

Archiving Absence: Instagram and the Diasporic *Genius Loci* of the Sindhi Hindu Community

Chandni JESWANI

Architectural Historian, Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE)
chandni68@hotmail.com

Abstract: This paper examines how the Sindhi Hindu community, displaced after the 1947 Partition of India, sustains its cultural identity and memory despite lacking a physical homeland, state-sponsored archives, or traditional monuments. It introduces the concept of a "diasporic genius loci," arguing that the "spirit of place" is maintained not through physical territory but through affective and aesthetic repetition, primarily via digital media like Instagram. Drawing on critical visual studies, memory theory, and digital ethnography, the study positions Instagram as a "prosthetic geography" and a "quiet archive" where fragmented cultural elements—such as ritual gestures, culinary traditions, and linguistic nuances—are reassembled and circulated. The paper analyzes how user-generated content, including food videos, devotional reels, and personal narratives, functions as a vernacular, participatory, and emotionally charged repository, enabling mnemonic reconstruction and fostering belonging without a fixed geographical anchor. It challenges traditional understandings of heritage tied to material permanence, demonstrating that cultural continuity for the Sindhi Hindu diaspora thrives through distributed, everyday digital practices and the "aesthetic recursion" of memory. While acknowledging potential drawbacks of this platform, the study ultimately posits Instagram as a foundational, rather than auxiliary, site for cultural survival, where repetition and resonance generate a living, non-territorial sense of place.

Keywords: Sindhi Hindu Community, Cultural Identity, Digital Ethnography, Memory Theory, Instagram, Diasporic *Genius Loci*, Cultural Continuity

Introduction

The departure of the British Empire in 1947 divided the erstwhile Raj, creating two dominions: India and Pakistan. Today, these form the Republic of India, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of Bangladesh. This decolonization was not a surgical operation, but an amputation (Hajari, 2016) which led to the largest single migration in history (Zaman, 2000), of at least fourteen million people and the deaths of at least one million (Singh, 2016). The Partition led to a violent division of land, rupturing shared histories and cultures between Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and other communities. It brought immense suffering, including mutilation, rape, conversions, forced migrations, rehabilitation challenges, loss of property, and death (Hay, 2006). Alongside these were the intangible violences of dispossession, forced assimilation, and the loss of a collective identity. "Partition," while representing this collective trauma of millions, also marks national liberation, triumph, independence and transformation (Greenberg, 2005). However, to this day, the overwhelming memory of 1947 for people across the subcontinent remains that of Partition rather than that of independence (White, 2014).

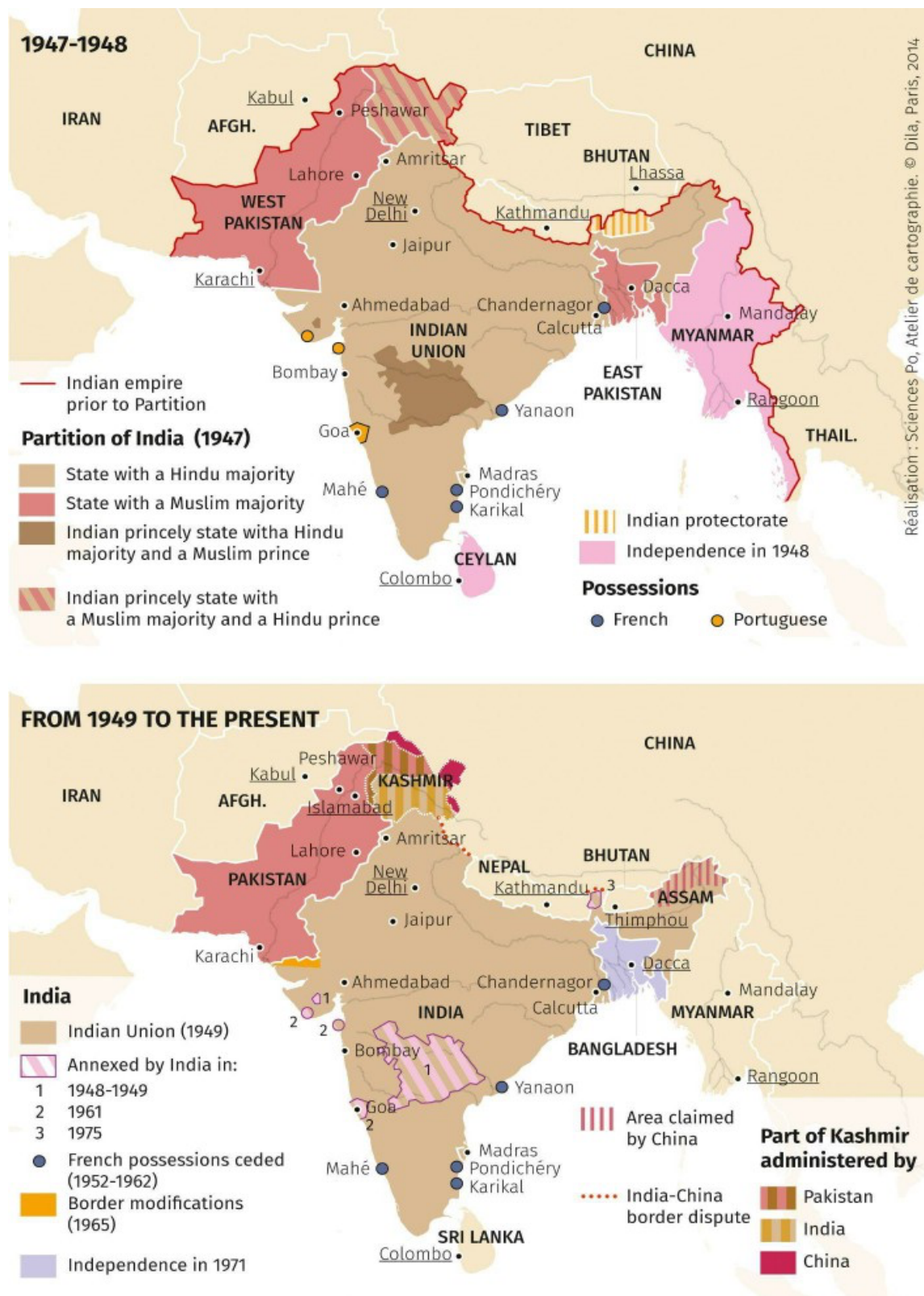


Figure 1. Identity mobilization driving the Partition of India

Sources: Espace Mondial Atlas. (n.d.): Dalziel (2006). *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the British Empire*. Penguin Books; Duby, G. (2003). *Atlas historique mondial*. Larousse.

Partition created questions of national belonging, and many communities (such as the Sikhs, Christians, Sindhis, Parsis, etc) faced dilution of identity, disrecognition, delegitimization and faced land dispossession and violence. Among them were the Sindhi Hindus: a linguistically and religiously distinct community displaced from the Sindh region (now in Pakistan), whose migration did not coincide with a new state, a linguistic homeland, or a corresponding cultural zone in post-independence India. Over 700,000 Sindhi Hindus were displaced from the province of Sindh. Their story of Partition, however, often goes unnoticed in Partition Studies and by the state, primarily because their arrival lacked the immediate archetypal scenes of violence and bloodshed (Kothari, 2009). Unlike the immediate, widespread violence seen in Punjab, the Sindhi migration was marked by a different form of trauma¹, primarily a slow-burning of displacement, dispossession, and a silent loss of cultural identity. There is no internationally recognized refugee status granted to Sindhis in India and there remains a lack of official, state-sponsored monuments to lost Sindhi shrines in India. Instead, what endures is a distributed and emotional cultural baggage, manifested through gestures, recipes, family rituals, and increasingly, Instagram posts.

Memory is 'making present' and contemporary—i.e., though concerned with the past, it happens in the present—and is a form of work or labor. Memory, like history, encompasses the personal, constructed and collective aspects of our relationship with the past (Rothberg, 2020). Following this, I argue that the "spirit of place" or *genius loci* of Sindh is being preserved by Sindhi Hindus who migrated to India in unique ways, despite the physical displacement from Sindh. This preservation occurs through digital fragments, ritual gestures, and aesthetic circulation on Instagram, which functions as a surrogate archive. In the absence of temples, institutions, or codified language preservation, Instagram becomes a living archive: a space where memory is neither curated by states nor inscribed in textbooks, but made tactile through everyday visuals. Unlike traditional archives, it is personal, participatory, and emotionally charged. Hashtags operate as catalogues; memes become mnemonic devices.

This paper examines the role of Instagram in sustaining what might otherwise be lost. It explores how Sindhi Hindu memory, fragmented, embodied, and frequently undocumented, has found a surrogate archive in the digital space. It offers a new formulation: the diasporic *genius loci*, a mobile, affective spirit of place that survives not in soil or monument, but in gesture, image, and sensory and cultural repetition. Drawing on critical visual studies, memory theory, and digital ethnography, this study proposes that the Sindhi Hindu community sustains its cultural identity not through return, but through visual and affective circulation—posts, stories, reels, and rituals performed online. This study positions Instagram as a modern tool for mnemonic reconstruction, redefining place-making as an aesthetic practice of survival rather than a return to territory. For the Sindhi Hindu diaspora, Instagram acts as a "prosthetic geography," digitally replacing spaces lost to Partition, political borders, or assimilation. This paper analyzes user-generated content, including images of temples, ritual captions, food videos, and bhajan reels to demonstrate how digital media fosters a sense of belonging without relying on land, monuments, or institutional archives. The argument is not that architecture is irrelevant, but rather that its role as the sole carrier of a place's spirit is being challenged and supplemented by new, non-physical forms of cultural preservation. The paper thus poses a theoretical challenge to a traditional, monument-based view of architectural history.

This paper is divided into five main sections. Following this introduction, the "Theoretical Frameworks" section elaborates on the concept of the "Sindhi Hindu condition" and introduces the classical notion of *genius loci*. The subsequent section analyzes specific examples of user-generated content on Instagram, demonstrating how these posts collectively form a vernacular archive. This leads into an analytical section, including a comparative analysis with existing

¹ It is not universally true, as there were documented instances of violence against Sindhi Hindus during and after Partition.

theories, which explores the unique attributes of Instagram as a platform for cultural memory, including its role in fostering diasporic networking and aesthetic recursion. Finally, the section *Platform Politics and the Limits of Digital Memory* critically examines the algorithmic, commercial, and exclusionary aspects of Instagram, before the *Conclusion* summarizes the study's findings and outlines avenues for future research.

Theoretical Frameworks

This section explores the "Sindhi condition"—marked by historical displacement, ongoing cultural fragmentation, and the absence of traditional anchors for memory—which sets the stage for a re-examination of the classical concept of *genius loci*. If the spirit of a place is typically understood as being rooted in fixed geography, enduring architecture, and established archives, then the Sindhi experience necessitates a new theoretical approach. It is precisely within this void of conventional territorial and institutional support that a fluid, performative, and digitally mediated understanding of *genius loci* emerges, one that allows a "spirit of place" to persist and be actively reconstructed in diaspora.

The Sindhi Condition

The Sindhis community, previously affluent and prosperous, arrived penniless and stateless in India and became a linguistic minority, experiencing a significant decline in social standing (Kothari, 2009). Their wealth was not in portable assets but was intrinsically tied to the land, trade networks, and social structures they lost, highlighting a powerful and often overlooked aspect of the economic violence of Partition. Their displacement was marked by dispersal into refugee camps like Deolali, into neighborhoods in Ulhasnagar, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, and later into global cities like Dubai, Toronto, and Singapore. However, the Sindhi mercantile community, upon migrating from Pakistan to India, actively shed the "refugee" label. This was due to their strong emphasis on wealth and self-reliance, which led them to perceive the term as pejorative, implying weakness, helplessness, and dependency. Sindhi Hindus viewed themselves as rightful citizens of independent India, always considering India their home, a sentiment briefly overshadowed by Pakistan's creation (August 15, 1947, until their migration). Upon arriving in India, they strove for financial improvement to avoid perceived helplessness and achieve higher socio-economic status.

To gain local acceptance, they chose to assimilate into the Hindu fold rather than clinging to their ethnicity: Sindhi Hindus adopted local cultures, learning languages like Gujarati, Hindi, or Marathi, and participating in festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi or Navratri. Many Sindhi women abandoned traditional dress for saris or salwar-kameez, and some in Gujarat and Rajasthan became vegetarian. This adaptation also led them to downplay or discard Sindhi ethnic elements with "Muslim" overtones. The Perso-Arabic alphabet, widely used for Sindhi, was among the first casualties, followed by a decline in written Sindhi, and to a lesser extent, spoken Sindhi in India (Ranjan, 2019). The dispersion and displacement of Sindhis around the world meant that many subsections of Sindhis emerged, with hybrid customs with the host land. For example, a Sindhi from Gujarat and a Sindhi from Maharashtra today would have many differences in dialect, customs and traditions followed.

The pragmatic Sindhi community, forgoing immediate nostalgia for their homeland, quickly reestablished itself as successful businessmen. This collective choice of amnesia enabled them to become exemplary migrants, adapting and achieving affluence as if Partition had never happened (Kothari, 2009). Unlike other migrant groups, most Sindhi Hindus in the diaspora do not view Sindh as a "sacred homeland"² due to its Muslim majority and their transplantation of

² There are, however, dissenting voices, i.e. some Sindhi groups (e.g., Jhulelal devotees) still imagine Sindh as sacred.

holy shrines to India.³ A lack of overarching Sindhi provincial identity meant little attachment to the land beyond personal nostalgia. For many, Partition transformed Sindh into an alien "Muslim" country, leading them to turn away from it. This, coupled with elements of Sindhi culture perceived as "Muslim," has diluted Sindhi Hindu identity in India (Ranjan, 2019). The "Sindhudesh" movement has quietened down over the years, there is no internationally recognized refugee status, no large-scale national monuments to lost Sindhi shrines in India.

What remains instead is a distributed and affective cultural residue - gestures, recipes, family rituals and local customs. Therefore, the Sindhis' attachment to Sindh is not political or provincial, but personal, spiritual, and affective. The diasporic *genius loci* is the preservation of this specific kind of non-territorial, intimate connection, and this distinction is key to the paper's central claim. The absence of a territorial anchor meant that several aspects of Sindhi Hindu culture were rendered particularly fragile in post-Partition India. Language was the most immediate casualty: the Perso-Arabic script for Sindhi was abandoned, while spoken Sindhi declined in favor of Gujarati, Hindi, and Marathi, leaving many younger Sindhis unable to read, write, or converse fluently in their ancestral tongue (Kothari, 2009). Ritual practices were equally vulnerable. Shrines and darbars left behind in Sindh could not be replicated at scale in India, and their transplantation was fragmentary, limited to improvised altars or small temples without institutional support (Kothari, 2009). Even devotional songs and bhajans, transmitted orally, risked dilution in hybridized forms. Cuisine, though resilient in domestic spaces, was threatened by its lack of codification: recipes like koki, sai bhaji, or Sindhi kadhi survived largely through oral transmission and the embodied memory of grandmothers, with no manuals or institutionalized preservation (Malhotra, 2018). Finally, broader social customs-wedding rituals, dress patterns such as ajrak, and forms of oral storytelling-struggled to maintain continuity in the absence of a Sindhi province or cultural infrastructure to safeguard them (Ranjan, 2019).

Academic studies on Sindhi Hindu ritual practice, migration patterns, or material culture are relatively scarce. These cultural elements were not simply underdocumented; they exemplify what may be termed archival absence-a condition in which a community's most vital practices lack institutional recognition, linguistic stability, or material permanence. This absence produces the archival precarity⁴ that characterizes Sindhi cultural memory: rituals survive in fragments, recipes in gestures, and prayers in partial translations. In this context, digital platforms like Instagram become not a novelty but a necessity-a dispersed, participatory response to the void left by the lack of homeland, monument, or state archive.

The inherent fragmentation, non-monumentality, and archival absence that characterize the Sindhi Hindu experience thus pose a significant challenge to traditional conceptions of *genius loci*. If the "spirit of place" is understood as being rooted in physical territory, enduring architecture, and state-sanctioned archives, then the Sindhi condition, marked by lost land, transplanted shrines, and undocumented rituals, forces a re-evaluation. It is precisely this void, this lack of conventional anchor points for cultural memory, that necessitates a new theoretical approach, moving beyond fixed geographies to embrace a more fluid, performative, and digitally mediated understanding of how a "spirit of place" can persist and be actively reconstructed in diaspora. This historical and socio-cultural context thus sets the stage for rethinking the classical concept of *genius loci* in a diasporic frame.

³ Sindhi Hindus ingeniously relocated their religious sites, including the Kambar Darbar, from Sindh to India. The Kambar Darbar, a temple in Kambar Ali Shah, Sindh, housed the samadhis of three gurus and was known for its interfaith Diwali festival. After Partition, most devotees moved to India and sought to move the samadhis to Bombay. However, Vali Vilaitrai's grandson, Saiin Radhakrishnan, who managed the darbar, refused. In 1957, Kishinchand Vilait, inspired by a meditation vision, travelled to Kambar with three devotees. They secretly collected a portion of the ashes from the samadhis, which was considered a miracle. These ashes were later enshrined in a new darbar built in Kandivli, Bombay, in 1959, which is now a bustling spiritual and charitable center. The original Kambar Darbar in Sindh, though retaining some ashes and its Diwali festival, has declined due to fewer devotees.

⁴ As Kamaljeet Bhasin-Malik (2007), urban enclaves such as Ulhasnagar and Adipur, which emerged as post-Partition Sindhi settlements, were constructed out of necessity rather than cultural preservation. These spaces fostered forms of community, but they did so informally, often without state resources or documentation.

Genius Loci

The classical Latin concept of *genius loci*—literally, the "spirit of a place"—has long anchored architectural and geographical theory. It implies a spirit unique to a site, felt through form, atmosphere, and embedded ritual. In contemporary scholarship, the idea has evolved from metaphysical to metaphorical: the *genius loci* is not a deity but a mood, not divine but affective. Norberg-Schulz (1980), drawing from phenomenology, famously argued that the *genius loci* is not merely symbolic but experiential: it is what allows inhabitants to "dwell" in a meaningful environment; *genius loci* is inseparable from architecture's capacity to foster belonging and is where space becomes place through orientation, repetition, and care. However, such spatial theories typically assume the fixity of location and the continuity of physical site.

For displaced communities, particularly those whose homeland has been lost, altered, or rendered inaccessible, the *genius loci* becomes a haunted and unsettled category. What happens when the site itself is no longer accessible? When the place is destroyed, repurposed, or politically unreachable? When its rituals, language, and spatial order are dislocated from geography? What remains of the *genius loci* when land is lost but longing persists? For diasporic communities like the Sindhi Hindus, there is no going back to a homeland that remembers them. Sindh remains in Pakistan, while the people who once lived there—those who built its shrines, spoke its dialects, cooked its recipes—live across India and the globe. The physical site has been severed, but its spirit persists. It lingers not in architecture, but in action. Sindhis globally utilize personal contacts and the Internet to reestablish lives in new locations, leveraging resources and experiences from other Sindhis. This international movement of people and resources shapes modern Sindhi traditions. Sindhi Hindu families and individuals developed unique practices influenced by their heritage, family traditions, personal interests, urban living, and chance (Ramey, 2008).

This paper proposes a new configuration: the diasporic *genius loci*—a spirit of place constituted through displacement. This spirit is not site-specific but mobile and networked, not fixed but fluid. It survives not in soil, but in syntax and repetition. It is sensed through ritual actions, reassembled cuisines, accent inflections, and increasingly, through digital images. For communities without a homeland, without visible monuments or state-sponsored preservation, cultural memory becomes affective, aesthetic, and participatory. It is not archived, it is enacted. As we transition from understanding the theoretical underpinnings of *genius loci* and its re-performance, the subsequent analysis will delve into how these concepts manifest in the digital realm, specifically through the lens of Instagram. This platform, with its emphasis on visual storytelling and user-generated content, offers a unique opportunity to observe the contemporary interpretation and dissemination of place-based identities, allowing us to explore how individuals digitally capture, share, and ultimately redefine the spirit of a place through their online interactions.

Digital Ethnography: Instagram as Cultural Archive

This study examines how the Sindhi Hindu diaspora uses digital platforms to preserve cultural memory. Employing digital ethnography, critical visual analysis, and postmemory theory, the research analyzed 200 Instagram posts with #Sindhi and #SindhiCulture from May-July 2025, covering diverse content. Ethical rigor was maintained by seeking permission for image reproduction. Semi-structured interviews with Sindhi Hindu diaspora members of various generations and geographies (including Partition survivors) provided context, focusing on cultural memory, digital platform use, and cultural continuity. Six illustrative posts were purposively selected. This mixed-methods approach combines quantitative data with qualitative analysis and interviews, ensuring robust and systematic claims about diasporic memory practices, moving beyond anecdotal evidence to reflect collective patterns.

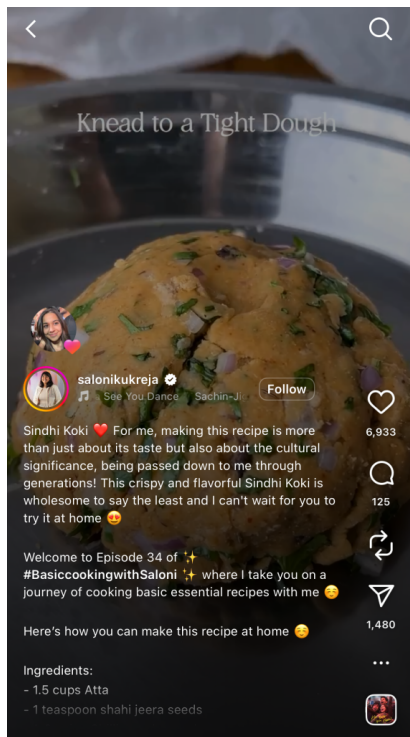


Figure 2a

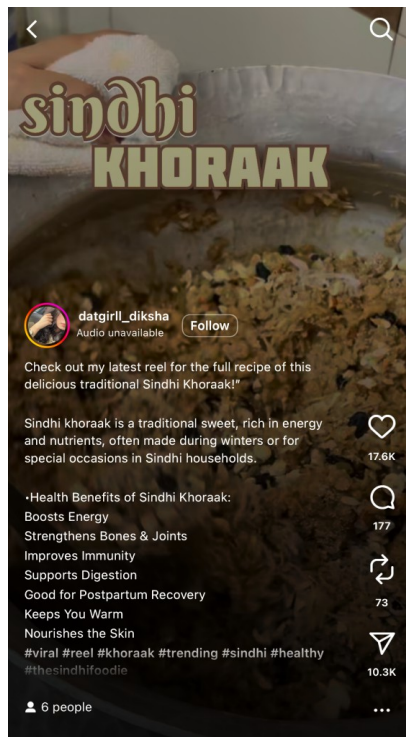


Figure 2b

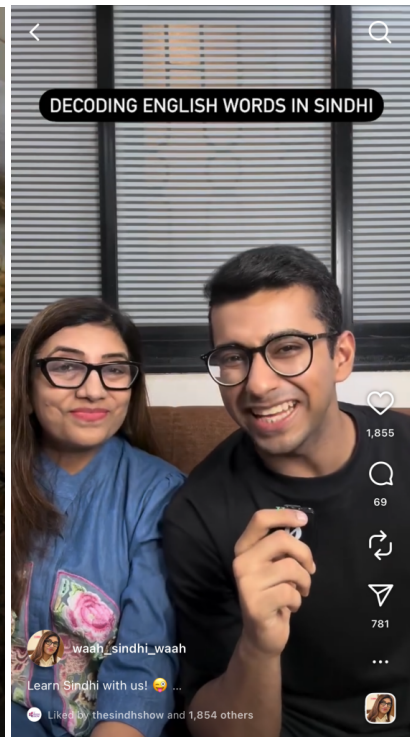


Figure 2c

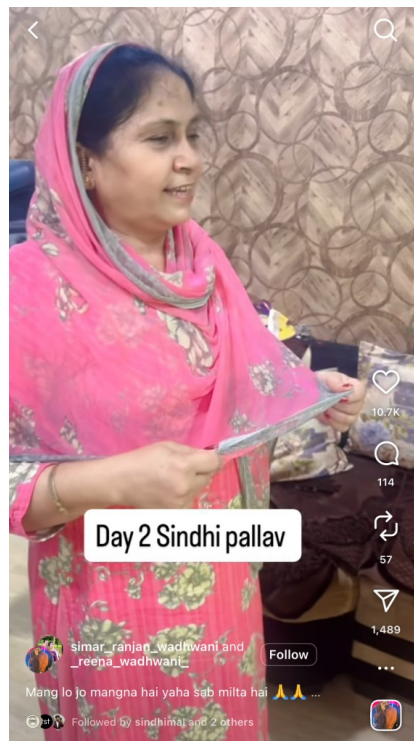


Figure 2d



Figure 2e



Figure 2f

Figure 2. Sindhi cultural presence on Instagram on the #Sindhi feed (images used with intimation and permission)

Post ID	Content Type	Theoretical Significance / Notes
Figure 2a	Food video (preparing koki)	Preserves a traditional Sindhi recipe. This digital snippet acts as a vital <i>mnemonic infrastructure</i> , transmitting cultural memory and embodied knowledge through an accessible, shareable format.
Figure 2b	Food video (preparing khorak, a traditional preparation with dry fruits for winters and/or postpartum healing)	Recipes with specific cultural or medicinal significance, like <i>khorak</i> , are now transmitted within the diaspora now through digital content. This is knowledge that would traditionally be passed down in families, especially through women.
Figure 2c	Funny reel comparing common English words into Sindhi slang	Highlights contemporary hybrid linguistic practices, demonstrating intergenerational connection. It supports anchoring identity in digital space by showing how language and cultural identity are preserved and adapted within the diaspora through engaging digital content.
Figure 2d	A reel (within a larger series about what happens in a Sindhi festival) explaining the wording of the post-ritual prayer Palau/Pallav	Ensures the continuity of a post-ritual prayer, along with its meaning and pronunciation by making a historically transmitted cultural element accessible to a modern digital audience.
Figure 2e	A reel (within a larger series about what happens in a Sindhi festival, Thadri) showcasing traditional foods, and the happenings around the festival	Digitally captures and disseminates the embodied rituals and traditions of the Thadri festival, making it accessible and shareable across the diaspora.
Figure 2f	Informational reel on the zones of Sindh. These zones are fundamental to Sindhi naming conventions and traditions, even though some places are no longer inhabited by the same families and subjects.	Highlights how historical geographical knowledge, even of uninhabited areas, remains crucial for Sindhi identity, informing naming conventions and traditions within the diaspora. It acts as a digital anchor, connecting individuals to a "phantom geography" and enabling the reconstruction of a non-territorial sense of place.

Table 1. Comparison of posts 2a-2f

Sindhi cultural presence on Instagram emerges across a spectrum of post types that collectively form a vernacular archive. Ritual and devotional content is central: reels of Cheti Chand celebrations, bhajans with phonetic subtitles, or images of makeshift home altars reframe sacred practice for diasporic circulation. Offline events, such as Cheti Chand celebrations, often generate content for Instagram and help spread awareness. Additionally, unique Sindhi traditions surrounding festivals like Diwali can also contribute to this content and engagement.

Equally prominent are posts around food and domesticity—videos of koki or sai bhaji prepared by grandmothers, photographs of festival meals, or humorous captions about “Sindhi breakfast”—that double as mnemonic devices. Language practices also migrate online through captions in Sindhi-English hybrid slang, transliterated prayers, and memes, which make cultural inheritance accessible to younger generations. It also focuses on historical informational content, such as the circulation of archival photos or maps of Sindh, which aids viewers in understanding the community's relationship with a phantom geography and how a sense of place is reconstructed through a combination of image and text. Diasporic belonging is often articulated through images of temples left behind in Sindh, posts tagged from Dubai, Ulhasnagar, or Toronto, and hashtags such as #SindhiCulture or #ChetiChand that knit together scattered geographies.

Finally, humor and creativity animate the feed, from memes about Sindhi thrift to remixed devotional songs with contemporary beats. Taken together, these posts demonstrate that Instagram is not a nostalgic scrapbook but a living repertoire, one that preserves memory through everyday gestures as much as through sacred ritual.

Analysis: Mechanisms of Digital Memory-Making

In our discussion so far, we have seen that the dislocation of the Sindhi Hindus created a distinct condition: a diaspora without monumentality. There are no state archives dedicated to Sindhi Hindu culture. There are a few university departments researching their literary or ritual contributions. Cultural memory exists largely in domestic spaces—temples above shops, kitchens echoing recipes without written instructions, and family WhatsApp groups swapping wedding songs with no subtitles. The past is preserved not institutionally, but intuitively.

The community's invisibility in national and global memory-making processes results in what might be termed archival absence (Falzetti, 2014). This is not just a lack of documentation—it is a lack of language, space, and legitimacy within dominant frameworks of heritage. When Sindhi Hindus are referenced, it is often through caricature: the entrepreneurial trader, the flashy wedding host, the wealthy merchant. The rituals and rhythms beneath this surface—those that connect generations, sustain memory, and construct belonging—are rarely seen.

The consequences of this archival absence are both epistemic and emotional. The lack of formal historiography has produced an insecure inheritance (Guénif Souilamas, 2003)—a condition where individuals know they belong to a cultural lineage but lack the tools to name, frame, or transmit it. This generates what some theorists term “ambient grief”: a sense of cultural loss that is diffuse, quiet, and difficult to defend against (Stewart, 2007). Many Sindhi youth do not know whether their festivals are specifically Sindhi or broadly Hindu, whether their prayers are canonical or idiosyncratic, or whether their cuisine is unique or adapted.

Cultural knowledge survives instead through micro-practices: the way a prayer plate is arranged, the cadence of a bhajan passed down orally, the specific heat of oil in a koki recipe. These are not inscribed in official records; they are intimate archives. For Sindhis, the memory of a place they cannot return to becomes a form of affective architecture: invisible, but structuring. In this case, Instagram does not merely emerge as a digital platform—it becomes an archival response. It allows users to document that which was undocumented, to preserve gestures that might otherwise fade into domestic obscurity. The platform's immediacy, aesthetic framing, and participatory model permit a kind of memory work unavailable in traditional media. The absence of Sindh as a place is countered by the presence of Sindh as a digital aesthetic—one formed

through ajrak prints, inherited rituals, phonetic hashtags, and visual storytelling. Instagram, then, serves a dual function: it becomes both the site of reassembly and the mechanism of recognition. For a community without monuments, archives, or institutions, the feed becomes the temple. The caption becomes the oral history. The shared post becomes the prayer. They are everyday anchors. Posts that say, "We were here. We are still here." In the absence of an official history, these fragments form a soft, affective archive.

Instagram is not an archive in the traditional sense. It is not a stable repository curated by cultural authorities, nor is it a platform designed for historical preservation. Yet for many Sindhi Hindus in diaspora, it has become the most dynamic and accessible site of cultural memory. Unlike museums or state-sponsored databases, Instagram allows memory to circulate in fragments-casual, aesthetic, improvised-and still remain meaningful. These fragments do not aspire to permanence. Their power lies in repetition, recognition, and emotional resonance. In the absence of state-supported cultural preservation or formal historical narratives, Instagram has emerged as a vernacular archive for the Sindhi Hindu diaspora. As a visual-first, user-driven platform, it allows for the circulation of mnemonic fragments that would otherwise go undocumented: images of community rituals, photos of home altars, reels of food preparation, scanned wedding invitations, or maps annotated by descendants to trace ancestral towns. These posts do not claim academic authority, nor do they aim for historical completeness. Yet they operate as nodes of affective connectivity, enabling users to perform memory, signal belonging, and recognize themselves in others' fragments. Across the search for #Sindhi, as seen in Figure 2, the images are inconsistent, unpolished, and often accompanied by personal anecdotes rather than historical facts. Yet collectively, they form a vernacular archive—a participatory system of memory sustained not through preservation, but through circulation.

Instagram's interface enables this circulation in uniquely diasporic ways. The platform's ephemerality (via stories), its aesthetic emphasis (via filters and layout), and its algorithmic visibility (via hashtags and engagement) all shape how Sindhi cultural material is produced, seen, and remembered. Hashtags like #SindhiCulture, #ChetiChand, or #LalMeriPat act as unofficial catalogues, linking posts across geographies. This scattered visibility constructs a digital map-not of a territory, but of a dispersed identity. Take, for example, Figure 2a, a reel showing the preparation of koki, a traditional Sindhi flatbread. In a traditional archive, this would be ephemera at best. On Instagram, it becomes mnemonic infrastructure. It is an image loaded with inheritance-of food as ritual, of gendered memory, of embodied knowledge.

Instagram's architecture also facilitates diasporic networking. Hashtags like #SindhiCulture, #Ajrak, or #ChetiChand2025 allow scattered individuals to find and form ephemeral communities. This constitutes what Appadurai refers to as the diasporic public sphere (Appadurai, 1996), a space where translocal subjects engage in cultural production that resists national enclosure. On Instagram, this is performed through the aesthetic curation of identity. A recipe card in Sindhi-English, a throwback photo of a Sindhi temple in Karachi, a bhajan reel with subtitles: each is a cultural utterance not just for visibility but for recognition and reply. This vernacular archive is not curated for academic institutions, but for intra-community resonance. It is non-hierarchical and participatory, allowing cultural memory to be circulated by youth, elders, preservationists, or enthusiasts.

The archive does not aim to historicize—it aims to remain legible across generations. As Cover notes in the context of feminist digital practice, "the informal circulatory logics of social media make it a site of care and repair" (Cover, 2024). Visual repetition plays a key role. A particular reel format is remixed across cities: one version in Ulhasnagar, another in Dubai, another in Vancouver. Each features different imagery but maintains the same melody and invocation. This is aesthetic recursion as memory-making. These fragments are not about accuracy; they are about recognizability. They signal: "You may not know this history, but you know this sound, this look, this mood."

The archival logic here is affective. Posts are bookmarked not for research but for remembrance. A photograph is shared not for its metadata but because “this looks like Nani’s kitchen.” The platform becomes what Haraway (1988) might call a “situated archive”—an archive built from the specific, partial, and embodied positions of its users. In this light, Instagram does not replace history—it rescales it. It becomes a shrine without bricks, an album without a spine, an archive built from touchscreens, hashtags, and recollections. For a community with an inaccessible homeland, undocumented rituals, and a fading language, this digital archive is essential.

Campt (2017), in her work on vernacular photography, describes such digital traces as a form of quiet archiving—residues of belonging that are “felt rather than fully known.” This framing is particularly apt for the Sindhi case. Such posts do not seek external validation. They are not made for educational purposes or academic legitimacy. They are offerings, visual murmurs shared with others who might recognize the song, the spice, the pattern. This recognition is often subtle: a “like” from another Sindhi in Johannesburg, a comment from someone in Mumbai saying “Same in my house too,” a saved post by a user in Jakarta hoping to try the recipe. These micro-interactions form a network of resonance, a dispersed community stitched together by aesthetic memory.

Instagram also allows for counter-archival creativity. Sindhi youth create memes in Sindhi-English hybrid slang (as seen in Figure 2c), remix devotional music with trap beats, or reimagine rituals as part of digital storytelling. These posts are not archival in the sense of being factual—they are performative archives, keeping memory alive through reinvention. In this space, a Thadri celebration, as seen in Figure 2e, becomes not a reenactment of the past, but a remixed, living ritual: part spiritual, part aesthetic, wholly contemporary. Ritual here does not exist in isolation. It is translated, reinterpreted, sometimes even redesigned for Instagram’s aesthetic logics. The brass diya is replaced with a scented soy candle. The sindoor is presented alongside hashtags. A religious chant becomes the background audio of a short-form reel. This is not dilution but adaptation. The goal is not to recreate the past faithfully, but to ensure its resonance in the present.

The key affordance of Instagram is not historical fidelity—it is affective visibility. What is seen, what is remembered, what is shared—all are shaped by what the platform amplifies. But within its limitations lies opportunity. Instagram permits a form of memory work that is fluid, collective, and emotionally resonant. It turns cultural inheritance into a visual rhythm. It does not preserve Sindh—it re-performs it. For diasporic communities, repetition becomes architecture. In the absence of homeland, belonging is not found in geography but in gesture, and gesture, repeated across generations and screens, begins to shape a new spatial grammar. On Instagram, Sindhi rituals are not only recorded; they are rehearsed as seen in Figure 2d. A lamp lit for Cheti Chand, a grandmother’s hands folding dough, a childhood prayer uploaded with subtitles—each act constitutes a form of cultural scaffolding. It is not the site that grants sacredness, but the performance that asserts it. This repetition is critical. Drawing from Taylor’s (2007) concept of the repertoire, we see that rituals are carried in bodies, not in books. For many young Sindhis who do not speak the language fluently, do not know the geography of Sindh, or cannot name the deities beyond Jhulelal, digital ritual provides a way to inhabit memory. This is repertoire at scale—a repetition that becomes ritual by virtue of its collective, emotional echo. These posts become mnemonic devices. Users remember what they forgot, or never fully knew, through visuals: these gestures are not aimed at historical correction, but at emotional continuity. They preserve not facts, but feelings.

This repetition also challenges the assumption that diaspora is inherently disintegrative. On Instagram, diaspora becomes an aesthetic assemblage: patching together prayer, joke, fashion, food, and memory. The repetition does not aim to create a perfect archive—it aims to create a living one. It is messy, inconsistent, and personal. But it allows memory to be distributed, instead of contained. In this way, Instagram becomes not just a platform, but a prosthetic ritual space.

Ritual is typically understood as the formal enactment of belief through symbolic practice. But in diasporic and digitally mediated contexts, ritual is often informal, improvised, and iterative. For the Sindhi Hindu diaspora, ritual survives not through grand religious architecture or state-sponsored liturgy, but through everyday aesthetic repetition on screens, in kitchens, and across continents. Instagram becomes not just a platform for cultural expression but a stage for ritualized digital performance.

In diaspora studies, repetition is both a sign of rupture and a mechanism for repair (Gilroy, 2002). When homeland is inaccessible, the gestures that once occurred in fixed geographies must be re-enacted elsewhere, often without full knowledge of origin, and increasingly mediated by screens. This process aligns with Turner's (2017) view of ritual as liminal, occurring at the thresholds of identity, and Judith Butler's theory of performativity: that identity is not a static possession but an act sustained through repetition (Butler, 2006). The Instagram posts in Figure 2 depicting Sindhi ritual practices are examples of this performative survival. These acts are not ritual in the orthodox sense; they are what anthropologist Don Handelman terms *ritual-as-event*: marked by repetition, but defined by participation and social recognition, rather than doctrinal fidelity (Handelman, 1998). Moreover, these practices reflect what anthropologist Michael Jackson calls *existential mobility*, the act of reproducing familiarity in unfamiliar contexts (Jackson, 2006). When diaspora subjects perform the same actions weekly, tag them with cultural identifiers, and receive feedback through likes and comments, they are not merely expressing identity. They are producing place, producing continuity, and asserting a sense of belonging that defies geographic separation.

Critically, these rituals are designed for viewership. They are captioned, edited, filtered, and posted, making them both sincere and performative. This apparent paradox is productive. As Rettberg (2016) notes in her work on digital self-representation, the act of curation does not negate authenticity. Instead, it renders identity visible within culturally legible forms. In this case, the visibility of Sindhi rituals allows them to circulate beyond the immediate family or neighborhood. A practice that might have been forgotten becomes retrievable, teachable, and repeatable. The performative nature of Instagram ritual also fosters intergenerational translation. A grandchild may not understand a *bhajan* in Sindhi, but they caption it with transliteration. A recipe that was once unwritten is now recorded as a reel. These are not translations in the linguistic sense; they are modal adaptations—transforming oral, embodied, and sensory knowledge into visual and textual formats. This is especially significant for cultures with non-monumental memory traditions. As Huyssen observes, modern memory is often tied to monumentalism: statues, museums, and archives (Huyssen, 2009). Sindhi Hindu memory, however, is largely transmitted through micro-rituals—the unspoken knowledge of how to fold cloth around a deity, or the instinctual use of spices in cooking. When such practices are documented digitally, they gain semi-permanence and shareability.

Ultimately, repetition in these digital rituals does not simply preserve culture; it generates affective coherence. When someone performs a ritual because “Nani did it this way,” and another person in a different city echoes it with the same caption, they participate in a diasporic choreography—a rhythm of identity composed across distance. These repetitions may not constitute theology. But they are unmistakably theory-in-practice, embodied philosophies of survival, intimacy, and recognition. The *genius loci*, once located in a riverbank shrine in Sindh, is now diffused across thousands of devices. It is felt not in the architecture of temples, but in the choreography of digital touch-clicking “post,” tapping “save,” captioning a memory with a half-remembered phrase.

Discussion: Comparative Analysis and Implications

Theorist/Concept	Key Idea	Mode of Belonging	Scale	How Diasporic Genius Loci Differs
Christian Norberg-Schulz (1984) – Genius Loci	Spirit of place arises from architecture, landscape, and atmosphere; memory and identity inseparable from site	Dwelling, embodied in site	Local/ material	In diaspora, the spirit of place is not tethered to physical site; memory and identity endure through gestures, performance, ritual, and digital circulation, rather than enduring stone or soil.
Benedict Anderson (1991) – Imagined Communities	Nation sustained through shared imagination, synchronized temporality	Collective imagination, political/national	Macro/ political	Focus shifts from nation to intimate, affective reactivation of homeland; belonging enacted via domestic rituals, repetition, and dispersed digital gestures.
Arjun Appadurai (1996) – Mediascapes	Global media flows shape imagination	Circulation of texts, images	Transnational	Diasporic genius loci emphasizes anchoring and affective continuity; diaspora is deterritorialized but not placeless, with Instagram as a prosthetic, mnemonic ground.
Homi Bhabha (2012) – Third Space	Identity formed in hybrid, in-between spaces	Negotiation, hybridity	Cultural/ relational	Emphasizes recursive, performative continuity over hybridity; belonging sustained through repeated gestures and rituals across generations and screens.
Diana Taylor (2007) – Archive vs Repertoire	Memory via texts/institutions vs embodied enactments	Embodied gestures, rituals, enactments	Local/ dispersed	Digital and vernacular hybrid archive; Instagram enables repeatable, shareable scenarios that activate memory in the present, transforming ephemeral acts into persistent cultural knowledge.
Marianne Hirsch (2012) – Postmemory	Descendants inherit affective memory of trauma	Transmission across generations	Generational/ cultural	Memory is secondhand, fragmented, visualized, and experienced as “phantom geography”; digital repertoire allows postmemory to be repeated, networked, performative, and aesthetic.

Avtar Brah (2005) – Diaspora Space	Identity shaped by displacement, history, everyday experience	Layered, plural, hybrid practices	Diasporic	Spirit of place survives without homeland, enacted through hybrid language, rituals, and digital visualization, sustaining belonging in layered, plural formations.
James Clifford (1999) – Routes vs Roots	Diaspora as mobility rather than fixed dwelling	Negotiation, mobility	Transnational	Highlights mobile negotiation; diasporic genius loci shows spirit of place as migratory yet anchored in affective, ritualized, and performative acts.
Andreas Huyssen (2009) – Monumentalism	Cultural memory preserved in monuments, archives, state-sponsored sites	Institutional/official	National/local	Sindhi diaspora demonstrates insufficiency of monumentalism; memory persists through vernacular monumentality, ephemeral, participatory, and digitally mediated counter-monuments.
Tina Campt (2017) – Quiet Archive	Memory preserved in small, repeated, affective acts	Participatory, everyday gestures	Local/networked	Instagram and repeated enactments function as searchable, shareable, quiet archives, preserving diasporic genius loci through minor, performative acts imbued with community meaning.

The diasporic *genius loci* synthesizes these frameworks while carving a distinct conceptual space. Norberg-Schulz situates spirit in architecture, landscape, and atmosphere, inseparable from memory and identity at a fixed site. The Sindhi diaspora, displaced after Partition, reconfigures this: spirit of place endures through gestures, ritualized performance, and digital circulation, rather than enduring stone or soil. This mobilization of memory highlights phantom geography, where place is experienced not through coordinates but through recurring acts, intergenerational echoes, and affective continuity.

Anderson, Appadurai, and Bhabha provide tools to understand imagination, media flows, and hybridity. The diasporic *genius loci* shifts focus to anchored, performative continuity: diaspora is deterritorialized yet not placeless, reconstituted through ritual, repetition, and networked digital gestures. Clifford's "routes vs roots" framework emphasizes mobility over fixity, aligning with the diasporic *genius loci*'s emphasis on migratory negotiation of place. Taylor's archive vs repertoire distinction clarifies how memory circulates: in Sindhi life, Instagram functions as a vernacular, digital hybrid archive—a scenario in which memory is activated in the present, transforming ephemeral acts into repeatable, shareable knowledge. Hirsch's postmemory theory underscores secondhand, intergenerational memory, now visualized and performative, enabling aesthetic reproduction of past experience. Brah's diaspora space situates this continuity within layered, plural, hybrid formations, enacted in language, rituals, and

visual culture. Huyssen's critique of monumentalism and Camp's quiet archive emphasize that memory need not reside in official monuments or institutional validation: the Sindhi diaspora sustains vernacular counter-monuments through everyday acts, now digitized. Instagram becomes a prosthetic, performative ground, where gestures, screenshots, captions, and posts coalesce into a diasporic *genius loci*, mobile, networked, and recursive—anchored not in land, but in relational, ritualized, and aesthetic enactments of memory.

Building on this comparative analysis, which highlights the unique mechanisms through which the Sindhi Hindu diaspora maintains its sense of place, the following section will delve into the inherent challenges and constraints of relying on platforms like Instagram. While the preceding discussion underscored the creative and resilient ways in which cultural memory is sustained digitally, it is equally crucial to critically examine the algorithmic, commercial, and exclusionary aspects that shape and potentially limit this new form of diasporic *genius loci*.

Platform Politics and the Limits of Digital Memory

Though Instagram provides a vernacular archive for Sindhi Hindus, its role as a host of cultural memory cannot be treated as neutral. The platform is shaped by algorithmic mediation: what circulates most visibly is determined not by cultural priority but by corporate logics of engagement. Highly visual content—festival attire, food photography, or stylized reels—tends to gain traction, while less “platform-friendly” materials, such as blurred family photographs or untranslated prayers, are often buried in the feed. This selective amplification risks producing “algorithmic memory,” a curated visibility structured by code rather than community (Van Dijck, 2022). It raises the danger of algorithmic erasure, where certain cultural forms fade not because the community neglects them, but because the platform deprioritizes them. This intersects with the problem of commercial ownership. Instagram is not an archive designed for cultural preservation but a profit-driven platform where ads, sponsorships, and influencer logics shape what is most visible. This corporate infrastructure introduces a tension between authenticity and performativity, as cultural practices become subtly reshaped to optimize for likes, shares, and algorithmic reach (Abidin, 2018). Rituals or memories may thus be refashioned into platform-friendly aesthetics, such as a bhajan reel with trap beats or a stylized recipe video—that perform Sindhi identity in ways that are legible to the algorithm but risk diluting their original context.

Equally pressing is the question of archival precarity. Instagram appears to offer permanence but is in fact a fragile repository. Its features are contingent on corporate decisions: changes to the algorithm, the discontinuation of reels or hashtags, or even the platform's eventual decline could erase large swathes of cultural material overnight. Digital archives are characterized by enduring ephemerality; they persist only through constant technological renewal (Chun, 2014). For a community already marked by displacement, reliance on such an unstable medium mirrors the vulnerability of their own cultural inheritance.

Finally, Instagram practices are marked by silences and exclusions. Elders who lack digital literacy, poorer Sindhis without access to smartphones, and those living outside cosmopolitan centers remain underrepresented. The resulting vernacular archive is therefore skewed toward younger, urban, middle-class diasporic voices. Hashtag culture further amplifies an English-language bias, privileging posts that align with globalized aesthetics over those in Sindhi or hybrid idioms. Digital publics are never evenly distributed; they are structured by infrastructures of visibility that reward certain identities while silencing others (Terranova, 2004). Instagram's role as an emancipatory archive for the Sindhi diaspora is complex. Online cultural survival is both creative and constrained, shaped by corporate algorithms and communal intent. Despite its precariousness, Instagram is essential for Sindhi Hindus to sustain cultural memory, given the absence of traditional archives.

Conclusion

The Sindhi Hindu community, displaced in 1947 and subsequently scattered, exemplifies a distinctive form of diasporic memory and belonging. Their experience demonstrates cultural survival without physical return, identity without a homeland, and continuity without institutional preservation. This condition—fragmented yet resilient—diverges from common diaspora models that emphasize trauma, monuments, or nostalgic nationalism. Instead, Sindhi Hindus sustain cultural presence through everyday practices—gestures, recipes, rituals, and increasingly, digital images. This paper has proposed that these practices constitute a diasporic *genius loci*, sustained through repetition and circulation rather than territory or monument. In doing so, it provides a conceptual reframing of place as diasporic, portable, and recursive, and contributes to broader debates in postcolonial memory, digital heritage, and diaspora studies.

The Sindhi Hindu case contributes three key insights. First, it demonstrates that vernacular preservation can emerge in the absence of state or institutional recognition. Second, it highlights the role of platformed publics in sustaining diasporic identity, complicating assumptions that cultural continuity must be state-anchored or monument-based. Third, it shows that digital archives are both productive and precarious, shaped as much by community practices as by corporate algorithms and infrastructures.

In this context, Instagram operates not simply as a visibility tool but as a prosthetic site of memory, where fragments of ritual and heritage circulate as vernacular, participatory practices. Posts, reels, and hashtags do not restore a lost homeland but function as sites of reassembly, enabling coherence across a scattered community. Through digital interfaces, practices once confined to domestic or local spaces are rendered legible, repeatable, and shareable, allowing for cultural continuity through fragmentary yet affectively resonant forms. By introducing the concept of a diasporic *genius loci*, this study reinterprets the classical “spirit of place” for communities lacking access to their original geography. It demonstrates that place can be detached from physical soil and re-anchored in ritual repetition, affective circulation, and digital mediation. In doing so, it challenges dominant binaries in memory and diaspora studies—archive versus repertoire, homeland versus hostland, nostalgia versus rupture—by foregrounding practices of continuity that are iterative, improvised, and platformed.

This digital understanding of heritage is crucial for displaced communities and academic discourse, spanning architectural history, digital archiving, and diaspora studies. Future research can expand on this framework. Future research could explore how other displaced groups leverage digital platforms for cultural preservation. Further attention to intergenerational dynamics would be valuable: how younger Sindhis’ use of Instagram intersects with elders’ oral and ritual traditions, and whether this produces tension, hybridization, or translation. Research should also examine platform politics more systematically, including how algorithmic curation, language hierarchies, and commercial logics shape what becomes legible as “heritage.” Finally, it is important to explore the limits of digital archives: what happens to memory practices when platforms change, disappear, or exclude certain demographics.

References

- Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Publishing.
- Anderson, B. R. O. G. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The location of culture*. Taylor & Francis.
- Bhasin-Malik, K. (2007). *In the making: Identity formation in South Asia*. Three Essays Collective.
- Brah, A. (2005). *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. Taylor & Francis.
- Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Campt, T. (2017). *Listening to images*. Duke University Press.
- Chun, W. H. K. (2014). *Programmed visions: Software and memory*. MIT Press.
- Clifford, J. (1999). *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Harvard University Press.

- Cover, R. (2024). Apprehending digital hostility and online abuse: Feminist care ethics in/and digital ecologies. *Thesis Eleven*, 183(1), 33–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136241284658>
- Espace Mondial Atlas. (n.d.). *Identity mobilization driving the Partition of India*. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://espace-mondial-atlas.sciencespo.fr/en/topic-strategies-of-transnational-actors/map-3C02-EN-identity-mobilization-driving-the-partition-of-india.html>
- Falzetti, A. G. (2014). Archival absence: The burden of history. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 5(2), 128–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2014.957258>
- Gilroy, P. (2002). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. Verso.
- Greenberg, J. D. (2005). Generations of memory: Remembering Partition in India/Pakistan and Israel/Palestine. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25(1), 110–189.
- Guénif Souilamas, N. (2003). *Des “Beurettes” aux descendantes d’immigrants nord-africains*. Grasset.
- Hajari, N. (2016). *Midnight’s furies: The deadly legacy of India’s Partition*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Handelman, D. (1998). *Models and mirrors: Towards an anthropology of public events*. Berghahn Books.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>
- Hay, J. (2006). *The Partition of British India*. Chelsea House.
- Hirsch, M. (2012). *The generation of postmemory: Writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press.
- Huyssen, A. (2009). *Present pasts: Urban palimpsests and the politics of memory*. Stanford University Press.
- Jackson, M. (2006). *The politics of storytelling: Violence, transgression, and intersubjectivity*. Museum Tusculanum Press.
- Kothari, R. (2009). *The burden of refuge: Partition experiences of the Sindhis of Gujarat*. Orient Blackswan.
- Malhotra, A. (2018). *Remnants of a separation: A history of the Partition through material memory*. HarperCollins India.
- Norberg-Schulz, C. (1984). *Genius loci: Towards a phenomenology of architecture*. Rizzoli.
- Ramey, S. W. (2008). *Hindu, Sufi, or Sikh: Contested practices and identifications of Sindhi Hindus in India and beyond*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ranjan, A. (2019). *Partition of India: Postcolonial legacies*. Routledge.
- Rettberg, J. W. (2016). *Seeing ourselves through technology: How we use selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rothberg, M. (2020). *Multidirectional memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization*. Stanford University Press.
- Singh, A., Iyer, N., & Gairola, R. K. (Eds.). (2016). *Revisiting India’s Partition: New essays on memory, culture, and politics*. Lexington Books.
- Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary affects*. Duke University Press.
- Taylor, D. (2007). *The archive and the repertoire: Performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press.
- Terranova, T. (2004). *Network culture: Politics for the information age*. Pluto Press.
- Turner, V., Abrahams, R. D., & Harris, A. (2017). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Taylor & Francis.
- Van Dijck, J. (2022). *Mediated memories in the digital age*. Stanford University Press.
- White, N. J. (2014). *Decolonisation: The British experience since 1945 (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Zaman, N. (2000). *A divided legacy: The Partition in selected novels of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*. Oxford University Press.