



# When 'Srimati Liberty' took over Brooklyn Museum

The South Asian Women's Creative Collective's art show SUMBLIME featured at the Brooklyn Museum — as part of its Women's History Month celebrations — drew large, diverse crowds that might not otherwise be aware of SAWCC and its work.

"(The Museum) saw this as sort of a representation of what women of our background are doing now artistically," said Jasmine Wahi, one of the curators. "This is now our 16<sup>th</sup> year and we've really evolved from what we first started out to be. People have really responded positively — not in the sense that we're South Asian women making art, but the performances, installations, anything else we do hold their own water as art. So that's great for us."

Wahi explained that the performances had all been adapted specifically for the large third-floor square space at the museum, which was different spatially from the outdoor street setup at the DUMBO Arts Festival last year.

One of the performances, for example, 'Unwrapped,' in which Monica Bose unraveled herself from 216-feet of sari, took up two sides of the square's perimeter.

Another, a bit more political piece, had Sunita Mukhi dressed in a green sari as an Indian Statue of Liberty, 'Srimati Liberty,' targeting museum-goers and asking them questions about Indian-American history, humorously poking fun at the idea that immigrants taking citizenship tests are not asked questions about minorities. Those who failed got red cir-

## Chaya Babu brings vignettes from the South Asian Women's Creative Collective's art show

cular stickers on their foreheads to mark them as a 'Person of Interest.'

Some performances were more overtly South Asian, while others had a looser connection to the subcontinent or culture that could only be discerned from hearing the stories behind them. Bose, who created 'Unwrapped,' explained how slowly emerging from the cocoon of fabric relates to her

background personally as well as on a larger level.

'Unwrapped' referenced both Draupadi, the mythological eternal virgin married to five brothers, and Bose's grandmother, who was married at age seven. Speaking to women's rights over their bodies and access to education, the performance involved wrapping/unwrapping the artist's body

with a 216-foot sari covered with writing by Bangladeshi women.

"In the Mahabharata, Draupadi was a very virtuous woman, and in men's attempt to violate her by taking off her sari, it grows longer and longer and she's never undressed," Bose said. "It's kind of a weird story, but it's one that I've thought about — that women need to speak up and challenge ideas of virtue."

She also recalled her own grandmother, a child bride who took off her wedding sari and ran stark naked up a tree and stayed there for the whole day.

"Her sari came off and Draupadi's never did, and it's all sort of tied to women's rights and control over our own bodies and our autonomy. So this piece is weaving together those narratives," she said.

Anjali Deshmukh's piece — a game that toys with the idea of destiny — was more subtly influenced by her South Asian roots.

"It's basically a game about Lila, a word that describes the universe as a cosmic game, divine play," Deshmukh said. "And the idea is essentially to ask players to confront their relationship with fate."

Other SAWCC artists who participated, included Roshani Thakore, Swati Khurana, and Ruby Chisti.



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## P RAJENDRAN

Fifteen years, the Sankara Eye Foundation has been working with its partner, the Sankara Eye Care Institutions, to dramatically improve eye care in India. But to effectively fund such a vision, takes more than volunteer donations. It calls for solid fundraisers — say, an evening of Indian performing arts in over a dozen cities across the US.

That's what SEF has come up with — Sangam 2014, a music and dance event — this month and the next. The event will be held at the Hindu Temple in Flushing, New York, March 28, and the next day at the East Brunswick High School in East Brunswick, New Jersey, March 29.

The performers will include N Ravikiran on the chitravina, a 21-string, fretless lute from South India; Pandit Tarun Bhattacharya on the santoor, a 100-string trapezoid-shaped hammered dulcimer; and Odissi dancer Sanchita Bhattacharya.

In New York and New Jersey, Ramya Ramnarayan, a Bharata Natyam dancer, who heads the Nrithyanjali Institute of Dance of North Brunswick, will join them. The other performers are Prosenjit Poddar on the tabla, and Ramesh Srinivasan on the mridangam.

It was Srinivasan who came up with the idea of using a classical concert to raise money. Krishnamurthy, SEF's founder and executive chairman, found the idea appealing — it promoted a culture while still not calling for the heavy volunteer mobilization and expense a Bollywood star show

# Music and dance gala for a cause

might demand.

Krishnamurthy admits he is a little worried about the New York event, given the location and paucity of volunteers. Drs Nageswara Mandava of Jamaica, Purna Atluri of Brooklyn, and Ramamohana Kancherla of Poughkeepsie do organize a banquet every year, which nets the foundation \$100,000. But this time only Dr Mandava is available.

Krishnamurthy said he would be quite happy to just break even with a tour collection of \$125,000. He is so open with figures that will be verifiable after the fact partly because the foundation puts all its accounts online.

This, among other things, has earned it top ratings from charity watchdogs like Charity Navigator. (It spends about 85 percent of all the money that comes in on actual programs, and it has the highest score possible for transparency and accountability, putting it at the top of comparable non-profits).

Thanks to the efforts of Nandita Chatterjee, who with her sister Anita, organized the Chicago event, a local donor promised Sankara \$2 million if it would set up an eye hospital in West Bengal. That more than covers all the costs of the shows, Krishnamurthy admitted. Of course, there would still be a new hospital to build...

Sankara's fundraising effort has also revitalized moribund volunteer groups in some cities, and exposed brand new ones in cities where the foundation has not been active, like Hockessin in Delaware, Rockville in Maryland, Atlanta, Memphis in Tennessee, Austin in Texas, and Sacramento.

Already planning new events are teams in Detroit (Chandra Mohan and his wife Sunjatha Chandramohan, Santhosh Kumar and his wife Kamakshi Santhoshkumar, and Tarun Desai), and Austin (thanks to Subba Venkiteswaran, a dormant volunteer making up for guilt about not having done more than donating money in the intervening years).

To do meaningful work Sankara needs to collect at least \$3.5 million, Krishnamurthy said. For a set of events that was conceived in February and over less than a month and a half later, the foundation seems to be right on track.

**The New York event will be held Friday, March 28, at 6 pm, at the Hindu temple at 45-57 Bowne Street in Flushing.**

**The New Jersey event is on Saturday, March 29, at 3 pm, at the East Brunswick High School, 380 Cranbury Road, East Brunswick.**

**Tickets — \$50 (VIP), \$25 and \$15 — are available at [giftofvision.org](http://giftofvision.org)**