



PRIYA AND PRITI PAUL

“Our new hotel represents the ‘new’ new India: it’s where the change is happening right now. It’s places like Hyderabad, people like Rahul Gandhi and Nandan Nilekani...” —PRITI PAUL

*Business*

PRIYA + PRITI PAUL

**Y**ou’d notice them anywhere: two beautiful women sharing a pot of tea, chatting and laughing. The morning light falls directly on them through the window, their white saris sparkle with gold and grey accents, their BlackBerrys and books lie neglected as silverware clinks and jasmine brews. You try to eavesdrop, but the conversation is scattered, flitting from one delicious thing to the next like a butterfly, resting on art, then fashion, then real estate, then tea, then hotels, then shipping... and you realise that these aren’t just any two enchanting women; they’re arguably India’s most glamorous sisters—Priya and Priti Paul—and the animated conversation you’ve been catching bits of is probably industry talk, and there may well be a few multi-million-dollar deals at stake.

“Luckily, our business is large enough that we have different spheres of control,” Priya explains. At 43, she’s the elder of the two, the one who exudes calm and quiet authority. She manages the family’s Park Hotels, six establishments across the country (two more are opening soon). Mother to a four-year-old, Priya is also president of the Hotel Association of India and is regularly voted among India’s most powerful businesswomen. It’s hard to imagine Priya at 24—fresh from Wellesley College and two years into learning the ropes of the hospitality business—when her father passed away, and she was catapulted overnight to the head of the Rs 6,000-crore Apeejay Surrendra Group. “I always knew I wanted to be in the family business... but we were thrust into immense responsibility at a very young age. We were still coping with the grief. It was a learning experience.”

“When you have to do something, you just do it,” Priti adds. She regularly jumps in, filling in details. She’s the one who loves books, the one who laughs easily, the one you can imagine doing something incredibly romantic and spontaneous, like having a whirlwind courtship with a Moroccan millionaire and marrying him in a spectacular seven-day travelling wedding, bursting with palaces and tents, fuchsia and peacock, marigolds and orchids, fire-eaters and baby elephants (which she did, in 2003). She’s the one who studied architecture at MIT before she was whisked away and placed in the centre of the family’s office in London to handle their shipping business. “My desk was in the middle of the office and I read every piece of paper that passed through it,” she recalls. “I was 21. Nobody knew what I was doing there. I didn’t know what I was doing there.” Thirteen years later, she handed the shipping division over to her younger brother, Karan, and moved to Marrakech; today she’s in charge of the group’s real estate and retail business and is a mother of two boys. “[If my father hadn’t passed] I’d have worked with an architect for a few years first, but we had 50,000 employees to worry about. You just have to think about the larger good.”

“You draw on the strengths your family has built in you,” says Priya, “a strong support system, good education...”

“Priya was head girl of our school in Kolkata,” Priti offers helpfully. “And school captain, and basketball captain...”

“And Priti was vice-head girl and a captain... and she has many degrees!”

Priti laughs her infectious laugh. “Yes, I have a very expensive education! When Priya and Karan came to Harvard for my graduation, they said, ‘We’re not coming for any more!’”

Priya and Priti have distinctly different portfolios, but share a lot in common outside the realm of business—like a love for fashion and a loyalty to wearing saris to work almost every day. (Today, Priya’s wearing Gaurav Gupta, Priti’s in a Suneet Verma she ordered last night—it arrived at 6am.) “It’s a shame that in this day and age, saris have become so unusual,” says Priya. “They’re always elegant and versatile.” Priti chimes in, “Priya and I just spent three months in Kolkata and went shopping for 300-rupee cotton saris at Saree Kuteer. I love what you can do with saris, how you can dress them up or down, play with materials and weaves... We love all kinds.”

Another similarity is their love for Indian art. The Park Hotel chain is known for pioneering design-driven boutique hotels in India and incorporating art into their decor. Personally, Priya loves pop imagery and contemporary artists (Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher). Priti’s penchant is for video art, but “my first purchase, when I got my first salary cheque, was a Souza,” she says, still delighted. “Our mother would always take us to galleries and museums growing up. She’d buy art when she loved the work—not when it was fashionable.”

It’s no wonder the sisters have a lot to talk about this morning over tea. Despite the fact that they meet formally, as a board, on a regular basis to take strategic decisions, they informally collaborate on almost all the projects they head individually, talking every day of two. Case in point: the Park, Hyderabad, opening this month. It’s especially close to their hearts—not only because it’s a one-of-a-kind “modern Nizam’s palace” that’s bringing together dozens of the biggest names in contemporary design in India and abroad—but also because it’s the first hotel they’re “building ground up”, versus inheriting or acquiring.

“I wanted to create something architecturally interesting, something outstanding, iconic,” says Priya.

“I love the idea of creating spaces, of influencing the way we live, work and move through cities,” Priti says. “As a developer, you influence so many wonderful things—like how you can sit and enjoy a cup of tea! The space, people, events, add to the fabric of a city... Our new hotel represents the ‘new’ new India,” and she offers as explanation: “The new India is Bangalore, the ‘new’ new India is Hyderabad. It’s where the change is happening now. It’s people like Rahul Gandhi, Nandan Nilekani...”

And certainly, it’s people like the Paul sisters: constantly on the move (with family vacations every couple of months, anywhere from Corsica to Bali), always adapting to whatever situation they find themselves in, seamlessly moving from one project to the next without forgetting their unique but shared history. As the conversation flits again, back to hotels and then art, Priya and Priti show how easy it is to be fooled by glamorous avatars. Sequins sparkle, silverware clinks, air miles clock non-stop, but what lies underneath—and between them—is all heart.

By Divia Thani Daswani