

**Famous People, Infamous Shots** India has the honour of being the subject of Lord Snowdon's latest exhibition. But go back in time if you want to see his finest work yet  
**KABEER SHARMA**

**I**T WOULD BE UNFORGIVABLE, if not border-line blasphemous, to not swoon over Lord Snowdon's pictures. Still, more unforgivable if it's an exhibition about India. Thankfully, these are godless times we live in. Lord Snowdon, for the uninitiated, has often enough been heralded as one of the finest and most prominent photographers of our times—his images have a quiet elegance, a comfort between the subject and the photographer, and a sense of serenity that's since been lost to Photoshop computer software.

*Snowdon in India* is an exhibition and book featuring portraits of prominent post-Independence Indians and features everyone from Mani Shankar Aiyer and E Sreedharan to Vir Sanghvi, George Fernandes, Naseeruddin Shah, Kamal Haasan and Anand Mahindra, to name just a few. Devika Daulet-Singh, the project director, fondly recalls the shoot with George Fernandes, one that was wrapped up in exactly 15 minutes and three frames and features the leader sleeping on a bed, half of it occupied with stacks of newspapers and ilk, his dog asleep by the side of the bed—a testimony to how Lord Snowdon works. "George Sahab had been travelling and asked if he could catch a couple of winks while the set-up was happening. We got exactly three frames and Lord Snowdon said he got his picture," she smiles.

Another one is of Naseeruddin Shah, shot in the tiny balcony of his son's apartment with the words 'Pull Brother' emblazoned on the wall in paint. "There was just enough space for him to sit and Lord Snowdon's wheelchair to be placed



in front of him," Singh says.

On a table in the gallery sits an opened copy of *Photographs by Snowdon: A Retrospective*, and suddenly it begins to sink in—the pictures on the wall may be fine specimens, but the ones in the book are flawless. There are shots of Charlie Chaplin during a lunch in Switzerland, a naked Damien Hirst in a fish tank, a naked Emma Thomson looking into a mirror, David Bowie perched on a pedestal in a garden, there's Lady Diana looking up in boyish beauty. After these, the photographs exhibited on the walls of the gallery seem, well, ordinary.

Lord Snowdon, though, is far less charitable about his early work. He turns the pages of the book, dismissing a picture of a bare-bodied Gent, an aesthetically-placed mannequin on the side, as too camp. He stops at a picture of Lady Diana holding the baby Prince Harry in her arms. He's not happy with the picture, and politely asks for another glass of wine even as he wonders if the picture isn't blurry. You were trying to focus on Prince Harry, his assistant Dylan reminds him. He moves on, to a corset-clad buxom Helen Mirren looking into a showgirl mirror (he recalls her being very fond of her assets). Next comes a photo of Lady

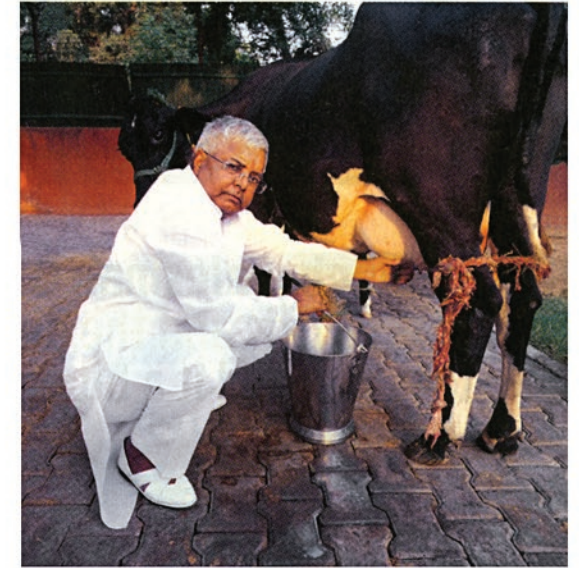
**FACES OF INDIA**

(Clockwise from above) Naseeruddin Shah, actor; and Kamal Haasan, actor; Lalu Prasad, MP; and Amar Singh, general secretary, Samajwadi Party

Diana, Prince Charles and Princes William and Harry at a picnic. Snowdon points out the table he took with him from London for the shoot, and dismisses the picture. Later, he does what would make many of us wince—he dismisses an image of Uma Thurman sprawled on a sofa as 'boring'. He certainly isn't his own best fan.

On the jacket of his book, he writes: 'I believe that photographs should be simple technically, and easy to look at. They shouldn't be directed at other photographers; their point is to make ordinary people react—to laugh, or to see something they hadn't taken in before, or to be touched. But not to wince.' Tragically, some of the pictures in this exhibition don't do much. Those in the book, though, would make you fall in love over and over and over again. ■

*Snowdon in India, an exhibition supported by The Nand & Jeet Khemka Foundation, will run from 12 Dec to 30 Jan at PhotoInk MGF Hyundai Building, Ground Floor Jhandewalan, New Delhi*



**musicalnotes**

**A Voice Unmatched**

To connoisseurs, the late Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan was a musician with tender emotions. To his disciple Malti Gilani, her *guru* is the guiding star behind her foundation for the welfare of musicians, named Bade Ghulam Ali Yaadgar Sabha. Having become the maestro's *shagird* in the early 1960s, when the Ustad was struck by paralysis, she recounts the *raison d'être* behind her venture. "At his behest, instead of erecting a monument, we created a corpus of funds to help musicians in their hour of need. Top-class artistes come forth to augment the fund-raising work by rendering concerts."

The tender association of ageing *guru* and youthful *shishya* lives on as an evergreen memory for Malti, as she became a *gainda bandha shagird* in Calcutta where Khan Sahib had voluntarily taken up residence on leaving Pakistan. "In 1948, after a recital over the

Lahore radio station, the director told him he should have sung about Rahim instead of Rama. The Ustad retorted that he sang as the creative urge of the music took him. Tearing up the honorarium cheque, he walked out of the studio, never to broadcast again from there."



The Calcutta and Bombay music circuits welcomed his arrival. Yet, he never forsook his *riyaaz*. Malti recalls that his legendary ability to interpret sounds, particularly nocturnal ones, could be traced to an episode in his boyhood. Having lost his father and uncles quite early, his musical future seemed doomed. With stubborn determination, the young singer began retiring for all-night *riyaaz* to a deserted monument beside the Ravi river, near his native Kasur. This soon attracted his first-ever 'fans', a motley crowd of singers, instrumentalists, *fakirs*, *shairs*, dervishes and friends, all spellbound by the power of his music. Singing through the night, her *guru* developed tremendous singing stamina.

Later, when he met painter MF Husain in Bombay, the duo began a painterly musical recital, as Husain painted the maestro singing in great abandon and complete command of voice and surroundings. Yet, says Malti, "There was no hint of ego and that is what makes him live on in our midst so fondly."

■ SUBHRA MAZUMDAR