

**CELEBRATION OF 42nd NSS FOUNDATION DAY AND INDIRA GANDHI
AWARDS CEREMONY
VIGYAN BHAWAN, NEW DELHI
(19TH NOVEMBER, 2011)**

**SPEECH OF Dr. S. RAMADORAI, ADVISER TO THE PRIME MINISTER
OF INDIA ON NATIONAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL.**

Good morning Ajay Maken ji, Smt. Sindhushree Khullar, Shri Rakesh Mohan, Smt. Sarada Ali Khan, officials from Ministry for Youth Affairs and Sports, faculty from University and Schools, all the young NSS members and very specially the award winners.

I am delighted to join you today to celebrate NSS Day. A day that I am sure all of you look forward to, a day to meet fellow volunteers, share experiences and celebrate success stories.

The National Service scheme has a wonderful legacy and carries forward the vision of our leaders that fought for independence from the British. Way back a newly independent India was still grappling with the enormity of the developmental challenges faced by a mostly poor country. Our national leaders in their great wisdom felt that the students of India must, as part of their educational experience give time for social and labour service. They also felt that a national service scheme could be a powerful instrument for national integration.

From the volunteers perspective, too there are benefits - students, are much more easily motivated to learn when confronted with real-life problems that need solutions, there is increased awareness of the community and world around them and their own responsibilities towards it. Most of all it teaches students to develop compassion and empathy for others. The social benefit is a deep appreciation of Indian society and its traditions.

Volunteering to serve the community is a well entrenched idea across the world. In Japan students volunteer through "The Education Reform Plan for the Twenty-First Century" or "The Rainbow Plan" that requires all school students to perform

community service. Elementary and junior high school students for a period of two weeks and senior high school students for one month. For instance students chose to visit nursing homes for the elderly and designed project plans on what help they can provide to the elderly. As you may know Japan has a growing number of elderly people, far greater in proportion to the younger generations who will care for them.

In America in 1961, President John F. Kennedy inspired young people to serve their country through the Peace Corps, calling on Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” Today some high schools, especially private ones, have mandatory volunteering requirements in order to graduate. There are also volunteering opportunities abroad so that high school kids can get exposure to other countries, the premise being that they become more well-rounded citizens who add value to society through their varied experiences.

In the spirit of “doing for your country” the National Service Scheme was launched in Gandhiji’s Birth Centenary in 1969 as a centrally sponsored scheme in 37 Universities involving 40,000 students with a primary focus on the development of personality of students through community service. It is perhaps one of the longest running schemes of the Indian Govt, being around for more than 42 years without any break.

Since then NSS volunteers, who devote 120 hours per year for two consecutive years, have covered a wide range of community related work such as Adoption of Villages, Construction and repair of roads, Afforestation, Conducting Literacy Classes, Water Shed Project and Plastic Eradication, discrimination against women, eradication of polio and health awareness particularly HIV AIDS. The students enrolled under NSS have shown better understanding of social issues and have exhibited volunteerism at times of need.

Today I am told, NSS has more than 3.2 million student volunteers on its roll spread over 251 Universities, more than 14,698 colleges and institutes of higher and technical education and 8174 Secondary schools all over the country. This is a huge network of young people and latent energy waiting to be unleashed. If

leveraged fully, each of the 3.2 million volunteers can become role models for others.

Today as we celebrate NSS day, this is a good time for all of us to re-affirm our commitment to the spirit of national service and serving the community. However this is also a good time for us to stand back and take a look at our nation, where it is today and deliberate on whether the NSS must remould itself into a more vibrant organization keeping pace with India's needs.

As we all know, India is no longer a poor country; it is an emerging economic powerhouse our GDP is growing at an enviable 8%. We are respected for our software expertise, our scientific talent even our cultural legacy. We are becoming one of the largest consumers of goods and services as well as the largest market for global companies to establish themselves and sell their products to us. Practically every one of the Global Top 100 companies has a presence in India. Clearly we can no longer be ignored.

In the year 2020, the average Indian will be only 29 years old, compared with 37 years for an average Chinese and American. The average age would be 45 in West Europe and 48 in Japan. That would make India a nation with the youngest and largest workforce. The most immediate impact on NSS of the future is the potential to expand membership, imagine if every Indian in high school or college would be a member, there would be over 200 mn NSS members in the future. Imagine the power of such a force on the community.

Inspite of our progress, we must admit that the benefits of economic progress have not reached in equal measure to the thousands of villages where millions of Indians reside. This anomaly needs to be corrected; else we will be unable to sustain our growth rate. Peak performance is possible only when all parts perform optimally. Inclusive growth is a real imperative.

To my mind the National Service Scheme can play a major role in contributing to this inclusive model. How ? Simply because volunteers are the bridges between development and the community. The proximity of volunteers to the people

sensitizes them to their needs, thus they can channelize projects to meet societal needs.

As an example, in urban India, cities like Mumbai, Bangalore are stretching their resources such as roads, power and water, to meet the needs of millions of migrants who come with a dream of a job. 60% of Mumbai citizens live in slums, Dharavi near Mumbai airport is Asia's largest slum. Such cities have their unique challenges – shortage of water, street children, hygiene issues in the slums, care of the elderly etc. What they need are literacy programs for the street children, health and hygiene programs, road safety programs etc. Community service in such cities need to be customized to the special needs of the city. Similarly villages may have completely different needs such as water management, adult literacy, disease prevention, malnourishment addressal etc. Therefore my first suggestion is to relook at the curriculum for NSS and create an element of flexibility and freedom for Schools and Colleges to determine their own projects as long as they are relevant to the communities around them.

One way of doing this is to create various corps within the NSS curriculum such as the Education Corps, Environment Corps, Health and Hygiene Corps etc. Students can make a choice on one or more Corps they wish to join.

For instance literacy programs could fall under the Education Corps. Computer literacy could be one important ingredient. Apart from literacy, new programs could be introduced such as teams of national service members in schools monitoring attendance, understanding the reasons for poor attendance or dropout rate with a view to identify solutions.

People with learning disabilities have difficulty understanding new information, learning new skills or coping independently. So the volunteer can help with activities, sports and crafts and social clubs, youth clubs and resource centers. Provide one to one support to families and assist at play schemes for children with learning disabilities.

The Environment Corp could include new programs such as Vermicomposting - This can be learnt in small space quickly and atleast one vermi-compost unit may be created during each of the village visit.

Soil Testing is yet another example. Samples of soils can be collected by NSS volunteers during their field visit. These samples may be tested in local Government facilities. Soil Health Cards prepared on the basis of reports may then be distributed by NSS volunteers to villagers concerned. Similarly Water Quality Testing can be undertaken where the samples could be collected by NSS volunteers, tested thereafter in school/ college/ Govt labs and results communicated to villagers and concerned Govt agencies for action.

Spreading awareness about alternate energies, use of solar for instance, water management could be yet another initiative

The Health and Hygiene corps could include programs such as mal nourishment assessment, weight records monitoring even eye testing which can be learnt quickly. NSS volunteers can quickly make assessment during their field visits and report to health authorities.

Care of the elderly is another option. This could include serving teas and lunches or reading to patients, playing board games etc

Each of the suggestions I have mentioned has a direct impact on the community and the NSS volunteer becomes an integral part of a larger ecosystem. The point I am making that there is a need to add new and varied programs into the NSS curriculum to keep it more current. Not only will the community benefit, this will enhance the skills and knowledge of the volunteer as well. Training programs for NSS volunteers will need to be devised accordingly.

The adventure camps, summer camps are excellent programs within the NSS and have a huge impact on moulding the personality of students. I am sure that they must also be the most popular programs amongst students. Discipline, teamwork, commitment and empathy are natural benefits of such initiatives specific inputs must be provided to all students to hone their communication and soft skills. How they walk, talk and conduct themselves when they interact with the larger

community has a large bearing on their effectiveness and their confidence. Equipping them with these skills will hold them in good stead in their adult life when they join the world of work.

I also believe that there must be rigour in evaluation and assessment to give the message of seriousness. A system of credits must be worked upon, so that students can leverage their NSS experience in their future education endeavours. This must be aligned to the proposed NVEQF framework. Students can prepare project reports and capture their learning from such experiences. Teachers should assess how well students understand the experience. It is critical that this learning be integrated with subjects such as social studies and science, to establish core knowledge. For example, if the issue is malnourishment, lessons in science and the social studies should teach nutrition and discuss the geographical regions, food sources. Such problem-solving experience must be integrated with academic requirements and must involve structured student reflection. Teachers should celebrate the success of projects through certificates, awards and recognitions like those being given today. These will go a long way in encouraging students to perform. I do hope these suggestions will be looked at.

On the other hand I would like to know the level of digitization within the entire NSS ecosystem. If we were to have a database of volunteers across the country, would it be possible to map it to demand for social services? There should be debate on the efficiency & value in an NSS portal, where the collective learnings of the NSS volunteers could be hosted. As we rethink the revitalized role of NSS all these issues must be thought through.

I am convinced that a stronger NSS would make India stronger, a more participatory democracy; unite the youth of all backgrounds in a common cause; and help address many unmet social needs. The motto of the National Service Scheme is "Not Me, But You". Never before has the country needed to mobilize the enormous energies and talents of Indians through national service.

Young volunteers almost invariably become better citizens themselves, enriching their families, communities and their nation over a lifetime. We know that those who participate in national service programs are often transformed into lifelong

volunteers and civic leaders. They are more likely to enter careers in public service such as teaching, public safety, social work and military service. National service works as a training program for idealists, who then go on to take leading roles in nonprofits and government agencies. Some may become social entrepreneurs, coming up with new solutions to social problems and implementing them on a large scale.

The time has come for the NSS program to capture the imagination and spirit of all Indians and mobilize them to work for the benefit of our nation. Thank you, so much.