

# The House of Jaipur

## Praise for the Book

'Gives a ringside view of the struggle between monarchy and modernity in a world where royalty is fit for museums.' *DailyO*

'A lush, vivid portrait of the Jaipur royal family and the many harrowing struggles beneath the glamour, *The House of Jaipur* also reveals the poignant drama of how India's princely families came to terms with democracy and change. A fascinating and absorbing book with an unforgettable cast of characters.' **Sagarika Ghose**

'Reveals a story almost Shakespearean, one crippled by addiction, forbidden love and feudal traditions.' *Harper's Bazaar*

'[A] sobering 20th century saga more twisted than the secret passageways behind Hawa Mahal's lacy façade . . . By removing layers of "airbrushed inconvenient truths" from her sanitized memoir, Zubrzycki's assiduously researched, gripping account is of a troubled family wrecked by alcoholism, avarice and labyrinthine litigation among brothers and heirs.' *India Today*

'Replete with exciting anecdotes from the inner quarters of the royal palace, as also lesser known historical facts about how the princely state was engaging with the British and an Independent Indian government.' *Indian Express*

'A rare glimpse into the fairytale of one of India's most intriguing royal families.' *New Indian Express*

'Engagingly elucidates how after the sudden death of Man Singh II at a polo match in England in 1970, for the late Gayatri Devi and her progeny, it has been a not-so-glamorous progression from champagne cases to court cases.' *Open*

'When you think of Indian royalty, the House of Jaipur is usually the first to come to mind. That's as true internationally as it is in India. The glamour and the romance, as much as their intrigues and tragedies, and their brilliance at promoting themselves make them special. John Zubrzycki's fascinating and revealing book covers all these aspects of the Jaipur dynasty.' **Karan Thapar**

'Zubrzycki unearths hidden gems with his remarkable storytelling.' *The Hindu*

'Thrilling, deeply satisfying and engaging, the book is a must-read . . . [Zubrzycki] is wonderful at blending fact, gossip and history into a heady cocktail.' *The Week*

'Reveals stories of forbidden relationships, tragedies . . . bitter family feuds.' *Vogue*

# The House of Jaipur

The Inside Story of India's  
Most Glamorous Royal Family

John Zubrzycki

 juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS

C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,  
New Delhi 110080, India

First published in hardback by Juggernaut Books 2020  
Published in paperback by Juggernaut Books 2023

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 9789393986863

E-ISBN: 9789353451189

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For sale in the Indian Subcontinent only

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

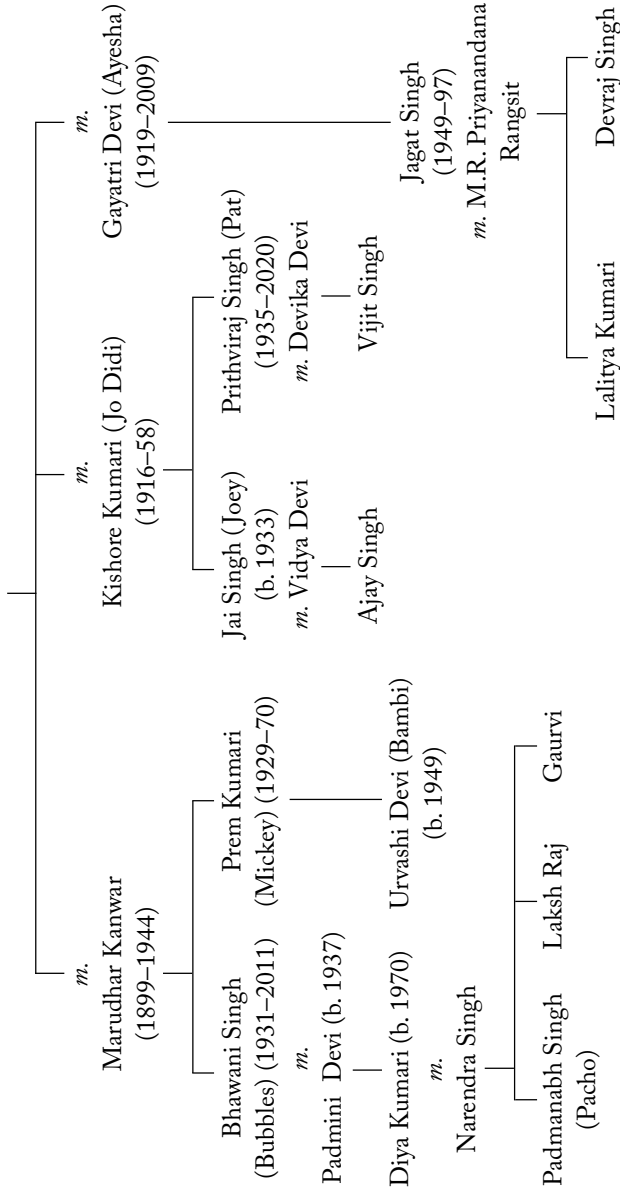
*To my late mother, Aleksandra Zubrzycka*



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**Sawai Man Singh II (Jai)**  
(1912–70)





# Introduction

Every year on the full moon night of Sharad Purnima, the harvest festival that coincides with the end of the monsoon, Gayatri Devi would hold a party on the rooftop terrace of her residence, Lily Pool. In Hindu tradition the festival commemorates Krishna's amorous dance of divine love with the gopis. To reflect the light of the moonbeams, idols of the god are adorned with silver and dressed in white silk. Bowls of kheer absorb the moon's cosmic rays and are distributed as prasad the following morning. When Gayatri Devi celebrated the festival, there were no electric lights, just the glow of the celestial body. The table service was silver but the dress code and decorations were strictly pale pink – as was the colour of her city. She was, after all, the Queen of Jaipur.

There have been no parties here for well over a decade. Lily Pool's art deco facade is showing its age. Plaster used to repair the walls has cracked and mould from the monsoon rains has stained the paintwork. Lily Pool was once part of the sprawling Rambagh Palace complex, the home of Gayatri Devi and her husband, Sawai Man Singh II, the Maharaja of Jaipur, before it was turned into a five-star hotel.

For years, the only boundary separating Rambagh from Lily Pool was a fringe of bushes and tall ashoka trees. Now a wire fence and a locked gate bar access to the hotel. The locks were put on by the hotel

staff in the days after Gayatri Devi's death in July 2009, ostensibly over non-payment of rent. Overnight a brick wall came up, sealing off access to the swimming pool – another symbol of the litigation that sullies the otherwise idyllic surroundings. Across the road from Lily Pool, grounds that once housed horse stables have been turned into a mothballed sports facility, part of a land acquisition drive by the Jaipur Development Authority (JDA). Guests once described Lily Pool as 'heaven on earth'. In the gathering darkness it feels more like an entombed reliquary of distant dreams and arrested glamour.

I am meeting Ayub Khan, whose father once worked at the Rambagh Palace. Khan used to earn a few rupees a day as Gayatri Devi's ballboy on Lily Pool's now abandoned tennis courts. After he completed his college degree, she offered him a job as a typist and bought him a trusty Godrej manual typewriter. It was a trajectory that ultimately saw him become her principal private secretary and a close confidant, often accompanying his employer on her annual visits to Britain. For three decades Khan typed all her correspondence – responses to constituents seeking help for their daughters' dowries, invitations to heads of state to visit her in the Indian winter, complaints to politicians who were neglecting Jaipur's heritage. 'Every year she would send Prince Philip a box of Alphonso mangoes for his birthday,' recalls Khan, who regularly met the British royal at polo matches in England. I imagine Khan's humbleness appealed to Gayatri Devi, who championed those she liked but could be ruthless towards those she didn't.

It is only a decade since Gayatri Devi died, but such was her stature it could have been a few weeks ago. Her memory is revered, her portrait found in many Jaipur homes – though strangely enough not in the City Palace Museum. She was the woman who took on Indira Gandhi, winning three straight elections despite neither speaking nor understanding the language of her constituents, then paid for her success with a lengthy incarceration in Delhi's notorious Tihar Jail. Her ghost-written memoir, *A Princess Remembers*, is still a bestseller,

though as a historian I found it more valuable as a resource for what she omitted than what she left in. *Life* and *Vogue* magazines ranked Gayatri Devi with her doe-like eyes, flawless complexion and jet-black hair that fell on her shoulders in perfectly cascading waves, one of the world's most beautiful women – 'a dream in sari and jewels'.<sup>1</sup>

Gayatri Devi and Man Singh – Ayesha and Jai as they were known to their friends – are central to the story of Jaipur over the past century. But the predominantly hagiographic accounts of their lives mask a complex, often tragic and sometimes dark tapestry. Despite being brought up in Cooch Behar, one of India's most progressive princely states where polygamy was frowned upon, Ayesha agreed to be Jai's third wife, knowing she would have to surrender to the norms of the ultraconservative Rajput society. Jai was also an ambiguous character. His duties as a ruler often came a distant second to indulging in the distractions that Western society had to offer – polo, parties and beautiful women. The British accused him of doing too little for the people of his state. Following Independence, stripped of all his powers as a ruler by the Indian government, it became almost impossible for him to do anything meaningful for those very same people.

Today, Jaipur is synonymous with the romance and valour of princely India. The city's romanticized mythology owes much to its First Family. Jai set the sporting world ablaze as captain of the most successful polo team of its day. In the 1950s and 1960s, Jai and Ayesha were India's golden couple, its answer to John and Jackie Kennedy, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. They were the only Indians invited to Truman Capote's Black & White Ball in 1966 at New York's Plaza Hotel – and Ayesha was the only woman who was allowed to break the dress code, arriving in a gold sari and a necklace of emeralds. Frank Sinatra, Rose Kennedy and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor were there too. All were friends of the Jaipurs.

Handsome, personable, athletic and urbane, Jai was the quintessential modern-day maharaja, with a portfolio of gleaming

palaces bursting with taxidermied tigers and sporting trophies, garages full of collectible cars and stables full of polo ponies and caparisoned elephants. Ayesha, like her mother, Indira Devi of Cooch Behar, was unique among Indian maharanis, breaking the stereotype of Indian princesses demurely hidden behind their veils. Born into a small eastern principedom, she grew to be a woman who was an international social celebrity, in a class apart from the maharanis of bigger, twenty-one-gun-salute princely states such as Gwalior or Kashmir. She combined the exotic allure of the East with the sophistication of Western aristocracy. Schooled in England and Switzerland, she spoke French better than she spoke Hindi, danced with the grace of a professional and rode horses as if she had been bred for the sport. She wore her trademark chiffon saris with the same stylish élan as she wore trousers, while sipping cocktails and smoking her fashionably long cigarettes. As a couple, Jai and Ayesha entertained their Western friends as royally and lavishly in London, New York and Paris as in their magnificent palaces, forts and hunting lodges in Rajasthan. In the hierarchy of India's princely states, Jaipur was not the most important, but it was the most evocative, the most romantic, the most glamorous. 'Everyone who can possibly contrive it goes to Jaipur. There is no other place quite like it,' wrote Rosita Forbes in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>



Jai bequeathed a complicated legacy when he died suddenly in 1970 at the age of fifty-seven while playing polo in Cirencester. He had married three wives, fathered five children, added to his ancestral properties and established a network of trusts to manage the family's wealth. He was a disciplinarian with his family. For as long as he was alive, a certain level of harmony and probity was observed. And then the cracks slowly widened. The dispute over who should inherit his estate now spans three generations. The litigation involves property,

shares, tax liabilities, trusts and moveable wealth such as gold and jewellery. As one set of litigants dies, their children inherit a poisoned chalice of complex court proceedings that range from the comical to the tragic. Allegations of forged wills, doctored share certificates, non-disclosure of assets, of treasures gone missing, of sick or senile members being made to sign away their fortunes, lead all the way up to India's Supreme Court.

Royal disputes are nothing new in India. Udaipur, Gwalior and Hyderabad grabbed the headlines for decades with their very public spats over eye-watering amounts of wealth. But in terms of complexity, the House of Jaipur is in a league of its own. Mother versus stepson, half-brother versus half-brother, mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law, uncle versus nephew – the list goes on, cutting across what were once close familial ties.

Not all the animosity relates to legal disputes. Personalities and politics pervade many aspects of this saga. When Ayesha and her stepson Bhawani Singh were imprisoned in Tihar Jail by Indira Gandhi during the Emergency, the rest of the family came together and lobbied politicians and heads of state for their release. A decade later, Ayesha and Bhawani Singh were shunning each other's company. When Bhawani Singh ran for the Congress party in 1989, Ayesha actively campaigned for his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) opponent.

Centuries-old traditions colliding head-on with rapid societal change are bound to cause instability. Laws of primogeniture that once governed successions in princely families no longer apply, but their descendants cling to them nevertheless. A ruler's wealth was once measured in bighas of land and the strength of his fortifications. Today it is hidden in trusts and offshore bank accounts. Throw in trophy ancestral properties, Persian carpets dating to the Mughal period, precious miniatures and priceless jewels brought back as war bounty from the sacking of Kabul, and one has all the ingredients for a long, complex and bitter confluence of disputes.



It is impossible to write about the House of Jaipur from the final decades of the British Raj until now without mentioning the years of litigation and antagonism that have torn the family apart. But that was not my intention when embarking on this book. As anyone who has stood by Maota Lake and looked up at the crenellated outline of Amber Fort or sat spellbound in the mirrored Shobha Niwas inside the City Palace can attest, the Kachchwaha Rajputs, Jaipur's rulers, were an extraordinary dynasty. The Kachchwahas trace their lineage to Kush, the son of Lord Ram, the mythical king of Ayodhya, whose reign is immortalized in the Ramayana. It is a legacy that the BJP politician Diya Kumari, the mother of the current 'maharaja', Padmanabh Singh,<sup>3</sup> wastes no time in reminding her constituents. As confirmed by palace genealogists, the polo-playing, catwalk-modelling royal who in 2019 made the cover of *Brides* magazine is the 311th descendant of Lord Ram and a potential claimant to what was until recently India's most disputed holy site, Ayodhya.<sup>4</sup>

The Kachchwahas originated in Gwalior in central India, before being driven westwards. The first ruler of the current dynasty, Dhula Rai, conquered a territory known as Dhundar from rival Rajput clans and Mina tribals in the eleventh century. His son Kakildeva captured Amber Fort, which remained the capital for the next six centuries. In the chaos that followed the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the dynasty's thirtieth ruler, Jai Singh II, decided to build a new capital laid out on a plan that combined the ancient Hindu treatise on architecture, the *Shilpa Shastra*, with the layout of Europe's greatest cities and his own ideas. His aim, writes the historian Giles Tillotson, was 'to assert himself and his kingdom as an alternative power base to rival the Mughals'.<sup>5</sup> In 1699, when he was eight years old, Jai Singh met Aurangzeb at his camp near Agra. In a famous exchange the Mughal emperor took the child's hand and asked him: 'Now what will you do?' to which Jai Singh replied: 'Nothing, I am in secure hands.' Impressed by his intelligence, Aurangzeb called him 'Sawai' or as good as 'one-and-a-quarter' men. Ever since the

title was formalized as per an edict granted by the Mughal emperor Farrukhsiyar in 1713, it has been used by all Jaipur's rulers, together with the practice of flying two flags, one full and one quarter-sized from the top of the City Palace, whenever the head of the family is in residence. As the city grew, Jaipur began to attract some of India's most talented artists and ateliers, whose descendants are still producing fine paintings, exquisite textiles, high quality jewellery, marble statuary and other crafts.

In folklore, the Rajputs had a reputation for being a meat-eating, opium-imbibing and alcohol-guzzling martial race. 'A Rajput who reads will never ride a horse' goes an old Marwari proverb. But even a cursory examination of their history reveals that the opposite is true. Once invited into a Rajput family's home, I often began by asking my hosts to explain the stories behind photographs that hung on the walls or were displayed on cabinets and side tables. Births, coronations, weddings, elephant processions, polo matches, the odd viceroy and the inevitable group shot of nobles standing over the corpse of a tiger told of a long and glorious legacy. Badges pinned on khaki uniforms were a reminder of the role their ancestors played in foreign fields of war. Over cups of tea and glasses of whisky, I was regaled by tales from history and offered lessons on etiquette and ritual. I started to appreciate the sophistication of Rajput society, the importance of close familial ties, the respect for elders and the legacy of their ancestors – something far from unique in India but taken more seriously than I had encountered elsewhere.

The forebears of these stately families called themselves Rajputs to differentiate themselves from other Kshatriyas. The word comes from the Sanskrit *rajaputra* meaning 'son of kings' and implies a royal ancestry – though that was not always the case. The origin of the Rajputs is the subject of fierce debate, with some historians claiming they were descendants of the Scythians. Others classify them as a caste rather than an ethnic grouping. What is clear is that they ruled over much of northern and western India from the eighth century

until they were pushed back to their desert domains by the coming of Arab and Turkic invaders from Central Asia from the twelfth century onward. Their strong military ethos won them admiration and notoriety. The reliance of Rajput warriors on intoxicants before riding into battle, the seventeenth-century English traveller John Fryer noted, 'makes them run upon any Enterprize with a ringing Resolution to die or be victorious. Before Engaging, it is usual for them to embrace one another, as if parting for another World.'<sup>6</sup> During his travels, the East India Company envoy William Finch heard of a Rajput captain who thrust his arm into the mouth of a lion to save his king.

The temptation to overplay the valour and chivalry of the Rajputs is largely the legacy of the early-nineteenth-century English historian James Tod, who almost single-handedly cast them as warrior heroes in the European imagination. Referred to as 'the Herodotus of the history of Rajasthan', it was Tod who helped construct the martial race theory, according to which only certain Indian communities were suitable for recruitment into the Indian army. 'The poorest Rajput of this day retains all the pride of ancestry, often his sole inheritance; he scorns to hold the plough, or to use his lance but on horseback. In these aristocratic ideas he is supported by his reception amongst his superiors and the respect paid to him by his inferiors,' Tod wrote in his two-volume *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* published in 1829.<sup>7</sup> And it was Tod who argued in favour of non-interference in the affairs of the Rajput states and that Indian rulers be treated as loyal vassals, rather than being subjected to direct rule as advocated by Utilitarians such as James Mill. Tod's reputation for favouring Rajput rulers over the British prompted David Ochterlony, the Resident of Rajputana and his direct superior, to characterize him as 'too much of a Rajpoot himself to deal with the Rajpoots'.<sup>8</sup>

Jaipur was one of the 565 princely states that covered two-fifths of India's land mass and one-third of India's population at the time of Independence. Nominally independent, these states recognized



the paramountcy of the British Crown. In return for the protection of the Crown against internal and external threats, they ceded their autonomy in areas such as foreign relations and communications. The British had the final say in matters of marriage and succession and could unseat a ruler for maladministration. The perfidy of the Raj in interfering in every aspect of their internal and external relations reached its zenith in states such as Jaipur and Hyderabad.



After 1947, the feudal order on which princely India was built broke down, forcing erstwhile royals to redefine themselves. But as the story of the House of Jaipur shows, abandoning their antediluvian mindset was not always easy. Traditions die hard and going against ancient codes relating to the role of women, marriage, adoption and one's place in the social hierarchy would lead to schisms within families. When Jai and Ayesha found their relevance as royals slipping, they began to dabble in politics and spent increasing amounts of time orbiting the world of Western aristocracy where deference to blue-blooded lineages remains strong.

The transition to modernity was not helped by a government bent on hastening the end of the princely order. For the princes, the ultimate betrayal would come in 1971 with the abolition of the privy purses. Already feeling cast adrift because of the rapid changes going on around them, the loss of privileges came as a further blow to their prestige. Some found new roles for themselves as hoteliers, army officers and diplomats, or as patrons of the arts and upholders of their culture and traditions. Others joined politics, often in opposition to the Congress party that had consigned them to oblivion. Although they earned the wrath of Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, they became a powerful political force, proof of their continuing popularity.

In the space of just a couple of generations, India's royalty

underwent changes that evolved over hundreds of years in Britain and Europe, leaving some stranded between two worlds. The House of Jaipur serves as a prism for viewing these momentous changes, as democracy evolved and defined the shape of post-Independence India and the lives of its citizenry. The days when Jaipur's rulers enjoyed the kind of wealth that funded jewellery-buying sprees at Cartier's in Paris, when they could slaughter dozens of tigers and leopards during their shikar parties and break speed limits with impunity while driving their Bentleys are long gone. Legally and constitutionally, members of erstwhile royal families have no more rights than any other citizen of India. Though many of them still retain a glamour and mystique that helps them win parliamentary and state elections, the power and glory that was once their birthright is no more. Like any other political candidate, they must go from house to house, from village to village to canvass for support. And in today's India their prestige and relevance depends more on their entrepreneurial and managerial ingenuity than on their inheritance.



So much has been written about the opulence and glamour of the princely states, it is easy to overlook the feuds, calamities and tragedies that afflicted these families. Whether through alcoholism or accidents, too many lives were cut short. Many of the stories in this book are deeply personal and reveal for the first time how these events and tragedies shaped the lives of members of the Jaipur royal family and their closest relations. In assembling this account, I have spoken to all three branches of the family and as wide a range of individuals as possible. I have also consulted thousands of pages of court records and archival material to gain a better understanding of the roots of the current conflicts and the personalities involved. Unfortunately, objectivity is a rare commodity in the Pink City. Apart from a few exceptions, what goes on behind the walls of the

City Palace has mostly been off limits to journalists and writers. Stories of intrigues and indiscretions, mostly unverifiable, of 'wheels within wheels', as one source puts it, would fill many a reporter's notebook. In the course of a single day, a person can be deified by one interviewee and vilified by the next, always with a level of certainty that leaves the uninitiated baffled and bemused.

Based on the sheer volume of litigation alone, it would be easy to characterize Jaipur as just another example of a royal family riven by disputes over property and wealth – an aristocratic soap opera where the princely protagonists alternate between waging wars and entering into temporary truces, with a final resolution always just out of reach. The saga of the House of Jaipur is much deeper than that. Behind their carefully curated reputations are complex individuals whose lives were touched by many of the great events of India's history over the last century. The Kachchwaha dynasty has a rich and proud past. Rulers such as Jai Singh I and Ram Singh II managed to put internecine struggles to one side and keep outside interference to a minimum, devoting their energies to creating dreamlike palaces, forts and extraordinary cityscapes, and patronizing the arts. It is perhaps these rulers that the present generation increasingly looks to as role models, as they create new roles for themselves, finding new ways to take their legacy forward while retaining the best attributes of Jaipur's glorious past.

Rajput valour, once tested on the battlefield, is now being played out in the political domain, in corporate boardrooms and on the sporting field. And, as this book also shows, it is in these arenas that the House of Jaipur's fighting spirit is now beginning to shine through.

# 1

## A Boy Named Mormukut

Along the route from Jaipur to Kota, the modern clashes with the medieval. It is the Hindu month of Bhadra and traffic on the six-lane highway often slows to a crawl as long processions of pilgrims making their way on foot to the shrine of the folk deity Devnarayan at Newai spill on to the road. Instead of bhajans, Bollywood music bursts from giant speakers mounted on tractors decorated with tinsel. The most devout of all will perform dandapranama, lying prostrate on the ground, then walking two steps and repeating the ritual until they reach the shrine.

Ninety kilometres from Jaipur there is a turn-off for Natwar and for a while the slender strip of bitumen points towards some distant hills. The monsoon rains have been abundant this year. The fields are waterlogged; the dams and reservoirs are full. The road snakes past fields of corn so tall they block out the surrounding landscape. Most of the time it seems to meander without purpose, bypassing an abandoned sugar mill before skirting the town of Siwar, its bulbous fort giving credence to an otherwise innocuous thikana, or noble's estate. Teflon-skinned buffalo saunter lazily down the middle of the road and pigs rut in the mud. As we detour past a lake with a

pleasure pavilion that appears to float on its waters, a black cobra slithers across the road – a sign of good luck, my driver assures me.

My destination is Isarda, the birthplace of Mormukut Singh, the village boy who was rechristened Sawai Man Singh II and became the most recognizable face of Indian royalty as the Maharaja of Jaipur. Most people can be forgiven for believing that India's maharajas and rajas, nawabs and nizams knew nothing but opulence. Stories of princes being weighed on their birthdays in silver and precious jewels and showered with rose petals every time they entered their palace gates as their numerous wives and concubines peered through latticed windows of the zenana, are often apocryphal. Jaipur's most famous ruler had a much humbler beginning.

Isarda was once a small thikana, one of hundreds scattered around the erstwhile princely state of Jaipur. Thakurs or nobles were originally granted jagirs or land by the Jaipur durbar. In addition to paying a proportion of the rent they received from their jagirs, they had to provide men, horses and elephants for the maharaja in times of war. Snug inside their fortified palaces, the thakurs patronized artists and musicians, while bards celebrated their family's lineage and deeds.

Isarda is so insignificant that once off the main highway my driver has to stop every few kilometres to ask directions. The town first announces itself as a signpost at a level crossing followed by a row of disused shops outside a railway station. Just when it appears there is nothing more and the road narrows further, a sharp left turn reveals an ancient archway topped by a crenellated wall overgrown with vegetation. The fortifications that once protected Isarda from marauding bands of Marathas have also served to keep it in a kind of time warp. Only one road wide enough for a car loops through the town before exiting another gateway that older residents can still recall being locked every night. Most working-age men are engaged in playing cards.

On the slightest of rises is Isarda Fort, its thick walls hiding a network of durbar halls and pavilions, courtyards, kitchens, storerooms, elephant and horse stables and zenana quarters. Before many of the surrounding houses added a second storey, the fort would have been a prominent landmark, a reminder of the power its thakur once wielded over the surrounding villages. Today it wears an abandoned look – its heavy wooden doors clamped shut with two rusty padlocks and a length of steel cable for added security. Through a chink in the gate I can make out a guardhouse and an open area overgrown with vegetation almost blocking out a low set of buildings in the background. What lies beyond, and the condition of those buildings, is impossible to ascertain. By standing on the roof of a temple at the back of the fort I see domed pavilions swallowed by trees. Wooden beams dislodged by the rain and wind hang precariously like giant scabs.

The fort has been sealed by an order of the Rajasthan High Court since 1996, leaving its once exquisitely painted interiors at the mercy of monkeys, peacocks, parrots and bats. I already knew that every significant property linked to the Jaipur royal family was the subject of litigation, some of it dating back more than three decades, but I never expected that this innocuous fort, not much larger in area than a cricket field, would also be contested. During his travels through Rajputana in the early nineteenth century, James Tod encountered many such contested fiefdoms that had succumbed to the ravages of time. ‘The tiger and the wild boar had already become inmates of the capital and the bats flitted undisturbed in the palaces of her princes. The ante courts where the chieftains and their followers assembled to grace their prince’s cavalcade were overgrown with dank shrubs and grass through which a mere footpath conducted the descendant of a hundred kings to the ruins of his capital.’<sup>1</sup>

Mormukut Singh was born behind these walls on 21 August 1912. He was the second son of Sawai Singh, the thakur of Isarda. Sawai Singh had inherited the family’s jagir consisting of around sixty-five

villages at the time of the Mughals. A man of little education, he was nevertheless a great marksman who boasted of killing more than four hundred tigers in his lifetime. He was also fond of wrestling. Mormukut's mother lived in purdah and had her own jagir consisting of several villages, in return for which she had to pay for the wedding clothes and funeral expenses of their inhabitants.

The thakur of Isarda belongs to one of the six branches of the ruling Kachchwaha family of Jaipur, known as the Rajawats, from which a ruler can be adopted. The rise to prominence of the Kachchwaha Rajputs owed much to their marital and political alliances with the Mughals. Raja Bharmal was the first ruler of Amber to offer one of his daughters to the Mughal emperor Akbar, a shrewd move that ensured the longevity of the clan and the prosperity of his kingdom. The Amber rulers were prevented from expanding their territories, but their alliance with the Mughals protected them from internal and external threats. Bharmal and his sons were incorporated into the Mughal hierarchy as amirs in the imperial service. His grandson Man Singh I became the commander-in-chief of Akbar's army. Other alliances with Rajput rulers followed, their steadfast loyalty providing crucial support for the expansion of the empire. In return, Akbar treated them on a par with his Mughal lieutenants, allowing them a measure of autonomy, freedom of religion and the right to follow their own traditions. Notes the historian John F. Richards: 'In accepting Akbar's service Rajput thakurs thereby accepted him as a Muslim Rajput who possessed far greater power and sovereignty than even the greatest of Rajput masters.'<sup>2</sup> Bardic tradition from this time equated Akbar with their great ancestor and cultural hero Ram. Two of his successors, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, were the sons of Rajput princesses. Many Rajput clans supplied wives for the Mughal emperors, the notable exception being the Sisodias of Mewar who viewed such alliances as disgraceful, leading to a schism among Rajputs that continued until well into the twentieth century.

Stories of Indian princes siring dozens of children from multiple wives and mistresses are often exaggerated, particularly when it came to the Rajputs who frequently had no legitimate male heirs. Adoption became the lynchpin of the inheritance system and on some estimates accounted for at least half of all successions among nobles and ruling princes. When it worked, it ensured continuity. The choice of a successor could be controlled and the adoption usually took place before the death of the ruler. There would then be a 'son' to light the funeral pyre. But if the strict rules governing the selection of an heir were broken, it could lead to bitter jealousies, feuds and even the threat of murder. Rajput history is replete with cases of legitimate heirs being set aside, illegitimate sons being adopted and the deceased ruler's senior widow deciding who would replace her husband on the gaddi.<sup>3</sup>

The authority on Rajput adoption, James Tod, wrote: 'Adoption is the preservative of honours and titles; the great fiefs of Rajasthan can never become extinct.'<sup>4</sup> For Tod the problem lay in the way adoptions were executed – too much consultation with too many vested interests over a long period of time being a sure recipe for internecine conflict.

The chief and his wife first agitate the subject in private; it is then confided to the little council of the fief, and when propinquity and merit unite, they at once petition the prince to confirm their wishes, which are generally acceded to. So many interests are to be consulted on this occasion, that the blind partiality of the chief to any particular object is always counterpoised by the elders of the clan, who must have a pride in seeing a proper Thakur at their head, and who prefer the nearest of kin, to prevent the disputes which would be attendant on neglect in this point.<sup>5</sup>

Mormukut became Sawai Man Singh II after his adoption by his uncle Maharaja Madho Singh II, who himself was adopted



from Isarda by Ram Singh II in 1880. The fort's locked entrance relates to a third adoption. Its last occupant was Man Singh's elder brother Bahadur Singh, who had three wives but no children – a potentially fatal combination when valuable ancestral property with multiple claimants is up for grabs. Following Rajput tradition, Bahadur ceremonially adopted his nephew and Man Singh's only son, Jagat, by his third wife Gayatri Devi. The first sign of trouble came when Bahadur died in 1970 and his widows began fighting over his possessions, leading to most of the rooms in the palace being sealed. By the early 1980s, when Man Singh's biographer Quentin Crewe ventured into the fort, the elephant houses were falling down and many of the stairways were unsafe.

With a penchant for flared denim, leather jackets and bright floral shirts, Jagat was cut from a different cloth than the average Rajput thakur. I struggle to imagine what his close friend Mick Jagger thought of Isarda when Jagat brought him here in 1985 or, for that matter, what the locals would have thought of the lanky, long-haired rock star. In those days, reaching Isarda by road required a sturdy four-wheel drive. Priyanandana Rangsit, Jagat's Thai ex-wife, remembers the inside of the fort being buried in bat shit and having to sleep in windowless mosquito-infested rooms. After showing Jagger and Priyanandana around the interior of his ancestral home, he took them to the kothi his father had built close to the Banas river, which in those days had yet to be stripped of all its fittings.

For once there is no court order barring entry to the kothi, but the dwelling is empty, traces of gold paint around a fireplace that is now a Hindu shrine the only hint of its former opulence. From the rooftop I can see the Banas River in all its monsoonal magnificence. The seventy-year-old chowkidar who lives in a stone cottage next to the kothi recalls dance parties that went on all night, with guests consuming crates of champagne brought by plane from Jaipur to a nearby private airstrip that Jai had built back in the 1930s. Groggy and hung over, patrons would pile into jeeps for the bumpy ride to

Sawai Madhopur and what is now the Ranthambore National Park for some shikar, bagging a few unfortunate tigers brought into range by beaters, before another night of partying at the royal hunting lodge.

When not entertaining his celebrity friends, Jagat was also expected to look after his uncle, something that Bahadur's second wife, Phanindra Raj Laxmi, claimed never happened. Allegedly fulfilling that role was Jagmohan, the son of Phanindra's lady-in-waiting. Regardless of his status, Jagmohan claims the fort was bequeathed to him in a will Phanindra made in 1985. Jagat and Priyanandana's son, Devraj Singh, the Raja of Isarda, insists he is the fort's rightful owner and has filed a suit challenging the will's validity. The likelihood of the litigation coming to a conclusion before what is left of the structure falls into an irreparable state seems remote.



The centrality of Isarda to the story of Jaipur goes back to 1880 when Maharaja Ram Singh II lay on his deathbed. Born in 1833 and invested with full powers when he turned eighteen, his reign coincided with a greater involvement in Jaipur affairs by the British. He learned to speak and write English fluently and took steps to modernize his state, adding a waterworks and a cotton mill, and championing education – at least for the elite – by opening the Noble College for boys and the Maharaja's School for girls. He was also responsible for the construction of the Albert Hall Museum, one of India's first. Not all the changes were welcomed unanimously. His commissioning of wrought-iron gas lamps and carriage drives of hewn stone inscribed with a royal crest that imitated Queen Victoria's had, according to Rudyard Kipling, converted Jai Singh's city 'into a big bewildering practical joke'.<sup>6</sup>

The French traveller Louis Rousselet, who met Ram Singh in the late 1860s, described him as handsome in dress but with an indifference to ornament. 'He wore scarcely any jewels, and no sword

or dagger, but an immense revolver was thrust into his belt from which hung a bunch of keys.<sup>7</sup> Rousselet also noted the maharaja's interest in photography, perhaps the most striking legacy of his reign. He was the first Indian photographer to make portraits of the women of the zenana. None of them are veiled, nor are their poses sexually suggestive. Equally remarkable are his self-portraits. For the first time in the history of the Rajputs, a ruler is portrayed not as a warrior but as a frail man wearing thick glasses, sitting next to a table piled with books. When not posing as an ascetic, he is frequently shown wearing a Rajput turban and English trousers. It was said that the exposure time for photographs taken at his studio was measured not with a clock but by chanting mantras.

Ram Singh's principal failure, if it can be termed that, was the lack of a male heir, prompting a succession crisis. To restrict the circle of claimants, laws were established in every state limiting this right to the issue of a certain family in each principality. In Jaipur, the senior branch of the ruling Rajawat family for the purpose of adoption was traditionally recognized as Jhalai, a thikana approximately twenty kilometres north of Isarda. As Ram Singh lay dying, the British Resident asked if he wanted to follow tradition and adopt a successor. He replied that he would but asked the British government to make the choice for him. When pressed a second time, just moments before his death, he named Kaim Singh, the younger son of the thakur of Isarda, as his heir.

Though tradition had been broken, the British were quietly relieved. The thakur of Jhalai at the time was paralysed and a drunkard. Kaim Singh was serving as a risaldar in the cavalry of the Nawab of Tonk, having been exiled from his home town by his elder brother because of a succession dispute. Barely literate, his upbringing in Isarda consisted mainly of wrestling lessons. It left him with an impressive physique, but not what it took to rule a state of Jaipur's stature and importance. After Kaim Singh was placed on the gaddi in 1880 as Madho Singh II, the British insisted that the Resident

act as a 'joint president' of Jaipur's royal council for two years. The Resident's initial assessment of the new maharaja was unflattering to say the least. Though bright, he was seen as 'indolent, easily flattered, obstinate and fond of inappropriate company'.<sup>8</sup> With the British reluctant to hand over the reins of power, the period of joint regency was extended from two to five years.

The British underestimated the young ruler. Madho Singh turned out to be tough, shrewd and assertive, particularly when it came to dealing with the perennial problem of recalcitrant thakurs. As the historian Robert Stern points out, instead of integrating them into the workings of the durbar, he used his ruling powers to crush them.<sup>9</sup> Known for being an extremely orthodox Hindu, his devotion to his household deity, Gopalji, was such that every morning when he got up he would cover his eyes and grope his way to the special room where the statue resided so that it would be the first object that he saw.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Ram Singh adopted Western hobbies such as photography and wore spectacles, Madho Singh was, in the words of his court biographer Hanuman Sharma, of an 'old nature', preferring 'deshi' customs and 'swadeshi' garb over 'videshi' ways and clothes. But he also credits the maharaja with 'tending and watering the garden his predecessor had planted'.<sup>11</sup> Dams and canals added thousands of acres of land under cultivation; roads and railways were extended.

His relationship with the British was complicated. Though he was considered among the most loyal to them of all the princes, contributing funds to Britain's war effort against the Boers and its campaign in Chitral and Tirah on the north-west frontier, he was ostentatiously unenthusiastic about English society. He discouraged his nobles from interacting with the British and refused to ride in a motor car until the end of his life. The *Times* praised him for being a ruler who accepted 'all the scientific, economic and political advantages of Western enlightenment', while maintaining all the customs of his forefathers. He had set an example of 'how to become an enlightened and progressive ruler and yet remain an orthodox

and pious Hindu'.<sup>12</sup> 'No crowned head in all Asia is surrounded by a more passionately attached people than Madho Singh Bahadur,' enthused another newspaper. 'Native civilization in India is its very best in Jaipur.'<sup>13</sup>

In 1901, Madho Singh was one of the few princes to receive an invitation to attend the coronation of Edward VII. This presented a dilemma. Crossing the *kala pani*, or black water, would entail flouting the rules of orthodox Hinduism. Just a few years previously he had used this excuse to prevent one of his nobles travelling by ship to England for medical treatment. Madho Singh's quandary was solved by a conclave of Jaipur pandits who ruled that he could go provided he only ate *prasad*. That meant travelling with his favourite deity Gopalji and that in turn meant finding a vessel on which cows had never been slaughtered or alcohol served.

Thomas Cook, which had its own 'Eastern Princes' Department' that specialized in catering to potentates travelling to Europe with two hundred servants, ten elephants and thirty-three tame tigers, came up with a solution: the SS *Olympia*. The passenger liner had just been commissioned. Six special kitchens were constructed, including one for the deity Gopalji, one for the maharaja and one for the accompanying Brahmin priests. Flour, ghee, rice, sugar, lentils, dried vegetables and other necessities made up a large part of the 75,000 kilos of luggage that went from Jaipur to Bombay in eight railway carriages. On board the ship were three huge silver jars filled with enough Ganga water for the four-month-long return journey. A herd of cows provided milk for drinking and dung for purifying the kitchens and dining room. Before the ship's departure from Bombay, Varuna, god of the sea and winds, was propitiated by throwing gold and silver vessels, strings of pearls and precious silks into the water. Assembled on the pier to watch the spectacle were the wealthy merchants of Bombay, many of whom were Marwaris from Rajasthan. As the *Olympia* was being battered by a storm in the Arabian Sea, one of the silver jars was thrown overboard to

placate the gods. After sailing through the Suez Canal the *Olympia* berthed at Marseilles, where Madho Singh and his sizeable entourage boarded a train for Calais. On their arrival in Southampton, they were taken to More Lodge in Campden Hill, where a well was dug to provide purified water.

The spectacle of dozens of bejewelled Indian feudatories attending King Edward's coronation at Westminster Abbey sent the press into a frenzy. 'Ranged against the screen in the places of highest canonical honour, were a row of Indian feudatories, whose jewels rivalled in splendour those of the regalia which they had come to see assumed by their Imperial Suzerain. In the stall of the canon residentiary sat the Maharajah of Jaipur, the lord of the coral city where he presides over the solemn worship of the Hindu Sun god.'<sup>14</sup> The *Boston Globe* described Madho Singh as enlightened, distinguished and 'one of the handsomest men in all India . . . [a] true Oriental'. The paper also noted his loyalty, faith and duty to the king-emperor.<sup>15</sup>



Madho Singh might have been a loyal servant of the empire, but Rajput tradition would dictate the choice of his successor. His lack of a male heir had nothing to do with any physical inadequacy. He had dozens of concubines who enjoyed their own zenana quarters in specially constructed apartments in Nahargarh Fort, where he could visit them surreptitiously without earning the ire of his two official wives. His decision not to have children with either of his wives derived from a prophecy that if one of them produced a son he would die within six months. Though he fathered upwards of fifty children with his concubines, he had only one daughter with his senior wife.

Madho Singh's selection of his successor was the culmination of years of secret manoeuvring and palace intrigues. Following Ram Singh's decision to go against tradition and adopt an heir from Isarda, there had been unproven but persistent rumours of a secret

undertaking that Jhalai would not be overlooked again. Isarda's claim was further undermined by the fact that its thakur, Sawai Singh, was himself adopted from some minor thikana with only distant ties to the ruling family, rather than a closer branch with a prior claim. But Jaipur's monarch saw things differently. He was afraid that if the eldest son of Jhalai's thakur Goverdhan Singh came to the throne he would not look after his mothers, widows and family after his death. His other reason was that Goverdhan Singh held a jagir in Bikaner, from where he had been adopted. His late wife was the niece of the Maharaja of Bikaner and Madho Singh felt that such a close connection with a rival state would not be in Jaipur's interests. Colonel R.A.E. Benn, the Agent to the Governor General of Rajputana, summed up the situation in a memo to the India Office: 'Intrigue and bribery were playing a very prominent part in the Palace at the present moment.'<sup>16</sup>

In 1916, Madho Singh left instructions for the succession in a sealed envelope that was to be opened on his death by the viceroy, Lord Hardinge. The instructions were never revealed but the British believed his preference was for Gopal Singh, the favourite of his two morganatic sons, to inherit the gaddi. When Gopal died of smallpox in 1920, the maharaja asked for the sealed envelope to be returned. A few months later, he took the unusual measure of appointing two Englishmen to his royal council. They were, Sir James Roberts, his physician, and Sir Charles Cleveland, an intelligence officer who had just retired as director of the Criminal Investigation Department. Both were 'old friends' of the maharaja but it was Cleveland who dominated the cabinet, becoming his *de facto* chief minister. His function was to gain British support for his choice of an official heir and stave off the inevitable opposition from the nobles of those Kachchwaha clans that missed out on getting their nominee in the top job. Once the new maharaja had been chosen, Cleveland was expected to block British interference in Jaipur's affairs until the boy achieved majority.<sup>17</sup>

In May 1920, Benn was told by a thakur from Jhalai that Madho Singh was preparing to adopt from Isarda and that if the plan went through there would be trouble. Benn's informant proved reliable. A few weeks later, the maharaja requested photographs of Sawai Singh's sons, Bahadur and Mormukut, who were then summoned to the City Palace. When they entered the durbar hall accompanied by their father, Madho Singh was sitting on a carpet with some courtiers. He asked the three to sit. Bahadur and his father obliged but Mormukut remained standing because he could not find a place, prompting the maharaja to ask the eight-year-old to sit on his lap. The act would later be seen as prophetic. A second incident that might have tipped the scales in Mormukut's favour occurred as the brothers were waiting to present nazars to Madho Singh. When Mormukut got bored of waiting for the maharaja to accept his tribute, he dropped his hand to the side and pocketed the gold coin. This was interpreted as a sign of independence and character appropriate to a prince. A less prosaic reason for choosing Mormukut may have been Madho Singh's belief that the eldest son of a jagirdar should not be adopted as it would deprive his father of an heir. The Jaipur ruler might have also heard the story that when eight or nine years old, Mormukut had teased an elephant until it was so enraged that it charged at him. But instead of shouting for help the boy stood his ground until a mahout who saw what was happening brought the elephant under control. The British had a more sanguine explanation. Bahadur, they had heard from palace spies, was already showing a weakness for the bottle.

Madho Singh's plan to keep his choice a secret had little hope of succeeding, especially now that years of pent-up anger over his contemptuous treatment of the nobility was finally coming to a head. In September 1921, Jhalai staked its claim to the gaddi by bringing a petition to the Government of India stating that Goverdhan Singh was the rightful heir and that his claim was supported by the thakurs



of Khetri, Samode, Diggi and Chomu as well as the Maharaja of Bikaner, Ganga Singh. The petition warned that violence could erupt if Rajput custom and Hindu law were overturned and cited instances where the British had backed the claims of the nearest relations over the preferences of a dying ruler. To concede to Madho Singh's request would put a question mark over all rightful claimants to princely thrones, the petition concluded.<sup>18</sup>

A crude attempt by the British to evade the issue by claiming they had no knowledge of who had been selected prompted a long letter from Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner to the viceroy. The letter described Jaipur as a hotbed of intrigue and made sinister references to its ruler being manipulated by certain interests in the court. He then referred to a report that said large sums of money were being drained from the treasury 'for the marriage in heaven [!] of the two morganatic sons of His Highness the Maharaja of Jaipur, one of whom died recently'.<sup>19</sup>

The astonishing claim had some basis. The maharaja had been lavishing money on one of his favourite concubines, Roop Rai, whom British intelligence referred to as a 'female Rasputin'.<sup>20</sup> She was rumoured to possess hypnotic power and allegedly had three girls from the zenana beaten to death by eunuchs and had their bodies burned. Her modus operandi was to eavesdrop on Madho Singh whenever he was with his favourite queen. After the queen died, Roop Rai told the maharaja that his wife had appeared to her and asked for certain tasks to be carried out. Because she had overheard their conversations, she was able to persuade him she was telling the truth. She even convinced him that she could send the departed queen a message by meeting her in her dreams and asked him for money to arrange the heavenly marriage of his two morganatic sons, who had died before they reached their twenties. Speaking on behalf of one of them, she demanded money to treat him in the other world.<sup>21</sup>

Roop Rai had firmly entrenched herself as the dominant force in the zenana with the support of Kwasji Bala Bux. As the keeper of the ruler's wardrobe, Bala Bux controlled all access to the maharaja and was said to provide him with women to supplement the services of his wives and concubines. Despite warnings from the British and many of Jaipur's nobles that Bux was corrupt, he was promoted from being a valet to the rank of a noble and put in charge of five forts as well as the kapadwara, or treasury. By the end of Madho Singh's reign, Bala Bux had acquired so much power that the British felt that 'no administration can afford to disregard him'.<sup>22</sup> Their greatest fears, however, were that the dying maharaja was losing his control over Jaipur's durbar and falling deeper and deeper into the clutches of the zenana, just as they were trying to avert a political crisis over the succession. They were also terrified of the influence Roop Rai and Bala Bux would exert on his chosen successor.

Whether it was Roop Rai's vice-like grip or his fear of invoking the curse of his forefathers, Madho Singh continued to ignore the viceroy's insistence that he should make his choice public. Meanwhile, Jhalai kept piling on the pressure by presenting two more petitions endorsing Goverdhan Singh as the rightful heir. Madho Singh responded by accusing the Jhalai thakurs and their supporters of 'disloyalty and sedition' and barred them from the royal council and the palace. To reassert his authority, he convened an open durbar starting on 12 March 1921 to announce that he had chosen his successor but then stopped short of naming who that would be. Over the next three days, thousands of people came forward to sign a document that confirmed his power to adopt anyone of his choosing. Once again, the outliers were the thakurs of Jhalai, Khetri, Samode, Chomu and Digg. For his part, Madho Singh refused to be swayed by the recalcitrant thakurs, sticking to his policy 'to reward and show special favour to those who are loyal' and 'punish the disloyal'.<sup>23</sup>