

# Breaking stereotypes

**Ranju Alex**, Area Vice President - South Asia, Marriott International, is leading several initiatives, including women empowerment, diversity inclusion, sustainability and new business models. In this exclusive interview, she sheds light on the principles that define the company and its journey ahead.



**W**ith a career that spans over 28 years in the hospitality industry, Ranju Alex is a name to reckon with. As she takes over the most catalytic role of her career, she holds a clear vision for her team and the company.

### LOOKING BACK

Alex had always been clear that hospitality was her calling and admits that she was born to be a hotelier. "My journey in this industry was a chosen path for me. Every day when I leave for work, I leave with a spring in my step. I've had times, especially when I was a young mother, when I wanted to quit and stay at home, but as I look back today, it has been one of the most enriching journeys of my life. Through these years, I've seen the hospitality industry undergo a radical transformation. And today, when I see the paradigm shift in people choosing hospitality as their primary career, and not just an alternate backup option, it gives me immense happiness. I have a son and a daughter who decided to be in hotels, and I supported him wholeheartedly because I know what a beautiful industry this is, and the growth potential it holds. And when an industry grows, you grow individually too."

For someone who overcame taboos about women joining hotels, she admits that while a considerable amount of work is yet to be done within this realm, women are also confident in choosing this as a preferred industry today.

### LEARNING LESSONS

In her three-decade career, Alex worked with the Oberoi Group for 17 years and then with Marriott International. She reveals, "Whilst the value system of both companies are very people and quality-

centric, the style of functioning is vastly different, and I have been very lucky to learn from the best between these two companies."

Reminiscing about her 12-year stint with Marriott International, where she started as a General Manager, she now harnesses an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of how an international chain operates and functions. She began her journey at the company by working at the Goa Marriott Resort & Spa - a stint that taught her how to run a resort and establish herself in the company.

"I then went to Calcutta, which was a very interesting assignment because I got the opportunity to work on opening the new JW Marriott there. After that, both the fun and the responsibility multiplied as I started doing a dual role of being a GM and looking after hotels as a property leader. When I moved on to a full-time above-property role, I learnt that I now needed to work with the amalgamated strengths and weaknesses of my team and bring it under one roof to make it a success.



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📍 Courtyard by Marriott Aravali Resort

And Marriott is a company that gives you a holistic infrastructure, which helps you succeed, as they believe in your success as much as you believe in yourself."

#### NEW VISTAS

Given that, Alex took over the mantle as the Area Vice President when the pandemic was at its peak; she reveals that navigating through that phase is what helped her prepare for this role. "When I took over this role, I assimilated almost 75% of its operations, as I had already charted across most of South Asia and knew the hotels well.



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But I still had to garner my understanding of the rest of the 25%. That said, I am able to do what I do, and deliver beyond what's expected, only because of the fantastic team I have - a team that I'm extremely proud of, as they have always had my back.

"The best part is also the support we receive from our owners. Each of them recognises and understands that there is a lot of work to be done, and that we need to invest in people, culture and product upkeep to create a success story."

Again, as travel changes and with the industry's evolving requirements, hoteliers are now ready to challenge the numbers they have achieved in pre-pandemic days. "If we must do a course correction, then late 2022 and early 2023 is the time



➡ The St. Regis Goa Resort (above and below).

to do it. There is a tremendous focus on adapting and addressing the evolving demands of the guests, who are now looking for 'new unique experiences. Given this, we have undertaken several initiatives to weave unique local elements of experiences into our guests' stay, irrespective of the segmentation they belong to. Even with corporate and leisure travellers, we are doing things differently and ensuring that those avenues are here to stay."

"Initiatives such as Marriott Bonvoy on Wheels took a different shape in the pandemic, and people still continue to order from the same. While, hygiene is something that we never take for granted, there is an exceptional focus on that now. Though work from home became a norm during the pandemic, hoteliers had to be at the hotel. But Marriott explored new ideas for roles that al-



lowed a hybrid working model. We are also focusing on digitalisation in our hotels, which, as we move forward, will be a part of life. The consumption pattern in the F&B sector has also undergone a drastic change with the emergence of several new sustainable and health-conscious trends. Along with this, we are also challenging the status quo on the concepts of restaurants. We are constantly rethinking and re-evaluating many things going forward and continuing this with a lot of good practices in place."

#### GROWTH STORY

The current growth patterns at Marriott are incredibly robust, with a portfolio of 144 hotels - out of which 107 are managed, and 37 are franchised. The company's ongoing growth strategy also encapsulates the tier-II and tier-III cities, with a pipeline of about 67 hotels currently under construction, and several others are being signed. We are concentrating on luxury, select service, and premium brands to even out our growth spread across all verticals, across geographies. We recently signed hotels in Ranchi, Deogarh, Gorakhpur, Pahalgam, Shimla and Solan and are opening soon in Trichy and Coorg. Out of the 30 brands that Marriott has, we have 16 in South Asia, meaning we have space for another 14 and are raring to go."

To work towards this goal, a huge part of Marriott's strategy is to create a people-centric work environment and to ensure they retain their talent and enable them with opportunities to grow. The Group focuses extensively on training its employees to take on the new roles that will come as the brand grows.

#### BEING INCLUSIVE

Women empowerment and diversity inclusion are aspects that have found new meaning today and are something that Ranju holds close to her heart. While many companies talk about it, Marriott has done it. "The hospitality industry has not had a woman leader for the longest period. But having said that, we are

focusing hugely on not just women, but diversity in general across various communities - be it the LGBTQ community, women, and differently-abled associates. At Marriott, what we also do very well, is set real-life examples by sharing stories and building an infrastructure where women or other associates find it easier to work. I am personally very invested in this. Now, I have a woman General Manager, Nikita Ramchandani, at JW Marriott Mumbai Juhu, who is doing the same by further disseminating these core practices and principles. Similarly, I believe that all the women that I work with will touch lives in the future. It is about mindset, paradigm shift and about changing gears."

#### OVERCOMING HURDLES

"My biggest learning then was that a good leader is one who changes and adapts some aspects of the leadership, while adhering to their core values, depending on the eco-system they are working within. And I carry that very close to my heart. In fact, I have had to adjust my leadership style from assignment to assignment. Instead of rushing into a role, what leaders should do, which I learnt very early in life, is to step back for the first three or six months and understand the new environment that they are in and adapt to the new style of leadership that is required for that environment," shares Alex.

#### HOSPITALITY MATTERS

For someone who has seen the industry grow into a larger-than-life segment, Alex knows the sector is vulnerable yet resistant. "The Indian hospitality industry is meant for great things and is consistently growing. I think it just needs that focus on talent because that is becoming a huge lacuna. The number of hotels opening against the number of travellers is very disproportionate right now. And while the confidence level of the industry was battered during the COVID crisis, we are now alive and kicking and how. Many states have given hospitality an industry status which is a huge recognition for the work that this industry deserves."

Marriott has always enjoyed the preferred employer status



JW Marriott Bengaluru Prestige Golfshire Resort Hotel Hotel & Spa.



Fairfield by Marriott Mumbai International Airport



The St. Regis Goa Resort

for several reasons - starting from its workplace policies to its growth opportunities. When the sector reopened after the pandemic, the company played a responsible role in bringing the people, who they had to let go during the crisis. Marriott also tied up with a mental wellness company and had care centres for the staff during COVID.

#### PEOPLE SKILLS

When hiring new employees, the skillset is not necessarily at the top of the list, but the person's attitude and value system is of utmost importance. "If your personal value system matches that of the company, you are a happier person while working, and the company is happier as you grow along with it. We see what the person brings to the table in terms of skills and values. We are a people-centric company, and our associates are very precious to us. We prefer a person who works as a team rather than individual performers, which is the criteria we look for when we hire."

With attrition in the industry ranging anywhere between 30 to 35%, Marriott is slightly lower than that as the Group offers a lot of career growth. The Group has a 360-degree view of training. "We have a very robust training platform, which is available online too. The company believes in people, so we also invest a lot in behavioural training."

#### FOOD TALES

F&B has changed its form quite a bit after COVID, and the company is focusing heavily on sustainability to be up-to-date with changing times. "Plant-based protein and local harvest have taken a lot of space in our hearts, minds and on the plate. Our diners, especially our corporate clients, have changed their dining habits, and we needed to keep pace with that. Vegan diets and gluten-free diets are also an area of focus. People today are keen even to know the calorific value of a food item, which helps them make an informed decision about their consumption. We are also focusing heavily on re-inventing our beverages portfolio, as India has a huge scope to concentrate on the quality of beverages and cocktails. And as this is also a source of huge revenue, the Group is capitalising on hiring the right people to run their beverage portfolios. The money churning is catering, and as weddings are becoming larger than life, we as hoteliers must keep up with the customers' expectations. We are going back to the drawing board on many concepts to see if we can develop a 'hero concept'."

#### GREEN CUES

The Group believes that adopting a holistic approach to sustainability is the only way to do business. From their corporate office to

the grassroots level, Marriott has been highly focused on sustainability, and they've realised that their guests are also aware and expect the same.

Marriott was the first company to announce its partnership on EV chargers in the country. They also have bottling plants and offer water as per the guidelines set out by the government. "A huge step is to be 100% sustainable on residential amenities by next month. We are diligently tracking, monitoring, and reducing our food wastage, and are also working on getting more of our hotels into the LEED certification."

As the company adapts to the rapid pace of technology, the IT-driven company is also focusing on data privacy and is using secure digitisation in all aspects, be it for guests or associates.

Alex concludes by stating that "One needs to have faith in oneself and in the industry. And if we hold hands together, there is nothing that can stop us. Every industry goes through its peaks and troughs. So be strong, and that is the biggest gift you can give this industry and to yourself." ■