

Citizenship in the Times of a Pandemic

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They [the two students] made a valuable and sizable contribution which would greatly benefit the underprivileged in Hoskote - Chandan, Goonj Coordinator

What must individuals do in order to fulfil their roles as citizens? Other than following the rules and laws of the country, citizens are expected to respect and acknowledge the needs of others. Volunteering is a socially beneficial act that strengthens the community and fulfils a core principle of citizenship.

People are the building blocks of a democracy. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru said, 'Citizenship consists in the service of the country'. In 1997 when the Labour government came to power in the United Kingdom, it aimed to transform citizens from mere complaisant users of public services to more active and engaged members of the community. This interpretation of citizenship benefits the community and, more importantly, the nation as a whole.

The recent months opened our eyes to the severe impact of the pandemic on certain sections of society. For the first time in our lives, we saw how a lockdown enforced in the interest of public health could negatively impact them. These included street vendors, daily wage workers and small businesses. While the Government was taking measures to ease the situation, we wanted to do our bit as concerned and empathetic members of the society.

We explored different ways to help the people who were affected. After some research, we chose to collaborate with a reputed NGO called *Goonj*. It has an established donation distribution network, which assured us that all donations would reach the people in need. In September, we proposed a donation drive across Bengaluru in multiple neighbourhoods to collect various essential items, such as clothes, shoes, books, dry rations, oil, stationery, bags and blankets.

When we started, we were doubtful if it was a good idea; if we would be able to collect enough

donations. But we relied on the generosity of fellow citizens. By the month-end, we had focused all our efforts on publicising the donation drive through WhatsApp messages and emails. We made a fervent appeal and spread the word through our friends' networks. To make it easy for the donors to contribute, we planned to place collection boxes in the communities. Getting big cartons was another challenge. A week before the drive, we requested friends and neighbours to save any boxes they got from online shopping. We approached our neighbourhood grocery store with a similar request. The store owners were very cooperative and told us to come back in a couple of days. After an appropriate sanitization process, we placed the big cartons at all proposed locations.

As the word spread, we received overwhelming support. People jumped at the opportunity to give away their unused items. Motivated by the positive response, we set up more boxes to deposit



donations and began collecting these donations periodically from the middle of October.

The next step of the process was to transport these donations to the *Goonj* facility in Bengaluru. However, the sheer number of donations made this task difficult. We required help from a few friends and family to carry the boxes to the vehicle, and numerous trips to the centre. Finally, after a week of heavy lifting and travelling, we were able to transfer all the contributions to *Goonj*. They were delighted to see everything we had collected and promised us that these valuable supplies would be distributed to those in need.

Helping people in need builds the psychological feeling of connectedness and belonging. A good citizen values this spirit and embraces it. A true citizen is one who actively participates in the community and empathises with all its members. We believe it is our responsibility to engage in the civic community and not just to offer blind allegiance to an authority. When people focus on their personal business, along with the wellbeing of their neighbours, they embody the spirit of citizenship. From offering community service to organising events and festivals, every activity done to aid and strengthen the community builds this spirit.



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