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GENIUS

Shakuntala Devi

Meet the psychic math whiz whose mind boggling calculations transcend human limitations and leave computers in the dust

Shakuntala Devi holds an undisputed place in the Guinness Book of Records for multiplying in 1980 two randomly chosen 13-digit numbers and giving the correct answer in 28 seconds. Her abilities, defying common theories of human intelligence, have been the subject of much research. In 1977 she won a standing ovation from an audience of mathematicians when she extracted the 23rd root of a 201-digit number. That means she found the number that when multiplied by itself 23 times equaled the 201-digit number she was given. She solved it in 50 seconds flat. The day's most sophisticated computer, a Univac 1108, also did the deed--in 62 seconds--but only after days of programming, 13 thousand instructions and 5,000 data locations. No one has a even plausible theory as to how she could have arrived at the answer, for the feat far exceeds the supposed limits of human intelligence.

Unlike many math prodigies, Shakuntala is a normal, well-adjusted person. She travels widely, demonstrating her talent and encouraging people to develop the powers latent within every human being. During a visit to Hawaii, she pilgrimaged to meet Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami at his

Kauai ashram, and Hinduism Today interviewed her about her life and abilities.

I will tell you how this gift happened. I lived in Tiruchirappalli, South India, where there is a famous temple to Ganesha. I decided to make that Ganesha my friend. My family was a very poor brahmin family. Only some families who had money sent their children to school. Otherwise, children just grew up like that, and the daughters got married, and the sons went to do the priestly duties and the like. My mother was married at age 14 to my father, who was age 60. Together they had eight children. Early in his life, my father was in a brahmin circus, as a lion tamer and a "human cannonball." Otherwise he didn't have a proper profession. He did some card tricks and the like, based on memorizing the entire sequence of a deck. One he was unable to perform and I stepped in. I was three at the time. When I started doing these card tricks plus other things with numbers, he thought, "Here is what God has sent." He started taking me to schools, colleges and universities to perform, and we made a living that way. We would get five or ten rupees a day. By the time I was five years old, I was the family's sole breadwinner. It became a motivation to better myself every day so that I could do shows to support my parents and my sisters and brothers. That's all that I did, basically. I kept up my devotion to Lord Ganesha and to Lord Krishna.

How does she do it?

The answer just flashes in my mind. For a difficult demonstration with large numbers, I prepare for two or three

days. I rest myself; just rest my mind completely. I set aside personal problems and don't even think about them--which is good therapy for me, too. When I go on the stage, all I think of is how to give the right answers to the problems. Yes, I'm in the Guinness Book of World Records. It's all God's grace. I take no credit to myself whatsoever. I can perform for one and a half hours to two hours. Once I get started, you can't stop me. But to do it again, I need to prepare for two or three days. I charge ^{us}\$1,000 or \$2,000, because I don't have any other source of income.

The "Rainman" movie connection

A doctor Arthur Jenson in California has done a thesis on my thinking. He attended a conference where a lot of psychologists put forward the theory that all people who are gifted, especially in mathematics, are autistic [abnormally introverted, unable to relate normally to people and their environment]. This was portrayed in the movie "Rainman," where Dustin Hoffman plays an autistic mathematician. At that time, Arthur Jenson put his foot down and said, "No. There can be a person who is very normal and yet gifted in mathematics." He heard about me and chose me as a research subject. After his study he came out with an extensive thesis in which he described me

as a very normal person. But certain things he mentioned in the thesis were adopted into "Rainman," such as my attachment to pancakes and maple syrup--the reason being that pancakes look like dosai. When I came to America, being a staunch vegetarian, I could find nothing else, so I just started eating pancakes, and that's shown in the movie as this man who's attached to them. They also used the trait that I shop at K-Mart--I don't know why. And also my attachment to the tap-dancing of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. I would just sit there and watch the movie over and over and again; the mathematical steps of their dance are so fantastic. It has a tremendous effect on me. I get hypnotized by it.

On child raising

I've written a book called, *Awaken the Genius in Your Child*. It shows how, right from the beginning, a mother can bring out the best in her child: Lots of do's and don'ts and also and the reactions that can be caused. A mother doesn't realize what happens when she says, "Oh, you idiot, you're never going to shine well in life." She may have

said it as a joke, but it has a deep and lasting impact on the child. I discuss all these things in the book and give advice on how to bring out the best in your child.

On domestic violence

I have heard it said in India that a wife has to be beaten regularly. I'm the authority on this because I used to see my mother being beaten up quite regularly. She felt it was the kind of thing that had to happen. She received it with grace, in other words. Whenever my father got annoyed, he would beat her. She felt that if your husband doesn't beat you, the neighbor next door will come and beat you. That was her attitude, and that was of course a wrong attitude. When I was young, I didn't want to do the shows, because I didn't like them. My father would beat up my mother, and my mother would beat me up. It was a very traumatic experience.

Plans for the future

This world has done so much good to me in giving me recognition and a very decent way of living. I feel I should do something for the world before I take leave. I've decided to set up a institute in Bangalore, a very special institute where mathematics is taught as a very special subject. At the same time, side-by-side, the institute should delve into the secrets of Vedic mathematics. It should explain the meanings locked up the old stanzas and bring to the world the awareness that Vedic mathematics did exist, and in a highly developed state. I'd like to devote myself entirely to mathematics, Vedic and otherwise. I want the institution to have a very spiritual backbone.

Most schools today are teaching computers and software. But one thing they miss is giving a spiritual backup to the children. I want that to be taken care of as well, because one without the other is no good.

Shakuntala Devi's book, *Awaken the Genius in your Child*, is available from Element Books Limited, Shaftesbury, Dorset, SP7 8BP United

Kingdom