

<https://www.sirfnews.com/sewa-in-covid-times-living-the-service-before-self-credo/>

Sewa In COVID Times: Living ‘Service Before Self’ Credo

Sewa International volunteers were first off the starting block, setting up non-medical helplines for the four regional areas — West Coast, East Coast, Midwest, and Southwest — for a coordinated national response, where people can call in for assistance

By Ramesh Rao

29 March 2020

The infographic is titled "CORONAVIRUS COVID-19" and features a red background. On the left, there is a 3D model of the virus. In the center, a world map shows the virus's spread. To the right, under "SYMPTOMS OF CORONAVIRUS", are three icons: a person with a fever, a person coughing, and a person with a respiratory problem. Below this, a banner reads "BE A SAVIOUR - STAY AT HOME AND SAVE OTHERS FROM CORONAVIRUS". At the bottom, six prevention tips are listed with icons: 1. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or an alcohol-based rub. 2. Maintain social distancing (minimum 1 meter). 3. Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth. 4. Practice respiratory hygiene. 5. If you have fever, cough and difficulty, seek medical care early. 6. Stay informed, follow advice from your healthcare provider. The Sewa International logo is on the left, and a "Follow" button is on the right.

Unlike the dastardly ‘South Asianists’ who spend most of their time plotting to destroy others’ reputations or good work, the targets of their ire, the good Hindus, were busy at work helping find solutions, contributing their squirrels’ mite, and coming to the aid of those who were stranded, left alone, or who were desperate for answers and help. Instead of handwringing or indulging in blame games, the 43 chapters of Sewa International (for whom I do a little bit of PR work) began setting up helplines and got some 500 volunteers to respond to calls from the desperate and the despairing. In the midst of this rare, strange, and unprecedented lockdowns

and shutdowns, when even hospitals, the police and emergency service personnel are running out of face-masks and of other personnel protective equipment (PPE), and stranded Indian students are desperately looking to get their visas cleared so that they can catch a possible flight back home, Sewa volunteers set up WhatsApp groups and began exchanging messages: who needs what, where, when, how much, and who can pick up what, deliver where, etc. They exchanged other notes: how much is the cost per face mask? For a KN95 face mask? For a 12 pack of toilet tissues? Is there an Indian store nearby which is open, and do they have pickles and rice in stock?

“How is the apocalypse panning out over there?” my nephew from Mumbai WhatsApp-ed me yesterday as I was busy planning what to cook for Ugadi — New Year for us Kannadigas and Telugus — and worrying about quizzes to grade and midterm grades to submit (all online) in these strange times of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID).

Gun sales are through the roof, and Sam’s Club and Costco warehouses were raided the first two weeks of March so that there was literally a countrywide shortage of hand sanitizers, toilet tissues, rice, and other essentials. It was as if Grandpa and Grandma, who had just loaded the big trunk of their 1990 Cadillac with six megapacks of toilet tissue rolls and a crate of hand sanitizers, were planning to leave in their will the unused toilet paper and hand sanitizers, stored in their basement, to their grandchildren: “To Johnny, two megapacks of ultra-plush toilet tissue. Use wisely, sparingly.” “To Emma, twenty bottles of hand sanitizers. Keep two in each of the rooms and toilets in your house, one in each of your cars, and of course a couple in your office.”

Sam’s, I found out after about half a dozen futile visits, did get enough of those toilet tissues that a person like me, who usually mocks the American habit of cleaning out store shelves as soon as a hurricane or a snowstorm is announced on the Weather Channel, finally was able to get his hands around one mega pack. We should have clean bottoms for a few months, thanks to the toilet paper industry in the US! “Install a bidet,” a friend advised, and many Facebook messages were all about how Indians keep their bottoms cleaner than us American toilet-paper fetishists.

Even as the weird and some rich folks stocked their bunkers in North Dakota and Wyoming with more ‘non-perishable’ items, and as more pastors warned that unless we accepted Jesus as saviour and lord, we would be left behind, and some of them, reading their Bibles closely determined that it was not really the end times, there were others, including some good friends of mine, who were spending all of their waking hours finding out how they could help people who needed help in these difficult times.

Sewa International [volunteers](#) were first off the starting block, setting up non-medical helplines for the four regional areas — West Coast, East Coast, Midwest, and Southwest — for a

coordinated national response, where people can call in for assistance. The volunteers began distributing about 20,000 masks that they had stored as part of their disaster preparedness plan – especially after Hurricane Harvey struck Houston in 2017. They began sending the masks out to medical facilities all over the country including Houston, Phoenix, Atlanta, the Bay Area, and New Jersey-based on the kinds of messages they were getting on their Facebook page and on their helplines. And they began scouring the market for these PPE and exchanging information on WhatsApp about the lay of the market in these difficult times.

The constant buzz and hum on the group chat is both dazzling and dizzying. Just watching the messages pop up, including some really fascinating details of the kinds of people who needed help is both humbling and satisfying. For instance, there was a message about four Indian “students” who were interning at a hotel and now were stranded without money and a place to stay because the hotel had closed, and the owner had left them emptyhanded. This was not a time to look closely at the antecedents of these stranded students. The questions were all about — where are they, who is the nearest Sewa volunteer there, what do they need, and who can help? There was another about a research scholar who had contracted the virus, his wife had too, and the father of the researcher, a diabetic, who was visiting them, had it too, and they were all worried about their eight-month-old baby. What could Sewa do?

In this context, in this fast-moving situation where the headlines keep screaming about numbers of those who have contracted the virus to those who have died because of it, and the daily dose of two hours of blather by a president on some kind of mind-warp, and 22 hours of commentary on and criticism of the Trumpeter, good Hindu Americans are now in the process of procuring three million additional masks and they are actively seeking funds to support their efforts in mitigating the harm and the distress caused by this pandemic. They have been responding 24x7 on helplines — aiding individuals reporting COVID-19 symptoms, checking in on family members, purchasing food and groceries, and assisting students living in university dorms or who have had to leave the dorms for financial and other reasons. The helplines have been fielding calls not just from within the US but also from India, Canada, and Australia, from those who have family connections here and want to know how Sewa can be of help for their loved ones. Volunteers have been checking on the elderly and working with doctors and medical professionals conveying up-to-date information about COVID-19, addressing how to combat and manage the disease, as well as providing advice on supporting mental health during this time of crisis. They are organising webinars hosted by professionals and experts from the community including doctors, lawyers, chartered public accountants, family therapists, and yoga/meditation experts.

Interestingly, and not so surprisingly, when the Hindu American Foundation hosted a webinar with doctors, including Dr Vivek Murthy, the former Surgeon General of the United States, a “progressive” South Asianist troll began posting the most provocative and demeaning questions targeting Dr Murthy and the other doctors who were offering their expertise. These South Asian “progressives” are nowhere to be seen delivering essentials, helping the stranded and the

elderly, or staying up late receiving and making phone calls to raise money to buy more masks and gloves and sanitising wipes. But they sure know how to destroy. In this hour of need, however, there are those who get up in the morning, bathe, chant their daily prayers, and seek the courage and the energy to be of help to humanity. Service before self is not a bumper sticker that they display to gain attention. Sewa International serves — quietly, and with conviction. For it is the way they live.