

Digital Archiving and Identity Formation: Indo-Caribbean Narratives on Instagram

Srishti¹, Santosh Sikarwar², Akansha Goswami³

^{1,2,3}Guest Faculty, University Of Delhi

Abstract: Social media platforms have redefined cultural representation and storytelling, offering marginalized and diasporic communities new spaces to assert their identities. This study examines how two Instagram pages, *Cutlass Magazine* and *West Indian History*, function as digital archives of Indo-Caribbean identity, blending traditional cultural memory with contemporary expression. Grounded in theories of cultural representation and concept of imagined communities, this research paper explores the intersection of identity and cultural preservation within the digital environments. Employing a postcolonial ethnographic framework, this qualitative analysis uses thematic coding and semiotic analysis to investigate visual, textual, and participatory strategies. The findings demonstrate how these platforms preserve cultural heritage, construct hybrid identities, and foster participatory storytelling among diasporic audiences.

Keywords: Digital Narratives, Indo-Caribbean, Diaspora, Archiving, Hybrid Identity

The Indo-Caribbean diaspora, rooted in the 19th and early 20th-century indentured labour system under British colonial rule, represents a rich yet marginalized cultural phenomenon within postcolonial studies. After the abolition of slavery, labourers from India were brought to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations. While distinct from slavery, this system perpetuated exploitative conditions, fostering both hardship and resistance. Originating primarily from regions such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu, these labourers introduced diverse languages, religions, and traditions, blending South Asian and Afro-Caribbean cultures. Despite their significant contributions, the narratives of Indo-Caribbean communities remain relegated to the periphery of mainstream historiography. Scholars like Brinsley Samaroo and Patricia Mohammed highlight stereotypes of insularity and resistance to creolisation, which obscure their role in shaping multi-ethnic Caribbean identities. As Mohammed observes, “The marginalisation of the Indian presence in the Caribbean is not just about numbers or demographics but about the erasure of their contributions to the multi-ethnic narrative of Caribbean identity” (*Feminist Review* 59).

Women within the Indo-Caribbean diaspora face double marginalisation under the colonial structures of indentureship and patriarchal norms. As Samaroo notes, “The experiences of women during indentureship remain buried beneath a historiography that has long prioritised the male perspective, rendering their stories invisible” (*Journal of Caribbean History* 15). Expected to balance field labour with domestic responsibilities, many women sacrificed education and autonomy. Their overlooked narratives reveal resilience and agency, portraying them as custodians of cultural memory and active participants in shaping diasporic identity.

The studies on Indian indentured women have evolved from marginalisation in early historiography to more focused explorations of their roles and experiences in the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. Early research, such as Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery* (1974), centred on the exploitative structures of indentureship, often overlooking women's contributions and struggles. Later scholars, like Marina Carter in her *Voices from Indenture* (1996) and Patricia Mohammed, brought attention to women's dual burden of plantation labour and domestic responsibilities, highlighting their agency in preserving cultural practices despite systemic oppression. Recently, Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013) deepened this discourse by exploring the intersections of migration, gendered violence, and survival, presenting indentured women as both victims of exploitation and active participants in cultural preservation. However, despite this growing body of work, significant gaps remain in understanding how the narratives of Indo-Caribbean women are represented in contemporary digital spaces. While much of the existing literature focuses on historical and archival records, there has been limited exploration of how platforms like Instagram are used to document and reimagine these stories.

This paper bridges the gap by analysing Instagram pages such as *Cutlass Magazine* and *West Indian History*, examining how these digital platforms act as modern archives that preserve and celebrate the identities, resilience, and cultural contributions of Indo-Caribbean women. It employs a qualitative methodology to analyze ten Instagram posts (five from each *Cutlass Magazine* and *West Indian History*), selected based on engagement levels, thematic relevance, and cultural significance. Specific thematic codes, such as cultural continuity, gender resilience, and representation vs. commodification, were applied to analyze the posts' textual and visual elements. The analysis reveals how such platforms function as modern digital archives that preserve Indo-Caribbean cultural heritage, represent hybrid identities, and foster participatory storytelling. By employing thematic coding, visual semiotics, and participatory analysis, this paper argues that these digital spaces challenge historical erasures, negotiate cultural authenticity, and empower diasporic audiences to reclaim their narratives. However, while these platforms celebrate cultural resilience and encourage community engagement, they also navigate the complexities of commodification and representation within globalised digital spaces.

Both *Cutlass Magazine* and *West Indian History* play a crucial role in preserving and recovering Indo-Caribbean cultural heritage. Through their posts, these platforms highlight the contributions of Indo-Caribbean communities, particularly women, to cultural preservation and identity formation. For instance, *Cutlass Magazine* celebrates intergenerational resilience by featuring images of elder women adorned in traditional attire, such as *orhani* and floral garlands, alongside captions such as:

Meet Pottiya Mahadeo, 102 years old, a living testament to the resilience of our ancestors. Draped in her *orhani*, she reminds us of the enduring strength of Indo-Caribbean women who balanced plantation labour with preserving traditions. Her life embodies the struggles and triumphs of a generation that held onto Bhojpuri songs and Hindu rituals, ensuring their survival across time and displacement. (*Cutlass Magazine*)

These captions not only narrate individual struggles and achievements but also connect them to broader cultural and historical preservation, illustrating how the platform blends personal stories with collective heritage. Another post features an elderly Indo-Trinidadian woman, highlighting her contributions to maintaining cultural practices like Bhojpuri songs and traditional wedding rituals. The visual and textual narratives align with Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* argument that Indo-Caribbean women, despite systemic exploitation, have been central to preserving traditions and sustaining cultural memory. Similarly, *West Indian History* anchors individual stories within broader historical contexts by sharing archival photographs, such as ID cards and ship records, to connect familial narratives with the collective history of indentureship. Posts such as "The story of Etwari Meah" vividly illustrate how archival materials reconstruct personal and communal histories, linking them to the broader Indo-Caribbean experience (*West Indian History*).

The use of visual elements—such as traditional attire, religious rituals, and ancestral photographs—creates a sense of cultural continuity, which Benedict Anderson in "Imagined Communities" (1983), saw as central to the formation of collective identities. By evoking cultural memory through symbolic imagery, these platforms not only preserve historical legacies but also reimagine them for diasporic audiences. For example, the portrayal of traditional tattoos (*godna*) and wedding rituals links contemporary diasporic identities to their ancestral roots, bridging the gap between past and present. A post depicting a 102-year-old matriarch in *Cutlass Magazine* exemplifies this connection by combining personal resilience with cultural memory, portraying her as a living archive of Indo-Caribbean traditions.

Another significant aspect of these platforms is their focus on Indo-Caribbean women, whose narratives have historically been marginalised. Women's representation in posts, such as those featuring centenarians or familial matriarchs, foregrounds their roles as cultural custodians and agents of transformation. As Rhoda Reddock observes, "The gendered experiences of indentureship remain largely understudied, with women often rendered invisible in narratives dominated by male labour and resistance" (Reddock 65). These platforms challenge such erasures by documenting women's contributions to cultural preservation, from passing down religious practices to sustaining linguistic traditions like Bhojpuri folk songs.

The representation of women's resilience is particularly evident in *Cutlass Magazine*, where posts celebrate elder women as living archives of Indo-Caribbean history. For instance, Pottiya Mahadeo's story, which highlights her role as a first-generation Indo-Trinidadian, reflects Patricia Mohammed's assertion that Indo-Caribbean women embody the dual legacy of cultural preservation and adaptation. Similarly, *West Indian History* addresses the gendered violence and systemic marginalisation faced by indentured women, using archival materials to reclaim their voices and agency. Posts featuring colonial postcards of Indo-Caribbean women, paired with critical captions, reveal how these women were exoticised under colonial narratives while simultaneously resisting erasure by sustaining cultural practices. As Reddock notes, "Despite their marginalisation, women contributed significantly to the social and cultural transformations of their communities, acting as agents of cultural continuity and change" (Reddock 72).

These social media pages also highlight the hybridity of Indo-Caribbean identities, shaped by the intersection of Indian and Afro-Caribbean cultural influences. Posts featuring traditional Indo-Caribbean attire and religious practices are juxtaposed with narratives of adaptation and creolisation, illustrating the dynamic interplay between ancestral traditions and contemporary realities. As Stuart Hall argues, “Diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora* 222). *Cutlass Magazine* often portrays this hybridity by showcasing cultural practices that blend Indian and Caribbean elements, such as adaptations of Hindu rituals in a Caribbean context. One post, for example, documents the integration of Afro-Caribbean rhythms into traditional wedding songs, demonstrating the fusion of cultural elements. Similarly, *West Indian History* emphasises the negotiation of authenticity by addressing how colonial representations exoticised Indo-Caribbean women while simultaneously erasing their agency. Posts featuring colonial-era postcards critically engage with the politics of representation, encouraging followers to reflect on the complexities of identity formation in diasporic spaces.

Other defining feature of these social media pages is their participatory nature, which transforms followers into active contributors to the storytelling process. Comments, tags, and user-generated content create a dialogic space where diasporic audiences share their own stories, memories, and interpretations. As Henry Jenkins’ observes that “participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement,” this study finds that audience interactions enhance the platforms’ role as dynamic archives that evolve with community input (*Convergence Culture* 7). For instance, in posts where followers share personal anecdotes about family members who experienced indentureship, the platforms facilitate a collective process of memory-making. One *West Indian History* post featuring a photograph of a labourer’s ID card sparked discussions about the importance of documenting family histories, with followers sharing similar artefacts from their own families.

Tags too play a significant role in shaping this participatory culture, acting as digital markers that organise and amplify the reach of content. Hashtags such as #IndoCaribbean, #Indentureship, and #DiasporaNarratives not only connect related posts but also enable audiences to discover, engage with, and contribute to the ongoing dialogue. By aggregating posts under these tags, the platforms create virtual communities where users collectively reconstruct and reinterpret cultural and historical narratives. For example, the use of #BhojpuriSongs and #CaribbeanHeritage in *Cutlass Magazine* posts highlights the hybrid nature of Indo-Caribbean cultural practices, while simultaneously inviting followers to share their own musical or ritualistic experiences.

The comments section further enriches these participatory dynamics by fostering a sense of shared memory and connection. Comments often include personal reflections, historical clarifications, or expressions of gratitude, revealing the emotional engagement of the audience. In response to a post on traditional wedding rituals, one user commented, “My grandmother used to sing these same songs during weddings; thank you for preserving this memory” (@culturalroots). Another follower of *West Indian History* shared details of a similar ID card from their family archive, encouraging others to look for such artefacts in their homes

(@HeritageStories). These interactions transform static posts into dynamic conversations, where audiences collectively expand and validate the narratives presented.

As Marina Carter says that “oral histories often reveal the personal dimensions of indenture, making visible the intimate connections between labour, family, and culture” (*Voices from Indenture* 45). By encouraging diasporic audiences to contribute their perspectives through tags and comments, these platforms not only preserve cultural heritage but also democratise the process of historical documentation. Through these participatory mechanisms, *Cutlass Magazine* and *West Indian History* transcend the role of mere content creators to become facilitators of a shared cultural archive.

While these platforms celebrate cultural resilience and foster community engagement, they also navigate the challenges of commodification and representation in globalised digital spaces. Posts that feature traditional attire or rituals risk being consumed as aestheticised artefacts, detached from their historical and cultural contexts. As Roland Barthes observes, “Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates” (*Mythologies* 151). It highlights how symbolic images can be stripped of their complexity and repurposed for mass consumption. Moreover, the platforms face the challenge of maintaining cultural authenticity while engaging with diverse global audiences. As Homi Bhabha also argues, “Cultural production in the diaspora is a process of negotiation, constantly reconstructing authenticity while resisting the homogenisation of globalised spaces” (*The Location of Culture* 55). Both *Cutlass Magazine* and *West Indian History* address this challenge by providing detailed captions and contextual information that ground their posts in historical and cultural specificity. However, the tension between cultural preservation and commodification remains an ongoing negotiation.

Thus, the analysis of *Cutlass Magazine* and *West Indian History* illustrates the potential of Instagram as a digital archive for Indo-Caribbean identity. These platforms preserve cultural heritage, amplify marginalised voices, and foster participatory storytelling, making them significant spaces for identity negotiation and cultural production. By documenting the narratives of Indo-Caribbean women, they challenge historical erasures and underscore the resilience and agency of diasporic communities. However, these pages also grapple with the complexities of representation and commodification within globalised digital spaces, raising questions about the tensions inherent in digital archiving. While these platforms undoubtedly contribute to the preservation of cultural memory, the extent to which they authentically represent the nuances of diasporic identities remains debatable. Future research could explore whether the strategies employed by these and similar platforms are sufficient to resist the forces of commodification and cultural homogenisation, or if they risk oversimplifying complex histories for broader appeal. As digital archives continue to evolve, their role in shaping and sustaining diasporic identities invites ongoing critical engagement and scrutiny.

Works Cited

1. Bahadur, Gaiutra. *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. The University of Chicago Press, 2013.
2. Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, 1972.
3. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

4. Carter, Marina. *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*.
 - a. Leicester University Press, 1996.
5. Cutlass Magazine. "Meet Pottiya Mahadeo, 102 years old, a living testament to the resilience of our ancestors. Draped in her orhani, she reminds us of the enduring strength of Indo-Caribbean women who balanced plantation labour with preserving traditions..." Instagram, www.instagram.com/cutlassmagazine. Accessed 25 Nov. 2024.
7. @CulturalRoots. Comment on *West Indian History's* post. Instagram, 15 Nov. 2024,
 - a. www.instagram.com/westindianhistory.
8. @HeritageStories. Comment on *West Indian History's* post. Instagram, 15 Nov. 2024,
 - a. www.instagram.com/westindianhistory.
9. Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*,
 - a. edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–37.
10. Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York
 - a. University Press, 2006.
11. Mohammed, Patricia. "Gender Negotiations Among Indians in Trinidad, 1917-1947."
 - a. *Feminist Review*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1998, pp. 57–73.
12. Reddock, Rhoda. "Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917:
 - a. Freedom Denied." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 20, no. 43, 1985, pp. 79–87.
13. Samaroo, Brinsley. "The Indian Connection: The Influence of Indian Thought and Ideas on
 - a. East Indians in the Caribbean." *Journal of Caribbean History*, vol. 15, 1981, pp. 1–
b. 17.
14. Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*.
 - a. Oxford University Press, 1974.
15. West Indian History. "The story of Etwari Meah." Instagram,
 - a. www.instagram.com/westindianhistory. Accessed 25 Nov. 2024.
16. West Indian History. "Traditional wedding rituals hold a special place in our Indo-Caribbean
 - a. culture..." Instagram, 15 Nov. 2024, www.instagram.com/westindianhistory.
b. Comments by @CulturalRoots and @HeritageStories.