

How Indian-Americans Shouldered Hurricane Harvey Relief Efforts

by *Ramesh N Rao*

- Sep 22, 2017, 5:55 pm



A boat passes through a flooded street during the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Texas. (BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/GettyImages)

Snapshot

- ***When nature strikes, the best and most equipped can still be left floundering.***
- ***Hurricane Harvey, the costliest natural disaster in US history left 200,000 homes destroyed, but the silver lining, however, was the initiative of Indian-American volunteers in one of the most amazing relief operations.***

Hurricane Harvey, the costliest natural disaster in US history, slammed the Greater Houston area on 25 August 2017 inundating homes, roads, and buildings, and affected one in four Houstonians, as rain poured in a deluge for almost a week. Thirty-three trillion gallons of water got dumped on the region! The damage was so severe that more than 200,000 homes were destroyed (50,000 in Houston alone), a million cars wrecked, and metro stations, schools, highways and other public facilities flooded. Hurricane Harvey is being considered the largest calamity in the United States in recent memory. The economic devastation is estimated by the Texas Governor's office at more than \$180 billion, and that it may take five years to rebuild.

Caught in the hurricane were 150,000 people of Indian origin, with one in six marooned, evacuated or needing rescue. Among them were 247 students from India studying at the University of Houston. Many of these students, motivated by the rescue efforts by Indian-American teams, joined as volunteers, making their first American experience a truly life-affirming experience.

Sewa International coordinated efforts to bring together over 800 volunteers for the critical rescue effort, which has now transitioned into a relief effort. The organisation, headquartered in Houston, incidentally, was founded in 2003. It is part of a larger movement in India that started in 1989. Sewa is active in 20 countries, and has been involved in disaster relief and development work in countries around the world including Colombia, Guyana, Sri Lanka, India, Kenya, and Pakistan. Twenty-five national and local Indian-American organisations have partnered with Sewa as it was the only Indian-American organisation first off the starting block and working on the ground at this scale.

Given the volunteering and the “can do” spirit in the United States, and inspired by the noble ideas of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and Swami Vivekananda’s message that “Service to humanity is service to divinity”, Sewa volunteers sprung into action even though some of their own homes had been flooded and they and their families had to move into friends’ homes and hotels. Gitesh Desai, president of the Houston Chapter of Sewa International, found his home flooded in five feet of water, and had to move into a hotel. Evacuated on the very first day of the hurricane he continued to direct volunteer efforts from his hotel room. A hundred Sewa volunteers from its 41 chapters across the United States joined hands working remotely on the rescue and relief coordinating fund-raising, communication, social media updates, etc.

As the rain and wind abated, volunteers have switched to providing relief to the hurricane’s victims by organising health clinics, cleaning the flooded homes, and providing hot meals by coordinating work with a network of partner organisations.

Sewa International raised \$250,000 in the first 10 days. In many areas of the city, volunteers reached distressed people much earlier than a big organisation like the Red Cross did. In fact, Sewa International has been at the forefront of rescue and relief from the day the hurricane hit. Volunteers worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the US Coast Guard and other agencies in rescue and relief. With a 24/7 telephone hotline, and a band of dedicated volunteers monitoring social media, Sewa International pitched in with more than its expected weight.

Volunteers served hot meals; provided food, water, supplies and medical support; arranged temporary housing; and began helping in cleaning up homes of the underserved and economically-challenged minorities – Hispanics, African Americans, Cambodian Americans, senior citizens, and single mothers. Its volunteers actively worked in five different suburbs around the Houston metro area. They delivered 1,000 hot meals a day to various shelters in the first 10 days. With the help of the various local organisations, they provided food and supplies for 5,000 hurricane victims. Ten trucks of water and food supplies were sent to various shelters in Houston and nearby small towns, thanks to the generous community of Indian business owners.

While people are willing to help there is also a need for training them and providing them guidelines because the conditions on the ground are dangerous. Therefore, along with providing food and shelter the experienced volunteers conducted orientation sessions for new volunteers every two days. They developed five satellite Sewa groups for the purpose of reaching out to the community more effectively by using services like WhatsApp on their phones. The current total of volunteers in these groups has reached 1,000 going to show that with the right leadership, dedicated and experienced volunteers, inspiring new people is possible. Prof Sree Sreenath, president, Sewa International, said, "We estimate that the Harvey devastation will stretch the relief from a traditional three months to up to five months. We are sending a call for more volunteer involvement and additional funds to help the underprivileged."



snapshot of the work till the previous week

Sewa International received support from 17 local Indian organisations which collaborated with, supported and guided the important work of rescue and relief. With their added support, Sewa International was able to step in to help the community in large numbers and also avoid volunteer burnout. The volunteers, along with Sewa administrators and staff, worked round the clock to provide over 1,000 meals a day and targeted to clean 1,000 flooded homes in the five suburbs of Houston – Cypress, Downtown, Katy, Pearland and Sugar Land. This clean-up effort is on-going. The volunteers were present at many of the big shelters like the George R Brown Convention Center, churches, Red Cross shelters, etc, to help them receive and sort donations. Over 100 Sewa volunteers have committed to helping the Houston Food bank for seven days.



Volunteers sorting relief material

Speaking to Kavita Tewary, project coordinator, Houston Chapter, who herself had to be evacuated with her family, and who spent a week in a friend's home, it became clear about how much emotional and physical energy have gone into these rescue and relief efforts. "Our volunteers will need to go through therapy sessions as they have seen so much trauma, and looked into the faces of people who are desperate, tired, afraid, and bereft, and who need help immediately," she said. Even though her own home was not inundated, the area she lives in suffered much water damage, and returning home she found out that she could not turn the water on for long, or do laundry, etc, because the pumping stations and other public facilities were still flooded.

"There is debris piled high on both sides of the road, all over, traffic is snarled, and families are crowded in apartments, and many are desperately looking for alternate living accommodation," she said. Schools have reopened, but not all children are in the "same boat" as children, whose homes are destroyed, find themselves under tremendous pressure to keep up with lessons, tests, and the ordinary demands of school life. Tewary gave an example of a friend's child who leaves for school at 7.30 am and cannot get home before 8.30 at night because the parents have had to move out of their residential locality and live with friends far away, and are struggling to meet the demands of work, minding children, and rebuilding their homes.

Many of Sewa Houston's volunteers were evacuated from their own homes but continued to work even though their families were in hotels, or staying with relatives or friends. Motivated by the work of Sewa, *garba* events in this season of Navratri around the US have turned into self-inspired fundraisers. As Houstonians enter the relief phase, nominally a three-month period but now expected to extend to five months due to the utter and widespread devastation, thousands of flooded homes will continue to need cleanup efforts for many days and weeks to come. The Sewa International team has organised cleaning crew teams, each with a minimum of six volunteers.

Each of these teams is going around Houston to help homeowners clean up. With the massive cleanup going on in the city, big stores like Home Depot and Lowe's were running out of house-cleaning and rebuilding supplies. Sewa stepped in and helped bring in supplies from neighbouring cities. Sewa International's San Antonio (Texas) chapter loaded two big vans with safety gear and building supplies and drove it down to Houston. They went to storage locations in Sugar Land, Pearland, Katy, Cypress, Humble and Clear Lake to deliver these supplies. Another 200 volunteers joined the clean-up crews to work on flooded homes in all the neighbourhoods.

Sewa International has started counselling services and opened medical clinics to help families cope with the disaster. To ensure that the families are not forgotten in this time of stress and worry, the volunteers organised activities to keep children engaged as the parents struggled to put their homes and lives back in order. Families have to deal with flood insurance and building contractors to help them, and experienced volunteers are providing help to these stricken families in applying for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) aid that the US Congress approved recently. FEMA requires homeowners to file the form for aid consideration within 60 days of the disaster. Some attorneys have also volunteered to offer free consultation to anyone affected by the floods. These attorneys answer questions on insurance contracts, leasing contracts, as well as contracts with construction and clean up companies.



Volunteers clean up debris at homes.



Sorting material at homes

Sewa has been getting requests every five minutes via its hotline and social media sites. Each request is unique, urgent and requires immediate action. One afternoon, volunteers got a call from a mother who came back to a disaster-stricken home after living with a friend for two weeks. She was overwhelmed and did not know what to do and where to begin. She reached out to Sewa, frantically seeking help. She had a young child, sitting with her in her car as the streets and their home were covered with debris. The Sewa crew mobilised a clean-up team within the hour and got her the help she needed.

A young engineer from Canada, Leighton Anderson, on the way back from his vacation took a flight going via Houston to help Houstonians. Having connected with Sewa via Facebook, Leighton became a part of one of Sewa's WhatsApp groups. He spent his two days until his next flight volunteering with Sewa, cleaning up debris in homes in downtown Houston and the neighbourhood of Katy. He said, "I love volunteering and I appreciate the work Sewa is doing. I

would like to thank Sewa for giving me this opportunity to help the Houston community. It is something I am going to carry with me for the rest of my life. I plan to come back to Houston and be a part of the Sewa Gala and put faces to names I have been talking”.

In times of crises, people can do amazing work. Shailaja Dixit, living in California, shared her experience on Facebook: “I am sharing this because I am grateful this happened. And I am grateful to the people who made this happen. Earlier today I saw a post by someone in Texas who was stranded with several other dependents and making urgent calls to be rescued. No help seemed to be coming. I happened to see their post, by chance, on a public forum I was just passing by.

Just this morning, I had also, by chance saw a public posting talking about Sewa International volunteers on the ground trying to bring relief efforts. On a wild hunch, I texted my contact in Sewa – Jyothsna – Sewa volunteer, East Bay, San Francisco – and asked if anything could be done. There was silence for a few minutes then back came a text that she was talking to volunteers, real time as she was reading my text. I was informed the person was on their radar and that relief efforts were going on. Jyothsna was on the phone talking to the person, and the organisation for several hours. Coordinators working with authorities urged them to dispatch a boat. I only know bits and pieces of what transpired through texts and updates – but I was told finally a boat reached the stranded people late in the afternoon. And finally, my friend here in California, stepped away from the phone to get something to eat. And breathe. I don't make this post for any other reason but to thank the human chain that came alive today – a small flicker of hope that I hold onto tightly tonite. And especially my friend, who always cares enough to act.”

Working with the Sewa media team, I get constant updates, and pictures of volunteers toiling away at their very demanding and difficult tasks. I worry about my friends and colleagues in Houston whose lives have been upended, and who are working very, very long hours to bring help to others. When nature strikes, the best and most equipped can still be left floundering, and their lives, following the immediate disaster, are rarely described and followed. Recovery in Houston will take some time, and we will need to keep tabs on the lives of people who have been deeply affected.

Ramesh Rao, professor, Department of Communication, Columbus State University, is a member of the Sewa media team.

Ramesh N Rao is Professor, Department of Communication, Columbus State University