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Jane Richardson Chronicles Mewar in Her Life and New Book

Draped in a svelte sari, hair swept regally high, Jane Richardson holds court in her home near Cleveland, Ohio. In a one-woman show, she becomes a Rajput queen, a rani in the stone castles of Rajasthan, northwestern India. Most Ohioans don't know she really is a princess, and if you invite Jane to a party, should you address her as "your royal highness?" Most Rajputs don't know she is a princess either. But ask the Queen Mother of Udaipur, India. She'll enthusiastically explain how Jane Richardson was officially adopted as her daughter, and by Prince Narendra as his sister. Udaipur is Richardson's second home, an atmospheric city in dusty Rajasthan. It was called Mewar in the feudal days and has been under a single-family rule for 1,400 valorous and sometimes ignoble years. It is in Mewar that Richardson sets her new historic novel *Virgin Princess*, a spicy saga of Rajput royalty two hundred years ago.

For a woman reared in the heartland of America, married 45 years, mother of two and grandmother of six, Jane Richardson has certainly wandered afar. She says, "As a child, I would think of India mainly as a place of extremely different cultures, and cultures always intrigued me." She and her husband often took their children out of school and took them to trips in the US and Europe. In the past 20 years, she has made 25 trips to India, struck up friendships with Indira Gandhi and President V.V. Giri, and knows more about Rajasthani history than many locals themselves. How did Richardson form this binding relationship with the royal family?

The encounter that Jane Richardson recounts seems almost a fairytale: Way back in the 70's, when she was planning her very first trip to India, she met an Indian

gentleman at dinner. This Mr. Singh asked her with Indian politeness if there was anything that he could do for her in India. She retorted jokingly that she would like him to arrange a meeting with the Maharana of Udaipur. Says Richardson, "Since then I've learned that you don't joke with Indians because they take you very seriously." Her new friend mailed her a copy of the letter he sent to India, with instructions for her to be picked up at the airport and put up as a guest at the Lake Palace Hotel. The last paragraph read: "Mrs. Richardson would like to meet papa, if he is in station." Mr. Singh was none other than Crown Prince Arvind Singh, son of the Maharana of Udaipur.

This serendipitous meeting led to a cementing of the friendship with other members of the royal family, all of whom liked their guest from Ohio. She says, "I was absolutely enthralled with their history. It threw me into a tailspin. Everything in India snowballed for me after that. It was the most amazing thing." On subsequent visits to Udaipur, her relationship with the royal family continued to grow. The Maharana's younger brother Prince Narendra asked her to be his sister, and she agreed. This formal adoption involved the Queen Mother's acquiescence, and just as in Hindu weddings, the horoscopes had to be matched, and the priests had to ascertain an auspicious date and time for the ceremony. The official ceremony was held at the Maharana's family temple Eklingji, 14 miles from Udaipur.

Richardson describes Udaipur as "the city of my dreams - awake or asleep. Being the City of Lakes, the world's most beautiful hotel - Lake Palace - rests comfortably in the center of Lake Pichola. This white marble royal residence was once the summer home of the ranas of Mewar. There was a fairyland. There is a fairyland. It is here in Udaipur."

She found the royals, in spite of living in lavish marble palaces, to be surprisingly down-to-earth. She observes, "They are extremely well-educated, interesting and interested. They have a rich heritage which they treasure, and the people of their cities, towns and villages are equally proud and revere their background. In fact, there is a Maharana Mewar Foundation Annual Awards ceremony at the City Palace in Udaipur, where people are awarded for their endeavors in writing about the kingdom's history."

At the palace, Richardson recalls, family members would get together only at lunch time, leaving everyone to follow one's own inclinations in the morning, with

breakfast being served in each individual's room. All members of the family would meet for lunch which was chicken or more often fish caught from the waters of Lake Pichola. Richardson remembers a full moon night with the family when they took a barge to Jag Mandir Island on Lake Pichola - then without electricity. Musicians and dancers entertained the party while their meal was being cooked on the island. This charming hideaway has a small palace where Prince Khurram, later to become Shah Jahan of Taj Mahal fame, came to stay for a few months while rebelling against his father, the Emperor Jehangir. At other times guests would be entertained with the renowned Mewari puppeteers, or with a horse-and-buggy ride to Sahelion-ki-Bari (The Gardens of the Maids of Honor), strolling around the fountains. "Especially interesting were the marble elephants spouting water from their trunks, and a little bird spinning around dizzily as the water jet stream hit it."

The Maharana his family enjoy raising horses, and Richardson's adopted brother Narendra Singh raises the Marwari breed. According to him, they are the only Indian breed. The horses raised by the royals are also used by riding clubs in Germany. In November, 1982, Granada Television from England used these horses for the filming of the highly acclaimed television serial on 1940's India, Jewel In the Crown.

Richard has been intrigued not so much by the royal family's exalted position in life but by their amazingly rich historical background. Giving us a mini-armchair tour of Udaipur, she describes this incredible city of dreams: "All of Mewar is extraordinarily beautiful with desert sands, lush jungles and the sprawling Aravalli Hills. There is a vast variety of birds and now protected wildlife.

"In every direction the romantic past lies before us - ours to seek and take. Skirting Udaipur at 2000-feet above sea level are spirit-haunted mountains, and everywhere are found inexhaustible treasures of bygone days. The Maharana's main palace was built by Udai Singh atop stone, soon after creating the man-made Lake Pichola. One awakens each morning to the rhythmic pounding of cloth on the rocks at the lake's edge as the dhobhis do their laundry. At the opposite end of the lake, well away from the city, one can take a boat ride and watch water buffalo ferrying heron while crocodiles bask in the sun.

When Jane Richardson first went to India she knew nobody, yet after her encounter with the royals of Udaipur, she had friends and friends of friends in every city she visited. She stayed almost always with Hindu families, and she says, "It made me

realize how many facets of Hinduism there are." Deeply interested in different cultures, she never missed an opportunity to participate in the rituals of family and social life. She went to every event she possibly could, especially if it pertained to religion. She sat with learned priests, and using interpreters, she was able to make sense even of Sanskrit discourses, and understand the reasons behind the rituals.

On her first visit to Udaipur, the Maharana sent her in the palace car, with a packed lunch from the palace, with the instructions to spend three hours in the temple. She wondered how she could pass such a long time there until she saw the temple of Ronakpur. This ancient Jain temple was very plain from the outside (a strategy to protect it from Muslim marauders who used to deface all the magnificent carvings). But once inside, you see the pure magnificence - 1444 pillars which hold the massive dome, and every pillar is carved differently. The dome itself is carved out of a single slab of marble, and the carvings of flowers are so intricate, they actually seem to have fragrance.

By far her favorite temple is the family shrine of Eklingji, where she was formally adopted into the family. This ancient temple has an inner sanctum which enshrines a fourfaced image of Lord Shiva in black marble and darshans are given four times a day. Having been adopted into the Mewar royal family, Richardson was able to enter this sacred shrine where non-Hindus are forbidden.

How much has Richardson been influenced by Hinduism? She says, "I'm a Christian, but I think many of my Hindu friends possess what I believe the Christians are supposed to possess - a moral way of life. I find many times Christians don't act that way. Hinduism, to me, is extremely complex. The more I learned, the more I realized I knew very little. I highly respect it, as I do all religions."

In her travels from north to south, from Delhi to Cochin, always wearing a sari because she finds it a most comfortable attire, she met countless people who extended her the traditional Indian hospitality and insights into their history and culture. Visiting humble huts and opulent palaces, villages and cities, Jane Richardson became a constant note-taker, jotting down oral histories of a vanished past in shorthand. She became especially adept at the history of Mewar, for she had total access to the palace library and archives. The palace librarian even translated books for her which were written in the Mewari dialect. Bit by bit, she pieced together the history of the 1,400-year-old kingdom. She says: "God gave me

the opportunity to go to India and meet all those people in all walks of life. I knew I had to do something with all that knowledge." The result of all her research has been two books: *Tender Hearts of India*, a non-fiction account of her Indian travels. And *Virgin Princess*. She is currently working on a contemporary Indo-American romance set in India, in which she hopes to use all the insights she gained while staying with diverse Indian families and understanding their lifestyles. Richardson, through her company, J.R. Enterprises, Inc., organized several successful tours to India, tailoring them to the needs of ordinary tourists, anthropologists and even bird watchers: "I would introduce them to nice people. Indira Gandhi would sit with them. I would take them to Rashtrapati Bhavan. Friends would invite them to hawans and weddings, and the American, women would even get a chance to make puris. That was my special way of promoting India. I would show them a bit of real honest-to-goodness India instead of hotels and the tourist spots."

Ill-health and the passing of time have slowed down Jane Richardson. Her last visit was five years ago, but the direct telephone line to Udaipur ensures that she calls her brother fairly often. Richardson may be thousands of miles away from India, but in spirit she is very much there. She says, "The love of my life, outside of my personal family, is getting the word around about the people of Mewar, their history and culture." So in Cleveland, Ohio, Jane Richardson transforms herself into the Queen Mother of Udaipur. The audience are her subjects, listening to her explain the rich history of Mewar. Later, in the question and answer period, Americans get to see an India which is very different from the one visited by tourists. Says Jane Richardson with firm conviction, "I get a chance to tell them what the people are about because I firmly believe you don't know any country unless you know its people, and you don't know its people unless you live with them."

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