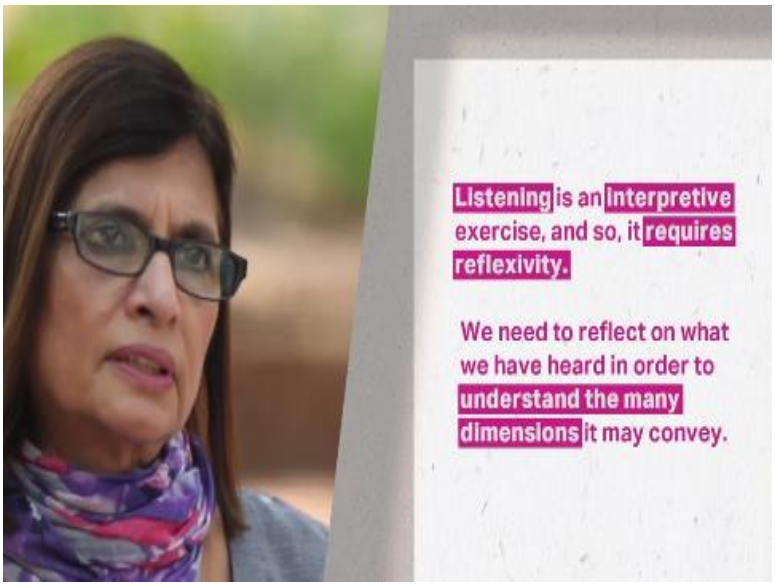
Lecture 45
Reflexivity in Interviewing

(Refer Slide Time: 0:10)

While it is important to share our own stories, we need to develop a balance between speaking and listening. If we speak too much, we may hijack or steal the conversation. And our participant may not be able to share their narratives. Moreover, a balanced conversation allows us to listen carefully to what is spoken. And to reflect on the interpretation going on in our heads as we listen.

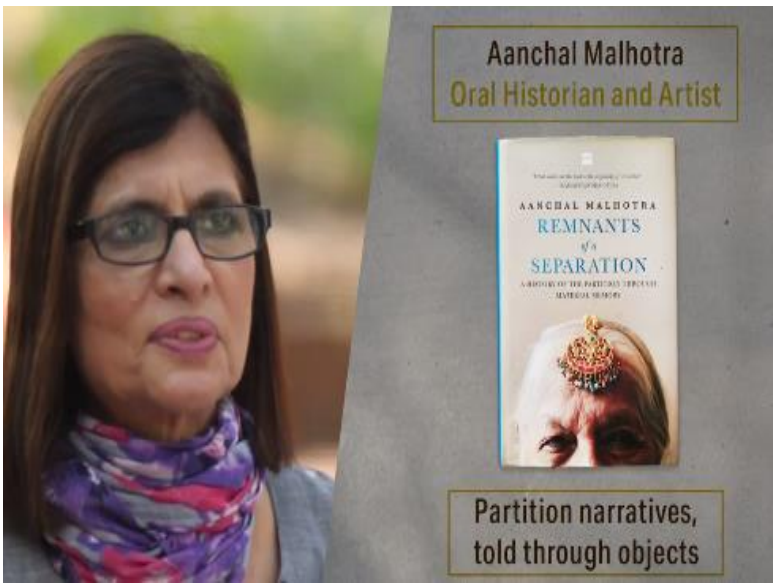
This kind of reflexivity is important in interviews because what is said is not always the same as what is heard and understood.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:43)



Like observation, listening too is an interpretive exercise. We may hear the words just as they are spoken, but the meanings and references that we draw are very much constructed. Sometimes speaking out what we think helped clarify any differences between our understanding and the participant expressions and it helps to share our understanding with the participants so that we may build on it together.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:11)



A wonderful example of this kind of reflexivity is seen in the work of Aanchal Malhotra. Aanchal listens intently to her participants and actively reflects on what they are saying. These reflections become a part of her representation.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:27)

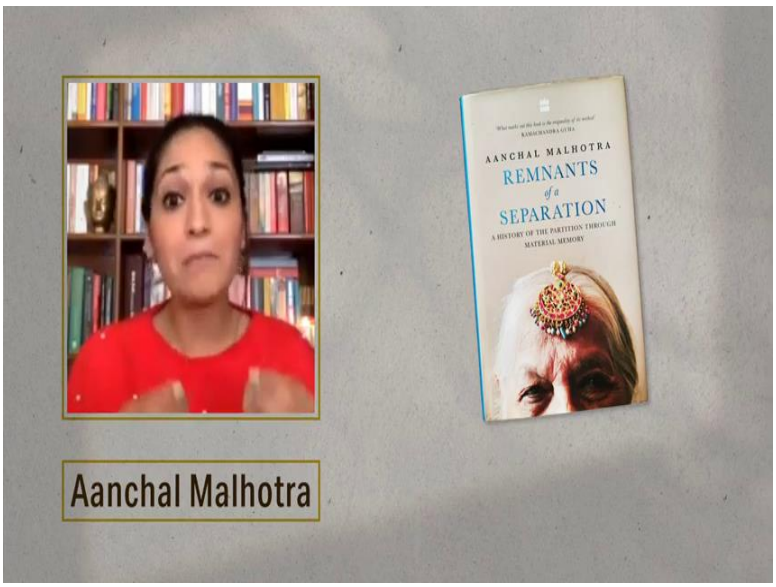
Let us hear from Aanchal about the role of listening and reflexivity in her work.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:33)

Aanchal Malhotra: Hello, my name is Aanchal Malhotra, I am oral historian of memory and material culture. I work with object, and the memory embodies, but in an inanimate object cannot speak. It does not have an emotion of its own. So any importance that an object may hold is deposited into it by people and as time passes the meaning of these objects changed with every passing generation. The period I focus on is of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

While studying a migration of 14 million people to either side of the border, I often contemplated the notion of home and what have might have felt like to flee from it hastily. For many years I travelled across India, Pakistan and the UK looking for themes that refugees brought with them. The object that became like companion on the way to her new citizenship.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:31)



From things as simple banal and mundane as household items to those of obvious monitory precious value. Such an artifact would be reservoir memory and experience and its physical weight would be outweighed by the emotional weight cashed into it over the years. So such an object would in some ways occupy the weight of the past. My project is called remnants of separation, and it is not just about objects from another time, but a correlated experience of the objects physical and metaphysical potential.

I wanted to know what it fell like to hold in one’s hand tangible part of one's history, particularly if that history was now on the other side of an impenetrable, international militarised border.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:23)

How did people look at these themes? Were these things prized possessions or something too mundane to be considered of value and most importantly could these objects be used as a guide for recollection, could they be propagators of the past. I strive to look at the notion of belonging through belongings to appreciate the object in its totality not is something that blends into the landscape of the past but is a primary character around which the entire landscape is arranged.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:53)

We often see that as memory passes and as the years passed our emotion settle into objects in a way that they become physical evidence of belonging to a certain place at a certain time. The object expands to transcend its own physicality by creating a tangible link to an untangible place or state of being things mundane things like books and shawls and pencil cases and hand-painted boxes and pocket knife all valuable things like jewellery or even documents and ID cards remain incredibly important yet unexplored means of understanding personal and collective histories.

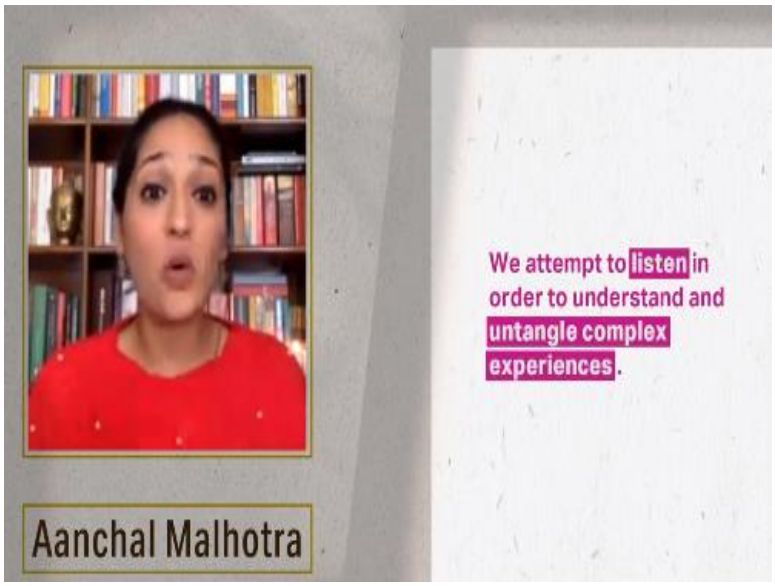
By unfolding memories (())(4:39) within materiality, my work unravels a deeper understanding of the personal narrative around partition.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:46)

And though the object remains at the centre what emerges through such a storytelling is social ethnography, a way of livfe in syncretic undivided India. Despite the sheer volume of inclination on the partition available to us today, we are still only learning how to speak thoroughly and sensitively about the events. How to encompass its many facets and countless individual accounts.

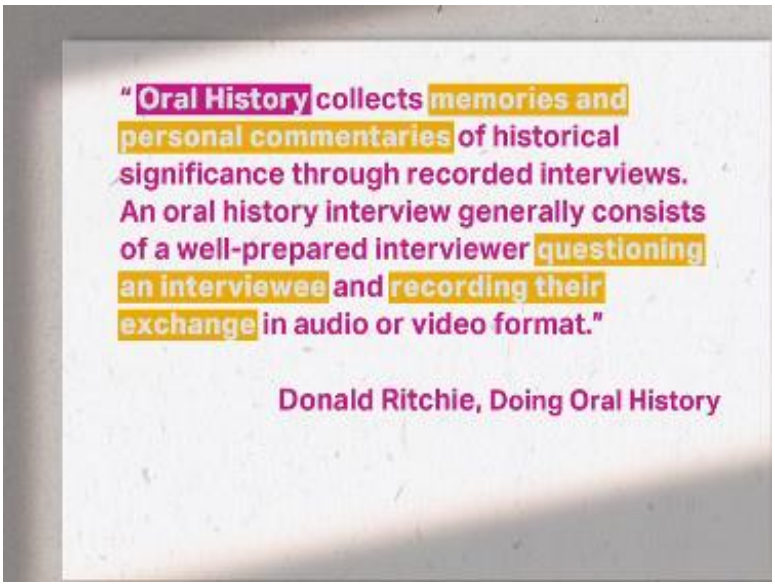
Traditional means and narration have failed to do justice to the depth of historical trauma and yet it is so necessary to continually express this in words and discuss it and gradually eradicate this notion of the unspeakable. This is what I will do. I speak to people about the past.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:32)



I listen to them not for the sake of mainly recording an experience or just listening, but to attempt to untangle and attempt the study the memory of traumatic time. So we may never receive an event like partition.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:48)



Oral history is not reportage or journalism, but it is the penetration of human memory. It asserts that people's experiences matter that the small age histories within the larger capital age history of geographies and landscapes and empire are also important. I have numbered many times about how reliving moments of trauma affect the people that are recalling the story.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:17)

But the interviewer and the interviewee together go beyond the scope of recollection attempting to untangle the traumatic experience. Many people are unwilling to talk about the event for many years. As those suppression might remove all traces of it. But I think from my experience, no one really finds peace and silence even when it is a choice to remain silent.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:44)

And so after doing interviews across the world, across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the UK, I do deduce that in crossing the great difficultly of remembering and in giving voice to the experience in 1947 does eventually result in some form of lightness. Because even an inactive crisis can remain a source of lingering trauma.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:10)

There is a need to talk about what happened because things have not yet settled. There is still so much we do know about partition and it is not yet an event of the past. Its heaviness continuous to way down, sometimes only subconsciously both for those who have lived through it and as well as those who inherited stories and memories of it. So one of the main questions that I get all the time is how do we begin with these interviews.

How do we approach people, and how do we start asking questions. The generation that lives through partition obviously had an impact in their mind it remains still, and it is not something to be taken lightly because to remember it is still very difficult.

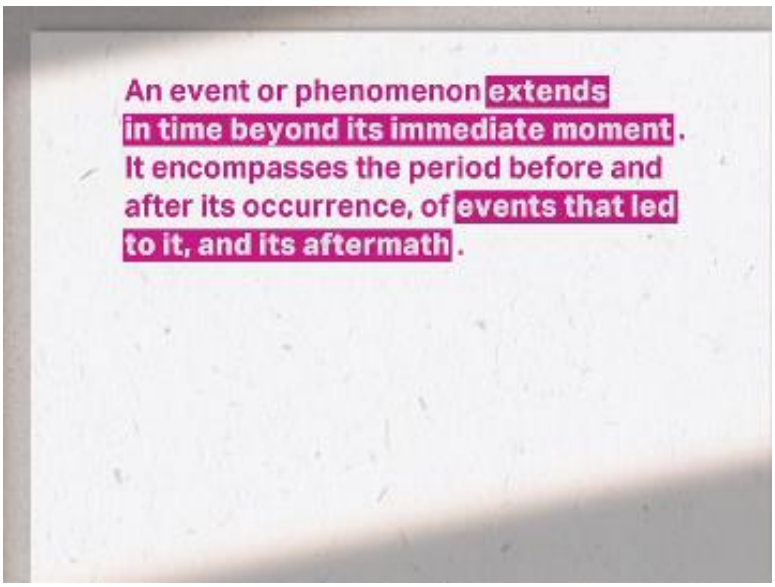
(Refer Slide Time: 07:53)

So how do we begin to ask the questions? One of the ways in which I began starting with my family I come from a family where all four grandparents move from across the border as close as the Lahore and as far as Dera Ismail Khan. I started slowly, I started asking about things because things were the way that I found an entry way into the past to approach someone ann say, “oh you lived through partition” it sounds horrible can you tell me about it is very crass and still is not sensitive.

But to tell someone “oh you brought this notebook with you” or “you brought this ring with you” or “you carried your pencil case from school, how did you know what to carry and who told you that you will never come back, did you think that you will never come back to your home, did you think that you will never see these walls again, your room again, your school again your friends.”

I think that these questions might seeing up their questions about everyday lives, but I want to stress this fact very clearly that partition is not just about August 1947.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:03)



It is about the time that came before it and the time that came after it. Riots happened throughout and relationship between Hindus, Muslim, and others did not disrupt overnight. So what we are trying to understand through listening, through asking questions through looking at objects, documents things like this is to build and form a social ethnography. We want to understand what life was like before it and how this event could happen, an event of this magnitude.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:35)

So what we are trying to do in our questioning, in our oral history interviews is, a) to make the person feel as comfortable with you as they can to be able to dwell deeper and more vulnerably into their past and the second thing, of course, is to gather as much information as we can about that time. When I go to do interviews. I have a very basic questionnaire about where you were born?

And if they do not know where they were born or when they were born then approximately what months or what season or maybe how old where the time partition and then you can calculate back. Things were not so easy then in terms of birth certificates or even people's documentation, so there is a little bit of calculation that is always needed, but I think your basic questionnaire should be there and apart from that you should try and build on what the person is saying.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:32)

Another thing I always enjoy is doing a bit of research on the area that the person comes from. So if someone knows I am going to come to interview them, I would like to know which is the town or the city or the village they come from. So I can do a bit of reading about exactly what happened during the partition there, what kind of migration happened, what the culture was like in terms of religion.

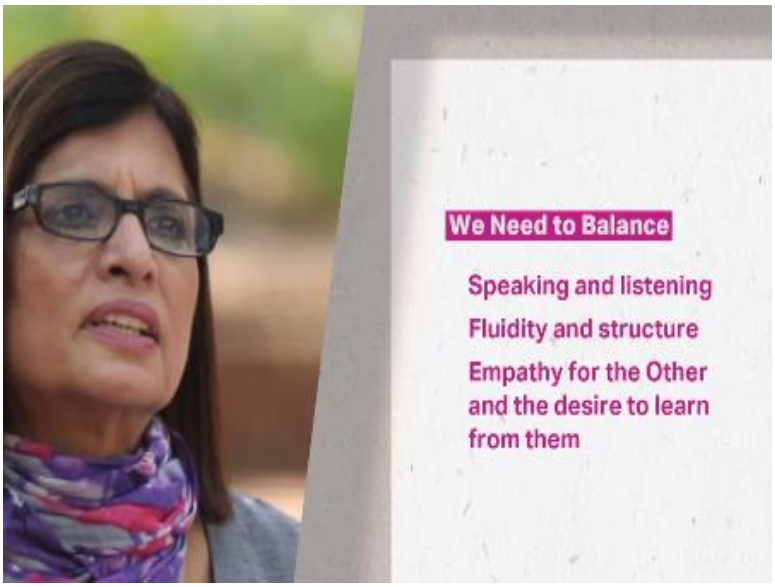
Was it an agrarian economy, did it focus more on shops. So my questions can be targeted to those specifics things that people might relate to, and the other thing about working with older people is that, and I think somebody in my generation a millennial really needs to know this and I know this question is about listening. So it is very important is that older people really just want someone to listen to them.

So, if you are in an oral history interview with someone who is a decade older than you, be present because it is very important for we to know what they are telling you matters to you. And it should matter to you because there is still so much we do not know about partition, so we are always unerathening something. So if you are genuinely interested, then incredible memories will come out.

But I think this is something that we as millennial forget a lot how to listen and how to let someone talk without interrupting them.

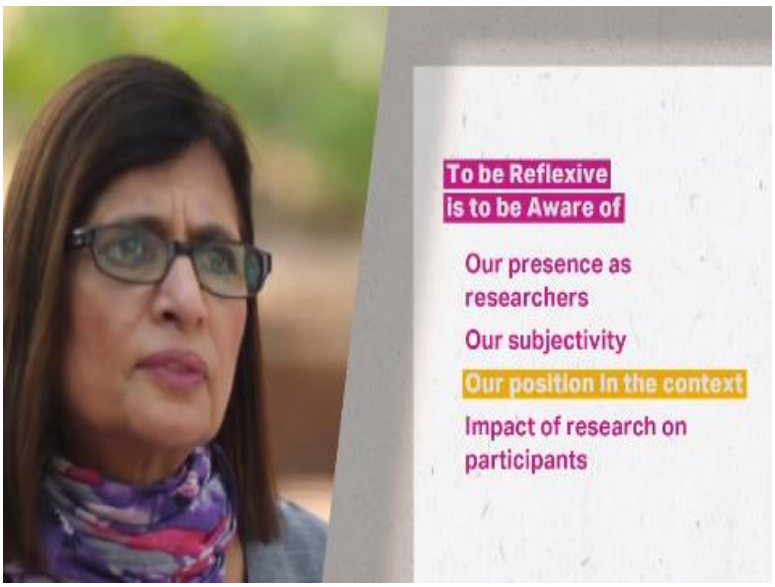
The idea of balance is key to engaging with and learning from our participants. We need to maintain a fine balance between speaking and listening, fluidity and structure, empathy for the other and a desire to learn from them.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:03)



Professor Indira Chowdhury: The idea of balance is key to engaging with and learning from our participant. We need to maintain a fine balance between speaking and listening, fluidity and structure, empathy for the other and a desire to learn from them.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:22)

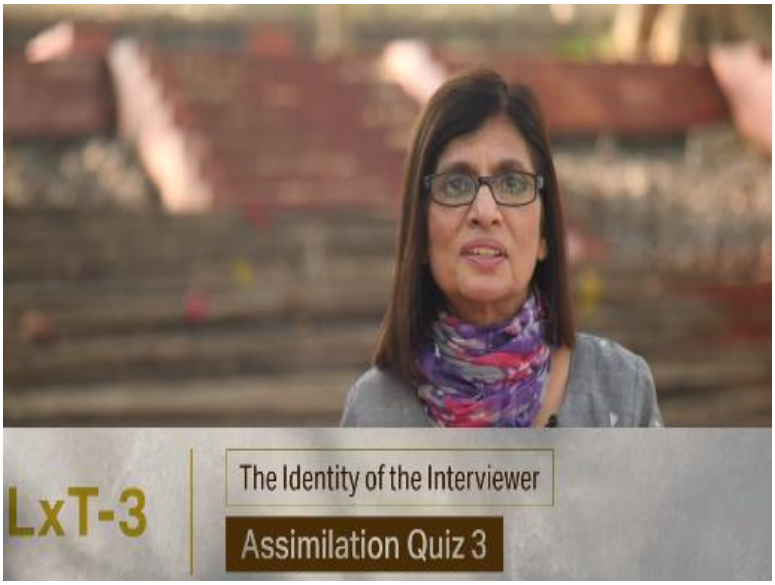


To be reflexive is also to be aware of our position in the research with respect to our participants. Often we engage with people whose cultures and contexts are very different from us. In an interview, these differences manifest in the narratives that are shared and the ways in which they are articulated. Participants build a perception of who we are, our background and experiences their interactions with us is based on these perceptions.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:52)

You may remember the experience of Hagar Salamon, the Israeli researcher in Jerusalem who interviewed Palestinian women about the maps they embroidered. The narratives shared with Salamon by her Palestinian participants were a response to her identity as an Israeli Jewish woman. It is possible they may have spoken differently to a person from another country. A similar example is that of a former black slave interviewed by two different researchers -one black and one white. In each case, the narratives shared are quite different.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:32)



You can read these two transcripts here and answer some questions based on your reading. As we immerse ourselves deeper into the world of our participants, their perception of us changes.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:44)

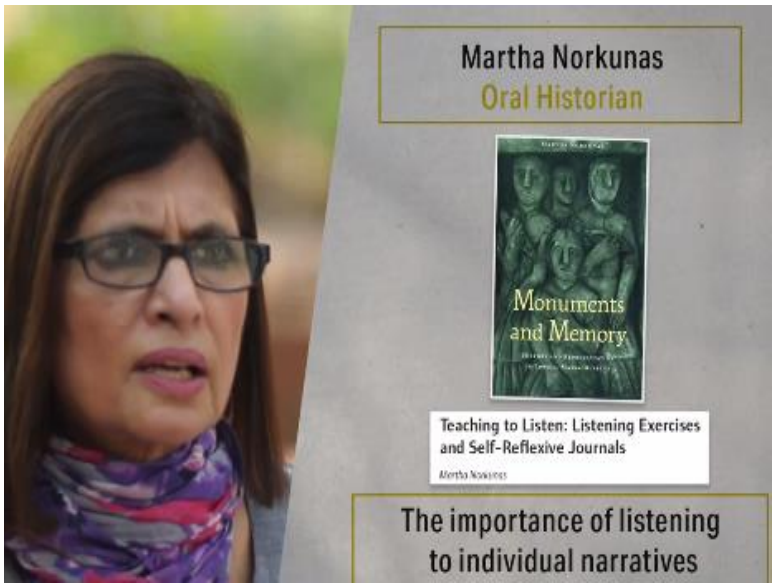
From being someone who represents the 'other' culture or community, we start to be seen as individuals. This shift happens within us too. We build our relationships with them based on this shifting and understanding of our similarities and differences.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:03)

Consider for example, my engagement with Raniben and Meghiben. To begin with, we shared a language Gujarati and the experience of the earthquake that devastated parts of Gujarat in 2001. These became common grounds on which we build our relationship in the earlier stages of our interruptions. I wanted to understand the notion of displacement that had shaped their lives.

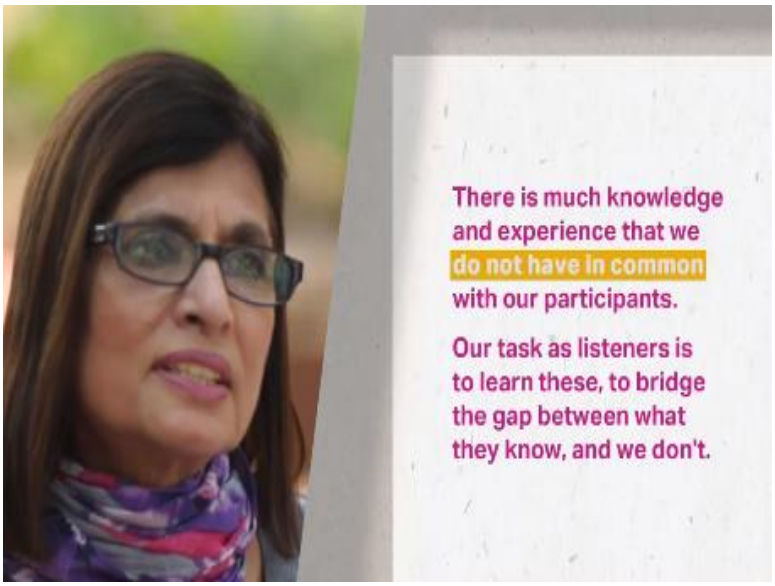
I have no experience of being forcibly displaced from my home. And they have been repeatedly displaced. First, because of the 1972 India-Pakistan war, and then by the earthquake in 2001. This was a huge difference between their experiences and mine.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:51)



Martha Norkunas calls this the difference between knowing and not knowing.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:57)



It is the difference between what the other knows through their experience which we do not. In interacting with each other, we tried to bridge this difference. Listening to the other's narratives helps us make sense of this difference in experiences. These narratives act as mediums. They are conveying experiences, feelings and thoughts that may otherwise be difficult to articulate.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:27)

In narrating the story of their migration, for instance, Meghiben spoke about moving to another place when she got married. Raniben shared details about the various stages of her journey of crossing the border.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:42)

She spoke of the hurdles and difficulties that her community faced along the way and of the hopes and fears that accompanied them. In each narrative, there were various themes which spoke about their experiences of migration and displacement. Their narratives were a record of their lives and their experiences. We see here that reciting their narrative can help participants speak about difficult and complex subjects.

And through these narratives, we can better understand their lives and contexts. For a participant having their narrative heard and recorded is a way of having their version of history recognised. In doing ethnographic interviews, we sometimes play the role of mediators and translators carrying our participants' narratives to the world at large. In this role, listening becomes an act of support and empathy.

It emphasises the human nature of our work. For these reasons, building a meaningful interaction requires a conscious and active effort on our part. We need to pay attention to all of the ways in which we speak and listen to our participants. We need to define what we wish to learn from them and how we may engage and learn. This work begins much before the interview. It is these preparations that form the focus of our next session.