

RESHAPING KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM- A TRANSITION FROM ORAL TRADITION TO WRITTEN LITERATURE

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Abstract

The present Research Paper aims to analyse how human knowledge shifted from oral tradition to written texts making it fixed, permanent and widely accessible. Previously knowledge was transmitted using myths, storytelling, rituals, songs and other oral modes. It was passed on through memory and cultural performance. The oral systems like folk songs, rituals and indigenous storytelling allowed flexibility and creativity. The emotional connect of oral performance was established immediately. With the shift in knowledge continuum, that is written scripts and printed versions, knowledge became permanent and recorded. It could be transmitted across time and place with no variations. Though it resulted in authoritative versions with little flexibility, at the same time it allowed ideas to spread beyond a community on a worldwide level. Unlike oral tradition, written literature could be preserved beyond the lifespan of humans. In this transitional phase, the flexibility, creativity and emotional touch seen in the oral tradition were lost and could not be replicated in written literature. This Research Paper attempts to explore the dynamics of this knowledge transition and its impact in a technology driven world where apart from oral and written literature, digital media has emerged as a third dimension, beautifully blending oral (videos, podcasts) with textual literature establishing the fact that knowledge systems are not fixed and permanent but ever evolving.

Keywords: Oral Traditions, Written Literature, Cultural Variation, Digital Media.

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Introduction:

The earliest and enduring method of preserving knowledge was to transmit it orally. Societies followed the tradition of forwarding their collective memories in the form of folklore, myths, proverbs, epic narratives, chants and the likes that served as a source of entertainment and education. Oral traditions laid the foundation of human communication through spoken words, memory, performance and community participation. The oral expressions are not only used to spread knowledge but also to pass on cultural and social values thereby keeping the cultures alive. They play a significant role in preserving genealogies, spiritual teachings, laws and continuity across generations. This tradition was an integral part of human lives and a means to connect with their past and shared experiences. Rhythm, tone and performance together with music, gestures and rituals create meaning in oral tradition. To ensure continuity, people developed mnemonic devices such as repetitions and expressions. Oral narratives could change with every retelling to suit the demand of the audience and hence was flexible and dynamic.

Analysis:

Some of the richest oral traditions across the world that are still relevant are the narrative epics like ‘The Iliad’ in Greece and ‘Mahabharata’ in India; the narratives celebrating heroic deeds such as Greek Myths of Zeus; folklore like the ‘Anansi The Spider’ from Africa and ‘Panchatantra’ from India; Folk songs like Baul song of Bengal in India or the Scottish Ballads; religious chants such as ceremonial chants in America and Vedic Hymns in India; customary rules and traditions that are transmitted orally in an indigenous groups, safeguard the heritage of that culture.

The transition from oral to written tradition started when humans thought of preserving ideas and knowledge so that they sustain beyond the limits of memory. Written traditions allowed permanence and accuracy. It was initiated by the Sumerians through Cuneiform. Later on, the Egyptians used Hieroglyphs and Chinese oracle bone scriptures laid the foundation of writing tradition that prevented laws, myths, stories and other oral forms from erosion over the period of time thereby offering precision and permanence. Written traditions unlike the oral were fixed, durable and could be accessed through literacy. With the gradual shift towards written literature, writers were able to explore and interpret works with greater depth than before. It was due to this shift that some of the best authors and poets could contribute to the literary culture and heritage today.

Some of the popular theorists of oral and written traditions have studied the interaction and evolution between oral narratives and written texts that helped in the preservation of cultural knowledge. Walter J Ong in “Orality and Literacy” explained the distinction between primary orality and secondary orality. He stated that in oral culture knowledge is linked to lived experience where repetition ensured retention. Writing enabled analytical thinking and abstract reasoning. Secondary orality refers to a phase where oral characteristics are shaped by literacy and technology like television, radio, and internet. His theory explains that the shift from orality to literacy basically transformed human consciousness and communication.

Like Walter Ong, Jack Goody argued that written texts allowed for codification of records, laws and rules that ultimately resulted in complex social structures and historical development. Milman Parry, another theorist researched on Homer’s epics and wondered how feasible it was to transmit and memorize such a long poem. He then discovered that it is the stylistic device known as formulae, a kind of mnemonic device that uses repeated phrases under same metrical conditions that made it possible for poets to improvise and compose long poems quickly. Albert Lord carried this research further by analysing South Slavic Oral singers in Balkans. He concluded that oral poems are recreated using repetitions and formulae technique. These theorists tried to establish that some popular literary texts are not just written texts rather a living example of cultural memory. Literature can therefore be seen as a cultural and historical record. It resonates the values and philosophy of the time and place in which it was written, providing a glimpse into the societal norms and cultural traditions of that era. For example, Toni Morrison’s novels capture the experience of African American in the twentieth Century and Charles Dickens works provide a deep insight into the Victorian England.

The narratives that were once fluid and adaptable were given longevity by converting them in a standardized text. The earliest literary work that was written in cuneiform on clay tablets and has survived till date is the Epic of Gilgamesh that dates back to 2100 BC. The Pyramid Texts are religious inscriptions found in the pyramids are the ancient Egyptian Literature written around 2400-2300 BC. Another work that provides insight into the ancient Egyptian society is the story of Sinuhe that dates back to 1800BC. Some of the ancient Chinese literature include The Book of Songs and ‘I Ching’ that dates back to 1000-600BC. Around 8th Century BC, in western literature,

Homer composed the earliest Greek epics- ‘The Iliad’ and ‘The Odyssey’ that are considered masterpieces exploring deep human emotions and truth. In Indian oral tradition, Vedas were recited by the priests during religious ceremonies. These were usually accompanied by music and dance and were considered as a means of worshipping. Apart from the Vedas, the Indian Epics- ‘The Mahabharata’ and ‘The Ramayana’ were transmitted orally from storytellers that preached people moral lessons and ethics and at the same time considered as a source of entertainment. With the gradual development of writing technologies over the centuries Indian oral traditions were standardized in the form of inscriptions. The earliest inscriptions on the pillars and rocks dating back to 3rd Century BCE were the Ashoka Edicts, written using Brahmi Script with a purpose to spread the teachings of Buddhist King, Ashoka. Later on, during 320CE to 1600CE, the collection of stories and legends in the form of Puranas were written down using Sanskrit language. As the orality transformed gradually into textuality, the details of flexible stories were recorded in the form of complex conversations which ultimately resulted in a change in linguistic expressions. Myths, rituals, rules and customs shifted from verbal improvisation to fixed and permanent printed documents. This transition enabled human beings to understand and get a glimpse of their civilization even before written documents existed. The knowledge system was thus reshaped offering profound intellectual growth. This transition has many pros and cons. Unlike the oral tradition that was mnemonic, written tradition helped in knowledge preservation. The printed versions ensured lesser errors and more precision of records. Unlike the localised transmission of oral literature, the print version had a widespread impact and can be disseminated to large audience through mass media. Power structures saw a major shift as people who controlled literacy influenced the oral tradition-based societies.

This knowledge continuum witnessed further transition with the advent of digital media. Digitization has reshaped knowledge by blending both the traditions. The print media resulted in mass distribution of knowledge but it reduced the participatory nature of oral knowledge exchange. Reading was a solitary act unlike oral participatory method. With the advent of Digital media, characteristics of orality surfaced once again. The videos, podcasts, reels and live streaming platforms have brought in dynamism encouraging real time interaction with a larger audience. Social media users can exchange dialogues and post stories which can be modified with each retelling. Unlike the written traditions that standardize content, digital communication just like oral tradition remains flexible and fluid. It allows editing, live conversations in the form of chatting and meaning can be interpreted collectively. Similar to oral tradition, digital communication also makes use of symbols and visuals. The emojis, GIFs, and memes are pictorial representation of emotions without making use of written words. Like written tradition that privileged literates only, digital media has created another inequality. It is controlled and used by people who have technological literacy, internet access and platform control and at the same time raising concerns about misinformation and fraud. Hence Digital media is a hybrid form carrying ahead the knowledge continuum by integrating the permanency of written form and the immediacy and fluidity of oral tradition.

Digital media integrated audio, video and text in an interactive format creating a multimodal knowledge tradition that is more accessible to people. It has archival features where information could be preserved in database, cloud and other online repository making it more expandable and updated compared to oral and written knowledge system. Digital communication has its own advantages. It can spread to a global audience at a very fast pace. It promotes inclusivity by providing voice to the marginalised section of the society resulting in the democratization of knowledge. It enhances interactivity where knowledge is created and debated in real time and

unlike the written tradition, knowledge validation is no longer monopolized by scholars and institutions. It is created collectively through consensus and online discourse. The challenges involved with digital tradition is the overwhelming content that can dilute the credibility of the information. With the ease in the spread of knowledge chances of disseminating false information is high. Unequal access to internet and technology can create a digital divide.

Conclusion:

Digital media has challenged traditional epistemologies as knowledge systems. It has resulted in the decentralization of authorities by redefining the validity of information. The future of knowledge continuum will rely on balancing credibility, regulation and preservation with dynamism and inclusivity. Digital communication as epistemic tradition is ever evolving and requires critical approach to address its challenges. It represents a transitional phase in the ongoing quest to transmit and preserve knowledge reasserting the fact that knowledge systems are not fixed but ever changing.

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