

## From Humble Roots to Commanding Heights -- Sewa International's Decade-Long Journey



*Sewa International 13th National Conference delegates assembled at the Thunderbird School venue in Phoenix, AZ.*

**Contd. on Page 3**

### Executive's Corner

*Dear Sewa Family,*

To me, Sewa International is not just a non-profit organization. Instead, it is a path of self-realization. I strongly believe the words of Swami Vivekananda who said, "Look upon every man, woman, and everyone as God. You cannot help anyone, you can only serve. Serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege".

These words always remind me that I have a responsibility of serving the under-served. Sewa International has assigned me the responsibility of coordinating Sewa relief activities during disasters, and whenever there is a disaster in any part of the world it amazes me how our karyakartas (volunteers) around the globe work tirelessly to serve humanity.

I feel proud when I think of our karyakarta rescuing 686 people in Houston during Hurricane Harvey or rescuing around 75,000 people in Kerala when unseasonal and heavy rains flooded and devastated large parts of the state last year. Sewa volunteers helped in removing hundreds of dead bodies from the debris of fallen buildings after the devastating earthquake in Nepal in 2015, and after the heavy flooding in the state of Uttarakhand in 2013. After each disaster strikes, I see hundreds of our volunteers work during all phases of disaster relief and recovery such as in pre-disaster preparation, rescue operations, relief operations, and rehabilitation work. For example, in Houston, our team is still working on rehabilitation work.

Our Houston team has helped in repairing more than 100 homes and have already rebuilt six homes.

I get the opportunity to watch people being served all over the world through Sewa work. Early this year, on a request from the Yezidi community in Iraq, Sewa sponsored a trip of four Yezidi girls to Nagpur (India) for midwifery training. These girls visited many Sewa projects in and around Nagpur. Not only did they share their positive experiences with us but started similar projects in Iraq after their return. Also, last year, we ran a prototype Sewa Learning Center in Tunja, Colombia and after seeing the positive response, early this year, we formally opened the first Sewa Learning Center in South America.

It is in this spirit I write to you this month. We have had the good fortune of being led by men and women of great wisdom, and therefore I shall end this little note to you by quoting Swami Vivekananda again: "Our supreme duty is to advance toward freedom -- physical, mental, and spiritual -- and help others to do so".

Sincerely,

**Swadesh Katoch**  
Vice President, Disaster Recovery



## One Done and 99 More To Go – A Young Man’s Dream to Build 100 Schools and Hostels



*Sewa International President Prof. Sree N Sreenath (far left) facilitating Sachin Kulkarni (2nd from right) at the National Conference In Phoenix, AZ. Community Leader Syam Byra and Sewa Director Sridhar Talanki (far right) were also present.*

He is a 35-year-old software professional working in California. He saw poverty closely as his grandfather had grown up poor. In his home lived a brother of his grandfather who was blind. As success and wealth came calling, he neither lost sleep comparing himself with his richer co-workers nor looked for strategies to grow his wealth.

This is Sachin Kulkarni, a bold, forward-looking young man whose plans to build a hundred schools and hostels in India is not only commendable but sets new ground for those seeking to do good in the world. While people of his age spend all their energy building up their personal net worth, he has donated more than \$1.3 million to Sewa International to build 100 schools and hostels in India’s Northeast region.

Sachin participated in a “Chai Pe Charcha” (discussion over tea) program at the national conference and answered questions about his

childhood, people like his parents and grandmother who inspired him, his supportive wife and why he chose Sewa International to be the conduit for his good work. Kavita Tewary, Sewa volunteer from Houston, moderated the program.

Sachin said he did a lot of research before donating. He started looking for places that needed the most help but were getting the least. After talking to a few friends and people working on the ground, he realized that Sewa International and its partner organizations were executing many great projects in India’s northeast region and needed money. Explaining the reason behind his generous donation, Sachin said, “I was donating \$1000 a month to charity. But that was not satisfying and I thought I was not doing enough. India’s northeast is very underdeveloped and there is a great need to educate kids from all walks of life. So, I decide to serve the underserved by building schools. It’s one done now and 99 to go”.

When asked about his thoughts on giving, Sachin said, “We need to be grateful for what we have and help others. The Indian-American community is the richest ethnic group in the US and we need to give back to the society much more than we do today. It is easy to procrastinate on this and get busy with our lives. Taking the first step is hard but it is important to take that step.

## Perform Sewa with Karuna and Maithri

“When performed selflessly with compassion (karuna) and friendship (maithri), an act of service is lifted up to a higher level”. This age-old wisdom from the Hindu scriptures provided a fresh perspective to volunteering and service at the national conference in Phoenix last month.

Saumitra Gokhale, the international coordinator of Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), provided this interesting dimension to sewa (selfless service).

**Contd. on Page 6**

## From Humble Roots to Commanding Heights -- Sewa International's Decade-Long Journey

"From its humble beginnings as a charity with under a million-dollar annual donations, Sewa International has made a leap, within a decade, to a mid-level charity with a well-diversified portfolio of projects and a dedicated volunteer force," Professor Sree N Sreenath, President of Sewa International, recounted his organization's recent growth in its 13th National Annual Conference. "Success comes with higher responsibility" he reminded the volunteers and leaders who had gathered at the Thunderbird Highschool in Phoenix, AZ, over the May 4-5 weekend.

Sewa International began its American journey in 2004. It was a small group of people, with some prior networking connections, who leveraged the Indian roots of Sewa to begin the American journey of this Hindu faith-based charity organization. In 2009, Prof. Sree N Sreenath took charge as president of the organization.

### **Sterling Reputation**

Releasing Sewa International's 2018 Annual Report at the inaugural event of the conference, Prof. Sreenath retraced the steps of Sewa from its fledgling Hindu-American community roots and small volunteer base to an organization with a sterling reputation for disaster relief and social development projects. Sewa International has a Platinum Seal of Transparency from Guidestar International, a Four-Star ranking from Charity Navigator, and is ranked among the top non-profit organizations by Great Nonprofits.

"Sewa has almost become a five-million-dollar charity in 2018. As custodians of the trust our donors and volunteers have placed in us, it is our responsibility to be transparent and execute programs that align with our values and achieve greater good of the society," Prof. Sreenath observed.

Sewa International's National Conference is an annual event that brings together the organization's board of directors, its executive team, employees and volunteers to review the organization's progress and learn from each other's experiences.

### **108 Participants**

A record 108 participants from 18 chapters and 20 cities across the country attended the conference hosted by Sewa International's Phoenix, AZ chapter. The conference attendees formed a very diverse group. Among the attendees was Prof. Ved Nanda, recipient of one of the highest Indian national awards, the Padma Bhushan. Prof. Nanda has been associated with Sewa International from its inception.

Among the event-packed two-day sessions were the keynote address by Dr. Sailesh Rao, one of the world's foremost experts on sustainable living; inauguration of the event by Saumitra Gokhale; felicitation of and a question and answer session with Sachin Kulkarni, who donated a million dollars to build schools in the remote areas of the Northeast India; an information session on the ASPIRE tutorial program that is a success in Houston, Cleveland, and Atlanta chapters; and a session on crisis management and communication.

There were presentations on family services; building high performance organizations; marketing, social media, and fund-raising opportunities; and youth and volunteering projects. Chapter leaders and functional teams conducted focus sessions and presented posters that included chapter highlights and achievements.

Sewa International's Vice President of Finance, Venkat Santhanaraman presented the 2018 annual report, and said Sewa raised \$4.3 million in 2018 that included a few large grants.

Volunteers from Sewa's Phoenix chapter hosted the conference attendees in their homes and arranged for the pick-up and drop-off of attendees at Phoenix's Sky Harbor Airport. They worked indefatigably over months to make sure everyone felt at home, everyone was well fed, and everyone had a comfortable home accommodation. Community leader and CEO of SQA Labs, Syam Byra, Sewa International's Phoenix Chapter President, and Prasad Koranne, Phoenix Chapter Coordinator, energized and guided chapter volunteers in organizing this successful annual meeting.

## Bay Area Sewa International Family Camp — Together, We Serve Better

Bay Area Sewa International volunteers attended the second annual family camp from May 25 to 27 2019 in the Redwood Forest area of California. The family camp was held at Krishnalaya, an ashram (retreat center) owned and managed by Chinmaya Mission and located about 200 miles away from San Francisco. The family camp was structured to help Sewa International families to bond with each other and 67 people from 21 families participated in it.

The camp started Saturday afternoon with lunch and followed by outdoor games such as cricket and volleyball. In a



networking event conducted in the evening, participants worked in pairs to learn about and introduce each other to the rest. Several indoor games, singing and other fun activities were organized after dinner and they continued until midnight. Sunday morning, after a yoga session, all the men in the camp got together to cook and serve a traditional Indian breakfast to all attendees. Before lunch, all families joined a 2.7 mile long hike in the wilderness and enjoyed the beauty of wild flowers and greenery abound in and around the campsite.

Sunday afternoon, attendees formed four teams to compete in a team building contest. Teams were challenged to think creatively about a community service project, work together on the execution part and prepare and present project details to the audience. Participants of all age groups - children, youth, adults and seniors - took an active part in the contest that lasted for 3 hours. This event was followed by an hour-long presentation in which many Bay area Sewa International team leads shared their specific project details.

Campfire, talent shows, skits and singing that continued until Sunday midnight capped that day. More group activities and games Monday morning wrapped up the camp and helped instill a desire in families to return to the camp next year. About 15 families who attended the camp were relatively new to Sewa International. All attendees showed a lot of interest in Sewa projects and returned home with a renewed belief that “together, we serve better”.

## Support Tribal Children Education In Telangana, India

Vanavasi Kalyan Parishad (VKP), Sewa International’s partner organization working for the welfare of tribal communities in India, is executing multiple projects in various parts of the country. These programs include running tuition classes and informal schools, organizing periodic health camps, offering career training and conducting cultural and sports activities in tribal areas.

To educate tribal children, VKP is running six hostels in the state of Telangana and supporting 190 students. Hostels are located in the following places: Achampet, Bellampally, Tadwai Kothagudem, Cherla and Hyderabad. To support VKP in its initiatives, Sewa International is requesting people to generously contribute.

- \$50 per student per month or \$500 annual donation for one student.
- One-time donation of \$1000 to help build the infrastructure.

To learn more & donate visit <https://sewausea.org/Educating-the-Tribal-Children> (Please choose “Educating The Tribal Children” in the Donate For project dropdown).

## The Wishing Tree And The Secret of Being Happy

Imagine a Wishing Tree that would grant all your wishes. Be it the money, palatial house, luxurious car, latest gadgets whatever you can ask for is yours. But there is a catch. Along with your fulfilled desires comes the misery. You get what you want but you would not be happy. There is only one way to escape this cycle of craving and gloom ...

“Asking the Wishing Tree for the wellbeing and happiness of others is the only way to make sure one’s wishes are fulfilled but not followed by misery,” making this point while delivering his keynote address at the inaugural function of the national conference, Prof. Shailesh Rao said “Sewa is one of the most important things we should be doing today”.

“According to a story from Upanishads, someone tells a group of children about the Wishing Tree and children wish for and get all things that they want. As the tree grants more and more of their wishes, children become greedy and also unhappy. A boy who was watching all this from afar, understands how to achieve happiness. As per the Upanishads, we all have both the wishing child and watching child within us,” Prof. Shailesh Rao said.

Prof. Shailesh Rao also drew attention of the participants to the dangerous levels of carbon monoxide in earth’s atmosphere and increasing temperature all over the world. He said, “by changing our money-driven economy to Sewa driven economy and being nice to animals, trees, forest and indigenous people you can change the earth for better”.

## Sewa International’s Relief Work For Cyclone Fani victims in Odisha, India



Cyclone Fani hit India’s east coast on May 3 2019 and caused extensive damage to about 500,000 houses, uprooted more than one million trees and destroyed electric and telecom infrastructure in the state of Odisha. More than 15 million people were affected by the cyclone and 60 people lost their lives. Torrential rains, ravaging ocean and gusty winds also destroyed livelihood of about three million people and killed an estimated 3.4 million cattle.

Sewa International’s partner on the ground, Utkal Bipanna Sahayata Samithi (UBSS), is operating 15 relief centers in the three worst affected districts — Puri, Khordha & Cuttack — of Odisha

UBSS is operating mobile medical units to conduct health camps in rural areas and so far these vans have travelled to 222 villages and treated 18,500 patients.

Sewa International released \$10,000 for relief work immediately after Cyclone Fani hit Odisha. Almost 2000 UBSS volunteers are working on the ground and have served freshly cooked meals to more than 100,000 cyclone victims in relief centers. Sewa is also helping fishermen who lost their nets and boats by extending INR 100,000 and INR 50,000 financial assistance to buy new boats or repair damaged boats. Sewa is also giving 25 new boats and repairing 100 damaged boats.

UBSS is also distributing cloth kits containing saree, dhoti, towels, bedsheets and mosquito nets to the needy. To help coconut, betel nut and betel leaf farmers affected by the cyclone, UBSS is distributing free saplings and providing monetary help.



“You never know how others’ lives are molded and shaped by your actions. The kindness you show today toward others will have a long-lasting effect on those whose lives you touch.”

These lines provide the motivation to Ritu Daryani who has made volunteering a part of her life’s work and daily focus. Ritu has been an active Sewa International volunteer for the last two years. At present, she serves as the Joint Coordinator for Sewa’s Phoenix chapter. Interestingly enough, Ritu was introduced to Sewa by her teen daughter, Muskaan. Prasad Koranne, Phoenix Sewa International Chapter President, approached Muskaan who was doing fundraising by selling hand-painted cards at an event for SNEHAM, a non-profit organization. Prasad encouraged Muskaan to join Sewa, which she did, becoming the youth coordinator of the Phoenix Chapter.

Ritu loves working on projects with her fellow team members. Though a relatively new chapter, the Phoenix team organized the 13th Annual Sewa Conference which hosted 108 Sewa volunteers and officers from all over the US.

“Every single day, I leave at the end of the Sewa sessions feeling so humbled and blessed that I get to work with such wonderful people. It is truly rewarding and most definitely I would encourage anyone to come join Sewa International. I promise it will enrich your life,” says Ritu. She believes passionately in social justice, social service, and community involvement, and according to her, Sewa has given her a great platform to accomplish her goals.

Ritu lives with her husband Rajesh and their two children – Muskaan and Aval – in Phoenix, AZ. She was born and brought up in Delhi, India and relocated to Phoenix almost 16 years ago. Ritu works as a Project Manager for American Express. Her hobbies include traveling and cooking.

Sewa International is proud to have her as an active and core member on its Phoenix team.

## Perform Sewa with Karuna and Maithri

...Contd from page 2

Speaking at the inaugural event of the conference, Sauimtra Gokhale reminded the audience that “*Karuna* and *maithri* always go hand-in-hand. *Mudita* (appreciation) and *upeksha* (detachment) too go in pairs in our scriptures,” he said. “When someone is suffering it arouses compassion in us and encourages us to act. But if we serve others with friendship and feel that they are our own, the service rendered would be of a different level”.

Summing up, he said, “While providing service, appreciate what others are doing. Appreciate the positives. Do not react to anything negative as reaction increases conflict and distracts us from our goal”.

## Upcoming Events

Feb 1 to Sep 1, 2019 : Sewa North Jersey | *Lead Program for High Schoolers* | Edison/Monroe/ChesterField Central New Jersey, NJ.

Mar 1 to Sep 8, 2019 : Sewa New Jersey | *Lead Program for High Schoolers* | Monroe Central New Jersey.

Jun 3 to Jul 19, 2019 : Sewa Atlanta | *Summer Internship 2019*

Jun 9, 2019 : Sewa San Jose | *Cyclone Fani - Fundraising Talent Show* | Cougar Hall, 3300 Quimby Rd, CA 95148

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