

## Turning on the Lights for Colombian Tribal Children



Sewa International's Colombia team distributed solar lamps and panels to two indigenous communities – hw Huitorá and Aguas Negras -- in the Amazon basin in June bringing light into the homes of people and enabling children to pursue their education without hindrance. The project, funded by Sewa, was carried out with the support of the Colombian government. About 250 people (45 families) in remote areas benefited from this gift of light.

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## Executive's Corner

*Dear Sewa Family,*

I recently visited Bharat with my family, and it was a rejuvenating experience as always, especially for my children. Meeting with family and friends, participating in various social activities, and the large scale of human interaction in such a short span in Bharat are just priceless. Traveling from the United States, we always like to compare things between Bharat and the US: be it systems, infrastructure, or even human behavior. We all wish to have the cultural heritage of Bharat and the infrastructure of the US: that combination is really something to strive for. During this visit, we came across a variety of people who got us inspired by their commitment to selflessly serve the community. For example, we met with some dedicated volunteers (sevavratīs) at the Hedgewar Rugnalaya (hospital) including someone who just had donated his blood for the hundredth time! His “century” of blood donations must have impacted so many lives in a real, powerful sense. All such interactions sparked deep conversations with my 11-year-old daughter about life's meaning and purpose and how to draw inspiration from such individuals. After all, Bharat has been historically known as the “go to place” to get inspired.

At Sewa, we devote our tan (hand), man (heart/head) and dhan (money) to make a difference in our communities. In Sanskrit, Sewa means “selfless service”: the act of serving without expecting to receive anything in return. Maitri (universal friendship) and karuna (compassion) are the

other cornerstones of Sewa. Patanjali's yoga sutra very aptly describes the four main virtues (also mentioned in the teachings of Buddha and in the Upanishads) that can help us achieve our mission.

मैत्री करुणा मुदति पेक्षाणां सुख दुःख पुण्यापुण्य वषियाणां भावनातः  
चित्तप्रसादनम्॥

“Through the cultivation (*bhāvanā*) of friendship (*maitrī*), compassion (*karunā*), joy (*muditā*) and patience (*upeksā*) to situations that bring (*visayānām*) happiness (*sukha*), suffering (*duhkha*), virtues (*punya*) and sins (*apunya*) of others (respectively) one obtains steadiness (*prasādanam*) of mind (*citta*)”

To reach a higher state of mind, we should be genial to the people who are happy, compassionate to the suffering, delightful to the virtuous, and, indifferent to the evil. For those involved in selfless service, following the above advice is imperative.

Sincerely,



**Sandeep Khadkekar**  
Vice President, Marketing & Fund  
Development



## Sewa's Support Crucial in Banning 'single use' Plastic Bags

Sewa International New Jersey, along with other environmentally conscious groups, achieved a significant victory in their efforts to protect the environment when the Parsippany Township Council passed an ordinance on July 6, 2019 banning single-use plastic bags



*Sewa team with the Mayor of Parsippany, Michael Soriano, after resolution banning "single use" plastic bags*

Considering that an average American family takes home almost 1,500 plastic shopping bags a year, and plastic bags can take up to 1,000 years to break down, this ban is noteworthy. Parsippany-Troy Hills is the largest community by population in Morris county, and the first in the county to pass a resolution banning single-use plastic bags.

After passing the resolution, City Council Vice President Janice McCarthy said, "I am thankful for the great support this effort received from the Environmental Advisory Committee, ANJEC, Sewa International, their volunteers, and hundreds of residents that recognize the importance of this issue and understand that the ever increasing use of plastic is out of control as well as how it impacts our environment and health."

The ordinance was passed in the presence of the New Jersey Sewa team and youth attending the LEAD Sewa leadership development program. LEAD volunteers campaigned hard to ban single use plastic bags and collected 310 signatures from Parsippany residents in favor of the ban. The Sewa team led by Srinivas and LEAD volunteers made several presentations in the townhall meetings on the harmful effects of plastic on the environment.

Appreciating the Sewa initiative, Lisa Plevin, member of the Parsippany Environmental Advisory said, "This is quite an accomplishment and would not have been possible without the hard work of Sewa. The petition that you created and circulated was extremely helpful in educating residents about this important effort. You obtained an impressive 310 signatures, which made the Council members take notice."

## Swadesh Katoch Receives Service Award



*Swadesh Katoch receiving the "Distinguished Service Award" from Sri Sri Sri Viswayogi Viswamjee Maharaj*

Sewa International's Vice President for Disaster Recovery and International projects, Swadesh Katoch, recently received the "Distinguished Service Award" for outstanding and dedicated community service and exceptional efforts in promoting human values, peace and harmony in an event organized at Yugal Kunj Radha Krishna Temple and Community Center in Atlanta, GA, on July 16, 2019, on the eve of *Guru Purnima*.

The award, given by the Sri Viswayogi Viswamjee Foundation for Universal Integration & Peace, honors exemplary work and dedication by individuals in the cause of humanity. The award ceremony was attended by India's Consul General for Southeast United States, Dr. Swati Kulkarni, Major Chris Smith of the Gwinnett Police Department, and noted Bharatanatyam dancer Subathra Sudarshan.

Sri Sri Sri Viswayogi Viswamjee Maharaj presented the award to Swadesh Katoch for his selfless service over the years coordinating and spearheading the efforts to reach out to and help people affected by natural disasters in many parts of the world. "I believe it is my calling to do my best to serve people, and while we are not seeking awards for what we do, it is always humbling to have people recognize you for your service to society," Swadesh Katoch said.

## Sewa hands over first "Tiny Home" to CA Wildfire Victim



Tina Balasek, standing in front of her "tiny home"

The first "tiny home" built by Sewa International Bay Area volunteers for those who lost their homes in the 2018 California Wildfire was handed over on July 21 in Oroville, California. Part of the "small house movement" these tiny homes advocate simply living in small homes. There is no official definition of a "tiny home," but houses less than 400 square feet in size are considered tiny homes.

Balasek, a former substitute teacher, who was living in a temporary mobile home in Paradise, CA, after she lost her house to the wildfire, received the first tiny home. Tina is a 56-year-old disabled person and went through a lot of trauma in the aftermath of the fire. She is a single parent with two daughters and is now the proud and happy owner of this home, built lovingly by Sewa volunteers.

The volunteers drove three hours each way every Sunday, over four months, to Oroville to build this first tiny home. They worked with Alyssa Nolan, a local construction volunteer and her team of builders, to construct this home. In addition to the labor, the Sewa team also collected and spent \$7,500 to buy construction materials and furniture for the home.

Bay Area Chapter Coordinator, Guru Prasad, thanked Sewa's donors and partner organizations for their support on this project, and said volunteers would start working on their next home soon. "It is this kind of work, and this level of dedication that makes me proud of our chapter volunteers, and makes us all happy to perform sewa," he said.



Sewa's Bay Area volunteers who built the "tiny home" in Oroville, CA

## Turning on the Lights for Colombian Tribal Children

The Sewa team, led by Priscilla Alvarado, started on June 13 and reached Florencia, the capital city of southwest Columbia. The next day, with an employee of Corpoamazonia they took a speedboat to the community of Huitorá, where they were welcomed by the governor and community members. Rosa Agreda, Deputy Director of Corpoamazonia, travelled to meet them at the “Maloka”, the spiritual house where the leaders and community gathers. The community members thanked Sewa for this gift of light and communication: 148 LED outdoor waterproof lamps and two solar panel lighting systems with FM radio. Four leaders of Aguas Negras traveled to Huitorá to receive the donation on behalf of their community.



“We were blessed to be able to visit this area of Colombia that not so long ago was considered a ‘Hot Area’ due to the strong presence of guerrillas,” said Priscilla, who along with Adriana stayed the night and spent the next day with the community, where they spoke about their work in Colombia. Community leaders wanted to work together with Sewa on future projects.

On their way back to Bogota, Priscilla and Adriana took the time to go to a women’s indigenous center, “Asomi”. This organization promotes the knowledge and practice of traditional medicine and education by working with children and women. Asomi started off small but has grown to include a large property of 21 hectares, and the community wants to adopt the Sewa Learning Center model with the goal of helping Asomi to spread traditional education.



First Secretary of the Embassy of India in Colombia, Vishnu Kumar Sharma, shared information about a project that the Indian government is planning to provide more than 500 solar kits to distribute to vulnerable communities in Colombia, and he sought Sewa’s aid in implementing the project.



Rashmita Shanbhag is a founding member of the new North Jersey Chapter of Sewa. Having grown up in an environment where her father Ratnakar Kamath was involved in social work and was a community leader, Rashmita has always had an inclination for serving society and her fellow community members, and a deep interest in Indian cultural and social activities. But the involvement with Sewa came through her husband Balkrishna and she being good friends with Prem Pusuloori and his family, and when in the fall of 2015, Prem Pusuloori proposed the launch of a new chapter in North Jersey, Rashmita had her “aha moment”, and she committed wholeheartedly to the idea and to the work of Sewa.

Rashmita has worked in the media team to grow the chapter outreach using marketing campaigns. She also built the chapter webpage and worked to increase the chapter’s social media presence. Working with the keen group of volunteers and chapter leaders, she has also helped several initiatives such as the highway cleanup, mending of facilities at local parks, lending a hand at soup kitchens, kickstarting the LEAD program for youth, and managing a variety of other Sewa chapter events.

Rashmita lives in Tenafly, NJ with husband Balkrishna and their two children -- Rohan and Sanika. She was born and grew up in Mumbai, India and has an undergraduate degree in engineering. She moved to the United States about 19 years ago and works for the Movado Group as Senior Manager, Analytics. In her spare time, Rashmita enjoys hiking and yoga. She also enjoys singing, and has emceed a variety of events.

## Upcoming Events

- Feb **1** to Sep **1**, 2019 : *Lead Program for High Schoolers* | Edison/Monroe/ChesterField Central New Jersey.
- Mar **1** to Sep **8**, 2019 : *Sewa New Jersey | Lead Program for High Schoolers*
- Jul **20** to Aug **31**, 2019 : *Sewa Houston | Serve at Rosharon*
- Aug **17**, 2019 : *Sewa Atlanta | Run for Sewa 2019* | 3150 Old Alabama Rd, Johns Creek, GA 30022
- Aug **24**, 2019 : *Sewa Raleigh | Spike for Sewa 2019* | 1100 Norwell blvd, Cary, NC
- Aug **24**, 2019 : *Sewa San Antonio | Sewa Annual Gala* | Taste of Bharat | Mahalakshmi Hall, Hindu Temple
- Aug **25**, 2019 : *Sewa Bay Area | Bike/Run/Walk 2019* | Alamo Creek Trial Park, Dublin, CA 94568
- Sept **7** to Sept **15**, 2019 : *Sports4SewaCricket 2019 | Lincoln Park Cricket Groun* | Jersey City, New Jersey
- Sept **7** to Sept **29**, 2019 : *Authentic Yoga to Prevent, Control & Manage Diabetes* | Evergreen, San Jose, CA
- Sept **7** to Sept **15**, 2019 : *Authentic Yoga to Prevent, Control & Manage Diabetes* | Newark, CA
- Sept **8**, 2019 : *Sewa Cleveland | Run for Sewa* | Weiss Field 33401 Webber Road Avon Lake, Ohio
- Sept **8**, 2019 : *Sewa Houston | Help 2019* | Stafford Centre | TX 77477

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