



Young and yore

- By Shalini Singh

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A great irony of everyday life is that one does not know much about the very people one lives with. This revelation, however, seems to have come well in time for Mahpara Banday, a resident of Ellahi Bagh in Srinagar. Banday, as a volunteer for the 1947 Partition Archive project, interviewed her grandfather and got closer to her roots. “When I interviewed my grandfather, I realised I hardly knew anything about his life, childhood, his siblings dying of disease, Kashmiri customs, how marriages were different then, how the food varied... It felt as if the culture he spoke about had faded away,” says the 19-year-old.

The project is a collection of life stories recorded on video and audio from those who witnessed the division of India. Guneeta Singh Bhalla, 34, cofounder of the project, which began two years ago, had grown up listening to the horrific tales her grandmother told her about the mass displacement. But, unlike Banday, she could not record them before her grandmother died. California-based Bhalla, along with two others, invested her savings and decided to record stories for future generations. “Talking directly to the source is the best way to get to know history,” she says. The project is crowdsourced and has trained volunteers from eight countries, including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, recording narratives with portable cameras and smartphones. Nearly 700 stories have come in so far. “We call them citizen historians,” says Bhalla, adding that oral histories are the beginning of a global trend. “It is an archive created by the people, for the people. It empowers the source. We want to democratise history because it has always been told through the eyes of the winner or the powerful.”

For the younger lot, it is a sense of being involved. “Books are not that interesting, especially since you have to mug it up. What one experiences ‘live’ while recording, or watching a video, gives a feeling of participation. I am keen that my friends get involved and learn about their roots, too,” says Banday.

A similar endeavour called The History Project came out earlier this year across the border. Three Pakistani friends in their twenties—Qasim Aslam, Ayyaz Ahmad and Zoya Siddiqui—brought out a book that presents events leading up to Partition from both the sides. Aimed largely at school students, the illustrated book, available free on their site, lets the reader decide. “As part of a school activity for the project, we asked students in Mumbai to say the first words they thought of when we said ‘Gandhi’ and ‘Jinnah’. Most had reverence for the former and negativity for the latter. The reactions were reversed in Pakistan. The inherent contrast between the versions that were being taught in both countries got us thinking,” says Aslam, an IT entrepreneur. Ayyaz is a consultant at the World Bank, and Siddiqui, an arts student. The three are now working on a second edition of the book. “We have got responses that this is a Pakistani conspiracy to influence young Indian minds, but we are just a bunch of kids who got together to simply present two perspectives,” says Aslam.

Perhaps, the predecessor to both these projects was the Indian Memory Project, started by Mumbai-based Anusha

Yadav in 2010. The 38-year-old photographer and designer wanted to do a book on the history of weddings in India and ended up with a document of personal/collective histories. “It started as a page on Facebook, where people started uploading images and stories on Partition, convergence of faith, migration. From two entries, it has grown to 120 in less than three years,” says Yadav, who runs the project from her study. “While we were growing up, we were told Pakistan is bad, Bangladesh is poor and India is great. But an entire generation on all sides suffered. There seems to be a surge of nostalgia around the world because we are afraid of what is going to come. We are interested in reviewing history today and the internet has made it easier for younger people.”

So what is the basis for this resurgence? Historian Sohail Hashmi says, “That time [Partition] period spans three generations. Those who were adults in 1947 and had kids were the ones who actually suffered. The second generation carried it, the third generation was influenced by it, and, now, there is a distancing happening. The history textbooks that determine how we look at our history have largely been jingoistic. Young people today are trying to understand what went wrong.”

While it is a welcome trend, he adds a cautionary note. “The discourse seems more Punjab-centric right now,” says Hashmi. “Other aspects could also be looked at such as, what about the Hindus in Sindh who did not migrate, or the trauma of the east (Bengalis and Biharis), or what happened to those Muslims who refused to go back to Pakistan? When you do not look at the trauma of Partition in terms of those who crossed the border and those who did not, then you are in danger of becoming a victim of a frame that is already there.”

Also, the subaltern school of history has focused attention on what is hidden in the larger picture. “The Ambedkar University is trying to tap into public memory. This seems to be developing into a full-fledged discipline,” says Hashmi. “The younger lot has decided to look around their immediate environment. Partition is everywhere. Not too many people in India were left untouched by it. Within the study of history, the experiences of people are being looked at by historians. It needs to be welcomed. It will help overcome the trauma, get new perspective on the ‘other’, and the process to demonise the ‘other’ would reduce greatly,” he says.

As Yadav rightly says, “There is no tomorrow without a yesterday.”

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