

OUR STORIES OUR HISTORIES

Oral history brings the past alive,
helping us to find our uniqueness.

By Vrunda Pathare, Godrej Archives

“In India, the field of business history is evolving and until recently no one had attempted to use oral history for reconstructing the past.”



“We forget things when we have no one to tell them to.” - this was the line that kept lingering in my mind after I watched the film ‘Lunchbox’ a few months ago. Hundreds of stories pass by us everyday. Some are heard, some remain unheard. Unheard stories vanish into the oblivion. History, I am sure, would be different if these unheard stories were recorded and added to the known history, making the history richer. Oral histories are now beginning to get accepted as a useful strand of the ‘mainstream’ history. Oral history is increasingly used by the historians, sociologists, and the activists to unravel the past and present it with many new viewpoints added.

In India, the field of business history is evolving and until recently no one had attempted to use oral history for reconstructing the past. Corporates are people too and the real stories may emerge from the memories of the people including employees who might have experienced the company at the closest. Dr. Indira Chowdhury, a well known expert on the subject was invited on 3rd September, 2013 to speak at the annual lecture organised by Godrej Archives at Mumbai. Speaking on the topic, she brought forth in a very engaging and professional manner the significance of oral history in the framing of Institutional Narratives (stories).

Dr. Chowdhury acknowledged that for many years oral history was dismissed by the mainstream historians as subjective,

self-serving or simply too biased to be taken seriously. Institutions including the Corporates were averse to history itself, let alone oral history and putting aside the entire endeavour as irrelevant. But this mindset has slowly begun to change and now there is a widespread consensus which acknowledges that there is value in studying how the events of the past are remembered; what is remembered and what is not. It is no more just about what happened, but it is also about how the memory of what happened is formed and how it gets changed over the years.

Dr. Chowdhury, drawing upon her extensive experience of undertaking oral history work at Indian Institute of Management Kolkata (IIM-C) spoke at length about the debates that took place in 1960s as to how management subjects were to be taught. She also elaborated as to how the alumni of IIM-C benefited by the ‘lecture and teach’ approach for management studies opted for at IIM-C. Quoting from an interview of Ajit Balakrishnan, the founder of Rediffusion - a well known advertising agency, and a Web pioneer, she said that he considered the ‘classroom teaching’ approach followed at IIM-C as a good grounding education for his success as an entrepreneur. She recalled Balakrishnan saying, “With this new way of looking at business, we saw ourselves as revolutionaries. When you have the self-image of a revolutionary, you don’t need to copy others; you do your own things.”

Further, she mentioned as to how IIM-C’s respect for the academics was what lay behind its support for Prof. Chattopadhyay when he was arrested under an accusation (false) of being a Naxalite ideologue.

IIM-C strongly supported him and when he was finally released, the institute sent a car to pick him up. Whatever people might feel about his beliefs, IIM-C stuck to the principle that the Professor had a right to hold and express his beliefs. Dr. Chowdhury working on the institute's oral history was apprehensive as to whether the faculty members would share their views on this and other highly sensitive issues with her. But the faculty members proved her wrong. The faculty members showed keen interest not only in expressing their views on the above topic but they freely expressed their views on the ongoing tussle between the government and the institute about the funding of the institute. The faculty stated that the government was trying to assert its control over the working of the institute by exercising control over its funding.

Dr. Chowdhury shared with the audience the details of her work in the field of oral history undertaken by her at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Mumbai. She spoke about how Dr. Homi Bhabha managed the institute in its early years. Dr. Bhabha had certainly unorthodox ways of functioning. He would consult many of his colleagues but in the end would decide to do exactly what he thought that ought to be done. Dr. Bhabha's way of working became very clear during an interview of Dr. Obaid Siddiqi taken by her sometime back. Dr. Siddiqi told her as to how Dr. Bhabha's decision to induct him- a molecular biologist, into an institute dominated by the physicists and the mathematicians resulted in a widespread reactions and objections. Notwithstanding all of which Dr. Bhabha firmly stood by his decision and went ahead with the appointment of Dr. Siddiqi, who later went on to lead the institute of molecular biology at Bangalore with distinction.

Sharing her experiences, she stated that oral history has to listen to all the voices irrespective of the levels of the hierarchy of an institution they emanate from. The voices emanating from different levels of an institution lend multiple perspectives to the evolving narrative. She cited an example of D.J. Narwekar, a glassblower at the TIFR, whose interview revealed as to how science institutions in those days (early '50s) had to make themselves most of the laboratory equipment required by them. He also remembered as to how he

had put together a spectroscope that was later used for analysing the samples of moon rock acquired by the TIFR.

Concluding her talk, she said that oral histories will be useful to the companies who wanted to unravel the real essence of their organisations. She also said that the oral history should be treasured as it was a trans-generational knowledge – an asset that can help the company to communicate, cogently, its values and philosophy to the next generation.

I am happy to add here that at Godrej Archives, we have already begun the process of interviewing our former as well as long serving employees and our long standing dealers to trace and put together the lost pieces of Godrej history.

All in all, it was a wonderful presentation on oral history by Dr. Chowdhury and everyone present in the audience liked it greatly. The talk was extensively covered in the leading print media a few days later.



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- 1. Mr. Nadir Godrej at the 9th Godrej Archives Lectures
 - 2. Godrej Archives Team with the speaker Dr. Indira Chowdhury, Mrs. Pheroza Godrej, Mr. I.P. Singh and Mr. Anil G. Verma.
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