

Shantha Ranganathan



Hi, my name is Shantha Ragnanathan, I am originally from Chennai which was previously called Madras, in India. I was actually born in Kuwait when my father was working there and then we moved back to Chennai when I was five years old. I grew up in a lower middleclass south Indian Brahmin family, which kind if says it all, in terms of our beliefs. Our approach to life, which is basically my parents' wanted me to be educated, thank God, but then wanted me to be married and have children. But as a child, the one thing my mother did was put me in a Catholic school, and that kind of, I felt, was my first influence of looking at the world from a different perspective, and it pretty much shaped my views of what I wanted to do. The other quality I think I developed over the years is to always look for role models, and kind of attach myself to them in terms of "I want to be like them ... or ... I want to be like him," and the one role model I had was my neighbor, who was a young widow raising three children, who was just an amazing person. And she worked in the British Council. She drove a scooter

in 1970's Chennai, which is unbelievable. All this kind of made me want to be the person I should be, and not what my parents wanted me to be. So that was basically, I think, a lot of my ideas, when I eventually decided that, you know, I kind of had to get out and be something else. So, every time I was asked to be ready to get married, I would beg for three more years of education, three more years of this, and that kind of led me to the U.S. because I came here to do my Masters in Computer Science, and my journey in the U.S. began.

The other thing about coming to the U.S. was also partly because I had a father who was probably a typical Indian father, but basically, his was the rules which were laid in the house and my mother was definitely not a role model who stood up to him ... and at the same time my mother had this amazing dichotomy of, "I will let you do whatever you want to do, but I can't cross your father." So I think that also helped me realize the role women play in keeping the peace in the house, and still being able to tell their children to go off and do things, which I mean, it was a very subtle communication from my mother, which I felt all my life. And coming to the U.S. was definitely my big act of resistance. First, I had somebody here I thought I was going to marry, but that did not work out. But, also that I wanted to come and get educated, and my father absolutely stood in the way. The community actually stood in the way, because there was advice given to my parents by how, "Yes, you can let her go but just make sure she's married before she goes." So, fighting all that to come here was hard, and, but once I came here, and the relationship that I thought was going to be the one for the rest of my life broke up, were basically the best things which happened to me, and, I remember meeting my ex-boyfriend after 25 years and profusely thanking him for dumping me because I would not have been half the person I am today. But for those pitfalls, because I think that

really kind of brings out that inner person in you saying, “OK, can I go back and say, ‘I failed?’” and listen to my parents – that was Choice One – and the second choice was to get there and get my Masters and want to be someone else, and that’s what I did. And yes, I met some amazing role models, including my very first roommate, who was a Muslim, single who had her own house, and I was just amazed... That’s who I want to be! I need to buy a house before I get married, and I did that.

Coming to my story at MAITRI, the role models I spoke about, that was my uncle, who always helped people, and I guess I watched that all my life. He didn’t have much money, so what he did was work. Whether helping people trying to get them funds, trying to get them a job, trying to get them into a college, that’s all I saw my uncle do. And I always used to wonder, “Wow! Where does he get the energy to do it?” And sometimes his family suffered, but at the end, when he died, suddenly we really felt that void. And a lot of us, me and his daughter, I think we stepped into those roles, too, in the community. I came to the U.S., finished my education, got a great job in the Bay Area, settled in with a good roommate, and then had two choices to make – “OK, now I’m ready to get married” or to actually live and learn about this community. And my first experience with MAITRI was my travel agent calling me, out of the blue, and saying, “Do you speak Tamil?” And I said, “Why” and she said, “Oh, there is this girl my husband saw on his way to the park, was knocking on this door and she asked him for his help, to say that her husband was inside but won’t let her come in, and so my travel agent had taken this girl in, and there was a long story to it, in terms of she being abandoned by her newly-married husband in Singapore, because he basically said, “You don’t come to the U.S. unless my parents are able to approve you, with a stamp of approval.” And he was working in one of the biggest computer companies at that time, and

my first reaction was like absolute shock, and that this cannot be, and not in the Bay Area and not with educated people. But I jumped in, both feet in, not having had any training, not even heard of MAITRI, but decided that, "Let me see what I can do for her," with literally no knowledge about laws, and family laws, or anything. But I helped her the way I could best, drove her around. We did silly things like go and stand outside his company and sing, "We're going to a lawyer..." and trying to figure out what her options were. There was no Internet at that time, information was hard to come. Eventually, it didn't end really well for her because her marriage was never registered in the U.S. and she ended up going back. And I still was kind of plodding along, trying to figure out what I should do. I used to tutor kids in homeless shelters, that was a passion of mine, and still do today, and while all this was happening, I ended up meeting and marrying my husband, and starting to have a family. And at that time I read an article about MAITRI in the San Jose Mercury News, just kind of an introductory article – it wasn't anything specific to a case. And that was what really got me started. I called them. They were a group of around 6 to 8 people at that time, they met at somebody's house, and they said, "Well, you cannot come and join us unless you train." And I'm like, "OK." And the first thing I was given was a manual and was asked to pay a dollar for it because that's how much a copy cost for the group. And then I went to the training, and I never looked back. That training, with support network for battered women (Currently the Y), was something which I cherish, even today. It really opened my eyes on domestic violence. The bigger opener of eyes was with lesbian domestic violence, because I had no clue, because I thought, "Wow, women get along well with each other; we help each other. How could we possibly hit each other?" And the stories, the way it was put together, was fascinating ... and scary. But I also knew that I had a path I had to walk; I

could not walk away from this situation any more. I had friends who were giving me advice about how I'm newly married, how I'm going to have a baby, and this is emotionally not the right thing for me, you know, but I don't even think I was actually listening.

I joined MAITRI when it was a very small group. It was very interesting to see amazing, strong women come, and sometimes feeling helpless, sometimes feeling useless, because we don't know how to help all the time, and sometimes just kind of saying, "I'm going to go get this done ; they're not going to walk away from this without answering us, the group." It was wonderful, I had, and I have to give a shout-out to my husband, because he's definitely my partner in crime; without his support, I would not have been able to have done the work I did, whether it was giving rides, whether it was helping women move, whether it is keeping people in my house, which MAITRI did not condone, even then, but sometimes we were just desperate, because it was 10:30 in the night and I can't find them a room, or anything else which was needed, Ram was there with me to help me out. And we have, you know, worked with hundreds of women over the years.

My fond memories of MAITRI are the fun memories. I ran a couple of fundraisers for them, and that was, you know, that's a challenge in itself. And I believe that in an organization, every work is good work. I do not think that I have to be all about working with women and not doing this, you know, so I am a decent project manager, so it was a fun project, but definitely, the community, was not ready for this. The community is probably still not ready for this because I still have enough friends who are like, you know, for them, it's a story. You know, I would always hear, going to parties, "Tell me a MAITRI story." And I'm like, "No. It's not a story –

it's somebody's life." So, it's not like these are bad people, but it's so far away from their realm of what is successful and what is normal, that they have no clue. And I look back on my life and I don't think I saw domestic violence, but I did recognize it in my own family... I don't think I've seen too many aunts or uncles being hit, but I can, you know, what my father ... the way he behaved is definitely our textbook version of DV. Abuse doesn't have to be... and that's the other thing we learned at MAITRI was that abuse is not just hitting. One client's words broke my heart, and I cry over that even now, she said, "Didi, (which means, Sister, in Hindi) it's OK if he hits me, or goes away, but he spits on me, and that really bothers me." And that's hard, so, over the years, we have learned to be peer counselors – I'm an engineer by profession; now I work in the legal field. I really don't have any specific degrees related to psychology... I think we watch these women, and we learn. We watch the signs and we figure out what would help them. The one thing about MAITRI which my husband reminds me every day, because sometimes I think I should help people, is he will always say, "Remember the motto! Remember the motto!" You know helping women help themselves. And that is key: as much as we can give them a long rope to get to that point of you know, getting up and saying, "What's done is done, and I need to move on." If they don't cross that line, and reach out to us, or ask us, we can't help them. And believe me, I have tried. And there are people even today who I am not able to help because they are not coming to that point, and I don't even mean a half-way point.

MAITRI's volunteers are amazing. We have put so many things on hold... I have stories from friends who have put their Thanksgiving dinner on hold in order to drop somebody somewhere. These are amazingly dedicated volunteers. But if the client is not able to step up and come, we really have to wait. And MAITRI has taught me that patience. It's hard, because a lot of

us are educated, we're professionals, we are hard-working, but we also don't have too much time, because we're also running our own little family, so we kind of try to match this all, and we want things to get "chop-chop" and move on, and we really have to be patient. I had a client who called me once in two years to talk about her cheating husband and how she wants to leave him and how on Monday she will be there at the courthouse with me to file papers, and I have spent like, two hours with her that Sunday, putting everything on hold, to explain the process, and she won't show up, and I'll hear from her again in two years, and that's happened many times. So, we have learned to be patient, to be kind, I think MAITRI has made me a much better person than when I started, and I cannot even explain that. I don't sound that way sometimes, but I know that in my heart I have learned to understand women. Because it's easy to say, "I know how you feel," because we don't. I have had to explain to parents about the domestic violence their children faced, and have had to openly ask, "Auntie, has somebody hit you, ever? If not, you and me don't understand what your daughter is going through." And they didn't like it, but I was kind of able to explain to them that these are such personal, humiliating experiences, that even if you went through it might not be your story, but without going through, MAITRI has made me humble even to say, "Don't think you know it. Don't think you know the solution. Don't think you know how to help them – you can just try. Stand on the sidelines and cheer them along."

Has the community changed? I think so, but I'm still not sure. And we live in an area of so much wealth and opulence that it's crazy. And yes, people do give us money, and we are extremely thankful for it, but I'm not still sure if more and more the community has deeply understood. A lot of times, they cross that threshold when their sister, their cousin, or somebody they know, goes through this and they come running to MAITRI. And then

we actually see in their faces, it changes them. "I can't believe he did this." You know, "I can't believe my sister is actually going through this – not my sister!" and then they don't understand their sister won't dump him. They don't understand why the sister won't just come and live with the brother who has all this money. And I have the brother tell me, "But I can take care of her and her daughter for the rest of her life – why won't she leave him?" And that is when they reach out to us, not that we are, you know, able to give clear answers; we are at least able to explain the dynamics. And the other problem I have with this community here is this concept of being a couple: you know, I feel like MAITRI clients are so scared because suddenly they are single. And I have noticed this even in my own life when I was single I hung out with single people; when I was married, I was with married people, and the cross-over is very difficult. It is really hard for single women in an opulent community like this with you know with the money and the, you know, even now when I go to a party, someone will go, "OK, which countries are you going to this summer?" That's the starting question, and I'm like, "I'm really not going anywhere, I'm going to be working! So, I think what is normal has changed to a point where our clients are finding it harder and harder to fit, and as much as I have some ideas, I think it's, we first have to get them out of their mess, and try to put them on a path of where they want to be.

What do I see for MAITRI for the future? My personal wish, and what I have kind of been talking about, is to be able to help with parenting. The most difficult part I have been seeing with MAITRI clients is they're able to come out of their situation. They've been able to get jobs, maybe even become stable financially. But the parenting, as much as we can try to send them to co-parenting classes, and all the stuff which the courts provide, parenting seems to be a struggle. Our parenting is a struggle, anyway, you

know, with two parents, parenting is a not free right to anybody. But for these women, they have this additional pressure of either two days here, four days there parenting. One side not being good about not maligning the other side. And how do these women rise above it? And sometimes they just fall into that trap of like, "If he's going to say talk things about me, then I'm going to talk things about him." And this child just completely become a pawn. And I don't know – I don't have the answers but I feel like that it is a facet I'd like to explore. I do it one-on-one with the people who call me, but I really feel there is some value in figuring out, "Can we?" And I know MAITRI does a lot with economic empowerment, and how to dress – those are all absolutely invaluable things we have to do, but this part sometimes, and this part ten years after they have worked with us.

The last thing I want to say about MAITRI is I have met some amazing, amazing clients who 'til today are my role models. And I tell them and they turn back and say, "Oh, you helped us. Without your help we would not be where we are." And I just want to tell them that without them I would not be who I am, because they are just amazing. I have one client whom I told "Do not come back." She went back to India and I said "Do not come back, because you do not have the education – you might have a green card but it's going to be so hard..." And she said, "You know? It's OK. I'm gonna make it!" And basically said that "I don't care if you don't help me." That was the message I got. I was upset, not from an ego perspective, but like, "Why is she not listening?" And I get this place. I know this place. How come she's not listening to advice, you know. And again, at MAITRI we are taught not to give advice, so it was just a suggestion. But she came. She started off, we picked her up. She went to a homeless shelter, and ten, fifteen years later, her son is in college, she went back to school, she got a degree, she got another certification and she got a job. She's immigrated

her mom. You look back and it's like: "You are the role model – not me." And I thank MAITRI for giving me the opportunity to see these kind of people, because I wouldn't have, otherwise.

And so, I picked up a few role models, picked up a few new ideas on what life is, and definitely MAITRI has made me realize humility. I thank myself every day for the life I have because it's nothing, I have no problems. My biggest problem could be like, "Oh my God, my daughter didn't get into her major." Or "My son has to get a job." And those are not problems. These women have problems of survival. They have problems with visas. They have problems with money. They have problems with staying alive. And for us to be able to be there, to kind of stand on that sideline and help them with MAITRI, it's been a fantastic ride, and I wouldn't trade that for anything.