



VARTA

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EDITORS' NOTE

This issue of Varta brings together reflections, field experiences, methodological insights, and a note on shared loss of a friend and fellow traveller. With the loss of someone so young, we lose so many possibilities that weren't unfolded and plucked halfway. In oral history, we are inherently oriented to capture the life of someone or life of people that have reached certain fruition. Their almost complete memories, a phase that was seen and witnessed, and experiences that lived to its almost complete meaning. Not about the life that is ongoing or still ongoing or just ordinary in a true sense. With Lian and her obituary we try to complete our story of hers. People who knew her and people who couldn't, now will have a tiny part of their memory which carries her name. And through continuation and completion of our own lives, we somehow complete hers as well. Perhaps that is one of the reasons we write obituaries. So that one we lose is not truly lost.

With this Issue 5, we hand over the editorial duties of Varta to a new

team. We wish them all success. The current Varta team constituted by Rimi Tadu, Shantanu Majee, Biswadeep Chakraborty and Pooja Sagar would like to thank the OHAI executive members and the OHAI members for their extended support in sharing articles for Varta. We hope that the team grows in strength and builds camaraderie just like we did, through publishing two issues of Varta over the last two years. As the past is the field of our studies, we hope that this will also be an act of collecting and making memories, a recognisable contribution to the field of Oral History in India, and OHAI which brings us all together.

In strength and solidarity

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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>

OBITUARY

Dr. Lianboi Vaipai: A Nightingale's life

Dr. Vinita Sinha

Associate Professor (Retd.), Joint Secretary, OHAI

"Take care of all your memories. For you cannot relive them." –Bob Dylan.

Dr Lianboi Vaiphei was my colleague at Indraprastha College for Women. She joined the IP family in July 2006 as a young member of the Department of Political Science. Looking back, it feels like only yesterday. What I write today is only a reflection of the days spent together as colleagues at the workplace; time was always on the fast track - fun filled, packed with laughter and joy! There was never a dull moment with Lian by your side. She was a spirited girl ('person' might be better?), brimming with unbound joy and unfathomable energy that she could spill into any conversation in a gathering. At work, Lian was passionately committed to teaching and loved the challenge of mentoring young minds. As Advisor of the

college's Western Music Society, she was a driving force behind students' performances leading them to win accolades at the competitive events organised in DU and elsewhere.

Once in college, I remember the occasion of practising 'Hey Jude' for the Principal's farewell, when we went off tune a number of times, breaking out in laughter at ourselves! After what must have been a several attempts, it all seemed to click and we got it right! Lian had beamed with happiness, crying out - **"Yess... McCartney!"** Her expression of innocent jubilation is still ringing in my years (ears?).

Very few of us had the privilege of knowing Lian up close. Still, few among

them would've known, for instance, how well she knew the nuances of colloquial Hindi and how quintessentially a Delhiite she had become over the years spent in the capital city. But her heart lay in her hometown!

On my trip to Shillong, to participate in the OHAI workshop, Lian insisted on drawing my itinerary. She was my guide, as I prepared to journey to Meghalaya. Her words resonate even today, "Ma'am, please don't forget to visit Lady Hydari Park, Wards Lake, Shillong Peak, Golf Links. And do send me a Hi! from Dylan's Cafe!" I did not forget to comply with her careful instructions and visited the picturesque spots as advised by my dear friend. My journey to Shillong may have remained incomplete but for Lian's itinerary.

When Dr Vaiphei decided to join OHAI, I had the privilege to be her referee for the same. She was an enthusiastic participant at the ninth annual conference of OHAI held in March 2024 where she shared the oral narratives of the second world war as recollections of the tribes from the North East Frontier. Her presentation was very well received and she soon became one of the "Trans Himalayan Participants", a label that she gave to herself! Lian was all set to take her research further when she was snatched away in beauty's bloom...

However, distance means so little when someone means so much! May you rest in peace while we continue to cherish the days spent together. Lian, you were the nightingale I knew, one so warm, compassionate and caring towards all.



IN THE FIELD

Interviewing on the field - When life overcomes the interview

Dr. Siddhi Bhandari

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I have been on the Faculty at the Center for Public History (CPH) at Srishti-Manipal Institute since 2016. The center focuses on and uses the oral history method. During my time here, I have co-authored a book *Lessons in Living: Stories from the Life of Triguna Sen* that used the oral history method and the archival method to construct a biography of the first vice-chancellor of Jadavpur University. By the time I began working on this book, the oral history interviews were done, and we focused mostly on the chapterisation, the focus of each chapter and the writing and curating of the archival material that included photographs and documents among others. I proofread several of the projects that were nearing completion, and which also used the oral history method. However, it was only in the winter of 2022 that I got around to conducting interviews following the oral history method. I was encouraged to conduct the interviews as part of the working group on the climate change research grant since early 2022. The meetings I attended as part of this group made me re-think the changes in and around our village Chilkiya, in the Terai-Bhabhar region in the Nainital district of Uttarakhand. For those even slightly familiar, the name would ring a bell for the Chilkiya-Kota jungle corridor that connects forests in several states and helps in the movement of wildlife. I have intergenerational family roots in the hill state of Uttarakhand in India, and in a village near this tiger reserve. The village borders Corbett National Park and Tiger Reserve, which was the first national park to be declared so in independent India and where the acclaimed Project Tiger began in

1971, an initiative that brought back the dwindling tiger population from extinction to a reasonable number now. However, this has had its own ramifications particularly from the perspective of human-animal conflict but that is beyond the scope of this discussion. It is a five hour drive away from the national capital and is a popular destination for tourists, with tigers being the main attraction. One gets a sense of this with the beeline of vehicles on weekends and the ensuing traffic jam on the single lane highway that passes through the nearest town of Ramnagar. The town and neighbouring villages are now dotted by hotels, resorts and homestays. India recently celebrated fifty years of Project Tiger, a project that sought to save the tiger. This has led to an influx of tourists. To cater to them, agricultural lands have been sold and converted to 'resorts'. At one village in particular, the walls have blocked the jungle corridor often resulting in man-animal conflict, particularly in this one stretch. What is cultivated is also determined by the demand of hotels and resorts; for instance, there is an increase in mushroom cultivation and schemes are being announced for fish cultivation for the locals. An increasing number of farms are growing Indian Gooseberry which I was told cater to Patanjali, an ayurveda pharma company which is also located in the same state.

Chilkiya was historically a mandi (a wholesale market) for fruits and vegetables because being at the foothill it served as the meeting point of hills and plains. It is(was) a fruit belt with mango and litchi orchards aplenty. I remember my mother recalling that during summer months, the moment

one neared the region, the waft of fruits' smell filled the air. All of this is in stark contrast to the way I see the landscape now. The agricultural land and fruit orchards are fast giving way to new building constructions like resorts, eateries and houses. The region has fertile land due mainly to its geography. The rivers flowing down from the mountains deposit their sediments here; further, the area is covered by a well-networked criss-crossing of the irrigation canal system which was set up during colonial rule. The usefulness of all this is fast diminishing. Extreme heat and humidity in the monsoons also made it infamous for a form of malarial fever called bhabhari buhkar and even locals, rich or poor, avoided staying here during the monsoons and went up to the mountains in ways they could. Much has changed and continues to with every trip I make, sometimes even three times a year. Orchards are being cut into residential plots and sold at exorbitant prices and the marginalized further pushed to the margins.

The interviews

In December 2022 – January 2023, I conducted three oral history interviews. I felt the need to conduct interviews in the region because I have known the place in the four decades of my existence and some changes are pronounced while others are more subtle. The age of the people I chose to interview furthered the necessity of using the oral history method as most appropriate. My access to the people and language looked to be an added advantage. However, what I took for granted had challenges as I was soon to learn. In this analysis, I will reflect

on some of the challenges I faced during the interviews. I had certain expectations from the interviews that I had planned to conduct, to gather some constructive information about the topic I wanted to understand better – climate change and its larger ramifications. I also made other logistical plans around the interviews I were to conduct. For instance, this was planned during the winter break when I would visit Chilkiya. I had also set aside a day for each of the interviews and decided on the best suited location, with minimum noise and other disturbances, apart from doing some preliminary research on the three interviewees and noting down the kind of questions I would frame the interviews.

The first person I met with and spoke at length was Bajar Husain, a nanogenarian who everyone knows and the village like the back of his hand. The interview went extremely well, or so I thought. It was a life-story interview in every sense I know – he started from the beginning, how he arrived in the village, the work he did, the changes he has seen and continues to see. The third interview I conducted was with a seventy-four-year-old Mahendra Singh who is a wildlife enthusiast and runs a motel in what used to be his farm and orchard. He was vocal and articulate and had knowledge of the changes that the region has seen in the recent past. The two of them were able to distance worldly knowledge from their personal lives. However, it is the second interview that I want to focus on as it was this which did not move beyond a point and it made me reflect on the role of the researcher in the field.

The second interview I conducted was with Roopvati Nanhe Singh, a 74-year-old resident of the village. My mother had met her a few weeks ago at the naming ceremony of a child in the village and after speaking to her was impressed with her knowledge, particularly about manual agricultural techniques. I thought she would be a valuable person to interview and sent

a word to her a few days before that I wanted to speak with her. She was more than willing to come to my house to have a conversation. I selected a spot that would be the setting for the interview. When I sent the car and driver to bring her over, the driver returned within minutes to inform me that she is unwell and is unable to travel. Since this was my last day in the village, I decided to go to her house. Her house was a brick house and she was lying on a cot basking in the winter sun. Later I discovered that she lived in one of her son's houses and the other two sons' houses were separated by a thin wall.

Roopvati did not recall the exact year she arrived at the village, but it was after she got married. She also did not know the age she got married but that she was very young, so young that it was only after a year and a half she realized that she was married. She has eight children, three sons and four daughters. She has bequeathed all her property to her children and in hindsight, was not too happy about it because it has made her dependent on them and strained their already fragile relationship. Soon the interview turned into a tirade against her sons and daughters and daughters-in-law who she felt did not look after her. In no time she began hurling abuses at them and shouting and weeping, aware that they were only an earshot away. I tried a few times to turn the unexpected (for me) course the interview had taken but to no avail. Her every response was a reprimand to her children and to children who do not look after their parents. Her setting of her house was also bane because my arrival was noticed by many. Soon people started coming to meet me saying that either they had heard of my arrival or heard my voice coming through the open verandah while sitting in Roopvati's house. They too added their take on her plight. The interview was going nowhere, or so I thought, and turned off the recorder after twenty minutes or so of recording but continued our conversation.



Bajar Hussain, Mahendra Singh and Roopvati Singh shared their experience of climate change in the surrounding areas of Corbett Tiger Reserve that ranged from water pollution to strained kin relations

Reflecting on the Interview

The interviewees are not only sources of information, who will speak to the researcher as and when the latter wants. Nor will they tell you the things be it about their life or respond to the questions you ask of them. They have their own realities and the things which are of immediate concern to them. Keeping a specific day and time to conduct the interview was more to do with my convenience, without accommodating that the interviewee may be unwell or unwilling or have other pressing matters to attend to. This is exactly what happened with Roopwati.

In Roopwati's case, it was to draw everyone's attention to the ill-treatment meted out to her by her children, particularly her sons and daughters-in-law. Even when she spoke about the changes, it was only keeping their behaviour at the centre. Language is another aspect that I did not account for. While I was more than familiar with the spoken language of the interviewees, I did not account for invectives and rants during the interview which was not a response to my question or in flow with the

conversation but seemed to take on a life of their own. The recording of her interview that I have of her, which had to be stopped abruptly, is full of expletives and will perhaps have to be redacted. Even though what she says contributes to our understanding of the larger impact of climate change, particularly on women. She continues to work on others' farms when her health permits or goes to collect firewood, thereby alerting us to the trend of increase in the working life of individuals as she tries to eke out a meager living for herself.

In the Bhabhar region that I have described, climate change cannot be separated from other changes that the area is undergoing, be it change in land use or people's relationships. Otherwise, climate change rhetoric tends to revolve around one point. All of these are often intertwined, and it is often the women who provide a more layered account of the changes by weaving it with their lives and realities. I am familiar, indeed entrenched, with complex changes over the past decades that comprise economic and domestic, and have affected land-use, kin-relations, migration to name a few. These

changes have shaped my interest and curiosity to bring together how other such changes unfold when viewed through the lens of climate change. The information is not presented in a straightforward manner but something that makes the researcher think and connect the dots. I cannot help but contrast the responses of the two men I interviewed with Roopwati's. The men had the privilege to leave everything within the home aside and focus on the outside world. Their responses were worldly wise and measured, telling me the things I wanted to hear. Roopwati does not emphatically mention the changing patterns of land use but these do emerge from the manner in which she frames her relationship with her children after she has sold the little land she had inherited and distributed the money amongst them. In Roopwati's case, it was her domestic life that provided a lens to examine the changes, including climate.

Addendum:

Bajar Husain passed away in 2023. He had gone to Mecca for the Haj and fell sick soon after his return. He did not recover.

FACE TO FACE

Erosion, Eviction and Disaffection: Fieldnotes from Ganga Bhangar in Malda

Dhritiman Chakraborty, Assistant Professor & Joint-Director, Abid Ali Khan Center for Digital Archive and Translation of Cultures (AAKCDATC), Gour Mahavidyalaya, Malda

Arunima Ghosh, Faculty Member and Research Associate, AAKCDATC, Gour Mahavidyalaya, Malda

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Monali Chatterjee, Independent Researcher and Filmmaker

When will the mighty river nibble away the lands on which they inhabit? In the night or day? Is it only land or life? Is it merely home or the entire habitus that includes neighbours, livestock, school, playground, temple, mosque, local bazaars and several other non-tangible components of life?

In Panchanandapur, Gopalpur, Birnagar, and Bhutni, located on the banks of the Ganga, thousands of people have been living with an acute sense of insecurity. These towns are just a few kilometres upstream from the Farakka Barrage where the Ganga enters West Bengal and then flows towards Bangladesh.

For over twenty-five years, the fear of erosion structured the daily lives of affected people. Over this

time span, entire generations were mutilated, thousands were forcibly displaced, and many others were rendered landless, unemployed, and subject to enduring psychological and social trauma. These miseries gave birth to the **Ganga Bhangar Protirodh Nagarik Action Committee** (Citizen's Committee to Save the Erosion by Ganges) in 1998. Four of us Dhritiman Chakraborty, Arunima Ghosh, Bikash Chandra Mandal and Monali Chatterjee, working in different professions, undertook this project at the Abid Ali Khan Center for Digital Archive and Translation of Cultures (AAKCDATC), situated in Gour Mahavidyalaya (College) at Malda with this sole objective to make the voice of the displaced heard in a world that sees development through a different lens and dislocation as only tragedy, that refuses to recognise the subtle layers of a disaffected life. Our intention was to go deep and explore how emotive issues like the river-human relationship, the non-tangible losses, the making of a river activist like Kedarnath Mandal, Khiddir Baux, and Torikul Islam can offer instructive and persuasive narratives.

Since the formation of the Committee, the movement has experienced periods of significant advances and setbacks, marked by both achievements and challenges. It has adopted distinctive forms of protest that continue to the present

day. Spanning nearly three decades, the movement has attracted the involvement of prominent activists from across India, alongside river experts, environmentalists, and non-governmental organisations who have extended their support. Despite this sustained engagement, large-scale riverbank erosion has continued largely unaddressed, posing an ongoing threat to Bhutni, the largest island in the Ganga. Recent flooding has further intensified these challenges, simultaneously exacerbating the crisis and reinvigorating the movement. This situation raises a fundamental question: what does resistance mean when the forces at stake—river erosion and flooding—are natural and inevitable processes?

Kedarnath Mandal, who is now 87 years old, has led the movement from the front since 1998. His involvement in the movement earned him the rare accolade, 'river activist'. He avers, "this erosion is due to the Farakka barrage that prevented the normal flow of the river. As a result, the silting has gone up manifold leading to massive floods and erosion in the entire region of Manikchak and Kaliachak-II blocks within the Malda district, West Bengal. Earlier, the floods were a blessing in disguise as it made lands fertile. But the floods have mutated to erosion. It is causing devastation. The river is changing its course and the entire

topography of Malda is in danger." He continued, unsparing, "I have travelled across all the tributaries and canals of Ganga in this region with river experts like Kalyan Rudra, and have prepared a hand-drawn map. In the next twenty to thirty years, the river will create its own passage and will bypass the bridge (read Farakka bridge)."

"What will happen to the Farakka Barrage then? The Kolkata port which receives water from the project?" He retorted, "what will happen to the people who are in danger of destruction and even death?" We are reminded of how easily we forget to keep on board the people who bear the brunt of such massive developmental projects. We think about cities, outside worlds that are supposed to benefit from such endeavour.

Farakka Barrage was built in 1971 with four main objectives: to save the port in Kolkata, to generate hydro electric power, to provide irrigation for agriculture, and to provide connectivity between South and Northern part of Bengal including the North-East India. However, after the construction of the barrage, the plan to set up the hydro-electric plant was abandoned. In its stead, National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) built up a thermal plant which has over the years heaped up huge amounts of "white dust" leading to extensive water pollution and



Sahajul Seikh, an affected villager, during an interview



Kedarnath Mandal in one of his many journeys across the Ganga

associated environmental hazards. The irrigation could not take off as the flow of the river was so intense that it destroyed all embankments from time to time. So, the only benefit it could accomplish was improving the connectivity.

At this point, Mr. Mandal intervenes, “why wasn’t a review ever carried out after the barrage was opened up in 1975?”. “We requested the union government to form a review committee. A committee should have been formed to review the four major benefits that the barrage was supposed to deliver”. But it did not materialise. The administration at the

state and central level intermittently stepped in, but no concerted effort was executed to assist the dislodged people. Kedarnath Mandal himself has suffered dislocations five times. He said, “people don’t want to leave Ganga as it gives them everything.” According to him, people who live around Ganga have been traditionally dependent on Ganga for livelihood needs. Once dislocated, they are forced to adopt different professions. This amounts to a psychological crisis, as the youths who lost their home do not find suitable means to live their life. Many have migrated to places like Mumbai, Bangalore, leaving behind their family and wives. Moreover, some

have never returned, deserting their wives and children permanently. The erosion has had its own toll on women, elders and infants. The trauma has lingered. Some have become blind, while others have caught different diseases. Goutam Paul, a prominent face of the movement, for example, told us during the interview how the erosion pushed people to various criminal activities. According to him, “man-made calamities turned them into criminal”. In a scenario where lines of legal and illegal are often overlapped to the advantage of the power that be, criminality takes a class form to further incriminate the downtrodden.

THE VERNACULAR VOCALS

In Conversation with Gojri folk singer Mohib Ullah

Faisal Javid

Cluster University of Jammu



Faisal Javid in conversation with Gojri folk singer Mohib Ullah

In this brief interview, Faisal Javid, a research scholar at the department of HSS, IIT Jammu, discusses about Gojri folk songs and recitations from oral based literature and their significance in the modern world with Mohib Ullah, a young Gujjar student and singer from Kalai village in District Poonch. The interview is a part of the Tribal Project by IIT Jammu, which aims to investigate the Gojri language and culture, as well as to document and translate Gojri folk songs and poems into English. IIT Jammu has made an important advancement by establishing an Oral Narrative Center called **Zuban-e-Kalam** at the department of Humanities and Social sciences under the supervision of Dr. Quleen Kaur Bijral, which aims to explore, revitalize and promote the literary and social aspects of Gujjar- Bakarwal community. The vast heritage of these communities including their oral traditions, folklore and spoken stories helps in discovering and showcasing their

true literary and cultural expressions. This interview aims to examine the socio-cultural environment of the Gujjar-Bakarwals in Jammu and Kashmir. It explores their rich folklore and emphasizes how individuals from these communities use it to express and shape their identity.

FJ: I would like to express my gratitude for your presence today Mohib. Thank you for your time. Could you kindly start by providing an overview of your journey as a singer?

MU: Thank you for inviting me, and for this opportunity. My journey began from my childhood. I resided in village Kalai of Tehsil Surankote in District Poonch, situated in the Peer Panjal Area, surrounded by the vibrant Gojri culture. My family has always cherished the tradition of orality, folk singing and storytelling. My Grandfather Ch. Abdul Ghani is a renowned poet of the area and is well versed in the art of Poetry in Gojri. I would attentively listen to my grandmother as she narrated stories of bravery and courage of tribal warriors, along with the stories of her everyday life, typically through Gojri songs. That is where I was introduced to rich Gojri heritage and there my fascination began.

FJ: What specifically attracted you to Gojri folklore and oral traditions as a form of expression?

MU: Gojri folklore and oral traditions are deeply embedded in our cultural identity. It is not solely about the melodies; it includes our moments of happiness, our sufferings and hardships and cultural heritage. Each song and poem carries a narrative that establishes a connection between individuals and their history, as well as their community.

FJ: Could you kindly provide a particular song or ballad that has special significance to you?

MU: One song that I can strongly relate with is "Cuckoo," which is kind of central to Gojri folklore and a symbol of oral traditions. Singers and storytellers have continuously used "Cuckoo"

in their works but the richness of this symbolic work is that there is a genuine freshness and novelty every time someone sings it. The song is marked by desire and longing to return to homeland, showcasing the emotional aspects of human existence. For me personally, whenever I perform it, I feel a sense of connection to all individuals in the audience who I believe share experiences of loss and yearning.

FJ: What sort of difficulties have you encountered during your journey as a folk singer?

MU: Well honestly there have been numerous challenges. Initially, there was a sense of disapproval from my own people, because of the fact that I was also studying and they were concerned about whether I would be able to balance these two. Additionally, our language was limited to a certain section of the society because people from various linguistic backgrounds were not able to relate to it.

FJ: How do you view this process of modernizing Gojri folklore and oral traditions while preserving its essence?

MU: I am in favour of this new development which is the fusion of traditional folklore and contemporary styles. I add a touch of contemporary compositions into my performances while remaining faithful to the lyrical themes and melodies. I believe that we should accept a few changes when it comes to our traditional singing in order to make our language and culture visible on the global stage, but at the same time we all should try to be true to our heritage and roots.

FJ: Can you tell us if there are any artists or musicians who have influenced you in your journey so far?

MU: Yes. I have been inspired by a few local artists including Ayaz Saif (Gojri Singer and writer) and Kabul Bukhari (Singer) but my biggest inspiration is my father Tanveer Ahmed who also sings in Gojri sometimes. I also hold great admiration for senior figures in Gojri

singing who have devoted their lives to the development and growth of Gojri.

FJ: What do you think is the significance of folklore in contemporary society?

MU: Personally I believe that folklore is the true connection to heritage, not just in our community but anywhere in the world. In a rapidly changing world, it offers a sense of belonging and continuity. I am of the opinion that by embracing folklore and oral traditions, we can contribute our part in showcasing our rich heritage and culture to the world.

FJ: In your performances, do you try to engage with your listeners? And how?

MU: Yes I often do that. I invite the listeners into the storytelling process. I encourage them to sing along, share their own stories, and reflect on the themes of the songs and connect these to their own lives.

FJ: As you progress on your journey, what are your aspirations for the future of Gojri folklore and oral traditions?

MU: One thing I desperately wish to see is the flourishing, rather than mere survival, of Gojri folklore and performances. I wish for more collaborations between traditional folk artists and modern musicians which will surely add a significant amount of listeners from other communities. In addition to this, festivals focusing on Gojri music, and educational programs aimed at nurturing our children's understanding of their cultural heritage should be given priority and I must say that we are blessed to have so many institutions and organizations doing that but more work needs to be done on this.

FJ: Before ending our conversation, I would like to ask if you have any message for individuals and groups who hold an interest in Gojri folklore, and also to the community?

MU: Yes, I have a simple message to all -- be true to your culture and community and surely you will get a pay-back. Whether we are doing it through music, or storytelling, or writing or by

any other means, our common goal is to preserve our cultural heritage and legacy. Additionally I would like to say to the upcoming artists, make your art a tool of unity and create strong ties with your homeland.

FJ: Your dedication to the Gojri folklore and culture is truly commendable, and I must appreciate you for perfectly balancing your studies and your passion for singing. I extend my best wishes to you as you continue on your journey ahead.

MU: Thank you, Faisal. It has been a pleasure talking to you about our folklore, culture and heritage. Many thanks to you and the Project Head Dr Quleen Kaur Bijral and your whole group of IIT Jammu for having this conservation.

AROUND THE WORLD

It's all about Listening. A Report on IOHA 2025

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Oral historians from all over the world convened at Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland for the 23rd International Oral History Association Conference

The 23rd International Oral History Association (IOHA) Conference took place at Jagiellonian University in Krakow between 16-19 September 2025 with the Polish Oral History Association and the Faculty of History at the Jagiellonian University as the principal local organisers. The conference theme this year was 'Rethinking Oral History,' which underlined the need to reevaluate the theory and practice of oral history in the context of a polarized, conflicted world and contemporary global challenges affecting the very conditions in which oral history is produced.

The conference was preceded by three master class sessions: 'Between the Raw and the Cooked: New Tools, Capacities, and Approaches for the Oral History Kitchen,' conducted by Michael Frisch, 'Twice-told tales. Narrative and Testimony,' by Alessandro Portelli, and 'Narrating the Now: How to Conduct Oral History of the Ongoing Crisis,' by Anna Wylegała. Among the special events were two keynote lectures and two plenary discussions.



Alessandro Portelli's masterclass session

The first keynote address on 16 September was delivered by Mary Marshall Clark, Director of Columbia University Center for iOral History Research. In a powerful lecture on 'Rememory and repair in a world of collective trauma', she reminded us of some of the most urgent and emotional issues in the field of oral history. Emphasizing the importance of examining change in the international oral history movement over time, she asserted that oral history, ultimately, was all about listening, about identity, about collecting and making memories and translating experiences. Prof. Clark acknowledged the significant contributions of several of her mentors, including Luisa Passerini and her notion of 'forced forgetting' in oral history, Alessandro Portelli's analysis of the palimpsests of memory, Anna Di Lellio's unfolding of the ethical role of oral history in constructing truthful narratives, Sebe Bom Meihy work demonstrating the power of fieldwork in oral history, Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory, and finally of the idea of rememory as outlined by Toni Morrison in her book *Beloved*, which ensures the transformation of memory across generations and carries out repair through shared listening.

Rib Davies who wears several hats as playwright, oral historian, author, director, editor and who had chaired the Environment and Climate Change Special Interest Group of the Oral History Society in the UK delivered the second keynote address on 'Oral History and Climate Change: testimonies of weirding' on 18 September. His was a passionate and moving lecture that addressed the relationship between oral history and climate change as well as the oral history of climate change, demonstrating how the abnormal or the 'weird' has been normalized in everyday discussions on climate change. He underlined the significant role that oral historians could play in recording climate change, especially as climate scientists with their focus on data rather than emotions are not the best communicators. He also pointed at the significance of indigenous people's knowledge, based on experiences pinned to localness, which had been ignored for long by western academia. The climate crisis is traumatic for many as it destroys communal and personal identity by separating individuals from their community. Like Mary Marshall Clark, Rib Davies also stressed the importance of collecting life stories

in oral history. He ended the keynote lecture by strongly asserting that the climate crisis needed to infuse the whole of the oral history movement.

The first plenary discussion on 'Oral Historians Facing Crises: Attitudes, Fears, and Hopes' was held on 17 September. Chaired by Dr. Jakub Gałęziowski, the President of the President of the Polish Oral History Association, the panel included six noted oral historians who shared their experience in preserving the stories of people affected by war, violence, displacement and public health crises. Fanny Julissa Garcia, the Editorial Programme Manager at Voice of Witness, shared insights from her oral history project on 'Separated: Stories of Injustice and Solidarity' documenting the lived experiences of more than 5,000 families separated by the United States government's zero tolerance policy and the transnational impact of failed border policies. Maria Bashshur Abunnasr, an independent scholar based in Beirut, presented her findings from her project on the community roles of Palestinian teachers in exile during the period 1970-2000. Ngozika Anthonia Obi-Ani from the University of Nigeria discussed the intersectionality



Micheal Frisch's workshop on processing Oral History transcripts



Rib Davis stressed on the importance of collecting life stories



Dr. Mary Marshall Clark delivered the first keynote address

between women, memory, and conflict in the context of the Nigeria-Biafra war. Natalia Otrishchenko from the Lviv Centre for Urban History and the leader of the Ukrainian team in the international documentation initiative '24th February 2022, 5 AM,' discussed Ukrainian testimonies of the Russian invasion. Gabriele Proglia, an associate professor from the University of Gastronomic Sciences at Pollenzo, Italy deliberated on the postcolonial experiences of Somali, Eritrean, and Ethiopian diasporas in Europe and Naoko Shimazu from the University of Tokyo shared her research findings from the project on "Living with Covid-19 in Southeast Asia," which analysed data from ten ASEAN countries during 2020-2022.

The second plenary session titled 'Oral history and community archives – intersections and impacts' took place on 19 September and was chaired by Magdalena Wiśniewska-Drewniak, assistant professor at the Department of Archival Science and Records Management, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Poland. The panellists included Tamara Štefanac, a senior archivist at the National and University Library in Zagreb, who talked about the archival documentation of diasporic

Croatian community experiences; Mônica Tenaglia, assistant professor in Archival and Information Science at the Fluminense Federal University, Rio de Janeiro, who spoke on the relationship between archives, archivists, and human rights; Andrew Flynn, professor of archival studies and oral history at University College, London, who deliberated on archival activism and social justice, and digital oral history;

the social activist Kamil Kmak who provided a Polish community archivist perspective; and Claudio Ogass Bilbao, a PhD student in Archive Studies at the University of Liverpool, who analysed the voices and records of under-represented groups in Latin America. Many of the panels focused on the oral histories of war, trauma and political violence and while many Ukrainian scholars could attend the conference, Palestinians were understandably absent. Some of the other themes touched on documentation and preservation, doing oral history at a distance, multilingualism, migration, the specificities of fieldwork, indigenous voices and marginalized experiences. The Indian contingent was a fairly large one this year. Indeed, it is heartening to see the growing presence of Indian participants in this international body. The Partition was a dominant theme with Sumallya Mukhopadhyay speaking on the Kolkata Partition Museum, Avishek Biswas on Dalit survivors, Subhasree Ghosh on migrant women, Sutapa Das on the human dimension of the Partition, and Tanisha Bhadury on the use of oral interviews. Jena Keshab Chandra and Rajesh Prasad discussed multilingual oral histories of marginalized communities and Sagar Jhariya spoke on visual narratives



The Indian contingent at the IOHA conference

of the Gonds. Other presentations included Susri Bhattacharya's discussion on documenting voices in Svetlana Alexievich's works, Pooja Sagar's analysis of the oral history of illness, and Chayanika Bhaduri's on oral history and digital ethnography. There were also two other presentations on India

by Vanessa Corrado who together with Nilanjan Dutta discussed the complex roles of the researcher and the field mediator in conducting oral history interviews and by Mallory Cekleski who utilized oral history to reconstruct the food history of Kerala.

ORALITY AND ORAL HISTORY

Matka, Memory, Margins: Listening to the Ghatam Beyond the Classical Archive

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How do we listen to an instrument that history has barely written about? How do we understand a classical tradition whose foundations lie not in texts, but in bodies, memory and lived experience? This sound essay traces the sonic life of the ghatam through the reflections of Carnatic musician and researcher Sumana Chandrashekar, who speaks about how the very category of "classical" in India was consciously constructed in the early twentieth century through writing, codification and an insistence on textual authority. As nationalist anxieties demanded the creation of a new classical canon, vast bodies of theory had to be produced, often overshadowing the oral and embodied custodians of the arts. The ghatam, frequently relegated to the status of an upapakkavadya, entered this system from the margins, its history remaining largely unwritten. Chandrashekar's recent work, *Song of the Clay Pot: My Journey With the Ghatam*, gestures towards these silences and traces how the instrument's journey through clay, craft and sound exceeds the limits of textual archives.

This essay brings together two short audio excerpts. The first traces Sumana's trajectory from Carnatic vocalist to ghatam practitioner, shaped by her growing discomfort with the

disconnect between shastra and lived classroom experience, and her recognition that the ghatam has spent more than a century struggling for a place within the classical archive. The second returns to her earliest memory of encountering the ghatam as a village pot, and to the oral histories that reveal an ecosystem absent from official narratives, one in which potters, makers

and everyday players have long shaped the sonic life of the instrument. These recordings offer a way of listening to the ghatam that is grounded not in the written canon but in the materiality of clay, the labour of its makers and the intimate, often overlooked worlds that sustain its music.



QR-1: Sumana Chandrashekar reflecting on how classical music was historically constructed through texts, and how the ghatam remained marginal within this written canon



QR-2: Sumana Chandrashekar recalling her first encounter with the ghatam and discussing oral histories that reveal the instrument's everyday life among potters and local communities

BOOK REVIEW

Archiving Voices: 10,000 Memories and The 1947 Partition Archive

10,000 Memories: A Lived History of Partition, Independence and World War II in South Asia. By The 1947 Partition Archive, 2024. ISBN: 979-8-9867479-0-3 (Hardcover), ₹3919.

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Scholars who have studied the 1947 Partition^[1] consensually hold the view that oral history has been profoundly conducive to unearthing the inherent complexities associated with the historical event. Renowned historians like Ritu Menon, Kamala Bhasin, Urvashi Butalia, Jasodhara Bagchi, Aanchal Malhotra, Anam Zakaria, and Devika Chawla have recorded intricate personal narratives, transforming individuated memories into testimonies that resonate with poignancy and urgency. The idea that oral history can foreground the lived experiences of eye-witnesses seems pertinent because in the nationalistic historiography of South Asia, the cartographic division and its ensuing crises were rarely granted a space wherein individuals, as well as families, could collectively communicate and commemorate their sense of loss and dispossession. In this regard, The 1947 Partition Archive, founded by Guneeta Singh Bhalla in 2011, has created a digital repository of oral histories on the Partition. Dedicated to preserving and sharing accounts of individuals from different ethnic, religious, and economic communities, the archive has secured over eleven thousand oral histories from across the globe. Recently, it published its first book, 10,000 Memories, which documents the life stories of people who witnessed the Partition. While the act of recording, digitising, and conserving the life stories is in itself quite significant, the publication of the book underscores what Churnjeet Mahn

and Anne Murphy term 'restorative justice'^[2] that seeks to resuscitate the voices of the survivors and incorporate them in discourses on 1947.

Interestingly, the book is structured in such a manner that it has a front cover on both sides. This innovative method ensures that all the regions that experienced the tremor and trauma of the Partition are equally represented. Moreover, there is an endeavour to explore Partition as a process that continues to influence the lives of ordinary men and women. The segments that introduce stories from the eastern and western regions reveal the intersecting aspects of multifarious events like the 1935 Quetta earthquake, the Japanese bombing of Burma (now Myanmar) in 1942, the 1942 Quit India Movement, the 1943 Bengal famine, the 1946 INA trials, the Partition in 1947, the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, and others. The narrative of Khairun Nisa Nageena will be in order here. In 1943, she was around ten years old when her family migrated on foot from Burma to Chhapra, Bihar. Within four years, she shifted to East Pakistan with her husband, and since 1971, she has lived at the Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. By shedding light on such life stories, the book tries to locate the Partition "in the context of the Second World War, the fall of the British Empire, and the changing world order at that time." To acquaint readers with these diverse historic events, the book is replete with "info-

boxes"/small beige-brown coloured boxes comprising general information and photographs. In the preface, the editors address some concerns that complicate the domain of oral history. They comment that the interviewees are not viewed as "subjects" of study but as "people" who nurture an agential thrust as they recollect episodes of their lives before the interviewer. The ethical premise rests on the fact that the narrators are given the option regarding how they want to tell their story, where they would like to tell it, and to what degree they would like to make it available to the public. It allows narrators to freely reflect on their past. Hence, Sarla Dutta could narrate that she was abducted and kept in Pakistan for six to seven months before the army rescued her. "I do not hesitate to speak of the days as an abductee," she said, "nor do I harbour any kind of fear." In another narrative, Arjun Verma remarked that he and his friends stabbed a Muslim boy for no reason at all. He confessed, "This is one incident which I still regret." While these narratives primarily focus on subjective experiences, they typify how oral histories can be decisive acts of survival and assertion.

Throughout the book, the oral histories are crafted in first-person narrative, which reads as summaries of the interviews. The brevity of the stories, however, does not diminish their emotional appeal. Regardless of their religious differences, the narrators evoke the same responses about the Partition. Mohammad Moosa, who migrated from Delhi to West Pakistan, said that for several years, he used to rush to the Lahore Railway Station on 14 August, i.e. the Independence Day of Pakistan, eagerly hoping to trace his mother, brothers and other family members. Vimla Malhotra remembered her aunt, who kept

visiting the Faridabad Railway Station to scan the crowds for signs of a son who never returned. At times, Hindu-Muslim narratives from the same region are placed on corresponding pages to demonstrate the absurdity of the entire period that led to the gruesome murder of children, women, and men. The book also consists of life stories of Jews, Anglo-Indians, and Parsis. These narratives present a commentary on the events unfolding around their communities and show how the departure of the British altered their socio-political status in India and Pakistan.

In the editorial note to the book, a section is dedicated to the process of documenting and conserving oral history interviews. Divided into ten steps, each part deals with essential features of oral history interviews that can immensely benefit those willing to record life stories in general. Simultaneously, it offers a glimpse into the organisational mechanism of The 1947 Partition Archive, as it has

trained over 17,000 individuals to conduct oral histories for the archive. A fundamental aspect of oral history is that it is co-created in the spatial configuration shared by the interview partners.^[3] In other words, the interviewer's presence tends to shape the narrative that the interviewee shares before the recorder. In 10,000 Memories, we sadly miss the part played by the interviewers who secured the interviews. Though their role as interviewers is acknowledged in bylines at the top of the pages, the summaries do not depict the interviewers' questions and reactions during the recording. Often, the narratives bear explicit reference to sectarian violence, honour killings, and suicide, which can be disturbing for the readers. A note of caution must be included so that readers are emotionally equipped when they go through an interview. Nonetheless, 10,000 Memories is vast in its scope, motivation, and execution. Generously supported by individuals and institutions who co-produced

different parts of the book, it brings to light innumerable forgotten chapters related to the Partition and manifests the potential of oral history in ushering in ingenious ways to examine the past.

[1] Hereafter referred to as the Partition

[2] Mahn, Churnjeet, and Anne C. Osborne. "Introduction: Partition and the Practice of Memory." In *Partition and the Practice of Memory*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

[3] Portelli, Alessandro. "Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience." *The Oral History Review* 45, no. 2 (2018): 239-48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohy030>.