

## MY FIRST TELEVISION EXPERIENCE

(En Mudhal Tholaikatchi Anubhavam (Tamil original))

by Sujatha Rangarajan)

Translated by

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You wouldn't believe it if I said television arrived in Srirangam in the 50s itself! Well, one fine day a signboard appeared in the South Utthara Street – 'The Ranganadha Radio and Television Training Institute' and below that it read, 'Prop: Annasami C&G, London'. I was then in the third year, the last semester of my Electronics course at MIT and was happily whiling away my time under the pretext of doing my project work.

The issue was hotly debated at Rangu's shop. "There is no television anywhere in the whole of India. How come it reaches Srirangam alone?"

"That's what he claims. Annasami says we can see what they broadcast in America."

"Sheer lie. What do you say da\*? You have done electronics."

"No chance!" I said.

"Let's ask him when he comes here. He is supposed to be highly educated... What kind of a person is he?"

"He is about thirty. Has a slight paunch and is balding. Do you remember that doll like beauty, Samba? You were all crazy about her. He is married to her," Rangu explained.

"He studied in America. So they agreed in spite of the age difference."

"What an atrocious thing?" Thambu cried in exasperation. He was head over heels in love with her once.

Once, when I was going to Therkku Vaasal via Utthara Street rather than going through the temple, I saw the signboard. Some boys were playing cricket on the street in front of the house. It was a big house with a large pyol. The board was new. There was even a bulb to light it up and a lemon and chillie\* were tied over it.

"What the hell is C & G? Is it homeopathy?"

"No Rangu. It is an exam conducted by an institute called City & Guilds in London like our AMIE. May be he has cleared the exam."

"Do you think they teach television in that course?"

"May be. That's why he has it on the signboard. However, that may be, we don't have television in Srirangam, nor can we receive the signal.

Once, the man himself came to Rangu's shop. "Rangu, do you have an insulation tape?"

"No, I don't even know what colour it is."

"It's black in colour. You should stock up these things in your shop".

"What does it look like?"

"It sticks on one side. When we connect wires we use these tapes and seal the junctions to prevent electric shock."

Rangu was not particularly interested in enhancing his technical knowledge.

“Annasami, it’s rumored that you have a TV in your house, is that true?”

“May be you should come and see for yourself.”

“How can I leave my shop?”

“Big deal, as if your business is roaring! You are swatting flies here most of the time. Let’s go have a look,” Thambu butted in. He was interested in meeting Samba.

“How is Samba, mama?”

“Dey\*, he is not your mama da...”

“Okay anna, I will come. But you have to tell us clearly what it is all about. We hear things...it seems they show nude pictures.”

“No, no! Nothing of that sort.”

“Then what is it all about?”

“It is a question of time before television reaches India. It is already on trial in Delhi. As it spreads all over the country, there will be a huge demand for people who can repair TV sets. I am preparing our youngsters to meet that demand. For those who join now, there is a discount in the fee.”

“What is your fee?”

“It depends on what you can pay.”

“Oh, come on, spell out your fee exactly.”

“I may give it free of cost if you are poor. Of course the first lesson ‘Fundamentals of Television’ is free for everyone.”

“Will we get to see pictures?”

“Definitely.”

Rangu looked at me. “May be I could join too. Thambu, do you want to?”

“We must to go see it ourselves sometime da,” he said. “But you said that we don’t have television here”

“At MIT, TV was a part of my third year syllabus. I read it uses VHF band and had also learned about line of sight.” I tried to explain these things to Rangu.

“All that’s fine, but have you seen a real TV?”

I had! Once! At an exhibition during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Madras University, Philips had installed a close circuit television in the Guindy Engineering College. They had a camera in one of the rooms and a receiver in the other. They showed all the girls who had come. There was a mad rush. You ended up seeing faces tired by the one-hour long wait.

I went with Rangu to South Utthara Street one evening. There was a match with South Chithira Street in progress (the bet was the pencil), in front of the house. The milkman was cleaning the cow’s udder for milking, as we reached the house. It was intermission time.

“Please come! Samba, make some coffee,” Annasami welcomed us. We don’t normally go to Utthara Street. These were, in our view, half-streets. You had houses only on one side. The temple wall formed the other side. Thorn bushes grew there. No matter what you say, someone or the other would find it convenient to relieve himself near the wall. Besides the wall was in ruins and you always had the fear of getting hurt. However, it was an ideal place for playing cricket.

“Mama, when you crouch and glance the ball, if the ball hits your chest, can we give LBW?” a boy ran up to me and asked. I wasn’t sure what to say. Anna was casually putting on his vest and calling us in. We went in.

“Doing some tinkering?”

“No soldering,” he said.

There was a radio lying with its back open, revealing a maze of parts inside it. A small kid was standing on a wooden plank and meddling with the IF transformer. We heard funny noises. On the other side there was a speaker, stripped clean, and a radio with its parts spread out. Surprisingly, we heard a woman's recital of 'Bakla Nilapadi' in raga 'Karakarapriya' coming from it.

"With a RF amplifier you can get all frequencies." Anna said.

"Now, where is your television please?"

He pointed to an object covered by a jamakkalam\*.

"It is inside that. The boys are playing cricket. Let them finish. A stray ball might break the picture tube."

"Can we see pictures?" asked Rangu.

"Yeah."

"You are telling tall tales," I said and Rangu turned towards me.

"Hey! You are saying you can't get the pictures here, aren't you?"

"Yes" I said.

"Oyi! How can we get a picture without a TV station? Look, a radio needs a radio station. A TV needs a TV station, right? What do you say da?"

"It is a must. That's what my books say," I said.

Anna smiled at me." Well that's all you have read. You are all tied to your books. You have just mugged up Tremont. I am practical. Look, I have never seen this radio set before. It has been totally assembled by me. I wound the transformer and I have done the tracking alignment and tuning. The works. Can you do it? I have a ham license too."

"Without a TV station we cannot have anything on the TV," I persisted.

"That's what you think. You have a long way to go, my boy."

"Look brother, he has learned everything about television. You are the one who is taking everyone for a ride, promising to teach young boys television and haven't you been collecting Rs 5 per class?"

"Rangu, I charge only those who can afford it. Just look at my curriculum. I begin with the TV principles and then the practical stuffs. Soldering, the benchwise, carpentry and then coil winding. The park radio and the panchayat radio are being sent here for repairs."

"There is no TV without TV station." I did not relent.

"In the first place show us that box. I think it's a barrel for storing paddy."

"I don't need to show my set to people with half-baked knowledge, to cynics and bullies. This is an expensive set. Do you know what RCA is?" Annasami was furious.

"Yeah, it means you have nothing to show."

"Suit yourself."

Samba brought coffee for all of us in silver cups.

"Samba, how are you?" Thambu enquired affectionately, "Do you remember the good old days?"

That did not go down well with Anna. "Samba get back in," he said. Samba could well have been his daughter. By the time, we came out of the house the match had been abandoned over the LBW decision. Thambu was fuming. "If I show the letters we both wrote to each other, there will be fireworks. I gave up not wanting to create a mess."

"Oh! Forget it da. Don't dig up the past."

There was a time when it was almost decided that Thambu would marry Samba. I believe the alliance was called off because one of them had 'Sevvai Dosham\*'. Besides Thambu did not

have much money. After contemplating to become a sanyasi for a year, he finally married Jayalakshmi, a simple traditional girl from Srinivas nagar. Promptly following it up with two girl babies in a row, and he is hardly two years older than me.

“Some people have all the luck,” Thambu said in a casual way.

Well, the TV dispute did not end there. Thambu made it a point to poke fun at Annasami whenever he came to the shop.

“Anna, so how is your TV? I hear we are able to see the Americans going about in their big cars.”

“Non-believers can see nothing, just like how it is with God. Nothing can convince them,” Annasami said.

“I believe you have covered your terrace with aerials...for drying clothes eh?”

“Yeah. Yagi array. Nothing that you guys can understand,” he threw some jargon at us. After he left, Rangu asked, “What is Yagi array da? That fellow is spinning a yarn for sure.”

“No Rangu there is one such array. If the signal is weak and you turn it towards the signal it picks it up like an aerial.”

“Does that mean he is right?”

“Impossible. You need a signal in the first place.”

“What about the signal sent by the Americans?”

“It cannot reach this far, Rangu.”

It was closing time at the shop one night around 10.30 pm and we were sipping ginger beer behind the almirah when Annasami came on his bicycle and called out, “Come on fellows, all of you.”

“Oyi! What’s up? You look agitated, would you like to have a GB?” Thambu said.

“You guys laughed at me about the television, didn’t you? Come to my house right away.”

“Why, can you see something?”

“Not a perfect picture but something definitely.”

“Come on engineer” he invited me too. I was shocked. “That is not possible,” I said.

We went with him. Samba was on the terrace of the house holding a torch. She was turning the aerial, which was spread all over the terrace, as per his instructions. Down in the hall there was a black and white TV. We could see only grains.

“Samba Dear, turn it around,” he said.

She turned the aerial, asking repeatedly if he could see anything. For a split second, an image appeared on the screen. A woman was talking. We couldn’t figure out the language.

“Stop... Stop! Just stay right there,” he yelled from here.

“Rangu, what do you have to say now?”

“It’s fuzzy, but you can see the face.”

“But you guys said you can never see anything on the TV here. What does your expert say?” He turned to me and winked.

“I have nothing to say at present. I have to ask my professor.” I said.

“You should never talk about anything with such arrogance. If I add more array elements we can get much better picture especially later in the night. As time passes...”

“Is that alright or should I turn it further?” Samba asked from above.

“That’s fine. Come down and give them payathanganchi\*” No sooner had he said that, we heard a loud thud and a scream. Samba had fallen some fifteen feet down from the terrace. We lifted her and brought her limping into the house.

“You should watch your step,” he said. Her leg was red and swollen. She must have been in severe pain. Thambu was in tears.

“Oyi! You make this girl climb the terrace and do all sort of things. You are abusing her.”

“Is it any of your bloody business?”

“How dare you! You’d better watch your tongue. If you force me to talk, the shit will hit the roof.”

“What’s that...? Hey, she is my wife. What I do with her is purely my business and who the hell do you think you are?”

“Please stop” Samba pleaded.

“Who am I? Rangu...tell him who I am.”

“Thambu let’s go da. We can sort this out later.”

“You heard what he said! Who am I...?” Thambu was high on ginger beer. His speech was slurred. “I’ll tell you who I am... This Samba here...do you have any idea how many letters she wrote to me, do you care to see them? And what about the letters I wrote to her?”

At that moment, I thought the world would end. But nothing of that sort happened.

“She has told me all about those silly letters before our marriage and showed them to me too. Now you get the hell out of here.”

When I came to MIT for the last semester, I clarified my doubt with Professor. Somayajulu. “How did we get to see television in Srirangam that night?”

“Nothing surprising in that. At times when we have an inversion layer over the sea, a sort of wave-guide forms by duct propagation. Under such circumstances, VHF signals can travel thousands of miles. It is called Anomalous propagation. What you saw is probably the TV signal from some South Asian country.”

To this day Rangu claims it is the grace of Ranganathan\*.

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### My First Television Experience

#### Glossary

Da, Dey	informal way of addressing friends
Lemon and chillie:	talismen used to ward off evil eye
Jamakalam:	thick blanket with specific designs usually used as a floor mat
Sevvai Dosham:	a blemish in a person’s horoscope which predicts problems in marriage
Payithanganchi :	sweet porridge prepared from green gram
Ranganathan:	the God who resides in Srirangam