

Mango Motifs and More – Myriad Memories of Kalpana Aunty

One night, we were whisked to the pantry for dinner and told firmly to go to bed after we had finished eating, for there was a party on that evening. Children were not to be seen or heard.

My brothers went off to bed, but I couldn't resist tiptoeing out and peering through a chink in the curtains, to see what all the fuss was about.

It was a marvellous scene, with drinks and delicious little snacks and the air was filled with the sound of all kinds of voices. As my eyes scanned the details, they suddenly stopped and focused on what seemed to me to be the loveliest lady I had ever seen. She was seated not too far from the curtain, elegantly draped in a saree and she wore a yellow rose in her hair. Suddenly she looked to her side and spotted me through the chink in the curtain. She gave a big smile and beckoned.

I was unsure. Many rules would be broken if I ventured forth, but I couldn't resist. I stepped out hesitantly and went up to her. She was like a beam of sunshine, and I immensely enjoyed talking to her (as it turned out, I wasn't admonished either).

That was my first meeting with Kalpana Aunty, and each time we meet, it is as though we are swept back to a time when life unfolded in a simple, joyous way, with time enough to do everything and more. That is how I think about her always.

Some years later, we all stayed together for several months in Delhi in my grandfather's house. I remember returning from school every day in time to watch Kalpana Aunty making and handing out perfect paans. The air was always full of conversation, sometimes there was a new game to play or a new thought to ponder over. Life was never still with her around.

Soon it was time for the Mathurs to move to their house near Chanakyapuri. I could see that they were greatly looking forward to settling into their home, but I missed the whole family. However, Kalpana Aunty had left behind a few memories that were special for me.

Her suddenly ushering me into an old wooden chair and giving me a wonderful new haircut. Measuring me for size and stitching some clothes that fit me really well (I held onto these long after I outgrew them because they were so perfectly made). Sitting with my palm upturned, while she decided on a mehndi pattern to draw out. "She will make a mango," predicted Shivani. "That's her favourite." And indeed, she did. I knew school rules forbade mehndi but I didn't care. It looked so beautiful! As it turned out, I wasn't admonished for this either.

Her sitting behind me at a late-night puppet show and periodically passing me some delectable mutton sandwiches she had made from dinner leftovers.

Many years passed and I would meet her briefly, from time to time. I always wondered if I should spend a summer with her sometime and learn how to stitch my own clothes, make many of the delicacies that I had enjoyed eating at her house, and just watch her effortlessly creating mango motifs and other beautiful art. But it never happened.

There now is a mango tree outside my bedroom window. Sometimes, in the early afternoon, when the light is yellow gold and its dark green leaves rustle gently in the breeze, I think of her, and send her love and happiness.

Wishing you many happy birthdays ahead, Kalpana Aunty!

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