

OPEN PAGE

## Mothering across generations



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## Striving to earn and deserve the advantages of nurturing received as a young one


I grew up in the 1960s in Mumbai. My family comprised my parents and two siblings, and my mother's parents. Our home was small – four rooms, each ten feet square, in a chawl tenement. The living room doubled as bedroom at night. The home was too small for everyone to even eat together. Dinners were consumed in waves – first the children, then the men, and finally the women.

Aji, my grandmother, had studied till fourth grade. She spent almost all her time at home, cooking and performing the many tasks related to that, such as cleaning the grain, cutting vegetables, and boiling the milk twice daily to keep it from spoiling (we did not have a refrigerator). The cooking took place in multiple waves too – first the lunches to be packed for the ones who left home for school or work, then the lunches for those who stayed back home, then the afternoon snack for children who are home from school, and then the dinner.

After lunch, Aji would have a few hours of unscheduled time and she would use it to read the Marathi newspaper, darn clothes, and re-purpose clothes that we children had outgrown, into shopping bags and other useful things.

Aji was born in Myanmar (Burma then), where her father worked for the British Customs. The only thing I recall she ever mentioning about him was that he was known for his honesty. The only thing I know about her mother was that she died during, or soon after, childbirth. How I wish I had asked Aji more questions when I had the time. Aji was the oldest of several children and was married at 14. So, there was not much mothering for her.

Since we were a joint family, Aji was more like a co-mother to me and my siblings. She told us stories from Hindu mythology and taught us the Marathi alphabet. Her greatest skill was in comforting us when our mother disciplined us. She managed to do this in a loving and gentle way, while also reinforcing rather than undermining our mother's authority.

Aji had come of age at a time when women were “lesser”. Hobbled as they were by insufficient education, it was common to also see women of her generation as having judgment, authority and agency of a lower order. In my family, this translated into Aji being shielded from the larger world and being taken care of by her husband, as well as by her daughter (my mother). In turn, she performed her assigned role by offering care and comfort unreservedly to all who crossed her  h.

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when women were taught that their virtue lay in sacrifice and service. As a result, they were

Aji would often ask my sister or me, when we returned home from school, if we felt like eating *pohe*, or *chiwda* or some other home-made snack. Considering the question literally, we would answer yes or no, purely on the basis of our own interest in that particular item of food and our level of hunger.

One day our mother overheard this conversation and called us aside. “Whenever Aji asks about preparing something for you, you should just say yes. Usually she asks you when she feels like eating that snack.” We nodded yes, and returned to our play. And from that day onwards, we answered in the affirmative regardless of which snack Aji offered to make for us.

As a happy and secure child, I accepted things as they happened. Living in the garden of childhood, for those like me who are fortunate enough to have such a garden, means enjoying the flowers, without having to give a thought to the gardeners who plant the seeds, water them regularly and trim the weeds. But this also means that the task of the rest of life is to live up to the privileges granted, to pay them forward to my children and to others who cross my path. Most important, it means striving to earn and deserve the nurturing received.

I celebrate the fact that the society of my childhood had changed sufficiently that granddaughters were not expected to live lives of denial, by self or others, that had been the lot of grandmothers. I appreciate the emotional intelligence of my mother who understood her mother and found a way to support her without drawing attention to it.

Who was mothering whom? Was Aji mothering her daughter and her daughter’s daughters? Was my mother mothering her mother? Or were the granddaughters mothering their grandmother?

I think it was all of the above. My life was the richer, though I did not know it then, because of mothering so thoughtfully and generously offered and so easily, and now, gratefully, received.

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