

'An absolute superstar'

MATTHEW SCHNEEBERGER meets Dr RENU KHATOR, winner of the India Abroad Publisher's Special Award for Excellence, 2007



Dr Renu Khator honors countless requests to relate the remarkable tale of her move from Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh, to West Lafayette, Indiana. But as she tells it once more and lives the memories afresh, her face flushes red, her eyes mist over and her lower lip begins to quiver, rare outward signs of emotion from the 52-year-old wife and mother of two.

She recalls that during the ninth month of her first year at Allahabad University, where she was working towards her Master's degree in political science, her family one day unexpectedly sent the driver to fetch her. When she reached home, alongside her father Satish Chandra Maheshwari stood Suresh Khator, a 26-year-old engineering student who her father indicated was to be her husband. They were engaged that very day, and married just days later. She was only 18 years old, but could envision her life post-marriage and saw her chances at a PhD slipping away.

"I really protested. I went on a hunger strike and didn't eat food because I was so unhappy. I had never seen a woman continue her studies after marriage. In those times, you studied to marry," she says. "At one point, Suresh and I went down to a nearby river to talk and he asked me why I was so upset. I told him that my problem was not with him, but with marriage itself. I said that I wanted to do my PhD, and that by marrying him, my dream would be crushed. 'If you want to study, that's a small thing, because we are going to the land of opportunity,' he said. 'We're going to America. There, you can study as much as you want!'"

And so, only a few short weeks later, the young couple set off for Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, where Suresh was studying to become an industrial engineer. Because she had never left India and was unfamiliar with the American lifestyle, she credits her husband for her near seamless transition, and claims that, without him, she would have been lost.

"When we reached America, Suresh acted as my mentor and guide. I was fortunate to be married to him; he was supportive and progressive. Coming from a small town in UP, I had very poor English. I had never even watched an English movie before! So it was tough," she says.

She remembers the humiliation and confusion she felt when she applied for admissions at Purdue University's Graduate Studies office; her husband had to translate for her. "The man saw my age, heard my English, and told me to 'Get up, walk outside and head over to the undergraduates studies office.' But I insisted that I had earned my Bachelor's in India; and finally, he gave me probationary admission, told me to take two classes and asked me to come back at semester's end," she recalls.

"That semester, I worked harder than I ever had in my whole life. I had to learn how to understand English. I had to learn how to write in English." She says that she would write a research paper; and her husband would edit it and groan, telling her, "This English is so bad!" She would cry with disappointment but write it again and again, until it passed the test. "I ended up writing eight copies for each assignment," she says. "Also, I never opened my mouth in class, because by the time I had formulated a sentence, the conversation had already moved on. But I watched eight hours of television a day, including every episode of *I Love Lucy* and *Green Acres*, just to pick up the accent. I used every minute of every day as an opportunity to learn. And at the end of the semester, I got an A in both classes. After that, Purdue said, 'It looks like you can do it,' and gave me admission. That changed my life."

From that bottom-most rung, as a student unfamiliar with the language and on probationary admission, Renu Khator's unlikely story has seen her climb the ladder to the pinnacle of American academia, through a combination of intellect, empathy and sheer grit. Today, she serves as President of the University of Houston's main campus and Chancellor of the four-campus University of Houston system, which counts over 56,000 students in its fold, and is the nation's ninth largest university system. Along the way, she has accumulated a collection of awards, distinctions, and honors; it's an impressive list



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that clearly traces the trajectory of an extraordinary career:

Her groundbreaking November 2007 appointment made her the first person of Indian origin to be named President and Chancellor at a major US university. Though Indians earn a disproportionate number of advanced degrees, they rarely crack the upper echelon into university administration. But it is not as if the University of Houston took a flyer on her because of her minority status. As Welcome W Wilson, the chairman of UH's board of

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FROM THE EDITORS

This is the story of a small town teenage girl from semi-urban India, who returned from college one evening to find she was to be married.

Within weeks, and despite her strenuous protests, she found herself in the United States of America — a stranger in a strange land, married to a stranger and with her dreams collapsing in shards around her.

Her one abiding dream was to study, to earn a doctorate, to parlay that into some kind of profession — doable in small town India, but when she went to Purdue University in West Virginia seeking a seat, her lack of familiarity with the English language befuddled examiners; she was given a

provisional seat, on probation as it were.

Cue sleepless nights and endless agony, as she spent classroom hours in an impenetrable well of silence, neither able to understand what was being said, nor contribute to the discussions swirling around her bewildered head.

Back home, she wrote, then re-wrote, her assignments a dozen times apiece while husband-turned-mentor Suresh groaned aloud at her ineptitude.

Snatching hours from sleep, she sat in front of the television screen, watching endless hours of television serials like *I Love Lucy* and *Green Acres* — her chosen tools for a fast-tracked understanding of the language.

And at the end of that first nightmarish semes-

ter, her will triumphed, when she received a straight A in her two papers. 'You can do it,' Purdue University decided, impressed by the perseverance and hard work, and gave her full admission.

Today, that once shy student, embarrassed into silence by her own ineptitude, is one of the most distinguished, most-awarded educators in American academia. As President of the University of Houston's main campus, and Chancellor of the four-campus University of Houston system, she is ultimately responsible for the over 56,000 students that make up the country's 9th largest university system.

"America is the land of opportunity".

A dime for every time we hear that bland asser-

tion would make us all rich; often, that statement is underpinned by the naive assumption that you merely have to set foot on American soil for the dollars to pour into your lap.

As the truly successful have discovered, success is not on tap, to drink deep from at will — it has to be mined, from deep within the bowels of the land; the process involves hardship and heartache in equal measure.

And if you seek a formula for that alchemic process, look no further than Renu Khator. Through a lifetime of path-breaking achievement, she has done the community, and her adopted country, proud — today, by naming her winner of the 2007 India Abroad Publisher's Special Award for Excellence, we do her honor.



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regents, says, "We chose Renu for her excellence and for her outstanding merit. Her diversity was an added bonus... (Dr Khator is) an educational superstar; she's exactly what the University of Houston needs as we reach tier one status. The former chairman of the board of regents at the University of South Florida told me, 'Welcome, we're sorry to lose her; but you could not have ever selected anybody better than Dr Renu Khator,' Leroy Hermes, who headed the UH selection committee, but who has since retired from UH, pushed hard for Dr Khator from the start.

Michael Rierson, a jolly man who peppers his speech with sports euphemisms, echoes the above sentiments, saying he has 'had the immense pleasure' of working with Dr Khator twice. He currently serves as vice president for advancement at the University of Houston; but he also once worked with her at the University of South Florida, where he held a similar position. "From the moment she stepped into an administrative role, she was a natural," he says, examining a photograph of her interacting with a local business leader.

"When she was provost at USF," he adds, "we treated her as a second President, even back then. She was assigned the staff and responsibilities of a second President; she was that good. In all my years, I've never seen someone so inherently talented, so naturally inclined to this type of work," he says. "William J Funk, a recruitment consultant for the major universities, told me that every single university in the country had Renu Khator on their short-list of candidates. She's an absolute superstar."

He goes on to recall a 2005 incident that cemented in his mind her status as academic and intellectual heavyweight. "The state of Florida holds these forums, where different academic leaders discuss and debate the issues most pertinent to the University system," he says. "There was this official, a very bright guy, from another state university, a more well-known university, who thought he could run roughshod on Renu because she was a USF representative. He was arguing that universities shouldn't be required to offer tenure to distinguished professors, while Renu argued the opposite. You should have seen it! It was like Ali versus Frazier, a real life war. But, in the end, no one in the room doubted that Renu had whipped him. She was funny, charming, engaging, direct, intelligent, compassionate; you name it. I've never met a more skilled debater. When I found out she had been unanimously chosen by the search committee here at UH, my wife and I celebrated for two days!"

Rierson's anecdote illustrates Dr Khator's enormous sense of personal challenge, and of a refusal to be intimidated. Though she had her choice of the nation's top ranked universities, she opted for the University of Houston which, though on the cusp of becoming a top-tier research institution, is by no means an elite university. Her friends and colleagues describe her as a goal-minded visionary; and it's this vision that led her to select UH. "The potential to become an elite research center is here. The resources are here. Someone just needs to take up the mantle, involve the community, and build on what is already an exciting foundation," she says.

She announced her arrival on campus with the launch of her '100 day plan', a formal effort meant to solicit opinion, input, thought and criticism from student body, the alumni family and the community at large. The web site url, <http://www.uh.edu/100days>, is splashed across mailers, billboards and radio waves in the Greater Houston area, and seems to have activated the local population. She recently participated in a teleconference with over 14,000 households in the surrounding area. During the one-and-a-half hour event, she fielded calls about her vision for the university, including tough questions about whether she plans to raise admissions standards, which might leave out some students who would easily have qualified in previous years. She minced no words in saying that UH must improve its selectivity if it intends to ever reach the top tier. Texas state Senator Rodney Ellis orchestrated and moderated the discussion.

"I want the city to give me my charge. I didn't want to



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walk in with preconceived notions and plans. That was the idea behind it, to involve every one. And it's working. We've received over 5,000 distinct replies and ideas, and the number increases daily," she says, obviously excited to discuss the details of her program. "I'm delighted to see such an outpouring of ownership, because it takes a whole community to build a university." After the 100 days end in April, Dr Khator and her staff will use a two-day retreat to process the submissions. Then, she will share the results with the board of regents, and incorporate the suggestions into a five or 10 year plan.

"My first major goal is for University of Houston to be recognized as a top-tier research university," she says. "The quality of living in the Houston area is directly linked to the quality of education provided by the University of Houston. We graduate over 11,000 kids a year; and most of them enter the local job market. I want the community to take ownership in the university, and I want students to take ownership in their degrees. A degree is just a piece of paper, like a stock or bond. As the school's reputation increases, so does the degree's value, and vice versa. These students need to make their degrees as valuable as possible," she says.

Though the 100 days are not yet over and she hasn't yet hosted the two-day retreat, Dr Khator has already identified a few key improvements UH must make in order to boost its status. "The university must first double the number of postgraduate engineering students," she says. "Second, we must improve the medical school because medical research garners huge stipends and grants from the government. And third, we should merge with a research center here in Houston to ensure that we always have top level research affiliated with our university." She has a clear strategy, and a knack for analyzing an array of issues. Rierson says, "I know a few well-placed CEOs who cannot do the things she does."

On being a manager, she says, "When people ask me the secret to my success, I explain to them the two important lessons I learned in India. One, I grew up in an extended family, where you learn to listen to many different people. And yet, you have to move your household in one direction. I saw my mom do that. I saw my dad do that. And I think I use that consensus building and ownership approach in my management style. The other thing I've seen growing up India, is that you do not worry about the resources around you. You have to dream beyond your resources, or beyond what seems possible. That's always

given me a great sense of optimism," she says.

But she is not a faceless manager, void of personality; she's a natural leader and motivator. Beginning with her involvement in student government at Purdue during her graduate school days, and continuing through to today, people have always been drawn to her aura. Two of her former colleagues at University of South Florida actually left their stable careers behind in Tampa, along with loved ones and memories, just to further associate with her.

Dr Dan Gardiner, who was at USF for 17 years, the last seven as director of planning and analysis of academic affairs, left behind his post to be her chief of staff at UH. "It was so wonderful to work with her in Tampa; she represents the epitome of professionalism. Moving cities, leaving friends, changing jobs, those aren't my major concerns right now. I'm excited about the future, because I know that Dr Khator will be a dynamic president; I'm happy to be part of her administration. She's a remarkable woman who has a real presence. Every time we go to a function, staff, students and guests want to meet her and talk to her. She usually doesn't even get to eat a proper meal because she's too busy working to represent the university."

Dr Gardiner, with his monotone voice and lack of emotion, is hardly an excitable man. But even he sits up in his seat and waves his hand while listing Dr Khator's most pronounced traits. "She's a visionary, but also thoughtful and deliberate. She's willing to take the small steps necessary to achieve a larger goal. She's committed to her mission, the improvement of the University of Houston. She's creative and funny; but she can also be hard-nosed and direct when it's required. She's the ideal academician."

Theresa Singletary, executive assistant to the president, also worked for Dr Khator at USF. Singletary, who was born and raised in Tampa, explained her decision to join Dr Khator's staff from a spiritual perspective. "I'm a religious person," she says. "I had to work through my options with prayer and conversations with my preacher. My soul searching and my preacher confirmed my instincts, that to work with Chancellor Khator was a great opportunity."

Singletary says since she began working for Dr Khator in 2005, she has been amazed by her high energy and inspired leadership. "She has an ability to make people work harder, better, and longer, just through her example. People want to give their all for her; I've never seen that in a person before. She naturally makes people excited to be part of her team." Skyler, Singletary's young daughter who enjoys a friendly relationship with Dr Khator, adds to her mother's thoughts. "Dr Khator proves that not only boys are smart enough to be President. Plus, she's really nice!"

This quality of being 'nice' helps to distinguish her from most leaders. While she can be shrewd and demanding when needed, she also empathizes with others, and can see multiple points of view on a given subject. She charms in conversation, and is an excellent active listener. These abilities, coupled with her steady doggedness, serve her well when she interacts with potential donors. Rierson says, "She's the best fundraiser I've ever been around. And not any donations, mind you, but the right donations. She builds trust with clients, which is not an easy thing to do. She's terrific with interpersonal communication."

His praise, while it sounds over the top, makes perfect sense when taking into account her record at the University of South Florida. As provost and vice president, Dr Khator oversaw that university's alumni giving increase a staggering 43% in five years. She also secured the school's largest-ever gift, a deal which ended up totaling \$34 million.

"Donors," she says, "will listen to a vision, but not to whining. If you can show someone a vision that provokes their passion, a vision that provides hope or a vision that is in sync with their intended legacy, people are very generous. In that sense, I think of the work as community serv-



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