance with democratic principles is civic engagement. An attempt is made to critically look at the youth and their civic engagement to find out whether there is a connect or disconnect between them and civic engagement.*

Key Words: Civic Engagement, National Service Scheme

Introduction

Civic engagement involves, according to Erlich, “working to make a difference in civic life of one's community and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make the difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” (Erlich, 2000) Political activism, environmentalism and community and national service, both paid and unpaid, are included in civic engagement. (Michelsen et. al., 2002).

Importance of Youth

Every country depends on the young population as they are considered to be the future of the nation. This is the case with youth of India. There are 315 millions of young people aged 10-24 years in India representing 30 per cent of country's population. This population is considered to be the most potential weapon as they have the potential to build the nation. They are the most dynamic and energetic population. This is possible only if they are motivated and directed in the right way.

To have a vibrant democracy, youth need to be engaged as citizens. Youth civic engagement focuses on issues related both to healthy development and the health of our democratic society. Youth of today lack interest, trust and knowledge about Indian policies and public life in general. The primary reason responsible for

this sad state of affairs is lack of opportunities youth have for meaningful involvement in the civic life of their communities. Thus youth is an overlooked resource. The need of the hour is to have now, authentic avenues for youth participation and influence.

National Service Scheme (NSS)

In India, the idea of involving students in the field of national service is not new. It dates back to the time of the British rule in India. During the freedom movement, Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Nation, tried to impress upon his student audience, time and again, that they should always keep before them their social responsibility. He used to advice them to have a living contact with the community where their institution is located. Asked students instead of undertaking academic research with regard to socio-economic disability, they should do “something positive so that life of the villagers might be raised to a higher material and moral values.”

The post-Independence era was marked by an urge for introducing social service for students, both as a measure of educational reform and as a means to improve the quality of educational manpower. Towards this end, a suggestion was made that we should introduce national service in the academic institutions on a voluntary basis, with a view to develop healthy and meaningful contacts between the students and teachers on the

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one hand and to establish a constructive linkage between the campus and the community on the other hand. A number of governmental committees/commissions considered and debated the issue of developing a feasible scheme of social service by students.

On 24 September 1969, the Government of India launched the National Service Scheme (NSS) in 37 universities covering all the states of India. At present it is under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India. The NSS, now covers all the states and universities in the country as well as +2 level institutions in many states. Starting with an enrolment of 40,000 students in 37 universities, the coverage of NSS students increased to more than 3.75 crores in 298 universities and 42 +2 Senior Secondary Councils and Directorate of Vocational Education. During its 43 years of existence a large number of students have benefitted from this student volunteership programme in the country.

The cardinal principle of the NSS is that it is organised by the students themselves and both students and teachers, through their combined participation in social service, get a sense of involvement in the task of national development.

The NSS is a student-centered programme and it is complimentary to education. It is an experiment in academic extension. It inculcates the spirit of voluntary work among students and teachers through sustained community interaction. It brings academic institutions closer to the society. It is a link between the campus and the community, the college and village, knowledge and action. It is designed to create an awareness on current issues and alarm the future emergencies in the social phenomenon. The overall aim of the NSS is the personality development of students through community services. It gives an extension dimension to higher education system and orients the student youth to community services. The motto of the NSS is "NOT ME. BUT YOU". This expresses the essence of democratic living and upheld the need for selfless service and appreciation of another man's point of view and also show consideration for fellow human beings.

Community service rendered by NSS units, cover social aspects like adoption of villages for

intensive development work, carrying out socio-economic –medical surveys, setting up of medical centers, programmes of mass immunisation, sanitation drive, adult education programmes for the weaker sections of the community, blood donation, relief work during calamities, organising campaigns for eradication of social evils and popularisation of national objectives like nationalism, democracy, secularism, social harmony and development of scientific temper.

Each institution ie college or university has a NSS Unit. A teacher from the institution is the Incharge of the Unit. The Inchargeship has a fixed tenure: one or two years. With the beginning of the new academic session, enrolment drive for student volunteers is undertaken. Orientation programmes for the volunteers arranged. The Teacher Incharge in consultation with student volunteers and others chalk out the plan of the activities to be undertaken in the year. From time to time changes are made in the action plan in view of the changed environment.

Data Collection

Being an exploratory study it was decided to collect data for the study from 332 NSS volunteers, spread over the two academic years ie 2011-12 and 2012-13 from one NSS Unit of a College of University of Delhi. The socio-economic profile of the same is as under:

	2011-12 (152)	2012-13 (180)
Male	109 (71.7%)	136 (75.5%)
Female	43 (28.3%)	44 (24.4%)
Humanities and Social Scs. Stream	89 (58.5%)	66 (36.7%)
Science stream	63 (41.4%)	114 (63.3%)
Rural	30%	25%
Urban	70%	75%

All respondents were pursuing under-graduate courses of University of Delhi. All belong to 18-22 years age group.

Data was collected with the help of a questionnaire. Data was further substantiated by

having discussions with them.

Findings:

When we asked our respondents why they joined the NSS, they told us various reasons for doing so:

- a) College requirement 55% (M:40%;F:60%)
- b) To address problems of the society 10% (M:55%;F:45%)
- c) To learn 20% (M:40%;F:60%)
- d) Altruism 5% (M:45%;F:55%)
- e) For fun 10% (M:90%;F:10%)

Majority of the students joined the NSS because they regarded it as the requirement of the University/College. Contributing to society was not a priority of our respondents as only 15 per cent joined the NSS for altruism and to address the socio-economic and political problems being faced by the society. 20 per cent of our respondents joined because they believed that participation in the NSS activities will help them in learning and improving their skills and capabilities to successfully meet the challenges of life. Some of our respondents (10%) joined the NSS for fun. They were not serious and just wanted to enjoy their stay in the College by attending, not regularly, activities of the NSS Unit of the College.

It comes out clearly from the above analysis that students were not aware of the NSS Scheme: its importance and significance in the reconstruction of the society.

We asked our respondents what they gained by participating in the NSS? Their replies are as under:

- a) Helped in learning how to interact with their community 95% (M:55%;F:45%)
- b) Helped in developing the skills, values and sense of empowerment necessary to become active citizens 90% (M:40%;F:60%)
- c) Helped in becoming better informed about current events 85% (M:30%;F:70%)

It is quite clear from the above that participation in various activities of the NSS helped our respondents in many ways. It helped them in acquiring the skills and capabilities which will help them in their professional life. Interaction with the community will help them in

understanding the problems being faced by them and the possible solutions thereof. In short they will be informed and active citizens who will be working for the people.

We asked our respondent what they are going to do after their college studies are over? They replied as under:

- a) Will continue with their voluntary activities to help their community in the upcoming years 85% (M:60%;F:40%)
- b) Motivate students to join the NSS 70% (M:50%;F:20%)

It is quite clear from the above that substantial majority of our respondents would like to continue with the voluntary work to help their community. They will also motivate their juniors to join and actively participate in the NSS activities.

We further asked them how they will continue with their volunteer work in future. They told us that they will work with four types of voluntary organisations:

- a) Schools 90% (M:20%;F:80%)
- b) Political organisations 70% (M:70%;F:30%)
- c) Religious organisations 20% (M:95%;F:5%)
- d) NGOs 75% (M:40%;F:60%)

The most preferred organisation to work with was the ones which were engaged in education of children especially belonging to the disadvantaged sections of the society. Gender-wise more female respondents (80%), as compare to male respondents (20%), opted for teaching of children. On the other hand a large majority of our male respondents opted for working with political organisations. They were of the opinion this will help them in serving better their community as well it will help them to join political career. NGOs sector was preferred by three-fourth of our respondents. Gender-wise, more female respondents preferred to work with this sector. A good number of our respondents, both male and female, wanted to join and work full-time with this sector.

Twenty percent of our respondent opted to work with religious organisations. Gender-wise more male (95%) than female (5%) preferred this.

When further probed they told us that they were interested only in those organisations which are working in the field of upliftment of the society and not those organisation which are working for spread of one or other religion exclusively. This is quite satisfying in the sense that young people are able to make distinction between the organisations who work for development and the one work for spread of religion.

Use of Internet

Internet has become a major part of our society. It helped young to have what they want “on demand”. It is heartening to note that our sample respondents were not shy in using the internet, both for personal and the NSS work. A substantial majority, both male and female, used internet for carrying out NSS activities: to connect people, to collect information, to share and exchange, they information with select clientele, Internet provided a platform to share knowledge, ideas and to unite on various topics of national importance like corruption, inflation and poverty. Internet provides a vast amount of information but how reliable it is, one is not sure. Personal and institutional biases do influence collection and interpretation of the data being made available through the internet. Our respondents did come across this problem while using information gathered through the internet. They pointed out that the problem at the ground level was bit different from what was stated in the internet information.

What Next?

Youth from diverse backgrounds and experiences, who are not enthusiastic in joining the NSS in the College, should be encouraged to join the NSS. To do so, it is necessary to be sensitive and conscious in a diverse and multicultural society like India. To engage and motivate youth:

- a) Provide/engage in those activities that directly relate to community or youth needs.
- b) Teach critical skills through training, careful

supervision, addressing problem solving, leadership, teamwork and life skills.

- c) Use the services of former NSS volunteers in motivating youth.
- d) Logistical issues that may affect youth participation need to be properly addressed to. Such issues may include lack of transportation, conflict with college and work schedules, giving due weightage and appreciation of their work. Simple incentives like food can also make a difference.

Concluding Remarks

Education and empowerment of youth is closely linked. The future generation, must be equipped with the skills they need to succeed. The NSS is one of such programme that aims at helping the youth, to acquire necessary skills and capabilities so that they can play an important role in the reconstruction of the society. The NSS inculcates the value of “giving back” to the community, in the youth. By working in the community, they develop a variety of skills and gain new perspectives. It enables them to develop leadership skills, self-esteem and positive attachment to their communities. This will go a long way in enabling them to realise their full potential.

The rewards of a youth empowerment approach, like the NSS, are significant. It is essential to invest in youth empowerment as they are leaders of tomorrow and if opportunities are made available to put their natural abilities through creative and productive channels, they can go a long way to create a vast reservoir of wealth for the next generation.

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