

The Impact of National Service Scheme (NSS) on Social Norms and Values of Higher Education Students

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the impact of the 'National Service Scheme' (NSS) on 'social norms' and 'values' of higher education students, analysing how participation in community service activities influences individuals' attitudes and behaviours. The 'NSS', established with the aim of promoting social welfare, 'volunteerism', and 'civic responsibility' among young people, plays a pivotal role in shaping the social fabric of communities. This study examines the program's effectiveness in fostering values such as 'empathy', 'equality', 'social justice', and 'active citizenship', as well as its influence on challenging entrenched social norms, such as caste discrimination and 'gender inequality'. Through qualitative interviews with 'NSS' volunteers and case studies of 'NSS'-led initiatives, the research highlights how the program contributes to personal development and social change. The findings highlight the program's role in promoting a sense of 'civic duty', breaking down 'traditional barriers', and cultivating 'values' of inclusivity, 'volunteerism', and 'social justice'. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the 'NSS's' potential as a transformative tool for social change, particularly in fostering 'progressive values' among the higher education students.

Keywords: National Service Scheme (NSS), Social norms, Values, Community service, Volunteerism, Social justice, Equality.

Introduction:

The 'Ministry of Youth Affairs' & 'Sports of the Government of India' oversees the 'National Service Scheme' (NSS), a Central Sector program. It gives students in the 11th and 12th grades at the +2 Board level as well as those in technical institutions, graduate programs, and postgraduate programs at the college and university levels in India the chance to participate in a variety of government-led community service initiatives. The main goal is to use volunteer community work to help student youth develop their personalities and character. The goal of the 'NSS' is "education through service." About 40,000 volunteers participated in the 1969 founding of NSS in 37 universities. Today, it is distributed across 657 universities, 51 +2 councils/directorates, 20,669 colleges/technical institutions, and 11,988 senior secondary educational institutions. More than 7.4 crore pupils have benefited from NSS since its beginnings (nss.gov.in).

The ‘National Service Scheme’ (NSS), launched in 1969, is a flagship initiative by the Indian government aimed at instilling a sense of ‘social responsibility’, ‘civic engagement’, and ‘community service’ among the youth of the country. The program focuses on encouraging students in educational institutions to actively participate in community service activities, fostering a deep understanding of societal issues and the importance of contributing to the welfare of others. The ‘NSS’ plays a significant role in shaping the social consciousness of young individuals by exposing them to the realities of ‘social inequality’, ‘economic disparity’, and the importance of ‘empathy’ and ‘inclusivity’ in addressing these challenges. In 1988, the inaugural ‘NSS’ Volunteer Republic Day Camp took place. Every year, from January 1st to January 31st, 200 ‘NSS’-selected volunteers who excel in discipline, March past, and cultural activities attend the camp in Delhi (nss.gov.in).

Every year on January 26, a contingent of chosen ‘NSS’ volunteers take part in the Republic Day Parade on Rajpath, New Delhi, in compliance with the Ministry of Defence’s directives and request (nss.gov.in). Through its wide array of activities—such as organizing awareness campaigns on health, education, and environmental sustainability, engaging in rural development projects, and conducting relief work during natural disasters—NSS seeks to reshape societal norms and promote values that uphold equality, justice, and collective well-being. The scheme serves as a platform for young people to challenge entrenched social practices such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, and exclusion of marginalized communities. By working closely with diverse populations, volunteers gain a deeper appreciation of inclusivity, solidarity, and the need for social change, thus becoming active agents of transforming outdated social structures and advocating for progressive values. “NOT ME, BUT YOU” (“स्वयं से पहले आप”) is the motto of NSS (nss.gov.in).

One of the key contributions of ‘NSS’ lies in its potential to create attitudinal shifts among young people, encouraging them to move beyond individualism and embrace a collective vision of social progress. The scheme promotes the idea that personal growth and societal advancement are interlinked, and that social service is not just an act of charity but a civic duty essential for building a more just and compassionate society. As a result, the ‘NSS’ fosters leadership skills, cultivates a sense of responsibility, and helps participants internalize values such as cooperation, ‘mutual respect’, and ‘empathy’.

In this context, the ‘NSS’s’ role in reshaping social norms and values is crucial, particularly in a diverse and complex society like India, where traditional hierarchies and biases continue to influence behaviour and attitudes. By engaging students in meaningful community work, ‘NSS’ contributes to the gradual erosion of social barriers and encourages the adoption of more inclusive and equitable social norms. This paper seeks to explore the specific impact of ‘NSS’ participation on the social norms and values of higher education students. By examining changes in students’ attitudes towards issues such as ‘inclusivity’, ‘civic engagement’, ‘environmental responsibility’, and ‘social justice’, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how ‘NSS’ activities influence their personal and professional development. Additionally, this study has look at the broader implications of ‘NSS’ initiatives on campus culture and the role such programs play in creating socially conscious graduates who are prepared to contribute positively to society. Through qualitative analysis, this research has highlight the transformative potential of ‘NSS’ in higher education and its influence on shaping the next generation of responsible citizens.

Objectives:

- To examine the role of the ‘National Service Scheme’ (NSS) in influencing and reshaping social norms in Indian society.

- To analyze how participation in ‘NSS’ activities impact the ‘personal development’ of volunteers, particularly in fostering ‘values’ like ‘empathy’, ‘social responsibility’, and ‘civic engagement’ in higher education students.
- To explore how ‘NSS’ initiatives promote ‘inclusivity’ and ‘social justice’ by engaging students in ‘community service’ with ‘marginalized’ and ‘underprivileged’ groups.

Methodology:

This research paper has been adopted a qualitative methodology to investigate the impact of the ‘National Service Scheme’ (NSS) on social norms and values in Indian society. Primary data has collected through semi-structured interviews with current and former ‘NSS’ volunteers, focus on their personal experiences and the ways in which their involvement has influenced their attitudes toward social issues such as caste discrimination and gender inequality. Additionally, focus group discussions has been conducted with NSS coordinators and participants to capture collective insights regarding the program’s societal impact. Specific ‘NSS’-led initiatives have been analysed through case studies to illustrate the tangible effects of volunteer work on community development and social change. Secondary data has include a comprehensive literature review of existing academic studies, government reports, and program documentation to contextualize the findings.

The Role of the ‘National Service Scheme’ (NSS) in Influencing and Reshaping ‘Social Norms’ in ‘Indian’ Society

The ‘National Service Scheme’ (NSS) has emerged as a vital program in India, aimed at promoting community service and fostering a sense of social responsibility among the youth. Launched in 1969, ‘NSS’ encourages students from various educational institutions to engage actively in social welfare activities, creating a platform for young people to contribute to society while simultaneously developing their own values and skills. NSS fosters social awareness, practical skill development, and holistic growth through practical community service projects. By tackling problems like health, education, and environmental preservation, it strengthens communities, unites diverse young, and advances national development (bajajfinserv.in, 2024).

Its role in influencing and reshaping social norms in Indian society can be examined through several key aspects.

1. Promoting Equality and Inclusivity

“NSS fosters a sense of unity and integrity among the diverse cultures and communities in India.” (slrtdc.in) (<https://slrtdc.in/about-us/nss-committee/>) One of the most significant contributions of NSS is its commitment to promoting equality and inclusivity. By engaging volunteers in activities that serve marginalized communities, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women, ‘NSS’ challenges the traditional social hierarchies that often perpetuate discrimination and exclusion. Volunteers learn to appreciate diversity and work collaboratively with individuals from various backgrounds, which fosters a culture of respect and understanding. This exposure helps reshape societal norms that have historically marginalized certain groups, promoting the idea that all individuals deserve equal rights and opportunities.

2. Fostering Empathy and Civic Responsibility

“NSS instills a sense of civic responsibility and social commitment among the youth.” (slrtdc.in) (<https://slrtdc.in/about-us/nss-committee/>) NSS instills values of empathy and civic responsibility in young people, encouraging them to recognize the needs of their communities. Through hands-on involvement in

various social initiatives—such as literacy programs, health camps, and environmental conservation efforts—participants gain firsthand experience of the challenges faced by different sections of society. This experience cultivates a sense of duty towards addressing these challenges, reshaping social norms around individualism and self-interest. As volunteers witness the impact of their contributions, they are more likely to adopt attitudes that prioritize communal well-being over personal gain.

3. Challenging Traditional Gender Roles

‘NSS’ initiatives often focus on issues related to gender equality and women's empowerment. By promoting participation from both male and female volunteers in community service activities, ‘NSS’ works to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Programs that educate about women's rights and advocate for gender parity serve to change societal attitudes toward women's roles in both the family and public spheres. This shift contributes to redefining norms around gender, encouraging a more equitable society where both men and women can participate fully in all aspects of life.

4. Encouraging Environmental Awareness

‘NSS’ has also played a crucial role in promoting environmental awareness and sustainability among youth. With initiatives focused on issues like cleanliness, tree planting, and waste management, the program raises awareness about environmental challenges and encourages volunteers to adopt sustainable practices. This aspect of ‘NSS’ contributes to reshaping societal norms regarding environmental responsibility, highlighting the importance of stewardship for the planet and fostering a culture of sustainability. ‘NSS’ “organizes tree plantation drives, cleanliness campaigns, and environmental awareness programs to promote a sustainable environment.” (slrtdc.in)

5. Cultivating Leadership and Active Citizenship

Through its diverse activities, ‘NSS’ cultivates leadership qualities and encourages active citizenship among participants. Volunteers are often placed in leadership roles, where they learn to organize and implement community service projects, thereby developing essential skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. This experience empowers young individuals to take initiative in their communities and promotes a sense of agency in advocating for social change. As ‘NSS’ participants become leaders in their own right, they inspire others to engage in community service, further reinforcing the value of civic participation. ‘NSS’ “provides a platform for students to develop leadership, organizational, and management skills. They learn to work in teams, plan and execute projects, and communicate effectively” (slrtdc.in).

The ‘National Service Scheme’ (NSS) has a profound impact on influencing and reshaping social norms in Indian society. By promoting ‘equality’, fostering ‘empathy’, challenging traditional gender roles, encouraging ‘environmental responsibility’, and ‘cultivating leadership’, ‘NSS’ plays a pivotal role in creating a more inclusive and progressive society. As young individuals engage in ‘community service’, they not only contribute to addressing pressing social issues but also become change agents who challenge and redefine the ‘societal norms’ that govern their communities. Through its sustained efforts, ‘NSS’ continues to pave the way for a more equitable and compassionate India, fostering a generation that values social responsibility and collective welfare.

Analysis of the Impact of ‘NSS’ Participation on the Personal Development in higher education students

Participation in the ‘National Service Scheme’ (NSS) plays a pivotal role in the personal development of young volunteers, particularly in fostering values such as ‘empathy’, ‘social responsibility’, and ‘civic

engagement' in higher education students. Through its focus on 'community service' and 'social welfare' activities, 'NSS' creates opportunities for volunteers to gain exposure to diverse social realities and challenges, driving transformative personal growth. Below is an analysis of how involvement in 'NSS' activities impact the development of these key values.

1. Empathy

The "program empowers young people to become responsible citizens by instilling values such as empathy, leadership, and cooperation" (cbitkolar.edu.in).

'Empathy', the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is one of the most profound values developed through participation in 'NSS'. By engaging directly with 'marginalized communities', including the 'economically disadvantaged', 'rural populations', and those affected by 'social discrimination', volunteers gain firsthand exposure to the struggles and hardships faced by these groups. This experience humanizes social issues, helping volunteers move beyond abstract concepts to a deep, personal understanding of the lived realities of others.

For example, working in literacy campaigns, health camps, or relief efforts in times of natural disasters exposes volunteers to the emotional and physical struggles of those they serve. As volunteers interact with individuals from different backgrounds, they develop a deeper sense of compassion, understanding, and solidarity, allowing them to put themselves in the shoes of others. This heightened sense of empathy is crucial not only for their personal growth but also for their ability to become more sensitive and responsive to societal issues.

2. Social Responsibility

Social responsibility refers to the recognition of one's duty to contribute to the well-being of society and the environment. NSS fosters this value by involving volunteers in activities that directly address pressing social challenges, such as poverty, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and public health issues. By actively participating in these programs, volunteers learn that they have a role to play in improving the lives of others and the broader community. 'NSS' helps "engaging in community service helps volunteers develop empathy, cultural understanding, and a strong sense of social responsibility, contributing to overall personal growth" (cbitkolar.edu.in).

This sense of responsibility is often cultivated as volunteers witness the tangible impact of their efforts. Whether they are teaching underprivileged children, planting trees, or raising awareness about health issues, NSS participants learn that their actions can make a real difference. This personal accountability for societal welfare motivates volunteers to continue contributing to their communities beyond the duration of their NSS involvement, encouraging lifelong social engagement.

3. Civic Engagement

Civic engagement, or the active participation in public life to improve the well-being of society, is another critical outcome of NSS participation. NSS instills in volunteers the importance of being informed, active citizens who contribute to societal progress. Through activities like organizing awareness campaigns, participating in cleanliness drives, or working on local governance issues, volunteers develop a strong sense of civic duty and a desire to engage with social and political issues that affect their communities. NSS "instills a sense of civic responsibility and social commitment among the youth. It promotes the idea of living for others and working towards the betterment of society" (slrtdc.in)

NSS activities provide a structured environment for young people to practice leadership, cooperation, and problem-solving, all of which are essential for active civic engagement. As volunteers take on leadership roles within the organization, they are empowered to initiate and lead projects that address local issues,

thus reinforcing their commitment to civic responsibility. Moreover, the exposure to grassroots-level work makes volunteers more aware of the importance of democratic participation, rule of law, and public accountability, further strengthening their role as engaged citizens.

Participation in NSS activities significantly impacts the personal development of volunteers by fostering key values like empathy, social responsibility, and civic engagement. By providing young people with opportunities to directly interact with societal challenges, NSS helps them develop a more profound understanding of the issues faced by their communities and the broader society. This transformative experience equips them with the skills and motivation to become active, compassionate, and responsible citizens, committed to making a positive difference in the world. In this way, NSS not only shapes the volunteers' character but also prepares them to contribute meaningfully to the social fabric of the nation.

How NSS Initiatives Promote Inclusivity and Social Justice through Engagement with Marginalized and Underprivileged Groups

In 1969, to commemorate the centennial of Mahatma Gandhi's birth, our nation launched the National Service Scheme, a magnificent youth initiative. 'Education via Community Service' is NSS's primary goal. "Not me but you" is the motto of NSS, which suggests that everyone should understand that society as a whole is more significant than they are (**banglaruchchashiksha**).

The National Service Scheme (NSS) serves as a powerful tool in promoting inclusivity and social justice by actively engaging students in community service activities that focus on marginalized and underprivileged groups. By involving volunteers in initiatives that address the needs of the most vulnerable sections of society—such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), women, rural populations, and economically disadvantaged communities—NSS helps reshape societal attitudes and works toward reducing inequality. Below is an exploration of how NSS initiatives contribute to these goals.

1. Engagement with Marginalized Communities

One of the core principles of NSS is its commitment to working with communities that are often overlooked or marginalized by mainstream society. Through a variety of outreach activities such as literacy programs, health camps, sanitation drives, and rural development projects, NSS volunteers interact closely with individuals who face social exclusion due to factors such as caste, gender, economic status, or geography. 'NSS' "aims to address the divide between urban and rural populations by encouraging students to work in rural areas and marginalized communities. This helps in reducing the Socio-economic disparity in India" (**cbitkolar.edu.in**).

These interactions help break down barriers between volunteers—many of whom come from more privileged backgrounds—and the communities they serve. By fostering mutual understanding, NSS helps reduce the social distance created by systemic inequalities. Volunteers not only provide assistance but also learn from the lived experiences of these communities, cultivating a deep respect for their resilience and a greater awareness of the systemic challenges they face.

2. Promoting Inclusivity through Education and Empowerment

NSS plays a vital role in promoting inclusivity by focusing on education and empowerment initiatives for marginalized groups. For example, literacy programs aimed at underprivileged children and adults help bridge the education gap that exists due to economic or social constraints. These efforts not only improve access to education but also empower individuals from marginalized groups by giving them the tools to break out of cycles of poverty and discrimination. "Volunteers from different backgrounds come together to work towards common goals, promoting national integration" (**slrtdc.in**).

Additionally, NSS conducts gender-sensitization programs and women's empowerment initiatives that focus on breaking down traditional gender roles and promoting gender equality. By addressing the needs of women, especially in rural or economically disadvantaged settings, NSS helps to challenge patriarchal norms and create opportunities for women to participate more fully in all aspects of society. This promotes inclusivity by ensuring that marginalized groups, such as women and girls, have access to the same opportunities as others.

3. Addressing Health and Public Welfare for Social Justice

Health is a key focus of many NSS initiatives, particularly in underserved and marginalized communities where access to healthcare services is limited. NSS organizes health camps that provide free medical check-ups, vaccination drives, and awareness campaigns on issues like hygiene, nutrition, and reproductive health. These initiatives help reduce health disparities and promote social justice by ensuring that even the most disadvantaged communities have access to basic health services. "NSS volunteers work towards the welfare of society. They engage in activities related to health, education, environment, and social awareness to uplift the underprivileged sections of society" (**slrtdc.in**).

Additionally, NSS promotes sanitation and hygiene awareness, especially in rural and slum areas where infrastructure is often lacking. By involving volunteers in cleaning drives, building toilets, and raising awareness about sanitation practices, NSS addresses not only the health challenges faced by marginalized communities but also the social inequalities that exacerbate these challenges. Ensuring access to basic health services and a clean-living environment is a critical step toward achieving social justice for these groups.

4. Creating Social Justice through Rural Development

NSS initiatives often focus on rural development, where poverty and exclusion are most pronounced. Volunteers work with local communities to build sustainable infrastructure, improve access to clean water, and create opportunities for economic development. These activities not only help uplift economically disadvantaged groups but also promote a sense of agency within the community. For instance, skill development workshops and self-help group (SHG) programs encourage individuals to take control of their economic futures by learning new trades or establishing small businesses. "The National Service Scheme (NSS) unit of GFGC Kapu aims to involve youth in the service of the rural community and its development" (**Kumbar, 2016, P. 40**).

By contributing to the holistic development of rural areas, NSS volunteers help dismantle the structures that perpetuate inequality and marginalization. These efforts align with the broader goals of social justice by ensuring that even the most neglected sections of society can benefit from economic, social, and infrastructural development.

5. Fostering Awareness and Advocacy for Social Change

Another critical way NSS promotes inclusivity and social justice is through awareness and advocacy campaigns. NSS volunteers conduct awareness drives on critical social issues such as caste discrimination, child labour, gender-based violence, and environmental degradation. These campaigns often engage not just the marginalized communities but also the broader public, including students, local leaders, and policy-makers. "NSS and NCC actively promote civic responsibility and raise awareness about the importance of voting (Directorate of NSS)" (**Alone, D. 2023, P. 99-105.**).

By raising awareness of these issues, NSS volunteers contribute to creating a more informed and socially conscious population. Such efforts encourage people to challenge discriminatory practices, demand greater accountability from authorities, and advocate for policies that promote equality and justice.

6. Developing Leaders for Social Justice

NSS fosters leadership qualities in volunteers by encouraging them to take active roles in planning and executing community service projects. Through these experiences, students develop a sense of responsibility and the ability to lead initiatives that promote social justice. By working with marginalized communities, NSS volunteers learn the complexities of social issues and the importance of inclusive development, preparing them to become advocates for equality and justice in their future careers. “The role of NSS and NCC in nurturing leadership qualities among young individuals is paramount” (Alone, D. 2023, P. 99-105.).

‘NSS’ initiatives play a crucial role in promoting ‘inclusivity’ and ‘social justice’ by engaging students in community service activities that directly address the needs of marginalized and underprivileged groups. By working with these communities, NSS volunteers help reduce social disparities and challenge societal norms that perpetuate exclusion and inequality. Through education, health, rural development, and advocacy, NSS fosters a culture of inclusivity and equips young people with the values and skills needed to continue the fight for social justice in India. As a result, NSS contributes to building a more equitable society where all individuals, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to thrive.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study underscore the significant influence that participation in the ‘National Service Scheme’ (NSS) has on the social norms and values of higher education students. ‘NSS’ activities, which range from community service to awareness campaigns, offer students more than just a break from academics; they provide a foundation for ethical development and social responsibility. Through active engagement in these programs, students experience firsthand the realities of various social issues, fostering a deep sense of ‘empathy’, ‘civic duty’, and ‘leadership’. This exposure encourages students to reevaluate their perspectives on social norms, leading to a stronger commitment to inclusivity, environmental sustainability, and community welfare. Moreover, the ‘NSS’ experience often instills a lifelong commitment to service, influencing students’ future careers and personal lives. By nurturing values like teamwork, integrity, and resilience, ‘NSS’ not only enriches students’ individual growth but also contributes to a more socially conscious campus culture. The ripple effect of this program reaches beyond individual participants, as these values become embedded within broader student communities, inspiring others to engage in meaningful societal contributions. In conclusion, the ‘NSS’ serves as a catalyst for change within higher education, equipping students with the moral compass and social awareness necessary to navigate complex societal challenges. As institutions and policymakers look to strengthen the impact of ‘NSS’, this research highlights the importance of continued support and expansion of such programs. By investing in the NSS and similar initiatives, higher education can play a crucial role in shaping future leaders who are not only skilled professionals but also compassionate, ethical, and active citizens.

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