

## KUSUM NAIR

(1919–1993)

It was a humid evening in a small backyard in Maryland. The young girl hit the shuttlecock over the badminton net to the not-so-young Indian woman, who lunged aggressively to attempt a winning return. The slippery grass betrayed her footing and she fell heavily. “My God,” I thought, “I am going to have to take Kusum Nair to the hospital.” I gave her my hand and she bounced to her feet. “You know,” she said, “I once won a girls’ tennis championship in India.” Never one to give less than her full and best effort to a task, she continued the game and dispatched my daughter by a score of something like 15-6. Friend and critic of Nobel economists Gunnar Myrdal and Theodore Schultz, Kusum engaged everyone who met her with deft wit, clarity of mind, and a preternatural intensity. At times she pushed egocentrism to its limit and demanded notice and care, but she always gave back much more: to students, to colleagues, and to the world. Her twinned legacies will not dim. The one is the always-fresh memories shared by those of us who knew her as a remarkable person, whose extraordinary life path had happily crossed ours. The second is the widely regarded brilliancy of the insights and cogencies of reason that are embedded in her written works.

Kusum Nair was born on August 17, 1919, in Etah, Uttar Pradesh. In 1936, at the age of 16, she married Pran Nath Nayyar, who survives her and currently resides in New Delhi. She received a bachelor’s degree in philosophy at the University of Nagpur in 1941. During the war years she became a practicing journalist and was involved in the founding of The Press Syndicate of India. She provided coverage of Indian events for several European papers. Kusum’s sympathies were fully committed to the Congress Party’s struggle to secure India’s freedom from British colonialism, and she and her husband, who was at that time serving in the Indian Navy, played significant roles in the Naval Mutiny of 1945. Following India’s independence in 1947 and the launching of the nation’s development program in the 1950s, Kusum was among the first to perceive that the grand Nehruvian schemes, with large-scale industries as their centerpiece, ignored India’s tens of millions of peasant farmers. The remainder of her life was informed by the zestful pursuit of her chosen vocation: to probe as deeply as she could into the psyches and conduct of the world’s farmers. This quest was to turn her into an “academic gypsy,” as she described herself. She indefatigably crisscrossed the planet, talking to peasants, to specialists at leading agronomic research centers, and to the most noted agricultural economists—the wisdom of the first group being that which she held always in the highest esteem.

In her preface to *Blossoms in the Dust* (1961) Kusum described her method: “In making this survey I travelled through India continuously for one year, mostly by road, starting in August 1958. In most cases, I went into a village without any previous intimation, introduced myself and explained the purpose of my visit, and then settled down to a long talk in groups or singly.” She invariably approached her tasks as a good journalist: seeing, interviewing, listening, taking notes. From hundreds of hours of such work she distilled the representative essence, the single quotation or phrase that captured and illustrated ubiquitous states of mind and general social processes. She never used five words when she could use one. Each of her short chapters had a point—a journalist’s tag line—which she often italicized.

Another trait of her writing was the use of arrays of precise facts, gleaned from official reports and abstracts.

Acreages, field sizes, yields, and tractors were counted and reported. By accumulating and reading shelves of books, which she arranged neatly around her writing desk, Kusum kept fully abreast of the newest work in the social and agricultural sciences. One effect of her method, which far surpassed mere reportage, was that she was a masterful communicator, reaching wide public, student, and scholarly audiences. In all of her writing she transcended the pedantry exhibited by the academically trained. She spoke with a distinctive, even unique, voice that will be sorely missed.

*Blossoms*, as she called it, was widely admired and went through many printings and translations. Its subtitle was *The Human Factor in Indian Development*. Her village visits had confirmed her belief that people were ambivalent and confused about the prospects for change in their lives and in their farming methods. She wrote, "In planning for the farm community it is apparent that there cannot be any economics in isolation from sociology and social psychology. Development will not become a self-generating process with its own momentum unless the value system of the community, and the social structure containing it, are first altered and adjusted to be in harmony with the socio-economic objectives of planning."

The acclaim accorded *Blossoms* made Kusum an internationally recognized figure in the field of rural development. In September 1962 she began work on a second book, this work designed to explore how American and Japanese farmers had achieved their apparent successes. For twelve months she interviewed farmers in thirteen of the United States and in 1963 and 1965 she spent a total of six months getting to know rural Japan. Everywhere, she visited universities, experiment stations, and officials. In 1969, *The Lonely Furrow: Farming in the United States, Japan, and India* appeared. Perhaps to her surprise, she had found no magic key that could be taken from the United States or Japan and used to unlock India's agricultural potential. She said, "Of all the variables in agriculture, therefore, the farmer is the most crucial and least predictable. He plows a lonely furrow. We do not have as yet a practical policy for inducing agricultural growth that will work by *design*." Take any four farmers—American, Japanese, or Indian—she stated, with her predilection for italics, "*They could be equally greedy and rational, but there is no key efficiency price, or rate of return on investment and labor, to which the four farmers will respond similarly.*" Puzzled by the obvious contrast between India's poverty and slow growth and Japan's increasing wealth, Kusum next wrote *Three Bowls of Rice: India and Japan, Century of Effort* (1973), a study in comparative history.

Because her viewpoint was so sharply at contrast with that of American agricultural economists, Kusum alarmed and challenged this establishment, just at the moment the U.S. government and private foundations were pushing their purported know-how as the panacea for rural development in the Third World. She attacked Theodore Schultz's "poor but efficient" thesis that propounded the universal economic rationality of farmers in her *In Defense of the Irrational Peasant* (1979), which contrasted the successful farmers of India's Punjab with those of Bihar. Her final book, *Transforming Traditionally: Land and Labor Use in Agriculture in Asia and Africa* (1983), advanced the proposition that policy should center on helping laggard farmers in a region attain the highest yields that the most adept achieved with traditional methods of seed selection, manuring, and tillage. She believed that the Green Revolution was a rare episode and that it could not be spread through much of Asia and Africa

where different tenures, attitudes, and water supplies made its intensive modern input approach nonviable.

In the course of her work, Kusum spent shorter or longer periods of time at Harvard, Michigan State, the East-West Center, Chicago, Guelph, Cornell, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Maryland, before settling for the last eight years at Kansas State University. There she struggled to cap her career by contriving an epic recounting of the agricultural history of the United States, with the intent of debunking the heady myths woven into standard renditions. Only a portion of this manuscript was completed when she died on December 13, 1993, at the age of 74. The lessons of Kusum Nair's lifework will advance rather than recede in significance as the onmarching decades confront large portions of the human species with challenges to survival. She would have wanted nothing more from her life. To those who knew her, Kusum will always be a radiant blossom in the dust.

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## ATTIPAT KRISHNASWAMI RAMANUJAN

(1929–1993)

A. K. Ramanujan, one of the outstanding interpreters of South Indian civilization in this generation and a major poet in Kannada and English, died in Chicago on July 13, 1993. A masterful translator, linguist, folklorist, teacher, and scholar, Raman—as we knew him—was above all a deeply loved and loving human being, with an unparalleled talent for friendship. Entire disciplines, enlivened by his insights, are bereaved by his passing; the loss to South Asian studies as a whole is beyond measure or imagining.

Raman was born and raised in a Tamil Srivaisnava family settled in Mysore. His mother was devoutly orthodox. His father, a famous mathematician, was at home in several worlds: Western mathematicians and scientists passing through India, as well as Sanskrit pandits and traditional astrologers, frequented the Mysore house, where Raman's father had his study upstairs; but Raman himself preferred the kitchen downstairs, an inner, largely female domain that was alive with stories told in his Tamil mother-tongue. Kannada outside in the streets, Tamil downstairs, English and Sanskrit upstairs—this linguistic distribution in space, so rich in meaning, in many ways molded Raman's inner world. All his life he was fascinated by the transitions and exchanges between two primary modes so concretely embodied in his childhood experience—*akam* and *puram*, the inner and outer spaces, mother-tongues and father-tongues, the folktales told in the former and the myths composed in the latter, with their different textures and structures of authority. This categorical division would become a major theme in the cognitive maps he offered of South Indian culture.