

Anita's story

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Kapurthala's Spanish princess was always ripe for a big-screen adaptation

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IN THE TURBULENT last years of the Raj, an Indian *maharaja* defied convention and married a Spanish flamenco dancer, who was then barely 17. The tragic love story of Jagatjit Singh of Kapurthala and his young bride, Anita Delgado of Malaga, provide perfect fodder for an engrossing read. Javier Moro's fictional account, *Passion India*, based on the Spanish princess's 18 years in India, dives headfirst into that complex relationship and paints an evocative picture of the time. Yet, this compelling story that has aroused interest in Hollywood, with Penelope Cruz planning to make it a big budget blockbuster, digresses into yet another account of princely India.

The story unfolds in Spain when the *Maharaja* sees Malgado perform. Captivated by her fragile beauty, he woos her with magnificent ardour. However, Moro's tedious descriptions of her journey to India and the spectacular royal wedding are all too familiar for readers who've grown up on works like *The Lives of Indian Princes* (Charles Allen) and *The Maharajas of India* (Ann Morrow). The story really takes off after Delgado settles into an Italian Riviera styled palace in Kapurthala. The young bride has to deal with his four previous wives, stepchildren and *zenana* politics. The British frown upon the new wife's humble background and refuse to address her as *Maharani*. The *Maharaja*, a progressive, modern ruler is unfazed by this criticism and stands by his bride.

Despite a huge disclaimer at the beginning of *Passion India*, Moro seems unsure whether this book is entirely fictitious. In a carefully worded statement, he says: "The incidents are real, a few conversations have been added af-



ter extensive research." The book is peppered with amusing anecdotes and observations on the *Maharaja's* style, and less on his tumultuous relationship with Delgado. For example, English doctors drew up a diet plan for the adolescent prince, when his first marriage wasn't consummated because of his expanding girth. Finally, a mahout was invited to solve this problem since he'd worked out a successful reproduction plan for his elephants.

Passion India occasionally meanders into long descriptions of India's poverty and rigid caste system. Those interested in just the love story can easily skip part two and part four of the book, which describe the wild, erotic parties of the Indian princes, their extravagant lifestyles and palace intrigues. Eventually, when Moro comes back to the *maharaja* and Delgado, he fails to evoke compassion for the Spanish outsider who's battling loneliness and a crumbling relationship. Her own scandalous love affair finishes the marriage. Delgado heads back to Spain and the *Maharaja* continues in his favourite pursuit: European women.

The descendants of Jagatjit Singh have sued Moro for defamation and claim the incidents never happened. "Javier Moro has resorted to cheap, sensational lies to sell his book," says Tikka Shatruijit Singh, great-grandson of Jagatjit Singh. "If its fiction, why has he used my great-grandfather's name?"

Anyone who's not overdosed on the excesses of erstwhile royalty, this is worth a read. ♦