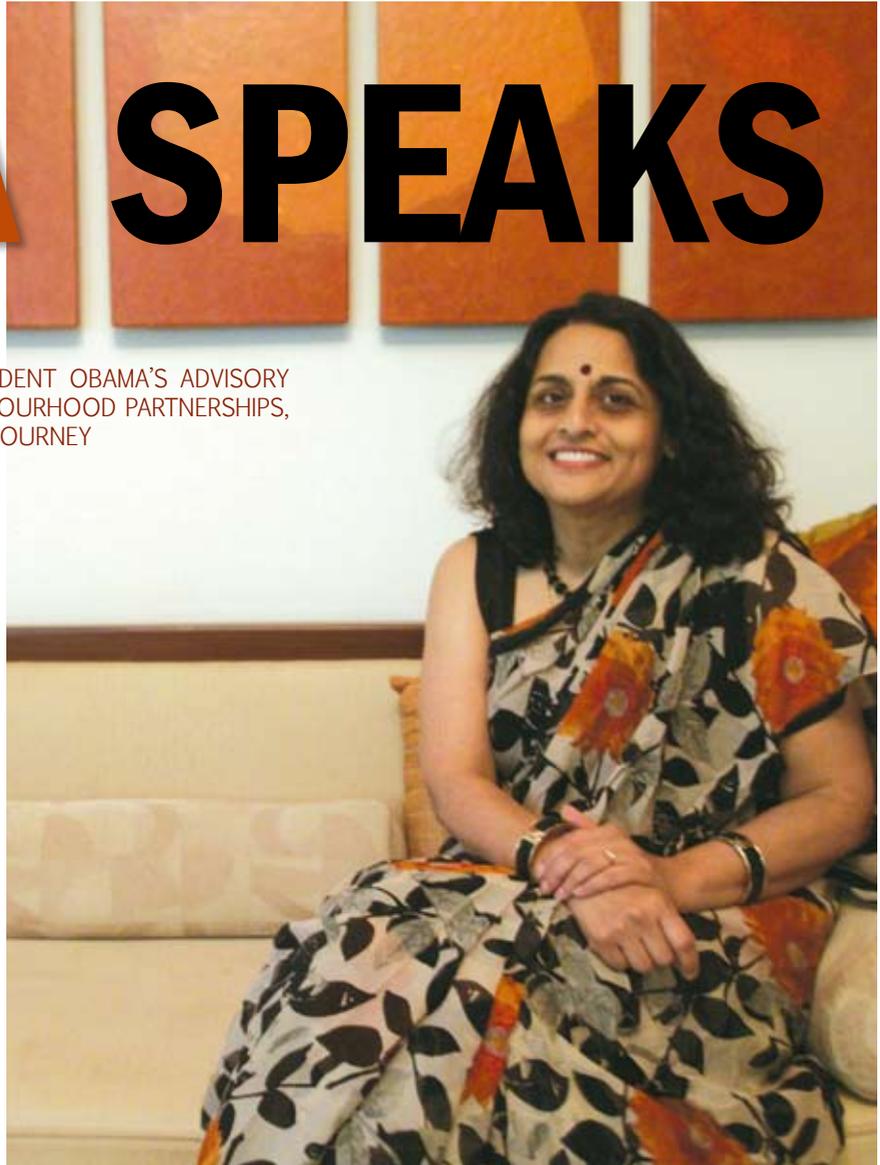


SEVA SPEAKS

THE ONLY HINDU AMERICAN ON PRESIDENT OBAMA'S ADVISORY COUNCIL ON FAITH-BASED AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PARTNERSHIPS, ANJU BHARGAVA TELLS US ABOUT HER JOURNEY

IT IS tristic to say that “work is worship”, but not many have translated this credo into action the way Anju Bhargava has. One of 25 members comprising President Barack Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships, Bhargava has been the interface between the government and the Hindu community in America. “In the US, faith-based establishments play a crucial role in community service and governance. Currently, the government provides funding to institutions with an established track record. The people of Dharmic* traditions and their infrastructures are different from those of established faith-based groups, hence their needs are not yet understood, and they are not part of the funding process,” explains Bhargava. “This historic appointment, the first public inclusion of a Hindu American, became an opportunity to collectively learn, educate and act.” The Council, formed in April 2009, brought together representatives of various faiths who put forth recommendations to engage faith-based and secular organisations in community development.

At the early stages of her appointment, an inspired team with Bhargava at its helm formed the Hindu American Seva (selfless service) Charities (HASC). “The Council provided a context, a voice and learning opportunities to bridge the gap between the US government and Hindu institutions,” explains Bhargava. Having migrated from Chennai to New Jersey, Bhargava’s own understanding



of Hindusim was initially influenced by her study of dance. “Classical dance became a means through which we could understand the multi-faceted Vedic Hinduism,” she shares.

True to its name, HASC reached out to the fragmented Hindu community to serve various sections of society. In response to President Obama’s ‘United We Serve’ 2009 initiative, HASC mobilised the Hindu community through temples and ashrams, and coordinated service projects to alleviate the pain of the economic crisis. “These organisations expanded their ongoing *seva* to collectively focus on poverty reduction, health, environment and other forms of

service, with more than 120 *seva* centres conducting over 1300 service projects nationally,” says Bhargava. “Temples in America are becoming more civic-conscious and are striving to be a place for the community to come together, cutting across all socio-economic classes.”

Another element of Bhargava’s work with HASC has been in the area of community research. “We conducted pioneering research with the aim of assessing the needs of the community itself. This appointment has been the beginning of a process to lay a foundation for integration, acceptance and inter-faith community building.”

*The Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh religions are referred to as the Dharmic religions or traditions.

‘Desi Abroad’ is a fresh new column featuring Indians abroad who have made their mark in various spheres. For feedback, do mail us at culturama@globaladjustments.com.