

Oral Traditions and Literature: A Discourse on the Need to Democratize Literature

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It may be safely be stated that throughout the history of literature in any language, hegemonic literary-cultural discourse had privileged the written-urban literary-cultural traditions over the oral rural traditions of the masses particularly tribals, through the method of “selection and exclusion” which carefully excludes marginalized tribal oral literature. It may be safe to state that histories and contemporary news media continue to be manipulated by hegemonic troupes. The same phenomenon can be witnessed in literature as well. Amid such a phenomenon, oral literature stands as a force of resistance against the hegemony of dominant narratives, putting up a fight for the marginalised literature to be heard and understood. In the light of the above, this paper seeks to highlight the need to democratise narratives based on the rationale that true democracy cannot be achieved through political representation alone.

The Written and Oral Forms

To understand oral literature, it is pertinent to first understand how it differs from the written form. The relevance of oral literature emerges from a study of ‘orality’ in contrast with ‘literacy’. The distinction between the oral and the written form and the dominance of the written over the oral form defines both the relevance and the struggle of oral literature. The written form has always been attached with privilege and accessibility to the written form has been alienated from the margins for a long time. If someone tried to read, his/her tongue was cut off. Representation or opportunity to voice themselves through print media had been a myth once upon a time and it continues to be a challenge even in the present era.

For the study of any tribal community, their culture and political identity, ‘orality’ is an important resource. Orality refers to a mode of expression without any written script, or document, which is usually not recognized by the mainstream knowledge systems although orality has been an intrinsic part of the life and existence of tribals. The dichotomy between the oral and the literate seems to be defining invariably a point between the ‘hegemonic self’ and the ‘marginalized other’.

Inclusion of oral narratives within the scheme of literature has also been one of subordination. It has only been seen as a subsidiary and never as an independent self-sufficient source, it is considered as marginal and untouchable, therefore not worth reading it. There has been a need for legitimization from troupes of literature, which has made it difficult to pursue oral literature or conduct research studies. This dominance also marks a dominance of popular languages on

vernaculars, which subordinates expression and self-identification through vernaculars. In this context, oral literature can play a vital role in empowering voices that have been suppressed for so long throughout our tribal history. It also helps us to deconstruct the dominant history that has come from the 'others'.

The diverse and rich oral traditions of the 'tribals' have been relegated in the domain of academia. Tribal narratives are branded as 'non-literary' in the Indian context though in the western context, speech and orality have received equal importance. The need then is to critique the dominant notions of literature and redefine literature, to pave the way for the study of oral tribal narratives.

Democratizing History

History is clearly a field of intense political contention, and oral literature can play a crucial role in taking it to new and neutral battlegrounds. Paul Thompson in *The voice of the past: Oral Literature* writes: "social purpose of history can be quite blatant: used to provide justification...For politicians the past is a quarry for supportive symbols", which is so often seen in discourses of nationalism. Modern states and national identities are built on political histories, which are functionally constructed by dominant troupes. It is this functionality of history that oral literature is posed against. And this is why advances of oral literature frightens many historians. It could question the unilateral narratives of national history, bringing out gruesome sides of the celebrated history. It would open up new areas of inquiry, enrich conversations, and through dialectic contention give us new perspectives on real history, which would no more blatantly, conveniently ignore the margins.

Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson in the introduction to *Oral History Reader* remarks that oral history and feminist history have enjoyed a symbiotic connection since the late 1960s. Feminist oral historians have also made significant contributions to theoretical and methodological developments in oral history. The book, *We were Making History* is a prime example. It brings out new heroes, those unspoken of, those blind eyed to by patriarchy. Oral literature has likewise brought out several untold versions of familiar stories, presenting to us heroes who were neglected for political reasons or out of mere complacency of the hegemony.

Mainstream history has conventionally based itself on the principle of exclusion. Mainstream history authenticates and prioritizes itself on a particular school of thought and select texts which validate pre-given definitions. They do not focus on tribal cultures or other marginalized groups of people, their languages, food, their knowledge systems and their world views. Since, tribal oral literatures have been largely neglected by the literary authorities, both liberal and the radical varieties, this paper is also an endeavour is to give a new direction to the scholarly discourse by deliberating on the forms and characteristics of the oral narratives of the tribals.

Expressional Form

Oral traditions are reflexive forms of expression unlike the regular documentary form of reporting. They create an experiential form of history, constructing history through an accumulation of experiences and related emotions. Oral traditions bring out the artistic value of human perception. It emotes more than it documents. They involve personal reminiscence and commentaries. The train song from Lambada community for instance is not a documentation of how and when trains were introduced to them, but about how they perceived the coming of trains.

Oral literature would enable a true expression of history through margins, rather than merely history of margins as written by the dominant. It would help realise a bottom to top approach of

constructing history, which has been understood as the very essence of subaltern studies. There is also a need to build local histories to tribal communities against overarching national histories and national identities. Clans and tribes have always had such histories passed on and constructed through oral forms.

Evolutionary Form

The story of the instrument Kinnera as narrated by the player Mogilayya, captures the evolutionary nature of oral tradition. As the steps were added one by one over time to the twelve-step Kinnera, stories and narrative elements are added to oral traditions over time and through their history. As there is history in the instrument, there is history in every song or every rendition. This is the greatest value of oral traditions for Alex Hailey who believes that oral histories tap into a vast, rich reservoir of oral traditions sustained through family, community and national memories.

Origin of songs being passed on through oral traditions would go generations back in time. They contain in them history collected through personal narratives over generations and knowledge passed on for so many years. Oral literature thus shows an evolutionary character. More than preservation that the written form pertains, it evolves as it gets passed on adding tales and interpretations to itself.

Interactivity and Subjectivity

Oral traditions and performances are always rendered and modified in present. They are never stagnant. They are not merely ghosts of the past visiting us in the present as writings of the past are. They are always alive and are rejuvenated with every rendition, every time they are evoked in the present. They are in this respect 'a present of the past in the present'. They carry with them a conjunctural nature, and they are always affected by the moment of telling.

They also carry an interactive quality that distinguishes it from dominant literature. It promotes dialogue between the orators and the listeners and dialogue, may be asserted as the very essence of truth. Unlike written form, there is nothing concrete or rigid in oral traditions as it always welcome contention and thus hold the capacity to evolve and refine itself. As Paul Thompson notes, oral history as opposed to the traditional pedagogic form of history, offers a dialectical, interactive form of collectively constructing history.

Jan Vansina's conception of double subjectivity in oral tradition becomes relevant here. Oral traditions offer scope for absorbing subjectivities of both the orator and the listener and they are recoded every time they are rendered. This subjectivity is invaluable in representation of margins, which have over time only been objects of dominant regimes of representation.

Addressing Concerns

The most pressing concern of oral traditions and oral history is its disregard from dominant literature and academic circles. Questions on accuracy and authenticity of oral sources are raised and exaggerated to demoralise or even reject any substantial research based on oral sources. Their arguments range from questioning credibility of narrators, pointing that they are often illiterate, to questioning authenticity of memories that might be influenced by their social bearings or even dominant histories.

Dominant troupes of literature involve hegemonic content selectivity and highly politicized stereotypes and normalisations. History and dominant literature are also skewed for social reasons

and interests of social groups. The question then is; why denounce only oral literature on grounds of its subjectivity? And as for authenticity, there is nothing more authentic than direct human experiences which oral literature captures.

Another great threat to oral literature is from troupes of critical interpretation, who believe that the only way to derive sense and meaning out of oral history is through interpretation. This manifests as the greater problem in reporting folklore too. Interpretational failures and representational manipulation malign the purity of these forms. The researchers are either socially biased or highly influenced by dominant traditions. They either refuse to see or fail to see the true meanings or questions of these traditions. This is seen commonly in studies of marginal communities by traditional anthropologists and sociologists. This is a fundamental issue with the research method of 'looking from outside' and trying to understand the other in terms of the dominant culture. To put it crudely, it is similar to one of the basic problems of translation. The key to understanding and utilising the value of oral traditions is to understand the problems of this forced inclusion. The way out of this crisis is going further into the margins and to let stories and history come from within them.

Chronology of oral history and its conformation to that of traditional history has been another concern. But the issue is with seeking validations for the oral form in the written form. It is necessary to understand that the way time and history itself could be different. Oral history is often narrated along events rather than around calendars and dates. For instance, tribes count years or age with number of rains or monsoons. Thus, there is a need to see history differently from within the perceptions of the margins, and to understand it through their language and semiotic systems. We should realise that looking for validations in outside sources and dominant narratives is not essential.

Conclusion

The key to really tapping the abundant resources of oral traditions and history lies in thinking beyond comparisons with dominant literature. Instead it should be celebrated for its contrast with the written form and the diversity it adds to literature. Its limitations should be understood, but not as reasons for denying its value. Limitations are implicit to all forms of inquisition and no research is easy or free from difficulties. Once we can look at oral literature, looking past its limitations, we would see its real beauty and endless prospects. It would then open up a scope for a more diverse historical reconstruction. To conclude, it may be reaffirmed that oral literature has a part to play in the reconstruction of the real past of the tribals in India. It may also be stated that oral literature has a lot of potential in opening up new paths for the empowerment of the marginalised and to herald a shift towards a more egalitarian inclusion in all aspects of life.

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