

Bapsi Sidhwa steals show at Manavi's fundraiser

VIDYA PADMANABHAN

Edison, New Jersey

DEDICATED donors and friends who had turned out on March 31 to support Manavi, a South Asian women's organization based in New Jersey, didn't need a reminder of why they were there. But there it was.

"I was nothing and Manavi made me something," said Farha (name changed), a victim of domestic abuse, in a moving testimonial to the organization's good work.

At Manavi's 21st annual community dinner and fundraiser at the Akbar restaurant in Edison, N.J., some 300 guests, predominantly women, sat around tables, rallying to the support of the oldest organization for South Asian victims of domestic abuse in America.

Established in 1985, Manavi now extends its services to hundreds of women of South Asian origin. Last year alone, 294 women were helped, said director Maneesha Kelkar.

The organization offers counseling, legal advice and referrals to immigrant women who, when faced with domestic abuse, find themselves stranded in a foreign country without a social network to turn to. The organization also runs a transitional home, Ashiana, where women and children can take refuge until they get back on their feet by learning English, and finding jobs and alternative housing. Nineteen women and children availed of these services last year.

Farha, who spoke at the event, was one of them. Her family in India arranged her marriage in 2001 to a US-based businessman. Soon after arriving in here, she found herself pregnant. But her husband, instead of celebrating the occasion, asked her to have an abortion. A devout Muslim, Farha refused. Her husband, a man she had "really loved," evicted her from their house, and a two-and-a-half months pregnant Farha had to move in

with relatives.

After years of itinerant life and unpaid domestic service to unsympathetic relatives, Farha, along with her daughter, took the step to move into Ashiana. "It was the most beautiful place I stayed in all those four years," Farha said to a rapt audience. "The Almighty has given me a wonderful new family."

Another highlight of the evening was a talk by Bapsi Sidhwa, renowned author and women's rights activist. Fans clustered around the table where Sidhwa autographed her books (on sale at the venue), before they settled down to hear her witty speech about her experiences on the set of Deepa Mehta's film *Earth* (which was based on her short story *The Ice Candy Man*).

As stills from the film—which tackles the theme of sub-continental Partition—appeared on a screen behind her, her mischievous observations and down-to-earth humor about being a rookie on a film set were punctuated by grim references to her own experiences of the brutality of the event, which are reflected in the book's narrative.

Sidhwa briefly mentioned her experience as a women's rights activist in Pakistan. "A lot of my feelings about orphanages and women's homes have gone into my writing," she said. Interestingly, her new book is based on Mehta's recent hit *Water*, which is set in a widows' home in 1930s India.

Guests also browsed through items on silent auction, donated or created by supporters, and several bent to jot down their bid. The eclectic collection included several paintings, wall-art made of clay, airline tickets, a balloon-ride for two, and a professional college application consulting service.

Nayikas, a New York dance theater company, put up a scintillating Odissi performance celebrating women power, in the form of the goddess Shakti.