

Life's many twists and turns take us thorough many unknown roads and unexplored alleys, but few perhaps leave as lasting an impact as **Dr Renu Khator's** whirlwind marriage to Dr Suresh Khator, when she was just 18. Unexpected and totally unprepared, it uprooted her from the comfort of her home in Farrukhabad, UP, and replanted her in faraway Indiana, where an alien people, an unfamiliar culture, an unknown language and boredom awaited her. But thanks to her inner drive and her ever supportive husband, she has risen above it all and achieved success far beyond her dreams. In conversation with Joseph Rozario, Dr Renu Khator, President, University of Houston, tells **MARWAR** about her thoughts, views, achievements, awards and her incredible journey from a small town girl to a top academician in the United States of America.

**You started as a small town Marwari girl from UP. Take us back to your early days, your family, your roots.**

I was born in the small town of Farrukhabad, about 250 miles from New Delhi. Being the first born, I was the darling of the house and the centre of my family's attention. That meant someone had to assume the responsibility for making sure I was not spoiled. This task fell solely on mom's shoulders because dad was too busy in being the most prominent lawyer on our side of the state. Mom's philosophy was that excelling in academics was meaningless if one ignored the other facets of life. Hence, in addition to school work, I was sent to learn classical Indian dance, Indian drums, sewing, embroidery painting, and cooking among other things. I had a silly dream to earn the highest degree possible. Today, people ask me, "What is the secret behind your success?" I say, my mother's expectations are my secret. She never expected any less from me because I was a woman. I may have had to cross extra hurdles or jump extra loops, but in

my mother's eyes, I was not being defined by my challenges but by the way I faced them. In those days when the social norm dictated that sons be given preferential treatment, my memories are of mom stuffing extra chocolates in my coat pockets as I went off to school.

**How and when did you meet your husband? How has he been instrumental in transforming your life and helping you be what you are today?**

I was only 18 when my life took a major turn. One night, I went to bed as a carefree teenager only to wake in the morning to the realisation that I was to marry—in 10 days!—a man studying engineering in America. Never once had the thought of going to America crossed my mind. I was shattered because I thought it meant the end of

my educational journey. On seeing me bawling, my mother said, 'That you are going to get married someday is inevitable... today is as good as tomorrow. Your father knows what he is doing.' I complained that no one cared about what I thought. I wanted to complete my master's degree and then get my doctorate. As it turned out, my husband Suresh supported that, and I joined him in America

to enrol at Purdue University, Indiana. Throughout my career, Suresh has been the dreamer and architect of my career. He does whatever is necessary to help me succeed, from fixing a last-minute dinner to graciously dressing up in a tux to accompany me to an event for the fourth time in one week.

**Take us through your initial years in America—your journey from a housewife to enrolling for higher studies to starting your career to excelling as president of UH.**

From the day I arrived in America in 1974, I found comfort in exploring new ideas, new fields and new discoveries. I remember the incredible liberation I felt as I walked unescorted down the street. I was astonished by the possibilities before me. I came to the US hardly knowing any English and developed my proficiency watching sitcoms like 'I Love Lucy'. But along the way, thoughtful and generous people gave me educational opportunities, and I was able to earn a doctorate from Purdue. I started my career facing many of those same challenges as a stereotypical Asian American—bashful about speaking in public, academically inclined, reluctant to talk about myself, enmeshed with my extended family, deferential and in awe of figures of authority, and publicly dismissing any desire to be in administration and assume a leadership role. But initial impetus from my dean helped me take the first big steps of acknowledging my administrative aspirations and seeking a mentor. As an immigrant woman, I had always known that I had to work harder to climb the ladder. But my journey from Kanpur to Houston was possible because of three Ps: purpose, passion and progress. I have also learned that people do not invest in whining; they invest in vision.

**You are the chancellor of the University of Houston System and the president of the University of Houston. Tell us a little about these institutions?**

The University of Houston System (UH System) comprises four distinct but complementary State of Texas universities, each with its own president, budget and mission. The largest, with 41,000 students, is the University in Houston, a nationally competitive doctoral degree-granting, comprehensive research university that is the flagship of the UH System. It has been recognised as a Tier One institution by the Carnegie Foundation for its very high level of research activity. The other three are University of Houston—Clear Lake, University of Houston—Downtown and University of Houston—Victoria.

**You are credited with having taken the University of Houston (UH) from a mediocre institution to a reputed one that has found recognition with the Carnegie Foundation. How have you been able to achieve this?**

Though I would not characterise UH as "mediocre" before I came, there was a good deal of untapped potential and perhaps a lack of focus. With the support of the community, the combined efforts of talented faculty and staff and the dedication of our student body, we were able to make great progress in determining what UH should be: a nationally recognised research university with focus on vital Houston-related disciplines like energy, healthcare and the arts, along with an overall goal of high student

# SHINING THROUGH



Suresh and Renu Khator were married in a traditional Indian ceremony in 1974



Suresh and Renu Khator during their graduate student days at Purdue University



Renu Khator, chancellor of the University of Houston System and president of the University of Houston

success. With that as our defining vision, we started working very hard to make it a reality. I was confident we could achieve 'Tier One' status within 8–10 years, but I was wonderfully surprised to have been able to do so in about half that time.

**How does the Indian education system compare with the American system? In which areas do you feel it is lacking and what would be your recommendations to overcome them?**

Both education systems—Indian and American—have pluses and minuses. Having done my undergraduate studies in India and postgraduate work in America, I feel the Indian education system is stronger in theoretical content while the American is richer in practical experience. In terms of the system itself, the beauty of the American system lies in its relationships with the private sector, whether in terms of internships or direct research support. For my university, which is a state university, we receive \$130 million of annual financial contribution each year from individuals and corporations. I think Indian universities can benefit from a closer relationship with industry and alumni.

**You have been elevated to the post of chair of the American Council of Education. What are its functions and what does your new post entail?**

The American Council of Education (ACE) is the country's leading higher education association, representing the presidents of more than 1,700 member institutions, which include two- and four-year colleges, private and public universities, and non-profit and for-profit entities. Our purpose is to collectively tackle the toughest challenges of higher education, with special focus on improving access and preparing every student to succeed. In my post as Board Chair, I help identify these challenges. Further, I look forward to working with my colleagues on key issues such as college completion, global competitiveness and innovation.

**As an Indian who has spent most of her life in America, you straddle two worlds. How do you strike a balance between the two cultures? How has**

**your Indian/Marwari upbringing helped you in this? How do you reconnect with your roots?**

I am very proud of my Indian heritage and I acknowledge and display it with great pride. However, I am never judgmental in my outlook and never try to establish if one is better than the other. India is my *janmbhumi* and America is my *karmbhumi*; I owe a great deal to both cultures. I strongly believe that your heritage is always an asset. I am blessed to be a Marwari, and I know that my value system—consensus building, risk-taking, respect and humility—has come from it. I reconnect with my roots on a daily basis. While other people like loud pop music in the gym, I listen to bhajans while on the treadmill, and chants when performing yoga. I follow our festivals with enthusiasm whether it is Teej or Karwa Chauth. My daughters, who now live in different parts of the United States, join in for Diwali Poojan by Skype. And finally, I wear saris as proudly and as often for galas in America as I do gowns.

**America has given you so much and made so many things possible for you. What do you appreciate about America?**

If a teenage immigrant girl, just married and with no knowledge of English can come to this country and enjoy the opportunities and success that I have, it speaks volumes about America, doesn't it. There is a deep and rewarding culture here that allows you to be judged on your merit. If you want something, you can work hard and have a good chance of getting it.

**You have been honoured with so many awards. Name a few of the more prominent ones.**

I have been very fortunate and humbled to have been recognised with honorary degrees from my alma mater Purdue University and from Swansea University in

*UH President  
Renu Khator  
meeting with  
former Indian PM  
Manmohan Singh;  
Khator served as  
a member of his  
Global Advisory  
Council*





Renu and Suresh  
Khator with  
US President  
Barack Obama

**“In my life, windows of opportunity have opened and I was ready to take advantage of such opportunities. I put my heart and soul into whatever I am doing without worrying about what comes next”**

the United Kingdom; with the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award (presented by the President of India); with the Outstanding American by Choice Award, given by the Citizenship and Immigration Services (to recognise the outstanding achievements of naturalized US citizens); with the President’s Award from NASPA (the National Association of Student Affairs Administrators); and with the Hind Rattan (Jewel of India) Award, given to Indians living abroad for making outstanding contributions in their fields.

**So many feathers to your cap: the first Indian to be appointed president of an American university; the first woman university chancellor in Texas; member of the (Indian) Prime Minister’s Global Advisory Council on Overseas Indians... What next?**

In my life, windows of opportunities have opened and I was ready to take advantage of such opportunities. I put my heart and soul into whatever I am doing without worrying about what comes next. But I feel very happy where I am right now at UH, and I think of Houston as my home.

Houston has every ingredient to be a great city. I immediately knew it was the destination for me.

**Tell us a little about your daughters.**

My daughters Pooja and Parul are both ophthalmologists. Both are married, and I’m delighted to say, they have made Suresh and me grandparents. My daughters have been a big part of my life, both personally and professionally. It has always felt like we were all part of a team with each of us pushing others to achieve their maximum potential. Today, they are my soul mates and brainstorming buddies when it comes to difficult situations. They have certainly helped me grow socially and culturally. They truly have been my eyes when it comes to seeing the world of today’s youth.

**How do you take time out from your hectic schedule?**

I love to go on long walks—because I can then be by myself. I can have my dog and just be out there. And, of course, I like to write. From time to time, I do like to get away from it all—feel sand under my toes, have a book in my hand, a vast ocean in front of me and the anticipation of having dinner with my family.

There is so much to do in Houston that claiming boredom isn’t allowed. I’m still discovering new communities and attractions, intriguing restaurants and shopping options. But, every time I think I’ve figured it all out, Houston surprises me. \*