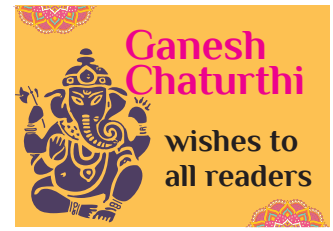




# Sewa News

www.sewausea.org

August 2020



## National Conference Goes Virtual; Leadership Change at the Top

Sewa International raised a record 8.3 million in 2019 as per the initial estimates and saw its revenues increase more than twenty-five fold from \$325,000 in 2009 to the current level, said departing President, Prof. Sree Sreenath, as he bid farewell to the Sewa family after eleven years at the helm. In the same period, the number of Sewa chapters increased from five to 43; the number of volunteers from less than a hundred to 3,000; the number of national executive team members from two to 62; and the number of volunteer hours recorded per year rose from the low 100s to more than 180,000, he said recapping his tenure and the successes that Sewa International notched during that tenure.

Tracing Sewa’s progress from being a fledgling upstart to a mid-sized charity recognized by FEMA as a partner in disaster relief and giving a ‘report card’ of the eleven years he was at the helm as Sewa’s national president, Prof. Sreenath took the attendees of the 2020 Sewa National Conference through a journey that was at once reassuring and forward-looking. Prof. Sreenath addressed over 300 participants in the conference held virtually on July 18 in the context of COVID-19.

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### Executive’s Corner

Dear Sewa Families & Friends,

Tough times never last...but tough people do!

It has been perhaps a few decades since I read a story with this title in Readers Digest. It has manifested vividly in the last few months as Sewa volunteers worked through the COVID-19 challenges in uncharted territory. We have been taking initiatives, experimenting, and multiplying the success of our service to the community. As I sat down to count the initiatives started by Sewa volunteers in the last few months to serve the community during the COVID pandemic, the number came to a whopping 28! Sewa volunteers partnered with over 400 local community and service organizations across the country and served in nearly 200 cities across 28 states. A number of ‘COVID warriors’ have emerged in these tough times and simply did what needed to be done. We are now compiling their ‘war stories’ and hope to share it with everyone in the coming days.

Finally, we had our annual national meeting, virtually, in July. The DC team was preparing to host the meeting, originally scheduled for May, since the beginning of the year. Due to the meeting being held virtually, nearly 300 volunteers from 31 chapters were able to participate. This was our largest turn out ever, and it was executed flawlessly. This truly was a befitting tribute to

Sree Sreenath ji, who pass on the responsibility of President after 11 years of tireless efforts, taking Sewa from a nascent stage to a major player in the non-profit sector in the US. It was a bittersweet moment as Sreenath ji presented his glowing recap of Sewa’s journey from 2009 to 2020. He has accepted a new role as President of the first yoga university, VAYU, in the USA. He will continue to help us as an advisor and a friend. We all wish him the best in his new role.

The Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir foundation stone was laid by the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, on August 5. This has been a historic moment, as after 500 years a magnificent temple will be built at the birthplace of Lord Ram, who is the epitome of righteousness – manifesting all that is good and pious. He embodies the best of human values, and for Hindus across the globe, this day brought immense joy and the fulfilment of a lifelong dream. Bhagwan Ram represents the ideal human being and is the basis of the values and principles that we in Sewa stand for. Let us ennoble the whole world....

Jai Shri Ram!

Regards,

Arun Kankani  
Arun Kankani

President, Sewa International



## National Conference Goes Virtual; Leadership Change at the Top

The annual event, which this year was scheduled to be held in Washington, DC, in early May, had to be postponed and held virtually. Sewa's Vice President for Technology, Anil Deshpande termed the virtual conference a new experience for Sewa. According to him, Sewa conducted successful national meetings around the country in the past, but this year's conference challenged Sewa to learn how to use technology successfully for a day-long virtual meeting.

### **Arun Kankani: Sewa's New President**

Presenting the 2019 annual report at the conference, Prof. Sreenath announced that his resignation has been accepted by Sewa's Board of Directors and he was handing over the role and responsibilities to Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President, Arun Kankani, whom the Board has selected as the organization's new president.

Prof. Sreenath said he had been asking to be relieved from Sewa President's responsibility for the last five years so that new leadership could take Sewa to further heights. He described Sewa's new president Arun Kankani as a terrific organizer and a fabulous leader. "Arun's discipline and steadfastness are legendary. I am proud to pass on the baton over to him," he said as the conference attendees expressed their admiration of Prof. Sreenath's leadership, and their love and support for him. "It has been a great eleven years, from 2009 to 2020, serving Sewa and our hard work has paid off. I feel fortunate for having travelled together on this quest to serve humanity. I have learned many important lessons from all of you," Prof. Sreenath said. He has taken a new journey in leadership as the President of Vivekananda Yoga University, VaYU, Los Angeles, CA, a position he recently accepted.

### **Low Administrative Expenses**

While presenting the 2019 financial report, Sewa's Vice President for Finance, P. Venkat Santhanaraman drew attention of the audience to the low administrative overheads Sewa enjoys as it is largely volunteer driven. Sewa spent \$128,032 in general and administrative expenses, and \$168,354 in fundraising expenses. The general and administrative expenses amount to 1.5 percent of the total funds raised by Sewa International. Venkat mentioned that a charity of Sewa's size would, at a minimum, have 12 to 18 percent of such expenses and Sewa is unique in that regard in the US, may be internationally.

Accepting his new role, Sewa's President Arun Kankani said Sewa would certainly miss the energy and enthusiasm of Prof. Sree Sreenath going forward. He also expressed happiness that continuing the tradition of Sewa International, Prof. Sreenath, as a former president, would continue to be part of the executive team and a member of Sewa's Board of Advisors.

The day's events started with traditional prayers and lighting of the lamp. Prof. Subhash Kak, Regents Professor at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, OK, the chief guest, in his address to the attendees spoke about India's traditions of giving and sharing, and how in these challenging times Sewa is showcasing the best in serving humanity without any discrimination or prejudice. In his concluding remarks, Saumitra Gokhale, Global Coordinator for the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, spoke of the guiding principles of Sewa International and how the good work done is for humanity and not for selfish reasons. "While we do take pride in what we do and what we have accomplished, our true calling is serving the world selflessly," he said.

### **Sewa Pays Homage**

The conference started at 8 AM PST and featured multiple sessions throughout the day. In the inaugural session Prof. Sreenath announced the new Sewa roles and responsibilities and in the second, Sewa remembered and paid homage to donor Dr. Ram Gehani, President of Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram Jageorao Unrao, Sewa Atlanta Chapter President Pratap Singh Chauhan and his wife Mayuri Chauhan and an Indian community leader Krishnamurthy Talanki, who all passed away recently. The different Sewa teams such as Marketing, Organization, Fund Development, Family Services and Bhutanese Empowerment conducted interactive breakout sessions and presented their 2019 accomplishments In the third session. In the afternoon, In his talk on Crisis Communication, Prof. Ramesh Rao, Sewa's communication consultant, discussed various crisis scenarios that a non-profit organization may face and presented strategies to handle them.

## FEMA Features Sewa International in its Partnership Day Virtual Exhibit

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the US government agency responsible for coordinating the response to a disaster, featured Sewa International in its virtual Partnership Day celebration organized to mark the 50th anniversary of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (National VOAD).

Sewa is one of the 58 organizations included by FEMA on its partnership day virtual exhibit at <https://www.partnershipday.org/>. The partnership day was celebrated on July 17 and the exhibits were available for viewing until August 17. Sewa's Director for Disaster Relief, Achalesh Amar, said, "FEMA's recognition indicates that we are on the national radar for disaster relief, and that our work is of a quality that merits national attention".



*Sewa's Bay Area Chapter gave away gift cards worth \$130,000 to 130 families and distributed more than 20,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables as well as 600 gallons of milk to the vulnerable and homeless population in the San Francisco Bay Area as part of COVID-19 relief efforts.*

Celebrating Sewa becoming a part of the FEMA network and terming this recognition as "a major milestone for the organization's Disaster Relief Team," Sewa's President Arun Kankani said, "this opens many doors for us". He said that "...partnerships like these are crucial for enhancing our reach and capacity to serve our community".

Recalling that Sewa received special washable face masks recently from FEMA, Arun Kankani mentioned that the masks were valued at over one million dollars and Sewa distributed them to more than 200 partner organizations.

In June, Sewa received a major grant for disaster preparedness which will enable Sewa to help local communities prepare for disasters.

## Sewa Welcomes New Leader: Arun Kankani Takes Charge



*(Arun Kankani, Director of Inventory Management, Star Pipe Products, Houston, TX, has been appointed as Sewa International's new President)*

Arun Kankani, Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President, Sewa International assumed charge as the new president of Sewa on July 18, 2020. A man with a twinkle in his eye, trained and experienced in leading large teams, never calling attention to himself, he said, while accepting his new role, "We shall certainly miss the energy and enthusiasm of Prof. Sree Sreenath. He will continue to be part of the executive team as Ex-President and will continue the great tradition of Sewa International where former presidents will continue as members of the Board of Advisors".

Arun Kankani is, of course, no stranger to Sewa as he was one of the founding members of Sewa, and has been involved in the organization's nationwide expansion – from disaster relief and rehabilitation to family services and child, tribal, and refugee welfare, and from women's empowerment and health and education to promoting volunteerism. One of his key initiatives was started in 2012 when he considered the problems faced by families, and the support they needed in times of crises and trouble. From his discussions with experts emerged Sewa's Family Services program that now supports and responds to unexpected

family situations such as death, hospitalization, mental health issues, and relationship issues. In 2013, Arun Kankani also helped build the foundation for the ASPIRE program in Houston. The ASPIRE program provides after-school educational support, in collaboration with the local school system, for children in underprivileged neighborhoods. ASPIRE helps children learn well and, in turn, enables the schools and school districts to improve their success rates.

In his day job, Arun Kankani is the Director of Inventory Management at Star Pipe Products in Houston, TX. He earned a Master's in Computer Applications from the University of Mumbai. Having successfully led large teams and done innovative work, Arun Kankani was chosen as Head of Operations for the largest community reception in Houston for a visiting foreign dignitary – the hugely popular and well-attended "Howdy Modi" event in 2019 -- that brought both Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump together in an unprecedented event. About 50,000 people from around the country attended the event along with many political leaders – from local and state leaders to regional and national leaders. Arun Kankani led a team of over 1,200 volunteers who worked together to organize the event, and his team had to get the work done in three months. For his successful effort he received a letter of gratitude from the Ambassador of India to the United States.

When asked about any new vision for Sewa International as he takes charge as its new president, he said that organizations like Sewa are not individual-centered and that the foundational strength for the organization emerged from its guiding principles – the conviction that serving humanity is serving divinity, and respecting the dignity of every human being, and considering humanity as one family (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam) while serving all regardless of race, color, religion, nationality, gender, and sexual orientation, are the principles what will guide him in leading Sewa International.

Arun Kankani resides in Houston with wife Meena, who is a Yoga therapist and teacher. Their daughter Karuna earned an MS in Management Information Systems from Texas A&M university and now works for Occidental Petroleum, and their son Anuj is a senior at Texas A&M majoring in Physics and minoring in Computer Science.

## Prof. Sree Sreenath Leaves Imprint on Sewa: Will be Missed



*Prof. Sree Sreenath, outgoing Sewa International President; he has now taken on the role of President, Vivekananda Yoga University in Los Angeles, CA*

When you have not just served an institution but been instrumental in moving it from its small, infant, baby steps stage to its strapping, vigorous, spirited youthful years, you can be proud of the work you have been able to do, and the leadership qualities and strategies you have transferred to the team you led. And, maybe, therefore it is time to hand over the reins to a colleague who has served with you, to take the organization to the next stage in its journey of serving all selflessly. Prof. Sree Sreenath, President of Sewa International, from 2009 to 2020, must have thought so as he also pondered too the strain on his sinews, and where next he might continue to offer direction and leadership that he has offered Sewa over the past eleven years. He therefore announced that Sewa's Board of Directors had accepted his resignation and that he was handing over the role and responsibilities to Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President, Arun Kankani, whom the Board had selected as Sewa's new president.

Prof. Sreenath ensured that despite his training as an engineer and a scientist, and as a leader in his own right at the prestigious Case Western Reserve University, where he has been Director of the Case Complex Systems Biology Center for fifteen years, he needed new training and credentials to lead a nonprofit organization like Sewa. So, he signed up for the Masters in Nonprofit Organizations at Case

Western, ensuring that he could bring a level of knowledge and understanding of the nature of nonprofits that would serve Sewa well.

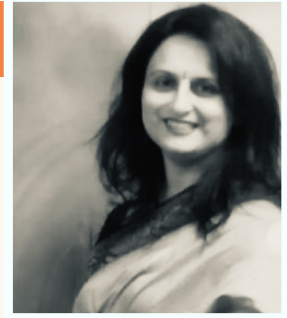
What he might not have been ready for, however, was what we were all not ready for at the beginning of this year -- the coronavirus pandemic -- which forced Sewa to meet online for the annual meeting instead of the traditional, annual conference where Sewa leaders and the indefatigable Sewa volunteers gather to update each other on the work done the previous year, release the annual report, learn some new tricks of the nonprofit trade, and share some quality time together talking, meeting in small groups, and be part of the "Sewa Family" by staying with local families in the city where the conference is held.

"It is a bittersweet moment that I share with you all my resignation from the responsibility of President of Sewa International. The relationship with you all has been a long, fruitful, and intimate. Together we solved many problems, fought many battles, took up many intimidating challenges, and in the end, we came out victorious," he said as he presented the 2019 Annual Report at the Virtual National Conference held on July 18th. "I have been asking to be relieved from Sewa President's responsibility for the last five years so that new leadership can take Sewa to further heights. Arun Kankani will take my place effective immediately. He is a terrific organizer and a fabulous leader. His discipline and steadfastness are legendary. I am proud to pass the baton over to him," he said as the nearly 300 attendees expressed their admiration of his leadership, and their love and support for him. "It has been a great eleven years serving Sewa working and working alongside with you. Our hard work paid off for Sewa. I feel fortunate for having journeyed together on this quest to serve humanity. I have learned many important lessons from all of you," he told the Sewa volunteers, executive leadership, advisory board, and staff -- virtual attendees spread across the US, India, Colombia, and other parts of the world.

Prof. Sreenath has accepted a new position -- as the President of Vivekananda Yoga University (VaYU), Los Angeles, CA. VaYU is offering a unique Online 21-month MS (Yoga) program. Prof. Sreenath, in his illustrious academic career and community leadership work, has received many scholarships and awards including the Best Undergraduate Teaching Award, Who's Who Among Teachers in America, and the NIH Research Career Award. He published a technical treatise on Global Warming back in 1990 and was a member of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in the 1990's. He also served as a scenario panel member of the World Water Commission (1998-2000), was a member on the UN World Water Assessment Program and has served on many National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) committees.

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Someone said that when you are young you want to do and experience a lot of things, but as you get older really connecting with others and enjoying those human moments become important.

Sonal Shah, who was introduced to the Sewa family by a Sewa volunteer, recalled this as she has been helping the Atlanta Chapter as a COVID 19 helpline coordinator, and the helpline experience has been a life-changing experience for her. Lending a helping hand and assisting community members that one is not familiar with is a tall task with a lot of responsibility, she found out, but she says also helped her connect with others.

"You can only make that connection only if you can overcome the formality you have towards strangers and empathize with their problems and be willing to share your experiences and help show them the right path. The right path might not always be the easiest to follow but if you are truly willing to help people will agree to heed your advice," she says.

Many people that Sonal has worked with are unaware of the basic cause and effect of the coronavirus along with taking the proper and necessary precautions. "People have been affected physically, mentally, and financially, and the helpline calls that we responded to included calls from COVID 19 patients, travel visa expiration/ extensions, stranded non-US citizens wanting to go back, students/families who are out of work, who don't have accommodation or food, and more importantly people seeking emotional support from a trusted source who could give accurate information and proper guidance," Sonal says and that she has handled all the issues that came through to her promptly and efficiently.

"I was brought up in an environment where good family relationships and social values were emphasized so that we could spare the time necessary to serve our community. I was able to get the real meaning of the 'Show me your friends and I will tell you what you are'," she says. "I have seen Sewa volunteers going out of their own comfort zone and helping people without any expectations. For me, that was enough inspiration to hold on to what I was doing. I really thank Sewa for giving me an opportunity to assist people in this pandemic/challenging situation to make a difference in people's lives," Sonal says.

Sonal lives in Alpharetta, Georgia with her supportive family and friends. She works in the Information Technology field. In her spare time, she likes to work out at the gym and play tennis. She has had the honour of representing India in Volleyball tournaments. Sonal Shah is a proud member of the Sewa Atlanta Chapter.

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## Prof. Sree Sreenath Leaves Imprint on Sewa: Will be Missed

Institutes of Health (NIH) committees. He has lectured in 25 countries, and has organized more than 40 workshops, symposia, and conferences.

An interesting tidbit: Prof. Sreenath has been a practitioner of Vedic Math for over 30 years and has developed a curriculum to educate children on it!

We will keep count of your achievements and track your milestones, Prof. Sreenath, and wish you and your family the best as you serve VaYU as its brand new president.

## Upcoming Events

Apr 25, 2020 to Aug 29, 2020 : Sewa PA/DE | LEAD Community Fridays

May 1, 2020 to Aug 31, 2020 : Sewa Bay Area | *Authentic Yoga to Prevent, Control and Manage Diabetes* | Fremont, San Jose, San Ramon, Saratoga in Bay Area, CA

Aug 4, 2020 to Aug 21, 2020 : Sewa North Jersey | *NJ Sewa Talent Show* | Virtual

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