

# The 1947 Partition Archive: A Living, Evolving Crowdsourced Archive on India's 1947 Partition

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Frustrated, the archivists rejected Zubair's submission once again. They cited patchy and cryptic communication, and video file submissions that arrived corrupted in our servers – sometimes after several month-long gaps in communication. On the one hand, the archivists wanted to believe his story: that his oral history recordings provided a rare glimpse into the life stories of elders living in remote villages deep in the Hindu Kush mountains straddling Pakistan and Afghanistan. Yet, on the other hand, when working with individuals that the archivists had only 'met' online, they were wary. It is not uncommon to run into elaborate schemes of online fraud.

Zubair's submissions eventually arrived intact. His interviews were conducted with stunning mountain vistas as the backdrop and were in the rare Torwali language of the Swat region that no archivist at our Berkeley, California-based office could decipher without Zubair's carefully prepared Urdu-language abstracts. These abstracts were translated via a volunteer based in Lahore in Pakistan. The histories that emerged were unlike any we had heard. For instance, one interview detailed accounts of an independence movement amongst the Pashtun tribal people for a separate nation, 'Pashtunistan', which would theoretically straddle the mountains between what became Pakistan and Afghanistan. The impacts of the modern Pakistan-Afghanistan boundary line are often left out of popular and academic discourse on the topic of India and Pakistan's 1947 Partition – the primary subject matter of The 1947 Partition Archive (hereafter, also 'The Archive').<sup>1</sup>

At the time of Zubair's participation in The 1947 Partition Archive's oral history project, his access to reliable internet connections was only possible during his trips to Islamabad in the warm season. These trips came months apart, creating a frustrating communications gap between the California-based archivists and Zubair. To compound the frustration, archivists in California, often college students who had grown up immersed in the digital age, could not comprehend the lack of internet bandwidth or the enormous logistical challenges Zubair faced. Zubair had joined our oral history program after learning about our free online oral history workshops through The 1947 Partition Archive's Facebook page.<sup>2</sup> Through our social media profiles, ordinary citizens around the world are invited to join free oral history webinar

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<sup>1</sup> See *The 1947 Partition Archive*, [www.1947PartitionArchive.org](http://www.1947PartitionArchive.org)

<sup>2</sup> See Guneeta Singh Bhalla, 'Gathering the Vanishing History of Punjab and South Asia Through Crowdsourced Lived

<sup>2</sup> See Guneeta Singh Bhalla, 'Gathering the Vanishing History of Punjab and South Asia Through Crowdsourced Lived Memories', *Sikh Research Journal*, vol 6, no 1, Spring 2021, pp 37–49

workshops to learn the basic techniques for documenting oral histories, as outlined by the Oral History Association and Baylor University's open source online resources.<sup>3</sup> Workshop attendees who successfully submit their first oral history interview, and it matches The Archive's standards with its nine-point criteria, are certified as 'Citizen Historian' volunteers.<sup>4</sup> Zubair was the first Citizen Historian volunteer to attempt the enormous logistical challenges present in the Hindu Kush that acted as barriers for him to document and submit oral history interviews.



Citizen Historian Zubair Torwali (right) with Muhammad Pervesh Shaheen (left) at Shaheen's home in the Swat region of Pakistan, 25 November 2018, photo courtesy of The 1947 Partition Archive

On the opposite side of the globe, another trained Citizen Historian, Erin Riggs,<sup>5</sup> began interviewing Partition witnesses in California and New York. Some of her interviews included members of the ancient Bene Israel Jewish community of India, who had lived originally in Karachi (now in Pakistan) but migrated to Mumbai (formerly Bombay, India) in 1947. Later, as young men in their teens, they were recruited to 'rebuild' Israel through the 'builders movement' and migrated without their parents to a Kibbutz in 1948. Like Zubair and Erin, more than 800 'Citizen Historians' from unique backgrounds have trained to document oral histories from a menagerie of micro-communities, and have brought to light hidden histories not previously acknowledged in academic literature or mainstream culture.

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<sup>3</sup> See the Institute for Oral History, Baylor University Libraries, Baylor University, Waco, Texas [www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/](http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/)

<sup>4</sup> See Oral History Workshop, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, [www.1947partitionarchive.org/collect\\_stories](http://www.1947partitionarchive.org/collect_stories)

<sup>5</sup> Dr Erin Riggs is now an Associate Professor of Archeology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; through her work at The 1947 Partition Archive, she was inspired to focus her academic research and PhD thesis on the impacts of Partition on built environments in South Asia

The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 is said to have created the largest mass migration in recorded history,<sup>6</sup> yet is little understood and little studied. The lack of documentation and understanding is in part due to the Indian and Pakistani postcolonial governments' eagerness to preserve nationalist narratives that are not necessarily rooted in a balanced understanding of history. The 1947 Partition Archive was conceived of more than sixty years after the Partition and was launched in 2010 as a community-based, crowd-sourcing platform to fill in the gaps in official histories by documenting the voices of the last remaining Partition witnesses, lest the people's history disappear completely and be replaced by demagoguery.<sup>7</sup> The platform empowers everyday citizens to become 'citizen historians' through a process that involves documenting oral histories in their family or immediate community, and in a language they are comfortable in. The concept was a novel one in 2010, and has since resulted in over 17,000 attendees at our oral history workshops, of whom over 3,500 have successfully completed the oral history training and more than 800 are now certified Citizen Historians with The Archive. Citizen Historians have collectively documented over 10,700 oral histories on digital video, in more than forty languages and dialects, from over 500 cities and villages located in fourteen countries. A crowdsourcing approach allowed us to reach traditionally underrepresented groups, and geographically widespread communities, not accessible through traditional oral history projects, which, at the time of The Archive's founding, generally employed professionally-trained historians. The approach also empowered individuals in the documentation process, sparking both new-found interest in history at the grassroots level, and an appreciation for diversity in the interpretations as well as the remembrance of history.

While a number of literary works have attempted to capture the incredible mass trauma of Partition, combined with an unprecedented mass refugee crisis, until 2017 (seven years after The Archive began popularising Partition witness narratives) there were no public commemorations of Partition anywhere in the world.<sup>8</sup> In 2010, the very concept of documenting Partition and giving it importance was received with much suspicion by Partition witnesses, although they often felt more comfortable sharing their oral histories once it was made abundantly clear from the legal disclaimers and release forms that the project was based in California – a perceived safe haven for their voices.

Given the non-traditional nature of the project, inspired by crowdsourced protein folding experiments at the University of California at Berkeley's physics department,<sup>9</sup> every aspect of the documentation process was conceived of from scratch, often in collaboration with the public. The project is shaped through the input and work of thousands of hands at its very core. Since

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<sup>6</sup> See Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010

<sup>7</sup> See Somini Sengupta, 'Potent Memories from a Divided India', *The New York Times*, 13 August 2013

<sup>8</sup> See Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2000 [1998]

<sup>9</sup> See Seth Cooper, Firas Khatib, Adrien Treuille et al, 'Predicting Protein Structures with a Multilayer Online Game,' *Nature*, no 466, 5 August 2010, pp 756–760

The Archive is built in collaboration with the public, its contents not only impact the public, but constantly impact its own relationship with the public that builds it and uses it for accessing an ever-changing body of information. Below is a description of this feedback mechanism that makes The Archive ‘alive’ in the community.

### A Living, Community-based Archive

Like other repositories, The 1947 Partition Archive is a compilation of thematically arranged content that holds valuable information for numerous fields of study within the humanities and is available for reference. The Archive is born-digital and its democratic approach to documenting history is possible due to technologies available in our present digital information age. For instance, Zubair’s work in the highland regions of Pakistan brought to light stories such as those of the retired language enthusiast and scholar, Pervesh Shaheen, who has collected over 35,000 books in his personal library, including many rare and out-of-print editions.<sup>10</sup> Zubair contextualises Shaheen’s life for us through photographs that accompany the interview video files. Shaheen is over eighty years old and no longer has the strength and energy required to care for his library, which appears to be in a state of disarray.



Muhammad Pervesh Shaheen with his book collection at his home in the Swat region of Pakistan, 25 November 2018, photo courtesy of The 1947 Partition Archive

<sup>10</sup> See the interview with Muhammad Pervesh Shaheen by Zubair Torwali, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, <https://www.1947partitionarchive.org/story/7567>

As a second example, consider the example of Farhana Afroz who interviewed individuals in 2010 who were still living in 1947 Partition-era refugee camps when Bangladesh was formed in 1971. As Urdu-speaking Behari individuals (and not native Bengali), many of these individuals have continued living in camps since 1947. The ‘Beharis of Dhaka’, as they came to be known, were a little-known community and their plight was not widely known when these interviews were conducted in 2010 and popularised over social media.



Farhana Afroz conducting an interview at a refugee camp with a man from the Behari community in Dhaka, 2010, photo courtesy of The 1947 Partition Archive

Our understanding of the past essentially informs our actions in the present and our planning for the future. Archives containing information about the past ultimately impact the present and future through the information they disseminate. In the case that information is continually being added to the archive, it could be thought of as ‘alive’. Furthermore, for archives such as The 1947 Partition Archive, which depend on citizens for active content contribution, the archive is continuously being built through crowdsourcing. As such an archive grows and as more citizens interact with its contents, their worldviews are impacted through the interaction, which, in turn, impacts their future submissions to the archive. Essentially, information within the archive informs the public, and the better-informed public in turn changes the archive with content and information acquired with a new mindset. In this manner, The 1947 Partition Archive has evolved with the evolving environment, while, at the same time, impacting the evolution of the environment – most notably the general public understanding of Partition,

which has, as a result, gained a prominent place in mainstream media over the last five years. Thus, citizens and The Archive evolve in response to one another.

Because The 1947 Partition Archive is developed in collaboration with the public, it is necessarily also a disseminator of curated content, playing, in part, a role similar to that of a museum. In order to engage content creators and build its repository of content, The Archive must create meaningful public awareness of its work. Some examples of how The Archive disseminates its work for public education and engagement include daily social media postings of oral history excerpts from Citizen Historian submissions. All postings highlight both the artefact (the oral history interview excerpt) and the content creators (the Citizen Historians, curators, archivists, editors, camera persons), thereby inspiring and empowering more citizens to contribute. This is a necessary feature of the living crowdsourced archive, which must keep the public engaged in an effort to inspire more content submissions, as well as its donation life-line, from the public.

Excerpts of oral history interviews posted for public dissemination are also curated by community-based content curators – often students of history, who join The Archive through its biannual call for volunteers. Content interpretation and curation necessarily require a level of responsiveness to ever-changing cultural and political landscapes. The curator must connect the content to the current cultural context to create engagement with the public. In this sense, too, The 1947 Partition Archive remains ‘alive’, in constant engagement with its environment in more ways than one.

## The Art of Interacting with a Living Archive

Because The 1947 Partition Archive is built by community members from diverse backgrounds, there is an element of variation between the interviews. One culprit is the intrinsic skill of the interviewer, which can range on a spectrum despite the training provided. Additionally, interpersonal chemistry between the interviewer and interviewee can vary and does not necessarily depend on the interviewer’s skills alone, although some highly skilled individuals can also have an impact on interpersonal chemistry. Access to quality recording equipment, educational levels, cultural differences and the socio-economic backgrounds of the interviewers can all add to the diversity of the received content. While crowdsourcing enables a global reach into underrepresented areas and communities, it sometimes comes at the cost of content uniformity. Ultimately, however, even low quality content is more valuable than no content at all. Professionals using or critiquing living archives must understand and appreciate such variables and limitations in order to fully appreciate the ‘living-ness’ and very existence of the archive.

Through awareness, and by being open to the evolutionary nature of archives in the modern digital and more democratic world, it is possible to become open to changing our own ways of

understanding and appreciating the artefacts they contain and present to the world. For instance, it is important to remain conscious, when interacting with the archive, of the manner in which the subject matter in the archive, and the contents, are impacted by events contemporary to the content creation as well as current events and ongoing changes in society that have occurred since the creation and the ‘freezing in place’ of the content in the archive – ie since the moment in time that the content is created and archived. A prominent example of changing environments and responsive methodologies is the COVID-19 pandemic, when The Archive was quick to evolve to a remote interviewing format in late March 2020.



Screenshot of Aquila Khanum being interviewed remotely using Skype software by Citizen Historian Aimee Genova during the COVID-19 pandemic, 16 May 2020, courtesy of The 1947 Partition Archive

It is helpful to seek an understanding of the archive’s creation in order to interact with it. How was it created? And by whom? What are the benefits and shortcomings of the methods of creation? How can the manner in which the archive was created, and its contents which are continuously shaping the present, reshape the archive and how it is viewed in the present and the future? The archive continuously interacts with its environment, each time it is accessed or contributed to. And through The Archive, society is also actively shaping its own future.

When exploring the contents of the archive, the explorer can benefit from the recognition that intrinsic and unavoidable biases are inherent to creating and also curating a particular piece of content. In a community-based archive, there is benefit in remaining open to new styles of content creation and content archiving that may not conform to traditional norms, given that the content creators and archivists will be adjusting methodologies and workflows in response to the unique requirements of its constituency of content creators. Furthermore, community-based archivists may not come from a background of traditional museum-based curating and archiving. Yet community-based archivists bring to light new pieces of information with new interpretations, and they possibly hail from a community not traditionally represented in the

realms of academia, or library and information sciences professions. Furthermore, this access to new and diverse information was made possible by engaging the non-traditional community archivist, the non-traditional Citizen Historian and non-traditional methods of content sourcing. The historian and anyone accessing the archive may thus benefit from re-evaluating the nature of the content, can reframe what might appear as ‘shortcomings’ and instead empathise with the unique and sometimes limiting circumstances of the content creator.

The same background that also enabled the content in the first place also limits its ‘completeness’ in many cases. For instance, Zubair’s submissions were nearly dismissed as not adhering adequately to the standards set forth by professional oral history societies. Upon learning of the days-long public bus journeys in rugged high mountain country, the inclement weather and the many other epic struggles that Zubair endured in procuring the content, the value of the interviews rose dramatically, despite the lack of quality according to some of the quality metrics adopted by The Archive.

Content created by users from diverse backgrounds represents a broad set of biases that are more representative of society in general, and the archive thus acts as a vehicle for representing this variety to the researcher. The modern living archive with its dramatic variations from traditional archives helps us re-evaluate our assumptions of the traditional, seemingly ‘static’ archive and begs us to probe the nature of both the artefact accumulation, and the artefact accumulator – the ‘what’ and ‘why’ and ‘by whom’ of the traditional archive. Such an analysis can enable an awareness of the evolutionary and non-static nature of archives in general, and place our own analysis into a framework that we expect will also evolve with time. Along with the evolution of its contents, the interpretations of the contents within will continually be evolving as well.

## Evolving our Understanding of the Past through an Ever-changing Present

The following are two ways of disrupting the ‘given-ness’ of the past and the ‘living-ness’ of the present: through continuous interpretation of the contents of an archive, and through ongoing contributions to it. Just as our worldview and our knowledge evolve, so, too, does our interpretation and understanding of the past, and hence the contents of crowdsourced archives such as The 1947 Partition Archive. Each new generation will bring a different set of values and social assumptions to their interpretation of an archive’s contents. Similarly, individuals from different cultural and educational backgrounds will also interpret the contents differently. The archive is always interpretive and in a crowdsourced archive, its interpretations will continue to evolve, based on many more variables than a traditional archive. Each new interpreter can benefit from developing an open approach to interacting with the archive’s contents. Acknowledging the fluidity of historical understanding in general is key to how we allow history to influence us going forward. With the added element of diversity in content

creator backgrounds, historical interpretation becomes much more colourful and nuanced. In an increasingly democratic world, diversity in interpretation and the acceptance of such diversity is key to moving forward, and the very inception of, and societal acceptance of, a crowdsourced living archive is a reflection of that world. The 'living-ness' of the archive in this sense, too, is 'living' in that its definition is evolving in response to our collective social evolution as time progresses.

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