

CZARINA OF INDIAN FASHION

Neeta Lulla is one of the most celebrated and respected names in the industry today. With a career spanning over 30 years, she has created nothing short of a legacy in the field of design and films.

BY CHITMAN KANWAR AHUJA

Driven by her curiosity to explore and an unwavering dedication to excel, Neeta Lulla is a true artist and visionary who has played a big role in revolutionising the Indian fashion and film industry. Neeta symbolises elegance, romance and opulence; with her designs being a unique blend of feminine fragility and power. Using India's rich cultural heritage of craftsmanship, embroidery techniques and textiles, she creates her own representation of Indian bridal and diffusion wear that draws style inspirations from Edwardian silhouettes and patterns, while remaining deeply rooted in tradition.

Known for giving a contemporary touch to aboriginal textiles such as *Srikalahasti*, *Kanjevaram*, *Benarasi*, *Paithani* and *Kalamkari*, the House of Neeta Lulla offers the perfect fusion of cultural and ethnic influences, blended together with contemporary designs that celebrate the evolution of tradition through its collections. Each unique piece is intricately woven to perfection, with impeccable artistry and quality. Edited excerpts...

How did the journey of fashion designing begin for you?

I got married at 16, predominantly thinking of it as an escape from high school and formal education. What I did not realise was that with two MD DPM psychiatrists, that too gold medalists, as well as BSC and MA English graduates in my husband's family legacy, my genius

idea was far from being a cake walk. My in-laws decided I should study further and pursue a career in cooking or tailoring.

As expected, academics were not my strength, but styling and coordination interested me. Thankfully, I found a brilliant *guru* in Hemant Trivedi, who saw my talent and groomed me in the art of makeup, fashion choreography, and styling shows. I was intrigued by the history behind world costumes, but could only grasp concepts through listening. Later on, I started designing for films, and found work in both national and international projects, clocking over 300 films with amazing experiences along the way. It has truly been one hell of a journey.

Once you stepped into the realm of design, how difficult was it for you to define your design sense and forte?

Life is the best teacher and if you pay close attention, you can learn every single day. For me, Frida Kahlo was my role model. She was confident in her own skin, challenged her creativity from time to time with a positive attitude, and pursued her passion against all odds. The 'secret to success' is the fact that you are grounded in your own self and look for others who are as well.

Defining my forte was 20 per cent work and 80 per cent passion. Ever since I started designing, there has never been a dull moment, as I am always surrounded by creative minds who inspire me to be the best



1,3,4,5 & 6. Models in designs from the House of Neeta Lulla
2. Designer Neeta Lulla

version of myself. Strangely, it was not an ambition, but the pursuit of passion, and the wish to be able to do an assignment in a way that becomes a landmark in quality.

How did the transition from one *kaarigar* and a single sewing machine, to that of the House of Neeta Lulla come about?

House of Neeta Lulla is my journey; the journey of an innovator who has built an empire over 30 years, founded on the principles of drive, excellence, hustle, vision and discipline. Mine is a true story of what happens when fate meets chance. My career started with buying one professional machine that I bought for ₹500 by selling sandwiches to school kids, and just one *kaarigar*.

I have always focused on the *mantra* 'Be your own kind of bride', which means every couture or bespoke bridal outfit is never a replica

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of another, and the bride's persona and look is more important than the outfit. Despite being the only fashion designer to have won four national awards, I have not restricted my brand to only fashion designing. I have done ad films, television serials, costume designing and even weddings. I was one of the first brands to foray into online retail. I introduced ready-to-wear *saris* way back in 2001, and the concept of fibre optics in 2017.

How did you land your first film? What were the initial days in the industry like? Were there moments when you had to deal with proud actors or actresses? How did you cope?

I landed my first film by chance, as somebody in the family approached me to help out with the costumes. In *Tamacha*, I designed clothes for Kimi Katkar and Bhanupriya, which had a very different flavour to the designs. Later, actors who saw my work contacted me to design for their films. Ever since then there has been no looking back.

I have noticed that people often confuse actors to be very insecure. In my opinion they aren't insecure, but rather persistent and curious as to know more about their look in a film, as that is how they would be portrayed in the eyes of the viewers. When actors question me about certain aspects of the character or portrayal of the characterisation, I don't attribute that to be pride, but rather their quest to understand and interact with the clothes better.



7,8,9, & 10. Models in designs from the House of Neeta Lulla

“BEING THE ONLY FASHION DESIGNER IN INDIA TO HAVE WON FOUR NATIONAL AWARDS; I HAVE NOT LET MY BRAND BE RESTRICTED TO JUST ONE FORM OF DESIGN.”

After designing for super hit Bollywood films like *Jodha Akhbar*, *Devdas*, *Taal* and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, to Hollywood films like *One Night With The King*, *Mistress Of Spices*, *Bride & Prejudice* and *Provoked*, you have been a formidable player on the cinema fashion scene. How do you view your journey? What have been the major lessons and challenges over the years?

I have always viewed my journey as a huge learning experience, as every film has been challenging, yet has taught me something that has helped me move forward. I remember the first time when I worked with Sridevi, I learnt the need to pick the right colours to complement background and moods.

Jodha Akbar taught me the art of turban making and *pagri* styling. *Manikarnika* taught me the art of armour making hands on, on set; so it's been a journey where I cannot take my work for granted, as it has given me many such references that can be used in my couture line as well. Today, I can confidently say that I have evolved into a costume technician.

Bollywood is known for its nepotism and not being very welcoming of outsiders, as well as the strong gender

bias that pervades the industry. Having said that, you have created a stronghold for yourself and your brand. Do you think that nepotism negates merit? What are your views on the concept, and ways to fight it? Yes, I would agree that at times nepotism negates merit. I remember back in the day when relatives and friends of superstars designed the costumes, and many of them exist even today. But I strongly believe that talent speaks volumes and that is all that you need by your side.

What are your views on the concept of revival in fashion? Are there any particular fabrics or techniques of times gone by that your label still uses?

I don't think fashion in India needs revival. There are traditional forms of textiles and motifs which are being used by several designers till date. Although I think it would be great to inculcate these values, and educate the consumers on the same.

What are your future goals and are there any new projects you are currently working on?

This year has been great in terms of our increased distribution presence, creation of an online platform, as well as some really satisfying work done in movies like *Manikarnika*, *Panipat* and now in *Thalaivi*.

Beyond design, my fashion resolution for 2020 is to drive our brand in a direction that involves more sustainable practices as a key value; by incorporating textiles that are bio-degradable and recycled. I will be working with my suppliers to use dyes that are more organic in nature and non-polluting, as well as switching to more environmentally friendly forms of packaging. While my embroideries are sourced from across the country, another area which is highly important for me is to work with women in various clusters and train them with skills that could provide them a much needed source of livelihood to add to their family income; as well as take care of their children's education and health care requirements.