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Chances are if you are invited to dinner at an Indian home in Los Angeles or New York, you are likely to get not only a mouthful but also an earful. Musical mehfils, private home parties, are the affluent Indian's hottest way to host friends in the United States. Of course, these are not a new invention.

Thousands of years ago, mighty maharajas in India nurtured court singers and dancers who would entertain the nobility in a personalized setting. The tradition was carried on by later rulers, especially the Moguls, with a flowering of music, dance and poetry, and the patronage of such great singers as Sangeet Samrat Tansen. During the days of the British, countless nawabs and rajas continued the tradition of musical patronage in their own little kingdoms. With the end of the British Raj, the power of the princely houses received a death-blow, and they were in no position to nurture artistes.

With the coming of Indian independence, a new princely class has taken birth--the suc-cessful entrepreneurs and business tycoons. These new rajahs can lavish several thousands of rupees on musicians and singers to entertain their guests at home all night. A big society wedding in Bombay or Delhi is rarely complete without a glittering musical evening with famous singers such as Pankaj Udhas or Nitin Mukesh entertaining rapt guests. These sparkling functions with an abundance of food, wine and music are held in five-star hotels or in equally extravagant homes. Indeed, sometimes one doesn't even have to be wealthy to organize such musical

evenings: Sudha Malhotra, the well-known ghazal and bhajan singer, explains that many middle-class families, especially in Maharashtra, form clubs where they pool their resources and gather enough money to invite high-priced artistes for a musical evening.

These home concerts, long common in India, have suddenly become the rage in America. Indians living here are increasingly holding musical evenings at home, centered around a visiting musician from India. Since Indian musicians and singers visit the U.S. frequently for public concerts, it becomes relatively easy to organize a musical evening around the time of the visit. Some of the most popular artistes are Nitin Mukesh, Pankaj Udhas, Ghulam Ali and Anup Jalota. It is still the relatively affluent who can afford to pay the thousands of dollars these artistes command. Different artistes have different rates, which vary from US$2,000 to $15,000.

Participants in these home concerts vow that the pleasure of listening to good music in a personal setting is unmatched. In public places like auditoriums and theaters, music lovers have to share the artiste with hundreds of other people: kids crying, ushers wandering, noises intruding. Add to that the awful discomforts of western style seating and impersonal audiences made of strangers, and you can see why the same concert in a hall is so disconcerting. At home, one can conduct the concert in true Indian style on the floor, thus establishing eye contact with the musicians who also sit cross-legged on the floor. Every little nuance is enhanced as the musicians timelessly explore each raga.

Dina Pahlajani, a New York-based pediatrician, often organizes musical evenings for family and friends with artistes like Chandru Atma. There is a delightful intimacy to such events because forty to a hundred guests, dressed in their best, sit facing the artiste on white sheets spread on the carpet. As Pahlajani points out, "It becomes very personal. You can request any song that you wish to hear and establish a rapport with the singer." So great is the camaraderie that by the end of the evening many guests join in the singing and indulge in lively impromptu dancing to such crowd-pleasers as the robust Sindhi religious song "Jhulelal."

For the singer, too, the rewards of a home concert are many. Sudha Malhotra, who has been singing for radio and films since her childhood, is adept at ghazals, bhajans as well as film songs. She declares, "As an artiste, you have more rapport with the audience as they are sitting so close by, while in an auditorium it is more formal. At the same time, it is more professional in a public place due to the

electronic equipment. Each, however, has its own charm."

Mahesh and Radha Vanjani, who organized the Sudha Malhotra concert at their home, are passionate about Indian music and never pass a chance to hear live music. Since their friends are like-minded, a concert at home seemed the ideal solution to entertaining friends. Gope Chander, son of the renowned singer Master Chander, has established a name for himself in private mehfils. He and his brother Mahesh Chander are well-known in New York's Indian musical circles and often team up with visiting musicians like Sudha Malhotra. He observes, "In a home concert, the audience feels close to the singer, sees every hand movement and smile, every modulation of voice. The singer also thrives on the verbal appreciation, and gets into the mood to create more variations in different styles to please the audience."

Indeed, these musical mehfils flourish in the intimacy nurtured between singer and music lovers. The verbal interjections of the audience are vital to the singer's performance, inducing him to new heights, to outdo himself. Members of the audience show their gratitude and joy by doing ghur--waving currency notes around their host's head and then placing them before the artiste. The pile of money continues to grow and is later gifted to the performer. Sudha Malhotra says, "The personal contact is unmatched. I would much rather sing to a live audience, than sing for radio or cassette."

What further intensifies the experience is the food and drink, which would never be allowed in an auditorium. Listening to the famous singer while nibbling on a delicious Indian snack and sipping a drink satisfies all the senses. Yet food and drink can be a distraction when the attention is diverted from the music as the eatables are constantly being passed around. Sudha Malhotra admits, "That puts me off totally." Certainly, the intensity of the moment is trivialized. One solution is to serve the food and drink before and after the concert. Yet many people enjoy a drink with the music, especially when listening to Urdu ghazals which romanticize the joys and sorrows of unrequited love and alcohol. The drinking of alcohol at such occasions is purely social, and women generally tend to stay with soft drinks.

All the same, it is a paradox that while alcoholic beverages and non vegetarian food are often served at such gatherings, almost all singers begin the evening with a favorite bhajan. Chandru Atma, younger brother of the late legendary singer C. H. Atma, is renowned in India and abroad for his rich bass voice and his emotional

rendering of classical songs. He begins each musical concert with a bhajan, an offering to God. Although he is equally adept at geets and ghazals, and has committed over 3,000 songs to memory, bhajans have a special place in his heart. He asserts, "The easiest road to get closer to God is through bhajans. It's direct communication with God. No matter who listens to the bhajan, it will affect his head and heart. When you listen to bhajans, or join in, you feel God is very near. It makes you want to do good, be good." Perhaps that is the reason that the audience, though in a party mood, often request favorite bhajans.

Another aspect of home concerts is the spontaneity and the control the audience has. People often request a Punjabi or a Sindhi song from these singers who are adept in several languages, and thus music helps to bring different communities closer. Music does away with language barriers. Children sit in at these concerts and develop a love of the different forms of Indian music, from the highly classical to the purely filmi--that of the Indian films.

The musical evenings are also solid advertisement for the singers as word of mouth spreads, and many more people want to repeat the musical experience in their homes. Some artistes bring along their latest cassettes and these are unblushingly sold to the audience at the end of the concert. Gope Chander points out, "These private mehfils allow the audience to meet the artistes, eat with them, and talk about music and compositions. Often friends tell friends and this way the artiste is introduced to Indians in other states and countries. So the artiste is promoted throughout the world, and Indian music remains alive."