

Silver Jubilee Reflections: A Short History of Our Beginnings

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On **February 28th, 1993**, The New York Times published an article written by Merri Rosenberg which opened with “The gently tinkling sounds of the hand bells, usually used in temple services, mingled with the haunting tones of a classical sitar” and it went on to describe a typical Indian music class in progress in Irvington, NY “as a group of eight Indian youngsters ranging in age from 5 through 13 sat in a semicircle around their instructor... Chander Kala Ahuja” and how “The sounds belied the frozen, wintry backdrop outside. Instead, the tunes spun images of the sunny, colorful landscape of their native India.” It was an article about Indians in Westchester County and it told the story of the effort of Indian parents “to pass along their cultural heritage to their children..... through such classes as Mrs. Ahuja’s.” This showed “a growing desire on the part of the members of Westchester’s Indian community to maintain their identity” even as they “assimilated successfully into the larger American society.” The article quoted Dr. Shishir Bhattacharya as saying “A few years ago, I think the Indian community was more hidden because people were mostly interested in setting themselves up professionally,” while now he had become involved “with other Indians in the county to explore the possibility of opening a community center in which to hold social activities, celebrate festivals and offer Indian cultural classes.”

In order to read the full article go to:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1993/02/28/nyregion/indians-in-county-on-a-spiritual-quest.html>

This, truly, was a major reason for the push for a cultural association. It had begun the previous year, in **1992**, when a small group of like-minded Indian-American residents of Westchester had joined hands to start a project which would bring the various segments of the community together to make a shared home on what still felt like foreign soil. It was a young community then, striving to find roots and wings in a new landscape. The idea was to come together as a unified whole and to celebrate **being Indian-American FIRST** - that is, **BEFORE** identifying with our narrower regional selves. This would create strength and unity within the community and help us build political clout outside of it. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, it would allow us to provide our children with the instruction and support necessary to imbibe the vast riches of the culture of their ancestors and to hold on to the rewards of their heritage. This, in turn, would provide the children with an understanding of the deeper nuances of their hyphenated identities.

So began the quest for a Community Center which would be inclusive and secular and become a second home to its members. In the late summer of **1992** the discussions became more frequent, held mostly on Friday evenings, when a group of tired and hungry but extremely enthusiastic professionals started weighing the possibility of such a communal home for all Indians in the area. Some of the earliest discussions

were held in the medical office of **Dr. Shishir Bhattacharya**, on Saw Mill River Road in Ardsley. **Dr. Sudha Rao** was the only female member of this exploratory group, and it was she, more than anybody else, who volunteered to bring food to these meetings and make sure everybody was fed and comfortable while the future of the Center was being envisioned over vadas, pakoras, idlis, samosas and endless cups of chai!

The first Official meeting of this still-unnamed organization was held in the home of **Mr. George Madapallil** in **November 1992**. By this time the enthusiasm had picked up for an all-inclusive Indian Community Center **where no regional group would dominate**. The diversity, even within the limits of this early group, spoke for itself. The earliest participants who regularly attended the meetings and worked hard to form the association included **Mr. D. P. Ahuja, Dr. Shishir Bhattacharya, Mr. Madapallil George, Mr. Sital Jain, Dr. Anil Joshi, Mr. Jagdish Mistry, Dr. Venkatachala Pathy, Mr. S. Raghuraman** and **Dr. Sudha Rao**. These were the actual **Founders** of the organization which was named **“Indo-American Community Center”** and they became the earliest office-bearers, with **Dr. Venkatachala Pathy** serving as the **First President of IACC**. Later, of course, this name had to be changed to **“India Center of Westchester, Inc.”** (the current name) because of conflict with other associations in North America with similar names.

There was an enormous excitement building up within the community regarding this new venture and that excitement was on full display during the **Inaugural Banquet** held on **December 12th, 1993**, at The Green Tree Country Club in New Rochelle. It was a grand affair, with an elaborate, interactive presentation of the proposal. Plans for a beautiful community center with a huge auditorium with elegant appointments were presented by professional architects. The crowd cheered and it seemed for a dizzying moment, that with this kind of backing from the community, the Center was a certainty! The nascent committee members felt their hopes soaring and their momentum unstoppable. It was impossible to be present in that ballroom-turned-town-hall that evening, and not be swept away by the possibility of this enchanting dream and all that it could signify for the Indians in Westchester!

Reality soon set in when it came time to collect the money for such a massive venture. A search for a community home had already started in the previous months with committee members meeting with realtors, discussing pricing and driving around the county, locating possible sites. But it was quickly evident that funds were lacking. The community was still young and there were not enough models to emulate for this kind of an undertaking and our shared financial strength was not adequate to provide the confidence to forge ahead with the purchase of any of the properties that were available or suggested. An immediate purchase was out of the question. **But the Founders were not giving up.**

The Second Annual Banquet was held at The Rye Town Hilton on **September 18, 1994** and this was the first time a Souvenir was printed for the occasion. Members voiced their thoughts regarding a Community Center and it was determined that though it

might be difficult given the financial limitations, the project was a necessity and worth pursuing.

In the following months it became clear the Community Center had assumed a life of its own. Classes, teachers, students were all part India Center's agenda now and an annual Youth Talent Show became a regular event which the Center supported and hosted at venues like the Yonkers Public Library. These stage shows were important as they gave the children an opportunity to exhibit their newly attained skills in Indian dance and music while learning about their culture and their roots.

The Center was also very active in organizing fun events for adults, such as an annual Valentine's Day Dinner-Dance when women volunteers, guided by **Shyla Pathy**, molded chocolate roses for each female attendee. It was a graceful touch which brought added joy, every time.

The Annual Banquet continued to be a gala event that everybody looked forward to and which served to generate both funds and publicity through ticket sales and the publication of the yearly **Souvenir**. Members wrote interesting articles for the Souvenir and shared their thoughts on varied subjects. The yearly banquet also served to build strong social bonds that kept this diverse group together over the years.

The year **1996** became a watershed moment when two significant changes occurred. The first was tragic - it was the sudden and untimely demise on **March 18th, 1996** of one of India Center's beloved Founders, **Mr. Raghuraman**, who was an extremely energetic, efficient and devoted champion of its cause. He was serving as the Secretary of the organization at the time of his passing. He had always taken his job very seriously and always served with a smile. He regularly got his children involved in helping out by asking them to stuff envelopes and lick postage stamps during the big events, a job that today's youth is ignorant of, as electronic mailing has eliminated the need. The loss of Mr. Raghuraman was a shock and a setback early in the history of the Center.

The second significant happening in **1996** was the incorporation of the Center as a **tax-exempt** association and the change of the name to **India Center of Westchester, Inc.** This was a major achievement and brought a sense of accomplishment to all the members of the Executive Committee who had worked very hard to make it happen.

The Grand Millennium Banquet in **1999** was the first time India Center held its annual event at **The Portuguese Center** in Tarrytown. This was such a good fit for the association that many members, immediately upon entry, questioned why the Indians in the county did not own a similar place of their own. Following the Millennium Banquet, India Center went back to this location several times and each time the same question was raised and no good reply could be found, other than our community being too diverse and separated to be able to pool their resources. This was never a satisfactory answer for India Center and the committee continued the drive and held on to the dream of someday achieving its goal of building a permanent home.

In 2002, Dr. Sudha Rao, with the help of Shyla Pathy, Mala Venkataramani, Sumita Bhattacharya and a few other women launched the Ladies' Forum at India Center and it was under this wing that IC hosted a guest lecture to expand and enhance awareness regarding women's issues. In March 2003 the prominent Indian scholar and activist, Dr. Shamita Das Dasgupta, who is also the co-founder of Manavi, addressed our members and spoke about safety issues concerning South Asian women in the US. The Ladies' Forum also hosted the stand-up comedian, Vijai Nathan in a very entertaining comedy show which served to underline the struggles associated with pursuing such a career as a South Asian woman. This was one of the major contributions of the Ladies' Forum in that it focused attention on women's and children's issues.

Also happening at this time was the evolution of the India Center Youth Group, headed by Piyali Bhattacharya and Darley Tom. This group of youngsters got together and arranged weekend meets to share their stories and discuss the challenges of growing up with a dual identity. They celebrated festivals like Holi and when the Gujarat earthquake happened they worked hard and raised a significant sum for the victims. This Youth group did not survive once these children left for college, but it has since been reincarnated several times under different names.

In April 2003 Dr. Shishir Bhattacharya became the Second President of India Center, after Dr. Venkatachala Pathy, who had served for **ten-year in committee**, since the inception of the association. Dr. Bhattacharya brought a new energy into the endeavor and during his four-year **Presidentship** he pushed hard to do more large-scale fundraisers to help find the Center its own premises. Dr. Bhattacharya was driven and passionate about the Center and had multiple plans for the varied roles it could play for its members, over the years. He had already visualized a possible Assisted Living facility for Indians run by IC, even before the Center had found its feet.

The **spring of 2003** was also the time that India Center found a temporary but well-equipped office space within the medical offices of Drs. Sudhakar and Lekha Mettu, and they very graciously let the Center use the space at **1010 North Broadway** in Yonkers, at no charge. Another significant occurrence at this time was the arrival on the scene of **Mr. S.D. Kalyanaswamy**. He was retired and available and meticulous in whatever he did. Having an actual office now allowed India Center to streamline its administrative work and Mr. K (as he came to be known) was a Godsend. He remained an asset to the Center for over a decade and was instrumental in maintaining and updating files and records with his inimitable precision and dedication.

Musical fund-raisers were regular features at India Center but in the year **2004** the committee outdid itself by bringing to its membership the music of none other than Padma Vibhusan Sangeet Martand, **Pandit Jasraj**. The Center had never before done a program with a celebrity of this stature. Understandably, there was much anxiety about the success of this bold venture but the enthusiasm for listening to Panditji, **LIVE in concert**, was so overwhelming that ticket sales rocketed and the grand Maestro performed on **April 24th, 2004**, to a packed audience, utterly enthralled, at the

Irvington High School auditorium. This sold-out show worked wonders, both for IC's coffers and for the confidence of its committee members.

India Center was on a roll now and at the same venue, the following year, in June 2005, it hosted the **Gupta** brothers, **Robert Vijay** and **Akshar**, both child prodigies, in "Shraddhanjali", an exclusive Western Classical Concert presented as a Tribute to the Baroque Masters. **This concert was also Robert Gupta's gift to India Center.** This amazing young violinist who won the **MacArthur "Genius" Grant** last month (October 2018), had vowed **since the age of ten**, to raise funds for India Center. In 2005, seventeen-year-old Robert and his fourteen-year-old brother, Akshar performed to a spellbound audience, for FREE! All proceeds from the show went to India Center. The concert was sold-out, but more importantly, it filled the heart of the community with immeasurable pride and joy to see the next generation achieve such virtuosity in the realm of Western Classical music. Robert and Akshar are the sons of our Life Members, the late Vivek Gupta and his wife, Chandana Gupta. Both brothers grew up in the Hudson Valley.

India Center also honored **Dr. Jatin Shah**, a resident of Westchester and a world leader in Head and Neck Surgery at the same event. Dr. Shah has a Chair established in his name at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and he is held in high esteem all over the world as a pioneer in his field. It was a proud moment for the Center to host the Gupta brothers and Dr. Shah on the same day.

The year **2005** ended with yet another prominent Indian-American gracing our stage. This time it was at the Annual Banquet held at the Beckwith Pointe Country Club and the Chief Guest was **Indra Nooyi**, the then President and CFO of PepsiCo. She spoke eloquently and delighted our members when she gave an inspirational speech about her own struggles as a new immigrant. In 2008 when **Mr. Ajit Jain**, prominent Vice Chairman of Insurance at Berkshire Hathaway, spoke at the India Center banquet, other luminaries at his table included the renowned filmmaker **Mira Nair** and the Grammy-nominated artist and eminent business woman, **Chandrika Tandon**.

While celebrities came and went, India Center continued to shine the light on our local stars, the men and women who live within our communities and make us proud every day. Included in this special group of contributors to India Center's cause are the teachers who have staged shows and presented their students in stage productions aimed at raising funds for our beloved Center. One of the earliest such attempts and one of the most engaging and ambitious productions of the time was a show called "**Conflict and Resolution**" which was a presentation of Indian mythology through different dance forms and through theater. The idea for this combined presentation came from our own **Dr. Nalini Rau**, Bharata Natyam Guru and staunch supporter of the Center. Her vision was to bring together all the beauty and grace of different classical dance forms - Kathak, Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, Odissi - in an expression of the same theme. Kathak Guru, **Satya Narayan Charka** came forward to help, as did other teachers and Marie Captain's Creative Drama group which added to the richness of the show while bringing a Western aspect to this unique East-West musical.

Local talent routing for the community center was becoming more and more frequent and in **April of 2006** we saw **Mita Bhaumik** and **Savita Ahuja**, both accomplished singers come together for a Ghazal program to aid IC. Mita Bhaumik, who was a Vice President and Relationship Manager for HSBC Bank had been a supporter of IC since the late nineties and had helped secure grants for major events. But this time she was using her passion for music to forward the cause - just like all the teachers who had come together on the Center's behalf.

With so much goodwill building for the Center, some magic HAD to happen! And it did!!

In the **fall of 2006**, the India Center committee made a bold decision to go forward with a rented place and give India Center a physical home. On **October 2nd, 2006** India Center was at last able to open its doors to the public, almost thirteen years since its inception. It was a rented warehouse, with no frills other than being bright and open, in a commercial section of Elmsford. But the joy of finally being able to hang a sign somewhere and call it **HOME** was incredible! It was everywhere in the air at **OPEN HOUSE** as members walked in with suggestions for new classes, new clubs, new adventures. Everybody was eager to participate and eager to help. Almost immediately the Center had a roster of classes set up and every day at the Center saw some training session or the other in full swing. From Sanatana Dharma classes for children, to Yoga, Vedanta, Sanskrit, Tamil, Hindi, Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Tabla, Mrudangam, Bollywood and Fitness Classes to Bridge Club, Kebab Corner, Movie Night, Karaoke, Antaakshari - a slew of activity had burst upon the scene! Help and donations poured in and very soon we had a sound system, a movie screen and projector, shades on the windows, partitions and screens, microwave and coffee maker, all kinds of furniture and furnishings to tell us we were supported and we were home.

This is basically the story of India Center from a vague concept to an actual establishment. From 2007 till 2018, under three different Presidents - **Mr. Ralph D'Spuza**, **Dr. Lekha Mettu** and **Mr. Siddhartha Basu** - each of whom added their own stamp and flavor to the success story that is India Center, the organization has indeed continued to grow and blossom and provide more and more services to the community. It has had to battle some severe financial hardships along the way but because of a tight control at the helm it has survived and thrived. The accounts are in a robust state of health today and the morale is high.

That said, on a sad note, it should be recorded here that India Center lost two of her Founders in recent years. Dr. Shishir Bhattacharya, the moving force behind the very concept of the Center and the fearless, joyful spirit forever nudging it to the next level of Bigger, Bolder, Better is hopefully in a bigger, better place now. He passed away in Boston on January 25th, 2016.

Mr. D. P. Ahuja passed away on September 22nd, 2017 in White Plains, NY. He was a beloved member of the community, a warm, caring and gentle soul who loved life and

spread affection all around him. The Center mourns the loss of both of these gems but they will stay alive at the Center forever.

Much has been achieved but much still remains to be done. Our recent experience with losing our lease at 81 East Main Street is a reminder that we have yet to get our own place. The last twelve years of renting have taught us how to run a community center and we have a great committee with a great support team going for us, as well. The Support Team are the caregivers. They step in to help the committee whenever extra help is needed. Over the years we have had many caregivers step in to lend a hand at many different junctures. They are too numerous to name individually but India Center remains grateful to each one of them for their contributions. We could not have come this far without our caregivers. What is wonderful at this moment in time is that the community has woken up to the need for a permanent home and friends of IC are most graciously stepping up with pledges of financial help to purchase a place of our own.

Where India Center goes from here will be decided in the days ahead. But 25 years of trying has not gone to waste. The Center is throbbing with vitality and brimming with hope. That is a good scenario to look back on, this Silver Anniversary. Not just good, it is Beautiful!