

TRACE YOUR FAMILY HISTORY: The family tree project

Setting the context

Family is the most important aspect of human life. It lays the foundation for a person's cultural heritage. When we connect to our family history we are taking a journey into our past and backgrounds. We are trying to understand where we come from, what has shaped us into the people that we are today. It is an attempt to understand ourselves better in order to understand the world around us better. We need to gain clarity about what are the cultural aspects that affect us and our behaviour. Do they lend us any prejudices or belief systems or stereotypes that shape our reality towards other people. It is in short an inward journey that we commit to when we explore our family history.

Why trace the family history?

It helps us understand ourselves better, our values and beliefs that impact our behavior. At the same time when we see the world through the prism of our own beliefs, it can lead to projection. This means we expect the world to be the way we have learnt about it.

Recording the family history is an effective tool to preserve and retain oral histories of families, people and events. Details which maybe nowhere accounted for, can be tapped into and retained.

MIRROR IMAGE

Those who work or live around people from other cultures understand the importance of learning about the differences surrounding them. What is often neglected, however, is the equal importance of knowing one's own culture, values and beliefs in order to relate more effectively across cultural lines.

Awareness of our own culture is important, because it can keep us from projecting our values onto others. By projecting, I mean the universal tendency to think other people are doing something for the same reasons we would. This can happen when we are unaware of the values that drive us and unable to distinguish them from those held by other cultures.

We are like a fish in a fish bowl. The fish swims inside the bowl surrounded by water and glass, but unaware of their presence. Most important, the fish does not realize these substances alter its view of the outside world. Our culture is like that water and glass. We see the world through a distorting screen created by our deeply held, often subconscious, values and beliefs.

Know Your Own Cultural Values

The first step toward solving this problem is obvious: Learn as much about other cultures as you can. The second step is too often forgotten: Understand your own assumptions about body language, communication style or other cultural characteristics that impact your impression of the outside world. This may seem easy, but it is not. Our own culture is such a part of us that—like the water surrounding the fish—we are unaware of its existence. Some of us go so far as to think of our own

culture as human nature and, to make matters worse, as one to which all should conform.

DEBRAJ GHOSH

I am Debraj Ghosh, pursuing engineering in [#IITD](#). I worked for the Reachout Foundation during my summer break, this year, for 40 days, on a project: [#TraceYourFamilyHistory](#), aimed to raise awareness about negative stereotypes that people have and how their behavior is affected by the beliefs, perspectives, attitudes passed on to them by their families.

The objective of this project was to create awareness amongst people through interviews and bring to light the hidden stereotypes that they may have which manifests in exclusion and discrimination. The project sets out to create awareness amongst people about how their behaviour and perspective is affected by their family culture.

Additionally it was an effective tool to record the [#OralHistory](#) of people.

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Challenges and obstacles

Convincing people to interview their entire family was pretty difficult. We had to repeatedly explain them our aim and how the simple things in the past which might

seem to be not worth mentioning play an important part in our behaviour and how it could be a step towards addressing the discrimination that people are facing in our society.

Apart from convincing people, trying to correlate their answers to their collective behaviour was tricky. We spent hours brainstorming about how something relates to another or is there something hidden that might not appear at the first glance.

Getting some personal information and stories out was difficult, indirect questions were the only resort.

Lessons learned and insight

Each individual might think that they are barely affected by their surroundings and they develop an independent perspective about the world. This is completely wrong. I did think in this manner when I started this project, but slowly things changed I could understand how the past has affected my outlook and attitudes.

Case Study

While working for the project, I came across many touching stories shared by the people we interviewed. I think this was a medium for them to open up their thoughts which they wanted to share, but no one had an interest in listening to them.

In one such interview, I interviewed Mrs Chabi Rani Pal, Born on 3rd June 1945, in a village under the district, Shantipur, in the house of her uncle who was a doctor back then. She had one sister and two brothers, and she was the eldest of them all. Her father was the Sarpanch of the community and had a pucca house built in the center of the village. Everybody in the village loved each other, helped under challenging times, and were caring for others. Their family has been respected a lot in the village as well, and she wishes the generations remember the loyalty and caring nature of the family.

Born and raised in Shantipur, her native language is Bengali. She is a Hindu and believes her surname was related to the Brahmin Kastas community.

The partition which affected millions of people had no impact on the family neither on the village they lived in, this was a surprise for me as well, as most people have a perception that the east side of India was profoundly affected by the partition.

She had a joyous childhood, playing with her friends and siblings, climbing the mango tree for the juicy fruit. She told that she was regularly scolded for being so athletic and she might get hurt. But, her stubborn nature never allowed her to stop, which had its own payoffs. She won many prizes in sports events at school as well as at the district level. Unfortunately, the village didn't have any schools neither did it have any proper roads for the bus to reach their home, so they had to take a ride on a bullock cart to reach the nearest train station followed by an hour of train ride each day to reach school.

Growing up, her favorite games were playing badminton and enjoyed classical music by Naushad. Clothing did change for her just like other women of the village, it started with skirts and kurtas and slowly shifted to sarees. Being a Bengali, she always had been eating seafood. Even now, seafood is her favorite.

She experienced various changes in her lifetime, the most significant being the availability of electricity. Earlier very few houses in the city had any supply of power, but now even the smallest villages have electricity supply. Music is also something that has changed according to her. She says, old music had a meaning associated with it, but in today's era, music rarely has any purpose attached and is just a bunch of words and syllables put together to form a three-minute song.

This project made me interact with my distant relatives with whom I barely interacted, also, many elderly relatives of my friends. Talking with older people and listening to their stories made me realize how different society was before I was born. It opened up my eyes to the perspective they have about our generation. It was an enjoyable experience

working on this project; it helped me achieve a different perspective about the society we live in, and also deliver some value to the people around me.

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