

# Words and Silences

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## Learning from the “Keepers of Memory”: Imagining a different genealogy for oral history in the Asian context

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**Keynote 2:**

**Learning from the “Keepers of Memory”:**

**Imagining a different genealogy for oral history in the Asian context**

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**Abstract**

What would the genealogy of oral history look like if we contextualised our practice within diverse cultures of orality? Would cultures that are often non-literate and primarily oral offer us new insights into the nature of our practice as oral historians? My talk is based in the context of my practice in India but much of what I say might be relevant for other parts of Asia, most of Africa and South America, and in other regions where oral traditions though increasingly marginalised, still form part of everyday life. I begin with an exploration of ‘oral histories’ that were created prior to audio recording technologies; such oral reminiscences were listened to and transcribed by the listener and checked by the speaker to create a record of lived experience from the past. One such example initiated by Rabindranath Tagore in 1941 was transcribed reminiscences of his nephew, the artist Abanindranath Tagore which offer us a glimpse of Tagore’s childhood and the times he grew up in. But while encouraging his nephew, the artist Abanindranath Tagore, to speak about his life and times, he also asked the writer Rani Chanda to transcribe these memories. Abanindranath called Rani Chandra - the *srutidhari* - the keeper of memory. Tagore or his nephew were not inventing something new. The “keeper of memory” plays a significant role in transcribing and recording traditional epics, songs and performances in India. Unlike the USA or UK, oral historians in India cannot argue about a founding parent. I argue that there is no single origin for oral history in India or more generally, within cultures of orality. Tracing the role played by “keepers of memory” in a few traditional oral repositories I suggest a different approach to understanding the uses of memory within oral history in such contexts. Such an approach enables us to understand the dynamic relationship between what is spoken, what is remembered and the complex negotiations that intertwine past, present and mythical time within local contexts. I shall end my talk with an analysis of my interview with Ranjit Chitrakar, a traditional scroll painter about his Covid scroll and his understanding of the pandemic. The role played by the “keeper of memory” within the interview helps us to gain a

nuanced perspective of the intertwined nature of what is spoken about and what is listened to and pushes us to recognize the unacknowledged presence of the mythical within the historical thus deepening our understanding of memory and history and inviting us to transform our oral history practice.

Let me begin by saying what an honour it is to be here today. I would like to begin by thanking the organizing team of IOHA 2021 - particularly Sue Anderson, President IOHA and Mark Wong, Vice President of IOHA and organizer of this conference for inviting me to deliver one of the keynote talks at this year's International Oral History Conference hosted at Singapore. The pandemic has of course delayed our meeting by a year and restricted us to such virtual meetings. I still remember the excitement of meeting so many fellow oral historians and the countless conversations I have had with many of you in Prague, Buenos Aires, Barcelona and Bangalore and these conversations have always been the inspiration behind many of the projects I worked on in India. I would also like to take a moment to appreciate the sheer hard work that has gone into organizing this virtual conference across so many time zones - it isn't easy to make it appear so seamless. So many congratulations to Mark Wong and his team at the Oral History Centre at the National Archives of Singapore for organizing this conference despite the hurdles that Covid created. I do hope that in the not-too-distant future, we will have many discussions about oral history face to face.

The theme of the twenty-first IOHA Conference is "Harmony and Disharmony: Bringing together many voices". My talk is titled: "Learning from the 'Keepers of Memory': Imagining a different genealogy for oral history in the Asian context." The theme of my talk today addresses the possible frameworks drawn from cultures of orality and cultures of memory that could enable us to bring together the many voices of oral history. My talk points to the ways in which memory, narratives and orality shape our interpretive reflections of the past and provoke us to reflect on a different genealogy for oral history in India and indeed in other cultures that live with such traditions. My talk is based on my oral history practice in India which has alerted me to the need to contextualize oral history within the diverse cultures of orality that exist around me. Much of what I say might be relevant in other parts of Asia, Africa and South America where oral traditions, though sometimes marginalized, still form a part of everyday life. In India, oral traditions, as we shall see, have shaped not just narratives about the past but also created cultures of memory that fashion the ways in which we remember and forget, and the ways in which we elaborate on the past.

### **Remembering and the culture of memory**

I would like to begin by playing you a recording of Rabindranath Tagore, Asia's first Nobel Laureate who visited Singapore in 1927 enroute to Malaya, Java, Bali, Sumatra, Siam and Burma. This poem written in 1893 was recorded at HMV's Calcutta studio in 1926, the year before he arrived at Singapore, and marked the inauguration of the company's first electrical recording system.

[See Sounak Gupta, "Rabindranath Tagore and India's first electrical recording"  
<https://learningandcreativity.com/rabindranath-tagore-and-indias-first-electrical-recording/>]

Tagore’s poem is translated by the poet Ketaki Kushari Dyson:

A hundred years from today  
who are you, sitting, reading a poem of mine,  
    under curiosity’s sway -  
    a hundred years from today?  
.....  
There lived then a poet, ebullient of spirit,  
    his heart steeped in song,  
who wanted to open his words like so many flowers  
    with so much passion  
    one day a hundred years back.  
A hundred years from today  
    who is the new poet  
whose songs flow through your homes?  
    To him I convey  
    this springtime’s gladsome greetings.  
May my vernal song find its echo for a moment  
    in your spring day  
in the throbbing of your hearts, in the buzzing of your bees,  
    in the rustling of your leaves  
    a hundred years from today.<sup>1</sup>

In this poem, Tagore plays with the notions of remembering and forgetting by imagining a future reader immersed in his poems a hundred years from the date of its composition - he feels the need to introduce the source of his poetic passion - “There lived then a poet, ebullient of spirit,/ his heart steeped in song,/ who wanted to open his words like so many flowers/ with so much passion...” and he hopes his song would find a momentary echo in the poems of the future poet and in the music of the natural world in the future - “a hundred years from today.”

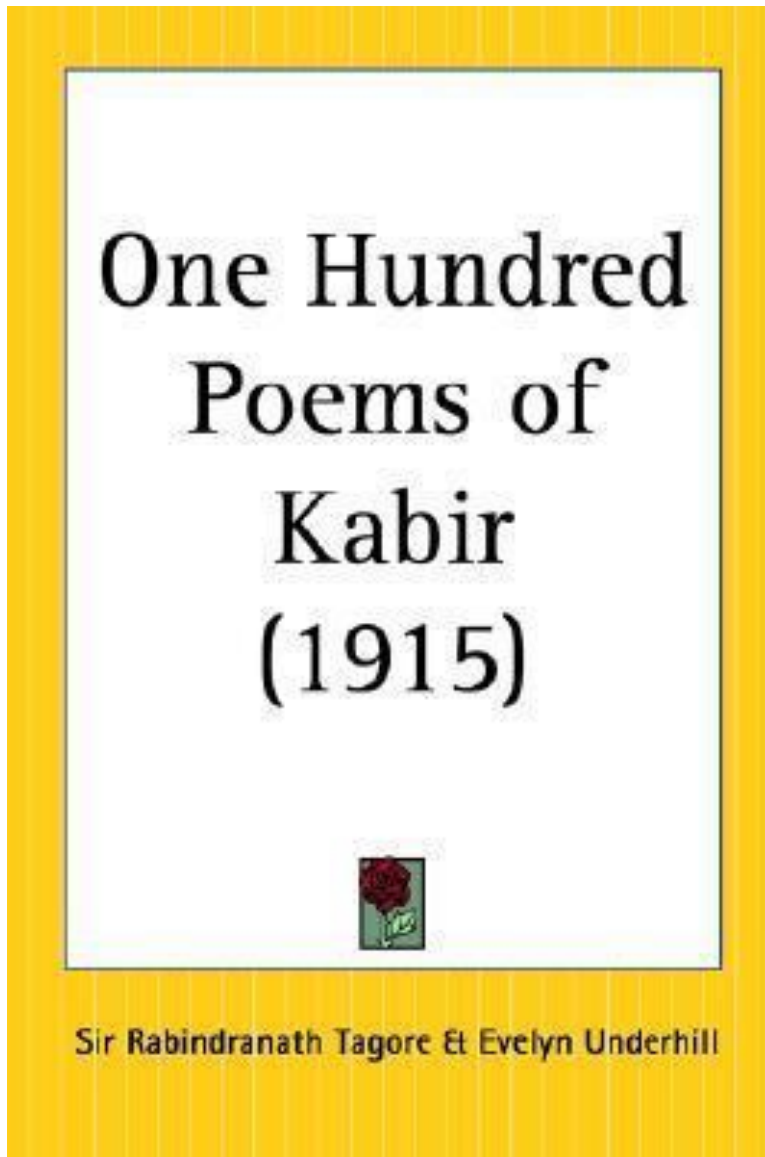
Tagore thus brings together time past, time present and the future. Time present is transformed into the past and yet it is a past that desires to inhabit a time in the future - not very different from the motivations of the interviewees in many of the Covid projects we heard about in yesterday’s panel. This is play of time and the relationship between time and timelessness, between cultural meanings that were local and at the same time capable of transcending the limitations of space to convey universal truths mark Tagore’s songs and poems, his plays and novels. This complex interplay of narrative, time and memory marked his creative work and perhaps echoed the themes expressed in the rich oral culture of India that never failed to fascinate him.

Tagore actively supported the scholar, Kshitimohan Sen to collect and publish the songs of the 15<sup>th</sup> century saint-poet, Kabir.<sup>2</sup> Sen collected these songs from written records and oral sources, transcribed them in Hindi and translated them into Bengali. Tagore translated one hundred songs of Kabir from Sen’s collection into English, and published them in 1915.

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<sup>1</sup> Ketaki Kushari Dyson, ‘The Year 1400’, <https://parabaas.com/rabindranath/articles/kKetaki1.html>  
Accessed on 3. 5. 2023. Tagore, writing this poem in Bengali in 1893-94, refers to the future year 1400 in the Bengali calendar which would be 1993-1994.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, Kshitimohan Sen was the grandfather of the Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen



Caption: Cover of *One Hundred Poems of Tagore*, published by London: Macmillan and Co. in 1915.

Tagore's interest in the "folk" traditions of India was not confined to Kabir - he also wrote the introduction to Dakshinaranjan Mitra Mazumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* - a collection of folk tales from Bengal, apart from which he was deeply influenced by the songs and the philosophy of the Baul singers of Bengal.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, scholars and singers have commented on the influence of Baul philosophy and the *kirtan* tunes on Tagore's songs. His deep interest in Indian traditions was marked as much by an engagement with metaphysics as by an anti-colonial stance that sought to

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<sup>3</sup> A community of wandering singers from Bengal who are syncretic in their approach and articulate a specific musical tradition.

dispel the destructive effects of the British Empire and reclaim a cultural space that was authentic and close to the values of India.

The Kabir tradition is a living tradition in India. Prahlad Tipaniya, a compelling folk singer from Malwa was born into a poor, unlettered, low caste family in 1954. He has been singing the songs of the 15<sup>th</sup> century saint Kabir. Unlike his parents, this singer has completed school and college and advanced to an MA in history after which he went on to become a school teacher. He is currently the Headmaster of the Kanasiya Middle School for Girls. In films made by my colleague, Shabnam Virmani as part of the Kabir Project which she began in 2002, on different dimensions of this living tradition, Prahladji speaks only briefly of his personal trials and tribulations preferring to sing his songs delighting in the insights that they open up.

There was once a mighty stern king,  
Who was known in lands far and wide  
Elephants were shackled in his court  
Elephants swayed though his court – oh yes!  
And it was all like pearl-drop dew  
Which soon vanishes...<sup>4</sup>

The story Prahladji evokes is of a king who had great wealth, control over land but it was all like the *os ra moti* - the pearl-like dew drop that disappears when the sun rises. This story in a song in the tradition of Kabir [with opening couplets by Kabir] with the main body of the song is composed by a later poet, Bhavani Nath, tells a generic tale - it has no specific historical roots nor is it located in any specific land. It doesn't need to be. For it is a time-worn tale used here to illustrate the temporary nature of life.

But these traditions, I argue, express in particular ways the relationship between narratives and memory. What are the deeper patterns of permanence and impermanence that we must remember - and what lessons do events from the distant past teach us. Perhaps the structure of the life story interview with its chronological approach is meaningless for oral communities. And perhaps they struggle to share the insights they have gained from their lived experiences with an interviewer who does not follow the deeper implications of the story. So when in answer to a question about his life, a singer responds with a song, the song becomes a way of sharing an insight into life itself. How can we adapt these insights into our own practice as oral historians?

This encounter with oral culture presents an opportunity for a deep, reflective, indeed a meditative encounter with the vulnerable nature of life itself.. The encounter with the bearers of oral culture allows us to step back and see what we are doing – are we trying to interpret a life? Or are we trying to learn from a life? The encounter with the practitioner of oral tradition is contained within two different cultural spaces and, poised between two different forms of orality. This encounter takes place at the boundary of two worlds and offers us the opportunity to

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<sup>4</sup><http://ajabshahar.com/songs/details/160/Mat-Kar-Maaya-Ko-Ahankaar&title=Mat-Kar-Maaya-Ko-Ahankaar> Translated by Shabnam Virmani.

understand not just history and memory but as Alistair Thomson puts it in a different context, “the humanity of our craft.”

A community’s response to historical events stored deep in collective memory and embedded in oral traditions have been explored by Africanists notably by Jan Vansina (*Oral Tradition as History*, 1985) and more recently by Nepia Mahuika in the context of Maori cultures of memory and history which move beyond the life story interview:

Māori oral history has been thought of as not merely ‘first-hand’ digitally recorded encounters limited to the lifetimes of informants, but as ‘kōrero tuku iho’ (stories handed down) transmitted across generations in highly developed art-forms and practices. Frequently, oral history accounts are found in written records, referred to by some as oral ‘texts’ or ‘literatures’, and by others as oral traditions or ‘standardised oral forms.’<sup>5</sup>

In India, Ganesh N. Devy, the thinker, cultural activist and institutional builder who moved out of the university to work with indigenous communities and created the People’s Linguistic Survey of India and the Adivasi Academy speaks of the connection between language and orality and the break that colonialism brought:

Language and orality are two major fronts of the existential struggle that the indigenous peoples of the world have to face. Language, orality, identity, environment, gender, belief systems, performance traditions and rights are the issues relating to the struggles and the survival of the indigenous all over the world. Their local features vary from community to community and from country to country. However, the general narrative is fairly common. Quintessentially, this narrative refers to a colonial experience that hammered a break in the long-standing traditions of the indigenous, and yet they kept close to their traditions and nature while losing control over natural resources, land, rivers and forests in the process and clashing with a radically different framework of justice, ethics and spirituality (Bragg, 2003). For the indigenous, invariably, there are two points in time marking their emergence: one that is traced back to a mythological time enshrined in their collective memory and expressed in their community’s “story of origin,” and the other that is synchronous with a Columbus or a Vasco da Gama setting foot on the land that was once their dominion.<sup>6</sup>

In independent India, as part of the nationalist project, oral traditions came to be seen as comprising a rich cultural heritage in need of preservation, which in turn led to a “folklorization” of culture. Unlike what happened in the African context, oral traditions were rarely seen as resources for historical understanding. Very recently, historians have turned to oral traditions using them as resources alongside textual and archival sources to understand how the figure of an eleventh century Sufi saint although of disputed historicity holds immense power over popular memory across Hindu and Muslim communities.<sup>7</sup> The region that Amin looks at is rich with oral traditions about other historical events from the relatively recent past. On the other

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<sup>5</sup> Nepia Mahuika, “An outsider’s Guide to Public Oral History in New Zealand”, *The New Zealand Journal of Public History* 5.1 (2017): 11

<sup>6</sup> G.N. Devy, “Introduction”, in *Orality and Language*, eds. G.N. Devy and Geoffrey V. Davis (London: Routledge, 2021), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Shahid Amin, *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of a Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan* (Hyderabad, Orient Blackswan), 2015.

hand, the writer, Amritlal Nagar wrote, *Gadar ke Phool* translated as *Gathering the Ashes* – a collection of folk songs, poems and memories about the rebellion of 1857 which is referred to by the British colonisers as the “Sepoy Mutiny of 1857” and within nationalist India as the “First War of Indian Independence”. Nagar wrote this book a hundred years after the rebellion. He collected folk songs that recalled how the battle spread over rural parts of northern India. Here is an example from Dariyabad – an incomplete song faintly recollected a hundred years later:

The Raja of Chahlari talked to his men,  
We shall attack their cannons that are aimed at us, he said  
We shall put their gunners to sword and grab the cannons,  
And then kill the firangees (white men) to the vultures.  
These firangees from London that are leading the Company’s forces,  
We shall make the ground soft with their blood.<sup>8</sup>

Amritlal Nagar’s collection of songs and poems about the rebellion of 1857 is accompanied by his observations of the responses of the villagers who recollected these songs and poems. In both examples, Amin’s recent book which he calls “historical fieldwork” and not oral history, and Nagar’s earlier work where oral tradition is viewed as a resource for understanding the past, orality nurtures memory of past events.

Rustom Bharucha’s book, *Rajasthan, An Oral History: Conversations with Komal Kothari* (2003) on the other hand, focuses on orality and oral history to analyze the sense of place that oral traditions express. Through long oral history interviews with the ethnomusicologist Komal Kothari, Bharucha unfolds multiple layers of regional, national and global cultures embedded in musical communities, agricultural and money-lending patterns, the complex relationships between musical instruments and crops and oral epics and everyday life.

Genealogies of families are preserved through the coming together of orality and memory in musicians like the Langas and the Manganiyars. As Komal Kothari puts it:

Indeed, the genealogical record of the Langas and Manganiyars, which is entirely oral, is often regarded as definitive. In controversial decisions regarding whether or not a marriage can take place across two sub-castes, it is their sources that are ultimately relied upon.<sup>9</sup>

The relationship between orality and memory is something embedded in the nature of oral narratives in India. The poet and scholar A.K. Ramanujam reminds us in his essay, “Is there an Indian way of thinking?” how significant narrative structures are and the also the deeper relationship these structures bear to time. For certain units of time breed certain kinds of maladies, politics and religion.

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<sup>8</sup> Amritlal Nagar, “A song from Dariyabad” in Hindi, *Ghadar ka Phool*, in English, *Gathering the Ashes*, translated Mrinal Pande (Delhi: Harper Collins, 2014), ‘Dariyabad’.

<sup>9</sup> Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan: An Oral History – Conversations with Komal Kothari* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003), p.29.



A story is told about two men coming to Yudhisthira [the eldest son of King Pandu of the *Mahabharata*] with a case. One had bought the other's land, and soon after found a crock of gold in it. He wanted to return it to the original owner of the land, who was arguing that it really belonged to the man who had now bought it. They had come to Yudhisthira to settle their virtuous dispute. Just then Yudisthira was called away .. for a while. When he came back, the two men were quarrelling furiously, but each was claiming the treasure for himself this time! Yudhisthira realized at once that the age had changed, and *Kaliyuga* had begun.<sup>10</sup>

So “hours, months, seasons, years and aeon have their own properties and contexts”.<sup>11</sup> This is something that marks most of the narratives that circulate orally.

There are other forms of orality that circulate within urban spaces that are of more recent provenance. The *adda* is one such. Although it is similar to the rural gatherings under the tree [katte] or *Chandi mandap* [the temple courtyard], the *adda* in street corners, tea shops and at the coffee house is an urban phenomenon and as Manas Ray puts it, “a recurrent cultural practice with its own style of language, specific pattern of behaviour and an embedded history.”<sup>12</sup>

All these forms of orality informed Abanindranath Tagore's story-telling sessions between 1937-1938. Abanindranath [1871-1951], the artist and writer, was the nephew of Rabindranath Tagore [1861-1941]. Rani Chanda, artist and writer was trained in Santiniketan. She was married to Anil Chanda who was Tagore's secretary and very close to Tagore and the Tagore family. In 1937 when Rabindranath Tagore was unwell, Rani Chanda accompanied him from Santiniketan to Calcutta along with others. Abanindranath would often drop by and attempt to cheer up the poet with stories about his childhood and their growing up years at Jorasanko in Kolkata. Rani Chanda who was present there kept meticulous notes. When prompted by Tagore to write something, she showed him her running notes of Abanindranath's stories. Tagore's reaction was: “These are beautifully written. It is as if I can hear Aban speaking. There is a stream of words flowing on - no need to edit these - let them be.”<sup>13</sup>

Rabindranath feared that Abanindranath would never sit down and write these stories down. So it was at Rabindranath's request that Rani Chanda returned to Calcutta the following summer to collect more stories. These stories deeply moved Tagore:

How beautifully Aban has brought alive the person I was at that time. Everyone thinks I was *babu* [an educated man] - wealthy, with a lot of leisure. But I had to struggle and these writings show that struggle clearly...I am amazed when I think - how fearless and reckless I was - I did what I believed in - I did not feel scared at all! Aban has put it all through so many astonishing pictures - he has captured the times - and his *Rabi kaka* floats through those times...It is as if I have returned to that time and can see myself there. That is where I felt fulfilled. Nowadays, people don't know

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<sup>10</sup> A.K. Ramanujam, “Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?”, in *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujam*, ed. Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Manas Ray, “Adda” in *Keyword for India: A Conceptual Lexicon for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Peter Ronald deSouza (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 299-300.

<sup>13</sup> Rani Chanda, “Preface”, in Bengali, *Gharoa*, Abanindranath Tagore and Rani Chanda (Calcutta: Visvabharati Grathan Bibhagh, 2008), 8. Translation mine.

that me - they see me through different fragments. I was alive then. Now people see me as someone who is almost a corpse - ready for cremation.<sup>14</sup>

Rani Chanda went on to coauthor another book with Abanindranath Tagore about his growing up years, *Jorasankor dhare* published in 1943. It is here that Abanindranath refers to her the “Keeper of memory” – *srutidhari*. Let me elaborate a little on the specific use of this word.

Traditional literature in India is referred to as *sruti* and *smriti*. *Sruti* in Sanskrit means “that which is heard” and in what we call Hinduism, *sruti* refers the most-revered body of literature considered to be the product of divine revelation: the four Vedas — Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda and ritual treatises as well as the Brahmanas (ritual treatises), the Aranyakas (“Forest Books”), and the Upanishads (philosophical elaborations on the Vedas that form the basis of much of later Hindu philosophy).

*Smriti* on the other hand, (Literally, Sanskrit for “recollection”) refers to that class of Hindu sacred literature based on human memory. Distinct from the Vedas, these are often compilations of ancient myths, legends and history – they include the *Puranas* and the two great epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The latter contains within it probably the single most influential text in what is referred to as Hinduism, the *Bhagvadgita*.

It is in this context that Abanindranath’s moniker for Rani Chanda, *srutidhari* becomes significant. It is a portmanteau word that combines the sounds and meanings of two other words: *sruti* – ‘that which is heard’ and *dhari* – ‘one who holds’ (feminine). Usually, we hear of the story teller or the *sutradhar* – combining *sutra* – ‘thread’ and *dhar* – ‘one who holds’ (masculine) - the thread of the narrative as it were. The term Abanindranath used does not refer to *smriti* but evokes *sruti*. He refers to Rani Chanda, as *srutidhari* – the feminine counterpart of *srutidhar* describing one who holds in memory whatever s/he listens to.

Abanindranath was bringing together the tradition of oral reminiscence – that which is listened to and later, written up. But he was specific - Rani Chanda was the *srutidhari*. She was not the stenographer who took dictation. Her ability to initiate and sustain dialogue about the past made her role a significant one. She was a collaborator and co-author of Abanindranath’s memories.

The *srutidhar* belongs to an older tradition and I shall now turn to an exploration of an interpretive reflection on the past by reflecting on one of the many interviews I did with a traditional keeper of memory - Ranjit Bahar Chitrakar - a traditional scroll painter from Bengal. I have been talking to Ranjit and his family for nearly two decades now. A traditional *pat-chitrakar* or a scroll-painter, Ranjit would traditionally be singing about the stories of the *Puranas* - stories about gods and goddesses and legendary men and women.

In the twentieth century scroll painters like Ranjit have turned to painting and singing about contemporary events - about 9/11 [2001] and the Tsunami [2004]. When Covid left us paralysed with the first Lockdown in March 2020, it was Ranjit who called to ask how I was. And when I could finally travel to Calcutta in November 2020, he visited to sing me his Covid scroll or as he called it the ‘Corona *pat*. Not only Ranjit, his two sons have painted Covid giving it their own interpretation.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.



Caption: Ranjit Bahar Chitrakar sings the Corona Pat, November 2020

Ranjit's song asks people to become aware of the virus that originated in China and spread across the world. The content of his narrative has a global reach - USA, Italy and India where hundreds of thousands were dying. He mentions all the measures that the local government had taken to ensure that the poor have free rations during the lockdown. The song ends on a positive note speaking about those who recovered. Puzzled by the narrative which is somewhat at odds with the times when we in India were still recovering from the shock of the first wave with still no vaccines in sight, I asked him about his understanding of the disease during my interview with him. Ranjit's answer focussed on the difference between the cities and the villages and the benefits of a non-industrialized landscape:

"I have not seen anyone with Covid. This disease did not start in our villages. This disease was there in the cities.

I thought to myself, I don't know if it is right to think this way – see the villages are all green with trees and open. The cities have no trees – cement buildings and tarred roads. I feel that the air that

touches our bodies in the villages. does not touch people in the cities. I guess that is why it has attacked the city more. The green breeze is different – it is better.

We heard we had to protect ourselves by using masks – got to know from the papers and TV.<sup>15</sup>

Disasters are among the many contemporary themes that these scroll painters have addressed. But in their scrolls that depict either 9/11 or the Tsunami of 2004 in India that killed more than 26000 people in different parts of India, death and dying are dealt with directly. In the case of 9/11, not only did the *patachitrakars* distinguish the dead from the living by painting figures with closed eyes, they also painted disembodied arms and legs falling off the buildings. The Tsunami *pat* on the other hand, symbolised the Tsunami as a demon that rises from the sea and carries away animals, humans and boats – the dead float upside down with closed eyes. I am struck by Ranjit’s narrative that speaks of instructions to be safe and even shows people recovering from Covid. Death is not mentioned at all, in fact, it is conspicuous by its absence.

**IC:** In your earlier *pats* about the Tsunami, 9/11 or Aids – you show people dying but not here. Why is that?

**RC:** I don’t show the deaths here – because the people will feel bad because when people die of Covid – nobody can see them again. That is so sad. If I die, my sons will not be able to see me or even go to hospital. Yeah – the family will not be allowed to see and where they will take the person who has died we don’t know. So I haven’t mentioned it – that is too sad. Others have spoken about it. I haven’t. I don’t like it. I don’t need to say that.<sup>16</sup>

I am surprised by Ranjit’s explanation which includes the prohibition of proximity and hence affects the mourning rituals for the dead; where a last farewell is made impossible by the rules in place to prevent contagion by enforcing an amended version (put in place in 2020) of the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897. Ranjit elaborates on why it was part of his responsibility as an artist of his times to be mindful of his audiences:

**RC:** I think people will feel worse if they see a drawing of the dead. They have heard it but seeing the numbers in a drawing – would be terrible! They will have to believe what they hear. Seeing it with your own eyes – would be a sin!

**IC:** Is it like a war?

**RC:** Yes. But in a war they fight and they die. That’s one thing. We also say, the storm blew them away. This is like a storm. No warning – it’s a sudden storm. Storm of Corona – we don’t know where it will come from, where it will take us.

Now I end my story with people recovering and coming home. Once the “injection” comes I will begin with that and write about how things emerged. That’s my thinking. We don’t know how this will work. It is uncertain – my mind is divided. What if I get another disease? Who knows?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Ranjit Bahar Chitrakar by Indira Chowdhury, 19 November 2020.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Apart from the uncertainty he felt about the efficacy and the risks associated with the vaccine. Our interview took place in November 2020. The first vaccines were rolled out in December that year and in India, only in January 2021. At this point, Ranjit spoke of other ays in which the disease affected people. The mandatory wearing of masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19 had other cultural and moral implications as it encouraged stealth and also attempted to silence people:

**RC:** See, you will not be able to take god's name in a mask. You will wear a mask – and you can steal or murder or do bad things while you are masked.

No matter how how many crores of rupees you steal from the public, just wear a mask and cover your face! Nobody will know. Many things can be hidden. Such a *yuga* [time] has come/time – it has shut your mouth!<sup>18</sup>

Not having the experience of seeing a Covid patient, Ranjit nevertheless spoke about the kind of psychological trauma that the introduction of rules to prevent the spread of the virus had caused people. Delving deep into ancient memory, as it were, Ranjit evoked the larger temporal dimension that are spoken of in Indian epics – the circling of time through the aeons – the *yugas* where each has a specific *avatar* – a specific form the gods take to descend to earth to hold out lessons for humanity:

**RC:** “The shashtras talk about *dhwansho* – destruction – as each yuga passes – it keeps its mark. This is kali yug .”

**IC:** Is Corona *Kalki avatar*?

**RC:** “It is the beginning [of *kali yuga*]. There are 4 stages of Kali. See, people will not have enough to eat. They will be smaller in stature. There will be too much religion [*dharmar bhaar*]. More education.

Our ancestors were unschooled so I think I will get my children schooled. People will praise him. But whether he will benefit from it? I don't know. Earlier – people respected their ancestors, now they don't. The bad part of too much *dharma* [religion or moral edicts] and too much schooling. But as we sow, so we reap. All this was in my mind when I composed the song.<sup>19</sup>

As oral historians, what can we learn from the keepers of memory? Ranjit, like all keepers of memory, renegotiates with the past – and this process is inevitably entangled in the present. Crisis, often invites a rethinking of earlier lessons – for Ranjit, these are lessons from the *Puranic* world – the world of the *Epics* ancient stories. As a keeper of memory, Ranjit is obliged to delve into layers of ancient timescapes which are available to him only through mythology.

Oral history in cultures of orality involves more than the interview. It demands an understanding of the intertwined dynamics of three worlds: the world of narratives with different timescapes, the repositories of memory, and the world of visuality. Oral historians can learn how to

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

understand and inhabit these other worlds as they seek out dialogues about the more contemporary past.

I end with a visual of intertwined trees from Gond Art - another traditional art form from central India. The two Gond artists Dwarka Paraste and Venkat Shyam represent trees that grow into and around each other appearing as entangled entities.<sup>20</sup> I use these visuals as metaphors for our learnings from the traditional keepers of memory. Because much like the hidden lives of trees which communicate, share nutrients and create a supportive ecosystem around themselves, the three worlds of the traditional memory keeper where narratives, time and memory co-exist and sustain each other. These are worlds we need to inhabit and learn from if we have to delve deeper into our practice as oral historians and locate the genealogy of our practice within the cultures of orality in Asia.

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<sup>20</sup> For an understanding of the Gondi tribe see, Elwin, Verrier. *The tribal art of middle India: A personal record*. Indian Branch, Oxford University Press, 1951. For biographies see Dwarka Paraste [https://gondart-india.com/en/artist/dwarka\\_paraste-en/](https://gondart-india.com/en/artist/dwarka_paraste-en/) and Venkat Shyam [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venkat\\_Shym](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venkat_Shym)  
For a view of these paintings see Dwarka Paraste <https://harmonyarts.com/products/curved-trees-gond-painting> and Venkat Raman Singh Shyam, ‘Peepal Tree’ <https://www.memeraki.com/products/peepal-tree> all links accessed on 3 May 2023.