

THE ROYAL PHOTOGRAPHER

He's clicked all manner of eminent people down the years. But Lord Snowdon is no less a star himself, finds **Gargi Gupta**



PRIYANKA PARASHAR



PHOTOS: LORD SNOWDON

Tony Armstrong-Jones, Lord Snowdon to the world, is a difficult man to get talking about himself. His recent, three-day visit to India for the launch of *India by Snowdon*, a book of portraits of famous Indians, and an accompanying exhibition at the capital's Photoink gallery, has been hectic, clearly taking a toll on the energies of the 79-year-old British peer, who has been described as "one of the defining photographers of the last 50 years".

"Which one is your favourite?" I ask to start the conversation. "Maybe the one that I'll take tomorrow," the answer, polite and matter-of-fact, to my set question blocks any further enquiries along those lines.

"Any favourites among the subjects here?" I plough on, turning the pages of the book to help jog his memory. After all, the photographs had been shot in 2004-05, over two-three months of intensive photographing, criss-crossing the country in pursuit of 100-odd eminent men and women whose busy schedules — or age, in the case of some like Sam Manekshaw — left them little time even for the privilege of being photographed by Lord Snowdon.

"What about him?" I point to the picture of Manekshaw. The blue-grey eyes blink, somewhat in confusion, the wrinkled hands pausing over the page — "Wasn't he the military man, Dylan?" Snowdon turns to his young assistant. Another dead end.

"This wasn't posed at all," the picture of George Fernandes, sleeping, with his books and papers strewn all over the bed which seems to also be where he works, finally stirs a reaction. "He was very tired. He had just come back from a campaign and said he would lie down a bit and then promptly went to sleep. His dog too came down to lie down

(Clockwise from above) Lord Snowdon; Jyoti Basu with a wax statue of himself is one of the many politicians who figure in the book, some of the others being Manmohan Singh, Atal Behari Vajpayee, L K Advani and Digvijay Singh; Vijay Mallya at home on an ornate silver swing. "Most people preferred to be shot inside their home," says Devika Daulet-Singh of Photoink, who was director of the project; this picture of Naseeruddin Shah was shot at his son's apartment. Clearly, performers inspire Snowdon the most

next to the bed," Snowdon recounts, the experience sufficiently unique to have remained lodged, even though the name eludes his memory.

Not all Snowdon's subjects were, however, so oblivious to the honour of being clicked by the photographer who continues to be Queen Elizabeth's favourite, the one she still turns to for official portraits, as to fall asleep on him. Veteran journalist Khushwant Singh, for one, confessed to being "vastly flattered" and dedi-

Priyanka gets down to business, Snowdon has yet more suggestions — why didn't she squat between the hedges herself, a little to the left?

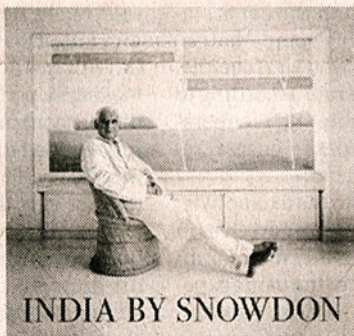
Have you ever tried digital film? I attempt to engage him again. "Never. I like film too much," the answer is brief and succinct enough not to leave any room for conversation.

I would have come away disappointed had not Dylan brought along a copy of *Photographs By Snowdon: A Retrospective*, which has some of his most path-breaking work of the past half-century published to accompany the 2000 exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

Fernandes, again, provides an opening. "Dogs and man, I notice, are quite a theme with you, aren't they?" I venture.

The thought seems never to have occurred to him — "You might have something there," he starts off, turning to a 1988 picture of Barbara Cartland, a study in pink — pink roses in the background, fuchsia gown, even pink trimmings on the umbrella — and her pooch. "Did you know she had two dogs? This one she liked to be photographed and the other, I think it was a Labrador," the ridiculousness still has him cackling 20 years on.

It's smooth going from here, as Snowdon turns the pages to his early landmark pictures — the grainy one of Alec Guinness, taken from the wings during a play; Marlene Dietrich and the smoke rings; Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn; the *Vogue* fashion photos and the social



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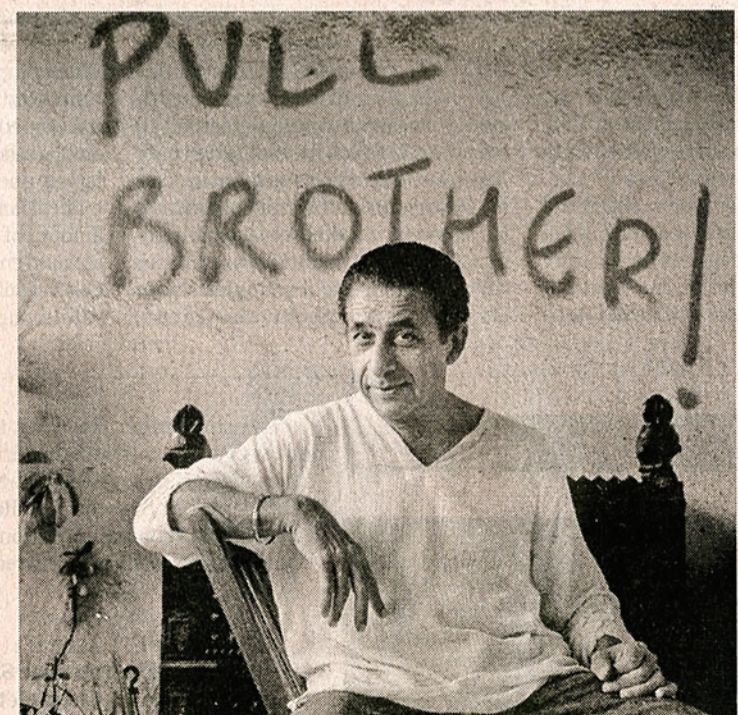
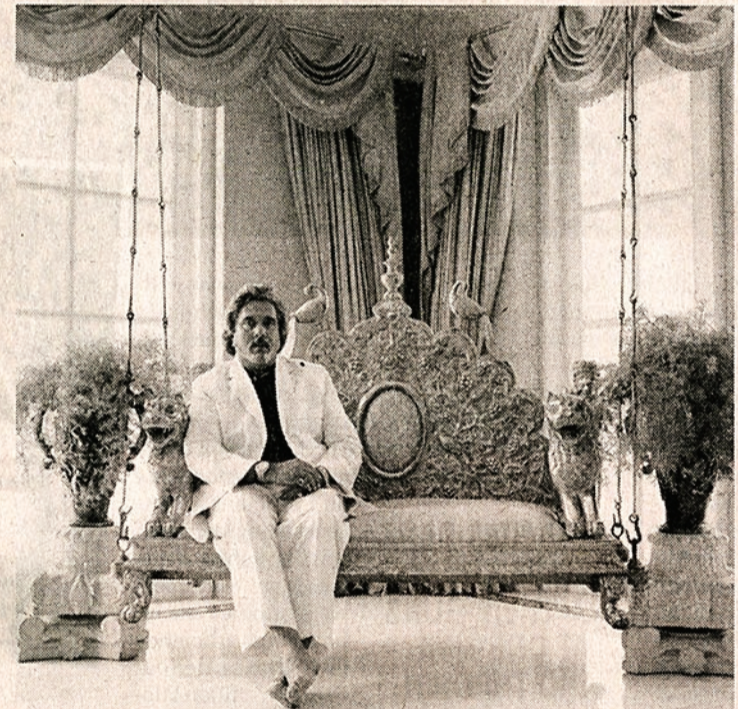
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cated one of his weekly columns to the experience of being directed "to remove" his glasses, jacket, watch chain, pens and even took off his cap to let down his hair.

The only time he seems to come alive is when it's time to take a picture of him. Snowdon, who has a reputation of being "quite a bully" when it comes to arranging his subjects just so for that soul-baring shot, has a very definite idea of how and where he wants himself shot. No, the lush lawns of The Imperial that Priyanka, our photographer, suggests, wouldn't do — what about the bushes yonder? Dylan has to wheel his chair across the damp grass and right into the hedge before Snowdon is satisfied. As



documentary ones on old age and mental hospitals for *Sunday Times Magazine*. The memories of a life rich in experience come tumbling out, offering a glimpse into the swinging socialite of the Sixties, who, along with his wife

of the time, Princess Margaret, had shocked and scandalised everyone with his behaviour.

It is an hour-and-a-half by the time I leave: the taciturn photographer has proved to be a voluble raconteur! ■