SPECIAL FEATURE

DR. V. RAGHAVAN
Renaissance man

This is the second part of a special centenary feature on the late Dr. V. Raghavan (Photos courtesy his daughter Nandini Ramani). The first part focusing on his role in the Music Academy, Madras, was published in Sruti 302.

“...The name of Raghavan is a legend in the revival of studies into ancient Indian culture. When our country had lost its memories of the past, Dr. Raghavan brought back the original thoughts. Those of us who had no identity, because of our English education, began to look into the Indian soul through the writings of this man who is more than a Professor of Sanskrit, but perhaps a doyen of renewed consciousness. What has he not taught us: classical music, the most ancient dances and some of the wisdom of the forest books....” This is an excerpt from the felicitation written by famous writer Mulk Raj Anand on the occasion of Dr. V. Raghavan's 60th birthday in August 1968. It truly sums up the man and his mission whose birth centenary was celebrated for a year starting August 2008.

The greatness of the scholar extraordinaire can be gauged as we browse through Dr. Raghavan's Shashtiabdapoorti felicitation booklet. It seems like a veritable who's who with a formidable list of members making up the celebrations committee and messages from luminaries like former President of India Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Vice-President V.V. Giri, the maharajas of Mysore and Kasi, from Governors of States, ministers, ambassadors, bureaucrats, educationists, scholars and artists from across the globe. The celebrations were presided over by Dr. C.D. Deshmukh. The Dr. V. Raghavan 61st Birthday Felicitation Volume was released by Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, national professor of Humanities, President, Sahitya Akademi. A portrait of Dr. Raghavan was unveiled in the Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute, Chennai, reflecting the high regard in which Dr. Raghavan was held as a man of letters. Many have described him as one of the foremost scholars and enlightened custodians of Indian culture in general, and Sanskrit literature in particular.

Dr. Raghavan was a scholar, poet, playwright, producer, teacher, critic, and a connoisseur of the arts. For decades he was at the hub of the cultural life of Madras. He rubbed shoulders with national leaders and international scholars, succeeded in ferreting out original Sanskrit manuscripts for references in the field of music, dance and aesthetics, played a major role in national cultural and literary institutions, wrote, edited and compiled books, and guided research scholars. He was a luminary in the field of Sanskrit studies. A bibliography of his published works brought out on the occasion of the Shashtiabdapoorti was a book by itself! It was released by Dr. A.L. Mudaliar.

As a creative writer, Dr. Raghavan wrote numerous poems and plays in Sanskrit, as well as short stories in Tamil. Most impressive was the stupendous range of his scholarship spanning literature and the sastra-s. With this he combined a meticulous eye for detail, accuracy and precision. Hardly any aspect of the alankara sastra did he leave untouched. Those who benefited from Raghavan's teaching include eminent scholars in India and distinguished professors in the West.

He was a walking encyclopedia. He did not live in an ivory tower, but combined his scholarship with abundant practical sense. He travelled extensively in Europe, the U.S.A., and the Far East presiding, teaching and lecturing at conferences and seminars. He was an indefatigable and sincere worker. His contribution to the study of basic materials in the form of old manuscripts was pathbreaking, greatly facilitating the work of future generations of writers and scholars. His deeply researched writings in Sanskrit and about the arts have been and will be a perennial source for many a keen researcher. Discovering old manuscripts, sourcing reference materials, recording them, networking and traveling, so easy after the IT revolution, were easier said than done in the last century.

Raghavan was hailed as “an unofficial ambassador of Indian culture to different parts of the world by his books, articles and travels.” His work opened the eyes of the world to the vast range of material available for comparative study.

Raghavan was a self-made man. He rose to fame through dint of hard work, pioneering research and scholarship. He was the recipient of countless honours and awards, including the Padma Bhushan. He has left his imprint in the various official organisations and cultural institutions he served.