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Scindia, Vijaya Raje Last Maharani of Gwalior

An Autobiography Author: Vijaya Raje Scindia 279 pgs. SUNY Press \$10.95 pb, 34.50 hc

This is a with book: written with Manohar Malgonkar, like the flock of personality books that are winging their way up the New York Times bestseller list on the hot air of gossip and mean spirit. Thank the Hindu Gods of the Scindia royal family that Last Maharani is not of that distasteful genre. Malgonkar serves the elegant purpose here of creating pungent English prose, not purveying dynastic dirt.

Not that this tale lacks spice and fire. As the Maharani, the elected representative of her Gwalior (Maharashtra, central India) district, ended up on the jail side of Indira Gandhi's 1975 emergency rule, she has plenty of gritty anecdotes and thoughts: her son's sour disaffection from her as mother and in political allegiance; the senseless ransacking and despoliation of her homes (palaces actually) by Keystone Copper tax officials and her hard, but spiritually rewarding, months in a women's jail. There's a velvet dignity even in the Maharani's thrusts of the verbal lance, and the suffering of those years warrants some probing anguish. Her life is tangibly more fascinating than Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis', and the Maharani of Gwalior is certainly as well-known in India as Jackie Onassis is in America.

This, though, is much more than women battling it out in the political ring. Vijaya Raje Scindia was the last queen of one of the twilight kingdoms of India, a karmically final period when the British Raj, beaten by Mahatma Gandhi, gave way to the democratic union of India. The diminutive royal kingdoms with their maharajas, maharanis and heirs apparent and fabulous palaces and tiger hunts and horse races didn't fit into the new incarnation of India. The kingdoms were signed

away, the royal families given purses and allowed to live in their palaces, but those too were eventually sucked into the political maelstrom of the fledgling republic. All this took several decades, and it is the Maharani's chronicling of this period and the childhood years of her life that is page-turning absorbing.

That Vijaya Raje became the maharani of Gwalior was in itself unlikely. No Gwalior court advisor or astrologer would have foreseen it 80 years ago. For Vijaya Raje was not of the Scindia clan that had carved out and ruled Gwalior for centuries. The blood of the Nepalese royal family - the Bahadur Ranas - flowed in her, a lineage far removed from Gwalior. And the royal lines have always been very fussy about marrying within the family gene pool. But neither did Vijaya Raje scurry about the Kathmandu palaces. She was born on an estate in the town of Sagar in Madra Pradesh, the heartland of India, and a thousand miles distant from Nepal.

It turns out that her grandfather, Khadga Samsher Rana, a key scion of one of two rival royal factions in 1880's Nepal, had been involved in a successful assassination plot of the king, for what apparently he thought were reasons good for the country. He became commander-in-chief of the armies and the virtual ruler, though his brother Bir Samsher was made the new king. But the king's wife poisoned him against Khadga, and he was banished from Nepal, forced in his thirties to take refuge with the British Raj in India and establish an estate in Sagar. Vijaya Raje remembers him, when she was two years old, when he was being bundled off into a car to be taken to Kashi (Shiva's city) on the Ganges to die.

So with that bit of skulduggery history, she begins her life, taking the reader into fascinating glimpses of secret royal talismans that bring great or devastating luck and the opulent lifestyle of the last Hindu royalty. After a broken engagement with another lineage, Vijaya Raje - a reedy girl, cosmopolitan yet religious, vegetarian and wearing Swadesh cotton saris in lieu of Paris silk saris-marries the Maharaja of Gwalior, Jivajirao Scindia. Photos and an index are included.

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