



Unsung Heroes:

Overcoming Adversity During A Crisis

PART 2:

Sewa Day

Sangh Sandesh
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Unsung Heroes: Overcoming Adversity During A Crisis

SEWA DAY



SEWA DAY

FEEDING COMMUNITIES – IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

VIBHUTI PATEL

For the past six years or so, proactive sewa has been a regular part of my life, although I must admit it initially came from a place of personal gain, in a way.

I love to cook, so when a colleague mentioned a charity project in the city which needed volunteers, it seemed a great way to do something fun with food for a few hours with a group of friends.

But from that first session, I was hooked by what FoodCycle had to offer: you take food that is considered 'surplus' by local supermarkets and wholesalers (mainly slightly tired fruit and veg) and cook it into a tasty, three-course, vegetarian meal, served to anyone who walks through the door.



Every Saturday lunchtime we take up to 200kg of surplus and plate up for an average of 50 guests; anything not cooked or served gets bagged up to be taken home, and on very busy weeks we can stock the local community fridge too. The thing that surprised me the most in the early days was the variety of people who joined our meals. Naively, I'd assumed it would be a lot of homeless people, but of course a meal is not just about filling an empty stomach.

Food has the power to bring people together and provide a sense of community,

and some of our most regular guests are people who join us for the chance to sit with others, to enjoy conversation and laughter in a welcoming environment.

So when the world changed earlier this year, it left those of us who are project leaders for FoodCycle in Cambridge feeling very unsettled. By mid-March it was no longer safe to continue our community meals: the very thing that offered comfort was now a huge risk.

But we knew how much many of our guests needed the food we offered, and that they would likely fall between the cracks of other formal services. We weren't strangers to having families among our guests, those where despite parents working hard, sometimes they just needed a bit of help. The people for whom our one meal a week with a bag of leftovers made a bigger difference than they'd ever tell us.

And what about the environmental impact of those tens of kilos of food that would go to waste? Believe me, the panic buying was not extending to the piles of carrots, swedes and cauliflowers we receive on a weekly basis! Within a couple of weeks, our national HQ had formulated phase 1 of a plan to keep serving the community.

Since the start of April we have continued to collect surplus and now drop bags of supplies on local doorsteps, at least two bags to each of 60-70 houses a week. Our regular guests take priority, but it's been astonishing to see how many self-referrals have come through, as the enormity of the pandemic takes its toll on people's income and access to the most basic of needs.

In the past couple of weeks, we've progressed to phase 2 of our service with a new "check-in and chat" service: anyone receiving one of our parcels will get a phone call from a trained volunteer to make sure all was okay with the deliver, and just to see how they're doing. It's not quite the same as the buzz of a dining hall, sharing a nice meal together, but the truth is we simply don't know when we'll be able to do that again, and at least this provides some contact.



We know that many of our regular guests come to us for some company, so even this small connection means a lot, as one person said: "It has made my day hearing from you. I used to go to the meal every week and I was hoping someone would call me, and now you have."

Reading that comment brought me back to the initial personal gain I felt when I first walked into a FoodCycle kitchen, brought home how rewarding it feels to partake in this sewa, whether putting a meal on a plate, packing up a takeaway or leaving a bag of food on someone's doorstep.

At the end of one of our sessions last year, I remarked that although I was physically exhausted after leading a three-hour

cooking shift, I felt so satisfied.

One of the volunteers responded that FoodCycle feeds

**"souls as well as bellies,
whichever side of the meal you
are on."**

In these strange, difficult and confusing times, that's completely true for my volunteering... and I think it sums up the whole idea of sewa pretty well too.

SEWA DAY

KARYAKRAMS MAKE KARYAKARTA

DEEPAK PATHAK

"Karyakrams make karyakarta."

These wise words were once passed down to me along with an explanation of how we learn by doing and the encouragement to constantly be involved with any karyakram where my help was needed. I was told how it is our kartavya to give back and do good work, not to make us feel good about ourselves or to feel we have been kind, but simply because it is our duty. Nowhere has this been more apparent than during COVID-19.

Many people may not know that the foundations for Sewa Day were laid some 20 years ago (which is a story in itself) and I'm fortunate to have been the Global Lead for Sewa Day during this pandemic, where I've been given the opportunity to learn so much.

Yet, just doing some sewa was not enough during COVID-19;

we needed to make the best impact we could as the country needed us like never before.

This meant the challenges and opportunities to learn were immense and I could probably write a book about it all, but sadly there isn't space for that here!! So, I've tried to pick a few lessons that might resonate with a wider audience.

From the outside, the Sewa Day campaign might look really easy to manage, but at times it has been really tough. Lots of people have different opinions and views on doing things, and different people need things to be explained in different ways. No one way of communicating works for everyone.

Remember, we have differences even in our own families. Now, imagine bringing 30+ regional family structures together and convincing them that 3 national projects are the best ways for us to work on Sewa Day. Now, imagine that most are used to independence or are totally new to a structured way of working!

Naturally, there was huge initial resistance from certain regions, and then you realise what Sangh Adhikaris have been silently dealing with for years. Everything always looks simple from the outside but it's often not. As humans we always have differences of opinions or personality clashes and we can't always put our emotions aside as if we are enlightened sadhus! It's here where I learnt the immense value of being surrounded by our experienced karyakartas, who would



constantly guide me through these challenges. They never told me what to do but suggested options which I may want to consider. You will never know all the answers to the challenges that lie ahead, but being surrounded by experienced and supportive people is a great way to help you get through anything.

The second lesson is that being invisible does not always serve us well. We talk about Swami Vivekananda as he took Hinduism onto an international stage, with a standing ovation for his speech, but far too often we ourselves do so much work that is hidden. That does not mean that we should be chasing promotion just for the sake of promotion, but we should be showcasing work where it helps us increase the impact of our sewa.

When MPs came to our Sewa Day activities, they were asked to work as volunteers and told not to come empty-handed, so they could see our work and feel our work. Volunteers were encouraged to showcase their work on their own social media so that their family and friends would be inspired to also get involved.

Promotion can still be selfless, if it is for the greater good of society.

The third lesson is to remember that whenever you do good work, expect some negativity. Not everyone will believe you are doing the right thing and even those

you thought will know better or should understand, will send you messages that will hurt. Again, surrounding yourself with experienced karyakarta is essential to overcome this, as is reminding yourself of the true reason for our work. A few people's negative opinions should never stop you doing good work as that will impact so many more people in the long run.

It made me really understand the meaning of Swami Vivekananda's words "stop not, until the goal is reached". It made me realise, that if Swami ji said these words, then he also faced exactly the same challenges; yet he carried on and look what he achieved.

Above all I've seen how sewa really is a way to bring the world together through the notion of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam; the whole world is one family. Everyone can participate in sewa and giving back is never limited to one faith group, gender or age group. People who never knew of our work before suddenly began shouting loudly about Sewa Day, whether it be on their own social media, within their business circles or even within Parliament. These same people are often shocked to learn that we are all volunteers; yet for us, this is a very normal way of life. A selfless way of life.

In Sangh the saying is 'In unity there is strength'. I truly understand and have now seen that in action. When we have a clear vision and follow a well-constructed plan together, our efforts can be amplified to an extent that is unbelievable. But Sewa Day is only just beginning and our work is increasing.

I hope many more make a commitment, every week, to give 1 hour for sewa - not because it makes you happy, but simply because it's our duty to make the world a better place.



SEWA DAY

SUPPLYING THE MOST BASIC OF HUMAN NEEDS

HETVI PAREKH

When COVID-19 struck, there was chaos, sadness and the world was faced with unfathomable adversity and tragedy. I believe in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) and my immediate thought was “how do I help and make a difference in these unprecedented times”. I joined the “Help a Neighbour” campaign, which was Sewa Day’s response to COVID-19.

I liked the ethos of Sewa Day, which was offering a service without any expectations and rewards. This was just the beginning and...

...I had no idea that this small initiative of joining Sewa Day would lead me to a path of happiness and fulfilment.

Food is one of the most basic requirements for human survival and I had an inherent desire to help the food banks. After initially appealing to our friends, neighbours and community, I soon realised that gathering food in this way would not be sustainable. I took inspiration, encouragement and guidance from the Sewa Day Global Lead, Deepak Pathak, on how we could make a difference on a huge scale. Our key strategy was to build relationships and a strong team of volunteers. With this vision in mind, our team grew to 8 volunteers who were all committed to making a difference. The last 75 days have been incredible. We have managed to get two local MPs, Ruth Edwards and Lilian Greenwood, to volunteer with and



promote Sewa Day through their social media channels. Through my relationship with local councillor, Jonathan Wheeler, I connected with the Community Champion at the local Morrison's. This ensured that we got a generous food donation every week.

We have donated over 5 tonnes of food in Nottingham, including 1483 Easter eggs.

Having initially started with one food bank, we have now expanded to helping 18 food banks, charities and schools in Nottinghamshire.

Regardless of what we have achieved, we have not become complacent. Our focus remains on collecting as much food as possible and serving as many food banks as possible. The message we give to all our donors is that even one tin makes a massive difference. We continue to work hard every day and as I am writing this, I would like to say that I have witnessed the most amazing coming together of communities in Nottingham. The entire town of Bingham got together to gather food for Sewa Day, raising around 100 kgs in just one day. Now my garage is full of donations ready to go out next week.

Reflecting on the journey so far, I can only say one thing - when you truly want to make a difference, when you really want something, the whole world will get together to make this happen. It has literally happened here. I believe in the law of karma, and doing sewa without expectations always leads to happiness in its truest form. I intend to continue doing my good karma beyond COVID-19 and spread happiness, joy and smiles in my community.



SEWA DAY

THE COVID-19 RESPONSE KITCHEN

CHETAN HARPALE

Sewa Parmo Dharma. If you work in the service of others, God will always be with you.

I live in Alperton, Wembley where there is a newly-opened restaurant called Desi Dhaba that, for good reason, has come to be called the COVID-19 Response Kitchen in recent weeks. In early April, Alperton Community Support Group, a group formed by the local councillors and one that I was a part of, sent an appeal for volunteers to help at the restaurant that had started preparing meals for the community and it was then that I decided to go help with a couple of friends. We just did simple jobs like packing the hot meals, cutting

vegetables and shifting goods from one place to another, small tasks but we were contributing. Within a few days, more swayamsevaks like Jeel Shah, Bhavya Shah, Ritesh Thakrar, Varun Harpale, Om Harpale, Khush Patel, Preet Patel, Samir Patel and Pranav Patel all got involved and suddenly, everything grew exponentially.

Within just a few short days, we were preparing 1,500 – 2,000 meals a day. We were cutting up to 60-70kg of onions a day and then 50-60kg of vegetables, depending on what was on the menu for that day. There was no way we could have done this from the restaurant kitchen whilst maintaining social distancing. Following a discussion with Anand Vyas, we re-worked the logistics of the

operation. Through Sewa Day and with the help of Anand Vyas, Punit Vara, Heena Hirani, Bhavesh Mistry, Harshil, Jayanti Varsani, Harsh Haria, Heena Solanki, Manisha Varsani, Kalpesh Mistry and countless others, our operation became significantly more sophisticated.

We sought out two much larger venues, the KSL Hall in Alperton and St James' Church Hall. Whilst food continued to be prepared at Desi Dhaba, donations and distributions would now flow into and out from these two locations. Supplying 20-25 drivers a day on 18 routes, KSL Hall would organise meals for hospitals and NHS care homes, whilst St James' Church Hall, which I was responsible for, would supply to vulnerable individuals.

As safety was paramount, both venues were prepared for the huge influx of people and goods that were expected each day with 2 metre markers placed throughout each hall. Every driver was given safety instructions, personal protective equipment (including hand sanitiser, gloves and a mask) and an

efficient route as they left the venues between 11.00am to 1:30pm each day. Food authorities and local councillors were left impressed following an inspection of our operations. Having worked every day from 9am – 6pm since 5th April 2020, I estimate that we will have delivered over 120,000 meals to date [as at 2nd June 2020].

With so many people and organisations involved, it's been an incredible team effort. I'm very grateful in particular to Shree Jalaram Greenford Mandir for donating the cost of all the raw materials, Chinten and Mona Pandya of Desi Dhaba for initiating this great work only 3 months after opening their business and for continuing to foot all the utility bills and pay their staff throughout this period, St James' Church and KSL Hall for allowing us to use their space, Little Darling Child Care for ensuring every meal had an allergen sticker on it, Premier Banqueting and Jalaram Sweet Mart for providing between 200-500 meals a day and all of the individuals for their dedication during this challenging time. Now it's possible to believe that through great Sangathan, we can overcome any adversity.



**1,500 – 2,000
MEALS A DAY**

**20-25
DRIVERS
A DAY**

**60-70KG
OF ONIONS
A DAY**

SEWA DAY

RE-IGNITING THE FLAME

RAJ SAHDEV

Watching my mother rolling fresh chapattis for those who could ill-afford to feed themselves seems like a distant memory - almost a dream away - but that small act instilled something that words can seldom describe.

It isn't an expectation, nor a thought but instead the very emotion and attitude from which sewa sprouts.

Sewa bhav is what some call it. Over the course of last 20 years, that flame of emotion has been somewhat suppressed; embers just kept alive by the monthly click of a button to donate funds through my online banking account and the once-a-year, hands-on sewa trip I make to some of the most deprived parts in my hometown, Phagwara, Punjab.

I have always longed for that opportunity to serve local communities here in the same way my mother did and instill a sense of gratitude for future generations to follow. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the air was tainted with something other than the virus: fear. Fear of getting infected, fear of infecting our loved ones, fear of doing the wrong thing. Still, for a number of us, our first reaction was to help as Sewa Day's 'Help Your Neighbour' was rolled out across the country and those first steps were taken to secure support for our



elderly neighbours. Our primary focus soon shifted to serving the frontline staff who were risking their own lives in trying to protect us at the Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. As the temperature rose, so did our collective efforts.

Our group of volunteers delivered hundreds of Easter eggs, over 1,200 soft-drinks and over 1,000 healthy snack bars to NHS staff when they needed it the most. As time went by, our vision broadened. We recognised that the local waste collection teams were doing an incredible job of keeping our streets clean and so we gave them Easter eggs and snacks to express our gratitude.

Food banks came under increasing pressure to supply an ever-growing community in need. In an attempt to alleviate some of that pressure, we supplied over 400kg of food to local food banks in Cheltenham, Elim, Springbank and Stroud, with a number of karyakartas also volunteering to pack food parcels.

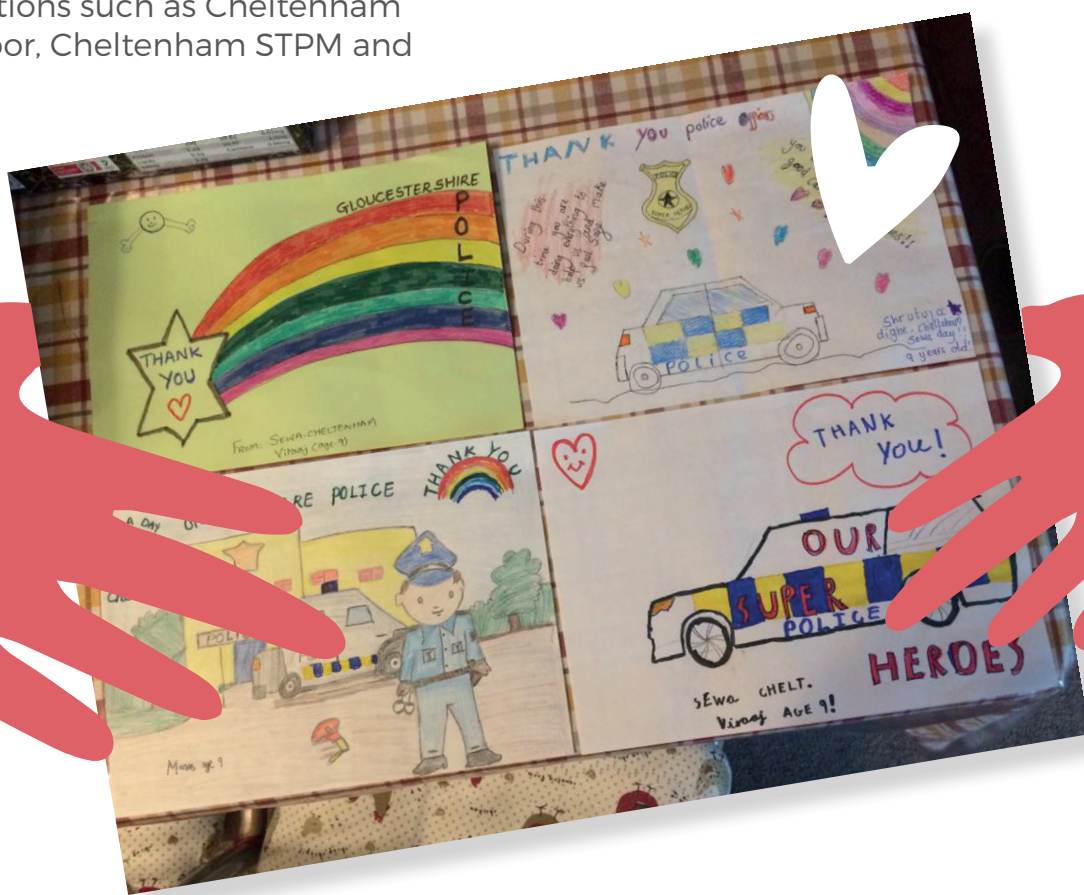
We partnered with other like-minded organisations such as Cheltenham Open Door, Cheltenham STPM and

Gloucestershire Bundles to deliver our service where it was needed the most. Above all else, it was amazing to see that when sewa was the 'need of the hour', our community greeted that need with such enthusiasm! The last 3 months have shown me that the

sewa bhav that was so subtly sown into the fabric of my being, is ingrained in all of us and those embers just need a gentle encouragement to ignite the flame

with which we have served our Gloucestershire community with since COVID-19 arrived.

My deep gratitude goes to the local volunteering team, neighbourhoods and local stores whose support is helping us to fight back against this disease.



SEWA DAY

DONATE A FOOD BAG

DR HARSHA JANI AND URVI DEPALA

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how vulnerable the 'at risk' communities in the country are during such calamities.

At this time of emergency our local communities in North London have demonstrated a willingness to pull together and support those in need.

During this crisis, sewa work by our swayamsevaks and sevikas included helping to do a doorstep collection of food bags donated by

local residents which were

stored and sorted at local food banks and shelters. The volunteers then distributed the supplies to NHS hospital staff, care homes, vulnerable people and families shielding from the pandemic.

In order to reach a wide audience and get maximum engagement within the community for the 'Donate a Food Bag' initiative, we decided that it would be a great idea to make a vibrant poster which included a list of the items people could donate. To make it suitable for the older members of our community, we decided it was a good idea to write the Gujarati translation as well as English on the poster, so that we could maximise

participation in the initiative.

A video also was made to deliver the message in the easiest yet unique and eye-catching way. The video explained that in these unprecedented times we are going through, we can still make a difference and help the community and those in need. Both the poster and video were distributed around various social media platforms as well as WhatsApp to reach a large audience and make this initiative a success.

We had 7 volunteer drivers on the day to help us collect all the food donation bags from the houses of those who wished to donate - which was an amazing total of 120 houses! A staggering

total of 1900 kg (2 tonnes) of donations were collected from this initiative! Furthermore,

on the day of the food bag collections, we had the local MP Theresa Villiers and Cllr. Roberto Weeden-Sanz help us in the 'Donate a Food Bag' initiative by collecting the food bags from several houses. They admired and appreciated the commitment and enthusiasm shown by everyone involved in the initiative as well as those that donated. Theresa Villiers commented that,

'HSS are doing wonderful work to get groceries to vulnerable people during the Covid crisis'.

This was a meaningful and much needed initiative which allowed us to help those that are less fortunate and vulnerable during the COVID-19 lockdown. It allowed us to reflect on how grateful we should be to have the basic necessities.

SEWA DAY

SLOUGH'S SEWA KITCHEN AND BEYOND


PRAVAR PETKAR IN CONVERSATION
WITH SUHAS MADHEKAR

COULD YOU GIVE US AN OVERVIEW OF THE SEWA WORK THAT YOU'VE BEEN ENGAGED WITH LOCALLY?

Initially, our work began in Hounslow. One of the pharmacies there needed prescriptions delivered to residents in the local area. Although we had only found a couple of people at this stage, we made the initial deliveries and started to build a team of delivery drivers. In Slough, we reached out to NHS and care workers who might be tired, self-isolating or unable to find food in the evenings after a long working day.

They merely had to call before 12pm, and a meal would be prepared for them. This did not gain much traction, so we decided to start a sewa kitchen that could provide fresh nutritious vegetarian Indian meals daily for NHS workers. We began to create a team of volunteers for it, as well as contacting local hospitals to identify the need for food deliveries.

The sewa kitchen at the Slough Hindu Mandir began on Monday 6th April. More and more people got involved in preparing and packing food over the coming weeks as demand increased, and the volunteer count averaged around 30 volunteers; this involved creating shifts to ensure adherence to safe volunteering guidelines. Alongside establishing the Sewa Kitchen, we had to channel our



energy to ensure Sewa Day was one of the recognised charities working with Slough CVS in its One Slough initiative. This recognition by the local council was required to keep the temple open and also enabled us to fulfil the provision of weekly food parcels to vulnerable or less fortunate people in Slough.

We encouraged people to bring food items for the parcels to the mandir. Our volunteers would even go out of their way to individually call recipients of the food parcels and ask them what items they needed so that it could be tailored to them; this tailored service is now the ever popular "Sewa Parcel".

This work also prompted individuals in other local linguistic community groups to come forward with innovative ideas; one person whose father was hospitalised wanted to help so would use his online shopping delivery slots to buy food for others who needed it too.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO SET UP THE SEWA KITCHEN AT THE MANDIR?

We have been working on a 3-year plan to bring the various linguistic community groups together to unify and work together as 'one Hindu

community' in Slough. The need for an accredited kitchen and the gravity of these unprecedented times was the right opportunity to bring them together to serve society, instead of simply operating as groups from different regions of Bharat. Even when another larger kitchen was made available, we were keen to overcome the shortcomings of the mandir kitchen to ensure we kept the Sewa Kitchen there so that the Hindu community could unite as one in this initiative.



HOW MUCH FOOD HAS BEEN PREPARED AND TO WHOM DOES IT GO TO?

We started off by providing around 200 meals a day for West Middlesex hospital and 50 for homeless people via Slough

Outreach. The typical meals provided include rice, lentils and sabji (vegetables). Soon, however, we heard from some of the medical staff at Hillingdon Hospital that their entire thirty to forty-minute lunch break was being spent in a queue for food at the hospital, leaving them with no time to eat during the day. In response, we increased our capacity to provide an extra 200 meals every day for the hospital. At the same time, we also added up to 75 meals thrice a week to Wexham Park hospital. In time, the food provision expanded to Upton Hospital in Slough, St. Marks Hospital in Maidenhead as well as hospitals in Reading.

After ten weeks, 26,185 meals had been prepared across Slough and Basingstoke for NHS workers.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE CHALLENGES THAT YOU HAVE FACED, AND HOW HAVE YOU OVERCOME THEM?

Although one of the first volunteers recruited was a professional chef so there was an experienced hand in the kitchen, he had to return to work after just 2 days. Fortunately, another volunteer from Langley, an IT professional who had begun to help the chef, was willing to take on additional responsibility. Over time, this even required him to study until late at night to acquire the necessary hygiene certification. Although more professional chefs were found in Hounslow as the weeks passed by, they could not drive to the mandir in Slough, so one of the initial pharmacy delivery volunteers would pick them up every morning and drop them back home at the end of the shift.



In the second week, to meet increased demand from hospitals, we needed a chiller in which to store the packed boxes so that we could continue to prepare as many meals as we were. It was difficult to find the mobile chiller unit and the funding for it, though we managed this by engaging people we knew in the local community to help out here.

Around three weeks into our work, a number of logistical and infrastructure-related challenges emerged. In order to keep up our inventory of fresh food produce, some of our volunteers would wake up at 5am to visit the market to purchase fresh vegetables. The health and safety and hygiene team at the council wanted to ensure that the Sewa Kitchen was going about its business in the proper way; this required the operations managers to acquire additional skills, which necessitated burning the midnight oil to complete their hygiene certification.

Though none of the volunteers had any previous experience of such matters, we very quickly learnt about hygiene standards, food temperature checks and the like. This was a steep learning curve and ensured that our intentions to do the right thing could be backed up in the proper manner.

WHO PAYS FOR ALL OF THIS?

Berkshire Community Foundation via Slough CVS have provided us with £6,000 worth of funding to support all the work we have done and have recognised the contributions of the Hindu community. A significant amount of money has also been collected through JustGiving, offline donations, and donations by the Slough Hindu Mandir to cover the costs of the mobile chiller unit. Morrison's donated Easter eggs to be distributed to NHS

workers and care homes, in addition to four major donations for the items in the weekly food parcels. Local language-based groups are also collecting items for food banks and to serve the less fortunate.



WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO GET INVOLVED?

Sewa is one of the cornerstones of our belief systems and at the core of every swayamsevak's being; as such we were keen to give back to the wider community during these unprecedented times, and through this initiative we have not only provided something substantial back to the local community but also brought the Hindu community together. Overall, it has been a very fulfilling journey so far and we will continue to adapt and fine tune our work to meet the need of the hour as we look forward to serving the community today, tomorrow and in the future.

WHAT OTHER WORK IS HAPPENING IN THAT REGION?

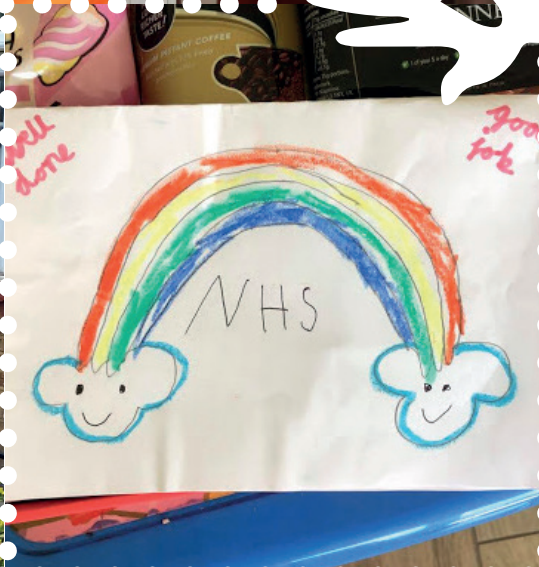
Lots of work to replenish food banks has started in Reading, as well as the delivery of toiletries and other non-food items to the Royal Berkshire hospital. Volunteers in Reading have also been making deliveries to care homes early every morning, seven days a week. The importance of spreading some joy to the care home residents was understood there; after starting by sending pictures, volunteers gave out appreciation parcels and 'pamper boxes' with food, chocolates and other items.

One volunteer in Maidenhead got in touch with the mandir there to organise deliveries not only to the Sewa Kitchen in Slough but also to local food banks. Reading have also begun working with FareShare in Reading to put together food parcels from supermarket stocks.

ARE THERE ANY FINAL COMMENTS THAT YOU'D LIKE TO MAKE FOR OUR READERS?

What we have achieved together is significant; the statistics speak for themselves and we could not have done this without the sewa bhav from all the volunteers. **Each and every one of them across the region have worked selflessly and in doing so, have learnt new skills. This experience is unique, and it is heartening to see the Hindu Samaj standing united but flexible to change given the need of the hour.** Everyone has come away from the experience feeling with joy and inspiration to give back more to society. Given this is a marathon and not a race, we hope this behaviour will help us sustain as the situation develops in the medium to long-term.





SEWA DAY

BLURRING THE LINE BETWEEN 'FAMILY' AND 'SAMAJ'

MAULI PANWAR IN CONVERSATION WITH KARAN SINGH PANWAR



It seems that a lot of sewa activity has been taking place in Basingstoke.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED?

Sewa has been a part of my life for many years but the current COVID-19 situation has been, as many others have repeatedly said, 'unprecedented'. In stepping out of our front doors, we were risking the lives of our families as well as our own and that was scary. Regardless, we felt that it was our duty to serve the local community in Basingstoke. Bikram Banerjee, Manoj Shakya, Arun Mumalanani from Basingstoke Multicultural Forum, Kishore Patel from Basingstoke Hindu Society and other Sangh karyakartas gathered to brainstorm ideas. I was fortunate to be at that first meeting.

WHAT WERE YOUR PRIORITIES WHEN YOU STARTED THE WORK?

Early on, we decided that this was an opportune moment to unite the various

communities in Basingstoke and we used our contacts to bring together local organisations from different regional (Nepalese, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, Malayali, Uttar Pradesh, Bengali) and social (Basingstoke Multicultural Forum) backgrounds under the umbrella of Sewa Day.

CAN YOU GIVE US A FLAVOUR OF THE TYPE OF WORK THAT WAS DONE?

Under the guidance of the national team, various campaigns including 'Help a Neighbour', 'Care for the Carer', 'Spread Some Joy' and 'Support for International Students' started in parallel. The home of Basingstoke Hindu Society, the Carnival Community Hall, became the hub for all the sewa activities.

We had volunteers dropping groceries to the elderly, supporting local schools for breakfast clubs and replenishing food banks. **Our younger baalas, baalikas and shishu from Basingstoke Balagokulam also got involved and made paintings, greeting cards and wrote letters for the 'Spread Some Joy' campaign.** Local Indian restaurants including Spicy Tadka, Chennai Express and Spice and Spirit came forward to cook the food and other volunteers offered to package and deliver it. Even our local MP Maria Miller came to support us in the kitchen.



WAS THERE ANY PARTICULAR CAMPAIGN THAT YOU WERE PARTICULARLY FOND OF?

One particular campaign was particularly close to my heart: 'Support for International Students'. When I was younger, I grew up in Bharat and left home for higher education. Whilst staying in a hostel, I still remember conducting tuition to reduce the financial burden on my parents. The needs of our international students haven't changed, and they still rely heavily on part-time work to support themselves. Over the past few months, these students, like many others, have not been able to work and no support has been provided by the UK government. INSA, the Indian National Students' Association, has taken on the welfare responsibility for these students. They provided us with the contact of

Preethpal Singh from Southampton Sikh Society and partnering with the Bournemouth Sewa Day volunteers, we purchased 2 tonnes of groceries including wheat flour, rice bags, pulses, onions, potatoes, tomato cans and oil so that students had enough to eat. We also supported the INSA 24/7 helpline and raised funds to support student journeys back home.

IN ONE SENTENCE, WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM THIS ENTIRE EXPERIENCE?

Our primary responsibility is the welfare and safety of our family but to take on the welfare of complete strangers and treat them like your family; that is sewa.

CLAP!

CLAP!





SEWA DAY

NORTH WEST SEWA DAY

DR HARDIK BHANSALI

The Sewa Day North West team is part of the national charity Sewa Day, which has been helping people in the UK during the coronavirus pandemic. Our team is mainly based in Manchester and we have been helping the surrounding regions. We have focused our volunteer work on four different streams.

HELPING THE VULNERABLE

Through telephone calls, we contacted the elderly people in our community to inquire about their health and find out how we could help with shopping for their basic essentials. We supported the stranded Indian and other international students studying in the various universities of the North West by providing them with dry groceries, minor financial help, home cooked vegetarian meals on some occasions, guidance about accommodation and how to get help from universities. Additionally we teamed up with the Student Support Group that was formed especially during the crisis. We even extended our help to parents from India, visiting their children in the UK, who needed medical advice and access to urgent care or GP services.



THE CARE FOR CARERS PROJECT

To show our appreciation towards frontline workers and boost their morale, our volunteers delivered 1050 Easter eggs, which were kindly donated by Morrison's. They were distributed to NHS workers in A&E and other departments at four hospitals and two hospices across the Manchester region. We supplied 100 hot vegetarian meals twice a week to the NHS staff working in the COVID-19 and ICU wards in Wythenshawe Hospital for 8 weeks, finishing on the 28th of May 2020. Collectively we served around 1400 hot meals!

We managed to supply 100 pot noodles, toiletries and biscuits to Salford Royal Hospital for staff working in the COVID-19 wards on two occasions. As well as providing medical face masks to care homes and nursing homes we distributed a massive 500kg of dates as a token of thanks to various frontline services including NHS hospitals, NHS care homes, fire stations, St Anne's hospice, and the Manchester Ambulance services. We even managed to enlist one of councillors from the Sale district to come along to help distribute the dates!

THE SPREAD SOME JOY CAMPAIGN

With such big projects there is room for everyone to get involved, especially the younger children in our society whose playful joy really does help to bring out a smile. The local children of our community from various age groups made cards, drawings and paintings for people in isolation which were distributed to care homes and nursing homes. This truly brightened up the day for many of the elderly who were happy to receive their hand made gifts.



THE REPLENISHING THE FOOD BANKS

Food Banks have been a life line for many during the crisis and we are proud to have been able to supply non-perishable foods and vegetarian groceries to local Food Banks in conjunction with other local communities.

APPRECIATION

Our work during the COVID-19 crisis was appreciated by the charity "Forever Manchester" who gave us a grant for £5000 to continue our volunteering. Our hard work was also recognised by the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham. Recently, we had a very fruitful discussion with Mary Robinson, Honourable Member of Parliament for the Cheadle area of Greater Manchester. Mary

was very impressed with selfless work of the Sewa Day North West team and has already offered us few avenues of help.

FUTURE PROJECTS

Our work does not stop here. Being in the service of others is a lifelong task. The economic outlook is uncertain and many people may still need our assistance in one way or another. So, we look forward to welcoming more volunteers to join us in our future projects of continuing to replenish food banks, start a soup kitchen and also distribute re-usable cloth masks which have been stitched by volunteers from our community.



2000 VOLUNTEERS

volunteers across the country
engaged in Sewa Day work
including numerous mandirs

30+

different regional groups/areas
of activity working together in
Sewa Day

3X

MENTIONS

in parliament for our Covid work,
including a discussion with
**Boris Johnson during Prime
Minister's question time!**



OVER 1 MILLION

meals worth of food delivered
to food banks and the needy

foodbank

OVER 60

food banks replenished on an
almost weekly basis



2000+

hearts knitted by craft groups and given to frontliners for Raksha Bandhan as a thank you for protecting us



OVER 350

appreciation parcels (full of goodies) have gone to care homes, ambulance and fire stations and hospitals.

COLLABORATION WITH



5000+ ITEMS

knitted by craft groups (baby hats, PPE and twiddlemuffs (help patients with dementia))

OVER 1150



Drawings and letters submitted by children that were sent to...

OVER 500 CARE HOMES



14 HOSPITALS

display these pictures in general walkways or in staff rooms!



An immense amount of work has been and continues to be completed by our karyakartas during the existing crisis. Whilst we were unable to speak to every karyakarta, this edition is dedicated to **every** karyakarta who has worked tirelessly in the Sewa of others over the last 6 months.

Thank you.



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