

The Lalitha effect

Shiv Visvanathan | Deccan Chronicle 05th Sep 2013



C.V. Raman and Lokasundari Ammal.

My aunt Lalitha died this week. She would have turned 103 this year. She was a remarkable woman but few will write about her. She was a housewife and her husband was a famous scientist, a Nobel Laureate.

His name was Chandrasekhar and he was an astrophysicist. I found her interesting but history is unfair. It will talk about Chandra and his effect but few will write about the Lalitha effect, the remarkable presence of this woman in the life of an extraordinary man.

Thinking about her, I realised that there are many such instances of women in the family. The men made history but few talk of the way the women helped them make it. It is always the great man and his unknown wife. There is a silence about women, their achievements, their narratives. The story focuses on the man alone, the woman becoming an annexe to the imagination.

I was asking myself how much space does C.V. Raman's wife get in conversations about Raman. I remember her as a remarkable woman with an acerbic wit, a complete match for her husband. Raman fed on his own ego. He was, as the legend goes, confident enough to predict and book tickets in advance for his Nobel Prize.

Raman pursued science to the last. In his later years he worked on flowers and started claiming that he deserved a second Nobel. Chinamma, his wife, had the perfect answer. She replied, "With one Nobel you were intolerable, with two you would be insufferable."

These women understood the men and yet had wonderful lives of their own. In fact, I remember my father saying once, "As they age it is the women who get interesting, the men remain merely professionally competent." More and more I am tempted to write a history of women in many Brahmin families. They lived normal lives but had a touch of eccentricity that allowed for a fund of storytelling.

I remember the last time I was in Chicago. Chandra was dead and my aunt was living alone. She was in her 90s, but she insisted I come home and that she would cook for me. She turned out a simple meal, beautifully served. I remember a frail but determined woman quietly asserting her will to live and her passion for company.

The conversation was wonderful. She talked about the early years in Chicago, the loneliness of being among the few Indians. Chandra would work relentlessly, oblivious of everything around him. It was she who had to keep him sensitive to the events around him, including the racism of the city.

She would cut little bits of news and place it in front of him, make him confront the politics of the university, the conflict between blacks and whites. She was the more radical of the two and had an intuitive sense of politics. Chandra's sense of life was aesthetic. His was a narrower politics. Lalitha created the rounded man adding ethics and the politics of everydayness to his aesthetic sensibility.

We sat and discussed democracy in India and she had a muscular sense of it. She talked about NGOs and civil society, wanting to know who to support. I remember my father once telling me about his older sisters. He said that they put all their rage and love into everything they cooked and the music they played.

He hinted at something deeper. It was as if the men in their intelligence made history, but it was women who rounded it off as sociology, added sensibility and sensitivity to it. They were autonomous to the core in a patriarchal milieu.

My family had many women who had the genius for creativity. My grandmother translated Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* into Tamil. I do not think my grandfather, the great patriarch, understood her feminism.

Many of them like, sister R.S. Subbulakshmi, were involved in the child widow remarriage movement. It was a remarkable space where you added to your freedom by creating a new freedom around gender and sexuality. The real history of these women and these movements needs to be written.

Even as witnesses they were great storytellers and great observers. I remember another grand-aunt watching her husband, the meteorologist Ramaswamy, Chandra and my father discuss the

monsoon. They were drinking coffee and conversing over idlis and the ferment was in the conversation. It ranged from the archaeology of water to carbon-dating to modelling the monsoon.

My grand-aunt listened, chuckled and said, “Aren’t they like happy, quarrelsome birds, happy with every morsel of science?” My grand-aunt realised science to them was a form of gossip. These men thrived on it as they did on her idlis and coffee. I wonder how many remember that Raman’s group borrowed their little diamonds from the nose rings of the women to conduct their research on spectroscopy. That little material contribution needs to be acknowledged.

The women understood creativity partly because society denied them opportunities. They turned their hobbies into obsessions, creating passions around the violin and the veena. They blended into society and yet were open in their defiance, convincing us as children that no woman was complete without a defiant cigarette. If protest was a form of creativity, these women were real geniuses of the society.

Living in these families was a privilege, but these families were only liveable because the women made it so. I remember my grandfather as a patriarch could be intolerant. I remember as a kid I wrote to him about my first electric train. I told him that it ran at 500 miles an hour. Quick came the response, “Your train could not travel at that speed. Please correct and inform me at the earliest.”

I was devastated but I knew secretly I also lived, thanks to the women, in a world where electric trains ran at the speeds I wanted. This essay is a child’s thank-you to the world they created, the women in the family.