

## **In Remembrance:**

### **Kailash Puri**

**(1925-2017)**

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Punjabi writer and “agony aunt” Kailash Puri, passed away peacefully at Ealing Hospital (London) on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2017, after a short illness. Her *gutka* [Sikh devotional book] was in her hand and the names of the Gurus were on her lips.

Kailash was born in 1925 in Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan) and she spent much of her childhood there and in Lahore as well as in her father’s ancestral home, the much smaller town of Kallar. She remembered vividly the rhythms of local life, the seasons and festivals, and she treasured memories associated with a much-revered local dignitary, a descendant of Sikhs’ first Guru. Her Sikh faith gave her inspiration and solace throughout her life.

In 1943 Kailash married an outstanding and unconventional young scientist, Gopal Singh Puri. He was awarded a Government of India research fellowship in London, and so in 1945 she came by ship to Liverpool to join him. Indians were few in London and she recalled being asked if she was a princess. By the time the Puris returned to the UK in 1966 substantial post-war migration meant that Punjabis were no longer a rarity and they experienced some more negative reactions. In the intervening two decades Gopal Puri had been appointed to academic posts in India (Dehra Dun, Pune and Allahabad) and in West Africa (Ibadan and Kumasi). Kailash loved to tell stories of her life in Nigeria and Ghana as well as from her extensive travels and encounters with famous people.

Kailash and Gopal’s son, Shammy (Dr. Shaminder Puri) was born in London in 1947 and their daughters, Kiran and Risham, were born in India. As a young mother, and with her husband’s encouragement, she began publishing articles on cookery and husband-wife relationships and she went on to launch a Punjabi-language women’s weekly, *Subhagvati*. Tackling as she did such (then) controversial subjects as birth control, Kailash scandalized some readers who sent her abusive letters. She also began publishing short stories.

On their return to England in 1966, the Puri family lived in Slough and Southall. Until Gopal was appointed to a post in Liverpool, Kailash found work,

initially in factories, then in Harrow Land Registry. She also began teaching oral Punjabi (to police and other professionals whose work now required it) and she gave cookery classes. In Liverpool she was a founder member of the Community Relations Council and often gave talks—for instance on multicultural Britain. She produced and distributed a new Punjabi magazine, *Roopvati*, as well as writing regular features on sexual matters for the Punjabi monthly, *Kaumi Ekta* (Communal Unity). In these articles and in her ten books on sex she developed a clean vocabulary, avoiding the bawdy words of Punjabis' oaths and jests. As a result of publishing *Highlights of Indian Cookery* she was delighted at being appointed by Marks and Spencer as a consultant on Indian cuisine for their pioneering production of ready Indian meals.

Kailash was best known as an agony aunt, the “shoulder to cry on,” as she put it. Callers who had found her name in the Punjabi press would contact her from India, Canada, California, Germany and other European countries. Domestic violence, alcoholism, impotence, adultery, gambling, relations between mothers-and daughters-in-law, dowry demands, arranged marriage, husbands neglecting their wives and children to spend their money on themselves: these and many other aspects of family life recurred in her postbag. She perceptively answered each person pragmatically, firmly and sympathetically.

In the 1980's Kailash and I met in a group of Sikhs and Christians in Southall. She requested me to work with her on the manuscript of her English-language autobiography, published as *Pool of Life*, [Sussex Academic Press 2013]. As Kailash's and Gopal's guest in Liverpool I learned more and more of her extraordinary life. In 1982, among many other honors, she received the Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid literary award.

Professor Gopal Singh Puri predeceased her in 1995 and she came to live in Ealing. She continued to take an active interest in her family, local community and current affairs for as long as failing health allowed. In 1999 the Mayor of Ealing recognized her contribution with a Millennium Woman Award.

She will be fondly remembered for her friendship, sympathy, humor and wisdom. She is survived by her son, two daughters, eight grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Eleanor Nesbitt