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## *An Ode to My Grandfather*

I have recently started pulling my hair back—a slick, polished look that reminds me of an Italian classic. For most of my life, I've been a side-part, short-hair kind of guy, an identity shaped by my Catholic all-boys school upbringing. But since completing my PhD, I realized that long hair does not make me any less of a "good boy." This small act of rebellion brought me closer to a surprising connection with my grandfather, Ramesh Chandra Singh, or as we affectionately called him, Rama Chandra.

He was the only one in my family who used to style his hair similarly. That memory, like many others, speaks to who he was—a quintessential "Thakur" man of principle. Born in December 1928 to Sarju Prasad Singh and Iyaa Maayi in the village of Nawada near Ballia, my grandfather grew up on the banks of the Ganga River. Those were times of new beginnings in India, as the nation had just tasted independence. My grandfather, with his sharp intellect and deep sense of duty, understood the price of "azadi" and the responsibilities it carried.

The brightest young man in the family, he completed his education and earned a BA—no small feat in a rural setting. Expectations were high, and he met them by securing a job in the city to support his parents and siblings. Married in 1955 to my grandmother, Sheela Singh, he balanced his responsibilities with grace, raising a family of four children, including my father, the youngest.

Yet life was not without hardship. When the twins, his first-born children, tragically passed away near their birthday, my grandparents were stricken with grief. My grandmother attributed it to the ill effects of "nazar," or the evil eye, and from then on, birthdays were no longer celebrated in our family. It may sound superstitious, but I've never questioned it. Having witnessed the love and sacrifices my grandparents poured into their family, I know that every decision they made, even one as unusual as this, was out of protection and care.

My grandfather worked at Punjab National Bank and climbed the ranks to become a Regional and Zonal Manager, an impressive feat. But his primary salary often went toward supporting his extended family in the village, leaving him to take on odd jobs to provide for his own household. Never once did he complain or speak of his sacrifices; he simply did what was needed. His integrity cost him promotions at times—he refused to approve bad loans or bow to corrupt demands. Yet, he never wavered from his principles.

Despite his grueling schedule, my grandfather had an insatiable curiosity about the world. Every evening at 7 pm, he tuned in to BBC World Radio, engrossed in stories of history and geography. He once described Damascus to me in vivid detail—its ancient origins, its role through various dynasties, and its place in world history. When I later learned of the city's fall during the Syrian conflict, I couldn't help but think of him and how deeply saddened he

would have been.

His relationship with my father was strict, shaped by his belief in discipline and responsibility. My father, by contrast, is an emotional man, often jokingly called "Kumar stuck between two Chandras." Despite their differences, my father carried forward my grandfather's values, which shaped both his life and mine.

What strikes me most about my grandfather is the lasting impact he had on others. From supporting village relatives in his Lucknow home to helping them find jobs, his generosity was unparalleled. Even decades later, people like "Bachchan Baba," who attended my wedding reception at 85, would tearfully recount the kindness my grandparents showed. My only regret is not meeting Bachchan Baba again before his passing. My grandfather's mentor, Uday Bhaan Singh, left a lasting influence on him, teaching him values that were passed down to me. One lesson I cherish is never to criticize food served to you—an act of gratitude and humility that speaks volumes about respect for others.

My grandparents, while initially hesitant about my parents' inter-caste marriage, eventually supported my mother's career aspirations. It was a mark of their evolving views, though the birth of a male heir (me) likely helped smooth things over—a cultural norm I've never condoned but understand as a product of their time.

In his later years, after my grandmother passed away in 2006, my grandfather was never quite the same. Losing her and their beloved daughter, who suffered from focal epilepsy, left a void that even his resilience couldn't fill. Between 2006 and his passing in 2011, he lived with us, teaching me mathematics, science, and history. His sharp mind amazed me, as he solved problems from my ninth-grade textbook without hesitation, recalling them from his own school days nearly seven decades prior.

Dementia marked his final years, a cruel disease that stripped away the dignity of a man who once stood so tall. He would wander off, searching for his "house," lost in a fog of memory. My parents and sister shouldered the burden of his care, shielding me so I could focus on preparing for college. He passed away on January 11, 2011, the coldest day of the season. As I sat by his side that evening with my school friend, Adarsh, we reminisced about his stern scoldings and boundless love. The grief was overwhelming, knowing the man who had been my pillar of strength was gone forever.

My grandfather taught me that life's battles are won by standing firm in your beliefs. His lessons guided me through challenges, whether facing an unscrupulous grad-school supervisor or persevering after failures. His unwavering principles remain a compass in my life.

Rama Chandra, you will always be my guiding light and my inspiration. Your legacy lives on in our hearts, forever cherished. (Below is the photograph from my childhood with him blessing me).

