

Harvard Business School India Research Center
Oral History, Business History and Business Archives in India

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Archival research is one of the most common practices among historians in gaining detailed and accurate information about the past. However, in recent years, the usage of oral history as a way to understand history through lived experiences has become more prevalent.

The *Columbia Encyclopedia* explains:¹

The discipline came into its own in the 1960s and early 70s when inexpensive tape recorders were available to document such rising social movements as civil rights, feminism, and anti-Vietnam War protest. Authors such as Studs Terkel, Alex Haley, and Oscar Lewis have employed oral history in their books, many of which are largely based on interviews [...] By the end of the 20th cent. oral history had become a respected discipline in many colleges and universities.

Geoffrey Jones, Isidor Straus Professor of Business History at the Harvard Business School, as part of his work, explores the uses of oral history and its different purposes. In this discussion, Professor Jones facilitated an interesting conversation about the nuances of oral history, its uses in academia as well as in industry, and the ways it can be collected and stored.

Uses of Oral History

Oral history has frequently been used to document the past. In India, oral history--in the form of epics and folk songs--has played an integral role in passing down history from generation to generation. With the prevalence of major technological innovations, the use of audio and video tapes as well as interview transcripts have recently become an important part of modern oral history. In this way, oral history is able to give historians primary sources on perspectives about everything from individuals and their everyday life to monumental events that altered the course of history. Indeed, the usage of oral history has been integral to the collection of data for several academic projects. This conference, in particular, showcased: (i) Ithaasa, a website which chronicled the history and evolution of the Indian Information Technology sector, (ii) a research project which captured the voices of migrants traveling between towns on the Eastern and Western coasts of India, recording 30 individuals' life and work histories, (iii) the Ratnagiri Project, a 100-interviewee project on migration history across generations, (iv) the Godrej Archives, and (v) the Cipla Archives.

In addition to aiding historians in understanding historical perspectives, oral history can also play a significant role in teaching and research. By showcasing his past work, Professor Jones demonstrated that video clips that provide vivid personal testimonies can be used in several courses in business schools and often provide ways to teach subjects that are difficult to find materials on.

Oral history also presents a unique opportunity for business organizations. Business organizations are often neglected in oral histories as a result of the dominant assumption that the business world has ample opportunity to be heard. However, oral history can be used to keep archives of a business as a record of decisions and events, of changes and continuities, and of reflections on past company strategies and their

¹The *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*®. S.v. "oral history." Retrieved July 25 2017 from <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/oral+history>

effectiveness. Oral history can also be important in ensuring different parts of the company are aligned with business/top management. As Dr. Usha Iyer found, oral history can be useful in aiding communication within companies. Human resources departments in companies can disseminate information about milestones of the company and elaborate on stories that demonstrate core values of the companies. But the uses of oral history are not limited to archiving past milestones in companies; rather, companies can also take note of things that are *currently* happening. As an example, at a company's ten-year milestone, one could interview employees who have been there for ten years to ask about their vision for the company, their personal experiences, and how they believe the company has grown. Ultimately, oral history doesn't have to be ancient history; it can be contemporary.

These examples are not exhaustive by any means—especially given the recency of oral history as a valid academic and business exercise. Companies are only just starting to appreciate and utilize oral history archives as a useful resource in business history, and while the examples above are great beginnings, the future possibilities are endless.

Collecting Oral History

The process of collecting oral history presents many challenges. The questions raised in this discussion regarded establishing what language to conduct interviews in, ensuring the legitimacy and accuracy of information shared, and pinpointing the exact time period of significant events. Several of the speakers highlighted these issues through anecdotes about their own experiences in conducting interviews.

Language can often be an obstacle in gaining information from interviews since there are a wide array of spoken languages in India. While English is the official language of India, and Hindi is commonly known in some areas, many other regions speak regional or vernacular languages. For example, when Dr. Chinmay Tumble's team was interviewing people in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, they realized locals only spoke a regional dialect of Tamil. He dealt with the situation by hiring team members who spoke the same tongue. However, even when interviewing people in their native language, interviewees often use local or colloquial phrases which lack requisite translations, and thus, some meaning or context is inevitably lost in translation.

Moreover, ensuring accuracy of information shared by the interviewee can often be difficult as information is frequently based on individual recollections, making specific dates difficult to obtain (especially among relatively illiterate populations). Indeed, interviewees often use national events or disasters, rather than specific dates, as reference points when describing events; this simultaneously helps interviewers contextualize company history in country history, but also lacks the precise accuracy that archives possess.

Another possible obstacle is making the interview feel natural enough for people to speak comfortably about their experiences. For instance, Professor Jones noted how business leaders in Chile were reluctant to be interviewed and preferred to remain discrete about interviews due to the political climate in the country. On the lines of informed consent, Dr. Tumble found that prospective interviewees often had difficulty understanding his research and intents and would frequently refuse to talk to him. He later explained how he solved this by first having casual conversations with locals, and then, after the conversation, explaining his work and asking if he could use their prior conversation.

Finally, oral history narratives may come across as being inconsistent, sometimes bordering on contradictory, since each person's unique perspectives may present the same occurrences in different ways. For instance, speaker Vrunda Pathare found that men and women often described their working lives much differently, with men tending to talk about professional achievements while women tend to focus on the personal aspects of their work. Oral history content can also differ depending on the rank of the person interviewed. Interviewing business leaders captures the evolution of companies and the higher-level issues that it faces, while interviewing mid-level employees presents the day-to-day life of work within the

company, a perspective that is often ignored when thinking about businesses. Thus, it is often useful when conducting oral history within businesses to interview people across corporate ranks as well as gender.

Conclusion

Academics can better understand the past by using oral history to dive into the various, complex perspectives of individuals, giving a much more rich and nuanced conception of a historical movement or trend than typical archives generally allow. Oral history can also be used to help businesses track milestones, determine strategy based on past policies, and aid intra-company communication.

In terms of collecting oral history, researchers must take into account the nuances of the demographics of the populations they are obtaining information from. From ensuring an accurate cross-section of demographics (e.g., across rank or gender lines) to choosing the best medium to capture oral history (e.g., video vs. audio recordings vs. informal conversations), academics must heavily research the populations they seek to interview and ensure the method in which they attempt to collect oral history is suitable.