

'A special woman, destined to do such great things'

A familial feel of the academic superstar



Newly-weds Pooja and Derin with the Khator family: from left, Suresh, Parul and Renu

The President's office at the University of Houston tells quite a story, starting with the silver nameplate sitting atop the large, mahogany desk in the room's rear. With elegant, feminine script that reads *Dr Renu Khator*, it's clearly the namesake of an Indian woman.

On the executive-style bookshelf, behind the desk, stand three framed diplomas that reflect an international journey — 1973 BA Kanpur University (Liberal Arts), 1975 MA Purdue University (Political Science), and 1985 PhD Purdue University (Political Science/Public Administration). There's also a Distinguished Alumni award from Purdue University and dozens of books on dramatically different topics (anthropology, religion, global governance, resource scarcity, bureaucracy, and Indian history, to name a few).

Alongside all this, and perhaps most prominently positioned, is the Hind Rattan (Jewel of India), an award given by the government of India to non-resident Indians for making outstanding contributions in their fields. In January 2007, she and husband Dr Suresh Khator became the first couple to both receive the award, when she was still vice president and provost at the University of South Florida and he a distinguished professor of industrial engineering and engineering management, also at USF.

Roughly a year later, Renu Khator has moved on to a new challenge at the University of Houston, becoming in January 2008 the first-ever Indian to serve as President and Chancellor at a major US university. With nearly 57,000 students and 8,000 staff beneath her, she's the administrative head of the nation's ninth largest university system. Her American colleagues and associates find that she is well-versed in the minutiae of Americana, and always direct, frank and accessible. But at the same time, there's no adopted American accent; and she's natural with her Indian identity and faith in Hinduism.

"Soon, there will be a large Ganesha idol on that shelf,"

Dr Khator says, pointing to an already-cleared space surrounded by tiny plants, ornaments, and flowers. "It's taken some time to get the office set up, because we've been meeting people, attending functions and working non-stop since the day we arrived. I want to make a few changes, perhaps make it more feminine, cheerful, and inviting."

Family portraits and heirlooms, primarily of her two daughters and husband, dominate her desk and sit just an arm's length from her while she works. Both daughters have inherited their parents' thirst for achievement. Both studied ophthalmology, a dream their mother always pushed them to pursue.

Pooja, 29, studied at the University of Florida before completing her residency in 2002 at the University of Maryland. She lives with her husband Derin, her high-school sweetheart, in Tampa, Florida, where she practises as an ophthalmologist.

Pictures on Dr Khator's desk capture the beautiful Pooja's festive multiple-day wedding. Though they had an arranged marriage themselves, neither Renu nor Suresh Khator ever mandated who their daughters would marry. And though Derin is a Caucasian-American, the Khators had no reservations regarding the union. "Derin's a great guy," says Dr Suresh Khator. "He's almost been like one of ours growing up, because we've known him so long. He's very respectful and hard-working."

Parul, 26, is completing her residency in ophthalmology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Pictures show her to be equally stunning, with intelligent eyes and luminous black hair.

"Both girls are extraordinarily hardworking and intelligent. But it's not only that; they're well-balanced. They have highly developed social and personal skills. And most importantly, they have big hearts," their mother says. She then relates how the two girls showed the gumption and wherewithal to travel to India as part of a program to per-

form operations on the under-privileged. "That really impressed me," says Dr Khator. "Those were not easy conditions. They did all the surgeries for free. And they kept their attitudes positive throughout the experience. It showed a lot of character."

She won't take the credit for rearing the girls properly, not without her husband. "Suresh is so strong a person. He leads this family," she explains. "I had to discontinue my education when we decided to have children. And from the time of Pooja's birth through Parul's infant state, I was removed from my professional life. Suresh always provided for us and ensured our needs were met. Without a stable environment our daughters wouldn't have been able to flourish."

She further maintains that when it came time to reimmerse herself in academics, Suresh was there to hold her hand and lower her in slowly. "That was a difficult time, raising children and earning a PhD. Without Suresh's support, it surely would not have been possible. We did everything as a team, as partners. And when he went to University of South Florida in 1985, I followed him and got my start teaching there; but they really only hired me because they needed to ensure they got Suresh. He's done so much to help me get to where I am today."

He husband, for his part, gives his wife a touch more credit than she's willing to give herself. "If you want to see the fruits of hard work and determination, just look at Renu. She has this unmatched ability to take goals, break them into tasks, and then go out and achieve them. Once she started climbing the ranks at (USF), you could just see her career taking its own course. She's a special woman, who was destined to do such great things."

At their 11,000 foot home, named the Wortham House and reserved for the Chancellor of the University of Houston system, this sense of transition remains. "It's so big and so beautiful," Renu jokes, showing off the impressive artwork adorning the first floor's walls. "Sometimes it feels like a hotel or a museum." Upstairs, the couple, amidst half-emptied moving boxes, have set up a place they call home. She makes omelets on the weekend, they watch television in the University of Houston themed drawing room, and the two share an all-white office that offers a gorgeous vista of the expansive property.

Still, they sometimes feel pangs for their home in Tampa. When news of the couple's imminent departure became public in late 2007, the outpouring of emotion from the community surprised them. "They presented us this giant farewell card," says Dr Suresh Khator, holding up a 3 foot by 2 foot card, full of signatures and best wishes.

Early each Sunday in Houston, they jog or do yoga with the Agarwals, fellow Indians whose patriarch Dr Durga Agarwal is a University of Houston alumna. "She's been so active and involved in just one month," says Dr Agarwal. "It's clear that she's already made a big impact." After jogging, the Khators freshen up before heading to a local Udipi restaurant, where they feast on a buffet.

Inside, it's clear that both Indian and non-Indian patrons know her name and status, evidenced by the prolonged stares and subtle whispers. She handles the attention masterfully though, and meets any and all who wish to speak with her. In the evening, she goes to another Houston area temple, her fourth in as many weeks; she hopes to visit a new one each week, so that she can best understand the city's highly active Indian-American community.

— Matthew Schneeberger

