

PRINCESS RAJYASHREE



Photograph: Anuj Parti

DEAD on target, that's what she learnt to be from day one. The sharp shooter was seven years old when she won the National Air Rifle Shooting Championship and was adjudged the best sports person. She was only 16 when she was awarded the prestigious Arjuna Award. She is now heading her own public charitable trust, determined to better the lot of Bikaner. Again, no half measures.

### **Respect has to be earned**

Growing up as a princess had a dual side to it. On the one hand, it was a golden, privileged childhood with the exquisite Lallgarh Palace as home. On the other hand, our father, the late Dr Karni Singhji, was an immensely practical person. He made sure we had the most modern education. He used to say that being a princess wouldn't cut ice in the times to come, and how you acted and behaved would decide how people would treat you. In life, I've learnt that you have to earn the respect of the people.

### **In whatever you do, give it your best**

Shooting must be in my blood! My great grandfather, grandfather and father were all excellent shots. It was a discipline that came easily to me. It was like part of growing up. My father must have realised the potential and started teaching me from a young age. I practised regularly and under all difficult conditions — sun, rain, heat, cold — so that during competitions, one could concentrate on shooting alone. I enjoyed my years of shooting. It taught me much, like if you take up something, do it seriously or don't do it at all. That has become my rule of thumb in everything I do. I don't know if I'm still the youngest Arjuna awardee or there have been others younger than me, but when it came to shooting, I knew that I was not doing it only for the sport, but also for the country.

### **Deal with life as it comes**

I married early and moved to London. My upbringing was commonsensical in many ways, but nonetheless, it was privileged and the only skill I had was shooting! Moving abroad knocked off all the edges. It was a great leveller and I learnt to get on with life on a day-to-day basis. It taught me to be self-reliant and most of the skills I know now are self-acquired. I've learnt to deal with life as it comes and that's the best way to do it.

### **Do good and it comes back to you**

Four years ago, I set up my own public charitable trust, the Maharaja Dr Karni Singhji Memorial Foundation, to meet the social needs and development challenges in Bikaner. It predominantly works with children, mostly through the paediatrics department at the Bikaner Hospital. I feel that working with children is a satisfying experience. We also work for employment generation, aid to deserving institutions, promotion and preservation of the local arts and crafts, etc. Empowerment of women is another area. Women are becoming more questioning now. I'm convinced that in the last elections in Rajasthan, women, for the first time, decided to move according to their choice as opposed to what their men told them to. I think women are now realising that they can exercise options themselves.

### **Politics is not the only way to serve the country**

I know I might be pushed into politics some day but it is not something I would get into without a great deal of thinking. Politics is not a road I'd willingly take. I'm not a political person as I'm too straightforward. I've been asked to join politics but I feel I can serve the people differently. Being political means losing one's privacy, and whatever party one joins, at the end of the day, you end up being dictated to. Though my father was in politics for 25 years, he was an independent and he kept his integrity intact.