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From the Editor's Desk...

Awakening to the volunteer spirit

It was a time of despair. There was darkness all around.

It was a world in shackles of ignorance and people under the reign of despots. One group of people enslaved another. Humans were divided at birth; some as privileged and some as people of a lesser god. The divide was wide open.

When indignities on the underprivileged crossed the limits, the voices of sanity questioned them. There was light at the end of the tunnel.

It led to a new dawn of awakening.

In that new dawn dignity of the human beings and human rights became buzz words. Laws were redefined and rights of the ordinary man were ensured leading to an egalitarian society.

We are human not because we have the ability to build spaceships, but because we are humane. We are one community, spanned over a world. Moreover, our greatest achievement lies in the fact that we can walk in other's shoes. We can not only sympathise but also empathize.

And this empathy has changed the course of civilization. We have coloured the world with the paint brush of humanity.

Today we are at the same juncture as we were in the Dark Ages of cruelty.

Our map is defined by conflicts and war torn regions where one man's hunger for power leads to one million hungry people. Lives are lost each and every second; there are over 925 million people hungry in the globe.

The world has never had more things to be aware of, and at the same time was never this aware.

But we all have one super power that outshines all our problems- We are one. One community, one race and we all stand jointly, hand in hand.

This is the age of volunteers, when young minds are waking up to the 'Gong' of change.

For every war a country wages there are over millions volunteering for a peaceful future.

The US-based environmental activist and author, Paul Hawken puts it: "You are brilliant and the Earth is hiring. Forget that this task of planet-saving is not possible in the time required. Don't be put off by people who know what is not possible."

And the best part about this particular recruiter is that we all got the job.

Official statistics say that there are over 200 million volunteers in the world. I disagree, all of humankind is thinking for each other. It's what makes us human!

All of us have the light in us, a light powerful enough to purge the darkness around. We all have the spark in us, just waiting to be kindled.

We are all peace warriors trying to work day and night for a better tomorrow.

And that's exactly what our newspaper "The Peace Gong" advocates—humanity.

We also firmly believe that to ensure a global non-violent future, children should be encouraged to volunteer in order to build bridges of friendship amongst young people. Promoting children's participation in community building will not only contribute towards trans-generational progress of the society, but also lay the foundation of an active young citizenry who are aware of their rights and duties.

We the children of the world have woken up to the reverse beating sound of the "Gong" of responsibility, and not just thinking about making a change we have started shaping the world in our own way.

This edition of "The Peace Gong" is being published to mark the 10th anniversary of International Year of Volunteers and features stories from six nations including Pakistan, Indonesia, Nepal, China, Egypt and Scotland, in addition to stories from over 12 states in India. It is significant that we are carrying the interview of Naheed Haque, the Deputy Executive Coordinator of UN Volunteers in Bonn who stressed on the need to promote volunteering amongst children for their own self-development.

While reading about the various volunteer work that our budding young writers have written about, I realized that you are never too early to make a change and never too old to believe in hope.

This is our moment to come together as one.

So let's all light up the world!

Spandana Bhattacharya

Prepare children to volunteer for a global non-violent future

Ms Naheed Haque is the Deputy Executive Coordinator of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Programme and is based in Bonn, Germany. As part of the special issue of The Peace Gong to mark the -10th anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers, Spandana Bhattacharya interviewed Ms Haque through email.

Q1. A large number of children fall victim to conflicts across the world. How do you think we can stop this?

People need to learn more about the rights and concerns of children, and greater efforts need to be made to foster a culture of peace and non-violence. The actions of volunteers, citizens and civil society (groups and institutions other than governments and business that work for the common good) are very important to ensure peace and development in all communities. Experience from different parts of the world suggests that volunteers often help take care of children caught up in conflict or other difficult situations, and they need as much support as we can give them.

At UNV, we have an important role in advocating volunteerism, not only for peace and the environment, but also for reducing poverty, disease and inequality – which we know as 'development'. On 5 December, 2011 we marked the culmination of the tenth anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers (we shortened this to 'IYV+10') and launched the first *State of the World's Volunteerism Report* at the United Nations General Assembly in New York. We also celebrated the contributions of millions of volunteers all over the world for peace and development, and showed that volunteerism really makes a difference in people's lives, including of children.

Q2. How do you think we can bring together children in different parts of the world who can volunteer to work for a non-violent world?

The tenth anniversary Year, IYV+10, helped volunteers and organizations to network and come together: for example, the World Organization of the Scout Movement and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, among others, were major partners working together during the Year. Children's

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Volunteering : A noble act

Syeda Rumana Mehdi, Pakistan



Illustration by Saba, UK

*See the destruction all around,
Look at the poor people lying dead
on the ground,*

*Doesn't your heart weep for the
victims of war and violence?
Doesn't your inquisitive mind*

question their unwavering tolerance?

*Elders have done enough; let children take the lead,
Let the innocent ones rule who have no knowledge of caste,
status and creed,*

*Let us volunteer to establish a world which is peaceful and lovely,
Where all the people are loving and trustworthy,*

*Look at the people dying of hunger due to famines,
Look at the miners blown up in coal mines,*

*Let us volunteer to provide food for everyone,
Allow the orphans of developing nations to breath freely and run,*

*Wipe away the tears of misery and hopelessness from your eyes,
Forget all the broken promises and lies,*

*So, let's promise to volunteer,
To rebuild a world free from shackles of hatred and despair!*



Painting a new canvas of life

Spandana Bhattacharya, Kolkata

I enjoy studying... and why not as I got double promotion last year? Without proper education we can never turn our dreams into reality," says Karan, a student of 'Touch World' where children of incarcerated parents stay.

For Karan and many others like him who live in Narendrapur, a place in the outskirts of Kolkata, West Bengal, there is thirst to do creative work, study hard and contribute to the society. Notwithstanding the fact that they must have gone through sorrow, fear and shock early in their lives, yet these children have a glow of happiness on their faces.

There are 11 of them from all age groups with the oldest being 11 years old and the youngest four-years old. It is the love to do something different which inspired me to start volunteering with these kids. Small acts of service, nothing extraordinary, do bring positive changes in our society, is what we believe in the Peace Gong family. So it is what we, the Kolkata team of Peace Gong, decided to work for by spending time with the children of 'Touch World'.

I was never expecting such a vivacious and exuberant group as I made my first trip. A portrait of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore hung in their study room and all of them referred to him as 'Robi Thakur'. They loved Rabindra Sangeet. Their library comprised over 200 books. The titles like 'Pocahontas', 'Cinderella', 'Panchantantra', 'Aesop's Fables', 'Secret Seven' and 'Famous Five' were some of the books which were my personal favourites too. The air was laced with giggles and laughter as we started interacting. They responded as if they had known me their whole lives, immediately warming up to me as they took me on a tour of their house.

One of them, Saddam, volunteered to read aloud some passages from a book called 'The Elephant and the Mouse'. After a while the youngest, Siraj, asked me to read a paragraph. They heard me with rapt silence and kept asking me how I read that well. I gave them pointers on when to pause, the reading speed and the pronunciations of certain words.

Later, Raj and Yunus took me to their room where on a high shelf sat what they

called, "their greatest achievement" -- a memento signed by Saurav Ganguly, the former Indian Cricket Captain, when they had gone for his quiz show.

Towards the end of the day I asked each one of them to write a composition titled "About Me" as I wanted to carry back home some mementoes concerning their life and world. Engrossed and lost in their thoughts, they immediately started writing. Each of them wrote 6-7 lines while the younger ones took to writing A-Z and 1-100.



Spandana with children of Touch World

I had never seen such delight and innocence shining through anyone as each one of them felt that 'Didi' (elder sister), as they fondly addressed me, wanted to keep their handwriting with her.

Their paintings and drawings were mesmerizing by their use of colours -- bright blue, powder pink, orange, yellow, radiating energy and vitality. One of the sketches that I particularly liked was that of a dove taking flight in the deep blue sky. They seemed like any other kids with an extraordinary will power; who had chosen to rise above! Just one visit changed many earlier perceptions I had about life.

I resolved to stop judging people according to their background. These delightful angels were the most wonderful people I had come across so far.

By branding them as children of prisoners and being prejudiced in our behaviour towards them would ensure that the society did a crime greater than what their parents had committed. My thoughts revolved around one question. "What is right and what is wrong?" "Who decides it?"

It is after all the circumstance that makes us do something or become certain people. And by not accepting that, we are only spreading despair and gloom in our world.

There is one thing our Peace Gong team in Kolkata has decided. We will surely continue to go to 'Touch World' and spend time eat children there with the great children there.

Fulfilling others dreams through volunteering!

Lavanya Garg, Bhopal

*"I slept and dreamt that life was joy.
I awoke and saw that life was service.
I acted and behold, service was joy."
Rabindranath Tagore*

I still remember the first day when I entered "Arushi." I had just given my tenth Board examinations and was feeling as light hearted and free spirited as ever. But that night when I was lying on my bed, thinking about the days gone by, I realized how futile it was to be happy about such a thing as Board examinations getting over, because even when there were still a million ways left to help children not as privileged as me, how could I feel satisfied or be at bliss? This is what propelled me to volunteer with Arushi.

Arushi, a voluntary organization based in the capital city of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal works for children with disability. I have been closely associated with Arushi since the past two years and it gives me immense satisfaction to be part of such a movement. I mainly perform the task of audio book recording, which helps children not only in this special care centre but also throughout the

country. I have always been encouraging my friends to do the same, because I believe that our small efforts, no matter how big or small, can definitely bring a positive change.

Being at Arushi has taught me lessons, which I think have somewhere been lost in school education. We are taught to be practical, focus on our studies, give more importance to our career than anything else and above all be pragmatic even about our dreams!



Illustration by Bilkisse, UK

Every time I come to Arushi I leave behind all my worries and troubles and discover the true meaning of life. When I speak with the children in the centre my problems just seem to shrink in their magnitude when compared to theirs. They however seem to be happier than I am. They find pleasure even in the smallest of things; things which escape our notice. They are living life in the way it should be lived.

Going to Arushi has broadened my horizons. I have become more mature, sensible and "less practical." Most importantly I have learnt to find happiness even in the darkest of places. I have realized the importance of love and family. I now see the meaning in these lines by J.K. Rowling in her novel Harry Potter,

which I'd read a long time back, but have understood only now, "Do not pity the dead Harry, pity the living, and above all those who live without love." All that the children need here is love, compassion and a sympathetic ear to listen.

The amount of satisfaction helping them has given me is unrivaled. Volunteering is a great way to do exactly what we are supposed to do: go beyond our own dreams and try and fulfill the dreams of others. As students it is essential that we learn the higher values of life, which are not taught in our books, but beyond them. I started it and if ten of my friends join me too, imagine the kind of work that we can do!

If by sitting on Facebook a little less, or watching the television a little less, we all could record a book for even an hour every now and then; it definitely won't affect our social circle but will definitely affect our soul.

*Our voyage is begun. Captain, we bow to thee!
The storm howls and the waves are wicked and wild, but we sail on.
The menace of danger waits in the way to yield to thee its offerings of pain,
and a voice in the heart of the tempest cries: 'Come to conquer fear!
Let us not linger to look back for the laggards, or benumb the
quickenings hours with dread and doubt.*

*For thy time is our time and thy burden is our own and life and
death are but thy breath playing upon the eternal sea of Life.
Let us not wear our hearts away picking small help and taking
slow count of friends.
Let us know more than all else that thou art with us and we are
thine forever.*

Rabindranath Tagore



Taking the little champs in community work: Surovi Shishu Panchayat

Pema Lamhoo, Guwahati

Sunday, December 4, 2011. It is the weekly morning meeting of the members of the Surovi Shishu Panchayat at the Sadanand Baishya Lower Primary School, Khankor village in Chandrapur Block, Kamrup Metro, Assam. The children have just finished their cleanliness drive around the area and have come together to discuss the initiatives to be started by the children in Shampathar, a tribal village under the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. The village is inhabited by the Garo tribe.



Supriya Dey, a class XII student and President of Surovi Shishu Panchayat briefs her

team members about Shampathar village which has high level of illiteracy, no facilities of school, shortage of drinking water facilities, no housing facilities and constant danger from wild elephants. The Shishu



Panchayat members decide to conduct a field study to further understand the concerns of the villagers and what they as children can do.

It is not the first time that the Surovi Shishu Panchayat has conducted a field study in a backward village.

According to Bimal Das,

the Secretary of the Panchayat and a student class XI, the children had earlier conducted a field study in Rajabori Chapori. "We came to know about the starvation and suffering of the villagers through the study. The Chapori is in remote area, with no vehicles, electricity, school, and other necessities of survival. We had to walk miles to reach there. When flood or food crisis occurs, no rescue is there to help them out. We went there, interacted with the villagers. After the study we prepared a series of comic strips on food crisis, to display what is happening in that village."

Similarly, the Surovi team conducted a field study in another backward village of Tamulbari. Supriya recollects the team's experience in

Tamulbari. "After finding out that the villagers of Tamulbari were extremely poor and having no facilities, we had a series of meetings on



Members of Surovi Shishu Panchayat take the leadership in community work

what we could do. We organized meetings with the villagers also and by the end of November 2010 it was unanimously resolved to develop a SUROVI PARK in the Shiva Mandir premises, the only holy place for the villagers. The Park has now become the hub of all the activities of Surovi."

Bhabhajyoti Das, a class XII student talks about the evolution of Surovi Shishu Panchayat which started in June 2009 and comprises of children from Chandrapur Block of Kamrup district in Assam. Children who are part of the Panchayat have initiated a mass awareness programme on child rights, women rights, responsibilities, Right to Education, health and sanitation. Generally this program continues once or twice in a month in separate places. Besides, Bhabhajyoti informed that Surovi members visit one another's respective families so as to learn how to exchange and share their individual work experiences.

While for Surovi, the field study programme has evolved into a significant initiative to develop understanding of the



concerns of the marginalized; it has a literacy programme where drop-out children are motivated to go back to school and a regularly organizes cleanliness drive in different areas.

"By helping drop-out children go back to school or working with villagers to see how problem in villages could be solved we children are developing practical knowledge as how to approach concerns of our society. Our efforts are surely going to make us more active citizens of our country," Supriya pointed out.

"We want to make a difference," says Momi Hazarika, a class X student and Shobha Dorji, a student of class VII. "Reaching out to children of entire Assam is our dream," adds their friend and team member Islam Ali, who studies in class XII.

It is fun to work in the community

Nayan Debnath, Agartala

On the eve of the International Volunteer's Day, children involved with the Rabi Thakur Shishu Panchayat of Nutan Nagar in the outskirts of Agartala, Tripura mobilized children and youth in the area to organize a community cleaning programme on December 4, 2011.

For the children of Rabi Thakur Shishu Panchayat this was part of their effort to create awareness on issues like sanitation, safe drinking water and environment. "We perform small skits in our village to create awareness amongst the villagers," says Tania Das, a class VI student and the youngest member of the Shishu Panchayat.

According to Biswajit Malakar, a class XI student of Patu Nagar High School and an active member of the Rabi Thakur Shishu Panchayat, the children organized plantation programme a few months back in the side of the village road. "We feel satisfied when we are



Members of Rabi Thakur Shishu Panchayat in a plantation drive

able to contribute to protect our environment," he says.

What makes little Tania take up work for the community? "It is fun," she says, "Even if we are able to do little we feel we have done something for all of us. She points to the tree she planted, "If each one of us plant one tree, the world will be a different place to live."

Dipak Rishi Das, an associate professor at the local BBMC College who regularly interacts with the members of the Shishu Panchayat feels the initiatives of the children have brought great hope amongst villagers. "These kids are future leaders, if they learn from now they will be do a lot for the society," he adds.

Meanwhile after their cleanliness drive, the members of the Shishu Panchayat are planning out their next initiative. "Of course next month again we are going to organize a cultural programme to create awareness on water pollution," Arpita Roy Parbat, a class VII student informs.

(This story has been translated from Bengali)



South Delhi residents protest at Okhla plant

Shreya Grover, New Delhi

A large number of women and children have come out in large numbers to take part in rallies against the Okhla waste-to-energy plant in New Delhi. The plant started operations on January 3, 2012 and has become a health hazard for the residents of Sukhdev Vihar, Haji Colony, Ishwar Nagar, Jamia Nagar and neighbouring areas of the national capital.

According to several residents, the plant has been releasing harmful toxic pollutants in the air leaving residents high and dry. A resident of Jamia Nagar said that the location of the plant is a major concern for them as it is located in close proximity to the prestigious Jamia Millia Islamia University, Holy Family Hospital, Apollo Hospital, Escorts Heart Institute and many schools.

Residents of these colonies have been protesting against the government's decision to install a plant in the vicinity of colonies for the last couple of years. In fact, residents of these areas held rallies and marched on the streets to register their protest. Memorandums were sent to Environment Ministry and Delhi Chief Minister's office.

Women and children are now raising their voice against the wrong practices and fighting for the cause. "We have started a blog and we are writing against this plant", said a class VIIIth student.

"We have heard a lot about Mahatma Gandhi and his fight against injustice but have not seen him. We have seen how Anna Hazare stood for the cause of corruption ignoring his health. We feel motivated and we intend to protest against the plant operation in our area", says Muskan, a resident of the area.

According to Saloni Mohan, a resident of Sukhdev Vihar, the authorities had assured them that the plant would be zero-smoke, zero-odour and zero-pollution unit but none of the promises have been kept. She said that the collected waste is being stored in an open ground across the road, which is emitting foul smell. Also, toxic emissions from the plant can cause birth deformities, respiratory ailments and hormonal problems. Like Saloni, there are many more who are concerned about their own health and health of their children.

Innovative plan for villages

Govardhan Yadav, Yasir Minhaj, Gulam Mustafa, Gourav Kr Singh, Shakil Ansari, Jharkhand

For many children of Anandalaya Public School in Madhupur block of Deoghar District, Jharkhand life is a struggle. The villages here are backward, in every indicator of development. It is this backwardness that has motivated the children to create a micro-plan for the four villages around the school.



The villages taken up by the children are not very different from the one's they come from. Through the exercise to develop micro-plan, the students are engaged at relooking at the villages to develop its natural resources. "We are relooking at our own

environment and we can see that the benefits of development do not reach the poor even though they are in the same village," the students say in unison.

As part of their exercise, the social mapping done by the children provided a clear picture of the socio-economic condition and the class, caste and religious relationship of the village. It provided a picture of distribution of available resources as well as the means of productions in relation to different socio-economic classes.

For instance, the hand pumps provided by the Government are mostly placed near the houses of few socio-economically powerful people of the village. Very few number of hand pumps are placed in the socio-economically weaker section settlement areas.



Children and adults in a discussion on issues of the village

Again, the "pucca" construction on streets connecting the socio-economically powerful section's houses was done, while streets connecting the settlements of weaker sections were not yet been constructed properly.

After doing the social mapping the students have decided that they should form a volunteer team to see that the discrimination ends and all the villagers enjoy the same development benefits.

Volunteering for national integration

Swati Panwar, Solan

For a large number of youth in Solan, Himachal Pradesh, volunteering is a powerful vehicle to promote national integration. Interviews of a cross-section of students in different educational institutions of the district reveal that these youth felt volunteering promote social cohesion and bring people together for common concerns.

Ms Vandana Sharma, 2nd year student of BA (Mass Communication), M.S.Panwar Institute of Communication & Management, Solan (H.P) under scores, "When we volunteer together for a common cause there is a feeling of solidarity. It gives us the chance to participate actively in solving problems of the society. Besides it gives us the opportunity to be responsible towards our community."

"I realized the importance of volunteerism when I attended a National Integration Youth Camp in Thrissur (Kerala). The activities in the camp and developing knowledge about volunteers from 26 states of the country were an enlightening experience," says Ms Shikha, also a 2nd -year student of the Institute. She has now decided to volunteer to work for the underprivileged in her area.



Peace Gong reporter interviews youth on national integration

Mr Pradeep Verma of Government PG Degree College, Solan feels that as volunteering efforts links people across communities and classes, there is a need to encourage volunteering amongst people of all generation especially the youth. "We learn to respect each other when we volunteer. Besides we learn about the struggle at the grassroots."

For Mr Mukesh Sharma, Lecturer (Journalism & Mass Communication) and NCC (National Cadet Corp) Officer, PG Government Degree College, Solan, volunteering teaches discipline. "Through volunteering we acquire a sense of pride. While discharging my duties as NCC Officer in the college, I realised the importance of volunteer work. We organised many camps and worked in the surrounding rural areas," he said.

Mr Kamlinder Kashyap and Mr Ashutosh Kumar, students of different colleges in the district summed up the essence of volunteering, "We will actually be strengthening our communities and nation if we promote a habit of volunteering among today's youth. We shall be discharging our duties towards our nation if we imbibe a spirit of altruism and concern towards others."



Tagore land : Student volunteers make a difference

When it comes to volunteerism we think it as some people doing self-less service for helping disadvantaged without any initiation. But it is a different picture for many students of Mass Communication in Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore's abode of knowledge. Seventeen students who did grassroots projects for their development communication course during November-December 2011 were inspired to work with the villagers to solve the concerns of the village. Now these students are regularly volunteering in four villages around Santiniketan, contributing to the development of these villages.

The students are unanimous in their views after diagnosing villagers' problems- they should be participants in the issues of these villages to solve these problems.

The tradition of initiating students into volunteerism was started by the Nobel laureate himself in Visva-Bharati. He began the custom of every student of Pathabhabana, the under-tree school of Visva-Bharati, becoming a 'broti balak' or volunteer boy working in surrounding villages in first decade of 20th century. That tradition continues and gets reinvigorated at higher level communication studies in the Centre for Journalism and Mass Communication of the University.

The students got themselves divided into four groups and choose areas from four villages for their initiatives. These four areas are Kalapukurdanga and Baganpara Santhal hamlets under Ruppur gram panchayat and Muluk-Birbangshipara and Muluk-Muslim Para under Muluk-Siyam gram panchayat.

According to Sayantani Roy of Birbangshipara group the students had no intention of going back to the villagers after the completion of their course projects. "But as we started working for our projects we realized that we could contribute a lot for the development of the villages in our spare time," added Ritam Dey who volunteers at Kalapukurdanga.

The villagers are optimistic about the efforts of the students. Prashnta Birbangshi, Natural Leader of Birbangshipara said, "The information provided by the students and the series of meeting they organized for us are helping us.

A reality check in Hyderabad Hospitals

Iqra and G Balaraju, Hyderabad

A reality check on the conditions at the Niloufer Hospital of Hyderabad came as a shocker to a team of students who visited the health institution. The sweepers were allegedly taking tips for their services even though there was nothing in the name of sanitation while unhygienic condition raised a stink in the hospital. Some security personnel, the students were told, were allegedly taking bribes between Rs 5-15 from poor patients and their family members. The helpless patients were forced to shell out the amount as they had no other alternative if they wanted treatment from the doctors.

The reality check was part of a 'Face to Face' programme organized by COVA (Confederation of Voluntary Association) and ICAN (Indian Children Action Network) in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

As the team members walked to the laboratory, they were shocked to learn that equipments used for separating blood components was not available and several machines were defunct. The patients, therefore, had to go to other hospitals where they were charged exorbitantly.

Probing questions were asked to the civil surgeon RMO Dr Usha Rani regarding the problems which the students had seen in the hospital. She expressed helplessness by saying the budget allotted to the hospital was for merely 500 patients but the inflow of patients was much more.

After visiting Niloufer hospital the students visited Government Maternity Hospital, Nayapul, Hyderabad, where the problems were extremely serious. In many beds, there were two patients and some of them were also seen in the floors in unhygienic conditions. There was water leakage making the conditions deplorable.

The student felt on the need to provide proper hygienic conditions and hope that the patients are not left to the mercy of irresponsible people in these health institutions.



Sayantani Roy, a student volunteer talking with the villagers



Natural leader of Birbangshipara, Shantiniketan

Earlier we were not enthusiastic about pucca toilets in our area. The students convinced us of the importance of pucca toilets. Now there are toilet pans in ten houses already," he informed.

In Kalapukurdanga, students from two successive batches have been working from April 2010. First, they did a First Information Survey (FIS) involving few volunteers from the village to gather details of the village. Rajesh Ram, who is currently volunteering in health improvement work there said, "Through this survey we now know the history of disease, nature of kitchen garden and plantation, festivals and rituals, media utilization, folk talents, indigenous knowledge, leisure and entertainment scenario, addictions and condition of youth of the village. It helps us to conduct information gap elimination meets (IGEMS) for making villagers know their problems, prioritise their problems, plan action with resource mobilization from within, and to act promptly to solve their problems."

Sayantani Roy of Birbangshipara group said, "We are using the IGEMS big-group development communication method for helping villagers to transform themselves into actors in community progress. If IGEMS find that they need to develop, it would help them identify their own resources, capacity and leader too. It triggers the sense of social awareness among the villagers." IGEMS at Birbangshipara, a hamlet of daily labourers and petty grocery and fish sellers, identified sanitation as the worst problem.

In Muluk- Muslimpara, IGEMS discovered great divide between two sides of the same hamlet. In this area, requirement of wall in the Darga (Muslim holy place) land was identified as the pressing need for peace. The artistry of making handicrafts and mats by women here is identified as having great scope of marketing. Students have already connected the hamlet leader with the Wakf board for walling purpose. Now the students are working for an action plan to initiate shishu panchayat in these villages so that the capacities of children to approach social concerns are developed.

The student volunteers are excited and satisfied of the work they are trying to do. Sayantani, Ritam and Rajesh are united in their views, "We are learning a lot through this effort. All students should try to volunteer as they can really be catalysts for positive change in the community."

Pledging for a better India

Shabad Shobti, New Delhi

The health of any country primarily depends upon the quality of its citizenry. Quality citizenry means the quality of people with a sense of belonging to the land. The emphasis on the sense of belonging to the land means citizens discharging their responsibility towards the land. It is in this context, a Pledge Festival was initiated to facilitate the citizenry to sign a promise to keep the country's interests paramount.

An initiative promoted by Mr Biraja Mahapatra, an advocate of the Delhi High Court and president of Build India Group, Pledge Festival is taken up on the third Saturday of every January every year. It is a festival of commitment and celebration of unleashing hatred against terrorism and corruption together across the country. Signature of commitment is a simple modern and easy thing that can be done anywhere, even in rural villages where only a paper and pen is required. The main goal of the Festival is to cultivate good and active citizenry.

As Mr Mahapatra "Good citizenry transforms a state into a nation. It is like good family members transform a house to home. A house means it has roof, walls, windows and all other amenities that help a person to live. But it cannot be called a home unless its residents are emotionally attached to each other. A home means emotional bondage among the family members helping each other live in dignity, self respect and love. Similarly, good citizenry means emotional bondage of the citizens with the country".

"Through the Pledge Festival, we can have thousands of citizens of country volunteer to discharge their duties in the interest of the society and nation. The effort over the years has been to take the Festival to different parts of the country. Mr Mahapatra thought about this endeavor in 2001, while he was working on a book on corruption. "I read a lot and then I felt probably corruption being illegal behavior cannot be dealt with by law alone so I went to the root of it that is called illegal behavior. Illegal behaviour can be addressed by society through correctional measures. To find an answer to this malady, I thought Pledge Festival could be an answer" he said.



Bringing smile to the dying

Shlok Singh, New Delhi

Bringing smile into faces of those who know that death is very close to them is a difficult task. Any amount of consolation or care cannot lessen the discomfort of the terminally ill patients for whom there is nothing brighter at the other end of the road. One thing that brings relief to such patients is the love shown towards them by people (doctors and volunteers) who give them little comfort from their physical pain with medication and care.

There are others, who spiritually motivate them and inspire them to live life as it should be lived and embrace death when the day nears to an end. One such place is the Ganga Prem Hospice (GPH), on the banks of the River Ganges in Rishikesh, set up by Dr A K Dewan. This is a spiritually-orientated, non-profit hospice for terminally ill cancer patients, built with an aim to make death easier for those fighting the disease.

The GPH is unique in the sense that it adds to other dimensions to the concept of hospice, i.e. the dimensions of spiritual care and holistic treatment.

The Hospice exemplifies a rare and valuable fusion between medical excellence and spiritual perception.

"There are patients here like Baisakhi Devi, who has cancer of the lymph node and is also affected by leprosy", informs Pooja Dogra, coordinator of the Hospice. Life for her was difficult and she had to live away from her family. It was during this time that she got cancer".

There are many others like Baishaki, who receive the care and comfort from the Hospice family. Till date more than 2700 patients have been given free-of-charge consultation, and they have managed to outreach their care in different areas such as Haridwar, Rishikesh and Dehradun. The GPH has been extending its helping hand beyond 'the call of duty' with an aim to make death easier. The GPH can't add days to lives, but can surely add life to days. It also offers a free home care programme, under which the nurse, palliative care counselors and volunteers visit a patient's house and provide medical, social, emotional and spiritual support to the patients as

well as their families.

According to Sarojini Murthy, the counselor of GPH, in situations where death is imminent, medicine is not the only remedy. The psychological and spiritual aspect is a core issue at the GPH. "Patients, who are on the verge of death, are more often depressed. Fear is a vital factor that we have to deal with almost regularly. They are also unwilling to accept the fact that they are going to die. Counseling helps. It helps them in understanding the disease that has affected their body. They slowly try to accept the fact that medicine is just a temporary cure," she says.

The comfort at a spiritual level to these terminally ill patients at the GPH comes from 'Nani Ma' who is a spiritual adviser at the Hospice. 'Nani Ma' came to India forty years ago for spiritual 'saadhna'. It was her determination to serve the terminally ill patients that made her choose Ganga Prem Hospice, where she has been serving for over six years now.

Sharing her experiences with GPH, Pooja Dogra feels that this was a greater service to humanity and to

God. She says, "When one works with dying patients, it is always very special as one sees a completely different facet of life that one do not see in everyday lives. One feels how meaningless all our 'pursuit' is, when it all invariably boils down to death, to



Ganga Prem Hospice brings smile to the dying the fact that ultimately, we have to give up our physical bodies, and that death is a fact that we can't fight or avoid."

"From those faces when we see a glimpse of smile, our hearts fill up with tears of joy and sadness. We could only wish if they would live a little longer!", Pooja exclaims.

A new Hope, a new Umang

Renu Saklani, Uttrakhand

When few children from the small town of Uttarakhand in India, were invited to the Geneva Convention on the 'rights of the child' organized by the UN in October 2011 to present their report on the occasion of the completion of twenty years of the passing of the *child rights resolution*, that was a moment of both pride and exhilaration.

For these children who represented their state as 'child reporters' of a children's newspaper, *Umang* (meaning joy), which has pioneered training of children in the state, this was an experience of a lifetime. *Umang* is a children's newspaper published from Dehradun, in which children report features, based on ground realities.

The training (of the child reporters) is conducted under the SBMA Plan India, and till date, over 3200 children have been associated with it. A major part of their training includes briefing them on issues related to children. These children - participating in the Convention - had received five-day training in media on child rights issues and ways to highlight them through news, stories, comics, features, radio-programmes and so on.

Not only this, the children were also trained in making video and animation films. They also

conducted surveys on many crucial issues such as registrations of birth and death, primary education and the discriminations faced by them. The survey was conducted in ten villages, and ten schools from each district of the state were identified. 132 child reporters prepared a report based on the survey of 142 villages and 10 schools.

During the process of their survey, the children identified the ground realities and found out that there was very little awareness about the registration of birth and death, even amongst the teachers, and members of the community. They (children of *Umang*) conducted an open assembly at the village level to generate awareness and they used various means like comics, general conversation, rallies, theatre, to generate awareness on the importance of registration of birth and death.

The awareness campaign initiated by these children as part of the *Umang* project has resulted in the increase in birth and death registrations from 240 in 2009 to 890 in 2011, and the process is on.

The recognition, which was due, came in the way of *Umang*, when it received a global award and the project they were working upon, got a three year extension.

These recognitions could not have been possible, but for Shri Lalit Prasad Bhatt, a teacher of *Omkanand Thimalayan Montessori school*, also popularly known as *Kulanand Bhatt Thing school*. It was the undaunting efforts of Shri Lalit Prasad, who along with a few students of his school, their parents and a group of dedicated teachers went from village to village to convince parents to send their children to school. The effort, though initially difficult, came to see the light of the day when children started arriving at school and their parents, mostly farmers, attended school meetings to discuss the problems and progress of their children.

A true educationist, Shri Bhatt is a living example of selfless service in the field of education. He not just trains children, and even calls good teachers from outside the state at his own expense, but also prepares them to work for the society. Today Jakhri is known by people and the school has reached the top position in the district.

"It is because of him that a village girl like me could go to Geneva to attend a world conference on Child Rights. The *umang* (joy) of a new *ummeed* (hope) shimmers through our lives and we are committed towards working for our society", says Renu.

Spreading literacy

Nikita Mishra, Mumbai

Teaching children to promote literacy is a significant volunteer exercise. For young people it is greatly satisfying to give time to less privileged children who don't have opportunity for quality education.

As part of this endeavour to reach out to underprivileged children and help them in their education, the Peace Gong Bureau in Mumbai decided to make a difference in their own small way.

Initially, it has been decided to teach children of maid servants who are unable to go to school due to financial problems. The first student of the Bureau is a five-year old boy, Suraj whose mother is a domestic help. His father is a construction worker.

I have started calling him to my house. While his mother attended to the

household chores, I began teaching him alphabets.

To my surprise he was a really fast learner and within two weeks he could write our country's name "INDIA"! The happiness and smile on Suraj's face meant a lot to me.

I strongly believe that if all of us took the responsibility of teaching at least one child on a regular basis, we could collectively bring about a major change in the society. It would make a difference to the world where a large number of underprivileged children are denied of even basic education. There are thousands of children like Suraj just waiting to be given a chance to study. A major volunteer mobilization effort is needed across the country to ensure children get their basic right to education.



Ignition of Humanity

Ananya Roy, Kolkata

November 10, 2011. The lives of more than a hundred changed. The peaceful city of Kolkata, West Bengal became the eye of the tornado which was a symbol of the anger building up in the people of the city. The citizens woke up to receive the news of AMRI hospital in Kolkata catching fire. It was as if the smoke from the ravaging fire was carrying the cry of help of the patients trapped inside the building to millions of houses in

were angry at the selfishness of the rich who owned the hospital. They were angry with the state of society and questioned if humanity existed any longer.

It was the youth of Kolkata who were seething with anger. The voices crying out in grief and anger were those of people who wanted a change. A few days later, when I crossed AMRI hospital, I saw angry posters stuck on its gate. It was these posters which inspired me to use my voice as a team member of the 'Peace Gong' and as a citizen of the city I had to do something.

This was the beginning of my initiative. On December 12, 2011 I sent out approximately three hundred text messages to students of various schools and

colleges telling them that I would be in front of AMRI, sticking a few posters and lighting a candle as a mark of a silent protest. The message was forwarded to numerous people and I received a huge response saying that they wanted to join in too. They wanted to light a candle which would ignite the change in the prevailing darkness. I went ahead to create an event on Facebook named "VOICE YOUR GRIEF AND ANGER-PLAY THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH". It was a public event open to all those with a heart and will to bring about a change. Within a day we got a response from more than 120 people saying that they would be attending the gathering.

At 5:00 pm on December 13, 2012, 122 people arrived with

posters and candles. They lit candles as they stared at the hospital- a place where we once entrusted our lives.

It wasn't merely people writing clichéd messages on a white sheet of paper. It was teenagers standing up to the wrong. It was teenagers standing up to selfishness, injustice, and neglect and standing up for humanitarian values.

The police allowed me to carry all the posters and stick them on the gate of the building which had been cordoned off. As I stood in front of the majestic multistoried building, I wondered whether it could ever be called a hospital. I wondered whether people would feel safe in any hospital. I wondered whether dead bodies, charred and limp, would still be lying on the floor of the hospital...waiting to be rescued...waiting for justice...even after death.

As the organizer of this event, I didn't look for either press coverage or mass attendance though they were eventually present. Just the thought of organizing this made me feel as if I had performed my duty as a human being.

The crowd of hundreds dispersed. The press moved on to cover another story. The tears of the grieved didn't stop. The candles melted. But the light never went out. For, after sometime, on the same day, the licence of the entire hospital was cancelled. And, as I saw one single candle, still burning, driving away the darkness, I believed once again, that a single step could create an entire movement.



Student volunteers lighting candles as a mark of protest

Death before Life

Neeladri Sengupta, Kolkata

The fire inhaled all the air,
The little babies cried for help,
Little did they know,
That their mothers lay black and burnt,
Like The dark coal found on the railway tracks,
Rejected and left to rot,
The Directors used up all the money,
To use it up in their journey,
Of self satisfaction and luxury,
But little did they say,
They would cause the world a grievous injury.

The mother's face filled with joy,
When the little baby cried for the first time,
Happiness conquered all the pain, at the sight of a pink little baby boy,
His eyes were innocent, as innocent as the angel Gabriel.
But this was no Gabriel's abode,
This was the temporary hell,
The hell which was not under God's governance,
But which was run by a group of corrupted human beings,
To whom materialistic luxuries cross all boundaries,
Unconcerned of whether they affect a Mother's hope,
To see her little baby son, make the world.

The Babies lay white and unconcerned,
It wasn't long before the ventilators gave up,
Carbon Monoxide had the nursery ward conquered,
Filled the young lungs with the toxic fumes,
The little souls died before feeling their motherly warmth,
The rhythm of the small little pink heart,
Died in the presence of the dark black world,
They cried for their Mother,
But little did they know,
That their mothers were left to rot,
Like the fire services which were never at use,
Such is the state of the top hospital,
Such is the state of our State Capital,
Such is the state of Mahatma Gandhi's earthly journey,
Such is the state of the newly born infant's country.



A volunteer writing his remarks at the protest march

the city.

Media reports state that the fire in the hospital was due to a short circuit in the cluttered basement. The arrangements made for the prevention or fighting of a fire were not efficient. According to reports and eye witness accounts, there was a two and a half hour delay in informing the fire brigade. Even the fire fighters were not prepared with their equipment. Patients continued to choke on the toxic gases emitted. Some patients were oblivious of death lurking in the hospital where they had come with hope of a better and healthier future.

The hospital turned into a nightmare. The official death toll rose to 92 patients. More than grief, there was anger. People

Joy to the World...

Caroline Nongsiej, Shillong

It was a bright and sunny day when I had gone to a market for shopping. While in the market, I saw a small boy sitting beside a drain and holding a bottle of water in his hand. I stopped there for a while and continued looking at him. I suddenly remembered the great Mother Teresa who had helped the poor people in our country, especially those who have no one to care for them. Inspired by the Mother, I went near that child and smiled at him and told him to get up, but the child refused, saying something which I couldn't understand. I then thought that this child was really in need of help. He needed happiness, joy and laughter as he was still a kid. He needed love,

care and protection.

I gave the child some food and some money though he refused to come with me and I could not force him either. When I went back home I always thought about him. I thought about how people in this world today think only about themselves and don't like to help others, especially the poor and needy. We should always remember that we are all Indians - whether rich or poor, young or old - are brothers and sisters. So we must help each other and care for each other and support each other instead of killing and discriminating against each other.

Joy of giving ...

Mema Taring, Shillong

It was during the last summer vacation that we, along with some of our friends, went to visit an orphanage run by Charity Sisters to give clothes to the poor children. There were more than 160 children who were abandoned by their parents. Half of them were disabled and half were very young - below four years of age. The children looked very happy when they saw us except for one small girl child. She was around two years old and all children in the house stayed away from her because she was suffering from tuberculosis. I felt anguished at the sight of the poor child. I immediately took the child to hospital with the help of the Sisters. After a few months of medication and care, the child was recovering. I felt some relief and really felt good after helping the child.



Prepare children – cont. from page 1

groups, schools, and organizations working for children still need to further unite for their common goals.

Gandhi rightly said, "If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children." So, to celebrate IYV+10, we asked children from many countries to volunteer their paintings and ideas for a children's art book "Volunteering through Children's Eyes"). Their creativity, inspiring stories and insightful quotes helped us to see volunteerism through children's eyes. These children have understood the core values of volunteerism so well. Especially at this the time of the year, they have reminded us about what inspires and motivates us in life: solidarity, tolerance and love. They reminded us that we can have a global non-violent future if we all try, including children, to make this a better and safer world.

Q3. In many countries the rights of children to participation is not even recognized. So how

can we even think of facilitating their participation as a volunteer force?

I recently met Felix Finkbeiner, a German boy who founded a global environmental campaign 'Plant for the Planet'. He is inspirational, and his voice is being heard, but he is lucky to come from a country where that is possible. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child highlights the importance of children's participation. We need to look at the world through children's eyes – they care as much about the future of humanity and our planet as adults do. Children's voices for a more peaceful and liveable world need to be heard and acted upon through initiatives such as the environmental movement and the Millennium Development Goals. The future belongs to children, not my generation.

Q4 In today's competitive world there is hardly time for many children to even think of contributing as a volunteer. We are burdened with studies

and focus on our career goals. In such a backdrop, how can the spirit of volunteerism be instilled in the next generation?

Programmes and activities that inspire children and young people to volunteer should be integrated into school education: this was something that many organizations we spoke to this year agreed on. Volunteering should be promoted as a way for self-development of children and young people. Volunteering enhances young people's skill sets and employability, makes them see the importance of protecting our planet from war, environmental damage and climate change, and also prepares them to work for the sustainable development of their community.

Q5. The new State of the World's Volunteerism Report states, "Online volunteering, online activism through social media, and micro-volunteering are fast growing trends." What do you think is the growth potential of

online volunteering?

There is great potential for young people and children to contribute to volunteering online though the internet. Social media and micro-volunteering are important means for young people and children to connect with each other, exchange views and promote a culture of peace, non-violence, solidarity, tolerance and love. We should encourage new media literacy amongst young people and children so that they can use new media to volunteer and contribute their talents and imagination wherever they may be.

Q6. What is your message to the readers of "The Peace Gong"?

The Peace Gong can play an important role in bringing children of the world together to promote peace and development through volunteering. Peace Gong is a wonderful initiative to integrate children into peace processes. Peace needs such young volunteers!

Mindfulness training is the key to humankind development : Shantam Seth

Vishwam, New Delhi

It is seven in the evening. As I enter the office of Shantum Seth, I smell of some fresh fragrance. I look for the source and soon find out that the sweet smell is from some incense stick that burns at the corner, filling the room with freshness. It's a different world. The floors inside are neatly polished. One cannot escape the vibration in the atmosphere within the four walls of the house, and they seem to be full of positive energy. I am soon greeted by a man – almost five feet, seven inches – with folded hands and a pleasant smile. By the look of him and his appearance, I know it is Shantum himself. I felt a high level of spiritual connection between him and everything around, and I knew that this was all because of his personal touch and connection with the humankind and his belief in his Master. My day with this spiritual master, who lives in his own world of pilgrimages, has just begun.

Shantum Seth is a Buddhist practitioner and an ordained teacher (Dharmacharya) in the Zen tradition of the Vietnamese Master, Thich Nhat Hanh. He teaches in India and other countries and has been leading well-acclaimed pilgrimages "In the Footsteps of the Buddha" since 1988. In the last few years, he has been leading inter-faith, educational, cultural and spiritual journeys to diverse regions of India. A core believer in volunteering, Shantum believes that volunteering is part of the ethos and culture of Indian civilization.

To him, volunteering can make an individual, peaceful – not only within oneself, but also helps inculcate qualities of peaceful behaviour in their daily interactions with other fellow human beings. Shantum believes that a volunteer, by serving others, feels a sense of joy and over time develops a sense of being equal

with all others. It also helps to develop qualities like compassion, empathy and love. Besides, volunteering facilitates the enhancement of self-confidence and self-esteem, he adds.



Does volunteering help an individual to learn? Smiles Shantum and says: "When we start volunteering in diverse situations, we learn to see the world through multiple lenses and develop capacities to embrace diversity. We then tend to expand our sensitivity towards different cultures and tradition which is important to take us away from rigid world views."

He explains that to be a better individual who cares for the humanity, 'mindfulness training' of all students in schools is important. Mindfulness, according to him, is the practice of becoming aware of who we are, what we are feeling, thinking, speaking and doing, what is going on inside us and around us.

"The more we are mindful, the more concentration and clarity we can develop on what we are doing and the greater is our depth of the understanding of a situation. Through this we gain the insight that leads to wisdom", he adds.

There is a silence in the air. I observe the movement of his eyes. It draws me to the conclusion that some

more and powerful thoughts will pour out. His alertness to his thoughts and philosophies – which he has been able to draw me near to – is a proof of his soft pauses in between his words. Not that he carefully chooses his words, but they flow spontaneously like the river water.

"Mindfulness", Shantum explains, "Has been an integral part of the traditional education systems in India. The emphasis has been to help each child to be aware of his or her own unique nature, to be comfortable with it and to realize his or her own awakened mind. The role of the guru or teacher is to guide that process and allow the latent potential in each child to flower. With the emphasis in education shifting from wisdom to knowledge, we have become adept as a civilization in controlling some aspects of Nature – but are often ignorant as to how to handle our own inner nature."

Does that mean that there is a need to change the educational system in schools?

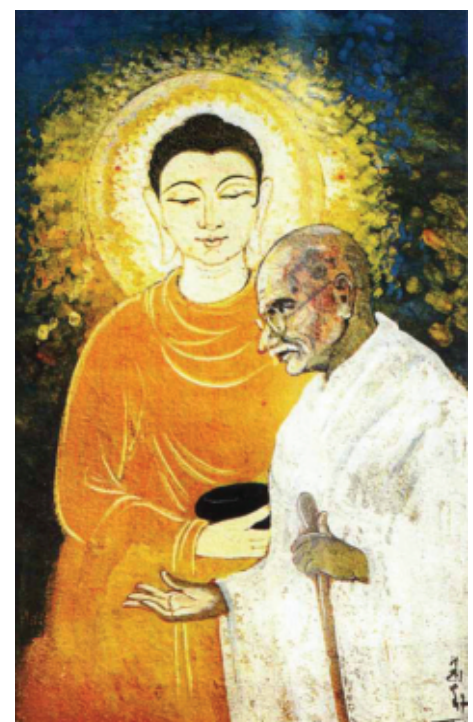
Shantum points out that in the school system, it is important that side by side with the current curriculum, there are ways to impart techniques of developing emotional stability and social tolerance. "Peace studies could be an important addition, but the focus should not be only 'outside Peace', but on 'inner' Peace, a way to Touch Peace, Cultivate Peace and to Be Peace", he stresses.

Mr Sheth shares a simple exercise, called the 'Bell of Mindfulness', which he says has become very popular among the students, wherever it has been introduced. He says, "The children take turns to ring a bell before the class starts. When the bell is 'invited' to ring, all the students and the class teachers stop what they are

doing to be present and fully attentive to what is going on in that moment. They use the awareness of breath to bring their body and mind into the present moment. It allows the children to 'stop', to calm down and de-stress. One teacher has this bell invited by a student every 15 minutes and she feels that her class has been transformed in a very healthy way and that because of it, children vie with each other to be the 'bell master'".

"Such an act, says Shantum, "helps in bringing the best amongst the students and teachers, and all in the right frame of mind".

As I leave this short spiritual journey from a world of reverberation and peace, to a world of chaos, I carry back with me Dharmacharya Shantum Sheth's profound and positive thoughts that will carry me across the heat and dust of life in a metro:



Meeting of the Saints by Upendra Maharathi



Children and Volunteering: A study

Ann Savina Devasia New Delhi

While underscoring the importance of volunteering for imbining positive values and developing deeper understanding of society, a large number of children in different parts of the country expressed their desire to volunteer for causes and issues at local community level.

In a survey by Peace Gong reporters in cities of Delhi, Guwahati (Assam), Kolkata (West Bengal), Solan (Himachal Pradesh) and Mumbai (Maharashtra), a majority of the children felt there were lack of opportunities and avenues for them to volunteer. About 100 children were interviewed in these cities.

The study also highlighted that students living in comfortable circumstances are not lagging behind and are ready to make positive contribution. Students across the country also think that children growing up in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Hyderabad are aware about ground realities through broadsheets and other means of communication. They also feel that the real purpose of volunteering is to serve people, who are in dire need of any external support.

Most of the students consider that volunteering can bridge the gap between haves and have-nots. Besides they think by volunteering for different social

concerns they can reduce the number of quarrels and conflicts between people.

For instance, 16-year old Surabhi Mitra from Delhi Public School, Ruby Park, Kolkata, feels that volunteering is reaching out to underprivileged people and that it can bring discipline in life if students make a time management plan to pursue their interests.

The study also negates the gender-biases in the field of volunteering. In fact many students felt that girls can be better volunteers as they have softness from within and are generally more compassionate.

According to 12-year old Amit Chetry from Chandrapur High School, and 11 years old Jintu Barman from Hajongbori LP School, Assam encouraging students to volunteer can help them to learn various aspects of the society and develop a holistic view.

Fifteen-year old Soham Bhattacharya from Delhi Public School, Faridabad, considers that volunteering can act as a morale booster and help him develop patience.

Sumigha Singhania from the same school considers that volunteering may help her to understand others' problems, situations and make her think of solutions that she would not think or ponder otherwise.

"Volunteering to me is an

opportunity to help the community and become better human being. It helps me to understand the pain of the less fortunate. It is a pedestal to step out from my comfort zone and level, work beyond my limits and realize my dormant potential," she added.

Students like Irene Treasa Joseph of St. Xavier's Senior Secondary School strongly feel that volunteering for causes is not a waste of time; instead it leads to development of their personality and make them better leaders. Speaking on the same chord, Sujit Joseph, class X student of Don Bosco School, Park Circus, Kolkata observes volunteering helps young people to come face to face with the 'harsh realities of life'. He shared his experience of living and working in Sunderbans after cyclone Alia. He talked about the agony of the farmers whose main source of livelihood was in jeopardy as salt water had entered their cultivable land due to the cyclone.

Meanwhile according to students of Class 12 in Notre Dame School, Badarpur, Delhi, Deepakshi Rawat, Priya Dubey, Sakshi Jha, Soumya and Shivani, volunteering is a vehicle to bring them closer to society, compel them to make an effort and look beyond their books and implement theories that they have learnt and read so far. "It is a tool to bring change in the society," they emphasized in unison.

A Simple Gesture of Giving

Anuradha Roy, Scotland

The name Oprah Winfrey is not one unheard of. She has touched countless lives through her eponymous talk show on TV, gaining the trust and support of millions of faithful viewers. Remembering a lifetime of hardships and troubles which she fearlessly overcame with goodwill and strength, Oprah said, 'I don't think you ever stop giving. I really don't. I think it's an on-going process. And it's not just about being able to write a cheque. It's being able to touch somebody's life.'

The 21st century is rushing past at an alarming speed- with advances in all fields, making time more valuable and the way we spend that time even more demanding. Selfless acts are now considered name worthy only if a celebrity adopts an African child, or if a royal prince visits a nation of extreme poverty. The simple and yet iconic gesture of giving, alas, has been forgotten. Giving does not need to be one on a gigantic scale. However small the amount is, it is always significant. This is what inspired me to volunteer in the Whitecraigs Old Age Home, Scotland. I do not have a complex set of tasks, but it is simply to help with

essential things like serving food and helping with washing the dishes later.

My shifts are only two hours long, and I do not earn a wage. Students should volunteer willingly, if not for their future, but for the fact that they possess magical energy which can be channelized to create wonderful things. Bringing a smile to the faces of all those people at the Old Home really made me feel better as a member of our society. We must not look at what we can get from something, we should simply give. Contributing to those who are less fortunate than us is a way of us being grateful for all that we are privileged to have.

There are numerous things young people can do to help when you want to volunteer. Helping out at schools for the underprivileged, pet shelters, soup kitchens, projects of voluntary organizations, there are lot of spaces for the youth to contribute. Every little drop of service helps, and if many more of us are inspired to give selflessly we can build a community of kindness and companionship- one that shall be constantly expanding. After all, it is not the gesture that counts. It is the thought that counts.

Being a volunteer... ..

Falak Lone & Afifa Lone, Srinagar

What makes me feel gutsy and worthy
 What fills my heart with love and mercy
 What makes me feel meek and polite
 What makes me assist needy and deprived
 What makes me optimistic and desirous
 What makes an exigent phase vigorous
 What makes me combat for a noble motive
 What leads me towards common positive
 What makes me feel relieved and content
 What teaches me to be zealous and patient
 What makes me feel sturdy and pride
 What makes my vision clear and bright
 What makes me break all the shackles
 What makes me confront hard battles
 What makes me feel reliable and selfless
 What instils compassion and kindness
 What gives me willingness and integrity
 What develops the feeling of oneness and equity
 What rekindles the body and inner soul
Being a volunteer, nourishes me as a whole!



Members of Rabi Thakur Shishu Panchayat, Tripura



Children take up trekking programme for wild life conservation in Assam

Seeking Peace

Rafiq Maharjan, Nepal

Oh! God send us a messenger of peace and love
 Who would change the world.
 Rain peace out of the cloudy sky
 Then, make a peaceful day out of a storm.

Oh! God send us a follower of peace and love
 Who would remove the fog
 Stop violence with peace and love
 Then, make the people see a joyful future.

Oh! God send us a volunteer of peace and love
 Who would light the world.
 Give us the warmth of the sun in the cold night
 Then, open the eyes of the people and bring justice.



Helping flood victims in Pakistan

Syeda Rumana Mehdi, Pakistan

The floods in Pakistan's Sindh province in September 2011 forced two million people to flee their homes, washed away crops and left millions at the risk of falling ill. The catastrophic floods which hit the province for the second consecutive year, were reportedly worse than the previous year because many of the victims have been forced abandon their homes for the second consecutive year. The non-availability of volunteers threatened to compound the suffering.

Hundreds of villages submerged in water when floods destroyed most of lower Sindh in September last year. Heavy monsoon rains and breaches in the canals in Badin and Mirpurkhas districts of Sindh province caused the floods.

Many schools in Karachi including the AES Girls' School joined efforts to help. The students bought loaves of bread, jam, chips, biscuits, juices, milk, milo, mineral water to be given to the flood affected.

Students themselves packed the food and relief material and left for Hyderabad 144 km away from Karachi to hand over relief material to flood victims. Moved by the efforts, AES School Principal, Amin Ahmedani said, "I've never been more proud and pleased with the girls who are like my own daughters. My prayers accompany all those poor

girls who have lost everything due to these floods and I'm thrilled that A.E.S is doing so much for them."

People were living in pathetic condition in one of the refugee camps in outskirts of Karachi, as flood water had accumulated near the camp, allowing mosquitoes to breed. The displaced families used thin and coarse sheets of cloth to shield their huts from the wind. As soon as the AES students reached outside the camp, flood victims gathered around them and pleaded for help. Few women complained of not getting food as men used to eat most of it. A young mother complained of not receiving food. "My child is only a few months old and needs breast feeding, but I can't do so as I don't get food", she said and added, "Food arrives every day, the authorities asks us to wait and by the time our turn comes, food is over." Some of them demanded gas stoves for cooking food.

Hearing grievances of women, AES decided to offer food to women and children. This became extremely difficult because of too many people in that camp. After lot of difficulty, the students managed to hand over food packets to women and children living in the relief camp.

Few kilometers away from the camp, the AES

students visited a re-settlement colony, affected by the floods. The AES students and offered clothes and water bottles to women and children of the colony. Ironically, a majority of children in the colony suffered from malnutrition.

The students returned to Karachi with a bit of satisfaction that at least something was done for the flood victims. As Mahatma Gandhi aptly said that "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others". This experience helped them realize that a small act of volunteering can indeed make a big difference in someone's heart.



Blissful Blessed Orphanage

Moustafa Ibrahim, Egypt

Euphoria!that blissful feeling you will never experience until you are the reason for drawing a smile on one of those faces.

A new trend has started in Egypt in the last couple of years. News reports indicate that professional skill based volunteers have come up in large numbers to work in voluntary organizations. While philanthropy has existed in the Egyptian culture, it was largely, until recently, in the form of alms. But with a boom in Internet and youth movements, volunteering was revitalized in the 90s, in Egypt. By 2004 there were 2.5 million



volunteers and 400 non-profit foundations registered in the philanthropic sector.

News reports suggest that many volunteer groups are now more involved in training and employment activities, loans projects and infrastructure development. Like these

volunteers, I also wanted to do voluntary work in an orphanage. Believe it or not, it was a wonderful experience for me. I chose to work in a leading organization, Wataneya Society for the Development of Orphanages' in Cairo, Egypt. Wataneya Society is one of the leading voluntary organizations of Egypt. Recently, it had invited national and international childcare groups to prepare a document on minimum standards for an institutional home or orphanage across Egypt. The document contains guidelines, for homes and institutions on issues like privacy, protection from harassment, quality and

environment of child care and hygiene.

Wataneya's sole aim is to provide facilities and proper care to orphan children. Also, its aim is to help orphans become self dependent and get socially integrated. Many volunteers have worked and are still working with this society.

I was just 17 when I went to this orphanage as a volunteer. I was sceptical when I met the people in the orphanage. Will or won't they allow me to be a volunteer there. Thankfully, I got a chance to evaluate their project on orphans. In Wataneya, my first task was to work in a library, which had English and Arabic books, publications and research materials. The library used to provide literary material to Wataneya team and outsiders.

Besides library work, I used to interact with orphan children on regular basis. It wasn't that easy, in fact it was very difficult to interact with orphans because I felt that they wanted to ask me-' why for God sake, you have got parents and I am deprived, why you and not me'.

Gradually things improved and I started interacting with them with ease. The fear had gone. Each of us (kids and I) got together and we had just one goal and one target. We started thinking together, learning from each other, playing and eating. Things became easy.

And then came a big day when I received certificates with other volunteers at the end of the course. That moment was superb because I learnt a lot from these children. In the end, we talked, laughed and took group photos. Indeed, it was the best time ever I had spent anywhere in my life. I still have those beautiful memories because I had made new great friends. I felt that I was on top of the world after working with Wataneya orphanage.

Hope Grows!

Shazaf Masood, Pakistan

A great philosopher had once said, "The most beautiful thing is to see a person smiling. And even more beautiful is when you are responsible for it!!!" I felt really inspired while working for an organization 'Make a Wish Foundation'. As a volunteer, I used to interact with lot of kids.

In fact, my life changed completely when I met 12- year- old Shahzad who underwent kidney transplant. Shahzad's mother was his donor. During my interaction, Shahzad and I became good friends. Shahzad was

full of life despite his kidney problem as he would impress others by his charms and little cute actions.

Once, Shahzad asked me to help him meet well known actor and TV and radio anchor Sahir Lodhi. I helped him to meet Mr Lodhi as I thought this would boost his morale. The meeting between Shahzad and Lodhi went off well.

I met Shahzad just before the transplant and he handed me his lucky jacket which Mr Lodhi had gifted him. He asked me to pass it to another child in need of it. He told me

that he would be alright after the operation as this jacket was lucky for him. He actually felt inspired to fight against death....!! I cried after meeting him and prayed to God to save his life. And Alhamdulillah God blessed him and his faith has won!

The interaction with Shahzad has completely changed me as it was like a complete journey for me to learn and understand the meaning of life, to face truth, deal up with sorrows and pains. I continue to work as a v o l u n t e e r .

Volunteerism has become an important part of my life. I know that hope is the main pillar, like a first step towards my aim.





Donate Blood - Give Life

Indri Ariesta, Indonesia

The idea of donating blood has been inculcated among students in Indonesia to serve the community. Many students belonging to various schools and colleges have been actively taking part in various blood donation camps.

One such camp is organized twice a year in 2 Tangerang Selatan SHS, near Jakarta in Indonesia. Wienna Maria and Chitra Tanti, students associated with this camp, are excited about the work. They said, "Blood donation activity is like a community service and efforts are being made to create awareness especially among students to come forward." "By donating blood we can create a sense of concern for others" commented Kresna Wirawiguna and Ratna Amelia, students of the school.

The Red Cross youth organization has been encouraging school and college students to work as volunteers and help in



Blood Donation camp, Indonesia

organizing blood donation camps in their respective areas. These camps are normally organized in association with local PMI blood transfusion unit. Organizers of these camps often find it easy to get blood donors throughout the year except during the Ramadan fasting month as people often hesitate to donate blood. Last year's news reports from Jakarta suggested that more regions across the country were feared to experience a blood shortage during the Ramadan fasting month. The Jakarta Health Agency had set up blood donation booths in several strategic spots in Jakarta, such as at schools and malls, and mobile blood donation hubs to encourage people to donate.

Indonesia needs 4.5 million bags of blood every year on an average. However, the onus is on Red cross youth organization to motivate more and more people to go for blood donation. According to Gisda Azzahra and Manda Ardelia, volunteers, these camps are organized after a lot of planning. Indonesian Red Cross Society units assist in providing medical personnel and equipment to the youth activists. Rizky Dyah and Fitri Faizah, volunteers say that the overall response from students, teachers, parents and others has been overwhelming. Other volunteers too echoed similar views and added, "All good things that we want to do for humanity sincerely will surely get the support of many people. So, do not be afraid to start something good from now on"

A Volunteer tourist

Jacob Gilmour in China

I am currently sitting in a hotel room in Southern China, anxiously waiting to head north to the outskirts of the city of Xi'An into a bitter Chinese winter where I'll undertake a programme with a New Zealand based organisation, called International Volunteer HQ (IVHQ). IVHQ currently helps co-ordinate numerous volunteer holiday programmes which work with local organisations in 19 countries across the globe, including China and India. These programmes aim at helping local communities, particularly those in rural and isolated areas.

There are currently three IVHQ programmes in China. One is to help with the conservation of pandas, which are currently facing extinction; another is to help with child care in

orphanages and at special needs centres; and the third programme, which I will undertake, is being an assistant English language teacher at a kindergarten or primary school. If it wasn't for volunteers, these schools, which usually educate students from poor farming backgrounds and are located outside the cities in industrial or farming areas, would not otherwise be able to afford to hire native English speakers. Of course I chose this programme because I find language learning to be an important part of modern society, not just in China or my homeland Australia, but across the world. I myself have studied Japanese since primary school, and I understand too well the opportunities that can arise from learning other languages. I believe

Koseli - A gift to Humanity

Shristi Sureka, Nepal

Koseli centre in Kathmandu is a shelter home for the underprivileged children. Koseli, which means a gift in Nepali language, provides shelter to many street children and those living in slum areas.

I have been working as a volunteer at the centre, which is home to over 100 children. My main task is story-telling and I also teach them techniques of art and craft. Initially the children were reluctant but as time passed, they started interacting with me.

Chandra, an orphan is fond of music and he has learnt it in the centre. Abandoned by his parents before he could even crawl, Chandra used to work in a carpet factory till the age of eight. He used to work in a restaurant as a dish washer. Like others, Chandra too had no place to go or have food. He could never think of going to school. It was only after he came to Koseli that he

realized that he has potential to become a musician. Koseli started sending him to a music school for learning music.

"I wanted to run a school for underprivileged kids since I was very young. I used to see such children on the pavements and I wanted to bring them home with me," says Mrs Renu Bagaria, founder of Koseli.

"The legal procedure of setting up the Centre was quite lengthy and cumbersome. Nobody especially the guardians of many of the kids believed in me that I actually wanted to gift a life to the kids who were playing on the streets all the time and were begging for food. We took a year to convince people," she adds.

"I wasn't hoping to solve any problems when Koseli was started, I just wanted to be part of these lives who deserved a better today and a brighter tomorrow," Ms Bagaria said.

Volunteering for a brighter tomorrow!

Fadhil Ahmad Qamar

I volunteer for Humanity First, an organization helping people in a need of help related to health. It is in Yogyakarta province which is located in the middle of Java Island in Indonesia.

We recently organized a mass health camp in Gunungpring village located in the north-western side of Yogyakarta. Located in the valley near mount Merapi, this village and surrounding villages have been facing lot of difficulties owing to lack of health and transport facilities. However, we managed to distribute free medicines to 500 people in a span of just two days. Five doctors and 20 volunteers were deputed to manage the camp.

Volunteers of Humanity First are very active whenever a natural disaster happens. The volunteers help the affected with medical treatment and contributions in refugee's camps, like building semi-permanent toilets, tents and many more. On normal days volunteers are involved in blood donation and mass health service. We've established some branches in some big cities in Indonesia; one of them is in Yogyakarta. We believe that every single thing we do will affect us, no matter it is good or bad, it will come back to us. Everything we give to others will come back to us, maybe in a different way and unexpectedly. Based on that idea, we have a slogan: Love for All, Hatred for None. Until now, we are trying and will always try to help others as much as we can, no matter how small it is it will make a change.

that these children deserve the same opportunities. After all, being able to understand more languages, cultures and people helps contribute to a much more peaceful global society as a whole.

I decided to undertake this programme for only three weeks. It's completely different to all my previous volunteering experience that I have undertaken in Australia, which includes some work at a local retirement home and helping organise events to raise money for organisations that help with such



Volunteers disbursing medicine during the health camp

things as cancer research or underprivileged children in Africa. Therefore I still don't know exactly what to expect, and I'm feeling a mixture of emotions as I frantically flick through the pages of my Mandarin phrasebook and China travel guide. I don't even know how this will change my outlook on China and on life, but if there's anything that I hope I can get from this, I hope that I will gain a new perspective on China, as well as on life, and hopefully make friends with backgrounds much different from my own.



Burari Shishu Panchayat on literacy mission

Suman and Rakesh, New Delhi

For the 30 odd children of the Burari Shishu Panchayat, spreading literacy is now a mission. Residents of a backward area of Delhi, the members of the Shishu Panchayat are trying to overcome their own personal difficulties to reach out to children of an adjoining slum to help them with their education.

According to Jyoti, a member of the Shishu Panchayat and a student of class XII with the National Open School, many of the members of their Shishu Panchayat realize on how they themselves are facing challenges to pursue their own education. "So when we started working in the slum, we found out that most of the students especially girls do not go to school. A few of our seniors who are in college then started going to the slum to teach them," she adds. The Burari Shishu Panchayat and their seniors who are members of the local Jan Jyoti Yuva Sangathan are working in the slum in Kathiababa Ashram Road, Burari.

"Initially we and the children of the Shishu Panchayat did a survey of the slum," says Ganesh, the leader of the Yuva Sangathan, "We found that the slum is inhabited by migrant communities from Bihar, Assam, Jharkhand, etc. The people here are mainly daily wage labourers. As the local school is about three km away, most of the children especially girls do not go. Also the school is in dilapidated condition with teachers not teaching regularly."



Children of the slum in the Kathiababa Ashram Road in a class

Mujlum Khatoon, a mother of two in the slum says, "It is risky to send daughters to the school. There is large number of cases of eve teasing. What will happen if something wrong happens with our daughter?" Her concern is echoed by other mothers who feel it is better to not get their daughters educated than risk them from getting exploited.

Sunny, a class X student of the Government Boys Senior Secondary School, Burari and a member of the Shishu Panchayat points out that it is this concern of the children of the slum not able to get even basic education that prompted them and their seniors to try and reach out to the families. "They are our friends. If we are getting some education despite hardships, they why shouldn't they. It is their right."



Members of Burari Shishu Panchayat taking out a rally on the importance of education

According to Ganesh, one of the major challenges before the Burari Shishu Panchayat and the Yuva Sangathan is lack of resources to continue their activities on a sustained basis. "We want to take up many activities and training programme which would help the children and youth of the area. But we are unable to raise even minimum resources to coordinate these."

Deepak Dubey, a Coordinator of the Yuva Sangathan observed that while more youth of the area were interested in joining the cause but difficulties in their own career were forcing them to getting involved in many programmes visualized for the community.

Jyoti is, however, optimistic and hopes that the efforts of the children and youth would galvanize the adults to take them more seriously. Of recently, the Shishu Panchayat and the Yuva Sangathan wanted to develop a Gitanjali Park is a space which was always littered and no one was bothered to clean it. "The children approached the adults of the area who unfortunately did not support them."

"We have to keep working so as to change the attitude of the society towards the capabilities of children and youth. They should understand that we too have a right to contribute towards our society," Jyoti and Sunny echoes in unison.

Persons with disabilities - leaders of volunteering

Ayushi Upadhyay, Bhopal

Thursday, 30 December, 2011. It is just another morning at the Arushi Centre in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh where the usual activity of training and teaching children with disability by means of fun and frolic has begun. However, the significant fact is that these children are being trained by persons with disabilities themselves.

Suphia Khan, the receptionist at Arushi and a specially challenged are capable of doing anything. it might appear hard to manage everything in the and kin, it will be like a cakewalk.

The persons with disability do not need the need to be judged on their talents and not on their with physical disability. He is one of the feeling of being valuable to others and being able to help He adds that the thought of children being able to walk

We are living in 21st century and there are many disability to overcome their limitations. Persons with new things. They can type and read the Braille scripts. A physically challenged person can easily climb a ramp using wheelchair if he can't climb the stairs. What is important is that these people should not feel disabled themselves or inferior to anyone. These people should start feeling that they are also able to do things that a common man does and then they will start finding ways to achieve their objectives, says Dr Rohit Trivedi, a professor of English at Sarojini Naidu Girls Post graduate College and a regular volunteer with Arushi. Dr Trivedi, is a person with visual disability, requests people 'not to build walls around themselves.'

"Rather than getting into a shell, persons with disability should try to find means and ways to volunteer. This is crucial for mainstreaming persons with disability," he emphasises.



Special children at the Arushi Centre in Bhopal

person with disability herself, believes that the What they need is the right direction. She also says that beginning but if there is love and support from the kith

sympathies; rather what they yearn for is equality and disabilities, says Ramaswaroop Ahirwar, a person physiotherapists at the Centre. According to him the others inspite of personal disabilities is extraordinary. due to his efforts is satisfying to the core of his heart.

technologies which have helped the persons with visual disability can use speech to text facility to learn

Sanitation tips

Vishwam, New Delhi



Students involved with the Clean Green Vision ready for a sanitation

The stinking sewerage, discarded plastics and rotten vegetable peels have always been a health hazard. The obnoxious

smell all day long was a blot in the entire area. The local authorities were not bothered by the sorry state of affairs.

It was then some of us got together and decided to act. We first went to the local Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) office and requested them to get the area cleaned but they refused to do it unless they were given extra money. Undeterred we decided to clean it ourselves. We got gloves and khurpis to take up the cleaning work. With help of some local drivers in the area we got cycle carts from the local resident welfare association office and transported the garbage through many trips and disposed it in the nearby MCD dump.

Enthused by the success, we decided to start a children's organization to inculcate the importance of a clean city. We wanted to create awareness about how to dispose waste and make the neighbourhood green. It was in this backdrop, Clean Green Vision (cleangreenvision.org) was initiated. It has been two years since we have started this organization. We have organized many plantation and cleaning drives since. We attend environment related programs organized by other groups and organizations to spread the word and support the cause. Our parents and school have been very supportive of us.



Rev. Katsu San A Journey to Humanity

Arindam Som, New Delhi

The allied forces had already started bombarding mainland Japan. The siren sounded "Emergency" across the town of Shizuoka. There was panic everywhere as people fled here and there to seek protection from the collapsing debris. But the San family was quite peculiar. They continued with their faith in God and took asylum under the Almighty's benevolent arms. And He protected them every time...

It was this inseparable bond with the Almighty that came generally to Katsu San. She was born in the beautiful town of Shizuoka, located on the foot hills of Mount Fujiyama in Japan. She was only eight years when she experienced the brutalities of war and violence. She was equally perturbed by the US sponsored nuclear catastrophe at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

"We were advised to put on helmets to protect our head from possible splinters which could burst out of falling bombs anywhere around. I had to thus wear a helmet during my way to school. My school bag had to be loaded with first-aid items and medicines for the fear of any eventuality which may come our way. We all had to take first-aid classes at school both to take care of ourselves and whosoever needed then" recalls the 72-year-old Rev. Katsu San, who took to Buddhism in 1969, becoming a monk.

As a child, Katsu San was famous for her pranks across the entire perimeter of the town. She used to run away with fruits from kitchen gardens and rice balls from open kitchen windows. Once her entire community went on a pilgrimage to mount Fujiyama and on the first evening they camped on the foot hill of Mt. Fuji. At the camp, Fuji Guru offered her a small rice ball, which she declined and demanded. She declined the offer and asked for a larger one though Fuji guru was the chief monk of the region...

After the war, European culture dominated Japan. Along with the European culture came the loss of values gifted to Japan by Buddhism and Confucianism. This disturbed the young Katsu San, who then determined to devote her life towards serving mankind and society.

After completing her schooling Rev. San began her preparations for the Medical entrance exam in Tokyo during 1958. However, due to some family commitments, she was forced to return to Shizuoka.

She was destined for something else. "A few weeks later I met two students from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and sailed along



with them to India. Fate had already intervened and introduced her to Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, who was so impressed by her that he patronized her.

"He was disciplined, a true divine personality", says Katsu behen (sister) as she is popularly known today. "I was his adopted daughter. He taught me simplicity, humaneness and inspired me to render my services to society".

Her journey to spirituality and peace had just begun.

"In 1969, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the first *Vishwa Shanti Stupa* at Rajgir. Every person dedicated something in the name of charity and Global Peace, but I had nothing to give, and, therefore, I decided to devote her entire life for the cause and in the service of mankind", recalls Katsu San.

Monks are not limited by the boundaries of any society, culture, language, caste or country. When asked why she chose India, Katsu Horiuchi says, "India is the birth place of Buddhism", adding, "750 years ago, a saint known as Nichiren made a prediction that after 75 decades, the sacred Buddhist verse, i.e., *Na Mu Myo Hoi Ren Ge Kyo* will

be reborn and shall relieve mankind of its sufferings like a medicine".

Rev. Katsu San's teacher- Fuji Guru decided to reinstate this medicine back in the place where it was born, India. Rev. Katsu San decided to follow her master's footsteps and hence gave up her Japanese citizenship in 1985.

Having had her guidance from teachers and philosophers like Bibi Amtu Salam, Kaka Saheb and the Japanese Buddhist leader Nichidastu Fujii - who met Mahatma Gandhi in 1933 - Katsu San had found her life's mission.

Her efforts saw her dream come true with the foundation of the *Vishwa Shanti Stupa* in New Delhi.

"Every religion and every holy soul teaches us the same thing but adopts different methods. So the same implies to our Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. He professed the virtues of truth, non-violence, equality and above all love for all living beings. Buddhism has also been a very strong pioneer of these values. From the Mahatma, I learnt a better way of carrying and preaching these amongst the common people", she says. "This is why I choose India", she adds.

She further points out that the concept of Religion has been gravely misunderstood and misinterpreted. "No religion has ever professed violence or hatred. The fact is very simple. There has been a lapse in the way they are professed. So we, the preachers are to be blamed. I shall just request them to divert their aids away from violence and into the service for mankind. This is the true aim of every religion."

At 72 as Rev. Katsu San beats her *uchiwa daiko* (Japanese drum), she believes, the reverberations will surely reach the hearts of even the toughest of people and melt their hatred and bring them to love humanity. "Shanti ki Kamna or prayas hi param dharma hai", (the desire to achieve peace and work for it is the biggest mission in life), gestures Rev. Katsu San with folded hands as she joins other monks in prayer.

Interact Club's special mission

Debarshi Majumder and Ashish Kothari, Kolkata

Society complements Man and Man complements Society. The identity of mankind is incomplete without the perception of a societal structure, of intermixing of cultures and values. In such a setup, we believe it is largely the youth who are entrusted with responsibility of the society's progress, who with an unspoken promise assure of keeping the flame alive and ever-growing. It is with this idea and realization that the Interact Club of Apeejay School, Kolkata takes up different social activities.

Every year a new Interact Board is formed with the students of Classes XI and IX. The students along with

the teachers, in-charges of the club, take up different activities. One initiative is the introduction of "Safety Masks" for spreading awareness in society about the harmful effects of air pollution and protecting oneself from it. The school also attempted to emphasize the need for improved sanitation by spreading awareness on clean public toilets in the city with Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). The programme included street plays, regular inspection and rally. The programme continued for two years and culminated in the construction of a public toilet in the slum near Baisakhi Khal Paar, Salt Lake.

Recently a "Go-Green" programme has been initiated in Victoria Maidan, where the students of the school carried out a mass cleanup program. The Interact Board along with a few other volunteers visited the Victoria Maidan and along with the clean-up, interacted with the early morning joggers to create awareness about keeping our surroundings clean.

One of our recent involvements with a KMC project has been 'Kolkata Learning'. We have adopted the KMC, 9 North Range Urdu Medium School to enhance their cultural and academic standards. Our

intervention is to promote healthy methods of learning. Students, teachers and parent volunteers regularly visit the school to conduct classes. We also invite the students to attend various programmes in our school.

Students should consciously try to contribute to the development of the society. Not everyone can or will work for the society but even if we can inspire a few, we believe the greatest benefactor out of it will be us, the society and the country at large.



Dump ego, empower others

Preetanjali Pasar, Kolkata

"After climbing a great hill, one only finds there are many more hills to climb." - Nelson Mandela

Notwithstanding the fact that social work has been part and parcel of my family's commitment, to me the underprivileged were "THEM" and not "US". So when I had to choose a club activity little did I think that I would choose social service. I made a choice to be a member of the Social Service Club CONNECT and have not had a moment of regret.

I realized and experienced the power of "CONNECT" in one's life. As 14 year olds we were made to question what we saw around us, we were asked what we wanted to do with our lives. But only questioning isn't enough - we were urged to do something about it, change what could be changed and improve what

could be improved. Volunteerism stands for action.

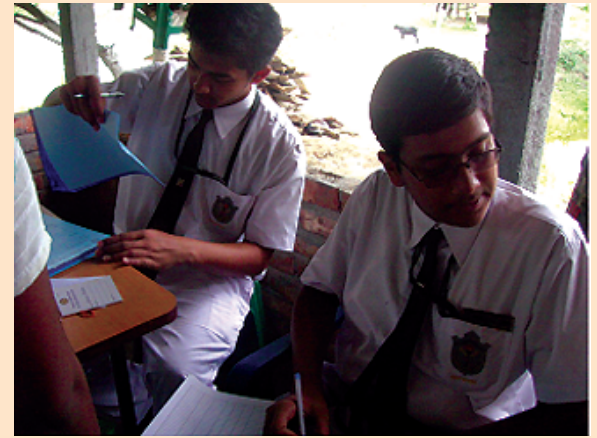
"Education is the most powerful weapon which one can use to change the world." With conviction in this statement, we put our belief into action. Our assignment, "each one, teach one" involved teaching our peers from a less privileged background.

While teaching children as young as four or as old as fourteen, I realized I was not helping them. They were helping me. The glint of naughtiness reflecting in their eyes, the toothless smile and their joyous laugh gave me more joy than I could ever dream of. The mere recital of the alphabets from A-Z filled me with a sense of pride. No. I wasn't awarded nor was I put on a pedestal for my efforts, but the pride and the pleasure I was filled with

after each interaction was invaluable.

CSP- Calcutta Social Project was an arena where we went to teach children who came from the slums. Teaching subjects such as maths and science, yoga and spoken English has been a fulfilling and fruitful activity which not only taught me the valuable lesson of sharing but also made me aware of the benefits of patience.

It has been a hard journey fraught with choices. Right or wrong- selfish or selfless- and clichéd as it may sound, overcoming my tendency to choose reality over a million other things which I had considered important, was not easy. At no point



was I patronizing the underprivileged, for, in empowerment of others there is no place for ego.

"Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending."

Living for others

Aniket De, Kolkata

You notice a torn plastic bag flying across the road.

You grab it, and throw it in the dustbin.

Congratulations! You have just volunteered for a global cause!

A widespread misconception about volunteering is that one has to join a major organization and rush off with badges in order to volunteer. While such tasks are commendable, every citizen can do his simple bit to help others. Society thrives on the small, unrecognized actions that make our planet favourable for life. Any work is social work provided it is done out of love and care.

The East Kolkata Wetlands are protected under the Ramsar Convention, 1971. The kidneys of the city, the wetlands recycle hundreds of litres of freshwater every day. Almost five hundred villagers dwell in this area. As part of our effort to do something for these villagers, we organized a team of four doctors, of various specialisations, to attend a medical camp there. The camp supplied basic medical facilities. Also, we needed to survey the diseases that were reigning unchecked. I could measure blood pressure. The camp also needed people to organise the crowd and record their symptoms. I joined the camp as a volunteer.

Reality struck like an arrow. The villagers had been abandoned to death. Virtually cut off from the city by the huge lakes, there was not even a primary health centre. Two days ago, a young boy had died of gangrene, as nobody knew what an antiseptic was. People had flocked to the medical camp with wide eyes and a silent plea to live. We had taken bottles of Dettol and Savlon with us, and distributed them. I stood up on a wooden bench and started shouting instructions on using these lotions. They did not have sterilized cotton. Germs, bacteria, infection were meaningless words. All they had was God and they queued up before small temples and prayed to Him.

We told the villagers what insulin was (the glucometer detected fifty diabetic patients). There were some cases of arsenic poisoning and the doctors arranged ambulances to take them to the city immediately. There was large number of cataract cases. A voluntary organization had agreed to pay for all cataract surgeries.



Students volunteering for the health camp

Our attempt did not transform society or mark a watershed event in the history of medical science. But I cherish the fact that we could be service to a large number of hapless villagers. Every life is priceless, and we cannot afford to lose people by depriving them of basic medical facilities. My own existence had a separate value that day. 'What men live by?' inquired Tolstoy, and answered that they live not for themselves, but for other men.

Volunteering calls for nothing but an intense passion to help. You soon get addicted to it. The pleasure to see someone else's face lighting up goes beyond earthly comforts. Raise your hand and stop the approaching truck when an old man tries to cross the road before you. A public tap at the corner of the road drains litres of water- turn the knob around!

You can do no great acts, only small things for others, said Mother Teresa.

Small things with great love bring forth change.

Motivate youth for Social Work, says veteran gandhian

Call him a social worker, a Gandhian with a revolutionary spirit of peaceful fighter for truth, or a grassroots level worker, Dr S N Subba Rao is a man of many traits. He is 81, and yet can challenge many youth when, it comes to organising peaceful rallies, working at the grassroots or undertaking a social campaign. Age doesn't seem a bar to stop him from continuing with his ceaseless efforts to bring a peaceful social order in troubled areas. He has been an ambassador of peace for the Government on several occasions and has devoted his entire life in propagating Gandhian ideals and the message of love and brotherhood amongst the youth of the country. Known for his National Integration Camps throughout the country, Dr Subba Rao expressed his concern about the fragmentation of the society to Swati Panwar from Solan.

Swati: What is missing in today's youth that they need reformation?

Subba Rao: If we look at 5000 years back, we will notice that the youth, at the time also was cursed and the same situation exists today. There is no problem in the youth, but the only thing they need, is little motivation and counselling. I was overwhelmed when a lot of youth participated in the blood donation programmes. There was a sense of belonging. We must cultivate that. What they have not faced are the difficulties that we did during the pre-Independence era. I was only 13, when I got inclined towards the freedom movement. I believe, if they had faced a similar situation, they would have certainly done something for the country.

Swati: How many youth camp have you set up till now?

Subba Rao: (Smiles) I have lost the count, but I have covered almost all parts of the country several times. Lot of units in the states offer to organize camps and I encourage all of them to organize one by one. We have separate camps called *Children's Festival* for juniors (small children from age 8-12) which shall be organized in Hubli (Karnataka) in November 2010.

Swati: How can India become an ideal country?

Subba Rao: First thing: Poverty should be removed. Then only India can be called an ideal country. If the Government decides to provide unemployment allowance to youth, I am strictly against it. They should work and earn. If they will get money for free, they may take on bad habits. Further, the Government should focus on developing small-scale industries in villages to create job opportunities.

Swati: You still spread Gandhiji's message of non-violence. Do you think it is applicable in today's fast life?

Subba Rao: I don't think there is any harm. Non-violence means, to stay in peace, and if you stay in peace, you will be happy. If you look at today's life, where is the youth heading? Life is complicated and significantly, the people are selfish. People are involved in alcohol, smoking, drugs and a number of relationships. I pity on them, as they are harming their own lives. They must think before they get involved in something illegal. Their energies have to be put to constructive use.

Swati: What is your dream for India?

Subba Rao: My first dream is to get India free from violence. Then, there are issues of poverty, alcohol, tobacco, drugs and corruption. All these issues should get resolved. I hope I will be able to work on these lines further and motivate the youth for social work, says veteran gandhian.



Preserve Ladakh's cultural heritage

Nargis Bano, Kargil

"One of the most important challenges for the people of Ladakh today is to protect the traditional wisdom and environmental heritage of Ladakh," says Nazneen Fatima, a third year student in Kargil, Jammu and Kashmir.



Preservation of Ladakh's cultural heritage is a challenge

For youngsters like Nazneen safeguarding the legacy of the people of Ladakh is of prime importance and they are determined to contribute their bit in this effort.

"We explore the hidden aspects of our historical places. Walking down the lanes of our ancestral villages along with our grandparents and their friends, helps us understand how things have changed since their youthful days. This, at times, makes us feel ashamed of how we have ignored our heritage, both cultural and natural," Nazneen adds.

Meanwhile according to Stanzing Kunzang Angmo, a young Ladakhi studying in Jammu in

the past few years, the unique culture of Ladakh has suffered great losses and the indigenous communities, intentionally or unintentionally, have included themselves in the fold of unchecked globalisation, further damaging their cultural wealth. "The damage, however, is not irreversible and the local communities themselves have taken a step forward to restore what has been lost and save what is vulnerable at the moment," adds.

Talking further Stanzing says the task of the local communities in conserving their heritage is not limited to imparting knowledge. "They have, in fact, designed a sustainable framework wherein they focus on strengthening the leadership quality in select members of the community who have it in them to take on the onerous task of protecting their common wealth and traditional wisdom. They are the community volunteer leaders."

Initially, according to Stanzing the local people would present and perform folk dances only on some occasions. "The startling rise in the number of travellers increased the worries of the Ladakhis, leading to more frequent organising of such cultural gatherings. Along with the traditional forms of songs and dances, they chose theatre as a medium to reflect their issues. This caught the imagination of the young generation. It gave the youngsters a platform not only to understand and appreciate their deep rooted culture but to put forth their own ideas, thus developing a better

understanding within the community," he adds.

It is commendable to see how wisely, the culturally aware citizens in the region have found new and interesting ways to create an engaging space where people can share their experiences, keeping culture, tradition and nature as the background. One such trend, seen during the festive seasons, is where people from remote locations come to participate in the ethnic programmes organised in the town and perform diverse rituals. One gets to see an amalgamation of various local cultures of Ladakh which also depicts the unity in diversity. This undoubtedly fascinates as well as helps develop a sense of responsibility among the community members to preserve this diversity.



Peace Gong Reporter interviewing the youth in Kargil

When dance gives a chance to break free

Danseuse Alokanda Roy is a cultural icon across India. Her Tagore dance dramas such as 'SHYAMA', 'CHITRANGADA', 'CHANDALIKA', are legends as are her classical dance items and innovative choreographic creations on classical style, such as 'VANDEMATARAM', 'MEGHDOOT' and 'AMRAPALI'. A Miss India First Runner Up in 1969, Ms Roy has performed all over the country and the world. As part of her social endeavour, she has been teaching dance to 330 prison inmates of Kolkata since 2007. During the Durga Puja in 2011, around 42 prisoners of Presidency and Alipore jails in Kolkata, including 12 women, performed in Mumbai. The troupe staged 'Valmiki Pratibha' - the acclaimed dance drama penned by Rabindranath Tagore - in Powai, Thane, Vashi and Dadar.

In a freewheeling interview with Spandana Bhattacharya, Ms Roy talks about her work with the prisoners and their children.

Q1. What led you to work with prison inmates?

On International Women's Day in 2007, I had been invited as a guest to the jail. The then

Inspector General of Prisons, Mr B D Sharma asked me if I could teach the girls dance. I readily agreed because it felt like a challenging job and I was curious to know more about them. That visit changed my perception about a jail. There were light and open spaces, contrary to what I had seen in films. As I was coming out, I noticed the boys. They had given up all hope of ever returning to the life outside and the hopelessness reflected on their faces. It was then that I decided that I would teach both the boys and girls dance drama.

Q2. Tell us about your journey from 2007 till date while working with the jail inmates.

When the class started, there were initially 10 boys and 12 girls. While the girls were enthusiastic, the boys were very reluctant. On the first day I told them that I didn't want to know why they were there and all I wanted was to channelize their unused raw youthful energy in a positive way. Eventually more and more joined the group and many began writing poems and painting. I began training them in Kalaripayattu, the ancient Kerala martial arts form. The first time they went out of jail to perform was on 13 December 2007 in Uday Shankar Dance Festival.

They got a thunderous applause and a standing ovation and this gave a new meaning to their lives. This was the beginning of a journey. Now, along with the jail inmates even the jail staff has



started calling me, "Ma".

Q3. What have you learnt from this journey?

This is a journey not only for them but also for me. It brought about the realization that even they are human beings, while also being the most discriminated people. And there are few who are willing to stand up for them.

Q4. How do you think the youth can contribute to the uplifting of prisoners?

Firstly, try to treat them as one of us and not as untouchables.

Secondly, when someone commits a crime they are punished. Justice takes its course. But after they have served their term, by not accepting them and their family back into mainstream society we are actually making more criminals. So the youth must be understanding and alleviate the social stigma associated with criminals.

Q5. What is your message for the readers of "The Peace Gong"?

Try to be sensitive to others needs and even a little sacrifice from one can give someone else a new life.



Illustration by Arijita Bose, New Delhi



Cultural icons and volunteerism.... A Tribute to Bhupen Hazarika

Nirjara Mahanta



When lakhs of people paid tributes to the legendary singer-composer Bhupen Hazarika by attending his funeral on November 9,

2012 in Guwahati, it created a world record. This was a poignant highlight of how the 'Bard of Bramhaputra' as he was rightly called had mesmerized both old and new alike through his music and films.

What made lakhs of people to go and attend his funeral? In fact his funeral had to be postponed to ensure that his fans paid their last tributes to him. There was heart rendering emotional scenes as fans were paying their tributes beating their chests and singing his songs. It was reminder of the funeral of Michael Jackson's which was seen by a very large audience over television across the world.

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, a cultural icon of the masses across generations, was a rare combination of a lyricist, composer, singer, poet, filmmaker, music director, literary editor, artist, writer, thinker and a political worker that distinguishes him from the rest of the artistes. His magnetic personality was

unparallel. And indeed, his voice was that of the masses. People found their hopes, aspirations and anger echoed in the songs of Bhupen Hazarika. He composed music that was in rhythm with human desire and aspirations. The words would melt into the melody of the songs.

Bhupen Da and Michael Jackson's funeral epitomizes on how cultural icons induces the spirit of volunteering amongst the masses to highlight the contributions of these icons. As their contribution in the field of culture finds chord with the common masses, they could inspire the people to be part of the cultural idioms they created.

The contributions of these icons are beyond simple entertainment values. Their thoughtful compositions for humanity is what that touches the heart of people. In fact, these cultural icons express truth, in whatever medium of expression, poetry, song, dance, drama, painting, movie - not just for others entertainment but from the depth of their beings and therefore they share without material concern for the 'self and' so they are able to touch a chord in others hearts, that reflects truth and beauty and love for others, which bind people together and encourage 'giving' or 'reaching out' which is the essence of volunteering

One of Bhupen Da's famous songs sums up the true essence of volunteering: 'If human beings don't care for fellow human beings tell me who will care'.

Manuhe Manuhar Babe
Jadihe Akanu Nabhabe
Akani Xahanubhuti
Bhbibo Kunenu Kuwa Xamaniya
Manuhe Manuhar Babe.....

Strange ties....

Priyanka Chetri, Guwahati

*In what a world we are here,
None have time to sit and share,
They look forward for establishing
'world peace'-
And let the poor starve on their knees!*

*They say "friends and friendship",
We know is all that matter"
But they are the ones whose ego is greater!*

*They pretend as if peace and friendship
is their major concern!
But all that they concentrate in
is wealth and power they earn!*

*You may be wondering, who 'THEY' are?
It is nobody else
But, you and me,
Brother....!*

Editor: Spandana Bhattacharya, Class XI, DPS Ruby Park, Kolkata

Andhra Pradesh

Iqra and G Balaraju, Brilliant Grammar & Gems High School, Hyderabad

Assam

Pema Lamhoo, Class XI, SFS School, Narangi, Guwahati
Nirjara Mahanta, Class XI, Kendriya Vidyalaya, Narangi, Guwahati
Priyanka Chetri, Class XI, Cotton College, Guwahati

Delhi

Ann Savina Devasia, Class XI, Nortre Dam School, Badarpur
Arindom Som, Class XII, Ryan International School, Mayur Vihar
Rakesh, Class XII, Government Senior Boys Senior Secondary School, Burari
Shlok Sobti, Class IX, Mother's International School
Shabad Sobti, Class IX, Mother's International School
Shreya Grover, Class IXth, Amity International School, Pushp Vihar
Suman, Class XI, Sarvodaya Bal Kanya Vidyalaya, Burari
Vishwam, Class IX, Mother's International School

Himachal Pradesh

Swati Panwar, Class X, MRDAV School, Solan

Jammu & Kashmir

Nargis Bano, Class XII, Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Kargil
Falak Lone, Class XII, Section A, Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Amira Kadal, Srinagar, A Fisa lone, Govt. Girls Higher Secondary School, Srinagar

Jharkhand

Govardhan Yadav, Yasir Minhaj, Gulam Mustafa, Gourav Kr Singh, Shakil Ansari, Anandalaya Public School, Madhupur, Jharkhand

Madhya Pradesh

Ayushi Upadhyay, Class XI, Carmel Convent Sr. Sec School, B.H.E.L. Bhopal
Lavanya Garg, Class XII, The Sanskaar Valley School, Bhopal

Maharashtra

Nikita Mishra, Class XI, RN Poddar School, Mumbai

Meghalaya

Mema Taring, Class X, Little Flower Secondary School, Malki, Shillong
Caroline Nongsiej, Class X, Little Flower Secondary School, Malki, Shillong

Tripura

Nayan Debnath, Class X, Patu Nagar High School, Agartala

West Bengal

Aniket De, Class XII, DPS Newtown, Kolkata
Preetanjali Pasar, Class XII, Modern High School, Kolkata
Ananya Roy, Class XII, Modern High School, Kolkata
Debarshi Mazumder, Class XI, Apeejay School, Kolkata
Ashish Kothari, Class XII, Apeejay School, Kolkata
Swastik Loho Choudhury, Class X, Nava-Nalanda, Santiniketan

Uttarakhand

Renu Sakhlani, Uttarakhand, child reporter, Umang

International

Syeda Rumana Mehdi, 16 years, Student of O'Levels (Cambridge System)
A.E.S School for Girls, Karachi, Pakistan
Anuradha Roy, Grade 11, Hutcheson's Grammar School, Glasgow, Scotland
Rafiq Maharjan, Class VIII, Hindu Vidyapeeth, Balkumari, Lalitpur, Nepal
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Moustafa Ibrahim, IGCSE- Grade 12, St. Fatima School, Cairo, Egypt
Indri Ariesta, 2 Tangerang Selatan SHS, natural science major, Indonesia
Fadhil Ahmad Qamar, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Shazaf Masood, Grade XI, Pace Girls College, Hyderabad, Sindh, Pakistan
Jacob Gilmour, Australia

Illustrations

Shivangi Chakraborty, UK, Arjita Bose, Class V, Montfort Senior Secondary School, New Delhi; Saba, UK, Bilkisse, UK

Advisors

Prof T K Thomas, Prof K V Nagaraj, Dr Biplab Loho Choudhury, Dr B S Panwar, Dr A S Guha, Dr Rohit Trivedi, Mr Anil Mudgal, Dr Mazher Hussain, Ms Sharmila Sinha, Mr Tarun Bose, Ms Amita Dahiya, Ms Anju Grover, Mr A R Patil, Mr Javed Naqi, Mr Manoj Rastogi, Mr Rihan Ali, Mr Vedabhyas Kundu, Mr Rajdeep Pathak, Ms Shaswathi Jhalani

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