

Witnesses of Partition

TESTIMONIES A researcher's project has led to the archiving of 650 first-hand accounts and oral histories of the survivors of 1947

Harinder Baweja

harinder.baweja@hindustantimes.com

Thousands of miles away from the South Asian subcontinent which witnessed a bloody Partition in 1947, Guneeta Singh Bhalla, 34, was happy — well, mostly happy — being a research scholar at the University of California in Berkeley, but a thought kept nagging at her and playing in her subconscious. The thought had taken seed from a story narrated to her by her grandmother; one of the millions, who had been uprooted during the Partition that divided India and Pakistan 66 years ago.

The story had seared her grandmother's soul and it haunted Guneeta too. Clutching on to three small children, her grandmother fled Pakistan on a train strewn with dead bodies. She spoke of those times rarely, but each time, it was clear that the memory was still fresh and painful. There had been no healing and

Lahore was still the home she longed for.

Many of us have grown up listening to stories of loot, plunder, rape and horrific killings — when neighbours turned murderers — but nobody has got down to recording the survivor accounts. Guneeta didn't either and the regret ate into her system till she visited the oral testimony archives at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in 2008. "It was very powerful to watch survivors recall their ordeal, more so than reading a book or watching a movie. That is when it clicked. The same needed to be done for the Partition. I began interviewing survivors and recruiting a team in 2010 and by 2011, we had registered an NGO."

Her grandmother was only one among 15 million refugees, uprooted and strewn across freshly drawn borders in 1947. She was also amongst the many lucky to survive the holocaust that killed an estimated 20 million. Despite the magnitude, there was no oral history, no survivor accounts,

no testimonies of the events that tore the subcontinent asunder. Recalls Guneeta, "I moved to the US when I was in middle 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."

But she had witnessed the significance first hand, through her grandmother. She was firm in her belief: the world needed to hear about the Partition not from myself but from my grandmother and the others like her. And so, Guneeta's angst gave birth to a first of its kind project that records oral histories that are uploaded on — 1947PartitionArchive.org — a site so popular, its server crashed when Pakistan and India were, ironically, respectively celebrating their independence days.

Far from the politics and the tensions that still grip the two neighbours, close



■ People migrating after the Partition; Guneeta working on her project (right)

PHOTO: GETTYIMAGES

to 150 volunteers travel across the world to video record first-hand accounts from survivors who fled to and from India to Pakistan. The website also contains accounts from the creation of Bangladesh.

The accounts are gripping and often cathartic, not only for the survivors, most 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'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."

While the project is handled out of



PHOTO: 1947PARTITIONARCHIVE

Berkeley, volunteers travel through the dusty villages of India and Pakistan, listening to survivors 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 violence? And, did you help drive out people from your area? Many admit to hav-

ing participated in the violence but says Guneeta, "We, as oral historians and as an organisation, record with objectivity. It is all a part of history." Do the oral testimonies reopen old wounds? Says Guneeta, "No one we have interviewed has felt that way. In fact, most are eager to share their stories so that such a tragedy can be avoided in the future."

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."