

Archiving memories of shared, partitioned past

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Guneeta Singh Bhalla's grandfather refused to believe the Partition was going to be a reality. He stayed put in Lahore until the communal frenzy left him with no option but to flee. The father of three had several narrow escapes, his car fired at while he drove to Amritsar. He remembers seeing bodies strewn all over the place.

His wife had earlier survived the carnage, having taken a train to India with her children. The family was reunited a month later at a refugee camp. But tens of thousands of others were not as lucky, slaughtered while trying to flee for their lives across the newly delineated border from India or what had now become Pakistan.

The 34-year-old US-based physicist Guneeta Singh Bhalla, grew up listening to these harrowing stories from her grandmother, who was traumatized by memories of her escape from Lahore till her last breath. Regret for her failure

to record her granny's stories prompted her to start the '1947 Partition Archive' in 2011 to record similar memories as part of a path-breaking oral history project dedicated to recording people's history through crowdsourcing.

The project includes conducting free classes to train volunteers how to collect stories, Dr. Bhalla told TOI during her recent visit to India. "So far 300 people have been trained and they have collected stories from nine countries including Mexico, Poland and even Israel. They have video-graphed over 700 stories and recorded them digitally."

Some videos featuring these stories are online at the project's website, which will soon have a feature to help survivors connect online. The rest of unedited footage of the recorded stories will be available for streaming soon. The cost of this venture, around INR 35 lakh, will mostly come from donations and an American India Foundation grant.

Dr. Bhalla said the project has grown far bigger and beyond her expectations in just two years and in part forced her to quit her postdoctoral research fellowship at University of California, Berkeley, to concentrate full time on the project she had first thought of while she was in school. Around 20 out of 100 people the physicist interviewed in India have died while most partition witnesses are now in their 70s and 80s. This has pushed her to urgently record as many accounts as possible.

"We are sending 20 scholars, who will fan across the subcontinent to collect stories," said Bhalla. She added the Partition narrative has largely been confined to Punjab, but the project seeks to record stories from across the subcontinent and wherever the survivors are based around the world.

The project's India Coordinator, Shagufta Siddi, underlined that the Partition is essentially seen from the prism of politics and the religious hatred it engendered. Yet its survivors too witnessed remarkable instances of compassion from those seen as the other, she added.

"There is a remarkable story of a young Hindu boy, who was orphaned during the Partition. He arrived in India with no relatives, left to fend for himself at New Delhi's Pura Qila camp, from where the Jamia Milia Islamia management adopted him," she says. "He grew up and was educated there and is now based in Canada."

Dr. Bhalla cited another story of a Hindu man, whom a Muslim had hidden in a train's first class compartment to protect him from a murderous mob while other Hindu passengers were either killed or assaulted. "It was remarkable how many survivors have overcome their trauma and bitterness," she said.

But Ali Shan (72) and 76-year-old Hardev Singh Grewal's reunion thanks to the project in California, where they are now based, is closer to her heart. The two were born in Gujjarwal village in Ludhiana, where six-year-old Shan's mother and brother were killed in his presence in 1947. Either a Sikh or a Hindu stranger had rescued Shan and months later handed him over to his uncle, who later took him to Pakistan.

The two met at Grewal's home over tea and snacks and initially remembered the annual village fair and the school. Later, as the teary-eyed Shan recalled his story, Grewal remembered how a group of Muslims were killed in his village and buried in a mass grave while they prepared to embrace Sikhism to save their lives. But Grewal's brother managed to save some of his wounded Muslim classmates, who later left for Pakistan.

"The history of the partition we know is mostly what those few historians thought. The archive is about recording oral histories as they are without being analytical or judgmental," said Dr. Bhalla. She added that war and peace are political; the project consciously chooses to stay away from politics to concentrate on the culture and heritage lost due to the Partition.

Politics may have divided the subcontinent over half-a-century back, but the centuries old shared heritage has the potential to undo much of the damage. This healing touch is needed as much today as ever before.

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