

Flood of Support for Houston's Indian-Americans

By Suman Guha Mozumder



Humanitarian groups mobilize in aftermath of Harvey

Gitesh Desai was overseeing the Hurricane Harvey relief and rescue operations as president of the Houston chapter of Sewa International when he found himself forced to vacate his home in the storm's aftermath after it too was hit by rain and flooding. Desai moved to a hotel on Aug. 29 to continue coordinating the relief efforts.

“Strange, I too am a victim of the calamity,” he said.

When the rain started pounding the city and waters started flooding the streets of Houston, Desai watched through the second-floor windows of his home near the Barker Reservoir at around 2 a.m. on Aug. 26.

The next day, most neighborhoods in this city of some 6 million people were under siege. Clogging and flooding was believed to be partially caused by release of water from the city's two reservoirs.

Desai, one of the estimated 100,000 Indian-Americans living in the Greater Houston area, watched that night as water rose on the street in front of his home. Within a few hours, Houston's streets had waist-deep water — in some areas, it was almost neck-deep.

Desai, who has been directing the humanitarian group's relief efforts despite displacement from his flooded home, had to wade through 5 feet of water to move into a hotel. Other Sewa volunteers went through their own hardships. “But we were not deterred from doing our service,” Desai said.

Around the same time in another quarter of the city, Vivek Sharda, a Houston University graduate, tried to return home. “I was planning to move from an apartment where I had stayed overnight. But once I came out of the apartment, I realized there was no way I could go back to my home. There was waist-deep water on the road and dozens of cars were stranded on the road,” said Sharda, who joined efforts to help stranded Indian students at the Stafford House Apartment, in Harris County.

At the Stratford and Felix apartments near Brays Bayou, where a number of graduate students from India live off campus, 160 Indian students were stranded. "For almost 24 hours there was no electricity, hardly any food and no means of getting out, and so all of us, whose phones still had battery, got on to make calls and use our Whatsapp group chat to see how best we can cope with the situation," Sharda said.

But hardly anybody, including Sewa volunteers or the Indian consulate officials, could reach them before the end of Aug. 27.

Vijay Pallod, a longtime Houston resident and a community elder, said members of the Graduates of Indian Students Organization (GISO) joined forces to move them to the second floor but were unable to deliver food due to the heavy flooding. Its president, Ravi Shankar, got in touch with Houston's Consul General of India, Anupam Ray, who reached out to various agencies for help.

Besides the 160 Indian students, almost all of whom are on international student visas according to Sharda, some more students from other off-campus neighborhoods were also affected. "Overall, I think over 250 Indians were affected, including about 200 students, but none of them suffered any serious injury," Sharda said. Out of 200, only 60 students living in places close to the university, had to be evacuated because of flood waters, Sharda said.

"We have relocated 60 students to places like Holly Hall and other apartments mostly inhabited by students and with local Indian families," he said.

At the University of Houston, classes began Aug. 21, and the school had closed just after noon Aug. 25 because of the impending storm and rain. Some of the graduate-level students from India had been to Houston only very recently, and inside the apartment housing they were a little scared as the calamity struck.

University president Renu Khator said she also visited students at the off-campus apartment housing to reassure the stranded students who were later evacuated by Sewa volunteers.

Ray personally came to find out about the stranded students and met the Indian students affected by floods at Stratford House Apartments.

Desai said that major Indian organizations including India House and Cultural Center, Indo-American Charity Foundation, and Indo-American Political Action Committee decided to coordinate all the relief efforts of the Indian community through Sewa International.

Joining the efforts were the Telugu Association of North America, which called upon the community to help Telugu people of the Houston area. "There is a huge need for assistance. We are requesting all Telugu people to step up and donate generously to help the fellow Telugus," the organization said.

Ray noted that the Indian community rallied to help the University of Houston by organizing food deliveries and evacuation.

The Hare Krishna Temple and Govinda's Restaurant reached out to area residents to offer anyone who needs food to come to their restaurant for take-out lunches. Govinda's manager and ISKCON Temple president Shyamasundara Das said ISKCON has a long history of service in disaster relief efforts globally.

"Even though we are not fully prepared, still we feel urgently compelled to start now, even though the temple lost electricity this afternoon. We have gas stoves and we requested people to bring their own containers for a fresh hot meal. We will expand our services as the need arises," Das said.

Volunteers of BAPS Charities have also been busy preparing warm meals and working with local state officials in Houston, Sugar Land, Missouri City and League City for any essential needs.

People from the community said it will take weeks or may be months before the city limps back to normalcy. Achalesh Amar, an active member of the community, described Houston as a “ghost town.” Others like Desai and Pallod said Sewa International has already issued appeal for help from the community and would begin major rehabilitation efforts within a few weeks