

**RADHA VISWANATHAN (1934-2018)**

## **A life of devotion and indomitable spirit**

**Gowri Ramnarayan**

**F**or most of her first 50 years, she was celebrated for her beauty and charm. For the next 35 years of untold suffering, she was an invalid, steadily declining in health, wheelchair bound, needing a caregiver all the time. She was totally bedridden towards the end of her life—which came on 1 January 2018. This was the tragedy of Radha Viswanathan, M.S. Subbulakshmi's stepdaughter, steadfast companion and sterling vocal accompanist.

That a woman who suffered so much could remain ever cheerful, unfailingly optimistic, continue to be interested in the lives of those dear to her, and get some fun out of her own life, was not just amazing, it made her a motivational force, a role model.

And who was Radha's heroine? This little incident tells us.

The venerable maestro with oil massaged into his skimpy tuft is seated on the swing in the verandah, singing an expansive Todi, as he waits to take his morning bath. A child is working on her sums close by. Suddenly, the singer exclaims, "I simply can't sing the high notes like your mother!" To his great amusement, the little girl responds matter-of-factly, "*Adudaan teriyume!*" (Of course, we know that!).

The musician was Carnatic music's doyen Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, staying in his equally famous disciple M.S. Subbulakshmi's home. The girl was Radha. To Radha, MS was unquestionably the best. To MS, Radha was undoubtedly the dearest.

Radha's freedom fighter father Sadasivam promoted Gandhian ideals even during his advertising years with the weekly *Ananda Vikatan*, produced film classics, and launched the nationalist weekly *Kalki* together with eminent writer Kalki Krishnamurti. When MS moved into his home, it was adoration at first sight for the young woman and the two-year-old toddler. They bonded as mother and daughter though Radha's birth-mother Parvati was alive then.

Radha grew up with three girls in the same household—her orphaned cousin Thangam, younger sister Vijaya, and Krishnamurti's daughter Anandhi (their constant companion and neighbour who eventually married Radha's cousin Ramachandran).



**Little Radha with MS and Sadasivam**

Radha was indisputably Sadasivam's pet, and Subbulakshmi's soul. No one resented this because Radha was everybody's favourite. She was confident, but never brash, strong but never aggressive. Anandhi's first memory of Radha was of a lovely, vivacious child, swinging merrily, and singing *Anandamen solvene* (How can I express my joy?), imitating MS in the famous scene from the film *Sakuntalai*. Indeed Radha's joy was so infectious that she could coax strong willed Thangam to join all their "jollities", and mentor young Vijaya who absolutely cherished her older sister.

MS was a star with hectic singing and shooting schedules, but she had to have Radha by her side all the time—on film sets, recording studios, concert tours, dinner parties, literary gatherings or political meetings. The child grew up among the musicians, artists, writers, litterateurs, poets, statesmen, scientists and intellectuals who thronged their house.

One day MS noticed that the girl sitting beside her on the concert stage was singing every song along with her. That is how almost involuntarily, Radha became her celebrated mother's vocal accompanist. Decades later, singer D.K. Jayaraman, himself a devoted accompanist to sister D.K. Pattammal, was to exclaim that Radha was matchless in this role. She was matchless because she did



not sing to make music, she sang to make her own spirit become one with her mother's spirit.

Radha did receive some formal training from T.R. Balasubramaniam, Mayavaram Krishna Iyer and Musiri Subramania Iyer's classes which she later attended. But mostly she imbibed music by listening to MS. She also learnt *with* MS, from some of the greatest maestros of her time. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer was as much Radha's guru as her mother's.

Soon MS began to rely on her daughter's razor sharp intelligence to absorb, polish and present gems from this immensely vast, diverse, multilingual repertoire. She remained Semmangudi's favourite. K.V. Narayanaswamy was impressed by her *karpoora buddhi*, supercharged at learning and notating songs at lightning speed. Sandhyavandanam Srinivasa Rao appreciated her deft grasp. Radha had the stern, hard-to-please T. Brinda nodding in approval when she learnt a padam from her, for faultlessly bringing off the Dhanammal style of gamaka. Brinda had such a soft corner for Radha that she insisted on plaiting her hair with flowers for her *valaikappu* ceremony.

Accompanying MS



In that era of only aural learning, her phenomenal memory made Radha her mother's human computer, storing diverse gems for instant and accurate recall at need. Radha's knowledge of Hindi (she had a *Visharad* diploma in that language) made her invaluable in learning and singing the many bhajans for which we hold MS so dear.

Even in vocal support, Radha revealed skills in every department of concert music. Her raga bore the stamp of an uncompromising tradition. Her kriti rendition and diction in 12 languages were as flawless as MS's. Her swaraprastara had zest, and kanakku patterns sparkled discreetly. In their recording of the Bhairavi varnam, Radha effortlessly matched her mother's swarasthana suddham in incredible speeds. She took the lead in every transition of raga in the chittaswaras of the magnificent 72 melaragamalika. Many still remember Radha's astute contributions in pallavi singing, where she took charge of some of the rhythm complexities, winning nods and applause for her witty pratilomam.

All the MS concert accompanists, from Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer to V.V. Subramanyam, Ghatam Kothandarama Iyer to T.K. Murthy and Nagarajan, enjoyed her little forays. All of them became her friends; she bantered and exchanged jokes with them. It was Radha who gave T.H. Vinayakaram his catchy nickname "Vikku".

Alert, vivacious, winsome, Radha excelled in whatever



**At the United Nations. Front row: T.K. Murthy, T.H. Vinayakram, M.S. Subbulakshmi, Radha and Vijaya. Back row: V.V. Subramanyam, T. Sadasivam, Bombay Kannan, an UN official, U. Thant (Secretary General, UN), James Rubin, G. Parthasarathi, C.V. Narasimhan**

she did. As a child, had she not won viewers' hearts as little Bharata in the film *Sakuntalai*? And as the singing, dancing and frolicking child in *Meera*?

However, she got firmly centrestaged when she and Kalki's daughter Anandhi, gave Bharatanatyam performances conducted by their guru Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai. This time MS sat on the side and sang for their abhinaya. And Radha became part of Indian cultural history in the genre's renaissance. When the time came, Radha gave up a promising career in Bharatanatyam without any regret, just as she had given up schooling at the Good Shepherd's Convent, and got back to her accompanist's role. She didn't even think that she had an option to go her own way. Why did she do that? She was only obeying her father's injunction: "Like Bheeshma, you must sacrifice your life for your mother!" This became her mantra and mission. Marriage and motherhood could not slacken Radha's musical and moral support to her mother. Radha's support was not only in music, she did all her mother's shopping—saree, handbag, footwear, medicine, fulfilled little commissions, managed all their concert tours.

We know how fate reversed the roles. Afflicted by tubercular meningitis in 1982, Radha needed her mother's devoted care to pull her back from death. MS returned to the stage in 1983, only when she had Radha by her side again, this time with a leg stretched out, back bolstered by pillows. With moist eyes the audience stood up to applaud Radha's unquenchable spirit.

The following years saw Radha trying to continue as best she could, though now she needed a caregiver and wheelchair. Her condition became gradually worse, but she never lost her grit and spunk. She continued to come to every concert that she possibly could, though more and more, MS had to assist Radha.

Around this time when I was drawn into accompanying grandaunt MS, Radha encouraged me with a giggle, "Singing with Amma? Easy! All you have to do is never let her guess you're scared." With selfless generosity she not only taught me what I needed to know, but also where I had to remain silent.

The first thing people noticed about Radha was her smile—genuine, friendly and impish. She could crack irreverent, pungent jokes. She won every heart in her husband's huge clan—from diehard mother-in-law to schoolgirl niece. Her children Chandrashekhar, Shrinivasan and Lakshmi adored her and waited for her to tell them stories as only she could.

Radha's prized possessions? An old book autographed by world celebrities from Linus Pauling and Yehudi Menuhin to Helen Keller and Margaret Thatcher. And her bookshelf with favourite novels Tamil, English and Hindi. She covered each one of them carefully in brown paper, and inscribed titles on their spines.

Those who came to learn music from Radha found in her an affectionate and knowledgeable teacher, with an immaculate pathantara. They were surprised to see how quickly she could assess them. Radha told Navaneet Krishnan that the K.V. Narayanaswamy style would suit him more, and that he should learn from Padma

Narayanaswamy. Later, hearing him sing the kriti *Annapoorne Visalakshi*, she called his guru Padma Narayanaswamy there and then, to compliment her on her teaching.

From my own personal experience I can say that I found her a superb teacher. She could make even a navavarana kriti sound easy. I have not forgotten anything I learnt from her.

As her niece, I remember so many things she taught me—to plait my hair, string flowers, to serve coffee to visitors, wear my first saree. As a newlywed I had Radha teaching me to make *kathirikkai vathakkal* (fried brinjal curry), giggling mischievously as she assured me that the dish would win my husband’s heart!

Even ill health could not make her self-centred. She continued to be interested in others. She would call family members and friends and keep the bonds strong. Bedridden as she was, she recorded a song for a little grandniece in the US. She retained her sense of fun, old-fashioned kindness, her masterful peremptoriness, and endearing bluntness.

There was no other word for Radha. She was enchanting.

It is not easy to be M.S. Subbulakshmi’s daughter and still be known as an individual in your own right. Radha achieved that easily, effortlessly, even nonchalantly. She made so many friends. She kept all those friends till the end.

For someone to acquire such in-depth skills without ever getting a chance to become a musician in her own right must have been difficult. Yet whatever disappointments she felt remained hidden. She brushed such thoughts aside as unworthy.

Did Radha regret not becoming a soloist? Not enough to complain. But she thoroughly enjoyed receiving lifetime achievement awards in India and the US. At the Cleveland music festival, she stunned everyone by doing abhinaya from her wheelchair. Son Shrinivasan and his wife Geetha strengthened her positive energy, gave rock solid protection. Grooming their daughters Aishwarya and Saundarya in music gave Radha a



Radha as young Meera

purpose in life, and the joy of perpetuating her mother’s legacy. She was lucky to have been cherished by her children and grandchildren.

As she took her last breath, it must have meant everything to Radha to listen to Aishwarya sing *Sriman Narayana*, remembering her mother’s tender bhakti. For that is what Radha’s life had been: a song of devotion—to family, to music, to God, and to the woman who meant more than the world to her.

When I think of Radha, I remember the MS evergreen *Kurai ondrum illai*, “I have no regrets”. To me it seems the perfect phrase to describe Radha Viswanathan. She made you feel life was worth living under every circumstance.

Through the years of active creative achievements and through the years of heartbreaking health setbacks, Radha saw only the light, never the shadows. Her courage remained high, her spirit irrepressible. I see that indomitable spirit and her selflessness as the legacy she has left behind to inspire all of us.

(This first appeared in a slightly abridged form in *The Hindu*. By permission)

Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai doing the nattuvangam and MS singing for Radha and Anandhi



PHOTOS COURTESY: RADHA VISWANATHAN’S FAMILY