

THE SOUND OF MUSIC

PART - II

The Sitarai of Bismillah Khan

Summary

This Chapter throws light on the origin of Sitarai and the life of Sitarai maestro, Bismillah Khan. Bismillah Khan is the greatest player of Sitarai today. He has received 'Bharat Ratna', the highest civilian award. We learn from this Chapter how Sitarai originated and how it was given a name. We also learn about Bismillah Khan's childhood, his dedication to music and his love for India in general and for Benaras in particular.

A musical instrument called 'pungi' was banned by Emperor Aurangzeb for its shrill unpleasant sound. It was perfected by a barber who belonged to a family of professional musicians. He played it in the Chamber of the King. Its sound was appreciated by the emperor. Since it was born in Sitar's Chamber and perfected by a Nai, it was named Sitarai. In the beginning, it was played in the temples.

before the images of Gods and Goddesses. It was played on every auspicious domestic occasion too. Gradually, it became popular.

Ustad Bismillah Khan belonged to the Benaras Gharana. He was born in 1916 at Dumraon in Bihar. As a five year old boy, he played Gilli-danda near a pond. He used to visit Bihariji temple and Sing Bhojpur's Chaita there. He would earn a big laddu from a local — Makaraja as a prize. At the age of six, he moved to Benaras. His uncle, Ali Bux, introduced him to the nuances of playing shehnai. He was deeply devoted to music. He used to spend most of his time practising on the bank of the river Ganga. The themes of his music are deeply affected by the flowing water of the Ganga.

He got the best performer award at the All India Music Conference in Allahabad in 1930. In 1937, he bagged three medals at a music Conference in Kolkata. He was invited by Pt. Mehra to play the shehnai from the ramparts of Delhi's Red Fort in 1947. He won many international awards as well. Bismillah Khan is very fond of Benaras and Dumraon. He declined an offer from one of his students to settle in United States. He ventured into the celluloid world also. He gave his music into movies. But the artificial world of cinema could not attract him. For him, music is God. Music is his soul.

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Assignment

1. Read the passage carefully and answer the questions that follow. When India gained Independence on August 15, 1947, Bismillah Khan became the first Indian to greet the nation with his Sankhai. He poured his heart out into Raag Kafi from the Red Fort to an audience which included Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who later gave his famous Toyst with Destiny Speech.

Questions:

- Who was the first Indian to greet the nation?
- Which Raag did Bismillah Khan play?
- How did Bismillah Khan greet the audience with his Sankhai?
- Which speech graced the Independence Day when India gained freedom?

2. Answer these questions in 30-40 words.

- Why did Aurangzeb ban the playing of the Mungi?
- How is a Sankhai different from a Mungi?
- Where was the Sankhai played traditionally? How did Bismillah Khan change this?
- When and how did Bismillah Khan get his big break?
- Why did Bismillah Khan refuse to start a Sankhai school in the USA?

3. Answer these questions in 100-120 words.

- Strong determination, motivation and right direction helped Bismillah Khan in being what he was. Do you agree? How important are these values in our life?
- Describe in brief the early life of Bismillah Khan, his achievements, and the various awards that were conferred on him in later years.