

One Hundred Gather at Sewa's Sixteenth Annual National Conference



Attendees at the Sixteenth Annual Sewa Conference in Washington, DC.

In the backdrop of monumental relief work done during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, and the second wave of the pandemic in India in 2020-2021, Sewa International volunteers gathered for Sewa's 16th Annual National Conference on May 7 and 8 in Washington, DC.

Meeting after two virtual conferences in 2020 and 2021, nearly one hundred Sewa volunteers, including Sewa's board members, advisors, and the executive team met on May 7 and 8 in the nation's capital. Volunteers from Sewa's nineteen chapters participated in the conference.

As the air filled with the excitement of meeting each other after a long gap, Sewa teams discussed and debated strategies to keep the growth and the momentum generated last year by its volunteers' brave and timely work -- when Sewa International raised over \$45 million from various corporations, foundations, and individuals for its pandemic relief efforts in 2021, and catapulted to the tenth place from its 375th spot in 2020 on Benevity's list of "Top Ten Charitable Causes Supported by Companies".

Ramakant Rambhatla, Vice President and Chief Engineer of Invacare Corporation, a US oxygen concentrator manufacturer, was felicitated for helping Sewa procure the much-needed oxygen concentrators to help India deal with the second wave of the pandemic.

Invacare dramatically scaled-up production to help Sewa serve people in need. Speaking at the conference he said he wanted to help when he got a call from Sewa. Invacare's management team organized a conference call on a Saturday morning in which top Invacare officials participated. On Sunday, Invacare's production facilities geared up to meet the demand, Rambhatla told the appreciative Sewa audience.

Sewa International also felicitated Honorary Board Member, Prof. Radheshyam Dwivedi, at the conference. Portraying Prof. Dwivedi's decade's long service to the community and his unwavering commitment to Sewa's vision, mission, and work, Prof. Yashwant Pathak, member, Sewa's Board of Advisors, said Prof. Dwivedi personified an ideal Sewa volunteer. Sewa's President Arun Kankani, former President Prof. Sree Sreenath, and members of the executive team felicitated Prof. Dwivedi.

Integrated Approach

Suresh Jain, Member, Sewa's Board of Directors, delivered the keynote address at the inaugural session. He said human greed and a western belief that humans run everything has caused a grave imbalance in the world causing man-made catastrophes.

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President Arun Kankani and former President Prof. Sree Sreenath, among others, who honored veteran Hindu-American community leader Prof. Radheshyam Dwivedi at the Annual Conference in Washington, DC.

He explained that in 1950 the world population was 2.5 billion, and within 70 years it has exploded to eight billion making it harder to feed all and posing dire threats to the environment. He also emphasized that only an integrated approach to life as espoused by Hindu philosophy would save the world from disaster. He said that the time is now ripe for Sewa to frame a Hindu faith-based service concept that promotes a holistic and symbiotic relationship with mother earth, culture, society, and family. He opined that guided by dharma, this approach to life can create balance and effectively control deforestation, global warming, and other such destructive phenomena.

Taking a closer look at the non-profit world, Suresh Jain said that many of today's service organizations are religious in nature, and they play a critical role in policy making in the West. They raise funds and resources through their congregations but mixing service with congregational goals can be problematic. He called on Sewa to build a global narrative where the happiness of all and considering the whole world as one family are the principles guiding our outreach to communities and to those in need.

Highlighting the extended family-like atmosphere that inspires and binds Sewa volunteers, President Arun Kankani asked Sewa chapters to share their experiences and resources to build sustainable teams. "What got us here may not take us to the next level.

To sustain growth and promote volunteering in the community, we need to organize more events that connect us with each other at a deeper level," he said.

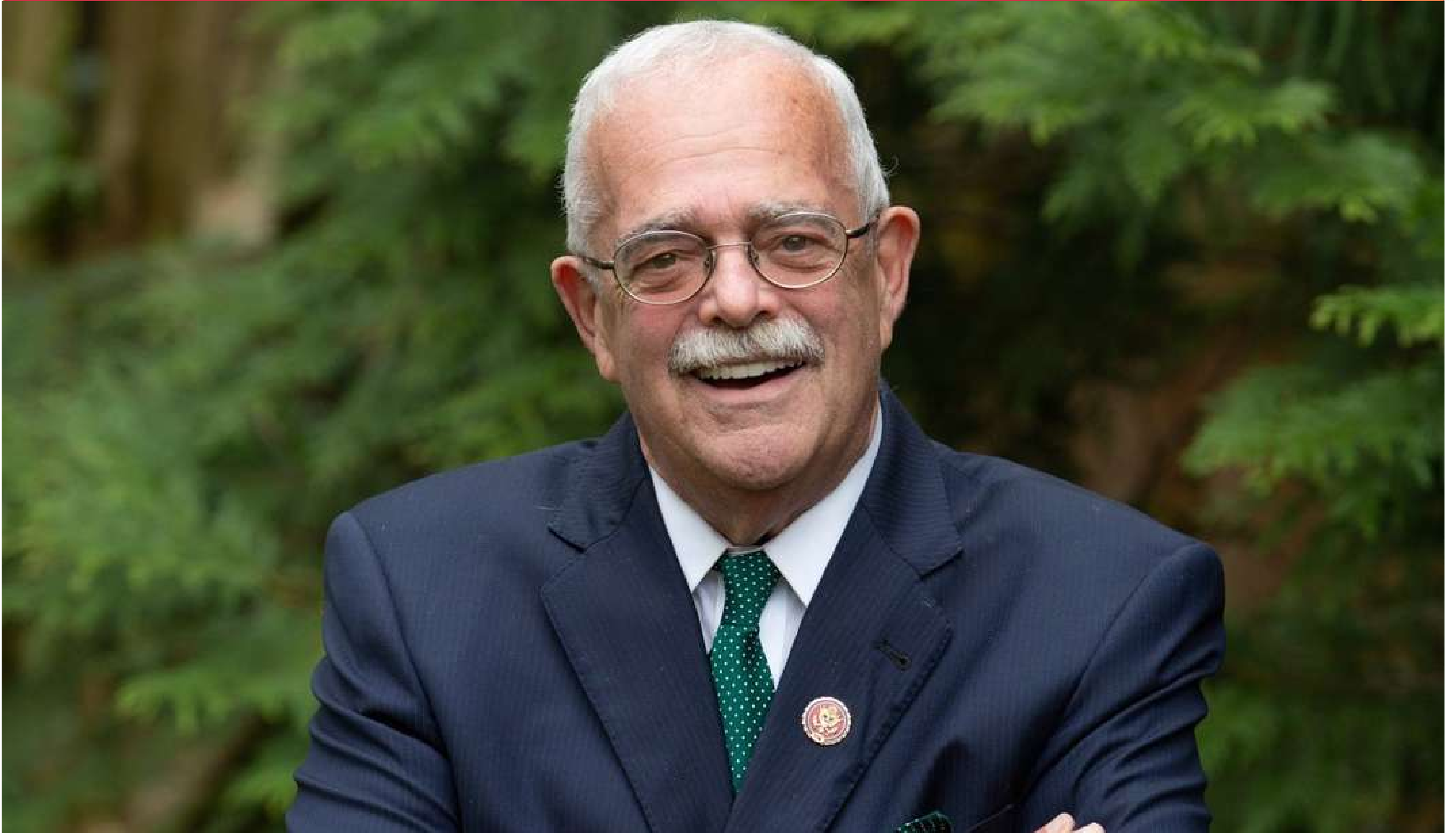
Sewa for Inner Joy

In his concluding remarks, Saumitra Gokhale, Global Coordinator for the Hindu Swayamasevak Sangh, said Sewa is now at an inflection point. Observing that the organization achieved phenomenal growth while serving during the pandemic, he said all Sewa volunteers want to serve as much as they can as it increases their inner joy.

He also said, compartmentalizing life into different activities is an often-recommended western technique but it results in more stress. The Sewa way is to integrate our family, work, and service to live with joy. Highlighting the extended family-like atmosphere that inspires and binds Sewa volunteers, President Arun Kankani asked Sewa chapters to share their experiences and resources to build sustainable teams. "What got us here may not take us to the next level. To sustain growth and promote volunteering in the community, we need to organize more events that connect us with each other at a deeper level," he said.

Concluding his remarks, Gokhale said the great Indian epic Mahabharata clearly says that the divine forces always align with the well-deliberated, thought-through, and boldly implemented good actions. "Volunteers and donors are Sewa's great strength, and caring and appreciating them will help Sewa scale greater heights," he said.

Congressmen Gerry Connolly and Raja Krishnamoorthi Applaud Sewa International's Work



Congressman Gerry Connolly

Congressmen Gerald (Gerry) Connolly of Virginia and Raja Krishnamoorthi of Illinois have recognized, on the floor of the US Congress, Sewa International for its service to underserved communities and for coordinating development projects around the world.

Speaking at the recently concluded session of the 117th Congress, Representative Connolly of Virginia's 11th District said that "Sewa workers take inspiration from the Hindu principles of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam -- meaning 'the whole world is one family' -- and Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah - meaning 'may all be happy'. These complementary outlooks have driven volunteers to serve humanity in times of distress."

Listing many disasters where Sewa volunteers have served in relief and recovery efforts over the last two decades, Congressman Connolly said, "Sewa volunteers have served in the US during the Hurricane Harvey in 2017, California wildfires in 2019 and 2020 and most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Their enormous network has been invaluable in the last few years, providing \$15 million worth of food, personal protection equipment (PPE) and medical supplies to those in need. Hundreds of thousands of people benefit from their work every year."

Referring to Sewa's work during the ongoing war in Ukraine, he said "Sewa volunteers have helped thousands of international students and citizens to evacuate the warzone, irrespective of their race, religion, gender, or nationality. These volunteers work tirelessly to aid those who are vulnerable... and they are one of the seven key trusted partners of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Concluding his remarks, Congressman Connolly asked his colleagues in Congress to join him in commending the extraordinary service of Sewa International and its thousands of volunteers.

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Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi

International Aid

Speaking on the floor of the House, Raja Krishnamoorthi, representative from Illinois' 8th congressional district, which includes Chicago's west and northwest suburbs, recognized Sewa International, eGlobal Doctors, the American Association of Physicians Indian Origin (AAPI), and Doctors Without Borders for providing international aid to fight the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the world. Congressman Krishnamoorthi is a co-founder of the Global Vaccine Caucus and member of the Special Select Committee on the Coronavirus Crisis.

Recognizing the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to curb the spread of deadly variants abroad helped save American lives at home, Congressman Krishnamoorthi said, adding, "Sewa International and other organizations assisted countries like India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Guyana, Iraq, South Africa, Suriname, and Trinidad by sending oxygen concentrators and other necessary COVID supplies.

These much-needed humanitarian efforts served people of all races, colors, religions, genders, sexual orientations, and nationalities."

Elaborating on the work of Sewa and other organizations, Congressman Krishnamoorthi acknowledged that "... such organizations raised millions of dollars for COVID-19 relief efforts, distributed hundreds of thousands of N95 and KN95 surgical masks, delivered millions of hot meals and food kits, established numerous non-medical helpline centers across the United States, and conducted hundreds of webinars on health and visa issues to help people in dire need."

Concluding his remarks, the Congressman said, "While our battle with this virus is not yet finished, I want to recognize the exemplary efforts of these organizations for their heroic efforts. Their work to provide international aid to fight COVID-19 has demonstrated an unrivaled level of compassion and commitment to humanity that is saving lives, preserving economies, and strengthening public health and safety across the world."

OneStar Foundation Brings Sewa's AmeriCorps Program to Spotlight



Sewa AmeriCorps Volunteers at work in Rosharon, TX. Sewa helped rebuild the Rosharon community after Hurricane Harvey hit Houston in 2017.

In its Partner Spotlight section of their 2021 annual report, OneStar Foundation has featured our Houston Chapter's AmeriCorps program. The report celebrates the resilience of Texas communities addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and winter storm Uri. The OneStar Foundation administers the AmeriCorps program in Texas.

The President & CEO of OneStar Foundation, Chris Bugbee, in his special note of appreciation sent to Sewa, mentions that the city of Houston, as a haven for immigrants and refugees from around the globe, has experienced tremendous growth. It has steadily boosted the demand for Sewa services, especially in disaster relief and education. As you are aware, many families served by Sewa live at or below the poverty line and lack the resources and English language proficiency to flourish.

The report quotes Carole Juárez, Sewa's AmeriCorps Program Manager, on how Sewa and OneStar work in tandem to serve people. She said that leveraging volunteer service showed them what they could do as an organization. Carole said she saw a synergy between AmeriCorps culture of "getting things done" and Sewa's core belief that "together we serve better". Thus, partnering with OneStar offered the key to Sewa's growth in Texas.

Referring to Sewa AmeriCorps' work during the COVID-19 pandemic, the report states that by tapping into the broad reach and local expertise of its new AmeriCorps members, Sewa could promote readiness more effectively with messaging targeted to the most vulnerable populations. Sewa AmeriCorps members organized workshops and health fairs to address vaccine hesitancy and promoted mobile vaccination clinics. In the other instance, ahead of the record-breaking freeze in February 2021, Sewa provided Spanish-language information sessions to people who had never dealt with extreme cold. The report specified that by the end of their first year, Sewa AmeriCorps members had assisted nearly 700 individuals in increasing their disaster readiness. They were also instrumental in recruiting and managing volunteers for Sewa's food drives for more than a thousand families.

The report praises the impact of Sewa's work on education through the Alief Independent School District and the organization's after-school academies. Sewa engaged twelve AmeriCorps members to provide individualized support to many new immigrant students facing language and cultural barriers.

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and local expertise of its new AmeriCorps members, Sewa was able to promote readiness more effectively with messaging targeted to the most vulnerable populations.

Throughout the year, Sewa AmeriCorps members organized workshops and health fairs to address vaccine hesitancy and promoted mobile vaccination clinics across southwest Houston. Ahead of the record-breaking freeze in February 2021, the cohort provided Spanish-language information sessions to people who had never dealt with extreme cold, and in the winter storm's aftermath, they helped neighbors complete needs assessments and partnered with schools to provide resources

"We saw a synergy between AmeriCorps' culture of 'getting things done' and Sewa's core belief that 'together we serve better.'"

—Carole Juárez,
AmeriCorps Program Coordinator, Sewa Houston

of Sewa AmeriCorps members has had a decided impact in the classroom, with 90 percent of students served showing academic improvement and 81 percent demonstrating increased attendance and class engagement. In addition to working with youth, AmeriCorps members also work with the families of students to provide a more stable home environment.

"It has been such a blessing to support students and administrators and teachers right now as we're all trying to figure out what education looks like," said Nathan Murphy, an AmeriCorps member serving at O'Donnell Middle School. "I get to be someone that they can look to for help, not only as they try to

Sewa AmeriCorps Volunteers at work after Hurricane Harvey hit Houston in 2017.

The report specifies that the focused attention of Sewa AmeriCorps members has had a decided impact in the classroom. Above 90 percent of students showed academic improvement, and 81 percent increased their attendance and classroom engagement. In addition to working with the youth, AmeriCorps members also worked with their families to provide a more stable home environment.

Tracing how Sewa AmeriCorps program started in Houston, Arun Kankani, President of Sewa International, said, the program started in the fall of 2020 with funding from OneStar Foundation and employed 18 members. He said the program has been a phenomenal success and that Sewa is now expanding the program by adding another 42 more members to the team.

Nathan Murphy, a volunteer at the O'Donnell Middle School, and Samiksha Deme, a disaster preparedness outreach specialist, expressed their happiness about being part of the Sewa AmeriCorps team and what they have been able to accomplish. Nathan said that it has been a blessing to support students, administrators, and teachers as they were all trying to figure out what education is. Samiksha said they had had an excellent opportunity to meet different communities of Houston and that being a team member she has not only developed her career interests, learned about the meaning of service, but has prepared herself for the next stage of her education and for how to make an impact in both small and big communities.

My Sewa Yatra

Founder of the Global Pragathi Foundation, Dr. Alok Agarwal recently visited the Dr. Hedgewar Multispecialty Charity Hospital in Aurangabad in the Indian state of Maharashtra in March 2022. Dr. Agarwal is a Nephrologist from Dayton, OH and a part of the "Doctors for Sewa" group. Below is his account of the visit he undertook in India:

"Ever since I decided to visit the hospital, I was struck by the enthusiasm of the physicians and the staff. Dr Suresh Jain from Boston accompanied me on this visit. We were received at the airport by two young enthusiastic Sevankur physician coordinators. Enroute to the hospital, we were apprised of the Sevankur Bharat program, the hospital activities, and the social outreach programs, unrelated to healthcare.

My Sewa Yatra

Amid about 100 physicians and staff members, we had the privilege of inaugurating the mobile medical van to transport staff, donated by Sewa International. In a subsequent meeting, over tea, I was awe struck by the humility and camaraderie exhibited by the several founding members and other leaders that I met. Sticking to fundamental values and mission, overcoming obstacles and challenges since inception in 1989 has resulted in tremendous growth and a 300 bedded multispecialty charitable hospital serving the underprivileged.

The Sevankur team is planning to start a new campus about five kilometers (about 3 miles) from the location of the current hospital, increasing the total strength to 900 beds & 250 students. Having established the good will by serving the community, a social services wing under the name of Savitribai Phule Mahila Ekatma Samaj Mandal working in the areas of education, agriculture, natural resources, women empowerment, health care etc., was started a few decades ago. The wide range of programs resonated well with me, having worked in few of these areas myself.



Dr. Alok Agarwal



Dr. Alok Agarwal inaugurated the mobile medical van at Dr. Hedgewar Hospital



One of the highlights of the visit was a three hour long meeting with about 75 medical students. We heard inspiring stories and experiences from these humanitarians. These exemplary youth exhibited energy; enthusiasm & ethics needed to make a difference in the society. The Sevankur project has grown over years and has about 5000 young medical professionals registered from the state of Maharashtra. I am sure that the group will expand to other parts of the country.

Learning from these Sevankurites, as they call themselves, I had the opportunity to address them and answer some of their questions.

In a tour of this beautiful, well kept, neat and clean charitable institution, we visited different departments of this hospital. We saw the state-of-the-art equipment and met with compassionate physicians, some trained in AIIMS, PGI and UK. Indigent patients were being treated with dignity.

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My Sewa Yatra



Dr. Hedgewar Multispecialty Charity Hospital in Sambhaji Nagar (Aurangabad)

Savitri Phule Mahila Ekatma Samaj Mandal

In the short amount of time we had, we visited the beautiful Vihang Center for about 300 kids with special needs. We visited the skill training center located in a slum. Several thousands have been trained in digital literacy, tailoring, beautician, fashion designing, electrician, and several other courses. The facility has a mass communication center and a health clinic. A few more days to visit the neighboring villages would have been worth the investment.

Our memorable visit ended with a meeting with the trustees of the hospital which lasted for 2 hours post a delicious Maharashtrian lunch. The pride in this group was evident as we shared different ideas. The hospital now serves about 400,000 patients every year. The other social programs have spread to neighboring 269 villages, impacting the lives of a few millions.

We thanked the group profusely for their hospitality, wished them the best, and left with the knowledge that Dr. Hedgewar hospital is not just a hospital; it is much more than that."

Thus spake Swami Vivekananda

"Have faith as Nachiketa...ay, I wish that faith would come to each of you; and every one of you would stand up a giant, a world-mover with a gigantic intellect - an infinite god in every respect. That is what I want you to become.

This life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others the rest are more dead than alive."

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