

The Begum of the Boutique



Priya Paul is one of India's most successful hoteliers. She also pioneered the concept of nationwide boutique hotels
By Ameeta Agnihotri.

PRIYA PAUL IS visibly glowing and happily pregnant. Before we start talking, she says, "Stick to the questions please." Like any CEO she obviously wants to be in control. There are a few she has 'X'ed out in my questionnaire. Married to Chennai's quiet and animal rights friendly businessman Sethu Vaidyanathan, she spends a lot of time here. There is no question of a long distance marriage or being torn between a career and a personal relationship. The couple travel together a lot.

"Right now, we are both together here, and tomorrow we are going away for a week. Balancing a marriage and work is an issue for all married women; there is no correct formula and it has to work out as you go along," she says matter-of-factly.

As the chairperson of Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels, Paul of course is one of the country's best known business women. She is among the most respected professionals in the hotel industry and has been nominated twice for *Economic Times's* Business Woman of the Year award. Her biggest achievement has been giving the once sleepy Park group a brand new identity in form of a boutique hotel company.



For the five-hotel group this distinguishing trademark was important in an industry dominated by behemoths like the Taj, Oberoi and ITC.

As Paul says, "We don't think of ourselves as a 'chain' and we certainly do not want to be called a 'chain', as a 'chain' implies a certain similarity, which we are trying not to do. We are trying to be a collection of individual boutique hotels." And the strategy has paid off. The Park Hotels in cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Calcutta

and Chennai stand out not for their size, but for the distinctive design, look and ambience of their rooms, lobbies, restaurants and night-clubs. Staying at a Park Hotel is all about savouring a different experience.

Paul's business acumen comes from her father, the Calcutta tea magnate Surendra Paul who was tragically gunned down at the height of insurgency in Assam in 1990. The family-run Apeejay Surrendra Paul group which was founded in the early part of the century has



interests that range from tea plantations, shipping, steel, real estate, construction, financial services to book stores, hotels and restaurants. By age 10, Paul says, she found all the shop talk about the family business so interesting there was no doubt in her mind about where her life would head once an education was in place. "Between class 10 and 12 I would often sit by my father's desk. I would sit in at meetings and he would try and get me to participate, or ask my opinion." And by the time she came back with a degree in economics from Wellesley College in the United States, her father had chartered out her career. "My father could have positioned me in any of the businesses, but he happened to put me in the hotel business", she says.

She started out as a marketing manager at the Park in Delhi, but by 1990, after her father's death, she was forced to take over the running of the group's hotel division (her sister and brother run the other divisions). She was still 23 then, and the three hotel group, though in existence since 1967, was a fringe player in the industry. As Paul saw it, "One of the issues was how were we, as a small hotel company going to be top of the line, how were we going to survive and be different from the rest of the pack. I felt that the hotel business could be much more creative and much more challenging for me." And thus was born her plan to re-orient her hotels to fit the concept of boutique hotels.

The term 'boutique hotel' was coined in the US in the eighties when smaller and largely

family-owned hotels tried to differentiate themselves and compete against the larger full service hotels. Boutique hotels as one expert put it, are "intimate hotels that are uniquely designed, dedicated to details and focused on highly personalised service, all at a value to the customer. In the boutique hotel, guests often sleep in, and the general pace is slower and more relaxed. Designs vary often from room to room and require a higher degree of service. The bars and restaurants stand out for their ambience and food. The guest's experience requires more attentiveness from the staff to achieve the degree of service the customer expects. The ratio of employees to guests is typically higher to meet that need, while the number of rooms in a boutique property is generally

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lower than larger full service hotels." The Bedford Hotel in San Francisco and Morgans Hotel in New York, both set up in 1981, are considered to be two pioneering boutique hotels, and the idea has become popular around the world since.

"Small, personal and intimate. And you do not have to have nine restaurants to be a luxury hotel," has been Paul's own definition of boutique hotels. The Park in Kolkata was the first to come under her knife in the early 1990s. The rooms were redesigned into 89 Deluxe rooms, 43 Luxury rooms and 17 plus Deluxe suites. The luxury rooms feature 43-inch Plasma TVs, the Deluxe suites come with Jacuzzis and personal butlers. A new oriental restaurant called Zen was set up with East Asian cuisine and a strikingly unusual black and white decor highlighted by powerful lighting and art on the walls. The hotel's trendy image was further enhanced with a new nightclub called Tantra.

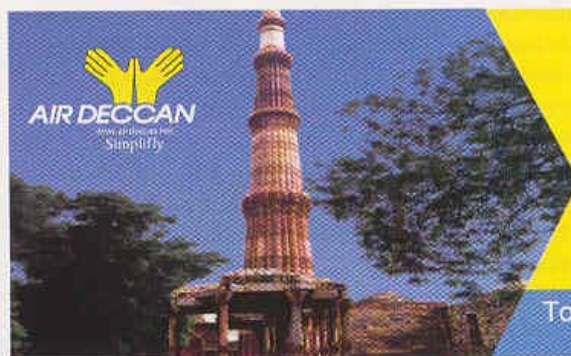
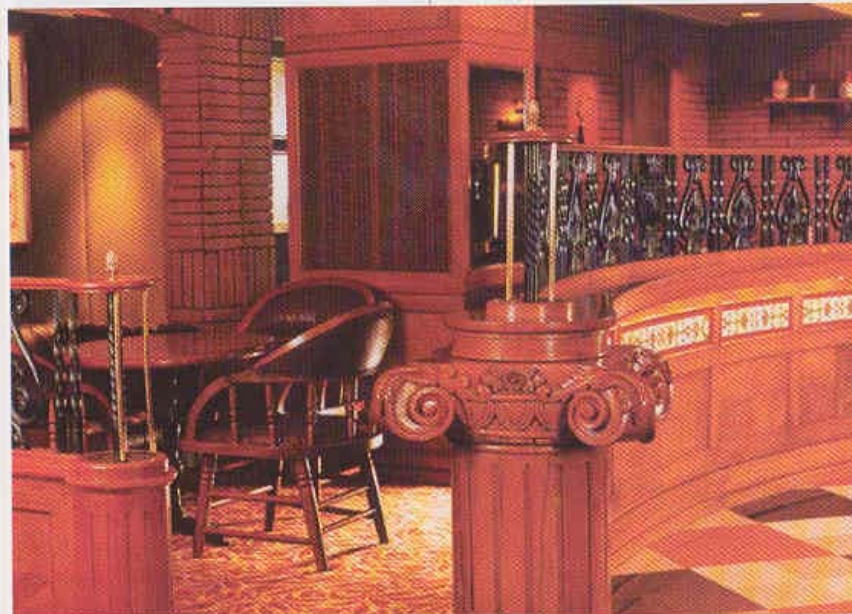
Spread over 5000 sq feet covering two levels with two bars, it has a dance floor and a lounge that many rate to be amongst the best in the country.

Simultaneously, work also started on new hotels in the flourishing IT cities of Bangalore and Chennai. The Bangalore property which opened in 2000 features 109 rooms designed by the UK firm of Conran & Partners. *Tatler* magazine has rated it as one of the 101 best hotels in the world. In keeping with the boutique tradition, the hotel is all about style.

"The design philosophy is a fusion of the vibrant colours and landscapes of India with international style. Each area is specially designed to provide a richer and more sensual interaction. The hotel draws on Indian sensations and environment to provide travellers an 'urban retreat,' is the management's description of the property. The lobby for example, has been termed as a 'silk box' with orange raw-

silk curtains, leather furniture and a series of gazebos.

The hotel's lounge bar, I-Bar, is considered among the hippest hangout places in the city with its low furniture, beanbags, neon colours and a wall of rich carpet woven in a pattern suggestive of a circuit board. Then there is the Italian restaurant called i-t. ALIA where the timber floor complements a charcoal black upholstery with lime green sofas in the niches. Even the massage and gym area has been specially designed with a translucent azure glass backdrop and given the soothing name of Aquazone. The rooms feature a combination of silk, leather, oak and glass with a four-poster bed carrying a custom-made 10 inch mattress as the centre-piece. Many rooms have balconies with deck chairs. On the outside, each of the four floors is designed to please the senses. The first floor has been designed to give the feel of a cool expanse of water, the second floor suggests



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a mountain landscape, the third floor the look of a jungle and the fourth floor denotes an oasis in a desert.

Cutting-edge design, this time by Hirsch Bedner Associates from Los Angeles, is also the central highlight of the Park in Chennai which opened its doors in the year 2002. Built on the premises of the historic Gemini Studios the luxurious 215-room hotel boasts of multi-layered lobby which has been modelled to evoke a look of a theatre, and is appropriately named The Stage. The 24-hour restaurant called Six-O-One has bamboo flooring and coconut shell inlay fused with 18 foot high light columns. The watering hole, appropriately named The Leather Bar is decorated with a rich black leather floor that blends into olive suede walls. Of course, you can't miss the silk encased Thai restaurant called Lotus and the night club with mirrored walls called Pasha.

While the Chennai property is called 'An urban haven', the Bangalore property 'An urban retreat', the Kolkata property 'An urban hub', the Visakhapatnam hotel 'An Urban Beach Retreat', and the newly done up Delhi Park is called 'The

Urban Junction'. The renovation was done by Conran & Partners who designed the Bangalore Hotel property. Fire, the New Delhi Park's Indian restaurant with a single sheet translucent white glass and crystal bead curtains, along with Agni which has a 12-metre long bar with leather tub chairs and glowing glass tables are already a landmark in the capital, particularly among the design minded.

For Paul, the hotels are an extension of her personality "I enjoy the hotels. I have made them into places that I enjoy using. So it works both ways – work and pleasure at the same time," she says. Having gone against conventional norms did she ever consider the possibility of failure? "I think you can't always think you will be a success. That is certainly not how you live your life. You have apprehensions about everything that you do. Being confident and sure comes with a lot of practical experience, and you know some things that are going to work and some that are not going to. You just move ahead and make plans work."

Does she feel stressed out by the burden of constant innovation? "I think every business

has its stresses and issues. I find the business very creative, not unusually stressful. We make our hotels a little different, a little more fun," A new project takes up a lot of her attention, 'particularly during the construction and development stage'. While an older, running property would naturally need less supervision. But a visit every three months is definitely on for every one of her hotels. Currently though she lives between Delhi and Chennai.

Quite calm in a crisis situation, there is no formula that Priya follows to guarantee success. "We just enjoy what we are doing and create things that we like doing. It is a team effort. We brainstorm a lot, but the final briefing and design direction is given by me." The decision to build the Chennai hotel, for example, was not based on any market survey but purely on intuition. "We simply went ahead and did what we wanted," she says. And it worked.

Currently what occupies Priya Paul's mind and time are three new projects – one is a new restaurant at The Park, Delhi, renovation of the famous Flurys, which was started in 1927, in Calcutta, and of course there is baby... ✧