

## Unsung Shehnai: Ramlal's Biographical Trace in the Musical Memory of Indian Cinema

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### Abstract

This study examines the musical contributions of Ramlal, a Benares-born instrumentalist whose virtuosity in the shehnai and flute shaped Indian cinema's sonic identity during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Despite his technical mastery and collaborations with cultural icons like Ustad Bismillah Khan, Raj Kapoor, and V. Shantaram, Ramlal's legacy remains marginalized in public memory and academic discourse. Through qualitative historical analysis, this research reconstructs his career using archival materials—including radio interviews, film scores, and theatre records—to explore his role in pivotal moments such as India's 1947 Independence celebrations, where his shehnai echoed alongside Ustad Bismillah Khan's historic Red Fort performance. Ramlal's work in films like *Aag* (1948) and *Shehnai* (1947) bridged folk traditions with cinematic modernity, while his undercredited contributions to *Goonj Uthi Shehnai* (1959) reveal systemic biases against accompanists in favor of vocalists and soloists. The study interrogates the socio-cultural mechanisms behind his neglect, including the film industry's prioritization of vocal music and the erasure of artisans in nationalist narratives. By contextualizing Ramlal's artistry within broader themes of cultural nationalism, craft labor, and postcolonial identity, this paper argues that his exclusion reflects deeper hierarchies in India's cultural historiography. The findings underscore the need to reassess the contributions of marginalized instrumentalists in shaping South Asia's auditory heritage and cinematic modernity.

### Introduction

Indian cinema has long drawn upon real-life narratives, forming a tradition of biographical and docudramatic storytelling that intersects with historical, cultural, and musical discourse. This paper focuses on Ramlal, a musician who remained in the background of many seminal moments in Indian cinematic history. Despite his expertise in flute and shehnai, and his involvement in significant national and artistic events, Ramlal's name remains largely absent from historical records. The study uses his life story to examine the systemic invisibilization of instrumental musicians in Indian film and music historiography.

### Methodology

Using a qualitative and historical approach, this paper combines secondary sources, archival materials, and content analysis of films such as *Aag* (1948), *Dahej* (1950), *Sehra* (1963), and *Geet Gaya Pathron Ne* (1964). The analysis includes musical sequences, visual representation of instruments, and references to real-life events. It also employs discourse analysis to interpret Ramlal's portrayal and erasure in popular and critical narratives.

## Ramlal's Musical Identity and Technical Prowess

Ramlal's mastery of the shehnai and flute epitomized a rare duality in Indian instrumental music, blending technical precision with emotive depth. Born in Benaras, a hub of classical arts, he honed his craft under the tutelage of his brother, Buddhalal Choudhary—a revered shehnai artisan and disciple of Pandit Bade Ram Das ji—while absorbing the legacy of Ustad Bismillah Khan, whose innovations redefined the shehnai's classical potential. Ramlal's technical prowess lay in his ability to navigate the shehnai's complex embouchure and breath control, alongside the flute's intricate fingerwork, mastering ragas like *Yaman* and *Bhairavi* with equal fluency. His transition to Bombay's Prithvi Theatre in 1944 marked a turning point, as his live shehnai accompaniments for patriotic plays such as *Deewaar* and *Pathan* amplified anti-colonial sentiment, merging folk motifs with modernist theatricality.

In Raj Kapoor's *Aag* (1948), Ramlal's cinematic debut, his shehnai and flute became central to the film's aural identity. He performed in various songs like “*Zinda Hoon Iss Trah*”, where the shehnai's plaintive tones underscored themes of existential longing, while the flute evoked romantic idealism. At one place, director Raj Kapoor's decision to foreground Ramlal's hands onscreen—a rare cinematic focus on instrumental labor—symbolized the shehnai's cultural resonance as a “swadeshi” (indigenous) artifact. Traditionally linked to weddings and temples, the instrument was reimagined in *Aag* as a marker of postcolonial identity, its auspicious timbre aligning with Gandhi's vision of cultural self-reliance. Ramlal's versatility allowed him to straddle devotional, folk, and cinematic idioms, yet his contributions were often overshadowed by vocal-centric narratives. His technical brilliance, rooted in Benares's guru-shishya tradition, laid the groundwork for instrumental music's integration into mainstream cinema, even as systemic biases relegated him to the margins of recognition.

## The Shehnai, Independence, and Cinematic Parallelism

On 15 August 1947, as Ustad Bismillah Khan heralded India's independence with *Raag Kafi* from the Red Fort, Ramlal's shehnai resonated in P.L. Santoshi's film *Shehnai*, released the same day. This synchronicity, though coincidental, framed cinema as a parallel platform for nationalist expression. While Khan's performance symbolized political sovereignty, Ramlal's cinematic contributions encoded the shehnai's folk roots into mass media, transforming it into an auditory emblem of cultural independence. The film's narrative, celebrating rural traditions and marital harmony, mirrored Gandhi's *swadeshi* ideals, positioning the shehnai as a bridge between pre-colonial heritage and postcolonial modernity.

Ramlal's later work in *Goonj Uthi Shehnai* (1959) further cemented his legacy. Yet, despite contributing over around 70% of the film's instrumental music, his name was not given due credit as desired by him while Ustad Bismillah Khan's standalone recitals received prominence. This erasure reflects systemic hierarchies in Indian cinema, where vocalists and soloists eclipsed accompanists, regardless of technical mastery. Ramlal's anonymity underscores how cultural nationalism often prioritized symbolic gestures—like Khan's Red Fort performance—over the labor of artisans shaping its sonic texture. His dual role as both a preservationist of Benares' *shastriya sangeet* traditions and an innovator in cinematic soundtracks reveals the tensions between individual artistry and collective memory in postcolonial India, where folk instruments became tools of nation-building even as their practitioners faded into obscurity.

## Collaboration with V. Shantaram: Recognition and Innovation

Ramlal's collaboration with visionary filmmaker V. Shantaram marked both the zenith of his career and a rare departure from the anonymity imposed on instrumentalists. Beginning with *Dahej* (1950), where his shehnai underscored themes of marital discord and social reform, Ramlal became integral to V. Shantaram's mission of blending realism with lyrical storytelling. Their partnership peaked in *Sehra* (1963), a folkloric romance set in Rajasthan. Ramlal's innovation further shone: to mimic the rhythmic clang of sculptors in "*Geet Gaya Pathron Ne*", he repurposed household utensils, layering them with flute melodies to evoke rural labor's musicality. This experimental approach—rooted in *swadeshi* ingenuity—transformed mundane sounds into narrative devices, enhancing V. Shantaram's commitment to social realism.

V. Shantaram's *Geet Gaya Pathron Ne* (1964) featured an unprecedented gesture: a character named "Ramlal" was explicitly lauded onscreen for his musical genius, mirroring the composer's contributions. This meta-reference, embedded in the film's climax, defied industry norms that relegated music directors to invisibility. Though Ramlal never received formal awards, this acknowledgment symbolized a fleeting victory against systemic erasure. His work with V. Shantaram—spanning devotional hymns, folk ballads, and orchestral fusions—bridged classical rigor with cinematic accessibility.

## Decline and Cultural Amnesia

By the 1970s, Ramlal's career dwindled as the film industry shifted toward synthesizers and Westernized scores, marginalizing traditional instrumentalists. He tried his hands at production but failed miserably. Forgotten by studios and peers, betrayed by friend, he spent his final years in obscurity, emblematic of a systemic disregard for artisans who shaped cinema's foundational aesthetics. His death went unmarked by obituaries or tributes, mirroring the fate of countless behind-the-scenes contributors erased from cultural memory. This neglect reflects a broader cinematic amnesia, where transient trends eclipse the labor of pioneers, reducing their legacies to footnotes in India's entertainment historiography.

## Conclusion: Memory, Marginalization, and Musical Labor

Ramlal's trajectory underscores a pervasive bias in cinematic historiography, where biographical narratives prioritize celebrity over craftsmanship, relegating instrumentalists to footnotes unless amplified by stardom. His contributions—pivotal in films like *Aag* (1948) and *Goonj Uthi Shehnai* (1959)—were eclipsed by the luminescence of vocalists and directors, reflecting systemic hierarchies that valorize visible auteurs while erasing sonic architects. This marginalization mirrors broader trends in Indian cultural memory, where historiography often obscures collaborative networks underpinning artistic innovation. Ramlal's story illuminates the selective construction of heritage: his shehnai, though integral to postcolonial cinema's *swadeshi* soundscape, was subsumed under collective nationalist projects, rendering his labor invisible.

Situated at the intersection of sound, story, and society, Ramlal bridged Benares's classical rigor, folk traditions, and cinematic modernity, yet his absence from archives reveals how cultural memory is curated. The industry's commercial shifts—from acoustic authenticity to synthesized scores—further erased artisans like him, privileging novelty over tradition. His

posthumous obscurity exemplifies the precarity of artistic legacy in capitalist-cultural ecosystems, where non-celebrity contributors are disposable.

Revisiting Ramlal challenges dominant narratives, urging a re-examination of whose labor is memorialized. Academic inquiry must confront these omissions, employing interdisciplinary lenses—oral histories, material culture, and sonic analysis—to recover marginalized voices. His legacy, a testament to resilience and innovation, demands inclusion in curricula and public discourse, not merely as a corrective but as a reimagining of cultural historiography itself. Only by centering figures like Ramlal can we grasp the plural, contested processes shaping India's auditory imagination.

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