MEMOIRS OF A SPLINTERED PAST

The 1947 Partition Archive at Berkeley is on an urgent mission - to fill the absence of personal narratives in the discourse before the survivors and their stories are lost forever.

Rakesh Sharma digs deeper

Story collection by Dr Guneeta Bhalla, right, in Jagdev Kalan, a village in India

COURTESY: METHA SKYLAB DAOHEUNG

There is a sea of start-ups surrounding Dr Guneeta Bhalla's desk at Skydeck — the incubator for University of California at Berkeley. Enthusiastic entrepreneurs eagerly discuss the latest technology and business trends around her.

The two desks occupied by the team of the 1947 Partition Archive — a nonprofit that aims to produce an oral history record of the India-Pakistan division — are silent. Their quiet conceals far stories that are vastly different from those of their colleagues' ventures.

"They call us a startup around here," remarks Dr Bhalla wryly, when I ask about her neighbors.

Misnomers about her venture apart, she has ramped up pretty quickly. Before she started the archive in 2009, the soft-spoken 35-year-old physicist had zero experience running a non-profit. In fact, her doctorate thesis — about manganite nanostructures — is hardly the sort of topic that would interest a historian.

Story collection by Silicon Valley software engineer Farhana Afroz in Dhaka

COURTESY: FARHANA AFROZ

Her journey from physics to non-profit storytelling was born out of an attempt to situate experiences from survivors of the Indian Partition within the larger context of world history.

Those attempts started early.

Dr Bhalla grew up with tales of Partition told by her grandparents. These stories resonated with the ones she read about the Holocaust in school. But her efforts to educate her classmates and teachers about Partition were met with stares of disbelief and incredulity.

Part of the problem lay in inadequate documentation about the event. Numerous fiction and non-fiction works catalogue the Holocaust through tales of its horror, unflagging hope and personal redemption.

The Partition experience, however, is different.

Dry government statistics record the event. Most non-fiction works are academic in nature. Fiction, whether in films or books, constructs a binary narrative of exclusive hatred between two communities. Such stories are bracketed under jingoism or art that is inaccessible to the common man.

Most tellingly, personal narratives are absent from the discourse.

There are no records of Ravi Chopra and how his family was uprooted from a secure existence in West Punjab to the chaos of a newly-independent Delhi when he was just 8 years old. The now 75-year-old former Indian Army officer remembers being shot at in a ghost train littered with bodies of dead Hindus.

Similarly, there are no records of Irfan Chaudhary's journey in the opposite direction from East Punjab to Karachi. His journey, which occurred when he was 14, was conducted on bus and foot with rest stops in open grounds, where women and children were raped or murdered.

Bhalla's moment of epiphany occurred during a 2008 research trip to Japan. She had read about the Hiroshima nuclear attack in history books. But audio recordings of the event, as it was described by survivors, vivified the event.

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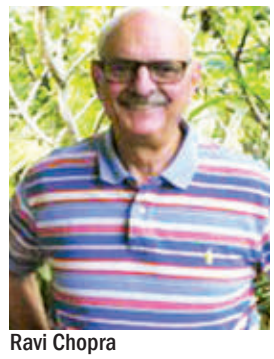
TALES FROM OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE BORDER

RAVI CHOPRA



Ravi Chopra

When he was eight, a bullet hit Ravi Chopra's calf muscle. It was fired as the train, one of several used during the Partition to transport Hindus from Pakistan to India, was standing on a railway platform in Pakistan. Chopra's family was too scared to venture out and there was no first aid on the train. Instead, Chopra's grandmother swabbed urine on a piece of cloth from a *dhoti* and tied it around his wound.

The Chopras had fled their home in Kosoval, a small town in West Punjab, in darkness with select belongings. Although they had heard tales of violence and atrocities from neighboring towns, the Chopra family's roots in their community had lulled them into a false sense of security.

That afternoon, the wife of a clerk, who worked at the local police station with Chopra's father, warned them of the townsfolk's intentions to torch their house.

By the time it reached Lyallpur in East Punjab the train that the Chopras had boarded was full of corpses. Their family escaped only because a Muslim railway official, an acquaintance, claimed them as members of his

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India Abroad March 7, 2014

MEMOIRS OF A SPLINTERED PAST

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COURTESY: MARLA AUFMUTH

The 1947 Partition Archive team at the University of California, Berkeley.

"It was an instant click," she says.

Dr Bhalla recorded her first archive interview during a trip to India soon after. The recording, which resulted from a chance encounter in a Faridkot bookstore, was rudimentary and hurried.

Those tentative steps became an urgent mission when a subject, who had promised her an interview, passed away. That day, Dr Bhalla set up a desk at a temple in Fremont, California, to source stories. Twenty people signed up for the initiative.

Since then, the archive's stock of stories and volunteers has multiplied.

Early this year, the archive's story count swelled to more than 725. Its operational scale has also expanded to span two continents, multiple cities, and several volunteers and story scholars. The last-mentioned category of users provides a stipend and equipment to scholars interested in working with the project.

Dr Bhalla, herself, become a tireless networker.

Back in 2009, the Florida native started her project in California without contacts or a network. After her temple stint, she says she "terrorized" South Asian student groups at the University of California in Berkeley to spread word about her initiative.

Sensing the universal theme of her project, students from several other regions, like Afghanistan, China, and Europe also signed up as volunteers.

In recent times, the project has taken on a South Asian hue: A number of Indian-American volunteers have signed up to know more about their cultural heritage.

When she started work on the archive, Dr Bhalla worked out of her home and recorded using a video camera. Publicity from mainstream outlets, like *The New York Times* and *The Times of India*, increased awareness about her project and work multiplied.

For a while, she juggled her duties as a physicist and non-profit coordinator by working through the night. Early last year, when the operational complexity of her venture increased, she resigned from her job at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory to focus full-time on The 1947 Partition Archive.

Since then, she has maintained a hectic work and travel schedule, regularly connecting with volunteers and story contributors. She has also become adept at traversing the cultural mishmash of identities to gather stories.

During an initial trip to India more than two years ago, Dr Bhalla spent hours scouring the streets of Amritsar. The object of her search was not stories, but elders within the community.

As she explains it, this approach served two purposes. First, it earned her trust from community members because their elders had already endorsed her.

Second, it provided her a readymade network because community elders are generally the best sources of information about Partition experiences.

The archive recently wrapped up a successful funding campaign on Indiegogo, a popular crowdfunding platform to fund additional story scholars in the subcontinent. The UC Berkeley incubator provides them with seating space. Their means of production have also become more sophisticated. Interviews are recorded using DSLR cameras and microphones and are backed up on hard disks.

"History told from a survivor's perspective is very powerful," says Dr Bhalla.

The 1947 Partition Archive has mixed that viewpoint with a global embrace. Although it is headquartered in the United States, it has received stories from places as diverse as Mexico and Israel. In the process, previously unknown narratives have emerged. These narratives are as much about violence as about the complex cocktail of identities during that period.

Ninety-year-old Stafford Elias was 25 when Partition occurred. Up until then, Elias, whose father was a burlap trader, had led a fairly comfortable upper middle-class existence.

The winds of Partition changed the dynamics of relationships.

Ethnicities and ideologies became arbiters of relationships. British factory managers were burnt alive in boilers by striking workers. Elias' father, who was born and brought up in Kolkata, was tied to a chair during worker negotiations.

"It was difficult to get anything done," says Elias.

Their Jewish roots spared Elias' family from the violence that engulfed Kolkata during Partition. But it also produced a piquant situation where they became treasurers to members of both communities.

Hindus, who dominated the jute industry, left sacks of money and jewels with them. Muslims comprised a majority of the meat industry and they deposited belongings with the Eliases before fleeing to East Bengal (which, subsequently, became part of Pakistan and, later, splintered into Bangladesh).

"If only both communities (*Hindus and Muslims*) would have come together, then India could have become a superpower," says the New York City native.

The project also serves as a repository of the effect that Partition had on its survivors.

Chopra's experiences during Partition left him wary of the fanatical elements within Islam. "Religion is different and these people (*fanatics*) were different," he says.

Chaudhry, who followed a circuitous route to become a medical professional in the States, swore off religion based on his experiences during that time.

"People from both communities were equally guilty," he says of his experience.

Piecing together a coherent narrative from such complexity is not a simple task. In their efforts, Dr Bhalla and her team have adopted a journalistic approach. Their questions during story documentation sessions loop from the generic to specific. Volunteers undergo an oral history workshop training to learn appropriate etiquette and how to ask the right questions.

The Archive is expanding, but one senses urgency in Dr Bhalla's mission. She plans to have 10,000 stories on record by 2017.

"The stories are just disappearing," she says, referring to the shrinking numbers of Partition survivors. ■

Log into www.1947partitionarchive.org or e-mail info@1947partitionarchive.org to know more about the project.

TALES FROM OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE BORDER

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family.

Arrival in India brought scant relief. Their family had dispersed during the journey. The sprawling grounds at Karol Bagh, full of Partition's survivors and makeshift refugee camps, further splintered them.

Chopra's grandmother walked the streets of Chandni Chowk in Old Delhi holding a piece of paper with a relative's name. His mother lost them in the crowds of Karol Bagh and briefly thought they had been murdered. Chopra's father risked his life to travel back to Kosoval to search for them.

Twenty five days after they left Kosoval, the Chopra family was reunited in Chandni Chowk.

Chopra's father, who worked as a police inspector, found another job as a police inspector in newly-independent India. Ravi Chopra went onto become a major general in the Indian Army.

After retiring in 1995, he shifted to the Bay Area to be with his son's family.

He has not yet forgotten the Partition experience. The shock of betrayal by close friends scarred him for life. His first reaction, upon encountering Muslims, is one of suspicion. Until the time that he verifies their thoughts on religion, Chopra prefers to distrust them, he says.

Irfan Chaudhry

Irfan Chaudhry

In 1946, strange people were seen around Sadhugarh, a small town near Ludhiana, now in the Indian side of Punjab. Light complexioned and sturdy, the newcomers were visible in public places, like parks and bus stations. They resembled Pathans from the Northwest Frontier of the subcontinent.

"Later, we heard news of entire villages being wiped out in that region," recounts Dr Irfan Chaudhry, former director of medical services at a New York hospital.

A year later, Dr Chaudhry imitated their journey. Except his journey was in the opposite direction, from India to Pakistan. He left his roots (and his favorite teacher) behind in Sadhugarh to migrate to Lahore and, then, Karachi.

His travels started with an incomplete journey. Twenty buses had been dispatched from Lahore to ferry Muslims from Sadhugarh to Pakistan. But the buses decamped their passengers at a random spot near Amritsar and never came back.

Tired of waiting, Chaudhry and his family joined a long procession on the Grand Trunk Road.

Eventually, they were corralled into open grounds near Flore, a town on the banks of the Sutlej river.

"People gravitated towards open spaces (*in towns and cities*) like flies," says Dr Chaudhry. But, such open spaces were a medical and security disaster.

Another train journey brought Chaudhry to Lahore and, subsequently, Karachi, where he worked part-time and attended night school to finish his studies. After being trained as a doctor, he worked in Bahrain and Ireland. The 80-year-old came to Chicago in 1972.

"It was like heaven," he says, describing the experience of seeing the waters of Lake Michigan for the first time. He married a second time soon after (his first wife had passed away by then) and moved to New York City.

Professional duties and work as a medical professional anesthetized his memories of Partition. After retirement those memories have returned.

"The anxiety (*and uncertainty*) that I felt during Partition has returned," he says. "Till today, I don't know who was responsible for the violence." ■