

V. Ramaswami Aiyer
(Aug 4,1871 – Jan. 22, 1936)

By
M. T. Naranienger

“Professor” V. Ramaswami Aiyer was born on August 4, 1871 at Satyamangalam, in the Coimbatore District, in his maternal grandfather’s house. His paternal grandfather Ramaswami Aiyar, known also as Munshi Ramaswami Aiyar from the fact that he held the important post of “Munshi” under the District Collector of Coimbatore for a long time, was a good Sanskrit Scholar and was noted for his piety and generosity. He became a Tahsildar in course of time and commanded great respect in his Taluk.

V. Ramaswami Aiyar’s father died when the boy was barely six months old and one of his paternal uncles brought him up and educated him in the local College to the end of the F. A. course, and during the B. A. and M. A. courses at the Presidency College, a Tahsildar, by name R. Ramachandra Aiyar. It is noteworthy that Abbu, that was the pet family name of our Professor, did not go through the formality of aksharbhusham, as is the Hindu custom in all orthodox families. When he was four years old, he was missing from the house one day, and after an anxious search, he was traced to a neighbouring pial school, with a broken chip of slate. This is how his informal schooling began and shows his thirst for learning at that early age of four. From his school days, his habit of deep concentration was characteristic of him. He was often found pouring over his books, while his companions were engaged in play and a musing themselves. Throughout his scholastic career, he was the ‘top boy’ in his class and carried away the First Prize, from the First Standard right up to the F.A.

During his undergraduate course in the Coimbatore college Mr. R. Krishna Aiyar B. A., another of his uncles, was Mathematics Lecturer, and Vice-Principal of the College. The neatness and elegance with which V. Ramaswami solved problems set in the class evoked his uncle’s admiration.

Unlike the present day school boys, Ramaswami Aiyar had a strong physical constitution which stood him in good stead throughout his scholastic career. He took an active part in cricked and gymnastics from his boyhood. The systematic practice he had in these games in the Coimbatore Literary Student’s Association- of which he was an organizer, enabled him to carry off several sports prizes annually at the College Sports. About this period he won the First Prize in the Competition held at the Madras People’s Park Exhibition.

His literary and artistic tastes induced him to take part in the dramatic performances in connection with the anniversaries of the students Literary Association.

While undergoing the graduate course at the Presidency College, his contributions to the Educational Times and other Mathematical journals, which were remarkable for their originality and elegance, attracted the attention of his Professors. The Editor of the Educational Times addressed him as “Professor Ramaswami”, judging from his contributions that he should be a College Professor. This title of ‘Professor’ stuck to him ever afterwards.

He graduated from the Presidency College with distinction in the year 1890 and soon afterwards he was offered a clerkship in the Collectorate, as a mark of appreciation of his distinguished performance in the B.A. Degree Examination. This glorious offer of Rs. 15 per mensem, he was forced to accept owing to family strained circumstances.

At this juncture, his Professors, Rai Bahadur RanganadhamModaliyar, and G.H. Stuart took an interest in his career and secured for him a Scholarship to pursue his studies for the M.A. Degree at the Presidency College. He gladly threw up the clerkship at the Collector’s Office and entered M.A. Course. His success in the M.A. Degree Examination in 1893 proved a stepping stone for him in his subsequent career.

He sat for the Mysore Civil Service Examination alongwith his friend C. Hanumanta Rao, another distinguished graduate of the Madras University; both however failed to come within the rank.

About this time, Professor VenkataswamiNayudu of the Central College, Bangalore, fell ill and had to go on the leave. In the acting arrangements during Mr. Nayudu’s period of absence, Professor Ramaswami got chance. Sir K. Seshadri Aiyar, Dewan of Mysore who had heard of Ramaswami’s high attainments in mathematics, sent for him and offered him the Acting appointment, which he filled with credit. When the

temporary appointment ceased on the return of Prof. VenkataswamiNayudu from leave, Mr. Ramaswami Aiyar was appointed at the Mysore Maharajah's college to assist Principal Weir in teaching Mathematics for the B. A. Degree. During his stay in Mysore, his close association with Mr. Weir, who was a Cambridge Wrangler, enabled him to secure memberships of various mathematical Societies of established reputation. His contributions to the journals of these Societies won for him distinction as a mathematician of high eminence.

In 1898, he sat for the Madras Provincial Civil Services Competitive Examination at the earnest solicitation of his friends and relations and was successful in the Test. Much against his inclination, he had to give up the teaching profession which he loved so much and joined the Madras Provincial Service. After holding some non gazetted appointments during the probationary period he started career as Deputy Collector in 1901. He retired from Service in 1926 after 25 years of work in various capacities, on a well-earned pension. Thereafter he made Chittoor his home and led a peaceful and contented life there devoting all his leisure on his favorite subject.

Throughout his official life as Deputy Collector, his interest in mathematics never flagged. Stories are there of his absent mindedness while in the midst of trials of Criminal cases, as a magistrate. It appears that he would often be found lost in tackling the solution of a mathematical problem, completely forgetting the ease before him, and after a time, as if awaking from a dream, would ask the Pleader to start his arguments afresh. This absent mindedness, or abstraction was a habit with him even in his domestic life. When at dinner in the company of friends and relatives, he was often discovered lost in thought; he would abruptly get away without finishing his dinner, and would go to the table to note down a solution of a problem which had been engaging his attention all the time.

While he was Deputy Collector at Gooty in 1906, his love of mathematics made him feel keenly the lack of facilities for advanced study and research in this country. He set to work to organize an Association for removing these disabilities. He addressed a few friends interested in mathematics, suggesting the formation of an Association called the Analytic Club, to secure facilities for Study and Research, by subscribing for Mathematical journals and by purchasing books for Advanced Studies. On the assurance of his friends that they would co-operate with him in this laudable object, he issued his famous Circular Letter, dated 25th December 1906; 'I propose to consider the Club formed as soon as three friends have agreed to the proposal, making with me four members.' Three months later, he announced in the Madras Dailies, the formation of the Indian Mathematical Society, with 20 members, on the 4th April 1907. Poona was chosen as the Head quarters of the Society and he himself acted as its Secretary till 1910. Meanwhile, he started the Society's Journal in its useful career and established the library. His capacity for Organization is well demonstrated by his labours in Founding the Indian Mathematical Society and framing its Constituion. The bundles of cyclostyled Circulars which he issued in the capacity of Secretary during his tenure of office go to prove the strenuousness with which he labored for the Society in the early days of his life. He withdrew from the Committee in 1910, after satisfying himself that the Society was firmly established. He did not enter the Committee again, except as President when in 1926 an Address was presented to him at the Bangalore Conference. He continued to be the President till 1930. He attended all the Conferences of the Society except one, and actively participated in their deliberations. His last trip to Delhi, in spite of the advice of friends to the contrary, in connection with the Conference held there, proved too tiring for him perhaps. Though he was seemingly all right, he took ill all of a sudden on the 20th January 1936. Cerebral haemorrhage followed and he expired on the 22nd January 1936 at 3-30 pm, in spite of the best medical treatment, at Chittoor.

A few days before his death, when he was reviewing his life, dividing it into eight Octaves, in his usual characteristic manner, he said he was proud of two things done in his life, both of which occurred in the fifth Octave – the prime of his life. One of them was the discovery of the renowned Mathematical Genius, The late S. Ramanujan, F.R.S. and the other the founding of the Indian Mathematical Society.

The Story of the discovery of Ramanujan is worth repeating here, though it has found place in the Obituary Notices of Ramanujan's life in our journal.

When Ramaswami Aiyar was Deputy Collector in Tirtukkoilur in 1910, Ramanujan sought his patronage and asked to be appointed as a clerk in his office. Ramanujan's only recommendation was his 'Ponderous'

Note-book, which has now become famous and is preserved in the Madras University Library. It was little known at that time that the notebook contained anything of value. On pursuing the contents of the Notebook, Ramaswami Aiyar was struck by the extraordinary results recorded therein, and declining to smother his genius by an appointment in his department, recommended him to his mathematical friends in Madras holding high positions. The story is well-known how eventually Ramanujan was made a Research Student of the Madras University, was deputed to the Cambridge University and achieved distinction as the Greatest Indian Mathematician.

No one has done so much to inspire enthusiasm for mathematical Research in India as Prof. Ramaswami. He may be said to have created the present craze for original work in our land. The journal founded by him has been responsible for discovering many a talented mathematician of the country, who would otherwise have gone unnoticed and unheard. His eyes used to glow with affection and delight whenever he met a student who had contributed to the journal. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to be surrounded by promising young mathematicians to whom he would go on talking mathematics endlessly. Many a young man will remember with gratitude the remarkable way in which they were inspired by his writings and talks and above all by his unique personality.

At the Silver Jubilee Celebration of the Indian Mathematical Society held in Poona on the 26th March 1932, under the Presidency of Dr. Paranjpye, the following Resolution was adopted:

“The Society offers its warmest and most felicitous Congratulations to Mr. V. Ramaswami Aiyar, the founder of Society and its most ardent and most enthusiastic Organizer, on the occasion of the completion of 25 years of its most useful work in the cause of Higher Mathematics in India.”

He used to confess to his intimate friends that he made a mistake in having resigned his appointment in the Mysore College to enter the Madras Civil Service. Had he continued in the Mysore Service, he would have brought credit undoubtedly to the Mysore University. No one deserved the appellation of the Professor better than he and his reputation as Professor would have been doubled had he stuck to the teaching profession.