

Personal Reflections

A Nephew Remembers

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When I was a little boy, K Venkataraman liked to say that I would be his PhD student. My father, who was his wife's brother, had become a scientist on the advice (and inspiration) of 'KV'. Like his admired *atimbair*, he has done chemistry honours at Presidency College, Madras, a college then at the height of its reputation. My father later obtained a PhD at the Indian Institute of Science, working with KV's friend, J C Ghosh. The men in my family had all studied science; several were professional scientists, none more eminent than Venkataraman himself. So it was to be expected that I would study chemistry and one day work with him towards a PhD.

I chose to do economics instead, whereupon KV predicted that I would now do a PhD with his daughter Dharma, who was a professor at the Delhi School of Economics. As it happens I shifted to sociology, thus to disappoint both father and daughter.

Yet I retain warm memories of an uncle in whose Pune home I spent several long holidays. He was then pushing seventy, and his devotion to research was ferocious. He would work from nine to one, return home for lunch and a ten-minute nap, and then go back to NCL. This commitment was made more notable in view of his asthma, a disease of which he was a lifelong sufferer, the wheezing doubtless intensified by the fumes in his lab.

When Venkataraman died in 1981, he was the subject of an affectionate portrait by Khushwant Singh. The prurient Khushwant recalled asking the scientist's son-in-law, the technocrat Lovraj Kumar, whether KV had any affairs. Lovraj replied: 'There were as many as three women in his life: his wife, his daughter, and his granddaughter'.

KV lived for his science, and, like all committed (one might say obsessed) scientists, only secondarily for his family. So far as I can tell he had no women friends other than the three I have mentioned. As for close male friends, these too numbered three. Two were his brothers, K Swaminathan and K S Sanjivi. Swaminathan was a legendary Professor of English at Presidency College and later, a still more legendary Chief Editor



of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Sanjivi was a greatly respected Professor of Medicine at Madras University and later, the founder of that remarkable experiment in community medicine, the Voluntary Health Service. KV took a just pride in his brothers' achievements (and they in his). They were an exceptionally close-knit trio. All three were awarded the Padma Bhushan, a record surely never to be equalled.

The other close friend of KV's was his brother-in-law, C R Ranganathan. The two had studied together at P S High School in Mylapore; later, they were to marry sisters. Ranganathan had a successful career in the Indian Forest Research Institute in Dehradun and as Inspector General of Forests. KV liked Ranganathan enough to have his daughter Dharma married from his house. And he admired him too; as he once told me, if Ranganathan had studied chemistry further he might have been a better scientist than himself.

Venkataramn was one of the two people from whom I learnt that to do something well one had to do it *thoroughly*. (The other was my maternal grandfather D Narayanamurti, a plywood scientist of distinction who, like KV, lived for his work and was active in experimental research until the day he died.) I learnt from them that there were no 'office hours' in science, nor any weekends either.

KV was, in his own way, not negligent of his family, whether nuclear or extended. But we all were in no doubt of what came first. Holidays were always brief, and a means only to take a deep breath (in this asthmatic's case, literally) before returning to the lab. The one exception to this was when he was forced to travel with his wife to the Soviet Union, so as to spend the accumulated rouble royalties of the Russian translation of his great work on synthetic dyes. I remember that trip well, chiefly for the stories my aunt told us of the difficulty she had in getting rid of vast sums of money in the large store in Moscow, a dreary place called GUM whose chief offering, Caviar, was of no use to this vegetarian couple ('If only the caviar were saris', said my aunt).

This must be a brief notice, for it is written by one who knows no science whatsoever. The Article-in-a-Box by Nagendrappa will explain the significance of K Venkataraman's scientific work, and also pay tribute to the two Indian institutions of high quality that he nurtured: the University Department of Chemical Technology in Mumbai and the National Chemical Laboratory in Pune. But I might be permitted to add a mention of his chief professional disappointment: the fact that he was never made a Fellow of the Royal Society. He was a Foreign Member of the American Academy of Sciences (then

a very highly regarded body indeed). His work was recognized and admired in scientific circles all over the world. Everywhere, it was part of the core curriculum of the discipline. And yet, the prize he would have most cherished never came his way.

Within the family, it was said that KV had not been made an FRS because he fell out with his teacher, the Nobel Laureate Robert Robinson. Robinson lived to a ripe old age; and made sure that so long as he was around KV would not be elected. Whatever the reason, we know that failure rankled, and rankled deeply, especially as several lesser chemists had been gifted the honour denied him. I got a sense of what it meant when reading the essay on Robert Frost in C P Snow's *Variety of Men*, which speaks of how this great American poet never quite got over the disappointment of not being awarded the Nobel Prize.

For most Indians, biography is equivalent to hagiography, and doubtless there will be readers of this article who will be embarrassed – or even offended – by what I have just recounted. But the life of a scientist, like of any other human being, is marked both by success and failure – and it would be disingenuous to speak of one while disregarding the other. In any case, in the balance-sheet of K Venkataraman's career the achievements far exceed the disappointments. As a patriot who did so much for science in this country, I think he would have been greatly pleased by the fact that *Resonance* has chosen to remember him so many years after his death – this a tribute, from Indians who never knew him, that wipes out the stain of not having won, in his own lifetime, that elusive FRS.

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