

Musings on My Mother

by

Selvi



I was born in *Janana* Hospital in Berhampur, Orissa. I was told that I was a very beautiful baby, weighed 8pounds 14 ounces, healthy and had lot of hair. The nurses cuddled me and they dressed me up with different outfits and showed me off to others in the hospital.

I was brought to our home ‘Laxmi Vilas’ on Church Road. Here, in this spacious home, I grew up as a daughter, went to school as a child, as an adult to college, and worked as a teacher until an unexpected move in 1967. It was my leap across the Atlantic Ocean, half the way around the world as wife to VK Viswanathan (VKV) to apt# 7H, 69, W 9th Street (Manhattan) New York City, NY, USA.

Thus, I lived until almost I was 29 years old with my parents in the same rented home. It is uncommon of a girl in those days not getting married for that long, also living in the same home. The reason is; I had my college studies in Berhampur and then worked as a teacher at a girls’ school for eight years. My parents were very nice and never put any pressure to get married and sought my approval when they considered the “boys”. So I have many fond memories of growing up!

I was not aware until I became a mother myself, to Hari, what my parents must have have gone through to raise us and instill good values. Only

now, I can appreciate what a lucky daughter I was. At Berhampur, we mostly had Telugu speaking people as friends. When I was growing up I was known as *Sundaresa mastergaru ammai* (daughter) or *Thailammagaru ammai*.

Because this essay is for our dear mother's centenary birthday this year on May 17th 2010 I will mostly muse on my mother.

When I was in grade school - we started at 4th class - we had to tell our mother's name to our schoolteacher, so the invitation will be sent to my parents. I was very shy to tell my mother's name was *Thailammal* because in Telugu, *Thailam* meant OIL! As a kid, I did not like my name either. I wished I had an ordinary name like Kamala or Lakshmi. Now I thank God, that my parents named me SELVI, which suits very well living in USA now. Rangan named his second daughter Thaila after our mother that now sounds very sweet too.

I think there are quite a few similarities between my mother and I, the way our lives have unfolded!

1. Specially, the big initial adjustment we both had to make when we got married: we both had to move *far away from home where we were born and raised*.

My mother married her ***athan*** - cousin (*athai pillai*: father's sister's son) - when she was 10 years old at Kattuputthur where they both grew up. When my mother was 13 year old, accompanied by her brother Subbu mama, who was a teacher, she joined our father at Berhampur, almost 1000 miles away from her home. The language spoken was predominantly Telugu. My mother might have been familiar with a few Telugu words because she learnt Carnatic music whose compositions are mainly in Telugu. So, for a young girl without knowing the language to speak where she had to run a family might have been difficult at first. It is like going to another foreign country. I am sure *Marella Bangala* family helped mother a lot and she became proficient in speaking Telugu. My father taught in English and he could talk with men in English but women spoke only Telugu. So it was harder for my mother than for my father. But my mother knew our father from her birth and that might have been a big comfort.

I had to move half the way around the world, but I was much older. I knew English language because of my college education, but never spoke a single sentence in Berhampur, as there was no need. But the American friends here understood, accepted me, and I never felt uncomfortable.

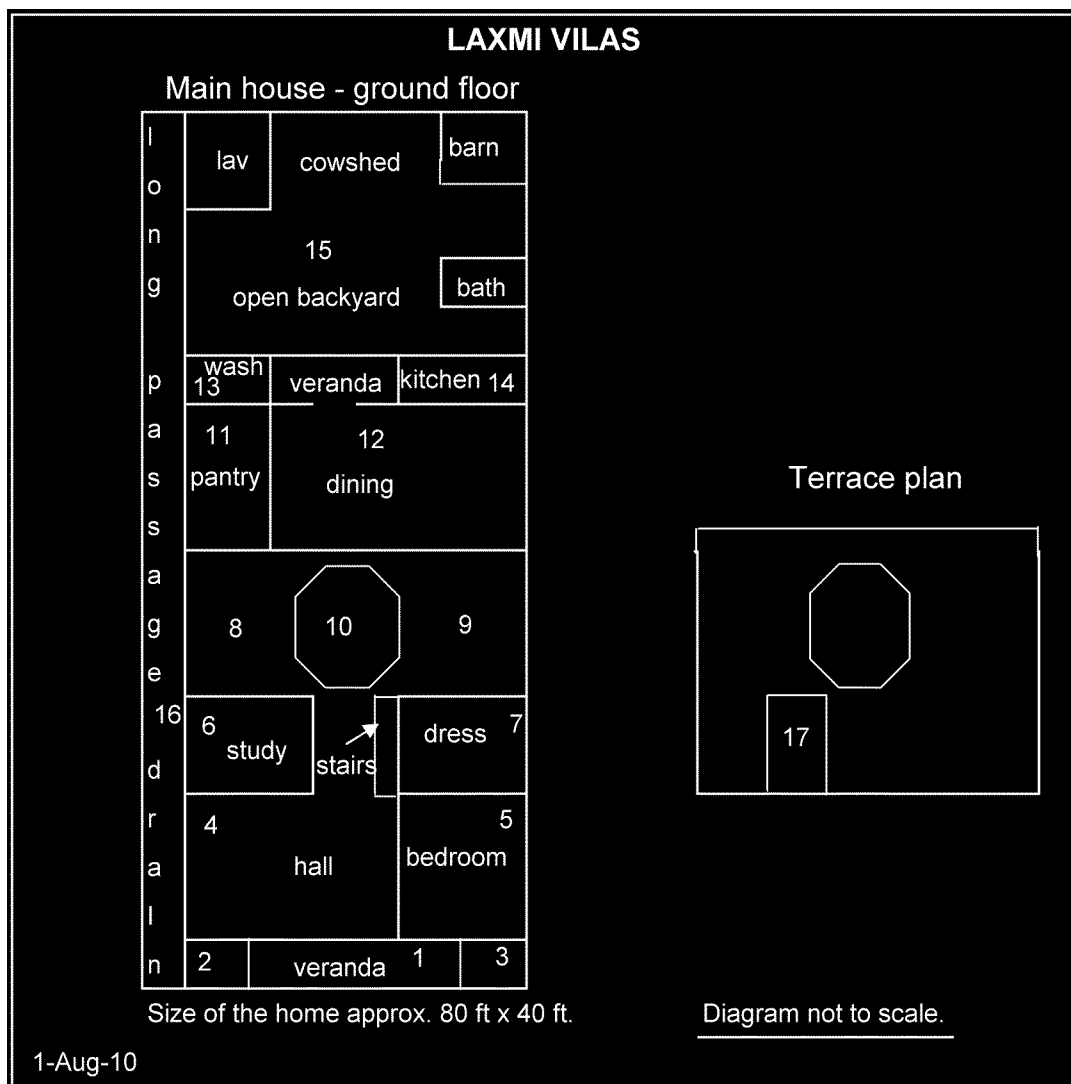
2. Our father and VKV both lost their fathers at the age of seven. Our father lost his mother at the age of four. VKV had his mother until he graduated from college.

3. Our father's passion really was Tamil Literature though he was excited about mathematics and enjoyed teaching to make a living.

VKV's passion is Carnatic Music though he also enjoyed Physics and worked as a scientist to make a living.

I should say my mother was very courageous in some respects than father. I am saying it because mother came to see me off at Bombay Airport. I received a touching note from father from Berhampur on the eve of my departure, explaining why he decided not to be physically present at the Bombay airport. This note has smudge, obviously father's tears.

The home Laxmi Vilas holds lot of memories and I am thinking may be I should try to describe the house by each room, backyard area etc. and write how we used them. Here is the floor plan of Laxmi Vilas, drawn up by Nannu. I will use the room numbers as I try to explain about each room.



Looking from outside it is very deceptive and it seemed like a small house. Actually it was a very spacious home and everybody had access and use of every room and area. The backyard, compared to the house is small but mother did use it efficiently. I will start describing it as we enter from the street and what we see as we move from room to room.

The front grilled door to the house is reached by climbing 5 or 6 steps from street level, and it took you to a grill- enclosed veranda (1). This door we used to lock at night. On the wall in this veranda, facing the street, we see the name plaque LAXMI VILAS. It had the year the house was built but I can't remember. We had a bench on this verandah to sit. On either side of this enclosed area we had two small rooms, each had two doors and a window facing the street. The left hand side room (2) was used mainly for mother's hand sewing machine and also used by women for three days every month on their special lady's days.

Some times in this room I used to watch mother very curiously what she might be making, may be a dress for me. My mother's name was actually Thail (though everybody called her Thailamma garu in Berhampur and others Thailamma) and in Tamil Thail Nayaki means: a very beautiful woman. Mother used to tell me that she made many dresses for me when I was a baby. She made dresses for everyone in the family including for our father.

Mother taught me with needle and thread how to sew buttons, hem, and a stitch called '*Dibbi Kuttu*' which is like the normal stitch we use in the sewing machine. I had sewing class in 4th class and she helped me to stitch a frock. Also in school we were asked to make a fancy design in the front of the frock called *honeycomb*. Mother knew how to do it and helped me with that too.

At grade school on Founder's Day we had programs for parents. I was chosen as one of the six girls to recite the Nursery rhymes and it was "Goosey Goosey Gander". I had to learn it by heart and I felt I got the hardest one! For this we had to wear a white pleated skirt, which was called "*Joolu gownu*". Mother made this for me.

I learned dancing from Dayalsaran for a couple of years. We gave some performance as a group and needed very fancy skirts some times. Mother made them with georgette material, orange color with silvery shiny ribbon borders. I think all girls had this same color.

The embroidery part was more fun and was not taught in school. Mother had a book with different patterns. After choosing the pattern, we used first a tracing paper and traced the design. Then the design was transferred with carbon paper to the fabric. We used a special embroidery frame to hold

tight the cloth with the pattern, and began sewing. The thread we used was DMC brand and came in many beautiful attractive colors. Usually the designs involved flowers and leaves. We bought three or four different shades of greens to be used for the leaves. I used to make small designs on pillow covers, handkerchiefs, curtains etc. One summer I embroidered a curtain with more than 50 different patterns and I have it with me now here.

The other room, on the right hand side **(3)** was of the same size and was used to keep our father's bicycle, which he used to go to College. But in later years the cycle was moved out to the verandah and the it became a study room for us with a table and two chairs. Father had his study room upstairs. When I was in college, this is the room I used to study.

From these two rooms and also from the verandah we enter the big room, which had very smooth floor, and we called it HALL **(4)**. We had a couple of benches for visitors to sit and the same benches were turned into our beds at night. As we enter this room we will be greeted by my mother's artwork with a different kind of embroidery. These were quite big and framed. Mother used a special tool and it was done on black velvet. She had her initial 'T' in the corner. I think she exhibited them; may be in Ladies club. Father gave me the one with the peacock design without the frame when I was packing to come to USA from Bombay. I adore this, it is framed now and I see it every morning when I get up.



In the hall there was a door on the right leading to a very big room (5) which had big canopy bed. For *Golu* we used this bed as base, few doors from the rooms, and several boxes to make the steps, which would be covered by white sheets. Then the dolls and clay figurines were placed on these steps. The ladies would sit in the hall, and view the *Golu* through the open door. *Golu* is a very big affair for whole family and we had 10 days of celebration. Mother will have bananas, some days bought a special sweet called *raskora* to give to the visitors. For *Golu*, called *Bommala Koluvu* in Telugu, I and Yedavalli Chelli used to go together, some times in a horse drawn *jutka*, to far away places of the town to invite friends.

In this bedroom we had a very special built-in safe (3ft x 2ft, and 2.5ft deep.) It is nice the landlord gave the key for the safe for us to use. Mother was the one in charge and had the key. Here, the most valuable things were kept, like father's salary, jewelry, silver utensils, *Varalakshmi Amman mugham* with *Kalagam* and many other things. I remember mother when I gave her my salary, she would put it in the safe until it was deposited in the bank.

Whenever she opened the safe I was very curious to see the things in it. There were mother's jewelry given to her by her family. They were called *Jadabillai and Raagudi*. ***The raagudi was bigger and was inlaid with red, green and blue stones with peacock design. These were hair ornaments. Malli mogghu (jasmine buds) was in gold.*** I remember vaguely mother had me wear them in my hair just for fun a couple of times. Later they were exchanged in the jewelry store for some gold necklace for me.

One thing I remember and it was a very touching moment even now. Just before we were leaving Berhampur home when I was looking at the things in the safe I found a small piece of paper folded tight and I noticed it. Usually when some vow was made to God or temple for a wish, the specific reason for the vow was written and kept in the safe. When the wish was granted and the vow fulfilled, the paper would be removed. So this folded paper that was still there I opened it and it was for India Devi to be blessed with children. This wish was not fulfilled so this paper was still in the safe. Even when I am typing this, my eyes are welled. Poor mother's wish did not materialize in this case.

From the hall we can go straight to a corridor. From here, the small room – library/study - (6) on the left was called for some time 'Selvi' room. This is where I was brought to from the hospital when I was born. Rangan and Seenu were born in this room. I remember athimbare used this room when he came with India Devi.

On the right hand side of this corridor were the stairs to father's study and a big terrace. Under this staircase in this corridor, we used to leave our sandals and shoes.

In this corridor we had a very narrow table and two chairs at each end. I used this table to iron (used burning coal chunks in the iron) my sarees every Sunday that were sent by Nannu and mannie.

Also father used to lie down in this corridor in the afternoons, sometimes the college peon will bring checks for father to sign when he was vice principal.

Father tutored some students. When a student came I would shout from this corridor "*Appa! Paiyyan Vandirukkan*", because father would be upstairs, usually working on his literary work.

From the *Golu* room there was an access to a room (7), which had a small skylight on the ceiling that gave nice light. Here we had our chest of drawers, a long big book shelf, clothes stand, appa's bureau and amma's fancy Rosewood bureau with a mirror. The chest of drawers had several drawers and we, the children, each had one to keep our clothes. The Rosewood bureau had special things like silk saris and valuable items in it. This is the room I used to get dressed.

I remember very fondly when mother took out a pair of plastic salt and pepper shakers – one white, the other blue - from the rosewood bureau and handed them to me smiling. She said this was a present from Buchhammagaru (T. Laitha teacher) for me. Buchhammagaru was classmate of India Devi. She used to come to our house often and was very close to my mother. I was afraid of her, so I did not converse with her when she visited us, because she was my teacher in grade school.

Here is an unusual instance, usually in India we do not expect from a teacher. Actually this was the time when Buchhammagaru was headmistress and I was a science teacher in a girl's high school. She was known as a very tough and strict person. We had an audit and I scored very high compliments from the auditor the way I kept the inventory, receipts etc. It was a government school, so very fussy about the vouchers. So Buchhammagaru told mother that this was a small gift, like '*Udatha Bhakthi*' from her to Selvi. She used a lot of proverbs in her conversations and this was in reference to an incident in the Epic *Ramayana*.

It is said, that while building a bridge to cross the ocean to reach Lanka to rescue Sita from the demon Ravana, a chipmunk (udatha) joined to help by bringing small amount of sand, by wetting its tail, then rolling on the sand and then shaking it at the bridge. Rama was pleased, he petted the udatha with his fingers. This is why chipmunks have three lines on their back.

This is a moral that any small help was appreciated as a big help). But she did not want to give me directly.

Then my mother made a comment saying, ***“Selvi! Now I know and am confident that you can get along with any mother in law.”***

Father’s book collections were in the book shelf. This is where we celebrated our Saraswathi Puja with father that Nannu has mentioned in Amma’s essay. One time we found a snake in the back of this book shelf, luckily not a cobra though!

Now going back to the corridor, if we go straight we come across a sunken tub called ***anganam (10)*** which was in an octagonal shape. When it rained, it would rain in here because it was open to the sky. Also, water would flow from the gutters around the opening, through a spout. As a small girl with Rangan and Seenu, I used to make paper boats, different kinds, some had four boats attached to each other floated them here when we had rain. Also we used to blow soap bubbles and were thrilled watching the different colors the huge bubbles produced.

We had a vine called it ***Money plant*** around the drainage pipe from the terrace that brought rain water. Yedavalli mami used to like this plant and she once wanted a clipping of it to grow in her home. For some reason she said that she has to take it when we do not see her taking, because of the name Money plant.

Here on both sides of *anganam* we had rooms without doors. The one on right hand side **(9)** was bigger. Here we had father’s cradle (yes, it was used when he was baby) and a radio that Nannu made. I was a big fan of the Ceylon radio station that broadcasted Tamil and Hindi movie songs. Here I used to listen to the songs while correcting the student’s mathematic books when I was a teacher. Also I used to sing the movie songs aloud using the cradle as a swing.

I should mention this is the area Thandava Krishnaya garu taught me violin and vocal carnatic music. We sat opposite to each other on a mat. He would bring his violin and play with me. I never practiced music by myself which is so fundamental to learning, so poor Thandava Krishnaya garu used to play with me 100 times each sarali swaram in four KAALAMS!

Our mother would give teacher special Madras coffee. She had very good knowledge in music. Sister India Devi also learnt from Thandava Krishnaya garu and gave concerts. She was known as M. S. Subbulakshmi of Berhampur. My mother knew all the songs (even Nannu I am told) that the teacher taught our sister. Thandava Krishnaya garu had great respect and regard for our mother. I learnt songs, because when the time, came for marriage, as a Tamil girl I was expected to know some carnatic music. I used

to argue with my music teacher that movie songs were creative, with nice background music, and every time there was a new song unlike the same songs of Thyagaraja sung by musicians again and again. I used to say raga alapana is a bore, no words at all.

My teacher once told me **“You are a TAMILIAN girl; you will end up marrying a ‘Sangeetha Priyudu (lover of music)’”. When I told this to VKV, he smiled and said “Your teacher has given you a saapam (curse)!”**

When my marriage date was fixed and from VKV’s letters it was clear he was a “Sangeetha Priyudu”. So my parents and sister decided that I should revive my carnatic music classes! I had stopped learning few years earlier when I was working as a teacher. It happened Thandava Krishnayya garu was available and he came to teach me few songs. India Devi suggested the songs “Endaro mahanu bhavulu and Saadinchene’ Pancha Ratna songs which he taught me. I also practiced the Violin. I wished some times I had learnt Veena instead of Violin because the pose is much nicer with Veena.

I have great regard for Thandava Krishnayya garu. He was very patient with me. **Within a few days after M. S. Subbulakshmi gave VKV and me, aarathi at her house, when we visited her after our wedding, I wrote to my music teacher about it.** I wrote him very regularly until he passed away.

I knew through Manorama Patnaik **that my music teacher saved my letters and showed it to her.** Manorama Patnaik was India Devi’s headmistress. She was known to be very tough. She also learnt music from our teacher.

In this area, Rangan conducted a Play. On Sivaratri day, a festival to worship Lord Siva, one has to be awake all night! So there will be entertainments on Siva’s mythological stories in movie theaters, and bhajans in temples. But Rangan organized his own play with his friends. Mother would help him to put up the curtains and also make costumes and Caritas (head ornament for kings) with colored foil papers.

The left hand side of the *anganam* was a similar area, but much smaller (8). It had its own importance too. Here, at the edge of the Anganam we had a big brass vessel filled with water and a brass *Chombhu*. This is where we washed our hands and mouth after our meals. There was a clothesline with towel on it to wipe our hands.

Here we had an *endhram* (grinding stone) which was used to make dry flour. I remember Nannu helping mother once to grind granular sugar into very smooth powder to make his favorite sweet **Rava Laadu**.

This is the place where we made our *kumpis* and sparklers for Deepavali. Nannu used to be in charge but mother helped a lot to mix the

ingredients, some needed to be made into powders. We all had a lot of fun, specially competing with Yedavalli friends.

When I was growing up, during periods, women were not allowed into many parts of the house for three days. These were the 'out of doors' days! So, our meals were served in this part of the house.

When I was very small girl I did not understand how mother knew when she would be out of doors. Sometimes, it would be before midnight, and sometime during the day and it was erratic. If it was before midnight mother had to stay 'out' only two days and that saved me a day and I had to cook only two days. *I used to ask mother about it. She used to tell me that God tells her when she should stay out. I believed it.*

In this foyer there was also a fancy mirror with a shelf where we had our hair oil, combs etc. This is where men shaved.

In this area there was a door which opened to the long narrow lane called **sandhu**. During 'out of door' days, this is the lane women used to go to the backyard and bathroom. Also this is the lane used by the persons who cleaned our latrines and sweeper who cleaned this *NaaLa (the drain)* every morning.

But the best part of this door to the *sandhu* was that we could peek into the Yedavalli family's foyer, and talk to them through a similarly placed window on their their side. We did this often. We both had a common wall here.

Here I need to mention about the wonderful friendship we had with Yedavalli family.

My mother and Yedavalli mami, both of them had immense regard and mutual respect for each other.

Here is one of the instances: *Our mother was the one who managed the house and also took care of the finances. Father gave the whole salary and also the money he made by tutoring, to our mother. During some months, mother would run out of money in the middle of the month. Then Yedavalli mami used to come to rescue and loan her the money. As soon as father got the salary, the next month, mother would return the money and tell Yedavalli mami that she was like a BANK helping her with money. To this, Yedavalli mami would graciously reply **that our mother was the BANK**, because she was sure that her money was safe when she loaned it, and she would have spent it otherwise.*

Yedavalli mami always admired my **Pulli Kolams** that I used to draw in front of our house in *Marghazi Maatham* that was from Dec15th to Jan15th. Mother taught me at very young age, to draw these beautiful *kolams*. The *pulli* is the dot. The way we use these dots to make a design is

remarkable. It can be started with a small design and can be expanded as much as we want. Mother taught first with pencil and paper. *Maavilai design*, first taught with five dots can be expanded adding three more dots at a time and, up to the size one wants. *Brahma mudri* was another pattern but it had a different way to expand. Yedavalli mami thought learning to draw *Pulli Kolam* is one of the musts for Tamil girls, like carnatic music was.

Then I had to learn how to draw *kolams* with special *Kolappodi*. I think it was a mixture of calcium and sand. India Devi used to bring very nice *Kolappodi* from the South; I think it might have been white crushed rock powder, from the texture I felt. I used to draw in the evenings and took almost an hour.

I drew kolams only during this *Margazhi* month and continued until I left for USA.

My mother was poor in bargaining with fruit and vegetable vendors. I have heard Marella family and Yedavalli family saying mother 'spoiled' these vendors and earned good name from them!

Yedavalli mami was very helpful in providing food for our father when mother took us for summer vacation to South India to visit her brothers' and sister's families. Father stayed back most of the time to write his poems, and plays.

This brings the subject to talk about my wonderful uncles Venkata Narayana mama, Subramanyan (Subbu mama) and aunt Subbulakshmi chitti. These trips were made only once in few years to attend some weddings. We were given royal welcome as we came from a very far away place.

I think again that mother must have been a very courageous woman in taking us when we were small that involved a two-day journey by train. She prepared food that would last for two days. I remember her big concern was whether our *periyappa* at Chennai would meet us at Central Station. Of course our *periyappa* always received us and we were excited to get into a taxi and see all the big buildings on our way to his three storey home in posh T Nagar and also meet our cousins Babu anna, Raju, Hamsa and Kappu (Balu was in Karur most of the time in school?)

Mother had two older brothers and one younger sister. Venkata Narayana mama was the eldest and closer to us. He managed a lot of land and lived at Kattuputthur. He had a big house and this was where India Devi, Nannu were born. So when we went to Kattuputthur this was where we stayed. One year mama asked me, Rangan and Seenu what we would like to have as a gift. It was decided we will have golden rings with gem stones. I

chose blue, Rangan red and Seenu green, I think. We did get these cute small beautiful rings after we returned to Berhampur.

I am told when Nannu went to Benares; our parents gave the borrowed Insurance money to mama for safe keeping and to send to Nannu. The reason: they wanted to make sure there was money for Nannu's education and may be it would be spent if it was with them at Berhampur. Mama did send money to Nannu at Benares regularly.

When mother passed away in 1977 I was at K4. We did observe the rituals but one of them seemed to have been missing. Mama came on the third day. As soon as he came, he looked at the verandah corner and expected to see some rice being cooked, and it was not there. He got very upset and asked "*Thaillammave pattini pottirukela*" (Are you starving Thailamma?) and I could feel the affection he had for his sister.

I visited mama with Nannu and mannie at Vellore when he was in his nineties at Vellore. We did not have much time and stopped only for half an hour. He was talking during that time how great a scientist Nannu was and I could see how proud he was talking about it. When we said we had to leave, he got very upset saying, he won't allow us to leave, and it was not fair. He compared it to giving a blind man sight and taking it away. He said he would obstruct us by falling down in the front of our taxi. We did not know what to do! Somehow we convinced him and were able to leave. He passed away when he was may be 92 years old.

Subbu mama was a school headmaster and he moved around a lot. But we visited him for a few days wherever he was.

Then we used to visit chitti Subbulakshmi and chittappa Janakiramayyar at Srinivasanallur, our favorite stop during these trips. Their children and we were pretty much of same age. Mother made dresses for them and also gave the famous Berhampur *kungumam*. Chitti always felt bad that her children could not get good education in her village like we did. The school there had only up to 5th class.

Now back to the tour of Laxmi Vilas home. To go to our most spacious room which was the dining room (12), we had access through the Radio room. The *anganam* came in between the corridor and the entrance to the dining room. This room, with high ceiling, had in one corner a beautiful altar the *Swami Mandapam*. Our landlady Savithri ammagaru had left her beautiful brass *simhasanam (throne) for the idols* (for us to use?) This *mandapam* brings me a lot of memories of my friend Durivari Adilakshmi family. They taught me how to decorate this *mandapam* for *Varalakshmi Vratham* with colored varnish paper for the posts, shiny colorful foil paper for the top and to make rose flowers with crepe paper to decorate the posts. Mother made glue

mydha flour to paste these decorations. I remember once my hard work was ruined, the decorations were all torn. Looks like a mouse tried to eat this delicious paste.

As per our tradition our mannie Visalam was initiated by mother to perform this *Varalakshmi Pujai* at this altar.

Also, from the ceiling of this room a couple of long bamboo poles were hung horizontally with ropes, like a short swing, which was used as clothesline. For festivals and for *srardhams* amma would use these clotheslines to dry her *madi* sarees (*madi*: pure silk or wet clothes are invariably used by orthodox brahmins before cooking and eating. She used a thin but strong bamboo stick called '*madikkol*' to transfer the sarees to the bamboo clothesline. It needed some knack ***and mother could do it easily.*** Once our *dhobi* (laundry lady) saw this and she was amazed how mother did it.

This room had one built-in almirah with mesh door to keep buttermilk, butter etc. Then a couple of built-in platforms, to keep rice in drums, and also another small platform to keep the drinking water in copper vessel called *kudam* that had a small mouth with a rim, so it was easier to pour water into a tumbler. I used to have a favorite small *kudam* to bring water from the tap that was given by somebody when they brought Ganges water from Benares.

This dining room had a long bench, on one end, leaning against the wall. It was near the entrance to this room. When the lady friends came, they sat here and mother would talk to them while doing her chores.

When I was 4 or 5 years old, while eating a snack in the afternoon, suddenly I felt sharp pain and screamed. First they thought may be my finger was stuck between the wall and the bench. It was not. I was bitten by a big scorpion and it seems that I almost died. I vaguely remember this incident.

There was a *paran* in this room. In English we can call it an attic or a loft of wooden planks for storing sundry items. This was across the whole room, on the opposite end of the bench, and above the *mandapam*. Our mother stored here the huge brass vessels and other items that were used only a few times in a year for special occasions. We had to use a ladder to get to the *paran*. I had fun climbing up and looking for things needed to bring down. These things used to excite me, may be because these things looked different, not seen every day.

In this dining room, during both lunch and dinner, the whole family sat on the floor, in a semi-circle, with father at one end as the head, with mother sitting at the center of the circle, facing father. As I was the only girl then usually my job was to set up the silver dinner plates we each had (supposed to be good for health) and set up *palagai*, ***specially made wooden plank*** to sit on.

Then I would fill the silver tumblers with drinking water. I have a couple of those glasses with me now.

After we ate I used to take the plates and wash them. Because these were made of pure silver, we did not give the maid to wash them. Then I cleaned the place using little bit of fresh cow dung with water. In the night, I used to wash the area with a lot of water and used a special broom and I used to do it while singing my favorite movie songs. I should mention I did these only when I was in college and working as a teacher. Before that mother was the one who did all these chores.

This room was the venue for special occasions and festivities.

From this area where we made *kumpis*, we can go to pantry (11). Here we had a *ponaka*, a special big container specially made to store *nellu* (raw rice is made from this) good for a whole year. We had a person to take this *nellu* to remove the husk and deliver the white rice, which was stored in big special drums in the dining room.

There was a small wash room (13) next to it and it had a *tap* water tap. The dirty dishes were put here overnight for the maid along with some left over food for her.

The next area, the *covered porch (veranda) had access on all four sides*. This is where we had *kalloral and ammi*. The *kalloral* was used to make the dough for *idli, dosa* and some chutney. The *ammi* was used to grind small amounts of spices with water. To make the *idli* dough it would take an hour. I remember when I was very young I offered to help grind the dough. At one stage it became hard to turn the stone ground the dough. To get the right consistency it was not allowed to add water. Mother added some salt, which came in crystals, and always looked wet. Then it became easy to turn. I told mother “Oh, this salt now acts as water and it is easy now to continue”. I could see my mother’s grin and she said “You are very smart to make this observation.” This is where I helped to cut the vegetables with *aruvamanai*.

For my mother *the heart of Laxmi Vilas I should say was the kitchen (14)*. The kitchen was small but adequate. This is where she spent the most busy morning hours. Her concern was always whether that she would be able to finish her cooking on time by 9am, so we all can go to school and father to college. In those days our school hours were from 10am to 4pm, with one hour recess from 12 noon to 1pm.

It was not just cooking that she had to attend to in the morning; she had several other chores along with it. For instance she always combed my hair and did the braid after her cooking was done. This she did in the front hall near entrance door so she can watch out for the post man who brought mail. Almost every other day we used to get post card from sister India Devi from

Cuttack and we all read it eagerly. I could help mother with chores only little as I had my schoolwork, also when I had my music lessons, it was in the morning.

Here in short I want to describe how mother managed the mornings on weekdays. Mother woke up around 6am. She would start making coffee for herself, and it involved powdering the roasted coffee beans in a hand grinding machine specially meant for this. She used a brass coffee filter. The aroma of this was heavenly. For us including our father, she made cocoa, which came in powder form. But here was the problem. We needed milk for all this (no refrigerator at home) so we had to wait for Dhandasi, the milkman to bring the milk. If he was late by few minutes, the whole sequence was disturbed.

Then the maid had to come on time so she can wash the dishes and for us to use. Also the maid was the one used to put ***kolam*** in the front of the house normally. This ritual was a “must to do” the first thing in the morning. The reason to draw the ***kolam in front of the house had specific significance***. If there was no ***kolam*** by 7 am, the neighbors might think there was a tragedy at home. So, if the maid came late, mother or I had to take care of this.

Mother also took care of making hot water to bathe for all of us, in the bathroom using firewood in the big mud kiln she made. The big ***anda*** was filled with water, also by her, most of the time.

Meanwhile vendors brought vegetables to the front door around this time, so mother had to take time to bargain and buy the vegetables.

We all used to gather around mother and have our beverages. Then we went back to do our own things and mother to do her things.

Mother’s next job was to wash her clothes, her long sari and then take bath. She will not start cooking before taking bath. This was the way she was brought up, so she followed it. It is a tradition followed by most orthodox Indians. Here in USA, I also cook only after taking bath. I think it was meant for one to be clean when the meals are made. But I need not wait for the milkman, vegetable vendor, thanks to the refrigerator!

Now I should talk about our quaint kitchen (15). It was situated next to the dining room and it had access from dining room and the enclosed veranda.

It had a big window, with bars, overlooking the backyard. When mother was “out of doors” I had to cook, and through this window she would give me instructions. She was very patient. Some times I was not happy to do this, because quite often this happened during my exams. Poor mother would keep quiet and not say anything. I feel sorry *now* because she could not do anything about it. We followed the tradition then.

On the right hand side of the kitchen, there was a chimney near the outside wall for the smoke to escape from the mud kilns which used chopped

wood. I used to watch with awe when mother made these mud kilns. There were two types, one single mud kiln and the other a double mud kiln. The double mud kiln had two vents and an intervening passage to aid circulation. I liked to cook on these kilns. These kilns use firewood. So mother used to buy a cartful of *chavuku tree wood* (a kind of evergreen tree) from the street vendor and then a wood cutter who came along, would take them to the back yard to chop them to the desired size we wanted. This wood used to burn clean. These kilns have to be maintained by scrubbing every afternoon with fresh cow dung mixed with water. I helped mother some times with it and then we draw with rice flour, a couple of lines on the top of the kilns (like Kolam) to signify they were sacred.

Mother also used a *kumitti* - a cast iron kiln that used coal. Thus, coal was also bought in large quantities through a vendor who brought it on a cart. We had luckily storage place in the back of the house to keep wood and coal.

In the wall nearby these kilns was a small cubbyhole where mother had a wooden spice drawer with six compartments. The spices were mustard seeds, turmeric powder, cumin seed, coriander seeds, Fenugreek seeds and black pepper. Along with this there was a jar with *rasam* powder that mother made with different spices.

This kitchen ***did not have a tap***, so we had to store water in this room. There was a special platform for it. There were also some shelves and planks on the wall to keep the utensils needed to cook.

In the wall across this, there was a reasonable size built-in *almirah* with doors. Here mother had big fancy glass jars with pickles she made, tamarind, and also sesame and peanut oil in huge tin cans. It is economical to buy things in huge volumes. So these are the things she bought.

It is interesting to note how mother used different vessels that were made with different materials to cook certain foods. These were made some with, stone, brass, Iron, bronze, Aluminum and ***Eeyam***.

There was a sequence and procedure how mother cooked and naturally I followed it. The menu was very simple. Rice was the main dish that we use to mix with other dishes like ***paruppu*** (*dhal*), ***kuzambhu***, ***rasam***, some times some vegetable ***karis*** (*or curries*) that can be mixed with rice, and finally ***moru*** (buttermilk).

Mother also made ***ney*** (*ghee*) every morning with butter that she made by churning buttermilk in the morning.

The only thing that would be different every day was ***kuzambhu*** and ***vegetable***.

The cooking was done mostly sitting on a *palagai* on the floor. So we had to get up several times up and down to get things needed while cooking, a good exercise I guess.

The *dhal* took almost 45 minutes to cook on the coal burning kiln. So mother would begin with one cup of *Thuvaram paruppu* (*Toor dhal*) in a special small bronze vessel. We have to give constant attention to this as we had to add water often. Also we added little oil and turmeric powder while cooking.

On the single mud kiln mother would start cooking rice in the *Vengala Panai*, a big vessel made of **bronze**. It was covered with a brass plate with holes, called *sippathattu*, allowing the rice to boil but not spillover. In the double mud kiln, vegetable can be boiled or fried for *kari* in a *Baanali*, **made of cast iron**, on one side, and *kuzambhu* (*soup*) can be made on the other side *simultaneously*.

The *kuzambhu* was made in a *Kachhitti* (vessel made with special stoneware). The *kuzambhu* was made mainly with **tamarind juice** and spices. The *kachhitti* takes time to heat in the beginning but then it heats slowly like a crock pot. So for this dish, a *kachhitti* is chosen.

The *rasam* was made in *Eeyah Chombu*. This had a broad base and narrow mouth. The *rasam* can be made only after the *paruppu* is ready. Mother would save a small amount of cooked *paruppu* for us to have as the first course in our meal and used the rest for *rasam*. *Rasam* was made with tamarind and *rasam* powder that amma made and *perungayam* (*asafedita*) was one of the main ingredients. First when cooked with tamarind the mouth should be open. Once the *paruppu* is added it has to be covered. This is where the tricky part. We have to peek at it by removing the lid a couple of times to see it just started to boil and we should take it down from the *Kumitti* with *Idukki* (*special tongs*) **right away. This is crucial.** If it does boil over, the taste will not be same. ***The mustard seed popped in Ghee is added to this rasam along with Kotthamalli (fresh coriander leaves) and karuveppilai to give a special flavor.***

One who makes best *rasam* is considered a great cook! This *rasam* is called *paruppu rasam* and there are other kinds, which are simpler to make, as cooked *paruppu* is not needed. This is our protein for vegetarians along with *paruppu saadam*, so we make these two items everyday.

The *eeyah chombu* adds a special flavor to the *rasam* and that's why it is used. But few years back it was found it has a lot of lead content in it so I gave up using it. Now I remember that mother used to save the used toothpaste tubes and melted them in the bathroom kiln, which had a bigger

mud kiln, to restore the tin content. Then she would exchange it to buy *Eeyam* vessels that *came* in different sizes at a special store.

Mother was very good in recycling these kinds of things. She did with the *jarigai (gold plated silver) borders* of our old saris. With the silver recovered from this, mother bought small silver *chandana pela*. She used to collect silver artifacts like *panneer chombhu, chandana pela* for me. She could give to me for my wedding as 'seeru'.

After the cooking was done, mother would call me for a very important daily ritual. This was to feed the crows/birds with some rice mixed with *paruppu and ghee*. I used to take it out to the back yard very close to the porch and there was a specific place I put this rice and call out '*kaa kaa*'. ***The crows waiting on the mango tree in the back yard rightaway call other crows and come to feed. This was a tradition may be the Tamilians had..***

I did this as a chore but did not seem to know that feeding the birds was very important. Now here in Los Alamos our yard is certified as backyard wildlife habitat. I wonder if I got interested in it so much because mother asked me to do this. These days when I get up, the first thing I do is to make sure the birdfeeders have seeds in them. In summer we get bears in the night and they break the feeders. So I bring all the feeders, like 8 of them, inside and put them out again in the morning. Only after that I drink my tea and have my toast. Must be the habit I acquired at Laxmi Vilas.

So now I have covered all the rooms and areas and how I grew up.

A few lines about the back yard (15), the bathroom, the cowshed the granary and also the upstairs father's study and the terrace we had.

Mother took care of the garden entirely. The granary - it looked like a cave - was never used. Sometimes we used to go inside to play. Near the granary there was a lot of space where we stored our wood and coal. There was a concrete area as we stepped into the backyard. Few feet away from the steps we had a very nice *Thulasi Maadam*. It was a built-in planter about 3ft high and two feet square. The shell was made of concrete and the sacred *Thulasi* plant was planted in the middle. There was a small cubby hole in the front of it in the middle for us to light an oil lamp. I used to paint this *maadam* once a year when my Telugu friends celebrated *Thulasamma pelli*, the marriage of goddess *Thulasi*.

The cowshed was very nice. It was spacious and had two built-in containers to feed the cows. I always wanted to have a cow and a cute calf. But we did not. I think when I was a baby they had a cow and once it went with cowherd and never came back.

In this cowshed area, I, as a small girl played with my age girls, Adilakshmi and Chelli. The favorite one was '*Bommala Pelli*', celebrating the

wedding of girl and boy figurines that were made with black wood. Adilakshmi had better figurines, which were of white wood and also had jewelry and nice dress. Mother used to help us.

The bathroom was near the big well we had. It was enclosed but no doors. Here mother used to give me oil bath that I hated. Every Sunday I had to go through this ordeal. Mother would ask me to remove all my jewelry for this. Then in the afternoon she would give me the sparkling jewelry namely, my diamond earrings, golden bangles, chain etc washed carefully with soap nut water.

I used to watch her when she washed them and used to dry them with special cloth. I could feel she was pleased that she was able to have these valuable jewelries for me. She was able to save money and acquire this expensive jewelry especially the *diamond* earrings. It was not an easy proposition. I have been wearing these earrings from year 1959. Even now I get compliments for them. Mary Deal, my wonderful broker and boss when I worked in Real Estate, a millionaire, used to like my earrings and said she wished that she had a pair like mine. Even last week a young girl noticed it and commented how gorgeous my earrings were. I told her “Too bad, I can’t see them myself”. She smiled.

We had a very small room upstairs (17) and it was mostly used by our father. He had a nice desk and a special cane chair. Father spent most of his time here. This is where he tutored a couple of college students. Then there was a big open area in the terrace where we had moon-light dinners some times.

In the summer mother used this terrace for drying the mango pickles, *Aavakkai*, *Maagai* for Rangan’s favorite *Maagai Pachhidi*. This was the place used for sun drying. These things were made in large amounts to last for a year.

This takes me back to the days how mother had to rush some times and get ready to make *Aavakkai* pickle when a vendor brought raw mangoes. Timing was important, so she will buy them. Then Rangan or Seenu will go to fetch Ramayya garu, an old gentleman, who had a special big knife to cut these mangos skillfully. Then mother had to prepare the ingredients ready to make this pickle. Once all the ingredients were mixed, the pickles would be dried in the sun for a couple of days. There was always fear of rain during those days!

So, in the summers when we did not have school and father did not have college, mother would be busy making these things. This made the very hot summers tolerable for mother.

I remember mother hiring a couple of ladies to come to our house to remove seeds from the tamarind pods. It used to take a couple of days. These tamarind pods have big seeds that have to be removed and also dried in sun to store for the rest of the year. So the terrace was used for this also. The tamarind seeds are beautiful and we girls played games with them in summer. One of them was to pile a large quantity of seeds and try to pick them with out moving the other seeds. The one who picks most was the winner.

This room (17) on the terrace had another special significance. One day my father called me upstairs when the mail man brought a big envelope. Here, he showed me the picture of VKV that Nannu had sent (VKV's friend Radhakrishnan had given it to him). Father was very pleased and so was I.

I think now I have covered every nook and corner of Laxmi Vilas, telling true stories of my life.

So time has come now to conclude my 'Musings on Mother'. It is hard to believe in seven decades how things have changed. For younger generation this essay might give an impression that I am from Stone Age. But, as I was writing this, I felt there was a lot of charm in growing up in Laxmi Vilas this way.

I have written an essay for Mother's centenary "Memorial Butterfly Garden for My Marvelous Mother" and Seenu has put it in the web site. But my brothers and Gowri, my daughter-in-law felt I should write more about my interactions with my mother. I hesitated first. But when I started writing suddenly I was transported to Berhampur home and relived the whole 29 years of my life there.

Also by musing on my mother I realized how lucky I am and blessed to be the daughter of Thailammal!

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