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In 1982, 16-year-old Sheila Chandra layed down the vocals over a tabla and sitar track in a London studio for a song Ever So Lonely with her Indian pop group Monsoon. European radio stations picked up the single and it skyrocketed into the top ten hits. All of a sudden Chandra had record company cars picking her up and the glare of media lights in her life. "In fact my lifestyle didn't change that much," says Chandra, now 25, whose last three albums are titled Roots and Wings. Nada Brahma and Silk. "What a hit did do was set a stage for my career as a new comer. People associated me with a style I wanted to specialize in: Indian influenced pop music."

Monsoon disbanded and Sheila went solo, creating four albums in two years by 1985. She was 20-years-old, had just married studio producer Steve CEO, and needed time to "find myself as a person. I got married and went away from the music scene and moved up north." Here by the seaside, for nearly five years she researched more of her Hinduness, explored her voice - she has had no classical Hindu singing training or theory - and sought an emotional strength and purity that would reflect in her music. In 1990 she reemerged into the music world with Roots and Wings, more Indianized than ever and laced with Hindu themes. One song sings simply prema, shanti, dharma, satya (love, peace, destiny and truth) Nada Brahma quickly followed - Music Week magazine calling it haunting and graceful. Her latest is Silk. She is now writing her next album, a process she does with her voice and calls meditation. HINDUISM TODAY correspondent Rakesh Mathur interviewed her in London.

HT: How do you look at your artistry?

SC: People want to hear something that is an idealization of humanity. They want to be inspired. That's why being an artist is such a privilege, because you have to hone your humanity to that highest level. And so for me growing up around Hinduism and being very spiritual is very important. One of the greatest influences was looking at everything as spiritual, as having a spiritual significance. Also looking at yourself as a soul that needs to be developed.

HT: Did living by the sea contribute to your spirituality?

SC: I think of things as animate. Even things that are animate - in the Western way of seeing things - are treated as inanimate: trees or grass. I feel close to the spirits of those things. The idea of everything having a soul, a spirit, and you need to respect that. And communing with it and asking for help and inspiration from it. A tree just knows what to do. It gives and takes without thinking about it. Humans have to be far more self conscious about it.

HT: You speak of tradition and innovation.

SC: Tradition. Fabulous. I couldn't do without my tradition. It feels like an incredibly rich bed, foundation to have. Nice to feel the skill of all the people who went into researching a certain way of doing things. It gives me a context. I innovate by juxtaposing vocal styles. Something like on Silk, or instance Lament of the Banshee takes a Scottish lament and its obviously ornamented in a Scottish way and I have taken a series of notes and used them like a raga. I have used sections of very Indian sounding and imitating the shenai by a very nasal voice.

HT: What does Nada Brahma mean to you?

SC: For me, I think that sound is sacred. I discovered that before I came across the phrase Nada Brahma, before I read any books that talked about the beginning of the universe and the sound Aum and so forth, and before I knew that particles vibrate and that vibration is sound - it's just something that I felt. It strikes me that India has realized the sacredness of it and the specialness and significance of it. I've liked the stories that the classical singers have told me in thinking of the raga

as a spirit. And being a good enough and humble enough singer to bring the emotions through. That's where spirituality neatly fuses with music for me. I find that if I am not calm, serene, clear, humble person, my vocals aren't as good as they could be.

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