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Ministry of Information and Broadcasting
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Interview of Screenwriter and Filmmaker A S Nagarajan of Tamil Cinema by Randor Guy

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Q : This is Randor Guy interviewing Mr. A S Nagarajan, one of the old timers and senior technicians of Tamil Cinema. He has been in films since 1937 and has had a varied and interesting career in South Indian cinema over a period of nearly 13 years. He began as an actor in National Movietone in Kilpauk, Madras and has worked with pioneers like Raja Sandow, C V Raman, T G Raghavacharya, S Soundararajan, T R Sudaram of Modern Theatres and many others. He has been an associate director and later directed films on his own. And one of the successful films is a Modern Theatres production called 'Pasavalai', a box office success and also highly critically acclaimed. In this M K Radha plays the main role. Mr. Nagarajan has also worked in Srilanka or Ceylon where he made films. This interview is first of its kind, takes place in Madras at his residence in Thyagaraya Nagar on the morning of Monday, January 21st 1991. He speaks both in English as well as Tamil.

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Q : Greetings Mr. Nagarajan. I am happy to have met you. You said you were planning to go to your native place. The festivals are going on and you are having a busy time. In spite of all this, you agreed to be part of this interview for the Oral history project. I thank you on behalf of the National Film Archive of India, Pune and its director Mr.

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P K Nair. He has been instrumental in initiating this idea. I personally thank you from my side. I must convey my sense of gratitude and thanks to you sir. Whatever experiences you have undergone during the past several years, you can tell, either in English or Tamil or in both languages, there is no problem. The idea behind this project is that, we don't have many personalities like you now. We can know about history only by talking to people like you. The things you share might not be pleasing for many. But that is how history is. It may not be good always. So, you don't need to hold back anything. You can share whatever you feel like. This will be kept confidential. This will be used mainly by historians and researchers. And this will be preserved forever. You may not hide anything. On that note, let me begin.

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Q: What is A S in your name? What is your native place?

A: A stands for Adoor Agaram. It is the name of the place. S stands for my father, Srinivasa Iyengar.

Q: How did you get the name Nagarajan? It is usually used by the Iyers.

A: Yes. Usually, we are not named that. When I was a four-day old infant, a snake got into the delivery ward. On seeing that, my grandfather immediately said 'Nagarajan' and prayed that he would name me that. He could have said 'Sheshadri' but that is what came to his mouth at that moment. However, I was named as Venkataramana Sharma as well.

Q: Please tell something about your early education.

A: I studied in Chidambaram. What now stands as Annamalai University was then Ramaswamy Chettiyar school. I studied there for 10 years till SSLC there and passed. After that I got into professional line.

Q: What do you mean by professional line?

A: I started off as a Role supervisor. In Chidambaram area.

Q: Was it a government job?

A: It was called Board, a quasi-government one.

Q: How did you come into Cinema?

A: When I was young, I used to see the serialized films that used to come to our tent theatres in our village. I was thrilled by it. For a long time, I didn't know that people were acting in it. I thought they were doing something with the paintings. When a friend told me about it, I started feeling like acting in one. We were thinking that if we act, we can go inside forests and shoot with revolvers. That was the first interest. But then, we didn't have much chance for it. I was working as a role supervisor. After sometime, I left that job and started as a Teacher -Manager at a school near our village.

Q: Where was this?

A: A village near Adoor Agaram.

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Q: Was that in Chidambaram as well?

A: It was in Cuddalore district. Even Adoor Agaram was in Cuddalore. I studied in Chidambaram. My life was like half time freedom fighter, half time cinema director. When I was in school in 1929, the 'Go back Simon' movement had begun. I was involved in it and I got some blows. In 1931, the Salt Satyagraha happened in Madras Marina beach and I participated in it. They said they won't take me in Congress but anyhow I was there. They didn't arrest me there but they let loose some horse over the protestors and I was injured in that stampede. In 1931, another protest happened. At that time, there was an order to do light lathi charge under the knee cap. The Malabar Special police hit me under the knee cap. I was angered by it and started wearing khadi from then on. Then I joined the profession in 1932 as the role supervisor. I worked for one year or so. The elections came at that time and I joined the union office. It was a competition between Natesa Mudaliyar and Muthuraman Mudaliyar for the post of MP. Muthuraman was in Congress. Natesan in Justice party. The ballot box was kept in the union office.

Q: How did you come to cinema?

A : I had a relative in Madras. The owner of National Movietone was one Chidambaram Chettiyar. A confidante of him Mr. Venkatachari was a relative of mine.

Q: Where was this National Movietone?

A: Poonamalle High road, Kilpauk.

Q: Was it opposite to Pachayappa college?

A: No, a bit away from Pachayappa college.

Q: There was one Kushaldas Gardens.

A: Yes, near that. It was a big bungalow. It was half glass and half galvanized sheet.

Q: How many floors?

A: One floor. But they had everything inside it. Even a lab.

Q: Who was running it?

A: It was run by his relative, Chinnappa Chettiyar.

Q: And what about technicians?

A: Jiten Banerjee was there, Dinshaw...

Q: Was Nagoor there?

A: No, he wasn't there.

Q: Did he join later?

A: No. He was not there.

Q: Because Nagoor once told me that he assisted Mani in the Setting department.

A: Mani was there I know. Nagoor was later in Kilpauk.

Q: That was Newtone. Before that he was here. He told me.

A: Then I would have not met him there. Other than Jiten and Dinshaw, there was Telang. Appa Telang.

Q: He was a Maharashtrian. A cameraman?

A: Yes. He had an eye sight problem. But he was a good cameraman.

Q: In National Movietone, you joined as an actor. Which was your first film?

A: Rajamohan.

Q: Which year was this?

A: 1937.

Q: Who directed this?

A: It was directed by Sethna. Fram Sethna.

Q: The Parsi filmmaker.

A: Yes. He worked as a director in National Movietone.

Q: What kind of film was Rajamohan?

A: It was a social picture.

Q: What role did you play in it?

A: P U Chinnappa worked in it. He was heroine's brother and the friend of the villain.

Q: Who was the hero?

A: K P Kesavan hero and A K Rajalakshmi was the heroine. P U Chinnappa played a friend to the villain. K K Perumal played the villain.

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Q: Yes, I've seen him in Manonmani. He worked for Modern Theatres a lot.

A: He is a very good person. Like how M N Nambiyar is a great man in life and a villain

on screen.

Q: A nice man who played a villain on screen.

A: Yes. Because of that film, I became a close friend of P U Chinnappa. Not just in that film but we were friends in life too. He was staying in a room in Aminjikkarai.

Q: Not when he was married to Sakunthala.

A: No. that happened much later. So, I would go to his room and he had a tall mirror – as tall as a man-in his room. We both would stand in front of that mirror and practice acting.

Q: I see that is very interesting.

A: He also used to sing very well.

Q: He had a unique voice and a peculiar style of singing, isn't it?

A: Yes. And he was a good actor as well. Actors in those days would sing well of course but not everyone could act well. P U Chinnappa was excellent in all of that.

Q: Can you tell me more about P U Chinnappa?

A: I never had any relation with him before the film and after the film. We met again when doing Manonmani.

Q: I see you didn't have any contact between that. In 1937, he was not a hero.

A: Yes. He was not a hero yet. One more thing was that, Raja Sandow made a film called Minor Rajamani. It was shot in National Movietone.

Q: Did Jupiter make that film under Olympic Pictures?

A: Yes. Olympic Pictures. You seem to know everything. When they are making a film, they won't let anyone in.

Q: Who? Raja Sandow?

A: No Olympic Pictures in general. The thing is that there most of the actors in those

days were not educated. Some actresses didn't even know how to do a signature.

Q: I know, thumb impression.

A: Yes. And somebody has to prompt the dialogues from the side as they didn't know how to read. Since I was educated, he took a liking to me. He thought I was a graduate though I wasn't.

Q: You worked with him in Minor Rajamani?

A: I didn't work with him but I helped him. We would discuss a few things. You may say Raja Sandow is my guru. If not for him, I would have not come to cinema. After Rajamohan, they started a film called Punjab Kesari. With the same team.

Q: With K P Kesavan, Rajalakshmi, Fram Sethna...

A: Yes. But they didn't have Sethna. They had some other director.

Q: What film was this Punjab Kesari?

A: It was a play by the Original Boys company. It is a very good play.

Q: I see. What was the story like?

A: It is something like the hero is hiding from the burglars. Like a modern-day Robin Hood. With a mask and all.

Q: It was an action film like a Robin Hood kind of story.

A: Yes. I asked for a role in that film. A character called Sundararajan that had more dialogues than my previous role. Chellappa Chettiyar said they can't give me a big role like that.

Q: What role did you play in Rajamohan?

A: A friend to the villain. A small role. I got 25 rupees salary. I used to go to the studio every day from Perambur.

Q: How did you go?

A: Walking 4 miles.

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Q: There was no transport facility then.

A: Nothing. You know the actual call sheet in those days was that they would paste a copy of the sheet in the studio. The actors and technicians would be marked in it. We should go and see the notice board ourselves and come for work according to the schedule marked for us.

Q: So, the artistes are not told in person?

A: No. some main people are told but others have to look at the notice board to know. Artistes also obeyed back then. Now we have to obey what they say. So, I was worried that I didn't get that role. Raja Sandow was doing a film called 'Vishnuleela'. I heard they were casting for that film.

Q: Have you seen the movie Minor Rajamani? Was M K Radha the hero?

A: No Chinnappa was the hero.

Q: For Minor Rajamani? M K Radha said he did. Because I did an interview of the same kind with M K Radha.

A: Maybe. The thing is T S Gnanam was introduced in Minor Rajamani.

Q: Was she a stage artiste?

A: No, she was brought straight from Pollachi for this film. She did very well for this film.

Q: She used to look sexy, didn't she?

A: Yes in a few. There was song in Minor Rajamani called 'Kolathankarai meenkala'. She sung that song and it became a hit.

Q: You didn't act in Minor Rajamani?

A: No, I didn't. The Vishnuleela office was there on Whites Road at that time at a

building owned by Art Gramophone company.

Q: It wasn't a European firm at that time?

A: It was a European firm. Carlmac (inaudible) and Smith, two Europeans were running it. They were very interested in films.

Q: Where was the Vishnuleela office?

A: In Royapettah. Not an office, a production house. Over there, Raja Sandow was selecting artistes. Somebody took me to Raja Sandow and introduced me. He said "You puny creature. Get out!".

Q: But didn't you know him already?

A: Yes, but he had forgotten about me. I froze hearing what he said. A moment later he said "Oh it was you. I couldn't recognize. I am selecting actors here". I asked him "Can't you see me act at least, Raja?". He was stunned to hear that. He asked me "What can you do?". I said "Any emotion you like Sir. I can act it" he asked me "Do you mean what you said?". I replied "Yes".

Q: Raja could speak good English?

A: Oh yes. Very well. Both Hindi and English. On hearing what I said he decided to test me. That was the place where 100 or 150 artistes were staying together. Very big building.

Q: Where was that building?

A: When you take a right to Whites Road from Mount road you can now see a temple. It was there. There were plenty of rooms in there. The ground floor rooms were for women. We all stayed above in a dormitory kind of setup. The test he gave me was this "You are a penniless pauper in a village. Your mother is in deathbed. You go around the village to borrow some milk. But nobody lends you. When you return empty handed, your mother asks you 'Son can you give me some milk?' What will you do? Do it now!"

Q: He wanted you to act that scene.

A: Yes. I made up my own lines and started performing. I cried and fell on ground. The 150 people around were all stunned because they were not able to deliver lines, fearing him. He is not an ordinary man, a great man. Only a few people like Ramanathan knew how to be normal around him. People were stunned. Raja was smiling at me.

Q: You spoke the dialogues in English?

A: Yes, his question was in English and my words too were in English. He asked “Do you call this acting?” I confidently said “Yes Sir”. He said “If you shout like this, your mother will die” I replied “I think I can correct myself”. He said “Alright book him”. And he immediately booked me. I got 10 rupees as a monthly salary.

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Q: How was the cost of living back then? If you were getting 10 rupees as salary, how cheap were things?

A: No, everything was provided by the company itself. They had all facilities. I was practically saving the money every month. And he would call me to play a role if someone was absent for the rehearsal. One day the Narada character was absent and I took the place.

Q: Who was to play that character?

A: CK Jayaraman, a violinist.

Q: Oh yes, the one with the tuft?

A: No, this one was different. The music teacher. He was handsome too. I started speaking lines I had made up on the spot. Raja Sandow would pat my back for that. He was a strong man, that pat was too strong for me. He was well built, a real Sandow. That was one incident, after which I was called ‘all round character’. He was very fond of me. Another incident was that...

Q: Yes please. You may share as many stories as you wish.

A : Movie Herald SK Iyer, Sunday Times Ramaiya, Srinivasa Rao had all come one day.

Q: Movie Herald was a magazine, right? Where was it published from?

A: From here only.

Q: And whose was it?

A : One SG Iyer. His son a small boy was acting as Krishna. The music director later became popular...I forgot his name.

Q: Rajeshwara Rao?

A: Yes. He acted as Balarama.

Q: He ought to have been a boy then.

A : Yes indeed. Raja Sandow played three roles in it. Hiranyakashipu, Ravana and Shishupalan. There was a requirement to stand in for the Ravana role and I said I would. Raja brushed it off. I said it was just a rehearsal. He said he'd rip my skin if I didn't do well. I said I was ready to lose anything just to work for him. Then his wife Leelabai was also present.

Q: Was she an actress as well?

A: Yes. She was a good actress. She played a role in Chandrakantha.

Q: In Savukkadi Chandrakantha?

A : Yes. She played the mother to the hero. She was playing Mandodari. Raja felt she was too big a Mandodari for the Ravana and replaced her with another actress. The scene was that Sita is in Ashokavana and Ravana is pleading. The lines were 'I've heard women are soft hearted. But you seem to be so stubborn in my case. If you accept my love, I will bring all the worlds to your feet and remain your slave forever.' I tweaked it a bit when I said that. I added a line 'Your rejection has made me sad. Look at how thin I've become'. The entire set started laughing and clapping for it. Raja also

found it funny and from then on, he had a good impression about me.

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Q: Who played Sita?

A: A girl called Lakshmi. She didn't act after that. Saroja who later acted in Kovalan as Madhavi, acted as Radha in that.

Q: Who later became Mrs. Raghunath,

A: Yes. She was very young 15 or 16. Poor girl had some sexy dialogues then.

Q: What was this film Vishnuleela?

A: It was about the three avatars of Vishnu.

Q: Who wrote it? Himself?

A: There was a team. There was a Pandit and one SK Iyer who was an assistant director under Raja Sandow who would help in writing. Sundar Rao who was an actor would write for him. He acted in Savukkadi Chandrakantha as a villain. Then there was an assistant director to Raja Sandow who used to write. There was a journalist Meenakshi Sundaram.

Q: He is a good friend of mine.

A: He was the one who taught me the fundamentals of film.

Q: He is a knowledgeable man.

A: Yes.

Q: What role did he play?

A: He played Lakshmana.

Q: Who played Rama?

A: Chandrakantha Ramanathan. One day, I don't know what happened, the actor

who played Lakshmana eloped with a girl.

Q: Lakshmana was missing!

A: Yes. So immediately Raja said 'We have our all-round actor. Cast him'. So, I was cast in that role.

Q: You played Lakshmana?

A: Yes.

Q: And also, Ravana?

A: No. That was just for rehearsals. In the film I played Lakshmana. The funny thing was that, we were shooting in Pallavaram. It was very sunny and our feet were burning. What to do, Rama and Lakshmana can't wear slippers. There was an actor who played Hanuman called Sandow Natesa Pillai. He was also a well-built man, like a disciple of Raja Sandow. I went and told Raja that according to Ramayana, Hanuman is supposed to carry us and not allow us to walk barefoot. We made him carry us and we had fun with that. Raja had a good image of me. In those days, actors should qualify with their singing skills. I sang a Thyagaraja Kriti and got my selection. Anai Vaidyanathan was in charge of the music. One day while singing, Raja noticed that my voice was breaking. As you grow up, the voice starts changing. He said "It won't be right for you to act. You be my assistant director." Having said so, he gave his clapboard to me. It was the duty of the assistant director to do the clap.

Q: You started as an assistant director?

A: Yes. In Vishnuleela, though unofficially so. I was gaining a good name with him. Then he went away.

Q: We were talking about Savukkadi Chandrakantha. It was a sensational film of 1936. It was directed by Raja Sandow. P U Chinnappa played a fairly major role. There is hardly anyone who has seen the film. Can you tell something about that film? I tried to locate the print. I think it is lost.

A: Yes, in that film T R B Rao acted as a masked...

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Q: Who is this T R B Rao, a stage artiste?

A: Yes. He and K P Kesavan were all one group. He sports a mask in the film and punishes the villain.

Q: Who was the villain, Madathipathi?

A: The main villain was played by P U Chinnappa. Kali N Rathnam played the other. He uses the word Yogabyasam for Sex.

Q: Like Euphemism for sexual intercourse.

A: Yes. A guest visits the villain and he would say “Swamival, choose a girl and conduct the yoga class”. This ‘Swamival Swamival’ dialogue became popular after the film among men.

Q: Brahmins must have objected?

A: Brahmins didn’t, but mutt heads did. Kali N Rathnam was given that kind of a hairstyle. That of a madathipathi.

Q: I see, it was a satire on the scandalous life of the mutt heads.

A: Yes. In that film P U Chinnappa is beaten with the whip. TRB Rao uses the whip to beat the villains. Leelabai, the wife of Raja Sandow played the mother of the hero. She goes mad when she doesn’t find her son.

Q: Who played the hero?

A: I think K T Koshalam.

Q: Who was Chandrakantha?

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Q: Can you tell me more about Chandrakantha?

A: Financially it was a very big success. It was a blockbuster hit film of that time. It

earned 11 Lacs in those days.

Q: 11 Lacs. What must have been the investment?

A: Maybe 60,000 or 70,000. It brought great fame to Raja Sandow.

Q: It was made by Jupiter Pictures, right? Somu and Moideen.

A: Yes. Olympic was also by them.

Q: I know. That was a different name that's all.

A: Yes. It also gave P U Chinnappa a good name. He had sung a song in that.

Q: He was the villain in that.

A: Yes.

Q: What role did Kali N Rathnam play?

A: He was the Madathipathi.

Q: Sahasranamam said N S Krishnan played a role in it. What role did he play? That of a pimp?

A: He started in Menaka. Had a good role in it. Then Sathi Leelavathi, Chandrakantha. I think he played a pimp in it. Something like that.

Q: You didn't play any role in Savukkadi Chandrakantha?

A: No. I wasn't in the field then. I came in 1937.

Q: Where was this film Vishnuleela shot?

A: It was shot in Motion Picture combines. The one that is Gemini now.

Q: The one started by K Subramaniam. Where did you shoot outdoors?

A: We shot in Pallavaram, Ennore, Tada, Ramanathapuram. There is an interesting story. In a scene, I was playing a rishi. Sporting a beard. Two other people played Rishis along with me. One was Jagadeesan, an actor. There was one actor called Kitta.

He acted in films like Konjum Salangai. C P Kitta. He played one Rishi. We were all Raja's pets. The scene was that the Asuras come to beat up the Rishis. The art department people had arranged for soft wood blocks so that the actors were not hurt. Unfortunately, one of that was real wood. I got beaten up with that log. I was shouting that it hurt but they all assumed that I was acting. My body was swollen. It was a funny incident. After that, Raja started directing Telugu films.

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Q: Which films did he make in Telugu?

A: Choodamani. With Pushpavalli.

Q: Was it his own film?

A: Yes. We asked him to make it in Tamil with all of us. We told him we didn't want remuneration for that. It didn't happen though. Choodamani was a failure. It made big losses for him. After that he moved to Coimbatore. Then once in a while, we met but he couldn't make it.

Q: He died with a broken heart isn't it? In 1942, after he was removed from the film Sivakavi?

A: The thing is Raja Sandow used to drink alcohol. He used to drink a lot. When he was writing a scene, the whisky would be kept mixed in the center of the room on a table. He would keep dictating and I would write the scenes. I would tell him often 'Why are you ruining your health with alcohol?'. I have that kind of freedom with him. Whenever I would say so, he would act as if he was about to beat me and I would act as if I was running from him. It was a play between us. He would say 'I get ideas only if I drink. I am drinking for my profession.' He stopped drinking towards the end. And some people say he died because of that too.

Q: Because he stopped drinking?

A: Yes.

Q: What about his family?

A: He had one. Swarna his wife. A Bengaluru brahmin. She was a vegetarian. Raja was non- vegetarian. They lived together but separate because of that.

Q: Where was he staying?

A: Lakshmipuram, near Lloyds Road.

Q: Did he have any children through her?

A: No. not with the other lady also. He had a brother called Shyama. He was also an actor. He was with him in Calcutta. But when he died, he was a poor man.

Q: How successful was Vishnuleela?

A: It was average. As the social subjects started coming up. Films that spoke against God and worship started coming up. Mythological themed ones suffered a setback.

Q: As early as 1930s?

A: Yes. In 1938.

Q: With the coming of Justice party.

A: Justice party, Dravida Kazhagam

Q : Dravida Kazhagam was later. It was the self-respect movement. Ramasamy Naicker was there

A : Yes. After Vishnuleela, I went back to my village. I was involved in the election propaganda activities

Q: You were politically involved with Congress.

A : Yes. Though I learned Sanskrit a lot, I had a good knowledge of Tamil. I could understand Sangam literature. I used to write poetry.

Q: You were also a poet?

A: To a certain extent. I was researching on Prabandam and the story of Thirumangai

Azhvar fascinated me. I found the story to have socialistic elements.

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Q: What was socialistic about it?

A: He was a Robin Hood of sorts. His wife Kumuthavalli Nachiyar tells him that she will marry him only if he serves food for the needy. He would deplete his entire wealth behind that. One day when he gets captured by the king and let free, his wife tells him to either earn or rob, but somehow bring money. He turns a robber and he would sit on a tree waiting for people to pass by so that he can rob them. However, he would not rob morsels of food or mangalsutra of the travellers. One day, the Lord Himself comes to test him. At a place called Thirunagari, Thirumangai Azhwar lays in wait on a peepul tree to waylay the travellers. The Lord comes in the disguise of a marriage party, with Vishnu as the groom and Lakshmi as the bride. He waylays them and asks to take out all their belongings. The Lord takes out all their jewels and ties them up in a cloth sack. One ornament he is unable to remove. When the robber tries to pick the sack, he realises he is unable to. He realizes a spell has been cast and asks them to release him from the spell. And then the Lord spells out the Ashtakshara mantra. At once, the robber transforms into a Saint. From then on, he goes to 108 spiritual destinations singing spiritual songs. It is said that he had even travelled to Nepal.

Q: What was his period?

A: I think 5000 years ago. He had been to Badrinath also. I was fascinated by the story and decided to write it for a film.

Q: You wrote a treatment for it.

A: Yes. I gave it a socialistic touch.

Q: You gave a modern twist to it.

A: It is the same story but some dialogues would be socialistic in nature. It had scenes where people playing cards would be talking socialism as sort of interludes. I was looking for a producer to make the film. Then I saw Soundararajan had announced

Thirumangai Azhvar film. I didn't know about it. I saw it in a paper and got to know about it. I immediately packed my script and sent it to him via post. With a note saying "You may use this". I got a reply from Soundararaja Iyengar saying "Looking at the way you have written, you seem to have technical knowledge. Come and work with me as an assistant director".

Q: I see. Where was he then?

A: He went to Guindy to Vels Pictures.

Q: From Eldams road he went to Guindy by then.

A: Yes. He gave accommodation for me in the studio.

Q: I see. You stayed inside the studio.

A: Yes. Those buildings are still intact. Others got modified into something else. The one where I was staying is still the same. So, when he asked me, I went and worked as an assistant in that film.

Q : You worked as an assistant director in Thirumangai Azhvar produced by Soundararajan...

A: Yes. That was the first job in cinema. Officially the first.

Q: You got the name in the credit.

A : Yes. At that time, one Santhanakrishna Naidu was the dialogue writer from Madurai. He was a playwright and used to write songs. We became good friends. We bonded over Tamil literature.

Q: He was a Tamil scholar.

A: Yes. Even in Vishnuleela, there was a dialogue writer named C A Lakshmanadas. He was a true 'self-respect movement' person. He was very fond of me. We bonded over Tamil. He would warm the water in the morning for me to bathe. We were that close. There an interesting thing that happened on the sets of Vishnuleela. Lakshamanadas asked Raja Sandow why there was a partition in the eating hall for

brahmins and non-brahmins. There was a picture of Lord Ram in the dining hall. Raja Sandow assembled all the brahmins of the cast and crew before that picture and asked “Who amongst you doesn’t smoke, drink or have affairs with women?” Everyone walked away laughing as they had done at least one of those transgressions. Only Narayana Rao and self were left.

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Q: Who was Narayana Rao?

A: He was a yogi. After shoot, he would go back to his cave for meditation.

Q: He was an actor and a yogi?

A: Yes. Raja asked us our opinion about the partition. I said it should be removed. After that, it was removed.

Q: I see. There was this practice of having Brahmin section and Non-Brahmin section on shoot? There was this caste division?

A: Yes.

Q: It was there on Vishnuleela set as well? Very interesting fact that you are telling me. Nobody has told me this so far.

A: Yes. But still some brahmins used to sit separately and eat. Lakshmanadas once asked Raja Sandow “Vasan in Gemini is employing Brahmins also. Why can’t you employ non- brahmins?”. Raja replied he didn’t take people based on caste but for the benefit of the film. He would say, “Find someone who can beat Meenakshi Sundaram and Nagarajan. I’ll employ him”. Meenakshi Sundaram was also a very good actor. After that, when I started assisting Soundararaja Iyengar in Thirumangai Azhvar, Santhanakrishna Naidu was the dialogue writer. Whenever I mentioned playback, Raja Sandow never believed me. By that time, the playback system had come to India. People had to sing on their own. If Narada had to sing, he will sing and walk and the accompanying orchestra would come alongside in a bullock cart. The box will also move along recording the song. Such was the practice. When I told him

about the playback system, he said I was blabbering after reading something somewhere. But in Thirumangai Azhvar, they had used it. Vel Pictures got it. But it wasn't a playback system actually.

Q: Would they use projector?

A: The Moviola that you see in editing studios, they brought that to the set. And it would be played 1,2,3,4 and clap.

Q: There was no playback machine. They used a Moviola?

A: Yes.

Q: Very interesting. And that would be taken back after the shoot?

A: Yes. The 1,2,3,4 would appear on it as well. At that time, editor Chandru would also come to help.

Q: Who worked in Gemini. Was he in Vel Pictures at that time?

A: No. Somebody called Natarajan was doing it. He was a corporation officer and an editor.

Q: I see, dual profession.

A: Yes. He was very slow. "Takes a lot of time. Don't hurry" was written at the editing studio.

Q: That was a board there?

A: That was their motto. He was a good man.

Q: They used to have a board like that in the editing studio?

A: Yes. Many studios had that board. It was there in Vel pictures and in other places too.

Q: Why would they do that?

A: It was done like that because editing is something you have to be very careful

about. A small mistake can cause the film. As they were handling materials like the film negative, they put a board like that. So, he was doing that and Chandru would help now and then. One day, Santhanakrishna Naidu and Soundararaja Iyengar had some misunderstanding. Kothamangalam Seenu was the hero and K T Rukmini heroine. If Kothamangalam Seenu is there Subbu would be around.

Q: How was he involved?

A: He was not officially involved. He would add a few things here and there on the sly. Listening to that Iyengar would ask Santhanakrishna Naidu to change the dialogues. This angered Naidu. He was a big dramatist. He took it to heart. One day that grew into a heated argument and he had to stay away because of that. K V Mahadevan you must be knowing, very famous music director.

00:50:52:01

Q: I know. He worked in my film.

A: There is an interesting story. There was a Krishanaiah who was running Kannaiah company.

Q: He was Kanniah's brother?

A: Yes. He had a drama company. In that company, K V Mahadevan was an artiste. K V Mahadevan quit the company when it couldn't pay its artistes anymore. Santhanakrishna was a good friend of Mahadevan. He requested Santhanam to get him some work. Unfortunately, he wasn't in good terms with Soundararaja Iyengar at that time. So, he couldn't recommend him. So, he called me and asked me to take K V Mahadevan to Iyengar. K V Mahadevan used to sing very well. So, I took him to Iyengar and introduced him as a singer actor who was part of the Kannaiah company. I told him to consider him for a role. There were plenty of roles like Thirumangai Azhvar's disciples. He could also sing for chorus sections. Iyengar asked him how much salary he expected. He said 50 rupees. That was a big amount for Iyengar. He said he couldn't afford that much but at my intervention, agreed to give 15 rupees a month and food and accommodation in the studio. That was how K V Mahadevan

came into films. Many years later when he became a successful music director, we met in Salem. He said “What is this Sir, I have become successful and you are still an assistant director?”. How he became music director is also an interesting story. There were these famous musicians called Alathur Brothers. There was a mridangam player in their group called Panju. He played mridangam for Thirumangai Azhvar. There was a violinist called Balakrishna Sastry. He was the music director for namesake. But Sami Ranganathan was there. He will do most of the work. Balakrishna Sastry was a bit old fashioned. K V Mahadevan became friends with Panju. That was his starting in music.

Q: But he was not the official music director.

A: No, he was just an artiste at that time. Balakrishna Sastry was officially the music director. Ranganathan was the harmonist.

Q: Kothamangalam Seenu was the hero in Thirumangai Azhvar. I have interviewed Kothamangalam Seenu also. He has also spoken to me about that film. I don't remember much. What do you remember of K T Rukmini?

A: I remember K T Rukmini very well. She belongs to my place.

Q: Where, Cuddalore?

A: Near Kurinjipadi. A village called Adoor Agaram. There was another place called Kullanchavadi. She came from there.

Q: K in her name stands for Kullanchavadi?

A: Yes. Her mother was also there with her.

Q: Was she a devadasi?

A: Not exactly. They were of low class.

00:55:01:15

Q: But they were not from the Devadasi community.

A: No. There were no Devadasis in Kullanchavadi. I had introduced a person called

Pazhanisamy. He played the girl's father in it. K T Rukmini started complaining that I wasn't engaging in any conversation with her and that I was acting proud. Then the director told her that I was a shy person and hence so. From then on, I was called Rishyashrunga.

Q: Can you tell something about K T Rukmini as an actress, as a person?

A: As an actress, she had done stunt pictures. She was a stunt queen.

Q: In this, she played a saree clad woman, didn't she?

A: Yes. In fact, I draped the saree for her. Because it was a brahmin madisaar style of wearing. No one knew how to drape it in that style. So, I had to help her. They all acted well. There was a girl called Pankajam who acted in Iyengar's Mahabharatham too. Pankajam acted as Mahalakshmi. Lakshmanan, a hero actor from Bombay Pictures also played Maha Vishnu in it. He was in one of those films with M K Radha. Lakshmanan and I became good friends. He once requested me to write a story for him to act. I wrote a story for him called 'Uthami'.

Q: I see. It later became a film too.

A: Yes. I had given him the entire script with dialogues as he wanted to first make it into a play. I had gone to the jail for my part in the freedom fight movement. In the meantime, he owned the script in his name and found a producer to make the film.

Q: And you had no idea at all?

A: No. I got to know later. Somebody advised me to file a case. Another person said 'Why to waste time behind all this? He stole one of your stories but you have the brain that generates more such stories'.

Q: Very good advice he gave you.

A: He was a good friend. His wife had also acted.

Q: Who directed Uthami do you remember?

A: I don't remember.

Q: Did Lakshmanan act in it?

A: Yes. In that film, the police come and measure people.

Q: What do they measure?

A: When a case is reported of a man missing, they start measuring people of that height.

Q: Was that the comedy in it?

A: Yes. I had written a humorous climax in it. The situation was that the marriage has to be stopped. On one side a marriage is happening. In the opposite house, funeral rites are going on. The same priest tries to manage between both the houses. At the auspicious hour, when the mantra is chanted, the call from the other house reminds him of the funeral ritual mantra and he confuses between the two. People start kicking him. After Thirumangai Azhvar, they had planned Rishyashringan, with me in mind; but just then, I went to jail.

Q: Was Thirumangai Azhvar a successful picture?

A: It was a moderate success. Not a loss. In those days, a film would cost 30,000 - 40,000.

Q: The cost of production.

A: Yes. C V Raman would do it in 20,000 or so.

Q: I know. I recently met Honnappa Bhagavathar in Bangalore and did a similar programme with him. He has said some hilarious incidents on record about how C V Raman directs a film, how he talks to artistes etc. It was very funny. He would say 'If there is profit, it is good. Are we creating a masterpiece here otherwise?'

A: I worked with him too as an assistant director later.

Q: We'll come back to the logical order. What did you do after Thirumangai Azhvar?

A: I was arrested and I went to jail for my participation in freedom movement.

Q: When was this?

A: 1941. 1940 was Thirumangai Azhvar. When I was in the jail, Uthami was stolen. I was fortunate to have worked with Jawaharlal Nehru. In Cuddalore, as a personal volunteer. For 2 days. Do you know Mr. Omanthur Ramaswamy Reddiar?

01:00:25:02

Q: Yes, he was a Chief Minister once upon a time.

A: Yes. He was very fond of me. Would call me 'double-trouble' because I used to argue. Nehru was to attend a meeting in Cuddalore. He was supposed to be there at 7 o'clock but it was already 11. He wasn't there yet. So Omanthur told me "Hey double-trouble! you go and speak something funny to keep people entertained." I gave a speech and people were enjoying it. At one moment, they were all clapping. I thought it was for me but I turned around to see Nehru who was tapping my shoulders.

Q: You must have been absolutely thrilled.

A: Yes. I then worked with him for the next 2 days as a volunteer. Indira Gandhi had accompanied him then. As a very young girl, 15 or 16 she must have been.

Q: Teenager.

A: Yes. I've had such interesting experiences. 1942 was the beginning of Quit India movement. There was a communist influence in that and we didn't become part of it after a point. I went to Modern Theatres. I went and met D V Chari in 1942.

Q: The famous dialogue writer. Not many know about him.

A: Of course. A very great person.

Q: Where is he from?

A: Srivilliputhur.

Q: I see. He is Varadachari?

A: Yes. He was working in a government office. He was also a journalist. He came to

Modern theatres to write.

Q: Did he come directly to Modern Theatres?

A: Yes.

Q: But Kumudhini told me he wrote Mathrubhumi before that?

A: Yes. I am sorry. He wrote Mathrubhumi which was a big success. After that he came to Modern Theatres. He wrote films like Bhakta Gowri.

Q: With U R Jeevarathinam

A: Yes.

Q: I see Bhakta Gowri was D V Chari

A: Yes. Also, Uthamaputhiran was D V Chari.

Q: Starring M.D Rajamma and P U Chinnappa. He was the writer?

A: Yes.

Q: That is the film that made Chinnappa a big box office hero. The subject of Man in the Iron Mask.

A: Yes. And then Manonmani was popular.

Q: That was later. In 1943.

A: Yes. I've worked in Sathi Sukanya and Manonmani.

Q: You went to D V Chari. Which year was this?

A: 1942.

Q: You were already in Modern Theatres.

A : Yes. Bhakta Gowri was completed by then. I had written a story called 'Vajradhari'. Taken from Bhagavatham, a puranic story. I tweaked it and added a message in it. I always write with a message in it. I don't write otherwise. They liked

the story and took me to TRS. But he wasn't impressed. He said "This kind of mythological setting won't work today". He asked me to work with him. I worked with him for Manonmani also.

Q: As an assistant director?

A: Not officially, like a private assistant. Engaged by him not by the studio. I lived with him at his place, ate there and worked for him.

Q: He was in Salem then?

A: Yes. In a Muslim neighbourhood called Park street. I was living with him assisting him in writing work.

Q: What was your first picture with Modern Theatres?

A: Not directly with Modern Theatres but with Chari. I worked in Manonmani and as an actor I worked first on Sathi Sukanya.

Q: When was this made?

A: Before Manonmani.

01:05:00:24

Q: Who all were the actors in that film?

A: Honnappa Bhagavathar, T R Rajakumari.

Q: Was it a mythological tale?

A: Yes, based on the story of Chyavana muni. You see this Chyavanaprash- he was the one who made that. It is about how one does tapasya to please Chyavana muni. Honnappa Bhagavathar acted in it.

Q: What role did Rajakumari play in it?

A: She played the heroine. She was Sukanya in it.

Q: She was the muni's daughter?

A : No, she is the king's daughter. She marries the muni played by Honnappa Bhagavathar. I have acted in that along with another actor.

Q: Who directed Sathi Sukanya?

A : T R Sundaram directed. D V Chari wrote the dialogues. That is my entry to Modern Theatres. I used to write regularly. I got a note from Soundararaja Iyengar. I had taken that to D V Chari. That 'I was a very good dialogue writer with a specialty in comedy'.

Q: Who acted in the comedy scenes in Thirumangai Azhwar?

A : M R Subramaniam, Madura Achari. He asked me 'It seems you write comedies well. Is that so?' I said 'yes. I can write it in any kind of situation'. He said 'Fine. This is a funeral house. Write a comic situation here, it should be acceptable'. He gave me a test like that. I made up a situation where the dead body is lying on the bier made of leaf. That is the ritual and the practice is that one should keep 7 leaves of grass on it. The man who had to make the bier keeps 8 instead of 7. The man becomes angry on the person who made it. He says "You fool! It should be 7 not 8". The person replies "I see. I didn't know about it. When you die, I will keep only 7 on your bier". Everyone laughed for that. Reading this scene, he said "You must be named Humour Monster". Our friendship grew from there. He was like a brother to me, much like the bonding between Duryodhana and Karna. When I was living with him at his place, he usually wouldn't take me when he went to the studio. I would be given some writing job. There would be a room in the verandah. I would be sitting there writing the whole day. His first wife was gone. His second wife, Pattamma was a young girl then. About 20. I was 27 then. He was around 40- 42 then. When I would write she would lie next to me with a pillow, in such close proximity. He had that much trust in me that he never misunderstood us being like that. She would address me as her brother and people assumed me to be his brother-in-law. C V Raman had a fight with him but I'll come to it later. So, I worked with D V Chari in Manonmani.

Q: Did you work in the sets of Manonmani?

A : No, I didn't. In Sathi Sukanya, I played a role. I haven't been to the sets of Manonmani.

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Q: I recently saw the film. The dialogues are very well written.

A: I have to say this about D V Chari. He wrote dialogues in a way that one couldn't remove anything from it. When you sat to edit the dialogues or trim it, you wouldn't be able to remove one word from D V Chari's dialogues. He wrote it that tight. Would not add anything unnecessary or extra. Only what was required. He would cut some lines and words from my dialogues and tell me "You shouldn't write it in a way that lets me cut something out. It should be crisp". He was the only person like that in the dialogue writing history. When it comes to acting and dialogue delivery, Raja Sandow was my guru. But when it comes to story writing and dialogue writing, D V Chari was my guru. When it comes to editing, L S Ramachandran was my guru.

Q: You said you didn't go to the set of Manonmani. After that, what was your next film with D V Chari?

A: Bhakta Hanuman.

Q: C V Raman's. Was D V Chari the writer for it?

A: Yes. By that time, he sent me to C V Raman to be an assistant director. With C V Raman, there was no technical work as an AD. He wouldn't make films the conventional way. He neither wrote scripts nor did 'shot breakdowns'. I would be typing his business-related letters not scripts. He would go to the set and shoot right away. When I broke down shots and took it to him, he said "Very good. You seem to know all these works. I have done 14 films. I don't need all these. Take it back and keep them safe".

Q: He wasn't bothered about writing.

A: Nothing. Once when D V Chari and C V Raman had a fight...

Q: What was the reason for the fight?

A: Some payment issue, I think. As I typed his business letters, I knew some business secrets of his. He told me "You know my business secrets and you are D V Chari's

person. I am scared you will let it out”. I assured him that I wouldn’t do anything like that. He said “That girl is calling you brother. You must be related to him. I can’t trust you”. I packed my bags and started to leave. He asked me if I was sure. I said “I am creating a lot of stress for you. It is better I leave.”

Q: So, you left and weren’t part of Bhakta Hanuman?

A: No, I worked in Bhakta Hanuman. Only towards the end of it, this happened.

Q: Who were the actors in Bhakta Hanuman?

A: TR Mahalingam played Ram. I remember Chari’s daughter playing Bala Hanuman. I don’t remember clearly who played Hanuman in it. I am growing old. Can’t recollect much.

Q: How successful was it?

A: It was an average success.

Q: We will talk about C V Raman. He was A Narayanan’s younger brother, right?

A: Yes.

Q: He was an LLB right?

A: Yes. He would write B.A LLB against his name.

Q: Nobody has a good opinion about him. Can you tell me why?

A: Good opinion, bad opinion... there is nothing much to talk about him anyway. He wasn’t bothered about anybody or anything. Completely commercial. If he started a film, first he would get some money from Ceylon Theatres Thambu.

Q: Was he a financier?

A: Not a financier. An officer in Ceylon theatres in Colombo. He would sell the Ceylon rights to him in advance and take money. And then A V Thomas in Trivandrum. He was a financier. He would give some money. I knew about all these as I was typing his official letters. These are the secrets he feared I would let out. He

wouldn't have an idea what to shoot in a film set. He would go and think of something. If one says the set is not ready, he would say "No need of set. You come here, you come here. All of you sit down" and then he would start shooting with absolutely nothing in the background. One day he was taking stills for Bhakta Hanuman. For publicity purposes. D V Chari's daughter Rajamani was playing Bala Hanuman. Hanuman was standing in front of a mould that was made for a figure. He had kept it in the background thinking it would look good. I had moved it out. He kept it back and I moved it again. He demanded, "Who is changing this again and again?". I said "It's me. I feel it would look like something is sitting over Hanuman's head if we place the mould behind. At least we need to give a separation by using backlight". He said, "You know nothing. I have done 14 films". After the still came, it looked exactly like what I said. Like something was sitting on the head. He said "You were right."

01:15:30:01

Q: I see, he wouldn't bother about quality much.

A: Not at all. His only film that collected well was Krishnapidaran. It had very good comedy by NSK.

Q: NSK and Madhuras combination!

A: Yes. Great humour it had. The track was that of a Bhagavathar. NSK was playing a Carnatic vocalist who performed in concerts. But a short-tempered man. One day, he slaps the mridangist and the mridangist goes away in anger. Now the Bhagavathar is left without a mridangam accompanist. In the meantime, the Bhagavathar gets a chance to sing in a concert. He goes in search of a mridangist. Just then, the 'Town Crier' is seen beating the drum the street to announce a reward for some missing person. He asks him to accompany him on the mridangam in the concert. He says he doesn't have a good shirt or dhoti. NSK takes off his shirt and gives it to him. In the concert, the singer starts with a song in Roopaka Taal. The substitute mridangist though, is playing to his own rhythm. The singer tries a lot but the mridangist is on a different beat altogether. Finally, the singer starts singing the Carnatic song in accompaniment to the mridangist's random rhythm! That was a hilarious scene. In

those days, NSK would be given 11,000 rupees per film for his track.

Q: Like a contract.

A: Yes. The set that he wanted would be put up in advance and kept ready. He would come with his troupe, do his portions and leave. We had to cut and use it in the film. Those days, without NSK comedy track, a film wouldn't run. When a film didn't run, they would separately shoot an NSK track and add it to make it work.

Q: Yes. He was known as the 'film repairer'. I have written a book on him too. Did you know NSK well?

A: I knew him but not that well. He did not work in the films I worked on.

Q: Just Krishnapidaran?

A: I didn't work in Krishnapidaran. They made that film in Modern Theaters in Coimbatore. He used to come to meet Raja Sandow.

01:20:00:13

Q: Yes, he is the one who got him married...

A: I don't know if I can share this story. It was a secret. There was a time when NSK and Madhuras were separated. She went off with a Chettiyar to Trichy. NSK went to Trichy to ask about it but she refused to go with him. The Chettiyar arranged for goons to beat him up. NSK ran to a theatre called Raja Talkies where people were watching a film. He went and screamed in front of the audience that he got beaten up by a Chettiyar. The mob, who were his fans beat up the Chettiyar. I heard him narrate this incident as a complaint to Raja Sandow, who patched them up once again, later. They were a good pair and a great combination.

Q: After Manonmani what did you do?

A: In 1945, I went back to my village.

Q: What happened to D V Chari? How did he fade out?

A : He faded out because of an unfortunate incident. He was an informer in the Lakshmikantan murder case.

Q: I am considered an authority in that case. I've written about it. Was he an informer like Ilangovan?

A : I don't know about Ilangovan. He ghost- directed so many films in Modern Theatres but he wasn't credited in any.

Q: I see D V Chari used to direct films in Modern Theatres?

A : Yes, but unofficially. TRS would let him shoot some scenes or film and he would step aside. He was given neither credit nor payment for that. So, in sheer vexation, he turned an informer and used to write anonymous letters about them. One day TRS caught him in the act with the help of the postman. Chari was locked up in a room and beaten black and blue. Wasn't even given water. I wasn't around him then, but that was hearsay. After that he left Modern Theatres and went to Mysore to work in Kannada films.

Q: When did he die? Not many people know about him.

A : In 1953. I served a lot for him during those years. In 1945, I went back to my native village to be part of the freedom struggle. In 1946, Mahatma Gandhi had come here. He was staying at the Hindi Prachara Sabha. At that time, I had a friend with me. Wait, I am confusing the period. Sorry, I made a mistake. In 1946, I was asked to work with T G Raghavacharya.

Q: That was Katakam?

A: Yes.

Q: Speaking of T G Raghavacharya, a great man, I've written about him.

A: A very great man.

Q: I know his son and the daughter.

A: Govindacharya. The girl plays Veena.

Q : His daughter is a great dancer now. Anuradha Jagannathan. Jagannathan is Raghavacharya's son. They are all very close to me.

A: I have lost touch with all of them now.

Q : T G Raghavacharya also had a son named Raman. He was in England. He committed suicide

A: I see.

Q : I am close to the family and good friends with them. I got to know a lot about Raghavacharya through his son Govindacharya. I wrote about him later.

A: I see.

Q: Can you tell something about Raghavacharya?

A: Quite a lot. He was a lawyer and began as a legal advisor for the film Ratnavali. He was a writer himself. Over there, he got into an argument with the director.

Q: R Prakash. I've heard so from AT Krishnaswamy.

A: Yes. When that happened, he was asked to direct Ratnavali and he did it. The film was also a success. Then he joined Gemini and made Mangamma.

Q: Didn't you do Rishyashringar before that?

A: Yes. He made Rishyashringar for Soundararaja Iyengar.

Q: In Soundararaja Iyengar's Rishyashringar, Raghavacharya's name is not there. Is there a reason for that?

A: There shouldn't be any reason. They both worked well together.

Q: But his name is not there.

A: Maybe he agreed to that.

01:24:54:11

Q : Vasundhara who is a good friend of mine, she told me that Raghavacharya only did everything in it. There are two reasons for it. When I asked around people told me something. Also, I did a lot of research to write about Raghavachariya and also for my various books on Tamil cinema. One reason cited was that since he was a lawyer, he personally didn't want to be named as a director. Second opinion is that Soundararaja Iyengar himself didn't want to credit him as a director.

A : Could be. But knowing Soundararaja Iyengar, he was not such a person. Maybe one can say that about TRS.

Q : Yes, I know him very well. I know their family also very well. They are also related to me in a way. Ok let's talk about Raghavacharya. You met him. Where was he then? Had he come to Thanikachalam street?

A : Yes, he had. But I joined him in Salem. I was asked to meet him there and started working with him there. The experience I had there got me the name 'topmost man of Ceylon' later. My experience with Raghavacharya...

Q : You were a leading director in Ceylon.

A : Yes. I am called 'the man with the golden scissors' by people in Ceylon. All thanks to the experience of working with Raghavacharya. The thing is that, I was asked to join as an assistant director. But I ended up being the Production assistant as well. For the film Katakam. He had one person who later left the set.

Q : Who was K P Varadacharya?

A : He was one of the partners. Soundararaja Iyengar gave the money. K P Varadacharya and Narayana Pillai were partners. Very great man. You can't see a gentleman like him.

Q : Can you tell something about him?

A : Of course. He is a very great man. A gentleman. Very strict with everyone. With me he was very nice.

Q: Isn't he an Iyengar from Salem?

A: No, he is a Kumbakonam Iyengar. A village called Kali in Kumbakonam. He was there. His brother Narasimha Acharya, younger brother Krishnamacharya... I knew everyone.

Q: His daughter lives here in Mambalam.

A: Yes. She knows me well. We once thought of marrying one of his daughters to my eldest son. We received a proposal. The horoscope didn't match.

Q: You worked in Katakam.

A: I worked as a production assistant in that film. Had to be the dress man too. There was a tailor named Perumal. He asked him not to be part of the shoot. What to do, if TRS says so, one can't disobey. I had to do it myself. Taking care of dresses, folding, giving clothes etc. And I was the assistant director too.

Q: I have a working still from Katakam. Govindacharya had given me.

A: I would be there in it for sure.

Q: I will check. Somebody is there holding books.

A: It must be me.

Q: Cinematographer RMK is also there in that still.

A: Yes. And sound was by Radha.

Q: Radhakrishnan. What I heard of Katakam is that it was a rehash of Shakespeare's Cymbeline. That is what K P Varadacharya first wrote as Chaya. He started making that with MGR which got stalled later. In Katakam, V N Sundaram's nephew by name Vijayakumar had acted in it.

A: He was a bus conductor. His name was Narayana Sami. He was a good-looking boy. He was a bit nervous guy.

Q: Did Raghavacharya name him Vijayakumar?

A : Yes. He was a timid boy. He was very proud that he was Acharya's actor. And day dreamed that he would become a star. Suriyakumari was a lean girl who acted with him. Those were the reasons for the film's failure. Raghavacharya also started feeling sick, almost every day. He had developed Tuberculosis and had to remove one of the two lungs. So, he would catch fever very often. Towards the end, he was very confused. He would call people and show them the film. Everyone would have their own opinions about it.

01:30:06:07

Q : Naturally.

A : Yes, and he suffered a lot because of that. It was a failure. I was also an editing assistant in that film.

Q : Who was the editor of Katakam?

A : L S Ramachandran

Q : I see. Was he a full-time editor with Modern Theatres? He later directed films too, like Shenbagavalli.

A : Yes, that and Bhojan. The thing is, there was an error in the playback machine of Modern Theatres. The sound would be ahead of the picture by 6 frames. It is called a plus error. You had to adjust the sync. I knew this thing. There was an editor who used to work there named Durairaj.

Q : Yes. His name is there in Manonmani. Editor Durairajan.

A : Yes. He was the one who initially did the synchronizing. When I was an Assistant director, I would go and help him with these things. L S Ramachandran came in later. He joined as an editor. I asked him to teach me editing. He said "Oh yes why not. Will teach you". I told him there was a plus error of 6 frames in the machine. He said "How can it be? I'll check it". He didn't do it but pretended that he had done it. Fortunately, there was a laboratorian. LSR had forgotten to remove the blue and red marks.

Recording interrupted.

Q: You were talking about LSR. Is he still alive? I would like to contact him and do an interview with him also.

A: Yes, he is.

Q: You were talking about Katakam. It was a failure. I also heard so. I have a working still with me. Can you tell me something more about T G Raghavacharya?

A: He was a very strict man.

Q: Yes, he was known as Green Chilli Raghavachary.

A: But no one can teach acting like how he would. He would teach like how a tutor would teach in a college. He would wish good future for his assistants.

Q: Who were his assistants?

A: I remember me assisting him. Chandru was there. Gemini Chandru.

Q: What about Vepathur Kittu?

A: Vepathur Kittu was not an assistant. He would have later joined maybe. He wasn't there for Katakam. Working with Raghavacharya would irritate you but that was what gave you sustenance. I worked in 4 departments at a time and it would be about 1 am when I go to bed. At 2 Raghavacharya would wake me up to say "I don't remember putting out the lights in the editing room. Go and check if it is off". If I replied "I am working so much, please pardon me", he would say "Even if you were to die, finish your work and then die, I don't have a problem. But if you talk like this, I'll cut your throat". But he was otherwise a kind man. One good quality was that, he would teach you everything. In Katakam, there was a character of a girl who walks around with a cane basket.

Q: Who was it?

A: A character called 'Sukki'. I don't remember her name. K V Mahadevan also married her later.

Q: I think Leela. She died of stomach cancer.

A: I see. Poor thing. Mahadevan would drop in at times to meet her.

Q: Was it a comedy role?

A: Yes. There was one character called Sukki. Another character called Kochchi. Played by an actress called Krishnaveni. In a scene, that Sukki character would swirl with the basket on her head. She was spinning clockwise. I wrote 'clockwise' to mark for continuity. The next day, when I wasn't around, the director asked her how she was spinning. She said 'anti clockwise'. When I saw that, I told the director it was the other way as per my notes. He said "You are being absent minded. The actress is saying this way. She must be right". At that time, Natarajan was the editor. L S Ramachandran had not joined at that time. When he saw the edit, he realised there was a mistake. He shouted at me for not maintaining the continuity. I said "I told you Sir, it was the other way. You brushed it off". He shouted "You had no confidence in what you said. That's why you were casual about it. If you were so sure, you should have sat on satyagraha in front of the camera. It is your duty and you have failed in it". Also, he often got confused about the 180-degree axis jump. One shouldn't cross the line while taking shot and counter shot. He often messed that up and it was my job to check it. When I said he was making a mistake, he would shout at me. I then would suggest to take an optional take for safety. We would work like that. Later, he would tell me "What have you done? It looks like I can't direct without you around". We became that close.

01:37:03:12

Q: I've heard he was an angry man.

A: That was his weakness. The thing is he was a perfectionist. Would expect everyone to do their work correctly. Wouldn't allow any mistake. He would fight till the things are right. He would listen to everyone's opinions. Once, he was doing a test with Suriyakumari. The stills in Modern Theatres wouldn't be good. So, he had arranged for a private photographer, Rangasamy. She would be dressed and clicked in

different costume options. I had to get the stills developed and bring them. He did Chandralekha isn't it. It was his script that was later completed by Vasan. He had done Mangamma also. He asked "you have seen Vasundhara and Rajakumari. When you compare with them, what do you feel?". Everyone would say she looked great. I said "You may call it divinity. But other than that, there is no 'it' in her". He asked "What do you mean? How can you say that?". I said "It is not about the physical appearance. There is no effect". She was very angry to hear that. She asked me "I get hundreds of love letters. What do you have to say for that?". I said "That's an impression of youth. You may not call it love or infatuation. Looking at you in your modern dress outfit, they would be writing letters. Mostly, it must be college students". She was very angry and shouted at me. Varadacharya took me along and told her "He is an honest man. Not an opportunist like other men you see. He said what he felt honestly". She said "No sir. I know he is a very good man. I know him very well". After that she continued acting in the film. She needed a lot of padding though. Even for Bhanumathy... I recently saw that in a movie that played on TV recently.

01:40:11:24

Q: Why was Suriyakumari chosen as the heroine? Because it was a cheaper option?

A: I don't know the reason.

Q: But you think it was a wrong casting.

A: Yes. Wrong casting. Even Vijayakumar was a wrong choice. Looked good but a bad actor. He would put on airs. It was a season of jasmines and he ordered an assistant to throw jasmine flowers on him while he was sleeping. Looking at all those behaviour Varadacharya would get irritated.

Q: He later acted in a film called Minmini. Pesum Padam Ramnath had made that movie but it didn't do well.

A: You can't see a person like Acharya.

Q: He was a very good technician also.

A: Very good technician. My technical skills were honed thanks to him. I became so well versed in technical side that many people in Ceylon come to me when they had doubts. For acting, my guru is Raja Sandow. One need not watch his films. Seeing the rehearsals itself was enough. He was truly an artist.

Q: Would Raja Sandow enact the scenes for other actors?

A: Yes. He could bring tears to his eyes in a second. He could emote so well on demand! He was so great. I would say even Sivaji Ganesan was second to him. On the technical side, it was Raghavacharya. Only if he was indisposed would he make some mistakes but otherwise, he was so thorough with everything.

Q: You said you were considered for the role of Rishyashringan. And you had gone to do political activity then. You didn't do anything in that film, right?

A: No, I didn't. I wouldn't have gotten the role either. When you compare me with the actress Vasundharadevi, I was shorter than her and wouldn't have matched. I would have worked as an assistant director maybe. But since I had to go for my political activity, I lost the chance.

Q: You said you acted in several roles in the same film. How was that possible?

A: No one would recognize. They would do completely different make - ups.

Q: After Katakam, what did you do?

A: At that time, D V Chari had come.

Q: Was Katakam written by Raghavachari?

A: Yes, based on Cymbeline. DV Chari had come to Salem with a production house called Srivi Productions from Srivilliputhur to plan for a film. He called me and asked me to come up with a storyline. The setting was that of a convent for Hindus where men are not allowed. The nuns are not supposed to marry. How a hero enters and does heroism there was the one line. I developed that and wrote it on two sides of a sheet and gave it to him. I titled it as 'Kalidasi'. He developed from that idea. I was the one who gave the name and the story. He said he was going to shoot it in

Coimbatore and wanted me to join him as assistant director. I was focusing on editing at that time. LSR also got a chance to direct films. He left the last six reels uncut. I did the negative cut for those reels. I was experienced in editing by that time. I told D V Chari that I want to edit the film as that was my area of interest. He said he was not comfortable about giving a novice the editing responsibility. He had spoken to Vichu by then. You know Vichu, right? He was an assistant with Padmanabhan and a good editor. His sister also married that muslim actor.

01:45:13:20

Q: G M Basheer.

A: Yes.

Q: I see, is it G Vishwanathan you are talking about? I know him very well. He was Vichu?

A: Yes. He was a very fast editor.

Q: Who did he work for?

A: I don't know that. But he worked in Modern Theatre.

Q: I see. He was an editor at Modern Theatre...

A: Not in Modern Theatre, but kind of freelance...I'll tell you about it in a while. He later directed many films too.

Q: I didn't know he was an editor.

A: Yes. He was a very fast editor. Can't comment good or bad but no one edited as fast as he did. Chari said he had spoken to Vichu. I said 'That won't be right. He brought some troubles for Padmanabhan. When he was assisting, he once placed cup and saucer in a mythological film set.

Q: Which film was this?

A: In Sakata Yogam. He did that intentionally to take revenge on Padmanabhan. You

can see that even now. In many films, there are things like that. People won't notice. There is a big mistake in Alibaba. I'll tell that later. So, when he said he could not engage me as an editor, I was hurt. I said 'You kept me in your house like a brother. If you don't give me a chance, who else will?'. But he was firm in his stand. Soundararaja Iyengar in the meanwhile told me "We are making a film in Bombay directed by Krishnagopalan. You go and work for that". I said, "Sir, please give me the editing responsibility also along with the work. Only then I'll go. I don't need extra remuneration for that. But please give me the job." He said, "Fine. But first six reels, you must edit and cut with double positive and show me. Only then I'll decide". I said "That is fair enough." I told DV Chari that I was leaving for the other film and left. His wife would tell me even after years "All our fortune went away after you left. You should have stayed. We would have done good in life".

Q: Did he make that film?

A: Yes. That was Marudhanattu Ilavarasi. With MGR.

Q: Did DV Chari start it? Was it not done by Govindan Company?

A : That was later. He started the film and the person he trusted the most G Viswanathan, was the reason for the film to go from his hand to the other and it became fatal for his career. It was later done by Kasilingam or someone for Govindan Company. The Kalidasi story I had written was rewritten as Marudhanattu Ilavarasi by him. He even began the film with the same name 'Kalidasi'. It was later renamed. I was the one who suggested MGR for that role. I also knew V N Janaki very well. When I was working in Vishnuleela, my roommate was a person called Ganapathy Bhat. One day he said "hey I've married V N Janaki". I asked him "What are you saying? Why suddenly?". He felt it was good to have a wife who was from the films. However, she acted with MGR in that film and after a few years he himself told me "She is now with MGR. After all, she was my wife first and if I go around telling that, people will stone me to death". I told him to ignore and move ahead. Those days, V N Janaki used to be very beautiful. She had beautiful eyes. In movies with King's court scenes, there would invariably be a dance scene of her. He had fixed Janaki as the lead. I had seen the film Mohini and said she would be good. And I suggested him to cast MGR for the

role.

Q: Did you know MGR well?

A: Not then. At that time, I didn't know him at all. I've seen him at the sets of Alibaba and other films. At the time of Modern Theatre, I didn't know him well. Later, he once offered for production.

Q: You said you were sent to Bombay to work in the film by Krishnagopalan.

A: Yes. In that Balachander was the hero and the music director.

Q: That was Wonder Man?

A: Yes, Wonder Man with Danny Kaye. I have to tell this thing about him. We were shooting in Ranjit Movietone.

01:50:27:16

Q: I see. In Dadar. I've been there.

A: Yes. We wouldn't get Moviola there. There would be one moviola and about ten people waiting to cut. It was always busy. I learnt one thing from L S Ramachandran. He had worked with R Prakash. He had taught me the method of cutting the positive by looking at the modulation. That was the technique before Moviolas had come. I cut about six reels like that. Just by looking at the modulation in waveform. One boy was working with me in Ranjit Movietone. I asked him what all he could do. He said "I will cut, tape and stick labels". I asked him to synchronise. He said he did not know. The thing is, they had not taught him deliberately. Otherwise, they would lose an assistant. He was working there for 12 years but had not been taught how to synchronise the film. I taught him that. So, when I was not around, he would pick the NG shots from cut films and started syncing them. He was practicing. The chief saw that and asked him who taught him that. He said the Madrasi Babu taught him. I was removed from there. When people got to know that I edited six reels without even going near the Moviola, they were all surprised. I then showed the film to Soundararaja Iyengar, got his approval and became the editor of the film.

Q: You were telling about Balachander.

A: Yes. Like how I can see and cut, he also can. Very brilliant. Very clever fellow. Later he directed films also. Krishnagopalan told me once “Balachander cheated me”. Some misunderstanding happened between them, I don’t know what.

Q: He made a film in Bombay. It didn’t run well.

A: Yes. It didn’t work well.

Q: So, you worked in Ithu Nijama as an assistant director.

A: Assistant director and Editor. And also acted as a sub inspector.

Q : I see, you were the sub inspector. I have seen the film in bits and parts. Soundararaja Iyengar has only one or two reels of that film. We did one class on Indian cinema in which I lectured. At that time, he played a couple of reels. The scene where the set of London bridge was made. With fog and the tower in the background. And of course, I didn’t know you at that time.

A: Yes. I was the editor and assistant director.

Q: Can you tell us something about the making of Ithu Nijama. It is a very interesting film.

A: They didn’t do anything special. He literally copied the Danny Kaye film.

Q: Balachander had written it.

A: Yes. There was one Seetharaman who worked in Gemini. I met him recently in a festival too. He was Kothamangalam Subbu’s student. He wrote the songs in it. Mani Iyer wrote the dialogues.

Q: How were the trick shots done? Did you do masking?

A: Yes, by masking.

Q: Krishnagopal was a very good technician.

A: Yes. He is excellent. But at times he would goof up. Not with me but with people like Shanthi who was his operating cameraman. He would sometimes take charge of the camera and shoot without syncing on a Mitchell camera and it would all be white out.

01:55:03:21

Q: Was he a Bengali?

A: No, A UP man.

Q: He built a lab and all.

A: Yes. It is still running well.

Q: KG died a few of years back.

A: Yes, I heard that. His son, Guru is now conducting the processing labs. In Bombay Dahisar.

Q: Ithu Nijama was completely directed by Krishnagopal. What did Balachander do in it apart from acting?

A: He got himself named the associate director. But he didn't do anything on the direction side on the sets.

Q: He wrote just the script?

A: Story he had written. Subramanian wrote the dialogues. Seetharaman did the songs.

Q: Soundararaja Iyengar didn't do anything other than being the producer?

A: He visited only once.

Q: Was he the financier of the film?

A: Yes. His Tamil Nadu Talkies financed the film. K G was one of the partners. I didn't get the remuneration for the film. Much later, Soundararaja Iyengar once told me they are planning a film called Bad Street and asked me to make a proper bill for the

work this time. Or else he would miss it like Ithu Nijama. I asked him “Do you remember that Sir?”. He replied “I would have given it. There was some account mismanagement from KG’s side and he missed this payment and no one followed up. I am very sorry for it.”. I joked “This time give me both the payments together”.

Q: Did the film Bad Street happen?

A: No, it didn’t. After that 1947 happened. When we attained independence, I was in Bombay then.

Q: We’ll go back to T R Sundaram. T R Sundaram as a man. I am writing a book on him. Can you tell me something about him?

A: I can tell a lot about him.

Q: The public impression is that he was a tough man. That he had beaten artistes and all. Mukta Srinivasan has told me that he was once beaten by him. I’ve worked with him. He said that after T R Sundaram beat him, he went and joined Balachander’s set in Coimbatore. Mukta Srinivasan worked with S Balachander in Coimbatore.

A: The thing is, he wouldn’t beat without one committing a mistake. Something that he couldn’t have tolerated. Otherwise, he was not a person who got drunk and beat up people. He was a very decent man. I have to talk about him first.

Q: Did Govindan company take over Kalidasi from D V Chari?

A: Srivi Pictures, the people from Srivilliputhur. Everyone said Viswanathan was behind that.

Q: The film still has portions directed by D V Chari? Did they retain the portions he shot?

A: Yes, it surely has.

Q: It is a very well-done film.

A: Yes. He made films very well.

01:59:28:00

Q: What happened to D V Chari after that?

A: In 1946,47 this got over. In 48 or 49, I was given a freedom fighter recognition. After that, I stayed away from Cinema for a while. When Mahatma Gandhi died, I was in Chennai. I wasn't getting much chances. I was staying in Triplicane. D V Chari had written a letter saying he was making the Tamil remake of a Kannada film 'Bhagavan Basaveshwara'. He wanted me to immediately come to Mysore for that. I went to Mysore for that.

Q: Was it being made as a bilingual?

A: Yes. In Kannada and Tamil. The story of Lingayat saints.

Q: Yes. Honnappa Bhagavathar has told me about it.

A: I see. A man called Shastri was the secretary. There was a production assistant Chowdappa in Mysore. He would keep pleasing D V Chari by bringing tasty Bisibella bath. The moment I reached there, I told them "I don't get a good vibe from this person. He will spoil things". They would tell me "No he is a nice man". His wife Pattu would tell him "better listen to Nagarajan anna. We didn't listen to his warning about G Viswanathan". But we went ahead and started shooting that film. In the story, Basaveshwara has two wives, Gangambika and Neelambika. So, we made a duet when he was getting married to Gangambika. He didn't like it. "how can we have a saint sing duet?" This grew into an argument and D V Chari being a short-tempered man, said something unpleasant.

Recording interrupted.

Q: We were talking about D V Chari and his problems while making Basaveshwara. We left it there, last time.

A: Yes. When my payment was getting delayed, I left it. On my way on a horse cart, I met the secretary who said "The payment will come tomorrow. Why are you leaving now?". I said "When you get the payment, you let me know". At that time, ASA Sami was doing a comedy track merger for Royal Talkies' 'Sudharshan'.

Some actors like Lalitha and Balaiah were part of that.

Q: For Royal Talkies' Sudharshan?

A: Yes. For the film by Sundar Rao Nadkarni. ASA Sami was also there. He had me as his assistant in Madras.

Q: Where was this made?

A: That portion was done here in Vauhini.

Q: Directed by Sundar Rao Nadkarni?

A: No, he did the main picture. This portion was done by Sami.

Q: I see. He did the comedy track?

A: Yes. Lalitha played an important character in it. I was asked to copy the dialogue script of the merger film and read it out to the producers. To Royal Talkies Rajaram, Narasimha Iyer and some others. At that time, Sami came in. They were all impressed by my reading. Especially, the way I read it like how a dialogue is delivered. Everyone was praising me.

Q: Didn't Sami like that?

A: No, nothing like that. He asked me to become a dialogue coach for Lalitha as she did not know Tamil. I was asked to go to her place and teach the lines. Every morning at 10 o' clock, I would go to her place. She won't accept it if you teach her leniently. She was particular about how it was said. She wanted me to train her in a way so that she could deliver lines like me. She was not just a perfectionist but was very kind to me. Padmini was small then and Ragini was a bit naughty.

Q: Ragini was a clown.

A: Yes. She was good to me. She would say "There is no one to talk to. Let's just talk for some time".

Q: Who, Ragini?

A : No Lalitha. We would go to the terrace and talk about everything under the sun. She would say “I can’t talk to anyone around except you”. When her mother would come up, she would pick the dialogue sheet and read. It was funny. She was very attached to me. Once when I was working in a Modern Theatres film ‘Kalyani’, she was acting in it and spotted me. She called me by name excitedly and we sat down to talk. We usually talk for almost an hour. Other assistants in the set were amazed by it. One of them told me how I managed to catch hold of an actress. I told him “I am a poor man and in no way suitable for a girl from such a family. Please don’t spread rumours. I’ll lose my job”. Also, there was Balaiah.

02:06:14:13

Q : You had known him from the time of Katakam, in which he was the villain....

A : Yes. He was also a humorous person. Himself and T R Ramachandran. They both were so funny that you’d spit the food out while eating.

Q : Ramachandran is a very good friend of mine.

A : While we were shooting in Salem, we had to pass the jail to reach the studio. Balaiah would walk past the guards in his khaki costume and they would salute him thinking he was a real officer. In Katakam, I was pretty strict, workwise. They told me “You show your strict self in Raghavacharya’s set. Don’t be strict here. We came here to indulge ourselves”.

Q : What did they spend on?

A : They’d feel like buying a falooda, just like that.

Q : Where did they shoot it, in New Tone or Neptune?

A : What was that, Venus?

Q : It was Neptune earlier. C V Raman started it.

A : Yes.

Q : So, in Sudharsan comedy portions, you worked on the set with ASA Sami. The portion of the Marwari girl.

A: Yes.

Q : I heard a story about Sudharsan that M L Vasanthakumari was replaced by Kannamba. M L Vasanthakumari told me that she didn't like the story and dropped out. You don't know about Sudharsan film, right?

A: No. I was not directly involved. I had an issue at the sets of that film regarding my payment. ASA Sami had promised me 500 rupees as it would be a month's work. And he also promised to get me pro rata payment if the duration overshoot the one month period. And things went on for about 7 months. The film got done, but no payment came my way. I was going through a tough time too. I had spent my savings on my children's education. I was skipping dinner at that time. Would eat in the mornings and afternoons but not in the night. Such was the condition. When I asked about the money, he asked "If you don't get it, why don't you leave the set and go?". I said "It's not like that. I will do it for the film". However poor I was, I always had the passion for cinema. While doing that, Acharya called me back for Kalyani.

Q: What happened to D V Chari?

A: After Basaveshwara was over... before that let me tell you about Kalyani. Acharya left the film halfway, as he was not doing well. The real reason was interference by TRS. D V Chari himself withdrew on health grounds. They asked me "Are you staying or leaving?". I told them "You booked me for the film not for Acharya. If you have problems, I'll leave or else I'll stay and do my duties". I was asked to stay and was working on it. At that time there was a Telugu assistant and there were two others. I was the chief assistant and in charge of continuity. TRS did a shot and called 'Cut. Take ok'. I said "Not okay. Retake". The whole set was terrified. Suleiman went hiding. TRS walked towards me. I thought he was going to beat me. "What is the reason you called for a retake?". I said "You cut it too sharp. This is the last shot of the scene. You won't have enough tail to lead up to the next scene. You have to shoot it a bit loose." He said "Oh I see. Retake!". Suleiman and others came back to shoot. They told me "You just got lucky. Don't ever say things like that to him". In those days, the

production assistants were not technical assistants. I said “Why should I get beaten if I do my job right?”. The surprising thing was that, TRS went for a retake and asked me “How is it Nagarajan?”. This left the crew amazed. From that moment onwards, he had a good opinion about me. There was an actress called P S Sivabhagam. She was playing the mother. Nambiar was the hero. She tortures B S Saroja and she gets separated from Nambiar. He turns insane and is seen feeding food to the dummy dog. I had written that scene and did the rehearsals. He asked me “Have you done the rehearsals?”. I said “Yes. they are doing well”. But on seeing him, P S Sivabhagam started fumbling. She got nervous. TRS asked me “Why is she fumbling? Haven’t you done rehearsals?”. I said “I’ll fix it now” and went to teach her the lines again. She delivered a good take. He called me and said “She is fumbling because of nervousness. This is an important scene. We can’t afford to make it bad. I’ll be outside. You do this scene”. It is a six-shot method which was not known to many people. It is a Hollywood method. I knew that. Acharya had taught me. I directed that scene and it came out well. He was very much impressed with me. Usually, he would break for lunch at 2 pm, starting the shoot early at 8 or 9 according to the call sheet. From 2 onwards, he would hand over the responsibilities to me. I was the afternoon director. Quite a few times, he’d give me a ride in his own car. These were concessions nobody ever enjoyed from him. Suleiman once told me “Next he will give you Valayapathi.” It was made by Masthan.

Q: Masthan is a good friend of mine.

A: I see. I told Suleiman that “I am in my late thirties. It would not be nice to stay an assistant at this age. Give me the dialogue department. Don’t tell this to TRS” He went and told this to TRS. He said “Okay. Give him the dialogue department but ask him to be on the set whenever there is an issue”. He gave me an additional 50 rupees as increment. I ended up shooting a few scenes for Valayapathi as well. At that time, ASA Sami asked me if I could go to Ceylon. To work in a Sinhala film. When I got the visa and told TRS, he said “Modern Theatre’s gates will always be open for you” and sent me.

02:15:05:09

Q: What happened to D V Chari?

A: When I came for Kalyani film shooting, there was a film called 'Sujatha'. It was a remake of the Hindi film Badi Behen. Modern theatres made it a Sinhala film with D V Chari's direction, Gunaratnam's production. I had written the one-line synopsis for that film like how I did for Marudhanattu Ilavarasi. I had seen the Hindi original of that film and had written it for him. While doing Valayapathi, there was a Kota Shanmughasundaram. No one liked him but he was close to me. He was keen that Modern Theatres should retain me. We were working on another film called Kanaiyazhi which was in the discussion stage. There were some people in the dialogue department. D S Rajagopal, Somu, Gaffar and many others. I had written a scene where the hero does a mistake and the heroine reforms him. Shanmugasundaram strongly felt the hero's character came across as faltering there and it wouldn't work. I said "In the epic Ramayana, Rama's character is also kept as flawed by Valmiki. Straight line character for heroes won't be interesting. A small deviation like this will only make it better". No one agreed. Everyone voted against my opinion while Kota Shanmughasundaram himself voted in my favour, lecturing them on favouritism. During Valayapathy times, mostly Gaffar used to write. Bharathidasan was the dialogue writer. But Gaffar had worked a lot in it. I had written one scene and felt it was very good. When I took it, everyone rejected it. And I met TRS personally to say the scene would work. He was thinking of others' opinions. I said "A hundred fools don't equal a clever man". He accepted it and overnight the dialogue department was dissolved. He was very sad at that time, TRS. After his foreigner wife left with their son. There was no one to talk equally with him. There was one advocate Soundararajan from Salem who could talk freely with him. No one else. So, one day, I went up to him and said openly, "Sir. You look very sad these days after your wife and son left. You seem to lack company. It hurts me to see you like this. Soundararajan seems to come only once in a while". TRS asked what one could do under the circumstances. I replied, "When D V Chari was there, you had somebody like him to talk to. You were very close to him. So close that if he wanted money, he won't 'ask' you, but just say that he was 'taking' 1000 rupees from you! You should take him back." He said "A misunderstanding happened between us and there

is no way he would come”. I took a promise from him that if ever Chari came back, he should take him into Modern Theatres and he agreed. I wrote a letter to D V Chari and he was living a very poor life, struggling to sustain himself. He didn’t even have money to travel. He wrote back saying he wanted 20 rupees. I sent him that and he came. On seeing him, TRS went and hugged him. They both apologized to each other.

02:20:00:19

Q: He was a nice man, TRS.

A: Yes. Very nice man. It is wrong to say that he was an angry man who went around beating people. He beat only those he was close to, if they didn’t do the job right, out of a sense of belonging and authority. In the matter of rightful anger, he and Acharya were alike. Kannadasan started from his camp. Venu is also from his camp. He would beat Venu also. It is wrong to accuse him that he was always a violent person. Then Chari joined. They asked him to direct Sujatha, the Sinhalese film. I had written the story for that too. That was the film, in which D V Chari’s name was mentioned in direction. Till then T R Sundaram used his name. That was over. D V Chari was a gluttonous person. He would eat everything without control. Would eat a lot of ghee too. His wife made very tasty food. That took a toll on his BP. He died of Cerebral Hemorrhage, in Salem. I was away in Ceylon then.

Q: When was this?

A: In 1953. D V Chari was a very great man. His dialogue writing was exceptional.

Q : Of course, I’ve seen the proof of it in Manonmani. Very crisp, unlike AP Nagarajan’s which was very meandering.

A: Yes indeed. After that I wrote for B R Panthulu. I wrote the story and dialogues.

Q: Ok Sir. We will stop for the day.

Recording ends and resumes.

Q: Sir, when we met yesterday, we spoke about D V Chari and then we stopped for the day. I would like to ask you something about Kalyani because I am writing a book on T R Sundaram for the National Film Archive of India. I am doing a series of books. This is one of the books. Was Kalyani a Modern Theatres production?

A: Yes.

Q: And Raghavacharya went to work only as a writer-director...

A: Yes.

Q: He didn't have any share in the production.

A: No. nothing of that sorts.

Q: MN Nambiyar, B S Saroja were the actors, right?

A: Yes.

Q: Was it successful?

A: It was an average success. Not a big hit.

Q: What was Masthan's role in it?

A: He didn't play any role in it.

Q: Was he not the cameraman of the film?

A: No, he wasn't. G Ranganathan and others were.

Q: Because Masthan told me he was involved in its making. I have done a similar interview with him.

A: He wasn't the cameraman. Vijayam was. JG Vijayam. The funny thing is that, Vijayam was an assistant to Ellis R Dungan and learnt cinematography under him. Acharya kept pulling his legs. Even after he became the main cameraman Acharya continued to do so. He would ask "Are you shooting in a way that the picture will be seen?". Their banter was funny. The thing with Vijayam was that he would compose shots beautifully. He would compose the shots and call Acharya to show the frame.

Acharya would say “Remove that flower vase from the frame”. Vijayam would say “Why sir? I thought it looks beautiful”. He would reply “That is why, I am asking to remove it. The audience will be distracted and they would be looking at the flower vase and not the actors”. He was very particular about the shots. Vijayam would find a window grill interesting and would place the camera in front of it and frame through that. Acharya would ask him “Why have you placed it here? It would look like a point of view of someone who is peeping through the window. Don’t do it”. Acharya was very sure of what he wanted. He never did anything without a purpose.

Q: He didn’t do any gimmicks

A: Never. He had a problem and left Kalyani midway. T R Sundaram also was a very good man. People talk a lot about his flaws. But I’ve seen only one bad habit in him. He interferes in other’s work. It happened with ASA Sami too. But he would not do that directly. Would do it through someone else. I’ve not seen any other bad habit in him. He could not tolerate inefficiency. Both Acharya and TRS. You said someone got beaten. Venu was a production boy, Srinivasan was in editing, Ramasamy in the office as a stenographer. He would beat them as they worked very closely with him. And he was someone who also believed it was wrong to beat people unnecessarily. I found the assistants in his set could not do continuity. When I told him, he said he never saw the necessity as he would design it in such a way that the continuity mistakes wouldn’t be noticed. He was also very fast in shooting. Would take about 40-45 shots in a day. But he was not stubborn about the rules. He would ignore if the track and trolley is bumpy or shaky. He would say “no one would notice”. These days you can see that a lot in films. No one cares about rules. He might have had his own weaknesses, personally. But you cannot call him a bad person. As a director, he was not a bad man. Some interference would be there. But that’s it. In Paasavalai, a similar incident happened with me.

02:27:48:16

Q: Did you have any contact with KLV Vasantha at that period?

A: She wasn’t there then. She had shifted to Madras, Mambalam by then. When I used

to work in Modern Theatres, we would greet each other but not much acquaintance with her.

Q: Was she interfering in others' works?

A: No, she would tell him maybe. But did not interfere with others' works. She would come to the set to watch the shooting, just like his first wife, the European lady. Sundaram was not a person who let others take over or give opinions. He was his own master. He hated inefficiency that's all. Take my case. In Katakam, I made a mistake in the costumes for the actress. Later, when I started working efficiently, he was very respectful towards me. I was the first assistant in Modern Theatres. I was given full liberty. He would leave the shoot for me to handle independently.

Q: Krishna Rao has directed some films there. Who was he, an assistant director?

A: Yes. He was an assistant director. Telugu speaking person. We were very close.

02:30:08:04

Q: I couldn't trace him.

A: He is no more.

Q: When you were working in Modern Theatres, was M Karunanidhi there?

A: I've met him and spoken towards the last days of my working at Modern Theatres. I've met him when he was leaving after finishing Manthirikumari. We never worked together in the same film.

Q: And what about Kannadasan?

A : I knew him well from his press days, in Gajalakshmi. He worked with us in Paasavalai. He worked and Pattukottai Kalyanasundaram also worked.

Q: And What about Jalakandapuram Kannan?

A: He wrote the dialogues. He was the dialogue writer for Paasavalai 'Pa Kannan'.

Q: He was very much involved in the Dravida Iyakkam movement.

A: Yes. We would debate a lot in the set. He would accuse the congress followers of being selfish minded. I was given a freedom fighter recognition. I gave up that money and told him “See you people accuse us. Look how I have given this up”. He said “You are saying as if it is a big deed. What else are you going to do for the people?”. He criticized that too and did not appreciate me for what I did. He was very strong with his ideology.

Q: Kannadasan was also involved in the movement...

A: Yes, he was. People criticize Kannadasan that he copies from classic literature. I would say it is not copying. People cannot understand if we quote something from the Sangam literature. But when Kannadasan tells the same message through his lyrics, people understand it better. I would say it is a service he has done.

Q: An inspiration...

A: Yes.

Recording interrupted

Q: You were talking about Kannadasan and the song in Rathathilagam...

A: In that he wrote a song “pasumai niraintha ninaivugale”. It had a spiritual undertone in that. I appreciated him for writing like that. He said “You are saying so because you are a Vaishnavite. When Alwar wrote, it wouldn’t be for that reason. People interpret it differently now. I did not intend to write it like that”. He had a divinity in him. That was showing in his works without him even knowing it. Poor guy, left early.

Q: If we consider Modern Theatres as your first innings, you went to Sri Lanka.

A: Yes.

Q: How did it happen?

A: When Modern Theatres didn’t give me a direction chance, I was a bit

disappointed. At that time ASA Sami...

Q: He came there to make a film?

A: No at that point he didn't come for that. He was the classmate of S M Nayagam's brother.

Q: Who was S M Nayagam?

A: He was a producer of Chitrakala Movietone.

Q: Was he a rich man?

A: Yes. A rich man and also a big industrialist owning Swadeshi Industries.

Q: Was he a Tamilian?

A: Yes. From Thanjavur. But domiciled in Sri Lanka. For three generations they were there.

Q: His brother was ASA Sami's classmate?

A: Yes. Ramanathan. He later died in an accident. When he had come, A B Raj was making a film 'Punda Comes to town'. He was a beginner who didn't know much about Filmmaking. He was in Sri Lanka making films. After I went, we both used to alternate and direct. The person he learnt filmmaking from was not very good, Wahab Kashmiri. So, when this proposal came, ASA Sami recommended me for the work.

02:35:06:00

Q: I see Sami recommended you.

A: Yes. Without him, I wouldn't have become a director. I owe my directorship to Sami. I owe my efficiency to Raja Sandow but the person who pulled me into it was Sami. If not for him, I would have remained an assistant. He recommended me to S M Nayagam. So, he wrote a letter asking me to come. I was arranging for the visa secretly. But somehow people got to know about it and informed the boss. Suleiman

was the production manager. He called me to ask if I was trying for it. I said 'Yes'. We called him 'Chandrahari' the inverse of Harichandra as he used to lie a lot. So, when I went to say goodbye to TRS, he said "Modern theatres' gates will always be open for you. Come back whenever you want. I couldn't take you for Valayapathi. But when you come back from Ceylon, come here". And I left for Ceylon. A B Raj couldn't wait long. So, he had started a film by the time I reached. It was called Prema Tharagaya which means 'Love competition' in Sinhalese. They asked me to edit it. My condition was that I would edit my own films, the one I would direct. I didn't want to edit for others. Neither wanted someone else to edit my films. But I agreed finally to edit just one film. But he had an issue. He was uncomfortable working with brahmin editors. He had developed a perception that they were not cooperative. There was another editor, Parthasarathy before me with whom he had a bad experience. That editor ruined the film to take a revenge on A B Raj. While I was editing, I asked him to come and see. He somehow wouldn't listen to me at all. He would pretend as if he did not hear me. I kept telling him and he kept typing on his typewriter. I pulled him by his collar and asked him to come and see the rushes. He was annoyed by it. I did it thinking I may get beaten up but I didn't mind as I wanted him to start working with me. I pulled him into the room and showed him how jerky the cuts and how improper the shots were. I told him that I would need a few shots to fix those. I wrote down a few inserts and asked him to shoot those patches for me. I sat with him on the shoot to supervise. After I got them, I inserted them and showed him the sequence. He immediately hugged me and said "I didn't know you would be so helpful. You are a senior and I thought you would have senior-junior ego problems. From now on, I'll listen to whatever you say". Then we started having a healthy relationship. Nayagam would give him one film and one film to me. He alternated between us as the directors. We had a healthy competition so much so that he would help me in my film to make it better than what he did. I would help him to make his better than my last film. Nayagam benefitted out of this competition. Raj's films won awards, while mine brought in money. Nayagam once told me "Raj is taking away all the awards. Why are you helping him make it better than yours?". I said "You are making profit out of it. Why do you even bother"? He said "As you wish". We still are very good friends. Raj lives close by and we meet once in a while. When Prema Tharagaya ended, a big

incident happened. ASA Sami had come to Ceylon. He was not getting good chance in Madras. So, he had made a contract with Nayagam that he would direct 3 films in Sinhalese, for a remuneration of one lakh rupees. Sundaram Pillai, Nayagam's father, known as Ayya used to live inside the studio. He would go on rounds every day and would notice me working from morning 7 to 11 in the night. He proudly talked about my dedication. He said, "Our studio wasn't taking off because we didn't have a person like this here". ASA Sami felt he could manipulate or exploit me as he had recommended me to them in the first place and told them that Raj didn't know anything and that it was me who covered up his mistakes in the edit. I told him "You have indirectly given me a certificate for my work. That is what I consider as the job of an editor. To hide and correct the mistakes of the director". That incident was over and I had written a story titled 'Vichithra Marumagal'.

02:41:14:14

Q: What was the Sinhalese title?

A: Puthumaleli. Leli means Daughter-in-law.

Q: Was it a comedy?

A: No, it was a thematic film. I used comedy in it too but it was a film with thematic value. So, I took it to ASA Sami to ask for an opinion as I was planning to make it. He said "I am going to make this film. You won't be. They are going to send you back". Saying so, he returned to Madras. As he said, Nayagam asked me to come to the office the next day to settle my account and hand over a flight ticket. He said "We don't have any issues with you. In fact, we are satisfied with your work. When your next contract comes up, you will be invited here again". I said "It is too short a notice. I haven't even seen Ceylon around. Have spent all my time working in the studio. I am not in a mood to tour also. But I would like to see the Kathirkamam temple. It is a famous Muruga temple in Sri Lanka. He said "You mentioned that name casually. You see, a big fortune might be waiting for you back in Madras". It is strange to think of what happened. ASA Sami had, in the meanwhile got a deal for three movies back home and wanted to wriggle out of this Ceylon contract. When I went in the morning to

collect the air ticket, Nayagam was cursing ASA Sami. He had received a letter from Sami saying that he was facing some litigation with Jupiter Somu and not in a position to travel out of India at that juncture. On seeing me, Nayagam complained about Sami, “Look what your chief has done”. I said “I know you just because of him. He has done only good to me. Please don’t curse him in front of me. You give me the air ticket, I’ll leave”. He said “Nothing doing. You are our chief director from now on. Ayya holds you in high regard. You stay back”. He immediately increased my salary from 750 to 1500 and made me sign a 5-year contract.

Q: He made a 5 years contract with you? On a monthly salary of 1500 rupees?

A: Yes. It was not a picture-to-picture basis. It was on monthly salary basis. When Ayya got to know about this, he was jumping in joy. He was excited and said “See that is what happens when you take Murugan’s name”. He immediately arranged for 2 cars and cameras were loaded in it. We went straight to Kathirkamam temple and over there, I took my first shot as an official director. I shot some inserts to be used in a song later.

02:45:05:21

Q: What was their production house called?

A: Sri Murugan Navakala Films.

Q: Where was it located?

A: In a place called Kanthanai (Kandana). 10 miles from Colombo.

Q: Was it a big studio?

A: Yes. Fairly big.

Q: How many floors were there?

A: There was one. Later, he built another big one. There was a mountain nearby.

Q: How many films did you make in Ceylon?

A: 7 or 8 films. The main film among them were Mathalan and Purusharathnaya. Means gem of a man. It ran well. It was a social subject and broke all records. For Mathalan...

Q: What was it about?

A: It is like the Mangamma Sabatham. A Sinhalese version of it but the son would have more prominence than Mangamma in this story. That is Mathalan.

Recording interrupted

Q: You said Mathalan. Was it a story that you wrote?

A: They also had the similar story in their culture. And Mangamma Sabatham was made by Acharya. So, I wrote my version of it with a mix of everything. But the comedy segments were unique in it. Nobody had seen that kind of comedy before that. It ran also very well.

Q: I see. It was a big success.

A: The thing about Mathalan is that, the film is said to have run continuously for more than 30 years. Not in the same screen, but somewhere in some theatre, there would be a show of Mathalan. It is almost a Guinness record I must say. Gunarathnam is no more. He was the distributor of the film. 'Cinemas Limited'. I don't know the whereabouts of the other partner in business.

Q: Who were the artistes?

A: I introduced new faces. I never took stars for my films in Ceylon. I created about eleven stars there.

Q: Can you mention some names?

A: Clairice De Silva was the top most girl. She was a typist. I cast her in my films. She became a star later.

Q: Is she alive?

A: Oh yes. She must be 45 or so.

Q: Has she quit acting?

A: I don't know actually. I've lost touch with them.

Q: She was a typist?

A: Yes. she must have been 16 or 17 then. I usually advertised for casting. She had come. Nayagam and I were sitting in the studio. She said "I work as a typist. I am looking for work". I asked her the age and she said 17. I told her "In that case, you need a guardian to sign on your behalf, for me to give you work". She said "I didn't know I would be getting the work; I would have brought them with me had I known". I fixed her for the work and she was appointed for 250 rupees a month. Made it 1000 rupees later, for Mathalan. In Pudumaleli she played a vamp. The heroine was Nanda Leelanayake. She had acted in films before. She was a good actress. I cast Clarice as a vamp.

Q: Is she alive?

A: Yes. Nanda Leelanayake married an actor Prem Jayanth later. His name was Rodrigo. He named himself Prem Jayanth. I only gave him big breaks. He was a good actor, good looking too. Then there was an actress called Girley Gunawardena. Then for comedy there was Pitipana Silva. Pitipana is the name of a place. There was a dialogue writer cum an old-time actor named Hugo Fernando, who wrote Prema Tharagay. He did not show much interest in my movie. I got Pitipana to do better than him. Some 5-6 people like this.

Q: All these films were in Sinhalese?

A: Yes, in Sinhalese.

02:49:57:00

Q: Not in Tamil

A: No.

Q: Did you know Sinhalese language?

A: I knew very well. If I talk now, people would think I am a Sinhalese person not a Tamilian. That fluent I am. I learnt the language in 3 months.

Q: Is it similar to Tamil?

A: A bit. It is similar to Sanskrit in many ways.

Q: How do you ask, 'What's your name' in Sinhalese?

A: Ubage nama mokadhdha- Ubage-your, nama-name. mokadhdha-what is. Ubage-addressing with respect.

Q: How long were you in Sri Lanka?

A: For 8 years. A break in between for Paasavalai. I came back and returned.

Q: What was your most successful film in Sri Lanka?

A: Mathalan and Purusha Rathnaya

Q: Who were the artistes in Purusha Rathnaya?

A: Clarice was the heroine. She was the heroine in Mathalan as well. She did very well.

Q: Was this all black and white?

A: Yes. no colour.

Q: What did you do for the music director?

A: A very important question you have asked. There was a Sinhalese music director there. I don't remember his name. I think Robert. He was a boozier. He gave me a tough time in Prema Tharagaya. I didn't like him. There was a violinist by name Muthusamy in Radio Ceylon. I asked him to become the music director. Not only in my film but also in A B Raj's films. He did it. He was also a boozier but worked very well. In Sri Lanka, everyone drinks. I had a good working relationship with him. I have a taste in

music but I don't have notation knowledge. I can hum and make a tune but can't write it down. If I got a tune idea, I would ask him to come running. He would listen and make notes. He would later make it into a fantastic tune. Everyone in Vauhini studio admired him. He was the music director for Mathalan, the record-breaking picture. Excellent music director.

Q: He came here later?

A: Yes. We brought him here.

Q: Was Mathalan done in Sri Lanka?

A: No. It was made here. We brought the entire team here and kept them in a place on Habibullah Road.

Q: Was there a specific reason for doing so?

A: It was a costume drama with lavish sets of palaces. We could not erect sets like that there. There were many trick shots too.

Q: Who was the cameraman for it?

A: Konda Reddy. He is an excellent cameraman. Admires my work a lot. He would say "No one writes such drama like you".

Q: He is a good friend of mine

A: He is a good friend of mine too. He was a bit slow but gave perfect result. No one would shoot night effect like how he did.

Q: Who were the other technicians? Did Sivaraman work in sound?

A: Yes. Sivaraman worked as a recordist. There was a recordist by name Hari. He used to come mostly. Sivaraman would come once in a while. The chief was Krishna Iyer. A boy called Bhaskar worked in the camera department. He later became a cameraman. About Mathalan, it was a film made here after I made film in Ceylon. That is when I had an issue with Sami. He asked me to shoot at another place where he could be of help. I told him I had already fixed up Vauhini studio for the film. He

took it to heart. He said “You don’t want me to be overlooking your shoot. That’s why you are not accepting it”. I said “I am now an independent director. It would be apt only if I come to you and not the other way”. He warned I was taking a risk by going to Vauhini. He said “You don’t know about Nagi Reddy. He would charge for each and every work you would do in the studio”. Exactly the opposite happened. When he asked me “What is your problem in working under my supervision?” I replied “I am fine with working under someone whose films have never flopped. Don’t you have any failures in your career?”. That hurt him hard. It still rankles in his heart. He never forgot it. The thing about Nagi Reddy is that, I had budgeted 75000 rupees for the set construction. He managed everything within 17000. He gave me the portions of sets constructed for other films with some alterations as required. He was very cooperative, took personal interest and not at all like how Sami had said. I’ll tell you one more interesting thing about Nagi Reddy. A very great person. You can’t find people like that. There was a studio manager named Radhakrishnan.

02:56:15:18

Q: He was Sundar Rao Nadkarni’s brother-in-law. Very well-built man. Good looking too. Died recently. He was the production controller there.

A: I see. He was the manager. That was the time when Magnetic tapes were replacing sound negatives. Krishna Iyer was obsessed with the compression method. When one camera is running while the playback is happening, another camera should run empty on the side. We needed two sound cameras. But Radhakrishnan said the camera was not available. But I stuck to my demand that I needed a second one and even offered to pay extra for it if needed. He replied “You have come from Ceylon and behave as if all this is your property. It doesn’t work this way. If you take a call sheet in the studio, doesn’t mean you can access everything”. In fact, it is true that one can access everything if you take a booking. He didn’t know that. He went and told Nagi Reddy and Nagi Reddy took my side. He asked Radhakrishnan to arrange for the camera and buy time from me till then. Radhakrishnan came and told me that Nagi Reddy requested to postpone it for a while and rehearse till the camera arrived. As

promised, after an hour and half, the camera reached and we did the shooting. When I was crossing his office, he called me by my name and said “What you said is true. I came here with 70 thousand in hand. Now I have 70 Lacs. It is all because of producers and directors like you. Once you book the studio, everything belongs to you. We can only charge for it. Thanks for reminding us of this”. He was a gentleman of that sorts. There is another interesting thing. There was a floor manager named Ramanujam. Gemini lab chief Ranganathan’s own brother. He died later by drowning. He was quite a famous man in Vauhini. When he was the floor manager, he had a practice of carrying a clock to the set to show people they were going beyond the call sheet time. In the whole schedule I shot there, he didn’t have to show up even once. I was very particular about my schedules. I would neither begin late nor overshoot my time. It was a training from Acharya’s shoots. Everyone must reach 45 minutes before the call time. His policy was that, one must roll the first shot at the call sheet beginning time. Everything must be ready before that. When I was in Ceylon, Ramanujam once wrote a letter to me asking me to come to Chennai as he would arrange for a Producer. Poor guy, before we could meet, he drowned in an accident. He was in a swimming pool in Saidapet and drowned. Another interesting that happened was, you would have seen Mangamma Sabatham. There is a scene where she is confined in a place and the Prince teases her about her vow. We were doing that scene. In that scene, I kept a tall mirror in the room. It had two sides. In that two reflections would appear. One was the good thought, one the bad thought. The third was her real self. The bad thought says “You aren’t going to fulfil your vow, so better you hang yourself”. The good thought would say “No, humans should live up to a hundred years to enjoy all pleasures, says Ramayana. Don’t do it.” The good thought and the bad thought start arguing.

Recording interrupted and resumes.

Q : We were talking about Mathalan and you were talking about the shot with two images...

A : Yes, I added the line ‘Wait and hope’ from Monte Cristo. The reflection would repeatedly shout ‘wait and hope’ just as she attempts to end her life. Irritated by it, she would fling the flower vase on the mirror, shattering it to pieces. Multiple

reflections would then appear in the individual pieces. In Mudaliyar's song, he did the same shot repeating in all pieces. In mine, every shard would show a different action. The whole thing was masking.

03:03:56:13

Q: Who shot it?

A: Me only. I mean Konda Reddy only shot it. One by one, each piece would start singing and the song should be synced to each by moving it frame by frame to match. Very heavy work. At that time, there was a special effects expert. Konda Reddy wasn't sure about him. He approached Adi Irani for it. When Adi Irani heard of the scene, he was very much pleased. He said he was surprised that somebody from Ceylon was attempting something which had not been done even in India. I said "I am an Indian who has gone to Ceylon for work". Adi Irani said he would himself supervise the scene and let Konda Reddy only shoot it. He warned us that "This scene might take several days to finish. Maybe a month. And if you make one mistake, we would have to shoot it from the beginning. A lot of film and time would be wasted on this. Is your producer okay with it?". Nayagam had come with us. He was very pleased with the night shots Konda Reddy had taken. He was excited when Adi Irani accepted to be part of it. He said "If it takes 3 months or 30 months, do it till you get it right, let's do it this way". I was happy as no producer would say things like that. We worked very hard and there was no need to go for retakes as there was hardly any mistake. Only in one place we had to because of an interesting reason. I personally cut all the masks. Konda Reddy was someone who did not have much knowledge about musical rhythm. The plan was to fade in the second camera along with the music. He gave that responsibility to me. We did that also well. The retake happened for another reason. The actress Clarice was asked to give position for a shot. And Konda Reddy wanted her to be in the frame for the clap shot. About 42 times, we had to ask her to stand up and sit down and she was getting irritated. I had brought some dancers who were very good looking. Clarice complained to her sister that we were ignoring her as there were more beautiful girls on the set. The sister came and told me and I asked her to not tell Clarice that we knew. I continued shooting and suddenly she backed off

and said “You are disrespecting me when you saw other beautiful girls”. I said “You silly girl, you got a good name because of me. I am getting good name because of you. How can I even think of disrespecting you? You are mistaken. Let us continue shooting”. She started crying. We finished shooting it somehow. Fortunately, the shot we had to reshoot was a 2-mask shot. Not the 8-mask shot. So, we could manage it. That shot is still there in the film. You can see her swollen face after crying in that shot alone. Anyway, we finished shooting and planned to watch it in the big screen after processing it. Everyone in the Vauhini studios by then got to know that this was a special shoot. They were all interested to come for the preview. Clarice came too. After watching it, when I was walking to the canteen to have lunch, she came running behind me. She held my hands and apologized profusely “I did a mistake and behaved silly on the day of the shoot. If I knew this was the desired effect, I would have given another 1000 takes”. I said “Don’t be silly now. Go and have food”. The technicians on the other hand who were watching it, mistook me for a trick photography cameraman. They would all come to me asking doubts and suggestions about trick shots. When I told them that I was not one and that I only composed that sequence as a director, they would never believe me. They assumed I was reluctant to reveal trade secrets. Even Venu, the cameraman told me the same once. Another incident happened. Clarice didn’t know how to dance. She was not a dancer. Jaishankar, the dance director who worked in Gemini was our dance director. He tried but she couldn’t get the steps right. He asked me to change the girl. How could I make a substitute dance, when Clarice was the character who danced and seduced the hero? Shesh Palihakkara played the hero, playing the role Ranjan did in the original. He was a dancer himself and also anti-Tamil. He would never agree to whatever we did. Would look down upon us. I was confident though, since I knew my cutting points. We shot it and I cut the song. When we projected it, Shesha said he would also come. We all saw it together and Jaishankar was astonished as there was no mistake in the dance at all. He asked me ‘How is it possible?’. I said ‘It is the magic of the golden scissors. I knew where my cut points were’. Shesha Palihakkara also said “Mr. Nagarajan. I never thought you would do this dance so interesting. Hats off to you”. In another incident, you would have seen Mangamma Sabatham. In the interval scene, she would speak gibberish with him and would go and lie on the bed.

She would then ask him to come. He would reply in gibberish and come to the bed. When they are about to kiss, she would close his mouth and put the light off. In my film, I was shooting it through a window that had no grills. Before she turns, she would look into the camera as if acknowledging the audience' presence. That got me a lot of appreciation. Seeing that Lalitha of Lalitha- Padmini were excited. She said "Sir. You have done such a great job. I feel like acting in your films now". One day I was watching an English film The Black Shield of Falworth in Odeon. Somebody tapped my shoulder during the interval. I turned back to see T R Sundaram. I said "Sorry sir. I didn't notice you earlier.". He said "Hush! Don't make noise now. I heard you've made very good films. I want to see it". I said "Come tomorrow sir. I'll show it". He saw my film the next day and immediately said "When are you making one for me? I am sitting here and you are making for some other people". I was planning to do a film called Vidhurajataka.

03:15:18:03

Q: Was it a Buddhist story?

A: Yes. Based on Jataka tales. One among the many births of Buddha. I also got the certificate from the Buddhist university head at that time.

Q: You were planning the picture.

A: I was planning the picture. The film was stopped because of some silly reasons. I told Sundaram that when I completed that picture, I would come back to him. He said "Okay. Come soon". I had to come soon as that film didn't happen.

Q: What exactly happened?

A: Nayagam had some weakness and one of his old affairs resurfaced here. His father didn't like his dalliances and feared the son would relapse into his indulgences away from home. He didn't let him shoot it in Madras. I had ordered for aluminium horses and everything for some flying sequences to be shot here.

Q: How old was Nayagam at that time?

A: He was 55 or so.

Q: His father thought he would get spoilt at this age?

A: Yes. He had some notions like that. Nayagam had some weaknesses like that. His father called me and asked me to tell Nayagam that this film wouldn't work. He wanted me to cancel the film. I said "I am not Nayagam's employee. I will do what is good for the studios. I won't lie for another cause". He was angry. He went to Gunarathnam and asked him to say there was no finance. He did that and the film was stopped. We went back to Ceylon after that. After many hassles, we released Mathalan in Ceylon and it became a raging hit. We asked the audience for their opinion on the first day. One person said "five flowers" which meant five stars in their language. Nayagam had put my photo in the prints and people already recognized me. They hoisted me up on their shoulders. That film ran very well. Nayagam had a plan to make Devadas in Sinhalese after the Tamil Devadas ran well in Ceylon too. I said it wouldn't run. He asked me "Why so? they loved the Tamil version. Why don't we do the Sinhalese version?". I said "If it has to be in their language, it should have their culture. They won't watch this culture in their language. So many questions will be raised". He first decided to drop it but came back to me and said "We have all decided to do this story only. You prepare for it.". I said "As a director, I don't relate to this film. So, you please ask A B Raj to make it". It was actually my chance. I gave it to A B Raj and said "I am going to Madras". Ayya always thought I would go back. He said "He might be wanting to go to Madras to make a film. Send him". I came here. 'Bhoologa Rambai', the film S Balachander made was supposed to be made by me. They had seen my Mathalan film and had decided me for it.

Q: Ashoka Pictures...

A: Yes. They wanted the same team. Nagarajan, Konda Reddy and others. We had a disagreement over just 1000 rupees. An astrologer had predicted I may not do this film. He said I would be making films in the west. Like he predicted, Suleiman came and said "Master wants to meet you" and took me to Modern Theatres for Paasavalai.

03:20:20:18

Q : We'll talk about Paasavalai. I recently saw Paasavalai on video, for my book. That's when I saw your name for the first time. I had a chat about Paasavalai with Vepathur Kittu. He said it was based on the old theatre drama 'Ali Badusha'. Is that correct?

A : It is correct but it is not entirely Ali Badusha story. In Sri Lanka there was a similar story by the name 'Pattachara'.

Q : What does that mean?

A : It is the name of a woman.

Q : Is it an epic in Srilanka or a folklore?

A : It is an Epic.

Q : Like our Ramayana and Mahabharata?

A : Yes. It belongs to the Mahavamsa. Mahavamsa, Kulavamsa...

Q : I see they are part of Sri Lankan epic

A : Yes. I took the idea of children separating in Ali Badusha and used the scene from Pattachara in its place. Both are more or less similar. For example, in the story, there was a scene where two babies are separated. The mother has two children- one is a little grown-up and the other is an infant. She abandons them in two different places. When she is about to leave, she notices an eagle is about to prey on the infant. She scares it away and takes the child. In the film, we changed that to two young boys who get separated and a thief kidnaps the child.

Q : I see. You wrote the screenplay yourself?

A : Yes. I did it myself.

Q : Not Vepathur Kittu?

A : He was there. He wrote the dialogues. He had come after his marriage. Dialogue is

something everybody claims as their own. I had written with Sivaji Ganesan in mind. I wanted to cast him. But TR Sundaram refused. He didn't like Sivaji Ganesan.

Q: What was the reason?

A: I don't know what they had between them. We made the film. G Varalakshmi was very interesting. She was very short tempered. A very turbulent woman. You'll laugh at this. We were shooting in the Kudumpampetti forest. She was supposed to walk in the hot sun for a particular shot. She came and told me after the shot "You are very bad. You don't know how to work with stars. Maybe you don't have experience working with stars. You have done only with novices. Why can't you have some stand-in instead of me? It is a long shot after all". I said "You are right. I don't have experience working with stars. I worked with small actors in Ceylon. Over there, I beat them also. You don't need to act. I'll have some stand-in". She said "No, I will do it. Otherwise, you will say I didn't cooperate". We continued shooting and somebody in the set who saw this went and told Suleiman. He asked me "When she behaved like this, why didn't you cancel the shoot and come back? Modern Theatres doesn't allow such behaviour". I said my name would also get spoiled because of it. Nothing would happen to anyone but me. He said "No, prestige is very important". We ignored that. I used to give cue to the actors before shooting the close-up. She said she was getting distracted because of it. I told her it was for my editing convenience. Otherwise, the dialogue rhythm would go off which would make the edit look bumpy. For the close up shot, I didn't give her cue. She asked why I didn't give the cue". I said "You only said you don't want cue". She said "No, the way you explained to me was good. I now understand why it is needed. People are saying you have done a great job in Mathalan. I'll from now on, take your cues". She had a good knowledge about film direction and all. For one scene, we had planned a trolley shot and she had to be inside the circle. Subbha Rao, the cinematographer said it wouldn't be possible as he is missing some component. I decided to drop the shot. She was observing it from one side. She came to me and said, "In all these days, you haven't made any mistake. Now you are going to do one. I should be within the circle. How are you planning to take this shot without me?". I said "What you said is right but I would use it later in the edit". She said "I know about you. You are a perfectionist and would not do anything wrong. You won't cut

the track shot in motion; I know that very well. The cinematographer would give you reasons but you don't listen to him". Subbha Rao and she would keep fighting always. After we finished shooting, two compliments that I got, pricked Modern Theatres. One was from Varalakshmi. She said "I have cancelled call sheets even on my husband's shoot but Nagarajan is the only director with whom I haven't done that. He tolerated all that and didn't take it egoistically. He considered everything as a discussion between the artiste and the filmmaker. I would love to work with directors like him". Subbha Rao went a step further and commented "Not only that. You are the only director who has not left Modern Theatres midway too". Modern Theatres' Sidhdhan was around when they made that remark and it didn't go down well with him.

03:29:06:19

Q: In this M K Radha played the hero. Can you tell me something about him?

A: Very nice gentleman. He didn't give me any trouble at all. Very easy to work with. V Gopalakrishnan also played a role in it. As his brother.

Q: V Gopalakrishnan played hero in all my TV Serials. Very close friends, we are. We meet quite often.

A: I haven't met in a long time. We were also very good friends. Please convey my regards to him when you meet next.

Q: Who was the Lololol Rajamani who acted in the film?

A: She was a Brahmin girl who lived in my house.

Q: Where is she now?

A: I don't know where she is now. She has acted in Mathalan also. The film was shot here. She used to live in Mambalam. In the same house as ours. My cousin sister A R Indira who was a college principal, used to live in the same building.

Q: You took her to Modern Theatres...

A: Yes. One more incident happened. It is like a case of plagiarism. The comedy scene

I used came in another film 'Yaar Payyan'.

Q: How did it happen like that?

A: I knew that comedy from some other place. It was from Sam's Boy, a story by WW Jacob. Rajagopal was the assistant director in Yaar Payyan. He came and said "We are going to file a suit against Modern Theatres for this". I said "Before you do, go to a library and take the book by WW Jacob titled 'Sam's Boy' and see where the scene is from. He was astonished because they had bought the scene by paying money to a Hindi film producer. I told him "He has lifted it from this book and has sold it to you for money. You've been fooled".

Q: Who were your comedians?

A : A Karunanidhi mainly. Very good comedian. Passed away recently. He spoke about me in high regard to everyone. Him and T P Muthulakshmi. A L Raghavan was a young boy then. He was there. He was full time boy in Modern theatres. Did many errands.

Q: Who was the music director of Paasavalai?

A: M S Viswanathan

Q: Along with Ramamurthy?

A: No. He did it independently.

Q: Some songs were popular isn't it?

A: Yes. the ones C S Jayaraman sang. Were philosophical in meaning.

Q: Written by Pattukottai Kalyanasundaram?

A: Yes. And Marudhakasi too.

Q: Who wrote 'Lollolol, Pazhaiya nadaiyai maaththu'?

A : Pattukkottai Kalyana Sundaram.I have also written one 'unakkenna sontham'. Sung by a madman character. That was because Suleiman insisted. He said the

director should say the moral in the story. I thought it will be better as a song. Pattukottai is a man without any ego. He put it as it is. Just added a line I remember.

Q: Whose name was credited?

A : It came in his name only. I got only the director credit. One should give it Kalyanasundaram for his humble personality. If there was someone else in his place, he would not have agreed. Would have done a lot of changes. He used it as it was. There was one more stanza which was not approved by Sundaram's uncle, Balu Mudaliyar. I had written lines that he felt would sound communist, while actually, they were not. He said, 'Let us not use it. The censor won't allow it'. T R Sundaram liked it very much but finally agreed to what others said.

Q: His uncle would come to the sets?

A: Yes. I think he had some kind of partnership in the business. He would visit the sets often. 03:35:26:20

Q: Would TRS visit when you are making songs?

A: No. he would listen later. After it was made.

Q: He wouldn't ask for any changes later?

A : No. Just one incident happened with him. We were supposed to shoot a cave sequence and TRS wanted to use matte shot. Means, to use a painted plate in front of the camera. But Subbha Rao didn't like that idea. He said "Let's shoot without the matte". I said "But the master wants like that". He replied "He wouldn't remember these things". But he did remember. He called me to ask "Why didn't you use matte shot?". Subbha Rao was also there. He said "The director didn't feel it was necessary". He put the blame on me. He was a good friend. So, I didn't want to prove him wrong. We did shoot the matte shot later. We made the film and released it. People loved it and it ran well. But this was one incident that happened with me and TRS. Otherwise, it was all good.

Q: After Paasavalai, what did you do?

A : After Paasavalai, I was staying here. I got an offer from a studio in Hyderabad for a Telugu film. But I couldn't go. In the meanwhile, Nayagam had made Devadas with A B Raj. Titled 'Ramyalatha'. It was a terrible failure. Big flop it was. But it was not A B Raj's fault at all. He had made the film so well. If you see the last 4,5 reels, you'll know. It was very well made. But it flopped big time and Nayagam had lost all the money. He had invested about 2 lacs for that film. He lost that money completely. He wrote a 6-page letter to me on how my prediction was correct. A Bharatanatyam dancer there by the name Sujatha Jayawardana, was the daughter of De Silva, a government art director. They were family friends with Nayagam and visited them often. She asked exactly the same things I had voiced as my concerns. "How can a love story be like this? If she doesn't like him, why didn't she divorce and leave? Who would marry an old man? And in the end, they all become lean and tired and die. What is this story?". He wrote a letter to me saying Sujatha Jayawardana asked him the same questions. He said "You please come back. Otherwise, my studio wouldn't pick up from losses.". I had an offer from Hyderabad, which I dropped. He came in person, and announced the film Vidhurajataka again with me in Woodlands hotel in a press conference. He had organized a party feast. The film didn't happen. But later, we did a film called Sohoyuro.

Q : What does that mean?

A : It means brothers. It was made by L S Ramachandran. LSR worked in the editing of Mathalan too. Nayagam wanted somebody to work on editing to hasten the work. I was particular that no one else other than me would edit it. The production controller didn't tell me anything. He brought LSR and asked "Do you have a problem if he edits it?". How can I say no? LSR is my guru. He was the person from whom I learnt the craft. He saw the rushes and said "Nagarajan has done everything as if I would do it. It is exactly like my work". He worked on it. And later, he was taken to Ceylon by Nayagam. By that time A B Raj had come to India. So, they made this Sohoyuro film with LSR. I was asked to edit the fight scenes and I directed the dance segments. That film also ran well. That was the film I wanted to remake with Sivaji but he ditched me. It grew into a trouble. I lost quite a lot in that.

03:40:32:20

Q: You started it?

A: Yes. I had setup things here, took up a place to accommodate people, booked halls etc. But Sivaji ditched me.

Q: What was it titled?

A: We didn't name it then. It was called Production number something.

Q: You were planning to produce it?

A : Yes. There was a production manager in Revathy Pictures called Thirumal Azhagu. He was the one who told me "You have earned good name in Ceylon. You deserve recognition here too". A distant relative of mine by name AL Srinivasan, a Principal in Thoothukkudi, was close to Sivaji. He told me if I wanted to make a film with Sivaji, he could arrange for money from a theatre owner in Thoothukkudi. We went and met Sivaji. He was doing Irumbuthirai. He hugged on seeing me. He said "I know him very well. He makes films for Modern Theatres". I got the story approval too. Sivaji had invited me on a Pongal day and garlanded me and introduced me to everyone as the new producer. He told his brother that "he is arranging money from Ananthaswami in Thoothukkudi. Let's not do that. Let's do it with our Ajantha". He fixed all these things with his elder brother. He was Sivaji's secretary. He left saying he will be back in a few days. In that assurance, I arranged for booking other artistes and the place for them to stay etc. I spent about 40,000 rupees from my pocket for that. One day, his elder brother asked me to meet Shanmugham and get his approval as he was managing things for Sivaji then. When I met him, Shanmugam said "Brother told me about it. You give us 70,000 as advance in black and rest in white." I said I didn't have that kind of money; not did I work like that. I was sent back to the elder brother for negotiation and he brought down the advance money from 70,000 to 50,000. Still, I could not agree. They asked me to come to a place the next day and the same thing continued. Sivaji was also there. He told me he had briefed his brothers and that I could go ahead and finalise things and left the place. But the brother said, the advance amount was now reduced to 40,000 and nothing else was left for

discussion. At the end of it, I became really angry. I said “May be not as big as your brother, but I have produced about eleven stars in Ceylon. I have a good name there. If you are giving a person like me so much trouble, I can only imagine what you would be doing with others.” I left saying I would come to them when I had a lot of money in hand. Sivaji said “There are some compulsions because of which I’m unable to supersede their decisions, but do come home often. I will arrange for some direction projects”. I never went, he never gave me any. This is one side but on professional front, he was spotless. Always on time, acted well, all that was great. Similarly, I was planning to make a film with MGR. I had fixed a person in Kurinjippadi who was ready to give me 50,000 rupees. ASA Sami took me to him one day and introduced me. MGR said he knew me well. He heard the story and agreed to do it. But my financier backed out. He said he was expecting 40,000 black money from Indonesia which he didn’t get. Because of that, I never met MGR for the next two years. One day, suddenly in Revathy Studios, he stopped me and asked why I didn’t go to him after that. I told him the matter and he said “Is that financier the only person in business? You should have told me. I would have connected you with some people”. I told him that I had 6 stories for him. He said frankly “I won’t read them. Sornam will read it. If he likes it, we will do or else he will return it to you”. As he said, he returned me the stories. I still have one story. It is a very good one. When I went to Chakrapani with it, they had picked Adimaipenn then. Mine was almost fixed then. K Shankar had even told me “You have become an MGR director”. Unfortunately, it didn’t happen. He still has good opinion about it. After that, I had written a story called Valarpirai, the Sivaji Ganesan film. You can see my name under the title as ‘Original story’. That film went from one hand to the other and AVM wanted to make it in color and then the financier wanted some other director. In the middle of all this, I accepted 10,000 rupees for the story and left. So Valarpirai was done. After that I went back to Ceylon. There is a second session there. I worked on Sohayuro there. It was my story, directed by LSR. After that we did some dubbing films. Abhayanayaka, a senior advocate there had two sons Kumar and Sena. His wife, Swarna Abhayanayaka, wanted to make a film with all of them together. Thinking it would bring profit to the studio, Nayagam agreed to it and sent them to me. I had written the story Purusharathneya, which Nayagam had already approved of and I told them the story and they said “We don’t

know much about these things. You take care of it”.

03:48:35:09

Q: They provided the money?

A: Yes. They come from an orthodox family. Ardent devotees of Kathirkama deity. I made that film. Clarice de Silva played the lead. I cast Pitipana Silva as her father. The ending was very good. Let me tell you.

Q: Tell me

A: Shall I tell you the story?

Q: Tell me

A: The story is of two brothers.

Q: Two brothers

A: Yes. Both of them are orphans. Their mother passes away when the elder one is 11 years and the younger one is 5 or 6 years old. While dying, the mother tells the elder son to take care of the younger one. The young boy says ‘That is not needed, mother. I can take care of my elder brother’. How he does that forms the rest of the story.

Q: I see

A: The education minister of Ceylon appreciated me a lot for this film. The elder brother tells the younger brother ‘I will go for work so that you can study’. The younger boy tells him, ‘Brother, you are in class 7. If you study for 3 more years, you can find a job with which you can make me study. If I go to school now, I will also not study and you will also miss the opportunity. So, you study, I’ll work’. He starts working in a hotel. The hotelier’s daughter is the heroine. His son is the villain. He has two friends who are fools. The comedy track with them was very good. The elder brother continues with his studies, falls in love with a girl. He passes with good rank and wins a scholarship. He is asked to continue with his studies. The younger brother helps him get married. The hotelier’s daughter falls in love with the younger boy but

he doesn't reciprocate her feelings. Her brother is a spendthrift. He steals money from his own house and spends it on his friends. He also promises one of the friends, his sister's hand in marriage. The girl is in love with the hero and her father is willing to give him her hand but the mother doesn't support it. I'll just tell you the end. There are very interesting portions in the middle but we don't have enough time for that. The hotelier dies and the son throws the hero out. The boy asks the hotelier's wife to allow him to do the rituals for his employer as he was a father figure to him. The wife allows him thinking her husband's soul will rest in peace if he does so. He then gets a letter from the daughter and in the letter, she says, "If you wish the welfare of your owner's daughter and not let her hang, you have to come and meet me in my room tonight at 12. The French window would be kept open for you". When he goes there, there's an ante-room where the jewellery is kept. I have to show you how the room looks like. There is a room here, where the jewellery is kept.

Q: Like the one in the diagram you've made.

A: Yes. She has asked him to come through the French window. Before he reaches there, the brother and the two foolish friends reach. They have come to steal the jewels. He asks the friend to bring the car so that they can leave after the robbery. He goes inside and opens the cupboard and becomes excited to see the jewels. He hears a sound and the hero enters. He hides behind the cupboard and the hero goes to wake the girl up. The brother takes the knife out thinking he has come to attack the sister. She wakes up asking 'Have you come?'. The man replies 'Isn't it wrong for me to be here at this time? What will happen to you if people get to know?'. She replies 'How does it matter? You are the one I am going to get married to'. He says 'That is a dream that will never come true'. She says 'I will get married to you and not anyone else. They won't let us live a life here. Let's elope and go somewhere else to make a living'. He refuses, saying 'That would be a breach of trust to my employer's family'. She says 'You are concerned about somebody who is not alive. And you are ruining a living person's life because of that'. He says 'Your father is not dead. He is alive in my heart. You please wait till I go somewhere and earn money to come and ask for your hand'. By the time, in a confusion, the brother has taken out the knife and the mother has come calling the daughter's name. The brother on hearing this, runs away. No one

knows he had come. The hero goes behind the cupboard and hides.

Q: Behind the cupboard...

A: Not behind the cupboard but next to it. The jewels are all lying open. The mother asks her whom she was talking to. She replies she was murmuring in her sleep. At that moment the mother hears a sound from the cupboard. The girl tells her it must be the cat. The mother checks and find it is the boy who is hiding and starts shouting 'Thief! Thief!'. All the guests come running. They all shoo him away. I've made this film in Malayalam too. He leaves from there. The next day when the brother returns, the mother tell him how the boy had come to rob the house. She tells him how the boy admitted that he had come to rob and how they made him run from the place. He tells them they have missed a big chance to teach him a lesson. And he leaves in a car. On the other hand, the boy's elder brother is torturing his wife. The boy is unable to stand it. He understands how they are struggling. He tells his brother's wife that he would work for daily wages somewhere to help them pay for the rent. She blesses him that good fortune will smile on him for his good nature. Not good fortune, but the villain arrives. On seeing the boy, the man asks his friends to take the boy in the car. The boy's elder brother pleads to the man. He also gets picked up by his friends. They take both the brothers in their car. They bring them to the hotel and in front of everyone he starts abusing the boy 'What all have you done when my father was alive! How much you troubled me for taking money from my own father's cash box? Do you think I'll leave you so easily?'. The boy mouths a dialogue that I had taken from Henry IV. 'If you had a son who stole from you and If I had reprimanded him for the act, how would you feel about me then?'. On hearing that, the man becomes furious. He takes him by the collar to the manager's seat and makes him sit there. He says 'If my son did something like this, I would ask you to do the manager's work properly for the entire life. That is the punishment of your lifetime'. Everyone is surprised. The man says 'I have become responsible in my life and I am doing what is good for the business'. To everyone's surprise, he brings his sister and gives him her hand. He says this is the golden handcuff. His fool friend says 'I didn't even get a silver handcuff'. The other friend says 'not even an iron handcuff for me'. When the mother is surprised he says 'It was me who came to steal the jewels. Though your daughter forced him to elope

with her, this boy resolutely refused, saying he would do no such thing that would damage his employer's reputation. Where else can we find an honest manager like him? Also, he had the letter your daughter wrote for him. He could have shown that to avoid the beatings, but her name would have been sullied. So, to save her honour, he took the blame of stealing on himself. Where else can we find a suitable groom for her? He is the Purusharathneya'. The interesting thing about the ending is that, he is someone who couldn't complete his studies. He always wanted to learn English. She promises she'll take care of that. When they are about to kiss, she says 'first dictation'. She says C-A-T cat. R-A-T rat. He writes them and says 'For rest of our life, you are going to dictate, I am going to follow. Allow me to write one of my own'. She says okay and he writes E-N-D end. And the film ends.

Q: Was the film successful?

A: Record breaking success

Q: In Sri Lanka?

A: Yes. I remade this in Malayalam named 'Baalyaprathijna'.

Q: Which year was this?

A: 1970 or 71, I think.

03:58:52:12

Q: You directed it?

A: I produced it also.

Q: I see. In 1971?

A: Yes. Gunarathnam was the financier.

Q: I did my Malayalam film in 74.

A: This film had Sathyan, Sheela, Bhasi, Bahadur.

Q: I see you have cast all main Malayalam actors.

A: Yes. Sathyan and Sheela were all happy doing it. Acted well too.

Q: Did you meet Sheela at the festival?

A: No, I didn't.

Q: She was sitting at the back.

A: I didn't notice her. I would have spoken to her had I known.

Q: It didn't run well, I think.

A: They cut the positive of the film. Vimala pictures, the distributors. It had some excellent comedy portions. After removing it, the film had nothing.

Q: Bhasi and Bahadur comedy?

A: Yes. Also, Sankaradi was there.

Q: Who was the music director?

A: P Bhaskaran wrote the lyrics. Music I am unable to recollect the name now.

Q: But it didn't do well.

A: No, it didn't.

Q: Was it the only Malayalam film you produced?

A: Yes. Somebody said the film got an award. I didn't know about it. I've been thinking of making the Tamil version of it. Based on my original film.

Q: What did you do after Balyaprathijna in Malayalam?

A: After that, Nayagam sent me to Hong Kong. I was not doing good after Valarpirai. I tried my hands at distribution also in between these. I distributed one of Captain Ranjan's film. With a partner who didn't help me. I suffered losses and had some debts. Nayagam sent me to Hong Kong for a business purpose. Not for a film, for his personal business. He had some raw materials business and the middlemen were not

maintaining proper accounts. So, I was sent to take care of it. I did that for a few months and earned some money with which I paid back my loans. I also saved some money. With that, I bought 20-acre land in my village and started farming. I earned about 2 Lacs from farming.

Recording interrupted

Q: We were talking about B R Panthulu. How did you know him?

A: I'd met him at Neptune earlier. I knew him very well. I then gave him a story titled 'Arthajamam'. LV Prasad tells about this in great praise. He said "As a director, I am very much pleased with this, but as a Producer I am very nervous about taking this".

Q: Why so?

A: It is about Somnambulism. It has a very good climax.

Q: Do you still have it?

A: Yes. I have about 20 written scripts.

Q: Is it possible to make it into a TV serial?

A: Of course, it can be made.

Q: It sounds very new and interesting. I will be interested to make it. Let me see if I can meet you separately for it.

A: Please do. Let's discuss.

Q: You are a senior master. There is lot to learn from you.

Q: You gave it to Panthulu.

A: Yes. He liked it very much. He also gave me money for that. I was planning to make it with Sivaji. At that time, Sivaji heard the story and requested him to make Paavai Vilakku as he was not ready to take a risk. Panthulu planned Karnan instead. One day, I went to his place when they were discussing Karnan. I am an exponent of Villu

Paattu and an authority on that subject too. In that, Ramayya had written a scene which was factually wrong. That particular line they felt would show the hero Karnan in a poor light and the discussion was around it. In Mahabharata it is not like that. There is a general misconception about a line said by Karnan. I interrupted and asked if I might share something. I explained it to them how it is actually said in Mahabharata and told them what they had written was a mistake. They felt it better to have an expert like me on board. Ramayya was miffed with this and quit and hence they asked me to write the screenplay for the film.

04:07:22:22

Q: You wrote the screenplay for Karnan.

A: Yes. And the amount Panthulu had given me for Arthajamam was adjusted in this work. We then took a room in Bengaluru. Chitra Krishnaswamy, I and a few others discussed and arrived at the script of Karnan. We initially had the Draupadi Vastraharan scene but Krishnaswamy opined that such a scene would show India in a poor light if the movie was screened abroad and later removed it. There was one more scene which I personally liked a lot which is not there in the film. He didn't shoot that. It is about how Karnan is humiliated for being from the lower caste. About how Karnan's father-in-law discriminates against Karnan's young boy, his own grandson and the boy reporting the incident to his mother Shubhangi. Upon hearing that, Shubhangi remarks that the old man is a mad casteist.

04:10:28:17

Q: They didn't shoot this scene? It is a good scene.

A: Yes, they felt the attention should be on Sivaji. They had suggested a wedding night scene which I didn't like. I removed that.

Q: What did you do after Karnan?

A: After Karnan, I worked for Padmini Pictures in other films.

Q: Which ones?

A: Dudde Doddappa, a Kannada film. And Emme Thammanna. That was G V Iyer's story. I worked on it. It was remade into Tamil as Mattukaara Velan.

Q: Was it a Rajkumar's film?

A: Yes. Also, Beedi Basavanna. It was remade as Thedi vantha Mappillai. I worked in that too. I also worked in Krishnadevaraya. I had written the story, screenplay and dialogues for Gange Gowri. Both in Kannada and Tamil.

Q: Gemini Ganesan, Jayanthi...

A: Yes, and also Jayalalitha. There is an interesting story about it. I had worked on the Kannada Gange Gowri before the Tamil version. I wrote and also worked on the sets of it. We were shooting in Mysore as there is a subsidy of 50,000 rupees.

Q: Yes, I know, I have also availed that. We did our Malayalam film in Bengaluru.

A: The interesting thing about this film was that we had Jayalalitha. She got into a trouble over there. Some journalist had published an article calling her a Kannadiga. She gave a press statement saying it was wrongly published like that while she was a Tamilian actress. This angered the journalist and the orthodox Kannadigas got touchy. She had been booked to dance at a state sponsored function and there was uproar over that-why should a non-kannadiga perform there? She also received a telegram warning of troubles like stone-throwing if she did. Therefore, she returned the cheque she had received for the dance recital and refused to turn up for the function. This became a big problem and the groups gave us a lot of trouble. Hundreds of people flocked to our studio creating a ruckus. They demanded a public apology from Jayalalitha. They did not fully get the import of her statement where she had talked about her proficiency in Kannada language and the mutual appreciation between her and Kannadigas. We sent them away somehow, assuring they will have an apology the next day. But the next day another mob of some 1000 people barged into the studio, with the police, claiming they were the stronger force. Barging into the studio where we all were seated, one man declared they would not harm anybody other than Jayalalitha and so, the rest of us need not fear! He threw a chair at us and

demanded that she stand on the chair, tender her apology and seek forgiveness. You have to give it to her guts. She said “One of your men abused me with some cuss word. First, he should fall at my feet and apologise, then I will”. The men had come with knives, sticks and acid bulbs...but she was not at all perturbed. A carpenter who was working in the studio bore the brunt of the angry mob’s attack and his screams instilled some fear in them and they left. While we all were shaken, she kept her cool and casually brushed it off. When we questioned the policemen why they allowed the ruckus, they nonchalantly replied, that they had come only to arrest ‘us’ in case ‘we’ created any offense! She was game to continue the shooting. But the hotel where she was put up, had received threats of vandalism and so it was decided to return to Madras and resume shooting there. And that’s how we finished the work. One day, I was looking at her and somebody asked me “The shot is ready. Why are you still looking at her?”. She said “Old men like him enjoy watching young girls. Why are you disturbing him?”. I said “I’ve crossed that age long back. I am a continuity specialist. I think you are wearing the wrong jewel. Please ask the assistant director”. Exactly like how I said, she had done a mistake of wearing green earring instead of red. She apologised and changed it quickly. She asked me once if I ate non-vegetarian food. I told her that I had not even tried eggs. She said “You have missed the biggest pleasure in the world”.

04:19:22:21

Q: I’ve written a song in a film called Suryakanthi. It is an English and Tamil duet.

A: She once told me that if I ate at her place, I would start loving it. But they arranged for vegetarian feast for all of us one day. A grand spread with many items. Her mother was there.

Q: I see, Vedavalli.

A: I don’t know if that was the name.

Q: Yes. The screen name was Sandhya. The sisters are Vedavalli and Ambujavalli. Hence the house is named ‘Veda Nilayam’.

A: Very clever woman. Very bold and clever. She can become the Chief Minister.

Q: But anyways, it is not too late. What did you do after Padmini Pictures?

A: I worked for Chinnappa Devar.

Q: In the story department?

A: Yes.

Q: What all films did you do there?

A: The most prominent of all was the Hindi film Maa.

Q: Dharmendra and Hema Malini...

A: Yes. A very good film it was.

Q: MA Thirumugam has spoken to me about this film. He is a very good friend of mine.

A: He is a good friend of mine too. That is mostly my story.

Q: You didn't work on the set....

A: No. I didn't. I worked only in the writing department.

Q: Was Ma Ra there?

A: Yes. He is a very good friend of mine. We were working in a way that if the story was his, I'd do the dialogues. If he was doing the dialogues, I'd do the story. I was the one who introduced him to Padmini Pictures. I did him a favour which he didn't return. For a film, I told Padmini Pictures a story by Oscar Wilde that he had already worked on, upon my suggestion. When they gave me the money, I asked them to pay Ma Ra. They refused saying it was Oscar Wilde's story and wouldn't pay anyone who had rewritten it. I told them the pact we had with each other. They finally did, and that was the film Bale Pandiya. But he didn't do a similar gesture when he was making a film. He himself directed it. I didn't even know he was making a film. I got to know about it later.

Q: Kalyanamandapam, the film where K R Vijaya acted in a bit role.

A: Yes. They all were a caste lobby. Vanniyars work with other vanniyars. So, I had no place there.

Q: That was the film where K R Vijaya came in a small scene holding a plate. That released after Karpagam and she had become a star by then. She requested him to remove the scene and he refused to do so, but gave her name prominence in the posters, though hers was a small scene.

A: I've worked in Vellikizhamai Viratham too. In the story department. I worked in a film called Raja. That was a failure though. After that, I got to know about the farm that I had. There was some mismanagement. So, I thought of taking care of it myself. I left films totally and started focusing on my farm. I introduced scientific methods and made good profit from it.

Q: Where do you stay now?

A: In Adoor Agaram. That is my native place.

Q: And the farm?

A: I have sold that recently after I had a bladder stone operation. Now I get some money from what I have invested. Safe and settled.

04:24:55:21

Q: I want to ask you some general questions. Most of it related to 1930s. I went back home and thought a lot and came up with some questions. Now, you have worked a lot in Ceylon. These days, you see a lot of sex and violence in films. In those days, were there sex and violence in Sinhalese films?

A: A B Raj would include sex and violence in his films but I didn't. People accepted that in Ceylon. With that perception, they remade one of the films here in Tamil, which Masthan directed. It became a bit too sexy for our people. The women folk didn't go to the theatres. And it didn't do well. When the producer happened to meet me, he asked me the possible reason for the flop. I analyzed the business area wise,

and asked them to compare my analysis with the DCR-the Daily Collection Report and they matched. In hindsight, he felt he ought to have given me the film instead of Masthan.

Q: Nayagam was running Chitrakala Movietone. You had no contract then?

A: No. I was working with Acharya then.

Q: You don't know anything about Chitrakala Movietone and their activity?

A: No.

Q: I recently went and saw. Only the arch remains there.

A: Ayya was very fond of me.

Q: Now talking about Raja Sandow. You have done some pictures with him and all that. Would he write the script himself?

A: Yes, he would dictate the script, we would write it. He would say the dialogues too in Tamil. But his grammar was not correct. We would fix it. There was one S K Iyer who used to work with him. Mariyappan was another assistant director, P Sundarrao who was the villain in Savukkadi Chandrakantha also was an assistant director. I don't think he is alive.

Q: Is anyone alive in Raja Sandow's family?

A: I don't know. I met his wife Leelabai after many years. She was more than a mother to us all. That was when I was directing Mathalan, in 54. After that I have had no contact of her.

Q: Why I am asking is because somebody said Raja Sandow has a daughter through Leelabai. I am not sure though.

A: Her name is Seetha. She is an adopted child. Leelabai had come to meet me when I was doing Mathalan. She came to see if the girl could be introduced as an actor. On seeing them, I stood up and paid my respects. Leelabai couldn't understand why. I asked her if she could recognize me. She didn't. Then I told her, 'This is like a mother

who couldn't recognize her children'. I reminded her that I, Nagarajan, used to work with Raja Sandow. She remembered and was very happy to see me in that status. But Mathalan was a Sinhalese film. I couldn't cast the girl.

Q: I see. Somebody told me about her. That's why I asked you.

A: Yes. She was an adopted child. Leelabai was a good actress. She had acted in Chandrakantha and also in Thyagabhoomi.

Q: I don't think she is alive now.

A: I don't know.

04:30:25:02

Q: Was the actress Lakshmiprabha connected to Raja Sandow in some way?

A: Not with Raja Sandow but with Ramanathan. The actor who played Rama in Vishnuleela. She was his daughter and Saroja was another daughter of Ramanathan. Ramanathan was not an assistant director with Raja Sandow, but a favourite actor.

Q: I am trying to write a book on Raja Sandow. It is one of my projects. T V Ramnath, the owner of Pesum Padam said he has written a book and the copy would be there somewhere.

Recording interrupted.

Q: No one has written about T R Sundaram. Mine would be the first one, I think. You haven't worked for Jupiter, right?

A: No, I haven't.

Q: ASA Sami with whom I did a similar interview, spoke to me for 10 hours. I have about 10 tapes. There is still more to ask him. He keeps moving from one son's place to the other. One son in Coimbatore. One son in Thirupathur. One is an insurance manager, the other is a college professor. He suffered a paralytic stroke. His

movement is restricted after the illness. He was supposed to come to Madras. They conferred on him the Raja Sandow award. I was expecting him but he couldn't make it. So, he was given the award in absentia.

Recording interrupted

Q: You started saying something about Modern theatres.

A: (Bad quality audio) ... Sami was to do a film for them but due to some interferences, he left and Thangavel did it instead. I had written about this in a magazine named Tamil Cinema. He happened to read and was touched. He said, "Even though we had differences, you have written good things about me. This is a great gesture". I said "I am here because of you. I am always indebted to you for that". I didn't meet him afterwards. G Ranganathan, the cameraman...

Q: G R Nath...

A: Yes. He had a jinx. If one film flopped, 4 films in a row would be hits. With ASA Sami it was the other way, if he had 4 hits, the fifth would flop. After superhit films like Thangapathumai, Arasilankumari he didn't get a chance. No one knows why. He was a good filmmaker, smart enough to handle people but somehow, things didn't work out. He was friends with MGR afterwards.

04:34:34:03

Q: Not so much. They had some indifferences. He told me "I don't understand this person MGR". He was appointed by Karunanidhi when the latter was the Chief Minister at the Film Institute as head of the direction department. He was teaching screenplay and direction there. I too was a visiting lecturer there. Later, MGR became the Chief Minister and he said "Next time when you come, I may not be here. MGR has a problem with me. He will remove me anytime". I told him "No, MGR is a tactician. He would never do things like that. If he removes you, he is inviting a controversy and is going to gain nothing. But on the other hand, if he doesn't, he will gain a lot." He was very sure he would be ousted. But the next time I went, he was still there. In fact, MGR visited the campus and spoke about him in very high terms, "He is

my guru. The one who gave me my first chance. If he is teaching Cinema to the students here, it makes me very happy”. He was surprised and expressed his disbelief to me. He was allowed to retire only when his health deteriorated. When he was helpless in the hospital, it was MGR who paid the entire hospital bill without his knowledge. Later when Sami met him, MGR once again gave him money. That’s when he told me “I don’t understand this person MGR, Randor”.

A: What is your name Sir, Randor?

Q: My real name is Madabhushi Rangadorai. I was working in a European firm as an executive. In a stock broking firm. They used to not like people of colour. So, I did a play with the letters in my name which became Randor Guy which has no meaning at all. But over a period of time, it became successful. I then changed it legally. People call me ‘Randor’ as it is easy to say.

A: You are a Madabhushi. A higher sect of Vaishnavite.

Q: That I don’t know about all that sir. Anyways, I must thank you very much. I am very grateful to you and I thank you on behalf of the National Film Archive of India, Mr. P K Nair its director an energetic person, and also on behalf of myself. I am considerably a junior to you in this profession. You have told me a lot of things. I’ve learnt a lot of things from you by this short chat. I hope to keep in touch with you sir. I wish you a happy retired life.

A: Thank you so much

Q: Do give some subject that you have written, sir. I would like to read them. Also, if you have some old magazines or stills do give me. I do a lot of work in this field.

A: I may have some stills of Vishnuleela and Katakam. I’ll bring them.

Q: We will recopy it and give it to you. It will be preserved for a long time. I wish you all the best. You said you will say something additional about N S Krishnan.

A: When I was working in Uthamaputhiran, D V Chari was writing the film.

Q: Man in the Iron Mask, written by D V Chari. Did you work in it?

A: Yes. I didn't work officially. I was a private assistant.

Q: Not on record.

A: Not on record. There was a nice role for NSK. Him loving a harijan girl...

Q: Played by Madhuras?

A: Yes...It was a great comedy track that makes a commentary on caste. But there was another comedy track that did not involve NS Krishnan, but we connected the two. In the film, the anti - hero is imprisoned and wishing to be rescued, he secretly sends out a message to his friend in a plate, also mentioning a reward of 1000 gold coins to anybody who would reach the plate to the friend. An illiterate harijan happens to get hold of the note, and he seeks the help of a brahmin to understand the written word. The brahmin misleads him with an absurd interpretation that the message is from the very Heavens and that if he immersed the bones of his dead father in the river, the father would come back alive as a brahmin! The illiterate man complies, trusting his words and soon after he does that, he hears the shout of a brahmin resting under a tree and assumes him to be his own father, now resurrected as a brahmin and a tussle follows...

Q: (Laughs)

04:40:04:21

Q: That was the interview with filmmaker Mr. A S Nagarajan. Mr. Nagarajan is now retired from the world of films and leads a peaceful life in his village near Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu looking after his farm, attending to various affairs including the renovation of a 500-year-old temple in that village. He visits Madras occasionally to call on friends and also to live for a few days with his children who are settled down in Madras. This interview with Mr. A S Nagarajan was recorded at the residence of his son in Thyagaraya Nagar in Madras during January 1991. This is Randor Guy saying adieu to Mr. A S Nagarajan.

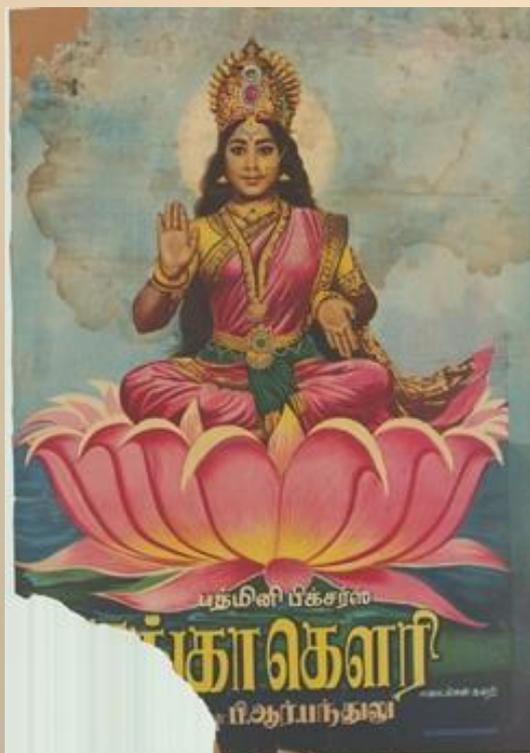
Some of his noted films are:



Movie - Karnan

Year - 1964

Story - Mr. A S Nagarajan



Movie - Gange Gowri

Year - 1967

Story - Mr. A S Nagarajan