



Rohit Revo

Aruna Chandrala, President United India Associations, had a tough year in 2009. She is also a member of CRC working committee which has been set up by NSW Premier to address the issues affecting Indian student community and is also a member of Community Safety Precinct Committee (NSW Police). Originally from Andhra Pradesh in India, she is married to businessman Viswanath Chandrala, Director of Bocar Pty Ltd, and is also the CEO for this company. Her daughter Shalini is a chartered accountant and son Pavan is a doctor. She also works as a Telugu language interpreter.

Editor-in-Chief Rohit Revo spoke to Aruna Chandrala in a free wheeling conversation.

How difficult is it to be a women and be the head of 23 bodies, with men manning almost all the executive positions.

At the time of my birth my father was young and successful President of the village, I had the privilege of watching village court proceedings while sitting in his lap in the foyer of our house. Being youngest in the family I was pampered a lot. I had 3 older brothers and more male cousins in an extended family which made me very competitive and I think it was the foundation for my determination and confidence. My father named me Vasantha Lakshmi, Aruna is the name I chose for my self at the age of 6. My association with a loyal Muslim and a priest from Rama mandir, working for my father and a converted Christian who is my mother's uncle at a very early age gave me tolerance to all these religions.

And this was in India.

Yes in *Gouripatnam* village in West Godavari district. We came to Australia in 1986 and before that we went to NZ in 1982.

Was it easy to adjust in UIA

UIA is a good and well established organisation to work with. UIA has most efficient and dedicated team of volunteers which I have never seen in any other organisation. UIA Governing council members are prominent members of the Indian community and each one of them has their own support networks and have been serving the community for long time. Most of them are presidents of their member organizations. I find it intellectually stimulating and challenging to work with these GC members. Although I had to face unforeseen family circumstances and my personal health issues I have been able to perform efficiently to keep UIA as the number one organisation with the support of UIA EC/GC members. My Family has been excellent support for me throughout my life.

When you first told your family you want to be President of UIA, did they ask you how much time will you commit for this

It didn't surprise them as I was involved with UIA as GC member and have worked hard to set up of UIA office prior to becoming President of UIA. I have been in public life since long and have been member of several committees. I was a representative of my class, President of Telugu Association here for their 8th, 9th and 15th year, have been member of committees like Sri Venkateswara temple, Diwali Festival, CRC working committee among others. I also broadcast on Telugu Vani programs for community radio on 98.5FM MHZ. I was called a born leader and community work is my passion!! I conduct study classes on every last sunday of the month at Strathfield Satya Sai centre. I am always doing community work and take it in my own stride. I guess my family will be worried if I don't do these things.

Did you face any harassment or resistance in conveying your ideas in UIA

In any organizations people would always welcome me as I work hard. Once they see my work, they believe in me and support me unconditionally. So far I have never felt any harassment in UIA. Infact I was called *Mabalakshmi* after the

INSIDE THE MIND OF A LEADER



India Australia Friendship Fair 2009 for getting the Premier's grant \$50,000 for the first time as this nothing happened in UIA before.

But is this amount in UIA Bank account.

Yes it is already in the bank account. India Australia Friendship Fair is a high budget program, last year we had 130K budget. As you know we are all volunteers in UIA when we put so much effort in showcasing Indian culture, although we had major sponsors and gate collections we were worried we may not break even. I actually had sleepless nights, fortunately having Premier's grant this year IAFF 2010 would be a pleasurable experience.

How much money did you make in the UIA Friendship Fair last year

Last year we made \$10,000 profit. April 25th was the election last year and once we realized our committee had to organise India Australia Friendship fair 2009 on 9th of August in Sydney Olympic Park. Once I started working for the IAFF 2009 as a Fair Director it was mind boggling as it is a high profile and high budget program and there are lot of expenses involved. I realized there is no way to get the money quickly and till last minute we were not sure if we could get the sponsorships in the light of Global Financial Crisis.

What is your biggest achievement

Apart from getting Premier's grant I would say setting up UIA office and making sure it is open Monday to Friday during working hours with the help of volunteers, UIA member organisations and other Indian community groups have been using this office for their committee meetings free of cost.

Is it a fully functioning office now

It is fully functional working from 10 to 5 and phone lines, computer and printer are all in working order.

Do you think the constitution of UIA should change

My personal view is that constitution is in order but member organizations have to maintain their standards and come up and meet the standards of constitution.

Some organisations are 15 years old and are taking it easy. How do you purge those members from UIA

At the moment we are thinking that we will bring out guidelines and give it to all member organizations and ask them to meet them which will improve their organizations and increase standards of UIA.

What about member organization who don't hold elections

When we issue these guidelines and ask them to provide AGMs and this will clean up their act.

Do you think UIA is worse off or better off after you became President

I would say better off as we have fully functioned office to work from, we have 50K grant money in bank, Benevolent fund has been established with seed money of \$5000 to help

the community as the need arises, Voice Of India news letter has been launched at our Republic Day 2010 function and 3 organisations are showing expression of interest to join UIA. I would like to make one point clear though, any success of UIA is a combined effort. You may see my photo or hear my name as a President of UIA, my success has been possible only due to our EC/GC members and well wisher's support.

Some other bodies have reclaimed leadership for Indian community

I think because of my mother I had to go to India couple of times and I was away from action. We never had this kind of situation in Australia before. When the fireball effect of students issues came, no one knew how to solve it but everyone came forward. Although lot of people from UIA were involved in student issues, we have organized 4 student forums I think we have not been given due recognition in the community. Whatever work we have done we have involved CG, CRC, student leaders including Anglo Saxon. But some people don't mention UIA at all and some people are doing negative publicity for us. I have been asking the UIA committee elders about this as this is puzzling me.

When the Indian External Affairs Minister was here you had to wait for 2 hours before meeting him. Were you hurt?

It was bit disappointing because 4 minutes before the room was closed I was called and it was known I was coming. There was possibly some misunderstanding which caused this. I waited there till the meeting finished so that I could give the Invitation to the Minister for the India Australia Friendship Fair. I would say I was more disappointed that Minister SM Krishna missed the opportunity to address the largest Indian community gathering at the fair which was also well attended by both State and Federal Parliamentarians.

Do you feel victimized when people hurl accusations at you. How do you react when such things happen.

I work hard and sincerely and my focus is always to bring the name of organization to higher levels. I believe empty vessels make more noise than full vessels. When we are in public life we have to be responsible and I believe in actions speak louder than words.

What is your message to your critics

Whatever questions they have I would prefer that they pick up the phone and clarify their criticisms. I do receive lot of respect and support from the Indian community and I do appreciate constructive criticism. I am still young and I would like to improve myself in serving the community at large.

So there was no active interest in getting these grants earlier

Organisations like UIA should be getting Federal as well as State government grants. In May 2009 when I have attended the meeting which decided Federal Gov't grants. Then we realized we should have applied in October 2008 for getting the grant for 2009. Now we are applying for all the grants as they advertise.

Is the Indian government liaising with you correctly or do you think there should be more interaction.

Most of our UIA organization members are Australian Indians, still we have always maintained good relationship with Indian Consulate office in Sydney and High Commissioner's office in Canberra. UIA's main aims and objectives are to help the Indian community especially the most disadvantaged sections of Indian community which are students, women and seniors. we conduct the forums for these groups to bring their concerns affecting these communities to the attention of both Indian and Australian relevant departments to get results. Each and every one of these forums are always attended by the representatives from the Indian consulate office.

Will you stand for next UIA President Elections.

Yes, I would like to continue. Usually UIA President can stand for 2nd year term, I now know in and out of UIA, I have been able to establish the contacts. We have also applied for CRC and few other grants which I would like to make sure they materialise.