

A requiem for Ramanna

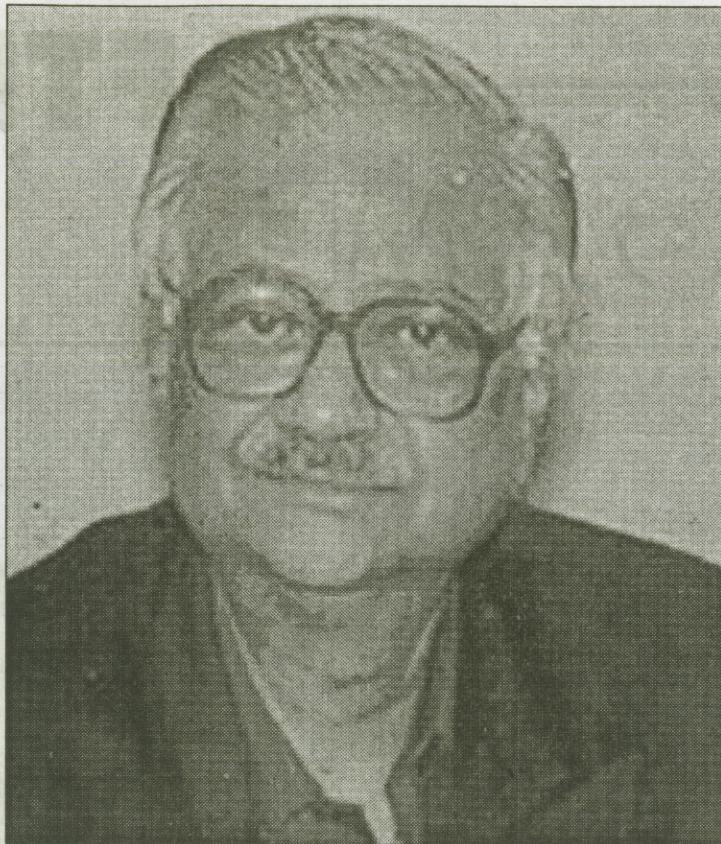


All in
ALL

H. Y. SHARADA
PRASAD

The last time I met Dr Raja Ramanna was six weeks ago at a meeting of the trustees of the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund. Being from the same part of the country we always spoke to each other in our regional tongue. His Kannada had an old world courtesy about it characteristic of the courtly Mysore and a suggestion that behind the affable informality there was some reserve. I noticed that he was carrying a stick and leaning on it and I asked him what had happened. He said he had fallen and damaged his hip while on a visit to Thailand. "Vayodharma," he added by way of comment — the things which naturally go with one's age. There was the unmistakable smile which lit up his chubby face and heightened the glint in his eyes. I apologised for not having been able to attend his farewell piano recital a few months earlier. "Music is a very demanding taskmistress. I didn't want to be gnawed by the feeling that I had not been putting in enough practice."

The news that he was no more brought to my mind the fact that I had first heard his name some 65 years ago. He came to public notice as a prodigy — of all things in Western music and in so unlikely a place as Mysore. The Maharaja was a celebrated patron of music, not only Karnatic and Hindustani music but also of Western music. The palace maintained a western orchestra also. And the Yuvaraja's son, Jayachamaraja Wadiyar, had serious interest in music. Guiding him was an expatriate Polish musicologist called Dr Mistowski. Raja Ramanna also received lessons from him. A friend recalls how it was in Mistowski's house that Homi Bhabha, just back from Cambridge and working in the Institute of Science in Bangalore first met and heard Ramanna. There was some discussion whether the young man should pursue a career in physics or in music but the family plumped for a conventional choice and off he



Dr Raja Ramanna: 1925-2004

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went to England on a Tata fellowship to study physics. I have not been able to look up Ramanna's autobiography to find out whether Bhabha, who also combined a love of music and science, had a hand in Ramanna getting the fellowship.

But the link with the Tatas proved to be a lifelong one. After obtaining a doctorate from London University Ramanna joined the Tata Institute of Fundamental

Research in Bombay and later, after he retired from government, he headed the National Institute of Advanced Studies that the Tatas set up in Bangalore. But in the intervening 30 odd years, he had come to be regarded as one of the foremost scientists of the country with remarkable achievements to his credit. He trained a whole generation of nuclear scientists and was scientific leader of the team which built a wholly indigenous

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nuclear device and successfully tested it in Pokharan in 1974. We called it a Peaceful Nuclear Explosion but the world took it as a signal that India had become a nuclear state. Dr Ramanna held a series of important scientific posts and was for a brief period a minister of state for defence.

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For some people there is no retirement at all but only a change of activity. After the tense decades spent in the governmental scientific organisations, Ramanna had the opportunity to live and work with scholars belonging to the humanistic disciplines at the National Institute of Advanced Studies which he built up in Bangalore. He was also able to pursue his studies of the Vedanta as also Gandhism. He didn't wholly lose touch with Delhi, for he was a member of the Rajya Sabha. I am sure he must have often wished he could have entered into true *vanaprastha*, but he could not escape the curse of modernity, namely the inability to wind down.

■ H. Y. SHARADA was adviser to Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi