

Paper Presentation

Topic: Volunteering of Retirees

Senior Citizens and Volunteering

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Abstract

The aging of population is a worldwide, but recent phenomenon. Advancement in science, economic development, rapid expansion of health services, increased input of nutritional information along with social welfare and social security measures have resulted in increase in life expectancy. This has brought about a demographic transition leading to sharp increase in the population of the aged. This phenomenon was first experienced in developed countries of the West like the USA, UK, Europe and Japan in Asia and later in developing countries like China, India and Sri Lanka. Due to its experience and expertise accumulated during the years, the aged population should be viewed as a resource and its potential should be exploited in volunteering for development.

The aged can be divided into three categories – 60 to 70 years (young old), 70 – 80 years (middle or mid-old) and 81 years and above (old old). The doyen of old age volunteering in India, Lt.Gen. Pannu, also the man behind the success of Helpage India, has called the young old as 'effectively elderly' or the persons who can make a major difference to the volunteering by the seniors.

There is a need to have a nodal agency to coordinate and integrate the aged into volunteering. Senior Citizen's movement needs to be started in an organized manner. Government, private sector and the NGOs should come forward together and identify means to tap this vast resource.

With their expertise, the elderly can play a significant role in volunteering in different sectors like education, disaster mitigation and management, social welfare, health, rural development and employment under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. They can be best counselors for delinquents and young people engaged in substance abuse. They can also play a role as elders in the society and engage in numerous other services.

The world population during the twentieth century, particularly during the second half of it witnessed a fast and steady rise in the number of citizens whom we call retired or senior citizens. This phenomenon has been predominant in the developed countries of the West like the USA, UK, Europe and Japan in Asia, though this trend is also fast catching up in the developing countries like China, Sri Lanka and India. Soon it will become a worldwide phenomenon, so much so that in the USA it is expected that by the year 2050 the proportion of this group may outnumber the proportion of working age group people.

Advancement in science, economic development, awareness of the importance of nutritional requirements, rapid expansion of health services along with social welfare and social security measures have resulted in the increase in the life expectancy. Recognizing this trend some countries in the West as well as the East have raised the retirement age in some sectors such as education to 62 or 65. In India, too, the retirement age in the Government service was first raised from 55 to 58 years and later from 58 to 60 years. In education, it has been raised to 62 years.

This ever-increasing population is highly motivated towards volunteerism. There are various reasons for this motivation. Humans are born volunteers. However, due to some constraints during their early life, like carrier building or responsibility towards families, prevents them from putting that desire into practice. But when they have lived their lives in full, a time comes when they are more or less free from those young age constraints and they want to live for others to earn much satisfaction. In their eagerness to do something for their fellow human beings, particularly those who are in need of help, they show their capability to go to extraordinary heights in volunteering. This may also help them in their after-lives as many a religions believe. They may take to volunteering just for the fun of it or to effectively utilize their time.

According to the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report 2004 (UNDP HDR – 2004) in 2002, the percentage of population aged 65 years and above was 12.2 in USA, 18.2 in Japan, 16.4 in UK, 13.2 in Russia, 5.4 in Brazil, 7.1 in China and nearer home, 6.9 in Sri Lanka, 4.3 in Bhutan, 3.2 in Bangladesh, 3.7 in Nepal and Pakistan. Each and 5.1 in India. If we take into consideration the population above 60 years in India, it is more than 8 per cent of the total or in absolute numbers 80 to 85 million, a substantial figure to make the difference.

The most precious asset the aged possess is their vast reservoir of accumulated experience so long as their health and mental faculties do not deteriorate. They can make valuable contributions towards development and welfare of the community through engaging in volunteer activities. Skills and time of the aged is a national asset, which

should not be allowed to remain dormant, but should be harnessed in the national development process. While thinking about the utilization of the expertise and energies of the elderly, a distinction should be made between the capable and needy aged.

They can be separated into three age groups:

- **60 to 70 years** – They are still very active, full of life, positively inclined and feeling comfortable to utilize their experience and knowledge acquired in a period of time for noble causes. This group can be termed as ‘young old’.
- **71 to 80 years** – Not so vibrant, but having energy though somewhat subdued. However, their mental faculties are still active. Emotionally they might like to contribute to the betterment of the society. They can be regarded as ‘middle or mid old’.
- **80 years and above** -- Physically or emotionally weak, but at times alert. They will prefer service rather than serving others. They can be called ‘old old’.

Thus, the elderly can be both giver and taker of voluntary service. The most prominent role in this endeavor has to be played by the young old (60 to 70 years) generation. Lt. General Pannu (Retd), the brain behind Helpage India, has called them ‘effectively elderly’. It is necessary to devise ways and means to create an environment conducive for optimal harnessing of energies and expertise of these ‘effective elderly’ and use them as a resource for the betterment of the society.

Areas of volunteering

Value-based education – At a time when spiritual values are being eroded and children and their parents do not know much about our past history and culture and are being exposed to alien culture not in sync with indigenous wisdom, the elderly as repository of past culture and heritage can be helpful in imparting value-based education to children. The children should be taught about national heroes and role models.. For making it happen, history taught in schools should be above controversy and education should focus on the value system of a country so that the students of today grow up as responsible citizens of tomorrow.

In countries of South Asia, there is a need to widen vistas of education in the open mode so that the children belonging to the deprived sections of the society who have to work for their living, can also educate themselves. Even with 65 per cent literacy (according to 2001 census figures), India has an illiterate population of 350 million. The elderly can take up the task of educating the children and grown ups in their immediate

neighborhood, in city slums and nearby rural areas. The effort of the elderly will definitely help improve literacy rate many fold.

Peace in multi-cultural societies – In multi-cultural societies with numerous religious, ethnic, caste, cultural and regional groups with sects and sub-sects, there are bound to be differences which sometimes disturb peace and tranquility between persons belonging to different groups. There is one aspect of Asian culture – respect for elderly -- which raises hope of amicable settlement of disputes and making people live in harmony. This should be used to bring the elderly belonging to different groups on one platform and working for peace in multi-cultural societies. As they are worldly wise, they can act as friend, philosopher and guide to the young and inexperienced and can teach them to give space to the other point of view and help bring about plurality and harmony.

Disaster management – Being a storehouse of information, especially specialists like doctors, engineers, architects and builders, they can help enormously in formulating disaster mitigation and management plans and their implementation with the help of other volunteers. They can be the best trainers and help the young and middle-aged volunteers to have a long-term view of the whole work as it has been seen that while relief is a short term work, rehabilitation is a long drawn out process as it takes much bigger time to rehabilitate uprooted persons due to disasters.

Social welfare – The elderly can play an effective role in providing linkages between the homes being run for destitute women, children, handicapped and the aged. They can identify the persons in the local community to sponsor/adopt children from children's homes. They can also help in assisting and organizing street children. Running of old age homes, welfare of the handicapped and destitute women etc. are other areas of social welfare which could benefit from skills and energies of the elderly. Senior citizens can vigorously involve themselves in drug abuse prevention. They can identify drug addicts, counsel them and bring them to counseling/de-addiction centers and create awareness in this regard. They can be the best counselors for delinquents and young people engaged in substance abuse.

In the old-age homes, physical needs of the elderly may be met, but many-a-time an elderly person wants to say something, but there is nobody to listen to him. If the elderly volunteers spend sometimes with such inmates, they can help the inmates in relieving them of much of their mental burden and make them feel really happy and wanted. Bodies like Senior Citizens' Welfare Associations can provide a platform to the elderly where they can meet once or twice a month and discuss their problems. This will enable them to talk among themselves and help improve their quality of life.

Office bearers of RWAs – In the Indian national capital, Delhi, under the Bhagidari (participation) scheme, mostly elderly people are playing a constructive role as office bearers of various Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs). The RWAs share some of the civil responsibilities in their areas and help in solving problems like general cleaning,

maintenance of street lighting, resolving disputes among the residents and also help in solving family problems.

Can act as pressure groups – Recently, two private companies supplying electricity to Delhi were allowed 10 per cent hike in electricity rates by the Delhi Electricity Regulatory Commission (DERC) formed to act as a watchdog to oversee the working of these private electricity players. This, felt the RWAs, was unwarranted, as electricity supply had not improved. They advised their members not to pay the hiked amount to the companies at the time of payment of their electricity bills and at the same time took up the matter strongly with the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi. Ultimately, the Government had to roll back the hike.

Environment and ecology -- Due to industrialization and vehicular pollution, environment of the cities is being degraded. It does not mean that all is hunky dory with the rural areas. They are also feeling the heat due to indiscriminate use of agro-chemicals. This combined with excess use of irrigation water under the High Yielding Varieties Program has played havoc with the ecology of the rural areas as chemicals leach with seepage into the ground and make underground water unfit for human consumption. The elderly in the villages, who know much about sustainable agricultural practices, can tell a lot to the younger generation about balanced fertilization in conjunction with organic and bio-fertilizers and traditional water conservation practices.

Rural development and employment generation – In South Asia, problems of rural development are acute. There is a lack of electricity, potable drinking water, sanitation facilities, education, communication (roads, rail links and telecommunication) and healthcare. There is a great need for voluntary effort and the aged have a definite role to play in it by settling in the rural areas as young experts with school-going children are loath to go to the rural and semi-urban areas to work.

Health – The elderly could be involved in the provision of medical services, particularly health and nutrition education. It is well known that Primary Health Centers (PHCs) are under-staffed in some countries of Asia-Pacific region. The retired staff from semi-urban areas could be very meaningfully used as volunteers in the rural areas. They can also be helpful in taking up health education programs such as advocacy of immunization of children and expecting mothers, nutrition and diet, sanitation and provision of potable drinking water etc.

In some of the South-East Asian countries like Thailand, organized groups of senior citizens are inducted as Village Health Communicators (VHCs) and Village Health Volunteers (VHVs). They have proved to be highly effective in improving people's knowledge, attitudes and practices relating to primary health care and implementation of health care programs. In Thailand, old people's clubs are successfully demonstrating the value of complementary primary healthcare program.

Other services – Services of experts like farm scientists, management consultants and social scientists can be utilized for dissemination of new knowledge in the field of agriculture and related sciences, management of resources and preparation of projects for development. They can organize common services for those who are too old to do things for themselves like payment of electricity, water and telephone bills, shopping, taking them to hospital, management of old age homes and day care centers etc.

Role in HRD – Since the elderly are experts in their respective fields, their expertise can be utilized in human resource development, utilization and playing a leadership role in their countries. The major countries of South Asia – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – are highly populated and they have huge human resource which if not properly utilized can go waste. With proper training, it can be converted into a national asset. The senior citizens can be the best trainers and counselors for the youth and budding leaders of tomorrow.

National Senior Citizens' Service (NSCS)

In order to integrate the aged into volunteering, a Senior Citizen's Movement needs to be started in an organized manner. The starting point could be the establishment of voluntary organization of the aged at the National level to coordinate the efforts of such bodies at the local, district, state, regional and national level.

Conclusion

There is a lot the elderly can do for their fellow beings. They have to make a start. Sky can be the limit to their effort.

