

M87 JUNE 2014

INDIA ABROAD PERSON OF THE YEAR 2013

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PARESH GANDHI



SHE SPEAKS
TRUTH TO POWER



‘All Americans must see hate violence as part of a history of racism and xenophobia in our country’

She built bridges between communities of color, created spaces of belonging for those on the margins, and is the winner of the **India Abroad Gopal Raju Award for Community Service 2013. Deepa Iyer** in conversation with **Arthur J Pais**



Deepa Iyer, facing the camera second from left, leads a coalition of Asian-American groups at a meeting with President Barack Obama to urge him to support family reunification in the new comprehensive immigration reform bill.

COURTESY: DEEPA IYER

HONOR ROLL

INDIAN ABROAD
GOPAL RAJU AWARD FOR
COMMUNITY SERVICE

SWADESH CHATTERJEE (2006, then called the India Abroad Community Leader of the Year Award)

NAVIN SHAH (2007, then called the India Abroad Award for Community Service)

DAVE KUMAR, DINO TEPPARA, HRISHI KARTHIKEYAN, TOBY CHAUDHURI, VARUN NIKORE (2008, rechristened to its current title, to honor the memory of Gopal Raju, the founder of *India Abroad*)

SUDHA ACHARYA (2009)

VALARIE KAUR (2012)

Deepa Iyer

For being a champion of immigrant rights; for her commitment to South Asian communities; for working towards creating a just and more welcoming America.

The biographical language about me contains some highfalutin signifiers: MacArthur, Harvard, jazz,’ said musician and Harvard University professor Vijay Iyer, his gaze on Deepa Iyer. ‘But to be honest I feel dwarfed by the presence of all of you here today, the real activists and organizers who bring your unique strengths to the trenches, changing America for the better.’

The event was last year’s farewell party to Iyer, who was stepping down after nurturing and galvanizing the pioneering civil rights organization South Asian Americans Leading Together.

SAALT is the only staffed, national, non-profit organization dedicated to fostering civic and political engagement by South Asian communities in the United States. And Deepa Iyer, an advocate of civil and immigrant rights for over a decade and the chair of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans for two years, had served as SAALT’s executive director for nearly a decade, drawing a

swath of second-generation activists.

Vijay Iyer had reminisced about the release of his third album, *Panoptic Modes* in 2011, with an original composition, *Invocation*, dedicated to Rishi Maharaj, an Indo-Caribbean man who had been nearly beaten to death by a group of white men with baseball bats chanting racist and xenophobic insults in Queens in the late ’90s.

‘My intent with this piece of music was to suggest to our own community, in case anyone was listening, that this young man was one of us; that we, as South Asian Americans, should embrace all of our massive Diaspora, regardless of national identity or historical circumstance,’ Vijay Iyer had said. ‘Because community isn’t just about common roots; it is about parallel experiences, a shared predicament, a common cause. It is about the fact that what happens to this young brown man could, and indeed often does, happen to any or all of us.’

But he had never imagined that this little piece of instrumental music might do any more than highlight the fact

that ‘stuff happens’ in America. So, he was ‘floored’ when he received an e-mail from a young lawyer named Deepa Iyer, Esquire, who had connected with Rishi Maharaj.

She put him in touch with Maharaj, who sent him ‘a heartfelt, frank and devastating message about his life’s journey after the attack.’ He had moved to Alaska to put as much distance as possible between himself and the experience; he confessed he didn’t know what he was going to do next.

‘The hate crime had thoroughly disrupted the delicate sense of rootedness and belonging that he and his family, like all of our families, had begun to cultivate in this country,’ Vijay Iyer said. ‘But Deepa’s work helped rekindle a sense of connectedness for him and his family.’

For Deepa, who was the executive pro-



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ducer of a 26-minute documentary about bias and hate crimes before and after 9/11, rekindling that feeling in Maharaj and others like him was what her endeavors were about.

She understood, as Vijay Iyer noted, that we had to embrace our own religious and cultural diversity as well as other communities of color 'because of a common predicament, a common cause, a common atmosphere of fear, surveillance, suspicion, and paranoia, and the persistence of inequality.'

She was not only against discrimination against South Asians — running workshops about bullying, supporting voter registration — but also marched in Washington, DC and elsewhere for common causes with African Americans and Latinos.

The farewell party had also heard from a number of activists and organizers who praised Deepa Iyer's vision, her capacity to embrace the cause of various South Asian communities, and personally inspire people.

One activist with little children had confessed that she had felt frustrated being an activist and a mom, but when she looked at Iyer, a mother of a three-and-half-year old (at the time of the farewell), she felt encouraged to fight on.

Deepa Iyer is among a small but growing number of South Asians — either born in this country or migrated here when they were young — who have taken the road less traveled. They might have gone to top schools in America, but chose not to pursue conventional paths. But only a few like Deepa have started or strengthened organizations like SAALT and brought them to the forefront for civic and racial justice.

A former attorney with the Justice Department, and now a mom, activist and prolific commentator on race relations and the challenges for American society in dealing with immigrants and justice and fairness at large, Iyer is one of the most visible and active community leaders anywhere in America. She might have stepped down from SAALT, but she is as busy as ever.

She readily admits balancing home life — she is married to Parag Rajendra Khandhar, a clinical fellow in law at the University of Baltimore, and lives near DC in an environment very different from the one she grew up in a medium-sized city in Kentucky with her professor father and homemaker mother — and her social calling is a daily challenge. But as she prepares for a new life devoted to writing and teaching, she says she will continue fighting for an inclusive America.

Iyer sits down for a chat with *India Abroad* on a visit to New York, partly on business, and partly to see her brother. Part of the interview was in person and part of it was conducted on e-mail.

What were your school years like?



From left, Manju Kulkarni of South Asian Network, Pramila Jayapal of One America, Seema Agnani of Chhaya CDC and Deepa Iyer at the National South Asian Summit last year. Iyer headed the pioneering civil rights organization South Asian Americans Leading Together.

COURTESY: DEEPA IYER

I was 12 when I came to America from Trivandrum with my parents and younger brother. We were not in New York or Chicago or Los Angeles where there were hundreds of Indian families, but in Louisville, Kentucky, which had a small Indian community at the time.

It did not take long to find out I was on the margins, that I was not mainstream. In the mid-80s in Kentucky, people were used to a black or white racial paradigm. People like me fit neither. I definitely had my share of experiencing some bullying and harassment at school, which shaped my sense of being different.

How did you handle bullying?

I kept it mostly to myself at the time, although I did have some friends and teachers whom I could rely on for support. Like many immigrant children, I tried to figure out what I could hold onto from my culture (for me, this was Indian classical dance) and what I could learn from my adopted one.

In recent years, there is a lot of consciousness about bullying and much pro-active work to stop it. Even SAALT has organized anti-bullying campaigns. What would you tell parents and young people today?

There are more resources today that children and parents can turn to, as well as a more open and honest dialogue about the impact of bullying on self-esteem. Some strategies that can be used are for children to feel safe enough to talk about what they are enduring, and training for teachers and parents to spot bullying when it happens.

What did you want to do while studying for a college degree?

I got my bachelor's degree in English, but was able to take a lot of classes in communications and political science. I applied to both law schools and master's programs in

English, but decided to pursue law school.

Why did you go into law?

I went to law school without a well-formed idea of why I should. At the time, I didn't know many lawyers and I wasn't altogether sure of what lawyers did. But I enjoyed writing and communicating, and I was eager to learn practical skills.

It was during law school that I began to formulate a clearer understanding of what being a lawyer could mean. I was particularly interested in classes on constitutional law and immigration, as well as being part of an immigration legal clinic. I veered towards aspects of the law that were relevant for immigrants and minority communities.

What was your tenure in the Justice Department like?

Even in law school, I had aspired to work at the Department of Justice, and so, it was a privilege to be able to join the Civil Rights Division as a trial attorney. I enjoyed my work very much because I could both help people individually as well as take part in policy matters.

Being at the Justice Department was also important when 9/11 occurred, because I could help to connect South Asians facing discrimination and backlash with the right agencies who could assist them.

Did you become an activist seriously after 9/11?

I had been working at several Asian-American organizations for many years before 9/11. But 9/11 was a defining moment for me. I knew that it was important for me to take on leadership at that time to help community members who were experiencing backlash in the wake of 9/11.

I did some of that work at DOJ and some of it at SAALT, which was a very new organization when 9/11 occurred.

What is the biggest challenge for SAALT?

SAALT opened our first office in 2004. I was the first hire as the executive director, and a few months later, I was able to hire a second staff person. In those initial years, the challenges were related to building our own internal infrastructure while also dealing with the tremendous needs facing our communities in a post 9/11 world.

As SAALT began to grow and get credibility, we entered the second phase of the organization, which was focused on building a national network of South Asian organizations that connected with each other and united under shared principles.

Now, the organization — which has an office in DC with six staff members and a \$1 million budget — is strengthening our partnerships with other communities. As America becomes more diverse, we seek to help build a more just and inclusive society for all.

What are some of the highlights of your work?



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Some of the highlights for me have been the creation of our national network of 50 South Asian groups; the national South Asian Summit, a conference we hold in DC every two years where people have a chance to meet directly with their Congressional members; a meeting I was able to facilitate between Asian American leaders and President Obama in May 2012; and my connections with people who have been struggling for justice — the Indian guest workers from New Orleans, undocumented South Asian youth, the families who lost loved ones in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, after the massacre at the Sikh gurdwara there in August 2012.

I believe your activism started when you were studying at Vanderbilt. What were some of the causes you fought for and what were the outcomes?

I helped to start the university's first Indian Student Association. I also worked with others on building political awareness around recruiting faculty of color and gaining more classes in the curriculum that reflected the diversity of the student body.

What kind of books have influenced you most as an activist and how?

I am inspired by writings of people like Vijay Prashad, Michelle Alexander, Rinku Sen, as well as the life stories told by immigrants and people of color today.

When did you start feeling you could belong here? What made you feel so?

I began to feel that I could create spaces of belonging — whether that was with the Indian Student Association in college to SAALT, I think that I have tried to help create a sense of community where not only I, but many others, can belong, shape, and create together.

When did you become an American citizen and what were your thoughts on that day?

Our family was naturalized in the late '90s. For me, it was a special moment also because the judge that I had clerked for in Louisville, Kentucky, administered the oath of citizenship.

I think I felt American well before I became naturalized. I think that citizenship status, and the process of acquiring it, can be long and painful for so many people.

Since I have been fortunate to go through that process, I am interested in advocating for those who cannot get on that path.

If a few years from now you were to offer your son some of the lessons from your years in the movement...

To listen to others.

To not take yourself too seriously.

To know that there is a lot you do not know.

To assess your privilege and the amount of space you are occupying.

To ask yourself why you are part of a cause or a campaign or a movement.

To let others lead.

What do you tell your 4 year old about life and diversity?



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: DEEPA IYER



Deepa Iyer, center, was 12 when she came to America in the mid-1980s and faced bullying and harassment at school. In dealing with it, she tried to figure out what she could hold onto from her culture. For her that was Indian classical dance.

Like the children of his age, he is very curious about life and asks a lot of questions. We are fortunate to live in a part of Maryland where Ahi meets children in school and in the playground of different backgrounds.

For him, it is more commonplace to be surrounded by

diversity — and hopefully, we can help him to understand what that means as he grows up.

You have said despite common perceptions, Asian Americans are neither newcomers nor bystanders in the struggle for equality of immigrants...

Often, Asian Americans are not part of the conversations or campaigns around immigrant rights because people aren't aware of the history of struggle our communities have had with immigration policy.

Part of my work has been to show the commonalities of struggle between Asian Americans and other communities of color.

What did taking part in the immigrant rights rally in Washington, DC recently mean to you?

It was significant to make the point that Asians and South Asians had a lot at stake when it came to immigration reform. Often, immigration is framed and perceived as an issue that only affects Latinos. It is important to have

Asian-American spokespersons to show that the issue affects many other communities too.

How different are the civil right challenges today than they were 10 years ago?

Thanks to the tremendous efforts of civil rights pioneers in our country, we now have laws and policies that address discrimination. We also have a more open dialogue about race in various settings.

What is different is that as our country becomes more diverse, we will need to address the complexities of race and race relations differently.

How can we reach not just diversity, but equity and equality? How can we build relationships between communities of color? These are the questions that await the America of the future in my opinion.

You were in Oak Creek to mark the first anniversary of the gurdwara killings and have written and spoken movingly about the life lessons and programs to fight for justice and honor for the victims of racial killings not only in Oak Creek but elsewhere.

I attended the memorial service after the hate crimes at the Oak Creek gurdwara in August 2012 and also the one-year anniversary events in August 2013. I believe that we need to find concrete solutions to address the surge of hate violence in this



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country.

Even though we are not seeing the dramatic numbers of hate crimes that followed the events of 9/11, we still continue to see acts of bullying, harassment, and violence around the country.

I believe that this is the result of three trends: Racial anxiety related to the changing demographics in our country; negative sentiments towards immigrants; and the post 9/11 environment in which people from certain communities are targeted as being suspicious or disloyal.

The South Asian, Muslim and Sikh communities have become caught in the midst of these three trends.

There is much we can do to turn the tide of these trends. We can start by recognizing and acknowledging the broader climate of racism and anti-immigrant sentiment that leads to hate violence in this country.

We can hold elected leaders and public officials accountable for engaging in xenophobic and racist rhetoric, which sends the message that it is perfectly acceptable to use negative words and images to describe people of color and immigrants.

Let's enact strong policies that prohibit racial and religious profiling, such as the End Racial Profiling Act pending in Congress, while eliminating harsh state laws such as Stand Your Ground, taking inspiration from the Dream Defenders in Florida.

Let's call upon the federal government to institute a task-force to address the epidemic of hate violence, which includes victim and witness services, enforcement and investigation, outreach and prevention plans, and coordination with state and local agencies.

And, let's build bridges with one another by understanding how our own points of entry into racial consciousness, race-based privilege, and encounters with injustice have strands that connect and interweave with one another.

This is how we can continue to honor the memories of people like Satwant Singh Kaleka, Ranjit Singh, Sita Singh, Prakash Singh, Suveg Singh Khattri and Paramjit Kaur, the six innocent men and women killed at the Oak Creek gurdwara.

The first wave of immigrants from South Asia that started coming here after the immigration laws were changed in the 1960s hardly had time for fighting for racial justice and civil liberties. But that has changed a lot in the last two decades.

You began to think a lot of creating 'safe communities' when a friend posted this on her Facebook feed many months ago: "This warning is to everyone but more specifically my hijab/niqab-wearing sisters — please be careful, don't stand too close to the train tracks, we need to be on high alert."

My friend's warning was related to the gruesome death of a 46-year-old Indian, Hindu, man who was shoved onto the path of an oncoming train at a subway stop in New York City at the end of 2012.

Part of Deepa Iyer's work has been to show the commonalities of struggle between Asian Americans and other communities of color.



COURTESY: DEEPA IYER

According to authorities, the woman held in custody for pushing Sunando Sen said, 'I pushed a Muslim off the train tracks because I hate Hindus and Muslims ever since 2001 when they put down the twin towers...'

My friend's response is one that many of us who are South Asian, Arab American, Muslim or Sikh can understand. We say, 'Be safe' to each other, with the silent understanding that those words, when spoken to our Sikh brother, our Muslim sister, our brown-skinned father, carry the weight of over a decade of profiling, hate crimes, deportations, and school bullying.

'Be safe,' we say, because it is possible that you will get harassed or hurt out there.

In our country, we have a tendency to condemn racist sentiment and actions, but then often leave it to others to confront it — usually, the racial or ethnic group that is at the receiving end. But all the organizing and advocacy within the so-called post-9/11 affected communities can only go so far in changing the climate in our country.

Rather, all Americans must see hate violence as part of a history, past and present, of racism and xenophobia in our country, and make it clear that we cannot and should not tolerate in any shape or form.

We must see the connections between the ongoing harassment of African-Americans on our streets and the profiling of Arab-Americans at our airports.

We must see the link between the mistreatment of undocumented Mexican immigrants and the detentions of hundreds of thousands of people from South Asian and Middle

Eastern countries.

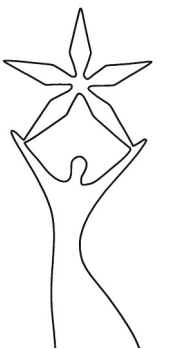
We must see the connection between the violence that is sadly becoming commonplace from Newtown to Aurora to Oak Creek — and call for an end to all of it.

Tell us about a new generation of Americans, the children of immigrants, who are changing their landscape.

The second generation of South Asians are different from their parents when it comes to their understanding of racial identity (which is often hyphenated, including both their countries of origin and American identity) and their interest in engaging civically and politically with the world around them.

I look up to many South Asians who are part of the social change movements in America, to improve the conditions of people who are working class or poor, who do not have access to the American dream, and who are struggling from day to day.

These include people like Bhairavi Desai, who coordinates the New York Taxi Workers Alliance and organizes a multi-racial coalition of taxi drivers who seek better benefits and conditions, or Rinku Sen who is the director of Race Forward, an organization that changes the media narratives around race, or the women who lead South Asian domestic violence organizations like Aparna Bhattacharyya at Raksha, Neha Gill at Apna Ghar, and Tiloma



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The little Deepa Iyer with her grandparents and extended family in Kerala. Her family moved to the US in 1985.



COURTESY: DEEPA IYER

For everyone in Deepa Iyer's family there was a lot to learn when they arrived in the Midwest in 1985. Mother Padma, a homemaker, had to maintain an Indian home with Indian traditions as she encouraged her children, including her younger child Gopa, to make friends with American classmates.

Deepa was 12 when she arrived in America; Gopa was six.

"Like so many of us who migrated in those years, we also thought we would go back after a year or two," Padma Iyer says. "But as it became clear we were staying on, I told the children they will have a good future here."

She remembers her daughter feeling insecure and lonely soon after she arrived from India. "But soon she was making new friends," the mother adds. "And she was a voracious reader. She would spend many hours writing essays and her thoughts."

Father Vasudeva Iyer, a neurologist trained in India who would practice and also lecture, was not only learning a lot about new techniques in treating neurological problems, but also about human care. "A good physician here had also to know a lot about a patient, including their financial options for a treatment and other areas of a patient's life," he says.

The family drew some cultural comfort from the small but growing Indian community. "There were also some doctors my father knew in his medical school in India who had migrated around the same time he did," says Deepa's younger brother Dr Gopa Iyer, an oncology researcher at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

"But essentially, it was just the four of us for the good part and that brought us even closer."

Though he made friends with American kids at school, Gopa says there were certain "small" barriers his friends could not overcome.

"They could not understand simple things like our custom of keeping the shoes and footwear outside the home entrance," says Gopa.

"I could not share my love for certain kinds of Indian music or films."

He also grew up in a Hindu vegetarian household and in a state where hefty steaks are the mainstay of many meals, the contrasting lifestyle must have seemed odd to many people over three decades ago.

He called his older sister by her first name. "I don't think I ever called her *Akka*," he adds.

Was there any sibling rivalry? "Never," he says. "I more or less did what she wanted me to do."

Deepa has said the adjustment period that she had and some of the experiences that the family and she faced shaped her future. "These were not unusual or traumatic experiences, but there were times when my family felt marginalized and isolated in the community."

Gopa fondly remembers his first day in class, how Deepa made sure he was in the right class, and how she waited for him at the end of the day to make sure he was on the right school bus.

We are family

Deepa Iyer's parents and brother speak about their family's pride to **Arthur J Pais**

"She was always the more extrovert of us," he says. "It helped me a lot that she would set out to be my big sister in every sense of the word..."

The bond between the siblings grew stronger while they visited India once in two years. "When we went to a city, be it Mumbai or Delhi, Deepa would always insist we visit certain historical monuments or sites. It broadened my knowledge. I also learned a lot about Indian culture because of her."

She also made him feel like his own man. "I would have ended up listening to every word my father said and having a myopic approach," he says, "and trying to excel in sciences and math. But Deepa got me to read a variety of literature. I had learned to play the harmonium, but with her I also learned to play the piano."

The books and magazines on his shelf in his Manhattan home range from history to medical history to medical journals.

"I think she is a bit disappointed that I do not have much by way of Indian writers," he says with a smile, though he has read Dr Siddhartha Mukherjee's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Emperor of Maladies* and keeps a copy at home.

"She is still encouraging me to do it (*read Indian authors*)."

Watching Deepa blossom into a community activist offered her father and her brother life lessons. Both use the word myopic in describing their worldview before her work and her reading added to their consciousness.

"I used to think that I could do good by helping patients fight their diseases and going beyond the call of duty," the senior Iyer says.

"She showed me there are many other ways of helping the communities."

What Gopa admires most is the way Deepa made her journey as a civil rights leader, calling it a "stupendous" achievement. "She has been to the White House, has addressed thousands of people about the civil rights movement and the need for a more inclusive America," he adds.

He was not surprised that his sister turned out to be what she is today. "It was very clear to me in childhood that she would excel in whatever she chose to do," he says. "And still I was surprised and very impressed when she executive produced a 26-minute documentary (*Raising Our Voices*) about bias and hate crimes before and after 9/11. I was very well aware that she was fighting for the civil rights of our communities, but to take the avenue of making a film was quite unexpected. I found it amazing."

The family has no history of activists, says Dr Vasudeva Iyer. "But Deepa must have



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‘We wanted our union to have resonance beyond our own lives’

Deepa Iyer and Parag Khandhar used their wedding to raise money for charity. They share their story before and after that with
Arthur J Pais

Deepa Iyer and Parag Khandhar had been dating for some time, but when he suddenly popped the question on a Greenwich Village Street on a balmy and beautiful day in New York City, she says she was completely surprised.

The engagement was followed by a simple and elegant wedding on a beautiful summer's day in Central Park and since both Iyer and Khandhar had chosen to be community activists, they decided to use their special day as an opportunity to raise donations for the Asian Pacific American Legal Resource Center, where Iyer was the legal director then.

Along with registering for traditional gifts, they also created a Donation Registry allowing guests to make donations in their name. Through their registries, the couple raised over \$500 for APALRC.

"It was not a huge amount," Khandhar, who had also worked for APALRC, tells *India Abroad*. "But we wanted to express our support for a nonprofit."

"We also wanted our union to have resonance beyond our own lives and our families and friends," Iyer adds. "By hosting a charitable wedding, we know that our coming together had a much bigger impact."

Not long after their wedding, Khandhar — who had begun to look at the larger immigrant and minority communities during his college days and then worked for 10 years in New York City in community arts and service projects, post-9/11 relief and advocacy efforts, and other nonprofit organizations — asked Iyer, an attorney, what she thought of him pursuing a law degree.

Her first reaction was, 'Why would you want to do that?' But she knew he was serious about his new goal and would use it for community work.

Khandhar, who grew up in Newark, New Jersey, and in the Hudson Valley in New York, had studied biology, literature and public administration in school, and Asian American and South Asian American arts, activism, and communities at the State University of New York, Albany. He got his JD from American University Washington College of Law six years ago.



Deepa Iyer with her husband Parag Khandhar and son Ahi.

COURTESY: DEEPA IYER

He joined the faculty at the Community Development Clinic, University of Baltimore as a full-time professor two years ago. "Teaching has been part of our family tradition in India and here," he says; his mother was a teacher too.

The Community Development Clinic offers free, non-litigation legal services to Baltimore-area community development organizations; advises on a range of business law, non-profit and legislative matters; helps clients structure and form non-profit organizations, corporations, partnerships, and LLCs; and counsels boards and staff on legal duties and best practices.

"We help communities help themselves by supporting non-profits, small businesses located in underserved neighborhoods, groups promoting affordable housing, community associations, and other locally-based organizations," Khandhar, who directs upper-level law students work directly with clients, says.

"It is also about empowering people. 'The law students here also provide training for groups on specific areas of the law, and advocates for changes in the law itself.'"

His interest in serving communities also was sharpened during his law studies; he was a public interest/public service scholar at the Washington College of Law, where he founded a student advocacy collective that pushed for better public interest programs and support in the law school.

He has since worked as a staff attorney with the APALRC in Washington, DC and in Maryland, providing free legal services and representation to poor and limited-English proficient immigrant clients and client groups, including tenant associations, mutual aid organizations and start-up nonprofits.

Given Khandhar's passion for community development work, he says, it was not a surprise to him that he was drawn to Iyer.

"Did you know that she had thought of becoming a journalist?" he asks, noting that she would not have gone for any kind of journalism but investigative reporting. "She has been doing a similar thing at SAALT. She investigates and examines the social issues and then does something about it and gets others to act too."

Iyer and Khandhar have now been married for 11 years and have a four-year-old son, Ahi. His love for pasta and new American cooking, and hers for traditional Indian vegetarian fare notwithstanding, the years have been full of their shared interests in community work, cooking, colorful stories for their son (both are good storytellers), and traveling.

"We love to travel," Khandhar, who describes himself "as a father, writer, and dreamer," says. "If we don't have the time to go to a far off place, we explore something nearby, like an island in Virginia which is reached in less than hour from our home." ■

'It is in her DNA to work for the community'

'We always wanted a stronger voice in Washington that we could trust and she created that voice for us.' Coworkers and compatriots speak to **Arthur J Pais** about Deepa Iyer's fierce commitment to a more just America

Manar Waheed may wonder at times if she would have become the policy director at South Asian Americans Leading Together if not for her passion for karaoke.

After several rounds of phone interviews with SAALT workers, the Brooklyn Law School graduate with years of community service, landed an interview in person at the organization's Takoma Park, Maryland, office. She had filled in some 20 pages of answers, including the response to the question on the last page that asked what she did for fun.

"I had never thought Deepa Iyer would be into karaoke," she said the other day as she spoke in her office about SAALT and Deepa Iyer. "But, of course, we had different favorites. My favorite is Pink and she is fanatical about Bruce Springsteen. But together we have karoked both singers."

Waheed is among a dozen SAALT staffers and part-timers. She came to the organization after working with the Legal Services of New York City where she provided direct services to domestic violence survivors who were primarily from immigrant communities.

Additionally, she co-taught a seminar at Wagner College on domestic violence and legal intervention, which included the impact of media and television on violence. From 2009 to 2012, she served on the board of the Muslim Bar Association of New York City.

Waheed, who is from Pakistan, is an example of staffers of diverse backgrounds that Iyer drew to SAALT over the decade.

Like the other staffers, she has seen the lighter and more serious side of Iyer. "We have had many karaoke nights with other staff members and some movie nights too."

Have they watched any Bollywood movies together and cried on each other's shoulders? "I used to watch a lot of them in New York," she says. "But it is not easy to watch them here."

While working in New York, Waheed had heard of Iyer and would soon discover from first-hand experience how "intense and driven" she is.

"I had also known that she had left the Department of Justice to help South Asian communities," Waheed adds.

Waheed had also worked for the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, providing technical assistance on cases where battered women were charged with crimes, and had long admired how SAALT, under Iyer's leadership, had tackled issues like school and college bullying and status of abused working women.

On many mornings, Waheed would find some 50 e-mails from Iyer. "Some would be articles on subjects such as



Deepa Iyer addresses a rally. Her colleagues say she has drawn diverse leaders like a magnet, brought younger and older associates to SAALT and mentored them with passion.

COURTESY: DEEPA IYER

immigration and voting rights," she explains. "And then it could be an op-ed piece Deepa has written and wanted my quick assessment. There could also be a memo or two."

She also admires Iyer's strategic skills. "Having worked with the government, Deepa has known how to get the attention of the policy and lawmakers," she adds. "She knows when to let things go and when to push them, what is a right moment and decides quickly on the more important issues."

Suman Raghunathan succeeded Iyer, who stepped down after being executive director of SAALT for nearly 10 years.

"I have known Deepa for so long," she says, "I cannot honestly pinpoint when I first heard of her."

Like Iyer and most of the SAALT staff over the years, Raghunathan too is a product of American schools. She received her undergraduate degree in international relations from Brown University and has a Master's degree in Nonprofit Management from the Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy in New York City.

"I have known Deepa's fierce commitment to South Asian communities for over a decade," she adds, "and I have watched her amazing journey with this critical, forward looking organization."

Perhaps she met Iyer for the first time in 2006 when the latter "orchestrated" a seminar that was yet another example of SAALT shaping into "a comprehensive community organization."

Even as she was eager to join SAALT, Raghunathan readily admits she felt "it was not easy to fill Deepa's very big shoes."

Raghunathan gained experience in leading non-profit organizations, having first served as interim executive director and then as a long-time member of the Board of

Directors of Chhaya Community Development Corporation, one of SAALT's close partners, and had admired how Iyer brought together various communities under the SAALT umbrella to fight for common issues.

"It must indeed have been a daunting task many times," she says.

Many leaders in the South Asian organizations refuse to step down. But Iyer, who would have easily continued running SAALT for many more years, did so last year.

"Even from her earliest years at SAALT," Raghunathan says, "Deepa has been drawing like a magnet diverse leaders. She has brought to the organization younger and older associates and mentored them with passion. Her decision (*to step down*) is the testament to her conviction of building a new set of leaders."

She says she will continue Iyer's legacy of working with diverse community organizations representing people from South Asian and Caribbean communities, fighting civil rights infractions and threats to civil liberties, "and creating a just and more welcoming America."

Like Iyer and Waheed, Raghunathan is also the daughter of immigrants. Iyer has said that she has been impressed with Raghunathan's sharp understanding of the issues affecting South Asian and other immigrants in the United States. She has admired her successor's work at the American Civil Liberties Union, Progressive States Network, and the New York Immigration Coalition.

The two have been keeping an eye on each other's work for years.

"Amazing is the word that comes to my mind so often when I think of Deepa and her work," she adds. "She has created a space for new leaders in an organic way,



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'It is in her DNA to work for the community'

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has shown amazing resilience as a leader and in her willingness to work 24/7 for the organization and yet keep a family together."

Raghnathan is not surprised that Iyer will continue to work for the communities even while teaching a course on South Asians at the University of Maryland and writing her memoir. And remain connected with SAALT.

"It is in her DNA to continue work for the community," Raghnathan said.

Seema Agnani of the Chhaya Community Development Corporation, founded by her to address housing issues in the city's South Asian communities, continues to be perhaps the strongest ally of SAALT, which has worked with a number of national groups. She is proud to call Iyer a partner and leader in the fight for a fairer and more just America.

Like Iyer, her own experience has shaped her outlook as

a fighter for immigrants. She has also said her parents, mother Jsvanti, and father, Mohan, an engineer, inspired her community work.

Seema moved to New York from Illinois with her brother, Sunil, who was doing a doctorate in English at Columbia University so that she could study the city's innovative affordable housing programs.

As 9/11 settled on the city, Chhaya also focused on helping people who were being "detained, deported and harassed on the street," something that Iyer noticed and appreciated.

Among its many activities, what the Queens-based Chhaya does is to offer foreclosure prevention seminars.

Agnani noticed Iyer's work when the latter wrote a national report on immigrant issues including housing concern in mid 1990s. "I found her extremely easy to work with," she says. "She has always been clear and direct. I always get straight answers from her, which is not always easy to come by in this work."

Iyer, who also grew up in the Midwest, honed her activism in New York before joining SAALT, close to DC. While Agnani, who completed her master's degree in Urban Planning and Public Policy at the University of Illinois in Chicago, her home town, has seen her activism

sharpened by her New York experience.

"SAALT is very important for the country," Agnani continues, adding that when one immigrant group is empowered and is helped to become a part of America, the entire country benefits.

"We always wanted a stronger voice in Washington that we could trust," Agnani says. "Deepa created that voice for us."

Iyer has not been coming up with her own positions, according to Agnani, but the consensus positions formed from listening and discussing the issues with other like-minded groups.

"She was never self-motivated."

And above all, Iyer is a friend. "Every once in a while, she remembers my birthday and will send a birthday cake and something to mark the day. She is one of those persons who goes beyond the work and keeps in touch."

Agnani cherishes most a music tape that Iyer compiled and sent her over a decade ago. "At the time of 9/11 many of our organizations were very small and struggling. It was easy to get demoralized and exhausted. The tape of music, some Indian, some Western, some pop, some classical and some inspirational was meant to celebrate what we were doing. It meant a lot to me and my organization." ■

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'All Americans must see hate violence as part of a history of racism and xenophobia in our country'

Jayasinghe at Sakhi for South Asian Women.

I am inspired by the South Asian DREAMers, undocumented students who believe in changing the immigration system.

There are more and more people in the third generation who are also getting involved in their communities and in different movements to bring about social change. These are the people who will make sure that our country lives up to its ideals of equality and justice for all.

What are some of the things that your very young son has said have made you and Parag take a breath and think about?

A lot of his questions are 'why.' Why does the moon come up? Why can't I stay up late? So, we are still in that stage — Ahi is almost four — where he wants to know why something is happening. I am sure he will ask more challenging questions soon!

What kind of bedtime stories do you tell your son?

We do a lot of reading at home to him. I tell him stories that I make up often — about children solving mysteries, some stories from Indian mythology (I'm a big fan of *Amar Chitra Katha!*), and stories from our own childhoods as well.

What is the book you are writing about? What kind of an audience do you have in mind? How much progress have you made?

I'm working on a book, set to be published by New Press next year, on the changing American racial landscape. I will



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Deepa Iyer at the Oak Tree gurdwara in Wisconsin. She attended the memorial service after the hate crime there in August 2012 and also the one-year anniversary events in August 2013.

We were brought up in a Hindu family, but I do not practice the rituals of Hinduism.

I'm still learning how to handle difficult and challenging times! I use a variety of tools — sharing with friends and family, going to yoga, and journaling.

What are some of the saddest moments in life and the most joyous ones?

Some of the saddest moments have involved losing family members, having friendships fall apart, or not being able to meet some of the goals

I've set for myself.

I tend to be someone who processes my feelings a lot; it's hard for me to keep them in. And because of that, I'm often able to get to a better place and remain optimistic.

Some of my joyous ones include the time I spend with my son and family, the celebration events I've been fortunate to have as I left SAALT, and even daily moments of being thankful for what I have in my life. ■

'She helped the South Asian immigrant community become an American community'

Deepa Iyer's work saw our constituency gain power, says **Rinku Sen**, a leading figure in the racial justice movement

It is remarkable that in the past decade Deepa Iyer has consolidated the South Asian constituency across America in a way that unites the first generation like me, our parents and our children. I think she has created a historic moment: Helping the South Asian immigrant community become an American community.

With SAALT and its centralized agenda and in pushing that agenda — fighting against racial profiling, creating awareness about school bullying, studying voter registration and voting patterns and bringing together a disparate group of people concerned with immigration issues — she created history.

Her work consolidated the US over time, saw our constituency gain power and helped to actually shape the United States. She was able to see that in a country whose demographics have been changing rapidly over the last few decades the people who were excluded from power could now demand a greater role in shaping this country.

Deepa has this vision of an all inclusive America, and people like me share that vision and applaud her fight to achieve it.

The first generation in our community was focused on building a new life and in doing that we are not different from other immigrant communities over the centuries. There are some in our community who do not want to acknowledge the problems of racism, discrimination, and other injustices that are working against us. There are people who are deniers of this reality in our community.

But our community is not monolithic and many are aware of the racial experience we have undergone and are still experiencing. Deepa and SAALT have not been afraid

to look at this and address it through seminars, workshops and policy interventions.

The new generation of South Asians like Deepa Iyer are studying poverty, sexism and what is needed to have a collective life — not just a good individual life. And she is looking not just as the South Asian community but at other marginalized communities across America.

As a leader and a motivator, Deepa projects a great deal of integrity, and she always follows through on her commitments. She is a no nonsense person who sets a very high standard of leadership. And underneath all this, she is very compassionate.

She has put in significant amount of time at SAALT and I am excited about the new opportunities she has after stepping down from SAALT. She will still be involved with SAALT and other like-minded organizations, but she will also be writing more and teaching.

She has been grooming a new generation of activists at SAALT and I am sure they will be looking for more guidance from her.

Among the issues Deepa and I have worked on is the thorny issue of racial profiling. We wrote about it on our news site, *Colorlines*, and got support from a wide range of individuals including people like Seema Agnani, who runs an economic development organization in New York; musician Vijay Iyer; and Amardeep Singh, who founded the Sikh Coalition.

'Stopping, interrogating, detaining or searching people based on characteristics such as their actual or perceived race, national origin, immigration status or religion is racial



Deepa Iyer at a rally.

profiling,' we argued. 'In a democracy, there has to be a reason to stop and search someone. Being a person of color isn't a good enough reason.'

'Stop and frisk sounds so benign yet it covers up the violent humiliation experienced by hundreds of thousands of young black and brown men annually,' Deepa and I wrote.

'Beneath the numbers is the human impact of this sort of policing. It involves being thrown to the ground face down. It involves cops dumping your belongings on the street while they taunt you with predictions that you'll never amount to anything. It involves having this happen to you a dozen times before you're 16 years old, and continuing into your adulthood.'

'This sort of police enforcement not only hurts the individual, but also entire communities whose members are treated as "others" and automatically deemed

unwelcome suspects in their own neighborhoods.'

We argued based on studies there is absolutely no evidence that stop and frisk reduces crime. New York City's crime rate had started falling before stop and frisk was ever instituted, and cities and states across the country have also reduced crime rates without using such an unconstitutional and destructive practice.

Deepa and I wrote this piece because we agree that the negative racial impact and ineffectiveness of stop and frisk would be reason enough to oppose it. And, South Asian communities have an additional stake in this debate.

She has many more years of advocacy, writing and leadership ahead of her, and I'm so excited to see that future unfold. ■

Rinku Sen is the President and Executive Director of Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation, and the publisher of *Colorlines*. She is also an author who has inspired Deepa Iyer with her words.

As told to Arthur J Pais

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We are family

read about social activists when she was very young. Growing up in Kerala, which has a large number of newspapers and where people are reading all the time, she could have known about social activism at an early age."

Was the family surprised when Deepa decided to quit the Department of Justice after working there for a couple of years and become an activist, of course using her law background to build and expand

SAALT?

"We were more confused than surprised," her father confesses. "We thought she could be a trial attorney. But as we discussed her decision with her, it became clearer she was very focused on what she wanted to do. It took us some time to realize the importance of the work she was doing and its impact."

Looking back, he remembers Deepa being interested in immigration issues and

fighting to secure civil rights for minorities and new immigrants even as she was studying law.

Initially, her mother did not understand what exactly Deepa was doing with non-profit organizations. "But as I attended some meetings, and read about her work, I knew she was doing something very good," she adds.

Keeping her Indian culture alive was

important to Deepa and she continued her Bharata Natyam practice. She took proper classes while she was attending Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

Padma is very pleased that Deepa plays the dual role of mother and wife on one hand and social activist on the other.

When President Obama hosted a State dinner in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's honor, Deepa and her husband were among the much-envied invitees. She took her father along.

"I got a chance to see the White House and the President because of Deepa," Dr Iyer says with a wide smile. ■