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By *editor*

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Abigail Lal, a graduate in English, believes sweating for a good cause is much better than pumping iron in the gym. This attitude has already taken her to the labour sites of Bawana and Bhalswa in Delhi, where she helped build homes for people who cannot afford one. Not just her, but over 4,000 Habitat for Humanity youth volunteers across the Asia-Pacific laid bricks, mixed cement and wielded hammers recently to help build homes for nearly 500 poor families in India, China, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand.



Whether working as labourers or ^[1] creating websites for NGOs, recording CA course books for visually challenged students or preparing marketing plans for the catering business of women's self-help groups — volunteering has got a shot in the arm with bright, young minds jumping on the bandwagon. While some youth have a vision in mind, a few just want to strike a chord with the less fortunate. P. Rajesh, an IT professional with an American IT company in Delhi and a passionate volunteer, suggests that this is the time for a holistic approach. "You can connect to anyone, anywhere with the social media. You can adopt out-of-the-box ways to make others part of your drive. Today, I am connecting with my friends in Mumbai to support a programme for the children of prostitutes in Delhi, so that the second generation of these women do something constructive. Soon, we will spread awareness in high-footfall areas like malls," he says. For Rohit Singh, head of social enterprise Volunteer Nest, this trend has now spread from students and young professionals to NRIs and foreign nationals and the causes have grown as well — from building homes to helping kids of those in the flesh trade. "A benefit of the globalised world maybe," he says, adding, "Today, we see a rising number of well-placed professionals taking sabbaticals in order to volunteer. Their mission is not charity, but sustainability, where they want to know the demand and make their skills available as enablers. They are ready to do anything — clerical work to participating in an outreach programme or going to the grassroots level to help," he shares.

Global interest has also led to dedicated programmes on volunteer tourism. One such initiative, i-to-i by TUI Travel brings a traveller a trip abroad while he or she assists on important environmental and community projects. One needs to pay around GBP 599 to travel and work on locally run projects that benefit local communities. “It could be 90 per cent travel, 10 per cent volunteer work — or could be 100 per cent volunteer work. We are already getting a lot of enquires from young professionals about it,” says the spokesperson of the travel group. With the scenario still only scratching the surface, Natasha Uppal, volunteer engagement coordinator, CARE India, is hopeful that the era of “actual social consciousness” has finally arrived. “India somehow never had the volunteering culture that other countries possessed. Even today, most kids know that there are social problems, but they refuse to face them. Our programme iCare had 10,000 youth coming together to empower women and girls. In the second year, all of them may not come back, but we are sure they will be connected and aware about the status,” she says.

Life and Style Age Correspondent Jyoti Verma
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