

Bismillah Khan (March 21, 1916-August 21, 2006).

# BISMILLAH OF INDIA

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In a delightful paradox, the man who best represented the holy Indian city of Varanasi was Bismillah Khan. Born on March 21, 1916 in Bihar, he moved to his maternal grandfather's home in Varanasi as a young boy, and lived there until he died; spending some seven decades in an old, rundown house, surrounded by his *shehnais*, a large extended family, and an even larger circle of fans.

While he loved all music, he loved most of all the soothing, almost sombre strains of the *shehnai* that he had first heard wafting from the grand houses by the river *Ganga*. That calm, that feeling of transcendence, was what he sought, which was why he always came back to his adopted city by the river. A top US university once offered him to be their musician-in-residence. He politely replied that he would come only if he could bring his beloved *Ganga* with him. Ailing for some time before passing away on August

becoming reality through ragas on *shehnai*. Who could better comprehend this even in thought so as to express it with a musical instrument?

Had it not been for his faithful devotion to music, *shehnai* would have been confined to being played at marriages and religious gatherings. Only through his delicate playing empowered by his phenomenal breath control has it been elevated to the concert stage. With it he produced sounds others did not know existed.

For more than 70 years, Khan captivated his listeners with the range of his musical genius. But his international career got off to a late start because of a fear of flying. The Indian government eventually cajoled him into appearing at the Edinburgh Festival in 1966, on condition that it would pay for a pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah on the way.

He belonged to a family of traditional



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In love with the music of it all.

the first lessons in *Shehnai*, he told the BBC, "My uncle and other musicians lived an ascetic life. They cared little about the material world and yet they were friendly. Their hearts knew nothing of the corrupt ways—thieving, cheating. He taught me how to respect music. We don't copy anyone. We all have our own style. I will never leave my style which my uncle had taught me. But I also take care that I do not become arrogant."

After the death of his uncle Ali Baksh in 1940, Khan became a soloist in his own right. And his humble home became a symbol of classical music and his country's cultural diversity. In 2001, the Indian Republic conferred on him its highest civilian award Bharat Ratna or Jewel of India. When he passed away, a state funeral saw thousands lining the city's streets to pay their last respect to the virtuoso, whose body was taken in a procession to a local burial ground. All schools in the state were closed and the national flag was to fly at half-staff. The army fired guns in the air in salute.

Khan's greatest moment, perhaps, came when he was the only musician invited to play at the official ceremony held on August 15, 1947 to celebrate India's independence from British colonial rule. His music made fragrant the shared humanity of his fellow countrymen. "Music has no caste or creed. That's the greatness of music," he said in Goutam Ghosh's famous 1989 documentary *Meeting a Milestone*. "Everyone talks about Bismillah Khan's breath, Bismillah Khan's hands on the *shehnai*. But who is Bismillah Khan? I say all the praise goes to the One who created Bismillah."

Despite all the adulation, the ustad was almost as famous for his modesty—a rare trait among virtuosos—as for his playing. He was a humble man, never choosing luxury even when he was given opportunities to have them. He led a simple, unostentatious life, never owning a car, travelling around the city in a bicycle rickshaw. He declined repeated requests from the district administration to have an AC installed in his room. "How could I have slept in the cool comfort of the a/c

when my neighbour Ramzan Ali poured buckets of water on his 'tattar' [made of tin] for keeping the heat away in the summer," he told a journalist.

Khan was also known for sharp wit. Once at a conference on classical music, a musician flippantly told him that the "problem" with his tradition was that it had downgraded music. With a twinkle in his eye, Khan reminded him that most of the

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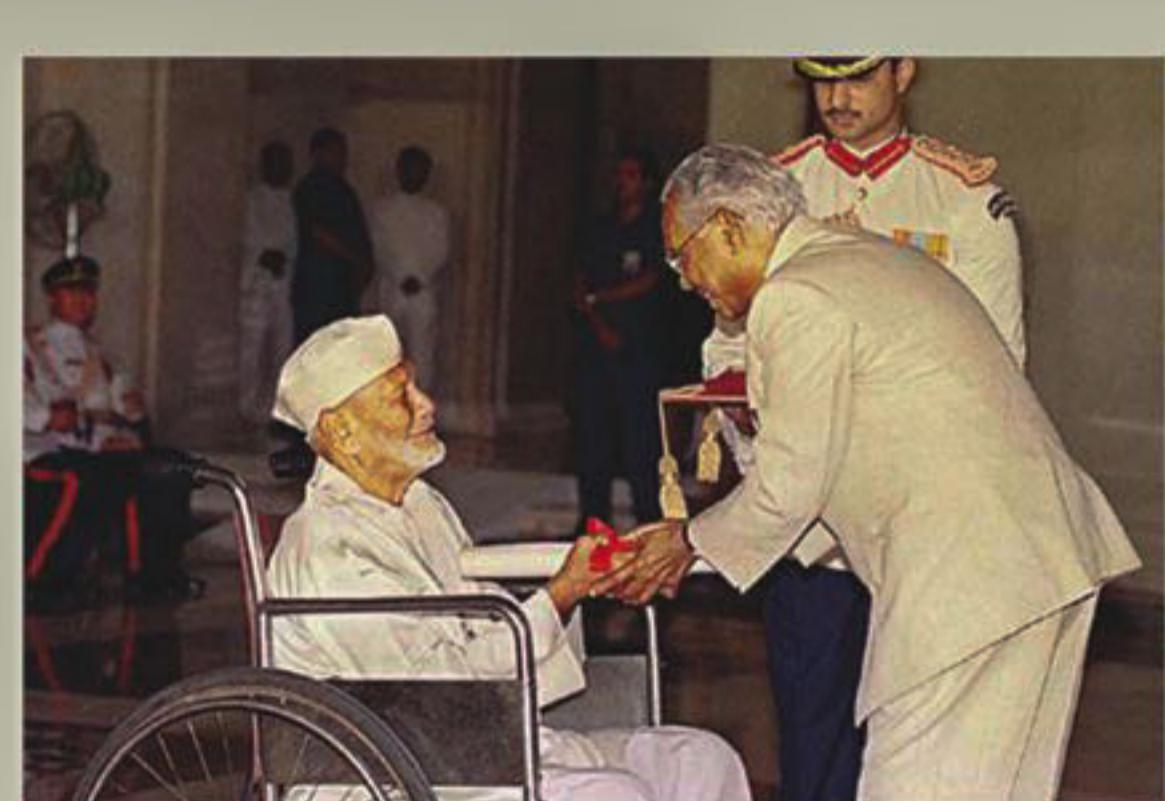
great classical musicians of the subcontinent were Muslim. "Imagine the height we could have reached if we upgraded our musical skills," he said with a chuckle.

The tunes Bismillah Khan breathed into the air are to be found in the hearts of millions worldwide. He leaves behind a rich legacy, which remains unparalleled in the annals of classical music. He enjoyed playing, the ludic impulse that encourages the listener out of habituated patterns of thought into some deeper experience or recognition, in his case toward a heightened consciousness.

But more importantly, he had a heart that knew not to differentiate between communities or persons. He was always mindful that his audience had to feel elevated, not just by the music of his *shehnai* but by the magic of it all.

That is the spirit of Bismillah Khan, and the rest of us willing, the spirit of mankind.

The writer is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.



Receiving Bharat Ratna from President K R Narayanan.



With Ravi Shankar.



Ustad Vilayat Khan and Ustad Bismillah Khan.



*Shehnai* was elevated to the concert stage through his delicate playing.

21, 2006, he turned down requests from the central as well as state governments for treatment elsewhere as he would not leave his town.

Bismillah Khan became the greatest virtuoso of the *Shehnai*, the north Indian oboe, which is played on important occasions, religious as well secular, and is particularly associated with north Indian weddings, where it must simultaneously carry and project two opposite emotional states—the joy of the occasion and the melancholy of the young bride taking leave of her father's home. It's about the music of life being realised, abstraction

musicians in the Shahabad district of what is now the eastern state of Bihar. His father, Paigambar Baksh, was a court musician employed in the Dumrao palace by the Raja of Bhojpur. His great grandfather Hussain Baksh and grandfather Rasool Baksh were also musicians in the Dumrao palace. His uncle, Ali Baksh, a *shehnai* player attached to Varanasi's Kashi Vishwanath Temple, was his teacher. He patiently practiced, listening and absorbing, until at last his fingers and breath caught up with the music inside his head.

Talking about his uncle who gave him