

VOLUNTEERISM AMONG THE ELDERLY - THE WAY TO PARTICIPATORY EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Ageing is an inevitable and natural process of life for everyone. Ageing is not uniform and most people dread old age. But this daunting process of ageing, with its negatives, may be alleviated through the concept of volunteerism. The concept of 'volunteerism' by the elderly means that older persons offer their services, voluntarily, in their areas of skill, interest or expertise to an organization/individual/society that requires them.

Volunteerism is a great means of staying fit and healthy, both physically and mentally, even after the age of 60, by rendering voluntary, service for the development of society. Volunteerism helps in 'productive ageing' and 'participatory action', all of which enable a person to be healthy and active even in old age. It is in the hands of each of us to empower ourselves by staying busy and active, participating in some form of meaningful and worthwhile occupation/work, engaging the mind with certain challenging tasks and, most importantly, of being able to contribute to the development of society in general by providing help, relief and succor to those in need. Volunteerism helps in leading a healthy and qualitative life, even in the golden eventide of one's life.

Key words : Volunteerism, productive participatory empowerment

Ageing - An inevitable process:

Becoming old - the very thought can bring on the jitters even in the bravest and young. No one really looks forward to growing old! The reasons are simple and clear - ageing brings on physical and mental health issues and problems, coupled with financial constraints, emotional turbulence, and dependency on others: in short, all of which makes living or leading a normal life a tedious and unpleasant task.

The pain, illnesses, suffering, loneliness, immobility, and incapacitation are all that most of us think of or visualize when we look at ourselves growing old. No one can escape old age and, of course, ageing is an inevitable part of everyone's life. It is also a known fact that ageing is not uniform; it differs from individual to individual, with gender differences impacting the process of how one ages.

Today, as the world is faced with the emerging challenge of longevity on an increasingly growing scale, where 22% of the total global population will soon be over the age of 60 years, the questions that arise are - Is the world equipped to take on this challenge? Are the elders themselves ready to take on the complexities of living longer?

Definitely, for most older persons, living longer and that not qualitatively can be quite daunting. As one ages, such issues as health, healthcare, finances, emotional support, family ties, and social relations loom large for the older person.

But now, with longevity blessed with efforts by medical science and technology to make it healthy and qualitative, mankind may look to old age or ageing with a more positive and optimistic approach.

Don't be afraid to grow old

It is an indubitable fact that the Western world grew economically strong before its population started ageing, unlike the Eastern or Asian regions, where the population aged much before the nations could develop a stable and strong economy. Thus, Asian regions have taken off on the back foot, as it were, and this has been a slight deterrent to them in terms of having a burgeoning 'ageing population' with no appropriate economic or even social infrastructure in place. But the greatest advantage to have come out of this lopsided situation is that, we, in the East, get to learn a few lessons based on the experiences of the West.

One of the most far-reaching lessons that we can take from the demographic transition in the West is that one can still be active, productive and contribute to the development of society even in the post-retirement period or after becoming a senior citizen. 'Productive ageing' is something that each individual should embrace and look

forward to so as to ensure a healthy, happy and dignified life after growing old.

Productive ageing

“Productive ageing,” a term coined by world-renowned gerontologist, Robert Butler, is a great motivational concept for all older persons. Productive ageing is not only paid productivity, but unpaid, voluntary activity for one's family, community and even one's self. According to Butler, also the co-founder of the Global Alliance of the International Longevity Centres, “The principal concept of productive ageing is to remain constructive in relationship to the larger society and immediate environment as long as possible. I think the downside to productive ageing is if it is only seen as work” (Butler & Gleason, 1985).

The Western concept of “productive ageing” initially referred to formal work for remuneration. Butler was the first to challenge this interpretation and to promote an Asian perspective of “productive ageing” (Butler & Gleason, 1985).

Gokhale (1995) extended Butler's concept by calling it “participatory and productive ageing.” Gokhale explains, “Productive ageing implies the participation in action-oriented policies and programmes aimed at guaranteeing social and economic security for the elderly as well as providing opportunities for them to contribute to, and share in, the benefits of development” (Gokhale, 1995).

The Indian perspective on productive ageing

In India, an older person's productivity is never measured in monetary terms. In Indian culture, older persons are encouraged to keep themselves busy, and help contribute to the development of society without monetary gain.

Indian society has had the advantage of a strong family system and social networks that function as a safety net for retired and elderly individuals. Traditionally, the joint family system took care of its elderly, the physically- or mentally-challenged, bachelors and spinsters, widows and widowers, giving them the much-needed solace, comfort, care and company. The elderly in India are viewed as the

“conscience-keepers” of society. They take care of their grandchildren, inculcating moral and traditional values in the younger generations through history, mythological stories and legends. Participation in such activities has helped them remain engaged and feel wanted. It has, further, contributed to strengthen the moral fabric of young Indians.

Older persons' engagement in unpaid activity is reckoned of value in Indian society, and is a hallmark of both Indian culture and Asian cultures. The activity may be of a spiritual or religious nature. The Indian concept of spirituality, as propounded by the ancient scriptures, has a direct bearing on the productivity and gainful occupation of the elderly. Spirituality, which differs from religion or the practice of any religion, affirms that “one does one's karma (duty) without expectations,” a maxim adhered to most conscientiously in old age. To give to society without expecting any return (either monetary or in terms of appreciation) is the true essence of spirituality, as propounded by Asian culture. The concept of volunteerism is an offshoot of this very spirituality propounded by Indian philosophy.

Gokhale (1995) contends that productive ageing does not only mean working for wages. He points out that certain areas of work cannot be monetized but yet need to be done by older persons in India, such as that undertaken by older women who carry out household chores, and grandparents who care for grandchildren. These are cultural and traditional roles that the older person has to play and which do not end with advanced age.

In India, an older woman rarely retires from household chores, duties or responsibilities, but carries on discharging them until she dies, or is no longer physically able to do them. This practice holds true in both rural and urban areas. By contrast, older men often have time on their hands, and few means of keeping themselves occupied or engaged (Raje, A. 2012).

Old age does bring on illnesses and ill-health, immobility and frailty, loneliness and isolation. But there are ways and means to overcome them. And the key to this is in your hands!

Planning for the period when one is officially recognized as having

become an older person or a senior citizen (as it is referred to in India - that is, at the age of 60 years) is the first step towards ensuring that we have a proactive, productive and qualitative ageing process in place.

And even if this planning for retirement or old age has not been done earlier, it is still possible to work towards a positive and proactive old age. Retirement is not 'the be-all and end-all' of life, and it should not be the uppermost thought on our minds as we move towards becoming senior citizens.

'Volunteering' as a means to ageing healthily

One of the most proven and effective means of staying young at heart and in the mind and, consequently, of being physically fit and healthy after 60 is to undertake volunteering activities or be engaged in voluntary service for society. Volunteerism is good, not only for senior citizens themselves but is also a very strong tool for the qualitative development of society.

It has been mentioned before that ageing is not uniform - that is, it differs from person to person and gender differences also impact an individual's ageing process. There are individuals who are fully fit, active, energetic and exuberant even at the age of 80, and on the other hand are persons who might be physically and mentally unwell at the age of 60!

How well we age is something that most of us can determine ourselves. Before we attain the universally acknowledged age of a senior citizen, that of 60 years, there are several things that a person can do that would help make the years post this age healthier and more meaningful, productive and satisfying. Exercising, having a healthy and balanced diet, a good social circle, and staying away from excesses (in short, having a healthy lifestyle) are some of the best-known means of staying fit and healthy during one's youth and as one ages. However, a vital element crucial to staying fit and healthy after 60 years of age is staying active, participating in some kind of occupational work, keeping oneself busy, engaging the mind with challenging tasks and, most importantly, of being able to contribute to the development of society in general by alleviating the problems of those in need of help, relief and succor.

One of the most effective means of facing old age with great courage and fortitude is to engage in voluntary activities for the upliftment of the underprivileged and/or by participating in social development activities.

Such involved volunteerism is sure to help us face old age without fear or anxiety. Don't be afraid to grow old - ageing is natural. With certain measures and safeguards in place, we can face old age without dreading it.

Volunteerism - A means to participatory empowerment

ILC-I, Pune had initiated the movement of volunteerism by the elderly to effect a qualitative change in society. Senior citizens are one of our greatest treasure-houses of knowledge, wisdom and experience. They are a pivotal source of information to be harnessed with the utmost care and warmth. Social engagement in worthwhile and meaningful occupations keeps an individual mentally and physically alert, active and healthy.

The concept of volunteerism holds that older persons offer voluntary service in their particular areas of skill, interest or expertise to organizations that require them. The Volunteers' Bureau, specially established for the purpose, registers the names and details of older persons interested in rendering such voluntary service and allots them organizations/establishments requiring the said services. Care is taken to ensure that senior citizens are allotted organizations adjacent to their residence, thus reducing the cost, time, and energy a senior citizen has to put in as a volunteer and ensuring that these factors do not burden the volunteers. After all, they are offering their invaluable services on a voluntary basis, without costing the organization a thing.

The system works by matching the skills and interests of older persons with the requirements of particular organizations. For instance, a retired school teacher goes to an orphanage to engage children in value education, telling them mythological stories, legends, folklore, and fables, while a retired financial expert offers his expertise and knowledge to voluntary organizations which cannot afford the professional fees of such experts. There are older persons who visit old

age homes and spend quality time with their more unfortunate elderly brethren residing there, even carrying out a few chores for them. Some older persons run a Help Desk at hospitals for patients' relatives; others help man helplines operating for senior citizens.

Opportunities for productive engagement post-retirement are plenty and the enthusiasm of seniors is well-harnessed through such activities, helping them develop a sense of well-being and rest in the confidence that they are still being useful to society as productive and participatory members.

Such participatory empowerment or active ageing also builds a positive attitude and approach in the senior citizen, leading to better physical and mental health. By promoting volunteerism in the elderly, there comes a sense of coordination and cooperation, helping keep isolation and loneliness at bay, and simultaneously encouraging active and productive participation in mainstream society.

This initiative of the ILC-I was officially recognized by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India, as an 'innovative initiative' and it commissioned the ILC-I to hold orientation and training programmes for the setting up of 'volunteer bureaus' in India's northern and southern zones.

To highlight how volunteerism has changed the lives of older persons and organizations/society benefiting from the voluntary services of these very 'active, productive and participatory senior citizens,' I cite below an example of 'volunteerism in the true spirit,' bringing to the fore the positivity of the individual in question and the qualitative difference it made to the organization he volunteered for.

Given below are the thoughts expressed by the late Mr C. S. Pathak, former Advisor and Hon. Director of ILC-I, in his own words.

“I started working in 1957 with ACC Ltd in Mumbai and later in the Kirloskar Group of Industries in Pune from 1965 to 1995 in the capacity of Company Secretary & Vice-President (Finance) and Vice President (Law & Taxation). It was a first innings, spread over 38 years.

Honestly, I had not planned for a life after retirement from active and gainful employment. But having fulfilled the expected familial responsibilities and coming from a typical middle-class family, and having set and maintained all along the required economic and social standards of living, I was certain that I would not be required to lower these even without gainful work or employment after retirement.

Also, I had trained myself to be neither needy nor greedy. Thus, I had the liberty to make the choice of living the second innings the way I wanted to. The only self-imposed conditions were that I should give back something substantial and invaluable to society, not make compromises as before, and be able to call a spade a spade. This was at 60.

Second innings

It was, therefore, a God-sent opportunity when the doyen of the industrial house where I had worked for forty years invited me to head and look after the affairs of an NGO, a public charitable trust of the Kirloskar Group. I was fortunate to have worked with him at close quarters and so there was no issue about acceptance and a warming-up period. One of the main objectives of the Trust was to encourage and help establish technicians and workers in the engineering industry to set up and own their own enterprises by extending them financial and technical assistance. This included the preparation of project reports for bank loans, giving loans and guarantees, and generally rendering management consultancy to run the unit.

The other objective was to conduct activities in the field of education. It included assistance in the form of scholarships to needy and deserving students in engineering colleges / institutions, giving them interest-free loans to meet travelling expenses, disbursing loans for postgraduate studies abroad and, more importantly, inculcating in children at a young, impressionable age, the habits of cleanliness, hygiene and aesthetics, with a view to making them better citizens of the country.

Nearly 125 schools from Pune City and neighbouring rural areas participated (and are still participating) in the 'Clean & Beautiful School' competitions. The schools were divided into groups - such as

convents, English-medium, regional-language, rural, municipal etc. - based on the students' social standing and family background. A panel of about 20 judges comprising retired school/college teachers, social workers, and retired bureaucrats used to inspect these schools. Ranking was based on a pre-prepared questionnaire of about 50 questions.

I am happy that with the full freedom and appropriate funding that came my way I was able to make a lasting mark during the twelve years of my association with the Trust. By now, I was 72 and needed a change.

Third innings

The change needed was essentially to remain active, productive, and occupied for a purpose. It was through an unknown external influence that I chanced upon an announcement of a course on Gerontology (unheard of until then) to be conducted under the auspices of the University of Pune (now renamed the Savitribai Phule University) and the International Longevity Centre-India (ILC-I).

I started in right earnest. As it progressed, I developed a great interest in the subject as it seemed so relevant to the issues, changes and problems that I, as a senior citizen, was facing. One day I walked into the office of Dr. S. D. Gokhale, noted social scientist and founder of ILC-I, asking for *pro bono* work.

I was wholeheartedly welcomed. I started the very next day, and the rest is history.

Besides contributing to the organisation in the areas of my own discipline that is, Finance, Accounts and Law - it was in the initiation to a totally new subject and the learning process therein that has been quite enjoyable. Exposure to the boons and banes of the challenges of longevity afforded me new insights.

The general level of ignorance about and indifference to the woes of ageing at the public and governmental levels is huge & alarming. The daunting task before gerontologists/geriatricians/sociologists can be alleviated by NGOs like ILC-I, with enhanced advocacy and training at the levels of the legislature, executive, judiciary and media, both at the

central and state levels. Elders are being subjected to a lack of reverence because of inappropriate upbringing in the absence of joint families. This gap can be bridged by NGOs imparting to school children basic family values, including respect for elders and making their remaining years worth it with dignified living.

My suggestion of developing a project on “Value Education of School children,” especially on the issues of the elderly, was received with great enthusiasm by ILC-I and soon, several schools were approached in this regard. The orientation of children to the moral values and information on the plight of the elderly was well-received by schools and several such programmes were conducted. One specific point I would like to make here is that these programmes also had senior citizens volunteering to interact with the school children to teach them the values of care, respect, love, patience, help, and cooperation with older persons through storytelling, fables, folklore, songs, poems and such interesting means which caught the attention of the children. I was truly glad that my idea had made a qualitative difference to the molding of the minds of school children and helped rebuild the value-based system of our society once again.

Another topic for action I put forward to ILC-I was a brainstorming meeting on euthanasia. Here, too, it gave me great satisfaction to see ILC-I work on this suggestion and convene a meeting with all the leading stakeholders in this field, positively and proactively debating and contributing to the topic of whether euthanasia should be legalized in India. Further still, the declaration issued at the meeting and its report were sent to some leading decision- and policy-making individuals and bodies in the country.

Such active participation in creating a positive momentum in society, and such involvement without any strings attached to the promotion of the noble cause of population ageing through creative means, have motivated me to work further with greater zeal and enthusiasm even today, at the age of 78. I have also been regularly writing letters and articles in the newspapers and in-house magazines of senior citizens' clubs/forums/associations on different topics and issues, all of which

have helped my mind effectively churn out thought-provoking contributions.

And, yes, there is one more voluntary social activity that I have been an active part of, and which is cultural in nature, but which gives me great contentment and satisfaction too, and most importantly, has the involvement of my wife as well! My old college friends, a group of seven of us, all with musical talent, have come together to form a 'harmonious melody' and we sing lighthearted classical and film songs, free of charge, for residents of old age homes, retirement community villages, palliative care centres and senior citizens' organizations.

One member plays the 'tabla' (a kind of drum-like instrument), and one the harmonium. Three of us, including my wife, sing. One comperes the programme and I take care of the coordination and logistics arrangements.

We sing and play old songs which fascinated older generations and are still heartily and enthusiastically received by audiences today as well. Just watching the older people with their wrinkled faces and grey hair lose all their inhibitions and join us in singing, clapping, foot-stomping, and cheering energetically gives us musicians an adrenalin high! The programs are conducted free of charge (except for a token amount towards the reimbursement of travelling and conveyance expenses) at senior citizens' clubs in and around Pune. During the past 15 years or so, about 60 programmes have been conducted.

It would be truly hard to imagine the glow on the faces of these otherwise sad-faced seniors, unless one is there to experience it and see it in person. This kind of giving to society, in a way that gives happiness not just to the receiver but also the giver, is what drives us volunteers to engage in such a joyous, satisfying and productive activity.

Ageing is not so bad, I have realized that now. It has given me a clearer insight now that I am free of job constraints, family obligations, and able to give myself wholly and completely to a cause that I believe in, empathise with, and look forward to advocating, without any expectations. If you are lucky enough to be able to retire without working for monetary reasons post-retirement, my earnest plea to all

retirees would be this: 'Take up volunteerism in any field of your choice or liking, and see how the years fly away. Observe how light you feel, experience the joy of giving without expectations, and see how your mental and physical health improve even as you grow older (or should I say grow younger?).'

The association with ILC-I has been rewarding and has given me immense pleasure in my twilight years.”

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