



Three stages of oral tradition in Indian communication: A study

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Abstract

India, an ancient nation with a history spanning over 5,000 years, stands out among its contemporary civilizations, such as the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Minoan, due to the unique nature of its communication system. While these other civilizations have vanished, the descendants of the Indus Valley Civilization continue to thrive. What makes a civilization eternal or "Sanatan"? Social, political, and academic discourses offer varied perspectives, but a comparison between the Ancient Egyptian and Indus Valley Civilizations provides further insights. The Egyptians excelled in monumental achievements, such as grand pyramids and statues of their kings. However, in the 21st century, no population identifies as direct followers or descendants of Ancient Egyptian civilization. Modern Egypt bears little resemblance to its ancient counterpart, with Egyptian gods and kings reduced to museum artifacts and the pyramids serving as tourist attractions. In contrast, Indian civilization has endured for 5,000 years, resilient against numerous attempts by invaders to erase its cultural legacy, and it continues to strive toward its historical glory. This paper explores the reasons behind this continuity from a communication perspective, focusing on the role of India's oral tradition in sustaining its eternal or "Sanatan" civilization.

Keywords: Oral communication, tradition, shruti-smriti, indian communication system, Indian culture

Introduction

Thousands of years ago, on the banks of the Indus-Sarasvati, our Vedic ancestors established a civilization with 'knowledge' as its cornerstone. The mantra "Ā no bhadrāḥ kratavo yantu viśvataḥ" (Rigveda 1-89-1), meaning "Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions," reflects the Vedic ancestors' yearning for knowledge. A distinctive feature of the Indian knowledge tradition is its oral structure, which emphasizes memorization, vision (mantra-drashta), understanding, and assimilation over writing. Our Vedic ancestors developed an oral tradition to transfer their vast repository of knowledge, in the form of Samhitas, from one generation to the next. This process gave rise to the style of mantra recitation, the shruti tradition, the guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) tradition, the concept of Shabda-Brahma (the divine word), and the Shruti-Smriti framework. In the context of oral communication, the mention of 'Shruti and Smriti' becomes essential. Shruti refers to what the sages heard, revealed to them by divine forces, while Smriti denotes texts created through human memory and intellect, essentially serving as human interpretations of Shruti. (Singh, 2020) [1]

Both Shruti and Smriti are integral to the Indian oral tradition. Vedic literature is referred to as Shruti because ancient sages received it through the tradition of listening. Later, texts written based on this memorized knowledge became Smriti. Over time, the complex mysteries of the scriptures were simplified and passed down through generations by the common people, with the oral tradition serving as the medium. The oral tradition of Indian communication has been unparalleled globally, as no other ancient culture has sustained such a prolonged oral tradition. Indian philosophy recognizes six means of valid knowledge (pramanas): perception, inference, comparison, testimony, presumption, and non-apprehension. In contrast, modern Western philosophy primarily relies on 'perception' as the basis for truth, accepting only what is directly observable and verifiable through reason. However, the Indian

communication tradition is predominantly oral, making it challenging to validate through the lens of perception alone. In Indian tradition, every individual is seen as a fragment of the divine ("Jivo Brahmaiva naparah"), and their spoken words are considered valid as 'shabda pramana' (testimony). Conversely, Western philosophy views humans as born into a world surrounded by sin, giving minimal importance to their spoken words and prioritizing written religious texts or officially verified documents as the ultimate truth.

During British colonial rule, the influence of missionary presses led to a trend among the Indian populace to accept only written words as proof. Common debates often include questions like, "Where is it written? Show it or prove it!" However, the Indian communication tradition emphasizes memorization and assimilation over writing. If we consider only written texts as proof, we risk dismissing many of our scriptures as 'false,' 'mythical,' or 'folktales.' In this context, studying the oral tradition of Indian communication can highlight the utility of other forms of valid knowledge. It also enables a historical evaluation of the oral tradition, underscoring its significance in Indian communication. (Kumar, 2025) [2, 5]

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the historical and current status of the oral tradition in Indian communication.
2. To categorize the historical stages of the oral tradition in Indian communication.
3. To evaluate the significance of the oral tradition in Indian communication within the contemporary global communication landscape.

Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research approach to comprehensively investigate the oral tradition of Indian communication. The qualitative methodology is chosen to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the historical, cultural, and contemporary significance of this

tradition, allowing for a nuanced exploration of its evolution and impact. The exploratory nature of the research aims to uncover insights into the unique characteristics of the oral tradition, its historical stages, and its relevance in the modern communication landscape.

The study primarily relies on secondary data to construct a robust framework for analysis. These data sources include a wide range of scholarly materials, such as books on Indian history, culture, and communication studies, peer-reviewed research papers, and articles that delve into the oral traditions of ancient and contemporary India. Additionally, past interviews with historians, cultural scholars, and experts in Indian philosophy and communication are utilized to provide qualitative insights and contextual depth. These secondary sources are carefully selected to ensure credibility, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives.

First Stage of Oral Tradition in Indian Communication Vedic Period

The German philologist and scholar of Vedic and Oriental studies, Max Müller, introduced the Western world to the profound knowledge of the Vedas and Upanishads. After 27 years of dedicated effort, he translated the *Rigveda* into German, along with other significant Sanskrit texts such as the *Kathopanishad*, *Kenopanishad*, *Hitopadesha*, and *Meghaduta*. These translations were subsequently rendered into various European languages, spreading Indian literature and culture worldwide. Recognizing Müller's deep expertise in Indian literature and culture, the British government invited him in 1882 to deliver lectures on Indian religion, philosophy, literature, and culture to trainee Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers. These seven lectures were later published as a book titled *India: What Can It Teach Us?* in 1882. In 2019, Dr. Suresh Mishra translated this work into Hindi as *Bharat Humein Kya Sikha Sakta Hai*.

In his seventh and final lecture, Max Müller elaborates on the unique characteristics of India's oral knowledge tradition. Responding to a question from a trainee ICS officer about how Vedic literature, particularly the *Rigveda*—dating back to the 15th century BCE—could have been preserved for centuries without a writing system before the 5th century BCE, Müller explains: "The answer lies in the power of memory. This may seem astonishing, but even more remarkable is that this fact can be easily verified today. Even if every manuscript of the *Rigveda* were to disappear, it could be fully recovered from the memory of Vedic scholars in India."

Müller further acknowledges the superiority of the oral tradition over his own translated works, citing an example: "Indian students memorize the Vedas and learn them directly from their gurus, not from manuscripts, and certainly not from my printed editions of the *Rigveda*. In my room at Oxford, I met students who could not only recite these verses but did so with impeccable pronunciation. When they examined my printed edition of the *Rigveda*, they pointed out an error without hesitation." In this lecture, Müller expresses concern about the future of this oral tradition, stating, "I have begun to doubt whether this tradition will remain intact in the future. Therefore, I continually urge my friends in India and my students appointed to ICS posts to learn as much as they can from these living libraries. If the community of Vedic scholars

were to disappear, a significant portion of this ancient literature would vanish with them." (Mishra, 2019)

Over thousands of years, numerous languages emerged and faded in India. After foreign invasions, Sanskrit largely lost royal patronage and faced deliberate attempts at erasure. Yet, through the oral tradition, the entire corpus of Vedic literature has been preserved in its original form. Despite being transmitted orally for millennia, the content of the Vedas remains unchanged. The oral tradition also preserved the ancient Vedic Sanskrit language, while written Sanskrit evolved over time, showing noticeable changes. Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization reveals traces of pictographic scripts, making it difficult to believe that the Vedic people were unaware of writing systems. However, despite the availability of writing, they recognized the profound importance of orality and developed a robust oral communication tradition to preserve and transmit their invaluable knowledge to future generations.

A comprehensive oral tradition was developed to memorize Vedic literature. Max Müller observes that this process was highly disciplined. He estimates that a Vedic student, over an eight-year period in a *gurukul*, would memorize around 30,000 lines from texts such as the *Rigveda*, *Brahmana*, *Aranyaka*, rules for domestic rituals, phonetics, grammar, rituals, etymology, prosody, and astronomy. This amounted to memorizing approximately 12 lines per day over 2,496 working days (excluding festivals and holidays based on the lunar calendar). According to *gurukul* traditions, using written materials during this memorization process was deemed inappropriate. (Mishra, 2019)^[3]

To transmit Vedic literature orally from one generation to the next, several specialized recitation styles were developed. Under the *Prakriti* and *Vikriti* systems, original mantras were recited in up to 11 distinct ways to ensure their accurate memorization and preservation. This marked the first stage of India's oral tradition, during which the Vedic people laid the foundation for a robust communication system. This tradition enabled the Indian knowledge system to retain its integrity over thousands of years, ensuring the continuity of its cultural and spiritual heritage. (Tatavam, 2023)

Second Stage of Oral Tradition in Indian Communication: Folklore Period

The oral tradition in Indian communication was established with a focus on the human mind rather than paper and ink. The oral tradition refers to the effort to transmit a society's culture orally from one generation to the next. In cultures where the oral tradition was influential, cultural elements were passed down through stories, hymns, poems, ballads, mantras, proverbs, and sayings. In the context of Indian communication, this oral tradition manifests in two major streams. The first and ancient stream is associated with the Vedas and Upanishads. Approximately 5,000 years ago, on the banks of the Sarasvati and Indus rivers, Vedic ancestors worshipped the goddess of speech (*Vagdevi*), regarded the spoken word as a manifestation of divine *Brahma*, and accepted it as a valid means of knowledge. This laid the foundation for India's enduring oral tradition. Over time, the common people (*lok*) embraced this Vedic heritage, forming what can be considered the second stream of oral communication. (Kumar, 2025)^[2, 5]

India's folk tradition (*lok*) is a cultural museum or archive in itself, carrying forward a priceless repository of knowledge across generations. This is why, despite a thousand years of foreign subjugation and concerted efforts by jihadist and missionary forces to erase Indian culture, India continues to exist as a nation. Even today, Indians live as a link in their ancestors' knowledge tradition. In this regard, the oral traditions of folk communication have played a significant role. When invaders like Muhammad bin Qasim, Mahmud of Ghazni, and Muhammad Ghori were plundering India and destroying its temples, and when Bakhtiyar Khilji was busy burning the great university of Nalanda, Indian grandmothers continued to narrate stories of Rama, Krishna, and Gautama to their children. Even during the challenging times of foreign invasions, gurus taught their disciples to memorize the Vedas and Upanishads. This ensured that, despite the destruction of temples, monasteries, ashrams, viharas, and libraries, India's knowledge tradition remained unbroken. The oral tradition prevalent among the folk kept the flame of Indian culture burning amidst the storm of foreign invasions. This flame of knowledge continues to illuminate not only Indians but also the entire world with its wisdom. (Kumar, 2025) ^[2, 5]

Third Stage of Oral Tradition in Indian Communication: Contemporary Scenario

Jnanpith Award-winning writer and former president of the Sahitya Akademi, Dr. Chandrashekar Kambar, in his article titled "Oral Tradition and Indian Literature" published in the February 2021 issue of *Yojana*, writes that a significant portion of ancient Indian literature is an expression of the spoken word, and its preservation is deeply tied to the oral tradition. (*Yojana*, 2021) ^[6] Through centuries of rigorous and profound oral recitation, the Vedas were preserved without losing a single syllable. It must be understood that the necessity of written documentation was reinforced by British courts, which could not trust the testimonies of local witnesses. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that Western civilization is book-centric, but in the context of Indian culture, books do not hold the same authority or influence. A society where the spoken word is supreme and carries moral weight differs from one where the written word is considered the definitive document of truth. In such a society, references to the wisdom of elders are invoked during disputes and conflicts.

In a country that regarded the spoken word as evidence and a manifestation of divine *Brahma*, its importance gradually diminished over time, leading to the erosion of the Indian oral tradition. The role of British courts and missionary presses was significant in this decline. Max Müller notes that English civil servants working in India firmly believed that all Indians were untrustworthy and their words could not be relied upon. In his book *India: What Can It Teach Us?*, Müller cites James Mill's *History of British India* (1817) to highlight the mindset of British rulers, who, driven by a sense of white superiority, believed that Indians belonged to an inferior race, lacked morality, were inherently litigious, and brought trivial matters to court. Consequently, their testimonies were deemed unreliable. During the same period, missionary activities led by William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward through the Serampore Mission were at their peak. Missionary presses across the country worked to portray Sanskrit as a secondary language and dismiss ancient Indian

oral narratives as myths. They presented beautifully printed, often illustrated, Bibles as authoritative texts in contrast to India's oral tradition. The combined impact of British courts' skepticism toward Indian testimonies and the missionary presses' promotion of written texts profoundly influenced the Indian populace. Over time, Indians internalized this mindset, labeling oral histories as myths or legends and accusing India of lacking a tradition of historical documentation.

However, in independent India, the past few decades have witnessed a positive shift in the perception of the oral tradition. Scholars like Vidyanivas Mishra and Jagram Singh have made significant contributions through their writings, leading to a change in the colonial missionary mindset that cast doubt on the validity of the spoken word. Nevertheless, the academic world and historical scholarship still often demand written evidence, with the refrain "Where is it written? Show it!" persisting. On the other hand, on November 7, 2003, UNESCO declared the Vedic chanting tradition as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. At a meeting in Paris, UNESCO's then Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura, recognized Vedic chanting as an outstanding example of cultural expression and heritage. UNESCO's official website notes that the value of this tradition lies not only in the rich content of its oral literature but also in the simple techniques employed by sages to preserve texts intact for thousands of years. In this tradition, Vedic reciters undergo rigorous training from childhood to master the pronunciation and meaning of mantras, ensuring the continuity of the entire Vedic corpus over millennia. (UNESCO, n.d)

Conclusion

The oral tradition of Indian communication has played a pivotal role in rendering Indian culture timeless. Originating with the Vedic sages, this oral tradition has traversed three distinct stages. During the medieval period, the common people (*lok*) embraced and perpetuated this tradition. The contemporary era can be considered the third stage, where, despite numerous challenges, significant efforts have been made to sustain and revive this tradition.

This study clearly establishes that the oral tradition has been the carrier of Indian culture. The oral tradition of Indian communication is unparalleled globally. It is this tradition that has kept Indians connected to their thousands of years of history. Even after the destruction of Nalanda's great library, the treasure of Indian knowledge remained preserved in the minds of our ancestors and reached us, a feat attributable to the oral tradition. The continuous oral tradition developed by Vedic sages thousands of years ago remains relevant today in various forms. It is well-known that only a fraction of the thousands of spoken words are ever documented in writing. Therefore, if modern communication incorporates the oral tradition alongside writing, the sources of knowledge for communicators could multiply manifold. To achieve this, it is essential to preserve the vast repository of knowledge embedded in the oral tradition and ensure its transmission to future generations.

In this regard, the study, teaching, and research of Indian knowledge traditions, particularly Indian communication traditions, in media education and research institutions are crucial. This will equip the new generation of communicators with richer sources of knowledge, enabling them to draw upon and transmit the abundant wisdom

inherent in the oral tradition. Such efforts will strengthen India's oral history and culture, liberating it from the stigma of being dismissed as myth or legend. In recent years, significant steps have been taken in this direction. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes the inclusion of Indian knowledge traditions in various curricula. Further efforts in this direction are needed to ensure the continued vitality of this tradition.

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