
Oral History: An Emerging Trend In Historiography

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Abstract

This paper shows the importance of oral history in present day in historiography. With the use of oral sources (interviews), I am trying to explain the event of partition of India in 1947. This is the history from below about the people what they think personally about partition because they suffered most, they lost the lives of their beloved. All written history about partition shows the difficulties of people but why not now we started seemed the history from their own real experiences with partition. When I met them, evaluated their stories I reach on the point that they make an ultimate history, which has so far been ignored by the mainstream historians. Therefore, this paper demonstrates the way how oral history is important in historiography.

Keywords: *Oral Sources, Historiography, Partition of India.*

Introduction

Without sources history is impossible. After written sources, oral sources are most imperative for history. Without consulting oral sources, history is incomplete and unauthentic. It is significant to describe first the meaning of oral history. According to dictionary "Oral history is the collection and study of historical information about individuals, families, important events, or everyday life using audiotapes, videotapes or transcriptions of planned interviews."¹ Similarly, oral history involves interviews, public opinion, literature, proverbs, folklores, tape recordings, video recordings, lectures and memories etc. Oral history strives to obtain information from different perspectives and most of these cannot be found in written sources.² Oral history also referred to information gathered in this manner and to a written work (published or unpublished) based on such data, often preserved in archives and large libraries.³

Origin of Oral History

The British historian Paul Thompson in his book *The Voice of the Past-Oral History*, writes "Oral history was established in 1948 as a modern technique for historical documentation when the Columbia university's historian Allan Nevins began recording the memories of persons significant in American life."⁴ Joe Gould (1889-1957) who had assembled the book *Oral History of Our Times*, notices that "All at once idea of oral history occurred to me. I would spend the rest of my life going about the city, listening to people and writing about

¹ Article on oral history from the Columbia encyclopedia.

² Definition of oral history from The American Heritage Dictionary.

³ Definition of oral history from the oxford online dictionary.

⁴ Paul Thompson describe the origin of oral history in his book, *The Voice of The Past: Oral History*, Oxford University Press, p.54.

whatever I heard them say that sounded reveling to me, no matter how boring or idiotic or vulgar or obscene it might sound to others.”⁵ He himself defines the history as, “The history of nation is not in parliament and battlefields but in what the people say to each other on fair days and on high days and in how they farm, quarrel and go on pilgrimage.”⁶ Than oral history becomes familiar among historians. But it does not mean that oral history is a new concept, it is as old as human himself, some historian says that “oral history really goes back as far as Adam and Eve. When Eve ate the apple, and told Adam about it that was the beginning of oral reminiscence.”⁷ Therefore oral history treating recollection of experience as valid evidence, has its own long history as Paul Thompson has shown.

Importance of Oral History in Historiography

Oral history is as much important as written history. It is like a mirror of society. Oral sources clear the picture of real society about particular time period. The legend of the *Dulla Bhatti* in Punjab clears the picture of social and political life of Punjab during Mughal emperor Akbar. Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.⁸ Oral sources preserve for a long-time generation to generation for example folk culture, literature, folklores, proverbs etc. There generalizations live throughout history. This thing makes them more authentic and reliable. Oral sources decide the time-period of history. When historians study the oral sources very carefully, they are able to decide where, when and why particular events happened in history. Oral sources also provide a base for critical analysis of history. Basically, oral sources based on oral form, so on the base of ups and downs (during speaking in interview) historians are able to judge the total reality behind any perception of interviewee, which most of time is not possible with written sources. So, oral sources are credible but with a different creditability. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination symbolism, and desire emerge. Therefore, there are no ‘false’ oral sources,⁹ once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of philological criticism and factual verification which are required by all types of sources. Anyway, the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.¹⁰

Most of the time written sources used by historians with their personal point of view or opinion. But oral sources live same for all even after centuries. Some people argue that oral sources are not much authentic compared to written sources, because in oral history people themselves make a history. A common person tells a story about particular event of history, maybe he is biased, maybe he is not much knowledgeable about specific events of history. But the question is, if one can trust on *Pliny* or *Kalhana* why can’t we rely on apparently no

⁵ Oral History Review, Oral History Association, U.S.A., 1980, p.24.

⁶ Ibid., p.25.

⁷ Charles T. Morrissey, *Why Call It Oral History*, The Oral History Review, U.S. A., 1980. P.29.

⁸ A. Portelli, *What Makes Oral History Different*, article in the book, *Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, Routledge Publishers, London and New York, p.67.

⁹ Ibid., p.68.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.68.

less reliable persons among us. If *Barni* or *Badaouni* can be accused of bias and yet treated as sources of information then a responsible contemporary can also be trusted, no more and no less.

With the use of oral sources historian should be responsible. Oral history is not necessarily an instrument for change; it depends upon the spirit in which it is used. Nevertheless, oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history.¹¹ So far from disappearing in the objectivity of the sources, the historian remains important at least as a partner in dialogue, often as a 'stage director' of the interview, or as an 'organizer' of the testimony. Oral historian may be using other people's words, but are still responsible for the overall discourse.¹² Historian have need to go through both kind of sources written as well as oral. The historian who seeks to portray the past in the round-who is as much concerned with the moral and material culture of the low classes- must draw upon a wide range of oral sources if he is to be true to his task.¹³

Partition of India with the Use of Oral History

I have gone through many books, documents, newspapers, reports etc. about partition of India. But from last few months, I started seeing this historical event with new perspective. From last 3 months, I joined '1947 Partition Archive' as a citizen historian. Citizen historian is a volunteer service captured or record the interviews of partition eyewitness (migrated or non-migrated) for 1947 Partition Archive. When I interviewed some eyewitness of partition and watched interviews already available on social media from 1947 Partition Archive and from other peoples, I recognize that these people also make so authentic a history.

Om Prakash Bhatia born in 1926, migrated from Atari (Pakistan) to Delhi (India) remember that "I had a bad incident, in 1941 when I study in 9th class, one our Muslim classmate wrote 'Pakistan' on blackboard, I came back with my father and asked him what is Pakistan, he replied me they (Muslims) want other country for them." He recalls the incident of partition with heavy heart as "when we sit on the train on 4th September 1947, train had gone only five miles when the Muslim looters came with arms and they cut some trees and threw them on the rails. Train stopped and conflict started between Sikhs and Muslims. 40 Muslims and 30 Sikhs were killed on the spot." During partition, the new government ran rehabilitation camps. He notices the original situation of one camp where he stayed after migration "camp commander was very bad man, he didn't provide any water to us and even the food bought from market was of poor quality. About 10-20 people died within a few days."

One other person named Mohammad Rafique Chaudhry migrated from Ludhiana (Punjab) to Karachi (Pakistan) recalls the cruel days of partition as "at evening when we reached the railway station of Lahore to migrate to India, we heard of a train that arrived with every passenger killed in this train and now they were cleaning the train. This was very horrible

¹¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past-Oral History*, Oxford University Press, p.22.

¹² A. Portelli, *What Makes Oral History Different*, article in the book, *Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, Routledge Publishers, London and New York, p.72.

¹³ See the Presidential address by Ravinder Kumar Director of Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi, *The Place of Oral Sources in Historical Research*, U.G.C. Seminar on, *Concept and Value of History in Modern Historiography*, Department of Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1983, p.20.

moment for me. Whole night I heard the cries of people. Next day I saw around 20-30 trollies filled with dead bodies. I can't have imagined that kind of scene ever in my life." He notices that "both (Hindu-Sikh and Muslim) groups are guilty. They believe in god but not follow god."

Sheila Sanyal was 17 years old on the time of partition. She migrated from Sargodha (Pakistan) to Rohtak (India). She recalls that her father was a government servant and he was on duty in those days. "When he was in Lahore, in train he was attacked. He took off his *pagdi* (turban) and he sat on that *pagdi* and said "*touba touba*". He acted like a Muslim and he was saved." She notices that Sargodha police commissioner was very secular person. He asked them to shift from villages to cities. It indicates that cities were safer than villages during partition massacre. She recalls the death of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 as "in Rohtak I heard that Mahatma Gandhi was shot, and that was very sad day for our country. There was silence in the whole country, you could feel the silence. Then on pandit ji's (Jawahar Lal Nehru) speech "the light was gone" I heard that on the radio myself." Its means that the local people of India felt great sorrow on the death of Gandhi.

Dr. Hameeda Hossain was born in Hyderabad (Sind, Pakistan) in 1936. Her father was a judge and she was also well-educated and started later the 'Political Weekly' in India. She notices the political atmosphere in the country near partition. She recalls, "in 1946, I remember, the political movement was very active. Independence struggle became very strong. Everyone was out in the streets and shouted. I heard some slogans like *laeke rahenge Pakistan. Marke lange Pakistan.*" She recalls "most of the Muslims supported the Muslim league but my family was quite against the partition. My aunt was a good friend of Jinnah (Muhammad Ali Jinnah) but she was not in favor of his demand for Pakistan." She notices on the days of partition "my grandmother found a lonely home and converted it into clinic shelter. When trains came, the injured were sent there. I also helped my grandmother in the clinic. One day a newly married girl with fully blooded cloths arrived. Her husband and whole family were killed. She was mentally very upset and crying whole night."

Gurcharn Singh Bajwa migrated from Sialkot (Pakistan) to Bathinda (Punjab) he explained that the agricultural system in India before Partition was as "generation after generation, *Mujare* worked on our fields. We had seven wells named after *Mujare*." He blamed the leaders for the massacre of 1947 as "we all lived with love and peace with each other, but the leaders started instigating the different religious sects by keeping different water pots for different communities on bus stands and on railway stations." And "Punjab was not divided, Punjab was cut into pieces, this co called freedom was forcefully imposed on us. Punjab and Bengal gave most sacrifices for freedom but these two states suffered the most." He recalls that during that time there was no provision for girls' education but girls were sent to gurdwaras to learn Gurmukhi.

Malkiat Sohpal born in 1925 in Lialpur (Pakistan) and migrated in Jalandhar (Punjab), explained the condition of depressed classes before partition as "we were *Ad Dharmi* considered untouchables, we were discriminated on the grounds of our caste and lot of discrimination was prevalent then in terms of food and clothes. Even a man from a good condition of our caste wanted to take his *barat* on horse, he was not allowed." He criticized

British rule as “I belong to depressed classes, we lived in mud houses in villages. Which were gov’t’s property, the people did not have the right to vote because they did not have any property, the political system of that time had many flaws.”

Everyone knows women were affected the most during partition. A Muslim lady named Fino, explained her experience with partition as “when we left for Pakistan I was 13-year-old, my sister and parents were killed on our way, two of my brothers fled, I jumped in a well along with other women. Later 40-year-old Sikh man kept me with him without marriage.” Partition affected the psychology of people, psychologically they became ill, she explains a story like that “there was a weaver’s house of 7 brothers. One of them killed his father and other 6 brothers and tore all the money to save themselves from attack. The children and women of the house were left alone to suffer.”

Mohammad Ramzan Lohar migrated from Ferozpur (Punjab) to Pakistan. He was born in 1924. He explained his experience with partition as “a Sikh man stood trying to forcibly get a Muslim girl with him on his horse, I hit him with a ‘*Barshi*’ on his back, he died there on the spot, I was shot and the bullet hit me in my arm for 20 years, which I myself took out after 22 years.” He recalls one other event as “a train came from Moga- Muktsar, there was a mass massacre not even a single child was alive in the train there was blood everywhere in the train. They (Sikhs and Hindus) were always friendly with us, I don’t know what happened to them then.”

Almost every interviewee recalls the brotherhood between both communities before partition. Most of times their neighbors belonged to opposite community, helped them for migration. A person named Gurcharn Singh Kahlon migrated from Pakistan to India recalls that “Mohhabat Zaildar mounted on the back of a horse and shouted to people that this Sikh is our brother, our government has made us miserable, but don’t hurt them, let them go safely. He saved neighboring villages of Sikhs. There was a Sikh village named ‘Bhaler’, people there cut their ‘females’ in pieces to save them from brutal Muslim atrocities.”

Surjit Kaur Sandhu was born in 1930 in Pakistan later migrated to India. She recalls the days of partition as “when the news and chaos of partition broke out, my brother was made to look like a girl by cutting his *joora* (hair style). When we came home from school, we were made to wear ‘*burkha*’ to look like Muslims. Similar story was recalled by Joginder Singh, who migrated from Sialkot (Pakistan) to Punjab, “my mother had made a lot of gold for the wedding of my brother. To save the gold she wove the gold in our hairs.” It shows how people were trying to save their children, their property which most of time they failed to protect both.

Atma Singh 14-year-old on the time of partition notices the cultural rituals popular on marriages among local people before partition as, ‘*Marasis*’ from our village started the celebration of a wedding 21 days prior to the wedding by climbing on the roof of the house and singing.”

Jasjeet Singh migrated from Montgomery to Punjab born in 1934, recalls that “there was an Arya school in Montgomery where I used to go when I was a child, there used to be pictures of Maharana Partap, Guru Gobind Singh and Shivaji.” Its fact that before partition religion

become much prominent component among every community. Schools ran after the name of religion and they started using religious symbols in schools as he observed.

Conclusion

Consequently, the interviews of eyewitness of partition tell a lot about partition. People explained the agricultural system, political atmosphere in the country, social rituals and cultural life of local people. The most important aspect, which I note, is that local people belonging to the all communities suffered a lot without having any fault on their own part as the partition was forcefully imposed on them by leaders. They lived in the harmony before such incident, but the day of 15 August 1947 changed everything belonging to them, almost every interviewee started weeping on the question of partition. Therefore, it shows that oral history is an important source for historiography in present day. Oral history has widened the scope of history as it is based on social and democratic ideas of history. By presenting new sources, by shifting focus of enquiry and by opening new areas of enquiry oral history has set in a progression of transformation in the subject of history. We need new pictures and definitions of human being, new moral categories, which oral history can provide. Perhaps oral history should be called moral history as James Bennett articulates.

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