TIMELESS LEGACY: A LIVING LEGEND

BRAJ KISHOR GUPTA

It was October 11, 2012. The venue was Faculty Hall of Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. The occasion was 125th Birth Anniversary of Srinivasa Ramanujan. The stage was studded with celebrities like Shri N. R. Narayana Murthy, Chairman Emeritus INFOSYS, Prof. M. S. Narsimhan, a noted Mathematician in the country and Shri Ramji Raghavan, the architect of Agastya International Foundation, Bangalore. They all graced the unveiling ceremony of the bust of the great Indian Mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, who has become an epitome of timeless legacy in the field of Mathematics.

It was sheer joy to be rubbing shoulders with dignitaries thanks to the special invitation extended to me by my Mr. Shrish Penurkar, who is an alumnus of Indian Institute of Science. His forte is to promote the interest of his friends. I had however no inkling then that the day would prove to be much eventful; it could be a day of discovery of timeless legacy and a meeting with a living legend? The man was no ordinary mortal! He is the heart throb of Karnataka and pride of India. He inspires the youth with his extraordinary achievements and impeccable conduct both in personal and professional life. He is a role model for the budding entrepreneurs and professionals. Mr Narayana Murthy, the man was the Guest of Honor.

I was equally thrilled to interact with Professor M.S. Narasimhan and Shri Ramji Raghavan; they took us through the memory lanes of the life and time of Ramanujan. It was quite motivating to know about the childhood story of Srinivasa Ramanujan. He was indeed a precocious child who became a mathematician much before anybody could even think of training him. No wonder, he is considered to be a self taught genius. Our youth can

derive much inspiration from his life and struggle. In fact, Ramanujan was born at Erode in Tamil Nadu on December 22, 1887 to poor parents Srinivasa Iyengar and his wife Komalahammal. But poverty could not come on the path of his achievements; he topped at the Primary examination at the District level and earned for himself a scholarship to study at Town High School, Kombakonam. Kombakonam was then regarded as the "Cambridge of South India." It is true he was an enigma to his teachers and classmates alike more for his prodigious memory. His love for numbers was so deep and real that it absorbed all his time and attention. He failed in his Annual First Examination in Arts (FA) in Government College because of his poor marks in subjects other than Mathematics. As a consequence, he lost his scholarship and had to leave Kombakonam . Later, he completed his second year FA at Pachaiyappa's College, Madras and appeared for the examination in December 1907. Ramanujan failed again for the same reason as before. But it is heartening to know that nothing could dampen his spirit to excel in Mathematics and emerge a force to reckon with. It is no surprise; he could make meaty contributions to the theory of partitions: congruence properties, asymptotic properties and some fabulous identities connecting infinite continued fractions and infinite products. It would be pertinent to revisit the candid compliments of Hardy on his two related theorems, which Ramanujan stated in his famous letter to him in the year 1913:

"…a single look at them is enough to show that they could only be written down by a mathematician of the highest class. They must be true because, if they were not true, no one would have had the imagination to invent them."

There can hardly be two opinions about the huge impact that Ramanujan's works made in many areas of modern number theoretic research. Does it not speak volumes of his far reaching contributions that today more than two hundred and twenty five research papers have already been published in the world subsequent to his discoveries? It was only befitting his stature that Ramanujan
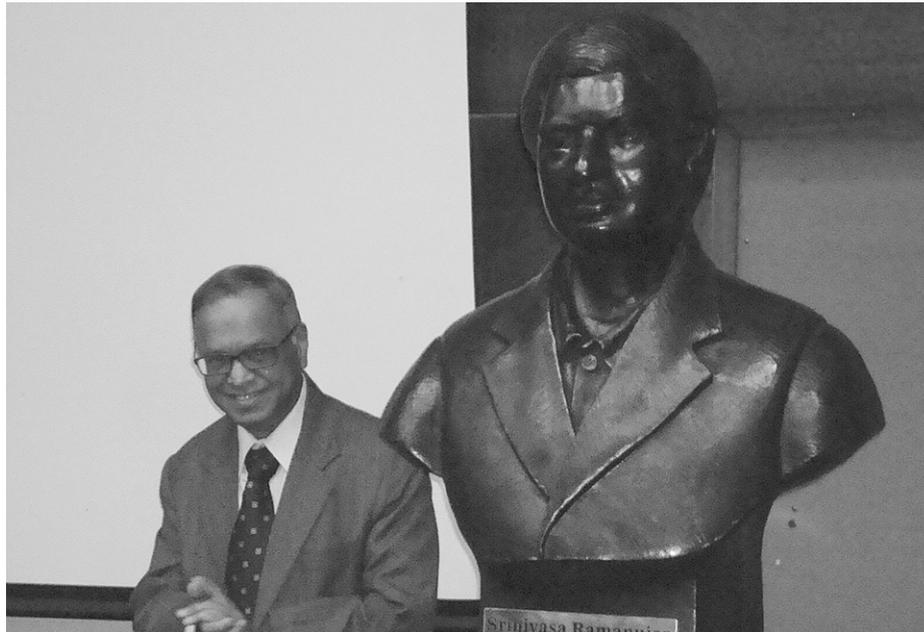
became the first Indian ever to be elected as the Fellow of the Royal Society as well as the Fellow of Trinity College in the year 1918. The legacy left by this towering mathematician remains timeless in its impact and value.

The next speaker Shri Ramji Raghavan, a social entrepreneur as described by Mr N R Narayana Murthy, was nostalgic about his past meeting with Srimathi Janaki, the wife of Ramanujan. It was a benign gesture on his part to have shown interest in meeting her & enquiring about her

wellbeing. His genuine interest in creating awareness about the life and works of this remarkable Indian mathematician deserves plaudits. He also shared his experience of watching the film on Ramanujan – The Man Who Loved Numbers and expressed confidence that the budding mathematicians of our society would continue to get inspired by him.

The last speaker on the occasion was Shri N. R. Rarayana Murthy, who was as unassuming as forthright. He began his brief talk by under-

lining the need for the youngsters to have role models like Ramanujan. Helping the youth get right role models could go a long way in igniting their minds. He felt this would alone leapfrog our society, enabling it to find it rightful place. He was emphatic about the role of education in differentiating a developed society from a developing one. He expressed the need for making education in India an instrument of change. Mr. Murthy was quite vocal about the challenges students are facing today. He

was deeply concerned about the yawning gap between the ever rising number in educated youth and their abysmally poor rate of employment in the country. He attributed the cause of this malaise to the exiting education system, which is completely divorced from real life situations and skills. He also talked about his interaction with one of his young employee, who impressed him a great deal with his knowledge of the theories but when he asked him to give some examples of their application, he went completely blank. The example given by Mr. Murthy is a classic case of what ails the educational system. The real challenge facing the academia today is to train the students to relate their studies to life issues.

I liked the pragmatic solution as well as the grace and humility of Mr. Narayana Murthy. Students were all eyes and ears. They had perhaps found role models to look up to and emulate. I too felt happy meeting a living legend, one who prefers to call himself a compassionate capitalist- a capitalist in mind but a socialist at heart.

I returned home reflecting upon the brief but glorious life of Srinivasa Ramanujan. I was convinced Mathematics must be the queen of the sciences. Bertrand Russell had a point when he said:

"Mathematics, rightly viewed possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty – a beauty cold and austere, like that of sculpture."

The author is a Motivational Speaker of international repute & a Consulting Editor for the Education Post.