



Oral Tradition and Minority without Written Literature

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India

I am really happy to be here to speak on a topic like “Oral Tradition”. The concept so close to me, not only as an individual, but because I belong to a country called India!

Indians are generally very vocal people. We speak a lot! We shout a lot! We argue a lot! We have an opinion about virtually everything and we want to be vocal about it; right from the neighbour’s new haircut to the colour of the Prime Minister’s turban! We sing songs. We sing in happiness... in distress... when in love... in loneliness... You must have seen that in Bollywood films, and got entertained.

We have given the basis of orality, the ‘sound’ a very important place in our culture. It is interesting to note that ancient Indian society owes the existence of the universe to the divine sound energy “Om”.

Vedas, the oldest books were preserved for generations together by memorizing and reciting the contents verbally. Even the authenticity and correctness of the written verses were checked by oral recitations. The epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata are said to be first orally composed and uttered, and then written down. The Bhagwadgita, the philosophical guide of Hinduism, is said to be narrated by Lord Krishna on the battlefield of Mahabharata.

These mythological tales, which were told and retold under the clear Asian skies, percolated from one generation to another, adding their indigenous spices to make them more and more interesting.

This urge to tell, or to express verbally lead to the development of our diverse, vibrant and colourful oral tradition, that flourished in India for centuries together.

India, which is a subcontinent in itself, cherished this strong, fertile oral tradition, bearing all the unique flavours of the language it had originated from. Bhavai in Gujarat, Yakshagan in Karnataka, Ramleela in UttarPradesh, Baul in Bengal, Powada in Maharashtra and Kathakali in Kerala, to name a few.

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India was always on the crossroads of civilisation. Thus, we adopted, adapted and internalised various cultures as our very own. Along with the cultures came languages and the oral folk forms. We take pride in being a multilingual nation with as many as 22 regional languages with each region of our country divided on linguistic basis, and more than 114 dialects.

As a child, I had to know at least 3 languages. My mother tongue – Marathi, our National Language – Hindi and our colonial legacy and the medium of instruction in schools – English. We also learnt Sanskrit – the mother of all our languages, and had a choice to learn the foreign languages. Besides these, every one of us could communicate roughly in the languages of our neighbouring state. We were the torch bearers of at least 4 to 5 different languages.

However, we never knew when this rich multilingual fabric has started fading out slowly. Today, many of our children cannot speak in their mother tongue, nor can they read or write its script. They know communicative English, and that is all. Now we are disturbed, and we popularly blame it on technology which came into our lives with the wave of globalisation that swept the world.

We debated on this issue, we discussed endlessly on different forums, wrote in newspapers about the visual menace that is TV, computer, Nintendo and X Box. But in all this, we never turned around and looked at ourselves.

The decline had started in the 1990s. This was the time when the structure of families, homes and the society in general was changing. Nuclear families mushroomed all over urban areas. Mothers became working women. Grandparents moved out of joint families, and with them, went grandmother's tales. They were never replaced. The flavour of the soil, your own heritage, mythology, fables, folktales, never percolated further.

We as parents really never invested our time and energy to refill that void, which was created due to the sudden loss of the wonderful world of stories that helped the young souls to rest, dream and aspire.

The child's thirst for communication was not quenched. At this juncture, our children naturally switched over to TV, as their mates! And then, the transition from TV to the Computer was rapid. Most of the modern families in India share the same story.



Interactions, in general, dwindled and thus started the downfall of linguistic ability. The need and importance of expression in the mother tongue started fading*.

In this past decade, this seemingly insignificant minority alarmingly became significant. It was now the time to rectify the mistake. If not acted upon in time, our 800 year old mother tongues would soon be reduced to the languages of the minorities. With this realization, came various efforts. Thus, started “Bhaashaa” – The centre for Preservation and Enhancement of Regional languages.

“Bhaashaa” is a movement started by us, a group of 15 professionals from various fields who had come together – Writers, Journalists, Media Heads, Illustrators, Corporates, Administrative Officers and Ambassadors. We have been working for the past three years to preserve our linguistic heritage.

To maximise the possibility of existence of any language, we have to focus on children today, as they are the ones who will take the language ahead tomorrow*.

To bring these children to written word was the first obvious option in front of us. We identified three major problem areas where written words could not reach.

1. Those children who cannot read, because they are not able to read, ie they are ILLITERATE or physically challenged;
2. Those children who are literate and want to read, but do not get anything to read due to various factors like financial constraints or geographical inaccessibility;
3. Those children who are literate, affluent and can easily get books, but do not want to read.

The biggest challenge among these three problem areas was the 3rd group. These children were educated children from affluent families. They possessed all other “attractions” but did not want to approach the written word. In their fast paced urban life, “age-old” possessions like books had no importance at all.

To combat this problem, to bring these children to the written word, we took the help of an ‘age old’ solution our civilization had offered, which was always there with us, but was forgotten – this solution was nothing else, but the use of “oral traditions”. We just had to give it a more innovative and contemporary dimension to suit the needs of today’s young adults.

Thus, we launched to concept of “mobile libraries cum interactive centres”. These centres are held once a week for two hours. We go to different housing societies



with a bag of carefully selected multilingual books and washing lines that are used for hanging clothes, and thus our ‘library’ starts – outside the four walls of children’s homes, under the open skies, feeling the warmth of the soil.

We tie the washing lines between two trees, and hang the books on it at the children’s eye level, like you would hang your washing. But all this is just the tip of the iceberg. This “literate illiterates” will not read if you just tell them to. At most, they will flip through the pages. To make them want to read, we have to prepare the grounds for them through the sweet candy of oral means. Storytelling becomes a tool here to bring these reluctant rebels to words, and here again, the grandparents come to our help. The grandparents staying in the vicinity come and tell the children of our centres beautiful stories. Tying these two generations together ensures that the void in a child’s mind is slowly filled, as before. Besides storytelling, other activities, too, form part of Bhaashaa’s carefully designed curriculum for these centres called “Find your best friend in 150 days!”.

We sing folk songs from different languages and dialects which refreshes the multilingualism in these children’s minds that we are so scared of losing. In these centres we play different language games, sometimes films are shown and discussions take place. Classics are read and then enacted in groups by the children themselves. In these centres, we aim to bring out the expression of children in three years, which ultimately leads them to get hooked to books.

For the 1st and 2nd group, i.e. the children who cannot read due to various reasons, we have to stick to oral medium. Thus, for these children in the rural and urban areas, we use folk forms that they can identify with. I would like to introduce one of them called Powada. Powada is a form of a ballad that originated in Maharashtra in the 13th Century to praise the bravery of kings and rulers. We have brought back this ancient form into use today for these children, to tell the tales of Heroes. To re-establish values in today’s chaotic world. Children love the rhythm, vigour and energy. They love shouting at the top of their voices while being part of the Powada – a tale of a hero in a capsule form!

Folk Forms transcend all boundaries. Linguistic and geographical. Like in Kerala, where I witnessed a wonderful performance by the Children’s literary Association of India – a close associate of Bhaashaa. There, the “Karthakali” – an



ancient temple dance form was used to narrate a story... the story of Alice in wonderland! It was fascinating to see semiliterate people from very remote villages who had never heard of Alice, blending the right elements of the west with the east, and performing with absolute panache !

While all these projects have been happening, “Bhaashaa”’s signature programme – a programme closest to my heart has been taking shape. This is a special research based programme that I have written and composed and is “Bhaashaa”’s own production. It is called “Jantarleli Mantargani” – “Magical Spellbinding Songs”.

Jantarleli Mantargani is a programme that has beautiful, chosen popular and not so widely known songs and poetry from various Indian regional languages. The speciality of the programme is that, children perform the three hours long programme for other children. We have travelled extensively, showcasing this production, with a troupe of 33 children, in the interior of my state, reaching children in rural areas. I have used some interesting folk forms while composing the dances that the children perform, so that these children get exposed to the ancient folklore and oral tradition by themselves.

And lastly, I am happy to tell you that all these children performing in Jantarleli Mantargani are from the minority problem area that posed the most difficult challenge to us... Those children who did not want to read, after 2 years of our efforts, these reluctant readers are so hooked to books that they are understanding the magic behind the words, and singing and dancing to bring that magic in front of hundreds of other children to bring them to their beautiful world of words!

