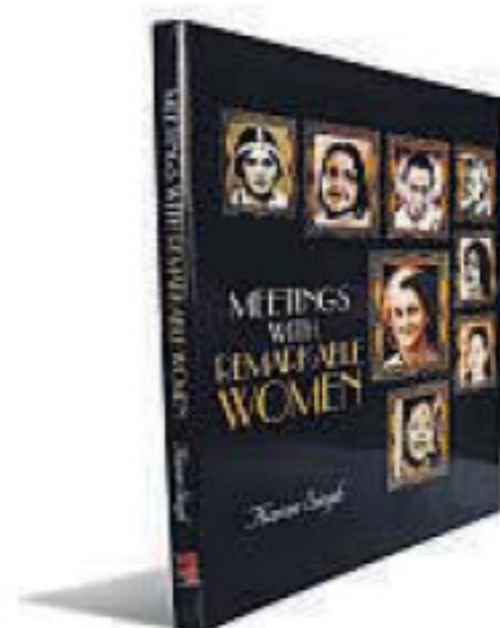


CRICKET WITH ALL ITS TRAPPINGS AND SUITS, AS IT HAPPENS,
OWES MUCH TO THOSE WHO MAKE MISSILES AND RADARS

THE ONES WHO LEFT A MARK...

Meetings with Remarkable Women by Karan Singh presents portraits of eminent personalities including Indira Gandhi, Gayatri Devi, and the author's mother, Maharani Tara Devi, among others. Excerpts from the book



Meetings with Remarkable Women
Karan Singh
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INDIRA GANDHI: A LEADER OF DEEPLY HELD CONVICTIONS

I have lots of memories connected with Indira Gandhi during the ten years when I was in her Cabinet — 1967-1977. But I will mention only three. The first was the crisis when she decided to abolish the privy purse and privileges that had been promised to the Indian princes when they had acceded to India. Although in this step the sum involved was virtually negligible, she made it one of her slew of populist measures which stood her in good political stead. Being a privy-purse holder myself and the member of her Cabinet, I was obviously in an awkward position. We did try to work out a compromise formula but the Concord of Princes took a maximalist view and refused to compromise as a result of which they lost everything. I was the only one to stand up in Parliament and support the measure when Indira Gandhi happened to be in the House for the important debate. The second crisis came when an Avro plane whose airworthiness had come under scrutiny crashed.

As Minister for Civil Aviation I had defended the decision to keep flying the aircraft. This became a matter of considerable controversy in Parliament... The third memorable occasion was in December 1971 at the height of the Bangladesh liberation war. For subsequent generations it may be difficult to realize the extent of emotional involvement of the entire nation with the Bangladesh freedom fighters, and the remarkable role of the Indian Army. I was sitting in the House and it so happened that my seat alphabetically came directly behind the Prime Minister. She seldom showed her emotions, but on that occasion she virtually ran into the House, interrupted the debate and said, "Mr Speaker, I have an announcement to make." There was an immediate silence in the House and she said, "Dhaka has fallen to the Indian Army." The House literally exploded in joy and had to be adjourned. That was in fact her finest hour.

GAYATRI DEVI: THE VIVACIOUS ROYALTY

Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur, the Maharaja's third wife, was the daughter of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and his wife, Maharani Indira Devi who in turn was the daughter of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad. She was one of the most beautiful women of her time and her celebrated romance with Maharaja Jai Singh is now part of popular legend... Growing up as boy, Uncle Jai and Auntie Ayesha, as the were called, became my most favourite people. An extremely handsome couple, they were part of the international polo set... After Independence Uncle Jai was appointed Ambassador to Spain. He continued his polo, and finally his wish was fulfilled when, after an exciting match, fell dead on the polo ground.

the very end, and when she passed away, hundreds of thousands of common people in Jaipur joined her funeral procession. She will always be remembered not only for her glamour but for the solid work that she did for the people of Jaipur including setting up the Maharani Gayatri Devi Girls School one of the finest in India.

Auntie Ayesha continued to be active, becoming one of the main supporters of the Swatantra Party which made a substantial impact in the 1967 elections. She herself stood for Parliament and with an overwhelming majority, defeating the Congress candidate. It was most unfortunate that during the Emergency she was arrested and lodged in Tihar Jail with common criminals. However, she bore the insult with grace and dignity thereafter continued her activity including riding for many years...

Auntie Ayesha's last years were somewhat clouded by family disputes which, regrettably, are a common feature in princely and big business families. Nonetheless, she retained her grace till



RUKMINI DEVI ARUNDALE: THE MUSE OF BHARATANATYAM

One of the most remarkable events in the cultural history not only of India but of the world was the transmutation of the somewhat derided dance tradition performed by Devadasis mainly in the Shiva temples, into the exquisitely classical Bharata Natyam, surely the greatest solo dance form in the world. Dance has always been a major motif of Indian culture... Over the centuries the tradition seems to have degenerated, and by the 20th century Devadasis and their tradition were looked down upon by society. The transformation of this ancient dance into what is now known as Bharata Natyam was the lifework of a truly remarkable woman, Rukmini Devi Arundale. Coming from a conservative Brahmin family, she and her collaborator, E Krishna Iyer, started refining the dance, contacting the great performers such as the legendary Bala Saraswati whom I had the privilege of

seeing dance. Towards the end of her life, she set up an institution in Adyar in Chennai known as Kalakshetra. This was one of the most inspiring stories of the 20th century. The orthodox Brahmin community was outraged. Rukmini Devi and Iyer were spat upon as they walked through the streets, and there was a great outcry against what she was doing. However she persisted and finally, the shining beauty of Bharata Natyam silenced all adversaries... She was a woman of great grace. Under her guidance Kalakshetra produced some of the most outstanding dancers of the century including Yamini Krishnamurty, Vyjayanthimala Bali, Malavika Sarukkai, Hema Malini and many others. The nation owes a debt of gratitude to Rukmini Devi for the extraordinary transformation that she was able to bring about by her courage, devotion and determination.



MAHARANI TARA DEVI: JOURNEY OF A MAHARANI - FROM THE ROYAL PALACE TO REFUGEE CAMPS

Although it is unlikely that she would have had a birth certificate, I do know that when I was born in 1931 she was twenty years old. This would mean that she was born some time in 1910. She was thus twenty-five years younger than my father.

How a girl from a small quiet village adapted herself to the grandeur and hubbub of the palace and the role of the Maharani of the largest State in India is in itself a saga which, unfortunately, she never really recorded. However, over the years she developed into a strong and vibrant personality, whose views were not always parallel to those of my father. She was fluent in Dogri and Hindi, and had picked up a certain amount of simple English. She would engage in long conversations with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and other national leaders without any hesitation. On one occasion after dinner at Teen Murti House she humorously asked Panditji, "Don't you have any cigarettes here?" Panditji immediately jumped to his feet,

offered her a cigarette from his own case and — always the perfect gentleman — lit it for her.

...During the Second World War (1939-45), Maaji worked tirelessly with the Ladies Clubs which she had set up in Srinagar as well as in Jammu, and also organized a War Aid Committee. Our State forces were involved in the War, and the ladies would prepare huge quantities of clothing, pickles and other items to be sent to the front. Indeed so impressive was her work that she was given the 'Crown of India' Award by the British, reserved for distinguished women and received earlier only by two or three Indians. My father also received an Imperial Honour the same year but the decoration was of a slightly lower category, much to our secret delight.

By a strange quirk of history, when in 1950 it had become impossible for my father and Sheikh Abdullah to work together, the Sheikh insisted that the Government of India ask both my parents to leave the State. He is believed to

have said that the Maharani was more dangerous than the Maharaja, because while the latter spent most of his time in the palace surrounded by courtiers, the Maharani would go out to meet the people, particularly in the numerous refugee camps that had come up after the disastrous Partition of 1947. She, therefore, left along with my father, although both went in opposite directions, he to Mumbai and she to Himachal Pradesh.

