

VARTA

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EDITORS' NOTE

Oral history is an intricate tapestry woven from the threads of memory, space, and material culture. In this edition of OHAI Varta, we examine how physical and emotional spaces—homes, gardens, public wells, festivals—serve as vessels of memory, influencing the way stories are told.

We reflect upon doing oral history intersubjectively with women political prisoners in West Bengal through Madhulagna Halder's essay. Listening as an oral historian's signature tool and connection to our own humanness is shown to us through her own process of unlearning as an oral historian.

In this edition, we visit layers of listening where we are pulled-in and out by the process, rendering us vulnerable to transformation as we become part of remembering and narrating. By intertwining oral testimonies with tangible artifacts, photographs, and documents, we create a richer archival experience

that inspires new methods for preservation and access.

This year, OHAI in particular and oral historians in general have had more engagements with traditional oral communities, particularly in the hills of North East India, introducing new dialogues on the 'insider-outsider' status of oral history with respect to tribal and adivasi communities.

Oral history's focus on people is ever more present in this curation. Fundamentally, it is a discipline and a process that speaks to people and analyses the lives of people with great care. The featured interview transcript by Elza D'Cruz gives us a poignant glimpse into the life of Muniswamappa, an 88-year-old gardener from Bangalore's iconic Thigala community, whose story reflects generations of migration and care.

Additionally, this edition explores emerging dimensions in the field,

including innovative new media approaches such as photo and sound essays. We feature Shruti Gosh and Palak Babel to highlight initiatives that reframe environmental history and prompt us to rethink sustainability and cultural preservation in the global anthropocene. Together, these narratives affirm that oral history remains a powerful medium for understanding our past and shaping our future. Join us in this journey of discovery.

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The membership to OHAI is open to all members of the public who have a professional or personal interest in oral history. To know more, please see <https://ohai.info/ohai-membership/>

Website: <https://ohai.info>

IN THE FIELD

Un-learnings from the Field: Becoming an Oral Historian

Madhulagna Halder

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“To tell a story is to take arms against the threat of time, to resist time, or to harness time. The story preserves the teller from oblivion, the story builds the identity of the teller and the legacy which she leaves for the future.”

Alessandro Portelli (2018)

The many readings on “doing oral history” and developing an ethnographic feminist gaze that had prepared me to plunge into my fieldwork only pushed me into a murky zone once I arrived for my interviews. My field greeted me with both enthusiasm and confusion, that I meticulously untangled through my experience at the job. I was returning after almost 5 years in the summer of 2023 and picking up loose threads from my MPhil to now work through my doctoral research on “carceral stories” of women political prisoners in the 1970s in West Bengal, India. My subjects were mostly retired individuals now in their 60s-70s willing to share their memories of youth, activism and revolutionary ideas with me.

Inviting me into their “homes” and cradle of memory

Most of my interviewees choose to invite me to their homes and I often found myself in the intimate spaces of their living rooms, personal libraries, and bedrooms. Sitting on couches, walking into their kitchens, and sharing meals with them helped tear down any walls between me and the participant, and guided us towards a symbiotic conversation. I was acutely aware of the dual process that each interview represented. As I was entering their homes, I was also metaphorically entering their domain of memory. This I believe was my first moment of realisation, making connections with the importance of space in oral history. My invitation into an “intimate space” of the home was

almost imperative for the project as it involved a recollection of violent and traumatic memories, and their homes became their safe spaces where they felt most in control. The conversations themselves were unstructured and interspersed with moments of casual conversation, laughter, sharing of interpersonal experiences, and bonding, and this was where I noticed my first theoretical backlash. The conflating ideas of remaining a “silent observer” in anthropology and “distanced from your subject” as a historian were both inadequate. Oral history operates on a different plane. It is essentially through the bonding with your subject that you arrive at your goal of accessing the memory. Memory also is not a passive object like the archival document, but an active agent in the process of history making, archive construction, and historical discourse.

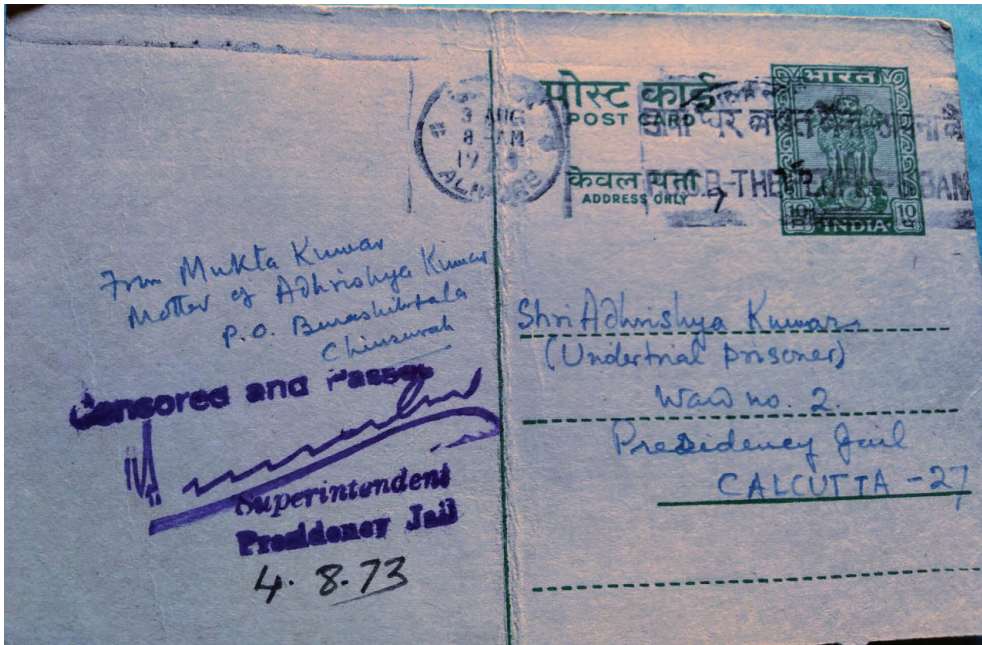
Subjective listener: engaging with violent memories

Another key takeaway of my experience as an oral historian dealing with traumatic memory is learning to be an active and subjective listener. I learnt and unlearnt the ways of listening and being compassionate but not alarmed. Besides learning to read cues, pauses, and silences, I was attempting to steer the conversation towards what the permissible limits of speaking for your subjects are, bounded within the scope of an ethical and consensual process. On occasions when participants narrated an extremely violent experience, I

had to discard my role as a quiet listener and become more, perhaps evolve as a confidant. Yet, in those instances I learnt to contain my own emotions on the matter. This was a daunting task at first, I could fall into the trap of being stoic, which hardly served the purpose, or I would be overly concerned to a point where I realised might make my participant self-conscious. While preparing for my interview, I reached a middle ground where I learnt to strike a fine balance, be an empathic listener, and allow my subject to speak for as long and as much as she pleased. I wouldn't interrupt her process with any questions. I would offer her a glass of water, or drink some myself as a non-verbal gesture that I understood her pain and acknowledged her journey to this moment of being able to speak about it. It is here through the very act of speaking out and sharing that I concluded that my subject had transcended her elemental position of “pain renders you mute”, as Elaine Scarry argues in her phenomenal book *The Body in Pain: Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985).

Conversation as healing

The final discovery at the field was speaking as a healing exercise, and this aligned itself to the project's ethics certificate commitments. My inexperienced claims of my project's potential to create a healing dialogue for my participants played out in unexpected ways. Often during conversation, interviewees would break into tears or have



myself. I realised how the space of the interview often transformed into something of a healing space where I saw participants often drifting into different modes not always strictly within the limits of a formal conversation.

Thoughts, takeaways and learnings

The conclusion of my fieldwork left me with a number of emotions and also made me introspect more about the idea of memory, history, and healing. I learnt that the interview is based on trust. It was a deeply personal experience where my participants, in the process of sharing their memories, were also making me acutely aware of my responsibilities as an oral historian. I was also aware that the interviews were transformative. They were charting out a gateway between “two human worlds”—mine and their past—that was revealing. Finally, I felt grateful and privileged to be a part of their stories, pride in helping them with their recollection, and perhaps healing and infinitely resolved to write their incredible histories.

emotional outbursts. In other instances they would smile at the recollection of some fond memories with a dear friend or fellow activists. Finally, they were also instrumental in connecting me to old friends, whom I later went on to interview. I have witnessed immense kindness where a certain interviewee not only made spontaneous phone calls to help my research, but also

accompanied me to other interviews which turned into group conversations. My research project has in those cases played a crucial role in reconnecting old friends and recounting a distant past which happened to represent an exciting distant phase of their youth. In fact, hearing these conversations have also made me contemplate and often draw out philosophical inspirations for

FACE TO FACE (THE INTERVIEWER'S LOOKING GLASS)

A Lifetime Crafting Gardens

Written, translated, and transcribed by Elza D’Cruz

Oral history interview with Thigala (Vahnikula Kshatriya) gardener Muniswamappa (88 years old at the time of the interview) on 7 December 2018 in Bengaluru (Bangalore till 2010)

This interview excerpt is part of oral histories that Elza D’Cruz recorded with Vahnikula Kshatriya (historically called Thigala) elders between 2018 and 2022 as part of her PhD. Elza’s research was on the role of public gardens in Bangalore in the making of certain landscape imaginations and its effect on vernacular blue-green landscapes in the 19th and 20th centu-

ries. She audio recorded oral histories to understand landscape changes through the perspective of the Vahnikula Kshatriya who are considered the traditional gardeners of Bangalore. The Vahnikula Kshatriya were involved in multiple ways in making Bangalore a city of gardens. Not only did they grow fruits and vegetables for Bangalore’s markets in small holding

market gardens, but many from this endogamous community were also employed as gardeners in public and private gardens of Bangalore. Since the 1950s, agriculturists around Bangalore have been losing their lands in Bangalore to urban expansion. Some farmers with large land holdings transitioned to nursery cultivation and contract gardening which involved large investments as did a few Vahnikula Kshatriyas like the Munivenkatappa & Sons nurserymen in Siddapura, Bangalore, mentioned in this excerpt. Most Vahnikula Kshatriya smallholders



Muniswamappa shares stories of the Thigalas crafting Bangalore's gardens

who lost lands ceased their practice of growing vegetables and fruits and became part of the industrial workforce. However, the narrator's story is one of adaptation of his practice from vegetable gardening in a smallholding farm to working for Munivenkatappa & Sons nursery as a labourer to contract gardening and nursery farming on his own. This interview excerpt is on the narrator's work in the gardens of Public Sector undertakings in Bangalore during the 1960s and the 1970s. It provides a glimpse into the everyday life of gardeners who made 20th century Bangalore a city of gardens in general and the transformation of Vahnikula Kshatriya smallholding gardeners in particular.

Elza D'Cruz: Can you tell me more about your work for Munivenkatappa nursery?

Muniswamappa: An engineer asked our people [Munivenkatappa & sons] whether they would make a garden at HMT. Our people started the garden there. I was sent to this garden for three years. We put the plants in, made the fountains.... It took three years to complete this garden. The contract was given for 16,000. By the time it was finished the bill came above 1,00,000. After we did this, another contract

came... Bharath Bridge... adjacent to HMT. We made a garden with fountains there too. Afterwards we did a garden with lawns for the Sharawati Current works. I worked on these three contracts. Sharawati was the last one. Afterwards I thought I would do some other work. I gave application to many places. The jobs I was called for required full-time duty. So, I didn't take them and took the contract work at ITI gardens.

ED: What was your daily routine then like?

M: When I was working on contract at the ITI gardens, I would wake up between 3.00 a.m. and 4.00 a.m. and work in my market garden [total] till 6.00 a.m. Then I would take my lunch and take the company bus to ITI. Till 5.00 p.m. I would work at the ITI gardens. I would then come back and work till 10.00 p.m. in my garden [total]. I would work between 16-18 hours and get to sleep only about 4 hours at night. This was how my life was when I started. Labour charges were around 75 paise those days [facial expression indicated that it was very high for the time]. I was doing seasonal flowers then. I used to grow 60-70 varieties of these flowers from seed. I got the seeds from Lucknow and other places outside Bangalore. I used to supply these flowers for Madras Flower show. There was a Pondicherry Flower show too. I sent flowers there also. These were my works earlier. In the All-India Flowers Exhibition in Chennai, I sent flowers in lorries. I was there for 3 months. I also worked in the garden of Indian Express for 3-4 months after I left ITI [He worked at the ITI gardens for 10 years]. I was also taking care of my garden at the same time.

ED: You belong to the Thigala community. Is there any difference in the way you work and the way others work on gardens? In what ways, do you think Thigala growing traditions influenced your work?

M: Thigalas would generally do horticulture. They wouldn't go for other jobs. They do work in the garden. My ornamental garden works are not different from others.

ED: When you were working outside, was it only Thigalas who were working with you?

M: No, all castes of people were there in the workplace. When I was working in ITI, there were Thigalas and other castes. We would work together. There was no difference in the way of working for any of these people working there.

ED: Who all came to work in the gardens at ITI?

M: All different castes.... Reddys, Naidus, Gowdas, AK [Adi Karnatakas], people for different castes used to come for work

ED: What was the kind of work in ITI?

M: We had seasonal Flower shows. Now ITI gardens are gone... There is nothing there. ITI has closed down. They don't have flower shows anymore. Nothing is done there now. There, I used to draw cockscomb flowers seasonally. It would be there for 5 months. The flowers used to be really large [indicates how big a flower would be with hands]. Then there were other varieties too. Like the Lalbagh Flower show there were different categories for the flowers in the ITI show. I used to grow these from seeds. Our people used to search for seeds in Darjeeling, Sikkim and other places. These seedlings were grown in beds and then planted separately. That's how I grew these plants. I used to get the seeds myself.

ED: How was the design for flower shows done?

M: Lalbagh used to give books on their shows. We used to refer them. It had information on what kinds of plants should be there in each group. Each group used to have clusters of 24 or 36 plants. If a group exhibitor wanted some particular plants for a group, I used to grow them upon their ordering those.

ED: How did you make the ITI garden?

M: Nobody suggested any design. I used to decide upon the design and the plants that I needed to grow. ITI used to get the manure and soil. If I require those, I would submit a list to the in-charge and they would give the required quantity. When I went for private works, for myself or for Muniven-

katappa to Darjeeling or some other place, I used to bring cuttings of plants and grow them in ITI also. I grew them myself for the Flower show.

ED: What plants do you love to grow?

M: I don't have any preference. I grow all kinds of plants. There are thousands of varieties of plants. I have grown lots of different kinds of plants. Some plants I reared are not even there at

Lalbagh now. Growing plants need patience. One has to be prepared for slow results. It cannot be done urgently. I have specimens which are 5, 10, and 20 years old. Some even 50 years old. These plants grow very slowly. If I find that there is a new plant somewhere, whatever the cost or effort, I will go and bring back growing material [cuttings or seeds].

VARTA FROM OHAI

Brief Report on Annual OHAI Conference in 2024

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The Ninth Annual Conference of Oral History Association of India (OHAI) was held in collaboration with the Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, NEHU; The North East India Archive and Sasakawa Peace Foundation, on "Mountain History: At the Intersection of Memory, Politics and Identity" between March 13 and 15, 2024. The keynote address was delivered by Shekhar Pathak, a noted activist and author, who spoke on "Himalayan Histories: Looking at the Corners". He said that the Himalayas is like the spine of a living body of thousand mountain ranges and valleys emphasising that in the Himalayas, the dynamics of uncertainty has shaped the behaviours and lifestyles of the locals, and the oral histories in the Himalayas have prompted the art of writing.

The first technical session was on the theme of exploring pastoral life-worlds chaired by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay. Nikita N. spoke on the "Route, Rituals and Relationships between Gojri Buffalo herders and the Alpine Meadows". On the same lines, Garima Sudhan spoke on life along the moun-

tain frontiers with special context on post-Partition dilemmas of pastoralists in Kashmir. The third speaker, Swati Condrolli, opined that the cuisine serves as a gateway to understanding various cultures. Rosaline Varsangzuali who spoke on the Oral History of Mizo Dress Tawhloh Puan, looked at it as a symbol of identity and politics. Fifth Speaker Regina Gurung presented her paper on funeral rites and practices of the converted Buddhists and Christian communities in Sikkim Himalaya. The sixth participant Aman Kant Panta discussed the role of the Himachal Devas in times of social change. His study of oral histories shows that the deities in the western Himalayas are changing, transforming and reorganising due to which the forms of castes in the 'lower castes' are also impacted.

The second session was on the theme of Histories, evolving masculinities, and ecofeminism. Chaired by Barath N., the first speaker C. Lalmuansanga explored the creation of masculinity in Mizo society through myths, legends and heroes where he found that the Christian ideology and the Mizo culture intertwine.

Hence the Christian sense of masculinity or manhood stands well with Mizo culture and is widely accepted. The second participant Rohit Mahanta explored the paradigmatic embodiment of ecofeminism in India using Kong Spelity as a subject of his study who is revered as a 'Hero' among the locals for her resistance against the uranium mining in the state of Meghalaya.

On day 1, a parallel session was conducted with the theme of music tradition in the mountains. It was chaired by Karen L. Donoghue. The first speaker Shantanu Majee studied Pahadi Music as the sound of the mountains. Questioning the stereotypical usage of Pahadi tunes in popular music to evoke vistas of the mountain in common imagination, the presentation illustrated the multifaceted nature of a traditional music pattern as independent oral history to embrace several forms of performance traditions. In the same vein, Gaurav Tamang discussed the wedding folk songs of the Tamangs as oral performances of the community. The second parallel session was themed on Linguistics, toponymy and the construction of moral geographics which was chaired by Sangamitra Chatterjee. The first speaker Santhwana Santosh spoke of the mountain



Conference participants and the OHAI team at NEHU, Meghalaya



narratives and reading Tottam of North Malabar. The second speaker Upasana Chettri discussed tales, toponymy and terrains through the exploration of the geography of Sikkim in Lepcha folklore. The third session on evolving trends in mountain histories was chaired by M. Indrakumar Singh. Sonam Chhomo presented a paper on re-imagining home through folktales and adivasi futurism in Subhash Thebe Limbu's Ningwasum. Nakhrai Debbarma spoke about mountain and ecosystem, cultural narratives, and conservation. The third presenter Lobsang Norbu Bhutia, traced the construction of indigeneity through oral history.

On day 2 of the conference, the keynote speaker was Vasudha Pathak who is a retired Professor of History from Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi. She spoke about the telling tales of mountains and changing Himalayan landscape. She observed that

the British created an understanding of the Himalayas and looked at mountains in terms of the river systems by commodifying the mountains. The next session on perspectives on World War II from Northeast India, was chaired by Manash P. Goswami, Head of Department, Journalism and Mass Communication, NEHU. The first presenter on this theme was Lianboi Vaiphei who spoke of recollecting the oral narratives of the second world war from the tribes in the Northeast Frontier and its impact on modernity in the tribal world. On the same thread, Sochanphy A. Shimray narrated the journey of a young girl in the Tangkhul Hills during World War II through the eyes of a young Tangkhul girl with personal anecdotes. The third speaker Dawa Lhamu Sherpa explored the historical trajectory of military recruitment of the Gorkhas of Darjeeling Hills. The preceding session was on the theme studying animals, diseases, and the

environment through orality chaired by Rahi Soren. The first presenter of this session Ritu Mehra studied the traditional Interpretation of bird calls in the oral histories of Bhumiyahtal Village in the Kumaon Region of Uttarakhand. She emphasised that the problem in the area is not deforestation, but overgrowth and the lack of proper care for the aquifers which forces the birds to move towards larger water bodies. The second presenter was Darisha Lyngdoh, who probed into the history of environmentality and orality in Khasi-Jaintia Hills. While the third presenter C. Lalrinchhani presented a socio-cultural study of the COVID-19 pandemic and Mizo society, Tenzin Nyima Bhutia delved into the topic of Tibetan Buddhist monks, reviving faith, revisiting memory, and revising culture in the Eastern Himalayan Regions of India as a custodian. The fifth speaker of the session Adhiraj Singh Bhist spoke on Brahmanism, masculinity, orality,

and text in the deific cosmology of the Kullu valley.

The second day's parallel session was about oral history from be-low–protests, and rebellions in the hills–chaired by Etawanda Saiborne. The presenters, Rahi Soren, Richa Raj, and Arpeeta Sharma explored alternative histories by efficiently discussing on Hul Narratives, Halla Bol and the Gorkha women testimonies. The second session was on oral history perspectives from the Western Ghats and was chaired by Ravindra Vemula.

The presenters Jagath V. and Parvathy V. presented their studies on memory and displacement and the struggles for identity in Wayanad respectively. The third session was about the making and unmaking of places chaired by Dr. Cherry Kharshiing, wherein speaker Antarlina Bhattacharjee spoke of the narratives weaving Jampui Hills and its nostalgic tapestry.

On day 3, the theme was constricting mobility and constructing precarious economies, and the session was chaired by Aniket Alam. The first

speaker Somashree Choudhury traced the movements of Hakka Chinese in India and their series of migrations to various locations. The second speaker Lahun Dashisha Rumnong traced Lewduh's past through the storytelling of a farmer who aspired to be a poet. The third speaker of the day, Kishan Sirswal, mapped the trans-Himalayan trade in the Darjeeling mountain economy through oral history. The afternoon session ended with a valedictory followed by lunch, and a visit to the Ever Living Museum which was arranged for interested participants.

REPORT ON OHAI ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP

“From Storytelling to Archive: Oral History, Oral Tradition, and Indigenous Practices”

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Keynote address by Dr. Indira Chowdhury

In one of its first workshops, a five-day one on oral history “From Storytelling to Archive: Oral History, Oral Tradition and Indigenous Practices” was organised in Arunachal Pradesh, the easternmost borderland state of India. The workshop was organised in collaboration with Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies (AITS), Rajiv Gandhi University, and OHAI from 5-9 November 2024. The workshop was designed to provide researchers and practitioners with the skills and perspectives needed to engage with tribal and Adivasi communities and their oral traditions. Doing oral history research there brings forth many frontiers and mixing of methods, sensitivities and unique ethical questions.

The workshop addressed the unique challenges of working in contexts where memory and knowledge are primarily oral. These communities rich in oral memories are also bound by the rules and customs of orality passed on to them through generations. The objective was to build oral history

practitioners and train them on the fundamental aspects of oral history documentation, particularly in the indigenous contexts. The workshop facilitated an engaging dialogic exchange among the OHAI faculty, AITS faculty, and participants from diverse fields, addressing many critical questions about uncharted methods.

The keynote address by Indira Chowdhury titled “Reimagining Our Journeys into the Past with People Who ‘Live Outside History’: Archives, Narratives, and Memory in Cultures of Orality”, highlighted the ways oral traditions challenge conventional archival practices. Her talk emphasised understanding the narratives within the cultural contexts of particular orality. Contributions from AITS faculty members Jumyir Basar and Lisa Lomdak further explored traditional orality and the dynamics of insider and outsider perspectives in research. Invited speakers such as Bodhi Sainkupar Raneer and Gyati Rana focused on decolonising research methodologies and engaging with indigenous practices of preserving oral traditions.

The OHAI team, including Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, Vrunda Pathare, Sumallya Mukhopadhyay, Deepshikha Behera, Karen Donoghue, Rahi Soren, and Tadu Rimi, facilitated discussions on various aspects of oral history research. Topics included dialogic approaches to interviews, transcription and translation practices, and preparing for fieldwork. Practical sessions also covered project development, ethical considerations, and strategies for archiving oral history collections. Sessions offered training on designing interview schedules,

using the right recording equipment, the nuances of transcribing and translating, developing oral history projects and developing digital archives, and how to give back to the communities. Participants were encouraged to consider the ethical implications of their work and the sensitivities of working in indigenous contexts.

Despite the geographical remoteness, the event attracted significant interest, with over 100 applicants of whom 29 participants were ultimately selected.

Several participants travelled for days to attend the workshop. Each day the participants showcased their own ongoing projects followed by mentoring feedback and open discussions. The workshop ended with a sumptuous and warm dinner with traditionally prepared and brewed local rice and millet wine by Nyishi and Gallo communities called Poka, organised by AITS on the last day.

AROUND THE WORLD

Oral Histories of Climate Change Pilot Project

Elza D'Cruz

Independent Researcher

This pilot project was a three-way partnership between oral historians at the Newcastle University, Archives at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bengaluru, and the Centre for Public History at the Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bengaluru. It received funding from the Newcastle University Global Partnership Fund. The project ran from 2022, with the initial bid for funding, to

2024, when the last of the interviews were conducted. Canopy Collective, Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan, Punar-chith Collective, Sahjeevan, and Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) were involved as advisories. AR Vasavi, Kulbhushan Suryawanshi, Nandini Velho, Rahi Soren, Rohan Arthur, PK Sajan, Rajeshwari Raina, Shalini Sharma, and Sushma Iyengar provided guidance for the project at various stages.

The motivation behind this project is the relative absence of narratives from community elders in studies on climate change. The collaboration was conceptualised as a pilot project whereby oral historians from the UK and India could jointly design and build capacities utilising oral history to understand the intergenerational impact on climate consciousness and activism. The resultant project, the 'Oral Histories of Climate Change' aimed to gather insights from climate change experiences in diverse landscapes using oral histories, when interviewers were not particularly oral historians, but researchers or community members based in those landscapes.

The project had five stages. In the first stage, partner institutions and potential interviewers from diverse landscapes were identified. With the idea that organisations which were already working with communities in different landscapes could aid the project, Sahjeevan (Kutch), Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF, Trans-Himalayas, Lakshadweep), and the Canopy Collective (Assam) were identified as partners. Potential interviewers and their mentors were identified from these host partners and from the collaborating institutions, CPH and NCBS. The



Dr. Graham Smith and Dr. Indira Chowdhury with collaborators



Project presentations

identified interviewers were Al Badush, Gaurab Talukdar, Joyshree Chanam, Krutika Haraniya, Rahi Soren, Rajeswari BT, Rigzen Dorjay, Priyanjana Pramanik, Sayani Saha, Siddhi Bhandari, and Tanzin Thinley.

In the second stage, the host institutions prepared a toolkit with online sessions to train the potential interviewers on the oral history method, including the conduct and recording of the interview, ethical concerns and requirements for consent, and allied skills like map-making and photography. During these online sessions, the interview materials which were in English, were translated to other languages on a case-by-case basis for ease of understanding. The experience underscored the necessity for an accessible training kit for oral history interviews, enabling interviewers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and promoting greater diversity in communities and participants.

The third stage of the project was the conducting of interviews. This pilot project had a total of 10 interviews. From the Trans-Himalayan Region, there are an interview each from Spiti Valley, Ladakh, and Kumaon. There are three from the state of West Bengal, one from the islands of Sundarbans,

another from Bankura in the Chhota Nagpur plateau, and the third from the Purulia drylands. There are two interviews from northeast India, one from the Brahmaputra floodplain, and the other from Manipur. There are also two interviews each from Kutch in western India and the Lakshadweep coral archipelago. The age of interviewees ranged between 60 and 96. These interviews were conducted in various languages native to the geographies, enhancing the intimacy of conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee.

In the fourth stage, with Graham Smith, Indira Chowdhury, and Venkat Srinivasan representing the collaborating institutions, the interviewers and several mentors met at the NCBS and online to collectively discuss the gathered interviews. The main themes for these discussions were the effect of climate change on foodways, human-nature interactions, land-use change and water. The interviewers themselves reflected upon how even when they knew the region from their own personal experiences, focusing on another life experience from the place helped them connect to the landscape in new ways. Finally, in the fifth stage, the interviewers deposited the interview recordings along with

consent forms and terms of access to the Archives at the NCBS.

Though the interviews did not cover the entirety of the country, they provided valuable insights into how communities are experiencing environmental change. They highlighted the fact that while global climate change is happening, effects are more prevalent at the local scale, with exposure and risk influenced by physical location.

Interviewees described how changes emerged from the past, often bringing a sense of loss, such as the disappearance of indigenous rice varieties, the disparaging replacements, the disappearance of certain fish, or the changing seasons, as they described the changing times. They did not always attribute loss to climate change or other causes, but they sometimes understood large-scale changes through local factors such as increased ship traffic in the Sundarbans which increased wave force, erosion, and loss of family lands.

In these narratives, the perceivable effect of climate change on the Sundarbans was increased erosion and cyclonic storms, while Brahmaputra floodplains in Assam experience unpredictable flood intensity. Drylands like Purulia experience increased droughts, while hills experience increased landslides and cloudbursts. Rains change from familiar to strange, affecting entire regions.

Oral histories showed that communities have adjusted to climate change in various ways. On the one hand, migration is the common strategy for people facing severe environmental or economic conditions. On the other, changing climatic patterns such as unreliable rainfall have made communities shift from agriculture to tourism. Understanding these nuances—which oral histories can spotlight—is crucial for successful interventions for communities threatened by climate change, enabling the development of effective resilience mechanisms and even evacuation plans.

The project also provided valuable feedback on how global teaching and learning with the oral history method can enhance the capabilities of individuals and NGOs to foster collaboration with the communities they engage with. As this pilot project shows, oral histories help us understand how individuals and communities have adapted to environmental change. It underscores the connection between climate change and community resilience, highlighting how oral history becomes a valuable tool for understanding and addressing issues on climate change and implementing interventions.



The team at the National Council for Biological Sciences (NCBS)

ORALITY AND ORAL HISTORY

Taarikh -e-samaat: Hearing the Past through the Preservation and Performance of Sonic Practices of Muharram

Shruti Ghosh

Dancer, Choreographer, Teacher, Independent Researcher

How do we access the past through sounds? How do we preserve sound? How do different kinds of sonic practices help us understand history and heritage? This essay addresses these questions through Muharram—a Shia Muslim festival commemorating the sacrifices of the martyrs of Karbala Battle—which is observed by a large community of people through processions consisting of self-flagellation, recitation and chanting of mourning songs.

The essay consists of short audio clips recorded (in Metiabruz in 2023), in the shape of QR codes, as part of my arts research on the cultural legacy of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and memory of exile and displacement in Metiabruz.



Shehnaï from Majlis arranged during the Muharram



Manzilat Fatima, great great granddaughter of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, recounting her childhood memories of visiting Metiabruz with particular reference to Muharram festival

PHOTO ESSAY

The forgotten well-makers of Jaisalmer

Palek Babel

Aabha Chhajer and Sambhaav Trust

This photo essay documents the endangered art and practice of making hand-made deep artesian wells and shallow percolation wells in the Thar desert, Jaisalmer district, Rajasthan. This is part of an ongoing research project by Sambhaav Trust, Palek Babel, and Aabha Chhajer. Researchers documented the narratives of individuals who used, repaired, or possessed knowledge about making the wells over two years. Ecological, socio-cultural, and economic factors influence the making and use of these wells. Their craft is passed down through oral traditions.

Hand-dug artesian wells, which reach depths of 150 to 400 feet, draw water from confined aquifers locally known as pataali paani. These wells showcase the ingenuity of communities in the Thar Desert, in the Jaisalmer district. Unfortunately, no new wells have been constructed in nearly fifty years, leading to the craft of well-making becoming increasingly obscure.

Constructed with dry stone masonry, stones were transported via camelback over distances exceeding 50 kilometres. The making and use of these wells are influenced by ecological, socio-cultural, and economic factors, with stories of their makers and the craft passed down through oral traditions.



“Jeevan tala ra irath – girth hai, aur kua hamari naak hai”

In the desert, life centres around wells. Tanay Rao Singh Ji represents the last of the pastoralists who use animal power to draw water. He often refers to the wells as the nose, symbolising their importance and pride in the community. These anecdotes are commonly shared when people discuss wells in the region.



“dehri ma darkhat hui, toh koi tirsho ni jave”

It is said if you see tree cover within a dehri, no one will go back thirsty. Artesian wells are usually sited within depressions called dehri which communities have over time discovered as a source of potable groundwater in the core desert area.



In our study, we utilised maps to identify potential sources of water. To confirm these locations on the ground, we were instructed to locate the Kherjri tree (*Prosopis cineraria*), which serves as a marker for identifying water sources in the arid landscape. Additionally, animal tracks help indicate the proximity of these water resources.



In Jaisalmer, these wells are known by various names such as khu, tar, tala, kua, and pataali kua. Among them, a select few are referred to as sagru kua. These particular wells carry an air of mystery, as their construction dates remain unknown, and the identities of their builders have been lost to time. They are named in honour of Raja Sagar's reign, a period noted for the remarkable feat of digging a new well each day.



The well at Phaledi, Jaisalmer reaches a depth of approximately 100 purush, with one purush equating to an average arm span of 5 feet. The erosion patterns on the stone highlight the well's extensive usage, illustrating the specific points where individuals placed their feet while drawing water.



“kua mein utarne mein jokhim hai, dar bhi lagta hai”

Bachal ji, a skilled well maker from Barmer, recounts his experience of being part of one of the last groups that descended into a well in Isawal, Jaisalmer to clean and repair



Stones are placed in courses without the use of any mortar. This well was one of the last wells to be worked upon in the region.



The proliferation of solar-powered pump systems jeopardise the fragile balance of recharge and consumption within the ecosystem, transforming the overall dynamics while preserving the original structure of the wells