

JOURNEY OF A MAHARANI – FROM THE ROYAL PALACE TO REFUGEE CAMPS



My father Maharaja Hari Singh married four times. The first three brides were princesses – from Rajkot (Gujarat), Chamba (Himachal) and Dharampur (Gujarat). By the time he succeeded to the throne in 1925 two of the Maharanis had passed away, and although the third one was still alive, she was living separately and there was no issue. In princely India, as to some extent in today's India, a son was considered an absolute necessity for a dynasty to continue into the future. It was, therefore, decided that he would marry for the fourth time, but on this occasion, a team led by the trusted General Janak Singh Katoch was deputed to survey the Dogra areas of Himachal Pradesh and identify a young girl who would be a suitable bride. That is how my mother, Tara Devi Katoch, who was born in the tiny village of Vijaypur in Kangra District, came to be chosen as the future Maharani. She was the youngest child of Thakur Beli Chand Katoch, with three elder sisters and two elder brothers.

Unlike the earlier occasions when lavish baraats accompanied the bridegroom, this time round it was an austere affair:



Obviously it was not possible for a grand bridegroom's party to descend on a sleepy village to the accompaniment of bands, caparisoned horses and bedecked elephants amidst the flourish of fireworks. Therefore the custom of bringing the bride to the bridegroom's house known as *dola* was adopted. Tara Devi, her parents and brothers were brought to Srinagar where in 1928 my father and she were married in what was then known as Chashmashahi House and is now the Raj Bhavan. 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.

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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 humourously 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.

In 1930 my father, accompanied by my mother with me in her womb, staff and maidservants, sailed to Europe. He was representing the Indian Princes at the Roundtable Conference held that year in London. London, of course, was at that time of year foggy and uncomfortable, while the French Riviera was glorious with its Mediterranean warmth and endless parties. It was the watering hole for the aristocracy of Europe as well as India, particularly the Indian princes. My father chose a newly constructed hotel in Cannes, the Martinez, overlooking the Mediterranean, for his stay. He booked the entire third floor of the hotel so that he and his staff, my mother and her maidservants, a doctor and others could be accommodated together. It was there, on 9th March 1931, that I came into the world this time around.



The whole party sailed back to India six weeks later on the Kaiser-i-Hind, which docked at Mumbai. Thereafter they proceeded to Jammu where they received an ecstatic welcome from the people. My parents drove through the city in an open carriage while I followed behind in a car along with my English nurse, Doris Trenchall. Reports say that celebrations of a royal heir were held throughout the State, including the Kashmir Valley.

For me, Maaji was for many years the most loved figure in my life. She was, obviously, deeply attached to me and I to her. I was with her until the age of five. At six I was moved to a separate establishment both in Srinagar and in Jammu with two companions and British guardians, and for the next five years before I went to Doon School, lived separately from my parents. This was apparently done because my father thought, perhaps wisely, that an only child growing up in the palace would end up being thoroughly spoilt. His instructions were very strict. We were to follow a well-set regime of studies with private tutors, learning music and various games, correct table manners and correct English.

This was all very well, but he also decreed that I was to meet Maaji only thrice a week for an hour or so and meet with him once a week only! This was very painful for Maaji, who used to hug and kiss me when I arrived at her wing of the palace, take me into her pooja room, give me flowers to offer and sacred water to drink, and let me play around with some of her nieces and nephews. However, whenever I had to leave, she was sad and would sometimes burst into tears. As a result of this strange situation, I grew up deeply devoted to Maaji while less so to my father who was a more distant figure.

I learnt a great deal from Maaji. Apart from devotional stories of our epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and from the Kalyan magazine (brought out by Geeta Press, Gorakhpur), which she read regularly. I learnt to love the Dogra Pahari songs and bhajans that Maaji and her maids would sing on festive occasions. She would teach me to be courteous and considerate to all persons regardless of their rank, and this included the staff and servants. She would tell me that if I wanted to do anything worthwhile in life I should do it for the poor; the rich will simply exploit me and then turn against me.





A beautiful village girl adapting to the role of the Maharani

Thus I learnt much from this beautiful though unlettered village girl who, despite becoming a Maharani, spent her whole life trying to help the poor and the needy, including her relatives. Despite being a devout Hindu, Maaji was very advanced in some of her views regarding social customs. In 1947 she created history by including a Dalit girl among the nine who are worshipped during the sacred Navaratri. I have in my autobiography described in more detail the family situation and the role played by Maaji therein.

As I grew older and went to Doon School, my establishment was wound up and I would spend the holidays with my parents in the palace in Srinagar during the summer, and in the winter at Mumbai where my father inevitably went for several months to pursue his favourite hobby of racing. I virtually grew up at the Mahalaxmi Race Course and by then Maaji would also accompany my father to the races, dressed in gorgeous saris and priceless jewels.

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 that 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. They came together once more when I suffered an accident in 1949 and was flown to the U.S. After my recovery, I was married to the most remarkable woman I have ever met in my life – my wife Asha – I was then 19 and she 13. However, that is another story.

My father passed away in 1961 and, despite their estranged relations, Maaji adopted the Hindu custom of wearing white clothes and sleeping on the floor. Despite our remonstrations she insisted on doing this for one year along with a restricted diet, as a result of which her health deteriorated. She came to live with us in the State for the last few years of her life. In 1966 she suffered a stroke in Srinagar. Thereafter we moved to Delhi and I joined Indira Gandhi's cabinet in March 1967. By then she was seriously ill and she passed away in October 1967. At the time of her passing I was at the other end of India — in the beach resort of Kovalam, Kerala, staying in the Maharaja's guest house there. I rushed back to Delhi and we brought her body back to Jammu where she was cremated and her ashes taken to Hardwar. A portion was preserved and placed under a Shivalingam in a Samadhi which I built for her in Jammu.

Her memory will always remain engraved on my mind. Next only to Asha she was clearly the most influential woman in my life.

