

Representations of Volunteerism among Young Indian Adults: An Indian Philosophical Perspective

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Abstract

Volunteerism has been extensively studied in the global context and is very relevant in today's rapidly changing world with growing inequalities and pressing public health concerns. There is a growing need for community programmes involving collective action. Volunteerism is an integral part of community healing especially when a community involving large numbers of people have been psychologically and physically affected by traumatic events. Since volunteers are often a part of the affected community, the healing process involves both themselves and others. The present study used a quantitative content analysis framework to understand the representations young adults have of volunteerism. The participants were 22 volunteers from a specific urban local setting in India. A word association task was used to generate content associated with volunteerism. Content analysis of the word associations yielded 24 codes that were further abstracted to three categories or representations of volunteerism. The present research tries to contextualise the representations to the traditional Indian philosophy and community healing principles. The findings have implications for a holistic approach to collective well-being of communities, especially in the Indian context, where concepts like 'seva' and 'dharma' and '*Śramadāna*' encourage a form of reciprocal giving where one gains from others as much as in sacrificing their needs.

Keywords: representations, volunteerism, Indian traditions, seva, *Śramadāna*

Introduction

Volunteerism has been extensively understood as a practice of community engagement anchored in prosocial values. It represents an important social construct that has emerged out of the periphery into a mainstream element

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of civil society (Halba 2014; Synder & Omoto, 2008). Volunteers are present in every society, because they are an expression of human relationships and an integral part of individual and community well-being (United Nations Volunteers [UNV], 2016). Volunteer work has significant relevance to crisis events and recovery in a community, such as providing mental health support services through direct and digital collaborative networks (Roy & Ayalon, 2020; Singh et.al.2020), being first responders in natural disasters like flood relief (Leghu et al, 2023), forest fires (Eriksson & Danielsson, 2021), post-hurricane volunteering (Miller, 2020) and offering humanitarian assistance during crisis like war and displacement (Sengupta, et al, 2023). It is also widely recognised as a means to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and as an area for further research and knowledge development in the Global South (Hazeldine, et al., 2015). Recent reviews have shown the positive and unique benefits that volunteering provides in the domains of social, mental, physical, or general health to volunteers themselves, in addition to organisations and recipients and its complex interplay with demographic factors like age, gender, socio economic status employment status and religion (Nichol et al., 2023).

Volunteerism is also widely accepted as an important applied psychosocial process that is instrumental in personal wellbeing, social cohesion at community level and shared social resilience (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). However, these understandings are predominantly based on western paradigms focussing on individualism where it is more considered to be an individual's choice, civic contribution and altruism. Compared to this, in the Indian context, volunteering work is connected to traditional values which are deeper, value oriented and anchored in culturally grounded indigenous ethical frameworks and traditions of healing. The concept of volunteerism can be tied to the age-old traditional and philosophical concepts of seva -benevolent service; dana - giving without return or expectations and shramdaan- voluntary giving of service (Sanchez et al., 2017).

Traditional Indian Philosophy and Volunteering

Within the framework of Indian epistemic systems, volunteering acts go beyond the simple act of helping but serve as avenues for developing moral character, self-regulation and overall wellbeing. Canonical and spiritual works regularly depict volunteering as a mechanism of rising above the personal self, enhancing empathy and integrating the self with communal wellbeing (Radhakrishnan, 1951). In spite of the strong cultural underpinnings, there is a paucity of evidence-based research studies on how youth today comprehend and make sense of volunteer experiences guided by the traditional value frameworks and how these representations contribute to their development and wellbeing.

The principles of *seva* and *dana* have been integral elements of ethical and moral traditions in India, stressing on engagement driven by a sense of duty and not due to expected benefit. *Niskama karma*, a key principle in Hindu philosophy, explains the concept of *seva* as acting without any personal materialistic expectations from outcomes (Vyasa, 2015). Acts of selflessness are regarded as a pathway for purification of mind and heart and towards a sense of inner balance. The concept of *dana* is not just a donation due to surplus but is understood as conscientious giving, decreasing emotional dependence and fostering gratefulness and humbleness (Sharma 1983). Both *seva* and *dana* are closely related to emotional equanimity and communal cohesion.

The concepts of *seva* and *dana* represent intent and generosity whereas *sramadhana* as a concept draws attention to the physical engagement, efforts and personal experiences of service. Historically connected to Gandhian principles, grassroot movements of Bhoodan and Sarvodaya, *shramdhana* focusses on collective benefit (Gandhi, 1960). This practice inherently denotes healing through engaged action, situating effort, tenacity and collective labour as life changing experiences for people and their communities. Unlike utilitarian approaches to volunteering, *sramadhana* is about the journey and process of volunteering rather than the end outcome. There is a clear investment of physical and emotional selves whether in the activities of cleaning drives or working towards community building activities. The volunteering process involves volunteers to move out of their personal comfort spaces, cope with weariness, exhaustion, exasperation and unpredictability. Research indicates that committed, intentional engagement leads to building of regulation, self-efficacy and resilience (Bandura, 1997; Ryff & Singer, 2008). It functions as experiential learning that leads to wellbeing. The repetitive nature inherent in *Śramadhāna* encourages deeper reflections leading to increased self-awareness. Volunteering helps individuals to confront their own reactions, personal limitations and capabilities. This process driven engagement closely aligns with the eudaimonic framework for wellbeing emphasizing growth and progress through purpose and directed effort (Ryff, 1989) rather than focus on comfort.

The core of the values of *seva*, *dana* and *Śramadhāna* are giving up of self-interest and willingness to contribute effort without emphasis on accolades or personal benefits. It represents a psychological expansion rather than giving up related to loss. Indian traditional philosophies perceive curbing of self-centeredness (*ahaṃkāra*) as important for maintaining balance and wellbeing (Radhakrishnan, 1951). Recent psychological scholarship emphasises the role of reduced self orientedness and increased other-orientedness are associated with lower levels of depression, increased sense of life purpose and improved emotional health (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011). Through these traditional values of service, there is an experience of larger collective for the

youth leading to interconnectedness and sense of belonging. Both are crucial elements of mental health. *Śramadāna* signifies the importance of holistic wellbeing rather than fragmented development.

Social services, education and health services form a major portion of the 1.2 million facilities in the non-profit sector, and volunteers alone comprise around 3.4 million of the 19 million who are employed in it in the contemporary Indian context (Handy et al. 2011; Ghose & Kassam, 2014). Although India has an established reputation for the demographic strength of its population, its articulation of national legislation that provides a framework for policies, schemes, and infrastructure related to volunteering is lacking. Conceptualizations of volunteerism in policy narratives, representations in media or community-driven practices inform how society understands the ethical, affective and socio-cultural dimensions of volunteerism. Volunteer activity is embedded in culturally grounded worldviews and indigenous ethical paradigms (Hustinix & Meljs, 2011). Globally, it is being examined as a relational construct and value-based practice which goes beyond the individualistic philanthropy perspectives (Onuki & Okabe, 2025; Prouteau & Wolff, 2008). Representations of volunteerism differ across age groups, gender, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status in representations of volunteerism (Bonnesen, 2018; Lee et al, 2018; Weisinger, et al., 2015) and differ based on cultural orientation (Aydinli, 2015; Ibrahim et al. 2020).

Collectivism and volunteerism

Literature in volunteerism across disciplines has focussed on well-discussed individual characteristics (Omoto, Snyder, & Hackett, 2010) and benefits of volunteering (Chinman & Wanderman, 1999; Kragt & Holtrop, 2019, see review). Volunteerism is classified as one of the 'individual action components' of activities undertaken for other individuals and families, by the workforce of organizations within the Nonprofit sector, (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2018). In this regard the role of voluntary organizations (Bhatt, 1994) and volunteer outcomes related to it like commitment (Faletehan, 2021), satisfaction (Moore & Allan, 1996), community engagement (Mao, et al., 2020; Talo, 2018) and social capital (Mohajer, 2018; Morrow-Howell, 2010) have been found to have a direct impact on recruiting and sustaining volunteers. Volunteer organizations through which volunteers participate, also provide a formal context for a work-like experience (relevant for those in the early adulthood period establishing themselves in the workforce), but unlike paid employees, volunteers use more diverse interpretive frameworks for personal development and connectedness to others (McCallum, 2014).

Young people as social change agents

There are generational shifts in the ways young people participate in social and political activities related to social change, as their contexts are

characterised by a fragmentation of traditional institutions and increasingly unpredictable life trajectories that impact their identity development. Youth are hence choosing expressive forms of civic and political engagement, with an increasing desire to create their own paths and engage in meaningful participation in informal individualized and everyday activities, in contexts which are impacted by formal political change and diversity of practices (Harris, et al., 2010). In addition, volunteer groups are distinct in their goals, approaches and structures (organizational structure, size, roles offered, cultural and social context) (Chen et al, 2010; Nissen et al, 2023).

Present Study

Volunteerism is found to provide a meaningful link between helping and collective behaviour (Pillaiavin, 2010). Citizen initiatives in community development, nation building and participation in social movements have in recent times succeeded in creating large scale social change. It is important to know how volunteers perceive the interactions and identities that they create in relation to each other. This has been under-researched, especially in a collectivistic culture like India which emphasises group participation and community belongingness. Moreover, psychological explanations abound in motivational and emotional bases and outcomes of volunteerism to predict who volunteers and why. While researchers have explored this through the concepts of social capital (Forbes, et al., 2014), organizational identity (Zollo, et al., 2019) psychological sense of community (Omoto and Snyder, 2002) and neighbourhood activism (Gilster, 2012) they have explored this through quantitative methods. Hence the current study will use qualitative methods to obtain a deeper understanding of the social foundations of volunteerism. An effort to examine this through the lens of the current study, can help frame organisational and public policies that can support formal institutions. Young people are a population with the potential and inclination to participate in social change. The present study therefore aims to explore the representations of volunteerism among Indian youth, and its relation to their personal development and traditional Indian philosophy.

Method

Research design and paradigm

The present study uses a qualitative exploratory design within an interpretive framework, with ontological assumptions grounded in the social constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Sampling strategy and participant selection

Purposive sampling was used. 22 volunteers who were in the age range of 18-35 years, with continuous participation in onsite activities in an NGO,

for a minimum period of 6 months were selected for the study. Face to face interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data collection

A word association task adapted from the methodological approach used by Doise, Clemence and Lorenzi-Cioldi (1993, as cited in Clemence, 2001) as developed by the researcher to generate spontaneous and free associations of volunteerism from the participants. The task used 14 items (with a stimulus word) and multiple responses were invited from each participant. Participants were encouraged to use images and any vernacular words, apart from using English words and phrases. The data collection instrument was face validated by two academics who are experts in the field of social psychology. An informed consent form was used to inform the selected participants of the overall objectives of the research and the research process. It outlined issues related to confidentiality, voluntary participation, right to withdraw and risk and benefits of participating in the study. The study received ethics approval.

Data analysis

Summative and conventional approaches to Content analysis were useful for the current research objective. Based on the works of Krippendorff (2004) and Salton & Buckley (1988), four steps were followed: transcribing the data and grouping them into three sets based on similar lines of enquiry generating a word frequency using NVIVO 12 to arrive at a frequency count and weighted percentage and open coding to identify the latent meaning and themes of the word frequency count, sorting into categories. An iterative process was followed to check coding consistency. At the conclusion of this stage, the relationship between subcategories were also identified to combine and reduce to a smaller number of categories. An initial label for each category was developed and finally abstracted to a more complex label. This final step helped flesh out the various representations of volunteerism.

Results

Following are the results of the current study.

Table 1: Summary table of participant characteristics

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Male	10	45.45
Female	12	54.54
Employment status		
Employed	12	54.54
Student	8	36.36
Freelance	2	9.1

Participant attributes showed that the age of the 22 participants ranged from 18 to 32 years. Among them there were 10 males (45.55%) and 12 females (54.54%). About half of the participants were employed (54.54%) while 8 were students (36.36%) and the rest were freelancers (9.1%).

A quantitative content analysis was done to explore the representations of volunteerism among Indian youth. The results in the following tables show five overarching categories with several sub categories capturing the recurrent meaning patterns. The three categories explaining the representations of volunteerism in relation to their personal development are. (a) Core conceptions of volunteerism, (b) Personhood of volunteers, (c) Drivers of volunteerism. The cluster analysis that has been performed began with a word frequency query, and subsequently it was researcher driven in terms of manual clustering of questions and segregation of verbal responses based on assigning meaning and interpretation. This is in alignment with the research paradigm. The numerical weighted percentage is used to further interpret the data in terms of what is given most weightage within the construction of a cluster or representation.

Table 2: Core conceptions of volunteerism (*Category 1*)

Category	Codes	Data extracts	Total number of similar coding references	Total weighted percentage of combined coded references
1	Actions (S1)	Helping, serving, giving	23	26.14
	Beliefs (S2)	Service, choice, proactive, believe	15	15.23
	Self (S3)	Self-driven, selfless, journey, realisation, purpose, redemption	17	14.15
	Object (S4)	Animals, cause, society, injured	8	9.79
	Institutions (S5)	Specific name of organization, centres	14	9.78
	Emotions (S6)	Happiness, satisfaction, care	9	9.78

Core conceptions of volunteerism which is the first category, described aspects of the phenomenon of volunteerism. For the first subcluster (S1), with reference to what constitutes the core nature of volunteerism, participants clearly identified “Helping” as the main anchoring word, in terms of both highest occurring response and total weighted percentage. “Service” and related synonyms formed the core of the second subcluster (S2). For the

third subcluster (S3) the core anchoring word is being ‘self-driven’, and other self-related words are mentioned to a lesser degree and are indirect. In the fourth subcluster (S4), volunteers who worked with a specific beneficiary clearly identified the label for it, but most participants used general labels to describe the beneficiary. Finally, although the number of codes generated are higher for fifth subcluster (S5) - Organization, the weighted percentage is the same as the sixth subcluster (S6)- Emotions. This indicates that the latter had a more uniform response by a number of participants, while the responses were more varied for the subcluster of Organization.

Table 3: Personhood of volunteers (*Category 2*)

Category	Codes	Data extracts	Total number of similar coding references	Total weighted percentage of combined coded references
2	General person (S1)	Active person, simple, plain, helping hand	30	33.58
	Ideal person (S2)	Mother Teresa, Saikrishna, Genuine person, inspiration	11	18.94
	Familiar people (S3)	Volunteer group, leader, colleagues, husband	21	18.06
	Self (S4)	My own interest, apart from me	2	1.72
	Organization (S5)	Name of specific organization, school, college	11	9.48
	Gender (S6)	Man, irrespective of gender	2	1.72
	Beneficiaries (S7)	Specific beneficiary label	1	0.86

The second cluster which presents the personhood of volunteers focuses on how volunteers are represented as persons and consists of 4 subclusters. The first subcluster (S1) represents the volunteer as a person and has both the highest number of coding references and total weighted percentage. Within this, there is a greater reference to the volunteer as a general person. The second subcluster (S2) has multiple references to the ideal person who acts as an inspiration. Thirdly, in the third subcluster (S3), friends who form part of the immediate volunteer group are mentioned by many participants, however volunteers who are familiar to the participant are considered as the second most significant representation. In the fourth subcluster (S4), most of the references are with regard to the participants who refer to themselves

as the volunteer in this subcluster. The fifth subcluster (S5) refers to the organization the volunteer is associated with. The sixth subcluster (S6) shows the association participants make with the gender of the volunteer (either as a male or not taking gender into consideration), emerging as a third most significant representation of volunteer and finally the seventh subcluster (S7) represented beneficiaries, and this could indicate that participants represented the people who were benefited and supported by the volunteer.

Table 4: Drivers of volunteerism. (*Category 3*)

Category	Codes	Data extracts	Total number of similar coding references	Total weighted percentage of combined coded references
5	Cause (S1)	Education, elders, animals, environment	91	19.12
	Personality traits (S2)	Dedication, generous, connect	91	18.3
	Motives (S3)	Passion, impact, interest, validation, ego,	77	18.2
	Emotions (S4)	Happiness, satisfaction, compassion, anger	58	12.67
	Activity (S5)	Skills, facilitating, helping hands, working hard, interacting	53	11.03
	Scope (S6)	Whole, beyond events, boundaries, larger, numbers	45	7.4

The last representation is drivers of volunteerism. This category captures the key factors that drive an individual towards volunteerism. Since the questions were more concrete and specific, there is greater clarity in the responses in how participants represented each subcluster under this category. The results show that the main driver of volunteerism is the cause towards which they want to volunteer for the first subcluster (S1) both in terms of coded references and weighted percentage. Personality of volunteers for the second subcluster (S2) and motives of volunteers for the third subcluster (S3) have numerous references as well. Emotions associated

with volunteerism for the fourth subcluster (S4) , nature of volunteering activity for the fifth subcluster (S5), and scope of volunteering the sixth subcluster (S6) are more or less similar in comparison, however within this combination of dimensions , emotions has the most identifiable association which is happiness, compared to activity and scope, which have more varied responses. Overall, the weighted percentage helps us identify the various aspects of a given representation, and they are to be considered relative to one another. Taken together they show what represents the nature of the phenomenon of volunteerism.

Discussion

The results of the study revealed three interrelated categories as representations of young adults on volunteerism. The identified categories capture the foundational meanings associated with volunteerism wherein volunteers are understood as morally grounded and relational persons and the drivers for their engagement in volunteerism. Together, the categories represent a coherent framework to understand the cultural narratives of volunteerism.

The first category which emerged as a result was the core representation of volunteerism. This category highlights how the participants articulated the defining characteristic of volunteerism through the meaning ascribed to it and the results align well with the Indian traditional philosophies of service. The total weighted percentage indicates that participants represent volunteerism as an other-oriented phenomenon (S1 & S2), which is individually-driven (S3). Representations are to a relatively lesser extent in terms of object (S4), organization (S5) and emotions (S6), However, in terms of significance to this representation, volunteerism is represented with positive emotions, clearly identifying beneficiaries need to be helped and association with the organization as also evidenced by research studies (Geng et al., 2022; Paxton et al., 2020). Representations of volunteer as a person, describes who is considered to be a volunteer. Participants also identified the volunteer as a person associated with the beneficiary. The salience of 'helping' as a central term highlights a socially embedded and practice-oriented representation of volunteerism, strongly resonating with the traditional Indian concept of 'seva' wherein aiding others is regarded as a moral imperative rather than utilitarian act (Pandya, 2014). The core significance of 'service' and its various other synonyms in the second subcluster of the results further enhances this core representation reflecting historically rooted culturally informed accounts wherein 'service' is regarded as a channel for ethical values and communal harmony (Lv et al., 2024). The appearance of 'self-driven' as an important third sub cluster points to a moral system ingrained in one's belief system in line with ideas of 'dharma' and self-directed moral engagement wherein values driven behaviour stems

from inner beliefs rather than forced compliance (Srivastava et al., 2013). The fourth sub cluster indicates those receiving support are represented with an inclination towards general framework rather than specific labels. This points to an abstract, universal perspective to 'helping' corresponding to values of compassion (*karuṇā*) and diminished self-other boundaries (Ho et al., 2021). The results of this category also indicate that organisational contexts enable volunteer behaviour while emotional states also remain important. The concept of '*śramadāna*' in traditional Indian philosophy also symbolizes this balance of structured collective action coexisting with lived emotional experiences indicating volunteerism as a collective organised social action with a moral fabric.

The second category which emerged in the results is personhood of volunteers which offers understanding of how today's young people envision volunteers. The first sub cluster which emerged under this category highlights how volunteers are represented as persons indicates a differentiated hierarchy of representations ranging from a generic volunteer to inspirational persons, to friends and families to one's own representation. This continuum reveals a culture-based grounding in comprehending moral role models and exemplar behaviour suggestive of traditional Indian texts that highlights the fostering of the value of dharma through observing and adopting other role models (Srivastava et al., 2013). The representation of self as a volunteer is consistent with the tenet of assimilating ethical behaviour wherein unselfish involvement or *seva* emerges as a journey towards personal development, resilience, wellbeing through meaningful living and development of ethical sensibilities (Webb et al., 2017). In a similar manner, the representation of organisations related with volunteers positions individual volunteer action within a wider social context relating to the principle of *Śramadāna* where service caters towards community welfare.

The third and fourth sub clusters which showed the associations of personhood with gender and the beneficiaries highlights the relational and equalitarian aspects of volunteerism. Gendered representations were lower, symbolizing that the values of '*seva*' and '*dhana*' are widely inclusive and accessible, strengthening equitable avenues for personal growth and development.

The fourth sub cluster denotes the importance of interdependence in societies wherein the well-being of other individuals in the community is not separable from personal growth and development. By drawing attention to the trajectory of sustained engagement in volunteering and its possible impact on its beneficiaries, results indicate that volunteerism as a cultural practice nurtures compassion, empathy, perseverance and holistic development of the volunteers showing that youth representations are closely aligned with traditional Indian philosophy offering spaces for inner growth and overall well-being (Geng et al., 2022; Paxton et al., 2020).

The third category which emerged in the results was drivers of volunteerism. This category highlights the motivation young adults have towards volunteerism. Overall, this representation shows that one of the key elements of volunteerism is having a cause to commit to which shows that the cognitive or ideological aspect of volunteerism is something that volunteers associate with spontaneously, followed by elements that focus on internal factors among volunteers namely personality, emotions and motives.

The importance given to the cause towards which they are volunteering reflects alignment with Indian philosophical tradition of dharma wherein one's behaviour is guided by moral commitment and greater good rather than individual gain. Significant inferences to the representations of personality and motives further indicate an innate tendency related to *svabhāva* and *niṣkāma karma*, wherein service is a result of intrinsic moral disposition (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). Among the affective responses, happiness came up as the most relatable emotional driver gathering support to the traditional view that self-transcendence and actions oriented towards it are more important than the goal itself (Liu et al., 2021). The responses participants gave related to scope of volunteerism was varied indicating flexibility in how participants engaged in volunteerism highlighting intent being more important than form in alignment with the traditions of *seva*. On the whole the results from this category convey volunteerism as driven by a sense of purpose, meeting the emotional needs and grounded in ethical frameworks embedded in traditional understanding of wellbeing.

Implications, Limitations and Scope

The current study has given insight on a pluralistic understanding of volunteerism focussing on social, moral, and spiritual dimensions. Volunteerism can be traced back to its roots in Indian philosophical traditions where it is often identified with collective responsibility, duty and self-transformation. In Western contexts, engagement in voluntary activities is largely conceptualized as an individual choice, often situated within formal and structured frameworks. In contrast, societies in the Global South emphasize both formal and informal forms of social engagement, which tend to unfold in more fluid and nonlinear ways. A culturally grounded understanding of these differing dynamics enables researchers to develop richer cross-cultural perspectives, thereby contributing meaningfully to the broader literature on volunteerism. Overall, the phenomenon of volunteerism can be conceptualized within the framework of traditional healing as something that contributes to overall well-being in a collectivistic framework.

The study however did have some limitations with regard to the researcher's access to volunteer database in the organizations. Moreover, participants did share very similar demographic characteristics in age, education, socioeconomic status and employment status that could have led to more homogenized representations of volunteerism.

Future research can be strengthened by also examining other behavioural and psychological dimensions associated with volunteerism. While the current study emphasised more on well-being, the empirical literature also abounds in volunteer compassion fatigue, burnout and emotional exhaustion. The framework of Indian philosophical tradition can be used to relook into how these negative effects of volunteerism can be addressed through concepts such as *vairagya*, *dharma* and other concepts covered in the present study.

Conclusion

Overall volunteers have a multidimensional representational understanding of volunteerism. The current paper has examined some of the dimensions that are central to volunteer well-being which provide meaningful pathways for overall personal growth and well-being. This further strengthens the social capital for communities in need in the Indian context, and emphasises how collective social action coupled with individual well-being can create transformative social change.

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