

# think!

# HISTORY IN THE MAKING

**Time travel** Young Indians are using technology and crowd-sourcing to create online archives of old family photos, traditional cuisines, architecture, music and even jewellery

Humaira Ansari

humaira.ansari@hindustantimes.com

Under a photograph showing two men at a pen exhibition in Bombay in 1951, a woman tells the story of her grandfather and granduncle, who struggled to run a pen-making business in pre-Independence India, through the duration of World War II.

Other photographs on the website Indian Memory Project.com offer similarly intriguing narratives—one woman submits a photograph of her mother and her aunt, dressed in traditional wear, who were also amateur rock musicians; a man shares a photograph of himself and his sister as children, playing with young members of the rare Andamanese Onge tribe, yet another has sent in a photograph of his dapper great-grandfather, one of the first Indians to attend London's Royal College of Art.

A total of 130 such pre-digital-era photographs are featured on the site. Founded in February 2010, the online visual archive urges people to submit their family portraits and share the stories behind them, whether they are anecdotal, historical or social context or pure nostalgia. Visual cues such as costumes, hairstyle and jewellery backdrops of streets, lawns or an opulent *haveli* spark the viewer's imagination.

"The aim of the project is to create a repository of visual and oral histories of the Indian subcontinent through family photos," says founder Anusha Yadav, 38, a Mumbai-based photographer and book designer. To attain this goal, Yadav dedicates anywhere between an hour to an entire day editing narratives and interviewing those senders who would rather narrate their stories than write them.

"Most first-world countries are great with archiving," says Yadav. "But India has a lot of catching up to do. I used to often joke that, here, history repeats itself because it was never documented. The memory project is my small attempt at archiving the subcontinent's history."

Across the country, similar attempts at crowd-sourced archiving are taking root, leveraging the power of digitisation to create online archives on everything from family portraits to regional Indian cuisines, folk and Hindustani classical music, architecture and monuments and even traditional Indian jewellery.

"Government archiving is intended to lock things in a cupboard where they gather fungus. The beauty of such online archives is that they are popularising what they are archiving," says Shefal Bhushan, 42, filmmaker and co-founder of Beat of India, a first-of-its-kind website to tap into the Internet to record, archive and disseminate folk music via paid downloads.

Launched in 2002, the website allows listeners to choose from a total of 1,000 tracks by 30 folk artists across northern India for ₹30 per track, 10% of which goes to the artist.

According to Mumbai-based sociologist Sarala Bijapurkar, for a country that takes pride in its history and cultural diversity but whose govern-

THE INTERNET AND TECHNOLOGY HAVE HERALDED NEW FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION. THIS IS WHAT MANY AMATEUR ARCHIVISTS ARE TAPPING INTO.

LAKSHMI LINGAM, deputy director, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad

seek comfort in the past, when things were simpler. It's an easy escape route."

Submissions on her site, meanwhile, have risen from one photo a month in 2010 to four in 2013. Its popularity, in fact, has led to the launch of the Indian Jewellery Project, a Facebook album intended to archive images of traditional Indian and heirloom jewellery and document details about how the pieces were made and used.

"The photographs must feature a jewellery piece where the piece itself or the context or the way it has been worn, has something meaningful and historic to convey," says Puja Bhargava Kamath, 35, a Delhi-born, US-based jewellery designer who created the archive.

According to Lakshmi Lingam, deputy director of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, it is important to have a memory of the past in order to gain an understanding of the future. "The government archives its own correspondence. This sort of administrative archiving is important for a broader public discourse from the vantage point of administration and control," says Lingam.

"But it is equally important to document oral histories, cultural narratives and contemporary transformations."

Much of the layered cultural insights into Mumbai's transformation, from a fishing village to a textile hub, to now a city that's towered by glass buildings, says Lingam, have been documented by private

LOOKING BACK

"Most of us mistakenly believe that history is about wars, but history is also about lost treasures."

- Perzen Patel, marketing executive and food blogger, who has started a crowd-sourced digital archiving initiative

save and share

ARCHITECTURE

HOUSES OF GOA

www.housesofgoa.com

Founded in January 2014

FOUNDER: Abhishek Sarda, 30, a photographer and entrepreneur who runs a two-year-old Goa-based company called Beard Design

This website is a tribute to classic Indo-Portuguese houses in Goa. Visitors can zoom in to carefully recreated images to see architectural details such as ornamental windows, decorated gateposts, and use of contrasting colours. Icons below each illustration lead to charming photographs of the structure as it is today, and



a map of where it is located.

With 17 completed sketches done in flat vector-illustration style, the website aims to eventually cover a total of 50 houses.

"A lot of great stuff gets archived as a by-product of projects that were taken up to indulge in a whim or nostalgia," says Sarda. "With the Internet, social media and some expertise, it has become easier to create such archives. Projects like these require a lot of money, time and effort, but they also offer us the liberty to use our designing skills for ourselves and larger non-commercial purposes."

Next, Sarda plans to create a similar archive on palaces, forts and architectural styles of houses across India.



CONFLICT

1947 PARTITION ARCHIVE

www.1947partitionarchive.org

Founded in 2011

FOUNDER: Guneeta Singh Bhatta, 35, a Delhi-born California-based physicist

Bhatta grew up listening to tales of Partition from her paternal grandmother, who migrated from Lahore to Delhi in 1947.

In 2008, while pursuing a PhD in Tokyo, she visited Japan's Hiroshima Peace Memorial and was struck by how well they had recorded their tales of love, loss and sorrow.

"I realised that India too needed a similar repository for our tales of Partition," says Bhatta. "And we needed to set it up soon, while those tales could still be gleaned first-hand."

Determined to do what she could to create such a platform, Bhatta began video-recording tales from witnesses of Partition, upon her return in 2009. Soon, she began receiving requests from around the world, from people who wanted their Partition stories

recorded for posterity too.

Two years later, she had 1,000 stories gathered from nine countries around the world, and began to upload synopses of those stories on a website called 1947 Partition Archive.

Visitors can view summaries and photos on the initiative's Facebook page (facebook.com/1947PartitionArchive). Bhatta plans to upload videos online over the next three years.

She continues to receive requests from people who want to participate, mainly through the "Share your story" tab on the website. Those who click here are put in touch with one of Bhatta's volunteer "citizen historians" in 20 countries, who then contact the witness and set up an interview.

— Danish Raza



MUSIC  
ARCHIVE OF INDIAN MUSIC

www.archiveofindianmusic.org

Founded in July 2013

FOUNDER: Vikram Sampath (in pic), 34, musician, historian and author

This is an online archive of digitised recordings taken from 15,000 gramophone records, featuring about 600 artists across genres such as folk, Carnatic and Hindustani classical music, and a collection of old Parsi, Bengali and Kannada theatre recordings, among other things.

Listeners can navigate by genre or artist's names, and they can plug in for free. "The dissemination of these old recordings is as important as their preservation," says Sampath. "At AIM, we are democratising these musical forms with every recording that we digitise and upload. While people donate some records, a majority of them are sourced from flea markets and thrift shops in Kolkata, Mumbai and Delhi. This is a sad comment on the state of archiving in our country. But thanks to the Internet, things are changing. Very soon, AIM's collection will be accessible via popular music platforms such as Google Play and iTunes too."

PHOTO COURTESY: VIVEK MUTHURAMAN LINGAM

HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY  
MONUMENTS OF DELHI

www.monumentsofdelhi.com

Founded in 2009

FOUNDER: Vikramjit Singh Rooprai (in pic, right), 30, a Delhi-based IT consultant

Rooprai loves to explore new places. So, in 2009, he divided the map of Delhi into four zones which he thought he would cover over the next four weekends. At his very first stop, the Mehrauli archaeological park in South Delhi, he realised that this was easier said than done. "This park alone had 70 monuments in it. It was impossible to finish seeing it in one day," he says.

As he started spending time at more of the city's monuments, he discovered that there was very little information available about them online. So Rooprai set up Monuments of Delhi, an archive that seeks to plot every historical monument in the city on a map.

So far, the website has uploaded location maps of more than 1,300 heritage monuments in Delhi, with separate tabs dedicated to lists and notes on the many dynasties and rulers

that have held Delhi, and the many cities that have been founded there over the past 3,000 years. "I had two options: I could wait for someone else to do it, or I could do it myself. I opted for the latter," says Rooprai.

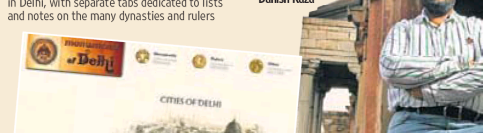
To ensure that all his information was accurate, Rooprai reached out to writers, publishers, historians and guides, scoured libraries and read articles online. He also reached out to the Archaeological Survey of India.

"ASI is one of the most cooperative government bodies I have ever come across," he says. "It is a different matter that often the organisation is unable to deliver as much one expects it to, perhaps due to paucity of funds."

Rooprai even began learning Urdu, since "a lot of information about monuments is in books in Urdu and never translated".

Next, Rooprai plans to write and upload articles on each of the monuments. "It looks like a 10-year project," he says.

— Danish Raza



VARIED

ment archives have remained largely inaccessible to the general public, "such archives are liberating because they are in the public domain."

A majority of these digital archives are being compiled, updated, and presented either in the form of a blog, video log, web-site or an e-book.

"The role of the Internet, of course, has been crucial," says Bhushan of Beat of India. "Plus, social media makes good archival projects go viral. This transformation in the approach to archiving where the focus is on popularising rather than preserving is quite unique."

On a more philosophical level, Yadav attributes the mushrooming of digital archives to our fear of the future. "At the turn of the millennium, Indians were excited about a lot of things, including a capitalist economy. But with bad governance, social chaos and policy paralysis, today we are terrified of the future," she says. "In complex times like these, we often

researchers and historians. "The Internet and technology have heralded new forms of knowledge production and dissemination, and this is what many amateur archivists are tapping into," Lingam says.

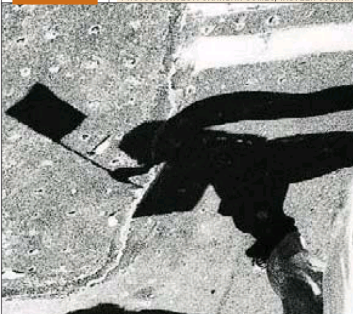
In another crowd-sourced digital archiving initiative, Mumbai-based marketing executive and food blogger Perzen Patel, 26, launched Best Kept Secrets earlier this month. This invites people to share food secrets about regional Indian cuisines — from recipes to anecdotes associated with Indian food. Of the 35 entries she has received, Patel will compile the best 10 into a free e-book.

"Most of us mistakenly believe that history is about wars, but history is also about lost treasures. It's about a dish that will never be cooked again, or a textile that will never be woven again because the art of weaving died with that last weaver," says Patel. "With the power of the Internet, we are now in a position to unearth those lost treasures and preserve their memory."

December 16  
gangrape.

Alternative Law Forum and co-founder of  
Indiacine.ma.

PHOTO COURTESY: CHANDAN GOMES/TASVEER JOURNAL



## CONTEMPORARY CULTURE PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

[www.tasveerjournal.com](http://www.tasveerjournal.com)

Founded in January 2014

**CURATORS:** Sameena Siddiqui, a research scholar for Tasveer Journal, and Chandan Gomes, an award-winning photographer, both in their late 20s

This initiative by online magazine Tasveer Journal uses the medium of photography to document, comment upon and inform viewers' perceptions of their world, in the con-

text of politics, history, culture and art. Through the public photographic archive, it aims to preserve the common man or woman's view of contemporary issues. The first topic for the project is 'Confronting Rape Culture'. So far, most submissions have been photographs of the dramatic protest marches in the wake of the 2012 Nirbhaya gang-rape case in Delhi.

"This public archive will commemorate the 'public memory' of that Unknown Citizen and others like her," says Siddiqui. "We aim to extend the reach of this archive by including issues such as the anti-nuclear protests in Kudankulam. A digital public archive is a decentralised approach to historical events, and brings multiple perspectives onto one platform." Submissions for the first edition of the archive close in the first week of March.

RAJ K RAJ/HT

press reader

Printed and distributed by PressReader  
PressReader.com \* +1 604 278 4684  
COPYRIGHT AND PROTECTED BY APPLICABLE LAW