

SPIRITUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS ON VOLUNTEERISM**Prajakta Sahani, Ashlesha Mane and Vaishnavi khopkar****ABSTRACT**

Volunteerism is examined through its spiritual and philosophical foundations in ancient Sanskrit literature, where Seva is understood as a dharmic and ethical responsibility rather than an expression of social subordination. In contrast to the modern tendency to associate servitude with social inferiority, classical Indian thought frames service as a discipline for inner purification and moral development. Drawing from the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, the principle of niṣkāma karma—action performed without attachment to results—is presented as the ethical core of volunteerism (Bhagavad Gita 2.47). A well-known Subhāṣita from the Subhāṣita-ratna-bhāṇḍāgāra, asserting that the human body exists for the welfare of others, reinforces altruism as an inherent moral obligation. Further, the Gita's discussion of charity performed as duty and without expectation is analyzed as a philosophical foundation for compassionate service (Bhagavad Gita 17.20). This research is based on qualitative analysis involving the interpretation of various ancient texts. Through textual and conceptual inquiry, service is presented not as self-negation but as a process of ethical cultivation and social responsibility.

Keywords: volunteerism, Indian philosophy, dharma, Sanskrit literature, ethical responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Volunteerism today is widely recognised as a powerful instrument for social transformation, community development, and civic responsibility. Modern discussions on volunteering, however, are largely shaped by sociological, economic, or psychological frameworks that emphasise skill-building, empowerment, or social cohesion. While these perspectives are valuable, they often understate a deeper dimension that has shaped Indian culture for millennia—the spiritual and philosophical foundation of sevā, or selfless service. In the Indian worldview, service is not merely an act of charity or social duty; it is a profound spiritual discipline rooted in ethical responsibility, inner purification, and the pursuit of universal welfare.

Indian philosophical traditions—from the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita to the Dharma sastras, Itihas, and Puranas—present volunteerism as an expression of the interconnectedness of all beings. The concept of sarvabhūta-hita (welfare of all living beings), niṣkāma karma (selfless action without attachment to results), and yajña-bhāva (the sacrificial spirit of offering) provide a conceptual framework for understanding service not merely as external action but as internal spiritual practice. These ideas highlight that serving others is ultimately a means of serving the Divine within oneself and within all.

In the contemporary world, volunteer organisations, such as the National Service Scheme (NSS), youth-led initiatives, and grassroots movements, continue to engage millions in community service. Yet the philosophical grounding of such service is rarely emphasised. It is a unique opportunity to revisit the spiritual roots of seva to understand and know modern volunteerism with a deeper meaning, ethical clarity, and emotional resilience. Understanding these classical foundations also enables young volunteers to perceive their work not only as a social contribution but also as a personal transformation.

This study aims to identify how ancient wisdom can help present-day practices of volunteerism and how seva rooted in timeless ideals can help shape compassionate, responsible, and conscious individuals in society by exploring the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of volunteering through a close examination of Sanskrit texts and Indian ethical thought.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this study is textual and analytical, which is appropriate for analysing philosophical ideas that have been mentioned in Sanskrit literature. This approach aims to examine the historical materials with reference to modern understanding of volunteerism. Design of Research:

This research is qualitative in nature and depends on analysis of original texts of Sanskrit literature, interpreting and comparing philosophical concepts, and connecting modern volunteer frameworks with traditional values. This method is helpful for analysing the philosophical and spiritual foundations of Seva described in traditional texts as well as connecting it to contemporary volunteerism.

Primary Sources:

This study analyses ancient Sanskrit texts and concepts related to selfless action (Seva), donation (dana), duty (Dharam), compassion and universal welfare.

The Rig Veda, the Shrimad Bhagwat Gita, the Mahabharat, and the Arthashashtra are a few texts examined in this research.

Secondary Sources:

The secondary materials include commentaries of scholars, modern interpretations and academic literature on volunteerism, ethics, and spirituality.

Analytical Framework:

The analysis of this study is guided by three major concepts. Those are spiritual motivation, ethical duty, and social philosophy. This framework allows us to connect ancient thoughts of Seva to contemporary-day volunteerism.

DISCUSS AND ANALYSIS**• Nishkama karma as spiritual foundation**

Reference: *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.47 Sanskrit (key concept):

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते ऽ फलेषु कदाचन । ऽ कर्मफलहेतुर्भमर्ाम ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मधि ॥ ४७ ॥

Translated sense:

You have the right to perform your prescribed duty, but not to the fruits of action. Do not consider yourself the cause of the results, nor be attached to inaction.

Analytical relevance:

The Bhagavad Gita mentions the principle of niskama karma, which means one must always do his prescribed duty. In this verse individuals are advised to focus on their duty rather than on its outcomes. Action is presented as an ethical and spiritual obligation rather than a means of personal gain.

• Renunciation of Fruit-Motivated Action

Reference: *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.49 Sanskrit:

दभरेि ह्यवरं कर्म बुद्धियोगािनञ्जय । बुिौ शरिर्द्धिच्छ कृ पिाः फलहेतवाः ॥ ४९ ॥

Translation:

Action driven by desire for results is far inferior to action guided by wisdom, O Arjuna. Seek refuge in wisdom; those who act for the sake of results are pitiable.

Analytical relevance:

This verse establishes a moral hierarchy between selfless action and result-oriented action. It critiques ego-driven motivation and affirms wisdom (*buddhi-yoga*) as the ethical foundation of *sevā* and volunteerism.

• Integration of Bhakti, Jñāna, and Karma as the Basis of Sevā

Reference: *Bhagavad Gītā* 3.3 (*Karma Yoga – The Art of Working* by Śrī Prabhujī, p.19) Sanskrit:

लोके ऽद्धिद्धिविधवि धनष्ठा पुरा प्रोक्ता र्यानघ । ज्ञानयोगेन साङ्ख् यानां कर्मयोगेन योधगनार् ॥ ३ ॥

Translated sense:

In this world, a twofold path was taught earlier by Me: the path of knowledge for the contemplative, and the path of action for the active.

Analytical relevance:

This verse establishes an integrated vision of spiritual life, wherein Bhakti (devotion), Jñāna (knowledge), and Karma (action) function as complementary disciplines. While jñāna appeals to the intellect and bhakti nurtures devotion, karma-yoga finds expression through selfless service (*sevā*). An integral life requires the harmonious presence of all three; the absence of any one results in spiritual imbalance.

• Niṣkāma Karma as Inner Discipline

Reference: *Bhagavad Gītā* 3.19 (*Karma Yoga – The Art of Working* by Śrī Prabhujī, p.118) Sanskrit:

तिदसक्ताः सततं कायं कर्म सर्ाचर । असक्तो ह्याचरन्कर्म परर्ाप्रोधत पभरुषाः ॥ १९ ॥

Translation:

Therefore, perform your duty constantly without attachment; for by performing action without attachment, one attains the Supreme.

Analytical relevance:

This verse highlights niṣkāma karma as a disciplined state of mind attained through selfless action. Purity of mind leads to purity of thought, speech, and conduct. Compassion and sensitivity—especially in speech—are essential, as wounds caused by words are enduring.

Sevā thus becomes an ethical and psychological purification process.

• Selfless Leadership and Universal Welfare

Reference: *Bhagavad Gītā* 3.25 (*Karma Yoga – The Art of Working* by Śrī Prabhujī, p.148) Sanskrit:

सक्ताः कर्मण्यधिविंसो यथा कु वमद्भि रारत । कु यामधि िंस्तथासक्तधिकीषुमलोकसंग्रहर् ॥ २५ ॥

Translation:

As the ignorant act with attachment to work, O Arjuna, so should the wise act without attachment, desiring the welfare of the world.

Analytical relevance:

This verse defines the ideal of lokasaṅgraha—working for universal welfare without personal motive. The wise individual finds fulfillment in serving others and sets ethical standards for society. Such selfless conduct influences not only human beings but also the broader ecological and moral environment, reinforcing sevā as a transformative social force.

• Selfless Action as the Means to a Fulfilled Life

Reference: *Yajur Veda* 40.2 (*Philosophy of Veda* by Principal K.M. Talreja, p.243) Sanskrit:

कु वमन्े्वेह कर्ामधि धिीधवषेच्छत सर्ाः । एेवं त्वधय नान्यथेतोऽद्धस्त न कर्म धलप्यतेे नरे ॥२॥

Translation:

By performing actions here selflessly, one may aspire to live for a hundred years. In this way alone can action not bind a person.

Analytical relevance:

This verse presents selfless action as the only path through which life remains untainted by bondage. Action, when performed without attachment, becomes liberating rather than binding, establishing sevā as both an ethical and spiritual discipline.

• Selflessness as the Antidote to Violence Reference: *Heritage of Vedic Culture*, p.115 Analytical relevance: The text emphasizes that unity cannot be imposed through force, fear, or coercive power. History testifies that violence—even in its most extreme forms—fails to establish lasting harmony. The true antidote to destructive power lies in the awakening of inner consciousness, where selfishness gives way to selflessness. Sevā, grounded in spiritual awareness, becomes the transformative force capable of countering violence at its roots.

• Threefold Classification of Action

Reference: *Heritage of Vedic Culture* (Commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*), p.314 Conceptual framework:

- Karma – ordinary action
- Vikarma – selfless, rightly directed action
- Akarma – non-action or transcendence of action Analytical relevance:

The text interprets Vikarma as action performed selflessly, with full enthusiasm and ethical alignment, directed toward collective welfare. Such action does not bind the doer but purifies consciousness. The commentary further echoes the *Gītā*'s paradoxical insight that the wise perceive inaction within action and action within inaction, highlighting inner detachment amidst outward engagement. Sevā thus emerges as spiritually liberating action rather than mere social service.

• Constant Engagement in Public Welfare

Reference: *Arthaśāstra* 1.19.35 (Kangle, Part II, p. 47) Sanskrit:

तिद्योगक्षेर् रािा कृ त्पानुष्ठानधनरताः स्यात्।

Translation:

Therefore, the king should constantly remain engaged in securing the welfare and protection of his people.

Analytical relevance:

Service here is continuous, disciplined action — not episodic charity. Governance in this context reflects the niskama karma done for collective well-being. This reinforces volunteerism as ethical responsibility, not optional benevolence.

- Dharma Defined as Universal Welfare

Reference: Śānti Parva, अध्याय 109 Sanskrit:

र्मिः स परर्ो यत्र सवमर्भतधहतं वैत्।

Translation:

That is supreme dharma which is devoted to the welfare of all beings.

Analytical relevance:

This verse establishes service as the very definition of dharma, not as a secondary moral act. This understanding closely aligns with the principles of niskama karma and seva reinforcing the idea of selfless service constitutes both moral duty and spiritual essence. Hence this gives a foundational philosophical definition of dharma by identifying it with universal welfare.

- **Paropakara:**

Paropakara provides the philosophical and ethical foundation of volunteerism. According to the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of volunteering, it is said to be the selfless service done without expecting anything in return. Paropakara means selfless action done for the welfare of others. Hence, volunteering is the modern, organised form of paropakara. Paropakara is the philosophical ideal, and volunteering is its living practice. Together, they unite spiritual values with social responsibility.

- **Volunteerism as lok kalyan**

Reference: *Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra* 2 by Narayan Ram Acharya, p.75, shlok-10 Sanskrit:

परोपकाराय फलद्धि वृक्षाः । परोपकाराय वहद्धि नद्याः । परोपकाराय दुहद्धि गावाः । परोपकाराथमधर्दं शरीरर् ॥

Translated sense:

Trees bear fruits, rivers flow, cows give milk, likewise, the human body exists for the purpose of helping others.

Analytical relevance:

This Subhashit is used to illustrate paropakara, Loka Kalyan, and social ethics. It states that this human body is made to help others, without expecting anything in return. The main motive of volunteerism lies in this subhashit. In classical thought, paropakara is considered the very purpose of human life as given above.

Reference: *Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra* 2 by Narayan Ram Acharya, p.74, shlok-3 Sanskrit:

रथविन्द्रो िना वृक्षाः नदी गावि सज्जनाः । एते परोपकाराय रूधव दैवेन धनधर्मताः ॥

Translated sense:

Sun, moon, trees, rivers, cows and noble persons, all are created for the welfare of the world.

Analytical relevance:

Here nature itself is shown as the model of paropakara. And a noble person should be like nature. A human's greatness lies in helping others.

• **Reference:** *Sumadhur Sanskrit Subhashit part-1* by Prof. Medha Soman, p. 35

Sanskrit: अयं धनिः परो वेधत गिना लघुचेतसार् । उदारचरतानां तु वसुिैव कु टुम्बकर् ॥

Translated sense:

This is mine, that is of a stranger, such calculations are done by the narrow-minded people.

For the noble hearted, the entire world is truly one/my family.

Analytical relevance:

This subhashit states service should be done without discrimination. A selfless service and volunteerism arise naturally from the recognition of the world as one family. Reference: *Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra* 2 by Narayan Ram Acharya, p.74, shlok-6 Sanskrit:

आत्माथं िीवलोके ऽद्धिन् को न िीवधत र्ानवाः । परं परोपकाराथं यो िीवधत स िीवधत ॥

Translated sense:

Who lives for himself alone? One who lives for the welfare of others — he truly lives.

Analytical relevance:

This subhashit appreciates the thought of service done for others. Volunteerism transforms mere existence into meaningful living. Service oriented life is portrayed as the highest form of life.

CONCLUSION

According to classical Sanskrit literature volunteerism concept lies in Niskama karma and Paropakara. The teaches of the Bhagavat Gita, Mahabharat, Arthashashtra, Vedas and Upanishads and various other Sanskrit literature collectively affirm that selfless service is the very purpose of human life. It is pathway to inner refinement, ethical clarity, and universal harmony. In the modern context deep, timeless insights hold significant relevance for youth volunteerism, community initiatives, and organizations like NSS.

According to Bhagavat Gita niskama karma is a disciplined state of mind attained through selfless actions. This selfless action is quoted as seva. The gist of this seva can be found in various Subhāṣita were Paropakara is the foundation of volunteerism. Deep Subhāṣita directly connect this act of service with nature.

Kautilya's Arthashashtra and the Santi Parva of the Mahabharata clearly demonstrate that Seva in Indian philosophy is neither charity nor servitude, but a foundational ethical discipline governing individual, social, and political life. This conception transforms service into niskama karma, where action is mandatory yet detached from personal gain. Indian philosophy does not glorify submission; it sanctifies responsibility.

Volunteerism, therefore, is not a modern humanitarian import but a deeply rooted dhārmic obligation—a disciplined, continuous orientation of action toward collective well-being. Volunteerism thus emerges not merely as social service, but as a dharmic and spiritual responsibility. Seva functions as the bridge between power and ethics, action and spirituality, self-realization and social harmony.

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