



Oral Tradition & Its Decline

(Oral Tradition – A Huge Minority)

Indira Bagchi

Member Executive Committee

Association Of Writers & Illustrators For Children, India

(bagchi.indira@gmail.com)

Abstract: Oral tradition kept a people's culture alive through generations by orally narrating the memorised stories of their history, beliefs, values and practices. The spread of knowledge of their way of life and thought bound people together and strengthened their cohesion. This practice flourished when written literature was sparse and large families were necessary to support the agrarian way of life. The development of written literature adversely affected the practice as memorizing stories and orally narrating them became redundant. Industrial Revolution is another factor in its decline as it impacted family structure through urbanization and fragmentation to meet the emerging manpower needs. A worldwide effort adapting modern technological means is necessary to prevent the practice from becoming extinct.

Key words: Oral Tradition, Storytelling, Its Decline, Revival.

Preamble

Human's unique capability to communicate verbally with each other distinguishes him from animals. But how humans came upon this unequalled capability? A view is that languages originated spontaneously as fortuitous events that led to human vocalisations getting sequenced into a series of associative sounds that became sentences. Human capability to communicate through speech and human intelligence, the cognitive ability to be aware of his surroundings and visualise in his mind, are the two pivotal factors in human society's progression.

Oral tradition is an aspect of human society's evolution. It is the complex process of passing on information of a people's culture from one generation to next, in the absence of script, by word of mouth through stories. Words are mental pictures that we associate with specific ideas, events or things. Culture, among other things, refers to a people's cumulative knowledge and experiences, the set of beliefs explaining the existence of, and giving meaning to, the universe and the moral code governing the conduct of social affairs.

Development Of Oral Tradition

Though the oral tradition's origin is shrouded in the mists of time yet its underpinning is the practice of orally communicating the accumulated knowledge in the



form of stories, a practice that is as old as human history and common to all cultures. In pre-historic times, as humans struggled to establish themselves, their main preoccupation was to forage for food. After day-long hunt for food the band of hunters and gatherers return to their shelter by evenfall, light fire for preparing a meal and eat it. Before going to sleep, one of its imaginative members may have started the practice of narrating, in simple words but with expressive gestures, the day's exciting events to inform and also entertain the group. Such a setting must have prompted the making of the storyteller and the origin of storytelling.

Gradually, as language became more sophisticated and people's imagination developed, the storyteller found that he could hold his listeners in thrall if he embroidered his stories with fanciful and imaginative details. The art and the practice of storytelling became the central means of spreading knowledge of all those aspects of life that strengthen their social bonding and make their social structure more cohesive.

At some point in time, an extremely imaginative storyteller may have invented 'supernatural beings' endowing them with extra-ordinary powers to influence phenomena that he found difficult, with his limited knowledge, to explain or make his listeners understand. These stories, with the passage of time, got embellished and grew into the great myths of tribes. How the first religions evolved still remain a mystery. However, they appear to be a response to human fear. There were probably hundreds of different stories which sought to explain how humans, other life forms, the Earth, the rest of the universe and Nature's phenomena came to be. These stories carried the seeds of religion as they imbued a people with a set of beliefs and values. Thus, storyteller came to assume a critical role in the community as he wove together the strands of beliefs, values, myths, superstitions, rituals, traditions, etc. into an invisible but strong cord that held it together. He could do all this because, through his stories, he could ignite his fellow beings' imagination and relate with their deepest emotional needs.

Indic Civilization And Oral Tradition

Greater Indian Subcontinent's civilization, also called the Indic Civilization, is considered to be one of the oldest living civilizations. Civilization refers to a multifaceted but inter-related social collectivity with distinctive cultural and ideational features that evolved and took shape through a long, historical process involving a



division of effort with a concomitant social hierarchy. From this perspective, the Indus Valley or Harappan Civilization, which flourished in *circa* 3300 to 1300 BCE (Before Common Era), was the first major civilization in India. From the second millennium BCE, its Iron Age Civilization, also known as *Vedic* Civilization, extended over much of its vast northern plains. Its scriptures, the *Vedas*, meaning *the knowledge*, are considered to have been written around 1500 BCE and are thought to be some of the oldest written texts.

The *Vedas* and the teachings associated with them, the *Upanishads*, before being written, were orally transmitted through generations forming the nucleus of the Indic oral tradition. The *guru-shishya parampara*, the tradition of a succession of *gurus* or teachers orally passing down the teachings to their disciples, and the system of *gurukula*, where disciples lived together with their teachers to orally imbibe knowledge from them, further strengthened it

Religion is at the core of every culture as it permeates every aspect of a people's way of life and thought. In the pre-literate period, the most effective way of spreading knowledge of a people's culture was through stories told as a part of the oral tradition. The common people, more than the privileged few, had then strengthened and perpetuated the nascent practices of storytelling, including chanting, singing, ceremonies and festivals. Thus, oral tradition sustained the shared, recurrent and egalitarian nature of pre-historic societies and their religions. In Indic part of the world, oral tradition was as sacrosanct as the transmission of texts and writings in the West. Whereas the Abrahamic religions are based on written texts, the Indic ones share the commonality of oral tradition.

Oral Tradition In Modern India

In 19th century, large numbers of simple but impoverished village folks from India's fertile northern plains, in quest of better economic opportunities, sailed across seas and made landfall at distant shores. Along with their meagre belongings they carried with them the rich traditions of religion, culture and language of their motherland to which, in their lifetime, they never returned. Yet they kept their traditions alive in their new-found homes through telling of stories to their children of their life and landscape, their tradition and rituals, and their fairs and festivals, etc. Their



children, in turn, repeated the heard stories further to the generations next. Thus, in far-flung foreign climes, religious and cultural traditions and practices prevailing in India's heartland took root and flourished. It is a living example of how oral tradition can sustain a people, enabling them to last out social and economic upheavals, holding fast to their civilizational roots and survive as a vibrant but distinct cultural entity. Some of the countries where this miracle has happened are Fiji, Mauritius, Suriname, Guyana, and the island of Trinidad in Trinidad & Tobago.

Early Societies & Extended Families

The oral tradition flourished and developed in all early societies. In the pre-Industrial Revolution period, the economy was agrarian in nature and the majority of people lived in rural settlements. Family was the basic unit of society but these were generally large and extended. Grandparents were a reassuring feature in every family and grandmothers were always available to care for children and entertain them. A simple means of entertainment was storytelling. In stories that they told, they wove, among other aspects, the strands of tradition and the way of life of their people with a garnish of supernatural to make them interesting for their young listeners. In every culture, grandparents appear as key instruments of oral teaching, of transmitting knowledge and information of a people's past and their traditions. They became the hyphen between the past and the present, and played a central role in socially integrating a people.

Industrial Revolution & Its Impact

Industrial Revolution, originating in England around mid-18th century was, without doubt, a major turning point in human history. As it spread from England into Europe, manufacturing units, powered by steam power, came up at a number of places. Though Industrial Revolution was economic in nature, its social consequences were far-reaching. The manufactories needed manpower and started drawing upon its rural hinterland to meet this requirement. Towns and cities proliferated but at the cost of rural society. As men, women and children, lured by better economic prospects, started moving to these manufacturing centres, the extended rural families started fragmenting and depleting. The new phenomenon of *nuclear* or small families emerged in towns.



One of its impacts was felt on oral tradition of telling stories. With grandparents left behind in villages, parents too busy with their long hours of daily grind and even children put to work to supplement income, the practice of storytelling started declining in the societies dominated by the new economic order.

Developing Societies & Oral Tradition

A larger part of the world, comprising mostly what is today known as *developing societies*, was left untouched for long by the Industrial Revolution. In these societies, the oral tradition still held its own and played an important role in spreading knowledge of its traditions through folklores, folk music, folk theatres, etc. However, with the advancing technological revolution, the oral tradition even in these societies is becoming less secure today and is being increasingly overtaken by modern means of information transfer.

Role Of Alphabets, Scripts & Printing

Millennia before the Industrial Revolution, the evolution of alphabets and development of scripts had its own impact on oral tradition as it was no longer necessary to memorize history and culture of a people for transmission to succeeding generations. The growth of written literature, though much of it is based on orally told stories and parables passed down from generation to generation, further hastened the decline of the oral tradition.

The development of new technology of printing, including movable type, and now computerized desk-top printing system, has helped to widely and rapidly spread the written word in the form of books. The advent of electronic mass media, including radio and television, is another factor. Their widespread networks are progressively reaching into remote places. These developments are also adversely impacting the oral tradition.

A further disturbing trend that affects oral tradition is that its basic tool, the languages, is facing a “global extinction crisis”. More than half of 7,000 existing languages worldwide are expected to die out by the end of this century. More than 2,000 are gravely endangered. When a language dies, it takes with it irreplaceable knowledge of the past traditions and the present day natural world. With languages disappearing,



human knowledge base is getting eroded and the rich reservoir of oral tradition is getting depleted.

Future Of Oral Tradition

Does the oral tradition belong to the past? Can it cohabit with the modern, scientific culture? These are the questions that are disturbing many minds. The modern society is characterized by the advancement of scientific thought, the technological developments and the evolution of new attitudes that includes, among other things, the yearning to go beyond one's capacities, to innovate, and to realize the pure intelligence. All these factors are influencing the modern pedagogy. The technological revolution in the means of communication is impacting the teaching methods that are significantly changing the past habits that were linked to the way of life and cultural pattern in extended families. With exponential growth of cities, today we are in the midst of the age of urbanization. In urban areas, individualism rages, which is not conducive to the spread of beliefs and values by word of mouth and tends to marginalize the oral tradition.

Modern Pedagogy & Oral Tradition

Modern pedagogy's aim is to encourage all means that will enable a child to understand the lessons quickly but well. So, the modern child prefers to play with a computer at home, at library or at school rather than trying to get the hidden messages of a quavered voice, broken by years, of an aged grandparent. The modern child shows a strong approval for modernity and cultural exchanges. It also explains the lack of discipline and absence of respect for the elderly. Thus, traditional and modern culture becomes more and more incompatible, the second losing ground to the first. Therefore, there is the need to explore the values that make oral tradition durable and adapt them to meet the needs of our present day information society.

Revival Of Oral Tradition

In the developing societies like India the oral tradition still holds sway in rural areas where majority of its people still live. The Indian classical dance forms like *Kathak* and *Kathakali* derived their names from the word *Katha* or story in which



storyteller tells a story through graceful and cadenced *mudras* (actions) laced with *bhava* (emotions) to the accompaniment of lilting music. Traditional and folk dance forms, folk music, folk plays, puppet shows that have the innate capacity to revive oral tradition are still popular with rural folk in India. But the threat from the increasing penetration of radio and television networks into countryside has to be met with imagination so that they become the carriers of oral tradition.

The electronic media like radio and television are like the double-edged sword. They appear as a threat to the oral tradition that can no longer be taken lightly. Yet they can also prove useful means for its recovery. The thrust of its efforts should be to promote the word of mouth and popularize what is integrative to the exclusion of all that are divisive insofar as families, clans and tribes are concerned. Finally, it would be necessary to represent oral tradition not as the only cultural underpinning of our societies but also to focus on the acquirements and innovations that are amenable to adaptation to meet the new needs of the new times.

Role Of Awic In Reviving The Oral Tradition

The International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) has been doing a yeoman's job in reviving the oral tradition through storytelling and reading promotion. Association of Writers & Illustrators for Children (AWIC), the Indian Section of IBBY, is involved in projects to encourage the oral tradition. It organized the first Asian Conference on Storytelling in 2005 and followed it up with the International Conference on Storytelling in 2007. The focus of its first International Conference on Children's Libraries held earlier in the year was, among other things, on promoting children's libraries as the emerging centres of oral tradition, especially in remote and inaccessible areas.

In the wake of devastating tsunami that hit India's southeast coast and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands in December 2004, AWIC's members reached the affected areas and set up libraries for traumatized children living in temporary shelters. Sessions of storytelling were also organized that greatly helped them to recover from their depressed state of mind. One of AWIC's on-going programs is reaching books to those children who have no access to books and connecting them with books through storytelling.



Conclusion

A worldwide effort is needed to prevent oral tradition from becoming extinct. Storytelling must be revived, especially among children with low literacy level and those who are physically, socially and economically challenged. A concerted attempt is necessary to reach children worldwide and touch them with the magic of stories and bring smiles on their faces. The wealth of stories found in great epics of every culture should be documented and transformed into animation films and dramatised versions, and presented to children, especially those who still remain deprived of their inherent cultural right to education. The oral tradition retains its strength to revive traditional values and that strength should be husbanded and used for greater common good of children worldwide.

