

## **Oral History: Scope and Significance**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The concept of oral history is not a new one. It is as old as history itself. Even when the human beings did not know the alphabets, the elders of the family used to narrate the achievements of their ancestors to the younger ones. In this way, the historical events and memories were passed on from one generation to the next. We find a number of oral traditions in the historical works of Herodotus and Thucydides, the Greek historians of fifth century B.C. Several Greek and Roman historians who came after Thucydides used written as well as oral traditions for historiography. In medieval Europe, historians had a vast collection of oral traditions. There were a number of story-tellers who had a lot of knowledge about the royal family and important affairs of the state. According to Henige, there were bards and poets who can be considered to be traditional historians. These people used to narrate the events of the past as a source of livelihood, and to gain prestige within their own society. It can be said that historians use evidence to understand the experience of people in the past while oral history can be a valuable source of evidence for understanding the experiences of individuals or groups in a certain historical context. Oral testimony cannot replace analysis of traditional historical materials (official documents, letters, newspapers, and secondary sources, etc.), but it can, however, reveal the role of individuals in shaping the past, and how major trends impact the individual.*

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Oral history is a distinctive branch of the discipline of history, which is based on verbal accounts and oral traditions of historiography. It can be defined as the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. It records the living memories and feelings of all kinds of people, which otherwise remain hidden, and creates a more vivid picture of our past. The methodology and techniques used for undertaking research in oral history are very different from those used in other branches of history. It includes eye-witness accounts about the past events, as well as the critical study of folk-lore, myths, songs and stories transmitted by word of mouth. Oral history also involves interviewing a person or a group to get an inside perspective of the event.

The concept of oral history is not a new one. It is as old as history itself. Even when the human beings did not know the alphabets, the elders of the family used to narrate the achievements of their ancestors to the younger ones. In this way, the historical events and memories were passed on from one generation to the next. We find a number of oral traditions in the historical works of Herodotus and Thucydides, the Greek historians of fifth century B.C.

<sup>1</sup>Several Greek and Roman historians who came after Thucydides used written as well as oral traditions for historiography. In medieval Europe, historians had a vast collection of oral traditions. There were a number of story-tellers who had a lot of knowledge about the royal family and important affairs of the state. According to Henige, there were bards and poets who can be considered to be traditional historians. These people used to narrate the events of the past as a source of livelihood, and to gain prestige within their own society.<sup>2</sup>

In ancient India, a number of works such as Veds, Upanishad, Mahabharata and Ramayana were based on oral traditions. Similarly, in early Muslim history, compilation of

*hadith* (sayings and deeds of the Holy Prophet PBUH) is the best example of the preservation of the oral traditions.<sup>3</sup> Some Muslim historians also depended upon the oral traditions. One of the most influential tenth-century Muslim historians was Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), who undertook the ambitious project of telling ‘all that occurred from Adam until the present time’ largely on the basis of what was or had been oral tradition.<sup>4</sup>

The above discussion shows the significance of oral traditions for historiography in the past. However, as a distinct branch within the discipline of history, oral history emerged at Columbia University in 1948 under Professor Allan Nevins. The object was to seek accounts that were never recorded, explanations of motives that do not appear on paper, and other elusive elements of history.<sup>5</sup> Since the memories preserved in the human mind can help fill the historical gaps, so oral history has brought a revolution in the field of historical research. Peter Burke has rightly argued that if printed sources are misleading, one can surely rely on oral traditions for historiographical purposes.<sup>6</sup>

When oral history emerged as a distinct branch in history, it created difference of opinion among the historians. Historians like A.G.P. Taylor, Homer Carey Hockett, Ellin Johnson and Robert H. Louis were critical of oral history,<sup>7</sup> but its proponents, reacting to the views of the critics, argued that the opposition to oral evidence was more founded on feeling than on principle. Paul Thompson, while countering them, argued that they did not know the new methods, and they did not command all the techniques of their profession.<sup>8</sup> Historians believe that where there is no written or documentary evidence, oral traditions must bear the brunt of historical reconstruction.<sup>9</sup>

Some contemporary historians have undertaken historical research bringing to the fore the popular dimension of history. For instance, Ian Talbot’s work *Freedom’s Cry: The Popular Dimension in the Pakistan Movement and Partition Experience in the North-West India* (1996). In this book, Talbot has employed the “history from below” approach. He has interviewed many common Muslims to explore their voice and place in the struggle for Pakistan and the partition experience. He has tried to explore the

emotional and psychological impact of the partition. He used autobiographical accounts, novels, short stories and poems written on the theme of the partition. Talbot also examined Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi and English literature on partition as a source of history.<sup>10</sup> Another work is *Martyr as Bridegroom: A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh* (2007) by Ishwar Dayal Gaur. As the title of the book suggests, Gaur has presented the historical event of Bhagat Singh's execution by the British in 1931 in the light of folklore.<sup>11</sup>

The colonial and imperialist powers viewed, recorded and interpreted the history and past of the conquered people keeping in mind their own interest. They wanted to justify their colonization. There is a dire need to reinterpret the history of the colonial polities in the light of the local traditions with new angles.

We, for example, see the events of the War of Independence 1857-58 in the Punjab; the descendants of the people who participated in the War have lot of information about the role of their ancestors. For example, in District Gugera, the descendants of Ahmad Khan Kharral and Murad Fatiana have still preserved the memory of their ancestors. Similarly, *Mirasi* is an important character of the Punjabi society. *Mirasi* is a story-teller and in rural society his role is like a genealogist. Therefore, the interviews of the descendants of the freedom-fighters of the War of 1857-58 and of the local *mirasis* can be very helpful in constructing an alternative history while undertaking the study of the events of the War of Independence 1857-58 in the Punjab.

The Punjab has been the gateway to the Indian Sub-continent for the invaders for centuries.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Punjabi poetry is replete with resistance themes.<sup>13</sup> Sufi poets like Shah Hussain (d. 1593),<sup>14</sup> Bulleh Shah (d. 1758),<sup>15</sup> Ali Haider Multani (d. 1785)<sup>16</sup> Waris Shah (d. 1798),<sup>17</sup> and Khwaja Ghulam Farid (d. 1901)<sup>18</sup> hailed those who fought bravely against the foreign invaders, and condemned the cowards and the traitors. Therefore, the Punjabi Sufi poetry is a valuable source for any study of the Punjabi society.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from the Sufi poetry, there is a distinct literary genre called *var* (plural *varein*) in Punjabi poetry, which is an important source of oral history.<sup>20</sup> In Punjabi poetry, *vars* are composed to

depict the adventures, expeditions and achievements of the heroes. These *Vars* play a significant role in preserving the memory of the popular heroes and their achievements. Four such *vars* are famous in Punjabi literature. First is *Nadir di Var* composed by Najabat (d. 1779),<sup>21</sup> which deals with the invasion of Nadir Shah Afshar. The second is Shah Muhammad's (d. 1862)<sup>22</sup> *Sikhan di Var* or *Jang Hind Punjab* which deals with the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-49). The third folk *var* is about Dullah Bhatti, a 'rebel' in Akbar's time.<sup>23</sup> The fourth is *Chatthian di Var* by Pir Muhammad,<sup>24</sup> which is about the struggle between the Chatthas and Charhat Singh, Mahan Singh and Ranjit Singh stretching over forty years. Although the above-mentioned *vars* are important literary works, having immense historical value as well.

Folklore is an essential element of oral history to construct an alternative history.<sup>25</sup> Like oral history, there is difference of opinion among the historians about the historical significance of folk literature. George Lawrence Gomme<sup>26</sup> (1853-1916) took the folklore as a historical science,<sup>27</sup> while Robert H. Louis challenged Gomme's assertion.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Phillip D. Jordan (1903-1980), Y. M. Sokolov<sup>29</sup> and many other historians of oral history are of the opinion that by ignoring folk literature, it is impossible to write a true and genuine social and cultural history. "Folklore grows out of the national experience", Jordan states, "and an understanding of oral tradition would greatly contribute to those who wish more clearly to understand the historical narrative".<sup>30</sup> Folk literature reflects religious and socio-cultural traditions, concepts, festivals, customs, attitudes, habits, mode of life and behavior of the people. It expresses the collective consciousness of the people. Therefore, in order to write a genuine history of the people, folk literature is an indispensable source of history.

Folklores are regarded as a source for constructing alternative history. Folklore and folk songs composed by writers and poets, often anonymous, have been very popular among the people for centuries. The folklores and folk songs reflect the world-view of the common people, and sometimes challenge the narrative presented in the official records or the statist discourse. Quite often an individual painted as a villain in the official historical narratives

is remembered as a hero in the folklore. The heroes of the people are dubbed as rebels, and the ruling elite tend to make people forget them by erasing their achievements from the memories of the people. However, quite contrarily, the folklore tries to keep their memory alive. The same happened with the heroes of 1857-58 in the Punjab. Freedom-fighters like Ahmad Khan Kharral, Murad Fatiana, Walidad Mardana, Mokha Wehniwal, Muhamand Kathia, Nadir Shah Qureshi, Bahlak Wuttoo, Salabat Tarhana and many others at Gugera and Murree were declared scoundrels and dacoits.<sup>31</sup> The official narratives try to devalue their movement, but the folklore suggests that the leaders of the War in different areas of the Punjab were neither dacoits nor cattle-lifters, as depicted by the British, but they were noble and influential figures of their respective areas, and the people still have a great respect and love for them.<sup>32</sup> So in order to understand the War of 1857-58, a historian needs to study the folklore and the records of the government side by side. So it can be said that to understand the role of the people of the Punjab during the War of Independence, the study of Punjabi folklore is inevitable for it.

Folk songs are an indispensable part of rural heritage. Though the poets who composed them are often anonymous, some scholars have collected Punjabi folklore and folk songs. They traveled from town to town, met the people of old age, especially the *Mirasis* in the villages and collected a number of *dholas*. These songs are very informative about the mutual relations of different castes and clans in the Punjab. A. D. Ejaz has collected *dholas* or folk songs about the War of Independence fought in the Districts Gugera and Multan with the title *Kal Bulendi*. His collection is useful to understand the extent and nature of War in these areas.

In a nutshell, it can be said that historians use evidence to understand the experience of people in the past while oral history can be a valuable source of evidence for understanding the experiences of individuals or groups in a certain historical context. Oral testimony cannot replace analysis of traditional historical materials (official documents, letters, newspapers, and secondary sources, etc.), but it can, however, reveal the role of individuals in shaping the past, and how major trends impact the individual.

## ■ Notes

- <sup>1</sup> David Henige informs that both Herodotus and Thucydides combined the use of oral tradition with information collected personally from informants. David Henige (1982), *Oral Historiography*, London: Longman, 7-8.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Hinds, "Al-Maghazi", *Encyclopedia of Islam* Vol. V, (1986), Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1161-64.
- <sup>4</sup> Henige, *Oral Historiography*, 11-12.
- <sup>5</sup> M. L. Kachroo, "Scope and Value of Oral History", *The Punjab Past and Present*, 38 (1985), 257.
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Burke, *Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), London: Temple Smith, 29.
- <sup>7</sup> Gwyn Prins, "Oral History", in *Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (1992), Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 144; and Lynwood Montell, "Preface to the Saga of Coe Ridge," in *Oral History an Interdisciplinary Anthology*, eds. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (1996), New York: Altamira, 177.
- <sup>8</sup> Paul Thompson (1978), *The Voice of the Past*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 63.
- <sup>9</sup> Jan Vansina (1985), *Oral Tradition as History*, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 199.
- <sup>10</sup> Ian Talbot (1996), *Freedom's Cry: The Popular Dimension in the Pakistan Movement and Partition Experience in the North-West India*, Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>11</sup> Ishwar Dayal Gaur (2007), *Martyr as Bridegroom: A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh*, Delhi: Anthem Press.
- <sup>12</sup> Agha Hussain Hamdani (1986), *The Frontier Policy of the Delhi Sultans*, Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 14.
- <sup>13</sup> For details, see Shafqat Tanvir Mirza (1992), *Resistance Themes in Punjabi Literature*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- <sup>14</sup> Shah Hussain is also known as Madhu Lal Hussain. His shrine is in Lahore near Shalimar Garden. He was born in 1539 during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great.
- <sup>15</sup> Bulleh Shah's real name was Abd Allah Shah. He was born in 1692 during the reign of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir. He was a disciple of Shah Inayat Qadri of Lahore. His shrine is at Qasur.
- <sup>16</sup> Ali Haider Multani was born at village Qazi Ghalib, three kilometers from Aroti, a town on Faisalabad-Multan Road, in District Toba Tek Sing. As this area was a part of District Multan, so he is also known as Ali Haider Multani. He was a disciple of Khwaja Fakhr al-Din Dehlvi. He was contemporary of Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah.

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- <sup>17</sup> Waris Shah was born at Jandiala Sher Khan in District Sheikhpura in 1720. He was a Sufi poet and wrote famous romantic tale of Heer Ranjha.
- <sup>18</sup> Khwaja Ghulam Farid was born in 1842. His ancestors migrated to Sindh from Arabia. During the Sikh regime, they came to Bahawalpur on the invitation of Nawab Sadiq Muhammad Khan, and settled at a place named Chachran on the Eastern bank of River Indus. His shrine is also located there.
- <sup>19</sup> For details, see Rama Krishna Lajwanti, (1977 rpt. First Pub. 1938), *Punjabi Sufi Poets 1460-1900*, Karachi: Indus Publications.
- <sup>20</sup> For tradition of oral history in Punjabi literature, see Saeed Bhutta (2008), “*Punjabi mein Zabani Tarikh ki Rivait*” in *Bazyaft*, ed. Tehsin Firaqi (Lahore: Department of Urdu, Punjab University, No. 13, 131-46; see also K. Srivastava and Y.K. Srivastava (1980), “National Consciousness in Punjabi Folk Songs” in *Guru Nanak Journal of Sociology*, Amritsar: Sociology Department, Guru Nanak Dev University, Vol. 1, No 1-2, April-October, 1980).
- <sup>21</sup> Najabat (1689-1779) was a contemporary of Bulleh Shah, Ali Haider Multani, and Waris Shah, and belonged to a far-flung village, Chaowal in Tehsil Bhalwal, District Sargodha.
- <sup>22</sup> Shah Muhammad (1789-1862) was a resident of village Vadala Virk in District Amritsar.
- <sup>23</sup> It is included in *Lok Varan*, ed. Ahmad Saleem (Islamabad: National Council of the Arts, 1971).
- <sup>24</sup> Pir Muhammad was a Punjabi poet of nineteenth century. He was resident of a village called Noonanwali in District Gujrat.
- <sup>25</sup> Alternative history is written on the basis of alternative sources of history, which challenges the assumptions of historiography based on written or documentary sources.
- <sup>26</sup> He is considered to be an authority on English folklore.
- <sup>27</sup> George Lawrence Gomme (1980), *Folklore as an Historical Science*, London: Methuen and Co.
- <sup>28</sup> Montell, *Preface to the Saga of Coe Ridge*, 177-78.
- <sup>29</sup> He was a Russian scholar of folklore, and authored *Russian Folklore* (New York: MacMillan, 1950).
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-80.
- <sup>31</sup> Cave-Browne (1858), *Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 202 and 214.
- <sup>32</sup> A.D. Ejaz (1985), *Kal Bulendi*, Lahore: Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board, 1985.