Conversation with the Past: Oral History in India

By

Dr. Remya V.P.
Assistant Professor Department of History & Archaeology Central University of Karnataka
Email: remyavp2010@gmail.com

Mr. M. S. Chandra
Research Scholar, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai
Email: sati8chandra@gmail.com

Abstract

Historical methods are exploring effective sources and methodologies to make history writing more effective and inclusive. In this endeavor oral sources and traditions have been more rewarding. Yet, it is still looked upon with apprehension, mainly due to the its unconventional nature, difficulty in validation and historicity. As western academia approach oral evidences to preserve the present for future through documentation and digitization, the Indian scenario present a different context. Indian society has been oral throughout its past, and literacy becoming a popular aspect only with independence, the majority of India's history has been preserved through oral mediums. Hence, any inquiry into India's past without consulting the oral sources would be incomplete and devoid of the mass population. It is argued here that to construct the history of an oral society, oral sources are essential and it is possible to write oral history following methodological rigor to make a factual, truthful history.

Key words: Oral History, Unconventional Sources, Memory, Inclusive History

Introduction

"Oral history and life stories help to create a truer picture of the past and the changing present, documenting the lives and feelings of all kinds of people, many otherwise hidden from history."

Paul Thompson

History writing as an academic exercise has well established methodology. Like most academic disciplines, practice of history is also founded on positivist principles. According to the positivist approach the goal of historian is to unearth the nearest possible point to the truth they are attempting to narrate. This goal is reached through use of various evidences, mostly empirical in nature which could be verified and validated. New trends in historical methods were introduced with emergence of post-modernist philosophy. Recently many new perspectives were introduced in social sciences in general and history writing in particular. One of the major paradigm shifts was due to the recognition of non-empirical sources for writing history. Unlike the earlier approach, which depended on artefacts, epigraphic, numismatic and written sources, the post-modern thought consider memory, testimony, art, living traditions, cultural practices and many other intangible human experiences also as valid sources for human past. This new recognition has largely widened the spectrum of sources at the disposal of historians. These non- empirical or unconventional sources are yet to receive wide acceptance among the conventional historians. However, these sources reveal information and views of the past which the conventional sources have not been able to communicate hitherto.

Nature of oral sources

A historian uses primary, secondary and tertiary sources for writing history. Primary sources are those which are directly connected to the information and hence, self-explanatory in nature, like an artefact, a coin, inscription, monument etc. The secondary sources are those which represent the information through a medium, like a literary work, travel accounts, treatises etc. The tertiary sources are those developed based on primary and secondary sources. The nature of the sources, its proximity with the information contained varies depending on its temporal position. For example, a study on ancient history of India will identify artefacts as primary source, literature as secondary source, while a study on modern Indian history will identify the archival data (written, documented source) as valid primary source, despite the fact that the information has no bearing on the source and they were being recorded by a second or even a third person. Thus, sources may have varied positions based on the context of its application as well. The unconventional sources, on the other hand, are much more dynamic in any given space and time. They do not have fixed nature and frameworks, thus offering the scope for deeper indulgence of the practitioner to churn out and extract the facts.

The unconventional sources include various types of folklore like oral epics, songs, folk practices and performances, dialectic variations of languages, memories and testimonies preserved by people, cultural practices, belief systems, art, popular traditions etc. The information carried by these sources are mostly not so obvious or explicit, rather embedded and enveloped. The folk stories might present the real events in an exaggerated or fictionalized manner; certain cultural practices might be the only evidence of past cultures, but might be preserved in the envelop of religion and faith; experiences of individual and social life are passed on as testimonies and memories, but might be added with exaggeration and intensity; most of the ritual performances in Indian society has a fictionalized version of past as folk story in the background; the process of development of language and its dialects are clear evidence of the cultural and intellectual diversity of its users. Thus, the unconventional sources, though directly connected to information, are not always self-explanatory, hence, does not get recognized as primary source.

The oral sources constitute the majority among the unconventional sources. The oral testimonies of experiences, witnesses, passed over narration of memories, inherited oral testimonies, folk songs and orally performed folk epics are the major oral sources for history. These sources could be an individual's orality or representation of a community's collective orality. The information, according to the informer, is the truth and it is up to the historian to establish its historicity. Human memory is the medium through which oral tradition transfer from generation to generation.

Historical methods applied in study of ancient Indian history ascribe primacy to tangible evidence over written sources, which is ranked above the other sources. In studies of medieval and modern Indian history, the written sources are given primacy above tangible and unconventional sources. In general practice of history writing, every kind of sources are corroborated to validate and complement the information with each other. However, superiority of the written word over the spoken has always been the norm. Such qualitative gradation of the sources makes history writing exercise complex and move away from social facts or truth.

Relevance of oral history

Writing or recording and documenting information for communication was not a common practice in Indian society. Writing was used for specific purposes, like recording

important administrative decisions, achievement of rulers, grants and donations etc. These records were not required to be read and complied by the whole population, rather meant to serve certain purpose in relation to the content. The act of writing or literacy itself was not a common thing in pre independent Indian society. Capability to read and write was required for specific professions and that constituted only a miniscule section of the society. Communication was mostly through oral medium.

Rulers like Asoka from Maurya dynasty had appointed readers called rajavachanikas, to read out his edicts to the public (Majumdar, 2016). Makers of hero stones added sacred or religious symbols to display its sanctity to the public, who would protect the object without even reading the text inscribed on them, the holy religious texts have been revered as objects of worship without reading its content, recitals after practicing and memorization is more popular than reading out from text. Orality was the mode of communication in Indian society until modern times. The society which had most of its communications and activities held on the spoken word has left behind many of its elements preserved through continued oral traditions, and that necessitates to use these sources to know the past from closer proximity.

It would be more rewarding to look for the history of an oral society through oral sources. Such sources could be inclusive of many sections of the society which otherwise are left unrecorded and unrepresented. Oral sources effectively help in understanding gender aspects, migration stories, its routes and experiences, labour histories, making and unmaking of settlements etc.. (Perks and Thomson, 1998). These are instances that might not leave behind much of written and other verifiable sources. The major contribution of oral history is inclusion within the historical record the experiences and perspectives of people who might otherwise might not find a place in historical records. Historians like Terkel argue that, through oral history, he is not aiming to find the facts but find the truth behind the fact. (Terkel, 1986). Such approach remarkably deepens the significance of oral history.

Limitations of empirical sources

The empirical sources contain the tangible and representative evidences of the past. The artefacts like tools, weapons and pottery reveal the daily life and livelihood activities along with their technical progression; the numismatic sources reveal the evolution of the economy itself along with the varied aspects of the society and metallurgy; the inscriptions record the information pertaining to varied aspects but selectively; while the literature from past are specifically meant for targeted reader and hence, its content also designed accordingly. In these sources, except for the tools and pottery, it is highly unlikely to connect with life of common people. They rather reflect the life, decisions, activities and achievements of certain individuals or groups or people. The tangible and the written sources from the past are not inclusive in its content, and any historical narrative constructed based on these sources are also incomplete and not inclusive. In other words, the empirical sources are more helpful for constructing history of great men rather than of a society and common people.

The subaltern school's attempt to write history of common men had clear and more inclusive objectives. There were a few successful works towards writing peoples' history from recent past of colonial and early independent years of India, but these methods were not effective for the study of remote past. The project of Bipan Chandra and his team of historians to record India's freedom movement through its participants is a pioneering attempt. The many works on partition of India like the ones by Urvashi Bhutalia, Nonica Datta, Ritu Menon, Marina Wheeler, Anjali Gera Roy, Nandi Bhatia were written based on testimonies of

experience, memory and observation (Datta, 2012, Bhutalia, 2017, Rashid, 2017, Malhotra, 2017, Azim, 2020, Choudhury, 2022). These works did utilize written government records, reports and such evidences and corroborated with the oral sources to create the substantial narrative. The experiences of India's partition have been mostly of traumatic and unpleasant. For decades, this era was not adequately focused by historians. The western writings on black holocaust was a trend setter for such works on India's partition. And the historians were immediately faced with the lack of traditional sources and the abundant availability of unconventional sources to deal with the subject.

A major attempt to record the present for future in India was undertaken by the Narmada Bachao Andolan movement by creating a website with audio and video records of the leaders, participants and people who were affected by the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project (https://oralhistorynarmada.in/). The website is a testimony of the common people about the experience of displacement, resistance, sense of assertion of rights etc., these views might not have been on record without this project. Similar digitization of Partition experience has also been taken up by creating an exclusive website with repository of audio-visual record of Partition experience of victims and witnesses (https://www.partitionmuseum.org/ and https://in.1947partitionarchive.org/). These websites have created a repository of information, that could facilitate further studies in this connection.

These recent developments in Indian historiography is adding to its inclusivity. However, there remains a major bulk of oral sources in the form of oral folk traditions yet to be utilized for historical studies. Folk lore has been studied either along literature or along performing art, its historicity is not yet recognized and utilized adequately.

Indian and Western methodologies and the contrast

The genesis and patterns of development of oral history is varied from country to country, yet there are certain common ideas and debates that were detrimental for shaping of oral history practice across the world. (Perks and Thomson, 1998).

Oral history practices in the western academia has been focusing on preserving the present facts and information for future, through digitalization, audio visual recording, interview of individuals who are involved or impacted by any given historical moment. The projects on documentation of testimonies from natural disaster victims, war, violence, exodus, other historical events are being practiced as oral history. This is a future- oriented historic approach. There is an imaginary vision into the present from the future. The oral narrations are preserved for its longevity. The recording of present will provide very helpful source for the future to know this contemporaneous times, especially visual documentation is ascribed greater value. These records could be reliable evidence for future historians. This method is in compliance with the empiricism, where the historicity of spoken word is being validated through other mediums.

In the case of India, like many other Asian societies, the need is more of looking into the past from the present as much as to the present from future. The history of India conjectured using existing methodologies, is still largely incomplete and has a lot more left to be explored. The oral sources can be helpful in filling some gap left by other sources. There are many evidences for continuity from past in culture, living traditions and oral preservations. Like many other aspects, these oral preservations from the past too have been enveloped in beliefs and religion. This could have been a method of preservation.

From the Vedic period onwards, we come across specified professionals involved in preserving the glories of rulers and patrons as dana stutis, gaathas, narashamsis, akhyana, itihasa and purana. (Pathak, 1966). The Classical Tamil poems called Sangam Literature have abundant references to bards and ballads who composed songs in praise of heroes, patrons and gods with detailed description of the events and individuals. (Subbiah, 1991).

Many arenas where family history, genealogies, village history, history of great personalities from the past and such narrations are still preserved exclusively in oral tradition across India. The Paanas of Kerala, Helavas of Karnataka, Banjaras of western India are some such examples (Remya, 2021). A unique scenario in oral tradition is present in Karnataka, where there are oral epics and related living traditions of cultural practices along with monumental evidences, clearly validating the historicity of the oral evidences.

Some of the oral epics of Karnataka are Manteswamy kavya and Male Mahadeswara Kavya of south Karnataka, Junjappana Kavya of central Karnataka, Halumatha Kavya, Yellamana Kathana Kavya and Mylaralingana Kavya of north Karnataka, Koti Channayya and Siri Padaddhana of coastal Karnataka (Boralingayya, 1997). These are lengthy oral poems being preserved in memory, transmitted from generation to generation through orality and performed live even today. In these epic performances, the central character is presented as a human being who was the reason for major social reforms and affected the social life of his contemporaneous times. Over the period of centuries these stories and the characters have been ascribed divine image and now came to worshipped as deities. However, a critical analysis of these living oral traditions can reveal immense historical information. Because, these were created by a society who were not literate and did not find the need to write down their history, rather preserved them in the form of oral tradition and memory.

Any historical enquiry into such sources cannot employ western interview method, it is not about documenting the present for future, but unravel the past through present evidences. Thus, instead of taking a prospective approach, oral history in these cases require a retrospective approach and historical method. This is the point of divergence between Western and Indian oral history practice.

Methodology

In the West, the Latin speaking region has the most well-established oral history practices, and they are produced in the vernacular. The pioneering oral history work in America is Alex Haley's Autobiography of Malcom X (1965) and Roots: The Saga of An American Family (1976) which were written based on the family memories and the oral preservations by the griots (designated historical story tellers of the West African tribe). In Europe, the pioneering work is The Voice of the Past: Oral History (1978) by Paul Thompson, which paved way for more oral history projects in Britain and further Europe. In this landmark book Thompson explains how oral history has transformed both the content of history and the process of history writing 'by shifting the focus and opening new areas of enquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial group of people who had been ignored'(Thompson, 1978). History of Africa had been extensively explored through oral sources by J. Vansina, J.C.Miller, S.F.Nadel, J.D. Fage, P.C. Lloyd etc. (Tonkin, 1986). Studs Terkel's Hard Times: An Oral History of Great Depression (1970) is another land mark in the development of oral history in America. In a review of this book, Michael Frisch raises some pertinent questions like What happens to experience on the way to becoming history? As an era of intense collective

experience recedes into the past what is the relationship of memory to historical generalization?' (Frisch, 1972).

These questions and concerns are the core of oral history practice. The essential question of historical consciousness of the particular individual in question or the community or the nation as a whole, become detrimental at this point. They possess memories, but would not ascribe relevance to everything in the memory a historical relevance. While making a choice from memory to be narrated as history, the individual exercise certain discretion, which is purely based on the individual's historical consciousness, what they consider historically significant, what they consider worth to be preserved/ recorded and worth to be passed to posterity. This historical consciousness is not instinctive, it is formulated from varied factors. These factors are not uniform in different cultures. What an individual or a society as a whole recognize as relevant to be preserved as historical is determined by their historical consciousness.

What the oral sources convey are memories, expression of experiences, learned or witnessed testimonies, thoughts and observations of individuals or communities. Use of memory and oral sources are being looked upon with apprehension by conventional historians, mainly the reliability of memory, relationship between memory and history, past and present (Perks and Thomson, 1998). The major criticism of oral history is with regard to its methodology. However, in practicing oral history also, sources are checked, documentation is provided, and evidences carefully examined, thus it is no way major deviation from use of other sources. Like, Whiteley says, it is possible to utilize the oral sources with analytical rigour, by treating them not as scientifically unassimilable myths, but as primary sources of evidence and interpretation of the past social formations (Whiteley, 2002). These measures are applicable in the use of written sources as well. This is the high time we must ascribe due importance to oral sources in the discipline of history and rebuild the history of people.

References

Boralngayya S.C. (1997). Karnataka Janapada Kalegala Kosha. Hampi: Karnataka Vishwavidyala Prasaranga.

Chowdhury, Indira (2022) Geographies of Memory and Spaces of Belonging: Journeys of the mind and displaced populations," Words and Silences: Vol. 10, Article 2.

Crown, P. (ed.) (1989) How Societies Remember. New York: Cambridge University Press

Eggan F. (2000). Ancient History in the New World: Integrating Oral Traditions and the Archaeological Record in Deep Time. American Antiquity 65:267-290.

Frisch, Michael (1990). A Shared Authority: Essays in the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History. Albany: SUNY

Gautam, Harsha (2022). "Reclaiming Dignity and Democracy: The re-emergence of Buddhist Nuns in India," Words and Silences: Vol. 10, Article 7.

Glassie, H. (1971). A Folkloristic Thought on the Promise of Oral History. Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History. New York: Oral History Association.

Halbwachs, Maurice, (1992). On Collective Memory. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Hamilton, P. (2005). The Oral Historian as a Memorist, The Oral History Review. Vol. 32 No. 1, pp- 11-18

Hiltebeitel, Alf (1999) Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadi Among Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

https://oralhistorynarmada.in/;   https://www.partitionmuseum.org/   and
        https://in.1947partitionarchive.org/

J. Vansina (1965). Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology (translated by H.M. Wright), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Morrissey, C. (1970). On Oral History Interviewing. In L. Dexter (ed.), Elite and Specialized Interviewing (pp. 109-118). Evanston: North Western University Press.

Pathak, V.S. (1966). Ancient Historians of India: A Study in Historical Biographies. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

Paul Thompson (1978). The Voice of the Past- Oral History. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Perks, Robert and Thomson, A. (eds.) (1998). The Oral History Reader. London: Routledge

Portelli, A. (1981) The Time of My Life: Functions of Time in Oral History, International Journal of Oral History, V2, N3, pp. 162-180.

Remya V.P. (2021). Helavas: The Living Tradition of Oral History. In Bengal Past and Present, vol. 117, pp- 762-765

Shelly Trower (ed) (2011). Place, Writing and Voice in Oral History. New York: Plagrave Macmillan.

Slaman Rashid (2017). A Time of Madness: A Memoir of Partition. Delhi: Aleph Books.. Firdouse Azim (ed.) (2020). Inherited Memories: Third Generation Perspectives on Partition in the East. Delhi: Zubaan Books. Anchal Malhotra (2017). Remnants of A Separation: A History of Partition Through Material Memory. Delhi: Harper Collins. Datta N. (2012). Violence, Martyrdom and Partition. New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks. Bhutalia, U. (2017). The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India. New Delhi:Penguin.

Studs Terkel (1986). Talking to Myself: A Memoir of My Times. London: Harrap.

Subbiah, G. (1991). Roots of Tamil Religious Thought. Pondichery: Pondichery Institute of Linguistics and Culture Publication.

Susmita, B. M. (2016). The Mauryas in Karnataka. Calcutta: Mahabodhi Book Agency.

Swain, D.C. (1965). Problems for Practitioners of Oral History. American Archivist. Vol. 28, No. 1, p- 64

Tonkin, Elizabeth (1986). Investigating Oral Tradition, in The Journal of African History Vol. 27 No.2 pp.203-213

W.W. Cutler III (1970). Accuracy in Oral Interviewing. Historical Methods Newsletter 3, pp- 1-7

Whitelely, P.M. (2002). Archaeology and Oral Tradition: The Need for Dialogue in American Antiquity, Vol. 67 No. 3 pp. 405-415.