



Importance of Oral History in reconstruction of past.

Munmi Dutta

Master of Arts (History department) from Dibrugarh University, Assam

Abstract:

Oral History is an important component of recording narratives and facts about the past. It is a practice, a method of research and the act of recording the speech of people and analysing their memories of the past, which collected through interview. An interview is a practical means of gathering information about the past. Oral History is the product of interview, the narrative account of past events. Oral History is a modern research technique for preserving knowledge of historical events as recounted by participants. In Oral History, the tape recordings of an interview with a knowledgeable person, someone who knows, he or she speaks from personal participation, observation of a past event.

Keywords: History, interview, reconstruction,

Introduction:

Oral history added the uncovering facts about the past. It is a creative, interactive methodology that forces to get to grips with many layers of meaning and interpretation contained within people's memories. Through Oral History, communicating with living beings, no other history method does this. Oral History as a method of reconstruction history with the help of recording, it gives historians the opportunity to record events or narratives that have not been recorded yet. Oral History refers to a field of study within history that uses the method of gathering, organizing and interpreting the voices and memories of any person or community that was involved in a past event.

*Definition of Oral History:

According to Cambridge Dictionary , Oral History is, information about a historical event or period that is told to you by people who experienced it. On the other hand, according to historian Paul Thompson, Oral History was the first kind of History. Ronald Grele , who is the former Director of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. Grele defined Oral History as “the interviewing the eye witness participants in the events of the past for the purpose of historical reconstruction.”

*Development of Oral History:

Oral History is the oldest method of recording history. The first oral historian was Greek historian Thucydides, who interviewed with people and used their information in writing the history of the Peloponnesian War. Herodotus (a Greek historians and father of history) wrote his work by travelling through Greece and collecting accounts of events from different people.

The study of oral history was given importance during the twentieth century. An article written in the New Yorker in 1942 about Joe Gould, a Greenwich Village bohemian who Compiled “An Oral History of Our Time”. In this article discusses the importance of oral history projects and oral historians. In 1948, Columbia University History professor Allan Nevins established the first archives to conduct and preserve interviews, he called it the Oral History Research Office. Nevins developed the modern concept of Oral History. By the works of German scholar Leopold von Ranke, historians were strongly influenced by him. Ranke emphasized archival documentation for accuracy in history . Also Ranke regarded eyewitness account as “the most genuine and direct sources,”

In United States, first Oral History projects started with focus on political, economic, and cultural elites, but European oral historians were more rooted in social and cultural history, and allied with political movements on the Left. They intending to include the voices of those previously excluded from national narratives. A sense of social responsibility motivated in this approach, which challenged the social and intellectual status by interviewing those who had been oppressed. By creating a history of everyday lives, they aimed to contribute to the larger movement to improve those lives, in which Ronald Grele put it, “to radicalize the practice of history.”

After second World War, portable recording machines become available then widespread use of the tape recorded interview become possible. Through, in 1948 Columbia University history professor Allan Nevins established the first archives to conduct and preserve interviews, he called it the Oral History Research Office. Nevins developed the modern concept of Oral History. Nevins began to tape-record the spoken memories, this was the first organized oral history project. Then, in the 1960s, an interest in recording the memories of people other than elites became paramount among academics.

Oral history research as an academic discipline emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. The success of oral history in a wide range of disciplines including ethnology, Anthropology, Sociology Psychology.

In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, particularly in USA, UK and Scandinavia, oral history occupied a particular and circumscribed place within scholarly research. In USA, the writer, broadcaster Studs Terket took oral history to the masses through his radio programmes and books on the depression, second world war, working life, race relations in conversation with ordinary Americans. In Britain, one of the most influential oral history publication was Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*, a portrait of East Anglian village life based on conversations with rural folks published in 1969. In many countries, oral history emerged as discipline and department other than history.

Oral history as the practice of interviewing people to provide evidence about past events not like conventional historical sources, usually like written one's, the hidden histories of individuals or groups which had gone missing from mainstream account's.

Oral history is a method for obtaining evidence by interviewing people about their experiences. So, interview played major role in oral History. During an interview there are several process.

At the start of the interview make sure that the electronic equipment like tape recorder is on and recording the discussion. Then, start the interview by includes stating the name of the narrator, the interviewer, the date, time, place and purpose of interview. The interviewer much aware that he or she do not start with a personal question. Let the interviewee become comfortable answering questions first, before asking emotional or personal questions. After that, ask open-ended questions, as this will extract long answers, with more detail and context than simple "yes or no" questions and answers. Ask follow-up questions, which will expand the information the narrator has given. Interviewer much be aware that the narrator will be speak chronologically, because narrator will tell their story from their memory. These memories will most likely be achronological. The interviewer much not interrupt

a interviewee while speaking unless they have deviated from the topic. If the narrator do deviate from the topic, kindly inform them that while it is important facts they are raising, you would really want them to answer a few specific questions first. It is important to focus on what the narrator says, while also focusing on what facts they are excluding. They might briefly mention negative aspects that they do not want to discuss. It is important that interviewer keep in mind that the narrator might only be telling their side of the story. If the interviewer want a balanced view of the past,he or she may be ask some argumenting questions to cross check the narrators viewpoint. If the interviewer done with the interview, need to thank the narrator for their time. If there is any more information need to acquire,need to ask the narrator if they want to answer that.

In Oral History, historian get the opportunity to gain access to resources that are not necessarily physically or visibly accessible. For example, in terms of physically; a historian could interview a person telephonically or through video-call.In terms of visibly; if there are no written accounts of an event, a historian could use oral tradition to write an account of an events.In Oral History, it gives people the opportunity to share their narrative that would otherwise not be able to share it, because of excluded from history and not recorded.

*Limitation of oral history:

Many historians not trusted Oral History because it is based upon memory and they regarded memory as unreliable.Thus, historical research was dominated by the document, oral history did not,in the main , produce data which could be verified and counted.In this case pioneering oral historians went to great efforts to justify their practice through Verification of evidence obtained from oral interview was one way of doing this, also cross checking with documented sources to separate truth from fiction.

Historian and sociologist Trevor Lummis,in his book “Listening to History” mentions detailed guidelines on the interviewing process,who and how to interview,how to analyze the information,and examined the problems of memory which recorded ,also how to researchers can check reliability,accuracy of data which collected from the interview.

Conclusion:

Accuracy played a significant role in history. Therefore, oral sources are required to be verified by using other sources as well. For example, if a person gives an account of an event, it is important to hear other accounts and to make sure of the facts and verify it. Sometimes the interviewer may over-sympathise with the interviewee and

not be able to stay objective. For example, if someone feels too much sympathy for their interviewee, one may not write the full truth, which indicates that a part of history is lost or missed. So it becomes biased therefore interviewer need to not be sympathetic about the interviewee or to a particular event that occurred in past. Also, Using oral sources depends on the interviewee significantly. Therefore, factors such as memory, to be verified from another documented account that the interviewee told facts are true or false. Memory may play important role in the accuracy of what is told by interviewee. For example, a historian is able to see or hear the emotion behind an event that occurred in the past and would therefore, understand it better. Oral History gives people the opportunity to share their narrative that would otherwise not be able to share it. For example, many histories or people are excluded from history because they were not recorded earlier.

References:

1. Yow Valerie Raleigh: Recording Oral History: A guide for the Humanities and social sciences
2. Thompson Paul, Bornat Joanna: The Voice of the Past.
3. Baum Willa : Transcribing and editing Oral History.
4. Abrams Lynn: Oral History Theory
5. Perks Robert , Thomson Alistair: The Oral history reader.