Shakuntala Devi
Category : April 1988
Published by Anonymous on Apr. 02, 1988

Shakuntala Devi

Math Prodigy Credits Ganesha's Mind Power

It felt like any waiting room: a courteous receptionist, a ball game on TV, families chatting, each of us waiting for our one-on-one or group consultation with the extraordinary woman dispensing wisdom and astrology in the adjoining room of this Sunnyvale, California, apartment.

Before long a smiling, straight-standing woman appeared, looking regal in her sari. "We'll talk next week," she said, bidding one client good bye. To another, "Who's next?" And to me, "I'll be with you soon." Her economy of words hinted at the talents I'd come to investigate and still held in awe. I waited and read. "Shakuntala Devi," one article said, "made the Guiness Book of World Records a few years ago (1980) by multiplying two 13-digit numbers - correctly of course - in 28 seconds." Another detailed how 3 years earlier, at Southern Methodist University in Texas, Mrs. Devi had bested the then world's fastest computer, the Univac 1108, in a head-to-chip contest to find the 23rd root of a 201 digit number. The computer required over 13 thousand instructions and thousands of data-locations, and took over a minute to solve the mega-problem. Mrs. Devi took fifty seconds.

Roots, both square and cube, logarithms, and calendar calculations are answered almost before the question is fully asked. Any day of the week from any year in the last century? Easy, 29 to the 47th power? Child's play. And yet some of the simplest details of personal memory are often misplaced. I read on. Born to a Brahmin family in Bangalore, India, Mrs. Devi is the oldest of four sisters, and now in her mid-40s. ("I've lost track," she says.) Her father was once a circus trapeze and tightrope performer, later a human cannonball.

At age 3, Shakuntala Devi's prodigious ability to calculate numbers was noticed when she began doing her father's card tricks, (he had his own touring magic show by then), not with sleight-of-hand or pre-arrangement of the deck, but by memorizing in order all 52 cards.

Her life has been one of traveling the world and demonstrating her remarkable talents ever since.

My turn arrived, and after a warm greeting, Shakuntala Devi led me to a chair beside her altar on which a small murthi of Lord Ganesha sat amid offerings of fruit and flowers. What is the source of this talent, I asked. "It is a God-given gift," she replied. Inquiring about her unusual upbringing, I was told, "I supported myself from an early age, but the Hindu religion has been there right since childhood."

Raised a lover of Lord Krishna and Lord Ganesha, Mrs. Devi says, "Ganapati is the Kula Deva [family deity] on my maternal side." I pursued the mechanics of this remarkable gift, asking if Lord Ganesha had dispatched a band of Ganas to assist her with these amazing calculations from the time-shifted existence of the inner planes. "You can assume it's something like that," she replied. Her faith in the Lord of Categories and Remover of Obstacles seems to be infectious. Mrs. Devi has authored two books on astrology, several short stories for children, a book on Hindu mythology, and naturally numerous books on mathematics. She recently received the Ramanujan Award, presented by the Ambassador of India. The inscription reads: "For her superhuman mathematical knowledge and skill in initiating children around the globe to explore the world of numbers."

This talent is rare but not unique to Shakuntala Devi. Others possess a clear channel to intuitive knowledge of numbers or other arts - such as music. Child prodigies learn calculus while most children are learning the alphabet. Psychologists have difficulty explaining the phenomenon. Mathematicians too. Robert Osserman. Professor of Mathematics at Stanford University told Hinduism Today, "There are these individuals who come along, a few in every generation. Nobody understands what it is, they just have some remarkable talent with figures, and it seems unrelated to any other talent, and they can be brilliant mathematicians or they can be totally untutored. It's not understood, but it's a fascinating thing." Mrs. Devi has no such problem in attributing her talent. She has no formal education. Her ability simply comes from God." When I need wisdom and knowledge I turn to Lord Ganapati," she says.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.