

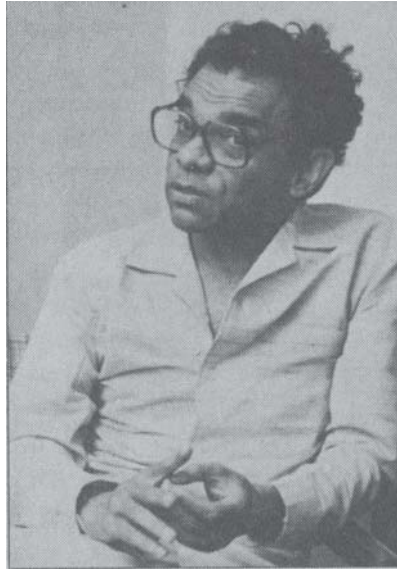
A.K. Ramanujan

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When A.K. Ramanujan died in Chicago on August 13, 1993, the world lost an exceptional human being and scholar. He was 64 years old. He had entered the hospital for minor surgery, yet the anesthesia bore him away. Active and writing to the last day of his life, he left the twentieth century richer by the quality of person that he represented, and by the bequest of his written work.

'Raman' as he was called by his friends, was a person of great gentleness. He was a slight man with penetrating eyes behind spectacles, a high, worried-looking forehead, broad nostrils, curly black hair. To me, he somehow conjured up the image of a lion: a stylised lion from folk art, with a grandeur and serenity befitting such a king among creatures.

Like most people, I met Raman first through the written word; his luminous English translations of medieval Kannada bhakti poetry in a white paperback book with a Nataraj on the cover: *Speaking of Shiva*. Later, I read his translation of U.R. Ananthamurthy's Kannada novel, *Samskara*, with a dazzling concluding essay. Still later, his essays on Kannada folktales; then, a groundbreaking edited volume on folklore, *Another Harmony*, then, startlingly, in a literary journal, his poems: refined as haikus, wise, and also wonderfully funny. All these different modes of expression and such surefooted virtuosity in every one. What kind of man, I wondered, could stand behind these



productions? (In listing what I encountered, incidentally, I also reveal my own ignorance — for example, that he was a widely published poet in Kannada, that he translated ancient and modern Tamil, Sanskrit and Malayalam poetry, that key articles of his on patterns in Indian culture, long circulating in manuscript, were surfacing into print in the late '80s).

Though Raman taught at Chicago for 32 years, he also was a visiting professor at different universities. I met him in 1987 when he was teaching at Harvard and I happened to visit Cambridge. Raman invited me to lunch at the faculty club. This was the first of several lunches scattered through the years, in which he encouraged me, a scholar young, awkward, insecure, who shared his passion for folktales.

The demands on Raman's time must have always been enormous, yet I believe he made many people feel as I did — that he cared for me, that my work was worthwhile. Even as his care focused on individuals, it was part of his orientation to the world. He lived with care, taught with care, wrote with care. It was a sage-like quality of attentiveness.

This caring aspect found its way into Raman's writings as an empathy for different points of view and the constraints they each carried. Rather than holding to any one authoritative idea of what constituted Indian culture, Raman identified a multiplicity of perspectives. In his diverse writings he explored this multiplicity at the level of self, folklore, religion, gender, literature, history. Multiplicity was never simply listed — he showed up dynamic rankings, crossings, shiftings, mirrorings. This interest in moving across boundaries took Raman also into the realm of women's oral traditions, which he identified as often belonging to the domestic realm and expressing values that contradicted Brahminical tenets (such as *karma*, *dharma*, or rebirth). Collecting Kannada folktales over several decades, he pointed out that folktales are often woman-centered even when they are not exclusively told by women: they express dilemmas that frame women's lives, and so carry a different structure than male-centered tales. For example, woman-centered folktales often begin with marriage, with travails following this

event, and end with reunion, while male-centered stories are often adventure quests that might end with acquiring a wife. As his old friend and colleague, Narayana Rao puts it, “Raman was intellectually and emotionally androgynous. He was a man, but he understood what it was to be a woman. He himself had nurturing qualities, that included actually feeding you.”

Raman did not just write about multiplicity; he lived it. *A New York Times* obituary, published several days after Raman died, reported him once quipping that he was the hyphen in Indo-American. Indeed, he managed to live effectively in between two countries, interpreting each to the other. Born in Mysore, he earned an M. A. in English literature from Mysore University, and a Ph.D. in linguistics from Indiana University.

He wrote in Kannada and in English, and was awarded both a Padma Sri and a MacArthur Foundation award. When in India, he taught English literature; when he emigrated to America, he taught South Asian literatures and languages. Just as he cross-fertilised cultural currents from India and America, he also dismantled the borders between disciplinary fields. Poet, folklorist, translator, linguist, anthropologist, literary critic, social critic: he was everywhere, in many fields, difficult to define and always compellingly lucid.

Giving form to ideas and emotions through precisely chosen words, Raman altered the outlooks of those who knew or read him. As I now work on a book manuscript about one Kangra woman’s repertoire of folktales, I recall daily that this book was partly his idea.

I wonder how many people scattered across the continents find A.K. Ramanujan’s influence reverberating — gently and powerfully — through their lives. □

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