

WhatsApp Historiography: Popular Historical Consciousness in Digital India

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of WhatsApp as a historiographical medium in contemporary India, analysing how the platform has restructured the production, circulation, and reception of historical knowledge among ordinary citizens. Drawing on discourse analysis, digital ethnography, and media studies frameworks, the study argues that WhatsApp groups have created a distinctive form of popular historiography — one that is emotionally inflected, politically contested, and radically decentralised. The paper traces how colonial memory, nationalist mythology, caste identity, and religious heritage are selectively transmitted through viral messages, image macros, and audio-visual clips on the platform. It further interrogates the epistemological implications of this 'WhatsApp history,' arguing that rather than constituting mere misinformation, it represents a meaningful, if fraught, democratisation of historical consciousness. The paper concludes by calling for a rethinking of historiographical authority in the age of encrypted mass communication.

Keywords: WhatsApp, digital historiography, India, popular memory, nationalism, misinformation, historical consciousness, mobile media

1. Introduction: History in the Age of Encrypted Messaging

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the dominant anxiety of historians concerned with digital culture was the fragmentation of authoritative knowledge by the open internet. Wikipedia, blogs, and user-generated content challenged the gatekeeping function of the academy, the archive, and the publishing house. By the 2010s, however, a subtler and arguably more consequential transformation had arrived: social media platforms began curating, personalising, and virally amplifying historical content within closed or semi-closed networks. Nowhere is this transformation more visible, and more consequential, than in India, where WhatsApp has emerged not merely as a messaging service but as a primary medium through which millions of people encounter, construct, and transmit historical knowledge.

India presents a uniquely fertile context for this inquiry. With over 500 million active WhatsApp users — the largest user base of any country in the world — the platform has woven itself into the fabric of daily communication across linguistic, regional, caste, and class lines. Unlike Facebook or Twitter, which operate as relatively open networks subject to public scrutiny and platform moderation, WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption and group-based architecture create a media ecology that is decentralised, intimate, and largely opaque to

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institutional oversight. Within these digital enclosures, history is not merely consumed but produced — assembled from fragments of the past, inflected by present political anxieties, and disseminated at a velocity no professional historian can match.

This paper argues that what circulates on Indian WhatsApp groups constitutes a distinct historiographical form: one that this study terms 'WhatsApp historiography.' This form is characterised by the democratisation of historical voice, the emotional encoding of historical claims, the collapse of temporal distinctions between past and present, and the subordination of evidential rigour to affective and ideological coherence. Rather than dismissing this phenomenon as simple misinformation — a frame that, while not inaccurate, is epistemologically insufficient — the paper proposes that WhatsApp historiography be read as a cultural practice that reveals deep truths about the state of popular historical consciousness in post-liberalisation, majoritarian-inflected India.

2. Theoretical Framework: Popular Memory, Digital Mediation, and the Historiographical Turn

2.1 Popular Memory as Counter-History

The concept of popular memory has a distinguished lineage in cultural and social history. Michel Foucault's seminal dialogues on popular memory (1974) positioned it as a counter-hegemonic practice through which subaltern groups preserve a relationship to the past that is suppressed by dominant historiographical narratives. Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies later elaborated this insight into a theory of 'memory work' — the active, selective, and politically charged process by which communities construct usable pasts. In the South Asian context, Ranajit Guha's foundational work in subaltern studies demonstrated how colonial and nationalist historiography alike had systematically silenced the historical agency of the peasant, the labourer, and the low-caste subject.

What distinguishes popular memory in the WhatsApp era is the radical transformation of its medium of transmission. Pre-digital popular memory circulated through oral tradition, pamphlets, devotional literature, public ritual, and the vernacular press. Each of these media had characteristic constraints: limited reach, slow diffusion, dependence on local social networks. WhatsApp dissolves most of these constraints while preserving, and indeed amplifying, the affective and communal dimensions of popular memory transmission. A historical claim that once required a village gathering, a local newspaper, or a pamphlet campaign to reach hundreds can now reach millions within hours.

2.2 Digital Historiography and the Question of Authority

The literature on digital historiography has largely focused on the transformation of scholarly practice: how digitisation has altered archival access, how big data methods have opened new questions in historical research, and how online platforms have created new publics for academic history. Relatively less attention has been paid to the historiographical practices of non-scholarly actors — to what Peter Burke has called 'history from below' in its

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contemporary digital instantiation. The WhatsApp phenomenon demands precisely such attention.

Scholars such as Ramachandra Guha and Romila Thapar have publicly lamented the circulation of historical falsehoods on social media platforms in India, framing the problem principally in terms of nationalist ideology and the instrumentalisation of the past for contemporary political purposes. While this diagnosis is substantially correct, it risks reducing a complex cultural phenomenon to a simple story of elite manipulation and mass credulity. A more adequate framework must account for the genuine epistemic agency of WhatsApp users — their capacity to evaluate, contest, supplement, and reframe the historical content they receive — while also acknowledging the structural conditions that make certain kinds of historical claims more legible and more shareable than others.

3. WhatsApp as Historiographical Medium: Structural Features

3.1 The Architecture of Viral History

The specific technical architecture of WhatsApp shapes the form and content of historical communication in determinate ways. The platform's group structure — with groups of up to 1,024 members, often organised around family, caste, religious, occupational, or political affiliations — means that historical content circulates within socially homogeneous networks that reinforce rather than challenge existing identities and beliefs. The forwarding function, combined with the 'Forwarded' label that became mandatory after 2018's reforms in response to lynching incidents in India, has made explicit the viral character of message circulation without diminishing it.

The dominant formats through which historical content circulates on WhatsApp in India include: image macros combining historical photographs or illustrations with bold textual overlays; audio clips in Hindi and regional languages, often in the voice of a recognisable religious or political figure; short video compilations that intercut archival footage with contemporary political imagery; and text-heavy chain messages that assert historical 'facts' with a rhetoric of recovered suppressed knowledge. Each of these formats has distinct rhetorical properties. The image macro condenses complex historical claims into immediately apprehensible visual propositions. The audio clip mobilises the authority of voice and the intimacy of oral culture. The text message mimics the form of the exposé or the educational disclosure.

3.2 Themes and Topoi of WhatsApp Historiography

Content analysis of WhatsApp historical forwards reveals a set of recurring thematic clusters that illuminate the preoccupations of popular historical consciousness in contemporary India. Colonial history is a dominant theme, typically framed as a story of exceptional victimhood and civilisational plunder: messages detailing the wealth extracted by the British East India Company, the atrocities of the Bengal Famine, or the destruction of

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Indian educational and manufacturing traditions by colonial policy circulate widely and with considerable emotional intensity.

Hindu civilisational history constitutes a second major thematic cluster, encompassing messages about the antiquity and global influence of Vedic knowledge, the architectural achievements of pre-medieval Indian kingdoms, the contribution of ancient India to mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, and the Islamic destruction of Hindu temples and cultural monuments. This cluster is particularly charged in the contemporary political climate, where the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has made the reassertion of Hindu civilisational pride a central element of its ideological project. The historiographical content of these messages frequently contradicts established scholarly consensus, drawing instead on a corpus of popular Hindu nationalist historiography associated with figures such as P.N. Oak or the writings of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

Caste history constitutes a third cluster, though one with a markedly different ideological inflection depending on the community of circulation. In Dalit and OBC (Other Backward Classes) networks, WhatsApp circulates messages reasserting the pre-Brahmanical dignity and historical achievements of oppressed communities, recovering the memory of anti-caste thinkers like Phule and Ambedkar, and documenting instances of caste atrocity that mainstream media has ignored. In upper-caste networks, a counter-narrative circulates that minimises or contests the history of caste oppression. The platform thus does not produce a single popular history but a set of competing popular histories, each anchored in distinctive communal identities.

4. Epistemology of WhatsApp History: Truth, Belief, and Affect

4.1 Beyond the Misinformation Frame

The most common scholarly and journalistic framework for understanding WhatsApp historical content in India is the misinformation or 'fake news' frame. From this perspective, the problem is primarily epistemic: false or distorted historical claims are spreading on the platform, with potentially dangerous real-world consequences. The evidence for this framing is substantial. Fact-checking organisations such as Alt News, Boom Live, and SM Hoaxslayer have documented thousands of instances in which historical photographs have been mislabelled, quotations fabricated, statistics falsified, and events fictionalised in WhatsApp messages. Several incidents of mob violence, including lynchings, have been linked to the viral spread of historically inflected falsehoods on the platform.

However, the misinformation frame, while capturing one important dimension of the phenomenon, is epistemologically insufficient as a total account. It assumes that the appropriate standard for evaluating historical knowledge is the criterion of factual accuracy as defined by professional historiography. This assumption, though reasonable within the norms of academic discourse, fails to engage with the way historical knowledge actually functions in popular culture, where criteria of truth are entangled with criteria of moral significance,

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communal identity, and emotional resonance. A WhatsApp message asserting that British colonialism extracted 45 trillion dollars from India may be imprecise in its specific figures, but it encodes a historically significant truth — that colonialism involved systematic economic extraction — and transmits that truth in a form that is emotionally accessible and politically motivating for communities with a lived experience of post-colonial inequality.

4.2 Affect, Identity, and Epistemic Community

The philosopher Miranda Fricker's concept of 'epistemic injustice' is useful here. Fricker argues that members of socially marginalised groups are systematically subject to two forms of epistemic harm: testimonial injustice (their testimony is assigned lesser credibility) and hermeneutical injustice (the dominant conceptual resources are inadequate to understand their experience). Both forms of epistemic injustice are structurally embedded in the relationship between professional academic historiography and the communities whose histories it purports to study and represent.

WhatsApp historiography can be understood, in part, as a response to epistemic injustice. When Dalit communities circulate messages about the historical persecution and resistance of their communities, or when lower-caste communities reclaim the memory of pre-colonial social orders, they are engaging in a form of epistemic self-assertion against historiographical traditions that have long marginalised their experience. The affective intensity of historical WhatsApp content — the sense of urgency, betrayal, pride, and solidarity it conveys — is not simply a vector of irrationality but an expression of the stakes involved in the politics of historical recognition.

5. Political Economy of WhatsApp Historiography

5.1 State, Party, and the Weaponisation of the Past

No analysis of WhatsApp historiography in India can ignore its entanglement with organised political power. The BJP's ascent to dominance since 2014 has been accompanied by a sophisticated and large-scale apparatus of digital propaganda, much of it transmitted through WhatsApp. The party's IT Cell, under the direction of Amit Malviya, has been extensively documented as a producer and disseminator of historical content tailored to mobilise Hindu nationalist sentiment. This content includes revisionist accounts of medieval Islamic rule, heroic narratives of Hindu resistance, and attacks on the historiographical legacy of Nehruvian secularism and the 'Leftist' academy.

The political economy of this operation intersects with WhatsApp's business model in important ways. Unlike Facebook or YouTube, WhatsApp generates no advertising revenue and therefore has no direct financial incentive to maximise engagement through algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged content. However, its encrypted architecture creates a structural immunity from the content moderation that, however imperfectly, constrains similar content on other platforms. The political weaponisation of WhatsApp historiography thus exploits a platform architecture originally designed for privacy protection.

5.2 Subaltern Historians and the Democratic Paradox

The same architecture that enables top-down political manipulation also enables bottom-up historical assertion. Independent Dalit media networks, tribal rights organisations, and feminist collectives have built extensive WhatsApp-based information ecosystems that circulate historical content challenging both Brahmanical and Hindu nationalist historiography. Scholars like Shailaja Paik and Uma Chakravarti have documented the emergence of a vibrant Dalit digital public sphere in which WhatsApp plays a central role.

This dual character of WhatsApp historiography — simultaneously a tool of majoritarian political manipulation and a medium of subaltern historical assertion — constitutes what might be called the democratic paradox of the platform. The same conditions that enable historically marginalised communities to speak their histories also enable dominant groups to amplify distorted or mythologised pasts. There is no technical solution to this paradox; it is a structural feature of a medium that is simultaneously democratic and anti-epistemic in its architecture.

6. WhatsApp History and Temporal Consciousness

One of the most striking features of WhatsApp historiography is its distinctive relationship to historical temporality. Professional historiography is premised on the fundamental distinction between past and present: the historian's task is to reconstruct the past as it actually was, in its difference from the present. WhatsApp historical content, by contrast, characteristically collapses this distinction, presenting the past as a directly relevant, emotionally immediate, and politically actionable present concern.

This temporal collapse is evident at the level of form as well as content. A WhatsApp image macro superimposing a quotation attributed to a Mughal emperor over a photograph of a contemporary mosque does not merely assert a historical claim; it asserts the contemporary relevance of that claim. A chain message detailing British atrocities in the 1857 uprising is typically framed not as a disinterested historical account but as an explanation of present political realities: it mobilises historical grievance for present political purposes. This instrumentalisation of the past is not, of course, unique to WhatsApp; historians from Hayden White to Paul Connerton have documented the inherently presentist character of all historical narration. What WhatsApp does is radically accelerate and democratise this instrumentalisation.

The collapse of temporal distance has both productive and dangerous consequences. Productively, it keeps historically significant questions of justice, recognition, and accountability alive in the public sphere, preventing the sanitisation of difficult histories into safely distant events without contemporary relevance. Dangerously, it fosters a presentist historiography in which the past is perpetually recruited as a weapon in current conflicts — a dynamic that is particularly explosive in a society, like India's, in which historical grievances are deeply enmeshed with present inequalities of power, status, and recognition.

7. Methodological Considerations: Studying WhatsApp History

The scholarly study of WhatsApp historiography faces distinctive methodological challenges that are worth addressing explicitly. WhatsApp's encryption means that researchers cannot access messages at scale through data scraping or platform APIs, as is possible on Twitter or public Facebook pages. Research must rely on participants sharing messages and group content voluntarily, on archives compiled by fact-checking organisations, and on participant observation within WhatsApp groups to which researchers have access.

This methodological constraint has important implications for research design. Studies of WhatsApp content necessarily involve sampling biases, since researchers can only access content within groups they are members of or that participants choose to share. The internal diversity of WhatsApp historical content — its variation across groups defined by different political affiliations, caste identities, regional cultures, and linguistic communities — means that any single study can capture only a partial slice of the phenomenon. Future research would benefit from multi-sited digital ethnographies that deliberately sample across different community types, as well as from collaborations with fact-checking organisations that have compiled large archives of forwarded content.

There is also an important ethical dimension to this research. WhatsApp groups operate under norms of relative privacy, and participants may not regard their messages as public data subject to scholarly analysis. Researchers must navigate the tension between the public significance of WhatsApp historiography as a cultural and political phenomenon and the legitimate privacy expectations of group members. Informed consent, anonymisation, and careful attention to the potential harms of publication are essential components of an ethical research methodology in this field.

8. Conclusion: Rethinking Historiographical Authority in Digital India

WhatsApp historiography is not a pathology to be cured but a cultural phenomenon to be understood. It represents the eruption of popular historical consciousness — with all its vitality, its contradictions, its partiality, and its dangers — into a medium that has no precedent in the history of historical communication. The challenge it poses to professional historiography is not merely technical (how do we correct the falsehoods?) but epistemological (by what authority, and for whom, do we claim to know the past?) and political (whose histories are legitimated by the dominant institutions of historical knowledge?).

This paper has argued that WhatsApp historiography in India is shaped by at least four interacting forces: the structural features of the platform itself, which favour affective intensity, viral diffusion, and group solidarity; the post-colonial politics of historical recognition, in which communities marginalised by dominant historiographical traditions assert counter-narratives of dignity and resistance; the organised political exploitation of the platform by parties and movements seeking to weaponise historical memory for electoral and

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ideological purposes; and the distinctive temporal consciousness of a society in which historical wounds remain structurally open and politically activatable.

A response to WhatsApp historiography adequate to its complexity requires interventions at multiple levels. Media literacy education in India must go beyond basic fact-checking skills to cultivate a critical historical consciousness that can interrogate not just the accuracy of historical claims but their framing, their sources, and their political purposes. Professional historians have a responsibility to engage not just with elite publics but with the vernacular media ecosystems in which popular historical consciousness is actually formed. Civil society organisations working on digital literacy must develop culturally sensitive approaches that acknowledge the epistemic justice dimensions of WhatsApp history, resisting the condescension that characterises much elite discourse about 'fake news.'

Most fundamentally, the phenomenon of WhatsApp historiography calls for a rethinking of what it means to democratise historical knowledge. True democratisation requires not merely the wider distribution of existing historical narratives but the structural conditions for genuinely plural, critical, and accountable historical discourse — conditions that are, at best, partially realised in the WhatsApp ecosystem. The challenge of building those conditions, in India and beyond, is among the central intellectual and political tasks of the digital age.

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