
Oral Discourses: Carriers of Knowledge and Culture & Resource for ELT**Ravi Bhushan***PhD, Dept. of English, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Khanpur Kalan, Sonapat, (Haryana) India***Abstract**

In this digital age, one finds it hard to imagine a time when knowledge was passed on orally, by word of mouth. The pursuit of knowledge in Indian traditions was developed and disseminated in a purely oral environment. Knowledge texts like *Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Upanishads, Iliad, Odyssey* etc were orally transferred from one generation to another before they were finally written. Language is an oral phenomenon; in fact language is nested in sound. Not only communication but thought itself relates to sound. Structural linguists like Saussure and Henry Sweet have laid emphasis on primacy of speech. In fact Saussure goes on saying that writing simply represents spoken language in visible form. In an oral culture knowledge once created has to be continuously repeated or it would be lost. Fixed formulaic thought patterns are essential for conveying wisdom embedded in oral cultures. Many modern cultures that have known writing for centuries have never fully intellectualized writing but cultures like Arabic and Mediterranean rely on formulaic thought expressions. Sustained thought is the hallmark of orality. In an oral culture experience is intellectualized mnemonically. I propose in this paper to delineate the salient characteristics of orality which make it supreme to written mode of expression and also the original and sustainable source of knowledge traditions.

Key Words: Orality, writing, culture, knowledge**Introduction**

The world today has been overwhelmed by the extraordinary use of technology. The dividing line between reality and virtuality is getting blurred. The notions of tradition, modernity, virtue and evil are being redefined. In fact communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking (4Cs), the core competencies and values of human civilization have been completely marginalized by the so called modernity. Literature is an index of human activities and behavior. The compulsions of modern times pretending to be more literate and knowledgeable have rendered a complete burial to oral mode of discourse. Ananda Coomaraswamy in his article *The Bugbear*

of Literacy says that functional literacy can't be considered sole criterion for evaluating the total human potential. Cultures are never blanks; modernism has imposed a single perspective in dealing with human culture. Knowledge has always been created, preserved and propagated in the mode of Orality. Our own epics like *The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, Kathasaritsagar, Jatak Kathayae, Therigatha* and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are apt examples of oral creations. Their relevance for human life is perennial and gets stronger with the passage of time. Bhalchandra Nemade writes in his book *Nativism (Desivad)* (2009) "for centuries we have been accustomed to literature primarily as an oral manifestation

of language and our rural literature has meant only the spoken word. No language is primitive in any sense and the spoken norm is not in any sense underdeveloped”.

Orality & Literacy

In modern linguistics, written language is considered secondary to oral language. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) advocated superiority of spoken discourse over written discourse; he in fact said that language is nested in sound. Another linguist Henry Sweet (1845–1912) said that words are not made up of letters but of functional sound units or phonemes. Since Orality involves power of memory, Homer though illiterate, produced greatest poetry. It is said that no script is ever developed independently of spoken language and that oral mediation is always necessary for acquiring written language. According to Levi Strauss (1829–1902) ‘shift from oral to written forms could be called as a shift from savage mind to domesticated thought’. In oral cultures language is used as a mode of action, oral utterances are dynamic. Oral discourses are without texts, thoughts are done in mnemonic rhythmic patterns.

Whereas writing establishes context free language or autonomous discourse, oral discourse is not context free. Even Plato was against computers and writing as mode of discourse. Plato in *Phaedrus* and *Seventh Letter* says that writing is inhuman; pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can be only in the mind. Writing is a manufactured product. Orality is about liberating our text bound mind. The orality to literacy shift can be best understood in the perspective of modern

theorems of criticism. New criticism is a good example of text bound thinking. It insisted on the autonomy of the individual work of textual art. For new critics a work of literature is an object, a verbal icon and not as an oral aural event. Similarly Formalists have made poetry as foregrounded language. Words become more important and eliminate any concern for message, sources, history etc. Formalism is a shift from oral (contextual) mentality to textual (non contextual) mentality. But can any text be without extra textual world. Text builds on pretext that is what Roland Barthes says. The orality literacy shift can be well understood with reader response theory. The reader is absent when the writer writes and vice versa but in oral mode both speaker and hearer are present.

Characteristics of Orality

Orality is a superior mode of discourse than literate mode because of the following unique characteristics as listed by Walter Ong (1982).

- a. Preference for Pragmatics: Oral literature prefers pragmatics (convenience of the speaker) over syntactic arrangement (organization of the discourse). The meaning in oral discourse is independent of grammar.
- b. Non-Analytic & Redundant: Oral discourse prefers epithets and formulaic structures (brave soldier, beautiful princess) and is redundant which is very natural because linear or analytic thoughts are artificial creations.
- c. Close to the Human Life: Knowledge in oral cultures is conceptualized and verbalized with close reference to the human life. Trades were learnt by apprenticeship

through observation and practice with minimal verbal explanation.

d. Contextualized: Orality situates knowledge within a context. Proverbs and riddles are not merely used to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual argument.

e. Operates in Present: Oral societies live in the present by abandoning memories which no longer are relevant. Oral cultures have no dictionaries and so less semantic discrepancies. Meaning in orality is controlled by 'direct semantic ratification' or by real life situations.

f. Situational : Oral cultures use concepts in situational and operational frames of reference so are minimally abstract and remain close to human life world.

g. Performative: Oral literature is primarily performative and recitative and operates on certain parameters; occasion of performance, theme & content, medium-verse/prose, participation/participants, structure, performative, mode of composition, composer (s)-male/female, community specificity, rendering frame, re-telling/ fresh composition.

Prose narratives (*katha*, folk tales) in oral tradition are allegorical and didactic, of practical wisdom and are of varied nature like myths, fairy tales, fables; they are grounded in supernatural or historical happenings and about animals. Oral literature travels freely across languages and geographical boundaries and can withstand multiple transformations- additions and subtractions are at work and local colour and idioms are added. In oral literature story is important, it relates to a culture, it is

dialogic. Element of fantasy is accommodated easily and used for inspiration and education. Birds and animals that can speak keep watch over human actions. Orality is audience geared with the listener intervening. It is an open structure, ending is always temporary, and subject is highly moldable. Oral traditions assess intelligence not as extrapolated from contrived textbooks but as situated in operational contexts.

Orality & India

Thought and knowledge in India have always been carried forward in oral traditions. Andal (08th Century) & Alvars (06-09th Centuries) of Tamilnadu, Jayadeva (12th Century) of Orissa, Lal Ded (1320-1392 CE) of Kashmir, Narsinh Mehta (1414-1481 CE) of Gujarat, Srimanta Sankardev (1449-1568 CE) of Assam, Guru Nanak (1469-1539 CE) of Punjab and Meerabai (1498-1557 CE) of Rajasthan are some of the distinguished progressive proponents of thought and knowledge through Orality. To quote a few examples of progressive thoughts created in oral mode, I would like to mention the *Vakhs* (translated) of Lal Ded's, who could be considered the pioneer of Kashmiri oral traditions.

1. *With a rope of loose-spun thread am I
towing my boat upon the sea.
Would that God heard my prayer and
brought me safe across!
Like water in cups of unbaked clay I
run to waste. Would God I were to
reach my home!*
2. *Foulness from my mind was cleared
as ashes from a mirror,*

*Then recognition of Him came to me
unmistakable and clear.
And when I saw Him close by me, He
was all and I was not, (and there was
nothing else).*

3. *They may abuse me or jeer at me,
They may say what pleases them,
They may with flowers worship me.
What profits them whatever they do?
I am indifferent to praise and blame.*

Orality & ELT

Is there a connection between English language teaching (ELT) and Orality? Yes there is. Notwithstanding the fact that English in most of the Indian States is taught as a compulsory 'subject' from class first to graduation; the dismal level of English in terms of its practical use by our graduates and even post graduates, certainly makes 'English for masses' a distant and futile dream. The problem lies with the pedagogy and teaching material used for teaching English to the masses. If the target is masses then the pedagogy and material used must be pro masses. The context and text lying in oral and rural traditions of India has not been explored to the desired extent. We wish to take English to masses through means which are pro classes. Our vernaculars are being rejected and neglected as far as English is concerned. If Google India estimates that next 300 million users from India will not use English in future; are we not pursuing the wild goose chase? Secondly are we there to promote learning of a second language at the cost of fostering critical thinking skill in our learners. It has been proved that critical thinking is best developed through one's mother tongue. The best ELT approach so far i.e. CLT works

effectively with realia. In Indian context as far as masses are concerned oral and rural traditions are the realia, which shall be the principle source of ELT. It works on the analogy of a tree i.e. if the roots of a tree are not strong, the tree will neither give good fruits nor shadow. The roots of English will gain strength if grounded in oral rural traditions.

We can teach better writing skills in English to an Indian student by asking him or her writing village histories. Oral performative traditions like *Swang* of Haryana and *Bhand Pather* of Kashmir (rather than any western dramatist) could best teach comparative literature and drama to an Indian student. Mallikarjun (2003) asserts that folk literature which is studied for its intrinsic merit and enjoyment is a powerful educational tool to imbibe values, style of language, and many other important learning items in the minds of learners. We are yet to recognize the pedagogical potential, folk literature offers for creative language curriculum, rhetoric and communication skills. We have pathetically failed in taking English to masses just because the need for English is forcibly induced and not spontaneously desired. The need for English shall be critically examined and the strategy to promote English thereafter has to be oriented towards the traits and traditions of masses which can only be rooted in oral – rural traditions of India.

Indigenous Languages

India is a rich source of oral discourses in indigenous languages. But the treasure of these Indian languages is getting extinct because of the indifference and apathetic

attitude. Though according to 2001 official census there are 122 scheduled and non-scheduled languages and 234 mother tongues in India, but according to Peoples Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) which is a nongovernmental group there are 780 living languages in India. "These Indian languages are crucial for the effective development of fragile communities and for stemming the erosion of India's diverse multilingual and composite heritage", says Ganesh Devi (Devi, 2013). He says that there is no need to privilege scripts – even English does not have a unique script of its own. All Indian languages (scheduled or unscheduled) are equally important for overall growth of our nation. India has lost 1/5th of its languages in the last five decades. The primary reason for this irreparable loss is focus on reading and writing of modern languages as a result of which we have lost access to knowledge and cultural history of indigenous people.

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Conclusion

Speaking on the place of Indian folklore in the 21st century, renowned Kannada scholar M.M. Kalburgi argues the question of authorship and relationship between oral and literary tradition. He says that folk songs are vanishing because their ritual and agrarian contexts have vanished. The permanent nature of writing damages oral tradition. A folk song in performance is always reinvented. When it is written down it becomes fixed and ceases to be a folk song. Orality as a mode of discourse has survived thousands of year because it represents a holistic worldview. There is an urgent need to accord academic validity for oral traditions because oral discourses are the most original and sustainable carriers of knowledge and culture in any human society.