

Rashmi Kaku – a personal sketch

I first met Rashmi Kaku (my mother-in-law) in 1990 at the O'Hare international airport in Chicago. She and Raam Kaka (my father-in-law) had just arrived from India to bless my marriage to their daughter Tanuja. I had spoken with Rashmi Kaku on the phone before this first meeting and even exchanged a letter or two. But it being the first encounter with my prospective in-laws I was naturally quite nervous.

It turned out that they were both a very gentle couple and in spite of the questions and concerns they might have had about me as their prospective son-in-law, they received me with utmost kindness. As time went by into the wedding day and past it, we were able to form a bond between us that gradually strengthened and grew to become a permanent relationship of love and friendship.

During that first US trip which they undertook specially for the wedding, we all went on a tour of the Niagara Falls. Rashmi Kaku wasn't sure about joining us due to health reasons. Partly because of my reassurances that the trip would be safe and comfortable, she agreed to join and had a wonderful time. Later, she graciously thanked me for insisting that she undertook that trip.

I realized then and through later interactions that Rashmi Kaku had a frail health. She was besieged by some problem or the other all the time. Towards the very end of her life, she continued to battle with all sorts of health troubles. Nature was indeed unfair to this wonderful person, who was at the core a very vivacious, romantic, funny, talented, interested, social, and adventurous woman. It was only because of the hanging sword of poor health that she often turned down offers to travel, to visit friends, to undertake activities, to watch movies and plays, to do boating, to eat out. She turned down these offers – to do all the things that she very much loved to do – not so much out of concern for herself, but more to avoid becoming a burden on someone else.

Rashmi Kaku was a most romantic person. She loved literature, movies, plays, people, celebrity stories, you name it. She was well-versed in the Marathi literature and often told us stories of writers and poets, stories surrounding the creation of certain famous literary pieces. She even knew many famous artists personally – connections that she had built purely out of love for the art forms. I remember once we were sitting together watching some show on the TV, and Rashmi Kaku didn't like some aspect of the story or presentation. So, she murmured that so-and-so must be informed about this. I thought it was a casual remark made by a fan, but the next thing I saw she was dialing the phone to talk with the director of that show!

Rashmi Kaku loved music and was ahead of her generation in exploring a wide variety of musical genres: from Indian classical music, light Marathi music, and Bollywood classics to the

latest Bollywood music. In her love for the Ghazal, she was prepared to disregard national and cultural boundaries. Some of her favorite artists were Pakistanis, which did not bother her, although at heart she was also a staunch Indian nationalist. In the pre-Internet days when music had to be collected meticulously and painstakingly, she used to present to me cassettes and CDs of music that she felt would tickle my taste. And indeed, I got the pleasant surprise every time of hearing some new music that I had never heard before. For example, I attribute my introduction to the music of AR Rahman and Hariharan to Rashmi Kaku.

Rashmi Kaku was certainly a modern, free-thinking woman, even though she was part of a conservative, patriarchal Indian society. I think she would have been fully at home and maybe even in the fore-front were she born in the liberal west. She valued education, culture, arts, and liberal thinking, which was apparent in the way she brought up her four children. She let them explore their interests and their ambitions, while encouraging active participation in music, theater, and literature. She fed them with liberal thought in addition to delicious food.

Rashmi Kaku loved to eat well and feed well. She experimented with new recipes, remembered the favorites of her loved ones, and made it a point to make those dishes on special days. For me, every visit to Rashmi Kaku's house was occasion for a feast. Every meal was a cornucopia of dishes. And I must mention that there was a particular seat in the dining room that was always reserved for me, and Raam Kaka would sit next to me and undertake the no doubt enjoyable task of pushing items into my plate!

During Rashmi Kaku's US trip, she met several people and befriended all of them with her wit, knowledge, and empathy. This included Ashfaq, one of our Pakistani friends. I saw them engage in a wonderful discussion about the Urdu language, Pakistani TV programs, Ghazal artists from Pakistan, and so on. She even took basic lessons from Ashfaq on the Arabic script so that she could read more of the Urdu literature and Ghazals.

The human factor, and not any artificial man-made boundaries, played a major role in Rashmi Kaku's equations.

Rashmi Kaku and Raam Kaka were both extremely kind and polite with everyone that came to their door. Sometimes people visited me when I was at Manas (Rashmi Kaku's house in Dadar) – people who were complete strangers for them. But, that did not diminish even a bit their warm hospitality. I don't know a single visitor to the Pethe house, who wasn't impressed with their hospitality and empathy, who wasn't surprised by their modesty and down-to-earth nature.

Another trait that brought me and Rashmi Kaku close together was our love for jokes. Rashmi Kaku had a sense of humor that was wacky, ever-present, and unmindful of any boundaries. She understood that humor cannot be boxed into artificial rules of right or wrong, kosher or not-kosher. Fortunately, she and I were able to form a bond that was close enough that she happily and unhesitatingly shared some really funny gems.

Rashmi Kaku had an adventurous child in her heart, even though unfortunately her poor health kept that child suppressed most of the time. She loved to experiment with new ideas, continue her involvement with the changing times, learn new gadgets and technologies that her grandchildren played with. She was extremely keen to learn how to use the computer, how to navigate the Internet – she even had a Facebook account! This is certainly remarkable when you consider that most other people of her generation were afraid even to touch a computer.

Rashmi Kaku's family lineage was impressive. Her great grandfather was the eminent social reformer Gopal Hari Deshmukh alias लोकहितवादी, the famous writer of शतपत्रे (100 letters). His son (Rashmi Kaku's grandfather), Nanasaheb Deshmukh, was the first Indian MD (doctor of medicine) who later founded a now-renowned Medical College in Mumbai. On her mother's side, Rashmi Kaku was connected with the royal court based in Gwalior. Rashmi Kaku often mentioned these people, recounted interesting episodes, spoke proudly of their achievements, and rued the fact that they were now forgotten.

For me, the word "royal" holds no particular meaning. I don't believe connections to royal families make anyone special. But, I certainly felt that Rashmi Kaku had a class – something that made her seem superior, not because of her status or genetics, but because of her outer and inner beauty. Rashmi Kaku was a beautiful woman: she had bright, gentle green eyes and a radiant skin. She seemed above pettiness, narrow-mindedness, the trivial pursuits of common people. I never saw her get angry or use hateful words. If she disagreed with someone on some point, she let it pass. If someone treated her badly, she suffered the injustice silently and didn't engage in a fruitless verbal fight. Most importantly, her taste for everything – art, music, theater, cinema, food – was far above that of the average person.

Some people might have considered Rashmi Kaku a frail and weak person because of her health. But, I think she was a strong woman. Her long battle with physical pain and troubles itself is testimony to her strength. From the way she preserved her unique identity, pursued her interests, raised four wonderful children, took care of the obligations of a large extended family, ensured through her hospitality that no visitor went away disappointed, it should be clear to anyone that Rashmi Kaku was a fighter – a brave woman.

On April 15th, 2015 – on US tax day – providence extracted the ultimate tax on Rashmi Kaku's near and dear ones; it took away Rashmi Kaku. But, it cannot take away her legacy of courage and class.



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