



WOMAN OF THE YEAR  
2007



Photos courtesy of SABITA SINGH; above, left, by JAY MANDAL

Somerville, Mass. resident Sabita Singh became the first South Asian judge of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts last October. Most of her cases involve domestic violence.



Photo courtesy of SABITA SINGH

Massachusetts judge Sabita Singh was diagnosed with breast cancer nearly five years ago, when she underwent intensive radiation and chemotherapy.

## Trailblazer honored with award

Massachusetts's first South Asian judge is 2007 Woman of the Year

By TUSHA MITTAL  
INDIA New England Staff

SOMERVILLE, Mass. — Sabita Singh remembers the drive to the Bar Association offices in her hometown village of Chapra, in Bihar, India.

"We ran into a huge crowd flowing into the streets," says Singh, assistant U.S. attorney at the time, who was heading to a celebration organized by the local legal community. Singh was in Delhi to receive a Hind Rattan (Jewel of India) award given by the NRI Welfare Society and decided to visit the village where she lived until she was three years old.

"I was a bit tense, because we were already late for the meeting, and now we were going to be delayed," Singh, 40, says. But apprehension turned into surprise, she says, when her car was actually driven into the swarming crowd and she was asked to step out. She realized that the crowd had gathered to honor her.

Singh said she found herself being ushered onto a stage under a banner that read "Miss Sabita Singh, Grand Baby of the Bar." The day proceeded with garlands, speeches, heavy armed security and television cameras, Singh says.

But as Singh peered into the mass of people cheering her accomplishments, she says she couldn't help notice a "fragment of sad reality."

"There were about a thousand people there, but I can't say that I saw a single woman," Singh says.

Last October, Singh, a Somerville resident, was nominated by Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney to be an associate justice at the District Court level. An eight-person governor's council confirmed her nomination on Nov. 15, making her the first judge of South Asian descent in Massachusetts. Singh

"What I love about being a judge is that it's really community based. Everybody who's got a problem can come into my court when they've hit the wall and say there's nothing they can do on their own."

**Sabita Singh**  
Associate justice, District Court  
Department of the Trial Court of the  
Commonwealth of Massachusetts

joins less than 10 South Asian judges in the United States, less than 5 of whom are women.

Singh says she was overwhelmed with the outpouring from the South Asian community in New England.

"As an immigrant group we measure ourselves to see where we've been able to make inroads in society," she said when she was confirmed as a district court judge.

She added, "I am happy to be the figurehead of our community opening up to the justice system."

Singh's role as a district court judge requires her to travel throughout Massachusetts, presiding over both criminal and civil cases. This includes both bench trials and juror trials. She also presides over arraignments following criminal arrests, though most of her cases involve domestic violence restraining

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# Singh battled cancer to forge ahead in legal career

**SINGH**, continued from previous page

orders, and women who need protection from abuse and domestic violence.

Singh agrees that the role of judge is even today stereotypically a male profession. "People still expect a man to be on the bench particularly in fields where you're sentencing someone to jail, people are not used to seeing women in that role," she says.

"It is an awesome thing to realize the kind of trust that has been placed in me," Singh says. "I feel it's a big responsibility because the first in anything that is looked upon like an ambassador from one culture to another."

Ameek Ashok Ponda, a partner at Sullivan & Worcester LLP and a prominent member of Boston's South Asian legal community, also relishes in Singh's confirmation.

"She is impressively credentialed and accomplished, but more important, she has been very active in Indian American community affairs, both in the United States and in India," he says. "It's very exciting for Massachusetts to have its first Indian American judge and particularly fitting that someone so accomplished and poised as Sabita should be that person."

Singh, who has been a founding member and former president of the National South Asian Bar Association, a legal organization with over 24 chapters across the country, said she is happy to take the South Asian community further on the U.S. legal map.

Many people who come to Singh's court are immigrants, she says, and it means something to them to see an immigrant judge. Singh says that having a diverse bench will help in how others perceive the justice system.

"I think it is sort of important that for people



Photo courtesy of SABITA SINGH

**Sabita Singh, above, left, with sisters, says she received huge support from the local South Asian community.**

to see different people in that role, not only women but women from all different cultures, immigrants who have become naturalized citizens," she says.

Ten years hence, Singh hopes to be at the bench with more confidence in what she is doing and be really involved in trying to improve [the system] rather than just preside over her cases systemically. "There are some basic issues with the trial court," Singh says. "I

do most of my work in the criminal field, many people who come in front of me are poor, have substance abuse problems, alcohol or drug abuse, homeless, mental health patients, and they are wrapped up in the justice system on the same level. We need a more holistic system to address their needs."

Singh's journey to the top of the bench has also been ridden with personal challenges. She was diagnosed with breast cancer almost five years ago.

"At that time, I went through surgery, chemotherapy, radiation and drug therapy. Since I'm almost five years out without a recurrence, things look good for me," Singh says, adding that this is an issue she thinks is important to discuss openly in the community.

"No matter who else we have to care for or what else we are responsible for, we need to care for ourselves," Singh says. "I've also found that there's a tendency in our community to hide misfortune, to suffer silently."

She adds that the cancer diagnosis was paralyzing at the time. "I was at the height of my career, or so I thought, and I saw it all come crashing down around me," she says. "Now, I view the experience as a gift that gives me perspective and enables me to enjoy every day."

A graduate of The Pennsylvania State University in 1987, Singh then graduated with a degree from the Boston University School of Law in 1990.

She served as a law clerk of the justices of the Massachusetts Superior Court, before becoming a Massachusetts prosecutor. As a member of the prosecutor's office, Singh also trained law enforcement officers at police academies, drafted and promoted legislation, and conducted investigations of public authorities.

In 1998, Singh argued for the state when the infamous Louise Woodward case went before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

Singh has also practiced both criminal and civil law at Bingham McCutchen LLP, an international law firm based in Boston. In her criminal practice, she represented clients before state and federal courts and advised clients on internal investigations. In her civil practice, Singh concentrated on product liability and consumer class-action suits.

Most recently, Singh served as an assistant U.S. attorney for Massachusetts in Boston and a special counsel for criminal civil rights enforcement.

Though she enjoyed her time in private law, Singh says the switch to her current position has allowed for more hands-on work. She says the transition was overwhelming, from the corporate world, where she had ample time for research and concentrated more on advocacy, to being a trial judge where she has to make many quick decisions on a day-to-day basis on a wide variety of cases, from civil to criminal; housing landowner eviction cases to domestic violence, and mental health civil hearings.

"What I love about this is that it's really community based," she says. "Everybody who's got a problem can come into my court when they've hit the wall and say there's nothing they can do on their own. It's much more immediate, they need the court's protection and they are not represented by lawyers."

Singh said she also looks forward to each day because she can never predict what will happen. "Every day is action packed," Singh, who is single, says. "There's a lot of emotion and drama which is to be expected, given the matters that are dealt with. It's always an adventure."



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Hyatt Regency Boston wishes to acknowledge New England's most influential Indian-American women and congratulate the nominees for the India New England 2007 Woman of the Year. Best wishes to all.



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