

International Literacy Day

In this modern world, the ability for people to read and write has been directly connected to reduced poverty, improved socio-economic status, reduced population growth, minimized child and maternal mortality rates, and balancing out gender and equality on a sustainable level. Because of this, many countries and governments, all over the world, believe that the increase of literacy rates in children will have a direct impact on the future welfare of them and their families. International Literacy Day aims to highlight the importance and value of literacy education for individuals and groups, as well as providing benefits for the wider global culture.

#CELEBRATION

Star Trek Day

“Star Trek” isn’t just a series. It’s a phenomenon that’s captivated audiences for decades.



Star Trek fans, often called Trekkies, take their passion to heart. For many, it’s not just a show but a source of inspiration and a way to connect with like-minded people. So, it doesn’t come as a surprise that there’s a Star Trek Day, celebrated every September 8th. This isn’t just any day; it’s a tribute to the day in 1966 when “Star Trek: The Original Series” first aired, introducing us to a universe of diversity, inclusion, and hope.

“Star Trek” isn’t just a series. It’s a phenomenon that’s captivated audiences for decades. It’s the brainchild of Gene Roddenberry, whose vision for a better future has inspired countless fans across generations. So, every September 8th, we don our Starfleet uniforms, engage our warp drives, and celebrate the legacy of a show that has truly gone where no one has gone before.

“Star Trek” continues to be a beacon of progress, diversity, and unity, connecting fans across generations. So, every September 8th, we don our Starfleet uniforms, engage our warp drives, and celebrate the legacy of a show that has truly gone where no one has gone before.

History
Star Trek Day has an interesting history that dates back to the first episode’s broadcast. It all started on September 8, 1966, when the very first episode of “Star Trek: The Original Series” aired.

This episode, titled “The Man Trap,” introduced viewers to a future where diversity, inclusion, acceptance, and hope were central themes. Gene Roddenberry created this vision, and it laid the foundation for what would become a significant cultural

How to Celebrate Star Trek Day

Celebrating Star Trek Day can be as adventurous and diverse as the universe it represents. Here are some stellar ways to mark this galactic occasion.

Engage in a Series Marathon

First up, why not embark on an epic journey through the stars from the comfort of your couch? Pick your favourite series or mix it up with episodes from different ones.

Host a Themed Watch Party

Bring your friends aboard for a Star Trek watch party. You can choose episodes that highlight the best of Star Trek’s values, diversity, inclusion, and the quest for knowledge. Decorate your space with Starfleet insignia, serve up some cosmic cocktails, and enjoy the camaraderie of fellow Trekkies.



Shehnai's Sweetness is fighting for survival

It was in Fatehpuri’s iconic Crown Hotel, less than a kilometre from Katra Pyare Lal, that Bismillah Khan would insist on staying when he was in Delhi, cheerfully giving audience to the musicians of the area. All these artistes were once knit in a fraternity. Even now, they know each other intimately but the structures around them have collapsed.

Malini Nair

It was pedestrianised a year ago, the pavement along Katra Pyare Lal in Chandni Chowk used to be the booking spot of Old Delhi’s shehnai players. This is where they have always waited for their

patrons, along with the accompanists, who play the unique drums that complete the shehnai ensemble, the *tasha*, *dukkad* and *nakkara*. Now, with no ornamental pillars popping up all over the sidewalk, the divider across the *katra* (small bazaar) has become their hangout. But the patrons are missing.

The business community of Old Delhi is among the few who routinely seek out the shehnai band to mark auspicious and ceremonial events. Kanta Prasad has just played at a local Jain mandir to mark a holy day and is waiting for more work to come from Ramliya troupes. In the first week of November, Delhi’s manic wedding season begins and he is hoping his calendar fills up, though, so far, he has only had a dozen requests. “There was a time when from 9 A.M. till dusk, the whole area used to buzz, you could always find 25-30 artistes here,” he said. “Between five *katras*, we used to boast of some of the greatest musicians.”

“Today, there are 60-70 artistes left scattered across Fatehpuri, Sadar Bazar, Pahargani, Nabi Karim, Bahari Dhiraj and Sitaram Bazar,” Prasad says. It is a big deal now, after the Covid-induced lockdowns, if a couple of shehnai-tasha players walk in at Katra

Pyare Lal. It was in Fatehpuri’s iconic Crown Hotel, less than a kilometre from Katra Pyare Lal, that Bismillah Khan would insist on staying when he was in Delhi, cheerfully giving audience to the musicians of the area. All these artistes were once knit in a fraternity. Even now, they know each other intimately but the structures around them have collapsed.

Image Trap

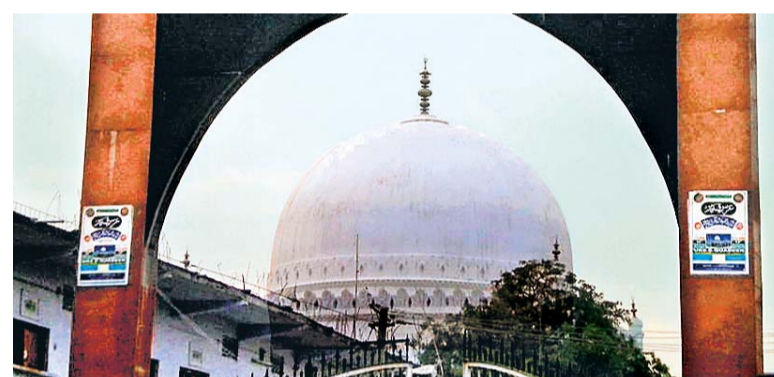
It was 20th century legends like Bismillah Khan and Anant Lal who brought what is essentially a ‘ceremonial pipe’ to the classical stage. But that did not altogether change its contemporary reality, which remains rooted in the social calendar of north, east and west India.

Far from being able to thrive in its dual identities, the shehnai is circumscribed by it. It is fighting for survival in the classical circuit since it has yet to shed its image as a “*shaadi bhajah ka baaja*.” At the same time, it is too traditional for modern-day revelries where the *Punjabi dhool* and brass bands have replaced it. “This crisis is, admittedly, not new to shehnai. It was there when its classical shift started, but the passage of time has not made things easier. What also inhibits the instrument is its immense complexity and the constricted range for *raga* exposition. Wrestling nuanced music out of it needs more than mastery, it needs wizardry and exhausting dedication. Watch a shehnai performance and see how often the musician has to adjust the reed at the end of the pipe to coax perfect notes and avoid discordant ones.”

In every generation, you never have more than 3-4 consummate shehnai players in the field,” said Ashwini, whose grandfather was the shehnai icon, Anant Lal and father the celebrated player, Daya Shankar. “It is a challenging and temperamental instrument.

Old-fashioned *naubat* performances now survive only in a few *dargahs*, where they mark the hours of prayer and so on, as documented between 1952 and 1962 by John Levy, a curator of Asian music traditions. Levy has recorded this music, featuring the shehnai and the *naqqara*, at the shrines of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer and Mubarak Shah Murad Bukhari in Mundra. This music was “intended to be heard in the

#MUSIC



Shehnai in the Naubat tradition at the dargah of Khwaja Banda Nawaz Gesudaraz in Hyderabad.

fewer still manage to master it. No music school or college includes it in the curriculum. Its makers, mostly in Varanasi, are struggling to survive.

This crisis is, admittedly, not new to shehnai. It was there when its classical shift started, but the passage of time has not made things easier. What also inhibits the instrument is its immense complexity and the constricted range for *raga* exposition. Wrestling nuanced music out of it needs more than mastery, it needs wizardry and exhausting dedication. Watch a shehnai performance and see how often the musician has to adjust the reed at the end of the pipe to coax perfect notes and avoid discordant ones.

In every generation, you never have more than 3-4 consummate shehnai players in the field,” said Ashwini, whose grandfather was the shehnai icon, Anant Lal and father the celebrated player, Daya Shankar. “It is a challenging and temperamental instrument.

Old-fashioned *naubat* performances now survive only in a few *dargahs*, where they mark the hours of prayer and so on, as documented between 1952 and 1962 by John Levy, a curator of Asian music traditions. Levy has recorded this music, featuring the shehnai and the *naqqara*, at the shrines of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer and Mubarak Shah Murad Bukhari in Mundra. This music was “intended to be heard in the



open,” said Levy, and it could not afford the “subtleties of refined indoor music.” But it did acquire subtleties and move indoors in the early decades of the 20th century.

Classical Shift

In the mid-19th century, the shehnai, as we know it, started coming into its own. “But its classical range was severely limited because of structural issues, so it could only be played to perform very short *raga-centric* pieces with folk elements, such as thumri, *dadra*, *chaiti*, *kajri*, *jhoola* or *dhun*,” said Sanjeev Shankar. *Badhai*, *prabhati* and *pujaya* are other ceremonial music forms that he mentions.

The earliest available classical recording (1904) of the shehnai is by one Talim Hussain of Lucknow. Flora points to the fact that it is labelled “*Bhairavi thumri*,” suggesting “vocal connections from the 19th century, and the importance of Lucknow in the history of *thumri*, a new genre of vocal music.” This is likely the first evidence that the shehnai was heading for a classical future, and a link to vocal (*gayaki*) style.

When and how did the shehnai actually make the big transition? In his MPhil dissertation on “*The Origins, Evolution and Present of Classical Shehnai*,” Sanjeev Shankar points out that this began after shehnai players started going to *Hindustani* vocalists for training and began weaving classical elements into their performance.

He cites the example of Nandlal, who trained under Banarasi *gharana*’s vocalist, Bade Ramdas Mishra and multiple

ustads and pandits of thumri, khayal and dhrupad. Bismillah Khan was also a *shagird* of Lucknow vocalist, Ahmed Hussain Khan. Anant Lal of Benares *thumri* maestro Mahadev Prasad Mishra, and Shankarrao Gaekwad of Baroda *khayal* legend Bhaskarrao Bakharekar.

This trend set off the shehnai’s classical engagement and its performance became more deliberative, slow and sweet in tone, in keeping with the principles or *raga* progression. But its tone was still shrill and more suited for fast playing. “In those early decades, the classicism never went beyond small, set compositions such as the *thumri* or *chhota khayal* because the reed in the shehnai was made from *tad* (palm leaf) leaves, which did not allow the player to explore the lower octave or higher octave much,” said Sanjeev. “Which meant playing only some *ragas* and then too, for limited time.”

The shehnai underwent its biggest transformation when Benares players decided to switch from palm to elephant grass reed (*narkati*). “This brought immense sweetness, fluidity and range to the sound, increasing its classical bandwidth. It was Bismillah Khan who gave the shehnai star power with his emotionally appealing work on the classical stage and in films. He burst into popular culture with the track of *Goonj Uthi Shehnai* (1959), a love story featuring Rajendra Kumar as a shehnai player. Khan’s work for the film was stunning, especially in a *raga-mala* composition where his shehnai melted fluidly into the voice of the great Amir Khan. The shehnai has always been one of Bollywood’s most favourite instruments. Anyone who has watched

old Hindi films is unlikely to forget its shrill notes tearing through the cinema hall any time the plot hit a poignant moment of bereavement, abandonment and loss. And, of course, it was a staple in wedding scenes.

Wedding Season

The classical tradition also fed back into the folk tradition, spawning a large community of shehnai players in Old Delhi, Anant Lal, originally from Benares and fondly called ‘*Babuji*,’ dropped anchor in Nabi Karim after he started working under Ravi Shankar at the AIR Vadya Vrinda. He went on to mentor many aspirants. One of them was Hari Singh, who became the *guru* of Kanta Prasad. Unlike him, many learners chose to carve a career in shehnai-tasha ensembles. “Playing classical shehnai was not an option for many of us who had to support large families,” said Prasad, who sometimes sits on the concerts of the Shankar brothers to provide *sur* (drone). “But even among us, there are those who can just pull off a few tunes and others who have in-depth knowledge of music.”

When the wedding season comes around, and the farmhouses of Chhattarpur, Gurgaon, GT Karnal Road, Alipur and Mehrauli double up as banquet halls, Prasad will be called in to perform mostly welcome music for the groom or bride. If he is lucky, his troupe will play on the stage for a brief while. What does he play mostly? “Few care what they play. It is usually a bunch of popular tunes, *bhajans*, *Inhi logon ne*, *Yeh desh hai mere jaaanon ka*, what else?” he said, not really looking for an answer.

rajeshsharma1049@gmail.com



Sanjeev Shankar and Ashwini Shankar.

#INSPIRATION

HULA HOOPING PRODIGY

Sinaya Biyani, a 7-year-old *hula hooping* prodigy from Jaipur, discovered her passion 14 months ago, and has since performed at over 20 prestigious events. Balancing her love for hooping with academics, she dreams of becoming the best hula hooper in the world, and representing India on a global stage.



Tusharika Singh
Freelancer Writer and City Blogger

Amidst the daily hustle of school and homework, there’s a young talent whose mastery over the *hula hoop* is turning heads. Sinaya Biyani, a 7-year-old student from Neerja Modi School, has emerged as an exceptional hula hoop performer, captivating audiences with her graceful skill. Her journey, which began just a little over a year ago, is one of pure passion and an unshakable connection with her hoop.



The Spark of Inspiration

Sinaya recalls the moment that started it all. “I remember visiting a kids’ carnival with my mother, where I saw a few kids doing waist hooping. I was fascinated and tried it myself. To my surprise, I got it on my first try! From that moment, I knew I wanted to learn hula hooping,” she says. What began as an innocent curiosity quickly evolved into the hoop becoming an extension of herself.

Finding Confidence on Stage

Her first public performance was at her hula hoop instructor’s annual academy show, a defining moment that solidified her love for the stage. “It was just me and the stage, and nothing else. That feeling was phenomenal,” she recalls, describing the joy and adrenaline of that first solo appearance. Despite being an introverted child, Sinaya found her confidence in the spotlight, with hula hooping transforming her from a shy student to a spirited performer.

A Unique Approach to Practice

Looking at her hula hooping skills, it is difficult to believe that Sinaya does not adhere to a strict practice regimen. “I go with the flow,” she explains. “Some days, it is single hoops, other days, it is multiple or twin hoops. And sometimes, I just dance without the hoop.” Her practice sessions are a mix of structure and spontaneity, but when a big performance approaches, she dedicates her weekends and holidays to perfecting her routines.

A Rising Star

Having already performed at over 20 high-profile events, Sinaya’s portfolio is impressive for someone so young. Yet, her favorite remains the annual show at her instructor’s academy. “It is a whole month of being surrounded by hoops, props, friends, and performances. It is always the best time of the year,” she says, cherishing the camaraderie and creative energy that fuels her growth.

Balancing Academics and Passion

Balancing schoolwork with her passion comes naturally to Sinaya. “It is not that difficult when you love something. I just make sure to finish my homework before practice,” she explains. And it’s not just hula hooping where she excels. Sinaya is also a gold medalist in the Math Olympiad for Grade 1, showing that her focus extends beyond the stage.

Support and Inspiration

Her journey has been supported by key figures, including her hula hoop instructor, Mr. Atif Bhat, whom she credits with teaching her the art form. “He’s the best hula hooper and the source of my energy on stage,” she says. Sinaya is also inspired by renowned hula hoopers and cricketer star, Virat Kohli, whose hard work and confidence resonate deeply with her.



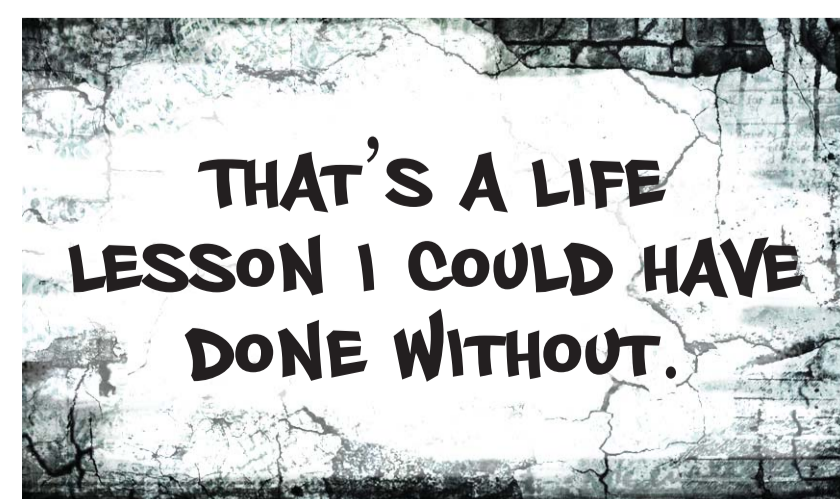
Aspirations for the Future

As for the future, Sinaya’s goals are clear. “I tell my parents that I want to be a hula hoop instructor one day. But before that, I want to become the best hula hooper in the world,” she says with a smile. Representing India on a global stage and winning a title for her country is a dream she holds close to her heart.

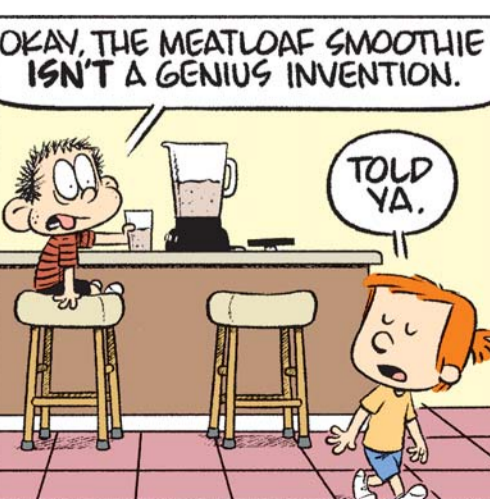
Words of Wisdom

To other kids looking to pursue their passions, Sinaya offers simple yet profound advice: “Try as many things as you can. When you find something you love, put your heart and soul into it. Very few people get to do what they truly enjoy so, when you find that thing, work for it because nothing feels better than that.” With her spirit and talent, Sinaya Biyani is not just spinning hoops, she’s spinning her way towards a bright future.

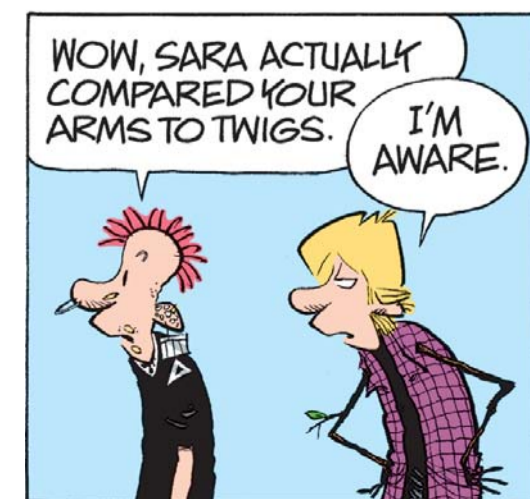
THE WALL



BABY BLUES



ZITS



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman