



DADDY'S LITTLE PRINCESS

For Princess Rajyashree Kumari, both Bikaner and London are home, one by birth and the other by adoption

TEXT | KISHORE SINGH

At her home in Delhi, surrounded by probably the single-largest collection of contemporary wildlife art in India ("I know it's not terribly feminine," she laughs), Princess Rajyashree Kumari is in a nostalgic mood. "What did it feel like, growing up as a princess," I ask her. It's probably not the most original question she's been asked, but gamely she laughs. "Like a disease," she says, "it set you apart from other people. Like you were always in quarantine."

No, I say, really? "Well, I suppose I didn't even realize it then, but I would take the most amazing things for granted. Like having the railway saloon pick us up for the journey from Delhi to Bikaner, when school term finished. I thought all people travelled that way, and

remember being astounded when I learnt that they didn't."

The first 19 years of her life, divided between Delhi, where she studied and where her father was a Member of Parliament, and Bikaner where she was simply the daughter of Maharaja Dr Karni Singh, were idyllic. "It's not as though I was unaware of my responsibilities," she continues to reminisce. "I was told that there were expectations about how I behaved, expectations that came from my association with a life of privilege."

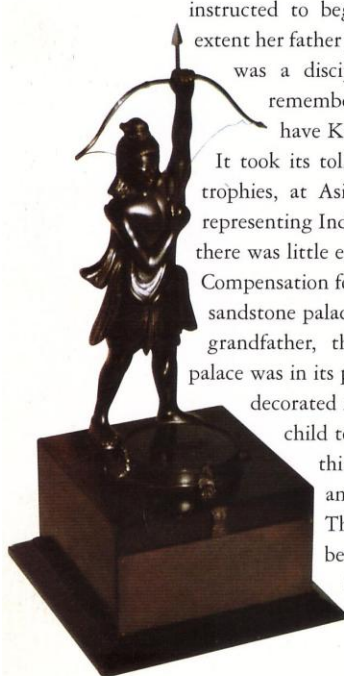
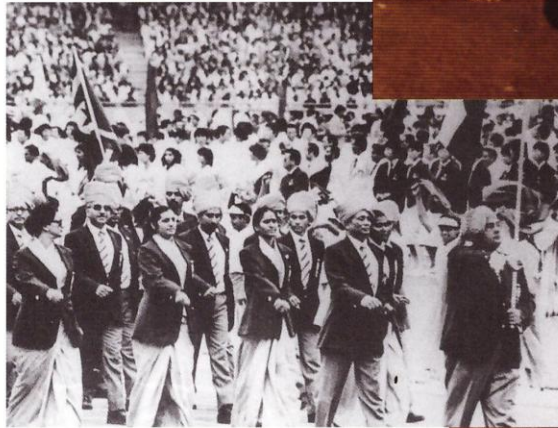
But privilege, nonetheless? "Daddy was a forward thinking person, so I was not allowed any airs and graces. He had a fairly good idea of the future, and for him, an education was the most important legacy that he wanted to pass on to us." Her siblings included a brother and a sister.

A few days later, at a banquet in Bikaner to celebrate her fiftieth birthday, her brother Maharaja Narender Singh recalls: "Biggie—as she is known among her family and friends—was my father's favourite child." In hindsight, it is easy to see why. For Rajyashree, like her father, was an instinctive shooter. "We grew up with guns," she says. "It isn't as if there was any novelty to it." Even so, by the time she was six, she had fired her first airgun. Then, a coach, Kalu Singh, was instructed to begin her training in some seriousness, to the extent her father gifted her a pair of 0.12 bore shotguns. "Daddy was a disciplinarian, and it was all terribly serious. I remember coming back from school exhausted, only to have Kalu Singh pushing hard for practice."

It took its toll. Even though she participated in, and lifted trophies, at Asian and world shooting championships while representing India—at 16, she'd already won the Arjuna award—there was little enjoyment left in the sport for her.

Compensation for that toil was living in Lallgarh, the beautiful sandstone palace designed by Sir Swinton Jacob for her great-grandfather, the legendary Maharaja Ganga Singh. "The palace was in its prime, with herbaceous borders and beautifully decorated rooms. It was the most wonderful place for any child to grow up. I suppose we did the usual childish things that most children do, but in the most amazing setting."

These days, though, Lallgarh has changed. It has been broken up into components. One part of it is a WelcomHeritage hotel, another, the Laxmi Niwas Palace hotel, while members of the



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material, utensils, paintings and other family memorabilia. "A new concept will be the textile gallery I'm setting up, for which I've already donated my own clothes."

That's by no means the end of her plans. "I'd like to have interactive computers in the museum, and would be delighted if groups of students would visit, potter about, read, and learn about the history of Bikaner at first hand."

Besides the museum, Rajyashree is taken with other works in Bikaner. Such as working with The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) to maintain and protect cenotaphs—memorials built to the erstwhile rulers of the state that are now in need of preservation. Or looking after their statues placed in strategic areas of the town. That's besides supervising the work of the trusts founded by her father, chief among them being Maharaja Ganga Singh Trust.

In addition, in 1999, using her personal funds, she launched Maharaja Dr Karni Singhji Memorial Foundation in memory of her father who had represented Bikaner for five terms at the Centre, in order to "address the social needs and development challenges of the region."

Clearly, she's no 'lunching princess', but life hasn't been a bed of roses either. Rajyashree was 19 when her father had her betrothed to Gujarat's Mayurdhwaysinh Jaywantsinh Gohel, and she found herself in London, managing on her own. "I had grown up in a huge palace and was spoilt, I guess, being

family still occupy independent suites. While the division of Lallgarh would have distressed Rajyashree's grandmother, Maharaja Sadul Singh's widow, she would be pleased with at least two things. For one, the garden is now being maintained in a beautiful manner, and for another, Rajyashree's plans for Sadul Singh Museum on its premises are innovative and in keeping with the spirit of the twenty-first century.

"I'm in the process of upgrading the museum," she says. Spread over the first floor in the WelcomHeritage wing, it consists of rare photographs, archival

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waited on hand and foot," she laughs, "but in London I lived in a suburban, three-bedroom house with my in-laws. It was a huge shock, and a very isolating experience. It took me a lot of time to get used to that."

Eventually, she did have a home of her own, and two children, Sajjansinh Mayur Gohel and Anupamakumari Gohel. Though she took to London like a fish to water, her marriage was not destined to last. Today, she has a small apartment of her own overlooking Hyde Park, and when not in London or travelling the globe, she prefers to spend time in either Delhi or Bikaner.

"I'm glad I left India when I did, otherwise with the continuing privileges of my life, my personality wouldn't have evolved. In London, I learnt how to run day-to-day chores, do my own gardening, or throw a party—things that all youngsters do so effortlessly today, but which I had taken for granted in my natal home.

I had to teach myself to be self-reliant." Part of that process triggered her interests—reading ("lots of biographies, not too much fiction, though I love John Grisham"), Western classical music, Arabic pop, movies, and above all, travelling.

"I'm just back from Egypt," she says. "I like places with a historical context...something that feeds the mind. I've been around Europe exhaustively, and large parts of Asia. Now that I'm spending more time in India, I'm travelling more around the country too."

Rajyashree feels that though she spent her childhood and adolescence in India, she's thankful that her formative years were spent in London. Living in two continents, two countries, did she develop a schizophrenic personality to fit into both places? "To me, both places are home," she argues, "one by birth, the other by adoption." Doesn't she hold a British passport? "Only for its convenience. The passport is just a travel document. I'm no less Indian for it. Bikaner is home," Rajyashree says, "I can't say it any other way. My ties with Bikaner are inextricable.

I was taught to speak the language of the region as a child, and even though I've spent 30 years in London, I speak it fluently. I still get withdrawal symptoms if I don't speak it for a few days."

However, it isn't the need to keep in touch with the language but a little more spare time, now that her children are grown, that has her spending a few months every year in Bikaner. "My father trained me to take an interest in Bikaner and its people. He would say, whatever we have, comes from Bikaner. I've decided to dedicate myself to my ancestral history and the heritage that belongs to the people of Bikaner; we are just caretakers. "Mine was a family of such great men," says the princess, "ancestors of such eminence, that it's frightening to think I am from the same stock. I feel small in comparison to them."

Now that she's back, is politics an option? "It's never interested me," she says. "There are other ways to serve the people of Bikaner. I'm quite happy doing it in my humble capacity, in a small way. I feel that it's a small measure of the debt I owe the place of my birth."



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