

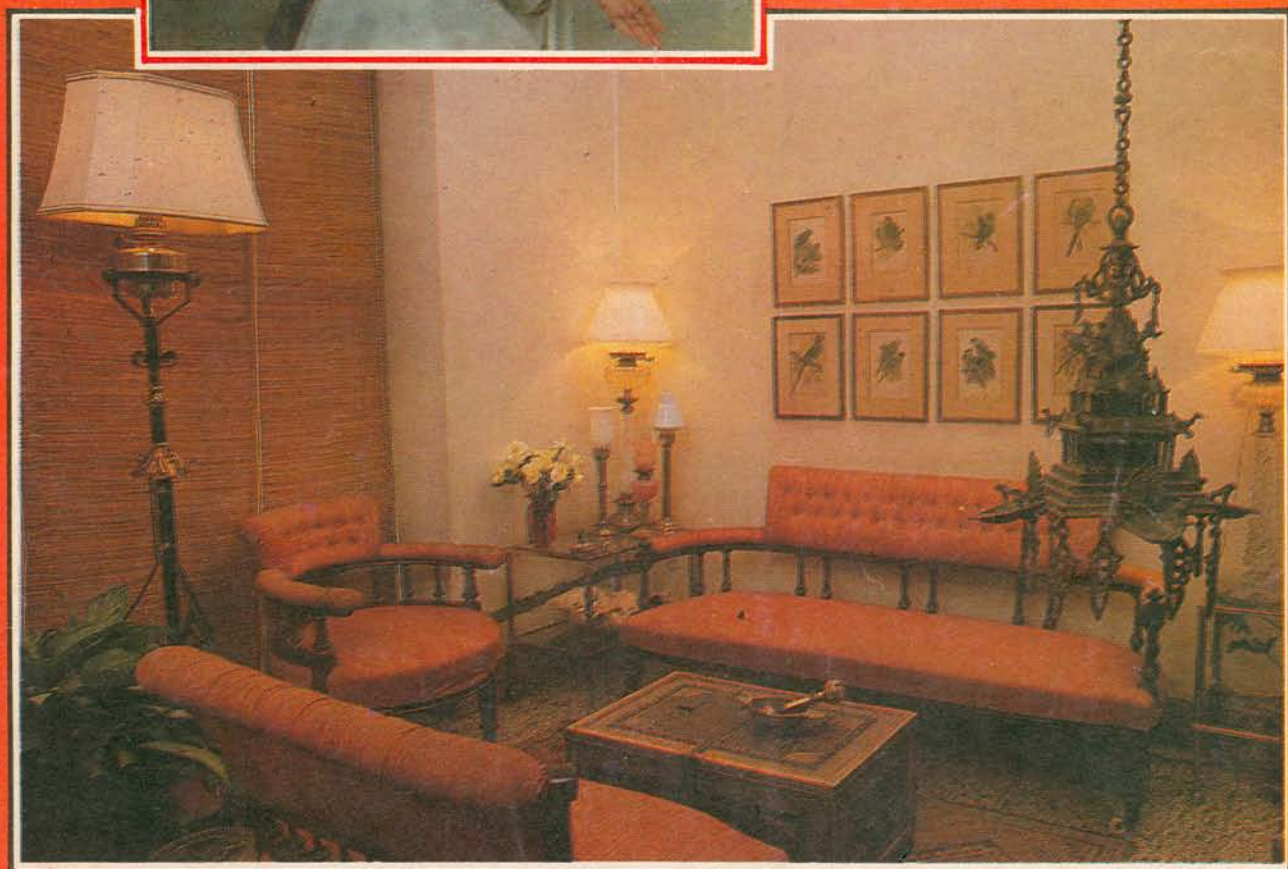
# ◆ Sunday Mail ◆

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# Interiors



- ◆ Mohit Gujral  
on Interiors
- ◆ Sunita Kohli,  
Superstar
- ◆ Designs for  
Living



# An Inside Person

**S**HE KNOWS exactly what the rooms of all the SAARC Heads of State look like. She should, she designed them, at Cubbon House, the retreat chosen for the summit at Nandi Hills, near Bangalore, in November 1986. Sunita Kohli (41) the Delhi based designer, landed the onerous task of restoring Cubbon House to its former 19th century country house glory, while reflecting its South Indian location.

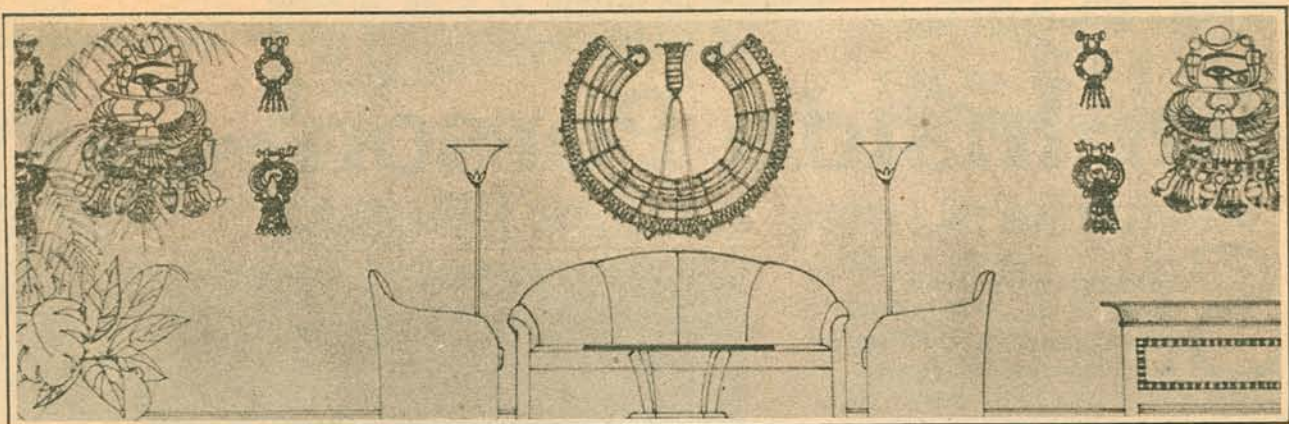
No easy task, but Kohli has applied her skills to some of the most select interiors in the land. A few years ago she was asked to help restore some rooms in Rashtrapati Bhavan and also worked on two of the Prime Minister's offices. Kohli is extremely reluctant to discuss the subject, blandly murmuring that "It's very rewarding to work with those who have good taste". She insists, quite naturally, that the connection should not be "sensationalized" and prefers to talk about her various projects, including the designing of hotels for the Egyptian government.

The milestones are interesting: she read English Literature but taught History at Loreto College in her hometown Lucknow. Born in a 'business family', she married Ramesh Kohli in 1971, whose family was also involved in Commerce.

"It was my interest in European literature that developed into an appreciation of the furniture from different periods of European history" explains Kohli. "It seemed to all go hand-in-hand. My favourite period is the 18th century. The craftsmanship and elegance of that age are truly marvellous". Her earliest attempts were however, in the restoration and then reproduction of furniture made by C. Lazarus, a famous Edwardian furniture maker in fin-de-siècle Calcutta.

"Lazarus chairs are unmistakable. And they were still available when I started out. Soon, I was copying them for those who wanted them very much but couldn't find any anywhere. Step by step, I started designing homes, then





offices and finally hotels. My first big contract was with the Oberois for a hotel in Khajuraho."

Kohli has not needed to look back since. She feels that perhaps the reason she succeeded was that she didn't impose her taste blindly on a place. Whether she works on a large or small project, the size doesn't matter in terms of her involvement. "I'm entirely self-taught and I work in a diversity of styles because, for each project the local culture with its motifs and elements, is what inspires me. Meticulous research down to the smallest details, is what I'd call the hallmark of my work" says Kohli.

Several notable examples seem to bear out her claim besides Cubbon House and the Delhi darbars: the Hotel Oberoi in Bhubhaneshwar, which was designed to look "unmistakably in Orissa" and Hyderabad House, in New Delhi, which hosts visiting heads of state, including Margaret Thatcher. "That was refurbished, not restored", distinguishes Kohli. "I helped with the Ball Room and Banquet Hall, to get it ready for NAM. The building dictates certain things. Whatever one does, one must keep in mind what the *purpose* of that space will be. My work is so very visual, it has to speak for itself," she avers, her eyes lighting up as she talks about her work in Egypt.



Top; elevation of bar, Hotel Aswan Oberoi with Pharaonic motifs. Below, Kohli enthused by Egypt.

**E**GYPT, SHE claims, is one of her enthusiasms. Her first project there was an Oberoi hotel at El-Arish. "I suppose I took a certain eastern sensibility with me, but out there I faithfully researched local influences. Accordingly, I've used classical Islamic designs, Bedouin, Nubian and even Pharaonic motifs,

depending on what was true to which area of Egypt, and what belonged uniquely there". El-Arish led to contracts with EGOTH, a large hotel organisation of the Egyptian government. Kohli has worked on the Mena House Oberoi in Cairo and the Hotel Aswan Oberoi, Aswan, Upper Egypt. "The lobby is inspired by Nubian motifs and the bar highlights the age of the Pharaohs. The bar itself is based on Tutankhamen's sarcophagus, the motifs on the wall are based on the Pharaoh's jewellery found in his tomb, those great golden pectorals, exhibited in Egypt's National Museum. Even the cornices are patterned on Pharaonic art. That's what I mean by minute detail," enthuses Kohli.

The handling of such vast projects may well seem daunting to many but Kohli seems perfectly organized. "Designing interiors is not as glamorous as it sounds, it's dirty work, too. The process goes like this: first, I visit the place of work and get thoroughly briefed by the client. He gives me the function, I then visualise the space—be it a lobby, a restaurant, a bar or a suite. Lots of facts are needed about every detail of the place".

Kohli then makes a design presentation—elevations, electrical layouts, floor patterns, colour schemes, ceiling, etc. Detailed working drawings of the specifications are then prepared, along with a bulky document called the Bill of Quantity, that lists *everything*: floorspace, how much marble, wall areas in square feet, surfaces to be painted, quantum of materials, *ad infinitum*.

There are other professionals to coordinate with—architects, air-conditioning specialists, and others with whom the design is discussed and modified.

The work is then parcelled out to the fabricators and contractors. Prototypes of furniture are made for approval before full scale production. The site has to be constantly inspected to check that everything is just so. It's often dirty, dusty work, and of course the client's deadline has to be met.

Kohli's career involves coordination at many levels—including the running of her beautifully appointed home in Golf Links, New Delhi and the needs of three young children. "I do my homework, whatever the field", twinkles Kohli, with all the confidence of a hardworking and successful career woman.



Kohli's interiors: top, home; centre and below, Cubbon House.