

His continuous and enigmatic presence for 28 years as a news-presenter on Doordarshan has earned S. Varadharajen the initials T V, and he is known only as TV Varadharajen. As a college student, while on a trip to Bombay in 1973, Varadharajen was thrilled that he could sit on the floor of his uncle's house and watch a Tamil film, "Iru Kodugal" on television. Three years later, when Doordarshan made its appearance in Madras, Varadharajen bagged the news slot!

Graduating from news, Varadharajen has anchored several programmes on television such as the breakfast show "Vanakkam Tamizhagam" on Sun TV and the news-based analysis programme "Mudhal Pradhi" on Vijay TV. K. Balachender, the iconic film maker, introduced him to television serials, and he has now 40 of them to his credit.

But what Varadharajen is most passionate about is the stage. Under the banner "United Visuals", he has spearheaded a drama troupe, which has staged innumerable plays such as "Plastic Kadavul" and "Vaasthu Vasu" depicting middle class values, spiced with humour and sentiment.

Awards and accolades cannot be far behind for such a talented artiste. "Nataka Kala Siromani" and "Nataka Kala Bharathi" are some of the titles conferred on him. He and his troupe were also honoured by former President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam at the Rashtrapathi Bhavan.

All this and more while he held on to his job with Bank of India!

It was a dream-come-true for the eBalak team to do an interview with such a versatile personality. Read on...

#### 1. What do you like best about your childhood?

The best part of my childhood was the values and discipline imparted by my parents and my school. It was because of this grooming that I am what I am today.

I did my schooling in Hindu Senior Secondary School in Triplicane, Chennai. There was a great bonding between teachers and students those days. No teacher ever scolded or beat us up. We respected them so much that we took pride in massaging their hands and legs.

Because of that discipline, even now if I see any teacher, I stand up! This habit prevailed during my banking days too. As an employee of Bank of India, I would stand in the presence of some of my colleagues who taught me in our training college.

Our teachers encouraged a healthy, competitive spirit among us. We had a special Moral Science class where we were taught good values

My father was a teacher in our school and he ensured that he treated me as a student in school. I was a son only at home. I was the eldest of three siblings. Each of us would ask him for something. He would place Rs. 25 on the table and ask us to decide whose need was greater. He gave us the responsibility of making priorities which stands in good stead even today.

My parents were like our friends. To me, whatever my father said had to be right because he was a teacher who had the best interests of his students in mind. I never played cards even for fun because my father said it was gambling. He always said it was better to have Rs. 99 when you need Rs. 100. This way you will realize the importance of the one rupee.

Our neighbourhood had many Hindu, Muslim and Christian schools. But we all lived in harmony. One could see about 300 to 400 children in different uniforms rushing to school in the morning. We used to go to a small 'Pillaiyar' temple before going to school. Elders like Kripananda Wariyar came to school every day to give 'pravachanas.' All this provided a stable foundation for our growth.

We did not have any parental pressure while studying. The present trend is that parents want their children to be P. T. Usha, Leander Paes and Sachin Tendulkar all at one go, and also excel in school. We in fact put up a play titled "LKG Asai" based on parental pressure. My parents supported us in whatever we wanted to do. That is how I took to the stage.

There was a library in the corner of our street. I could always be found there reading all the newspapers because we could not afford to buy one. This habit ended up in my becoming a news- presenter on Doordarshan.

I would also like to mention Vivekananda College in Chennai which provided a good platform for further studies.

## 2. What came first – stage or news-reading?

I would say they both came simultaneously. After graduation, I began working in Bank of India. Five of us started a drama troupe and took part in a play competition. Our play became a runaway success following which sabhas began inviting us to perform in the evenings. Our bank was very supportive.

Around the same time, Doordarshan started a Kendra in Chennai. I used to write letters to a programme called "Ediroli." In one of my letters, I requested for an opportunity to read news on television. They called me for an audition and I was selected.

## 3. How did you juggle all three – banking, acting and news reading?

It is all about time management. My family was a pillar of support. My wife took the management of our troupe in her hands, ran rehearsals and designed costumes. My two daughters never demanded anything. They grew with me and enjoyed my stardom. I was fortunate to get eight hours of sleep, despite my busy schedule.

Also, I never mixed up my roles. This was again something I learnt from my father - when you are in the bank, think of banking, when you are acting, think only of that.

4. What are the qualities required to be a good news reader?

Graduation, good personality, appealing voice, sound general knowledge and some awareness about everything including politics and sports are the prerequisites to be a successful news-presenter. In-depth knowledge is not a necessity but you must be able to identify an editorial mistake at the spur of the moment and correct it.

About 60 people work behind every news bulletin. So there are bound to be mistakes. We receive the bulletin just five minutes before the telecast, which means we get only that much time to prepare and identify the mistakes. A news reader should give the impression that he knows everything.

Effective presentation of the news is an important aspect. People who watch news bulletins on television are men on the move such as office goers and busy housewives. They must be able to easily hear and understand. Hence clarity of language and good delivery are very vital.

News gets flashed on a teleprompter located on the camera, as we read. As a result, we need to register the news in a matter of seconds and change our facial expressions accordingly. A news-presenter is a guest in every drawing room and his presence and voice get registered by the viewers. We are watched by millions of people; it is a great sense of relief when the camera is switched off!

5. How do you compare today's news presentation to your days?

Today, competition between news channels is high. So they make news sensational giving secondary importance to quality. No doubt, media is very powerful but they don't worry about the authenticity of the news. The same news is presented differently in different channels; the viewer never knows which is right. They pass judgments, which is not right. Those days, we gave only clean, unadulterated news.

6. Who are your idols and why?

My parents are my first idols. I have interacted with Thiru M. G. Ramachandran during my Doordarshan days and I respect him immensely as a person. He was the only one who used the film media properly by spreading good messages through his songs.

K. Balachander Sir taught me to focus on the finer aspects of acting. He infused in me the philosophy that work is worship. Once while doing a shot with me, Kamal Hassan came to see him. But he made Kamal wait until he had completed the shot and arranged for the next one.

I admire Cho Sir for his frank views. He will never mince words or accept mistakes. Recently when we had been to Gujarat to stage a play, we met the Chief Minister Narendra Modi, and he referred to Cho Sir as his Raja Guru. That is the kind of respect he commands!

Nagesh is another idol. You cannot find an artiste like him – so sharp, so intelligent and so talented. In life, we learn something from everyone we come across.

Above all, my biggest role model is my wife.

7. How do you unwind?

Theatre is my priority. I watch other plays, even those of languages I don't understand like Kannada and Marathi. Ranga Shankara in Bangalore is my favourite haunt. Although I don't understand the dialogues, I follow the body language.

8. Can you describe one day in your life?

Every morning, I spend one hour reading four newspapers, contemplating on the content and analyzing the news. The rest of the day, I am meeting people, attending humour clubs, talking to my daughters, giving talks...I spend the day charging myself and sharing my experiences.

The main focus today is taking care of my 95-year-old father who never expected anything from us until the age of 90. I watch all news channels and make my comments. I still keep getting a lot of news!