

Once a First Lady...

By [Gita Krishna Raj](#)

Not so long ago in the past, she was India's First Lady, recipient of every respect that role commanded. Yet today she is gone, almost in silence, the glory of her role unsung at large – Mrs. Janaki Venkataraman.

With tears in her eyes my mother Dr. Mohana Krishnaswamy was narrating the times they had spent together – several hours in both personal and professional capacity as a documentarian. Hesitantly my mom shared an incident that was both touching and revealing of *Mami's* character. It immediately reminded me of Charles Plumb, a US Navy jet pilot in Vietnam.

After 75 combat missions Plumb's plane was destroyed by a surface to air missile. Plumb ejected and parachuted into enemy hands spending six years in a communist Vietnamese prison. He survived the ordeal and returned home when one day a man came up to him and said 'Hey! You are Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam and were shot down!' Surprised, Plumb asked 'How in the world did you know that?' The man replied 'I packed your parachute!' Plumb gasped in surprise and gratitude. The man smiled 'I guess it worked!' Plumb assured him 'It sure did! If your chute hadn't worked I wouldn't be here today.' Ever since Plumb kept wondering how many hours the sailor must have spent in the bowels of the ship carefully weaving the shrouds and folding the silks of each chute holding in his hands every time the fate of someone he didn't even know. Plumb realized that he had needed many kinds of parachutes to carry him through when his plane was shot over enemy territory. He had needed his physical parachute, his mental parachute, his emotional parachute and his spiritual parachute. He had to call on all these supports before he could reach safety. This makes us wonder 'Who is packing our parachute?' Everyone needs someone who provides them what they need to make it through the day.

India as a country had its most turbulent political period of recent times under the presidency of H.E. Shri R. Venkataraman. His wife, the first lady Smt. Janaki Venkataraman, must have surely packed quite a few parachutes that helped Shri RV and in turn the whole nation land safely. My mother's narration brought tears to my eyes...

My Mother, Dr. Mohana as the producer and my father, Dr. S. Krishnaswamy as the Writer-Director work jointly in creating documentary films. One such film which they completed with great involvement was a Biographical film on our former President Sri R. Venkataraman. It portrays how Sri RV bridged generations. My father interviewed him on camera for about 27 hours in different sessions. Some sequences of his young age were reenacted covering the period up to his participation in the freedom struggle and his

imprisonment. Most material from 1947 onwards were dependent on photographs, newsreel material etc., depicting him as Labor leader, as Minister in Tamilnadu, as member of the Indian delegation to the United Nations, his role in the ILO, his contributions to the Planning Commission and to the many portfolios he held as Union Minister, before becoming Vice President and then occupying the highest office of the country presiding over the reign of four Prime Ministers. How do you squeeze this material into not more than 50 minutes of screen time, which Doordarshan had allotted for the film? When the Krishnaswamys told RV that they intend to interview *mami* (Smt. Janaki Venkataraman) and add extracts to the film, without hesitation, RV said: **“Make it strictly a political Biography – without any personal frills”**.

When the edited 50-minutes’ version was screened to Sri. R.V for his final approval at the preview theatre of Krishnaswamy Associates, several members of the President’s family including Smt Janaki Venkataraman were present.

The former first lady was gracious and congratulated the husband and wife team on a film well done. However, as a personal friend the following day a request to meet Mohana was made. With quite dignity, Smt Janaki once again congratulated the producer and firmly added, ‘Please remove that one line reference that you have made of me in the film.’ Her unsaid statement could be interpreted as ‘It is better to be noticed in the absence than to be ignored in an insignificant presence!’ The sensitive producer returned to question her director-husband ‘Where have we gone wrong that we have made the first lady of the country feel belittled’. The director recognized the lapse. Well, even though the directive was to make a “Political Biography”, the story could not be in an emotional vacuum of personal ties. A couple of things should be sacrificed from the political content and a personalized few lines on Smt Janaki added back to get at least a little extra dimension.

The Krishnaswamys were happier with the film after this change. It must be hurriedly clarified that *Mami* was certainly not trying to get any share of the limelight. She wanted to be consistent in her attitude of self-effacing withdrawal when she suggested that even the one line reference to her may be dropped because it was only a Political Biography. But my mother could not ignore the parachute packer of the great man’s life. My parents always say that ultimately every film has to maintain a very delicate balance.

Listening to my mom’s narrative I thought *‘Isn’t it time for us as Indians to reflect and acknowledge the support systems that have constantly helped us be the foremost among civilizations? Isn’t it time to go down on our knees in gratitude for those little words, little acts that has brought us so far? Isn’t it time to think and acknowledge the sacrifices of a wife who wanted nothing more than a safe haven for her cherished family but ended up being the unacknowledged first lady?’* Perhaps the lonely nights she spent when her husband was imprisoned during the freedom struggle, and finally the courage to remain

just a parachute packer not haggling for recognition that was most certainly due, need not be in vain. Can we as a nation learn to salute the roles of these parachute packers in our everyday life without whom we may never have landed to safety?



Smt.M.S.Subbulakshmi, Smt.R.Venkataraman & Dr.Mohana Krishnaswamy



Shri R. Venkataraman, Dr.Mohana Krishnaswamy, Smt. Janaki Venkataraman & Dr.S.Krishnaswamy.

About the author:

Gita Krishna Raj writes a column ‘When Science met God...’ in the growth magazine FROZEN THOUGHTS. As a freelance writer she contributes to other publications as well. A dancer, actor, TV serial director and orator, Gita is the CEO of the fitness group Maverick Fitness Studios.

