

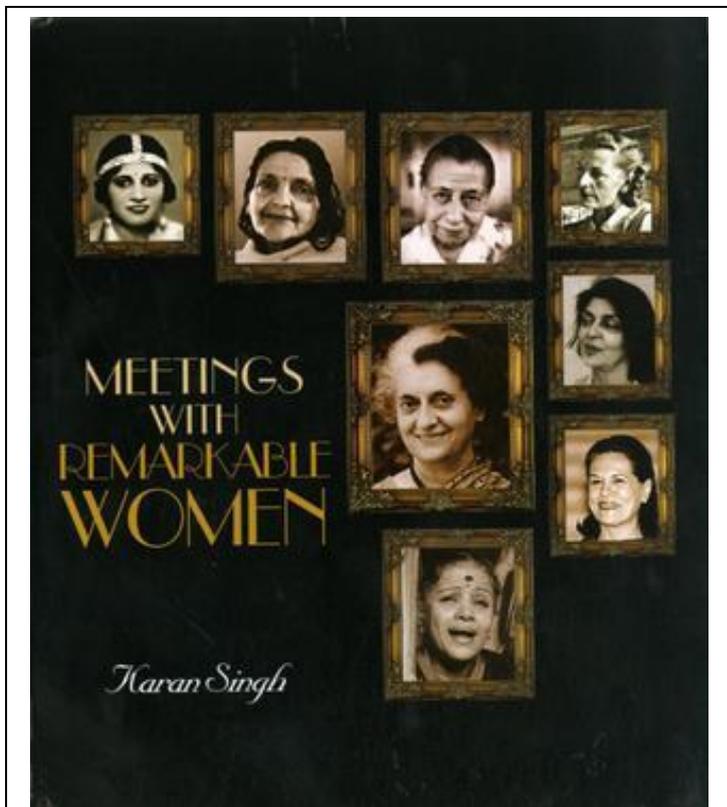
Touching so many lives

Swaran Singh

Karan Singh provides a glimpse into the lives and contributions of 27 outstanding women in various walks of public life

Dr. Karan Singh needs no introduction. Heir-apparent to the Kingdom of Jammu & Kashmir — the largest princely state at time of India's independence — later Sadar-e-Riyasat (President of his province), then Union Minister and celebrated representative of India on various assignments including India's Ambassador to the U.S. and most recently President of Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). But more than these positions, it is his reputation as one of India's greatest living, English-speaking Sanskrit scholars, and especially

his enduring essays on Hinduism and his works on India's post-independence political history — of which he has been an integral part — reflect his multifaceted personality and experience. *Meetings with Remarkable Women*, therefore, not just provides a glimpse into the lives and contributions of 27 outstanding women in various walks of public life but also tells us lot more about the remarkable life of this author.



Meetings with Remarkable Women: Karan Singh; Palimpsest Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 16 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110017. Rs. 1500.

A part of his deep admiration for these women is owed to his childhood experiences where he shows a bit of scorn for his father's pompous regimentations while he venerates his mother's subaltern innocence and her love for the poor. He describes his father as "indecisive" and "feudal" and sees his inactions partly responsible for the painful legacies of Partition for his state. Conversely, he prides himself on his daughter Jyotsna's nudging him into writing this book and dedicates it to his wife Asha, "the most remarkable woman I ever met" and who comes alive in various episodes of his interactions with these 27 women.

The book opens with the story of his mother — fourth wife of Maharaja Hari Singh — who was

“a village girl” from Dogra regions of Himachal Pradesh but

successfully “adapted herself to the grandeur and hubbub of the palace”. Other women of royalty includes Maharani Gayatri Devi, “one of the most beautiful women of her time” and whose playing polo and “celebrated romance” as third wife of Maharaja Jai Singh were part of the popular legend. He talks of her countenance with public life after the death of the Maharaja; not just becoming Member of Parliament but, during Internal Emergency, being lodged in New Delhi’s Tihar jail along with common criminals. He also talks of the lesser known Princess Niloufer of Hyderabad, who got her divorce from the younger son of the Nizam “on the personal intervention of Jawaharlal Nehru” and lived happily in Paris with her second husband, former British diplomat, Edward Julius Pope. He has a detailed chapter on the Mountbattens visiting his father and calls Edwina the “healer” of Partition with her keen intellect and vivacious nature.

Other than this close first circle of royals, the most visible set of his remarkable women are politicians. Like royals, public life was thrust upon them as part of their inheritance. He credits Prime Minister Indira Gandhi with bringing him to the national scene, which he desperately wanted. He, however, also records how, following the 1975 Allahabad Court judgment declaring Mrs Gandhi’s election as null and void, he wrote to her suggesting that she should resign and let the President not accept it on pretext that her challenge lay in the Supreme Court. When she chose to impose national emergency and split the Congress by launching her own Congress (Indira), he parted ways with her. He writes about the “steely charm” of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and how her “overpowering personality” eclipsed the role of Kamala Nehru in the family; something that made Mrs. Gandhi push her to the very margins of her charmed circles. He talks of Sonia Gandhi emerging as the “saviour” of the faction-ridden Congress of the late 1990s and describes her as a good listener. But he gives the credit for her rise to power to the secularism of Indian civilisation.

The third set of women belongs to the field of music and dance. Rukmini Devi Arundale, not only transformed the dance form of the degenerated tradition of *Devdasis* in Shiva temples into the pride of the nation — Bharatanatyam — but institutionalised it by setting up *Kalakshetra* in Chennai which has since inspired institutions like ICCR to open multiple centres for nourishing this art further. The author was equally impressed with the “grace and charm” of M S Subbulakshmi, especially her “exquisite and full of emotions” renderings. He recalls his first encounter with the artist at Nehru’s residence in 1950 with Nehru showering his admiration on this 34-year-old genius of classical music.

Amongst his fourth set are professionals. Fiery environmentalist from Kenya, Wangari Maathai, known for planting lakhs of trees survives state authoritarianism and gains international recognition through the Nobel Peace Prize for 2004. Durgabai Deshmukh was the first woman Member of India’s Planning Commission. Her marriage to then Chairman, Planning Commission, Dr C D Deshmukh had “created quite a sensation.” He talks of his contemporary Kapila Vatsyayan, an eminent art historian of eastern traditions, who played a critical role in New Delhi’s Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Art (IGNCA) and the Indian International Centre (IIC). He also talks of diminutive anti-apartheid scholar Nadine Gordimer with great power of emotions.

Amongst his fifth set of the spiritual women, he recalls having felt the spell of the gravitas of The Mother who was ‘interpreter of Sri Aurobindo’ especially when he went into several years of solitude in his Pondicherry ashram. Dr. Singh also talks of their long relationship

with Belgian Queen Fabiola whose “deeply spiritual and compassionate” personality made her the darling of her friends and commons alike. He narrates his meetings with Bengali Saint Anandamayi Ma and Englishwomen Beryl Stileman and poetess Kathleen Raine, as also with young Thai princess Maha Chakri and old Madame de Salzmänn — disciple of Russian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff — who lived fit and fine well over hundred years; possibly result of following her teacher’s teachings along with his prescribed exercises and dance movements that were designed to lead to spiritual progress.

The author talks of his book title being inspired by this Greek-Armenian mystic Gurdjieff’s *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. But other than this title and their extremely lucid style of writing these two books remain far apart.

Given his informal approach to his reminiscences, most of these remarkable women are presented as wives and daughters except that each one of them successfully goes far beyond her expected remit. He describes them in his very apt and interesting titles for each of his narratives. Also, the exquisite selection of about sixty-four photographs plus several paintings and portraits make this sketchy text read so vibrant. The author though misses on crediting these photographers and portrait makers as also in giving the sources of paintings and their significance. He remains the quintessential philosopher and describes his birth on 9 March 1931 in South of France — during an extended trip of his father’s participation in the Round Table Conference in London — as his coming “into the world this time round” which underlines his being rooted in the sense of timelessness in Indian thought of which he remains an iconic figure.

Keywords: [Karan Singh](#), [Meetings with Remarkable Women](#), [Karan Singh book review](#)

Printable version | Jul 9, 2014 12:42:08 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/touching-so-many-lives/article6186925.ece>

© The Hindu