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

There is a sea of startups 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.

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. Mismatches 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.

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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.

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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.

Bhalia'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.

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 dhari 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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“It was an instant click,” she says.

Dr Bhalla recorded her first archive interview during a trip to India more than two years ago. 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 90-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.

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, became a tireless networker. Back in 2009, the Florida native started her project in California with contacts or a network. After her tem- plate stunt, 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.

First, she has juggled her days 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 pow- erful,” 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 identity during that historic 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 rela- tionships. Ethnicities and ideologies became arbiters of relationships. British factory managers were burnt alive in boil- ers 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. “People from both communities were equally guilty,” he says.

Dr Bhalla recorded her first interview in a Faridkot bookstore in 2009.

The times, she says, are different. “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.

Chaudhry, former director of medical services at a New York hospital.

Chopra’s experiences during Partition left him wary of “People gravitated towards open spaces (in towns and cities) like flies,” says Dr Chaudhry. But, such open spaces were a med- ical 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 see- ing 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 memo- ries 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.”

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 med- ical services at a New York hospital.

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

Chaudhry, former director of medical services at a New York hospital.

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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.

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