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An abiding friendship



A shoulder to lean on -- M. S. with Narayani. The photographer was Ellis Dungan.

THE OVER sixty years bonding between Kunja (M. S. Subbulakshmi) and Chinnani (Narayani Mahadevan) has remained a rare experience for both. In 1941, husband T. Sadasivam too felt close enough to Narayani's spouse K. S. Mahadevan to insist that he send him an annual subscription of Rs. 3 for *Kalki*, the magazine he edited. In 1992, he was to write playfully to Narayani's grandson, "The golden jubilee get-together of Chinnani and Mahadevan, and Subbulakshmi and Sadasivam, is being celebrated with biscuit packets."

When did the women meet? Narayani's memory goes back to Calcutta 1941. "I was coming down the stairs after visiting my relatives in the neighbourhood," she says. "A woman was coming up the steps. She smiled and said please come to my flat before

you leave." Narayani recognised the speaker as the famous Carnatic vocalist who had come to shoot for the film ``Savitri." What a surprise to find her quartered in a flat on the same street! ``M.S. was famous even then. But she was totally unconscious of her celebrity status." Though startled, Narayani did accept the invitation. It was the start of an abiding friendship.

What was young Subbulakshmi like? ``Just the same as she is now — gentle, soft spoken, extremely sensitive, worried about not hurting or giving offence to anyone. So timid that little things terrified her. Every single thing she did had to have her husband's approval. She was intelligent. Despite her innocence she could assess people, she knew sincerity when she saw it. The aura of divinity was not something that came later, it was with M.S. from the early years."

Quickly Narayani's two children found a playmate in Radha, a child of four who was with her parents during their nine months stay in Calcutta. Narayani looked after Radha when Subbulakshmi was engaged in shooting. However late their return from the studios, Sadasivam always came to take the sleeping child away. M.S. could not bear to be away from Radha for long. Their attachment was deep. Only once did Narayani attend the shoot. The sequence had Subbulakshmi singing the ragamalika viruttham in Yama's court (``Agni enru ariyayo").

The Mahadevans were steeped in music. He was a music critic, she had been trained in the violin by Papa Venkatramiah's father Srikantiah. Moving to Bombay meant that the couple could hear all the Carnatic vidwans at the Shanmukhananda Sabha. ``But M.S. thrilled you. The hall was always packed to bursting point. Such pin-drop silence. No one moved until the last note of the mangalam. You couldn't take your eyes off her face, there was no relaxing even between songs, you were keyed up wondering what comes next."

For M.S. a Bombay concert meant a chance to meet her friend. Another film brought them together, as M.S. stayed in Bombay for nine months, recording the music for ``Meera." Though the Mahadevans are now Chennai residents, for decades the friends lived in different cities. But they visited and wrote to each other. What did they talk about? ``Not music," Narayani chuckles. ``We talked about our children, old times, the people we knew." Narayani excelled in cooking, her *ukkarai* and *badham halwa* were famous.

M.S. often discussed recipes and cooking methods with her friend though she never had a chance to try them out herself. Says Narayani, ``She was at home in any company — with humble fans, or with important national leaders. There was no one to teach her tact and elegance. They must have been inborn."

Once, when a lesson with Musiri Subramania Iyer was interrupted by a call from Narayani, M.S. hesitantly told the guru that she would be back in a minute. He was teaching her his signature song ``Tiruvadi charanam" for her Tamil Isai concert.

But Musiri replied that if the caller was ``Chinnani Mami," he had better pack up for the day. Despite her hectic schedule, Kunja wrote to Chinnani regularly, from train and plane. Major concerts and interactions with international figures get a passing mention. The focus is on children, their ailments, little domestic happenings, and wishes for more time spent in each other's company.

M.S. insists that Narayani should come a week ahead for Radha's wedding. And it was Narayani who went to Ahmedabad with the

newly weds and stayed for a month to `set up' their household. Similarly, every event in the Mahadevan household had the Sadasivams with them.

Narayani says in a voice that betrays emotion, ``Once, when I was hospitalised, the doctor was stunned to see Kunja beside me. She wouldn't leave until she asked him whether I'd be well enough to go to Madras when she received the Sangita Kalanidhi. I don't know why she gave me so much affection. Not because of anything I did. It was just meant to be." — **G. R.**

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