

Reverberations of the Past: The Role of Oral Traditions in Shaping Indian Literary Narratives

N R Gopal
Associate Professor
CUHP, Dharamshala

Abstract

This paper investigates the oral tradition's deep-seated influence on the evolution of Indian literature across various literary forms, languages, and dialects. It looks at the translation from the oral world into the written one, and at the same time, it checks out themes, motifs, and cultural values that oral narratives carry over into contemporary literary works. It attempts to capture the appearance of oral tradition's forms in literary genres. It also tries to get at the recent past—how modern Indian writers are reshaping the oral tradition to explore contemporary concerns. Key questions include: What impact have oral traditions had on the evolution (and devolution) of contemporary forms of Indian literature? What might be lost or gained in the tale's fidelity when an oral storyteller gets translated into a literary scribe? And in what way are our so-called postmodern forms of storytelling "ethnographically" and sometimes "fictionally" illuminated by the very old forms of storytelling common to oral cultures?

Keywords: Oral Traditions, Indian Literature, Cultural Heritage, Literary Narratives, Thematic Evolution, Folktales, Epics, Bhakti Songs, Sufi Poetry, Textual Analysis, Interdisciplinary Approach, Contemporary Literature, Cultural Continuity, Regional Variations.

1. Introduction

The storytelling tradition—both oral and written—forms the bedrock of the incredible and unfathomably diverse Indian literary landscape. “Orality and storytelling are the two most dominant features of the Indian narrative culture and tradition and a rich repository for the preservation of ever dynamic Indian collective consciousness” (Joshi 17). While oral traditions serve as the precursors to any form of written textual literature, they hold a far more significant place in India's cultural and literary history than they are often given credit for. Indeed, India's astonishing array of myths, legends, and folktales, preserved in and passed down through this country's oral tradition, is a dynamic and vibrant wellspring from which contemporary Indian literature—in any form—so readily draws. This paper makes the case for a fresh theorization of Indian literature that positions oral traditions at its very core. It contests the usual oppositional terms we employ to think about our literature, such as orality versus textuality, tradition versus modernity. With the Indian context as its base, the study offers a model that is not binary but hybrid, one that allows for a better, more vibrant understanding of our literature in all its forms, spoken as well as written.

2. Literature Review

The wealth of knowledge about the bond between oral tradition and written cultures provides an excellent base for comprehending the complex workings of the Indian literary narrative. Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982), with its basic premise that oral and written cultures are fundamentally different, is key to this understanding. Ong, for instance, emphasizes the way in which orality makes use of memory, communal participation, and incipient performance. But for our purposes perhaps Goody's critique of the oral-literate divide is most illuminating (Halverson 315). After all, not only do too many critics too readily idealize oral tradition, but we also need to reckon with the fact that, at least in our time, there is no pure oral tradition in the living societies of South Asia.

Asserting a postcolonial view, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o advocates for "decolonizing the mind" and stresses the importance of preserving indigenous oral traditions as a kind of resistance against the watering-down of forms of expression in cultures formerly colonized. He holds up the oral narrative as an equally valid and important form of storytelling—akin to and as meaningful as anything written down in a book—when it comes to handing down wisdom and shaping cultures for future generations.

Indian academia deepens this discourse by offering homegrown frameworks like *Shruti* (based on what is heard) and *Smriti* (based on memory), which emphasize the interdependence of orality and textuality in Indian thought. Also, the aesthetics of Indian art teaches us that if you want to know how a society conceives of a performative or literary art form, you should apply Rasa theory. This framework examines the performative, emotional, and "intimate" dimensions of oral traditions. Hearing or reciting a text is not merely a performative act in Indian society; it elicits a profound emotional response that renders the experience an art form in its own right.

There are still some unfilled spaces in scholarship; for example, Western frameworks often overlook the lip and written forms' coexistence in Indian literature. This points to an urgent necessity for a theoretical approach that is firmly planted in this culture and attentively addresses the special dynamics and complexities of India's oral tradition. Such an approach would lead to a literary study that is far more capacious in both its theoretical foundations and its range of narrative forms and would be better able to comprehend the more impactful slams, poems, and narratives of the oral form.

3. Orality and Textuality in Indian Literature

“The foundation for Indian civilization, history, and thought laid down by the Vedic Literature represents cultural forms of remembrance in varied forms, traditions, and practices. Memory has always been an integral part of our knowledge systems as the Vedic knowledge was preserved through *Shruti* (hearing), *Smriti* (memorizing) and *Puranas* (written texts)” (Joshi 17). The connection between orality and textuality in Indian literature is profoundly historic. It is also exemplified by the oral beginnings of the epic narratives such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana. These texts, which serve as pillars of Indian culture, were born from oral traditions. Yet even after the transition made by such stories to the new medium of the written word, they continued to thrive. Not only have the kinds of stories told in the epics continued to be performed in still-present forms of oral tradition, but so too serve our numerous regional Bhakti poets, Sufi singers, and almost tribal figures of storytelling—who assure us just as much as a written text, of the stories' ongoing presence and relevance.

The beautiful oral and literary traditions of India are truly diverse. You can see that right off the bat with the comparisons between Tamil *Villupattu* and Punjabi *Heer-Ranjha*. Both of those forms are beautiful in their own right and are features of the regions that produce them. Yet, those forms (and the contents therein) are not nearly as "universal" as oral narratives get. In addition, storytelling holds the collective memory of a people. Important elements recall the past, consider the present, and plan a shared future. In storytelling, communal memory is engendered and maintained. Oral storytelling has long been our first means of codifying what we, as a species, know and ensuring the survival of that knowledge across generations. As is the case with the performative nature of all oral traditions, oral storytelling has even more sway because the audience—the as yet unnamed characters in the story being told—participates in making the retold tale one's own personal-societal-history-shaping artifact.

4. Theoretical Framework

In this part, we give a detailed theoretical framework to understand how talking and writing are connected in Indian literature. This framework is based on many different academic viewpoints. We also draw on native knowledge systems. These are important because they show us the relationship between oral and written stories in their own cultures. The native knowledge systems we use in our framework aren't just local. They are old. They are often called ancient wisdom. They are known across many different parts of the world.

i. Critiquing Western Dichotomies

For a long time, the West has focused on the written word in its literary theories. These theories have often set up a clear division between orality and textuality. They think that oral traditions are inferior to written ones. People who think this also believe that oral stories are inferior because they aren't as permanent or trustworthy as texts. Obviously, this is the wrong way to understand an entire continent's literature, especially since India has such a long history of both literature and the very old art of storytelling. When they say "storytelling," they don't mean just reading and writing. Even in the West, our theories have talked too little about the ancient art of performance. It is pointed out that:

We have to take into account the fact that the western civilization is book-centred, but the book does not exercise the same power and authority in the context of Indian culture. The essential culture of India is embodied by a living individual who not only interprets the norms of culture but also acts as a frame of reference (Kambar 110).

ii. Performance Theory

The basic idea for this study comes from performance theory, which highlights how oral traditions are naturally performative. In other words, these ancient ways of telling stories perform instead of just conveying a message. Characters, plots, and settings come alive in what can be called a "scripted" part of the story. But, even more interesting, the story itself lives on in what Walter Ong called "the art of memory." "Since oral cultures have no fixed texts, they organize and transmit knowledge and information in a unique way" (Biakolo 45). For a society that memorizes stories as a central part of its culture, understanding the next generation comes from adults telling stories to young kids. Through this repeated act of storytelling, the society shapes its future.

iii. Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The framework also uses ideas from traditional indigenous knowledge. Two important concepts from these knowledge systems are what are called *Shruti* and *Smriti*. The narrower meaning of *Shruti* is knowledge that is directly heard and passed along orally, but it's actually used more broadly to refer to the knowledge itself. In this context, when someone says, "they heard it as *Shruti*," it means the person knows the information comes from a source that is recognized as reliable in a cultural, communal, or family way, even though the person might not agree with what is being said. In other words, it is knowledge or information that is respected in some way because of its source. "A large portion of ancient Indian literature is a manifestation of the spoken word, and it belongs to the oral tradition as far as its preservation is concerned. The Vedas have been preserved without the loss of a single syllable through a difficult and an intricate system of recital down the centuries" (Kambar 110).

Smriti, on the other hand, refers to knowledge that is remembered (or "hidden") and then recorded in a more formal way. Historically, when someone remembered what was said in the *Smriti* style, they would later add their own commentary to the text that made up for what was "lost" in the hearing.

iv. Proposed Hybrid Model

The latest framework gives us a new idea about how to think of orality and textuality in Indian literature. It suggests a model that combines both oral and written parts, even though they are different. It shows that studying either by itself misses the rich and complex old and new Indian literary heritage. "It would be futile to attempt to draw lines between the written and the oral traditions in India" (Handoo 93). This model helps see how parts of both combined literatures mostly work and how they influence each other. It lets us see the relationship as a continuum, where mostly oral literature and mostly written literature can talk to each other in a meaningful way. This way, it becomes better than the "one model fits all" way of thinking that too often makes up how people study these two different kinds of the literary past.

5. Indian Oral Traditions as Sites of Resistance

Oral traditions are a resilient and powerful way of resistance found all over India. Different communities use them to tell stories that keep the languages, customs, and knowledge of their cultures alive. These communities see these stories as central to who they are. In this way, they push back against the often-one-sided stories that postcolonialism says between the lines about cultures. While the importance of stories has been recognized and studied by writers like Walter Ong and Charles L. Cohen, ordinary storytellers who tell traditional tales at home, in communities, and in public have been overlooked.

Indigenous people and tribal communities all over the world use oral storytelling to keep their cultures and knowledge alive. But the act of storytelling itself, and the stories told, are also powerful ways to resist dominant cultures that have tried to silence these communities. It is revenge fiction. The tales of the ancestors told around the fire at night are a way to fight

back. Anyone who has spent a lot of time with indigenous people knows that for them, storytelling is both an everyday practice and a sacred one. Indigenous cultures may be the ones who have preserved the art of oral storytelling the best, but they aren't the only ones.

Women's roles in the oral traditions of our cultures can't be overstated. As guardians and transmitters of these important practices and the stories they contain, women have been leading figures and often the main characters in all the stories told. They have built anti-patriarchal structures by using the family practice of storytelling as their own. Women's storytelling and women's rights are closely linked, because both share and challenge ideas about the places women hold in our societies and how some stories (or some ways of life) are more valued than others.

In short, Indian oral traditions are important in today's world because they play a big part in the cultural resistance that postcolonial societies are creating. Not only do these societies maintain and pass on their oral traditions, but they also use them to fight back against ongoing colonial influences in the modern world. These cultures that "remember" assert their identities as cultures that speak out and fight for the rights and recognition of their communities. They also claim their place as actors in history on both the local and global stages.

6. Obstacles and Pathways Ahead

Keeping Indian oral traditions alive is definitely a tricky challenge. For one, it's hard to document and preserve them. If you just write down a story word for word, it might lose some of the effects that the storyteller's performance, their gestures, and the audience's reactions have when shared in person. These "traditional" stories are closely linked to the rituals and events where they're told. So, how can we understand what's going on without paying attention to the place (both physically and in terms of the stories themselves) that these traditions, and the communities that hold them, occupy?

To keep oral traditions alive, we really need different fields to work together. When people in areas like anthropology, linguistics, and literary studies work together, they make a stronger team. All these fields are important for protecting cultures with oral traditions because they understand different parts of those cultures well. Their teamwork helps us see oral traditions as they really are complex and valuable parts of our shared humanity.

Also, the digital humanities offer really cool chances to share the oral traditions of people all over the world. Recording tools like the digital ones we have today are flooding the field. They have blown up really fast. Since they were invented, they've become much more powerful and way more available. These tools, almost all of them, put logging into formats that people often think of when they hear "archiving" at the center of their activity. In fact, they put archiving and logging really at the heart of the digital humanities.

To end with a note of hope, we could say that keeping Indian oral traditions alive in the future totally depends on two things: the next generations of Indian people continuing to value and enjoy them, and ongoing effort within academia and beyond to treat these deeply cultural practices (from storytelling to song to ritual to plain speaking) not just as preserved records but as integral and evolving parts of their (our) shared history and the even more

exciting and huge shared future they can imagine (and help create). "Some of our religious rituals in which recitals are compulsory and some of our art forms in which eloquence is an inevitable element can be of great help" (Kambar 115).

7. Exploring India's Oral Traditions

As India continues to emerge as a global cultural powerhouse, the preservation and promotion of these time-honored oral traditions have become increasingly important, not only for the sake of cultural heritage but also as a means of showcasing the depth and diversity of the nation's artistic legacy (Thussu).

i. Pandavani: The Oral Epics of Chhattisgarh

In Chhattisgarh, there's an old storytelling tradition called Pandavani. It's all about telling stories from the Mahabharata. The people who perform it use simple ways to show their artistic skills. With just a little music from an *ektara* or *tamboora*, these performers, usually men, focus more on the words than the music or acting. They tell stories about the five Pandava brothers. The main performer is often a woman. Unlike male performers, women tell the stories historically and humorously, criticizing men in the process.

ii. Baul Songs: Mystical Minstrels of Bengal

The Bauls of Bengal are famous for their spiritual and philosophical songs. They belong to a mixed tradition that combines Hindu *Bhakti* with Sufi mysticism. Their music is the oral *Bhakti* of our times, and their songs are simple, deep, and full of devotion. They use common phrases to remind us to transcend the boundaries of religion and society. The Bauls live an almost non-violent, weird, and harmonious life, walking around the countryside. They sing songs that criticize "the way the world is" and praise love. They also talk about something special and every day: they look at the blue sky and see the "aroti," the light of love.

iii. Villupattu: The Bow Song of Tamil Nadu

The "bow song" storytelling art is famous in Tamil Nadu. People say it goes back thousands of years. Today, it's often called "villupaatu." But the real name is "villupattu." "Villupattu" means "bow song" in English. Performer orators tell stories while playing a traditional instrument. Sometimes called a "bowed harp," it's more like a cross between a lute and a banjo. With its four "strings," the instrument can play in more than one key, adding to the audience's enjoyment.

iv. Lavani: The Poetic Dance of Maharashtra

In Lavani, a lively oral tradition from Maharashtra, women performers act out a mix of poetry, music, and dance. Instead of the usual one-way oral storytelling, the performers, who are usually women, engage their audience with lines full of puns and plays on words. Lavani is a mainstay in the state's thriving performing arts, and its bold expression confirms its lasting entertainment value and often tackles sensitive social issues that can't be talked about openly.

v. Nyishi Folktales: The Voices of Arunachal Pradesh

The Nyishi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh keeps its history and core values alive by telling stories. Like their ancestors, the Nyishi people today tell traditional folktales about their unique Idum culture. These stories remind them they are an important part of their people's long history.

vi. Bhil Folklore: Echoes of Central India

The Bhil community, one of the oldest in Central India, has a rich collection of oral traditions. Although most of their stories are told in private, these simple but strong tales have been shared with outsiders who speak Hindi, English, or other languages. The Bhils, who still live off the land in some of the most beautiful (and ecologically threatened) forests in India, have retained much of their old culture even as the new (government) culture has tried to change them.

vii. Kirtan: Devotional Singing in Assam and Beyond

The Vaishnavite culture of Assam is deeply connected to Kirtan, a devotional singing tradition that is really important here. Kirtan, which Saint Srimanta Sankardev started, happens when people gather together to sing their hearts out. They recite sacred texts and hymns that show full devotion to Lord Krishna and his various forms. It is said that most Assamese people are in some way connected to Kirtan. This is not just a cultural or religious practice, but also a way that many people reach/stay on the path towards moksha (liberation) in this life and the next.

viii. Toda Songs: Rhythms of the Nilgiris

The Toda people in the Nilgiri Hills show their unique culture with special songs. These songs are sung at important ceremonies like weddings and funerals. They show deep appreciation for nature and the tribe's strong bond with it. Some might say that the songs are the tribe's recording of their life and culture. But actually, the songs are much more than that.

8. Conclusion

Indian literature isn't just made up of written stories. An important part of what it is comes from the rich tradition of oral literature. This is true not just in remote, traditional, or tribal communities that might seem "backward" to many, but also in today's urban societies. These oral stories and performances share important cultural ideas. They also serve as an important test of their characters' and communities' actions.

Actually, the work of any literary critic who studies Indian literature without looking at oral forms is mostly useless. To better understand the many cultures and communities that make up Indian literature today, we can benefit from using a modern mix of theories and literary models. To decolonize our understanding of what Indian literature looks like, we need to include the many forms of stories that exist in different parts of India, both in how they are

told and in their content. This includes dealing with the often ongoing (despite colonial efforts to 'freeze' it) debate about oral performance as an art form. This form can be analyzed and enjoyed just like written texts, and maybe even more, because politically significant changes and powerful cultural performances often happen in the space between the text and the act (in places like the court, temple, or public assembly).

What's more, this idea not only connects different times and cultures, but it also underlines something really important that people often ignore: stories told out loud are just as valuable and important as those written down. If we don't value that idea, there will be less and less discussion about who we are as a society and what our history is. When stories become less important or are seen as flawed, the societies that told them or that are telling them endangered the identities and practices. Too often, we see storytelling as something only few, supposedly primitive, societies do, when in fact it's at the base and along all our lives. Making an inclusive future means we shouldn't ignore societies that value oral storytelling, whether from the past or present, and that doing so isn't just a Western-orienting thing.

Works Cited

Biakolo, Emevwo. "On the Theoretical Foundations of Orality and Literacy." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1999, pp. 42–65. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3820556>

HANDOO, JAWAHARLAL. "ORAL LITERATURE IN INDIAN TRADITION: FOLK CATEGORIES AND MODERN INDIAN SOCIETY." *Indian Literature*, vol. 37, no. 5 (163), 1994, pp. 89–109. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44295583>.

Halverson, John. "Goody and the Implosion of the Literacy Thesis." *Man*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1992, pp. 301–17. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2804055>.

Joshi, Divya. "Oral Narrative Traditions of India and Language Philosophy." *International Journal of Allied Practice, Research and Review*, vol. IV, no. I, journal-article, Jan. 2017, pp. 17–21. www.ijaprr.com/download/issue/Volume_IV/Issue_I/277_Volume_IV_Issue_I_17%20-%2021_Dr_Divya.pdf.

KAMBAR, CHANDRASEKHAR. "ORAL TRADITION AND INDIAN LITERATURE." *Indian Literature*, vol. 37, no. 5 (163), 1994, pp. 110–15. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44295584>.

Thussu, Daya Kishan. "Communicating India's Soft Power." Palgrave Macmillan US eBooks, by Daya Kishan Thussu, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137027894>.