Book Review
By Ushnish Sengupta

From Seva to Cyberspace: The Many Faces of Volunteering in India. *By Femida Handy, Meenaz Kassam, Sharjah Jillian Ingold, & Bhagyashree Ranade.* New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications India, 2011. 251 pp. ISBN 9788132106982.

From Seva to Cyberspace: The Many Faces of Volunteering in India by Femida Handy, Meenaz Kassam, Sharjah Jillian Ingold, and Bhagyashree Ranade is a useful addition to the literature on local volunteerism in different countries. The text is authored by scholars who have a deep understanding of volunteering in countries around the world, including the U.S., Canada, and India. They provide a deep analysis of the religious basis of volunteering in India, report on surveys about volunteering conducted across multiple countries (including India), and discuss case studies that highlight the theories and analysis presented in different chapters.

The book's main strength is the way it coherently combines a review of the literature on volunteering, case studies, and an analysis of theories about volunteering in the Indian context. The book is well organized. It begins with a historical overview of volunteering in India, followed by a chapter on defining volunteering in the contemporary context. The subsequent chapters describe volunteers, including youth, corporate employees, and mature adults. It concludes with chapters on religious volunteering, the value of volunteering, and virtual volunteering. The book is well designed, allowing researchers to quickly orient themselves with volunteering in India.

The examination of religious influence on volunteering in India is one of the highlights of the book, which provides both a historical and a contemporary analysis of the major role of religion in the country. Religion has a stronger influence on society in India than in countries such as Canada, where a significant percentage of citizens report no religious affiliation. Handy et al. start by explaining the origins of volunteering in India and its basis in religious beliefs, including Hinduism and the practice of charity, Islam and obligatory social duties, and Buddhism and ethical behaviour. In Chapter 6, the authors give a deeper analysis of religious volunteering and its inherent limitations, which include serving only one's own religious community and restricted involvement in more politically charged issues.

The volunteering case studies provided at the end of each chapter are also extremely valuable, as they enhance the analysis with a personalized illustration of theory grounded in practice. One example that stands out is the Non Resident Indian Parents Association, a uniquely Indian organization, in Chapter 5. Moreover, the explanatory notes at the end of many of the case studies reconnect the cases to the preceding analysis, effectively providing further subjective rationale in the form of personal stories the chapter's conclusions for the reader.

The primary limitation of the book is the small sample size of the surveys and the demographics of the surveyed population, which do not necessarily represent the broad and diverse Indian population. Notwithstanding the limitations of the sample size, the book does include surveys of volunteers, which contribute insight and knowledge to an area where additional empirical research is decidedly required. At the same time, as reported by the authors, a sample size of over 500 adults limits the ability to generalize for all of India, a country with a population of over one billion people. Furthermore, the demographic characteristics of the survey sample over represent an educated, English speaking population. The volunteer characteristics of the educated, English speaking population in India may be more similar to middle class volunteer characteristics in developed countries such as the U.S. and Canada. Comparing survey results between countries without controlling for socioeconomic demographics is inconclusive at best. The survey of university students from one city in India, for example, does not necessarily represent other cities or the rest of the country, which is socioeconomically diverse across regions.

In terms of further exploring volunteering in India, a deeper analysis of volunteering by class, income, gender, and geography would be useful, since these elements have different impacts across different countries. Handy et al. allude to differences in class and income in certain areas of the book. The level of income inequality in India is higher than that of Canada, but lower than the U.S., as measured by the Gini coefficient. The absence of a robust public social safety net in India is an income and class related factor that may affect volunteering. For instance, a person without a social safety net is less likely to volunteer, as they are more likely to spend the majority of their available time looking after basic needs for themselves and their family, including food, water, and shelter. Handy et al. also allude to geographical differences in volunteering, such as the percentage of people who volunteer in different places but do not expand on these differences, which can be substantial in a country as diverse as India. Since the survey of Indian volunteers was completed in one city, Pune, the geographical applicability is a further limitation of the study. A broader survey sample of volunteers covering additional geographical areas may provide some different results. Although not an explicit subject of the book, the increase of global and transnational volunteering and the related issues of "voluntourism" would be a useful addition to the book. Lastly, the final chapter on virtual volunteering, while a useful examination of the intersection of information technology and volunteering, could be enhanced by an analysis of Indian volunteer contributions to, for instance, the global open source software, open access, or open data movements. After all, Indians are also part of a significant global diaspora, and an analysis of the global diffusion of volunteering-related social innovations originating from India—such as Gandhian principles—would enhance a future edition of the book.

From Seva to Cyberspace: The Many Faces of Volunteering in India is a useful addition to the literature on volunteering that will be useful for both scholars and practitioners. The authors have been able to successfully communicate their research through theory analysis and case studies. This exploratory research enables additional study that will enhance our understanding of the similarities and differences of volunteering not only in India but also across the world.

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