

PRIYA PAUL

Park Ranger

The latest addition to The Park Hotels portfolio is a modern palace inspired by Hyderabad's glittering past, explains **Priya Paul**, Chairperson of the hospitality division of the Apeejay Surrendra Group.

Words: Catherine Martin Photography: Courtesy of The Park Hotels

Priya Paul is feeling a little under the weather. "I'm losing my voice," she explains apologetically before it transpires that the group's centenary celebrations took place a few days earlier – clearly a great success.

Apeejay Surrendra Group, the owner of The Park Hotels, was commemorating one hundred years in business with a lavish bash at its newly opened 'baby', The Park Hyderabad. From its beginnings in manufacturing steel goods for the domestic agricultural market, the group has diversified with operations in tea, hospitality, shipping, real estate and retail. The family values that have nurtured the group continue to guide it through expansion and new business ventures, so for the woman at the helm of the hospitality division, there's no time to waste.

Despite the sore throat, Paul's ambition and drive is clear as she recalls her journey from marketing manager to Chair. "My family owns the company so I've been with

The Park Hotels since 1988," she explains. "I started as marketing manager at The Park Hotel Delhi and now I head the company, driving it since the early Nineties."

Having completed her studies in Economics at the Wellesley College, Massachusetts, Priya returned to India working under her father, Surrendra Paul. After his untimely death in 1990, she succeeded him as the Chairperson of the hospitality division of the Apeejay Surrendra Group, aged just 24.

She didn't assume her position just because of circumstance, however. Her hard work and determination have pioneered the concept of boutique hotels in India, seeing The Park Hotels portfolio triple in size. "When I joined we had three hotels and now we are up to nine with another five under development," she reveals adding that they are currently working on a record five projects right now, two of which are under construction. Located in Pune, Jaipur, Kolkata, Kochi, and Goa, the new





LEFT: The latest addition to the portfolio, The Park Hyderabad, takes inspiration from the Jewels of the Nizams ABOVE: The seven-star palace has been designed by Skidmore Owings & Merrill (SOM)

► properties will go some way to the target of doubling the group's room count in the next five years.

Its latest flagship, The Park Hyderabad, is the city's first member of Design Hotels™. It seeks to build on the group's signature style, innovative design and passionate

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service. Since she began her tenure, Paul's attentions have been on "refocusing the entire company and to really use design as a differentiator." As such she has employed international design firms to create her vision, including Conran & Partners. "They've done a lot of work with us starting with our Bengaluru hotel in 1999-2000, then Delhi

responsible for the entire renovation and refurbishment, working with us on our brief to create contemporary Indian hotels."

In addition, Paul has collaborated with London-based practices Blacksheep and Project Orange, with the latter currently creating interiors for a new property in Pune.

For The Park Hyderabad, Paul used a total of 15 designers no less, some of whom had no previous history of designing hotels. Although open to new ideas, Paul admits she was very clear on the ambience she wanted to create and remained heavily involved in the entire design process.

"I wanted to build something that was iconic in terms of architecture," says Paul of the newbuild, nine-storey property. Working with Skidmore Owings & Merrill (SOM), the brief was to take inspiration from the Jewels of the Nizams, the largest and richest collection of jewels in India. "We worked on a glass building enveloped in a skin of some 6,700 metal panels which take their



she explains. The perforated metal screen based on the Indian '*jali*' wraps around the building and serves as both an ornamental façade as well as a shading device. This is just one of the aspects that has contributed to The Park's status as India's first LEED GOLD certified green hotel.

Paul continues: "I wanted this to be a modern seven-star palace, so just as a palace had many rulers and different design influences through its life, I too wanted to use different designers." She was also keen on infusing Indian culture in the hotel, ensuring the design is rooted into the locale, not just the country. "My job is to bring the art and craft to the hotel and make sure there is some sort of context," she explains. For The Park Hyderabad however, Paul wanted to do something a little different. "I felt that in India, whether it be product design, furniture, or lighting, there were some really exciting new practitioners that I wanted to showcase," she reveals.

The ambitious project has seen

embroiderer Jean-Francois Lesage design one of the suites, with Indian fashion designers Manish Arora and Rohit Bal, architect Rajiv Saini, and artists Subodh Gupta and Bharti Kher each designing further spaces. Throughout the property, customised pieces – including chandeliers, textile installations, furniture and tableware – celebrate Indian design trends. Himanshu Dogra for example has created in-room Nizam graphics, and Preksha Baid a series of chandeliers.

Leading fashion designer Tarun Tahilliani was also commissioned to create Aish, a restaurant serving Hyderabad and Andhra cuisine. Based on a modern monochromatic theme inspired by the legendary style of the Nizams, the restaurant features antique artwork and traditional craftsmanship with a light colour palette of cream, beige and ivory. Diners enter through a handcrafted silver Art Deco style door, crafted by Jodhpuri craftsmen and walk over a floor etched in floral prints typical of Jaipur. ►

ABOVE: First opened in 1967, The Park Kolkata was the group's flagship property. It has recently been refurbished by Conran & Partners to dramatic effect



► Guestrooms and public spaces, including The Veranda, The Sicca Bar, The Box souvenir shop, Kismet nightclub, the Aqua restaurant, and the 3D infinity pool have been created by international design firms, Conran & Partners, Chhada Siembada, and Blacksheep. In addition Sandeep Khosla has designed The Aura Spa. Each space follows Paul's brief of referencing Hyderabad's proud tradition as a centre of design and the production of precious stones and distinctive textiles. Guestrooms draw inspiration from the architectural language of the building, as well as local traditions of craftsmanship, all the while recognising the needs of the international traveller. The play of light and shadow inside the room is created by the patterning of the façade, whilst jewel coloured accents of ruby, coral, emerald, peridot and sapphire have been used on each of the five guestroom floors. The art in the room comes in the form of hand drawn patterns on the bed and specially commissioned leather puppetry artworks,

while carpets reference India's reputation of henna. The use of embroidery and selection of fabrics consciously draws on the expertise of local artisans.

Also worthy of note is The Ruby Lounge, a one of its kind lounge where the infusion of local art form and contemporary design is at its best. Created by award-winning designer Niranjana Jonnalagadda, it takes inspiration from Mughal architecture. The ceiling is created using handmade KalamKari textile, native to Andhra Pradesh, in a contemporary style with diffused lighting. In addition, a series of handcrafted suspended dome metal lights in shades of gold, silver and purple, depict a colourful richness associated with the life of the Nizams.

Priya Paul is clearly very proud of her "new baby" but with plans to consolidate The Park Hotels' position as a world-class boutique hotel business through the launch of new hotels across India, she must get back to work. After all, the next 'baby' will be due before the year is out. ■

ABOVE: Project Orange is currently working on The Park Hotel Pune. Renowned as 'The Oxford of the East' and home to many universities and colleges, their concept is to understand the hotel as a hub of knowledge