



Part II

The Shehnai of Bismillah Khan

BEFORE YOU READ

- Do you know these people? What instruments do they play?



- Think of the shehnai and the first thing you'll probably imagine is a wedding or a similar occasion or function. The next would probably be Ustad Bismillah Khan, the shehnai maestro, playing this instrument.

1. EMPEROR Aurangzeb banned the playing of a musical instrument called *pungi* in the royal residence for it had a shrill unpleasant sound. *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

generic name: a name given to a class or group as a whole

reeded: wind instruments which have reeds like the flute, the clarinet, etc.



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'.



Pungi



Shehnai

2. The sound of the 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, 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 great shehnai players.

auspicious:
promising to bring good fortune

indispensable:
without which a piece of work cannot be done

ensembles
(pronounced 'onsomble'): things (here, instruments) considered as a group

paternal ancestors:
ancestors of the father

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 on end. 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 raagas that were earlier considered to be beyond the range of the shehnai.

on end: for a very long time without stopping

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 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 Raag Kafi from the Red Fort to an audience which included Mahatma Gandhi and 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

taken in by: attracted or charmed by

souvenirs: things given in memory of a place, person or event

after the instrument called *Gunj Uthi Shehnai*. The film was a hit, and one of Bismillah Khan's compositions, "*Dil ka khilona hai toot gaya...*," turned out to be a nationwide chartbuster! Despite this huge success in the celluloid world, Bismillah Khan's ventures in film music were 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.

chartbuster: record-breaker

celluloid: old-fashioned way of referring to films

ventures: projects that often involve risk

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 keep yearning

conferred: given, usually an award or a degree

coveted: much desired



SHEKHAR GUPTA: When Partition happened, didn't you and your family think of moving to Pakistan?

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. (Readers' Digest, October 2005)

to see Hindustan. While in Mumbai, I think of only Benaras and the holy Ganga. And while in Benaras, I miss the unique *mattha* of Dumraon.”

13. 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.

devout: believing strongly in a religion and obeying its laws and following its practices



Thinking about the Text

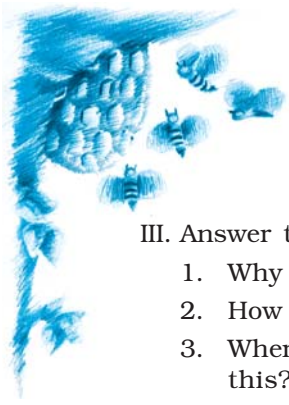
I. Tick the right answer.

- The (shehnai, *pungi*) was a 'reeded noisemaker'.
- (Bismillah Khan, A barber, Ali Bux) transformed the *pungi* into a shehnai.
- Bismillah Khan's paternal ancestors were (barbers, professional musicians).
- Bismillah Khan learnt to play the shehnai from (Ali Bux, Paigambar Bux, Ustad Faiyaz Khan).
- Bismillah Khan's first trip abroad was to (Afghanistan, U.S.A., Canada).

II. Find the words in the text which show Ustad Bismillah Khan's feelings about the items listed below. Then mark a tick (✓) in the correct column. Discuss your answers in class.

<i>Bismillah Khan's feelings about</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
1. teaching children music			
2. the film world			
3. migrating to the U.S.A.			
4. playing at temples			
5. getting the Bharat Ratna			
6. the banks of the Ganga			
7. leaving Benaras and Dumraon			





III. Answer these questions in 30–40 words.

1. Why did Aurangzeb ban the playing of the *pungi*?
2. How is a shehnai different from a *pungi*?
3. Where was the shehnai played traditionally? How did Bismillah Khan change this?
4. When and how did Bismillah Khan get his big break?
5. Where did Bismillah Khan play the shehnai on 15 August 1947? Why was the event historic?
6. Why did Bismillah Khan refuse to start a shehnai school in the U.S.A.?
7. Find at least two instances in the text which tell you that Bismillah Khan loves India and Benaras.



Thinking about Language

I. Look at these sentences.

- Evelyn was determined *to live a normal life*.
- Evelyn managed *to conceal her growing deafness from friends and teachers*.

The italicised parts answer the questions: “What was Evelyn determined to do?” and “What did Evelyn manage to do?” They begin with a to-verb (*to live, to conceal*).

Complete the following sentences. Beginning with a to-verb, try to answer the questions in brackets.

1. The school sports team hopes _____ (What does it hope to do?)
2. We all want _____ (What do we all want to do?)
3. They advised the hearing-impaired child’s mother _____ (What did they advise her to do?)
4. The authorities permitted us to _____ (What did the authorities permit us to do?)
5. A musician decided to _____ (What did the musician decide to do?)

II. From the text on Bismillah Khan, find the words and phrases that match these definitions and write them down. The number of the paragraph where you will find the words/phrases has been given for you in brackets.

1. the home of royal people (1) _____
2. the state of being alone (5) _____
3. a part which is absolutely necessary (2) _____

4. to do something not done before (5) _____
5. without much effort (13) _____
6. quickly and in large quantities (9) _____ and _____

III. Tick the right answer.

1. When something is *revived*, it (remains dead/lives again).
2. When a government *bans* something, it wants it (stopped/started).
3. When something is considered *auspicious*, (welcome it/avoid it).
4. When we *take to* something, we find it (boring/interesting).
5. When you *appreciate* something, you (find it good and useful/find it of no use).
6. When you *replicate* something, you do it (for the first time/for the second time).
7. When we *come to terms with* something, it is (still upsetting/no longer upsetting).

IV. Dictionary work

- The sound of the shehnai is *auspicious*.
- The *auspicious* sound of the shehnai is usually heard at marriages.

The adjective *auspicious* can occur after the verb *be* as in the first sentence, or before a noun as in the second. But there are some adjectives which can be used after the verb *be* and not before a noun. For example:

- Ustad Faiyaz Khan was *overjoyed*.

We cannot say: *the *overjoyed man*.

Look at these entries from the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005).

elder *adj., noun*
 adjective 1 [**only before noun**] (of people, especially two members of the same family) older: my elder brother • his elder sister 2 (the elder) used without a noun immediately after it to show who is the older of two people: the elder of their two sons 3 (the elder) (formal) used before or after sb's name to show that they are the older of two people who have the same name: the elder Pitt • Pitt, the elder.

awake *adj., verb*
 adjective [**not before noun**] not asleep (especially immediately before or after sleeping): to be half/fully awake; to be wide awake. I was still awake when he came to bed.

Consult your dictionary and complete the following table. The first one has been done for you.

<i>adjective</i>	<i>only before noun</i>	<i>not before noun</i>	<i>both before and after the verb be</i>
indispensable			✓
impressed			
afraid			
outdoor			
paternal			
countless			
priceless			

Use these words in phrases or sentences of your own.

Speaking

- I. Imagine the famous singer Kishori Amonkar is going to visit your school. You have been asked to introduce her to the audience before her performance. How would you introduce her?


Here is some information about Kishori Amonkar you can find on the Internet. Read the passage and make notes of the main points about:

- her parentage
- the school of music she belongs to
- her achievements
- her inspiration
- awards

Padma Bhushan Kishori Amonkar, widely considered the finest female vocalist of her generation, was born in 1931, daughter of another great artist, Smt. Mogubai Kurdikar. In her early years she absorbed the approach and repertoire of her distinguished mother's teacher Ustad Alladiya Khan. As her own style developed, however, she moved away from Alladiya Khan's 'Jaipur-Atrauli gharana' style in some respects, and as a mature artist her approach is usually regarded as an individual, if not unique, variant of the Jaipur model.

Kishori Amonkar is a thinker, besotted by what she calls the mysterious world of her *raagas*. She dissects them with the precision of a perfectionist, almost like a scientist, until the most subtle of shades and emotions emerge and re-emerge.

She is very much inspired by the teachings of the ancient Vedic sages, written at a time when vocal music was highly devotional in character. This



soul searching quality of her music, coupled with a very intellectual approach to *raaga* performance has gained her quite a following in India and has helped to revive the study of *khayal*.

Significant awards bestowed on this artist include the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1985), the Padma Bhushan (1987), and the highly coveted Sangeet Samradhini Award (considered one of the most prestigious awards in Indian Classical Music) in 1997.

- II. Use your notes on Kishori Amonkar to introduce her to an imaginary audience. You may use one of the following phrases to introduce a guest:

I am honoured to introduce.../I feel privileged to introduce.../We welcome you...



Writing

“If you work hard and know where you’re going, you’ll get there.” says Evelyn Glennie.

You have now read about two musicians, Evelyn Glennie and Ustad Bismillah Khan. Do you think that they both worked hard? Where did they want to ‘go’? Answer these questions in two paragraphs, one on each of the two musicians.

Whenever you see darkness, there is extraordinary opportunity for the light to burn brighter.

BONO

