



Voice of Sneha

A Network for Women of South Asian Origin
Newsletter

September 25, 2005

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

From the Editor's Desk

We are delighted to bring to you the second issue of Voice of Sneha, the organization's annual newsletter launched last October.

World over, year 2005 was packed with events that will leave an indelible imprint in the lives of millions of people worldwide. The final draft of the Iraq constitution, due for a nationwide referendum on October 15, is a body blow toward fostering democracy in the Middle East. The identification of Islam as the basic source of legislation and the lack of women's rights with regard to issues such as property ownership and divorce are deeply troubling. Preeti D. Bansal, a guest speaker at the Sneha annual gala today, was former Solicitor General of New York State and is a member of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, where she advises President George Bush on foreign policy with regard to religion. Ms. Bansal oversaw the drafting of the Iraq constitution, which she condemns as Iran-like and theocratic. She reveals her thoughts on this subject and more in an interview on page

Earlier in March in New York, the Beijing+10 convention took stock of the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) developed at the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995. Ten years ago, world governments had pledged to “ensure the full enjoyment by women and the girl child of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and take effective action against violations of their rights and freedoms.”

Continued on Page 3

Dear Sneha supporter,

Welcome to our 2005 annual gala.

How quickly the year has gone by on the back of several fulfilling and meaningful projects! It seems just yesterday we inaugurated our first newsletter in October 2004 at the viewing of Dr. Kiran Bedi's documentary on Navjyoti and India Vision Foundation, her two India-based voluntary organizations. Dr. Bedi showed us how adult literacy programs for women prison inmates are conducted, how socially stigmatized children of these inmates were taken care of at day care centers and educated at schools run by her foundation.

During the year, Sneha dealt with some extraordinarily difficult and intense cases that took a lot of effort, time and commitment from our board members. We learnt, yet again, that each case is different and must be approached with an open mind and a fresh perspective. Our members encountered and resolved problems ranging from visa, child custody, abandonment of spouse and children, behavioral issues, and divorces. Our toll free phone line, 1-800-58-SNEHA, was busy and our website, www.sneha.org, was inundated by emails from women seeking help.

This year, our operating costs consisted of airline tickets and other means of transportation, medical expenses, groceries, living expenses in shelter homes, and direct financial assistance.

Continued on Page 2

Continued From Page 1

All cases for the period, we are proud to say, were satisfactory resolved This would not have been possible if it were not for the support of Atty. Nawaz Walah and Dr. Hira Jain.



Jothi Ramesh
Sneha Annual Gala - 2004

In addition to case work, Sneha, in conjunction with North Carolina-based KIRAN, a voluntary organization, submitted letters, testimonials and statistics on the status of H4 visa holders to members of the U.S. Congress. It is hoped that these documents will help expedite legal changes and allow individuals with H4 visas to obtain work authorization and qualify for VAWA status under the Violence Against Women Act. VAWA allows an abused spouse or child of a U.S. citizen or a lawful permanent resident to self-petition for a legal status in the U.S., receive employment authorization and become eligible for health benefits. VAWA provides survivors of domestic violence with essential tools that are crucial to escape the cycle of abuse and establish a safe and independent life. Currently, spouses of H1 visa holders are allowed entry into the U.S. only under the H4 visa category, which bars them from being employed, thus curbing their financial independence

In April, our Open House event in Cheshire brought Sneha to the people of southern Connecticut. We celebrated four women who have made great strides in their respective professions – Kiran Jain, a senior airport executive, Nandini Pandya, a writer

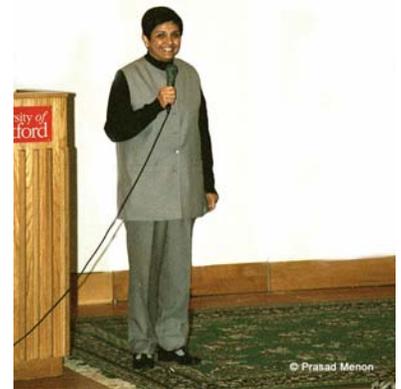
and editor, Sharmila Ghosh, an entrepreneur, and Sgt. Alpa Ladani, a medic in the National Guard of Connecticut who served in Iraq for a year. Sneha salutes Sgt. Ladani for her bravery. Only a handful of South Asians in the U.S. have ventured beyond the corporate and academic fields. Sgt. Ladani's career choice is a unique one and we are all very proud of her. Sneha recognized her achievement and nominated her for the Woman of the Year award by India New England, a newspaper for South Asians. We are thrilled that Ladani was awarded the first runner up prize.

I'd like to thank Joe Mathews Kavampurath for sponsoring our 2004 annual event featuring Dr. Kiran Bedi. Sneha also thanks all our supporters who attend our events and encourage our work.

We are pleased to introduce to you at this year's outreach event, New York-based attorney Preeta Bansal and Rekha Malhotra, a disc jockey, also from New York. You can read their interviews in this edition of the newsletter.

Once again, I thank you all in helping us to keep the momentum going.

Jyoti Ramesh
Co-President, Sneha



Dr. Kiran Bedi
Annual Gala - 2004

FUNDING FOR SNEHA

Sneha is a volunteer-based, non-profit organization. Donations are tax-exempt to the fullest extent allowed by the IRS Code: Section 501 (c) 3. Sneha is also registered with United Way. When making a donation to the United Way Campaign, please mention Sneha as the organization of your choice.

For more information please contact Sneha.

Continued from Page 1

Today, despite the progress made, these governments have no quantifiable milestones to share with us. Carolyn Hannan, Director of the Division for the Advancement of Women, announced in a public statement, “Ten years after Beijing, this review called attention to the many areas where women’s equality is not a reality --- continuing high rates of violence against women in all parts of the world including in armed conflict, increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS among women, gender inequality in employment, lack of sexual and reproductive health rights and a lack of equal access under the law to land and property, to name a few.”

The role of organizations like Sneha, among other things, is to keep our society informed on women’s rights and the lack thereof. Sneha’s efforts in creating awareness about cultural differences among South Asian women have helped sensitize local law enforcement agencies, who approach victims of domestic abuse with greater empathy and understanding. Social service agencies contact Sneha members with questions about cultural issues such as reluctance toward divorce and the role of “joint” families.

This month, the U.N. hosted the Millennium+5 summit in New York to evaluate the progress made with regard to the U.N. Millennium Declaration adopted by over 150 heads of state at the Millennium Summit in September 2000. The U.N. Millennium Project recommended strategic actions in seven priority areas to promote gender equality. These are: post-primary education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, infrastructure investments that assist women and girls, property and inheritance rights, employment, representation in national parliaments and local government, and issues of gender-based violence. The U.N. admitted that it might not reach its goal of halving poverty by 2015. “There is a threshold where we always knew we would not get the full loaf. We have to start counting slices. Half or more will do at this stage,” said Mark Malloch Brown in a public statement. Mr. Brown is chief of staff to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

This issue of Voice of Sneha features interviews with two remarkable Indian American women -- Rekha Malhotra and Preeta Bansal. Both are speakers at this event. Ms. Malhotra, better known as DJ Rekha, popularized bhangra music (from Punjab in India) across clubs in New York City. Wrote Newsday on 27 February, 2002, “Basement bhangra has been one of the hottest parties in Manhattan for nearly five years.” Malhotra, who was nominated Best DJ by New York Magazine, provided the musical input to Sarah Jones’ acclaimed Obie Award Winning one woman show Bridge & Tunnel, a story about immigrants, produced by Meryl Streep in 2004. Her production company, Sangament, produces live concerts and provides music consulting services.

Sneha Co-President Jyoti Ramesh writes about Sneha’s projects during the year. Malavika Vidwans and Mira Patel discuss casework, while Trupti Rao captures the mood at the Open House in Cheshire, which garnered seven new members. Kshiteeja Bhide takes a stroll down the memory lane and recounts the organization’s formative years. We have also republished the true story of a victim of domestic violence, whose life was transformed with Sneha’s assistance. The article originally appeared in Mantram, a magazine, in May 2005.

As always, we appreciate your support and value your feedback.

Sujata Srinivasan
Editor

Sujata Srinivasan is a Manchester-based journalist with domestic and international experience in writing stories on contemporary issues. She has written for several publications in the U.S. including The Hartford Courant and Hartford Magazine in Connecticut, and The Hindu, Indian Express, and Business Line in India. Concurrently, she is a senior editor of financial reports for investment firms. Srinivasan, who conducts writing workshops, is currently writing a biography of Mark Twain, to be produced in CD form nationwide by an Oregon-based company. Prior to this, she wrote for Business India, was a reporter for The Economic Times, and correspondent and acting bureau chief of CNBC (India), Chennai.

A NOTE ON SNEHA'S CASE WORK

Malavika Vidwans and Mira Patel

It's time once again to take stock of Sneha's case work from October 2004 through September 2005. Since all cases are strictly confidential, we have refrained not only from revealing the identities of individuals who were helped during this period, but also the exact circumstances under which they approached us. However, here is some insight into the nature of their problems and how they were resolved.

A 37 year-old woman, who was referred to us by her colleague at work, was reunited with her 13 year-old son after a separation of three years. Sneha pursued the case for a year and a half. Our members collaborated with child service agencies, arranged for legal counsel, provided travel tickets, offered emotional support, and guided her through the process of obtaining U.S. citizenship. With this, the woman is expected to gain legal custody of her son and estranged 15 year-old daughter.

Sneha helped another woman wade through legal quagmire and return to her native country with her children. Our members supported her in a shelter home for about six months and arranged for legal counsel, which was provided pro bono. Sneha is currently helping a man through custody hearing by providing financial assistance. We wish these people the very best.

These three cases apart, our members have had a busy year. Incoming calls to Sneha's toll-free hotline, 1-800-58-SNEHA, rose 35% over the previous year. We continued to focus on ongoing cases, one of which was very successfully resolved during the year. The outcome was published in May 2005 in Mantram magazine, republished here.

Contrary to popular belief, abuse transcends both education and wealth; we receive distress calls from people in all socio-economic strata. Also, Sneha hears from men too. Currently, two out of every six calls we receive are from men, who, like women, can initially feel lonely and isolated in a foreign country. In some instances, our members refer callers to certified counselors. Often, after a divorce or separation, women feel the need to rethink their lives and their jobs. In such cases, they are referred to careers counselors. Sometimes, due to the possibility of being judged by friends and family, women are wary of divulging personal problems. During such times, talking to an objective stranger appears comforting. We at Sneha often talk about the need for a social club where people can meet and talk in a neutral environment. Perhaps someone could initiate this project?

Our members continue to liaison with Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Department of Children and Family Services, and the police. These agencies are increasingly contacting us to learn about baffling cultural differences such as the role of a "joint family", dowry-related harassment, reluctance toward divorce, and interference from the in-laws. Occasionally, these agencies connect us with families who need our help.

Mental health is still a taboo subject among most South Asians. Women contact us with regard to depression, and drug and alcohol abuse within families. Our members have referred callers to psychiatrists and counselors who support Sneha's activities.

Our phones were very busy in December 2004 when the earthquake and tsunami hit parts of Asia. Reporters from across the U.S. called our members, asking to be referred to a "suffering family". We also received several calls from individuals who wanted to donate to a charitable organization in India.

Sneha's is the only toll-free phone line for a South Asian women's support group. We receive calls from Florida, Georgia and several regions in the mid west, and refer callers to their nearest South Asian / women's support group, or the local domestic violence hot line. We realized how important our toll-free line is when an irate woman of Eastern European descent remarked how unfair it is that we only help South Asians! She was directed to the help line in her state.

Monies donated by individuals and groups during the year were deployed toward legal fees and travel expenses. Our donations to shelter homes enabled women to live there for extended lengths of time as opposed to only six weeks allotted to other women. If you wish to know how our funds are managed and utilized, please contact Sneha and we will be happy to provide you with details. Donations can be made directly to Sneha or through United Way. Please continue to extent your support and remember Sneha when you make your yearly tax-free donation!

COMING OF AGE

Kshiteeja Bhide

Born as the brainchild of Dr. Shyamala Raman in 1983, Sneha is over 20 years old. Founded as a listening post, Dr. Raman and a small group of friends took the initiative to reach out to South Asian women who needed to talk about the unhappiness in their immigrant lives, women who were caught in the bind of an ethnic group that upheld the concept of maintaining and projecting a successful image even at great cost to oneself. Like a child, the organization was open-minded and curious for knowledge through its infancy. Much had to be learnt and experienced. The group grew when more friends and acquaintances joined. Everyone tried to understand why each member was there and also what each saw as women's needs based on their own experience in society. Soon, a level of comfort was created through open dialogue.

Five years later, more women in the Greater Hartford area joined Sneha. Each contributed something unique to the organization, based on her background. We learned a great deal about trust and confidentiality. Strong bonds of friendship emerged, and the real purpose of Sneha was accomplished by creating a solid support system for women. During this period, we held book readings, health seminars, and open house events to inform and educate the community about Sneha and encourage more women to join us. One of our achievements during this phase was the Golden Social, which was created to meet the needs of our parents' generation who had immigrated to the U.S. decades earlier. A coordinator was selected to arrange meetings, write agendas, and record the minutes. Our needs were few and financed by our own donations. We set up a post office mailbox and established a dedicated telephone number with an answering system. Those were the times when we waited until the end of the year to collect enough money to pay our phone bills!

Sneha's second decade was marked by development, sorrow and joy. Younger women joined the group. Their interests were varied and they flooded Sneha with new ideas. The organization became known by its creative flyers, bookmarks and, importantly, community activities. The complexity of situations, which needed much resourcefulness on our part, became learning and teaching tools for Sneha as

we developed resources to meet emergency housing, and arranged for counseling and legal assistance for women who were victims of abuse. We honed our ability to listen, assess, and promote resources among women more effectively. During this process, members leaned on each other and a marvelous network evolved. Our monthly meetings invariably pertained toward finding the most effective manner to serve the women we were responding to. The purpose of Sneha was to help with confidentiality. In a small community, this was essential in gaining the trust of those who sought our assistance. Members became active in defining their roles, developed procedures to improve organizational efficiency, and created societal acceptance of our work. We increasingly connected with other South Asian and mainstream support organizations primarily through member participation, and made inroads for smoother cooperative relationships within the community. Even at this stage, Sneha had to swim upstream against the social current, which did not acknowledge abuse against women from their spouses or in-laws as a serious issue. Our work, being of an emotional nature, took a toll on us. We learned how much we could give while maintaining our own equilibrium as volunteers. Our members decided that donations to Sneha should become tax deductible. We also established our website, www.sneha.org.

We hosted a spectacular series of events such as Sari Katha, stories about South Asian women that their saris tell. We received more calls regarding domestic violence from younger immigrant women. Women seeking jobs came to Sneha to network. We received an increasing number of calls from abandoned women with complicated divorce and child custody issues. Networking among members enabled us to utilize legal assistance at minimal or no cost from local attorneys.

I served as a coordinator for six years and president for two terms. One of my most challenging tasks during our 'adolescent' phase was to keep the growing Sneha family together. And today, over two decades later, we have come of age and matured as an organization.

Preeta D. Bansal is a member and former chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an advisor to President Bush on foreign policy on religion, and a practicing lawyer at the New York firm of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher and Flom LLP. She was formerly the Solicitor General of the State of New York, Special Counsel to the White House, counsel to Attorney General Janet Reno, visiting professor at the College of Law in Lincoln, Nebraska, and supervising editor of the Harvard Law Review. Ms. Bansal was instrumental in preventing India from being listed as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) subsequent to infamous 2002 Gujarat riots. Refreshingly, this trailblazer is an idealist at heart and her achievements sit lightly on her down-to-earth shoulders as **Sujata Srinivasan** discovered during the course of an interview that ranged from ethnic identities to diplomatic missions and the Iraq constitution.

You grew up in Nebraska and thought you were blonde until the age of 24! At what point did you perceive the Asian American in you?



My understanding of my Asian Americaness is still a work in progress. I grew up feeling and learning that race and ethnicity are not, and should not be relevant, and therefore should not matter in one's life experience in America. I did not come into my professional situations or approach public policy issues

from the vantage point of race and ethnicity. Only recently, after I got into a visible public role, did my South Asian Americaness come to the forefront.

In your experience, how does one integrate insularity and assimilation into the American mosaic?

Many segments of the South Asian American community must move from a hyper ethnic consciousness and a kind of insularity to learning about the broader American mosaic. I grew up with no sense of being part of a particular ethnic group; that's just the reality of being in Nebraska. While I

think that there are aspects of my growing up experience I missed because of that, I also think it became, in some ways, a great source of strength for me. I've come from a very, almost naïve sense that ethnicity is not important, to spending many years coming to terms with that and figuring out where that fits in. But now, coming back around, I feel that part of my contribution to the South Asian community now is to encourage them to go through the same growth pattern that I did, but in the reverse. The truth, I think, is somewhere in the middle.

You've traversed a broad professional terrain in a remarkably short span of time and dealt with unusual and sometimes funny cases. Could you talk about the time in 1999 when you defended a law that withheld paychecks from legislators until they passed a budget?!

Well, the legislators passed their own law! They gave themselves a pay raise and to politically justify it, they said they would suspend receiving their pay until they passed the budget on time. They passed this law and the very next day they went to court and challenged the second part of the law, saying it was unconstitutional to suspend their paychecks! So they passed their own law to make it politically palatable and they challenged it as unconstitutional! My role was as lawyer for the state, defending the constitutionality of the acts passed by the legislature. So my basic argument was that it may or may not be a matter of good or bad public policy, but it is not unconstitutional.

What made you leave Washington when you could have continued for a second term in the Clinton administration? Did you feel stifled by bureaucracy?

Not at all. I loved the government, I loved being part of the administration, and I loved living in Washington. The thing is I've had some extraordinary experiences at a very young age. I'd worked in the Supreme Court, I'd worked at the White House, and I had demystified many sources of power. I thought hard about the kind of person I wanted to be and looked around at the people I really admired. In my mind, I split people into the

moon and the sun. Most people in Washington seemed like moons to me. They got their light, power and strength off the reflected glory of others. They were important because they were around someone important, so their status and their identity was very derivative of others. And then I looked around and found just a handful of people whom I thought were suns. And those were the people who found the light within them and shone it outward. And I thought that's obviously the kind of person I wanted to be. I want to be one of these people who were in government for the right reasons. And that's because I want to contribute, not because I want to feel important. I looked at the people I admired and found a common pattern. Most of them had built a life, a career, an identity, and substance out of Washington.

Did you find the sun inside you when you got back to New York and was appointed Solicitor General in Attorney General Elliot Spitzer's administration?

Absolutely! I definitely felt and sensed the extent of my inner light and inner power. I wanted to move into a different mode of life and wanted to nurture and foster that.

In 1996, you traveled to Uganda to assist in the drafting of the Copyright Law. Could you recount your experience?

During the 10 days I was in Uganda, I met local artists, large business groups, lawyers and ministers. I enjoyed listening to the local artisans; it was just so clear how interested they were in copyright protection. But I don't think they quite knew what copyright law was. I just think they had a feeling that they would rightfully get paid for their labor. I came away with two impressions. One, that Uganda still had a nascent legal system. People did not know what to expect from the law, but were hoping that it would be some kind of magic bullet for many of their problems and economic needs. Secondly, they felt here was someone from the U.S. government to give them some kind of a law that will solve all their problems. It was clear to me that the U.S., in some ways, had fostered these expectations. I was just there as an advisor to government officials and law associations on what kind of legal protections would

help their population. But ultimately, they had to pass the law. That's their own process.

You oversaw the drafting of the Iraq constitution, which is currently based on sharia. Could you explain your involvement in the process? Have you been to Iraq after the American occupation?

No. I've had several meetings in Jordan and was supposed to go to Baghdad but it has not happened due to security reasons. From what we hear and the polls done, the people of Iraq want a broad and fairly liberal constitution. It's the clerics, into whose hands a lot of all this is falling, who don't want it to happen. Our role was to try and communicate effectively as to why the international legal standards that Iraq is a party to, is something that they should institutionalize. I think the final constitution as its drafted and formulated is an incredible blow. Our commission has been pushing very, very hard within the U.S. government and the international community on this issue. What we have now is an Iran-like theocracy.

We've been giving advice particularly on religious freedom guarantees in the constitution. Obviously the Iraqis are free to either accept or reject our advice and so far it appears to be uniformly rejected. We were told that they don't want to hear from anyone on religious issues. Right now, the draft is extreme and could impose a very extreme version of an Islamic state.

When you entered Harvard at 16, you remarked that it was "stifling, narrow" and you "didn't know what all the students were looking for at the end of the rainbow."

My comment was about the narrowness of some of the students that were drawn to Harvard Law School. They had blind ambition, without a focus for that ambition.

Do you think this has changed now and students have more idealism?

Harvard in the last 10 to 15 years has changed a lot since I was there. Take the Public Interest Fellowship, for example. The school is getting students affirmatively engaged in the law inherently

and not just as a trade or profession. So I do think it's much better.

Could you tell us about your recent trip to China?

We met the Vice Premier and other officials [and discussed] religious freedom and human rights issues. It was two weeks of escorted visits. We got the Chinese government's view on how religion is flourishing in China. I wouldn't say we really saw China. We saw it as the government wanted us to see it. We definitely learned about their take on religion and religious freedom. We told them how different it was from our take.

Earlier this year, Narendra Modi was denied diplomatic visa to the U.S. based on the committee's recommendations.

We put out a statement on Narendra Modi's visit a day before the day he was denied the visa. We recommended that he be denied the visa. I was thrashed on the Internet and received death threats for that. I think the fact that the Indian American community invited him to come --- I'm not talking about the legality of the situation or anything like that--- reflects very poorly on Indian Americans and Hindu Americans. I did not think the invitation of Modi, after the Gujarat incident, as a political, public relations, and moral position, was right. I hope that Indian Americans will get past this need to defend every single government official just for the sake of it, and start drawing distinctions about what they believe in and what they don't.



Sneha Open House
Trupti V. Rao

Sneha's open house luncheon on April 10, 2005, helped disseminate information to prospective members and donors on the organization's activities and goals. The event was held at the Youth Center in Cheshire for the convenience of those living in southern Connecticut, since most Sneha events are typically held in the Hartford area. We also brought together four successful South Asian women speakers from diverse fields – airline, publishing, cultural assimilation, and the military – to share with us their career experiences.



Kiran Jain

Kiran Jain, Director of Marketing and Route Development at Bradley International Airport in Hartford, reflected upon her job and career growth, while Nandini Pandya, a writer, editor, and IT professional, who incidentally is a Sneha member, recounted how she started Desijournal.com, an online magazine for South Asians. Sharmila Ghosh, founder of Cross Cultural Collaboration, Inc., explained how her company assists non profit agencies and corporations in building a cohesive, multicultural work environment. The audience was transported from cultural assimilation to Alpa Ladani. A medic in the Armed Services

since 1997, Ladani recently returned from serving in Iraq for a year. She was awarded the Army Commendation medal, an honor given to those who distinguish themselves through acts of heroism. Ladani was also the first runner up for the India New England Women of the Year 2005 award. Painting word pictures, she described her experiences in Iraq, and how she was fascinated by the Armed Forces at a young age.

Unsolicited feedback from the audience revealed that the open house was a great success. People were inspired by the four talented and courageous women and appreciated the opportunity to know more about our organization and its activities. Subsequently, seven participants became Sneha members and we warmly welcome them.



Sharmila Ghosh

The Power to Empower



Sisters in arms: Madhu Chandra, Uma Narayanan and, Jyoti Ramesh, all Board members of Sneha

Anusha Shrivastava

Sitting pretzel-legged on the floor in a sparsely furnished room, Reena Patel*, 33, seemed calm. Her son, Tejash, 12, had stepped out to play with a friend, so Patel could describe her checkered life over the past 14 years without pause or embarrassment.

Tricked into marrying a gambler in Ahmedabad whose first wife had dumped him, Patel became the victim in an abusive relationship where she was finally “exported” to the U.S. to help her husband’s sister, a brand new mother. Her own kids, then five and three, were sent away to boarding school and later brought to the US, without her permission or knowledge.

Speaking in an even tone, she broke down only once: to reveal she had been raped by her sister-in-law’s boyfriend, expressly to intimidate her, forcing her to leave the “home” she had been made to slave in for over five years, fleeing without her children, a \$10 bill in her pocket and a green card she obtained surreptitiously by “marrying” a janitor, who took pity on her. “I found a job in a cafeteria, slept on the floor in a studio and ate what I could at work because I had neither utensils nor money to buy groceries and cook,” Patel said, regaining her composure.

A co-worker told her about Sneha, a non-profit organization operating in Connecticut since 1983 to help South Asian abuse victims like herself. Sneha helped her get her son out of a foster home in December last year, where he was sent upon being abandoned by her in laws, when they sold their home and business, moving to an undisclosed location four years ago. “They took her daughter away,” said Mira Patel, a volunteer with Sneha who has been accompanying Reena to court. “She doesn’t know where.”

Handling nearly 30 cases like this each year, Sneha’s group of volunteers has learned abuse is neither restricted to an economic group nor is affected by the length of a marriage, often includes alcoholism and job-induced stress and the women often put up with it all because of their children. “In most cases, the women are here on an H4 visa and are dependent on their husbands so the money issue comes in,” says Uma Narayanan, a volunteer since 1984. “They don’t want to go back to India because they don’t want the shame of being divorced.”

So what can “they” do?

Jyoti Ramesh, one of 12 board members, says counseling may work but, most often, husbands don’t participate. “Some have the typical Indian mentality that counseling is not for them.”

Further, says Madhu Chandra,

Checklist for abuse victims considering leaving home

- If you have minor children, take them with you. When there is a dispute over custody of the children, you will have a better chance of getting the custody if the children stay with you.
- Take all immigration papers - green cards, passports, visas - so that you can handle your own legal immigration status efforts, or leave the country when you want to.
- Take all identification papers - birth and marriage certificates, social security cards, driver’s licenses.
- Take all educational certificates - college or high school diplomas/certificates that you may need when you apply for employment.
- Take financial documents - check books and bank papers, stocks, bonds, or any papers that you feel may be important. If you have a joint account remember that both of you have the legal right to take all the money out of the joint account.
- Take personal belongings - jewelry, prescriptions, medications and health care items that you may need for yourselves or the children.

Source: www.sneha.org

treasurer at Sneha, many women feel they are responsible for making a marriage work so they suffer until the abuse reaches a point where they have no option but to move into a shelter. Sneha also co-ordinates with other groups in other states, to find place in shelters or volunteers to take the abuse victims to court or even talk to family and friends on their behalf.

In Reena’s case, Sneha even raised money to buy tickets for Reena’s mother to visit so she could watch over Tejash while Reena works two jobs.

The next challenge?

To find Reena’s daughter and reunite the 15-year-old with her mother and brother, who haven’t seen her for the past four years.

“One thing at a time,” Reena says, pointing out that her citizenship interview is scheduled for later this month. “Right now, I don’t even have the money to feed an additional person.”

Her greatest worry? “My daughter is with the same man who raped me.” •

(*Not her real name.)

This article originally appeared in Mantram magazine in May 2005. It is republished with permission.

THEY KNOW HOW TO GIVE
Madhu Chandra

Recently, my family and I had the good fortune of being invited to a party hosted by a nanny from South Asia. The roughly 40 or 50 odd guests crammed into a small apartment on a hot summer day. These folks were South Asians and worked as cab drivers, nannies and domestic workers. My guess is that most of them did not have the necessary papers to make them legal immigrants. They, I believe, are part of the millions of undocumented workers in this country that newspapers and politicians talk about. These people, by all indications, did not seem to have much money or material possessions. From their conversation, it appeared that a large portion of their earnings went toward their families back home. However, from the way they treated each other, I came to realize that what they have is a great capacity to give. This particular group had taken under their wing an 87 year old white woman who lived across the hall from them, whom everybody affectionately referred to as “mama”. In the course of the evening, I learnt that mama would have been in an old age home if it were not for the care of these people. Although mama has grown children who live nearby, she has dinner with her “adopted family”, parties with them on weekend and enjoys dancing to Punjabi music!

I spoke with many men and women at the party to learn more about them, their lives, their aspirations and frustrations. I came back with many questions that we as American citizens should think about. Should these people be accepted or should they be deported? The issue of undocumented workers has been debated in this country for a long time. But I started thinking about it only after my encounter at the party. Thus far, I had been relatively untouched by this debate and have not had a strong opinion one way or another. But meeting these people face to face and seeing their humanity and compassion makes me wonder, why can't we accept them people as immigrants? The people I met were employed and were not on Welfare or Medicaid. Many of have left their families back in their home countries and have not seen their parents, spouse and children for many years. In the past, we have come across just over achieving professions of South Asian origin --engineers, doctors, investment bankers and professors. Indeed, they have made many contributions to our society. But now shouldn't we do something to bring illegal workers out of the shadows and provide them with the dignity they so richly deserve?

This essay reflects the opinion of Madhu Chandra and not of the organization.

AD SPACE

BREAK FREE OF “DESI” STEREOTYPES, SAYS DJ REKHA

By Anusha Shrivastava

When an entertainer with Indian roots suggests you cut back on watching “desi” television (desh in Hindi means country, desi is a term used by Southeast Asians that refers to someone or something from one’s native land), you probably need to pay attention.

“Indian soaps reinforce disturbing ideas about women,” said Rekha Malhotra, better known as DJ Rekha, the woman responsible for making ‘basement’ bhangra (lively Punjabi music and dance) in New York a draw for hundreds of desis and non-desis alike. “They are overly dramatic and don’t address real issues facing South Asian women.”

The issues she referred to are domestic abuse, the empowerment of women, and social justice. Having worked as an intern with New York-based Sakhi, an organization for victims of abuse, Malhotra said she is cognizant of the existing problems and hopes to help by talking about issues that women should consider important.

As seen through her prism of working in the field of entertainment and socializing with Indians living in the U.S., abuse against women is often both physical and verbal. “This is rampant in our community because women are often not allowed to speak up,” she said. Further, she pointed out that immigrants are disadvantaged since they have to navigate around the social and legal structures in a foreign land, without the support of their families.

So, what should women do to help themselves?

“Whatever road they take, they should strive to network and be really good at it,” Malhotra said, acknowledging that breaking away and traversing the road “less traveled” – entertainment in her case – was not easy.

“You have to socialize within the industry so you can break into the old boys’ network. You have to forge connections. You have to fulfill your interests and strive to do what you really want to do,” she emphasized.

S. Mitra Kalita, author of *Suburban Sahibs*, an exploration of South Asians living in the U.S. and a reporter for *The Washington Post*, is all praise for Malhotra. “She is an example of a South Asian woman

who has had a tangible impact on mainstream culture through a non-traditional medium (bhangra). She does her own thing and that in itself is inspiring.”

Mocking the stereotype of the Indian parent desperate to see their child take up a ‘stable’ profession, Malhotra says people assume that if you are a doctor, a lawyer or employed in corporate America, you have stability. “That’s not the case,” she said. Citing the example of a girl she met recently who wanted to be in the entertainment business and yet wanted to be a “good Indian kid,” following what her parents said about going to college, Malhotra suggested to the girl that she study communications and the business of media. “You’ll like yourself better if you do what you really like,” she advised the girl.

“The life of an artist is certainly not stable but neither is the life of a person in the corporate world. There is too much hype about college and the American dream. There is no necessary connection between the two and you can only be successful if you are truly interested in the work you want to do,” Malhotra said.

Anusha Shrivastava is a writer based in West Hartford, Connecticut. She currently writes for the Hartford Business Journal and freelances with the Hartford bureau of The Associated Press. She has been a columnist for Mantram, a New York-based magazine targeted at South Asian professionals living in the U.S., writing primarily about lifestyle and child-rearing issues. Prior to this, she worked for the business desk of The Associated Press in New York, the Web site of The Globe and Mail in Toronto, and TV18, a broadcast house in New Delhi.

Board Members

Kshiteeja Bhide
Madhu Chandra
Sushma Godha
Parvathi Hosain
Rubina Islam
Sree Menon
Uma Narayanan
Jyotsna Patel
Mira Patel
Jyothi Rao
Trupti Rao
Aysha Saeed
Sheela Sinha
Malavika Vidwans

General Members

Sandya Shetty
Minati Roychoudhuri
Amena Islam
Malathi Kesaree
Lata Patel
Shazia(Nina) Raza
Sarju Shah
Sowmya Sundarajan
Jaya Ganta
Bela Mandavilli
Rama Bhalla
Usha Bhargava
Veena Sridhar
Aruna Ramanan

SNEHA THANKS:

INDIVIDUALS

Joe Mathew Kavumpurath
Kokila & Jothi Purushotaman
Dr. Rajiv Saxena
Mallika Kantayya
Dr. Krishnan Gopal
Drs. Naseem & Shaikh Deen
Dr. Hira Jain
Atty. Nawaz Wallah
Dimple & Anand Shukla
Dr. Chittrajan Sahay
Sujata Srinivasan
Azam Saeed
Dr. Jaheda Begum Sumaw
Indra Nooyi, President &
CFO, PepsiCo
Neelam Ruchandani
Nandita Ruchandani
Sheela & Gyanendra Joshi

NON-PROFIT GROUPS

- Sakhi, NY
- Manavi, NJ
- Geetanjali, CT
- Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV)
- Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS)

BUSINESSES/UNIVERSITIES

- Asia Grocers
- Cosmos International
- Ambassador of India
- Entegram LLC
- PBM Printers
- BharatUS.com
- University of Hartford
- University of Connecticut

Voice of Sneha

Published by Sneha Inc.

Editor: Sujata Srinivasan
Layout/Design: Arun Srinivasan
Printer: PBM Printers

Contents © 2005 The authors

Sneha Inc.

P.O Box 271650

West Hartford CT 06127-1650

Phone: 860-658-4615

Email: sneha@sneha.org

Toll Free: 800-58-SNEHA (76342)

Website: www.sneha.org