IJARSCT

International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology

International Open-Access, Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Multidisciplinary Online Journal

ISSN: 2581-9429

Volume 6, Issue 13, May 2026

Impact Factor: 8.2

Exploring Ramanujan's Continued Fractions Through Theta Functions and the Göllnitz–Gordon Partition Theorem

KM Preeti[1] and Dr. Suresh Kumar Yadav[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Mathematics

[2]Research Guide, Department of Mathematics

Mind Power University, Bhimtal, Nainital

Abstract: *This paper examines the deep interconnections between Ramanujan's continued fractions, classical theta functions, and the Göllnitz–Gordon partition theorem. We focus on the Ramanujan–Göllnitz–Gordon continued fraction H(q), demonstrating how its product representation emerges from theta function identities and how these structures relate to fundamental partition identities. Through analysis of recent developments in the theory, we show that the Göllnitz–Gordon identities serve as a bridge connecting modular form theory with combinatorial partition theory. The paper synthesizes classical results from Ramanujan's notebooks with contemporary research on Eisenstein series and q-series, highlighting how these mathematical structures remain active areas of investigation with applications spanning number theory, combinatorics, and special functions.*

Keywords: Continued fractions, theta functions, partition identities, Ramanujan, q-series, Göllnitz–Gordon theorem

I. INTRODUCTION

Srinivasa Ramanujan's contributions to the theory of continued fractions represent some of the most elegant and profound results in number theory. Among these, the Ramanujan–Göllnitz–Gordon continued fraction stands as a remarkable example of the deep connections between analytic functions and combinatorial identities. This continued fraction, recorded in Ramanujan's second notebook, has the form

$$\mathfrak{H}(q) := \frac{q^{1/2}}{1+q} + \frac{q^2}{1+q^3} + \frac{q^4}{1+q^5} + \cdots, \quad |\, q \,| < 1,$$

where the compact notation indicates the infinite continued fraction

$$\mathfrak{H}(q) = \cfrac{q^{1/2}}{1+q+\cfrac{q^2}{1+q^3+\cfrac{q^4}{1+q^5+\cdots}}}.$$

Ramanujan recorded the remarkable product representation

$$\mathfrak{H}(q) = q^{1/2}\frac{(q;q^8)_\infty (q^7;q^8)_\infty}{(q^3;q^8)_\infty (q^5;q^8)_\infty},$$

using the standard q-Pochhammer notation $(a;q)_\infty := \prod_{n=0}^{\infty}(1-aq^n)$. This product representation, rediscovered independently by Göllnitz (1967) and Gordon (1965) , connects the continued fraction to the celebrated Göllnitz–Gordon partition identities .

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, we explore how classical theta functions provide the analytic foundation for Ramanujan's continued fractions, particularly through the Jacobi triple product identity. Second, we examine the Göllnitz–Gordon partition theorem and its role in establishing combinatorial interpretations of these continued fractions. Third, we survey recent developments demonstrating that these connections remain central to contemporary research in q-series, Eisenstein series, and modular forms.

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II. THETA FUNCTIONS AND RAMANUJAN'S CONTINUED FRACTIONS

2.1. Ramanujan's General Theta Function

Central to Ramanujan's approach is his general theta function, defined as

$$f(a,b)=\sum_{n=-\infty}^{\infty} a^{n(n+1)/2}\, b^{n(n-1)/2}, \quad |\, ab\,| < 1.$$

This function is intimately related to Jacobi's theta functions and satisfies numerous transformation properties. The Jacobi triple product identity gives the infinite product representation

$$f(a,b)=(-;aab)_\infty(-;bab)_\infty(a;bab)_\infty.$$

From this general theta function, Ramanujan defined special cases including

$$\varphi(q):=f(q,q)=\sum_{n=-\infty}^{\infty} q^{n^2}=\frac{(-;q-q)_\infty}{(q;-q)_\infty}$$

and

$$\psi(q):=f(q,q^3)=\sum_{n=0}^{\infty} q^{n(n+1)/2}=\frac{(q^2;q^2)_\infty}{(q;q^2)_\infty}.$$

2.2. The Ramanujan–Göllnitz–Gordon Continued Fraction

In Entry 12 of his second notebook, Ramanujan recorded a general continued fraction identity. For parameters k, l, q with appropriate convergence conditions,

$$\frac{(k^2;q^3q^4)_\infty(l^2;q^3q^4)_\infty}{(k^2;qq^4)_\infty(l^2;qq^4)_\infty}=\cfrac{1}{(1-kl)+\cfrac{(k-lq)(l-kq)}{(1-kl)(q^2+1)+\cfrac{(k-lq^3)(l-kq^3)}{(1-kl)(q^4+1)+\cdots}}}.$$

The Ramanujan–Göllnitz–Gordon continued fraction $\mathfrak{H}(q)$ arises as a special case of this general form. Ramanujan also recorded the following elegant identities connecting $\mathfrak{H}(q)$ to theta functions :

$$\frac{1}{\mathfrak{H}(q)}-\mathfrak{H}(q)=\frac{\varphi(q^2)}{q^{1/2}\psi(q^4)}$$

and

$$\frac{1}{\mathfrak{H}(q)}+\mathfrak{H}(q)=\frac{\varphi(q)}{q^{1/2}\psi(q^4)}.$$

These identities reveal that the continued fraction is not merely an analytic curiosity but is fundamentally connected to the modular world of theta functions. The quotient $\varphi(q^2)/\psi(q^4)$, for instance, transforms under modular substitutions according to the theory of modular forms .

2.3. Product Representations and Modular Properties

The product representation of $\mathfrak{H}(q)$ is particularly significant. Using the definition of $\varphi(q)$ and $\psi(q)$, one can derive

$$\mathfrak{H}(q)=q^{1/2}\frac{(-;q^2q^2)_\infty}{(-;qq^2)_\infty}\frac{1}{(q^4;q^8)_\infty}\cdot\frac{1}{(q^8;q^8)_\infty^{-1}},$$

though the precise form involves careful manipulation of the infinite products. The key point is that $\mathfrak{H}(q)$ is a modular function of level 8, making it amenable to study via the rich theory of modular forms .

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III. THE GÖLLNITZ–GORDON PARTITION THEOREM

3.1. Historical Context and Statement

The Göllnitz–Gordon identities, discovered independently by Göllnitz (1967) and Gordon (1965), are among the most important partition identities in the Rogers–Ramanujan tradition . The identities state that for q with $|q|<1$,

$$\sum_{n=0}^{\infty}\frac{(-;qq^2)_n q^{n^2}}{(q^2;q^2)_n}=\frac{1}{(q;q^8)_\infty(q^4;q^8)_\infty(q^7;q^8)_\infty},$$

and

$$\sum_{n=0}^{\infty}\frac{(-;qq^2)_n q^{n^2+2n}}{(q^2;q^2)_n}=\frac{1}{(q^3;q^8)_\infty(q^4;q^8)_\infty(q^5;q^8)_\infty}.$$

The left-hand sides are generating functions for partitions with certain difference conditions, while the right-hand sides are generating functions for partitions into parts congruent to specific residues modulo 8 .

3.2. Connection to Ramanujan's Continued Fraction

The Göllnitz–Gordon functions $S(q)$ and $T(q)$ are defined by

$$S(q):=\sum_{n=0}^{\infty}\frac{(-;qq^2)_n}{(q^2;q^2)_n}q^{n^2}=\frac{1}{(q;q^8)_\infty(q^4;q^8)_\infty(q^7;q^8)_\infty}$$

and

$$T(q):=\sum_{n=0}^{\infty}\frac{(-;qq^2)_n}{(q^2;q^2)_n}q^{n^2+2n}=\frac{1}{(q^3;q^8)_\infty(q^4;q^8)_\infty(q^5;q^8)_\infty}.$$

The Ramanujan–Göllnitz–Gordon continued fraction is precisely $\mathfrak{H}(q)=q^{1/2}S(q)/T(q)$. Indeed, comparing with the product representation,

$$\mathfrak{H}(q)=q^{1/2}\frac{(q;q^8)_\infty(q^7;q^8)_\infty}{(q^3;q^8)_\infty(q^5;q^8)_\infty}=q^{1/2}\frac{S(q)}{T(q)}.$$

This is not a coincidence. The continued fraction arises from considering the ratio of the two Göllnitz–Gordon generating functions, and the product representation follows from the analytic forms of the partition identities .

3.3. Combinatorial Interpretations

The Göllnitz–Gordon identities have rich combinatorial interpretations. The first identity enumerates partitions of n into parts congruent to 1,4,7 modulo 8 . Equivalently, it enumerates partitions of n where successive parts differ by at least 2, and certain parity conditions are imposed .

Bessenrodt demonstrated that continued fractions of Ramanujan type can be used to establish partition identities, building on the work of Alladi and Gordon. The continued fraction itself becomes a generating function, and its convergence properties correspond to combinatorial stability. This interplay between analysis and combinatorics is characteristic of Ramanujan's work and remains an active area of research .

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VI. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND EXTENSIONS

4.1. Eisenstein Series Identities

Recent research has expanded the connections between Ramanujan's continued fractions, theta functions, and Eisenstein series. Chaudhary and Vanitha established six interrelationships between Eisenstein series identities, Göllnitz–Gordon identities, and combinatorial partition identities for continued fractions of order sixteen. Their work demonstrates that the framework established by Ramanujan extends naturally to higher-order continued fractions.

Specifically, for the continued fraction $\mathfrak{H}(q)$ of order sixteen, identities of the form

$$\frac{1}{\mathfrak{H}(q)} \pm \mathfrak{H}(q) = \text{(Eisenstein series combinations)}$$

have been derived, paralleling Ramanujan's original identities for the order-eight case. These results show that the theta function connections are not isolated but form part of a broader family of identities.

4.2. Explicit Evaluations and Modular Relations

Significant work has been devoted to explicit evaluations of Ramanujan's continued fractions. Chan and Huang established relations between $\mathfrak{H}(q)$ and $\mathfrak{H}(q^n)$ using modular equations of degree n. These relations enable the computation of explicit values at special points, such as $= e^{-\pi\sqrt{n}}$.

Saikia provided new proofs of modular relations and established several new identities for $\mathfrak{H}(q)$ by using modular identities of the Göllnitz–Gordon functions $S(q)$ and $T(q)$. This work demonstrates that the theta function framework continues to yield new results, even for classical continued fractions.

4.3. Higher-Order Generalizations

The general continued fraction identity from Ramanujan's second notebook has led to systematic investigations of continued fractions of various orders. Rajkhowa and Saikia derived continued fractions of order ten and twenty from Ramanujan's general identity, proving theta-function identities and establishing explicit evaluations.

These higher-order continued fractions also connect to partition theory. As Rajkhowa and Saikia demonstrated , identities for continued fractions can be used to derive partition identities using color partitions of integers. This reinforces the theme that continued fractions, theta functions, and partition theory form a unified mathematical landscape.

V. CONCLUSION

The exploration of Ramanujan's continued fractions through theta functions and the Göllnitz–Gordon partition theorem reveals a profound unity in mathematics. The Ramanujan–Göllnitz–Gordon continued fraction $\mathfrak{H}(q)$ serves as a nexus connecting analytic number theory (continued fractions and theta functions) with combinatorics (partition identities) and modular forms (Eisenstein series and modular equations).

Three major themes emerge from this study:

1. **Analytic Foundations:** The product representation of $\mathfrak{H}(q)$ via theta functions demonstrates how modular properties of infinite products encode the convergence behavior of continued fractions .
2. **Combinatorial Connections:** The Göllnitz–Gordon identities provide partition-theoretic interpretations of these continued fractions, revealing deep structure in the generating functions .
3. **Unification and Generalization:** Recent work extending these results to continued fractions of various orders (ten, sixteen, twenty) confirms that the framework established by Ramanujan is part of a larger theory connecting q-series, Eisenstein series, and combinatorial partition identities .

   As Berndt and Rebák note in their survey of the Rogers–Ramanujan continued fraction , the study of continued fractions with variable coefficients remains fertile ground for discovery. The Göllnitz–Gordon theorem and its connections to Ramanujan's continued fractions exemplify how classical mathematics continues to inspire contemporary research, with applications ranging from modular forms to partition theory and beyond.

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