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Voice, Script, and Tradition: Lok-Shastra Dynamics in Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract:
The Indian subcontinent has fostered one of the world's most advanced knowledge systems, marked by an active dialectic between oral traditions (*Lok*) and textual knowledge (*Shastra*). This paper offers a detailed analysis of the ways in which these two means of knowledge transmission have interacted, impacted, and enriched one another over Indian history. Pushing against the Western epistemological dichotomy favoring textuality over orality, this paper illustrates how Indian systems of knowledge have sustained a dynamic progression between oral and written formulations. Using an interdisciplinary approach that integrates Indology, anthropology, and postcolonialism, we discuss decisive historical shifts - from the Vedic oral tradition to textualization of Bhakti poetry and the continuing vigor of folk tales. This article makes the case for a decolonial perspective in understanding Indian knowledge systems, one that acknowledges the inherent value of oral traditions and their interdependence with classical texts. Through analysis of digital revivals of oral forms in contemporary times, we underscore how technology is making it possible to return to voice-based knowledge transmission, completing the circular journey from voice to text to voice.

Keywords: Lok and Shastra, Indian Knowledge System, Oral Traditions, Lok Culture, Folk.

Introduction: Reassessing the Orality-Textuality Paradigm

Understanding knowledge transmission in India involves transcending the traditional Western theory of a lineal development from oral to written cultures. Research by scholars such as Jack Goody (1987) and Walter Ong (1982) provided the theoretical basis for conceptualising this process in European settings, where literacy had been identified as the dividing line between "primitive" and "advanced" civilisations . Yet these models are found not suitable when applied to the Indian situation, where written and oral knowledge systems have existed and interpenetrated for more than three millennia.

Indian intellectual history offers an unusual example in which the conventionally accepted "classical" or "textual" knowledge (*Shastra*) tends to originate in oral practice, and "folk" knowledge (*Lok*) often interacts with and reinterpretation of classical concepts. The *Vedas*, the core of Hindu philosophy and religious life, existed in an elaborate system of oral recitation for centuries prior to being committed to script (Staal 2008). Also, the Bhakti movement devotional poetry arose out of oral performance traditions prior to its codification in written form, but still remained as living oral traditions (Hawley 1988). This intricate interaction defies the hierarchical division between "folk" and "classical" traditions and requires a more subtle comprehension of Indian knowledge systems. The colonial encounter seriously dislocated this natural closeness of oral and written knowledge. British administrators and intellectuals, working in their own epistemological orders, privileged textuality over oral traditions as unscientific or unreliable (Nandy 1983). This legacy continues to affect Indian academia and education systems today, where oral knowledge systems continue to get less attention. Decolonial thinking with regards to Indian knowledge systems must then start from a recognition of the false binary between *Lok* and *Shastra* and respect their dynamic interdependence .

Theoretical Framework

The anthropological model constructed by Robert Redfield (1956) differentiated between "Great Traditions" (elite, textual, universal) and "Little Traditions" (folk, oral, local). Though helpful for some comparative studies, this paradigm is not helpful in explaining the Indian knowledge system where distinctions between elite and folk, textual and oral are extremely absortive. Indian scholars such as A.K. Ramanujan (1991) and Kapil Tiwari (2008) have shown how these categories continually encounter and transmute one another. The Puranas, for example, are defined as *Shastra* (classical texts) but contain many local myths and oral narrative conventions. Likewise, the philosophical arguments retained in the Upanishads frequently utilise dialogic structures that hint towards oral sources (Witzel 2003). Conversely, folk practices often interact with classical ideas, reformulating them for localised contexts and purposes. Kabir's poetry, initially developed as oral works among craft communities, later found its way into the literary tradition but retained its oral performative aspect (Hess 2002). This ongoing exchange between *Lok* and *Shastra* implies that Indian knowledge systems can be described as a progression rather than as separate categories.

Classical Indian philosophy acknowledges several different sources of valid knowledge (*pramanas*), namely *shabda* (testimony in the form of words) and *aitihya* (tradition), both of which establish oral transmission as valid (Bronkhorst 2016). This is in contrast to Western epistemological contexts that emphasise written records as superior and more authoritative. The *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition), the skeleton around which Indian pedagogic systems are constructed, operates primarily through oral teaching, even when passing on highly technical *Shastric* knowledge. Tribal societies in India have sustained complex knowledge systems through oral modes of transmission. The Warli people in Maharashtra, for instance, retain its history, ecological knowledge, and cultural values through oral storytelling and ritual performances (Devi 1992). In the same way, the Baul singers in Bengal impart intricate philosophical concepts through their songs (Manuel 1993). These instances prove that orality can sustain and pass on complex knowledge systems in high fidelity and flexibility. Identification of orality as an acceptable epistemological mode undermines the premise that textuality necessarily precedes orality in cultural development.

Historical Case Studies

a) The Vedic Tradition: Orality as Sacred Technology

The preservation of the *Vedas* is perhaps the most advanced and well-crafted system of transmission of oral knowledge ever invented in human civilisation. The Vedic mantras were protected for more than three millennia by an intricate and highly organised system of recitational practices called *pathas*, which guaranteed perfect phonetic, grammatical, and syntactical accuracy (Staal 2008). These procedures were *Samhita* (stream-of-consciousness recitation), *Pada* (word-by-word division), *Krama* (step-by-step ordering), *Jata* (interwoven recitation), and *Ghana* (layered complex chanting), all functioning as self-correcting processes to avoid even the least amount of variation in pronunciation or pitch (Witzel 2003). As comparative linguistic analysis by Frits Staal (2008) has illustrated, the oral transmission of the *Vedas* had a degree of precision that tended to be greater than that of the early manuscripts, which were prone to scribal mistakes, deteriorative copying, and regional diversions. This phenomenon presents basic epistemological questions regarding the nature of textuality. Can the *Vedas* really be considered as "written" texts when their initial mode of preservation continued to be strictly oral even after writing emerged in India? Contrary to most other ancient traditions that developed entirely into textual codification, the *Vedas* maintained their preeminence as oral texts while written texts were only auxiliary instruments and not substitutes (Staal 2008). The *Shakhas* (Vedic branches) had separate oral traditions, wherein Brahmin priests memorized complete scriptures word-for-word generation after generation, having an unbroken chain of sonorous and semantic accuracy. This contradicts the Western presumption of textual fixation as a requirement for authoritative knowledge retention.

The ongoing tradition of Vedic chanting in modern India—imbued in rituals, temple rites, and learned traditions—is testimony to the long-term vitality of oral communication. Written texts, if employed, serve only as mnemonic aids and not as original sources, articulating the supremacy of the spoken word (Olivelle 2006). The Vedic model thereby illustrates how *Shastric* learning is able to maintain its authority, accuracy, and sanctity free from reliance on textualisation, offering a special instance where orality itself serves as a

sacred technology for preservation. Not only does this model counter the assumed superiority of written texts but sets a paradigm whereby voice and memory preserve learning with unparalleled accuracy over millennia.

b) The Bhakti and Sufi Movements: Vernacular Voice to Classical Text

The Bhakti (devotional) and Sufi movements that bloomed throughout India between the 8th and 18th centuries produced a remarkable convergence of *Lok* (folk) and *Shastra* (classical) traditions, effectively transforming India's religious and literary landscape. Resisting the elitism of Sanskrit, poet-saints such as Kabir (15th century), Mirabai (16th century), and Bulleh Shah (18th century) wrote in their native languages - *Braj Bhasha, Avadhi, Punjabi,* and other regional dialects - bringing deep spiritual ideas to the masses through oral recitation (Hawley 1988). These scholarly poets used ordinary imagery - Kabir's weaver's loom, Mira's lovesick yearning, Bulleh's quest for the Divine Beloved - to talk about non-dualistic philosophy in language that was understandable to farmers, artisans and women (Hess 2002). The circulation of this poetry was a special path from oral creation to textual canonization and then to oral performance. Kabir's poems, for example, were initially sung within craft communities in Banaras and circulated through women's singing traditions for generations before being anthologized as the *Bijak* (Hess 2002). Likewise, Mirabai's *padas* were kept alive through women's singing traditions before being put into writing. This process generated a dynamic interaction where written works coexisted, and frequently branched out from, living oral traditions (Novetzke 2016).

Interestingly, textualisation did not replace oral performance. Kabir's poems developed further in *qawwali* and *bhajan* contexts; Mira's songs thrived in women's devotional meetings; Bulleh Shah's poetry developed in Sufi musical gatherings (Manuel 1993). Punjab's *Dhadhis* (balladeers) and North India's *Katha* performers ensured their continuation through improvisational narration which shortened verses to fit into present situations. This illustrates the way Indian traditional knowledge systems have progression between oral and written modes, where textual fixation does not harden but instead feeds continuous oral creativity (Flueckiger 2013). The Bhakti-Sufi tradition thus illustrates the way vernacular voices can become classical and yet not shed their living, breathing relationship to oral performance traditions.

c) Folk Epics: The Persistence of Orality

Indian folk epics offer a dramatic contrast to the text-based continuity of Western epics such as Homer's Iliad, illustrating how oral forms continue exceptional vitality over centuries. The Rajasthan *Pabuji-ki-Phad*, acted out through elaborate scroll paintings and epic recital, and Kerala's Teyyam ritual performances, in which gods appear through possessed dancers, continue to adapt by embracing modern social commentary while sustaining essential mythological structures (Flueckiger 2013). In contrast to fixed written forms of Greek epics, these dynamic oral traditions evolve naturally according to shifting circumstances - the *Pabuji* epic annually incorporates allusions to contemporary politics, and Teyyam actors improvise responses to contemporary community issues during ritual possession trances (Blackburn 2003).

This dynamism is in creative tension with written forms. The *Teyyam* tradition, for example, is informed both by palm-leaf manuscripts recording ritual disciplines and the improvisational brilliance of performers (Freeman 2003). Tamil folk epics such as the *Annanmar Kathai* are transmitted in printed books as well as in oral story sessions where narrators add local allusions to the story. Anything but "manipulated" by oral transmission, these differences illustrate the genre's adaptive strength (Beck 1982).

The concurrent presence of folklore in classical Sanskrit works also testifies to the *Lok-Shastra* discourse. Folklore is embedded in the Mahabharata itself, whereas regional versions such as the Tamil *Villiputturar Bharatam* and Bengali Kashiram Das's Mahabharata rework the epic along oral aesthetics of local territories (Hiltebeitel 1999). This reciprocity between the two sides undercut the artificial dualism between "great" and "little" traditions, illustrating how Indian cultural memory survives in the interplay between dynamic oral performances and stabilizing textual forms (Ramanujan 1991). The ongoing vitality of these traditions - in village narrating communities, ritual theaters, or cyberspace - is evidence that orality continues to be an effective form of knowledge transmission today in modern India.

Colonial Disruptions and Contemporary Revivals

The colonial encounter with India radically transformed the subcontinent's epistemological field through structured interventions that privileged literacy-based textual knowledge vis-à-vis oral tradition. Colonial administrators and Orientalist intellectuals, working within Enlightenment frameworks of foundational equivalence between literacy and civilisation, selectively "canonised" specific Sanskrit texts such as the Manusmriti and Bhagavad Gita to represent "authentic" Indian thought and marginalised oral traditions as primitive superstitions (Upadhyaya 2019). This curation developed an artificial hierarchy in which *Shastric* knowledge was elevated as authoritative scripture, while *Lok* traditions were demoted to the level of inferior folklore. The Asiatic Society of Bengal's book projects (1784 onwards), while monumental in the preservation of manuscripts, deliberately left out living oral traditions from the domain of scholarship (Trautmann 2009). Missionary activity added to this bias; the vernacular translations by the Serampore Mission (1800-1837) favored Biblical textual models to indigenous oral pedagogies (Sengupta 2005). The colonial education system formalized such epistemic violence in the form of Macaulay's 1835 Minute that codified English-medium text-based schooling as the normative model. Conventional gurukul systems based on oral transmission of *Vedas*, oral storytelling (*katha*) schools, and community knowledge sharing got systematically excluded (Kumar 2021). Ethnographic surveys (1891-1921) also fossilized oral traditions by recording them in the form of static "specimens" and not as lived practices (Dirks 2001). After independence, Indian academic circles inherited these colonial paradigms, reflected in university curricula giving importance to classical literature and excluding oral histories of tribal societies or women's folk tales (Nandy 1983). The consequent epistemic break disconnected urban educated Indians from oral cultures, with disastrous results - from 1961-2011, India lost 250 languages, the majority from oral societies (People's Linguistic Survey 2013). Ironically, these digital technologies are enabling an oral renaissance in innovative platforms that merge tradition and contemporary times. YouTube channels digitally preserve *Manganiar* folk songs, while Spotify's playlist plays out modern interpretations of *Baul* music (Manuel 1993). The *Pad.ma* collective has also converted 200+ hours of native storytelling into searchable oral databases. Podcast platforms also demonstrate the same innovation - Kahani Suno by Pratilipi translates folklores into episodic audio drama, while Audible Suno's "Voices of the Earth" series chronicles tribal myths of creation.

Community radio has become a crucial means of oral revival, with daily shows on stations such as Radio Bundelkhand (90.4 FM) being played out in local dialects. The *Dastangoi* revival is a prime example of this digital-orality hybrid - once almost extinct, this Urdu oral literary tradition now flourishes through YouTube performances and live-mahfils broadcast (Sarkar 2022). Digital technology facilitates participatory archiving; the Adivasi Academy's smartphone program educates tribal youth to record elderly oral traditions directly onto cloud servers. This digital renaissance undermines three colonial presumptions: i) that orality is pre-modern (platforms demonstrate its relevance today), ii) that folk knowledge is not systematic (crowdsourced tagging provides new taxonomies), and iii) that textualisation is the same as preservation (interactive media more accurately reflect performative aspects). Decentralised nature of digital environments enables marginalised groups to go around conventional gatekeepers - the Gondi language, kept out of print for centuries, has now numerous Wikipedia entries made directly by native speakers (Nag 2021). Government programs such as the National Digital Library of India are starting to integrate oral archives, and companies such as Gram Vaani employ IVR technology to disseminate folk wisdom through simple phones. Still, challenges remain - copyright problems haunt traditional narrators, algorithm-based platforms prefer integrated content, and the digital divide keeps out far-flung communities. The real measure of achievement will be when the improvisation by a *Baul* singer is equal in scholarship to a footnote in a Sanskrit manuscript - restoring the *Lok-Shastra* in cyber space.

Toward an Integrative Knowledge Paradigm

The recognition of the *Lok-Shastra* continuum has serious implications for reframing India's educational and cultural policies, requiring a sharp break from colonial-era hierarchies of knowledge. Present pedagogical models, still wedded to Macaulayan frameworks, overwhelmingly favor textual knowledge at the expense of oral systems of learning that have supported plural Indian communities for thousands of years.

This bias is reflected starkly in national curricula: a study conducted by NCERT in 2022 found that 87% of social science prescribed readings come from written sources, while just 3% refer to oral traditions, even though oral-based communities make up 8.6% of India's population (ASER 2023). Incorporating oral histories, folk epistemologies, and community-based learning can transform education to make it more inclusive and culturally situated. The *Dhavatari* (oral maps) of the Warli tribe that store ecological information through song, or the Kani community's medicinal plant verses in the Western Ghats, are all advanced knowledge systems that continue to be kept outside formal schooling (Devi 1992). Government programs such as the National Mission for Manuscripts (initiated 2003) and Sahapedia (initiated 2016) are significant but modest efforts to capture India's knowledge traditions on record. Although these initiatives have scanned more than 5 million pages of manuscripts and 25,000 entries of culture respectively, their approach is still hindered by bureaucratic processes that focus on the archiving of texts rather than the living transmission (National Digital Library 2023). The Sahapedia Oral Traditions Archive, for example, has saved 1,200 hours of recordings but does not have procedures for community-led annotation, making these resources static "exhibits" instead of dynamic knowledge resources (Sahapedia 2022). Properly respecting the *Lok-Shastra* dynamic means building decentralized platforms on which various forms of knowledge intermingle naturally. The Kerala state government's *Arangu* program offers a hopeful model, creating 450 village knowledge centers through which folk artists, Sanskrit experts, and tribal narrators work together to design curricula (Kerala Education Department 2021).

A decolonial project on Indian epistemology has to start by establishing oral pramanas (sources of knowledge) as valid to the same extent as written texts (Spivak 1999). This requires the deconstruction of three colonial constructs: i) the spurious identification of orality with illiteracy (disregarding systems such as the *Gurukul's śruti paramparā*), ii) the artificial distinction between "classical" and "folk" knowledge (when Puranic texts themselves arose out of oral traditions), and iii) the visual prioritization over aural learning (disregarding India's *shabda*-centric epistemologies) (Bronkhorst 2016). The Rathwa community work of the Bhasha Research Center exhibits alternatives - their tribal university curriculum interknits Pithora painting narratives with written anthropology using dialogic teaching (Bhasha 2020). Prioritising marginal voices is paramount for such epistemological readjustment. Jangam oral histories maintained in *Vachana* poetry, agrarian proverbs concealing agronomic knowledge, and indigenous creation myths such as the Gond Ramayani (recorded by Tiwari and Kaushal 2019) are knowledge systems sustained through oral modes of transmission, frequently in opposition to prevailing textual styles. Chhattisgarh's *Pandvani* tradition, in which women performers retell the Mahabharata in folk song, is a model of how subaltern society has preserved counter-narratives (Flueckiger 2013). Their contributions need to be acknowledged with more than nodding inclusion; they need structural adjustment such as the Odisha government's 2021 ruling to admit tribal oral tradition as admissible evidence in land cases (Odisha Gazette 2021).

Digital technology provides unprecedented possibilities for such integration when utilised with consideration. Project Vaani, led by IIT Madras, maps 1,500 oral dialects through AI, and Adivasi Academy's "Knowledge Ledger" based on blockchain allows tribal groups to document and copyright oral tradition (IITM 2023). Such technological interventions, however, need to escape colonial exploitative paradigms. The 2023 controversy regarding the unauthorized commercialization of *Toda* prayer recordings by a French record company highlights the importance of ethical guidelines that honor intellectual property rights of oral communities (The Hindu 2023). The way ahead needs policy interventions on multiple levels: i) Curriculum reforms allotting 25% space for oral knowledge systems (in line with NEP 2020's multilingualism), ii) Institutional patronage for hybrid learning models such as Rajasthan's *Lok* Shiksha Kendras blending folk arts and formal education, and iii) Legal validation of oral transmission as acceptable academic citation (as commenced by the University of Mumbai's 2022 folklore studies guidelines). It is only through such deep decolonisation that India's education system can do justice to its epistemic pluralism and equip the next generation to negotiate tradition and modernity.

Conclusion: The Eternal Cycle of Knowledge

The *Lok-Shastra* dynamic captures what may well be India's greatest epistemological contribution to the world - showing that knowledge does not have to be bounded by either speech or writing, but can shift fluidly between these forms (Pollock 2006). From Vedic hymns that still preserve their oral purity after millennia to Bhakti poems that glide seamlessly between song and scripture, to cyberspace and other digital spaces, which are developing new forms of oral expression, Indian knowledge systems persist in demonstrating this cyclical motion. As India confronts the forces of globalisation and technological innovation, respecting this continuity between voice and text represents a route toward more just and robust knowledge systems. By transcending colonial classifications and embracing the entire range of knowledge transmission - from voice to text and vice versa - we may construct models of learning and cultural preservation that are informed by tradition as well as adaptive to the needs of the present.

Future studies need to work on recording endangered oral traditions before they are lost, formulating techniques for merging oral and textural knowledge in learning, and establishing digital repositories that honor oral-textual hybridity fluidity (OHAI 2024). In this way, we celebrate the richness of India's intellectual heritage while making it relevant to coming generations. The trajectory of Indian knowledge - from ancient Vedic chants to the virtual narratives of the moment - recalls that wisdom transcends any given medium. It is within the continuous shuttling between voice and text, between memory and invention, that Indian knowledge systems have discovered their long-term vigor. Seeing and cultivating this dynamic could be the key to creating more integrative ways of knowing in our more globally connected world.

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