

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 Begum's high caliber. She has known her personally when they worked together. Raj Begum 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 Begum'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 Begum'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>