

# Stories from The Folks: Perceiving Society through Oral Narratives

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## Abstract

Oral History as a method of academic research is gaining attention. While the significance of the method are under analysis, it has been acknowledged for its potential to bring to light the micro perspective of a phenomenon. The present study attempts to locate the lives and times of insurgency infliction in Assam (Nalbari district), with the help of recollection of memories by the people on the basis of their first hand experiences. The narration, expressed in the form of anecdotes, attempts to throw light on the common people's perceptions about the socio-political circumstances of their past. While not intending to be inductive, the study tries to bring out notions of life and times in the past, based on individual narration of experiences.

*Key Words:* Assam, Insurgency, Memory, Oral history.

## 1.0 Introduction

History, or the study and knowledge of the past, has been heavily drawing from documented literature. Documented sources of knowledge are believed to provide a detailed and clear picture of the historical, geographical, cultural journey of an entity. Documented sources are known for their authenticity and reliability as they can be easily verified and used as evidence. However, History has also written about cultures and groups that lack a definite script, language, etc. to express themselves. The lack of evidential bases for materials have often place such groups at the periphery of the entire process of making history. Notably, contemporary methodological approaches to social science research have started taking cognizance of the history that has not been written or documented, i.e. Oral History.

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## **2.0 Oral History: The Method**

Oral History as a method and approach to study, has been subject to a wide array of academic attention. Oral History Association defines it in the following words:

[...a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies."(<https://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>).

Further, highlighting the role of oral historians, it is asserted that "Oral historians document the past by preserving insights not found in printed sources." ("Oral history methodology, the art of interviewing", n.d.)

Oral History, as a method, dates back to times immemorial. Paul Thompson (2000) argues that Oral History is the 'first kind of History'. Again, highlighting the significance of oral history, it has been argued that "The spoken word was the only form of 'history' in pre-literate societies - and we sometimes forget just how many written historical sources are actually based on oral testimony" ("What is oral history?", n.d.).

John Foley (1999) argues that there are several evidences of perseverance and transmission of knowledge through oral mode, across different cultures. He, further elaborating the role of oral history, states:

[The Judeo-Christian Bible reveals its oral traditional roots; medial European manuscripts are penned by performing scribes; geometric vases from archaic Greece mirror Homer's oral style. (...) Indeed, if these final decades of the millennium have taught us anything, it must be that oral tradition never was the other we accused it of being; it never was the primitive, preliminary technology of communication we thought it to be. Rather, if the whole truth is told, oral tradition stands out as the single most dominant communicative technology of our species as both a historical fact and, in many areas still, a contemporary reality. (pp.1-2)]

Closer home, the historicity of oral history needs no elaboration. For example, the 'śrutis' of Hinduism, the *samhita-patha*, *pada-patha*, are prominent exemplifications of the rich tradition of oral history and its significance. Highlighting the importance of oral transmission of knowledge reflected in the Vedas, Michael Witzel (2003) states:

[The Vedic texts were orally composed and transmitted, without the use of script, in an unbroken line of transmission from teacher to student that was formalized early on. This ensured an impeccable textual transmission superior to the classical texts of other cultures; it is, in fact, something like a tape-recording... Not just the actual words, but even the long-lost musical (tonal) accent (as in old Greek or in Japanese) has been preserved up to the present. (pp. 68-71)]

Oral History as a tool or method of academic research gained prominence with the establishment of the Oral History Association in 1966. Oral History Association engages at various levels to facilitate and support the development of Oral History and its practitioners. Further, the Oral History Society was also established in 1973.

The reliability and authenticity of Oral History as a method of research, has also been subject to wide discussions. On the one hand, it has been advocated by many for it being an inexpensive and easy to conduct method. On the other hand, many have expressed their scepticism about the reliability of the oral history method owing to the fact that in this method, the transmission of information is exclusively based on memories.

While the ways to establish the legitimacy and reliability of collective memory as a methodological tool are being increasingly discussed, nonetheless its significance has been well comprehended by researchers. It is notable that a glance into mass perceptions about our own culture and society brings to light interesting and often novel aspects of the same phenomena, which otherwise do not find place in the dominant sources of knowledge. It reveals the multiple and often latent narratives about events, individuals and phenomena, which often remain out of the purview of the manifest, documented and widely accepted sources of information and knowledge.

### 3.0 Doing Oral History: Recollecting the Past

The present study intends to peep into mass perceptions about circumstances of social significance, with particular reference to the times of insurgency infliction in Assam. With the help of oral narratives, collected from people who had first hand experiences in the mentioned context. Attempt has been made to look at the daily lives of the common people in the highly inflicted insurgency zones in Assam. The purpose of the study is not to develop or establish alternative narratives and perceptions about any aspect of the subject. It rather attempts to locate phenomena from the perspective of the common masses and their views regarding the happenings around them. As it has been rightly argued, "*The final objective is not to interpret, but to record factual evidence and, thereby, to create primary documents from which historians can reconstruct the past.*" (Oral history methodology, *The Art of Interviewing*, n.d.)

Insurgency in Assam finds an explicit reflection in the activities and conduct of the organization of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), identified as the radical wing of the Assamese nationalist movement. Born in 1979, ULFA is predominantly identified with its demand for 'swadhinata' (independence) of Assam from India, amongst others. Although formed with political objectives, yet initially the ULFA leaders also played a moral responsibility. ULFA is known to have been indulged in several social developmental works in the villages and towns of Assam, which were also embraced by the people of Assam (Nath, 2013). Perhaps it is the moral role and responsibility taken up by ULFA which facilitated the organization to create a niche for itself amongst the people. The organisation at one point of time had become a part of the everyday lives of the people. Hence, ULFA has naturally been subject to not only a plethora of academic deliberations, but also common sense analysis by the larger society.

The academic scholarship on ULFA has depicted the organisation on varied lines. While some have provided a strong critique to the organisation, yet some others have justified the organisation's activities. The large array of easily available literature is also indicative of the fact that the studies on ULFA have been well documented. Not only written material, but also a number of works have been undertaken on the audio visual mode to study and depict the organisation.

However, it is interesting to note that there is also a huge literature on ULFA, its social and political presence, in the oral mode. The wide array of undocumented literature on ULFA speaks of the common people's notions and understanding about the organisation and also of the impact that ULFA had made on the daily lives of the people, especially in the areas where ULFA had a high concentration. For the purpose of the present study, people's notions about ULFA built through true incidents experienced by people in the Nalbari district of Assam in the 1980s are sought to be discussed. For the purpose of easy comprehension, the narratives provided by the people have been described briefly. The following account narrates three incidents (denoted as Case A, Case B and Case C), which have been narrated to the researcher by family, friends and acquaintances, which is a reflection of their memory of lives in times of insurgency.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, it was not uncommon in most households in most of the ULFA concentrated areas of Assam, to have at least one member in the family, friends, acquaintances, who were associated with ULFA, in different capacities. Thus, the sympathy of the people towards the organisation was inevitable. It was perhaps the empathy of the people that enabled them to provide shelter and food to the young and energetic ULFA boys who would seek shelter at nights in their attempts to escape from the police and the army. This was a common practice. The following narrative (A) is that of a young girl in her early twenties in the late 1980s, in her village at Nalbari.

### *3.1 Case A*

The restless and impatient knock on the door at a remote village household at night inherently implied who the visitor was. Father opened the door, prepared for any undesired impending danger on the other side. Immediately the visitor entered the house in haste and locked the door from within, of course all without the permission of the hosts. The dinner, which was already cooked, had to be shared with the guest. At bed-time, he handed over a packet to the host and asked him to keep it under his pillow for that night, as that would be a safe place, and assured the latter not to be worried. At dawn, the next day, he touched the host's feet and took his blessings, and left. The host, who had a sleepless night, more so because of the packet under his pillow, than the presence of an insurgent at his house, revealed to the family later, that the packet contained guns, other

tools and weapons the names of which he did not know. The next day was a normal day for the family, devoid of any expression of angst or despair because of the incident of the previous night. The normalcy of the family was a result of their mixed emotions - fear of being convicted for giving shelter to an insurgent, the anguish of providing security to dangerous weapons which would perhaps be used to kill people, the sadness of seeing the youth taking resort to weapons, and ironically the sympathy towards the revolutionaries because often most of them were familiar faces. *(This incident has been narrated by Reena Sarma in a conversation held with her on 2nd April, 2015, in Guwahati: Author).*

### **3.2 Case B**

It was a usual village night of the 1980s at Nalbari district, when ULFA boys would be the guests for the night, seeking food and shelter at the village households. The narrator of this incident recounts this particular incident.

The nonagenarian, non-literate grandmother of the house insisted her grandson to take her to the next door neighbours, for she had heard that ULFA had come to the neighbours to take shelter for the night. Her desire to see ULFA had grown over time because of the plethora of information she had gathered about ULFA from overheard conversations in the family, at the village neighbourhood, etc. That ULFA was at her doorstep, an opportunity she did not want to miss. Unable to deny her, her grandson requested the neighbours to fix the appointment. On getting permission, he took his grandmother and raised the hand-lamp towards the ULFA member's face so that he was visible to his grandmother. She exclaimed in joy and excitement "He looks like a man (human being)" !! *(This incident has been narrated by Binoy Sarma, in a conversation held with him on 5th May, 2015, at Guwahati: Author).*

### **3.3 Case C**

The narrator here recounts his childhood experience. An ULFA member brought along a captive (a common man abducted by ULFA) to their house one night, and requested for accommodation for 2-3 days. The narrator's grandmother enjoyed the lazy afternoons of those days when the captive person would be her accompaniment in their long chats about life. On the third day, the captive was

taken out. Late in the evening gun shots were heard in the entire village. It was only in the next morning that the grandmother learned that her friend for the last three days was shot at by ULFA. The grief and despair of the family for having lost a person who stayed under the same roof as theirs, is inexplicable, the narrator states. (*This incident has been narrated by K. Barman, in a conversation held with him, on 2nd July, 2015: Author*).

#### 4.0 Conclusion

The aforementioned incidences throw light on the impact of the social, political events and circumstances of a society on shaping common perceptions amongst people about their surroundings. These are anecdotes narrated by three persons based on their memory of their past. These narrations have come up in the conversations with the narrators within a discussion of a larger discourse on life and times, based on their reminiscence of their past. While it does not intend to claim that these narratives are indicative of a larger opinion or social convention, yet, it does reflect latent and diverse voices.

The significance and usage of Oral History as a methodological tool to study phenomena from a macro perspective is being put to analyses in contemporary times. While the potentiality of Oral History as a method of studying macro phenomena may be examined, nevertheless the affectivity of this method to bring out the micro elements of an aspect cannot be denied.

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