



Photo: Marla Aufmuth, UC Berkeley Skydeck

Story collectors Guneeta Singh Bhalla (centre) with the team of 1947 Partition Archive, a people-powered, oral history project.

Partition, by citizen historians

Guneeta Singh Bhalla once interviewed a 93-year-old man in Batala who commented at the end of a very long interview, “I feel I can die now, thank you.” Bhalla, 35, who has set up 1945 Partition Archive, says, “I was really stunned when he did, just a few months later.” There are many such people whom she and her team have interviewed for this unique crowd-funded oral history project.

An introductory video on www.1947partitionarchive.org says, “1947 marked the end of British rule in India, giving

birth to India and Pakistan. Chaos unfolded during transfer of power and division of states along religious lines, millions fled at a moment’s notice. In 1947 alone, an estimated 15,000,000 people became homeless, making it the world’s largest mass human displacement and between one to two million lives were lost. Shockingly, there exists no memorials or public archive devoted to Partition, to memories of those whose lives were affected, no source of witness voices for us to learn from so we decided to create one.”

The 1947 Partition Archive is a people-powered non-profit organisation dedicated to documenting, preserving and sharing eye-

witness accounts from all ethnic, religious and economic communities affected by Partition in the form of video and sometimes audio testimonies.

California-based Bhalla is a physicist by profession and was working as a post-doctoral researcher at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory at University of California at Berkeley before she joined The 1947 Partition Archive as a full-time volunteer director in January 2013. She grew up listening to stories about Partition from both sets of her grandparents. Guneeta says, "It was mainly from my paternal grandparents who actually did the migration. They never really got over having to leave their ancestral home and land behind, even 50 or 60 years later. I knew it was a really traumatic and large-scale event but I never learned about it in high school here in the US. In fact, it was not even mentioned in my textbooks while in contrast we learned about the Holocaust in Europe and Hiroshima/Nagasaki for a whole semester in my World History class. At the time, when I had tried to tell my classmates, and even years later when I tried to talk about it in college and graduate school, the reaction was always the same. It was probably not 'a big deal' because it was not written about in textbooks."

That bothered Bhalla because the sentiment contrasted so sharply with the stories she has heard. "The thought that we could let such a massive historical event slip through the cracks without documenting it at the level that it should have been deeply troubled me. I feared we were going to live in a world where history would keep repeating itself. I realized that first-hand accounts validated the experience of Partition. They made it human, palatable and accessible. The numbers that we find on Wikipedia or in books simply cannot convey the true meaning of Partition, what it meant to live through and the decisions made during that time. People needed to hear about Partition from my grandmother, and not me or books. Only those with lived experiences could truly attempt to convey the horrors and trauma of that time. A trauma that affected millions upon millions of people—a population larger than many Western European nations combined! Yet, no one was talking about it. And most people I had known had not even heard about it. This includes most South Asians I knew," she says.

For Bhalla, it became really important to tell the story of Partition. She says, "Where would the world be today if the Holocaust had not been documented

"People needed to hear about Partition from my grandmother, and not me or books. Only those with lived experiences could convey the horrors."

GUNEETA SINGH BHALLA

and understood as it is today? Survivor and witness accounts are crucial to our present day understanding as you already know. In that light, overall, we hope that we as a global community can come away with a deeper understanding of communal violence and the root causes. We also believe that the work we are doing is a cathartic outlet for the witnesses, while also creating a unique opportunity for inter-generational and cross-cultural understanding during the story exchange (or story recording process). People from all sorts of backgrounds come on board to record the oral histories of the South Asian and British elders who are witness to Partition. We hope to ignite grassroots understanding amongst the people, of both the collective history of the people's history of the subcontinent and a more accurate knowledge of the communal tensions and their root causes. This will help in moving beyond communal tensions and towards a better use of our resources."

For those who believe in law of attraction will eventually not get surprised knowing that how the idea to form this archive came to her. She reveals, "I was visiting the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in 2008 when I came across the witness archives. I was doing part of my PhD research at the University of Tokyo in Japan at the time, and happened to take a trip down to Hiroshima. It was so powerful to hear and watch the survivors recall their personal memories of experiencing the atomic bomb. Suddenly, it was all very real and human and I felt their pain much more than watching videos of the mushroom cloud or reading written accounts of those hours that followed the dropping of the bomb. It was an immediate click for me. I knew the same had to be done for Partition. I began recording witness accounts on a hobby camcorder I always carried with me, while on a trip to India in 2009 in a small former kingdom in Punjab called Faridkot."

In 2010, when Guneeta was based in Berkeley, the last member of her family who remembered partition as an adult,

died before Guneeta could reach him to record his story. "I was deeply troubled, not only by his passing, but by the tremendous loss of knowledge that my generation was facing. My great uncle took with him an immense amount of knowledge, wisdom and it was now gone forever. We would have no other chance to learn from it. I began recruiting a team in late 2010/early 2011 and we registered The 1947 Partition Archive in 2011. To collect stories from across the globe quickly and cost effectively, we decided to crowd-source the story collection," shares Guneeta.

Currently, 1947 Partition Archive has a core team of six full-time members (globally), 12 volunteer interns, 250+ volunteer citizen historians, four active story scholars (including two emeritus) and three oral history apprentices. Anyone and everyone present anywhere can associate with this project. For instance, for becoming a citizen historian one has to attend a free workshop on their website on how to record and submit oral history interviews. Here one is taught the basic etiquettes and procedures for conducting interviews, basic video recording techniques and using the online system for submitting. They strictly follow format set forth by the Oral History Association. "Once people take the workshop, they have access to the information they need to go out in the community and record stories. After the story is recorded they submit it to www.1947PartitionArchive.org within one month of completing the workshop. Their story then may appear on our story map online or on our Facebook page," she says.

So far they have managed to collect more than 1,100 interviews in different languages such as English, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati and Sindhi. Bhalla says, "No matter what language one speaks, they can join us as a citizen historian. Hence, they can record and submit a story in the language of their choice as we are not limited by the languages our team speaks." They aim to collect 10,000 stories by December 2017.

In Bhalla's enriching journey, one wonders the impact that these stories would have left on her. "I think every single story I have collected has impacted me in a significant way. I always come away moved and having learned something new. Since we collect life stories shaped by Partition, we learn a lot about traditional agricultural practices, food and cooking practices, educational practices and norms and so much more. My mind has really opened up and my appreciation for my roots grows deeper and deeper," she says. ■