

# The big shots

Portraits of India's stars by aristocrat-photographer Lord Snowdon are lighting up the capital, says **Jane Mikkelson**.



**Shutter eye** George Fernandes caught napping, with best friend

Celebrity is as celebrity does – and nobody does celebrity better than legendary photographer Lord Snowdon. This fortnight, portraits of some of India's most famous people, taken by Snowdon during his travels across India in 2004 and 2005, will be on display at the Photoink gallery.

"They're achievers," said Snowdon, explaining why he chose to focus on the crème de la crème of Indian success as opposed to, say, the curds-and-whey proletariat or the middle classes. "There are already too many books about India showing poor people."

The *Snowdon in India* series aims to document the influential men and women who have shaped post-Partition India: politicians, actors, bankers, musicians, activists and fashion designers, among others. Aishwarya Rai, Teesta Setalvad, Amar Singh and Bim and William Bissel (who run FabIndia) are only a few points in the constellation of stars spread across the gallery's walls.

Who better to immortalise India's Who's Who than Lord Snowdon? Born Antony Armstrong-Jones in 1930, Snowdon was elevated to the peerage in 1960 after his marriage to Princess Margaret, the sister of Queen Elizabeth. Since then, he has rubbed shoulders with the likes of Margot Fonteyn, Rudolf Nureyev, Laurence Olivier and the British royal family. A regular contributor to *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and other magazines for the last 40 years, Snowdon has acquired a reputation for his celebrity shots (among other things), and is a fairly major celebrity in his own right.

All the portraits on exhibit at Photoink were done in colour. Some of them – like those of Aishwarya or Montek Singh Ahluwalia – are rather pedestrian studio portraits taken

against solid-colour backgrounds. These portraits skew the exhibition, risking a resemblance to any newsweekly's "100 Important Indians" list. But others are deeply candid, and reveal familiar faces in strikingly humanised moments. Snowdon captured George Fernandes taking a nap, right after getting home from campaigning in Bihar, surrounded by clutter, with his dog sleeping on the

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floor in the same position. Equally intriguing is the portrait of the elusive Khushwant Singh on his porch, looking his age and gazing steadily into the camera, as though daring viewers to guess the thoughts on his mind.

Snowdon said that he was drawn to photography in his early twenties out of logical necessity. "I drew very badly," he confessed. "It's much easier taking photographs." He was educated at Eton and later at Cambridge, where he read natural sciences for ten days before promptly switching to architecture, most probably under the influence of his uncle, the famous theatre set designer Oliver Messel. Two years later, in 1950, he dropped out after failing his exams and apprenticed himself to a photographer in London. "I'm still an undergraduate," he said with a chuckle.

Snowdon's early photographs, taken in the 1950s and 1960s, revolve around the theatre

scenes of London and Paris, and in the 1970s he widened his focus to include less attractive settings of urban squalor in the UK. Particularly outstanding among these are the black-and-white shots of patients at an insane asylum in London. Snowdon said that he used to get up in the middle of the night in order to arrive at the asylum by 6am, as the night staff were less likely to interfere with his photographing of the patients. He traces his interest in asylums back to his childhood. His grandfather was a Master in Lunacy, a court-appointed authority who ensured that orders pertaining to the mentally ill were followed. Snowdon visited several asylums with him.

He was quick to point out, however, that photographs of patients – or of anybody else – can't be taken at their expense. "The word 'portrait' is so pompous, don't you think?" Snowdon said. "A photograph should be simple; it ought to speak for itself."

The photographs in *India by Snowdon* are a marked departure from those earlier works. The Photoink exhibition is accompanied by the release of an eponymously titled book of these portraits, and visitors at the gallery also have the opportunity to flip through books of Snowdon's earlier work. Although the portraits in this exhibition are a mixed bag, the best of them make the trip worthwhile. At 80, Snowdon is sanguine about the future. When asked what's on the docket for next year, he said that he plans "to be alive". He explained, "I think there's a lot of future in that."

*Exhibition: Photoink, MGF Hyundai Building, 1 Jhandewalan, Faiz Road (2875-5940).*

*⊕ Jhandelawan. Mon-Sat 11am-7pm. On display till the end of January. See Art.*

*Book: Snowdon in India, Photoink, Rs 5,000.*