

# Looks like a flamenco fiasco

Javier Moro's *Passion India*, the tumultuous tale of a Spanish dancer married to a Punjab maharaja, has outraged a scion of the Kapurthala dynasty, writes Namita Bhandare

**[ROYAL MESS]**

IT IS a love story that is a century old, but the story has lost none of its ability to spark off passions. At the centre of an unlikely literary storm is the Spain-born Javier Moro's book, *Passion India*, the story of the Spanish princess of Kapurthala, Anita Delgado, the fifth wife of the Jagatjit Singh, the maharaja of a 13-gun salute princely state.

Claiming to be a 'work of fiction based on the diaries of Anita Delgado', Moro's book documents the courtship, marriage and the subsequent falling out of the two charismatic figures.

According to the book, Jagatjit Singh met Delgado, a flamenco dancer, when she was 17. He fell in love with her, convinced her father to let him marry her and brought her to Kapurthala, already pregnant with their son.

But, continues Moro's book, the relationship was more or less doomed; the other wives—with the exception of one—hated Delgado. They resented the fact that she refused to live in the zenana. The British government also refused to recognise the marriage. Over a period of time and as Delgado's health became more frail, Jagatjit Singh began to spend less and less time with her. And this, Moro says, led to a relationship between the lonely wife and the son of the maharaja from another wife. Caught in *flagrant delicto*, Delgado was banished to Europe with a generous pension.

This is a version of the Kapurthala family—specifically Shatruijit Singh, Jagatjit Singh's great grandson—disputes. "It's a pack of lies," says Shatruijit Singh. "The entire account is scandalous, designed to sell and driven by money."

Shatruijit Singh does not elaborate on specific portions that he objects to—though in response to a direct question he denies that Anita Delgado had an affair with her stepson. "In her own diaries there is no mention," he says.

But Moro insists that the affair did take place. "It was reported in a French newspaper at the time," he says. The book also alludes to another relationship, which took place later between Delgado and her secretary Gines Fernandez.

"My portrayal of the character of the maharaja is much more human than ever shown before," says Moro. He says he has depicted Jagatjit Singh as a progressive royal who be-



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—Shatruijit Singh

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lieved in the development of his state. "He was loved by his people, yet he was a womaniser."

Moro says he had interviewed Shatruijit Singh in New Delhi when he was researching his book; Singh says he never met him and that the first time he heard from him was when Moro sent him an email in November 2004 requesting an appointment and informing him about the book.

Singh says he responded by asking to see the book—a copy arrived in Spanish along with an epilogue entitled *Who will wipe our tears?* It is then, he says, that he realised that the 'beautiful, romantic' story of his great grandfather was 'sacacious gossip'. Anita and her only son, Ajit have no one to defend them, and it is my job to defend them," says Singh. "They wanted to be left in peace."

Moro says he had set out to write a historical novel. "My interest was not so much in writing a love story as in writing about India. I wanted to describe the end of the Raj and the beginning of the biggest democracy in the world through the eyes of Anita Delgado," he says.

However, he says, there simply

wasn't enough documentation to write a historical account. "I wanted to make a portrait of a real human being," he says of his intentions. Moreover, how was he to imagine the conversations that took place between Delgado and her husband, or the other characters?

It was to solve that problem, Moro says, that he decided to do a 'recreation' rather than a strict historical account. "It's dramatised non-fiction," he says.

The Indian book comes with a disclaimer that it is, in fact, a work of fiction, 'corroborated by substantial research and interviews'. The book does, however, include black and white photographs of Jagatjit Singh, Anita Delgado and other maharajas, including the maharaja of Patiala.

In a major departure from the Spanish original, Moro has chosen to change the names of several major characters—including the sons of the maharaja. Why? "I did not want to hurt anybody's sensitivities," he says. "There is no mention of any living member of the Kapurthala family."

That is not enough to assuage

Shatruijit Singh's feelings. "I have a legal team in place. I will take action," he promises.

Published in Spain in January 2005, the book has sold 500,000 copies in Europe. Penelope Cruz has bought the rights to make a movie and is a producer along with her friend Beatriz de la Gandara. Moro will not be writing the script.

"I have heard about all the fuss," says de la Gandara. "I don't really understand what is their problem, but this is something that occurs very often with biopics."

None of the other Kapurthalas, so far, seem to have got involved though Shatruijit says he alone is a direct descendant. Vishwajit Prithvijit Singh, also a Kapurthala scion though descended from a different line and so, not an immediate descendant, says Moro has in fact devoted a whole chapter on what Jagatjit Singh did for Kapurthala. "But you can't wish away the facts that he fell in love with and married a Spanish woman," he says.

His advice? "The best way to deal with it is to ignore it."

But for now Shatruijit Singh doesn't seem to be inclined to do that.



## Penelope's Passion

She says she loves India with all her heart, that *Mousoon Wedding* is her favourite Indian movie and that she is keenly looking forward to the filming of *Passion India*.

"Beatriz de la Gandara, who is also an executive producer on this project, told me about the book," Cruz told HT. "I read it and fell in love with it. I knew it was a project I wanted to be involved with."

Cruz who is currently in the US to promote her Pedro Almodovar directed film *Bad Education* says filming for *Passion India* is not expected to begin any time soon. "It's a big movie that will be shot in three countries. It takes time to put a project like this together."

Although there is talk that Shekhar Kapoor could be directing the film, Cruz says, "We are meeting with different people, and focusing on finding the right writer and director that can work as a team," she says.

She is, however, clear about roping in as many India actors and crew on the project. "It is very important for me, as one of the producers of this movie, to involve a production company from India, as well as a large number of the crew and the majority of the actors," she says. NB