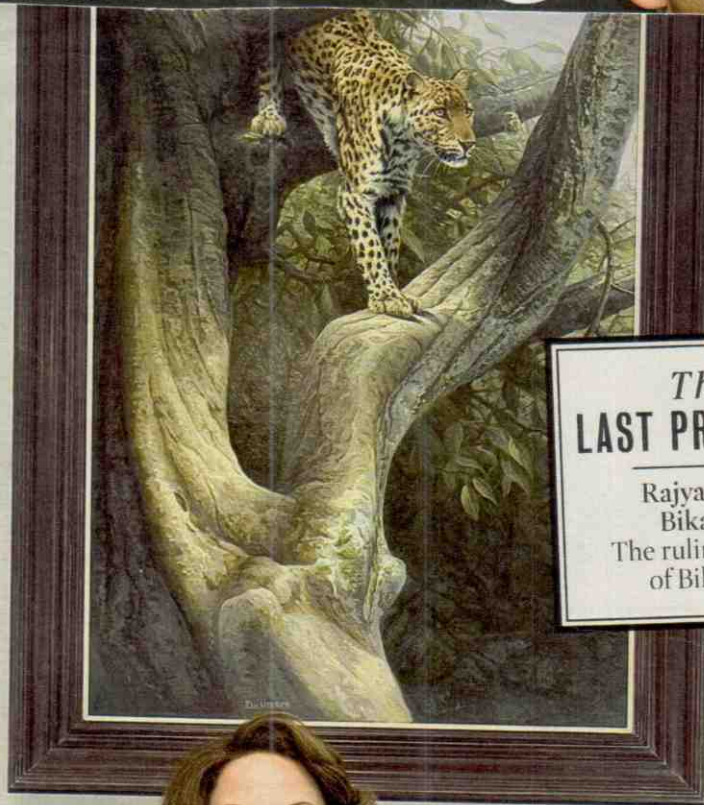


MAGAZINE



The LAST PRINCESS

Rajyashree
Bikaner
The ruling house
of Bikaner



"I can remember my father saying, 'Don't depend on these titles and privileges, they're fripperies. They may one day be a handicap'"

for four terms, one of my sisters' father-in-law was president of India, two of my uncles were governors, a grandfather was a governor, there've been ministers and ambassadors..." The branch of his family who joined the Muslim migration to Pakistan have enjoyed similar positions there.

And in India today, there's some notion of a wider reappraisal of the princes. "In the past," says Anna Jackson, the curator of the V&A show, "the historical focus has been either on British India and the nationalist struggle, or on the Moguls, overlooking the maharajahs. But these were Indian states, more or less independent, and they produced some extraordinary things. And a new generation can assess that more fairly."

The last princess

"I can remember my father saying, 'Don't depend on these titles and privileges, they're fripperies,'" recalls Rajyashree Bikaner, daughter of the last Maharajah of Bikaner. "And he said that your titles may one day be a handicap rather than a benefit, so don't depend on these things. Instead try to do something for yourself if you want to gain respect and have your honour – honour doesn't come from titles." Rajyashree was a brilliant shot who frequently represented her country in competition. She now lives between London, Delhi and Bikaner, where she helps to manage several trusts established to maintain family properties.

She has recently published a book about life in the beautiful palace at Bikaner, now a hotel. "I caught the end of that life, so that's what I've tried to record, even if people don't agree with various things like the hunting, which upsets so many people... The interesting thing is that the maharajahs maintained the forests, so there was no deforestation, like what's happening today; the habitat was protected. There was a certain order, which is now not there, frankly." She is proud of her family's achievements, especially the canal built by her grandfather, which has brought prosperity to the region. "But it's not beneficial to dwell on the past." The loss of her title "doesn't matter – I know who I am. I know that I am the descendant of a long line of aristocrats. I know their achievements, that is sufficient for me. I don't use my title."