

A dinner to remember for Indian Americans

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L-R: Deepa Iyer, Executive Director, South Asian Americans Leading Together, Annetta Seecharran, former Executive Director of South Asian Youth Action, Seema Agnani, Executive Director of Chhaya CDC

NEW YORK: It was the most sought after party of the year held at the country's First Address - the White House. And when the President of America hosts a state dinner and the First Lady comes under the spot to prove herself as the First hostess, one can be assured that no detail would be spared.

And so, at President Obama's first state dinner in honor of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the candle lights, chandeliers, place settings, flowers, music and the thoughtful vegetarian menu aside, it must be given to the Obamas for their careful selection of their guest list, where they brought under

the beautiful tent on the White House's South Lawn a mix of political biggies to Hollywood A-listers, business tycoons and professionals to local community activists.

"Being invited to the White House state dinner was a tremendous honor, one that I will always cherish," said Deepa Iyer of SAALT (South Asian Americans Leading Together). "I was fortunate to have my father, a physician in Louisville, Kentucky, with me at the event.

"We enjoyed every moment of the event, from the pre-reception in the East Wing where we met Attorney General Eric Holder and director Steven Spielberg to the receiving line where we spoke briefly with the President, the First Lady, the Prime Minister and Mrs. Kaur, to the dinner and entertainment."

The honor of being invited for such an occasion was more than personal for Iyer. Speaking from the standpoint of a community advocate, she says: "Both the President and the Prime Minister remarked upon the contributions and presence of the growing Indian American community here in the United States as acknowledgment of the ties that bind India and the United States.

For those of us who are community advocates and activists, it was important to be part of the event. Among the corporate leaders, entertainers and elected officials in the audience were also people like Bhairavi Desai (New York Taxi Workers Alliance), Maneesha Kelkar (Manavi), Seema Agnani (Chhaya CDC) and Annetta Seecharran (South Asian Youth Action) who advocate on behalf of South Asian communities each day.

Having a seat at the table - for an event like this and more important, for purposes of affecting policy change - is extremely meaningful. It demonstrates that the Indian American community is blazing trails in many sectors and

arenas, and that community-based organizations are important partners."

Echoing her sentiments is Maneesha Kelkar, Executive Director of Manavi, a South Asian women's advocacy group. "We were excited to be part of this momentous occasion," she said. "It was an honor to represent social justice issues such as gender based violence facing South Asian Women, and to highlight their importance to South Asian communities across the US."

For the young and trailblazing Assemblyman from Ohio, Jay Goyal, it was an experience he would not forget soon. "The state dinner at the White House was a magical evening," he told India Post. "It was a privilege to be able to take my mother, Kiran, as my guest. She said that felt truly honored and privileged to be able to attend the event. Her highlight was meeting President Obama and the First Lady."

Goyal says the evening provided him an opportunity to interact with a number of government, military, and business officials and discuss the many issues and challenges facing Ohioans.

"In particular, it was a pleasure to talk with Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs for the U.S. armed forces. The 179th airlift wing, a military base for the air national guard, is located in my district. At the event I was able to speak with Admiral Mullen about the deployment issues and the strain that it places on families."

"Overall," he says, "it was an experience that I will not forget anytime soon."

Dr. Surinder Malhotra, a New York-based physician and President of the Indian Overseas Congress (INOC), it was an honor to be part of the evening, more because it was his native country's prime minister who was being honored as the first state guest of the Obama White House.

Of the evening itself, he loved the exotic food, Jennifer Hudson's singing and was most impressed with the Bhangra performance that was part of the entertainment at the dinner.

Dr. Malhotra does not think the gesture was merely symbolic on part of America. "When two heads of the state meet, it cannot simply be symbolic," he told India Post. "Particularly when one is invited as the first state guest, it has to have some depth and substance... this itself is a message to the rest of the world about Indo-US relations."

The day after the dinner, Dr. Vinod Shah, president of the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (AAPI), who attended the dinner with his wife Ila, was still starry-eyed from the experience.

"It was an absolutely unbelievable experience for me in the 42 years of my life in the US," he says. "It was one of the best moments of my life."

Dr. Shah, who had attended the Democratic Convention last year and later President Obama's inauguration earlier in the year, says nothing could beat the experience of the state dinner. "This is an unusual experience. The friendship and mutual respect between the two leaders was so visible that we could feel it. The way the President spoke about our culture, our country and the way the Prime Minister responded by appreciating the President's wisdom was just unbelievable."

Dr. Shah felt the atmosphere under the tent where the dinner was held, reminded him of being under a beautiful

Indian shamiana. "The gorgeous chandeliers... the whole atmosphere was fantastic," he gushed. More than anything, he says, "I think the depth was in the bond between the two leaders, which was so genuine, it cannot be just symbolic."

Dr. Shah was the only national president of an Indian American organization invited to the State dinner. He also attended the lunch hosted by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for Prime Minister Dr. Singh the same afternoon.

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