

LUCKY CHARM

Jindal's home is filled with masterpieces of art

SOCIETY

home ministry

She is the wife of an MP, an art patron and a celebrated Kuchipudi dancer. MANJU SARA RAJAN meets the affable **Shallu Jindal**

Jindal House looks foreboding. It's not just that the gate is a heavy-set edifice that cuts off any view of the house's inhabitants, but also the fact that it sits on Prithviraj Road. Prithviraj Road is to Delhi what Rodeo Drive is to Los Angeles—an avenue with an important collection of India's political and industrial brands: Advani, Goenka, Dalmia and Punj. So, when I meet Shallu Jindal, it's not just a relief but also a total surprise.

Lady of the house

This month, Shallu will celebrate the 17th anniversary of her marriage to polo player shooter steel titan MP Naveen Jindal, head of the conglomerate Jindal

Steel & Power Ltd. The daughter of a businessman father, Shallu married Naveen when she was 23 years old. The wedding took place soon after she moved back from London, where she studied fashion and interior design. Since her marriage, Shallu has been in a state of constant transformation, going from young wife to mother, then art patron to her husband's most reliable ally, and now a lauded Kuchipudi dancer.

Married into a family that has always been active in politics—her late father-in-law was an MLA from Hisar, Haryana; her mother-in-law Savitri Jindal represents the constituency now—Shallu is the essential supportive wife. Shallu says she and Naveen haven't spent a Sunday alone in years; the most amount of time

they get together is when they are traveling in a car or on a flight.

In 2004, when her husband declared his intention to join politics, she stood by him despite family reservations about the idea. "He said these were the best years of his life and he wanted to use them for his country, and I supported that," she says. In fact, Shallu applies a great deal of zeal to every project her husband takes on. A symbol of their symbiotic relationship sits in the front yard of the Jindal home: an Indian flag at full mast. It's an unusual sight for an Indian home, but for this family, the flag is a victorious symbol. Naveen spent nine years in court fighting for the right of private citizens to fly the national flag: it was illegal till he won the case amending that law in 2003. Shallu >

worked on the project with him, and after his win she published a coffee-table book, and organised events to spread awareness through Flag Foundation of India, a Jindal organisation.

In person, Shallu doesn't look like a politico wife. A petite woman with an open smile, lilting voice, and the demeanour of a self-conscious person, she's intentionally humble, suffixing many statements with "God has been kind". But then, Shallu is extremely religious—a quality reflected in small but telling ways in her life. For instance, her children have decidedly traditional monikers. "Names should mean something because the child becomes like that," she says. So, there's 15-year-old Venkatesh, one of Lord Balaji's names, and 12-year-old Yashasvini, which means "bringer of fame and fortune". Shallu was actually born Shalini (one of Durga's names, she points out), but it's a shortened version that stuck. "I try to live like a Shalini, though," she says, laughing.

Dance, dance

Shallu's spiritual leanings also paved the way for her to meet Kuchipudi master Raja Reddy at the age of 31 and become his student. "I met my guru at Tirupati. Both our families were together during the puja, and we exchanged phone numbers," she says. Shallu, who'd learned some Kathak as a child, was deeply interested in learning Kuchipudi, and Reddy was convinced to take on a new student.

Now she's become one of Reddy's most prominent dancers—a regular performer at classical dance festivals around the country. "Her dedication is unimaginable," says Reddy. "She makes me very happy with the hard work she puts in. For a Punjabi girl from a conservative family, she is a very expressive dancer." Shallu's daughter is also Reddy's student; the mother-daughter duo has done several shows together. Shallu practices dance five times a week, does yoga daily and eats carefully. Her regimen keeps her looking much younger than she is.

That's also why it's hard to imagine Shallu standing on a podium giving a speech during an election campaign through the hinterlands of Haryana. "I remember the first time I had to do it," she says of her public speaking adventures. "To speak in Hindi in front of thousands of people who are just looking at you, wanting to know what you are go-

ing to tell them, was difficult. I was very nervous." It's not difficult to believe her when she says the first time she accompanied her husband, many people didn't believe she was Mrs Jindal.

In the family way

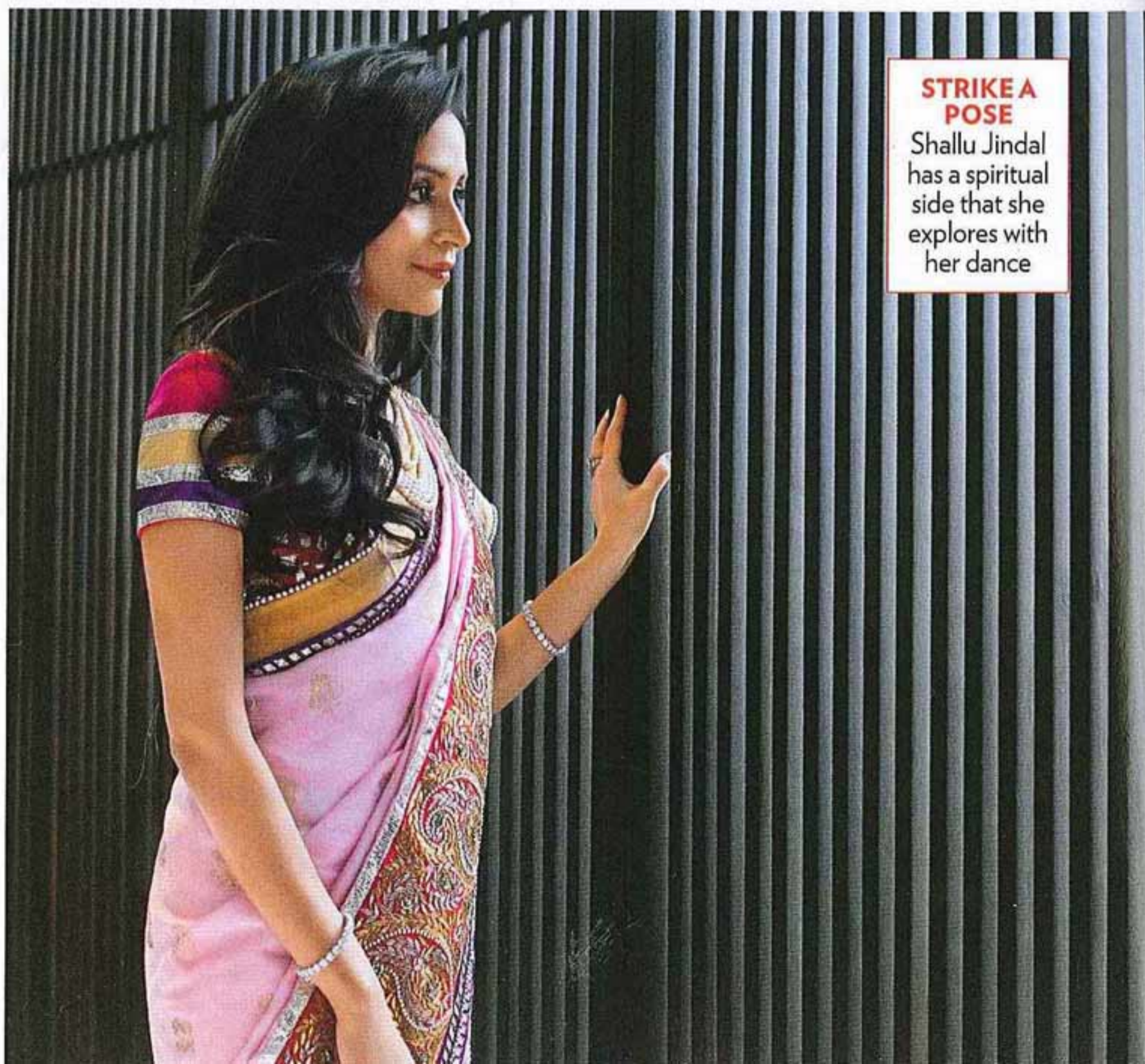
Jindal House sits on a large plot of land, divided into four self-contained quarters: one for Shallu and Naveen, two for the families of two brothers (they are a total of six brothers and four sisters) and one for his mother. Designed by Singaporean architect Chiu Man Wong, the residence affords both privacy and communality, and a shared pool and gymnasium.

We met for the interview inside the senior Mrs Jindal's quarter because Shallu's section was under renovation. All through the walls of the living room were some of the biggest signatures in Indian art, including SH Raza and MF Husain. But one piece is distinctly Shallu: the sculpture of a flower-bedecked woman by artist Ravinder Reddy. It's the face of a Kuchipudi dancer. "I never commission pieces except this one," she says. "I emailed Mr Reddy to ask if he could do a sculpture for me; he did this knowing I am a Kuchipudi dancer."

Art is another Jindal family interest that Shallu embraced and made her own. She scoured auction catalogues, attended art courses and taught herself as much as she could. "When I started, I was so excited that I would get up in the middle of the night, go to the bathroom, switch on the light and sit there going through catalogues and mark everything I liked so that I could analyse what I liked about the artist," she says. Over the years, she has built a reputation as a collector. One of the earliest events she organised for the Flag Foundation was an art project for which names like Subodh Gupta and Jitish Kallat made flag-inspired art. Still, Shallu is a conscientious buyer. She sometimes spends weeks ruminating over whether a piece is worth it. "I have to have sleepless nights over it, literally see it in my dreams to be convinced I should put money into it."

Shallu attributes that sensible approach to her other life as a dancer. It has made her realise that money can only get you so far, she says. "When I'm on stage in front of strangers, no amount of money will help the audience relate to me. Knowing that makes me humble." Her address, in that case, is also unimportant. ■

"On stage, in front of strangers, no amount of money will help the audience relate to me"



STRIKE A POSE

Shallu Jindal has a spiritual side that she explores with her dance