

Images of Indian Royalty

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Fig. 6 Maharaj Kumar Rani Sita Devi of Kapurthala, formerly of Kashipur
Photograph by Andre Durst, 1934

A third unforgettable moment was of her wearing a black and silver sari with her head covered, and a black coat with a small diamond brooch; and as she smiled, the sun shone on a rainy day. Later in her life, as her hair turned silver, Sita Devi grew more involved with the growing of trees in Mussoorie, a project in which she got many schools involved. As she once sat on the main road surrounded by hundreds of children, all that the little children did was look at her in utter delight and yell "Save Mussoorie!"

This then provides a brief introduction to five extraordinary and beautiful Princesses of India. Each had charm, a spiritual quality and grace; each loved the place they belonged to, each served their people well; and this is possibly what legends are made of.

In any culture, a picture of a prince or princess is never simply a visual record of the sitter. A royal portrait is a statement of power and a projection of moral and physical attributes. With the rise of British control in the subcontinent, Indian royalty began to subscribe to European conventions of portraiture. They eventually adopted Western symbols of authority and rank for official photographs by wearing the medals and honours awarded to them by the Crown. Although traditions existed for portraying rulers in wall painting and on cloth, painting in India reached its greatest height in miniature form, on the pages of manuscripts. The Western technique of oil on canvas—and later photography—therefore offered royals alternative ways in which they could be represented, both in scale and effect. They were quick to appreciate the skills of Western portrait painters and commissioned works from the leading painters and photographers of the day.



Fig. 3 Portrait of Maharaj Kumar Rani Sita Devi of Kapurthala posing outdoors in Versailles. She is seen wearing a two-piece suit and skirt ensemble with a feathered hat, and carrying gloves and a crocodile leather bag. The outfit is rounded off with a simple scarf and pinned corsage. Unknown Photographer, c. 1930s

order by adopting, to some extent, Mughal forms of tribute and homage. As a representative of the Crown, the Viceroy therefore held *darbars*, granted landholdings, affirmed or awarded titles, and observed court rituals such as distributing *paan* and sprinkling rosewater. In visual terms, the authority of the Viceroy, too, was partly represented in an Indian way, for although he wore Western dress, he was typically portrayed with attendants with *chauris* (flywhisks) and *morchhals* (fans of peacock feathers), two traditional attributes of Indian kingship.

The dress worn by Suniti Devi had been made for her by a French milliner, although her usual London dressmaker was Madame Oliver Holmes.¹⁹ European tailors and couturiers were naturally much in demand among Westernised Indian princes, who ordered clothes and uniforms while they were in Europe and supplemented their wardrobes by mail order once they returned home. Firms such as Henry Poole & Co. catered to an international clientele and kept rubbings of clothes and details of measurements from which they were able to cut new garments for commissions from around the world. The shoe-makers John Lobb & Co. likewise retained foot measurements for the same purpose. The accounts of Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner (r. 1887–1943) and his successor, Maharaja Sadul Singh (r. 1943–50), are replete with references to the purchase of clothes and shoes from London firms. A list of ‘things to be ordered immediately in England’ include khakhi socks, silk ties, starched collars, silk handkerchiefs, a motoring cap, an opera hat, flannel trousers, suiting fabric, suits, complete morning dress, ‘Nice Tennis or Polo Sweaters’ and accessories for uniforms.²⁰ Transactions were rarely simple, with details verified back and forth between Bikaner and London. For instance, Peal & Co.’s invoice of August 1948 for shoes, which listed no fewer than twenty-two items ordered by Maharaja Sadul Singh, met with protracted correspondence from the Master of the Household about the exact material used for the soles of some of the shoes.²¹

Whether or not in *purdah*, from the late nineteenth century onwards Indian princesses began wearing Western garments and ordering their trousseaux in Europe. Begum Kaikhusrau Jahan of Bhopal (r. 1901–26), for instance, often wore European clothes under her *burkha*.²² The daughters of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar (r. 1863–1911) were completely comfortable in both Indian and Western dress, and, having ‘danced through the ball-rooms of London and Calcutta in the smartest Parisian toilettes, were as much at home in the Park or at a gala night at the Opera as in their own country.’²³ Indian princesses sometimes commissioned clothes and shoes from the leading designers of the day. Among them was Indira Devi of Cooch Behar. In his autobiography, Salvatore Ferragamo (1898–1960) recalled her order for more than

one hundred pairs of shoes, among them a pair made with pearls and diamonds supplied by the princess herself: ‘I made one pair of shoes in green velvet with a spiral of pearls running up the heels and one in black velvet with a diamond buckle and two straight rows of diamonds running down the heel.’²⁴ For another, unnamed Indian princess, Ferragamo used the feathers of a humming-bird to create the rarest and most highly priced shoes of his career.²⁵ Rani Sita Devi of Kapurthala (1915–2002), considered one of the best dressed women in the world [fig. 3], and Australian-born Rani Molly of Pudukkottai (1894–1967) ordered clothes from the latest French designers [fig. 4], among them Callot Soeurs, Jeanne Paquin, Jean Patou, Madeleine Vionnet and Elsa Schiaparelli, Edward Molyneux, Coco Chanel and Jean Lanvin. It wasn’t only Western-style clothes that were custom-made in Europe for Indian royals. Monsieur Erigua of Paris produced fashionable chiffons in sari lengths for Indira Devi of Cooch Behar, and Parisian firms such as Sarees Inc. specialised in creating for elite Indian women rare sari materials in the latest Western fabrics and patterns.²⁶

With Western education, wearing European clothes became increasingly common among Indian royalty, although traditional headdress was sometimes retained. When Man Ray (1890–1976) photographed Sultan Mohamed Shah, Aga Khan III (1877–1957), he expected to find ‘a vision of Oriental splendour with silks and turbans, pearls, emeralds and rubies.’ Instead, the prince appeared ‘wearing a yellow woollen sweater, doeskin trousers and—a pair of boxing gloves on his hands. He explained that since he spent so much of his time in Europe and England, his subjects would be most impressed to see him in a Western outfit.’²⁷ Man Ray likewise observed that during his photo session with Maharaja Yeshwant Rao II of Indore (r. 1926–61), the prince wore only ‘Western clothes—sack suits and formal evening dress.’²⁸ The photographer portrayed Maharani Sanyogita of Indore (1914–37) in both, a sari and in Western dress. On one occasion she posed in ‘French clothes, and a huge emerald ring. The maharaja had bought it for her that morning while taking a walk.’²⁹

Shopping was an indispensable part of a European tour, offering princes an opportunity to acquire first hand goods which they had hitherto bought by mail-order or purchased via British agents and shops in India. Britain’s political empire was underpinned by an ‘empire of goods’ through which subjects worldwide shared the same material culture. For Indian princes the ownership and use of Western goods were critically important in articulating modernity and success in the imperial system. Clothes occupied a particularly prominent role in projecting Western attitudes. Princes traveling to Europe noted that the sooner they adopted full



Fig. 4 Portrait of Molly Fink of Pudukkottai attired in a belted muslin dress and wearing a simple three-string pearl necklace with a pair of pearl and diamond tear drop earrings. Photograph by Francis Goodman, 1953

Indore

Indore, whose rulers belonged to the Holkar dynasty, was a 19-gun salute Maratha princely state in India during the British Raj, and acceded to the newly-founded Indian government in 1948.

The last Maharaja of Indore was Yeshwant Rao II Holkar XIV Bahadur, who spent much of his time in Europe and the United States. A patron of many important artists and designers of the day, the Maharaja was a connoisseur of jewellery, fashion and art. He also greatly enriched the Holkar family's already sizeable collection of cars—the family being amongst the earliest to drive cars at a time when they were still a great novelty, and the Maharaja's mother, Maharani Chandravati Holkar, being one of the first women drivers in the country.

In the year 1924, he married Maharani Sanyogita Bai Holkar who, like him, had been educated in England. The couple made a splash in European salons as a modern, cosmopolitan,

progressive couple with wealth and good taste. They also sat for many portraits, with both painters and photographers. The Paris-based American photographer Man Ray, for instance, photographed the Maharaja extensively; and many of these photographs are with his wife. Some of these photographs, such as the ones that show the couple on holiday in Cannes, showcase an informal and intimate side usually entirely absent in royal portraits. The couple lived in a social whirlwind, and their unconventional, candid portraits speak of youth, invincibility and fun. Unfortunately, this happiness was short-lived with the Maharani passing away unexpectedly at the very young age of 23 in 1937, leaving behind a four year old daughter and a husband who not had yet turned thirty.

The Maharaja got married twice thereafter, both times to American divorcees: firstly Margaret Lawler, and later Lady Euphemia Watt, and remained to the end—a debonair gentleman.

