

# People's Princess

**Sharpshooter Rajyashree Kumari of Bikaner would like to troubleshoot for her people's welfare, says Anuradha Kapoor**

It's a bit tough to believe Rajyashree Kumari. She says life for her is no different from that of her neighbours. But it's clear even she doesn't believe it — not really. Take, for example, the nameplate engraved at the entrance of her apartment in New Delhi which, in gold calligraphy, announces her as Princess Rajyashree Kumari Bikaner. Not what you'd expect from a garden-variety commoner.

Servants fuss around Biggy, the elder daughter of the late Maharaja Karni Singh of Bikaner, as she imperially asks for coffee for her guests, the *koi-bai* voice resonant with a clipped British accent. You try to imagine her as the girl-next-door, but at forty-something, given her lean looks and distant demeanour, it's stretching the imagination a bit. Mind you, when she isn't jetting between her homes in London, Delhi and Bikaner, she's being driven around in a Maruti Esteem in Delhi, saving her Mercedes for when she summers in London. The *barsati* she occupies on Delhi's posh Prithviraj Road — what, elsewhere, would be called a penthouse — has been furnished with huge 19th century Baccarat crystal bowls, Venetian glass vases, original oils, bronzes and antique furniture. She could say she hasn't bought the stuff — and it would be true — but you and I don't have an inheritance such as hers.

Even then, it may seem like slumming for someone whose family and ancestors have occupied forts and palaces for the last 500 years. And this is only one of her homes. She also has her own private residence in one wing of the ancestral Lallgarh Palace in Bikaner, and a four-bedroom house in the Golders Green area in London. And she's fighting in court for rights as a trustee of Gajner Palace near Bikaner. Girl-next-door? Only if you have Queen Elizabeth for a neighbour.

True, the princess' fortunes may have diminished considerably over the years since Rao Singh Bika founded the state in 1465, but her royal antecedents bind her to the state her family called home. Till, with one stroke of the pen, the spoilsport Indira Gandhi forever abolished the privilege of privy purses, reducing them — she hoped — to commoners. Not that the titles disappeared: they

may not have meant anything, but for a majority of their people, they continued to be known by the titles they retained. If anything, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sowed the seeds of dissent within the royal families. And, like many others in the state, there's deep dissension within Rajyashree's family too. But, though she's fighting legal battles both with her brother — the 'Maharaja' — and mother — the 'Rajmata', it hasn't deterred her from her father's true inheritance as a philanthropist: that of projecting Bikaner as a tourist and cultural centre.

The Lallgarh Palace, built by Rajyashree's great-grandfather Maharaja Ganga Singh at the turn of the 20th century, looks straight out of a fairytale. Designed by Sir Swinton Jacob in the Indo

Saracenic style, its four wings of intricately carved red sandstone surround an inner courtyard. Rising maintenance costs and divisions in the family meant letting go of the two main wings and leasing the properties to hoteliers and other relatives. Now only a small part of the palace, the Shiv Vilas wing, is used as living quarters while another wing houses Rajyashree's pet project, the Sadul Museum which is a showcase of family heirlooms, and an exhaustive library with manuscripts dating back hundreds of years.

Here, in the Shiv Vilas wing, Rajyashree's apartment is somewhat austere, far less majestic or opulent than the hotel wings. The morning room, where she spends most of her time when she's in Bikaner, is bright and cheerful, but functional. The princess suits the mood of the room in her simple *kurta* and *churidar*, which is her standard wear when in Bikaner. She's certainly unlikely to sport the traditional Rajasthani *ghagra choli* and *kundan* jewellery in the manner of other royal cousins. But a pair of solitaires in her ears would probably buy a flat, or two, in Delhi.

She's just finishing a meeting with lawyers on various matters of the trusts she heads, and the legal wrangles she is embroiled in



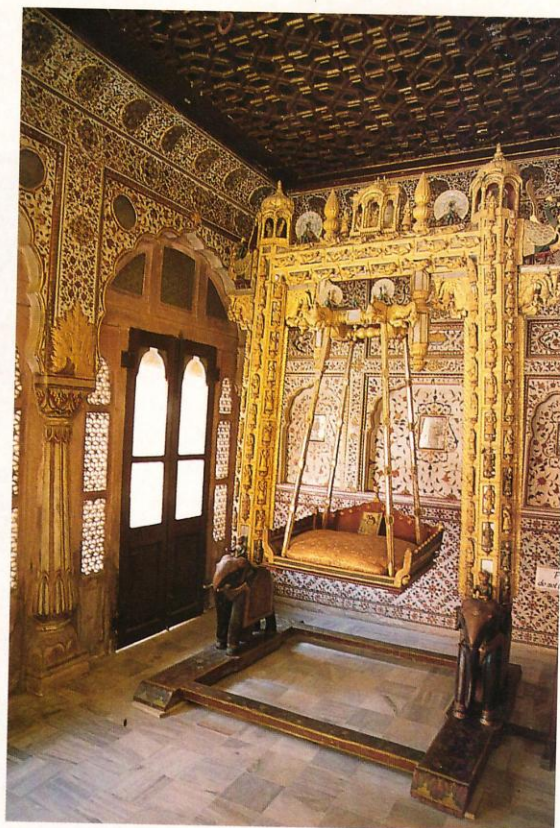
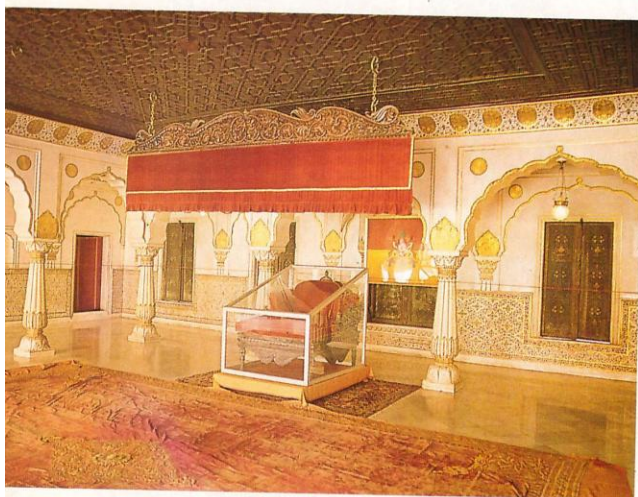
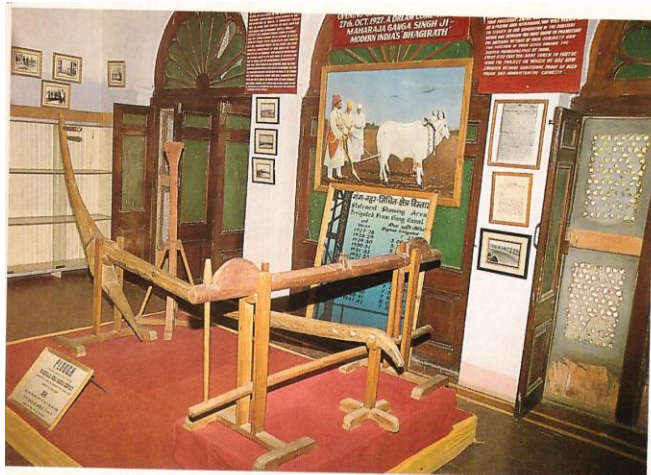
(Above) Biggy with Daddy: Princess Rajyashree of Bikaner shared her father, Maharaja Karni Singh's interest in shooting (above); (Right) To the manor born: Rajyashree did up her Delhi apartment recently with family relics stored at her London and Bikaner homes





Photos: SHASHI SAHAJ





Once part of what she may have casually called home, both Junagarh Fort (left and above) and Lallgarh Palace's Sadul Museum are looked after by the family's trusts. But they need some moving and shaking to ensure maintenance and management — something Rajyashree says she's trying

with her family. While we wait, an old retainer and his wife join the queue with an invitation to their daughter's wedding. For the people of Bikaner, she is their *Baisa* whose royal blessings count for a lot. "One way or another," she tells us, "my life is linked permanently with my ancestry, and over a period of time, I have become more and more drawn back to my roots."

It's not difficult to imagine why. "I was happiest as a child in Lallgarh," she remembers wistfully, "and was lucky to spend my formative years in such a glorious home. We would roam all over the palace, lawns and gardens chasing butterflies and having enormous fun." That lasted till Indira Gandhi pulled the rug from under the royal feet. Like the other princes, Dr Karni Singh too had to surrender the family's estates and properties. "A no-nonsense person he told us that we would have to get on with our lives as practically as possible," says Rajyashree.

It was then that Karni Singh set up various trusts to run the family estate, and to run a number of philanthropic activities. The charitable trusts have a joint corpus of about Rs 4 crore, and

own and run some of the more important buildings in Bikaner — the 500-year-old Junagarh Fort and Lallgarh Palace among them. Rajyashree, very much a Daddy's girl, shared many common interests with him including shooting. She won her first clay pigeon shooting competition at age seven. "My greatest achievement has been my shooting career," she recalls, "the highlight of which was the Arjuna award. It was something I did through my own hard work and talent." To her father's dismay, she gave up the sport, but has never given up her interest in the family's history and heritage.

It wasn't easy, at least initially, because she settled down to a married life in London. But now that her two children are older, and she's estranged from her husband, getting involved with her work in Bikaner is a lot easier. She spends at least two months every year in Bikaner and takes an active interest in the eight trusts she heads. "My involvement with the trusts continues from a very young age because my father wanted me to take an active, hands-on role," she says. Dalip Singh, secretary of the Maharaja Ganga Singhji Trust, gives her the credit for the Sadul Museum's collection. Apparently, Karni Singh was sometimes reluctant to part with



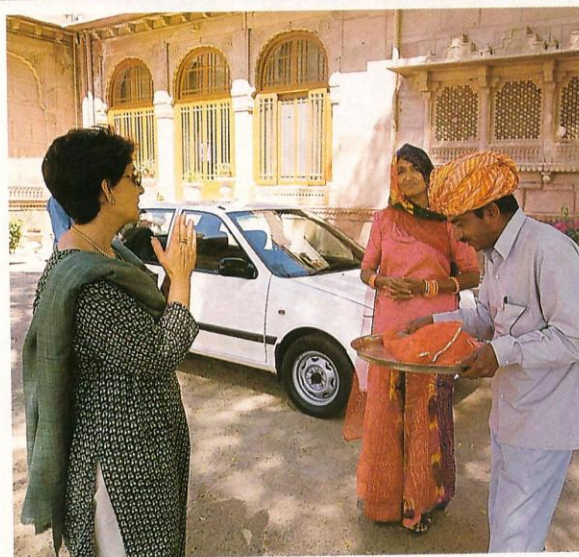


(Above) Lallgarh Palace, where Rajyashree grew up, is a sprawling sandstone edifice, now split into two hotels, a museum, and separate apartments for the family; (Right) Royal blessings for former retainers

artefacts for the museum but Rajyashree always managed to persuade him to give them away. No wonder, it's still her top priority. She now wants to modernise the museum, and to separate the records, files and books as a readily available reference library. There are plans to revamp and de-clutter the various rooms. "We have thousands of old *babis* and *karitas* (gazettes recording all activities that took place within the royal household). There's so much information that we could commission a book every year for many, many years," says Rajyashree.

There's also at least one book she would like to do herself, documenting the lives of the *ranis* and *maharanis* and princesses of Bikaner. "It's a sorely neglected but fascinating part of history, and I felt that some justice should be done to the women of the family," she says. However, it's an uphill task as all the records are either in Hindi or Sanskrit and are all over the place. But she has set the ball rolling by commissioning the research as the first step towards the making of the book. The concept of *sati* too fascinates her. "*Sati* is maligned by people today, but it was a basic act of faith once upon a time," she says. "I feel these facts need to be explored and put into perspective." But won't this raise a controversy? "It is a controversial subject," she counters, "but there is no denying it. I want to see what motivated these women."

Rajyashree has also set up a new charitable foundation — her own — in her father's name. "My first project was a cataract eye camp at an eye hospital in March this year." Since cataract is a major and widespread problem in Bikaner, she feels that this would aid people living in the city and farther afield in rural communities.



Given that she's no commoner, though she hopes to work with them, what are her goals? Rajyashree says she's not a long term player but takes things as they come. Her involvement with the trusts, and Bikaner, are all she can think of for the moment. "I'm just trying to do my duty by my ancestors and all these activities are just a drop in the ocean," she says.

Basically a loner, she has few friends whom she meets when in Delhi and London, preferring to spend time listening to Bach and Vivaldi, collecting original wildlife paintings, reading the likes of Naguib Mahfouz and — for comic relief — watching *Ally McBeal*. Almost common, you could say.