

MY GRANDFATHER, BAPU: RAMESHWAR LAL MEEL

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March 1, 2024; Revised: March 4, 2024

My grandfather (*Bapu*, as we all called him), Rameshwar Lal Meel, passed away early morning of 29th February, 2024. I flew in on 26th of February and I was able to meet him on the same day; he was not able to speak by then but I hope he was able to know that I did manage to reach just in time.

Bapu was 86 year old and lived a full life, during which he raised four children, witnessed the birth of ten grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, as well as the weddings of five of his grandchildren. His youngest great-grandchild, Bhavesh (born in 2021), loved him and will miss him dearly.

Bapu led a remarkable life, going from being born into poverty to enabling his children and grandchildren to run successful businesses and become professors. His story is one of hard work, perseverance, friendships, and a life focused on performing simple but good deeds.

1 CHILDHOOD AND TEENAGE YEARS

Bapu was born in 1937 to Ganpatram Meel (*Dada*, as we all called him or *Kaka* as Bapu called him) and Shringari Devi (*Buddhi Maa* as we all called her) in the village of Palri. Bapu spent almost all his life in Palri. Bapu was their third child, but the first two died young, making him the eldest surviving child of his parents for most of his life. Bapu had eight younger siblings, among whom one died young, so for most of his adult life, Bapu had seven siblings.

Bapu grew up in a poor family. These were the times before the White Revolution, and milk was scarce. From the months of Jyastha to Kartik, no one in the entire village had milk, and instead, Rabri was substituted for milk. Consequently, tea was made without milk. Of course, ghee was beyond the reach of Bapu's family, and Bapu did not remember ever having rotis with ghee in his childhood.

Despite poverty and lack of access to formal education, he enjoyed his childhood. Bapu never went to School but he didn't mind much as he knew he wanted to be a farmer – after all, he was a *Jat* and farming was his destiny. The year of 1951 brought a significant drought in our region, which put the survival of animals at risk. Therefore, Bapu, then aged 14, went with his maternal grandfather, taking along about nine head of cattle, on a 170 km long walk to reach Ganeshpura where there was enough grass for cattle to survive the drought.

The scarcity of money and complete dependence on rainwater for agriculture forced Bapu to look for other opportunities to supplement income. From his friends in village, Bapu found about temporary job as helper during harvesting season in summers. Bapu went to Punjab two years in row in summers. The pay was meager by absolute standards but quite good by relative standards of Bapu's life in those days: *1 rupee per day*. Furthermore, it came with accommodation: well, floor to sleep alongside animals. The job involved walking about 12 kilometers to reach fields at 4 AM and then work till sunset and walk back to their housing complex!

2 MARRIAGE WITH MAA AND CHILDREN

Bapu married Mohini Devi (*Maa*, as we all call her) when he was 18. They were married for 68 years, i.e., until his death. They were always together – the past few weeks were very hard on them, and Maa's eyes told of how much they loved each other; she would check on him multiple times during the night in the past few weeks despite struggling herself with health issues.

Back to Maa and Bapu's wedding: The baraat went on camels. The baraat stayed for a night and were served rice with shakkar (*sugar*) and ghee. And of course, the groom and bride rode back on the second evening together on a camel: a pretty good deal for the first romantic ride!

Maa wanted to have two children, but Bapu managed to convince Maa for four! And they were blessed with four children: Ranjeet (1965), Ashok (1970), Sumitra (1975), and Manoj (1980). Their eldest son (and my father), Ranjeet, turned out to be academically excellent, and he even qualified via the state-level engineering exam and received a Bachelor of Engineering from MBM University. When I asked Bapu in 2016 whether he ever argued with Maa, his response was: "Of course, never and how could I? She cooks the food, and I don't know how to cook." Perhaps the secret to a successful marriage is to never argue with your partner, especially if they cook.

3 JODHPUR JOB

The year 1965 brought another drought to the Sikar region, and Bapu found a job in Mandor (Jodhpur) as a gardener. From there, he transferred to a job as a security guard presumably at an agricultural institute. It was a government job that came with lifetime job security and benefits of a pension. He was paid 80 rupees per month. He would often recount to us the story of his meeting with a palm reader. He would tell us that the palm reader predicted, “you will always have sufficient money available to you but never in your own hands.”

When Bapu came back home for Holi, *Dada* (or *Kaka* as Bapu would recount in his story) asked him not to go back, as Dada was worried about who would look after the fields if Bapu took up the job. So Bapu reluctantly decided to stay back. Over the years, Bapu’s attitude towards his decision kept fluctuating. On one hand, the transformative growth in the fortunes of the family was enabled by Bapu’s decision to stay back, so he felt the decision was worthwhile. Yet at the same time, Bapu never had a lot of money on his own, so some days he felt a government job and retirement with a pension would have been worthwhile. By late 2021, he felt content with his decision as he finally began to realize what he had enabled and as he began to enjoy his retirement, allowing himself to be supported by his children and grandchildren.

4 THE RISE OUT OF POVERTY

Bapu and his siblings set out to lift themselves out of poverty. They engaged in a myriad of jobs: from trying to operate irrigation equipment repair shops, as tractor operators during crop harvesting season, livestock trading, and of course, farming. Bapu excelled at trimming acacia trees, and he was able to trim about 10-12 trees in a day. Thakur, the zamindars, had huge fields, so they were always in need of employing people to trim down acacia trees, and he worked on it for many years: his pay for acacia trimming started with two rupees per day, and their pay did rise over the years, going all the way to ten rupees per day by the late 1970s. Little by little, they kept saving money and used it to buy land, which has proved to be a remarkably longterm investment – in particular, the land they bought in Sikar appreciated significantly in value, allowing the entire Meel family (comprising over 20 households) to build houses and also achieve financial gains from selling part of the unused land.

Physical Fitness: Bapu worked in the fields all his life, which, of course, required him to maintain high levels of physical fitness. He was able to trim acacia trees until he was 58 and stopped only after Ranjeet asked him to stop. In his youth, he would routinely carry about twenty kilograms of animal feed on his head from Sikar to Palri (nearly 30 kilometers). He routinely walked about 20-25 kilometers per day until his early 70s. Ranjeet, my father, recalls the story from the early 1970s when Bapu and he went to Nawalgarh for an animal fair and it rained that night, and Bapu kept him in his lap while holding the umbrella for the whole night.

Animals: Bapu always kept a camel for most of his adult life. And he made sure to decorate the camel whenever he went to his in-laws’ place to bring Maa back to the village. Another of Bapu’s favorites was *Thakar*, the pet dog of our extended family. Thakar was given his name for his attitude: he did behave like a zamindar, he would only sit on a bed, even during the day, and would take offense if a family member spoke to him harshly. Thakar loved being with Bapu or Buddhi Maa and would sneak out of the farm whenever he sensed either of them was about to leave so that others couldn’t keep him from going with them.

Among the many buffaloes Bapu kept over the years, one of them has left its imprint in everyone’s memory. This one was around in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bapu once sold this buffalo to one of his acquaintances but later bought it back. The buffalo was used to help in sowing as well as to transport goods between the farms, which were about 4 km apart. The buffalo would complete the journey between the farms running (i.e., without ever stopping or slowing down) while carrying goods (as well as a few people) on the accompanying bullock cart.

5 BANTWARA, GRANDCHILDREN, AND LOSS OF PARENTS

As the family of *Dada* and *Buddhi Maa* grew, *bantwara* (i.e., the partitioning) became inevitable. It eventually occurred in 1989. Bapu was very traditionalist in such aspects: being the eldest, he felt that others should be prioritized before him and eventually got a fairly raw deal. That meant Bapu and his children had to move to the farm in Dhaani (i.e., the farthest farm from the village), and that’s all they received – i.e., no cash nor any ownership in the homes built in Sikar. So at 52, he found himself starting all over

again: in fact, right after the *bantwara*, he didn't even have enough money to buy footwear. Maa had to borrow money from her family to get him to buy shoes. By then, his eldest son, Ranjeet, had graduated from engineering but decided to move back to the village to help Bapu and the family become financially independent – a major sacrifice for someone who had finished engineering from a top school in those times. Bapu and his children, accompanied by Bhanwari, set out to rebuild from scratch, and that included leasing and irrigating others' farms. Hard work paid off, and slowly but steadily, the income from the farm and leased farms enabled financial independence. The government's policies meant that agricultural income did not rise with the rest of India, and accordingly, he could never build up significant savings: in fact, he never managed to have savings of one lakh rupees (his dream target) in hand. However, as was predicted by that palm reader long ago, he always had enough. Everyone remembers that Bapu would always buy apples (well, small, greenish, and the cheapest ones as that's all he could afford) for home after selling crops. Financial sufficiency allowed his sons, Ranjeet and Ashok, to move to Sikar and start their own businesses in construction and transportation.

These years were marked by birth of grandchildren: Kuldeep (1990), Virender (1991), Amit (1994), Taramani (1995), Nirmal (1996), and Santosh (1997). In later years, he had more grandchildren: Bulla (2001), Shruti (2006) and Hardik (2012). Viru and I spent the first five years in village and Maa and Bapu loved their grand-children. I was Maa's favorite and Viru was Bapu's. Bapu also overheard Viru and me in planning to go inside the well to repair the well and thankfully, he had the well secured next day!

By summer of 1995, it was about time that Viru and I be sent to school and Manoj was ready to go to high school. Since the city offered better schooling opportunities, all of Bapu's children moved to Sikar. Maa and Bapu were determined to make sure their children's future wasn't limited to farming. Maa and Bapu stayed back to run the farm and over the years, they continued to send to Sikar all the required grains as well as fodder for animals, and they never charged for it.

In 2002, Bapu lost his parents in quick succession. Dada passed away suddenly on September 28, 2002. After Dada's sudden death, Buddhi Maa's health deteriorated as she never recovered from the shock of the death of her husband of nearly 80 years. Bapu and Maa took great care of her in the two months and she passed away in Bapu's hands in the early morning of December 4, 2002.

Friendships Bapu was master of the art of friendship. Bapu had several close friends over the years; two of his closest friends from these times were Rameshwar Khakhhal and Bhugana Khati. Bapu's secret to friendship was meeting friends every day and he would claim that he never had arguments with his close friends. His close friendships allowed him to truly enjoy the life of being in Dhani.

6 RAISING GRAND-DAUGHTERS

Bapu's daughter Sumitra had two girls (Taramani and Santosh) and one boy. Raising daughters puts a lot of financial strain on families, primarily the worry stemming from expenses in weddings and dowries. Sensing that this was putting a great deal of stress on their daughter and her husband (Bhagirath), Bapu and Maa asked if they could raise the two girls, Taramani and Santosh, by themselves. And so in their 60s, they were back to raising kids: this entailed feeding them, bathing them, buying books and clothes, and everything else that comes with raising kids. By now, the roads had been constructed, which allowed the school bus to pick up and drop off Taramani and Santosh from our farm. Bapu and Maa spent the 2000s raising Taramani and Santosh. Bapu and Maa were overjoyed to find a wonderful match in Mahesh Matwa for Taramani. Taramani and Mahesh were married in 2014 and have since welcomed a daughter. Taramani has always been *their* daughter. Meanwhile, Santosh excelled academically, and therefore, she shifted to a boarding school, and Sumitra and Bhagirath insisted to Bapu and Maa that they would cover her further educational (and future wedding) expenses, which allowed Bapu and Maa to feel that they were *finally* freed from the need to provide for and care for the children – 48 years after having their first child!

One of my favorite memories from those times is when I took all four of my grandparents (and Pratap *Nanaji*) on a trip to Delhi and Tirupati in 2011. It was an adventure for everyone: this was the first time for all of them to fly on an airplane, stay in hotels, eat at restaurants, or even go sightseeing. One of my funniest memories from that trip is from our very first flight from Jaipur to Delhi: It was a short flight operated by Air India, which still served breakfast. Since it was the first flight for all of them and none of them spoke English (in those days, it was fashionable for air stewards to speak in English), I had to ensure everyone was able to get their meals, then unpack for everyone, and then I suggested everyone eat the food quickly given the duration of the flight. Since none of them had ever used a fork and knife until then, I suggested they ignore the utensils. I then proceeded to eat my breakfast using a fork, and after a bite or two, I noticed

Bapu trying to use a fork to eat; this was probably the first time he had held a fork in his hand. I tried to convince him to eat with his hands but, of course, he didn't want to be seen as an incapable grandpa and instead finished the meal with a fork, albeit with a lot of struggle. Another memory is that unbeknownst to me, he saved all his boarding passes and took them to the village. For months following the trip, whenever one of his younger friends (in particular, the ones who could read) would drop by, he would ask them to read the boarding pass. They would be surprised to see his name on the boarding pass, inquire further, and then he would proceed to tell the story of the entire trip.

7 WEDDINGS OF GRANDCHILDREN AND RETIREMENT

By the mid-2010s, five of Bapu's grandchildren were in their twenties, and he was eager to see them get married. In fact, he offered to be a matchmaker if needed. Bapu was overjoyed to learn of Viru and Kamlesh' impending engagement. The prospect of Viru's wedding probably made Bapu feel five years younger as he was suddenly so full of energy. He was excited to be assigned the task of officially inviting extended family members and his friends from the village: he had a tight schedule for nearly twenty days, and he was so full of energy that Subash, the driver tasked to drive Bapu around, would often jokingly complain of Bapu not taking any breaks the entire day. Bapu and Maa were also getting older by now, so we sought to convince them to move to Sikar so that they could live with their children (and grandchildren) and be looked after. I was once tasked with convincing Bapu, and he resisted by mentioning that he had friends in the village and none in Sikar. Therefore, Bapu and Maa were in Sikar intermittently over the next year but still continued to live in the village.

In another year and a half, Amit and Nirmal were also ready to be married, and Bapu was again entrusted with the responsibility of personally visiting and inviting the extended family, a task he desired and seemed to energize him. He was back in his element, and he

Following weddings of Amit and Nirmal, Bapu and Maa were finally convinced to stay in Sikar and stayed at Ashok's home for nine months before Covid struck, and they returned to the village. But Maa fell very sick in August 2020 and had to be hospitalized for two weeks. And it was no longer feasible for them to live on their own in the village, so they finally gave in to living in Sikar. They moved in with Ranjeet, Manoj, and Viru. My mother, Bhanwari, and aunt, Pratibha, loved being able to take care of their in-laws, particularly Bapu. My mother always insisted that she was Bapu's favorite daughter-in law. Bapu fell sick in December 2020 but recovered thanks to quick intervention from Viru and Manoj. After that, everyone made taking care of Bapu a priority, and Bapu too felt energized by the love and care, seeking to make Sikar his new home, relying on his charm and friendships.

Bapu managed to build a new strong circle of friends. He knew how to make friends with both young and old; in fact, one of my friends, Vikas Ola, became a good friend of Bapu; Vikas made sure to visit Bapu until the last day. Our extended family lives within close distance, so Bapu expanded his social circle and would regularly visit many households. One of Maa's sisters also moved nearby, and the two brothers-in-law (Bapu and Pokhar Ji) loved hanging out with each other. Bapu always had a knack for interacting with in-laws, particularly the women – he had a way of being charming and funny, so he ensured he would regularly visit any of the households related to in-laws (broadly interpreted) in the vicinity. They all loved having Bapu come over for short chit-chats; you could see it in their teary eyes when they visited Bapu in his final days. One of his closest friends was Amarchand Ji: they would meet each other every day. Bapu would walk to Amarchand Ji's house where he would be waiting with an empty chair for him. If for some reason, one of them didn't see the other for a day, they would go to the other's house next day to inquire about the whereabouts.

Bapu was overjoyed to know that Suguman and I were getting married in December 2021. He eagerly waited for Covid restrictions to be relaxed so that the wedding could happen. Bapu was energized yet again by the task of personally inviting extended family. He was proud to have two grand daughter-in-laws who were lecturers and professors.

Bapu often spoke of the desire to have the house in the village repainted and to host a final *sawamani* (a feast) in the village, which would be a way for him to say a final goodbye to his village. Unfortunately, it never materialized, and with time, he gave up on it.

Bapu had one final task for himself: ensuring an unambiguous division of his property among his children. He wanted to eliminate any ambiguity and ensure that all legal details were completed, so there would be no disputes after his passing. He was very wary of his children engaging in any disputes arising from any of his failings. Accomplishing such tasks in an amicable manner always involves some back-and-forth among different parties, but Maa and Bapu managed to finalize every single detail by late 2023.

8 THE FINAL MONTH

I was in Sikar in December 2023, and by then Bapu had sensed his death was near even though there did not seem any worrying signs physically or medically. However, he felt he had accomplished everything he wanted. He had also increasingly begun to wary of having lived longer than *Dada*, and often spoke of friends that were long gone before him. Therefore, he was content and felt ready.

In January, he had begun losing his appetite: he slowly started eating less, refusing curries, and switching to simpler meals. He was still able to go for his daily walks, but by the first week of February, he began to say goodbye to his friends, especially the ones he would regularly walk to see. By the first week of February, he began experiencing lightheadedness. He had a fall on February 6th and underwent hip surgery. The surgery accelerated delirium, and his sugar levels began fluctuating, and he became increasingly withdrawn. He nearly lost consciousness by the time I met him on February 26. While his health deteriorated slowly and steadily, he did get to experience how much he meant to everyone. His grandson, Viru (Virender), and his youngest son, Manoj, were his primary caregivers and made sure that until the last day, Bapu was dressed everyday with style and precision that he always maintained and ensured that every medical care be available to him. Bapu was certainly lucky to have such a son and grandson. His son, Ranjeet, made sure to check on him multiple times during the night and help him eat and sip fluids. His daughters-in-law, Bhanwari and Pratibha, and his granddaughter-in-law, Kamlesh, kept checking on him multiple times all the time. His grandson, Hardik, and his granddaughter, Shruti, kept doing everything to assist in the caretaking of Bapu. And his great-grandson, Bhavesh, kept asking him to get well. In the preceding days, Bapu had indicated a desire to visit the village. Virender and Manoj took him on one last drive to the village farm on the 27th afternoon, and then instinctively on the 27th evening, Bhavesh decided to walk up to his bedside and gave him a lori (lullaby); Bapu never woke up from unconsciousness after that evening.

When Bapu could no longer go for his daily walk after the first week of February, his best friend from the past few years, Amarchand Ji, dropped by few times to meet him. In their last meeting, Amarchand Ji promised Bapu that they would soon restart their daily meetings again, and Bapu promised back. And little did we all know that they were serious: Amarchand Ji had a sudden heart attack and passed away shortly after midnight on the 28th of February, i.e., in the wee hours of the 29th of February. He probably had enough time to find and set aside a chair for Bapu, and therefore, by the early morning of the 29th of February, Bapu too was ready and he breathed his last breath. Amarchand Ji and Bapu must be back to their routine, and freed from the aged body, he is probably busy catching up with all his other friends. They all must have been waiting for him.