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Category : [January/February/March 2012](#)

Published by senthil on Dec. 06, 2011

Style

Mom's Hands-on Sari Lessons

"In a ritual passed from mother to daughter, I, too, underwent the awesome training that is required to tie one's own sari in stylish fashion"

By Priyanka Srinivasa

My mother unfolded the silk and pulled it above me. As cloth slipped around my shoulders, her hands pleated swiftly. Fabric fans tumbled from her fingertips, and she tucked them into my waist. "Let it flow, don't forget to walk with your back straight," my mother whispered, safety pins clenched between her teeth. I held my neck high as she draped a jeweled corner across my chest as my sister watched in silence. Done. The ritual was complete. I stood before the mirror, admiring her work.

Whenever I ask my mother why she came to the US with my father in 1989, she replies by saying, "It was those movies. Stories of strong sultry women in furs and clinging to wine glasses was what I wanted. I was young. America was adventure." And so she flew over the great green ocean with the ambition that her husband would make it big. But immigration was more complex than my mother anticipated. First, my parents had to decide where they would live. Most Indians migrated to urban areas on the East and West coasts. My parents decided on Pittsburgh, with its strong Hindu population and large Venkateswara Hindu temple. That Indian-American micro-culture helped my parents raise me, not only as an American, but as a proud desi, or Indian-American youth. Even though we second-generation Indians live in an American society, prescribed gender roles have been passed down to us. As an Indian-American girl, my mother initiated me in female-ascribed ceremonies that were secrets themselves, rituals that bonded those in one micro-culture into another micro-culture.

The Meaning of the Sari

One ritual in particular, the most intimate of them all, is the sari-tying ceremony. It was performed at least each week as my mother and I prepared for the temple. This commonplace act of dressing is steeped in an array of issues: gender specification, sexuality, coming of age and the continuation of an ancient tradition. This piece of cloth is more than what meets the eye: like threads woven together, the sari stretches across the ocean from India to America. Strings intertwining the old and the new. From the moment you lift the sari over your head, the story of the sari surrounds you.

The sari is six yards long of cotton or silk fabric. When I unfold the fabric on the ground, I am always astounded at the simplicity of the cloth, because when woven around the body, it hangs so elaborately. It is wrapped, folded and tucked around the body over a cropped blouse. The sari, or something close to it, has been a symbol of womanhood in Hindu society since the Indus River civilization, more than 4,000 years. Close to the same design that was worn in the ancient civilization has been passed down generation after generation.

Growing up, I used to watch my mother tie her sari, thinking that it was the most beautiful dress in the whole world. Her upper back was exposed and the dramatic drapes gave her such an elegant stance. This ethnic dress is sensual yet practical. It is so well fastened that it will never fall, yet when women walk; the folds make them look graceful and fragile. The cloth is shroud of something more. The sari is a tableau for the complex identity of Indian women.

There are several styles of saris--from simple cotton to diamond-studded silk. Even conventional cloth is elegant because of the many different styles of saris. My mother has hundreds of saris; some of them are in traditional colors: red and white, the colors of the holy days. Some of the saris are rich jewel-tones: garnet, emerald, amethyst, sapphire. Some are strong pastels like soft corals, robin-egg blue and sea-foam green. Each sari is different from the other. Each sari tells a story of weddings, holy days, birthdays, births and sometimes death.

The Ritual of Sari Tying

On one Saturday, my family and I were planning to attend a classical Indian dance performance fund raiser. My sister and I were expected to wear saris because it was a cultural event. As usual, my mother would do the tying. It's all about patience, and a ritual that my sister's and my body had gotten used to. For a novice sari wearer, it is so difficult to tie the sari for herself. It takes a lot of opening of safety

pins, holding cloth, spinning it into little fans to tuck along the waistline. So as my mother spins the cloth around each of us, she tells us stories about India and her family, weaving tales about married cousins and sleepy village days where young girls in saris pick jasmines in desert gardens after classes.

I once asked my mother why she dresses in saris. She replied by saying: "Indian women were born to please Indian men. I dress the part." Whenever I open old wedding albums of the women in my family, I notice the lines of young women draped in sequined cloth. They look so elegant in their dresses. They look like little dolls lined in rows by their husbands. The sari turns the girl into a woman. On my first day of college, my mother gave me a photo of herself on her wedding day. She was barely twenty-one, but she looked strong, confident, cool and ready for marriage. The sari is a symbol of womanhood. It was her uniform of marriage. The sari was a mark of pride for my mother. Whenever she pulls out her wedding sari, her face flushes with emotion. She excitedly stretches the cloth over her chest and insists I run my hands along the silk. "The cloth is so fine that you could pull it through my engagement ring," she gushes hurriedly. How could a piece of cloth mean so much to someone? This is the beauty of the sari: it is woven with the secret story of Indian women.

What the Sari Means to Me

In the United States, the sari is not worn every day as my mother did in her youth. My sister and I wear them during religious and cultural events at our temple. We feel the same pride my mother feels when she wears hers. We feel pride because we know that we are keeping our traditions up and protecting an ancestral tradition. For my high school graduation, girls had to wear white dresses. I chose to wear my grandmother's white sari because it defined who I am. The sari is the mark of my history: my mother's struggle of adjusting to America, my grandmother's struggle of marrying at the age of ten. The sari to me is a symbol of strength. My mother was so thrilled when I decided to wear that sari, because I was demonstrating what I stood for at a right-of-passage ceremony. I was able to wear what I believed in and pay tribute to my culture.

When we go to community events, wearing a sari gives us an impression that we have Indian pride. We are demonstrating to other Indian families that we are grounded in our culture. To my mother and Indian women, presentation is everything. Personal grooming and neatness bring luck to the family. The sari is a physical emblem of etiquette training for girls. When you wear a sari, you must do so with ease, grace, poise and elegance. When you wear a sari, you become an instant lady. Women bring joy, luck and pride to a family. The more poised the

woman, the more refined the family. I learned quite quickly to walk with tiny steps and to hold my head high so that my family will be proud of me, and my family would have a high stature here in America among the Indian-American families.

The sari is not a piece of cloth. It is the story I have inherited from my mother and her mother and her mother now wrapped around me--regardless of my parents' decision to travel across the ocean to "Amreeka" for economic security. Due to globalization, Indian women are torn between old Eastern traditions and Western, autonomous lifestyles. The tying of a sari is a secret communal act that is shared between different generations. The tying of saris is a forum for women to come together and share gossip, stories and advice. The reason why Indian women make sure their saris are tied in a proper fashion and dress to perfection is because their looks and demeanor are a reflection on their husbands and families. The sari, since it is a traditional apparel, brings pride that is twofold: feeling joy that you find yourself looking beautiful, and knowing that other women acknowledge the beauty of your sari folds. The sari is a tradition that is passed on from woman to woman. Those who are born and raised in the United States feel a pull to wear the sari because it is a recognizable symbol of Indian pride.

As my mother adjusts the fabric, I look into the mirror and watch the pleats roll off my shoulder, I cannot help but smile. I hold my neck up high, just like my mother told me to. And her mother told her. And her mother told her. We women are woven together like the golden threads of the sari.

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