

A royal mess

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Kishore Singh finds that two Andalusian women a century apart are still creating rifts in the Kapurthala family.

In a corner of south Delhi in a flat overlooking the neighbour's laundry, publisher Shekhar Malhotra is having a belly laugh. "I've been getting calls from actors wanting to act in Penelope Cruz's movie on the Kapurthala family," he says. Malhotra is the low-profile publisher of Javier Moro's book, *Passion India*, which has sold 4 lakh copies in its original Spanish.

In another part of south Delhi, in his rooftop eyrie, Tikka Shatruijit Singh is surrounded by copies of emails and ageing photographs, and the laundry he's worried about is definitely not the kind he'd like to see being aired publicly. "The family," he says, "is pissed off."

"As far as I know," counters Javier Moro, in Madrid, "only Mr Shatruijit Singh has vented publicly his displeasure with the book." And adds for good measure, "Maybe it's time to remind Mr Shatruijit Singh that the times of the maharajas are over and that India is a democratic country with freedom of expression."

For someone sensitive to royal titles, whatever their relevance in republican India, the commonplace snub denoted by "Mr" should be obvious to the Tikka, who flaunts his hereditary title as heir to the kingdom that was once Kapurthala.

"A lot of garbage has been written on the royals, including the Kapurthalas," says Vishwajit Singh — who insists on being identified as "not a member of this branch of the family" — "but we've kept quiet about it in the past. Why raise a controversy now?"

But where there's incest, money, power and glamour, there's also likely to be a potboiler. Anita Delgado, the subject of the book, wrote a diary that was published by Elisa Vasquez de Gey in 1997.

Earlier, a Spanish paper had serialised her diaries in the newspaper in the sixties, but souped them up so that Delgado expressed her discontent and her son, Jit Singh, had them stopped after her demise in 1962.

What's getting everyone's knickers in a twist now is Javier Moro's book (*Passion India*, Full Circle, Rs 295) about the Spanish commoner who married the sophisticated Francophile Maharaja Jagatjit Singh of Kapurthala. Delgado wasn't the maharaja's first wife — he had four earlier wives — and they only married when she was five months pregnant with their child.

Delgado, who came to India with visions of leading a gay life with a man she didn't really love, or love enough (thinking him some "Moorish prince"), learnt soon enough that her position as his fifth wife, a commoner and a foreigner was far removed from their giddy courtship in Madrid and Paris.

She was rejected by the women of the zenana and by the status conscious British, and in the absence of friends to spend her days with, she resigned herself to luxurious

isolation till, seeking companionship elsewhere, she seduced or was seduced by her stepson, Karamjit, the maharaja's favourite son from his fourth wife, Rani Kanari.

The maharaja was persuaded by Mohammad Ali Jinnah not to make the affair public. Eventually, Delgado was exiled with an extremely handsome settlement, and went on to lead a luxurious (and not entirely lonely) life in Paris.

Gossip attributed covetousness to her nature, her secreting away of Kapurthala jewels, and accepting gifts from the Nizam of Hyderabad. Incest was just another vice in the gossip that surrounded her till the end of her days.

Maharaja Jagatjit Singh continued to surround himself with glamorous women, and soon after Delgado, he courted Arlette Sherry, a giddy girl who ran off with his Cartier gifts and a boyfriend she had kept hidden, and Germaine Pellegrino who came to Kapurthala despite being engaged to the Ford heir, Reginald.

Eventually, he married another European woman, the Czech theatre actress Eugenie Grossup who suffered from "nerves" and took her life, jumping off the Qutub Minar with her favourite poodles under each arm.

The real problem, says Tikka, is in the way Moro has deceived them and misrepresented the family. "This young man," he says, "came to see me in May 2004 saying he wanted to write a book on the Sikhs. I presented him a book at the time on my ancestor, Jassa Singh."

He also invited him to Kapurthala to visit the gurdwara where he celebrates his ancestor Jassa Singh's birth anniversary at a gurdwara built by Jagatjit Singh "in the presence of 40,000-50,000 local people". He did not find Moro in the crowd, he says.

Earlier, in March 2003 in fact, the author had contacted the Tikka's mother where he expressed his desire to re-look at Anita Delgado and Jagatjit Singh not to do "a 'gossip' book (so many have been written already!) but a serious one about the end of the Raj through the life of the prince who ruled for the longest span..."

Maharani Geeta Devi's response was imperious. She asked Moro to contact her husband, Brigadier Sukhjit Singh, at Kapurthala. But she used the communicate to vent her ire against the de Gey book for its "serious inaccuracies" and added, for what it was worth, that Moro's uncle Dominique Lapierre's acclaimed *Freedom at Midnight* too consisted of "a sensational chapter on the princes filled with exaggeration and hurtful ridicule".

The maharani did not hear from Moro again, but met him in February 2006 at the Spanish ambassador Don Rafael de Conde's residence in New Delhi where "Mr Moro came up and introduced himself to me and spoke about the book, which he had already written and published. I certainly told him it was improper for him to write a 'novel' about real persons, and that as no direct member of the family had approved nor consented, what he had done was hurtful and the cause of resentment."

Moro, in an earlier despatch to Tikka, in November 2004, wrote that "since I got no help at all from your father...I decided to write a novel mostly based on the years Anita Delgado spent in India", and asked if he was willing to be interviewed and photographed as "heirs of the maharajas" for various European luxury magazines.

Tikka wrote back saying he would first like to read the proofs of the forthcoming book, and to ensure that his great-grandfather's portrayal was of "a benevolent and enlightened ruler". Moro wrote back saying his aim was "not to make a caricature of him" but since the book was in Spanish, perhaps the epilogue might indicate "the tone of the book".

"When I tried to get his impression, he banged the phone," Moro says about why events have soured since. "He then missed an opportunity to have a constructive dialogue on the book."

Has the Tikka been caught on the wrong foot? "He has not said anywhere that what's written is wrong," says Shekhar Malhotra of Full Circle, the book's Indian publisher. "I'm privy to Javier's research materials and audio-recordings and so know that none of what is written is untrue."

Even Charles Allen in an earlier book, *Lives of the Indian Princes*, quotes the current head of the family, Brigadier Sukhjit Singh saying of his grandfather, "...he enjoyed the company of interesting and attractive young ladies and he brought many back from Europe to stay in Kapurthala as his guests and personal friends, some of the most beautiful women I have ever seen."

It's interesting that though Tikka says "the family" is upset, there is clearly no closing of ranks and only he seems to be involved in an unseemly squabble over the proprieties of someone who, as Moro points out, "was a public figure". Even Vishwajit Singh asks, "Where's the problem?"

But then, trouble in the Kapurthala ranks is hardly new. Maharaja Jagatjit Singh's children never outgrew his shadow; Tikka's grandfather Paramjit (who also married a white woman, Stella Mudge) inherited the gaddi in the very year (1949) that the states were amalgamated, and his son, Brigadier Sukhjit Singh saw even the privy purse snatched away by Indira Gandhi, disinheriting the princely order forever.

Of the other children, Mahijit had one son and Karamjit (who reputedly had the affair with Anita Delgado) two. As for Delgado's son, Jit Singh went on to become a playboy too, well known in Europe, "a handsome, jolly uncle to whom I gave blood as a teenager before he died in hospital in 1984", recalls Tikka.

There are two ways the scenario could unfold. Apparently, Penelope Cruz has been sent an email from solicitors in Chandigarh hoping to represent their client who could open the doors for shooting in Kapurthala for her.

There is an impression gaining ground that this might be the Tikka's way towards a rapprochement, since he has much to gain. A giant Hollywood/Bollywood co-production could place Kapurthala on the world map. "Once," says Tikka, "Kapurthala was a very important destination for European travellers."

Its French, Moorish and Indian architecture is certainly exceptional, but there has been no attempt to promote tourism there.

Beatriz de la Gandara, one of the three co-producers of the film, says they are issuing no statements on it yet because "we are in a very early stage of the film production. We

do not have a scriptwriter attached to the project yet and it will take very long until we shoot the film.”

It would certainly help if in the meantime they could find a way to iron out their differences. “If you want to shoot a film on the royals in the original ambience, there’s no way you can do it without their acceptance,” says Anu Malhotra, whose documentary Maharaja of Jodhpur, *The Legacy Lives On...* was shot over 18 months and involved the participation of Maharaja Gaj Singh and members of his clan. “How else would I have access to their archives, their private apartments or their intimate ceremonies?”

In the case of the Jodhpurs, an earlier feature film on Zubeida, Maharaja Hanwant Singh’s second wife (though there’s the unexplained presence of a Stella McBryde too) made by Bollywood had to be shot in Jaipur.

“The Jodhpurs could have made a scene, but chose to keep a dignified silence,” says an insider, suggesting Tikka’s discretion, or compliance, since the public washing of family secrets is only helping the sales of the book and interest in the proposed film.

Anu Malhotra’s advise to Tikka is that he should “negotiate across the table, since you can’t research a script on the basis of one book alone”. Tikka says he’s ready to bite the bullet provided the film crew “co-operates”.

“We’ll open up Kapurthala for them, give them all the help they want, welcome Penelope Cruz properly, open the family homes for her provided” — again the reminder — “it’s a realistic portrayal”. “It’s the first time Mr Shatruijit has agreed to meet with me!” Moro reacts in astonishment.

But given the past acrimony it might already be too late for a settlement. Rancour had been eating into the dynasty even before Maharaja Jagatjit’s grandchildren’s differences settled into a cold indifference.

Vishwajit Singh painfully plots the family’s fortunes since Raja Nihal Singh. Of his three sons, the eldest and heir apparent, Randhir Singh, was found unsuitable because he was “less than normal”; the second, Bikram Singh, was “intelligent, anti-British and pro-Sikh, and so articulated public sentiment” and was Nihal Singh’s chosen successor, which the British opposed.

Eventually, they had their way while Bikram and his younger sibling, Suchet, were sent off to live in Jalandhar with a privy purse. It is this second branch of the Kapurthala family of which Vishwajit is now the head.

So, when questioned about the Kapurthala family that helped Moro with his research, the author reacts sarcastically, “Mr Shatruijit Singh is neither the only one nor the most respected member of the Kapurthala family.

There are even doubts about the legitimacy of the lineage represented by Mr Shatruijit Singh, as there was a succession problem after the death of Raja Kharak. A branch of the Kapurthala family still claims its legitimacy (see chart). So if we go to court, it will be a good occasion to ask for DNA testing and set the record straight once and for all.” Certainly, according to Vishwajit Singh, there is “another branch of the family that lays claim to the rightful Kapurthala lineage”.

Given so much division and the possibility of a juicy scandal being aired across the international media, it's unlikely that Tikka Shatruijit Singh's hope that "theirs was a nice romance, but it was his private life" will address the public mood. Unless there's some quick tending of sentiments, greater infamy than even Anita Delgado's incestuous affair could await the tattered branches of the Kapurthala clan.

Wives, but not maharanis?

In courting white women of dubious or at least humble origins, Maharaja Jagatjit Singh was not alone. The maharajas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were well travelled, liked to socialise, and enjoyed the companionship of women.

Their wives, increasingly educated but still confined to the zenana and uncomfortable in the presence of other white men, could hardly be social companions at parties, banquets and on their European sojourns.

As a result, they wooed (less with their charm and more with their money, according to some) bar girls and chorus girls to whom they promised marriage. These "marriages" seldom worked.

There was always suspicion within the zenanas that the rulers might in some state of inebriation sign away their rights to their half-caste children born of these unions, and so the ranis usually banded together against the "outsiders", and there were hints about mysterious deaths caused by poisoning, resulting in most white maharanis fleeing to freedom. Boredom caused some others to run away. But there were more reasons — flings, concealed husbands, greed — that often ended in acrimonious partings.

The Punjab princes — Patiala, Jind and Kapurthala — were particularly profligate, but Jodhpur, Udaipur, Hyderabad, Rampur, Tikari, Indore, Pudukkottai all found themselves with white amours.

Family links

Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, who traced his antecedents to Jaisalmer, founded the Kapurthala dynasty

In the absence of an heir, the gaddi went to his second cousin, Bhag Singh, whose son Fateh Singh next succeeded him

Following the rule of primogeniture, the next descendants were Nihal Singh, Randhir Singh and Kharak Singh

Kharak Singh's son Jagatjit became Kapurthala's most flamboyant ruler at the age of five. Kharak Singh's other son Harnam Singh was disinherited because he had converted to Christianity, though that branch of the family has "questioned the legitimacy of little Jagatjit", Moro notes in the book. It is to this branch of the family that tiger activist Billy Arjan Singh belongs.