

Volunteer For Our Common Future

“Volunteers do not necessarily have the time, they just have the heart”

Volunteering is believed to be a communal link that traverses the gap between the body and the spirit. It is a step towards the advancement of a community with work that demands both time and vigour. In the purest form, volunteering is undertaken freely by choice without any ulterior motives. The UN and different governments of countries have successfully joined hands with volunteers and NGOs around the world to commemorate December 5th as **International Volunteers Day** and acknowledge their selfless contribution to society.

The ongoing covid pandemic has disrupted the world's social and economic reforms and rendered millions helpless as they seek accessibility to essential medical care and goods required for their survival. Volunteers have been at the frontline of providing medical care, arranging beds in hospitals and providing necessities to the old and needy. These heart-warming gestures by volunteers across the world were recognized and paid gratitude for their selfless behaviour.

‘Together we can through volunteering’ was the United Nations theme for International Volunteer Day 2020 while this year's theme is *‘Volunteer for our common future’*. The intention of observing this day is to boost enthusiasm among the various voluntary organisations and individuals by celebrating their effort, promoting and sharing their ideology and beliefs among different governments, private organisations and NGO's.

The Story of a Volunteer: Dr Swaiman Singh

Scarce illustrations of this generous attitude towards humanity are noticeable today. One such example of this altruistic and benevolent nature was Dr Swaiman Singh (President & Founder of 5 Rivers Heart Association) at the Tikri border of our capital city Delhi. Dr Singh was a part of the peaceful protest by farmers for over a year since the first breakout of protest by farmers against the new farming rules imposed by the Government of India. Dr Swaiman Singh and his team of volunteers, registered with the Five Rivers Heart Association, have played a crucial role in the protest by providing demonstrators with essential medical care, improving sanitation measures and living conditions amid the freezing temperatures.

With barely a few months left in his Cardiology fellowship at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, Dr Singh was affirmative about living a perfect life with his family back home in New Jersey. He is a father, husband, son and brother who managed to put his comfortable lifestyle aside when he saw a video of someone giving a CPR incorrectly to a protestor and heard that one of his close family friends from his ancestral village in Punjab had suffered a heart attack at one of the protest sites and no doctor or medical personnel was there to administer first aid.

Dr Singh knew that this was his calling, following which he decided to visit India in December 2020. His sister supported his decision and convinced others family members for the same. Initially, his mindset was to oversee and streamline the work done by NGOs but after witnessing the suffering of his community, he decided to work for and among farmers at the Tikri border. Dr Singh and his team then set up medical camps, makeshift hospitals and provided free consultation, along with medicines to volunteers, protestors, policemen and visitors

for free.

How Did This Movement Start?

2020-2021 Indian Farmers protest is was a protest against three farm acts that were passed by the parliament of India in September 2020.

For generations, farmers sold certain crops of their produce in Government-run markets for a minimum price (MSP), which gave farmers security. Modi Government's new laws were directed at selling crops directly to buyers, other states or grocery chains, without any guaranteed minimum price, which would potentially result in farmers being vulnerable in an unpredictable profession.

Many trade unions in areas of Punjab and Haryana condemned the introduction of these new laws and protested in rallies, which finally resulted in the movement '*Dilli Chalo*' in which thousands of farmers migrated to the borders of Delhi to protest peacefully for their survival and legal rights. The key demand was the withdrawal of these farm laws but they were also willing to settle for a legal assurance that the MSP system recommences through an amendment in these new laws. With more than 100 Million farmers affected and 200+ martyred, their movement had gained momentum.

Five Rivers and Heart Association

Dr Swaiman Singh founded this organisation in 2012 in response to worsening healthcare and education crises around the globe. This association intends to provide cost-effective medicine with optimal utilisation of available resources and via innovative new ways. Beginning with door to door screening and treatment of patients in rural areas of Punjab, this association is willing to take over underserved domains of the USA, Ghana, Egypt and Columbia in the future. Apart from medicine, education has also been of paramount importance to

this association with a focus on providing free educational material and scholarships to needy students studying and living in rural areas of India. Currently, they are with thousands of farmers protesting for their survival and legal rights.

Pind California

“Pind California” was the name given to the rising community of farmers at the Tikri border by Dr Singh and his colleagues. With “Protect our Farmers” being the new motto of Singh and his 5 Rivers Heart Association, “Pind California” now become a night shelter for more than 10,000 farmers and their families. To survive for months on roads, Dr Singh and his association continued providing free medical care, food and nutrition to the protesting farmers (Of varying ages with a multitude of co-morbidities) and semi-permanent houses out of tarps are being constructed for men, women and children to rest their heads at night. The volunteers also wished to include a medical clinic, gym and classrooms, and ensure proper sanitation to prevent the spread of diseases in the area. They initiated clean-up drives aimed at proper disposal of garbage on protest sites and motivation to adopt good hygiene practices. A makeshift library had given out over 10,000 books to encourage self-directed learning among the youth.

The collective efforts of Dr Singh and his team of voluntary workers had managed to treat over 1 million patients free of cost in their 10-month long journey, irrespective of their caste, religion or occupation.

Swaiman means “A person who is willing to give his soul and body to projects that he loves” and Dr Singh is surely living up to his name.

Challenges Faced

Dr Singh's organisation's journey had been a roller coaster ride and each day had been a new challenge for his team on the ground. Medical problems were just a fraction of problems that cropped up daily. The consequences of inclement weather made the supply of medication, healthy water and food at the front line arduous. Not losing sight of the country's ongoing battle with COVID-19, the Government had been nonchalant about Dr Singh's plea for the administration of the COVID-19 vaccine among the protestors. Sanitation was another major issue with utters overflowing with filth and rubbish that eventually increased the number of dengue and malaria cases. Despite the hardships, Dr Singh remained optimistic and considers it is a humbling experience.

Wrapping it Up!

Dr Swaiman Singh's solicitous act was witnessed and shared by his growing audience over various social networking sites, which resulted in an increase in the number of volunteers at the protest site. Putting his carrier and family aside has not been an easy assignment; several people questioned his decision but his selfless and optimistic nature made him serve at the borders as long as the protest went on. Dr Singh and his team have been an inspiration for all mankind for their altruistic behaviour. More power to them!

If anyone wishes to join the movement or donate to the cause – 'Protect our farmers', they can contact Dr Swaiman Singh through his website: www.5riversheart.org or drop a mail to join5heart@gmail.com.

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