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# Society



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# Tying Times

A goodwill gesture gets aristocratic Brits and Delhi's bigwigs together

All these titles can bore the pants off people. The present is so much more interesting," says Davina Ingrams or Lady Darcy de Knayth, the great-great-grandchild of Robert Clive who is on her first visit to the country that her ancestor helped colonise for England. When the descendants of British viceroys who ruled India for over 250 years decided to pay a visit, the city did sit up and take notice; with the crème de la crème of Delhi society — Shireen Paul, Gauri Keeling, Surina Nirula, O.P. Jain and Maheep Singh all opening up their homes and hearts to the visitors.

Led by Baroness Shreela Flather, the only conservative Asian member of the House of Lords, seven direct descendants of the Viceroys of India, including Davina Ingrams, were invited to the Republic Day celebrations and the President's reception, as a goodwill gesture during the 50th year of India's independence. To the obvious question as to whether it's a good idea to rake up memories of the Raj when the country is joyfully celebrating its liberation from that very Raj, the Baroness replies, "These wonderful people that I've brought here have a close relationship with India and I believe that only good can come of it. Certainly, we'll have a jolly good time".

That they did. At the end of the two-week visit, the Viscountess Ridley (whose ancestor was Sir Lutyens,

Delhi's architect and the Governor of Bombay), thought the Republic Day parade was the best she had ever seen. For the Countess of Elgin and her husband Lord Elgin, a visit to their ancestor's grave at Dharamsala was a profoundly moving experience. And as for the Taj Mahal, each one of them declared it was an experience they would treasure forever.

Relating how the visit crystallised, the Baroness says, "When I had been in the House of Lords for a couple of years I realised how much goodwill there was for India amongst the families who had Indian connections in the past. I also felt that this goodwill had never been harnessed in any way. It seemed to be a tremendous opportunity to do so by inviting some of the descendants of the Viceroys to participate in some small way in the celebrations marking the 50 years of independence. With this in mind I discussed the matter with a number of Indians and very naturally with the High Commission of India to see what the reaction would be. Once I found that the idea was received with enthusiasm, I wrote to some of the best known names from the British Indian period and arrived at a list of seven members of the aristocracy to participate in the visit. The seven members are Baroness Darcy de Knayth, the Mar-

quess of Reading, Lord Elgin, Baron Lawrence, Countess Mountbatten, the Earl of Lytton and Viscount Ridley.

When they set out for their tour of India many in the group were unsure about the reaction their presence would evoke.

After all, there had never before been a trip like this, and for many members of the group, it would be their first experience of the country which their forefathers ruled. As Lord Lawrence put it, "We were apprehensive in the nicest possible way. One of my ancestors, John Lawrence, was Viceroy in the 1860s and another was killed in the Indian Mutiny of 1857, so I didn't quite know what to expect. But I must say it's been simply marvelous to be in India and we will be going back to England with a lot of respect for this wonderful country."

The credit for this Indo-British bonhomie certainly

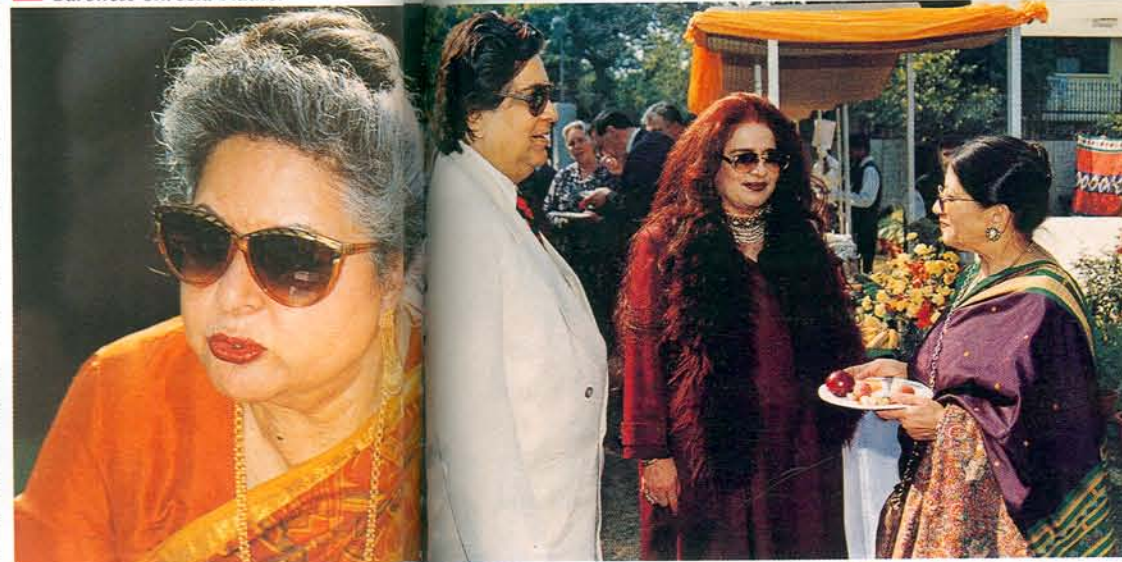
goes to Shreela Flather who has gone out of her way to give the group an unforgettable visit by chalking out an extensive itinerary that took in not only Delhi but also Jaipur and Agra. The visit itself was made possible by generous sponsors and hosts who put up the British in their homes. For instance, Countess Mountbatten and Lord Brabourne stayed with Sir David Gore-Booth, the British High Commissioner at his official residence. The Earl and Countess of Lytton stayed with Jyotsna and Lalit Suri; Lord Lawrence, his partner Belinda Gentle and Lady Darcy de Knayth were the guests of H.S. and Surina Nirula; the Earl and Countess of Elgin stayed with K.P. and Indra Singh. The Viscount and Viscountess Ridley stayed with Amarjit and Amrita Bakshi and the Marquess and Marchioness of Reading with Siddarth and Rula Shreeram.

According to the Baroness, "This trip is not weighed down with symbolism or expectations from either side. The visit, if anything, has a deeply personal relevance for each one of the party since all of them are linked to India by their ancestry and history. It's not a visit where we are trying to make a politically correct statement, but a way of building a bond that seeks to enrich both cultures. Each one of this party was inspired to come here by a genuine love for India and an interest in knowing more about it. In many ways, these people share a complex relationship with India. Neither they nor India can afford to ignore the past. This visit in a way acknowledges the intricate bond between the two countries and draws on that experience to forge a better future for the relationship between India and Britain."

We would like to second that.

— SHASHI SUNNY

Baroness Shreela Flather



Shahnaz and Nazir Husain

Photographs: Atul Chowdhary



Deepti Naval at a lunch hosted by Surina Nirula



Shreela Flather and her group of visitors



Shireen Paul, Viscount Ridley, Shreela Flather, Sunita Kohli, Countess Mountbatten and Lord Brabourne



Countess Mountbatten and Surina Nirula