

ANALYSIS / OPINION

IACF Unity Dinner, and Unity in Diversity

By Dr. SUBHASH GARG
Special to India-West

Many Americans think of India as a homogeneous entity, but our readers know better. All Indians do not look alike, talk alike, dress alike or even eat and drink alike. India's astonishing diversity enriches not just India but our community in the U.S. as well. This fact results in a dizzying array of Indian associations, cultural, religious and political groups, where shifting and sometimes conflicting alliances are common.

Amid this hustle and bustle stands the Indo-American Community Federation, a serene symbol of unity and friendship. Its Board of Directors has been unchanged for 15 years. Its events are attended by most leading Indian organizations. Once a year, it brings an unmatched array of elected officials at all levels face to face with the rich diversity of Indian groups in the San Francisco Bay Area. Its founder and chairman, Jeevan Zutshi, is well known in the local Indian community; his soft-spoken unassuming style is liked by all. As you get to know the organization, you wish all Indian organizations would work like this — driven not by egos but by shared goals and a sense of service.

Zutshi founded the non-profit in 1993 as a low key association to foster cultural exchange in the Indian American community and to gradually and gently raise the community's profile in mainstream politics. Their strategy of being low-key and collaborative has turned out to be highly effective. The IACF may work unobtrusively, but its reach and prestige are unmistakable.

Nowhere is this more evident than at their annual signature event, aptly named the Unity Dinner. Its genesis in 2002 is remarkable in itself. The IACF's board



Originally from India, Aditi Narvekar (U), 13, and 24 other children say the Pledge of Allegiance after becoming U.S. citizens during a ceremony for children hailing from 14 countries at the Sully Historic Site May 21, 2010 in Chantilly, Virginia.

The Indo-American Community Federation has been hosting an annual Unity Dinner since 2002 to show unity of purpose amidst diversity. The 2002 Unity Dinner had guests representing every major Indian association, the Chinese, Filipino, Hispanic, Afghan and Bangladeshi communities, and local, state and federally elected representatives. (Getty Images)

of directors sensed that the fall of the Twin Towers would herald a new era in American history, where all Americans regardless of ethnicity or political beliefs would coalesce to rid the world of terrorism. They felt that it was important for Asian Americans to demonstrate their resolve to work together towards this goal, by a concrete and visible action. Thus was born the concept of a Unity Dinner, leading to the first such event in January 2002.

The response from dozens of Bay Area ethnic organizations and elected representatives at city, county, state and federal levels was overwhelming. Over 400 people attended the 2002 Unity Dinner, representing every major

Indian association, the Chinese, Filipino, Hispanic, Afghan, Bangladeshi and other communities; the mayors and other senior officials of Fremont, Newark, Union City and Milpitas; California state legislators and senators; and congressmen elected from these areas. It was a remarkable gathering for a remarkable purpose: to show unity of purpose amidst diversity.

The IACF has held a Unity Dinner every year since then, featuring keynote speakers who have achieved excellence in many walks of life, ranking up to the former First Lady of California, Sha-

ron Davis. The dinners have recognized dozens of worthy activists and leaders by judiciously chosen awards, featured informative and moving but quite brief speeches, and entertained hundreds with a diversity rarely found in other events. The organizers have made a special effort to reach beyond Indian culture, in terms of cuisine, music and dance, while retaining a distinctively Indian flavor.

The next Unity Dinner will be held on March 25 in Fremont, Calif.

Between the annual flagship events, the IACF undertakes activities consistent with their

mission to foster understanding between the Indian American community and other groups. The events vary from one year to the next, and range in focus from a fun trip to Yosemite National Park to a well-attended national symposium on the still-intractable Kashmir problem. True to its name, the organization has celebrated quintessentially American milestones from the Fourth of July to Mothers' Day. It has held health care camps, community fairs, awareness seminars, town hall meetings with public officials, and participated in a variety of events organized by like-minded ethnic associations including Chinese and Hispanic groups. It has even held musical nights featuring local Indian talent.

Two special themes close to the federation's emotional core must be mentioned. One is the serious, neglected issue of Kashmir and of 300,000 Kashmiri refugees driven out to Jammu. IACF chairman Jeevan Zutshi is from Kashmir and has made several trips there to underline and highlight the refugees' suffering.

The second theme is related to the untimely demise of Zutshi's son at 30, caused in part by unregulated over-the-counter supplements. The IACF is campaigning for improved regulation and FDA oversight of substances that aren't prescribed but are nonetheless consumed by millions of Americans in the hope of curing or preventing a disease.

All things considered, the Indo-American Community Federation has quietly but surely earned its place among leading South Asian organizations in America over the last 17 years.

(Dr. Subhash Garg is secretary of the Indo-American Community Federation.)

Other Voices:

More Diversity Needed in Television Shows

By KAREN K. NARASAKI

Ten years ago when we started grading the four major networks — ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC — on the inclusion of Asian Pacific Americans in front of, and behind, the camera, the picture was dismal. In 2001, only 17 Asian American actors were featured in the prime-time lineup and they were generally limited roles. The following year the number was even worse at 14. In 2010, the picture was much brighter with breakout shows such as "Grey's Anatomy," "Lost," "Heroes" and "Glee" featuring APA actors in quality roles.

But to have prime-time television truly reflect the America we live in, the networks must do more to invest in shows that feature an APA as the central character. There has not been a primary cast of APA actors since Margaret Cho's "All-American Girl" in 1994

— a span of more than 15 years. With the growing pool of proven Asian American talent in primary roles in large ensemble casts, the time is long overdue for an Asian American-led show.

Over the last decade, reality shows emerged as a force during prime-time hours. The networks should be commended for the diversity of shows such as "Dancing with the Stars," "American Idol," "The Amazing Race," "Survivor," "The Biggest Loser" and "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," which have featured APA talent including Carrie Ann Inaba, Cheryl Burke, Yul Kwon, Ada Wong and Kat Chang, who was part of the first all-female team to win "The Amazing Race." We applaud ABC for featuring Rhex Arboleda, a native of the Philippines, and his family on an episode of "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" during the 2010-2011 season. However, not every reality show producer

has been committed to assembling casts that are consistently diverse.

Losing "Lost" and "Heroes" will have an impact on the number of APA actors on scripted prime-time shows in the 2010-2011 season if efforts are not made to ensure diversity initiatives are implemented. But we do see promise in shows such as "Outsourced" and "Hawaii Five-0."

Overall, there were 37 APA actors cast in regular prime-time roles for the 2009-2010 season, an increase of four from the previous season.

Although the quality of these roles has vastly improved — APAs are now cast in roles with real dimension, not just as sidekicks or in menial roles — APAs are still less likely than actors from other racial groups to appear in primary roles.

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