



Another Face(t) M. S. Subbulakshmi

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Many celebrities are well known in one field but do they have talent in another area? Can singers be actors, sportsmen be film stars, or authors be painters? Would history have been different if they had taken the 'other' field seriously? Perhaps so.

M.S. Subbulakshmi, the legendary singer who became a revered figure in her time, tried her hand at acting in films. Would the movie field have had a different history if she had continued? Would the Carnatic music field have been the same

if she had been a full-time actor and part-time singer? Who knows?

Her movie career was short as it was sweet. She did just four films. The last one was in 1945! But people remember them with fondness many decades later. The movie stint lasted just seven years!!

It all began in 1938 when director K. Subramaniam made *Seva Sadan*, the celluloid version of Munshi Premchand's novel. MS enacted the role of a poor girl married to a rich man played by actor Natesa Iyer. For its time the movie dealt

M.S. with G..N.Balasubramanian in 'Sakuntalai' (1940).



with 'bold' topics of prostitution, woman's emancipation, feminist ideals, etc. To make the movie acceptable to a larger and a more conservative audience, it was disguised as a musical.

Kalidasa's *Shakunthala*, the evergreen legend was the next story MS chose to act in. This was in 1940 with Ellis Dungan wielding the megaphone. Her co-star in the movie was G.N. Balasubramaniam (GNB), the dashing and handsome Carnatic singer. The movie like the earlier one was in Tamil (Shankunthalai) and was a runaway success at the box-office.

You have seen Hollywood star Robin Williams play a woman in Mrs. Doubtfire and our own Kamla Hassan do it too (Avai Shanmugi in Tamil and Chachi 420 in Hindi). But in both the movies the script demanded that a man play a woman's role in parts of the film. But MS did something else. In an era where it was common for a man to do a woman's role (both in theatre and cinema as many women did not consider them a good profession), MS played a man's role!! In the Tamil film of 1941, *Savithri*, directed by Y.V. Rao, MS played the role of Narada while Shantha Apte, the North Indian star, played the role of Savithri. Gender bending in 1940! This film too kept the cash box ringing for its producers.

The crowning glory of her short film career (short by the standards of those days where stars lasted forever), was *Meera* in 1945 again directed by Ellis Dungan. This movie was 136 minutes of movie magic. MS played the role of the revered Rajasthani saint poetess. The chart busting song *Katrinele varu geetham* is still as melodious and as popular as it was in those days. The bhajans in the film became household



tunes. When the movie was partially remade and partially dubbed in Hindi and released across the country in 1947, MS became a pan-Indian icon. A star was born. Although she gave up films after this, she continued to be the star in the music field for almost six more decades!! It may have been a short innings in films but it left an indelible mark on the psyche of Indians. Like it is said, life is not about the moments you breathe but the moments that take your breath away.

Endnote: It has been recently announced that a movie is being made on MS with the South Indian star Shobhana essaying the role. That will be worth the wait for MS fans.

