

Faith organizations respond to Obama's call for service

ARTHUR J PAIS

The Hindu Society of Minnesota is among scores of Indian organizations across America that are responding to President Barack Obama's call to people at large to participate in the United We Serve initiative to help address social needs resulting from the economic downturn.

Like many temple organizations across the country, the Hindu Society — established in 1978 — has consciously extended its services to the larger community, says Dr. Kunnud Sane, a leader of the group. The Society plans to join Sharing and Caring Hands this month and make healthy and wholesome food in downtown Minneapolis kitchens to feed the homeless and needy.

Many Hindu organizations are joining the United We Serve initiative, supporting the call by Hindu American Seva Charities and the Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Conducting charity drives are not new to organizations like BAPS and the Hindu Society. But they are intensifying their effort and have joined the United We Serve campaign which started June 22 and will lead to a National Day of Service, September 11. Temples in Michigan, New Jersey, Texas, Washington, Illinois and other states are participating in a major national event for the first time in a united way.

Anju Bhargava, an interfaith leader and pillar of the HASC, has been campaigning



A BAPS health fair; left, Anju Bhargava

for concerted participation by Indian organizations for the last three months.

"The effort is bringing disparate communities together," says Bhargava, a banker and community leader for over a decade. "Indian nurses, a large number of them being Christians, offered spontaneously their services at many Hindu temples. Surely, they are also carrying on the seva at their Indian churches."

Dr. Siva Subramanian, a leader of the Sri

Siva Vishnu Temple in Maryland, recently helped the temple hold a health fair. The temple is also joining other organizations in helping run emergency free kitchens in Washington, DC.

"Temples are not just places of rituals but helping people in all aspects of their lives," he says. "Seva/service in Hinduism and temples is the fundamental substratum that binds us all. Temples must be in the business of helping people through seva."

He says the HASC has helped for the first time to coordinate Hindu service activities

nationally.

Urnula Shivaram, president, Hindu Organization of Long Island, says her organization has to act differently from the temples.

"Since we are not a temple and do not have a place of our own, we have assigned a few drop-off points for people willing to donate," she adds. "We are going to collect food on four Saturdays in the month of August. This gives a choice of dates for people to give. We plan to go to local grocery stores — Indian and American — make

PHOTO COURTESY: BAPS

them aware of the HSAC initiative and request food donation. We want to enlist our children to be a part of this initiative. We will collect the food and donate it to the needy through the Interfaith Nutrition Network and the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Manhasset."

Getting the second generation involved in community work strengthens the temples, says Dr. Uma Mysorekar of the Hindu Temple in Flushing, New York. "They start looking at the temple not as an insular organization but an institution that is responding in some concrete way to the needs of a larger community," she explains.

Bhargava argued her case in an op-ed piece in *The Wall Street Journal* last week.

"In a remarkable spirit of preserving the *dharma* traditions and our cultural heritage, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists have made remarkable strides in establishing houses of worship in America," she wrote. "Now, to remain relevant to both their own communities and the larger mainstream, they are realizing the need to transform, mobilize talent and resources, and institutionalize the service, or *sewa*, component."

Bhargava, who lives in Livingston, New Jersey, is on many township and board of education committees and is also a member of the Interfaith Clergy Association.

Summarizing the responses of the temples and organizations connected to them, she said a few like-minded friends and she considered President Obama's call and "thought we should engage the community service through the temples."

"Many temples already do some *sewa* work and their work is not known nor appreciated," she reflected. "In addition,

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PHOTO COURTESY: BAPS

they are unable to get funding as the government does not know how they function. We are also hoping to showcase our talent so that all segments of the community can see our collective talent and the *sewa dhava* of the community."

Over 60 *sewa* centers had signed up by late July. The target is reach over 150 Indian-American organizations in the coming weeks.

"It is not just the temples, but organizations such as the National Association of Nurses of Indian Origin and AAPI [American Association of Physicians of Indian origin], who have also joined us."

"The Hindu temples want to be under-

stood," Bhargava says. "Most established faith-based organizations in the US started to take care of the needs of their immigrant communities. For example Catholic Charities started 100 years ago to resettle orphan Catholics. Today they are the largest social service organization and get government funding. Many temples have *sewa* centers which serve the community but they cannot get funding as they are not understood."

By showcasing the community's talent and collecting information the temples, the two-year-old HASC can help the government understand about their needs, she says.

"The HASC is spearheading the *sewa* movement by informing temples and faith-based organizations about strengthening their voice and communication with larger faith-based communities and the government," she adds. "Most importantly, HASC's *sewa* movement is meant to motivate temples and faith-based groups to address their community's needs — whether its health-related issues; youth, family and senior citizen social services, etc. Ultimately, the HASC expects Hindu temples and faith-based organizations nationwide to join forces with groups that have a similar agenda in order to foster a mutual dialogue and move toward a pluralistic society."

The Vedic Cultural Center in Seattle is doing much more than holding a health fare this month. It is also organizing a senior appreciation day. And August 12 and 13 at the Festival of India at the Seattle Waterfront, it will serve at least 8,000 free plates of fresh, vegetarian food. It held a health fare at the request of the HASC.

"The Bharatiya Temple community in South East Michigan has been involved in outreach and service for years, and the participation in the HASC complements our activities," says Padma Kuppa, a community leader. "Being part of the HASC's United We Serve Campaign strengthens our bonds within the community and brings us closer as Hindu Americans."

The temple, she adds, will focus on a few new activities during the United We Serve campaign, like a clothing drive for Bhutanese refugees.

"SE Michigan has many unemployed and hence uninsured," she adds, "and our newly organized Health Care *sewa* project to provide support to the uninsured is also gaining momentum."

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Where charity is a way of life

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Holding health fairs for the poor and uninsured across America is not new to the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purshottam Sanstha. BAPS, arguably the first large Indian faith-based organization to hold outreach programs for communities at large, has organized charity drives for relief work in earthquake-hit cities in the United States, Mexico and India and also held relief work in several African countries like Ethiopia.

There are 720 BAPS temples and 9,000 centers in 45 countries. The organization says it has 55,000 volunteers at over 3,300 centers across the globe, providing over 12 million hours of free service annually.

The seva mission is an inherent article of faith for BAPS, said Raymond William, a Christian professor of religion who wrote a book on the organization 10 years ago. "Building temples and carrying out humanitarian work across America shows that the practitioners of this branch of Hinduism are not mere sojourners in America," he said. "They belong to America and they carry out their obligations with enthusiasm."

This summer, BAPS Charities is taking part in the United We Serve movement by organizing 125 community service events. These include health fairs, blood donation drives, health awareness campaigns and walkathons across the

country.

Nilkanth Patel, president, BAPS Charities, said that while the organization has been aware of its responsibilities to the larger communities in America, it is making a special concerted effort to respond to President Obama's special appeal calling to service.

July 26, it hosted a health fair in Edison, New Jersey, providing free check-up and tests to over 700 people. Nearly 100 doctors, nurses and interns offered help in disciplines ranging from cardiology to ophthalmology.

Health fairs and blood donation drives were also held recently by BAPS in Landsdale, Pennsylvania, Jacksonville, Florida, and Houston.

"At a time when quality health care, routine check-ups and medical consultations are hardly affordable and largely inaccessible to many, mused Dr. Yushar Patel, a BAPS volunteer, 'BAPS Charities Health Fairs have been of great help to a lot of people providing educating seminars, free examinations and medical consultations.'

Dr. Suresh Mody and his wife, who is a dentist, have been volunteering for BAPS Charities Health Fair for seven



BAPS health fairs, above and below

years.

"This is a very good opportunity for many without adequate health insurance to meet a specialist," he said, "and get a diagnosis done from medical experts for free."

The organization has been aware that the Indian-American community should also be educated with urgency over heart health care, Dr. Mandeep Oberoi said. www.bapscharities.org