

Reflections

Oral Interviews as an historical source

Although oral testimony cannot always be depended upon for factual accuracy, it is a good way of getting some insights into the way people view the world, how they structure their lives and how they regard others. Oral testimony is also a means of identifying issues or events that might otherwise go undocumented.

What are the risks?

Testimony from individuals may not be representative of a wider constituency. In small-scale research such as our own, it is often impossible to interview more than a small proportion of people from a particular group. In the case of outside researchers investigating disadvantaged or marginalised minorities, it is easier and thus more tempting to make contact with the head of a community organisation rather than to seek out the rank and file members of that community, especially when poverty, caste, gender and/or language differences make some people less accessible than others.

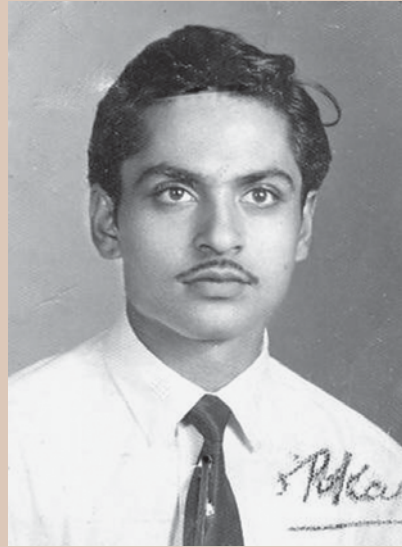
This is where the depth and quality of one's community contacts, the knowledge one has about the internal divisions within a particular group and the time one takes to cultivate relationships with individual interviewees can make all the difference to the quality of the knowledge obtained.

Asking the right questions

Those who come to this country to seek a new life bring with them their existing values and experiences. How much the interviewer needs to ask them about their life in their home country is a matter of judgement, but we have only lately come to realise that such questions show respect for the complexity and richness of an individual's experience and so elicit a more informative response.

Confidentiality

Gathering oral testimony brings with it ethical obligations. In particular, the issue of confidentiality has



Rais Hyder as a young man, c. 1960. Hyder fled from India shortly after Partition and later came to Britain, where he eventually settled in Bristol.

raised its head in various ways during this project. Many people asked for anonymity for a wide range of reasons: the wife subjected to physical violence by her husband, the illegitimate child of mixed race, the immigration worker who did not want to compromise her professional position, the asylum seeker who did not want to jeopardise his application, the social worker who feared violent reprisal. By contrast, a few people opened up during the semi-structured interviews in ways that made them more vulnerable and thus more needful of anonymity than they realised. One person spoke so frankly of his deprived and brutalised childhood and subsequent involvement in criminal activity, that his identity would have been instantly evident had the transcribed interview been made public.



Mukhtyar Singh Bhakerd (second from left) with elders and a friend of the Ramargharia Gurdwara in Chelsea Road, Bristol (2007). The second oldest of Bristol's four Sikh Temples, it was founded in 1977 in an old factory which began life in 1901 as the Small Free Brethren Gospel Hall (Bristol 2007).

How valid are the results?

Another dilemma which oral history poses has to do with the way testimony is gathered and the status of the knowledge it yields. During the course of this project, some people would speak only when the tape recorder was turned off; others would be willing to speak informally but not in a structured interview. Was the knowledge gathered by taking notes after an encounter as legitimate as that transcribed directly from a tape recorder? To put it another way, when does the oral historian become an ethnographer garnering information by way of participant observation in the field? What is the dividing line between contemporary historical

research and investigative journalism? There are no easy answers here, but careful documentation and a willingness to wrestle with contradictory and complex evidence are the ways to begin to find out. In the case of this project, oral interviews have proved invaluable for opening up aspects of Bristol's 20th-century history, but there is clearly scope for much more work to be done.