

## **The National Service Scheme (NSS) – State of Voluntary Labour (shramdan) and University Extension Services**

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### **Abstract**

The National Service Scheme (NSS), established in 1969, is the largest government-sponsored student youth organisation in the world. With an enrolment of over 4 million student volunteers, the scheme engages them in a range of service activities that benefit the community and enhance the social perception of the volunteers. Although it is a part of the higher education system in the country, it shuns 'elitism' and promotes voluntary labour (*shramdan*) to uphold the principle of 'dignity of labour'. This article analyses the role of the NSS in connecting the campus to the community and the social work component in it and seeks to find out the reasons for the decline of *shramdan* activities in its scheme. It shall also be the endeavour of the paper to visualise the future of the programme in the wake of changed priorities and far-reaching changes. This article draws on research articles, government reports and documents, and a vast number of NSS annual reports of colleges and universities.

**Keywords:** *shramdan, voluntary labour, extension, social work education, student volunteer.*

### **Introduction**

The National Service Scheme (NSS) was introduced in 1969, the centenary of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation. Its stated objective is to involve the student youth in working with and among the people to initiate social projects and thus enhance their knowledge and skills through a confrontation with reality (Hasan, 1976). In other words, it was started with the goal of creating integration between the academic environment and society to make the student learn from society and, in turn, give something to society (Mate, 2025). The voluntary programme not only

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serves as a potent extension tool of the higher education system and operates on the lofty principles of austerity, group living, and empathy but is also implemented by low-cost structures to fetch high social returns (NSS Manual, 1986).

The cardinal principle of the scheme is that it is organised by the students themselves, and both students and teachers, through their combined participation in social service, get a sense of involvement in the tasks of national development. The Ministry of Education, Government of India (then the NSS was under this ministry), entrusted the Delhi School of Social Work and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) with the task of devising the operational guidelines and delivery mechanism of the scheme in 1967–68. Thus, the scheme is visibly social work-oriented with emphasis on field-based activities, especially voluntary labour (*shramdan*). While serving as a template of civic learning, the NSS builds civic competencies among the volunteers and facilitates ‘twinning’ of students and the non-student youth in the urban and rural communities (Sekhar et al., 2022). As an effective trope of university community engagement, it eases the student youth into citizenship and, at the same time, consciously shuns boisterous advocacy or activism (Sekhar et al., 2022). The very participation in the scheme’s activities confers on the students the membership of a huge collective (Sekhar et al., 2022).

### Overview of literature

The authors reviewed a corpus of literature related to the National Service Scheme. It contains articles, unpublished dissertations and theses, policy documents of the Government of India and the annual reports of the colleges and universities about their NSS activities. Most of the literature throws light on the philosophy, historical evolution and implementation of the scheme. Very few studies have dealt with *shramdan*, one of the most important activities of the scheme. This article seeks to fill this conspicuous gap in addition to presenting a descriptive and analytical account of the present state of the programme. While critiquing the overall functioning of the programme, this article probes into the reasons for the decline in *shramdan* and the creation of durable community assets.

### Grounding in Gandhian Philosophy

Mahatma Gandhi accepted the necessity of the division of labour but rejected the idea that bodily labour should be confined to one class and intellectual labour to another. He believed that all individuals, regardless of their social or economic status, should engage in bodily labour as a form of contribution to society and self-purification.

For Gandhi, voluntary idleness had to be eliminated, and labour, both physical and intellectual, should be integrated into daily life. He argued that bodily labour, or *shareer shrama*, was essential for cultivating equality and breaking hierarchical distinctions. Gandhi viewed labour as a form of *yajna* (sacrifice), where working for others constituted desireless action, contributing to the greater good. This perspective challenged societal norms that segregated labour based on class and caste, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable approach to work. For Gandhi, voluntary idleness had to be eliminated, and labour, both physical and intellectual, should be integrated into daily life.

Based on the Gandhian precepts of self-help, service and participation, the scheme, during its initial years, concentrated mainly on *shramdan* (literally meaning ‘donation of labour’) and, from a social angle, voluntary work for public good as a tool for student engagement. In other words, the volunteers were often seen engaged in physical work. Under the broad rubric of *shramdan*, cleaning of the campus, roads, and public places in the adopted villages or urban communities; planting of saplings; digging of soak pits; construction of makeshift houses after disasters; removal of the blockades in drains; desilting of the ponds and tanks; repair of the public buildings; and harvesting of rainwater were among the micro-level projects on which the volunteers embarked. It was during the drought in 1972-73 that the NSS organisation swung into action by engaging itself in the aforementioned activities, thus adding lustre to the very idea of voluntary labour (NSS Manual, 1997). In addition to the voluntary labour, the NSS organisation also involved its volunteers in awareness building on crucial areas like human rights, gender equity, immunisation, nutrition, disaster mitigation and management, communicable diseases, hygienic practices, HIV/AIDS, old age problems, girl child education and the preservation of heritage structures. The NSS intervention in these areas had helped the volunteers gain first-hand experience of the tough realities, though on a moderate scale.

### **Decline in *Shramdan* Activity**

From 1969 onwards, the NSS has travelled a long way. The global situation since then has changed substantially, especially with the onset of globalisation, which ostensibly resulted in the structural adjustment programme and consequent economic reforms. Policy formulation is guided by the new shifts and priorities. Though the NSS continues with its core agenda, it is compelled to adopt new practices and intervention methods. The digital revolution, the explosion of the entertainment industry and online shopping have radically altered the lives of young people. Social media platforms not only keep the young glued to their mobiles but also update them with

information and provide them with an opportunity for online activism (Sekhar et al., 2022). It is not uncommon to see educated, enthusiastic and conscientious youth taking up causes, pooling resources online in no time and making it reach the beneficiary. Information technology has made activism much easier and proactive. The International Institute of Population Studies and Population Council (2010), in their study conducted in six Indian states, found that only 30 per cent of the youth participated in civic and social causes. Though the percentage of youth in civic engagement is low, Bhangaokar (2021) argues that the NSS facilitates some kind of engagement nationwide by being a part of the formal education sector. In this backdrop, it is acknowledged that programmes like NSS have lost their sheen to a great extent. Yet they have not lost their relevance totally. Quite naturally and predictably, the NSS needs to change its strategy and modus operandi.

Since the advent of the new millennium, *shramdan* has been sidelined in favour of sensitisation exercises and awareness-building activities. A perusal of around two hundred annual NSS reports of colleges and universities reveals that programmes like plantation, cleaning the campus, and blood donation are the most preferred activities. Extension activities have shifted from labour-intensive *Shramdan* to organised, skill-based social work, such as digital literacy drives, health campaigns and environmental awareness programmes, among others (Mate, 2025). The integration of technology has also reshaped NSS's approach (Mate, 2025). Social media campaigns, workshops, and mobile apps for disaster coordination have replaced physical labour in many instances. While these methods increase outreach, they often lack the personal touch and empathy (Mate, 2025).

New figures from the 2022-23 NSS Annual Report reveal that the programme has over 4.2 million student participants/volunteers on its rolls in more than 42,000 institutions, representing a 68% increase in engagement since 2015 (NSS, 2023). But this expansion has happened at a time when there is a perceptible decline in the type of programme orientation, from labour-intensive rural area programmes to skill-based urban area programmes. This shift mirrors wider socio-political changes, notably the increasing urbanisation of India, which reached 35% of the population by 2023, compared to 17% in 1951, and the professionalisation of volunteering (Chandrasekhar, 2023). The NSS organisation did remarkable work during disasters like the cyclone in Andhra Pradesh (1977), the earthquake in Latur (1993), and the super cyclone in Odisha (1999) – to name a few. Of late, the advancement in technology, speedy delivery of services, the emergence of a huge corpus of highly trained personnel in the domain of disaster management, and the vastly expanded voluntary sector have reduced the importance and visibility of the NSS. In the north-eastern region, every

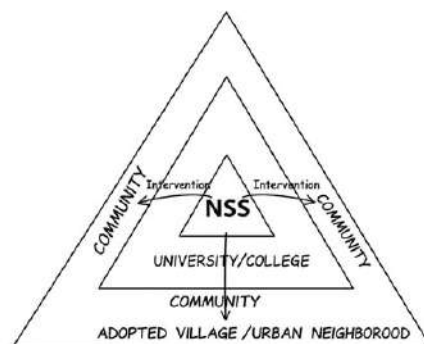
state has powerful NGO networks based on ethnic identities, which are proactive and participate in a variety of developmental and service activities. A strong civil society presence may not accord space for *shramdan* by organisations like the NSS or NCC in the community.

The increase in government spending on roads and infrastructure, and the availability of automated machinery, also contributed to the decline in self-help projects. Added to all these factors is the possible disinterest of the young people in straining themselves in the field.

The world is steadily going digital. The mobile phone facilitates everything from entertainment to financial transactions, thus making lives much easier. A massive skill development programme, 'Skill India', was launched to impart necessary skills to the youth for preparing them to make use of the opportunities in India as well as abroad (Government of India, 2014). Several initiatives, including the 'Smart Cities Project', have been launched for the development of infrastructure. 'Swachh Bharat Mission' and 'Clean Ganga Mission' have been launched for building a 'clean and green India'. The NSS, no doubt, is an intelligent blend of social work education, youth development, civic engagement and extension components of the higher education system. Its role in sensitising and organising the youth into a potent force for decades is worth emulating and undeniable. Yet it is time the planners attempted to reformulate the objectives and the modus operandi of the NSS in tune with the changing priorities, prescriptions of the National Youth Policy (2020), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

### **The University Extension Service in India and NSS**

The figure below shows the 'triad' of the three components of the university extension services, i.e., the NSS, the university/college and the community. The figure also represents the intervention of the NSS as an important arm of the extension wing in the community. In other words, it shows how the NSS forges an organic link between the higher education institutions and the community. In 1977, the University Grants Commission recognised extension as the third dimension of higher education, in addition to the two-fold dimensions of teaching and research (Saldhana and Velaskar, 1993). Though the structure of the extension services of the university system has not been successful. The NSS served as a fulcrum of the extension wing and forged a meaningful link between the campus and community or neighbourhood (Sekhar, 2002).

**Figure -1**

A university functions through three core components: academic teaching (knowledge dissemination), research (knowledge creation), and extension (community engagement). The National Service Scheme (NSS) operates under the extension component, acting as a bridge between higher education institutions and society (University Grants Commission, 2021). This component encompasses the university's engagement with the broader community, including public services, community development, and partnerships with external organisations.

The NSS acts as a bridge, forming a constructive link between the higher education institution (HEI) and the larger communities surrounding the university. The NSS is an integral part of the university/college extension programme, which enables the institution to engage with the larger community, share its knowledge and resources, and work together towards sustainable development. It involves the volunteers in community service activities in the adopted village or neighbourhood that are part of the whole called 'community'.

The above figure exemplifies/clearly demonstrates how the NSS intervenes in the community and forges a constructive link between the higher education institutions (HEIs) and the larger community. By engaging in participatory activities (e.g., awareness campaigns, skill development), students apply academic learning practically, fostering empathy and civic responsibility. Simultaneously, communities gain access to resources and expertise, promoting sustainable development. This symbiotic linkage exemplifies experiential education, where theory meets practice, enriching both the curriculum and societal well-being (Tilak, 2018). NSS thus

strengthens democracy by nurturing engaged citizens and reinforcing the university's role in national development.

The University Extension Service in India refers to outreach programmes originating from the British model. These services aim to bridge the gap between academia and society and foster socio-economic development. In India, they encompass activities like adult education, agricultural training, and community health initiatives, aligning with national goals such as those in the National Education Policy (2020). Conceptualised as a third dimension of academia, alongside teaching and research, its mandate is to disseminate knowledge and technological innovations to the wider community, particularly rural and marginalised populations. It plays a pivotal role in bridging academic knowledge and rural community development, particularly in agriculture and allied sectors, thereby fostering socio-economic development and enhancing agricultural productivity.

Figure 2 below shows a layered hexagonal diagram with the NSS ensconced in the centre. It conveys a slew of community-focused activities. The hexagonal stacking visually communicates interconnected endeavours and domains, the most arduous one being 'creation of durable assets' for the community. This visual representation effectively mirrors the multifaceted nature of the National Service Scheme and its commitment to diverse areas of social welfare and intervention.

**Figure -2**



The NSS, being essentially an 'outreach' programme, enables student volunteers to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems. For instance, NSS volunteers, guided by university extension protocols, are most likely to engage in literacy drives

in rural areas, health awareness campaigns, environmental conservation projects, or skill development workshops for underprivileged communities. The synergy between the university's outreach mandate and the NSS's volunteer framework ensures that both academic institutions and the broader society benefit from a proactive and engaged youth population, contributing to sustainable development and social uplift. Evidence suggests that the NSS acts as a pivot in linking higher education to the social environment. Under the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) launched in 1978, out of 165,000 students, 145,000 were NSS volunteers and taught 150,000 people in 1987 (University Grants Commission, 1986-7). A huge number of 500,102 people were made literate by 474,006 NSS volunteers who had taught functional literacy to 855,213 illiterates up till March 1992 under the National Literacy Mission (NLM) launched in 1988 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1992-3). In view of this training potential of the NSS, Baxi (1976) called the volunteers *ipso facto educators* much earlier.

## Conclusion

The National Service Scheme (NSS), since its inception in 1969, has played a pivotal role in redefining the relationship between higher education institutions and society by showcasing the extension dimension of universities. Rooted in Gandhian values of self-help, service, and participation, the NSS has historically emphasised *shramdan* and direct community involvement while, over time, adapting to new social, technological, and economic realities. Its evolution from labour-intensive rural programmes to awareness-driven and skill-based urban initiatives mirrors India's broader transformation, including urbanisation, digitisation, and professionalisation of volunteering. Despite concerns of declining visibility and reduced emphasis on physical labour, the NSS continues to remain relevant by integrating modern tools such as digital literacy drives, disaster coordination apps, and social media campaigns. Importantly, the NSS provides a vital experiential learning platform through which student volunteers can mainstream classroom knowledge into the exploration of alternatives concerning turf realities. They can also address challenges, cultivate empathy, and develop civic responsibility and democratic values. By linking higher education institutions with communities, the NSS not only strengthens societal development but also reinforces the university's role in national progress. As India redefines its commitment to youth development and formulates policy accordingly, and aligns it with the Sustainable Development Goals, the reconfiguration and revitalisation of the NSS will be essential to ensure its transformation into a more dynamic force for social change and inclusive development.

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