

## Representation of women in Karan Singh's Autobiography

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### Abstract:

Dr Karan Singh was the *Heir-apparent* of the Dogra Kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir and presently is a great philanthropist, philosopher, profound humanist, politician, poet and a great writer. Dr Manmohan Singh calls him a 'man of great learning, of great wisdom, of great liberalism and great humanism'.<sup>3</sup> He is a great visionary statesman, orator, musician, as well as a visionary of an Indian nation that should lead the world on the values of Gandhi, Buddha, Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh. He has been an eye witness to eventful history of the state of Jammu and Kashmir right from the tumultuous days of the partition of the subcontinent as well as the state. More importantly, he has seen this history from the high politics of the center of the political establishment of the state and Centre. In the history of modern Kashmir, he played a very prominent role up to 1967 when he joined the national politics. Without highlighting his role, it will remain uncompleted. He was the man who helped India in cementing the bond of Jammu and Kashmir with Centre. His views on various aspects of the history and society of the region thus assume significance.

### Introduction:

Dr Karan Singh was the *Heir-apparent* of the Dogra Kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir and presently is a great philanthropist, philosopher, profound humanist, politician, poet and a great writer. Dr Manmohan Singh calls him a 'man of great learning, of great wisdom, of great liberalism and great humanism'.<sup>4</sup> He is a great visionary statesman, orator, musician, as well as a visionary of an Indian nation that should lead the world on the values of Gandhi, Buddha, Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh. He has been an eye witness to eventful history of the state of Jammu and Kashmir right from the tumultuous days of the partition of the subcontinent as well as the state. More importantly, he has seen this history from the high politics of the center of the political establishment of the state and Centre. In the history of modern Kashmir, he played a very prominent role up to 1967 when he joined the national politics. Without highlighting his role, it will remain uncompleted. He was the man who helped India in cementing the bond of Jammu and Kashmir with Centre. His views on various aspects of the history and society of the region thus assume significance.

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<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, Kishore, Dr. Karan Singh: The Portrait of a Statesman, New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 2012, p. vii.

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Karan Singh was born into the ruling family of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, one among the largest states within the British Empire. From a distance it seems that he being the *Heir-Apparent* of the Dogra Empire was born with a golden spoon as he got things of every comfort in a very easy way. He lived a life that one can dream of, first as prince, then regent, head of the state despite the fall of Dogra kingdom. But on close examination, his life delineates the path of hardships that Karan Singh has to face and how audaciously he faced them and came out victorious. He was also an adventurous and dynamic personality. Nature has bestowed him the quality to accommodate. He in his life has to make many shifts and accommodations. Earlier born under one law i.e. Law of Dogra's, he has to shift to new one i.e. Indian Laws as partition leaves no other choice. Secondly, he born and grown up in a feudal setup, has to make shift to a democratic order. He was born with the extraordinary ability for establishing an intimate relationship with almost anyone he meets as he found these interactions fascinating, warm and profoundly touching.<sup>5</sup> He did not confine himself to the limited space around him rather was very much exploratory in nature. He likes to meet the people all around the world belonging to different walks of life to know their nature, customs etc. In this exploratory process, he met many such people that left a lifelong impression on to his life. There is long list of those persona's with whom the Karan Singh was impressed and the list ranges from the persons having very limited following to the persons of international repute.

Karan Singh unlike other princes of his contemporary times, did not remain lenient with his studies, rather was a guy with a great thirst for Knowledge and exploration. For developing this habit, credit should be given to his parents, especially to his father who was very cautious and strict with related to his studies. It was because of this committed approach on behalf of his parents on building the overall personality of Dr Karan Singh, he was in very early age separated from his mother as well as from the lavish atmosphere of the palace, where he was having the ample chances to getting derailed from the path. The same sacrifice bore the fruits as Dr Karan Singh became an ardent reader, speaker and a great intellectual, who after then never turned back, achieved very high and esteemed positions in his life not because of being the prince but because of being the great intellectual, great academician.

Karan Singh was brought up in a traditional patriarchal ruling family. Patriarchy structure has generally been a major feature of the Indian sub-continental society where women are dominated by men and were getting a second class treatment with reference to the male members. The qualities of the women were never admired and they were kept under strict restrictions. But Dr Karan Singh has been an exception for being opposite to the patriarchal traits, as he paid a due respect to the women in his entire life. As this paper is based on the preliminary reading of the autobiography of Dr. Karan Singh, titled *Autobiography* to see how women got representation through his autobiographical texts, to see how women representation is placed on political front and how it is valued, because as a genre, autobiography is the important modern form of expression.

### **Women and Discrimination:**

Women discrimination has been the most persistent social problem in the world. Despite of the fact that the women have continuously been contributing in the growth and development of the respective societies and nations, continued to share their responsibilities, constitute about half of the human population, they are still openly discriminated. When we will glance back at the history of the Indian Sub-continent, we see that in Vedic period that goes back to 5000 years, the position of the women was at par with the men

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xxv.

in all fields.<sup>6</sup> In comparison to contemporary Greece and Rome, the status of Vedic Indian women was much higher.<sup>7</sup> They receive education same as did the boys receive as in *Atharveda*, it is written that for the successful marriage life of a women, it is necessary for her to have a proper training during the '*bramacharaya*'.<sup>8</sup> They participate in the decision making bodies i.e. *Samiti*. They were enjoying the real freedom. But this position started receiving setbacks in the later Vedic period. In this period, we see the image of ideal Hindu women starts slowly establishing. She was defined in connection to the others especially men. The Hindu law makers write down the law books, where women were assigned role of wife and mother. They delineated their position in such a way that was supposed to be in subordination, in devotion under any circumstances and serve faithfully and tirelessly. The laws were simply framed in such a way that the position and powers of man were unquestionable comparison to women.

This image of the ideal womanhood that was solidified with the woman personality in earlier times continues up to the present times. Despite of the progress that the man have made in different sectors of life, the way of thinking with related to the women is still governed by the consensus on the ideal of Indian womanhood that got its origination in ancient times. To accept the positions of Men and women on equal terms, treating the two on equal terms in the Indian Sub-Continent was tantamount to admitting the equality of Shudras and Brahamans, an admission that would shake the foundation of Brahaman-Kshatriya superiority. India being the patriarchal society, women were always treated next to men. So was the case in Jammu and Kashmir and applies not only to the common people but also within the ruling family women. Later under the influence of the European Enlightenment, people started searching for answers outside of religious institutions. They challenged the social structures and religion. They questioned the biased approach towards women. Men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy began to fight for the right of women by arousing the public opinion on matters such as prevalence of Sati and finally get it abolished by passing the Sati Abolition act, 1892. His followers like Ishwar Chandr Vidya Sagar raised their powerful voice in favour of widow remarriage, education of women and ban on child marriage etc.

Prominent social thinkers and leaders came forward and expressed their uneasiness against the discrimination to which the women were conventionally subjected. Vinoba Bhave said "if I were a woman, I would rebel".<sup>9</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru points on the condition of women that "This period of women in India during many hundred years was not a good one, neither according to law nor in public or social life. For twenty five centuries one half of the citizens of India kept the other half in virtual slavery."<sup>10</sup> Mahatma Gandhi referred to women as a nobler sex. He says that "if she is weak, she is strong in suffering". He calls women as embodiment of sacrifice and ahimsa. He further adds that "to call a woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strengthen is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior".<sup>11</sup>

### **Dr Karan Singh Autobiography and Women Representation:**

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<sup>6</sup>R. C. Mishra, *Towards Gender Equality*, Auhthors Press. 2006. ISBN 81-7273-306-2. See Also <http://www.legalservicesindia.com/article/1867/The-Socio-Economic-Status-of-Women-in-India-Ancient-to-Modern-Era.html> (Accessed on 13-10-2018).

<sup>7</sup> Ramesh Chander Majumdar, *Ideal and position of Indian Women in Domestic Life*, Great Women of India, Calcutta, 1982, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Sharma kiron, *Manu Smiriti*, (Assamese edition), P 12

<sup>9</sup> Vinoba Bhave's autobiography

<sup>10</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru Speeches.

<sup>11</sup> *Young India*, April 10, 1930.

*Autobiography*<sup>12</sup> of Dr Karan Singh occupies a prominent place within the modern political history of Jammu and Kashmir. The *Autobiography* is packed with dates and significant events about the author's personal life and Jammu and Kashmir history from 1930 to 1967, which forms the very crucial phase of the author's life as well as of Jammu and Kashmir political history. The autobiographical text traces the author's personal struggle against the different odds he met in his life i.e. losing the empire, facing serious health problems, his struggle against the ill treatment the women that she met from male side and his triumph in raising the proper awareness about the strengths, rights of women as well as assigning them a proper place and voice.

Dr Karan Singh was born in the patriarchal society, where women were not having any power in any aspect; they were simply bound to follow the orders. The women are deprived of any decision making power. The male over all dominated both families as well as in society. So, in such an atmosphere, their representation in politics was out of question. But fortunately, it was during his period of studies, Karan Singh was exposed to different thought and ideas, his vision also got broadened. Being a noble heart from the beginning, he was very much attracted by the democratic ideas and the personalities who were advocating the same. He was very much against ideals of patriarchal society. Though being a product of the patriarchal society in which he was to be bound to follow the same suit, he was an exceptional case. That was the reason he was attracted by those personalities some of them later became his ideals, who were advocating for liberalism, democracy and social reformation. He was impressed by those who advocated equal rights for the women. He himself was a great advocate of granting equal rights for the women. It was because of this advocacy that after many generations, we see a daughter got birth in the Dogra ruling family, in the form of *Jyotsna Singh* daughter of Dr Karan Singh. As in the earlier generation, no daughters were allowed to be born in the Dogra family as the general perception was that by marrying their daughter with someone else will reduce their grandeur, reputation.

Karan Singh is a great scholar, intellectual of Hinduism. He is vehement supporter for the spread of Hinduism as he praises various aspects of Hinduism but at the same he is very critical of the dogmas associated with the Hinduism. Like other great social reformists, he too has advocated for the removal of these evils and cleansing of the Hindu religion. In this regard Dr Karan Singh Says:

“Effort of Brahma Samaj was the first deliberate attempt in modern India to reform Hinduism and to cleanse its of undesirable encrustation that had developed around it”<sup>13</sup>

Dr Karan Singh elaborates the role of Hinduism in supporting the status of women. In his book '*Hinduism*' Karan Singh has lamented over the treatment that the women get from the past times.<sup>14</sup> Like other great saints and reformists, he too advocated for the reformation of the system. He in a lucid way has tried to trace the trajectory of the descending position of women. I.e. how a woman earlier commanded respect in her society, how she used to be at par with the men at every stage of the life and how it got deteriorated with the passage of time. He wrote:

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<sup>12</sup> *Autobiography* by Dr Karan Singh is actually the combination of the two volumes namely *Heir Apparent* written in 1982 and *Sadar-i-Riyasat* written in 1985. The volume of *Heir Apparent* covers the time period from his birth up to 1953 and got completed in 1982. While as the volume of *Sadar-i-Riyasat* covers the time period from 1953 to 1967 and got completed in 1985. The two were combined and were collectively printed under the name of *Autobiography* in 1989.

<sup>13</sup> Gupta, N.L, *An Introduction to Eastern Ways of Thinking*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company. 2003. P.172

<sup>14</sup> Karan Singh, *The Sterling Book of Hinduism*, New Dawn Press Group: New Delhi: 2005 p. 60.

“Women, who once enjoyed a honored position and are found in the *Upanishads* conversing freely with men upon the highest philosophical topics, had become virtual slaves in the joint family. Widows were treated with great cruelty; female infanticide was rife in some castes and compulsory immolation of widows was often enforced.”<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, all this led him to play an important role in recovering the lost wisdom of the *Upanishads* and Vedic writings<sup>16</sup>. He advocates for the full equality for women, emphasis on educating the women and supported the crusade against the untouchability. He started it from his home, as he paid due respect to his mother and an equal treatment to this wife as well. He never let the patriarchal setup to overcome on him. Dr Karan Singh throughout his autobiographical writing has attributed the credit for his success and position to women in the form of his mother Maharani Tara Devi and his wife Maharani Yasho Lakshmi. He has candidly acknowledged the profound effect of his mother and his wife on his evolution as statesman, politician and philosopher.

### **Maharani Tara Devi and Karan Singh's Political Self:**

Throughout the text, Karan Singh has shown his deep admiration for the women with whom he encounters in his life. He has wholly credited to his mother for his successful political journey. Karan Singh presents his mother as the personality who gave him the advice by which he was able to make progress in his political carrier. Kishore Gandhi writes that ‘Dr. Karan Singh's trek to transcendence, his search for ultimate reality and his reverence for life could be located in his upbringing by his mother’<sup>17</sup>. He narrator credits his mother for lightning in him the spirit of humanism, soberness and people friendly approach. The author venerates his mother's subaltern innocence and her love for the poor. He described her for being very benevolent, people friendly, always advising the author to work for the welfare of his depressed masses. She told Karan Singh “if you help the rich, they will only take your money, the poor will appreciate it and pray you and bless you”.<sup>18</sup> Kishore Gandhi views this to be the introduction of Karan Singh to the concept of distributive justice and social equality.<sup>19</sup> She also taught him to acknowledge every salutation with folded hands and always in a smiling mood and enquire about the welfare of people's families and try to mix, with whosoever comes to see you, whether rich or poor. And at the same time, the author frames himself as one who is taking the advices of his mother very honestly and seriously and tried very hard to make it reality. The author presented his mother as the one who was on the secret mission to alleviate the wants and sufferings of the people. The author praises his mother for being very helpful and generous. She had been financing the marriages of the poor people. The author has presented her as advocate of secularism when he writes that in 1947 her mother created history when she introduced *Harijang* girl, who were generally regarded as untouchables, in the group of nine, whom were worshipped during the sacred *Navratvas*.<sup>20</sup>

The character of Maharani has not been confined by the author within the walls of the empire. Through the texts, a posture of boldness has added to her identity. It was on the partition of the Indian Sub-

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 60

<sup>16</sup> Gandhi, Kishore *op.cit.*, P.xxx

<sup>17</sup> Gandhi, Kishore, *op.cit.*, p.xxvii.

<sup>18</sup> Dr Karan Singh, *Autobiography*, p.18.

<sup>19</sup> Gandhi, Kishore, *op.cit.*, p 130.

<sup>20</sup> Karan Singh, *Autobiography*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.p. 35.

continent as well as on the sudden attack of tribal's, the Dogra empire was crumbling, the Maharani took a brave posture by way of coming forward out of the walls of the palace to participate in the defense of the kingdom by way of preparing the food for the soldiers, gets engaged in the relief works. Karan Singh wrote;

My mother had done remarkable work in refugee relief, throwing herself heart and soul into the work, collecting money and spending many hundreds of thousands of rupees of her own.<sup>21</sup>

In defending the borders of the empire during the hey days of the second world war, when the threat of foreign invasion was looming on the valley, the Maharani came to the forefront by way of taking the initiative by organizing a war Aid Committee and along with other ladies of Srinagar who meet regularly in the palace to knit, sew prepare food material (pickel) that was send to the Dogra soldiers, who were serving on the borders.<sup>22</sup> And for her well doing during the hue hours, she was awarded “the Crown of India”, a decoration reserved for distinguished women, who was till then received by only two to three other Indian Women.

Throughout the writing of Dr Karan Singh as being very candid in his writing, the image of Maharani Tara Devi remain very dominant as she has been presented as the role model, a humble soul believing in caring of the ruled people. She has been presented as a lady who always tried to fill the gaps that the Maharaja Hari Singh usually made, when not serving his subjects in a fair manner and about which she often complained to the author. As the author writes that his mother complains him that “your father never meets the people’, ‘that’s the trouble’ as he remained surrounded by the sycophants and never really gets to know what is going on outside.”<sup>23</sup>

The author has shown his scorn for his father’s ‘pompous regimentation’ as he describes his father as indecisive and feudal and sees his inactions partly responsible for the painful legacies of the Partition for his state<sup>24</sup> as well as his anger against the treatment that his mother get from Hari Singh. The Maharani has been presented as very much disappointed with the attitude of Maharaja Hari Singh and his associates whom she thinks were a group of ‘sycophants’.<sup>25</sup> Dr Karan Singh very candidly recollects about the differences between his parents throughout their marriage life that later resulted in their separation in 1950. The pain and the uneasiness with which the author was going through became quite visible throughout the texts. The narration has clearly shown the tilt of sympathy towards Maharani Tara Devi, as Dr Karan Singh presents her an embodiment of love, who has come from the hinterlands of Himachal. Maharani Tara Devi has been presented as a personality that remained very down to earth that always remained very much concerned about the welfare of his kingdom and its subjects. The narration talked about the lack of parental care that the author got from his father side during his early childhood days as the author complains that he despite of being a prince; he never used to be ‘really happy as a child’.<sup>26</sup> The author attributes this unhappiness wholly to his “unsatisfactory parental situation” and his “enforced

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.p.79.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*,pp. 18-19.

<sup>24</sup> Singh, Swaran. Touching So many lives. The Hindu (Accessed on 08-11-2017)

<sup>25</sup> Karan Singh, *op.cit.*, p.19.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p.21.

absence" from his mother.<sup>27</sup> The author signals out that his father's hard and "undemonstrative" behavior does not allow him to get the fatherly warmth him.<sup>28</sup>

"My only regret is that because of my father's strictness and the absence of an outstanding housemaster, I did not have any strong figure upon whom I could rely during those formative years, someone who might have filled the inner vacuum of uneasy insecurity that afflicted me."<sup>29</sup>

The author dismissing the tastes of the feudal system, therefore takes pride in declaring that of having the distinction of being different from the rest of Princes of his contemporary times i.e. distinction of being the son of the mother, he was royal by blood rather was a village girl from a poor family of Himachal Pradesh. Who has not infected with the germ of feudalism. Even after becoming he queen, though outwardly she adopted the pompous show of the royalty, but 'in her heart she identified herself with the aspiration and sentiments of the people'<sup>30</sup> and worked very hard for the upliftment of the poor people by way of spending a huge amount of money on the poor and distressed people, married off girls from poor families, built houses and gave food to the poor people. Dr Karan Singh recollects that her mother being a Queen did not do this for her pomp and show, rather she considered it as a 'sacred duty'.<sup>31</sup> Dr Karan Singh credited his mother for this benevolent spirit as it later became a guiding spirit for the author for choosing the path of 'distributive justice'.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Maharani Yasho Lakshmi: A Wife cum Guide**

Dr Karan Singh is known for establishing the intimate relationship with any one he meets.<sup>33</sup> But among all the relations of his life, the only deep and abiding relationship of Dr Karan Singh was with his wife i.e. Maharani Yasho Lakshmi. She had remained always at his back, supporting him at every low or high times, travelled with him around the world to the places where his assignments took him, including the United States, where he was posted as the Ambassador of India, inspiring him for every great endeavor that is aimed at benefiting of the common masses.<sup>34</sup> She had always been the source of spirit of strength for Dr. Karan Singh. The author being open minded personality, did not limit the space of Rani YashoRajye, rather remains very much supportive to the endeavors of his wife in her life.

Through the texts she has been presented as a straight forward retaining the innocence of a child, who was always having deep concern to empower the deprived and destitute with educational inputs. She has been presented as a source of strength for the author as she has been portrayed as the women, who could easily interact with the outstanding minds of India and abroad: statesmen and scientists including Nobel Laureates. She has been an excellent hostess and earned great appreciation for making every guest comfortable who joined them at lunch or dinner. She got the representation as the lady of compassion and

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<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p.31.

<sup>30</sup> Karan Singh, *The Sterling Book of Hinduism*, NewDwn Press Group: New Delhi: 2005. P.130.

<sup>31</sup> Dr Karan Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup>Gandhi, Kishore, *op.cit.*, p. xxv

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p.xxv.

generosity, who believed that unequal societies cannot achieve their full potential or even sustain a high level of growth indefinitely.<sup>35</sup> She has been presented as a lady of vigor who undertook several important activities in various parts of the State, including the setting up of work centers, and other social welfare projects. The J&K branch of the All India Women's Conference was set up by her in 1956, and she also developed the *Ladies Club* of Srinagar and Jammu, which undertook a series of social and community welfare programmes. During the 1962 and 1965 Wars, the author takes the pride while mentioning the role of his wife in the relief work both in Srinagar and Jammu. He wrote:

Asha mobilized the Ladies Club at Jammu and Srinagar to undertake a whole range of welfare activities for the refugees, particularly women and children. Almost two decades earlier my parents, especially my mother, had been involved in the same sort of activities.<sup>36</sup>

Singh supported his wife whole-heartedly when she founded the Delhi Society for the welfare of mentally handicapped children. This Institution caters to over 300 mentally retarded children and includes a sheltered workshop, a vocational training centre, a diagnostic clinic for evolution of such disadvantaged children and several other rehabilitation facilities. It is now acknowledged as one of the finest institutions of its kind in the country.<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The ethics of this autobiography articulates about the parting the way of thinking of the author like that of his predecessors who see women as mere assets of pleasure, to the new broader vision where the author tries to do justice with the women folk. He didn't underestimate the caliber of women rather he considers them a flock that were at par with men. He remains very much open and did not shrink the space while making representation of women in his writing. He rather highlighted the role of women and appreciated the caliber. He delineates their position as very important for a society or a nation to grow up. Therefore he gave the women a proper place in his writing for his caliber, virtues, which itself speaks about the broader vision and liberal outlook of the author.

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<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xliii

<sup>36</sup> Karan Singh, *Autobiography op.cit.*, p. 306.

<sup>37</sup><http://netindian.in/news/2009/05/25/0002020/vasho-rajya-lakshmi-passes-away>



## Representation of women in Karan Singh's Autobiography

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