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Oral Narrative Traditions of India and Language Philosophy

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Abstract -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. There are myriad storytelling and narrative traditions popular in India. 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. Language has always been at the center in India, and all schools of language philosophy had given attention to the ultimate question of the relation between the “word” and “reality”. This paper discusses the structures of consciousness found in India’s language philosophy and the gamut of culture preserved in Indian oral narrative traditions.

Key Words: Orality, storytelling, culture, language, consciousness.

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. The stories that are told and retold in families, in villages, before or after dinner, and in plays, performed at street corners by people who are not professional artists, cannot just be put under the rubric of “oral tradition”. Moreover, in being so used, the term “oral tradition” itself seems to be restricted in sense and range, because it encompasses much more than narratives or songs or plays; it embraces the whole gamut of the ways of living preserved in and by the “word”. Generally, the term “orality” has been used to describe the structures of consciousness found in cultures that do not employ, or employ negligibly, the intricacies of writing. Collective memory is a reservoir from which an individual or society draws resources to shape the future. This recollection or collective memory is a cultural phenomenon and a product of variable cultural practices that bring images of the past into circulation. Future is invented through a dialogue with the past engaged in the present and the past is further invested with meanings and interpretations through overt acts of remembrance in the form of stories, rituals, monuments, images, poems, epitaphs etc. Memory, recollection and history thus are not separate from each other.

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), *Smṛiti* (memorizing) and *Puranas* (written texts). The perspicacious achievements of Indian culture lay scattered across several fields of study in archaic Indian texts ranging from the Vedas and the Upanishads to a gamut of scriptural, gnostic, scientific and artistic sources. Further the development of the six traditional branches of erudition (*Vedāṅga-s*), and gradually other scientific disciplines like arithmetic, algebra, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, biology, astrology, logic and grammar bespeak of India's astute tradition. Living in the echoes of that culture, we Indians inherited traditions richer and more vigorous than other nations, and the extraordinary collective recollection, cultivated by congruous exercises, preserved many antediluvian oral works for posterity.

Indian narrative tradition, as many texts, like the Buddhist *Jatakas*, the Panchatantra (the fifth century), and the *Kathasaritasagara* (the eleventh century), owe their origin to oral traditions. *The Ramayana* and *The Mahābhārata* are the best examples that speak about the power of orality and oral traditions and also the most striking prototype of reference to writing embedded in oral traditions but is an oral epic in its textual tradition, an epic dictated by Vyasa to Lord Ganesha as it was transcribed in the written form. It is believed that at one point when the stylus broke down, Ganesha pulled out his tusk and continued to write with the broken tusk which in oral traditions is a symbol of "writing" trying to catch the rapidity of the "oral". Before discussing orality and Indian narrative traditions, it is imperative to understand as to what constitutes a "text" in a multilingual country like India and also the nature of language and translation. One way of defining orality and folklore for India is to say that it is the writing of the vernaculars, those first languages of the towns, roads, kitchens, tribal homes, cottages, and wayside coffeehouses. This is the wide base of the Indian pyramid on which all other Indian regional literature rests. According to Ramanujan, "Past and present, what's 'pan-Indian' and what's local, what's shared and what's unique in regions, communities, and individuals, the written and the oral—all are engaged in a dialogic reworking and redefining of relevant others" (1990, 15). Although there are many ways in which orality and textuality interrelate in the Indian context, still most discussions on orality in India owe their origin to the transmission of the Vedas (Rocher). The Vedas are also called *Shrutis* because they are recited and heard, not written and read. *Shruti* or *Shruthi* in Sanskrit means "that which is heard" and *Smṛti* means "that which is remembered" ("Sṛuti"). The word *Shruti*, also means the rhythm and the musicality of the infinite as it is heard by the soul. The Vedas have been transmitted from generation to generation through the oral tradition. This implies that Indian speculations on language began with The Vedas; and the school of Grammar and Mimamsa seem to be an outcome of the expanded recommendations found in The Vedas. According to Sreekumar, the four auxiliary disciplines of The Vedas, namely *Shiksha* (phonetics, phonology, pronunciation), *Chandas* (prosody), *Vyakarana* (grammar and linguistics), *Nirukta* (etymology), have been the foundation of language philosophy. The divine nature of speech, the creative and illuminative power of the word and the different levels of speech, are the main doctrines, which formed the philosophy of language in the Indian context (Sreekumar 51). Language has always been at the centre in India, and all schools of language philosophy had given attention to the ultimate question of the relation between the "word" and "reality". Talking about language philosophy and language function, Krishnaswamy and Mishra writes:

In India, from the beginning, language philosophy took into consideration both performative and contemplative functions of language; the performative function included ritualistic as well as communicative or transactional functions of language in the outside world; the contemplative function considered the use of language for inward or private functions, like meditation and introspection in the inner world. (2)

Language thus had both phenomenal and metaphysical dimensions in the Indian language philosophy and was examined in relation to consciousness and cognizance. Similarly, in the Indian

context, the reader is never a passive receiver of a text in which its truth is enshrined. The theories of *rasa* and *dhvani* suggest that a text is re-coded by the individual consciousness of its receiver so that he/she may have multiple aesthetic experiences and thus a text is not perceived as an object that should produce a single invariant reading. Orality helps us understand these structures of consciousness. According to Bhartrhari, consciousness is essentially the nature of the “word”. When he says that the essence of language has no beginning and no end, and it is imperishable ultimate consciousness, he in fact emphasizes the presence of language as priori similar to the “arche-writing” of Derrida. For Derrida, the consciousness is the trace of writing and for Bhartrhari it is *sabda-tattva*. This *sabda-tattva* is Absolute, a distinguishing factor of human consciousness, and by saying this, Bhartrhari lends a spiritual character to speech (qtd. in Coward 132).

Grammarians like Panini and Patanjali were worried about human discourse in the ordinary exact world, and yet they have additionally given equivalent significance to the powerful aspects of language. Similarly, Bhartrhari begins his *Vakyapadiya* with an account of its metaphysical nature, but then he goes on to explore the technical and grammatical points involved in the everyday use of language. According to *Vakyapadiya*, language is conceived as “being” (Brahman) and its divinity expresses itself in the plurality of phenomena that is creation. The acknowledgment of supreme information and the profound freedom which results is unmistakably an ontological reflection on language. The knowledge of the “absolute” followed by spiritual liberation is only possible by comprehending the relationship between “word” and “reality”. The grammatical tradition of Bhartrhari identifies the Brahman as *shabda* (word) and the *shabda* as *sphota* (utterance). The inward nature of the Brahman (Lord of Speech), and the creator of the four Vedas, is thus hidden in consciousness, but it has the power to express itself as communication. This capacity of self-expression and communication gives it the character of “word”. Language then constitutes the ultimate principle of reality (*śabdabrahman*). Meaning (*artha*) stands for the object or content of a verbal cognition of a word (*śabda-jñāna*) which results from hearing a word (*śabda-bodha-viśaya*) and on the basis of an awareness of the signification function pertaining to that word (*padaniṣṭha-vṛtti-jñāna*). The meaning further depends upon the kind of signification function (*vṛtti*) involved in the emergence of the verbal cognition. Therefore, the role of cognition as a process of acquiring knowledge and comprehending it through thought, experience, and the senses becomes very significant in derivation of meaning.

There are myriad storytelling and narrative traditions popular in India. Stories are told in various ways. Use of voice and gestures are the commonest modes. Other modes include using painted scrolls and boxes, texts, dance, music, presentation, performance or a combination of all could be used. The rich heritage of storytelling in India defines our culture and our identity. The various art forms encompassed in the periphery of oral storytelling traditions include music (vocal and instrumental) pictorial representation (paintings, scroll, wooden temples), performative arts (various dance forms, Ram Lila, Ras Lila, Ras Dhari Lila, Puppetry, Lok Natya) and literature (Lok Katha, Log Gatha, Lok Geet and Lok Subhasit). These categories carry a huge corpus of sub-genres. Some of the immensely popular storytelling traditions of India are Pandavani in Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh, Tal-maddale and Yakshagana in Karnataka, Chakya Koothu and Kathakali in Kerala, Gondhal and Powada in Maharashtra, Burra Katha and Hari Katha in Andhra Pradesh, Daskathia and Chhaiti Ghoda in Orissa, Oja- Pali in Assam and Kaavad in Rajasthan. Bauls are the traditional singers (storytellers) of West Bengal. Mankha Vidha is an art of narrating story with the help of pictures. In this art form the artists create a pata (traditional scroll-paintings) that are the script or the basis for storytelling and song. This tradition is popular throughout India. It is popular as Phad in Rajasthan, Yam Pat in Bihar and Gorodus in Gujrat. Keertan is popular in almost all parts of the country under different names. There are varied Schools of paintings popular in India. The Buddhist paintings of Ajanta are renowned worldwide. Krishnalila or Bhagvata Purana series and Gita-Govind series, Rukmini-Harana, Usha-Aniruddha, Hammir-Hatha are the series with local flavours of Chamba, Bilaspur and Kangra. Bani-Thani of Kishangarh School of Rajasthan is a world famous painting.

Puppetry commonly known as Kathputli is also a traditional narrative form popular throughout India. Glove, string, rod and shadow are the basic four types of puppets. These types are known by different names in various states of India. The various dance forms popular in India can be classified as classical, folk and tribal. Some of the mesmerizing classical dance forms of India are Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Manipuri, Kudiattam and Kathakali. The earliest form of storytelling was oral in nature; therefore, the term storytelling is specifically applied to the oral storytelling. It is an act of conveying events through words, sounds, gestures, expressions and images. Storytelling has been an important part of oral tradition. In the past through oral tradition of story telling the legacy of rich cultural heritage, history, beliefs, values and practices of a cultural community were handed over from one generation to another. It was therefore a medium of transferring 'the way of life' from one generation to another. It is the oldest form of communication known to mankind. The storyteller mesmerizes the listener and expresses the deepest desires and anxieties of the society. The oral traditions and art forms reflect, preserve and propagate the cultural legacy. Narrative traditions are the heart and soul of a culture.

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