

Gala Raises \$725,000 for Women's Empowerment, Quality Education

By ELA DUTT

There was a time three decades ago when a fledgling non-profit found it tough to raise even a dollar to do good works in India. Today, a single mailer can fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars when New Jersey-based Share and Care Foundation sends it out.

The U.S.-based group was founded by six couples moved by the plight of India's poor who vowed to "do something" about it. This past weekend Nov. 9, at Share and Care's 32nd gala held in Bergen Performing Arts Center, Englewood, New Jersey, the group raised \$725,000, according to organizers, for its signature programs on women's education and quality education. It was another milestone for an organization that uses grassroots Indian NGOs to implement education and other projects.

Some 1,270 people attended and pledged their support. Several women activists and achievers received "Impact" awards for showing courage under adversity and succeeding despite the odds.

One of them, Vidya Sri, a Human Rights Policy fellow at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, delivered the keynote address. Sri was a victim



Above and right, dancers from Aatma Performing Arts present "Shakti," a tribute to women's empowerment at Share and Care Foundation's 32nd annual gala at Bergen Performing Arts Center in Englewood, New Jersey, Nov. 9.



of forced marriage at a very young age. Today she heads "GangaShakti", an organization she founded to bring global awareness about forced marriages. "When we started nobody



Above, seen from left are. Dr. Sudhir M. Parikh, publisher of Desi Talk and recipient of India's Padma Shri award; Dr. Sudha Parikh; Meera Gandhi, founder of the Giving Back Foundation; H.R. Shah, chairman of TV Asia; Kumar Jhaveri and Nita Jhaveri. Below, from left, Varsha Mehta; Vidya Sri, founder of GangaShakti, a women's organization aimed at spreading awareness about forced marriages; and Arun Bhansali, president of Share and Care Foundation.

knew us and it was very difficult to collect even a dollar. It was a normal cynicism about our ability to do anything," Arun Bhansali one of the founders of Share and Care told Desi Talk. So the group decided to begin by sending used clothes to India. Today, it handles more than 700 programs with an investment of over \$67 million, aimed at benefiting some 3,500 slums and rural communities, with quality education, affordable healthcare and skill development.

"Now we can send an appeal and easily collect 3/4 of a million or a million. So people do see us as genuine and know that they will receive a return on their investment," Bhansali says. In fact, now the challenge is to continuously meet the rising expectations of donors. To step up its game, the organization has appointed an executive director for the first time, Gautam Desai, who told Desi Talk that in his conversations with "old-timers" and founders at Share and Care, the Nov. 9 event appeared to be "a milestone." The dance troupe Shakti, performed at the gala as a tribute to "Women's Empowerment" a major objective of every initiative SCF takes up.

"SCF's Women's Empowerment initiative - "WE" has been developed and managed by the women for the women," Dr. Ketki Shah, chairperson of WE, is quoted saying in a press release.

"The WE aims at cultivating powerful chain of good deeds through our peer-to-peer "State Ambassador program," Dr. Shah said. She added that the potential of 50 ambassadors committing to \$100 a month for 10 months a year, each of them in turn recruiting seven more donors to generate \$350,000 "is both revolutionary and realistic."

By 2015, the organization hopes the WE initiative will provide skills training and career opportunities to 50,000 women working in factories and farms and promote gender equality in their own surroundings, the press release said.

The "Shades of Shakti" Awardees

1. Ekta Doshi, who is fighting leukemia while facing the odds of dramatic under-representation of S.Asian donors in bone marrow registries.
2. Ramya Ramana, the 19-year-old New York City Youth Poet Laureate and activist.
3. Meera Gandhi, founder of Giving Back Foundation.
4. Rashmi Acharya, with some trail-blazing experiences to share as mother of adopted children
5. Nisha Mathur, the concept creator, writer, producer, host of "Shades of Shakti" on TV Asia.
6. Vidya Sri, founder of GangaShakti, a women's organization aimed at spreading awareness about forced marriages.

