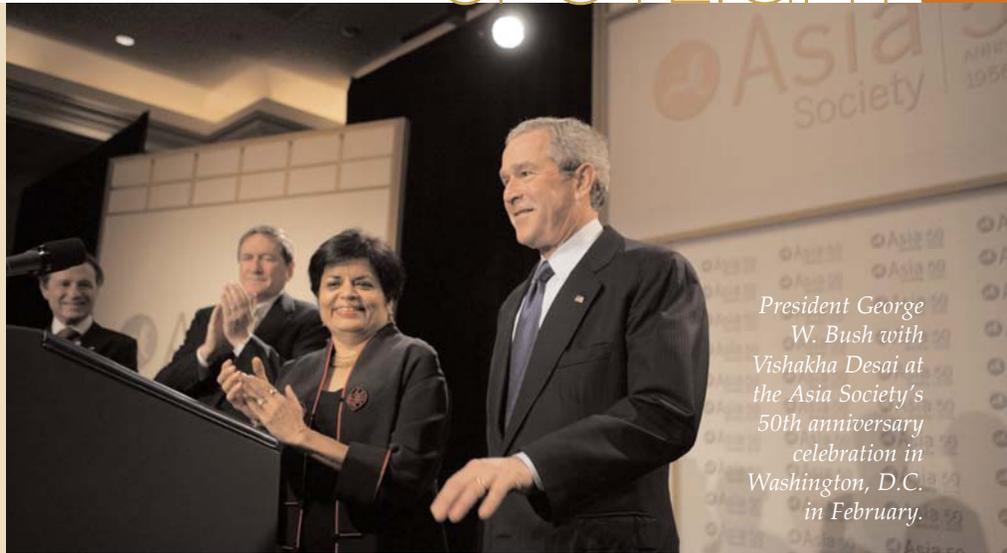


Vishakha Desai

Asia Society: Forging Stronger Ties

By RAMOLA TALWAR BADAM



President George W. Bush with Vishakha Desai at the Asia Society's 50th anniversary celebration in Washington, D.C. in February.

White House photo by PAUL MORSE

Three Cs define the work of the Asian American who heads a 50-year-old American non-profit organization seeking to promote cultural understanding between the people of these two continents. For Vishakha Desai, president of the Asia Society, the critical Cs are: culture, creativity and current affairs.

Desai is the first woman and the first Asian American to head the institution founded by millionaire philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III. She succeeded Nicholas Platt, a former U.S. ambassador, who retired in 2004.

Not too fond of tags, she is happier to recall that she was chosen from 200 candidates, irrespective of her race and gender. While making the point that she wasn't selected "because I was a woman or I was an Asian American," she acknowledges an additional duty. "The responsibility has to do with the fact that lots of people look to you as a role model. It's not that I have become a role model, but people look to you for that."

After joining the Asia Society as director of its museum and cultural programs in 1990, she worked as vice president and then senior vice president. Earlier she was curator of Indian, Southeast Asian and Islamic art at the

Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and taught at the University of Massachusetts, Boston University and Columbia University. Always interested in international relations, she says she fell into the museum career by accident.

Museums are "the site of where culture was and is in the United States," said Desai, during a visit to Mumbai in March for the Asia Society's 16th Asian Corporate Conference, which focused on global business, India's new priorities and Asia's new realities. "Ultimately I was always interested in the potential role art can play in cultural understanding rather than simply art as an aesthetic object."

Ahmedabad-born Desai first went to the United States as a 17-year-old high school student, staying for a year. She returned to complete her graduation in political science at the University of Bombay, and then left India again at 20 to study for a masters and PhD at the University of Michigan.

Desai believes her current position draws on her main interests in political science, arts and culture. She enjoys the challenge of heading an organization that holds international business conferences, lectures, art exhibits, cultural performances and pro-

grams on education about Asia.

"It's like anybody who becomes the president of a university, you know, they are scholars and then they realize they have another kind of ambition in life....It's not just the acquisition of new skill sets, but it's really the ability to grow and become a fuller person and fulfill your own potential that you didn't even know you had."

Having a former Asia Society president at home is a plus—her husband, Robert Oxnam, headed the organization from 1981 to 1992. She jokes that between them the couple are Indo-China experts—Oxnam is a China scholar. "So we basically cover Asia, you know!" she laughs.

Desai says even she is surprised at the rapid pace of growth. "It's explosive. If you had told me two years ago India would be the flavor of the month the way it is today I could not have imagined it would be this fast." While the Chinese economy expanded by 9.9 percent last year, India is the world's second fastest expanding economy with growth close to 8 percent. Aiming to tap this growth, the Asia Society launched its first center in India in March, an office of three at Nariman Point in Mumbai. The center's next big

event will be a contemporary Indian art exhibition, "The Edge of Desire," in New Delhi at the end of November, says Executive Director Bunty Chand.

Headquartered in New York City, the society has regional centers in Washington, Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Manila and Shanghai.

Desai hopes to develop the India office into a South Asia hub with the priority being to create a platform for India-South Asia-U.S. dialogue. "It can't be just business or just social issues or arts and culture. Ultimately it's about relationships and relationships are about people. That's why art and culture become very important, because they often transcend differences."

Creating partnerships is vital and her origin does play an important part. "The fact that I am of Asian origin really makes a difference as to how the institution is perceived," she says. "Therefore, it matches our current aspiration of seeing the institution as truly trans-national, not simply an American institution. And I think with my presence it makes it more credible." □

About the Author: Ramola Talwar Badam is a writer based in Mumbai.