



CAREER SHIFT: Suhasini studied cinematography in Chennai and had been working with the ace cameraman, Ashok Kumar, when Mahendran's movie pulled her into the world of greasepaint and glitz. **Photo: Wikipedia**

Suhasini's long journey

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The first film of actress Suhasini's that I remember seeing was K Balachander's *Sindhu Bhairavi*, where she falls in love with a married Carnatic singer. That was 1986, and Suhasini was then a young woman in her mid-20s. Her first movie, however, was Mahendran's 1980 *Nenjathai Killathe* – a plot revolving around two marriages in turmoil.

Suhasini has travelled a long way since those days. And a longer way from Paramakudi, where she was born in 1961. Her father, Charu Hassan (also the elder brother of Kamal Hassan), was a noted lawyer in the town, close to Rameshwaram, in Tamil Nadu, a man who later went on to act in films like Girish Kasaravalli's *Tabarana Kathe* and Mahendran's *Uthiripookkal*. And in an important way, Charu Hassan was responsible for Suhasini to step in front of the camera. Much, much to the chagrin of uncle Kamal, superstar Rajnikanth and many others – who had thought that she would become the first woman cinematographer in South India.

Suhasini, in fact, studied cinematography in Chennai and had been working with the ace cameraman, Ashok Kumar, when Mahendran's movie pulled her into the world of greasepaint and glitz. She has acted in no less than 275 films since then, and with heroes like Kamal, Rajnikanth, Mammooty, Mohanlal and the like.

She is fluent in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada,

not Hindi. She can read and write Malayalam. "I picked up this language by reading the *Malayala Manorama*. You will be surprised to know that so many of the alphabets in Tamil and Malayalam look alike," Suhasini tells me during a long free-wheeling chat the other day at her aesthetically done-up Chennai office. Where large posters of her husband and director, Mani Ratnam's (they married in 1988 and have a son, now studying in England) *Raavan* stare at me.

Happy with rave reviews of her latest role in Gnana Rajasekaran's *Ramanujan* (on the math wizard) – where Suhasini plays his mother – she says: "There were several commonalities between my mother, my grandmother and Ramanujan's mother, Komalathammal. I belong to an Iyengar clan, like Ramanujan was, and I was familiar with the language and mannerisms of his family. So, the part seemed tailor-made for me."

The role would have been, but a life in cinema was not exactly so. Suhasini says she could have never imagined a career in tinsel town when she was growing up at Paramakudi, and in an orthodox Brahmin family at that. "It was rare, even unthinkable for a girl from such a background and family to join cinema," she avers.

But Kamal fought with her father, who wanted Suhasini to become an engineer, and with her mother, who wanted her daughter to take up literature. (One of Suhasini's two sisters wanted her to do medicine.) And Kamal convinced them all that the girl had that quality in her to make a name for herself in movies.

(Later, Charu Hassan would fight with younger brother Kamal to let Suhasini act, and not be a cinematographer, when Mahendran came up with *Nenjathai Killathe*. Suhasini tells me that she was shocked when her father asked her to work with Mahendran. "Here was my father, Dravidian in his ideas and principled to the core who had even looked down upon Bharatanatyam and had refused to arrange an arangetram for me, telling me that *Nenjathai Killathe* was a golden opportunity, one that was not to be missed.")

Kamal took his niece under his wing. She moved from Paramakudi, came to Chennai and joined the Madras Film Institute after doing a year of under graduation at Queen Mary's College in the city. "Kamal was a great teacher. He would bounce stories and ideas off me, he would take me for shoots, he would take me for editing, dubbing. I saw cinema from behind the camera. Also, Kamal's house on Chennai's Eldams Road was a place where writers (Sujatha), singers (Usha Uthup) and directors (Bharati Raja, Balu Mahendra) conglomerated.

Anybody who thought differently those days made a beeline for Kamal's home. It was a fun place where people hung around, and it became a great place for learning. I learnt a lot there. And three films were shot there in that house. I remember Sri Devi's first movie, *16 Vayathinile*, was shot in Kamal's place. She was my age and she would rest in my room. We became great friends."

While Kamal also introduced her to world cinema and Indian auteurs, such as Aravindan and Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Suhasini herself made efforts to watch arthouse fare. "I would

take a bus from Eldams Road to T Nagar on Sunday mornings to see a Satyajit Ray movie. I saw *Pather Panchali*, *Apur Sansar* and so on. Till then, my exposure to cinema was only Tamil works. Later, at the Film Institute, I would get a chance to look at international movies. Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* changed my very idea of cinema. I got truly hooked on to it."

Suhasini realised that day that films were not a joke. They were serious business. And she had to be really good in a cinematography class of 150 boys and one girl! We would never know whether Suhasini would have turned out to be a good cinematographer. Acting just sucked her in, but the entry into it was as rough as a spacecraft breaking into the earth's atmosphere on its way back. Kamal was livid that his niece was giving up cinematography. "How can you do this?" he stormed.

"There are actresses and actresses, but no woman cinematographer." The other person who was also disappointed was Rajnikanth, who told Suhasini in no uncertain terms that she was not cut out to be an actress. Both Kamal and Rajnikanth predicated doom for her.

Well, they were wrong. Suhasini is still acting, and as *Komalathammal* in *Ramanujan*, she was just superb. Even early on in *Sindhu Bairavi*, she was refreshingly charming. Her journey goes on, and I am sure still greater performances will come by.

● *Gautaman Bhaskaran has been watching Suhasini on screen for a long time, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com*