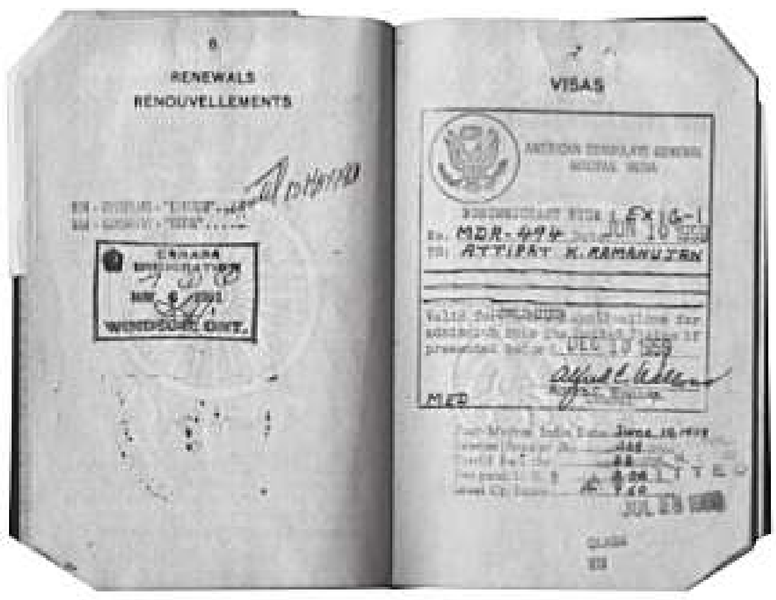
POOR, ELITE WRITERS INC.

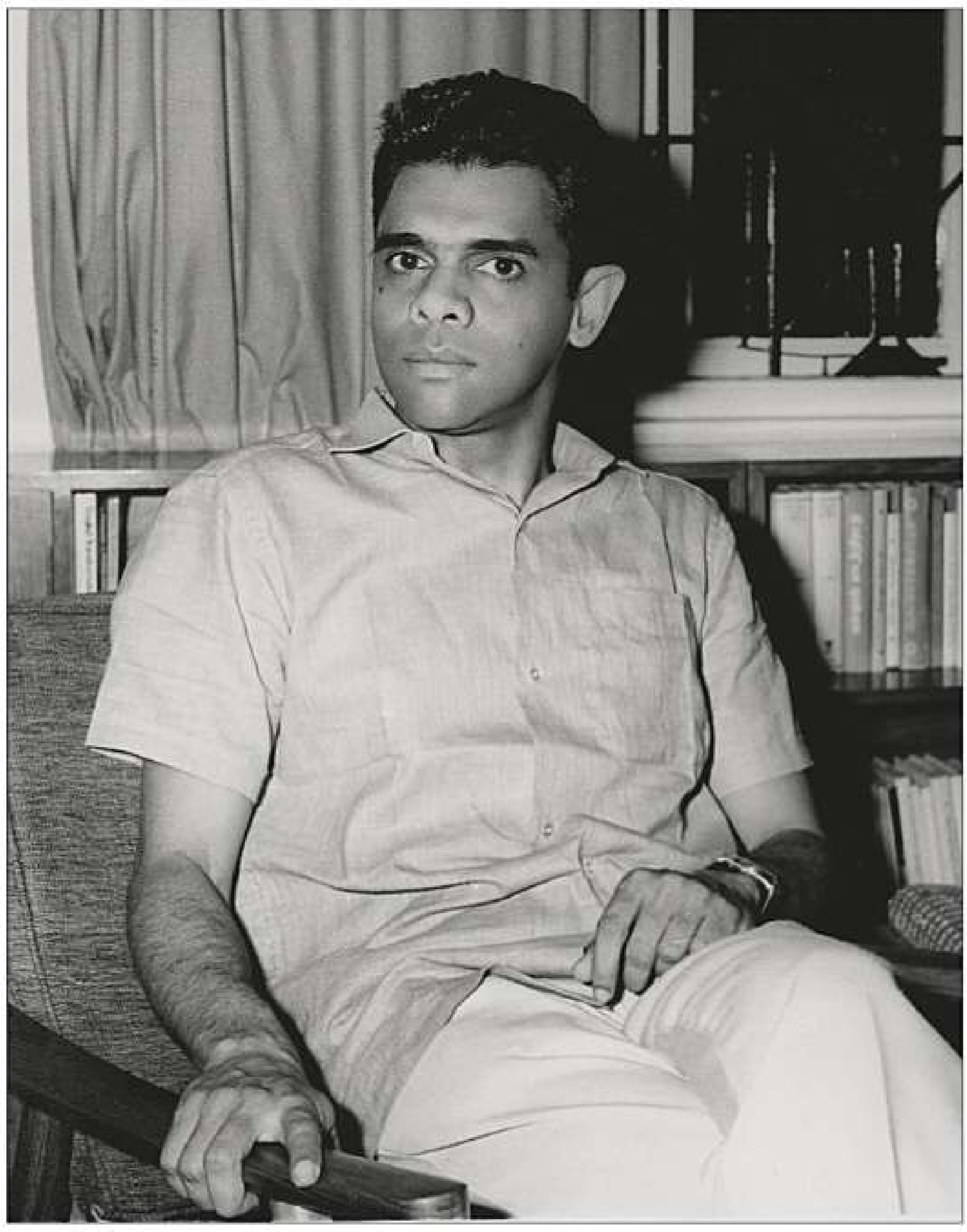
There are now reports to prove it — writing is becoming an elitist profession. The latest comes from the annual Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society, UK. Authors, increasingly, are being subsidised by their partners or a second job, it says. Almost 70 per cent of respondents said they needed to earn money from sources other than writing, according to the report.

'Betray yourself always in your writing'

The remarkable, unassuming life and literary legacy of AK Ramanujan

NABANEETA DEV SEN





Ramanujan (right) in 1954, and his first US visa (above), stamped at NYC Harbour, where he arrived by ship, July 28, 1959 *Courtesy Estate of AKR*

WE MET in 1959 at Bloomington, Indiana. It was our first trip to the USA. I was 21, nine years younger than my friend Ramanujan. We were graduate students doing our PhD. Sixty long years have passed. Today we are meeting once again in the pages of his journals. Our most intimate meeting.

This is a reader's private journey through a poet's inner self, witnessing a poet's soul-searching. I feel like an intruder in a private space, peeping into a creator's innermost self. He is sharing his most private moments, baring his truths, disappointments, surprises, dreams, loves, the process of creation unfolding on every page. Full of self-doubt and self-criticism, and self-improvement routines sincerely planned (but never to be followed!), the journal is also filled with dreams remembered in amazing detail. A poet is honestly searching for his true self, his very soul. Creative? Scholarly? Scared? Confident? He searched for an answer for 50 years in his diaries.

AK Ramanujan was a poet, scholar, multilingual translator and teacher. A brilliant mind endlessly searching for the artist's self, he is open at times, but very private at other moments. He mentions very few names, uses initials for most, even changes names. "Betray yourself totally in your writing," he writes, and that is precisely what he does here. For example, he lists the people who ill-treated him, and supplies possible reasons for their dislike. He is totally self-centred in these pages. Except his wife Molly, others do not occupy much space in his life and mind. Of course, the material here has been selected by the editors. We cannot really draw conclusions about Raman's personal choices.

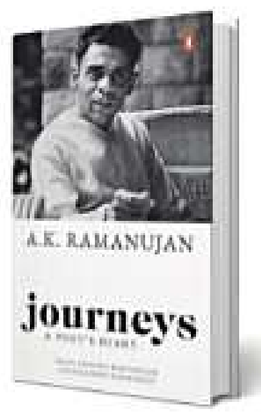
Ramanujan was engrossed in folklore, poetry, translation, language, sex and psychology. How could such an intellectually powerful man be so unsure of himself emotionally? He reasoned that the lack of confidence owed to his thin, high-pitched voice. He even took voice training in the US. A brilliant conversationalist, his thin voice was scarcely noticed when he spoke. The strange diffidence which he expresses in these pages was never visible. The sparkling wit and humour of Raman in conversation could only come from deep self-confidence.

He planned to publish some of these journals, but never did. His son Krishna Ramanujan and the Spanish scholar Guillermo Rodriguez did the job after he was gone. It was possible thanks to the jewel box of AKR papers at the Joseph Regenstein Library in Chicago University. And there's a fascinating foreword by his old student, close friend and admirer, Girish Karnad.

In the first section, 'Mother India', Ramanujan is a young man in India discovering himself as a poet. From a Tamil Brahmin background and early literary leanings, his journey has begun towards a meat-eating, whiskey-drinking Western academic life. The second, 'The Journey', is an extraordinary travelogue of his first sea voyage to Europe. He uses language like a paintbrush, detailing the sights. With his knowledge of history, art and literature, he is at home everywhere in his journey through several cities. But there are intricately detailed descriptions of intimate public kissing, a sight one does not see in India. Even-handedly, he also mentions strange Indian practices, like men walking the streets holding hands.

In the third section, he is an academic in the US, publishing a lot of poetry, exploring and rediscovering himself in a new culture. The fourth is uncomfortable-making, as if you are watching the poet's most private moments through a half-closed window. We are privy to a brilliant creative mind, totally absorbed in but strangely unsure of itself. His humility is astonishing: invited to a poets' meet in Jerusalem, he hesitates because two Nobel laureates would be there.

To be a poet is to be in control. Raman never let go. He even critically details the effects of mescaline when he tries it in 1971, alone in an apartment in Madison. His delicate, beautiful poetry documents the experience in images, yet hangs on to logic. The scholar and the poet are both at work, both in control. Raman was always self conscious – in his jokes, in his tales, in his writings. He thought of his self as a writer's self, even in his private diaries.



JOURNEYS: A POET'S DIARY
A K RAMANUJAN
Penguin/Hamish Hamilton
384 pages
₹599

The book keeps you spellbound with its amazing intellectual humility. His literary brilliance shines through every carefully-crafted line. The book develops with time, but two things remain the same from 1949 to 1993: his dedication to poetry and his self-doubt.

In 1972, Raman looks back at his pages from the Sixties: "Sickening that one's thoughts, cravings and self-reproaches have remained the same, said in the self-same words, while everything in one's circumstances have changed — marriage, children, divorce, travel, a career of 20 years, new intimacies, suicides, aging of friends, books written… One's self-awareness has stayed out of touch with the self itself and its changes."

Bloomington, September 1959. Our first day at the university. We were in a queue at the dining hall. A small Indian man with a shock of curly black hair and a thin, high-pitched voice was among us. Happy to find a brown face, I smiled at him. A big smile and shining eyes flashed back. He was an Indian poet in English, the kind I was strongly against. Why should anyone create poetry in any language other than her mother tongue? I wrote poetry too and had a book to my credit, but certainly not in English. Ramanujan said that he had written poetry in Kannada and Tamil, but felt happier writing in English. I did not ask why. I thought I knew. English has a worldwide readership. But perhaps his reasons were different?

We soon became friends and went for long evening walks through the woods, admiring the gorgeous red and gold leaves of fall and discussing life and literature. Once, looking at the leafless skeleton of a wintry tree, with its naked branches spread out in the sky, Raman said, "Look, doesn't it look like the tree is upside down with its head buried in the ground and its roots clawing the sky?" Every time I see a bare tree in winter, I remember Raman's words.

Years later, during a walk in Harvard Yard, he mentioned women's oral tales in Telugu about Rama and Sita. I was then working on *Chandrabati*, a Bengali woman's *Ramayana*, and thought of exploring the genre further. This was well before he wrote his fabulous essay, The *300 Ramayanas*, which became controversial in 2011 when Delhi University dropped it from its syllabus following right-wing threats.

I last met Raman in June, 1993. We were both staying at Delhi's India International Centre. Raman had delivered a glittering speech, as always, about the continuity of folktales through generations. The details keep changing, yet the basic story remains the same. He spoke of a woodcutter, who said that his axe was actually his great-grandfather's. How was it still so bright and sharp? "Oh, the blade has been changed a few times." And the wooden handle was not worn either! "Yes, the handle, too, has been replaced a few times, but the axe remains the same." So does the orally transferred story.

Over dinner that night, Raman said he was returning to Chicago for a surgery which he was uneasy about. His family and friends had assured him that it was very simple and safe. I, too, encouraged him to be relaxed about the surgery, since everyone was saying it was necessary. He remained silent, clearly unconvinced. Back in Chicago, he had the operation against his will, and never regained consciousness. There is a reference to our meeting in the last page of his journal, but my name is changed to Gita (Raman called me Nita). The journal ends the same day, strangely — or maybe not so strangely — with a reference to Yaman, the lord of death.

Poet, writer and academic, Nabaneeta Dev Sen's works include studies of the Ramayana and literary translation

Netsuke stories

Vignettes of a rarefied space of political power and celebrity from a seasoned journalist

NALINI SINGH

'Netsuke' are miniature Japanese sculptures that distil the aura of a time and place so vividly that you are transported to another space, both familiar and distant. Kumkum Chadha's *The Marigold Story* is a collection of netsuke, whose beauty lies in how much they convey with so little.

Chadha is a well-known journalist who has for decades enjoyed a close view of the power-play in Lutyens' Delhi, and of the great drive — and greater foolishness — of many stars. Here, she has turned her microscope on them, to produce forensic, yet empathetic, accounts of persons who have dominated our imagination for decades. Chadha writes accessibly about their inner lives in the book:

■■■

Smita Patil, a new mother at 31 and India's leading actress, brought her days-old baby from the hospital alone to the new apartment she had purchased off Mumbai's Carter Road, to set up home with fellow actor Raj Babbar (now contesting the 2019 Lok Sabha elections). Joyless and despairing at her collapsing relationship, she did not perform the *grihapravesh* (house-warming) ceremony. She reached out to her friend, the author: "Kumkum, I have lost my will to live." Within a week, Patil died of septicaemia related to pregnancy, broken-hearted and a victim of medical negligence. "Smita's life was waiting endlessly: for perfect relationships, for that elusive happiness." The reader wonders if celebrityhood leached the resilience that Smita would have inherited from her strong-willed parents — her father started as an agricultural labourer and her mother was a housemaid in Nashik.

■■■

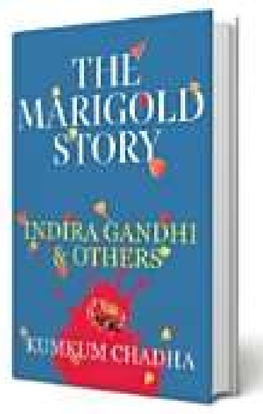
Lalu Yadav has widely-splayed toes because he grew up without shoes. He often went without food, and survived on rodent *chokha* and curried wild rabbits. The village schoolteacher gave him basic lessons gratis, in lieu of odd jobs around the house. When he passed an exam, as *gurudakshina*, Lalu gifted the teacher a bit of rope, his only possession. Lalu's journey, from a key player in Jayaprakash Narayan's Sampoorna Kranti against Indira Gandhi's corrupt regime to Jharkhand's jails for conviction in corruption cases, is studded with seeming contradictions.

Chadha says that he often spoke about "*gai, gobar, bael-gaadi*" (cow, dung and bullock-cart), and yet claimed he achieved an unprecedented financial turnaround in the loss-making Railways, a 'fact' which was contradicted by his successors. Although he managed to foist his wife Rabri Devi as Bihar's chief minister for 10 years, Lalu reminisced wistfully, "*Kalank lagta hai. Pata nahin kya hai nakshatra mein. Har baar hota hai ki Lalu gaya, gaya, Lalu gaya, par har baar Lalu wapis aa jaata hai. Jo photo finish kar dena chahte hain, par photo toh mit-ta nahin*" ("It is a slander campaign; something to do with my planetary alignment; every time there is talk of Lalu being finished, but he bounces back. The rivals want to finish him, but my identity is difficult to erase"). Now, over to May 23, when his Rashtriya Janata Dal and his squabbling family will be tested.

■■■

The genesis of the contemporary slogan, "*Chowkidar chor hai*", lies in the late 1980s: "*Gali gali mein shor hai, Rajiv Gandhi chor hai.*" Astonishingly, we heard echoes of this slogan in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's taunt to Rahul Gandhi on May 4, when Modi said that Rahul's father had died as "*Bhrashtachari* No. 1". Talking of the day Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated, Chadha notes that at Sriperumbudur, Rajiv had asked the security detail to let the young lady Dhanu meet him. "She struck with precision, placing a sandalwood garland around Rajiv's neck. As he took it off as he always did, she bent down to press the button… a loud explosion ripped him and others apart".

After 28 years, Rajiv Gandhi's death in Sriperumbudur is convertible election currency, yet again. "Millions of ordinary Congress workers… are full of enthusiasm… But they are handicapped, for on their backs ride the brokers of power and influence, who dispense patronage to convert a mass movement into feudal oligarchy… They are reducing the Congress to a shell from which the spirit of service and sacrifice have been emptied…" — This is what Rajiv Gandhi had said in Mumbai in 1985. Chadha says, Rajiv had acknowledged that " it was always the cabal, the coterie in the Congress who got the better of the sincere members. This perhaps explains the mediocrity that had gripped the system."



THE MARIGOLD STORY: INDIRA GANDHI & OTHERS
KUMKUM CHADHA
Tranquebar
360 pages
₹699

The book notes that Rajiv Gandhi had nurtured his constituency Amethi keenly, with Sonia. In the years after Rajiv became its MP, "Amethi transformed from a village into an industrialised city, brightly-lit. Every village in the district had water and electricity, motorable roads." Thursday, May 23, will reveal if Rajiv Gandhi laid enduring foundations in Amethi for his son, Rahul Gandhi, in the hearts of its people.

■■■

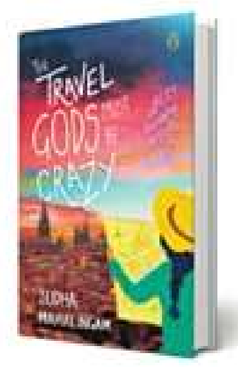
At the age of 25, Ajay Bijli decided to leverage the Indian love for movies and take it to dizzying international standards of movie-going. Without his transporter family's approval, Ajay contacted Warner Brothers and Village Roadshow to invest in transforming the staid Priya cinema in New Delhi's Vasant Vihar. His grandfather, an awe-inspiring wrestler, had once retrieved a Hindu girl from kidnappers in the aftermath of Partition — "*Bijli ki tarah gaye or bijli ki tarah aaye*" (went in like lightning and rushed out like lightning). And Bijli became the family surname.

Chadha has named her book after the marigold flowers that Indira Gandhi disliked — the very flowers that bedecked her bullet-riddled body as it awaited cremation. And yet, it is this chapter that Chadha is not as sure-footed as she is with Amitabh and Jaya Bachchan, Ekta Kapoor and Smriti Irani, Abhinav Bindra, LK Advani, Arun Jaitley and Sanjay Gandhi. As India awaits the election results, Chadha's book tells some compelling back-stories, conveying the insight of Netsuke.

The writer is a senior journalist based in New Delhi

PAPERBACKER

Wild Wanderlust



THE TRAVEL GODS MUST BE CRAZY: WACKY ENCOUNTERS IN EXOTIC LANDS
SUDHA MAHALINGAM
Penguin
272 pages
₹299

TRAVEL FRUSTRATES and discombobulates just as much as it delights and enriches. It takes a particular passion for travel to find something to love even in the scariest, most confusing and annoying of journeys. Thanks to her job as an energy consultant — which requires her to make as many as 18 international trips a year — Sudha Mahalingam has had the good fortune of being able to travel to some of the most interesting parts of the world. These trips — and the frequently mind-boggling adventures that such travels entail — provide the fodder for her book *The Travel Gods Must Be Crazy: Wacky Encounters in Exotic Lands*.

Of course, Mahalingam's idea of what makes a specific destination interesting does not universally apply. After all, few would consider a trip to the isolated Issyk-Kul lake, Uzbekistan. That too in the middle of winter, when they could easily be enjoying the beauty of Tashkent and Bukhara, ensconced in the warmth of modern civilisation. Few would even think about picking a non-descript village in the humid jungles of Borneo as a destination, when Indonesia has far more convenient attractions to offer.

But Mahalingam is a traveller who delights in going off the beaten track, even if it means ending up in a hotel with no or limited modern conveniences, or being stranded in off-the-grid places, without access to public or private transport. With her breezy prose (that is let down a little by terribly-used photographs), Mahalingam teases out the humour in every situation, even if it means confessing that — thanks to her stubborn preference of off-beat, uncomfortable holidays — she's the kind of traveller who ends up with broken friendships, if not broken bones.

Of course, not many Indian women, especially over a certain age, have the privilege of traveling like she does, but Mahalingam's impish delight in nosing out the worst circumstances and then making the best out of them is rather inspiring. Not that one is moved to trek through knee-deep snow on impossible mountain trails upon reading this book: this reader, at least, is happier to simply chuckle over some of the more outrageous adventures described in it.

POOJA PILLAI