

PRITI KUCHAMAN

A BOHEMIAN PRINCESS, A SINGLE MOTHER TO TWO GIRLS, SHE OVERSEES OPERATIONS AT KUCHAMAN FORT AND ADOPTS A RICH LEGACY OF LOCAL CRAFTS FOR THE WORLD MARKET. HELLO! ENTERS HER COLOURFUL WORLD

Coffee-table books on Simonetta (the famous Italian designer), Robert Polidori (a Canadian photographer known for his work in America's museums of art), as well as paintings by Cuban artist Rene Porto Carrero, find pride of place in different parts of Rajkumari Priti Kuchaman's house. Such bric-a-brac could be part of any urban home in India's vast metropolis, but what sets Priti's home apart is the fact that many of these possessions displayed carelessly across her house have a personal story to them, reflecting her rich encounters with these personalities over many years.

Priti Kuchaman is the daughter of late Raja Pratap Singh and Rani Prem Kumari of Kuchaman in Rajasthan, and was married to the late Rudolph D'Mello, who held the office of Indian ambassador to Cuba in 1970. In fact, it was in Cuba where her two daughters Indirita and Pia were born. It's interesting how checkered her life has been – she grew up an avid horse rider, surrounded by the aura of being a princess in her home estate in Kuchaman. Her father was not just a *raja* of his *thakana*, but an Oxford-educated, spiritually inclined man who finally gave up the ways of the world. On the other hand, life in the *zawana* section of the palace was full of women that wore colourful clothes, jewellery and came from different financial and educational backgrounds. "Most royal families in India had huge extended families that were part of palace life. We had aunts and uncles that did not come from similar financial backgrounds and were not well educated, but we were taught to respect and love them equally. We lived as one unit and that was the beauty of those times," explains Priti, sitting in her luxurious Sundar Nagar home in Delhi.

Priti's mother, a Rajkumari from the *talasabari* of Rehwan, Rai Barielli in UP, could not completely condition Priti to the *zawana* way of life – she often floated between the women and men's section of the palace. In fact, she was the first girl in the family to step out into the *bazaar*, and go camel and horse riding – all unheard of activities for the much-sheltered noble women of the time. "My mother was not very happy with my horse-riding, as she worried about me. She was afraid I would fall and break my bones and then no one would marry me," laughs Priti. "In fact, my mother's fears came true as I had a serious

'For me, getting into the business was the easiest as I grew up watching quilts and blankets being made at home. During those days, my mother would get them made every season and there were *kaarigars* in the house throughout'

injury and was barred from mounting the horse thereafter."

Priti's daughter Indirita – who now helps Priti with her business of producing exquisite, hand-crafted quilts, shawls and stoles under the label Kuchaman Fort – is a mixed product of the rich Kuchaman history that finds its roots in Meera Rai, and the *jo de svite* that emanates from her father's Goan genes. If Priti runs her business purely from the heart, Indirita has been able to infuse innovation into it with her managerial skills, technical savvy and methodical approach. She graduated from Oxford, both like her father and maternal grandfather. Says Indirita, "I've had the best of education and exposure to the Western world, which gives me an advantage to expand this business internationally."

Priti's diverse personal story comprises not only of people that she met in her eventful life, but also embraces her courage. She is a bohemian spirit who chose to marry against her parents' choice, building her own career and bringing up two daughters on her own. That she has had the good fortune to be exposed to cultures, races and people across the globe has proved to be a trump card for her business – reorienting Rajasthan quilts, shawls, table linen, monogrammed bed sheets as well as silver and brass tables, and giving them a contemporary twist. She boasts a clientele as diverse as Princess Michael of Kent, Countess Verde Visconti of Italy, designer Diane Von Furstenberg, Vera Santa Domingo, American film producer Richard Roth, and Italian media personality Bruno Vespa. Closer home,

she caters to clients like the Maharani of Tripura, Maharani Vasundhara Raj, and couturiers Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla. Her quilts are considered luxurious and stylish and have even been displayed in galleries abroad. Intricately hand-stitched in different patterns and textiles, these nuances give the quilts a unique artistic spin. "A lot of research goes into making each quilt. Over the years, I have been able to combine the colours of Rajasthan and contemporise it with new styles. For me, getting into the business was the easiest as I grew up watching quilts and blankets being made at home. During those days, my mother would get them made every season and there were *kaarigars* sitting in the house throughout," recalls Priti.

Indirita's journey has been closely linked to her mother's in more ways than one – she has inherited her grit and fine-tuned her career to her mother's way of life. "I was pursuing a career in human resources, but when my mother was diagnosed with cancer in 2005, a lot of things changed for me. During that year, life for Pia and I was all about going through hospital corridors. There were so many things wrong with the medical health system in the country. That's how I got involved in hospital administration, just to understand it and do my bit for people struggling to find their way through medical bureaucracy," explains Indirita, who eventually gave that up to join her mother in running Kuchaman Fort. "My mother needed my help. It also allowed me to spend time with her. She has inculcated in me the importance of creative work and understanding its ethos – aesthetics are an essential part of our production, the monetary gain is secondary."

Priti, on her part, has been able to inspire her daughter with an unusual strength common to women of her generation. "I think people around me were more upset than I when they learned about my cancer. I knew I would get out of it though," she says casually.

Indirita remembers a time when Priti shocked an international client who happened to be in Mumbai around the time she was undergoing treatment in Mumbai. "This client happened to call my mother about work, so mum invited her to the hospital room to conceptualise a quilt together – on the hospital bed!"

Kuchaman Fort has been running ▶



The mother and daughter have teamed up to carve out a niche for themselves! Rajkumari Priti Singh Kuchaman wears a Jadoo-design georgette bandhej saree matched with family heirloom jewels in kundan and South Sea pearls. Priti also wears a bandhej saree. An antique quilt with Mughal motifs form the backdrop to the tented seating in the living room

99



'Meeting Manu has been the best thing to happen to me. He gives me the freedom and space to do what I want. I'm now trying to expand our business in Bangalore, and love my new life between two cities'

- Indirita Singh



Indirita in a chiffon saree worn with an amethyst and pearl necklace and maang tikka from her personal collection (left), the creative duo (above)

successfully for more than a decade now, and the duo is currently busy planning exhibitions internationally for next year. As of now, tours to the US and Italy have been finalised. They recently tied up with Khazana, the Taj hotel store, and are building a wicker chair base having also completed an exhibition in Delhi "which was a sellout".

While business has picked up steadily, Indirita made time to sit in a wedding with Manu Topolitz, a radio professional based in Bangalore, last year. "Meeting Manu has been the best thing to happen to me. He gives me the freedom and space to do what I

want. I'm now trying to expand our business in Bangalore, and love my new life between two cities - I love being with my mother in Delhi, and then going back to Bangalore to get pampered by my husband and in-laws. It's a great feeling," says Indirita.

Both Priti and Indirita have a spiritual side and aver that despite going through the biggest hurdles, life has evolved out with the blessings of their guru, Anandmayee Ma. Ma has been the family guru of the Kichamans for years, and Priti got drawn to her from a very early age. Despite the flamboyance surrounding her life, Priti has an air of

simplicity and deep spiritual beliefs that she claims is the result of time spent with Ma. "She was a great influence in my life. My years spent with her were the most significant times of my life. Even after she gave up her body, she continues to guide me."

Having settled one daughter, Priti now hopes her other daughter, Pri, a lawyer in Delhi, will soon find someone to spend her life with. "I am quite confident that she will find someone suitable for herself," smiles Priti.

As the HELLO! team prepares to leave their home after the photoshoot, Priti and Indirita get busy giving instructions to Mohammad, their quilt-maker. Flitting through rich silks and sarees, the mother and daughter find warmth in a professional bond that they have lovingly created and nurtured. Truly a rich extension of their natural ties to the soil they hail from! **H**

TEXT: SANGHITA SINGH
PHOTOS: ANIL CHAVLA
MAKE-UP & HAIR: MICHELLE FROM VIDYA
TIKARI'S STUDIO
STYLING: AMBER TIKARI