

Sarmishta Ramesh

January 24, 2005

Unity Dinner – Newark

As the name suggests, “Unity Dinner 2005” organized by the Indo-American Community Federation was all about bringing various ethnic communities in the San Francisco Bay Area together for one night to celebrate the amalgamation of diverse cultures that has become a unique symbol of this region. The sell-out event was held at the Newark-Fremont Hilton Jan 21, and is the fourth annual dinner organized by the IACF.

As the night began, members from the Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Filipino and Caucasian communities intermingled and sat together at tables exchanging views and ideas with close to 70 public officials also present at the occasion. The list included Congressman Pete Stark, California’s insurance commissioner John Garamendi, State Assembly Member Alberto Torrico, the Mayor and council members of Fremont, members of the city’s chamber of commerce and school board.

“I saw a need for an event like this. I found that our people tend to make an island for themselves and not penetrating the mainstream community. We usually have our Diwali melas and cultural shows but nothing that reaches out to the community at large”, explains Jeevan Zutshi, Founder of IACF talking to India West.

Zutshi points out that while the India community organizes events and fundraisers for causes and disasters back home in India, “we don’t look at things that are happening in our back yard”. He stresses the need for Indians to be more involved in issues like homelessness and schools that need community cooperation. “An event like this is a way of reminding us that we need to be involved in this community that has understood and accepted us so well”, he adds.

Zutshi’s passion for community involvement is not just rhetoric. In 2000 he ran for the Fremont School board but lost in a close race. He is a member of the city’s chamber of commerce.

But the idea of a “unity dinner” gained a life of its own in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy. “I was really shaken up after the attacks. I was expecting a severe backlash given the fact that we look like terrorists”, he says. Zutshi’s fears stem from the fact that his family was driven away from Kashmir by the terrorists during the 1990s. “To me it was personal. I am from Kashmir and I saw several members of my extended family forced to flee Kashmir overnight because of the atrocities there. So I was expecting something along those lines here too”, he told India West.

“But there was no major backlash in the country except for solitary cases. And in California especially, the diversity is well accepted. I realized how well we have been understood and accepted in to the system and felt that it was a reason for celebration”, Zutshi explains.

Talking to India West Insurance Commissioner Garamendi said that the “unity dinner was a demonstration of unity of the human spirit in coming together and sharing histories and experiences”. He also said that the unity of this community was made evident when people from all backgrounds came forward to help the victims of the Tsunami disaster. “We share the problems and the fate of this world. We are not isolated”, Garamendi added.

The affair also became a platform for state democrats to coalesce public support. Democratic Congressman Pete Stark taking a bash at Bush’s Iraq doctrine said the money being sent into Iraq would be better spent on the victims of the Tsunami disaster.

The first “unity dinner” was held in January of 2002 and since then has attracted top public officials every year. Apart from presenting “fusion” cultural shows, the organization also honored Dr. Krishna Reddy, Founder and President of the Indian American Friendship council, Terry Alderete, Chief of Operations of the Hispanic Unity

Council, Dr. Raj Prasad from the Indo American Chamber of Commerce, Jan Perkins, Former Fremont City Manager and Nilima Sabharwal, Founder of Home of Hope for their contributions and community involvement.