

Heritage for modern times



Scions from many royal families are making sure that their culture and traditions are being conserved for the future generations



REGAL REPAST: Ashwa Poojan of royal horses being held at City Palace, Udaipur, and (right) the newly renovated 200-year-old Belgadia Palace in Odisha

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As a frontrunner in conserving heritage and culture, Udaipur's royal family has been working towards the cause through the Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation (MMCF), which was established in 1969. At the fourth edition of the World Living Heritage Festival 2018, the focus was on how heritage and culture could be conserved. For this, the trust has been holding several events aimed at reviving and revitalising arts, crafts and traditions.

"Heritage today has come to a stage where it is recognised and accepted as a brand. We need to engage with the younger generation to make heritage relevant in the present times. It is a question of drawing the heritage and culture out and presenting it in a way everyone understands," says Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur, 76th custodian of the House of Mewar.

Custodians of culture

At the City Palace, Udaipur, which houses the museum that is open to the public, regular events like Holika dahan, a traditional festival held on the first day of Holi, Kartik Purnima and Ashwa Poojan, the tradition

of praying to the royal horses, are held by the royal families. There is only one family of swordsmith or *sikligars* that is currently restoring swords in the armoury by using traditional methods. The palace also showcases traditional textiles like *dabu* printing, an indigo-resist block-printing technique from Akola, *khari* printing, a tinsel-printing technique from Udaipur, and embroidery techniques like *danke ka kaam* (metal plate embroidery), also from Udaipur.

Likewise, Maharani Raseshwari Rajya Laxmi and her family from the royal family of Jaisalmer are leaving no stone unturned to ensure their heritage is preserved. "In 1992, Maharawal Brijraj Singh revived the colourful Gangaur Festival, which is integral to the history of Rajasthan and has a special place in the local folklore. Processions and religious traditions are of much interest to tourists, especially in Jaisalmer where the Maharawal escorts Goddess Parvati on horseback, followed by procession from the fort to the Gadisar lake.

Since its revival, there has been an increase in tourism during this period. In 1992, he made efforts to revive the Dasehra festival. Rajput heads from all villages attend the ceremonies. In 1998, the

Maharawal started the Jaisalmer Foundation Day to highlight the day when Maharawal Jaisal founded the Jaisalmer Fort in 1156 AD. At the ceremony, awards are given for excellence in multiple fields," says Maharani Raseshwari.

The Girdhar Smarak Dharmath Trust of the royal family maintains many temples in and around the fort. Yuvraj Chaitanya Raj Singh has been organising music festivals. Local musicians (*Mangniyars*), who have their roots in Jaisalmer but are famous internationally, perform here.

Taking the legacy forward

The next generation has successfully taken over the mantle and is ensuring that heritage comes first. Princesses Mrinalika and Akshita M Bhanj Deo, the second and third daughters of Praveen Chandra Bhanjdeo, 47th ruler of the Bhanja dynasty, which was formed in the erstwhile princely state of Mayurbhanj, now part of Odisha, are taking their legacy forward.

"We recently renovated our 200-year-old palace in Odisha called the Belgadia Palace, where we have introduced sustainable and purposeful travel. A certain part of the funds received by the palace will be used to promote and preserve community-led organisa-

tions in the theme of education, health, arts and culture/architecture, which were patronised by my ancestors. My sister and I are strong promoters of dying arts like *chhau* (martial arts dance form performed by *paikas*, the class that were the warriors of the Bhanja Dynasty) and *dokra* (earliest known method of non-ferrous metal casting known to human civilisation) and black stone carving (made famous by the Konark Sun Temple). We are trying to promote tourism wherein people can visit tribal families which still practice these arts. This will also help instil a sense of pride among the younger generations so they can practice these dying arts and also help them build confidence that these arts can bring sustainable livelihoods in their lives," says Princess Akshita.

Project Chhauni is an NGO that was started

by the family to introduce younger generations to Chhau and has performed in national festivals. The royal family is closely associated with them and helps them in promoting this Unesco heritage art.

And the tradition continues

The Mysore royal family has kept the annual Dasehra festivities, including the procession called Jumboo Savari, alive over the years. The tradition that is close to 408 years old dates back to 15th century Vijayanagara Empire kingdom. An idol of Goddess Chamundeshwari, weighting about 750 kg, is placed on a golden pedestal that is carried by a decorated elephant after it is worshipped by the royal family. The royal *darbar* tradition continues with the royal sword placed on the golden throne too.