# INDIAN SHORT STORIES



# SELECTED AND EDITED BY MULK RAJ ANAND AND IQBAL SINGH

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### Alagu Subramaniam

Alagu Subramaniam was a Tamil short story writer from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), born in 1915. He arrived in London in 1937 and

regularly published short stories in Life and Letters To-day, Left Review and Tribune. *He was one of the founders and editors of the literary magazine* Indian Writing. *Mulk Raj Anand and Iqbal Singh also published one of his short stories in their anthology* Indian Short Stories (*New India Publishing Company, 1946*). *He was also involved with the anti-colonial organisation Swaraj House. Alagu Subramaniam died in 1971*.

#### A Note on the Text

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## THE MATHEMATICIAN

#### Alagu Subramaniam

It was a moonlight night, and the people of the town were walking leisurely on the *maidan*. Among them was a newly married couple. They did not walk abreast. The man was half a step in front of his wife. Strictly speaking she should have been at least a step behind her husband, but they were educated and comparatively modern. Hence half a step, which to them was a negligible distance.

Chandram, the husband, taught mathematics to senior students in a high school. His qualifications fitted him to be a lecturer in a university. That was his ambition.

Suddenly Subhadra, his wife, became thoughtful, as if she had recollected an important event.

"What are you thinking?" asked Chandram.

"I'm thinking of the days I spent at the Tamarind School. Look, look there. Do you see that building above those walls?"

" Yes."

"That's my school."

"Oh yes, I remember now. The go-between told my parents that you were an educated girl. Did you learn a lot?"

"Well, I went up to the third form. It was once my ambition to pass the Junior Cambridge examination, but I married you in the meantime"

"Are you disappointed ?"

"No, oh no." She laughed, showing her teeth in the moonlight.

"Did you do any mathematics, Pearly Teeth ?"

"Yes, I did algebra and geometry."

"Well," said Chandram," define parallel lines."

"Parallel lines are those which do not meet however

far they are extended."

"That's not quite correct. Your definition is all right for one who knows only elementary mathematics."

"How would you define them ?"

"Parallel lines are those which meet at infinity," said Chandram solemnly. "You see, Subhadra, I'm a higher mathematician."

"You're an educated man," commented his wife.

"You are educated too," replied Chandram, "but not too much. Excessive education does not befit a woman. You're educated enough to be impressed with my learning, and you're not so educated that you get on my nerves."

Subhadra smiled, showing her teeth which were whiter than the moonlight. Chandram, pleased with himself, wanted to go home. He led the way. His wife accompanied him half a step behind.

During the years that followed Chandram showed more interest in mathematics than in his wife. She resented it, but never expressed her resentment either in words or deeds. She bore it all like a model wife. The husband, however, did not entirely fail in his matrimonial obligations. Subhadra gave birth to children at regular intervals.

Chandram persuaded his wife to believe that he was a genius. His was no ordinary brain, he was different from the others. The poet is devoted to his poetry and the musician to his music. They may be failures as ordinary human beings but you have to judge them in relation to their work. Chandram should be judged in the field of mathematics and not in the social world of ordinary men. He often went for long walks, and when his wife asked him if he had met any of his friends, he would reply: "No, I've been roaming in the realm of mathematics." He quarrelled with his neighbours ; he found fault with his servants ; he solved the most difficult problems in caculus but made mistakes in summing up tradesmen's bills ; he neglected his children.

The husband and wife discussed Chandram the

genius. One day he was a Newton, or at least a Ramanujam. Subhadra boasted about her husband to her friends and requested them to overlook his faults. She simplified life for him by attending to all his needs, and never allowed her children to disturb their father in his work. Chandram acted like an eccentric. He inadvertently wore socks that didn't match, invited friends to his house but was out at the appointed time, and went for long walks in heavy rain. Chandram worked hard, his mind always on the alert for original solutions of problems. He discovered new and quicker methods, and advised his students not to be frightened by complexity in a test paper, but to ponder the question deeply and try and render the puzzle in terms of pure geometry.

But Chandram's attitude to life was not destined to go unchallenged. By winning an international prize for mathematics he became famous and was appointed a Professor at the Colombo University. The varied life of the university was not a suitable field for the new professor's idiosyncrasies. Besides, the members of the staff, in additon to their own curriculum, took an interest in other activities.

Colombo itself was very different from Jaffna, the home town of Professor Chandram. Life was more complex in the city and people knew less of other's private lives. Chandram was jealous of his colleagues. There was Professor Sunderam, who, in addition to lecturing in history, considered himself an authority on music. He presided at most of the concerts. The assistant lecturer in mathematics held discourses on philosophy, while Mangalam, the lecturer in philosophy, was considered a writer. Apart from the adulation he received from his students and the residents of the town for his literary work, Mangalam thought and spoke a lot about himself.

But Professor Chandram could not even indulge in self-praise successfully. In his home town he had roamed in the realm of mathematics, but in the metropolis there were so many who were roaming in the land of figures that it ceased to be orignal. The people who mattered were those who came out of their shells and entered the arena of life, in art or in politics. Chandram wished to be recognised in the university and to be given his due place, but as the years went by the staff of the university began to treat him with less and less deference. Chandram found that he was never asked to be the chairman of any committee, or warden of a hostel, or to act as registrar or principal of the college.

His colleagues believed they were not being unfair to Chandram. They, of course, recognised his capabilities, but only as a very clever mathematician. They were prepared to look up to Chandram with awe and respect if he could discover a new theorem like the Binomial and thus justify his claims to genius, or they gave him the alternative of widening his interests and impressing on his colleagues that he was not merely a mathematical apparatus like the slide rule.

During the next few years Chandram became very restless. He was yearning to discover something new, but it was not easy. "My predecessors have discovered everything that is to be discovered, perhaps there's nothing new," he remarked to one of his friends.

"While you're differentiating equations on the blackboard the world is marching past you," his friend commented. "Why don't you take an interest in life? Then people will think you're somebody. As it is you're nothing."

"Don't say that," shouted Chandram. "I'm a genius. Do you realise that? I am a genius." He stared at his friend angrily, then controlled himself and added: "Maybe you're right. I too feel a pull in two directions; mathematics and the wide world. Still the force of mathematics is stronger."

The professor of mathematics, unlike the other members of the staff did not hold himself aloof from his students. He was rather free with the undergraduates. Sometimes he even made jokes about himself or his dozen children. One day when it rained heavily and the water began to leak through the tiles, Chandram said : "In the honours class there are only a few students, I could ask them to come home, but with you intermediate students who number a hundred I can't possibly do that because I already have an intermediate class at home." In the course of a lecture on Permutations and Combinations he would ask: "In how many different ways is it possible to take two of my boys and two of my girls across a stream ?"

The undergraduates and post graduates naturally did not keep themselves aloof. They joined their professor in the fun. Some became free and easy with him, others even overstepped the limit.

Chandram gave his students an excellent training in mathematics. He held tests frequently, and he chose lunar days for them so that while walking in the moonlight he might meditate on some of the original solutions of his students. At one of these tests Chandram himself was present, though usually he asked his assistant to preside. Chandram was fantastically dressed and had forgotten to comb his hair. He looked like an eccentric musician. During the test he paced up and down the room supervising. He noticed that every student was hard at work except one whose paper looked blank. You cannot bluff in mathematics. You either solve the problems or walk out of the hall.

Chandram also noticed that every time he looked at this particular student he seemed frightened, like a startled deer. The professor went up to the pupil whose paper was bare except for two lines. Even these the undergraduate covered with his palm as the professor approached him. Chandram forcibly pushed the student's hand away. The top line was now visible, and it read as follows:

Prof. Chandram. Mathematics—Infinity. Chandram smiled happily, then began to pace the room again. Soon he mounted the platform and strutted about like a peacock. He was pleased with himself. "Newton, Ramanujam, Chandram. Chandram, Newton, Ramanujam," he repeated the names. A sudden thought flashed across his mind as he descended the platform. He asked the pupil to show him the second line. The latter turned pale and folded his book. Chandram told him it was improper to do that and ordered him to hand over the file. The professor read :

Prof. Chandram. Mathematics—Zero. Chandram's face fell. It was such an unexpected blow that Chandram could not even regain enough composure to scold the student. He walked about like a man who had lost all his possessions. He felt like a paralytic in a room full of energetic and vital people. The metropolitan university had reduced him to this state.

The light from the full moon spread itself like a white sheet over the *maidan* adjoining the university. People were not heavily dressed as during the day. Light shawls were carelessly thrown over the bare shoulders of men, and translucent muslins held the soft contours of their wives. Subhadra, standing half a step behind her husband, loosened her jacket and let the air wander over her breasts, when she was suddenly called by her husband.

"Where are you ?" he cried.

"I'm just behind you."

"What's Professor Chandram plus mathematics ?"

Subhadra was taken aback. She was not familiar with the term 'infinity.' Her knowledge of mathematics did not go so far. But she knew that mathematics, together with her husband, was something immeasurable. Subhadra used her own method of description.

"Well," she replied, "it's something greater than this world and the oceans."

"Splendid," said Chandram, "your description is wonderful." He looked at her affectionately and fondled her. Subhardra, having been taught that a woman should maintain strict modesty in public, even with her husband, resisted.

"I was not doing anything," said Chandram defensively. "I was only testing the quality of the muslin." He gave his wife a sly look.

"My husband is behaving strangely to-day,"

thought Subhadra. "No, oh no," she immediately corrected herself, "he's a genius, that's why. . . ."

"Subhadra !"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Now, tell me, what's Professor Chandram minus mathematics ?"

"That's easy," commented his wife, as her lips curled with a smile : "Well, my dear Professor, you're nothing without mathematics."

Subhadra expected her husband to be delighted at her answer and express his appreciation of her muslin dress. She was surprised to find him reacting differently. Chandram abused his wife, threw his hands in the hair and became hysterical.

A small crowd soon collected around the professor. They all looked like shadows in the moonlight. Some said that Chandram had actually gone mad, others that it was only a temporary aberration of the mind which now and again afflicted talented people, while the rest believed that he was performing the cosmic dance of Siva.

Some friends of Subhadra took her in their charge. Chandram broke through the crowd, ran to the Principal of the college, and demanded replies to his two questions. The demand was accompanied by emphatic gestures. The Principal had no answer to give, became speechless, and was genuinely frightened. His wife began to scream. Her husband retained enough composure to send for the servant and ask him to call a taxi.

They experienced great difficulty in removing Chandram. The servant finally overpowered the professor and put him in the taxi. While the servant held Chandram to his seat the Principal got in and instructed the driver to drive them to the Mental Hospital. Through the windows and in the moonlight he saw Mrs. Chandram being led home by a group of women. Chandram shouted for his wife. "You can't see her now," said the Principal in a commanding tone.

"All right," replied the professor, "doesn't matter, I'll meet her at infinity." A cloud covered the moon. The road no longer looked like a white sheet. Chandram became more violent; and despite the darkness the driver drove furiously to the Mental Hospital.