

# India's Heirloom Textile

## Grandmother's Sari in the Cupboard

By Piu Lahiri

*The soft silken fabric flowed around me. I can still smell the soft fragrance of sandalwood wafting from the sari as I pleated the folds and tucked them into the petticoat. This sari had been my grandma's favourite and she had given it to me on my 21st birthday. As I looked at my reflection in the mirror, memories flooded in. I could almost hear her voice as she told me the story of her first sari, given to her when she was 12 years old...*

Suniti (my grand-ma), with her grey-blue eyes and neatly plaited hair, loved walking down Shimla's Mall Road wearing her bright blue velvet and lace frock and smart shoes. Her father had ordered them specially from London for his two daughters. What a good-looking duo they made as they happily skipped side by side! Often, the perfumed *memsahibs* with their lovely voluminous gowns and lacy parasols would stop and smile at them.

Then one day her dashing father presented her with a gift. It was a lovely sari – just like the one her mother wore. It was so pretty, light pink with sequinned flowers! With it were a lovely underskirt and a blouse. She ran in to try them on.

Soon she had an array of saris and her pretty frocks were packed away. She was so proud when she got to wear a sari to school. She was a 'big girl' now. Yes, she tripped a couple of times, but within a month she was able to tuck her sari into



*The author's grandmother, Suniti Ganguli, age 16, in a studio photograph taken in Calcutta; photo courtesy of the author*

her underskirt and comfortably play catch and hopscotch with her friends.

These glorious days of childhood did not last forever and in a few years she had to bid farewell to her friends and leave for their hometown Calcutta. Oh how hot it seemed after the cool breezes she had left behind. Her sari proved invaluable as a sunshade against the blistering rays, an impromptu dish holder (when she was helping her mother cook) and a fan when she was babysitting her young brother.

Just when she was getting used to life in Calcutta, she was told that she would soon be going to her 'own home' as she was getting married. She peeked shyly from the wings as the *sari-wala* came and displayed rich silk *Banarasi* saris for her trousseau. Her wedding sari was of deep maroon silk, shot with pure gold threads in the form of

exquisite paisley designs embroidered with little pearls. For her turmeric paste ceremony she had a bright yellow and



red muslin sari specially ordered from Dhaka. For day wear, an array of soft, light, silk saris with lovely floral patterns woven into the borders, was bought. They were so pretty, but they were totally eclipsed by the rich peacock-hued and deep coloured rich silks from South India that were bought for her to wear on special evening occasions. The blouses were of silk too and had rich, raised gold-thread embroidery called *zardozi* with little touches of lace on the sleeves and the neck.

All these were packed into giant teakwood trunks with dried *neem* leaves and fragrant herbs in silk pouches and loaded in the same train that carried this innocent 15-year-old with her 6-ft tall handsome husband to 'their home' as they started their lives together.

Years passed and this child bride became the doyenne of a huge household. I loved listening to my grandma's stories about her childhood during our annual visits to our family home. As I sat at her feet while she oiled and combed my hair, I asked her what was so special about a sari? She smiled, "If you think jeans and the little black dress were fashion staples, then think again. The sari has been a constant in fashion for some 5,000 years!" She added, "The tailored blouse and petticoat came to India only with the arrival of the Muslims and later the British. Earlier Hindus believed that any cloth pierced by a needle was impure, so for years the sari was just draped over the body." At my scandalised expression, she went into peals of laughter and explained how the six-yard and in some cases the nine-yard-long sari was tied so that nothing was 'exposed'.

She continued, "Haven't you noticed that the older men wear unstitched cloth *dhotis* when they go into the prayer room?" I nodded, having seen my grandfather and his brothers wear a long, wide piece of white cotton cloth around their waists, drawing it between their legs to tuck into the waist. I added that during our visit to south India I had also noticed the men wearing a loose, sarong-type garment called a *veshti*. Later that evening, while attending a traditional wedding, I noticed the bridegroom was wearing only a silk *dhoti* around his waist with a silk gold-bordered shawl over his shoulders.

Now I started digging in earnest for information. The word *saree* has its origin in the Sanskrit word *chira* meaning cloth. Though the beginnings of sari-wearing is obscure, it is known that cotton was grown in India and woven into fabric at least 5,000 years ago. The sacred books of the Hindus, the *Vedas*, written 3,000 years ago, mention the *saree*. The earliest known depiction of the sari in the Indian subcontinent is the statue of an Indus Valley priest wearing a drape. Terracotta sculptures dated 100 BCE depict a dancer with her sari tightly wound around her body in the trouser style. This elaborate body-hugging style might have evolved amongst the temple dancers to give them freedom of movement yet maintain their modesty. Sculptures excavated in the Gandharan period (first to sixth centuries CE) show goddesses and a dancer wearing what appears to be a sarong, in the 'fishtail' version, which loosely covers the legs and then flows into a long, decorative drape in front of them.

*Watercolour paintings of sari types by Rao Bahadur Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar (1867-1944), a noted Indian painter and postcard artist.*



Since ancient times, the concept of ideal Indian beauty was a narrow waist and full-bodied hips and bust (as can be seen in the statues made during that time). In *Natya Shastra* (an ancient Indian treatise describing dance and costumes), the navel of the Supreme Being is considered to be the source of life and creativity, hence the midriff is to be left bare. The sari was therefore the ideal garb as it drew the eyes to the tiny waist and the pleats moulded the beauty of the full figure. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fitted underskirt and blouse were adopted from European-style clothing as saris of sheer chiffon fabric came into fashion.

My grandma is no more, but her saris remain precious heirlooms hanging in my cupboard. Her black silk sari embroidered with scenes of Indian village life in tiny *kantha* stitch attracts admiration whenever I wear it. And when my brother was married, he wore the same silk shawl my grandfather had worn when he married my grandmother almost half a century earlier.



*Bangles, the perfect accessory to any sari; photo courtesy of the Singapore Tourism Board.*

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The Asian Civilisation Museum will present a special ACM exhibition beginning 12 November 2011; *Patterns of Trade: Indian Textiles for Export, 1400 - 1900*. FOM docents will offer dedicated tours Tuesdays through Fridays from 12:30 to 1:30, beginning 6 December.

Readers who are interested in Indian textiles and jewellery may also enjoy the archived article "*South Indian Jewellery: Motifs and Metaphors*" from the July / August 2009 issue of *PASSAGE* (pp. 16-17), which may be downloaded in pdf format from our website at [www.fom.sg](http://www.fom.sg)