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How Genealogy, History, and Mythology Shaped My Ancestry

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Honors Seminar: Genetics and Genealogy

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Abstract

The purpose of this narrative was to provide a thorough review of my ancestry. It begins with the results obtained by 23andMe. The outcomes indicated that I was Gujarati Patidar, which is where individuals of my mother's caste, Vaishya, live. It also indicated that I had 7.0% Southern Indian Subgroup and 4.4% Southern South Asian in my 23andMe results. I discussed the explanation that I was able to come up with for the reason why my results indicated that I had some Southern Indian ancestry in my results. I explained how I might have gotten these results because of my father's side, since they live in a town that is located more southern compared to Rajkot, or these results could be because of my mother's side because the city that they lived in, Rajkot, had a lot of problems with the partition of India into India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh because it was near the border of India and Pakistan and people were migrating to relocate. The story about how my parents first met, how they got married, and how my sister and I came into the picture came up next. The reason as to why they left India to come to America was also discussed. I went into the specifics of both of my paternal and maternal grandparents by discussing the time period they were born in and how that affected their lives. Finally, I discussed how history and mythology are subjects about our family that my father always made sure we learned. I talked about how the last name, Desai, plays an important role in the very well-known epic of Ramayana of when Lord Rama and his brother Lakshman were trying to look for his wife Sita after Ravana, a demon, kidnapped her.

I. 23andMe Results

The results obtained from 23andMe mostly did show up as how I expected that it would. However, the results weren't as specific as I hoped it would be. Through my results it was reported that I am 6.5% Gujarati Patidar, which is where individuals of the Vaishya caste, my mother's ancestry (farmers, artisans, tradesman, and merchants) are from, and 82.9% Northern Indian and Pakistani. The results were not able to provide direct evidence of my father's caste, Brahmins (priests). As I was analyzing the percent breakdown of my results, I saw how it said I have 7.0% Southern Indian Subgroup and 4.4% Southern South Asian in my genes. I always assumed that my results would indicate that I am only from the north of India because both sides of my family did indicate they had lived in Gujarat, India, for a long period of time. However a possible explanation could be that this could be from my father's side of the family because the town that they live in, Killa Pardi, is located more in the south of Gujarat compared to Rajkot, which is where my mother's side of the family lived. Another explanation could be that the Southern Indian subgroup in my 23andMe results could be due to my maternal side. This is because when India partitioned into Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh many individuals began to migrate to relocate.

23andMe was able to provide me with results about my haplogroup. It was able to provide me with information about how 180,000 years ago I was a part of the L haplogroup. Dating this far indicated that my maternal line traced back far to a single woman who lived in eastern Africa. More specifically I was then a part of the L3 haplogroup, which then branched into the M haplogroup. These individuals exited from Africa and migrated to southeastern Asia. More specifically, my maternal haplogroup was M5a2a1. This haplogroup is relatively uncommon with 23andMe customers since only 1 in 7,000 individuals in the 23andMe customers

have it. This haplogroup is more diverse on the Indian sub-continent than anywhere in the world. It was hypothesized that my ancestors arrived here nearly 50,000 years ago.

II. My Family

The way my parents met always made me feel like it was a typical Bollywood film minus the dancing and music: Love at first sight, they date, the mother's father refuses to let them date, they break up, they get back together after the actor convinces the father to let him and his daughter be together, and finally live happily ever after.

My parents met at Bharati Vidyapeeth University in Pune, Maharashtra. My dad, Pranav, was a typical popular senior jock: he knew everyone and everyone knew him. As he and his friends were strolling through their college to go to the library to study for their upcoming physics exam, he saw my mom in the library. He immediately stopped his friends and asked them who was she and why didn't he know her yet? They all told him she was new to the school and that she was a freshman.

It wasn't until they met again at a friend's gathering and were introduced to one another by a mutual friend that, after a bunch of laughs, they became friends, which then quickly turned into a relationship. My mom's brother Sanjay attended the same college as they (did), and word got back to him that his younger sister was dating my dad. He rushed to my sister and asked her what she was doing because dating was not very normal (or approved) during that time. She told him to get to know Pranav because he was a really good person. It wasn't too long until my uncle liked the person my dad was, too.

During that spring break, my uncle told my mom it wasn't good to hide these secrets from her dad and they decided together that they would tell my grandpa that she was dating my dad. When they told him, it didn't go well. My grandpa was furious and yelled at my uncle for

not protecting my mom and yelled at my mom for making such decisions. He told her immediately to break up with him.

Days became weeks, and weeks became months that my parents were not in contact. My mom and dad were both very devastated that they could not be together. However, one day, my dad thought it was silly that just because it wasn't normal for people to date at the time, that shouldn't be a reason why he and my mom should not be together. So that very day, he and his brother Prashant decided that they would both travel to Rajkot, which is an 8-hour train ride from Killa Pardi, and convince my grandpa why they deserved to be together. After hours and days of convincing, my grandpa finally caved and realized that my dad really did have the best intentions. One year later on December 10th, 1993, they got married.

My parents had my sister, Smruti, a year after that on September 19th, 1994, in Rajkot, Gujarat, India. My parents were so happy: however, they didn't realize how ill my sister was. The doctors told my parents that her chances of surviving were very low. She always had a fever and wasn't able to walk until she was 4 years old. Luckily, she defied the odds. She is now 25 years old and happily married. Fearful of having another child as sick as Smruti was, my parents were afraid and hesitant to have another. However, they decided to take the chance and then I was born March 8th, 1999, in Killa Pardi, Gujarat, India. It wasn't too long after I was born that my parents decided that they wanted to move to the United States of America for better opportunities for their little family.

My dad was a computer-science major. Finding a job related to his major where he lived in India was not very common. He applied to many jobs in the United States and was fortunate to find one. He knew that if he left Killa Pardi, he would be able to pursue a career in computer science and also become a business owner like his father. My mother, on the other hand, went to

college for a few years, but did not finish. After both my mother and father moved to the United States, she wanted to get certifications as an application developer, which she pursued and successfully completed.

II. Paternal Side of the Family

Historical Background:

The culture during the historical time period when both of my grandparents were raised was very different. They were born towards the end of the 200 years of British rule over India (the “raj”). I was fortunate enough to meet my grandmother’s father, Shanti, before he passed away. I spent almost every single day with him when I went to India in the summer of 2010. He and I played carom, a Indian board game, together and laughed about the stories he would tell me about my dad. He told me how he had to learn French because the British wanted to introduce the language in the education system so it would be easier for the students and citizens of India to communicate with the authorities. Because of this, my grandpa spoke 5 languages: Hindi, Gujarati, English, French, Marathi. Upon doing more research on this historical time period, I discovered that the British took advantage of the caste system. Individuals who were a part of the higher caste system were more likely to obtain positions in the government compared to individuals who were in the lower caste. This caused a lot of division in India. Also, there was a lot of clashes due to cultural differences. To elaborate, Hindus and Pakistanis did not eat meat like the British did. This caused a lot of repulsion to the citizens of India, which made them more uncomfortable under British Rule.

Father’s Father (Jawahar)

My dad’s father, Jawahar, was born on January 27th, 1942, in Mumbai. He was one of the middle children in his family of nine. They were all raised in Killa Pardi, Gujarat, because his

father, Govind, was raised there as well. After conversing with my father, it was predicted that his side of the entire family has been living in Killa Pardi at least since the 1920s. As my grandpa grew older, he showed tremendous passion in Law. From then on he was determined to become a lawyer. When he finally opened up his own law firm in Killa Pardi, Jawahar's parents Govind and Satyavati decided that it was time to arrange his marriage to someone.

Father's Mother (Pramila)

They met my grandma, Pramila, because they were family friends. Before my grandma passed away, she used to giggle and tell me how it was definitely not love at first sight when she met Jawahar, but she grew to love his nature and who he was. Pramila was born August 20th, 1947. She was one of 5 kids in her household. Both of her parents' names were Shanti, which means "peace." They lived in Tukwada and then eventually settled down in Mumbai. My grandma was very well educated, just like my grandpa, and was well known in town for practicing Ayurveda medicine, or practicing herbal medicine. Trust me, it really works. I remember having a fever and she would give me turmeric and honey mixed together and that cured my fever in less than a few days. Once she and my grandpa settled down, they had my father, Pranav, November 16th, 1968, and his brother or my uncle Prashant June 19th, 1970.

III. Maternal Side of the Family

Historical Background:

The years that my grandparents on my mom's side of the family were born was the aftermath of British Rule. During this time, it was decided that India would split up into 3 different countries: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. This time caused a lot of havoc and an overwhelming amount of refugee crisis. This is because approximately 10-12 million people felt (or actually were) displaced because of their religion. The city where my grandparents lived,

Rajkot, after moving there from a city called Kutiyana, was one of the cities that had a lot of problems with the partition. When I went to India last year in December, I was actually able to observe that there still are a lot of Muslim and Hindu people living there peacefully together. The split of India into three different countries could hypothetically explain why my 23andMe results indicate that there are a lot of migrations from different regions of India.

Mother's Father (Bhagwanji)

Beginning with my grandfather, Bhagwanji, his parents Bhanabapa and Jetu had 3 kids: Laxman, Vhaji, and my grandpa. My grandfather was born March 10th, 1948. They grew up in a small town called Kutiyana. My grandpa's dad, Bhanabapa, was a farmer who grew wheat, rice, sugarcane, and really anything that was prosperous during certain seasons. Bhanabapa wanted to pass down his farmland to his sons, however, Bhagwanji had something else in mind. He wanted to be a business owner. His father Bhanabapa agreed, but stated if he did not make a profit with the amount of money he was giving him, which was \$50 (which was a lot of money during that time) he was to return home right away. Bhagwanji took the \$50 and went to Mumbai and started his very own shop. He sold pots and pans, and after a few years, he was able to triple the amount of money his father gave him. After coming back to Kutiyana, and showing him what he was able to do, his father and mother were both very proud of him.

Mother's Mother (Godavari)

My grandma, Godavari, was also raised in Kutiyana. She was born on October 10th, 1950. Her parents were farmers. Her father, Bhimji, and mother, Nandu, had seven kids, including her. Unfortunately, her family went through many hardships in life because of a variety of diseases. Her mother Nandu had passed away from stomach cancer, and some of her other siblings passed away at younger ages. This was the reason why I was not able to get much information from her.

However, Godavari and Bhagwanji got an arranged marriage. They had three kids together. Sanjay, their eldest, was born first on June 21st, 1971. My mother, Mintu, was born next on November 19th, 1973. Lastly, their youngest brother Sameer was born June 11th, 1975. When all the siblings grew up, they all moved to America and both my grandparents came to live with Sanjay. This is because in the Hindu culture, the grandparents tend to live with the eldest son.

IV. Mythology

I was raised in a household that thoroughly enjoys discussing history and mythology. I don't think I remember one breakfast, lunch, or dinner conversation as I was growing up that didn't involve learning about a story from the *Ramayana*, *Bhagavad Gita*, or the *Mahabharata* and/or discussing about the history of numerous empires that used to thrive in East Asia as early as 600 B.C. My dad never failed to remind me that there are many individuals who question how true or real our mythologies are. "Nisha, it has never been about whether all of this is real or not. It's about the lessons you get out of it." This is what he replied even when I, very much a skeptic about almost everything, asked him if any of these Hindu mythologies were real. Following this will be a background about how the last name "Desai" plays a role in *Ramayana*.

The epic *Ramayana* is a composition of numerous stories. One of the most notable stories in *Ramayana* is about Lord Rama and his wife Sita. The story begins with Lord Rama's father, the King, wanting to make him the next king; however, one of the king's wives was jealous and wanted to make her son king instead. The king had no choice but to send Lord Rama and his new wife Sita to the forest for 14 years, and they both obediently complied. With them came Lord Rama's brother Lakshman.

As they were living in the forest, Ravana, a demon, saw Sita and fell in love with her and wanted to do everything in his power to have her. So Ravana plotted a beautiful deer near their

hut. When Sita saw a beautiful deer from their hut, she asked Lakshman and Lord Rama to go get the deer for her. Lakshman and Lord Rama said they would fulfill her request, as long as she promised she would stay within a blessed circle that they drew for her. This circle provided her with protection from demons. No matter what, she was told to stay in the circle. As Lakshman and Lord Rama went to fetch the deer, Ravana morphed into a poor old man and pretended to need help to lure Sita from the circle. Unfortunately, Sita did leave the protection circle and Ravana kidnapped her and took her away. Jayatu, a divine bird, saw the kidnapping and tried to help save Sita, but was killed by Ravana for his attempts to save Sita.

Jayatu was on the ground when Lord Rama and Lakshman came across him. Jayatu didn't have much time before he passed away to tell them how he tried to save Sita from Ravana, but how he had failed. Lord Rama and Lakshman thanked him for his courageous service and gave him very respectful funeral rites. On their search for Sita they were passing through Surat, Navsari, and finally Valsad when they came across a Rushi, who is essentially a prophet. He said that if Rama fed 100 Brahmins, which are priests, his quest to find Sita would be fulfilled. It is said that if you fulfill the task that a Rushi gives you, your mission will be accomplished, however, if you didn't there would be consequences. Lord Rama was able to feed 99 Brahmins but was having difficulty finding one more. Lord Rama saw a cow herder roaming around. He went back to the Rushi and asked if he could bless the cowherd, who was a Desai, and make him Brahmin. The Rushi said that would work. Lord Rama asked the cowherd if he would do him the honor and become Brahmin. The cowboy initially said no because he was happy with who he was and didn't want to change, however, since a lord was giving him a blessing he took it. The cowherd thus became an Anavil-Brahmin (Anavil-Brahmins are individuals who live in the

Surat, Navsari, and the Valsad area). Finally, Lord Rama and Lakshman were able to find Sita and defeat Ravana.

The last name “Desai” is pivotal for this story since it is very rare for gods to randomly bless an individual, so they can become Brahmin. “Desai” is the only family line that was able to convert into a Brahmin in all of the Hindu epics, while the only way for people to become Brahmins, is being born into a family of that caste and/or gaining knowledge and following certain rituals that make them Brahmin.

V. Conclusions

Throughout this entire project, I learned a lot more about my family than I could have ever imagined. I was a skeptic going into this project. I assumed that my family wouldn't be able to provide me with any information about my ancestors or even a generation or two back from my grandparents: however, I was proven wrong. It gave me an opportunity to get in touch with my family members that I haven't talked to in a long time. If it weren't for this project, I doubt that I would've even gotten in touch with my cousins from India again.

I was really excited when my mom was able to provide me with a family tree from her side of the family. I could have never imagined that someone on her side of the family was keeping track of not only her family but her second cousins, third cousins, and so on. From this experience, I was fortunately able to keep record of the descendants on my father's side, since sadly no one has been keeping records of the Desai family. If it weren't for my father and our long talks about mythology and history, I don't think this paper would have turned out the way it has. I look forward to taking advantage of the resources that were provided to me from this class and can hopefully incorporate more evidence that I find.

Appendix A

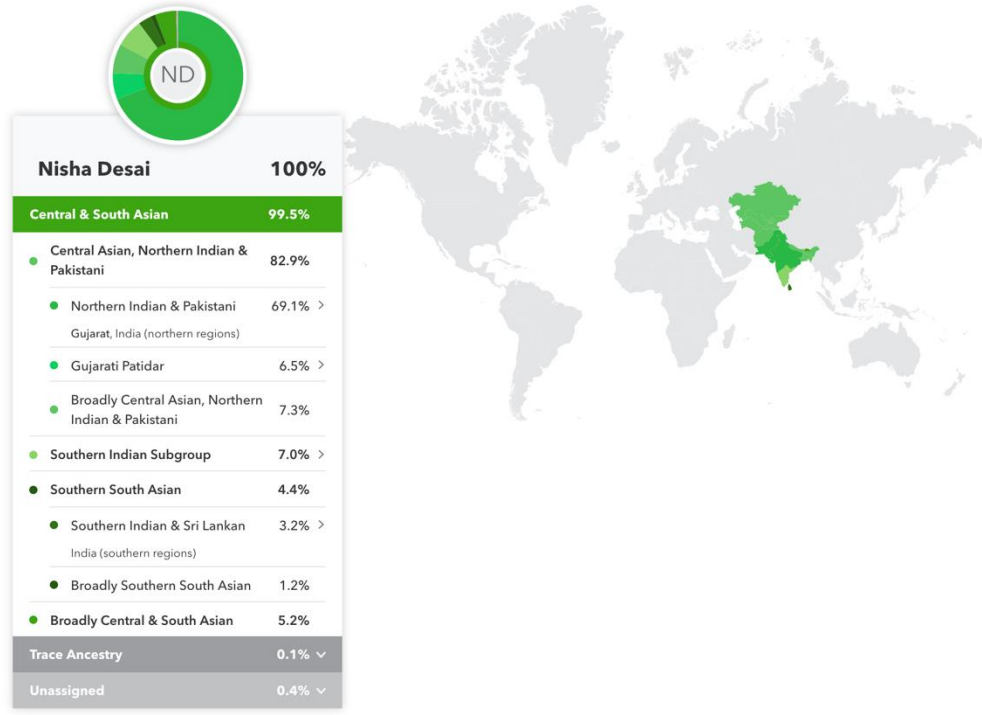


Figure is obtained from 23andMe. It shows my ancestry composition.

Appendix B

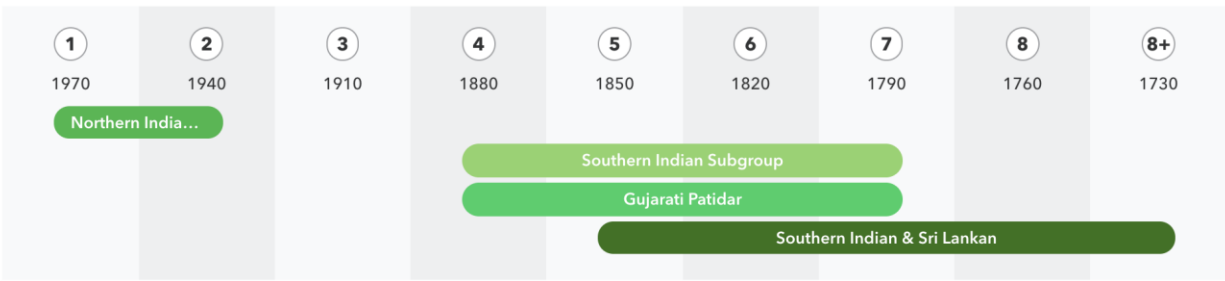


Figure illustrates my ancestral timeline. It demonstrates which population my ancestors were from.

Appendix C

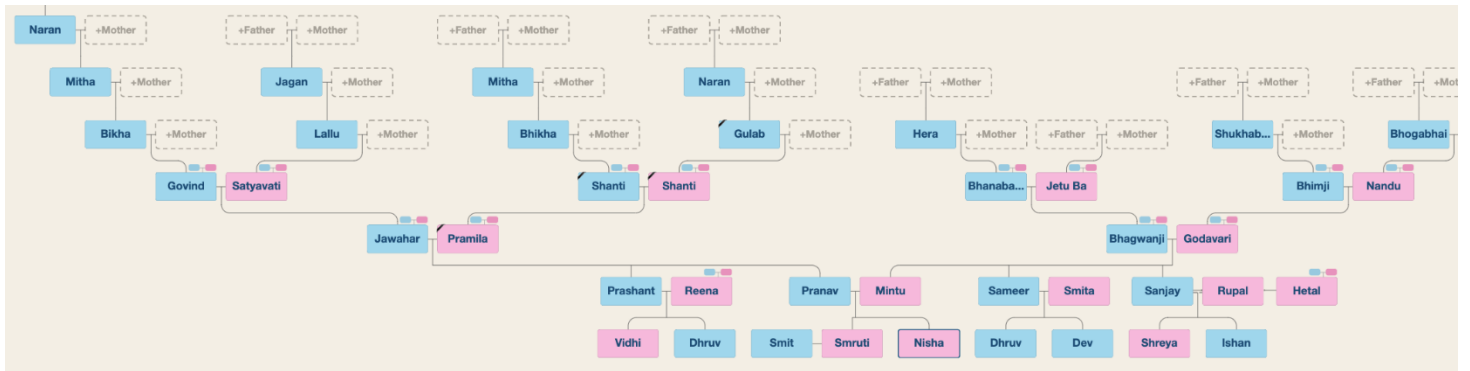


Figure illustrates my family tree from both maternal and paternal sides.

Appendix D



Figure demonstrates direct ancestors of myself. The image provides date of birth and death dates if available.

Appendix E



Figure provided above is the family tree for the Dhingani family. This was obtained from my mother's side of the family. The trunk of the tree indicates my oldest ancestors, and the branches indicate the current generations. The tree does not contain any female names because females do not pass down the family name.

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