

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.

Suffern, New York, July 24,2023

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Best of Raj Begum



Raj Begum in 2011 (at 84)

Raj Begum continues to have a special aura among the singers of Kashmir.

It is because she had a high-pitch, deep-drilling, haunting voice, that

touches the timeless and sorrowful plateau of a listener's psyche. Sorrow,

more than joy, touches the deepest chords of human soul. There were and are other good singers but none has the sorrowful, almost mournful voice that Raj Begum had.

Those of you have read my article Meeting Raj Begum know that I was able to get thirty songs of Raj Begum in 1988 with considerable difficulty, as they were not available commercially. I pleaded with Director of Radio Kashmir in 2011 to release them to public as they were a public treasure but that was not of any avail. Raj Begum's songs started coming on YouTube just a few years ago, but they are only few.

In early 90's I released a few of Raj Begum's songs to KP Network, if that is the correct name. Now I have decided to release twenty-one of the thirty-one songs of Raj Begum that I possess. It is being done through Google Drive. But that only creates listings alphabetically and not according to the desired order in which its author would like to publish them, according to the quality of the songs.

In my, and that of the many Kashmiri music professionals' estimation, following are the six greatest songs sung by Raj Begum:

1. subh phul bulbulav tul shore-googa
2. vaisey gulon aavuy bahar

3. kya kya wanay dost che
4. rum ghayam sheeshas byegur gov bane myon
5. kyah roze pardan chaaye chaaye soze-jigar myon
6. wal az vaisey dokh mashravith sheraw loluk bagh (duet)

I am sorry that I do not have “ kyah roze pardon chaay chaaye soze-jigar myon” song. The “rum ghayam sheeshas” song has been obtained through Youtube, it is given after the Google Drive listing.

As stated earlier, as the Google Drive listing is not according to the merit of the song, therefore, I am suggesting that the listeners use the following hierarchy:

1. subh phul bulbulav tul shore-googa This I consider to be her best song.
2. vaisey gulon aavuy bahar
3. kya kya wanay dost che
4. wala wav katha boz
5. marimund yaro
6. wal az vyasey dokh such mashrith
7. may ravum rath doh aram
8. mushrav thus janan
9. kan thuv agar choy hosh
10. rang phatney meney jawane

The rest of the songs can be heard in any order.

The Google Drive Listing link is the following:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1zhf4BYwcW5SH-s-x1iNH01ovi9vYdCcj?usp=sharing>

Rum Ghayam Sheeshas begur gav baana myon:

<https://youtu.be/IyNrYhQfz0g>

Suffern, New York, Feb. 27, 2021

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**Neerja Pandit : An Elite Artist of
Today : Tomorrow's Legendary**



Introduction

Neerja Pandit has been an established professional singer for more than thirty years. Originally a Kashmiri music singer, she grew out of that boundary some twenty-five years ago, embellishing herself as a playback singer in Indian Hindi films and T.V. as well as a live singer.

She was born in Pampore, Kashmir, the land of the mystically beautiful saffron flower. She discovered her musical soul in Kashmir and went through its initiation process, maturing into a brilliant Kashmiri singer. Later, the drama of her life took her to Bombay, where she developed into a fine Hindi films and TV singer. She remains independently an excellent singer in both the genres. But her musical soul still remains unitary.

I believe her decision to broaden out of Kashmiri music was well thought, as Kashmiri culture is in sharp decline due to political conditions in Kashmir and the Kashmiri Pandit diaspora out of India. No other Kashmiri singer has as successfully developed a niche in popular Hindi music as she has. But one can see her tug for the Kashmiri music, as she keeps on singing it in Indian and foreign cities, and keeps on producing new albums in it regularly.

She has sung for the following Hindi films and TV programs:

Films: Hindi

- Traffic Signal (2007)
- Sheen (2004)
- Indian Babu (2003)
- Yeh Dil (2003)
- Khoobsurat (1999)

Films: Regional

- Chatrapati- M.M. Kreem (Telugu)
 - Piya Piya Bole Jiya (Bhojpuri)
 - O ji re Diwana (Rajasthani)
 - Mata Rani Bhatiyani (Rajasthani)
 - Nakoda Bhairav (Rajasthani)
-

Television

- Mukkammal (Sahara One)
- Filmi Chakkar (Zee TV)
- Mast Mast Hain Zindagi (Zee TV)
- Tere Mere Sapne (Zee TV), Rapa Awards
- Sarhad (Alfa Punjabi), Rapa Awards
- Shapath (Zee TV)
- Noorjehan (DD National)
- Gul Gulshan Gulfam (DD National)
- Hanste Khelte (Zee TV)
- Chahat Nafrat (Zee TV)
- Ehsaas (Doordarshan)
- Naagin (Zee TV)
- Specials@10 : Heroine-Zindagi Ke Panno Se (Sony)- 12 FILMS
- Maharaja Ranjit Singh (DD National)

Devotional Albums

- Durga Kavach with Gundecha Brothers
- Sant Sarovar with Udit Narayan, Suresh Wadkar
- Jo Bolo Hanuman
- Jai Ram Ji Ki

She has recorded major Bolywood remixes with Venus.

Following have been the music directors she has been associated with:

Lalit Sen

Raju Singh

Nadeem Shravan

M.M. Kreem

Roop Kumar Rathod

Shamir Tandon

And others

Neerja Pandit has been singing abroad in countries like U.S., U.K., Canada, Dubai, Mauritius, Nepal, and Dubai. She has been active within India. In live concerts she has performed with Abhijeet, Jatin-Latin, Nadeem-Shravan, and Bappi Lahiri.

She has performed in shows along with major Bollywood playback singers and in a show featuring Amitabh Bachchan.

So if Neerja Pandit had not sung even one Kashmiri song, she would still be a very

famous singer.

Musical Soul

Neerja Pandit has discipline, resolve, style, and intensity - almost everything an artist could want. But singing is somewhat more difficult than other arts as the demand on the artist's soul is greater, in the sense that singers feel closer to their hearts - or it seems so. A singer sings as if it is the last song of his life - so goes broke for it. This is sheer emotionalism on one face of the coin, but it is the *modus operandi* on the other.

Neerjaji has faith in sticking to the classical principles of singing: sticking to the meter, rhythm, and composition. She is able to freeze whatever temptations she might have to make changes to the script. This is not mere discipline but a religion transcending excitement, trend, and popularity.

Her voice is smooth, modulating easily to highs and lows, strong, and yet sensitive. Kashmiri music has basically three genres: traditional, folk, and *sufiana*. She is very good in all of them.

Her albums, *Chehma Be Wanday*, *Yaadvotar*, *Patram Pushpam*, *Rashvaer*, and *Kong Vaer* contain some of the greatest Kashmiri songs - which challenge every Kashmiri singer to sing them well enough to graduate into the elite group of singers. Neerjaji graduates excellently. We know well that she is competing against some of the greatest Kashmiri singers: Raj Begum, Kailash Mehra, Shameema Dev Azad, and others.

But Neerjaji is not limited to the classic compositions, she has sung songs which break new ground in singing and compositions. In one her new albums, *Mukhtahaar*, the song, *Maaj Che Akher Maaji Asaan* and *Baha Chusay Khan Maj*

Koor are of that genre. All the songs of the album are of high quality - among the best of Neerjaji.

Where does the musical soul come from? It comes from God and nowhere else. Singers are born so, rest of their lives they expand and refine their music by *riyaaz* and inspirations. Following interview between Neerjaji and me gives a peep into her musical soul:

Note: MK stands for Maharaj Kaul and NP stands for Neerja Pandit

Interview

MK: When did you realize that you had a good ability to sing?

NP: Back in school when I used to participate in music competitions and other cultural events, I was appreciated for my singing. My teachers motivated and encouraged me to take up music training, which further boosted my confidence.

MK: What were the inspirations for your musical soul to grow?

NP: My mother and grandmother both have been blessed with singing talent. You can say music runs in our family blood. As a kid I would observe my mother sing at our family weddings and sing along, picked up my love for Kashmiri folk music from her. During my school years I would also listen to artists like Shameema Dev, Kailash Mehra Sadhu, Arti Tiku Kaul, Vijay Malla on radio and aspire to sing on radio someday. My main inclination towards Kashmiri folk music has always been because of my attachment to our roots and rich heritage.

MK: Did you first start singing in Kashmiri then moving on to Hindustani?

NP: Up until my school years, it was mainly Kashmiri. During my college years I took up music as a subject and started learning Hindustani classical from my Guru Pt. Shambhoo Nath Sopori Ji.

MK: Who were your music teachers?

NP: I have been blessed with the finest of gurus during different phases of my life so far. Namely: Shri Bhushan Lal Kaul Ji, Pt Shambhoo Nath Sopori, Padma Shri Pt. Bhajan Sopori (Santoor maestro), Shri. Shambhoo Sen, Shri, Dhruva Ghosh (Grammy award winner Sarangi maestro), Ustad Akhtar Azad Ji, Mrs. Kailash Mehra Sadhu and Mrs. Jaijawanti Parimoo.

MK: Do you find learning Hindustani classical music is a requirement for the quality of your singing?

NP: Yes, absolutely. Classical training is a must.

MK: What is music to you?

NP: Music is like praying for me. It is an integral part of my life. How food is for my body, music is for my soul. Can't imagine my life without it.

MK: How much of an inspiration or practice is required to maintain the quality of your music?

NP: One can't really measure it. More the *riyaaz*, the better it is. There is always so much to discover and learn, it's a never ending process.

MK: Has being a singer created social problems for you? How did your family react when you decided to be one?

NP: Not at all. I have been extremely blessed to have had two wonderful set of families (the one I was born in and the one I married into) who have always supported my love and passion for music.

MK: How much time do you spend being a Kashmiri singer and how much time being a Hindi TV and films singer?

NP: There is no time division as such. It's music at the end of the day.

MK: Who do you think are the greatest Kashmiri singers, both among dead and alive?

NP: The list is endless but to name a few great ones:

Late Raj Begum Ji

Smt. Shameema Dev Azad

Late. Ghulam Hassan Sofi Sahib

Late. Ghulam Nabi Sheikh Sahib

Smt. Arti Tiku Kaul

Smt. Kailash Mehra Sadhu

Late. Shri Vijay Malla

MK: Who are the best Kashmiri poets and composers and why?

NP:

Composers:

Pt. Bhajan Sopori: He revolutionized Kashmiri folk music with his tremendous contribution, we being the younger generation could relate to it and loved his kind of compositions.

Late. Nasarullah Khan Sahab: His *ghazals* had a certain folk flavor to them, which I personally liked a lot.

Shri T.K. Jalali: He combined the classical touch with the folk in the music that he created. I liked that kind of blend.

Poets:

I have always been inclined towards Sufi music, naming a few best:

Shamas Faqir

Lalleshwari

Ahad Zargar

Mehmood Gami

Rasool Mir

All of the above mentioned names had a Sufi and philosophical way of poetry. I was always inclined towards that style and it deeply influenced me. They live on till today with their historic work of writing.

MK: Give me a timeline of your musical biography?

NP:

- In my growing years: Observing my mother and grandmother's love for music inspired me. Also, heard popular singers on radio in Kashmir, aspired to become a Kashmiri singer.

- Joined college and took up music as a subject. Started singing professionally on All India Radio Kashmir and Doordarshan, Srinagar. Was deeply encouraged by Bhajan Sopori Ji, sang mostly his compositions. My confidence as a singer built there on.

- Masters in Indian classical music from Chandigarh (Punjab University), under the guidance of Shri. Shamboo Nath Sopori Ji (who we fondly addressed as Masterji)

- After marriage I shifted to Mumbai in 1988, was fortunate to be married to Ashoke Ji, who is also a part of the film industry. He was always very supportive through my professional journey.

- In Mumbai I continued my classical music training with Shri. Dhruva Ghosh Ji.

- Alongside sang for TV serial title tracks, background songs, ad jingles, live plays/ dramas (theater) with different music directors.

- Started doing live stage shows (In India as well as abroad). Mainly *ghazal*, *sufi*, *bhajan* and film songs. Performed for Kashmiri Pandit communities at the Kashmiri association cultural events in India and abroad.

- Playback singing in feature films with Nadeem-Shravan, Dilip Sen-Sameer Sen, Jatin- Lalit.

- Albums: First Kashmiri album composed by Bhajan Sopori Ji: *Chashma Bu Vandaye* . Followed by many other Hindi devotional and Kashmiri folk albums.

Kashmiri Music Albums:

1. Chashme Bu Vanday (composer: Bhajan Sopori, songs: Bhagayani)
2. Yadavtur (composer: Nassarullah Khan)
3. Patram Pushpam
4. Reshvaer
5. Kong Vaer (a tribute to music legends of Kashmir)
6. Vilzaar
7. Sangarmaal
8. Ruhaniyat
9. Mokhthaar

Summing Up:

Neerja Pandit has unique musical talents and a personality that caters to it. Starting as a Kashmiri singer she has branched into Hindi films and TV shows in a big way. Her musical soul is disciplined and she can create variety. Considering that she has just turned fifty, she has some thirty more years of singing ahead of her. She is a consummate artist now, what will she be like a few years from now?

Like a finely fermented wine, she will only become richer by time.

Suffern, New York, February 19, 2017

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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.

Legend Of Raj Begum

There have been many excellent Kashmiri singers before Raj Begum and there will come many excellent singers after her, but her unique singing style will remain legendary and continue to warm our hearts forever.

The following songs of Raj Begum have entered the folklore of Kashmir:

1. Subh phul bulbulav tul shore-googa
2. Vyasiye gulan aavuy bahar
3. Rum ghyam sheeshas byegur gav bane myon
4. Wal az vyasiye dokh sukh mashrith sheraw loluk bagh
5. Kyo roze purdan chaaye chaaye soze-jigar myon
6. Wola wav wanay soz
7. Kya kya wanay aye dost chey

The reason why these songs have become part of the folk-lore is not only due to the quality of their lyrics but also quite a bit due to the way they were sung. Raj Begum has a deep haunting voice, which pierces the heart of sorrow. And sorrow is the heart of human condition: sad songs are more remembered than the happy songs.

Raj Begum was born at Magarbal Bagh in Srinagar on March 27, 1927. Her father was Ghulam Rasool Sheikh. Like most of the great singers she started singing in her childhood. As she grew up she sang in weddings. But as Naya Kashmir movement took root in Kashmir, for the first time in their long history common Kashmiri people started tasting freedom. With the freedom came the chance to express their pent-up emotions suppressed for so long. Radio Kashmir began to broadcast Kashmiri musical programs. In 1954, introduced by the well known folk singer Ghulam Qadir Langoo, Raj Begum started singing at Radio Kashmir. She attracted immediate attention because of the way she rendered songs in Gulrez. She went on to sing with Radio Kashmir until 1986.

Raj Begum has sung in many different genres: folk, religious, light, romantic, ghazals, etc. No one knows exactly how many songs she has sung, as in the beginning days of Radio Kashmir, there were no recordings made of the songs sung by singers, as it had no recording equipment. Singers sang live. Often no paper records were kept of the songs sung. Some people believe she has sung a few thousand songs.

Raj Begum, along with Naseem Akhtar, broke the cultural barrier of women singing publicly. Until when she joined Radio Kashmir in 1954, female singers would sing in a guarded manner, similar to their expected behavior in society. But Raj Begum's uninhibited, high-pitch, sonorous voice changed that. She sang from her heart, unmindful of cultural constraints. So, she ushered a new freedom for women in Kashmir.

It is the opinion of many professional singers and music watchers in Kashmir that Raj Begum is the greatest modern Kashmiri singer. What is most joyous to the music lovers is that she is still alive. Last year she sang 10 songs for me in an album called Songs From The Corners Of My Heart.

Like Dal Lake Raj Begum is a legendary symbol of Kashmir.

Suffern, New York, March 10, 2012

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Meeting Raj Begum







I took these photos of Raj Begum and others on Aug. 13, 2011, at a restaurant at Dal Gate, Srinagar, Kashmir. Following are the descriptions, from the top:

1: Raj Begum and me.

2,3,4: Raj Begum

5: Irshad Lone (Raj Begum's grandson), me, and Rehmatullah Khan (a friend of Raj Begum and me).

6: Rehmatullah Khan.

It was sometime in early 70s when I was paddling through the back waters of my life that I realized that I liked Raj Begum's singing very much. It was her deep drilling, haunting voice that captured my imagination. There were other good singers but none had the sorrowful, almost a mournful, and poignant voice that Raj Begum had.

I used to listen to her occasionally on radio when I lived in Kashmir, but now I wanted to listen to her extensively. But where to get her music, as it was not sold anywhere? So, I started the search for Raj Begum's music, which lasted over several years.

On my three different visits to India in 70s, I met different people in Srinagar, who I thought might help me obtain Raj Begum's music. In one of the trips I carried a bottle of Johnnie Walker whiskey from U.S. to be used as a bribe to get my goodies. But even that failed to do the job, as in all the cases I would be given a cassette of her music, which when played back home in New York, would deliver at the most one or two of her songs. I was frustrated and disheartened and was about to throw in my towel. But before I did so an idea flashed to me: why don't I write to my uncle, who until recently used to hold an I.G.P's position in the Jammu and Kashmir government. The rationale was that because of his high-level position his network of contacts ought to deliver the cat. I wrote to him in 1988 and lo and behold within two months I had a cassette filled with 93 minutes of songs of Raj Begum. I was ecstatic beyond ordinary experience; an inner joy seemed to glow through my mind.

At the heel of this stunning success, within a year a relative travelling from India on a business visit to New York met me. He worked for All India Radio, New Delhi, but previously had worked for Radio Kashmir, in Srinagar. I told him that by virtue of his connections with his previous posting, he ought to be able to get me more of Raj Begum's music for me, as obviously the great singer had sung many hundreds of songs. My relative felt challenged, especially because my uncle, who was his relative too, had an achievement to his credit in this field. My relative accepted the challenge and I handed him the highest quality cassette I could buy. But, in spite of his bravado to accept the challenge, I had doubts about his ability to deliver the goods; the reason being that he was a very busy bureaucrat. But a miracle did happen, as within six weeks I got another 80 minutes of songs of Raj Begum.

Now I possessed 2 hours and 45 minutes of songs of Raj Begum; so I was in the

company of a select group of lucky people. People measure their fortunes in money, but I measured it by the number of Raj Begum's songs that I possessed.

I made many copies of my booty and generously gave it away to my friends. But I realized that every Kashmiri should have access to all of Raj Begum's music, which was much more than 2 hours and 45 minutes of songs, but which was not available, because of a special situation. When Raj Begum started singing professionally, in mid-50s, only radio stations had recording equipment. Her best years of singing were spent working for Radio Kashmir, with the result that her entire music is only available through it. Having the mentality of a Government of India department, Radio Kashmir did not think it was their business to release a singer's music to public, even if the singer was of as high a caliber and legendary as Raj Begum was.

So, I launched a project to make Raj Begum's music accessible to people. I sought the help of my friend Kailash Mehra, a renowned Kashmiri singer. She approached a deputy director of Radio Kashmir about the project but met discouragement. I thought of getting the help of Farooq Abdullah, a former chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, and now a central government minister, who is an ardent lover and supporter of Kashmir music. But this also fizzled out due to practical difficulties.

In 2011 I had an awesome chance to speak to the director Radio Kashmir and meet Raj Begum, as I went on a trip to Kashmir in August. It looked like too good to be true. But I had to try to achieve both the items to the best of my abilities. Due to Kailash Mehra's help I met Rehmatullah Khan, a well-known singer and a senior artist of Radio Kashmir, and the son of the renowned music composer Nassarullah Khan. He arranged my meetings with Raj Begum and the director of Radio Kashmir.

I waited with an excited expectation and keen eagerness for Raj Begum's arrival for lunch outside Shamiyana restaurant, at Dal Gate, Srinagar, on August 13. Almost exactly at 2:00 P.M. she arrived in an auto-rickshaw. She stepped out of

the auto with measured though delicate steps. I approached her with joyful trepidation. She waited for me to come to her and though standing toward me she seemed to be looking at nothing. She was of small build, slim, and composed. Her face was age-beaten but poised. She seemed to have seen a million tragedies but having refused to be blown off the ground. A patina of time skinned her face. With a torrent of thoughts gushing through me I just managed to greet her. She reciprocated with a dignified movement of her body. A young man escorting her I was later told was her grandson Irshad Lone. Soon Rehmatullah Khann joined us. Getting into the restaurant we were told, in a comic turn of the event, that it was closed for the afternoon due to some reason.

We went to another restaurant at Dal Gate, just a half-mile away. We started talking about the old times, 50s and 60s. Raj Begum recited many names in the music world of that era. When I asked her if Farooq Abdullah was an ardent lover of Kashmiri music, she replied that Bakshi Gulam Mohammed was much more so. Soon Rehmatullah told her that it would be a good idea for her to record some songs for me. I was taken aback by it as I had never thought of that. To my utter surprise she excitedly agreed to it. Now Rehmatullah started discussing with her which should be the ten songs she would sing. At this a burst of enthusiasm took hold of her. She started humming lines of songs. The meeting lasted an hour.

The first day of recording was set for August 19 at Zee Studio, At Residency Road. She was escorted this time by her son Mohammad Ramzan. Rehmatullah and she started going through the motions of setting up the tunes of the songs. She sang in a deliberate, though practiced, manner. Her song-laden voice came from deep within her, her hand-gesturing only giving it an after-delivery confirmation. Her delivery was smooth, without an apparent effort. She seemed not to need much musical instrument support for her singing. Here I was seeing the performance of the greatest Kashmiri singer that I knew of. It was an ecstatically dramatic moment for me. What more did I want in life, I thought?

During the recording break I engaged her in a conversation. I asked her at what age did she tell her family that she was going to be a professional singer. She told

me that it was 21. I asked her this question because in the days of her youth singing was considered to be a low-level profession, more so for women, who would be taken to be of low moral caliber. I further asked her what difficulties she faced in the society because of her profession. She told me that her husband forbade her to sing publically. But after a show of rage about it he let her sing. She also told me that the renowned ghazal singer Begum Akhtar told her to switch to ghazal singing.

Further conversation with her elicited that though she had been bestowed a thousand awards but was hardly rewarded monetarily. I learned furthermore from other sources that she was poor, as the sole source of her income before her retirement had been the Radio Kashmir salary, which is so meager that it is a cruel joke. Here we have the greatest singer of Kashmir having difficulty making two ends meet. In Kashmir artists do not amount to much in public estimation. They cannot make a living on their artistic work. Any nation that does not value its artists is a backward nation, as art uplifts the human soul equal in caliber to religion.

At the end of the first recording session she told me that she was going to resume her daily riyaz. Obviously, meeting an ardent admirer of hers and recording her songs after an absence of some six years she was exultant, which gave a boost to her musical soul.

Next in line for me was to meet the director of Radio Kashmir Mr. Javed Iqbal. I explained to him why recordings of Raj Begum had to be made available to the public because (a) they were not available commercially and (b) because she was an outstanding artist, whose work brought joy to Kashmiris, especially the ones living in the countries far away from India, who would get home-sick easily. I told the director that the recordings should be released to me, so that I could inform the world-wide Kashmiri community of their availability, a task I presumed Radio Kashmir would not like to do itself. Any proceeds from the distribution of her music would be given to Radio Kashmir. In fact, I suggested that they should be rather given to Raj Begum, in light of her strained economic conditions. In case

Radio Kashmir did not want to give me the recordings, they should make them available on a website. I told the director that diffusion and continuation of Kashmiri music such as Raj Begum's songs must be a mission for Radio Kashmir, which is a preservation of the best of Kashmiri culture. He seemed to understand my points very well, and in that direction asked me to give him a letter stating my case. Which was eminently understandable to me in light of Indian government's bureaucracy's deep penchant for paperwork. Two days later the memorandum was delivered to him. Weeks melted into months, there was no response. At one point Rehmatullah indicated to me that based on some brief conversation he had with the director it seemed that the matter would be decided in my favor. But this good news did not convert to an official decision. When my friend again inquired about it, the director told him that he had already "released" Raj Begum's previously recorded music, and since she did not professionally sing anymore he did not have to release anything. This statement was incomprehensible to me because if Raj Begum's music had been released to the public, why wasn't it available anywhere? It was an absurd statement made just to get out of the trap he found himself in. He didn't have the decency to even reply to my letter. What killed my project was sheer Indian bureaucratic arrogance. So, Raj Begum's music lies buried in the Radio Kashmir archives forever. So much love Kashmiris have for the arts and artists.

The second session of the recording on August 22 for the CD dedicated to me had to be cancelled on account of Raj Begum's sickness. On August 23 I had to return to Delhi. Later on the recording was completed and the CD is now in its cover design stage. I have called the CD Songs From The Corners Of My Heart.

Raj Begum was born in a poor family of Magarbal Bagh, Srinagar, on March 27, 1927. Her father was Ghulam Rasool Sheikh. Like most of the great singers she started singing in her childhood. As she grew up she sang in marriage parties. It is only later in her life she received some formal training in singing, which came from the established musicians like Ustad Jhandee Khan, Ustad Muhammad Abdullah Tibetbakal, Ustad Muhammad Qaleenbaaf, and others.

Raj Begum was introduced to Radio Kashmir, Srinagar by the well-known folk singer Ghulam Qadir Langoo. She started her career there on July 16, 1954. Her unique voice and delivery of songs drew the attention of music lovers right away, especially her rendering of the famous love tale Gulrez. She went on to sing at Radio Kashmir till 1986.

She has sung in most of the genres of singing: folk, religious, ghazals, romantic, light, etc. It is difficult to estimate the number of songs she has sung as in the early days of Radio Kashmir it did not have recording equipment; a singer sang live. Often no paper records were kept. Some people familiar with the Kashmiri music scene estimate that she has sung a few thousand songs. Besides my estimation of Raj Begum to be the greatest Kashmiri singer of the modern times, it is also the popular opinion. The following songs of her have entered the Kashmiri folklore:

- Vyasiye gulan aavuy bahar
- Subuh phul bulbulav tul shore-googa
- Rum ghayam sheeshas byegur gov baane myon
- Wal az vyasiye dokh sukh mashrith sheraw loluk bagh
- Kyah roze pardan chaaye chaaye soze-jigar myon

She had the courage to break the social stigma of women singing in public, when she along with another great Kashmiri singer Naseem Akhtar, went to sing for Radio Kashmir. She was married to Qadir Ganderbali, who was a D.I.G. Police with the Jammu And Kashmir State when he passed away several years ago. She lives at Channapora, Srinagar.

Some of the notable awards she has won:

- Sadiq Memorial Award

- Robe Of Honor from Jammu And Kashmir Academy Of Art, Culture, And Languages
- Gold Medal For Best Concert In Kashmiri Folk Music by Jammu And Kashmir State
- Silver Shield by Kala Kendra
- Bakshi Memorial Committee award
- Certificate Of Excellence from Prasar Bharti (1999)
- Government Of Madhya Pradesh State Award (2004)
- Jammu And Kashmir State Excellence In Folk Music (2008)
- Jammu and Kashmir State Cultural Award Winner (Golden Jubilee, 2009)

- . Sangeet Natak Academy Award
- Padma Shri (2002)

Since returning to New York I have been regularly in touch with her either directly or through her family members. She recently underwent a gall bladder removal surgery and seems to be recuperating well. Next year when I return to Kashmir I plan to meet her again, as she is as precious to me as Dal Lake is.

Suffern, New York, November 30, 2011; Rev. December 18, 2011; Rev: 2.21.21
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The Queen Of Kashmiri Melodies Transports Us To Our Roots

Kailash Mehra Sadhu's 2009 Concert Tour Of America

Maharaj Kaul

The queen Of Kashmiri melodies came like a refluant breeze out of the blue and soothed out Kashmiri expatriates' hurt feelings over their separation from their roots for long. Like a goddess she sprinkled some holy water of music on her children and they were transported back to their enchanted land as if they had never left it. Most of the people listening to her will continue to stay in Kashmir in their minds for a while, as paradises are hard to leave. The queen is back in India but neither the still enraptured people here nor she herself know how she wove the magic in her just four weeks long concert tour here.

She sailed the deep azure skies,
Responding as if to a divine invitation.
Her melodious, tranquil voice
Transported us to Kashmir that is no more.
Our ecstasies were wrapped in haunting sorrow.

Sometimes good fortune smiles on us unexpectedly, as Kailashji's concert tour news came to the Kashmiri Pandits in U.S. suddenly, just about a month before her arrival here. It could be that its organizers were planning it for much longer. She had had concert tours in 2003 and 2006. Each of those were overall successes, as the audiences by listening to the famous melodies of Kashmir touched the hallowed ground of their origin and as Kailashji delivered her art in opulent sophistication. It is the totality of her personality: artistry, humility, and communication that enchant her audiences and long after she is out of their sights her songs reverberate in their beings.

The making of her artistic personality is the more striking when we come to know that she was not born a Kashmiri. Her parents were Punjabis and came from Sailkot, now in Pakistan. She was born in Nainital, India. They migrated to Kashmir when she was about five. Like all great singers she was born one. Her first public singing occurred when she was eight. She became a professional singer at the age of sixteen when she joined Radio Kashmir, Srinagar. In her

thirty-six years of singing she has sung several thousand songs, recorded in numerous cassettes and CD's. Besides Radio she has also sung on TV and in movies. She has sung in about a dozen Indian languages. By her deep immersion in Kashmiri folk and devotional music she had to touch the terrains of Kashmiri history, culture, and geography. In the process she has become more Kashmiri than many Kashmiris.

The present tour of Kailashji was produced by the organizers of The 2nd KP National Camp to have her concert in the Lake Tahoe Camp on the third and fourth of July. The theme of the camp was, Connect To Kashmir, which was especially focused on the KP youth. It emanated from the KP's feelings of sorrow from separation from Kashmir, physically, culturally, and symbolically. The practical loss of Kashmir has been an irretrievable dagger thrust in their hearts. The majestic setting of Lake Tahoe was in synch with the natural grandeur of Kashmir and the unity of the universe Kashmiri Shaivism envisions. Kailashji sang many of the haunting, touching, and exciting melodies of Kashmir. The magic of Kashmir seemed to re-permeate through the audience. The performance lasted two and a half hours on the first day. The following day she added ghazals to her continuation of the Kashmiri songs. The more than two hundred concert attendees, who came across America and Canada, did not want the spell to break. See the link below for the event excerpt.

This was followed by a concert in Sacramento, CA, on July 11th, where she sang Hindi songs besides Kashmiri songs. After that she had a concert in Los Angeles, CA, on July 31st, which was attended by one hundred fifty people. This ended the California chapter of the concert tour.

Florida phase of the tour, organized by Florida Kashmiri Group, had a significant break from her regular concert content. She held two concerts there exclusively singing devotional songs. This repertoire was not given by the artist before anywhere. In the first one, at Davie, on July 31st, a Mata Chowki and Bhakti Sangam function, two hundred and fifty people who pray at South Florida Hindu Temple came to listen to her there. The second devotional music concert, held in

the same temple, on August 2nd, was on chanting and bhajans, attended by four hundred regular temple devotees, as a replacement for their Sunday Puja. In both the events listeners were enthralled by the music and wanted Kailashji to continue singing. She was herself inspired by them and said she had always wanted to do them. Here some self discovery took place. I have asked her to produce her first devotional CD, which she has agreed to do. I believe she should create her website to the benefit of her listeners.

On August 1st, in Maimi, a concert called "Palm Kulne Tal" (imitating the title, Glass Kulne Tal, of one of Kailashji most popular songs), was held at Dr. Shaykher Pandita's residence, which was attended by about a hundred KPs. Traditional Kashmiri songs and ghazals were sung.

Even though this tour of Kailashji was shorter than the previous two but it was effective. Beyond the evocation of the past it reignited KP's ardor for the preservation of their culture. The leading international and Indian media (Wall Street Journal, India Today, The Economic Times, The Hindu, ITV News, Yahoo India News, etc.) reported the Lake Tahoe concert event. (see the link below) There is no KP community in the world which has the same fire in its belly to reconstitute its ethos as KP community of America. It has translated that also in the practical terms of helping the very ill refugees and the refugee children and youth in their education. We had an additional value added to this tour by the accompaniment of Kailashji's husband, Vijaykumar.

I have been working on a Kashmiri music project with Kailashji for sometime. This is on Kashmir's greatest singer in the modern times, Raj Begum. Her strong, lean, and haunting voice penetrates the mind and heart, evocating sorrow and loneliness. Listening to her one feels she does not need music to embellish her singing. Kailashji recognizes Raj Begam's high caliber. She has known her personally when they worked together. Raj Begam is now past eighty and does not sing publicly any more. No commercial recordings were made of her music outside of Radio Kashmir, Srinagar. With the result music lovers can not listen to her now beyond a song or two available in collections. The project calls for

Kailashji, by virtue of her name recognition, to approach All India Radio, Srinagar (which was previously called Radio Kashmir) authorities and urge them to transfer Raj Begam's music from the existing reel to reel tapes to CDs, which will be sold. Any profits accrued by that will be given to Radio or, if acceptable to them, donated. This is the preservation and dissemination of our culture. (A sampling of Raj Begam's songs is at www.radiokashmir.org) The second project that I have discussed with Kailashji is to collect all the available unrecorded Kashmiri folk music and select out of it the pieces worthy of recording. This will again be an act of preservation and dissemination of our culture.

The tour's success lay not only in the artistry and the personality of Kailashji but also in the inspiration and perspiration of its organizers and workers. Besides the organizing team many individuals and families contributed to it. It was like staging two dozen old style Kashmiri weddings at the same time.

Kailashji has come and gone and those who listened to her are not the same. A change has occurred in their hearts and minds. In our dying culture she has become a unifier of our community, a preserver of our artistic heritage, a messenger from our deep past. We salute her musical talent, we are inspired by her human sensitivity. We are fortunate that she is still young and therefore should enchant us for many years to come.

I want to thank Deepakji Ganju of Miami, Fl. for providing the information on the concerts and on the following three links.

Maharaj Kaul
Suffern, New York
Aug.8, 2009

Video Links:

Please see at the end of the page at: <http://www.shehjar.com/list/96/902/1.html> for links to media reports on Kailashji's visit.

Camp video overview with Kailashji's short clippings at: <http://www.shehjar.com/list/96/896/1.html>

3. Her Popular Hindi Ghazal "Aj Jane Ki Jidd Na Karo" at: <http://www.shehjar.com/list/96/911/1.html>

The Introduction To The Second Volume Of Poozai-Posh

Kashmir Overseas Association, U.S.A. presents the second volume of Poozai - Posh, a collection of Kashmiri Pandit religious songs, hymns, and devotional verses.

Spiritualism is an attempt to free human beings from the fetters of their flesh and the shackles of the world, to transcend to the states of beauty, joy, and freedom. This is the highest religion, this the deepest wisdom.

Kashmiri Pandits, scattered now round the world, after a barbaric destruction of their society and security, roots and religious milieu, homes and heritage, by the ongoing political war in their motherland Kashmir, need the spiritual lift of these songs more than ever. They may destroy Kashmiri Pandits' physical lives but they can not break their spiritual spine.

These songs devoted to praise of God, love of man, and brotherhood of mankind will remain forever elements of Kashmiri Pandit spirit, wherever he or she is.

The Lata Mangeshkar Of Kashmir Sings In New York

When it was all over after four hours of singing, Kailash Mehra's concert was giddy, dazzling, and enchanting - transporting us to old Kashmir of our forefathers and our childhoods, which lies now forlornly dead.

The power of Kailash Mehra's singing lies in its enormous range, texture, variety, and nuance. She is truly Kashmir's Lata Mangeshkar. Though of a small build Kailash Ji can produce a voice that is booming and towering, if the song demands it be so. Just by listening to one concert of hers one gets an idea of her long immersion in music - training as well as experience. She sang the immortal folk songs, popular songs, and meditative songs. She even threw a couple of ghazals, showing us that she could have had the whole concert in that genre of singing. But it were the folk songs that drilled through our hearts by their universality, simplicity, and haunting melody.

How is that this lady who was born in U.P. in a Punjabi family has come to become a doyen of Kashmiri singing. Her family came from Sailkot (now in Pakistan) and when she was just in single-digit years of age it moved to Kashmir. She grew up, went to school and college there. She stayed in Kashmir till 1989 when the war broke, forcing her to move to Jammu. To be as accomplished a singer as Kailash Ji is, a person has to be very gifted. Singing at higher levels is not just being endowed with a good singing apparatus and having a good training but it takes a keenness of mind to feel the nuances of the culture a singer is singing in. To be able to sing the folk songs of Kashmir the way Kailash Ji sings, she had to absorb Kashmiri culture. Getting to know her while she was staying with us, I could see the depth of her penetration in Kashmiri culture. Also I came to see the other aspects of her personality. She has the sense and the sensibility of an artist. Her sensitivity to people, her sentimentality, her connection with the

distant past, and her awe for the established outstanding singers and singing in general was quite apparent. She has been singing for some four decades, since she was a child. (singers are most generally discovered while they are children) She is a living legend in Jammu and Kashmir and yet she carries herself in awesome and magical humility. I was touched by her humanness, easy affability, and humility. To have crossed from her birth-culture to another culture and excelled so well in it is itself a sign of originality and force of personality.

Kailash Mehra Sadhu's concert in Tri-state area (New York, Connecticut, New Jersey) and northern Pennsylvania was held in Clarkstown Senior High School, West Nyack, New York under the auspices of K.O.A.. It was the only place where an auditorium was used for her concert in her U.S. tour. (I do not know what kind of hall was used in Toronto, Canada concert). The acoustics of the auditorium accompanied by the sound system provided by Kalpesh Patel created an exceedingly pleasing musical environment. To this if we add the superb tabla playing by Dharmendar Tapodhan (this was the opinion of Kailash Ji) and excellent synthesizer playing by Vijoo Jacob, a music listener's dream came true. Kailash Ji was ecstatic about these physical attributes of her concert. We had an almost four hours of undiluted and unvarnished experience of a sublime and superb singing. Kailash Ji's performance was smooth, polished, versatile, and deliberate. The choice of her songs filled an entire gamut of Kashmiri culture, from folk to bjaans. She generously catered to a long string of farmish.

The concert ended with a session of thank-you's and the award of a plaque from K.O.A. president Sanjay Kaul (who was on hand to assure that he took Kailash Ji the following day to perform in Boston Concert that day)

The sublimity of the concert was followed by a delicious Kashmiri dinner catered by Jewel Of India (Manager: Rattan Lal Koul)

Many of the ninety-three concert attendees at the end felt that \$40 apiece concert

admission was not a high price to pay for the quality of the evening they experienced.

Long after the concert's visible signs faded, its glow has lingered on in some attendee's minds. Here was this evening when with the magic of Kailash Mehra's singing they were immersed in a culture which has given us our identity and roots - two of the most powerful forces in a man's life. We are physically apart from Kashmir but the concert reminded us that actually Kashmir lives on silently in our hearts. Like an angel Kailash Ji came to liberate us from our fetters for a short time but this fleeting freedom seemed eternal while we were listening to her singing. She showed us that paradises are not always far away and out of our abilities to get them, they can be summoned by gifted people to enchant us, howsoever briefly.