

# Ambassador Shankar Mingles With Atlanta Indian Community

BY MAHADEV DESAI

Atlanta: A diverse cross-section of Indian-American communities representing over sixty diverse ethnic, religious and cultural Associations of Georgia gave a red carpet welcome to India Ambassador Meera Shankar and her husband Hon. Ajay Shankar on their maiden visit to Georgia. Consul General of India Hon. Sanjiv Arora and Vice Consul Azad accompanied them to the glitzy Banquet at the Ashiana Restaurant on April 30.



**Ambassador Meera Shankar.**  
Photo by Vinod Devlia.

The Banquet showcased over 250 who's who of the Indian-American Community at the Ashiana banquet hall at the Global Mall.

U.S. Congressman John Lewis, SCLC President and daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Elder Bernice King; Sandy Springs Mayor Eva Galambos; National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Executive Director, Doug Shipman; Georgia State Senator Curt Thompson and numerous dignitaries ordained the list of distinguished guests.

In her keynote address, Ambassador Shankar said the Indian American community has become a vital bridge between India and the US. "The community has youth, entrepreneurial spirit, the values it imbibed in India, its adaptability and acceptance of diversity, its hard work and of course the opportunity that America has provided to hone their talents. With all this, the community must give back to India as well as to the adopted land," she said.

Ambassador Shankar said it was wonderful to see leaders of over 60 diverse associations in Atlanta at the event, who had come together in a spirit of community. "As I look around, I see people from various parts of India reflecting India's diversity. We had great visionary leaders like Nehru and Gandhi who gave people a strong belief in human values, human freedom and in social uplifting," she said.

She cited statistics to convey the complete stagnation in India due to colonial rule, particularly during fifty years before India's independence. "To remove inequities, poverty and chronic under development, the Indian state undertook its audacious experiment in its first and widest 'affirmative action' program which was constitutionally mandated. The result has been a huge broadening of democracy. Today we have a wonderful to and fro of ideas between India and America and particularly the Gandhi-King connection. For the world as a whole, Gandhi has enormous relevance.

In a lighter vein, she added: "We have seen in India the incredible resurgence of interest in Gandhi with the film called 'Lage raho Munnabhai' which has greatly appealed to the young generation. Its

message that Gandhigiri (practicing Gandhi's methods) is far more effective than Dadagiri (crooks and cheats) has a great impact.

Elder Bernice King, in her address, expressed her wholehearted gratitude to the Ambassador for her first visit to the King Center. "Your visit certainly strengthens the bond of solidarity between India and the USA and especially those of us who share the abiding reverence for the great legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and my father Dr. King," she said, adding: "I felt privileged to welcome you to the King Crypts earlier where you paid homage to my parents. The Indian community here has enriched our culture and strongly supported the legacy of M L K Jr. Atlanta shares a special spiritual bond with India as a result of the great impact of Gandhi's teachings on my father. In African-American homes, you generally find two portraits of American leaders-one of President John Kennedy and the other of Dr. M L King Jr. But in our home, we were graced with the portrait of Gandhi in our dining room. The portrait was not only in our home but also in our hearts as well as my mother and father shared so many teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was the source of inspiration for the African-American's freedom struggle", she exclaimed.

"The Gandhi legacy lives on at the King Center. My mother insisted that Gandhi's birthday be formally commemorated at the King Center every year. The King center also has a Gandhi Room. So

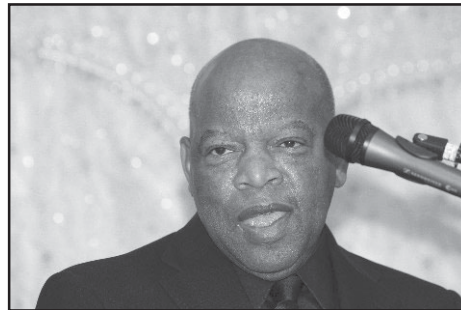
growing up in Tennessee, while in schools, in sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, while participating in Freedom rides, and of beatings, arrests and jail by police during marches for justice and racial equality. He narrated about his visit to India together with MLK III and how he was touched seeing a little child in India learning about non-violence.

Delighted at the success of the banquet, Consul General Sanjiv Arora got swinging with his own shairee about Gandhi, "Log kehte hain, zamaana badalta hain aksar, par shaks woh hain jo zamaane ko badal dete hain (People say times keep changing but true leaders are those who change the times," he said to applause.. He was jubilant about his past visits to Atlanta adding that his most overwhelming experience with respect to his jurisdiction of Atlanta was accompanying the Chief Justice of India, Justice K G Balakrishnan to the King Center on 4<sup>th</sup> April of last year, on the solemn occasion of the 41<sup>st</sup> anniversary of Dr. King's assassination where he got to interact with all the family members of Dr. King. "Tonight's gathering here is as broad based as one could envisage for this special evening in honor of Ambassador Meera Shankar and Ajay Shankar and it is a great privilege to join all of you here in welcoming them on their first visit to Atlanta," he concluded

The host for the evening was Gandhi Foundation of USA chairman, Subash Razdan who jazzed up the program by lauding the outstanding accomplishments and achievements of the Indian American community in the US, which has excelled as prominent academicians, engineers, doctors, as college graduates in diverse



**Elder Bernice King.**  
Photo by Vinod Devlia.



**Congressman John Lewis**  
Photo by Vinod Devlia.



**Pageantry of prominent community members, ready to present bouquets to the dignitaries at the banquet. Photo by Bharat Kotecha.**

let us create a new global community where freedom, justice, and human rights, for all people will indeed reign supreme."

In his absorbing speech, Congressman Lewis recounted the humiliation of the segregation experiences

fields.. "Let's be proud of our accomplishments and our rich heritage," he said.

Razdan showcased the community by recognizing a few amidst many including University of West Georgia, President Dr. Beheruz Sethna, Prof. of Mar-

keting, Goizueta Business School, Emory University, and acclaimed Speaker and author, Dr. Jagdish Seth; Global Mall CEO and philanthropist Shiv Agarwal, Ashiana Restaurant owner Zahid for his magnanimity in sponsoring this banquet, past chairman of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA) Mike Patel and incoming chairman, C. K. Patel; Swadesh Katoch who has been helping Bhutanese refugees in

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Atlanta with selfless service; First Asian Indian Baptist Church pastor Rev. Younis Farhat for co-hosting a historic banquet for the large Indian contingent for the 1996 Olympics, Rifka Mayani for her Bharat Natyam dance at the 'Sari Unveiled' exhibition over a decade ago and Ram Sidhaye and Dhuru Shah for their dedicated service to the community as well as in ensuring the success of the banquet. Razdan apologized that the list of community-achievers was so large, that it would take him all night if he were to recognize them all.

Earlier, CEO of Global Mall Shiv Agarwal in his welcome address said he felt overwhelmed that the Ambassador and Ajay Shankar had graced the Global Mall with their presence and thanked all the dignitaries for attending this reception at such a short notice.

Ujjagar Singh Wassan regaled the attendees with some original shairee (Urdu poetry). Kusum Sinha recited an original poem on Mahatma Gandhi in Hindi.

In his formal Vote of Thanks, Dhuru Shah, thanked everyone who helped make the banquet an unforgettable night! He thanked the distinguished guests and community leaders for the show of solidarity and their presence. He acknowledged the support of the co-sponsors Global Mall, Ashiana Restaurant, Kingfisher Airlines, Sanjay Pandya of Davis Printing and over 65 community organizations of Georgia, volunteers, professional video and photographers Vinod Devlia and Bharat Kotecha and all those who helped with audio, stage set up and decorations. Numerous members of media were also acknowledged.

After the dinner, Ambassador Meera Shankar cheerfully mingled with the guests and posed for pictures with them and signed autographs.

This Banquet provided an opportunity for Georgia's Indian Americans and civic communities to welcome and honor the Indian officials for their role in building valuable relationships between Georgia and India.

Earlier on Friday, the Ambassador had attended a business luncheon hosted by the Georgia Indo-American Chamber of Commerce, (GIACC), an interview with the CNN, courtesy Sonia Tucker of CNN, paid Homage at the Gandhi Statue and at the Martin Luther King Crypts, and visited the Gandhi Room where Elder Bernice King and Councilman Kwanzaa Hall exchanged pleasantries and gifts with Ambassador Shankar. The next day, the Ambassador met with select faculty members of the University of Georgia in Athens and inaugurated the Gardens of the World Ball in Athens.