



# National Film Archive of India

Ministry of Information and Broadcasting  
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## Interview of Renowned Star from the early talkies era in Tamil Cinema S D Subbulakshmi By Randor Guy

00:00:00

Q: This is Randor Guy interviewing Mrs. S D Subbulakshmi at her residence in Mylapore, Madras. Mrs. Subbulakshmi is one of the pioneering film artistes in South Indian Cinema. She has been a very successful heroine of yester years and in private life she was the wife of Mr. K Subramanyam, one of the pioneering film makers of South India. This first interview takes place on Sunday April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1984. Mrs. Subbulakshmi speaks in Tamil.

00:00:49

Q: Greetings madam

A: Greetings

Q: I am grateful to you for giving us this time and opportunity to interview you. I first of all thank you on my behalf and on the behalf of the National Film Archives of India in Pune.

A: I am very happy to be part of this. I am ready to share with you the true incidents from my past. If you can tell me what to talk about, I can speak accordingly.



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Q: Which is your native place?

A: My native place is Srivaikuntam. In Tirunelveli district. It is situated near Thiruchendur. I was born there. When I was 4 years old, my father was acting in Dramas.

Q: Your father's name?

A: S S Doraisami Pillai.

Q: He was also an actor?

A: Yes. He was acting in plays. My grandmother was an expert in Harikathakalakshepam.

Q: Do you remember her name?

A: Muddulakshmi Amma. My mother used to dance till she got married. She was a popular dancer.

Q: Your mother's name?

A: Janaki Ammal. There was an environment of art in the whole family. I also grew an interest towards acting. I wanted to act in plays. But my family was not very encouraging. They were not convinced with me choosing dramas. They encouraged me to sing or choose dance or anything else other than dramas.

Q: Dramas were not respected much then

A: No, it had no respect. It was more like street plays and folk theatre. Not like today's times.

Q: They used to think low about it

A: Yes. They thought their daughter will be spoilt if she joins the theatre. They completely discouraged my desire. They said no to it. But I would still go watch

plays and come home to perform lines from it and sing songs I heard in the plays. When I was in class 8, they put me in a school in Tirunelveli, Manthiramurthy High school. My grandfather's desire was to give me good education. I had to leave my own house to take a rented house in Tirunelveli to do my studies. So my mother was living with me to take care of my education. When I was studying there, Kanniayya company was performing their plays.

Q: Kannaiyya company is very popular, isn't it?

A: Yes. Very popular. So she would take me to watch those plays.

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Q: Do you remember the play you saw back then?

A: Yes. Bhagavath geethai, Ramayanam.

Q: He also did Dasavatharam

A: Yes. Dasavatharam.

Q: Do you remember who were the actors?

A: S G Kittappa, C V V Panthulu..

Q: I see, the one who later became hero. He is still alive

A: Yes the same person. And many others.

Q: He came to cinema from theatre.

A: Yes. He is senior to me. My previous generation. In those days, the plays were excellent. Better than today's plays.

Q: In what way?

A: The settings in the plays were very attractive. But in those days, when Kittappa

started singing on stage, the crowd gathered like anything in large numbers. There were special trains called Kannaiyya trains for people who come to watch the plays from different places. If there was one door on display, it would be placed like a grand door like you would see in temples. Like how Garuda appeared in the play, how Mohini came flying sitting on Garuda. If you look around, the elderly women would start worshipping those characters, chanting prayers. They would perform a play for one year at a place.

Q: Daily shows

A: Yes.

Q: Female artistes used to act in those plays?

A: No. Only men used to act in those days. They didn't allow women. Kittappa also played female roles in the play. He would play Krishna and Mohini. C V V Panthulu was also there. Watching that play re-kindled my interest in theatre. I wanted to pursue theatre acting again. My family couldn't put up with my nagging. That's how they took me to the play. We went there and met Kannaiyya. He found me very energetic and smart. Though I was small then, I was bold and confident while speaking. I said "I want to act in plays." He also discouraged me "don't waste your time by coming into theatres"

Q: He said so?

A: Yes. I was sure about what I said. He told me "I used to have some women in my troupe but after some mishaps, I avoided that practice".

Q: I see, only men were part of his troupe

A: Yes. He said "I don't take women in the troupe. But I like you so much. I don't have a daughter. Be like my child, you can watch the plays every day". I said "I am from a well-to-do family. I have everything needed in life. I don't want to act to

earn money. I want to act for passion”. He said “forgive me. I can’t take female artistes in my troupe”.

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Q: He rejected it

A: Yes. I came back. I was dejected thinking about the rejection. While studying also, I was always pre-occupied by theatre. I used to sing also. I would be the background singer standing behind my grandmother while she is doing Harikathakalakshepam. I used to learn Bharatanatyam. I could do all that I liked. Only the drama dream remained unfulfilled. There was a drama company called ‘Thanthimukhananda Sabha’ run by Ponnuswamy Pillai. You know S R Janakiammal who acted in Bhakta cheta, in our film. They both are sisters. Janakiammal was Rajapart, the lead and S N Rajammal, her pair.

Q: In the play

A: Yes. They used to perform regularly. My father was acting as a comedian in that company. It was because my father joined theatre, my family discouraged me. They felt my father was spoilt after joining theatre. There was a theatre in Tirunelveli. Kovalan play was being performed there. In that S R Janakiammal was Kovalan.

Q: I see, in their company, women play men’s part too

A: Yes. She was a very famous artiste of that time. Nobody can do Rajapart as good as her. There was a character called Balakannagi in Kovalan plays. A scene where Kovalan is marrying at the age of 5. They gave that role to me. Just a small scene. In those days, one has to sing as they exit the stage. As I knew how to sing, they asked me to sing. I am an otherwise a confident singer. When I saw the crowd, I lost my confidence. I would sing one line and would forget the next. I somehow managed to finish it. There used to a balapart in the plays, small roles

like Kurathi, Narada. I started doing such roles and slowly became part of the theatre world. One day, Kittappa had come to watch a play. We were doing this in Sengkottai, his native place. He liked me so much in it and invited us to his house for a meal. He asked me “hey child, would you act with me?”. I was so young that I never knew what is right, what is wrong. Immediately I replied “why not? I will act”. He said “this one quality is enough for you to shine in your career. Whenever I asked someone to act with me, they would get scared and say no. Look at you, how confident! You see, you will reach great heights. One day, you may even play heroine in my film”. He blessed me thus. When I was about 12 years old, my parents moved to Madurai. The drama center used to be Madurai. Over there, I started doing small roles like before and slowly I started playing heroine roles. There would be around 30 plays in a month.

Q: Daily shows

A: Yes. People like Ananthanarayana Iyer, K S Chellappa, M Nataraja Pillai, Muthuvelu, Swaminatha Pillai, Damodaran all were there. All popular actors of that time. S P Subbayya Bhagavathar. I was acting with all of them. When I was doing the part, M K Thyagaraja Bhagavathar joined. He was doing his roles in the plays and they were not happy with the female artistes paired with him. Finally, they selected me. They asked me and I agreed. I accompanied them. The play was happening in Kollam.

Q: Was the play in Malayalam?

A: No, it was a Tamil drama conducted there. That’s when I acted with him for the first time.

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Q: Which play was this? Pavalakkodi?

A: No. Vallithirumanam. He was known for that play, very famous. I acted in it.

He was a great singer but can't deliver dialogues well.

Q: You mean dialogue delivery

A: Yes. His master would write dialogues for him. He would speak what was written. But if we improvise or say something else, he would not respond. So, he wrote a Virutham. 'Kallo irumbo... un manassu parayo' he would sing that. It ends in "un manassu parayo kuttichoro". After that line, the audience would start clapping. And pass comments like "that girl is doomed now. She can't speak a word now." I wanted to speak but bit my tongue there. It is anyhow not happening in Tamil Nadu, nobody would understand anything if I say a line in Tamil. Also, my father had warned me not to speak unnecessarily. After that, it was being performed at Virudhunagar. People would understand if I say something here. I was pretty popular there. They had advertised it as MKT-Subbulakshmi. The whole Madurai had come to watch the play. The same virutham. He sang the same way that ends as "kuttichoro". Again, the audience erupted in claps. I was standing there silent. Then I said "I'll tell one thing if you don't mind. You look like somebody from the same clan as mine. Despite being the king's daughter, I was talking to you all this while with empathy. You love me, I agree. But I should also feel the same for you, right? Without knowing that, you saying all these things are not nice. I don't feel anything for you despite you shouting so much. It makes sense for you to say, are you a stone. But in the end, you asked if I am a kuttichor (a short wall). What does that mean? Do you know what comes near a kuttichor?" The claps kept going on and on after I said that. He didn't know what to say. No one spoke to him like this before. If somebody speaks like this, he would remove the female artiste from it. He would replace it with somebody else. I didn't bother about that. I spoke what I felt. People started creating a ruckus. He didn't leave it there. He stupidly replied "I know. Only a donkey would come near a kuttichor". I replied "I am princess. If you are calling yourself a donkey, I don't mind calling myself kuttichor. Don't talk like this anymore". A newspaper known as Gandhi wrote a detailed article about what happened. How I responded and what followed afterwards. We then went to

Ceylon to do the same play. There they were waiting for this moment to occur thinking we would fight. We said we are artistes and not here to fight. After performing, we went back together, we sat together to eat, we all stay at one place. There would be competition within us but we don't grow bitterness. Having said that, we went to Jaffna to do the 'Kovalan' play. I was doing Madhavi, he did Kovalan. He said lines like "you are like a prostitute. You would go with anyone who calls you" something like that. I said "you are such a learned person. How can you say filthy lines like this? Don't you know what Kambar wrote for Ponni. He wrote annai means mother, woman is devi. And you wrote a line like what you spoke just now. You've shown your true self, that of a businessman. This grew into a fight between them and the Tamil Sangam there. They said "what she is saying is correct. How can one write lines like this? All of you come for a meeting tomorrow." People became agitated. I said "this is theatre. We behave like this with each other but would forget it the next moment. We would eat in the same leaf and live together. We don't have any caste-class difference. If you would drop this sensationalism here, I would continue or else, I am leaving". When we were doing plays like this, we were doing Pavalakkodi play in Karaikkudi. Me and Thyagaraja Bhagavathar were the actors. People were talking about our performances by then. So one day, when we were performing in Karaikkudi, Lena of Krishna Pictures, a chettiar and K Subramanyam had come to watch our play.

Q: They were not into films then?

A: No. Only K Subramanian had worked with Raja Sandow in silent pictures. They had planned a project and wanted to watch our play and cast us.

Q: Do you remember the year?

A: 1932.

Q: All three of them had come to Karaikkudi to watch the play?



A: Yes. They watched the play and expressed their willingness to cast both of us in their film.

Q: To make Pavalakkodi?

A: Yes. To make the same play into a film 'Pavalakkodi'. We agreed. But the payment wasn't that good in those days. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar got 2500 Rupees.

Q: For the whole film?

A: Yes. 2500. 2000 for me. Director 1500 rupees.

Q: That's all

A: Yes. But that was the highest of that time. People around me started asking me "you are getting 2000 from a film. If the film doesn't take off, you'll lose theatre as well. What would you do?". Some out of concern, some were jealous. It was not like how it is these days. We were asked to sign a contract that the film would be shot in Madras and we wouldn't go for any other play during the production of this film. For three months, we must be there and not sign up any other drama or even perform this particular drama. Even if another film offer comes, you must not go.

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Q: Do you remember the production house the three of them began?

A: They were doing it as AL Azhagappa Chettiar banner. There was no particular name. A team of 5,6 people got together and made it. A partner had invested some money, C V Raman the director was one partner, R Padmnabhan the director, one more partner.

Q: All of them were partners in it

A: Yes. The Sathya studios you see now. That was Meenakshi cinetone earlier. We

shot the film there. There were big halls on a floor and we all stayed there.

Q: You should live inside the studio?

A: Yes. There were no houses or inhabitants around. There were rooms for the director, the hero, heroine, other actors, crew. Everyone stayed inside the studio. There was a cook who made food for all of us. At 6 or 7 in the morning, we would have breakfast. They would ring a bell at 12 or 1. We would all go for lunch. Another bell at 8:30 for dinner.

Q: A disciplined life

A: Yes. The director would come to knock at each room at 6 am every morning.

Q: The director used to do all this? There was no production manager?

A: There were but nobody knows what to do. Even they were woken up by the director. After he woke us, we all got up, brushed our teeth and took bath. We would get ready. You know there was a mridangam artiste called Dorairaj. He used to play Tabla in our dramas. He was our make-up man too. He would do make up for everyone in a row in the morning.

Q: Not like these days. He was one makeup man for everyone.

A: Yes. He would puff the face with makeup from a tube. There was no lipstick, nothing. It would be a strong half an inch-thick makeup. Only then it would be exposed right for the camera. We would obey what he says. He would draw the eye brows with a pencil and leave us for shoot. Sharp at 7, we would have had our breakfast and coffee and be ready at the set for shoot. We would dress up and wait at the set. There were no lights. It was under the sun.

Q: No electric light back then. Shooting would happen in sunlight.

A: Yes. The set would be constructed in open air with no rooftop. The top would be open for the sun. They would use reflectors to bounce light and shoot us. There was no playback either. You need to act, sing, perform and also make sure you are

posing for the camera. Sound must be right, pitch should be perfect, the rhythm should be perfect. In a small bullock cart would be kept a tabla, a mridangam, a fiddle and a clarinet. Musicians would be sitting to play these instruments. They would put towels on their head under the scorching heat. They would keep moving as we sing and move. There used to be no separate close-up, mid-shot, long shot. It would be shot with multi camera setup and they would edit later. There was no boom. One person would be standing holding a bamboo pole with a mic tied to its end. When the clouds move, the sunlight becomes dim. We would all sit looking at the sky to see when it would clear up. When light shines again, we get ready to see it going again. It would be 12 or 1 by then. We would go to eat and as we touch the food, the sun would shine again. We would wash our hands and run back to shoot. Some days, we would go without eating. Sun was more important than the food. Actors who are needed for those scenes are used. We would pack up by 5 pm sharp. No work after that. We would all go take bath and there was a ford car kept for us. If we hop on to that, you can go to the beach. If you want to watch a movie, you can. But we should all get back by 8-8:30 for dinner again. There was no special food or treatment for directors and actors. We all should eat what everyone eats.

Q: All are equal

A: Everyone. Hero, heroine, labourers everyone. And we should all go to bed by 9. We have to get back by 5:30 in the morning. In this way, we did that film in a span of three months.

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Q: Sunday used to be a holiday?

A: No. Only if there was a rain or someone falls sick.

Q: Working every day



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A: Yes. There were no labs, processing or editing there. Everything would be shot and kept. No one knows what is there inside till processed.

Q: Not that you can preview rushes

A: No there was no scope for that. We should just obey the director nothing else. Whatever he asks us to do, sing, dance, perform..In Pavalakkodi we have 60 or 70 songs there. There were no playbacks. We had to sing on our own.

Q: 70 songs?

A: 60 or 70. Papanasam Sivan was our composer. He would write lyrics and compose music.

Q: Lyricist cum music director

A: Yes. He was introduced in Pavalakkodi by K Subramanyam.

Q: That was his first picture?

A: Yes Pavalakkodi

Q: Who was the cameraman for this film?

A: A person called Ellappan.

Q: The one who was in Gemini

A: Yes the same. And there was one more person.

Q: In Pavalakkodi, you were there, Thyagaraja Bhagavathar was there. Do you remember other artistes in it?

A: K K Parvathi...

Q: Which role did you play in it?

A: I played Alli. There was one S S Mani Bhagavathar

Q: Was this Vadakkancheri S S Mani Bhagavathar?

A: No not him. Another Mani Bhagavathar. He played Krishna. There was a famous comic in dramas called Jolly Kittu Iyer. Who else... right, I have to tell about this. Remember K L V Vasantha, she played the role of heroine's friend.

Q: Like a junior artiste

A: That was her first film. She was brought from Karaikkudi. When we all left to our respective places after the pack up, the director took the film to Bombay.

Q: He doesn't know what is inside

A: Yes. Everything from processing to editing happened in Bombay.

Q: There was no facility here back then?

A: No. we were all praying to God day and night. No one knows the fate of what is there in the film. Our career was at stake. If the film didn't work, we would lose our drama career as well. After two months, they finished editing and brought the film to Madurai. They did all the work in Bombay. The film was released in City Cinemas.

Q: Was City cinema in Madurai? Which year was this, 1934?

A: Yes. We all were taken to Meenakshi temple for offering prayers. We did a puja there with the film. The film was screened at 9 in the morning.

Q: A morning show.

A: Just for us

Q: I see, a preview show

A: Yes as we haven't seen it. No one knows what is there inside. Then we saw the film and it received high appreciation. It ran for 8 or 9 months there. The crowd

was such that there were incidents of stampede death.

Q: It was a hit film. So that was your first film Pavalakkodi in 1934. Do you remember who edited the film?

A: I don't know the name as it was done in Bombay.

Q: Do you know what would have been the budget of the film?

A: I think they would have finished it in 1.5 Lacs. Not even that much, I think a lac. What happened was that a partner in the film had indifferences and quit the film midway. In those days, there were no compound walls or barricades for shoots. We would construct set on a ground and shoot. This person who quit the film, would come when the shoot would happen and keep honking his car horn to disturb us. I forgot his name.

Q: I've heard of this incident

A: Yes it went on like that and police had to intervene to solve it.

Q: I see, it escalated to such a big problem

A: Yes. And a few others quit the film one by one. Padmanabhan distanced himself from the film. C V Raman quit. Only A L R Azhagappa Chettiyar remained.

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Q: You spoke about Pavalakkodi getting released in one theatre in Madurai where it ran well. These days, a film releases in 50 or 100 theatres simultaneously in different places. How was it back then?

A: Not like these days. There would be at the most 3 or 4 main centres. 3 or 4 prints would be made. It would be sent to those centers. Madras, Madurai, Trichy, Tirunelveli, Trivandrum were the main places.

Q: Only those many prints were made?

A: Yes. Not more than that. Only if somebody buys prints, it would be made for them. Recording interrupted

Q: So there would be distributors who would buy the film from the producers?

A: Yes. Distributors were there. Mostly it is directly with the theatre on a 60-40 basis.

Q: I see. Producers dealt directly with the theatres.

A: Yes. A certain percentage would be fixed for the first 4 to 5 weeks. As it progresses, the percentage would reduce. It would begin as 60. Then 50, so on..

Q: Like the first week, second week prices.

A: There was no theatre hire costs back then.

Q: I see. No rentals like these days

A: No rentals. It was all on percentage basis depending on the collection. The film also used to collect a lot. Because there weren't much films releasing. A film per year or something. So audience are forced to see only one. There is no other choice. Therefore, no films made in those days faced financial loss per say.

Q: I see. No flops you mean.

A: Yes. Some films would make more profit, some make less. There was no such thing as a loss.

Q: Very interesting.

A: It is important to note because nowadays 10 films are made. Only one or two films are successful. Rest fail. At the same point, 10 different places are getting 10 different films. You are confused to choose which one to watch. In those days a film would run for at least 3 months. Only after that, a new film would release. That's why they said before you finish one film, you must not commit to another

film.

Q: They had a contract like that

A: Yes. When it is so, they can't go to 10 different places and shoot for different films.

Q: Like how they do these days

A: Yes. When you think of it, there is less stress on actors, the makers would get profit, the audience can also watch them peacefully. All three factors work in the film's advantage. The probability of the film becoming a success is higher. The budget wouldn't be high too. When there are 7,8 simultaneous shoots, artistes charge more. Stars would be born. Financial loss is natural. If there are 1000 film goers and 10 films are releasing in 10 different places, the group is divided. That is the reason for the flops. In those days, not all films run very well. Some would be bad, some average, some good. But none of these would incur losses. There was a unity and understanding among people. There was a good relation between people. There was no high status for director or a hero. All were equals. Azhagappa Chettiyar also had some indifferences and went back to his native place. The film has to be shot. The director is stuck. He came to me and asked if I had some money. He said he would return it in a few days. I was in a better position than them. I had revenue from the theatre. I gave him 2000 rupees. They shot the film for 4 days with that money. By the time, he came back and the money was returned. We have done things like that.

Q: That much interest you had in films. The sincerity

A: Think of it, the director could have quit the film when the producer left. Actors also could have left if the film hit a roadblock. Everyone is passionate to see the film happening, to see it releasing and becoming a success.

Q: People had such involvement in the film.

A: Yes the producer would make good profit



Q: That was the first film

A: Yes

Q: What did you do after Pavalakkodi?

A: After that, Murugan talkies made a film called Naveena Sarangadhara. I was the heroine, Thyagaraja Bhagavathar was the hero.

Q: I see, you had become a popular pair after the first film

A: K Subramanyam was the director. There was a Sarangadhara before that called Original Sarangadhara. It was adapted to modern times. Hence it was named Naveena Sarangadhara. In the original Sarangadhara, the hero and heroine both died. This was altered a bit. The story was the same. That was shot in Calcutta.

Q: Was K Subramanian a writer too in the beginning?

A: He used to write story, dialogues etc.

Q: He used to write before becoming a director?

A: Not a writer. But he used to write stories for the films he made. There was no separate scriptwriter or a dialogue writer. He only had to do on his own. In Calcutta, there was an East India films company, called Khemka. We shot in their studio.

Q: The Meenakshi Cinetone was not used then?

A: No. that was the only film we made under that. After that, we went to Calcutta for Sarangadhara. We booked a big lodge there. We all were staying there. A cook was taken from here to prepare food for all of us. That also went for 3 months.

Q: So you stayed in Calcutta and finished the shooting?

A: Yes. We shot the film there.

Q: Who were the other artistes in that film?

A: Thyagaraja Bhagavathar, myself, Mani Bhagavathar, Nagapattinam Mani Iyer, G Pattu Iyer. Papanasam Sivan composed the songs.

Q: The same team continued.

A: Yes.

Q: Cameraman was from Calcutta?

A: Yes. Sailan Bose. Kamal Ghosh was his assistant then.

Q: He worked later in Gemini

A: Yes. We only brought him here. He was an assistant there, Bose was the main. Mr Sinha was the recordist. All were Bengalis.

00:35:5

Q: So you had brought Kamal Ghosh to Madras.

A: Yes. Both Kamal Ghosh and Sailan Bose. Dhiren..

Q: Dhiren Gupta, the one who owns the lab.

A: Yes. Same. We brought him too. We finished the film in three months.

Q: How many songs were there in Naveena Sarangadhara?

A: I think 15 to 20 songs. If Thyagaraja Bhagavathar was there in the film, you can't go without songs. I think not less than 20 or 25 songs would have been there. B S Parthasarathy Iyengar, the music director in our company was also there. There was a Sarangi player there who played well. He could play Pallavi swaras like how we sing in Carnatic concerts. All other accompaniments like Tabla was taken from there. Hari babu was the make-up man. We brought him also here.

Q: I see, he was also a Bengali?

A: Yes.

Q: Which means K Subramanyam has introduced a lot of people. For bringing Bengali technicians here.

A: Yes. I got 4500 as the salary. Bhagavathar got 5000. Subramanyam got 2500.

Q: Directors got less

A: Because directors didn't have that value. That film was over and then came Usha Kalyanam.

Q: Where was that shot?

A: In Calcutta. After Naveena Sarangadhara, it was Usha Kalyanam

Q: Do you remember the year, 1935, 36?

A: 1936. In that, M B Krishnappa, a famous drama artiste from Madurai was the hero.

Q: Usha Kalyanam is a story from Mahabharata, right?

A: Yes. He was the hero, I was the heroine. Also, Pattamma from Mayavaram.

Q: Bhagavathar wasn't there in it

A: No. Pattamma was the second heroine. Acted as my friend. Also C V V Panthulu played the father role. We finished that film too, in 3 months' time in Calcutta.

Q: Same technicians worked on that too?

A: Yes. Same

Q: Sailan Bose, Kamal ghosh, Hari Babu, Papanasam Sivan, same team. K

Subramanyam wrote screenplay and dialogues.

A: Yes.

Q: Who was the producer of Usha Kalyanam?

A: Same, Murugan Talkies. It was a hectic shoot, from morning to night. Outdoor during daytime.

Q: So the lights had come by that time.

A: Yes.

Q: You were no longer dependent only on the sun

A: No. even the microphones and all had come.

Q: Is that why you had to shoot in Calcutta?

A: Yes. We had nothing here in Madras then. We used to go there and shoot. One day, I had a lot to do. Night shooting, day shooting, everything made me sick. I had fever. 2,3 people were partners as producers.

Q: Do you remember the names?

A: Kuppuswamy

Q: The yarn merchants.

A: Yes. They had come to visit me. They stepped out and were talking. I could hear them say “couldn’t she fall ill after the shoot was over? The shooting has halted because of this”. Not that I should recover. His concern was that the film has halted. I felt so sad. That day I took a vow that I must make films for myself, enough of working for others. That would have been the first thought.

Q: The producers were not much different from these days.

A: I was sad that I got to hear it. They could have at least gone far and spoken.

Because I've given so much for the film. I countered them. They said it was a joke. I told them your film seems to be more important than human life. One of them apologized that he shouldn't have said like that. After that Usha Kalyanam shoot got over and we came back.

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Q: How well did the film run?

A: It wasn't a big hit. But ran well. No loss as I said earlier. When we came back from the shoot, the director also went back to his place, I came to mine.

Q: Where was he at that time?

A: Nagapattinam. His place was Papanasam. His wife was in Nagapattinam.

Q: Did he continue his practise in law while making films?

A: No.

Q: So what does he do in Nagapattinam?

A: Nothing. The shoot was over, he went back. His wife's family didn't like him working in films.

Q: You were in Madurai with dramas

A: Yes. We met and were discussing what to do. So we decided to make films on our own. We decided to make a film Naveena Sadaram.

Q: Like Naveena Sarangadhara

A: Yes. There was a singer named Kalladaikurichi Sankaralinga Bhagavathar. We cast him as the hero. There is this actor called Kunjithapatham Pillai, you see. We introduced him too.

Q: I see, the comedian.

A: Yes, him. And Jolly Kittu, myself..

Q: Naveena Sadaram is the old Sadaram?

A: Yes. The same. Modernised a bit.

Q: K Subramanyam wrote it?

A: Yes. Story, dialogues etc.

Q: Which production was this? You named something?

A: Yes. That is when we named it. Madras United Artists corporation was formed.

Q: I see MUAC, started by K Subramanyam, 1935. That was his first company?

A: Yes. Both of us partners.

Q: No one else in it?

A: No. We started it on our terrace.

Q: In Madurai?

A: No in Madras. We shifted to Madras when we decided to make films. We took a place and wrote from synopsis to each shot. He won't do anything without writing it down. He would give everyone one copy. To cameraman, recordist, editor..

Q: Like how they do in Hollywood

A: Yes. Same way. Everyone gets a copy. It would have every detail. Even order of shots. Even a child can make films by reading it. He would give everyone such detailed copies. 20,30 of them. After that rehearsals would begin.

Q: I see you would do rehearsals

A: Yes a month of rehearsals. This has to be made in Calcutta.

Q: I see you would rehearse here and shoot there

A: Yes. We were thinking what to do. He alone went to Calcutta. He met Eastman studios and spoke to them. 'me and SDS are making a film together. We don't have money on our own.' I had 5500 rupees and he had 4500. We had about 9000 or so as capital. That was MUAC's first capital. But we were determined to make the film. He explained the situation to Khemka. 'We would make the film and give you. You give the copies after that. Before that you must give us all facilities without any advance.' He was very fond of Subramanyam. All of them Sailan Bose, Nema Ghosh all were close to him. He agreed to Subramanyam's offer. We all went from here with the 9000 rupees in hand. We went there with all artistes, took a cook with us and settled at a place like before. Exactly 29<sup>th</sup> day from then, the film released.

Q: In 29 days, the film was finished?

A: Finished and released in Calcutta.

Q: You released a Tamil film in Calcutta?

A: Yes. We got up at 4 in the morning. From 6 am to 5 pm, outdoor shoot. From 6 pm to 4 am indoor shooting.

00:46:23

Q: Round the clock shooting

A: Yes, we shot about 4000 feet in a day.

Q: 4 cans of film

A: If we exposed that much, you imagine how we would have worked. We worked so hard like that for 25,26 days. We did the printing and 29<sup>th</sup> day it was released. There is a Tamil community there, Tamil Sangam. It was scheduled for it but the prints were not ready. One reel after other were arriving by car.

Q: The screening began and the reels arrived.

A: Yes one reel would run and the other would come behind. We finished it in 29 days. All our expense, of going to Calcutta, the money we borrowed from them, the printing everything put together, one lac rupees. We finished it and it ran very well.

Q: When you shot this in Calcutta, did you record in the studio or did they have playback facility?

A: We recorded on set. We did playback for a film called Mr. Ammanji. That we made in between. We did a film called Kousalya Parinayam.

Q: When did this happen? After Sadaram?

A: Yes immediately after Sadaram. We didn't take any expensive artiste in that film. Did with small actors. That wasn't that big a success. It was the story of Dasaratha marrying Kousalya.

Q: This was MUAC's next film

A: Yes. But it wasn't a big success.

Q: Who was Dasaravatha in it?

A: A person called Venkataraman who was a typist with us. He was the hero. We had two girls in our company Rajam and Kamalam. Rajam played Kousalya. Kamalam also played a role.

Q: You didn't act in it?

A: No I was just one of the producers.

Q: K Subramanyam directed it?

A: No. His uncle SCV Iyer. He was K Subramanyam's assistant



Q: He was his uncle and assistant?

A: Yes. His father's own brother.

Q: I see.

A: So that film was made but it wasn't a success. So he made a comedy in 6 reels called Mr. Ammanji. It was a like an English comedy. Slapstic

Q: Not a vulgar one.

A: Yes. A clean humour.

Q: Tastefully made

A: Yes. I acted in it. Karaikkudi Kamalam played my mother. Jolly Kittu Iyer was there. Muthuswami Iyer who worked with us in our company was there. G Pattu Iyer. We were 5 or 6 people in total.

Q: G Pattu Iyer worked with your company

A: He was Mr. Ammanji. I played his aunt's daughter.

Q: I see. This is like a family comedy

A: The character Ammanji that Pattu Iyer played is a village simpleton. From a Brahmin background. A staunch conservative character. The role I played, Vimala is an educated girl.

Q: Modern and educated.

A: Yes. The uncle had educated her. Ammanji is sent to our family to talk marriage alliance. To marry me. He brings with him basket full of vegetables, sweets and savories. The compartment he travels in is also transporting a basket of fish. When he alights, he takes the basket of fish instead of his. My mother sends me to pick him up from the station in a car. I hesitate as he is a small-town guy. I am

forced to do so. There was a Maurice car. I drive it and go to pick him up. After loading everything, there is no place for him to sit. She gets angry as she is a modern girl. He has brought with him broom, cane baskets and what not. He asks her where can he sit. She asks him to sit on the top of the car. He tells her it would be sunny. She tells him to hold the umbrella. He sits on the top. As the car moves, he falls off. One by one the things in the car keep falling off and he keeps running behind the car picking them all up. She keeps driving laughing. He finally manages to stop her car.

Q: What happened to the basket of fish?

A: That would come. She tells him the car is not starting. He pushes the car till home. There would be light jokes that compares the car and a bullock cart. He finally reaches their place and greets them in the customary ways and starts giving them what he has brought. That is when the fish comes out. There is a joke around it and he is taken to the room and asked to freshen up. When the girl brings coffee, she notices he has put his langot to dry on the fan. He asks her if he can listen to his mother quarrelling with the milk man in the radio. There are jokes around his practise of not sipping from the glass. So a film with such jokes were made.

Q: This was released with Usha Kalyanam?

A: No that was different. After Sadaram, we made Kousalya Parinayam. This film was made and added to that.

00:54:42

Q: Like a double feature.

A: Yes. The film ran because of this. Mr. Ammanji was the crowd puller. Also, Mr. Ammanji was the film for which we did the playback system for the first time. My song was prerecorded and played back for shoot.

Q: That is the first playback. Which year was this? 1937?

A: Yes.

Q: And shot in Calcutta?

A: Yes.

Q: And music by Papanasam Sivan?

A: Yes. Parthasarathy and a couple of others assisted him.

Q: We call background music as a re-recording music. Did the films of those times have re recording?

A: Yes. But not when these films were made. Not when films like Pavalakkodi were being made. But the films we made in Calcutta had the re recording. They had the infrastructure for it. So we could do it. The plates, playback systems all were there as Hindi films were being made.

Q: Mr. Ammanji is 1937. It received good reception?

A: Yes. Very good reception.

Q: You released both these films together?

A: Yes. It was a 6-reel film. After finishing that film, we came back to Madras. We didn't go back to Calcutta after that.

Q: Why? Because Madras got facilities by then?

A: After we came back, we started the Motion Picture Combines.

Q: Where the Gemini stands now

A: Yes. That was our company.

Q: What was there before you built it?

A: There was a bungalow and a garden.

Q: Who's bungalow was it? Englishmen?

A: No, it belonged to some Seth (Seth in Tamil slang means North Indian).

Q: I see, it is a private house

A: Yes. We bought that and to raise the shares for the company, in order to make it limited company, me and him went to different places. Like Salem, Coimbatore. To meet producers and distributors. We took 5000, 10000 from each like shares. We brought all that back and started the motion picture combines as a limited company.

Q: Do you remember the people who associated with you?

A: We began like that. After that those ties were snapped later. Like Maruthapillai from Salem. But no one significantly famous in it. We then brought Sailan Bose, Kamal Ghosh, Nema Ghosh, Hari Babu, Ali who plays sarangi, Gopal Maharshi a manager, Sinha, the recordist, Diren Babu, Sudhir Babu, all of them from Calcutta. We then started making films with all of them under Motion picture combines.

Q: Was it you who named Motion picture studio as movieland?

A: Yes, only after Vasan bought it, he renamed it Gemini.

Q: When did you start Motion picture combines, do you remember? 37,38?

A: 1939 I think.

Recording

interrupted

00:59:25



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Q: In your films, you said there were many songs, 20, 30, 40. Do you remember any of the songs that you sang which became a hit?

A: In the film Naveena Sarangadhara, the film me and Thyagaraja Bhagavathar acted. There is a song in it. Holding a dove in hand. That song was sung by a 5 year old child to a 80 year old old woman. That popular it was.

Q: Was it your solo or duet?

A: It was my solo. The dove has flown to her from Sarangadhara. She is in love with him and imagines the dove as her lover and sings the song as if it is a message to him.

Q: This song was very popular.

A: Yes. I can't sing like those days. I am growing old.

Q: Did you release the records for this?

A: Yes they did. Not much 4 or 5 songs came out I think.

Q: Not all songs in a film comes out as records?

A: No.

Q: This particular song was very popular

A: Yes. Very popular. Papanasam sivan composed the song. I didn't know then that it has become popular. I was focused at work, I used to not go around and ask or try to find how it is being received. I was called at Suchindram. There the film ran for 7 or 8 months. In a touring theatre in Suchindram. To give an appearance at the beginning of the film and at the interval of the film. We didn't get down at Suchindram as they advised that we can't get down because of the crowd that has come to see.

Q: I see you had so many fans back then

A: Yes. Then Kunchithapatham Pillai had come with me. It was so crowded. I wasn't being able to take bath or eat. Now I feel amused thinking about it. But I was uncomfortable back then thinking why people are disturbing me so much. They took me in a car from there. On our way, an 80 year old woman holding a stick in her hand stopped our car. She was not letting the car pass. I was confused. She said the driver 'call that girl who is inside'. She first kissed me and praised this song a lot. That 80 year old woman sang the whole song for me. She said "I felt like seeing you once. I know I can't see you in the crowd that has gathered. That's why I stopped you like this. You may go now". That is when I knew it was popular. After that a 6 year old child told me she knows my song. When I asked her which one, she sang this song for me. She was sweet to show how I acted and sang. With actions. I was taken to the temple and was asked to sing the song. I am talking about 1935,36. I was given a royal reception then. We also did Bhakta Kuchela.

Q: When was Bhakta Kuchela made?

A: That was in 1937.

Q: In Madras?

A: No In Calcutta. It was after Mr. Ammanji. I had a double role in the film. I was the first double role female in Tamil cinema.

Q: I see that was the first for any actor, male or female

A: Yes. I hold the record for it. I was 18 years then. I played Krishna in it. And Kuchela's wife, the mother of 27 children. One is a handsome male. One is an old lady character, Brahmin lady.

Q: Mrs. Kuchelan

A: Yes. Mother of 27 children living in poverty. In the titles, they didn't mention who played who. It was a very successful film.

Q: Under which banner was Bhakta Kuchela produced, NVS or Murugan Talkies?

A: NVS. Under our own banner

Q: He wrote and directed the film

A: Yes.

Q: Who played Kuchelan in the film?

A: We introduced Papanasam Sivan as an actor for the first time

Q: He looks like Kuchelan indeed

A: Yes he looked the part and we all felt it would be good if he plays it. It was the hero character. An actress was asked to do his wife's character. She refused to do it. To play somebody who is the mother of 27 children. He asked me if I can play it. I don't have such complex. I never say no to any roles. He is comfortable with me in that ways. There was one scene where he is welcomed. Kuchelan has come to meet Krishna and the guards are not letting him in. They beat him down. Krishna realises his friend has come outside the palace and the guards are not letting him in. He asks everyone to arrange for his welcome. With rich grand reception, Krishna warmly greets his friend in. He introduces Kuchelan to his wife Bama and asks him if he is married. Kuchelan tells Krishna that he is married and feels delicate to say that he has 27 children. Krishna makes fun of him that he underestimated his potential. He later takes Kuchelan and makes him seated at one place. That day the entire Tamil diaspora in Calcutta had come to see the shoot. We had prepared pots full of milk, curd, panchamritham etc. I did abhishekam with my own hands. That is, Krishna does it for Kuchelan. He then drapes a Peethamabaram on Kuchelan. Kuchelan becomes clueless. He then serves Kuchelan a grand feast with about 50 types of food. Looking at both the wives standing next to him, he asks them to eat as well. Kuchelan is lost in amazement. He mixes all sweet,sour,spicy food and eats together. The wives

make a remark that no individual tastes matter for Kuchelan. His devotion is only Krishna. That scene was done so beautifully. The entire Tamil community had brought their pots, drums, utensils and other items and they were all used to make the scene grand. Even today, no one can pull off such a scene. Today there is facility for one to do it. We did that in that time when there were hardly any resources. I consider it a big achievement.

Q: Sailen Bose shot the film?

A: Yes Sailen Bose shot it. Sinha did the sound, Dhiren editor and Hari Babu, make up. 01:10:15

Q: You said you played Krishna. Who played his wives Rukmini and Sathyabama?

A: Rukmini was played by Parvathy who acted with me in Pavalakkodi. We didn't find any actor to play Sathyabama. We tried to get somebody locally also. Nothing worked out. So finally we cast Mani, an assistant to Papanasam Sivan. We made him a woman in the film. We gave a woman's voice also for that scene.

Q: So you had dubbing technology then?

A: Just for one scene. Rest of the scenes he did it himself changing his voice. Another interesting thing is, Papanasam Sivan's daughter acted as the child version of Kuchelan. She also looks like Kuchelan only. She is a splitting image of Papanasam Sivan. She played Kuchelan and Balasaraswati played the child version of Krishna. We introduced her. She was 8 years old then. She also resembles me in a way. So we cast her in that role.

Q: So you were the first woman to play a male role?

A: Yes. First woman. After me, many actress did that. Raja Kumari, Santhana Lakshmi.

Q: Yes even M S Subbulakshmi did



A: Yes. Many did.

Q: This Nandanar with K B Sundarambal

A: That happened much later. I was the first one to do it. Even the first double role. After we finished it, me and K Subramanyam went to Kalki's house.

Q: Kalki Krishnamurthy, the writer.

A: Yes.

Q: He was in Ananda Vikatan then, as an editor

A: Yes. We went to his place and said we have made a film Bhakta Kuchela with SDS as Krishna and Susheela. You come and give your blessings. If you like the film, tell us that. If you don't like it also, tell us that. He said 'I won't watch the film since a woman has played Krishna'. K Subramanyam said 'You come and watch it once. If you don't like it, you may say so. When you walk along a road, you may see good things and bad things. How we ignore bad things, ignore it if it doesn't please you. When you come, bring your 8 year old daughter'. He persuaded so much and told him he would print his opinion whatever it is. 'If you don't like it, I'll print that Kalki didn't like the film'. Finally he agreed. He came with his wife and daughter Anandi. We did a show in Gaiety theatre. That was a big theatre in the city.

Q: Did he watch it with general public?

A: No. it was a special show for him. I sat behind them. I could see him talking to his daughter pointing at Susheela's character. 'Look how the poor lady is suffering with 27 children'. She replied 'yes father. I feel sorry for her, poor lady'. He then pointed at Krishna and asked her. She said 'This Krishna is so lovable. I feel like praying to him'. He then told her 'you know, the same actor who is playing Krishna played Susheela..' She reacted saying 'stop it father. You know nothing. See how poor the lady is and see how charming Krishna is. I won't agree it is the same person'. He tried convincing her a lot. She never agreed. She told him he is wrong and the two actors are different. He gifted me a chain the very next day and

said 'children are innocent and their minds are not corrupted. Their words are even taken seriously in court as they speak the truth.' He wrote 'Subbulakshmi has played the best Krishna till now. She is born to play Krishna'. Saying so he had given a 3 star review.

01:16:26

Q: I see in his column 'aadalum paadalum'.

A: Yes. He wrote a 3 side review. It meant a lot to us. We were happy that he changed his opinion. He wrote 'one can watch this film over and again to just see krishna's smiles.'

Q: How was the audience reaction?

A: They all loved it. They enjoyed it a lot. Bhakta Kuchela ran in so many places for over 100 days. Some 3 months, 4 months, 5 months.

Q: A big hit

A: Yes.

Q: It was all black and white. Not hand tinted in color

A: No it was all black and white. The film didn't need that. Already it had that stuff in it. That was the film that raised my star value.

Q: You said you played a double role in the film. Was there any portion where Krishna and Kuchela's wife would come together in the film?

A: In a couple of places.

Q: How was that shot?

A: Using mask.

Q: I see the masking technology had come by then in Calcutta.



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A: Yes. On one side Krishna and other side Susheela. They would take one at a time.

Q: Sailen Bose shot it well?

A: Yes. He is a very talented cameraman. Had shot it beautifully.

Q: All this would have been so surprising for audience I am sure

A: Yes. Their response was great. We thus finished Bhakta Kuchela.

Q: You spoke about your journey of starting Motion Pictures Combine in Madras. It was situated where the Gemini studios now stands. What was the first film to be made under that banner?

A: In that studio, we made Bhakta Prahalada.

Q: Again a Puranic story

A: Yes. With Lakshmi. She is C P Ramaswamy's secretary Chidambara Iyer's granddaughter. Thangamani acted as Leelavathi in it. Thangamani of Gopinath-Thangamani. Prahalada was played by Kumari Lakshmi. Thangamani played the mother.

Q: Who played Hiranyakasipu in the film? You didn't act in it?

A: No I didn't.

Q: Who played Vishnu?

A: Some small actor. Not popular actors.

Q: Papanasam Sivan did the music?

A: We had set up our own company orchestra. With 20 people. Music was by Papanasam Sivan. Our films always had him. Music director was Parthasarathy Iyengar. Our company orchestra used to do 3 hour long music concerts. The sarangi player we brought from Calcutta played Sarangi. One Perumal used to play clarinet.

Q: So Papanasam Sivan wrote the songs. Composing was Parthasarathy Iyengar.

A: Papanasam Sivan would give the tunes too. The whole orchestration is done by Parthasarathy Iyengar. Doing the arrangement and backing instrumentation.

Q: How was Prahalada received?

A: It ran well. We made that in 3 languages. Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam.

Q: Which year was this?

A: 1939 - 40

Q: I see this is before the war?

A: Yes. We made it in Telugu also. You see Rajkumar, the Kannada actor. His sister acted as Prahlada.

Q: What is her name?

A: I don't remember her name. I think she is no more. She acted in it. And one actor called Narasimha Rao.

Q: Did you use the same actors or cast Malayalam actors as well?

A: We cast Malayalam actors also.

Q: Who all acted in Malayalam?

A: Thangamani. Even Gopinath acted I think. Some role, I think Hiranyakasipu. After Bhakta Kuchela, we did one Kannada Bhakta Kuchela.

01:22:14

Q: K Subramanyam spared no language I see

A: In Kannada too, I acted as Krishna. I didn't act as Susheela in it. Another actress

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did. An actor named Narasimha Rao played Kuchela. I spoke Kannada myself in it. Also sang songs. I didn't know the language. So I wrote them in Tamil and acted.

Q: Was Papanasam Sivan the music director for Kannada as well?

A: No. We did it with our own orchestra.

Q: Do you remember the year?

A: 1940 or 41 I think. After that, Thyagabhoomi.

Q: Which year did you make Thyagabhoomi. Did it come as Kalki's story first?

A: No it didn't come as a story first. When Kalki wrote the story, he and K Subramanyam discussed. He told Kalki that "we can't make a novel into the film as it is. We would have to make 15 films to do that." He said he can adapt it into a script. Kalki wanted me to play the role. Papanasam Sivan also acted in that film. He played my father in it. And K V Mahadevan. Also Baby Saroja. Kamalam, our company artiste played a role. That of my aunt. Also, Krishnaro Bhonsle's wife acted as my mother-in-law. An office boy in our company played a role.

Q: In Ananda Vikatan, a series had also come out with stills. Did that come later or before?

A: He would publish the portions that was shot that week, simultaneously. It was such a craze in the households back then. They would wait for the Thursday to read that week's issue. A family would sometimes buy 5 copies of the magazine as everyone wants to read it first.

01:25:11

Q: Ananda Vikatan got a big boost with it

A: Yes. Thyagabhoomi gave it a big boost. Every week, it would come along with the dialogues spoken in the shoot. Along with the photos. Till the film was completed,

the magazine ran this long series.

Q: Was this K V Mahadevan's first film?

A: Yes. That's when he went to America or London to study and came back.

Q: Yes. He was my father's classmate. Has told me stories.

A: Jayaram Iyer is his close associate. So he was cast in it as his story is similar to that of the character.

Q: The film's story is written by Kalki and not K Subramanyam

A: No the story was Kalki's. Subramanyam wrote the dialogues for it. He himself said he can't write cinematic dialogues. But he would come everyday to the shooting spot. I have done so many films but I haven't struggled as much as I did for Thyagabhoomi. It was very challenging.

Q: What was in it that you say so?

A: There was a rain scene in it. There was one person named Rao in our company. He had bought an aeroplane to use its spare parts. He was a mechanic. It was kept in our studio as we had a lot of place there. That was operated and the dry leaves and water were all thrown over its blades. It would fall on us like a storm. The propeller acted like a wind machine and the scene is that I am walking back home drenched in rain. So the Harijans are on one side of the road struggling with the rain. The scene is that they were being brought into a temple to protect them.

Q: He made such statements long back

A: Yes. So the scene is that they are being given food. The scene was shot and we all went home. I don't know what was in the propeller. Either it could be the paint or some insect. I developed rashes all over the body, an allergy. My face got deformed. It was that severe. The whole body became swollen. You can't make out where the eyes and nose are. It was very bad. Kalki was petrified looking at

me. Doctor Shankaran had come and gave me an injection. Everyone thought I would die. For a week, I was given Penicillin injection. 10 or 15 times. Only after that I recovered. The shooting was stalled for a week. Another was a delivery scene at the hospital.

Audio interrupted

Q: Last time you spoke about Thyagabhoomi. We were talking about the delivery scene at the hospital. I think we can continue from where we left. We are all curious to know about the incidents that happened in Thyagabhoomi as it was a landmark film in Tamil cinema history. A very important and controversial film. Today, one can't produce such a film even if one wants to. So whatever you feel like saying about the film, you may.

A: In that scene, I had to go to different places in Madras holding the baby. We shot at many places in Madras like Mannadi, Thiruvallikeni, Mylapore, Adyar, Parrys Corner

Q: So you shot in real locations.

A: Yes. A van with a camera in it would go in the front. If it goes in 20 miles per hour speed, I have to go along with it in that speed.

01:30:01

Q: When you shoot in real locations, crowd would gather to see the shooting. One would need police and crowd control to shoot the scene. How was it done in those days?

A: The police would be informed and a couple of them would come with us like escorts as it is tough to manage crowd that gathers to watch shooting. We shot like that in many places as I would go around holding the baby in hand. As I would go to each house to ask for work, they would shoo me away as I have a baby in my

hand. Finally, she goes to the father of the child and without him knowing, she leaves the baby there and goes away so that she can work.

Q: Who played the father's role?

A: Papanasam Sivan. She has come to Madras to be with him. When she has come, she gives birth to the child and none of the houses take her for work as she has the baby. She finally finds him doing rituals near a pond.

Q: Why did he come to Madras?

A: Because he was having a bad reputation in the village as he helped harijans enter a temple. They had made him an outcaste. His only aunt also dies leaving him alone. Somebody advises him that if he goes to Madras, he can find work by teaching music to children. So he comes to Madras. He is a child-like man with an innocent heart. He doesn't know anyone in the city and behaves the same way how he was in the village. One day he comes across a person who used to work under him in the village. He offers him to come with him if he doesn't mind. He is given a small hut to stay where he would teach music. He has been living a life like that. On one such day, she finds him but doesn't go in front of him thinking it would only add to his misery. So she leaves the baby under a tree and goes away. After a while, the baby starts crying. He goes around asking whose baby is that. Nobody claims it. He thinks it must be the god's decision to leave some relation for him. He brings the baby with him to the slum where he is living. He brings her up. But he doesn't know that the girl is his own girl. That child is Baby Saroja.

Q: She was a popular child artiste of that time, right?

A: Yes. We introduced her too. People named her the 'Indian Shirley Temple'. She had fans all around. So many girls were named Saroja back then. Every household would have a Saroja photo. That hectic shoot of running around with the baby in the heat took a toll on my health. I developed Ulcer in stomach and was bed ridden for a month or two. I used to go for shoots and do it but would come back and rest



as advised by Doctor Sankaran and Doctor Gurumurthy. I had developed Ulcer because of friction inside the stomach. People started spreading rumours that I was dead. When Nadaswaram Vidwaan T N Rajarathinam Pillai got down at the station, somebody told him 'didn't you know S D Subbulakshmi is dead and they are cremating her body'. He is very fond of me. Always calls me sister. He didn't even go home from the station. He came to our place with all his luggage. We had shut one side of our gate. When he saw that, he thought it must be true. He came to our back door and started crying aloud. When my family members came out, he said what he heard. They told him 'there is nothing to worry. Somebody has spread rumours. She is down with ulcer and doctors have advised complete rest.' Such was the experience during Thyagabhoomi. I suffered a lot while making that film. The film released and was a big success. It was also getting published as a series novel in Ananda Vikatan. There used to be fights in households to get the copy of the magazine if it is a Thursday. Such was its popularity. Ananda Vikatan became very popular with Thyagabhoomi. It earned a great name.

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01:36:13

Q: I've heard a lot about the film through my friends Babu Krishnaswamy and Ramanan. I would like to ask you some specific questions about Thyagabhoomi. I have seen the stills of the serialized novel in the issues of Ananda Vikatan of that time. Some facts are known to me that Baby Saroja was a popular child actress of that time. Every household would have her photo and girl children were being named Saroja. Isn't she the daughter of Viswanathan, K Subramanyam's brother?

A: Yes

Q: Was this her first film?

A: No. her first film was Balayogini.

Q: What role did she play in it?

A: She played a child, actually, the film was made for children. It was a children's film.

Q: The one that we now call Children's film. K Subramanyam did that long back.

A: Yes. It was all children in it. Some 7,8 children in total. There was one R Parthasarathy

Q: The khadi Parthasarathy, YGP's brother-in-law. He recently passed away.

A: Yes. He was the hero in that film.

Q: He was also an actor then? I know that he was a journalist in Ananda Vikatan

A: Yes.

Q: He was the hero in it. What was his role like?

A: He played Saroja's father in it.

Q: I see.

A: He is not an actor and was reluctant to do so. He and K Subramanyam were classmates. He asked him to do the role. But he acted so well in that role. In that R Balasaraswathi, Pragathambal, Rukmini.

Q: Baby Rukmini, Lakshmi's mother.

A: Yes. And one more speciality was that a real-life widow played the role of a widow. Thiruppugazh Seethalakshmi was her name. She wore a white saree like how widows do, with her head tonsured.

Q: She is not an actor

A: No.

Q: How did K Subramanyam convince her to be part of the film?

A: She was someone who used to sing our classical Thiruppugazh. Her husband passed away and it was a practice in those days to shave head and wear a white saree. She was also like that. One day, she felt the desire to act in films. She came to visit K Subramanyam as he is a progressive man. He said “it wouldn’t be appropriate to give you some other role. I’ll give you a widow character. Would you play?”. She agreed to it. There is a role of a sub collector in the film. K R Challam played his wife. That was the first film for her. The widow played the sub collector’s elder sister. Others were all children like Saroja. 7,8 year old children.

01:40:33

Q: It was a success?

A: Yes a big success. It was the first film for Parthasarathy as well as Saroja.

Q: Where was this shot?

A: It was shot here. In Motion picture combines.

Q: Did you make this in Telugu as well?

A: Yes I think.

Q: Was that the film Gudavalli Ramabhramam assisted?

A: Yes. Since he didn’t know Telugu, he was brought in.

Q: You didn’t act in Balayogini. What was your work like in the set?

A: I was helping around. My main work was to take care of the children who were acting in the film. To feed them, make them sleep, entertain them, dress them up etc. The kids also like to be around me and I like them too. After that, we did Thyagabhoomi.

Q: I see. It was a big hit wasn't it?

A: Yes. A big hit.

Q: I read in the papers that the Government had banned the film. What was the reason for it?

A: That's because it represented the Congress. There were sequences about boycotting the foreign goods and about Swadeshi movement, picketing etc. In the end, my character also goes and joins the freedom movement. The woman has come to be with her husband and child. The court also gives verdict that I have to be with my husband. But looking at the freedom movement, her decision changes. She leaves the child with her husband and takes the congress flag and joins the procession of rebels. The police lathi charges them. The husband also meanwhile has a change of heart. He too wears clothes like the congress people and joins the procession. The husband doesn't know that the wife is part of it. The wife doesn't know the husband is part of it. The police are taking her in van. In a van opposite to her, her husband is being taken. They both look at each other and go different ways.

Q: There is a famous song in that film. 'Desa sevai seyya vareer'. It also featured in the film 'Indus valley to Indira Gandhi'. Who sang that song?

A: D K Pattammal.

Q: She has not acted in it. Has only sung playback.

A: Yes. Only playback. She is a good friend of mine. A very close friend. I asked her to sing a couple of songs in the film. She said "why not? Your company doesn't feel like it is a company. It feels like a family.". Her father also agreed immediately. She wasn't married then. She sang two songs in it. This song became very popular. And one more song was there.

01:45:02

Q: Do you remember this song?

A: Not really.

Q: The film had boycott of foreign goods, non-cooperation movement, lathi charge etc. This would have created ripples back then.

A: Yes. The British was ruling back then. This film created a ripple and a massive uproar among people. Seeing this, the Government banned the film.

Q: Didn't he preempt the risk of making such a film? A film with such scenes are meant to create trouble.

A: He very well knew it. But he felt he shouldn't just be uttering words. It should be put to action and people must feel inspired by it.

Q: He himself was a Congressman, wasn't he?

A: Yes. Till he died. He was friendly with people of all ideologies but he wore the khadar till his death.

Q: This film ran in Gaiety theatre I've heard. Some friends have told me about the drama that happened in the theatre around its ban. That Subramanyam did continuous shows for people.

A: Yes. He played it again and again and made it free for people to watch. So much crowd turned up and one person died in stampede.

Q: Such was the impact it had on people. It is a milestone film in South Indian Cinema. Did this come in other languages too?

A: No. It created enough troubles in one language. We didn't do it in other languages. Then the screening resumed after a year. By that time, Congress had come.

Q: The Congress Ministry had come.

A: Yes. When they got to know about it, they allowed a re-release and it ran well again on re- release.

Q: K J Mahadevan played your husband in the film. Jayaram Iyer's son. He later produced films under Sudarsan pictures banner or something. Some films like Hello mr. Zamindar. This was his first film?

A: Yes. He cast him as he was suitable for the role. An Anglo-Indian lady was also cast in the film. She was from here only. Tall and beautiful.

Q: Do you remember her name?

A: I think Ms. Ford.

Q: She was credited like that?

A: Yes with her original name. That was one of the first films where the girl is wearing a frock. In those days, our people won't wear such clothes in films. They won't allow.

Q: Who won't allow, the actors?

A: The actors and the directors too. They feel even if it is films, we need to follow certain traditional values. But when an Anglo-Indian person wears, they don't mind it. It is how they are. Our actresses won't agree to do a role like that. They are uncomfortable about what people would think. He cast her well for the role. He is somebody who would cast people for the characters. And not write stories thinking about the star in mind.

Q: Not like today's times.

A: Not at all. Look at my case. It was our company. He is my husband, I am an actress. I could have easily been in all the films as the lead. It doesn't work like that. These days if there is somebody like me, she would be in all the films of the

company as the heroine. We never did things like that. We made a film called Bhakta Cheta.

Q: Which year was this?

A: I think 1944. I could have played that role. But it was a 15 year old girl character. Not very young not very old. For that we cast G Subbulakshmi.

Q: One more Subbulakshmi in South Indian films.

A: Yes. And one 15-16 year old boy as the hero.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: Thirumalai I think. He did some more films but don't know what happened after that. Kothamangalam Subbu acted as the father.

Q: That was Kothamangalam Subbu's first film?

A: No. He had acted in Kacha Devayani.

01:50:33

Q: Was Bhakta Cheta before Kacha Devayani or after?

A: Before.

Q: How did you cast G Subbulakshmi?

A: She is from his same place, Kumbakonam. She used to do Carnatic music concerts. She came to meet him when he was there. He told her when there is a suitable character, he will call her. This character was suitable for her. Papanasam Sivan played the cheta character.

Q: It was a mythological tale?

A: Yes. Kothamangalam Subbu played Drona. Her daughter is played by G

Subbulakshmi.

Q: And Cheta?

A: He is the son of a cobbler.

Q: He is a harijan. He included a harijan story in a mythological story as a social commentary.

A: Yes. There was one S R Janakiamma. She was a famous drama artiste. She wanted to act in films. She is not that good looking but a great artiste. We cast her as Cheta's wife. The character doesn't demand good looks but good acting skills. She performed so well in that role. There is a scene where she has to donate two eyes. Everyone would cry watching that scene. She gave such a great performance in it. There was one Nagalakshmi, a comedian.

Q: I wanted to ask you about G Subbulakshmi. I've read somewhere that she is a relation to your driver and she comes regularly to watch shooting and K Subramanyam cast her from there.

A: Her father was someone whom Subramanyam knew.

Q: This is not a correct information?

A: No. Her father is from the same village. His son, that is Subbulakshmi's brother used to work in our production. One day her father brought her saying she wants to act in films. That is how it happened.

Q: Where is she now? Is she alive?

A: She is alive. But leading a life of misery. All her relatives have gone. She is all alone now. Living in poverty. If somebody gets her food or money, she survives with that. She has learnt music and can do concerts. Recently, Sangeetha Nataka Academy announced pension and I had signed for her. She came to ask for help. When she comes, I give her some food and money, whatever I can.



01:54:25

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Q: Did she act in other films?

A: Only 3. She acted in Bhakta Cheta. After that, director's younger brother made a film. Kamadhenu. She played a vamp role in it. A girl who works in a hotel. A very low character, somebody who seduces men. Whatever good name she earned in Bhakta Cheta, she lost it in this. She was flying high with the roles she was getting. She acted in this and everything collapsed. She started doing concerts after that but soon she lost control over her life. Her reckless living cost her everything. She has now come to streets. Doesn't even have a home for herself.

Q: Feels bad to hear this. A popular artiste.

A: She used to do concerts but now that is also gone. Nobody calls for that too.

Q: K Subramanyam made a film called Inba Sagaram. Which year was it made? Do you remember? Was it a mythological film, social?

A: It was a social film. It was based on a play by Nawab Rajamanikkam Pillai, the famous dramatist. We made that film in Hindi also.

Q: What was its name, Premsagar?

A: Yes.

Q: That would have been the first Hindi film to be shot in Madras then. K Subramanyam would have been the first.

A: Yes

Q: Where was it shot?

A: Here only. In Motion picture combines. It used to be a happening place. Always busy with shoots. At one given point, about 10 films would be shot simultaneously here.

Q: Was Inbasagaram released?

A: It came out but we lost a lot in that fire accident. Raja Sandow was there at that time.

Q: The famous actor director.

A: He is a close friend of Subramanyam. He came running hearing about it. He took off his shirt and tried a lot to save the remaining copies. Couldn't do it fully.

01:57:47:10

Q: What was the reason for the fire?

A: Some firestick would have caused it. It was not done intentionally. Must be an accident. We lost many films in that.

Q: Which year was this?

A: I think 41 or 42.

Q: Did Vasan buy it after this accident?

A: No. we continued for a few years after that. We made a film called Ananthasayanam.

Q: Which year was this?

A: 1941

Q: Why I ask is because Gemini was started in 1941. The accident must be before that then.

A: Maybe. I get confused with the dates.

Q: What was the film about, mythological film?

A: Yes about the story of the Padmanabhaswamy temple in

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Thiruvananthapuram. The royal family had invited him to make a film on it. The Maharaja's mother asked him to do so. They gave us the rights and asked us to make it. The character of Divakar is a court poet or minister or something like that. The girl he is about to get married to is his relative. The girl is played by Janaki.

Q: MGR's wife Janaki

A: Yes.

Q: Was this her first film?

A: In an acting role, yes. Before that she has danced in Kacha Devayani and Inbasagaram.

Q: Her name was Vaikom Janaki then.

A: Yes. Also M D Rajamma played the King's daughter.

Q: Was this her first film?

A: No she had done some other films before that.

Q: Have you acted in it?

A: Yes. I have also acted in it.

Q: What was the role?

A: I played a gypsy girl who is actually god in disguise. Who has come to test the person. God comes in disguise like the Mohini Avatar. Then there was R J Lakshmi

Q: I see the stunt actress. Is she alive?

A: Yes she is. She has played Lakshmi, Mahavishnu's wife.

Q: Who played Mahavishnu?

A: Some Iyengar. Not a famous actor. Somebody who was from our company. Divakar plays a diwan in the film.

Q: The role played by K Subramanyam

A: Yes. He is forcefully married to his relative girl. She is a doubting girl. Always keeps doubting him. He is teaching music to the King's daughter. The daughter knowing that he is married falls in love with him. He finds it difficult to manage between these two women. At that time, I arrive as a gypsy girl. He falls in love with me. Seeing that, both these women feel jealous. The wife one day trips and falls. She dies. Janaki's role is over with that. Meanwhile, a man tries to molest this gypsy girl. That role was played by G Pattu Iyer. He rescues her and at the end of it, she tells him that she is a maya who has come to test him. She asks him to come to a place, Anandankattu where she would show him her real self. He goes there. Mahavishnu comes in the form of a child Krishna. The child comes near him to play. He is sitting in devotion waiting for the god to appear. When the child disturbs him, he pushes the child with the back of his hand. The child tells 'see I came in front of you but you pushed me away with the back of your hand. You won't get any blessing' and goes away. He puts his hand into fire in regret. After that he goes around in the forest and finally becomes one with the god. It is called Anandapadmabhaswamy because of the place Anandankattu it is said. The film is about that.

02:05:44

Q: Who adapted it into a film screenplay, K Subramanyam?

A: Yes. The maharaja gave him the story and all. He developed it into a screenplay.

Q: Was it a successful film?

A: It was an average hit.

Q: Who did the music for this film?

A: Parthasarathy.. That is our MUAC orchestra.

Q: Not Papanasam Sivan

A: He was there. He was the one who wrote the songs. They would do the arrangement, background etc. There were about 15 people in our orchestra. They would do concerts. In Radio also. All were Sangeetha vidwans. Subbaiah Pillai flute, Sankararama Bhagavathar's brother in fiddle, Parthasarathy Iyengar also plays the flute, one Radhakrishna, Alidasa from Bengal on Sarangi, and Perumal, a clarinet artist who was with Padmini in dance concerts. With all of them with us, we would primarily make Carnatic music in our films. Some changes or new styles would be tried but predominantly it used to be Carnatic music in our films.

Q: Do you remember the cameraman in all these films, Ananthasayanam, Balayogini, Thyagabhoomi etc.?

A: All were Sailen Bose, Kamal Ghosh. Either of them. Kamal Ghosh was assistant to Sailen Bose. So many films used to be made in our studio. One of them would shoot. They would alternate among themselves.

Q: When did Thambu start working with you?

A: When we were making Kacha Devayani, he came as assistant to Kamal Ghosh.

Q: I see. When did you make Kacha Devayani. Before or after Anantha sayanam?

A: Before Ananthasayanam.

Q: It was a film that earned name for Rajakumari.

A: That was her first film

Q: I heard she acted in Kulothungan before that

A: No that wasn't released at that time. This was her first film. Kothamangalam Srinivasan acted as the hero.

Q: Is that Kothamangalam Seenu?

A: Yes. Same. Kothamangalam Subbu has also done a role. Nagalakshmi in our company has done a comedy role.

02:09:06

Q: How did K Subramanyam discover T R Rajakumari?

A: S P L Dhanalakshmi is her aunt.

Q: That is Jothilakshmi's mother

A: Yes. Dhanalakshmi was acting at that time. We were all friends. Her niece Damayanthi was also an actor. Kuchalakumari's mother. Me, Madhuras, Damayanthi, Dhanalakshmi were all friends. We used to go out together to cinema. On a Navarathri day, I saw Rajayi. That is the name we call her. For films, we used Rajakumari. She was staying with Dhanalakshmi at that time. She sang a song for us on a Navarathri day. I spotted her that day. I told K Subramanyam that I saw a girl with dark complexion but sings very well. Has good hair and good looks. You may try casting her for Kacha Devayani. You see it is our company film. I could have played that role. I was hardly 5 or 6 years elder to her. But we don't work like that. We never exploit our privileges. We do what the film deserves. That is the reason why our films are successful I feel. I then spoke to Rajakumari. That is how she came on board. She was also interested to try acting. We paid her 1000 rupees and shot for 3 months.

Q: This was her first film?

A: Yes. She did Kumara Kulothungan but it didn't release before Kacha Devayani. She did Suryaputhri which released later.

Q: I heard a story about this film. Wanted to ask you about this. I read that K Subramanyam took Rajakumari to a makeup test and Hari Babu said he won't do make up on somebody like this who is not suitable for a heroine role. And heated arguments broke out among them.

A: It happened but this is exaggerated. Hari Babu asked him why he chose somebody like this for a heroine role. He advised him to not go ahead with her. Subramanyam said it is him who is putting money on her and asked him to do his job. In the film, she plays a simple girl living in the forest who doesn't wear ornaments or fancy clothes. K Subramanyam made her open her hair and let it loose. She had long hair that reached her knees. It became a style after that. She was given a pot in hand. Everyone started to do that. In context or otherwise. Just because K Subramanyam did everyone starts doing it. They would open the hair and hold a pot.

Q: People say the sex appeal factor started with Rajakumari in Kacha Devayani.

A: Not at all. Kacha Devayani wasn't sexy at all. He doesn't picturize like that. How can a Rishi's daughter dress like? He has come for something else. She falls in love with him and tries to get his attention. I won't call it sexy. Even if you see it today, you'll understand what I mean. She could have done sexy roles later in her career maybe but not in this.

02:14:46

Q: There is a shot of her over an elephant. That image stays with me even now.

A: Yes. I forgot about that. Now I remember. We made that in Kannada too.

Q: Yes. He directed it himself. With Saroja Devi.

A: Yes. She was introduced in it first.

Q: Was this shot in Motion picture combines

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A: Yes.

Q: Was this before the fire accident or after?

A: Before it happened.

Q: Do you remember the last film that was shot there before the fire?

A: The accident happened for one day. The next day we started shooting there itself. We made Bhakta Prahalada in Malayalam. Also in Kannada.

Q: Who acted in Bhakta Prahalada in Kannada?

A: An actress called Lakshmi. Chidambaram's granddaughter. She acted as Prahalada. Gopinath, the dancer of Gopinath and company played Hiranyakasipu. Leelavati played by Thangamani. We made that film. After that we did in Kannada.

Q: Who played in Kannada?

A: Actor Rajkumar's sister.

Q: You spoke about Premsagar, the first Hindi film to be made in Madras. Do you remember who played in Hindi? Did you act?

A: No I didn't act. Artistes came from Bombay. Our own company artiste Ram Pyaari acted in it. She used to act in Bombay before joining us. I didn't go for the shoot as it didn't interest me much.

Q: I heard it faced many difficulties releasing there. How was it received?

A: It was an average success. Not a great one.

Q: Your company was later bought in auction by Vasam, right?

A: No not auction. Vasam met us to open a distribution office inside our studios. He started his distribution company there.

Q: Thyagabhoomi was distributed by him, right?

A: Yes. He did all our films. When we handed over, we gave everything including our office staff to him. Some commission terms were discussed but only K Subramanyam knows the specifics. I am not aware of it. He later approached us for the studio. I was one of the partners in the studio. I refused to sign it. He came to meet me. He said “You seem to have misunderstood it. I am offering this just because he is not doing well. He has made it into such a fine institution. I will never destroy its reputation. We are just changing names. If the studio was your husband’s, consider this to be your brother’s.” Finally, everyone managed to convince me and I signed it. After that for almost 12 years, I didn’t go to the studios. I was very egoistic about it. I decided if I give my studios to somebody else, I wouldn’t go there. They invited me so many times for different functions. If I see it is Gemini’s function, I would avoid it. After many years, they did a function with NSK and others. He personally came and invited me and we broke ice. I went for that function. After that too, I don’t really feel like going there. It makes me sad. We built it from the scratch and one fine day gave it away. They managed it so well, that is different but I don’t feel like somehow. It used to be such a vibrant place. Always active with shoots. about 10 films in various languages used to happen simultaneously. In Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada. It just went out of our hands one day.

02:20:37

Q: You spoke about Ramabhrammam. Did you know him well?

A: He was very close to our family. He comes home frequently. We had a good relation. He directed under our company in Telugu language.

Q: In Balayogini, he is credited as an associate director.

A: Yes. He worked with us mainly as a person who knows the language. One should get the language correct. K Subramanyam didn’t know the language much.

One can direct shots and execute the film but language is main right. You need to get that correct. So he was with us in our films in that capacity. We did Prahalada in Telugu. In that also, he worked with us in that capacity. He used to be in our home most of the time. He would eat here, work from here. Very close to our family.

Q: Why I ask you specifically about him is because I am planning to write a book on Ramabhrammam. So I've been asking people who have worked with him.

A: He made Kanchanamala. First class film it is.

Q: You knew Kanchanamala personally?

A: Yes. Haven't spoken much but she was so beautiful that one would feel like looking at her. Such beautiful eyes. She was a very talented actress. Great performer. Unfortunately she lost her mind after her association with Vasam. Anyways, we lost a great artist. I am telling this as a fellow actor.

Q: After you left the studio, what film did you make?

A: We made Andamana Kaithi. It was financed by Kumarasamy chettiyar. K Subramanyam directed the film for him. It was the first time MGR acted in a K Subramanyam film. I acted in it too.

Q: What role did MGR play?

A: He played the girl's brother. Thikkurissi Sukumar Nair also acted in it. Saraswathi played the heroine. MGR's sister. They were my children in the film, Saraswathi and MGR.

Q: Who wrote the songs in the film?

A: It had two Bharathiyar poetry as songs. Krishnamurthy wrote one song.

Q: Where did you shoot the film?

A: In Motion Picture combines only

02:25:14

Q: After it went to Gemini?

A: Yes before they began their operations

Q: Which year was this?

A: 1946 or 47.

Q: But Gemini started in 41. Must be somewhere else

A: Yes but we shot it there only

Q: What about the film 'Kubera Kuchela'? K Subramanyam made it?

A: No we didn't do that film. It was made by Srirama Naidu. They made it as a competition to our Bhakta Kuchela. They made it in Coimbatore. They cast Rajakumari, Papanasam Sivan, P U Chinnappa and all. T R Mahalingam also.

Q: How was it received?

A: Failure.

Q: Didn't run?

A: No. they tried a lot by adding songs and other things. It didn't work. They experimented by casting Papanasam Sivan as Kuchela. They cast him like how we cast him. The poor Kuchela was Papanasam Sivan and the rich Kuchela was P U Chinnappa. But it didn't work.

Q: After that, which film did you work for?

A: I don't think we didn't do anything after that.

Q: There is a film called Manasamrakshanam



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A: Yes. It was made during the war period. When they bombed in Rangoon. At that time. I played the heroine. T K Sampangi played the hero, the famous drama artist. Kali N Rathnam and Rajakantham Were the comedians. Other than that, many children acted in it.

Q: Though it was made as a war film, it had many anti-British segments right? The go back movement was shown in it.

A: It was a war picture. I play a spy in that film. The one who spies for Indian government. Rakjakantham played the other spy. My goal is to find her activity and report it to the government. Me and my husband played by Sampangi are from Burma where we lost all our belongings. I think his character dies in the film. In this house, she finds out that Rajakantham is the spy and with the help of many children she plans to expose her. She feels because of people like her, so many lives were lost in Burma. She voluntarily takes it up on his hands to expose this girl. Kali N Rathnam also comes in a role.

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Q: How does the story end?

A: It ends with how she gets caught. How with the help of the kids she catches the spy.

Q: Who acted as the kids, do you remember?

A: Sadasivam who is now a mimicry artist played one of the children. Others were not prominent artistes. Some 5,6 kids.

02:30:25

Q: This film is said to be made for the government propaganda during war period. This one Burma Rani, Kannamma en Kadhali made by Vasam. It created a

controversy at that time that a congressman like Subramanyam made a film like this with British propaganda. And when people watched it, they felt it also aligns with the freedom movement spirit.

A: Yes. He didn't portray the characters as supporting the British. They expose a spy who is not doing the right thing. But it was not done at the cost of sacrificing his ideology.

Q: Yes, people realised it just felt like that but it was indeed a congressman's film.

A: Yes that ethics he would never give up. Not even if it costs his life. He was a staunch congressman till he died. He is not someone who sacrifices ideology for money. He is someone who wore khadar cloth till he died. Even if he has to travel abroad like Russia, he would wear dresses made out of khadar. In those things, he is very strong.

Q: After Manasamrakshana did you make any film? As a heroine or with him?

A: Throughout my career, as long as I was a heroine, I've never acted in any films other than his.

Q: So many offers would have come your way

A: Yes. Plenty. But I said no to them all. After I split with Bhagavathar, Sriramanaidu called me for a film with him. He offered a one-year two-films contract with 3 Lac rupees. A house would be given in Coimbatore with all facilities including a car.

Q: And you said no

A: Yes. I said I have a principle that I won't act as a heroine in any other's films than his. I said sorry I can't do. If money was the factor, I would have made a lot. In Andaman Kaithi, I acted as a mother to MGR. As a blind lady. After that film, I stopped acting for some time. About 6 years or so.

Q: What was the reason?

A: No reason. I didn't feel like. I felt enough. I was not taking part in any film or drama. Then we started Natana Kala seva where we did dance play like ballets. Drama with story and dance. Janaki had also acted in some. She would play the hero, me heroine. If she is Murugan, I would play Valli.

Q: Where did you perform this?

A: It performed all over Tamil Nadu. The Natana Kala Seva had all Kathakali, Manipuri, Kathak, Bharatanatyam. We mixed all four to create a new style. One Ramachandran Pillai came from Thanjavur as the master. Kumar came from Kerala. Sinha who came with our company handled the Manipuri dance. Bolonath took care of the Kathak form. All these people danced except the Bharatanatyam master. He would just teach and go. We did many plays Rasaleela, Valli Thirumanam.

02:35:32

Q: It was successful?

A: It was very successful. We did the first performance at Chidambaram. It toured all over Tamil Nadu. There would be no place it wouldn't have visited. Even Lalitha, Padmini, Ragini sisters were also performing in it. They were given training in dance.

Q: In 1947-48, K Subramanyam has made some films like Vikatayogi. Didn't you act in it?

A: No I was not an actor in them but I was there with him.

Q: How was it received?

A: Those ran average. In Geetha Gandhi, Padma Subramanyam comes as a small girl. Pazhaniyandi also acted in it. Vissu, a professor also acted. Lakshmi Prabha, Saroja, Chinnappa had acted, Rajam acted.

Q: Was it a comedy?

A: Yes. Periyanyaki also acted in it

Q: Is she alive?

A: Yes she is. She lives in Mambalam.

Q: She is not active, I think

A: Yes. She is not keeping well.

Q: You didn't act after that

A: No I didn't. I was taking care of the production. B S Saroja also acted in it.

Q: You introduced her?

A: Yes. I think in this film only or Geetha Gandhi, I am not sure.

Q: Can you tell about you and K Subramanyam introducing M S Subbulakshmi?

A: Yes. She was in Madurai. Her family didn't approve of her choice to marry Sadasivam. They also don't like her coming to films. Her family is a musical family. Shanmuga vadivu, her mother is a renowned Veena artiste. Her brother Sakthivelu plays mridangam. Sadasivam is good friends with K Subramanyam as he was working in Ananda Vikatan at that time. One day he brought her to our place. It became a big issue. Her family sent people to beat him up and take her with them. K Subramanyam got the police costumes kept in our studio and asked our people to wear it. He made a scene that police has come and made Sadasivam and M S Subbulakshmi jump the wall and stay in our back house. We kept them at our place for about a year and a half. Then the police came and case was booked, a lot of issues happened. Finally it was all sorted and we made our film Sevasadanam. F G Natesa Iyer also has acted in it. A famous drama artiste. He was also a high official in the railways. He is feared by people. He was cast in the role as her husband in the film.



02:40:08

Q: What kind of film is Sevasadanam?

A: It was a Bengali story, I think by Bankim Chandra. It was made in Hindi. We made it in Tamil. It is the story of an elderly man married to a young girl. He always doubts her. The issues grow into the children. She finally joins a sevasadanam home.

Q: How was it received?

A: It was an average film.

Q: M S Subbulakshmi would have sung many songs in it

A: Yes. She did.

Q: Was there any hit song?

A: One song 'Ma Ramanan uma Ramanan' became popular. There was one Carnatic song also.

Q: Who did music for it?

A: Our company artistes. MUAC orchestra

Q: Is this film where S Varalakshmi comes as a small girl?

A: Yes. In Sevasadanam. She acted in Balayogini also.

Q: Sevasadanam also had all this Congress ideologies?

A: Yes yes.

Q: Did it face any difficulty in releasing?

A: No. because the book had come. People knew about the story and it came later. So

it wasn't that big an issue.

Q: Which year was this?

A: It must be before Sakuntalai.

Q: This was your own production?

A: Yes.

Q: In one place Chandraprabha Cinetone is mentioned as co-producer. Why is that so?

A: They actually didn't have anything of their own. We only gave them clothes and other essentials. I think K Subramanyam would have given her remuneration as a credit. Like a share.

Q: Who's is this Chandraprabha Cinetone?

A: I don't know why it is named so. Sadasivam's wife's name is Parvathy. Daughter Radha. I don't know why it is named so.

Q: Many technicians would have worked you like Thambu

A: Yes. Ramanna worked with us.

Q: In which film did Ramanna work with you?

A: He joined our company as a sound recordist. He later became an assistant to Ramachandra. Ramachandra was one of the senior sound recordists we had. He joined like an apprentice. Thambu is actually related to K Subramanyam. He is CSV Iyer's son. That is Subramanyam's uncle's son. When Thambu wanted to come to films, he advised him to learn a technical skill so that somebody from our family can come into it. He then started assisting in camera.

02:44:58



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Q: N Krishnaswamy who made Padikkatha Medai. He worked for your company?

A: Not exactly worked. They used to come and go. He visits our sets to meet K Subramanyam. They are all his relatives.

Q: Were there any regular assistants in direction?

A: A lot of them. Pattu Iyer used to work there. His uncle CSV Iyer used to work with him.

Q: Like how Thambu later became a cameraman and how Ramanna started as sound recordist and went on to direct films, were there any assistant directors who are K Subramanyam's students? Who later made films on their own?

A: There are some but I can't recollect anyone quickly.

Q: You have acted in a lot of his films. Under his direction. Can you share with us any incidents that you remember about his direction? How he directs a scene or takes a shot

A: He is somebody who doesn't discriminate between actors, technicians or relatives when he is on the set. He would treat everyone equally. I don't enjoy special privilege because I am his wife. He would treat everyone very respectfully. He doesn't show his power or dominance as a director. Even a child is treated with utmost love and respect. The children also love him back. I would lose patience seeing the naughtiness the kids show. He would not let me near them when they do so. He would talk to them lovingly. They were playing with his watch and it somehow broke and fell off the tram. He knows that if I get to know I will shout at him and the children. He would instead present the matter to me that 'did you know, the watch I was telling you that I wanted to change..it fell off somewhere. Good riddance! Come let's go celebrate this by having sweets. Such was his heart. He does that to save the children from scoldings. When children act in his films, he would make them sleep on his lap and he would wake them up

lovingly before the shot and would lie down on the floor and do the action so that the child actor can do the same as he does. His patience to deal with children is unparalleled. There would be somebody today who can do like that but not that I know of. If he is that angry, he would tell me which is intended at someone else. I would start crying but later would tell me 'I can only tell you'. It is to make others feel alert that 'see if his wife is getting scolding, we would also'. No one has that kind of skill to manage people. If somebody works with him, they won't feel like working with others. That is the reason I have not worked with anyone else.

02:50:32

Q: How does he write scripts?

A: He makes every detail in the script, the scenes, the individual shots everything would be written down including where the actors should stand, where the flower will be kept etc. The copy of it would go to all crew members to the cameraman, recordist, actors, editor everyone. After that a month-long rehearsal would happen. Only after that is done, he would go the shoot. There won't be any secrets. Everyone must know everything. He would shoot about 3000-4000 feet a day. He would have given them the floor plan that who should stand where. It becomes easy for everyone. That is the challenge these days. People go and write dialogues on the set. That is why it is taking time. One should prepare for a film like how they prepare for an exam.

Q: What is the last film that you acted after him?

A: I did 4 or 5 films. Did some mother characters. There is a film with T R Mahalingam called Thiruneelakantar. After that film was done, in 15 days he passed away. After that, I didn't act.

Q: You said you did some mother characters

A: Sampurna Ramayanam, Sridhar's Kalyanaparisu as mother to Saroja and

Vijayakumari. One film with MGR. I think Parakkum Paavai.

Q: I've seen that film. As his mother.

A: A maximum of 10 films maybe. I did a couple of films for Merryland Subramanyam Pillai. He is like a brother to me. If he makes films, he would take me in that. He also passed away. After that I didn't act.

Q: Completely retired after that

A: Yes.

Q: You have acted under K Subramanyam a perfectionist who plans everything on set. After his time, you have acted for other filmmakers. What is the difference that you feel from filmmaking of that time?

A: The main difference is that when we go on a set in those days, we would know each and everything. I would know which shot, what scene, who will be in which shot etc. We just need to focus on action. The dialogues are memorized and practiced for over a month. You have perfected it with rehearsals. But these days, after you reach the set, they tell you 'today is the scene where you are dying'. I am not told why did I die, what I was doing before I died, nothing. Immediately after that, I am asked to laugh for a scene. I am not told why I am laughing, what was the context. If I am aware of the context, I can give the exact smile. Whether it is a cynical smile or a pleasant smile. If one randomly tells you 'smile' what would you do if you don't know the emotion or the context? You would mechanically smile. You won't feel it. It would show on screen. It comes across as bad acting and the film would have a bad result. Everything counts. People will think I am unable to act. They would take effort only with the hero and heroine. Also, when you are giving dialogue sheet to elderly actors, you need to give them time. Their memorizing capacity is low when they are old. When I am given a dialogue sheet and asked immediately to perform, I just memorise it and not internalize. That will look like bad acting. When I saw practices like this, I decided it is not a place

for me. They are making good films now. I am not saying no. But the work environment is not suitable for actors of that era. So I decided to stay away.

02:56:06

Q: I wanted to know some information about K Subramanyam. I can only ask you these questions. What is his native place?

A: His native place is Papanasam near Kumbakonam. He grew up there. His father was a renowned advocate. Subramanyam was also an advocate. He was a BA BL. But he didn't have interest in pursuing that career. So he came to Cinema field. His family never agreed to his choice of profession. After the death of his father, Subramanyam, Raja Sandow and all got together to make a couple of silent films with T P Rajalakshmi. I don't remember which ones.

Q: Do you remember the titles of those silent films?

A: I think he made a film called Sri Valli or Valli Thirumanam with T P Rajalakshmi. I think one more he did by the name of 'Madura veeran'. Much later a film was made in talkie era. This was a silent film. After that Raja Sandow went back to Bombay to make films in Hindi and K Subramanyam came to Madras to make Tamil films. Then we did our film.

Q: The Pavalakkodi that you said where he came to your theatre and cast you.

A: Yes. That was our first film. His first film, M K Thyagaraja Bhagavathar's first film. There were C V Raman, Padmanabhan and all with him. They all left it midway. He finished the film.

Q: I've seen in some posters in my childhood. Some films of K Subramanyam under the banner of Kalaivani films. Was it his own company?

A: Yes. After we sold MUAC to Gemini, we started our company again in the name of Kalaivani films and produced films. It is our company. We started the Nadana

kala seva under that. It is like a musical drama that we performed. We were planning a film under Kalaivani films called Krishna Leela. For that purpose, dance masters were called and began rehearsals. It didn't go as planned. We wanted Chidambaram's granddaughter as Lakshmi. Lalitha, Padmini, Ragini all were planned to be part of the film. Even the songs were made. Narayanakavi had come and written songs. Shoot didn't happen.

03:00:19

Q: Udumalai Narayana Kavi, N S Krishnan's writer.

A: Yes. But we know each other before N S Krishnan. When I was a child, playing theatre, my father and Narayana Kavi were close friends. He would stay at our place when he comes to Madurai. We were that close. He came in, wrote songs but due to some circumstances, the shoot didn't happen. We then started Nadana Kala seva under the Kalaivani films. To perform musical dramas. A Bharatanatyam master had come from Mayavaram. Kumar master from Kerala for Kathakali, Bolonath for Kathak, Sinha master from Calcutta for Manipuri dance. We did a mix of these dance forms to create a choreography. The rehearsals for which would go from morning 7 to evening 7. Each dancer should learn under the respective teachers. All these forms would come together to make the play. We did plays like Valli thirumanam, Bama Vijayam, Rathi Manmatha, Patakotti, Boy and girl in that style. Janaki was there in our company on monthly salary basis. She danced. Then there was a girl Kantha. There was a girl called Kousalya. One Sadasivan who does mimicry these days. Then there was baby Subbulakshmi, Nagalakshmi's daughter. He is Natarajan's wife, the villain actor who does many films now. And 15 to 20 other women. All ladies. Among the masters, Kumar master dances, Bolonath dances, Sinha master would also dance. Bolonath would do the Siva- Parvathi dance. Kumar master would do the bolt scene, all dance dramas. We did the same for about 3 or 4 years. We began our performance at Chidambaram and travelled all over Tamil Nadu. At the

university. Everyone advised us not to go there as the students would create a ruckus. They have overthrown bigger artistes in the past. We went ahead and before the performance began, Subramanyam gave a speech about how we were also students once and how the students must watch something and then say if they like it or not. The play was well received and we performed it twice. The students themselves threw a tea party for us and left us at the railway station. We did at all places.

03:05:35

Q: Did you dance as well?

A: Yes. I learnt Bharatanatyam. I am formally trained in it. Rest of the dance forms I learnt it from the respective masters. Just for this purpose. We did that for all plays. I would play Valli in Valli Thirumanam and Janaki would play the velan, vedan roles. In Rathi Manmatha, she would play Manmathan and I would play Rathi. I played Krishna and she played Gopika in Rasaleela. In Bama Vijayam, Janaki plays Naradam and I play Krishna. Kousalya and Kantha would plays Rukmini and Sathyabama. We take roles like these and not by choosing which one is the best. This ballet format became popular and many others started doing the same.

Q: You didn't make any films in Kalaivani films?

A: Yes we did. We did Malayalam Prahalada, Telugu Prahalada all under Kalaivani films only. Vichithra Vanitha, Vikatayogi, Geetha Gandhi all were Kalaivani films.

Q: You didn't act in them?

A: No. we cast people as per requirement. In only one I did a playback.

Q: Which one was this?

A: Vichitra Vanitha



Q: This Vichitra Vanitha is the film that is an adaptation of Cease to Conquer?

A: No not that story. It was a good story. Krishnaswamy acted, Saroja acted in it. Periyannayagi did an acting role in that film for the first time. Kumarasamy, a comedian acted in it. He would cast different people like this. We have even done dramas under Kalaivani films.

Q: You are not just an acting star but a singing star too. Do you remember any song that was popular from those times? Can you tell something about the musical side of your career?

A: I sang all my songs in those days. I sang the venpura song the other day. Similarly, a song in Pavalakkodi, called 'Summa irungal kannane'. It became very popular.

Q: Do you remember it?

A: It's been long. 1934 or 35.

Q: What role did you play in Pavalakkodi?

A: Alli. This is her telling Krishna about Arjuna after she has had a fight with him. She is telling Krishna who has come to console her that Arjuna can't be changed and asks him not to come to her supporting him.

Q: Do you remember any song from Thyagabhoomi that became popular? You would have sung many.

A: There was one song called Pattas pattas. It was set in Diwai. To show how happy she was who later went into misery.

03:11:03

Q: Have you sung any western style songs? Like how they do these days?

A: There was a sequence where we dance listening to a song from the gramophone.

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Q: Not that you are singing one

A: No.

Q: Did you play a singer in the film?

A: No. it was a rich girl role.

Q: Do you remember any songs from Bhakta Kuchela? You played double role in it as Krishna and Kuchela's wife. You would have sung songs for Krishna in your own voice.

A: Yes I did. In the film, I spoke in a lower scale for Krishna's voice. So when I sang songs in that way, it matched with the character. I don't remember the songs though. I've sung many songs in it like Keerthanas.

Q: I've heard you had a good friendship with NS Krishnan and T A Madhuran. Can you tell us something about them? How you met them and all?

A: I knew Madhuran for a long time. A friendship that developed since Madras times. She didn't become an artiste. I and S P L Dhanalakshmi and group would hang out. Me and K Subramanyam had gone to Bombay for an official work and on the way we went to Pune. He wanted to meet Shantaram in Prabhat Studios. He is his good friend. He took us to the studios, showed us around, gave us tea. In that studio, they were shooting a Tamil film called Vasanthasena. With SPL Dhanalakshmi, Chellappa, T A Madhuran, and NSK as comedians.

03:14:55

Q: Was that their first film together?

A: Most probably. Raja Sandow was the director. He saw us and came to greet us. At that time, Madhuran introduced NSK as her fiancé. She would pull his leg even back then by saying 'look at his face'. After we came to Madras, we meet frequently. She would come home. There was not a single day that she didn't visit

me. That kind of friendship we had. K Subramanyam asked NSK to act in one of our films. Raja Barthruhari. In that Guppi Veeranna's wife Jayamma played the heroine. NSK and Madhuras also played comedians.

Q: What was Barthruhari's story like?

A: Barthruhari is the story of a poet who transforms from an innocent man on seeing the girl falling in love with a horseman.

Q: Isn't it the film where Jayamma and NSK sang duet?

A: Yes. They fall in love and Madhuras is called to the court for a statement. She tells the court how innocent he is. That is a pathos scene and she did it so well. That is the first time she did that kind of a scene. K Subramanyam felt she is a good artiste but people see her only as a comedian. He thought people should see her performance capacity also.

Q: Which year was this film?

A: Approximately 1940

Q: Where was it made

A: Madras

Q: Was it your own production?

A: Yes. Kalaivani films.

Q: And direction K Subramanyam

A: Yes

Q: Who did the music?

A: Songs by Papanasam Sivan. Orchestration by our company orchestra.

Q: Did you act in it?

A: No I didn't

Q: What is the reason for casting Jayamma in a Tamil film. She is a Kannada artiste

A: We knew them for a long time. She played her drama here in Madras so many times. We played our drama there. We go for each other's plays often. We are friends. She expressed her desire to act in a Tamil film. That is how this happened.

Q: Was it a success?

A: It wasn't a great success not a flop either. It was average.

Q: Did NSK or TA Madhuran act in any of your films after Barthruhari?

A: No they didn't. this was the only film. But our friendship goes a long way. It was beyond cinema bonding. We were like sisters. She would be here most of the time. If she comes in the morning, would go in the evening only. If NSK is looking for her, he would come here as he knows she would come to her sister's place only. We were family. NSK is a gem of a person.

Q: Why do you say so?

A: He is the one who brought in social messaging in comedy. In the time where the comedy scenes were like husband beating wife, wife beating husband, pots being broken..he wrote scenes that would give good advice to people. For example, there is a scene in a film where he asks a lazy man why he is lazing around. The man would say he didn't get any work. NSK tells him one should create work for oneself. He takes the man with him to the market and asks him to broom the ground in front of the shop and water it. After he does so, the shopkeeper gives him a rupee. He makes him do the same for other shops. Everyone gives him a rupee but one shop says he doesn't want it to be broomed and washed. At noon, when it is hot, people crowd around near the shop that has made its floor cool. The

one who refused doesn't get any customer. NSK tells the man that is how one should create work for oneself.

03:20:35

Q: This came in a film?

A: Yes.

Q: Your film?

A: No not ours. Some other film. Also, I have acted in one of his films later. I was feeling hesitant initially. I told him I can't talk remuneration with you.

Q: Which one?

A: Manamagal as Sivaji Ganesan's mother. They would treat me with utmost respect. NSK asked Madhuran to take the responsibility of making sure I am given all the respects. She would come in person and pick me up every day from home and while returning after pack up, both NSK and Madhuran would come home and drop me. One day, I had fever. When I had fever, I took my mother with me. My mother doesn't accompany me usually. Looking at her, NSK asked Madhuran to attend me. When he got to know that I had come with fever. I was thinking that the shoot might get affected if I didn't go. He called off the shoot for the day and asked people to leave. One more incident. I would go sharp at the call time for the shoot. That is a discipline from the K Subramanyam days. I would also not engage in any unnecessary talking inside the set. Outside, I would be social. Inside the set, I am taught to look at the place like a temple. In that film, K A Thangavelu is acting as my husband. He came at 9 o'clock. NSK called him and in front of everyone pointed at me and asked him 'Do you know this lady?' he said 'of course. Who doesn't know SDS amma? She is the main reason I am into films'. NSK asked 'Do you know I have acted in their company films and she is a company owner?' Thangavelu replied 'yes I do know'. NSK said 'if she comes at 9 am, I wouldn't ask her. With her stature, she can afford to come late. You all young

men, coming at 9 is shameful. She has come here sharp at 7 and is ready with make up.' I told him not to scold them taking my name. NSK said 'no amma. I am taking your example for them to understand the importance of commitment. They must learn from you. I am somebody who you employed. When I call you for my film, you are not thinking that I am junior. You value the profession bigger than who is directing you.' He is that kind of a man. Not just a good comedian but a great man. Very respectful. There are some bad habits that I don't want to comment on. About his drinking. For that also, he would have convincing reasons. I have spoken to him about it and I have stumbled without a reply listening to his explanation. Also, when it comes to charity, he does it generously. One day we had gone for a film. I had taken 10 rupees with me just in case there is some expense. When people see NSK, they would ask for money. He didn't have then. He asked me what do I have and took that 10 rupees and gave that man. Madhuram scolded him for taking my money and giving it to charity. He said 'I am not keeping it for myself. I have given it for charity. It is a good thing. Not to worry'.

03:25:41

Q: You have worked with MK Thyagaraja Bhagavathar. He is a singer, actor. He has done your films like Pavalakkodi, Naveena Sarangadhara.

A: I've known Thyagaraja Bhagavathar for a long time. Since our theatre days. I have told you about our early days in theatre together, how we used to do plays and how it landed us in Pavalakkodi. As a person, he is a good man. He behaves well with people. A great singer. No one else can have that kind of voice anymore. Looks handsome. But performance was not up to the mark. He would be sing well and got fans mainly for his songs and looks. Not that he is a bad actor. Not great. The dialogue delivery are weaker compared to his songs. We did two films together Pavalakkodi and Naveena Sarangadhara. He had other hits like Haridas, Ashok Kumar, Sivakavi. We split after the two films. He went on to act in

other films, I continued with our films. We did a play together after 10 years. We went to do plays till end of his life. Like how we did our first film together, we did our last film also together. His last film was Sivagami. It was like our real-life story where I am a theatre artiste and he loses his eyesight.

Q: Who directed that film?

A: Venu directed it. In Salem. I went there and acted.

Q: It must be M A V Rajendran who directed it because Venu has never directed films.

A: It must be so. I don't have good memory of that.

Q: Thyagaraja Bhagavathar would have had hit songs in the films he did with you. Do you remember any of that?

A: Yes. In Naveena Sarangadhara there was one song. Like how I had one Venn pura that was very popular he had one. 'Sivaperuman kripai vendum'.

Q: I've heard this song. Was it in this film?

A: Yes.

03:29:55

Q: Can you share some incident that you remember about acting with him? As it was all new for you both.

A: I knew Bhagavathar when he was riding high. He is somebody who has lived a king's life. No one can ever live life this luxuriously like him. He enjoyed all pleasures one can enjoy in one's life. He would wear almost a lac worth jewellery on him all the time. It would be worth more maybe. He would wear diamond studs, diamond chain, ruby, jade, all nine stones as rings in both hands. He would wear expensive golden shirt and a grand veshti. He would always have about 10

men with him as body guards. He was like a king. At home, he would have 3 brahmin cooks all the time. If someone visits him, he would serve them with 3 varieties of sweets and payasam. There would be a big spread of food items. After eating, he wouldn't even have to get up. A man would bring water to wash hand. One would bring towel. They wouldn't let him get up even. He was fond of perfumes. That is a chettinad people practice. I don't want to go into each and every detail but he lived a luxurious life. Not like how actors are living now. Now people earn but save it up. He spent everything on himself. When we were doing plays, he started having the eye problem. Towards the end he almost lost his eye sight. He had diabetes which grew affected the eyesight. When we were performing at a place, we were asked to take a dark narrow lane to reach the theatre as the public road was full of fans. He asked me to walk in front and he would follow as others shouldn't know he is losing eyesight. I kept saying watch out on left, right as I guided him to the theatres. After the show, I told him, "I feel bad to see like this. You must go back home and get it treated. Don't commit to plays without getting this treated." I was thinking of the man who lived such a luxurious life losing eyesight. While I was not doing plays for almost a year, I decided to do a play. I arranged for a play 'Bama Vijayam'. I played Krishna. I took Chokkalingam with me and Sukumari acted in it, the Malayalam actress. T A Madhuram played along with Chokkalingam as comedy pair. It was a whole ladies team other than music. When we were performing that in Salem, Thyagaraja Bhagavathar was in town. Chokkalingam had gone to visit him. MKT asked him 'is SDS making new plays as I am losing eyesight?'. I felt so bad that he took it to heart. I didn't continue the play after that. While shooting for Sivagami, there was a scene where he is eating food and unable to find where the curry is. In reality also, he has lost the sight. I help him by taking his hands to each food item. He cried in that scene thinking how he is unable to see anything. I couldn't see him like that. I also cried. Everyone consoled me. I told them 'you don't know how this man has lived a life. I feel so sorry to see him like this. Please finish this quick and send us back. I can't take this anymore'. After that he was hospitalized



and eventually passed away. He asked me to tell no one about his condition. He doesn't like people visiting him or asking for financial help. There were people who were ready to give anything if he needed. But he has high principles. Hariram Seth, a student of MKT, would shower him with wealth if asked. He was a rich person. MKT requested me to not cremate him here. Not among the cinema people. He wanted to be taken to his native village for cremation. After his death, the Nadigar sangam asked but we told them that was not his will. I got to know about his death only past midnight. I didn't have a car at that time. I was feeling bad because it was a 40-year relationship. Not a day or two. The next day I took a car on hire and went to Trichy. Among the actors, me and M R Radha went for the ritual. Other drama artistes who acted with him in Madurai had come. Hardly anyone from the cinema actors came. But throughout the street, when the body was being taken, each and every shop would keep a photo of MKT and a camphor was lit in remembrance. So many villagers had come. That much crowd would have not been possible in Madras. Everyone from young people to the 90-year-old came crying for their loss. 'He was the king of Trichy. He is the one who earned Trichy its name' they said. He did everything with his own money. Didn't take anything from anyone. His house was also auctioned. He didn't mind losing anything. People have a perception that he is a proud man who has an air around him but in reality, he is a soft-hearted person. He would talk to everyone the same way.

Q: Was he short tempered?

A: Not at all. He wouldn't get angry at all

03:40:14

Q: I've met him only once. When I was an apprentice at V C Gopalarathinam's office. He had some case going in his name. He was in a bad shape then. I asked him to sit as VCG will come soon. He asked me if I know him. I told him who wouldn't know him, Thyagaraja Bhagavathar. He was surprised and said 'in the

time nobody recognizes me, you have recognized. Not bad’.

A: Yes he is a good person.

03:40:55

Q: You are not acting anymore. After K Subramanyam has also passed, how are you spending your time?

A: After he passed away, I have retired totally from my profession. Till 10 years back even, I used to do drama, cinema, katha-kala-kshebam regularly. I have stopped them all. I have been working since I was 8 years old. I also see no purpose or motivation to do it now. Also, my son Ramji who now runs a pop music thing called Abaswaram Ramji. He is my only son. I had to work till he stood on his own. Now he tells me ‘I am in a good position to take care of you and the family. It is not good that you work for a day and fall sick for 9 days. You may stop all this and stay home.’ I decided to do what he feels is right. I don’t go anywhere now, not for a film or drama. I wake up in the morning, do puja. I have a spiritual guru. As per his advice, I do an hour-long puja in the morning. After that cooking. I don’t have a cook. I have to pass time. I was someone who was very active all the time. Now even if my body says no, my mind doesn’t allow me sit idle. I take rest in the afternoon. In the evening, I watch some TV or something. Or if someone has invited me for a function, I would go. I don’t go to other’s house unnecessarily. I am not liking that anymore. I read a lot of books.

Q: What kind of books?

A: I read novels, magazines. I have a lot of mythological story books. If I want to pass time, I would sit and read. I don’t mind reading for 24 hours. I don’t need anything else.

03:43:50

Q: As per my request, you shared with me your past experiences, stories from film career, your relationship with K Subramanyam and other information in detailed and interesting manner. We are indebted to you for that. I thank you on behalf of me, National Film Archives of India and P K Nair for the time you have given to us. I have disturbed you for 4 or 5 days. Apologies for any inconvenience, if caused. This oral cinema history project is for researchers working on the subject of cinema in early period and this interview will be very useful for them. There is no doubt about it. We are deeply indebted to you.

A: Let me also say this, I live in one corner, forgotten. I feel deeply touched and honoured that I am also considered as one the people you wanted to interview for this project. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

03:45:14

That was the with Mrs. S D Subbulakshmi held during April and May 1984 at her residence in Mylapore, Madras. Mrs. Subbulakshmi now lives a quiet, retired life, a life of happy contentment.