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Spotlight on Gen Next



The Hindu Aparna Guhan and Aruna Guhan, partner AVM Studios. Photo : R Ravindran

“We used to sit on script discussions with our grandfather. He would make references and make us go back and watch some film or the other”.

Twenty-five-year-old twins Aparna and Aruna Guhan of the AVM family talk to Sudhish Kamath about driving the change in the digital space for the celebrated production house

Twins. Fraternal, not identical. Similar, yet different. Modern, and traditional. AVM Productions, one of the oldest film studios in the country has two of the youngest faces from the AVM family spearheading change. Twenty-five year olds Aruna Guhan and Aparna Guhan are making their grandfather M. Saravanan proud, by taking AVM into the digital space.

Over the last two years, the twins have driven change through YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, produced fresh content including a new film *Ithuvum Kadanthu Pogum* and continue to manage the family business from their fortress at the heart of the film industry.

At the interview and photo shoot, its easy to see how they complement each other perfectly.

If Aruna chose to study Fine Arts, Aparna chose Business. Aparna runs an NGO (Tiara Haemophilia and Cancer Foundation) while Aruna has her own designer clothesline (Aruna & Malvika, a brand she started with her friend Malvika Korrapati). If Aparna is younger by 13 minutes, it doesn't show because Aruna is the brat among the two. They even complete each other's sentences but have a mind of their own.

When they were six, they looked so much alike, that they would swap their clothes to fool their friends. When they were in college, the librarian thought Aruna was snooty not to acknowledge her outside the department because every time she saw Aparna, she assumed it was Aruna — until one day she saw the twins together. “Some people can't still tell our voices apart over the phone though we are quite different, once you get to know us,” says Aruna.

The twins were about eight when they first visited a movie set. Aparna recalls, “*Minsara Kanavu*. Lawrence School, Lovedale, the first time I saw a rain scene I was enthralled. Mom was very strict, so we had never visited a movie set until then.”

And Aruna continues, “We were so excited to dance with Kajol. *Minsara Kanavu* was the first movie we were allowed to watch because it had no fight scenes.”

Till they were in their early teens, they even got the same kind of clothes. “Teachers would call us Aruna-Aparna because they couldn't keep track. We wanted to break free from each other. So, when we finally got a chance in Class 9, we chose a completely different subject, just to be apart for atleast one period in a day,” says Aparna. “I chose Art, she chose Economics,” adds Aruna.

After class X, they were finally in different classes. Aruna picked Humanities while Aparna chose Commerce at Sishya. They knew they would have to take over the family business even when they were kids. **Once they started going to college (Stella Maris College)**, they also started spending time at AVM. “We worked there for half a day after college,” says Aparna. “We used to sit on script discussions with our grandfather (M. Saravanan),” adds Aruna. “He would make references and make us go back and watch some film or the other,” continues Aparna.

And early on, they knew what they liked. “I used to watch a lot of TV serials, so I would offer inputs on how to tweak stuff,” says Aparna. Aruna just couldn't watch soaps. She was more of a film person. “We would sit in the editing room and give our inputs,” says Aruna.

Once they finished college, Aparna decided to stay back and work at AVM for a year while Aruna left for the U.K. to study costume design and followed it up with a Masters in Fine Arts from Kingston University. Aparna left for the U.K. a year later for her programme in business management at the London Metropolitan Business School.

“It was important to be independent and experience so many things,” says Aruna. “We were never allowed to be extravagant and always had to explain why we wanted money. We took up part-time jobs, met new people from different cultures,” Aparna explains.

If Aparna worked as a student warden and administrative assistant, Aruna designed artwork for a real estate firm. Aruna was the first to return from the U.K. and the sisters worked on the marketing and distribution of *Sivaji 3D*.

Aparna handled the Twitter account for AVM, Aruna managed the Facebook account before YouTube got in touch with them, urging AVM to upload content online. Aruna started managing the Movies channel and Aparna the TV serials on YouTube. Within six weeks, over seven lakh people had watched *Sivaji* on YouTube. The movie channel got 1.2 million hits, driven by *Sivaji*. The serials channel on YouTube, that uploads about eight episodes a day (two of every show, three in Tamil, one in Telugu), got over 3.5 million hits.

Before going back to the kind of mainstream fare AVM produces, the twins decided to push the envelope by producing content for the youth. Inspired by the rise of the new Tamil cinema post Nalaya Iyakkunar, they started scouting for fresh talent. They spent time watching short films on YouTube when they came across Anil Krishnan and Srihari Prabaharan. “We had started looking out for talent last January, we sent them an email and by June, we got started on production,” says Aparna. “We wanted to make something for a younger audience, not necessarily commercial,” adds Aruna.

The 55-minute long film, *Ithuvum Kadanthu Pogum*, starring Sivaji’s grandson Shivaji Dev, Shilpa Bhatt and Ravi Raghavendra is finally complete and the sisters are working out a release strategy. “It is a powerful drama about finding hope. What excited us is that in some small way, everyone will be able to identify with it. We want to make films like *Sivaji* and films like *Ithuvum Kadanthu Pogum*, that are offbeat,” says Aruna.

Aparna wants to make a difference to TV programming. “I want to revamp TV content. It is time we moved away from women sacrificing and crying... Hindi serials go through all sorts of genres, there’s a lot more we can do. There is nothing wrong with happy stories,” says Aparna.

Do they fight at all?

“We argue a lot at work. I have a business way of seeing things and she is not like that,” Aparna admits. And Aruna adds: “But it is actually the best of both worlds once the issues are resolved. She looks at the bigger picture and I look at the aesthetics, pick out the tiny details, the really small things...”