

THE SHEHNAI OF BISMILLAH KHAN

*USTAD BISMILLAH KHAN, the great Shehnai maestro, and the recipient of the highest civilian award the **Bharat Ratna** (2001), was born on 21 March 1916 in a well-known family of musicians in Bihar. In spite of having travelled all over the world, he was exceedingly fond of Benaras and Dumraon and they remained for him the most wonderful towns of the world. He passed away on 21 August 2006 at the age of ninety after a prolonged illness. He was given a state funeral and the Government of India declared one day of national mourning.*



A. Work in small groups and discuss the following:

1. Have you ever heard a shehnai being played in marriage ceremonies or festivals?
2. How do you like this instrument?
3. Discuss any pipe instrument which is played in your locality in marriage ceremonies or festivals.
4. Do you know that it was Bismillah Khan, the great Shehnai maestro, who made this instrument a reality? Can you name some leading players of other popular musical instruments?

THE SHEHNAI OF BISMILLAH KHAN

- 1 **E**mperor Aurangzeb banned the playing of a musical instrument called *pungi* in the royal residence, for it had a shrill unpleasant sound. *The pungi* became the generic name for reeded noisemakers. Few had thought that it would one day be revived. A barber of a family of professional musicians, who had access to the royal palace, decided to improve the tonal quality of the *pungi*. He chose a pipe with a natural hollow stem that was longer and broader than the *pungi*, and made seven holes on the body of the pipe. When he played on it, closing and opening some of these holes, soft and melodious sounds were produced. He played the instrument before royalty and everyone was impressed. The instrument so different from the *pungi* had to be given a

new name. As the story goes, since it was first played in the Shah's chambers and was played by a nai (barber), the instrument was named the 'shehnai'.

- 2 The sound of shehnai began to be considered auspicious. And for this reason it is still played in temples and is an indispensable component of any North Indian wedding. In the past, the shehnai was part of the naubat or traditional ensemble of nine instruments found at royal courts. Till recently it was used only in temples and weddings. The credit for bringing this instrument onto the classical stage goes to Ustad Bismillah Khan.



- 3 As a five-year old boy, Bismillah Khan played *gilli-danda* near a pond in the ancient estate of Dumraon in Bihar. He would regularly go to the nearby Bihariji temple to sing the Bhojpuri 'Chaita', at the end of which he would earn a big laddu weighing 1.25 kg, a prize given by the local Maharaja. This happened 80 years ago, and the little boy has travelled far to earn the highest civilian award in India – the Bharat Ratna.

- 4 Born on 21 March 1916, Bismillah belongs to a well-known family of musicians from Bihar. His grandfather, Rasool Bux Khan, was the *shehnai-nawaz* of the Bhojpur king's court. His father, Paigambar Bux, and other paternal ancestors were also shehnai players.



Pungi



Shehnai

- 5 The young boy took to music early in life. At the age of three, when his mother took him to his maternal uncle's house in Benaras (now Varanasi), Bismillah was fascinated watching his uncles practise the shehnai. Soon Bismillah started accompanying his uncle, Ali Bux, to the Vishnu temple of Benaras where Bux was employed to play the shehnai. Ali Bux would play the shehnai and Bismillah would sit captivated for hours. Slowly, he started getting lessons in playing the instrument and would sit practising throughout the day. For years to come the temple of Balaji and Mangala maiya and the banks of the Ganga became the young apprentice's favourite haunts where he could practise in solitude. The flowing waters of the Ganga inspired him to improvise and invent ragas that were earlier considered to be beyond the range of the shehnai.

B.1.1. Write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

1. Bismillah Khan belongs to a family of musicians from Uttar Pradesh.
2. Bismillah Khan's ancestors were also great shehnai players.
3. The flowing water of the Ganga gave inspiration to Bismillah to create ragas.
4. He learnt shehnai from his parent and grandfather.

B.1.2. Complete the sentences on the basis of the unit you have just studied

1. The pungi is a instrument.
2. The pungi became the generic name for noise makers.
3. The instrument which is so different from the pungi is called
4. holes were made on the body of a pipe.
5. was the Shehnai nawaj of Bhojpuri king's court.
6. was Bismillah's grandfather.
7. Bismillah accompanied to the Vishnu temple of Benaras.
8. Bismillah played at the temple of and at the banks of as a young apprentice.

B.1.3. Answer the following questions very briefly:

1. Who banned the playing of the pungi?
2. What generic name did the pungi come to acquire?
3. Who revived the pungi?
4. Where was the Shehnai played for the first time?
5. Who played the instrument for the first time so different from the pungi?
6. What is naubat called?
7. Who brought the instrument Shehnai on the classical stage?
8. Which sport did Bismillah Khan play in his childhood?
9. Where did he play the sport?
10. Where did he go to sing the Bhojpuri "Chaita"?
11. What is the highest civilian award in India?
12. Who was Bismillah's father?
13. Who was Bismillah's maternal uncle?

6 At the age of 14, Bismillah accompanied his uncle to the Allahabad Music Conference. At the end of his recital, Ustad Faiyaz Khan patted the young boy's back and said, "Work hard and you shall make it." With the opening of the All India Radio in Lucknow in 1938 came Bismillah's big break. He soon became an often-heard shehnai player on the radio.

7 When India gained independence on 15 August 1947, Bismillah Khan became the first Indian to greet the nation with his shehnai. He poured his heart out into Ragg Kafi from the Red Fort to an audience which included Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who later gave his famous 'Tryst with Destiny' speech.

- 8 Bismillah Khan has given many memorable performances both in India and abroad. His first trip abroad was to Afghanistan where King Zahir Shah was so taken in by the



maestro that he gifted him priceless Persian carpets and other souvenirs. The King of Afghanistan was not the only one to be fascinated with Bismillah's music. Film director Vijay Bhatt was so impressed after hearing Bismillah play at a festival that he named a film after the instrument called *Gunj Uthi Shehnai*. The film was a hit, and one of Bismillah Khan's composition, "*Dil ka khilona hai toot gaya...*," turned out to be a nationwide chartbuster! Despite this huge success in

the celluloid world, Bismillah Khan's success in film music was limited to two: Vijay Bhatt's *Gunj Uthi Shehnai* and Vikram Srinivas's Kannada venture, *Sanadhi Apanna*. "I just can't come to terms with the artificiality and glamour of the film world," he says with emphasis.

- 9 Awards and recognition came thick and fast. Bismillah Khan became the first Indian to be invited to perform at the prestigious Lincoln Centre Hall in the United States of America. He also took part in the World Exposition in Montreal, in the Cannes Art Festival and in the Osaka Trade Fair. So well known did he become internationally that an auditorium in Teheran was named after him – Tahar Mosiquee Ustaad Bismillah Khan.

- 10 National awards like the *Padmashri*, the *Padma Bhushan* and the *Padma Vibhushan* were conferred on him.

- 11 In 2001, Ustad Bismillah Khan was awarded India's highest civilian award, the *Bharat Ratna*. With the coveted award resting on his chest and his eyes glinting with rare happiness, he said, "All I would like to say is: Teach your children music, this is Hindustan's richest tradition; even the West is now coming to learn our music."

- 12 In spite of having travelled all over the world Khansaab, as he is fondly called, is exceedingly fond of Benaras and Dumraon and they remain for him the most wonderful towns of the world. A student of his once wanted him to head a shehnai school in the U.S.A., and the student promised to recreate the atmosphere of Benaras by replicating the temples there. But Khansaab asked him if he would be able to transport River Ganga as well. Later he is remembered to have said, "That is why whenever I am in a foreign country, I think of only Benaras and the holy Ganga. And while in Benaras, I miss the unique *mattha* of Duraon.



- 13 Shekhar Gupta: When partition happened, didn't you and your family think of moving to Pakistan?
- 14 Bismillah Khan: God forbid! Me, leave Benaras? Never! I went to Pakistan once-I crossed the border just to say I have been to Pakistan. I was there for about an hour. I said *namaskar* to the Pakistanis and *salaam alaikum* to the Indians! I had a good laugh.
- 15 Ustad Bismillah Khan's life is a perfect example of the rich, cultural heritage of India, one that effortlessly accepts that a devout Muslim like him can very naturally play the shehnai every morning at the Kashi Vishwanath temple.

(Courtesy: NCFE, New Delhi)

B.2.1. Complete the sentences on the basis of the unit you have just studied:

1. At the age of fourteen Bismillah accompanied his uncle to
2. In 1938 came Bismillah's first break in
3. He sang on 15th August 1947.
4. His first trip abroad was to
5. Film director Vijay Bhatt named his film as after being impressed by the shehnai.
6. National awards like the and the Padma Vibhushan were conferred on him.
7. Bismillah Khan was also referred to as
8. An auditorium in Tehran named after him is called.....

B.2.2. Write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statement:

1. An auditorium in Tehran was named after Bismillah Khan.
2. Bismillah Khan was fondly called 'Khansaab'
3. Khansaab was a shehnai player of international repute even then no National Awards were conferred on him.

B.2.3 Answer the following questions very briefly:

1. When was Bismillah Khan awarded India's highest civilian award?
2. Of which two cities was he most fond of?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

generic name (n): a name given to a class or group as a whole.

reeded (adj): wind instrument which have reeds like the flute, the clarinet.

auspicious(adj): promising to bring good fortune.

Indispensable(adj): without which a piece of work cannot be done.

ensemble (n): things (here instruments) considered as a group.

souvenir (n): things given in memory of a place, person or events.

celluloid (n): old fashioned way of referring to films.

venture (nj): project that often involves risks.

coveted (adj): much desired.

C.1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. Which emperor banned the playing of the pungi? Do you think that it is against the right to expression?
2. Ustad Khan refused the celluloid world after two films. Was it a loss to the cinema world or gain to Hindustani Music? Discuss.
3. Capture in your own words the feelings of the Ustad, when he received Bharat Ratna.
4. 'Only in India it is possible that a devout Muslim like Khan Saheb can very naturally play the Shehnai every morning at Kashi Vishwanath temple.' What light does this statement throw on India's cultural heritage? Discuss.
5. Describe the incident of Ustad Khan visiting Pakistan.
6. How did shehnai get its name? Describe in your own words the process how the Pungi became the shehnai.

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in groups or pairs:

1. Composite culture of our country
2. Musical instruments of your area

C.3. COMPOSITION

1. Imagine yourself as young Bismillah and write in 10 lines about your attachment to Benaras (Varanasi).
2. Write in about 100 words the achievements of Ustad Bismillah Khan.

D. WORD STUDY**D.1. Dictionary Use:**

Ex. 1. Correct the spelling of the following words:

mucisal	awardeb	conapnoin
auditorium	instrumint	

Ex. 2. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of the following words - the one in which it is used in the lesson and other which is more common.

impressed	traditional	favourite
auspicious	ancestor	coveted
heritage	hollow	prestigious

D.2. Word Formation

Ex. Study the following sentence:

And for this reason it is still played in temples and is an indispensable component of any North Indian wedding.

Mark how **indispensable** is made of 'dispense' (verb), prefix 'in' and suffix '-able'.

Now make ten more words, adding suffix '-able' to different verbs.

D.3. Word Meaning

Ex. 1. Match the words or phrases in column **A** with their meanings given in column **B**.

A	B
promising to bring good fortune	souvenir
things considered as a group	auspicious
believing strongly in a religion	ensemble
given (a title, degree etc)	conferred
something that reminds one of a place, occasion or event	devout

D.4. Phrase

Ex. 1. Read the lesson carefully and find out 10 sentences in which phrases have been used. Use these phrases in sentences of your own.

E. GRAMMAR

Ex. 1. Different Punctuation marks have been used in this paragraph from the text. Identify them in the passage given below:

"In 2001, Ustad Bismillah Khan was awarded India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna. With the coveted award resting on his chest and his eyes glinting with rare happiness he said, "All I would like to say is: Teach your children music, this is Hindustan's richest tradition; even the West is now coming to learn our music."

apostrophe: 1. Used to indicate the possessive case

2. Used to mark an omission of one or more letters.

Colon:

1. Used to introduce an example or a list

2. Used to introduce an interpretation or description of what precedes it.

3. Used to introduce the Direct Speech in a play or in a newspaper report where quotation marks are omitted.

Comma:

1. to separate items in a list
2. to separate Main Clauses
3. after a Vocative or a Clause etc. with no finite verb
4. to separate phrases etc. in order to clarify meaning
5. following words that introduce the Direct Speech or after the Direct Speech where there is no question mark or exclamation mark
6. to separate a parenthetical word, phrase or clause

Dash:

1. used to mark the beginning and end of an interruption in the structure of a sentence.

Full stop:

1. used at the end of all sentences that are not questions or exclamations.

Hyphen:

1. used to join two or more words so as to form a single expression

Question mark : 1. used after every question that expects a separate answer

Quotation marks: 1. used round a direct quotation

Semicolon:

1. used to separate those parts of a sentence between which there is a more distinct break than would be called for by a comma but which are too closely connected to be made into separate sentences.

F. ACTIVITIES

1. Make a shehnai using newspaper, glue, thermocol etc.
2. On the map of India show the two cities Ustad Bismillah Khan was fond of.
3. Among a group of four, discuss the origin, use and construction of the shehnai.
4. Cut and paste the pictures of musical instruments, which are similar to the shehnai (e.g. the flute)
5. Cut and paste the pictures of shehnai players of these days.

G. TRANSLATION

Translate into Hindi/ your mother language

Bismillah Khan has given many memorable performances both in India and abroad. His first trip abroad was to Afghanistan where King Zahir Shah

was so taken in by the maestro that he gifted him priceless Persian carpets and other souvenirs. The King of Afghanistan was not the only one to be fascinated with Bismillah's music. Film director Vijay Bhatt was so impressed after hearing Bismillah play at a festival that he named a film after the instrument called *Gunj Uthi Shehnai*. The film was a hit, and one of Bismillah Khan's composition, "*Dil ka khilona hai toot gaya...*," turned out to be a nationwide chartbuster! Despite this huge success in the celluloid world, Bismillah Khan's success in film music was limited to two: Vijay Bhatt's *Gunj Uthi Shehnai* and Vikram Srinivas's Kannada venture, *Sanadhi Apanna*. "I just can't come to terms with the artificiality and glamour of the film world," he says with emphasis.

