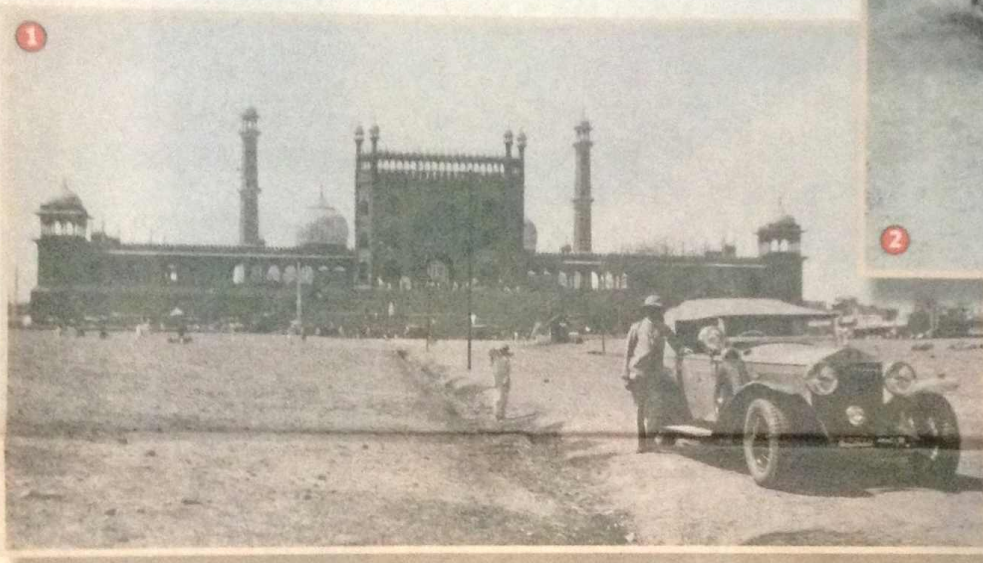


Royals Relive the Rolls

With the government lifting a ban on import of cars made before 1950, a clutch of next-gen members of the maharaja families rally together to bring back some 100 vintage Rolls Royce models that had been sold overseas



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ROLLS ROYCE ARCHIVES

1. A Phantom II spotted outside the Jama Masjid in Delhi in 1930
2. Maharaja Bhupindra Singh and the Prince of Wales, traveling in a Silver Ghost through rural Punjab
3. The MP of Amritsar in his Phantom II
4. Maharaja Sir Vijaysinhji of Rajpipla receives Sir Frederick Sykes, governor of Bombay, at Rajpipla in December 1929
5. Governor of Bombay Sir Leslie Wilson alongside Silver Ghost 1921

ROLLS ROYCE ARCHIVES

:: KP Narayana Kumar

Indra Vikram Singh does not miss the title of "maharaja" that his ancestors enjoyed for over six centuries until their princely state was merged with the newly formed Republic of India in 1948.

The Rajpipla family ruled from the banks of Narmada in Gujarat for over 600 years. The clan was counted among the wealthiest in the country around the time the republic came to life.

His grandfather Maharaja Sir Vijaysinhji is the only Indian owner to have won the richest horse race in Britain, the Epsom English Derby in 1934.

The family kitchen at the palace was as large as a huge hall where about a hundred people assisted a number of royal chefs who cooked only select dishes they had mastered.

Maharaja Sir Vijaysinhji is credited with introducing free primary education and scholarships, and setting up a civil hospital, five dispensaries and a veterinary hospital in the princely state.

The family also owned several cars out of which 11 were of Rolls Royce marque.

Indra Vikram Singh prefers not to "revel in or flaunt the past" and does not use the title in any form of communication. The only occasion when he felt bitter

about the transition into the new era was when a statue of his grandfather on a horseback in Rajpipla started being referred to as "Kala Ghoda chowk" (Black Horse junction); he promptly sought to name the circle after the former king.

"I use titles only to address people out of respect and I find the usage of the titles

in public to be superfluous."

Changing Times

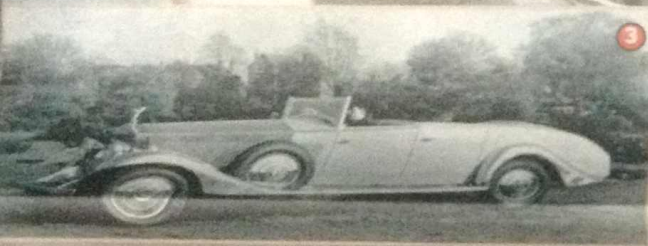
After India won Independence and the privy purse was abolished, the Rajpipla family, like many other royals, had to sell off jewellery and land and opt for a less flamboyant lifestyle.



Mir Osman Ali Khan, the seventh Nizam of Hyderabad, inherited this Throne Car (left), a Silver Ghost. It came with a dome and a special throne designed for the Nizam. The car was painted yellow as it was the state colour of Hyderabad. The car has been restored by Princess Esra, wife of the Nizam's grandson Mukarram Jah



Royce Romance



ROLLS ROYCE ARCHIVES

RAJPIPLA ROYAL FAMILY COLLECTION



RAJPIPLA ROYAL FAMILY COLLECTION

They also had to sell their cars. Even as he remembers the glory of those days, Vikram Singh does not aspire to get back the entire property the family owned. "There is no way I can buy back everything we owned. If any one [among the erstwhile royal families] aspires for something like that, he would surely go mad," he says.

On the Rolls

But then the cars are something else and he is hopeful of locating at least a couple of the Rolls Royce models that used to grace the palace. Vikram Singh desperately wants to drive some of the vehicles that were used by his grandfather.

One of the Rolls Royce cars once owned by the family, a Silver Ghost, featured in the James Bond film *Octopussy* after it was bought by the Rajkot royal family.

Legend has it that Vikram Singh's grandfather asked for the car to be left behind at the Kolhapur palace after it was sent there to run an errand. Years later, the car changed hands twice and ended up in the hands of the Rajkot royal family.

The government recently lifted a ban on import of vintage cars that has given hope to people like Vikram Singh. They can now

track their cars and bring them back to India. The commerce ministry order issued in April allows people to import cars manufactured before 1950.

"I plan to collect details of Rolls Royce models that were once owned by our family. I am sure many of them are in Europe or the US. I hope to bring back at least a couple of them," says Singh.

The Luxe Quotient

Media reports suggest that India could become the world's third largest market for luxury cars by 2020. Experts have pointed out that despite the slowing down of the automobile industry in the country, the luxury car segment is still growing in double digits.

However, this phenomenon of India being a market for luxury cars is not new and India has been a sought after destination for car-makers around the world even before independence. Most accounts on India written before independence seem to have overlooked the significance of the country as a luxury market.

According to estimates by experts, Rolls Royce has sold over 800 cars in the country during the first half of the 20th century. Some other accounts even sug-

gest that a fifth of the 20,000 cars produced by the company before World War II were sold in India.

Although the exact number of cars sold in the country during the period may still be a mystery, evidence of the massive appeal of the Rolls Royce brand among the royals lies scattered across India.

Experts aver that around 100 of these cars were sold overseas in the years before the '70s when the government banned the export of vintage cars while another 200 to 250 are still believed to be with collectors in India.

The remaining cars, in hundreds, are believed to be scattered around the country with many of the owners not realising the actual worth of these vintage beauties. Most car collectors have a stock of tales about how exquisite models of the Rolls Royce brand have been found in obscure garages around the country.

A rare Rolls Royce Phantom I from 1927 at V&A Museum for the opening of the Maharaja Exhibition in 2009 in London. The V&A exhibited 250 objects belonging to the Maharajas from over 200 years of rule



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Left: Sir Frederick Sykes, governor of Bombay (rear right seat) and Maharaja Sir Vijaysinhji of Rajpipla (rear left seat) in the Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost 1921. Right: A Rolls Royce belonging to the erstwhile royal family of Panchkote.

Corroding Past

In a small town in Bihar, a derelict Rolls Royce with the springs bursting out of its leather upholstery has chicken eggs laid on the back seat, say Manvendra Singh Barwani and Sharada Dwivedi in *The Automobiles of the Maharajas*.

Another 1920 Rolls Royce originally from the royal garages of Nabha was retrieved by an Army general from a scrap dealer in Patiala.

"It lies abandoned in his garden since the transport authorities for the purpose of levying tax on the vehicle insist on an original registration certificate - which doesn't exist since the royal cars were not registered," write the authors.

A variety of cars such as Manza, Buick, Cadillac, Pontiac and the Studebaker were used by the royal families. However, the Rolls Royce seemed to have interested them most and it was common for the families to own multiple cars of the brand.

Royal Connections

While the Rolls Royce seemed to have lent glamour to the Maharajas, they in return have provided the brand a place in history.

In 1905, the Maharaja of Patiala is known to have returned to India with eight Rolls Royce cars. The Maharaja of Bharatpur specialised in duck shooting and used a

1925 nickel-plated 20 hp Rolls Royce that facilitated the maharaja to be driven straight up to the lake through a difficult terrain. At the lake the top would be opened for the maharaja and his guests to facilitate a good shot. Similarly, Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir ordered a 40-50 hp Rolls Royce in 1926 for his coronation.

The automobile-maker has also publicly acknowledged that India has contributed much to its early success. In a write-up released to the media recently, the company said Rolls Royce owed much to India. "The sub-continent has been the ultimate destination of many of the early cars, including the 40/50 hp Silver Ghosts and Phantoms built during the first half of the twentieth century."

The article also suggests that the connection between Rolls Royce in India could well have begun when the parents of one of the two founders, Charles Stuart Rolls, attended the 1902 celebrations of the Corona-

tion Durbar in Delhi, two years before the formation of Rolls Royce Ltd. "They must have told their son Charles, who was selling French cars in London at the time, of the burgeoning interest in motoring amongst the fabulously wealthy Indian potentates."

The Maharaja of Gwalior purchased the first Rolls Royce car in 1907 and four years later the company delivered eight identical Silver Ghosts at the imperial Delhi durbar.

Mir Osman Ali Khan, the seventh Nizam of Hyderabad who was named as the all-time richest Indian and the fifth all-time wealthiest man to have ever lived, owned over 50 Rolls-Royce cars.

MA Faiz Khan, who hails from an aristocratic family which was also close to the Nizams, says Mir Osman Ali Khan's father, the sixth Nizam, preferred Napier's till early 1900s. But once the brand arrived in India, he was interested in acquiring Rolls Royce cars. The prized car in his garage was the Throne Car which came with a dome and a special throne designed for the Nizam.

The car was rarely used because of the passing away of the sixth Nizam who ordered it. The seventh Nizam's railway department was asked to redo the vehicle many years later. The car was painted yellow as it was the state colour of Hyderabad. "The seats were put up in such a way that no one was allowed

to show his back to the Nizam. Even the driver's seat propped up in a certain angle such that his back was not totally facing the Nizam," says Faiz Khan.

The Nizam's railway department carried out repairs in the '30s and since then it has been kept in the garage. In recent years, the car has been restored and taken out for public viewing.

Prized Possession Still

After the '50s, the Rolls Royce brand disappeared from India, probably because its patrons, the royal families, had begun to tighten their purse-strings as they were faced with a rapid loss of power and wealth.

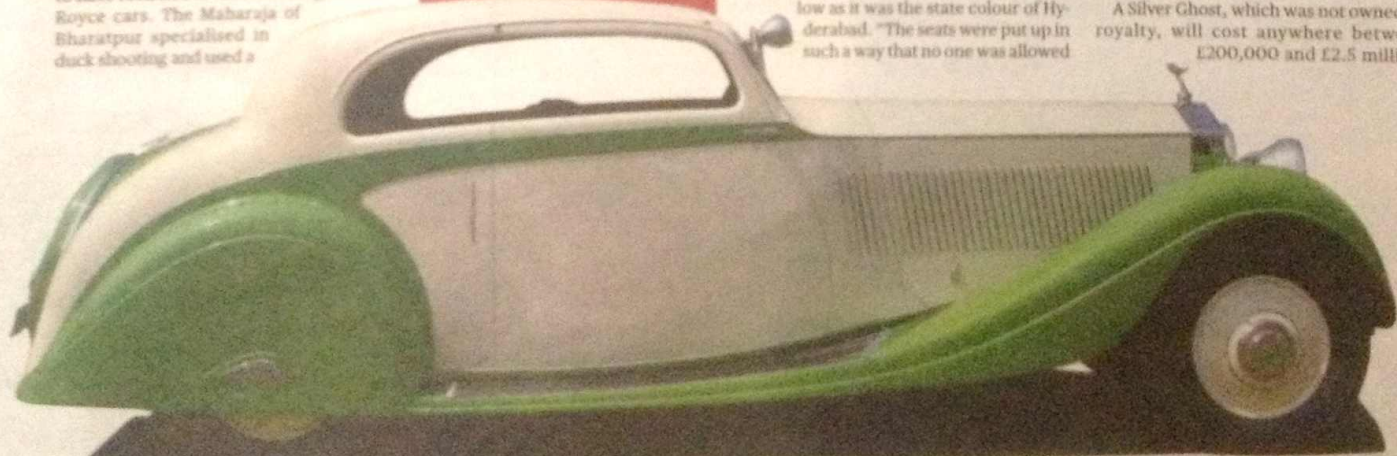
But after India liberalised its economy in the early '90s and international carmakers began to take interest in the rapidly booming India market, Rolls Royce once again returned to India to sell its top-of-the-line modern cars.

It was after a gap of over 50 years that the brand returned to India in 2005, opening its first showroom in Mumbai.

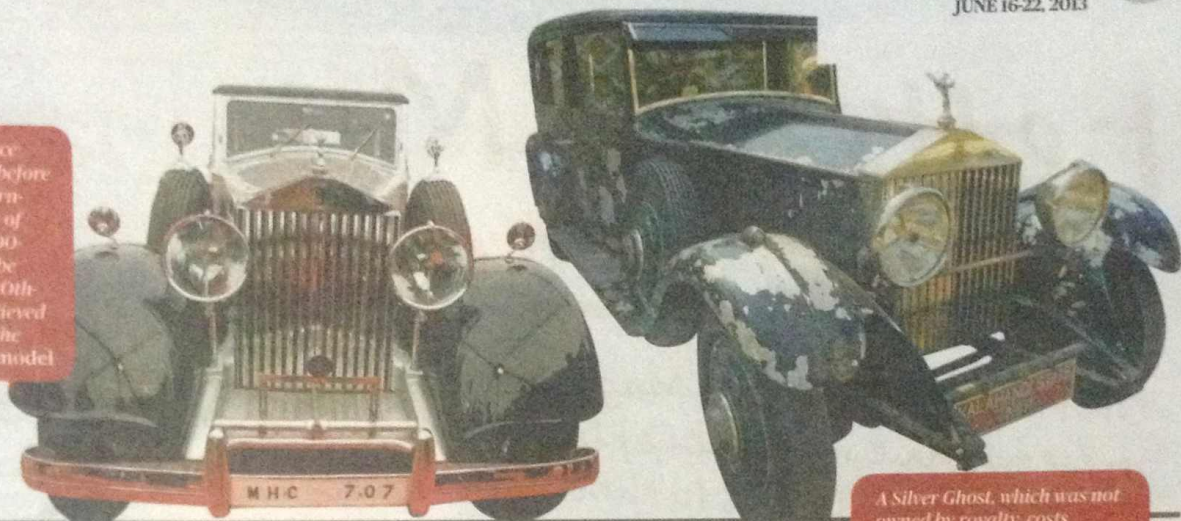
According to Diljeet Titus, a lawyer in Delhi and one of the biggest names among car collectors in India, there is tremendous interest among the former royal families to buy back their cars.

A Silver Ghost, which was not owned by royalty, will cost anywhere between ₹200,000 and ₹2.5 million,

A 1935 Phantom II Continental
Rolls Royce of Cartier 'Travel
With Style' Concours 2003



Around 100 of Rolls Royce cars were sold overseas before the 1970s when the government banned the export of vintage cars. Another 200-250 are still believed to be with collectors in India. Others, in hundreds, are believed to be scattered around the country. Right: A 1934 model



A Silver Ghost, which was not owned by royalty, costs between £200,000 and £2.5 mn, depending on restoration work done, the name of the coach builder & embellishments. Similarly, the Phantoms (above: a 1930 model) cost between £60,000 and £1,50,000 whereas the 20 hp models would be in the range of £40,000 to £1,20,000

depending on the kind of restoration work carried out, the name of the coach builder and other embellishments. Similarly, the Phantoms cost between £60,000 and £1,50,000 whereas the 20 hp models would be in the range of £40,000 to £1,20,000.

However, if the car was ever owned by one of the royal families the price spirals by 15-30%. "Convertibles are more expensive and the golden rule is that if the top goes down, prices go up," says Titus. The name of the coach-builder is also a matter of interest to potential buyers and influences the price.

Brand Building

Rolls Royce has a unique advantage over other luxury brands when it comes to keeping alive a vintage tradition. It is perhaps the only brand among the luxury models sold in the early years of the 20th century which is still available in the market and is also in a position to help owners trace their cars, says Titus.

"Rolls Royce has a thriving owners' club which keeps track of all vehicles that have been bought and sold. The chassis number of the cars helps potential buyers decide whether it is the vehicle they have been looking for."

The order lifting the ban on import of vintage cars comes at a time when there is a lot of interest among the erstwhile royal families to research their history. The need to bring back pieces of lost heritage has led to the formation of a few associations of royal families in India.

One of them, Royals of India, now also plans to link up with former royals in Europe.

The interaction with people around the world with whom their forefathers shared history would help families here understand those times better, says Royals of India founder Deepak Kapoor.

Almost as a corollary, meeting people with whom their forefathers did business will also help today's generation search for their cars and many other memorabilia.

According to Kapoor, Royals of India is a voluntary coming together of erstwhile Indian royals. "We seek to extend the heritage, customs and traditions in relevant context of the present day. We will represent most erstwhile Indian royal families. Efforts are being made to link with similar networks of aristocrats



across Europe and a few other geographies."

Royal Romance

The romance of the royals with the Rolls Royce happened between the two world wars, says Indra Vikram Singh. After the merger of the princely states, the old system was dismantled and the good times began to unravel for the royalty in India. After losing power, the royalty also had to sell off property, cars and jewellery to afford the upkeep of their palaces and to retain the army of servants. A few decades later, the privy purse was also abolished, changing life forever for the erstwhile royals.

According to Vikram Singh, the period between the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and Independence was perhaps the best for royals in India. "Before that period there were too many wars between the kingdoms. Our kingdom, for instance, was repeatedly attacked by various other kingdoms and one of them even extracted a tribute from us."

But after the British came to occupy India, the rulers settled into a more transactional and pragmatic relationship which offered some sense of stability from the point of view of the Indian rulers, he says. The absence of

war also created an ambience for the Royals to indulge in some luxuries.

The prevailing peace also contributed to the fact that it was during the first 50 years of the 20th century that the sale of Rolls Royce models in India flourished. Repeated tours to London also introduced the maharaja to the ultimate 20th century marvel: the motorcar.

"If you did not have connections in London then you would have to put up with some harassment at the hands of the officials in India and therefore the maharajas had to go abroad very often to do what is today known as networking," says Singh.

The best tale about the maharaja and his car was perhaps captured by Murad Ali Baig in *Rolls Royce and the Indian Princes*.

According to Baig, the Maharaja of Alwar, who used to stay at Mayfair Hotel in London, once wandered into a nearby showroom and was spoken to rudely by a salesperson who thought him too shabby for a Rolls. "Fuming, the Maharaja ordered seven cars and turned them into garbage collection vans at his home state in India. Rolls Royce was appalled and, apart from profuse apologies, reportedly gave him a few cars in exchange for restoring the rest to glory." ■

The cars used by erstwhile royal families included Manza, Buick, Cadillac, Pontiac and Studebaker. However, the RR seemed to have interested them the most and these families owned multiple cars of the brand. Below: A 1935 Phantom II belonging to the erstwhile

