



National Film Archive of India

Ministry of Information and Broadcasting
Government of India

Interview of Renowned Actress R B Lakshmi Devi from the early decades of Indian Talkie Films by Randor Guy

00:00:00- 00:01:28

This is Randor Guy interviewing R B Lakshmi Devi. R B Lakshmi Devi is one of the senior most actresses of South Indian cinema who has been in films from the 1930s and she has acted in several important successful hit films of the period 1934 for over a decade or even later. She was the heroine in the first Tamil film of course a talkie which was made in Madras called *Srinivasa Kalyanam* by Mr. A Narayan and she has acted with the famous hero of that period like P S Srinivasa Rao, M K Radha, T A Chellappa and many others. She has made films not only in Madras but also in Bombay and Calcutta. This interview, the first one with Lakshmi Devi takes place in Madras on the morning of Thursday, February 11th, 1988. Lakshmi Devi speaks in English.

00:01:29-00:07:13

Randor Guy : Good morning to you Lakshmi Devi.

Lakshmi Devi : Good morning!

Randor Guy : It's very nice of you to have responded to my request to come here to my residence at Ayanavaram and do this recording for the National Film Archive of India, Pune for the aural film history project. As I told you earlier, this is a project initiated by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi some years ago by which we go to the original sources of

||ntai||

film history that's available to us like senior actresses like you, actors like M K Radha, technicians and others and know how things were being done in our film industry in those days. And you know there aren't many books about film making or film history in the Indian context, practically nothing is there except for one or two and attempts are being made to write, for which material is needed. And this is the purpose of this kind of research work being done by people like me. As I told you I have done projects of this kind with your old hero Mr. M K Radha who's sadly no more with us and technicians like R M Krishnaswamy, ATK, music directors like S V Venkatrama Iyer, heroes like Kothamangalam Seenu and others. And now we have come to you. Now let me start by asking you something about your early background. I know you are from Madras. Can you tell us something - where you studied and things like that before you got into films?

Lakshmi Devi : In my younger days, is it?

Randor Guy : Yeah.

Lakshmi Devi : I was in Presentation Convent.

Randor Guy : Which part of Madras was that?

Lakshmi Devi : On Poonamallee High Road in Aminjikai.

Randor Guy : You were living in Aminjikai, your family was in Aminjikai?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, Shanmugam Gardens. Our own residence.

Randor Guy : You come from the family of famous snuff manufacturers T V Shanmugam and Co.!

Lakshmi Devi : Not 'T'. *Asal Shanmugam Pattanam Podi*, It's a world trademark.

Randor Guy : It was a very famous brand of snuff and you belong to that family.

Lakshmi Devi : I was in Aminjikai, Shanmugam Snuff Garden.

Randor Guy : Where is it actually?

Lakshmi Devi : In front of the civil office I think (inaudible).

Randor Guy : Does that Shanmugam Garden still exist?

Lakshmi Devi : No, we sold it off long ago.

Randor Guy : Because I don't remember a place like that.

Lakshmi Devi : From there I used to come to Presentation Convent in my younger days.

Randor Guy : Where was this convent?

Lakshmi Devi : In Vepery.

Randor Guy : You studied in Vepery?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, I was a little child you know... and after that, we went to Church Park and after that we went to P T Training school and then when we shifted to Royapuram in Tondiarpet...

Randor Guy : You live in Tondiarpet now?

Lakshmi Devi : After some days...then we went to Royapuram school there... I studied there and the co-students were... Tara Cherian...we all studied together.

Randor Guy : You were a classmate of Tara Cherian!

Lakshmi Devi : Yeah.

Randor Guy : Now, what brought you into films?

Lakshmi Devi : We stayed on Tondiarpet High Road. Soon my father died...of course, he died very young...we were left alone- we were four brothers and myself one sister...

Randor Guy : Five children in all.

Lakshmi Devi : So, we had to run the show because my father expired suddenly. Then we had our own say, we had our own car, we had to do anything ourselves. The next door was C V Raman, if I'm not mistaken.

Randor Guy : Next door to your house?

Randor Guy : About a little away...

Lakshmi Devi : What was C V Raman doing there?

Randor Guy : He was... I think was taking films or something, I couldn't know.

Randor Guy : I see, did he have his studio there?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes he had his studio.

Randor Guy : With A Narayanan and R Prakash?

Lakshmi Devi : No, A Narayanan came afterwards.

Randor Guy : Only C V Raman was there?

Lakshmi Devi : C V Raman was there. His wife asked me to go over to his place, by my little brother.

Randor Guy : How did he know C V Raman? Just like that or...

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know.

Randor Guy : You didn't know at all.

Lakshmi Devi : But the children had gone there for the shooting. He had told them to bring me over there. My younger brother took me over there, I don't know what he had in mind. But anyway, I was brave enough at that time, I went there. He said that he was going to take you all in pictures and told us to walk around and so we just walked around and he took the pictures. We asked him what he was doing...

Randor Guy : Do you remember who the cameraman was, R Prakash at that time?

Lakshmi Devi : That I don't know. But in my first picture, he was there. Prakash was there.

Randor Guy : What happened with C V Raman?

Lakshmi Devi : After that, after one or two days, he said he was taking me to Crown Talkies to show me the pictures that he had taken.

Randor Guy : Oh, he had shot some footage!

Lakshmi Devi : I didn't know.

Randor Guy : You didn't know about it!

Lakshmi Devi : Just a little, walking around the garden.

Randor Guy : He took it with a movie camera and wanted to show you the rushes. I see.

Lakshmi Devi : It was very nice when we saw it.

Randor Guy : So you saw yourself on the screen at Crown Talkies.

Lakshmi Devi : We were so flabbergasted after that and we did not know it was ourselves.

Randor Guy : (laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : Next he came home and talked to my brother and said that he wanted me to act in the picture.

Randor Guy : I see.

Lakshmi Devi : And naturally I didn't accept, I said I didn't know anything about pictures. My brother encouraged me and said, 'You go'. So I listened to him. That same C V Raman took me to A Narayanan's sound studio on Poonamallee High Road.

00:07:14-00:08:29

Randor Guy : That was near Nehru Park, called Srinivasa Cinetone, also known as Sound City. That was about 1934?

Lakshmi Devi : Actually I don't know...

Randor Guy : You don't remember the date...

Lakshmi Devi : No, I've been gone so much. He made me record. He told me to read a book.

Randor Guy : Who, CV Raman?

Lakshmi Devi : No, A Narayanan.

Randor Guy : You met A Naryanan for the first time there.

Lakshmi Devi : A Narayanan and his wife...

Randor Guy : Meenakshi, who was the sound recordist.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, both of them were introduced, they asked me to read and they recorded. He produced it again, it was quite nice and they also liked it. And they said we are going to book you as Lakshmi Devi in our picture.

Randor Guy : What picture was that?

Lakshmi Devi : *Srinivasa Kalyanam*.

Randor Guy : *Srinivasa Kalyanam* was made in 1934 by A Narayanan. You played Goddess Lakshmi in that and who played Srinivas?

Lakshmi Devi : Srinivasa Rao.

Randor Guy : P S Srinivasa Rao BA.

Lakshmi Devi : He was also new to the thing, first picture. And my first picture.

Randor Guy : This was shot in Sound City on Poonamallee High Road. Do you remember who directed this film?

Lakshmi Devi : A Narayanan himself.

Randor Guy : What was R Prakash doing there?

00:08:30-00:10:45

Randor Guy : Was he the cameraman?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know, but I knew his brother Chitti...

Randor Guy : Chittibabu...

Lakshmi Devi : He was a production manager.

Randor Guy : He was already there?

Lakshmi Devi : I remember because he used to come and tell me, 'Do this, do that'. Because I was very new. And there was another man Israni from Bombay. He brought the recording machine from Bombay. Now he's an MLA, I know him, I met him now...

Randor Guy : He's in politics? Israni, is it?

Lakshmi Devi : Now he's an MP, I've got his address.

Randor Guy : Do you remember what he was doing at Sound City?

Lakshmi Devi : Because he brought the equipment for recording.

Randor Guy : That's about all, he did not direct or...?

Lakshmi Devi : Nothing at all. He was just recording, that's all. He was teaching Mrs. Narayanan how to record and she has also done some of the portions. Israni was recording.

Randor Guy : And when you were shooting this *Srinivasa Kalyanam*, did you have artificial lights, electric lights for shooting or was it solely done with sunlight?

Lakshmi Devi : Some of them were electric lights, and all the rest was only on board.

Randor Guy : Reflected...

Lakshmi Devi : All was outdoor, in the garden. In the studio itself, it was a huge place and they had some of the lights.

Randor Guy : What about the songs, were they recorded earlier or did you sing on the set while you were acting?

Lakshmi Devi : On the sets.

Randor Guy : While you were acting?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, the mic was put on top of us, we had to see where it was... very difficult it was, we couldn't run around or do anything, but see where the mic was and the reflectors were there.

Randor Guy : Do you remember who the other artists were who acted with you in *Srinivasa Kalyanam* apart from Srinivasa Rao?

Lakshmi Devi : I was the first girl from a family in Madras to come into films and straight from school.

Randor Guy : You were a kind of a pioneer.

Lakshmi Devi : I didn't know anyone and I never used to speak to anyone. Only Israni used to talk to me and Chitti...Chitti Babu used to talk to me...

Randor Guy : R Prakash's brother...

Lakshmi Devi : And Mrs. Narayanan was very helpful. She used to give me tips and send me home in her car.

00:10:46-00:12:34

Randor Guy : And how well did you know A Narayanan? Can you tell us something?

Lakshmi Devi : No, I don't know anything about him.

Randor Guy : But he was an early pioneer.

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know anything about him. But he was very kind, very helpful. Even though I was a beginner, he allowed his wife to accompany me anywhere we went. And then we worked in *Ananda Ashramam* in Salem.

Randor Guy : Much later...

Lakshmi Devi : Later, it was I think with A Narayanan because Mrs. Narayanan accompanied me.

Randor Guy : It was at Modern Theatres, Salem. How did this *Srinivasa Kalyanam* run?

Lakshmi Devi : Quite well in Broadway Talkies.

Randor Guy : It ran in Broadway Talkies.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes it ran well and all of them were talking about me saying I was an Anglo-Indian girl.

Randor Guy : (Laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : Because of my accent of Tamil, because I always spoke in English.

Randor Guy : Your Tamil was slightly anglicized...

Lakshmi Devi : The Anglo- Indian girl, she's very beautiful, but she has got an anglicized accent! So anyway I was (inaudible) actress. And soon after that film finished, Mr. Padmanabhan came and called me for...

Randor Guy : *Dhruva*? That was R Padmanabhan.

Lakshmi Devi : R Padmanabhan. He was a friend of A Narayanan.

Randor Guy : They were all together in some other ventures earlier.

Lakshmi Devi : He said, 'I want her to act in my project'. And A Narayanan said, 'You must take care of her because she's quite new'.

Randor Guy : What was that film, *Dhruva*?

Lakshmi Devi : *Dhruva*.

Randor Guy : Where was *Dhruva* made?

Lakshmi Devi : Pioneer Films.

Randor Guy : But where was it made- Calcutta, Madras....

Lakshmi Devi : Calcutta.

Randor Guy : Pioneer Studios in Calcutta!

00:12:35-00:16:05

Randor Guy : Do you remember who directed this picture?

Lakshmi Devi : R Padmanabhan.

Randor Guy : R Padmanabhan himself direct it?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. He had taken a huge place for all the actors and actresses...

Randor Guy : To stay, in Calcutta? So, you went to Calcutta to do this picture?

Lakshmi Devi : He took me to Calcutta.

Randor Guy : Who were the other artists, what role did you play?

Lakshmi Devi : I was the hero's mother.

Randor Guy : Dhruva's mother, Sunidhi.

Lakshmi Devi : Younger mother. And there was Gnanambal, a drama actress.

Randor Guy : Who later became Mrs. M K Radha...

Lakshmi Devi : No, not that...

Randor Guy : Not that Gnanambal?

Lakshmi Devi : Gnanambal was a different type. She was taken from dramas, an elderly person. And Dhruva was that boy...I don't know his name...and Swaminathan was also a drama actor.

Randor Guy : A stage artist who played the father I suppose.

Lakshmi Devi : The father of that little boy. Because it was centered around the little boy. And plenty of songs were there.

Randor Guy : Were they shot in Pioneer studios?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, in Calcutta, but before that could end, I was called for *Purnachandra* in New Theatres.

Randor Guy : They produced it in Tamil?

Lakshmi Devi : They had the Hindi picture of *Purnachandra* and they said the same set they would take in Tamil picture.

Randor Guy : Do you remember who acted with you?

Lakshmi Devi : V S Mani was the hero.

Randor Guy : V S Mani was the hero in *Purnachandra*...

Lakshmi Devi : And I was there. I was the Amazon Queen.

Randor Guy : What was this *Purnachandra*? What sort of a picture was that? A historical or....

Lakshmi Devi : Kind of historical. Because all the dresses were like that. We were all dressed up like the Amazon Queen, battle dresses... and that fellow was the sage.

Randor Guy : V S Mani played a sage?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, he was to enter the compound, they wouldn't allow him and all sorts of (inaudible).

Randor Guy : Do you remember who directed *Purnachandra* in Calcutta for New Theatres?

Lakshmi Devi : I can't remember the director, but the music director was Pahari Sanyal.

Randor Guy : Pahari Sanyal was the music director for *Purnachandra*? I see.

Lakshmi Devi : Because I used to go for the rehearsals you know.

Randor Guy : You were singing yourself?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, in all my pictures I have sung.

Randor Guy : You sang yourself. And in Calcutta when you made *Dhruva* and this *Purnachandra* ...you said while in Madras, the recording of the songs was done on the sets while you were acting...

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : Was it the same in Calcutta or you had a playback system in Calcutta?

Lakshmi Devi : No, I don't think so. I don't remember but I don't think so.

Randor Guy : You don't think so...you sang on the set while shooting for the film, even for *Purnachandra* and *Dhruva*?

Lakshmi Devi : Correct.

Randor Guy : Because the system of recording playback songs earlier than the shooting, was supposed to have been introduced in Calcutta; much earlier than it was done in Madras. That's why I'm asking you this question.

Lakshmi Devi : I think that *Purnachandra* must have done that. Because I used to go for rehearsals and all that.

Randor Guy : But where was the recording done, you are not very clear. Whether it was in the studio while you were shooting or whether it was done earlier...

Lakshmi Devi : Exactly what I know when they did was in *Toofan Queen*...

Randor Guy : That was much later.

Lakshmi Devi : Ah, that was done like that. They recorded in the studio, they got the instruments. I used to stand...

00:16:06-00:19:07

Randor Guy : *Purnachandra*...how did it run?

Lakshmi Devi : It ran well because it was a different subject altogether.

Randor Guy : After *Purnachandra* what did you do?

Lakshmi Devi : After *Purnachandra*, I think *Dharmapatni*.

Randor Guy : *Dharmapatni*? Again in Tamil? V A Chellappa was the hero...

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : Who were the producers? Who directed it do you remember?

Lakshmi Devi : I think he was called Paul Vincent... he was one of the partners.

Randor Guy : From Coimbatore- Samikannu Vincent of Variety Hall Cinema... I see he produced...?

Lakshmi Devi : Correct. He was one of the partners.

Randor Guy : I see, that's interesting. Do you remember who directed this *Dharmapatni*?

Lakshmi Devi : That was Marconi, that you know.

Randor Guy : Marconi, the Italian technician. And this also was shot at New Theatres?

Lakshmi Devi : Pioneer.

Randor Guy : All that was done in Calcutta.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : Was *Dharmapatni* too some kind of a religious, folk-lorish type of story?

Lakshmi Devi : No no.

Randor Guy : Because the title suggests that.

Lakshmi Devi : *Dharmapatni*- because the wife was a very orthodox type. But this fellow wanted a very stylish kind of...

Randor Guy : Oh, that kind of thing.

Lakshmi Devi : Goes to the clubs.

Randor Guy : What they call as 'social'...

Lakshmi Devi : Actually we had a lovely scene at Grand Hotel.

Randor Guy : In Calcutta? It was shot on location?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : You went to Grand Hotel and what sequence was that?

Lakshmi Devi : The hero and heroine are seated at the table and some dance is going on...

Randor Guy : Who did the dance?

Lakshmi Devi : A cabaret dancer.

Randor Guy : Cabaret dance was already introduced in *Dharmapatni*!

Lakshmi Devi : It was already playing there.

Randor Guy : I see *Dharmapatni* was made in 1936 and your *Purnachandra* was made in 1935.

Lakshmi Devi : You have this...we don't know ...what book is this? I'd like to take...

Randor Guy : I'll get you a copy. This is an index, which gives the names of films, which were all released. Only the names of the films are there. There is another book, which is published by the South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce. In the Golden Jubilee, we had in 1981. There we have the year, the name of the film and the name of the production company. But the names of the producer, director and the artists are not there.

Randor Guy : In this *Dharmapatni*, who played the hero?

Lakshmi Devi : V A Chellappa.

Randor Guy : He played the stylish husband? And who directed it? Marconi?

Lakshmi Devi : Marconi.

00:19:08-00:24:04

Randor Guy : After *Dharmapatni* what did you do?

Lakshmi Devi : After *Dharmapatni* I think it is *Anand Ashram* or something like that?

Randor Guy : I don't think so. I don't think *Anand Ashram* came that early. It came much later.

Lakshmi Devi : What is it then? I don't know.

Randor Guy : You don't remember?

Lakshmi Devi : They took me to Bombay actually on a year's contract.

Randor Guy : Who took you on a contract?

Lakshmi Devi : Ramniklal Mohanlal.

Randor Guy : Ramniklal Mohanlal who had a studio at Andheri?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor : For which film?

Lakshmi Devi : I acted in *Danger Signal*.

Randor Guy : *Danger Signal* was made in 1937. That was made by Ramniklal Mohanlal, was it?

Lakshmi Devi : Correct.

Randor Guy : I see. What kind of film was *Danger Signal*?

Lakshmi Devi : All social pictures.

Randor Guy : Something like a stunt and all that or...

Lakshmi Devi : Stunts and the villain coming...

Randor Guy : Did you do any stunts those days?

Lakshmi Devi : Oh I did that. Many.

Randor Guy : There were no dupes or doubles for doing stunts?

Lakshmi Devi : Very rare.

Randor Guy : When you say stunts, what kind of stunts did you do? Can you give an example?

Lakshmi Devi : For example, you had to stand on top of someplace and jump down on some pillows...

Randor Guy : Pillow for padding?

Lakshmi Devi : Do a somersault and get up.

Randor Guy : (Laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : Stand on top of a bus and jump from there. And then we get up in style.

Randor Guy : So all this you did in *Danger Signal*? Do you remember who directed this *Danger Signal* in Bombay? Was it a south Indian director?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know. Shanti Dave...

Randor Guy : Shanti Dave?

Lakshmi Devi : Shanti Dave directed *Toofan Queen* that I know.

Randor Guy : That came later. You don't remember who directed *Danger Signal*?

Lakshmi Devi : *Tanjavur Rowdi* (inaudible).

Randor Guy : Even in *Danger Signal* he was with you?

Lakshmi Devi : And *Pakka Rowdi*.

Randor Guy : It came later. The same year, but later. *Pakka Rowdi* was originally called *Tanjavur Rowdi* because the people of *Tanjavur* objected to using the word *Tanjavur*. What was this *Pakka Rowdi*, do you remember or not?

Lakshmi Devi : I know some shots, they put me in a boat and just let me go. There was a big lake...

Randor Guy : Where in Bombay?

Lakshmi Devi : There's a big lake in Bombay. Powai Lake, some lake...

Randor Guy : Some lake near Bombay. Did they put you in a boat?

Lakshmi Devi : And they let me go straight in or something like that... I forgot about it. But in one of the shootings in Powai Lake, I was supposed to go.. I don't know for what. They sent three boys to see if everything was clear. Three boys went in and never came out.

Randor Guy : What happened to them?

Lakshmi Devi : I believe the crocodiles ate them. The next morning they were floating. Luckily they cancelled the shooting and I came home. The next morning all this happened. After that, I was very frightened getting inside.

Randor Guy : (Laughs) I think I can quite understand, crocodiles eating people and all... Powai Lake is now a well-known picnic spot. So it used to have a lot of crocodiles in those days?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes very difficult. Those days people won't get in.

Randor Guy : That is an interesting bit of news about Bombay.

Lakshmi Devi : We were in Bombay now, it's a lovely place now.

Randor Guy : Now it is a well-known picnic spot of Bombay where quite a bit of shooting also goes on.

Lakshmi Devi : In the same place I used to go riding the horse every day.

Randor Guy : Where?

Lakshmi Devi : Not in Andheri. Now it is known as...

Randor Guy : Juhu?

Lakshmi Devi : Juhu! There is a big Bombay Dyeing shop now. The same place was just a beach like Marina.

Randor Guy : Vile Parle, Jogeshwari?

Lakshmi Devi : In front of that Siddi Vinayak Temple.

Randor Guy : Khar? Anyway, that doesn't matter. So you learnt horse riding?

Lakshmi Devi : Every day early in the morning to practice. Had to pay five rupees for the man with the horse. In *Toofan Queen* I had to do that.

Randor Guy : They were all only action films as there was more of action, jumping, riding...

Lakshmi Devi : Fencing, riding, jumping.

Randor Guy : Did you learn fencing also?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : All things were taught to you in Bombay at Ramniklal Mohanlal Studios?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes they were very nice.

Randor Guy : That's interesting.

Lakshmi Devi : They were very good to me. They gave me a separate place, they made someone cook food and all that.

Randor Guy : That was the system in those days.

00:24:05-00:29:11

Randor Guy : Did you do the film *Raja Bhakti* in 1937?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes I did.

Randor Guy : In Madras?

Lakshmi Devi : As I told you, it was a small... after they called me to Madras.

Randor Guy : After all this activity in Bombay?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know when.

Randor Guy : The date is 1937 *Raja Bhakti*.

Lakshmi Devi : Who directed it?

Randor Guy : Sunder Rao Nandkarni directed it and I think Pantulu was in that film. B R Pantulu. He came for the first time. This was shot at Sundaram Studios, now Satya Studios... run by Saathappa Chettiar. While we were talking you told me that you attended the *muhurat* of *Pavalakkodi*. Can you tell us something about it? That was in 1934 again...

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. I was not in that picture then. But C V Raman and A Narayanan invited me.

Randor Guy : They were partners in that venture...

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know. Just as a friend they called me, and they wanted me to the *aarti*.

Randor Guy : For the *puja* of *Pavalakkodi*?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes where S D Subbulakshmi and Thyagaraja Bhagavathar were already in the studio.

Randor Guy : That was the first film they acted in. For S D Subbulakshmi it was the first venture and for Thyagaraja Bhagavathar also it was the first picture. And for K Subramaniam, it was the first independent venture.

Lakshmi Devi : Ohh yes.

Randor Guy : Did you meet Bhagavathar and all these people at that time?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. After that, I used to go with S D Subbulakshmi wherever she went for dramas and all that. She's a good friend.

Randor Guy : Do you remember anything about the making of *Pavalakkodi*? Did you attend any of the shootings?

Lakshmi Devi : No I went off to Bombay.

Randor Guy : Immediately? So you went there only for performing the puja?

Lakshmi Devi : Just for the *puja* they asked me here.

Randor Guy : And you do not remember anything of what happened on the first day about *Pavalakkodi* in 1934?

Lakshmi Devi : Then I came back when I was called for *Anantasayanam*. When was that?

Randor Guy : *Anantasayanam* came later. That was in 1939. In 1938 did you do any film? After *Raja Bhakti* in 1937...

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know about the dates.

Randor Guy : Because almost 37 films were made in 1938. I find from the list of the films I have with me, in 1939 you acted in *Ananda Ashramam*. Do you remember that film?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes I do. It was made in Salem.

Randor Guy : At Modern Theatres, T R Sundaram.

Lakshmi Devi : Directed by him.

Randor Guy : Directed by T R Sundaram? Are you sure about it?

Lakshmi Devi : I think it was A Narayanan.

Randor Guy : No if it was a Modern Theatres production, I don't think A Narayanan would have directed it.

Lakshmi Devi : Then why Mrs. Narayanan came with me?

Randor Guy : Maybe she came along with you because normally all Modern Theatres productions were invariably directed by T R Sundaram.

Lakshmi Devi : Could be, I don't know him.

Randor Guy : I'll check on that. I find from this directory that *Ananda Ashramam*, which you acted in, which you say was shot at Modern Theatres Studio in Salem, the

producers were Sri Ranga Films. Quite likely that this production company had something to do with A Narayanan and probably they rented the studio space at Salem. This could have been possible. Are you definite it was made in Salem?

Lakshmi Devi : Very definite. Because sometimes I used to stay with.. What is the name of that owner of the studio?

Randor Guy : T R Sundaram.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, his wife, Mrs. Gladys Sundaram.

Randor Guy : Did you know her?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. Because he was a Mudaliyar also.

Randor Guy : Was he related to you? T R Sundaram?

Lakshmi Devi : Could be. Just because he was also a Mudaliyar.

Randor Guy : Do you remember T R Sundaram well?

Lakshmi Devi : He's no more.

Randor Guy : He's dead.

Lakshmi Devi : Mrs. Narayanan was always with me. I stayed with them and all other actors stayed somewhere else.

Randor Guy : You stayed at T R Sundaram's house?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes with Mrs. Narayanan.

Randor Guy : So A Narayanan directed it, you're positive about it? I think C V V Pantulu was the hero I think. Am I right?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : What kind of a film was it?

Lakshmi Devi : You know Rani, Maharaja, that kind of kings and queens story. And the queen is a rebel and all that. And there she goes in search of someone, the hero or something. And at that time there was a film- *Street Singer...*

Randor Guy : New Theatres, *Street Singer*.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. We just got off the street and Pantulu...

00:29:12-00:38:12

Randor Guy : Now we've come to 1940 and this was the year you told me, you made the film *Toofan Queen...*

Lakshmi Devi : With association. We were also half the producers on that one.

Randor Guy : Who is 'we'?

Lakshmi Devi : 'We' means me and some other friends.

Randor Guy : You mean you had invested some money in the production. So you were all producers? Who were the other partners with you?

Lakshmi Devi : They were the studio people.

Randor Guy : Which studio was this?

Lakshmi Devi : Shankar *Bhai* was there...

Randor Guy : In Bombay? In Mohan Studios?

Lakshmi Devi : No, same road. What studio was there on the same road?

Randor Guy : I don't know. You should know.

Lakshmi Devi : Shankar Bhai was the owner of the studio. Prakash Studio!

Randor Guy : Prakash Studio in Bombay?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : In Andheri?

Lakshmi Devi : In Andheri. Very near Ramniklal Mohanlal. And it was directed by Shanti Dave.

Randor Guy : Was he a very popular director in those days? This Shanti Dave?

Lakshmi Devi : Very good with stunts.

Randor Guy : In action he was good. And who was the hero? What role did he play in *Toofan Queen*? Did you play *Toofan Queen*?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes I played *Toofan Queen*, because that was the center, the heroine. Hero-Heroine picture, everything was taken by the heroine, she was the center of it and the others were nothing. But there was a dog and a horse. The horse was Bahadur and the dog was Tiger. These three were the center.

Randor Guy : Oh the heroine, the dog and the horse. Who is the hero of *Toofan Queen*?

Lakshmi Devi : Hero was Raja, who was the king's son.

Randor Guy : But who played that role?

Lakshmi Devi : Rajagopal.

Randor Guy : Was he a prominent actor at that time?

Lakshmi Devi : No not at all. Just like that because we were known to each other, so he said all right.

Randor Guy : Because this Rajagopal's name occurs now and then but nobody seems to know about him. That's why I'm asking you. Who was this man Rajagopal? How did you pick him up? Was he on stage? How did you choose him?

Lakshmi Devi : We did not have to choose at all. It was the studio...

Randor Guy : Because you said you were one of the producers.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes I was one producer and it was the studio that selected Rajagopal. He was just a friend that's all.

Randor Guy : Because why I'm asking these questions is I'm trying to know who this Rajagopal was. Nobody seems to know about him at all. But you have acted with him. He probably did very few films.

Lakshmi Devi : Not at all. Only one.

Randor Guy : Oh first and last one? I see, that's why people don't know about this artist.

Lakshmi Devi : Just because it only centered on the girl.

Randor Guy : And where did they get this horse and dog? Bahadur and Tiger?

Lakshmi Devi : All from Jabalpur or Bombay.

Randor Guy : But they were trained dog and horse?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes all trained. They were paid also.

Randor Guy : I know but what kind of tricks did they do?

Lakshmi Devi : Oh lovely tricks there were...

Randor Guy : Can you give us a few examples?

Lakshmi Devi : It was a very good picture. It ran very well. I was supposed to cross two mountains...

Randor Guy : You had to cross two mountains on a horse?

Lakshmi Devi : No when the villains were chasing me. And you just had to put a rope on the other side and the horse would catch it on its hooves.

Randor Guy : I see. How did they shoot it? Do you remember? Where were the mountains?

Lakshmi Devi : Parel or something. This place I told you that I was driving there, even now there are mountains there.

Randor Guy : Outside of Bombay?

Lakshmi Devi : Not outside, this is inside Bombay.

Randor Guy : Ghatkopar? Somewhere there?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't (inaudible)

Randor Guy : How did they shoot this... Can you describe it?

Lakshmi Devi : They actually put the rope (inaudible) is catching, (inaudible) they had the hoof, it was a thick rope. I had to go and catch it in the tail and get into the other dress.

Randor Guy : How did you do that?

Lakshmi Devi : I did that and the villain came and cut it, cropped it. And I had to hang on the rope. It was a big valley, and I've actually done it...

Randor Guy : You hung in the valley?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes I held on to it. Of course, they had all the beds and all that down.

Randor Guy : Underneath you, to protect you.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : And how high were the mountains?

Lakshmi Devi : Oh they were real mountains. I was hanging. So we shot there and then the dog would come to help also and the horse was there. It went on like that. It was a very big shot. And all the villains were inside their huts chasing the people, so this dog went and with a light put kerosene all round the huts and set fire to it.

Randor Guy : All this the dog did? It was so well trained. Very interesting.

Lakshmi Devi : And Bahadur... They had tied me up somewhere and I just had to say, 'Bahadur, C'mon'. Just had to say that and it ran and came and it opened out the knot out with its mouth and let me out. Then I had to go to the top of the cliff...

Randor Guy : So all these shots were done by you. There was no dupe or double? You did it yourself?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : And the horse did all this untying and...

Lakshmi Devi : Some of them where they knew it was the third or fourth floor.. from there, there was a grip. One man would put on my dress- my dress was a chudidhar with breaches and tights and a belt. And two plaits hanging. I had long hair. So from there, I couldn't jump.

Randor Guy : Third story of some building?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes it was very high. Inside the studio itself.

Randor Guy : Oh in the studio itself they had a building.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. So they just put all the beds and propped this man up with my dress. And he jumped so I had to make that somersault and get up. I just got up.

Randor Guy : So just the somersault you did it, but everything else was done by the dummy?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. Actually, in the film, you see that I'm jumping.

Randor Guy : In editing, you get that effect that you're doing it. And again Shanti Dave was the man behind all this?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. He was very clever.

Randor Guy : And who were the other artists apart from the dog? Do you remember?

Lakshmi Devi : Vico, Coco... They were very nice people...

Randor Guy : S S Coco

Lakshmi Devi : Yes very nice person.

Randor Guy : Who was the other person?

Lakshmi Devi : Vico.

Randor Guy : There is a man called Vico? Apart from Coco?

Lakshmi Devi : I think his name is Vishwanathan.

Randor Guy : Vishwanathan became Vico.

Lakshmi Devi : So they called them Vico and Coco.

Randor Guy : Can you tell me something about this Coco? S S Coco? Do you remember anything about him?

Lakshmi Devi : He was very nice.

Randor Guy : What was his name? What was he? Coco sounds like a very odd name.

Lakshmi Devi : You know I don't mix with all these actors...

Randor Guy : But you've seen him?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. When I've seen him, he would make fun and laugh...

Randor Guy : He looks like a comedian.

Lakshmi Devi : Very nice fellow.

Randor Guy : Because from his name, you can't make out.

Lakshmi Devi : He died, I think?

Randor Guy : He died. And some people say ...

Lakshmi Devi : Where is Vico now?

Randor Guy : I don't know. They're all gone. Some people say he was from Andhra, some people say he was an Anglo Indian. That's why I'm trying to trace. How did he look like?

Lakshmi Devi : Like an Anglo Indian.

Randor Guy : He looked like an Anglo-Indian.

Lakshmi Devi : He was short and wearing a collared dress, all the time pants and... Not very handsome, ordinary fellow. Very nice man.

Randor Guy : I believe he was a buffoon in some circus and all that. That's what I hear.

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know. I've never seen all that.

Randor Guy : He acted in *Toofan Queen*?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. People appreciated his jokes and all that.

Randor Guy : Very popular at that time.

Lakshmi Devi : Very popular.

Randor Guy : And what was the reception to this *Toofan Queen* by the public? Was it a successful film?

Lakshmi Devi : Very nice. When Mr. Giri came for the jubilee...

Randor Guy : V V Giri, the President.

Lakshmi Devi : They put this *Toofan Queen* in one of the...

Randor Guy : Theatres in Madras. Did you see the film?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, they called me as a Chief Guest and it was again produced in the film chamber where all the films, S D Subbulakshmi...

Randor Guy : They all saw? What was your reaction when you saw yourself after so many years? What did you feel like?

Lakshmi Devi : I thought I could do better now than what I did then. Because I was just a novice at that time. Still, I have done what I could, you know. It was nice. All the boys came down... 'how quick (inaudible) you don't look that old at all...'

Randor Guy : (Laughs) They asked you in Madras?

Lakshmi Devi : They went on and on...

00:38:13-00:42:44

Randor Guy : For the Jubilee time? (Laughs). After this *Toofan Queen*, do you remember what film you did? Should I look at the directory and tell you? I see in 1941, you did *Prem Bandhan* in 1941, was that also done in Bombay, in Ramniklal Studios?

Lakshmi Devi : In Ramniklal Studios I think so.

Randor Guy : That's what M K Radha told me. M K Radha was the hero.

Lakshmi Devi : Suryakumari was there.

Randor Guy : T Suryakumari. (Inaudible) very early films. Do you remember T Suryakumari?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes very well. And who directed it... Bhagwan.

Randor Guy : The famous director.

Lakshmi Devi : He directed the picture. And the music director was Chittalkar...

Randor Guy : C Ramchandra. The same team, which did *Vana Mohini* earlier. Again with M K Radha, Thavamani Devi and all that, the same team acted.

Lakshmi Devi : They came and called me but I was in (inaudible) so I couldn't come.

Randor Guy : They called you for *Vana Mohini* also?

Lakshmi Devi : *Minnalkodi* or something was going on... I don't know but I didn't do it.

Randor Guy : These films were offered to you? Even *Minnalkodi* with K T Rukmani.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. One of my friends Vishwanathan was instrumental in getting the films to me.

Randor Guy : Vishwanathan? Was he a producer?

Lakshmi Devi : Sort of a producer.

Randor Guy : Sort of a producer. But this *Prema Bandhan*, what kind of a film was this?

Lakshmi Devi : That was a very nice picture. It was done well also.

Randor Guy : Was it a social film, was it a Maharani-Maharaja kind of picture.

Lakshmi Devi : Social picture.

Randor Guy : Do you remember what was it all about? What kind of story was it and what role did you play in it?

Lakshmi Devi : I was an educated girl. And Suryakumari was the village girl. Actually a gardner's daughter.

Randor Guy : And you were the rich lady. And M K Radha- what kind of character was that?

Lakshmi Devi : I think he was... God knows what he was!

Randor Guy : No, what kind of character was he?

Lakshmi Devi : He was the hero.

Randor Guy : I know he was the hero. Do you remember what kind of character he played, what was the story? I'm trying to find out what kind of film was that from the characters.

Lakshmi Devi : I'm not very much... That I know that he started loving the gardener's daughter. So he was always after her, something like that. I've quite forgotten.

Randor Guy : And you sang your songs in that film also?

Lakshmi Devi : Yeah.

Randor Guy : Do you remember any of the songs from *Prema Bandhan*? Tamil songs...

Lakshmi Devi : No. In one place, in *Toofan Queen* I know I sang that *Mokshamu Galada* tune.

Randor Guy : Thyagaraja Swami's *Mokshamu Galada* in *Toofan Queen*.

Lakshmi Devi : The tune.

Randor Guy : The tune was used. And who composed it do you remember? Who wrote the songs, who was the music director?

Lakshmi Devi : I know that fellow, I don't know his name... I think Jayaraman. He sang very well. He was a (inaudible). Not my song. I sang my own song. But he was a good musician.

Randor Guy : Was it C S Jayaraman?

Lakshmi Devi : Not C S Jayaraman. So he sang 'Sadhu', a very good song in that.

Randor Guy : In *Toofan Queen*... You've done so many films up to 1940, like the films you've described, *Ananda Ashramam*, *Srinivasa Kalyanam*, so many films you did... and you said in all these films you sang your own songs in your own voice and no playback was used. In the early days, no playback was possible also. Do you remember any of the songs that you sang in those days?

Lakshmi Devi : No not at all.

Randor Guy : You don't remember at all?

Lakshmi Devi : Well I left this line for some time and I never thought I'd come back again because I thought I'd stay abroad, and I was in Bombay for quite a while 15 years and Calcutta for 15 years, like that it went on. And I was the principal of one school in Calcutta.

00:42:45-00:44:17

Randor Guy : All this happened when you retired from films. You don't remember any of the songs or the tunes? *Purna Chandra*... They always had very good music you know... You don't remember at all?

Lakshmi Devi : No. I've quite forgotten all this.

Randor Guy : I see. And so that was the film you were talking about...

Lakshmi Devi : Actually I was very interested in going to the dances, learning English dance, and was all the time out dancing.

Randor Guy : You learnt all that when you were in films?

Lakshmi Devi : Not in films, after films. I was very much interested in that and I forgot about it. But then my uncle Mr. Natesan made me a member of the Race Club so in that, I used to go to all the races and make myself very...

Randor Guy : And after this *Prema Bandhan*, Mr. M K Radha told me, I had done a program with him like this as I had told you, that he did a film called *Raja Gopichand*, did you act in that film with him?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know. Did he say that?

Randor Guy : No he didn't say, I'm asking you. He told me that you were the heroine in *Prema Bandhan*. But *Raja Gopichand* was the next film he did. I think it was the same group of people, made in Bombay. Do you remember this film?

Lakshmi Devi : I know that he had done one picture...

Randor Guy : But you didn't act in it?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't think so.

Randor Guy : This *Raja Gopichand*, *Manasa Devi*...You were not connected with that?

00:44:18-00:49:17

Randor Guy : And then we come to 1942, that was the year you said you did this *Anantasayanam*.

Lakshmi Devi : We were with Subramaniam all the time.

Randor Guy : K Subramaniam.

Lakshmi Devi : In Madras, in Gemini Studios.

Randor Guy : It was done in... Gemini had earlier... Vasan had taken it over in 1942?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : And this *Anantasayanam* I think K Subramaniam himself directed...

Lakshmi Devi : He was the hero.

Randor Guy : He played the hero.

Lakshmi Devi : And the heroine was Subbulakshmi.

Randor Guy : S D Subbulakshmi.

Lakshmi Devi : And I was Lakshmi then.

Randor Guy : It was some kind of mythological story.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes it was mythology.

Randor Guy : About Padmanabha Swami, *Anantasayanam*.

Lakshmi Devi : So actually when Krishnan came, Krishnan was a famous man, I was Lakshmi then.

Randor Guy : Then who was Vishnu?

Lakshmi Devi : I have no idea. The set was done very nicely. It ran also very well...

Randor Guy : *Anantasayanam*?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : And who were the other artists in *Anantasayanam*?

Lakshmi Devi : The other dancers, Janaki was there.

Randor Guy : V. N Janaki?

Lakshmi Devi : She was an extra dancer.

Randor Guy : She was only a group dancer at that time? Mrs. MGR?

Lakshmi Devi : And we all used to meet you know. And he looked after her for a very long time.

Randor Guy : K Subramaniam. He was taking care of her?

Lakshmi Devi : S D Subbulakshmi.

Randor Guy : S D Subbulakshmi also?

Lakshmi Devi : We were all very good friends.

Randor Guy : I see. V N Janaki...

Lakshmi Devi : Till the very last I was good friends with S D Subbulakshmi. I've been to her garden. They gave her fifty-five thousand as some award or something. Raja Sandow Award.

Randor Guy : S D Subbulakshmi. All those came many years later. I'm talking about the time when you made *Anantasayanam*. Do you remember anything when you were making *Anantasayanam*? Did you have any songs in *Anantasayanam*?

Lakshmi Devi : No.

Randor Guy : You did not sing? You only did the dancing.

Lakshmi Devi : No. They had the songs.

Randor Guy : Who? S D Subbulakshmi and others? This was a (inaudible) production. K Subramaniam's own production. Madras United Artistes Corporation with S D S and others.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. I think so.

Randor Guy : And this *Anantasayanam*- that was the only film in which K Subramaniam acted. After that he stopped acting.

Lakshmi Devi : No he couldn't act.

Randor Guy : I see (Laughs).

Lakshmi Devi : You knew him as well?

Randor Guy : Oh yes I knew him quite well.

Lakshmi Devi : Very nice man.

Randor Guy : He directed it himself and also played the hero?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : What role did S D Subbulakshmi play in that?

Lakshmi Devi : (inaudible)

Randor Guy : And after this *Anantasayanam* do you remember what film you did? Did you do any other film for K Subramaniam afterwards or before?

Lakshmi Devi : No.

Randor Guy : Was this the only film you did?

Lakshmi Devi : We were just friends.

Randor Guy : But you did not work with him?

Lakshmi Devi : *Meera*... When *Shakunthala* was shot we were just friends.

Randor Guy : M S Subbulakshmi played Shakunthala. Do you remember anything about *Shakunthala*? Making of *Shakunthala*?

Lakshmi Devi : No I was not there. We used to stay in that place where all the group of stars and all that used to stay. So we used to play in the evenings together, M S Subbulakshmi, S D and myself.

Randor Guy : Do you remember Ellis R Dungan who directed the film?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes very much. Ellis R Dungan directed *Meera*.

Randor Guy : He directed *Shakunthala* and also *Meera*.

Lakshmi Devi : Ellis R Dungan was very good.

Randor Guy : Do you remember anything about the man?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't. I think he had done some pictures.

Randor Guy : No he did pictures. I'm asking because you said you know the man. I've not seen him. Because we're trying to do something on him also, that's why I'm asking you.

Lakshmi Devi : He's no more.

Randor Guy : No he's very much alive.

Lakshmi Devi : Where is he?

Randor Guy : He lives in America. In Vegas city. He's very much alive and kicking. He recently married again and...

Lakshmi Devi : How do you know all this?

Randor Guy : I know because I'm proposing to do a book on him, that's the reason I'm asking you.

Lakshmi Devi : He was a very good gentleman. He was a very nice photographer.

Randor Guy : He did everything. He was the director, he was the cameraman, and he was an expert at makeup. Do you remember anything specific about Ellis R Dungan? What he did, what kind of person was he?

Lakshmi Devi : He was a very gentle person. His work was very good.

Randor Guy : Any incidents that are embedded in your memory?

Lakshmi Devi : Nothing.

Randor Guy : You used to watch him at work I suppose?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes I used to watch him at work and we all used to gather together...
(inaudible)

Randor Guy : Beyond that, you don't remember much about...

Lakshmi Devi : Not about his work.

Randor Guy : You never worked with Ellis R Dungan in your career?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't remember much. I don't know how I know him. Which picture he did...Marconi I know, he had that picture...

Randor Guy : The Italian!

Lakshmi Devi : Ellis R Dungan...

Randor Guy : Maybe you knew him socially later? Having lived in Madras for quite a few years before he went out.

Lakshmi Devi : Ah maybe.

00:49:18-00:52:53

Randor Guy : Now we are coming to 1947 I think. And you said you did a film called *Veera Vanita*. Where was this film made?

Lakshmi Devi : Made in Mohan Sound Studios.

Randor Guy : In Bombay?

Lakshmi Devi : In Bombay.

Randor Guy : Was it their own production? Mohan Bhai.

Lakshmi Devi : Could be.

Randor Guy : Mohan Films or Mohan Productions.

Lakshmi Devi : Could be.

Randor Guy : And who directed it? This *Veera Vanita*?

Lakshmi Devi : Nana Bhai Bhatt.

Randor Guy : Nana Bhai Bhatt was the director?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes he was a Gujarati director. Such a nice director. I think Srinivas Rao was the actor.

Randor Guy : P S Srinivas Rao. When you say *Veera Vanita*, did have something to do with some revolutionary type of girl? Because the stills you showed me shows the portrait of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and all that.

Lakshmi Devi : She was a leader like Lakshmi.

Randor Guy : Jhansi!

Lakshmi Devi : No Subhash Chandra Bose's...

Randor Guy : Ammu Swaminathan's...

Lakshmi Devi : Daughter.

Randor Guy : Lakshmi Swaminathan.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes she studied with me. So I portrayed that character there.

Randor Guy : It was a kind of revolutionary girl, fighting for India's freedom and all that?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : And who played the hero? P S Srinivas Rao?

Lakshmi Devi : P S Srinivas Rao.

Randor Guy : And you remember who scored the music? Was it also an action film like your other films?

Lakshmi Devi : Little, not much. Like *Vasanta Utsavam*, and that type of...(inaudible) Not much of stunts.

Randor Guy : Not much of the stunts you did. I see. And how was the reception for this film *Veera Vanita*? Do you remember who scored the music for this?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know.

Randor Guy : You don't remember at all? I see. And do you remember any of the outdoor sequences? Was there a lot of outdoor in this?

Lakshmi Devi : Yeah I guess they have shot...

Randor Guy : Where was this shot? This outdoor sequence?

Lakshmi Devi : Near Powai, some lake...

Randor Guy : Again Powai Lake.

Lakshmi Devi : Always go to Powai Lake and Andheri, so many other places...

Randor Guy : All in Bombay.

Lakshmi Devi : All in Bombay. Studio there and some setting in the studio like a cave and all that.

Randor Guy : This was the Mohan studio in Bombay? I see. Where was this Mohan Studio in Bombay?

Lakshmi Devi : Andheri.

Randor Guy : All at Andheri? Andheri at that time probably was not very crowded?

Lakshmi Devi : It was. Now it is very crowded. Buildings that are 3-4 stories. And I used to come all the way from town.

Randor Guy : Where were you staying in Bombay?

Lakshmi Devi : First when I went there I was staying at Grand Hotel for some time. Then they gave me a separate place to stay in Parsi Colony. Then they brought me to the studio and gave me a bungalow.

Randor Guy : To the studio in Andheri?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : And you said that you made a film called *Malaimangai*. Am I right?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : And I think it was released about the same year. Do you remember about that film *Malaimangai*?

Lakshmi Devi : Not at all.

Randor Guy : You've forgotten about that film itself?

Lakshmi Devi : I think it all came side by side...

Randor Guy : It was released in the same year so it should have been during the span of the 12 month period when you had this on. You don't remember?

Lakshmi Devi : I was just you know... Just go there do the shooting and come away. Actresses were different...

00:52:54-00:54:36

Randor Guy : I see. I think we have been talking about specific films you have made during those years from 1934 to 1947. I would like to ask you some general questions about the conditions of filmmaking in those days. You have worked with quite a few directors, like K Subramaniam and then Shanti Dave and other people you had told us, R Padmanabhan, A Narayanan and others. Can you tell us something about how these people used to direct in those days? Did they have scripts written out? Were they giving you the dialogues earlier?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes we did have the dialogues and we used to rehearse.

Randor Guy : Rehearse before the shooting?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. Before the shooting. And how actually to go to the set and what is to be done. But not so polished as it is nowadays. And the songs we used to rehearse.

Randor Guy : With or without the sound artists there?

Lakshmi Devi : No just the harmonium and tabla. Just to get into the groove of the sitaar and all that. And we used to sing ourselves on the set with the microphone on top of us.

It was very difficult to act. Nowadays it is very easy. All that we have to do is act there, see where the mic is and accordingly we have to come. We don't have facilities to run around and do the acting.

Randor Guy : The camera was static I suppose...

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. Just one special space, that much space to do all the acting. Very difficult. Nowadays it is very easy to act.

00:54:37-01:02:18

Randor Guy : We were talking earlier about the directors you had worked with in the old days. You started telling me about how you had rehearsals for singing, how sometimes even the dialogues used to be given to you... that's where we broke off earlier. Would you like to say something about the methods of working in those days? You said that acting today is very easy. How difficult was it in those days?

Lakshmi Devi : Actually, taking a film was just like fun you know, not serious.

Randor Guy : Nobody took it seriously, is that what you mean? Why?

Lakshmi Devi : It was not... I couldn't tell you. But personally, I felt it was just like having a play and then forgetting about it...

Randor Guy : Just like going for a picnic...

Lakshmi Devi : And we were all like one family. This money matter didn't come in at all.

Randor Guy : What about those who had invested money, the producer, financier or whoever it was?

Lakshmi Devi : Of course they were interested in taking and all that.

Randor Guy : Naturally, at least they should have been serious.

Lakshmi Devi : They should have, but we had not met them at all. It's the unit that we used to stay together, go about and shoot films...

Randor Guy : Are you suggesting that the producer never used to come there?

Lakshmi Devi : I didn't know about any producers then. The director and us, would sit together and rehearse just like one family.

Randor Guy : But who used to book you?

Lakshmi Devi : The producer.

Randor Guy : That's what I said, at that time you would have known.

Lakshmi Devi : They used to come home, this Ramniklal, to my place where I was staying in Tondiarpet.

Randor Guy : Ramniklal came here to Madras?

Lakshmi Devi : He met me at the beach once, driving the car. He said for his picture *Danger Signal*, he wanted a rich girl...

Randor Guy : Who knew how to drive a car...

Lakshmi Devi : I was very rash. He followed my car and came home to Tondiarpet.

Randor Guy : Looks like a film (laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : True. And he liked me very much. And he said he wanted to book me for his picture and asked if I was ready. He wanted me for one year, for three pictures.

Randor Guy : So, he gave you a contract for one year in Bombay, to work exclusively for him?

Lakshmi Devi : And he gave me a bungalow inside the compound.

Randor Guy : Inside the studio? And you did three pictures? He was only a producer, not a director?

Lakshmi Devi : No, not a director. He'd come and see if I was comfortable if they looked after me well and go back.

Randor Guy : He never used to come to the set? To watch the shooting or find out what was going on?

Lakshmi Devi : Very rarely.

Randor Guy : Did he have other business?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. Ramniklal had other businesses.

Randor Guy : Did you know what kind of business?

Lakshmi Devi : That I don't know. They were staying away from Bombay. But he used to call us for dinner after the shoot...

Randor Guy : The social type...

Lakshmi Devi : Used to go and enjoy with his wife. That's all, I never took it seriously. It was just fun to me. I was just a beginner and didn't know anything.

Randor Guy : How old were you when you entered films?

Lakshmi Devi : About 15 to 16 years.

Randor Guy : Not even a major yet?

Lakshmi Devi : No. Because when my father died, that was the opportunity to go out. Otherwise I couldn't have gone out at all. They wouldn't have allowed me...

Randor Guy : To step out and act in films.

Lakshmi Devi : My mother was grumbling about me going out but still we said, "No, let's see what comes!" And they came, sent people with us...the servant maid and some relatives escorting me.

Randor Guy : (Laughs) Escorting you and going around... You worked with A Narayanan, who is one of the pioneers of South Indian cinema, as you know.

Lakshmi Devi : He looked after me very well.

Randor Guy : Can you tell us something about Mr. A Narayanan, your impressions of him?

Lakshmi Devi : He was quite a nice gentleman, a family man. His wife was always trailing him.

Randor Guy : Trailing him? Meenakshi Narayanan?

Lakshmi Devi : Because she wanted to learn recording and wanted to know what was going on in the set.

Randor Guy : I see, she was always on the set?

Lakshmi Devi : Seeing what we were doing, helping us. Because I was there, she was always there.

Randor Guy : She was actively involved with her husband. I think she was the first woman technician of South India, maybe even in India or the world!

Lakshmi Devi : She recorded some pictures also, she told me.

Randor Guy : I've known about that.

Lakshmi Devi : Paappaa, her son...

Randor Guy : Paappaa, A Narayanan's son...

Lakshmi Devi : Where's he?

Randor Guy : I wouldn't know, I'm told he's living somewhere else. I'm trying to trace him.

Lakshmi Devi : I also want to see him. He was about 10 years...

Randor Guy : Small boy. Was he too acting or anything?

Lakshmi Devi : No. He just used to come and see... and we used to play with him. I want to see him very much because I met Israni there in Bombay and he came to our house and told, "Why don't you go and see Paappaa (inaudible)?"

Randor Guy : In Calcutta, you made some films, you've worked with R Padmanabhan who directed some of your pictures you said. What kind of a director was he? Another pioneer of south Indian cinema... What was your impression of him?

Lakshmi Devi : Knowing about the present times, they were all just novices, just beginners.

Randor Guy : Even the directors?

Lakshmi Devi : Just like us, they...

Randor Guy : They also didn't know much?

Lakshmi Devi : Nothing at all, absolutely!

Randor Guy : (Laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : We had to do our own styling, standing...he'd say, "Do what you want".

Randor Guy : They won't direct you at all?

Lakshmi Devi : They'd direct us of course. But they'd say, "This is the position. How'd you like to do this and what will you suggest?" We'd rehearse.

Randor Guy : So, you had a lot of freedom to do what you wanted by way of acting. They did not act it out and say you must do it this or that way?

Lakshmi Devi : No.

Randor Guy : No such restrictions were placed on your style of acting? You had to be involved...

Lakshmi Devi : More action than talking.

Randor Guy : I see.

Lakshmi Devi : There were more actions than dialogues. Dialogues used to be short. They used to cut and take. A few lines, another angle and another angle...

Randor Guy : What kind of a director was C V Raman? You said you started with him.

Lakshmi Devi : I don't think C V Raman started anything at all. He just introduced me to the film industry, to A Narayanan who was his brother. C V Raman was taking silent films.

Randor Guy : That was much earlier.

Lakshmi Devi : In that studio....

Randor Guy : In Tondiarpet. Do you remember the name of the studio?

Lakshmi Devi : Some studio was there... we didn't know what studio was there. After my father's death, you know we had those 16 days ceremony...after that only, we went there. I remember fully well because otherwise I wasn't allowed to go out. If at all, we'd go to the beach or the club.

Randor Guy : Which club was that?

Lakshmi Devi : Lady Willington's Club.

Randor Guy : You were a member of that club?

Lakshmi Devi : After that the Gymkhana...

01:02:19-01:12:11

Randor Guy : You were talking about this Shanti Dave, about whom nothing much is known today. What sort of a director was he?

Lakshmi Devi : He was a very good director, very hard-working, very fattish fellow. With all that he used to carry himself, would tell us how to face the camera...a very good director. And took much interest in stunts and dialogues.

Randor Guy : Did he know Tamil?

Lakshmi Devi : A little.

Randor Guy : He had some assistants I suppose to help him.

Lakshmi Devi : And he'd talk in English while explaining. Sometimes he'd say, "This is the position, this is the scene. Do what's necessary, do what you want". A very good director. He was very good at editing also.

Randor Guy : Shanti Dave was an editor too?

Lakshmi Devi : He used to go to the editing room and look at the close-ups...

Randor Guy : So he knew editing too! Of course, directors should be good editors also; otherwise one can't be a good director.

Lakshmi Devi : Bhagwan also used to do that.

Randor Guy : What do you remember about Bhagwan?

Lakshmi Devi : I know Bhagwan very well. Now also I go and see him. He's so old but still acts in pictures with a little dancing. He's very old now.

Randor Guy : How was he at that time? Was he slim? He was a big man?

Lakshmi Devi : No, was always like that.

Randor Guy : Even during the time of *Prem Bandhan*?

Lakshmi Devi : Short. Had a commanding power.

Randor Guy : I see, in what way?

Lakshmi Devi : In the sense, if we are not on the set, he'd tell us to walk out.

Randor Guy : Oh, he was tough!

Lakshmi Devi : He made us do an outdoor dance, an English dance because he knew I knew some dance. But that was cut off because those days, heroines were not supposed to dance! I was surprised!

Randor Guy : Heroines were not supposed to dance?

Lakshmi Devi : Such a lovely dance it was! I saw the rushes, the first time I had given a dance, and it was cut off. They said no heroine should dance!

Randor Guy : Who decided that? Producer?

Lakshmi Devi : Studio or producer...someone came and said, 'no, cut it off'. Such a lovely dance!

Randor Guy : (laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : Now, all dances only...

Randor Guy : Heroine does everything else, except being the heroine. (Laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : Honestly, it's surprising, eh! Even walking, they said, "Oh, you are walking very stylishly, go slow".

Randor Guy : Be a more 'modest' Sita, Savitri type...(laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : All nonsense! That's when I said I'd rather go to Bombay and do some social...

Randor Guy : This was in Madras? And what kind of a director was K Subramanyam? You did some pictures with him.

Lakshmi Devi : He was very good. We used to have rehearsals in a big hall and he'd also say the dialogues. He was a good director. And he gave us scope to do things by ourselves too. He would ask how I wanted to do it. He won't show because...

Randor Guy : He was not an actor.

Lakshmi Devi : He'd say, "This is your position, this is your acting element, and this is your nature. You do it and let's see!". It was natural for me, we've been acting in so many pictures, so we did our own thing. Nothing much. But we rehearsed all the dialogues. We all used to sit together and rehearse every morning. I remember that he had a big house with a big hall. We used to sit down and...

Randor Guy : Where was this house, do you remember? In Mylapore, on Kutcheri Road?

Lakshmi Devi : In Mylapore, but only now I know Kutcheri Road.

Randor Guy : Because he had his office on Kutcheri Road.

Lakshmi Devi : Ah! That's the place! On the top floor was the big hall where we used to rehearse. After that as usual I used to play about at *khana* time, teatime. They used to feed us well.

Randor Guy : In those days, there were no dances, you say. Were there any dance masters teaching dancing and all that? Like we have today... we have dance directors.

Lakshmi Devi : Not at all. No dances at all, as long as I was there. Even the walk shouldn't be a dance step. Nowadays... we can't get it, that's not there.

Randor Guy : What about costumes? Did you have any costume designer?

Lakshmi Devi : Nothing of that sort, no costume designer. We just had to wear the saree.

Randor Guy : In some of the stills I think you are wearing pants.

Lakshmi Devi : What costume was that? I was horse riding, so I had to wear breaches. Those days we used to wear frills and all, which they used to stitch. In *Raja Bhakti* we had.

Randor Guy : Because it was a costume drama? Can you tell me something about this *Raja Bhakti*? Do you remember anything at all?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, we used to rehearse.

Randor Guy : What role did you play?

Lakshmi Devi : In *Raja Bhakti* I was the mother of the child who was supposed to be the king. It all centered on the boy. They wanted to kill him...

Randor Guy : Do you remember who played that boy?

Lakshmi Devi : They had the cradle ceremony and all that. And what was their name...Ratna...the sisters who were acting...?

Randor Guy : Ratnabai, Saraswatibai, they were sisters. Did they act in *Raja Bhakti*?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. In fact, I think they were producers.

Randor Guy : They were not directly producers.

Lakshmi Devi : That Chettiar was there...

Randor Guy : Sathappa Chettiar was supposed to be maintaining these two sisters. That's what I have heard through the gossip grapevine.

Lakshmi Devi : Correct. He wanted me also to come there. Because we used to go to their house.

Randor Guy : Who...Ratnabai, Saraswatibai? Did you know the sisters well?

Lakshmi Devi : No...

Randor Guy : Can you tell me something about them?

Lakshmi Devi : No, I don't know them. They are no more.

Randor Guy : No... one is living in Hyderabad. Maybe Saraswatibai... I don't know the address but supposed to be in Hyderabad.

Lakshmi Devi : Really? Find out and let me know.

Randor Guy : Because I tried to trace the two sisters, see if I can talk to the...

Lakshmi Devi : Ratnabai is elder and Saraswatibai is younger.

Randor Guy : One of them, I think Saraswatibai...

Lakshmi Devi : She must be very old now. When I was there she was old...

Randor Guy : Yes, supposed to be living in Hyderabad, but I'm quite not sure. Because, they have a property in Egmore and some of the relatives are supposed to be living. When I tried to contact them...

Lakshmi Devi : *Acha*, where are they?

Randor Guy : Somewhere in the same colony. That information I can possibly get you. And they said one of them is alive and that she lives in Hyderabad, but they were not able to give me their Hyderabad address. There the trail became cold and I abandoned it for that time being. That's how I know these 'Palayamkotta Sisters' as they are called... they are from Palayamkottai.

Lakshmi Devi : Until that picture, I didn't know who they were.

Randor Guy : They were very popular stage artists.

Lakshmi Devi : After so many pictures, *Raja Bhakti* came and that's how they knew my name and asked me...

Randor Guy : Did you know Sathappa Chettiar, did you meet him?

Lakshmi Devi : Yeah, I've met him.

Randor Guy : He was the man who owned the studio also at that time.

Lakshmi Devi : That's why. I know them but not too much. Sathappa Chettiar, some other Chettiar, M Ct Muthaiah Chettiar who died in the air crash...it just wasn't worth it, was it?

Randor Guy : (inaudible)

Lakshmi Devi : He was the one who, when I first sang in All India Radio...

Randor Guy : Did you sing on the radio also?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, sang the film tunes.

Randor Guy : I see, when was this? All India Radio, Madras? Did you give a musical performance?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. Then Muthaiah Chettiar was very much pleased that a family girl should go and act in films and he sent me a silver plate full of roses, sent his card.

Randor Guy : You sang film songs or Carnatic songs?

Lakshmi Devi : Film songs. After that, they called me for an hour of Carnatic...because I learnt Carnatic music from when I was 10 years old.

Randor Guy : Who taught you Carnatic music? Who was your Guru?

Lakshmi Devi : Tiger Varadachari.

Randor Guy : You were a disciple of Tiger Varadachari? I see!

Lakshmi Devi : Even now I remember so many songs and sing in the house.

Randor Guy : Tiger Varadachari was one of the giants of Carnatic music. Did you learn under him?

Lakshmi Devi : When I was 10. All my cousins also...

Randor Guy : Did he come to your house to teach?

Lakshmi Devi : To our house in Shanmugam Gardens.

Randor Guy : Here on Poonamallee High Road?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, after that the family split and I don't want to talk about it. The family split and so he had come to my house.

01:12:12-01:15:20

Randor Guy : And what about some of the cameramen whom you worked with?

Lakshmi Devi : Do you know Thambu?

Randor Guy : Oh yes very well.

Lakshmi Devi : Thambu is a very good friend of ours. In *Anantasayanam*, he was the cameraman.

Randor Guy : He's actually the nephew of K Subramanyam.

Lakshmi Devi : I know his father.

Randor Guy : C S V Iyer, with a beard. Do you remember him?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, very well. During the shooting, he used to...

Randor Guy : He was the associate director of K Subramanyam. He was K Subramanyam's uncle. Thambu and K Subramanyam were cousins, not nephew and uncle. C S V Iyer was K Subramanyam's father's younger brother, *Chithappa* and Thambu was his son. So he becomes the cousin, cousin brother as we say in India. He now lives in retirement.

Lakshmi Devi : He was in Mylapore.

Randor Guy : He was in Mylapore. That entire establishment he has wound up. Now he lives in the village Papanasam, near Kumbakonam. He has a son employed in Delhi. He spends most of his time with his son in Delhi or in Papanasam. He gave up films some 4, 5 years ago. He has surrendered his telephone, gave up his establishment, sold his car. I once met him in Bangalore, when I was there. He told me that he had retired. I did a book on S S Vasam, for the National Film Archive and also on Gudavalli Ramabrahmam the famous Telugu filmmaker who made *Mala Pilla*, *Raithu Bidda* and all that. At that time I wanted to talk to Thambu whom I knew very well earlier. I came to know through S D Subbulakshmi that he had retired and she told me if I was very anxious to see him, I should go to Delhi or to Papanasam which of course was not possible. So, you worked with Thambu, he was the cameraman in *Anantasayanam*?

Lakshmi Devi : But we were more friendly. Because with Subramanyam and C S V, were all...

Randor Guy : He was from the same family.

Randor Guy : Do you remember any other cameraman of your earlier films like *Dhruva*, *Purnachandra*, *Toofan Queen*, *Pucca Rowdy* and all those films that you did?

Lakshmi Devi : I didn't associate with them at all.

Randor Guy : But you must have seen them every day.

Lakshmi Devi : Of course, then I forget. But Thambu and all in Madras were just like family. And Jiten Banerjee of Newtowne Studios...

Randor Guy : Did you know Jiten Banerjee? He was the main man at Newtowne Studios. How did you know him?

Lakshmi Devi : Just friends.

Randor Guy : You didn't work with him? Didn't you do any pictures with Newtowne Studios?

Lakshmi Devi : No.

Randor Guy : Not at all? I see.

Lakshmi Devi : We used to meet at functions, at Film Chamber... That's all.

Randor Guy : You knew him more socially than as a cameraman?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

01:15:21-01:15:58

Randor Guy : How was the make-up in those days, can you tell me something?

Lakshmi Devi : Make-up, nothing at all, absolutely nil. Because I used to do it myself.

Randor Guy : There was a make-up man? Studio make-up man? He didn't know much?

Lakshmi Devi : Not good service. Israni gave a book on make-up, those days a very big name. So I started doing the make-up myself. I never allowed anyone to do the make-up from that time. Make-up was nothing. These days it has gone leaps and bounds.

Randor Guy : Those days, it wasn't much?

Lakshmi Devi : Not much.

01:15:59-01:19:54

Randor Guy : Another question which I ask a lot of people is that in films today, we see a lot of violence, sex and things like that. Those days did you have anything like that?

Lakshmi Devi : No, not at all. Even the hero and heroine were so much far apart...

Randor Guy : Should not touch...

Lakshmi Devi : Only through the eyes we have to show a reaction. Nothing to get together. And these days, my God! We were shy to even remove something. In *Toofan Queen* they said that I had to take off over the knee and show my legs. I denied that I shouldn't do it. But they insisted if I was interested in the picture, and I was a partner, I must do it. So I decided to oblige just a little. What I did was that I just open the zip a little and left it down. It came out in the picture.

Randor Guy : It was considered sexy?

Lakshmi Devi : Even today, I went for this... the policemen and the Sub Inspector were there and they asked if I was the *Toofan Queen* actress and I said, 'Yes'. "Oh! We can't forget your legs in *Toofan Queen!*" I was surprised and it was on Lloyds Road. My God! I said, "What are you talking about!! When did you see this? You wouldn't have been born even when I acted!" "No no, we know it!"

Randor Guy : (Laughs) That was considered sexy!

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. One of them pulled me...one of the Malayalam fellows wanted me to act in some pictures.

Randor Guy : What film was that?

Lakshmi Devi : That Balan fellow.

Randor Guy : Did you act in any Malayalam film?

Lakshmi Devi : No. He just wanted me to make me act as a heroine and he just pulled off my saree, just like that! This is my house and I'm talking to him...

Randor Guy : He came to hire you?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, for the film. And he just pulled out my saree, saying he just wanted to.... I warned him saying, that was not the way; it's different had he approached me in a studio...he had not signed me on, no contract, nothing of that sort... and pulling my saree! I flatly refused to act in it and that was the end of it.

Randor Guy : Balan, was it? When was this?

Lakshmi Devi : I think it was Balan... some Malayalee. Long time back. I was in pictures, was staying in Thirumurthy Street, T Nagar.

Randor Guy : But you didn't do any Malayalam film at all?

Randor Guy : No, they asked me, but I didn't.

Randor Guy : Because not many Malayalam films were made in those days.

Lakshmi Devi : And they asked me to do negative roles also. But I refused saying I was acting in Tamil.

Randor Guy : Who asked you that?

Lakshmi Devi : Ramniklal.

Randor Guy : Bombay!

Lakshmi Devi : They said they'd teach me Hindi.

Randor Guy : You didn't know Hindi then?

Lakshmi Devi : I was dead scared. They were after that... the Sarangiwalas... I had a terrible time there. They used to ask me out to tea parties and would be drinking and all that.

Randor Guy : (laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : Now they dare not. (Inaudible) Then I was too young to know the world.

01:19:55-01:25:08

Randor Guy : You produced a film you said, that you invested money... *Toofan Queen*, was it?

Lakshmi Devi : A partner.

Randor Guy : You were a partner. How much did it cost to make *Toofan Queen*, do you have any idea?

Lakshmi Devi : Not more than 3 to 5 lacs.

Randor Guy : *Toofan Queen* cost 3 to 5 lacs in those days?

Lakshmi Devi : Because we selected our artists in the house in Madras, in Tondiarpet. We have sold that place. The Agastya Theatre there now was our compound. There we selected all the parties and Pandurangan was the music director.

Randor Guy : C N Pandurangan.

Lakshmi Devi : He's no more.

Randor Guy : I know.

Lakshmi Devi : He was the music director and one Mr... he had a shop in Moore Market, I forget his name... he was the production-in-charge. We selected our own parties, took them to Prakash Studios, got a house in... and that's how...

Randor Guy : And that's why it became a bit expensive?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : Because in those days, 3 to 5 lacs was very big money. Because we had to hire the house, dogs, this and that...

Randor Guy : And what was the salary like, of artists, directors those days? Now it's all in lacs.

Lakshmi Devi : For us, it was nothing at all. Fifty thousand was more than enough.

Randor Guy : Fifty thousand was very big money those days.

Lakshmi Devi : Actually, for my first- *Srinivasa Kalyanam*, I didn't know what I got, it was a present- a gold *oddiyanam*.

Randor Guy : A gold *oddiyanam*! Wow! Today it must be worth lacs! Are you still keeping it? It must be costing a fortune today, with a sovereign selling at Rs.5000!

Lakshmi Devi : My God! Never did I ask what money I got...Who wears an *oddiyanam*? We had our own things...so much.

Randor Guy : So you got only a present for *Srinivasa Kalyanam*?

Lakshmi Devi : I didn't know to ask for money. Neither did my people come to ask for money (inaudible).

Randor Guy : But what was the salary they'd pay a heroine, not you though?

Lakshmi Devi : Actually I can't say... about 25000...

Randor Guy : And people like P S Srinivasa Rao, what was their...?

Lakshmi Devi : Must be 10000 or 15000.

Randor Guy : As low as that!

Lakshmi Devi : Because he's from our family also. He came just to get a role. After that he (inaudible). When he came to Bombay, we were paid a monthly salary.

Randor Guy : By this Ramniklal?

Lakshmi Devi : Establishment...everything was theirs.

Randor Guy : All (inaudible) plus salary? (Inaudible)

Lakshmi Devi : And we were treated nicely. And we had seen Bombay all through. (Inaudible)

Randor Guy : But today the purchasing power of the rupee is very low. The lacs really don't mean much. I'll tell you one instance. When I made my first film, it was in Malayalam where I made my debut. It was in Madras in 1974, my first film called

Moham, which I wrote and directed. That film was in B&W. I made it for a total cost of Rs1,28,000/-up to the first print. Today, for even an average Malayalam production, just the cost of transport and travel will be more than the production cost of that.

Lakshmi Devi : Yes.

Randor Guy : Today there's a Malayalam film being made about the Moplah Rebellion, which I'm told is costing Rs.75 lacs! It's an unheard of figure for a Malayalam picture.

Lakshmi Devi : Who is directing the picture?

Randor Guy : I V Sasi, one of the top directors of Kerala is directing. And the cost of production is 75 lacs!

Lakshmi Devi : Oh my!

Randor Guy : To talk to you about the cost of production, today if you take the cost of *Moham*, I could perhaps make 40,50 pictures like that today. And it was not 'those days'; it was only '74, hardly fourteen years ago.

Lakshmi Devi : In the course of a short time...

Randor Guy : It has gone very high.

Lakshmi Devi : After '77, '78...

Randor Guy : Every year the cost keeps moving up. The cost of petrol goes up. Cost of everything...cost of artists, salary for people, freelancing, cost of publicity has gone up. Today you can't dream of making pictures like that.

01:25:09-01:27:30

Lakshmi Devi : And we had something to do with *Mamiyar* also.

Randor Guy : What is *Mamiyar*?

Lakshmi Devi : The picture *Mamiyar*. Sometimes when we were in Madras only...

Randor Guy : Which year?

Lakshmi Devi : Don't talk about years. I don't know.

Randor Guy : Did you act in it?

Lakshmi Devi : No. Varalakshmi and we were interested in it.

Randor Guy : That was S Varalakshmi?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, S Varalakshmi.

Randor Guy : We were talking about *Mamiyar*. That was in 1953. It had R S Manohar and S Varalakshmi. Were you one of the producers?

Lakshmi Devi : No, my relatives were. In Bangalore...Subramanyam...he's no more. They were two brothers; they invested the money.

Randor Guy : You didn't invest any money?

Lakshmi Devi : No. But we were interested in it, to look after it and all...

Randor Guy : Regarding the shooting and...who directed the film, do you remember? It was in two languages, was it?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, forty lakhs.

Randor Guy : Cost forty lakhs for two languages? Telugu and Tamil?

Lakshmi Devi : Both were acted by these two.

Randor Guy : Manohar acted in Telugu also?

Lakshmi Devi : Yes. Subsequently, it flopped. It flopped so terribly that the man got a heart attack!

Randor Guy : The producer?

Lakshmi Devi : The producer.

Randor Guy : Naturally.

Lakshmi Devi : Mr. (inaudible) who owns Imperial theatre, Bangalore and Opera theatre Subramanyam- both of them are brothers. They've got a very big palatial place in Infantry Road...the big road...? Mahatma Gandhi Road!

Randor Guy : M G Road.

Lakshmi Devi : They had (inaudible) company, a car company. They were relatives... we were talking about the 40 lakhs, in 1953...40 lakhs was gone just like that, after that, that man got a heart attack, silent heart attack.

01:27:31-01:34:03

Randor Guy : Would you like to say anything more about your films, about your career? And one thing I wanted to ask you, why did you give up films?

Lakshmi Devi : That's because of my people who went off to Calcutta. They changed the place to Calcutta.

Randor Guy : What took you to Calcutta? By that time, you were married and had a family?

Lakshmi Devi : My daughter had gone to London; when she came back, there was no base for that...

Randor Guy : What was she doing? Airhostess?

Lakshmi Devi : No, (inaudible)...in English...

Randor Guy : Training...?

Lakshmi Devi : So, we both went to Calcutta to settle down. We were there for 15 to 20 years.

Randor Guy : You didn't try to do any film in Calcutta?

Lakshmi Devi : Nothing at all. I had lost interest. I went off to a school. A friend of mine a Punjabi, called me there. It was a very good higher secondary co-ed school.

Randor Guy : And one other question...you've acted in films those days and I'm sure you see films today. What differences do you find?

Lakshmi Devi : It's very nicely made and full of cuts. It's not the stale...going on talking, keep on singing... now it's so nice, in one second everything is changed.

Randor Guy : Fast-paced.

Lakshmi Devi : Very fast, very interesting also. Those days there was no back projection, nothing of that sort; now everything is done with back projection. Now they just go on top, which is known as boom, it goes up and down. Only the actors and actresses stand up and it goes around...

Randor Guy : You mean they are technically far better, than what it was during your days? Do you think there's an improvement?

Lakshmi Devi : Very. And the labs, editing... everything is quite different. Very nice to see and interesting. And the fight scenes...

Randor Guy : You've done the fights yourself. What difference do you find today?

Lakshmi Devi : I'll show you what they've written in papers. "What Lakshmi Devi has done? What are they doing? They are just acting like that." That's what they've written in *Paesum Padam*, and I've got the paper also. When M G R acted you know, they said, "What's this stunt? Someone else has to do the stunts? Lakshmi Devi was the last one to (inaudible)"

Randor Guy : (laughs)

Lakshmi Devi : Someone gave me the piece of paper.

Randor Guy : Now the dupes do the fighting. Those days you all did the fighting. Did you know K T Rukmani?

Lakshmi Devi : I knew her.

Randor Guy : She was known as the stunt queen or something like that.

Lakshmi Devi : Just one or two pictures, *Minnal Kodi...*

Randor Guy : *Minnal Kodi, Jaya Kodi...*

Lakshmi Devi : That's all, nothing much.

Randor Guy : You didn't know her intimately? What about T P Rajalakshmi?

Lakshmi Devi : That also I don't know; because many of them left before I came...they were all drama actors.

Randor Guy : I know, they came from the stage.

Lakshmi Devi : They've seen us. There's some difference between us. They seldom come, they are shy to come and talk.

Randor Guy : I see, shy to talk to you.

Lakshmi Devi : I mean either I was feeling shy or they were feeling shy but we were not (inaudible) each other.

Randor Guy : What was your impression of V A Chellappa? You acted with him in one film.

Lakshmi Devi : He was a drama actor. Song, song and song!

Randor Guy : He was a good singer?

Lakshmi Devi : Very good singer. Even to talk to you, he'll come and sing a song. (Inaudible)

Randor Guy : He was more interested in singing!

Lakshmi Devi : Yes, and all the time used to chew betel leaves and betel nuts. Subbaiya Bhagavatar was there. He was acting, wasn't he?

Randor Guy : Yes, did you act with him in any film?

Lakshmi Devi : No. V A Chellappa only.

Randor Guy : Who were the other actors or actresses who acted with you, whom you remember? You spoke of V N Janaki, whom you said was a group dancer at that time. Do you remember K L V Vasanta, who became Mrs. T R Sundaram afterwards?

Lakshmi Devi : Oh, K L V Vasanta! We never acted...I know her well.

Randor Guy : But you didn't act with her?

Lakshmi Devi : No. I know Kannaamba.

Randor Guy : But did you act with her?

Lakshmi Devi : No. But in Woods Road, we had our film chamber.

Randor Guy : In Woods Road, yes, the office was there.

Lakshmi Devi : I was then a committee member there. Kannaamba and myself.

Randor Guy : Oh, you both were in the committee?

Lakshmi Devi : I had just joined. Vasan and others gave my name, and Kannaamba was senior. I remember that. That's how I know Kannaamba.

Randor Guy : Did you know Mr. Vasan well?

Lakshmi Devi : Oh yes, very well.

Randor Guy : But you didn't work in Gemini films?

Lakshmi Devi : No. I know the whole family. Every time I used to go and meet his mother but now, they've changed the house...

Randor Guy : They've sold the house.

Lakshmi Devi : Three crores!

Randor Guy : Two and a half crores, they've sold off the Gemini House. How's it that you never acted in a Gemini picture?

Lakshmi Devi : Because I went away to Bombay. Bombay has changed quite a lot. I know Pakshiraja Films...

Randor Guy : Sriramulu Naidu, Narayana Iyengar...

Lakshmi Devi : Narayana Iyengar...

Randor Guy : How do you know Narayana Iyengar?

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know how, but we were very friendly. (Inaudible) he used to invite us to weddings, the wives were very friendly. And the other partner, what's his name...

Randor Guy : Sriramulu Naidu. In Coimbatore.

Lakshmi Devi : Kakuma... We were so friendly that during Diwali time, we all used to take the same saree, give the same print to the Kanjeevaram fellow and he used to bring.

Randor Guy : (Laughs) You all were so friendly those days!

01:34:04-01:38:01

Lakshmi Devi : I've never asked them for any piece, to make me act...never used to ask. Only now it has come to that stage...

Randor Guy : Do you remember the writers of those days, people who wrote dialogues, song lyrics... Elangovan and all those people? Dialogue writers of your own films? Maybe they disappeared by the time...

Lakshmi Devi : I don't know much, I don't remember. (Inaudible)

Randor Guy : There was no link, I know.

Lakshmi Devi : They gave us...in fact, in the beginning, I used to have a Tamil tutor, a *Pandit* teaching me the lines.

Randor Guy : Because you were anglicized... who engaged the tutor, yourself?

Lakshmi Devi : No.

Randor Guy : The studio people? Which studio?

Lakshmi Devi : Same Narayanan did and Padmanabhan kept one for me in Calcutta.

Randor Guy : He engaged a Tamil tutor to teach you Tamil to talk?

Lakshmi Devi : No, only the dialogues.

Randor Guy : Do you remember who that was?

Lakshmi Devi : All that I don't remember. Just like a school, the teacher would come every morning, tell me all the dialogues.

Randor Guy : And you'd repeat...? So, that became some kind of a rehearsal. Do you wish to say anything else?

Lakshmi Devi : No. Thank you for taking so much of trouble.

Randor Guy : That was the interview with R B Lakshmi Devi, the heroine of yesteryears, recorded at my residence at Ayanavaram, Madras in February 1988. Mrs. R B Lakshmi Devi who is back in Madras after a long stay in places like Calcutta, Bombay and Hyderabad is still a member of the South Indian Film Artistes Association, popularly known as '*Nadigar Sangam*' which shows and goes to prove that she is still interested in acting. As a matter of fact, she tells me that she is anxious to get back to acting and likes to do roles befitting her age like mother, doctor or aunt or any elderly relations... 'character roles' as they call them. Unfortunately, I can't show what she looks like - on an audio tape, but I can tell, she still looks very impressive, very attractive, trim and shapely and she should be able to do roles fitting her present state. I thank you Mrs. Lakshmi Devi very much, for taking the trouble to respond to my request to come here all the way and sit with me and talk about your experiences and impressions of the old days. **I thank you on behalf of the National Film Archive of India, Pune and its Director Mr. P K Nair** and of course myself; and as you know whatever you have said in this interview will be very useful for research scholars and others who are studying the

history of Tamil Cinema as I do. And I'm certain that these bits of interesting information you've given will go a very long way in finding out how things were done in the good old days. Thank you very much and I wish you all the best and all success in whatever you want to do, you hope to do and you propose to do in the days to come.

Lakshmi Devi : You are most welcome! Do ask me for more anytime you want.

Randor Guy : Thank you very much.



||ntai||