



VARTA

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EDITORS' NOTE

Dear Oral Historian,

We hope you are well. The last two years have been an unexpected and extraordinary time in which we as a global community had to rethink our fundamental way of doing oral history and replace the intimacy of the in-person interview. What was the impact of this on oral historians and their interviewees?. To understand these experiences and create a space for sharing, we asked oral historians how they had coped with the pandemic and its impact on their projects. While the common refrain is the stark impersonality of zoom or phone interviews, there were also reassurances of hope, often, from interviewees themselves. We as an organisation also had to make the unexpected shift, moving our conferences and workshops online and this issue includes a reflection on the events organised over the last two years. While we managed to reach new audiences and learnt new skills organising digital events, we hope we can meet you in person at a conference in the future. We also follow Dr Fleur D'souza as she reflects on her journey of unlearning and rethinking historical inquiry to make space for oral history as a methodology to record the collective

histories of tribal communities. We travel to projects looking at youth cultures in Himachal Pradesh, histories of the Tibetan refugee community in Mcleodganj and the heritage walking tours of Mumbai. Looking at archiving oral history recordings, we explore the building of a website with oral histories, it's place in the museum display and collections and share tips from the Citizens Archive of India on using social media effectively to promote exciting projects in oral history. We also have an extract from a book that uses the life history approach and announcements of new projects and e books. We hope you enjoy the issue and in our attempt to share, learn and build this community, we would love to hear from you. Write to us at oralhistoryindia@gmail.com with ideas and suggestions.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Avehi Menon
and Sanghamitra Chatterjee
Editors @ Varta

We would like to thank Aniket Alam for his time, ideas and support and Shweta Pathare for her work on this issue.

CONFERENCE ALERT:

Oral History Society's Annual Conference 2022

The Oral History Society, UK announces Call for Papers for its annual conference on 8th and 9th July 2022. The theme for the conference is Home. The Oral History Society is inviting proposal abstracts on a variety of perspectives within the theme. The deadline for submission of proposals is 31st January 2022.

For more details,
<https://www.ohs.org.uk/conference-2022/>

OHA! EVENTS

Shift from Offline to Online: A report on OHA! Annual Conferences (2019-2021)

Debarati Chakraborty

Debarati Chakraborty is the Head of the Department of English, Techno India University, West Bengal. She is currently the Vice President of OHA!.



5th Annual OHA! Conference, Mumbai 2020



Professor Nina Sabnani, holding up the artwork created for the animated film 'Making Intangibles Tangible', OHA! Conference

The Oral History Association of India (OHA!), in the past three annual conferences, has discussed and deliberated on varied themes. In 2019, the 4th OHA! conference was held in collaboration with Ambedkar University, Delhi on February 1st and 2nd with the theme on "Community, Place and Identity: Possibilities of Oral History". It focused on intersections between Community, Place and Identity, when seen from many 'other' perspectives.

The papers and presentations examined how in a world increasingly mobile and interconnected, groups and individuals redefined pasts and connected to the present, negotiated their own identities or constructed it for others. They further explored how construction, narration and negotiation of our own and other identities are seen in relation to different situations, contexts and interviewers.

The inaugural session began with an

introduction to OHA! and the conference by Dr Indira Chowdhury and former President of OHA!, Mr Surajit Sarkar, with the opening remarks by Professor Jatin Bhatt, Vice Chancellor, Ambedkar University Delhi and Professor Denys P Leighton, Director, Centre for Community Knowledge, Ambedkar University Delhi. The Plenary Keynote on the first day was delivered by Ms. Nandini Oza, on "Learnings from Oral Histories of the Narmada Struggle: Questioning Notions of Nation, National Interest, Development." A panel discussion on "Oral History: Parallel History - A Role for the Archive" by eminent scholars like Urvashi Butalia, Dr. Guneeta Singh Bhalla, Dr. Suroopa Mukherjee, Dr. Pallavi Chakravarty was held. There was also a Lecture-Demonstration by Dastangoi Artist, Fouzia Dastango on 'Dialects of Old Delhi,' based on oral narratives collected from traditional professions and livelihoods of Old Delhi.

The second day started with a Plenary Keynote by Dr. Rita Padawangi, Singapore University of Social Sciences on "Oral History in Studying Cities and Their Neighborhoods", followed by paper presentations. The conference concluded with a Lecture-Demonstration on 'Aural History' - Oral History techniques in Folk Music by Dr. Shubha Chaudhuri, American Institute of Indian Studies.

The 5th OHA! conference was on "Oral History at the intersection of politics and identity", and was held at Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai, on March 1-2, 2020. The conference focused on the intersections of identity and politics when seen from an individual perspective through oral histories. The presentations explored how the place, language and gender shape the frameworks of identity and how politics of memory keeps reconstructing these frameworks.

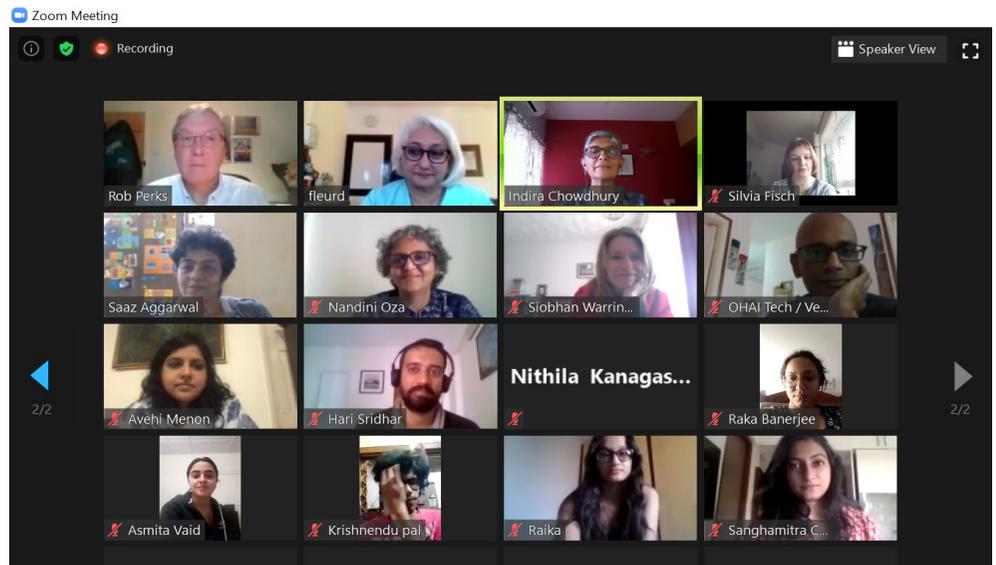
The keynote address was on “Making Memories Tangible”, delivered by Nina Sabnani, Professor, Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay. Enriching presentations on the topics related to Gender and Conformity, Politics of Memory and Migration and Displacement, Oral History and Activism, Space Place and Identity and Archives as Public space: Use of Oral Histories were made.

An important issue was raised at the conference– “What does it mean to identify as oral historian?”, where practicing oral historians like Dr. Indira Choudhary (Oral Historian and Head, Dept. of Public History, Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Vrunda Pathare (Chief Archivist, Godrej Archives) and Fleur D’souza (Academician, Retired Professor from St. Xavier’s College) discussed and deliberated on the topic, providing examples from their own experience.

Immediately after the Mumbai conference the wave of Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, which changed the course of how the next OHAI conference was held. Being forced by circumstance to shift online, OHAI successfully organised an introductory workshop in October 2020 for oral history enthusiasts, which helped them to understand what an oral history project involves. Due to an overwhelming response from interested candidates, the workshop, which was originally intended to be for two days, was extended.



5th Annual OHAI Conference, Mumbai 2020



Online Conference 2021

The experience of conducting an online workshop came handy when OHAI organised the 6th Annual conference on “Crisis, Community and Oral History”, in collaboration with the Department of Humanities and Languages, Flame University, Pune, on March 6-7, 2021. Given the online platform, there was a wide range of online presentations of papers, films, audio documentaries, art and panel discussions from various corners of India and abroad. The opening talk was delivered by Rama Lakshmi, on “Oral History’s Bad Timing - Crisis in Bhopal, Disability and RTI Movements”. It was followed by presentations on various topics which included Films and Crises, Citizen and the State, Gender, Community Knowledge and Crisis, Displacements, and the current issues of Covid-19 and Oral Histories and Changes and Pedagogy. Two public talks were organised and live streamed at the end of each day, one by Rob Perks, former lead curator of oral histories, British Library who was in conversation with Indira Chowdhury facilitated by Fleur D’Souza. The other public talk was by Jason Kelly from IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute, Indiana University, who spoke on “COVID-19 Oral History Project”, which is a rapid response oral history project focused on archiving the lived experience of the covid-19 epidemic.

This was facilitated by Maya Dodd Associate Professor, Literary and Cultural Studies, Flame University. Taking advantage of the online platform, and given the fact that the participants were unable to talk to each other face to face (which they could in the case of physical conferences) apart from their respective sessions due to the constraints of technology, a Google document was created and was shared with all the participants, who were able to ask pertinent questions and discuss various topics in the document itself. A group of dedicated volunteers took the notes of each session, which was later uploaded in the OHAI website for future reference. The online version was frustrating, but also liberating in other ways!



OHA! EVENTS

Starting your Oral History Project: A Workshop

Vrunda Pathare

Vrunda Pathare is the chief archivist at the Godrej Archives (<http://www.archives.godrej.com/>). She is a founding member of OHA! and is also currently the Secretary of OHA!.

what they do. The discussion regarding 'subjectivity' continued in a session where practitioners presented their oral history projects. Surajit Sarkar spoke about understanding of orality by the oral historians as being positional and argued that interpreting individual oral history narratives begins as one recognizes that we continually participate in processes of social transformation – as individuals, family members, or members of a shared community defined by ethnicity, age, gender or even a taste in music or food. Knowledge and discourse come out of experience, and talking about our own experiences are means through which we come to understand our own participation in the social.



OHA! Workshop Poster

As the year 2020 hit a roadblock in the face of the pandemic, it also offered a whole new set of challenges to oral historians as in-person interviews were suddenly not a possibility.

Oral historians were forced to revisit their methodology. OHA! also felt it necessary to engage with those interested in starting an oral history project and offer a road map to not only help them think like an oral historian but also address these new challenges of interviewing online. With this intent, OHA! conducted two introductory workshops on 'Starting Oral History Project' in October 2020 to help new interviewers understand what undertaking an oral history project involves. Over two days, faculty

led the discussion about varied aspects including the basics of planning for an oral history project, budgeting it, undertaking background research, the legal and ethical issues involved, consent forms, equipment and media, how to keep track of the project and archiving oral histories for the future.

Dr. Indira Chowdhury in an introductory session defined oral history and brought out aspects of orality, oral traditions and oral history. She brought forth challenges of oral history while discussing dilemmas of 'authenticity' 'subjectivity' and argued that oral historians do not start out with a distrust of the speaker, rather they try to understand why the speaker says

In this session by practitioners presenting their projects, Dr. Fleur D'souza while talking about the project 'Bombay remembers what Mumbai forgets' addressed challenges of dealing with memories of violence and trauma, whereas Venkat Srinivasan spoke about place of oral history in mapping the trajectory of history of sciences and scientific institutions.

Among the practitioners who presented their projects in the second workshop, Dr. Debarati Chakraborty shared her insights into dealing with memories of displacement and identities as emerged from her research on partition of India on the Eastern frontier.

Nandini Oza triggered discussions around the challenges of capturing oral histories of struggles, movements and activism through the lens of her vast experience in curating oral history of Narmada Bachao Andolan while Sanghamitra Chatterjee brought forth challenges of doing oral history to put together a corporate or an institutional narrative. On more practical aspects of doing oral history, Dr. Chowdhury

gave the participants an overview of the aspects to be considered before commencing an oral history project such as planning background research, methodology, finances etc. and also guided participants regarding ways of asking effective questions in a separate session. In a session on equipment, Vrunda Pathare, Sanghamitra Chatterjee and Avehi Menon introduced participants to various equipment and tools available/preferred by the practitioners. They also spelt out factors to be considered while buying equipment and weighed pros and cons of audio and video recording.

Avehi Menon, in another session, introduced the participants to nuances translating oral history interviews and also touched upon different transcribing and editing tools available. This was followed by a session by Vrunda Pathare who briefly spoke about archiving and processing oral history interviews as a collection.

As part of the workshop, OHAI also hosted two public talks. Nandini Oza, independent researcher, writer and



OHAI workshop

currently the President of OHAI, shared her experience chronicling Oral Histories of the Narmada Struggle and Saaz Aggarwal, independent researcher, writer and artist, through her talk 'Memories and History' spoke about how the partition touched the lives of ordinary people as revealed through their oral memoirs.

The workshop got an overwhelming response. Around 100 participants

(divided in two batches) attended the workshops and prompted discussions on complexities involved in methodology, memory, technology, and legalities. During the Q&A sessions, the workshop faculty also addressed issues revolving around consent, subjectivity and challenges involved in interpreting oral history.

ORAL HISTORY AND TECHNOLOGY

Open Access: Archiving Oral Histories Online

Nandini Oza

Nandini Oza is a writer, chronicler and an archivist. She is a former activist of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). She is engaged in bringing the oral histories collected out in the public domain. The book, 'Ladha Narmadecha', (Struggle for Narmada), based on the oral histories of two tribal leaders of the NBA in Marathi is an outcome of this work and so is the website: <https://oralhistorynarmada.in/>. She is the President of OHAI.

It has been estimated that "Development" induced forcible eviction of people in India, in fifty years since independence, is 50 million people. Every decade since 2000, the number of people displaced by mega projects are increasing at the same pace. Gigantic dams and mines often

permanently destroy large regions. Thus, victims of development/ development refugees or their generations next have no hope of returning or visiting their homelands. It is also the case that such massive projects largely impact communities belonging to diverse ethnic groups dependent on

natural resources. Hence, such projects are a threat to their distinct social-cultural traditions, languages, religious practices and unique knowledge.

During my work as an activist of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a movement against a mega dam called



Bawa Maharia Family, Village Jalsindhi, Madhya Pradesh. Source: <https://oralhistorynarmada.in/photos/>

the Sardar Sarovar Project on the river Narmada, I found that the to be displaced communities passed on their history, wisdom, social, religious, cultural practices, etc to the next generation, orally. This was true especially among communities whose languages did not have a script.

Therefore, when I began documenting the history of this powerful movement in early 2000, I felt it was important to capture this rich oral tradition and oral history was the right methodology to document what the key members of the struggle wished to share. By then, with advancement in technology, I could record eighty interviews, in 400 hours in seven different languages and dialects in digital format with broadcasting quality sound. Faint ambient sounds only added to the feel of the interview.

While working on the interviews I realised that the oral narratives of people are a very rich source to hear and learn from. The feelings, the knowledge, the struggle, got conveyed sharply through the voices of the people themselves. Besides, even the silences in the interview between

sentences or change in tone, conveyed what was not spoken. The tone itself sometimes conveyed joy, sorrow, anger, fighting spirit, confidence, disappointment, loss, victory and so on. With this realisation and better digital-internet accessibility, a website where the oral histories could be shared became a viable option.

I therefore began work on the website in June 2019 and in the two years, 31 interviews in seven different languages and dialects (with translations as subtitles) covering different aspects of the struggle have been shared. The interviews shared cover the early history of the movement, the strategies of the struggle, the role of women and the impact of displacement. All of this has been shared in the voices of people who have been a part of the history making.

The website can be viewed at : [Oral History Narmada - Oral Histories of the Narmada Struggle](https://oralhistorynarmada.in/). More interviews covering newer subjects concerning the struggle and the life of the people on the banks of the river Narmada displaced by the mega dam will be added to the site by and by.

While the oral history interviews that I have collected will be ultimately deposited in a repository, a repository has limitations in terms of accessibility for people in general. The website, I feel with edited interviews helps easy accessibility, particularly as the oral histories are made available with translations, subtitles, thematic classification, photographs and introductory notes. And the material on the website allows open/free access beyond boundaries and can even reach interior areas where there is some digital accessibility. Additionally, the interviewees have access to their own interviews and the website is interactive. Another advantage of the website is that photographs of the Narmada struggle, its people and the submergence areas that may otherwise not see the light of the day could also be shared along with the interviews.

Importantly, through a website, an oral historian can take up the role of a publisher. This may be necessary particularly when the histories to be shared are of the marginalised communities that are challenging a dominant history/discourse and more



A screenshot of the Online Repository

so if these oral histories are challenging an authoritarian state. This is the case with the people's movement in the Narmada valley, a movement fighting the destructive development paradigm being pushed by the state and powerful forces. There are some limitations of sharing oral histories on a website too, for example, it is difficult to do referencing, even when the interview may not be self-explanatory. For translation to match the speed of spoken sentences is difficult sometimes and websites are at the risk of being hacked. But many of these challenges can be overcome. As oral histories and its publication on websites are still a developing field within India and in an Indian context, suggestions, inputs, and questions are welcome.

ORAL HISTORY AND TECHNOLOGY

Is my oral history project instagrammable?

Malvika Bhatia & Antara Shankar

Malvika is the Archive Director of The Citizens' Archive of India.

Antara Shankar has been the audio and video editor at the Citizens' Archive of India since 2018.



Harlynn Homan of Citizens' Archive of India interviews Mrs. Kamla Bhushan



Social media has democratised the manner in which we share and access information, and this has redefined how we can preserve and showcase our cultural narratives. While the documentation of history was once the purview of the educated elite, oral history took great strides to include the voices of the masses. In a way, social media furthers that cause by helping get our history out to an even wider audience who may not usually engage with it. While social media has many V pros, its users must be very careful in how their content is represented on it. As custodians of personal histories, oral historians have an especially large responsibility in that regard.

At The Citizens' Archive of India (CAI), we try to share a variety of stories with our audience. Our flagship project, 'The Generation 1947 Project', focuses on recording the stories of people born before the country became independent. We find that those who are in their 80s and 90s today have their most vivid memories of the time they were children and young adults. Growing up at a time of such political upheaval in India and the world, they have both happy memories, and sometimes sad or traumatic ones. Here are the CAI team's tips on handling social media:

Find the story.

Each interviewee will have at least one story of an event or experience that you have not previously heard about, or that wows you. Make sure you make a mental (or physical!) note of it and its time stamp when you are interviewing them. We have an editor who edits our audio and video, so we ensure we tell her to look out for it as she edits, and mark it out for future use.

Present the story well.

While most oral history stories may be interesting to the historian, they need to be presented in a way that invites curiosity, excitement, and the promise of a rewarding end. Anecdotes - particularly those posted as videos - should be approachable to

an audience despite them not knowing the larger context of the speaker's life. Succinctly told stand-alone narratives from a person's life work best as video stories.

Video is not always best.

Take into consideration the quality of the material you want to share with your audience. A rambling anecdote filled with digressions may not make for a good video story, but with some editing and a picture, it could do well as a photo post with a quotation from the interview as a caption. Showcasing material memory in a photo post offers the historian an opportunity to provide a larger context to the viewer without having to overwhelm them with a narrated story. In addition, some audiences may enjoy watching longer interviews, while others might be more interested in archival photographs. If you cater to all attention spans and interest-levels, you're more likely to retain a wider, more diverse audience.

Stay true to the story.

Keep in mind what the intent of your project is. A good story becomes a good post when it best represents your work as a whole. In the age of click-bait, it has become a necessity to think about the aesthetics and overall draw of a post, particularly when you want to reach a new audience. But engaging content does not have to include clever edits and overly dramatic captions that sensationalize an incident.

Your first responsibility is to the interviewee.

Interviewees open their hearts up to a good oral historian. Their stories will include moments of joy, as well as trauma or sorrow. If an interviewee has had a vulnerable moment during the interview - for instance, if they have cried, or have expressed a strong political or religious view that may not be well received - do not post that part of their interview on social media. They have trusted you with their story, and while such moments form an important part of your archive, it is just as important to ensure that they do not show up on the internet.

Make sure it is interesting.

While it can be difficult to be objective about the "Instagrammability" of a piece of oral history, it is in the best interests of your project and your social media presence to be discerning about what content is genuinely interesting to a lay audience, and what content is better suited to an archive.

Make it accessible.

Post clips from interviews taken in multiple languages to engage a wider variety of users. Don't forget to subtitle them clearly!

Watermark your posts.

Always remember to watermark your posts, as people tend to share them without giving you credit. While having a post go viral on social media is usually to your benefit, you want to do everything you can to ensure it is not misused.



IN THE FIELD

Heritage Walking Tours: History from Below

Bruce Carter

Bruce is an archivist and oral historian in Australia. His PhD research used Mumbai's Irani as cafes as a prism to explore how non-elite aspects of Bombay's 20th century past are now understood as 'heritage' in the 21st century.

Until Covid-19, a subtle movement had grown substantially on Mumbai's streets in the last five years. Heritage walking tours have engaged thousands of Mumbaikars with the city's past.

When we met in the suburb of Byculla, InHeritage Project's Alisha Sadikot told me, the heritage walks she had been conducting were some of the most compelling she was running. "Heritage is not just the Fort area, it's not just the British, and I think making Mumbai's complex story accessible, bringing it alive, is what gets people interested" she enthused, before sharing an historical fact that she says almost always surprises her Byculla walking tour participants. At the Byculla vegetable market, Alisha talks about the life of BR Ambedkar, architect of India's constitution, whose first marriage took place right where we are standing, in the Market shed. "Yet, who would know?" Alisha asks, telling me she uses the market as a starting point for discussions around caste and faith.

A decade ago, the opportunities to consciously connect local landscape and memory through walking experiences were limited in Mumbai. The pioneer was Bombay Local History Society. Later, two architects began walks of Mumbai's Fort area. Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) had offered occasional walks and Fiona Fernandez made conscious encounters with the past through walking more easily accessible in 2007 when she published *Ten Heritage Walks of Mumbai*. Today, several start-ups have entered the scene, offering tailored 'heritage

encounters' to recreational walkers but also corporate groups and tourists. Social media has been a key driver in the emergence and sustained enthusiasm for these city walks.

I conducted oral history interviews with Alisha and several others for research on popular perceptions of history and heritage in Mumbai. In Byculla, Alisha led me on a walk she said was "about putting [Mumbai's] story into a wider setting, making links that most [people] haven't heard of. Bombay was situated in the heart of a world, there are international links that you can make, when you tell people these amazing things are happening far away and then bring them home and link it to something that's happening in their neighbourhood, in their city, that's what interests people, its identifying with a city, with the past, with wider events, people think well what's in Byculla? Well, there's quite a lot in Byculla!"

Popular framings of Mumbai as a 'heritage city' have seen heritage become a catchword promoted by the media and politicians. A highly politicised concept, heritage in the context of Mumbai has been used for a range of uses; the 2018 listing by UNESCO of parts of South Mumbai and the international cachet this offers is something that is well understood by the city's political and social elites. Yet what may not be as obvious is the social and cultural work that can occur as a process of personal meaning-making for people taking walking tours and those who lead them. As geographer Lachlan Barber

observes, "walking is not only practical, but also exploratory, sensuous, and political".

Rupali had just returned from studying in the US. She told me she had decided to go on a heritage walk because she hadn't considered Mumbai's past until she lived outside it. Visiting a community museum in New York led to a personal reflection on her sense of 'home' and what Mumbai meant to her: where her family were placed within the greater city she had lived in most of her life. Another walk participant, Nirgosh told me his motivation to walk was borne of a concern about development in Mumbai, "we need to each take ownership of the history, and we need to make sure that it is remembered, but also more than that, it needs to be shared" he told me as we stood opposite a long-closed cotton mill.

Politically-engaged walker Faria told me "We are forgetting what matters. No one is thinking about the people. They are putting up walls. I am here to learn; I want to learn because you can't fight if you don't know the story from the back side". For Faria, a walk in Girangaon was a starting point, a space in which to connect the streets of her city to dramatic shifts she has witnessed in configurations of space in Mumbai during her lifetime.

For walking tour start-up founder Aslam of Go Hallu Hallu, heritage "is all around us, in your neighbourhood, all over, we walk to the places, the chawls, the fishing colonies, to the very normal places in Mumbai, to the



average neighbourhood mosques, to the small synagogue in Bhendi Bazaar, places that people barely notice". For some, heritage walking opens understandings of the past beyond dominant narratives. Aslam comments "there are a lot of people running agendas that are untruthful, so when your history is untold, the stories on the ground that we can share with each other, we must, it's a good time now in India for this".

- Lachlan Barber. "Heritage Tours and Trails on Foot in Hong Kong: Towards a Typology That Crosses the Tourist-Local Divide." *Journal of Heritage Tourism* (2018)
- Interview with Alisha, Mumbai, September 2017
- Interviews with Rupali, Nirgosh and Faria, Mumbai, September 2017
- Interview with Aslam, Mumbai, January 2020

The InHeritage Project
<https://www.facebook.com/theinheritageproject/>

Go Hallu Hallu
<https://gohalluhallu.wordpress.com/why-go-slowly-slowly/>

IN THE FIELD

Narrativising 'McLeodganj' Through Tibetan Experience

Swati Condrolli

Swati Condrolli is a PhD Candidate at Department of Political Science, Panjab University and is currently working on her doctoral research, "Fluctuating Identity and Host Refugee Dynamics: A Study of Tibetan Refugee Community in Dharamshala".

A quaint hamlet, McLeodganj, transitioned into a suburban space, has a short history of its own. In April 1960 when McLeodganj was offered as a haven to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and his establishment by Pandit Nehru, the Tibetan spiritual leader was suspicious about his relocation to the margins. However, more than six decades later, the growth of the refugee community runs parallel to the development of the place.

While the term Dharamshala is more commonly used, narratives from the field unravel the manner how McLeodganj within Dharamshala is a 'point of reference' which holds different meanings for different Tibetans.

Oral narratives and individual life stories of Tibetans having resided in McLeodganj for years provide an account of not only successful rehabilitation and resilience in the aftermath of exodus, but also an enriching account of new forms of association with the

place of refuge. A theme where the oral narratives approach continues to dominantly aid this research is in unfolding a sense of belonging to this place. It is in the process of narrations where Tibetan subjectivities come to the forefront.

Inter-generational research at its core, the oral accounts of exilic experience in early decades in McLeodganj reveals a sense of claim and ownership of the refugee community in McLeodganj. This claim does not come from a position of ownership of resources as such, but embedded Tibetan-ness in the visual and demographic landscape of McLeodganj. While the longing for one's own country and the ongoing struggle for the Tibetan cause remains a constant feature within the community, there are multiple ways in which members of the community feel dissociated with their home-land and associated with the current place of residence. In recounting the early

years in McLeodganj, the first and the second generation of Tibetans discuss the transition of McLeodganj for Tibetans from a secluded township with a makeshift arrangement of housing to pucca houses and thriving businesses. It is through the individual storytelling by informants in the field that we understand how this transition in housing pattern is not merely symbolic of development; rather it signifies a shift from exile as a temporary condition to the acceptance of exile as a permanent feature. In chronicling their lives in McLeodganj, the earlier generations emphasize the initial three decades as a phase of the dominant Tibetan populace in McLeodganj and nineties as a period when 'many outsiders began to settle in McLeodganj'.

To make sense of the belongingness of the Tibetan community with Dharamshala in a prolonged exile context, oral narratives of Tibetans facilitate us in annotating the nuances



Tibetan mother and daughter assembled at McLeodganj to commemorate the 1959 Tibetan uprising against People's Republic of China in Tibet.

that go unnoticed in the structured form of the interview approach. Multiple informal conversations followed by conversational style of interviews has been the key to break the ice between the researcher and the interviewee.

The oral narratives approach, as used in this ongoing research, has 'individual subjectivities & informality' at its core, which strengthens the study. For instance, the storied accounts of the demographic transition in McLeodganj over these six decades provide us with anecdotal evidence of reversing the host-refugee relationship. In a scenario where Dharamshala as the political nerve centre for the Tibetan refugee community exhibits a homogeneous representation of the community; working with oral narratives turns out to be insightful in teasing out the fluidity across different generations within the community beyond the stories of victimisation and success in the exile communities.

IN THE FIELD

Walking: A usual day in the field

Nilanjana Sen

Nilanjana Sen is doing her PhD from the University of Melbourne and working on youth cultures in Himachal Pradesh.

It is the year 2021 and I am in Shimla.

At 8 AM I am expected to arrive at the gate of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (IIAS). I timed my walk to IIAS knowing that the traffic will be less at this hour of the day. My journey however has coincided with the play time of monkeys. As I begin my stroll from Ambedkar chowk, I remember the stern advice of a concerned stranger who I met during one of my previous walks, 'never look into a monkey's eyes.' But it had only been a few months into my fieldwork and I had still not acclimatized myself to the socially preferred ways of dealing with the famed monkeys of Shimla. So, instead of walking mind-ing my own business, I slowed down to watch one of them snatch a packet of apples from a young girl who was on her way to university. As I observe the routine of the monkey, I call up my friend and intimate him about my possible late arrival. He does not know yet the reason for this delay.

My friend waited for me for a good half an hour. Upon sighting me at the gate of the IIAS, he shouted 'Were there lots of monkeys at this hour?' Generally I take the other route to avoid the monkey menace in the morning.' In the initial days of my fieldwork that looked into the social practices of youth in the small town of Shimla, I patiently observed the walking routines of my interlocutors. I was intrigued by how they would always curate the time, duration and routes of their walks with a keen sense of awareness of their natural environment and human-made disturbances.

As Rakesh and I walked towards the main building of the IIAS, he enthusiastically exclaimed, 'the future of independent India was decided here in Shimla. You are walking into freedom now!' I am visibly in awe of the grandeur exhibited by the physical infrastructure of this famed institute. At this point, Rakesh pats my shoulder to distract me so I immediately shift my glance towards him, 'but you know we [youth] don't know anything about the contribution people of Himachal Pradesh have made for India's independence...we were never taught about it.' During my daily walks with young people in the midst of colonial leftovers, I learnt how these traces of the past could become a means through which youth engaged with their own local histories. My initial impressions suggested that young people's everyday efforts at engaging with the history of Himachal Pradesh often became a way of negotiating between their desire to either 'fit in' or 'contribute' to the nation.

But sometimes young people pointed more specifically to the idea of uniqueness that characterized their way of life. 'Par hum [Himachalis] alag hai [But we are unique],' Raman tells me as we begin walking on the road overlooking the Kalka-Shimla rail line. Watching the Kalka-Shimla train pass us by, he explains the idea of uniqueness by embedding himself in Shimla's colonial history, 'There is no place like Shimla anywhere in India... why do you think the British chose it as their summer capital'.

He is smiling as he continues to describe to me the incredible scene we find ourselves in, in a manner he believes is similar to his grandfather who taught him about the Himalayas in his village. At this point I find myself elated as I accidentally (finally) recognize the value of walking as a methodological tool to learn more about ways in which indigenous knowledge is passed on orally across generations. 'This is the baan tree,' continues Raman as he runs his hands over the flaky bark of the tree. He adds, this time kneeling down to touch the moist soil, 'My grandfather back in the village had explained to me how the Baan tree holds the moisture in the soil together and prevents landslides. This road leading to the university which we call Thandi Sadak remains cool for this reason.'

Walking regularly with my interlocutors has led me to recognize and learn the art of what I call 'loose grasping'. I realized early on that a crucial skill I had to acquire during fieldwork was an ability to grasp, even if loosely, the incomplete ways in which the 'past' made its way into discussions on issues that mattered to young people in the present. While most of my participants spoke confidently about contemporary issues of concern to my research-study and that mattered to them, they simultaneously projected their 'ability' to associate—even if loosely—with one's historical past as a source of power and agency.



Thandi Sadak that leads to the Himachal Pradesh University in Summer Hill.

I learnt in detail about this desire of youth to establish a strong sense of association with one's historical past from my friend Rani. Rani, who hails from Kullu district, would always insist that I walk with her.

Often excruciatingly tired but determined to walk, we would laugh as we watched the Ride with Pride, famed for killing tiredness, bus service zoom past us. During our walks, Rani had a peculiar habit of always describing journeys of her ancestors on foot to me, 'I grew up listening to family stories about long journeys on foot (pedal) from Kullu to Shimla. My grandmother would say that they were never bound by concerns of time. They knew it would take many days but they were not calculating the time it would take to reach the destination.' As Rani narrated these tales of her grandmother to me, I sensed that through retelling the stories of journeys that are no longer undertaken she expressed an irreplaceable sense of loss. 'You know, now we are only

thinking about the fastest possible way to reach a destination—we only think about doing everything quickly (jal-di)...We no longer see traces of footsteps on the ground...tyres...tyres...everywhere,' sighed Rani.

For young people like Rani, the disappearance of the footsteps of her ancestors also signaled a decaying of moral values that bound society together. Vikram, who was also on his way to university in Summerhill, joined our conversation mid-way. As Rani and Vikram bonded on their common Kullu connection, Vikram added to Rani's stories and explained that the new forms of transportation curated not just shorter journeys but also reduced patience and induced a lack of attentiveness among young people. 'We have stopped observing our surroundings. Unlike our grandparents and parents who walked long distances on foot, we no longer have to plan what food to carry, how much wood to carry. As a young generation

we don't have any patience left in us to do this.'

The young people that I encountered during my fieldwork frequently explained their experience of loss through narration of oral accounts. They understood loss in not merely material terms, rather it reflected in their changing social attitudes and everyday social practices. My work with youth in Shimla town has taught me the powerful ways in which oral narratives are invoked by them to reaffirm the place and value of oral histories as a source of moral agency, especially in times that are often described by young people as morally decadent.

Oral Histories in the Museum

Priyanka Seshadri

Priyanka Seshadri is a museum professional. She has previously worked at the Centre for Public History (Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology), the Centre for Community Knowledge (Ambedkar University Delhi) and as a Curatorial Associate at the Partition Museum, Amritsar.

On a morning in September 2019, I visited the neighbourhood of Rajouri Garden in New Delhi to interview Mrs. Vijay Kapur and her husband. As I spoke to her about her childhood in the city of Amritsar in Punjab, she fished out a phulkari (a piece of embroidered cloth made mostly by women in Punjab). It had belonged to her great-grandmother, who gave it to her dadi (her paternal grandmother). After many years, it was finally in her hands.

In this article, I make the case for oral history's place in museum collections. Today, we see museums around the world investigating the roots of their collections. Consequently, museums are being urged to follow more ethical collecting practices. Oral history as a discipline can serve as a useful guide towards this goal. It creates a rich world of storytelling around any type of collection, including works of art, archival documents, photographs and material objects. Its methods can also shape a museum's relationships and reimagine its role as a custodian of collections.

For three years, I worked with the Partition Museum, Amritsar, collecting oral histories, photographs, documents and objects from individuals and families. We were documenting a history which took place 70 years ago, when British India was divided into two independent countries: India and Pakistan, leading to widespread violence and a devastating refugee crisis. We collected trunks, textiles, albums, sewing machines, and even passports. The stories we recorded helped us understand the contemporary

significance of these objects, and the histories they embodied. In the case of Mrs. Kapur's phulkari, our conversation also provided the genealogy of this piece of embroidered cloth.

This practical experience made me think deeply about oral history as a medium. In her essay on the book *One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices*, Meena Menon talks about the role of oral history in uncovering historical truth. Oral history, she says, involves 'constantly learning more' and 'adding more layers' to what we know about the past. Oral history, because it takes on board different perspectives and challenges existing ones, acknowledges this layering process.

In museums, oral histories are often placed alongside other types of collections and offer exciting ways to reflect on historical sources. They add additional layers of information to what a record tells us. A collection of newspapers can tell us a lot about journalism of the past, for example, but interviews with journalists can give us an insight into reporting practices or ground-level negotiations and conflicts which never made their way into the documentary record. Visitors to the Partition Museum can read official sources describing how the 1947 borders were drawn, and layer this understanding by listening to people talk about waiting for news about their family members, or which side of the border their city or town would fall. Major political events can be understood through the immediate experiences of eyewitnesses.

Oral history interviews rely on an 'active human relationship between

historians and their sources'. These interactions encourage museums to maintain consistent and long-term relationships with the people they interview. The neighbourhood of Chittaranjan Park, in New Delhi, was originally a residential colony for people displaced from East Pakistan by the Partition. For the past three years, an organisation called Shapno Ekhon has been working to preserve local heritage by encouraging children to record oral histories, collect material and curate pop-up exhibitions, theatre performances, poetry and music for residents. On a Saturday morning, I attended a group 'adda' or discussion amongst older residents as they chatted about old times. This was just one of many regular sessions organised by Shapno Ekhon, and an example of how oral history and group discussions can be used to explore a shared past.

Oral history interviewing enables museums to engage with participants in an impactful way. In recent years, neighbourhood museums and history museums have used oral histories to connect with communities and involved them actively in museum projects and exhibitions. In some cases this has also led to the building of collectives that have a say in the museum's work and its narratives. Manchester Museum's South Asia Collective does precisely this. Members of the South Asian diaspora in Manchester are currently co-curating the museum's new South Asia Gallery to be opened in 2022. Telling stories through the voices of South Asian residents of Manchester is at the heart of this project.

This regular interface with people urges institutions to safeguard the rights of interviewees. Oral history interviewing over the past few decades has generated important conversations around consent and ethics, which have led to the framing of robust practices.

These conversations have led to a shift from thinking of collections through the lens of ownership, to thinking of the museum or the archive as a facilitator, steward, or temporary custodian.

Managing oral history collections involves standardising procedures for obtaining informed consent, documentation, cataloguing and preservation. For a museum on the Partition, it was important for me to

create procedures that were both practical and sensitive to interviewees' wishes.

Interviewees could, for example, restrict sections of their interviews from display, either offline or online. If we think expansively, these processes, otherwise limited to oral history practice, can inform a museum's overall approach to collection building.

By creating a consent-based operative framework, museums can regularly connect with their contributors to ensure they still feel comfortable with their interviews or objects being on display or being publicly accessible.

Lastly, by speaking to a wide range of people and providing a supportive

platform for their stories, museums can use oral history to connect the past to present-day political concerns. In the case of the Partition Museum, this involved creating a space for people to articulate their desires—to meet their friends and relatives across the borders, or to travel to their home villages and towns. These desires tell us how relevant the Partition still is for those who experienced it. Using oral histories, a museum can document these contemporary concerns and find ways to support and nurture them, creating exciting possibilities for a museum's role in today's society.

'This article was originally published on [History Workshop Online](#).'

THE PANDEMIC AND MY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

"Covid has had a strange effect on oral historians, by taking away the privilege that we enjoy of building "new" relationships with interviewees through the act of listening."

Indeed. COVID-19 has impacted all of us in ways that we are still coming to terms with, but as Oral Historians, the pandemic redefined the very nature of the process. We, at Varta, asked a

few people about how they'd coped during the pandemic and here is what they had to say...

Dr. Indira Chowdhury



Dr. Indira Chowdhury is a founding member and Secretary, OHAI (2013), and former President of OHAI (2013-2016).

"I spent a lot of time listening to old interviews and writing about them both for academic and non-academic publications and for my blog."

"I had to postpone my oral history project with midwives in Jharkhand as it was not possible to travel to the Birth Centre run by Jan Chetana Manch in Chamrabad, near Bokaro. However, I kept in touch and listened to the problems the Centre went through during the Lockdown as funds became unavailable and PPEs and masks too were difficult to get hold of.

The Centre bravely carried on with their work and also began educating villagers about Covid, the health workers also travelled to the outskirts of the village and communicated with the villagers about Covid and how they could care for themselves. So Covid taught me how not to give up on a to learn more about those you want to interview.

I am now getting ready to begin my interviews online [over Zoom] with nurses and health workers at the Centre. I am also looking forward to my interviews with Dr. Lindsay Barnes, a sociologist by training and 'an accidental midwife' who set up the Centre in the 1990s.

I spent a lot of time listening to old interviews and writing about them both for academic and non-academic publications and for my blog. The one most relevant might be: <https://theorahistorian.com/2021/06/07/when-breath-becomes-air/>

I spent some time attending an online forum [the Covid-19 group] organised by IOHA on Covid where I learnt about ways in which remote interviews were being conducted. However, I only conducted one oral history interview

remotely. The three other oral history interviews I did during this period were face to face: with Ranjit Bahar Chitrakar about his scroll on the Coronavirus, with Jugal Rani Sarkar about her life in India as a refugee single mother and with the centenarian historian, Professor Arabinda Poddar. These were conducted in November 2019 maintaining safety protocols [RTPCR test and social distancing].

Covid has had a strange effect on oral historians, by taking away the

privilege that we enjoy of building a 'new' relationships with interviewees through the act of listening. Listening online through Zoom is a very different experience and while I do this under the present circumstances, I cannot reconcile to the idea that this mode of listening might continue for a long time."

THE PANDEMIC AND MY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Harpal Singh



Harpal Singh is completing an Oral History Master of Arts (OHMA) at Columbia University, New York. He is a journalist in India.

"During both the rounds, it was harder to meet the narrators, mostly old and ailing widows of 1984, because of the fear of the COVID-19 infection"

'My project is the 1984 Sikh Genocide, of which I'm a victim and survivor. Last year, I had made a plan to interview my narrators, most of whom are in Delhi. I conducted the first round before coming to New York in October last year. And I travelled back to Delhi in February this year for the second round of my fieldwork. During both the rounds, it was harder to meet the narrators, mostly old and ailing widows of 1984, because of the fear of the COVID-19 infection.

I curtailed the shortlist and also followed strict safety protocols before and after each Oral History interview.

After I returned to New York to complete my programme, I tried to conduct the remaining interviews over Zoom as per OHMA's guidelines, which, in turn, follows Oral History Association's 'Remote Interviewing Resources'.

I also began to identify survivors of 1984 in the US. In one instance, a narrator in Boston I was scheduled to meet had travelled to New Delhi earlier this year to visit his family and he is still stuck there because the US administration hasn't yet allowed non-essential and non-air bubble travel from India.

So, the pandemic has certainly affected the timelines. It has also affected rigour. In at least two cases, it has necessitated a second session, which essentially means that both my narrators and I were not able to marshal our thoughts together due to a stressful interview setting and circumstance. I will return to Delhi later this month and pick up the thread from where I had left it.

"The pandemic has certainly affected the timelines. It has also affected rigour."

THE PANDEMIC AND MY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Nandini Oza



Nandini Oza is the president of OHAI.

“With the digital medium providing opportunities, I could engage with interviewees even in the interior parts of the country and could send them their published interviews on the website.”

My experiences coping as an oral historian in the pandemic.

Challenges:

“As with everyone else, I could not meet interviewees in person and several initiatives got delayed. The second edition print of my book in Marathi titled, “Ladha Narmadecha”, which is based on the oral histories of two adivasi leaders of the Narmada Bachao Andolan got delayed. There was a delay in its e-book edition as well. Translation and publication of the book, “Ladha Narmadecha”, in English and Hindi, too, has been delayed.”

Opportunities:

However, the reach of the digital medium came to the fore sharply during the pandemic and so the work of dissemination of the oral histories collected by me through a website gained significance. I therefore focused on publishing more interviews on the website Oral History Narmada - Oral Histories of the Narmada Struggle and reaching it out to a larger audience. With the digital medium providing opportunities, I could engage with interviewees even

in the interior parts of the country and could send them their published interviews on the website. I had an opportunity to listen to experts internationally also on important subjects including Oral History during the pandemic at minimal cost. I found that I was invited by different educational institutions and civil society organisations to talk about my work both within India and outside more than earlier times. This was also because it was possible to do so through the digital medium and at a negligible cost.

THE PANDEMIC AND MY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Vinita Sinha



Dr. Vinita Sinha, Associate Professor in English, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi.

“While the physical distance became almost insurmountable, the emotional distances collapsed. The frequency of interaction on phone was now meant to cover other issues of sentiment, health, ready resources and availability of help.”

“In my case, it was almost shelving the new project in mind, due to the severity of conditions both at home and in the world. However, I would love to share whatever transpired between me and my dear subjects of study. While the physical distance became

almost insurmountable, the emotional distances collapsed. The frequency of interaction on phone was now meant to cover other issues of sentiment, health, ready resources and availability of help.

I was meant to meet Lalita Devi, resident of village Simri in Block Rajnagar of Madhubani district in Bihar. She is a forgotten and overlooked artist who is a repository of rare artistic experiences and a remarkable story teller. Lalita Devi has made some rare contributions

to Madhubani art which adorn international museums that she is unaware of. She is perhaps the first artist to have painted her autobiography; one who took up projects for bringing women to the fore through art by painting on subjects like 'Women and Dairy', 'Women and Forestry'. She is a survivor of two cataclysmic events in the history

of the region- Earthquake of 1934, Famine of 1960's.

I was keen to meet Lalita Devi and record her wisdom! Interestingly, Lalita was happy with her confinement at home now because all others were around her too, unlike normal times, when the 80+ Lalita stayed home waiting... I look forward to picking up

threads very soon. Phone calls were not enough to appreciate and capture Lalita's art of taking the listener to the locale of the narration. Lalita Devi maintains that adversity has always created opportunities and she plans to go ahead with her brush and paper to relive memories."

THE PANDEMIC AND MY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Sanjna Yechareddy



Sanjna is an Assistant Archivist at the Archives at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore

"My interviewees chose to be interviewed over the phone rather than over video-conferencing platforms. The absence of facial cues and cues derived from the interviewee's body language was initially very disconcerting."

In May 2021, in the midst of the second wave of the pandemic, I began working on an oral history project with the Archives at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS). The aim was to conduct life history interviews with women working in the field of biology in diverse roles.

I had not visited the Archives or NCBS and when I began working from home, I had no contacts with individuals working in the field of biology or at NCBS, aside from my supervisor. One of the biggest difficulties I faced was finding participants who were willing to be interviewed. While I had prior experience conducting interviews as part of fieldwork, I soon found out that conducting them remotely was an entirely different ball game altogether. My interviewees chose to be interviewed over the phone rather than over video-conferencing platforms. The absence of facial cues and cues derived from the interviewee's body language was initially very disconcerting. At times when I felt a sense of rapport lacking, I would often imagine my interviewee sitting in

front of me to try and gauge their response during interviews. However, the process of relying entirely on the interviewee's voice and tone pushed me to think about how I could become a better listener. I realized no matter how many interviews you do, the process of improving this skill never truly ends.

I conducted multiple sessions with a scientist, a lab technician of the Drosophila facility and a field assistant working in conservation research. When interviewing the field assistant who was based in Dibang Valley, I ran into a number of disruptions due to poor connectivity. However, my interviewee would persevere to ensure we were able to complete each session, despite the multiple times the call would disconnect. She would often walk some miles away from her house to reach a good spot from where she could continue the interview. This put into perspective any difficulties I faced in conducting interviews and made me realize the privilege of being able to do this kind

of work from a comfortable and safe urban bubble.

During times of intense isolation caused by the pandemic where I felt completely cut off from the world at large, conducting oral history interviews helped me feel a renewed sense of connection - not just with other people but also with myself and my work. Listening, responding and reflecting on the stories from the interviews aided in re-affirming my choice to base my research in people and their narratives. This reminder is something I desperately needed and received by conducting oral history interviews.

"During times of intense isolation caused by the pandemic where I felt completely cut off from the world at large, conducting oral history interviews helped me feel a renewed sense of connection - not just with other people but also with myself and my work."

BOOK EXTRACT

In May 2021, as the devastating second wave of the pandemic ebbed, we were approached by 36 year-old Bhargav Jangle for a project he wanted to kick-off immediately. The Jangles were excited about Suhas Jangle's (Bhargav's father) 70th birthday and were keen on presenting him and close family members with a coffee-table book on the latter's life. In the absence of any real documentation and with only two months in hand, we embarked upon a series of Oral History interviews touching upon various aspects of his life.

The more we interacted with Suhas and eventually the rest of his family, it was evident that Suhas held a special place in everyone's heart. He was a nurturing father, a supportive

husband and hugely popular amongst his friends. He added an unusual cheery energy to the interview which scattered away the monotony of Zoom interactions, regaling us with delightful anecdotes often and innocently reflective when pushed to do so. The book commemorating his life therefore could not be constrained by his entrepreneurial journey and immodest success but an extension of his spirited personality. We took a creative call to keep the content anecdotal and language simple, thereby making it an engaging read for all generations of the Jangle family.

The following is an excerpt from the book drawn from Suhas' reminiscences of his father, Namdeo Jangle.



THE MAKING OF NAMDEO JANGLE

Namdeo Jangle, Suhas's father, was a self-made man who had toiled his way up from unremarkable roots to become a Deputy Secretary in the Government of Maharashtra.

As a young lad, growing up in a tiny village in Khandesh, where his parents were small-time peasants, Namdeo did not have access to quality education. His day began at the crack of dawn as he rounded up a flock of sheep belonging to the more well-to-do households in the village. For the next couple of hours, Namdeo and his flock would lumber along the low rolling hillocks that were typical of the region, until it was time to head back home for school. This seemingly mundane, but deeply invigorating task earned him an extra one or two annas, which along with the scholarship he received helped pay for his school. Yes, Namdeo was no simpleton. When in primary school, Namdeo was granted a scholarship of Rs. 3-4 every month in the 4th and 7th standard.

His aptitude and intelligence shone through his simple demeanour and had an unusual mesmerizing effect on

everyone. That is how he aced his job interview, that is how he earned a stellar reputation within the corridors of Sachivalaya and that is how he won the respect of Home Minister Balasaheb Daulat Patil.

The thirst for a college education took Namdeo to Pune, a city known for its educational institutions and reformist attitude. Here, he enrolled in Fergusson college to pursue BA Honours in Mathematics, eventually ending up at the Indian Law School to get an LLB degree. His life in Pune was not the easiest. More than often, Namdeo was caught in a situation or two which required him to step out of his comfort zone to permeate into a group of friends. One day, a bunch of boys from ILS had decided to rent bicycles and cycle to Sinhagad, a historic fort nestled in the lap of the Sahayadris. But, there was a problem. Namdeo didn't know how to ride a cycle. As a child growing up in a village in Khandesh, somehow he never had the opportunity to learn the skill.

The cycle trek however, sounded too good to miss out on and so, Namdeo

convinced a friend to teach him cycling. For two straight days Namdeo practiced riding a bicycle non-stop, attempting to master the skill till late into the evening. The next day, as he and his friends attempted to maneuver through the tricky hilly terrain, Namdeo's overzealousness got the better of him. His legs were sore and his eyes felt like they would defy his brain and close at any moment. And close they did! The next thing Namdeo knew was that he was lying in a ditch face down, several parts of his body throbbing under the impact.

BOOK EXTRACT



Namdeo wished he could appear for the ICS examinations conducted by the British Government. However, going abroad to take the exam was out of the question. As luck would have it, the State Government recruited employees from institutions such as ILS and Namdeo hurriedly put in his application. For a bright young man, the interview should have been a cakewalk. But, there was a hiccup. The panel of interviewees who had arrived at ILS to recruit employees consisted of an all white group and poor Namdeo struggled to understand their British accents. All he kept saying, at first confidently and then timidly as the moments ticked by, was - "I beg your pardon!" "I beg your pardon!" He was dismissed from the room unceremoniously. Namdeo was miserable and in tears. As he waited outside in the corridor, expecting what could only be bad news, a senior official, who was an Indian, walked past and noticed his plight. Taking pity, the official offered to plead his case to the panel who eventually agreed to include an Indian in the interview process. Namdeo was recalled for the interview, and this time there was no doubt in anyone's mind about the potential of the candidate in front of them. Namdeo was offered a job in the Government of Bombay Presidency.

And that's how Namdeo and his wife Kusum came to Ghamat Colony, Dadar, where they lived, built their lives and raised their four children. For three odd decades, till he retired from service, that corner room on the second floor was their home. Time and again, he was offered or was eligible for comfortable government accommodation in either Worli or Yashodham near Churchgate, but each time he chose to live modestly in a chawl in Dadar for which he paid a meagre rent of Rs.17/70. Every day, rain or sun, Namdeo would walk to Dadar station from home, board a local train to Churchgate station, from where he would walk to his office in Sachivalaya. Evenings, he would do the same in reverse. All perks offered by the government were humbly turned down.

FIRST PERSON MUSINGS

Hesitant explorations in Oral History

Fleur D'Souza

Ph.D in History, Fleur retired after 32 years of service at St. Xavier's Mumbai as Associate Professor of History and Head of Department. Fleur in her teachings has extensively used Oral History as a pedagogical tool. She has conducted interviews of different communities in Mumbai including interviews of people on Dharavi Island. She was formerly the Vice President of OHAI.

"Stories are data with a soul"

- Bene Brown

1997: the year India celebrated 50 years of Independence

1997 :the year the Google search engine was launched

1997 : the year we took our first hesitant steps in Oral history

1997 : the year we realized we had to practically self- learn and practice techniques in Oral History

1998: Routledge published Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson's The Oral History Reader.

With little or no training in the Techniques of Oral History or the history of subalterns, we, an undergraduate Department of History, decided to do a "history from below" in the closing years of the twentieth century. If there was an objective, British Sociologist and Oral Historian, Paul Thompson's words ring true. He adequately sums up what could not be articulated as we flagged off this project. "Oral History can be used as a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history... open up new areas of inquiry and break down barriers between teachers and students." Our little project to study the Pawaras, served to rethink the discipline of History and its content, and the days in the field certainly forged new relationships between teachers and students.

What follows comes as a hesitant offering. This article will focus on the use of Oral History techniques to document life stories of individuals and sometimes of villages of forgotten groups like adivasis who have only the Oral tradition to go by. It recognizes the limitations of the research tool and yet brings to life the history of a tiny community with a unique language and way of living. With great trepidation we embarked upon a project to study a little known tribe called the Pawaras that inhabit villages hugging the hill slopes of the Satpudas, on the northern limits of the State of Maharashtra.

Raised in the school of "no document no history" our steps took us through a search for published work on the people, the area and even the forest

regulations. Extensive interviews conducted with the NGO working in the field may have given us a background but certainly did not prepare us for the reality.

The Basis Of The Project:

What began as a pedagogical tool to use new methodology and enthuse undergraduate students in developing an interest in Historical research and in debating perspectives, studying the Pawaras became personally an area of research that has been exploratory at best.

The germ of the idea came from a friend working with a Non-Government Organisation with non-formal educational initiatives who wondered if a more relevant history could be injected into his curriculum with a



collation of data on this tiny tribal community.

In 1998, tribes of the Nandurbar area branched out as a district separate from Dhule. Nandurbar now forms the main tribal district of the state of Maharashtra. However, Dhule is still home to quite a few tribals, especially in the Northern part of the Shirpur Taluka (sub-division of the district) and a few other Talukas. Our study was based on villages in the Shirpur taluka of Dhule. The 1961 census, 'discovered' 18 different Scheduled Castes in Dhule. This included the Bhils, who formed the largest tribe, Gamit and the Koknas. There was no mention of the Pawaras, whatsoever.

Paraphrased here are the reflections of Godfrey D'Lima who has worked in the region for nearly four decades. Tribal history must document the evidence of tribal struggle for survival, their incessant striving for cultivable land and their relationship with the forests (now shrinking) that once sustained their basic need for fuel and fodder. It must record their interactions with, and celebrate triumphs over exploitative structures like the money-lender or timber cartels, their coping with cultural "handicaps" of language lifestyle etc. and note the changes that have occurred over time. From the interviews in around 15 villages and padas, we had not detected a sustained "active and explicit" resistance against the "exploitative" forces. A quiet acceptance of forest officers demands for a chicken meal and a bottle of liquor and hushed and a guarded response to our probing of the burning of a forest officer's jeep were given matter -of -factly."

Over the last fifty or sixty years the Pawara story is one of survival to "legalise" land-holdings that often clamber up the hill slopes and their own desire to overcome odds. Uripbai, proudly emphasized how she and her husband cleared the land themselves and her goal in life was to have it

declared "Renu" land...it was only later that we realised she was making a distinction between forest land and revenue land. Revenue land meant security. The security that came from that scrap of paper that recorded payment of taxes. Subsistence agriculture with its attendant "bad harvests" would mean that the Pawaras often worked on Government schemes of canal digging or road building in times of drought.

Life Stories:

Of the many people we met all those years ago, the life story that I found interesting was that of Surmibai.

In 2016, I caught up with Surmibai again, over the cell networks and can now write a further chapter to her story. An incredible woman, Surmibai, a grandmother, must be around 70 years old. Married to Ramesh, Surmibai started her community service by

member of the Mahila Mandal, she got the women together in a bacchat group to help them put away a meagre surplus to save themselves from the clutches of the money-lender. Women would take loans to buy a goat. At one time she also started a small co-operative shop to sell food grains at reasonable rates. She admitted, and her husband concurred and assured us that he supported her "work" beyond domestic. She says Joyeda now has pukka houses built under the Rajiv Gandhi yojana. Her daughter is a nurse in Nandurbar, one son has plumbing contracts and one son and his family live with her in the village where they have now opened a small kirana shop.

Method of Research:

Oral historians use reminiscences (recollections of the past either events or situations). They contain elements of



Surmibai and Ramesh

helping a medical NGO distribute natural medicines and give the immediate medical care needed. Scabies and other skin diseases, TB and Anemia commonly affect the community and these "barefoot" health workers would be the first line of defence in regions where medical centres stood perhaps two hills away.

Now, she says, they have a government dispensary in the village. An active

the speaker's life history while reflecting his/her personality and identity.

Our interviews were conducted in the cold seasons of 1997 and 1998 and then again in 2007. Fanning out into smaller groups, we covered around fifteen villages or hamlets (padas) The approach to interviews proved as exigency demanded; sometimes with individuals, at others with groups. Village people congregate in a flash



especially as the visitors from the city are the attraction.

Though personally at first I did not favour group interviews, they are unavoidable under circumstances and sometimes useful. A community tightly knit by its isolation possesses a collective memory. When the respondents said only what they all agreed upon, corroboration became unnecessary. As a matter of method it became easy to note the group consensus on matters like the birth and growth of the village and their dealings with the forest officials. Jan Vansina says, "But group testimony may also be customary and a guarantee of the truth." At village Vahanyapani not reachable by motorable road, the whole village congregated in the sarpanch's house. In course of the conversation he mentioned and the gathering confirmed that the hamlet had not a single literate adult! The light filtering in through the cracks in the walls and his tattered banyan hardly confirmed his status as the sarpanch. But he and his brothers formed the first of the tiny cluster of houses that broke away from the main village to form a pada.

India's complex reality unfolds in different dimensions. This experiment brought home to us a truism that has held for so many years.

An editorial in the journal *Life stories* vol 3, 1987 declares, "the purpose of research is to advance knowledge, useful knowledge." We looked for human association and human meaning in the research undertaken. In a very humble way this was an attempt to understand and interpret History as the community's internal struggles for survival. This tiny community may not have had a "big bang" event that we recorded. Nevertheless we documented the community's response to changed circumstances and its struggle for survival against all odds, to exult in its triumphs in an effort to strengthen identity. Our engagement with the community continued through UTTEJAN an enrichment programme in Summer with the teachers of the non-formal tutorial centres.

As new methodologies emerge and interdisciplinary studies make for more relevant research which gains recognition, this hesitant exploration

reinforced the idea that we must dispel the notion of politics as the "backbone of History" to borrow the term of Jacques le Goff, and look for a more democratized "history from below".

NEWS

Oral History Project : Soboicar

Soboicar, which is being done in partnership with the Citizens Archive of India is an oral history and material memory project, which attempts to trace the stories of Catholic neighbourhoods in South Mumbai, which over the last few decades, due to movement patterns (people shifting to the suburbs or migrating abroad), gentrification and the spate of redevelopment projects, are slowly disappearing from the city's consciousness.

Through the project, founders, Sheena Maria Piedade and Jane Borges seek to document the personal and visual histories of Catholic migrants from the Konkan who made South Bombay their home, living alongside the East Indian Catholics, and why some of them left, and a few others stayed, and how this influenced the complexion of these spaces.

The scope of the project is deeply personal to its founders. Jane's family hails from Karwar and Mangalore in Karnataka and currently lives in Cavel, and Sheena is Goan, with an ancestral home in Dabul. The project hence focuses on these communities as a starting point. But, they want to cover an entire gamut of neighbourhoods in South Bombay. These include the Catholic pockets of Colaba, Byculla, and Mahim, Matharpacady in Mazagaon, Sonapur in Dhobi Talao, Dabul and Cavel in Chira Bazaar, Khotachiwadi in Girgaum amongst others. South Mumbai, or SoBo, as the locals say, is what inspired the title of their project.

Bombay Goans call themselves Bomoicars and the objective is to archive the disappearing stories of those who lived as Soboicars, and made the Southern part of the island city their home.

OPEN CALL



SOBOICAR

Chronicling the lives and stories of Catholic immigrants who made South Mumbai their home.

Submit your stories and photos by writing to dearsoboicar@gmail.com

In partnership with

THE
CITIZENS'
ARCHIVE
OF INDIA

The Soboicar project poster advertising an open call for stories.

NEWS

E Books: Art and reminiscences to find hope: a Brazilian pandemic archive

In Brazil, there are currently several projects being carried out on memory and Covid-19. Andrea Casa Nova Maia, President of the Brazilian Oral History Association recently just published 2 e-books called *Pandemic Archive*. It is a collection of memories, stories, emotions, desires, and expressions during the pandemic. It records daily life in the pandemic and the experiences lived by the most varied intellectuals, writers, teachers and artists.

It also documents art and literature created during the pandemic: a collective production of texts, drawings, photographs, quotes, poetry. As Andrea states, 'If we start from the assumption that the idea of "duty of memory" is directly related to collective traumatic experiences, such as the Holocaust, with thousands of deaths and state violence (HEYMANN, 2007, p. 31)

and that there is an important sense in relating memory to justice, it is possible to attribute a character of "memory duty" also to the oral history projects, public history and memory projects that currently seek to preserve the evidence and the memory of the victims of Covid-19 and a state, in this case, the Brazilian government, which was negligent and responsible for the slow pace of combating the pandemic in Brazil.' She further adds that it is the duty of a historian committed to social justice, to register, denounce from the collection of testimonies, so that the past, not even so far behind, may become "a principle of action for the present".

To access the volumes, here is the link - <https://www.editoraufmg.com.br/#/pages/ebook/792>



News Street Art and ContraConsciência, 2020.
Image from Arquivo Pandemia volumes 1 and 2