

3 more SEF eye hospitals to open in India

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IN a step forward towards realizing "vision 20/20 by the year 2020", non-profit organization Sankara Eye Foundation (SEF) which is dedicated to eliminating curable blindness in India, will soon be opening three more eye care hospitals in the states of Karnataka and Gujarat.

The construction of hospitals in Bangalore and Shimoga in Karnataka has already started while 'bhoomi puja' ceremony has been done for another one in Anand, Gujarat, said Murali Krishnamurthy, chairman and founder of the foundation.

The Bangalore hospital will also have an integrated super-speciality eye care training center that will train medical staff for service at the various Sankara Eye Hospitals and other programs all over the country.

"To achieve our mission of establishing community eye care hospitals in every Indian state, the foundation would also start facilities in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and Maharashtra in a few years' time," he said.

In the year 2004, the foundation established a state-of-the-art eye hospital at Guntur in Andhra Pradesh, through funds raised in the US. These hospitals are being set up on the model of Sankara Eye Hospital in Coimbatore, run by the Sankara Eye Society, the inspiration behind SEF.

Since its inception in 1998, the SEF initiates community eye care activities including



Murali Krishnamurthy

free eye surgeries in collaboration with Sankara Eye Society, for patients from all across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Pondicherry and Andhra Pradesh.

Through sustained efforts, the SEF has been able to increase the number of free eye surgeries from 8,000 to 70,000 per year in a span of nine years.

"Our immediate target is to raise the number of free annual surgeries to 100,000 and continue to provide the gift of vision to the visually impaired in India, which has 1/5th of the world's blind population," Krishnamurthy pointed out.

He further said that two million new cases of cataract were added every year in the country and this high incidence was attributed to lack of awareness, superstitious beliefs, lack of facilities in remote rural areas and inability of

the poor to afford quality treatment.

"I have been brought to tears when I saw families rejoice as their patients got their eyesight back. There cannot be a bigger satisfaction than to give someone the gift of light and vision. I call upon everyone to consider donating small amounts for this noble cause, treating it as a divine opportunity," he said.

Krishnamurthy informed that it took only \$30 to support a cataract operation and provide the gift of vision to those in need. All members at the SEF are volunteers and the hospitals belong to the entire community. The big or small monetary donations from the US would go a long way in accomplishing the greater mission in our motherland, he said.

The San Francisco Bay Area based Sankara Eye Foundation is run by more than 200 volunteers and is spreading its reach fast amongst Indians all over the US through fundraising programs, advertising and working with major donors. The entire funds collected under specific programs are sent to India even as extensive feedback is provided to its donors on how the money is used. The feedback has led to a large number of repeat donors.

In close partnership with the Sankara Eye Society, which has one of the largest rural outreach programs in India, the foundation conducts rural outreach eye camps to identify patients, brings them to the nearest Sankara eye care facility and provides comprehensive eye care in addition to providing lodging and food free of cost. They are also given a follow up after a month to assess results. Over 275,000 free eye surgeries have been performed so far.

Sindhis celebrate Cheti Chand

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SINDHIS celebrated their new year, Cheti Chand, at the Sindhu Center temple on March 25. Cheti Chand is celebrated on the first day of the *Chaitra* month which is known as *Chet* in Sindhi. The community celebrates the festival in honor of the birth of their *Ishtadeva* Uderolal, popularly known as Jhulelal. On this day Sindhis worship water, the elixir of life.

The program started with a puja by Pandit Bhagirath. This was followed by a ritual called Jyot Jagan, as a part of which the devotees keep one lamp, vermillion and picture of the Lord on 'Baharano Saheb' or bronze plates.

Popular bhajans in praise of Jhulelal were sung by Suresh Makhijani, Pandit Bhagirath, Suresh Kumar, Chandra Ramsinghani and Sarla Sippy. Next was the observance of the popular practice of holding 'Baharano Sahib' on head by all the devotees.

As per the tradition, a procession is taken out to the river front or sea shore. Thousands of people participate in the long processions taken out in different cities with colorful floats depicting the life of Jhulelal and other aspects of Sindhi culture. The Sindhi folk dance called 'Chhej' is performed with the procession. People go to a river or a lake and 'Baharano Saheb' is immersed in the water along with rice and sugar prasad called 'Akho'. New ventures are also started on this day.

