If a Swan Could Sing; Rita Sahai
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"My first singing memory? I was very young, maybe five years old," recalls Rita Sahai. "I was wearing a light blue dress and sang Madhur, madhur; murli bajai at a children's program celebrating Nehru's birthday in my father's college. It was evening. The sun was setting and I still remember the clapping. There was a lot of clapping." I could almost hear the applause myself as she reminisced this special moment during a wonderful interview at her Berkeley home perched over San Francisco Bay. "Built to accommodate music," she enjoyed telling me as we settled in the spacious living room. Fanning off on one side was the music room - her hermit-chamber where she soars and glides on swaras three hours every day. Her eyes lit up with pleasure as she told me that Ustaad Ali Akbar Khan, her mentor in America, had played in her house. "Khan has never performed in any other private home."

This North Indian songster grew up in India in a traditional Hindu home. She married and moved to California in 1975. Today she has a son Jaideep who plays tabla and a daughter Mala studying the sitar. She tenderly shared with me that her husband Raj has really supported her music. I could feel how much this has meant.

Like others in her royal artistic class, she trod the path of royal discipline - starting at age nine at the feet of master vocalist Pandit Rama Shankar Misra of the Benaras Gharana tradition. He was not her only light. Her home itself was the sun of a smallmusical solar system. "There was always singing going on in my family, either in concerts, for religious functions or pujas," she recalls. "My grandmother sang. Still, at 80, she is the leader of her bhajan group. Through my father's interest in music, I was able to meet many of the famous classical artists of the time." She took a degree in music, sang on radio and received the title of Sangeet Visharad from the Prayag Sangeet Samiti. After that, "My father insisted that I also study something practical so I did my master's degree in Sanskrit literature."

Today she teaches over 50 Indian youth in the Bay Area and performs often, her blissfully plaintive, swan-like voice stretching single notes into entire musical landscapes.

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Solo Path

RITA SAHAI INTERVIEW

Hinduism Today: Could you share a few special moments from your childhood?

Rita Sahai: I remember winning the All India Music Competition when I was 14 years old. Once I sang in front of 10,000 people in honor of the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. I also remember being asked to sing at a big occasion about 50 miles from my house. I was the only singer selected from our school. I came down with the mumps the night before and my parents refused to let me sing next morning. When my father told the principal of my school that I could not go, the principal said, "Our school's reputation depends on her. She has to go!" So my parents took me to the hospital, then to the concert. Of course I did sing.

HT: How did your move to America affect you?

Rita Sahai: When I got married, I knew I would be living in America. I heard that Pandit Ravi Shankar was teaching in California. I was looking for Panditji's school and instead found the Ali Akbar College of Music! Khan Sahib asked me to join the college and each time I sang, he got more and more interested in my voice. It was Khan Sahib who, in 1983, suggested I make my first CD, Khayals and Bhajans.

HT: What took you so long?

Rita Sahai: I had been practicing very hard, about five hours per day in 1983. Then I had Jaideep and became, very busy in the house. Then about four and a half years ago I had two major auto accidents and injured my lower back so badly I could not sit erect on the floor without support. I was always in pain and depressed a lot of the time. Then last year I thought I couldn't just sit and cry about my career. I had to get ahead with my life. I was inspired by the Bharata Natyam dancer Sudha Chandran who lost her leg in a bus accident but today continues to dance with a false leg. Moreover, I had just received a grant from the California Arts Council and it presented the perfect opportunity to make the CD. Ali Akbar Khan Sahib even composed the music for my CD. Since Khayals and Bhajans, came out, it has been the most wonderful period in my life, like a dream. I feel I have finally done something with my life.

HT: What music do you most enjoy listening to?

Rita Sahai: Pandit Jasraj, Ustaad Amir Khan and especially Parveen Sultana, from whom I have drawn special inspiration. I also listen to Mozart and Beethoven. Actually I listen to all kinds of music. I turn the dial on the radio until I hear a voice I like. My daughter Mala has introduced me to a whole new genre of music like rap. Paula Abdul, Joni Mitchell and Joan Baez all have lovely voices.

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