

SUNIL KATARIA



UNLIKE the rest of us, who are identified and located by our names, Rajyashree Kumari is known simply by the state she hails from. "Bikaner, third floor *pe hai* (Bikaner is on the third floor)," says the guard at 10-A Prithviraj Road in Delhi.

You can tell it's the home of a royal from the Wedgewood porcelain vases, a chandelier that doesn't look like it belongs to the living room of a modern, free trade economy, and silver photo frames carrying insignia of the royal family from Bikaner, Rajasthan. But it's not a decadent palace. And she's not the typical princess.

Rajyashree Kumari, Maharaja Karni Singh's daughter, walks in with a light step, greeting us to reveal a slight British accent. The predictable chiffon sari and pearls don't stand a chance. She has gone for pink nail varnish to match a multi-coloured blouson thrown over a pair of tights. The hair she wears in a short bob, bounces as she sinks into the sofa, saying, "I lived a free life, made my own choices. I was lucky."

The awareness of her blessed existence has only grown deeper in the last three years that she has spent with dusty files locked away in the archives of the Bikaner Palace. "It was destiny that I should have documented the family's history," says the 59-year-old about the just-launched *The Maharajas of Bikaner*, a book that traces a

dynasty whose foundations were laid in 1465 by Rao Bika, a young Rajput Rathore prince who dared to penetrate the Thar desert. "I was barely 15, when my dad

would ship me off to the royal library to look into old letters and records, because he suffered from a dust allergy," she laughs, her chiselled jaw softening a shade.

Excerpts from the interview:

What is it like to put together the story of a family of maharajas?

It's tedious. I must have gone through thousands of files in the Palace archives. I taped interviews with trusted servants who had served my grandfather, and that worked because I was looking for the men behind the legends. It was a slow-burning process—researching, recording, writing, fact-checking. But fascinating. I was reading up on how Maharaja Ganga Singhji shopped, and I found detailed booklets titled, *Rome, London, Paris*. The *aide de camps* were sent to foreign cities before him so that they could make a list of items needed at the Palace: which flower pot would look good in what room.

Maharaja Zorawar Singh's reign saw the highest incidence of sati—by his two queens, 19 mistresses, several maid servants and slave girls. A cook for one of the mistresses, also committed sati. Again in the 1850s,

Princess Deep Kanwar became 'sati mata'. Was it tricky to write about an archaic practice like widow self-immolation?

From where I sit in modern, independent India, it will be difficult to judge those women. They didn't know freedom. They lived for their husbands, to produce a male heir.

You, on the other hand, were free, even encouraged to pursue shooting. You won the Arjuna award in 1969.

Yes, I was encouraged to play the sport. Women in royal families had mastered the art. My aunt, the Rajmata of Kota, was an ace shooter. My father had competed in the Olympics in Rome, Tokyo, Mexico, Munich and Moscow. He'd train me for hours. I began training when I was just 7. I won the award at 17, and gave up the sport at 19. I got tired.

But women came second, didn't they? Your book addresses the issue of male accession. When your brother, Bhanwar Narendra Singh, passed away, there was pressure to adopt a male heir.

It wasn't a pleasant experience, but I haven't added a personal voice to the book. I was clear about leaving my opinion out, and reporting objectively. The decision, after all, had an impact on our family history and lineage of 500 years.

The PRINCESS diaries

Nona Walia meets the once-Princess of Bikaner to hear the story of how a dust allergy decided she would write the just-published history of her ancestors. The Maharajas of Bikaner

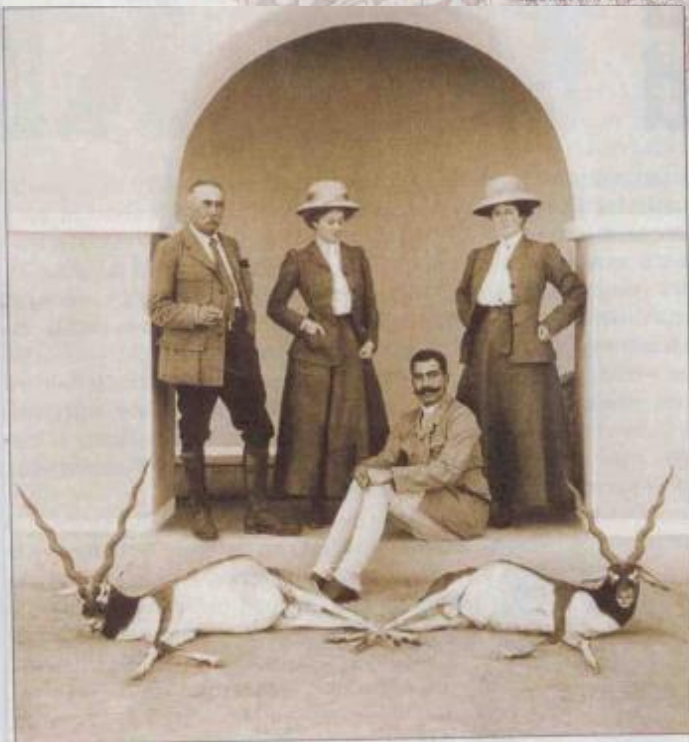
If a family is without a male head, it's like a rudderless ship. That's the belief.

Even male heirs had it tough, like your brother whose romance with the princess of Alwar was nipped in the bud. Did you ever grudge being a member of the royal family?

Like any teenage sister, I was excited to

Rajyashree Kumari's grandfather, Maharaja Sadul Singh and his sister Chand Kanwar in traditional *poshak*

PHOTOS COURTESY THE MAHARAJAS OF BIKANER



hear of my brother's romance. Dalip Singh, my father's assistant, would stand guard with a glass of juice while my brother would have a clandestine meeting with the princess. My father, although practical, and of the opinion that "titles take you nowhere", reacted like any protective par-

Viceroy Lord Minto, his daughter, wife and Maharaja Ganga Singh (sitting) in 1908. Singh's cigarettes were refrigerated for a cooling effect. His food was cooked by eight Western cuisine chefs and 18 Indian *khansamas*, and served by 24 waiters

ent. We lived in different times. I'd be fine if my children chose their partners. Several members of India's royal families have taken to electoral politics. Did you ever consider it?

Politics isn't for me. It's intriguing; I enjoy discussing it, but I'm not cut out for it.

Although you write of your grandfather, Maharaja Sadul Singh being in favour of joining the Constituent Assembly in 1947, the view is that India's royals grudgingly gave up power. Do you feel a sense of loss?

The Maharajas had a responsibility towards their subjects, and the bond continues to this day. As part of the royal family, I can't deny the connect I share with the people of my state. But I grew up and studied in Delhi, and moved to London after I was married. My marriage ended in divorce; that taught me survival. I, and my kids, Sajjan Singh and Anupama Kumari, are proud of our lineage. But life evolves. My golden childhood, where I was the princess of my palace, is over.

■ TIMES NEWS NETWORK

nona.walia@timesgroup.com