

## Sindhi Voices Project: SHARING OUR STORIES



Building interviewing skills at Sindhi voices workshop

Initiated in Spring of 2010, the Sindhi Voices Project (SVP) began with a commitment to connect Sindhis across borders through the documentation of Sindhi elders' life narratives - vibrant and meaningful sources of Sindhi cultural practices and histories or culture and history. SVP is working to engage Sindhi communities and other supporters to creatively document and share their stories.

### **Background - Sindhis and the Partition of 1947**

As many of you readers have heard or experienced, the 1947 Partition of British India yielded one of the largest mass migrations of people in contemporary history. The Sindh province,

experienced a huge efflux and influx of people. We believe, Sindhis, as well as others in South Asia continue to fall prey to conflict along the reductive ethnic and religious lines imposed and hardened in the hurried partitioning of the subcontinent. We feel that each Sindhi elders' life stories and memories of partition can shed deeper insight into the unique relationships amongst our community.

### **Why do Sindhi voices matter?**

Why do these histories matter? Beyond the great historical value of an archive for future generations to come, Sindhi life narratives offer an insight into issues of migration that characterize our increasingly globalized world today. In these narratives, lies an



## Listening and Sharing

exploration of the effects of the movement of people, community, and culture. A widespread and systematic documentation of the ongoing changes amongst Sindhi communities has not been undertaken and dominant, collective memories of the past continue to have a stronghold over generations of Sindhis. Thus, we are prioritizing individual experiences of Sindhis from diverse class, gendered, geographic, and religious backgrounds. After traveling throughout India in 2010, we will be heading to Sindh in Pakistan to hear from more Sindhi elders.

### **How do we listen to Sindhi voices?**

Though we may always be listening to stories of our family and friends, this project aims to document stories through audio and video recordings that can be preserved for future

generations to come. Reflecting our commitment to include Sindhis in the production and documentation of their history or more precisely, histories, we have developed oral history interview field kit. Oral history is type of study and a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. The twelve page kit guides untrained interviewers with step-by-step instructions on how to conduct and submit an interview. Of course, we know people have unique stories to tell! Everyone is encouraged to use the guide as a starting point, a platform to share stories dear to them. Many people have appreciated the opportunity to formally document their family's stories via our project, as they have been thinking about it but life's routines tend to take priority. The type of preservation: audio, video, or written interview

is up to each narrator. We use the term narrator to describe the person telling their life narrative, stories, or history. Family or friends are encouraged to be the “interviewers”, though volunteers also have been interviewers.

For many youth thus far, uncovering family histories has been inspiring personal reflection and provoking further curiosity. Hearing different sides of the past and being reminded that grandparents were once young too, has, after surprising many interviewers, inclined them to revisit their inherited memories of the past. Our field kit is currently available in English, Hindi, Sindhi and soon to be in Urdu. The kit is available on the project website. We do recognize not all have access to internet and recording equipment. Our goal is to also connect to people via community and school workshops. We'll also be working to build a group of SVP point persons in areas around the world to conduct outreach and share resources to nearby communities.

### **Learning and Listening with Youth**

In addition to distributing this field kit amongst Sindhi communities across the globe, we are conducting oral history and audiovisual recording workshops with 10th-12th standard Sindhi students in India and Pakistan. This assignment, in engaging students to record an interview and evaluate the process of interviewing with an elder in their family or in the wider community, enhances the social studies process as history comes alive through the narration of a living person. Interview recordings will be stored at both the school library and become part of a larger Sindhi Voices Archive. Each narrative also receives an interview. Thus far, we have facilitated a total of 10 community-wide and school workshops in India. Workshops cover oral history basics and include interactive interviewing exercises so

participants can walk away ready to conduct an interview with elders. Videos of participant feedback are up for you to listen to on our website.

### **Traveling Voices**

Recognizing the limitations of a web-based interview archive in terms of appeal and connectivity, we aim for further outreach and exposure, within and outside of the Sindhi community, through the physical circulation of an artistic multimedia exhibit that will showcase oral histories. This exhibit will creatively depict a unique set of experiences and demographics, engaging patrons on multiple sensory levels by bringing together documentary photography, excerpted audio and narrative text.

### **Dialogue**

As many of the oral histories illustrate, the drawing of territorial maps and borders too often does not correspond to the complex ambiguity of lived realities. To further explore these intersections, we strive to situate our stories with collections from other communities that are also largely shaped by migration and partitioning. As part of our commitment to extending community participation beyond the recording of oral histories, we will be integrating the narratives collected into a multimedia-based dialogue curriculum for Sindhi youth to unpack differences.

### **Make your voices heard!**

We encourage you to visit our website at [www.sindhivoices.org](http://www.sindhivoices.org). There are many ways to get involved. For starters, if you're an elder reading this or if you know an elder who would like to share their stories (anywhere in the world!), please share the relevant contact information using the form on our site. If you're feeling really inspired, download a field kit and help someone share their story. Or, maybe you have your own ideas on how to join? Let us know! Please visit us at: [www.sindhivoices.org](http://www.sindhivoices.org) or email us at: [sindhivoicesproject@gmail.com](mailto:sindhivoicesproject@gmail.com).

## About Natasha and Neena

indianexpress.com

The partition of India changed the lives of thousands of people, who had to leave their motherland and migrate to an unknown place to start lives afresh. A number of communities across religions and languages were affected and Sindhis were one of them.

They were uprooted from Sindh. It has been 63 years now, but the irony is that today's Sindhi youths are totally unaware of the happenings of Partition and their social and cultural roots. The absence of any communication among the elders, who underwent the tragic experience during that time, and today's youth, gave birth to an idea of recording the experiences of the elders in their own voice and putting these together online.

The project – Sindhi Voices Project – is the brainchild of Natasha Raheja, who was born and brought up in the US.

The idea came to her during her year-long stay in Lucknow in 2008-09, when she began informal conversations with the community elders to find out their experiences about Partition.

Natasha is being helped in her endeavours by Neena Makhija; Robin Li, a research specialist at The Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Office, UC Berkeley; Sahar Ali, Country Representative for Panos Pakistan; Sapna Shahani, Founder-Director of WAVE (Women Aloud Videoblogging for Empowerment); and Sarah Singh, Independent Artist and Filmmaker.

The project is currently working towards including Sindhi communities across the globe in the development of a web-based digital library of oral histories. It encourages inter-generational and community dialogue as interviewers and narrators come together to document and share their experiences and cultural knowledge.

Natasha recently held workshops in three city

schools – Mahatma Gandhi High School, Sadhu Vaswani School and Dr C G High School. Before this, she had conducted workshops at two schools in Delhi and four schools in Ajmer.

She said: "Each workshop improves and gets better response than the previous one. For people who cannot attend workshops, we are planning an online oral history."

She added: "The project was formally launched in spring 2010. Thus far, we have approximately 30 interviews. We have not yet uploaded any interviews on our site because we are waiting for a more diverse batch. We want to upload interviews once we have some representation from Sindhis of different religions and different nationalities. I am going to Sindh in March and hope to conduct some interviews with Sindhi Muslims and Muhajirs to help balance our archive. We are also working on locating libraries and archives around the world that will co-host the interview collection."

Natasha has personally interviewed people in Chicago, Dallas, Ajmer, Delhi, Bangalore and Ahmedabad. People in Ajmer, Mumbai, Pennsylvania, Ahmedabad, Seattle and California have also conducted and submitted interviews to the project.

Asked if she had interacted with any Sindhi organisation about the project and its response, she said: "We have no formal partnerships as yet but we have been in dialogue with the Bangalore-based Sindh Culture Foundation, Citizens Archive of Pakistan, and the 1947 Partition Archive. Each organisation has given us a positive response and we are all about collaborating and engaging in productive synergies. We are hoping to partner with a foundation or institution that has the capacity to support our initiative and help make the project sustainable."

Makhija's passion for this project can be traced to her grandmother's home, the place she began hearing many of her family's stories of migration and longing.