

-Ionospherics and Wagner, cosmic rays and Coriolanus...



AN EXPLOSION OF HARMONY: Raja Ramanna now — and then

The scientific advisor to the defence ministry is immersed in the *Chandogya Upanishad*. The man who conducted a nuclear explosion meditates on the philosophy of Adi Sankara. The Rajya Sabha member and one-time minister of state for defence is right now wondering how a percussion instrument can be improved. That is, when he's not preoccupied with Gandhian studies. Or deliberating with *vainikas* on the merits of the stringed instrument. Or planning how to sensitise computer professionals to the fine arts.

That is Raja Ramanna — scientist, musician, man of letters, Vedantic scholar and visionary. A formidable delegate at international fora. A caring boss who visits a retired secretary. An informal host

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Raja Ramanna

who makes you feel at home even at the NIAS by conspiratorially telling you: "Today they have *uddina vada* on the canteen menu."

He muses on his eventful life, talking between mouthfuls of the cholesterol-loaded delicacy. He interrupts himself only to say: "Have it with the chutney — it's simply delicious."

Justice Nittoor Srinivasa Rao, who has known Raja Ramanna since his boyhood days, says he can never stop being amazed at his "many-sided interests". Recalling a convention held at the centre for theoretical studies at IISc some years ago, the former chief justice describes how he found Ramanna busy working in candlelight at the dead of night at the guest house. "Whatever are you doing?" he asked. Ramanna said he was translating the epic poem *Mukunda Mala* into English. "I don't find the time during the day," he explained.

Ramanna's passion for classical music goes back to his childhood when he watched his sister Balamani sing and play the piano. "When she died of typhoid at 21, I continued where she left off," he says. He found in Mother Maurice at the Good Shepherd Convent an understanding teacher. She was followed by a Eurasian nun called Sis-



ter Agnes. But it was the very Victorian Margaret Moffat who kindled a nine-year-old Ramanna's interest in Beethoven, Mozart and Chopin, even as she taught him how to handle a knife and fork! Ramanna recalls how these last two teachers, with their missionary zeal, escorted him to church services where the only thing that impressed him was the organ on which Bach was played.

He was studying at the Bishop Cotton School in Bangalore when news of his musical skills reached royal ears. The then Maharaja of Mysore, Krishna Raja Wodeyar, invited him to become a member of the palace orchestra. "I was paid a princely sum of Rs 200 for each performance," laughs Ramanna. He was awarded an overseas scholarship which lapsed for lack of supporting funds from the State exchequer. But the loss to music proved a gain for science. The young student who graduated from the Madras Christian College in 1945, did go to England. Although not through the efforts of his piano mentor Alfred Mistowsky. His guru now was Homi Bhabha. Instead of the Trinity College of Music, he enrolled at the King's College in London. Instead of Beethoven and Chopin, it was now nuclear reactions and fission fragments. In the midst of sporadic efforts at piano practice in hired rooms in post-war London, Ramanna obtained his doctoral degree in 1948 and returned to an independent India. The rest is history.

Recalling their decades-old association through shared musical interests, Dr Alfred Mascarenhas of the St John's Medical Centre says: "Ramanna is an accomplished classical pianist who can execute the most difficult compositions with incredible ease. Yet, when a six-year-old requests him to play Mozart's *Minuet*, he obliges!"

Former Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Dawson is the other music buff who can hardly conceal his admiration for this "formidable pianist". However, for octogenarian

Vedanta Iyengar, the hero of Pokhran will always remain the kid brother who smuggled in firecrackers at festival time, to the dismay of his frugal parent. Having splurged Rs 5 on them, he would set a match to the lot and run for his life before they exploded! "That was the biggest sound he ever heard until 1974!" he chuckles.

Born in 1925 in Mysore State, Krishna Raja Ramanna belongs to the small community of Hebbar Shri Vaishnava Iyengars. His home milieu was Victorian England. His mother was brought up on Dickens and Scott. His father played tennis, billiards and bridge. Yet, in spite of this "blatant Anglophilia", Ramanna learnt to abhor British rule.

As a young US journalist said "He has an informed sense of anger against foreign rule. Yet he names his autobiography after a passage from Listz! Quite a guy!"

Vatsala Vedantam