

Passions of a Princess

Society & the Arts books. By Dilip Bobb. India Today, 8 March 2006

"The Maharaja of Kapurthala falls for a Spanish Cinderella who in turn goes for his son. Romance and disgrace in an Indian court"

Providence created the Maharajas in order to offer a spectacle to the world. Rudyard Kipling's famous observation serves as a fitting epitaph for Indian royalty and their extravagant lifestyles after Mrs Gandhi pulled the gilded plug. No collection of royals lived in such dissolute splendour, none less so than Jagatjit Singh, Maharaja of Kapurthala. A hardcore Francophile, he built palaces that were a replica of those in France: his own palace was called L'Elysee. If L'Elysee was his greatest extravagance, it also symbolised the juiciest scandal of the time, involving his fifth wife, Anita Delgado, a 16-year-old, middle class Spanish girl who Jagatjit saw in a Madrid café-cum-cabaret where she worked as a stagehand, and fell obsessively in love with. It was a scandal in itself and so out of character. He had fallen for a Spanish girl when he was enamoured by all things French, a woman with no pedigree when he was obsessed with lineage and caste, and above all, someone who was almost the same age as his son from his first wife. His decision to marry Anita was akin to an earthquake in Indian political circles and the upper echelons of colonial power.

Jagatjit, however, was also a rebel, frequently abandoning custom and royal tradition for convenience, practicality or whim. Like most royals, vanity was his Achilles' heel and the conquest of a beautiful young Spanish girl was his way at showing his diamond-encrusted finger to high society. Anita Delgado would be Eliza Doolittle to his Professor Higgins. He moved her into a luxury apartment in Paris, showered her with expensive clothes and jewellery and hired a Frenchwoman to teach Anita the proper social graces to allow her to mix with the upper class.



Javier Moro, a Spanish journalist, has labelled his book fiction which is odd considering the amount of research he has done and his knowledge of India. He bases his book on diaries that Anita maintained ever since her Cinderella tale began and his own interviews of people with knowledge of Kapurthala, including surviving members of the former royal family. Where fact ends and fiction takes over is difficult to say but her fairy tale life explodes in her face as another scandal erupts, this one much bigger. She falls in love with Kamal, the Maharaja's youngest son. Jagatjit's fury when he finds out and the damage to his ego and reputation force him to banish her to Paris. She died a few years later in Madrid, in the arms of Ajit, their son. It is an absorbing story and Moro has done an exceptional job in chronicling a little known saga involving one of India's most colourful royals. There are plans to make the book into a movie starring Penelope Cruz. What this book does prove is that when it came to India's erstwhile royalty, fact was often stranger than fiction.