

They're arbiters of elegance, style divas and the first ports of call when the international jetset come visiting. Meet Mumbai's Sunita Pitamber, Delhi's Sunita Kohli and Kolkata's Sunita Kumar, whose dinner parties dominate the social landscapes of the cities they live in

# The Three Sunitas

*Sunita: a name found in classical texts, probably from the Sanskrit prefix su = good + nita = led or conducted, and meaning 'of good conduct'.*

Style and Sunita Pitamber go together like champagne and caviar. Her aesthetic sense is well known in the art, fashion and design world. Sunita used to run an art shop in Colaba, Mumbai and travelled all around India looking for unique and interesting *objets d'art*. "But I never knew where these pieces were being put," she says. So she and her friend Parmeshwar Godrej got into interior design in 1982. And after nearly 20 years in the interiors business, both working with Parmeshwar and on her



Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla: A Celebration of Style

## Sunita Pitamber

own, Sunita has decided it's time to slow down. "I have become very choosy about what projects I do.

Currently Sunita is working on several projects, including one in Kathmandu which involves redoing seven regal suites at a family-run hotel, a house in Dubai which Sunita describes, "as a great challenge". There's also another project in Hyderabad that's very close to Sunita's heart as it involves restoring Chawmahalla.

But it's not only art and interiors that Sunita has a flair for, she has also been a promoter of Indian fashion. It was Sunita who introduced Shakira, actor Michael Caine's wife, and Princess Luciana Pignatelli (both of who have been house guests at the Pitamber residence) to Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla. Sunita loves to travel, and admits that travelling is not only her passion in life but her biggest expense too. And she has become well known for being a style diva both here and abroad.

In the late 80's Shakira also commissioned Abu and Sandeep (who then retailed their garments at Sunita's Colaba store and used her Juhu residence as a workshop) to design a line of embroidered shawls for her design label. Abu and Sandeep's shawls were a huge success retailing at Harrods, Harvey Nichol's, Nieman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman.

Says Sunita, "I first met Abu and Sandeep through my friend Jaya Bachchan. I could see how talented they were and they needed space so I offered them my Juhu residence. I am, by nature, a catalyst and a collector of people and talent. But it's my principle not to hog but to let talent grow."

Sunita Kohli shares more than just an international collection of friends and the status of growing *grande dame* with Sunita Kumar. For Kohli, Sunita Kumar's father was Uncle Judge (his surname was Judge, although he was a businessman). Uncle Judge and her father were bachelors together in pre-Partition Lahore, where their home Laxmi Mansions, was the centre of a trendy young set. Uncle Judge moved to Kolkata, Kohli's father shifted to Lucknow, which he said was the last



Neeraj Paul

## Sunita Kohli

bastion of grace and charm.

It is from her father that Kohli learnt what it means to be civilised. "My father would read at least five books simultaneously. He would take me along with him to auctions and sales, looking for old lamps and furniture." When he died in 1992, he was re-reading A. L. Basham's *The Wonder That Was India*.

That inherited sensibility ("one becomes a sum total of how one has been brought up"), honed by years spent reading English literature at Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi and at Lucknow University, prepared Kohli for an accidental career in interior design. Whether it is the restoration of the state rooms at Rashtrapati Bhavan or the design of Aswan Oberoi in Egypt, the home of Sidharth Shriram or the Laxmi Machine Works corporate office in Coimbatore, she's done it all. Managing three children, thanks to whom she's never done lunch, "because I always wanted to be home after they returned from school". Being pals with a set that is perennially charmed by her "small dinners", which she always throws together for "friends of friends who drop by".

Kohli is a great one for tradition. Whether it is the *jamewars* and *shahtoosh* she's inherited or the sarees she wears — only silks and cotton — Kohli's style is all Indian. "No beiges and blacks for me. And only *jadu* jewellery. No diamonds," she says.

And even as she discusses the day's simple menu with her cook, there is at least one social climber a day who would want to dig in to be part of her social circle, and mingle with American ambassadors and Spanish marquises.

At 18, she was married to a nationally-acclaimed tennis player. At 58, she is still creating news. Meet Sunita Kumar, wife of Naresh Kumar, consultant designer to Hermes since the last one year. It all started with Jean-Luis Dumas-Hermes spotting her in a saree embellished with Hermes' scarves! Ever since, she has been the pivotal

## Sunita Kumar

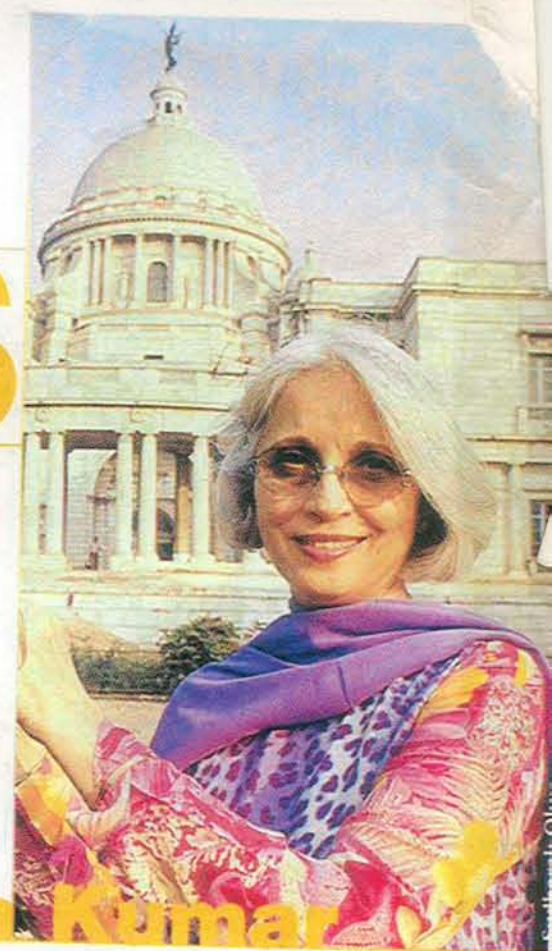


figure behind the setting up of Hermes Designer Sarees, woven with the finest silk.

You saw her recently in M F Husain's magnum opus, *Gaja Gamini*. Husain, also her great buddy, could only think of her to replicate 'the presence of a Rajmata' onscreen. In fact, her Husain connection goes back a long way. She had even teamed up with him for an art exhibition earlier. The *grande dame* is also an accomplished painter, a self-taught one like Husain, and has shows across the world.

Husain has created most of his works from her house whenever he has been in Kolkata. But then her list of celeb friends does not end with Husain, reading like a Who's Who. Prince Michael of Greece, Prince Philippe of Belgium, poet Stephen Spender, celebrated chef Mossiman, Lord Jeffrey Archer, Mick Jagger, Jerry Hall, Cricketer Ted Dexter, while closer home, it's Tiger Pataudi, Sharmila Tagore, Amitabh and Jaya Bachchan... the list goes on.

She has also penned a book on Mother Teresa. Not surprising for someone who was so close to the Mother for over three decades. But what is more interesting, is the perspective behind the project. "The world has seen and read of her halo. I wanted to talk about her more humane side. For example, how many people know of her great sense of humour?" she queries.

Her hectic social activities include an annual pilgrimage to Wimbledon, "Naresh has been going there ever since 1949, I got married to him in 1961 and I've been accompanying him ever since. Wimbledon is essentially the annual get-together where you are sure you will meet friends whom you haven't seen the whole year round."

So for one whole month, Wimbledon becomes home for the Kumars. "It sounds funny, but I feel totally at home at the tournament. The idea of being able to watch world class tennis is so exciting," she adds.

Now, of course Paris takes away a lot of her time, thanks to Hermes. But for this jetsetting Sunita, it's just another day in paradise.