

Meet a King in Udaipur, a Custodian in Perpetuity

An Interview with Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar
of Udaipur, 76th Custodian of the House of Mewar



Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur

EDITORS' NOTE Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur has been preserving a vibrant cultural heritage enshrined in the City Palace Complex, Udaipur in Rajasthan. As the Chairman and Managing Trustee of the Maharana Mewar Charitable Foundation (MMCF), Udaipur, Shriji is managing a spectrum of philanthropic and charitable activities emanating from the City Palace Complex in Udaipur. Several nonprofit and commercial organizations are seamlessly networked to exemplify 'Eternal Mewar' for global and Indian audiences. The Maharana Mewar Charitable Foundation, Vidyadan Trust, Maharana Mewar Historical Publications Trust, and Rajmata Gulab Kunwarji Charitable Trust have emerged as the public charitable trusts responsible for more than 50 developmental projects in and around Udaipur. The City Palace Museum, Maharana Mewar Special Library, Maharana Mewar Research Institute, the publications division, and educational institutes are some of the key projects being managed and developed by the Trusts. HRH Group of Hotels, Udaipur, is the flagship commercial venture of the House of Mewar. HRH Group of Hotels is India's largest and only chain of heritage palace-hotels and resorts under private ownership. Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur is the Chairman and Managing Director of the HRH Group of Hotels, which offers regal experiences in island-palaces, museums, galleries, car collections, and much more. In recognition of his contribution to the promotion of tourism

in the country, Shriji has been conferred several prestigious awards that include the IATO Hall of Fame Award in 2009, the Tata AIG Lifetime Achievement Award by Galileo Express TravelWorld for 2007, and the 'Agastya Award' by the Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI) for 2001. Shriji has been an active member of the prestigious World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC). With the Government of Rajasthan, Shriji has been the advisor to the Rajiv Gandhi Tourism Development Mission, as well as an Executive Member of the Rajasthan Foundation. Shriji was educated at the prestigious Mayo College, Ajmer from where he completed his school certificate conducted by Cambridge University. He obtained his Bachelor's of Arts degree in Udaipur. He studied English literature, economics, and political science at the Maharana Bhupal College in Udaipur. Shriji undertook a hotel management course from the Metropolitan College, St. Albans in the U.K. Later, he gained invaluable on-the-job training in hospitality services in the United States.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The House of Mewar (www.eternalmewar.in), acknowledged as the world's oldest-serving dynasty, has faced challenges, which have tested the maintenance of the Custodianship form of governance and the Custodian's commitment to carry on serving as The Diwan of Shree Eklingnath ji. In 1947, with India's Independence, and again in 1971, with the abolition of Princely Privileges, the office of the Custodian necessitated reinventions. In 1984, the mantle of 76th Custodian devolved upon Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur. The original status of Custodian, as provided in the Constitution of India, ceased to exist. The challenge for Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur was to bring the different identities of inheritance under one umbrella. Eternal Mewar was conceptualized to provide the vision for the 21st century. It encompasses the core values and legacy of the House of Mewar. Eternal Mewar covers all the activities of the House of Mewar. Eternal Mewar has also emerged as a unique heritage brand exemplifying hospitality, cultural preservation, philanthropy, education, sports, and spirituality for global audiences.

Your main focus since the beginning has been the palace-hotels, but you've gone beyond that now, correct?

We've gone much beyond palace-hotels because the next generation is into the operations and the running of the business. But I've been in the hospitality business since 1961. We opened the Palace in 1963, so we have been in it for a long time.

What is the main business focus now?

Other than our personal portfolios, the running business is heritage hospitality. But my responsibilities go beyond hospitality. The Western world, in particular, needs to understand what the House of Mewar is all about. The scope of responsibility that I have assumed is rather large. I'll take you back to 1947 being the year of independence when we amalgamated the State of Udaipur into the Union of India.

At that time, India consisted of nine British principalities and approximately 565 Princely States. The challenge was to unite and form them into the Republic of India, which is what happened in 1947. So when the British left, the Presidencies went with Union and 565 States, one of which was ours, was also amalgamated with the Union of India. There was a special position for the ex-rulers guaranteed in the Indian Constitution as it first came into existence in 1951. Thereafter, it was amended and all the citizens of India were brought on a similar platform in 1971.

The challenge, first for my father and now for me, is how to continue to discharge our age-old responsibilities as the head of the House of Mewar. I understand and I accept that we now have no constitutional responsibilities today. We are not in the business of active elective politics, which is also our choice. And yet the desire is that this house should continue to function in



Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur worshipping the horse on the occasion Ashwa Poojan at the Manek Chowk, City Palace Complex, Udaipur (above)



its entirety as earlier, as the legacy goes back to the 8th century AD; I am the 76th generation of this House.

We have always looked at it as a Custodianship form of government from day one, not a Kingship form of government, and there is a vast difference between the two. That



is the basic thrust that you must comprehend, because this is a unique form of government.

The State of Mewar was not acquired aggressively, but rather on the principle of a teacher and a pupil. The pupil was selected on merit and was given the responsibility of administering this parcel of land, where the wise man said, "You'll be holding it in trust; you're not the owner of it." We still believe this even in the 21st century and I suppose this is also a modern corporate thinking process. But there was no trust act that governed, so it's your conscience which is responsible. You can lie to anybody, but you can't cheat your own conscience; that was the critical point of which we were made responsible in our governing. In a Kingship form of governance, the ownership of everything rests with an individual, so once you're an owner of something, you can do what you like. But if you're holding something in trust on behalf of somebody, it's a different concept of divinity. The idea is that you are also responsible towards somebody, so you preserve, enhance, restore, and pass it onto the next generation.

I am often asked, what is the secret to the sustainability of 76 generations? I'm not saying that everybody was a great contributor to the family fortunes, but everybody was very conscious of the fact that they have to pass it onto the next generation. It's a collective responsibility, which is continuous and eternal. In today's day and age with iconic thinking about brands, we started calling it Eternal Mewar, which is

everything Mewar stood for, whether it is a commercial existence or water management or environment or cuisine – that which we have been looking after.

So I am the Custodian of this but we are looking for joint custodians to make sure we perpetuate the traditions of the House and the Eternal Mewar concept into the future.

Of course, palace-hotels and income are very important; earning money is not a sin. But at the same time, we feel that the different hats I wear help me discharge my responsibilities and duties on both commercial and non-commercial fronts.

You also do a great deal for the environment, particularly on the lake, which is man-made.

Udaipur is a man-made city, and if it is competing with a State like Kashmir which is a natural beauty, then you can imagine that our forefathers must have done something right to



create this. The Aravalli Range, these old-formed mountains, are more ancient and much older than the Himalayas. You pick a site, you build a capital city, and you can sustain it. There are so many cities built on this mountain range, but few have had the sustainability that Udaipur has demonstrated. We have hotels, but it's a living palace; it's a living hotel. It's not a big monument. We don't want Udaipur to ever become a dead monument and be talked about in the past tense. We want Udaipur to be contemporary and we continue to contemporize because we are not fearful of change; what was true 1,400 years ago isn't true today. But as the forefathers went along, they had the foresight and did not fear change and, therefore, they were relevant to the time in which they lived and remain connected today.

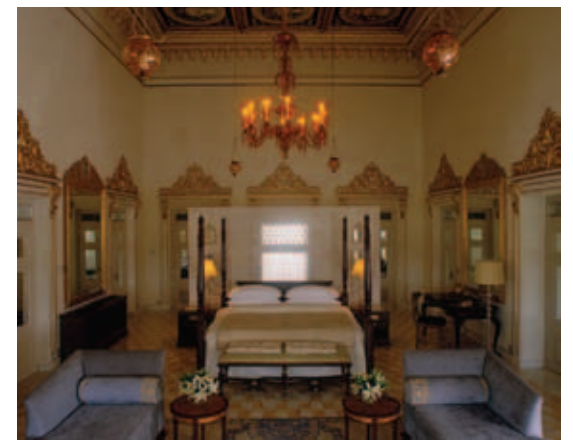
A lot of what I've discussed may seem abstract and intangible, but we believe firmly in continuing this form of governance even in a democratic set up because it has worked for so long and still works. Kellogg School of Management and the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad, did a case study on our family that was presented in March 2010. I am proud that some of the best minds in family business management – Professor John Ward and Professor K Ramachandran – spent almost two years researching and studying the House of Mewar and the challenges it has faced.

How are you handling the issue of water purification, as well as the lake disappearing at certain times?

It's a serious issue, there is no doubt about it, and there is no reason why it should happen. I am aware of global warming and I'm aware of the insufficiency of rain during the monsoons. But today's technology can do a lot of things in terms of water harvesting and making sure that the lake never dries up. This is too political for me to go into in depth, but there are ways and means of ensuring that this lake never dries up. Tourism is the main industry focus for this area.

Is the lake being filled important for continuing the success of tourism?

Rajasthan's economy depends on tourism; it provides the people with a quality of life and with a means to sustain themselves. So it's an economic necessity. What the city authorities haven't been able to do, tourism has done. We're a much cleaner place because the people have realized that to keep a clean shop front, they can't put the garbage at the front door and expect the municipality to take it; people are



Exterior View of the Lake Palace (top); Sajjan Niwas Suite (top left); Jag Mandir Darshan Suite (center); Chandra Prakash Suite (bottom right)



doing it themselves, because there is a commercial value to it. I firmly believe that in the sustenance or preservation of any destination, there has to be an element of commercial interest in all of it. Otherwise, you can talk until you're blue in the face but it won't impact anything or anyone.

The Taj Lake Palace Hotel is one of the great landmarks in the hotel business and has a view and feeling that is found nowhere else. You made an arrangement a few years ago with the Taj Hotels property, and put millions of dollars into upgrading everything. This must have been a tremendous investment on your part.

Investment in the past 10 years has been done with Taj because we changed our arrangement a bit. We don't have those deep pockets which a public company has for this kind of work. We thought that in the larger interests of the business and of the people of Udaipur, it is best that we come up with an arrangement with a company like Taj, and we've been with them since 1971.

You have remarkable employees working at the hotel. Where do you find such good people?

You don't find good people. There is no such thing as bad people and good people. It's the culture of the city. We are a very proud people here. Yet we don't feel ashamed to serve; 90 percent of the Western countries find it very difficult to find people who take pride in service. Now, if you are not a service-oriented person or service-minded person, you shouldn't be in the hospitality business. You can train people, you can hone in skills, but you can't hone in attitudes.

Many years ago, when Kings visited other Kings, they were presented with decorations, and each country had various stages and orders of their decorations, and when, for instance, the Queen or King of England gave you an order, it was with real diamonds, rubies, and emeralds – that is no longer the case. It seems a sad reminder of the good old days of the past.



I see where you're coming from, but we never coveted any of that. One has to take a lot of pride in one's own self-respect today. And in order to do that, you have to lead from the front, and unfortunately, the younger generation is often not prepared to work hard enough to demonstrate those leadership qualities. The advantage we have is that we have so many precedents in our family and we take our inspiration from our history. We feel that there is an honorable way to live and that is extremely important and dear to us.

As a King, what is your greatest frustration?

I am a Custodian and, yes, there may be some frustrations but not major ones. These days, if you have the ability to carry people with

you and have enough leadership qualities, you can achieve what you want to achieve. Perhaps there is a better way of doing things than in a dictatorial manner. In our family, this business of Custodianship form of government always took these factors into consideration and, therefore, the art of management of collective responsibility is something that is not new to us. So when you say King, I wanted to qualify your question by saying that as Custodians, what is my greatest frustration, because as a King, I have none. As Custodians, you want things to move and it takes a little time, and I find it a little frustrating.

One of the frustrations of anyone in your position must be trying to bring better understanding between India, the East and the West, for those who don't travel and develop the understanding of other cultures and peoples as they should.

I wish the government would do more to achieve that. Unfortunately, even after 60 odd years of independence, there is a feeling of a "you and me" sort of a thing. They don't look at us – the former Princely Order – as ordinary contributing citizens of India, because we are very proud to be citizens of India today. But our legacy is often held against us; this could also be used in a positive manner. But this is how it is. You can't do anything about it. They still haven't forgotten the old Maharaja days and they pick and choose some of the ones who are not very good towards their people.

Today, even though I'm not in politics, I feel proud of my connection with the people of Udaipur; we have a great affectionate relationship based on love and trust. I can't find a job for everybody, I can't give a pension or medical treatment to everybody, but we do what we can. They trust me and any relationship is something you need to work at. People ask me why I don't go into politics, but I feel that I can do more for the people of Udaipur by being out of politics.

You are a very public person and are out and about, meeting many tourists.

I probably meet more people than the people internationally traveling and coming to my hotel. Obviously, I meet many people who are tourists. But at the same time, I give a lot of my time to interacting with global and Indian influencers and decision-makers. It is a great learning exercise for me, helping me to remain contemporary and relevant as a Custodian. ●



Lake Palace, Udaipur: Swimming Pool (top); Spa Treatment Room (center); Private Sit Out (bottom)