



FULL TILT
The image
of the
Maharani
after it was
restored

NOSTALGIA

high profile

On holiday in India, JULIA BOOTH chanced upon an old photo of an Indian princess. As she set about restoring it, an amazing story emerged

On my first visit to Kolkata this February, I was rummaging through photos at an antiques store when, in the middle of a dusty pile, I found the strikingly beautiful image of a woman. Her strong profile and soft downward gaze set her apart from the others. Someone had distractedly coloured in some of her jewellery, but it couldn't mask the high-voltage glamour of her diamond earrings and pearl necklace. There was a stamp on the back of the photograph, but I could barely make out two words. I was captivated. "I think she is Gayatri Devi," the shop owner told me.

I'd read about the Maharani of Jaipur, queen, politician, philanthropist and re-

nowned beauty, and here I was with her portrait. Without hesitation, I bought it.

Clearing it up

Back in Sydney, the photo in the process of being restored, I began scouring images of Gayatri Devi. Something didn't seem right—the strong jaw of the woman in my photograph didn't match the gentle, open images of the princess. I sought help from a friend, who emailed the portrait to an expert in India. The response was remarkable—the woman in the image wasn't Gayatri but her mother, Indira of Baroda. She was petite, with a deep, husky voice, a sharp mind and extraordinary charm, and Gayatri described her as "simply the most beautiful and ex-

"Simply the most beautiful and exciting woman any of us knew" —GAYATRI DEVI

citing woman any of us knew."

Indira's carriage in the portrait is regal and determined. The tilted head and gaze hint at humility, the thrust-out chin insinuates defiance and strength. It's a fitting pose for a woman who, in 1911, caused an international scandal when she cancelled her arranged marriage by telegram to the Maharaja of Scindia because she had fallen in love with Prince Jitendra of Cooch Behar and escaped to London in 1913 to marry at age 20. They became the Maharaja and Maharani of Cooch Behar; but tragedy struck when excessive drinking took Jitendra's life after nine years and five children.

Princess of style

Widowhood didn't stop Indira from travelling extensively with her kids, becoming part of the European set and collecting friends like the Prince of Wales and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. She was India's first international celebrity. Evelyn Walsh, a friend of hers from Philadelphia, recalling the queen at a casino in Le Touquet in the 1920s, describes her as "the most fabulously beautiful young Indian lady, holding the longest cigarette holder I had ever seen, wearing a brilliant sari and covered with pearls, emeralds and rubies. She was quite poker-faced, but had a pile of chips in front of her to testify to her success, and to top it all she had a live turtle, whose back was laden with three strips of emeralds, diamonds and rubies, and which she used as a talisman."

Full circle

When the portrait came back restored, I could read the stamp: Hanover Square, London—the address of Vogue House, the offices of Condé Nast. The photo was taken at the famous portrait studio Lenare, once located at Vogue House, where celebrities and royalty of the 1920s and 1930s came to be immortalised. The pearls were more clearly visible. I also noticed something about her enigmatic half smile. Perhaps a glint of what the author William Gerhardie said of her: "With her, life was never dull and you never knew what would happen next." ■