



Courtesy Indian Memory Project

Above: A photograph taken at the annual town fair of Etawah, Uttar Pradesh, 1977. Right: Anupa Nathaniel with her closest friend Shalini Gupta, Delhi, 1962, who formed Delhi University's first female rock band, Mad Hatter.

[ By Sanam Maher ]

# Step across this line

Recollections of pre-Partition life are encouraging dialogue on both sides of the border

As an undergraduate student at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India, Anusha Yadav used to sneak out of her classes in order to spend time in the college library. "I'm a strange creature," she says, "I was fascinated by the library system, the catalogue..." Today, the budding graphic designer is the founder of the Indian Memory Project, an online repository of a rich visual history of India and Pakistan – the countries that Yadav describes as "twins separated at birth" – and the citizens created when the subcontinent was cleaved.

The project started in 2010, the idea taking form as Yadav found herself at a slew of weddings where traditions and rituals had morphed into Bollywood-inspired tableaux. "You know, a lot of the time at these weddings, the priest is just making a complete fool out of everyone because nobody knows enough to correct him," she says, laughing. On a more serious note, Yadav says she realised that her generation would soon be 'the elders'. She explains, "we were relying on Non Resident Indians (NRIs) to remember these ceremonies and traditions, because NRIs are more Indian than Indians themselves — they hang on to their culture because they need something familiar, something they know." Yadav decided to begin researching Indian weddings – from the North,

South, East and West – in the hope of putting together a book on the ceremonies and how the rituals had evolved over time.

She initially created a Facebook page, Heritage Photos of India, and asked people to contribute photographs from family weddings. As the stories of bridegrooms glimpsed for the first time on their wedding day and brides chosen from a stack of sepia-tone photographs began to accumulate, Yadav's interest was piqued by the common threads intertwining these narratives — stories of lives rebuilt in a new country, travel to a land unseen, forced migrations and the heart-

rending loss of childhood homes and family businesses. When her brother-in-law showed her a photograph of his grandparents, originally from Lahore, she says, "that's when the penny dropped." That photograph is now available on the Indian Memory Project website

(www.indianmemoryproject.com), along with a short narrative: "Balwant Goindi owned a whiskey shop in Lahore. He was a wealthy man and owned a Rolls-Royce. During Partition, he and his family came to Delhi, India, without any of his precious belongings, assuming he would return after the situation

had calmed down ... that never happened. Later, he heard that his house and his shops were burned down."

"Growing up, we had heard about Partition, we'd read about the Mutiny and so on," says Yadav. "But those stories had never been amplified like this, never felt so personal." As she continued to collect photographs from amongst friends and family, she realised that there was a trove of stories waiting to be heard — you just needed to ask the right question. "I'm a bit of a geek and it made sense to me to start up an online library where people could access these kinds of stories," she explains. The project graduated from Facebook to a WordPress blog before it found its own home on the internet in March this year.

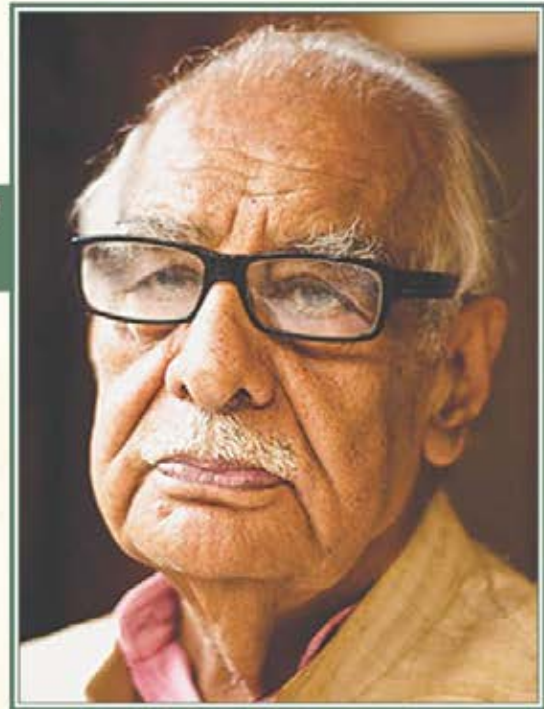
Its premise is simple: Yadav is interested in "the story outside of the frame" and feels that a collective visual record is far more powerful than photographs shared individually on sites such as Flickr or Facebook. "In isolation, a photograph doesn't have the same high or the kind of imaginative quality that a collective narrative can trigger," she says. Her contributors agree. Hundreds of photographs and stories arrived in

[ By Rakhshanda Jalil ]

## “Partition was not inevitable”

In a career spanning over six decades, India's veteran journalist, Kuldip Nayar has covered a host of events; he has met, interviewed and written about major figures in India's, as well as the world's, political life: Indira Gandhi, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Jai Prakash Narayan, Mujibur Rahman, Ziaul Haq, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan.

The list is endless. His first major assignment as a cub reporter working for Delhi-based Urdu newspaper *Anjaam* was to write on Gandhi's assassination in 1948. The poignancy of that moment left a deep impact on his psyche. Only three months into working as a journalist, he could "see" history explode before his eyes; he admits he wept unashamedly. He is still haunted by Gandhi's words, delivered at a public prayer service a few days before his death where Nayar was present: Hindus and Muslims are like my two eyes, he had said.



Courtesy Rail Books

In a previous book, *Tales of Two Cities* (co-authored with senior Pakistani journalist Asif Noorani), Nayar has written with empathy and clarity about Partition, which changed countless lives, including his own, forever. Was it inevitable, I ask? Could its thirst for blood have been slaked by some means other than India's division? Holding Jinnah and Nehru equally "responsible", Nayar explains the Partition was not inevitable to begin with. The Cabinet Mission Plan held promise of resolution but as events panned out and Nehru and Jinnah remained implacable, it *became* inevitable.

Yadav's email inbox as the project grew – one gentleman even sent her nearly 70 photographs from a personal photo album. The photographs are simple – ranging from formal studio portraits to passport photographs and the occasional letter – and their accompanying stories even more so, sometimes not more than a few lines. "I think the motivation here is pride," Yadav explains. "People want to share their story with the world or they are in awe of a friend or a family member and want people to know their story. They feel pride about where they come



Left: A photograph of the 1970 winner of Miss India, contributed to the Indian Memory Project. Right: Anusha Yadav, founder of the Indian Memory Project

from, they realise that they are who they are today because of someone in their past."

The project has also proved cathartic for some contributors. "With a lot of sorrow, and seeing no other option in a very precarious India, my grandparents, along with their children, were finally forced to

join thousands of others and leave India in 1955," writes one Pakistani

Having witnessed first-hand the blood and gore, the massacres and the communal carnage, how, then, did he not go the "other" way? After all, many did. In fact, right-wing organisations on both sides of the border fed on precisely the trauma that the first generation of migrants had experienced to swell their ranks and obtain sympathisers, if not members? Nayar explains that it is precisely because he witnessed the trauma and the madness that his belief in pluralism was strengthened. He learnt to judge a person by his beliefs and commitments, not his religion.

Nayar's great love for the Urdu language is well known. In fact, in his youth, he even wrote poetry until Hasrat Mohani, the maverick poet-politician, told him he was wasting his time "writing verses that made no sense". Yet Urdu has remained Nayar's "first love" and he is one of its most vocal champions. But what does he make of the neglect of Urdu in India? Why is it that any Urdu-related soiree sees only a grey-haired audience? What does he make of the Indian

in times when bilateral relations suffer from frostbite. But what compels a man of 88 years to undertake this long journey – by rail from Delhi, by car from Amritsar and eventually on foot, that too at the perilous hour of midnight – year after year to raise the cry of "Hindustan-Pakistan Dosti Zindabad" in the face of continuing cynicism? "I am an optimist," he tells the Herald. "One day, all of South Asia will be a union – one visa, one currency ... everyone will be free to work, travel, think." As we wind up our

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Muslim's oft-repeated lament that Urdu has languished due to official apathy? Holding Urdu to be the worst casualty of Partition, Nayar blames political parties, including the Congress which held sway in post-Partition India, as responsible. In his characteristically blunt manner he says, "Such deliberate neglect is understandable on the part of the BJP [right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party], but why the Congress?"

In 1992, Nayar started the practice of a candlelight vigil at the India-Pakistan border on the night between August 14 and 15. Scores of peaceniks join him as he marches up to the border-crossing at Attari, candle in hand; an equal number of activists, writers, poets and performers surges from the other side. This annual event is viewed with some bemusement by hard-nosed political commentators and dismissed as dewy-eyed idealism by hawks on both sides, especially

conversation, he recites a verse by Faiz Ahmad Faiz:

*Jis dhaj se koi maqatl mein gaya,  
woh shaan salamat rahti hai*

*Yeh jaan to aani jaani hai, iss  
jaan ki koi baat nahi*

[Immortal is the way people go to the gallows; life is not important since it has to end anyways]

And this unshakeable belief is the heart of the matter. Herein lies Nayar's real eminence. ■

*(Kuldip Nayar's autobiography, Beyond the Lines, is reviewed on page 113)*

contributor. "With our roots and legacies all left behind, my family had to go through a lot of hurt, disillusionment and suffering, the consequences of which can be felt till today. In my family's words, 'We were simply plucked and sent into a dark and dangerous journey to Pakistan, with no home, no job or even land to call our own.'" The writer concludes, "In all these years, I have never stopped thinking about what could have



Balwant Goindi and his wife, 1923. Their house and shops in Lahore were burned after they migrated to Delhi after Partition.

been." This story, which Yadav calls "a personal story within this immensely political story of Partition", has been one of the project's most popular, resonating with many readers who had not considered the idea of forced migration. The comments on this submission alone illustrate the linkages that the project is enabling those from both sides of the border to form.

However, such admissions have not always generated positive responses — Yadav says the website is regularly flooded with abusive comments and aggressive rhetoric. "The truth is that we only hear one side of the story — in school or [while] growing up — and

we don't want to look at the other side," she says. "At the end of the day, families also only pass down one side of the story. Everybody wants to display themselves in the best light." Yadav says she has never rejected a photograph on the basis of its content, but remains cautious about the stories the website provides a forum for — a counter-narrative passes her filter, but a story with an agenda does not. "My agenda is not to start a fight." She says she can understand why some stories have elicited heated responses. "It's about blame. Your family might have suffered during or after Partition and you can't find one person who is responsible, or one political agenda, if there is any, to account for your problem or you don't know who to blame, so you blame an entire community," she explains. Yadav feels that as you hear more stories from within different communities and see the faces of men and women of different religions and ethnicities,

you begin to understand their stories and motivations — it becomes harder to nourish an unfounded bias. The Indian Memory Project also includes the stories of those British men and women who helped families escape to the country of their choice or who remained in India or Pakistan after Partition in order to support the new nations' fledgling infrastructures.

Born in London, Yadav returned to her hometown of Jaipur at the age of six, consequently moving to Delhi and then Bangalore (she quips that she's glad her archive exists online, allowing her to pick up and move to anywhere in the world and continue to work on it, describing herself as a "restless person who gets bored easily"). "I have no idea what India is about," she says. "As someone who has always been on the move, I'm almost within a bubble, and in that bubble I have no idea of other communities, ethnicities, religions and so on. This project was my way of exploring and getting to know these facets of India." And that Indian identity, of course, has been significantly coloured by the country's neighbour — Pakistan. Yadav says she is always curious about Pakistani contributions to the project, as there is "a sense of wonder" about Pakistan and Pakistanis.

Her guiding principle through the process of building the project has been to avoid a revenue-based model, steering clear of the route followed by request-based or sales-only archives. Consequently, she has come to rely on personal donations. She has learned not to rely on the government as a source of funding and not to focus on the official approach

towards preservation and education — recently, she says, the [Indian] National Museum spent 35 lakh rupees on books about African safaris. Not surprisingly, Yadav was also offered the option of looting Jaipur's Albert Hall Museum's photo archive — at a price, of course — in order to add to the Indian Memory Project's archives. "Even if I don't get the funding," she says, "I'll keep doing this work. I'm in no hurry to build up a 20,000-photo archive. This project was going to happen sooner or later and I feel like I was just the right channel to bring it to life."

Yadav says her love for history is rooted in the classroom and a teacher who wanted her students to look beyond their textbooks. Today, however, she feels that the coming generation is not as curious about their heritage. "The hunger to earn a lot of money is their only interest and if history would help them make that money, they'd be interested."

Her plans for the Indian Memory Project are ambitious — a possible book, collaboration with a sound-recording museum, recording the histories of Indian companies such as Godrej or Tata and their employees — as her search for "the notion of what India is and what it will become" continues. Above it all, the memory of those weddings, the lost traditions and rituals persists — and Yadav refuses to be, like a non-resident Indian, a foreigner, in her own land and in her history. ■