

Rooting out a Hindu family history the traditional way

By Anu Anand BBC News, Haridwar, India

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The Anand family scroll

in Haridwar

Genealogy is big business these days, much of it internet-driven, but as the BBC's Anu Anand discovered in Haridwar, if you are from a Hindu family tracing your roots in the traditional manner can prove a little more demanding.

Dusk falls over the holy city of Haridwar in northern India, turning amber the waters of the Ganges river.

Reflecting the flames from hundreds of small clay pots and towering candelabras, the river becomes luminous, alive.

By day, thousands of Hindu pilgrims come to wash away their sins or to perform last rites with the ashes of their deceased loved ones.

Now they gather on its banks to join in the chanting of evening prayers.

My own pilgrimage to Haridwar is for a different reason.

I grew up in the southern United States, where classmates often showcased copies of intricate family trees, each ancestor's name written in neat calligraphy.

Their past had been carefully unearthed through public records, family Bibles and most exciting, by whizzing through the black and white microfilm reels held in the big library downtown.

But my own past was a mystery.

Neither my parents nor I possessed birth certificates. My mother did not even know her real date of birth.

Like many of her generation, it had simply been concocted when officialdom required it.

It was only when I moved to India in my 20s that I heard of the existence of a unique, ancient Hindu genealogical tradition - a tradition that I had finally come to see for myself.

When Hindus make a pilgrimage to a holy place, they also reconnect with their personal family priest, and record births, marriages and deaths on long paper scrolls.

The earliest records, written on palm leaves, have been lost to the elements, but there are sites across India where such records can still be found, and Haridwar remains the most comprehensive and well-preserved repository.

Today there are some 300 hereditary priests, or pandas, still at work.



Hindu family history scrolls have been held in Haridwar for centuries

As evening prayers ended, I set off into the warren of alleys to find my family priest.

The only trouble is, in order to find your family historian, you need to know something of your family's history.

"I'm looking for the Anands, they were from Rawalpindi, I think," I told the priests loitering in carved wooden doorways.

One invited me inside.

He leafed through a scroll, its pages scrawled with names and dates; the script alternating between Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, the three main languages of northern India.

I felt my heart begin to race with anticipation.

I was not expecting to find any kings, or spies or luminaries in my family tree - just a confirmation that I belong somewhere.

Three priests later, and no joy.

Without computerised records or even a local registry, the search for the right priest could take weeks.

In desperation, I phoned my father in Florida. He had met our family panda once, after my grandfather died. Perhaps he would remember where.

It was 4.30 in the morning local time. He finally answered, his voice groggy with sleep.

"All I remember is a giant tree in a courtyard," he told me. "That's where I found him." A tree? Great!

Dusk had now turned to night and I was forced to abandon my search.

Had I come so far only to fail?

The next morning, I redoubled my efforts. A local man overheard my entreaties and tapped me on the shoulder.

"I know this tree," he said.



Mystery solved - the local man who led the way to the hidden courtyard

A few minutes later, he unlatched heavy double doors into a hidden courtyard, and right in the middle was one of the thickest banyan trees I have ever seen.

Centuries of girth, hundreds of tangled roots reached for the ground, obscuring a doorway.

Here, finally, lay the key to my past.

Inside, Mahendra Kumar, a round, jovial man laughed as he heard me recount my journey.

Moments later, as my eyes watered with delight he unravelled two scrolls, going back to the early 1800s.

They contained entries written in the hand of my father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfathers - going back a staggering ten generations.

My father's family originated from a village called Mianwali, outside Rawalpindi, now in Pakistan. They were traders and businessmen, selling wholesale grain and dried fruit across northern India and the North-West Frontier.

Mr. Kumar then invited me to make my own entry in our family scroll.

Under the date, I put my name, as well as the names of my English husband, and our two children.

With hindsight, I would be mad to bequeath my children a pre-printed family tree with ancestors' names already laid down in neat calligraphy, when they could instead inherit a marvellous adventure.

Right down to the search for a giant, mysterious tree and under its canopy, their hidden ancestral roots.