



LIFE

# Out of the fold

The Chennai sun was in full bloom; summer heat coating the skin like melted caramel. Ideal weather to wear as little as possible. Instead, I was in a tiny dressing room off a marriage hall, layering myself in nine yards of silk.

I was being dressed like a child by my aunt, in front of an interested audience that comprised my mother and other women. Outside, the sounds of the nagaswaram were in full play for my nephew's thread ceremony. "Don't fidget," said my aunt, tucking in silk around my waist. "Here, hold this," handing me some pins, "you can admire yourself later." Finally, I was deemed ready for public consumption. My awkwardness faded; I took comfort in the fact that my cousin was dressed similarly. When I stepped out of the room, people glanced in my direction and smiled. Someone said: "Oh, you look like Rajam periamma." He was old and near-sighted, but this passing uncle paid me a

As she drapes the traditional nine-yard saree, **LAVANYA SANKARAN** remembers her grandmother's other legacy—the gift of telling stories



## SEA OF STORIES

From left: Lavanya Sankaran with her debut novel *The Hope Factory*; a photograph of her grandmother with two of her cousins

compliment I was secretly hoping for: he was comparing me to my grandmother.

## THE STORYTELLER

When I was very little, Paati, Tamil for grandmother, was a figure of comfort; with a cuddlesome lap, the teller of wonderful stories that drifted between the Indian epics and *Panchatantra* to plots cunningly reinterpreted from contemporary cinema about queens and soldiers and thieves in the dead of night. When I learned to read, I discovered the magic key to a kingdom of new stories—and I stepped away from my grandmother's lap. As I grew into self-absorbed girlhood, I didn't think to question what I knew of Paati: old-fashioned, a typical Tamil Brahmin grandmother, epitomised by her traditional dress. My mother's generation was the first to wear six-yard sarees; my grandmother and the women before her wore nine. This I knew: my mother was chic, my grandmother, unfashionable; a relic of a bygone age, mouldering, knowing nothing of the yearning within me for a life very different from hers.

If girlhood is to tie up your brain with fruitless convictions, it is one of the great pleasures of adulthood to see them unfurl. When I grew up and started on my own storytelling journey, I finally took the time to see my grandmother clearly: a creative free spirit, a sharp social observer, and, in her quiet way, a rebel.

My teenaged grandmother was unwittingly at the centre of a culture clash. Born into a family of Sanskrit scholars and musical mavens, she married at 16 into a family that had no patience for cultural exploration. Paati, playful, pretty and with the gift of enjoying life, found herself cherished by her husband—the eldest of four sons—and thwarted by her mother-in-law, who was famously brisk and very capable; who ruled her sons, and, furthermore, ran her house on strict lines. Paati painted her nails. "Who are you?" her mother-in-law said, "a prostitute?" In a Tamil Brahmin house, an interest in self-adornment was suspect. Paati wanted her daughters to dance. This was especially daring; Bharata Natyam was still emerging from the province of temple-dancers. But Paati was enthralled and wanted her daughters to learn. >

Her sister, Seetha periamma, aider, abettor, and even more suspect than Paati (for wearing her hair in a long braid down her back like a loose woman instead of in a tidy, well-oiled bun) sent a dance master over, only to have him chased out of the house by Paati's mother-in-law.

Paati and Seetha periamma: if they were around today, you'd know those girls. Bright, driven hipsters, part of culture and counter-culture, telling their stories, beat-boxing for women's rights, growing their own weed and being fierce. Simply fierce.

Once a month, during their menstrual flow, the girls of the house were expected to remain sequestered in the aptly named *dhooram* or 'distance room'. For entertainment, they could think pious thoughts or read improving books. My grandmother did neither of these things; she spent her time writing stories. And then, she would carefully hide them under the mattress, ready for her secret readers: the other young girls of the house. When the *dhooram* room door closed upon them, they would reach under the mattress and read the next installment of her story. This was contraband. Their equivalent of a secret porn stash.

Of course she was found out. The mother-in-law, armed with information from a daughter-turned-narc, marched into that room, upturned the mattress and discovered pages and pages of stories. Whereupon, she read them, adored them, and sent them to a publisher. No, of course not—she burned them. My grandmother never did write another story, saving them instead for her grandchildren who would later play in her lap. When her mother-in-law died, Paati finally started dance classes



**THE LEGACY**  
Sankaran's grandmother  
Rajalakshmi Suri

Paati and her sister: if they were around today, you'd know those girls. Driven hipsters, part of culture and counter-culture, telling their stories, beat-boxing for women's rights

for her daughters, and gifted them with the power of free speech.

## THE WHOLE NINE YARDS

Two years ago, when my cousin suggested it was time for us to wear nine-yard sarees for her son's thread ceremony, I envisioned myself walking slowly in penguin steps, stumbling. Our mothers and aunts had their doubts. They had lived through their own rebellion against the nine-yard saree, and proceeded, with Paati's support and occasional eye-rolling, to do astonishing things with their lives, outside the house and within. "It's not going to be very comfortable," they said. "Are you sure?" We were. And, as soon as we were dressed, we realised the truth of the traditional nine-yard saree: it is functionally far more comfortable than a regular saree. The weight is distributed around the body and through the legs; the *pollu* is worn like an apron in front, leaving the hands free for a very active life. The mental constraints that the nine-yard saree represented for an earlier generation didn't translate into physical discomfort for us. Years later, now that Paati's presence at family gatherings is in a photograph, we are gathered here: her daughters of blood and marriage—and the gift of her free spirit is something that is in all of us. We are wonderful about tending to our responsibilities; not so good at genuflecting to rules. We don't hide our stories. We share them; some of us with the world, some at company meetings; some around the dining table. And we have no need for mattresses. ■

Lavanya Sankaran's debut novel, *The Hope Factory* (Hachette India), is in bookstores.