



**Rural Mentoring Is Good Not Just
for Equality but the Economy at
Large**



The pandemic has had a substantial impact on every aspect of our society, not least the economy. With its most significant fall in four decades, the Indian economy has shrunk by nearly a quarter (23.9%) in June. The shortfall, however, is not just economic, but also moral, as this dip comes in the face of a rural population that has borne the brunt facing issues related to income and other inequalities. That said, although this situation may seem like an opportunity to get stuck into cause and effect thinking, we may be better served by evaluating the avenues for development and resilience.

Recent events notwithstanding, India's growth story over the past few decades has been nothing short of exemplary. That the country has become a force to reckon with, globally, without addressing the perennial issues of income inequality, healthcare, and widespread poverty, is testament to its potential and ability. However, we are now at an inflexion point in our history. One where we must choose between prioritising short-term slapdash interventions or long-term strategies that will help build a nation capable of leading the future. Given what

COVID-19 has shown us about the importance of robust models and resilience, the latter option would be a prudent choice.



Our rural growth story is an essential part of this paradigm. For far too long, we have developed the country's urban centres with an almost myopic focus on developing sectors with a high economic impact. The rural population, critical and forgotten in equal measure, continues to be an afterthought. While they are the subject of issues like financial inclusion or even healthcare, rural India very rarely is on the economic development plan. That discrimination can no longer be the status quo.

The availability of opportunity is just the first step. Enabling people to build on what they have been given is the more crucial intervention. Previously, what used to be within the scope of informal conversations or counselling now falls under the more structured purview of mentoring. While mentoring has started to grow in popularity in more urban regions, the current situation has meant that working professionals across locations have lost jobs. That's where I believe rural

mentoring can play a vital role. In markets that are transitioning from a focus on artisanal jobs (like weaving, for instance, in Yemmiganur) to a mix that includes corporate opportunity, mentoring is a vital catalyst for growth and resilience. It helps employees in these rural regions to develop an approach beyond mere utility by empowering them to move beyond the skills required for their daily tasks.



Access to leaders from corporate India, urban corporate India, can imbibe in the rural workforce a confidence to create their future, not just feed on the crumbs left behind by urban trailblazers. It is here that we, at IndiVillage, have placed our faith in a rigorous and structured corporate mentoring program featuring leaders from some of the country's finest companies. A six-month engagement will see first-time managers at IndiVillage have access to mentoring from these leaders, enabling them to take ownership, define more nuanced career paths, and augment the impact of their leadership ability. Already off to a great start, we expect the program to be a recurring initiative at the company, adding even more value to our hugely inspiring teams in Yemmiganur, AP, and Raichur, Karnataka. The program serves to inspire the mentors too. With the pandemic freeing up time otherwise spent on travel and other logistics, the mentors in our program have spoken about how the initiative gives them the opportunity to pause, develop

an idea, and make a meaningful contribution. This ability feeds into the fact that time, our most valuable asset, is easier to contribute now, shifting the reliance on CSR programs and other altruistic endeavours to the knowledge and intent of well-trained professionals in the corporate sector.



The ability to build a successful company on the back of rural empowerment and community impact is more than a unique attribute; it is a superpower and one we believe many organisations can replicate. That's why we have built a replicable and scalable mentoring program that can easily be adapted and adopted by companies across sectors.

The success of IndiVillage's purpose-led profit model has been nothing short of a transformative experience. Previously the responsibility of nonprofits or other charitable organisations, the results of our model demonstrate that doing business for good doesn't have to be a tradeoff between the moral ground and the bottom-line. Conscious business and capitalism can be mutually inclusive, impactful, and lucrative. And that's what we have seen through the success of our

impact sourcing model. As we see more companies start to explore the idea and develop their iterations of this setup, it is essential to evolve a model that is built for tomorrow, one that empowers leaders to define and deliver their unique contribution. India Inc. must turn its hand to creating equal opportunity and augmenting our collective intelligence at scale. It's only then that we will set the stage for an economy resilient in the face of crises and, more importantly, one with a clear conscience. While building businesses and providing opportunities in rural areas is a step up from the zeitgeist, we cannot be content with tactical and cost-based wins.



**Fostering
development
Volunteerism**

**Urban-Rural
through**

In India, the post-pandemic phase caused the urban-rural divide to grow deeper than before. The containment of the pandemic and the treatment was handled differently in rural India, and even the recovery methods have been uneven compared to the urban regions. Since the availability of resources is higher, and with a belief that the development of the country happens only through urban areas, the recoupment of rural areas has been considerably slower. At IndiVillage, we spent a large part of the past pandemic year finding initiatives that would help reset rural India, and through an experience, we came to an understanding that volunteerism could play a key role in bridging this urban-rural gap.



How does volunteerism aid rural India?

India being the fastest-growing economy is home to **20%** of the world's youth population. Though a majority of the Indian population resides in rural India, the population distribution is highly uneven, as most of the youth migrate to urban regions to find work. This large void can be filled as rural India grows more

through employment opportunities, but until then volunteerism could be a way to stitch the gap closer.

Rural India is home to a hub of entrepreneurship as **54.2 %** of the population is self-employed. Bringing more light to these initiatives through volunteer involvement helps the people of rural India recuperate from the pandemic faster and better. The knowledge gap that exists can also be bridged while the urban can gain varied perspectives through association in rural regions.

Employee volunteering program

For corporate institutions, an employee volunteering program is an effective way to involve their employees to give back to society. The process is simple: The corporate can partner with an NGO or a social enterprise, in a domain that aligns with its larger vision and goal and encourages its employees to dedicate a certain amount of time to activities that are chosen collectively by the corporate and NGO partners. They include ventures such as the building of school infrastructure, skill development and capacity building, financial literacy programs, and volunteering their time in schools. In India, Corporate Social Responsibility was legally mandated in 2014. Under Section 135 of the Indian Companies Act, companies with a certain turnover were required to donate 2% of their average net profit for the past three years to CSR organizations.

There are clear linkages to the benefits of employee involvement in the social sphere. A study by Harvard Business Review revealed that approximately 50% of the global millennial workforce wanted to work with companies that work towards a greater social goal or purpose. There are many proven benefits to employee volunteering programs that include greater job satisfaction, team building, capacity development, and skill-building.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, employee volunteering engagements

have moved to an online forum. While the shift to an online platform has been difficult, there is a great need for various forms of volunteer support. During Samvāda: Dialogue for Impact, IndiVillage conversed with NGOs, iVolunteer, and Concern India Foundation that work extensively on achieving development goals through employee volunteering engagements.



Pre Pandemic Employee Engagements

Concern India Foundation, an NGO which works towards funding and capacity building of smaller grassroots organizations said that most companies were very keen on engaging employees for volunteering programs. “Over the years, we have received very positive feedback from both corporates and NGO partner organizations. It is a great team-building and capacity building activity for corporate groups and also very useful for NGO partners because employee

volunteering provides additional manpower and financial support. Before the pandemic, we would reach out to our corporate partners and design an intervention based on their requirements in our primary domains: health, education, and community development.”

iVolunteer works in both individual volunteerism and employee volunteering also follow a similar procedure. “We match employees with organizations based on the goals of the corporates and the needs of the organization. The programs are designed for employee engagements, along with the monitoring, and evaluation component and the logistics.”

Virtual Employee Volunteering Engagements

In the time of the pandemic, there has been a great need for any form of support, especially in rural communities. There was also a keen desire amongst individuals to give back and support disadvantaged groups. However, taking into account the need for social distancing and the safety of the volunteers, the shift to an online module was essential.

Concern India Foundation observed that designing an employee volunteer engagement was a tricky process. “The activities need to be for a certain period, and they need to be consistent. Since most office work structures moved online, people are facing a digital overload and may not even want to increase the already heavy screen time for activities like volunteering. Hence, we had to be very creative while moving forward with these activities. Education was an area of interest for corporate volunteers to help provide study materials for students during the pandemic. A very recent event that we had was that the volunteers from CISCO recorded audiobooks for differently-abled children to use in Bangalore”



iVolunteer too faced many challenges in moving employee engagements online. “We took some time to devise programs that could be done online and we also developed a portal which we could use to track employee activities and the amount of time dedicated for the task. We redirected many of our present employee engagements to education programs. One of the activities that we engaged employees in was recording audio files for stories which could be shared with children.”

Apart from domains such as education, the online medium has also proved to be an effective medium to address the challenges in the health space and give back to the frontline workers. “What we noticed was that there was a shift in the interest of the corporates. Many were keen to contribute to the domain of health especially during the pandemic. We had employees make videos giving thanks to frontline workers and making different kinds of gifts for them. We also engaged employees in making masks which were distributed amongst those in need.” said Concern India Foundation.

Whether online or offline, employee volunteering engagements have proven to be an effective way for corporates to train, incentivize, and retain employees.

What can be done next?

In a way, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for us to relook how we approach corporate volunteerism. With the shift to a digital medium, while the nature of engagement is different, it has the potential to be equally impactful. There are multiple forms of volunteer engagements that corporates and impact institutions can engage, to bridge the gap between rural and urban communities. From the employees mentoring rural workforce or rural youth to assisting in a child in education, the possibilities are endless. Engaging employees in volunteering work moves beyond the mandate of the Indian Companies Act and helps create socially conscious and responsible citizens.

If you want to collaborate with us or learn more about volunteering opportunities, please contact impact@indivillage.com.