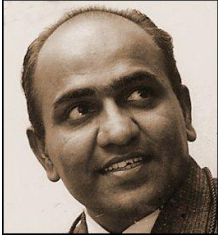


Portrait of a Diva



T.S. Nagarajan

T.S. Nagarajan (b.1932) is a noted photojournalist whose works have been exhibited and published widely in India and abroad. After a stint with the Government of India as Director of the Photo Division in the Ministry of Information, for well over a decade Nagarajan devoted his life to photographing interiors of century-old homes in India, a self-funded project. This foray into what constitutes the Indianness of homes is, perhaps, his major work as a photojournalist.

Editor's note: This story is reproduced from Mr. Nagarajan's not-for-sale book of his memories, A Pearl of Water on a Lotus Leaf & Other Memories, 2010.

The first time I ever saw 'MS' (*Editor's note: The reference is to M.S. Subbulakshmi*) was when I was a boy of ten or twelve in her role as Meera in the famous film (*Editor's note: The film was released in 1947*), which ran for years in cinema halls and had the whole country humming her bhajans (*Editor's note: See [Youtube videos](#) and a [detailed description with videos](#)*). I accompanied my grandmother, an avid movie-goer, carrying a mat rolled up under the sleeve, to the cinema tent in our town. It was an evening show. House full. I spread the mat on the sandy floor and sat beside her in front of the screen, amidst all the chatter and whistling by the impatient crowd. The lights went off. The whistling stopped and the show began. Soon 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, apart from the excitement of the outing, I remained untouched by MS and her music on that evening.

The next time was in Mysore. I was in the high school. My friends and I were on our usual evening stroll in the city. We stopped at Bidaram Krishnappa's Rama Mandir, where an over-flowing crowd stood outside the gate listening to music. I managed to move forward and got inside the hall. 'MS' was singing. Chowdiah was accompanying her on the violin. Though I was not equipped enough to appreciate her music, I remember, I was indeed struck by her grace and charm. Over the years, an 'MS' concert in the town became a great event for me and the family. 'MS' by now was a household name in the country, a legend.

In September, 1986, I was specially 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. My wife Meenakshi and I arrived in Chennai with almost no introduction.. My friend and one-time colleague Narayanaswamy, who happened to know 'MS' very well, had telephoned the family from New Delhi about me and my mission. I had pitched all my hopes of doing this assignment successfully only on the strength of this single introduction. I had been told that 'MS' was shy and shunned the media. I was also warned that her husband, Sadasivam, was a 'tough man' to deal with. I should be satisfied if I succeeded in making just a couple of formal portraits of the lady.

But my own thinking about what I wanted to do was different. I was not interested in mere portraits of 'MS'. I wanted to be with her, as part of the household for a day or two, observe the family and capture the charm of her personality in pictures. This appeared somewhat a tall order.

Soon after reaching Chennai, I talked with Sadasivam on the telephone and explained briefly about the assignment. Could I see him tomorrow and discuss details? 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 sounded not very encouraging. There was no other choice but talk to Atmanathan.

‘MS’ and Sadasivam lived on Tank Road in the Nungambakkam area of the city. Next morning, while driving, Meenakshi stopped on the way to buy some jasmine flowers, a favourite of ‘MS’. Atmanathan had been a trusted member of the ‘MS’ household for years. He managed all matters concerning the family. He sat in a separate one-room structure, his office, in the compound. A well grown creeper covered the asbestos roof and made the inside a little more comfortable. As we sipped coffee, I explained my mission. He said he would take us inside the room as soon as ‘MS’ 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 wall were many framed pictures. Gandhi, Nehru and C.R. were all there. Dressed in a simple cotton Saree, ‘MS’ came in with folded hands- a picture of quiet dignity and humility. Sadasivam also joined; MS’ looked radiant and egoless and Sadasivam erudite and saintly. Introductions over, I discussed the work to be done. 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”, said MS looking at me 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. I explained. ‘MS’ looked at her husband who nodded his head. It was agreed that we join her next morning and start work

At home, Kunjamma, as ‘MS’ is called, is just a modest and a self-effacing housewife. Paradoxically, she is an intensely private person and 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. They sparkle with every movement as if vying with her natural beauty.

A normal MS day begins early in the morning. It starts with a two-hour *puja* which includes recitation of *slokas* in deep concentration. She herself plucks the flowers required for the ritual and strings them into garlands. She also draws rangoli designs in her *puja* room, a particular design for every day of the week. After the *puja*, it is time for breakfast. Though there is a cook and a maid to help, ‘MS’ herself attends to the preparation of the breakfast every morning.

Her home has always been a ‘Open House’. The cook and the maid have been part of the household for years, The cook is adept at looking after the endless stream of friends and visitors who keep dropping in all through the day. The maid Vishalam joined the family as a girl of eight over 50 years ago. Today she is indispensable to the household. She is ever on the alert knowing every little requirement of ‘MS’. Anything to be remembered is generally passed on to Vishalam. She is her human computer. After the breakfast and attending to household matters, it is time for music practice. It is a two-hour session in the company of her daughter Radha, who joins her mother every morning.

When we reached her home the following day, ‘MS’ had just finished saying her prayers. She welcomed us standing at the door- a perfect picture with the door frame around her. Sadasivam was busy writing a letter to someone. We sat with ‘MS’. Sadasivam joined us with the letter in hand and read out for us a paragraph from it. “Subbulakshmi and I met on the 30th of June, 1936. She took four years to do her ‘MRS’. We got married in 1940, July 10. Within a few years thereafter, with the blessings of the Lord and the goodwill of the people, she took her ‘MS’ without so much as entering the portals of a college.” the letter said. We all had a hearty laugh.

The first picture to be taken was MS doing her puja. She took Meenakshi into her room and asked her to select a suitable Saree. She wore the Saree in a jiffy and was ready for the picture in her *puja* room. Strictly speaking, it was not a *puja* room. It was, in fact, an open cupboard in one corner of the hall.

There were two lovely wood carvings- one of Krishna and the other of Saraswathi. There was a big portrait of her mentor and guru, the elder Kanchi Kamakoti Sankaracharya. There were some other pictures too: a portrait of Shiridi Sai Baba and one of Shri Sathya Sai Baba. 'MS' sat on the floor in front of the rangoli and started her prayer. Within moments, she was in deep concentration. I had to ask my wife to tell her that the picture taking was over. "This is my difficulty. When once I start my prayers, I hear nothing else," she said apologetically.

The photography continued with me and Meenakshi visualizing a number of picture situations to project 'MS' as a simple housewife, who lives her day with much grace and no tantrums whatsoever. 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 action a few times for the sake of the camera. She did so without a murmur and I apologized 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. Then there was a coffee break. 'MS' went into the kitchen and produced some delicious dosas and hot coffee. She urged us to sit at the table and did the serving herself.

Picture sessions went on for the next two days. Sadasivam, whenever he was around, tried to make the entire exercise look lighter and enjoyable with his witty comments and useful suggestions. The 'tough man' image of his was nowhere in evidence. I found him a methodical and a practical person. A no-nonsense gentleman,

One morning, Radha, her daughter, joined the photo session. I wanted both the mother and daughter to sing together for a picture. Dressed in blue Kancheepuram sarees (the famous 'MS blue' as the colour is referred to among women in the South), they started a mini concert in the hall. "What do you want me to sing?" 'MS' asked me so graciously. I had not expected this windfall. 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 great delight. Then followed a *kriti* by Puranadaradasa - "Neene Anaatha Bandhu"- which 'MS' sang in flawless Kannada. I was totally unprepared for this feast. I abandoned the camera and lost myself in the melody around me.

Daughter of the celebrated Veena player, Shanmugavadivu, 'MS' inherited her melodious voice and rich range of imagery from her mother. A little known fact is that MS herself is an accomplished Veena player. One of the photos that attracted my attention in the hall was a beautiful study of her mother sitting with her Veena. I wanted 'MS' to sit with her Veena right below this framed picture so that I could make an interesting composition." I still have my mother's Veena, the same instrument you see in the picture. It is my priceless possession", she said and fetched the instrument from her room. "She was not merely my mother but also my music teacher. What little knowledge of music I possess today, I owe, in the first instance, to her", she said movingly. Sadasivam passed away in 1997. 'MS' is now on the wrong side of eighty and in frail health. She continues to live in Chennai in a rented house on modest means.

Honours, awards and titles have been showered on 'MS', including the Bharata Ratna. She remains unaffected by all the adulation. Jawaharlal Nehru was a great admirer of her music. He adorned her with the ultimate accolade: "Who am I, a mere Prime Minister, before you- the queen of song?" All that she was able to say on herself was "I am only a singer who just sings where I am asked to sing." ❖

(After the death of her husband Sadasivam in 1997, MS Subbulakshmi gave no more public performances. The couple were childless. Madurai Shanmugavadivu Subbulakshmi, born on September 16, 1916, died on December 11, 2004 after a brief illness.)