

ORAL NARRATIVE IN INDIA

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Overview From the ancient Vedas, orality has been inseparable from Indian literature. Many texts are oral in composition, performance and transmission, or some combination of those three processes. Some texts also demonstrate the influence of oral tradition in their frame-story and/or dialogical form. The statement that a text was 'written' in a particular century or by a specific author is often mistaken and ignores the fact that the text was the product of oral processes. Equally important, most Indian texts, written or not, pass into oral tradition, where they are reinvented and kept alive.

Genres Indian languages have literally hundreds of terms for different genres of oral narrative, chiefly prose but many also in verse. These genres do not always translate accurately into existing western ones, but a rough equivalence would be this:

katha, katai for 'story', 'tale'

vrat katha for a religious tale told by women

git, pattu, pad for 'song/ballad'

caritra for 'legend'

purana for 'myth'

kavya, kappiyam for 'verse/epic'

History Oral narratives form the basis of most of the earliest recorded texts in Indian literature. The written texts of the Pali-language Buddhist *Jatakas* (c. 300-100 BCE), for example, are oral stories adapted to make a religious point. The collection of oral narratives directly from oral tradition, however, began only in the latter half of the 19th century, mainly inspired by European collectors. Those authentic oral tales have been useful in confirming that the stories found in early prose literature (*Kathasaritsagara*, *Pancatantra* etc.) were in fact borrowed from oral tradition.

Folktales Folktales told in the regional languages of India are beyond counting; even today one can find dozens of tales within a single village. Many of these stories are part of an Indo-European folktale tradition, whose influence is strong even in the Dravidian languages of south India. Cinderella suffers in Telugu and Assamese, just as she does in Danish and Italian, but her plight is inflected by local culture. The plot may similar, even identical, but the ethos and ethical perspective will differ. For example, for a long time scholars believed that India had no Oedipus tales, until A. K. Ramanujan demonstrated that they do exist but are told from the mother's and not the son's point of view.

Formulas One fascinating feature of folktales, across the world, is their traditional opening and closing formulas. 'Once upon a time' is itself a classic, with interesting counterparts in Indian languages. Tamil tales begin 'In a town,' which tells the listener/reader that the story is not set in any specific time or place; in other words, it is a folktale. Then come the characters, beginning with the king (*raja*), who remains unnamed for the same reason. The tales often end with another kind of formula: 'The tale has no legs, and you have not tail.' In other words, 'Don't ask any questions; after all, this is just a poor little story.' Oriya tales end with a different convention: 'I saw the prince in the marketplace but he didn't recognise me.' The teller is saying, in effect, 'The story is over, the spell is broken, we're back to reality.'

Features If we had to identify key features of Indian folktales, we would begin with the tale-within-a-tale. Likewise, there is a great deal of meta-material, such as tales about telling tales and about the consequences of listening to them. Although this is not exclusive to the subcontinent, it is nonetheless exceptionally prominent. Another feature would be the tendency of these tales to domesticate the pan-Indian gods and goddesses of Sanskrit myths. When villagers or townspeople tell tales of Rama and Sita, the hero

sneezes and his wife has her period. Folktales everywhere tend to reverse hierarchies, and in India this means that Brahmins appear as greedy and foolish pedants. Women, who are often the tale-tellers, are shown to possess inner power, wit and wisdom. Finally, Indian tales have an intense moral energy that seeks out wrongdoers and punishes them.

Reading

Patrick Olivelle, *The Pancatantra: The Book of India's Folk Wisdom* (Oxford, 1997)

Peter Khoroch, *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Arya Sura's 'Jatakamala'* (Chicago, 1989)

Stuart Blackburn, *Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from Oral Tradition* (Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2001)

K. Ramanujan, *Folktales from India* (Pantheon, 1994)

A.K. Ramanujan, *A Flowering Tree, and Other Oral Tales from India* (California, 1997)

A.K. Ramanujan, Three hundred Ramayanas. In *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (OUP, Delhi, 1999), pp. 131-160

Paula Richman, *Many Ramayanas: Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (California, 1992)

Brenda E. F. Beck, Peter J. Claus, Praphulladatta Goswami and Jawaharlal Handoo (eds.), *Folktales of India* (Chicago, 1999)

Kirin Narayan, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon: Himalayan Foothill Folktales* (Oxford, 1997)

Antii Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale* (Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1964)

Ruth Finnegan, *Literary and Orality* (Oxford, 1988)

Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987) Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge, 2002)

Discussion questions

Oral tradition, it has been suggested, is not just a method of composing or telling narratives. It is a mentality, a way of looking at the world that is different from the worldview of a text-based culture. Purely oral cultures, that is, cultures without writing, are rare, but even cultures that are dominated by orality, like India, are said to be fundamentally different to cultures that depend on the written word. Analyse the validity of this argument with reference to India. First identify cultural characteristics that might be correlated with orality. Then compare those features with others found in a text-based culture (in Europe, north America, etc.).

Compare the oral stories of Rama with those found in written texts. Focusing on the key events (the marriage, exile, abduction, death of Ravana, fire test of Sita), analyse the differences and suggest what values or attitudes the oral versions express.

Compare one popular Indian folktale with its parallels in world literature. 'Cinderella' would be a good choice, although 'The Needle Prince', 'The Juniper Tree' and 'The Maiden without Hands' are other possibilities. Find as many versions of this folktale as is possible by consulting the international folktale indices (see Aarne and Thompson above). Then identify the narrative variations between the Indian and other versions. Finally, analyse those differences for their cultural significance.

Compare a collection of Indian oral tales with a collection from a European country. You will find many parallels between the two collections. Scholars have attempted to explain this phenomenon by various theories, which basically form two camps. Monogenesis is the idea that a tale has a single source ('one birth') and is then borrowed and transmitted across time and space. Polygenesis, on the other hand, claims that each variant of a story is born independently in different places ('many births'); so, five versions of the same story would have emerged separately in five different places. This second theory assumes a human universalism, or a belief that all cultures share the emotions and attitudes from which stories spring. Analysing the two collections (one Indian and one European), which of these two explanations is more convincing?