

Award for woman who fled forced marriage

By Arifa Akbar

Jasvinder Sanghera ran away from home at the age of 15 to escape a forced marriage to someone she had never met. She lived in cars and bedsits after hiding for eight years for fear of reprisals from her Sikh family.

But, at the age of 24 she returned to her home town of Derby, where she put herself through university and set up a women's project from the front room of her student lodgings so that others did not have to go through such experiences alone.

Ms Sanghera, 39, now an Asian affairs manager at the Refuge domestic violence charity and a prominent women's campaigner, was last night honoured at the Asian Women of Achievement awards ceremony at the London Hilton on Park Lane.

The awards were launched six years ago by Pinky Lilani and Munir Samji to recognise all levels of achievement by Asian women in Britain, including contributions to the worlds of medicine, law, the public sector, business and the arts.

Ms Sanghera, a mother of three, was joint winner with Sheetal Mehta, a former Microsoft executive who left to launch a fund to help women around the world with a charity called Global Partners.

Her early experiences left her with the ambition to help other women, although she still re-

Asian Women of Achievement



■ **Sudha Bhuchar and Kristine Landon-Smith - arts and culture award, founders and artistic directors of Tamasha Theatre**

The two have created a company which has helped to bring Asian experiences to the forefront of British theatre. Tamasha has been going for 16 years and their production successes include *East is East*, *Balti Kings*, *Fourteen Songs*, *Two Weddings and a Funeral* and *Strictly Dandia*. The company has a professional development programme for writers, designers, directors and actors.



■ **Lopa Patel - media professional of the year award, editor of redhotcurry.com**

From its humble beginnings as a small cookery site in 2001, redhotcurry.com has become the leading lifestyle portal for British Asians, offering a recipe of news, entertainment information, lifestyle articles and opinion pieces. It the only female-owned Asian website and is entirely self-financed. The site now receives 5.1 million hits and has more than 40,000 users every month.



■ **Professor Shaheen Sardar Ali - public sector award. Professor of law, University of Warwick**

Professor Shaheen Ali was born in Pakistan and, after being engaged at the age of four, was married at 19 and had a daughter during the first year of taking a law degree at Peshawar University. She became the first female professor of law in Pakistan, the first woman to become a government minister in North-West Frontier province and the first female Pakistani to become a professor of law in the UK.



■ **Ayesha Hazarika - young achiever of the year award, stand-up comic**

Ms Hazarika began in stand-up in 2002 but what was a hobby soon became a passion. She was a semi-finalist in Channel 4's *So You Think You're Funny*, in 2003, and in the BBC's comedy new talent awards in 2004. She has performed at the Edinburgh festival, on ITV's *Take the Mike*, and on Radio 4's *Women's Hour*. She also organised an all-female comedy night for International Women's Day.



■ **Shami Chakrabarti - AWA-Lloyds TSB award, director of Liberty**

A barrister, Ms Chakrabarti became director of the human rights organisation Liberty in 2003. Born in London in 1969, she is married with one son. She joined Liberty in September 2001, and spent the next two years campaigning against anti-terrorist measures brought in after 9/11. She writes and speaks on the need to create a "culture of respect for human rights" and maintains a high media profile.

ceives threats from her family, who have disowned her, Ms Sanghera said.

"I used my past as a catalyst to support other women," she said. "Sadly, I was brought up to believe that to talk about your problems would be to shame your family. That's what many Asian women still believe. It is

at the heart of the majority of Asian women's experiences.

"I didn't feel like a victim of forced marriage after I ran away. I felt I had betrayed my family."

Among other winners was Nigat Awan, 50, from Manchester, who won the entrepreneur of the year award for her business initiatives over three

decades despite suffering from cancer, motor neurone disease and temporary paralysis.

She started off designing a best-selling Bay City Rollers T-shirt in her father's factory at the age of 18, and went on to set up a floristry business that sold to Interflora. She now heads the Shere Khan curry products and

restaurant concern which provides sauces to supermarkets.

"I had had three children and been quite ill, but I worked through all of it. I set up one of my businesses from a hospital bed after I had cancer of the thyroid. I like a challenge, it's a great way of fighting your problems," she said.

Bushra Nasir, head of Plashet School for Girls in Newham, east London, who was Britain's first Muslim female secondary headteacher, was praised for transforming her school, which has been awarded beacon status by the Department for Education and Skills. She received the professional of the year award.