

A file in time...

...saves history, from being a blurred part of the future generation's memory. **Khushwant Singh** reaches out to the US-based physicist who endeavours to archive eyewitness statements of the Partition

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I must thank my school-mate from St John's High School, Chandigarh, Sumer Johl, for introducing me to Dr Guneeta Singh Bhalla, who is doing pioneering work in recording and archiving eyewitness accounts of the 1947 partition.

A physicist by profession (PhD University of California, Berkley), thirty-something Dr Guneeta was inspired to undertake this task when she visited Hiroshima and saw the witness archives of the Hiroshima bombing. The powerful narrative of the eyewitnesses had brought about an awakening of what she could and should have done with her grandmother's stories about her journey from Lahore to Delhi.

Old age had taken her grandmother away, and Guneeta realised that if she had to replicate what she saw in Hiroshima, she had to make her move fast. She immediately got into action, recording oral history of Partition witnesses' around her, in her bid to immortalise them before it was too late.

The movement, given the kind of bearing the event has had on millions of lives, soon gained a global momentum and, The 1947 Partition Archive, a non-profit organisation was

set up in 2011 to undertake this work at a larger level.

I am sure many honest and serious attempts to chronicle such stories have been made by universities, organisations and individuals previously; but what sets this first-of-its-kind initiative apart is its vast scope, its methodology and easy access of the archives, should historians, writers, authors, researchers, movie makers etc want to study that era.

And for those who want to record their stories, the process is very simple. Willing people can log on to the partition archive through its website (www.1947partitionarchive.org) and sign up to share their stories. Volunteers or scholars, who have been trained and empowered through an online training and a set questionnaire, will then soon contact the witnesses.

The language used is that of the interviewee, be it Punjabi, Bengali, Kashmiri, Gujarati Sindhi, Hebrew or Tamil. The organisation according to Guneeta has already recorded over 700

stories through its various volunteers and the target is to collect 10,000 stories by 2017. The stories are not restricted to any region, caste or community, and for which vast areas have been traversed, be it the highways of America, the mountains of Burma, or the hostile environment of Afghanistan.

The recording and archiving also aims at offering a firsthand glimpse of the lifestyles, languages and cultures of pre-partition days as well as reflect on post-partition.

The organisation is supported through donations and about 300 different organisations, like the American Indian Foundation, and individuals have joined hands to support the cause.

The oldest witness to be recorded is a 109 (107 then) year-old man from Indian Punjab. He was a tailor in the pre-partition days and carries on to be one, says Guneeta.

Unfortunately, time waits for none, as witnesses are fast fading out. "Almost 20 people out of the

100 that I have interviewed personally since 2009 have passed away," says Guneeta. Do people, because of age, have blurred memories about the event? "No," says Guneeta. "In fact, I was surprised to find out that even the ones with Alzheimer have remembered 1947 vividly. Imagine the impact the event must have had."

And do the stories leave an impact on her personally?

"Yes, every single story that I have interviewed has shaken me because you realise how people had to suffer with no fault of theirs," says Guneeta.

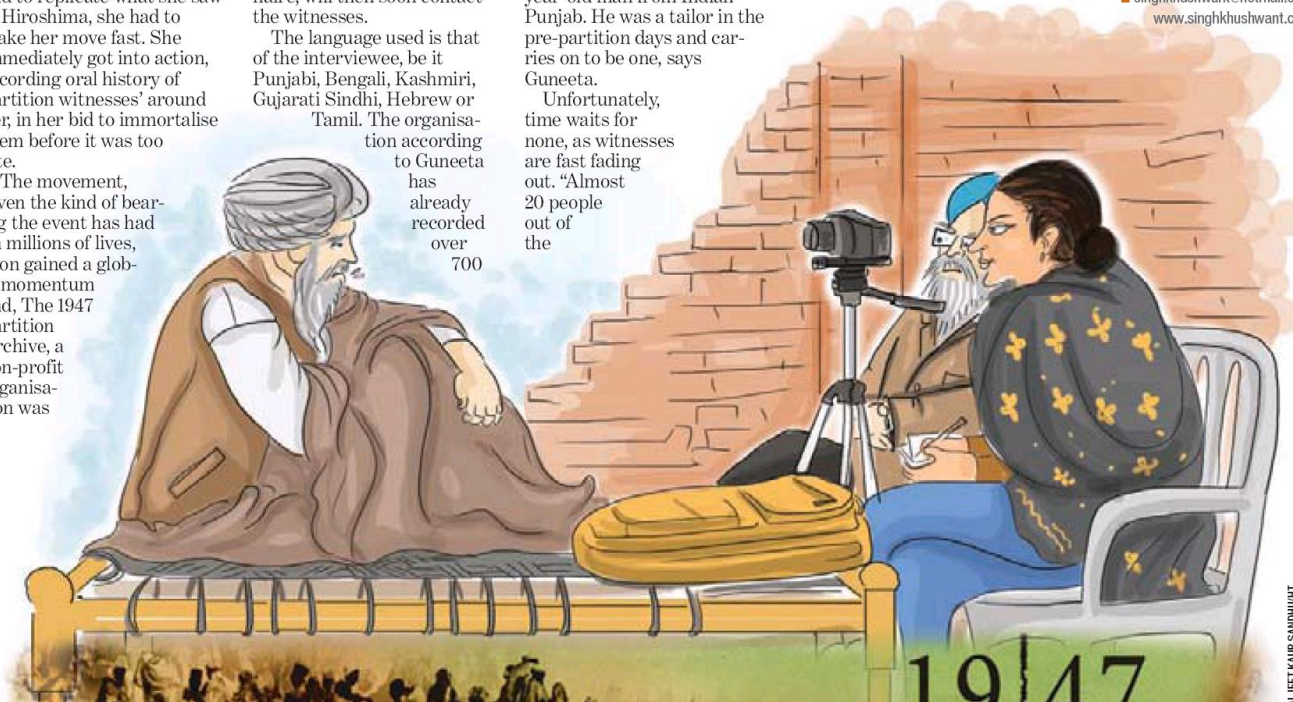
To a question that, have any testimonies of political people of that era been recorded, Guneeta says that they might not be around. But yes, The 1947 Partition Archive has been able to record testi-

monies of some very eminent people including the author of *The Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh and author of *Cracking India*, Bapsi Sidhwa. 'So, has the organisation recorded the present political lot, who were witness to the partition? For example Dr Manmohan Singh?' I ask. "None yet. Though it will be highly motivating for us, should they come forward to share their accounts," remarks Guneeta.

I admire people like Guneeta. So readers, if you have elders who are witness to the 1947 partition, please come forward and help them share their stories. It is not only cathartic, but time is running out too.

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