

Michael Sugich

PALACES OF  
**INDIA**

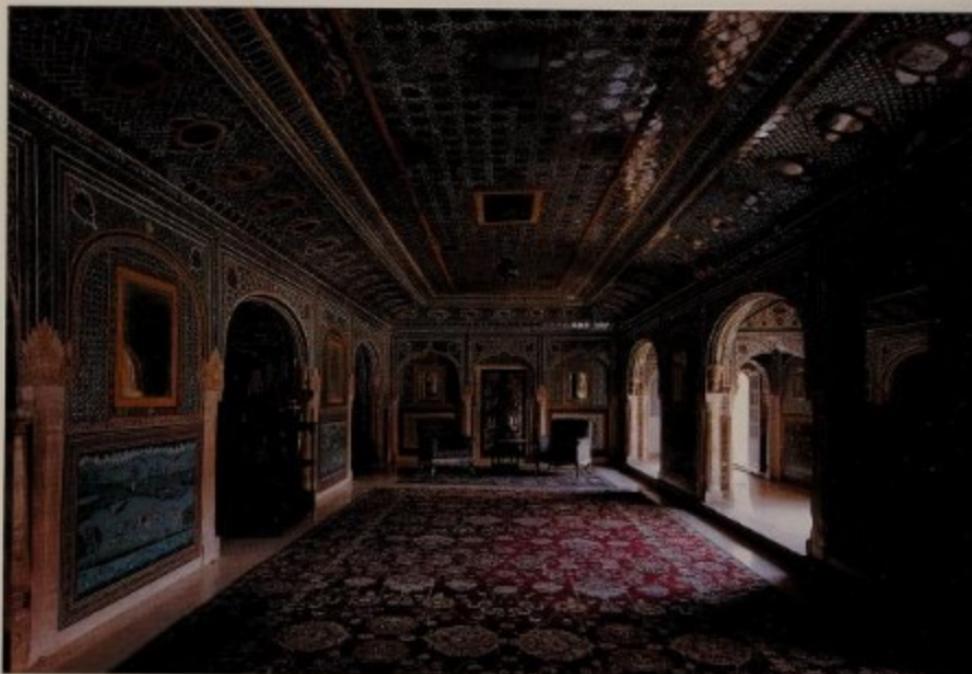
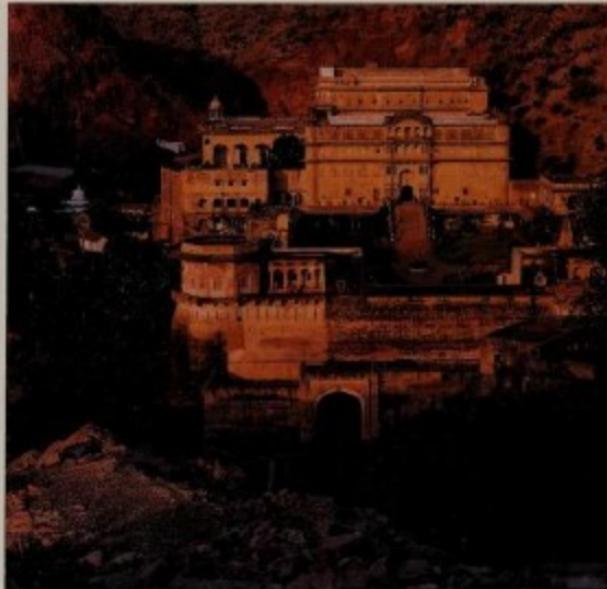
*A Traveller's Companion  
Featuring The Palace Hotels*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MOHAMMED AKRAM



*Right* The original Samsode Palace was built as a fortress in the 16th century but reached its glory during the 19th century when the Nathawat clan virtually ruled the Jaipur durbar. Today it is one of the most beautiful and successful palace hotels in India.

*Below* The Sheesh Mahal, or glass palace, was one of the additions made by Thakur Sheo Singh during his tenure as Prime Minister of Jaipur in the mid-19th century.



**T**he rulers of Samode (situated some twenty-four miles north of Jaipur) which, according to the *Rajputana Gazetteer* of 1879, was a 'large and flourishing town, the principal place of the zamandari [a private landholding] of that name held by one of the principal thakurs of the State . . .' were the Nathawat clan from Chomu. This clan was a branch of the House of Amber, tracing its affiliation back some 600 years to the fabled Prithviraj Singh, the seventeenth prince of the house of Kachhwaha, whose ancestors are said to be descended from the god Rama.

One of the sons of Prithviraj was Gopal Singh, whose father made him Thakur of Samode, which at the time was among the wealthiest territories in the Amber kingdom. The *zamandari* eventually passed within the clan to the hands of Behari Das, a Rajput warrior in Mughal service. After six generations in the hands of his descendants, Samode was relinquished to the Raj. In 1757 the territory was returned to the Nathawat. One Hamir Singh, the eldest son of Thakur Jodh Singh of Chomu became the Rawal of Samode and his descendants maintained this hereditary title as rulers of their large thikana, or feudal estate.

The Rawals of Samode commanded total allegiance within their small dominions and arbitrated absolutely the fates of their subjects. At the same time these palatines were feudatories of the Maharaja of Jaipur and distinguished themselves in a multiplicity of services to the Durbar. Rawal Ram Singh, for instance, is remembered for his valour when, at sixteen, he defended the fort of Ranthambor against the Marathas, fighting fiercely and triumphing in combat even, according to legend, after his head had been severed from his body.

No documents exist which trace the history of Samode Palace but the estimated age of the hereditary home of the Nathawat is 400 years. For the first half of its existence, however, it was little more than a fortified stronghold in the rugged Rajput tradition. Not until the early nineteenth century under Rawal Bairi Sal Singh and his son and successor Rawal Sheo Singh did the feudal castle begin to take on the sumptuous

decorative aspect it is now known for.

Rawal Bairi Sal was a leading courtier in Jaipur who first reached distinction as the principal signatory (on behalf of the Maharaja) of the historic treaty of 1818 that made Jaipur a protectorate of the British East India Company. He was as a result heavily favoured by the Company and became in effect their front man in Jaipur.

Through British influence Bairi Sal was installed as Dewan, or Prime Minister, of Jaipur during the minority of Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh III. It was not an enviable post, for he found himself caught in crossfire between the Regent Maharani and the British East India Company, which was trying to wrest control of the Jaipur administration from her incompetent and corrupt zenana faction led by the Maharani's sinister paramour, Jhota Ram. In such circumstances Bairi Sal's position as Dewan rapidly became untenable and the Regent Maharani replaced him in 1823 with Jhota Ram.

The Rawal then became a pawn in the power struggle between the zenana and the British East India Company which lasted until the Maharani died in 1834. With the sudden and mysterious death of her unfortunate sixteen-year-old son, Sawai Jai Singh III, the following year, the British made their move against the zenana faction and, invoking their paramount authority, summarily dismissed Jhota Ram, who had been suspected of engineering the child Maharaja's murder, from his position as Dewan. The Company then reinstated Rawal Bairi Sal as Dewan as well as appointing him to head a Council of Regency to govern on behalf of Sawai Ram Singh, without consulting the child Maharaja's mother, the new Regent Maharani.

The Jhota Ram clique within Jaipur was finally overthrown and extirpated from the Durbar when a British political officer called Blake was murdered by a mob inside the city walls and the former Dewan was indicted as an instigator, tried, convicted and imprisoned for life.

From this point until his death in 1838 Rawal Bairi Sal Singh of Samode wielded almost absolute power over the government of Jaipur. There are conflicting reports as to the character of the man. The *Jaipur*

Handbook, published in 1935, states that Bairi Sal was:

*a very wise and judicious administrator and a perfect model of a statesman . . . He was . . . at the helm of the entire administration of the State which he controlled with great credit. He was fully alive to the responsibilities of his high office . . . and earned universal gratitude by restoring perfect peace and order throughout the State . . .*

But other narrators tell a different story about the Dewan and his successor.

When Bairi Sal died the British installed his son Rawal Sheo Singh as Dewan of Jaipur and head of the Council of Regency (in Sawai Ram Singh's minority), as well as appointing Sheo Singh's brother Thakur Lachman Singh, the adopted Rawal of Chomu, as Army Minister and Regency Council member, thus perpetuating the Nathawat domination of Jaipur for a second generation.

From 1835 to 1862 Bairi Sal and his sons served British interests in Jaipur very well indeed, and evidently served their own interests even better. According to Robert W. Stern:

*In the early years of the regency, the resident discovered that the Nathawats, father and sons, had, under cover of two decades of British patronage, expropriated crown lands and the lands of their political opponents with a 'rapacity' unexcelled even by the notorious zenana party at its most rapacious.*

Nevertheless, the brothers were by this time too entrenched in power to unseat and British interests were in any case so completely intertwined with the Nathawat administration that they were stuck with it.

The Nathawats remained at least nominally in power long after Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh reached his majority in 1851. By 1854, however, their grip on the administration of Jaipur was beginning to loosen as Maharaja Ram Singh gained confidence in governing his state and cleverly set about consolidating his own authority over the Durbar through a showdown with Sheo Singh which forced the Dewan's resignation. In this he had the support of the East India Company, which was fed up with the peculation of Sheo Singh and his clannish network, which had driven

the state deeply into debt. Ram Singh realized, however, that the Nathawat influence had become so pervasive in the state that a sudden purge would have disastrous consequences. Therefore he appointed Lachman Singh to take his brother's place.

Rawal Sheo Singh's position in Jaipur politics was further weakened three years later when he joined the rebellious factions during the Mutiny of 1857. The Nathawats were tainted and Maharaja Ram Singh used the Mutiny as an excuse to finally purge his administration of their partisans. So, although Rawal Lachman Singh served as Dewan until his death in 1862, his appointment was the beginning of the end of the clan's supremacy in Jaipur affairs and through most of his ministerial tenure he was without real authority.

By the time of his dismissal, Sheo Singh had used his expropriated revenues to adorn Samode Palace with ornamentation that is, according to the writer Aman Nath, 'considered as good, if not superior to that of Jaipur's City Palace'. Sheo Singh is credited with the palace's most fabulous addition: the extravagantly florid, hand-painted durbar hall with an overlooking zenana gallery which forms the breathtaking Sheesh Mahal, or Hall of Mirrors.

Early in the nineteenth century Rawal Bairi Sal had also constructed a large *haveli* (town house) within the old city of Jaipur which over the years was similarly elaborated, featuring a reception hall with painting almost as dazzling as that in Samode Palace, a beautiful courtyard verandah and a lovely back garden. An elephant ramp was added in the 1940s for the wedding of the thakur's sister.

Although the thakurs of Samode never again achieved positions of influence within the Jaipur Durbar they had sufficiently enriched their estates to live in comfort until 1954 when the Jagir Abolition Act eradicated feudalism in India and stripped all feudal barons of their territories. Samode Palace remained the private residence of the Nathawat family, but without income from their estates their fantastically decorated castle had become a colossal millstone and at the beginning of the 1970s the thakur put his hereditary property on the market for one lakh of rupees. They could not find a buyer. Fortunately,

In the early 1980s the late thakur's youngest son Yaduvender Singh had just passed out of Mayo College at Ajmer, and was burning to get into the hotel business. His uncle Vikram Singh, the hereditary Rawal of Chomu, was a veteran hotelier and General Manager of Ram Bagh Palace Hotel in Jaipur. Yaduvender was planning to follow in his uncle's footsteps and work for a big hotel chain. His older brother, Raghuvender, was already a working capitalist and proposed that they join forces and convert their hulking hereditary home into a hotel. The Nathawat brothers contacted a travel agency, which looked over the property and advised them to begin by offering luncheons and dinners to test the market.

In 1984 Samode was still very much off the beaten track for travellers but the palace was so spectacular that success was inevitable. Almost immediately Samode Palace was used as a principal location for the lavish television mini-series *The Far Passions*. The film company restored some of the ornamental painting in the palace and the brothers began to invest their revenues from the rental into further renovations. This fortuitous prelude was followed by a privately arranged visit from that great patron of royal India, Mrs Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who had been told about the palace by her friend Rajmata Gayatri Devi of Jaipur. Mrs Onassis brought along a team from *House and Garden* who did a feature for the magazine and gave Samode Palace a strong international launch. In October 1985 Yaduvender and Raghuvender Singh opened their impressive home to the public as a hotel.

Encouraged by the success of their first venture the Nathawat brothers launched the second of their hotels in Jaipur City itself when they opened Samode Haveli, their family's private Jaipur town house, in October 1987. Both properties are among the most delightfully evocative palace hotels in India.

# SHEIKHAWATI

## NO MAN'S LAND

**S**heikhawati was a loose, belligerent confederation of principalities in the desolate region to the north of Jaipur, first carved out and cobbled together in the fifteenth century by descendants of Raja Udaikaran, the Kachhwaha king of Amber and named for his great-grandson Rao Sheikha whose forename has an unusual Muslim derivation. Sheikha's father had been childless for many years and made pilgrimage to the holy village of Brindaban to seek some sort of thaumaturgic intercession that would yield him an heir. A guru advised the supplicant to lead his cow into the forest where the grazing was better and once there the Hindu Rajput ran into a Muslim saint called Sheikh Burhan who asked Allah on his behalf for the birth of a son. The Sheikh's prayers were answered when in 1433 a boy was born to the Rajput chief and the child was named Sheikha, in honour of the Muslim Sheikh.

Rao Sheikha extended the conquests of his forefathers and consolidated these territories into an independent entity. The Sheikhawat lineage was further strengthened when the Rao's descendants ingratiated themselves with the Mughal emperors, attaining influential positions within the Delhi Durbar.

The Jaipur kings never really accepted the independence of Sheikhawati and tried repeatedly to subdue their prodigal clansmen, but it was a fierce, inhospitable desert these war-lords lived on – what Sir Arthur Lothian called 'a no man's land' – and while the region came to represent one third of the territory of Jaipur State, its treeless wastelands were something of a disincentive to concentrated campaigning. Moreover, the chieftains who controlled them were skilled desert fighters and repulsed Jaipur forces over and over again. But the Mughals were a different matter, and it was the threat of an invasion from Delhi that drove the Sheikhawats into the protective arms of Sawai Jai Singh II, who made Sheikhawati a protectorate of Jaipur in the early eighteenth century. This, however, was only