

The pianist

RAJA RAMANNA was a nuclear man all right. People know him that way — one, who, with many others, pioneered the 1974 “peaceful nuclear explosion” that made the world reel and take a good, hard look at India. “The Pokhran test was a bomb, I can tell you now... An explosion is an explosion, a gun is a gun whether you shoot at someone or shoot at the ground... I just want to make clear that the test was not all that peaceful,” Dr. Raja Ramanna told PTI on October 10, 1997.

The architect of the bomb was a fascinating man. His neighbours in R.T. Nagar waited every evening for his virtuoso piano recital with Nirupama, his daughter. His fan club must have also known he was good at drama, philosophy, mathematics, and religion. But nuclear physics was always home terrain. The unusual marked and made the man too. It is fortunate he spent the last 10-15 years in this city.

Emphatic presence

The piano — music really — seems to have had an emphatic presence in those 15 years. Much before he saw himself as a nuclear physicist, he began learning music at 15 from the nuns at the Good Shepherd Convent School, Mysore. And what he did with the piano from then, and during his days of science and nukes, is instructive. “He took interest in setting up a formal school of music in Bangalore, nothing like which existed before 1987 at least in Western classical music,” recalls Aruna Sunderlal of the Bangalore School of Music. She was surprised when he, a ‘big’ man by 1987, turned up at an unknown concert by students of the school. “He expressed his desire for closer association with us, and we, the same. The city got its first school of music with his sup-

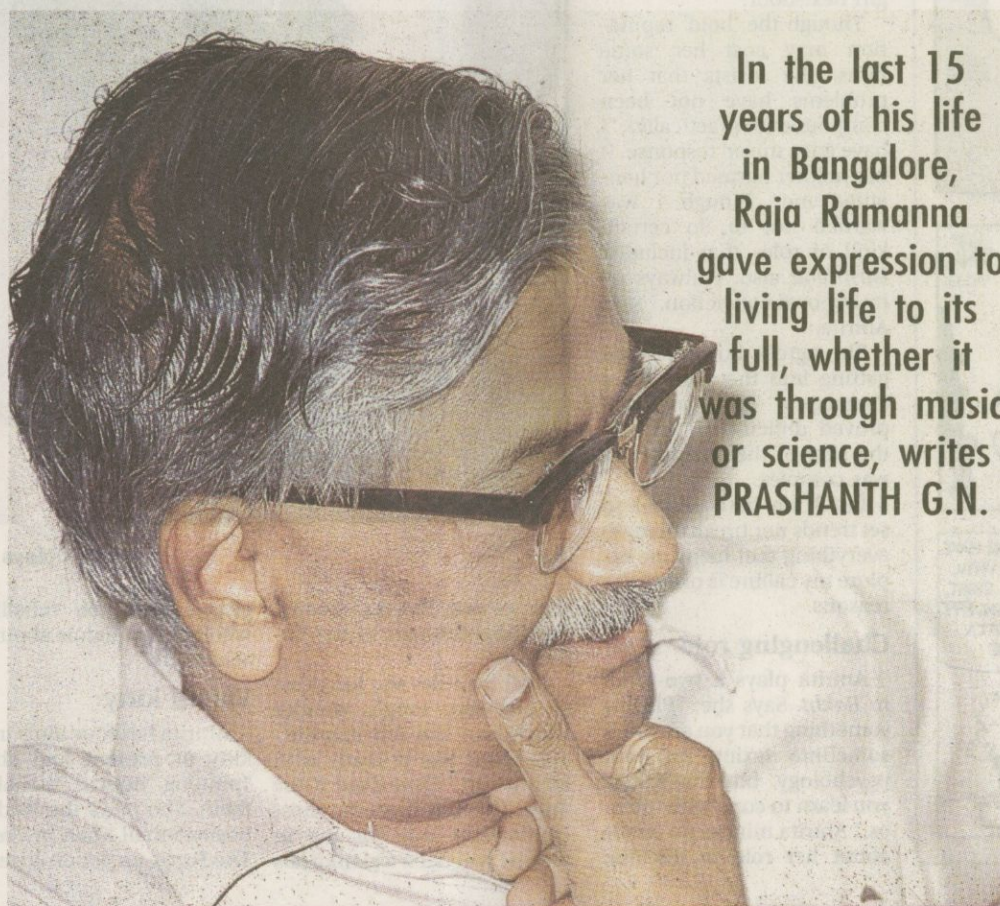
port and he agreed to be chairman of our Advisory Board.” His musical intent only made visible his unusual, perceptive self. He began with the piano. Aruna recalls musical instruments, particularly pianos, attracting 300 per cent import duty a decade back. Dr. Raja Ramanna told the Government the duty was unfair because there was much talent here and the piano was too expensive for education in music. After his sustained efforts, the duty was cut to 150 per cent, and eventually, to 60. As MP, he had even raised the issue of high duties in Parliament. No one took it up. He was disappointed.

Music festival

He also encouraged vigorously the school’s chamber orchestra conducted by V. Narayanswamy, and later mooted the idea of a national orchestra. He helped organise the first international music festival, the East West Music Dance Encounter, in the 1990s in the city that put the Bangalore School of Music on the world map. His interest in Indian and Western music disciplines gave him that concept. He not only headed seminars but even played the piano for the inaugural one. Aruna recalls he played solo, Beethoven’s concerto No. 3 with the school’s chamber orchestra at the 2000 festival.

To Aruna, he was a pianist of high calibre; a certification from London would not otherwise have been possible. “Perhaps owing to lack of time, he could not turn a complete professional. But it is inspiring that he could play at 79 and in the few days before he left us.”

He encouraged musicians as young as four, five, and six years, and never failed to meet students. He loved the Hungarian, Franz Listz, who is very difficult to perform, and Beethoven. His favourite possession was the handcrafted grand piano from Europe. He



Raja Ramanna: At 79, he was still playing the piano like a virtuoso.

never once refused to play the piano for the school, and would bring books of his favourite composers there, attend every student concert with daughter Nirupama. If he couldn’t make it, his wife and daughter did.

“What balances your other interests is important in life. That much is clear from Raja Ramanna’s life. We will really miss him. He was an inspiration,” says Aruna.

It was his original science (physics), perhaps, that gave him insight into the science of music. He not only had high-quality research capacities, in Physics, but emphatic organising talent as well.

S.V. Bhat, Professor, Department of Physics, Indian Institute of Science, says his contribution to the scientific establishment is seminal. “IISc has progressed and he helped

In the last 15 years of his life in Bangalore, Raja Ramanna gave expression to living life to its full, whether it was through music or science, writes PRASHANTH G.N.

set up the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS). He would always use available resources to the needs of the nation. Pokhran was one of them.”

Goverdhan Mehta, Director, IISc, also points out that Raja Ramanna was not just a nuclear physics man, but someone, who, over the years, acquired enormous experience in managing large-scale scientific in-

stitutions. “He belongs to that class of post-Independence Indian scientists like Homi Bhabha and Satish Dhawan who were building the nation. His absence will certainly be felt.”

Prof. Mehta remembers him as a forthright, warm, large-hearted, and multi-faceted individual. “He was extraordinarily enlightened, and had a sense of humour that was subtle and enjoyable. It was a privilege to work with him...”

Prof. Roddam Narasimha, NIAS Director, recalls J.R.D. Tata looking for an institution that would do two things: create a new leadership for the country and bring different disciplines into dialogue. “Raja Ramanna was the man who set up structures that enabled this to happen.” Raja Ramanna “personified the idea of NIAS”, an institution he helped set up in the city in 1988, the first of its kind. He was its first Director, holding the post till 1997, and its Director-Emeritus to his last day. He initiated a course for executives from a range of institutions to evolve leadership skills, and the programme of associates for people from different walks of life. “Inviting M.N. Srinivas, the sociologist, and R.L. Kapur the psychologist, as Director, was a visible indicator of his efforts to integrate natural and social sciences.” And fulfil J.R.D.’s vision.

LCA project

Prof. Narasimha recalls an aspect of Raja Ramanna not spoken of much. He encouraged the LCA project headed by Prof. Narasimha (even before it received government approval) for over three years from 1980 and even travelled to Europe to seek collaborations. “He was always a positive man. That was his virtue. When you went to him with an idea, he would see how best to promote the man and the idea...”

How much more can a man do in one lifetime?