

A Conversation With Renu Malla

On 16th of October, 2012, I landed at Jammu, coming from Srinagar. I wanted to meet Renu Malla, wife of the recently deceased renowned singer Vijay Malla. I was escorted by Vijay Sadhu, husband of another renowned singer Kailash Mehra. The meeting was set on the 18th.

Renuji was staying at that moment in a relative's house, though she was going to move to a government provided house in a few days. It is an irony that while Vijay Malla was alive, government could not provide housing assistance to this acme artist of Kashmir, who like most other artists barely earned enough to break his bread. Malla Sahib's renown as a singer had touched the highest levels of the government, where some of the icons of political power would have loved to hear him sing for them. But he discreetly, and with some revenge, kept away from them.

Malla Sahib sang from the deep anguish of his heart, but he possessed the requisite voice and the singing technique. He had told me many years ago, when I was trying to recruit him for a concert tour of U.S., that he would rather be remembered as a *ghazal* singer than a Kashmiri singer. He had also tried film playback singing but he did not succeed at it. It seemed that in the last few years of his life he had mellowed, which expressed itself in his singing. For a singer possession of his soul is absolutely essential for good singing. It seems like that is what Malla Sahib had acquired in the final phase of his life. But as has become usual with the Government Of Jammu And Kashmir, it ignored artists. The people did not help him either.

I met Malla Sahib sometime in mid-80's in Jammu to have him make a concert tour of U.S., under the auspices of Kong Posh, a KP cultural organization in U.S., whose president I was. He was interested in doing that. We had tea in Gnadhi Nagar, and then he took me to Doordarshan to show me his office. From there he took me to his home. There he briefly sang for me, so that I could take a picture of

him in that posture, which I needed to use in the poster about his planned tour. He was a very friendly person. And at the same time, I saw his sensitivity, which in a different form was a building block of his artist's personality. He dilated on his eight-year tenure in Bombay, during the time when another great Kashmiri artist Mohan Lal Aima was working there. As his wife Renuji's health started deteriorating, he moved out of Bombay, back to Jammu and Kashmir. He told me the story of how when felicitating the great *ghazal* singer Mehdi Hassan, on behalf of Radio Kashmir, with some *ghazals*, when the latter was visiting Kashmir, Mehdi Hassan told him that he should not copy him. My efforts to bring Malla Sahib to U.S. hit ground, as the U.S. Embassy would not give him a visa.

When Renuji walked in the living room, where I talked with her, she seemed to have a light step, was graceful, and quiet. She sat unobtrusively next to me. The recent tragedy of the loss of her husband, who was only 56, was writ large on her face, but she did not seem to wear her heart on her sleeve.

I asked her how many songs had Malla Sahib sung. She seemed to muse on the question but said with a painful irony that they were not enough. That was a way of saying that she did not know the number of songs Malla Sahib had sung but they were not enough to fill the legacy of his talent and popularity.

Then I asked her if I could borrow some of Malla Sahib's CDs from her so as to make a compilation of his best songs. She responded by saying that a website was already in making which would contain most or all of his songs. She further explained the need of the website by saying that there were many crooks using Malla Sahib's music to make money for themselves.

She gave an example of some singers who wanted to hang on the coattails of Malla Sahib to get their fifteen minutes of fame. These obviously she wanted to keep away from the luminescent flame of her husband's memory. A widow's love for her husband burnt bright in her eyes.

Finally, I asked her that I was in a position to collect money for her needs from the Kashmiri community in U.S. At this she looked a little pensive and after lowering her voice, said wistfully that she did not need any money. Many attempts at that were already made which later proved to be scams. In spite of my assurance to her that the money collection in U.S. would not be a scam, she stuck to her guns.

During the conversation she was very solicitous about me and my companion, Mr. Vijay Sadhu, to have tea and snacks. Throughout the conversation she looked subdued but in control of himself. She knew what she wanted to say.

At the good-bye time I could not but help feeling sad about the untimely demise of Malla Sahib at 56, who was considered to have been a great Kashmiri singer.

For quite a while afterward, the meeting hung like a concatenation of elegant dew drops on the poignant string of Malla Sahib's memory.

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