

1. Title of the Practice

Cultivating Empathy for the Underprivileged: An Initiative by the Students and Alumni of Gushkara Mahavidyalaya

2. Objectives of the Practice

Through this practice our students learn to undertake socially relevant initiatives for the benefit of fellow citizens such as people who are differently abled or people who are homeless. The key objective of this practice is to enable our students to cultivate and express empathy for individuals and groups belonging to underprivileged sections of their immediate social environment. Based on humanitarian values and the basic principles of philanthropy, this practice will enable our students to become socially aware and responsible citizens by encouraging them to engage with contemporary social issues in a constructive manner.

3. The Context

Our social milieu includes several sections or groups of people who are less privileged than others. They include, for instance, the differently abled people and the people belonging to economically backward segments. The recent pandemic has aggravated the harsh realities they have to deal with.

The presence of homeless people is clearly visible in public places like railway station platforms. Despite their visible presence, ordinary individuals, engrossed in their daily activities, often fail to pay attention to the predicament and needs of these marginalized people. It is, however, ethically important for us to respond to problems like poverty, disability and disease. This ethical imperative based on the harsh realities of our social context has been foundational to the humanitarian initiative undertaken by our students. As young citizens, our students need to cultivate a sense of social responsibility and compassion for those who need help. They should learn to organize and participate in welfare activities that aim to improve the lives of impoverished and underprivileged people.

4. The Practice

The students of our college enthusiastically organize a special annual charity event that focuses on helping the people who live on the margins of our society. It is organized and conducted primarily by student volunteers from the Department of English, Gushkara Mahavidyalaya. The initiative is funded by monetary contributions from the teachers, students and alumni belonging to various departments including the Department of English.

A group of students from the Department has formed a philanthropic group which they have named 'Abegi'. The Bengali word 'abeg' can be translated as 'emotion'. The name 'Abegi', therefore, denotes a state of mind that is characterized by emotions such as compassion and empathy. The goal of this group and its efforts is to provide emotional and material assistance to the people who urgently require help.

The Covid 19 pandemic devastated lives and livelihoods in the year 2020-21. On 15 August, 2020 a group of student volunteers organized a programme to spread awareness about Covid 19. In villages of Bhatar Gram Panchayat they distributed masks, gloves and sanitizer among people who were financially incapable of buying such things.

Again, on 25th of December, 2020 a group of student volunteers organized a Winter Donation Programme for the people, for whom the railway station floor is the bed and the sky is the roof. In early morning our student volunteers gathered at Gushkara railway station with all arrangements in order to serve the needy. There they distributed blankets. There is no better gift than providing warmth to the needy in winter. Moreover, they distributed chocolates and cakes among those children who live in the station surroundings and slums. Afterwards, they left Gushkara to reach their next destination at Bardhaman and continued the rest of the program there.

At Bardhaman railway station they distributed cakes, biscuits and chocolates among children who live there. These children belong to impoverished homeless families who permanently live on the railway platforms. Needless to say, the gifts made them immensely happy. Because of poverty, some of these children are forced to beg or work. For them, empathy is a rare gift. Our students then visited a nearby slum where they again distributed cakes, biscuits and chocolates among children.

Our students befriended the platform dwellers and spent the entire morning with them. Not surprisingly, the children immensely enjoyed their friendly presence. They absolutely loved the delicious cakes and chocolates they served.

One of the central purposes of higher education in our country is to create ideal citizens by disseminating certain moral values including altruism. The annual philanthropic event organized by our students reflects and upholds those ethical values.





5. Evidence of Success

The activities organized by our students in villages of Bhatar Gram Panchayat, at Gushkara and Bardhaman railway station and at the slum substantially contributed to the emotional well-being of the needy. This is evidenced by the manner in which they responded. Besides, these efforts have enriched our students morally. They have proved that they have the desire and the ability to organize constructive social welfare activities on their own.

These results indicate that higher educational institutions can play a significant role in stimulating moral values and a vigorous sense of social responsibility among the young citizens of the nation. Clearly, they can create a better world through their energetic and enthusiastic interventions.

6. Problems Encountered and Resources Required

The desire or the ability to help others is not uniformly present in all students. While the majority of the students are enthusiastic about philanthropic efforts, some of them may lack motivation. Through our experiences we have realized that the task of motivating them is a possible one. Through meaningful conversations our teachers have been able to encourage these students to get involved in this initiative. At present the annual philanthropic event organized by our students is entirely funded by contributions from students, teachers and other members of the staff. We intend to broaden the scope of this endeavour by increasing the funds available to our student volunteers