

## Women in Business

# Betting big on boutique: India's hotel revolutionary

## Profile

Priya Paul took a huge gamble when she rebranded the family hospitality business, writes *Alice Hancock*

It is hard to judge what Priya Paul likes more: proving people wrong or having fun.

The chair of The Park Hotels, an Indian boutique hotel group, remembers some advice she received before opening a hotel in the conservative southern Indian city of Chennai in 2002. Colleagues and friends said the locals would not like her brand of urban, colourful, design-focused hotel.

"I said, look, I'm going to do a hotel that I like doing and that I'm happy doing — and that's what we did. We opened that bar," says the 52-year-old entrepreneur, smiling broadly.

She is referring to the Leather Bar, a lively meeting place at The Park Chennai. Today, most guests are international business travellers, along with well-heeled city residents coming in for the nightlife.

Ms Paul's company, which has 22 hotels and more than 42,000 employees across India, is part of a family-owned conglomerate that stretches from tea plantations and shipping to logistics and property. She sits on the board of the shipping company, Apeejay Shipping, but her main focus is The Park, which she has run as chair since 1990. Soon

after she took on the role, her father was murdered on a visit to a company tea plantation in Assam.

"It was not just an emotional challenge but also a business challenge, because you suddenly had this type of aggressive act in one of the businesses," she says, her gaze turning towards the rooftops visible from the company's London office. The answer, she says, was to focus on "a very robust business plan, achieving the goals that we wanted to achieve".

Ms Paul praises her mother, who took over running the business just 10 days after the murder. But Ms Paul had already proved to her father that she was capable of managing his hotels.

The Apeejay Surrendra group was founded by her grandfather in 1910 and is still run by Ms Paul and her two brothers. The first hotel opened in Calcutta, now Kolkata, with — unusually for the time in India — a discotheque.

Having grown up alongside the business in Kolkata, Ms Paul studied economics at Wellesley College in Massachusetts before her father appointed her to a marketing position at the company's recently opened hotel in New Delhi. This was the group's second hotel after Kolkata, and Ms Paul handled anything from making sales calls to sorting out plumbing problems.

At that time, she says, the market in India was tough and bureaucracy ruled. Hotel owners had to apply to the tourism ministry if they wanted to change their room rates. "There was really nothing of this fantastic growth and power that India has become," she says.



**Priya Paul:**  
**'Why not start the party early?'**

Suzanne Plunkett for the FT

Much of The Park's growth was driven by the liberalisation of the Indian economy that was spurred by changes to economic policy imposed under the terms of loans India received from the World Bank and the IMF in 1991.

The Park has expanded as India's middle classes and their spending power have grown. Today, Indians make more than 1.6bn domestic tourist trips, according to India's Ministry of Tourism. Roads are improving and air travel is cheap. Yet until the early 1990s there was little nightlife in the country's biggest cities or colour in its hotels.

It was 1989 when Ms Paul stayed at a New York hotel designed by Ian Schrager, co-founder of New York nightclub Studio 54, and realised she could do hotels differently. But changing the brief for The Park's designers would be a risk — the "biggest risk that I took".

Her hospitality revolution worked. The hotels were the first in India to adopt a style that became "boutique":

colourful and carefully designed, with international food and modern music.

By 2010 she had expanded the portfolio from two to seven hotels. There are now 11 Park hotels as well as 11 properties under the company's four-star Zone brand. All display art chosen by Ms Paul from her collection of some 4,000 works.

Gesticulating as she adjusts her vermilion salwar kameez, she says she could never understand why hotels were decorated with cheap "paint-by-numbers" pieces. She has loved art since she was a child. "We would goad my parents towards art exhibitions," she says.

She also has a breezy disregard for the starchiness favoured by some high-end hoteliers. Staff, though required to wear a uniform, are encouraged to show their individuality. "If they want to have an earring or a tattoo, we don't mind," she says, though she draws the line at scraggy beards, for "food safety" reasons.

In 1997, Ms Paul returned to her stud-

## Campaigning 'A long journey'

Ms Paul applauds her father for never treating her differently from her brothers, even in the more conservative 1970s India, and says she is shocked by the decline in the participation of Indian women in the workforce.

One reason, she suggests, is a lack of good childcare provision and a breakdown of family support systems.

"There is a bit of this Indian traditional thing that only the man should work, and if your wife is working, it is seen that you can't provide," she says.

Ms Paul is an advocate of a greater role for women in business and public life. The Indian women's cricket team, currently ranked second in the world, could provide some inspiration, she says.

She is also on the board of Breakthrough, a women's rights organisation that focuses on gender discrimination and violence against women.

"It is important for women to have women mentors," she says. "It is a long journey to success. I hope people understand that." AH

ies to do an executive MBA at Harvard Business School. This gave her the time and confidence to reassess and evaluate the way she led the business.

"It's also important to keep educating yourself. The field keeps on changing. That's really how you keep growing," she says. Two new Park hotels are set to open in 2020, while the group has various Zone properties under development.

Ms Paul is frequently on the move, across India and overseas. She travels around India from her home in Delhi every week or so to visit the group's hotels or its headquarters in Kolkata.

Wherever she is, she makes time to check the company WhatsApp chats, where employees suggest new ideas for the business.

One recent suggestion was to start offering guests shots — alcoholic and non-alcoholic — on arrival. Ms Paul loves it. "Why not start the party early?" she laughs.

'If staff want to have an earring or a tattoo, we don't mind'