

Friends in deed

Volunteering in the Tata group is bringing together good people and good causes and making a difference to many lives

Daud Makoda of Tata Chemicals in Mithapur, Gujarat, Mangesh Joshi of Tata Motors in Pune and Praveen Kumar of Tata Communications, Bangalore, working in three different industries in three different cities of India, have a twin thread tying them together. First, all three work for Tata companies and second, all three are committed to a common cause called volunteering.

The three are not alone. Joining them in their crusade are more than 28,000 registered (and probably half as many unregistered) comrades in 32 Tata companies who, in 2009-10, put in a total of about 6.5 million volunteering hours to various community initiatives. Each one of them has taken time off from busy work schedules, and often on holidays and Sundays, to reach out to someone in need and make a difference to somebody's life. They may not have been able to change the world yet. They have, however, made a difference to their own lives and to the lives of several others around them.

The spirit of volunteering is integral to the Tata ethos. This tradition has even been institutionalised under the aegis of the Tata Council for Community Initiatives (TCCI), which encourages and guides Tata companies in their volunteering endeavours. It also finds a place in the Tata Code of Conduct, the set of guidelines that define the value systems on which the Tata group of companies has been built. Clause 10 mandates Tata companies to

encourage volunteering among their employees and help them around their areas of operation. Tata companies have been assiduously following these directives by encouraging employees to use their skills and interests to improve the quality of life of the people they serve.

With time and growing expertise, the whole process of volunteering has become fairly structured. With facilitation from TCCI, each company formulates its own volunteering programmes and policies. Usually they evolve a core-competency matrix and match it optimally with probable activities. So Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces uses its food production skills to conduct classes teaching self-employment skills to youth and women in slums, and Voltas uses its air conditioning and engineering competence to impart vocational training to underprivileged youth. Employees pitch in to render selfless service, making the programmes a success.

What is spectacular about this programme is the fact that so many employees, voluntarily and selflessly, sacrifice after-office leisure hours to work for the good of others. They volunteer without expectation of monetary returns or personal gain, and admit it has enriched their lives and their organisations in more ways than one.

"It is a beautiful combination of a structured practice made effective with the emotional connect of the people involved," says Anant Nadkarni, vice president, corporate sustainability, TCCI. When Tata employees engage with



Tata Teleservices volunteers at an old age home



Taj volunteers teach self-employment skills to women living in slums

people in the community, they do so as ambassadors of their company and the Tata brand. "It helps a lot because brand building comes not just from 'what' we produce as an organisation, but also from 'who' we are," he adds.

In sum, Tata's volunteering programme has succeeded so well because it brings benefits to all concerned: volunteers grow and learn from their interaction with the community; their work on sustainable and development-oriented projects helps the community in many tangible and intangible ways; and the goodwill thus generated helps the company and the brand build enduring relationships with the community, which, in the words of the Founder, Jamsetji Tata, "is not just another stakeholder in business, but is in fact the very purpose of its existence".

These words have been taken to heart by Tata companies and employees. Their active involvement in volunteering has made possible a slew of sustained and innovative programmes for the benefit of the community.

In 2008-09, 7,415 Taj employees volunteered 73,710 hours to impact the lives of 57,688 people. Taj focuses on building livelihoods, and its initiatives are driven through the Community Development Action Group, a group of volunteers who come together for the duration of a project. Taj recognises and appreciates volunteers during 'town-hall meetings' in the presence of the entire operational staff and through online communications.

Tata Chemicals has a strong culture of volunteering and an enduring relationship has developed between employee-volunteers and the community. Now called HOPE — Harnessing Opportunities for People's Empowerment — this initiative has a database of volunteers spanning the organisational hierarchy, from senior management to contract employees. Family members of employees, too, find time regularly for community initiatives. The work they do is recognised and rewarded at various company functions; the three

volunteers who clock the maximum number of hours are given the opportunity to visit a non-government organisation of their choice anywhere in India.

At Tata Communications, volunteering activities are chalked out in advance every year by the Employee Volunteering Programme (EVP), which was set up in 2007 especially for this purpose. It has operations in several cities, including Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Ernakulam. A champion volunteer is appointed every month to drive the movement. Among the many programmes falling under the EVP umbrella are support to the less privileged, cleanliness drives, tree planting, blood donation camps and NGO fairs.

At Bangalore-based Tata Elxsi, employees have banded together under an umbrella called SAFE that stands for Social Activity Forum of Elxsians. This organisation matches volunteers to projects by checking on their preferences and core talents. The current focus area for SAFE is to help deserving children looking for higher secondary education. SAFE also has an added dimension where employees donate not just time but also have the option of making automatic payments from their monthly paycheck to a charity called The Power of One Fund. The company fully supports its employees by enabling them to put in volunteer manhours even during office time, providing transport and materials, and so on.

The 2,000-strong Tata Motors corps of volunteers — including employees and retired employees, and their families — is active in various locations. Depending upon the requirement, the volunteers spend time both in rural and urban areas, working in alignment with the commitment of the company to improve the quality of the lives of the people living around their facilities.

The corporate services division of Tata Steel involves employees and their family members to volunteer for its community development programme in order to inculcate values of humanity and care, and to make them experience community as an extension of business.

Employees of Titan Industries volunteer in the areas of health, education, environment, livelihoods and income generation. Apart from Hosur, Titan volunteers are active in the smaller units at Dehradun, Baddi and Roorkee, and in the regional offices and in the corporate office. Titan acknowledges the services of its volunteers and recognises them by presenting them with awards.

As the Tata brand spreads its footprint across the world, the volunteering movement has spread its wings beyond Indian shores. Tata Consultancy Services, Tata Communications, Taj Hotels, Tata Technologies, Brunner Mond and Tata Steel Europe (Corus) are all clocking dedicated hours for some noble cause or the other.

By creating a structure for volunteering, the Tata group has enabled a movement that encourages employees in their earnestness to bring about social change. ●

Shubha Madhukar



Volunteers of Tata Steel Europe (Corus) find time to teach under-privileged children