

Pandit Ramlall
BA, DipEd Vedic Scholar

Pandit Ramlall is a well known Vedic scholar and founder of the Arya Spiritual Center in New York. He is a well-loved doyen among Guyanese religious and political leaders, a legend as one of the most influential leaders of the Hindu faith of Guyanese heritage.

From an early age, he had a passion for learning all about Hindu religion and culture, and with equal verve, fighting to better the lot of fellow Guyanese. These have forged in this humble and affectionate Guyanese, commitment, vigor, and boundless energy to be a fearless leader in the fight for freedom from injustice under colonial rule in British Guiana, and a learned exponent of Hindu Vedic thought, an accomplished scholar of Sanskrit and Hindi.

He was born on February 28, 1928, in British Guiana. He was orphaned at an early age, only age four when his father died and age seven when he lost his mother. His father had come from India, indentured to Port Mourant, then went to Skeldon. He was raised in a Hindi-speaking environment of his uncle's home.



Ramlall had a rough childhood. He worked in his uncle Goberdhan's bakery business as a child from as early as he can remember. He had no opportunity to go to school. He had to find work instead. He was only nine when he was helping out men building the road, for which he was given a pittance. He fetched water to give to the men to soak burned bricks before they pounded them into smaller bits to make up the red brick road. He was one of a number of young boys who worked in the Creole gang in the fields at the sugar estate. Their job was to fetch water and earth to make up the beds where they grew sugar cane. Their boss was a fierce man who didn't spare the whip when he didn't get his way.

A better job came when Ramlall, finding himself near the tennis courts where the white overseers played, picked up tennis balls outside the courts. For this he got six cents a day.

One kind overseer, Mr. Shultz, then gave him the job of housekeeper. It was a decent job, a servant to the overseer, to do errands and minor chores in the house. For this he had to look tidy and wear clean shirt and pants. This led to a better job in the estate porter gang. Mr. Shultz then found him an opening in sugar boiling, where he could learn sugar boiling and be a chemist. He was getting on well there, until the chief chemist fired him. The man was an Orthodox Hindu. He learned that Ramlall was from an Arya Samajist family, regarded then as religious upstarts. Despite protest from fellow workers, the boss had his way.

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Another white overseer, Mr. Scargall, came to Ramlall's rescue. Scargall was the welfare officer at the sugar estate. Ramlall was given work in the mechanical section operating the lawn mowers in the estate.

By this time, Ramlall had developed his knowledge of Hindi and Hindu religious ceremonies. He also sang well. There was a public meeting at which Skeldon Pandit Deodat presided. Scargall suggested to Ramlall that he could attend the meeting also and conduct the Hindu prayers. This he did, and his abilities were acknowledged. There was also a fund-raising event at Albion Sugar Estate, where Ramlall contributed with his singing. At the same time, through the guidance of Mr. Scargall, he secured a steady job as a mailman in the sugar estate. He did this job for over ten years.

From very early in life he was active in the Arya Samaj and became a practicing pandit of the Arya Samaj at age nineteen.

The Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformation and intellectual movement, was founded in 1875 in preindependence India by Swami Dayananda. Its purpose was to adhere to the teachings of the Vedas, summarized in the Sanskrit words "Krinvanto Vishvam Aryam" (Make the Whole World Noble). It was active in education and social reform in the early years of the India's struggle for independence from colonial rule.

From his youth, Ramlall fervently promoted the tenets of Arya Samaj. He seized every opportunity to learn from the Arya Samaj (Vedic) missionaries who came to British Guiana from India, including Pandit Ayodhya Prasad, Professor Bhaskaranand, Pandit Narayan Dutta, Shrimati Janki Devi, Pandit Bhesh Pati Sinha, and Pandit Usharbudh Arya.

In addition to being a Hindu priest and a postman, he was also a good Hindi teacher. In the early 1950s he played a leading role in the Hindi Schools Convention. This annual event, organized by the American Aryan League in British Guiana, was a showcase for students of Hindi schools throughout the country. Top students were brought by their teachers to display their learning and talent in speaking Hindi, reading shlokas (verses) from the Vedas, Ramayan, and Gita, singing bhajans (Hindu hymns), and group performances.

At the Hindi Schools Convention, a panel of judges from among the senior pandits in the country adjudicated. The best students were suitably awarded prizes by the chief guest. The chief guest, a prominent person in the country, included among others in British Guiana the acting governor, the mayor of Georgetown, and the district commissioner, Upper Corentyne.

Ramlall's knowledge of Hindu scriptures and philosophy, coupled with his grasp of the essentials of the ancient and sacred language Sanskrit and his excellent command in speaking Hindi, made him stand out among contemporaries. He did so over years of hard work, self-study, and dedication.

Under the guidance of Pandit Usharbudh Arya (now Swami Veda Bharati), Pandit Ramlall became a leader in the youth movement known as the Arya Veer Dal. This was in the late 1950s. He excelled in the Arya Veer Dal, which provided a combination of yoga exercises and meditation. This youth movement, which began in Arya Samaj of India and was known to be associated with the India independence struggle, provided Pandit Ramlall a formidable training ground for strict spiritual discipline and physical training.

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He has dedicated his life to freedom and justice. He was an indomitable leader in the fight for human rights and was a stalwart in the campaign for an independent Guyana under the leadership of Dr. Cheddi Jagan. Because of his activism, he was jailed with others in 1964 by the British government. During his incarceration at the Sibley Hall Detention Center, he taught many of the other inmates to read and speak Hindi and educated them in Vedic philosophy.

He was a teacher at the Tagore Memorial High School, Corentyne, Berbice, Guyana. There he was the head of Hindi classes for seventeen years, and he taught other subjects as well.

In 1974, Pandit Ramlall was awarded a two-year scholarship by the government of India for intensive studies in Hindi at the Kendriya Hindi Sansthan, New Delhi, India.

In 1979, Pandit Ramlall emigrated to New York, where he obtained employment and also enrolled at Roshell College. He completed his bachelor's degree in psychology and subsequently, the DipEd (diploma in education). He was employed at New York County Health and Hospital Corporation as hospital care investigator. He was also a union representative for the Local 371 Civil Service Union.

Pandit Ramlall's commitment to his passion for learning and sharing his knowledge of Vedic philosophy and culture, combined with his scholarly accomplishments in the Hindi and Sanskrit languages, propelled him on to more significant roles on the world stage in the United States, in Canada, Europe, the Caribbean, and India.

He is the founder and spiritual head of the Arya Spiritual Center, a pioneering institution of its kind, at Queens, New York. He is a patron of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of New York. He is the founder of the Cultural Center in East Coast Demerara, Guyana.

He has gained international recognition for his missionary work. He regularly travels to Surinam, Guyana, Netherlands, Europe, the United States, Canada, and India, where he lectures on Hinduism. He is a motivational speaker, a spiritual guide, and religious counselor. He has authored many books, and articles on Hinduism.

Pandit Ramlall was the special guest of the Vedic Cultural Center in Markham, Toronto, on March 8, 2008, where a prayer service was held to honor him on his eightieth birthday.

Adit Kumar, distinguished journalist, wrote an illuminating report on the event, for *Indo-Caribbean World's* March 19, 2008 issue of *Community News*. He described the celebration, noted the many other events held to honor Panditji on his special birthday, and traced his remarkable life story from his childhood. Adit Kumar wrote, in part:

The occasion was used to recognize the esteemed religious personality for his outstanding contribution toward the spread of Vedic philosophy worldwide. He was presented a plaque by the presidents of Toronto Arya Samaj and Arya Samaj Markham, Mr. Anand Rupnarain and Pt. Amar Erry, respectively.

Among those who extended their personal good wishes to Pt. Ramlall were many of his long-standing friends and coreligionists that included Dr. Ganraj Kumar and Dr. Krishna Persaud ...

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This was only one of many similar celebrations to mark Pt. Ramlall's attainment of the status of an octogenarian. He was likewise felicitated at the Central Vedic Mandir in Georgetown, Guyana, as well as at the Vedic Mandir in Nickerie, Surinam, on February 28, his actual birth date. In New York, where Pt. Ramlall is domiciled, celebrations were held at the Trimurthi Sanatan Dharm Mandir, the Arya Spiritual Center and at the Fair Field Pavilion in Richmond Hill.

Kenneth Persaud, esteemed writer, a former headmaster and university lecturer, in a reverential biography of Pandit Ramlall, paid homage to this exemplary Guyanese religious and political leader. Pointing to the pandit's role in Guyana's fight for independence, he stated, in part:

Pandit Ramlall is one of Guyana's distinguished sons. He has been in the forefront for Guyana's independence since the middle of the last century. For resistance to the British Raj, in his fight for freedom for all Guyanese, he suffered imprisonment by the British in 1964. He was granted a pardon and released on Independence Day, May 26, 1966.

This freedom fighter continued to dedicate his life to freedom, justice and the protection of children ... by dint of selfless duty to his people, he continued to support and influence the youths of Guyana and the United States.

Pandit Ramlall ... has been a leading light in his work with inter-faith groups both in New York and elsewhere around the world. He says that his sole aim is to engender peace and harmony among religious faiths and especially among the Indian community ...

He initiated the Phagwah festival in New York, which has become highly respected with the colorful attendance of thousands of participants, including elected officials ...

Most recently recognizing the plight of children and the great need for housing and care facilities in Guyana, Pt. Ramlall has built an orphanage in the Corentyne, Guyana, he himself an orphan. It is testimony to his strength of character and perseverance that he has risen to become one of the most respected pandits and revered persons both in the United States and at home ...

He has also published the *Vedavandana* and produced an English version. It is a book of prayers and contains spiritual and healing songs as well. He also wrote three Hindi textbooks.

Panditji's accomplishments have received recognition at the highest levels.

In 1975, in the presence of Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India, and Dr. Sewsagar Ramgoolam, prime minister of Mauritius, at the first Vishwa Hindi Sammelan (World Hindi Conference) in Nagpur, India, he was presented with a prestigious literary award.

On the occasion of Dr. Shyam Sundar Das centenary celebration organized by Nagri Pracharini Sabha, he was, among thirty-two other literary scholars, presented with an award by the vice president of India, Shri BB Jatti.

He was a guest of honor at the 16th International Ramayan Conference in India, which was attended by intellectuals and academics from twelve different countries around the world. He has attended every Ramayana Conference since its inception in 1984 and represented Guyana and the United States in different locations in the world. In 1984 he received the Vishwa Hindi Darshan Award.

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He was also nominated as chief delegate representing the Vishwa Sahita Sanskriti Sansthan (Institute of World Literature and Culture) to the Tenth International Ramayana Conference in India, in 1993. Pt. Ramlall was awarded the honor of chief guest at the Kanya Kumari Seventh International Hindi Seminar in 1997.

In 2002, the National Arya Samaj Award was presented to him and the Vedic Cultural Center Award at their Annual Dinner and Awards Program.

On the occasion of Phagwah celebrations in New York in 2003, Ms. Helen Marshall, Queens borough president, declared March 23 as Pandit Ramlall Day, he being the founder of an important ingredient in the cultural fabric of the city. The citation of the county's Declaration of Honor says, in part:

This declaration acknowledges Pandit Ramlall on the occasion of the Hindu festival of Phagwah ... A priest, scholar, and a leader for Guyana's struggle for independence, Pandit Ramlall has continued to live by his humanitarian ideals in New York, as a union representative, as the founder of the Arya Spiritual Center, and as a pioneer of the Phagwah Festival Parade in Queens. Through his interfaith work and his special concern for children, he lights the way for all people.

The prestigious Bharat Gaurav (Pride of India) Award was bestowed on him on January 8, 2005, by the India International Friendship Society (IIFS) for sterling community service at home and abroad, for "your fight in life and your worthy example to inspire others to a certain remarkable achievement." The IIFS is an organization of international repute and influence. Some of the past recipients of this coveted award include Her Holiness Mother Theresa; a former vice president of India, movie stars, and the famous cricket star Sunil Gavaskar.

In 2006, the International Arya Samaj presented Panditji with the International Service Award.

Pandit Ramlall is now a retired social worker from the Cumberland Hospital and Woodhall Hospital, Brooklyn, New York. He has been appointed commissioner of deeds for the state of New York and also voluntary chaplain of NY Transit Authority.

He continues to serve and lead the way to make real those values of his faith, "Make the whole world noble," lecturing around the world and writing on Vedic philosophy.

Sources:

Biography of Pandit Ramlall by K. Persaud. August 27, 2008.

Website accessed January 6, 2009: www.indocaribbeanworld.com/archives/march 19.2008/community.
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