

Sindhi Voices: A Word with Natasha Raheja

Beyond Sindhi Magazine is proud to feature ‘Sindhi Voices’, a valiant and enthusiastic project that seeks to preserve our Sindhi history and oral traditions for generations to come. Beginning in August of 2010, Natasha Raheja, a young South Asian-American woman from Texas, USA – will travel for a year across the United States, Pakistan, and Northwest India to interview and audio-visually document the experiences of our elder generation that lived through the 1947 Partition of India.

Natasha is currently based in Austin where she is pursuing an MA in Asian Cultures and Languages at the University of Texas. Prior to Austin, she lived in a suburb of Dallas with her younger sister and parents, who were raised in North India and immigrated to the United States in 1982. She completed her undergraduate education in Biology and South Asian Studies at UT in 2008. To enhance the depth of her research, Natasha has formally studied Sindhi last summer at the American Institute of Indian Studies language center in Pune as well as in Austin with the support of the UT South Asia Institute.

Rachana Mirpuri speaks to Natasha Raheja about the inspiration behind such an intimidating task, what she hopes to achieve, and what being Sindhi means to her.

What prompted the interest of working on an oral histories project such as this?

From an academic perspective, this project is valuable as there is a paucity of scholarship on the Sindhi community in the fields of South Asia, Diaspora and Cultural Studies at large. Academic and even popular work on the 1947 Partition focuses predominantly on the Bengali and Punjabi experience, which differs significantly from the Sindhi experience.

On a more personal level, my grandfather’s passing in 2005 harshly reminded me that our elders would not always be around for us to leisurely listen to and record their stories. Because of the time-sensitivity of this project, it is imperative that we, as a community, sincerely commit to the interview process. Our elders’ stories of success and struggle have increasing relevance in a time of increasing migration, globalization, and ethnic conflict.

Spending 2008-09 between Jaipur, Lucknow, and Pune for respective language programs afforded me the space

to develop the project as I was able to connect with and was graciously welcomed by Sindhis in each city who were open to sharing their stories.

The project’s inspirations are manifold and range from similar oral history projects conducted amongst Vietnamese-American and African-American communities to the ethnographic works on the Sindhi community by prominent figures such as Anita Raina Thapan, Lata Jagtiani, Mark Anthony-Falzon, Ram Jawaharani, Rita Kothari, and Steven Ramey, to name a few.

Countering dominant histories written from above, the Sindhi Voices Project is unique in that it aims to build a historical archive of first-person narratives from Sindhi men, women, Hindus, Muslims, and so on that are accessible to both academics as well as to the community at large.

To make this project successful, in what ways should the Sindhi community get involved?



My travels this year will serve to only get the project off the ground; in reality, only the participation of the community in conducting/submitting interviews, will keep the project rolling and growing.

All it takes for this project to be a success is for each Sindhi youth to record and submit an interview with one elderly person in their family! Visit our website, download an interview field kit and get started!

How would those interested be able to gain access to the archives?

The collected interviews collected will be hosted on an accessible and user friendly virtual archive that we hope to develop over the following year. Visit our website www.sindhivoices.org for links to established online oral history archives that will serve as templates for the Sindhi Voices Project.

What do you hope to achieve with such a project?

The Sindhi Voices Project encourages multi-generational and inter-community dialogue as interviewers and interviewees and their unique life narratives will come together in the form of a historical archive. Out of this archive of oral histories, we hope creative community projects will emerge in the form of museum exhibits, multimedia presentations, documentaries, reflective writings, and so on. Alongside the archive, we are currently working toward the development of a creative, multimedia installation of select oral histories to be on traveling exhibit at museums, galleries, and cultural gatherings.

A separate, but related, project of ours called the Anhad Project aspires to initiate inter-community dialogue between Sindhi Hindus and Muslims and other divided groups at large that are at risk of becoming further polarized. This is an ongoing peace-building initiative that specifically engages the youth using both multimedia visuals and conflict resolution curriculum to encourage a re-evaluation of divisive binary constructs.

Which countries and cities will you be traveling to?

Beginning in August, I'll be traveling across cities within Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. Most of the places I'll be visiting in India such as Pimpri and Ulhasnagar contained army barracks that functioned as the sites for government refugee camps for thousands of displaced Sindhis. Over time these camps have developed into urban townships, but the barracks still remain as visual reminders of what was initially a marginal existence for Sindhis in India.

First having visited and fallen in love with Kacch in the spring of 2009, I am also very excited to return and conduct interviews in Adipur-Gandhidham and Banni where Sindhiyat abounds.

I plan to spend two to three months conducting interviews in between Karachi, Hyderabad, Larkana, Shikarpur and other Sindhi cities as well. On the next project circuit I hope to visit cities such as Dubai, London, and Hong Kong that also contain significant populations of Sindhis.

What do you feel would be the future of our Sindhi culture?

I'm visiting these interview questions after an energetic and productive three day gathering of Sindhi youth in Newport Beach sponsored by YSA (Young Sindhi Adults). Later this summer, I hope to also attend the annual SANA (Sindhi Association of North America) convention in Houston, TX and the Sindhi Sammelan in Jakarta. A couple of weeks ago a delegation of women represented Sindh in the UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation). Additionally, the University of Wisconsin at Madison plans to offer Sindhi classes next summer! These are just a couple of events amongst other such gatherings and initiatives on different scales. There has been a lot of recent momentum in the Sindhi community and there are several promising pockets of mobilization and organization of the youth.

If we soften our hard-line notions of cultural purity and authenticity and remember that the beauty of our culture is in its dynamism and fluidity, I think that the Sindhi community and culture will have a long time coming.

What does being a Sindhi mean to you?

Since I am still in the process of negotiating the multiple facets of my identity, I cannot definitively answer this question.

However, I can say that my own multi-hyphenated identity and simultaneous occupation of multiple locations has led me to relate significantly to a Sindhi community identity that can perhaps be characterized as "in-between," in terms of geographical place, historical experience, and ways of thinking and living.

Personally, at the heart of my "Sindhi self," if one may call it that, is a strong commitment to open-mindedness and non-judgment. The more I continue to read and experience, I find that this commitment to love is deeply rooted in a tradition that while significantly embraced and cultivated by Sindhi culture simultaneously transcends any such distinctions of Sindhi, Rajasthani, Punjabi, Balochi, Indian, Pakistani, American, Chinese, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and so on. ✘

'Sindhi Voices' needs YOU! This project cannot be realized without the involvement of the Sindhi community both in the forms of interviewees and interviewers. If your grandparents or anyone else you know are currently in their 70s and would be open to an interview, please submit their contact details via www.sindhivoices.org or email us at sindhivoicesproject@gmail.com. To conduct interviews yourself and submit recordings, you can download a field kit which explains how to conduct an oral history interview in thorough, yet easy to follow detail. Because of the time-sensitive nature of this project, the sooner you can assist, the higher our chances of documenting and conserving the rich histories of generations past.