ROOTS THAT REMEMBER: FOUR GENERATIONS OF MY FAMILY AND THE CHANGING STORY OF RURAL INDIA

By: Mahi Arvind Maurya

Family Tree
Shri Chhote Lal Maurya (Great-Grandfather | Agriculturist)
↓
Shri Kamta Prasad Maurya (Grandfather | Government Primary Teacher)
Married to Smt. Susheela Devi Maurya
Children:
Arvind Kumar Maurya (Advocate)

Neelam Maurya
Neetika Maurya
Pallavi Maurya
↓
Arvind Kumar Maurya
Married to Preeti Maurya
Children:
Anshika Maurya
Divyanshi Maurya
Mahi Arvind Maurya (Writer)

When I first read the announcement of the Kishwar Memorial Trust Family History Essay Competition, I smiled to myself. I thought I already knew my family's history. After all, I had spent my childhood listening to my grandparents narrate stories during summer afternoons, winter evenings, family gatherings, and festival celebrations. I believed I knew where my family came from, what my grandparents had done, and how our family had reached where it is today. I was wrong.

The moment I sat down with a notebook and began interviewing them seriously, I realised that I knew only fragments of our story. Behind every familiar face was a forgotten struggle. Behind every achievement was an unseen sacrifice. Behind every family tradition was a memory that no one had ever written down.

This essay is the result of those conversations.

As I began these conversations, I quickly realised that interviewing one's own family is very different from reading history in books. History textbooks usually present events through dates, wars, rulers, and political movements. Family history, however, reveals how ordinary people experienced those larger changes in their everyday lives. My grandparents did not remember history through years and timelines; they remembered it through harvests, school days, festivals, financial struggles, marriages, and the gradual transformation of their village. Many stories emerged unexpectedly. One memory led to another, and often different family members remembered the same event from different perspectives. Listening to these conversations taught

me that memory is not simply a record of facts; it is also a reflection of what people valued, feared, celebrated, and hoped for during their lives.

Over the past two days, I interviewed my paternal grandparents, my maternal grandparents, my parents, and other family members. I noted their memories, compared different versions of the same events, reflected on my own childhood experiences, and connected these stories with the history of my hometown, Bilgram. While this essay is deeply personal, it also attempts to understand how one ordinary family experienced the larger social, educational, and economic changes that transformed rural India across four generations.

As I continued these conversations, I slowly realised that family history is not only about names, dates, and relationships. It is about values that travel across generations. It is about dreams that parents silently pass on to their children. It is about traditions that survive modernity and about sacrifices that future generations often enjoy without ever knowing they were made.

My family's story begins in a small town called Bilgram, situated in the Hardoi district of Uttar Pradesh. Although Bilgram appears to be an ordinary town today, it carries an extraordinary historical legacy. One of the most significant events associated with Bilgram is the Battle of Bilgram (1540), also known as the Battle of Kannauj, where Sher Shah Suri defeated the Mughal emperor Humayun. Growing up, history never felt distant because my grandfather made sure it remained alive.

Whenever my sisters and I visited a nearby temple with him, he would point towards the historic battlefield and proudly tell us that our town had witnessed one of the decisive battles in Indian history. As children, we listened with curiosity, trying to imagine armies, horses, and warriors where we saw only open fields. At that age, we understood little about medieval history, but we clearly understood the pride in our grandfather's voice whenever he spoke about Bilgram.

Growing up in Bilgram also meant growing up in a place where people still recognised one another across generations. It was common for elders to ask not only our names but also the names of our parents and grandparents, reminding us that identity was deeply connected with family and community. Festivals were rarely celebrated in isolation; neighbours visited one another’s homes, children played together regardless of age, and important family occasions often became community celebrations. Although modern lifestyles have gradually changed these patterns, traces of this close-knit culture continue to survive. Looking back now, I realise that the environment in which I grew up quietly shaped my understanding of belonging. It taught me that a hometown is remembered not only through its buildings or streets, but also through the relationships that connect its people across generations.

Bilgram's identity, however, is shaped not only by its historical past but also by its living traditions.

Every year during Muharram, beautifully decorated Tazias are carried through the streets in solemn processions from the local Imambara. Even today, families gather along the roadsides to witness this age-old tradition. I still remember standing with my sisters, cousins, grandparents, and neighbours, watching the procession pass by. The event was not simply a religious observance; it represented the continuity of Bilgram's shared cultural life. It reminded me that traditions survive only when communities continue to value them.

Agriculture has always remained another defining feature of Bilgram. Even today, fields surrounding the town continue to support countless families. Although education and professional careers have expanded opportunities for younger generations, farming continues to connect many families, including my own, with their ancestral roots.

Our family belongs to the Kachhi (Maurya) community, traditionally associated with agriculture,

vegetable cultivation, and farming. While many families today have entered professions such as teaching, law, medicine, business, and government service, they continue to maintain their agricultural land and preserve their connection with farming. My own family reflects this transformation. Although my father is an advocate and my grandfather served as a government teacher, our agricultural fields continue to remain an important part of our family identity.
Long before Bilgram became our permanent home, our family lived in a nearby village called Tapnor.
My great-grandfather, Shri Chhote Lal Maurya, spent his early life there. He was an agriculturist whose livelihood depended entirely upon farming. Like countless rural families of his generation, he measured prosperity not through salaries or businesses but through the quality of crops harvested from the land. Agriculture was not simply work; it was dignity, identity, and survival.
At some point during his youth, he migrated from Tapnor to Bilgram.
Today, travelling a few kilometres appears ordinary. However, several decades ago, even a small migration required courage. It meant leaving behind familiar surroundings, rebuilding social relationships, and beginning life once again in an unfamiliar place. Looking back today, I realise that this single decision quietly changed the future of every generation that followed.
Had my great-grandfather never moved to Bilgram, perhaps my grandfather's educational opportunities would have been different. My father might have chosen another path. I might never have grown up hearing stories that connected my family so deeply with this historic town. Sometimes history changes not through extraordinary events but through ordinary decisions taken by ordinary people.
My great-grandfather probably never imagined that one day his granddaughter would be documenting his life for an essay competition. Yet the journey he began continues through every member of our family today.
His eldest son, Shri Kamta Prasad Maurya, would become the person who transformed our family's future forever. His story, however, did not begin with success.
It began with hardship.
Long before my grandfather became a respected government teacher, he was a young boy who had experienced loss much earlier than he should have. He lost his mother at a young age, a tragedy that left an emotional void no child can easily overcome. Yet, like countless children growing up in rural India during those years, grief did not pause life. Responsibilities continued, and so did the struggle to build a future.
My grandfather often tells me that life never offered him shortcuts. Every small achievement demanded patience, perseverance, and sacrifice. Education itself was a privilege rather than a certainty. Schools were simple, classrooms were modest, and resources were limited. Children carried slates to school instead of notebooks and sat on sacks spread across the floor. Electricity was unreliable, and many evenings were spent studying under the dim light of an oil lamp or candle. To my generation, these stories sound almost unbelievable. Yet for my grandfather, they were simply everyday life.
One memory that he narrates repeatedly is how different Bilgram looked during his childhood. The roads were mostly unpaved, many houses were made of mud, and the local economy revolved around agriculture. Currency itself looked different from what we use today. He remembers transactions involving annas, chawannis and atthannis, coins that have now disappeared into history. Markets were small, transport was limited, and every household relied more upon human relationships than upon technology.

Listening to him, I often realise how rapidly India has transformed within the lifetime of a single individual.

Despite every difficulty, my grandfather remained committed to education. His determination eventually led him to become a Primary Government Teacher, a profession that he continues to regard not merely as employment but as a responsibility towards society. His first monthly salary, as he remembers, was around ninety rupees. Today, such an amount may appear insignificant, but at that time it represented security, dignity, and the beginning of a new chapter for our family.

That modest salary did not bring comfort overnight. It had to support an entire household. My grandfather and grandmother were raising four children while trying to build a stable future. Every rupee was carefully planned. Luxuries were almost non-existent, but education, food and honesty were never compromised.

Whenever we ask him why he still lives such a simple life despite the family's improved financial condition, he smiles and says,

"Humne kapdon mein hamesha kanjoosi ki hai, lekin khane mein kabhi kanjoosi nahi ki. Insaan ko hamesha apni priorities samajhkar jeena chahiye."

("We have always been economical when it came to clothes, but never when it came to food. A person must always know what truly deserves priority.")

Those words reveal far more than financial discipline; they revealed an entire philosophy of life. Even today, my father regularly buys new clothes for him, yet my grandfather continues wearing the older ones for as long as they remain usable. Whenever we persuade him to replace them, he gently reminds us that we belong to a generation that has seen comfort from childhood, whereas he belongs to a generation that built comfort one saved rupee at a time.

For him, every possession carries the memory of effort.

Among the many stories he shared with me, one has stayed with me more deeply than any other. When he was a young man, his father told him that he would never be able to own agricultural land again. Those words were painful, but instead of accepting them as fate, he transformed them into determination. Years later, through relentless hard work and careful savings, he purchased agricultural land of his own. Ironically, after achieving what many believed impossible, he rarely visited those fields. According to my family, he went there when they were purchased, entrusted their care to people who cultivated them, and thereafter chose to remain away.

I once wondered why.

Perhaps the land itself was never the destination. Perhaps proving to himself that determination could overcome doubt was enough.

Interestingly, this experience shaped the way he speaks to all of us even today.

Whenever he wants to motivate his children or grandchildren, he rarely begins with encouragement. Instead, he deliberately says something like,

"Tumse yeh kaam nahi hoga."

("You won't be able to do this.")

As children, we disliked hearing those words. We often complained that he always began with negativity. Years later, he explained his reasoning. He said that when someone tells you that you cannot achieve something, a fire awakens inside you to prove otherwise. He had experienced that fire himself when his own father doubted his future.

What once seemed like negativity was, in reality, his unusual way of inspiring resilience.

That lesson has remained with me long after the conversation ended.

Even today, whenever I encounter a difficult examination, an unfamiliar challenge, or a goal that seems beyond my reach, I remember my grandfather's words. I have come to understand that he was never teaching us to doubt ourselves; he was teaching us to find strength in proving ourselves. In his own way, he transformed disappointment into determination, and that philosophy quietly became one of the greatest inheritances of our family.

If my grandfather taught me resilience, my grandmother, Smt. Sushela Devi Maurya, taught me the meaning of silent strength. Unlike my grandfather, who expresses his thoughts through stories and advice, my grandmother's wisdom is woven into her everyday habits. She has spent her life caring for the family without seeking recognition. Her generation of women often measured success not by personal achievements but by the well-being of their families. Yet reducing their contribution to household work alone would be deeply unfair. Women like my grandmother became the emotional foundation upon which families survived years of financial uncertainty and social change.

Even today, she remains remarkably active and disciplined. Whenever she sees any of her children or grandchildren spending too much time on their phones, her reaction is immediate. "Phone mein hamesha kuch na kuch aata hi rahega. Zaroori kaam ho tabhi phone chalao." ("There will always be something on the phone. Use it only when there is something important to do.")

As children, we often laughed at this familiar sentence because she repeated it almost every day. However, as I have grown older, I have realised that her concern is not merely about mobile phones. She worries that technology should never replace conversations, relationships, and meaningful use of time. Watching her, I often feel that every generation has its own challenges. While her generation struggled with scarcity, ours struggles with distraction.

One family tradition that my grandparents have preserved with remarkable sincerity is the lighting of mustard-oil diyas during Diwali.

My grandfather often recalls that there was a period in his life when money was extremely limited. Providing food, educating children, and managing household expenses left little room for celebrations. Yet he made one promise to himself: no matter how difficult life became, he would light at least one diya filled with pure mustard oil on Diwali. That single lamp symbolised hope rather than prosperity.

Today, our financial circumstances have improved considerably. We are blessed with comforts that my grandparents never imagined during their younger years. Many households now decorate their homes with electric lights and decorative lamps, but in our family the mustard-oil diya continues to occupy a special place. Every Diwali, dozens of diyas are lit, not because tradition demands it, but because memory does. Each flame reminds us of a time when even one small lamp represented faith in a better tomorrow.

As I continued interviewing my grandparents, I realised that their stories were never only about themselves. Every memory reflected larger changes taking place across Indian society.

When my grandfather was young, evenings belonged to people rather than devices. After finishing their work, villagers gathered on roadside platforms, exchanging news, discussing farming, solving problems together, and strengthening relationships through simple conversations. Children played outdoors until sunset, and neighbours knew one another not through social media but through daily interaction.

Today, those evenings look very different.

Television, smartphones, and busy schedules have quietly changed the rhythm of community life. Families spend more time indoors, conversations have become shorter, and neighbours often

know less about one another than previous generations ever imagined possible. My grandfather does not criticise modernity itself; he simply misses the warmth of human connection that once defined village life.

Listening to him made me question my own generation. We have access to unlimited information, yet we often struggle to find time for the people sitting beside us. Progress has undoubtedly improved our quality of life, but preserving meaningful relationships remains equally important.

The story of my paternal family is one of perseverance, education, and gradual social mobility. The story of my maternal family, however, adds another equally inspiring dimension to our family history—the story of courage, dignity, and women's independence.

My maternal grandfather began his career as an electrician through his family's traditional occupation. Like many young men of his generation, he inherited a profession rather than choosing one. After marrying my maternal grandmother, however, life took an unexpected direction.

My maternal grandmother possessed dreams that extended beyond the boundaries society had prepared for her. She wished to continue her education, become financially independent, and build a professional identity of her own. At a time when many married women were expected to remain within the household, she faced resistance but refused to abandon her aspirations.

Instead, she pursued higher education with determination and eventually became a Jailer. Her career demanded discipline, courage, and leadership—qualities that she displayed throughout her service. More importantly, she never believed that marriage required a woman to sacrifice her ambitions. Rather than choosing between family and career, she demonstrated that dedication could honour both.

Her determination also transformed my maternal grandfather's future. Encouraged by her, he pursued government service and eventually became a Deputy Electrician in the District Jail at Agra. Together, they served in public institutions with commitment and integrity, proving that mutual encouragement within a marriage can change the destiny of an entire family.

Their relationship taught me that progress is rarely achieved alone. Behind many successful individuals stands someone who quietly believed in them before the rest of the world did.

Even after retirement, my maternal grandmother continues to inspire every member of our family. Among all the people I have met, she remains one of the strongest women I know. Age has not diminished her confidence, discipline, or sense of self-respect. Whenever my sisters and I spend time with her, she reminds us that education is important, but character is even more important.

One sentence that she has repeated throughout my childhood has become a guiding principle in my life:

"Tum ladkiyan ho, lekin kabhi is baat ko apni kamzori mat samajhna. Kabhi kisi ko itna adhikar mat dena ki woh tumhare wajood, tumhare astitva ya tumhare aatma-samman par sawal uthaye. Hamesha apni pehchan banana aur imaandari se jeena."

("You are girls, but never consider that your weakness. Never give anyone the power to question your identity or your self-respect. Always build your own identity and live with integrity.")

These words were spoken with quiet conviction born from experience. Having built her own career despite social expectations, she wanted her granddaughters to grow into independent women who valued education, dignity, and self-respect above everything else.

My maternal grandfather, on the other hand, possesses an entirely different personality. Calm, cheerful, and content, he believes that life should be lived with patience rather than unnecessary

worry. His advice is simple yet profound:
"Araam se zindagi jiyo, khush raho, imaandari se apna kaam karte raho aur aage badhte raho."
("Live life peacefully, remain happy, do your work honestly, and keep moving forward.")
Whenever I compare the personalities of my grandparents, I realise that each of them represents a different way of understanding life. My paternal grandfather teaches resilience, my paternal grandmother teaches discipline, my maternal grandmother teaches courage and self-respect, and my maternal grandfather teaches contentment. Together, they have given our family a rich inheritance—not of wealth alone, but of values.
Listening to these stories also helped me understand how dramatically occupations have changed across generations.
My great-grandfather depended entirely upon agriculture. His fields determined the family's future.
My grandfather believed that education could provide greater stability and became a government teacher.
My father, Mr. Arvind Kumar Maurya, entered an entirely different profession. Inspired by my grandfather's belief in education, he explored different career paths before discovering his true calling in law. Today, he practices as an advocate. His profession reflects another stage in our family's journey—from farming to education, and from education to the legal profession.
Whenever I asked my grandfather why he encouraged his children to pursue different careers instead of continuing farming, his answer was simple. He believed that land feeds a family, but education expands its possibilities. He never wished to restrict his children to a single occupation. Instead, he wanted each of them to become financially independent and intellectually capable of making their own decisions.
That philosophy shaped not only my father's future but also the lives of my aunts. Education was never considered unnecessary because they were daughters. Every child in the family was encouraged to study according to their interests and abilities. This belief gradually transformed the outlook of our family across generations.
Today, my sisters and I represent another chapter in this continuing journey. We have left our hometown to pursue higher education, something that would have been almost unimaginable for the women of earlier generations in our family. While many members of our extended family migrated to different cities for employment, my sisters and I became among the first girls in our immediate family to move away from home primarily for higher education.
Whenever I think about this opportunity, I realise that it did not appear suddenly. It rests upon decades of sacrifices made by those who came before us. Every examination I attempt, every book I read, and every dream I pursue has been made possible because previous generations believed that education could change lives.
As I reflected upon all these interviews, one thought kept returning to my mind. Every generation in my family seems to have defined progress differently.
For my great-grandfather, progress meant cultivating land honestly and providing for the family through agriculture.
For my grandfather, progress meant education, dignity, and proving that circumstances could never define destiny.
For my parents' generation, progress meant professional independence and ensuring equal educational opportunities for both sons and daughters.
For my generation, however, progress carries another responsibility—the responsibility of preserving memory.

In a rapidly changing world, families often preserve photographs but forget stories. We inherit houses, jewellery, and land, yet we sometimes lose the values that gave those possessions meaning. While interviewing my grandparents, I realised that memories disappear silently. Unless someone asks questions, listens carefully, and writes those stories down, an entire family's history can vanish within a single generation.
Writing this essay has therefore become much more than participating in a competition. It has become an act of preservation.

Every conversation I recorded, every memory I noted, and every lesson I learned is now a part of my family's written history. Long after these voices fall silent, I hope their wisdom will continue to speak through these pages.
One of the greatest gifts this journey has given me is a new understanding of identity. Before beginning these interviews, I introduced myself simply as Mahi Maurya—a student preparing for her future. Today, I understand that my identity is far richer than my name, my education, or my ambitions. It is shaped by a farmer who dared to leave his village, by a teacher who transformed discouragement into determination, by a homemaker whose quiet discipline held an entire family together, by a woman who challenged social expectations to build her own career, and by a man who believed that happiness lies in honesty and contentment rather than material success.
As I wrote down each story, I also began noticing small details that I had previously ignored. I realised why my grandfather still folds and preserves his clothes with such care. I understood why my grandmother insists that festivals should never lose their simplicity. I understood why my parents repeatedly remind us that education is the greatest investment they can make for us. These habits were never random; they were shaped by experiences, hardships, and values accumulated over decades.
Family traditions, too, began to appear differently in my eyes.

Every Diwali, the mustard-oil diyas remind me of hope during hardship. The Muharram Tazia procession reminds me that traditions survive because communities continue to preserve them, while every visit to our agricultural land reminds me that although our professions have changed, our roots remain deeply connected to the soil that nurtured our ancestors.
While interviewing my grandparents, I repeatedly noticed one common thread running through all their stories. None of them measured success by wealth alone.
For my great-grandfather, success meant ensuring that the family never went hungry.
For my grandfather, success meant educating his children honestly and giving them opportunities that he himself had struggled to obtain.
For my maternal grandparents, success meant earning respect through public service while never compromising their principles.
For my parents, success has meant creating an environment where their daughters can dream freely, pursue higher education, and build independent lives.
Each generation expanded the meaning of success without abandoning the values inherited from the previous one.
Perhaps that is why I believe that our family's history reflects a larger story unfolding across rural India. Over four generations, occupations changed from farming to teaching, law, and public service. Educational opportunities expanded. Women entered professions that earlier generations could scarcely imagine. Roads improved, technology entered our homes, and communication became almost instantaneous. Yet, despite these remarkable changes, the values

that my grandparents consider most important—honesty, discipline, respect for elders, education, simplicity, and compassion—remain unchanged.

This continuity amidst change is, perhaps, the greatest lesson our family history offers.

Writing this essay has also changed my relationship with my hometown. Earlier, Bilgram was simply the place where I was born and raised. Today, I look at it differently. I see a town whose fields have witnessed history, whose streets continue to preserve living traditions, and whose people quietly carry memories that deserve to be documented. I now understand that local history and family history are deeply interconnected. To understand one fully, we must also understand the other.

Most importantly, this journey has taught me the importance of asking questions while we still can. Too often, we assume that our grandparents' stories will always be available whenever we choose to listen. We postpone conversations because of studies, work, or daily routines. Yet memories are fragile. Every story that remains untold risks disappearing forever.

I feel fortunate that I asked these questions now.

Had I waited a few more years, perhaps many details would have faded from memory. Dates might have been forgotten, names might have become uncertain, and precious experiences might have remained forever unrecorded. This essay is therefore not merely an academic exercise; it is an effort to preserve voices that deserve to be remembered.

When future generations of my family read these pages, I hope they will recognise that they are beneficiaries of sacrifices they never personally witnessed. I hope they will understand that comfortable homes, educational opportunities, and professional freedom did not appear overnight. They were built gradually by people who often placed the needs of their children above their own comfort.

I also hope they will remember that preserving family history is not the responsibility of historians alone. It belongs to every family that wishes to honour its past while preparing for its future.

In preserving my family's story, I realised I was also preserving a small chapter of India's social history. Throughout this journey, I often wondered why we rarely document the lives of ordinary families. We preserve certificates, property papers, and photographs with great care, yet we seldom record the conversations that explain what those documents can never tell us. A photograph may show a smiling family standing together, but only a conversation reveals the struggles, hopes, disappointments, and decisions that brought them to that moment. Oral history gives meaning to family records by preserving emotions alongside facts. While writing this essay, I realised that every family, regardless of its social or economic background, possesses stories worthy of preservation. They may never become part of national archives, but they remain invaluable to those who inherit them. In documenting my family’s journey, I have also come to appreciate the countless ordinary lives that quietly contribute to the larger history of India. As I bring this essay to a close, I return to the thought with which this journey truly began. I had believed that I was writing about my family.

Instead, my family rewrote my understanding of history.

History is not created only by emperors, freedom fighters, or political leaders. It is also created by ordinary farmers who cultivate hope alongside their crops, by teachers who educate children despite limited resources, by mothers who silently hold families together, by women who challenge social expectations with courage, and by parents who believe that education is the greatest inheritance they can offer their children.

Their names may never appear in history textbooks.

Their photographs may never hang in museums.
But their lives have shaped the future of families like mine, and through families like mine, they have quietly shaped the story of India itself.
To the next generation of my family,
If you are reading this many years from now, remember that these pages are not only about the past; they are also about you. The story of our family did not end with my grandparents or with my parents, and it does not end with me. One day, you will add your own chapter.
Wherever life takes you, never forget Tapnor, never forget Bilgram, never forget the fields that sustained our ancestors, the classrooms that transformed our future, the values that guided our elders, and the countless sacrifices that made your dreams possible.
Preserve these stories, ask questions with curiosity, and carry forward the values that have shaped our family.
Because families remain alive not only through blood, but through memory.
And as long as we continue telling these stories, our roots will always remember.

Sources of Information
Oral interview with Shri Kamta Prasad Maurya (Paternal Grandfather), conducted on 12–13 July 2026.
Oral interview with Smt. Sushela Devi Maurya (Paternal Grandmother), conducted on 12–13 July 2026.
Oral interview with my Maternal Grandfather.
Oral interview with my Maternal Grandmother.
Oral interview with Shri Arvind Kumar Maurya (Father).
Oral interview with Smt. Preeti Maurya (Mother).
Personal observations of Bilgram, family traditions, and the annual Muharram Tazia procession.
Family memories and discussions with members of my extended family.