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A researcher’s project has led to the archiving of 650 first-hand accounts and oral histories of the survivors of 1947. The accounts are gripping and often a cathartic experience, “I’d heard about Partition but I had never really looked it up. I did— it isn’t a significant event if there was no testimonies of the events that tore the subcontinent asunder. Recalls Guneeta, “I moved to the US when I was in mid-high school and in high school I spent nearly one semester learning about the Jewish Holocaust in Europe. When I brought up the topic of the Partition, I was often met with the same sentiment: surely it was not a significant event if there was no mention of it in our textbooks.”

“People migrating after the Partition; Guneeta working on her project (right) PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

The stories are many. One of the volunteers describes her experience thus, “I’d heard about Partition but I had never really looked it up. I didn’t even know that my own grandfather had lived through the Partition. I didn’t realize how brutal and harsh the journey was. I was shocked at how little I knew, I had always thought of it as a train ride.”

Testimonies reopen old wounds? Says Guneeta, “No one we have interviewed has felt that way. In fact, most are eager to video record first-hand accounts from survivors who fled to and from India to Pakistan. The website also contains recordings of who are sharing their testimonies for the first time but also for the volunteers, who are learning more about Partition. One of the volunteers describes her experience thus, “I had heard about Partition but I had never really looked it up. I didn’t even know that my own grandfather had lived through the Partition. I didn’t realize how brutal and harsh the journey was. I was shocked at how little I knew. I had always thought of it as a train ride.”

While the project is handled out of Berkeley, volunteers travel through the dusty villages of India and Pakistan, listening to testimonies slowly opening up. The bodies have aged and the mind has tired but the memories are fresh and they come pouring out. Amongst the 650 stories that have already been recorded, there is one by Ravi Chopra who moved from Sialkot in Pakistan, to Firozpur in Indian Punjab — only one who made it alive in the train. He can be heard saying, “Partition was a curse on human history. I hope your generation doesn’t see the kind of history we have gone through.”

The questions are formatted — When did you first hear about the partition? Did you have to defend yourself against the murderers — but nobody has got down to recording the survivor accounts. The accounts are gripping and often a cathartic experience, “I’d heard about Partition but I had never really looked it up. I didn’t even know that my own grandfather had lived through the Partition. I didn’t realize how brutal and harsh the journey was. I was shocked at how little I knew, I had always thought of it as a train ride.”

People migrating after the Partition; Guneeta working on her project (right) PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

For now, there is a sense of urgency. The survivors are in the 70’s and 80’s and their testimonies must be captured on camera before they die, like Guneeta’s grandmother did. There is also a larger goal — to connect survivors through the online portal and eventually, to share the oral histories with libraries and research centers across the globe. For, as one volunteer put it, “To forget is to kill twice.”