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People By Country Singapore

An extraordinary woman

Dr Kanwaljit Soin: Singapore's first female orthopaedic surgeon, first female Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) and, to date, the only Sikh woman in Singapore's history to have entered parliamentary politics.

By Asia Samachar - February 20, 2018

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Dr Kanwaljit Soin - Source: SINGAPORE AT 50: 50 SIKHS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

Most people would be proud to have been recognised for their accomplishments in just one



major field in their lives. However, it takes an exceptional person to be recognised for his or her achievements in several fields.

One such exceptional person is Dr Kanwaljit Soin. She is Singapore's first female orthopaedic surgeon, first female Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) and, as a founder member of gender equality organisation, Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), is one of the most well-known feminists in the country. To date, she remains the only Sikh woman in Singapore's history to have entered parliamentary politics.

The eldest of four siblings born into a relatively well-to-do family in Gujranwala in present-day Pakistan, Kanwaljit's birth in 1942 led her straight into the violence and conflict of the partition of India and Pakistan, of which she retains some horrific memories. Her family initially fled Gujranwala as refugees to Delhi, following which her father decided to move them to Jakarta, Indonesia, where he started a sports goods business to sustain the family.

Kanwaljit started her education late because of all the upheavals of history she lived through in her formative years. She only began her formal education in school at the age of eight or nine, and was sent to Singapore in 1952 for better quality education. She attended St Margaret's Boarding School, then Tanjong Katong Girls School and Victoria School, before obtaining her MBBS (Honours) in 1966 and a Master of Medicine (Surgery) in 1970 from the University of Singapore. In 1972, she was the recipient of a Colombo Plan scholarship to train in hand surgery in Australia.

The 73-year-old Kanwaljit says that she decided to be a doctor when she was 10 years old – she met a very kind and humane doctor in Indonesia who inspired her to want to heal people. According to her, at that point in time, many did not believe that women were up to the task of becoming specialist doctors. She cites marriage pressure and the Singapore government's previous one-third cap on female medical students (abolished in 2003) as additional obstacles for women wanting to pursue a medical career. However, female doctors rarely give up their careers even when they train as specialists where the demands are higher – this is evident in her pursuits and life experiences.

BALANCING CAREER, SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND FAMILY

Kanwaljit is married to prominent lawyer and judge, Mr Amarjeet Singh Bhatia, and they have three children. She says maintaining a balance between her career, social activism and family has required a lifetime of negotiation and cheekily adds that combating a "head of the household" mentality with constant reminders that, "we have a roundtable in this home" helps. This is where the old feminist adage that "the personal is political" comes in. (1)

She believes Sikhism is unique in its egalitarianism and focus on gender equality, values that she feels she has imbibed subconsciously and regrets that this aspect of Sikhism is never emphasised enough.

Feminism to Kanwaljit means equal respect and consideration for both sexes and she is unashamed about calling herself a feminist. In 1984, she was invited to speak at a forum on women's issues called 'Women's Choices, Women's Lives' organised by the National University of Singapore Society. She then began hosting follow-up meetings at her clinic that eventually led to the formation of AWARE a year later. Kanwaljit was AWARE president from 1991 to 1993 and remains a life member of the organisation.





Dr Kanwaljit Soin in an undated photo – Source: SINGAPORE AT 50: 50 SIKHS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

PARLIAMENTARIAN

After some initial attempts to convince a few women she knew to stand for the NMP post, Kanwaljit decided she should apply for it, and this paved the way for her foray into the political realm from 1992 to 1996. She entered parliament with very little preparation at a time when civil society was not so vocal and describes it as “plunging into the deep end of an icy cold pool.” Even so, she stood up to ask a question (on childcare centres) on her very first day in parliament and never looked back. To this day, she has the reputation for being the NMP who has asked the most number of questions in parliament. However, a cap has now been placed on the number of questions one can ask.

1992: HER WORLD WOMAN OF THE YEAR

Kanwaljit Soin is probably the only woman in Singapore who can speak Punjabi, perform surgery on your hand, deliver a passionate speech in Parliament on women's rights, and tell you where to find the best dosal on Race Course Road. For that alone, she deserves an award, and in fact she's got one; the 1992 Woman of the Year.

Most encounters with Kani (“Call me Kani!” is the first thing she says to strangers) are mixtures of warmth, good humour—and if you have the bad luck to be a journalist, frustration. The energetic Kani, who juggles many balls as wife, mother, president of Aware (Association of Women for Action and Research), orthopaedic surgeon and Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP), is almost maddeningly reticent on the subject of herself.

She won't discuss any topic which strays within 50km of what she considers “personal”. Though one of Singapore's most visible public women, she has successfully kept hidden basic details such as where she lives, what her father did for a living, or how a traditional Punjabi girl transformed herself into the country's boldest feminist leader.

Any woman in Singapore is free to approach Kani during her Saturday-afternoon “meet the women” sessions at the Aware office on Race Course Road. She prefers that women phone first for an appointment, but she'll also take walk-ins. Kani grants private audiences, averaging 20 minutes in length, and listens to a wide range of problems, from wife-beating to immigration matters to sexual harassment. About seven women show up on a typical Saturday, and Kani sometimes promises to raise individual problems in Parliament. When she joined Parliament last October, Kani decided that she had to represent a group, rather than just herself. She chose as her constituency all Singapore women.

Full story, go [here](#)

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Kanwaljit did not ask questions for the sake of it. Her constant questioning was a valuable way to obtain information and statistics on important issues – knowledge that individuals and civil society could then use to help enact social change. She refuses to be pigeonholed by critics who felt she was dabbling in too many different issues and feels that all citizens should have the right to be interested in all aspects of their country's governance and socio-economic policies.

Although the Family Violence Bill she tabled in parliament in 1995 was defeated, many of its provisions dealing with the problem of violence against women were later incorporated into the government's review of the Women's Charter, including the introduction of Personal Protection Orders for survivors of domestic abuse. In addition, two of her parliamentary suggestions – an educational account for every adult Singaporean and a medical savings account for each elderly Singaporean – have now been implemented in the form of the SkillsFuture Credit scheme and the Pioneer Generation Package. These measures give her immense satisfaction.

"My wife and I have known Kanwaljit for many years. She was my wife's contemporary at Medical School. My wife recalled that Kanwaljit topped her class and won all the prizes. Her husband, Amarjeet, and I were classmates at the Law School. I have had the privilege of seeing her function in her many roles – as a medical practitioner, NMP and President of AWARE, as well as the founding Chairman of WINGS.

Kanwaljit is a brilliant doctor and an important leader of Singapore's civil society. She was an outstanding NMP. One of her legacies is the amendments to our Women's Charter to protect women from domestic violence. Kanwaljit is an outstanding human being. The Sikh community should be very proud of her.

PROF TOMMY KOH

Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore

Kanwaljit has won recognition in various spheres for her achievements. She won the Woman of the Year award Singapore in 1992, Women Who Make a Difference award presented by the International Women's Forum in Washington DC in 2000, Lifetime Achievement award presented by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Singapore in 2006 and Singapore Good Samaritan award presented by the Rotary Club in 2008. She is currently a council member of the Washington University International Advisory Council for Asia, a global ambassador of HelpAge International, and immediate past president of the Singapore Orthopaedic Association. She was also a founder member of UNIFEM Singapore and the Association of Women Doctors.

STILL GOING STRONG

Not content to retire quietly, Kanwaljit continues to practice at her clinic in Mount Elizabeth hospital and, in 2007, set up and became the founding President of women's active ageing non-profit organisation, Women's Initiative for Ageing Successfully (WINGS). Her book, *Our Lives to Live: Putting a Woman's Face to Change in Singapore*, which was co-edited with fellow AWARE founder Margaret Thomas, was published in early 2015.²

Kanwaljit balks at having to choose her greatest accomplishment, suggesting that she may not have achieved her best work yet. She draws enormous gratification from the synthesis of ways in which she has been able to make her contributions on an individual level through her medical work, at the systemic level through her activism and political work and on a personal level through her familial, friendship and social networks.

Kanwaljit is an optimistic person and believes that there is no insurmountable difficulty in today's context. She states: "There is strength in numbers. If you put your heart and mind to it, and if you have a group of people to brainstorm and network, you come up with great ideas, great strategy, and there should be no reason why you cannot get ahead. If you really want to achieve something, you just have to find the route to do it."³

It seems that this lady is all geared up for more achievements in her life.

Soin Orthopaedic, Spine & Hand Surgery

Specialty: Orthopaedic Surgery

Qualifications: MBBS (Singapore) 1966; M Med (Gen Surg) (Singapore) 1970; FRACS (Gen Surg) 1970; FAMS (Orth Surg) 1975

Background:

- Dr Soin graduated with MBBS Hons (1966) and was top of her class. She obtained her Master of Medicine (Surgery) (1970) from the University of Singapore, and became a Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in 1970 and a member of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore I 1975. Dr Soin was also the recipient of a Colombo Plan Scholarship to train in hand surgery in Australia in 1972.
- She is a member of Singapore Orthopaedic Association and was President of the Singapore Hand Society in 1989-1990. She was previously a Visiting Consultant (Hand Surgery Department) of the Singapore General Hospital. Dr Soin was a Nominated Member of Parliament of Singapore from 1992 to 1996, Dr Soin has held numerous positions in welfare, advocacy and professional organizations.

- She is presently a Global Ambassador of HelpAge International which works with and for disadvantaged older people all over the world, and is the founder and Chair of WINGS – “Women’s Initiative for Ageing Successfully” in Singapore. Dr Soin is on the Board of Consultants of the Osteoporosis Society (Singapore) and is a Board Member of Washington University International Advisory Board Council for Asia.

Awards:

- In 1992, she was nominated “Woman of the Year” in Singapore.
- In 2000, she was presented “Women Who Make a Difference Award” by the International Women’s Forum, Washington D.C.
- In 2008, she received the Singapore Medical Association Merit Award in recognition of her significant contribution and valuable services to the Community and the “Good Samaritan” Award from the Rotary Club of Singapore in recognition of her spirit of true volunteerism exhibited above and beyond the call of duty.

– Source: Mount Elizabeth hospital website

Endnotes

1 Interview with Dr Kanwaljit Soin, June 24, 2015.

2 Our Lives to Live: Putting a Woman’s Face to Change in Singapore World Scientific, 2015, Soin & Thomas 2 Ibid.



[This article is courtesy of SINGAPORE AT 50: 50 SIKHS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS, a book published in 2015 by the Young Sikh Association, Singapore (YSA) in conjunction with Singapore’s 50th birthday. Some parts of the article above have been adapted from other external sources]

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