

THE HINDU

Online edition of India's National Newspaper
Sunday, Jun 20, 2004

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M.S. Subbulakshmi: Portraits of a diva

The first few times he saw MS was as a boy ... fleeting glimpses. Then, years later, T.S. NAGARAJAN was to meet the singing sensation once more.

T.S. NAGARAJAN



The Hindu National Essay Contest Results

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THE first time I saw "MS" was when I was a boy of 10 or 12. This was in her role as Meera in the equally famous film by the same name, which ran for years in cinema halls and had the entire country humming her *bhajans*. I was accompanying my grandmother, an avid movie-buff, to the "cinema tent" in our town. It was an evening show and "House full". I spread the mat which I had taken tucked under the arm, spread it on the sandy floor and sat down beside her in the front row, amid the chatter and whistling by the impatient crowd. The lights were soon switched off, the whistling stopped and the show began. The tent was filled with the devotional ecstasy of Meera's *bhajans*. I found my grandmother lost in her admiration for Meera. Looking back, I think that apart from the excitement of the outing, I remained untouched by MS and her music that evening.

The next time was in Mysore. I was in high school, and out on a stroll with my friends. We stopped at Bidaram Krishnappa's Rama Mandir, where a crowd had gathered outside the gate listening to music. I managed to get inside. MS was singing, with Chowdiah accompanying her on the violin. Though not knowledgeable enough to appreciate her music, I remember being struck by her grace and charm. Over the years, an MS concert in the town became a great event for me and the family. By now, MS was a household name.

In September 1986, I was commissioned by the VST Industries, Hyderabad, to photograph MS at her home in Chennai. They wanted to produce a brochure to mark the occasion of presenting MS with the "Spirit of Freedom Award" at New Delhi. I had been told that MS was shy. And that her husband, Sadasivam, was a "tough man" to deal with. Getting a set of formal portraits would be an achievement.

But I had something different in mind. I was not interested in mere portraits of MS. I wanted to be a part of the household for a day or two, and then capture the charm of her personality in pictures.

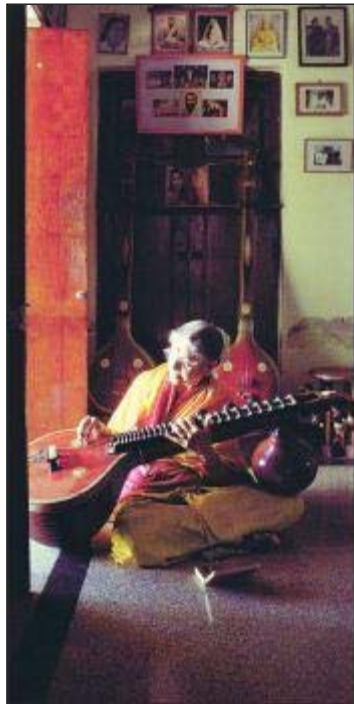
Soon after reaching Chennai, I telephoned Sadasivam and explained the nature of the assignment. Could I see him tomorrow and discuss it in detail? He sounded matter-of-fact but polite. "Please talk to Atmanathan, my secretary. He is, in fact, my *atman*. He will settle everything," he said. This did not sound very encouraging but there was no other choice than/but to talk to Atmanathan.

MS and Sadasivam lived on Tank Road in the Nungambakkam area. Next morning while driving there, my wife Meenakshi stopped on the way to buy some jasmine flowers, a favourite of MS. Atmanathan, a trusted member of the MS household, sat in a one-room structure, his office, in the compound. A prolific creeper covered the asbestos roof making the structure a little more comfortable inside. Over

coffee, I explained my mission. He said he would take us in as soon as MS had finished with her morning prayers. I could then discuss everything with her.

A little later, we were led into an austere-finished hall which had a touch of elegance. The furniture was minimal and functional. On the walls were many framed pictures — Gandhiji, Nehru and C.R. Dressed in a simple cotton saree, MS came in with folded hands — a picture of quiet dignity and humility. Sadasivam also joined us. MS looked radiant and egoless; Sadasivam erudite and saintly. Introductions over, I discussed the assignment. They sounded kind and helpful.

MS signalled to her maid Vishalam to fetch the *tanpura* from the corner. She then sat on the carpet and started tuning the instrument. "You can take my picture now," she said with a twinkle in her eyes. I had not brought my camera. I had come only to meet her and discuss the assignment. I needed more time. I was ready to make any number of visits and stay for brief periods so that the photo sessions did not cause her much strain. MS looked at her husband who nodded. It was agreed that we start work next morning.



... with her mother's veena.

At home, Kunjamma, as MS is called, is just modest and self-effacing. Paradoxically, she is an intensely private person, yet lives her life like an open book. When one visits her home, more likely than not, it is MS who will answer the door. She has a child-like simplicity which seems to enhance her charm. Her diamond-studded nose rings and the dazzling ear rings add lustre to her face.

The following day, MS welcomed us at the door — a perfect subject. The first picture was to be MS doing her *pooja*. She took Meenakshi into her room and asked her to select a saree. She draped it in a jiffy and was ready in her *pooja* room. Strictly speaking, it was not a *pooja* room, but in fact, an open cupboard in a corner of the hall. There were two lovely wood carvings — one of Krishna and the other of Saraswathi. There was a large portrait of her mentor and guru, the elder Kanchi Kamakoti Sankaracharya. There were some other pictures too: a portrait of Shirdi Sai Baba and another of Sathya Sai Baba. MS sat on the floor in front of a *rangoli* and began her prayers. Within moments, she was deep in concentration. I had to ask my wife to tell her that the session was over. "This is my difficulty. Once I start my prayers, I hear nothing else," she said apologetically.

The assignment continued with Meenakshi and I visualising a number of situations to project MS as a simple housewife.

At one stage, I wanted her to re-enact the charming manner in which she walked up to the door with folded hands and received her visitors. I wanted her to repeat the act a few times. She did so without any sign of irritation or objection and I apologised for the inconvenience. "Please don't hesitate to tell me what you want me to do. You must remember that I have acted in films, after all," she said. There was a coffee break. MS went into the kitchen. Appearing a while later with some delicious *dosa*s and hot coffee, she urged us to sit at the table and began to serve us.

The picture sessions went on for the next two days. Sadasivam, whenever he was around, tried to make the exercise enjoyable with his witty comments and suggestions. The "tough man" image of his was nowhere in evidence. I found him to be a methodical and a practical person.

One morning, Radha, her daughter, joined us. I wanted both the mother and daughter to sing. They sat down, dressed in blue Kancheepuram sarees (the famous "MS blue" as the colour is referred to among women in the South). "What do you want me to sing?" MS asked me graciously. Taken by surprise, all that I could mutter to myself was "Madhyamavathi", one of my favourite *ragas*. And there it was, "Paalinchu Kaamakshi Paavani", which they rendered to my

delight. Then followed a *kriti* by Puranadaradasa — "Neene Anaatha Bandhu" — which MS sang in flawless Kannada. I was totally unprepared for this treat. I abandoned the camera and was soon lost in the melody around me

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