

HEADLINE: Lara's laurels

SUBHEADLINE: Miss Universe describes her role as Goodwill Ambassador

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Having won the title of Miss Universe 2000 on May 13 this year in Cyprus, Lara Dutta, Miss India 2000, is in Thailand on an official visit until tomorrow. Despite her tight schedule ranging from gala dinners _ to raise funds for Aids victims _ to a meeting with the Prime Minister, the beauty queen managed to take time off and talk to the Bangkok Post.

uHow do you like your new life as a beauty queen?

Lara Dutta: It's a great change and since I won the title in Cyprus, I couldn't even go back to India. I went directly from Cyprus to New York. It means working with a new organisation, living in a new apartment in a strange city... But I think I love my job and it's a big responsibility. Life has become so much bigger and better. You share it with millions of people, all over the world. Wherever you go, you're welcomed, you're loved, you're looked after. It's an experience of a lifetime, so it's good.

uls this your first visit to Thailand?

No, it's my second. I was here about three years ago. I was in Bangkok, Udon Thani and Chiang Mai. I had such a great experience when I was here that I was very excited when I was told I was coming back again.

I love Thailand. I love the food, I love the culture, I love the people. But this is an official visit, I am mainly coming for the gala dinner and fashion show (Miss Universe for Aids Patients) intended to raise funds for Aids and HIV patients. I will also be meeting the Prime Minister and other dignitaries during my trip here.

uWhat do you see as the most difficult part of your job?

It is a very very tough job in the sense that there are a lot of responsibilities that go with it. It's not just waking up in the morning, putting on your make-up and just looking beautiful. You work really hard. You're dealing with people from all walks of life, the poor and the rich, the young and the old, not excluding the children. You have to be somebody with whom they can identify, someone with whom they can come and talk to, if need be. It's important to do your job well.

I am also a Goodwill Ambassador to the United Nations Population Fund and have to focus on increasing global awareness of women's rights. There are serious issues like health care and family planning that have to be addressed. And then I travel absolutely non-stop, so that's difficult. But I love it.

uWhy did you choose to campaign for Aids awareness?

Aids-awareness campaign gets the highest priority for the Miss Universe organisation, and everyone who wins the title gets a chance to work for the noble cause. But it is not completely exclusive, you can also work on other important issues.

Aids, to me, is important because a lot of concentration of Aids/HIV concern has gone only to the Sub-Saharan countries (in Africa), which are the worst hit. But in Asia too, the problem is huge but people are not aware of it. It's called the silent bomb because there is no method to find out the exact number of people who are infected with this dreadful disease. For example, in India statistics put the figures at four million, but actually it could be anything between 20 and 40 million people. There is no way to determine the correct figures. So I see it as an issue which is not restricted to just one part of the world and which is not gender-biased. It is an issue which is truly universal.

So being in the position that I am in, I feel proud and privileged to be able to influence kids and youngsters and create an awareness among them.

uIn the past six years, India has grabbed six beauty awards. Why do you think India is doing so well in beauty pageants?

I think anywhere in the world, women have always been very beautiful and intelligent, but they have not had the support of mother organisations that send them to such contests. Fortunately for us, The Times of India, which runs the Miss India Pageant, developed in the last couple of years an excellent training programme.

For six months, prior to going anywhere, you are trained very hard on physical fitness, public speaking with a particular emphasis on diction, using your wardrobe, and taking lessons from nutritionists and dietitians. There are courses on meditation, too!

They don't try to change the person because they can't do it, but they enrich the personality. If you have something to say, they make you say it with confidence.

That makes all the difference, internationally as well.

uDo you think your predecessors, including Sushmita Sen, Aishwarya Rai and Yukta Mookhey [former Indian beauty queens] have brought about some changes to the status of women in India?

They did a lot ... In the past years, even in India, no matter how big the contest was, they would just think, 'here comes another beauty queen'.

But now they realise the amount of work these girls do, how they represent the country internationally _ you are literally representing a population of one billion people _ especially all the women. But you are not just an ambassador of your country alone. You belong to the world and you're loved everywhere in the world.

uWhat do you think is the most worrying issue in India today?

I would think it is illiteracy. With a population of over one billion, about 55 percent are illiterate. That is something that needs serious consideration, and I am trying to give my best. We are trying to make primary education compulsory. And if that goes well, it would be an excellent step to start with. But honestly, nothing, anywhere in the world, is going to take off within a period of one year. It's something you have to stick to, persistently, or else nothing will never happen.

uWhat would you like to tell feminine activists, especially in India, who revolt against beauty pageants?

Luckily, these contests are not so controversial any more in India. Miss India is looked on as a potential Miss Universe or Miss World. They even expect it of her, they all want to see you coming home with a crown. That is why there is so much pressure on these beauty pageants, the expectancy rate is very high. But everywhere you go in the world, there will always be

social activists, or feminist or religious groups that oppose such activities. But in general, the outlook of the people has changed for the better and the business itself has changed a lot.

uHow do you see yourself in the future?

What I wish to do after I give up my title, is to go back to university and do a course in film technology and direct documentaries. I might do something for my predecessors from the other side of the camera.

uDo you consider yourself as a big star?

(Laughs) It's glamorous and wonderful, but at the same time, I want to be my real self and be someone who can be approached by all. I don't want to look so perfect for people to say ``Oh my God, if I touch her she will fall apart''. I want to be real and be someone you can easily approach.

I want to be very much more than just a pretty face.