



The PRINCESS *from* Bikaner

On meeting Princess Rajyashree, her grace, upbringing and perfectly articulated English, showed through so clearly that it had me straighten up and consciously become proper too! However soon once the conversation began, one was able to connect also with her great sense of humour, her passion for her work and her detailed observing sense. This royal is pragmatic and progressive. I tentatively approach the topic of her divorce. However she smiles and declines to really talk about it, adding, “I hate playing victim!...” *No self-piteous damsel in distress here, but a fighter, who embraces life’s challenges head-on, so I gathered!* Unlike most, Rajyashree’s surname is the state she belongs to: Bikaner. She has dedicated herself to preserving the five hundred years old heritage, passed down by the long lineage of her family. We interacted over a cup of coffee and the questions centred around how the evolution of history brought about the many changes in her life. Turn the pages and know more about this Princess from Bikaner...

Interview: Vaneeta Vaid
Photographs: Personal Collection

Rajyashree Kumari of Bikaner: was born in Bombay and is the daughter of Dr. Karni Singh, Maharaja of Bikaner, (elected member of Lok Sabha, 1952-1977), and Maharani Sushila Kumari. She was educated at the Convent of Jesus & Mary, New Delhi followed by Lady Sri Ram College for Women, New Delhi.

COVER story



You were born and the winds of change were rapidly evolving the very depth of a lifestyle you otherwise were entitled too. The era of Maharaja's and Royals was slowly merging into the mainstream. Comment.

I must admit that we lived a very privileged lifestyle not many children are fortunate to have an entire palace and its extensive grounds at their disposal. My father used to say "you are children only once" and indulged us but never spoiled us. The first major change came about around the late sixties and early seventies when the talk of abolishing the Princely privy purses and privileges grew ever more shrill and strident. Though we were brought up and educated in a very down to earth fashion nonetheless we were used to a certain way of living. I saw my father worry ceaselessly as to how he would be able to maintain such huge properties such as the Old Junagarh Fort and Lallgarh Palace without the privy purse. Following the abolition of the privy purses and privileges there were many dramatic changes when suddenly whole wings of the palace were shut down and a great number of staff were retrenched, it was all very sad and a huge upheaval but in many ways it forced us to assess our lives and regroup ever stronger and forge our own way in life.

Give us a peep onto the way of life of a Royal thereafter? Was it all about 'tor & threekha' and dealing with your 'Raj' in spite of adapting to the changing times? (added :could be snippets of royal life , anecdotes etc).

We cannot change who we are or the families that we come from.

It is not a post that one is appointed to for a period of time. My ancestor Rao Bika founded Bikaner in 1488 and since then some 24 generations have been closely linked with Bikaner State and its people. No de-recognition or abolition of privy

purses can shake that bond. That said, each person also has to earn the respect for the position they occupy. My father, grandfather and Great grandfather all worked exceedingly hard in their own capacity amidst changing times and left their own mark. The name of the family even today is much respected and honoured thanks to them. As far as I am concerned I work with the various Trusts that my father created and through them we do a diverse number of projects and charities. I think people also know of me because I used to shoot in my youth.

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Unlike other Princely States in Rajasthan Bikaner has never been much for pomp and show and festivals and dressing up. My mother does however observe the essential occasions as is expected of the family such as the festival of "Gangaur" which is celebrated all over Rajasthan. Let me just say that we observe the niceties that are expected of us but in a low key way.

Your father Maharaja Dr Karni Singhji, a visionary, must have imparted many words of wisdom to you? Which were the most striking ones that carried with you through these years?

My father was a practical and down to earth person, he was very much influenced by the freedom struggle, he was a young student in St. Stephens at the time, I think that changed his perception of things and he was not worried about change it was after all inevitable. He brought us up to believe that we owed a duty and responsibility to our ancestral past and must try and emulate their good work and deeds in our daily lives. He also used to tell us that in the times to come our tiles would be a hindrance and not an asset,

Did you Know?

That her father and she have been responsible for many medals and for the Indian Flag being raised, at shooting competitions all over the world.

Some of the laurels earned by Rajyashree are that at the 13th National Shooting Championship held in Madras in 1968, at the age of 15 she won all the items in which she entered and won the largest number of gold medals in shooting. At the 11 Asian Shooting Championships in the individual clay Pigeon trap shooting she was placed on the 14th position with a score of 152/200.

When she was only 17, she established National Record scoring 92 out of 100 in Trap shooting (I.R.) at the National Shooting Championship in 1970 which is still unbeaten. National Champion in All India Ladies Clay Pigeon Trap Shooting Championships. At the National Shooting Championship at Chandigarh in 1975, whereas her father won first place, she won Second place in Trap Shooting, beating all male competitors. She was named Sportsperson of the year, age 16, in 1969 and was also awarded the Arjuna Award in shooting this year by the President of India, Mr. V.V. Giri.



he believed that we would have to earn respect with our actions and deeds and not merely because we were Rajkumaris. He sent us to Jesus and Mary school in Delhi. I can say that without any doubt it was he who set the foundation on which I have built my life. He also taught us never to discriminate with anyone based on caste, gender or religion. It was a valuable lesson. He refused to let us use the surname 'Rathore' at school as he felt it would identify us with one group of people, instead we used Singh as that was his last name. "I represent the people of Bikaner in Parliament" and in that there was no room for any form of discrimination.

Your work and passion involves preserving the Heritage of a 500 hundred years old legacy. Please share with our readers the core of this passion.

From our childhood it was deeply ingrained in us to be proud of our ancestors and their achievements and at the same time forge our own path in life keeping in mind at all times what background we came from. It is a rare honour and privilege to serve the house of Bikaner into which I am born. Though the task is onerous no doubt, but what is life if there are no challenges? I am a Trustee and Chairperson of various Trusts created by my father and some that I have founded myself and we work our way through a very diverse field of works during any given day from requests from scholars to study various files and documents specially in our Anup Sanskrit library, to supplying photographs to various authors writing books about the Maharajas. We have a strong publishing arm and publish a great many books ourselves the most recent one was a reprint of the Bikaner Golden Jubilee Book which was brought out in 1937 during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of my great grandfather Maharaja Ganga Singhji, and then there



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is the philanthropic side of distributing and disbursing funds to many individuals and institutions.

You won the Arjuna award for shooting at the age of 16? Share those moments with us please. Are there any other ways we can further promote this sport in India since this is one sport that seems to be raking in the medals!

It's interesting to know that clay pigeon shooting has been practised in Bikaner since the time of my grandfather Maharaja Sadul Singh. In those days it was regarded as preliminary practise before the hunting season began normally in August. The idea was to get one used to shooting at a moving target so that when the time

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came for grouse or duck shooting one was ready. Shooting came very easily to me, I imagine it is an inherited talent, seeing me win medals and cups greatly

pleased my father. He was a tough coach and made no allowances for soft behaviour. He made us practise in all manner of conditions, high winds and extreme cold as he said you are not going to have perfect weather when a match is on. I am very proud and satisfied with my shooting, which culminated in my being given the great sporting honour by being conferred the Arjuna Award; it was earned by my own hard work and talent, though of course, it was my father who was entirely responsible for finetuning and refining that aspect. Shooters are doing brilliantly in the Commonwealth Games and recently in the London Olympics; it is very encouraging to see young shooters bring back the medals.



She is a writer too!

Rajyashree has published many books in the course of her endeavours towards her work. A few names of her published work are given below:

- The Maharajas of Bikaner
- Bikaner Golden Jubilee (1887-1937)
- The Lallgarh Palace
- The Regal Patriot – Maharaja Ganga Singh
- History of Bikaner State



COVER STORY

I am firmly of the view that shooting should be part of the sporting curriculum in school and colleges and by doing so potential champions can be cherry picked and trained to a high standard from a young age.

Women are the true pillars for structuring harmony at home ? Your views on this?

It is refreshing to note that film icons like Amitabh Bachchan celebrating the birth of their granddaughter with great joy, we need a major shift in the way we view women. They are not victims to be preyed upon at any point of time. They are in fact the very backbone of every family and this country.

Beginning with “Bharat Mata” there is in the Indian culture a great reverence for women. Apparently even in the pantheon of Hindu Gods they are not complete without a female consort. Therefore it is astonishing and disturbing that Indian society even to day is so obsessed with male children. Female feticide is one of the most inhumane and disgraceful crimes. The strange thing here is that this horrible practise is not so much in rural areas where one can claim lack of education but in urban areas and in the best of societies, after all, lets face it they are in a financial position to be able to carry out gender detecting tests and since it is banned in this country go abroad for the same. ‘Indain sons and their wives

are not treating their aged parents well” scream the headlines in an important newspaper ‘The son has been found to be the primary abuser in 56 percent of the cases’ details from a nationwide survey as yet it’s the male child who is preferred over the female which is truly astonishing. This is the 21st century and our thinking has to change there is nothing even remotely inferior about women and they are definitely not second class citizens or any less than sons in any way. It is refreshing to note that film icons like Amitabh Bachchan celebrating the birth of their granddaughter with great joy, we need a major shift in the way we view women. They are not victims to be preyed upon at any point of time. They



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You are the mother of two children. How do you define good parenting? (In reference to your own experience as a parent)

I think the most important thing to remember is that ones children are individuals in their own right from the time they are born and they also have the right to choose their own careers and make life choices according to their own preferences. A good parent provides

the support and care needed it is their duty to guard and warn where deemed appropriate but it is not in my opinion their right to live their lives through their children or to set unrealistic standards for them. More often than not when they are not met it creates great heartache for both parents and child. Respecting each others boundaries is essential.

Your health regime and diet for a fitter you?

I think one should take steps to keep both mentally and physically as fit as possible.

I read a lot and enjoy meeting a wide variety of friends and acquaintances, I think that keeps you both mentally alert and widens ones horizons. One should eat less as the years pass, its best to have small regular meals and watch ones sugar and oil intake at all times. I take a number of supplements like multi vitamins and Calcium with Vitamin D essential for bones. Other than that I have a great application on my i-pad for relaxation and I find listening to it for 15 minutes twice a week helps greatly in de-stressing. I think ultimately practising common sense is the key to healthy living. ●



With her father

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