



Oral History : New Approach in History writing

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Abstract:

Oral history is a valuable source for historians. Although the major beneficiaries of oral history usually have been social historians, all historical methodological fields have the potential to learn from this rich primary source. Some historians rely on oral history to form the core of their research. Others use these individual testimonies merely to illustrate a particular point. Yet however historians choose to use oral history, it has the potential to greatly enrich their scholarship on a number of levels. One of the primary benefits of oral history for scholars is its ability to bring to life the voices and experiences of individuals, many of whom might otherwise have been forgotten by history. By Oral history we generally mean the individual experiences of the people. The information about such individual experiences can be gathered by having interviews of the concerned people. The main advantage of the oral history is that it can be helpful in enlivening the events occurred in the past. By this method, we can know the experiences of the weak and the poor, who have often been neglected in history. The process of documentation through interviews in an oral history project is comparatively of recent origin. The paper will also examine the significant contributions that oral history has made to the study of history.

KEYWORDS: Oral, History, Historical, Traditional,

Introduction:

'Oral History', it simply means utilization of oral evidences for writing history. When we adopt the method of oral history in order to study about the Partition of the country,¹ our knowledge gets widened. Government reports provide the data and the statistics only. But these do not tell us about the trials and tribulations of the people. For example, the data and the statistics cannot tell the sorrow and the hardships of the women during the Partition. Only the distressed women can tell their tales of woes. Only the relevance. Yet what historians are really doing is examining the past-incredibly personal - and asks intricate questions about who we are as individuals and how we fit into society. Incorporating oral testimonies into historical writing allows historians to illustrate their thesis and conclusions in a much more relatable way than they could ever achieve with impersonal theory or simply by relying on famous individuals from the past. Every day people make history, even if we do not realize it. It is the everyday person that most of us can relate to. Ultimately,² the value of oral history is that it allows the reader to grapple with the magnitude of important life changing historical events but it requires the eyes of real people.³ Oral history provides a level of accessibility to the past that often is missing from other forms of history, and this is one of the primary reasons why it is so popular among historians and students. When listening to oral testimonies then, historians need to remain cognizant of the fact that people forget many of the small details of their daily life and instead rely on presenting a broad sketch of their experiences. Often, only the most profound memories stand decades later. Therefore, historians need to be careful when relying on oral histories to provide historically reliable details. When possible, a good historian will try to compare the information gathered in oral testimonies against established historical fact. When the two do not correspond, it can be a frustrating affair. After all nobody wants to hear that they do not remember their own life experiences.⁴

The idea of not being able to remember every detail of one's past is complicated further when many people experience a particular event, a phenomenon known as collective memory. The flexibility of oral archives enables

more voices to be added to the archive unlike the State's record of the 'facts' of the event. Urvashi Battalia in her introduction to *The Other Side of Silence* remarks: 'the oral narrative offers a different way of looking at history, a different perspective, for, because such narratives often flow in to each other in terms of temporal time, they blur the somewhat rigid timeframes within which history situates itself. Because people locate their memories by different dates or different timeframes, then the events that mark the beginning and end of histories, their narratives flow above below, through the disciplinary narratives of history. They offer us a way of turning the historical lens at a somewhat different angle, and to look at what this perspective offers,⁵ "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. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open new areas of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students; between educational institutions and the world outside; between generations; and in the writing of history-whether in books, or museums, or radio and film-it can give back to the people who made history through their experiences and their own words, a central place. While sharing certain common features, oral documents are not identical to the written ones. There is an important distinction which is of concern to the oral historian. The written documents are usually no longer living when the document is used by a historian-a feature of various privacy and ethical codes. In contrast, oral documents are derived from living persons; at least the initial recording of any such document on tape or paper is a product of living persons in conversation. Thus, whereas written documents are often referred to as dead letters, oral documents are generally styled living testimonies. The difference here can be an important one if, as is commonly the case, a historian generates oral documents which he subsequently uses for historical interpretation. This is because the archival historian is limited to the written word and cannot go beyond what the author of a given document thought, what he thought happened or ought to happen, or what he wanted others to think happened; in other words, the distinction between the behavioural and ideational is blurred; and the historian is uncertain of historicity of the evidence.⁶ On the other hand, the oral historian who employs a document which he has created with an interviewee is able to observe human behaviour first-hand in all its complexity and under varying circumstances; and he is able to engage in dialogue with the historical actor.

Oral history can be defined as the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. It may take the form of eye-witness evidence about the past but can include folklore, myths, songs and stories passed down over the years by the word of mouth. While it is an invaluable way of preserving the knowledge and understanding of older people,⁷ it can also involve interviewing younger generations. Oral evidence has certain advantages over historical documents. In contrast to any historical document, oral evidence comes from a living source. If it seems mislead, it is possible to ask more and informant can also correct and the interviewer who may have misunderstood it. Moreover, a document cannot answer back. But oral history is a two-way process. Oral evidence is independent of any document but can lead to its discovery. However, one individual testimony cannot carry the full analytical weight of history but it can bring insight into the processes and provide account of past experiences.⁸

There are several varieties of oral documents. Personal reminiscence or oral history is the most elemental of these. Oral history is the recollection of a single individual who participated in or was an observer of the events to which he either is an actor himself or an eyewitness. When oral history is passed on to another person, usually of a succeeding generation in that family or lineage, it becomes oral tradition'. Thus, oral tradition is derived from a transmission of testimony vertically. If that tradition spreads horizontally to a wider, definable group of people, it is referred to as folklore as elite lore, depending on the social class of the group.⁹" The nature of the interview also influences oral history. Some interviews are free form. The interview simply turns on the videotape or the recorder and lets the interviewee speak. In these cases, the person speaking does not have to worry about being interrupted or cut off. However, they also might leave a lot of information that you as the historian are curious about. In other cases, the interview might be much more structured. In such cases, the interviewer asks a set of questions." However, the interviewer might rush the person they are interviewing, cutting them off or interrupting which may lead to not getting certain information. The selected individuals, however, need not be comprehensive nor statistically representative of the wider linguistic community from which they originate. Oral historians realize that the interview is a limited document. At the same time, they maintain that a given individual has as much right to be heard as anyone else and what his history is worthy of being recorded. The difference is in one's conception of what constitutes history. On the other hand, the oral historian (i.e. one who is a consumer of the interviews he has conducted) does not merely regurgitate the contents of the interviews. As noted above the historian must

examine the oral document critically both internally and externally and place that document within his theoretical framework. Thus, the oral of history and historical reality which need not necessarily coincide. The oral historian is not a mere publicist of individual perceptions; the ultimate goal is the reconstruction of historical reality. According to Jan Vansina, oral traditions are testimonies of the past which are deliberately transmitted from mouth to mouth. Historical narrative is not the only aspect of oral tradition that can be recorded, collected and utilized. Sacred formulas, names, poetry, genealogies, folk tales, myths and legal precedents can be had from the oral tradition of African tribes. Professor Allan Nevin of Columbia University devised the term oral history in 1948. Though there is no direct evidence, he appears to have been influenced by his contemporary Joe Gould (1889-1957) who had compiled Oral history of Our Times. Gould wrote about oral history, '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 whether I heard them say that sounded revealing to me, no matter how boring or idiotic or vulgar or obscene it might sound to others. About history he had his own ideas, he wrote, "The history of a nation is not in parliament and battle fields but in what the people say to each other on fair days and high days and in how they farm. quarrel and go on pilgrimage. "¹⁰

Joe Gould and Allan Nevin had different conception of oral history. Nevin interviewed Charles N. Higgins and declared that it was very useful. To Gould only the condition of his times, as collected from oral testimonies, was oral history. He had no idea of interview programme in oral history. Gould and Nevin had in the beginning not only different ideas of oral history but they followed different methodology. Of course, Nevin was more scientific. He tried through oral history to conserve knowledge and experience that was being lost through lack of adequate records. He continued to use history in terms of describing his interview programmes. Thus, oral history became familiar nomenclature for interview project.¹¹ The term oral history' is new. But it does not mean that it had no roots in the past. In fact, oral history is as old as history itself. Oral tradition predominated in the pre-literate societies before the dawn of civilization. At that stage all kinds of knowledge were imparted orally. Oral testimonies or oral traditions and oral evidences prevailed and dominated. Some writers are of the view that, "Oral History really goes back as far as Adam and Eve. When Eve ate the apple and told Adam about it that was beginning of Oral reminiscence." When there were no written records, then, man used to narrate the deeds of his ancestors to their children verbally. Even the Rigveda, the Mahabharat and other historical epics were mostly relied on oral accounts. But, in the sum total it has to be admitted that the use of oral evidence could not altogether be discarded for historical writing. Also, that the entire knowledge about the pre-historic and ancient times, when the written script had not been invented, has descended to us only through oral tradition or the remembered word. It is this realisation which has once again brought the oral tradition back to its proper place as a source of history. Accordingly, the puranas, which at one time were totally discarded by the modern historiographers as nothing but myths, have been re- accepted as containing valuable information not only on ancient Indian dynasties, but also on the socio-economic history of their times. The entire texts of the Vedas have come down to us, originally in the memorised form.

Accordingly, the concept of historiography in the ancient Indian thought was very comprehensive. Itihas or history comprehended purana or itivritta, viz., ancient occurrences akhyaika or historical tales and udabrana or declaratory songs or panegyrics. The Dharam Shastras and books on arthshastra were treated as historical expositions. Kautilya, the famous exponent of Indian political thought regarded Itihas as the 5th Veda and held its scope to be wide enough so as to include not only legends, tales of occurrences but also treatise on religion and also social and political history. Further it goes to the credit of perfect documentation system evolved by the ancients that the texts of ancient treatises have come down to us, more or less unadulterated. There are two reasons for this. One that before writing was invented, human beings had naturally developed in them very strong memory cells. Secondly, a strict methodology was followed in the memorising of the texts of treaties. This memorizing was possible expositions. It was considered to be a sacred duty of certain families to transmit that knowledge to the successive generations in the same meteoric perfection in which those hymns or poetic songs were composed. We, in India, call this by the name of shrutis and smritis. The descendants of sages and monies in India had actually kept that knowledge in their safe custody almost in the same fashion as we expect from the legitimate custodians of family archives.

In a way, the entire bardic literature in which form most of the political and social history of medieval India has come down to us, is nothing but a continuation of the tradition of sruris and smritis. Writers like Kalhan, Tod and many others did succeed in resuscitating the histories of Kashmir and Rajasthan with the help of bardic literature.

In Rajasthan, this bardic literature was later on documented in the families of the bards in archaic Rajasthani dialect called dingala or in medieval Brajhasha called Pinjala. In Punjab, the history of the struggle of the Sikhs for survival has come down to us in the form of the rustic but inspiring poetry of the Dhadis. John Malcolm significantly wrote in every research into general history of mankind, it is of utmost essential importance to hear what a nation has to say of itself and knowledge obtained from such sources has a value independent of its historical utility. It aids the promotion of intercourse and leads to the establishment of friendship between the nation". Oral history fulfils this purpose as it brings to the forefront what different classes have to say about themselves.

Clearly, oral history presents a number of problems to the historian. Does that mean that we should avoid oral history or only use oral history as an illustrative filler to grab people's attention? Oral history is one of the most exciting forms of history. It certainly has the potential to connect the day-to-day experiences of an average person to the momentous events that occurred in the past, and it allows us to see a little more of our self and our humanity in history. Yes, you must always approach oral history with a critical eye, but a critical eye need not be a sceptical eye. Just because someone does not remember every small detail of one's life or just because collective memory and public discourse have the potential to invade our memories, does not mean that our experiences are not real. The feeling behind the memory is still authentic. Even if a memory has been influenced by outside factors, those influences can be just as historically informative as the memory itself. After all, the factors influencing how we remember are also products of historical forces. Once you recognize that oral history has its limits, you can begin to appreciate better its myriad possibilities. Regarding the accuracy of oral history, Jean Loup Gassed concludes in the book *Autopsy of a Battle*. I found that each witness account can be broken down into two parts: 1) descriptions of events that the witness participated indirectly, and 2) descriptions of events that the witness did not actually participate in, but that he heard about from other sources. The distinction between these two parts of a witness account is of the highest importance. I noted that concerning events that the witnesses participated in, the information provided was surprisingly reliable, as was confirmed by comparison with other sources. The imprecision or mistake usually concerned number, rank and date, the first two tending to become inflated with time. Concerning events that the witness had not participated in personally, the information was only as reliable as whatever the source of information had been (various rumours): that say it was often very unreliable and I usually discarded such information',¹²

Though historian has used interviews for centuries as a source material for the study of history, the concept of oral history is comparatively a recent phenomenon. It is now recognized that a substantial topic cannot be studied on the basis of one kind of material alone. The official records of an organisation, it may be argued, may provide the frame, the skeleton of a historical narrative. But private correspondence or papers can enrich it with flesh of personal feeling, opinion or interpretation. Above all, the human story of how the thoughts and wishes of individuals brought forth certain actions can be told in a more personal and less formal way. Archival institutions of foreign countries are now among the agencies that have taken part in this effort to supplement the written record by the creation of new unpublished sources for the historical study under the oral history programme. It is necessary to point out that this is not the place to narrate the details of the process of recording of interviews, typing of transcripts, and review by the persons who have been interviewed, as everyone is quite familiar with it. No doubt, there may be a little variation in the working but that too does not need any reference. The tradition of keeping and preserving old record is a concept which is few centuries old in our country. The official communication was preserved in the record offices for its consultation for official use. Private individuals, writers or research scholar had no access to these documents as these were considered strictly as state property. With the passage of time, these documents were found to be in very bad shape—often moth or rust eaten, on an account of non-availability of their scientific preservation Thus we were deprived of the most valuable documents which, in fact, would have been very useful for penning the events of the past centuries. A systematic effort was, however, made by the British government in India, when the Raj began to have its deep roots in our soil. It took the cue from the India office Library, London and established the imperial Record office in Delhi, now called the National Archives of India. Similarly record offices have been established in almost every state of our country. The Oral History centre has been established, in a comprehensive way in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, New Delhi.

The chief objective and value of the oral history is to complement and supplement unpublished sources, viz. official records and private papers and it was first recognized by the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in the

year 1966 and it was taken as a part of its research activities. The Museum has done commendable job and one cannot but praise the said institution for its concerted efforts to serve the cause of creating new sources that will be available to all the interested scholars. The programme or the project of oral history undertaken by the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, perhaps caught the eye of our historians and as a result, rather belatedly, considered the importance of the programme and its usefulness as a source to supplement public records and private archives."¹³ During the 44 session of the Indian Historical Records Commission, held in Bikaner, in the year 1976, the following resolution, brought forward by our eminent historian Prof. O.P. Bhatnagar, was adopted, 'resolved that an Oral History record office be established as part of National Archives whose purpose should be to record on tape and then transcribe the recollections of men who have played an important part in recent history as well as the reaction of those who have seen history made. The different State Archives should also take up this urgent work'." Although a long time has passed, the importance of the programme has not been realized by National Archives and State Archive. A few State Archives, namely U.P., Haryana and Delhi have set up Oral history Cells so far. I have no information with regard to Universities, but

Conclusion:

The concept of oral history is based on the social and the democratic ideas of history. The oral testimonies are unwritten sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission from generation to the generation. However, the technique for collecting oral tradition as a source material for historiography is of recent origin. Oral history has widened the scope and the value of history as it is based on social and the democratic ideas of history. Till now the focus of history had been the struggle for power in the field of politics and where economy, religion, labour class and lowest strata of society, etc., were given no attention. Oral history has made the life experiences of people of all kinds high and low, as basis for writing history. By introducing new evidences by shifting the focus of inquiry, and by opening new areas of inquiry, history has set in a process of transformation in the subject of history.

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