

The Role of Collective Action in Volunteering: An Analysis of Atmashakti Volunteering Programs

By: Ridhi Dar*

*M.S. in Non-Profit Leadership, University of Pennsylvania

Keywords: Volunteering, Collective Action, Motivation, Odisha, Atmashakti, Mo-Chatashali, Social Capital, COVID-19

Abstract

The paper explores the role of Collective Action in Atmashakti's volunteering programs, Mo-Chatashali and Young Eagles, in the state of Odisha. Collective Action is the coordinated efforts of a group of individuals or organizations to achieve a common goal or address a shared problem. It involves the collective mobilization of resources, such as time, money, or other forms of support, to achieve a desired outcome. Volunteers can grow professionally, acquire new knowledge, improve their leadership and social skills, strengthen local economies, advance social and environmental concerns, and aid society's most vulnerable citizens. Collective Action is a form of community organizing that involves strategic campaigns and pressuring powerful individuals to improve the lives of community members. It requires and encourages social capital, which is composed of the resources embedded in one's social networks. Collective Action is often motivated by a desire to bring about social, political, or economic change. It requires effective communication, strategic planning, and a willingness to work together toward a shared goal.

Introduction

Volunteering is a social glue that secures the social fabric through its support of causes, organizations, and communities by donating their time, talent, and energy. Atmashakti, like many agencies, relies on the volunteers' Collective Action to make a meaningful impact. Volunteering has captured the attention of policymakers, community activists, religious leaders, and social scientists alike. They volunteer to assist with duties including event planning, fund-raising, and administrative support. Additionally, volunteers provide new viewpoints and creative ideas that might aid organizations in achieving their objectives. Many non-profit sectors are impactful because of different types of volunteer support. This includes hospice organizations, food banks, environmental organizations, youth sports organizations, animal shelters, rescue groups, and even during disaster relief situations. This paper explores the role of Collective Action in an Indian organization called Atmashakti and its volunteering programs, namely Mo-Chatashali and Young Eagles in the state of Odisha and its 18 districts.

Volunteering offers personal advantages for the volunteers as well. They can grow professionally, acquire new knowledge, and improve their leadership and social skills. The contributions of volunteers strengthen local economies, advance social and environmental concerns, and aid society's most vulnerable citizens that are lonely, ailing, grieving, and destitute.¹ Volunteering builds social capital and promotes civic engagement as well.

Collective Action is the key factor that brings people together to volunteer. Collective Action refers to the coordinated efforts of a group of individuals or organizations to achieve a common goal or address a shared problem. Collective Action is not spontaneous; group leaders and dedicated activists must get the ball rolling.ⁱⁱ

It involves the collective mobilization of resources such as time, money, or other forms of support to achieve a desired outcome.

Collective Action can take many forms. It can range from peaceful protests and demonstrations to more formalized organizations such as unions, political parties, or interest groups. It can also involve collaboration and cooperation between individuals or groups that might otherwise have competing interests. It is sometimes termed Community Organizing which includes strategic campaigns and pressuring powerful individuals and holding them accountable for improving the lives of community members.ⁱⁱⁱ

Collective Action requires and encourages social capital. Social capital is composed of the resources embedded in one's social networks.^{iv} Wherever there are dense social networks and tighter bonds, even highly damaged communities benefit more than communities with lower social resources and social capital.^v The more people come together, the more social capital is built, and more trust in the community is fostered. Social capital gets cultivated when there is Linking Capital. Linking Capital connects communities to resources that help their communities prosper. It has been proven that strong Linking Capitals like panchayats (local village-level committees in India) speed up the recovery of communities from disasters.^{vi}

Collective Action is often motivated by a desire to bring about social, political, or economic change and is an important tool for addressing systemic issues and advancing social justice. Successful Collective Action requires effective communication, strategic planning, and a willingness to collaborate toward a shared goal.

Collective Action has a long history, dating back to ancient times when people organized themselves to achieve common goals. Collective Action has taken form through labor movements, women's movements, the civil rights movement, student societies, the black power movements, and anti-war mass confrontations.^{vii} It has also occurred in disaster recovery after Tokyo, Kobe Earthquakes, Indian Ocean Tsunamis, and Hurricane Katrina.^{viii}

The journey of Collective Action has not been easy. In the mid-1950s, western bureaucrats and aid donors focused entirely on physical infrastructure and believed it would jump-start the economies of poor nations in Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America. As per Woolcock and Radin, it soon became clear that merely pumping physical and financial resources was not enough to cause a marginal positive impact.^{ix} Finally, in the 90s, the World Bank recognized that these nations had been missing social infrastructure. They shifted their focus to building local trust, interconnectedness, and networks to improve productivity and educational levels which are the backbones of Collective Action. Programs that encourage community involvement are among the experimental strategies for boosting social capital. According to Leiter's research, volunteers in certain programs in the US and Japan are paid in scrip, which they exchange for services.^x

Collective Action can be negative or positive. We need to recognize that forms of Collective Action differ depending on the benefits and harms it produces on those in a group and those external to it. Mobs, gangs, and cartels are forms of Collective Action, neighbourhood associations, charities, and voting.^{xi} We will be exploring the positive effects of Collective Action through the work of Atmashakti and its volunteering efforts in the face of crisis in 18 districts of Odisha, India.

Indians' relationship with volunteering has been growing. Charities Aid Foundation's (CAF) 2012 study shows that 87 million Indian individuals volunteer their time each month, ahead of Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa (BRICS) and second only to the US with 105 million volunteering individuals.^{xii} According to CAF research in 2012, while India comes third after China and the US for the number of individuals who have helped a stranger in a typical month, 10% of Indians volunteer their time, and 19% help strangers.^{xiii} Although the amounts of money donated and volunteer hours logged are significant, there is still an opportunity to grow.

Atmashakti Trust was founded by Manmohan Singh and Malti Singh in 1995 to work towards a myriad of development issues in rural as well as urban slums. The aid provided included livelihood and food security, sustainable agriculture, women's rights, health, education, and disaster interventions. Some of Atmashakti's partners are Odisha Shramajeebee Manch (OSM), Mahila Shramajeebee Manch, Odisha (MSMO), and Sonbhadra Vikash Sangathan (SVS).^{xiv} The mission of Atmashakti is to assist 8 million underprivileged families in the most impoverished states. They serve underprivileged, marginalized, and other excluded communities to combat poverty, inequality, discrimination, patriarchy, and social injustice. They envision a world without poverty, inequality, injustice, and patriarchy and where everyone enjoys the right to life with dignity. Atmashakti's work is based in two states of India: Odisha and Uttar Pradesh.

Atmashakti's work in the state of Odisha was imperative, given everything the state had been through. When COVID-19 hit India in 2020, Odisha was recovering from the 2019 cyclone Fani. It had a devastating effect on the state. According to the Government of Odisha, it caused overwhelming amounts of damage to the infrastructure of the state and extensive damage to the life and property of more than 1.65 crore people in the 12 districts it passed through.^{xv} It triggered the biggest human evacuations in history, with a record 1.5 million people being shifted in just 24 hours.^{xvi} The assessment of the disaster showed that 5,735 elementary and secondary schools were damaged, along with 2,513 anganwadi centers (village daycare centers for children).^{xvii} To make matters worse, 272 kilometers worth of national highways, 5,240 kilometers of state highways, and 6,251 worth of rural roads were affected, thereby restricting the transportation of goods and services.

Atmashakti bridged the education gap during COVID-19 through Collective Action. COVID-19 struck as the state was undergoing rebuilding. Atmashakti went into overdrive because of this. One major concern was students lagging in studies due to COVID-19-induced lockdowns. Atmashakti did a needs assessment and found that there was no digital infrastructure for students to rely on government-led initiatives requiring smartphones. Adding to that, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), which measures the national school enrollment, showed that children are lagging in basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, and their learning levels do not match their grade levels.^{xviii} This propelled Atmashakti to

launch the Mo-Chatashali, a community-led intervention by the members of the villages to educate primary-level students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mo means ‘my,’ and Chatashali means ‘classroom.’

Mo-Chatashali, a volunteering program, was formed with a sense of urgency as a response to COVID-19. Atmashakti leveraged their 10-year relationship with all the district and community heads in the 18 districts and mobilized them to search for educated volunteers in their communities to educate the students who could not attend schools due to the COVID-19 lockdowns. The villagers came back with their lists amounting to 6,000 volunteers across the state. This led to the formation of volunteer-led education centers in the villages across 18 districts.

Making the centers and the goal to impact about 1 lakh students was not easy. Once the villagers made their lists, Atmashakti provided online training to the volunteers about teaching methodologies, child rights, the curriculum, assessment techniques, attendance taking, etc. that helped build a conducive learning environment for the students. After the training, the volunteers set out to search for safe spaces for learning. Some people offered their homes, some volunteers conducted the sessions in the open courtyards of shut schools, while other volunteers taught in open spaces in fields.

All volunteers were motivated to help the children in their respective communities. There was a collective awareness amongst the members that if the children were not engaged, it may lead to child marriages or child labor. This was also a motivating factor for volunteers to provide their services. Atmashakti maintained volunteer motivation by recognizing volunteer efforts through state-level events, award ceremonies, skill certificates, jerseys, and media coverage. Volunteers were excited to learn about new teaching techniques and felt satisfaction when students performed well during examinations.

Once COVID-19 started to loosen its clutches, the Mo-Chatashali volunteers transitioned to young eagles. As the schools started to re-open, students rejoined schools. Atmashakti worked towards retaining the volunteers. This led to the volunteers to call themselves young eagles, and the Young Eagles program was born.

The Young Eagles program is all about empowering communities. Once the volunteers braved COVID-19 and bridged the education gap during the pandemic, they were enthusiastic and motivated to continue volunteering. They did so by turning to social media, voicing their concerns about issues in their villages on Twitter, and tagging concerned authorities to act.

Several factors contributed to the success of the volunteering Collective Action. Firstly, all the members of the community knew each other and came from the same villages hence there was a sense of shared identity, which is critical in forming social capital. Secondly, Atmashakti acted as the Linking Capital for all the volunteers to be able to communicate, coordinate and strategize how the education processes will take place. Thirdly, resources such as time, expertise, physical space, and technology were available to fructify the volunteering efforts.

Atmashakti continues to foster Collective Action in their volunteers through motivation. They do skill mapping with the volunteers to find out what they are good at. Then Atmashakti helps these volunteers by connecting them to the right opportunities, government schemes, and skill training to help them grow professionally. Atmashakti, through maintaining healthy managerial styles and open communication channels, was able to retain 66.6% of the volunteers as Young Eagles. These volunteers are transitioning to become sustained episodic volunteers.^{xix} Sustained episodic volunteers are those that are in the organization as volunteers for 5-6 years. Atmashakti targets to grow this network of volunteers to 10,000 volunteers by 2024.

A lot of volunteers also benefitted personally from Atmashakti's Collective Action. It led some volunteers to open their coaching centers to earn livelihoods. A lot of migrant workers that were asked to leave built their skill sets in education. One volunteer got state-wide recognition in the media from a famous Odia actor. Another volunteer got the confidence to stand in elections and won. Many volunteers also got job opportunities due to the certificates they got from Atmashakti. From confidence building to good networking, many more motivations can lead one to volunteer. Overall, one can see how community organizing led to increased social capital, improved quality of life for the beneficiaries, empowerment through technology, increased resilience, and an enhanced sense of community.

The importance of Collective Action lies in its ability to drive and sustain communities. When individuals identify a common problem, build a coalition, develop a shared vision, mobilize all the available resources, take action, and evaluate progress, it successfully solves a community issue through Collective Action. Atmashakti has not only been successful in mobilizing volunteers in the time of a global crisis but has also been able to retain most of their volunteers who dedicatedly worked towards solving their community issues. Furthermore, this has led to increased satisfaction and well-being for the volunteers themselves, which can have ripple effects on civic engagement and disaster response. Ultimately, good understanding and nurturing of the volunteers have helped Atmashakti create a more engaged, supportive, and vibrant civil society.

Acknowledgments

I would like to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the Atmashakti team that helped provide me with valuable information about Atmashakti Trust. Their dedication, expertise, and professionalism made it possible for me to gather the necessary information and insights that I needed to complete my project successfully.

First and foremost, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Mrs. Ruchi Kashyap, the Executive Trustee at Atmashakti. She was instrumental in ensuring that I got everything I needed for the purpose of research for this paper.

I would also like to acknowledge Atmashakti team's willingness to go above and beyond to help me, especially Mr. Naba Kishor Pujari and Mr. Panchanan Pradhan. Their open communication, prompt responses, and willingness to collaborate made the entire process smooth and seamless. Their insights and perspectives were invaluable in helping me gain a deeper understanding of the organization's structure, culture, and operations.

References

- Aldrich, Daniel P. 2012. *Building resilience: Social capital in post-disaster recovery*. University of Chicago Press.
- “Atmashakti Trust India.” Atmashakti Trust. Accessed May 2, 2023. <https://atmashaktitrust.com/about-us/>
- Chong, Dennis. *Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- “Cyclone Fani Damage, Loss, and Needs Assessment.” United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2019. <https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/cyclone-fani-damage-loss-and-needs-assessment>.
- Ghatak, Neha, and Jyotsna Jha. “Why We Shouldn't Look at Aser 2022 Results as a Glass Half Full.” *The Wire*, February 16, 2023. <https://thewire.in/education/why-we-shouldnt-look-at-aser-2022-results-as-a-glass-half-full>.
- Hyde, Melissa K., Jeff Dunn, Caitlin Bax, and Suzanne K. Chambers. “Episodic Volunteering and Retention: An Integrated Theoretical Approach.” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2016): 45–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764014558934>.
- Kassam, Meenaz, Femida Handy, and Emily Jansons. *Philanthropy in India: Promise to Practice*. New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2016.
- Ostrom, Elinor. “Analyzing Collective Action.” *Agricultural Economics* 41 (2010): 155–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1574-0862.2010.00497.x>.
- Schutz, Aaron, and Marie G. Sandy. *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Stukas, Arthur A., Keilah A. Worth, E. Gil Clary, and Mark Snyder. “The Matching of Motivations to Affordances in the Volunteer Environment.” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (February 2009): 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764008314810>.

ⁱ Arthur A. Stukas et al., “The Matching of Motivations to Affordances in the Volunteer Environment,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (February 2009): pp. 5-28

ⁱⁱ Dennis Chong, *Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 132.

ⁱⁱⁱ Aaron Schutz and Marie G. Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 12.

^{iv} Daniel P. Aldrich, *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 23.

^v Aldrich, 13.

- ^{vi} Aldrich, 104.
- ^{vii} Aaron Schutz and Marie G. Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change*, 47.
- ^{viii} Aldrich, *Building Resilience: Social Capital*, 23.
- ^{ix} Aldrich, 158.
- ^x Aldrich, 160.
- ^{xi} Elinor Ostrom, "Analyzing Collective Action," *Agricultural Economics* 41 (2010), 156.
- ^{xii} Meenaz Kassam, Femida Handy, and Emily Jansons, *Philanthropy in India: Promise to Practice* (New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2016), 67.
- ^{xiii} Kassam, Handy and Jansons, 67.
- ^{xiv} "Atmashakti Trust India," Atmashakti Trust, accessed May 2, 2023, <https://atmashaktitrust.com/about-us/>
- ^{xv} "Cyclone Fani Damage, Loss, and Needs Assessment," United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2019, <https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/cyclone-fani-damage-loss-and-needs-assessment>.
- ^{xvi} Cyclone Fani, xiv.
- ^{xvii} Cyclone Fani, xiv.
- ^{xviii} Neha Ghatak and Jyotsna Jha, "Why We Shouldn't Look at Aser 2022 Results as a Glass Half Full," *The Wire*, February 16, 2023, <https://thewire.in/education/why-we-shouldnt-look-at-aser-2022-results-as-a-glass-half-full>
- ^{xix} Melissa K. Hyde et al., "Episodic Volunteering and Retention: An Integrated Theoretical Approach," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2016), 47