

Field Notes

With Rama Lakshmi

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984 is considered one of the worst industrial disasters in the world. Poisonous gas that accidentally leaked from a Union Carbide factory took the lives of an estimated 10,000 people in the surrounding region. When Rama Lakshmi learned that the activists and survivors from Bhopal, India had collected some objects of memory from the survivors' families, she curated a small exhibition. Through conversations with stakeholders, Rama also learned that they opposed the government's memorial project. The survivors felt that the government had no moral right to build a memorial. With that came the idea of a survivors' museum of their own.

Funded by the Remember Bhopal Trust, this unique museum relies on oral history. The museum houses twenty objects, which are the only remnants of the victims, and has interactive visual and audiological simulations of the night of the tragedy. It has received an incredible response so far and stands as a powerful reminder to the world that says "No more Bhopal".

Q: What were the challenges of your projects and how did you negotiate them?

For my oral history project in Bhopal, there were two big challenges. It was quite a task to get museum-quality recordings, with no distracting sounds or needless echoes. Getting people to speak in a manner which could later be edited, and used, as separate stand-alone audio grabs for the museum, was another challenge.

Q: Were there any memorable experiences that you had while conducting interviews that stand out in your memory?

My most memorable experience was recording the protest songs that survivors have sung in the movement over three decades. The protest songs have been treated as the literary memory of the movement in the museum.

Visit rememberbhopal.net for more details.

Rama Lakshmi is a journalist and an oral historian who set up the "Remember Bhopal Museum" which sheds light on the struggle for the rights of the survivors from the Bhopal Gas tragedy. In IOHA 2016, Rama is one of the speakers in the second public panel titled: "Shifting perspectives: Oral history and the memory of disaster."



Spotlight

Citizens Archive of Pakistan



The Citizen's Archive of Pakistan (CAP) is a non-profit organization based out of Karachi and Lahore, established with an aim to preserve the nation's heritage and culture. Since 2007, the CAP has been working to raise awareness about Pakistan's history through the voices of its people. The CAP's flagship project, the Oral History Project (OHP), celebrates ordinary people's experiences in the decades following Pakistan's independence. The project, which has collected over 1,800 oral histories, lends voice to those neglected people on the margins of society, whose voices have been hidden from history. The OHP has collaborated with various groups in Pakistan, particularly through 'sub-projects' which focus on the histories of minority communities and others, such as the Lollywood film industry.

Many of the CAP's events and exhibitions, such as the Shanaakht ('Identity') Festival, draw directly from the OHP oral histories and related materials – newspaper clippings, official correspondence, refugee cards, photographs, passports and the like – all of which the archive seeks to preserve. To date, the project has digitized more than 87,000 photographs from both private and public collections.

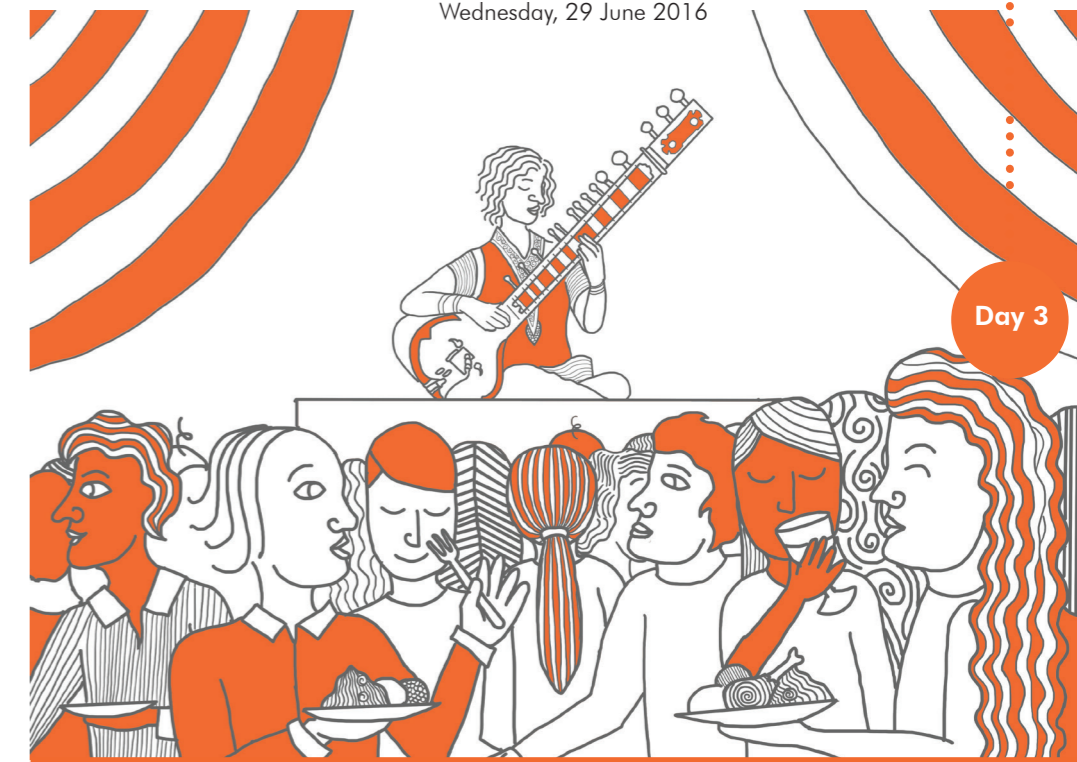
In future, CAP aims to archive the voices of the partition generation and document a version of that history that cannot be distorted. They plan to establish a Living History Museum of Pakistan that will allow visitors of all ages to experience the history of their nation. The museum will house interactive multimedia exhibits drawn from the material of the rich archives they possess, inviting visitors to touch, feel, think, and play whilst they learn.

For more information, visit the CAP website at www.citizensarchive.org.

The daily Listener

Newsletter / IOHA Bangalore 2016

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Panel Discussion / Mesa redonda: "Shifting Perspectives: Oral History and the Memory of Disaster" / "Cambiando Perspectivas: La Historia Oral y la Memoria de los Desastres" **Speakers / Ponentes:** Mary Marshall Clark (USA), Rama Lakshmi (India), Xun Zhou (China) and Mark Cave (USA)
Chair: Don Ritchie (USA)

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¡Escuchen queridos lectores! The third edition of *The Daily Listener* puts the 'spotlight' on voices from the margins, especially in the wake of violence and disaster. After the whirlwind of the master classes, public panels and parallel sessions that is the IOHA Conference 2016, this issue asks: how do we navigate the politics of voice? Do marginalised voices really have a 'voice'? The newsletter provides a platform today for our esteemed contributors to deliberate on these very questions.

Urvashi Butalia addresses the tricky terrain of revealing and concealing 'truth' in her research narratives of marginalized women. Rama Lakshmi engages us with her thought processes on the creation and upkeep of the 'Remember Bhopal Museum' while Miroslav Vanek offers insights into his continued engagement(s) with oral history. We also feature the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP) and their impressive collection. As the IOHA 2016 Conference hits fever pitch, the editorial team hopes to offer more insights, through our contributors' work, into the idea(s) of voice, politics and the opportunities that oral history provides.

Ear to the ground



The panels in session



Glimpses from the inaugural ceremony

On record



Urvashi Butalia



“History had been silent on the experiences of women; I would like to break that silence, recover women’s voices, set right that absence, that gap.”



The following is an excerpt from an interview with Urvashi Butalia (UB), conducted by Anupama Arora (AA) and Sandrine Sanos (SS) for the *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*.

AA & SS: *In many ways, you are an archivist and historian, though you never say so explicitly. Despite our best efforts, it may be sometimes impossible to recover the testimonies of women who have been subject to the violence that accompanied the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent. How and why should we create the space for this silence and absence of these voices?*

UB: “The more I work with women, the more I realize how difficult it is for them to speak of some things like sexual violence, violence at the hands of their families, etc. History had been silent on the experiences of women; I would like to break that silence, recover women’s voices, set right that absence, that gap. Of course the reality was nothing like this, and as I spoke to more women I realized that even though the experience of sexual violation was widespread and common, and everyone knew about it, it could actually never be explicitly named by the women themselves.

“It was almost impossible for women to speak about it, even to express what they had lived through. Often this was because they were now in families, and people in their families either didn’t know or didn’t want to know about these experiences, because it was a matter of shame. Sometimes there were further complexities: many women actually married their rapists, had children with them, how could they now identify them as criminals—their lives were tied to them.”

“So the question before me was: Was there an absolute “truth” that I, as researcher, was bound to reveal? And yet, when doing this kind of research, towards whom did my responsibility lie? Towards some abstract notion of truth or to the people, in this case women, who would have to live with the consequences of any “revelation” I might make, any “truth” I might expose? And also, if they could not speak about it, perhaps I could. And so I took a decision and it is something I have stood by all these years: that my primary responsibility was to the women, dead or alive, and I would protect their identities, preserve their secrets, and not expose them.”

Rewind



Miroslav Vanek

Miroslav Vanek reflects on his years as an oral historian.

Miroslav Vanek teaches at Charles University in Prague and is the director of the Oral History Center at the Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences. Vanek recalled a lecture given by Vaclav Havel, the then President of the Czech Republic, as a decisive moment when his relationship with oral history began. In that particular speech, Havel alluded to recordings of meetings between the Civic Forum and the Communist Party in 1989 that had attracted scant attention. Vanek was intrigued and got hold of those recordings. He especially wanted to experience the atmosphere of the meetings, not just read dead transcripts.

He began employing oral history only when met with the lack of archival sources available under the newly democratic regime. Vanek interviewed people that witnessed historical events, thus undertaking some of the first experiments in oral history, in the Czech Republic.

In 1996 he began a study on the ‘student generation’ of 1989 that had taken part in the “Velvet Revolution”. Vanek and his colleagues, who worked to lay the foundations of oral history in the Czech Republic, found that initially it was readily met with detractors. Apart from questions of subjectivity and mistakes of memory that arose everywhere, there were those who thought history was meant to be lofty and academic. Though fairly skeptical, there were others who were willing to help, in spite of not knowing anything about the discipline.

Vanek puts emphasis on the personality of the interviewer. He believes that while oral history as a tool can be learnt and supplemented with research, the ability to empathise, practise patience, remain forthcoming and be sensitive are key skills that are not easily learnt. Vanek finds tremendous value in helping ordinary people through his work. He says it constantly surprises him what people are open about and what they remain ‘mysterious’ about. Over the course of his career, he feels he has learnt a lot, not just about the people he has interviewed, but also about himself, and for this he is grateful.

To find out more, look out for Miroslav Vanek’s recent publication *The Velvet Revolution OUP USA* (February 2016)