

HELLO!

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**INSIDE: A RETROSPECTIVE
WITH SUNITA KOHLI**

SUSSANNE ROSHAN

**'I aim to be someone
consistently doing
things beyond usual
expectations'**



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SUNITA KOHLI

HELLO! TRAVELS BACK IN TIME WITH PADMA SHRI WINNER SUNITA KOHLI WHO REVISITS SOME OF HER MOST ILLUSTRIOUS AND FAVOURITE PROJECTS THROUGH THE LAST FOUR DECADES

Sunita Kohli is seated in one of the lounges of their K2India Design Concept Spaces. She wears a simple vegetable dyed *khadi* sari. The furniture is all manufactured by their 40-year-old companies. A recent addition is the coffee table with leather trays. A block of petrified wood from Bali is used as a side table. "No designer can improve upon the beauty of nature," maintains Sunita. Underfoot is an antique Kurdish Kilim from Carpet Seller. The overhead light is made from natural wood

She is one of the most creative and influential women in Delhi's power corridors, the original uncrowned czarina of interior design in India. The only woman to have been honoured with the Padma Shri for her contribution to the industry, few may realise that her journey encompasses not just designing new spaces, but restoring some of the most fabulous heritage buildings around India and the world. In recent times, she has admirably kept up the momentum despite a grievous neck injury 10 years ago which rendered her immobile for months. HELLO! meets a designer who has risen like the phoenix – creatively and personally.

Early influences: Sunita Sur was born in Lahore to Inder Prakash and Chand Sur, in a progressive Rajput family of Pakistan before the partition of India. "In Salman Rushdie's phrase, I guess I am one of 'midnight's children'," reflects Sunita, who took on the surname Kohli after marrying Rome Kohli, a dashing young man with impeccable pedigree whose family was in finance. Rome was a Doon School and St Stephen's graduate, who romanced her in the hills of Mussoorie. Sunita's father, a man of refined sensibilities who spoke chaste English, Urdu and Faarsi migrated from Lahore to Lucknow and arrived in India with practically nothing except his education. Hard-working and intelligent, eventually he became one of the biggest distributors of Phillips in India, carrying on from where he left off in Pakistan. She studied at Loreto Convent and grew up in the laid-back Awadhi culture of Lucknow. While imbibing the spirit of the abounding heritage of Lucknow, she had her father by her side, constantly encouraging her to learn through traveling and exposure to finer aspects of life. "He loved exploring antique shops and taking us through the old parts of Lucknow. I was 11-years-old, and had accompanied him once to an auction where he had seen a beautiful ▶



Receiving the Padma Shri from President Venkataraman at the Darbar Hall, 1992 (above); The resplendent Ashoka Hall, Rastrapathi Bhavan, in New Delhi (below)





string of emeralds. I remember him saying, "These are the colour of your mother's eyes." He had stepped out when the bidding came up and I started getting nervous that the piece would go to someone else and raised the placard. My mother was shocked when the string was declared ours," says Sunita, recalling her life spent with her parents, filled with old-world pleasures like dance parties, prolific reading, music lessons, and extensive traveling.

Life comes full circle: "The first time I met my husband I was around 13 and he was in St. Stephen's! He was one of the best looking men of his time and extremely gifted. Over the years we started meeting as friends and were drawn to each other much later," she elaborates. Personally, she had two men with unique finesse, who silently influenced her – her father and then her husband. It somewhere helped her travel to a vocation in an unknown territory, she embarked upon without quite being aware of it. "My husband is superbly creative and his name still appears in Doon School records for creating the best design in their carpentry workshop. He teases me saying, 'I think I was meant to marry a *tarkhan* (carpenter),' He also created the tallest sculpture there, still displayed in the school grounds."

In her years of being an accomplished interior designer, Sunita has had many emotional reminders of the past, urging her into retracing metaphorical footsteps of memory that were erased with the sands of time. Her interior design career took her back to Pakistan in recent

years and she was able to go back to Lahore while designing and restoring an old haveli, a heritage building originally belonging to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, for conversion into a boutique hotel. "Life does come full circle. I went and saw the house where I was born," she reflects.

Literature and Design: Sunita joined LSR College in Delhi and was President of the English Literary Society. She was actively interested in theatre and joined Yatrik, a popular theatre company. In literature she found a great magnet and went on to do her masters from Lucknow University and later even pursued a PHD on Christopher Marlowe which she could not complete eventually. Her first job was as a lecturer in Loreto College after which she moved to Delhi, taking up a job as a copy-writer.

"If I had not studied literature I wouldn't ever have been a designer." Literature spawned an interest in lifestyles of the past, period furniture, etc. "People often ask me where I studied design. The answer is nowhere. It all began when I started looking for furniture for our own house after my marriage. We scoured markets in Lucknow, Dehradun, Mussoorie and Rajasthan. I started studying the history of English furniture and with the help of a master craftsman in Lucknow started restoring some old pieces. That is where it all began. Many people liked what I did and I ended up starting an antiquarian business in 1972, which soon become a manufacturing one of fine reproductions," recalls Sunita.

First project: "My first project was

given to me by a client/friend from Modinagar who had bought furniture from me. I did their drawing room, dining room and study. After that I got a few more offers from their other family members, I began, like the 18th century cabinet makers of England, who not only designed furniture for their clients but also designed their homes. In all these years I have got all my work through word of mouth. I started getting international clients and in the mid-'70s designed a house in Kuwait for their Sheikh's daughter-in-law. Over the years I have set up many manufacturing ateliers, but have purposely never had a retail store for my furniture," says Sunita.

Designing Hotels: "My first hotel project was the Oberoi Khajuraho in the mid 1970s," she says. Gradually, Sunita started getting international offers and made a lasting impression in Egypt where she designed several resorts and luxury hotel boats on the Nile for the Oberoi Group such as Hotel Oberoi Mena House, the Oberois in El-Arish and Aswan and the Oberoi Philae Cruiser. Hotels became the core of her work for a long time. The Oberoi Bhubaneswar, designed by Sunita, was written about in a Taj magazine as one of most beautiful hotels of India! Sunita has designed hotels as diversely spread out as in Baghdad, Lahore and Sri Lanka. "While designing, I realised the most challenging part was how to conceptualise space. That ability has to be God-gifted, you cannot learn it. I realised I could do that without any training, although other design skills I ▶





Some stellar interiors executed by Sunita Kohli include The British Council in New Delhi (above, left), with Charles Correa as architect, and exterior facade by the late Howard Hodgkin. Seen also is the Grand Staircase designed for The Oberoi Philae Cruiser, with a specially commissioned Orientalist painting (above, centre). In stark contrast, is the lobby of the Oberoi in Bhubaneshwar (above, right) which features bronze temple bells as the central cluster of lights, with special stone work, executed by R. Mahapatra. The *katha*-coloured terrazzo floor, has a central motif inspired by the ceiling of the Mukteshwar Temple. The Hyderabad House (below, left) was completely restored and refurbished. The National Assembly Hall-cum-Throne Room at Thimpu, Bhutan (below, right) features Bhutanese exterior windows and a great mandala motif at the centre of the ceiling





kind! I was also particularly honoured to receive the Mahila Shriromani Award, which 'recognises women of achievement', from the hands of Mother Teresa," she reflects, in a spirit of gratitude.

Learning, by accident: By 1999, after 30 years in design, she broke two cervical vertebrae in her neck, after falling off a ladder at home. "But that turned into a watershed. I read immensely and, in fact, revisited many of my favourite Shakespearean plays," she says philosophically. True friends also became apparent at that time.

The journey continues: "But once I got back I lessened the quantum of my work," she clarifies. Now she does eight to 10 projects at a time, closer to Delhi or her home-country. If they are international assignments, she has a business partner in her architect daughter, Kohelika Kohli, who joined her after studying and working as an architect in New York. She has moved into a space which is her own and clearly Sunita has evolved, personally and professionally,

honed with study and travel," she concedes. A marine bathroom she designed, in one of her luxury boats, was so unique that the French manufacturers in Nantes decided to call it 'Sunita'!

Rathrapati Bhavan, the most prestigious one: "Restoring and designing the Rashtrapati Bhavan in 1985 to 1989, has to be the most prestigious project for any Indian interior designer. The entire project was done on an honorary basis," she explains. Sunita traveled to England on her own and carried out elaborate research on Lutyens' architectural archives at the Royal Institute of British Architects, since most of the material was available there. "Our archives on this were then not well catalogued. Lutyens' had left his architectural studio to his son in England who then bequeathed it to RIBA. Once there, I found access to a mine of information. Without interfering in Lutyens' vision, I yet wanted Rashtrapati Bhavan to represent independent India by choosing fabrics created by master weavers and art works, such as the reproduction of Chola bronzes, by master craftsmen," says Sunita. Subsequently, Sunita designed Hyderabad House in New Delhi (the focal point of all major international political meetings), the PM's Residence on 3 Race Course Road, two official state aircrafts. She also designed Cubbon House, renamed Nehru Nilayam, for the Retreat for Heads of State for the international SAARC Summit held in Bangalore in 1986.

Designing Bhutan's National Assembly Building: At the SAARC Summit in Bangalore, where Sunita had designed the Retreat for Heads of State, the then Foreign Minister of Bhutan had complimented the Indian PM about the beautifully maintained old buildings. When the PM informed the Bhutanese Foreign Minister that it had just been restored and decorated, the Bhutanese high official swung into action and got in touch with Sunita to design their Parliament Building. Sunita terms it the most challenging project of her lifetime. "For every other



The Jindal entrance with a reflecting pool in which Sunita placed a series of specially commissioned temples in black granite done by Raghunath Mahapatra. Deep madder red is used as a foil to all the greys. The Living and Dining Room of the Jindal home with two coffered ceilings gilded in pure gold and silver, in the Ganga-Jamuna tradition. From it hang the iconic 'Flying Carpet' lights by Venini. The room has a vibrant art display, merging with contemporary sofas from Sunita, placed along with Corbusier's classic chaise lounge. All imported furniture, lights and accessories are by Suryaveer Kohli Home

project there was ample material to research on. But there was nothing available then that I could use as a reference point. While designing their National Assembly Building, I travelled extensively through Bhutan. I had permission to visit any monastery of Bhutan and had the late Dasho Khandu, an expert on Bhutanese history, accompanying me. The first project was in 1989 and, thereafter, I was asked to revisit this project and the adjoining National Council Building, for the 2010 SAARC Summit that was held in this Bhutan Parliament." From one SAARC Summit to another, Sunita's design journey came full circle once again! "In 2010, we worked with 190 people on Kohelika's team and had all the furniture manufactured in my workshops in India," she shares.

The Padma Shri: "For me, being conferred the Padma Shri in 1992 was a very humbling experience. It also meant that interior design as a discipline was being officially recognised for the first time in our country. But God has been

painting each new day with her changing colours. "I do not have a trademark style I would say, except quality and creativity. One keeps evolving and continues to be very conscious of the context of each project," she says. She is presently working on the restoration on the buildings on 1 Safdarjung Road which houses the Memorial Museum of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, and is once again on the restoration, decoration and modernisation of Rashtrapati Bhavan. "These days I work with many contemporary elements. In fact I have left behind some old styles and have adopted new ones. One cannot be boxed and tabulated, one keeps moving with the times" she signs off. Judging by her constantly ringing phone and queue of meetings, we can sense this clearly!

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