

Museum of Material Memory

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The Museum of Material Memory is a crowdsourced digital repository of material culture from the Indian subcontinent, tracing family history and social ethnography through heirlooms, collectibles, and objects of antiquity. Through the intimate act of storytelling, each essay reveals not just a personal history of the object and its owner, but leads to the unfolding of a generational narrative spanning the traditions, cultures, customs, conventions, habits, languages, geographies, and history of the vast and diverse subcontinent.

It was during my masters' thesis at Concordia University (Montréal) that I would come to understand the intimate relationships that humans share with objects, particularly heirlooms whose origin may lie in geographies that are inaccessible, both physically and temporally. In the year 2013, I embarked on a cross-border research project, trying to archive the objects that had migrated with refugees during the 1947 Partition of India. The intention was to understand whether the notion of belonging to a particular land can be imbued within an object carried from that land, even though the land itself now remained on the other side of a border. Over time, this research coalesced into a book published in South Asia as *Remnants of a*

Separation and internationally as *Remnants of Partition*. This method of excavating personal history through material culture found resonance even with many who had no history of Partition. Gauging this interest, I co-founded the Museum of Material Memory with a friend, Navdha Malhotra, who works in the social impact space, in September 2017.

With the exception of physical museums, there are few places where the life and materiality of an object of age is celebrated. The inherent misfortune of mundane objects, unlike those which may be either monetarily valuable or visibly precious, is that they are often underappreciated. Too often, the stories connected to them are forgotten to time. These are the objects that find their way into the virtual shelves of our Museum – an ordinary patina-lined utensil in a grandparents' kitchen, a framed photograph of a distant ancestor, perhaps a notebook, or even a box that holds trinkets. The Museum of Material Memory, thus, invites South Asians from around the world to submit short essays and photographs – either through our submission page or via email – on aged objects they may find in their possession. We have expanded beyond the theme of Partition that initially inspired the project, and the Museum now welcomes objects predating the 1970s and originating anywhere in the subcontinent or its diaspora.

In the folds, crevasses, edges, and lingering smells of old objects live the tangible links to a past that the writer may never have known of, or to family members they may never have met. The process of oral history and familial interviewing embodied in each essay also ensures that the objects can act as multi-generational emblems, encouraging active conversations, and the writing often becomes a deeply emotional exercise. After receiving a submission, we work closely with the writer to develop the narrative further. The final piece, therefore, is a result of extensive collaboration, detailing not only the physical and tactile nature of the object, but also highlighting generational memory and collective history.

For the subcontinental region, where borders are still fraught with contention, resulting in a history that often remains unreconciled, this humble archive aims to be a borderless platform for conversations extending beyond nationality, citizenship, religion, ethnicity, and caste. To that end, the Museum is both digital and crowdsourced to retain accessibility. But most importantly, it is a space where material culture acts as a democratic medium to tell the stories of a shared history.



Fig. 1 (main photo): The *bont* passed down the generations of women in Kasturi Mukherjee's family (Photograph courtesy of Kasturi Mukherjee).

Fig. 2 (inset above): A British Indian passport belonging to Rajita Banerjee's great grandfather (Photograph courtesy of Rajita Banerjee).

Fig. 3 (inset left): The chequebook from 1947, belonging to Saba Qizilbash's grandfather (Photograph courtesy of Saba Qizilbash).



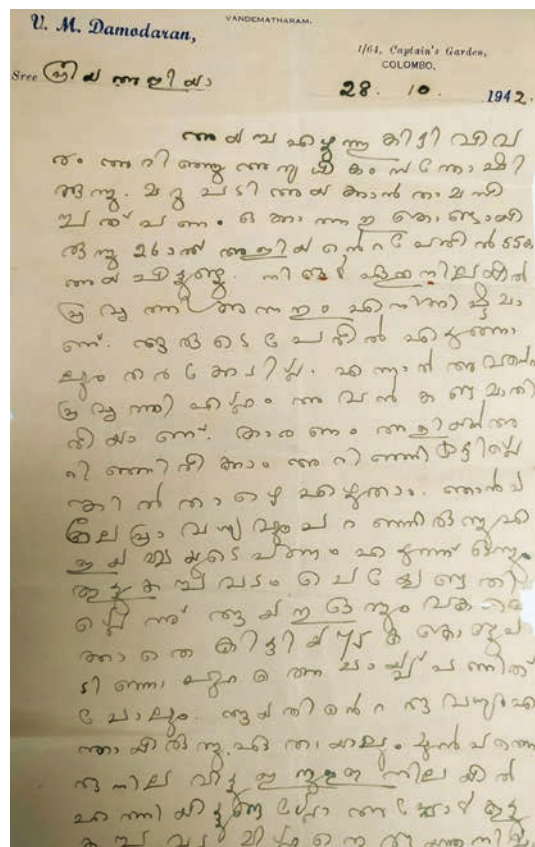


Fig. 4 (above): A letter sent from Ceylon to Kerala in 1942 by Amit Pallath's grandfather (Photograph courtesy of Amit Pallath).



Fig. 5 (right): Sahiba Bhatia's heirloom Princess Mary Gift Box from WWI (Photograph courtesy of Sahiba Bhatia).

An ideal example of this is a piece titled *The Bengali Bonti*, where Asansol-based Kasturi Mukherjee writes about “a kitchen instrument that is used in Indian households to peel, chop, shred, slice and dice items, especially in the states of Bengal, Assam, Orissa.” The piece narrates how a woman at the bonti is a quintessential part of Indian, particularly Bengali, iconography. Mukherjee traces the matrilineal history of the particular instrument, from her great grandmother’s kitchen to her own [Fig. 1]. No one could have anticipated the overwhelming response to this story. Once it was published, highly nuanced memories began to pour in from across the subcontinent, including what the *bonti* was called in different regions: *Pankhi* or *paniki* in Odisha, *danti* or *dranti* or *data* in Punjab, *chulesi* in Nepal, *kathi-peeta* in Andhra Pradesh, *hasiya* in Uttar Pradesh, *haansu* or *pehsul* in Bihar, *pasuli* in Chhattisgarh, *paushi* or *vili* in Maharashtra, *aruvamani* in Tamil Nadu, *nopak* in Assam, *daa* in Sylhet, *chirava* in Kerala. We also learnt how particular ones were used for particular things like fish, meat, only a certain kind of vegetable or fruit and even coconuts, and never interchangeably. The object appeared emblematic to so many people’s lives in

different parts of the region, and the collective tapestry of their responses affirmed the purpose with which we had begun the project. The submissions to the Museum are divided into various categories, including Household Items, Textiles, Photographs, Jewellery, Documents & Maps, Heirlooms & Collectibles, and Art & Books. However, the stories of widely different objects can live together within a single category. For instance, Documents & Maps includes the story *My Great-Grandfather: A British Subject by Birth* by Kolkata-based Rajita Banerjee. By way of a British Indian passport, Banerjee writes about how travel documents and modes of identification were issued in the 1930’s to those under colonial rule in India [Fig.2]. Also included is Lahore-born, Dubai-based Saba Qilizbash’s *Aghajan’s Cheque Book*, which discusses the treasured document from the Imperial Bank of India, carried by her grandfather from Srinagar, India to Lahore, Pakistan after a ten-month imprisonment in New Delhi, following the 1947 Partition [Fig. 3]. The chequebook was bequeathed to Saba at her wedding day. In a third story, Kerala-based Amit Pallath’s *News from Ceylon: 1942* describes a letter addressed from his grandfather to the family in Thrissur,

Kerala from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he stayed and worked for almost eight years sending money back home [Fig. 4]. The letter highlights the hardships felt by migrant workers during the British rule: “Food is rationed and I receive 3 *naazhi* a week.” One *naazhi* was approximately 200 grams. At times, what is considered a mundane object by a family can reveal itself to be a rare and important artefact from history, as in the case of Indore-based Sahiba Bhatia. In *Souvenir from the Trenches of World War One*, she discovers her grandmother’s brass jewellery box to be Princess Mary’s Christmas Gift Box given to “every sailor afloat and every soldier at the front” in 1914, including the nearly 1.5 million soldiers from undivided India sent on behalf of the British Empire [Fig. 5]. Bhatia found out that her grandmother had inherited this box from her mother, whose adoptive father was a buyer and seller of military equipment for the British. He had procured this Christmas Box as a valued artefact of the time. Around the same time that this submission was made to the Museum, I was working on a book partly set in World War I and had done significant research on the Princess Mary Christmas Box. Thus, the final published piece is a collaborative text between Bhatia and

myself, where she offered a personal perspective on the artefact, and I, a historical one. In the Jewellery category, which remains our most popular, we often receive submissions for objects that look near identical but unravel deeply different histories. On first glance, the substantial pair of silver anklets in Delhi-based Prabhdeep Singh Matharu’s *A Spared Pair of Payal* and Sri Muktsar Sahib-based Khushveen Brar’s *Heirlooms from Faridkot* look as though they could have been fashioned by the same jeweler [Fig. 6 and Fig. 7]. However, Matharu’s story begins in 1949 in Kapurthala district, with the anklets traveling to Delhi with his grandparents. Upon their death decades later, amidst a division of family wealth, Matharu’s mother is moved to pay more than the last traces of her mother-in-law. Meanwhile, Brar’s matrilineal story extends to the 1920s in Faridkot, where her great-grandmother inherited the anklets as a part of her trousseau, subsequently passing them down the generations. In both cases, the jewellery bears an identical interlinked design, oxidizing with the passage of time, and is similar in weight and length. Despite the unique contexts, both families consider the weight of the past to have settled into these anklets. While the virtual world may seem impersonal to some, we believe that our efforts at the Museum not only offer a personal corridor into the past, but also inculcate within our readers and writers a deep sense of nostalgia and pride for their personal histories and memories, which can, when threaded together, represent collective histories and memories.

Fig. 6 Prabhdeep Singh Matharu's mother wearing the silver payal (Photograph courtesy of Prabhdeep Singh Matharu).

Fig. 7 Khushveen Brar wearing the heirloom silver anklet (Photograph courtesy of Khushveen Brar).



Aanchal Malhotra is an oral historian and writer based in New Delhi. She is the author of *Remnants of a Separation* (2017), published internationally as *Remnants of Partition* (2019), and co-founded of the Museum of Material Memory in 2017. To submit to the Museum, email: hello@museumofmaterialmemory.com