



*Manohar Raju at a press conference at San Francisco City Hall on March 11, 2019. Photo: Amy Osborne*

# MEET MANO

SAN FRANCISCO'S INTERIM  
PUBLIC DEFENDER

**Katie Burke**



**On February 22, 2019, Mano Raju was the San Francisco Public Defender’s felony unit manager. That evening, his boss died. Seventeen days later, Mayor London Breed appointed Raju Interim Public Defender; and on April 26, at the Ella Hill Hutch Community Center, she swore him into office.**

**As Interim Public Defender, Raju will lead the 195-member staff, across the office’s felony, juvenile, bail, pretrial release, paralegal, investigative, mental health, and immigration units. An Oakland resident at the time of his March 11 appointment, Raju and his family have since moved to San Francisco, enabling him to run for the four-year post in the November election.**

Jeff Adachi, the office’s leader before his unexpected death at fifty-nine, was widely known for his dogged advocacy and criminal justice reforms throughout his seventeen years in charge. Clocking in at six foot two, Raju towers over the side table in his new office, formerly occupied by Adachi.

“Jeff was an amazing visionary, and he would want us to take our practice to the next level,” Raju says.

Raju’s parents grew up in a farming village in Southern India, in the state of Tamil Nadu. Later emigrating to the United States, his mom was a skincare consultant and his dad an engineer. Raju’s paternal grandfather was a peanut merchant. “It is a very working class community

within India, where most people’s livelihoods depend on agriculture,” Raju says.

Mano is short for Manohar—which in India, according to Raju, means “heart mind: he who can influence the heart mind of others.” Raja, his family’s original surname, means “king.” His family changed their surname to “Raju” when Raju’s father was a child.

True to his name, Raju appears to have won the collective heart mind of the Public Defender’s Office, and it seems he will be its king: Raju, who will turn fifty-one this June, expects to run unopposed this November. Chief Public Defender Matt Gonzalez, commonly known as “Adachi’s No. 2,” will not run for the seat.

“I know Matt’s fully supportive of me in my efforts to be Public Defender, and he’s staying on as Chief,” Raju says.

“We are behind [Raju] 100 percent without exception, so fair warning,” said fellow defender Rebecca Young to the *San Francisco Chronicle* on March 16. “I hope that he runs unopposed, and if anyone dare oppose, they will face fierce opposition from this very well organized and committed office.”

Raju spent the first two months of his life in Delaware, before his family moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After studying philosophy and literature at Columbia, Raju earned his master’s degree in South Asian Studies and his law degree, both at Berkeley.

Raju’s civil rights leanings showed up in college, when he was a research assistant for Kendall Thomas, a critical legal studies professor at Columbia Law School, who encouraged Raju’s interest in law school.

“[Thomas] took a critical view of the law, and saw how it has often disproportionately affected people based on their race, class, gender, sexual orientation,” Raju says.

During law school, Raju worked with San Francisco’s Asian Law Caucus and Chicago’s Fair Housing Organization. After passing the Bar, he discovered his passion for public defense at the Contra Costa Public Defender’s Office, where he served as a defender for seven years before his eleven years to date in the San Francisco Public Defender’s Office.

In Contra Costa, Raju worked with Bill Veale and Susan Hatcher, who had taught his law school criminal trial practice class, which Raju credits with his awareness of his “real knack and passion for trial work.”

He also has a personal tie to public defense. “My uncle was wrongly accused of murder in India, solely based on his caste,” Raju says, referring to jati, India’s caste system.

“The police thought because of who he was that he had done this murder, but when they researched further into it, they realized he hadn’t. Something similar happens in the Bay Area with, quote unquote, gang prosecutions: Because of the group you are associated with, cops say you did ‘x,’ and often that’s not the truth.”

Asked what parts of Adachi’s work he wants to carry on, Raju says, “Well, one important thing is that we continue to shine a spotlight on our work, as Jeff did through his movies and press releases, and through this program called Court Watch that I’ve been involved in. Jacque Wilson is the attorney in the office who has done a lot of that.”

Wilson reaches out to Bay Area and Central Valley high schools and universities, inviting groups of around thirty students to shadow defenders in court, then debrief with them. “I’d love to invite smaller groups of five, ten people to watch trial or the felony calendar or misdemeanor court. It gives a window into society that not many people see—and if they do, they may not understand what’s happening, so to have someone there to explain what just happened can be illuminating.”

Raju also wants to further Adachi’s practice of questioning settlement. “We should take more cases all the way through,” Raju says. “The unfortunate reality, though, is that with overcharging, with strikes, with crushing sentences looming, many clients fear trial because the risk is so high.

“Nevertheless, it’s important that the attorney be prepared, no matter what is charged, to do all the appropriate investigation, motion work, and trial preparation. If after doing that the client takes a deal, well, that happens—but the client should not be taking a deal because they don’t have a good attorney prepared to do everything they can to fight for them.”

Raju says he will draw on the office’s collective wisdom before making certain decisions, and credits Adachi’s work growing the staff for this resource.



*Manohar Raju, the city's new public defender appointed by London Breed, speaks during a press conference at San Francisco City Hall on March 11, 2019.  
Photo: Amy Osborne*

“We started something in our office called trial practice groups, where you practice pieces of your case [with other lawyers]: cross-examination, pieces of jury selection, direct examination, closing argument, opening statement,” he says. “So much of our work as lawyers is behind our laptops, drafting motions. It’s a sitting practice, in large part, but trial work is a standing practice. It’s performance art.”

Raju values input on his own cases. “Before I started shaving my head, when I would get a haircut, I would run ideas—of course, preserving confidentiality—by someone cutting my hair,” he says. “The more non-lawyers you can talk to about the case, the better, because lawyers sometimes tend to be an insular group with other lawyers. But generally speaking, it’s not lawyers on the jury, so it’s important to get a feel for what resonates with non-lawyers also.”

Raju pushes for the use of community experts, witnesses who educate jurors about the defendant’s community, on any relevant issue beyond the jury’s common understanding.

“Historically, that’s been perceived as someone who has a Ph.D. in a particular area. But the reality is, there’s a lot of expertise more valuable to trial than the expertise you’ve gotten through your education,” he says.

“Something may have a certain meaning in one community and a totally different meaning in another community, like carrying a gun. The, quote unquote, gang task force expert has to testify that a gun is like a carpenter’s hammer, so it’s something he takes to work every day and uses to do his job,” Raju says.

“But most of the transitional age youth that we’re aware of are not carrying a gun because they want to do anyone harm. They’re carrying a gun for protection. And I’ve actually called experts to say that some young people will pray that they won’t have to use it.”

Raju wants to work with prosecutors on Young Adult Court, a diversion program where people receive substance abuse counseling, mental health treatment, and realistic job opportunities, rather than prison sentences. “Young people’s brains are not fully developed,” Raju says. “We know that poverty and substance abuse and trauma are often the reasons that crimes are committed.”

Asha Mehta, Raju’s wife, works with various organizations in leadership development and facilitation. She encourages nonprofit and community leaders to join forces to realize their own potential, Raju says.

Mehta and Raju’s son, Asim, will turn nine this June. According to Raju, if asked what Raju does for work, Asim would say “that I argue for a living and try to get people out of jail.”

Raju defines his role in more nuanced terms. “Criminal defense attorneys look out for the underdogs. I particularly

enjoy and relish the challenge of trying to bring the full story into the courtroom.”

Given the emotionally draining nature of the work and the “frightening possible results,” Raju says, “It’s so important that you somehow manage to regulate and channel those emotions into productive work. Most people should not be criminal defense attorneys, with those kind of stakes. It has to be a calling.

“Of all the areas I’ve done in law, I’ve felt most at home doing public defense work,” he adds. “I’ve really enjoyed the connection with clients and the ability to have a direct impact on their lives through my representation. It’s the best fit for me.”

*Katie Burke owns Burke Family Law in San Francisco. Katie has practiced family law in San Francisco for thirteen years, representing individuals in their divorce, child custody, and financial division matters. She also helps people secure domestic violence restraining orders; drafts and reviews premarital agreements, post-marital agreements, and cohabitation agreements; and handles probate guardianships and civil and family law appeals.*