

Young Volunteers

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI

Nonprofit organizations help youngsters promote social change and realize their potential through innovative programs.

A sharp breeze cuts through the swaying grass but fails to dampen the enthusiasm of a bunch of students from New Delhi's Sanskriti School as they take off their shoes and wade into the Yamuna River on a cold December morning. They have come to chart the course of the river and understand how its relatively clean water turns totally murky as soon as it enters the city.

Vimlendu Jha, who designed this course on environment education for three schools in New Delhi, rolls out the shocking facts—more than three billion liters of chemical waste and untreated sewage get dumped each day into the Yamuna, the source of 70 percent of the city's drinking water. The responsibility for cleaning it up, he says, lies not only with the government but also with common people like you and me.

The awareness trip is part of Bridge the Gap, an environment education course running in Vasant Valley, Shri Ram and Sanskriti schools in New Delhi. Bridge the Gap tries to help students understand their ecological environment and develop a sense of responsibility for it. "We work with rich schools from where we earn our resources and spend it in poor schools where we do it for free," says Jha, explaining the cross-subsidizing format.

After graduation from New Delhi's St. Stephen's College in 2000, Jha postponed further studies in order to launch the We for Yamuna campaign. Disgusted with the condition of the river, he started the movement with 10 people to create awareness about how the Yamuna was being polluted and what needed to be done to clean it up. Within a few months, they were able to mobilize more than 500 volunteers.

The organization has now grown into a full-fledged NGO called Swechha—We for



Vimlendu Jha tells students from New Delhi's Sanskriti School how the Yamuna River gets polluted.



Change Foundation, which is active in the fields of environmental conservation, empowerment and social consciousness. Swechha has engaged with more than 5,000 young volunteers in the past six years. “One form of volunteering is when we work for you or for your cause. The other form is when volunteers are given a message and they take it forward on their own. It’s a very interesting model where the target of change becomes the vehicle of change,” says Jha.

Among the many organizations promoting social change through youth volunteerism is the New Delhi-based Pravah. Started in 1992 by a group of young professionals, it works with students as well as teachers to build social responsibility. Its programs enable young people to understand and debate social issues.

Pravah’s SMILE program (Students

four to six weeks outside the capital.

Swechha’s programs are driven forward by enthusiastic youngsters, too. “Young people just need the right platform and somebody needs to channel their energy,” says Jha, who is 27. “One very important thing we do in most of our volunteering programs is that we try to make people realize their self-worth—who am I, how am I different, what is my potential and where do I place myself in society.”

Self-development is a key element of volunteerism and participants are often driven by the desire to bring about positive changes in their surroundings. In the process, they learn to work in groups and to communicate. While many do it just to help the less fortunate or spread a social message, volunteering has also become a good way for students to build up their resumes,

tributed saplings throughout New Delhi and encouraged people through street plays to rejuvenate the city’s green cover. The program includes an informal school, called the Pagdandi School, run by university student volunteers who teach children in slums and promote awareness about sanitation and health. Swechha’s music band, Jigri, gives voice to its message of social responsibility.

Jha also takes school students on four-day exposure trips to rural areas to make them aware of the symbiotic relationship between urban and rural India. One such trip to Mussoorie in September taught Ameesh Bhatnagar of Shri Ram School the basics of rural life. Staying with the villagers and helping out with their daily chores made him “appreciate the privileges I was accustomed to and how urban society is dependent on village resources,” he says.

“Mahatma Gandhi talked about how there’s enough for everybody’s need but not enough for somebody’s greed. For us, success means as much as you can consume and waste. But is that ideal for our planet, is that ideal for our social institutions? That’s what our programs talk about,” says Jha.

Pravah’s rural exposure trips for urban schoolchildren help them break stereotypes and understand concepts like sustainable development and equitable distribution of resources. At times, these camps also turn into revelatory experiences for the volunteers looking after the students.

Neha Buch, a volunteer at one such camp in Wardha, Maharashtra, remembers a quiet girl from New Delhi’s Sanskriti School who mostly kept to herself. On the last day, Buch saw the girl making a temporary road in the village. To her surprise, she saw this girl carrying a basket of cow dung, laying it on the path, leveling it with her hands and then jumping up and down to press the dung into place. Buch still hasn’t forgotten the look of pure joy on the girl’s face. “That was the first time I felt at peace.... The reason why I was doing what I was doing sank in. I know each person has a true potential. They just need a chance to realize it,” she says.

Pravah’s SMILE program is divided into three stages that encourage the volunteers to learn from each other’s experiences. As a first step, they meet and bond with their fellow volunteers. In the next stage, they are taken out of New Delhi for three to six



Courtesy Vinitendu Jha

Students from New Delhi schools take part in a drive to clean up the Yamuna River on International Volunteers Day on December 5, 2006.

Mobilisation Initiative for Learning through Exposure) helps people aged 17 to 25 volunteer with urban and rural NGOs, address social issues through youth clubs and influence public opinion through campaigns. The program is operational in 15 colleges in New Delhi and 22 other cities in India.

Whether it is street plays to raise awareness about civic responsibilities or initiating dialogues on sexual harassment in public transport, the youngsters spread the message with creativity and enthusiasm. Each volunteer is expected to put in at least 80 hours of work in New Delhi and spend

learn new skills or make contacts that can help them in their careers.

Sushant Arora, a SMILE volunteer, was part of the team that made the short film *It Matters* for the 2003 campaign Operation Ballot Box, to encourage young people to vote. “The film stands out as one experience that not only allows me to boast about having made a film in the very first year of my graduation studies, but also gives me an edge over others in terms of the knowledge I gained in the process,” says Arora.

Swechha’s programs also tap youthful energy in different ways. Last year the Monsoon Wooding program brought together more than 200 young volunteers who dis-

International Visitor Leadership Program: <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/ivp/>



Above: Pravah's student volunteers from New Delhi help villagers in Rajasthan with their daily work. Left: Volunteers from Pravah stage a street play on the right to shelter in front of a multiplex in New Delhi.

weeks where they get a chance to connect with other communities and learn about their social realities. The concluding stage is one of reflection, where the young participants share their experiences.

An extension of Pravah's involvement with youth is the Bridging Universities to Societies initiative with Ashoka Innovators for the Public, based in Arlington, Virginia, in the United States. The initiative promotes entrepreneurship among youth and students in India.

On a visit to the United States under the State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program in 2005, Jha learned how voluntary organizations in America engage with young people on issues of ecology. "I learnt a lot, traveling to different

places, understanding different cultures, understanding different ways of looking at things. The IVLP program was quite an eye-opener," he says.

The journey indeed is most often one of self-discovery and realization. Journalist Newly Paul from New Delhi, who went on a Pravah awareness trip to Shahbad village in Rajasthan as a college student, says, "All these years I had read of poverty, drought and illiteracy as chapters in a book. But this exposure has changed my views completely. Each of these words is now alive for me—associated with those hopeful faces that I saw in the village."

Sweta Roy Kashyap, research fellow with the Indian Agricultural Research Institute in New Delhi, took up voluntary

work in Bihar's Munger district with the Self Employed Women's Association, looking for "real satisfaction and an opportunity to work directly with people." Though she complains about the entry of people without the necessary level of commitment into this sector, Kashyap says that her experience helped her "grow and evolve as a person."

Volunteering as a youngster, in fact, encourages people to dedicate their time and energy for others later on. Rashmi Sarmah, a Guwahati-based journalist, fondly recalls the time she spent working with sick animals as a volunteer with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in Baroda, Gujarat, during her college years. When she landed in the United States after college and wanted to take a break from her job at a news channel, she chose to volunteer at the Signal Mountain Animal Shelter and an assisted living facility for the elderly called Manor House in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

"My experience at the SPCA shelter encouraged me to go ahead with something similar there," she says. Spending time with the elderly people also helped her feel less homesick. "The most rewarding moments were when they would eagerly want to listen to stories from India and also tell me about their childhood days." 

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