

PRINCELY
TALES

Of erstwhile maharajas and
their modern-day
kingdoms



STATELY missionary

Few among royalty in India come with a strong sense of service to the common man. *Princess Rajyashree Kumari* of Bikaner is an example of sacrifice and devotion to the wellness of her people. An ace shooter with an Arjuna award and a great attachment to her state, she exudes grace and does justice to her royal lineage

Text by DHARMENDAR KANWAR

Responsibilities have come naturally to Princess Rajyashree Kumari of Bikaner. The daughter of the erstwhile Maharaja of Bikaner, Dr Karni Singhji and Maharani Sushila Kumari, a woman of today but with a strong attachment to

her regal past, shouldered her share of responsibility when her brother seemed uninterested. The princess was interested and attached to her state. Attachment is not in terms of hankering for the bygone era but of an awareness, of commitment towards its people.

"I think the onus of carrying that legacy

forward just fell on me because my brother, for whatever reason, was never really interested. The natural flow from father to son was never there. That's the reason my father trained me and I found myself helping him in all administrative matters," says the princess. Looking back now, she remembers her

childhood as being rather special, "When I was young, I didn't really think about it, it was just home, but growing up in Lalgarh Palace was a privilege. What a glorious childhood to have!"

YOUNG ACHIEVER

Childhood also had a very fascinating facet to it. To this day this dynamic princess stands unrivalled in target shooting. She smiles, "I think I was the youngest recipient of the Arjuna Award." At the age of seven she had the unique distinction of winning the National Air Rifle Championship in the junior category. She beat competitors in all age groups in air rifle shooting and won the open championship trophy first at the age of ten and then again at the age of twelve. At the age of fourteen, at the All India Selection Trials held at Ahmedabad during the year 1967, she set a new All India record in air rifle shooting by beating her nearest rival by a big margin of 33 points. She was declared Sports Person of the Year and was awarded the much-coveted Arjuna Award in 1969 when she was only 16 years old, making her the youngest recipient of this award.

Shooting and hunting have always been royal pastimes and it helped Rajyashree tremendously to have an ace shooter for a father. Maharaja Karni Singh was a four-time Olympian, and an Arjuna awardee himself. To him goes the credit of putting India on the shooting map of the world. The Maharaja trained Rajyashree from the age of six and she remembers those shooting days as, perhaps, the best period in her life. "If I had to spotlight one moment of glory, it would be the Arjuna Award," she reminisces. One very important lesson she learnt during her 'shooting days' and what she still believes in is – "If you take up something, do it seriously or don't do it at all. That has become my thumb rule in everything I do."

Part of her childhood was also spent in

Delhi where she went to school there and has a lot of friends. The city became a learning ground as her father who was member of parliament had to visit when the house was in session. "I like being here because there is a lot happening here. It's a busy place and quite exciting. It's a break for me when I'm able to spend time with my friends here," she smiles. Her other interests include music, reading and collecting original wildlife paintings.

A LIFE OF SERVICE

Life is busy as she is actively involved in a number of trusts that were set up during her father's time as well as one of her own – the Maharaja Dr Karni Singhji Memorial Foundation. This is her baby and she works closely with local hospitals, providing, among other things, medical equipment and financial aid to infants as well as the underprivileged. "I set up this trust to meet the social needs and development challenges in Bikaner. It predominantly works with children, mostly through the pediatrics department at the Bikaner hospital. I find working for children a very satisfying experience. We also work for employment generation, aid to deserving institutes, promotion and preservation of the local arts and crafts et al."

"I really have my hands full," says Rajyashree. "I've taken on far too much but I'm happy to be doing something for my people." When she gets a little free time, which is quite rare, she tries to upgrade and streamline the activities of these trusts. It is a result of this hard work that the Sadul Museum has one of the best libraries in the state with a very efficient and helpful staff. She is in the process of modernizing the museum and archiving the large collection of records, files, photographs and old manuscripts. She says, "We have thousands of *bahis* and *karitas* (gazettes) that need to be catalogued." She is also very keen to do a book on



the life of the *ranis* and *maharanis* of Bikaner as nothing substantial has ever been done on them. "I once picked up a book by Earl Spencer and was quite impressed by it. I think I have a far more interesting background...! I'm still in the process of putting it together." In fact, she says there is so much material available in the palace that she could do not one, but several books on the subject.

PERSONAL NOTES

Rajyashree is not a great one for long-term planning and takes life as it comes. Now estranged from her husband, she divides her time every year between Bikaner, Delhi and London. She had moved to London in the 70s after marriage and stayed there for a few years. She has two children, now grown up, leading lives of their own.

Rajyashree Kumari is straightforward and focused. She is clear that she would like to do something for the people of Bikaner. "My life is linked permanently with my heritage. Over a period of time, I am increasingly drawn to my roots. I'm just trying to do the duty given to me by my ancestors and all these activities are just a drop in the ocean." *Me*