

K.S. Rao: In association with Ramanujan's life and works and whatever he has done you have tried to propagate this in your own way. You came across Robert Kanigel and he has visited you. It is all recorded in the book of Robert Kanigel on "The Man who knew Infinity: the life of a genius Ramanujan". Could you please tell us your association with Robert Kanigel and how you came in to contact with him ?

V. Viswanathan: Well Mr. Srinivasa Rao, as you know, I am the grand son of Mr. Narayana Iyer through his daughter Kamakshi Ammal. Actually, I have never met Narayana Iyer because I was born five months after his demise. But my mother used to say quite a lot about her father Narayana Iyer and also about their association with Ramanujan. These are all the things you know in the childhood what I have heard from my mother.

Of late, somewhere in 1988's end I was on a direct flight from London to Madras. Just a few days prior to that, while at London, I saw in the BBC fourth channel, a documentary: "A clerk from Madras" about Ramanujan. So, all the old things I had heard from my mother, the entire thing was going through my mind once again. Just with this back ground, when I landed at Madras, by the end of 1988, it so happened that at Madras, there was a Bandh on that particular day. The entire airport was empty. There was no transport. But, I found one auto rickshaw in which already there were two people. I just managed to get in. And then, I found a lone foreigner standing there. Evidently, he had also come in the same flight and I took pity on him and I asked him "you won't get any transport because, there is a problem here in the city. If you want, I can drop you wherever you want. You can also squeeze in". He said "Thank you" and then got in to the autorickshaw. Then I asked him: "where do you want to go?" He said, " New Woodlands hotel". I told him "there is no problem, I stay very close to New Woodlands hotel". Then to keep the conversation on, I asked him, "Are you a tourist?" He said "No, I am a writer. I am going to write a book on Srinivasa Ramanujan". Then I said, "Oh! It is Ramanujan! Then, I can put you in to contact with some of the elder members of my family. Because, I am now 65, this happened in 1988, as you know by elder members what I meant was my elder sister and also my father-in-law who happens to be a nephew of Narayana Iyer. Then, I told him, " I can put you on to some of the elder members of the family because, Ramanujan happened to

work under my grand father in the Port Trust”. Immediately, he asked me “Is it Narayana Iyer?”. Then I told him that is a coincidence that we met. He said “No ! It is a providential that we met”. He has also mentioned about this, in the year 1971 – of course, I have got cutting of that the India abroad in one of the issues – he had mentioned about our particular meeting. Then, of course, rest of them is history. I had invited him home, where all my brothers and sisters – as you know ours is a very big family – and their children. About 30-35 people were there on a Sunday morning. We had a typical South Indian Idly-Sambar session. Kanigel was so happy to be with us and then he embarked on his duty.

My sister-in-law had introduced him to Ragami me the writer who was writing in Tamil the history of Ramanujan. She works for Doordarshan. So, she knew Ragami. Kanigel told me that he even went to Kumbakonam, Kodumudi, Namakkal and then, after some time his wife also joined. For a few months, they were here in Chennai. At that time, I had an assignment at Muscat. So, he used to write me letters when I was in Muscat asking me for some clarifications anything with regard to Narayana Iyer and I used to get it cross checked with my people here. Then, that is how it all went on. Then after a few years, the book was released. Then, within a few months there was a letter from Prof. Bruce Berndt saying that he had been advised by Robert Kanigel to contact me to get more details about my grandfather. So, I prepared a write up about Narayana Iyer with the help of my family members and sent it to him. This was released in the book of “Ramanujan Letters and Commentary” by Bruce Berndt and Rankin under the auspices of the American and London Mathematical Societies. When I was going through this copy, see unlike the earlier book of Kanigel which was a complete biography this one is actual letters written about Ramanujan, by Ramanujan, to various people and also foot notes by the authors.

In that, as I was passing along the pages, there is a particular reference to Ramanujan talking about one Setlur Sundara Surya Narayana, page number 115, where the author has said “no whereabouts of him were known”. Suddenly it occurred to me because my family came from a place called Setlur, my family house is named as Setlur house. Then this Setlur Sundara Surya Narayana, immediately it struck me, it is my father’s paternal uncle S.S. Surya Narayana Shastri whom he has referring to. Then I

contacted my people and got the entire details about S.S. Surya Narayana Shastri and forwarded it to Bruce Berndt. I had sent the detail write-up about S.S. Surya Narayana Shastri to Professor Bruce Berndt. Then he asked me, there is a photograph. See, I could also identify S.S. Surya Narayana Shastri, in the photograph of Ramanujan with his friends taken at Trinity. Then Prof. Bruce Berndt asked me whether I could identify for him the others in the photograph. It has taken me almost two years. About 300 pages of documentation in my personal PC – of course, which all of them have been burnt in to CD by my son and finally – I was able to identify all these people. That was a very interesting job and not only that, I was fortunate to identify the descendents of those people. All of them have given the write up about those people. Now the entire detail has come out in the third book of Bruce Berndt in writing “Ramanujan: Letters and Essays”, recently released, once again by the American and London Mathematical Societies. Well, these are all my involvements as far as Ramanujan is concerned and of course, my eldest sister in the family is about 77 years old. She had lived with my grandfather Narayana Iyer. So also my cousin, my mother’s sister’s son, Mr. S.Shankara Narayanan, who is a few years junior to her. Virtually he was brought up by Narayana Iyer because he lost his mother when he was very young. Narayana Iyer brought him up. These two people will be able to say more about Narayana Iyer.

Thank you very much.