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# A man for all people

He's captured the bold and the beautiful of the world. Lord Snowdon, an icon in portrait photography, talks about his life, work and latest show, *India by Snowdon*, to **RANVIR SHAH**.

The Delhi smog has enveloped the city in an absolute grey curtain, everything seems to be moving slowly. It is on such an afternoon that I come into Photoink, the gallery run by Devika-Daulet Singh to meet Lord Snowdon, the famous portrait photographer, who is in town to open his show 'India by Snowdon'.

Born Anthony Armstrong Jones, Lord Snowdon became an icon in the world of portrait photography, due to his encounters with royalty (he was married to Princess Margaret, the Queen's younger sister), celebrities, politicians and the bohemian beau-monde. He captured them all in photographs that became sometimes their callingcards to greater fame. He is now in his early 80s and, due to health reasons, confined to a wheelchair.

With time, his memory has also faded like photographs turning colour, yet his charm quotient is in full form. Sipping his third glass of wine that afternoon, I meet him in the deluxe office of Devika Daulet Singh, a slyph who knows her place in the world of photography, has studied the form and promotes it with a passion that stretches beyond the assertive.

Lord Snowdon has had a series of people meet him and he is a bit bored, but something about my cobalt blue corduroy shirt with birds printed on it interests him and he wants to know more about me. During his mini-interview of me, he makes me want to take off a nandi-sivalingam ring and is fascinated by it. Then I venture into excavating his nostalgia and the markers of his life's trajectory.

## Early memories

One of his earliest memories is of a picture taken of the great actor Marlene Dietrich, who used to hang around at the Café de Paris. He mentions her manager's pet name was Donnie Nellie Willie and says he loved going to see her every night. She loved two of his pictures of her: one in which the smoke from the cigarette was just right and another in which she wanted a composite image, which was a wonderful idea but tough to deliver. He imitates her throaty voice and German diction, as he was told to run along to mix the negatives overnight and the picture he got was a classic.

Closer home I ask him about the photograph of Chandralekha, the dancer from Chennai. He mumbles about her

## Snowdon says

- **Photography as a career:** "I was very privileged. I had the chance to work with marvellous people and enjoyed every moment. I was terribly lucky. It really is a minor profession. Apart from luck it's important to do a lot of research on the person. Never know when it will be all right, it can be fraught with disappointment."
- **On digital photography:** "\*\*\* (expletives)"
- **On photography as art:** "\*\*\* (more expletives)"



**CLASSIC SHOTS:** Rekha, Lalu Prasad Yadav, George Fernandes. **PHOTOS:** ©LORD SNOWDON

being very nice, very special but it is clear he has forgotten. Sadanand Menon, her companion, later tells me that Chandralekha herself bristled a bit when directed about what to do and how to pose.

This is another quality of Lord Snowdon that has made many sitters uncomfortable and I ask him about this. "Well yes it's uncomfortable, a bit like porcupines making love; each time though it's different, sometimes there are long silences (and he stares at me with meaning in silence) and then perhaps something comes out that is interesting!"

Four portraits from all the achievers and aspirers he has photographed for this show stand out. There is Rekha, the Bollywood actor, gazing straight into the camera, sans smile as if saying 'Capture me if you can, the real me'; the challenge is well met! Then there is Lalu Prasad Yadav, the much loved politician and media favourite, milking a cow whose hind legs are tied as he looks cherubically at the viewer. Vir Sanghvi, the noted journalist and TV personality, sitting in his office with his legs on a pile of newspapers. In his own words in an essay in the show's catalogue he concludes, "And for 20 seconds I forget how much of an idiot I would look when the picture was finally published" deprecating in his own esteem but the balance of colour and siting of the sitter is simple and classic.

Finally the most honest photograph is that of George Fernandes, asleep in his bed with his dog beside him as he had come from a tiring trip and asked for a moment to refresh himself before being photographed but fell asleep....

I am raring to ask him about his completely liberal bohemian life of the swinging Londonjet-set and finally do. "Wasn't a great party person. I never know what to say. I guess you are a celebrity depending on how many cocktail parties you go to. I prefer staying home...."

Lady Diana, another royal whom he photographed and was close to, is in his memory. He says of her, "I was a tremendous admirer of hers, her going



away was a great, great loss, she was very special and I think the boys (Prince William and Harry) have inherited her specialness. I think they will turn out very well. They're both pretty good. That picture of her with her hair all wet, well it was instant, she soaked her hair and I shot it and now it's a classic."

On India: Whoever said it's "very large" was right. I love the country and more so the people. I have been lucky to travel to the North and South and a great friend of mine Jeremy Fry lived in Cochin for many years before dying recently".

## New India

The show which was conceived by the Nand and Jeet Khemka Foundation was shot over several trips. Sometimes with two or three people a day. Over six months and nearly over 100 portraits of what the Khemka Foundation thought the new India represented: industrialists, politicians, stars, culturati, cricket-

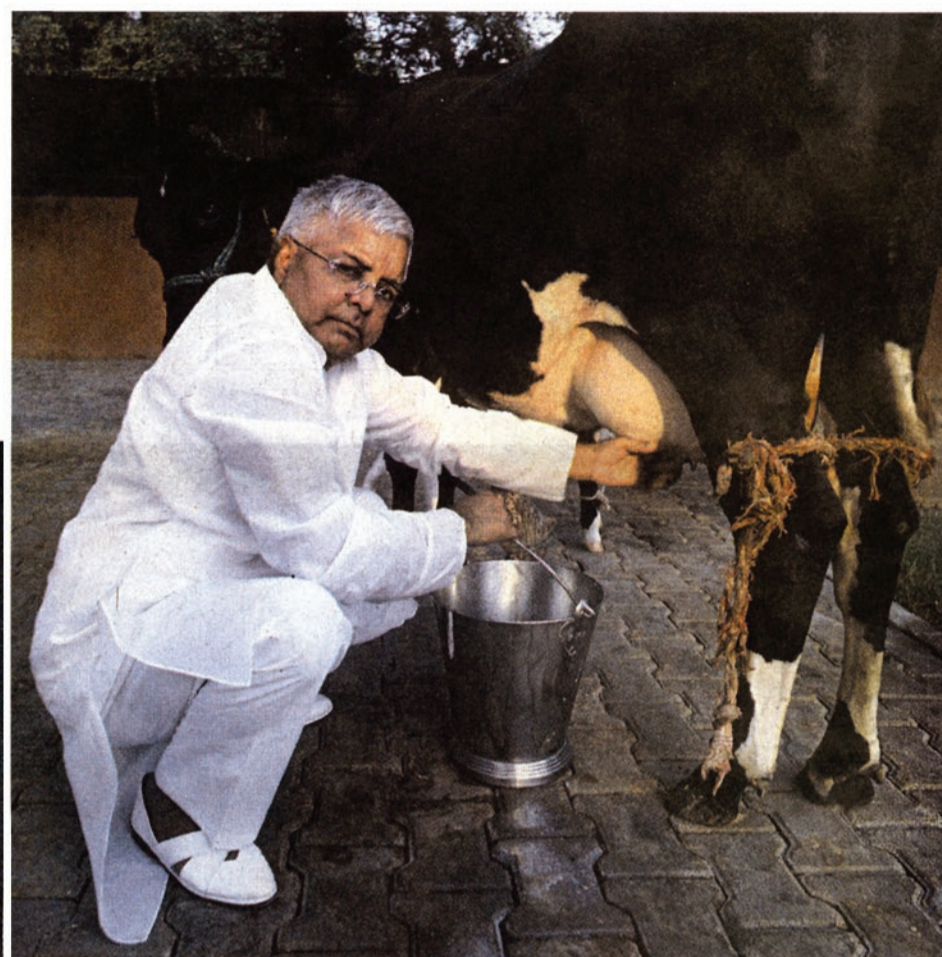
## Other interests

- **Theatre:** "I loved the theatre. My uncle Oliver Messel who designed for theatre shaped my life. I adored him. I feel at home in the theatre. All those greats like Harold Pinter and others who I used to hang around with are gone. I don't go so much anymore...."
- **Gardens:** "Well, I have absolutely no idea about gardening but have a nice small garden. A patch, a lovely patch. Our family was full of gardeners, but no, not me...." His assistant Dylan Thomas assures him and reassures me that his garden is not small and nice but rather grand and wonderful!
- **Handicap-related charities:** He has set up the Snowdon Awards Scheme, which allows challenged youngsters to continue with their education and train for employment.

ers, they are all there. Unfortunately the entire show has a few superb portraits mentioned earlier, the rest are like any regular staff photographer could have shot for a news magazine. It is Snowdon lite, a filtered, diluted, vision of his earlier rigour and finesse. Time has caught on.

It makes me think of what Vir Sangh-

vi says in his essay "As India becomes the flavour of the new century, we seem suddenly to be the centre of the world. American bestsellers focus on our IT success and our role as an out-sourcing hub. Investors crowd the lobbies of our hotels. And at seminars in faraway universities, they discuss our success in running a multi-ethnic, multi-religious



democratic state.

It is all very gratifying and more than a little heady. But even as the dollars snake their way across the world and into the stock market and as America discovers new virtues in a country it had always ignored, many of us still think back to England as a symbol of the cultural values we imbibed while growing up.

Sitting in my office, sucking my stomach in and trying to look unselfconscious for Snowdon's picture, I wondered how far our two countries have travelled: from coloniser and colony, from Commonwealth partners to sunset economy and sunrise state.

In a nexus where the wealthy new India commissioned a member of the grandees of Empire to return and photograph them in a reversal perhaps of power and domination, Snowdon has had the last guffaw. The Empire has struck back.

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