

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.

ARJUN LAKHERA

Reachout Foundation carried out a project called The India Project: TRACE YOUR FAMILY HISTORY, which aimed at sensitising its stakeholders about multicultural diversity. I worked for Reachout on this project during my summer break for 40 days, was part of Community Work Credits in my college. The project aimed at recording the oral history of various families. By tracing their family history, a person can understand themselves better, understand their values and beliefs inculcated through their culture and upbringing which in turn impacts their own behaviour. This also makes a person aware of their own biases and prejudices against other cultures because they are not similar to what they hold. This makes one introspect, which gives them a better understanding of multicultural diversity which can lead to understanding and finally, acceptance.

Objectives

This project was undertaken to make its participants realize their own beliefs and notions through their family history, and in turn begin to understand multicultural diversity.

1. To create awareness about the concept of diversity.
2. To make people understand their own ideas and beliefs better.
3. To gain insights into various families which in turn provide valuable information for understanding the demographic of various parts of the country better.
4. To make people more aware of their own culture to preserve things such as their language, familial traditions etc.

Activities undertaken

1. Framing the questionnaire necessary for the given project.
2. Contacting people, and making them schedule their time for interviews to be conducted either on the phone or personal visits.
3. Preparing a transcript of the interviews, and making reports out of them.
4. Making a page on Facebook to increase awareness of this project and making posts of own family reports.

My Takeaways

- 1) Challenging own beliefs and notions.
- 2) Gaining more knowledge/awareness of various other cultures through their family history.
- 3) Improving communication/conversational skills with people.

Challenges and obstacles

- 1) Making people realize the importance of multicultural diversity as an issue, so they could look at their belief systems as their own and not universal.

- 2) Scheduling interviews with people given they were busy on weekdays and not willing on weekends from time to time.
- 3) Most importantly, realizing the importance of this project for myself and connecting to its idea properly.

Lessons learned and insight

After working on this project, I can firmly say that I got to know a lot about myself in the form of my culture and family, and I could see how with changing times the dynamics of diversity have shifted. On similar grounds when I saw the histories of various other families, it made me appreciate diversity much more and I could connect with the concept better than ever. In the case of younger people who I interviewed; their cultural background has had meagre impact on their daily lives, mostly because they were not aware of it. This is because staying in a metropolitan such as Delhi has made them part of its metropolitan culture which is far from where they belong to. It gives the younger generation a sense of unity, and cultural differences do not permeate deeply within daily interactions. This is in stark contrast to the older generation however, who knew more of their culture as quite a few of them started their lives from their particular region (towns, villages etc) and their experiences of the world have been much different. It is safe to say that with changing times they have come into contact with concepts of diversity but acceptance is on a different plane altogether. I do believe people who participate in this project, especially the younger lot, would gain the most; by learning about their culture and understanding multicultural diversity.

I feel to further this project; people need to be shown that they do have biases and stereotypes regarding other cultures. For this some form of a psychological test or survey would make the issue tangible to them, and hence may make them participate and know more about it. Furthermore, the tests can be shown a statistic to increase the reach of this project to many more people online. Finally, a website can be created with a database of families and their oral history which can be used to find more innovative ways to tackle multicultural diversity in areas of interest, such as minority groups.

Case Study

I am Arjun Lakhera a student of IIITD, pursuing B.Tech degree. I am tracing my family history to connect back to my roots and to record the oral history of my family members. In this pursuit I hope to rediscover myself, my beliefs and my perceptions. The first person that I connected to was my grandfather, Mr. Vishnu Prasad Lakhera.

Family History: Lakheras

Born in 1938, Vishnu had humble beginnings. He was born in a village of district Tehri Garhwal. He lost his parents when he was still a child of less than two years old. However, he never felt lonely as everyone in his village were his kith and kin. He also had two elder siblings, his sister Rama and his brother Tara Datt. He lived in a village called Jakhand. His village home was like any other in Tehri Garhwal; roofs made of stone slates and houses built on stilts. There were no streets either.

Coming from Tehri Garhwal, Vishnu's native language is Garhwali. He is a Hindu and according to him his surname originates from Lakheri village in Rajasthan from where his ancestors had migrated to Garhwal. The partition of India was a tough time for his family which impacted them both socially and economically.

Vishnu had a happy childhood. One of his fondest memories as a child was when he and his friends used to race down to the mango tree and try to pluck as many mangoes as possible. Growing up, he received his education in different places. His elementary school was in his village. However, as he was growing up his elder brother took him in his home at the city where he started going to school. He attended his college at Dehradun as well. In his college days, he aspired to be a lawyer, a writer and a poet. However, destiny had other plans for him. He joined the BSF and served as an officer until retirement. He got married in 1967 in Tehri Garhwal.

During his time in the BSF, he had visited enough places in the country to have an idea of the diversity of the nation as a whole. However, he has a preference towards North Indian food, classical Hindi and instrumental music and he speaks Hindi and English. He also loved playing sports like football, badminton, tennis and volleyball. Clothes were something which changed for him overtime. As an elementary student he used to wear kurta and pyjamas. Later on, he transitioned to shirt and pants. In his times of service, he wore his uniform and after retirement he wears what is most comfortable to him.

During his lifetime he has seen changes in many shapes and spheres of life but some things which have stood out to him are advent of modern ways of communication such as the telephone and the internet. The changes in modes of transport from cycle rickshaws to cabs, and increase in public transport such as buses and metros. The changes in media and entertainment, fashion and finally the thinking of the society. He wants to be remembered for helping people in times of need.

P.S: Lakheri is a town and municipality in Bundi district in the Indian state of Rajasthan. It is located in the southeast of Rajasthan, around 180 kilometres (112 mi) south of the state capital, Jaipur. Lakheri has been a subdivision headquarters since 2002. It is the second largest city in the district, after Bundi.

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