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SACRED STORIES, LASTING LEGACIES

SEHR KHOSLA EXAMINES THE SHIFT FROM ORAL TO WRITTEN TRADITIONS IN THE PRESERVATION OF INDIAN EPICS

Sukadeva reciting the Bhagavata Purana (Ancient Stories of the Lord) to Savant Singh (r. 1748–1757), *by an unknown artist from Kishangarh, Rajasthan. Image from Los Angeles County Museum of Art.*

Hands weathered by time resting on her lap, silver grey hair rolled on the tip of her hunched shoulders, an ancient grandmother hums softly but steadily to a dozen children sitting around her. She speaks to them not from a book or scroll but from her memory of listening to these poems from her elders. Though illiterate, every note carries the weight of a thousand tales woven into epic poems that transcend generations. Her storytelling harks back to Narada, the pioneer of storytelling known for his boundless travels in heaven and mastery of passing on stories. Like Narada singing tales, this grandmother becomes the living bridge between the past and future, preserving these narratives, and passing on the cycle of wisdom to her grandchildren and the descendants to come.

It is through these traditions spanning across millennia that intricate tales of heroism, devotion and duty permeated Indian culture through epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These revered works have withstood the test of time due to the meticulous oral reciters who initially memorised and performed them with astonishing accuracy. However, the eventual shift to written forms enabled a more structured preservation, leading to broader dissemination and educational commentaries. This article explores the cultural significance of this shift, examining its impact on the transmission, interpretation and continuation of India's literary heritage.

THE FOUNDATION OF INDIAN EPICS

The *Vedas*, which translate to "knowledge", were among the earliest examples of ancient Indian oral literature. Other than the content, aspects such as phonetic pronunciation, rhythm and repetition have deep ritual significance. Consider the *Gayatri Mantra*, one of the most famous Vedic chants.

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Durga slays the Buffalo Demon Mahishasura, *Mahishasuramardini Mandapa, Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu, India, made of 7th century granite. It depicts a tale from the Markandeya Purana from 5th–6th century CE carved in a cave temple. Image by Arathi Menon.*

om bhūr bhuvaḥ svaḥ tat savitur vareṇyam
bhargo devasya dhīmahi dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayāt..

"Om, the Lord, is earth, the space in between and the heavens. That Lord is the one who is the most worshipful. We meditate on that effulgent, all-knowledge Lord. May he set our intellect in the right direction..."

The phonetics are specifically crafted to produce vibrations and a profound impact on the person reciting it. Sacred sounds such as *Om*, considered the sound of the universe are meant to invoke divine energy and the varied pitch of sounds such as the emphasised *svah* affects the rhythm and meaning.

The *Vedas* laid the foundational structure for much of ancient Indian literature, influencing the content and manner in which stories were told.

A FEAR OF LOSS

As expected, storytelling through oral tradition created the risk of losing valued knowledge over generations. There was always a possibility of modification, whether intentional or accidental. At times, contextual details were modified to enable greater relatability among contemporary audiences leading to a multitude of diverse interpretations emerging across regions. Different sects and philosophical schools had varying interpretations of characters and events in sacred stories.

Further, natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires and floods could destroy the physical environments such as temples where these oral texts were memorised. With empires expanding, native traditions and oral texts were often suppressed. Conquerors imposed their languages and cultures as in the case of invasions by the Huns or spread of the Roman empire. There was also a possibility that the storytellers died or moved away leading to cultural memory loss.

ROCK INSCRIPTIONS AND CHISELS

Before the adoption of manuscripts in India, there was an intermediate stage in the preservation of epics – chiselling images of mythological figures such as Rama and Shiva into rocks. This means of narration suggests that visual presentation was integral to reinforcing oral traditions before the use of writing. Moreover, these chiselled inscriptions represent a stage in the evolution of written storytelling, reflecting an increasing desire for preserving revered narratives. Sculptures dating back millennia can be found in Hindu temples as well as carvings and paintings of scenes in Hindu and Buddhist mythology which can be seen in cave temples, thus reiterating the importance of tangible stories.

THE ADVENT OF WRITING

Writing became more accessible in ancient India around the third century BCE with *Brahmi*, thought to be the forerunner of all of the scripts used for writing languages in Southeast Asia. Primarily used for administrative purposes, *Brahmi* inscriptions appear on stone pillars, coins and edicts, with the most notable instance being the rock edicts of Emperor Ashoka. *Brahmi* was closely followed by its descendant scripts such as *Devanagari*, evidenced first from the 1st century (used for Sanskrit, Hindi and other regional languages).

Palm-leaf manuscripts, birch bark scrolls and copper plates using *Devanagari* scripts allowed epics to be recorded systematically in Sanskrit. According to tradition, Sage Vyasa is credited with composing the 100,000-verse (shloka) long *Mahabharata* and dictating it to Lord Ganesha who "wrote" it down. However, this "writing" was symbolic of the transcription of an oral performance, and the first written version of the *Mahabharata* was in Sanskrit, the language of scholars, priests and intellectuals. Over time, different regions of India created their own retellings with the core narrative serving as a unifying force and collective memory among diverse communities.

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Mahabharata Manuscript, 17th century, gouache on paper, from Mysore – Seringapattam area. Image from the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. The image is a rare and early Sanskrit manuscript with an illustration of the Pandavas praying to Devi (Hindu deity).

THE SHIFT TO WRITTEN MANUSCRIPTS

The evolution of written tradition was vastly significant, leading to the epic texts becoming standardised and authoritative editions established to operate as references. Consequently, scholars could now partake in further analysis and discourse, leading to extensive commentaries such as those on the *Vedas* by Adi Shankaracharya. As societies began to value written texts, thinkers sought to move beyond mythological explanations to more rational and systematic enquiry. Similarly, shifting to the written preservation of epics made the development of theological curricula possible in educational centres such as Takshashila, one of the oldest centres of learning in India. Trade routes further facilitated the spread of epic literature. The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* reached Southeast Asia to countries such as Thailand and Indonesia where they were adapted to local cultures.

Preservation of oral epics does not end there, instead persisting into contemporary society. Modern technology has actually revitalised this preservation through interactive digital archives, digital storage and online platforms like YouTube, podcast services that enable greater accessibility to global audiences.

CONCLUSION

Oral traditions continue to remain relevant with *Kathas*, or the art of storytelling, allowing for epics such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Puranas* being transmitted in the form of performances in temples and festivals. Whether it be through the swish of a stylus writing Sanskrit script or *Kathas* recited in community gatherings, India's literary and cultural landscape continues to be shaped by the coexistence and cooperation between both oral and written conventions.

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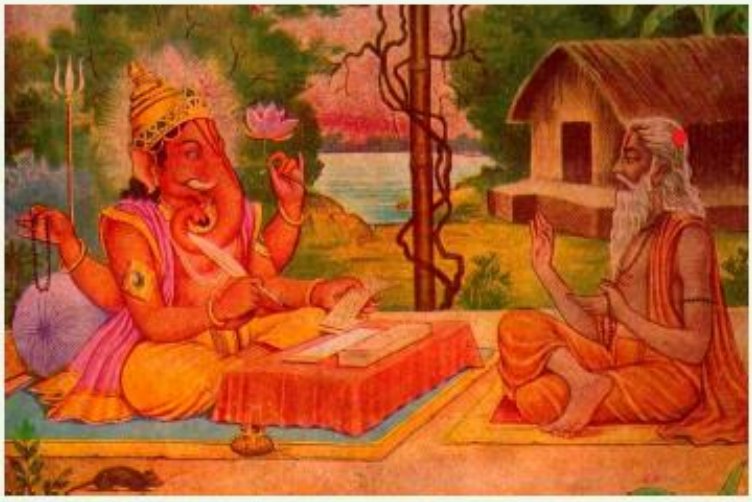

Sage Vyasa and the Hindu god Ganesha writing manuscripts. Image from Hindu American Foundation Organisation, Philadelphia.

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THE ROLE OF DIVINE IMAGERY IN FEASTS

SEHR KHOSLA EXAMINES THE ROLE OF DIVINE IMAGERY IN FEASTING ACROSS CULTURES

What connects the ancient Romans, Hindus, and Japanese? Feasts! More specifically...the influence of divinity in these feasts. Examining the role of divine imagery in feasts reveals how various cultures use religious symbols to express their beliefs, uphold social structures, and maintain a connection with the spiritual realm. Divine imagery is the use of visual, symbolic or descriptive language including depicting gods, goddesses, angels or other celestial elements that are associated with the spiritual world. In essence, these depictions help to invoke a sense of reverence or awe and have prevailed across civilizations in distinct ways that reflect their unique religious and cultural values.

Celebration of Cerealia festival in ancient. Rome. Image from Flickr.

Fresco of Bacchus from the triclinium (dining room) ceiling of an ancient Roman home. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

DIVINE IMAGERY IN ROMAN BANQUETS

In ancient Rome, banquets were more than mere celebrations of abundance; they served as opportunities to display religious devotion and social status. Known as *convivia*, these feasts often coincided with festivals dedicated to specific gods, with divine imagery playing a central role.

Feast settings often featured statues or altars dedicated to household gods, the Lares and Penates, who were believed to protect the home and family. Their presence at the feast emphasized the sacredness of the household and the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the divine.

Roman banquets typically began with libation: ritual pouring of wine or other liquids as an offering to symbolically invite the gods to partake in the feast, establishing a connection between the participants and the divine. Bacchus, the god

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Typical Navratri Thali (platter) with buckwheat roti bread, potato vegetable, curd and salad. Photo Source: India Today.

of wine, frequently appeared in these settings, as depicted in frescoes and mosaics. As the deity of wine, revelry, and ecstasy, Bacchus represented the pleasures of the feast while also reminding attendees of the importance of moderation - a key virtue in Roman moral philosophy.

Other gods also played significant roles in the imagery of these banquets. Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, symbolized the earth's bounty. Feasts held in her honour, especially during the Cerealia festival, provided Romans an opportunity to express gratitude for the harvest. Feasts included freshly harvested grain and bread; participants would adorn themselves and altars with garlands made from wheat and flowers to visually align themselves with the divine blessings of the goddess.

NINE-DAY HINDU FESTIVAL - NAVRATRI

Navratri, a significant Hindu festival, consists of a series of feasts and rituals dedicated to the goddess Durga in her various forms. Celebrated over nine nights, Navratri honours the divine feminine and the triumph of good over evil. Each night is dedicated to a divine quality of Durga, with its associated divine imagery.

Navratri feasting extends beyond the physical act of eating; it is a spiritual ritual with divine imagery connecting devotees with the sacred aspects of the festival. This includes consuming Sattvic foods that are considered pure and spiritually uplifting such as fruits, dairy, nuts, and grains like buckwheat. The colours of food also reflect divine imagery honouring different aspects of the goddess; yellow, red, and white foods represent knowledge, power, and purity respectively. Food prepared during the nine days is offered to the goddess as *prasad* (offering) before being consumed as a gesture of gratitude and devotion to the divine.

On the first day, devotees worship Shailaputri, the daughter of the mountains, who is depicted riding a bull and holding a trident - symbols of strength and determination. The foods prepared on this day, often simple dishes like boiled potatoes, reflect the values of simplicity and purity associated with Shailaputri. They serve as a reminder of the virtues embodied by the goddess and their importance in overcoming life's challenges. As the festival progresses, different forms of Goddess Durga are honoured, each with unique imagery and symbolism. On the seventh day, for example, devotees worship Kalaratri, the fiercest aspect of the feminine divine, or dark, wild incarnation represents vanquishing evil and gives devotees strength. The corresponding feast is typically more austere, reflecting the serious nature of Kalaratri's role as the destroyer of darkness.

Navratri feasts are communal events, bringing families and communities together in worship and shared meals. The divine imagery during these feasts serves as a focal point for collective devotion, strengthening communal bonds, and transforming the feast into a sacred ritual.

Celebrating the Female Divine - Durga Puja celebration in Singapore. *Photo source: Times of India.*

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Shimaen on Shinto shrine with Torii gate symbolism. Image from Koichi Barrish - Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America.

KAMI SYMBOLS IN SHINTO FEASTS

In Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, divine imagery is associated with Kami, the spirits or deities believed to inhabit natural elements, objects, and ancestors. Feasts and rituals, particularly during festivals known as Matsuri, often involve offerings to the Kami.

Kami are often symbolised by elements like the Torii gate, which marks the entrance to a sacred space, or specific natural features like rocks, trees, or bodies of water believed to house a Kami. During Shinto feasts, these symbols are treated with great respect, and offerings of food, sake, and other items are made to honour and appease the Kami, ensuring harmony between humans and the natural world.

Unlike the more anthropomorphic representations in Roman and Hindu traditions, Shinto divine imagery is closely tied to nature and is often abstract. The focus is on recognizing the presence of Kami in the natural world and living in harmony with these spirits. To honour this, participants first purify themselves by periods of abstinence varying from a few hours to days and by bathing, preferably in salt water. The Kami is then requested to descend through an invocatory rite involving opening inner doors of the shrine, beating a drum, and ringing bells. Shinto feasts are not just celebrations of abundance, but also expressions of gratitude and reaffirmations of the bond between the community and nature. The preparation and consumption of rice during these feasts are acts of reverence, wherein the rice itself symbolizes blessings of the divine Kami. Rituals like the Kagura dance, performed during or after these feasts are intended to entertain the Kami and secure their continued protection.

Kagura dance performance. Image from Dive! Hiroshima: Introduction to Kagura.

DIFFERENT PATHS... SIMILAR DEVOTION

The use of divine imagery in feasts across societies serves to connect humans with the divine, yet the ways these cultures employ such imagery differ significantly. In Roman banquets, divine imagery is closely linked to social order and the relationship between the gods and the state. The imagery in feasts is often elaborate, reflecting the wealth and status of the host and the importance of the gods in maintaining societal order. In contrast, divine imagery in Navratri feasts emphasizes personal devotion and the embodiment of divine virtues. The focus of rituals and food preparation is on individual relationships with the goddess, expressed through communal worship and shared meals. Shinto feasts, on the other hand, use more abstract divine imagery that is closely linked to nature. The presence of Kami is symbolised through natural objects and rituals, rather than detailed visual representations, and feasts emphasize the importance of living in harmony with the natural world.

Feasts in different civilisations incorporate sacred symbols in ways that embody their distinct cultural and religious contexts. Despite their differences, the use of divine imagery in feasts across cultures underscores a universal human desire to connect with the divine, reinforcing community identities and expressing religious devotion.

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