

## **Memories as Oral History: Reading Rustom Bharucha's Rajasthan: An Oral History.**

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### **Abstract**

The use of oral history as a methodology in the field of historiography is a development of the last few decades. Scholars of Subaltern School, Prof. Shahid Amin and Gyanendra Pandey; and others like Urvashi Butalia have used this methodology in their history writings. Rustom Bharucha's 'Rajasthan: An Oral History' is another priceless work in the field of historiography of oral history. The text gives rise to a new way of thinking in the context of history and challenges already-established preconceptions.

### **Keywords**

Memories, Oral History, Subaltern, Shahid Amin, Komal Kothari, Local Histories, Regional histories, Rajasthan, Historiography, Methodology

Even today, historiography exists as a complex and new challenge for historians, which inspires historians to search for new sources and methodologies through which historians write the discovered history. In the field of historiography, Oral History is one such experiment which historians are using as a methodology to reconstruct new history. Oral history can be used to know about customs, traditions, religious rites, everyday life of marginalized social groups, and women and traditions related to domestic life of which either very little description is available in written sources or it is described indirectly. In historiography, oral epics, songs, genealogical accounts, ballads as well as interviews are used as sources.

The use of oral history as a methodology in the field of historiography is a development of the last few decades. Scholars of Subaltern School, Prof. Shahid Amin and Gyanendra Pandey have used this methodology in their history writings. Apart from them, Urvashi Butalia has also used this methodology in her writing. In his writings, Shahid Amin<sup>1</sup> has presented a new dimension in historiography by combining history with memory. Apart from 'Event, Metaphor, Memory', Shahid Amin shows the role of rumours behind Gandhi's fame in the lower-class context in 'Gandhi Ka Mahatya'. Oral Methodology is also used in partition historiography on questions like pain of partition, problem of displacement, and emotional attachment among people. In the partition documents or official sources issues like emotional attachment, pain, etc are missing. For this kind of historiography, the only valuable source is oral methodology. Urvashi Butalia's book 'The Other Side of Silence' is a unique example of this<sup>2</sup>.

Rustom Bharucha's 'Rajasthan: An Oral History' is another priceless work in the field of historiography of oral history. In this text, the author explains how the writing of this book became possible as a result of hours of conversation with Komal Kothari<sup>3</sup>. This conversation continued in Jodhpur between and the author Rustom Bharucha for almost two years.

Before discussing the methodological issues described in this book, it is important to know about some important questions related to oral history, as well as the people associated with this book. Apart from this, it is necessary to know the nature of oral history, its characteristics as a methodology, its shortcomings, and its importance in historiography.

Oral history is mainly writing or reconstructing history by interviewing eyewitnesses involved in an incident<sup>4</sup>. Jan Vansina believes that in oral tradition, evidence is passed orally from one

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<sup>1</sup>Amin, Sahid; *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995

<sup>2</sup>Butalia, Urvashi; *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Penguin Books, Delhi, 1998.

<sup>3</sup>Komal Kothari is an acknowledged doyen of Rajasthan culture. He founded Rupayan Sansthan. For his contribution, he was awarded Padma Bhushan by Govt of India.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.); *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London 1998.p.9.

generation to the next or even beyond, through eye witnesses of the incident<sup>5</sup>. Such oral sources are important sources of knowing the past culture and society, while the other type of sources is personal memory which is based on the personal life experience of the person. In this way, events do not pass from one generation to the next, except in a highly emaciated form. This is how Rustom Bharucha used Oral Methodology in writing his book.

Oral history as a Methodology, which, like other methodologies, is being used as a source in historiography, is a subject of controversy among historians. Is oral history a reliable source for historiography? How important is it to use oral history as a methodology in historiography? It holds importance in the historiography of that time. Marwick says that historiography based on non-documentary sources may be less satisfactory than writing based on documents, but history is all the same<sup>6</sup>. It is seen that oral sources are used to provide completeness to history based on written sources and thus the relevance of oral sources as an independent source is undermined.

Responses from historians using oral sources, such as Jan Vansina<sup>7</sup>, challenge assumptions about oral sources and argue that written sources are not related to oral sources. Understudy is obvious, when writing fails then tradition comes to the fore, and this is wrong. The oral source corrects the other perspective as much as the other perspective corrects the oral source<sup>8</sup>.

In his seminal essay 'The Interpretation of Culture'<sup>9</sup>, Clifford Geertz argued that cultural analysis involves "thick description." Not materially thick, but semantically thick. Thick description examines the behaviours of the masses because of what they say. That is what they do. It expands the content of an action and interprets it as a sign. Geertz's understanding and particularism adopt

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<sup>5</sup>Cited in Gwyn Prins, 'Oral history' in Peter Burke (eds.) *New Perspective on Historical Writing*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1991 p. 126.

<sup>6</sup>Gwyn Prins, 'Oral history' in Peter Burke (eds.) *New Perspective on Historical Writing*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1991, p. 120.

<sup>7</sup>Vansina, Jan, *Oral Tradition As History*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 1985.

<sup>8</sup>Gwyn Prins, 'Oral history' in Peter Burke (eds.) *New Perspective on Historical Writing*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1991 p. 122.

<sup>9</sup>Geertz, Clifford; *The Interpretation of cultures: selected Essays*, Basic Books, New York, 1973.

causal relationships whereas reject causal relationships. The same can clearly be said about Oral history as a Methodology<sup>10</sup>.

Written sources have always been held in high regard because they possess certain qualities believed to be absent in oral history. Historians look for certain qualities in their sources, none of which are present in oral data. First, they demand precision in size which indicates the importance of the permanent nature of the evidence and since a document is an artefact, it is also argued that the evidence is beyond doubt. It can also be tested in various ways, not only physically but also through comparative, textual, structural, and other means.

Second, and related to the first, is the accuracy in chronology. The claim of objectivity by traditional historians depends on the debased force of deduction. Third, writing is easy and it leaves a definite identity and since it is written it offers possibilities of authenticity. On each of these grounds, the place of the unsupported oral evidence is not good, its shape is not fixed, chronology is often inaccurate, and communication is often unsupported. Two more limitations are added to the oral sources which relate to their objects of study. Oral History is a self-indulgent one that deals with tangential issues. The second is related to the irrelevance of small measurements.

According to Gwyn Prins, a common complaint of methodological scope about accuracy, it often reflects the belief that oral data cannot explain change and that recorded change is what historians primarily study. But it is completely true, and in some circumstances, primarily in non-literate or quasi-literate societies, continuity is much more interesting and more difficult to explain than change. Complaints about self-indulgence reflect a bias against history from below or a fear of it since oral data is said to be on a scale of personal perception. Historians will be trapped by them on a lower scale, possibly misdirected or unable to extrapolate competently<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup>Aleta Biersack, Local Knowledge Local History, in Lynn Hunt (eds.), *The New Cultural History*, University of California Press, 1989, pp.74-75.

<sup>11</sup>Gwyn Prins, 'Oral history' in Peter Burke (eds.) *New Perspective on Historical Writing*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1991, p. 125-26.

Nevertheless, such criticisms have been levelled by historians who have used oral sources. These historians pointed out that there are shortcomings even in documented sources and they have not bequeathed to us as unknowingly, without self-consciously as one might think. Oral evidence may be collected on tape or close to the source in field research. It is also certainly vulnerable to the problems that doubt modern written sources. What is common in both is that they have a desire to discover tradition. Two common problems with the misuse of source criticism affect oral evidence. One is Composite Culture (A culture where language takes both oral or written form for all or a portion of the people). Second is unconscious influence of literary form on verbal testimony in the oral testimony of illiterate people. More fresh and valuable details are found nowhere else in oral sources. It is based on small-scale histories like 'Regional Histories' and 'Local Histories'. And thus, the power of oral history is the power of efficient history through some experimental method. It comes from the class and intelligence with which a variety of sources are brought together.

As far as memory-related factors are concerned in employing verbal sources in reconstructing the past, experiments on various types of memory agree that long-term memory is particularly characteristic of individuals who have entered that phase of what psychologists call life. Life-review is the final product of remembering the whole life. An enduring Life-review narrative is the beginning of a long-term oral tradition in the 'Information Pool'. In reconstructing the past, personal recollection, which is a type of oral history, allows historians to do two things. First, to be a well-rounded historian: one who studies the full range of scales and problems of contemporary history and draws on the appropriate source materials. They also provide small details that are inaccessible and stimulate the historian to re-analyse other data in a new way. Second, there is also an adverse effect. The ownership of a rich and varied "second record" may keep the historian away from the common people.

Some historians think that their job is to describe or perhaps explain why things and events happened over time. It is a necessary but not sufficient explanation (function). There are two more essential components. Continuity must be explained because historical continuity,

especially in oral culture, requires more attention than change. Second, the job of the historian is to give the reader confidence in the efficiency of his methodology. It is on those core parts of the historian's work that oral history rests on tradition and memory, past and present with its detail, its humanity, often with its emotions and always with its well-defined scepticism about the entire historiographic undertaking. Scepticism explains it the best and Komal Kothari has proved it to be true. Komal Kothari is not only a storehouse of memoirs but also an instrument for reading oral history.

Over the past decade, oral history has evolved as a technique and as a genre within the historian's parameters. This means that it has lost its reputation for incredible exoticism, though not its stereotypical energy. Again, one needs to be mindful of the dangers of misdirection and exaggeration. This technique requires deft handling and in crude and inattentive hands will quickly degenerate into intemperance<sup>12</sup>.

There are innumerable types of historical evidence. The nature of history-writing changes with the emergence of the oral narratives of the people, irrespective of national biographies or the narratives of prominent personalities. This kind of history places the masses at the centre of historical inquiry. Before advancing the discussion on the peculiarities of oral history, some questions we can ask

- What kind of history is proper history, is it the national biography that should be written or the history of the people?
- Is there an alternative to writing completely different narratives?

It is about the second question that this article discusses in Rustom Bharucha's 'Rajasthan; An Oral History Conversation with Komal Kothari' tries to address this by keeping it at the centre and looking at the possibilities of different types of histories outside the master narrative and its importance is not only in writing about people but mainly in that outside the colonial archives.

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<sup>12</sup>Gwyn Prins, 'Oral history' in Peter Burke (eds.) *New Perspective on Historical Writing*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1991 p. 137-38.

However, this is not the usefulness of these sources and does not deny validity. Here a more nuanced picture emerges from ShahidAmin's 'Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992', which emphasizes a more integrative approach between archives and memory. But an important point here is not just to establish the integrative aspect of the colonial sources but to observe the relationship between records and memory<sup>13</sup>.

Memory or verbal evidence is not without complications and it poses many curious questions before we can consider it as authentic evidence. Memory is dependent on experience, both conscious and subconscious, and how one remembers past also depends on the process of how an event entered one's memory, and memory thus does not appear to occur linearly. There appears to be a "Pack of Snapshots". Part of memory is getting rid of the unnecessary without chronological succession<sup>14</sup>. This means that there is a constant negotiation through which identity arises and is reshaped. Another issue that comes into play here is that oral history about whom. If we accept the argument that it is the peasants or subalterns who are written about in the records and not about themselves, then this indicates that 'Oral History' only includes Subaltern as its subject and they are the true source of information.

But Rustom's book is based on a solo conversation. It seems that it would have been completely different if Rustom had approached local singers, acrobats, and dancers. At this key juncture, the source in oral history is quite important. Amin has shown well who the best source could be regarding the Chauri Chaura incident and the subsequent killings in Dumri and the process by which numbers become fixed in local memory<sup>15</sup> and the inspired historian who moves back and forth between records and oral narratives. Moving away from this issue of memory, another question central to Oral History is how new meanings overlap existing memory. In other words, several completely different versions and meanings of the same story

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<sup>13</sup> Amin, Sahid; *Some Consideration of Evidence, Language and History*, Indian History Congress, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Southgate, Beverley, *Why Bother with History? Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Motivations*, Pearson Education, Harlow, 2000, p.42.

<sup>15</sup> Amin, Sahid; *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p.144-5

emerge over some time. This change is manifested in the case of Return of Martin Guerre<sup>16</sup>. The confusion over the selective nature of memory explores how memory interacts with the multiplicity of events<sup>17</sup>.

Shahid Amin Tested the verbal memories during the writing of Chauri Chaura: Memory and History, where eyewitness NaujadiPasan repeatedly mentioned 172 people in his memories, "One hundred and seventy-two people were gathered in the police station of Jutla Kali Mai<sup>18</sup>". This led to the fact where 172 people being sentenced to death. Hence, flaws in memory are also visible which leads the historian to investigate with written sources.

The main topic here is to know about the interviewees Rustom Bharucha and Komal Kothari. I believe that without them it is impossible to present the real history of Rajasthan. Komal Kothari belonged to the Marwari community. He studied Rajasthan for five decades, presenting the narrative of his life experience and knowledge of land, water, agriculture, lives, musical instruments, oral songs, folk songs, genealogies, rituals rites, etc<sup>19</sup>. The old man of Rajasthan gradually became famous among all the people around him and was not only talking but his conversations were creating oral epics.

As a first point, I would like to say that I would first like to examine the choice of Komal Kothari as the interviewee. Komal Kothari spoke about Rajasthan, its culture and issues like water, religion, and the status of women as first-hand knowledge. Through this book we get information about the cultural life of Rajasthan and not about the political and nationalist history, which is a strong aspect of this text which takes us from the historiography of the leaders to the historiography of the public. Komal Kothari has presented the geographical unit and cultural understanding of Rajasthan in this text. It not only gives us information about the cultural diversity within Rajasthan but also presents the cultural relations with the neighboring states. In

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<sup>16</sup>Davis, Natalie Zemon: *The Return of Martin Guerre*, HUP, 2001, p. 125.

<sup>17</sup>Amin, Sahid; *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, pp.140-42.

<sup>18</sup>Amin, Sahid; *Chauri-Chaura, Smriti aur Itihas*, Bahuvachan, 2001, pp.153-54

<sup>19</sup>Bharuch, Rustom; *Rajasthan: An Oral History*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2003, p.1



this way, Komal Kothari has added to the decline of the 'Local Knowledge System' which leads to the disappearance of local culture when we talk about culture at the national and state level. The text talks about epics, folk stories and mythologies, but this text is primarily oral history narrated by Komal Kothari.

The study of any culture is incomplete unless popular beliefs, rituals, mythologies, and performative aspects of popular culture are added to it. Here Komal Kothari has presented in a very interesting manner the origin of some musical instruments in a particular region and some musical traditions in a certain region. Some communities like Gujjar, Kunbi, and Patel were richer in folk music tradition<sup>20</sup>. While such a culture is not visible in the Jat community, it can be understood based on patterns of demand for survival and shelter in response. In comparison to settled communities, pastoral communities travel more, as a result, new folk music and instruments develop as new communities meet and due to this, the spread of music and musical instruments is seen throughout Northern India.

Based on Komal Kothari's understanding, this text looks at the daily lifestyle of Rajasthan, its tradition, culture, religion, food as well as social life. Such accounts serve as valuable sources of information about ordinary life. It also gives information about the lower caste people as well as the marginalized category of community which the general historians do not give importance to. This account of Komal Kothari is a challenge for professional historians who study the states, palaces, forts and famous men. Komal Kothari throws light on issues like ethno-geographic distribution based on food habits, oral genealogy of lower castes, identification of people based on occupation, region as well as status of women, Sati and social activities.

Rajasthan is known for its nomadic culture. There are 80 different types of Bhugata castes or pastoral communities which include pastoral communities like Raika, hunters and gatherers like Jogis, snake charmers, Kalbelias. Camel herders' community, Raika and Raberi community, which sings Heer Ranjha epic, which is found in Alwar-Bharatpur region and Jogis play Sarangi.

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<sup>20</sup>Bharuch, Rustom; *Rajasthan: An Oral History*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2003, p.91

Heer is sung to control diseases occurring in the feet and mouth of animals and Ranjha is identified as Mahiwal, a buffalo keeper, thus Heer Ranjha is completely related to the pastoral community. In this way, it becomes clear that the book looks at general and community-related activities from a very deep perspective.

In the text of Oral epics, an attempt has been made by Komal Kothari to show the coordination of people's lives and ecology. Jat caste is mainly established in the animal husbandry sector. Gujjar is the dominant caste in the Jawararea. Tribes like Bhil are prominent in the Mecca region. In some epics, women and mother goddesses are prominent and there is no male hero.

In the context of Rajasthan, apart from popular opinion, we talk about geographical division, social institutions, and religion. In this context, food is discussed based on ethnography and geography. Along with discussing issues like millet, sorghum, and maize depending on the season, it also throws light on land-based crop patterns, language and animal husbandry. Here, he discusses how local knowledge is important for ecological balance.

As far as reconstruction of social history is concerned, Kamal Kothari's oral history throws light on some insider facts on this subject which are related to the daily life of the people. According to Komal Kothari's oral genealogy, it is known about the transition of low-caste people like the Raut community to the Ruling class, is beyond the basic facts of life. Apart from this, the existence of an exploited form of relations in society is revealed. This oral genealogy also questions the purity of upper-caste women from the community point of view.

Interesting information related to folk songs has been given in Komal Kothari's account. Information about the social struggles of the Bania and Bhil communities is also available through these folk songs. This type of information is used as an important source in social historiography where social conflict is reflected in folk music.

Gender studies need to assimilate an analytical subject in the pursuit of oral history. To contextualize oral history, we need to survey the major ideologies that shape women's world. After listening to the world of women, we come to know how women understand, compromise,

and sometimes challenge the prevailing ideology<sup>21</sup> Here Komal Kothari succeeded in replacing gender as a historical analyst. Komal Kothari, while reacting to the current situation, says that the lower caste musicians have gone out of the public world and in their place, it is mainly women from the middle-class and upper-class caste groups who sing folk songs for public entertainment. In this way, the role of women becomes important in public life. Sexuality comes out as an important fact of a woman. This happens because women cannot express their sexual desires in public places which is visible in Women's Songs. Wedding songs are mostly vulgar and sensual and their intensity increases as the night progresses. They also talk about immoral relationships, and violence which challenges traditional social beliefs. On the other hand, 'Woman Songs' give information about opposition to dowry and polygamy.

The information given here about the prevalent practice of 'Sati' as a social evil is different from the prevalent tradition where Sati means that after the death of the husband, the wife has to commit Sati on her husband's funeral pyre as per her wish. However, in the corresponding text, it is different. Different types of Sati have been discussed such as Dholan Sati (Sati is not caused by the husband but by the person Jhuma Devi (for the village), Bala Sati (for her son) and an unmarried Sati in Nagaur. While such information tells us about patriarchal domination, it also gives us information about the prevalent beliefs and mentalities of common people in social life.

Important information about folk gods and goddesses is also found in Komal Kothari's account. This kind of information shows the religious belief of common castes and communities in which local Gods and Goddesses have so much power that they solve the problems in the lives of common people. These communities believe that the local gods and goddesses will directly solve their daily problems.

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<sup>21</sup>Joan Sangster; *Telling our Stories: Feminist Debate and Use of Oral History*, in Oral history Reader, London, 1998, p.91.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we can say that Komal Kothari's oral history of Rajasthan appears capable of bringing two types of changes. First, it gives rise to a new way of thinking in the context of history and challenges already-established preconceptions. The second, it tries to provide historical justice to some important communities which were left out in the writing of history. This text attempts to break down the barriers between educational institutions and the outside world. The information given based on personal experience of eyewitnesses of past events not only creates history but also enhances our knowledge, especially where documents or official files are not available. The use of oral source as a Methodology is valuable. Although oral sources also have some shortcomings, still this methodology has a valuable contribution to the field of historiography. Apart from this, to make historiography more mature, it is necessary to adopt a multi-disciplinary method along with the discovery of new sources.