Saying it all in Sanskrit

Scholar Ramanuja Tatacharya talks about his masterpieces in the language.

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F rail health doesn’t deter N.S. Ramanuja Tatacharya from researching, writing texts and commentaries and sharing his knowledge of Sanskrit and the Sastras with seekers the world over. A day after Kamal Haasan was appointed Chevalier de l’Ordre Arts et Lettres (Knight in the National Order Arts and Letters) by the Minister of Culture and Communication, France, in August, the actor tweeted that it had been ‘silly’ of him to have advertised the award, when a couple of Indian scholars have already been its recipients and are humble about it. Ramanuja Tatacharya is one of them. Four years ago, he was presented the French Government’s highest Civilian Award Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur for lifetime achievement in Sanskrit literature, more specifically for his masterpieces, ‘Pratyaksha Tattva Chintamani Vimarsa,’ and his original work, ‘Sadbodbha Mimamsa’ in four volumes.

I was a bit hesitant to line-up my posers as the octogenarian has just been discharged from hospital. But he was game to answer my questions.

I have his works been confined to Sanskrit, I begin. “No, I have written ‘Sribhashya Chintamani,’ a commentary on Sri Ramanuja’s work on Visisthadwaita Vedanta, in Tamil,” replied the linguist.

who, besides his proficiency in Sanskrit, Tamil and Hindi, is fluent in Telugu and English. Invaluable research treatises that number more than 60, nearly a dozen books and an equal number of works on all Sastras, research monographs – Tatacharya’s oeuvre is spellbinding.

His study of palm leaf manuscripts, which he accessed when he worked at Deccan College, Pune, and also from Saraswati Mahal Library in Thanjavur, is another major contribution. Some of the writings were in Devanagari script while others were in Grantha but they posed no challenge to this savant, because he is accomplished in both.

Hailing from Shrotiyam Navalpakkam, in North Arcot District, Tatacharya’s mastery of Sanskrit and the four Sastras, which enabled him to come out with original works, his academic pursuits in Tamil and in Hindi and his Doctorate from Sampoornananda Samskrt University at Varanasi, exemplify his passion for languages. This passion and diligence led Tatacharya to eminence. As the first vice chancellor of Rashtriya Sanskrita Vidyaapeetham, at Tirupati (P.V. Narasimha Rao personally invited him to take up the post) and later as an Honorary Professor and Researcher at Institut Francais de Pondicherry (French Institute of Pondicherry), he had avid students here, from France and the U.S. He guided many in their Ph.D. programmes and under his tutelage several of his students have emerged as renowned scholars.

Every year, I have academicians like Stephen Phillips, coming down from the U.S. for a couple of months to get their doubts clarified and to take a few lessons from me,” says Tatacharya. Phillips is a professor from the Department of Philosophy and Asian Studies, The University of Texas at Austin. He has authored seven books, including ‘Epistemology of Perception,’ with Tatacharya himself. “It is very interesting to watch my father and Stephen converse in simple, chaste Sanskrit,” his son Srinivasa Raghavan tells me.

“I also have some of our own scholars, who are well-versed in the Sastras but a little different about Sanskrit, coming over to learn.

President to receive the honour, barefoot, as Vice President Mr. Hamid Ansari and BJP’s president Amit Shah look on!

Why did he do it? A true Gandhian, “Somehow at that moment I wasn’t comfortable in footwear,” is the reply. He had removed it just before walking up to the stage!

At the ceremony Tatacharya interacted with a few awardees - Dr. Shantha, Swami Tejomayananda and Rajnikanth – and had a discussion with Union Minister Venkaiah Naidu regarding ways to make people aware of the greatness of Sanskrit. Nevertheless recognition sits lightly on him.

The Governors of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra have felicitated him for the honours he received. But the Government in his home State is yet to recognise him. However, our previous Governor, Mr. Rosaiah, went to Navalpakkam to felicitate him at a private function organised by Tatacharya’s disciples.

Tatacharya is still busy researching and writing treatises. The 88-year old has just completed a commentary in simple Sanskrit, which will be an offering to Sri Ramanuja, on his 1,000th Jayanthi.