

Sree

MANDAYAM AJI RAMANUJA IYENGAR

(1862 – 1937)



Sri M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar (MAR) was born in Mysore in Dundubhi Nama Samvatsara, Shravana Shuddha Ashtami, Rohini Nakshatra on Krishna Jayanti day (19-08-1862). He was the third child of Sri Mandayam Aji Venkatacharya and Srimathi Shringamma.

He was initiated to learning Sanskrit and Kannada languages by Vidwan Periyaswamy Thirumalacharya in Mysore. He completed F.A. from Madras University with scholarship.

He was married to Srimathi Yadugiriyamma, of Annadorai family.

M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar joined Wesleyan Mission School as a Mathematics teacher. But his knowledge in English, Sanskrit and Tamil were exemplary, though Kannada was his passion and prime language.

In those days, Kannada literature had gone to the background as Sanskrit was the leading language. But many overseas Christian missionaries, for their propagation of Christianity, had come to Karnataka like Rev. Kittel, Rev. Rice and so on, studied Kannada and became proficient in the local language. They did a very great job for revival of Kannada as a language. These aspects were benchmarks for three personalities namely R. Narasimachar , S.G. Narasimachar and M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar.

From the year 1880, they worked together for about half a century and they are considered as 'Praathah Smaraniyaru' (ಪ್ರಾತಃ ಸ್ಮರಣೀಯರು) in Kannada beneficiary. R.Narasimachar has done an outstanding work on 'Shasanagalu' (ಶಾಸನಗಳು), 'Kannada Language History for several centuries', because it is a Pancha Draavida (ಪಂಚ ದ್ರಾವಿಡ) vocabulary, which is more than two thousand years old. S.G. Narasimachar and R Narasimhachar covered 'Kavicharithre' (ಕವಿಚರಿತ್ರೆ) about poets, their achievements in poetry and prose. Sri M.A.Ramanuja Iyengar was a pioneer on publishing number of valuable books in old (ಹಳೆಗನ್ನಡ) and contemporary Kannada (ನಡುಗನ್ನಡ), which were not in a position to see the world.

Students were living in his house and Smt Yadugiriyamma used to feed them with food and clothing, which is remembered by that generation even now. The house was a congregation of Sanskrit, Tamil and Kannada litterateurs.

Publications of Sri M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar:

Arya Matha Sanjivini (ಆರ್ಯ ಮಠ ಸಂಜೀವಿನಿ):

M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar had friends like Komaraswamy Thirumalachar, who was running Sadvidyamandira Press in Mysore. M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar studied the then printing technology (not Word or Pdf!), and became a professional. He started a monthly magazine and named it as 'Arya Matha Sanjivini'. The purpose of the magazine was to start Sanskrit slokas in Kannada like Mukundamaalai, Neethi Subhashitha, Bhagavadgeetha etc. In this magazine, valuable kriti 'Chikkadevaraja Binnapa' (ಚಿಕ್ಕದೇವರಾಜ ಬಿನ್ನಪ) a Vishishtadwaita Siddantha (ವಿಶಿಷ್ಟಾದ್ವೈತ ಸಿದ್ಧಾಂತ) by King of Mysore, Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar, was published, with editing by M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar. Also, in this magazine, with S.G. Narasimachar, he published Mahabharata's 'Aid Parvo' and 'Sabha Parvo' written in the prose order. The magazine was stopped in the year 1890.

Karnataka Kavya Manjari (ಕರ್ನಾಟಕ ಕಾವ್ಯ ಮಂಜರಿ):

From 1890 to 1893 MAR, along with S.G. Narasimachar, had to go to remote places in Karnataka including the then Madras province like Mangalore, and searched, got several works in palm leaves and old and worn out books. The passion of publishing palm leaf poems in paper brought a monthly magazine called Karnataka Kavya Manjari. In Kannada literature, this was not thought of in those days. Around twenty five works of old Kannada (ಹಳಗನ್ನಡ) came to light. The Government of Mysore instructed all the schools to subscribe to Karnataka Kavya Manjari. Also, some of these as poems and proses became text books for not only Mysore but also in Madras and Bombay Universities.

B. L. Rice in Mysore Gazetteer (Vol I, Page 502) said "A few young men have combined to publish a monthly periodical called 'Kavya Manjari', in which ancient works recently discovered are published with careful editing".

Karnataka Kavya Kalanidhi (ಕರ್ನಾಟಕ ಕಾವ್ಯ ಕಲಾನಿಧಿ):

In 1899 he published rare books and a monthly magazine titled as 'Karnataka Kavya Kalanidhi' for fifteen years. This was viewed by Dr. D.V. Gundappa (DVG) as "from his very busy schedule, he searches palm leaf articles and publishes it too, without any monetary benefits. It takes half a day for each leaf, to understand and to find out whether it is worth publishing or not. This shows the amount of patience and passion of M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar for the language". He published around seventy five books under the name of Karnataka Kavya Kalanidhi.

Karnataka Kavya Kalanidhi did not have any particulars like caste, religion or relatives, known friends, man or woman and so on. It has in its publications from Jain, Veerashaiva, Gowda, Brahmin, as well as Sanskrit and Tamil works and others. He published 'Hadibadeya Dharma' (ಹದಿಬದೆಯ ಧರ್ಮ) from Sanchi Honnamma, who was supplying betel leaves to the Palace. The purpose was only and only to promote Kannada literature for common man. This shows clearly, the 'Nirmoha' and 'Balance of Mind' of the publisher, which should be followed even today.

After the demise of S.G. Narasimachar in the year 1907, and the closure of Wesleyan Mission School due to insufficient funds, M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar struggled hard to continue publishing. He was helped by Smt. Yadugiriyamma's uncle, Sri M.A. Srinivasacharya, [who had translated, Alexander Duma's 'Count of Monte Cristo' to Kannada as 'Raja Malaya Simha' (ರಾಜ ಮಲಯ ಸಿಂಹ)], and became a Kannada lecturer in Maharani's College, Mysore.

The then King of Mysore, Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar was impressed by M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar's works, and 'Ordered' [Order No.956/17.04.1903] publishing of Sougandhika Parinaya (ಸೌಗಂಧಿಕಾ ಪರಿಣಯ), Vatsarajana Kathe (ವತ್ಸರಾಜನ ಕತೆ), Shakuntala Naveena Teeke (ಶಾಕುಂತಲ ನವೀನ ತೀಕೆ) and thirteen other books of late Mumtaz Ali Khan. Some of them were published in Karnataka Kavya Kalanidhi.

His Highness Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar used to go to different places and was giving lectures in English. Because of his proficiency in British English and also Kannada, M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar was given the 'Translator' post in the Palace to translate official documents from English to Kannada and vice versa. This was for the benefit of people under the Kingdom of Mysore.

Masti Venkatesha Iyengar was his student in Wesleyan Mission School. Masti has narrated about incidents discussing with M.A.Ramanuja Iyengar in his bibliography 'Bhava'. Sri B.M.Srikantiah was considering M.A.Ramanuja Iyengar as his 'Guru'. Dr. D.V.Gundappa in his 'Gyapaka Chitra Shaale' has written a paragraph on M.A.Ramanuja Iyengar, which shows the respect and honour to M.A.Ramanuja Iyengar.

Works of M.A.Ramanuja Iyengar:

For children he wrote Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels, Halasina Hannina Maya (ಹಲಸಿನ ಹಣ್ಣಿನ ಮಾಯ), and so on.

His Kannada Reader-4 was a text book for primary school children.

'Kavi Kavya Prashamse' (ಕವಿ ಕಾವ್ಯ ಪ್ರಶಂಸೆ) was a lecture he gave to Vidyavardhaka Sangha, Dharwad, and is published as a booklet.

'Pramaana Prameya Viveka' (ಪ್ರಮಾಣ ಪ್ರಮೇಯ ವಿವೇಕ) was a lecture for Sanskrit poets in Maharaja's Sanskrit College and is also published as a booklet.

'Kavisamaya' (ಕವಿಸಮಯ) has lot of poets and their poems which is one of the research works of M.A.Ramanuja Iyengar and is a reference book for research students.

'Bhagilu Bhadra' (ಭಾಗಿಲು ಭದ್ರ) is an exposition of 'Deha' and 'Atma' (ದೇಹ ಮತ್ತು ಆತ್ಮ). This gives peace of mind when it is disturbed.

'Suvratha' (ಸುವ್ರತ) is a prose form of Janna's Yashodara Charite (ಜನ್ನನ ಯಶೋಧರ ಚರಿತೆ).

Others include Prabandhaavali (ಪ್ರಬಂಧಾವಳಿ), Kavi Rannana Jivana Charitre Matthu Kavya Mimamse (ಕವಿ ರನ್ನನ ಜೀವನ ಚರಿತ್ರೆ ಮತ್ತು ಕಾವ್ಯ ಮೀಮಾಂಸೆ) to name a few.

He passed away on 27.06.1937 at the age of 75 years. Condolence meetings were held in several places and several poets spoke about him and even now a photo of M.A. Ramanuja Iyengar is displayed in Krishnaraja Wodeyar Auditorium and Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Chamarajapet, Bangalore.

Comments on MAR by the famous Kannada Author Sri D V Gundappa, in his Jnapaka Chitrasale:

Whenever I recall the name of S G Narasimhacharya, I'm also reminded of Mandayam Aji Ramanuja Iyengar. SGN (S G Narasimhacharya), RN (R Narasimhacharya), and MAR (M A Ramanuja Iyengar) – these three were a group. The three of them were relatives and they all worked passionately in the area of classical Kannada literature.

Ramanuja Iyengar (1864–1937) served as a teacher in the Wesleyan Mission School, Mysore for a long time. For a short while he also worked in the Government's Department of Education. Among his notable works is the publication of the Karṇāṭaka Kāvyaṃāñjarī.

Exploration of Literary Works

During his hours of leisure, Ramanuja Iyengar visited libraries that contained literary works in haḷagannaḍa (classical Kannada), gather treatises written on palm leaf manuscripts, study them, and finally prepare the same for publication.

Only someone with experience in this domain can truly understand how tedious and frustrating it is to undertake this task. Old manuscripts written on palm leaves are quite similar to dry wood. They are so fragile that a mere touch can crumble them. They must be separated from one another with extreme care. Then comes the task of reading the manuscript. A special concoction made of leaves should first be applied on the palm leaf. That darkens the letters, making it more readable. The next big difficulty is to untie—i.e. decipher—the chain-like Moḍi script (ancient script written in a cursive style). Today's people cannot understand it. Further, poetic verses aren't divided into lines on palm leaf manuscripts. Even the verses themselves will not be separate from one another.[1]

An entire treatise would be a chain of letters and appear like a single sentence from beginning to end. If it takes half a day to decipher the meaning of a single side of a palm leaf manuscript, it would hardly be a surprise.

Ramanuja Iyengar was a person who accomplished this strenuous endeavour. Mere erudition is not sufficient for this task. Along with that, an incredible amount of enthusiasm, patience, and forbearance is required. It is my opinion that the preparation of a draft for print from manuscripts is far more difficult than writing a new work.

What was more difficult than preparing these works was perhaps financing their publication. Those who are aware of the amount of encouragement given to Kannada poetry in today's unified Karṇāṭaka can easily guess how much encouragement was given to the same by the

people sixty years ago.[2] During such a period, for M A Ramanuja Iyengar to run the Karṇāṭaka Kāvyaamañjarī without losing enthusiasm for such a long time is indeed an act of great sacrifice; when we think about it, we are truly astonished.

If the material losses and fruitless exhaustions weren't enough, Ramanuja Iyengar took up another such burden. That was the publication of Karṇāṭaka Kāvyaakalānidhi, which published old literary works along with new ones. Karṇāṭaka Kāvyaakalānidhi was a series in which seventy to seventy-five books were published. In this great endeavour, Ramanuja Iyengar toiled indefatigably. But he didn't care much for his physical strain or monetary losses. Many haḷagannaḍa (classical Kannada) and naḍugannaḍa (middle Kannada, pre-modern Kannada) works were published as part of the series. Initially they were published in parts and later they as individual books along with an introduction about the poet and related study materials. Kāvya (poetical works) like Gadhāyuddha of Ranna, Mallināthapurāṇa of Nāgacandra, Nemicandra's Līlavati, Harihara's Girijākalyāṇa, Yashodharacarita of Janna, Kabbigara Kāva of Anḍayya, and Cauṇḍarāya's Abhinavadaśakumāracarite; śaṭpadi (poems with six-line verses) works such as Rāghavāṅka's Hariścandrakāvya, Kanakadāsa's Naḷacarite, and Rāmapaṭṭābhīṣeka of Mahālakṣmi; and prose works such as Muddaṇa's Rāmāśvamedha were published in Kāvyaakalānidhi series. Further, Ramanuja Iyengar also published treatises on lakṣaṇa (characteristics of poetry) such as Udayādityālaṅkāra, Nāgavarma's Chandombudhi; lexical treatises such as Śabdasāra Nighaṇṭu and Caturāsya Nighaṇṭu; and a treatise on alaṅkāra-sāstra (poetics) – Apratimavīracarita. An advaita work titled Vedāntavivekasāra and a viśiṣṭādvaita work titled Cikkadevarāyabinnapam were also published in the same series.

Ramanujayangarya's own works such as Prabandhamañjarī; Kavisamayam, an aesthetic criticism; and numerous prose translations of plays were included in the Karṇāṭaka Kāvyaakalānidhi series.

Bhabha's Encouragement

During those days, the officers of the Department of Education were perceptive in identifying the good qualities of others and were endowed with benevolence. Hormasji Jehangir Bhabha was their head.[3]

I feel compelled to write lofty words about Bhabha, erring on the side of exaggeration. He had earned his M.A. degree at a young age of eighteen and was considered a great scholar. He was from a Parsi family and was a close relative to the world famous Jamshedji Tata. The honour of bringing him to Mysore goes to Sir K Sheshadri Iyer. Bhabha worked as lecturer and president of the Maharaja's College, Mysore. When he was made the head of the Department of Education, he travelled the length and breadth of the province and also learned to communicate in Kannada. His travel around the region was largely on a bicycle. His bicycle was one among the earliest bicycles that came to India.

Once he had visited Mulabagal. I was a student when he was inspecting our school. I remember an incident from that time. Oriental Reader was the name of our textbook. In that, we had a lesson about a lion. When Bhabha opened the book, he saw that page. He asked me to read it out aloud. There I found the English word 'majesty'. He asked for its Kannada equivalent. If I remember right, it was either I, or the one sitting next to me, who said,

“Gambhīra.” Turning towards the headmaster, he said, “What about vaikhari – will that work?” Chandrashekhara Shastri replied, “But that word also has a specific linguistic implication.” Bhabha said, “Yes, yes. But while teaching, children must be told the meanings in practice.” This shows the hands on acquaintance he had in Kannada language.

There’s another incident I wish to narrate. I learnt this from a reliable source. There was a Sanskrit school in a small village in Kolar district; it was sustained by a government grant. The then inspector, having examined the school, recommended that the grant be cancelled since the school wasn’t running satisfactorily. While sending this to the government Bhabha wrote some comments about the decision; it was his recommendation that the grant should not be cancelled. Those comments are interesting and are as follows:

1. The inspector has complained that the school doesn’t follow proper timings. But the government hasn’t provided the school with a clock and therefore the villagers are following their preferred timings.

2. There is a complaint that there is an assembly of villagers in the school who aren’t students. Let them be there. It is definitely a benefit for them—and not a loss—if they listen to a word or two of Sanskrit. Even this paves the way for promoting education.

3. It is also mentioned that Shastri’s teaching lasts till two in the afternoon. Isn’t that a good thing? He’s a Vedic brāhmaṇa and is bound to perform daily rituals. When the rituals demand more work from him, he might cut short the class and at other times, he might elongate the duration of teaching, thus compensating for what he missed out.

4. If the government wishes to promote education in the country it should be a little lenient towards Vedic brāhmaṇas. We have to primarily ask these questions: Are they training the students properly? Are the villagers respecting the work they do? Since the answers for both these questions are satisfactory in the case of this school, the grants should not be stopped.

Somewhere during 1930, H J Bhabha visited Bangalore for some reason, perhaps in relation to his work at the Tata Institute. He stayed in the West End hotel. By some means, Prof. Bellave Venkatanaranappa came to know about this and was enthusiastic to hear the news. That was the time the Karṇāṭaka Saṅgha of Central College, Bangalore was involved in the publication of a book. Venkatanaranappa was the president of the Karṇāṭaka Saṅgha. Venkatanaranappa wished to give the first copy of the book to Bhabha. It’s quite natural that the others seconded his decision. Venkatanaranappa, T S Venkannaiah, Cha Vasudevaiah, and I went to the West End. It is there I witnessed the sort of admiration that Bhabha had towards Vasudevaiah. Venkatanaranappa placed the book in Bhabha’s hands. He opened the book, read it here and there, and expressed his appreciation. He congratulated the work undertaken by the Karṇāṭaka Saṅgha.

Bhabha’s respect towards Kannada was really of a superior order.

It’s natural that Bhabha was sympathetic towards the literary efforts of M A Ramanuja Iyengar. It is only due to Bhabha’s encouragement that he could publish periodicals like the Kāvyaamañjarī and Kāvyaakālānidhi for some time.

When I met Ramanuja Iyengar for the first time, he was quite aged. He was at Melukote to pay his respects to the presiding deity, Śrī Tirunārāyaṇasvāmi. After I introduced myself, we had a friendly conversation.

I have read through two of his original works – Kavisamayam and Prabandhamañjarī. Both these works reflect his deep knowledge of poetry, his command over the language, and his erudition in the subject. In the intellectual world of Karnataka, if readers were endowed with the ability to discern the quality of great works, his books would have seen several reprints.

This is an English translation of the eighth chapter of D V Gundappa's Jnapakachitrashaale – Vol. 3 – Sahityopasakaru. Thanks to Śatāvadhāni Dr. R Ganesh and Sudarshan Muralidhara for their review. Edited by Hari Ravikumar.