

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 bjjans. 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.