



National Film Archive of India

Ministry of Information and Broadcasting
Government of India

Interview of Actor, Producer, Theatre Artist & Carnatic musician

Mr. C Honnappa Bhagavathar By Randor Guy

00:00:00

This is Randor Guy interviewing Mr. C Honnappa Bhagavathar, a former Superstar and producer of Tamil and also Kannada Cinema. He was one of the leading heroes of Tamil Cinema in the 1940s. And he took the place of M K Thyagaraja Bhagavathar and Bhagavathar unfortunately had to go to prison as a result of the alleged involvement in the Lakshmikanthan murder case. Mr Bhagavathar incidentally came into Tamil cinema in 1937 in Ellis R Dungan's superhit 'Ambikapathy' which again had Thyagaraja Bhagavathar as the hero, and which, along with 'Chintamani' made in the same year, brought Thyagaraja Bhagavathar super stardom. In 'Ambikapathy', Mr Honnappa Bhagavathar who hails from Karnataka-or old Mysore state, was introduced in a small role as the court musician and later, he made a name as the Superstar of Tamil cinema acting in many successful movies of the 1940s like 'Sri Murugan', 'Valmiki',

'Kundalakesi' and many others. He also turned producer, making films in Kannada and also continued to act in Kannada films. He's basically a qualified, talented, skilled Carnatic musician - and hence the name Bhagavathar which means one who gives public performances in music. It's a kind of appellation or a prefix. This interview is

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the first one, takes place at his residence in Chamarajpet, Bangalore City on the morning of Sunday November 11th, 1990.

Mr Honnappa Bhagavathar speaks in Tamil.

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Q : Namaskaaram Sir! I'm very glad to meet you. I've been planning for many days to meet you. There's this National Film Archives of India in Pune and its Director Mr P K Nair is known to your son. It's at his behest that I've been doing these things for a while. M K Radha, S V Subbulakshmi, ATK...have done all their's. I've been trying to interview you for some 2, 3 years and only now it's become possible in Bangalore. I'm indeed indebted to you for agreeing to this interview despite your age and health concerns. Very thankful to you Sir!

Q : Sir, what does the 'C' in your name 'C Honnappa Bhagavathar', stand for?

A : The 'C' stands for the village Chaudasandra and another thing would be that my father's name is Chikkalingappa.

Q : What was your father doing?

A : He passed away when I was five years old and my mother used to say that he sang Gamaka Vachana and did Upanyas....

Q : Like Harikatha?

A : Singing Bhajans and giving their meaning. So my mother said....

Q : You were too young...

A : When I was about 7,8 years old, if I heard anybody sing, just by listening, sing it myself. One used to wonder how I was able to do so. I had a good voice. When asked

whether there was any Vidwan in the family, my mother would say she didn't know any, but just that my father used to do the Gamaka Vachana and that by God's Grace, I happened to receive such a blessing!

Q: Whom did you learn Carnatic music from?

A: I formally started to learn Carnatic music at the age of 19. Till then it was just by listening...

Q: Learning through listening....?

A: Street plays...wherever there was a street play, I would be present. There, they would give me a chance to sing as I sang well. Then I started to do the children's role. In the year 1927-28, my mother brought me to Bangalore for a wedding. I used to amuse people by being jovial. Seeing me amusing people, they dressed me up like a woman. There was one Sambandhamurthy Bhagavathar from Madras who had come to Bangalore much earlier. His Guru was Parthasarathy Bhagavathar. His photo is here. They used to do Katha Kalakshebam. He was the disciple of Lakshimiyachaar. And Sambandhamurthy Bhagavathar was his disciple.

Q: So you learnt from him?

A: When he came, seeing me amusing people, somebody at the wedding hall told me, "a Sangeeta Vidwan has come.... Tell him that you've heard him sing in Madras and ask him to sing a song". Now I did not even know where Madras was then! But I told him as instructed. And he was also told that I sang well. Looking at me, he asked me to sing. For which, I said, he should sing too. He obliged and then it was my turn. Knowing that he was a great Vidwan, I got out of my disguise and fell at his feet. I apologised that I just played along as others told me to. He asked me to sing a song. And I sang 'Sujana

Jeevana”, a composition by Saint Thyagaraja that I used to sing in Bhajans.. He was very impressed with my singing and my voice. He said I had very good prospects and asking me to come to Bangalore, said that he would teach me. But later, about a year after returning to our village, my mother refused to come, fearing that the city life would spoil me. We had meagre means of livelihood and I was already doing a job then.

Q: What job were you doing?

A: Weaving.

Q: Oh, Devanga...

A: Weaving...but mother refused to come. My elder brother and I, somehow convinced her and came to Bangalore with her.

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A: After about 4 months, I went and met him. He was glad to receive me and said I could start my lessons from that Thursday. There’s this Avenue Road where people of about some ten families from Madras had settled. So, on that Thursday, I went to meet him with proper offerings of coconut, fruits and flowers. But unfortunately, nearby in a house, people were mourning a child that had died just three days earlier and we could hear them wailing....

Q: Oh, what a start!

A: I felt crestfallen. He too was somewhat upset . But after thinking for ten minutes, he told me to take the Sruti box and we went to the Mysore Bank circle and there, lighting the camphor, my class started with the Saptaswaras.

Q: Right there? Weren't there any houses around?

A: Those days there weren't many people there. By six o' clock, the place would get deserted. He could tell stories in three languages- Tamil, Telugu and Kannada. He would first teach me the Saptaswaras in keeping with the norms, and then teach Vocal Accompaniment. Isn't that how it's done even now? In this way, he started to teach....

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Q: Oh! To sing as Vocal Accompaniment...?

A: Yes, like this, I learnt some 500 to 600 ditties and if somebody came, in between the story sessions I would sing ragas and some Kritis too. But once back home, it'll be back to the basics like 'Lambodara lakumikara'. And his friends who saw this would wonder - why I who could sing Kritis during story sessions, was learning very basic songs? For that he'd reply, "that's my method. I don't know what the future has in store for him. But he has a good voice, can sing by listening just once. Therefore, I must do justice and teach him properly".

Q: I see...

A: And his Guru would do Ramayan series and there, both of us would give vocal accompaniment. And by and by, I started doing music concerts...

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Q: Music concerts...stage concerts...Carnatic....?

A: Then there was Arunachalappa...

Q: Was he your third Guru?

A: Yes, third Guru. He was well known for Harmonium, I don't know if you've heard him.

Q: No.

A: He used to play Harmonium for Chowdayya's concerts.

Q: He must've played well, or else Chowdayya wouldn't have taken him in.

A: My Guru for some reason went to Mysore and stayed there itself. An elder brother was there. I didn't know what to do. My livelihood was in question. Survival depended on work.

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Q: Such was your state.

A: Right from my childhood, I was aloof...my routine was such that I'd work at home, then straight to my Guru's home. Even if he wasn't around, I'd do my practice. At nights too, I'd have dinner at home and go to sleep at his place. He'd wake me up at 4 and tell me to practice...

Q: He gave you a rigorous training...

A: Yes, rigorous...

Q: Gurukulavasam..

A: Yes, gurukulavasam.

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A : I was wondering what to do, now that my Guru had left for Mysore. For his story sessions, he (Arunachalappa) used to play the harmonium and he was quite taken in by me and felt I'd do well. Due to my poor means of livelihood, I had returned to my earlier job at the village.

Q : In the village itself...?

A : Yes. By now Arunachalappa had heard about my plight and enquired about me. Feeling very sympathetic that my talent was all going waste while I had a bright future, he sent for me through a student of his. When I explained why I had taken the decision that I didn't have a dedicated Guru, he was quick to point out, I could have gone to him! I was delighted! But he didn't have it easy either. He himself would return home by cycle, late in the night around 12, 12.30 after his performances. Yet, he told me to start my lessons from the very next day. He was residing in Cottonpet and I in Cubbonpet. Another student of his and I would reach his house after dinner by 10. He would reach later than that, have his dinner and then the practice will start.

Q : Practice sessions after midnight!

A : (laughs)

Q : You have suffered a lot in the early days.

A : But he helped me a lot by recommending me for concerts. He ran a shop for Harmoniums and would recommend me to his customers by speaking highly of me. And he had a person by name Rangappa who'd play the Mrudangam for him. They both would play for me as well. Such a great support he was! Once, we had a concert at a wedding in Cubbonpet, Bangalore. Some folks from Salem who were guests at that

wedding were impressed with our performance and expressed their appreciation. They also invited us to the Thyagaraja Utsav they were planning in the month of January at Salem. This was in the 37th year.

Q: 1937?

A: They took us to Salem. There was a famous violinist by name Fiddle Thayappa. His young son by name Rajanna, was a violinist too. And Rajanna's wife too played the violin well! And there was this mrudangam player Ayyamani who used to play for our sessions. We all went to Salem. The programme was for seven days and our concert was on the fifth day. These Salem folks were into lot of innovation and pomp. They wanted to have two violinists- Thayappa and his son Rajanna; they also wanted two mrudangam players- Ayyamani and another one by name Pazhanisamy from Shevapet, Salem. The people too were all thrilled at such an arrangement. I was quite fazed by such a prospect. But Thayappa, being a senior, dispelled my doubts and encouraged me by assuring all their support. By the blessings of my Guru, the concert was a great success and well received by all and I got a good name from it.

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Q: More than anybody else...

A: I was staying at a friend's place. On the second day, some five, six people came to meet me in a car. They were making a cinema Ambikapathy.

Q: Salem Shankar Films...Doddanna Chettiyar...

A: These were youngsters of age just around 25. They had fought at home with their families who obviously were not favourable to the idea of making movies and had each invested some ten thousand rupees.

Q: The families must have had their misgivings about film making...(laughs).

A: They had booked Thyagaraja Bhagavathar for this.

Q: For Ambikapathy ?

A: Because just then Chintamani had been a success.

Q: Yes, Chintamani had been a runaway hit.

A: Aswaththamma acted and Y V Rao directed. That was his fourth film or so and this was his fifth film or so.

Q: I've written a book about Thyagaraja Bhagavathar.

A: So they had booked Thyagaraja Bhagavathar. Those days they had a technique. Subramania Iyer felt, no matter what the story was, the hero should have a friend, a companion throughout the movie partaking in all his troubles. They were on the lookout for such a person who could sing, have a good personality and act too, alongside Bhagavathar. They took me to their office. It was the extension of Rajagopalachari's house.

Q: Rajaji...C Rajagopalachariyar?

A: Yes. They asked if I knew Tamil. I had learnt a little Tamil. How I knew Tamil was, I used to sing ditties in Marathi, Telugu, Kannada and Tamil as vocal back- up. Like Nandanaar, Valli Thirumanam in Tamil... I used to transcribe the lyrics in Kannada and sing.

Q: That's how you learnt?

A: A friend came to my rescue saying learning Tamil was very easy. He felt however well I transcribed the tamil lyrics in Kannada, it won't be quite alright and volunteered to teach me Tamil. He was a BA and an officer and actually he was learning singing from me.

Q: He taught you Tamil? (laughs)

A: So when he'd be learning music from me, I would learn Tamil from him.

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Q: I see.

A: I suppose I learnt quite a bit. Went back to them and I was asked to read from a magazine Hanuman Patrika.

Q: A very popular one.

A: He was quite impressed and enquired if I would act in cinema. I laughed and replied, 'Sir, I don't know anything at all about cinema. So far, I have seen only two pictures, that too silent ones'. Only now in 31, the talkie film Savitri starring Ramatilaka and Gaggayya had released at Doddanna Hall near Market Circle where now we have Apsara. That was then the best place. Being a talkie, it created a lot of buzz and ran for about a year! People would flock to see the movie here in Bangalore, travelling in bullock carts from villages. He didn't mind me replying so and informed that he'd be visiting Bangalore in a month to meet Y V Rao and that I too should meet him.

Q: Y V Rao was in Bangalore then?

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A : Y V Rao is from Bangalore only. He was in Malleswaram. And then I was told, incidentally Thyagaraja Bhagavathar was in town for a drama the next day and I should meet him. The drama was Alli Darbar.

Q: Pavalakkodi.

A: Yes. He felt it'd be good if we both met each other and I could watch the drama too. I agreed.

Q: Did you watch the drama Pavalakkodi?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: You met him for the first time.

A: Yes, that Alli...where he was the hero.

Q: Pavalakkodi. That's where he plays Arjun.

A : The next day the whole drama troupe had arrived at their office, lunch was arranged and I too was taken there. In their troupe there was one Annamalai Chettiyaar who was a very respectable man with a good musical sense. He introduced me to Thyagaraja Bhagavathar as a good singer from Bangalore by the name Honnappa Bhagavathar who had performed there a couple of days back. But Thyagaraja Bhagavathar didn't show any interest and was busy talking to somebody else. He didn't even acknowledge my greeting. Others noticed it and they didn't relish it at all. Annamalai Chettiyaar too felt bad. Everbody had lunch, but I just could not eat. I was just a youngster, but I wasn't comfortable with such behaviour. I had come up the hard way and had self-respect. After lunch, he left saying he'd be back at 4 after meeting a friend. The rest of the troupe were in the two rooms there. The producers there had

noticed that I had not eaten at all. But Annamalai Chettiyaar could sense why and comforted me saying, “What to do, today he’s flying high. But don’t keep it in mind. Such things are quite the norm here. This is how this line is and you’ll get to know it yourself. But please forget it and sing a raga. For our pleasure, please”. He was a very practical man. So I sang the raga Shanmukhapriya elaborately, with Niraval and all, just as in a concert. The entire troupe assembled there, impressed by my singing. They requested me to sing some more and I obliged by singing a Kriti of Purandara Dasa. Later, around 4 O’ clock, he arrived.

Q: Oh, Thyagaraja Bhagavathar?

A: Yes. They told him about my superb singing. I woke up from my sleep and saw all of them assembled in the verandah. This time, he shook my hands on his own and said, “I’m so glad to hear that you sing very well”. I replied humbly I was just a novice, while he was the Vidwan.. He continued, “this afternoon my mood wasn’t alright. I was pre-occupied with some things. That’s why I wasn’t attentive when you were introduced. Please don’t mistake me”.

Q: Oh, he apologized!

A: Such things were common. Then he requested me to sing and I did. He was pleased and wished me to stay on and watch the drama that night from the first row. The drama would open with Thyagaraja Swamy’s kritis. Arjuna would enter with the song Ksheerasagara. What connection does this song have with this story?

Q: (chuckles)

A: Now the heroine entered with Sakshatkaarani sarva.(sings).Whatever!

Q : No connection to the story and the song. Do you remember who the heroine was? Was it S B Subbalakshmi?

A : No, it wasn't S B Subbalakshmi. Someone else.

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A : One would hold the Harmonium and sing and another would start from where he left, with swaras and such, like in a concert.

Q : Oh yes, that's how it used to be those days.

A : Oh, I just couldn't bear it. Yes, I have heard such singing by S G Kittappa, Sundarambal in dramas before. But those songs were different. Music was a torrent with them both! The story and the music had no link whatsoever.

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Q : You were talking about Bhagavathar..how you met him and about his dramas...what happened afterwards?

A : Afterwards I came away without meeting them further. But the producers came to Bangalore as promised after a few days. They wanted to meet Y V Rao and I took them to his house. He was smoking a cigarette...

Q : I know..., he's from my place.

A : He didn't receive us well. Not even for courtesy's sake. He enquired in an offhand manner who we were. I spoke to him in Kannada that the guests were producers and that they wished to engage him as a Director.

Q : Did you know him before?

A : No, those days there wasn't much publicity. Just knew that he was there. And he didn't even offer us a seat. He himself was sitting on a mat. But not even as a matter of courtesy did he ask us to sit. Instead you know what he did? His film Chintamani was a hit. So he had an air of arrogance about him. He enquired, "so, you folks are going to produce a movie?" in the same attitude. This didn't go down well with Annamalai Chettiyar who was a very decent man as I told you. However, he replied, "Yes, we are producing a film and we've come to book you as the director. Will you be willing?". "Oh! You'll have to pay me Rs 25000 as remuneration. Can you?", he demanded. We took our leave and left, wondering how haughty the man was that he couldn't even show any courtesy as a matter of social behaviour. We decided that he wouldn't work out. That was the time when we heard Ellis R Dungan was staying in some hotel in Madras...

Q : Lavendar hotel?

A : No...some English hotel...

Q : Spencers' Hotel?

A : Someplace near the station..

Q : Victoria?

A : I forget. Anyway, learning that he was in a hotel in Madras, we approached him and he agreed for Rs.4000.

Q : Just Rs.4000?

A : He agreed to that sum. He was getting a chance to prove himself as a director and so he agreed. It was decided that everyone would reach Madras in a month and then will proceed to Calcutta for shooting.

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Q: Shooting was in Calcutta?

A: Yes, in Calcutta. Santhanalakshmi heroine

Q: M R Santhanalakshmi

A: All the popular artistes of the time...

Q: T S Balaiyah, Serukalathur Saama..

A: B B Rangachary

Q: N S Krishnan.

A: So we all went.

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Q: What role did you play?

A: I'm coming to that. As I told you, I was to be the companion till the end of the story. Those days in Calcutta, the rent was Rs.125.

Q: Rent for one Call Sheet in the studio?

A: At Praveen Studio. And there was a four storeyed house in Kali Ghat with some 30, 35 rooms.

Q: 35 rooms! (laughs)



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A: For a rent of Rs.150. An old house where we all stayed. Papanasam Sivan...everyone had arrived. Then on an auspicious day, it was decided to do the Puja and begin. We were asked to sing. All musicians had come from Madras. One Tabla player by name Naidu was there, a smart person. He had a good name, playing for recordings. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar was in the fourth floor where there were two rooms. And even then he had....

Q: Yes, yes, we've heard...(laughs) K R Meenalochani.

A: You remember the name too...(laughs) well, he was the hero. The puja was held in the hall. And he'd come down the stairs in a regal fashion! Surrounded by two men before and two behind, like an entourage. He'd wear the musk perfume and the scent would fill the air. We all requested him to sing and Annamalai Chettiyar asked him to sing one from that story itself. Don't know what he planned to sing. But when he started to sing, we couldn't make out if it was Kapi or Shanmukhapriya or Karakarapriya ...

Q: One couldn't make out the raga..?

A : All could sense it wasn't going right. Sivan the doyen of music too was there. Bhagavathar himself realized it. He sat there with bent head for a while and saying he had taken oil bath and hence not feeling alright, he excused himself and just left, saying he'd sing some other time.

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Q: He just left?

A: Now, this BB Rangachary, Saama and others got together and called out to me to sing. I paid my respects to Sivan..

Q: Papanasam Sivan?

A: Yes, certainly, as he was a great man. Others observed how well-mannered I was and teased that it was the Mysore culture. Sivan too blessed me and I sang. Others too joined in. By this time, what he had done... he collected the Nadaswaram recordings of Rajarathnam from the homes of some Iyers in Calcutta and would sing along the lyrics...

Q: Who, Thyagaraja Bhagavathar?

A: But Sivan told him it wouldn't work out and taught him. After about 4, 5 days, Dungan, Dialogue writer Elangovan, an assistant from Coimbatore by name Mani...

Q: M K R Nambiar...

A: The set was ready in the studio and they decided to start rehearsals for some scenes involving the hero Bhagavathar and me as his friend. They gave me some dialogues and I acted as they taught me. Dungan observed the rehearsal and commented, "you people say this one is a Bhagavathar and has done a few movies already. But he can't seem to give the expressions this one who's new and hasn't done any film yet, is giving! And he speaks too with clarity!"

Q: Good!

A: This didn't go down well with him. They said work will resume after a couple of days but even after four days, there was no shooting. I learnt that the producers and assistants were planning something. They began to say keeping my role till the very end was an old technique and unnecessary and that it can be curtailed to just a few scenes. They couldn't tell me openly and as a pretext wanted fresh rehearsals. Now at

this time, those who praised me earlier, began criticizing me. They said, not just the scene but even my role wasn't needed at all. I felt deeply hurt.

Q: Naturally.

A: But it was all out in the papers that Honnappa Bhagavathar was acting as the second hero alongside hero Thyagaraja Bhagavathar. I didn't seek any of this. I was a devotee of Lord Ram from my boyhood days. I pleaded in my mind to the Lord why I had to undergo all this heart ache. I was terribly hurt. For my own puja, I had a picture of Lord Ram's idol that Saint Thyagaraja worshipped and back in the room, I began to address the Lord with tears in my eyes, thus- "I didn't seek these things. Why did I have to come this far and face such humiliations? If you are indeed Lord Almighty, you must get me to reach the status this man now enjoys in Tamil Nadu. Or else I'll throw stones like a mad man".

Q: Such humiliation and grief!

A: Serukalathur Saama was sitting right opposite. I decided to pack off and leave right away. It was time for meals and there were 4,5 cooks with us who had come with us and it'd be a feast every day. All had gone to eat except me. Saama, Balaiya..they were all fond of me. Sensing my absence, one by one they came knocking at my door- Balaiah, Santhanalakshmi... but I didn't respond. In the meantime, somethings had happened earlier. Music lovers in Calcutta who had heard and read that I was a concert singer, had invited me to perform for the South Indian Club. They had accompanying artists there itself. Rajamani Iyer disciple of Rajanaickam Pillai and a mrudangam player Eswaran or so...they had arranged for my concert and I earned a good name there in Calcutta. They treated me with affection. Now, coming back to this incident, it was around 3 O'clock and producers had returned from the sets by now and had been told

that I had not eaten. They knocked at the door and Annamalai Chettiyar told he'd break down the door if I didn't open it myself. Seeing my eyes swollen because of crying, he consoled me saying, "We know what the reason is. Please pull yourself together. We all have fought with our families to produce films. Because of our actions or decisions if this film is stalled, that'll be the ruin of our lives. We'll somehow see to it that you get a good name from this film". I too relented and ate my food. They told Sivan Sir to comfort me. He told me, "Why do you worry? This film field is like this only and these things are quite the usual. I'll teach you and you'll do a great concert scene in the King's court". I agreed on the condition that I won't do even a single scene together with Bhagavathar in the movie. They agreed and gave me a background song to sing first. In raag Khamas.

Q: Which song was it?

A : In Khamas. Poovulagil..(sings) The tune was from the Ramdas kirtan Ramajogi mandu konare (sings). For the same tune, he wrote lyrics. For the concert, it was the tune of Ninnu Vina Gathi(sings) by Subbarayulu. Keeping the tune same, he wrote fresh lyrics Unnai Allaal (sings).

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Q: You sang for a concert scene in the King's Court?

A: Do you know how long the song was? 9.45 minutes!

Q: Your concert scene for 9.45 minutes?

A: Ragam, Niraval and swaras... the whole works. The scene had about 300 extras. The film released. Thanks to the blessings of Guru Sivan I got a good name. The film ran very well.



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Q: Yes, it was a great hit.

A: What Dungan did...there was an English film...

Q: Romeo and Juliet?

A: He took everyone and showed...

Q: Yes, he has written that in a letter.

A: He shot some scenes like in that movie. Did a good job for an English man.

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Q: Did you know Dungan well?

A: I didn't know much English, so it was just...

Q: (laughs)

A: If ever you write to him write that I had mentioned all these...

Q: Definitely. He has enquired about you. He has told me to say hello to you on his behalf if I met you. "How's the old boy?", he has asked. I write letters to him frequently. I'm writing a book on him.

A: Do tell him that I have indeed grown old now.

Q: I have a still photograph of the Puja. You are seen standing next to Bhagavathar with a tuft on your head. I'll take an extra print and send you that picture.

A: They all used to call me 'Iyer'.

Q: I'll send a copy across to you.

A: Then there was a movie Krishnakumar.

Q: By National Movietone.

A: Yogi..

Q: S D S Yogi.

A: His younger brother

Q: S D R Chandran,,he's still there.

A: Sambamurthy as Narada. He said he'd go to Arakkonam, drove there...
but...

Q: Died...?

A: Hence, he was replaced by Mahadevan.

Q: Nagarkoil Mahadevan. Who was this Sambamurthy?

A: Don't you know? He used to sing well. The movie Chandragupta- he was featured as the hero in that. But it didn't run well. The reason is he didn't have much of a personality, nose was flat. But sang very well in Hindustani and Carnatic styles. He was the son of a judge. Don't know the name.

Q: Madras?

A: Don't know the native place. Thus it went on...about 25 films...

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Q: A film by name Sati Sukanya, do you remember acting in it?

A: It was very special.

Q: Do tell. Who wrote, produced, directed? Modern Theatres?

A: Sundaram's direction.

Q: T R Sundaram

A: I forget...

Q: Never mind, I have the details, I'll check.

A: They were all nice people. Some Mudaliars got together and...

Q: What was your role?

A: I was the hero.

Q: What was the name? Was it a mythological film?

A: T R Rajakumari was the heroine.

Q: What was the story?

A: Sukanya is a princess. A sage by name Chavana is in deep meditation and is covered by a snake burrow. The king and his family are out in the forest for fun one day and



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while playing around with others, Sukanya sees the snake burrow and pokes the burrow with a stick. The stick pierces the Sage Chavana's eye and he's blinded.

Q : This was directed by T R Sundaram, was it? It was picturized in Salem? With Rajakumari as the heroine? Did it run well?

A : Yes, that's what I'm trying to say. There's a scene where I'm supposed to be performing a Yagna. During the shooting Sundaram suddenly felt it'd be good if I had a few lines to sing in that scene. He called the writer at once and told him to write a few lines. The musicians too were called to assist. I was a little unsure at first, but later somehow wanted to sing in the style of Gaggayya in the film Savitri and sang in raag Kanada. It was approved in just one take!

Q : It wasn't pre-recorded but shot then and there with a trolley in place?

A : Yes. But I wanted another take. But was told it was great as such and that I may not sing as well the second time.

Q : (laughs)

A : Sundaram said I had done very well. When the movie released, in all places, that song in that scene got wonderful applause. I was applauded in magazines too for being appreciated so.

00:54:29

Q : Later you acted in a movie Bhakta Kalathi...C V Raman was the director?

A : Not C V Raman, but Padmanabhan.

Q : R Padmanabhan. Sorry. Was Kumudini your heroine?

A : Yes, Kumudini.

Q: Was it a devotional movie? What was your role?

A: I was the hero.

Q: Kalathi was male or female?

A: Kalathi was male. I was doing several films those days like Valmiki, Sri Murugan....

Q: The movies supposed to be done by Thyagaraja Bhagavathar that came your way...

A: He decided to come and shoot where I was.

Q: In Salem?

A: No, in Coimbatore. At this studio...

Q: Shankar Studio? Pakshiraja? There were two studios- Premier and Central. Did they shoot in Premier?

A: Yes, in Premier. Jupiter Pictures with...

Q: Central Studio. If you remember about your film Deva Kanya, do share.

A: That's the movie with V N Janaki and Jeevaratnam.

Q: U R Jeevaratnam.

A: Both, heroines.

Q: Was it a folklore, this Deva Kanya?

A: Yes, kind of. There he brought in some comic element by way of Old Yaman and New Yaman. He had a good name, the comedian.

Q: T R Ramachandran.

A: It was well liked by the audience. The movie was made at a very low cost.

Q: Whose direction was this Deva Kanya?

A: Padmanabhan's. People used to tease him. During love scenes, purposely one would ask him to enact and show and when he did, would laugh and tease him about it. Was a very good man.

00:56:53

Q: Then the film Prabhavathi, Lena Chettitar's film. Do you remember?

A: It's about the curse of Durvasa. Being man and woman alternatively.

Q: Oh, such was the storyline?

A: Whenever I had to don the female part, NS Krishnan, Madhuran and all will call and bring people to the sets to see me play the female part. The set will be filled with audience. Even Lena Chettiyar used to invite people over to watch me play that part.

Q: (Laughs). Rajakumari was the heroine?

A: Rajakumari and Kanakalakshmi or so ...her aunt.

Q: SPL Dhanalakshmi.

A: See, I've forgotten the name. Saroja as Krishna- you know who? Director Ragu...

Q: T R Raghunath. His wife. She was Krishna?

A: Yes.

Q: She's there. Raghu is no more. It's about a year since. Their son is now a director by name Karthik Raghunath. Where was Prabhavati shot?

A: It started in Newtowne, then due to evacuation, shifted to Salem for completion.

Q: Do you remember the songs? Since you had to change to a woman's part as well, did you have to change your voice too?

Recording Interrupted and Resumes

Q: We were talking about you playing a woman's part.

A: In the story Pradhyumna Krishna's son, is cursed by Durvasa. I had to play a man for 15 days, play a woman for the next 15 days. Whenever I did the female part, Lena Chettiyar would call people over to watch my acting. NS Krishnan and Madhuram were sure to be there on those occasions. Madhuram used to tease wherefrom I learnt to play so. I used to retort, "through association, how else?" I used to be jovial . Raghunath was the director, but before him was one Ramachandran. He did a little bit of direction.

Q: N S Ramachandran?

A: He only began. But later Raghunath came in and finished it. It was shot in Newtowne at Madras.

Q: Then there was bombing in 1942.

A: In Salem I had a couple of movies.

Q : Raja Rajeswari ? Modern Theatres? Arundhathi? What was the story of Raja Rajeswari? Folklore?

A: Not folklore, kind of mythological. There's Prince who is affected by epilepsy. He's unaware, gets married and later is cured by his devotion.

Q: KLV Vasantha was the heroine. Do you remember her?

A: She was there only during that time, along with Sundaram. I did 3 to 4 films with her. Then...

01:01:31

Q: Kundalakesi....

A: Burma Rani .

Q: Burma Rani, war propaganda film.

A: Something funny happened in that movie. Sundaram himself was the main villain. I also had a main role. The role required me to hit a Japanese man while he was asleep. Usually, they'd give a fake stick to hit with. But here I was given a real one and asked to hit. Now that person was a young lad of about 20 years and I was worried he might get hurt. But Sundaram insisted and I attempted to hit but couldn't bring enough force while hitting. I again hesitated to hit on the head with force. He told me I should not worry about how he'd get hurt and should just go ahead and hit.

Q: (laughs) he really told so?

A: And that man had to be hospitalised for a couple of days afterwards and I was very hassled but was told he was recovering. I met him and offered Rs.50 and explained my helplessness in the action. He understood. Such a shocker it was!

01:03:41

Q: T R Sundaram...do you remember what type of person he was?

A: Very stubborn and rude. Will not change his ideas, won't listen to anyone. But quite a man, he went abroad and returned with a foreign woman as partner.

Q: Yes, Gladys.

A: She died long ago.

Q: Yes, but her son is there, Ramasamy.

A: Is the name Ramasamy?

Q: Ramasamy Sundaram.

A: He was a small boy then .

Q: Did Raja Rajeswari run well?

A: Somewhat fine. Average.

Q: Burma Rani?

A: Not good.

Q: It was done as a war propaganda film...

A: He was not troubled by all that. He just wished to make a movie and complete it within three months.

Q: Wasn't worried about making profit or loss?

A: If he made a little profit, would give it away. Or else he'd say, we'll see. Such a type of man. There was yet another incident.

01:05:00

Q: In Arundathi? U R Jeevaratnam...

A: No, Santhanalakshmi.

Q: Murali?

A: She's Agni's wife...tells Agni not to go...I don't remember the story. But Agni doesn't pay heed and when she insists, he has to kick her and leave.

Q: Were you Agni?

A: Yes, I was. I didn't know what to do. I had a good rapport with her and she used to call me 'elder brother'. She playfully chided that I lacked both aesthetic sense and acting sense that I could not even kick. Everyone was amused. Even Sundaram the director who never laughs, laughed out loud. The cameraman Subburao...

Q: W R Subburao

A: He too is a Kannadiga.

Q: Yes, I know.

A: Even he teased me in Kannada that I couldn't kick.

Q: (laughs)

A: But they told me to not worry but do it right. I had to do it a second time. Now she playfully warned me about kicking her and collapsed after the scene with a cry.

Q: Santhanalakshmi? You had to kick her in the chest? (laughs)

A: They told to fetch some water and after splashing it on the face, she came around after about 10 minutes and complained, "Brother, you did as told, but did you think of what would happen to me? What if I had lost my life?". I pleaded I was helpless. Thus, there were some awkward times and some fun times as well.

01:07:41

Q: Wasn't it U R Jeevarathnam?

A: Santhanalakshmi.

Q: Then she was Arundhathi? Where was Kundalakesi shot?

A: In Coimbatore.

Q: In Central or Premier Studio?

A: K V Vasantha was in it.

Q: Which studio was it taken in?

A: Central Studio.

Q: Who directed? Boman Irani?

A: Yes. That rascal came to direct the film and we became friends... (incoherent speech) God alone knows what angst I went through.

Q: Oh, Boman Irani? (Laughs) Vasantha Kokilam acted in Kundalakesi, didn't she? N C Vasantha Kokilam. Was she your sister in it?

A: Oh, was this the movie where Vasantha Kokilam was my sister?

Q: I think so.

A: But she wasn't the heroine.

Q: Heroine was K V Vasantha. The song 'Ennudane Pirandhai' - was it from this movie? Do you remember?

A: I just can't seem to remember anything. But Valmiki...

01:09:10

Q: Sri Murugan and Valmiki, both were by Jupiter Pictures. Both were started with Thyagaraja Bhagavathar, but as he went to jail, you came into the pictures.



ntai

A: The whole Ramayan was picturised in that.

Q: The song 'Bhagawan Avadhariththaar', do you remember?

A: A little bit...

Q: Please sing a little. Let's hear it in your own original voice.

A: The whole Ramayan was in songs. Some 11 to 14 ragas or so.

Q: Oh, for each canto a raga?

A: Sivan did a great job.

Q: Papanasam Sivan?

A: Yes of course. He would write the lyrics and also set them to tune. Then it will be sent for orchestration. Sri Vaikunthapathe... (sings)

Q: It features the song Bhagawan Avadharippaar, doesn't it? I remember.

A: That's a different song.

Q: Can you sing at least just that line?

A: Bhagawan Avadharippaar...(sings)

Q: I remember seeing that movie as a young boy.

A: (Continues to sing) Many years have passed, so have forgotten many things.

01:12:01

Q: In Valmiki, Rajakumari acted with you and T S Balaiah was the villain. I saw the movie as a boy. There were scenes of you jumping across things. Who did those action scenes?

A: Stuntman would perform, but in close-up, they'd shoot me. Not possible by me.

Q: Yes, I remember.

A: Satyanarayana or somebody was the stuntman.

Q: It was done well. Who was the cameraman? Marcus Batley?

A: Yes indeed.

Q: That's what I heard. He had done it well.

A: The movie Meera that had M S Subbulakshmi was directed by Dungan and Batley was the cameraman there too. That was the time movies like Ramrajyam had released and Sadhasivam wanted to have similar sets here and it was all arranged. Some 80 people landed there for the sets.

Q: Kanu Desai.

A: The cook got vexed making Chapati for these 80 odd workers.

Q: (laughs)

A: The sets too came up well. But strangely, when the movie released, the sets were not seen clearly at all. Everywhere it was the close-up of M S Subbulakshmi. There's some other reason for it. But we can't be discussing it.

(Conversation interrupted and resumes) 01:14:05

Q : Do you remember Sri Murugan, where you replaced Thyagaraja Bhagavathar? Originally it was to be He was an editor.directed by Chandrashekhar, but later by V S Narayanan?

A: V S Narayanan?

Q: He told me he had done it. He was an editor.

A: There was one Saami.

Q: A S A Saami. M G R acted as Sivan doing a dance, can you recall?

A: Why not? (laughs)

Q: Did you sing many songs in Sri Murugan?

A: Of course, I sang some 3,4 songs. But don't recall any now.

Q: Who was your heroine in that?

A: Some Mangalam...

Q: Yogamangalam.

A: Yes, she and her sister both used to dance. And Malathi...

Q: Malathi was Parvati. She was the main and she was Telugu.

A: Yes.

01:15:16

Q: What other movie did you do for Jupiter Pictures, Central Studios? Sri Murugan, Valmiki...

A: Maybe just those two.

Q: You did one called Gokuladasi directed by K Subramaniam with MV Rajamma. I suppose it didn't do well.

A: It didn't do well. Some boy played villain and the story wasn't great. And Devan Dasgupta...

Q: Devan Dasgupta, K Venkatraman.

A: He had good money and told Subramanyam to go ahead and make the movie, they were friends, but bad luck prevailed.

Q: Were you good friends with K Subramanyam?

A: He was a very good man. He'll invite me to eat at his home. Chowdayya was quite familiar in his household.

Q: Mysore T Chowdayya. Is he a good friend?

A: For some 4 concerts, he has played for me.

Q: He too shot a kannada movie Vani which didn't do well and he incurred some losses.

01:16:42

Q: What other movie did you do in Tamil? Valmiki...then there was one Bhakta Jana.

A: P Pullaiyah.

Q: What kind of a film was it, a devotional film?

A: Panduranga.

Q: Something like the glory of Panduranga?

A: You see this photo here?

Q: Were you the devotee in the film?

A: No, Krishna, Panduranga.

Q: Shantakumari, P Pullaiyah's wife had acted in that.

A: He had taken it well. But the film did just average business. His direction was good. But as she was his wife, he had engaged her.

01:17:27

Q: After Bhakta Jana what was the next movie you did in Tamil?

A: Sundaram's Subhadra.

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Q: Were you Arjuna in that?

A: Krishna. Serukalathur Sama was Balram.

Q: Who was Arjun?

A: Some random person.

Q: KLV Vasantha was Subhadra?

A: Yes. This random person they had got to play Arjuna, was not at all good looking. And for a scene where he should be dressed in disguise as a Sanyasi, he came dressed as some Prince with zari dhoti, coat and such! I was taken aback and said as much to Saama who was with me on the set as Balram. He told me not to say anything to the director as it won't be received well. I well knew why he warned me so. If I had expressed my opinion, he would've turned around and asked whether the films I made, did well? And that's exactly what happened. I had a scene with this actor playing Arjuna and he just could not deliver the dialogues. I could not take it any longer and somehow conveyed to Sundaram that the costume of the Sanyasi was not appropriate, that it looked as befits a king rather. And as expected, he retorted, "oh well, did the movies with right costumes run well? Just let it be!". Observing all this, Sama chuckled when I returned after the take with a "I told you so!".

Q: Sundaram was so curt?

A: Lot of hilarity around. C V Raman was there, he made a film Rama Anjaneya.

Q: Bhakta Hanuman, that was the film he made. Did you act in that movie?

A: No. He did ask me to, but I excused myself saying I had other commitments. I didn't want to engage with him, as it was difficult to get remuneration from him. He was himself the director and his wife the recording sound engineer. One day he invited me to watch some 4 reels that he had shot. I went over and watched. And I got to see Ram's mother Kausalya dressed in all royal glory with jewellery and Kumkum.

Q: As a widow, after the demise of King Dasarath?

A: He asked for my opinion and I expressed my misgivings about her make-up after her husband's death. He was quick to retort, "Damn! So what? Who cares? If we make her look bare, will it look nice?". "No, but in the story..." "Who cares about the story? Am I going to release the movie? Not my concern. My concern is that I complete a movie in a month or two. It's enough if I make a profit of a lakh of rupees. Whether he releases the movie or goes to ruin is not my lookout". What a fine temperament!

Q: That's why he underwent hardships, I've heard.

A: And how he'd direct people was hilarious. He'd call the assistant and instruct him to position the actors and then would say "See, the rascal Eswaran is coming, keep watching and there he has come. Come on, pay your respects, with devotion, yes, pay your respects, Cut!".

Q: (laughs)

A: He would say in a matter-of-fact way, "Look Bhagavathar, I've made some 10 films and I haven't made losses. Why should I trouble myself? I make the movie and someone else runs with it. So be it. Tell me honestly, will you call me to direct? Nobody does. What to do, I don't know any other job".

Q: He was a lawyer.

A: He'd say, "My wife too works with me".

Q: She was the recordist? A Narayanan's wife Meenatchi Narayanan was a recordist. Even Mrs Raman? What was her name?

A: Don't know the name. There was so much fun.

01:24:25

Q: Have you done any movie with him? You didn't act in Bhakta Hanuman, did you?

A: No. Who would work with such a man?

Q: What did you do after Gokuladasi, Bhakta Jana? You didn't act in Bhakta Hanuman.

A: There were some more.

Q: A T K directed and you acted in Devamanohari. AS Saroja, you, Bhanumati. I've seen that movie in my childhood. ATK is a good friend and I've worked with him. Tell me something about that movie. Wasn't it a folklore?

A: Yes. In that movie, there were some love scenes between Bhanumati and me. She turns into a parrot in the movie. A particular scene required me to hit her on her back and I naturally couldn't bring myself to hit her hard. Bhanumati teased me about it during the take and A T K did a retake after assuring me with a wink that she wouldn't mistake if I were to hit hard. This time I gave it my all and she was sportive and laughed that I could act after all. A T K said I being a Bhagavathar was mild by nature and needed some goading to get aggressive.

Q: (laughs). Bhanumati is a good friend. I'll tell her that I met you. B S Saroja too acted in Devamanohari as second heroine. That movie had two heroines. Do you remember her? Wasn't she a Malayali?

A: She was my neighbour.

Q: In Venkatnarayana Road?

A: Near Hindi Prachar Sabha. We were on either side.

Q: Oh, so you lived there. Later you did Gunasagari.

A: In two languages.

Q: And then Sathiya Sodhanai in Tamil and Gunasagari in Kannada.

A: Yes.

Q: Was it the own production of Gubbi Veeranna?

A: Meyyappa and his partnership.

Q: Those too were folklores? Before Gunasagari, you did a Kannada film by name Hema Reddi Mallamma under Gubbi Veeranna's production. Did Soundarraja Iyengar direct it?

A: Director as well as his partner.

Q: Oh, it was a joint venture! What kind of a story was this Hema Reddi Mallamma?

A : Mallamma is a devotee of Eashwar. Just as in Bhakta Meera, Meera is devoted to Krishna, here Mallamma is devoted to Eashwar. Her husband is no good.

Q: Veeranna was the husband.

A: And I was Eashwar. This too was just another devotional film like Bhakta Meera.

Q: Was Mallamma a real life character in Karnataka or was it all imaginary?

A: It was all real. In Uttar Karnataka it happened. Everything was quite the same. The picture did well.

01:28:28

Q: You also did a drama with Gubbi Veeranna.

A: I had told you...

Q: You said you were doing a concert, in 37 or 38.

A : In 38, I was already married. He was camping in Bangalore and was to leave for Mysore for Dussehra at the end of the camp. I was performing in a concert for a photo studio on Premier road at the Empire Studio. After hearing my concert, Veeranna wished me to join his troupe and act. I refused. But friends coaxed me to join him saying it'd help me learn acting as I had just started acting in a tamil film.

Q: This was after Ambikapathy.

A : That time was I was learning music from Arunachalappa. Even though friends encouraged me, I wished to get guidance from Arunachalappa as he was a learned man.

I told him how I was being pursued to join them. I also mentioned I wasn't interested to continue my lessons. He thought for a while and advised, "It's alright. Anyway, you've attempted a tamil movie. Times are changing and so you do try it out and see". I accepted the offer. He enquired about my concerts. I categorically made it clear that I won't give up concerts no matter what. He agreed to that and said I could do my concerts and act only when there wasn't any concert. A contract was done for two years but it didn't incorporate these conditions. He told me it was an understanding even if not spelt out in the document. I went to Mysore for the first drama.

01:31:14

Q: Which was your first drama?

A: The first one was Kurukshetra. The first day I acted as the Sutradhar and had to chant a shloka followed by a song. I was told to sing any song of my choice. So I chanted the shloka that was given and then sang Kanchadalayadakshi, with Chittaswaram and all. Until then the audience had not heard anything like that and went "Once More! Once More!". There was a buzz about me and Veeranna was delighted and encouraged me to sing. After about 4 days in another drama Sadaarama I did a few scenes as a rogue. As days passed by, I started to play main characters in his dramas. If it was Kurukshetra, I would be Arjuna or Krishna, and in others as hero. During this time I had done some 4 concerts as well in between. This caused him some heartburn and he started to cause some trouble.

Q: That you should not go away to do concerts?

A: Yes. He complained, "I assumed you'd be away for concerts once in a while. But if you get away every week, how am I to manage?" I told him concerts were important and I could not give it up and if it was a hassle, sorry. There were skirmishes and I stayed on

for 10 months. The troupe returned to Bangalore by which time lawyer notices were served on me. I decided to fight back measure for measure.

Q: You sent lawyer notices too?

A: I decided to let him do whatever he wanted and went ahead with Krishnakumar.

Q: The film, taken in Madras, by S D S Yogi.

A: In the meantime, he had taken the troupe to Davangere and publicised the drama with my name in it. There were skirmishes as audience didn't find me in the play and so the very second day he came looking for me. By then I was already in Madras. I sent a missive through a friend that if he agreed to cancel the agreement, I'd come and stay on for a week, not more; if he consented, then the friend should send me a telegram and only then I'd come. My friend conveyed the same to him and after he agreed they sent a telegram and I went to Davangere and acted there for 2 weeks.

Q: This Sadarame that you mentioned, wasn't it a popular drama?

A: There was this role of a thief.

Q: Pucca Kallan.

A: He was very famous for that.

Q: He himself played it?

A: He even produced a movie.

Q: Yes, in 1935. Murarachar, Aswaththama, Jayamma were all in it.

A: It was taken again.

Q: A second time? But I suppose the first one was the famous one, the one directed by Raja Chandrashekhar. Have you seen it?

A: No.

Q: Where is that story from?

A: It was just an imaginary story.

Q: Not folklore? In kannada, it was a very famous drama.

A: It was taken in Tamil too.

Q: Yes, but didn't do well. It had Gemini Ganesan, Bhanumati, K R Ramasamy.

A: There were comedians and such...

Q: To make the story likable by the audience.

A: Those days it worked to have such street dances.

Q: Pucca Kallan one...

A: But now it won't work.

01.36.27

Q: Was Gubbi Veeranna a good actor? Could he do comedy well?

A: He was involved in this from the age of 5.

Q: Like from the very beginning, as in Boys Companies.

A: He achieved a lot in the field of dramas. In Kurukshetra, he would bring elephants, horses...

Q: You mean on the stage itself! I see! Very interesting.

A: Maharaja gave away his elephant to him.

Q: Maharaja of Mysore!

A: Kurukshetra became very famous in Andhra, Tamil Nadu.

Q: Yes, indeed. I've heard he was very good comedian. Could he do all kinds of roles? What was his role in Kurukshetra?

A: Something like a servant...

Q: But he did fine I suppose.

A: And then, Dasavataram...

Q: Did you perform in that or not?

A: I had left by then. After quitting his troupe only I got booked for Hema Reddi Mallamma and Gunasagari.

01:38:06



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Q: After you were done with Tamil films, you came to Kannada films. What was your first Kannada movie?

A: First Kannada film was Subhadra.

Q: Who produced it?

A: Veeranna and another from Balaji Company.

Q: Partnership. Were you Krishna in that?

A: Arjuna. Only in Tamil I was...

Q: Krishna. Here you were Arjuna. Who played Subhadra? Was it Jayamma? Who played Krishna here?

A: One by name Girimaji. He was in dramas.

Q: Wasn't he a telugu brahmin?

A: No.

Q: Was he a Kannadiga?

A: And Raghavendra Rao who was Duryodhan. And(indistinct) was..

Q: Balram?

A: He played Bhojaraja in Kalidasa.

Q: Who directed Subhadra in Kannada?

A: Pullaiya.

Q: P Pullaiya. Where was it shot?

A: In Pune.

Q: In Prabhat?

A: No not in Prabhat. One Siraj had just started to build a studio. Shantaram who's now no more...his elder brother his entire family was in this line...

Q: Avadhoot?

A: I can't remember..under his management..

Q: Keshav Rao Dhaibar? Not him? Karnakar?

A: Some name... he and Pullaiya were good friends.

Q: So it was taken there?

A: It was felt things could get done there.

Q: Did Subhadra do well?

A: Kind of...did well. Those days it was tent cinema and ticket was two annas.

Q: Ticket for two annas? Did Bangalore have tent cinema?

A: In Bangalore theatres,(indistinct) it was one and a quarter rupee. Tents were in villages.

Q: Did Bangalore have many theatres?

A: Not so many as now then.

Q: Now there are four in each road!

A: Then Bhakta Kumbara.

01:40:41

Q: Was Bhakta Kumbara your own production?

A: Yes, my own.

Q: Under what banner?

A: I've forgotten.

Q: (laughs) And you were Gora Kumbhar? There was Chakradhari, Sudharshan...all were the same stories. Weren't they all stories of miracle? Weren't there two heroines playing two sisters whom he marries? One was Lakshmibai. Who was the other?

A: Pandaribai.

Q: Pandaribai must have been very young then. Wasn't Lakshmibai very famous in Kannada then?

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A : She was very famous in Harichandra. And then...I forget.... with Nagendra Rao...

Q : R Nagendra Rao. And Subbaiah Naidu in Bhookailasa.

A : Yes, Bhookailasa, Harichandra were all AVM Productions and fared well. And Vasantasena...

Q : Kalinga Rao acted in it.

A : Nagendra Rao...

Q : He is there in the movie. Nagendra Rao did the main role. And he played the Sanyasi's role. I've seen the movie. He also sings in it. Udaya vaara dhinam...Now, was Lakshmibai the wife of Subbaiah Naidu?

A : Subbaiah Naidu.... extra.

Q : And Kamala Bai and Nagendra?

A : They both....

Q : Were shared between them? (laughs)Were they both sisters?

A : One really doesn't know. There were different versions. Anyway, they were there from the silent era and later joined these people's own drama company.

01:42:52

Q : Who directed your Kannada film Bhakta Kumbhara?

A : As I had earlier mentioned, I engaged Boman Irani who had directed Kundalakesi. He was a good cameraman and in Bhakta Kumbhara I felt some trick shots would look good. He said he too would join as a partner by giving 10,000 rupees and that I need not pay him any remuneration. As I had mentioned I had become friends with him and so agreed. But ultimately it was all my money only. He ate up all my money and gave me lot of trouble. Even before half the film could be completed, he had taken a personal loan of more than 10,000 rupees from me. Didn't return a paisa even, moreover, wouldn't turn up for work. Gave me so much tension. I could not take it anymore and engaged Pullaiah. But I had taken his signature on pronotes for three lac rupees as he was a partner.

Q : Where did you shoot the film?

A : Pragjothi.

Q : Pragathi, Vijayanagaram Palace Admiralty House. Who was its music director? You yourself?

A : Yes, myself. For this as well as Kalidas.

01:44:49

Q : Mahakavi Kalidas, was it your own production?

A : Yes.

Q : Were you Kalidas? Who else acted in it?

A : Raghavendra Rao was Vikrama.



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Q: The king.

A: Comedian Narasimha Raju and some Kannada ones.

Q: Who was the heroine?

A: I told you, my neighbour Saroja.

Q: Yes, you had mentioned Saroja Devi. Was she a Bangalorean, Native of Bangalore?

A: She was just in the next road.

Q: In Chamarajpet?

A: Yes, I did cast her.

Q: I've heard from Vijaya Bhaskar that she used to sing in chorus. Was it her first picture?

A: Yes, I cast her, she is doing fine.

Q: She is photogenic and was successful in all language films. Who directed it?

A: I had engaged all new people for Kalidasa. Cameraman was a new one named Paramesh, a diploma holder. And Seetarama Shasry who used to score music.

Q: K R Seetharama Shastry. He did the music and Ramanathan his assistant?

A: He was director, Saroja Devi the heroine and the vamp was...

Q: Raja Sulochana.

A: The film was going fine. It was being shot in Nagi Reddy's Vauhini Studio. I'm very thankful to him for his help. The sets of Chandraharam were there. I requested if he could let me use the sets with a little more modifications as I was short of money. He summoned the set director and told him to do as I wanted. It would have been impossible for me to spend money for such a set. The set was wonderful, thanks to him. But what happened, even before two reels could be completed, Seetharama Shastry became proud and stopped keeping me informed. He was a good man but what to do? The cameraman was a diploma holder but jobless and he had asked to be engaged and he did a superb job. Now he's leading a retired life with family after working in Delhi.

Q: In Films Division.

A: And there is this person in Hindi...

Q: S Ramanathan. Shivaram's brother...Sharapanjara...

A: He knew nothing at all about this line, had lost all his money in running some paper and was in trouble. Seetharam Shastry brought him over here as his assistant as they both were friends. I was worried what was to become of me, with all newcomers. Seetharam Shastry assured he was a smart one and not to worry. But they both got together and kept me in the dark about the proceedings. Thankfully the cameraman was a loyal one who hinted to me that things were not going right and warned me to be careful. As luck would have it, he got a call for interview from Films Division in Calcutta some 10 days before the film's completion. Poor boy was at crossroads. He wanted to stay on as he felt the movie would get him a good name as it was shaping up well. But I advised him to attend the interview and see if he could ask for some time to join so that he could come back and finish the movie. "What if I am asked to join at

once?” he asked. “Then take it up. This film line is not a stable one. And such job opportunities are not to be missed. I’ll engage somebody and get the movie completed”, I told him. He was in tears and emotionally moved about my blessings. He’s doing fine now.

Q: Then whom did you engage in his place?

A: Some local studio person.

Q: Where did you shoot?

A: In Vauhini itself.

Q: So Nagi Reddy helped you out.

A: Hear me say what happened. We had announced the release dates to the theatres and the movie got censored too. But at that time only I found out the movie was not in sync at all and that it was some 19500 feet long! I got very agitated. It was 3 O’clock and I sent everyone away and sat under a tree sobbing. Getting to know about this Nagi Reddy sent for me and enquired what the matter was. I could only sob. But at his prodding, blurted out that there was no continuity or sync. Very calmly he told me to go home, rest, eat and return in the evening along with the director and others. I did as told. He chided the director for taking me an artiste, for a ride and not keeping me informed of the problems in advance. Then he called his editors...

Q: Jambu.

A: Yes, Jambu and Kalyan. He called them both and told them to play the entire movie. After watching, he said he’d return that night and told the editors to cut just two reels

and edit the way he guided. Since the dates had already been given to the theatres, he decided he would come every day and the editing should get done, one or two reels at a time. He also told the director in no uncertain terms, that he was to only mention the number and not say anything more. Like this he worked for 10 days, at the end of which, he had brought the film down to just 16000 feet! Cut short by 3000 feet and the links were great. Great editing!

Q: Yes, Jambu edits very well.

A: He asked how I felt now. I was overwhelmed and said he was indeed the reason I was still alive. Further, he went ahead and waived off the payment for the work done the second time. I shall remember his magnanimity all my life. But for him, I would have been finished long ago.

Q: You were in such a plight!

A: I still owed him some 20,000 rupees but he waived off that too. I remember that noble man's timely help till date.

01:54:39

Q: How was the film's run? Did it do well?

A: It ran well. Those days, Kannadigas themselves were not watching Kannada films.

Q: Why?

A: The reason being, all language films were playing. But this one got a good name.

Q: It got a national award too? For best regional language film?

A: Most probably, before January....

Q: They'll play it on TV National Network, you had told me.

A: Do watch it.

Q: I certainly will. I never miss Kannada films. And certainly, won't miss yours.

(Interview stops and resumes) 01:55:27

Q: Yesterday we stopped with Mahakavi Kalidasa. After that you did another kannada film called Pancharatna. Can you talk about it?

A: It was neither historical nor mythological. Who was the one who sang Tiruppugazh?

Q: T N Krishnaswamy Iyer?

A: No, a devotee of Muruga who sang the Tiruppugazh.

Q: Many have sung Tiruppugazh.

A: No, the one who wrote the lyrics of Tiruppugazh.

Q: I don't know.

A: A devotee of Muruga...

Q: Was it a Nayanmar or Azhwar?

A: Neither. He's a devotee who goes astray and seeks carnal pleasures.

Q: Thiruneelakandar?

A: No.

(Interview stops and resumes) 01:57:01

Q: We were talking about Pancharatna, your own production in Kannada. What was the story?

A: We tweaked the story of Arunagiri Naadhar in tamil to suit Kannada...

Q: You changed the story accordingly.

A: Somebody gave me the story.

Q: Do you remember the writer?

A: It was Balakrishna.

Q: An artiste.

A: The comedian actor.

Q: Balakrishna, a famous actor.

A: He told me to take a look at the story and wanted to complete it quickly. It's the story of a rich man and his father. The man goes astray and indulges in carnal pleasures.

Q: Oh, he goes after women.

A: The father too does the same.

Q: Oh, both father and son go the same way!

A: Basically, they both indulge in Shringara Rasa. But seeing the father too in the same place...

Q: Oh, they both go to the same woman?

A: Both stand exposed before each other and the son becomes a monk.

Q: Oh, the son and not the father (laughs).

A: The son becomes a monk and turns to spirituality singing hymns. This leads to misunderstanding between him and his wife. She feels he has gone crazy. Sarojadevi was the heroine in this movie.

Q: Was she the wife or the vamp?

A: The wife. Vamp was played by Lalitha Rao. She didn't act afterwards.

Q: Lalitha Rao, a kannada artiste?

A: Yes, from Mangalore. She was a newcomer. I engaged her as she was a dancer. But she didn't scale up after that. Anyway, he goes mad and both hero and heroine die in the end. Those days such movies were not liked. Now a days it's not so. A tragedy where both hero and heroine die, wasn't welcome. Vembu directed it.

Q: K Vembu.

A: It did average business.

Q: Where was it shot?

A: That too in Vauhini.

Q: Madras Vauhini Studios. Did you score the music yourself?

A: Yes. I didn't give the music direction of these three movies to anyone else.

Q: Because you are a singer yourself.

A: For Bhakta Kumbhara, Mahakavi Kalidasa and Pancharatna, I did it myself.

Q: Did you play this hero's role based on Arunagiri Naadhar?

A: Yes.

Q: You must have sung many songs then?

A: Some 5,6 songs.

Q: Why did you name it Pancharatna?

A: I didn't quite understand...nor did I like the story much.

Q: But still you did the movie. (laughs). Did Balakrishna act in it?

A: Both Balakrishna and Narasimha Raju acted.

Q: Both famous comedians of Karnataka cinema.

A: It had an average run. We didn't spend much.

Q: It was a black and white film.

A: Those days it was all black and white only.

Q: Colour had not arrived yet then.

02:01:17

Q: Later in 1959, you produced a tamil film Uzhavukkum Thozhilukkum Vandhanai Seivom . I read in the directory last night at the hotel room. Can you tell me about that movie?

A: There was a writer by name Ayyapillai from Tirunelveli. He impressed upon me that it was based on agriculture and would do well. That time Thirumugam was....

Q: M A Thirumugam , Thevar's younger brother.

A: Yes, of Thevar Films. He had earned a name in two films. He was quite friendly. While I was acting with Central Studios, he was an editing assistant to Sundar Rao. Had known him since then. I decided to do a tamil film after the anxiety of Pancharatna, but I didn't act in it.

Q: Oh, you didn't? Why?

A: I wanted someone young and good looking and brought in

Q: Prem Nazir the Malayalam actor.

A: Yes. I brought him first to Tamil cinema.

Q: So you gave him his break in tamil films.

A : And O A K Thevar as villain, E V Saroja as heroine, M N Rajam as the vamp, Kannamba as the mother andkeep forgetting the names....someone by name Rajagopal....

Q: Kuladeivam Rajagopal.

A: Yes, as comedian and yet another...

Q: A Karunanidhi, comedian.

A: Yes, and banking on Thirumugam, we started off making the movie. But he got busy with his brother Sandow Chinnappa Thevar's films and didn't give much co-operation here. Managed to complete some 4 reels or so. Impressed by the title of the film which was a verse from Bharathiyar's poem, many distributors showed interest. I was assured that the title alone would ensure a good run. Somehow the movie got finished. In 56-57, no tamil movie did well.

Q: There was a slump?

A: There were skirmishes everywhere. Three of us had produced tamil films then. Me, Pandaribai and Kemparaju...

Q: Kemparaj Urs who took Karkottai.

A: Yes. All three burnt our fingers. I had distributed the film to some districts and on account of it suffered losses.

Q: The movie was a flop?

A: I was crestfallen. Anyone whom I trusted, let me down. My nature, I must say, was not suited to this line of profession.

Q: How do you mean?

A: To be a producer, one needs to be a little cunning and business like.

Q: (laughs) Being straight forward doesn't help.

A: One needs to be street smart, while I was too plain and gullible, believing in God and taking things at face value. No use blaming anyone. I took it as God's will and had to move on. Was deeply affected and had to sell off my house.

Q: You had a house on Venkatnarayana Road in Madras.

A: Had I retained that house, that alone would suffice for me now. Had to settle the huge losses of 6 to 7 lacs.

Q: That was a huge sum then!

A: All films Tamil, Kannada put together suffered. Only Mahakavi Kalidasa had a good run. To this day people praise it. It picked up slowly and got me some money. I felt I was a misfit and decided to call it quits. In the meantime, the Kannada film Basaweswara happened.

Q: Did you produce it?

A: No. Sashikala Films produced it. The film got stalled for nearly a year due to some feud amongst the producers. Gubbi theatres, the distribution company gave trouble.

Q: Oh, Veeranna's!...he was into distribution?

A: He wished to be in it, but I was called to step in as Basaweswara and Rajkumar as Bijjala.

Q: Yours was the main role and Rajkumar was Bijjala Raja.

A: The movie ran well.

Q: Who was the heroine?

A: I forget the name. Balram...Balramayya the telugu artiste...his wife, even now she acts, is from Bellary. She used to act in Gubbi Films. Even her daughter is a star now.

Q: Adavani Lakshmi? Her daughter too is acting now.

A: Lakshmi as heroine. The movie had as good a run as Kalidasa.

Q: Was it in black and white?

A: Yes of course. It won an award too. But I had had enough, paid off my dues and turned my back on films. But this Veeranna coaxed me not to do so. He said since both I and Jayamma were still not so old, he'd do a drama just for the two of us. He stated I need not work for a remuneration, but can have some other terms of engagement. I flatly refused saying we should part cordially given our shared past incidents and if ever it was destined that I should start a drama company, I'd do it on my own. He parted

ways. But some others approached and wished to join hands and start a drama company. It was the Empire studio people. I told them I didn't have any money.

02:11:14

Q: Do you remember their names?

A: We all were like friends staying in a same house.

Q: Like family friends.

A: Muniappa, Gorappa were brothers. Muniappa had good experience from early on. He had worked with Gubbi Veeranna too. With their encouragement, Srinivasa Kalyanam came about. A vidwan by name Ramakrishna Shastry was asked to write the story. We got the sets and props ready. They wished to stage it first in Bangalore. I was of the opinion that it would be better to stage it in outstations first, get a good name and then stage it in Bangalore. Veeranna got wind of this and insisted that we stage it in his own theatre.

Q: Where was his theatre?

A: In Gandhinagar. Even now efforts are on to build a new one there in his name.

Q: Yes, I've heard.

A: So we began here itself. The drama got a good name. Right away they wished to camp at Davangere. Davangere was a town of Lingayats, Shaivaites. While this drama was about Srinivasa, a Vaishnavite. I tried to dissuade them, but it fell on deaf ears. A drama

contractor from Davangere had come to watch the drama. He was mighty impressed with my performance as a gypsy.

Q: Srinivasa dressed as a gypsy comes as a fortune teller.

A: I played the gypsy's role too.

Q: You played the role of the gypsy too?

A: He felt that scene alone would bring in good collection and wished to fix a contract at 30,000 rupees for 30 days. I wasn't convinced. We were already in talks with theatre folks in Mandya. But despite my misgivings, my friends got lured by the Davangere contractor's words and so we went to Davangere. Once there, my fears came true.

Q: The Vaishnavites were not accepted?

A: The drama collections were somewhat alright for a while. Then the skirmishes started. Within a month, my folks gave up and deserted me. I took some loans and managed to keep the artistes around. Then I too wound it up and started with a social play and had 2,3 camps.

02:15:36

Q: Which play was this?

A: Makkala Phala. Had a fair run.

Q: It was a social one?

A : Yes. Though Srinivasa Kalyanam was the main one. Then another social one Bheeshmachari.

Q: This one was a social one, not the Mahabharata one?

A : Yes. The character is a con man who comes in several disguises and I played that comic role myself. This too did average business. Like this I managed to run the show for about 4 years even after others deserted me, by taking loans. But my troubles were not over yet as other drama companies poached my company artistes with better remuneration. I did the last show in Shimoga and returned with a heavy heart. A drama actor by name Neelkanda Murthy offered to buy off the set properties and run the company himself. I sold them off to him. He also decided to stage the plays himself with the same actors and offered me one third share of the profits. He began in Nanjangud. Within a week, he began to show his true colours by concealing the actual figures. He'd show 400 rupees in place of 1000.

Q: He played down the collection amount.

A : I got disgusted and left. Around this time my elder brother fell ill and died. I was not paid even the accepted sum. All in all I was fed up and decided only the Goddess of Saptaswara could resurrect me and returned to music. I started a music school named Narada Sangeeta Vidyalaya and engaged a music teacher to teach music.

Q: In Bangalore?

A : At home. This teacher played truant. If he was present for one day, would absent himself for 8 days. I could not manage beyond 2 years and gave up. Then in 1970 some music stalwarts here approached me to set up an association for music. It has shaped up well and is doing fine even now. Within 8 months of starting, we had a conclave and

ever since, every year there's one. This January, it'd be the 21st year. Just carrying on with life and my friendship with these vidwans.

02:19:47

Q: You did a film recently for the Government for state department.

A: Sadananda. How it happened, I'll tell you. Kemparaj Urs' elder brother was...

Q: Devraj Urs, Chief Minister.

A: There was this Kanteerava Studio. Kemparaj Urs, with the help of his brother started a studio by name....

Q: Karnataka Film Development Corporation.

A: He bought some equipment like camera and such, set it up and sent for me. Saying we all had suffered losses as a fraternity and that he was the Managing Director there. He wanted us to do a movie together. When I said I had no money at all, he assured Government will plough in the money and all I need to do was to pay just 250 rupees as membership fee. I paid up the first membership fee.

Q: Of 250 rupees.

A: What he did, he had told three other people too to produce films just as he had told me. B S Ranga and two others. At a time 4 films were under production. Pujas were performed and production began. But there was no proper agreement, no transparency about officials. In about one and a half years, before the pictures could be finished, things went downhill. Everything had to be approved by him. Re recording

wasn't complete yet and still some shooting remained to be done, when Kemparaj passed away. Now a police officer came in as Managing Director.

Q: Was it Garudachar?

A: No, some Tamilian by name Raju or so. He knew nothing of this film line. When I required a car to go for re- recording, he said such a requirement wasn't in the agreement and told me to engage an auto rickshaw instead. After enduring such hardships, we somehow completed and handed over the films. The films weren't promoted for viewership properly and we too weren't interested anyway.

Q: The movie came on TV and I saw. What was the story of Sadananda?

A: The story of a widow in a family who gets married the second time.

Q: Widow re-marriage was the subject? Who wrote the story?

A: A woman kannada writer...

Q: M K Indra? A famous writer.

A: I've forgotten but you can mention it, see? We bought the story, somehow audience didn't like it. Hindu's are still not...

Q: Still not forward or approving of it.

A: The movie didn't run. People are just buying equipment with the Government's funds and swindling money.

02:24:09

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Q: Who acted in it? Did you act in it?

A: Yes, I did, as the father.

Q: Yes, I saw on TV.

A: My son Ramkumar was the son. Another one by name Manu.

Q: Manu, a very good actor.

A: He played the hero. My son was the heroine's younger brother. The movie did an average run.

Q: Who was the heroine?

A: Now she is no more. Sashikala.

Q: She had big eyes and used to play vamp's roles. She died in an accident by stove-burst, didn't she?

A: (indistinct mumbling)

Q: I dubbed for a movie from Kannada to tamil. She had played the vamp in it.

A: They sold of the rights to the movie to somebody. They are still carrying on.

Q: You didn't make money in that venture?

A: I was again disillusioned with it all. Finally consoled myself that my God- given talent in music alone will work and resolved to continue with it.

Q: You retired and are pursuing just music?

A: Yes. Spent my time doing pujas and singing whenever I felt like. My wife had a paralytic stroke and suffered for about two years and passed away. After her passing, even my health is not alright. My children are looking after me and I've just left it to God's will. I've lost interest in things. Many who suffer losses go mad or totally downhill. Thankfully, I haven't got affected so badly, because of a strong will. Singing the songs of Saint Thyagaraja, Muthusami Dikshitar, Shyama Shastry and Purandara Dasa has given me the balance to count my blessings and not complain. Many stalwarts before me had suffered more, some had lost all reputation and good will and got a bad name, at least I am spared of all such misfortunes. Since I meditated upon the Lord, I got into this line as an artiste.

Q: You became a star in both Tamil and Kannada.

A: It was Lord Ramachandra who showed me the way to come this far. Whatever He gave, He has taken back. That's all. I didn't earn a single penny the wrong way. It's great consolation to me that whatever I earned through the field of arts, I paid back to the same field. It's all God's grace. Otherwise how is it even possible to be born somewhere else and come into the Tamil industry, and do well? Is it easy to produce 4,5 films all by oneself? I know nothing, it's all His Grace. Pujiyakarmakarani, as they say. God has kept me with my self-respect intact.

02:28:39

Q: You recently received the Sangeet Natak Academy award. Isn't that a great achievement?

A: Yes, indeed.

||ntai||

Q: You've been a recipient of many awards.

A: I've received many awards from the state.

Q: Karnataka state awards?

A: In 79, I was given this...

Q: Talkie Jubilee?

A: In Delhi...

Q: At the film festival?

A: I don't seem to remember right... for my contribution to stage, I was given a pension of 1000 rupees for two years.

Q: Didn't you receive the Karnataka state government pension too?

A: Yes certainly. All due recognitions came my way, absolutely no complaints. Even today I enjoy the love and acknowledgement from the general public. I'm totally content with my life now.

Q: You are happy now.

A: Money comes, and goes back the way it came. Who gave the money? As Purandara Dasa sang Keraya Neeranu Kerega Challi Varave Padedava Rante Kaniro , I received from the arts and I sacrificed the same for the arts. God has given me a decent, comfortable life. I'm content now. You've chosen to come this far...

02:30:26

Q : It's our duty. I would like to ask you some general questions. You did Sri Murugan and Valmiki for Jupiter Pictures Central Studios. Do you remember Somasundaram and Mohideen of Jupiter Pictures? I'm writing a book on Jupiter Pictures.

A : What was that movie with Chinnappa and Kannamba where Madurai got burnt?

Q : Kannagi.

A : Yes. How famous they became after that movie!

Q : It was great hit.

A : They got ahead with a good name. Made good movies. Because Thyagaraja Bhagavathar went to jail, I got to do those two movies with them. They took over the Coimbatore Santosh Studios on lease and ran it well.

Q : Can you recall anything about Somasundaram? Were you friends with him?

A : He did well. I knew him only professionally, nothing beyond. They treated me with respect. Maintained the good name that Jupiter Pictures make decent movies. He's no more.

Q : You've done three movies with T R Rajakumari. Prabhavathi, Sati Sukanya and Valmiki. Can you share some thoughts?

A : A very decent lady. Was very professional. Would arrive on time always and treat people with respect. Very dignified. She always showed respect towards me.



ntai

Q: Was she reserved?

A: She won't talk much, but always spoke with polish. Very good girl.

Q: I've heard that she was reserved and not talk much.

A: See how she managed to build a theatre those days at a cheap cost. Helped her brother come up.

Q: Yes, Ramanna.

02.33.20

Q: What about K L V Vasantha? Not worth, you say? (laughs).

A: Let's not talk about her. She was a type. Don't ask and I won't tell.

Q: What about other heroines? Kumudini...

A: Sweet soul.

Q: She is in Hyderabad now with her son.

A: Oh?

Q: Yes, her son got transferred there. She has a house in Madras.

A: Very innocent.

Q: Yes, a nice lady. She is a friend. Bhakta Kaalaththi.

A : Then Vasantha Kokila. She had a good name and was a great singer. And then Bhanumathi. Very stylish and a great artiste.

Q: An excellent actress.

A: Very intelligent.

Q: Very sharp, that's how she is able to hold fort this long.

A: Another factor is that her husband Ramakrishna knows this industry.

Q: He is no more.

A: Really?

Q: He had heart trouble and was taken to America for treatment but he died there itself. They got the body here.

A: What's her son doing now?

Q: He is a doctor. He is a big cause of concern for her. Doesn't listen to her and they have quarrels on account of that. He's a big problem for her.

A: What happened to the studio?

Q: She's still running it. They've built a theatre by name Bharani inside that. They play English, Hindi, Tamil films there. Generates some income.

A: So much has changed. There wasn't much those days.

Q: Yes, the city has grown much since then.

A: What's that extension...Anna..

Q: Anna Nagar?

A: Pulla Reddy nagar?

Q: Kalaignar Karunanidhi Nagar, Ashok Nagar.

A: Oh it's named after Karunanidhi?

Q: Those are on the other side. This is in Saligramam. Karunanidhi Nagar is on the other side where it used to be all forest. It's all developed now.

A: And they've named a place after Anna.

Q: That's Anna Nagar- all forest land now developed. Can't recognise that Madras now.

A: I had a decent innings as long till the time I bade goodbye.

02:35:58

Q: Can you recall A S A Sami?

A: He was in Sri Murugan.

Q: He wrote the dialogue and worked as associate too. He had paralytic stroke and stays with his two sons alternatively. He is over 75. Though his health is not alright, he is happy. He is not in Madras, but lives in Coimbatore and Thiruppathur alternatively as I said.

A: Wasn't he from Ceylon?

Q: yes, he was originally from Ceylon, did Bhilhana.

A: was intelligent.

Q: Did Bhilhana, Velaikkari and many films.

A: He had a good rapport with Jupiter Somu. 02:36:46

Q: Do you know Ramnath well? K Ramnath the cameraman and director? He and Shekhar were with Gemini.

A: Just know of him. No acquaintance though.

Q: You were not social with people?

A: By nature I was reserved. I don't like loose talk. Once I put on make-up while shooting, if anything, I might be cordial in my speech. Or else I'll just retreat to a corner and go when they call for the shot. That was my nature. Otherwise people won't leave you alone. There are ways in which they approach. I have seen it all and don't like to be part of it. From my early days, I've been attuned to godly practices.

Q: You were in Bhakti Marg, somehow came into cinema.

A: What to do, it was all God's will. I didn't ever dream of doing all these. Things happened organically.

02:38:09

Q: You did fight scenes – sword fights and boxing in movies including Valmiki. Did you learn to fight?

A: Where did I learn all that! One Lakshminarayanan was my double and he did the fights.

Q: Just the close-up was yours. (laughs). Can you say something about Sundar Rao Nadkarni who directed Valmiki?

A: A very decent man who knew his job and did a good job in films. Very respectful man.

Q: Was he a Maharashtrian?

A: He was like me, quite naive. Not a Maharashtrian but Konkani, from Karwar.

Q: From North Kanara.

A: Spoke Kannada mostly. He did Tukaram in Kannada.

Q: Did you act in it?

A: No. Rajkumar did it. Poor man is no more.

Q: He also did Haridas.

A: He did a great job of Ramayan in Valmiki.

Q: Yes, where you sang Bhagawan Avadharippar. Who scored the music for that film?

A: One Subbayya.

Q: S M Subbaiyya?

A: Those days music direction was not all that prominent. Papanasam Sivan would both write the lyrics and set the tune and teach to sing. Only for the background score...

Q: The orchestra will come in.

A: The current day arrangements were not there then.

Q: So even this song with some 13 or 14 ragas as you had mentioned and all other songs -were they all done by Sivan? Only orchestration was taken care of by Subbayya?

A: Yes. Jupiter Pictures retained them on salary basis.

Q: Were you acquainted with G Ramanathan the music director?

A: Of course. He did two movies. Deva Manohari and another one.

Q: You can't recollect the other one? There's a lot of buzz around the term 'sex' now a days. How was it those days in films?

A: May be somewhat was there.

Q: Nothing in your movies perhaps.

A: Certainly nothing like how it is now. Isn't it all nudity now?

Q: What about love scenes?

A: In Kalidasa, in a particular scene, Rajasulochana's breast was a little exposed though she had a blouse on. The censor cut it out.

Q: Censor was so strict then.

A: Now it's not at all so. All that spoils children is there.

Q: (laughs). You say cinema spoils them. Do you watch films?

A: Sir! After going through the hardships that I went through, I just don't have any interest to watch any film. If I did, they only revive the unsavoury memories. Moreover, we did certain kinds of films in our times. It hurts to see the kind of films that are churned out in current times.

Q: What kind do you mean? Sex?

A: What else? And violence for no reason.

Q: During your time there was no such violence, right?

A: I may watch a little if it's good and if I have time.

Q: So you've stopped going to theatres and watch on TV.

02:43:26

Q: You've sung many songs in your movies where music was by Papanasam Sivan, G Ramanathan and by yourself too. In Modern Theatres, who was the music director?

A: Kalyanam.

Q: T A Kalyanam.

A: Yes, and Mahadevan was his assistant.

Q: K V Mahadevan. Now he (mama) is right at the top.

A: For the movie Uzhavukkum thozhilukkum too I had engaged him only as the music director. He was very respectful towards me.

Q: He has done for our movie too. I'll be meeting him and I'll relate this to him.

A: Do tell him that I enquired about him.

Q: I certainly will. He had scored music for my movie.

A: I was so impressed with his Sankarabharanam.

Q: It was outstanding. I'll surely pass on your enquiries.

A: He must be old by now?

Q: Yes, his health isn't alright, but he's still composing.

A: In Telugu too?

Q : He's the top music director in Telugu, even more than Tamil. Even before Sankarabharanam, he had given many hit songs, but that movie took him right to the peak. It won Central Government awards. He is a top music director of Telugu Cinema, K V Mahadevan.

A: There was another film by the same director who did Sankarabharanam...

Q: K Viswanath.

A: In which Kamala Hassan acted...

Q : Swati Muthyam? Where Kamala Hassan acts as an old man...You like to watch such films? He also did Srutilayalu. Viswanath did quite a few films based on music and dance- your favourite things and Sankarabharanam was the biggest hit.

02:45:24

Q : So, you don't watch movies and if at all only on TV? Do you watch Kannada films?

A : Don't watch any.

Q : In Bangalore there must be Kannada films on TV.

A : I watch only if I like, otherwise I walk away. As I said, my mind is not on these things.

Q : I'm very glad that you spent so much time with me.

A : Do you know how I feel now? I've seen all that there's to see in life, the ups and downs and have understood the ways of the world. On the family front too...

Q : How many children- five daughters and two sons? All married and settled?

A : What more do I want now? My wife too was good and pious like me. Now that she is gone, what have I got now? In my old age some ailments that I have to suffer, I just have to take them in my stride and spend time in meditating upon the name of the Lord.

Q : Thank you so much Sir. You have been very kind to spend these two, three days with me and very patient despite your discomfort. Not just personally but also on behalf of MRP K Nair of National Film Archives of India, I'm very thankful to you, for all your co-operation.

||ntai||

A : It's my pleasure. I'm not eloquent like some other artistes, nor am I like them in manner.

Q : But you have spoken well about your own experiences.

A : Right from my childhood till now, I am the same person. In my youth I used to sing hymns on Rama, even now I'm meditating upon Lord Ram's name. That meditation is all my wealth now. It's the Lord's grace that has given me this birth. A question may arise as to how I spend my time. I'm not a learned scholar. But I have composed 101 kritis in Kannada and a little bit in Sanskrit in a book titled Omkara Nadaswara. Kannada Sahitya Parishad has published it.

Q : Do people sing it?

A : Some do. It was released in 83. Now I've written about 100 to 110 keertanas in Telugu.

Q : You know to write in Telugu too?

A : Somehow God has gifted me. I've written a book in Kannada titled Sunaadajothi. And in Telugu, Kritiratnamalabharanam.

Q : You've kept yourself active composing songs.

A : The songs have notations with arohana and avarohana in a way that any student with some basic knowledge of music can learn those songs by oneself.

Q: You've been quite occupied.

A: I'll be sitting idle and suddenly a spark will come and till I finish acting on that, I will be sleepless. In this way the Lord has kept me in a meditative spell, what better blessing do I need?

Q: One can't ask for more.

A: I have the greatest blessings of Lord Ram.

Q: You have sung in Tamil and Kannada films. Which is your most favourite one?

A: No one thing as favourite. All are favourites.

Q: Which was the most popular one?

A: Bhagavan Avadharippaar, Vaikuntapathe

Q: Which movie was Sri Vaikuntapathe from?

A: From Ramayan...Valmiki

Q: Oh the ragamalika!

A: That was based on the story. In Mahakavi Kalidasa, the song Sringara Vahini became very popular.

Q: Can you sing the tune now?

A: In Kumbara, some 7,8 songs. All were hits.

Q: All composed by you.

A: Yes.

Q: Thank you Sir. I've troubled you a lot please excuse me for that. I wish that you continue to compose more kritis and thank you very much.

A: I'm very glad to spend time like this.

Q: I enjoyed it.

A: I don't know how much of it people would like, I've spoken all the matters.

Q: Research scholars will need this and it's like a dictionary. I'm indebted to you, thank you very much and all the best!

02:51:51

That was the interview with Mr.C Honnappa Bhagavathar, leading Tamil and Kannada film star and producer of yesteryears. These interviews took place at his residence 190, Third Main Road, Chamarajpet, Bangalore on November 11th and 12th 1990, being Sunday and Monday. Mr Honnappa Bhagavathar is now 75 and has recently undergone a serious operation which has confined him more or less to his house. He doesn't go out yet and sits in his bed, praying studying, occasionally singing and composing his Carnatic keertanas or song, as he has been doing all these years. He lost his wife a couple of years ago who had been a source of strength to him, right through his life and career. He has two sons and five daughters, all of them married and well settled in life. His son Ramkumar who looks after his father toyed with a career in films following his father's footsteps and acted in a few films like the famous G V Iyer's Hamsageethe and a few others and also in one or two Kannada mythological movies, as Narada and so on.

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He had to look after his father and also run a business in textiles and he thought discretion was the better part of the valour and gave up his budding film career for a prosperous career in business. This is Randor Guy concluding this interesting interview with MR C Honnappa Bhagavathar, a great singer actor who had been extremely active during the period 1940s and early 50s in Tamil cinema and also to a lesser extent in Kannada cinema too.