

On target

“We never performed for fame” –Rajyashree Kumari, Bikaner



The lift opens into the top floor of the posh Prithviraj Road apartment block in New Delhi. A brass plaque reads ‘Princess Rajyashree Kumari of Bikaner’. Inside, amid Baccarat crystal and Venetian glass is a black-and-white photograph of an eight-year-old girl on the wall, receiving a trophy from Jawaharlal Nehru. Opposite, on a table, is another photograph of a young woman in a sari, standing next to Lord Mountbatten on the grounds of his Wales residence. Rajyashree Kumari welcomes you with a firm handshake, a British “hello”. Black trousers, a purple geometric print shirt, designer leopard-spots-and-diamante footwear, her eyebrows shaped in a sharp arch.

Daughter of four-time Olympian shooter Maharaja Karni Singh of Bikaner, who put India on the world shooting map, Rajyashree Kumari set a record at the age of seven. She won the National Air Rifle Championship in the under-12 section. At 10, she beat all competitors in all age groups in air rifle shooting and at 12 did an encore. In 1967, at the First Asian Shooting Championships in Tokyo, she bagged 21st place—the only woman, and 14

years old at that, in competition. In 1969, at the San Sebastian World Shooting Championships in Spain, she won the Silver Masters Shooters Badge in the Clay Pigeon Trap event, the eighth position in Ladies Trap Shooting and the third position in the Castillo de Chichon Trophy for ladies. In 1970, she scored 92 on 100 in Trapshooting at the National Shooting Championship when she was 17—a record still unsurpassed. The list of victories and achievements goes on booming right until 1974.



Courtesy: RAJYASHREE KUMARI

Rajyashree Kumari at the World Championships, San Sebastian, Spain, in 1969

Shooting and hunting was part of family life. “My father trained me from the age of six,” says Rajyashree Kumari, now 51. “I guess I had the aptitude for it.” Though born with a silver gun in her hand, it wasn’t always easy to focus only on shooting. The time, attention and dedication that her craft required sometimes irked her. “As I grew older, the competition grew tougher and more serious. Daddy was a terrible disciplinarian. And I was like any other teenager, into Beatles and the Rolling Stones,” she recalls.

If ever she was in doubt, it didn’t show in her performance. In 1969, both Rajyashree Kumari and her father were awarded the Arjuna Award—a unique achievement for a 16-year-old. “If I had to spotlight one moment of glory, it would be the Arjuna Award,” she says. “The other was the Second Asian Shooting Championships in Seoul where my cousin, Bhagyashree Kumari from Kota, and I were two of the four people representing India in an all-male Clay Pigeon Trap Shooting event. We brought back the bronze.” There were no sports camps and generous sponsorships at the time. Then, Maharaja Karni Singh single-mindedly worked to create an infrastructure for shooting—the Olympic shooting range at his Bikaner palace matched the World Shooting Federation’s norms.

“It’s an expensive sport. Today, if you win a medal, you get a hefty grant. In those days, Daddy had to fight with the government even for cartridges, which were difficult to import. He was mostly expected to dip into his own purse,” recalls Rajyashree Kumari, adding how Karni Singh also opened up his shooting range and his

home for participants before a tournament. “We never performed for fame or money, but because we were expected to put in our best for the country.”

In 1973, Rajyashree Kumari married and moved to London. “It’s always best to go out on a high, isn’t it?” she smiles. She now divides her time between Bikaner, Delhi, Jaipur and London. On the board of several trusts, the princess has also set up the Maharaja Dr Karni Singhji Memorial Foundation, which works for social development in Bikaner.

The Bikaner shooting range lies silent now. Yet somewhere—with shooters like Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore kissing his silver medal, the olive tiara around his head—the echo of a legacy rings loud and clear.

—Vatsala Kaul