

SHRIJI ARVIND SINGH MEWAR

THE CUSTODIAN OF THE WORLD RENOWNED MEWAR LEGACY OF UDAIPUR, SHEDS LIGHT ON AN UNBROKEN, LIVING HERITAGE OF INDIAN LUXURY AND ITS ESSENTIAL CONNECT TO SPIRITUAL ROOTS

'While it is a privilege to be born in the Mewar Family, I was also fortunate to have mindful parents and experienced governesses. Together they ensured that we wore hand-me-downs of our elder siblings, didn't waste food served to us and didn't behave as if we owned the world'

A foreign guest to Udaipur recently said: "For years Udaipur was hailed as the 'Venice of the East', today I can definitely state that Venice should be known as the 'Udaipur of the West'." laughs Shriji Arvind Singhji of Mewar, adding, "My *salaams* for the lady... and the finest champagne awaits her when she comes visiting us!"

The 76th custodian of the Mewar dynasty, Shriji oversees the family-owned heritage hotels, resorts and charitable institutions across Udaipur, managing a collective staff of over 1,200 people. He also has an intimate understanding of issues related to his legacy, be it the ecology around the centuries old structures, the attendant spiritual practices of the dynasty. He strives to keep the cultural codes alive for present and future generations and is a spokesperson for the Mewar legacy globally. HELLO! got talking to the regal pater-familias, who has been widely seen in the news recently offering his perspective on the controversial film, *Padmavati*.

Spirituality and worldly prosperity were never at odds with each other in Hindu scripture. We are thinking of the idea of artha, kama, dharma and moksha, where artha prescribes worldly wealth as a legitimate goal. How did the Mewars look upon this, given the dynasty had a richly spiritual base with Eklingji at the centre?

"Artha, kama, dharma and moksha may prescribe worldly wealth and pleasure as legitimate goals, but they are certainly not ultimate goals. To me these goals come along the way to moksha, and for families of great privilege and jurisdiction, they come with a great sense of responsibility. The final goal is to seek freedom from all things worldly, after having paid one's dues to family, society and legacies. Spirituality is the ultimate luxury for the soul and is also a way of life. But divine luxury comes with its own price-tag. We have developed the ability to look beyond ourselves. Having wisdom is spiritual and to be wise is a luxury. To serve people is luxury for me. We are highly aware of the need to serve mankind and give back to society. Spirituality and service to society are two sides of the same coin. With the blessings of Shree Eklingnathji, our lives are that of mere Custodians. We think and act for others. That is what my forefathers did and I am attempting to follow their principles and values."

The Crystal Gallery of Udaipur houses rare crystal that Maharana Sajjan Singh (r. 1874-84) ordered from F&C Osler & Co in England in 1877. The Maharana died before it arrived, and all the items stayed forgotten and packed up in boxes for 110 years! Clearly Maharana Sajjan Singh travelled widely and had a highly developed fondness for beautiful things. What stories did you hear as a child growing up, about him, and his commissions?

"Maharana Sajjan Singhji's life was meteoric; he may be likened to a blazing meteor in our skies. Yet in his brief life he made a huge and visionary impact. In fact he never ventured overseas and the crystal he ordered was indicative of the changing needs of a new generation of the Royalty of Mewar in the 1880s. A hundred years before, it would have been unthinkable and unaffordable! Sajjan Singh also began the newspaper system in Mewar and also set up a huge library. He was environment conscious and planted hundreds of trees. ▶

Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar seen with his Aircraft VT-USA



Yes, I am honoured to have established the Crystal Gallery at Fateh Prakash Palace, The City Palace, Udaipur. It was a labour of love and my humble tribute to Maharana Sajjan Singhji. The collection includes a bewildering number of objects d'art; dinner sets, perfume bottles, decanters, glasses, washing bowls and even furniture. The Crystal Gallery also houses the only crystal bed in the world! The collection has been customised for the House of Mewar; the Crest of Mewar being delicately etched on the crystal, adding yet another amazing facet."

What made the Mewars so prosperous?

"Mewar was never prosperous nor wealthy like the Princely States of Hyderabad, Mysore, Bikaner, Gwalior or Kashmir etc. Above all, the real prosperity lay in our people. Mewar was always highly regarded for its principled service to humanity. This is our true prosperity and we continue our service to mankind through Eternal Mewar. It is after all, our living heritage."

What are some stories we can relay about your vintage car collections and your love of them? Which are your favourite and rich in sentimental value?

"The vintage cars have been a life-long passion. Each one is a favourite of mine, though I may be particularly partial to the MG TC 1946, a delightful gem of a four-cylinder two-seater that I purchased sometime in the 1970s. It's my favoured mode of transport within The City Palace. Stories are aplenty when it comes to the 1924 Rolls-Royce GLK 21. It is the most celebrated, awarded and photographed beauty in our collection. All her stories have been compiled into a luxurious book. Check out the website: <http://www.royalcarsofudaipur.org/> - there are enough tales in it to fill a hundred pages or make an entire film!"

We noticed that in your extensive restoration efforts, you have sourced the original materials that went into building

the beautiful pavillions and structures on Jag Mandir island. How do these old materials complement the environment and help preserve the purity of it?

"Jagmandir Island Palace is not merely a pleasure-palace built by my forefathers but an engineering marvel. We can barely match those feats even in the 21st century.

Yes, we have done our bit to renovate it, revitalize the island-palace to its glory. We are delighted to share, that only a day before this interview, Matthew Teitelbaum, Director, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA and his wife Susan Cohen, visited The City Palace Museum and took great interest in our ongoing



A view of Jagmandir Island Palace at sunset (topmost); Mini-crystal throne with a crystal Ganesha, (above) and a crystal sofa set, both by F&C Osler, embedded with the Mewar royal crest

conservation projects. We reproduce below the comments in the *Museum Guest Book*: 'A Conservation project that is a gift to the World.' We could not have received a higher accolade."

What was your relationship with a luxurious legacy growing up?

"While it is a privilege to be born in the Mewar Family, I was also fortunate to have mindful parents and experienced governesses. Together they ensured that we wore hand-me-downs of our elder siblings, didn't waste food served to us and didn't behave as if we owned the world.

I grew up wanting to be a cricketer, a sportsman and I spared no efforts to become one. Yes, I was conscious of our rich legacies and heritage but at age 15 or 25, I was more concerned about the quality of willow used in my cricket bat than the scenic beauty of Lake Pichola. It was much-later that 'luxury' took a different interpretation for me."

How do you feel when you see technology replacing people... do you feel old world hospitality is essential to a sense of luxury in a highly accelerated world?

"Technology can substitute people to an extent. We use technology to help us preserve our heritage and culture. Technology is merely engaged to achieve our ultimate goal of preserving our identity. Yes, we have retained, and also revived, many of the protocols and practices within The City Palace. Even here the technology is assisting in managing ancient, age-old practices more efficiently. The traditional Palace Band is definitely one of these traditions and it is my favourite. Above all the biggest luxury in our fast-paced life is the luxury of time. You need to be innately creative to create time to enjoy the luxuries that life presents before you. If one wants to truly relish luxury, one must create the time to enjoy it, preserve it."

What have been some of your most memorable experiences conveying Udaipur's rich association with luxury that involved handicraft, globally?

"I have always emphasized that our brand of luxury has to be modelled on our heritage and culture. This will ensure we remain trendsetters and not keep chasing others. We have immense talent, no question about that. What we lack is a strong belief in our own potential to showcase brands built on our heritage and culture. It is difficult but not an impossible task to blend the forces of tradition and modernity. We need to strengthen our self-confidence and pride in our ability to make Indian luxury brands unique, stronger and rooted in our values. Let's do it...now and not later!"

TEXT: SANGEETA WADHWANI
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