

Shakuntala Devi

Kersi Meher-Homji talks with a human computer with heart and humour



I was fortunate to meet the mathematical genius Shakuntala Devi in Sydney in February, once during her performance and a week later when interviewing her in her hotel office.

The first thing you notice about Shakuntala is that

she looks nothing like your idea of a genius. One associates a mathematical genius with eccentricities, an anti-social attitude; a person who looks down upon you, to who you are only a number.

Shakuntala is nothing like that. Facially she resembles two women I know well who have heart, a sense of humour but no extraordinary skills. Shakuntala Devi has heart, soul, humour and skills which blow your mind away. **With her, the term extraordinary appears an understatement.**

You are overawed, nay transfixed, with her ultra rapid calculations, your mouth gasping for breath when she brings you down to earth with a witty comment.

"I want five handsome men on the stage. What's your name?" she asks. And she remembers your name throughout the performance lasting about 100 minutes. She wins you over not only with her mathematical super power but also with her humanity, adding a fourth dimension to her persona.

She asks your year, month and date of birth and tells you the day you were born instantaneously. No umm's, no urr's and certainly no errors!

She asks you to calculate the cube of a five-digit number and gives you the cube root in a second! If her answer is different from what you have found on your calculator, the calculator is wrong, not she! Yes, it happened to me. I checked and found my calculator -- and the way I had fed the data -- wrong. And the same was the case with others in the

audience.

Her name is in the Guinness Book of Records for multiplying a 13-digit number with a 13-digit number in front of an audience in 1980. She gave the answer in 28 seconds. The computer took minutes and made a mistake!

One can only surmise:

"To err is electronic, To get it right, first time every time, is Shakuntalic!"

How does she do it? Is she psychic or is the gift God-given -- or both?

"I'll tell you how this gift happened", she told Hinduism Today. "I lived in Tiruchirappalli, South India, where there is a famous temple to Ganesha. I decided to make that Ganesha my friend."

From the age of three she stunned audiences with her uncanny ability to answer complex addition, multiplication and division questions in a flash. Today, after 66 years, she has added extra dimensions to her mathematical prowess.

In 1977 she received standing ovation from an audience of learned mathematicians when she extracted the 23rd root of a 201-digit number in 50 seconds flat! A high powered and sophisticated computer took 62 seconds -- and that too after days of programming!

Unlike many mathematical prodigies Shakuntala is a normal, well-adjusted person. She travels widely, demonstrating her incredible talent and encouraging others to develop powers latent within all of us. This is Shakuntala's third tour down under, having





her my cricket book *Out for a Duck* which featured cricketers (including Don Bradman, Greg Chappell, Sunil Gavaskar and Mark Waugh) who scored zeroes and still were outstanding batsmen. She readily autographed that book for me. Have you noticed any changes in Sydney in the last 40 years? I asked.

“More tall buildings”, she replied with a smile. “Every country has its beauty and Sydney is beautiful and people are friendly. I’m happy to be passing through Australia.”

Any country you have not visited?

“Russia, but I am going there soon.”

Her current project is to set up an Institute in Bangalore. “It will be a very special Institute where mathematics is taught as a very special subject. At the same time, the Institute should delve into the secrets of Vedic mathematics. I want the Institution to have a very spiritual backbone.”

To her, most schools teach computers and software without any spiritual backup. She wants that to be taken care of as well, because one without the other is no good.

Shakuntala is also a world renowned astrologer.

Is astrology related to numerology, I asked.

“Certainly”, she responded. “But to make global predictions, she has to be aware of what is going on around the world and study the background”, she added.

Apart from being a mathematical genius and an astrologer, she is also a linguist. In addition to most Indian languages, she can converse fluently in English and Spanish.

Is there anything Shakuntala Devi cannot do?

What impressed me most about the Numbers Queen is her honesty, lack of false modesty and the common touch with humanity. Her friend Lord Ganesha has truly blessed her.



visited us in late 1960s, then in 1978 and now. It was an experience interviewing her in her hotel room. There were framed photographs of her with Indira Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump ... on her cabinet and with Sachin Tendulkar, Kapil Dev and many other VIPs in her album.

She stressed the importance of number zero. Indian mathematicians have been pioneers in stressing the importance of zero. She chuckled when I showed

