

Why Dev Patel's *The Man Who Knew Infinity* is important for mathematics

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Dev Patel plays Ramanujan, a 25-year-old shipping clerk and self-taught genius, who failed out of college due to his near-obsessive, solitary study of mathematics.

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The academic world has always taken “great interest” in Indian mathematical genius Srinavasa Ramanujan’s path-breaking works, but the Hollywood film *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, starring Dev Patel, has brought more public focus on the scientist, says noted mathematician and Ramanujan expert K. Alladi.

Indian-origin mathematician Krishnaswami Alladi of the University of Florida, also the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Ramanujan Journal* says the 19th century scientist’s legacy (a college drop-out who revolutionised the field of mathematics in his short life of 32 years) should inspire youngsters to pursue a subject out of pure passion and not fashion.

[Read the *The Man Who Knew Infinity* review here](#)

“There has always been great interest in Ramanujan’s work in the academic world, especially the world of mathematics. Robert Kanigel’s book did a lot to attract the attention of the general public worldwide to the fascinating life and work of Ramanujan.

Now with the movie, there is even greater attention on Ramanujan worldwide among the general public,” Alladi told IANS in an email interaction.

The film is based on the book *The Man who Knew Infinity: A life of the genius Ramanujan* written by Robert Kanigel.

Watch the trailer here

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Born on December 22, 1887, Ramanujan belonged to an orthodox Hindu Brahmin family in the town of Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu.

In the film set in 1913, actor Dev Patel plays Ramanujan, a 25-year-old shipping clerk and self-taught genius, who failed out of college due to his near-obsessive, solitary study of mathematics.

Read: [Ramanujan, a man who was more than the sum of his parts](#)

“Determined to pursue his passion despite rejection and derision from his peers, Ramanujan writes a letter to G. H. Hardy (Jeremy Irons), an eminent British mathematics professor at Trinity College, Cambridge. Hardy recognises the originality and brilliance of Ramanujan’s raw talent and despite the skepticism of his colleagues, undertakes bringing him to Cambridge so that his theories can be explored,” according to the movie’s website.

It also tackles Ramanujan’s dilemmas, as a young vegetarian Iyengar boy, in England during the days of the British Raj and racism with World War 1 in the backdrop.

Alladi rues the discrimination bit, in general, has been carried a bit too far.



Jeremy Irons and Dev Patel in a still from *The Man Who Knew Infinity*.

“There is discrimination everywhere in the world in one form or the other. We should accept the fact that the British did recognise Ramanujan by electing him Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) in 1918 (despite opposition) even though he did not have a college degree,” he asserted.

Ramanujan returned to India in 1919, “a very sick man” and died in April 1920 in Chennai (then Madras).

The Shanmugha Arts, Science, Technology & Research Academy (SASTRA University) purchased his home in Kumbakonam and is maintaining it as a museum. Apart from December 22 which is observed as National Mathematics Day, there are innumerable conferences, books and films (the 2014 Tamil film *Ramanujan*) that serve as constant reminders of his contributions which also impacted physics and computer science.

[Read: Ramanujan is the Jackson Pollock of mathematics, says Dev Patel](#)

Alladi believes the younger generation in India know about Ramanujan: “His life, not so much about his mathematics (number theory etc.) except for a few sensational stories like 1729 (the famed taxicab number).”

Ramanujan (L) and Dev Patel playing him in the movie (R).



“His life and work should inspire youth today to pursue a subject passionately, for the love of it (be it science, poetry, or painting). One should not take up a field because it is fashionable or lucrative. If you pursue a subject in which you are passionately interested, then you will succeed and make a fundamental contribution,” Alladi signed-off.