

### **Ramanujan's wife: Janakiammal (Janaki)**

Janaki was born on March 21, 1899. She was the fourth daughter of six children (five daughters and a son) of Rangaswamy Iyengar and Ranganayaki Ammal of Rajendram, a village close to Marudur Railway Station. Janaki's mother was a friend of Ramanujan's mother, Komalathammal, who on a visit to Rajendram saw the nine year old girl and negotiated with the parents of Janaki to get Janaki married to her son Ramanujan, who was 21 years old at that time. The marriage took place on July 14, 1909 and Ramanujan's father was not present at the wedding. A delay in the arrival of Ramanujan with his mother on the day of the wedding, was a cause for anxiety to the parents of Janaki who even thought of another groom for Janaki, to avoid the stigma to the family that the marriage did not take place as planned! The Ramanujan-Janaki wedding was a five-day ceremony and it took place along with the wedding of another sister of Janaki.

After the wedding, Komalathammal took Janaki along with her son to Kumbakonam. The young wife was soon back with her parents. She came of age and joined her husband in 1912, after Ramanujan got a clerical job in the Madras Port Trust. They resided at Saiva Muthaiah Mudali Street, in George Town. In May 1913, Ramanujan joined the University of Madras as its first research scholar and he first moved, for about 10 months, to Hanumantharayan Koil Street, and then to Toppu Venkatachala Mudali Street, both in Triplicane. His wife and mother lived with him for some months, at the latter residence, before Ramanujan left for England, on March 17, 1914.

Ramanujan was alone in England for almost five years (April 14, 1914, to February 27, 1919) and he fell ill in the spring of 1917, and was treated for tuberculosis. The ongoing first World War prevented the possibility of his wife joining him to take care of him or his being shifted to a warmer country like Italy. Eventually after the war ended, Ramanujan returned to India, in April 1919, emaciated from prolonged confinement in sanatoria but with a great reputation. Janaki joined him in Madras and nursed him till his untimely death on April 26, 1920. During those months, the household was run by Ramanujan's mother Komalathammal and grandmother Rangammal. In later years, after Ramanujan's death, Janaki was happy to state:

*I considered it my good fortune to give him rice, lemon juice, but-*

*ter milk, etc., at regular intervals and to give fomentation to his legs and chest when he reported pain. The two vessels used then for preparing hot water are alone still with me; these remind me often of those days.*

After April 1920, the young widow spent the next eight years of her life in Bombay<sup>1</sup> with her brother, R.S. Iyengar, Assistant Commissioner of Income Tax. During that period, she learnt tailoring and English at home. In 1931, without any resources – having been deprived of all her dowry (*sthree dhanam*) – she returned to Madras and spent a year with one of her sisters and another year with friends, before deciding to live independently. She started to teach tailoring and live in a small house in Hanumantharayan Koil Street, having one room upstairs and one room downstairs, for the next five decades. She earned enough from her tailoring and could even save a little, thanks to her frugal living. In 1950, one of her friends, Soundaravalli, died suddenly entrusting her with her 7 year-old son, W. Narayanan.

Janakiammal took up the responsibility of bringing up this boy and became a foster mother to him. During his school years, she sent him for some years (1952–55) to the Ramakrishna Mission Boarding School. She educated him up to the Bachelors Degree in Commerce (B.Com.) of the University of Madras, in Vivekananda College, Madras, and he became an officer of the State Bank of India. Janakiammal conducted the marriage of her foster son in 1972. The daughter-in-law Videhi was also an employee of the State Bank of India. Mr. Narayanan resisted transfers and took voluntary retirement from the Bank in 1988, about 6 years before Janakiammal passed away, to take care of her health. The Narayanans have a son and two daughters and the family took good care of Janakiammal and they were an integral part of her family.

Janakiammal being extremely orthodox and pious, preferred to stay alone in her house in Muthaiah Mudali II Street, Triplicane, under the loving and tender care of the Narayanans, despite her failing health, till a few years before her death, when she moved to 14, Hanumantharayan Koil Street, also in Triplicane. This house was purchased by Janakiammal with her earn-

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<sup>1</sup>Bombay has been recently renamed as *Mumbai*.

ings. The Narayanans have three children – Mr. N. Sridhar, C.A., I.C.W.A., Ms. N. Sripriya, M.C.A. and Ms. N. Sri Vidya, B.Com.

Janakiammal being philanthropic and sympathetic by nature, supported financially the education of several children and other youngsters. Some parents used to go to her for token amounts towards their children's examination fees, since they considered it auspicious to get her support and blessings.

Janakiammal was receiving a pension from the University of Madras since 1920, the year of her husband's death. This amount was then only Rs.20 per month and it gradually rose to about Rs. 500 per month, at the time of her passing away. In interviews which appeared in newspapers, soon after the "Lost" Note Book of Ramanujan was discovered by George Andrews in 1976, Janakiammal lamented the fact that a statue of Ramanujan had never been made, although one had been promised. Prof. Richard Askey saw these newspaper interviews and decided that a bust of Ramanujan was long overdue since Ramanujan's widow wanted one and that

*In Ramanujan's case a permanent memorial is appropriate: one which can be appreciated by those who do not understand his mathematics should be added to the memorial Ramanujan made for himself with his work.*

So, garnering the support of a hundred mathematicians, including Profs. George Andrews, Bruce Berndt and S. Chandrasekhar, Prof. Askey commissioned a bronze bust, from the only authentic passport size photograph of Ramanujan, by Paul Granlund, sculptor-in-residence at Gustavus Adolphus College at Saint Peter, Minnesota in U.S.A. A copy of the bust was presented to Mrs. Ramanujan in 1985 at a formal function in the University of Madras.

Janakiammal had cherished memories of her great husband. Even in recent years, though she was hard of hearing, had failing eyesight and was having indifferent health, when mathematicians like Profs. Andrews, Askey, Berndt, Bollobas and others<sup>2</sup> made it a point to call on her at her residence, she recalled with pride the prophetic words of her husband that his mathematics

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<sup>2</sup>On one such occasion, when a visitor asked her whether she had conjugal relationships with her husband, she was happy to answer the question in the affirmative.

would provide for her whether he was alive or dead. She also pointed out on such occasions, when asked, that recognition and financial support to her started coming after the 75th birth anniversary celebrations of Ramanujan in 1962, the year in which a commemorative stamp was brought out by the Government of India. During the centenary year of the Madras Port Trust, she was honoured and was given a pension for life. Since then, monthly pensions were also offered to Janakiammal by the governments of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, the Indian National Science Academy, the Ramanujan Mathematical Society (founded in 1985) and the Hinduja Foundation – Mr. A.P. Venkateswaran, the Secretary of the Foundation, at the instance of Prof. E.C.G. Sudarshan, the then Director of the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Madras, was instrumental in presenting a purse of Rs.20,000 to Janakiammal, from the funds of the Hinduja Foundation. An honorarium of Rs.1000 per month was also announced, at this function at the Institute's premises, presided over by the Patron, of the Institute, Mr. C. Subramaniam, on Aug. 13, 1987.

Mrs. Janakiammal Ramanujan, the wife of Srinivasa Ramanujan, acclaimed as the greatest Mathematician of this century, breathed her last on the morning of April 13, 1994, at her residence (14, Hanumantharayan Koil Street, Triplicane, Chennai -600 005), at the age of 94.

One of her cherished hopes was that a fitting memorial should come up to honor Ramanujan – who for natural genius has been compared to the all-time great like, Euler, Gauss and Jacobi – and to house the correspondence, papers, and the original Note Books of Srinivasa Ramanujan, besides the large size slate used by him and other such memorabilia. The receptive ears of Prof. Askey resulted in the bust of Ramanujan being made and a copy delivered to her when she was alive. Action is being taken by the University of Madras and it is the hope of many mathematicians that an appropriate National Museum will come up, at least in this decade, befitting the stature and reputation of Ramanujan.