



Status of Indian Women Circa 2007

From the Editor's Desk

Year 2007 marks a big turn for Indian women. This is the year that Pratibha Patil changed the history of India by becoming the first Indian woman President, Indra Nooyi changed the history of American business by breaking the glass ceiling and becoming the President and CEO of a multinational giant PepsiCo and Sunita Williams became the first woman to spend the longest time in Space! Yes, indeed we have come a long way, but these women are still the exceptions. Indian women, as a group, have a long way to go in breaking the barriers that have kept them down socially, professionally and economically.

When one thinks about portraying India, it is mind boggling to even attempt to do so in a cohesive way. We are, historically, an amalgam of many races and many cultures; all bound by common threads of traditions with individual variations among states, castes and sub castes. Add to that, India's diversity comprised of extraordinary economic growth and of crumbling or inadequate infrastructure, of well educated few and the uneducated masses, of the growing new rich middle class and the poor majority, and you can assess the difficulty in creating a portrait of India. The same is true of attempts at defining the Indian women and their perception of Indian society and issues that affect them. To each of us, the perception of the status of Indian women is very much colored by our own identity, social status and stage of life. So, when we talk about South Asian or Indian woman, we may all interpret the status related information differently.

Unfortunately in India, for many women, biology is destiny. A destiny that keeps them on an unequal footing with men in all important aspects that define the quality of life. Indian women's issues are; poverty due to not having equal property rights, female feticide due to avoidance of potential dowry issues at the marriageable age and girls being perceived as a liability in general. As such, scant attention or resources are available to them for accessing good education, well paying jobs or equal pay compared to men for same type of

work. It is a culture with tacit acceptance of inequality, small injustices at personal level and licentious behavior of men resulting in HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Some may see women's issue as real problems and others simply as the feminist bias but numbers do not lie and they are the only indicator of some common issues regardless of race or original ethnicity. The latest data on Indian census was conducted in year 2000 and here are some facts:

- The ratio of men to women has been on the decline for some time with the latest census pegging it at 927 women to 1000 men on national basis. Except for Kerala (with more females than men comprising the population) most states reflect the overall trend. The worst ratio is in Punjab at 793 women per 1,000 men. In some states, the number of women is so low that polygamy is making an unofficial comeback, i.e. one woman satisfying the sexual demands of more than one man in the family, a situation rife for abuse.

This is an outcome of female feticide practiced within many sub-cultures of India, which is further aided by abortions thru the use of modern technologies for early sex determination such as, amniocentesis and ultrasound although they have been outlawed in India.

- Additionally, poor postnatal care for female children is also responsible for this imbalance. According to a UNICEF report, 25% of the 12 million girls born in India will not live beyond the age of 15. A third of these deaths occur before the first birthday. Add to these the high mortality postpartum deaths among new mothers due to poor post birthing care and HIV among other women and you have the complete dark picture of women's demographic profiles.
- In 1991, the literacy rate for females aged

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SNEHA At A Glance

A not for Profit 501 C 3 organization serving South Asian Communities in CT, NE and USA for the last 22 years.

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Contd. From Page 1

Status of Indian woman Circa 2007

7 plus years in age was 39% to males' 64% . The rate of annual growth in female literacy since 1991 is 11% (for men it is 9%). More working class women are now understanding that the way out of poverty is thru education and as such, many mothers are encouraging their daughters to attend evening schools specifically being setup by Working Women's Forum (NGO) to accommodate the working girls. And more women are finishing middle school.

- Participation of Indian women in the paid workforce is at 15% according to a report, "Women and Paid Work", a project of UNPAC. The unpaid working labor force is large but research on its monetary value was hard to come by. The good news is that globalization is offering opportunities to women in well-paying jobs. Coupled with the national push for empowerment of women and the goals to bring economic parity between men and women, the rise in paying jobs by multinational corporations and Indian companies is creating huge opportunities for women. This may help mitigate the problem of Dowry as a condition for marriage, provided these women stand up for their equal rights when considering marriage.
- Despite 21 women heading Indian companies, overall few women are in decision-making positions. The job growth is primarily in fashion, media, service oriented jobs and software development and information technology.
- Women are making inroads in the public sectors in administrative jobs where males have traditionally dominated. Nearly 1,000,000 women have been elected to 500,000 village Panchayats. In national politics the number of women in the Parliament is at 9% down from 11% in 1988.

Additionally, the push for empowerment of women has spawned many reforms to the old laws and introduced new ones to help India move towards its goal of equality.

- One of the most important reforms was in property ownership by daughters and married women in the joint family system. Under the new amended Act , women will have equal rights to ancestral properties in agricultural lands across the states and in case of the joint family system, a daughter can now claim her share by right because she is a coparcener in joint family partnership.

The importance of this law is *huge* for Indian women because not having the right to property has kept women in poverty and stuck in violent or abusive relations because they could not rightfully go home again . Women in such situations were advised even by her own family to make peace with her fate and live through it. Research shows that in Kerela where women have equal rights in property ownership and who own property are treated better by the family and the society. Generally, Women who do not have their own resources are more likely to be victims of violence.

Many laws have been on the books in India, but their implementation is not strict. To this day the Dowry system still prevails as does unequal pay and many other societal ills that keep women down. Laws provide a cover but it is Indian women who have to take charge of their future and their lives and claim their dignity.

-Pratima Mehta



Trupti Rao discussing Mental Health Issues at April 2007 Open House



Thirity Umrigar discussing VOW at Book Reading in September 2006



Audience engrossed in the discussion on VOW with Thirity



Voice of SNEHA



A Letter To Sneha Supporters From The Co-Presidents

As Mira and I took the reigns over from Jyoti and Uma in April 2007, we were a little anxious about following the previous president's exemplary leadership. We continued efforts to expand the reach of SNEHA within the community, as well as among various governmental and non-government agencies that promote the causes specific to South Asians. And, we continued supporting the needs of families who are facing difficulties in adjusting to bi-cultural living in a country that is so significantly different in lifestyle and value system.

2006: In Rearview

SNEHA is growing; more demands are made on the Board members' time and efforts.

This year, we attended many conferences and workshops. Some members attended the SAALT (South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow) meeting in April 2008. We met people from many organizations all over the U.S and learned about happenings and trends in other states. We learned of legislations in the Immigration, and the Hate Crimes departments. We strategized about fund raising, outreach and publicity. We met other domestic violence groups and shared experiences.

In April APAACT (Asian Pacific American Coalition of Connecticut) went before the state legislature to defend a bill being considered to form an advocacy group to address the needs of the rapidly growing Asian-American population. Kshiteeja Bhide, a Board member spoke about domestic violence issues with special reference to the need for South Asian and Asian counselors and social workers. She also addressed the issue of people with H4 visas who, while being legally in this country, cannot access help from the state for legal and mental health issues.

The Publicity and Outreach committee has been busy as well. We attended GOPIO (Global Organization of People of Indian Origin) program at Stamford. SNEHA was represented at the Bengali Mela this year. Kerala Association of Connecticut donated part of the funds raised in their 'Shrutilaya' music program to SNEHA.

In April 2007, SNEHA held Open House with the theme 'Mind and Meditation'. The latest U.S. census report states that in USA 40,000 South Asians suffer from mental health issues. Their cultural taboos and ignorance of the system in U.S. prevent people from seeking help. We at SNEHA wanted to start a conversation about this issue. Mental health professionals Dr. Hira Jain and Ms. Kshiteeja Bhide addressed various mental health and chemical dependency issues in the South Asian population and provided guidance regarding how to recognize and seek help. Ms. Lynn Kaplan of Transcendental Meditation™. spoke about the advantages of Transcendental Meditation as an adjunct or alternate way of dealing with mental health issues. In spite of the "unpopular" subject matter, the open house was well attended with active audience participation. (see photo on pg.2)

In September 2006, SNEHA hosted a book reading of Thrity Umrigar's novel, 'The Space Between Us', a novel that deals with the issues of violence in the family and community. The novel touched a cord with SNEHA members as it deals with domestic violence. It also tells about relationships developed between an upper class woman and her domestic servant and how each, despite their social status and differences in education, still were subjected to emotional and physical violence. It also highlighted the indifference that our culture shows towards their plight. The author was present to sign books and answer questions. This generated interesting discussion. SNEHA presented views from a panel of 'book reviewers' that included a high school student, women of different age groups and professions and also a view from a male member of our society. The different points of views were engaging. (See Photographs on pg.2)

Awards and Recognition

SNEHA was honored for 'Outstanding Community Service' by the South Asian Bar Association of Connecticut. This recognition means a lot to SNEHA, as we work very closely with lawyers, dealing especially in Immigration and Family law. Past President and Board member Uma Narayanan was a finalist for the '2007 Woman of the Year' by India New England. Founder of SNEHA Shyamala Raman was honored by the State of CT Children & Family Services for 'Advocacy for Women'. We are very proud of their achievements.

We hope to continue to do the work we do and hope that you will continue to support financially and encourage SNEHA as you have done so far. We all become stronger as a community when we take responsibility to help our own people.

Thank You.

- Malavika Vidwans and Mira Patel.



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CASE UPDATE: 2006

For new immigrant women adjusting to life in a new place, lacking support system, being non-fluent in the local language are contributory to struggles for survival itself. A battered woman who is not a legal resident and whose immigration status depends on her partner, is isolated and cultural dynamics prevent her from leaving or seeking assistance from the legal system. These factors contribute to the higher incidences of abuse among immigrant women. Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women. Domestic abuse knows no boundaries. It occurs among well-known and little known, the rich, the poor, the well educated and uneducated, foreign-born and American-born, all cultures, racial and religious groups. Following are a few statistics from NCADV.

- ⇒ 5.3 million women are abused each year.
- ⇒ 1,232 women are killed each year by an intimate partner.

During the past year Sneha dealt with approximately 100 calls. Since, we are the only organization to have a 1-800 phone number, about 25% of the calls are women needing assistance, from out of the state. In those instances, we refer them to our sister organizations in those states. However, many states lack a similar set-up, so we act as a conduit to help our clients connect with a group that is geographically close.

The clients who approach Sneha have a variety of concerns, so typically we deal with multiple issues at once, ranging from domestic abuse to immigration and to acclimatizing themselves with living in this country. In some cases, children are involved so inevitably, child-custody comes into play. We also came across few cases where women lost a lot more in divorce settlements because of the woman's inability to seek timely advice from the right lawyer. Ashamed, they keep their plight secret from the community and do not obtain support from friends or neighbors. Correct advice in these situations is of vital importance to avoid hardship later. SNEHA owes a big "THANK-YOU" to many lawyers, physicians and counselors who have helped with constant guidance and support. We also thank all who helped with transporting such clients to various appointments. Sneha depends on you at a time of need!

- Uma Narayanan and Rubina Islam.

"In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."

- George Orwell



Finding A Bahu Post Independence

Arranged marriages offer an alternative to dating based marriages and I am not discussing the relative merits of either but my dismay is about the fact the arranged marriage process – the commoditization of prospective bride and groom, the reliance on astrological rituals and the tacit expectation of dowry- has not changed an iota even in post-independent India! Why are we, especially the well-educated middle and upper class still clinging to traditions that are no longer relevant and do not empower any party; the parents of the bride or the groom and most certainly not the Indian women?

We all know parents who take their responsibility to select the best “Bahu” for their son seriously. The family, usually educated, progressive and sometimes even with western tastes searches for specific qualities in their future daughter-in-law when looking for a “bahu”. Primarily, the criteria includes a “good family” (translation-rich one, preferably from their own caste), good looks, and Indian family values. Even though, they (the family) do not seriously believe in astrology, they want to compare horoscopes. They do not plan to ask for dowry but expect the girl’s family to offer expensive “gifts” (the new euphemism) and plan an elaborate wedding. This is typical of an Indian arranged marriage process.

There still is heavy reliance on astrology to determine compatibility between a boy and a girl to the exclusion of other life style attributes. There is the “Indian family values” as a qualification for an ideal bahu (translation- An obedient one who follows mother-in-law’s advice without question, and her career is never her first priority). There is strong belief amongst the US based Indian Diaspora that only a “desi” girl understands the family values, not an “amariki girl”. Many of today’s mothers-in-law seem to have forgotten their own struggle to win independence and freedom when they got married and instead of helping young women to find the work-life balance, they are still demanding the old fashioned values from their daughters-in-law.

One would think that today’s parents (mothers, especially the educated and/or professional women), would have a more progressive mindset when looking for a daughter-in-law, favoring education over looks, compatibility in life styles over horoscope matching and a work-life-balance ethos over the “Indian family values” where the daughter-in-law is supposed to ‘think of everybody else in the family first’. Unfortunately, not much has changed in the process of arranging marriages between 1947 and 2007.

Dowry has been officially banned in India since 1960s, yet even amongst the educated middle class families, the custom of dowry is alive and well. My friends in Delhi told me that for an engineer, it is customary to expect Rs. 25 lakhs and a car or Rs. 50 lakhs if there is H-1b visa. In my informal survey, all the girls’ parents (without exception) acknowledged that they might have to pay dowry.

Since independence, Indian women have made tremendous progress in many fields. A typical urban middle-class woman is well educated and usually has a good job. So, one would think that in 2007 women will have a very different experience with arranged marriages than their mothers in 1977 or grandmothers in 1947. One would think that she would have a say about who does she wants to share her life with and who is the most qualified person to share her dreams and aspirations. Why don’t modern women shoulder some of that responsibility with parents? Why do they let their life be hijacked right from under them? (Yes, even some America born Desi women succumb to the family pressure!)

There is a quote by Andy Warhol, “*They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.*” So, are we ready to change the process of arranged marriage? We need to stop thinking of our sons and daughters as commodities in the marriage market. It is time to introduce more choices, more freedom of expressions and more discussions about what our sons and daughters want from their life-partners. Shouldn’t we put more faith in understanding our children – their life styles, their aspirations, their likes and dislikes than on horoscopes? Isn’t it time to pledge not to accept dowry or pay dowry? Dowry is not going to disappear unless each one of us relinquishes this antiquated, demeaning and burdensome custom. We, the post-independence generation, owe it to our children to bring about real change by making arranged marriage a truly democratic process. And those of us born outside India, need to understand that our lives are far different than those who are born and raised in India. We need to factor that in when facing the most critical, life-changing decision and raise thought provoking questions such as :

Why Does Tradition Have A Strangle Hold on us?

We are still insisting on ancient custom without modifying it to modern times and perpetuating financial burdens for future generations.

Why Don’t Women Support Women?

As parents, instead of strengthening the spine of our children to stand up for our rights, we still ask them to succumb to the will of elders. Does anybody really have all the answers? Life is a 50/50 chance, why let our fears hold us down?

Why Do We Put a Price Tag On Human Life?

In this age of enlightenment , is it morally right to treat another human being as “property”?

Where is Our Thinking Hat? If Not Us Then Who?

Why aren’t we outrage at injustices that ensue from such blind adherence to old modes of thinking. Why are we so complacent?

-Sharayu Tulpule



850 Grams of Gold

It is 2007. India still holds to her long-standing value system when it comes to marriage. A girl and boy are placed on a 'Tarazu,' or weighing scale. Antiquated in most modern civilizations where the union of two people is based on their personal preferences, this tradition is still in practice! In India the weighing in on the tarazu is engaged in by both sides of the family, entangling them in the transaction of money, goods and property, which serves to cement the bonds between families whose tentacles will be checking the balance. The perceived importance of this is the greater psychosocial bonding for the community of the two individuals and their immediate and extended families.

The investment on the tarazu starts at birth and binds these individuals in multiple ways. This transaction is kept account of by the older aunts and uncles and others who remember who gave what, when, and to whom and who fell short, who was offended at not receiving what they'd hoped for or what was expected to be given or received as per custom. Failure invariably brings more masala to the chatter. Occasionally, there is the silver lining of having received more than expected, which is often quietly celebrated, but rarely shouted from the rooftops. The expectation then bears upon the girl and boy on the tarazu. If she comes with beauty, she may stand in the center of the scale, her family freed from adding on material items. If the boy's side of the family pursues her for her beauty, then that family may adorn her with more than her own.

Beauty in India is generally equated with fair skin, i.e., fairer than the average of that group of people. For a girl, beauty of course is the wild card, a genetic stroke of luck. For the boy, this wild card is only a fringe benefit. His stand on the scale must be accompanied by academic or professional accomplishments, which translate to earning potential. In the last century this correlated to being a doctor, engineer or academician; now it includes IT professionals who earn a good income. Men in general can then be sought after and the giving increases exponentially with their worth on the tarazu. What is the fate of the boy who does not fit into the higher earning bracket? He may be complemented by an extended family system earning capacity, have inherited wealth or seek the same correlation on a lesser socio economic level. The beat however goes on.

What happens to the girl who is average looking? Here the known components of contributing to her scale have multiple and unforeseen consequences. Those are often the situations that we see in women who contact Sneha. Add to these inherent value system differences, psychological factors pertaining to individual mental health issues or those emanating from family dysfunction and top it off by being an immigrant with its adjustment problems and ongoing life challenges in a new country. These are enough to wobble the tarazu, requiring a continuous balancing act.

Any one woman's story is not vastly different from another, and symbolizes the tarazu theme. Take the story of a young genteel Muslim woman who graduates from college away from home, encouraged by her mother who comes from an egalitarian background. The girl's maternal grandparents divided their land equally between their sons and daughters. Her father, in a limited income government job, follows an honest path in life (a courageous feat in India today). She is to wed a young new IT professional. He is good looking, but she is 'average.' On the basis of the boy's future earnings projection, the girl's maternal uncles produce 850 grams of gold to add to her scale. Additional material goods of a moderate scale are asked for and received by the boy's side. The boy announces to the girl immediately after the marriage that since he did not ask for much and agreed to marry her even though she was 'ugly,' she is to consider herself his slave. She is punched, pinched, beaten, whipped and verbally abused for the next eight years. Why does she tolerate this? She had self-esteem and self-worth before marriage. Where did it go? A chaste girl from a conservative and quiet upbringing initially does not know otherwise.

Hindu or Muslim, the Indian value system hostages the woman to "make it work," at much cost. The consequence of victimization is evident when she states, paradoxically, that she stayed because she loved him and thought that the situation might get better. There was also the love, affection, kindness heartfelt good wishes that had come from a caring and emotionally close extended family. Then there was the 850 grams of gold. Given with love, this investment is part of the emotional burden the woman carries to "make it work." The turning point came with the birth of a child, who was traumatized from witnessing the ongoing violence, understanding that it was wrong. He did not fear his father and from the mouth of babes came truth. The woman knew she must change the course of her life and sought help with the assistance of a few good friends.

If in this day and age a girl and boy want to make a union, let them stand on their own merits on the tarazu. Gifts ought to be given to each by their own families for them to keep as their own assets. Then allow them meet each other and life head on. America is a land that lets you forget who you were. It lets you be who you want to become.

-Kshiteeja Bhide

“ India’s quest for freedom, dignity and self respect for all citizens can never become a living reality unless women are equal partners in all processes of development and governance.” - Dr. -

- Manmohan Singh



Voice of SNEHA

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Growing Up In America

If you ask what I am, this is what I would say: I am the definition of a confused American-Desi teenager. I was born and raised in the 90's, the era of moral decline and economic development. I get very bored watching classical Indian dance but I love to dance to Bhangra. I love Hip-hop and Hindi songs. I like to eat pizza, burgers, fries and soda but I also enjoy Nan, basmati rice, curry and mango lassi. I am proud of my heritage but I always make fun of Bollywood movies. If you read the past few sentences and realized that each sentence basically contradicts itself, I'd like to let you know I did that on purpose because those sentences are what my life is like.

Growing up in this country is hard especially in New England where the desi population isn't right next to each other like New York City. My parents came to this country in the 80's and I was born in Hartford. My primary languages were Bengali and Urdu. Though I was born in the U.S., I did not pick up English until I was 4 years old. Raised in an all Caucasian neighborhood, most of my school friends were Caucasian.

I always knew that I was different, my parents always acted in a different manner than other parents did. Even in my own community, I was different because I was Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi (very long story).

My parents, especially my mom, had always instilled a deep pride within me for our culture but my dad, who was the more "Americanized" one, always told me that this was our country and the land of freedom. I was always so puzzled by this because sometimes my mom would use the word "amreekenized" like it was a curse word (!) but my father would speak English to me when I was younger so I would learn it. My mother was always proud of our culture and my dad always talked about the problems of political chaos in the Indian subcontinent. In a way, I got the best of both worlds. My mother was traditionalist while my father was a modernist.

One thing both my parents agreed heavily on was academics. My parents always stressed education. A "B" grade has never and will never satisfy them. They always wanted an "A", even when in high school where there is no "A+", my mom demands it.

I was never allowed to go out to anyone's house unless my mother knew their family. When I became a teenager and the beginning of the dating process was going on with my friends, I was in the dust. My mother had told me that I could not go out on a date until I was married (ha ha ha!). Anytime the topic of marriage came up, my mom said she would find a nice desi girl for me when I was of age and I would just blurt out "NO WAY!"

Other than some very rare occasions, the topic of the opposite sex never really came up, it was a taboo subject. Sometimes I would question my mother's views but at the same my fathers views as well. I have been the victim of some racism after 9/11 but I've learned how to deal with it.



Contd. in next column

SNEHA's Trupti Rao Draws Attention To South Asian Women's Issues

On June 19, 2007, Trupti Rao, a Vice President on SNEHA's board provided a workshop at the 2007 National Center for Victims of Crime Conference: Advancing Practice, Policy, and Research, which was held in Washington D.C. from June 18 to June 20. The focus of the conference was to share practice, research and policy ideas related to better meeting the needs of crime victims. Participants attending the conference included psychologists, social workers, domestic violence advocates, law enforcement officials, attorneys and educators. Trupti provided understanding of Asian women's issues zooming in on the findings of the 1999 National Violence Against Women Survey, which revealed that Asian women were the least likely of all cultural groups to formally report physical victimization (Tjaden & Thoennes). Trupti's workshop was entitled, "Providing Domestic Violence Services to South Asian Americans." The 1 1/2 hour workshop focused on three main areas: (I) providing a greater understanding of South Asian culture, (II) helping understand the cultural, immigration, and linguistic barriers that contribute to South Asian American individuals' not reporting domestic violence and/or seeking out services and (III) highlighting the Support Networks that have been developed (including SNEHA) to meet the needs of these individuals

These goals were achieved through a combination of reviewing literature on South Asian Americans, providing general examples from SNEHA, and providing examples from various excerpts from South Asian novels. The presentation was well received by individuals, from areas across the country, who attended the event. Purvi Shah, Executive Director of SAKHI, a New York based agency that provides domestic violence services to South Asian Americans, was also in attendance. Trupti also attended a panel session, which focused on the specific linguistic challenges that immigrant populations face when attempting to access services.

The event provided an opportunity for non-South Asian Professionals to gain specific insight into our community's problems. **- as reported to Sneha by Trupti Rao**

Growing Up In America -

I questioned what or who I was but then I realized yes I'm American but I'm always Desi. I am an American-Desi. My life has been mixed with positive and negatives from both sides but in the end, I think that I got the best of both worlds. Of course, there are the restrictions my parents have put on me but I have broken a few rules, but hey! I'm in the land of free.

America Zindabad !

-Tariq Islam



Voice of SNEHA

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Learn more about SAALT's civil rights work at www.saalt.org.



Voice of SNEHA

A Dream, Ever So Beautiful

Marvelous dreams
 may be meaning to become real
 or just to pass as in another phase
 of wistful lively thoughts
 but I do dare not to stop dreaming
 about that moment
 when every possible hassle voids
 and we together
 make shapes out of
 the magnificent cluster of stars
 and walk together
 to give the world a little bit
 of our unselfish selves
 and strive together
 for freedom and peace
 and dream together
 for the beginning of an eternal world
 where only love blossoms. - *Mamatha Kodidela*

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GOPIO-CT serves as a non-partisan, secular, civic and community service organization. It helps promote awareness of Indian culture, customs and contributions of PIOs through community programs, forums, events and youth activities. It seeks to strengthen partnerships and create an ongoing dialogue with local communities. Our goals are to:

- Present and promote the interest of India and PIOs, and help shape relevant policies
- Promote better understanding of Indian history, culture and customs
- Mobilize the growing professional and intellectual resources of Indian-Americans for economic and social programs beneficial to the community

UPCOMING PROGRAMS – SAVE THE DATES:

- Health Awareness Series – July and September '07
- Interactive session with Mayor Dan Malloy/
Independence Day Celebration – August '07
- Festival of Lights Celebration - November '07
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Voice of SNEHA



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Voice of SNEHA

An Interview with Shazia Mirza



Shazia Mirza, a keen observer of life in a bi-cultural mode, grew up absorbing all that comes with coming of age in an environment that is all too familiar to the first or second generation of the transplanted South Asians. But instead of being confused or crushed by the diversely different duality, she thrived on the differences and developed a way of looking at things that is uniquely Shazia's.

I present a brief interview conducted through an e mail that will give an insight into this artist's mind.

Sneha: When did you discover that you had a sense of humor that gets people laughing out loud? Were you born with it or did you develop it?

Shazia: I have never been aware of it, most of the time I do not think I'm funny. I don't think about funny I just do it.

Sneha: If latter, what experience or events lead you to sharpen your skills at stand-up comedy? Where did you find your inspiration?

Shazia: I just do a gig every night, that makes you better, failure makes you better and everyday life is my inspiration, there is nothing funnier than real life.

Sneha: When did you decide to become a professional in this field?

Shazia: There wasn't a day when I decided to become 'professional' it's an art that just have to work at. it's no ordinary job, it's a part of your life.

Sneha: Your path to success is through a lot of personal vulnerability and even physical risk as the events have proven in recent past. What is the driving force that helps you overcome such overwhelming odds?

Shazia: Every comedian has to overcome odds not just me. It is a difficult job, and your desire and love for the job has to be greater than the desire for fame and money. That's how you know when you really love something and will do it no matter what.

Sneha: By focusing on your personal experience as a Muslim woman, you are trying to cross a big gap in cultural understanding among your diverse audiences (particularly Western). How do you bridge the gap without a common context?

Shazia: I am not religious and I do NOT focus on being Muslim. I focus on my life and the world around us so everyone and everything can like the comedy. I would to appeal to a mass audience not a minority so it's best to diversify your material.

Sneha: You are an actor and a writer as well. Can you tell us a bit about these other sides of Shazia Mirza?

Shazia: It's all the same. It's all about yourself and putting yourself into different arts.

Sneha: What are you passionate about?

Shazia: Traveling, people, life.

Sneha: Anything else, you would like our readers to know about You?

Shazia: No, I don't want people stalking me. I've had enough of that.

- Pratima Mehta

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