

# NEWAGE Youth

Cover

## Helping others to help yourself

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**Sushmita Saha** highlights the rise of volunteerism among modern Bangladeshi youth and shows how the practice can better prepare volunteers to shine in their careers and life

Once Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had rightly said: 'The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others'. There is hardly any greater happiness than making a deprived soul smile with a service provided which involves no



self-interest, which is conceptually defined as 'Volunteerism.'

Today's youth have engaged themselves in a wide array of voluntary activities as the practice of volunteerism has increased among thousands of young university students in recent times.

'We volunteer to change the society,' says Najmus Sakib, vice president of Dhaka University Philanthropic Society. With a group of 60 volunteers and members, the society is engaged in various social activisms like aiding a poor fellow student in DU campus, providing funds for food for the students of a school at Bandarban, collecting and sending relief to Nepal after the devastating earthquake and more. 'The volunteers are the dedicated souls of the society. The urge to make the society a better place is what motivates us to serve people,' assures Najmus.

Whereas some people partake in voluntary activities as an expression of responding to humane calls, many step in to hone their skills, abilities and put some weight of experience on their resumes.

'Employability for youth is a problem in Bangladesh. Even after obtaining good CGPA or having proper references, many students do not get the desired job for lacking soft skills like problem solving, verbal

communication, and stress management. Soft skills are taught in different courses in the universities abroad, however, this is not completely true for our universities,' says Imran Newaz Khurshid, executive director and lead facilitator of Mind Mechanics, a leadership development institution.

According to him, 'Volunteerism is the only way a student can master soft and practical skills, hence a student should engage in voluntary activities right from the first semester of the undergraduate programme or even before.'

Extracurricular experiences are also a must admission requirement for most universities around the world. Bangladeshi students who seek to go abroad to pursue higher education often fail to stand out in their applications because Bangladeshi schools hardly emphasise on volunteerism, which is a major way of scoring high as far as extracurricular activities are concerned.

Md Mehedee Zaman Sonnet, president of BRAC University Film Club regards volunteerism a step-by-step learning process through which the doer learns to work in a team, communicate with a wide range of people, keep cool in adverse situations and eventually be a passionate leader. 'I worked as a volunteer in the convocation programme of BRAC University. When I earned adequate leadership skills, I was selected as the coordinator of hundreds of volunteers in the last convocation programme. So, this is not a one-day achievement,' he shares with New Age Youth.

While working in a club/forum of a university, the members/volunteers get to visit different corporations for making sponsorship deals. 'Basically, they get a glimpse of the corporate sector before being a part of it, which adds value to the credibility of a student,' elucidates Syeda Maisha Ali, team leader of Creative Core, Young Economists' Forum, North South University.

A comprehensive exposure to voluntary activities distinguishes a fresh graduate from other applicants. It provides the experienced ones a competitive edge over the ones who do not have experience of voluntary work under his/her belt. 'The voluntary experiences in my profile helped me look more competent and capable while I was being evaluated in the recruitment process,' explains Juthi, who has recently secured an internship in the Bangladesh office of United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

But even though volunteerism is supposed to create a win-win situation for all parties involved, there are reports of some questionable practices in this field. Many corporations call for volunteers and assign them activities which do not fall under the range of voluntary activity. These corporations or profit-oriented firms try to get a job done economically by engaging volunteers instead of hiring professionals who would cost more. Juthi Ahmed conveys New Age Youth about such an experience where a local radio station had called for volunteers for a certain period, and assigned them tasks which should otherwise be conducted by a permanent employee of the station.

However, focusing on the positives, Mehedee says, 'I got a promotion within a short time after joining my current job, thanks to my years of voluntary work experience.' He is currently working as a manager (Marketing & Training), at Mohammed Food & Allieds, a firm that runs Pizza Inn and Spice Chicken in Bangladesh.

The impact of involvement in voluntary activities on a student's overall development is beyond a shadow of a doubt; however, proper selection of voluntary involvement plays a role here. 'The essence of volunteerism does not only confine to personal improvement of the volunteer. A volunteer must evaluate the voluntary opportunity ahead of him/her to see if the task matches with his/her particular skills or the skills that s/he wants to develop,' says Imran.

The university clubs are making a remarkable contribution in the voluntary practice of Bangladesh by creating a bunch of volunteers every year who dedicate their skills and labor in club events, university

events or national events. However, an unscrupulous practice of a small group of students regarding joining a university club just to get the perks of having the nametag of the club in the CV but not willing to have an active participation – is evident. In this way, neither they devote themselves to self-improvement nor do they do anything beneficial for the community.

‘In the selection process of members/volunteers, we give them a form to fill up in which the level of dedication they are willing to offer the club is well reflected. Besides, getting a club’s name in the CV does not really help a person unless s/he demonstrates his/her share of activities during the period of stay in the club,’ explains ASM Riad Arif, president of Film Club at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

In order to curb such practices among students, the authority of ULAB ensures that no students be certified from any club unless s/he attends six events of the respective club or is involved actively in the club activities for three subsequent semesters.

Many students take interest in club activities which are completely different from their respective disciplines and hence join the club as member/volunteer. ‘A Club requires the active functioning of many departments like marketing and PR, finance and the likes besides their core activities. Many engineering students join film clubs because some of them are genuinely interested in this area and some of them want their soft skills to improve by organising events or communicating with a wider range of people because these are the skills which students from any discipline must muster prior to stepping in the real world,’ Mehedee says.

The concept of volunteerism is relatively new in Bangladesh, therefore, it has still a long way to go. ‘In a developing society like ours, it takes time to get the cherished result. We have yet to implement far-ranging voluntary activities to make a bigger change in the society and with the vibrant bunch of youth, this is surely possible,’ asserts Imran.