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# Excavating Stories of Indo-Caribbean Women from a Self-Curated Family Album

*Prabha Jerrybandan**

## Abstract

I examine very limited family photographs, and explore the politics of identity as they relate to the social and cultural history of Indo-Caribbean women. This study offers insights into lived realities of three generations of my family by excavating narratives through life history research methods. Life-history research methods include auto ethnography, interviews, oral history research, and memory work. Family photographs work as cultural and social artifacts, which offer a space for contextualizing meanings of lived experiences. They hold cues about the cultural and social conventions of the particular time, and offer a site for asserting what is not yet articulated in the captured moment. The narratives as well as the process of elucidating them are crucial in better understanding the lives of generations of Indo-Caribbean people. It is important to capture experiences that have been historically omitted in the literature of the region, and are at risk of being lost.

**Keywords:** Indo-Caribbean history, immigrant experiences, family narratives, photographs, memory work, life-history research

## Introduction

This paper examines photographs of my family taken in the 1950s and 1960s. It is a period for which there are few stories of Indo-Caribbean women within the existing literature. In tracing and interrogating the contextual relationships of the photographs, I excavate previously untold stories as well as shed light on the gendered and generational relationships, and cultural practices that existed at the time. In the

**Professor of English and ESL, School of Advancement, Centennial College, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada. Email: pjerrybandan@centennialcollege.ca*

discussion surrounding the photographs, there are questions that arise about photographs, which are absent. The photographic gaps are crucial in understanding life during a period when the personal camera was not easily available to my family, so the ones that were taken were done so through conscious acts of capturing significant moments. Whether it was the will of the person who made the decision to have a photograph taken, or an occasion that demanded that the photograph be captured, the contextual details help to understand the experiences of Indo-Caribbean people at that time, and also to make sense of the history that has been inherited.

My grandparents did not put photographs up on a wall like in my family's home. They did not own albums. In fact, they did not have their pictures taken as an act of commemoration or celebration. My maternal grandparents lived in rural Trinidad, specifically in the sugar-cane fields where agriculture was the major activity. Indian immigrants had moved to the region as indentured labourers between 1845 and 1917. Neither of my maternal grandparents possessed birth certificates, so their actual ages have been approximated using other details of their lives. My paternal grandparents had more exposure to urban services as they lived in the town of San Fernando. They had birth certificates and opportunity to take family photographs than my relatives who lived in the country, but those too are few. In this paper, I curate my own family album by gathering the very few photographs that can be found. To accompany the photographic artifacts, I employ memory work, autoethnographic methods including informal interviews with family members, acts of remembering through conversations and writing, and pulling together stories that offer "rituals of commemoration" that "reference and construct a commonly shared past" of Indo-Caribbean women (Kuhn 2010: 298).

## Collecting Family Stories

My doctoral research cited a dearth of family stories among Indo-Caribbean people, and more so, the scarcity of the experiences of women as compared to men. I continue to search for means to unearth histories that are at risk of disappearing as they have not been recorded in the prevailing literature, and do not as yet appear in the family stories that are told. Some of the uncovered stories recorded in my doctoral research have become part of the family stories that are now told by my aunt, my mother and myself. I have realized that in re-telling the discovered family stories, they have become a part of an oral history narrative practice. As we share our sense of belonging through these family stories, we enact methods of self-representation for a previously subjugated group, and when these stories are recorded and made public, they contribute to building community with others. This paper examines women's experiences in relation to the larger society, and to the men who have been historically dominant. At times, the fragments of women's experiences can only be retrieved through their peripheral positions surrounding the men in their lives, but this is important in illustrating the male-dominated histories that characterize

Indo-Caribbean people. This study attempts to continue to fill some of the apparent spaces in existing literature with stories and experiences.

Two of the photographs that are discussed in this paper, those of my maternal grandmother, and my paternal grandmother have been examined before.[1] Memory work allows for the uncovering of layers of experience that are not necessarily exhausted. Kuhn describes the process as "potentially interminable: at every turn, as further questions are raised, there is always something else to look into" (1995: 6). So too, it is with my family photographs—different information and experiences turn up with evolving questions. Gaps in stories and experiences, and in photographic patterns are as important as the ones that show up.

## My Self-Curated Family Album

In the absence of a single person's family album, I curate one for the purpose of this study. In searching out the earliest existing photographs in my family, both on my mother and father's sides of family, I arrange them chronologically. The practice of putting photographs of grandparents or parents at the beginning of physical albums is not new. Zussman notes that photographic albums can become narratives when they are considered as stories of the self (28). I employ the use of memory work as a personal practice, but I also invoke the memories of others through oral, informal interviews. Those appear as conversations with my mother, my aunt, and my father. I draw on memory work as "a conscious and purposeful staging of memory" (Kuhn 2000: 186). In constructing a narrative for each photograph, I propose that the result will offer understandings about the lives of the people who emerge from these stories within their social, cultural, and historical contexts.

There are three sets of photographs—a total of ten that are examined. The first set of photographs is from my mother's side of the family—they are those that are taken because of my mother's decisions to do so. There are six photos in this set: 1. My maternal great grandfather—Old Nanaa. 2. My mother and her friend. 3. My mother and her nephew. 4. My mother and her younger brother. 5. My parents' wedding. 6. My first birthday. The second set of photographs is two separate headshots of my maternal grandparents that seem to have been taken for identification of documents. 7. Nanee. 8. Nanaa. The third set of photographs is two pictures that have been preserved by my father's family. 9. My paternal grandparents—Ajee and Ajaa. 10. A family portrait of my paternal grandfather, my father and five of his brothers, three sisters-in-law, and eleven grandchildren.

## My Mother's Album

### *1. Photograph of Old Nanaa: Around 1964 (supposed date)*

There is a single, full body photograph of Old Nanaa—it is a black and white photo taken around 1964 at a Chinese run studio in San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago.

This picture was encouraged by his granddaughter—my mother. She took him to the studio on one of their trips to the town of San Fernando. In the photo, he is wearing a *pagree* (headdress), *kurta* (Indian styled shirt), *dhoti* (Indian men's pants), and holding a large umbrella usually called a parasol by Trinidadians. His scowl is outstanding, and he does not look directly at the camera. I imagine that Old Nanaa posed for the photograph, but does not know exactly where he should be looking. He must have focused on the photographer instead—the photographer was Chinese, and would not have been able to communicate successfully with Old Nanaa. The Chinese photographer was most likely able to speak in a Chinese dialect and English. Old Nanaa knew very few words in English, and certainly, no Chinese. He would have understood that his image was being captured, and it was a serious, official moment.

Because of his dress, Old Nanaa is unmistakably Indian. From interviews with my mother, I know that he mostly spoke in Hindi and Bhojpuri. My mother is bilingual, so she was able to communicate with him as well as with others who spoke English. She accompanied him on his trips to San Fernando when he visited the doctor. My mother is unclear about the reasons for his visit. In fact, she describes the relationship between Old Nanaa and the doctor as friendly, and explains that they had conversations in Hindi or Bhojpuri. Old Nanaa knew the doctor's parents, so he must have felt some kind of kinship to him. My mother was not included in the meetings. The men were older than my mother. As a girl of around fourteen years old, she did not belong in their company due to age and gender. In spite of being excluded in his social meeting, my mother took her grandfather to the studio and had his photograph taken. She did not stand in the picture with him. When I ask her for a reason why she did not have a picture of herself taken that day, or why she did not have one taken with her grandfather, she cannot think of a reason. I believe that generational distinction and gender were important in the workings of Indo-Caribbean society. She respected the generational difference between her grandfather and herself, but she recognized the importance of his position in the family. He was the patriarch. The generations before his were left behind in India.

I ask my mother about her reason for taking her grandfather to the studio. She explains that the doctor's office was situated only a few buildings away from the studio. At age fourteen or fifteen, she was attending St. Stephen's High School in Princes Town. In addition to having a formal education at that time, her father would take her to watch Hindi films whenever they were shown in the cinemas. As a result, my mother was more sensitized to media than her older siblings. Even in her position as mediator of the two cultures – her grandfather's Indian-ness in terms of language, and Trinidadian-ness, knowing English and being able to move freely between them, she excluded herself from being photographed that day. Without understanding the reasons for doing so, she acknowledged the differences between them—she was a girl child, and her grandfather was a male elder. His

granddaughter's act of taking her elder to the studio, and having his image recorded is an act of reverence, and of commemoration.

***2. Photograph with her school friend, 15 years old—sometime in 1965***

My mother has no pictures of her early childhood. The earliest ones were taken when she was in high school, and she went to the photo studio. She went to the studio with her female friend, and they had their photographs taken. There were no male friends in her photographs, although she attended a school with both male and female students. In the photograph of my mother and her friend, they are wearing their school uniforms. They are wearing pleated skirts, with short-sleeved, button down shirts. Princes Town was the urban area in which their school was situated. There was also a photo studio there. The two girls would have been around fifteen years old. My mother's hair is combed up into a style that was popular at that time. She tells me that her father would complain about the style, saying that it looked like a "bud nest", meaning a bird's nest. He was not happy that his youngest daughter was becoming more exposed to certain western traditions including embracing the fashion styles of the day. My mother's three older sisters did not wear any make-up, and they did not style their hair in any other ways than in a bun, or braid. They also wore dresses that were accessorized with *orhnis* (traditional Indian head scarves). These styles were considered more demure, and were in line with the conservative tradition practiced by Indian women. Education provided my mother with new ideas and opportunities for becoming more western, and thereby more Trinidadian.

***3. Photograph with her nephew on the occasion of his birthday—September 25, 1965—my mother is 15 years old***

Through interviews with my mother, the date on which this photograph was taken has been calculated to be on the birthday of her nephew. A number of elements contributed to figuring out the date of the event: she had not been married as yet, and it had to be on a day that was not a school day. It was her nephew's birthday, and he was either one or two years old. In checking the calendar, we realize that it must have been on Saturday 25th September 1965. I ask her why she chose to take her nephew to have his photograph taken. He is the first-born son to her oldest brother, Mohan[2]. The importance of sons to Indian families is great, and there are oral accounts of how my grandmother's eldest son was extremely special to her. In doing this research, I have asked his children to recall their memories about their relationship with my grandmother, and her relationship with their father—her eldest son, Uncle Mohan. My cousins have confirmed that my grandmother was particularly attentive to their father. She also favoured Uncle Mohan's first-born son although she had eight other grandsons by three of her daughters. Uncle Mohan's first child was a daughter, but my grandmother's partial treatment of her grandson is a family narrative that gets repeated often. The importance of sons, and especially oldest

sons, is paramount in Indian culture as they are the ones expected to carry on a family's name. What seems like an unconscious act points to my mother's understanding of important gender-relationships among Indo-Caribbean people.

### *4. Photograph with my mother—sixteen years old, and her younger brother—February 1966*

There is a photograph of my mother and her younger brother by two and a half years. This picture was taken around February 1966. My mother would have been sixteen, and her brother would have been almost fourteen years old. When I asked about this photo, she recalls that her father who worked with the San Fernando Borough Council would take them to the town to watch Hindi films. His shift began sometime in the evening. He would take them to the cinema, and then he would go off to his workplace, which was on the same street as the studio. My mother and her brother would walk to the taxi stand, where they would get transportation home. On that day, she took her brother to the studio and had a picture taken of them together. My mother had sewn her dress—a trendy one in Western style. Her brother wore short pants and a short-sleeved shirt. He was still a child, and did not wear trousers. My mother and her brother were the two youngest children in her family. Their relationship had always been close, and she was the older sister who could encourage her sibling to have their picture captured. She asserts her power as an older sibling in staging the photo, but her emotional closeness to her youngest sibling is what she recalls when she remembers him in family narratives.

### *5. My mother's wedding photo—1966*

In this photograph, my mother is wearing a sari, and she stands with my father who is wearing a Western styled suit with a jacket, shirt, tie and trousers. Her sari is not very decorated, but the design is elegant. It is wrapped simply, and it is pinned on her shoulder, and draped over her head. She holds a bouquet of flowers in her hands, and she wears earrings, a necklace and a bracelet. Her stocking covered toes show through her flat, metallic, strappy sandals. The couple was married at the Registrar's Office in the town of San Fernando, and the photograph was taken at the photo-studio in the same town. There is a second photo on the day my parents were married—it is a photo of my mother by herself. My father does not have a picture in which he is without the bride. This is one of the social situations in which a woman is celebrated—her position as a bride is highlighted.

### *6. My first birthday: Colour photographs with my father—1967*

My earliest photograph was taken on my first birthday. There is a shot of me in a basket shaped chair that was a standard prop for babies in the 1960's in Trinidadian studios. The camera was not as ubiquitous as it is in the smartphone era, and the Chinese run studios in Trinidad provided a valuable service to people who did not

have access to a camera. There is another photo taken on the same day—I am seated comfortably in the lap of my father. Only recently, in seeking to understand the social relationships that characterize my heritage, I questioned my mother about her absence in the photograph. She tells me that she was pregnant with my younger brother who would be born the following month. She wanted to make sure that there was a commemoration of my first birthday, and convinced my father to take me.

## Incidental Photos of my Maternal Grandparents

I have come across two photographs—one of my grandmother, and one of my grandfather.

***7. Nanaa's Photograph—Black and white, estimated date of 1959***

There is one simple headshot of my maternal grandfather that has been found. It was previously secured on a document identifying him as a Cane Farmer. I have seen the copy of my Nanaa's Cane Farmers Identification and Record Book for Caroni Limited, Ste. Madeleine Division. The first entry is dated 1959, so it can be deduced that this photograph was taken either in this year or before. There is a place for the "Signature or Thumbprint", and there is the cursive signature of my grandfather, Ramgarib Maharaj. He was literate in both Hindi and English—a skill that was not achieved by any of his children other than my mother.

***8. Nanee's photograph—date unknown***

My maternal grandmother's picture is the single full headshot that has survived her passing. She wears the *orhni* pulled firmly over her head, covering all of her hair. Staring into the camera, she smiles in the photograph. This picture seems to have been taken for some form of identification, and until now, I have not been able to find out the exact details. I initially discovered this picture hanging on the wall of my uncle's home. He does not know the origins or circumstances surrounding the photo—it is in colour, unlike most of the other pictures in my mother's album.

## My Father's Album:

On my father's side of the family, I examine two photographs that have been preserved in the family—a photograph of my paternal grandparents, and a full family portrait with my grandfather, his sons who were living in the same home at the time, and their respective families.

***9. My paternal grandparents—estimated date in 1955***

This is a black and white portrait that was taken at the studio. My grandparents, my Ajee and Ajaa, are next to each other, but it is not a full-bodied shot. Only the upper parts of their bodies show. My paternal grandmother, my Ajee, had been sick, and her family recognized that she was going to die. This was an attempt to capture her

image as a remembrance when she was no longer alive. Although she was sick, she was not photographed alone—she was paired with her husband. The act of staging the married couple in a photograph is indicative of an ideal of Indian tradition. The woman subject is accompanied by her husband to fulfill that ideal, which will be valorized by the family.

My Ajee's upper part of her dress shows in the photograph. An *orhni* is draped over her body, pinned on the shoulder, and placed on her head. The *orhni* is further back on her head. Her lightly greying hair is parted in the middle and flattened to the sides. Ajee has a marked *bindi* between her eyebrows—her identity as Indian is visibly clear. My Ajaa is wearing a Western styled long sleeved shirt. Their shoulders are close to each other without a substantial difference in height. My father has explained that they must have been sitting, especially since his mother was sick and probably could not stand comfortably. In this picture, my Ajee has a subtle smile as she looks directly into the camera. Ajaa also looks into the camera, but there is no apparent smile. His appearance is much more sombre.

### *10. My father's family photograph—July to August 1961*

I have come across a photograph of my father's family. In the centre of the photo is my grandfather, Ajaa, his six sons, three women who are wives to three of his sons—the others were unmarried at the time, and eleven grandchildren. There are twenty-one people in this single photograph. Of these people, my father is the only surviving son, one of the women—his sister-in-law is still alive, and nine of the grandchildren still survive. From informal interviews with the oldest surviving person from that photograph—my father's sister-in-law—my aunt who is 81 years old, I am able to calculate the age of the children on my grandfather's lap—one is about a year and a half, and the other is her son. He is less than a year old. That means that the photo would have been taken fifty-nine years ago, in 1961. My father would have been eighteen and my grandfather would have been 60 years old. The men in the picture are dressed in Western clothing, button down shirts and trousers. My Ajaa, my paternal grandfather is wearing a jacket, button down shirt with a tie, and trousers. He also wears formal western styled shoes. Two of the women are wearing dresses with *orhnis*. The wife of my eldest uncle wears a *sari*—Indian styled woman's clothing.

My Ajaa's single surviving child is my father. When I interviewed him about the context of the photograph, he could not remember any details. Through a three-way phone call with my sister, my aunt and myself, I asked about the details surrounding the photograph. She told me that the photograph was taken when my uncle Dakka—the fifth of seven sons—now deceased, was leaving to study in England. It began to make more sense. This was a momentous occasion for the family. My uncle had attended Naparima College, which has been a prestigious secondary school in San Fernando, Trinidad. He was about to pursue tertiary education

in a foreign country. When there is a change within the family unit because of an event such as migration, there is an accompanying desire to capture the image of family—an intact version of an ideal. This points to the structures that are validated through the groups that are staged. My grandparents were photographed as a couple—even though my Ajee was terminally ill; she was not photographed alone. The family unit consisting of my Ajaa, his six sons who were living in Trinidad at the time, and the families of those who had been already married is framed in a family photograph. One of my uncles was missing from the photograph. He had previously migrated to Venezuela, but it had not been a planned migration. At least it was not one that was sanctioned as that of my other uncle who was leaving to pursue education. In fact, there were no family stories about my other uncle's leaving for Venezuela. Before he died, I asked about his migration, and he related an exciting tale of running away to another country when he was eighteen years old.

My father's family considered being educated as an ideal worthy of being noted. This photograph is evidence of that. When I think about reasons why this occasion was not included in family stories, it becomes clearer with the interview with my aunt. She explains that my uncle did not stay in England. After about a week or two, he returned home. I recall conversations with that uncle before he died in 2014. He related an incident where he had gone to England with the intention of studying, but he made the decision to return because of the woman he wanted to marry. She was in Trinidad, so he left England to be with her. In the interview, my aunt recalls that my Ajaa always reminded my uncle that he had given up his opportunity for higher education.

## Capturing idealized images of family: sickness, migration, and weddings

In an interview with my father's sister-in-law who is present in his family photograph, I asked her about her family before marriage. My questions about whether she remembered any photographs of her own family revealed that there was one full family photograph that was taken before she was married. Her father had become ill, so the family decided to have a picture taken. She explains that they went to the Chinese studio in San Fernando, the same one in which many of the photographs in this paper were taken. She does not remember any other photographs that were taken. When my paternal grandmother became very ill, her image was also preserved through photography. However, it was not just a photograph of my Ajee, but also an image of my grandparents together in one frame that was preserved. My aunt's family as a unit was captured when her family considered that he could die. Both instances highlight the urge to preserve the memory of people through photographs when there is a threat through sickness.

When my uncle was leaving his home to study in another country, an image of the family was staged and captured. It was an attempt to secure an idealized image.

The extended family is important in Indian culture, and in my father's family; they all lived in a singular home. No one has been able to tell about the person who took the photograph, but it was taken at the family's home. I can only imagine that it would be a task to get all twenty-one people to the photo-studio, and it was probably much more convenient to have the photo staged at the home.

The photograph of my parent's wedding led to my consideration of the bride's photo being taken separately. My mother is presented as the bride in a snapshot of herself, and without my father in it. My father's sister-in-law, who was able to give me details about my father's family photograph, also has a picture of herself as a bride, and it is without her husband. Interestingly, the wedding is an occasion where the woman is celebrated as a bride, and so she is captured in an image on her own. In researching the other photographs, except for my first birthday photo and the ones of brides, there are no snapshots of individual women. The Indo-Caribbean woman subject as a bride is celebrated, and so the cultural expectation of being married is explicit in this act of recognition—the photograph.

## Clothing: Gendered and generational cultural markers

Some of the most obvious pieces of evidence from the photographic album are the clothes that the subjects wear. Kuhn and McAllister discuss the photograph as "a record, a piece of evidence that something happened at some time, somewhere—in the time and the place in front of the camera (1). Old Nanaa was an Indian immigrant to Trinidad. He retained his Indian-ness as is apparent in his clothing. My great grandfather's generation was not as yet assimilated into Trinidadian culture that was still a British colony until 1962. For the following generations—those of my grandparents, and parents, the men wear Western styled clothing—a sign that they were visibly adapting to the dominant culture. The evidence from the photographs in this paper shows that the experience for Indo-Caribbean women has been different. Both of my grandmothers wore the *orhni* as an essential part of their daily wear, and it covers their heads when they pose for a photograph. Visibly, they retained their Indian-ness through the way they dressed. In the following generation—that of my older aunts, my father's three sisters-in-law who are in the family photograph, there is a slight change in the way the *orhni* is worn. Importantly, it is kept as a cultural marker, but it is draped on the shoulders instead of covering the head. The image, a woman who wears a dress with an *orhni* that is tucked in at the waist, draped over the bosom, and covering the head is one that is consistent with the Indo-Caribbean woman in the 1950's and 1960's. Many first and second-generation Indo-Caribbean women continue to wear the *orhni* as a show of their identity. My mother is a second-generation Indo-Caribbean woman like her sisters, but her age and education gave her access to the dominant culture. She does not wear the *orhni* in the style that her sisters have. In her photographs other than for her wedding, she wears Western-styled clothing.

## The *Sari:* Indian women's traditional dress

The image of the *sari* appears in the photograph of my father's family. I have had to interview my aunt who is in the photograph, and the daughter of another aunt in the photograph—my cousin, to get information on why the women were dressed differently. She tells me that her mother did not own a *sari* until the 1970s when she had saved enough money to be able to buy one. The story continues that her mother would save from the food allowance given to her by her husband. She did not work apart from in the home, and had no other income. In an interview with my aunt—my father's sister-in-law who is in the family photograph discussed, she told me that she did not own a *sari* at the time that the photograph was taken. She said, "They didn't buy any *sari* for me"[3]. My aunt tells me that she did not own a *sari* until many years later, in the late 1970s. Her husband had been shopping for some gifts to take to his brother's friends in Venezuela, and was requested to purchase some *saris*. He had included one for my aunt. I learn that the woman who wears a *sari* had received it as a gift[4]. In the 1950s and 1960s in Trinidad, the *sari* was not easily available as it was sold in very few specialty stores. The fact that one of the women had to save for some time in order to buy a *sari* illustrates that it could not have been a cheap purchase. My mother wears a *sari* in her wedding photograph. Despite living in a rural area, her father was gainfully employed in the town of San Fernando, and could afford to buy for his daughter clothes and jewellery that are traditionally required in a Hindu wedding[5].

## The rural-urban difference for Indo-Trinidadian people

Experiences for Indo-Caribbean people were influenced by where they lived, whether it was in a rural or urban area. Most of the Indian indentured labourers who migrated to Trinidad from 1845 – 1917 moved to rural areas of the country where the sugarcane plantations were situated.[6] As a result, they did not have access to facilities and services that were only available in the urban areas.[7]

All the pictures in the group of photos from my mother's side of the family were captured because of my mother's wish to do so, and she had to travel to the town to get them snapped. My father's family photograph was taken at the family's home, which was situated in the town of San Fernando. I believe that it would have been more workable to stage this event in the town as opposed to the countryside, and more practical to have twenty-one people convene at the family's home instead of the studio. All the photographs in this paper were snapped in either San Fernando or Princes Town—two urban spaces, where there was access to the photo studio during the 1950s and 1960s.

## Missing Subjects

### *Cultural dominance through education and language*

There are no photographs of my maternal grandparents that were taken in a studio. My mother did not take her parents to have their pictures taken. When I ask her for reasons why she did not have their picture taken, she does not know. It was necessary for her to accompany her grandfather since he was not able to communicate well in English. She at once asserts her power in orchestrating her grandfather's photograph while acknowledging her role as a child, and as female. The opportunity to take photographs with her parents may not have arisen for my mother even though her father took her to the town to watch Hindi films. She did not suggest taking a picture. My grandfather was literate in Hindi and English, and employed with the government. He comfortably straddles both Indian and Trinidadian culture, and so does my mother. In his relationship with his daughter, my grandfather's dominance asserts itself because of gender and generation.

## The Indo-Caribbean woman's invisibility and the Indo-Caribbean man's visibility

In a photograph taken on my first birthday, I am photographed on my own, and with my father. My mother was absent. According to my mother, she did not have much money, but she wanted to capture this important event of her child. She recalls that she was pregnant with my younger brother, and she may not have had appropriate clothes with which she could take a photo. As discussed earlier in this paper, "clothes" emerge as a marker of cultural identity. In this case, the missing person in the photograph points to the importance of clothes for staging the photo. No extra money would have been needed for the photograph that was taken if it were with my mother instead of my father. The woman subject is not visible in the photo although she is the one who orchestrates it. For my mother's generation, the dominance of the Indo-Caribbean male emerges in snapshots of everyday life such as this one. In spite of being educated, and having proficiency in the dominant language, a second-generation Indo-Caribbean woman is easily omitted from a photograph with her first-born child.

## Conclusion

The photographs are not accidental but wilfully constructed keepsakes of occasions that were important to the people who are in the photos, and also to those who consciously make them happen. My mother is the main force behind the crucial photographs that have been used for her side of the family. Janning and Scalise highlight the curatorial input of women in collecting and displaying photographs (1702-1725). My mother was the first in her family to have had her relatives purposely photographed, and it is due to her efforts that there are photographs that serve as

social and cultural artifacts. She is responsible for the single full photograph of my great grandfather, and the earliest photograph of her nephew, and those of her teenage years until her marriage at sixteen years old. She is also the person who demanded that my first birthday photo be snapped even if she could not be in it.

There is agency for the Indo-Caribbean woman acquired through education and urban access. Where the older generation, mostly record themselves in photographs when there are risks of removal through illness, death or migration, acts of commemoration and celebration become more apparent in the pictures orchestrated by my mother. She is representative of the educated second-generation Indo-Caribbean woman. Other than as a bride, the woman subject is not as dominant within the photographic evidence. At times, my mother is photographically invisible in her own staging of photographs.

Gender emerges as a marker of dominance for the Indo-Caribbean man. My maternal grandfather—Nanaa was a literate man, a government worker, fluent in the official language of the country in which he lived, and therefore identified culturally as more Trinidadian than Old Nanaa. He knew little English. His fluency in Indian languages accentuated his Indian-ness in a country that was not Indian. He remained an outsider.

Of importance is the relationship between my mother and her father, and my mother and her grandfather. Through education and her consequent proficiency in English, and her fluency in Hindi and Bhojpuri due to her upbringing in a household where those languages were spoken, she is able to straddle both cultures comfortably. She acts as an agent for her grandfather in navigating a space where he experiences alienation, but she lacks that position of power with her father.

Generational differences appear mainly in the way Indo-Caribbean women identify through clothing. The *sari* and the *orhni* are representative of Indian culture. For second-generation Indo-Caribbean women, these symbols remained an essential show of their identity. Visibly, women retained their Indian-ness through clothing later than men. Indo-Caribbean men seemed to have begun their visible assimilation into British colonial and newly postcolonial Trinidad earlier than women.

The act of excavating stories of experiences of Indo-Caribbean women through interrogating the photograph as a cultural artifact has simultaneously given access to gendered and generational relationships that are at risk of being unheard. The historical dearth of life-stories of early generations of Indo-Caribbean people, specifically women, has created a void for younger generations in terms of understanding our history and ourselves. These artifacts have not been exhausted in terms of uncovering stories. In this type of work, there are evolving questions—some that are answered, and some that remain unanswered. There is hope that in the future, continued questioning and probing would offer new stories for understanding.

## Endnotes

1. Two photographs are discussed as a family inheritance in "Towards a Richer Inheritance: The Work of Receiving, Gleaning, and Unearthing Family Stories". This paper appeared in *Vitae Scholasticae: The Journal of Educational Biography*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2018, pp. 41-55.
2. "Mohan" is a pseudonym.
3. I had an interview with my aunt—my father's sister-in-law, who is the eldest surviving relative from the family photograph examined in this paper. Since she lives in Trinidad, I asked my sister to facilitate a three-way call, so I could ask her questions about the context of the photograph. There were two interviews: one on 10th September 2020, and another on 12th September 2020.
4. My father's eldest brother was known as *Dadaa*. His wife was called *Khakee*. In the family photograph, *Khakee* is wearing a *sari*. When I asked my aunt about the *sari*, I was not sure that she would be able to answer. However, she explained that *Dadaa* had a friend who had owned an Indian store in San Fernando—the town in which they lived. The storeowner had gifted *Dadaa* with a *sari* for his wife.
5. In traditional Hindu weddings in Trinidad and Tobago, the bridegroom usually gifts the bride with five pieces of jewellery. Her parents would normally buy her wedding clothes. In my mother's case, her father bought both the five pieces of jewellery as well as her bridal clothes.
6. Eventually, some began to move away from the plantations to urban areas. San Fernando was the hometown of my paternal grandmother's family, but it had not been a borough until 1953, and subsequently a city in 1988. This information about the status of San Fernando was taken from www.britannica.com/place/Trinidad-and-Tobago/People.
7. In conversations with my uncle before he died in 2014, he described his early childhood memories of San Fernando. He described the areas of Cipero Street and Sutton Street where his mother's family had been living. There had been cane-fields instead of roads and streets. Ultimately, with the evolution to an urban centre, there were the accompanying services.

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