

# 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)
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### **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 Bollywood 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. Nirjaji 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.

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