



When **Shashi** and **Sumeet Mittal** ventured into the world of television in the late '90s, they were intent on steering away from *saas-bahu* melodramas that the audience was beginning to tire of and creating meaningful and relatable content. Today, their eponymous five-year-old production house, ShashiSumeet Productions, has given us TRP-toppers like *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, *Punar Vivaah* and *Tumhari Paakhi*, and is on every television actor's wish list.

Text ✨ **Crystal D'sa & Ranjabati Das**

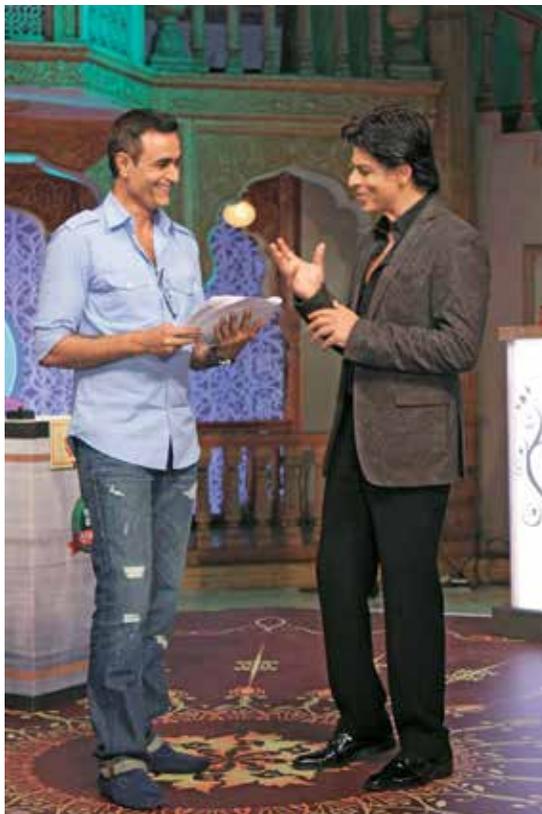
Photographs ✨ **Mausam Pattnaik**

TWO'S COMPANY INDEED!

LIKE MILLIONS OF OTHERS, SUMEET MITTAL TOO YEARNED TO COME TO MUMBAI TO GIVE WINGS TO HIS dream of becoming an actor. However, being a married man and a father, he had the welfare of his wife, Shashi, and four-year-old daughter to think about. It would mean uprooting their lives from Ahmedabad and leaving behind the stability of the family textile business. As a bachelor, venturing into the unknown might seem exciting, but with a family to fend for, it was a daunting prospect. It would, by no means, be an easy move, but the decision was clear to his wife: she would leave no stone unturned to help her husband achieve his dream. So they sold their house in their hometown and moved to Mumbai in 1998 to begin a new journey.

Untapped potential

Once in Mumbai, Sumeet enrolled himself in an acting class and was caught in the endless loop of rehearsals and auditions, while the ever-resourceful Shashi diligently made rounds of production houses. Her efforts paid off when she managed a meeting with Rajshri Productions' Rajkumar Barjatya, who had produced *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...*! "I suppose we struck a chord with him. He seemed to relate to our simplicity and admired our determination. Rajji called us back and asked us to develop a film script and ended up really liking our work," says Sumeet, still in awe of the man who gave them their first break as writers. Shashi would ideate on the script with her husband in the nights and work on the writing during the day, while Sumeet was away at auditions or shooting. Writing helped provide their family with financial stability. It also helped them gain a foothold in the television industry, and so, for the time being, Sumeet put his acting dreams on the backburner. "I realised that I had crossed the age where I could bag leading roles. After a certain point, one can do only character roles and that can be done anytime. I thought, 'let's make life better for my family'," he says candidly.



The guidance received from Rajshri Productions helped them develop their writing skills, and they got an opportunity to write for Aruna Irani's *Zameen Se Aasman Tak* in early 2004. Then, when the Barjatyas sought to make a foray into television in 2005, they turned to Shashi and Sumeet to translate their creative vision for the small screen. As it was the Barjatyas' first TV show, the channel expected them to go with big-ticket names, but Sooraj Barjatya rooted for the couple. That show turned out to be *Woh Rehne Waali Mehlon Ki*, which ran for six-and-a-half years and cemented the Mittals' place in the industry as well as in viewers' hearts.

On paper, they had begun by developing film scripts, but it was their TV show that hit the screens first. Sumeet says, "We had written two film scripts for Rajshri. One was a love story called *Meri Prem Kahani*, and the other was an untitled project. Unfortunately, they were both shelved. But we were lucky to gain experience with big names so early on in our careers. We began to get a lot of TV work and almost all those shows clicked with the audience."

Their tryst with movies may have begun with a setback, but far from disheartening them, it fuelled their desire to hone their craft and sharpen their writing skills. For the talented pair, producing and directing was the next step. Sumeet understood that branching out is vital for gaining creative control and executing the written word closer to their vision. He shared these aspirations with his friend, Vivek Bahl,

A still from Diya Aur Baati Hum, on the sets of which, Sumeet shares a joke with Shah Rukh Khan (below)

It is not easy balancing small-town sensibilities and modern ideas, but their mantra has been to avoid underestimating viewers' intelligence or taking them for granted.

who was heading Fiction for Star Plus back then. "Vivek was supportive. He asked us to present our concept and said that if it was good, we would be given an opportunity," says Sumeet. Their efforts paid off and *Sajan Ghar Jaana Hai*, the first TV show produced by ShashiSumeet Productions, was aired on Star Plus in 2009.

Dynamic duo

Fans of *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, *Punar Vivaah* and *Tumhari Paakhi* agree that Shashi has a gift for creating strong onscreen husband-wife pairings that make the audience pine for them. Having resisted following the trend of glorifying families stuck in a regressive time warp, they feature couples who each other's support systems. For example, one of their most popular shows, *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, features the



*Above:
Sumeet and
Shashi with
Shraddha
Arya and
Iqbal Khan,
stars of
Tumhari
Paakhi
Left:
Sumeet with
Madhuri
Dixit on the
sets of Main
Laxmi Tere
Aangan Ki*

Winning a Special Mention Award at the celebrated Dadasaheb Phalke Film Festival, the first film produced by Shashi Sumeet Motion Pictures was one of those rare debuts which was not only deemed a box office success but also lauded by critics.

protagonist playing a common man who supports his wife's dreams and helps her pursue educational and career aspirations much higher than his own. The show, airing on Star Plus, fetched a record viewership last April by touching 14.5 TVM (Television Viewership in Millions), which is highest ever viewership for any fiction show.

It is quite clear that there is a very effective chemistry at work during the collaborative process between husband and wife. When you watch them interact, you see a partnership of equals and this dynamic seeps through into the leading

couples created for their shows. "Initially we had a lot of arguments while writing, but we found ways to strike a balance and compromise. Now, I handle production and direction while she writes, so things are relatively calmer now," Sumeet reveals. Both Shashi and Sumeet believe that since TV is a medium that engages viewers on a daily basis, it is an effective medium through which to actively impact their audience and explore rigid social mores and taboos. They credit their success to viewers' receptiveness to plotlines that revolve around progressive themes such as remarriage and women's

rights. They reveal that it is not easy balancing small-town sensibilities and modern ideas, but their mantra has been to avoid underestimating viewers' intelligence or taking them for granted.

Graduating to the big screen

Sumeet had been mulling over ideas with which to test the waters in the Hindi film industry, while keeping a close watch on developments in the Marathi film industry. "As a scriptwriter, I wouldn't have to shoulder the responsibility for the film's success alone as making a film is a collective



Sumeet and Shashi Mittal reminiscing about their early days in the TV industry

effort. Ultimately though, when producing a film, the responsibility for its commercial success would lie on me. Regional cinema provided me with the knowledge and experience I would need before plunging into Bollywood,” says Sumeet.

The perfect opportunity finally came about when director Sanjiv Kolte narrated the concept of the film *Rangkarmi* to him. The movie follows the journey of Keshav Inamdar (played by Dr Amol Kolhe) who dreams of becoming an acclaimed stage actor. The sensitive film examines the unique teacher-student relationship between the protagonist and a famous make-up artist, Dwarkanath (played by Mohan Joshi), who plays a vital part in the former’s success, and their subsequent fallout.

“While working on *Rangkarmi*, I came to realise that language is just a medium; emotions are universal. There were two other motivating factors: one was that I wanted to create something for Mumbai and secondly, I had observed that Marathi cinema was experiencing an all-round boom and I wanted our company to help further it,” he adds. Winning a Special Mention Award at the celebrated Dadasaheb Phalke

As it was the Barjatyas’ first TV show, the channel expected them to go with big-ticket names, but Sooraj Barjatya rooted for the couple. That show turned out to be *Woh Rehne Waali Mehlon Ki*, which ran for six-and-a-half years.

Film Festival, Best Director Award at the Nasik International Film Festival and Best Dialogues Award at the 5th DD Sahyadri Cine Awards, the first film produced by Shashi Sumeet Motion Pictures was one of those rare debuts which was not only deemed a box office success but also lauded by critics.

Branching out

Keenly aware of the potential of the commercials industry and its ability to spin quick monetary returns, Sumeet is ready to venture out of his comfort zone again by entering the intensely competitive field of television commercial (TVC) production and branding solutions with Qats Whiskers and Shashi Sumeet Innovations, respectively. “I was driven by the challenge of delivering engaging content in a

30-second format which is quite a departure from the 30-minute one that we are used to. Now that we have successfully navigated the TV industry and received a great response for our film, I am eager to take on the next challenge,” he says. It makes good business sense since they don’t have to invest much in infrastructure either.

Their success story serves as an inspirational one that prompts you to work hard and follow your heart. Like so many talented Bollywood aspirants, Sumeet may have not become a big movie star himself, but has certainly given that elusive break to many newcomers as co-founder of one of the top TV production houses in the country. In a way, he has accomplished his dream many times over. ✨