

# A photographic journey into modern Indian kingship

Photography in colonial India has received a fair share of academic attention; this coffee table book is no less important than scholarly interventions as it creatively narrates the story of princely India. The photographs cover a large number of states across every geographical and political variations and generation of modern Indian rulers. Neatly divided into sections, with short notes accompanying every photograph, the book displays vividly the changes as to how the royals negotiated modernity, imperial administrators, the public, technological advances, and the art of producing self-images among things relevant.

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THE PHOTOGRAPHS REVEAL a dynamic history of kingship. For instance, a 1930 photograph of the Bikaner royal children – Karni Singh and Sushila Kumari – in informal clothes, stands in stark contrast with the visage of an unidentified young prince, who was photographed in 1890 in elaborate apparel and jewelry. This bears evidence of the erosion of artificial formality in royal photographs. A definitive change in how one approached inter-religion marriages is evident in the photograph of the two wives of Maharaja Rajindar Singh of Patiala, one of whom was Florence Gertrude Bryan (renamed Harnam Kaur), who married the prince in 1893, adopted Indian clothing and tried to fit into the complex palace hierarchies. Portraits of traditionally dressed and heavily ornamented princesses exhibit the burden of normative behavior that weighed on most royal women, particularly in the nineteenth century as is evident from the photograph of the princess of Baroda from 1880. On the other hand, photographs such as that of Maharani Chimnabai II of Baroda during a hunt, taken in 1909, show that it was not uncommon for aristocratic women to come out of the inner domains of household and participate in outdoor activities, often wearing traditional costumes.

Top left: Painted photograph of Maharao Khengarji Pragmalji III (b.1866, r.1876-1942) of Kutch, 1879.

Top right: Painted photograph of Maharaja Shivaji Bhonsle (1863-1883) of Kolhapur, c.1870.

Below: Painted photograph of Maharaja Kishan Singh (b. 1899, r.1900-1929) of Bharatpur, c.1900.

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Just as the princes dressed in ornamental traditional clothing, there was a tendency to pose in contemporary Western apparels. By the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, royals across India had started to wear riding breeches, knee-high leather boots, overcoats, jackets and caps, even in the warm months. The stunning photographs of several queens and princesses, particularly that of Rani Sita Devi of Kapurthala, show that royal women were more at ease with Western clothes and also that they were less tradition-bound when it came to adopting foreign clothes. Among the men, Maharaja Jitendra Narayan, Prince Nitendra, Maharaja Rajendra Narayan and Prince Hitendra stand out as the subjects who, unlike many other pretenders, carried the clothes effortlessly, due mainly to their British education. There were other ways of showing affinity for the West. A photograph of Maharaja Jagatjit Singh with a bicycle, a new mechanical marvel when the shot was taken around 1890, shows how the princes used even simple vehicles in order to associate themselves with the progresses of Western modernity. An even lesser vehicle, a perambulator, was the subject of another photograph from 1900, purportedly to commemorate a rite of passage for a royal child and its claim to use objects of wonder. Maharaja Jagatjit Singh should be mentioned again for the photograph in which he poses intimately with his wife, Rani Kanari, who is seen draped in a tightly corseted gown and long silk gloves, proof again of the prince's fascination for all things Western.

## Visual Techniques

In addition to history, the book throws light on techniques of photography too. It shows how photography replaced the art of portrait painting at the royal court, creating a new category of artists that was so much in demand that many famous painters put aside paintbrushes and shifted to camera. Yet, when technology failed to satisfy royal demands of grandeur, professional hand-tinting of photographs became the means to accentuate color and highlight the details of dress and jewelry, often at the expense of the subject's face being blurred. Manipulating photographs by merging two negatives into one composite print or over-painting was widely practiced to introduce new subjects and effects. However, the book also admits the presence of cutting edge techniques such as selective use of ambient light diffused through strategically placed glass panels. The book is as much about history of camera technology as it is about social history of princely states.

## Omissions

The book features very rare photographs such as that of the last Mughal Empress, Begum Zeenat Mahal, taken in 1857 when she and her husband Bahadur Shah Zafar were imprisoned at the Red Fort in Delhi. However, it underrepresents many aspects of princely India, such as some of the royals' patronage of cricket and polo. It is not clear whether this omission was an editorial decision or was there simply not any photograph that showed princes playing or in company of players, which is quite unlikely given the level of involvement of the Maharajas of Patiala, Bhopal, Porbandar or other states in Indian sports. Conversely, paucity of photographs on sport or music leads to a number of speculations on why these subjects were largely absent from royal archives – such as whether or why princes considered being photographed with hunted animals, family or contraptions as more important than with cricket or sitar players?

The photograph was an occasion when the ordinary could share the same frame with the royals. Still, these were also sites in which the grandeur of princely households glossed over mundane social realities like war, poverty and famine, thus reanimating in the present reader nostalgia for indigenous monarchy. Although the princes intended to make their bodies look affluent, dominant and progressive, most of them looked strikingly unattractive compared to their wives and even the average Indian men. The seriousness with which royals approached the act of being photographed and preserved the print for posterity is quite evident. It also leaves the reader wondering if at least some of them (except Raja Deen Dayal whose passion for photography was widely known) learnt the craft with as much interest. Despite the inconclusiveness of some aspects of royal household that the book raises, it remains an excellent compendium of photography in princely India.

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