



SaiNet Project in Laos

9th to 13th March 2006

2006 Brings Hope and Joy to the Poorest in Laos



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A National Community Project to save the people of Laos from Malaria

“If you do not feel the call at the sight of human distress, disease or deviation from the right, how can you muster the determination and dedication necessary to serve the unseen, inscrutable, mysterious God? When you do not love man, your heart will not love God. Despising brother man, you cannot, at the same time, worship God. If you do, God will not accept that hypocrisy. God is resident in every heart: so, if you serve any one, that service reaches the God within him: it brings to you the Grace of God.”
-Baba-

Sai Ram everyone,

Sabbai dee! (“Hello” in Laos language)

March 2006 was unique and will remain etched in my memories.

I was rather fortunate enough to have been given the opportunity to be part of the SaiNet Seva/Service Project in Laos from 9th to 13th March 2006.

During this period of time, we distributed more than 5,000 insecticide-treated mosquito nets, which we call SAINETs, and 40 tons of rice to 17,000 people in 20 villages in Xiengkhuang province, Laos. Each SaiNet can last more than 5 years.

For your quick information, the total land area of Laos is approximately 237,000 sq km - an area similar to that of the United Kingdom. The main features of the country are its mountains and the Mekong River valley.



SAINET is a branded, insecticide-treated mosquito net—to be distributed, free of cost, to people living in malaria-prone areas, particularly to high-risk groups (families with pregnant women and/or children below five years), will represent a gift of selfless Love from SAI through His devotees to people in need, without any discrimination on grounds of race, religion or ethnicity.

Laos, with half the size being a forest, grows precious little but mosquitoes. Close to the top of the poverty index in Laos, there is indeed a country threatened by famine. Thinly spread over a vast mountainous area, the people in Laos have little access to primary health care facilitates or to any other basic services. Malaria, the number one killer in the area, thrives on these poor people, who are weak with malnutrition and can seldom walk the long distances to reach health case facilitates of any kind. The best protection against malaria, the mosquito bed nets, remain mostly in statistics, not in the homes of the poor in Laos, who can hardly access or afford a subsidized net.

Laos has rich vegetation, mainly monsoon forest. It has a large number of animal species, including as

many as 500 different birds. Reptiles include many snakes, including king cobras. There are a large number of lizards, from the small ghekos to 2m long monitor lizards. Mammals include wild cats, bears, leopards and tigers. There are up to 500 wild elephants in Laos, although more than twice that number are in captivity. There are a number of rare species in Laos which include rhinos and wild cattle.



There are 68 official ethnic groups in Laos, belonging to three main groups.

Lao Loum - Lao, or Lao Loum consists of about half of the population. The Lao Loum cultivate and eat wet, or sticky rice, and generally practice Theravada Buddhism.

Lao Theung are the largest hilltribe group, with 45 subgroups. They live on mountain slopes, between 300 and 900m altitude and practice slash and burn agriculture.

Lao Sung live in the high mountains of the north. They raise cattle, pigs and chickens and generally survive on a barter economy.

For me, this trip to Laos has truly enlightened me and has set my clear direction towards “seva/ service”.

To start of with, I would first like to share with you my experiences before the trip.

Brother Yugu had forwarded an email, from Dr. Yeoh and Brother CS Teng, back in January regarding the SaiNet project. In fact, an hour before I received Brother Yugu’s email, I had received another email from a friend, which mentioned the following Swami’s quote: “Service To ManKind Is Service To God”. After reading Brother Yugu’s email, I opened the next email from another friend, which had the following quote: “Hands That Serve Are Holier Than Lips That Pray”.



I wanted to be part of the SaiNet Seva/Service Project to Laos. I was very much aware of the dangers involved – Malaria, Communist Country, Broken Roads, Mountains, etc.... but I just wanted to go.



As such, I expressed my interest in joining this trip and was told that I was confirmed going. The first obstacle that I had to deal with was my health. I was very concerned about my health at that point of time, as I had been hospitalized in Singapore for few days in January due to health reasons and was continuously falling ill.

Anyway, during mid February, I got a call from one of the brothers of the SaiNet group that unfortunately, due to various requests from the Laos government, they had to reduce the size of the SaiNet group to only 10 to 12 of them and I was not selected.

I was rather upset and disappointed with the decision. I prayed to Swami to please give me the opportunity to go to Laos for seva/service. But nothing happened.

As I was not going to Laos anymore, thus I arranged for my business trip to Malaysia during that same period of time. All the business meetings were arranged.

On Thursday, 23 February at around 5:00pm, I received a call from my Malaysia office that they had to postpone all the meetings due to the unexpected traveling of the Malaysian senior management to Jakarta for another meeting. As such, we decided to postpone the meetings towards the end of March.

The next day, Friday, 24 February at around 8:20am, I had a missed call from an unknown number followed by a sms (text message) by one of the brothers from the SaiNet group, Brother Thiaga, that they wanted me to join the SaiNet group.

I was excited and immediately said yes.

I was all set. The next day, I went for the SaiNet meeting only to understand more about the challenges and dangers involved in this mission. Dr. Ho, gave us medications in order to ensure that we were in good health and minimizing the chances of us contracting malaria.

The dangers of this mission were:

- UXO (unexploded Ordnance – Mines). UXO is a major problem there. Xieng Khouang province suffers from very high levels of UXO-contamination with an estimated 25% of its land affected, UXOs are explosive weapons, bombs, shells, grenades, etc. that did not explode when they were employed during the Vietnam war, and still pose a risk of detonation, decades after the battles in which they were used.

- Uneven Roads
- Steep Roads
- Narrow Roads
- Malaria
- Mountainous Area
- Long Travelling Hours
- Language Barrier

I was scared but nevertheless, I was excited to go. I never had any doubts that the 2 emails that I received earlier on with Swami's quotes on seva plus the postponement of my business trip to Malaysia were all directed by Swami. I always believe if I have faith in Swami, He will take care of me.

There was some concern about availability of vegetarian food. However, thanks to our Sai Centre Katong ladies, Auntie Rekha, Sisters Kashmira, Hemlata and Sheila, who made so much food chapattis, snacks, chips. Wow! I carried a lot of food. The entire Singapore group were so grateful to the aunts and sisters of Sai Centre Katong.

We left for Bangkok on Thursday, 9 March, on Air

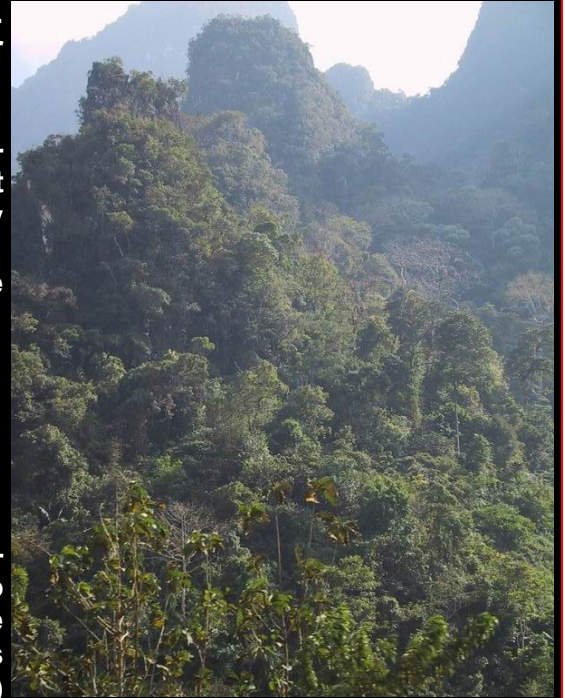


Asia. How talented are our Sai devotees! We have a Sai brother, brother Priveen, who holds an important job position at Air Asia. He joined this seva trip, so we were well taken care of by the Air Asia staff.

We arrived at Bangkok at 5:30pm and transferred on to a domestic flight to Udon Thani in Thailand at 8:00pm. Whilst on the flight to Udon Thani, I prayed to Swami and gave him my wish list. My wish list was as follow:

- Swami, I don't want to go to far-away villages in Laos. Please give me the closer villages to serve.
- Swami, please give me a nice great dynamic team.
- Swami, I don't want to fall ill.
- Swami, please save me from all the dangers.
- Swami, please don't let me be bombed by the UXO (unexploded Ordnance – Mines).

We got to Udon Thani and a coach was arranged prior to our arrival. Thanks to Brother Kartik and Sujoy, as they volunteered to arrive at Udon Thani a day before we got there to finalize all the logistics pertaining to the satellite phones (normal GSM phones don't work in remote areas outside the main area of Phonsavanh) and the 1-night hotel accommodation at Hotel Pantawee. The bus took us to the hotel.



Another team that left for Pongsavah 2 days earlier than our group were Dr. Yeoh and Brother CS Teng. Their task was to ensure everything, including the hotel at Pongsavanh, SAINETs, Rice Bags, Trucks, Monks, District Officials, were all confirmed before our arrival.

At Hotel Pantawee, I was somehow allocated to share the room with brother Priveen (who works at Air Asia).

The next morning, 10 March, the coach picked us up at 6:00am from the hotel and drove us to the Thai-Laos border. We took about an hour to pass through the border and were then greeted by the Laos team of Sai devotees. I was indeed very impressed that the Laos

students, aged around 15 to 20 years old, were joining this trip. They greeted us so lovingly and guided us onto another bus (bus plate no. 30069, adds up to 18—divine number), which drove us from the Thai-Laos border to Phonsavanh - a 13-hour ride, up the mountains (1,000m above sea level), crossing the steep curves, zig-zagging around, and passing through some villages.

When the engine of the bus started, the Singapore group decided to sing bhajans. It went on and then, the young Laos students took over. I must tell you this, when they sang, I was impressed – “100% perfect – all Sanskrit bhajans”. They even sang 1 English bhajan, which I fell in love with.

Although they are non-English and non-Indian speakers, they have memorized ample number of bhajans and they sing it full of devotion. It is just amazing!





I spoke to some of the students, who told me that they are actually from villages and have a dream – the dream to study. They go to SSEHV school in Vientiane, Laos where they learn English and attend bhajans and study circle. A Sai devotee in Laos, Brother Avi and his family, organize the SSEHV school.

They are all young but the way they behave is so wonderful. They are so dedicated to Swami. They know His teachings, more than I do, at least. Infact, since coming back to Singapore, I miss all of them!

About 15 minutes before getting to Phonsavanh, we were told that there were limited rooms available in the small hotel (Hotel Duangkeomany) that we were going to stay at. The challenge was to pair all of us in the rooms.

I had to share the room with 3 other brothers — Brothers Priveen, Kartik and Sujoy in the same room. Just imagine, we were 4 of us sharing 2-single beds. There were no extra mattresses and no extra blankets and no extra pillows in the hotel. It was a challenge. However, we all had the same mindset – “We have come here to do Swami’s work. We have come here to do seva/service. We have not come here for a holiday”. With that in our mind, we planned how we would sleep and joined the 2 beds together and the 4 of us slept. It was not difficult at all. It was just a lot of snoring that I had to bear with the entire night.

The entire 18 members of the Singapore group (divine number), 60 members of the Laos group and 15 members of the Thai group had a meeting that evening to decide on the split of members into 9 teams for day 1 (11 March) and which team would go to which village or a combination of villages.



Somehow, I was assigned to 3 villages over 2 days, which, I was told, was supposed to be the closest villages to the hotel. The villages are called Maang, Xiang Nga and Nanchat. Hurray!!! My wish came true! I had wished for the closest ones.

Wait! Let me tell you, closest does not mean easiest accessible. My team was allocated 2 villages for day 1. In my team, I had Uncle Chong from Singapore, few Laos students, a Thai Sai devotee, and Mrs. Avi from the Laos Sai Centre, Laos district official and a monk. Again, Swami granted my wish. I wanted a dynamic team and I got it.



We had to take the military truck to the villages. We had to sit on top of the rice bags and mosquito nets at the back of the truck. Let me tell you, the roads are not as smooth as in Singapore. They are very rough. We had to go through bumpy rides. Although my 2 villages were supposed to be the closest as seen on the map, the truth was that they weren’t. There were times when the vehicle almost toppled, there were times



that we had to go through 45-degree slopes and then having the vehicle break down, there were times we had to brush off the bushes. Our faces and clothes were almost covered with sand. I told Swami, "Why didn't you give me the closest villages?" Right away, I answered myself – I had asked for the closest villages based on the map but I had not asked for the easiest-accessible villages.



Anyway, we got to the 1st village – Maang and were greeted by the village chief who brought us to the village clubhouse. Hold on!!! This clubhouse is not what you see in Singapore. It was made of wood and rattan - no flooring, no light, no fan, no electricity, no water. It was all sand and some old and broken wooden bench. That's all! We started work. Some of the villagers had to walk about 3 hours to get to the so-called village clubhouse. We got all the villagers to bring their family books, which list down all their family member's details. Based on the family size and the age group and gender, we then distributed the appropriate number of SaiNets. Apart from SaiNets, each village was given 1,000 kgs of rice. This rice is to be deposited at the Sathya Sai Rice Bank, which operates like a

bank. For example, if the harvest of one farmer is not good, he can go to the rice bank and get a rice loan. He needs to repay during the next harvest. Likewise, if one farmer's harvest was very good, he can deposit the extra rice into the rice bank and can earn interest. The 1,000kgs of rice that was given to each village was to firstly clear all the rice debts that some of the villagers had and to start fresh with the rice bank system. This was to educate them how to save for the future.

We also educated them on the importance of SaiNets and how to control the spread of malaria.

When I was giving out the SaiNets to the villagers, the happiness, gratefulness, sincerity and joy shown on their faces, the tears in their eyes brought tears into my eyes. There were situations where the villagers knelt down to thank me and I had to tell them not to kneel. They were grateful in happiness that they were receiving the SaiNets and the rice, the sadness they have to go through sufferings in life, and I almost broke down in tears.



In the 2nd village called Xiang Nga, I could not hold back my tears when I saw a young boy, aged only 2, playing alone in a house with a small balloon. I asked where his parents were and I was told that the father, mother and his siblings all passed on due to malaria. He was the only one who survived. When I asked who was taking care of him, they said they themselves need to work the whole day so he is left alone most of the day. He is provided food. He's just 2 years old. That's all. I couldn't hold back my tears when I saw this innocent face and the unhappiness on his face. I gave him all my sweets and chocolates and some toys I was carrying with me. I played with him whilst the SaiNets were being distributed and the rice was being transferred to the rice bank. I just wanted to bring him back to Singapore with me. Before leaving this village, I hugged and kissed this child over 30 times and could not hold back my tears. Every time, I close my eyes, I see him and I pray to Swami to please take care of this child and all the children in Laos.



We completed the 2 villages and returned back to the hotel. Our expected return time back to the hotel was supposed to be around 4:00pm, but due to the bumpy ride, steep slopes, vehicle break down, etc... we got back to the hotel at around 7:30pm. I had a severe back pain, arms were aching, legs were aching and my buttocks were aching. However, this did not stop me from continuously doing seva.

When we alighted from our truck, we realized that 3 teams, which went to far-away villages, met a lot of obstacles. I must give them credit to go through all those obstacles. One of the vehicles had to go through 3 meters of water in the river, vehicle break down, vehicle almost falling off the cliff, Laos volunteers throwing up in the vehicle. One of the team had to stay overnight in the village, with basic facilities, due to the unexpected time required to travel to the village.

The next day (12 March), we continued to the 3rd village, Nanchat, which was also supposed to be one of the closest villages. The team was almost the same, with the exception of Uncle Chong who decided to help out Dr. Ho at the medical camp in the local hospital. This medical camp was set up temporarily by Dr. Ho at the local hospital to provide medical service to the villagers.

For the seva at Nanchat village, I was privileged to have Brother Sathya, Mrs. Arvi from Laos, some Laos students and the district official in the team. Like earlier on, I had only wished for the closest village, but not the easiest accessible village. The vehicle had to go up the mountains, passing through jungles and steep and narrow slopes, bumpy rides. The Laos students were throwing up. The truck almost toppled again on few occasions. We finally got to the village and distributed the SaiNets and helped them arrange the rice bank.

I played with the kids. They were soiled. They have no choice as their parents need to walk almost 2 hours to get water. So, a return trip to collect water takes almost 4 hours. I was told by some of the villagers not to touch the children as they were soiled and that I would soil my clothes. But I still carried them and played with them.





Their parents were happy and started chatting with me in the local language. Although I did not understand them, I could feel the happiness and gratefulness in them.

This trip of going to poor villages and giving out SaiNets and the rice bags, educating them on Malaria and rice bank, which brought happiness to the villagers totally wiped out all the fears that I had gone through during the trip.

Water is another problem in the villages in Laos. The SaiNet group is now studying the possibilities of providing water facilities in Laos.

For me, although this trip made me have body aches and some near-death incidents, it was truly a self-reflection experience and I thank Swami for allowing me to be part of this seva/service. Swami was with all of us the entire time. I know it. I could feel it. I could sense it. All my wishes came true.

I have learnt a lot. A person should strive to use every talent and skill they have, not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of the whole world.

I told myself on the return flight to Singapore to strive and continuously do the “real-seva” and not “convenience-cosmetic-seva”.

Inspired by the Gandhian principles of truth, non-violence, uplifting the poor and oppressed, promoting health and sanitation, and to educate the poor masses, I was aware of the dangers involved in the SaiNet project in Laos but I have faith in Swami. Faith is the ability to not panic. If you worry, you didn't pray. If you pray, don't worry.



If there is a next trip organized, I will definitely go! Probably we, amongst ourselves, should organize one such trip to a neighbouring needy country. Are you ready?

Khopjai. (“Thank you” in Laos language)

Jai Sai Ram

- Brother Dilip -





THE BEAUTY OF SEVA Be Part of it!

Sun Love Home

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