



WITH A ROYAL FLOURISH



Rajyashree Kumari, Princess of Bikaner, is a living embodiment of the many qualities that have characterised her long line of royal ancestors. In an interview with **MARWAR**, the Arjuna Award winning royal speaks about her many roles as sportswoman, writer, hotelier, curator, philanthropist and conservationist.

Text ✱ **Joseph Rozario**

Decorated as 'Sportsperson of the Year' and honoured with the much-coveted Arjuna Award (for shooting) when she was just 16, Rajyashree Kumari exemplifies the idiom 'chip off the old block'. After all, her father, Maharaja Dr Karni Singh, was an Olympian who had represented India five times in clay pigeon shooting.

Now the custodian of the imposing Lallgarh Palace, a heritage property set amid beautiful lawns and gardens that houses the Lallgarh Palace Hotel and Sri Sadul Museum, she dutifully takes on her many functions as the CEO of the Maharaja Ganga Singhji Trust (named after her great-grandfather), managing its many units with surprising élan. An author of two well-received books on history, it is no surprise that she is a voracious reader. Apart from her passion for classical European music, she also finds comfort and joy in tending to the garden in her home in Bikaner and playing with her three pugs.



Here's an excerpt from our chat with the multitasking Princess:

You have taken to writing lately and have authored two books. What motivated you to put pen to paper?

I have read a number of books where various authors have written about their ancestral homes and this was really the inspiration to write my first book, *The Lallgarh Palace: Home of the Maharajas of Bikaner*. The Lallgarh Palace has an amazing history, and many extraordinary events have taken place within its walls over the past century. I wanted to document them for posterity.

What does your recently launched book *The Maharajas of Bikaner* talk about?

The Maharajas of Bikaner is an exploration of the deeds and achievements of 25 generations of the Royal House of Bikaner. The book is an account of how each generation has contributed to the growth and development of this once-arid region. It is about their contribution to art, music, literature and culture. Many books have been written about my father, grandfather (Maharaja Sadul Singh) and great-grandfather, but I wanted to write this book from the point of view of an insider. Hence, I have included many anecdotes and reference notes in the book.

You are involved in a number of trusts and projects related to charity and heritage preservation. Please elaborate.

My job as the CEO of the Bikaner Trusts, especially the Maharaja Ganga Singhji Trust, is to ensure their smooth functioning, and I don't take that lightly. I oversee various

projects and make sure that charitable disbursements are made according to the wishes of my father, the late Maharaja Dr Karni Singh of Bikaner. The Maharaja Ganga Singhji Trust was created by him in 1972 to serve public, charitable and philanthropic causes. Among its functions are the promotion of socio-cultural activities for the development and progress of Bikaner and providing for the poor and the needy. The trust also disburses large amounts of funds to worthy causes, and has a publishing arm too. From time to time, we publish new books and reprint old ones.

You are also said to be involved in the creation of the Sri Sadul Museum within the Lallgarh Palace ...

My grandfather and my great grandfather were both prolific collectors of art. In the early 1970's, my father asked me to assist him in collecting artefacts, miniature paintings, pieces of armour, exquisite textiles, crafts and other items. We started storing them in one of the wings of the Lallgarh Palace. With this collection, my father set up the Sadul Museum to honour the memory of his father in 1976. A new building was made within the palace complex and all items were shifted to this new wing in 2008 under my supervision and care. The museum is open to anyone who is interested in the rich history of the land which is an amalgamation of valour, glamour and splendour.

What has your experience with restoration and preservation of heritage properties been so far? Do you think this is an easy task?

We are very fortunate to have skilled *ustas* and *karigars* who work tirelessly to restore the old Junagarh Fort and the Lallgarh Palace. Many of the ancestors of these *ustas* were brought to Bikaner in the 17th century by my ancestor Maharaja Anup Singh, the 10th Maharaja of Bikaner. He was a highly cultured man under whom art, painting and culture flourished.

Being an award-winning sportswoman, how would you like to promote sports among women, especially in a medal-starved country like ours?

Like my father, I also believe that there is no dearth of talent in India—it just has to be tapped correctly. In the United States, there are talent spotters who go across every school and college and cherry pick those with potential and then train them rigorously. The same happens in Russia and China, where sports institutions scout and select talented children, even if they are very young, and train them on their country's behalf. Adequate facilities, coaching and financing are offered to them from the very outset. I believe that if you start the process early, then it is almost certain that at some point, these children will bring back medals for their country. Unfortunately, hardly any talent scouting is done in India. ✱