

Textual Tradition of India and the West: A Study

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Abstract:

Indian textual tradition dates back to the later Vedic Period. It is a firm belief that Veda has directly come from the Almighty and is created even before the existence of human beings. They are considered among the oldest, if not the oldest, religious works in the world. They are commonly referred to as “scripture”, which is accurate in that they can be defined as holy writ concerning the nature of the Divine. Unlike the scriptures of other religions, however, the Vedas are not thought to have been revealed to a certain person or persons at a specific historical moment; they are believed to have always existed and were apprehended by sages in deep meditative states at some point prior to c. 1500 BCE but precisely when is unknown. In contrast to this, the Holy bible focuses on ‘WORD’. According to the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" ([John 1:1](#)). This passage suggests that Jesus is not only a messenger of God's word but that He is the very essence of that word. The importance of ‘word’ has given the required ground to the acquired prosperity of the textual culture in the west and with the spread of Christianity in the world this concept is spread. The current paper tries to study both the textual traditions in this light and provide a just comparison with the help of selected texts.

Keywords: Almighty, scriptures, messenger, textual culture

The foundation for Indian textual tradition, history and thought is laid down by the Vedic Literature which represents cultural forms of remembrance in varied forms, traditions and practices. Orality and storytelling are the two most dominant features of the Indian narrative culture and tradition and, a rich repository for the preservation of ever dynamic Indian collective consciousness. The Vedas are but a manifest form of God's compassion. Containing knowledge on subjects beyond the domain and reach of human intellectual capability, the mere word Veda itself sends up a thrill through the spine, and there arises from the bottom of one's heart a feeling of immense gratitude and affection for the Divine Creator from whose breath have emerged these guiding words of wisdom. The depth of the faith people have in the Vedas is amazing. This is not restricted to India where such a faith is universal, expressed one way or the other. Even in foreign lands we see many men and women diligently trying to establish Vedic traditions in their native places. The Vedas are not man made. It is impossible to associate any human being with their authorship. Then who made them? Before proceeding logically to establish the authorship of the Vedas, let us remember one simple definition: God is one who is responsible for all those things for which we are not responsible. Therefore, Vedas must be the work of God. On the contrary we find, historically, the rise of cities coincided with the development of a script suitable for serving bureaucratic purposes. Later, the scientific and philosophical tradition that originated in Classical Greece and that prevails in the West to this day developed along with the alphabet. Many writers, including Eric Havelock, have maintained that the alphabet was a decisive factor in the cultural development of the West. Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan and American scholar Walter J. Ong have claimed that the rise of literacy and the

decline of “orality” in the later Middle Ages were fundamental to the cultural flowering known as the Renaissance.

When one speaks of orality and oral transmission in India, one thinks in the first place of the Veda. In fact, many discussions on orality in India bore solely on the transmission of the Vedic texts. To account for the fact that the transmission of the Vedas has been largely oral, much emphasis has been put on the secrecy argument: the Indian brahmins did not want their Vedas to be written down for fear that they might fall into the wrong hands. The idea that knowledge of the Veda is useless if it is acquired from a book, is particularly significant. To understand its full import, we must keep in mind that the sole purpose of the Vedic mantras is to be recited, by a variety of priests, in the course of the numerous types of yagyans "sacrifices, rituals." More important, the mantras are not only to be recited; they are to be recited absolutely correctly. Not only should the words or the order of words not be changed; even a single syllable wrongly pronounced or a single accent wrongly placed might bring ruin on the sacrificer and make his sacrifice futile. "A mantra with a wrong accent or a wrong phoneme is pronounced in vain and does not convey the right sense; it is a vajra (Indra's weapon) in the form of words, and it destroys the patron of the sacrifice, even as the word *indra-iatm* when the accent is placed on the wrong syllable." And, to make Vedic recitation absolutely flawless, the mantras are taught according to the progressive recitation (*kramapiithu*), again with eight different and gradually more complex word combinations: 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, etc.; 1-2, 1-2-3, 2-3, 2-3-4; . For many Indians Sanskrit is not just a language, not even merely a "ornate" language. To them Sanskrit is different from any other language because it is the one and only "language of the gods." The mere sound of Sanskrit is something absolutely special, something out of this world, both for the speaker and the listener. Thus Indian literatures are basically a product of the essentially oral Indian culture. Orality is an alternative culture — it may get written down or may co-exist with written analogue or it may not get written down. But even when an oral culture gets written down, it continues to be oral — witness for example texts such as *Mahābhārata* that remain recitative, performative texts even when rendered in different languages.

While spoken or signed language is a more or less universal human competence that has been characteristic of the species from the beginning and that is commonly acquired by human beings without systematic instruction, writing is a technology of relatively recent history that must be taught to each generation of children. Historical accounts of the evolution of writing systems have until recently concentrated on a single aspect, increased efficiency, with the Greek invention of the alphabet being regarded as the culmination of a long historical evolution. This efficiency is a product of a limited and manageable set of graphs that can express the full range of meanings in a language. As the British classicist Eric A. Havelock wrote, “At a stroke the Greeks provided a table of elements of linguistic sound not only manageable because of economy, but for the first time in the history of *homo sapiens*, also accurate.”

Indian narrative tradition, as many texts, like the Buddhist *Jatakas*, the *Panchatantra* (the fifth century), and the *Kathasaritasagara* (the eleventh century), owe their origin to oral traditions. The *Ramayana* and *The Mahābhārata* are the best examples that speak about the power of orality and oral traditions and also the most striking prototype of reference to writing embedded in oral traditions but is an oral epic in its textual tradition, an epic dictated by Vyasa to Lord Ganesha as it was transcribed in the written form. It is believed that at one point when the stylus broke down, Ganesha pulled out his tusk and continued to write with the broken tusk which in oral traditions is a symbol of “writing” trying to catch the rapidity of the “oral”. Before discussing orality and Indian narrative traditions, it is imperative to understand as to what constitutes a “text” in a multilingual country like India and also the nature of language and translation.

One way of defining orality and folklore for India is to say that it is the writing of the vernaculars, those first languages of the towns, roads, kitchens, tribal homes, cottages, and wayside coffeeshouses. The Vedas are also called Shrutis because they are recited and heard, not written and read. Shruti or Shruthi in Sanskrit means “that which is heard” and Smṛti means “that which is remembered” (“Sruti”). The word Shruti, also means the rhythm and the musicality of the infinite as it is heard by the soul. The Vedas have been transmitted from generation to generation through the oral tradition. This implies that Indian speculations on language began with The Vedas; and the school of Grammar and Mimamsa seem to be an outcome of the expanded recommendations found in The Vedas. The Vedas. According to Sreekumar, the four auxiliary disciplines of The Vedas, namely Shiksha (phonetics, phonology, pronunciation), Chandas (prosody), Vyakarana (grammar and linguistics), Nirukta (etymology), have been the foundation of language philosophy. The divine nature of speech, the creative and illuminative power of the word and the different levels of speech, are the main doctrines, which formed the philosophy of language in the Indian context (Sreekumar 51). Language has always been at the centre in India, and all schools of language philosophy had given attention to the ultimate question of the relation between the “word” and “reality”. The theories of Rasa and Dhvani suggest that a text is re-coded by the individual consciousness of its receiver so that he/she may have multiple aesthetic experiences and thus a text is not perceived as an object that should produce a single invariant reading. Orality helps us understand these structures of consciousness.

Indian tradition of Orality can also be justified in various other aspects . The important works as the Grammatical research of Panini. The students were to remember the sutras and then the teacher used to explain. But memorizing was considered very important. The structure of the grammatical work was such that the user can use it only by getting the sutras by heart. Western Sanskritists in India faced difficulties when they are faced with the question: which Sanskrit texts have you read? or, have you read this or that book? Indeed, when one has "read" a Sanskrit book, one is supposed to be able to recite from it, i.e. recite from it without a written text in hand. The difference between the Indian and Western appreciation of Sanskrit literature may be illustrated by the fact that the Sanskrit equivalent of English "well read" is "well heard, having heard much." Panini's grammar consists of some 4000 sutras. Sutas are short, aphoristic statements in prose. There is at least one advantage to memorizing Panini's grammar: it is a brief text. In fact, every effort has been made to keep it as brief as possible. For instance, rather than using long grammatical terms, Panini resorts to all kinds of brief sigla, symbols which, even for someone who knows Sanskrit, are true nonsense syllables.

The grammatical treatises are probably the best known example of Sanskrit texts that are memorized for practical purposes, texts that are unusable unless one either indexes them or memorizes them. But there are similar, less well-known cases. That is to decode the complex lexical items and the rich vocabulary. The best way is to memorise them as it is used in the *Karmakandam*.

Nonetheless, all contemporary orthographies have a history of development, and there are many common features in these histories. It is unlikely that writing was invented only once and then borrowed by different cultural groups. While all Western writing systems may be traced back to the beginnings of symbol making in Sumer, there is no reason to believe that Asian writing systems were borrowed from the Sumerian form. Consequently, there are two quite separate histories of writing, that of the writing system developed by the Sumerians and that of the one developed by the Chinese. The invention of the alphabet is a major achievement of Western culture. It is also unique; the alphabet was invented only once, though it has been borrowed by many cultures. It is a model of analytic thinking, breaking down perceptible qualities like

syllables into more basic constituents. And because it is capable of conveying subtle differences in meaning, it has come to be used for the expression of a great many of the functions served by speech. The alphabet requires little of the reader beyond familiarity with its orthography. It allows the reader to decipher words newly encountered and permits the invention of spellings for new patterns of sound, including proper names (a problem that is formidable for nonalphabetic systems). Finally, its explicitness permits readers to make a relatively sharp distinction between the tasks of deciphering and interpreting. Less explicit orthographies require the reader first to grasp the meaning of a passage as a whole in order to decide which of several possible word meanings a particular graphic string represents. However, that efficiency depends not only on the nature of the writing system but also on the functions required of it by its users, for orthographies are invented to serve particular cultural purposes. Furthermore, orthography is invented to satisfy one purpose may acquire new applications.

Writing allows exactly repeatable statements to be circulated widely and preserved. It allows readers to scan a text back and forth and to study, compare, and interpret at their leisure. It allows writers to deliberate over word choice and to construct lists, tables, recipes, and indexes. It fosters an objectified sense of time, a linear conception of space. It separates the message from the author and from the context in which it was written, thereby “decontextualizing,” or universalizing the meaning of, language. It allows the creation of new forms of verbal structure, such as the syllogism, and of numerical structures, such as the multiplication table. When writing becomes a predominant institutional and archival form, it has contributed to the replacement of myth by history and the replacement of magic by skepticism and science. Writing has permitted the development of extensive bureaucracy, accounting, and legal systems organized on the basis of explicit rules and procedures. Writing has replaced face-to-face governance with written law and depersonalized administrative procedures. And, on the other hand, it has turned writers from scribes into authors and thereby contributed to the recognition of the importance of the thoughts of individuals and consequently to the development of individualism.

With the introduction of Christianity to the world scenario, the concept of textuality was given a new dimension. Logos is the Greek term translated as “word,” “speech,” “principle,” or “thought.” In Greek philosophy, it also referred to a universal, divine reason or the mind of God. In the New Testament, the Gospel of John begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:1-4). Here it is clear that the “Word” or Logos is a reference to Jesus Christ. John argues that Jesus, the Word or Logos, is eternal and is God. Further, all creation came about by and through Jesus, who is presented as the source of life. Amazingly, this Logos came and lived among us: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). John’s Gospel begins by using the Greek idea of a “divine reason” or “the mind of God” as a way to connect with the readers of his day and introduce Jesus to them as God. Greek philosophy may have used the word in reference to divine reason, but John used it to note many of the attributes of Jesus.

By starting out his gospel stating, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” John is introducing Jesus with a word or a term that both his Jewish and Gentile readers would have been familiar with. The Greek word translated “Word” in this passage is Logos, and it was common in both Greek philosophy and Jewish thought of that day. For example, in the Old Testament the “word” of God is often personified as an instrument for the execution of God’s will (Psalm 33:6; 107:20; 119:89; 147:15-18). So, for his Jewish readers, by introducing Jesus as the “Word,” John is

in a sense pointing them back to the Old Testament where the Logos or “Word” of God is associated with the personification of God’s revelation. And in Greek philosophy, the term Logos was used to describe the intermediate agency by which God created material things and communicated with them. In the Greek worldview, the Logos was thought of as a bridge between the transcendent God and the material universe. Therefore, for his Greek readers the use of the term Logos would have likely brought forth the idea of a mediating principle between God and the world.

So, essentially, what John is doing by introducing Jesus as the Logos is drawing upon a familiar word and concept that both Jews and Gentiles of his day would have been familiar with and using that as the starting point from which he introduces them to Jesus Christ. But John goes beyond the familiar concept of Logos that his Jewish and Gentile readers would have had and presents Jesus Christ not as a mere mediating principle like the Greeks perceived, but as a personal being, fully divine, yet fully human. Also, Christ was not simply a personification of God’s revelation as the Jews thought, but was indeed God’s perfect revelation of Himself in the flesh, so much so that John would record Jesus’ own words to Philip: "Jesus said unto him, 'Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, "Show us the Father"?"' (John 14:9). By using the term Logos or “Word” in John 1:1, John is amplifying and applying a concept with which his audience was familiar and using that to introduce his readers to the true Logos of God in Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God, fully God and yet fully man, who came to reveal God to man and redeem all who believe in Him from their sin. He has also given a divine status to ‘word’.

The modern scheme of thought has progressed in this direction and thus ‘TEXT’ has gained favour not only from religious quarters but also formed an important element of judiciary and common rule. Thus rising levels of literacy in Europe were closely related to great social transformations, notably the Protestant Reformation and the rise of modern science. The right to read the Bible for oneself and to discover its meaning was the fundamental tenet of Protestantism, and the private study and verification of written texts was important to science. Both of these functions were enormously facilitated by the development of printing from movable type and by the translation of important books from scholarly Latin into vernacular languages. In India as well as the rest of the world textuality was spread more and more to the common people and the emergence of rapid development and need all around the cultures, textuality became an accepted form of acquiring knowledge. Although rich folk literature still fed the oral tradition the ancient method of memory is reduced to parroting. The modern literate world thus should attempt to revive the pattern which has once surprised Megasthenes. One of the successors of Alexander the Great, Seleucus Nicator, sent an ambassador, Megasthenes, to the court of the Indian king Chandragupta Maurya, ca. 300 B.C.E. Megasthenes wrote a book on India, ‘The Indica’. The Indica itself is lost, but several fragments of it have been preserved in the writings of later Greek and Roman writers. One segment, has recorded in Strabo's Geography, speaks of the ambassador's surprise that there was so little crime among the Indians "and that too, among a people who have unwritten laws only. For, he continues, they have no knowledge of written letters, and regulate every single thing from memory.”

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