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## IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HISTORY IN THE CONSERVATION OF ANGLO-INDIAN CULTURE

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### INTRODUCTION

When I was just a little girl, my most cherished memories were those of 'bed time' which to me meant 'story time'. My favourite stories were not to be found in any book, rather they were those stories narrated to me by my elders who told me about their experiences especially those of their own childhood.

I was thus kept enthralled by wide ranging narratives replete with fictional ghost stories like those of the 'gulla-katta coffrees'<sup>[1]</sup> and comical escapades about how some naughty little Anglo-Indian children in my home city of Kolkata risked a 'lamb-basting' at home by furious parents after waving frantically at warplanes manned by their favourite pilots and watching dogfights in the distance during the Second World War. In the midst of these tales were interspersed everyday incidents and experiences of Anglo-Indian women who resourcefully planned and executed menus for large families despite limited funds and food rations at the time. I also heard about mothers who, with babies in their arms, ingeniously slid tin trunks containing bare necessities down the stairs to get to the bomb shelters located on the ground floors in the quickest possible time during periods of bombing.

Such stories about the past form an integral part of oral history which according to one of the most renowned oral historians, Alessandro Portelli (as cited in Freund, 2009: 23), tells us "not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did." Indeed, collecting oral histories within the Anglo-Indian community can greatly magnify the value of these stories which themselves become an excellent vehicle for the transmission of values,

tradition and culture in the future. Portelli notes that “what makes [these] oral sources important and fascinating is precisely the fact that they do not passively record the facts, but elaborate upon them and create meaning through the labour of memory and the filter of language” and that “the very tones and accents of the oral discourse [in this case, oral narratives and stories] convey the history and identity of the speakers, and transmit meanings well beyond the speaker’s conscious intention” (Portelli, 2005).

In this article, I will highlight the value and urgency of utilizing oral history with regards to the conservation and preservation of Anglo-Indian culture and examine the possibility of members of the community establishing an oral history archive. As an Anglo-Indian research scholar, I consider it a matter of grave concern that our community will soon face a scenario where a veritable treasure trove of valuable information in the form of traditions, practices, memories, experiences and stories possessed by its elderly members will be lost with their demise.

At present, the greatest danger faced by the Anglo-Indian community is not the extinction of its people but of its identity and culture. Indeed, David McMahon (as cited in Brown, 2001: 70) says, “for all too soon a generation passes and with it goes part of our heritage. We must not let this happen [...] we owe the act of chronicling to the generations to come [...] We must review and record what went before [...]we run the risk of losing whole family histories [...] for if we do not make the effort those stories [...] and pride for a strong heritage will be diluted with each passing generation.”

## THE VALUE OF STORIES

Both written and oral versions of stories have a powerful social purpose and can provide the Anglo-Indian community with a valuable tool to reconnect with its roots and actively engage with its cultural history. Indeed, folklorist Barbara Allen argues that “the storied element of oral history reflects the social nature of an interview, for in communicating something meaningful to others; stories attempt to create a collective consciousness of what is important” (as cited in Shopes, 2005: 9-10). The value of stories is further highlighted by Shopes who says that even “oral history interviews are often quite simply good stories. [ ... ] Edited carefully, they can open

the listener to a life very different from his or her own in a non-threatening way. Contextualized thoughtfully, they can help a reader understand personal experience as something deeply social” (Shopes, n.d). This means that the life histories of individuals within the Anglo-Indian community can be related to “broad themes of social life that cut across individuals' experience” (Shopes, n.d.:596) such as the trials of transition, pain of alienation, the trauma of partition and emigration, desire for acceptance, and struggles to integrate with mainstream society while preserving one’s traditions.

Oral history also offers unexplored personal perspectives from individuals within the community which are often unavailable in mainstream historical sources. It also enables a wider cross section of individuals some of whom may not be confident of their penmanship skills, to document their stories in an alternative manner. In addition, it establishes an "interpersonal bridge"<sup>[2]</sup> which Kaufman (as cited in Errante, 2000: 20) says “becomes a vehicle to facilitate mutual understanding, growth and change”. Lived experiences narrated by elders of the community dealing with faith, perseverance, respect for women, dealing with poverty, large families, overcoming prejudice and opposition with a quiet dignity, courage, a sense of duty and humour would go a long way in teaching future generations to triumph over obstacles in their own lives. This may also to a large extent renew and cement the bonds between different generations of the community, giving each an opportunity to reach out and enlighten the other.

In recent times, researchers have digitized and preserved the culture of various communities by recording interviews and their oral traditions with audio devices. These recordings are then archived and sometimes also transcribed. Oral historians have created archives of data from various oral history projects, some of which are briefly discussed next. I see these as examples of what Anglo-Indian oral history projects could produce, or be modelled upon.

## EXAMPLES OF ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS

**The Oral History Research Office** was established in 1948 at Columbia University, U.S.A., by the historian Allan Nevins who “was the first to initiate a systematic and disciplined effort to record on tape, preserve, and make available for future research

recollections deemed of historical significance” (Shopes, n.d.: 2). The OHRO is a good model of a well-organized oral history project in its inclusion of both donated interviews as well as interviews from employed interviewers to conduct interviews with people as part of specific projects. It has also progressed from using qualified historians and journalists to interviewers with varied backgrounds. The selected interviewers, if not already trained in interview methodology, are then offered a graduate course in oral history by the Office in the School of Library Service and the Department of History (OHRO, 2006). This, in my opinion, greatly enriches its oral history collection and equips interested individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Also worth mentioning is that although “a private institution, [the] collection is a public archive, as the legal release of the material is available to the public and not only restricted to scholars” (Kaldas, 2009: 7). This is essential in bridging the gap between academics and the wider society. According to Kaldas, the recorded files which may be focussed, project-based interviews, or life histories are also transcribed when financial resources are available. The transcriptions and a large amount of the data collected are then made available online whenever possible (2009: 7).

**The USC Shoah Foundation and its Visual History Archive** is an admirable instance of academic institutions and non-academics uniting to spearhead a project whose main aim is “the distribution of the material [to the public] for research and education purposes” (USC Shoah Foundation, 2006: n.p.). It was established by Stephen Spielberg in 1994 “to document interviews with survivors of the Holocaust. Between 1994 and 1999 the organization videotaped 52,000 testimonies in 56 countries and 32 languages” (USC Shoah Foundation, 2006: n.p.). The enterprise has video recordings of interviews which have been catalogued, indexed and then digitally archived.

Notably, the Shoah Foundation cooperates with a number of institutions and partners with three U.S. universities—Rice University, the University of Southern California, and Yale—and access to the archive is available through the various campus networks. (Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, 2012: n.p.). The Foundation also recently initiated the ‘iWitness Video Challenge’, to allow access by schools to

the testimonies of thousands of Holocaust survivor testimonies and survivors of recent genocides in Africa, hosted online, [www.iwitness.usc.edu](http://www.iwitness.usc.edu). It is now possible for participating schools to incorporate and utilize material on the website directly in classroom teaching and assignments (Spielberg's Shoah project turns memory into action, 2013: n.p.).

Thus, in providing a well-organized and fully digitized archive, uniting with various partner universities and involving schools in the project, the Shoah Foundation and its Visual History archive exemplifies what other communities could also do.

**Duke Collection of American Indian Oral History:** In 1966, Doris Duke funded seven American Indian oral history projects which resulted in 'The Duke Collection of American Indian Oral History'. The project allowed for Native American participation in recording and preserving their oral narratives and traditions "in order to provide an emic view of their history and cultures" (Repp, 2005: 6). Significantly, some of the researchers also belonged to the participating tribes. The collection consists of both the original tapes and "microfiche copies of the typescripts" (Repp, 2005:n.p.). Typescripts of interviews (1967 -1972) which are "organized by tribe but may be searched by interviewee, by interviewer, by tape number, or by keyword searching of the full-text of the transcript" (Repp, 2005) are available online.

This collection is instrumental in uniting various universities, and encouraging Native Americans to participate in preserving and recording their languages and oral histories as well as providing the public with easy access to online transcripts of the interviews conducted. As such, its value as an oral history project might be considered as a useful model.

**Collect Britain: The Way We Speak:** One of the largest digitized collections, 'Collect Britain: The Way We Speak' compares and contrasts the data of two oral history projects conducted fifty years apart and "reflects how English accents and dialects (sounds, words and structures) have changed over the past fifty years, and how notions and understandings of place and community have shifted during that period" (Perks and Robinson, 2005: 79). In the first project, the 'Survey of English Dialects' (SED), data was collected by field workers under Eugen Dieth and Harold Orton over an eleven-year period between 1950 and 1961 in a total of 313 locations.

The second project, Millennium Memory Bank (MMB), involved data collected during 1998 and 1999 by forty BBC local radio stations across the UK which gathered 5429 oral history interviews on minidisc, now catalogued and archived at the British Library.

Collect Britain is commendable as it has successfully appealed to a diverse audience and has achieved extensive dissemination of its collection. Due to its digitization and convenience of accessibility, “visitors to the site can view and hear 90,000 images and sounds; including 681 oral history extracts (fifty-five hours in total) without needing to visit the British Library in London” (Perks and Robinson, 2005: 79). However, the site admits the “need to learn a great deal more about the particular way recordings are being used; how long users are staying onsite; whether they return; and whether the user profile changes over time” (Perks & Robinson, 2005: 88).

**Storycorps:** Another model of an oral history project is StoryCorps which aims “[...] to strengthen and build the connections between people, teach the value of listening, and weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that every life matters [...]” (Storycorps, n.d.). Since 2003, StoryCorps has collected and archived more than 45,000 interviews with nearly 90,000 participants. The subjects are interviewed most often by non-academics already known to the interviewees. Each conversation is preserved at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The recorded interviews can be uploaded from their website.

Some of the latest initiatives of Storycorps are to devote separate sections on its website to stories reflecting Military Voices, Latinos, African Americans, September 11 experiences, as well as stories by people of all ages with serious illness and memory loss. (Storycorps, n.d.).

StoryCorps’ success as an independent, non-profit oral history project thus lies in the fact that it provides people of all backgrounds with the opportunity to record, share and preserve their stories. Users around the world can also easily listen to the uploaded stories due to easy accessibility.

**The Travelling Archive**, set up in 2004 by Moushumi Bhowmik is another excellent model of easily accessible and online oral history and oral tradition collections which

include, for example, songs and stories. It is interesting to note that while there has been much scholarly research conducted on the Bauls and their music, the recordings of Baul performances in rural areas by non-academic individuals also contribute to the data available on the Bauls.

As noted on the website, The Travelling Archive “ shares with readers and listeners extracts from a growing collection of folk music of Bengal, recorded in the field by Moushumi Bhowmik and Sukanta Majumdar from 2003. The collection stands at present at approximately 180 hours of songs and interviews from about 97 sessions, and it is sorted here by performer/composer, form and place names, with descriptions of the recording sessions, while the audience/viewer is taken through an interactive map.” (The Travelling Archive, n.d.). Other informative websites which share uploaded videos of interviews and performances by Baul artists with users of all ages and nationalities are <http://www.baularchive.com/> and <http://shohojgaan.tumblr.com/>.

#### ANGLO-INDIAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS: IDEAS AND POSSIBILITIES

The above mentioned models can be used to inspire a similar project, or projects, to record and collect oral histories of members of the Anglo-Indian community with the primary purpose of “documenting the community’s past and support[ing] its present” (Sacks, 2009: 6). Besides being invaluable both for preserving the culture of the community and providing a repository of relevant data for researchers in the future, the resultant data can then be collected and stored in archives. In addition to building pride and awareness of the experience of members of the community, the resultant archive will provide concrete and systematically organized information which can be made available online and digitized for easy accessibility as has already been done by the organisations discussed earlier.

The initial factors which need to be determined for such a project are the budget, scale of the project and who is to be involved. It seems advisable that there is a core group of academics and members of the community who would initially draft a plan of action, determining, for example, the extent of accessibility of the data, considering the extent to which anonymity of participants (for ethical reasons) may be maintained, deciding on ownership rights and copyright issues, implementing the

project and an estimate of costs involved. The involvement of Universities may enable the procurement of educational grants while members of the community could apply for governmental grants and perhaps even community sponsorship for the project. However, it is essential to point out that while small scale and informal projects by non-academics are likely to be less expensive and allow for greater accessibility; large scale academic endeavours run the risk of limited accessibility.

The ideal scenario would be a project which has academic involvement but which is open enough to incorporating the contributions of non-professionals in building a composite body of knowledge on the community thus “breaking of the boundary between the educational institution and the world, between the professional and the ordinary public” (Thompson, 2009: 27). This would require using the guidelines and practical advice provided by professionals regarding the method of conducting interviews, the formats in which files can be recorded, making sample copies of consent forms etc. available for download, and making it possible for ordinary people to record life histories using simple voice recorders provided in mobile phones, laptops and camcorders. The resultant media files could then be uploaded online. There also needs to be a uniform and systematic cataloguing of collected data which should be available as collections of audio recordings housed at the University and online and made user friendly by organizing it under the categories of date, video recording, and other searchable categories.

There could perhaps be a central archive located at one particular university, or a network of partner universities located in various countries and whose archival data can be linked via their online databases. This follows the example of what has been achieved by the Shoah Foundation. This would enable scholars and members of the community from various countries to access the data online while the physical copies, where applicable, can be housed and preserved on site at particular universities. Large scale downloading for commercial purposes can be avoided by limiting the number of files which can be downloaded by users, or by restricting users to only viewing or listening to the life histories online.

Another factor to be considered is the written, or in this case transcribed, value of the collected life histories. Indeed, Portelli says “Orality and writing, for many centuries now, have not existed separately: if many written sources are based on orality,



modern orality itself is saturated with writing (Portelli, 1998: 37). He further states, “In the end, we might define oral history as the genre of discourse which orality and writing have developed jointly in order to speak to each other about the past” (as cited in Schneider, 2002: 63). Thus there needs to be adequate training of those who conduct the interviews and transcription of the life histories collected. Following in the footsteps of the OHRO the archival centre or partner universities can offer short training programmes or online courses on oral history, transcribing, data collection and documentation for willing but untrained individuals. Besides generating employment as part time jobs for college students and researchers, it would also provide them with a better understanding of the community and harness the potential of the youth (both Anglo-Indian and non-Anglo-Indian) who can then be involved in an integral part of the project.

In lieu of the fact that “the historian/activist’s contribution to the community is an elaboration and articulation of the community’s knowledge, and the spreading of this knowledge beyond the community’s boundaries” (Portelli, 2005: n.p.), an online digital archive would be a perfect platform for dissemination of oral history. It would also encourage and assist the organization of other programmes to benefit the community and society.

In this context, as an educationalist<sup>[3]</sup>, I concur with Quinlan’s argument for the use of Oral history as a classroom teaching technique due to “its interdisciplinary nature, drawing on a variety of research, verbal, writing, and technical skills and its built-in ability to tie the school [or college] to the community to bring a unique focus and skill set to a curriculum” (Sommers & Quinlan, 2009: 13). Indeed, a curriculum could be built around the archive (by relating it to broader social and historical issues such as communal harmony, diversity, ethnicity, and identity ) ranging from primary school to college level projects as oral history is flexible enough for various age groups to be involved. For instance, children at the primary level might be able to listen to recorded clips of life histories from the archive and then have a discussion in class about issues it brings up, while projects can be slightly more ambitious with older students who might be set the task of recording and transcribing their interviews using the recorded interviews in the archive as a template and writing a report on

their experiences, or writing a research paper on the data available in the archive, or generated by their field research.

The direct experience of being a part of the process of collecting oral histories and listening to the stories told by their elders first-hand will hopefully make being Anglo-Indian more meaningful for the Anglo-Indian youth by bringing the history of their community to life and encouraging renewed interest in their cultural heritage. In addition, the curiosity and exuberance of the youth belonging to other communities may lead to fresh perspectives on old issues and give non-Anglo-Indians an insight into the Anglo-Indian community.

Keeping in mind that our stories tell us much about who we are, oral history has the ability to bestow upon our younger generation a stronger and more grounded perspective not just on the community but about themselves in a rapidly changing world. Lemley, Hudson and Terry also believe that “Oral history can critically enhance student knowledge through community engagement” (2013: 125). For example, as part of summer camp activities organized by Anglo-Indian community groups for its youth, an individual or group oral history programme or competition could be organized which would encourage young people to learn about their family history by interviewing family members, visiting old age homes or simply listening to the recorded data in the archive and planning a project (ranging from show and tell, scrapbooks, power point presentations, recording their own interviews, documenting aspects of community life through oral history interviews, short films etc.) around it. The entire process could culminate in an exhibition of the completed projects for their families and other members of the community.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

An Anglo-Indian oral history project would benefit from cooperation and collaboration between various educational institutions, influential members of the community, and community groups to procure the necessary grants, provide planning, organization and direction and effort to successfully implement and sustain such it. If successful, such an enterprise has great potential in aiding, involving and uniting the Anglo Indian community in a project of value now and into the future.

In the quest to integrate with mainstream life and economically improve the community wherever its members may be based, it would be unwise to neglect this essential aspect of culture preservation for it is akin to the roots of a great tree which provides it with crucial support and nourishment. We need to know about where we have been in order to know where we are heading in the future otherwise we will be left without direction. I would thus conclude with the lyrics of the song 'Roots before Branches':

I'm standing if

I have roots before branches.

To know who I am before I know who I want to be

With faith to take chances to live like

I see a place in this world for me...<sup>[4]</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>[1]</sup>The name 'Gulla–Katta Coffrees', partly in Hindi means throat/neck (gulla) cut (katta) African-Americans (coffrees due to their densely curled hair and dark colour). The reference to African Americans points to a time when American troops were stationed in Calcutta during World War II.

<sup>[2]</sup> The term interpersonal bridge has been cited in Antoinette Errante, 'But Sometimes You're Not Part of the Story: Oral Histories and Ways of Remembering and Telling', 2000, p.20

<sup>[3]</sup> I spent three years teaching at high school level and recently began a PHD programme in English Literature at Jadavpur University. I have also qualified to lecture at the university level.

<sup>[4]</sup> See "*Roots Before Branches Lyrics*." *Lyrics.net*. STANDS4 LLC, 2013. Web. 28 Jul 2013. <http://www.lyrics.net/lyric/26479940>