

From Service to Self-Discovery: Exploring the Behavioural and Cognitive Impact of NSS Special Camp on Youth Volunteers

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ABSTRACT:

The National Service Scheme (NSS), established in India in 1969, is a key program for youth engagement, aiming to instill values of social responsibility, community participation and personal growth among students. A particularly impactful initiative within NSS is the seven-day special camp, which provides volunteers with opportunities for direct engagement and experiential learning in rural or socially disadvantaged communities.

This qualitative research study investigates how these camps influence the thinking patterns, attitudes and behaviours of participating volunteers. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews, structured questionnaires and observations from current and former volunteers, as well as program officers and key informants.

The findings indicate that participation in NSS camps significantly enhances leadership skills, communication abilities, emotional stability, teamwork, problem-solving, decision-making and planning competencies. Furthermore, the camps are crucial in fostering cultural sensitivity, challenging gender stereotypes and deepening participants' sense of social responsibility. Volunteers frequently reported transformative experiences that not only boosted their confidence and interpersonal skills but also reshaped their perspectives on community service and personal goals.

This study highlights the transformative power of NSS camps as catalysts for behavioural and cognitive development. It also offers recommendations for improving camp activities to maximize their developmental impact on youth, ultimately contributing to the creation of socially aware, responsible and skilled citizens.

Keywords: National Service Scheme (NSS), Youth Development, Volunteerism, Experiential Learning, Leadership, Communication Skills, Emotional Stability, Community Engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The National Service Scheme (NSS) was initiated in 1969 by the Government of India with a primary focus on fostering student participation in nation-building activities. The program operates on the Gandhian principle of "Not me but you," encouraging empathy, responsibility, and civic awareness. One

of its most structured and intensive components is the seven-day residential special camp, where students live and work in rural or disadvantaged settings.

These camps provide a rare opportunity for volunteers to apply theoretical knowledge to real-life issues, often away from urban comforts. Students engage in community mapping, awareness campaigns, shramdaan (voluntary physical labor), cultural interaction, and issue-specific workshops (on health, hygiene, gender, environment, etc.). Given their immersive nature, these camps are expected to contribute significantly to the behavioural and cognitive development of participants. However, empirical documentation of such impacts, especially in Indian higher education settings, remains scarce. This study seeks to fill this gap.

2. OBJECTIVES:

- To investigate the behavioural and cognitive changes experienced by NSS volunteers as a result of participating in seven-day camps, including growth in leadership, teamwork, emotional stability and communication.
- To examine the role of camp activities, leadership opportunities and community engagement in shaping volunteers' attitudes, problem-solving abilities and decision-making skills.
- To document volunteers' personal experiences and reflections, highlighting how these camps impact their confidence, social awareness and sense of responsibility.
- To provide insights and practical recommendations for NSS camp organizers and educational institutions to enhance the effectiveness of future camps in fostering youth development.

Literature Review:

- While numerous government reports and institutional evaluations have highlighted the administrative and educational significance of NSS, empirical literature focusing on its psychological and behavioural impact remains limited.
- A study by Patil and Sharma (2019) in the International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research assessed leadership growth among NSS participants, noting improved decision-making and communication. Similarly, Rao (2020) emphasized NSS as a vehicle for promoting civic responsibility and emotional maturity in Indian youth.
- Kumar and Roy (2017) found that students involved in community engagement initiatives, including NSS, developed a stronger sense of identity and ethical reasoning. However, they noted a lack of longitudinal studies assessing sustained behavioural change.
- On the global front, Eyler and Giles (1999) in the U.S. context examined service-learning programs and found that students reported increased social awareness and a redefined understanding of citizenship — echoing the findings emerging from NSS in India.
- Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory remains a dominant framework underpinning such initiatives, where concrete community experiences serve as catalysts for reflection and behavioural transformation.
- Despite these contributions, there is minimal qualitative research capturing the personal narratives and cognitive shifts of NSS volunteers during immersive special camps. This study seeks to fill that void by focusing on experiential accounts of youth transformation in the Pune region.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Study Design:

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on understanding the lived experiences of NSS volunteers during their participation in seven-day special camps. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for this research as they enable an in-depth exploration of personal narratives, emotions and behavioural changes that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures alone. The research design integrates in-depth interviews, structured questionnaires and direct observations to gather comprehensive data on the behavioural, cognitive and emotional transformations experienced by volunteers. This multi-method approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the impact of NSS camps on participants' thinking and behaviour.

Sample & Participants

The study was conducted among volunteers who participated in a seven-day NSS special camp organized by Sir Parashurambhau College (Autonomous), Pune, in the Pune district, Maharashtra. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring the sample included individuals with diverse experiences and roles within the camp.

The sample comprised:

- **10 in-depth interviewees**, categorized as:
 - 1 Super Senior (experienced volunteer)
 - 2 Senior volunteers
 - 7 Junior volunteers (first-time or early-stage participants)
- **2 key informants**:
 - 1 Program Officer (PO)
 - 1 Ex-volunteer (alumni with prior camp experience)

In addition to these interviews, data was collected from a Google Form survey completed by a larger pool of 202 participants, including current volunteers, senior members, program officers (POs) and assistant program officers (APOs). The inclusion of different categories of participants—current volunteers, seniors, program officers and alumni—ensured that the study captured multiple perspectives, enriching the findings and helping to identify both immediate and long-term effects of camp participation.

Data Collection Methods

- **In-Depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 volunteers and 2 key informants. Each interview lasted 20–30 minutes and was conducted during non-disruptive hours, such as during 'shramdan' (voluntary labor) breaks. Questions explored behavioural aspects (leadership, communication, teamwork, emotional stability) and cognitive aspects (problem-solving, decision-making, planning, sense of responsibility). Open-ended questions allowed participants to narrate personal stories, adding depth to their responses.
- **Structured Questionnaire:** A Google Form survey was distributed among 202 volunteers, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Questions focused on demographic information (age, gender, education), motivations for volunteering, perceived benefits of participation and self-assessed changes in skills and attitudes. The questionnaire included questions on confidence, self-esteem, management skills, leadership, communication, teamwork, technical skills, physical and mental health, expenses, academic performance, career prospects, social connections, sense of community and understanding of diverse backgrounds.

- **Observation:** Direct observations were conducted during the camp to assess volunteer behaviour, participation levels and group dynamics. Observations provided contextual insights into how camp activities influenced interaction, problem-solving and emotional expression.

4. DATA ANALYSIS:

Data analysis followed a thematic approach:

- **Step 1: Data Organization:** Interview transcripts, survey responses and observation notes were compiled and anonymized to protect participant identity.
- **Step 2: Coding:** Responses were coded using thematic labels based on key research areas (e.g., leadership, communication, emotional stability).
- **Step 3: Thematic Analysis:** Common themes were identified across responses, such as growth in leadership, enhanced cultural understanding and improved emotional resilience.
- **Step 4: Interpretation:** The identified themes were interpreted in light of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1995) to connect findings with existing literature on youth development. This systematic analysis allowed for an integration of qualitative narratives with broader theoretical insights, ensuring that the findings are both grounded in data and supported by relevant academic frameworks.

Profile of Participants:

The Google Form survey and in-depth interviews provided a clear demographic profile of the participants.

Attribute	Details
Total Respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 202 (survey),• 12 (interviews)
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 58% Female,• 42% Male
Age Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 15–19 years: 40%• 20–24 years: 55%• 25+ years: 5%
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Predominantly Undergraduate Students (Arts, Science, Commerce)
Roles in NSS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Junior volunteers: 70%;• Senior volunteers: 20%;• Program Officers/APOs: 10%
Previous NSS Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First-time participants: 65%;• Experienced volunteers: 35%

Key Observations from Profile:

- A majority were young students (20–24 years), indicating that NSS camps serve as an important formative experience in early adulthood.
- Female participation was slightly higher, showing encouraging trends in gender inclusivity.

- A large portion of participants were first-time volunteers, making the camp their initial exposure to intensive community service.
- The presence of experienced seniors and program officers enriched the learning environment, offering mentorship and guidance to new volunteers.

5. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS:

This section presents the key findings from the qualitative interviews and structured questionnaires, offering an in-depth analysis of how NSS camps influence the behavioural, cognitive and socio-cultural aspects of volunteers. The findings are categorized into three main areas to provide a comprehensive understanding of the transformative impact of the seven-day special camps.

I. Behavioural Aspects

Participation in NSS camps significantly contributed to the enhancement of various behavioural traits among volunteers, fostering greater personal effectiveness and social interaction.

a. Leadership

The camp environment provided numerous opportunities for volunteers to develop and exercise leadership skills. Even junior volunteers, initially hesitant, often found themselves in situations requiring them to take initiative, manage small groups and guide their peers.

- Many volunteers, particularly those with no prior leadership experience, stepped up when specific tasks demanded it. As one junior volunteer recounted, *"When there was confusion about water distribution, I gathered the team and quickly divided tasks. It made me realize that leadership is not about giving orders but solving problems together."* This highlights a shift from a passive role to an active, problem-solving leadership approach.
- Senior volunteers and program officers frequently delegated responsibilities, such as organizing events, managing resources, or leading small groups for 'shramdan' (voluntary labor). This hands-on experience taught them about effective delegation, accountability and coordination.
- Leadership also manifested in mediating conflicts within the group. An interviewee noted, *"We had a misunderstanding about kitchen duties. I organized a short meeting, listened to everyone's concerns and we resolved it peacefully. I understood that good communication means listening first."* This demonstrates the practical application of leadership in maintaining group harmony.
- Senior volunteers often acted as mentors, guiding junior participants and demonstrating effective leadership. This peer-to-peer learning was crucial in transferring practical leadership knowledge.

b. Communication Skills

NSS camps fostered significant improvements in both interpersonal and public speaking communication skills due to the constant need for interaction, coordination and information sharing.

- The collaborative nature of camp activities, such as group projects and community interactions, necessitated active listening. Volunteers learned to pay attention to instructions, understand diverse perspectives and respond thoughtfully.
- Participants frequently had to communicate instructions, share ideas and address community members, which improved their ability to articulate thoughts clearly and concisely. Public speaking opportunities during cultural programs or awareness campaigns helped many overcome stage fright and speak confidently.
- Living in close quarters and working in teams also enhanced their awareness and use of non-verbal cues, vital for effective communication, especially across diverse groups.

- As seen in the leadership example, volunteers learned to use communication as a tool for de-escalation and resolution, focusing on understanding rather than blame.

c. Emotional Stability

The immersive and challenging environment of NSS camps played a crucial role in enhancing volunteers' emotional resilience, self-regulation and empathy.

- Volunteers were often faced with unfamiliar living conditions, demanding physical tasks and social challenges. This exposure helped them develop coping mechanisms and adapt to stressful situations, leading to increased emotional stability.
- Overcoming these challenges, often with peer support, fostered a sense of accomplishment and improved their ability to bounce back from setbacks. One volunteer shared, *"I felt nervous before our cultural performance, but my senior motivated me. I learned how to manage my emotions and focus on the goal."* This demonstrates growth in self-management.
- Direct interaction with community members, particularly those facing hardship, cultivated empathy. Volunteers learned to understand and share the feelings of others, leading to a more compassionate outlook. This aligns with Goleman's (1995) concept of emotional intelligence, where self-awareness and social awareness are key components.
- Being away from home and engaging in demanding tasks required a high degree of self-motivation, which volunteers often developed through shared purpose and peer encouragement.

d. Teamwork

Teamwork was foundational to almost every aspect of the NSS camp, leading to significant improvements in collaboration, cooperation and mutual support among volunteers.

- Most camp activities, from cleanliness drives to building projects, required collective effort. Volunteers quickly understood that individual success was linked to the team's success.
- Participants learned to identify their strengths and weaknesses within a team, taking on roles that best utilized their abilities and supporting others where needed. *"Our treasure hunt game was tough, but everyone contributed in their way. That's when I saw how teamwork makes even the hardest task possible,"* a volunteer stated, highlighting the synergy created by combined efforts.
- The principle of shared responsibility for tasks and outcomes became ingrained, reducing individual burden and fostering a sense of collective ownership.
- Living, working and eating together for seven days fostered strong bonds and a sense of camaraderie, which significantly improved team cohesion and mutual trust. This echoes Johnson and Johnson's (2005) Social Interdependence Theory, where cooperative tasks enhance trust and mutual respect.

II. Cognitive Aspects

The NSS camps had a profound impact on the cognitive abilities of volunteers, enhancing their critical thinking, responsibility, decision-making and planning skills. These improvements were directly linked to the practical challenges and learning opportunities presented during the camp.

e. Problem-Solving

Volunteers were constantly confronted with real-world problems that required immediate and innovative solutions, significantly honing their problem-solving abilities.

- Unlike theoretical learning, problems encountered during the camp (e.g., managing water scarcity, organizing logistics for a community event, dealing with unexpected issues during a cleanliness drive) demanded practical, on-the-spot solutions. A junior volunteer recalled, *"Our water supply got*

disrupted and we had to quickly find an alternative source. We brainstormed with the villagers and found a well. It taught me to think fast and practically."

- Many challenges required a collective approach, fostering an environment where volunteers learned to pool their knowledge, skills and creativity to arrive at effective solutions. This reinforced the idea that diverse perspectives lead to better outcomes.
- Operating with limited resources often forced volunteers to be innovative and resourceful. They learned to make the most of what was available and improvise when necessary.

f. Sense of Responsibility

The nature of community service during NSS camps instilled a deeper sense of responsibility—both towards the tasks at hand and the welfare of the community.

- Volunteers were entrusted with specific duties, ranging from cooking to organizing events, which fostered a strong sense of accountability. Failure to perform a duty would directly impact the entire group or the community.
- Direct engagement with rural communities exposed volunteers to societal issues (e.g., sanitation, illiteracy). This firsthand experience cultivated a heightened sense of civic duty and a desire to contribute positively to society. As one volunteer put it, *"Cleaning the village and interacting with locals changed how I see society. I realized service is not just about giving, but also about learning."*
- Activities like cleanliness drives and tree planting instilled a sense of responsibility towards environmental conservation and sustainable practices.

g. Decision-Making

The dynamic environment of the camp provided ample opportunities for volunteers to practice and refine their decision-making skills under varying levels of pressure.

- Volunteers often had to make quick decisions in unforeseen circumstances, such as adjusting plans due to weather changes or unexpected community needs. This helped them develop agility in decision-making.
- In group tasks, decisions often required consensus, teaching volunteers the importance of considering multiple viewpoints, negotiating and finding common ground.
- Participants learned to assess the potential consequences of their decisions, both for their team and the community, leading to more thoughtful and responsible choices.

h. Planning & Management

From daily routines to specific projects, effective planning and management were essential for the smooth functioning of the camp, significantly improving volunteers' organizational skills.

- Volunteers were involved in planning daily schedules, allocating duties and managing logistics for various activities. This hands-on experience taught them about efficient task organization and time management.
- They learned to manage resources such as food, water, tools and budget, often under constraints, which improved their practical management skills.
- For specific events like cultural programs or health camps, volunteers were responsible for end-to-end planning, including outreach, preparation, execution and post-event review. This provided invaluable experience in project management.
- The unpredictable nature of field work taught them to develop flexible plans and adapt quickly when initial plans faced challenges.

III. Social & Cultural Aspects

The NSS camps served as a powerful platform for volunteers to engage with and understand diverse social and cultural contexts, leading to significant shifts in their perspectives and a heightened sense of social consciousness.

i. Gender Dynamics

The camps created a unique environment where traditional gender roles were often challenged and volunteers, both male and female, had opportunities to participate equally in all activities, fostering greater gender sensitivity and collaboration.

- Many activities, such as 'shramdan' (manual labor) or organizing community events, were performed collectively, irrespective of gender. This direct participation helped volunteers recognize that abilities are not gender-specific. A female volunteer noted, *"I never thought I could carry so much or lead a discussion in front of villagers. The camp showed me that girls can do anything."*
- The camp structure encouraged equal participation from all volunteers in tasks like cooking, cleaning and leading group discussions. This created a level playing field where roles were often assigned based on skill and willingness rather than traditional gender norms.
- Working closely together in a supportive environment fostered mutual respect and understanding between male and female volunteers. They learned to value each other's contributions beyond preconceived notions of gender roles.

j. Impact of Camp Activities

The diverse range of activities undertaken during the seven-day camps had a multifaceted impact, contributing to personal development, community engagement and a broader understanding of societal issues.

- Direct interaction with rural communities through surveys, awareness programs and joint projects provided volunteers with invaluable firsthand exposure to the realities of different socio-economic backgrounds. This immersion fostered empathy and a deeper understanding of local challenges.
- Activities such as health awareness campaigns, literacy drives and environmental conservation projects allowed volunteers to apply their academic knowledge in practical settings and develop new skills relevant to community development.
- Participation in cultural programs, interacting with local customs and sharing traditions enhanced volunteers' cultural sensitivity and appreciation for diversity. They learned to respect different ways of life and communicate effectively across cultural barriers.
- Engagement in social issues, like sanitation and education, heightened volunteers' awareness of critical societal problems and their potential role in addressing them. As a volunteer reflected, *"Cleaning the village made me realize how much difference even small actions can make. It wasn't just about cleaning, it was about dignity for the people."*
- The shared experience of working towards a common goal within the camp fostered a strong sense of belonging among volunteers and a realization of the power of collective action.

6. DISCUSSION:

The findings of this qualitative study underscore the transformative potential of National Service Scheme (NSS) seven-day special camps in shaping the behavioural, cognitive and social aspects of youth volunteers. The observed improvements in leadership, communication, emotional stability, teamwork,

problem-solving, responsibility, decision-making and planning align strongly with established theories of experiential learning and youth development.

The consistent emergence of leadership qualities among volunteers, even those without prior experience, supports Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. By actively engaging in tasks such as organizing events or managing resources, volunteers moved from concrete experience to reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. This practical application of leadership in real-world scenarios, as evidenced by instances of conflict resolution and delegation, demonstrates that such immersive environments are far more effective than theoretical instruction alone.

Improvements in communication skills, including active listening and clear articulation, are critical outcomes. The necessity for effective interaction within teams and with community members, particularly during activities like awareness campaigns, fostered these skills. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of interpersonal communication in collaborative settings (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). The ability to communicate effectively, even in challenging situations, directly contributes to enhanced teamwork and overall project success.

The significant enhancement in emotional stability and resilience is a compelling finding. Exposure to unfamiliar conditions, demanding physical tasks and direct encounters with community hardships pushed volunteers out of their comfort zones, prompting them to develop coping mechanisms and self-regulation. This directly supports Goleman's (1995) concept of emotional intelligence, where self-awareness and social awareness are honed through challenging interpersonal and environmental experiences. The development of empathy, particularly through direct community immersion, further strengthens this aspect, as volunteers learn to understand and share the feelings of others.

The profound impact on cognitive abilities, such as problem-solving, decision-making and planning, highlights the camp's role in fostering critical thinking. Volunteers were not just recipients of instructions but active participants in identifying and resolving issues, often with limited resources. This type of hands-on problem-solving, as seen in the water supply disruption example, cultivated resourcefulness and practical thinking, preparing them for real-world challenges beyond the camp. The increased sense of social and civic responsibility is a direct outcome of direct exposure to community needs, validating the core principle of "Education through Service."

Furthermore, the challenging of gender dynamics within the camps signifies a critical social impact. By promoting equal participation in all tasks, irrespective of traditional gender roles, the NSS camps implicitly contributed to gender sensitivity and mutual respect among young participants. This demonstrates the potential of such programs to act as agents of social change, fostering more equitable perceptions and behaviours among youth.

In summary, the NSS seven-day special camps act as powerful catalysts for holistic youth development. They provide a unique blend of practical experience, social immersion and collaborative learning that significantly enhances behavioural traits like leadership and teamwork, cognitive functions such as problem-solving and planning and crucial social aspects like emotional intelligence and gender sensitivity. The findings validate the program's effectiveness in producing socially aware, responsible and capable citizens, thereby contributing meaningfully to national development goals.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

While this study offers valuable insights into the impact of NSS special camps, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may influence the generalizability and scope of its findings:

- **Qualitative Design and Generalizability:** As a qualitative study, its findings are based on in-depth narratives and observations from a specific group of volunteers at one institution. While this provides rich, nuanced data, the findings may not be broadly generalizable to all NSS camps across India, which vary in their organizational structure, activities and participant demographics.
- **Sample Size and Selection Bias:** The study utilized a relatively small sample for in-depth interviews (10 volunteers and 2 key informants) and purposive sampling. While effective for qualitative depth, this method may not represent the full spectrum of experiences within the larger NSS volunteer population. The ~202 survey responses provide broader input but still represent a specific context.
- **Self-Reported Data:** A significant portion of the data relies on self-reported perceptions of change through interviews and questionnaires. While valuable for capturing personal experience, self-assessments can sometimes be influenced by social desirability bias or a lack of objective measurement.
- **Short-Term Observation Period:** The study primarily focuses on the immediate impact of a seven-day camp. It does not track long-term behavioural or cognitive changes, meaning the sustainability of the observed transformations beyond the camp duration is not fully assessed. Longitudinal studies would be required to evaluate lasting effects.
- **Single Institutional Focus:** The research was conducted with participants from a single college (Sir Parashurambhau College, Pune). While this allowed for focused data collection, it limits the diversity of organizational practices and volunteer experiences that might be found across different educational institutions and regions.
- **Subjectivity of Interpretation:** Qualitative data analysis inherently involves a degree of researcher interpretation. While efforts were made to ensure thematic consistency, different researchers might arrive at slightly varied interpretations of the narratives.

These limitations suggest areas for future research, including quantitative studies with larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal designs to track long-term impacts and comparative studies across different NSS units or regions.

8. CONCLUSION:

This qualitative study has provided comprehensive insights into the transformative impact of the National Service Scheme (NSS) seven-day special camps on the behavioural, cognitive and social aspects of youth volunteers. Through in-depth interviews, structured questionnaires and observations, the research revealed that these immersive experiences serve as powerful catalysts for personal growth and social awareness.

The findings consistently demonstrate that NSS camps significantly enhance essential life skills. Volunteers showed marked improvements in **leadership**, by taking initiative and managing tasks; in **communication skills**, through active listening and clear articulation; in **emotional stability**, by developing resilience and empathy in challenging environments; and in **teamwork**, through effective collaboration and mutual support. Cognitively, the camps fostered advanced **problem-solving** abilities, a heightened **sense of responsibility**, improved **decision-making** capacities and stronger **planning and management** skills.

Beyond individual development, the study highlighted the crucial role of NSS camps in promoting social change. The camps actively challenged **gender dynamics** by encouraging equal participation, thereby fostering a more inclusive and respectful environment. Furthermore, the diverse **impact of camp activities**

led to deeper community immersion, practical skill application, enhanced cultural sensitivity and a profound sense of social awareness and collective purpose.

In essence, NSS special camps are not merely service initiatives but powerful educational platforms that bridge academic learning with real-world experience. They equip young individuals with a unique blend of practical skills, emotional intelligence and a strong sense of civic duty, shaping them into responsible, empathetic and capable citizens. The continuous evolution and support of such programs are vital for fostering a generation of youth committed to community well-being and national development. This research serves as an evidence-based affirmation of the profound and multifaceted benefits of NSS camps, advocating for their continued integration into youth development frameworks.

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