
SCIENCE NEWS

SRINIVASA RAMANUJAN*

I AM somewhat embarrassed to communicate some remarks about Ramanujan to this assembly which includes so many who have a far deeper appreciation of Ramanujan as a mathematician than I can even pretend to have. As far as I can judge, my only credentials are my knowing of Ramanujan for a longer time than any of you and my good fortune in having secured for Hardy the photograph of Ramanujan that appears as a frontispiece to his Harvard Lectures of 1936 and which was later to provide the basis for the bust that is being unveiled here today. I understand from Richard Askey that I am to tell you something about what Ramanujan has meant to India, and more particularly to the development of science in India during the past sixty and more years.

I said that I have known of Ramanujan for a far longer period than any of you. Perhaps the circumstances of my first learning of his name may already give you some idea of what Ramanujan meant to India of the twenties and the succeeding decades.

It must have been a day in April, 1920, when I was not quite ten years old, when my mother told me of an item in the newspaper of the day that a famous Indian mathematician, Ramanujan by name, had died the preceding day; and she told me further that Ramanujan had gone to England some years earlier, had collaborated with some famous English mathematicians, and that he had returned only very recently, and was well known internationally for what he had achieved. Of course at that time I had no idea of what kind of a mathematician Ramanujan was. But his role for the development of science in India did not depend upon his being understood! The fact that his early years were spent in a mathematically and a scientifically sterile atmosphere, that his life in India was not without hardships, that under circumstances that appeared to most Indians as nothing short of miraculous he had gone to Cambridge, supported by eminent mathematicians, and had returned to India with every

assurance that he would be considered, in time, as one of the most original mathematicians of the century—these facts were enough—more than enough—for aspiring young Indian students to break their bonds of intellectual confinement and perhaps soar the way that Ramanujan had.

It may be argued, perhaps with some justice, that this was a sentimental attitude: Ramanujan represents so extreme a fluctuation from the norm that his being born an Indian must be considered to a large extent as accidental. But to Indians of the time, Ramanujan was not unique in the way we think of him today. He was one of others who had, during that same period, achieved, in their judgement, comparably in science and in other areas of human activity. Gandhi, the two Nehrus, father and son, Rabindranath Tagore, J. C. Bose, C. V. Raman, M. N. Saha, S. N. Bose, and a host of others, were in the forefront of the then fermenting Indian scene. The twenties and the thirties were a period when young Indians were inspired for achievement and accomplishment by these men whom they saw among them.

I do not wish to leave the impression that Ramanujan's influence was only in this very generalized sense. I think it is fair to say that almost all the mathematicians who reached distinction during the three or four decades following Ramanujan were directly or indirectly inspired by his example. T. Vijayaraghavan, S. Chowla, S. S. Pillai, C. T. Rajagopal, K. Chandrasekharan, C. P. Ramanujam, Raghavan Narasimhan, Harish Chandra and many others have at one time or another expressed their personal indebtedness to Ramanujan's example. What more is there to say? My own view, sixty-five years after my first knowing of his name, is that India and the Indian scientific community were exceptionally fortunate in having before them the example of Ramanujan. It is hopeless to try to emulate him. But he was there even as the Everest is there.

* Remarks made by Prof. S. Chandrasekhar, University of Chicago, on the occasion of the unveiling of a bust of Ramanujan at the University of Cambridge.