

***Sumathi Iyer India's first woman cricket umpire.***



# My World: In the middle...

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By Mythily Ramachandran



## **Sumathi Iyer**

*India's first woman cricket umpire*

*I never realised while playing cricket with my brothers during my childhood days, that I would be storming a male bastion in the years to come.*

I was a tomboy. I played the game for the sheer enjoyment it gave me. Yes, initially I was a little afraid of the ball but playing with my brothers helped me overcome this fear. Soon I found myself playing cricket while I was at school at Rosary Matric in Chennai.

I continued playing the game in college, too. We were a large joint family. My father, a business advisor, was always on the move leaving my mother to bring us up. Growing up with cousins (we were in a joint family) taught us the value of sharing and caring for one another.

Women's cricket had just raised its head in India in 1973 and girls striding on to the cricket ground was a new phenomenon. We were the pioneers. My peers included Shantha Rangaswamy (former Indian women's cricket team captain), Diana Eduljee, Sudha Shah and the present coach of the Indian team, Fowziah Khalilee.

Although cricket was my first love, i didn't allow it to affect my studies. I graduated in sociology from Stella Maris College and then took a degree in law from Madras Law College with excellent grades. There were times when I would sneak out of home without my mother's knowledge and play cricket.

I became an expert in wriggling through the bars of the window!

Women in pants playing cricket and that too in Chennai, where society was most conservative, was something my father did not quite approve of. But my siblings always came to my rescue and bailed me out of difficult situations.

I represented Tamil Nadu from 1973 and played for Madras University from 1975-80. I represented South Zone for two decades since 1978 and the Indian team in the 1980s. I was part of the Indian contingent that toured England and West Indies on an unofficial series.

The crowd in the West Indies was most encouraging and fun-loving. When the Tamil Nadu team toured Sri Lanka, I established a world record for taking the highest number of catches - seven in a match. In

fact, I bettered my earlier record of six catches.

### **Enriching experience**

Playing under a captain like Shantha Rangaswamy was an enriching experience. I was fortunate to learn a lot from her. Shantha, with her tremendous motivational skills and game strategies, could steer a team to a thrilling victory from a virtual defeat. Even today we are good friends.

Playing cricket paved the way for me landing a job. I had just completed my law when I got a job with Canara Bank under the sports quota in 1981 and I continue working there.

Air-India and the Indian Railways have also done commendable work recruiting women cricketers. Still, India requires more sponsors from corporate houses.

It was my mentor and former Ranji player, P. K. Dharmalingam, who suggested that I appear for a test to qualify as an umpire. I took the test in 1976, conducted by the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association, and came out with flying colours. I am the Associate member of the Association of Cricket Umpires and Scorers at England since 1978.

My first match as umpire was in 1980. It was just like going out to the field to play and I gave my best. I have been officiating local women's matches for more than a decade. It is exhausting, no doubt - standing in one place and keeping a watch on the movement of the ball, but I love being associated with the game.

It is not lucrative either, and many a time I have been paid a mere Rs150. On occasions I have officiated free. I am happy so long as I am in touch with the game. Nothing can eclipse those rare moments like when a senior BCCI official from a Patiala men's team congratulated me for my work. I was clean bowled!

### **A long way**

Women's cricket has come a long way. During our time we had to arrange for the bat, ball, pads and grounds. We even paid our train fares when we played an outstation match - all for the love of the game. Today's scenario is much better. The girls only have to play good cricket. The rest is taken care of.

The Indian Women's Cricket team is good. Women's cricket in India is not a lucrative profession, though. We need more funds. Besides, the Women's Cricket Association is an independent body unlike in countries like England where the women's cricketing body has merged with the men's association.

Recently, the New Zealand team was in India and the Indian team won the series 4-1. I got an opportunity to be the third umpire for two matches, one in Bangalore and the other in Chennai.

I got married in 1988 to Hari, a former captain in the army. I told Hari that the only condition for our marriage is that I should be allowed to continue with my cricket. We got married and in all these years of my marriage my husband and in-laws have given me their unstinting support.

As a child, I was affected with rheumatism and would be confined to the bed most of the time. I used to move around wearing socks but playing cricket has given me a healthier constitution. Though I had Caesarian section deliveries, a bout of hepatitis and a serious knee injury... nothing could keep me away from the grounds.

Why did I want to be an umpire is a question often posed to me. Well, knowing the rules of the game is as essential as knowing one's blood group. I am passionate about cricket and want to be well-versed in the game. Women can make good umpires - as good as men if not better.

Having played on the field for a long time, I have a good insight into the behaviour of the people and this does help me. I believe in being fair and doing the job to the best of my ability.

So far in my career as an umpire I can say with conviction that I have not failed in my duty. I strongly believe that women should play the game with utmost sincerity and no concessions should be given because of their gender.

I hope that I have opened a door for more women to follow. Women cricketers past their prime can take up umpiring and remain connected with the game. It is not all over for them.

I have two children, a daughter, Purnima, and son, Krishna. I believe that values take precedence over everything. My upbringing in a joint family certainly taught me good values, which I am keen to pass on to my children. I respect people for their magnanimity and accept them for what they are.

### **Serving people**

My job as a banker gave me an opportunity to serve people. I headed the cell for entrepreneurship development for women in Canara Bank, Madras Circle. It was a platform for rural and urban women entrepreneurs. Those years were a learning experience, increasing my self-confidence.

Even as I have been playing so many roles - a mother, a wife, daughter-in-law, I also forged many relationships. I had the power to empower others. Several women, who would have otherwise led a lost and forlorn life, are today running independent businesses, holding their heads high. It was satisfying and gave me a pride in my job.

Thiruvananthapuram

## Batting for a women's IPL

By Athul Lal A G

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THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: What 's the quickest way to promote women's cricket in the country? If you ask Sumathi Hariharan Iyer, the country's first woman international umpire, the answer will be - introduce a women's version of the exciting Indian Premier League (IPL).

"It's just a matter of time. Since BCCI has taken over the Women's Cricket Association of India, a women's IPL event is possible. Definitely, it will be a boost for women's cricket in the country. Now, women's T20 championship is there at the zonal and national levels," says Sumathi, who was in the city during the last three days as the match referee of the 12th Inter- State Veterans' Cricket Tournament (South Zone) that concluded at Medical College Ground on Sunday.

But, the 56-year-old veteran from Chennai is well aware that her dream of a women's championship in IPL will be a tough challenge as it involves so much of money. "Definitely, it's a huge task. You have to bring in a huge crowd and should find a lot of sponsors. But, the BCCI can also think of conducting women's T20 exhibition matches amidst the IPL event. That will be good for the cause," opines Sumathi, an allrounder (right-hand middle order bat and an off spinner), who played for Tamil Nadu for 27 years.

Having started her cricketing career in 1973 representing Madras University, Sumathi was selected for the national team twice. She was the captain of Tamil Nadu, South Zone and Rest of India teams and started umpiring matches in 1976.

"Initially, I used to be an umpire in women's tournaments in which Tamil Nadu did not qualify and also in some corporate matches. It's not an easy task. One should be fit and tough, both mentally and physically," says Sumathi, who is presently the chairman of the selection committee, Tamil Nadu Cricket Association.

Asked about the present state of the Kerala women's team, Sumathi says, "There are some good talents, especially Saranya and Asha. I think they should play more matches and should be given opportunities to play with the boys' team. The women cricketers in the country are getting better travel and infrastructure facilities. So, they should utilise this opportunity to the maximum."

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