

# Witnessing History

By Riddhi Sarkar

## From the 1947 Partition of India to the 1963 March on Washington

When Cassandra Joseph was growing up, her family never spoke about the fact that her ancestors had been slaves or that the family was living in a segregated America. In her home, there was complete silence on the topics of slavery and the systemic oppression faced by African-Americans for generations.

But by the time Joseph got word that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was coming to her hometown in 1963, she was 21 years old and had come to understand the truth about her family history. She knew she had to drop everything and go.

As soon as she started recounting to me what happened in Washington, D.C., on August 28 of that year—which she recalls was a bright and sunny day—the hint of excitement in her voice was unmistakable. She told me how glad she was that she decided to leave work that day to participate in the now famous March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. She recalled Mary Travers from the American folk group Peter, Paul, and Mary accidentally stepping on her foot just before the trio's onstage performance; the crowd singing "We Shall Overcome" in unison; seeing small children in strollers and on the backs of their parents.

The memories of the day are forever etched in her mind, as they are for many of the ordinary people who sacrificed careers, families, and even their personal safety to make up the massive effort that is now often reduced to a few speeches by a few famous people. Highlighting the contributions of ordinary citizens—the students who risked being kicked out of school to demonstrate on campus, the canvassers who wore the soles of their shoes thin while trying to register voters—was the goal of the 2017 March on Washington Film Festival, which every year strives to tell the stories of the untold events and unsung heroes of the civil rights era.

Listening to Joseph, I could not help thinking about some similarities between her story and that of my own grandmother Priti Basu.

When my grandmother was four years old, her family fled their hometown of Bandar, in the Chittagong region that is now part of Bangladesh, to Kolkata, India, to escape riots and religious and political tension after India's independence from Great Britain in 1947. Their first six months were spent at a government refugee camp, after which the family settled down in the outskirts of Kolkata. Although it proved difficult to start a new life from scratch, her family was lucky that they were able to make it safely across the border. Her uncle crossed the border in 1947 on a train of which he and one other passenger were the lone survivors after all the Hindus aboard were murdered. My grandmother told me that he was able to escape by hiding in the bathroom of the train.

When the Indian subcontinent was broken apart during the 1947 partition of India, it marked an upheaval across the region, with many families having to leave their homes overnight as new borders were hastily drawn along religious lines. India was finally free from British rule, but the event led to one of the largest mass migrations in history and left a scar on the lives of many. Yet there was a silence around personal aspects of the topic in affected families for years afterward. Like Joseph's family, my grandmother's household never discussed their family history at home. Even my mother knew little about her mother's migration experience while she was growing up. My grandmother only opened up to me when I implored her to tell me more.

My grandmother, despite being one of the smartest students at her school, had to give up her education and abandon her dreams of becoming a doctor because her

family had very little after they migrated as refugees. Taking care of the home and getting her married became bigger priorities for her family than paying for her education, thus cutting short her career aspirations. I also learned about the struggles her parents faced in keeping her and her siblings safe among the violence caused by the partition of India. In the days prior to the family's migration, her mother would stay awake holding her every night, waiting for daylight at a Muslim neighbor's home since their own was at risk of being burned down—just like many other Hindu homes in the neighborhood—in the religiously motivated riots. To know that even in the midst of the tension between Hindus and Muslims there were individuals who looked beyond religion to help those in need gives me hope about creating a more peaceful world by fighting the tension that still exists between religions. If tolerance, love, compassion, and open-mindedness could transcend religious dogmas then, they certainly can now.

While speaking to my grandmother, I learned that her father had put his medical career second and activism first, often joining local activists in protesting the nearly 200 years of British colonization of India. Incidentally, it is that fight for independence—particularly Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience strategy used to free India from the shackles of British imperialism—that inspired Martin Luther King, Jr., to use that very tactic in the American civil rights movement years later.

My grandmother told me all of this during the summer after my 18th birthday. After my grandparents were married and started a family, they made numerous sacrifices to ensure that their children would have more opportunities than they did. As I sat across the table from my grandmother in Kolkata two years ago, just as I was preparing to take off to attend American University in Washington, D.C., I made sure this story of her sacrifices—the story of my family—would be properly preserved. I turned on my iPhone's video recorder one evening before leaving, trying my best to balance the phone on a stack of old newspapers and books. Then, with pen and paper in hand and a determination to ask long-buried questions that would help me get to the bottom of my family's migration story, I dived right into interviewing her. Seeing how grateful my grandmother was to have her story shared was an unforgettable moment. By logging her story and those of other witnesses, in my role as a citizen historian for the 1947 Partition Archive, I am part of a movement that adds to the body of knowledge on the partition of India by gleaming witness accounts.

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There must be a reason why my grandmother never spoke much about her history until her own granddaughter was 18—and why Joseph's family also remained silent about theirs. A deeply rooted pain caused by history that I can only imagine sometimes stops us from having a conversation about it. But events like the March on Washington Film Festival are powerful agents in sparking intellectual and moral curiosity. In rekindling conversation about the civil rights movement and the sacrifices people made during those seminal events in our nation's history, we create a space for dialogue that is crucial to understanding where we are today and to shaping our future as a fair and just society. These conversations can start right at home, simply by questioning where we come from. No matter how painful it is to talk about the past, if we remain silent and do not dig deep, the voices of our ancestors will be forever lost, and with them a chance to create and chronicle an accurate representation of history.

While it is essential to pay tribute to the work of prominent leaders who advanced civil rights, we must never stop seeking more witnesses of history and voices of unsung heroes—people who were less famous than King or Gandhi but who did their part in our societal march to equality for all. If we do not recognize the contributions of Cassandra Joseph, of my grandmother Priti Basu and her parents, we are ignoring the fullness of history and thereby the opportunity to learn from the work of not just icons but of everyday people like you and me.

I do not need expensive tripods or fancy recording equipment to preserve an important story; a genuine curiosity to learn and ask critical questions is a great first step. Anyone can be a storyteller, and that is a gift we can give to honor the legacy of the past and, in the process, contribute to a better future.

Riddhi Sarkar is a student at American University. Her essay, "Witnessing History," was a winner of the Freedom's Children Student Journalists Competition for the 2017 March on Washington Film Festival.

