

## EXHIBITION

**The Inscrutable OBSERVER**

The world's leading portrait photographer defies age and illness to journey across the collective face of contemporary India



(L TO R) LALU PRASAD YADAV MILKS A COW; REKHA LOOKS REGAL; JYOTI BASU SITS ALONGSIDE HIS WAX STATUE

George Fernandes had just returned, exhausted, from campaigning in Bihar. He lay down on the bed, his dog on the floor, both asleep in seconds. Puff. Three photographs later, the portrait was done. The result, a wonderful study of a politician abandoned to his fate, forgotten by time, and yet dogged in his persistence. Or Jyoti Basu, sitting by the side of a wax statue, dressed in the exact same crinkled spotless white kurta, looking less a dogmatic Marxist and more a posh toff. Or even Shabana Azmi and Javed Akhtar, shot in a cosy embrace, not the chief causeratis of Mumbai but just another cheesy couple. Anthony Armstrong-Jones' craft has always been overshadowed by his celebrity, a function of his famous marriage to Princess Margaret that made him Lord Snowdon. But over three trips between the fall of 2005 and the summer of 2006 supported by The Nand and Jeet Khemka Foundation, he spent 70 days photographing 105 of the best and the brightest in contemporary India.

Revisited by polio, confined mostly to the wheelchair, Snowdon has captured some remarkable portraits, a few subject vamping it up for the camera, others simply being, and yet others surrounded by predictable props. So if there is a Lalu Prasad Yadav, milking a cow; there is also J. Jayalalithaa seated regally on an armchair in the middle of a corridor at the

Secretariat when she was chief minister; and historian Romila Thapar on a bench, with a pile of books by her side. It wasn't easy getting all of them to pose, not even with his aura preceding him. It took Devika Dault-Singh, the brain behind PhotoInk, the photo agency and design studio, three months of voicemail messages to engage the interest of Rekha, who turned up on the dot, without entourage, no mirror and minimal make-up. It took a lot of work to organise a shoot with the late dancer Chandralekha, then very ill with diabetes. And it required some gentle persuasion to convince the reclusive Mani Ratnam to pose—though the final frame Snowdon has chosen is tellingly of him looking away from the camera.

In all this, the 79-year-old Snowdon had to be left completely alone, locked in a sort of creative tension with his sitter, free to observe and indeed interpret. There are some dodgy inclusions in the exhibition, no doubt the result of a schedule on speed and a lack of intimacy with his subjects, as well as some glaring exclusions. But the exhibition is an approximation of the charm of metropolitan India, its barefoot tycoons and its reclusive designers, its pouty performers and often pompous politicians. Catch India by Snowdon, on at PhotoInk, Delhi, between December 12, 2009, and January 30, 2010.

by Kaveree Bamzai