
UNIT 1 ORAL TRADITIONS

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1.1 ORAL TRADITION - TRENDS

Every one of us as a child was always interested to listen to the stories. Particularly if the grand parents or elderly neighbors are around they will tell a different story every day. Do they refer to any book or CD? No. they will be telling the stories and events orally. The stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata, stories of kings, queens, saints or legends from villages or pilgrimages, the events associated with freedom movement in India are all interesting to listen. Before the arrival of television and video games the chants, songs, stories were told and retold. The children always looked forward for the story time. Many questions were asked and answers were given convincingly. This ability to remember and narrate has come from our culture and tradition. So they are known as Oral tradition. It is also called as oral culture and oral lore. It is the way a society transmits its history, literature, and social order and knowledge of various kinds. All these pass on from one generation to the next generations without a writing system.

Oral Tradition can be defined as the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, or narration of events based on the personal experiences or it has been a oral singing or chant or narration of the story pertaining to particular community. Even the chants offered in rituals belong to the category of oral tradition.

The oral tradition remains a unique testament to the capacity of the human brain to absorb, remember and reproduce structures of great complexity and sophistication without a system of written notation.

It often takes the form of eye-witness evidence about past events, but can include folklore, myths, songs, and stories passed down over the years by word of mouth. While it is an invaluable way of preserving the knowledge and understanding of older people, it can also involve interviewing younger generations. More recently, the use of video recording techniques has expanded the realm of oral history beyond verbal forms of communication and also recording the actions and gestures.

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF ORAL TRADITION IN INDIA

It may be songs or rituals or stories or the preparation of medicines, or dishes which are practiced in common by a group of people over several generations. They are distinct in some way from written information. In general "oral tradition"

refers to the transmission of cultural material through saying, and was long kept as tradition by village folk which are known folklore. Before the script or writing developed, the four Vedas, Ramayana and Mahabharata were in oral form. The entire scripture was learnt by memory. It was recorded in personal memories. It was very much essential to be transmitted to others. In this way they had passed their acquired knowledge to know generation. In many countries due to the growth of cities and industries the opportunities to remember and transfer are lost. Many folk practices, songs, narratives have faded away. They are not in living form.

But in India the rural society is still large and a large section of population lives in villages. So the oral tradition is living tradition. The chants in the temples, *bhajans*, *sankirtans*, folk songs, legends, cult practices, *raslila* tradition, the harvest songs and rituals, songs and legends associated with the celebrations of *Holi* festival, *Nautanki*, *Ramayan Katha* and other *kathas*, (stories), *Harikathas*, the ways of cooking large number of dishes in each region, *Bhuta* worship, Vedic *yajnas*, reciting Quran, Bible or *Gurugranth* and such other scriptures are all very much practiced in our country. All these Holy Books available in the written version today were in the oral versions once upon a time before they were scripted. The folk fairs and festivals are regularly conducted in mass scale. These oral traditions were part of fairs and festivals. There are plenty of opportunities for the people to know and participate in these occasions, where the oral traditions play a significant role.

In India Oral form of literature is privileged than the written form. It is always easy to remember poetry than the prose. The oral tradition has been continuing from ancient times and will keep evolving in future too, of course they may take new forms depending on the prevailing socio-cultural environment.

Historians, folklorists, (the experts in folk traditions) sociologists and journalists, are the people who are well informed about the oral traditions. During their research and field work they come across with many kinds of oral traditions of various places. The content of these traditions are applicable to real life, society, belief systems of the common people belonging to particular community. Earlier these were recorded and written about in the books, newspapers. But today they are regarded as the important academic discipline. Scholars and practitioners of the traditions are working together to document and revive and also restore these traditions. There is great awareness in the communities where oral tradition is significant for their survival.

1.3 INTANGIBLE HERITAGE - UNESCO

UNESCO, the international body is taking lot of interest in the oral traditions, which is covered under Intangible Cultural Heritage. According to UNESCO Cultural heritage is not limited to material manifestations, such as monuments and objects that have been preserved over time. This notion also encompasses living expressions and the traditions that countless groups and communities worldwide have inherited from their ancestors and transmit to their descendants, in most cases are unnoticed.

Many years of research undertaken by UNESCO on the functions and values of cultural expressions and practices have opened the door to new approaches to the understanding, protection and respect of the cultural heritage of humanity. This living heritage, known as intangible, provides each bearer of such expressions a

sense of identity and continuity, insofar as he or she takes ownership of them and constantly recreates them.

As a driving force of cultural diversity, living heritage is very fragile. In recent years, it has received international recognition and its safeguarding has become one of the priorities of international cooperation thanks to UNESCO's leading role in the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

1.4 REPRESENTATIONAL EXAMPLES

For Indian peoples, the narratives or what are often referred to as the oral traditions convey their most cherished values as well as contribute to the perpetuation of their worlds. The narratives encompass a variety of categories, two of the most prominent being the stories of creation and the tales of human or mythological heroes.

Vedic Chants: In the year 2003 UNESCO recognised the Vedic chants as the most valuable oral tradition for the humanity. The knowledge, contents, the ways of chanting of Vedas is regarded as invaluable. This has directed Indian Vedic scholars to consolidate their efforts to safeguard and revive the oral tradition in the Vedic learning tradition.

The teaching of classical music and dance: The teaching of classical music and dance has been primarily oral. The raga and its structure, the intricate nuances of tala or rhythm, and the rendering of raga and *tala* as *bandish* or composition, are passed on from guru to *shishya* by word of mouth and through direct demonstration. There is no printed sheet of music, with notation acting as the medium, to impart knowledge. Similarly in Indian classical dance also the steps, movements, *abhinaya*, the use of hand gestures and dancing for compositions are all depends on the ability of a teacher to teach the disciple. They are not found in written form. It is directly taught by the guru in oral form to a *shishya*.

Bhajan Tradition: In Maharashtra, millions from all walks of life go on a pilgrimage twice every year to Pandharpur a temple-town. As they travel, they sing the poems composed by Dnyaneshwara (13th Century), Eknath (15th Century) and Tukaram (17th Century). The entire body of songs consists of hundreds of the medieval poems learnt orally. Similarly, the poems of Mira, Nanak and Kabir are learnt orally and sung by millions of Indians to this day. In *Haridasa Parampara* people travel to Tirupati. During the entire pilgrimage they would be singing the compositions of *dasas* and *acharyas* in oral tradition. In Tamil country singing in oral tradition the 4000 hymns of *Divyaprabandha* composed by 12 *alvars* is a household activity.

Folk Traditions The folk form of drama in India is very rich. They rely on the oral tradition of the languages known to the people of the particular region. The Kannada language has the *Yakshagana* theatre, the Gujarati language has the *Bhavai* theatre and the Marathi languages have the *Tamasha* theatre. *Terakuttu* in Tamilnadu, *Bhagavatamela* in Andhra Pradesh and *Jatha* and *Ramlila* in northern parts of the country.

1.5 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Self Assessment Questions 1

Complete the following with right answers:

a) eye-witness evidence b) oral lore. c) living tradition. d) be transmitted to e) others written information.

1. Oral tradition is also called as oral culture and _____
2. It often takes the form of _____ about past events
3. They are distinct in some way with _____
4. It was very much essential to _____
5. So the oral tradition is _____

Self Assessment Questions 1

Match the Following:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. UNESCO | a) Alvars |
| 2. PPandharpur | b) Music |
| 3. <i>Gurushishya parampara</i> | c) Vedic chants |
| 4. <i>Yakshagana</i> | d) <i>Bhajan</i> |
| 5. <i>Divyaprabandha</i> | e) Kannada |

1.6 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What is oral tradition?
2. Write about the UNESCO recognition of Intangible heritage.
3. Write a note on A) bhajan tradition and B) music and dance tradition in India.

1.7 ANSWERS

Self Assessment Questions 1

1 – b), 2 – a), 3 – e), 4 – d) 5 – c)

Self Assessment Questions 2

1 – c), 2 – d), 3 – b), 4 – e), 5 – a)

Terminal Questions

1. Oral Tradition can be defined as the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, or narration of events based on the personal experiences or it has been a oral singing or chant or narration of the story pertaining to particular community. Even the chants offered in rituals also belong to the category of oral tradition. The oral tradition remains a unique testament to the capacity of the human brain to absorb, remember and reproduce structures of great complexity and sophistication without a system of written notation.

2. UNESCO, the international body is taking lot of interest in the oral traditions, which is covered under Intangible Cultural Heritage. According to UNESCO Cultural heritage is not limited to material manifestations, such as monuments and objects that have been preserved over time. This notion also encompasses living expressions and the traditions that countless groups and communities worldwide have inherited from their ancestors and transmit to their descendants, in most cases are unnoticed.

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As a driving force of cultural diversity, living heritage is very fragile. In recent years, it has received international recognition and its safeguarding has become one of the priorities of international cooperation thanks to UNESCO's leading role in the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

3. A) Bhajan Tradition: In Maharashtra, millions from all walks of life go on a pilgrimage twice every year to Pandharpur a temple-town. As they travel, they sing the poems composed by Dnyaneshwara (13th Century), Eknath (15th Century) and Tukaram (17th Century). The entire body of songs consists of hundreds of the medieval poems learnt orally. Similarly, the poems of Mira, Nanak and Kabir are learnt orally and sung by millions of Indians to this day. In *Haridasa Parampara* people travel to Tirupati . During the entire pilgrimage they would be singing the compositions of *dasas* and *acharyas* in oral tradition. In Tamil country singing in oral tradition the 4000 hymns of *Divyaprabandha* composed by 12 *alvars* is a household activity.
- B) The teaching of classical music and dance: The teaching of classical music and dance has been primarily oral. The raga and its structure, the intricate nuances of tala or rhythm, and the rendering of raga and *tala* as *bandish* or composition, are passed on from guru to *shishya* by word of mouth and through direct demonstration. There is no printed sheet of music, with notation acting as the medium, to impart knowledge. Similarly in Indian classical dance also the steps, movements, *abhinaya*, the use of hand gestures and dancing for compositions are all depends on the ability of a teacher to teach the disciple. They are not found in written form. It is directly taught by the guru in oral form to a *shishya*.