

When I Met Kailash Mehra the First Time



I do not remember when I first heard about Kailash Mehra the singer the first time, but I remember thinking about her seriously in 1990's when her musical CD Bal Maryo came out. It was a fabulous collection of Kashmiri songs, including the classic *bedardi chani*, which also is her favorite song of herself. I heard the CD dozens of times. It also introduced the singer Vijay Malla to me, whose singing I have cherished since.

In 2003 we heard that Kailash Mehra was touring U.S. for her musical concerts. My wife felt strongly that we should manage her New York concert. I supported her in her vision, and in that direction, we realized that we should invite her to stay with us. To our good fortune she accepted the invitation, and the date of her arrival from, I think, one of the Midwest cities, was set.

Kailash Mehra's flight was coming at LaGuardia Airport in New York City. I started two hours before the flight arrival time from my home. I was lucky to find the parking for my car at the airport quickly. This put me in the arrival gate an hour before the flight arrival, a long time to kill comfortably. It was a busy arrival gate where several flights came. Every few minutes I would check my watch to see how much more time I will have to wait to meet Kailshji. Finally, it was announced that my guest's flight had landed. I waited anxiously for her to come to the baggage arrival carousel, from which I was only twenty feet away. One by one the passengers from the city in Midwest flight came to the carousel and after some search picked their bags and left the arrival building. But I did not see Kailash Mehra. But wait a minute, I had never met her before. How was I then going to recognize her? Well, I had seen her photograph in the concert flyer used in one of the cities she had given a concert in. Arrival passengers around the baggage arrival carousel were thinning out, but where was my Kailashji? Now there were only four passengers looking for their baggage. But which of them was Kailashji? It remained a \$64,000 question, as I was not able to match the passengers with the image of Kailash Mehra I had in my head. I started panicking, which is not normal for me. Finally, there was only one passenger left at the baggage arrival carousel. Logically it must be my Kailshji. I started focusing on her keenly. She had a lot gold ornaments on her. She was dressed in *shilvar-kameez* and *chuni*, Indian women's clothing. My brain was shouting to me: that is her, that is her. We were both staring at each other for several minutes, as we were not sure if we were seeing the right person. Finally, I could not take it anymore. I jumped the rope separating the passenger receivers and the passengers. We were the only two people left, as every receiver had paired with his arriver. I rushed toward her in excitement and virtually hugged her, but did not do it out of the fear that an Indian woman would not allow a stranger to touch her. I braked my rushing feet just a few inches from her and folded my hands in the classic Indian hand gesture of *namaste*. I peered at her intensely and she looked at me with controlled inquisitiveness. Later in my relationship with her I learnt how a controlled personality she was. I wanted to ask her why she was wearing all that gold jewelry but did not dare to do that because of her Indian sensibility. Meanwhile, my brain was busy in figuring out the difference between the Kailash Mehra photo I had seen and the Kailsh Mehra I was seeing.

Once in the car we started to cast off our shyness, she faster than I. I had to keep myself in control lest she think I was a mental lightweight. Once home she relaxed considerably in the company of my wife.

On August 28, 2003, I organized a concert for her in Rockland County, New York. I introduced her to the audience in what turned out to be a very successful event. She sang some of her famous songs to the joy of the tri-State (New York, New Jersey, Connecticut) Kashmiri audience.

Later she and her husband Vijay Kumar Sadhu became very good friends of me and my wife Mohini. In the 2006 visit to U.S. she and Vijayji stayed with us, and I again organized a concert for her, but this time in New Jersey. It was even more successful than the earlier concert. I stayed with Kailashji and Vijayji at their residence in Jammu during one of my visits to India. Our relationship became deeper with time.

But with the passage of further time, she became formal with me. She now addresses me Respected Kaul Sahib in letters. But for me the magic of that first encounter and the subsequent meetings has never been dulled. Behind her present very formal and disciplined persona lies a simple girl who needs affection and attention. That is what I have captured in the photo at the top of this essay I took of her in 2009. But behind her controlled demeanor lies a long-suffering personality. She has seen a lot of hard times in her life but yet she has managed to become a very successful artist in a language she was not born in. I believe her being denied a Padma award is disgraceful on part of the government. Last year I tried to persuade the Jammu and Kashmir Governor to give her that award but it did not succeed.

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