

The younger generation was not sure about her real name. Papa means baby in Tamil and Telugu. She was known as Papamami to her neph-ews and as Papavahini (baby sister) to their fathers. Papamami is what my father called her. She died this year in September at the age of about 103 or 104 years. Not that anyone knew the exact year of her birth, but it was constructed from the ages of younger members of the family. By asking older relatives I learnt that her name was Saraswati.

According to the custom of the times, Papamami was married when she was a small child. I suppose that is why she was called Papa or baby. Her husband was the only son of his father. When Papamami was around 20 years old she lost her husband and her infant son. She was left a childless widow. However, her head was not shaved, even though this was the custom amongst Brahmins. Indeed she retained her hair till the very end. This gave her the freedom to socialise and move around freely. She used to dress neatly in coloured nine yard saris with bor-ders, and a white blouse. She always wore a gold chain and gold bangles.

After a few years, Papamami's fa-ther-in-law adopted his brother's young son, Keshav Vazalwar. He was young enough to be Papamami's son. After her mother-in-law's death, Papamami became the mistress of the house in a family that consisted of her father-in-law and her adopted brother-in-law. Mami was an efficient mis-tress of her house and of her kitchen. She remembered the likes and dislikes of scores of visitors. If one went back after even five years she would take delight in surprising one with one's favourite dish. In the kitchen, Papamami kept to strict rules of pollu-tion and purity. Yet when younger men in the family made inter-caste marriages she accepted their brides. In their turn the newcomers

Papamami

Vasudha Dhagamwar



kept disreectly out of her kitchen and enjoyed the meals! When Mami became too old to cook for the family, her grand daughter-in-law argued with her and Mami agreed not to impose her rules on others. Her only request was that the person doing the morning cooking should have a bath before entering the kitchen.

Over the years Mami carved out a life of her own. She could read Marathi

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with ease and read her religious texts, the daily newspaper and the occasional novel. She performed her rituals, went to temples and even on pilgrimages with other family members. She had a good judgment of people and did not hesitate to express it from time to time. She was a soft-spoken gentle person with a mind of her own.

Despite her honoured position in the family, she was fully aware of its fragility. She knew well that her best piece of luck was in her adopted brother-in-law and she used to say so. Tatya, as he was called, was a sensible kind-hearted man. Had he been selfish or unkind he could have made Papamami's life utterly miserable. When Tatya got married he was in his mid-twenties. His bride, Vimala, was only sixteen years old. Mami was over forty. Mami's little

empire was threat-ened. She was only human. She could not tolerate the smallest change the new bride might introduce. "Not in my house," she would say ! Poor Vimala was very hurt and upset.

What followed is best told in Vimalamami's words. "I complained bitterly to my husband one night. I thought that I had as much right to the house as Papavahini. My husband heard me out patiently. Then he put his arm around me and drew me to him. 'Look, my dear,' he said, 'you and I have each other. She has no one else in the world. To whom can she com-plain?' After that I never resented Vahini."

Instead Vimala got busy with out-side activities. She took an agency for selling steel vessels, joined a mahila mandal, gave radio talks, played bad-minton and acted in plays. Papamami never raised any objections. Instead she helped to bring up Vimala's chil-dren. In turn, Vimala accepted Papamami's authority and discipline over the youngsters. Vimala and Papamami were two sisters-in-law but Vimala always introduced Papamami to outsiders as her mother-in-law so that she would get the respect due to her age and position. There was after all a gap of over 25 years between them.

When my father died he was 79 years old and Papamami was about 98 years old. After the funeral, his wife, my 78-year-old feminist mother, went to visit her when she could think of travelling. Later mother wrote to me:"Of all the people who spoke to me, Papamami offered me the best consolation. She said, 'You are an educated woman. Find something to do; start working'." That one sentence, Ma wrote, vividly depicted the poi-gnancy of a widow's existence.

One cannot step outside one's time and age. Had Papamami been born one hundred years later she

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might have achieved many things. But not neces-sarily. Indian women have not done all that spectacularly well. But one must acknowledge that given their constraints, Taty, Vimalamami and Papamami created space for one an-other so that a childless widow, legally entitled to no more than food and shel-ter, could live a life of dignity and purpose. This process was set in mo-tion by her father-in-law and mother-in-law who did not allow her head to be shaved. Yet the food she cooked was acceptable for all religious cer-emonies. Our family was originally from Telangana in Andhra Pradesh. It had a very strong bi-cultural base. Not

shaving Papamami's head was prob-ably part of the Vidharbha influence. In Telangana the custom continued much longer.

None of these people were con-scious social reformers. They were intensely human middle-of-the-road members of their world. Papamami could see quite clearly what she had missed and what she had been lucky to receive. She was grateful for what she had and did not regret what she had lost, though her remark to my grieving mother showed how well she knew the score.

In January 1988, Mami's hundredth birth anniversary was celebrated by the Vazalwars and other relatives. She was feted, feasted and given gifts. Papamami died this year of old age. She could no longer hear well and could not see at all. Time stretched endlessly in front of her, and she wanted to go. She was the living memory of our clan and we shall miss her. □