The Royal Cars of India

by Ian Wright

The running of the Statesman Vintage Car Rallye in New Delhi in February 1985, will be its 20th anniversary, along with its sister rallies in Bombay and Calcutta. The organizers of this wonderful event expect an even greater turnout of vehicles than last year's record total of 87. To celebrate, they are inviting the Maharajas to attend with their amazing collections of cars.

It is a tribute to the owners that these cars were in such beautiful condition. This in a country where until a year ago you could only buy one make of a car: an Ambassador (modeled on the lines

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of a Morris Oxford). The judges were particularly praiseworthy of the condition of the engines, and as if to prove them right, every car finished the 70 mile rally (including a hill climb) from Delhi to Sohna and back. The Statesman had over 20 trophies to be awarded, and these were presented with the accompaniment of a military band, under Indian Gate in New Delhi by Air Chief Marshal Dilbagh Singh.

This mobile tribute symbolizes the efforts made by the Vintage Car Club of India to keep these cars in their homeland; they are particularly indebted to Maj. S.N. Bhatia, the club president, who was instrumental in 1969 in having the Indian government pass laws making the exportation of vintage cars illegal. Before 1969, they were leaving the country in alarming numbers and for a great deal of profit. Many car dealers found these one-of-a-kind cars usually in very good, often mint, condition. Even today the dealers know no bounds in pursuing their quarry. At the moment, a network is delivering a rare Delahaye to a customer in England.

There are many ways this can be carried out. The easiest, and most preferred, is to drive the car into the Kingdom of Nepal and register it, re-import it into India with Nepalese documents and finally, export it from either Bombay or Calcutta. Another way — one that is more time consuming — is to dismantle the car, export its parts along with legitimate refrigerator parts, then reassemble it at its destination, the most profitable ones being the US, Europe and Great Britain.

Wandering the sub-continent, as has 39-year-old Australian author John Faisal (now living in North London), has rewards of another kind. His two volume book, Rolls-Royce of India, is in its final stage before going to the printer. Faisal has spent 17 years criss-crossing India in search of his documentation. He delved into R-R archives in Great Britain and has detailed every Rolls and Bentley that made the P & O journey to Bombay. The persistent author has over 3,000 letters, has looked at 6,000 photo albums of the Royal Maharajas and has over 1,000 photographs for his books. Faisal has documented every detail including line drawings of the engines, chassis and bodies; coach and registration numbers; their original dates of manufacture, exportation and even the ships they sailed on; their original owner and their whereabouts today. He has established that since 1907, there have been 900 Rolls-Royce and 100 Bentleys shipped east.

The Maharajas had enormous wealth, and it was they who brought the majority of cars to India. The Sikh Maharaja of Patiala was a most colorful man, being a connoisseur of beautiful women, cricket and Rolls-Royce motorcars; at one time, he had 42 of them at his palace. Today, at the Moti Bagh Palace of Patiala, one can still see the rare 1898 Cottereau from Dijon (France) but, alas, all the Royces have rolled on.

Rolls-Royce was the preferred car of the Indian Royals, but not all of these thoroughbreds were used as intended. The Maharaja of Gwalior had the front of a Silver Ghost (named the Pearl of the East) mounted on the front of his steam railway engine which he ran on his private lines. Another Prince, angered that R-R refused his original order,
would only transport garbage in it after he obtained one. Yet, a farming Royal in the northeast of India sawed off the back and made it into a flatbed to transport vegetables to the market. But the top prize goes, undoubtedly, to the northwest state of Bhavnagar; they have converted a Rolls-Royce Phantom I into a fire engine!

Cars appear to be everywhere. Parked on blocks in a garden in Jodhpur is a rare 1939 Delahaye 135 MS, originally made for the Prince of Berar Mukarram Jah. (It even had a bird's nest in the engine compartment!) It is fitted with a total gearbox having the usual four forward and four reverse speeds, and has only 17,475 miles recorded. Next door, in a junkyard, is a 1936 German Tempo, an ex-army staff car; it has two 2-stroke engines — one front and one rear — the front and rear wheels turn independently in small circles. A wonderful old jeep rotting away!

Majestic, even in its own dust and cobwebs, is an ancient wooden-bodied British Lanchester, standing in a decaying garage like a ghost ship. It has an 8-cylinder engine with just 50,800 miles logged. Keeping it company is a 12-cylinder Hispano-Suiza with only 34,402 miles recorded on its odometer.

The reason given for this disgraceful deterioration is that the mechanic can't get air into the tires! Those cars are owned by the Mahā Raj Kumari of Alwar and are at the Phool Bagh Palace on the edge of the great Rajasthan Desert. The Maharaja of Nabha has a priceless, but unidentifiable, 1901 model car, with a swan neck and head rising from the bonnet.

The Maharaja of Udaipur, whose Shivniwas Palace Hotel was the setting of the James Bond movie *Octopussy*, will collect you and your luggage in either his 1938 Rolls-Royce or his 1939 Cadillac, and so the list goes on. One last car, and lady, worthy of mention is the outstanding 1905 Delaunay-Belleville — with a 6-cylinder engine owned by the Maharani of Darbhanga. She was a past winner of the Statesman Challenge Trophy for the oldest car and will undoubtedly win the trophy in the 20th running rally!

Among the private collections of vintage cars in India are those of Pranlal Bhogilal of Bombay (140 cars), U.S. Guljar of Ahmedabad (30 cars), and Ram Chander of New Delhi (25 cars).

Visitors to the Indian sub-continent are welcome to inspect these artifacts of days gone by, but to try to take these fine antique and classic cars home with them is definitely discouraged.

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*Boa constrictor horn adds an exotic touch to Rakesh Jain's 1923 Austin.*

*R.S. Gill of New Delhi owns this rare 1932 Lancia Astura.*

*This 1929 Buick six-cylinder phaeton is owned by D.M. Supta.*

*Vijay Mohan of New Delhi rallied in this 1925 Chevrolet.*

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This 1935 Rolls-Royce Phantom II Continental by Windover is in the collection of the Maharaja of Jodhpur, Gaj Singh. The palace was completed in 1942 at a cost of £7 million.

H.H. Raj Mata Gayari Devi keeps this mid-'30s Bentley 3½-litre with unusual custom coachwork at Lily Pool Palace in Jaipur.

The Maharaja of Patiala is shown with his 1898 Cottereau (built in Dijon, France) outside his Moti Bagh Palace in Patiala.

This 1932 Ford Model B phaeton was donated by the Maharaja of Jaipur, Bhawani Singh, to the Rajasthani School of Motoring.

Note the snaffle door-handles on this 1935 Wolseley Hornet Special, also owned by the Maharaja of Jodhpur.

Past winner of the Statesman Challenge Trophy is this French-built 1905 Delaunay-Belleville owned by the Maharani of Darbhanga.