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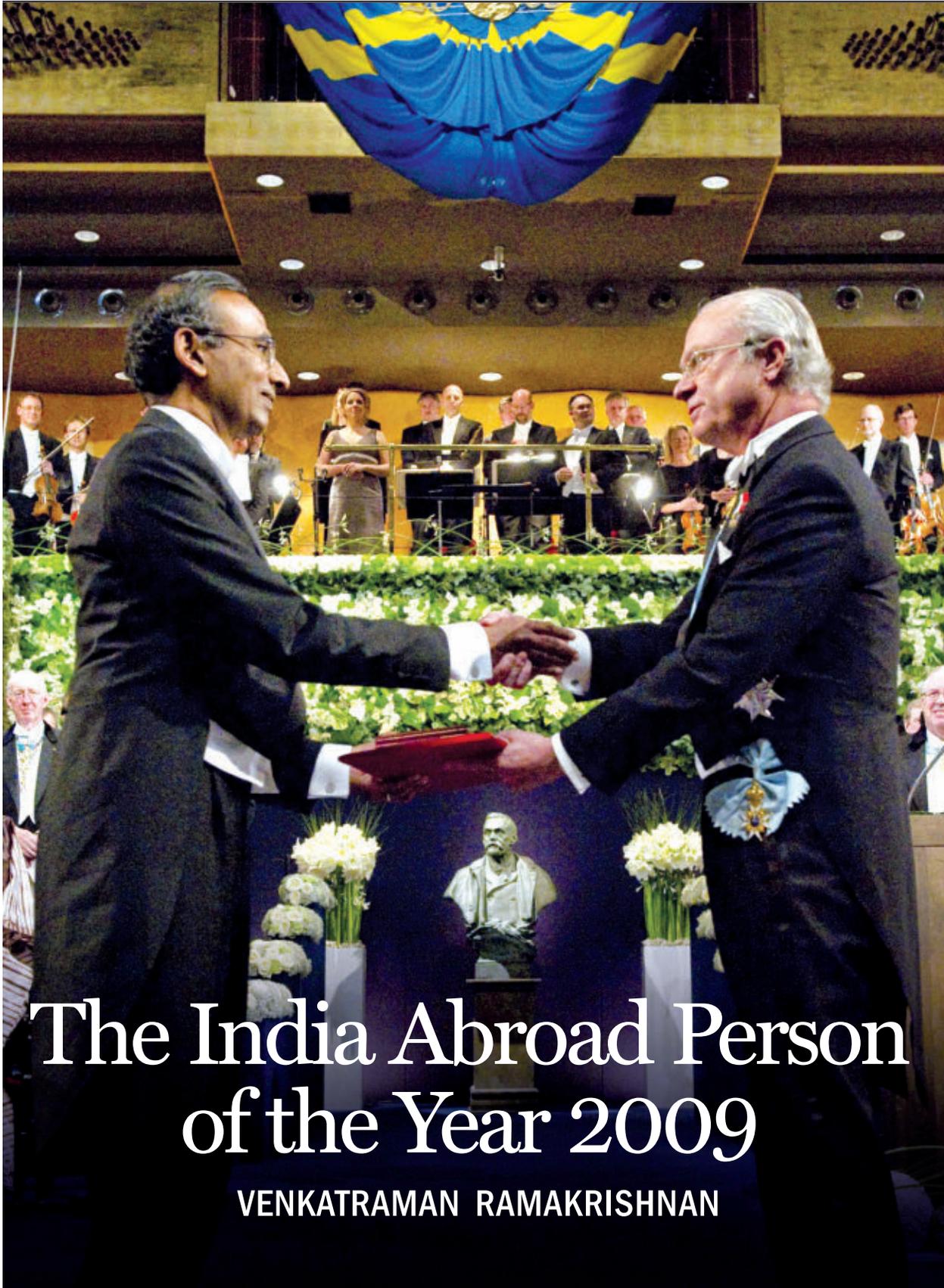
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The India Abroad Person of the Year 2009

VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

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PERSON OF THE YEAR 2009

VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

FROM THE EDITORS

For unsurpassed scientific achievement, for consistently fostering the spirit of discovery, for pioneering research that won him the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, India Abroad salutes Professor Venkatraman Ramakrishnan and honors him with the India Abroad Person of the Year Award 2009.



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2008

‘You don’t have to be that smart to be a good scientist’

VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN, winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry 2009 and India Abroad Person of the Year 2009, explains his work and vision to **PRAJENDRAN**

Venkatraman Ramakrishnan wears his laurels lightly. He can joke that he is not very intelligent, talk about failure with candor, and success, self-deprecatingly. But he is most ardent when discussing the passion for science.

Hunted, haunted by a need to find – not just himself – but a more fundamental truth, Venki, as friends know him, found no peace in medicine, in the promise of engineering, or even the airy heights of theoretical physics.

He encountered something he could wrestle with in biology, and brought his intellect and

passion together in a frenetic duet that yielded extraordinary results. For some, that would be the Nobel Prize. And for those who just want to know stuff, it would be the ribosome, exposed in its native beauty at 3 Angstroms or less.

A seeker of big problems, Venki started his biological career with ribosomes and made his best-known contributions studying them. He and his competitor-colleagues raced to explain the structure of bacterial ribosomes.

Ada Yonath and Thomas Steitz and he may have been good, but it was just the limitation of three winners

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PERSON OF THE YEAR 2009

VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

'He's a person who can literally do everything'

Associates hail Venki Ramakrishnan's genius and personality

Some top academic mentors tend to be a little otherworldly, a little out of touch of facts beyond the context of their own reality. Not Venki Ramachandran.

William 'Bil' Clemons, now teaching at Caltech, was close to his mentor's family.

"It was more than a scientific interaction," he says of his dealings with Ramakrishnan, going on to describe the family as a very close one.

"They talked all the time — and not just the immediate family but the extended family as well on both sides," he says, describing Ramakrishnan as being engaged both in the family and other social settings.

"He was a sort of central figure, and we'd play games like Trivial Pursuit," says Clemons, adding, perhaps reliving some painful defeats, "He's a very good ping-pong player."

As for work, Clemons says, "All of us who contributed brought in our talents but Venki really oversaw everything. What made us so efficient was because Venki was a central hub of knowledge ... He could understand the problem at all the levels."

Brian Wimberly, who worked as a post-doc under Ramakrishnan says his mentor mixes a spartan life with a child-like nature, a mix he finds unusual in a scientist. "I never had someone so joyous, [with] such a joy to work for," he says,

while describing Ramakrishnan as an unusually clear thinker and speaker.

Wimberly also remembered the child-like euphoria Ramakrishnan showed in the lab in early 1999 when the team came up with an interesting find in a chart that would mean little to laymen.

He described Ramakrishnan's patience after he procrastinated over freezing crystals of a protein and found, just before making a trip with them to New York, that they were not freezing right.

Though Ramakrishnan had repeatedly asked him about it, the future Nobel Laureate let him go for an engagement, but stayed back himself working on the problem till Wimberly returned and working on till late at night to resolve it.

Like a lot of academics he was capable of a lot of focus and there were times he would not even hear people who spoke to him.

"It's merely a technical matter, not that he doesn't care," says Wimberly, who says it was due to Ramakrishnan's recommendation that he got his current job at Rib-X pharmaceuticals.

"He's got excellent social skills in addition to science skills," he says.

Ramakrishnan's own mentor at Yale, Peter Moore, agrees.

"He has a very pleasant personality. He learned the skills he needed to learn very, very rapidly and made major contributions to the work we

were doing," says Moore, who adds that Ramakrishnan "is the most able younger associate I've ever had. We had a perfectly wonderful and highly productive time while he was here."

Wes Sundquist, who helped recruit Ramakrishnan to the University at Utah and shared an office with him, says it was remarkable that someone who had done no X-ray crystallography before could come up with two crystal structures, important enough for articles about both to be published in *Nature*.

"I was amazed at how quickly he can learn new things and master things," says Sundquist, who also remembers how both Ramakrishnan and his wife Vera, who wrote and illustrated children's books, read to Sundquist's children, Chris and Emily.

Speaking of Ramakrishnan's encyclopedic knowledge, Sundquist says, "I offer people advice but I can't do it myself. But he's a person who can literally do everything." Besides, Ramakrishnan also was able to calm his own charges and teaching them every step of the way.

"It is very unusual to find someone who can do biology at the level that he can do, physics at the level he can do," says Sundquist. "People are good at one or the other but he's truly unusual in being good at as many things as he is."

- P Rajendran

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PERSON OF THE YEAR 2009

VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

Venki Ramakrishnan with Sweden's Crown Princess Victoria at the Nobel Banquet in Stockholm, Sweden, December 10, 2009. He received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry that day

'You don't have to be that smart to be a good scientist'

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for a Nobel Prize that kept other deserving people out, he points out.

In this in-depth interview, the Nobel Laureate discussed, patiently and at length, his early life, his influences, and the things that drive him.

In school, was there any point you really got interested in science?

I think it was because of this teacher (*TC Patel*), who sparked my interest.

Why did you opt for physics?

After my SSC board exams, I went to the pre-science programs of M S University. I had to decide what to do next.

At that time, my mother encouraged me to take the National Talent Search Exam, which was modeled after the Westinghouse, and now Intel scholarships, in the US. In India, it involved doing a small research project and a written exam. If you were short-listed, you appear for an interview. The project was actually done in my parents' department. It was on nitrogen fixation and plants. I learned a lot about laboratory techniques. I worked with a staff member in that department in the evenings.

At the same time I took the IIT entrance exam. And applied to the Christian Medical College, Vellore. That involved an entrance exam, too, but the number of seats for (*non-Christian*) men was extremely limited. I didn't make either of those.

By the time I was in pre-science, I was already very interested in science. I would read a lot of other science books – like popular science books ... George Gamow's books, relativity, things like that. I read a lot of books that were not part of the curriculum, just out of interest. I never went to any exam prep classes and I never practiced any exams. It's also possible that I'm not as clever (*laughs*). That's a definite possibility.

But is science only about cleverness?

No, no, it's definitely not. I think you don't have to be that smart to be a good scientist. You can't be an idiot, but you don't have to be some genius.

For whatever reason, I didn't get into the IITs (*Indian Institute of Technology*). I certainly don't blame the exams. Let's just say

there was a mismatch between my aptitude and preparation and the nature and competition of the exams.

I got the National Talent Search scholarship. I also scored in the top 10 or 20 candidates in the pre-science exam and qualified for something called direct admission to the Baroda Medical College. I made a deal with my dad that if I got the science talent scholarship I would give up my medical seat and do a BSc.

By that time I'd already decided on either physics or mathematics. Biology in pre-science was taught in a really awful rote memorization way. It just didn't seem like it was for me. Chemistry was also taught in a fairly rote manner.

I was somewhat inclined toward mathematics but, in hindsight, it's a good thing I didn't because I don't think I would have been very good at it. But some of the faculty (*at MS University*) had just returned from the US and they had persuaded the department to completely change and modernize their undergraduate curriculum. Even for pre-science we had a very modern undergraduate (*physics*) curriculum ... designed at MIT.

We had very modern physics, right from the start and the BSc program continued that by instituting the Berkeley physics course, which actually my son took at Harvard 30 years later. It used to be that if you were a second-year, third-year student, you never got taught by the top professors – and these people decided they were going to teach from the first year. I had a choice – going away to Delhi University. Once you had a science talent scholarship you could go to almost any BSc program.

My parents heard something about Delhi University students being into drugs and things like that. They didn't want me to go, partly because I was only 15. They didn't want me to go off and be with kids who were two years older, at least. So I stayed on. The new curriculum was the clincher. So I gained in the sense that I got a reasonable physics education but I lost in the sense that I lived at home when I should have been out on my own and growing up and maturing.



PETER ANDREWS/REUTERS

In the US, you did multiple degrees, right?

Most people do a Master's and then they take the GRE and come to the US. I was slightly fed up and I wanted to go off to the US, partly because all of my books were by famous American scientists, and I thought that was the place to be. One book (*that particularly interested me*) that apart from the Berkeley physics course was *The Feynman Lectures on Physics* and that really just blew me away. So I thought, my god, this is the place to be – America.

My parents were on sabbatical in Urbana, Illinois, when I was taking my (*undergraduate*). I thought I could join them for the summer and then continue on to a PhD. The trouble was, I was 19, and had not taken my GRE. The only school that would offer me a fellowship was Ohio University. I was happy they gave me a fellowship because Indians need a fellowship to study unless they are very rich. I got through the first two years of coursework and passed my comprehensive

exams. But once I started doing research, it was clear to me that I was not terribly interested in my field.

If I'd gone into maybe a more experimental area of physics, maybe I would have stayed in physics. I don't know. At that time I also regularly read *Scientific American*, and found articles on biology really interesting. It seemed like the whole field was booming. It also seemed like if you knew physics you could actually learn the stuff. I applied to a number of schools – and some of them said, 'Well, you already have a PhD so we can't take you but maybe you could come as a post-doc.'

In fact, Yale gave my name to two people and they both asked me if I was interested in a post-doc. But I wasn't interested because I wanted to acquire a broad background in biology. Because otherwise you go to a person and all you learn is that person's area and you don't know anything about the broad

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'You don't have to be that smart to be a good scientist'

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field.

Three universities accepted me and, because I was going to have a newborn (*Raman*), I chose it for where we could actually live with two small children. But I only applied to good schools because I thought if I'm going to have a second shot at becoming a scientist, I don't want to go to a second-tier school. And so I went to the University of California-San Diego, which is really first-rate. (*He was also accepted at the University of Chicago and the University of California-Los Angeles.*)

My wife (*Vera Rosenberry*) didn't want to live in a big city. At that time, La Jolla was still a somewhat separate entity --- it wasn't merged into San Diego the way it is now. After two years (*of studying*), I thought that, well, I don't really need to get a second PhD, and so I wrote to one of the professors who had written to me from Yale (*Donald M. Engleman*) because he and Peter Moore (*Dr Ramakrishnan's eventual mentor at Yale*) had written an article in *Scientific American*. He wrote to me and said (*there is a position to*) work on the ribosome (*the unit in a cell that actually manufactures proteins from the code sent down from the DNA*) with Peter Moore.

When did you first meet him?

I met Peter Moore at a conference (*in 1977*). We had an informal interview and he offered me a job. Then I visited Yale and I accepted the job. I was in Peter's lab for about three-and-a-half years, 1978 to 1982. That's when I really got interested in the ribosome and started working on it, and doing structural work on it but at very low (*visual*) resolution. I was trying to find out where the proteins are located in the small ribosomal subunit. That was not a crystallographic structure. That was a technique where you measured the centers of mass between proteins. Then, by triangulation, you (*can find out the*) arrangement. It used a very esoteric technique called neutron scat-



Venki Ramakrishnan and wife Vera Rosenberry

tering.

The structures of the proteins were not known. We just thought of them as spheres. We just wanted to know, is S12 at the top or the bottom.

Then I started applying for about 50 faculty positions, including second- and third-tier places. I didn't get a single interview. Part of it is, my career was sort of weird. I had a physics degree from Baroda University, so immediately people were wondering whether this guy can speak English without an accent and whether he can teach undergraduates. The other thing was I had gone to a second-tier physics degree from Ohio University. Then I did this weird two-year graduate program with no degree from UCSD. Then I did my post-doc in some very esoteric technique called neutron scattering, which hardly anyone used. So I don't actually blame them but that was my situation.

What did you do after graduation?

This is not on my CV — because I think I wasted an entire year. I got a job at Oak Ridge National Labs (*in 1982*). I left in 15 months. I was told I would have to collaborate with people by stimulating neutron scattering experiments. I said, 'Look, I need to develop my own biological research program.' They said, 'Oh, no problem. We'll put you up with a lab in the biology division and

you'll be okay.' When I went there, there had been some budget cuts and they had no budget for me and they hadn't talked to each other so it wasn't a joint appointment. The biology department acted like they were doing me a big favor by even letting me

come in there and have a desk. So within a month of arriving there I knew this was not a place for me. It was really one of the worst years of my life.

Luckily, I used to talk to a few people in the biology division and I identified three or four problems in which a neutron experiment would tell them something. I actually published four papers that year. Of course, if I'd stayed another year, I'd have zero papers because I'd identified the four problems and done them.

Where did you go from there?

I started looking around and, luckily, Brookhaven National Labs had a truly independent position where I could do my own work and operated like a university: You had five to six years to prove your worth and then you got tenure and then you were continued on. They said, if you come here we would like you to do neutron scattering experiments but you can do other things as well. It was much more the kind of position I needed. So I moved to Brookhaven. Even though we liked Oak Ridge because we liked hiking and the countryside, and Long Island is this horrible suburban sprawl ... I stayed there longer than any other place, except now in Cambridge.

In Brookhaven I spent from '83 until '95. That would be 12 years except that we spent one year in Cambridge... on a sabbatical.

I got my program going in Brookhaven. One good thing that came out of Oak Ridge was that because of one of these collaborations, I developed an interest in chromatin in addition to ribosomes. So I worked on both chromatin and ribosomes in Brookhaven.

In Brookhaven, a colleague of mine, Stephen White wanted to determine the atomic structure of proteins in the ribosomes. Each one is a tiny, little piece of the ribosome but could be isolated and crystallized and solved. I was very good in biochemistry and he knew crystallography. He said, 'Look, Venki, a guy with your background in physics and so on will not find it hard to learn crystallography.' So he encouraged me to learn crystallography and start collaborating with him on it. Then I also learned molecular biology. I learned how to clone all the genes for these proteins and make lots of them so that we could crystallize them. That was because two people who pioneered the way proteins are expressed in bacteria, Bill Studier and John Dunn, were my colleagues at Brookhaven.

I had great colleagues. Studier and Dunn taught me how to clone, and taught me molecular biology, and Steve encouraged me to get into crystallography. I took a course in Cold Spring Harbor (*Laboratory*) on crystallography. It was the very first Cold Spring Harbor course on crystallography — and I'm actually the second person to have taken that course to win a Nobel Prize (*The first was Roderick MacKinnon, who won it for showing how some proteins help to generate nerve impulses*).

During the tenure process (*at Brookhaven*) I was asked, 'Supposing we give you tenure, what will you do?' I said, 'If you gave me tenure I would stop doing crystallography, go away on sabbatical and I would learn crystallography and then apply it to my problems.' That was the truth. I didn't want to lie. Fortunately, they were broad-minded enough to give me tenure. Then I wrote to Aaron Klug (*Nobel Laureate and head of the MRC laboratories in Cambridge then*) and asked if I could come and work on a component of chromatin (*the complex made up of DNA wrapped around proteins*) — he's an expert on chromatin — which I had crystallized. The idea was that I would bring these crystals and then I'd use the sabbatical year to solve the structure.

I had crystallized a histone (*the proteins that DNA wrap around. They were first found in the red blood cells of birds*). Aaron Klug was very interested in that protein and I said I'll bring this project with me and I'll use it to learn crystallography. I didn't want to go there and learn crystallography on some irrelevant problem. It wouldn't be as motivating as doing something you cared about. And that worked absolutely brilliantly. First

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PERSON OF THE YEAR 2009

VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

‘There is the man: So intolerant of intolerance’

SUDHIR KAICKER reveals to **P RAJENDRAN** what an unusual person the Nobel Laureate is

Venki Ramakrishnan did not like the look of a temple in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, after he saw a sign that prohibited menstruating women from going in.

“He said, ‘If these people are going to discriminate, I’m not going inside,’” remembers Sudhir Kaicker, an old friend from his college days at Ohio University. “There is the man: So intolerant of intolerance.”

Kaicker remembers the time they went trekking in the Appalachians and jumped off a freight train while the crew looked the other way and even stopped for them to get off outside Cleveland.

He remembers Ramakrishnan as a good chess player, one who read every kind of book, one particular favorite being *How to Be an Alien* by George Mikes. Kaicker says he believes Ramakrishnan even worked for the Democratic Party in Ohio during the McGovern campaign. And when they stepped out to the local McDonalds, the employees were hard put to organize a plain cheese sandwich without the regulation burger. Not having that on the menu, they would just ask Venki to toss a quarter in the till. His favorite drink then, though, was easier to provide — hot chocolate.

Kaicker believes he may have stopped Ramakrishnan from doing as well as he could in academics.

“None of us were happy doing physics,” he says “We had a great time (*but*) I wish we had studied a little harder... He has never been happy about that wasted time.”

Kaicker, who went on to head the computer center at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University in



Venki Ramakrishnan receives the Nobel Prize in Chemistry 2009 from Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf at the Concert Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 2009

PETER ANDREWS/REUTERS

New Delhi, remembers Ramakrishnan as being generous to a fault and very passionate about his beliefs.

“When we were going on the Appalachian Trail I wanted a camera. I had no money. I said, Venki, I need 500 or so dollars. And (*I*) got it immediately. He’s that kind of friend,” says Kaicker, describing him as the most unassuming of men: Kind, compassionate, gentle, and (*yet*) very easily aroused to anger.”

Kaicker recalls he and another friend Anthony Grimaldi enjoyed teasing Ramakrishnan.

“Tony would say something absolutely ridiculous. Venki would retort immediately. I’d side with Tony and say, ‘No, Venki, Tony’s absolutely right’, though I knew quite well that Tony was (*not*). We just wanted to irritate Venki. He would see through it a little later,” says Kaicker, laughing.

When people in India criticize Ramakrishnan, says Kaicker, they don’t know his true character. “They just don’t know

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‘Kindness, humor and authenticity’

Professor **Wes Sundquist**, an old friend from Utah, recalls his association with the Nobel Laureate

I’ve never really asked Venki much about his youth in India, but since he won the Nobel Prize, Venki has been quoted as saying that he was a carefree youth and that he has fond memories of playing in the mango and chikoo groves as a schoolboy. Venki is one of only a handful of people born in India to win the Nobel Prize, and his words now therefore carry great weight in India.



When he was asked about his experiences in the Indian education system (and how it might be tailored to produce even more Nobel Prize winners), he offered the advice that he thought that the system should be careful not to burden kids with too much homework. That one comment, of course, has made him the most popular man in the world amongst the children of India.

I recently asked Venki’s sister, Lalli, about the young Venki, and she sent me this picture. Now it’s not uncommon for 18-year-olds to lounge around in bed, but in my experience very few of them do it while reading the Feynman Lectures in Physics. Lalli tells me the photo was taken in the verandah of their shared bedroom when Venki was about 18 and she was 11. She says: “We had an extra cot in the verandah and on the other side hung a dartboard which Venki would use regularly when he was stuck over a physics or math problem.”

Lalli herself is an MD/PhD, and is a terrifically creative and talented medical researcher at the University of Washington. She’s a brilliant woman, but she tells me that when she and Venki were growing up, they both had a very influential math teacher called T C Patel. She says that Mr Patel once cheerfully told her “While you might be the best math student in your class, you should not for a moment think you are in Venki’s league.”

Venki did his undergraduate studies in physics at the University of Baroda, which he attended on a National Science Talent Scholarship. He graduated with a BSc in Physics in 1971. He then moved to the USA, where he obtained his PhD in Physics from Ohio University in 1976. I have asked Venki about his graduate work, and he claims that he wasn’t a great student because he spent almost all of his time playing competitive chess and chasing Vera Rosenberg, who ultimately became his girlfriend and is now his wife.

Vera is a remarkable woman in her own right — she’s an award-winning artist, illustrator, and children’s book writer, and she’s the author of the delightful *Vera* series of children’s books.

After receiving his PhD in Theoretical Physics, Venki made the unusual decision to re-enroll in graduate school studying molecular biology at the University of California, San Diego. That was a key decision, because it allowed him to make the transition from theoretical physics to biology. Fortunately for him, he already had a PhD, and so after two years as a graduate student, he did what every second year graduate student dreams of doing — he left graduate school and became a postdoc.

His postdoc was in Peter Moore’s lab at Yale. Peter Moore is a great biophysicist, and it was in Peter’s lab that Venki began his work on the ribosome. During that period, Venki did pioneering diffraction experiments that allowed him

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PERSON OF THE YEAR 2009

VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

The Nobel Laureate, as brother

Dr **LALITA RAMAKRISHNAN** recalls the many pranks he used to play when they were children



KIND COURTESY: LALITA RAMAKRISHNAN

Venki Ramakrishnan, second from right, with, from left, wife Vera Rosenberry, mother Rajalakshmi, sister Lalita with her son Rajan in sling, her husband Mark Troll with daughter Maya and father C V Ramakrishnan

One day, many years ago, when the household help came to the Ramakrishnan

home in Baroda, she was startled by a strange woman who asked her who she was, what she wanted there, and told her to be off. The help retired in confusion.

The bossy 'woman,' in the years ahead would earn a Nobel Prize, but then just 16, stepped back in to enjoy a good laugh.

Venkatraman Ramakrishnan was always a very mischievous child, says Lalita, his sister, who has a bent nose to prove it — the result of a challenge to run down a corridor and back without hurting oneself. That was when, Venki, then about 10, peeked during his run so as to avoid an accident. Being younger, more honest and, perhaps, more gullible too, Lalita did not, and so had to be taken down for treatment while Venki hung around in purgatory in preparation for hell in the thereafter.

On quiet afternoons, the Nobel Laureate-in-waiting also used to go to the kitchen and bark like a bitch in estrous to get the attention of the dogs next door before heading off to the library.

'What has he done? *Mathu dukhe che* (*my head is aching*), ' housekeeper Jethiben used to grumble in Gujarati over the desperate howls of the excited dogs.

It was the same kind of impishness that led him, at a time when India was at war with Pakistan in 1971, to tell his younger sister that he had tickets to the war that he

would give away unless she checked with their mother Rajalakshmi who was taking an afternoon nap. Their mother wasn't amused.

Then there was the time he convinced his friend Sudhir Trivedi they would jump out of a classroom window and renege on his part of the plan. Or when he used very technical details to assure his maternal grandfather Gopalsamudram Ramaswami, an avid cricket fan, that the Australian cricket team was visiting Baroda.

Ramakrishnan was also protective of his sister, helping her shave down the limited number of laddoos, and taking her to films along with him. In one case, deterred by a House Full sign, the teenager 'wept' copiously, horrifying the man at the counter, who put in two seats for them to see the Laurel and Hardy matinee for free.

"He got us a snack with that money," says Lalita, a medical researcher at the University of Washington, who Ramakrishnan has described as a very good sibling and, in her work, more original than him.

Father C V Ramakrishnan says while much is made of their home being driven to academic pursuits, there was no biochemistry lab in the

house as many have claimed. He also attributes a lot of his son's success to the resilience of Vera, his daughter-in-law.

He says the first person to insistently say his son would win a Nobel was Venki's maternal grandmother Meenakshi, who looked after him when his parents were in

Canada.

Speaking of his son's troubles in school, Ramakrishnan admits he did not realize at the time that he was not doing two well.

"I had to manage two departments. I didn't know what time he was doing at that time. I only know now," he says.

Lalita now works with the progress of tuberculosis, a disease her mother recovered from, and has papers in prestigious journals like *Cell* and *Science*. But when she was working on her thesis, she turned to him to clone a gene for her when she could not do it.

"He helped me with my work in a way I needed desperately. He did help me get my first *Science* paper," she says.

She says her brother appears to have got his level of scholarlyness from their mother. Lalita remembers that even the day her mother chose to go off dialysis, effectively consigning herself to death in the next few days, she, as always, was reading a novel and looking up words in the dictionary.

"You know you're going to be dead in two days. Why do you want to know the meaning of a word? Venki's gone above and beyond, but (*he too wants to be*) knowing things for the sake of knowing them," she says.

Venki got his analytical bent from his mother and the mind of a tinkerer from her father, adds Lalita.

"(*The Nobel Laureate*) got this broad interest — both in science and everything else," she says. "He's very, very knowledgeable and that level of scholarlyness is something that my mother had — a very profound interest in all sorts of things."

— P Rajendran

'There is the man: So intolerant of intolerance'

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just how much he loves the country. He does not have an iota of pride," he says.

But his love of India is also the kind that makes some people unhappy. As happened in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots in 2002. Hundreds of people were killed, many of them Muslim, and Ramakrishnan, who grew up in what is now Vadodara, contributed to their upkeep, upsetting right-wing groups in the process.

Kaicker still remembers

Ramakrishnan's trip to India in 2005.

"The two of us just took off the way we (*did*) on the Appalachian Trail. We went to Rajasthan, we went to the Bharatpur bird sanctuary, we just kept traveling."

While chatting with their fellow travelers at New Delhi station, students traveling to Jodhpur for a musical show, Kaicker told them they were traveling with a very famous scientist.

"I said to them, 'Look at this guy's face very, very carefully. Because soon you'll see it splashed across the news-

papers in India. He's going to be winning the Nobel Prize," Kaicker says. The boys got up and touched Ramakrishnan's feet — and then Kaicker's.

"Venki was so touched by this," says Kaicker. "This sort of thing is possible only in India: this great reverence that anybody has for anybody who is so scholarly."

Sudhir Kaicker retired from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He now teaches part time at Sheridan College in Brampton, Ontario, Canada

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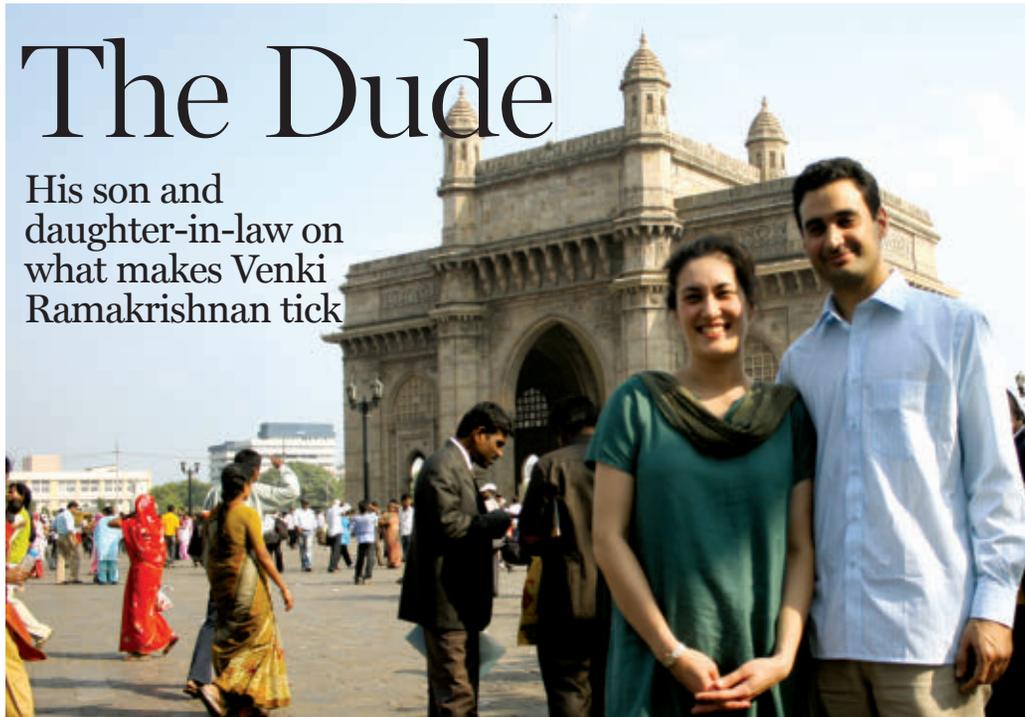
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Raman Ramakrishnan and Melissa Reardon at the Gateway of India in Mumbai

The Dude

His son and daughter-in-law on what makes Venki Ramakrishnan tick



RAJESH KARKERA

Raman Ramakrishnan, Venkatraman Ramakrishnan's son, majored in physics in

Harvard before changing career tracks and earning a Master's from The Juilliard School. He plays the cello. He is a member of the Daedalus Quartet, who have performed at many notable venues like Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Vienna's Musikverein and New York's Carnegie Hall, gathering-glowing reviews. Raman also teaches at Columbia University.

On what he admires about his dad:

A quality I respect a lot in my dad is his sense of humor about life, and about himself. He works very hard, but he loves a good joke, and he never takes himself too seriously. Whenever he gets an award, or a job offer, his standard line is, "Well, I fooled 'em again!"

Another quality, which I respect, is his ability to draw people out and discover what makes them tick. He is able to engage them with just the right tone, and before long, he has them talking at length about the crucial issues of their lives. I think this is probably similar to the way in which he investigates problems in science: by being curious and perceptive, and by asking the right questions.

I like his appreciation for nature, for which my mom is largely responsible. My childhood was filled with family walks, bike rides, and camping trips. On a walk through the countryside, my dad visibly relaxes. He reaches a friendly hand out to the butterflies fluttering past him, and whistles Carnatic or Chamber music melodies. I am sure that these breaks from his work are rejuvenating to him; no doubt they are partly responsible for his success.

On his exposure to classical music through his father:

My dad is a big fan of Carnatic music. He is also a fan of Western classical music and had a pretty extensive collection of

LPs — a lot of Chamber music. I remember he had a recording of the Juilliard String Quartet playing Beethoven's late (*String*) quartet, which I really loved having growing up. We were exposed to this.

My parents are both big fans of music. They used to take my sister and me to concerts when we were growing up. My sister started playing the violin when she was young. I wanted to do something too, so I begged to play the cello. When I was seven they let me start taking lessons.

My dad took me to some Carnatic concerts near Stony Brook. My father, I think, developed his interest in Western classical music (*in India*). My grandmother, his mother, was also very into Carnatic music. She was an amateur veena player. She was also interested in other forms of music.

(*Once you embark on a career in music*) the thing about music is that you can't escape from it. Even on a vacation you think you should be practicing. Or the piece you are working on is constantly playing in your head.

Music is very similar to physics. You are constantly working on a problem. I see that in my dad. He has this lost, vacant look on his face — he is thinking about the ribosome.

A message for his father:

Thanks for being such a great dad. For always putting me high on your priorities

even when you are thinking about the ribosome constantly. And for encouraging me to follow a career path that I really felt passionate about, in spite of the fact that I wouldn't be making much money. And above all for encouraging me to get out of science because I am really grateful that now I don't have to fill your footsteps. Thank you for everything.

Melissa Reardon, a violist on the faculty of East Carolina University, made her stage debut with the Boston Symphony Orchestra aged 13 and has earned several prestigious prizes and played with several prestigious string quartets. She met her husband Raman Ramakrishnan at the Marlboro music fest.

I remember first meeting Venki very clearly. It was after a concert at the Marlboro music festival (*the Vermont chamber music summer event*). I had just met Raman and I was waiting back stage and Venki came up to me and said, "Hi I am Raman's dad." And I was like... I didn't even know who he was at first. It was very surprising.

He was very forward and very friendly. He is very funny, friendly, warm, generous. In some ways he is like Raman. He likes the movie *The Big Lebowski*. I think he thinks of himself as being quite similar to *The Dude* (*the film's protagonist*).

— As told to Vaihayasi Pande Daniel

'Always at every turn, he was watching out for us'

What are Nobel Laureates like as parents? Harvard-educated physician **TANYA KAPKA** tells us:

When she first met him, Tanya Kapka was very impressed to learn that Venki Ramakrishnan was an alien who screwed off his head and stuck it in the closet every night.

"I believed him for a long time," says Tanya, then four, now 39, with a laugh. She continues to look up to her stepfather, even though her reasons are a little different now.

One of the first things he did after marrying Tanya's mother Vera Rosenberry, was to take charge of the child's education. Soon, he got her to skip a grade, going from kindergarten to second grade.

"He really believes in education," says Tanya, a Harvard-educated physician who now practices near Portland, Oregon and does health policy research on the side.

When the family moved from a good school district in Tennessee to Long Island, New York, Ramakrishnan got into an argument with the principal of the new school. Tanya says it was a very "tense session" because the principal thought her B+ grade meant she could not handle the tougher class. Even her mother would not have risked that confrontation, says Tanya, who went on to get A+s the whole year.

Ramakrishnan still says he is responsible for her career in medicine because he got her into the right math class in high school, she says, laughing.

"Always at every turn, he was watching out for us," she says.

She remembers that life with Ramakrishnan in the family was spartan, but fun.

"We did not have a TV or a car most of our lives. Not until I was in high school. Even then, it was only one car — for Venki to get to work," says Kapka. Both her parents insisted that she and her half-brother Raman go across town to see *Eyes on the Prize*, a prize-winning documentary series on the civil rights movement. Her parents "made it a priority for us to see it (*to*) realize how recent that fight for equality was and how horrible conditions were prior (*to it*)."

There were long treks, in which even her young brother, when he was two, covered four miles

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VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

Venki and his father C V Ramakrishnan



KIND COURTESY: LALITA RAMAKRISHNAN

'You don't have to be that smart to be a good scientist'

M5 ← PAGE of all, Aaron sponsored me for fellowships, and I got the Guggenheim fellowship (*in 1991*). And that allowed me to (*stop worrying about money*). Brookhaven paid half the salary and the Guggenheim paid slightly less than half the salary. But that didn't matter: I still wanted to go.

So I went off to Cambridge to the place where I am now. During that year, I solved two structures: one was the histone I took with me, and the other was a ribosomal protein structure (*S5*) that I was (*working on*) with Stephen White. (*Articles about*) these were published in *Nature* the following year.

I learned crystallography during that year. I solved two structures.

How did that trip affect you?

That sabbatical was a big eye-opener for me because it was the first time I'd been in an incredibly first-rate place — I'd been at Yale but I was at a more immature point: I was a post-doc and I wasn't (*yet*) that comfortable in biology and so on, was still making a kind of transition. Although there were a few famous people in Yale, it was nothing like the MRC lab. A lot of the pioneers of molecular biology were here. Max Perutz (*who won a Nobel Prize for solving the structure of hemoglobin*), Aaron Klug, a pioneer of electron microscopy and crystallography, were here.

You ask why an institution does so well... When you come here it looks like a dump, okay? The building's sort of run down, the equipment is in all the hallways. It's crowded. It's not at all posh looking. Offices are tiny. Most people don't even have an office though they are senior scientists. Then you realize that if you need to do something there's always equipment somewhere, buried in some room. All equipment here is shared so they have almost everything you need. Because it's shared it encourages collegiality.

Then they have a tradition of meeting for meals in the canteen. So people always talk to each other. Zero hierarchy, you know. So the first-year student will be sitting next to the lab director and talking — stuff like that. It didn't matter.

At seminars, these famous Nobel Laureates would ask questions that seemed really basic and obvious. And it didn't bother them that they didn't know. They didn't know so they asked the question. They weren't embarrassed to ask a question for fear of looking foolish. That's a common problem in science. It changed my perspective on science. I didn't want any more work on mundane problems. I wanted to do things I felt were important.

By that time, DOE (*the US Department of Energy*) had also changed the way it was looking at national labs. It didn't like funding small groups like university groups at national labs. It wanted big projects. It made (*BNL*) not the right place for people like me who were basically investigator scientists. So

I decided to go somewhere else.

Where did you go?

I considered a number of places but I went to the University of Utah because it has a terrific reputation in the biological sciences. Secondly, there were a lot of people there doing RNA biology, and ribosomes are mostly RNA. Thirdly, we loved the place geographically because my wife (*Vera Rosenberry*) and I love the outdoors and hiking. It seemed like a very nice place to live — great science — and so we went there. I was quite happy there. You may ask why I didn't stay over there because I only stayed there about four years. The reason is that already by the time I went there I had ideas on how to tackle the entire ribosome crystallographically.

This is because Ada Yonath had crystallized the 50S subunit (*the bigger of the two subunits that make up the ribosome*), and a Russian group (*led by Maria Garber at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute for Protein Research at Pushchino*) had crystallized the (*smaller*) 30S (*subunit*) and the 70S ribosome (*complete with both subunits*).

Those crystals didn't diffract (*light*) very well, and those that diffracted well, Ada had a lot of trouble making progress on. I thought I had a good idea how to crystallize the 30S subunit. ...Because of my histone work I had done on my sabbatical, I also had an idea how, if we got crystals, we could solve the phase problem (*the difficulty in getting information about the position of light particles*).

With these ideas I went to Utah but the trouble in Utah is, like every other professor, I was dependent on grants. I also realized that if I wanted to tackle a hard problem like this I couldn't be doing other stuff to keep papers rolling. So even though my chromatin stuff was going very well ... I decided that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a truly ground-breaking contribution. I thought I'd explore the possibility of working at the MRC lab — where I'd done my sabbatical — on this project. I came to a meeting in Sweden and stopped in Cambridge along the way and had a discussion with the lab director (*Richard Henderson*).

He said this is exactly the kind of fundamental, challenging problem we'd like to support. And it's so different from an NIH (*the US National Institute of Health*) committee (*which funds a great many projects*). He didn't ask, 'Do you have crystals? Do you have preliminary data?' He didn't care. He just felt this was a problem worth tackling — and that's the difference between this place and some, you know, standard place. Of course, he asked me how I'd go about it: It had to make some reasonable sense. He was a very important per-

son in my life.

He said 'We'd like to have you but ... we don't have space now. But we're planning to acquire some space and when that happens I'll get back to you.' I thought this was a polite rejection... In America, this would mean, 'We're not interested.'

I wrote to him again. In a few months, he wrote back and said, 'Yes, you can come.'

How was it moving to Cambridge?

Moving there was a very tough decision because my work was going well, and this was a big gamble. I was gambling everything on a problem that nobody thought was even possible (*to solve*). I didn't know whether I would get good crystals and I would be taking a huge salary cut — 40 percent. Plus, the cost of living is much higher here than the US.

But I was excited about the problem. I had 20 years left and I didn't want to spend it doing a bunch of stuff that nobody would remember, that wouldn't amount to anything when I was done.

I didn't leave Utah right away. It takes a while to wind up; it's a little bit like shutting down a small business and restarting somewhere else. And then there's this paperwork and formal interviews. It took over a year — actually, almost two years.

During that time (*at Utah*), I completely focused on the ribosome to ensure that I was off to a good start when I moved. The strange thing is, we actually got our first good diffracting crystals in Utah — we even got our first data in Utah. The paper we published in 1999 came out of entirely Utah data although by the time it was submitted I'd already moved.

Could you not have finished your work there?

People often tell me, you could have just stayed and done it; there's no need to move. But the fact is, if I didn't know I was moving, I wouldn't have had the courage to stop everything else (*I was doing in research*). I would have had to work within the US system of keeping a lot of things going and having some safety projects and so on. Even though (*the breakthrough research*) happened in Utah, it was motivated by the fact that that I was going to MRC and going to focus on this problem.

I moved to Cambridge and two people

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VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

'Kindness, humor and authenticity'

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to locate the positions of most of the proteins in the ribosome.

After finishing at Yale, Venki moved to Brookhaven National Laboratory, one of the DOE national laboratories, where he again did excellent work, particularly in the area of neutron diffraction. 1992 was a key year for him, because that year he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to do a sabbatical at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge, England.

It was my great fortune to share a bench with Venki during his sabbatical year because I was already there as a postdoc. The thing that was truly amazing about his stay there was that he had never before done X-ray crystallography (the goal of his sabbatical was to learn crystallography). Yet that year, he not only learned crystallography, he solved the crystal structures of two very important proteins — one that helped to explain DNA is organized in cells, and the other that contributed to our understanding of the ribosome — and he published both structures in *Nature*.

I can tell you that it was simply amazing to have a front row seat where I could watch the rate at which he learned crystallography, crystallized those proteins, and solved their structures. In principle, this could have been a bit demoralizing for a struggling post-doc, the truth is that Venki was such a delightfully modest and wise man that it was impossible to feel jealous of his success.

After his sabbatical, Venki returned to Brookhaven, and a couple of years later, in 1995, it was our great fortune to recruit him to Utah. In his early years at Utah, he made a series of significant discoveries and wrote a number of important papers. In 1996, he wrote a very influential paper in which he described what has now become most common method for solving a fundamental problem in X-ray structure determinations, called the phase problem. You will therefore realize that in just four years, Venki had gone from learning X-ray crystallography to leading the field in developing new methodology. During that period, he and his students also solved the structures of a series of interesting proteins and RNA molecules. In short, he was at the top of the field.

It was therefore a stunning development when Venki decided, in about 1997, to stop working on the 'small' problems that he had already mastered, and instead concentrate on determining the X-ray crystal structure of half of the ribosome (the so-called 30S subunit). I would argue that decision was a moment of genuine genius.

To put the decision in perspective, Venki was a highly successful scientist at the top of his field, and the 30S subunit of the ribosome was much larger than any crystal structure that had ever been solved. It was true that Ada Yonath, with whom Venki shared the Prize, and others had made remarkable progress in crystallizing the ribosome and its sub-units, but the daunting biochemistry and X-ray crystallography required to grow high quality crystals and solve the structure was literally beyond most people's imagination at that time.

However, Venki realized that he was perhaps uniquely qualified to tackle the problem. Elsewhere, there were outstanding scientists like Harry Noller, who had made great contributions and were true experts on the biochemistry of the ribosome. There were also a few X-ray crystallographers, including Tom Steitz at Yale, with whom Venki also shares the Prize, who understood what it would take to solve the phase problem and to solve a structure as big as the ribosome.

However, I think it's fair to say that there literally wasn't anyone in the world who combined both of those qualities in the way Venki did. So, to his great credit, Venki set out to solve the structure of the 30S subunit of the ribosome. In doing this, he had great help from two members of his lab—graduate student, Bill Clemons (who is now a Professor at Caltech), and a post-doc, Brian Wimberly, who was important because he had an encyclopedic knowledge of RNA structure.

I'd like to tell you that they struggled for years and years, but in fact it was astonishing how rapidly they overcame every hurdle that they faced and how quickly their work progressed, so that by early 1999 they had grown crystals, collected data, solved the phase problem, and were interpreting the electron density maps that defined the structure of the 30S subunit.

I can still remember walking into our shared computer room one morning and seeing Bill, Brian, and Venki sitting around the computer and looking at electron density that clearly defined a right handed helix and therefore had to be a piece of double-stranded RNA within the ribosome. As you know, it's not unusual to miss the significance of events when they happen in real time, but I can honestly say that I knew that I was witnessing history that morning.

Later that year, they published the first structure of the 30S subunit of the ribosome in *Nature*, and Venki moved back to the MRC-LMB, the premier structural biology laboratory in the world. In the ensuing 10 years, Venki and his colleagues have pushed forward the structural biology of the ribosome at breathtaking speed and with wonderful insight. I won't describe all of their firsts, but three years ago they reported the first structure of the entire ribosome, bound to the RNA message and to the transfer RNAs that read the message.

One thing is, as scientists, we occasionally have the great privilege of being the first to glimpse a new secret of nature. And when that happens, we invariably find that nature is more beautiful, subtle, and elegant than we could have imagined. By elucidating the structure and inner workings of the ribosome, Venki has revealed far more of nature than most scientists, and the results have been stunning.

The second thing I hope you get is a feeling for what a truly special person Venki is — not just as a scientist, but also as a person. He and Vera have raised a wonderful family. Their



Venki
Ramakrishnan
loves trekking

daughter, Tanya, is a successful physician in Portland. Their son, Raman, received his Bachelor's degree with honors in physics from Harvard University, his Master's degree in music from The Juilliard School, and he is now the cellist in the renowned Daedalus string quartet that gives concerts all over the world.

I read a quote from his colleague, Professor Varshney, from the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, that I think captures Venki perfectly:

What strikes me most about Venki is his simplicity. He is a great scientist and has loads of knowledge, but the way he talks to any person — be it a great scientist or a child — is unique. Anybody can be at ease speaking to him. This quality of putting people at ease is a trait that is extremely enviable and I must say that most scientists do not possess it.

The simplicity with which Venki and Vera live their lives is legendary. Venki is perhaps the only Nobel Prize winner in modern times who doesn't own a car. Instead, he and Vera often canoe into Cambridge along the Cam River, sometimes to get their groceries in town.

Several years ago, Venki was named a fellow at Trinity College, which is the most prestigious college at Cambridge University and is the college where Isaac Newton was a student. Venki accepted their offer to become a fellow, but turned down their offer of a parking space (one of the most valuable things you can get in Cambridge!), and instead asked if the college could give him a place to moor his canoe.

Similarly, Vera is a great hiker, and when Venki won the Nobel Prize, Vera was out hiking (or rambling, as they call it in England) and Venki couldn't contact her for several hours because she doesn't own a cell phone.

While Venki was solving the 30S subunit of the ribosome here at Utah, Vera was writing and illustrating her wonderful series of *Vera* children's books, which tell the touching and poignant stories of the young Vera as she deals with the different challenges that face all young children. Vera and Venki used to occasionally come over to our house and when they did, they would invariably end up entertaining our kids.

On those evenings, my wife Nola and I would marvel at the fact that our kids were oblivious to the fact that they had the audience of one of the great scientists of the world and that they were hearing the *Vera* books read by Vera herself. We underestimated them, however, because while it was true that they didn't really understand who Venki and Vera were, like all kids they had a keen ability to sense kindness, humor and authenticity.

I would be remiss if I didn't tell you about one more of Venki's great attributes, which his wonderfully wry and often self-deprecating sense of humor. Venkatraman Ramakrishnan is not a name that slides off the tongues of most Westerners, and Venki and his students used to derive great amusement in discovering the different ways that various salespeople and others could misspell Venki's name. They would collect the various mistaken addresses and letters and display them on the wall, so that people could come by and read all the ways that people had butchered his name.

So one day, Venki walks into our lab, and he has a huge grin on his face. He says, "Check this out", and hands us a package. The label on the package reads 'to the attention of Dr Spanky Ramakrishnan.'

This is an excerpt from the introduction Professor Wes Sundquist from the University of Utah gave before Professor Venkatraman Ramakrishnan's Benning Society lecture last year

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Venki Ramakrishnan at Mumbai's Nariman Point, January 2010. He traveled to the city to attend son Raman and daughter-in-law Melissa Reardon's concert at the National Center for the Performing Arts

'You don't have to be that smart to be a good scientist'

M9 PAGE moved with me — Bil Clemons (*then a student, now a professor at California Institute of Technology*) and Brian Wimberly (*now at Rib-X Pharmaceuticals started by Dr Ramakrishnan's Nobel co-winner Thomas Steitz*). Then I had to get two or three more people.

We were working round the clock, and in 2000 we solved the complete atomic structure of the 30S. That led to a lot of other work like antibiotic binding (*to the ribosome*), how (*the 30S subunit*) does decoding (*of the code coming down from the DNA*), (*how it ensures*) accuracy, etc.

The next step was more difficult. To understand how the ribosome functions, you need to understand the structure of the whole ribosome. There was a low-resolution structure of the ribosome from Harry Noller's lab. Then there was a sort of high-resolution structure from Jamie Cate's lab. It took us six years. Finally, we got a high-resolution structure of the whole ribosome --- with mRNAs and tRNAs. That was published in *Science*.

Three years later, but really representing about nine years of work, we got a structure of the ribosome with these factors involved in loading the ribosome with tRNA and helping the ribosome move the mRNAs and tRNAs through it. These were published in *Science* only a few weeks after the Nobel Prize.

So, I've had a very good time. I've been able to have a productive group for ten years now. It's a great place to come to work every day.

One thing we did when we came from America is we gave our car to our stepdaughter and we don't have a car here. So it's the opposite of my Long Island days: I have no car and I ride my bicycle to work. And, you know, it's closer to India.

Why so?

When I lived in America, I only visited India about three times in about 30 years. So I'd essentially lost touch with India. Since I'd left (*India*) when I was 19, I'd essentially no contact with the Indian research establishment. But in 2002, (*India-based physicist*) G N Ramachandran had just died. Some scientists in India knew I was going to a meeting in New Zealand. They said, 'We would like you to give the first G N Ramachandran Memorial Lecture in Chennai.' They said, 'We will adjust the annual meeting of the Biophysical Society to your convenience.'

Though this would have been slightly disruptive (*to my schedule*), it would be really arrogant if I said no. To my pleasant surprise — since I hadn't gone there for a long time — I enjoyed it tremendously. I got to meet a lot of prominent Indian scientists in my field and I also, for the first time, visited the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. I flew in for a day, gave talks and returned to Chennai and went off to

New Zealand.

This great trip had re-introduced me to India in a way. Then I went again to India in 2005, then 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009.

I got a G N Ramachandran visiting professorship at the Indian Institute of Science, which allows me to visit periodically. I've also visited a number of other places in India, like the Center for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad, Madras University — which invited me again last year — and The International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology in (*New*) Delhi.

Some of the side benefits to visiting India is that it made me closer to India than I had been in the 30 years that I lived in the US. I'd lost touch with India because my parents lived in the US and my sister (*was there*). Also, if you live in the US, India is not on the way to anything: it's on the other side of the world.

You described the work of Harry Noller in your phone interview with Adam Smith (*editor-in-chief of Nobelprize.org*)...

If there hadn't been a limitation of three, he would have been an obvious choice. And, frankly, if they'd given it to him instead of me, I'd not have been surprised at all.

According to you, what makes for a great scientist?

The most important thing is to be passionate about a problem and do what's needed to solve the problem. That could mean asking for advice, learning new techniques, things like that. If I look at my career, I've not been afraid to go back. Several times actually (*in some surprise*). I've not been afraid to give up medical school and a safe career for basic science. Then I wasn't afraid to go back to graduate school after (*my PhD*) in physics when I realized what I had to do to learn biology. I chose to learn crystallography, and when I wanted to work on the ribosome I wasn't afraid to go to (*the MRC despite*) a big salary cut and so on. That's the kind of thing you sometimes need to do to pursue a problem.

You don't seem very interested in the money.

No, I'm going to be spending a big chunk of (*the Nobel*) money on a cello. So it's not like I need this money (*laughs*).

Why is Indian science, despite the record number of papers it outputs, not really competitive?

I think part of it is psychological. There's now money in the Indian system — that's what people who I know say. I think Indian scientists are not doing the most important experi-



RAJESH KARKERA

ments in their field. There are always a few exceptions. By and large, even the good Indian scientists are doing safe experiments, and not the high risk, high gain experiments. That's a fundamental difference.

Part of it is because they don't have enough role models in India for doing the other kind (*of experiments*) — always asking what is the next big question in the field. The thing in the West is, in the good universities professors are always asking, what is the next big important question and going after that. If I hadn't gone on that sabbatical (*to MRC*) I wouldn't have thought that way either.

What can India do besides throwing money at the problem?

I think money is very important. The fact that many Indians are coming back from the US and Europe after having been in very good labs, they are going to have a different attitude. I know that there are a couple of very bright young Indians who have come back from top labs after publishing very good papers.

What do you like in Indian music?

We don't go by pieces so much as singers. I go for old singers like Madurai Mani and G N Balasubramaniam, M S Subbulakshmi. And among the new people, I like Sikkil Gurucharan — he's fabulous.

And Western classical?

Bach and Beethoven and Mozart.

They are quite the safe ones, right?

(*Laughs*.) Yeah, but I like their chamber music. Not a big fan of orchestral music, partly because chamber music reminds me a bit of Carnatic music because you don't have a conductor telling a bunch of people what to do — it's interactive. The musicians look at each other and respond to each other. So that's much more like Carnatic music. It's not hierarchical at all. I like it partly because I grew up listening to Carnatic music.

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PERSON OF THE YEAR 2009

VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

'Always at every turn, he was watching out for us'

M8 PAGE alone, a fact Tanya stresses now when her husband Surj Patel protests that their son Rohan, 3, could get tired walking.

"My parents instilled in us the need to play an instrument. You need to be physically active... don't drive your car if you don't need to... It sounds simple but they instilled it in us in a way that I really appreciate and I'm definitely passing that onto my kids (*Rohan and Naiya, 5*)."

Ramakrishnan always made it a point to be there for all of their concerts and other events.

"He cooked on the weekends to give my mother a break and he always gave my brother his bath at night — that sort of thing that I really appreciate now as a parent," says Tanya, asserting that Ramakrishnan did not distinguish between a father's and mother's job. She says she realizes that a lot of South Indians are like that.

Ramakrishnan cooked Indian food at times, but they did not appreciate it as much early on.

"I have to be honest... We grew to appreciate it much more as adults than as kids," she says with a laugh.

"He's a chemist in the kitchen. He follows the recipe carefully and he makes sure he's got all the ingredients in just right. When he gets it right, he remembers," she says, and then goes on to describe Ramakrishnan's incredible memory.

"He has, like, a playback memory. He's not even listening to you when you're telling him a story. You catch him and say, 'You're not really listening.' He can actually recall what you said even though he wasn't really listening. Even though you know he wasn't really listening, he can pretend that he was. It's really incredible. There aren't many people who can do that... It drives you crazy," she says, laughing again.

He is also into self-development, and once began secretly taking violin lessons, a

lifelong ambition that may have been spurred by the fact that Tanya, then a child, was also learning it.

"My mom eventually suspected he was doing something she didn't know about... and he eventually had to own up to the fact that he was sneaking around on her and learning the violin," Tanya says, laughing. As he got busier, he had to stop.

More recently, she says, he did the same thing, this time to learn Spanish.

"Eventually, he started trying to talk to me in Spanish because I speak fluent Spanish... He started testing himself, coming up with these whole phrases. And I'm like, 'What? How did you learn Spanish?' We found out he'd been taking these classes," she says, saying that he recently took his exams in the subject.

"All this Nobel stuff got in the way of his studying and he's a little bit discouraged because he thinks he did not do well in his exams. He was a little frustrated actually," she says with a laugh.

But when he gets busy with work, Ramakrishnan gets so abstracted that, in one case, "he drove his bicycle into a parked car and chipped his tooth," says Tanya, saying the family used to tease him about it. The future Nobel Laureate, though, was more upset that no one in the passing cars stopped to help him.

Ramakrishnan has had some unpleasant race-related experiences, at one time shaving off his trademark beard because "he got sick of being treated poorly at airports," says Tanya. Raman didn't believe his father and so decided to test the theory by growing a beard. After a few trips abroad, he concurred: He was indeed treated worse when he had a beard, Tanya says.

She says her parents have really complemented each other.

"I'm just grateful that I can see a model of the way a relationship can be," she says.

— P Rajendran

'Until about seventh through ninth I did very poorly in school'

Venkatraman Ramakrishnan on his early days in India

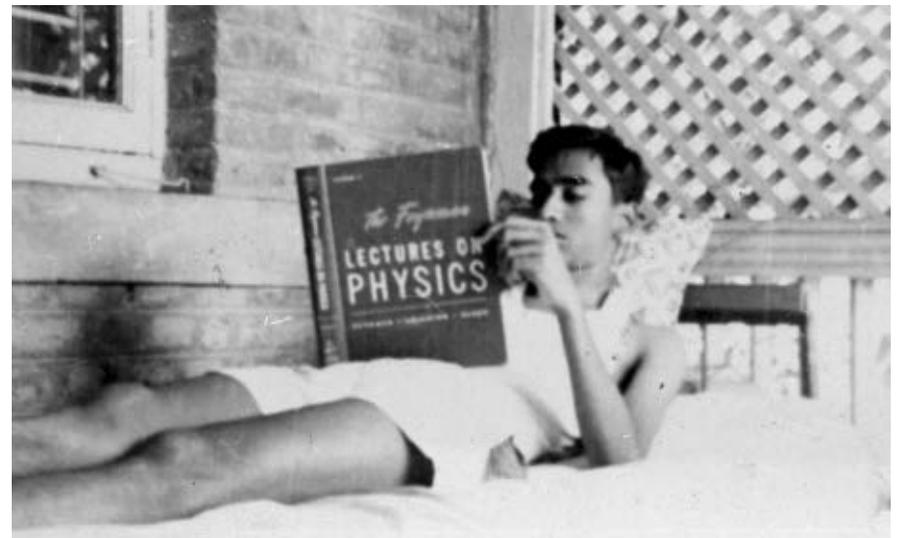
I moved to Baroda when I was three years old when my father took a job in MS University. I was born in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, in South India. I knew no other language but Tamil then. I remember it being slightly disorienting. When I reached school age, my parents sent me to the only English school in town — the Convent of Jesus and Mary.

In the third grade the school decided to become an entirely girls school but the

maternal uncle, Balasubramanian, who was also very interested in education. He would talk to me about all sorts of things. And an aunt, Gomati.

My friends (*in high school*) were Ranjit Mathews, Joseph Lobo and Akhilesh Chavan. We would often play games after school and... get into mischief. We'd play almost anything — table tennis, cricket...

We used to cut classes and go walking down the river (*laughs*) — I'm not sure this is a good message. We had Saturday



Venki when he was around 18 years. He is reading his favorite Feynman lectures in a verandah that was adjacent to our shared room. A somewhat typical pose that I remember well. On the opposite wall of the verandah was a dart board that Venki liked to use for recreation and when he was thinking about a physics problem. Suspended from the verandah were a pair of Roman rings which we and all our friends liked to use

(*Convent of Jesus and Mary*) allowed the old boys to stay on. By the time I graduated, there were only about three or four classes of boys; below that it was all girls. That made me very comfortable around women (*laughs*). Many men get flustered if they enter a room full of women but I don't find any problem with it.

I had this high school math and science teacher. His name is T C Patel. He was a very strict teacher but if you were good he really tried to challenge you. He took a liking to me and would assign me a lot of interesting problems. I think that was the first time I was spurred on to try and do as well as possible in science and mathematics. He would give me problems in physics that weren't on the curriculum... Theorems in geometry not part of the curriculum but which might be interesting.

There were other influences. I had a

half-day off... Actually we'd often cut (*physical education*) classes because we had kind of an irritating teacher and we decided not to bother with it.

My parents were very busy in their careers. So it wasn't as if they paid very close attention to anything we were doing. They expected us to do well. But up until about seventh through ninth I did very poorly in school. I went from being near the top of my class to being in the bottom third. My parents were worried, and in the end they sort of gave up on me. Once they gave up on me, I started doing well again.

My sister (*Lalita*) is a very good sibling. She is very good-natured, fun to have around. She used to hang out with a lot of my friends, even though we were seven years older.

— P Rajendran

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VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

We lived in this house in Baroda, rented from the university, from the mid-1960s



My mother Rajalakshmi Ramakrishnan and baby Venki, a picture which I really like



Venki, age 7, carrying me, along with a neighbor Sushma



Venki, aged 9, with me, aged 2

Dr LALITA RAMAKRISHNAN's photographic tour of her brother's early years:



Venki with our mother, left, and our father's sister Lakshmi, who adored him. Another favorite aunt was my mother's sister Gomathi, who is still alive



Venki with our cousin Jaya



Venki with our cousin Mani



The elder woman is Jethibai, our housekeeper, who was like a grandmother to us. This photograph, with her family, was taken after she retired

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PUBLISHER'S SPECIAL AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE 2009

MADHULIKA SIKKA

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It is 9 am and most people are getting to work in Washington DC. But at *Morning Edition* on the second floor of the National Public Radio building, the night shift is about to end. And the day shift employees are just trickling in. It is like this every day, where some people are starting their day with their morning coffee and others are heading home to sleep. Before they switch roles, the entire team – nearly 15 of them – gather around an open conference room, for Madhulika Sikka's daily staff meeting. Here ideas are thrown around, as Sikka, the show's executive producer since January 2009, hears her staff, and helps modify and shape their story plans for the next few days.

Among the stories discussed that morning was the follow up to the massive Toyota recall – what happens to single-car families who have to turn in their vehicle?

There is also an immediate concern. *Morning Edition*'s Washington DC anchor Steve Inskip is out sick. He had spent the weekend in the cold of New York City, working on a story on Shah Rukh Khan and his new movie *My Name Is Khan*. Inskip's co-anchor, Los Angeles-based Renee Montagne happens to be in town, and she will cover up for him, but Sikka also has to find an alternative plan.

"There is a challenge," Sikka, 47, later says in her calm, British accent, about Inskip being out from work for a couple of days. "But you get used to it." On the follow up to the Toyota recall stories she adds: "I am a big believer in planning for news – that you can plan those sidebar stories and things that will be in people's minds a couple of days from now."

This is Sikka's greatest strength as the show's executive producer, says Montagne, a 29-year-veteran with NPR. "What she does very well and she is gifted in is balancing the management side and the journalism side of her job. Usually in my experience it is one or the other."

Morning Edition is one of the most respected newsmagazine shows in the world. The two-hour show is broadcast from 5 am to 7 am and then repeated with updates. It boasts of a loyal 13 million weekly audience and airs Monday through Friday on more than 650 public radio stations across the United States.

Sikka gets to work around 7.30 am, but she is up by 5 am. "I listen to the show from



PARESH GANDHI

The Producer

ASEEM CHHABRA meets MADHULIKA SIKKA, Executive Producer of NPR Morning Edition, and a winner of the India Abroad Publisher's Special Award for Excellence 2009

my home just as a listener would," she says.

She sits in a relatively small, windowless office located on the middle of the floor. She has occupied this office since she joined NPR in 2006 as a supervising senior producer. The office is packed with books. "I

am a book person," she says. "I like books. I get excited by books." She points to a shelf that has novels she might consider for the Crime in the City segment on *Morning Edition*. The segment features authors who write pulpy popular crime novels, where

FROM THE EDITORS

For breaking new ground, for taking NPR Morning Edition to new heights while exploring new topics, for consistent excellence, we honor Madhulika Sikka with the India Abroad Publisher's Award for Excellence, 2009.

the city is as much a character as the detective.

India-born and London-raised, Sikka was always curious about news as she grew up on a regular dosage of BBC radio and television. "I used to like to watch news and would say, 'Wow that would be very cool to tell people what was happening in the world.'" Her father came to Britain on an Indian government job. He later started a business and raised a family of three daughters (Sikka is number three) and a younger son. "I think my dad would have preferred me to pursue something in politics, but this way I get the best of both worlds."

Sikka has strong academic credentials – a BA from the University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, and a Master of Philosophy in Economics and Politics of Development from Cambridge University. "I went to college and to graduate school, something that hadn't happened in my family," she says. At the University of London she met her future husband – Jim Millward, now a professor at Georgetown University, where he teaches the modern history of China and Central Asia. They have two daughters – Priya, 12, and Maya, 10.

She joined NPR after a 13-year stint at ABC News' *Nightline* show, with the legendary journalist Ted Koppel as its anchor. She started at the program as a researcher and left as a producer. *Morning Edition* was her first venture into the world of radio. All her previous jobs – at the *Christian Science Monitor*'s World Monitor show in Boston, CBS News in Japan and the *Today* show in London were in television.

Journalism as a profession has undergone substantial changes in recent years, as newsrooms in the US and UK are seeing an increasing presence of minority faces. But that was not the case when Sikka joined journalism. "If you had a Scottish accent you were not going to make it on the news," she recalls. "It was a very different landscape for Indians especially. Nobody went into

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MADHULIKA SIKKA

The Producer

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journalism. You know the old cliché about being an engineer or a doctor?"

At *Nightline* Sikka worked with her manager Tom Bettag. "He was my mentor," she says. "He helped shape my career."

"She was a real journalist and a real television person," Bettag says. "She was street smart, bright, and also very fast, dealing with pressure extremely well. At the center was an ethical compass that was absolutely dead on. You could trust her unflinchingly to get it exactly right."

Koppel, according to Bettag, never liked to be told that he was wrong, but he also disliked sycophants. "He had deep respect for people who would say directly to him 'Ted you are wrong,'" Bettag recalls. "Ted adored Madhulika because she was this gutsy young person who wouldn't back down if she thought she was right. I would like to have seen

Madhulika as a little girl because I am sure she then had a great sense of presence."

At *Nightline* Sikka also became a force in getting the show to make room for employees with children. Bettag recalls Sikka making a case for employees who had families that they were dealing with issues that the average people faced every day — schools, mortgages and household budgets. She believed that these employees, connected as they were to the audience, would make much better journalists.

"*Nightline* became famous for being family and child-friendly," Bettag says.

"It became a place where we had a number of young children and everybody shared cribs, playpens, nannies and doctors."

Sikka learnt a lot working on the show. "I learnt from my boss there, how to be a better journalist, a better producer and how to be a good boss. I realized that benevolent dictatorship works really well."

And she learnt the meaning of the expression that broadcasting is a team effort.

Nightline was a cohesive team she says.



With husband Jim Millward and daughters Priya, second from left, Maya, right, August 2009

PHOTOGRAPHS: KIND COURTESY MADHULIKA SIKKA

"There is no way you could do it without a whole host of people," she adds.

So coming to radio from television was not a huge switch for Sikka, also given her exposure to the BBC. "She had a real sense of what it means to paint an audio picture," Montagne says.

"The mechanics of television are obvious-

ly different than radio, but I think in terms of news aesthetics, of what we were trying to do at *Nightline* and here at NPR, that hasn't been much of switch," Sikka adds. "The point is to provide serious news but also to be entertaining and all encompassing."

Sikka is a great believer

PAGE M18

Road to Glory

1962 Born September 8 in New Delhi, India

1982 – 1985 Earned her BA, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

1986 – 1987 Earned her MPhil, Cambridge University

1992 - 2006 Worked at ABC News's *Nightline*, first as a researcher, ultimately as a Senior Producer; Won 4 Emmys (1994, 1995, 1996, 2004) and two Peabodys (2001)

2006 Joined NPR *Morning Edition* as a supervising Senior Producer

2009 Named NPR *Morning Edition's* Executive Producer



With former *Nightline* anchor Ted Koppel, left, and executive producer Tom Bettag, 2005

'Madhulika is a moveable feast'

TED KOPPEL, the legendary newscaster, hails Madhulika Sikka

Ted Koppel, the now retired famous face of ABC's *Nightline*, worked on the show with Madhulika Sikka for almost 15 years. During that time, he saw her rise the ranks from researcher to senior producer. He shared his thoughts on Madhulika with *India Abroad*:

Madhulika is the best possible argument for diversity in a newsroom. Because of her gender, her background in India and the UK, and her eclectic interests, she would — first as a producer and ultimately as one of *Nightline's* Senior Producers — focus our attention on stories like female circumcision in certain African cultures that I, as a white male, would, quite frankly, have ignored.

Madhulika would, quietly, but with enormous determination, argue the relevance and importance of such stories to the great benefit of our broadcast. Madhulika's stubbornness combines with a charming sense of humor, producing a mix that is deadly to those who may begin a workday by disagreeing with her. On matters of principle she is unshakable.

During the Second World War, as a child in England, I developed a great fondness for condensed milk; which, it turns out, is a key ingredient of certain fudge-like, Indian sweets. Madhulika never failed to provide for my sweet tooth whenever she visited her family in India or London.

Madhulika is a moveable feast.

Whether as a manager or as a senior lieutenant, she will enhance any workplace, with charm, dignity and intelligence.

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in the future of radio, given that we live in times where people get their news from so many different sources, including their smart phones and other devices.

"We are living in a culture where you see everyone walking on the street has head phones in their ears and that's an audience for us," she says. "I think people like to listen to pieces and the radio is just one of the many ways we can reach our audience. NPR has been bucking the trend in terms of listenership. Our listenership has increased or remained

steady over the last few years when there are a lot of competing sources of news. People know what they will get when they come to NPR. I like to think that in the morning we give people enough of everything — when they start their day with knowledge, information and entertainment — and maybe put a smile on their face."

Sikka's work has often been recognized by the journalism fraternity in the form of awards — Emmys, Peabodys and also a couple of DuPonts. *Morning Edition* won a DuPont for its coverage of race in 2008 and also a National Association of Black Journalists award. "I am proud of that," she says smiling. "That one was a labor of love for everyone who worked on it."

Morning Edition staffers say the show is now blessed with Sikka's interest in politics, coupled with her love for entertainment and a sense of popular culture.

"She brings a really wide curiosity to the job," says Inskeep later in an e-mail interview. "When you work at *Morning Edition* you need to draw on all your interests and experience, because anything that happens in life can become a story. So it helps to have somebody of Indian descent, who grew up in England, became an immigrant to America, has spent time in Japan, is married to an expert on China, has covered politics in Washington, likes crime novels, and can have a detailed conversation about James Bond, *Mad Men*, or *24*."

Inskeep recalls an interview he and Sikka did with former British prime minister Tony Blair. The interview went off well until the end when Sikka caught him off guard. "She asked him why it was becoming impossible to get a good cup of tea in



Sikka, center, heads an NPR Morning Edition meeting, February 2010

The Producer

London," Inskeep says.

Sikka was hired at NPR by Ellen McDonnell, currently the station's Executive Director of News Programming. McDonnell immediately saw value in Sikka's Indian background and her sensitivity and knowledge of the current affairs in South Asia.

"I grew up as Irish Catholic in Scranton, Pennsylvania,

and I am carrying that around with me, so I am not going to see things, the way Madhulika does,"

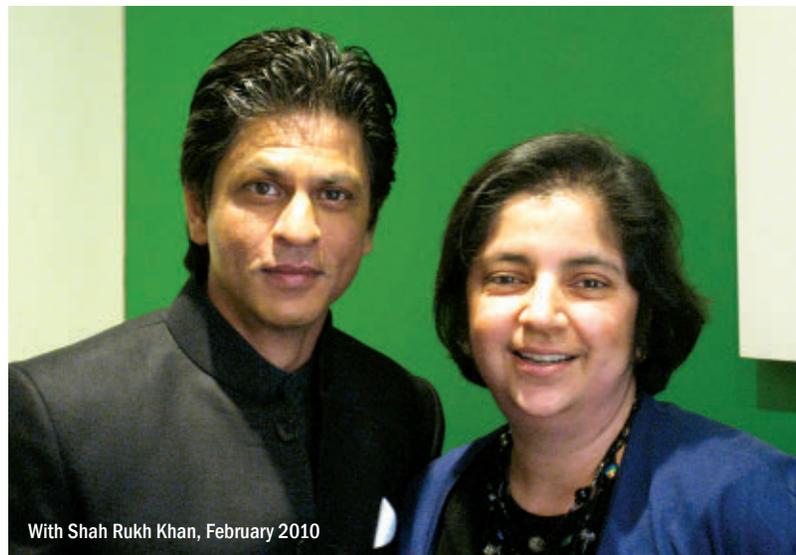
McDonnell says. "The ideas she has are coming from her frame of reference which is completely different from mine. So I always hire my weakness. I hire what I don't have."

"I think it is fair to say that no one at NPR other than Madhulika came up and said that 'I know Shah Rukh Khan is going to be in New York and he is having a blockbuster film and this is a really big deal,'" McDonnell says. She adds that at the same time Sikka is also deeply involved in the show's Toyota recall coverage and how it impacts consumers. Also, under Sikka's guidance, *Morning Edition* has covered stories including the longest cricket game and the Jaipur Literature Festival.

It was a matter of her suggesting the story idea to Philip Reeves — NPR's correspondent in New Delhi, and he developed a seven-minute segment on the festival.

Along the way McDonnell and Sikka have developed a close friendship. McDonnell is always gifting Sikka the jams her father makes in Pennsylvania. "She makes great dinners and I always say 'Don't make me anything American,'" McDonnell says. "She just came back from India and brought these spicy, savory nuts that her father had made."

Adds Montagne: "I wanted to be friends with her from day



With Shah Rukh Khan, February 2010

PHOTOGRAPH: KIND COURTESY MADHULIKA SIKKA

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The Producer

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one. I am very, very fond of her and it is an honor to work with her. It's lovely to be around her."

It is no surprise that there is a friendly camaraderie among *Morning Edition* staff. Sikka runs a management team, composed entirely of women with strong bonds, on the show.

"She will have us over for dinner sometimes and I am sure her husband feels outnumbered," says Cara Tallo, a supervisory producer and a 10-year veteran at NPR. "I think in a company that is very dominated by white males it's sort of liberating for her to be able to build a team that she feels supported by."

Tallo recalls the time when she was on the night shift and she would receive a call from Sikka at 3 am. "I would say to her 'What are you doing? Go back to bed.' But there is a lot on her plate and hers is a buck stops here position." Sikka's job involves not just following the

stories, but she also has to be connected with all the NPR offices in different time zones, Tallo adds.

Over the years as a journalist, Sikka has interviewed a lot of famous people – presidents, prime ministers, even the Pope. But after the Shah Rukh Khan interview in New York City, as Inskip was wrapping up, Sikka did something quite different from what she usually does. She asked Khan to pose for a picture. She plans to send the picture to her father who lives in India.

In her entire career, she has only asked for three pictures to be taken with people she has interviewed. "The Dalai Lama – that was a highlight," she says with a smile and then adds the other two names with a laugh, "Hrithik (*Roshan*) and Shah Rukh Khan. Usually when you interview people, it's just the job. But here it is more of a joke and you always want to please your parents."



From left: Former Pakistani cricketer Imran Khan, Madhulika Sikka, NPR Morning Edition host Steve Inskip



At the DMZ North/South Korea, 2007



With the Dalai Lama 1994



Preparing to cross the border into Rwanda, 1994



With ABC colleagues Jay LaMonica and Chris Bury, Kuwait, 2003

PHOTOGRAPHS: KIND COURTESY MADHULIKA SIKKA

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Narisetti at The Washington Post's new 24-hour universal desk, a creation he spearheaded to help integrate the paper's online and print operations, February 2010

FROM THE EDITORS

For leadership at the very highest levels of American media; for running major publications on three continents, for taking *The Washington Post* on journeys untraveled before, we honor Raju Narisetti with the India Abroad Publisher's Award for Excellence, 2009.



DOMINIC XAVIER

The Editor

When Raju Narisetti was named Managing Editor of *The Washington Post* in 2009, he created history by becoming the first Asian Indian to be named to such a senior position at the *Post*. He also added yet another first to a career that has been highlighted by several such firsts for an Indian immigrant journalist.

Before starting at the *Post*, Narisetti, 43, was deputy managing editor at *The Wall Street Journal*, a first for an Indian journalist. He then went on to run an edition of the *Journal*, as editor of *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, yet another first.

He then left the *Journal* to create the *Mint* in India, which quickly rose from being that country's fifth biggest business newspaper to its second largest in less than three years.

After he returned to the US last year, in just a single year he

AZIZ HANIFFA meets RAJU NARISETTI, Managing Editor, The Washington Post, and a winner of the India Abroad Publisher's Award for Special Excellence

has been at the forefront of the *Post*'s redesign and the integration of its print and online operations.

Professor Sree Sreenivasan, co-founder of the South Asian Journalists Association and Dean of Student Affairs at Columbia University's School of Journalism points out that Narisetti assumed this role 'in an absolutely pivotal point in *The Washington Post*'s history, never more critical than back

in the Watergate days.'

According to Sreenivasan, the *Post*'s executive editor Marcus Brauchli 'could have hired anyone in America, but brought back Raju from India for this gig.'

On January 13, 2009, when Narisetti was named one of two managing editors with Elizabeth Spayd — who was promoted from within the *Post*, having been editor of *washingtonpost.com* since 2007 — Brauchli said, 'Raju has vast experience at the forward edge of news design and technology, in addition to his tremendous accomplishments as a newsroom leader in the US, Europe and Asia.'

The understated Narisetti explained the challenges ahead in this eloquent inter-

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Marchus Brauchli, executive editor of
The Washington Post, with Narisetti

People who have interacted with Raju Narisetti over the years find it easy to extol him. These included his current boss, former supervisors, his journalism professor at the University of Indiana, a mentor, professional colleagues, and, perhaps most importantly, those who worked under him.

And, the consistent theme was the awe of Narisetti's consummate professionalism, strategic vision, intellectual curiosity, and above all, intense loyal friendship.

Marcus Brauchli, executive editor at *The Washington Post*, described Narisetti as "a rare combination. He is both an outstanding journalist and a brilliant strategic thinker."

Brauchli, a former editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, recalled, "Years after he covered IBM and technology for the *Journal*, I was meeting top executives from that era who asked if I knew Raju and who praised him for his understanding of the industry and its issues."

"He broke news, he wrote thoughtful ahead-of-the-curve long-form journalism about a complex and important subject, and he was prolific," Brauchli said.

"I began working with Raju shortly after he became a news editor responsible for media coverage at the *Journal* in New York," he added. "I'd moved back from China to the US, and was, to put it mildly, out of touch with popular culture. Raju somehow knew every television program or movie worth watching, and he followed US sports closely. I learned from the master and was quickly current and the owner of a giant Sony television recommended by Raju."

Brauchli pointed out that "I've worked with him now for more than a decade, first at the *Journal*, now at the *Post*, and we know each other's way of thinking."

Going down memory lane again, he added, "Once when Raju was managing editor of *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, I came to Brussels directly from London, where I'd met with friends at *The Times*, which had recently converted from a broadsheet newspaper to a compact format. I realized that if we did the same thing at the *Journal*, we would achieve significant cost savings our bosses were looking for."

"Critically for our global ambitions, it would let us do that without reducing our correspondent ranks. Excited at the idea, I walked into Raju's office and outlined the idea. As I talked, he reached behind his desk and pulled out a mock-up of a compact version of the paper he'd just finished. We took the idea back to our bosses in New York and got it approved."

"That redesign," Brauchli said, "led to a redesign we led of the US edition of the *Journal*. Raju left midway through

'An outstanding journalist and a brilliant strategic thinker'

Colleagues applaud Raju Narisetti's professionalism and humanity, in conversations with **AZIZ HANIFFA**

the project to launch *Mint*, but we remained in touch and *Mint* launched in full partnership with the *Journal*."

"After I came to the *Post*, Raju was practically the first person I approached to join me. Together with Liz Spayd, the *Post's* other managing editor, we have integrated our print and online operations, redesigned the newspaper, launched a new Thursday section, started a new locally oriented Web site, and overhauled our Sunday magazine."

Brauchli said "Raju led each of those initiatives," and while acknowledging that "the issues the *Post* faces are very different from the challenges facing *Mint* or the *Journal*," spoke of how "Raju has adapted successfully."

"He's a first-rate strategic thinker," Brauchli reiterated, "but he's also a first-rate manager and actor. He will spot the fulcrum issues in any strategy before anyone else, then map out a solution."

"It was exactly what we needed for the scale of changes we were undertaking," he added. "Another measure of his talent is the intense loyalty his colleagues feel towards him and he towards them. He exudes not just competence but authority, not just leadership but vision."

Greg Stricharchuk, currently associate business editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, and Narisetti's mentor and erstwhile business editor at the *Dayton Daily News*, said, "Raju was my first hire, and he remains the best hire I ever made. He

is, by far, the smartest journalist I've ever worked with. His ability to analyze companies, situations, people is top notch."

"At the time I hired him (*at the Dayton, Ohio, paper*), he told me his goal was to work at *The Wall Street Journal*, the paper where I had worked for nearly nine years. I liked that because it meant he would be driven to succeed, and to learn."

Stricharchuk recalled how "I promised him that I could coach him as if he were at *The Wall Street Journal*, and that I could get him in touch with people at the paper but that getting hired would be up to him — he'd have to produce stories of *Wall Street Journal* quality."

"Raju accomplished that, and more. Not only were his stories of high quality, but he helped me innovate new products. By today's standards some of these things sound too old-fashioned, like selling information on companies on discs. But back then we were cutting edge, and when Raju interviewed at the *Journal* for a reporting job the top editors were aware of what he had done and said we had beaten them to the punch."

"One of the things I appreciated about

Road to Glory

1966 Born June 26 in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh

1989 - 1990 Started his journalism career in India with *The Economic Times* as a business writer

1990 - 1991 MA in Journalism from Indiana University

1992 - 1993 Worked with the *Dayton Daily News* in Dayton, Ohio, first journalism job in America

1994 Married journalist Kim Barrington

1994 - 2002 Joined *The Wall Street Journal's* Pittsburgh bureau, rose to deputy managing editor, New York City

2002 - 2006 Editor, *The Wall Street Journal Europe*; worked from Brussels

2006 Founder-Editor, *Mint*, today India's second largest business daily

2007 Named a Young Global Leader at the World Economic Forum in Davos

2008 Torchbearer for the Olympics

2009 Named managing editor of *The Washington Post*

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The Editor

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view with *India Abroad*:

It has been just over a year since you were named managing editor at the *Post*. How challenging has this first year been?

It's been a pretty difficult year for the business of journalism. (*But*) It's been a fabulous year for the journalism end of journalism because the stories have been very rich, and Washington remains front and center of not just the US but of much of the world.

To be in Washington this past year — from a journalism point of view — has been really great.

The business of journalism — as you know, along with all the media companies, *The Washington Post* has suffered, perhaps a little less so because of our other strengths. We've had some difficult decisions to make in terms of staffing, in terms of cutting costs.

We also embarked on a whole bunch of initiatives, which have really transformed *The Washington Post* — how it operates — and the challenge has been to do that without affecting our journalism.

When we went through the Pulitzer nominations for this year, that's when you realize that despite all the ups and downs of the year, our journalism has been really fabulous. You see all those great bodies of work at the end of the year and you feel pretty good about it. So, it's been a mixed year.

You spoke about it being a tough year business-wise. Unfortunately, what happens is, some of those things sometimes encroach on the allocation of resources to cover stories. Hence, you probably end up doing much more today with much less.

Has this been a reality that has got to be factored in — to stretch the limited resources to cover as many stories as possible, travel for stories on sparse budgets, etc?



Narisetti, torchbearer for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China

We have not had any layoffs unlike some other major papers. We did a round of buyouts for some eligible employees and we've had several dozen (*employees*) take the buyout. It's always difficult when talent like that leaves. What we did was we kind of focused the buyouts mostly on the editing ranks rather than on the reporting ranks.

So, the result was our ability to go after the stories we want to go after hasn't significantly been affected. But we have fewer editors than before.

The other thing we did was take advantage of the fact that I was merging the print and online operations and that leads to some amount of productivity kind of efficiencies and that also meant that we could let go some staff.

Would I have liked to have not

reduced any staff? Absolutely. But the reality is that the level of revenue or the level of our circulation and readership demands that our costs be lower. That's what we did and it was not just the newsroom. Every department kind of did its share.

Didn't the *Post* digress from the tradition of appointing a managing editor from within its own staff when it hired you? You came from outside and you came here at a time when there were all these challenges. How has it been in terms of being 'the outsider', and having to make some of these tough decisions?

Before me there was an outsider in the sense that the executive editor of the paper — Marcus Brauchli was the first outsider if you will, and he joined about six months before me, coming directly from

The (Wall Street) Journal — and the CEO, the publisher of the company Kathryn Weymouth was also relatively new. So, as a result, I think there was a sense that the franchise and the company were going through a difficult period and it could use some outside perspective as well.

I think that logic wasn't hard for the newsroom to absorb. (*But*) As with any job, when you come from the outside, there is some element of skepticism of what you can do. There is a learning curve and much of what the *Post* does is very successful and because of what it is — it's the *Washington Post* and it has got a culture and history of doing some things.

The key is to kind of quickly embrace what's working but not be beholden to

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'His demand for precision is legendary'

Former Wall Street Journal editor **PAUL STEIGER** has known Raju Narisetti since he was an intern at the newspaper

During Raju Narisetti's 13-year stint at *The Wall Street Journal*, first as a reporter and ultimately as deputy managing editor, with overall responsibility of Europe, Middle East and Africa, he reported to Paul Steiger, the paper's legendary managing editor.

Steiger, who today is editor-in-chief of *ProPublica*, an independent, non-profit newsroom, tells **Matthew Schneeberger** he knew Narisetti was marked for greatness even during his days as an intern.

What was it like to work with Mr Narisetti?

It was great fun to work with Raju, on two levels. First, he was so well organized that one could always count on anything he committed to, so he eliminated a lot of fun-killing anxieties. Second, he has a famously dry and sharp wit, delivered absolutely deadpan, that could make me laugh at unpredictable moments.

Could you pinpoint some of the qualities that you believe have helped him in his career?

The aforementioned high level of organization.

Deep quantitative comprehension combined with a powerful sense of story.

An innate understanding of people.

Are there any stories you could share that demonstrates the type of person he is, inside and/or outside the newsroom?

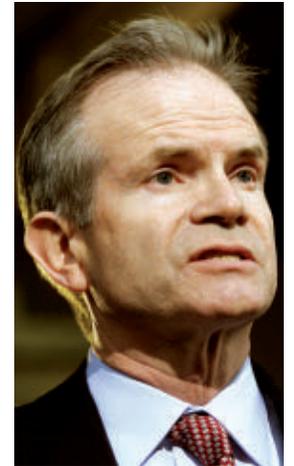
His demand for precision is legendary.

When *The Wall Street Journal Europe* launched weekend coverage, Raju insisted that any product or service mentioned include a price.

He found a slyly racy survey of the Antwerp brothel scene sorely wanting, because it neglected to say the length of time the quoted price would buy.

What do you expect to see in the future for him?

More success, more leadership, more hopping back and forth across the Pacific.



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Your 2010 Census information is protected by law, regardless of your citizenship or visa status.



The Census must be completed in all States on April 1, 2010.

Before you answer Question 1, count the people living in this house, apartment, or mobile home on April 1, 2010.

- Count all people, including babies, who live and sleep here most of the time.

The Census Bureau also conducts counts in institutions and other places, so:

- Do not count anyone living away either at college or in the Armed Forces.
- Do not count anyone in a nursing home, jail, or detention facility, etc., on April 1, 2010.
- Leave these people off your form, even if they live here after they leave college, the military, jail, etc. Otherwise, they may be counted.

The Census must also include people who do not have a usual place to stay, so:

- If someone who has no permanent place to live here on April 1, 2010, count that person. Otherwise, she may be missed in the census.

1. How many people were living or staying in this house, apartment, or mobile home on April 1, 2010?

Number of people =

2. Were there any additional people staying here April 1, 2010 that you did not include in Question 1? Mark all that apply.

- Children, such as newborn babies or foster children
- Relatives, such as adult children, cousins, or in-laws
- Nonrelatives, such as roommates or live-in baby sitters
- People staying here temporarily
- No additional people

5. Please provide information for each person living here. Start with a person living here who owns or rents this house, apartment, or mobile home. If there are other people living here, start with any adult.

What is Person 1's name? Print name below.

- Male Female

7. What is Person 1's age and what is Person 1's date of birth? Please report babies as age 0 when the child is less than 1 year old.

Print numbers in boxes.

Month Day Year of birth

8. What is Person 1's race? Mark ONE box.

Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban
- Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on
- Other Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

9. What is Person 1's race? Mark one or more boxes.

- White
- Black, African Am., or Negro
- American Indian or Alaska Native — Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.

- Asian Indian
- Chinese
- Filipino
- Japanese
- Korean
- Vietnamese
- Native Hawaiian
- Guamanian or Chamorro
- Samoan



Every 10 years, the Census counts everyone living in the U.S. And it's not just a count. Filling out your 2010 Census form can help increase job training, improve education and more, for your community. And the law prohibits sharing your information with any other government agency. So don't worry and send back your 2010 Census form.

- The law requires everyone in your household to participate in the Census.
- The law will ensure that your information is confidential, even if you are undocumented.
- Help your community get its share of over \$400 billion per year in federal funds.

For an assistance guide in Hindi, please visit 2010census.gov

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Narisetti, who has editorial oversight of washingtonpost.com, in his office, where monitors are kept open to its local and international home pages, February 2010

DOMINIC XAVIER

The Honor Roll

Winners of the India Abroad Publisher's Award for Special Excellence

VANITA GUPTA

Lawyer
2004

**ANURAG KASHYAP,
ALIYA DERI, SAMIR
SUDHIR SHAH, RAJIV
TARIGOPULA**

Spelling Bee Stars
2005

SUNITA WILLIAMS

Astronaut
2006

RENU KHATOR

President & Chancellor,
University of Houston
2007

JHUMPA LAHIRI

Novelist
2008

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Raju," Stricharchuk continued, "was that he always pushed to make things better. When we'd brainstorm a new product or a story or a package of stories he always pushed upwards. 'What if we'd do this?' he'd ask. 'How about if we added this?'"

"Looking backwards over the past 20 years as an editor at regional dailies," he added, "I'd say that this is rare. Most of the people I've worked with tend to push downwards — they want to make things as easy as possible for themselves. They want to cut corners. They don't want to stretch, they don't want to get out of their comfort zones."

"They may not recognize that," Stricharchuk said, "but that's what I've experienced. Raju was the opposite, and that made work fun, lots of fun. It also meant he was a true colleague, a person I could call on and trust. In my mind, it also meant he would succeed at *The Wall Street Journal* or any place he went."

"He also taught me some important lessons," he noted, and pointed out that "I remember one businessman making all kinds of unfounded accusations about a story Raju had written. We ended up in a very heated meeting at the paper, and I raised my voice a number of times and finally said I was leaving the meeting, and did just that."

"Raju, on the other hand, kept his compo-

'An outstanding journalist and a brilliant strategic thinker'

sure," Stricharchuk recalled. "At the end, Raju refused to shake the man's hand. That image has stayed with me. If you know Raju it's hard to imagine him not shaking someone's hand. What a great way to communicate how you feel about someone who has falsely accused you of wrongdoing. That action was more powerful than words."

Professor David Pritchard, currently chair, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and former journalism professor at Indiana University at Bloomington where Narisetti was a Master's degree candidate in journalism, said, "Raju was a star student, not only because he was so smart and so hard-working, but because he was so intellectually curious."

"He had already established himself as a skilled journalist before he came to Indiana, and he could have written a master's project on journalism in India in his sleep. But Raju never seemed to be looking for shortcuts."

Pritchard, who supervised Narisetti's mas-

ter's project, said, "He threw himself into courses that dealt with investigative reporting, and his program culminated with a strong piece of in-depth reporting on a strange and complicated case from the local criminal justice system in Bloomington."

"As good as Raju's work was — and has been ever since — a focus on the work alone overlooks the qualities of the man. Raju is the kind of person everyone enjoys being around. He is thoughtful and kind, quick with a smile."

Pritchard said that he had "left Indiana University a couple of years after Raju did," to chair the journalism department at the University of Wisconsin. He recalled, "This past September, I met our new crop of master's students. One was from Nepal, and when I inquired about her background, she told me she had worked for a newspaper in India."

"I took a one-in-a-billion shot and asked her if she knew Raju Narisetti. Amazingly, it turned out that he had hired her to work on the newspaper, and she gushed for several minutes

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The Editor

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what's not working just because that's how it was done. Being an outsider gives you that advantage because you are not so beholden to the ways of doing some things.

Some days it's been easy to play that role, some days it's been hard because you do have to prove yourself, and coming into an organization that has a strong sense of... It's almost a family-oriented approach and there's lots of long-standing relationships. And, so, they've been very welcoming, but at the same time not been shy of kind of pointing at all the good things that don't need to be changed.

Any regrets about leaving *Mint*? When you left *The Wall Street Journal* to take up the assignment in India, you had told *India Abroad* that 'India offers a once in a lifetime opportunity.' What made you leave *Mint* and India for that matter?

India was never about going back home, because home is the US. It was once in a lifetime opportunity to start something new. As you know, you could spend a lifetime in Western journalism and not start anything given the state of the industry. I believe that India offered a really good market, both from the business of journalism point of view and from just the ability to do different kinds of journalism.

Mint, which just turned three by the way and is today India's second-largest business newspaper (it was number five when I launched it), is proof that if you do a product that appeals to readers and its fundamentals are pretty strong, it will succeed.

Could I have stayed an extra year or two? Absolutely.

But I also felt the team that I had hired, which is the team that's still running it — every single one of them — was fairly ready to take on the challenge of running it. I had hoped that I could stay a little longer and do other things within the family of offerings that HT (*the Hindustan Times group*) Media has, but my decision to hand off *Mint* also coincided with the fairly strong recession or downturn in the economy and rather than just hang around and cast a pretty long shadow on my successors, I thought it would be better for me to look for other opportunities.

It is my baby — it will always be. It's like my third child, but it feels like sending it off to college after kind of teaching it all the right behavior. I am very, very, happy to see *Mint* do well. Do I miss *Mint*? Yes, I



Narisetti with daughters Leila, left, and Zola, right, in 2009

miss working with a bunch of very talented people.

In this past year, I have done very little journalism of a traditional sense, because the things that I needed to do here don't give me the time to sit and edit every day. At *Mint*, I would edit a lot and that I miss a little bit. Do I miss India? Not really.

How did *The Washington Post* position come about? After *Mint* was there an interim period where you were looking for other opportunities back in the US?

When I decided to hand off the editor role, at the time I had no job offers of any kind. At the time the intention was still to kind of stay for probably another year and contribute in other ways to HT Media. But, again, as I said, with the economy going the way, those opportunities were kind of a little further away. Then I had a conversation with HT Media and said I intend to start looking elsewhere.

One of the conversations — I had a few conversations with different people — was with Marcus Brauchli who at that time didn't necessarily have any openings, but we discussed the possibility of working together. But it was only after I left *Mint* — because of some departures here — that there was actually a specific opening that we could talk (*about*).

I came up here in the first week of January (2009) to kind of formally have fairly serious conversations and then ended up actually starting the next week because there was



Narisetti with his bride Kim, October 8, 1994

just a lot to be done.

Since you took over as managing editor, you have been responsible among other things for the 2009 redesign of the newspaper and the integration of the print and online operations. How has the reaction been to what you have done?

For someone like me who's been in this town for nearly three decades and been reading the *Post* since day one and gotten used to

a certain kind of format, layout, design, etc, it has been quite revolutionary in terms of some of the changes that I see.

You're being kind by saying it's revolutionary. The main reason to do the redesign of *The Washington Post* in print was to make it a little more contemporary — it hadn't been redesigned in any significant way for a long time. It also needed to reflect the fact that a lot of our readers are busier than ever before and to help them understand stories, find stories, navigate through the paper a lot more easily.

So, it's driven by more visual cues about where they can find content, it's driven by the fact that the needs of our readership continues to evolve and the fact that as the average age of your reader goes higher and higher, you do want to use design as a way to attract younger people who are used to a more livelier product.

I've been involved with four or five — redesigns now, including a few at *The Wall Street Journal*, then *Mint*, and now here. In many ways, this has been the smoothest redesign from a reader reaction point of view. We did get some readers initially calling in and complaining about the fonts they were getting used to and there are some specific things — like the weather map they didn't like, which we again re-changed.

But I got more subscribers complaining about changes in the comics pages, which was nothing to do with the redesign than the number of people complaining about the redesign. So, in some ways, we feel like it's actually gone fairly smoothly. We still have a significant redesign of our Web site to do and that will roll out this year.

In terms of the integration of print and online operations, I guess that was inevitable.

It was not only inevitable, it was probably several years behind when we needed to do it. The original intent was to create a stand-alone company that was nimble and agile and not overshadowed by the large print publication of the company. It was the right strategy because it needed to act as a nimble, independent, digital company.

But, over time, I think the value of keeping them separate had long disappeared. Both for business reasons as well as for the fact that you can no longer run a media company as a print version or an online version and keep them so distinct, it made sense to do it. January 1 was the official integration — and this is an integrated newsroom.

How has it gone thus far? Are you confident it will work?

In the last three months, our Web site has never performed better. So, early indications are that the integration is working. I can't sit here and say it's a huge success because it's early.

There's more focus on the Web — a lot more people are kind of putting a lot more stories out in today and the culture is moving to

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RAJU NARISSETTI

The Editor

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let's get the stories where readers want them and when they want them, rather than kind of think that we'll only do it in the paper the next morning. So, it seems to be working so far.

It had the potential to blow up because you are integrating two different cultures and that's the part I am most proud of, which is that that hasn't happened. People have kind of integrated in a cultural sense very well. Again, it remains a work in progress. If you come back and talk to me six months or a year from now, there will be more evidence whether it has actually succeeded or not.

The reality is that it's a fast moving environment and we need to be as nimble as we can be.

Obviously, you have your work cut out since you also run the newspaper's editorial operations online as well as the *Post's* print features sections and its photo/design/graphic teams. How do you manage all of this? Do you find yourself being overwhelmed at times?

I confess that I don't manage it very well. The good news is that these departments have some really, really excellent editors and managers who run them. So there are certain priorities that we pick for the year where I am very hands on.

With the other areas, I am a believer in light-touch management — I am accessible. So, if people need me for any issues, I am very responsive, but I don't see the need to kind of micromanage, especially when we have priorities, where I need like 95 percent of my attention.

It's been hard, and as I said, the biggest personal disappointment has been how little actual journalism in a conventional sense that I do. Everything I do helps our newsroom do the right kind of journalism, but it starves me of actually sitting down and editing stories. That's something I am hoping to at some point to try to get back to.

Every few months, I think, OK, things are calming down, now I can do a little bit of that and then comes a few more things that need to be accomplished. So, I am hopeful that in 2010, I'll still be able to do a little bit more hands-on journalism that I am used to.

I guess, being on the field and reporting has been a far cry for you for quite a few years now.

Yes, occasionally, when something big happens, you miss the ability to take a note-

book out and be out there. But I don't miss that aspect of it because I feel like as an editor, you can fairly, vicariously, make your reporters do what you would have done — you can have a larger impact in kind of driving coverage.

I don't miss reporting because I haven't done it in a long time anyway as an editor. But I do miss being able to spend more time with reporters and editors and discussing stories and ideas. I feel like I am more of an entrepreneurial editor, so I get involved in a lot of business issues involving journalism, but all of those are critical to make sure that we have the right resources and our newsroom continues to get all the resources it needs to do the right kind of journalism that the *Post* is known for.

You've achieved a number of firsts for an Indian journalist in America, particularly for an immigrant Indian journalist - the first Indian to reach the level you did at *The Wall Street Journal*, the first Indian to run an edition of the *Journal*, then you returned to India and created *Mint*, then came back to the US where you now have this role at *The Washington Post* at an absolutely pivotal point in the newspaper's history. Do you reflect on this and take a double take?

As my wife puts it, you've come a long way fresh off the boat. The reality is you tend not to get so self-important.

You do realize that when you have a role like this at the *Post*, what a tremendously successful, historic institution you've been charged with, and it comes with a huge responsibility to do the right thing. You do kind of lose sleep over are you coming up with the right ideas, are you executing them well and do you have the right strategic plans, because a lot of careers and a lot of lives do depend on the decisions, Marcus, Liz and I make. There is a burden you carry because of the very uncertain time in our industry.

The reason why America is home is precisely because of where I am today and where I am able to get to, because my country of origin, or what I look like, or my difficulty of pronouncing my name or the still



JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

Your new avatar at the *Post* also coincided with the advent of the Obama administration. How has this new phase in American history been in terms of the *Post's* coverage — the outlook towards covering an administration led by an African-American president? Because, however you look at it, it probably needed a new kind of approach vis-à-vis coverage.

As I like to put it, the President and I started in the same week. The difference is that both of us have problems, but he has a lot of money to throw at problems. The reality is that it is a historic presidency and I think *The Washington Post* in some ways is perfectly poised to cover it, partly because it's a paper that understands Washington and understands a relationship between an administration and a city. Some of our editors are fairly brilliantly equipped to do it.

I think the role the managing editors or the executive editor play in this is to kind of ask all the questions that need to be asked, but it isn't like our politics team needs to be told that they have to cover some things differently. I think our role tends to be more to provide them the resources that they need to cover the administration and redirect some resources the right way.

slight or still Indian accent that I have hasn't stopped me from wanting to do all the things I've wanted to do and has never been either a burden or an advantage in some ways. And, so, that's why it's so great about calling the US home and wanting to make your life and career here.

Can you provide an example of some of that kind of redirection of resources?

Robin Givhan, who is our fashion reporter, was based in New York and one of the first things I did was to have a conversation with her to say, 'Look, Michelle Obama represents so many things to so many Americans now, and you are the perfect person to bring that sensibility (*to the Post's* readers). So she moved to Washington.

She now covers Michelle Obama and she's brought a very unique sense of Michelle's personal style and her role that she plays. Robin is perfectly poised to cover that. I think that's where I see my role — in kind of being able to say 'Are we covering the right things?'

On the national side, it's more Liz's role, but we have several people that are covering the administration in different ways than we used to cover the previous administration. So, there is sense of being an eyewitness to a new kind of history that is forming in front of your eyes and it feels like you have a great ringside view of covering this administration.

More generally, with regard to coverage, has it been difficult to make the adjustment from your days at the *Journal*, which some may argue is a conservative newspaper — fiscally and perhaps politically too — to the more liberal, progressive outlook of *The Washington Post*? How did you balance that or did it need any balancing at all?

I'd like to challenge your first assertion because,

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The Editor

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sure, the *Wall Street Journal* is perceived as closer to the right than middle or left, but that's on the edit page. The news pages of the *Journal* — which was where I spent 13 years — has never been influenced by whether we are right or left. I think we were fairly middle of the road. But, sure, because of the edit pages, a lot of people perceived the product as being right.

The same thing, in some ways, at the *Post*. You are labeled as more of a liberal paper clearly because people perceive our edit page perhaps to be more liberal. Again, being on the news side, with the very firm separation — a Chinese wall between edit and news — it doesn't really affect how we make decisions on the news side.

It hasn't required any personal adjustments on my side. What I have realized this year is that, because of its larger-than-life influence on Washington and by default on America, the *Post* itself tends to be news. So, things that you did at *The Wall Street Journal* as an editor didn't necessarily make news.

Here, you are much more closely scrutinized and second-guessed and here are a lot more people who make a living off following the ins and outs of internal *Post* issues. I found out the hard way when I tweeted something ... you tend to become more circumspect because there is an opportunity for people to misunderstand what you are trying to do.

In terms of the cutbacks at the *Post* due to a scarcity of resources, has foreign coverage — of South Asia — been affected? Only a few years ago the *Post* was expanding, even adding correspondents in India. This, after the days when the New Delhi correspondent covered Islamabad, Colombo, Dhaka and the rest of South Asia...

We have closed a couple of bureaus, but we've also opened a couple of overseas bureaus. In fact, foreign coverage has been least affected by any of our cutbacks, in part, because it's really critical, not just to cover it, but (*because*) our audience in Washington expects us to cover the world because Washington has such a big impact on it.

So, we still continue to be one of the few papers that has two full-time correspondents in New Delhi. Between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, we probably at any given time have half-a-dozen correspondents there. I don't think our Asian/South Asian coverage is going to be any less this year than it has been before, and certainly not because of economic reasons.

You have to focus your foreign coverage. There are always resource issues, but in terms of what's happening, we spent a lot of energy last year covering Mexico. This year, our focus will be on Af-Pak, and China. India still remains a fairly large area of focus and so does the Middle East. The new Japanese government makes a lot more interesting story that it was two years ago. So, we have somebody very focused on that. You do need to shift your resources to where the story is a little bit. We have hired a new foreign editor as well and so, overall, there haven't been any cutbacks.

Where we have pulled back is actually our national bureaus because our feeling was that despite the perception of *The Washington Post* being a national paper, the reality is that we are national because of how we cover Washington and where

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Narisetti at the World Economic Forum in Davos

we are, as opposed to national in terms of being there in every city in the US.

So, it made sense for us to reinforce Washington coverage and for all major stories, we deploy resources. Fort Hood was a good example. Haiti is a good example. We had, within two, three days, six people on the ground including two photographers. Some people could argue that that's not really a Washington story. (*But*) The reality is that on the first day (*of the devastating earthquake in Haiti*), it was obvious that America would play a gigantic role and we have to cover it.

Is the writing on the wall for print? Is it on its way towards an inevitable slow death? Or will it survive? And if it does, can it ever get back to even some level of its halcyon days?

Just this past year we've had venerable newspapers that were over a hundred years old, Pulitzer Prize winners like the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* going bankrupt. Even the *Post* and *The New York Times* have had to let go of staff and engage in a significant number of buy-outs.

So, even with all the changes print may institute, can it in the final analysis survive?

Unequivocally, yes.

I am a strong believer in journalism in the print form not only continuing to exist but continuing to exist in a fairly robust way. I think this notion that using the examples of papers that have stopped or companies that have filed for bankruptcy are not valid.

Most media companies that have got into trouble in the US had got into trouble for either having too much debt or having expanded fairly quickly at a time when the economy was slowing and revenue was slowing. US newspapers have faced worse recessions than the one they have faced in the past year. So, it was not a situation that they have not been in before.

Obviously, the continuing, secular decline of readership does have an impact, but take *The Washington Post* for example. Eighty plus percent of our revenue still comes from the print paper. We have the largest penetration of any mass media in Washington — from a readership point of view, from a household point of view.

The fastest and cheapest way to reach a Washington audience still remains the print *Washington Post*. You'll have to have x times the radio spots or x times the television spots, or you have to do all sorts of things to reach the same audience that you can reach through the *Washington Post*. It remains fairly effective on a large number of advertisers.

It's true that the online business while it's growing in terms of audience has kind of flattened out a little bit in terms of revenue, and that does pose a challenge because the original notion that online will make up for decline in print hasn't materialized, which means that we have to reduce our costs to adjust for the fact that our circulation is lower and our revenue is lower.

But print remains front and center of everything we do at *The Washington Post*.

Besides your appointment as managing editor of the *Post* last year — which is historic because you are the first Indian or Indian-American managing editor of the *Post* in its entire history — Rajiv Chandrasekaran holds a senior position at the

Post.

There has been a trend that you see across the country of Indian Americans now in senior positions in American journalism. Sreenath Sreenivasan wrote this op-ed piece for us in December about what an eventful year 2009 was for Indian-American journalists.

It was an amazing year... Nik Deogun, who is a good friend of mine, at CNBC, there is Stephanie (*Mehta*) at *Fortune* and several others. Nobody has connected the dots except Sree in that one story.

In a year, when everybody lamented at one level the reduction of diversity in newsrooms, just the notion that Asian Indians are now in significant roles at probably 10 major news organizations and all of it happened in the last year is a significant untold story in some ways.

Do you see this as an evolving trend? Because this clearly indicates that Indian Americans — especially the second-generation — is moving away from the traditional fields of medicine, engineering and law, and now carving out a niche in fields like journalism?

I sure hope so. When I got into journalism, SAJA was barely forming and there were not that many people. But the best thing we can do for younger Asian Indians in the US is to be there for them to look up and say, 'Look if Raju can do this, or if Nik or Stephanie can do this, we can do it too.'

It's a different matter that you didn't become that without paying your dues or without doing all the hard work that it takes to get to that. But seeing — and it is not very dissimilar to looking at President Obama in the White House and (*saying*) that if an African American can become president, you don't need to tell your kids that one day you can be in the White House too, because they can see it.

And, that's why — despite having a crazy schedule — the one invitation I never ever turn down is when somebody asks me to come and speak in colleges or universities because I feel that is something I really need to do because you have to be there, to show people that normal people — ten toes and fingers and hands — looking like any one of them with the same name can actually do well in US journalism. It is important for us not to forget that.

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RAJU NARISSETTI

'An outstanding journalist and a brilliant strategic thinker'

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about what a wonderful person he is."

Pritchard said, "A journalist liking her boss? It doesn't happen that often, but then the boss was Raju."

Byron 'Barney' Calame, former *New York Times* readers' editor and deputy managing editor, *Wall Street Journal*, echoing similar sentiments, said, "Raju is an amazing combination of traits and abilities," and then went into a laundry list of attributes saying "he is honest, modest, bright, incisive, practical, hardworking, strategic, considerate and loyal."

"He is a wonderful friend and colleague. He is also one of the most effective newsroom managers I encountered in my 42 years of journalism," Calame added.

He recalled "when we wanted to create a corrections database at the *Journal* that could spot patterns in the errors we were making, I was pondering in pursuit of the perfect — and elaborate — system. Raju quietly cut right to the heart of the matter and came up with a practical system that could be quickly implemented and start producing valuable insights."

"One of the things I admire most about Raju is his honesty and straight-forward manner in dealing with conflict and differences of opinion," Calame noted. "Because he manages to be honest without being harsh, he is an excellent colleague — whether you are on his side of an issue or not."

He noted that "Raju is appropriately skeptical — an essential trait for a journalist — without slipping into cynicism. I greatly admire that balance, which many of us find so difficult to achieve in the newsroom."

"He can also get truly excited about a story or a new idea," Calame said, "without engaging in hyperbole or getting gushy about it being the biggest story of the year of the salvation of journalism."

"Seeing around corners is one of Raju's major strengths," he added. "As a reporter, it meant anticipating where the story was going beyond tonight or this week. As a manager, it meant anticipating where journalism is going beyond this month or this year."

Stephanie Mehta, executive editor, *Fortune* magazine, said, "He is the consummate professional, someone I'm very proud and honored to call a friend. Raju and I worked most closely together from about 1997 to 2008 when we were both staff reporters at *The Wall Street Journal*, covering technology."

"It would be folly for me to describe us as peers, though," she added. "Raju at the time, covered IBM, one of the most important companies followed by the *Journal*. I was the junior-most of three telecommunications reporters."

"Raju," Mehta pointed out, "stands out as one of the most generous reporters at the *Journal*, which was an incredibly competitive place at the time. Reporters jockeyed for first billing on co-reported stories, and some hoarded their sources."

But she spoke of how "Raju was quite the opposite, and he regularly reported stories for me and other reporters on the team without demanding so much as a reporting cred-

it — in fact in a few instances, he explicitly asked not to have his name attached to a piece. It wasn't that he was protecting his sources; he simply felt part of his job was helping strengthen the quality of all *Journal* stories, not just the ones he wrote and reported."

Mehta said "though he was years away from becoming the superstar editor, Raju was honing a skill that would soon become one of his hallmarks as an editor — making others look good."

"At *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, *Mint* and now at *The Washington Post*," she said, "Raju has worked tirelessly — perhaps exhaustively — behind the scenes to make his news organizations shine. He's all the things a great editor should be — a coach, a resource, a sounding board, a cheerleader, and advocate, and when necessary, devil's advocate, testing a premise, thesis or conventional thinking — all without seeking the spotlight for himself."

"Raju is a serious journalist," Mehta added, "but he doesn't take himself too seriously. And woe is the journalist who starts to sound too self-important around Raju."

She recalled a time "when one of our editors left the *Journal* to take a top post at a business magazine. The editor was boasting about the [importance] of his new gig, and how this new post was more senior than the job held by his wife," Mehta said, adding that this editor's wife was a high-ranking editor at *Newsweek*.

"Raju replied jokingly, but knowingly, 'Sure, unless you take circulation into account!'"

S Mitra Kalita, now with *The Wall Street Journal* after a stint as editor under Narisetti at *Mint* and an erstwhile *Washington Post* alumna where she was a staff reporter covering Metro, reminisced how "as an aspiring journalist in high school, I first encountered and admired Raju Narisetti as a byline."

"Over the next decade or so, I watched his meteoric rise and turned to him occasionally for advice, to fill a last-minute panel at a (*South Asian Journalists Association*) convention, to sound out on job opportunities in his organization and elsewhere."

But Kalita said, "It was not until I moved to India in 2006 to help Raju launch *Mint* that I better appreciated and understood why he's gotten where he is."



DOMINIC XAVIER

Narisetti greets the paper's newest editorial staffer, February 2010

"To work for Raju is to work alongside him," she said. "He is a boss who gets dirty — the first one in office and often the last to leave. He can be tough, gruff, exacting. We sparred early — I think (there were) 5.45 am e-mails — and often."

But she said Narisetti "never asked more of colleagues than he did of himself, and that is largely why the experiment called *Mint* has become so successful and grown into India's second largest business daily and arguably the country's most trusted newspaper."

"What Raju instilled in the *Mint* newsroom was the very best of journalism — clarity, accuracy, fairness, integrity, transparency, accessibility, idealism, commitment to and a belief in readers," Kalita added. "They are qualities he himself embodies, as a journalist and a person."

In "a strange twist, we are now at each other's previous news organizations — me at the *Journal* and he at the *Post*," she noted. "Not a day goes by that I don't rely on a lesson imparted by Raju, whether related to managing reporters or committing better journalism."

"While I'd like to think the relationship I have with him is unique — he has been boss, mentor, friend — I know he has impacted countless journalists around the world in similar ways," she said, and added: "Or success is ultimately a testament to him."

Sukumar Ranganathan, who succeeded Narisetti as editor, *Mint*, said,

"Raju is one of the best — if not the best — editors I have worked with. He was intelligent and could put a finger on what was wrong with a story almost instantly, could write well, and, in a departure from the behavior of most editors in this part of the world, was not unwilling to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty."

"Much of the vision for what *Mint* is and what it is growing to become came from him — honest reporting, smart packaging, skilful editing, and excellent writing."

Ranganathan said one of Narisetti's "biggest achievements here was to attract a great team of senior editors. I think of Raju as a sort of catalyst who brought this team together — something like a cornerstone around which *Mint* was built."

He acknowledged, "I do not think many of these people, me included, would have made the move if not for Raju."

"Raju and I made a great team," Ranganathan said, and recalled how "we sort of nurse-maided *Mint* into what it is now, working long hours and, for almost two years, editing, between us, every story that went into the paper."

He said Narisetti's "stamina was amazing," and bemoaned that "since his exit, I have been unable to recreate that sort of working relationship with anyone."

Ranganathan said, "In 2006, when I was managing editor of *Business Today*, if someone had asked me if I could run a paper, I would have probably said yes. I may have been able to, but it wouldn't have been a paper like *Mint*."

"Raju brought to *Mint* a great understanding of the technical and managerial aspects of running a world class paper and I and many other people here benefited from that."

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Abhijat Joshi at the Amish furniture store in Westerville where a lot of *Lage Raho Munnabhai* was written

There surely must be something in the air in the town of Westerville, about a 20-minute drive from Columbus, Ohio. For it is in this Midwestern town that two of India's biggest movie hits, *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* and *3 Idiots*, were nurtured and developed.

Westerville is where Abhijat Joshi lives. Joshi, who teaches at a private university affiliated with the United Methodist Church, lives here with his wife Shuba, who works at a children's nursery, and 13-year-old daughter Anushka, who is into human rights and writing poetry protesting deprivation and injustice.

In the family's modest two-bedroom house, you won't see any pictures or idols of gods. Even Anushka declares she does not believe in God. Like her parents, she is a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi. Values and principles are casually, but enthusiastically, discussed at dinner. The family also knows how to have fun. Joshi shares his passion for food with Shuba and Anushka. He knows where to get the best vegetarian dishes in restaurants in Columbus, even in its German quarter where bratwurst and schnitzel are the standard fare.

Joshi, who taught English for about a year in Ahmedabad, came to America for his graduate studies soon after he wrote his first screenplay (*Kareeb*) at age 23 for the man who would become his mentor for life, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, the producer of the two hugely popular *Munna Bhai* movies and *3 Idiots*, Bollywood's biggest hit ever. Chopra also produced and directed the Amitabh Bachchan starrer *Eklavya*, which Joshi wrote.

Joshi, who has an MFA degree from the University of Texas, Austin, and teaches cinema, won three Filmfare awards last week for his work on *3 Idiots* -- Best Story and Best Dialogue (with Rajkumar Hirani) and Best Screenplay (with Hirani and Vidhu Vinod Chopra).

You have said working with Vidhu Vinod Chopra has made you learn a lot of life's lessons....

One story he has told me will stay with me forever. Vinod was out of the Pune Film Institute (*the Film and Television Institute of India*) when he met with a prominent film producer. It does not matter who the man was, but what happened in this encounter is a life lesson.

After their meeting, the producer offered Vinod a lift. Vinod said he would get off at a



PARESH GANDHI

The Writer

ARTHUR J PAIS traveled to Westerville, a small town in Ohio, to meet a professor who has a stellar role in Bollywood history. Meet **ABHIJAT JOSHI**, a winner of the India Abroad Publisher's Special Award for Excellence 2009

particular place. As the chauffeur drove them in that direction, the producer asked Vinod: 'Have you seen my latest film?' Vinod was a bit brash in those days. He told the producer that he had very high regard for him, but he was sorely disappointed with that film.

Just then the car reached the bus stop. The producer looked at the oncoming bus and told Vinod: 'So, you are taking a bus? Once you have a *vaddi* (*big*) car like this, then we can talk about your views on cinema.' Vinod told me that he started thinking of the compulsions the producer had and why he had to make the kind of films that would support his lifestyle and status.

Vinod decided there and then that he would not bow to convention to support his lifestyle or status. Whether his films became hits or flops, he would make only those films that he believed in.

In the last three films you scripted, you debunk a few things: Traditional thinking in *Eklavya*; astrology and *vastu shastra* in *LRMB*; the educational system in India in *3 Idiots*.

It is all part of the progressive values instilled in me by my parents. My father Jayant Joshi, who teaches English in Ahmedabad, is a great admirer of the social reformer, Sane Guruji. My

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FROM THE EDITORS

For bringing a new idiom to Indian cinema, for the multi-layered stories he has told with great humor and understanding, we honor Abhijat Joshi with the India Abroad Publisher's Award for Excellence, 2009.

Design: Dominic Xavier
Editorial Coordination: Archana Masih, Matthew Schneeberger, P Rajendran, Vaihayasi P Daniel

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'Each script has its own DNA'

Abhijat Joshi shares glimpses of his life with **ARTHUR J PAIS.**
Photographs: **PARESH GANDHI**



Joshi at the Amish furniture store

On a wintry day, Abhijat Joshi took a reporter and a photographer through the town of Westerville and Otterbein College where he teaches creative writing and cinema; he reminisced about writing his famed movie scripts in this Ohio town, his life as a husband and father, and the life lessons he offers to his students.

"Each script has its own DNA," he says. "But the three scripts I have worked on in the last seven years are connected to Westerville, where I live and where I also teach scriptwriting. Recently I completed a screenplay *Broken Horses* based on a story idea by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, which is set in New Mexico and deals with the communities around the border. Its script was also mostly written in my home town."

"*3 Idiots* was discussed during hundreds of walks Raju (*director Rajkumar Hirani*) and I took in this town. After the walks we would come home and work on the script. But *Lage Raho* was worked out mostly on the steps of an Amish fur-

niture store in the middle of the town. The shop used to close by around 6, but a few chairs remained out. We would sit there with coffee, thrash out the ideas, shape and reshape them. We carried a tape recorder too. When we got a little tired, we would watch the traffic flow through the town, the lovely streets filling up with students, teachers and town people. I did not realize at first, but the building used to be a movie theater long, long ago."

"When I screened the film for the faculty and students of the English department (*which also includes the scriptwriting program*), they gave me a big gift wrapped so well that I could not make out what it was. When I saw it, I called Raju immediately in the presence of the professors, put on the speakerphone and asked him to guess what the gift was. He would have just one opportunity I said. He did not even pause for a minute. 'Amish chair', he said. He was right. The chair is in my house now."

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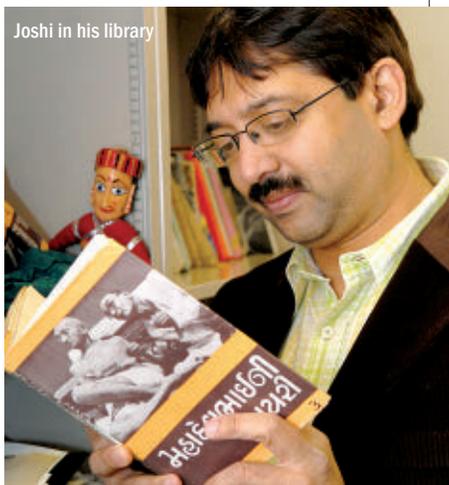
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I studied in a Gujarati medium school, and I enjoy reading Gujarati books. Since my mother tongue is Gujarati (though my father is a Marathi speaker and my mother, a Gujarati) and it is also the language of the Mahatma, I enjoy reading his writing in this language. I have the access to his sounds, slant and the spirit of his words. I have also the 23 volumes of work by his secretary Mahadevbhai Desai in my office.



Joshi in his library

We spoke about empowering children with our wisdom. But we can also learn from children. What have you learned from Anushka?

"Gentleness and concern for others," says Joshi. "I spent some years in the US on a very small stipend. I could not buy a single toy for her when she was growing up, but she never demanded anything though she was very little. In her own way, she taught me how totally unimportant material things are. Those years of frugal living were spent reading more and more books and viewing more and more films from the University library. We became great friends through this."

You not only teach the craft of film writing but also life lessons to your students. What are some of the most important things you have taught them?

"I tell them in the first class if they think scriptwriting means making quick money, they should get the idea out of their mind" he says. "The screenwriter's craft is to be learnt over many years, like you learn classical music. It is important to become aware of the technical aspects of cinema like editing and cinematography. Most importantly, they must develop a great curiosity about the world — the simple things around them as well as the larger social, political issues. An incurious writer is a dead writer."



Abhijat with daughter Anushka

Abhijat teaching at Otterbein College



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Joshi at work at his home in Westerville, Ohio



PARESH GANDHI

The Writer

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mother Nila Joshi, who teaches philosophy, is also a rationalist. The progressive tradition in my family has been there for many decades.

My grandmother Sarla Joshi started a school for girls in Junagadh (in Gujarat) during British times. Raju (director Rajkumar Hirani, *3 Idiots* and the *Munna Bhai* movies) and I are both rationalists and agnostics. What was emphasized as we were growing up was that real dharma did not consist of going to *mandirs* (temples) to ask for favors from deities, but to lead a good life and offer our services to the community in whatever form we saw best.

My father used to say all the time while we were studying in school that *dharma* should be accepted only if it stands to reason. In *Eklavya*, which is very dear to me even though it did not do very good business, we questioned the tradition that declared Dronacharya (the great guru in the *Mahabharat*) a great man even though he demanded blind obedience and sacrifice from (his student) Eklavya.

Though *Eklavya* was not a hit, it was well appreciated. The film is very close to me because of the life lesson it offers — that one should not follow something blindly, thinking that our fathers and grandfathers followed a tradition or a custom.

Dharma, as I was taught by my parents, should stand the test of reason.

Your family is vegetarian. Have you always been a vegetarian?

My wife Shuba has been a vegetarian all her life. I ate anything and everything till I began working on the script of *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*. Reading Gandhiji's literature extensively for the research of the film, I started seeing Bapu's point, and turned vegetarian.

The other day, Vidhu Vinod Chopra told me, 'You gave up meat while working on *Lage Raho*. Now the script you are working on *Broken Horses* has plenty of guns and violence. Won't you eat meat now?' (*Chuckles*.) I told him I am comfortable with my food habits as they are now.

You admire Gandhi considerably, but he was a man of religion unlike you...

Gandhiji's religion was uniquely his own. He would sometimes equate God with truth. This is very different from orthodox religion. His spiritualism was at the service of his karma yoga. He was brave enough to discard the *janavi*, or sacred thread, because it exemplified religious and caste superiority, but he kept his *shendi* (tuft) for some time, as it did not denote any religious class-ism. That kind of religiosity I welcome.

He was not a super human being. He had his faults and he admitted his mistakes. I can still like him greatly while rejecting many of his views on brahmacharya, science and technology, modern medicine and other issues. I am very comfortable disagreeing with him. It does not diminish his greatness at all.

Some people must have been surprised that Rajkumar

Hirani and you were able to convey so much of Gandhi in a film that was a delightful comedy.

Both Raju and I are not the type of people who tell jokes, but when we meet and start working somehow there is plenty of comedy. Going back to *Lage Raho*, it was fitting that the film was comedic. Gandhiji had a great sense of humor.

An admirer once asked him for his autograph. Bapu browsed through the autograph book, and paused at a page that had the autographs of English cricketers who were then touring India. He smiled and wrote at the bottom of the page: '12th man, M.K. Gandhi.'

While working on the script of *Lage Raho*, we were worried how best to convey Bapu's message without diluting the comic flavor and the essential irreverence started in the first film. The story I mentioned provided the answer. With that little gesture, he was saying something profound.

He was saying that he was fiercely opposed to the British government in India, but he was no enemy of the British. He could play cricket with them any time. But just then his status was very clear; he was an outsider, and he could cross the boundary and approach the players only when he carried their drinks. There was wit, sarcasm and gentle protest in the story, and it provided the tone and texture for *Lage Raho*.

After the huge success of *3 Idiots* you must get quite a few offers to write scripts...

Yes, but I am happy with the work I have been doing with Raju and Vinod. They are fully aware of the importance of a script. When *Kareeb*, which was based on a story by Kamini

Chandra, did not do well, I realized its failure had to do a lot with my script. And yet Vinod did not lose faith in me. He said I should study more about cinema and screenplays. He encouraged me to study in America.

Do you plan to direct a film?

It is a great joy to be working with two great directors like Raju and Vinod. I nurture no thoughts of direction at the moment. I am enjoying writing immensely, and want to learn more and more about this craft.

You have written just about four scripts in the past decade. There are some writers who write three or four scripts a year.

(*Chuckles*.) I am certainly not one of those. The question then is if proper justice can be done to a subject. I know SalimSaab and JavedSaab (the legendary Salim-Javed who wrote Bollywood classics like *Zanjeer*, *Deewar* and *Sholayi*) wrote the script for *Deewar* in 18 days. I really admire their work. But those are the exceptions.

I doubt if anyone can regularly turn out a good script in just three months. Some times, the first draft of a script can be ready in about three or four months, but fine-tuning it, adding or taking out details, takes a very long time. And it is this stage that determines the success of a script and the film.

What challenges did you face as a scriptwriter on *Broken Horses*?

The challenges were many. First of all, it is my first-ever film set in the US and for a US audience. A huge amount of research was needed to understand border issues and people. We have to get these things exactly right. Also, the aesthetic of Western films is different. The rhythm here is very different.

In an Indian film, we tackle a number of emotional themes, a number of set pieces. We don't shy away from big dramatic situations. Indian films are very inclusive. They are an amalgamation of various *rasas*, various *ragas*, various genres. In a Western film, we look to have one *raga*, stick to one genre.

How about the language?

I have lived in America for over 10 years and have taught here for many years and I have listened to a lot of colloquial talk. But we also have a script consultant attached to the film just to make sure that we are getting the vernacular right.

What stage is the project in?

Apart from giving the finishing touches to the script, negotiations are going on with Hollywood companies. The casting process is also going on. Many people in Hollywood studios are aware of *Eklavya*, which received very good reviews in the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*.

What are the earliest films that made an impact on you?

I was in the fourth grade when I saw *Sholay*. I was stunned. I loved the performances and the sweep of the film. I understood the role of the script in cinema through films like Ketan Mehta's *Bhavani Bhavai*. It was a fantastic film, combining an ancient folk form with an extraordinarily modern sensibility and narrative techniques. I am yet to see a film as bold, as dynamic, as experimental and as entertaining and also moving as *Bhavani Bhavai*. The next big influence was (*Charlie*) Chaplin.

When did you begin paying attention to the other aspects of a film?

When I was in college. I was blown away by the realism and raw power of *Ankush*. It was a powerhouse of a film, with some of the greatest dialogue in Hindi cinema. At the same time Vinod's films came along: *Khamosh*, a brilliant who-done-it, and *Parinda*, a brilliant dramatic thriller.

But you did not start off as a screenplay writer...

Whatever I was absorbing from the movies then, I was using it to be a playwright. That is how I started, but Vidhu Vinod Chopra guided me into writing the script with the movie *Kareeb* over 12 years

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The Writer

M32 ◀ PAGE

ago.

What are the films that have shaped you most?

Certainly, the films of Charlie Chaplin; then the films of Satyajit Ray, particularly *Pather Panchali*.

What did you take from Chaplin and other filmmakers that you admire?

Chaplin (*Limelight*, *Modern Times*) showed how to combine humor with tragedy. Billy Wilder (*Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment*, *Sunset Boulevard*) showed how to combine humor and drama. Watching Vittorio De Sica's films, especially *Bicycle Thief*, I learned more about the appeal of social realism.

In those years — I am talking about 15, 18 years ago — the DVD culture in India was very new and renting DVDs was not inexpensive. So many friends would gather, hire four or five DVDs and watch them all through the night or in a single day. I was also a great admirer of many Indian films — *Saransh*, *Anand*, *Deewar* etc.

What did you learn from these Indian directors?

Vinod's films *Khamosh* and *Parinda* showed that in India too we could make films for a wide audience without the song and dance drama. His films went directly into the core of their subjects. I also admired and learned a lot from Sai Paranjpe's *Sparsh*, which had superbly conversational and yet lyrical dialogue.

We have talked about the films you adore and what you have learned from them. Are there any popular Indian or American films that you have totally disliked?

I dislike pretentious films that pander to be spiritual, psychological or artistic in a deliberately obscure way. Having a solid grounding in literature, I can see through this pretense quickly, and pity the lack of competence trying to pass off something as obscure and profound. I can't remember the names of such films, because I leave them quickly and try to remove them from memory. But I am sure all of us familiar with such films.

You have said the original idea for *Munna Bhai 3* in which the two protagonists (*Sanjay Dutt* and *Arshad Warsi*) came to America to meet with the president has been scrapped. What direction is the script taking now?

I am working on a film with Raju, and we are both very excited about this new idea. It can become *Munna Bhai 3* or an entirely new film. Like our earlier films, this too will have a strong social angle. If anything, this film is even more deeply personal for us, about an issue that we have been thinking about for very long. Once again it will be a dramatic comedy, a genre we like.

Some writers find it difficult to work on a new book or a script following the huge success of their work. Did

you have any such fear when you began working on *3 Idiots*?

I am deeply grateful to both Vinod and Raju for teaching me how the success or failure of the earlier work means absolutely nothing when you are writing a new film. It is stunning to see how both of them have remained unchanged after their massive success. Only cinema matters for them, not the trappings of success that follow it. We never have any kind of *muhurat* or *puja* before starting our films.

The act of making the film is our act of worship; nothing else matters.

You prize books. What are some of the books you have in this town that you value most?

In my office I have the books on Gandhiji by Mahadevbhai Desai. They run into 10,000 pages, 23 volumes in all. I read each page carefully and with a lot of enthusiasm not only because I wanted to convey the gist in *Lage Raho* but also because I enjoyed them a lot. Gandhiji's own writings in Gujarati are also to be prized. If you admire his writings in English, you will be surprised to hear that he is even better in Gujarati.

Apart from Gandhiji's writing, I have in my office and home the books of three great social reformers and writers from Maharashtra: Gopalrao Agarkar, Sane Guruji and Baba Amte. The authors I read again and again are the humorists P G Wodehouse and P L Deshpande, the French mystery writer George Simenon, Gujarati poets Mareez and Sundaram, and the novelists Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Bhalchanda Nemade. I pick up every book that comes my way from these authors and keep them both in Westerville and India. For decadent pleasure I read a lot of books on cricket, and, of course, the *Astrix* comics.

My favorite living writer is Saumya Joshi, my brother, who is an absolutely outstanding poet and playwright; vastly more talented than I can ever hope to become.

Will there be a *Lage Raho 3 Idiots*?

I don't think so. It is important not to imitate your successful films. That kills creativity and breeds corruption and laziness. It is important to do new things, take risks, and set out on new adventures. Vinod had taught me early on that he can forgive commercial or even artistic failure, but never the failure of intention.

'Each script has its own DNA'

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Would you have been able to write these wonderful scripts had you lived in India?

"I do live both in India and here," he says. "I divide my time

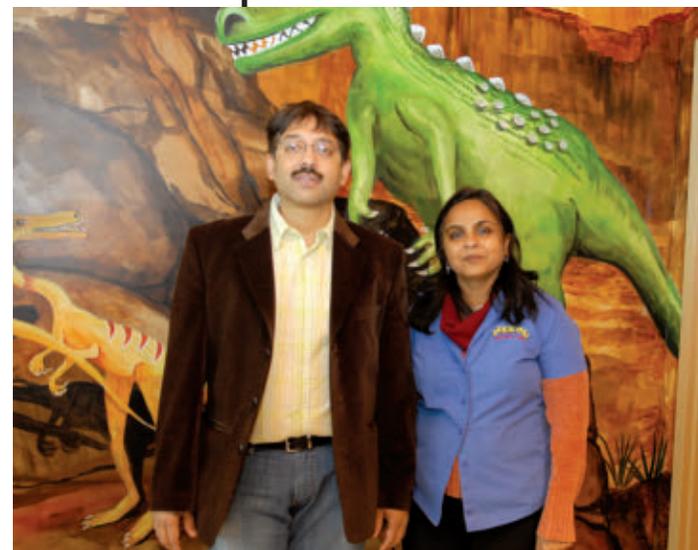
between these two continents. Being away from India, and living in a town that has just a handful of Indian families and teaching at a university with just about a dozen Indian students and professors make me look at India from a very different perspective. There are a lot of beautiful things in this town and in this region, but the more I travel around, the more I think of the Indian landscape, the Indian warmth and things like that."

Abhijat Joshi, his wife Shuba and daughter Anushka have few material things, even after the spectacular success of *3 Idiots*. It is a willful choice, he says, as he looks at his prized possessions, books, DVDs (mostly borrowed) and his car and bicycle....

"On the days the weather is good, I ride to the school on my bicycle; it is about a 20-minute ride and I find it very relaxing. I have had this car for over 10 years. People wonder why I still keep this old car. It is not that it has brought me any special luck, but since I have been spending about six months a year in India with Shuba and Anushka, I don't feel the need to buy a new car."

"I love going to bookshops, especially used bookshops that

offer a wide variety of books," he says. Shuba says on their honeymoon in Karnataka, he spent hours in the bookshops in Bangalore and Mysore. "I had to buy him a bag to carry all those books to Ahmedabad," she adds.



Joshi and wife Shuba

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Abhijat Joshi, right, with Rajkumar Hirani



‘Between us it is an egoless existence’

Director **RAJKUMAR HIRANI** salutes his mate

Rajkumar Hirani, the director of *Lage Raho Munnabhai* and *3 Idiots*, co-wrote the script for both films with Abhijat Joshi. He spoke to Patey N in Mumbai about the joy of working with the talented Ohio professor.

Do you remember your first meeting with Abhijat?

My first meeting with Abhijat was when he was writing *Kareeb*. I was making the promos of the film and helping (*the late legendary film editor*) Renu Saluja with the editing. Abhijat would be hanging around the studio. Once in a while he would politely request if he could watch the editing process. He would sit quietly and watch what was happening. After the film, he went his way and I went mine. I did not see him for about three years.

After that you worked together on *Lage Raho Munnabhai*. You were an editor who became a writer-director; as a writer did he feel that you had stepped in his domain?

No. Abhijat is not that kind of a person, he is quite a fearless man. I don't think we have a relationship where we would think we are stepping on each other's toes.

I had *Munnabhai MBBS* behind me, which I had written and Abhijat was not part of. In fact, the way he came on board is interesting. I was narrating the concept of *Lage Raho Munnabhai* to Vinod (*filmmaker Vidhu Vinod Chopra*) and Abhijat was present. He got very excited and interested in it since he had lived in Ahmedabad and had read quite a lot about Gandhiji. I was not even looking at him as a writer on the film because I thought he stayed in the US and I lived in India — how could we work together?

It was only when he sent me a scene written from the US that we started interacting. The first scene he sent me was so bad that I thought how would I work with this man. But I was polite to him. The next day he sent me a scene, which was out of this world. I wrote to him, saying the scene is good but he should work on it further. We started e-mailing and working with each other — unknowingly, without any official thing, he came on board.

I would do a scene, send it to him and go to sleep. He would wake up and work on it the whole day — so we were working 24 hours. We would call each other if we had an important doubt. For a month we worked like that.

I had always worked in isolation and always thought that I couldn't work with anyone else. I always thought that writing was a very personal process, but for the first time I realised that I could work with somebody else as we thought alike. Normally when you work with someone else there is lot of ego as when someone writes a scene they spend lot of time defending it.

Between us, it is an ego-less existence.

If Abhijat says he does not like a scene, I will give it a thought. Similarly if I say something, Abhijat does not feel bad about rejecting the scene. He will go back to the scene and rework it. It has been very comfortable, we can talk about anything and we can say anything to each other.

How did he officially come on board?

He had worked with Vinod on *Kareeb* so he was part of the Chopra family. We had been working informally (*on the script for Lage Raho Munnabhai*), but at one stage we realised that the script was getting better, so I asked him to come to Mumbai for 10 days. I picked him from the airport and took him to a hotel in Madh Island (*north-western Mumbai*) so that we could utilize

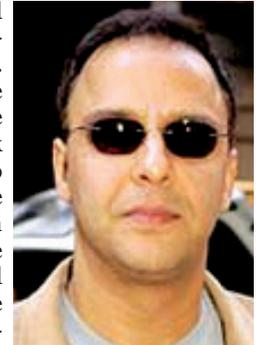
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‘He’s not only my co-writer, he is also my memory bank’

Filmmaker

VIDHU VINOD CHOPRA on his association with Abhijat Joshi

Vidhu Vinod Chopra and Abhijat Joshi have an interesting working relationship. On some occasions, they have worked on a script in a house Chopra has hired in New York where he stays for several weeks to negotiate business deals. This time they have spent over a week in Hollywood; Chopra has been there for nearly a month. “I am astounded by his commitment to the movies he makes,” says Abhijat. “He has a talent to bring out the best from everyone involved in his films.”



Even by Hollywood standards, Chopra is a late sleeper. Except that he — instead of partying into the early hours of the morning — is working on finalizing the script with Abhijat and the casting for their first English-language film, *Broken Horses*.

In the middle of all this, he took some time off — around 2.30 am West Coast time — to talk about his protégé.

You have watched Abhijat grow over the decade since you worked with him for the first time on *Kareeb*. What kind of progress have you seen in him in recent years?

Abhijat was always a good writer, but over the years he has evolved as a wonderful screenwriter. It is his commitment and dedication that has led him here.

Though *Kareeb* was not a hit, you did not lose faith in him and encouraged him to study abroad. What are the best things that have happened to him studying in America?

He got the exposure that he deserved.

You wrote on a poster you gave him that *Eklavya* would not have happened without him. Apart from the script, how else did he contribute to the film?

Not only *Eklavya... 3 Idiots, Lage Raho Munna Bhai* and *Broken Horses* would not have happened without him. He is not only my co-writer, he is also my memory bank. He knows more than I know about screenwriting today.

Would you expect him to direct a film?

I think he is such a fine writer that it would be a waste of his talent and energies if he were to spend it managing hundreds of people on a film set. However, if he so wishes, I'm sure he can.

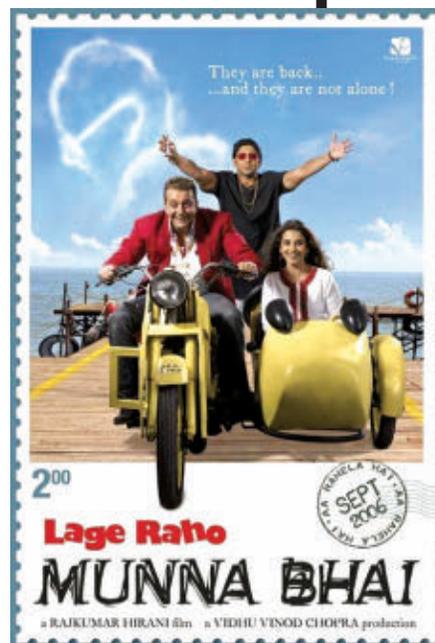
What is the best advice you have given him?

These days, he gives me advice... I listen.

And what is the best thing you have taken from him, apart from the scripts?

Persistence.

— Arthur J Pais



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'Between us it is an ego-less existence'

M36 PAGE the time to the maximum extent. I dropped him back at the airport after 10 days. In fact, his parents, who live in Ahmedabad, came to meet him for a day as he could not go and meet them.

Those days were very fruitful and we realized that so much could be done with the script. We both have grown in a small town — I am from Nagpur and he is from Ahmedabad. We both have had a very naughty college life, we have lots of anecdotes and stories to talk about so there are lots of similarities between our personalities.

The biggest thing is that we think alike. We don't have to convince each other. Those days were magical. But we still could not finish the script. What we did in those 10 days was destroy the second half we had already written and opened some 20 doors to explore.

Meanwhile, we had started shooting *Lage Raho Munnabhai* because initially our script was ready. But after Abhijata came on board, we did not have the second half of the film as we started rewriting it. Our shoot got delayed as Duttsaab (*Sunil Dutt*) passed away and Sanjay Dutt could not shoot, so we got about six months. This time I went to meet Abhijata in the US, stayed there for a month. During that month we completely transformed the story.

You said the first scene he wrote was very bad; what was it?

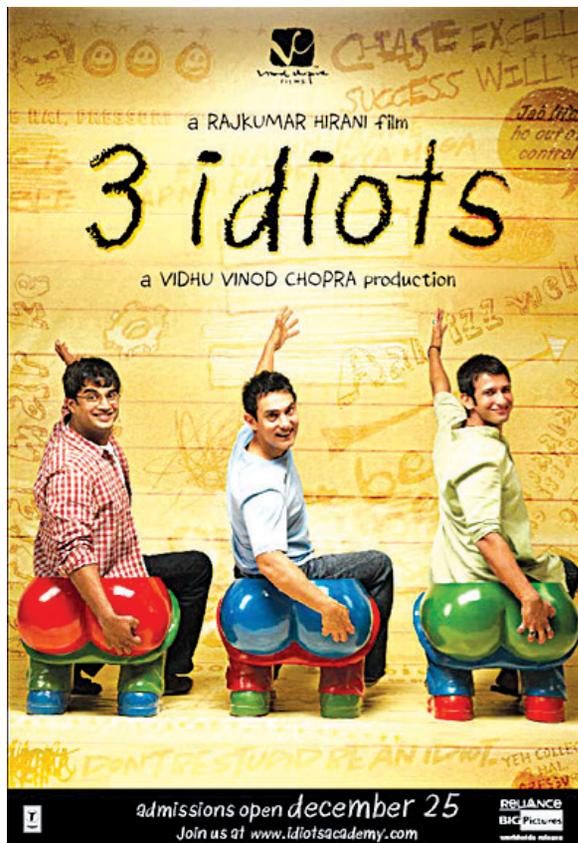
I don't remember it now because it was a bad scene, but I will tell you the first great scene that he wrote got edited out of the film.

There was a scene (in *Lage Raho...*) where the old men are protesting through peaceful means in front of Lucky Singh's (*Boman Irani*) house. One old man dies, there is a funeral and during the funeral Munna (*Sanjay Dutt*) gets angry and says 'Forget Gandhigiri I am going to trash Lucky Singh.' Bapu (*Mahatma Gandhi*) appears and asks Munna what would happen if he beat up Lucky Singh.

While Bapu is speaking, the wind blows and Bapu's cloth billows to expose the three bullet marks on his chest where he was

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fired upon (*by Nathuram Godse, his assassin*). Bapu says: 'Yeh teen goliya mujhe to maar sakti hai par mere vicharon ko nahi maar sakti (*You can kill my body with bullets, but not my views*).' This dialogue was retained in the climax when Bapu is sitting in the library, but the scene was edited out. I think that was a wonderful scene he wrote.

How is it working with Abhijata?

I have never seen Abhijata angry. He is very easy to work with; he never comes under pressure. He is very child-like. He gets very excited about ideas and can wake you about three or four in the morning. If he e-mails the scene, he will wait for a reaction, and if you don't mail him back he will call you.

Vinod has an interesting incident when they went location hunting for *Eklavya* in Udaipur; they were also writing the script. One night when Vinod was sleeping Abhijata got an idea. He was getting very edgy and wanted to share it with Vinod. But waking up (*the famously temperamental*) Vinod was a risky thing, yet Abhijata entered his room and woke him up.

Vinod opened one eye and said: 'Bol idea bol, achcha idea hoga toh doosri aankh kholunga (*Only if your idea is good will I open the other eye*). When Abhijata told him the idea, Vinod said, 'Bahut bakwaas idea hain, so jaa (*Terrible idea, now go back to*

sleep).

As a director there is a lot of man management that I have to do. Everyone on the set is an artist — whether it is a cameraman or an art director. Everyone comes with their ideas. If you disagree with some ideas you have to be careful when you are saying no, but with Abhijata I don't have to camouflage anything I want to say. I have had difficulties working with other writers, but after working with Abhijata, I think I cannot work without him again.

Any anecdotes about your brainstorming and scripting process?

Whenever we are thinking of a scene we take a recorder and go for long walks. We don't return till we crack the scene. Once we went for one such long walk at Bandra Reclamation (*north-west Mumbai*). It started drizzling, but we did not want to leave as it would break the thought process, so we continued walking. Soon it started raining heavily and became windy, we were totally drenched and cold, but we did not move. Our driver came with an umbrella, we told him to forget it since we were already wet. We left only when we had our scene.

At times we would walk and forget what time it was till we got the scene right only to realise that we hadn't eaten. Once we had to get a restaurant opened and ask for bread and olive oil. Another time in the US, Abhijata and I had gone to a mall and when we left we started discussing a scene in the car. Abhijata was at the signal (*traffic light*) and we were so engrossed, we waited for about 20 minutes till I realised that the signal wasn't changing.

When I asked him, he said, 'Oh sorry, that is not a signal.' It was a blue light and since I was new, I thought it was some sort of signal in the US. Abhijata, of course, knew about it, but when he is engrossed in thought he does not understand other things.

When he is discussing scenes and driving, I am very scared because he will invariably take a wrong turn. In the US if you take one wrong exit you have to drive for hours. This has happened many times and we have driven 40 to 50 miles without any reason. I once got him a GPS system to guide him on the road, but the next time I went he had lost it. Barring scripting, his whole life keeps going haywire.

Have you had any creative differences with Abhijata?

We have creative differences all the time, but the greatest thing is we never have any

arguments. I will disagree with something, but since we think alike we convince each other very fast and move ahead. Abhijata is not capable of fighting.

How does he sustain the flavor of India since he lives in the US? How is he so uniquely Indian?

Abhijata is pretty rooted here, he travels very frequently and he is in India for almost six months in a year. His college (*Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio*) has recognized the films he has done and they are very happy with the kind of work he is doing. They have given him a six-month sabbatical every year so he gets work in both places. His teaching keeps him connected with the real world.

I think it is a nice call that he has taken to stay there as it keeps him away from the corruption of this city (*Mumbai*) and Bollywood. He has lived in a small town all his life and when he comes here from the US, he stays in Ahmedabad and interacts with his non-filmy friends who are very close to him. He is very close to his family; his brother Saumya is a Gujarati writer.

Has it ever happened that you have changed a scene without his consent? How has he reacted?

He has tremendous amount of faith in me that if I change anything I will change it for a good purpose and with good reason. So that has happened at times. I have changed a few scenes and told him. He trusts my judgement that I am doing it for the betterment of the film.

He was happy and shocked when he saw the song *Aane Char Aane* in *Lage Raho Munnabhai* with old men in Goa. We had not written a scene for it. We had planned that they would go to Goa and have a good time, but I added scenes like Munna trying to propose to Janhavi (*Vidya Balan*), the old men drinking beer and dancing at the poolside. He is always aware of what is happening; it is only sometimes that he gets surprised but he says that when such thing happens it goes beyond the page.

How do you plan to celebrate the huge success of 3 Idiots?

Abhijata has been asking me to come to the US, but I have been dreading the thought, because it is not going to be a holiday. It will be work. I have decided that I don't want to start work immediately; I want to meet people, read books watch films.

Abhijata finished his writing work on *3 Idiots* two years ago; for me the movie released just now, so I am trying to detach myself. He knows I am trying to avoid it (*the trip to the US and work*) so he keeps telling me that we will not talk about work. I guess I will be going there after 15 days. I will roughly do the sketch of the story that we will next work on and come back. I have two ideas in mind — one is *Munnabhai Chale Amerika*. We will decide which story we would like to go ahead with.

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NEWS

India Abroad
March 12, 2010

In a first, IARC is official co-sponsor of annual conservative soiree

AZIZ HANIFFA

In a first for an Indian-American organization, the Indian American Republican Council was last month an official co-sponsor of the

Conservative Political Action Conference —the annual conservatives' soiree that features potential presidential candidates, leading GOP lawmakers and national stars in the conservative movement.

Last year, radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh brought the house down. This year, it was Fox News' controversial and acerbic liberal- and progressive-basher Glenn Beck. As always, there was Ann Coulter adding to the vitriol poured by Beck on President Barack Obama, the Democrats and other progressives, and declaring that this is the year of conservatives and that the Congressional elections was theirs for the taking.

Former vice president Dick Cheney, just two days before he suffered his fifth heart attack, was also in his element, declaring that Obama would be "a one-term President."

More than half of the record 10,000 attendees were young people under the age of 25 and besides Beck, Coulter and Cheney, the most popular politician at the three-day event was United States Senator Scott Brown, who created a political tsunami in Massachusetts when he wrenched the seat held by the Democrats for over half a century, the bulk of it by the late Senator Edward M Kennedy.

Among the others who were on hand, obviously to make an initial pitch as potential Republican presidential candidates in 2012, were Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, and former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney. The conference included panels on subjects ranging from foreign policy to blogging. There were book signings and receptions with party leaders like Pawlenty, which several IARC members participating in the conference were invited to.

Dino Teppara, IARC chairman, made history by becoming the first Indian American to ever address the CPAC, speaking to a live audience of over 4,000 people in a national televised speech on C-Span. He bemoaned the long wait times for legal immigrants from around the world anxiously waiting for their Green Cards and exhorted the audience to fight any attempt by the Democrat-led Congress to approve amnesty for illegal aliens and other proposals to provide undocumented workers with a pathway for a green card or

permanent residency and ultimately citizenship.

"We were honored to be part of this year's CPAC," Teppara told *India Abroad*. "We had a booth in the exhibit hall and hundreds of people approached us to express an amazingly positive image of the Indian-American community. We lost count of the number of people who thanked us for being there and told us of Indian-American friends and others whom they knew in their states whom they believed should be part of our organization."

Teppara, former chief of staff to Representative Joe Wilson, South Carolina

Republican and who is awaiting an officer commission later this year in the

United States Navy — that would make him the only Indian-American public affairs officer in the US armed forces — said, "People also expressed a positive view of [Louisiana] Governor Bobby Jindal, and having worked on both his campaigns in 2003 and 2007 with Congressman Wilson, I was extremely pleased and gratified to hear that. We had a great reception this year and certainly made our presence felt and networked among the hierarchy and powerful in the conservative movement. We look forward to being part of CPAC every year."

Former senior Bush administration official Suhail Khan, another pillar of the IARC, said, "We were pleased to be part of this excitement as America's conservatives came together in showing solidarity and determination to put our country back on to a path of prosperity by embracing center-right principles." He too said the number of people who had visited the IARC booth "and expressed their support to Governor Bobby Jindal and told us of their high opinion of

the Indian-American community was simply amazing."

Rajesh Bharwani, a Congressional staffer who was among the more than two dozen IARC members who participated in the conference, said, "I can sum up my CPAC experience in one word: Energy. With so many young people in attendance, it is only natural that the convention reverberated with excitement and feelings of 'we can make a difference.' As an IARC volunteer, I was excited to be able to participate at this major conservative conference and share the IARC's message and our efforts towards the conservative cause. This was a great occasion and opportunity for the IARC to get name recognition and spread our message to all those in the conservative movement and those sharing our ideals, goals and mission."

Ketan Poladia, another IARC member and volunteer, was all praise for Teppara. "He did us proud by doing a fantastic job by standing up and speaking out for the plight of legal immigrants," Poladia said. "He articulated the argument so well and I hope more people hear the message that we at the IARC and Indian-American Republicans strongly believe in the rule of law."



Dino Teppara addresses a live audience of 4,000 people at the Conservative Political Action Conference

CHRISTINE SEQUENZIA

AZIZ HANIFFA
IN WASHINGTON, DC

Calling Rashad Hussain a 'voice of radical Islam', right wing conservatives have demanded his ouster as the special envoy to the Organization of Islamic Conference.

But the White House has said United States President Barack Obama has full confidence in Hussain, 31, and has accepted his clarification about remarks he made as a Yale University law student in 2004.

Hussain had spoken out against what he alleged was the Bush administration's 'politically motivated persecution' of a Muslim professor at the Florida State

University, Dr Sami Amin Al-Arian, and others accused of raising funds for Islamic Jihad, a group proscribed by the State Department as a foreign terrorist organization. He later conceded that his comments were 'ill-conceived and not so well-formulated'.

Obama noted that Hussain had consistently written against terrorism perpetrated by groups in the name of Islam, saying it

was a distortion of the Quran and the tenets of the religion.

Leading American Muslim scholars and the Association of Indian Muslims slammed the campaign against Hussain by the likes of nationally syndicated columnist Cal Thomas and the conservative Washington, DC tabloid, *The Examiner*, saying the attacks were bigoted.

Obama last month appointed Hussain,

his deputy associate counsel at the White House, to serve as his special envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference — which comprises over 50 member states and is the second largest inter-governmental organization in the world.

The White House said, "Hussain would deepen and expand the partnerships that

Right-wing campaign demands Rashad Hussain's ouster

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Bharat Ratna for Sachin? Wait a bit

The name of Sachin Tendulkar is going to be written in gold in the annals of Indian, nay, world cricket (*India Abroad*, March 5).

His latest exploit — scoring 200 not out in 147 balls — in the second one-day international against South Africa will remain unmatched for a long period. He had made many other records that put to shame many commendable records by his peers that have earned the envy, admiration as well as pride of his fellow cricketers, including Pakistanis, all the world over. There is no doubt he will stick around for some more time, god willing, as he is but only 36, and should set more records and earn thankful admiration from innumerable supporters from around the world.

How does he do that? The main reason is that he continues to enjoy playing cricket. Over the years he has retained the same love, enthusiasm and pleasure playing it that a ten-year-old lad manages to have. Besides, he is a perfect gentleman who never loses his



Sachin Tendulkar in Mumbai after his record-breaking 200 in Gwalior, February 26

SAHIL SALVI

ing any demeaning controversy.

Sauri P Bhattacharya
Plano Texas

An important initiative

I enjoyed reading Aziz Haniffa's enlightening column (*India Abroad*, February 26), about the bold new initiative President Barack Obama took to reach out to the 1.5 billion strong global Muslim community and 53 Muslim majority nations.

This initiative was badly needed to correct the imbalance created by the mindless punitive policies of the previous Bush-Cheney administration, which over-reacted indiscriminately against all Muslims at home and abroad, rather than eliminate the rogue elements among them. At the same time they cajoled despotic kings and dictators in many a Muslim majority country.

In today's global village where the Internet and television carry detailed images of happenings and attitudes instantly into peoples' homes, no one can wish away the other. The United States and Muslims need each other and hence need to work harder to reach out to each other and create strong bonds, thereby preventing the alienation that the extremists on both sides are trying to create.

The high level and visible appointments of Rashad Hussain as the US envoy to the Organization of Islamic Conference — an international forum of 53 Muslim majority countries — and Farah Pandit as America's outreach coordinator to Muslims, are excellent initiatives by the Obama administration.

Hussain, a lawyer — scholar with roots in India and the US — two large and vibrant democracies — is most suited to dispel the recent estrangement between the US and Muslims. At only 30 years of age he has accumulat-

ed enviable intellectual capital and political acumen, while he has maintained strong moorings in Islam. Thus as he approaches his very difficult 'American outreach-to-world-Muslims' assignment, he carries much credibility.

The fact that both the outreach officials President Obama chose are of Indian origin sends a powerful message about the important place that India and India's Muslims have in the global Muslim community.

Indeed, Indian and Indian American Muslims with their unique composite heritage and skills in successfully dealing with majority non-Muslims are well suited for the role of bridge-builders over the troubled gulf created by the awful 9/11 catastrophe.

Kaleem Kawaja
Association of Indian Muslims of America, Washington, DC

These are no solutions

There we go again. Kalyan Dutta Choudhury (*India Abroad*, February 26) is putting the blame squarely on academia for failing to teach counter-terrorism to the students in India. He sounds pedantic in his minimalist suggestion of having people trained to deal with suspicious objects. Then he goes on to put down ministers and doctors with anecdotal evidence.

I wonder if Choudhury has any trick in his bag he can offer to preempt the shooting rampages that have occurred in US universities. This, when there is an effort at some universities to allow guns on campus. I am at a loss to think where that will lead us.

Isaac Samuel
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

legendary cool. That's how he has become the darling of India's sporting public. That he continues to make records when India has also managed to become world's number one Test playing nation is a matter of deep satisfaction.

Cricket, the world's most nuanced sporting tradition, owes Tendulkar a whole lot of gratitude. His contributions to world cricket, I dare say, are second to none.

Some of his compatriots have suggested that he be given the Bharat Ratna. I would say wait a bit. He is only 36. Let him survive the hoopla, spend some of his cricketing largesse on worthy causes, including charities, and strengthen cricketing facilities in the country. A more mature Sachin Tendulkar would have earned his Bharat Ratna — for his life's achievements without risk-

India does have problems

I'm a 19-year-old living in this country. I know India like the back of my hand. I'm a frequent reader of *India Abroad* and have great interest in following the letters to the editor and the opinions expressed.

I'm deeply affected by the views of many readers such as Chitra Raman. It is so sad to know that such readers attempt to whitewash the problems expressed by Matthew Schneeberger. The problems are very real. Why is it that desis attempt to rationalize every aspect of a problem in India? We even refuse to acknowledge that such issues exist.

Yes, the infrastructure is poor and there is no denying that. Why do we let out an enraged cry of injustice when someone points out real issues in India? Is it that hard to digest the facts? Are we to live in an imaginary world where things are perfect in India and the problems are trifles? People can argue as much as they want about India progressing. But there are thousands of people starving and living on the streets. If we rationalize everything and blame everyone else, when will we face our own faults? When will we wake up and realize that we lead to our own problems? We are responsible.

The only way India can improve is by changing our attitude. I have heard it said that only attitude not aptitude will achieve altitude. Comparing India to the US and citing the US's faults is not the way to fix problems. It is a form of rationalization and escapism. Let's get rid of the log in front of our eyes before we get rid of the speck in somebody else's eye.

Anu Balaji
Sarasota, Florida

A3



PEOPLE

India Abroad
March 12, 2010

Teen Patti folds

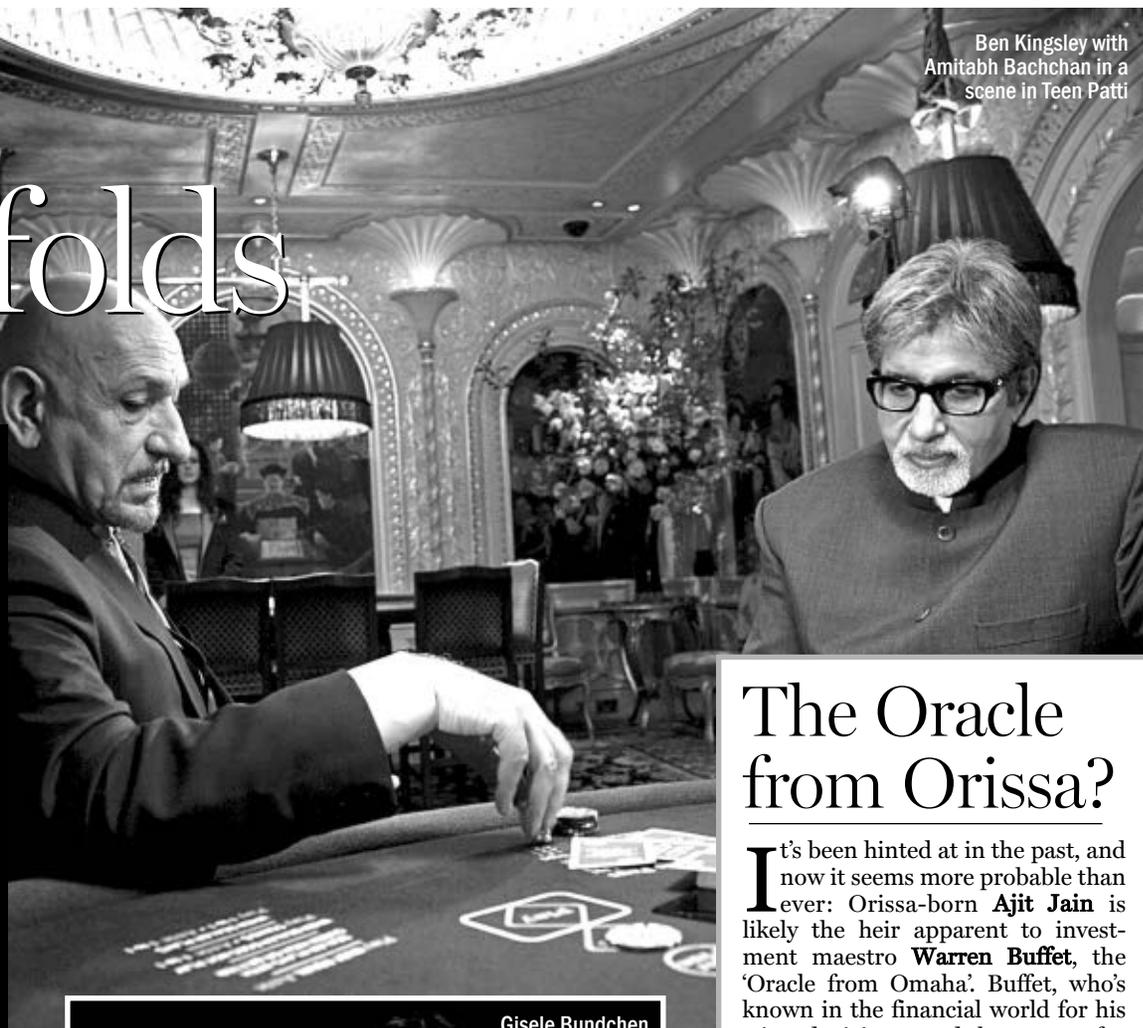
Ben Kingsley with
Amitabh Bachchan in a
scene in Teen Patti

Even the historic pairing of Ben 'Gandhi' Kingsley and Amitabh Bachchan in *Teen Patti* was not enough to draw the crowds in the lucrative foreign markets. Though its distributors in North America and the United Kingdom had not released the box-office numbers by Sunday evening as most distributors do, the grapevine says the film is a dud. In fact, some box-office analysts believe that the film was dead on arrival.

The new movie was ridiculed in the mainstream media (at least among the few who cared to review it). 'Sir Ben Kingsley has never been one to turn down a job, which is why his recent résumé includes everything from the current No. 1 movie in America, *Shutter Island*, to a role as a villainous vampire daddy in the 2005 schlockfest *Bloodrayne*,' wrote *The Washington Post*. 'His heroic willingness to cash anyone's cheque might explain why Kingsley, playing a Cambridge professor, phones in a handful of scenes in the overwrought, overlong, totally bonkers Bollywood thriller *Teen Patti*.'

Time Out gave the film one star out of four.

On the subject of box-office, *Shah Rukh Khan's My Name Is Khan* became his highest grossing film in North America over the weekend, narrowly overtaking *Om Shanti Om*. Only two other Hindi films have made more than MNIK's \$3.6 million in North America — *Deepa Mehta's Water*, \$4.5 million and *Rajkumar Hirani's 3 Idiots*, which set the record with \$6.6 million.



The Oracle from Orissa?

It's been hinted at in the past, and now it seems more probable than ever: Orissa-born **Ajit Jain** is likely the heir apparent to investment maestro **Warren Buffet**, the 'Oracle from Omaha'. Buffet, who's known in the financial world for his wise decisions and keen eye for potential, has lavished public praise upon Jain throughout the latter's quarter century career at Berkshire Hathaway, the company Buffet's headed since the mid-1960s. For Jain, who holds an engineering degree from IIT-Kharagpur and an MBA from Wharton Business School, running several reinsurance companies for Berkshire and cracking billion-dollar deals is all in a day's work. In the 2010 version of his famous annual letter to Berkshire stockholders, Buffet went out of his way to praise Jain, 58, who's considered one of a handful of serious contenders to succeed Buffet, 79. "A hugely important event in Berkshire's history occurred on a Saturday in 1985. Ajit Jain came into our office in Omaha — and I immediately knew we had found a superstar," Buffet wrote, continuing a trend of mentioning Jain by name in his annual letters. 'If Charley (Charley Munger, Berkshire Vice-Chairman), I and Ajit are ever in a sinking boat — and you can only save one of us — swim to Ajit,' he added.

The Big B(oycott)

The 55th *Filmfare* Awards lost some of its sheen this year when B-town's first family boycotted the event, which took place February 27. **Amitabh Bachchan**, son **Abhishek** and daughter-in-law **Aishwarya Rai** followed through on their threats to boycott the awards ceremony after *Mumbai Mirror*, tabloid published an article claiming that the Bachchan bahu suffers from an ailment that has stopped her from conceiving.

Amitabh went on to win the best actor award in absentia, for his role in *Paa*. **Vidya Balan**, his co-star from the film, accepted the award on his behalf.

But it was Ash pulling out that must have caused more of a scramble. She was supposed to perform at the event. Event organizers were able to bring in **Deepika Padukone**, who stars in the just released *Karthik calling Karthik*, to fill her shoes.

As for the spat, according to the *Mumbai Mirror* story, Ash suffers from 'stomach tuberculosis', which has prevented her from conceiving. Amitabh blasted the tabloid, calling the story about the couple, who married in 2007 'completely false' and demanded an apology. The paper refused to concede and since both *Mumbai Mirror* and *Filmfare* belong to the Times Group, the Bachchans made their displeasure known through the very public boycott.

The many celeb paths to yoga

Reality TV star **Heidi Montag** and super-model **Gisele Bundchen** have taken up yoga for very different reasons. Bundchen, who in December gave birth to son **Benjamin**, credits Anusara yoga for helping ease her pregnancy problems and allowing her to quickly snap back into shape. She's even reportedly got her husband, American football star **Tom Brady**, in on the act.

Meanwhile, Montag has reportedly used yoga to get over the litany of plastic surgeries she's undergone in recent months, including an almost unbelievable breast augmentation. When photos from a yoga session featuring *The Hills* star, sporting amplified assets, recently surfaced, Montag tweeted, 'It's so hard to get moving post surgery!' Um, we can imagine.



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Maddy gets personal with Illinois

Film star **R Madhavan** kept his date with Illinois and how. The *3 Idiots* actor was attending a function to raise funds for Habitat for Humanity, the international philanthropic organization that builds homes for needy people all over the world, including India, and he swept the audience off their feet with his charm and candor.

Madhavan, who had just returned from Haiti where he saw first hand the devastation wrought by the recent earthquake, opened up to the audience about a number of topics.

"I think it's a great thing to be an actor. Today, there is diversity in films in a way that didn't exist 10 years ago. It's easier to find a place and create a niche, which is what I am trying to do," he said.

When asked how he became a movie star, Maddy talked about it all — being born in a Tamil brahmin family, his school days at Jamshedpur, his days in Alberta in Canada as an exchange student, his first crush, his struggles as an engineering student in Kolhapur, his first profession as a public speaking tutor and finally his entry into TV and subsequent success in tinsel town.

He shared personal stories, mentioning how difficult it was to balance professional life and family. He even told his



Autograph hunters mob actor Madhavan at a function in Illinois

fans about the days when he used to teach communication and public speaking at workshops around India, and how he encountered his wife, **Sarita Birje**, an air hostess, at just such a workshop.

The event took place in Rolling Meadows, Illinois, and was organized by the Maharashtra Mandal, Chicago. It also turned out to be a kick off function for the international convention of Brihan Maharashtra Mandal, to be held in Chicago

next year.

Then **Raja Krishnamoorthi**, Assistant State Treasurer, joined him in lighting a ceremonial lamp, while **Niteen Joshi**, the chief convener of the convention, described preparation for the upcoming convention. Krishnamoorthi said that despite his narrow loss in the recent election for State Comptroller, he had big plans for returning to Illinois politics and was likely to bid for lieutenant governor.

Uttaran girl bags Hollywood film

Sparsh Khanchandani, who played the adorable Icha in the Hindi television serial *Uttaran*, has managed to bag a Hollywood film called *Meena: Half The Sky*. *Charlie's Angels* actress **Lucy Liu** will make her directorial debut with this film.

There will be a series of six short films based on issues like child trafficking, prostitution and social injustice. It will be shot in different countries and is expected to release this year.

Sparsh's film will be about a girl called Meena, who hails from Uttar Pradesh. She gets abducted by her uncle and is forced into prostitution.

The young actress completed her shoot in three days in Madh island, Mumbai, where the red light area was created.

"I have no idea how Hollywood got to know about Sparsh," Sparsh's mother Sarita said. "We got a call from the



Lucy Liu

REUTERS

Indian team for an audition. After a week, we had a meeting with the director. It was followed by a workshop. We started shooting in a few days. Everything happened very fast.

"I thought it would be difficult for me to explain the sensitive issue and her role to Sparsh but the creative team managed it easily, and also got the best out of her," her mother continued. "I was surprised when my daughter started talking in an American accent. I have not heard her speaking in that accent before. She managed it very well."

Quiz Sparsh about the accent, and she replies, "I don't know how I managed to get the right accent. I just went with the flow. Everyone appreciated my work and it was fantastic shooting for the film."

The film also stars Tannishtha Chatterjee, who plays the adult Meena, and Himani Shivpuri.



Sparsh Khanchandani

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Medical practice untenable without tort reform, says AAPI

AZIZ HANIFFA
IN WASHINGTON, DC

Rising malpractice premiums would make medical practice — particularly by specialists — untenable if tort reform is not instituted, the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin has said.

“While we appreciate President Barack Obama’s effort to push through health care reform, we must recognize that one of the primary sources of increasing health care costs are the lawsuits filed against physicians from aggressive trial lawyers,” Dr Vinod Shah, president, AAPI, told *India Abroad*.

“Our health care providers are tied up with lawsuits filed against doctors, nurses, assistants, medical practices and even hospitals. Litigation places a huge burden on the health care sector and this fear of litigation leads to unseen costs such as the practice of defensive medicine and settling merit-less claims simply to preserve our hard earned reputations,” he said.

“This can cause spikes in our malpractice insurance and can raise insurance premiums. We must have lawsuit reform to bring down health care costs.”

“Secondly,” he said, “Congress must pass a permanent fix to the Medicare sustainable growth rate formula. By not doing so, we are jeopardizing senior health care as physicians will not see Medicare patients with this reimbursement uncertainty.”

Thus, he asserted that “Congress must move away from temporary yearly patches and permanently fix the system they

created.”

“Lastly,” he added, “we must address the current physician shortage and include more residency slots in health care reform. With the baby boomer generation retiring, we need more doctors now and will need even more in the future.”

Shah said that any health care reform package “must include more residency slots over the next 10 years to train the doctors we will need to provide quality health care to our growing nation.”

Dr Sharad Lakhanpal, chair, Government Affairs Committee of the American College of Rheumatology, acknowledged that the bipartisan healthcare reform summit that President Obama convened was very telling in that although both parties agree that change is needed they have honest philosophical disagreements on the direction of the changes.

“I wish this debate had happened earlier,” he told *India Abroad*.

Lakhanpal said that Obama’s proposal that attempts to bridge the gap between the House and Senate bills passed last year, for all its laudable intent, faces many challenges and is quixotic.

Though the bill includes new provisions to eliminate waste, fraud and abuse in Medicare and Medicaid and tries to make insurance more affordable and makes it illegal to discriminate against Americans with pre-existing conditions, it would be difficult to implement, he said.

“The current measures in the House and the Senate are largely funded by promised Medicare cuts which may not materialize



Dr Vinod Shah

as these will be politically difficult for the Congress to enact. Therefore, there is a very real possibility that the current bills will further add to the federal budget deficits and the national debt,” he said.

He said “one way to address this will be to

eliminate or sharply reduce the tax subsidies that employers receive for offering health insurance coverage to their employees. This will also reduce or eliminate the so-called ‘Cadillac plans’ that are currently offered because their cost is subsidized.”

According to Lakhanpal, “The revenues generated from eliminating these subsidies will provide a more reliable way of financing healthcare reform.”

He said that there were also several other things that should be done if healthcare is to become a reality and said that they are missing from Obama’s plan.

“Small businesses should be allowed to combine into larger groups to get health insurance and consumers should be allowed to purchase health insurance across state lines. These measures will help reduce health costs,” he said.

Lakhanpal also echoed Shah’s sentiments regarding tort reform in reflecting the top priority of AAPI and that of physicians generally. He said it was a travesty that this issue had not been addressed and said “it has been estimated that reforming malpractice laws will save \$50 billion annually from healthcare costs.”

He pointed out that “the benefits of tort reform have been clearly demonstrated by the two largest states, namely California and Texas but unfortunately have not been taken up by Congress or the administration.”

Lakhanpal said that for any genuine healthcare reform to happen, “this needs to be done and should be part of any final legislation that is enacted.”

South Asians for Obama is now South Asians for Opportunity

AZIZ HANIFFA
IN WASHINGTON, DC

South Asians for Obama, the most successful South Asian grass-roots organization that campaigned for President Barack Obama, has now become South Asians for Opportunity.

“We like the SAFO name,” Hrishi Karthikeyan, who co-founded SAFO with Devendra ‘Dave’ Kumar, told *India Abroad*. “But since the initial objective of winning the election was achieved, we wanted to keep the organization around to continue to build others types of positive change. So, now, under South Asians for Opportunity, we are focused on more grass-roots community building, finding candidates that we could support, and really continuing to get out people and be active in the field registering voters, talking to people about issues, doing more grass-roots fund-raising,” he said.

He acknowledged that in the wake of the Democrats’ loss in Massachusetts and the earlier gubernatorial losses in Virginia and New Jersey to the Republicans makes SAFO’s work cut out, particularly since the majority of independents who constituted the base of

Obama’s support had apparently dissipated in large numbers.

Thus, he said, SAFO’s priorities were now to help regain the unprecedented momentum and grass-roots mobilization that had been put together during the presidential campaign and that now while it is essentially a case of maintaining the network and infrastructure, the agenda had to change.

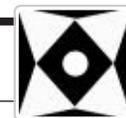
“It is still working for positive change, but doing it in a way that we didn’t think should just happen every four years. We wanted to shift the focus so that we could continue to expand opportunities not only for people of our community, but also the country at large.”

He said the protagonists of SAFO when it was founded, were still on board but noted that “it is not as high profile as it was during the presidential campaign. But we are still organizing smaller events and trying to get people behind some of these South Asian candidates and candidates who have shown interest in our community that are running in the 2010 cycle.”

He said that like the earlier body, South Asians for Opportunity was neither a non-profit organization nor



Hrishi Karthikeyan



Delegation puts education in US-India cooperation spotlight

SUMAN GUHA MOZUMDER

Under Secretary of Education Martha Kanter and Allan E Goodman, president and chief executive officer, Institute of International Education, were to lead a delegation of United States university presidents and higher education leaders to India last week to promote American higher education and enhance US-Indian educational institutional linkages.

During the weeklong visit that was to begin February 28, the delegation was to meet in Bangalore with top officials from institutions like the Indian Institute of Management and global information technology major Infosys. In Pune, it was to meet with officials at the University of Pune, which hosts the largest number of international students at any higher education institution in India, and with Symbiosis University. In New Delhi, the delegation was to meet with representatives of the Indian government, the US embassy, and the US-India Educational Foundation, known as the Fulbright Commission. In Delhi, the institutions the delegates were to meet included the Indian Institute of Technology, the Delhi University, and the Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The delegates were to participate in a plenary session at the three-day Emerging Directions in Global Education Conference, which was to bring together policy makers and global and Indian educational institutions and businesses to address issues about excellence in education, and forge forces to internationalize education. The delegation was to take part in a roundtable hosted by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry on 'US-India Partnership: Cementing Relationships through Education.'

Since 2001-2002, India has been the leading place of origin — slightly over 15 percent — of international students in the US, according to the IIE's annual *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*, supported by the State Department's Bureau of Educational and



The Columbia University library

tries are looking to each other for ideas as they seek to develop institutional partnerships.

Last month Robert Blake, assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, had said education is a central element of US-India relations. 'We expect significant new opportunities to expand our cooperation in this vital field and better harness the limitless potential of young people in both countries,' he said at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

He said India's Human Resource Development Kapil Sibal had promised that his government would introduce in Parliament a new bill to allow greater foreign participation in education in India, particularly in higher education. The new law, he said, should open up tremendous possibilities for American universities — not just traditional research and liberal arts universities, but community colleges, vocational training and distance learning programs.

During Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit in November, the two governments announced a joint expansion of the Fulbright-Nehru Scholarship Program for the exchange of students and scholars, and announced a new effort, the Obama-Singh 21st Century Knowledge Initiative, to support university partnerships and junior faculty development.

'Even without the revised legislation, universities have already started partnering with each other,' Blake had said, pointing out the University of Chicago's recent initiative to conduct joint research with a counterpart in Delhi.

The presidents and senior officials accompanying the delegation include those from Bryn Mawr College, Case Western Reserve University, Chatham University, City University of Seattle, Lehigh University, Louisiana Community and Technical College System, Miami Dade College, Michigan State University, New York Institute of Technology, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rollins College, University of Kentucky, and Washburn University.

Cultural Affairs. In 2008-2009, there were more than 103,000 international students from India studying in the US, an increase of 9 percent from the previous year.

The number of students from the US studying abroad in India has also increased rapidly in recent years, albeit from a much smaller base. In the 2007-2008 academic year, more than 3,000 students from American colleges and universities received credit for study in India — almost 20 percent more than the previous year.

Encouraged, colleges and universities from both coun-

Missouri governor appoints Sreenu Dandamundi to administrative tribunal



Sreenu Dandamundi

GEORGE JOSEPH

Missouri governor Jay Nixon has appointed attorney and Democratic Party leader Sreenivasa Rao "Sreenu" Dandamundi to the Administrative Hearing Commission for a

six-year term. Dandamundi, a resident of Town and Country, Missouri, currently serves as general counsel for the State Board of Registration for the Healing Arts, a position he has held since 2006.

'I appreciate having such a quality candidate for this position, and Sreenu will bring valuable experience and diversity to the commission,' governor Nixon said in a statement.

The state senate has to confirm his appointment.

The Administrative Hearing Commission is a neutral, independent, administrative tribunal. Some of its cases are appeals from decisions of other state agencies. Others are cases that an agency or private person starts at the commission. The commission has jurisdiction in over 100 statutorily specified matters. The commission's decisions are subject to judicial review.

Dandamundi was a delegate for Barack Obama from Missouri at the Democratic Convention in 2008. In 2004, Dandamundi contested in the Democratic Primary for the Missouri House of Representatives.

'I'm a Democrat because the party offers equal treatment under the law and dignity to religious minorities,' he said then.

He resigned as assistant attorney general

to contest the election. He was a staunch supporter of Dick Gephardt, Democratic candidate for president in the 2004 election.

Dandamundi's family is connected to several political leaders in India. He arrived in the US at age 3 from Andhra Pradesh, and has worked with political groups since he was 17.

'I've been a part of Democratic cam-

paings since 1990,' he said.

Dandamundi, who graduated from the University of Illinois in 1993, received an MA in International Affairs from American University in 1998. He completed law school at Washington University in 2001.

His father Babu Rajendra Prasad Dandamundi is a doctor, mother Jhansy a homemaker.

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Cops kill man armed with frying pan

A CORRESPONDENT

The shooting and killing of an emotionally disturbed man armed with just a frying pan by the New York police last month has attracted little attention outside the blogosphere.

Four police officers reached the second floor of building number 3055 on Third Avenue, near 156th Street in the Melrose section, around 11 pm after one Balbir Singh alerted them that he had not heard from his mother Kuan Balbir. The police knocked on the door; it was not opened. Donovan Howell, the building's superintendent, tried a spare key, but the door was chain-locked from inside. Through the opening, the officers saw Satnam

Singh, 32, standing over his mother, who was covered in blood and sitting on a couch, the police said, and he kept hitting her with a frying pan, *The New York Times* reported.

The officers broke the door down and ordered Singh to drop the pan. He refused and raised the pan again to strike his mother. At that point Officer Brian McCarthy fired twice from 15 feet away, hitting Singh, the *Daily News* reported, quoting a police source. Despite being badly wounded, Singh continued to pound his helpless mother with the pan, according to Howell. Singh then moved toward the policemen, and McCarthy fired two more shots, hitting Singh in the torso, according to the report. The ser-

geant in the team, a 17-year veteran, then fired a single shot at Singh, who collapsed and died.

A New York Police Department spokesperson and the Bronx District Attorney's office informed *India Abroad* that no investigation is going on against the police officers involved in the incident. Deputy Commissioner Paul Browne said McCarthy and the sergeant, both from the 40th Precinct, had no choice but to use deadly force. 'The woman appeared to be in imminent danger of death,' he said.

Balbir, 61, was taken to the Lincoln Medical Center with multiple skull fractures and bleeding of the brain. Reports said her condition is stable. The Sikh

organizations and *gurdwaras* in New York could not provide details about the family. Neighbors told the police that Singh had a history of mental problem. He seemed to have suffered from bipolar disease.

A Melrose blogger wrote, 'not sure how a man with a frying pan should have been killed by the cops... perhaps a shot to the leg to disable him would have been more appropriate? Is this another case of police brutality? According to NY1, though the NYPD is currently investigating the incident, an independent investigation might be a better route considering that last year too police officers from the same 40th Precinct brutalized a man who was already subdued.'

South Asians for Obama is South Asians for Opportunity



President Obama greets Indian Americans on Diwali

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would it evolve into a political action committee.

"It is totally grass-roots," he said, "SAFO is not an established legal entity. Earlier, all we did was on behalf of the Obama campaign, and now it is on behalf of candidates in our community. So, in terms of raising money, it is not like PACs, where the money is written to the PAC and then the PAC spends it on whichever candidate they want."

"If there is a candidate of your choice, what we do is disseminate information about that candidate so that people can attend their fundraisers and urge them to support them and directly contribute at these events or later," he explained.

Karthikeyan acknowledged that in some ways it would be a sort of lobbying organization, "but in a grassroots way. Not in the way of a traditional lobbying group."

Karthikeyan said the large network of chapters across the country that SAFO built during the campaign had essentially disbanded after achieving the specific purpose of electing Obama, but that in major cities like New York, Washington, DC, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, "a lot of our active ones are still around."

He said in many ways

the new model was similar to Obama's campaign manager David Plouffe's Organizing for America, transitioned from the erstwhile Obama for America.

"That is a good model," Karthikeyan said. "We are much more limited in scope, but we had the same idea of continuing to harness that grassroots power so that it is not just about working for one particular election, but rather it is about continuing to advance these issues."

And, much of it, he said, would continue through social networking sites.

Last week, the new transformed SAFO was busy inviting people to participate in a live White House video chat with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Domestic Policy Adviser Melody Barnes.

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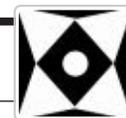
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Community launches campaign for Krishnamoorthi as Illinois Lt Guv

SUMAN GUHA MOZUMDER

The Indian-American community in Illinois has launched a grassroots campaign for Raja Krishnamoorthi for his selection by the State Democratic Party in the November ballot as Governor Pat Quinn's running mate and the party nominee for lieutenant governor.

Krishnamoorthi, who lost in the party primary for state comptroller last month, was endorsed by the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Peoria Journal Star*, and *Kankakee City News* during the previous campaign. He lost the race with one percent of vote, bagging 45.7 percent against State Rep. David Miller's 46.7 percent.

The current campaign spearheaded by the Indo-American Democratic Organization

has so far secured more than 2,000 signatures on a petition to select Krishnamoorthi and hopes to gather at least 10,000 supporting his selection. They plan to present the petition Gov Quinn, Illinois House Speaker Michael J Madigan, Illinois Senate president John Cullerton and the members of the Illinois Democratic Party State Central Committee.

'I have never seen such an outpouring of interest,' said Ranjit Ganguly, IADO board member and former president, at a press conference held on Devon Avenue to announce the gathering of signatures.

'No one is better qualified than Raja,' said Sainath Reddivary, IADO secretary. Others said that the Asian American community would give unprecedented financial support to Krishnamoorthi.

'We have worked hard for Democratic

Candidates for years, knocked on doors and raised millions. It is time the Democratic Party puts an Asian American on the state ticket,' said Pramod Shah, former IADO President and a Skokie Trustee.

'The reason for this enthusiasm is that a lot of people here in Illinois never thought I will get so close to the race for state comptroller. They now feel that an Indian American should be on the ballot,' Krishnamoorthi told *India Abroad*. 'You know what they are telling me — you might have lost by a whisker, but you have won friends by a landslide,' Krishnamoorthi, a former Illinois deputy state treasurer said.

The position for Illinois lieutenant governor is vacant after nominee Scott Lee Cohen resigned following controversy about his personal life. Krishnamoorthi showed interest in the position after Cohen resigned.

'But this campaign is not something I have orchestrated. I think people here in Illinois like the issues that I brought to the forefront — like more openness and transparency in the government and they think that I can still put them to the front burner in the next campaign,' Krishnamoorthi said.

But even if the community manage to collect 10,000 signatures for Krishnamoorthi and send the petition to the decision-makers, at this point it is doubtful if he will make the cut.

'What is going on now is a game of insiders within the party and no one is sure if Raja will ultimately be selected for the spot,' sources told *India Abroad*.

The Democratic State Central Committee will nominate a replacement for Cohen this month. The candidate will be elected in November.

Right-wing campaign demands Rashad Hussain's ouster

◀ Page A1

the United States has pursued with Muslims around the world since President Obama's speech in Cairo last June."

Obama, said, 'Rashad has played a key role in developing the partnerships I called for in Cairo. And as a *hafiz* of the Quran, he is a respected member of the American Muslim community, and I thank him for carrying forward this important work.'

A *hafiz* is one who has memorized the holy Islamic text.

According to administration sources, Hussain was among the White House staffers who had contributed significant inputs into Obama's Cairo speech including several quotes from the Quran, which went down very well in the Islamic world.

The controversy over Hussain's 2004 remarks erupted when Politico.com reported about it recently. After denying the charges for months, Al-Arian finally pleaded guilty for one count of "aiding a terrorist organization" and was sentenced to 57 months in prison.

After Politico.com showed a video of Hussain criticizing the Bush administration, Hussain put out a statement admitting that he "made statements on that panel that I now recognize were ill-conceived or not well formulated."

"As a law student six years ago," he said in his statement, "I spoke on the topic of civil liberties on a panel during which I responded to comments made about the Al-Arian case by Laila Al-Arian, who was visibly saddened by the charges against her father."

Hussain said that "I made clear at the time that I was not commenting on the allegations themselves," and added that as "the judicial process has since concluded," he had "full faith in its outcome."

Asked if the White House had been misled about Hussain's background and if it still maintained confidence in Hussain as a *Special Envoy* to the OIC, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs, said, "This is an individual that has written extensively on why some have used religious devices like the Quran to justify (*acts of terrorism*), and why that is absolutely wrong, and has garnered supported from both the left and right. So, we obviously have confidence."



Rashad Hussain

Thomas in his column had said that Obama's appointment of Hussain "should be of serious concern to Congress and the American public."

"Especially because Hussain, a devout Muslim, has a history of participating in events connected with the Muslim Brotherhood, which according to the *Chicago Tribune*, is 'the world's most influential Islamic fundamental group' whose goal is to create Muslim states throughout the world."

Thomas noted that "the president proudly announced that Hussain is a *hafiz*, but he did not spell out what qualifies Hussain to meet with foreign leaders at a diplomatic level in a role that approximates that of an ambassador."

"It is unsettling to see someone with Hussain's background representing the United States to nations that may harbor or fund terrorists and want to destroy Israel and America."

"It is unfortunate that the US Senate is not required to confirm special envoys," he added, and exhorted that "Hussain should be asked about his ideology and associations. If he is to represent America, he should represent what America stands for and not a personal ideological or religious agenda that is not just un-American, but

anti-American."

The Examiner, taking the cue from Thomas' column, said in an editorial, 'Put aside the uproar that would have ensued had Bush selected for the Court of St James someone because he had memorized the Anglican Church's Book of Common Prayer.'

'The question for Obama is this: How can Hussain be a forceful advocate to OIC and other international forums on behalf of individual rights that are most brutally and routinely suppressed by Islamic regimes like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran? Or is this no longer a topic American diplomats are allowed to bring up on the world stage?'

Professor Sayyid Syeed, co-founder of the Islamic Society of North America, responding to the campaign, told *India Abroad*, "Obama's election was a landmark victory of the evolution of a democratic society where color, status and creed should not be a criterion in putting people in positions of power and authority."

"The appointment of Rashad has broken another barrier — the religious barrier, particularly bigotry against Islam," he said. "Cal Thomas could not control himself and came out with a column to attack Rashad's appointment."

"It is quite revealing to see how the mind of these religious bigots work — how closed they are to the beauty of meritocracy. It's hard for them to realize how the selection of a young Muslim, qualified and distinguished, could contribute not only to raising our standards of merit and excellence, but to help in the fight against the hate and revulsion against America."

Kaleem Kawaja, of the Association of Indian Muslims in America, told *India Abroad* that the Thomas column and the *Examiner* editorial are "a grotesque distortion of facts about Rashad."

"Rashad Hussain has never had any association with the Islamic Brotherhood," Kawaja, an engineer with NASA said. "As to his belief in Shariat laws, it should be understood that the genuine Shariat laws are not rigid; indeed they are flexible and accommodating of the circumstances and ask Muslims to interpret these laws with changed circumstances."

"It is irresponsible to say that just because Rashad Hussain is an observant Muslim, he is a radical Muslim. In today's society where freedoms are being abused and exploited by some people to justify their ends, it is important to have religious guidance in your life. Because religion per se teaches you to think of the consequences of your actions and to understand that God abhors anyone taking law in your hands, creating mayhem or hurting anyone."

Kawaja said that critics should realize that "President Obama's selection of a Muslim lawyer-scholar to conduct outreach to the global Muslim community sends a powerful message that the US — the world's only superpower — is interested in resolving issues by peaceful dialogue and not with gunboat diplomacy."

WE, AS ASIAN AMERICANS AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS, CAN REALLY CONTRIBUTE TO REBUILDING THIS ECONOMY



Kiran Ahuja

The executive director of the White House Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islanders speaks to **Aziz Haniffa**

Kiran Ahuja, 37, executive director, White House Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islanders, says she hopes to institutionalize the initiative and build strong partnerships between the government and community groups. Many community activists and analysts believe her position could impact directly on the lives of Indian Americans and the greater Asian American community. In her first exclusive interview after her appointment to this position — that many in the community believe could have a much more significant effect than any other Indian-American appointment made by Obama thus far — Ahuja said she had already been in consultations with community leaders and activists so that a strategic plan can be crafted that would “really address the needs of the community.”

Ahuja — till recently the founding executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum — was a civil rights lawyer with the Department of Justice in the Clinton administration. Before her stint in Washington,

IN THE SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITY, IT'S ISSUES AROUND CIVIL RIGHTS AND DISCRIMINATION AND RACIAL PROFILING THAT ARE OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

DC, Ahuja, an alumna of Spellman College and the University of Georgia Law School, used to live in Tampa, Florida, where she taught women's studies as an adjunct faculty member of the University of South Florida. During the Obama presidential campaign, she led the grass-roots effort in the battleground state of Florida, with her Tampa home being the base for hundreds of volunteers.

What was your first reaction when you were tapped for the job? The position seems right up your street in terms of your track record of community activism?

I was extremely honored and excited about the opportunity. I was familiar with the initiative and the commission during the Clinton administration. I was then working in the government with the Department of Justice. So, we were all very excited, and I think also the prospect of working in this administration and for the President who has expanded the commission back to its broad mandate is very exciting as well.

Do you consider it your dream job? Not just because of its expanded mandate but also because it fits in with the type of work and activism that you've been involved in for the past several years? Because here you have the opportunity to kind of put it all together because President Obama's personal imprimatur is on it in restoring it to what it was envisaged to be by then President Clinton and then some?

Most definitely. I do really think it is a culmination of everything that I've been doing and the culmination of being in government but also working in the nonprofit sector and advocacy communities, and so, having a strong connection to those groups and those individuals. But at the same time, realizing that it really has to be a strong partnership between government and between the community and building those relationships not only with the various sectors of government, but also between these government agencies and the community. So, it's a real opportunity and I am again very privileged. As far as a dream job, it's certainly up there. Nowadays in our generation, we tend to...we move around quite a bit. But, I would like to be here for definitely the long term because that's what's important also. Because if you think about the initiative during the Clinton administration, it only had a life of about a year-and-a-half and then it changed its focus [*during the Bush administration*]. So, now, here's a real opportunity for the long haul to really institutionalize the initiative. That's really my hope.

What are going to be the major priorities of your agenda?

The executive order spells out a very broad mandate. It's pretty ambitious, which is improving the quality of life for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. So, a lot of that will be set in place once we have the commission in place. We really want it to be a strong partnership with the commissioners. Many of them [*who are under consideration*] have worked in the community for many, many years. So, they should really know how these issues play out in everyday lives of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. But in terms of priorities, some are crosscutting — like data collection, language access, cultural competence, etc, and others like health disparities, health-care access/reform, small business/economy, education, civil rights, immigration, community development/housing, among others. There are so many issues that impact the community. We are hoping that for the [*government*] agencies, that they pick to or three priorities that they think are important to really make a significant impact — ideas around improving access to resources. A lot of them have been doing a lot of work already but looking to see what are those key programs — where if there was a little more effort to reach out to the

Asian American and Pacific Islander community or to craft or develop a program that can really address the needs of the community. In the past, we had these really extensive reports with a lot of information. While that's valuable, often times you can get caught up in the details — almost buried in the details. So, it's important for them to prioritize. And we really are talking to the community leaders and saying, ‘If you can have that one big sort of act of the agency... or what you think would really be instrumental if they institute this program or expanded this program in your community, what would it be?’

Always, some of the crosscutting issues have been around data collection — because that's a huge piece for the community. One of the issues that was brought to the forefront during the Clinton administration was around health disparities. Of course, the priority for the administration is around jobs and the economy and small businesses. Asian Americans — a significant number of them — are self employed and also own small businesses. We, as Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, can really contribute to rebuilding this economy because we have some of the highest numbers [*of small businesses*] in the country percentage-wise, considering we are 5 percent of the United States population. Health care is a key piece for the administration but also for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and so is language access. It's critical to be able to access this information, especially because we do have a significant portion of our community who are limited-English-proficient. So, these are sort of the number of issues that we will be helping to put together as a strategic plan — laying out for the community and for the agencies in terms of key priorities and what are the outcomes, what will be the indicators of success because at the end of the day, we need to be able to measure that success.

I believe the advisory board — the commission — maybe expanded to 20 from the original 15. Will you have significant input into who these commissioners will be? Have you been sounding out some of the potential candidates?

Yes. We are in the midst right now of putting that list together and a number of people will be involved in making that selection. We've had an application process for a couple of months now where we have been reaching out to community members and individuals to self-nominate or to nominate other individuals to really make it an open process. So that if you are interested and you want to serve the President and this administration, that you have the means to do so, that here's an opportunity — and we are very humbled by the response. It's been a very overwhelming response.

Would you say there is a very strong likelihood that maybe at least two or three Indian Americans would be on the board? In previous commissions — both in the Clinton administration and the Bush administration — there were at least two Indians Americans on the advisory board.

We're trying to be mindful of the ethnic diversity of our community — and the South Asians are a significant part of the Asian American community — but I can't state numbers. That is very much on the minds of all of us as we think about not only the South Asian community but if you think about the Southeast Asian community, the Pacific Islander community, all of these communities, you know that we all want to be part of the large Asian American and Pacific Islander community. The difficulty or the challenge is that even within the South Asian community, there are those complexities and the diversity, and so... you know we have 20 commissioners and we wish we could have 50 in order

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to meet just the level of expertise and accomplishments within our communities! Of course, the 20 doesn't do justice... but in order to manage everyone and to bring people together and be able to move forward, we have to put a number on it.

I know you've already met with South Asian activists like Deepa Iyer [*executive director, South Asian Americans Leading Together*] and also been briefed by former commission staffers like Parag Mehta and others. And, of course, there's no denying that the South Asian community — as you said — is so complex and diverse. But their issues and concerns are quite different from the other ethnic communities like the Southeast Asian community. So, are these issues and concerns of each of these ethnic communities something you will zero in on their own merits?

Definitely. That's a very important question. There is going to be specific issues that are going to be of particular concern to one community over another. I mean [*for example*] the South East Asian community has significant poverty rates, and so, how are we going to be addressing these issues. Even within the South Asian community, we are quite diverse economically, though that doesn't receive as much attention when you think about the South Asian immigrant community in New York or Los Angeles — the Indian, Bangladeshi communities, the economic disparities. We don't all come as highly-trained professionals... And, even those of us who do come highly trained, sometimes those opportunities aren't there. There are roadblocks depending on what degree you have, and what you can qualify for. And so, we face those challenges. So, it's an understanding within the South Asian community — the economic diversity and the religious diversity. And, this is from my background of understanding the community and I bring that. At the same time, I am also cognizant let's say, that I am not from the Pacific Islander community, and so I need to have someone on staff or working closely to say, 'OK, what are specifically those issues that impact that community around health and environment?' And, similarly, in the South Asian community, it's issues around civil rights and discrimination and racial profiling that are of particular concern to our community. So, I do think for some communities, certain issues will rise to the top and it is about understanding that we have to be inclusive, that we have to have to build that extra piece. That's why we want a diverse staff and we want a diverse commission because they will bring those perspectives to the table, and say, 'Let's not forget about this community or this issue that is so critically important.' That's why we've spent so much time thinking through who the commissioners will be and who the staff will be — because their backgrounds, their personal experiences, are so critical. We have a President who comes from a diverse background, who's had



A candy store owner in New York

PARESH GANDHI



A supporter of the health care reform holds a sign outside a health care town hall meeting with Congressman Kendrick Meeks (R-FL) in Miami, Florida, September 3, 2009

CARLOS BARRIA / REUTERS

campaign and what he's trying to do, despite the defeats the Democrats have suffered in the gubernatorial races in Virginia and New Jersey and the political tsunami in Massachusetts where the Democrats lost the Senate seat that was held by Senator Ted Kennedy for four decades — losses some argue is a referendum on Obama?

I absolutely do. I believe people are still working very hard, are still committed, and that you always in politics, you are going to have challenges along the way. It's not going to be smooth sailing and the President made that very clear that it wasn't going to be easy. And, so, I believe people are committed for the long haul and I believe the American people want change. They want to see a government that is being responsive to their needs and that will speak loud and clear whether again...you cannot project sort of the future in the elections, but I do think that the

international experiences, and so, he understood why it's important to expand the commission from 15 to 20.

Are you as confident as you were during the campaign now that the President is one year into his tenure, about his commitment to his vision that he articulated during the

need for health-care reform, for reducing unemployment, for building the economy back up, all those things are critical and that's what drives the President. And this administration is going to hold true to that and be responsive to the people.

NRIAMERICA.COM

The Website For The Indian Community In The USA & Canada

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Of the 36 bills listed for introduction in the ongoing session of the Indian Parliament, the move to introduce the Nuclear Liability Bill, a pre-condition for the entry of American companies in the Indian civil nuclear sector, is the most significant. Civil society groups and opposition parties are alarmed at the swiftness with which the bill is being introduced to facilitate the entry of American nuclear power companies in India.

One of the biggest myths being propagated is that nuclear cooperation with the United States is the answer to India's energy crisis, which in any case would not see the light of the day before 2016. Also the Indian Parliament and citizens have been kept in the dark about the cost of electricity from foreign-built nuclear power reactors. Unmindful of the fact that all the countries producing nuclear energy are facing a crisis in the management of nuclear wastes, India is taking the same route, that too with a plan of 25,000 megawatt by 2020.

In an interview with E G Weymouth, editor-at-large, *Newsweek*, November 16, 2009, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said, 'We had a watershed and landmark agreement with the US on nuclear cooperation. We would like to operationalize it and ensure that the objectives for the nuclear deal are realized in full merit. My sincere hope is that we can persuade the US administration to be more liberal when it comes to transfer of dual-use technologies to us. Now that we are strategic partners, these restrictions make no sense. India has an impeccable record of not participating in any proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. So, that is my number one concern.'

This was in reference to the consent agreement that the US president would have to sign and send to the Congress.

Responding to a question about the need for the Indian Parliament to pass a liability agreement in the matter of nuclear cooperation with the US, the prime minister said, 'We will do that. Our cabinet will be taking a decision. I do not see any difficulties in honoring our commitments.'

While the prime minister was asked about the role of the Indian Parliament, he appears to have highlighted the federal cabinet.

On October 1, 2008, the Nuclear Cooperation Approval and Non-Proliferation Enhancement Act came into effect after it

was passed by the US Senate. While the role of the US legislature is quite manifest, the Indian Parliament has not been allowed any role to play, not even to examine the deal's provisions. Now, the US government wants the Indian legislature to pass a special law to provide foreign companies with liability protection in case of nuclear accidents. This is being done because private American nuclear companies are demanding it. So far in India, the nuclear companies, quite like in France and Russia, are



GOPAL
KRISHNA

state-owned.

The proposed Civil Liability for Nuclear Damages Bill, to be introduced in the current Parliament session, is an exercise to provide state subsidy to foreign-nuclear reactor builders from the onus of the financial consequences of nuclear disasters, accidents and incidents by shifting the onus for accident liability from the foreign builders to the Indian state and citizens.

The Three Mile Island nuclear plant accident in Pennsylvania led to 14 years of clean-up, costing \$1 billion. American

interests are seeking to avoid open-market competition. The US assumes liability for any nuclear catastrophic damages from an accident only above the \$10.5-billion figure that is inflation-adjusted every five years and thus variable, but it denies India even that relief which it provides to its own companies. The bill must be revisited in the light of the international nuclear accidents world over before it is even tabled in Parliament.

'If there were no cap and no suitable legislation insurance in place, then we wouldn't be in the nuclear industry,' Peter Mason, president and chief executive, GE-Hitachi Nuclear Energy, Canada, explained to the Parliamentary Standing Committee of the Canadian House of Commons on Natural Resources that is dealing with Bill C-20, their Nuclear Liability and Compensation Act, November 2009.

The proposal of the Congress party-led United Progressive Alliance government's Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Bill, 2009, is ridden with glaring loopholes and booby traps because it insulates nuclear energy companies from punitive legal consequences. The bill seems to pretend the non-existence of Report of the US President's Commission on The Accident at Three Mile Island that happened in 1979.

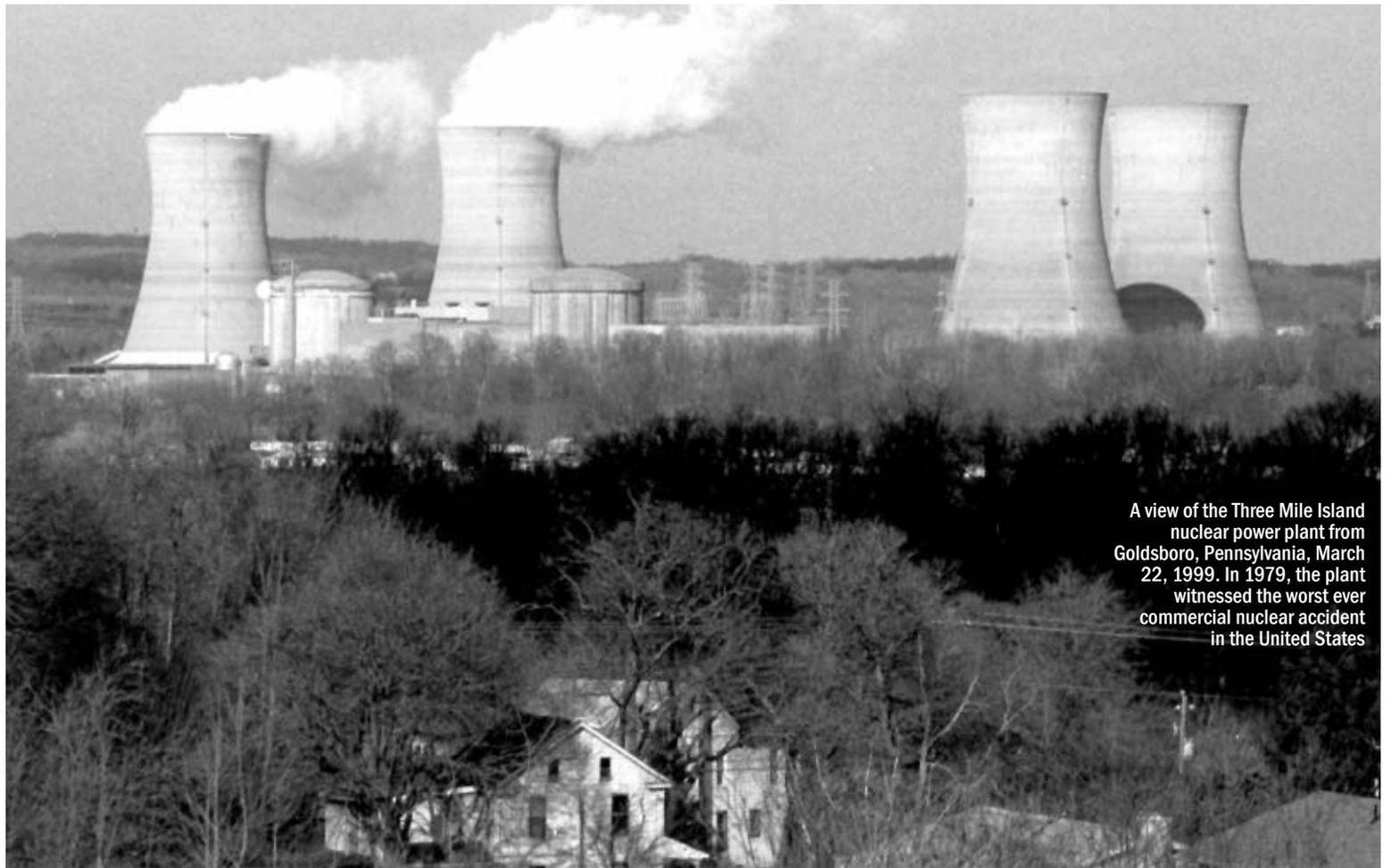
To begin with it should be renamed as

Liability from Nuclear Damage Bill and it must explicitly inform Parliament and the citizens what lessons from the report have been incorporated in the bill.

Mere civil liability is totally unacceptable because clearly it has not factored in all the nuclear accidents that have happened in India and the world. Most importantly, before a bill of this nature is brought in, the federal government must come out with a white paper on the status of relief to radioactive radiation victims and the liability therein with regard to existing facilities. The Bill must include mining sites of radioactive minerals like uranium in its definition of nuclear facility.

The federal cabinet cleared the text of The Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Bill on November 19, 2009, for introduction in Parliament. The passage of the Nuclear Liability Bill will allow India to join the international convention on civil liability for nuclear damage. So far, this is not in public domain.

While placing a cap on the compensation to be paid in the case of an accident at a nuclear site, the proposed legislation puts the responsibility for paying this compensation on the operator and not the suppliers or foreign companies installing the reactors in India as has been demanded by multinational corporations like Union Carbide Company and Dow Chemicals Company. This provision is not in public interest. Nuclear power companies in general and US nuclear companies like GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy, Westinghouse and Babcock & Wilcox intend to invest in India only if they are provided anticipatory bail for their legal liability in case of nuclear accidents. US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake informed a US House committee: 'We are hoping to see action on nuclear liability legislation that would reduce liability



A view of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant from Goldsboro, Pennsylvania, March 22, 1999. In 1979, the plant witnessed the worst ever commercial nuclear accident in the United States

REUTERS

A disaster of nuclear proportions



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for American companies and allow them to invest in India..."

The US nuclear industry is addicted to special laws made by the US government that limit their liability from nuclear radiation accidents. It wishes to be operated under the law that has been shaped by it.

It has been noted that US companies who are part of a US commercial nuclear mission to India, organized jointly by the Nuclear Energy Institute and the US India Business Council, have informed the media that they are satisfied with the nature of the Bill and are in active discussion with the Nuclear Power Corporation, Tata Power, GMR, Jindal, National Thermal Power Corporation and Larsen & Toubro to explore business potential. Clearly, the US nuclear companies have seen the bill (*may have drafted it as well*), which has not even been tabled in the Indian Parliament.

Notably, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry's 25-member Working Group on Civil Nuclear Energy-2009 under the Chairmanship of Dr S K Jain, chairman and managing director, Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd came out with a 57-page report on the proposed bill.

The FICCI report has an annexure about 'Domestic Legislation Dealing with Civil Nuclear Liability' wherein it states, 'As a natural corollary to the liberalization of the nuclear sector in India, the government of India is mooted the idea of a CNL bill. Aligning to any international CNL treaty would involve the enactment of a domestic CNL legislation with appropriate provisions. There being no explicit statute or legislation in India, either creating or limiting liability of persons engaged in nuclear installations till now, liability would stand determined by courts, pursuant to actions in tort.'

FICCI's working group on nuclear energy suggests that the directions and observations of the Indian supreme court should serve as the object and purpose for enacting such CNL legislation. This entails the basis for damages in case of leakages and accident should be statutorily fixed, taking into consideration the nature of damages inflicted, the consequences thereof and the ability and capacity of the parties to pay. A law should be enacted to ensure immediate relief to victims by providing for a constitution of tribunals regulated by special procedure for determining compensation to victims of industrial disasters or accident. The law should also provide for interim relief to victims during the pendency of proceedings. The law should provide for the establishment of a statutory 'Industrial Disaster Fund', contributions to which may be made by the government and industries, whether they are of transnational corporations or domestic undertakings, public or private. The Public Liability Insurance Act has been constituted pursuant to this, but it excludes damage from accidents caused by radioactivity.

In the US, liability for nuclear accidents is set at \$10 billion, while in Japan the cap will be doubled next year to roughly \$1.47 billion. Whether a nuclear accident is a \$650-million event or a multi-billion dollar catastrophe is determined by the direction and speed of the wind that carries the radioactive radiation. Currently, Canada is seized with a Nuclear Liability and Compensation Act wherein the bill raises the cap on liability to \$650 million from the \$75 million limit established in 1976. The damage from Chernobyl is estimated at some \$250 billion. In Germany, there is no cap on nuclear liability, but an operator must be able to cover at least \$4 billion, but the civil liability is estimated at Euro 2,000-5,000 billion. The international conventions that provide for liability regime also favor the industry and not the possible victims and provide for



A crane lifts a nearly 200 ton nuclear reactor safety vessel at the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research, Kalpakkam, about 48 miles from Chennai, June 24, 2008. The reactor is a 500 MW prototype fast breeder and it will begin commercial production of nuclear power by 2011

BABU/REUTERS

indemnity to the global nuclear industry: the Paris Convention (1960), the Vienna Convention revised in 1997 and the Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage.

Another worrying thing about the new bill is that the liability is likely to shift from manufacturer to operator.

FICCI's suggestions for 'Domestic legislation dealing with CNL' may incorporate the following: single point liability for the operator of the nuclear installation, liability of non-operators transferred to the operator, exceptions to liability to include standard force-major provisions with specific emphasis on terrorist and anti-social activities, capping of liabilities according to internationally adhered benchmarks may be adopted with the government prescribing the threshold limit, prescribed liability for the plant must be benchmarked to the risk-magnitude of the installation.

The CSC limits the compensation payable by the operators of nuclear plants for any accidents or damage to \$450 million, leaving the responsibility for the rest to national governments almost in the range of compensation paid to the victims of Bhopal's industrial disaster (\$470 million) wherein victims were turned from citizens into subjects of the ruling regime.

It is now well known that 'hazardous corporations' are a fit case for the application of the principle of absolute liability and multinational enterprise liability because they

are neither restricted by national boundaries nor effectively controlled by international law because of their complex corporate structure with networks of subsidiaries and decisions which make it exceedingly difficult or even impossible to pinpoint responsibility for the damage caused by the enterprise. They operate through a neatly-designed network of interlocking directors, a common operating system, global distribution and marketing systems, design development and technology worldwide, financial and other controls and highly-sophisticated and technologically-capable machines and working staff. Consequently, victims of such daily actions are unable to identify which unit of the enterprise caused the harm. Therefore, faults by even a local subsidiary must be attributed to the parent company because their duty too is non-delegable.

Notably, the Indian supreme court also held that the act only deals with civil liability and as such does not curtail or affect rights in respect to criminal liability. The Civil Liability from Nuclear Damages Bill must be redrafted to include both criminal liabilities and deterrent civil liabilities.

The Defense Research and Development Canada, Canadian Department of Defense, has suggested that a severe nuclear accident results in wide contamination. The research looked at the impact of a relatively small dirty bomb going off in downtown Toronto. It estimated that cleaning up the contamination, using the most stringent standards could cost up to \$250 billion, and that the economic toll could reach \$23.5 billion. The research was commissioned in 2007. No such research has been commissioned in India.

The institutional accountability for Bhopal and Kaiga-like disasters rests with the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs and the Civil Liability from Nuclear Damages Bill shows that it has not learnt any lessons because it has not been made accountable for its past lapses.

Private companies who want to do business with India have been seeking a liability law that protects their nuclear energy business at any cost. Foreign companies wanting to supply nuclear reactors and other equipment have been pressing India for the speedy passage of this crucial Bill. The Indian government is

required to make some changes in its Atomic Energy Act as well. In such a context, the report of the investigative commission appointed by the then US President Jimmy Carter immediately following the accident must be studied by the drafters of Green Tribunal Bill and the Civil Nuclear Liability Bill. Carter had appointed a 12-member commission, which submitted its report on the accident at Three Mile Island in October 1979. It is advisable to learn from the blunders of the past.

The Indian 'Nuclear Liability Bill' must take note of the environmental hazards from the nuclear facilities and potential nuclear accidents and incorporate stringent criminal and civil liability provisions, taking lessons from the worst accidents at civilian nuclear power plants – the Three Mile Island disaster on March 28, 1979, in US and the Chernobyl disaster, a nuclear reactor accident that occurred on April 26, 1986, at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine. This nuclear accident led to a cessation of new nuclear plant construction in the US.

Before passing the bill, an independent and credible multi-disciplinary commission should be constituted with immediate effect to ascertain the potential consequences of nuclear accidents or 'incidents' and the liability arising out of it.

Gopal Krishna is a New Delhi-based environmental activist and lawyer.

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THE WEEK THAT WAS

India Abroad
March 12, 2010

Pravin Mahajan passes away

Pravin Mahajan, the brother of slain Bharatiya Janata Party leader Pramod Mahajan, who was suffering from brain haemorrhage, passed away March 3. Pravin, 50, had slipped into coma after a brain haemorrhage in December.

He was serving a life term for the murder of his brother in 2006 and was released on a 14-day parole on medical grounds November 27. He suffered a brain haemorrhage during this period and remained in intensive care ever since.

He is survived by his wife and two kids.

Key Maoist leader arrested

The West Bengal Police arrested Venkateshwar Reddy, a top Maoist leader, in Kolkata March 2. This is the first-ever arrest of a Maoist military unit member. Also known as Telugu Deepak, Reddy is the chief of the Maoists' military operations across Bihar, Orissa and Jharkhand.

He is believed to be the mastermind of the ambush at the Shilda police camp last month where the Maoists gunned down 24 security personnel.

His arrest, however, confirmed the establishment's worst fear — that the Maoists had managed to infiltrate even the state capital.

The arrest came about a week after an

The building on top of which the Indian Navy's aircraft crashed in Hyderabad, March 3



SNAPS INDIA

Indian Navy plane crashes into building, 3 dead

A trainer aircraft of the Indian Navy crashed into a two-storied building during an air show in Hyderabad March 3, killing the two pilots and a civilian on the ground.

The aircraft, an HJT-16 Kiran Mk2 trainer was part of the aerobatics team, Sagar Pawan. Thousands of people were enjoying the spectacle in the heart of the city when disaster struck, sending thick clouds of smoke into the air. The aircraft was unable to pull up from a dive and went into a spiral as the planes were breaking away from the formation and going in different directions. It crashed into mobile phone towers on top of the building.

In the wake of the crash, the Indian Navy has grounded its entire fleet of Kiran aircraft.

alleged ceasefire offer from Maoist leader Kishenji. Home Minister P Chidambaram called Kishenji's cease-fire offer bizarre, saying that barely three hours after the so-called offer, they had attacked policemen in West Bengal. In the seven days since then, there have been 18 significant attacks in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. They also beheaded another policeman in Munger, Bihar, March 2.

MF Husain welcome back in India: Chidambaram

Days after Qatar gave citizenship to renowned painter MF Husain, New Delhi March 2 said it would be very happy to see the eminent painter return to India and that it would give him adequate security. 'We would be very happy if MF Husain returns to India,' Home Minister P Chidambaram said.

But breaking his silence for the first time after Qatar's offer, Husain said, 'How can I trust the leaders who had refused to protect me?'

'India is my motherland, I can never hate my motherland. I love India, but she rejected me,' Husain was quoted in an interview to a Malayalam daily. He added that he was 'happy in Qatar where he enjoys complete freedom.'

Tharoor stirs up new controversy with remarks on Saudi

Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor got into trouble yet again February 28, while accompanying Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on a visit to Saudi Arabia, he said Saudi Arabia could play the role of an 'interlocutor' in talks between India and Pakistan, which were restarted last week. 'We feel that Saudi Arabia of course has a long and close relationship with Pakistan, but that makes Saudi Arabia even a more valuable interlocutor for us,' he said.

The comment attracted the ire of the Congress party leadership, with general secretary Janardan Dwivedi reportedly warning Tharoor that his controversial statements were proving to be an embarrassment for both the party and the government.

Police complaint against Taslima for row over article

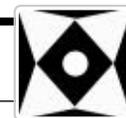
The intelligence wing of the Bengaluru police filed a complaint against Bangaldeshi writer Taslima Nasreen in connection with an article on burqa that appeared in a Kannada daily and led to rioting in parts of Karnataka March 1.

The complaint suggests Nasreen was



B MATHUR/REUTERS

Policemen use a water cannon to disperse activists of India's opposition Bharatiya Janata Party during a protest against the hike in motor fuel prices in New Delhi, March 2. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh ruled out rolling back the price hike despite pressure from his allies, saying populist policies would hurt the economy in the long term. When Parliament resumed after a four-day break March 3, the Lok Sabha had to be adjourned as the opposition created an uproar



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indirectly responsible for the riots that killed two people. It said the motive behind the article was to create a controversy. It also blamed an Urdu daily, which attempted to counter the article, for allegedly provoking people to go on a rampage. The complaint also names the newspaper's editor, publisher and a reporter, who is believed to have translated the article.

However, Nasreen has denied writing the article.

Meanwhile, violent protests spread to Mangalore, where the offices of the newspaper which published it was attacked March 2. However, the situation in Shimoga and Hassan towns, which witnessed the first bout of protests, remained peaceful.

India not in favor of Greater Nagaland

Rebel Naga leaders, who met Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to discuss the issue of sovereignty of Nagaland were disappointed when the government gave its nod to autonomy, but said no to the demand for a Greater Nagaland. The government had formalized a 'peace formula' to break the deadlock with the Naga rebels, who held a first round of talks with the government March 2.

The government has a proposal to counter the Naga demands, which would include a Naga body without territorial jurisdiction, but with constitutional sanction.

India to send team to grill Kandahar hijack accused

India is expected to send a team to Dhaka to interrogate Jaish-e-Mohammed operative Belal Mandal, who has allegedly confessed to having played a key role in the hijacking of Air India flight IC-814 in 1999.

Five operatives of the Pakistan-based militant group, including Mandal and the outfit's Pakistani coordinator in Bangladesh who was also a recruiter for operations in India, were nabbed in Dhaka February 28.

IC-814 was hijacked from Kathmandu to Kandahar, Afghanistan, December 24, 1999. After seven days, the then National Democratic Alliance government released three militants, including Maulana Masood Azhar — who went on to found the JeM — in exchange for the hostages on board.

Home ministry officials, who described Mandal as a 'wanted man' in India in four terror-related cases — including the plan to plant bombs in Surat and Bangalore — however, said he didn't figure in the list of suspects in the hijack case. Home Minister P Chidambaram said reports on Mandal's role in the hijack might be a bit 'exaggerated'.

But there could be aspects to the hijack that investigators have not yet been able to unearth. "We did



Paratroopers jump from an Indian Air Force aircraft during IAF Vayu Shakti 2010, an impressive day-dusk-night fire power demonstration held at an air force field in Pokhran, Rajasthan, February 28

VIJAY MATHUR/REUTERS

not know about the (David) Headley connection to the 26/11 Mumbai attacks till he was caught by the United States. So, let's wait and see," reports quoted a government official as saying.

India is also trying to extradite Mandal.

Air India employee arrested for molesting 9-year-old

An Air India employee was arrested and another detained March 2 for allegedly molesting a nine-year-old girl at the Kolkata airport.

The police claimed AI baggage handler Ahamed Reza molested the girl when she came to the airport at about 1.30 am to catch a flight. Another baggage handler Binoy Sanyasi was detained for questioning. The incident took place when the girl was waiting after luggage checking. She had gone to Kolkata with her mother to visit relatives and was on her way back to Boston.

The girl's mother lodged a complaint with the airport officials and officers from the Airport police station arrested Reza. An AI spokesperson said Reza and Sanyasi have been suspended from duty.

Sikhs rescued from Taliban return home

Surjit Singh, 32, and Gurvinder Singh, 18, who were kidnapped by the Taliban in Peshawar about 40 days ago and were reportedly released following a rescue operation by the Pakistan Army, returned home to India March 1, with shorn heads.

Surjit sustained injuries in the gunfire, but Gurvinder escaped unhurt. The duo had been kidnapped along with another Sikh, Jaspal Singh, who was beheaded February 20 after his captors were not paid ransom.

There was, however, no news of another kidnapped Sikh, Robin Singh.

Meanwhile, in the United States, members of the American Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee met government officials in Washington, DC on Monday to urge them to use their influence on Pakistan to pro-

vide basic amenities to Sikhs, along with ensuring security of their lives.

Chandrayaan detects ice on moon

Scientists have detected more than 40 ice-filled craters in the moon's North Pole using data from a NASA radar that flew aboard India's Chandrayaan-I.

NASA's Mini-SAR instrument, lightweight, synthetic aperture radar, found that the craters were between two and 15 km in diameter.

The finding would give future missions a new target to further explore and exploit, a NASA statement said, adding it was estimated that there could be at least 600 million metric tons of water ice in the craters.

Scientists said the emerging picture from the multiple measurements and resulting data of the instruments on lunar missions indicates that water creation, migration, deposition and retention are occurring on the moon.

Kin of Telangana martyrs to contest elections

The Osmania University Joint Action Committee on Telangana has appealed to political parties in Andhra Pradesh to field relatives of people who died during the agitation for a separate state when by-elections are held in over 10 constituencies in the state.

More than 10 legislators from the Telangana Rashtra Samiti and other parties have resigned from their posts to protest the Terms of Reference of the Justice B N Srikrishna Committee.

Manavat Rai, a member of the OU Joint Action Committee, said the parties should field relatives of the people, especially students, who have 'sacrificed their lives for the cause of a separate state'. 'If they don't give them the opportunity, we will persuade the relatives to enter the fray as independents,' he said.

Revelers apply color on a woman during Holi in Allahabad. The festival was celebrated in India and by Indians around the world March 1



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Political storm brews over price rise issue

The Congress party-led United Progressive Alliance government's dream run seems to be over even before it can celebrate the first anniversary of its second term, May 22.

February 26, in a rare incident in the history of the Indian parliament, the presentation of the federal Budget was hijacked when the entire opposition walked out, protesting against the move to raise excise duty on diesel and petrol by Re 1 per liter. The politics over the Budget began even before Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee could complete his important speech.

Suddenly, political alarm bells started going off for what had been so far been a stable and confident government.

When the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Left parties, Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav all walked out, the government realized that inside the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament, it was left with 275 members in the ruling alliance. That is, just three more than the majority mark of 272.

The government found the situation vastly different from the brouhaha over the United States-India nuclear deal, where opposition unity didn't yield final results. Even now, the finer details of the nuclear deal are too esoteric for many political leaders to comprehend.

Price rice, on the other hand, is too emotive an issue to ignore or underestimate for politicians and their voters. Mukherjee's proposal will lead to a hike of Rs 2.67 per liter and Rs 2.58 per liter in petrol and diesel prices respectively at a time when India is reeling from the impact of skyrocketing food prices.

The government does have some arguments in favor of its decision, but not enough to counter the opposition's long list of charges, which includes favoring the middle-men and traders indulging in export-import of food items.

A political storm is brewing over the price rise issue.

When the UPA coalition was elected to its second term, it brought hopes of stability combined with uninterrupted growth. But, in less than 10 months, a series of government actions, inactions and miscalculations has belied the high hopes. Despite having financial wizards within the government, it has failed to contain inflation and food prices in the retail market. PDF files of inflation data are one of the most circulated ones amongst lawmakers these days.

There is merit to the petrol price hike — it was done to help increase revenues and cut a 16-year high Budget deficit. Also, Indian retail prices of fuel are much below the market price because they are subsidized. And no one can deny that it's a fiscal burden. But if economic logic cannot help families meet basic requirements without heartburn, the government has to take the blame.

From the Left parties to the rightist BJP, the opposition churned out enough data during the parliamentary debate over price rise. In contrast, the prime minister's justification of the hike in indirect taxes on diesel and petrol as taking a 'long-term view' reflects a flawed elitist economic thinking marked by insensitivity towards the people's sufferings.

The government claims it seeks to mobilize between Rs 250 billion (\$5 billion) and Rs 300 billion (\$6 billion) in the forthcoming year through the increase in customs and excise duties on diesel and petrol.



A customer checks products inside a food store in Hyderabad, January 28

KRISHNENDU HALDER/ REUTERS

To that, the Communist party of India-Marxist pointed out that the finance minister announced in his Budget speech that Rs 260 billion (\$5.2 billion) revenue will be lost during the same period due to the cut in income taxes. How come the prime minister is defending the indirect tax hike in the name of fiscal consolidation while turning a blind eye toward the direct tax cuts, the CPI-M asked.

There are no easy answers to such pertinent political questions.

The government returned to power by projecting the image that it stands for the common man. Opposition parties argued that how can you object to low indirect taxes on fuel, which is consumed by an overwhelming majority of the people, and not have any problem doling out corporate tax concessions worth Rs 800 billion (\$16 billion) in the year 2009-2010 in the name of stimulus?

The prime minister's assertion that the fuel price hike will lead to only 0.4 percent rise in the wholesale price index, the opposition leaders argued, is a gross miscalculation since it does not take into account the impact of high fuel prices on food prices. Food prices soared after the last hike in petro prices in July 2009. At a time when the people are reeling under nearly 20 percent food price inflation, this round of fuel price hike will amount to a backbreaking burden on the common man.

To many political pundits, the February 26 opposition unity reflected a sort of revival of the anti-Congress-ism of 1977 and 1989. That is a marked departure from last year, when for a while it seemed India was moving toward unipolar politics at the federal level where the BJP would not be able to challenge the Congress party in near future.

But Indian politics is in fast-forward mode. Nitin Gadkari, the new BJP president, has started on a low key to tune up a party that is not playing together. Without big promises or grandstanding, he has quietly arrested the party's downfall in the public eye.



SHEELA BHATT

been able to conduct the question hour since the start of the session — the opposition parties have forced adjournments.

About the fuel price hike, Congress party leaders argue that this is the year when they can take risks and bring in decisions that may not be popular or populist since the UPA is just one year into the government and is not facing any major elections. But already, the Congress party is busy pacifying allies. Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee is fuming

because she doesn't want any hurdle before the West Bengal state elections, where she wants to become chief minister. She simply refused to react to the Budget in New Delhi and flew away to Kolkata. And though she was present in the cabinet when the Budget was approved, she launched a movement against the federal Budget. Mukherjee has slapped a service tax on the railways, further angering her.

Lalu Prasad Yadav, once known as one of biggest supporters of Sonia Gandhi, has now turned against her party. He says privately that the Congress party's arrogance must be answered.

"The Congress party needs introspection," said political commentator Achyut Yagnik. "Its inaction in containing prices and its arrogance cannot continue."

India's GOP has more problems than price rise. The Congress party has tied itself into a knot over the issue of carving a state of Telangana out of Andhra Pradesh. The Congress party's proposed new education policy has also got mixed response. Its policy regarding Maoists is still far from confidence-inspiring — Home Minister P Chidambaram is dishing out his office's fax numbers to militant leaders.

However, the Congress party is clever to exploit the contradictions of opposition parties and once it is time for the Uttar Pradesh assembly election, new alignments are likely to form, weakening the new born unity in the opposition ranks.

"Sushma Swaraj and Arun Jaitley's nomination in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha respectively as leaders of the opposition reflects the moderation within the BJP. It was not there before," said veteran commentator Neeraj Chaudhary.

Many observers think Swaraj has achieved something her predecessor and mentor Lal Kishenchand Advani could not possibly have achieved. Sushma and Jaitley both were not in the forefront of the Babri Masjid movement in 1992 and that may help non-Left and anti-Congress parties to strategize with them in parliament. This would worry the Congress party a lot.

The opposition is set to take the battle inside the parliament in the coming months. The only problem is they are also still a divided lot.

In the Budget session, there were 2,000 unanswered questions, and 200 starred questions went without answers. Parliament has not

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Broken system can warp job market

ALLEN E KAYE

Problem: Labor mobility restrictions

Elements of the employment-based immigration system can warp the labor market. A primary concern rests in the potential for a sponsoring employer to exert disproportionate leverage over foreign workers. When a worker is bound to a single employer, it affects other similarly situated workers employed by the same employer or competitors. As noted Princeton Economist Alan Krueger has written:

'Job shopping is an essential protection against exploitation and inefficient allocation of resource... If (temporary workers) do not have the opportunity to change jobs with minimal administrative burden, other workers in the United States will potentially suffer because employers will have some scope to exploit guest workers and lower labor conditions more generally.'

If an employer is able to significantly constrain a worker from exercising his or her rights or competing for the best job opportunity, it creates an advantage for the employer.

As noted above, the different visa categories carry different restrictions. Some employment visas permit more job mobility than others, but for the most part, a foreign worker is tied to a single employer until he or she receives legal permanent residence. For example, an employer must sponsor a foreign worker on an H-1B visa to work in a specific position at a specific salary. In order for that worker to change jobs within the company, the employer must file a new H-1B petition with the government authorizing the change of position. In order for that worker to change employers, he or she must wait until the new employer files a petition on his or her behalf.

Two factors diminish the foreign worker's mobility. First is the requirement that visa holders maintain their immigration status or be subject to long-term repercussions, including in some cases bars on re-entering the United States. An H-1B visa holder who quits his or her job or is terminated must secure immediate sponsorship from a new employer or risk falling out of status. If he or she fails to secure such sponsorship and does not leave in timely fashion, a subsequent petition filed by a new employer will be denied and other consequences may attach. In short, H-1B visa holders remain tied to their employers unless and until a new employer files a petition. This diminishes visa holders' ability to assert their rights by walking away from an abusive employer.

This is not a problem in most circumstances because most employers are not abusive and most workers will not leave a current job until a new one is lined up. But the extra steps that are required to obtain new sponsorship and the interim limitations on mobility do establish a dynamic in which employers possess greater influence over their employees than in traditional 'at will' employment situations. That dynamic in turn hurts all workers and undermines employer competitiveness.

The second feature of the current system that diminishes worker mobility is the general requirement that an employer sponsor a foreign worker for permanent residence. The sponsorship process can take years because of the disparity between the number of temporary and permanent visas available annually. And in most cases, if the worker leaves to join another employer, he or she must start the green card process all over again.

This lengthy process accords the employer another axis of leverage over the worker. The most obvious concern is that an unscrupulous employer can exert excessive control over the visa holder by holding permanent residence over his or her head. But even in the normal course, the inability to freely change employers – or even jobs with the same employer – and maximize earning potential during that time can have a depressing wage effect.

There is also evidence that this overly cumbersome process discourages immigration among the talented foreigners who have the most potential for scientific breakthroughs. The United States has had many successes among its foreign-born scientists, but it is alarming that foreign enrollment in graduate sciences and engineering has dropped 20 percent from 2001-2004, and foreign graduate students are increasingly faced with a harder and more expensive road to staying in the United States.

President declares ongoing commitment to immigration reform

'America – a nation made up of immigrants from every corner of the globe.'

In the State of the Union Address on January 27 this year, President Obama made clear his ongoing commitment to immigration reform noting 'we should continue the work of fixing our broken immigration system – to secure our borders, enforce our laws, and ensure that everyone who plays by the rules can contribute to our economy and enrich our nation.' Some may continue to argue that immigration reform is too politically risky to move on this year and that we should focus instead on rebuilding our economy. However, comprehensive immigration reform is compatible with economic reform as it would generate needed economic growth, create jobs and increase tax contributions by ensuring that everyone working in the United States is doing so legally. In fact, immigration reform would allow us to take full advantage of the opportunities for economic growth that immigrants bring.

Immigration yields tremendous economic benefits to America

A 2007 report from the White House Council of Economic Advisers concluded that immigration as a whole increases the US gross domestic product by roughly \$37 billion each year because immigrants increase the size of the total labor force, complement the native-born work force in terms of skills and education, and stimulate capital investment by adding workers to the labor pool. Immigrants do not compete with the majority of natives for the same jobs because they tend to have different levels of education and to work in different occupations. In fact, The roughly 90 percent of native-born workers with at least a high-school diploma experienced wage gains because of immigration between 1990 and 2004, ranging from 0.7 percent to 3.4 percent depending on their level of education, according to a 2006 study by Giovanni Peri, associate professor of economics at the University of California-Davis.

If comprehensive immigration reform is enacted the benefits will be even greater.

According to a 2010 study by Professor Raul Hinojosa of the University of California, Los Angeles, comprehensive immigration reform that includes a legalization plan for the unauthorized would contribute a cumulative \$1.5 trillion to the GDP over 10 years, as more tax revenues are collected, wages increase for US-born and legalized workers, and immigrant workers spend more in our economy. The report also finds that wages for immigrant and native-born workers would rise in part because workers will have more bargaining power in the workplace.

(Part 4 of 4)

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BUSINESS

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'Indian hospitality industry is clearly poised for tremendous growth'

Top AAHOA delegation explores investment possibilities

AZIZ HANIFFA

A delegation of nearly two dozen Asian American Hotel Owners Association members led by chairman Tarun S Patel visited India last month to explore investment possibilities.

The delegation included members of the AAHOA executive board, regional board directors, vendors and franchisors. They visited Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai and Gujarat — the state of origin of the majority of AAHOA members — and met with senior officials of the tourism industry both at the federal and state levels. Many of these meetings were put together by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, which organized interactive meetings regarding investment in hotel infrastructure in the cities that attract the highest numbers of tourists. The meetings delved into the legal aspects, real estate, development, banking, and involved top Indian officials, consultants and hoteliers. There were also presentations and panel discussions put together by FICCI and sector representatives about investment opportunities in tourism infrastructure.

"AAHOA brought a wide representation of the American hospitality industry to India and it was a very informative and productive trip," Patel said. "There are tremendous growth opportunities for all sides when it comes to getting involved with the hospitality industry in India."

Echoing Patel's words, AAHOA president Fred Schwartz said, "The Indian hospitality industry is clearly poised for tremendous growth in the coming years." Lauding the "hospitality and generosity of all our hosts during the trip," he said AAHOA intends to



A highlight of the delegation's visit was a closed door meeting with Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi

"build on the significant progress we were able to make during our visit."

A highlight of the visit was a closed-door meeting with Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who Patel and Schwartz said had again invited AAHOA to invest in Gujarat and be a partner in the state's prosperity. Modi had first extended this invitation by video link-up four years ago while delivering the keynote speech to the AAHOA convention.

Patel and Schwartz said that Modi had empathized with the concerns of the AAHOA delegation with regard to issues like incentives for hotel projects, liquor policies (Alcohol is illegal in Gujarat, though there is a huge black market) and high land costs.

The AAHOA leaders said Modi had proudly declared that Gujarat now boasted of an energy surplus and had invited private investors for the power sector excluding nuclear power, which is government-controlled.

Coinciding with the delegation's Chennai visit was the release of a study compiled by FICCI and Evalueserve that called for the creation of land banks for budget hotels, provisions for 100 percent foreign direct investment, creation of civic amenities under the private-public partnership model and single-window clearances for pending hotel projects.

The study had strongly criticized the federal government that despite the huge earning potential, there had been little

effort to expand India's hospitality industry.

Rafeeqe Ahmed, chairman, Tamil Nadu, FICCI, acknowledged to the delegates that the global recession had caused a major liquidity crunch and a number of hotel projects on hold had been scrapped. However, he said, the tourism industry had fought back and slowly but surely, occupancy was beginning to climb back.

The study said that last year, despite the global economic meltdown and terror, leisure travel and tourism had registered a 6 percent growth and the hotel industry had created 31 million jobs, with the figure projected to grow to 40 million jobs by 2019.

Jyotsna Suri, chairperson of the FICCI tourism committee, said the mid-market segment — which the majority of AAHOA members operate in and dominate in the US — had escaped the harsh effects of the slowdown. While only 5 million foreign tourists traveled to India in 2009, Suri said, there were 550 million domestic tourists.

S Bakhavatchalam, joint director, Tamil Nadu Tourism Department, promised government support in clearing projects fast. S V Ranganath, chief secretary, Karnataka, said his state was 'dead serious' about attracting private investors in the hotel sector. He estimated that the state's tourism policy through 2014 would conservatively amount to about \$5 billion.

There was a consensus during the meetings that international hotel chains were eager to expand the upscale brands into the Indian market. Industry experts said China and India would be the hottest markets in the coming year for tourism, which was echoed by AAHOA franchisees.

India's fiscal deficit rises

India's fiscal deficit soared by 34 percent from Rs 2.62 trillion a year ago to Rs 3.5 trillion in the first 10 months of the current financial year due to the stimulus measures of the government. This makes the April-January fiscal deficit 87.2 percent of the budgeted estimate of Rs 4.01 trillion for the current fiscal. Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee presented a Budget with a deficit of 5.5 percent for the next fiscal as he pegged total expenditure at Rs 11.09 trillion on an estimated revenue of total tax and non-tax at Rs 6.82 trillion for 2010-11. The fiscal deficit for the current fiscal is pegged at 6.9 percent, a tad over the previous estimate of 6.8 percent.

RBI to hike repo rates

The Reserve Bank of India is likely to increase its short-term interest rates by April as part of its strategy to exit the easy money regime, Deutsche Bank has said. In January, the RBI hiked its cash reserve ratio (the amount banks keep with the central bank) by 0.75 percent to 5.75 per cent

the week that was

to absorb around Rs 360 billion excess money from the system. The apex bank is set to announce its annual monetary policy for the financial year 2010-11 on April 20.

India's exports rise

India's exports grew for the third straight month in January at 11.5 percent to \$14.34 billion, helped by an increase in demand for marine products, tobacco, man-made yarn and fruits and vegetables. However, for the period between April-January 2009-10, exports showed a decline of 17.8 percent to \$131.93 billion from \$160.4 billion in the corresponding period last year. Imports, which showed an increase in December 2009, continued the momentum in January and rose 35.5 percent to \$24.70 billion compared to \$18.22 billion a year ago. The trade gap in the month under review increased to \$10.36 billion against

\$5.35 billion in January 2009.

RIL's LyondellBasell bid may be rejected

The creditors of LyondellBasell may reject Reliance Industries' \$14.5 billion bid for the bankrupt Dutch company, a newspaper report has said. Mukesh Ambani's bid for the world's third-largest chemical company is expected to be rejected by a creditor group led by Apollo, the *New York Post* said. Quoting people familiar with the matter, the *Post* said private-equity firm Apollo Management, was poised to prevail over RIL in its battle for LyondellBasell. The move would pave the way for Apollo to merge LyondellBasell with its Hexion Specialty Chemicals operation, the paper said. A hearing on a reorganization plan at the US bankruptcy court in Manhattan to transfer ownership of the company to the creditors is scheduled for March 8. LyondellBasell's US operations and one of its European



What the Indian Budget means for the NRI

As a taxpayer, what is the extent of relief that non-resident Indians can expect due to the increase in tax slabs announced in the Indian Budget?

— *Manmohan*

The relaxations in the tax slabs will significantly lower the tax outgo on an NRI's Indian income. The following table showcases the tax benefit for different income levels. The maximum benefit of Rs 51,500 is for income levels of Rs 800,000 and above.

(Rs)	Old Slabs	New Slabs	Saving in Tax
Income Level			
4,00,000	35,020	24,720	10,300
6,00,000	86,520	55,620	30,900
8,00,000	1,48,320	96,820	51,500

I have heard that the recent India budget contains a provision that seeks to apply service tax of 10 percent on rental income. I have a property in Mumbai, which I have given out on rent. I already pay income tax on the rental income. Does it mean that I will have to pay service tax on this too?

— *Shrijeet*

This service tax pertains only to rental income received from leasing commercial property. If you have rented your apartment in Mumbai for residential use, then no service tax is payable. Secondly, service tax on rentals of commercial premises is not a new provision, it is applicable from 2007 onwards. However, the letter of the law was open to interpretation and hence the matter was under litigation. Now, in the Budget, the government has sought to bring further clarity. But once again, for residential rentals, no service tax is payable.

I have been living in the United States for the past many years and have got US citizenship. Next year I plan to retire and settle in India. However, I am entitled to pension from my employer for the next few years. Also, I am entitled to certain social security benefits. My concern is regarding the taxation thereof. As after 6 months of living in India I would become an Indian Resident, how will these payments be



A N SHANBHAG

SANDEEP SHANBHAG

taxed?

— *Gangadhar*

There is a transitional status of Resident but not Ordinarily Resident between being an NRI and becoming a full-fledged Resident after returning to India permanently. RNOR is a person who satisfies one of the following conditions:

a) He has been a non-resident in India in nine out of the ten previous years preceding that year, or

b) Has during the seven previous years preceding that year been in India for a period of, or periods amounting in all to, seven hundred and twenty-nine days or less.

Therefore, depending upon your date of return to India, you will be an RNOR for 2 or 3 years. An RNOR is not required pay tax in India on his Forex income. Thereafter, your Forex income will be taxed in India. Since it is also taxed in the US, you can claim the advantage of Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement between the two countries. In the case of taxation of income earned in the US, credit will be available in respect of taxes paid in the US. Such credit is available only in respect of federal taxes. No credit is available in respect of state tax and payment in respect of social security, insurance, etc.

Article 20 of the Indo-US Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement, which spells out that pension would be taxable

in the country of Residence — that is India. However, Social Security Benefits or other public pensions would be taxed only in America.

I am NRI. This year I will be getting interest from my friend Rs 30,000. This is the only income I will have. Is it necessary to take PAN in India for this only income? Can I issue Form H to my friend as he says he will deduct TDS from my interest income?

— *Milind*

It is mandatory for your friend to deduct tax at source @ 30.6 percent on the interest paid by him. Your tax liability is nil. Form 15-G (or 15-H) cannot be used by an NRI. The only way of getting the refund of the tax is to file returns. Note that you will require PAN for filing returns.

Readers who wish to ask A N Shanbhag a question can fill in the following details and mail the coupon to: The Business Editor, India Abroad, 42, Broadway, 18th Floor, New York, NY 10004
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A N Shanbhag is an investment consultant and author of *In the Wonderland of Investment; How to Convert a Taxpayer into a Taxsaver; NRI Investment Guide*. This article does not constitute any tax- or legally-related investment decisions. The authors may be contacted at wonderlandconsultants@yahoo.com

the week that was

◀ Page A20

holding companies had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2009.

Auto sales zoom in India

India's automobile companies have posted impressive sales figures in February. Maruti Suzuki reported its highest-ever monthly sales of 96,650 units for February, a jump of 22.05 percent over the same month last year. Hyundai Motor India touched a new high with record sales of 31,001 units in the domestic market, registering a 46.1 percent growth over the same month last year. Riding high on the success of the popular Chevrolet brand, General Motors India has registered a record growth of 126 percent in sales in February 2010. Mahindra & Mahindra, Toyota Kirloskar and Bajaj Auto also steered ahead with high sales in February.

India, China more influential at WTO

India, along with China and Brazil, has a 'new level of influence' in the World Trade Organization now and would be expected to accept greater responsibilities in the global trade deal under the Doha negotiations, US President Barack Obama's Trade Policy Agenda for 2010 has said. 'As today's fastest growing economies, China, Brazil and India have enjoyed a new level of influence in the WTO and each will be expected to take on an increased level of responsibility,' the report said. Describing the countries as 'advanced developing countries,' the US sought 'meaningful new market access.'

Indian Hotels, M&M among top 27 brands

Tata Group firm Indian Hotels and auto major Mahindra & Mahindra are the only Indian brands to figure in the list of 27 top 'Great Brands of Tomorrow' compiled by Credit Suisse. The list also includes computer hardware maker Apple, car major Hyundai Motors, luxury car maker

Ratan Tata: Most trusted businessman in India

Ratan Tata has been ranked as the most trusted businessmen in India in a list compiled by *Reader's Digest* magazine. Tata was ranked second only to former President APJ Abdul Kalam in the list of 100 most trusted individuals in India and was far ahead of Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, ranked seventh, and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi at 29. Business leaders who ranked higher than the Ambanis in the online poll include N R Narayana Murthy (4th), Kumar Mangalam Birla (20th), and Azim Premji (10th). Mukesh Ambani was ranked 74th, three rungs ahead of his younger brother Anil, who heads the Reliance ADA group.



Ratan Tata

ARKO DATTA/REUTERS

Mercedes-Benz, the world's largest watchmaker by sales Swatch, networking site Facebook, and online market place Alibaba.com. According to Credit Suisse Research Institute, the global brands figuring in the list would significantly outperform the market over the next three to five years as they build and leverage brand equity to grow in size, scale and profitability. The survey found that these companies spent at least 2 percent of sales revenue on marketing, and outperformed the Standard & Poor 500 index by more than 4 percent annually since 1997.

Tata Motors to launch electric version of Nano

Tata Motors will launch the electric version of the world's cheapest car Nano in Europe within the next two-and-a-half years. The electric Nano will be launched in select markets like Britain and the Scandinavian countries first. However, no time frame has been fixed for its launch in India. The Nano EV will be a four-seater. The electric car, using super polymer lithium battery, would have a 160 km battery range and would touch a speed of 60 km in 10 seconds.



Indian players celebrate a goal against Pakistan at the Hockey World Cup in New Delhi February 28

DANISH ISMAIL/REUTERS

India crush Pakistan in World Cup opener

Sandeep Singh scored twice from penalty-corners as India beat Pakistan 4-1 in their opening match of the 12th men's hockey World Cup at the Major Dhyani Chand National stadium, New Delhi, February 28.

The drag-flicker scored in the 35th and 57th minutes to enable India avenge a 3-6 Champions Challenge defeat in Salta, Argentina, in December.

The eight-time Olympic champions, who won the World Cup in 1974, led 2-0 at half-time. They got their other goals through Shivendra Singh (27th minute) and Prabhjot Singh (37th minute).

Sohail Abbas scored from a penalty-corner 11 minutes from time to reduce the margin. Sandeep Singh was named man of the match.

The victory not only gave India, who finished 11th out of 12 teams in the last World Cup at Monchengladbach, Germany, a 3-2 head-to-head record against Pakistan in the quadrennial event, but also a Rs 100,000 purse to each player and the support staff.

Both sides earned five penalty corners each. The hosts converted two while Pakistan could find the net just once, the crossbar twice denying Abbas.

But for goalkeeper Salman Akbar, Pakistan would have been down by a bigger margin at half-time. First he stopped India forward Tushar Khandekar's powerful strike in the seventh

minute and then gloved away Diwakar Ram's flick from the hosts' first penalty-corner, in the 16th minute.

India were able to dictate terms because of their control over the mid-field. The pressure eventually resulted in the first goal through the hardworking Shivendra, who scored from a rebound after Sandeep's low flick was saved by Akbar off India's second penalty-corner, in the 25th minute.

India doubled the lead five seconds from the break from a set-piece following their third penalty-corner, after they appealed for a foot foul and the video umpire upheld it. Sandeep made no mistake this time.

It was 3-0 two minutes into the second half when veteran forward Prabhjot Singh scored from a goal-mouth melee.

Sandeep registered his second goal of the day, again converting a penalty-corner with aplomb in the 57th minute.

Pakistan got a consolation goal two minutes later when Abbas got third time lucky, converting his side's fourth penalty-corner.

There was more drama in the dying moments of the match as both India and Pakistan earned a penalty-corner each but failed to find the net.

Indian forward Shivendra Singh was handed a three-match ban for 'deliberately' hitting a Pakistani player. The International Hockey Federation later reduced the ban to two matches. Singh will miss the matches against Australia and Spain.

South Africa thrash India by 90 runs at Motera

India's bench strength lay exposed in the face of some accurate bowling by South Africa in the third and final one-day international at the Sardar Patel Stadium, Motera, February 27. The visitors won by 90 runs. India had won the first two matches.

Chasing South Africa's 365/2, India collapsed to 275 all out.

After winning the toss and opting to bat, South Africa's top order batsmen made significant contributions, with Jacques Kallis (104 not out) and AB de Villiers (102 not out) leading the way.

The Indian innings, also had an aggressive beginning, but the visitors made a double breakthrough inside six overs.

Dale Steyn foxed Dinesh Karthik (11) with a slower one, forcing him to hole out to Hashim Amla at mid-off. Then, Lonwebo Tsotsobe induced an edge from Murali Vijay (25) and Mark Boucher made no mistake behind the stumps.

The dual dismissals reduced the home team to 40 for two midway through the

sixth over.

Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli helped India recover with a 95-run stand for the third wicket before the former's patience gave in. Sharma swept a Johan Botha delivery straight to Tsotsobe at deep square

leg.

Kohli completed his sixth ODI half century in the next over. Then a procession of Indian wickets started.

Suresh Raina and Ravindra Jadeja put on 54 runs for the seventh wicket to revive

Indian hopes, but Raina, just one short of a well-deserved fifty, hit a Botha full toss straight to substitute fielder Wayne Parnell at wide long-off.

Soon, the Indian innings folded 90 runs short.

South Africa 365-2 (50)

L Bosman c Jadeja b Pathan	68	(46)
H Amla c Vijay b Jadeja	87	(103)
*J Kallis not out	104	(94)
AB Villiers not out	102	(59)

Extras: 4 b:0 lb:2 nb:2 w:0

Total: 365-2 (50)

Fall of Wickets: L Bosman (113-1, 15.4), H Amla (192-2, 32.5)

India: S Sreesanth 9-0-83-0, S Tyagi 8-0-59-0,

A Mithun 8-0-63-0, R Jadeja 10-0-53-1, Y Pathan 10-0-66-1, V Kohli 2-0-11-0, R Sharma 3-0-28-0.

India 275-10 (44.3)

D Karthik c Amla b Steyn	11	(11)
M Vijay c Boucher b Tsotsobe	25	(16)

V Kohli c Boucher b Steyn	57	(71)
R Sharma c Tsotsobe b Botha	48	(61)
*MS Dhoni c Boucher b Steyn	9	(7)
S Raina c sub (Parnell) b Botha	49	(30)
Y Pathan c Steyn b Tsotsobe	5	(8)
R Jadeja c Boucher b Tsotsobe	36	(35)
S Sreesanth lbw b R Merwe	1	(3)
A Mithun st Boucher b R Merwe	24	(23)
S Tyagi not out	1	(2)

Extras: 9 b:0 lb:5 nb:0 w:4

Total: 275-10 (44.3)

FoW: D Karthik (22-1, 3), M Vijay (40-2, 5.2),

R Sharma (135-3, 25), *MS Dhoni (156-4, 27.2),

V Kohli (157-5, 28), Y Pathan (179-6, 31.2), S Raina (233-7, 36.2), S

Sreesanth (237-8, 37.2),

A Mithun (273-9, 43.3), R Jadeja (275-10, 44.3)

South Africa: D Steyn 8-1-37-3, L Tsotsobe 9.3-0-58-3,

M Morkel 7-0-48-0, R van der Merwe 10-0-47-2, J Botha 10-0-80-2.

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Community saves New York ashram

He began the fast-unto-death in protest against the move to evict him from the ashram.

"I will wait, watch and see if the help comes first or my death," he had said then.

Reading the news of the fast in *India Abroad*, people from far and wide offered to help. Four people came forward to put money and a fifth one offered a loan. The donors – who did not want their names published – raised more than \$200,000 to buy back the property. February 23, \$155,000 was paid to the First National Bank of Jeffersonville, which foreclosed the 13-acre ashram situated in Catskill, New York. The swami would have had to vacate the ashram by February 24 if the money had not been raised.

The property with two buildings is worth more than \$300,000. The value attracted buyers who were ready to pay over \$185,000. Local businessman Sonny Patel and ashram's attorney Frances Clemente negotiated with the bank to reduce it to \$155,000.

"The bank is not bound to give the property back to us. They could sell it to anyone. But we pleaded with them to reduce the

amount," one of the donors told *India Abroad*.

The team also plans to renovate the ashram and temple at a cost of \$75,000. The future ownership of the ashram and other details are yet to be worked out, the donor said.

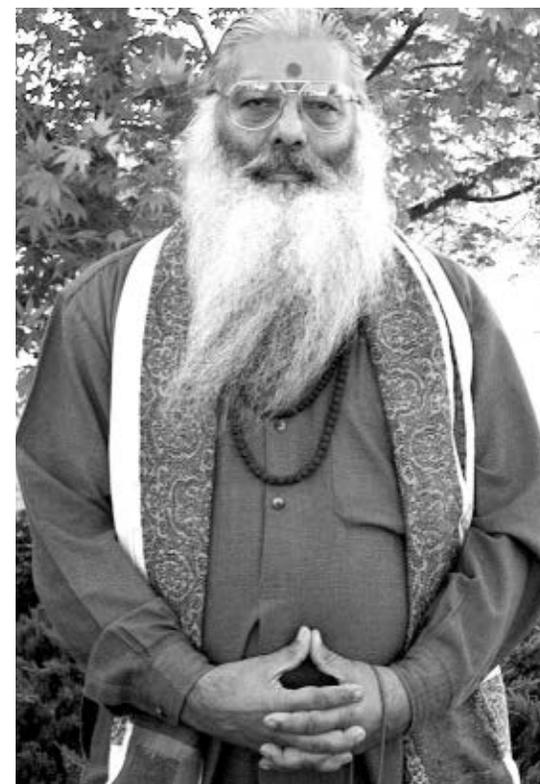
"But we are happy that we could save a place of worship and also help the *swamiji* to end his fast," he said.

Madan had written to the White House earlier and a local official, John Stern, contacted him a few times to inquire about the situation and his health.

The temple offers all the services required for the Hindus from birth to cremation. The next temple is about 50 miles away, in Orange County. Occasionally Swami Madan goes there too to perform *puja*.

Madan bought the temple with two residential buildings in 1999 using his own money. It took five years to get tax-exempt status for the temple.

"It created a problem. Few people would



Swami Madan

make donations without tax exemption. The temple had very little earnings too," he said. To overcome the situation, the ashram took the loan. With little money coming from the devotees, the temple could not pay the mortgage amount.

GEORGE JOSEPH

A host of donors came forward to buy back the Panchvati Ashram – which had been facing foreclosure – from the bank.

Swami Madan ended his fast – which he had undertaken to appeal to the devotees to save the embattled temple – February 25, the 26th day since he had stopped eating solid food.

"I thank everyone for their moral and financial support in this difficult journey of my life," said Madan, 72, who had used his life's savings to buy the modest temple in the Catskill Mountains. "May Lord Shri Ram render me strength to serve in the development of Panchvati, the devotees of the Ashram and the community as a whole."

New Jersey dance group performs at NBA game

A CORRESPONDENT

A dance recital by 58 students, 55 of them girls, from New Jersey's Kalashri School of Arts ahead of the National Basketball Association game at the Izod Center in East Rutherford took the court by storm.

This was the first ever Indian dance during a New Jersey Nets NBA game. The pre-game entertainment show – before the New Jersey Nets played against the Miami Heats – was shown on sports channel all over the United States.

Directed by Bina Menon, the students performed to the tune of hit Bollywood songs and concluded with *Slumdog Millionaire's* famous number, *Jai Ho*. The dance and the colorful costumes were a hit.

The Nets invited the group to come back next year to perform again during a game.

"I am glad I was able to present a very colorful and energetic piece to impress all and pave a way for other Indian dance companies to audition too," Menon said. "The NBA has its own cheerleaders and those dancers were selected from many

professionals who auditioned for some spots that open every year. They are professional dancers and competing with them for a spot is not an easy task. What we achieved was really an honor," she added. "A total of 400 my students and parents came to watch these 55 girls and three boys at the game on a weekday event, which goes to show the importance people attached to this."

About 12,000-odd spectators attended the game at the Izod Center, which can accommodate 19,000.

Asians, Latinos unite for Indian teachers

In a rare show of unity, Asian and Latino groups came forward to support two Indian teachers facing discrimination at the Piscataway School System in New Jersey. Leaders of the 80-20 Initiative were joined by the Latino Leadership Alliance and the Asian-American Heritage Council in calling for accountability and to condemn cases of misconduct against minorities.

80-20 is a national, non-partisan, political action committee dedicated to winning equal opportunity and justice for all Asian Americans through a swing bloc vote, ideally directing 80 percent of the community's votes and money to one presidential candidate endorsed by the group. Nationally influential, it has a large following among the Chinese Americans.

Uma Swaminathan and Raj Bansal, the two teachers, explained their plight and how the system was used against them at a press conference.

Swaminathan was accused as an inefficient teacher, while the accusation against Bansal was not made clear. The Piscataway Board of Education wanted her to go for a psychiatric evaluation, without assigning any reason. After much protest, she did the same and came out with flying colors. But the school board is yet to rescind its action against her, even though they lost their case against Swaminathan.

After years of adverse publicity and court cases, Swaminathan's case was settled quietly. In December 2009, she was awarded several years of back pay, attorney's fees and



Dancers staging a performance before the basketball game



In Texas, Telugu gets a boost

A CORRESPONDENT

The San Antonio Telugu Association last week announced two awards for outstanding Telugu students at the University of Texas at Austin. Madhava Rao Govindaraju, the association's president, made the announcement at the Telugu Language Day celebrations.

The UT-Telugu program now has four awards for outstanding Telugu students. These awards will be given at a special event in the fall.

Murali Vennam, south west regional director of the Telugu Association of North America, assured the regional association of TANA's continued support, pledging \$100,000 for five years.

The UT Telugu Students Association joined the Telugu Language Day celebrations. Prasad Thotakura, president-elect, TANA, said TANA along with other Telugu associations in Texas is committed to generate more financial support to develop the Telugu program at UT Austin.

Professor Joel Brereton, chairman of the department of Asian Studies, mentioned the efforts of Afsar Mohammed in developing new teaching materials and strategies to improve the quality of the Telugu program. The increasing number of students taking Telugu clearly shows the program's success, he said.

"It's our fortune to have a well-known Telugu writer and



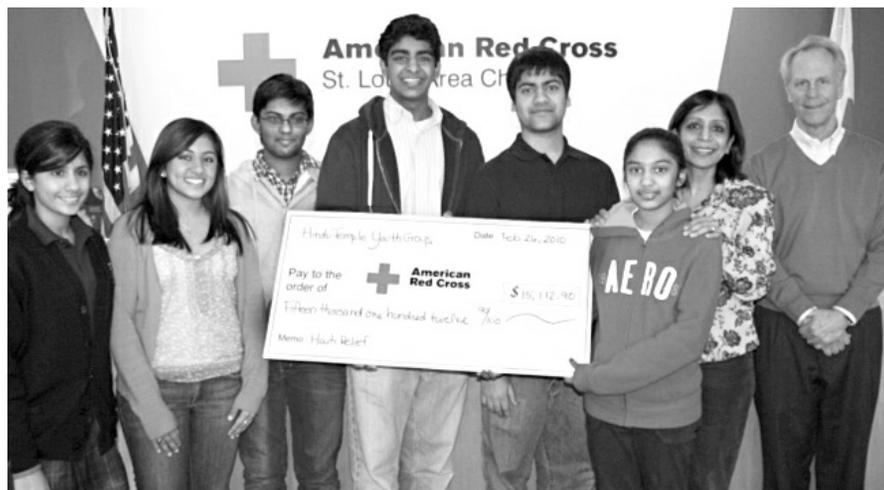
TANA Telugu at UT

scholar such as Afsar teaching this program, and the entire Texas community should take advantage of this unique opportunity," said Lakshmana Vishnubhotla, a representative from the Austin Telugu community.

Ramki Chebrolu, chairman of the Telugu Language com-

mittee of TANA, encouraged Telugu learning students to speak the language at home. Divya Yalamanchili and Deepica Mutyala, president and vice-president of the UT-Telugu Students Association respectively, announced the organization's new board members.

St Louis temple youth group raises over \$15,000 for Haiti



From left, Ranjana Kodwani, Manisha Reddy, Ravi Kasinadhuni, Rishub Keelara, Mrigank Gupta, Arya Kasinadhuni, Chaya Gopalan and Arthur Hailand

The Hindu temple of St Louis, Missouri's Youth Group raised \$15,112.90 for the American Red Cross to help rebuild earthquake-ravaged Haiti.

The temple's executive board provided kitchen space, storage, and manpower. The Gandhi Center offered to host the event and donated generously. Individual donors, and grocery stores like Seema Enterprises, Global Foods, and India Bazaar, and restaurants like House of India, Flavor of India and Mayuri came forward to show their support.

Ashoka, the Indian group from Washington University, and St Louis College of Pharmacy students provided part of the cultural program. Comedian Paul Varghese performed. Arthur Hailand shared the mission of the American Red Cross in rebuilding Haiti and Professor Jean-Germain Gross, from the University of Missouri, St Louis, a native of Haiti, addressed the guests. The youth members instrumental in this effort were Rishub Keelara, Ravi Kasinadhuni, Kunal Mathur, Aashish Chalasani, and Harsha Swamy. Other members and parents joined in.

Asians, Latinos unite for Indian teachers

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damages for pain and suffering following a legal battle.

The court also threw out charges of "conduct unbecoming" filed against Swaminathan as the basis of her suspension in 2007 and reinstated her as a teacher at the Conacknack Middle School. "I was the first Indian person to actually fight the system to the point that the Piscataway Board of Education wanted to settle," Swaminathan had said earlier.

Bansal, an elementary school teacher at the Arbor School, had been teaching under the board since 1993, without any complaints. But all of a sudden, she was being evaluated in a negative way. "Why? I have not changed. I am happily married with two sons attending Princeton University. At this point, I believe that the agenda is something different. I have been singled out, and I have been put through an unnecessary burden, thus jeopardizing the education of my students," she told at a board meeting.

Although the district has 30 percent Asian population, Bansal is the only Asian Indian tenured teacher at all the six elementary schools. She also asked the administrators to compare her students' scores for the last two years with other teachers.

She underwent five evaluations in one school year that culminated in her being given a negative review and being asked to go through a psychiatric evaluation in October 2009. Bansal was declared 'completely normal' in the evaluation and it was concluded that there was "no abnormal behavior in her personal or professional conduct". She continues to teach elementary fifth graders at the Eisenhower School to which she was trans-

ferred from Ann Arbor in September 2009.

Her attorney Lennox Hinds presented a copy of the psychiatrist's report to each member of the Board and demanded that they personally review the report and arrive at their own conclusions without the advice of the superintendent or the school attorney.

The board has not gotten back to her with their decision even after a month.

During her career as teacher, Bansal has won several recognitions. In 2005, she won the Students Teachers Achieving Results Award for winning lessons.

Incidentally, Hinds, who has worked with Nelson Mandela, represented Swaminathan too.

New Jersey Assemblyman Upendra J Chivukula addressed the importance of making lawmakers and authorities at the local and state level aware of such incidents and engaging their help in resolving such conflicts. "From the two cases brought to my notice, there seems to be a need to address a possible systematic problem of harassment in the Piscataway School System," said Chivukula. "I offer my services to help resolve current conflicts and prevent future incidents," he added.

"We strongly condemn discrimination of Asian-American teachers and demand an investigation into allegations of harassment," Ved Chaudhury, a member of the board of the 80-20 Initiative, said.

Tina Liu Jen, president of the 80-20 Initiative, New Jersey; Cuqui Rivera, secretary, Latino Leaders Alliance; Ludi Hughes, chairperson, Asian American Heritage Council, New Jersey and Dr. Stephen Ko, founder, Asian American Heritage Council and member of the 80-20 Initiative were among the attendees.

**CALIFORNIA****Workshop**

On Emerging Technologies of the Decade
Hosted by: IISc AANA
March 13, 1 PM
TIE-Silicon Valley
2903 Bunker Hill Lane
Santa Clara, California 95054
415-670-2080

Musical concert

March 13, 6:30 PM
Chandni Restaurant
5748 Mowry School Road
Newark, California, 94560
510-673-0153

Night with DJ Suketu

March 13, 8 PM
Hosted by: Ecstasy production
ILLUSIONS Nightclub
260 S. California Avenue
Palo Alto, California 94306
917-440-5110

Classical Dance of India

March 16, 10 AM
Hosted by: Abhinaya Dance Company
Children's Discovery Museum
180 Woz Way
San Jose, California 95110
www.abhinaya.org
408-871-5959

Bollywood Dance Show

March 12, 8:30 PM
Hosted by: blue13 dance company
Highways Performance Space
18th Street Arts Center 1651 18th Street
Santa Monica, California 90404
www.blue13dance.com
310-315-1459

Leadership retreat

March 18
Hosted by: Isha Foundation
Hyatt Regency Beverly Hills ,
2025 Avenue of the Stars ,
Los Angeles, California 90067
www.ishafoundation.org
248-739-2934

DELAWARE**Thyagaraja Aradhana**

March 13, 8 AM
Hosted by: Sruti The India Music and Dance Society
Hindu Temple Delaware
760 Yorklyn Road
Hockessin, Delaware 19707
www.sruti.org
610-630-1878

GEORGIA**Khel mela 2010**

March 13, 9 AM
Hosted By: Vibha
Alpharetta High School Gym
3595 Webb Bridge Road
Alpharetta, Georgia 30005

<http://wiki.vibha.org>
770-740-1223

Holi celebration

March 13, 10:30 AM
Medlock Pavilion - Pinckneyville Park
4758 S Old Peachtree Road
Norcross, Georgia 30071
<http://www.sewaua.org>
404-314-0212

Ugadi celebration

March 16,
Hosted by: Hindu Temple Of Atlanta
Hindu Temple Of Atlanta
5851 GA Highway 85
Riverdale, Georgia 30274
770-740-1223

ILLINOIS**Holi Hai**

March 13, 6:30 PM
Iowa Community Center
338 N. Iowa Avenue
Villa Park, Illinois 60181
630-542-2318

Ugadi celebrations

March 16, 10:30 AM
Hosted by: Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago
Hindu Temple
10915 Lemont Road
Lemont, Illinois 60439
630-972-0300

Rajasthani colorful night

March 13, 6 PM
Hosted by: Rajasthanis Association
Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago
10915 Lemont Road
Lemont, Illinois 60439
630 886-3106

MASSACHUSETTS**Dance by Jayshree**

Bala Rajamani
March 13, 8 PM
Hosted by: World-jazz ensemble
Natraj
Amazing Things Arts Center
160 Hollis Street
Framingham
Massachusetts 01702
508-405-2787

Saturday night party

March 13, 10 PM
Hosted By: Bostonviplist.Com
The Greatest Bar
262 Friend Street
Boston, Massachusetts
www.bostonviplist.com

Trend Thursdays

Hosted By: BostonVipList.com
March 18, 10 PM
Wonder Bar
186 Harvard Avenue
Allston, Massachusetts
www.bostonviplist.com

**CALIFORNIA****Shreya Ghoshal Live**

March 12, 7:30 PM
Hosted by: Sankara Eye Foundation
Flint Center
21250 Stevens Creek Boulevard
Cupertino, California 95014
866-726-5272

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**Atif Aslam, Shreya Ghoshal Live**

March 14, 6 PM
DAR Constitution Hall
1776 D Street NW
Washington DC
District of Columbia 20006
<http://dcconcert.com>
866-600-5760

GEORGIA**Atif Aslam live**

March 19, 8 PM
Where:
Robert Ferst Center At Georgia

NEW JERSEY**Tribute to Madan Mohan**

March 13, 4:30 PM
Hosted by: SwarVeena School of Music
Sri Venkateswara Temple Auditorium
780, Old farm Road
Bridgewater, New Jersey 08807
973-539-5534

Holi Hungama

March 14,
Hosted by: Prajee Events
Royal Alberts Palace ,
1050 King Georges Post Road ,
Fords, New Jersey 07095
www.prajee.com
732-750-1546

Patrata

March 14, 10 AM
Knights of Columbus Hall
116 Grand Street
Iselin, New Jersey 08830
732-207-7592

Tech ,
Georgia Tech ,
Atlanta, Georgia 30332
<http://atifatlanta.com>
404-518-7988

NEW YORK**Zakir Hussain Live**

March 13, 8 PM
Hosted by: World Music Institute
Rose Theater
Broadway at 60th Street
New York 10023
www.worldmusicinstitute.org
212-545-7536

TEXAS**Shreya Ghoshal, Atif Aslam Live**

March 13, 8 PM
Hosted by: Indo American Association
Jones Hall
615 Louisiana
Houston, Texas 77002
www.iaahouston.com
281-648-0422

Lecture Demonstrations on Odissi

March 17, 7 PM
Hosted By: Odissinilanjana
Wayne Public Library
461 Valley Road
Wayne, New Jersey 07470

NEW YORK**Rang Barse**

March 13, 12 PM
Hosted By: IN Group
Peking Ship
Pier 16
South Street Seaport
New York 10038
info@ingroupevents.com
www.ingroupevents.com
646 226 6557

Bollywood Remix Saturdays

March 13, 10 PM
Hosted by: Bollywood Remix Group

Tonic
727 7th Avenue
Between 48th & 49th Street
New York City, New York 10019
www.bollywoodremixevents.com
914-433-4118

PENNSYLVANIA**Holi**

March 13, 1 PM
Montgomery School
1141 Kimberton Road
Chester Spring, Pennsylvania
610-363-7568

TEXAS**Kismet Konnection**

March 12, 7 PM
Hosted by: Shalabh Entertainment
Lift Lounge
2404 Cedar Springs
Dallas, Texas 75201

Meditation course

March 13, 9 AM
Kessler Park United Methodist Church
1215 Turner Avenue ,
Dallas, Texas 75208
www.easwaran.org
800-475-2369

Shanti - A Journey of Peace

March 13, 8:30 PM
Hosted By: AIM for SEVA
Cullen Performance Hall
University of Houston
4800 Calhoun Road
Houston, Texas 77004
713-412-8478

Spiritual Discourse

March 17, 9 AM
Hosted By: SMVA Trust
Unity Church
2929 Unity Drive
Houston, Texas 77057
www.karunamayi.org
713-365-9676

Seminar on employment law

March 17, 6 PM
Hosted by: Indo American Chamber of Commerce
India House
8888 W. Bellfort Street
Houston Texas
www.iaccgh.com
713-624-7131

Meditation Retreat

March 18,
Unity Church Pyramid
2929 Unity Drive
Houston, Texas 77057
Houston@Karunamayi.org
www.karunamayi.org
713-365-9676

WASHINGTON**Rudresh Mahanthappa**

March 12, 8 PM
Kirkland Performance Center
350 Kirkland Avenue
Kirkland, Washington 98033
www.kpcenter.org
425-828-0422

Music concert

March 13, 8 AM
Kirkland Performance Center
350 Kirkland Avenue
Kirkland
Washington 98033
www.kpcenter.org
425-828-0422

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ALLIANCE for Jat Sikh girl, US born, attractive, fair, dentist, 29/5'4", graduated from a reputed university, status and well-educated physician family; seeking well-qualified, clean shaven, professional groom, physician or dentist preferred. Email details/photo to: pjsfl80@yahoo.com

ALLIANCE invited from Hindu professionals, for US born daughter, Dentist (DMD), Bengali, 27/5'6", beautiful and slim, raised with family values. Parents: well-established engineer and physician. Email: omgnpn@gmail.com

BENGALI Hindu parents invite alliance for their US born lawyer daughter, 31/5'2", employed in New York City; from professionals. BanikMD@optonline.net

BROTHER seeks handsome prof. match; for beautiful, talented MD sister, 31/5'4", finishing residency in June. Family of physicians email bio/ recent photos to: abgupta10@hotmail.com

CANADIAN Hindu business parents seek businessman /professional; for beautiful, cultured daughter willing to relocate within North America, 29/5'2", Computer Science Ph.D., East/West values. Email bio/recent photo: nk_29_1980@yahoo.ca

EXTREMELY BEAUTIFUL, very fair, slim, 5'8"/28 yr. girl with graduate degrees from Ivy League universities, with a perfect blend of eastern & western values, from highly established family, seeks tall, very fair, 29-34 yr. professional man, preferably in medicine, finance, or business. Please send biodata with photo(s) to: dreamlist11@gmail.com US Citizens only.

GUJARATI PATEL parents invite correspondence for USA born daughter, 32/5'8", tall, slim, beautiful, doctor. Caste no bar. Please email biodata & recent photograph to: shree144@aol.com

GUPTA parents invite correspondence from suitable Physician match in Maryland area; for 27yr/ 5'7", beautiful, attractive, intelligent girl, 2nd year resident in Surgery. Call (601) 898-8885(H) (601) 954 2366 (C)

HARVARD educated executive, beautiful, 34/5'8"/125, U.S. born, v.fair, affluent SI Brahmin family; seeks accomplished professional, age 33-38, tall, never married, vegetarian. Email: reply2488@yahoo.com

HINDU parents invite alliance from educated professionals, residing in USA; for never married, 40yr, MD. USA raised daughter. Respond with recent photo/ biodate: mbSukanya1@gmail.com

HINDU parents seek alliance for daughter, 24/5'1", 2nd year medical student, from US medical students and residents. Email photo and biodata at : anu79@hotmail.com

HINDU Punjabi parents invite correspondence from MD professionals for US born MD daughter, 30 yrs old, slim, attractive, working physician. Send bio-data & recent photo to: C43kdk@yahoo.com

HINDU Punjabi parents seek suitable match for US born, beautiful, fair, slim, MD - doing fellowship, 32yr/5'4", never married, match must have Graduate level education, be career-minded, handsome, athletic, personable, 5'9" - 6'2", 32-36 & never married. Email photograph, CV & bio to: tspt101@gmail.com

NORTH INDIAN parents (Physician father) invite correspondence for Doctor of Optometry daughter. Beautiful, attractive U.S. born 32yrs/5'2". Serious inquiries from physicians only. Email biodata & recent photo: weddingmatch2010@gmail.com

PUNJABI parents seek a professional match for their professional daughter, 30/5'5", an outgoing clean shaven Punjabi boy, 5'9" and over. Please email bio-data & recent photo : sandalykatyal@yahoo.com

SEEKING Catholic boy w/family values, for niece, US resident, graduate, 27/5'3", very fair, attractive, Mangalorian Catholic. Email biodata with recent photo to: ericfernandes19@gmail.com

SINDHI family, well-established, well-educated, would like to introduce you to their vivacious, 26yr/5'4", daughter, raised in USA, just completed medical school, moving on to residency on the East Coast. She is kind, fun loving, smart, beautiful, v.fair, charming, friendly, loves pets and loves life! Genuinely inclined towards charitable causes, loves to visit India, deeply ingrained Indian values, otherwise totally western. As religious as you can expect a 26 year old to be. Lets just correspond by email, send us a few sentences about yourself along with your photo. If we both are comfortable, perhaps we can talk on the phone and share more details. All were attempting at this time is to introduce you to our daughter, and you take it from there. sindhifamily1@gmail.com

SOUTH INDIAN Brahmin physician parents seek alliance for USMD daughter, 28/5'7", attractive, fair, slim, resident at a prestigious medical institute in New York. Email bio/recent photo: nymd1978@yahoo.com

ALLIANCE for very beautiful, 36/5'4", USMD vegetarian Hindu girl. Email biodata/photo to: damini56@yahoo.com

SOUTH Indian Hindu Brahmin parents invite Brahmin correspondence from well-educated professionals preferably tall; for daughter, 24/5'7", (B.E, M.S), currently residing in the US. Email: sprema@me.com

SPECIALIST physician for an extremely beautiful doctor Nephrologist, slim, Garg, 33yrs/5'4". Send recent photo & biodata: **170 Howard Oaks Drive, Macon, GA 31210.** Call (478) 361-5558/. Email: shyamgarg@sonalimports.com

ALLIANCE from Hindu professionals; for Maharashtrian girl, 37 years/5'8", MS MBA working on West Coast. Email: Biodata/ photo: brc983@gmail.com

ALLIANCE invited for a beautiful, slim, Bengali Brahmin girl, US educated engineer, 30/5'1", working in a reputed company in US. Seeking suitable Bengali or Punjabi Brahmin professional, below 36yrs old. US raised required. Please respond with bio/photo to: prajapatiag6@gmail.com

BENGALI KOLKATA girl, 31/5'3", seeks US based groom. Parents live in New York. Call (917) 833-4279/ (818) 308-0119

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Classifieds

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B'FUL Software Eng, 28yrs/5'4", BS MS Agarwal girl in USA. Seeking edu prof boy. Email: AgarwalGirlUSA@yahoo.com Ph: (978) 710-6106

CORRESPONDENCE invited from non-smoking decent gentleman for 45 years old, Goan Catholic divorced US citizen female. No bars. Please reply to: Jmich4@msn.com

GUJARATI Jain family invites correspondence for US based daughter, 40/5'4", good-looking, brief divorced (no issue); from well settled vegetarian grooms. Bio/photos: ajabi1820@yahoo.com

GUJARATI parents invite correspondence for daughter, 34/5'6", pretty, slim, fair skin, biology graduate, musician, born & raised in USA. Cast no bar. Send correspondence/ recent photo: saran.75@hotmail.com

GUPTA Physician parents invite alliance for UK born daughter, beautiful, fair, 27/ 5'1", MBA, employed MNC; from professionals: s-kg2010@hotmail.com

HINDU Punjabi professional for daughter, medical technologist, never married, NYC, 44/5'4"/140. Email: nymedteck@yahoo.com

NORTH INDIAN Panjabi Khatri parents seek match; for 24/5'5", slim, fair, daughter, in her final year JD at a prestigious law school in US. Email: sood250@yahoo.com

SI Hindu Physcian parents seek suitable alliance for their US born USMD daughter, 30 yrs, starting Neprology fellowship in Washington, DC July 2010; from US born professionals preferably USMD. Email: srk51@yahoo.com

Matrimonial Groom

A VERY affluent sophisticated Hindu Punjabi physician family invites introduction from exceptionally elegant, beautiful, cultured, professional young ladies 22-27/5'6", or taller; for their extremely handsome, charismatic, athletic, sincere physician son, USMD, 29/6'1", radiology resident. Photo/ biodata: sdg610@gmail.com

HINDU Business family seeks alliance; for handsome son, 41/5'7", settled in Canada, divorcee, no liability. Family owns hotel, real estates; seeking beautiful girl, family values, respectable background. Email biodata, photo: matricanada@gmail.com

HINDU Punjabi parents seek alliance; for US born, handsome, fair, Athletic, Musical, IT Consultant with Prestigious firm, 27yr/5'9", never married, match must have good sense of humor, beautiful, between, 23-27yrs, never married. Please email photograph, CV & bio to: tspt101@gmail.com

Parents seeking Hindu bride for 30yrs old/5'8", Hindu (Sindhi), good-looking, Bachelor Computer Science, well-settled, US Citizen, legally divorced son. Call (847) 287-2171 or email: chicagoguy1979@gmail.com

Sikh match for a well settled, handsome, athletic, sincere and caring biomedical executive on the US east coast; US citizen, 40yrs/ 5'9". Divorced after a very brief issueless marriage. GurSikh family of professionals, well established in the USA. Ecormat@gmail.com

WELL established Gursikh parents based in Midwest, seeking USA based Gursikh bride, for US born Gursikh son, 27/5'6". He is pursuing full time MBA graduating in the class of 2011. Please send bio-data & recent photo to: bhk_2000@yahoo.com

GUPTA family invites educated girl; for a 76 born/5'7", software consultant. Call (718) 461-5283 or email biodata/ recent photo: naveeng1992@gmail.com or pjgupta007@gmail.com

HINDU Punjabi Khatri Canadian Citizen boy, 36/5'5", handsome fair, businessman, never married; seeks professional, good-looking, family oriented girl. Prefer from USA and Canada. Caste no bar. Serious enquiries only with recent photo and Biodata. premg36@gmail.com

NI Hindu parents of MD, 30/5'10", from NYC; seek suitable professional, tall, slim, beautiful match from Tri-state area. Family well-established. Email biodata & photo: erdocofny@gmail.com

PARENTS seek bride; for 33/5'11", Harvard MBA earning seven figures/annum. Email: newyorkmatch@gmail.com

PUNJABI Aggarwal family seeking match for their handsome son, 29/5'9", Engineering from India, Masters from USA and working as Senior engineer in California. Educated/ beautiful girl; from good family presently in USA on any kind of visa is preferred. Please send bio-data/ recent picture: ms30@live.com

TELUGU Boy, US Educated, 31/5'10", MS; seeks 24-31. \$250K/yr. Caste no bar. telugupellisandadi@yahoo.com

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Food Runner and Wait Staff required for Indian Restaurant in Somerville, NJ. Accommodation provided. Salary no consideration for right candidate. Call: (973) 953-9945.

WANTED

Experienced Food Runners for busy NJ Restaurant in New Jersey. Accommodation available. Please call (201) 220-1405 or email: mrdarowalla@yahoo.com

Continued on Page A29

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The Immigrants' Voice

From helping immigrants pass the citizenship test to empowering them at various levels, **ARTHUR J PAIS** reports on the **SOUTH ASIAN COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL SERVICES**, winner of the India Abroad Gopal Raju Award for Community Service 2009

Now, let us get you to remember a few key states," the instructor said. "Let us start with the states beginning with New."

The man started, "New York, New Jersey, New Virginia..."

He knew, it transpired, the names of just three states, New York, New Jersey and Virginia. But when he panicked, he would make the last into New Virginia.

Though he had been through several rounds of coaching, he still could not get the names of New Mexico or New Hampshire. He was losing faith in passing the citizenship test. He had tried it five times, and the failure was eating at him.

The man, who was in his early sixties, was at the classes organized by the South Asian Council For Social Services, SACSS, in Queens, New York.

"It was not easy to keep him focused, but we had to be very patient with him," says Veera Mookerjee, the program manager for the council.

Sudha Acharya, Executive Director, SACSS and one of its founders, remembers the man vividly. "He had difficulty getting the names of prominent presidents, but we were not going to give up on him. When he referred to Washington DC (*as a president*), we would tell him that he had got it half-right and now all that he had to do was to forget the DC part."

At his sixth attempt last year, the man passed the examination. He was not the only one in a celebratory mood. About a dozen others in the group who encountered various difficulties with the test felt emboldened.

Empowering people at various levels is the mission for SACSS, a 10-year-old organization that offers numerous free services. Through its help to obtain insurance for low-income groups, it empowers dozens of New Yorkers each year.

It also organizes free medical clinics, especially checking out hypertension, diabetes and heart problems and offering education resources for a proper diet. Being one of the more powerful voices for immigrants, it empowers them to deal with their elected representatives.



Sudha Acharya, center, with program manager Veera Mookerjee, left, and volunteer Reena Prakash at SACSS

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Many state agencies seek its help. Three years ago, SACSS was invited to join the New York Immigration Coalition's efforts to get immigrants access healthcare services in New York. It works with New York University to increase health awareness among immigrants. Its services have been used by the New York City Commission on Human Rights in conducting surveys on racial bias and discrimination.

It is also a recipient of the annual Union Square Award for groups that help New Yorkers get the best of the possible benefits from social agencies and work with communities to empower them.

One of the biggest initiative SACSS took, even during its teething period, was to help 45 families who had lost loved ones in the 9/11

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FROM THE EDITORS

For being one of the more powerful voices for South Asian immigrants and empowering them at normal and abnormal times, India Abroad honors the South Asian Council For Social Services and its Executive Director Sudha Acharya with the Gopal Raju Award for Community Service

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The Immigrants' Voice

M38 ◀ PAGE attacks, offering them counseling, and in some cases training them for job placement.

Meena Jerath, who dealt with her husband's death and looked after her young son mostly by herself despite feeling increasingly despondent, is one of the many who benefited from SACSS' help. Acharya contacted her a year after the tragedy, asking her if she wanted to join counseling with families of other victims. She wasn't sure if she wanted to accept their help, but SACSS volunteers were persuasive.

'Some of the people there had just come from India and were lost,' she told the *Daily News* two years ago. 'We also helped each other. I came out of my shell.'

SACSS, despite its dozen staff members and volunteers, makes a bigger impact than many organizations of its kind because it is continually aware of the need to work with similar-minded agencies.

"We work not only in the offices and in schools and temples, but also on an individual basis," Mookerjee says. "We run into a cabbie and find out he has no insurance; we tell them the services the city provides. I talk to people on the subways. We are proactive throughout the day."

"Luckily for us, we are surrounded by faith institutions," says Acharya, referring to half a dozen Hindu temples, two gurdwaras and one mosque for South Asian immigrants. "It makes our work a little easier when we go to a temple or a mosque and hand out the information regarding our services and the medical clinics we run from time to time."

It is to temples, mosques and gurdwaras that Ayaz Ahmed, the organization's health program coordinator, turns to when he wants to set up screening tests. 'Health cleaning' stands have also been put up out-



A session at SACSS in Flushing, Queens

DOMINIC XAVIER

Day of Remembrance
September 28, 2002

BOOK OF MEMORIES

*A tribute to the
South Asians and
Indo-Caribbeans
who were lost on
September 11, 2001*

*South Asian
Council for Social
Services (SACSS)*

side the Eagle Theater in Jackson Heights, New York, a popular destination for Bollywood films, and in and around restaurants on the 6th Street (known as Curry Lane) and around 29th street in mid-Manhattan (Curry Hill) that beckon many South Asian cab drivers.

On a recent Saturday, about a dozen parents came to listen to Mookerjee about parenting and getting their children the best out of New York public schools. It was a mandatory program and the parents did not want to be named or photographed. The emphasis is on the positive, the organizers say, and hence it is called Parents Empowerment Program initiated by the state agencies.

SACSS, which has held the program in public schools, religious institutions and libraries, also conducts it on its premises. Parents also learn about Internet safety, health and nutrition and financial management.

"This is one of the best services offered by SACSS," says board secretary Ranu

Boppana, a child psychiatrist who has a private practice in Manhattan. "If the parents do not change their behavior, the children will be taken into foster care homes."

Many South Asian parents do not know how to discipline their children without using corporal punishment or emotional torment.

"But there are indeed parents amidst us who need to know of the risk they are running, how they are harming their children and themselves," she says. "SACSS is doing a very good job at preventing further abuse."

Her thoughts are reflected by Dr Runi Mukherji-Ratnam, chair and professor of psychology, SUNY College at Old Westbury, who has two PhDs, one from an American university and another from an Indian Institute of Technology in India. She is the vice president of the organization.

Mukherji-Ratnam, who has been with SACSS since its inception, says it is one of the hand-

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‘Don’t forget there are thousands of Indians who need help’

SUDHA ACHARYA, Executive Director, SACSS, explains to **ARTHUR J PAIS** why we cannot afford to be bystanders anymore

As the dire economic situation deepens, forcing many community organizations to confront budget and salary cuts, Sudha Acharya appeals to Indians across America to help organizations that offer services to struggling immigrants. Among these organizations is New York’s South Asian Council for Social Services, SACSS, which she co-founded a decade ago.

A New York publication revealed last year, without mentioning what her salary was, that Acharya took a 50 percent pay cut — along with a 15 percent cut imposed on her staff — so that SACSS would continue to do its work.

“There is a lot of philanthropy in our community, but we would like to see more money coming into organizations here,” Acharya, Executive Director, SACSS, mused the other day as she sat down for an interview in the canteen of the Hindu Temple in Flushing, New York. “People tell me that their dollar goes a long way across India. I understand that. Give by all means to India but don’t forget there are thousands of Indians and people from other countries in the region who need help. These immigrants came to this country with lot of disadvantages, unlike many of us who migrated in the 1960s.”

SACSS, located on the ground floor of a brick building in Flushing, Queens, offers free services not just for the poor. Many middle class immigrants come to it to learn or practice their English. The organization also helped families of 9/11 victims cope with their tragedies and concomitant emotional and physical problems by arranging counseling. Some family members had visa problems too. One woman with several children had to fight deportation because her husband, who had perished in the attack on the Twin Towers, had not received his green card.

“We are doing an important job, I believe,” she said in her soft-spoken but resolute voice. “We are not helping just the older immigrants by teaching them their responsibilities and how they can get help for themselves and their children from the government and other organizations. By doing so, we are helping families — and a new generation.”

There are organizations in New York like SAYA! (*South Asian Youth Action*) to help children of South Asian and Caribbean immigrants learn skills, leadership qualities and deal with racial bias or hazing in the schools. “But we also needed an organization to help the adults,” she said, adding that there are a handful of South Asian organizations like Sakhil which help immigrants with different needs.

“We work with some of them,” Acharya said. “But we have our own specific programs and they are helping immigrants like taxi drivers, newspaper vendors, domestic help, and retired people.” Helping the community also means conducting surveys of immigrants’ needs or joining a Census drive.

Acharya came to America from India about 40 years ago. Even as she was raising her daughter and running a home while earning an MBA, she was looking for service opportunities.

“I grew up in a very progressive home in India,” said Acharya who studied English literature at a Karnataka uni-



DOMINIC XAVIER

versity. Her father was an engineer; her mother Bharathibai Rao, an educator deeply interested in helping Dalit children.

“I used to accompany my mother to the villages, helping the poorest children to read and write, and getting them to learn the basics of hygiene,” she said. “When I arrived in America, I wanted to continue similar work. But many people, who had come here around the time we arrived, were professionals, and they did not seem to want any help.”

Of course, later she realized that many of them indeed needed help in adjusting to a new culture, in taking care of their older parents and in handling their children, who were growing up knowing very little about the religion and culture of their parents.

Her work in the past decade dealt mostly with empowering poorer and less-educated immigrants from India and half a dozen countries in the subcontinent, not to forget people of Indian origin from the Caribbean.

But even in the 1970s, she had started working with

Indian organizations that were creating awareness in Indians to fight for their place in the larger American society and to network effectively with their political leaders.

“It was clear to me and some other like-minded people that we needed visibility,” she said. “We needed an organization to make that happen.”

Acharya started her community service work as the chairperson of the Joint Committee of Indian Associations in New York in 1973. After the Joint Committee became the Federation of Indian Associations, FIA, she became its president in 1983-84. She was also the first woman to lead the organization, which became famous for, among other things, hosting the India Day Parade to mark India’s Independence Day. It became a routine for top elected officials in New York as well as aspirants to march with the parade on Fifth Avenue. The parade has a long tradition of inviting Indian movie stars to be grand marshals, starting with Sunil Dutt.

She later became the vice president and the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of

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With Hindi film star, Suni Dutt



PHOTOGRAPHS: KIND COURTESY SUDHA ACHARYA

‘Don’t forget there are thousands of Indians who need help’

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the National Federation of Indian-American Associations, the largest umbrella Indian organization in the US. In 1989, Acharya served as the co-convenor and secretary of the First Global Convention of People of Indian Origin when GOPIO was born. Acharya represented the All India Women’s Conference, AIWC, at the UN, worked on the Planning Committee for the NGO Forum for the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing in 1995, and later chaired the NGO Committee on the Status of Women for two terms 1995 to 1999. She was also a Vice President of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN, CONGO.

During her early years in America, people looked at India as a mystical country. At the same time some would only think of a few people connected to India: Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa. Many people knew of snake charmers, but not that India was constructing huge dams, industrial plants and roads across its nooks and corners

But when Indians began to prosper and fast became the ‘model minority’, there seemed no room for failure anywhere.

Like many other professionals, she knew that everything was not all right with the community. There were a handful of women like her who had begun in the mid 1980s to address the problems of domestic violence among Indians and other South Asians

Her part-time involvement in various communities led her to be a full-time community organizer, with the establishment of SACSS. She took early retirement from Verizon, where she was a project manager, and began preparing the organization to teach English to immigrants, get them to attend parental counseling, encourage them to see a doctor even when they wrongly thought they could not get any insurance from government agencies, and prepare them for the Citizenship Test.

“The health drive we hold reaches over 400 people each year,” she said. “We have been helping people who have been postponing seeing a doctor till it was very late because they did not know how to access help from city and state agencies.”

She has met people who have been in America for many years but were seeing a doctor for the first time — even though they have been sick on and off — only after meeting with SACSS officials.

The organization has been around for a decade, and has received awards for its work, and coverage in publications like the mass circulated *Daily News*, but its foundation may need to grow stronger.

As *The Nation* magazine wrote last year, ‘SACSS is the sort of agency most at risk of not making it through the downturn: A shoestring operation that could disappear tomorrow with few people noticing, save for the hundreds of South Asian immigrants who rely on it for job-training courses and healthcare workshops that help clients navigate a byzantine system even many native New Yorkers find impenetrable.’

It has been a long time since Acharya took her own first steps in creating a life for herself and her husband and their daughter. But as she sees around her thousands of other immigrants facing a multitude of problems, she feels she cannot be a bystander.

The Immigrants’ Voice

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ful of South Asian organizations in the state that recognized that there were serious emotional and health problems in the community, and that many affluent Indians (and by extension other South Asians) were ignoring them or were not aware of them.

SACSS volunteers have heard from some high achievers in the community who boast of how they came to America with hardly any resources and made it on their own.

“If I could do it, so can they too,” said one man who owns a couple of firms employing hundreds of people.

“But we forget that many of us came to America with an excellent education in India which, like the IITs, was subsidized or funded by the government,” Ratnam muses. “We have to give back to our communities not only in India but also

here.”

She applauds SACSS for working with a number of city agencies, with New York University, with temples like BAPS to provide service to the communities.

Though the organization uses the word South Asian, many of its serv-

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Acharya, right, with then Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi, October 1983

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Acharya, third from left, with then Indian ambassador to the US, K R Narayanan, second from left, and then New York mayor Ed Koch, third from right, at the India Day Parade



PHOTOGRAPHS: KIND COURTESY SUDHA ACHARYA

The Immigrants' Voice

M41 ← PAGE ices also go to people of South Asian origin in New York from the Caribbean countries.

“On several occasions, non-South Asians and in one instance a Colombian has sought our help, and we have helped them despite the severe demands on our resources,” Acharya says.

One reason the organization is able to reach hundreds of South Asian immigrants are the languages its staff, including the cherubic administrative assistant Hasmukh Parekh, and volunteers speak. They can converse in at least a dozen languages, a factor that will help them a lot when they join various other associations in canvassing people to register for the 2010 Census.

As SACSS gets ready for a big drive to mobilize the South Asian community to participate in the 2010 Census, the organization also recalls with pride two of its publications. The booklet *Unlocking the Golden Door: A Report on The Needs of South Asian New Yorkers* became a good resource for city and state government agencies.

The organization has also produced *Book of Memories*, a tribute to those who were lost on 9/11, 2001. The tribute includes profiles of 40 people. “The *Book of Memories* is a grateful celebration of their lives and legacies,” the organization says on its Web site.

Unlocking the Golden Door assessed the needs of the South Asian and Indo-Caribbean communities in the areas of child-care, health and other services for families and individuals. Other areas of assessment included prevalence of child and elder abuse, domestic violence, alcohol and substance dependency and the extent of discrimination in the aftermath of 9/11.

Reena Prakash saw the sign outside the SACSS office on the way to the Hindu Temple in Flushing last summer. She was curious and began chatting with Acharya. Next thing, she was volunteering with the council. After working as an intern for over three months, Prakash, a Hunter College student, decided to stay on “because of the quality of the service we provide here and the need for volunteers.”

If she was not so drawn to the organization, she said, she would have added the internship on her resume and left. But she stayed on.

“The dedication here is exemplary,” she says.

“One of the things I tell the people here is that they know much more English than they realize,” Prakash says. “Some of them remind me of my mother. She knows some English, but she hesitates to use it.”

Since she knows a certain amount of Hindi,

Prakash, whose parents come from Kerala, can communicate well with the learners.

On a recent Saturday, Prakash was teaching English to a Muslim immigrant. The woman has been in the program for just about three months. She has also been taking one-on-one conversation classes. And yet when a photographer asked if he could take a picture for a magazine feature, she said without any hesitation, in English: “My husband will not like it.”



Acharya, left, at an All India Women's Conference Workshop, August 2001

Acharya, first row, second from left, with then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, first row, third from right

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Spellbound!

After she won the Scripps National Spelling Bee last summer, **KAVYA SHIVASHANKAR** returned home to find the local news channel shoot her welcome video from a helicopter. **ASEEM CHHABRA** spoke to this year's winner of the India Abroad Youth Achiever Award

In the days and weeks after she won the Scripps National Spelling Bee competition in Washington, DC last summer, Kavya Shivashankar's life changed substantially. There was a trip to Los Angeles to appear as a guest on the Jimmy Kimmel Live show in Los Angeles, where she competed with the host in his 6th spelling bee competition.

Guillermo, Kimmel's funny assistant, who apparently works in the show's parking lot, gave out the words, messing up the pronunciations. The first word for Kavya was "vegetate" although Guillermo insisted on pronouncing it as "bicatey." It was all fun as Kimmel playfully pulled Kavya's pony tail, while the 13-year-old kept her smile and laughed, showing her braces and the camera even focused on her family — dad Mirle, a computer program manager for a global consulting firm, and a civil engineer by training, mother Sandhya, who also works in the software industry, and younger sister Vanya, who is eight. At the end of the segment, Kavya was declared the winner.

"They were so funny, and they pronounced words in a funny way or the definition would be something very funny," Kavya recently said from her home in Olathe, Kansas. "I figured out one word and so I was able to beat Jimmy Kimmel. I was the first person to

beat him in that spelling bee."

When Kavya arrived home after winning the Scripps competition, her friends came to receive her at the airport. "There were people lined up on our street," she recalls. "There were banners welcoming me back."

"The local news channel shot the welcome home video from a helicopter," Mirle adds. Later in the summer Kavya was also honored by the Karnataka government in India and she also met with former Indian president A P J Abdul Kalam in Orlando, Florida.

"Both were once in a lifetime opportunities and I was honored that they would recognize me," notes Kavya.

Then in the fall Kavya started high school and things changed even more for her. "I know it's over for me and now I cannot participate in the spelling bee anymore and yes, it has been kind of empty," she says. There is a lot more schoolwork and the teenager's life is busy with other activities. But she does



Kavya, a week after winning the 2009 Scripps National Spelling Bee, meets Goofy at Disneyland in Anaheim, California, June 3, 2009



Kavya with the trophy after winning the 2009 Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington DC, May 28, 2009

JIM YOUNG/REUTERS

FROM THE EDITORS

For the success she has earned, for the example she provides not just for the community but for mainstream America, for the promise she holds out for the future, India Abroad proudly honors Kavya Shivashankar with the Young Achiever Award for 2009.

SCOTT BRINEGAR/DISNEY

miss her routine of studying spellings.

"Spelling was such a big part of my life, I loved doing it, I enjoyed it and every day I would sit down and find time for my passion. The whole family would get involved."

Kavya and her family heard about the spelling bee competitions in 2002 through family friends who directed the Shivashankars to an organization called North South Foundation.

Run by Indian Americans the NGO helps needy and eligible students, and provides scholarships in India. They also provide educational content for spelling, mathematics and geographical bees. Each

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Kavya, center, and her father Mirle, right, meet former Indian president A P J Abdul Kalam, left



Spellbound!

M44 ← PAGE year the organization holds national and regional competition.

As a coincidence in 2002 NSF opened a regional center in Kansas City. That was eight years ago and Kavya was five at the time. She participated in her first competition the next year.

“We didn’t know how it worked and we thought let’s see how she is going to perform,” Mirle remembers. “That was when we started focusing on spelling bees and since then it has been a family effort together. We have enjoyed it. It’s not like she won it every time. She has made mistakes and we learnt from those mistakes.”

So how did Kavya prepare for the spelling bee competitions?

“That I can’t share with you,” Mirle says, laughing. “I never studied the dictionary, but only used it as a research tool,” Kavya adds.

“It’s basically very simple,” says Mirle. “We didn’t adapt to memorization. Yes, there are a very small fraction of the words that you have to memorize. But for the majority of the

WORDS...

Kavya spelt these on the road to the Spelling Bee title

disciples
mesophilic
ergasia
kurta
escritoire
hydrargyrum
blancmange
baignoire
huisache
ecossaise
diacoele
bouquiniste
isagoge
phoresy
Laodicean

words there is a science behind it. For Latin and Greek we would understand the roots. When it came to Sanskrit, Italian, French and Spanish — words that were brought into English from other languages — we looked at the pattern. There were certain rules to follow. We understood that, did a lot of research and followed that. And that’s how we went in and built our mnemonics.”

It was important for Mirle and Sandhya to develop the process for Kavya. “It’s very simple,” says Mirle. “Every kid has the potential to do it. It’s all about skill and will. You can always develop the skill if you have the will and you develop the will by making it fun. So we made it interesting. Imagine memorizing words for six years?”

Kavya’s parents were always keen that their older daughter should not miss out on her childhood activities while focusing on the spelling bee. For one thing they sent her to public schools, instead of home schooling her. And Kavya also focused on her extracurricular activities.

At one point she was engaged in ice-skating, playing the violin, swimming, learning ballet and Bharata Natyam. But

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‘Spelling is my passion’

Kavya Shivashankar explains her motivation

Last June, we published Marsha Girish’s encounter with her cousin, champion speller Kavya Shivashankar. We reproduce parts of that interview:

A new Spelling Bee champion has been crowned, and it is an honor for me to say that Kavya Shivashankar is my cousin.

To win the Bee is a very big thing — every television network, every newspaper wants a bit of your time and Kavya, tired as she was, was rushing from one interview to the other. I managed to get some time with her for an interview, in course of which my cousin helped me understand how spelling affects one’s life as well:

You spent about six years preparing to be the winner of the Scripps National Spelling Bee. What was the best part of the competition?

I enjoyed most of it, but I think the best part would probably be spelling my winning word, ‘laodicean.’

This is your fourth year at the Bee. In the previous three years you placed in the finals but never managed to win. Was there any time you felt as if spelling just was not your thing? Did you ever want to give up?

Not really. I enjoy spelling. I love it.

The Spelling Bee preparation is a family event. Your sister Vanya wants to compete in the Spelling Bee too. Is your father going to coach her or are you going to be the main coach, now that you have won the title and know what it takes?

I’m definitely going to help out by quizzing her and teach her the roots and stuff. But my dad will still be the main coach.

What would you say to young spellers who want to compete in the Scripps National Spelling Bee some day?

My advice would be that you have to know that you want to do it, because it’s something that takes a lot of practice and dedication as well as time and effort, because you have to study pretty hard. It doesn’t come easily.

You said Nupur Lala, who won the Bee in 1999, was your role model. Now that you are a winner, many young children are going to be looking up to you. How does that make you feel?

I think that’s great. It’s kind of a great honor to know that, and I hope to set a good example.

Many kids just spell, nothing else — but you dance, play the violin, manage to keep great grades in school, and still win the Bee. How hard was it to manage your time?

I would like to point out that it’s not always true that the spellers just spell, because many of them do have extracurricular activities. I try to enjoy it, the studying and preparation, and to mix it up with my extracurricular activities.

It was kind of hard, but you just have to find the time every day.

You have talked about how your father coached you for the Bee. Did your mother play any part in the process?

Oh, most definitely. She was a great source of encouragement and support, and anything I asked for or needed, she would help me out with.

Who is the one who discovered your talent, and how?

I am not sure who discovered my talent. But I first got interested in spelling during my kindergarten years. I went to a private school and they had a program called The Vitamins to Reading, where they taught us the fundamentals of consonants and vowels.

That subject got me interested in want-

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KAVYA SHIVASHANKAR

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Spellbound!

M46 ◀ PAGE

it was getting too much for the young girl and so her parents sat down with her and asked her to choose between some of the activities. Kavya decided to give up ice-skating and ballet. “And she was getting quite good at these activities,” Mirle notes.

“The rule in the house was that she would have to get done with her homework first and then came her extra-curricular activities,” says Mirle. “For instance, if it was dance or the violin, she couldn’t just go to class without practice. Then there was also her dinner and play. And then, if she had time, she needed to do spellings.”

So there were days when Kavya would have to catch up with her homework, or she had to prepare for tests. At those times she would skip practicing spellings. “She would often catch up on weekends,” Mirle adds. “We would sit together and work on words.”

Still Kavya would often get breaks to do regular things that kids like to do on weekends. “Absolutely, it wasn’t like she was bombarded with work,” says Mirle. “But we had to prioritize, to make the right choices at times.”

“It was definitely a new experience at first,” Kavya says, recalling her early days preparing for spelling bees. “But I had fun even though I didn’t do too well. There was the thrill of getting the words and trying to spell them. And I even enjoyed the preparation, with my dad coaching me. I just really wanted to continue from there.”

Her friends and teachers encouraged her. She even got extra homework and additional challenging spellings from her teachers. At times the competitions were tough, but she never felt down or rejected.

“I never took it as a disappointment but as an opportunity to learn from my mistakes,” she says. “It was through these mistakes that I developed the method of spelling on my hand with my fingers. It was just a method to help me visualize the words. I enjoyed spelling so much that I really wanted to win. It had been my dream for so long.”

After the initial disappoint-

ments, Kavya’s perseverance began to pay off. From 2006 to 2009 she was placed in the top 10 in the competition. “In 2006 she surprised a lot of people for making the top ten and she was just 10 years old at that time,” Mirle says.

Last year at the Scripps competition, Kavya was the only contestant left in the final tenth round. She had just spelt the word “phorse” correctly to move up from the ninth round.

“In the tenth round I was trying to control my nerves and I was becoming quite emotional, because I knew I still had to spell a word,” Kavya recalls. “Even when I heard my word — “laodicean” and I knew how to spell the word, I had to be very careful. I didn’t want there to be a slip of the tongue and ruin everything. It was a word I had studied so I was familiar with it, but I decided to play it safe, asked all the information, wrote it down on my hand and then spelt it.”

Winning felt good, but through the competition she learnt so many life lessons. “I learnt about focus, discipline, setting goals, perseverance, composure and being able to be up on stage and controlling my nerves,” she adds.

The Shivashankars are still busy with spelling bees.

One daughter has crossed the finish line. Now the younger, Vanya, just 8, recently won the Olathe Spelling Bee and will compete in the National Bee in May.

“I really want to be in the spelling bee like my sister,” says Vanya, adding that she did not find the practice hard. “Once you know how to do it, nothing is hard.”

“It is because of her own interest,” Mirle says, referring to Vanya. “In the past five years as we went to the Scripps competitions, ESPN featured Kavya, and Vanya would be right in the middle. Everyone also wanted to interview Vanya. So she has kind of developed that interest.”

One of the many things the family agrees on is their favorite film *Spellbound* — the Oscar-winning documentary that featured the lives of a number of kids as they prepared for the Scripps Spelling Bee competitions. They own a DVD and have watched it many times.

“It was one of the main sources of inspiration, for me,” says Kavya. “We still watch it,” adds Mirle. “Our younger daughter can even recite lines from it.”



JIM YOUNG/REUTERS

‘Spelling is my passion’

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ing to compete in the Spelling Bee.
Are you relieved that it’s finally over, that you’ve finally won?

In a way I am relieved, because it’s something that I’ve been wanting to achieve for such a long time — it’s been my dream.

But I’m also going to miss spelling, because it’s been such a big part of my life, and I hope to kind of bring it back in by helping coach Vanya.

Many people say that Spelling Bee competitors lose their childhood because they spend so much time preparing for it. Does it feel that way to you? Do you think you have lost out on your childhood?

No I don’t, because I know that I’ve been doing something that I really enjoy and it was something I really wanted to do. I mean, if it was something I didn’t want to do, then I would have said that, but spelling is my passion, and I follow my passions.

I was reading some blogs where a few people were saying the Spelling Bee is a useless competition, because all you do is spell a bunch of words no one uses, to win a lot of money. How do you react to such comments?

I think sometimes people don’t understand that you just have to follow your passion. Someone might be passionate about batting and other people will say it is useless, it is just making money hitting a ball with a stick — which I think it is, actually, in my opinion.

So the thing is, what makes sense to you doesn’t have to make sense to everyone else — and it doesn’t matter. It has to be your passion, something you want to do — and in spelling I am following my own passion. Maybe in the opinion of someone else it is not particularly useful, but I think it is, because spelling is something you use in everyday life. I don’t think people say such things out of jealousy; I think it is just that they don’t understand, just like how smart people in school are considered nerds.

The Honor Roll

India Abroad Youth
Achievers, all

SOMDEV DEV VARMAN

Tennis star
2008

AKSHAY RAJAGOPAL

Geography Bee
champion

SAMEER MISHRA

Scripps Nation Spelling Bee
champion

SHIVANI SUD

Winner, Intel Science
Talent Search
2009

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THE **India Abroad**
AWARD OF LIFETIME SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY 2009
SREEDHAR MENON

Banker on a Mission

Fortune smiled on **SREEDHAR MENON**. He spends his retirement returning the favor. **BIJOY VENUGOPAL** meets the winner of India Abroad's second Award for Lifetime Service to the Community

As a schoolboy growing up in Kerala in the 1940s, Sreedhar Menon dreamed of a better life. But even his fantasies did not prepare him for the experience of riding up the elevators of Manhattan high-rises with the stalwarts of international banking.

Menon went on to blaze a stellar career with American Express Bank and other Wall Street giants. Like all bankers he enjoyed creating wealth, but a burning ambition to empower India motivated him to give back to the country of his birth. And he was not content with making donations to nonprofits.

Outlining his vision to *India Abroad*, Menon said, "I have always wanted to contribute to improving India's profile in the US."

Two of his initiatives speak for themselves: In 1992, he founded the Center for the Advanced Study of India at the

University of Pennsylvania; and in 2004 he took the lead in establishing the Jagdish Bhagwati Chair in Indian Political Economy at Columbia University.

Menon dedicates his vision to his father who struggled to send his children to school. His alma mater, named after merchant and philanthropist Haji Essa Haji Moosa Sait, president of the Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Kochi (then Cochin) from 1924 to 1927, was known for anything but academic accomplishment. Of the 120 students who attempted the higher secondary board examination with Menon, only six got through.

"Fortunately, I was one," says the stocky, white-haired banker, leaning back in an armchair at his holiday home in central Bangalore. He bought the apartment in 1997 and visits the southern Indian city every year to escape the New Jersey winter. The visits are also necessitated by Menon's cur-

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PARESH GANDHI

FROM THE EDITORS

For his eloquent vision, his selfless generosity, and his tireless advocacy of Indian and American causes and institutions, we honor Sreedhar Menon with the second India Abroad Lifetime Service to the Community award.

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AWARD OF LIFETIME SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY 2009

SREEDHAR MENON

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Menon, right, and wife Saroj, left, with then US Senator Hillary Clinton at philanthropist Meera Gandhi's home in New York, 2007



Menon, right, with wife Saroj, left, and daughter Jyoti



Banker on a Mission

M48 ◀ PAGE rent work as chairman of the board of Viteos Fund Services, a business process outsourcing company headquartered in New Jersey with delivery centers in Bangalore and Mumbai.

"I come here as a tourist, but my wife spends three months here," he jokes. "She arrives before me and leaves after I do!"

The spacious living room, furnished tastefully by wife Saroj with American-style loveseats and decorated with fine paintings and antique silverware, is sheltered from the hubbub of the business district by a veil of vegetation. Yet, through the curtained windows, the growl of rush-hour traffic sneaks in.

"This," says Menon, pointing to a blue antique-finish lampshade drooping from the ceiling, "is from Jew Town."

Jew Town in Mattancherry, Kochi, with its 16th century synagogue and alleys of shops

stocked with antiques, brassware and spices, is the last bastion of India's Malabari Jews whose ancestors spoke the now decadent Creole of Judeo-Malayalam. Menon was born in Palluruthy, three miles away, on December 6, 1936.

His father M N Velayudha Menon was a head clerk with a family-oriented business that traded in tea picked in the Kanan Devan hills a hundred miles away. His mother Madhavi Amma was a homemaker. The eldest of four children, Sreedhar grew sensitive to their economic hardships at an early age.

"My father worked for 33 years without much of an income," he recalls, adding that his education was mostly financed with borrowed money.

For the next six years Menon read economics. He chose the government-aided Maharaja's College, Kochi since it was more affordable than the other two city colleges - St Albert's and Sacred Heart College.

Boasting an excellent arts faculty, Maharaja's was the haunt of the royal family of the princely state of Cochin. "They came in busloads from Thripunithura (about six miles away, where the royal family has palaces)," he recalls with a quiet smile. "Especially the girls."

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The Midas touch

There is no one in America — Indian or otherwise — who has given as much money to so many causes and not had the projects named after himself or his family members, says
T P SREENIVASAN

No good cause should suffer for lack of funds. That seems to be the motto of Sreedhar Menon with regard to business as well as community work.

A wizard in financial management, he has the extraordinary skill to use money, whether it is of the companies he has managed or his own, or for charity work, for the maximum benefit to most people.

Having had an illustrious innings in the corporate world, he continues his profession of finding funds for feasible and innovative projects. But what distinguishes Menon is the fact that he brings his invaluable experience to community work and uses it for the common good. Just as his companies like American Express benefited from his skills during his earlier years, many institutions and organizations are getting his help and support today.

Setting up of an India Chair in the Columbia University was a cherished dream of the Indian community in the New York area. An enthusiastic group was engaged in fundraising for years, but they still had a huge gap in the required amount.

Sreedhar Menon rescued the whole project not only by making a huge contribution himself, but also by leveraging funds from other sources. Today, the Jagdish Bhagwati Chair in Indian Political Economy at Columbia is a reality and is a tribute to his vision.

As a member of the Board of the Centre for the Advanced Study of India at the University of Pennsylvania, I was involved in an effort to save the centre from extinction for lack of funds at one time. The university had planned to integrate it with some other department to save resources. It was again Sreedhar Menon, who gave the lead to others in the Indian community to salvage CASI and to place it on a firm footing.

There are several other institutions like the Madan Lal Sobti Chair at UPenn, the George Foundation and the Kerala Center, which owe their continued existence to his initiatives.

Perhaps the most amazing part of his record is that he has never used his influence or donations to further his own name. There is no one in America — Indian or otherwise — who has given as much money to so many causes and not had the projects named after himself or his family members.

He has always worked hard to bring professionalism to the various US-based Indian organizations he deals with, infusing them with the current best practices as well as fiscal responsibility.

Sreedhar Menon remains simple and humble in spite of his monumental accom-

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The Honor Roll

Dr Joy Cherian received the first-ever India Abroad Award for Lifetime Service to the Community. Dr Cherian founded the Indian American Forum for Political Education, aimed to translate the community's increasing numbers into political power. President Ronald Reagan named Dr Cherian as a Commissioner on the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. He served six years on the EEOC from 1987 to 1993, the first Asian-American member of a US administration, under President Reagan and, later, President George W Bush.



Dr Joy Cherian at the awards ceremony in March 2008

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From right: Columbia University Professor Padma Desai, Menon, wife Saroj, Columbia University Professor Jagdish Bhagwati and then Columbia University president George Rupp

Banker on a Mission

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Fascinated with life in uniform, he enrolled with the National Cadet Corps. Occasionally, he caught up with Malayalam movies. "Prem Nazir was then the superstar," he recalls. "And there was T S Muthiah and Sathyan."

Education, however, eclipsed other pursuits. To equip himself for a government career Menon took private lessons in Hindi, the *lingua franca* of the administrative services. Visiting the new Customs House at Willingdon Island in Kochi with his friend and mentor R Prabhakara Menon, who worked there as an examiner, he fancied the officers' smart white uniforms with the gold laurel buttons. He attempted the qualifying exam for a job with the department but did not clear the interview. After receiving his postgraduate degree in 1959, Menon moved to Kolkata (then Calcutta).

"It was very difficult to get a job even with a Master's degree in economics," Menon says, recalling his first four months in what was then India's largest city. Unemployed and anxious, he borrowed from friends and stayed with his cousin, a bank employee, in a "mess" – a two-roomed accommodation shared among seven people.

A recommendation from the secretary of the Indian Banks Association fetched him his first job – as a clerical assistant – with the Union Bank of India on monthly wages of Rs 135 (then about \$30), which were hiked to Rs 175 (about \$40) by the end of the year.

In 1962, American Express Bank opened a branch in Kolkata. Menon applied for a job. "I got a reject letter saying that there was no opening," he remembers. "But three weeks later, I was called for an interview."

He was hired as a junior officer in January 1963. Within a decade, he rose to the position of branch manager.

"It was unexpected," reflects Menon. "Such positions were usually held by Americans or foreign nationals. But American corporations always recognize talent."

The City of Joy had more surprises in store. Menon took a liking to Saroj, a south Indian Brahmin girl who lived on the ground floor of his building and worked at the Australian high commission. After many conversations over coffee, they were married in 1967.

"It was then unheard of for an Iyer to marry a Menon," says the bespectacled banker with a conspiring laugh, referring to the difference between their communities. "Neither her par-

ents nor mine knew about the wedding!"

In due course both families embraced the newlyweds. But in the footfalls of happiness came tragedy.

In 1972, Velayudha Menon died of complications caused by hypertension. Sreedhar, who flew to Kochi to be at his father's bedside, was distraught.

"For all the trouble my father took, he did not live to see me achieve greater heights," he recalls with undisguised regret. "I could have given him a really



From right: Professor John Hawley, Trustee Joan Spero, Menon and Dean Lisa Anderson at a Columbia University India Chair celebratory lunch

good life."

In 1974 Menon was posted to Singapore. After a two-year stint in London, he took charge of the bank's operations in India in 1979. Two years later, he returned to Singapore as regional manager, with eight country heads reporting to him.

"I always wanted my boss's job," says Menon, implying that he keenly observed his superiors at work and "learned the ingredients" that would take him up the corporate ladder. "I wanted to accomplish anything I got involved in, even if it was too large for me."

During his tenure as regional manager he learned an important lesson. A junior employee at the Singapore branch committed a minor fraud for which Menon received a letter of reprimand from New York.



JOE PINEIRO

"My bonus was cut and my salary increment for that year was reduced," he recalls. "It taught me that irrespective of how removed you are from a particular incident, you are always responsible and accountable for it."

In 1994, Menon parted ways with his employer of 34 years. "American Express Bank had a rule: If age plus service equaled to 90, you could retire with full benefits. I had only two years left to achieve that milestone," he says, his bright eyes twinkling. He joined Lehman Brothers, then a wholly owned subsidiary of American Express, as managing director in the emerging markets group.

"I came down from the 23rd floor to the 19th floor but tripled my income!" he laughs.

When the investment bank required him to move to Hong Kong in 1996, Menon stepped down. "I had already seen seven or eight location changes in the previous eleven years," he recalls, "My wife wasn't keen on moving, and my daughter was then looking for colleges in the US."

His only daughter Jyoti went on to receive a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University and now lives in New York with her husband. She is a senior manager in customer experience at American Express.

"I had nothing to do with it," Menon laughs. "She was selected from campus."

"In the many years that (*my father*) worked there I quickly learned that AmEx is a company he was proud to be a part of," explains Jyoti. "As I entered my job search and spoke with people and researched multiple companies, I also found that AmEx would be a place I would enjoy working in and a place where I would be challenged every day."

When he left Lehman, Menon was approached by James D Robinson III, former chairman and CEO of American Express Company, then CEO of RRE Ventures. Accepting the new opportunity, Menon took over as a general partner and vice chairman of the venture capital firm, which invests in information technology startups.

In 2001 he teamed up with Shankar Iyer, CEO, Viteos Fund Services, which provides

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M50 ◀ PAGE administrative services for hedge funds, and joined his company as chairman of the board.

Throughout his career, Menon gave his money and time to community causes in India and the US. Until a few years ago, he served on the board of the George Foundation, which runs Shanti Bhavan, a school for underprivileged children, near Bangalore.

He has served on the board of the US-India Business Council, the US-ASEAN Business Council, and as president of the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce in New York. He was also a member of the South Asia Task Force of the Council of Foreign Relations in New York.

"India and the US looked at each other with skepticism for a number of years but now our relationship is being built on a strong and healthy platform," he says.

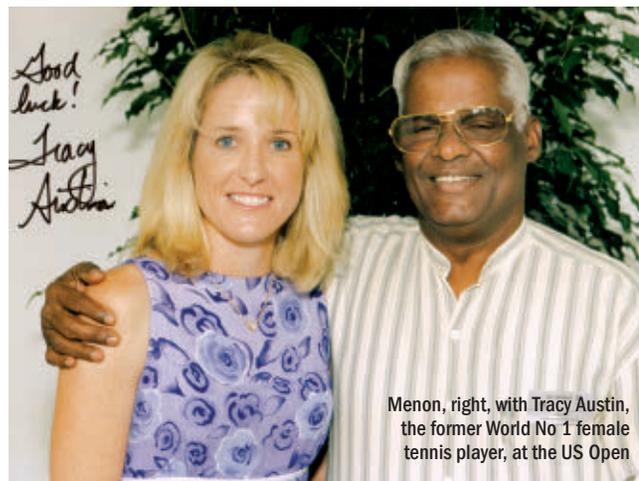
Setting up CASI and the Jagdish Bhagwati Chair, Menon believes, constitute a small step in securing the future of this relationship. "I intend to develop them into full-fledged India centers that would do better research on the issues confronting India," he says.

Menon declined to name the Jagdish Bhagwati Chair – to which he contributed \$600,000 of the \$2 million raised – after himself. "Who knows Sreedhar Menon in the United States?" he says with a dismissive laugh. "On the other hand, (*economist and scholar*) Professor Bhagwati is an icon of India."

To arouse Menon's interest, a cause must satisfy three criteria: It must be related to India; it must be concerned with education or research; and it must be run by committed peo-



Menon, left, with then Indian finance minister Manmohan Singh at a fundraising dinner in New York



Menon, right, with Tracy Austin, the former World No 1 female tennis player, at the US Open

The Midas touch

M49 ◀ PAGE plishments. A graduate from my own university in Kerala, Menon is equally at home among the glitterati of Manhattan as in a village in Kerala. He is classy without being showy, influential without being arrogant. His views on the economy finance and politics are heard with respect both in India and the United States. He has a large circle of friends and is active in different social circles. His Midas touch has added glitter to the Indian community in the United

States.

By his rich contribution to public life, he joins the ranks of the famous Menons of Kerala like V K Krishna Menon, V P Menon and K P S Menon.

T P Sreenivasan is a former ambassador of India to the United Nations, Vienna, and a former Governor for India at the International Atomic Energy Agency, Vienna. He is currently the Director General, Kerala International Center, Thiruvananthapuram and a Member of India's National Security Advisory Board.

ple. One of his passions is to develop high-quality human capital in India.

"Human capital refers to more than engineers and doctors," Menon explains. "Do we have enough plumbers and electricians in India, or masseurs, or people providing manicure and pedicure services? Vocational training is very important in a country where the population is growing by one and a half percent – we are producing the equivalent of an Australia every year."

In his view, the Indian economy's current preoccupation with information technology outsourcing is myopic.

"The captains of industry in India have not really contributed to inclusive growth," he says. "We need proactive public-private partnerships to see India moving, as opposed to just businesses moving."

Menon is full of admiration for Indian-

Americans achievers like PepsiCo Chairperson Indra Nooyi, venture capitalist Vinod Khosla and former McKinsey managing director Rajat Gupta. But it is India, with its new crop of entrepreneurs, which really fascinates him.

"When the license raj was lifted, Indians could compete with anybody in the world," he says proudly, referring to the economic reforms that were initiated in 1991.

Menon is reminded of his college days, when he took part in a strike called by a students' federation to protest a government fee levied on students using the subsidized river transport system.

"Out of emotion I must have shouted a few slogans," he says, smiling at the memory. "To tell you the truth, I'm against subsidies today unless they are intended to alleviate poverty. Subsidy is just printing notes – it's only going to create inflation and eventually somebody has to pay for it."

Menon is dismayed that Kerala has missed the boat on industrialization but blames his home state's petty politics for the stagnation of its economy. While at American Express Bank he was instrumental in financing a \$3 million loan to set up a tire manufacturing plant near Kochi, but Menon grew frustrated with the man-days lost to strikes and protests over the "flimsiest reasons."

"Kerala has been too liberal with strikes," he says with indignation. "The political parties have been irresponsible, considering the average talent and education of the population."

An early riser, Menon watches the morning news on television over a cup of tea before he heads to the fitness center. A cricketer during his college days, he also loved to play tennis until his "knees gave up." Now he is content to watch both games on television.

About three times a week, he drives out to New York for business lunches. Evenings are reserved for social events and meeting people for "purposeful" and "intellectually stimulating conversation."

Something of a cardsharp, Menon loves to indulge in a game when time permits. "Rummy, poker, *Teen Patti (Flash)* — he plays them all and he's good at them," says Saroj, who herself loves to play bridge.

"He is also an avid tennis enthusiast, a wine connoisseur and an admirer of Indian art," says Jyoti.

Asked what she admires most about her father, Jyoti says, "His commitment. Whether it's personal or professional, he always puts 100 percent into everything he does. His energy is just unbelievable. I don't know anyone else who works as hard as he does or is as committed to anything as he is. He is an amazing philanthropist and his desire to give back is inspiring."

Her father, says Jyoti, knew the importance of a work-life balance. "He was definitely very busy, but I can't remember a birthday or graduation where he was not there," she says. "He was always able to make time for us."

Menon had just returned to Bangalore after seeking the blessings of Sri Sankaracharya, the spiritual head of the Sringeri Sharada Peetham on the banks of the Tungabhadra River in southwestern India.

"For me religion is more about community service," says Menon, who helped establish the Sringeri Sadhana Center in Poconos, New Jersey, the first overseas branch of the mission, modeled after the architecture of the original temple.

"When I met His Holiness, I asked three wishes of him: I need resources to help the poorest of the poor, I need to be able to educate them, and I need good health to continue to do that."

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FACE OF THE FUTURE AWARD 2009

PRIYAMVADA NATARAJAN

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An astrophysicist exploring brave new worlds, she pushes back the frontiers of our knowledge, constantly. It is the enchanting promise of future achievements that India Abroad recognizes today by conferring on Priyamvada Natarajan its Face of the Future Award, 2009.

When average people look up at the sky, they see the stars fixed in their courses and blinking implacably down upon them. But Priyamvada Natarajan, a theoretical cosmologist at Yale University, sees it as others might a landscape through badly uneven glass — a distorted, shifting, vista that can seem different from the original in shape, size and position. And so flat galaxies appear bent, gain kaleidoscopic multiples, and even project mirror images of themselves.

But as Natarajan considers this play of light on a cosmic scale, she also keeps in mind more prosaic things: The problems that minority and poor students face in a discouraging society, the need for more women in hard sciences like physics, ways to address sexual harassment...

Professionally, Natarajan, who did her undergraduate degree in physics from MIT, and earned her PhD at Cambridge University in England, has earned accolades for her work on the growth, development and 'death' of black holes. If Nobel Laureate Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar discovered the lower limit for a dying star to become a black hole (1.44 times the size of the sun), Natarajan has defined the upper limit: 10 billion times the size of the sun. After that, she has argued, they begin leaking out as much energy as they taken in.

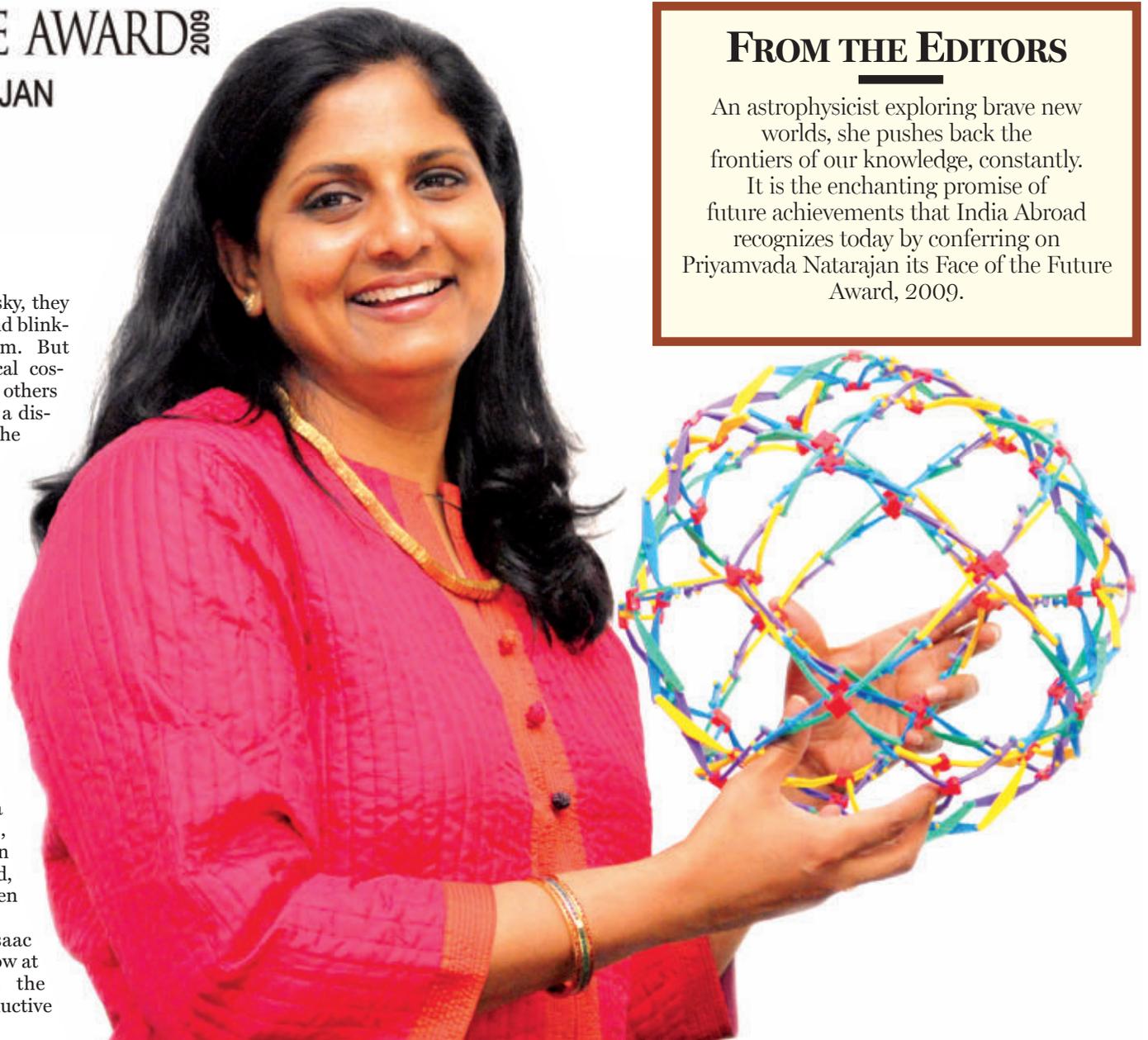
At Cambridge, in 1997, she received the Isaac Newton Studentship and went on to become a fellow at Trinity College. Back in the US, she won the Guggenheim Fellowship last year, given for productive scholarship.

In person, Natarajan comes across as chirpy and easygoing, a professor who wears her academic credentials lightly though academic discussion are marked by sharp sobriety and a tightening of the features. But her office, down a corridor that showcases an assortment of such astronomical wonders as nebulae, galaxies, clusters, and more, is rather spare: A plain desk bearing two flatbed monitors, a quiet set of dark sofas for visitors, a whiteboard marked with orange and green graphs and formulae. Less visible are a self-portrait by Van Gogh, books on ethics, yoga and Islamic civilizations. But then Natarajan was always one with eclectic tastes, with interests in the arts, philosophy (she still plans to complete her PhD in the philosophy of science) computers and more.

She apologizes for the barely noticeable computer boxes and the general disorder (there is none to speak of) and sets about postponing a teleconference so she can speak to a visitor about her work.

Even in her school days, Natarajan always looked like an academic in the works. But then, her home was a haven for that kind of thinking.

"It was a life of the mind. Books were valued. And at din-



PARESH GANDHI

A Life of the Mind

Astrophysicist **PRIYAMVADA NATARAJAN**, winner of the India Abroad Face of the Future Award 2009, explains her vision of the universe to **PRAJENDRAN**

ner every night we had very lively conversations... We also used to have a lot of guests because my father (*was the*) director of the Association of Indian Universities. We had a very intellectually alive household." Her parents entertained a lot — but the visitors were not society divas and jaded multimillionaires but vice chancellors, philosophers and people of intellectual stature, she says.

As a child, she read omnivorously — philosophy, fiction,

poetry... Her reading included the *Physics for Everyone* series from the House of Soviet Culture and Martin Gardner's recreational mathematics books.

Studying in the St Thomas High School in New Delhi till Grade Ten was good for her. It encouraged all-round development — social, sports, art, singing, dancing — even acting, thanks to Principal Joy Michael who had links with India's National School of

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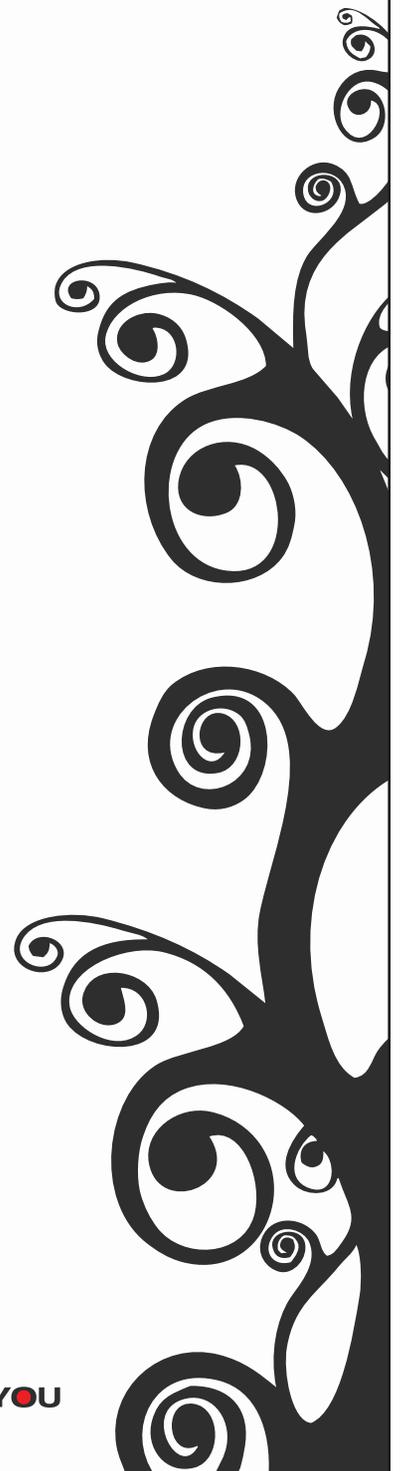


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The Mentor

Her students describe a sharp professor who is active, does not micromanage and knows everyone

“The thing that struck me is that she knows everyone,” says Andrew Davis, a fifth-year student with Priyamvada Natarajan. He speaks of the first conference he attended as a grad student.

“It was a week-long conference. Everyone knew Priya. The same thing happened when I went to a conference in Maryland a year later.”

Andrew agrees that it is good for him to have a famous mentor. He laughs. “I’m just impressed at how much she’s known and talks to people and knows people.”

There are three groups of people in cosmology – the observers, the particle physicists and theoretical cosmologists. “And she still knows everyone.”

Pedro Capelo is a grave seventh-year graduate student, who, like Davis, opted for theoretical cosmology after giving up on the observational variety.

He says that Natarajan works on a lot of different aspects of cosmological theory.

“You often find people who focus on only one aspect. If you look at her literature, she wrote about almost everything which is...”

“...Very broad.” Davis completes the sentence.

“Which is why perhaps why she knows everybody: because she wrote about everything,” says Capelo.

Davis says he finds Natarajan the biggest help when interpreting results – “how our simulations fit into the larger picture.”

Capelo says while his mentor can tell him where to look for solutions to everyday problems, Natarajan does not micromanage her students.

“But in terms of ideas, from the output from our code, she’ll look at that output pretty detailed and then say, ‘This does not match what other people have expected; something must be wrong’. And it is up to me to figure what is wrong, if anything, or if it’s a real result...”

Asked to describe Natarajan as a person, Davis comes up with the adjective “active.”

“She’s always got another idea, another project, or another thing that she’s working on,” he says. “And it’s not always astronomy, really,” he says, speaking of her outreach work to help children who need help in mathematics and the sciences.

“She’s always very engaged – busy,” he says. “She’s not a nanny for us because there are so many things she is doing,”

According to Anson D’Aloisio, that’s a good thing.

“What makes us compatible is that I like to work inde-

pendently and I think she prefers students that are more independent. I think we’re at a happy equilibrium,” he says.

D’Aloisio’s first mentor left the department and he was lucky that Natarajan took him on. “She was there and saved me from changing fields,” he says with a nervous laugh.

Natarajan does make time to hold a party or have students over to her place for food, says Capelo, adding that depending on the time she has for it, it could even be Indian fare on the menu.

“Very delicious,” Davis interjects quickly.

Asked about lighter moments, he describes the de-stressing play that students write and perform at the end of the year in which they play the professors. He has played Natarajan, complete with large flowing skirts and large earrings, though he can’t do the accent. But while antago-

Face of the Future 2008

One of the youngest professors at Princeton, mathematician extraordinaire, a musician of unusual talent, Dr Manjul Bhargava won India Abroad's Inaugural Face of the Future Award last year.



PARESH GANDHI

nists have changed, Natarajan has always remained the protagonist.

“I don’t think that’s a coincidence that the students consider her always to be the protagonist in the play,” he says. “It just reflects how the student population views her.”

— P Rajendran



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'The openness to learn is still there with her'

Priyamvada Natarajan, her parents reveal, has had an inquisitive mind from childhood

Father Venkatesa Natarajan says that as a child Priyamvada was very intelligent. And while she knew she was intelligent, she was also very hardworking. And that, he says, is the secret of her success.

Natarajan remembers that Priyamvada used to study the editorials of newspapers. So he asked her to summarize what she understood. That is how she started thinking on her own, he says.

"She had an inquisitive mind," says Natarajan, who describes his daughter as not an extrovert though tending towards it. Natarajan himself is a former director of the Association of Indian Universities.

Even as a baby, he says, Priyamvada "used to keep us busy – in the sense she had a lot of questions and was not very easily convinced."

She used to talk about material from her textbooks and then go far beyond it, he says, asserting that science, mathematics and English were her favorite subjects.

She had a great many friends, helping them all in their studies, being very affectionate, he says.

Natarajan admits that the family was worried when she decided to study abroad.

"More than me (*her mother*) was worried. 'Why are you sending a girl child all the way to a remote place, (*she asked*),'" he says. "Then I convinced her, this (*was not an*) opportunity that comes to people just like that," he says. Natarajan stayed a week at MIT with his daughter before returning to New Delhi.

Money was not a problem because financial aid covered all of Priyamvada's expenses, he says.

And when she got admitted to MIT, one of the people who used to come home, Yash Pal, a former chairman of the University Grants Commission, told her to take up physics there.

Mother Lalitha says Priyamvada has an astounding memory, remembering events



Priyamvada with her parents Lalitha and Venkatesa Natarajan

from the past that are dim for others but with astonishing clarity.

"She was a precocious child with excellent memory. And very observant, you see," she says.

And while Priyamvada has learned Indian classical music she is also interested in Western classical music, says Lalitha, adding that the award-winning dancer Saroja Vaidyanathan who mentored her daughter "still remembers how quickly Priyamvada used to catch all the movements."

According to Lalitha, "The openness to learn is still there with her."

— P Rajendran

'She's original'

Her peers explain why Priyamvada Natarajan is a rising star of cosmology

The way (*Priyamvada Natarajan*) thinks about the problem (*at hand*) is more philosophical, more conceptual. It's a broad view of things. It's more conceptual. Most people work on the technical details. But she's thinking more about the concepts. That's a novelty. I think we need more people like that. New horizons are opened by people that have the broader perspective and are not just worried

galaxies to the mass of the galaxy itself. She was able to made predictions of what would happen to the way the spinning black holes at their centers aligned while the galaxies merged, increasing increased the size of the resulting galaxy.

According to David Spergel, chair of the Department of Astrophysical Sciences at Princeton University, Natarajan is one of the rising stars of cosmology.

"She's bright and creative. Many people in astrophysics focus on one particular problem and become experts in that. She's already shown a significant intellectual range in her work."

"Personally, she's a warm person, pleasant to interact with – cares about ... her students, the people she interacts with," says Spergel.

Margaret Geller, a senior scientist at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory who worked on mapping dark matter in the universe, speaks of how Natarajan went out of her way to help one of Geller's students, Ken Rines, who was a post-doc at Yale.

"She encouraged him to look at the data he had, the distribution of mass in the clusters (*of galaxies*)... It broadened his view."

"I know her as a very energetic, creative young scientist. I think her work on the growth of black holes, gravitational lens and looking at the distribution of matter in the universe is fascinating."

"She's very young. She has all the hallmarks of a leader ... and great personal warmth."

Geller says she has watched Natarajan grow in stature. "She has a nose for very good problems and she really has a kind of sparkle in science, which is very nice to see."

While Natarajan does not stray far from observational data, Geller says, "She has a lot of insights into the observation of gravitational lensing. There aren't so many theorists who do that."

She really tries to think about how observations constrain theory, says Geller. "She's very good at that. She's very sane in her approach to looking at the data and the theory and making the connection between the two."

— P Rajendran

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The explorer

Priyamvada Natarajan journeys into heavenly places on earth

A Life of the Mind

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Drama.

But she was quite good as a tinkerer: She soldered and made little circuits but was much more interested in fundamental physics and applying them.

She was lucky that at a very young age, well before most young people in India, she got a computer.

"My father had bought me a (*ZX Spectrum and the Commodore 64*). ... I taught myself programming. BASIC and COBOL." She also learned assembly language to find out how the machine understood the instructions.

And when she learned the horrifying truth that parents could not provide every book to address her needs, she found new ways to get them.

"When I was in the fourth standard (*Grade 4*), against my parents' wishes I used to take a DTC (*Delhi Transport Corporation*) bus to go to the Delhi public library without telling my parents." Once an older South Indian man noticed her on the bus, followed her home and told her parents that they ought to know the girl was too young to go on the bus alone.

"They were aghast to know," says Natarajan who says that while she was pretty unstoppable if she wanted to do something, "I never pushed. It was always very reasonable things (*I sought*). I never clashed with my parents." But she always wanted to be an academic.

"Even when very young, I wanted to be an intellectual, a scholar. I wanted to be a professor even before I knew what that meant. I liked that life and I like the life that my parents and their friends had. I was not exposed very much to business people; it was a different milieu (*I was exposed to*)," she says.

After she passed the Grade 10 examination it became clear that she needed a much more challenging environment, she says. And so she moved to the Delhi Public School, R K Puram.

She had excellent teachers, particularly her physics teacher, a man named Kirmani. "I was well ahead of the class. He spotted that fairly quickly and he would give me extra problems to do — more difficult problems. He would be pretty scared of me. Every time he would derive something, he would ask me, 'Priya, is this correct?'" Then there was the English teacher, Geeta Sahni, and her mathematics teacher, Majid Khan.

"I was the teacher's pet. Nauseating to my brothers who went to the same school, nauseating to my classmates," she says, laughing. "I was the goody-goody two-shoes."

But perhaps the most important influence on her was the time she spent at the Nehru Planetarium, doing an outreach program under Nirupama Raghavan, a new director who had just returned from the US.

"I was itching to do research because I wanted to know what it was like to do," remembers Natarajan.

"I banded together several of my classmates and

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Priyamvada Natarajan's mother Lalitha would have loved to go to South America. Because circumstances conspired against her, her daughter did it for her.

Lalitha had done a BA in geography and even started an MA a couple of times but stopped for personal reasons — those being three children in rapid succession, says Natarajan. Lalitha finally got an MA in sociology and wrote a book on the comparative regional geography of Argentina, Brazil and Chile.

"It is totally strange that I have inherited that love of South America too," Natarajan says with a laugh, who puts among her finest experiences the time she spent exploring the Torres del Paine national park in Patagonia in Chile.

"Chile is an incredible country for astronomy, with the world's best telescopes," she says. Though she works not with telescopes but the data generated from them, she used a baby telescope she hardly needed.

"You could see the Milky Way so beautifully," she says.

Among the "pretty crazy things" she has done is the solitary six-day hike she took

through the Torres del Paine national park in 2002 because the government wanted people to walk around, take pictures and make cartographic maps of the place. She loved it because she always believed that, if convention had not prohibited her from it, in a different age, she might have done something different.

"I fancy myself as (*being*) an explorer. It's a minor detail that I'm female and I could not have [been permitted then] to lead an expedition to discover new lands."

But her Chilean adventure passed without mishap.

"I didn't see another human being," says Natarajan, who remembers that she was instructed to dig out her flesh if a scorpion bit her. For someone who quailed at the thought of a frog dissection and fainted before formaldehyde, she was quite prepared for the ordeal, if it indeed was necessary.

But she found no other large animals there, except the guanacos (*related to the llama*) and a few birds and some baby scorpions that left her alone.

What Natarajan did enjoy about Chile were some beautiful wind-twisted tree trunks with

no leaves, the chilly oxygen-deficient Atacama desert, and the blue and purple shades of the Andes there.

The Chilean government have since stopped this program because it's extremely dangerous, she says, adding that her toughness flies in the face of how she appears to most people — a sophisticated, woman unused to a rugged life.

But she is now working on a book about her favorite subjects, cartography and cosmology.

"You're trying to figure out your place (*in both*)," she says. "The common thread is my current work: I map the universe. I see that as the modern equivalent of what the explorer was doing."

— P Rajendran



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A Life of the Mind

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we all went to the Nehru Planetarium. There was an amateur astronomical society. I was very active in it. I also began doing research with her (*Raghavan*) on sunspots. I built a camera. I built an automatic shutter, then

we took images of the sun and we tracked sunspots. It was a sunspot (*maxima*). I made a little report," she says, adding that it was unusual for a school-going child to do that in India.

By then, she knew that while she adored

physics she was also interested in the "philosophy (*like the writings of Marvin Minsky*), of artificial intelligence – what constitutes mind, what constitutes consciousness. I wanted to study in America because I wanted to do physics and mathematics." In India, if she took up physics, she could not learn anything from the humanities.

"Basically you don't study anything else except physics and maybe a little bit of chemistry and mathematics. You can't take courses in literature or philosophy or French or anything else. It was just the Indian system – too focused, too specialized too early. I wanted something broader."

So in 1986, in her Grade 12, she began applying to foreign universities, relying on her parents to do the background work.

"My mother kept the SAT forms in her

handbag and really hesitated about posting it. She thought, 'Oh my god, she's gone,'" says Natarajan with a laugh.

As backup, she also gained admission to the prestigious St Stephen's college, also in Delhi, until it was clear she was going abroad.

At MIT, she was very homesick and took a long time to adjust. But she found the academic going easy, taking some graduate level courses in her second year itself – and doing just those by her third year.

She did courses in philosophy, including logic, Cartesian philosophy, and the philosophy of mathematics and physics.

"I was interested in the philosophy of science," she says.

"She also took French to read the people she liked – author Andre Gide, for his lyrical descriptions, particularly in *The Immoralist*, of

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'The stakes are only ego – and work'

Priyamvada Natarajan believes that bias has gone underground in the US, thanks to the laws against it.

She finds it in words such as 'sociable' used to praise women candidates that are never used to extol men and she tells committees to watch out for patronizing language in descriptions of women.

A self-described feminist, even at MIT she was an undergraduate representative on a committee that drew up the first sexual harassment guidelines there.

"It was an issue, and I felt there had to be rules," she says.

All for equal rights, inclusiveness and diversity, when she joined Yale, Natarajan became one of the founding members of the Women's Faculty Forum, a group of the female faculty providing a place not just for intellectual exchange across disciplines but also a platform to assess the status of women faculty, particularly their numbers in the hard sciences. While women seem to have made a real dent in biology, physics and mathematics, she points out.

"Women in science has been a strong underlying cause that I feel quite committed to," she says. "I think the best way forward is if we have a lot of strong, male advocates. I don't think this is a cause just for women. It helps everybody if a university is a better reflection of the world."

In some ways, she says, the corporate world is ahead of academia, but takes issues with people like Larry Summers, the former president of Harvard University, who straddled both the corporate and academic world but, she says belittled women while trying to address the

Priyamvada Natarajan explains the equation between science and feminism



PARESH GANDHI

issue of the dearth of women in tenured positions in the hard sciences at top universities.

But she agrees that women have it harder in some counts, given the many priorities they have to manage.

"The ladder to full professor takes 10 to 15 years. Even if you start out at 25, you do 4 to 6 years as a post-doc

and are 30 when you start work. You become an associate professor by 40. You are expected to do research." And unless women have a husband who is both willing and whose job permits him to spend more time at home, that is hard for women, she says.

The culture of the field as it is set up is very macho, very aggressive, very competitive," she says. And then, there is no direct, visible application of the subject.

"Nobody's life is going to benefit. No industry is going to fund us. The stakes are only ego – and work," she says.

Trying to address the problems of women in the workplace, she and another faculty at Yale co-authored a report on curbing sexual misconduct – including those that don't cross legal lines but make the workplace uncomfortable for women and under-represented minorities. The university administration has been very receptive to the report, she says.

Even at Cambridge, when she was offered a fellowship, she was put off seeing that the booklet described a fellow only as 'he.' that limiting male third person, singular personal pronoun.

"Coming from America, I was annoyed that they were using 'he' instead of 'he/she,'" she says. So she wrote to the council, saying that while she was honored and was going to apply, she did not "find a place for myself because all the forms refer to the fellow as a 'he.'"

The council wrote back saying that in Britain, the 'he' referred just to the human, not a male and that they looked forward to her application.

It did not work against her: she became the first woman in astrophysics (and the second Indian, the first being Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar) to become a fellow.

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light. But then, she says, a lot of the intellectuals of that period were misogynists. And that, she says with some amusement now, was a blow. That was one course that went badly for her.

“The only ‘B’ I ever got was in French literature,” she says, ruefully.

She also took courses in Women’s Studies and became politically active. A fan of Left-leaning philosopher and the father of linguistics Noam Chomsky, she was involved in the demonstrations against US interventions in Central America – in Nicaragua and El Salvador – at the time.

She also started doing a PhD in the philosophy of science, one she hopes to complete during an upcoming sabbatical – “There was no philosopher of science who was a practicing scientist, she says. “I wanted to be this unique animal – this person who does active research and also examines, from a philosopher’s point of view, what they’re doing.” In this, she says, she is making the same point as Alan Sokal, a physicist who wrote a famous hoax that got published in *Social Text*, a social journal, suggesting that the sociologists of science really don’t know what science is about. While she agrees with his view, she disagrees with the methods he used to put it across, she says.

She suspended physics for a while, took courses in history, learned how to write and got a good grounding in the humanities. And then she met Martin Schwarzschild.

A pioneer of computing in astrophysics, Schwarzschild, then at Princeton University, met her to speak to her about the ways he simulated a chunk of the universe. The discussion that was intended to last an hour was so stimulating that, though he was ill, she stayed the weekend at his place and they talked it over.

Schwarzschild later encouraged her to get back into science and she told him she intended to – though after her current PhD. She told him she wanted to learn the sequence of events in the universe. He recommended that she work with Lord Martin Rees at the Institute of Astronomy at Cambridge University. But, having done her undergraduate work in particle physics, even if with Alan Guth, a proponent of the inflationary universe, she had not considered astrophysics as a career.

She contacted Lord Rees who set things up so she could first meet one of his colleagues, Donald Lynden-Bell, at Harvard.

“Talk about lucky breaks,” says Natarajan. Lynden-Bell has a soft spot for India because he was born and spent his early childhood there.

“He was very comfortable with Indians and India – specially South India (*where her family is from*),” says Natarajan, describing their interaction as being akin to a house on fire.

“We were talking about Marina Beach (*in Chennai*), Ooty and Mysore Rasam, we just really got on very well,” she says.”

Lynden-Bell helped her get the prestigious Isaac Newton



PARESH GANDHI

Scholarship when she explained she would need financial aid to study at Cambridge.

Though she was plagued by asthma in rained-out England, and had to take a six-month break for personal reasons, she loved the warmth of Trinity College and the sense of community there her time at Cambridge.

“People worked really hard to help you assimilate — in a good way. They accepted you as you were, but also worked very hard to make you comfortable,” she says, adding that while mentoring is a buzzword in academics, in Trinity “they did it without making a fuss of it.”

Every graduate student had a tutor in the college who had nothing to do with the student’s PhD. And when Natarajan began limping because of local knee damage, the mentor got the college to get her the best knee specialist in the country.

“The system there is very unselfconscious, but it works

very well,” she says.

Relying in what she calls her only gift, mental discipline, she studied the growth of black holes over cosmic time, using then novel data from about 12 billion years. It helps her keep everything out and focus on the task at hand the way nothing else can.

But the end of her PhD, she had 13 published papers, while also getting a lucky break in dealing with dark matter, thanks to new data coming in from the Hubble telescope in space.

She was groomed for a fellowship at Trinity, a prestigious position that, besides being funded for six years, also ensures a set of rituals defining one’s superiority – including meals at the High Table (a bigger privilege that those on the Low Table).

But having been in hospital three times for her asthma, once with a collapsed lung, Natarajan was ready to leave England for good, despite the enjoyable time she had there.

She worked at the Canadian Institute for Theoretical Astrophysics for eight months, during which she gave a colloquium at Yale, at the end of which she was asked for her resume. She was called for an interview soon after she was offered the job. But she chose to keep away for three years, so that she could concentrate on work and not teaching students. Between 1999 and 2001, she shuttled between Toronto and Cambridge, fully involved with her work on weak gravitation. And then she took up the job.

By now, she had already made her mark as a theoretician who could do large leaps of imagination that subsequent data would corroborate. Her work with Jean-Paul Kneib, then a post-doc at Cambridge and

now a researcher at the Laboratory of Astrophysics of Marseilles, was on the bending of light by gravity from dark matter. She studies how huge black holes gain their mass and how galaxies form with some help from quasars, galaxies that spurt out a huge amount of radio waves, and supernovae, huge stars that die in a massive explosion.

Chandrasekhar’s biographer Kameshwar Wali told her that her life parallels that of the legendary scientist – coming to America, going to Trinity College in Cambridge and becoming a fellow there, and studying the weight limits on a black hole.

“I am thrilled to be in such exalted company,” says Natarajan, but points out that Chandrasekhar did not have the kind of data nor the computers available now. And while she is happy to hear such comparisons, she is even happier to continue doing her thing. Though, of course, there is that philosophy of science degree to collect...

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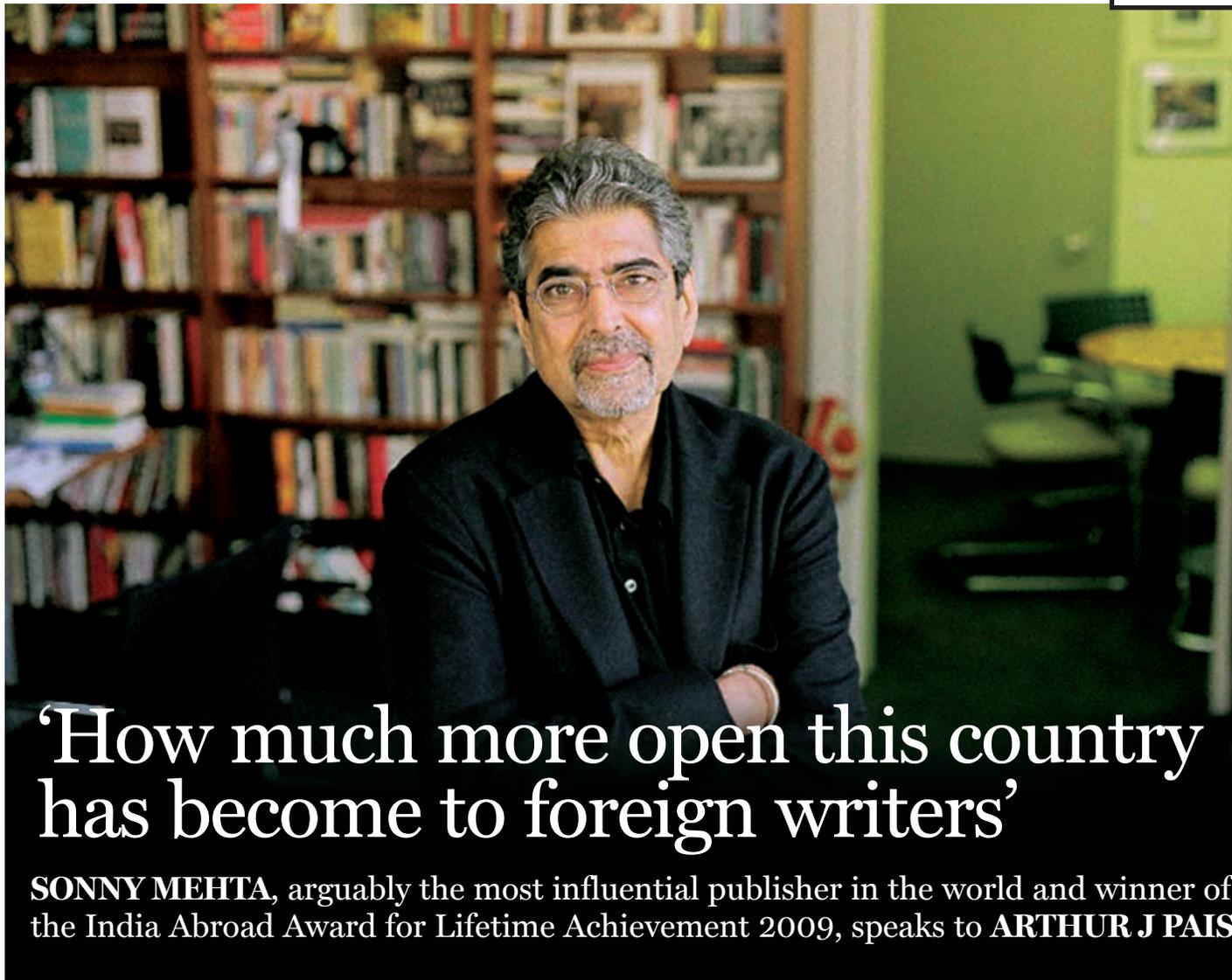
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For giving us some of the finest books of our time, for his brilliant vision, for being the most influential publisher of his generation, India Abroad honors Sonny Mehta with the Lifetime Achievement Award 2009.



'How much more open this country has become to foreign writers'

SONNY MEHTA, arguably the most influential publisher in the world and winner of the India Abroad Award for Lifetime Achievement 2009, speaks to **ARTHUR J PAIS**

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The Honor Roll

SALMAN RUSHDIE
Novelist

**PADMA DESAI,
JAGDISH BHAGWATI**
Economists

ZUBIN MEHTA
Maestro

Three years ago when Knopf offered former President Bill Clinton \$10 million to write his memoirs, some people felt the publishing giant's editor-in-chief and publisher Sonny Mehta was gambling big time. Clinton had secured an advance bigger than the luckiest of airport bestseller writers Stephen King and Mary Higgins Clark would have received together.

Publishing industry sources believe the gamble paid off very well as Clinton's *My Life* stayed on the hardcover bestseller list for many months, followed by a long second life as a paperback.

Over the last 23 years, Ajai Singh 'Sonny' Mehta has taken many gambles; with the help of his editors he has discovered many writers including Suketu Mehta and Tania James in recent years, blessed the move to bring over Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri from another distinguished publisher, and continued to publish books not only by Nobel Laureates like V S Naipaul, Toni Morrison and Orhan Pamuk, but also bestsellers by distinguished crime writers like James Ellroy.

Now that Doubleday, a smaller division of Random House, has been attached to Knopf, he also publishes the phenomenally successful Dan Brown and the master of legal

thrillers, John Grisham.

Knopf and its divisions published 455 books last year in addition to 10 original paperbacks; Doubleday published 75 books.

Among the Knopf writers who have received the Nobel Prize after Mehta joined the publishing house, the most important division of Random House, include economist Amartya Sen. As for the number of Knopf books that have won the Pulitzer Prize and other major awards, don't ask!

Mehta, who is in his late 60s, is arguably the most influential publisher in North America today, if not in the world. As one of his writers, Pulitzer Prize finalist Suketu Mehta pointed out, he has made an art of turning literary books by the likes of John Updike and Orhan Pamuk into bestsellers — and pulp books by the likes of James Ellroy and now Dan Brown become even bigger successes than expected, thanks to a number of factors, including masterful marketing.

The son of an Indian diplomat, Mehta went to the Lawrence School, Sanawar in north India, continued his education in Vienna and at Cambridge University, before joining the well-known Paladin publishing house and later the paperback giant, Pan Books, in London. His success across the pond, especially in publishing many distinguished and new American writers, and discovering the likes of Germaine Greer, famous for her polemical essay *The Female Eunuch*, caught the attention of Random House leaders who brought him over to America to lead its most distinguished division, Knopf.

Many lost no time in predicting that Mehta would not survive the tempestuous publishing scene in America. He would either be dismissed or would leave on his own, the carpers said.

Three years after his arrival at Knopf, an article in *The New York Times* looked at those predictions.

'Into this house of 19 Nobel Prizes in Literature, the home of the effortlessly classy Borzoi dog stamping numberless classics with its slender elan,' wrote the *Times* in 1990, 'came Mr Mehta, Cambridge-educated, slight, somewhat inscrutable, curious, impish, amused.'

There were reasons to think he would not last long in America, *The Times* thought: 'His purported self-absorption, failure to return telephone calls and inability to grasp the workings of Random House were all cited as reasons

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SONNY MEHTA

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Nominated four times for the Man Booker Prize, **Kazuo Ishiguro** won a Booker in 1989 for his novel *The Remains of the Day*, later made into a critically acclaimed film by producer Ismail Merchant and directed by James Ivory.

Born in Nagasaki, Japan, the 55-year-old has lived in the United Kingdom since he was 5. His recent book *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* has received good praise. His novel *Never Let Me Go* was featured on *Time* magazine's 2005 list of the 100 greatest books in the English language.

He spoke to **ARTHUR J PAIS** from his London home:

Sonny Mehta may not remember this, but he once told me a story about following his father-in-law across India during an election campaign. I had the impression it made quite an impact on him, and I think it has been a big influence on his various publishing strategies.

He had to accompany his father-in-law (*the late Biju Patnaik, chief minister of India's Orissa state for many years*) on muddy paths to remote, difficult to reach places. It was important for his father-in-law to campaign not only in big cities but also in tiny villages. Sonny must have seen then the link between small gestures and the big picture. He felt it was important for writers to go on book tours in small cities as well as big ones, and for publishers and writers to be connected with booksellers and readers at the grassroots level.

When I'm touring, I've often had a bookseller, in a city thousands of miles from New York, talk about the time they discovered that the person who'd walked into their store to say hello was none other than Sonny Mehta, president of one of the nation's great publishing houses. Booksellers are used to reading about publishing heads in trade magazines, but for most part someone of Sonny's caliber doesn't tend to make the effort to personally visit stores in person.

I should emphasize that this isn't just good public relations. Sonny has a near-reverential attitude to a certain kind of bookseller of discerning taste, and I suspect he goes to pick up ideas and tips, as much as to establish a personal business link.

I have known Sonny for nearly three decades. But long before I met him, when I was a student in 1970s Britain, I was reading the stylish paperbacks he'd launched under the Picador logo. These books seemed to be very much for our generation, slightly counter-cultural, books like Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. The designs were strikingly different from the books of that time, and what was inside felt cutting edge, alternative, quite highbrow. They were very important for my generation: In a way, as important as the music albums of that time.

I met him at a party in London shortly after I published my first novel. I was 27 and unknown, but Sonny came up to me and talked to me with great respect and kindness, telling me he'd read my novel, how much he'd liked it and how he wished his company had published it. I was very touched and encouraged by this.

Our professional relationship began with my third novel, *The Remains of the Day*, which he published in



Kazuo Ishiguro

MIKE SEGAR/REUTERS

'Sonny is devoted to his writers and worries a lot about them'

Celebrated novelist
KAZUO ISHIGURO recalls
his wonderful association with
Sonny Mehta

America in 1989, a year after he'd joined Knopf. He really threw himself behind that publication. I'd won some recognition in Britain by that point, but was still largely unknown in the States. I think Sonny made it something of a personal mission to make the book a success in America. I stayed in his apartment for about a week during the publication, and he and Gita took me out to various places and introduced me to all kinds of people.

Since then, whenever I'm on a tour of the States, he has insisted I stay with him during the New York stop. I know he regularly has his authors staying with him. In my experience, this is quite unique in a publisher.

On one occasion, Knopf put me up in a hotel in Manhattan, a very good hotel. But the stay lasted only a few hours. Sonny found out, turned up in the lobby, and checked me out. After that, I was his guest, and he and Gita looked after me morning till night. I remember him telling me once, with genuine outrage, how when he was out of

town, (*novelist; Flaubert's Parrot, Arthur & George*) Julian Barnes had passed through, he had been put up in what Sonny called 'a businessman's hotel'. I'm sure this was some utterly luxurious place, but for Sonny, it wasn't right for an author he respected. He has a very special sense of how authors he admires should be treated.

During one of my stays, in the middle of an afternoon, he suddenly announced that the two of us were going for a walk. I thought it was going to be a leisurely affair, but instead we marched around Central Park at a frantic pace, not talking. I had real trouble keeping up with him even though I was then a young guy. I discovered later this was part of his fitness regime.

He works very, very hard. He'll work late into the night, then get up early to read manuscripts before breakfast. Once I had to get a ridiculously early flight out, and was sneaking around the apartment trying not to wake up Sonny and Gita. When I got to the kitchen — this was around 5 am — I found Sonny there, in his night clothes, reading a manuscript at the kitchen table. I gathered this was part of a regular routine.

I believe you can't understand what makes Sonny tick without taking into account Gita, who has one of the liveliest intellects I've ever come across. They spend a lot of their time testing out ideas on each other — about politics, literature, social trends, movies, anything. Their scope is very international, and when they're at home, you'll hear them arguing, sometimes quite heatedly, with the unselfconsciousness of people thinking aloud to themselves and each other. They know one another very, very well, and Sonny tends to be at his most relaxed when Gita is present. I think she is by far the biggest influence on Sonny, the way he thinks, the way he behaves, what he thinks is important.

Sonny is devoted to his writers and worries a lot about them. He might seem distant during a meal, and then he'd reveal that he's worried about how a particular writer of his would react to the bad reviews her latest novel was getting. What impact would this have on the book she's currently writing? Would it discourage her from continuing with her career? Quite often, he worries about writers he doesn't even publish.

He once confided to me how excited he gets when he overhears people, at a party or in a restaurant, discussing with enthusiasm a Knopf book. A real twinkle came into his eyes even as he was telling me this. He told me he's seized by the urge to interrupt and say: 'Excuse me, but I just wanted to say, I published that book. And I'm so proud and pleased you like it.' I got the impression he's never actually done this, but this told me a lot about why Sonny Mehta is in publishing.

He has a wry sense of humor, which sometimes stretches to the blackly comic. About ten years he had a serious health problem; he underwent bypass surgery. I spoke to him by phone while he was still in the hospital, and when he related the whole story of his emergency treatment and operation, everything he said was screamingly funny. There was a very darkly funny part about how after surgery a number of patients are led into a room to be lectured about exercising during convalescence. And in the middle of one exercise session, one patient started to have another seizure.

I've heard people talk about him as mysterious, even hidden. But I've always found he's very open in talking about what makes him happy and what brings him down. He knows how to laugh at himself, and the strange things we all do to keep going.

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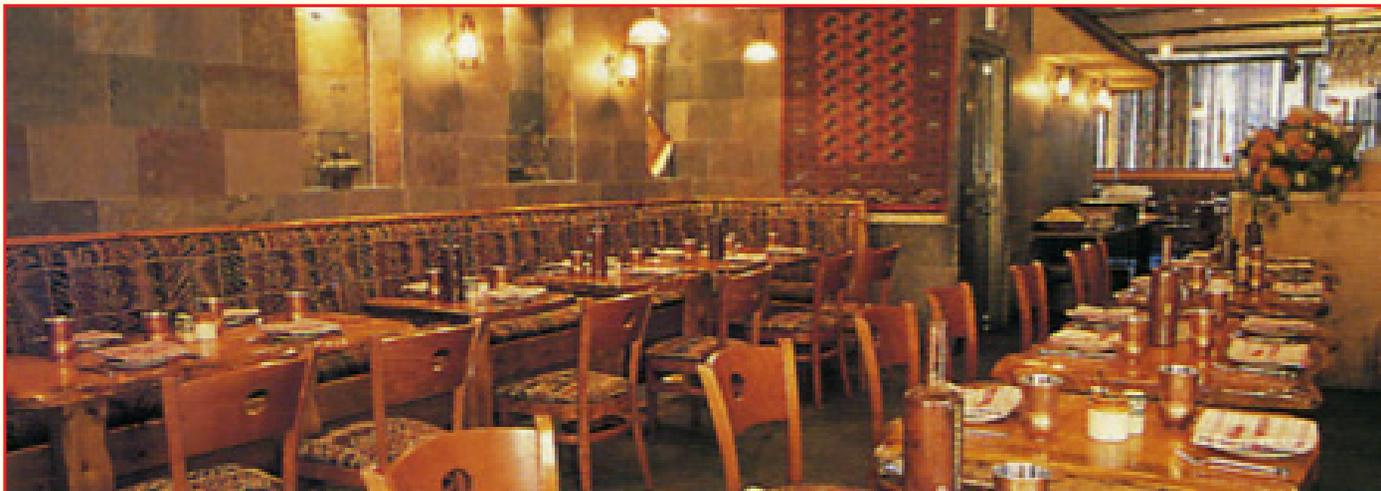
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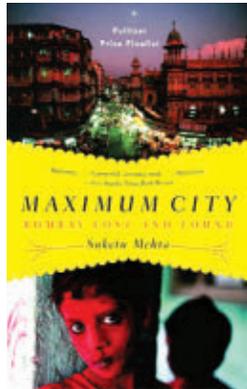
SUKETU MEHTA on how Sonny Mehta transformed his career.

Suketu Mehta, an associate professor of journalism at New York University, is the author of *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, which won the Kiriyama Prize and the Hutch Crossword Award, and was a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize, the Lettre Ulysses Prize, the BBC4 Samuel Johnson Prize, and the *Guardian* First Book Award.

He has won the Whiting Writers Award, the O Henry Prize, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship for his fiction. He is currently working on a nonfiction book about immigrants in contemporary New York, for which he was awarded a 2007 Guggenheim Fellowship.



Suketu Mehta



Throughout the writing of the book, he was a kindly encouraging light that guided my journey.

I was thrilled when my agent gave me the news: Knopf was publishing it, and Sonny himself was going to edit it line by line. I had heard for many years that across America a Knopf book gains immediate respect from booksellers and reviewers. A reviewer is more likely to review a book by a newcomer, which bears the Knopf imprint.

A magazine editor had told me that having your first book being published by Knopf is like going to Harvard as an undergrad. “It does not matter where you go next,” she added.

Sonny had for over 20 years demonstrated a great ability to make literary books become bestsellers in

America. It had to do a lot with the way the book was edited, designed and sold to booksellers across the country. He has an instinctive understanding of how a book moves from author to editor to salesman to bookseller to

reader.

He has a proprietorial pride about the books he has commissioned. It is a class act. Once, when I was in his office after my book came out, I was touched to see that he had framed the poster for my book, and hung it up on his wall along with posters for Toni Morrison, John Updike, etc.

Soon after buying the book, Sonny invited me to lunch. I was surprised that he had taken me to an Irish bar with wooden tables and not to a more elegant restaurant. But then he told me the reason: “I used to sit here with Joe Mitchell.” He knew that I revered Joseph Mitchell, the great *New Yorker* writer, whose reporting about New York taught me most of what I know about writing about cities. And now I was sitting with his publisher — and mine — at the table he used to sit at. It is little things like this, which make me feel happy that I am a writer.

The manuscript I submitted was at 1,667 pages. He rolled up his sleeves, got to work, and cut it in half. As writers we are egotists; we resent anyone cutting our work. But he made me realize that nobody was going to read a thousand page book. And he made it much, much better.

Sonny was not only an excellent editor, but he also had the best quality any publisher could have: Patience. I missed the deadline by a couple of years and the book came out in 2004.

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‘He is invaluable in helping me focus on the line of the book’

MICHAEL ONDAATJE on working with Sonny Mehta

MICHAEL ONDAATJE, who was born in Sri Lanka and is a resident of Canada, is the author of the Booker Prize-winning novel, *The English Patient*, later made into an Oscar-winning film. His novel’s *Anil’s Ghost* won Canada’s best-known literary award, the Giller. He spoke to **ARTHUR J PAIS**:

In *The English Patient* I had a whole section about (the bomb detonation expert of Indian origin) Kip’s brother who is a radical in India. “There is only one reason to have all this,” Sonny said. “That is, if he is going to be the central character in your next novel.”

I said, ‘No, he won’t even be in my next book.’

Sonny said: “Then you should cut it down.”

I have always been fascinated by editing in books and films. Though I also work with an editor in Canada, Sonny’s input is

essential to me. I don’t necessarily agree with everything he says, but he is invaluable in helping me focus on the line of the book, and to where I should cut back.

I first met him in London about 30 years ago when the memoir *Running in the Family* had come out in hardcover. He was at Picador then, and wanted to get the book for the paperback. Later he moved to America to head Knopf and he published me. Since then all my work including the novels *The English Patient* and *Divisadero* have been published by him.

I guess we hit it off the first time we met. We had many common interests: We love the blues, rock & roll. He adores classical music too. As a writer I am influenced not only by what I have read, but the other arts — studying the structure of other

arts like painting and opera. Sonny is someone who has that wide range of interests.

Besides, there was probably also a bonding because we both came from Asia, and found ourselves as adults in the West. Over the years he has remained a friend as much as a publisher.

He is very involved with the designs of the books that Knopf does, which is something



Mehta, center, and author Michael Ondaatje at an Asian American Writers Workshop event in New York honoring the publisher, November 14, 2009

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Mehta, with writers and colleagues including Michael Herr, Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan and Oliver Sacks



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'How much more open this country has become to foreign writers'

M61 PAGE why he would be leaving just a couple of years after moving from London to take over from Robert A Gottlieb, who ran Knopf for 18 years before going to edit *The New Yorker* magazine in 1987.

But Mehta could not be stopped. For here was a man who not only attracted new talent and continued to have a great rapport with established Knopf writers like John Updike, but who also promoted Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* more as a love story than a philosophical argument, making it a nationwide bestseller. Another literary novel that stayed on the bestseller list for more than a year was Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, which also won the Pulitzer Prize.

Mehta's interest in publishing is not confined to fine editing and getting great book jackets designed. At times he also wants to make sure the pricing is appropriate. Giving an example of his pricing instincts, *The New York Times* wrote 20 years ago how he overrode objections to price *The Civil War* as high as \$50 — others favored \$40. The book went on to become a big bestseller. Then he moved more cautiously on the new Anne Rice novel, *The Times* wrote — shunning a suggested \$24.95 in favor of \$22.95 — because, he said, 'we want to go on gradually building her.'

Three years ago, Everyman's, a division of Knopf, republished several of R K Narayan's books to mark the writer's birth anniversary, with an introduction by Alexander McCall Smith.

Mehta, who went into publishing, disappointing his family who had expected him to follow his father Amrik Singh Mehta into the Indian Foreign Service, and his writer wife Gita have one son, who lives in London. Gita is the only daughter of Indian politician Biju Patnaik and elder sister of Orissa state's current chief minister Naveen Patnaik. The Mehtas divide their time between New York, London and New Delhi.

When Mehta had emergency triple heart bypass surgery 10 years ago, there was speculation that he would not last much longer in the New York publishing world.

But as his admirers — and even adversaries — point out Mehta is not a quitter. His passion for the written word is so strong that he will fight hard not only to make a book edited the best possible way and endow it with an attractive cover, but also send the writers — even in the days of economic distress — to many book readings.

Those who had predicted in 1987 that his days as head of Knopf would be numbered have been proved wrong time and time again. Over two years ago, his power at Random House grew even more as

he became the chairman and editor-in-chief of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

India Abroad's interview with Mehta took place on the 25th floor of the Random House building in Manhattan where the likes of John Updike, Joan Didion, Robert Caro, Toni Morrison, Anne Rice and Dan Brown might have joined the legendary publisher in a conversation about books, books and books.

Many people had warned Arthur J Pais that Mehta was a man of very few words but he was soon to discover that once you engage him in a discussion about books, you became a special guest.

Knopf has published a large number of fine novelists who happen to be of Indian origin and some of them have also set their books in India.

Twenty-five years ago, when I began publishing in the United States I felt there was an indifference to foreign writers in America. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* had been published here before my arrival. He was considered a Titan then. Well, he still is. But there are so many wonderful writers of Indian origin, and their audiences are growing.

We continue to publish the legendary V S Naipaul (*The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel, A House for Mr Biswas, and An Area of Darkness*) and it was a particular privilege to be in

Stockholm for his Nobel Prize ceremony — an extraordinary event which I also attended when Toni Morrison (*Beloved*) and Orhan Pamuk (*My Name Is Red, Snow*) were honored — and I am eagerly awaiting his new book, *The Masque of Africa*.

Jhumpa Lahiri (*Unaccustomed Earth*) has joined our list. Rohinton Mistry has a passionate following. Suketu Mehta's excellent biography of Bombay, *Maximum City*, was very well received. And justly so. We will be publishing a new novel by Aravind Adiga, who won the Booker Prize for *The White Tiger*.

We have a new book by Pico Iyer (*The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama*) and Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* is now a film. We've just published Amit Chaudhuri's well-received new novel (*The Immortals*). Recently we also published first works of fiction by the new writers Nalini Jones (*What You Call Winter*) and Tania James (*Atlas of Unknowns*).

It is always exhilarating to discover new writers, and wonderful when they achieve success. For instance, I began reading Abraham Verghese's novel *Cutting for Stone* one Saturday morning at our kitchen table where I often work, and could not put it down. We published it last year and now it is in paperback and on *The New York Times* best-seller list.

And then there is a great new generation of writers of Pakistani origin that we have published: Nadeem Aslam, Mohammed Hanif, Mohsin Hamid.

Other publishers have also issued books by Indians writing in various genres. Amitav Ghosh (*Sea of Poppies*), for instance. Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* was a fabulous novel. And so is Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.

I see all these names, and I tell myself: what an extraordinary change has come over American publishing in the past two decades. How much more open this country has become to foreign writers, and how much more welcoming to foreign cultures and experiences. I'm thinking not only about the way Indian writers have been received but also how enthusiastically the great Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk (*The Museum of Innocence*) or the Chinese writer Ha Jin (*Waiting: A Novel*) or the large number of South Americans, most notably Roberto Bolaño, have



Mehta, with writers Robert Caro, Joan Didion, Richard Russo, Richard Ford, Peter Carey, Toni Morrison and Carl Hiaasen

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been embraced. In fact, given how many people speak Spanish in the US now, we are publishing many writers in the original Spanish in Vintage Español.

Do you take a special pride in the publication of the books by writers of Indian origin?

I do. India is in my bones and although Gita and I still divide our time between America, England and India, I do not get to visit India for as long or as often as I would like to or used to. So I read these books to be there. I have also been fascinated with how much India has changed in recent years and how much it continues to change. Books help me understand this changing India.

About 20 years ago when no one in America would touch it, you decided to edit and publish Bret Easton Ellis's book *American Psycho*. Some people thought it was pornography and would incite violence against women. You were very courageous to publish it.

There are two things to be mentioned here: Firstly, I had published Bret's book *Less than Zero* when I was in England, and I knew Bret was a serious and original writer. I was surprised that *American Psycho* was dropped unceremoniously by a major American publishing house when it was on the verge of publication.

It was unusual that a book would be dropped so late in the publishing process and it occurred to me a kind of censorship had come into play. I found the action unacceptable and unjust. It was some sort of moral panic.

My position has always been that if you think you will find a book or work of art offensive, avoid it. I had not read the book when Bret's agent approached me. But once I read it, I offered to publish it. I am pleased to say the book is still in print, continues to sell and find readers, and America seems to have survived *American Psycho*.

We pick up so many wonderful books published by Knopf; some are by famous writers and some are by new writers. Invariably every writer thanks you for nurturing his or her books. What is nurturing a book or author like?

Certainly I know that what the writers are saying is not just about me; it is about our editors and it is about the publishing culture we have at Knopf. We attempt to support the writers through the writing process; we have a team of extraordinarily talented editors here who offer their assistance in shaping a book. But in the final reckoning, it is the writers who do the work. They know their stories, they know



Mehta, third from left, with guests at the Asian American Writers Workshop event in New York honoring him, November 14, 2009

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how best to tell them. We offer suggestions.

I can only tell a writer, this works for me, this doesn't. But I believe finally it is their call. We also do our best to make the books look special. Our art department is without doubt the best in the country. Nurturing a writer also means building a relationship. At times it also means staying with a writer when the second or third book doesn't work out as well as expected.

I have heard that *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, one of the best books you have published in recent years, was going to be a huge book on the war in Iraq but that you helped writer Rajiv Chandrasekaran focus it on one area.

I was familiar with Rajiv's coverage of the war from Iraq and I read his book proposal when it came in to Jon Segal, his editor here. When

I talked to him on the phone, I asked him if he had read Ryszard Kapuscinski's *The Emperor*. (That book is set in Ethiopia following the downfall of Emperor Haile Selassie; it is based on interviews with members of the imperial court but it is also the story of a larger society, Ethiopia.)

Rajiv understood what I was saying. He shaped his own book, which is an extraordinary piece of reportage, using the microcosm of the Green Zone (the American enclave in central Baghdad) to take on a bigger subject. The Green Zone thereby became a metaphor for the American War in Iraq.

Ryszard Kapuscinski is one of the best authors you have published. Like many Knopf books, his work offers scholarship and exciting stories. He also covers India a bit in his work *Travels with Herodotus*.

I had wanted him to do a book on India. He was a man of unique vision. His death is a big loss.

Knopf (and Doubleday, which is also under your wing) has published not only writers who have won major awards ranging from the Nobel to the Pulitzer but also a fine array of crime writers. Some people see a contradiction there.

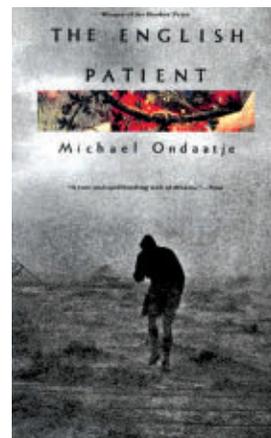
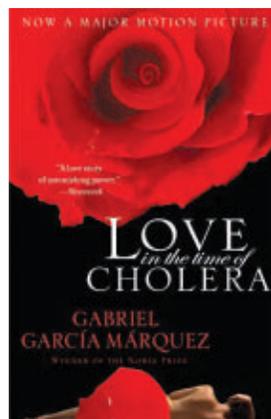
I am not ashamed of my enthusiasm for crime books or books that are big bestsellers. People forget that before I came to Knopf there was a long tradition here of publishing such fine crime writers as James M Cain (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*), Dashiell Hammett (*The Maltese Falcon*), Raymond Chandler (*The Long Goodbye*), and Ross Macdonald (the *Lew Archer* series). So there is nothing new about Knopf publishing best-selling books.

We also published Michael Crichton. When I arrived, I edited *Jurassic Park*, which went on to be a huge bestseller and then a film by Steven Spielberg which was also an enormous hit. I have been privileged to know many writers but Michael was special. He was a Renaissance man, a man of great curiosity. And a terrific storyteller. It was a thrill to work with him.

You have also published another generation of fine writers including P D James (*The Private Patient*), James Ellroy (*American Tabloid: A Novel*) and comparatively new writers like April Smith (*North of Montana*).

Personally, I love crime novels. One of the things that fascinates me is that crime writing at its best depicts the underbelly of society. Some of the most interesting crime books have dealt with people at the fringes of the state. They are more than murder and revenge and the apprehension of criminals. They hold a mirror to society.

We have also published some fine crime



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Gita Mehta has been a documentary filmmaker and written several best-selling books including *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* and *A River Sutra*, which have been translated into over 20 languages. She met her future husband Sonny Mehta when they were both students at Cambridge University.

When my husband was invited to become the publisher of Alfred Knopf, America's most prestigious publishing house, there was a lot of controversy. Many people viewed it as a cultural invasion, as if a foreigner was being brought in to run *The New York Times*. What made it worse, it wasn't only someone from Britain being imported to run an American cultural institution, but an Indian. Remember this was 25 years ago.

Today, Indians occupy many important positions in America, but then it was scandalous that an Indian would be running America's major literary publisher, home not only to great American writers and a galaxy of Nobel Laureates, but also to such international icons as Thomas Mann, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir.

Actually, my husband had a difficult time entering publishing even in England. It was the sixties, and the idea of an Indian being good enough to edit established British writers was not received warmly. Nobody remembered that decades earlier Krishna Menon, the man who would become our first high commissioner to Britain, had created the non-fiction list at Penguin books. Anyway, after many attempts Sonny finally landed a job as a lowly assistant at a London literary house, only to discover that one of his first tasks was assisting the publisher, Sir Rupert Hart-Davis, in destroying his private correspondence with the poet T S Eliot.

Sonny was horrified. For someone who worships writing, this amounted to sacrilege.

I suppose Sonny's passion for writers comes from his passion for books, and that has a lot to do with being Indian. We belong to the generation of Indians for whom books was our primary entertainment and our greatest pleasure. We didn't have television or shopping malls or the Internet so we read books, voraciously and indiscriminately — everything from J D Salinger and P G Wodehouse and R K Narayan to Plato or Balzac or Mulk Raj Anand.

I guess we were lucky. We didn't think we needed a license or a degree to read. We read quite simply because we loved books, and later we often found ourselves better read than many of our colleagues at Cambridge University. Even there, as students with little money to buy books, we would buy a paperback and share it. Since I am a faster reader than Sonny, I would read the first 25 pages, tear them off and pass them on to him.



Gita and Sonny Mehta

PRESTON MERCHANT

'The Indian habit of reading everything has given him an edge as an editor'

Novelist **GITA MEHTA's** fascinating account of what it is like being married to the incomparable Sonny Mehta

As a result of being an Indian reader my husband has never been a cultural snob, and I think he has brought that attitude to publishing. He believes everyone should have the opportunity to read any book and a publisher must find a way of making books accessible. For instance, one of his major early publications in America was Gabriel Marquez's wonderful novel, *Love in the Times of Cholera*. I remember Sonny was determined to gain the book the widest possible audience by selling it primarily as a great love story. To avoid intimidating the general reader he instructed the publicity department not to play up the fact that Marquez was a Nobel Laureate. The strategy must have worked. That year the book sold over 300,000 copies in hardback.

I also think the Indian habit of reading everything has given him an edge as an editor. Someone once told me, "Give Sonny 10 books each in different genres, literary fiction, popular fiction, poetry, science fiction, or works of non-fiction, and he will choose the best in each category."

I think it was Sonny's love of books that led him into publishing. Initially, his father Amrik Singh Mehta wasn't very happy with the decision. He wanted Sonny to become a diplomat because he himself had been one of the first Indians to join the foreign service and represent the Republic of India abroad. In fact, Sonny has Lord Wavell's letter allowing his father to leave the RAF for three days — it was during World War II — to travel to Delhi to be interviewed by Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel. Fortunately, for us readers, Sonny persisted in following his vocation.

My husband is a man of few words, many people will tell you that, but he is very clear in his analysis of a book. Bruce Chatwin once remarked to me, 'Sonny's genius is that he will make just three or four observations. But each comment is like a spear to your heart.'

I guess Sonny was invited to America to run Knopf because he had published books that had made a great impression in England, non-fiction books such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch* and Ryszard Kapuscinski's *The Emperor*, as well as stream of terrific novelists like Ian McKellan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, Edmund White. Not only did he publish these wonderful writers in paperback in England, but he continues to publish them today in Vintage, a division of Knopf.

By the time we arrived in the United States, Sonny already knew a lot of American writers because he had published them in the United Kingdom. He also knew many American editors. But he did not know the booksellers and he did not know the overall American market. He had to learn many things quickly, knowing everyone in the book business was watching his moves. It was also a time when people were saying that there was no significant market for literary fiction. But he was not convinced of that, and he proved it. He sold more copies of Marquez than Jackie Collins sold the same year.

Every season he put a first time novelist on *The New York Times* bestseller list, writers like Donna Tart and Rohinton Mistry who have gone on to become household names. Last year of the 10 best books published in America, *The New York Times* chose nine titles published by the group of companies he runs. Nobel Laureates, Pulitzer Prizes, Booker Prizes, National Book Awards, he has been privileged to publish writers of such quality they routinely win these awards.

But then he is only continuing the tradition at Knopf, publishing great literary fiction and poetry, and equally great non-fiction. Even when he publishes very popular novels, he doesn't think like an accountant which is to say, he doesn't say that since a best-selling author makes money anyway why bother to try and make the books better.

I remember when Sonny read the first draft of Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, he told Michael, "I like this very much, but maybe it lacks some Chaos Theory." Michael said that comment made him think, and eventually he came up with idea of faulty DNA tests leading to the dinosaurs being able to reproduce. Those changes made a huge difference to the novel.

Over the years, I have watched Sonny involve himself with every aspect of book production including the design of the book jacket. He has a great understanding of the creative process of making a book work. He believes each book should have a personality of its own. Go to any bookshop, and you will find that some of the most eye-catching, elegant, and evocative book jackets belong to Knopf books. Being a writer myself I have enviously watched the skill with which writers belonging to the Knopf group of companies are promoted and marketed.

One thing is certain: He never seems to stop working. Maybe that is why he still enjoys such a distinguished reputation. As the writer Michael Herr told me years ago, "Sonny brings the same intensity of passion to publishing as a writer does to writing."

— As told to Arthur J Pais

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'A kindly encouraging light that guided my journey'

M64 PAGE Right at the beginning of working on *Maximum City*, he told me that my chapters were too long. Break them into sub sections, he urged me. Imagine, he said a reader reading a few paragraphs, then getting up to fetch a glass of wine, and continuing to read the book, savoring it paragraph by short paragraph.

He took a chance on a first time book writer, and I found out soon that the legend about him discovering writers and nurturing them not just as writers but also as friends was very true. I also discovered that he would himself edit a couple of books a year because his first and greatest passion is not publishing; it is editing.

He could have spent his time more profitably editing a more lucrative writer. Well, he does that too, but he also grooms new writers.

When the book came out, there was a review in the *San Diego Union Tribune*, which identified me as 'the son of Alfred A Knopf editor in chief Sonny Mehta.' So when I signed my copy of the book to Sonny, I was having a drink with him in his house along with my parents, and I wrote, 'To the true father of this book.'

His writers often become the Mehta family friends. His and his wife Gita often meet many of the Knopf writers in their home in Manhattan — something which few publishers do.

In some ways, he is not an American publisher. He is more like the collegial types you find in Britain but unlike many old-fashioned Brits, he is not afraid of paperbacks. And precisely because of that he has been able to survive and prosper in this business when many well-known editors and publishers have seen their power decline. He commands an extraordinary loyalty from his writers.

Sonny, whose real name is Ajai Singh Mehta, has a really big Sikh heart and a passionate attachment to the written word.

He realizes that a book is an imperfect object. His enthusiasm for carpets, especially Persian carpets, say a lot about him. He loves looking at them at the Metropolitan Museum and he has plenty of beautiful carpets in his home, on his floors and his walls. Carpet weavers deliberately leave small flaws into the rugs, because they realize that perfection is only for God. Sonny recognizes similar imperfections in his writers too, and loves them nonetheless.

— As told to Arthur J Pais

M66 PAGE writers from abroad including Henning Mankell, from Sweden, whose work appeared in paperback editions from our imprint Vintage and now for the first time from Knopf in hardcover (*The Man from Beijing*). Then there is Stieg Larsson, who died a few years ago, but has left behind three books including *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. There is a Swedish movie version, which is coming out in the States soon. When I watched it I wondered how Hollywood could possibly improve on this unsentimental and gripping examination of political and judicial corruption in Sweden. Incidentally, the actress who plays the lead is terrific.

Among the crime writers I enjoy enormously is Carl Hiaasen. His books (*Flush*, *Basket Cases*) are comic masterpieces and very hard-hitting. I also admire David Peace, whose *Tokyo Year Zero* is an almost unbearable portrait of Japanese society crumbling during the American occupation after World War II. Then there is John Burdett, whose books including *The Godfather of Kathmandu* brilliantly combine Buddhism and the milieu of Bangkok's gangsters. James Ellroy, a writer of great ambition, continues to mine American history and reveal the underbelly of the Nixon and Kennedy years.

You are only the third ever head of Knopf (after Alfred A Knopf and Robert Gottlieb). Over the years, from time to time, people have written your professional obituary. And here you are growing stronger year by year.

I was a very surprising and unexpected choice to head Knopf. I think people could not make out who I was and what I really wanted to do here. I was a paperback publisher from Britain, but I was not a Brit. When I was growing up in India, a book to me meant a paperback. It's how I discovered reading, how I discovered most of the writers who excited me. Frankly, it was the only type of book that I could afford, even as a student at Cambridge.

When I was given a chance to publish paperbacks early in my career, I jumped at it. I was involved in the start-up of two trade paperback imprints in England: Paladin, where we published writers such as Hunter S Thompson (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) and Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*); and then later, in the 1970s, Picador, where we published Edmund White (*Forgetting Elena*), Bret Easton Ellis, Oliver Sacks (*Awakenings*),



KIND COURTESY: KNOPF

'How much more open this country has become to foreign writers'

Ken Kesey (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), Michael Herr, Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior*), and Cormac McCarthy (*The Road*).

Many people, like me, come to their reading through paperbacks. Paperbacks last longer in the sense that they stay in print for new generations of readers. Many of the writers I have introduced at Knopf, including Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Remains*

of the Day), Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance*), and John Banville (*The Sea*), have continued to find their real readers in paperback. Many writers I published in paperback in London are still with me; now many of their books are published in hardcover here by Knopf (Peter Carey's *Parrot* and Olivier in America, for instance, is coming out soon).

Ondaatje is one of your favorites. People usually think of him only as a novelist, the writer of *The English Patient*, *Divisadero*....

Michael is a writer with many talents. His books show that. His *Running in the Family* is one of the finest memoirs I can think of. I believe he's working hard on a new novel and I can't wait to read it. He is also a good friend.

When you graduated from Cambridge

you had thought of turning to writing.

Did I? I might have, but I realized very quickly that I wasn't as good as I hoped to be. I have not the slightest regret that I didn't pursue that course. But I think I do have some publishing skills and over the years, I have been privileged to know and work with some of the finest writers of several generations.

Among the books you have published there was a lot of talk about Bill Clinton's memoir *My Life* and the \$10 million Knopf had reportedly paid the former President. Some people thought it was a big gamble.

There was extraordinary anticipation for those presidential memoirs. And, of course, there was a lot of speculation about how much we had paid for it. But President Clinton is a dynamic and charismatic figure, and he turned out to be a wonderful storyteller. It was an unprecedented seller for a presidential memoir. I'm proud that we were the publisher.

I heard a story a few years ago; I think it was in *New York* magazine. The writer asked you of your survival secret. You showed her your *kada* and said, I come from a warrior class.

(*Chuckles*). I must have been drunk.

The writer and editor Khushwant Singh once told me that he was an atheist but he was culturally a Sikh. So he has the turban, the beard and the *kada*. Does wearing the *kada* make a statement for you?

It would make a statement if I removed it. I have been wearing it since I was a child. Of course, I've had to order a new one now and then as the size of my wrist changes.

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