

KEEPER OF PARTITION STORIES

It is nearly 70 years since Partition. The personal stories of those traumatic days are finally being recorded and archived. **Venu Sandhu** speaks to the people behind the unique initiative

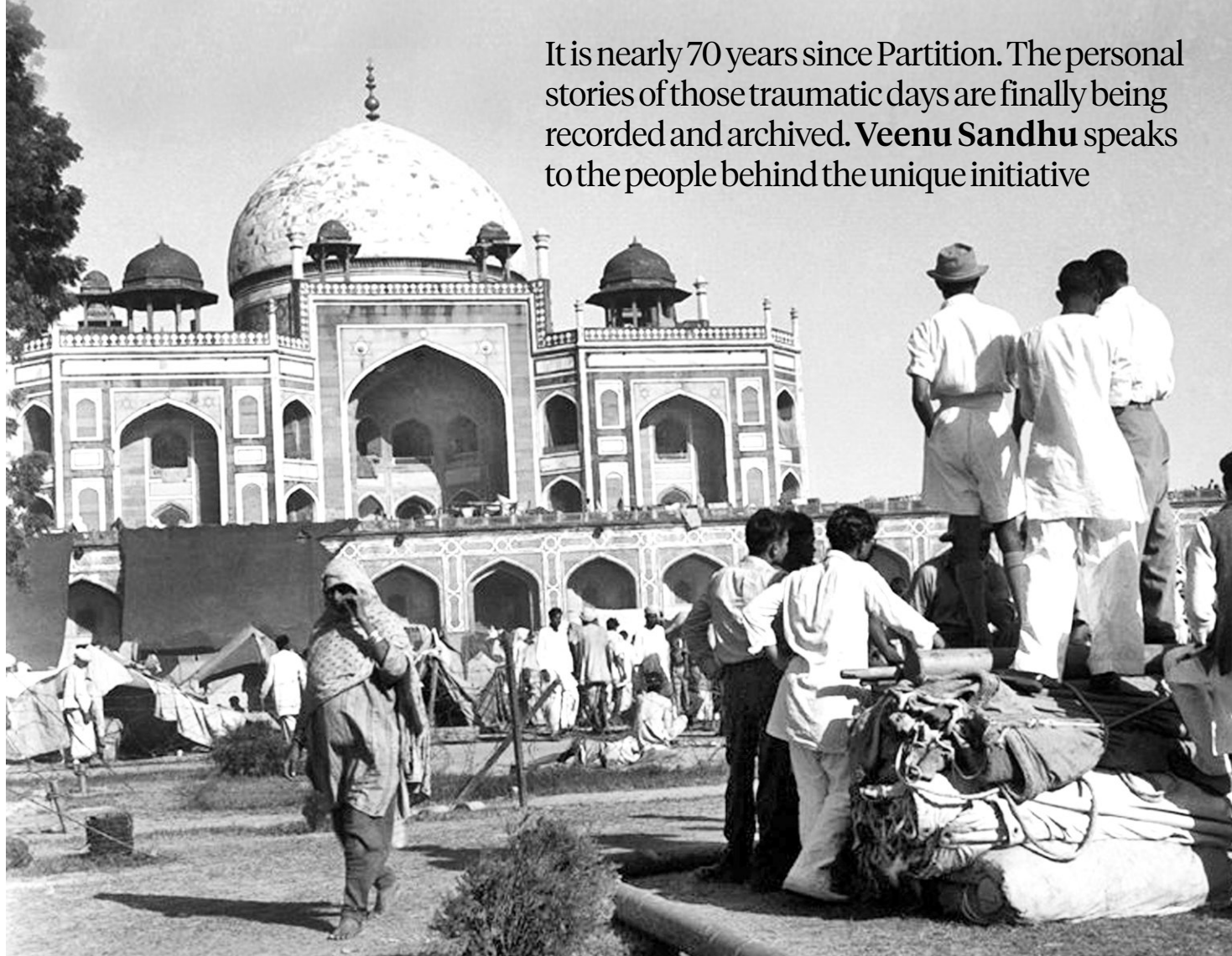


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Partition on the Internet. There was no such archive whatsoever. It was disturbing.

Then in 2010, her grandmother's brother visited her in San Francisco. "I wanted to record his story, but I didn't have my camera with me. So he said, 'Don't worry. You do this the next time we meet.'" That was the last she saw of him. He died that year. "I couldn't speak for a week. Our entire legacy was slipping away from before our eyes," she says. That was the tipping point. Bhalla started going to temples, gurudwaras and mosques where she knew she would find those who had lived through Partition. "I would go around asking people if they would share their story with me." Friday to Sunday evenings, when she didn't have to go to work, were spent on this mission.

As the word spread, volunteers, many of them Americans of South Asian origin, came on board. Today, this army of memory-keepers and story-collectors has swelled to 300. Most of them are in their 30s, professionals who are involved with the project out of a sheer desire to capture this history before it vanishes. Given that the testimonials are by those in their 70s, 80s, 90s and some who are over 100, time is not on their side. About 20 of the people Bhalla has interviewed are no longer alive. Her eyes well up as Delhi-based volunteer Shagufta Siddhi recounts how Hari Kishore Singh — who had served as minister of state for external affairs and was India's ambassador to Syria — died days after she interviewed him on August 12. Siddhi, like the other volunteers, is separated from the people whose stories she is capturing by two generations. "But Partition is a part of my life," she says. "My grandmother belonged to Montgomery which is in Pakistan now. All the girls in my family continue to have Persian names. It's like representing a syncretic culture."

Siddhi has conducted over 50 interviews in Batala (Punjab), Kolkata, Delhi, Gurgaon, Karnal and Srinagar since she joined the project in May. "Everywhere I found that the people do not view the events that happened then as 'us versus them'. They see it as the pol-

"I REMEMBER ONE PERSON TELLING ME AS HE RECOUNTED THE HORROR, 'I CAN'T BELIEVE WE WERE HUMANS THEN'"

SHAGUFTA SIDDIHI
Story Scholars Program coordinator for the 1947 Partition Archive in India



SANJAY K SHARMA

and mosques which say '1947 Partition Archive'. This is one way we reach out to people and get their stories. They do want to share them."

The stories that come out are those that we will never find in the textbooks. "One person told me how hard science and history lessons became when he moved to India from Pakistan. On the Indian side of Punjab, the medium of instruction had changed from Urdu to Punjabi," says Berkeley-based Ganesh Ananthanarayanan, a PhD student in computer science who belongs to Chennai. Nobody in Ananthanarayanan's family has witnessed the turmoil of Partition. He became part of the project when he learnt about it from his flat-mate who happened to be Bhalla's lab-mate. "I am now getting to understand the various undercurrents of Partition and intriguing details are emerging." He and the others say the one remarkable quality which they have found in every individual they have met from that time is that they are not bitter. "Each one of them, whether educated or not, affluent or modest, has accepted what has happened with exceptional grace and dignity and moved on," says Siddhi.

Post-Partition, there was a huge emphasis on surviving and on character-building. Siddhi recalls a poignant incident. "There was this lady from an affluent family who would always be wearing the same *salwaar-kameez* whenever I met her. I was curious but didn't know how to ask her about it without offending her." One day, she finally did. And the woman replied: "Beta, we had fled from our homes wearing two pairs of *salwaar-kameez* and with nothing else to fall back on. These things don't matter any more."

Given that over 10 million people were uprooted during Partition, and this one-of-its-kind digital library has so far collected about 700 of those stories, there is huge ground to be covered. Hence, the need for more and more volunteers. "We conduct online courses

for those who want to become story-collectors," says Bhalla. "Wherever possible, trained volunteers conduct workshops. There is also the 'Story Scholar Programme' where people are trained to become citizen historians." The plan is to soon conduct Story Scholar Programmes in Jammu, Delhi, Punjab, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In India, Siddhi is the Story Scholars Program coordinator. Funds come from personal donations.

While some of the stories can now be viewed on the 1947 Partition Archive website (www.1947partitionarchive.org/), "making them all accessible is a huge technological challenge which will cost a lot of money," says Bhalla. "But our goal is to eventually make all of them accessible to everybody."

This is, after all, an intergenerational history that needs to be passed on. In the process of salvaging it, the volunteers sometimes encounter painful questions. One lady, for example, asked a volunteer, "Child, is this all that we are today — a story?"

As a child, one of the most extraordinary stories I heard was of the perilous journey from Faisalabad to Amritsar that my grandmother undertook with four young children in tow. Among them was my father who was seven then. It was a journey forced upon them by Partition. They made their way from the newly-created Pakistan to India, often hiding in the fields to escape marauding mobs. In the mayhem brought about by the decision to split the country, my grandfather had got separated from the family. But they were lucky. A year later in Amritsar, the family was reunited with him. They had found each other through radio announcements for missing people.

I have heard this story over and over again. And every time it gave me goosebumps. What I didn't realise until much later in life was that this was an incomplete

story. So focused was I on that hazardous journey, the separation and the dramatic reunion that I had never asked my grandmother what she went through when she realised that her husband was missing. Or what was her house back in Pakistan like? Through the stories, I did get sketchy glimpses of the *haveli* that was once her home, but never enough to form a complete picture of that house. Were her two lives — the one in Pakistan and the other in India — different? Who were the people she, as a young woman, had left behind? Today, I have some images that are part of her story but I don't have her story. And I never will. She is 96 years old now and on her death bed. We all know she is going. And with her is going her story of that traumatic period in Indian history which altered her life forever. Will I regret this loss? I suppose I will.

It was a similar and irrevocable loss of her grandmother and her story of Partition that prompted Guneeta Singh Bhalla, a 34-year-old research physicist from California, to initiate a unique project — "The 1947 Partition Archive". The project hopes to salvage as many of these stories as possible. In the last two years, Bhalla and her growing team of volunteers have video-recorded nearly 700 personal oral histories of people who were affected by Partition. There are stories from the Punjab fragmented into two — one each on the Pakistan and the India side. There are stories from West Bengal, Bangladesh, Peshawar and Kashmir. There are stories of people who migrated from as far as Hyderabad or Chennai to Karachi. There are stories of those who left the life they knew and of those who stayed on but were witnesses to the turmoil. These are not just stories of the displacement — these are stories of the customs, cultures, homes, schools and community life they left behind



Guneeta Singh Bhalla recording the story of a Partition survivor. Time is running out. About 20 of the people Bhalla has interviewed are no longer alive; (top) a refugee camp at Humayun's tomb in New Delhi

and the new life they reconstructed. The accounts are in Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and English.

While working on her PhD, Bhalla had travelled to Japan for a few months. "There I visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. What I saw in the Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims was both heartbreaking and powerful. Along with the stories of the victims was a library and video presentation of personal accounts and testimonies of the survivors," recounts Bhalla. "That's when it hit me that people also needed to know the story of those who survived Partition, like my grandmother." But no matter how hard she searched, Bhalla could not find even a single video recording of any personal account of

itics of the time and are remarkably secular," says Siddhi. "The exercise of recounting that time is like a psychological journey during which they are able to reconcile to what happened and look at the event in totality. I remember one person telling me as he spoke of the horrors. 'I can't believe we were humans then.'"

Sometimes, the interviews, which are recorded on non-intrusive video cameras and smart phones, are conducted over days. Siddhi recalls how one such interview went on from 11 in the morning to 11 in the night. It's a journey back in time, often cathartic for the people being interviewed. Farhana Afroz, 36, who is based in California and is originally from Bangladesh, recalls how an 80-year-old Muslim man who had migrated to East Pakistan broke down while talking about his home in Meghalaya. "I just want to visit it once before I die," he told her when she visited him in Bangladesh. Afroz, a software engineer, has collected nearly a hundred stories. "On weekends we set up tables in gurudwaras



"OUR ENTIRE LEGACY WAS SLIPPING AWAY FROM BEFORE OUR EYES... I WOULD GO AROUND ASKING PEOPLE IF THEY WOULD SHARE THEIR STORY"

GUNEETA SINGH BHALLA
Initiated 1947 Partition Archive

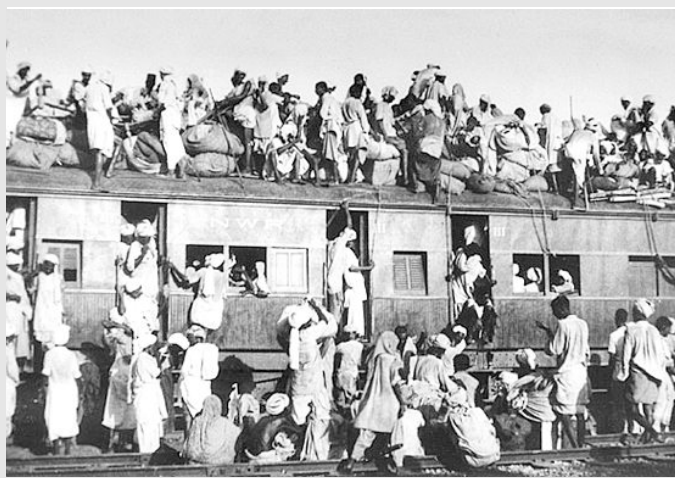
PHOTO COURTESY UC BERKELEY SKYDECK

RECORDINGS FROM THE 1947 PARTITION ARCHIVE

VOICES FROM THE SUBCONTINENT

ABDUL JABBAR
MOVED FROM MEERUT TO LAHORE

I was really shocked when I saw the change in my friends. ... I always wonder if you can pick up that kind of dislike so quickly because it is very hard to imagine that. It was almost imposed on them... We were going to the house of so-and-so for a few days and then we would go to Pakistan in a train. I had this pet rooster. I would share my best food with that rooster. It would come to me whenever I came to the house. I just grabbed that rooster and said I would take it with me. I wouldn't let it go. Somebody, who was going to speed up the transition because the attack was imminent, just yanked it from my grip and there was a bunch of feathers of the rooster that stayed in my hand. A feather stayed with me for a long time, for many years. I just wouldn't let it go. I'd just use it as a bookmark. It was a part of me that was clinging on to that past which is beyond retrieval.



RAVI CHOPRA
MOVED FROM SIALKOT TO FIROZPUR

I was eight when Partition took place. Nobody imagined that such a holocaust would take place... We had to catch the mail train to take us to India. On the way what we saw was heartbreaking. You could see young girls jumping into the well to save their honour because people would catch them and rape them. The houses were on fire. People were running, killing each other, even on the railway track. You could see bodies, hands cut, legs cut. And then the train came. There was firing... There were bullets flying around and one hit me on my left leg... There was no bandage, nothing to sterilise it. My grandmother was in tears. She didn't know what to do. She tore off the only *dhoti* she was wearing. But how to sterilise it? She soaked it in her urine, cleaned the wound and put a bandage.

KAZI SHAMSUZZAMAN
MIGRATED FROM WEST TO EAST BENGAL

During 'Direct Action Day', when the riots broke out, we were given an option to choose between Pakistan and India. Just because we are Muslims, we would be going to Pakistan. A person from Faridpur (East Pakistan), a neighbour of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was my father's friend and who was a postal officer at Howrah (India), insisted that we migrate... My father gave me a bag of valuables and asked me to hide on a tree next to a graveyard. My father hid in a broken grave... We came out when the riots were over... We started by Surma Mail from Calcutta, Sealdah Station [with] a bag with my mother's jewellery, post office pass books and some documents that my father thought were important... Partition was not a good thing. If we were together, the country could have been more prosperous.