

# Celebrating a genius

## *The Bust of Ramanujan*

An extended lull between one's intent and action sometimes leads to an unexpected positive outcome. I first read about the self-taught mathematical genius Srinivasa Ramanujan in Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*. Writing from a British jail, Nehru described Ramanujan's brief life and death as 'symbolic of conditions in India. Of our millions how few get any education at all.'

Nearly a decade elapsed before Ramanujan invaded my consciousness through an article in the New York Times titled "An isolated genius is given his due" (1987). As an Indian I felt proud; like many others, I was intrigued by Ramanujan's tragic and compelling life story. In a pensive moment, I reflected on how his life and achievements captured so splendidly later by Robert Kanigel in *The man who knew infinity*, might be memorialized. I was a banker living in New York then and had no idea about how I might pay tribute to a genius. Then PBS (NOVA) featured an absorbing and fascinating documentary entitled "The man who loved numbers". Through interviews with Cambridge dons and Mrs. Janaki Ramanujan in India, the film explored Ramanujan's short and remarkable life and extraordinary contributions to mathematics. It ended on a wistful note – while Ramanujan's collaborator G.H. Hardy would be remembered through a plaque at Trinity College, there was no plaque or bust of Ramanujan at Trinity.

I mentioned the PBS film to my uncle on a visit to Madras in 1989/1990. To my surprise, he offered to arrange for me to meet Mrs. Ramanujan. The same evening I was led into Mrs. Ramanujan's modest home in Triplicane. A frail woman in her nineties, hard of hearing with bright liquid eyes and a sweet smile welcomed me. The small, nondescript room where we sat and talked for less than an hour was made exceptional only by an arresting bust of Ramanujan, made by Paul Granlund, and gifted by a group of international mathematicians. Ramanujan's presence shone through the bust and dominated the room. I was impressed with the sculptor's skill in capturing Ramanujan's deep and penetrating gaze into the beyond; almost suggesting he was privy to a secret knowledge not within the reach of mere mortals. Yearningly and, almost surreally, Mrs. Ramanujan in Tamil spoke about her husband as if he had just died. For him, she said with tears in her eyes, "the only thing that mattered was numbers, numbers and numbers." Looking forlorn, she said that her husband was forgotten - a math teacher from England of Indian origin and I had been her only visitors in a long time. As our meeting drew to a close, I offered Mrs. Ramanujan a customary gift, a sari and some fruit. I leaned towards her, gently held her slender hand, and told her that she was exceptionally fortunate for having had the opportunity to love and care for her husband, who had found a lasting place among India's greatest heroes. A smile lit up her face. As I walked out of her home I was led by her foster son

to a street where I was shown several fine-looking water color paintings of Ramanujan. I purchased a few of them - R as a boy in traditional dhoti, his mother braiding his pigtail, a picture of the goddess Namagiri in the background; a young R and an innocent, almost playful, Janaki facing the sacred fire, reciting vedic mantras at their wedding; R wearing a U shaped caste mark, reading a math book; R in a cap and gown receiving a certificate from an English university. In my mind's eye that night I saw a young man dying, with pen and notebook in hand, working passionately on rarefied mathematical formulae.

My wish to memorialize Ramanujan became reality almost a decade later, when as the head of the Agastya International Foundation I felt it would be inspirational for village children and teachers to have a bust of Ramanujan in the Agastya campus in Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh. After a brief search, we appointed Mr. Jayaprakash Shirgaonkar, the well known Mumbai-based sculptor to make the bust (1). Working from two of four extant pictures, Mr. Shirgaonkar initially produced a clay model of Ramanujan. Agastya Managing Trustee, Mahavir and I compared the model with Ramanujan's pictures, one of which appeared on the 1962 commemorative Indian stamp. We watched in fascination as Mr. Shirgaonkar honed and sculpted the bust to capture Ramanujan's distinctive features and intense gaze. Fully satisfied with the progress, we left him to complete the job. A few months later a youthful looking bronze bust, thirty three inches high and weighing fifty kilos arrived on campus, where it was unveiled by 2006 Ramanujan Prize winner Ms. Sujatha Ramdorai and members of the Prime Minister's National Knowledge Commission, in early 2008.

More than a year later my father K.V. Raghavan, a founder trustee of Agastya, suggested that Agastya should gift a bust of Ramanujan to Cambridge University, his alma mater. I thought this was an excellent idea and requested Sujatha to speak to John Coates, our common friend at Cambridge. Sujatha called back to say that John and his colleagues at the Centre for Mathematical Sciences would be delighted to display Ramanujan's bust at the Centre. In keeping with Agastya's mission to inspire and spark creativity among young Indians, Agastya decided to gift Ramanujan's bust to two premier Indian educational institutions. At Sujatha's suggestion, Agastya gifted a bust to the TIFR's Centre for Applicable Mathematics, Bangalore, where it was unveiled in the library on December 22, 2009, Ramanujan's one hundred and twenty third birth anniversary by Prof. K. Ramachandra, publisher of the Hardy-Ramanujan Journal. Speakers on the occasion included Prof. Srikanth, Centre Director and Dr. V.K. Aatre, former adviser to the Minister of Defence, Government of India. An Agastya mobile math lab

---

(1) Among Mr. Shirgaonkar's works using the lost wax process are the equestrian statue of Emperor Shivaji (Sahar International Airport, Mumbai) and busts of Mahatma Gandhi (Hull City, England), Sardar Patel (India House, London) and Julius Nyerere (Tanzanian parliament).

for rural children was launched by Dr. V.S. Ramamurthy, Director, National Institute of Advanced Studies. Agastya gifted a second bust to the Indian Institute of Technology – Madras, where it was installed in the foyer of the main Humanities and Sciences Block, and unveiled by the world famous agricultural scientist Dr. M.S. Swaminathan in the presence of IIT-M Director, Dr. M.S. Ananth on March 31, 2010. A cash award was promised to students who produced the most innovative math and science models for dissemination in rural schools. The speakers at both events quoted Ramanujan's inspiring example to communicate the uplifting message, to students, faculty and staff, that originality, intuition, passion, faith and profound commitment can rise over any obstacle and elevate one to the highest peaks of human achievement.

In May, 2010 my family and I had the pleasure of joining John Coates, Martin Hyland, Tadashi Tokieda and Sally Lowe for lunch at John's office in Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Lunch was followed by a visit to the Centre for Mathematical Sciences, where we looked admiringly at Srinivasa Ramanujan's magnificent bust. Ramanujan's eyes, commented Martin, were gazing at some faraway realm. The bust as promised was installed at a prominent location, where, in John's words, "literally hundreds of students will pass it each morning...and (the bust) will be a constant reminder to our large student body in mathematics, who comes from all over the world, of the greatness of Indian mathematical thought."

**Ramji Raghavan**

Agastya International Foundation