

The Invaluable Oral: Trajectories of genesis, challenges and longevity

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Summary

The article delves into the symbiotic organic connection between identity and folk idioms, often overlooked. The idea of language and self-representation of one's identity (dependent on the demography) remains ambiguous, fluid and anachronistic as several folk songs, epics, ballads and proverbs are not passionately dealt with by the written word. The article scrutinises the power hierarchy evidently present in the realm of language itself, as oral traditions are often dogmatically over-powered, thereby also jeopardising the rural identities linked with it. Further excavating the context of regional dialects, the article studies the rural identities of Mithila region in Bihar as its sample. The article further expresses the authoritative and at times patronising impact of translation and transcription on oral narratives and its reach. Towards the end, the article explicitly states how oral traditions, inspite of being undocumented would protect their longevity, circulation and impact, thereby shifting the paradigm towards their popularity, essence, intensity and presence, hence making it an interesting case study.

Keywords: Folk idioms, oral narratives, languages, regional dialects, transcription

Introduction

Storytelling is a significant site for the construction of identities.¹ For a demographic structure like that of India, where literacy in the majority of geographical regions has been limited, folk idiom is the symbolic language of the non-literate. Apart from the fifteen official languages, thousands of speech varieties and dialects thrive in oral forms such as tales, proverbs, songs, ballads and epics. This reveals how central folk language is to the definition of identities in such a cultural context. In the act of storytelling, the participants become part of a linguistic tradition that enables their self interpretation.

Tales grant a linguistic structure to thoughts and language is what constitutes reality because it is the site of perception and articulation of reality. However, the factors that define our sense of history and time often efface pieces of such unacknowledged histories for two reasons: one, because they do not belong to the institution of the written word and therefore bear no authority², and two, because they do not even belong to a privileged 'language' as we understand it today.

Folk narratives circulate in the oral medium which, while it is widely enjoyed in the 'popular' realm, does not have a fixed record as happens in the written tradition. The concept of language itself sidelines unwritten forms as 'unreliable' and as a result, regional dialects never manage to reach the mainstream. This paper asserts the value of the Oral in the context of traditional cultural expressions and explores whether this invaluable asset of society is under threat by the very means employed to preserve it. The study will make references to the Mithila region of Bihar³ and the oral folklores that persist there.

Cultural subjectivity of Orality

Orality is often considered a deprived medium vis-a-vis the written text. It denies access to an original presence unlike the seemingly authentic authoritative text of a written narrative. It is preserved in memory and its structure allows individual interventions. These factors are frequently posed as questions against its literary and cultural merit. Mobile, dynamic and fluid oral narratives are counter posed against written texts and challenged for authenticity, diminishing that their very power lies in this lack of conformation to a fixed narrative. This hierarchy has also translated into the linguistic marginality of regional cultures and their oral literatures.

Regional narratives are undocumented and persist on the streets, in cultural and religious community gatherings, in intimate dialogues within families and not necessarily on the pages of a written document. *Bhuinya* groups in highland Orissa, even after having been treated as outcastes by the 'upper caste' Maliks continue to keep their heroic figures like *Tulsi bir* (bir is attached as a suffix meaning 'hero') alive through oral poetry. Hence, the significance of oral narratives lies in their ability to be shaped by the community, and although they do not confer to an authorial hand they are vested in the community's voice.

Orality lends more fluidity to stories, as stories travel into each other and also get intertwined with personal as well as the community's historical narratives. Every site of re-telling bears witness to individual investments from the speaker and is fashioned differently according to the listener, escaping an official authorial aura. It is everybody's legacy and nobody's property. This is evidenced in *Naach*, the Maithili folk drama performed on occasions like *Dasain* or *Chhath* festivals⁴. There is a basic skeleton to the performed story but the dialogues are unwritten and the narrative emerges in performance: amenable to the actors' impulses, the script is like wet clay in their hands.

This allows for individual interventions and contextual alterations as the story is no longer told to but created with the community, and as Coralynn V. Davis (2014) suggests ‘the construction of meaningful, moral selves happens at the conjunction of lived experiences and folk narrative.’ She also reiterates how folklores as a medium emerge in a social context where women are often suppressed and have less opportunities of engaging in the production and circulation of knowledge.

An oral narrative’s predisposition to interventions also makes it susceptible to propagandist use by the structures in power and one needs to be cautious in its understanding and analysis. But what is remarkable is that it can emerge in the most intimate pockets of the community in the most unsuspecting manners and hence, is better at escaping the structures laid out for it than documented narratives. So even though it is navigated by dominant structures just like written narratives, it is not determined by their sanction and is better armed at eluding their purview. Stallybrass and White (1986) point out in ‘*Politics and Poetics of Transgression*’ that cultures think themselves in the most immediate and affective ways through the combined symbolisms of body, geography, social order and psychic identity. Organic intellectuals use their oral traditions of narrative, theatre and performance to opine and contest these presumed fixities in order to reorder or overturn them.

Two well-known dance forms of Mithila region in Bihar serve as suitable examples to analyze the issue of how recordings seek to preserve but freeze the folklore performances. Jat-Jatin is a dance that is performed in times of deficient rainfall or drought. The onus to petition higher powers (Lord Indra) to propitiate the rain falls on the womenfolk, interestingly cutting across castes. This is an exclusively female performance where both performers and audience are women only. They set off from their homes at night in a state of gay abandon, wearing their sarees upto the knee which is totally not normal otherwise. The theme is of a demanding wife who seeks great indulgence of her husband who agrees with some dramatic interaction. This is an example of subversive performance in which the woman enacts by asking for her just dues in society which are normally denied. There is an underlying motif of pleasing the Rain God (Indra) to whom Hindu mythology attributes great power and beauty and also all the attendant vices that come with such boons. The rendering of the dance-drama is a liberating act for the performers and the audience. Another example of the feminine oral is the dance of *Jhijhiya*. Once again the woman takes charge of propitiating the deities for the well-being of the family and the society. In Mithila, the birthplace of the virtuous Sita, this is also a celebration dance to celebrate the return of Rama after His victory over the evil Ravana. This dance is performed by lower caste women who are continuously encouraged from the sidelines by all other women. Performances such as these in free spaces in rural

areas are slowly dying. The effort to resurrect them are mostly in staged performances in urban areas. As the rural migrant slowly urbanizes, these performances would become more anecdotal. The risk is that these performances may soon thereafter be recognized as the primary art form itself. Loss of original context often leads to the recording becoming the reference point for all new practitioners which may even prevent organic development of the art form. This fear is likely extended to translations which often find a larger audience than the original and thus become the primary source of information.

The impact of transcription of oral texts

Oral texts belong to a tradition premised upon flux- an unofficial form of language that conveys peculiar experiences and employs gestures which are codes for peculiar socio-cultural phenomena. The process of transcription involves not just the conversion of a text from one mode of expression to another, but it also includes a translation of text from speech to the written word- a process that alters the very nature of the text. As Walter J. Ong (1982) writes in his book *'Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word'*, in community-based oral sharing of stories the 'residue' of words does not exist as it does in the case of the written word which is a sign that enables meaning. An oral, un-transcribed story remains in the memories of people as a potentiality.

The evolution of written narratives rendered memory obsolete by investing an external 'sign' with meaning. This is a function that had previously been performed by an internal resource, namely the mental faculties of the teller and the listener together constructed the meaning. This process also implied an influence exercised by the listener over the narrative because the teller, facilitated by the fluid nature of oral articulation, altered it according to topical demands and needs. The narrator thus identified with the text and the audience directly moulded the story. New criticism emphasizes this inseparability of context from the text, and the symbiotic relationship between the two. With the switch from orality to the written word came the possibility of fixing and stabilizing the narrative by recording or transcribing it. However, as Ong points out, 'the paradox of the written word' operated to ensure that its fixity and 'deadness' assured its "endurance and potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers"⁵. The writing of a text also leads to analytic reflexivity for the solitary author and reader- while orality had promoted spontaneity in the author and uncritical perception in the 'group of listeners'. Certain important points ought to be made with regard to these shifts from orality to literacy. In the act of transcribing,

there is a loss of the visual tools such as gestures, mimicry or the physical ambience that were part of the oral tradition. The teller-listener dynamics are altered in this shift to author-reader dynamics. Also, the use of phonetic devices such as voice modulation, pitch and the ability to convey emotions such as anger, sorrow, fear are all rendered obsolete. Transliteration can be seen as an attempt to carry over this aspect from the oral to the written narrative.

Words that hold peculiar significance in the cultural context of the original story are often transliterated into the target language to retain the essence of the meaning and associations attached to them. However, while transcription does lend stability to narratives, it paradoxically opens new possibilities for translation of the text into other languages, thereby opening it to alternative audiences. With this entry into another language begins an endless play of meaning. Cultural meanings, much like transliterated words, leave some of the previous associations but also form new associations in the target language.

Translation of narratives

It is important to remember at this point that rendering of such narratives in the English language takes them to another level by first recording them in the written form and then offering them to a reader of English. English literary traditions in India have always treaded the fine line between constructions of the self and the other. In translating these tales to English, one addresses a readership that is not only literate, but also literate in English. Indian English has however, attained a status of its own, separate from British or American '*Englishes*'. With the infiltration of the language with a whole set of Indian words, phrases and the meanings they carry, transliteration and translations must not be seen as a literary translation, but as a cultural translation. The tendencies of globalization have rendered English in India a 'glocalized' language- the global turned local has been assimilated into the linguistic consciousness of the Indian readership.

The nature of folk language, idiom and diction thus allows not just indigenous tales of common people to thrive but also enables alternative renderings of widely known legends and epics. But with all the possibilities it offers, it is also challenging and leaves unknown as much as it makes known. Translation signifies movement of expressions not only from one semantic field to another but also a transaction between different cultural codes.

Expressions carry immense cultural value, they bear the imprints of cultural communication, the words Carrot Cake burst forth a specific taste which is the affective value of the expression. It can become *gajar ka halwaon* the level of semantics but to a reader embedded in a certain cultural language it will taste different and in turn become different. Hence, the challenge as expression moves from one language to another does not merely remain lexical or structural but beyond that into the dimension of cultural. Expressions such as proverbs speak multitudes in a particular cultural context but encased in another language and reproduced in a different context, might find themselves devoid of all the annotative layers that produced them. It is necessary to dive deep into the cultural challenges that translation as a process faces.

Diversity of oral performances

Apart from translation, another method often adopted to seek to preserve the Oral has been to record the same either in print or on film when it is being performed. We need to ask the question whether doing so calcifies and locks the expression into a single form. Further, many oral expressions are to be really enjoyed in the overall context in which they are performed. There are many festivals associated with harvest and sowing times. These have often given occasions for various oral performance styles. Such occasions also provide opportunities for interactions between communities, castes and genders. Example: Holi is a harvest festival. Its songs have themes which differ from *Chaiti* which is a folk style to celebrate sowing of fresh seeds for the next crop. Both are occasions for social interface. Once these expressions are recorded in print or on film, they tend to lose the context since they can actually be watched any time of the year without reference to the agricultural moorings at all. Thus, print can only archive the expression but cannot perhaps perpetuate it. The focus is on the value of the Oral in the context of traditional cultural expressions and how print and audio-visual modes lock expressions in snapshots of time.

Conclusion

The story changes, reinvents itself at every site of performance. Transcription and translation freeze the narrative in an authoritative moment. The purpose of the research is not to speak either against transcription or translation of oral narrative but to make visible the problems and challenges that surround it and establish that

print can only archive the expression but cannot perhaps perpetuate it. It is important to ensure the subversive oral voice does not become threatened by the very means deployed to preserve it and recognise that no matter how accessible the written word may be the oral shall continue to stay in(valuable).

Notes

1 The genesis of storytelling is difficult to document due to the lack of resources, evidences and growth patterns, thereby making it difficult to decipher. Nevertheless, storytelling has continued as a powerful medium, across various civilizations, races, ethnicities and religions, thereby galvanizing the very essence of empowered identities and their communication strategies.

2 The idea of written word being more modern and developed in the visual architecture of language and oral tradition implied the connections in the historical context with the backward societies (Ahearne: 1995)

3 Also known as Tirhut and Tirabhukti, the Mithila region is located in the Indian state of Bihar. Historically, it gained prominence after the Indo-Aryans established the Videha kingdom there in the Vedic period (100–500 BCE).

4 The folk dances in the Mithila region are diverse depending on the religious, caste and sectarian lines. Naach, a dance form, is quite prevalent in this region. It gives permission for the women to engage in the cultural discourse of dance during the festivities.

5 Further explaining the ‘paradox of written word’, Ong always stresses that voice (used in storytelling and other narratives) have power, which can compete with the written word. Every voice has authority, and it creates the ‘other’ to which the word is spoken to, simultaneously also creating an ‘other’ within oneself.

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