

# SAVING THE LIBRARY BEFORE IT BURNS

An archive works to conserve the stories of the 1947 Partition of India.

ARIEL RAMCHANDANI · NOV 19, 2018

In July of 1947, Surjan Singh Sood sensed a coming danger. The British government had announced a plan to divide colonial India into two separate states and Surjan, having already received threats on his own life, wanted to move his family to safety. He loaded his wife and children into a friend's car and sent them away, across the Punjab province of British India, from Lahore to the city of Ludhiana. At the time, there was no border to cross between Pakistan and India, and the family made the trip with only one or two boxes, leaving most of their possessions at home. To Surjan's middle son, Kulbhushan, it seemed inconceivable that they would not return. But a month later, Lahore became part of Pakistan. His father's decision to move the family quickly to Ludhiana may have saved their lives.

Before the move, Kulbhushan Singh Sood's life was peaceful. He spent his first 12 years in a concrete-and-brick house his father built in the 1930s, living alongside his family—he had seven sisters and one brother at the time—a cow, and a buffalo. His father worked for the Lahore Electric Supply Company, and he loved his mother dearly. Sood's childhood was a happy one. He played sports and ate fresh dairy from the animals. There were barfi and gulab jamon sweets on special occasions. The family drove around in their tonga—a horse-drawn cart.

Everything changed in 1947, when Britain relinquished control of India and Pakistan in the bloody power transfer known as Partition. Partition was not exactly the glorious "new hope" Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, spoke of. In the cleaving of two nations, the promise of freedom was met with ugly, unexpected tragedy.

It is a tragedy that for a long time has been buried in history. Sood is helping to rectify that by telling his story to the [1947 Partition Archive](#), a project that records stories like his so that no one can deny what happened that summer.

The bloodshed began when the British Empire, broke and dying after World War II, was finally ready to grant independence to its colonies. It wanted out quickly, and that meant dividing India (a strategy also employed in Palestine). Some Indian leaders, like Muhammad Ali Jinnah, dreamed of a separate Muslim homeland in Pakistan, while Mahatma Gandhi wanted independence before arrangements were made. The parties' failure to negotiate "made Partition unavoidable," according to Pakistani scholar Ayesha Jalal.

British Royal Navy officer Lord Louis Mountbatten, handsome, charming, and a reckless military tactician, was sent to India as the last viceroy, tasked with overseeing Britain's exit. For reasons not completely understood, he moved the planned date up by 10 months. An English lawyer, Cyril Radcliffe, drew the maps outlining two independent dominions; he had never been to India before.

The speed and carelessness with which the division of British India was implemented led to problems across the region. Though Britain intended to divide the countries along religious lines, the new borders bisected territories where Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs had lived for centuries side by side. Hindus and Sikhs flowed out of Pakistan into India. Muslims fled to West Pakistan, which is current-day Pakistan, and East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Estimates vary, but as many as 15 million people migrated as a result of Partition, making it one of the largest mass migrations in human history. As people fled or were chased from their homes, chaos and extreme violence broke out. The subcontinent was beset with genocidal skirmishes. None of the leaders involved saw the violence coming, and they could not control it when it arrived.

In *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition*, Nisid Hajari writes that witnesses claimed "pregnant women had their breasts cut off and babies hacked out of their bellies; infants were found literally roasted on spits." Accounts from the time describe bodies lying in the road and trains creaking into stations after having been ambushed, silent and filled with blood. When looking back on Partition, Sood sees a mess of details. In terms of blame, "I don't know," he says. "You can't. It is everybody's fault."

The haplessness, hope, and violence of that time would eventually create modern India and Pakistan. "Partition is central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent," wrote the historian and writer, William Dalrymple, in a 2015 [piece](#) for *The New Yorker*. He quotes Jalal: "[P]artition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present, and future."

Despite Partition's enormous influence, Sood's story—and those of so many others on the Indian subcontinent who endured the violence of the time—are in danger of being lost. That's why he's sitting in his son's house in Dublin, California, with a high school student named Zachary Ngin. Ngin, 18, is walking Sood through an interview process designed to immortalize his story so that it won't be forgotten.

Sood sits rod straight on a sofa in the home's front room, in a checked shirt and a blue vest, his pants pressed, his feet slippered and crossed at the ankles. He stares across at a video camera Ngin borrowed from his high school. In front of Ngin is a 90-page packet with thousands of questions, crowdsourced from over 6,500 interviews. "People are the lens of history," Ngin tells me; it's why he spends his weekends interviewing for the archive.

The archive is the brainchild of Guneeta Singh Bhalla, an experimental physicist and member of the Forbes Nonprofit Council. Part of a military family, Bhalla would make the trip to visit her grandparents on the Indian side of Punjab every summer. The family would visit the border, Bhalla curious about the other side. Later, she thought it was so strange how she could travel anywhere in the world but Pakistan. She started asking questions about Partition, an event she had never learned in school, and began to see it "as a dying, untold story we can revive."

In 2008, Bhalla visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. She spent hours in the oral history exhibition, listening to stories. No one could ever say the events didn't happen, or use politics to obliterate them, because the records were there, right in front of her. The next year, on a trip to Punjab visiting family, she met an owner of a bookshop who had been a freedom fighter and talked to him about her hopes for the project. Customers overheard, offering to introduce her to relatives with similar stories. Then another person asked to be interviewed, and another. At the time, she was a self-described "hobby filmmaker," always with her camera, so she filmed many of her interviews. Now entire Punjabi and Bengali villages have participated in the archive.

In 2009, Bhalla moved to Berkeley, California, to work at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. The area has a large South Asian population, and she would show up at local temples with a tape recorder and some paper. The response was overwhelming: Everyone had a Partition story to share. She eventually quit her day job and devoted herself full-time to the archive. "I literally pulled an all-nighter a week for the first two years," she says.

The archive currently has three full-time employees. It works with scholars in India and elsewhere (there are 44 now) to conduct some interviews, but many are done by citizen historians, at least 550 of them, who, like Ngin, must attend training before they can contribute. The archive has collected over 6,500 oral histories—the goal is 10,000 by the end of 2019—in more than 400 cities, 12 countries, and 24 languages. Recently, the archive has partnered with the library at Stanford University to make interviews available to the public. It has done similar work with museums and libraries across India and Pakistan.

Partition was 71 years ago, making the collection of these interviews a race against time. "We only have a few years left," says digital archive manager Karyn Bellamy-Dagneau when I meet her at the archive headquarters. The project inhabits the former office of Kloudless, a file-storage platform that powers the archive's online submission application. "It already happens too often that an interviewer will be on their way to see a Partition witness, only to learn that the same morning or the day before they fell or got sick or passed away," Bellamy-Dagneau says. She paraphrases an African proverb: "'Every time an old person dies, it's a library burning.' That's exactly what's happening here."

The power of the archive is that it combines oral history with digital technologies that can preserve this history for time immemorial. Interviewers can store huge amounts of footage—as well as images and photographs and artifacts—in a way that is easy to access. As the archive evolves, its power as a searchable living digital interface grows as well. More and more people populate the map on the archive's website, a world of histories filled in to be explored.

Besides the goal of getting to 10,000 interviews, Bhalla is interested in using the archive to help people find each other—a sort of missed-connections site for 71 years ago. To that end, interviewers ask subjects to remember and give names of anyone they knew and lost track of. One set of friends from a secondary school in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, who had lost contact years ago, found each other through the archive's Facebook page. Another man, Ram Dev Arya, was reconnected with a former classmate when the classmate's granddaughter saw his story and asked the archive to help bring them back together. Bhalla sees this as her way of giving back to all the people sharing stories. "I want to do it for them," she says, "though I know it is super late."

Halfway across the world, a man from Lahore tells his story of August 15th, 1947—Independence Day. "Life had to start all over again," in the chaos of the new India, Sood says. "We saw death from very close quarters." After moving to Punjab, the family slept on the floor; Kulbhushan's mother mended their tattered clothing. His father, Surjan, stayed behind in Lahore, unreachable in the chaos. August turned to September, and they feared him dead. Finally, three months after the family had left, Surjan showed up on their doorstep. It was one of the happiest times, a cause for celebration, but, "What can you do if you have no money for sweets?" Sood asks.

As did many of the witnesses interviewed, Sood, who was 12 in the summer of 1947, came of age with Partition. The dawn of India was the dawn of his adulthood; it determined the course of his life. After school, he joined the Indian Navy, because, with his family's savings gone, that seemed the quickest path to a good job. Sood has never returned to Lahore. "I did feel like we could have easily gone back," he says. "But we never did." He was worried his house would be gone after all this time.

Late in the interview, Ngin calls a break. Sood's wife comes in with tea and cake. The house is quiet. His granddaughters, high schoolers, are upstairs studying quietly.

The interview takes over three hours. When it's over, most of the memory cards on Ngin's camera are full. We take pictures together with his wife, who, Sood says, looks especially pretty that day. Ngin tells Sood his story will hopefully be preserved for 3,000 years. Ngin asked Sood how it makes him feel, sharing these memories. Like many of the Partition witnesses, he has never shared his story before. Sood stares at his hands, clasping and unfurling them. "I feel light," he says. "These things are there in the memory. Nobody talks about it; nobody has talked for a long time, but when I'm talking to you I'm reliving it." He returns to a point he has been making all afternoon: that the archive should feel free to share his story anywhere, because it was the clearest recollection he could muster.

"These are not politics," Sood says. "Just facts of life."