32. Storytelling: An Enduring Aspect of Indian Culture

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Abstract

One of the most significant and ancient art forms that humanity has ever encountered is storytelling. In the Indian knowledge system, storytelling has long been a potent tool for knowledge preservation, transmission, and exchange between generations. India has a rich oral heritage of storytelling that is intricately linked to social values, history, culture, and spirituality. Stories have been used for generations to educate history, philosophy, ethics, and cultural values in a way that is interesting and approachable for people of all ages. This art form has helped societies form, communicate, and become immortal. Value systems, lifestyles, and cultures have been preserved or have changed over time due to the unique stories that have emerged in different human settlements. As these stories were passed down from one generation to the next and from one individual to another, they travelled across different regions and became sources of information and cultural exchange. Thus, it would be more accurate to say that storytelling unites generations and cuts over geographical boundaries, reaffirming the ideals and philosophical concepts that form the foundation of Indian culture through teaching social dynamics, ethics, spirituality, and cultural identity. It is therefore an essential part of India's common heritage and knowledge foundation.

Keywords: storytelling, transmission, knowledge, generations

1. Introduction

Indian knowledge systems place a high value on storytelling, which has traditionally been used to transmit knowledge, customs, and cultural identity. Stories are more than just amusement in India; they serve as a vehicle for the preservation and dissemination of information, morals, history, and religion in an approachable and enduring way.

Our nature is ingrained with the ability to share our life experiences and tell stories. A human natural instinct is to tell stories, whether or not they are true. However, the way we communicate has changed throughout time. Storytelling began with visual stories, like those found in cave drawings, and later transitioned to oral traditions, when stories were verbally transmitted from one generation to the next. After that, there was a change to tales composed of words, such as stories that were typed, printed, or written (Menzoda, 2015). As a result of the advent of new technologies like the printing press, the camera, the internet, and social

media, the way we relate tales to others and stay up to date on current events has changed to become more comprehensive. Humans can now employ all types of storytelling, thanks to technology, including written stories on blogs and statues, spoken stories in recordings and videos, and visual stories in images (Menzoda, 2015). As a result, this review paper examines the distinctive features of storytelling in Indian knowledge systems and their millennia-long social impact.

2. Evolution of story telling

The timeline for the story telling is enumerated below (TrueEditors, 2022) which is well depicted in figure number 1.

2.1. Cave paintings, Folklore, Epics and Religious writings

The origins of storytelling can be found in cave drawings that depict early humans interacting with animals. Oral storytelling, which eventually evolved into folklore, came later. These tales were derived from origin stories that were specific to a town, village, colony, etc. As ballads, they were recited. Prayer was a means to praise God. Thus the epics were born. The narrative style of epics was verse-based. The number of religious works began to rise as writing evolved and story manuscripts began to be produced. As the words of God, they were read. The epic tradition was preserved in written manuscripts, honoring local heroes. Homer, an ancient Greek poet wrote the epic poems known as the Iliad and the Odyssey. The Vedas were first compiled in India. Stories about Gods, creation, and the role of humanity on the planet were among them.

2.2. Carvings on pillars and rock

Throughout history, pillars and carvings have been employed in storytelling because rulers would have their sermons preserved by having them etched into rocks and stone pillars. These sculptures would depict the king's wealth, the limits of his realm, and episodes from his life. The monarch was idolized by the town's residents, who would study these sculptures to learn about his achievements.

2.3. Hand written copies and stories

Moral and spiritual education could be effectively imparted through stories. However, because these stories were handwritten, there were not many copies, making them valuable. Only a small group of society's elite, primarily the clergy and aristocrats, had access to knowledge of language and literature. Poets, authors, and storytellers began to be patronized by the wealthy court members. They compensated them to construct their own narratives that incorporated their values and views.

2.4. Theatre and Plays

In the history of narrative, theatre emerged as a fundamental element. A variety of languages were used to write and perform plays that were based on myths and certain   human   traits.

Rich conversations, dances, songs, and narration were all used. They captured the attention of a story-loving audience.

2.5. Printing press, Journalism and Novels

Books began to be published in ever-increasing quantities after the printing press was invented. As the cost of production dropped, books were widely accessible. The Industrial Revolution marked the start of the Age of Science and Development. The "progress" of humanity started. Novels were made possible by the emergence of journalism, another storytelling medium, soon after. The importance of novels as a storytelling medium dates back to the late Middle Ages. By sharing tales of intrepid British explorers who found new continents and sailors who were left stranded on an island, they profited from the European colonization effort. Various European colonies' indigenous populations were described differently in scientific publications   on   discoveries.

Being an author became a career that was rewarding. Story criticism also began to emerge, primarily directed at the government-monarchy. In addition to complete novels, stories were still told in the form of poetry, short stories, articles, and novellas. A recurring subject was the sacrifices made by scientists, sailors, and soldiers.

2.6. Editing

Editing has developed into a fulfilling career in addition to creating stories for books and articles. It helped writers communicate their stories as effectively as possible by using the appropriate words. Repetitive, brief descriptions have been reduced into understandable paragraphs. Editing was first applied to enhance a story's consistency and precision. To be of higher quality, texts of all kinds—including novels, stories, essays, novellas, and papers—had to be edited and proofread.

2.7. Films

Visual narratives are conveyed using pictures. One of the most significant developments in   storytelling   was   the   creation   of   motion   films. Various moving visuals on a screen were used to tell stories. Similar to books, these stories   allowed   audiences   to   escape   their   everyday   life. Cinema began to replace theatre as a storytelling medium as it evolved to incorporate   sound   and   colour.
It took editors to produce high-calibre movies. Audiences could be shocked by this storytelling   style   and   still   be   left   wanting   more. The cultural undertones in stories were still visible to the educated eye. Stories started to play on TVs in families.

2.8. Digital storytelling

An major step for humanity was the creation of the internet. The planet became smaller as a result. In terms of narrative, it meant exploring newer channels—

publishing varied content for a worldwide audience on multiple websites in the form of blogs. The 21st century's minds are being shaped by digital storytelling. It is now an indispensable way to share stories at any time or place. The emphasis has returned to visual narrative. Stories on Instagram and WhatsApp resemble a collage of images, music, and captions. As young adults' gaming habits have increased, games have become central to digital narratives.

Figure number 1: Evolution of storytelling.

3. Mode of storytelling in Indian Knowledge System

To put it mildly, telling stories is a magical art! It involves putting together a series of words, followed by happenings, and then engaging the audience with your presentation and words. Storytellers who captivate their audience are successful. Making someone or a tale heard is the art of storytelling, whether it is done through spoken or written words or by graphics. A good story should not only be significant, but it should also teach us about the great and the ancient, the people who shaped history, or even those who remind us of our ancestry. Every story told is a heritage that has been passed down through the universal language of imagination (TOI, 2023).

3.1.   Moral Stories/Panchtantra

To begin with, the traditional phrase "Once upon a time" or "Bade dino ki baat hai" might be used to recall Panchtantra. Because they are told by the family's Dadi's and Nani's, Panchtantra are a favourite in the home. The Panchtantra is a collection of

oral stories about animals that date back thousands of years. The lectures cover moral principles, wit, wisdom, and how to be successful in life. These are the tales of animals who, like people, have lives, backstories, and challenges of their own. Children are taught friendship, wisdom, clever, and achievement at a young age through Panchtantra stories (TOI, 2023). Figure number 2 is an image representing few characters of Panchtantra.

Figure number 2: Panchatantra. The image was extracted from the following link as described below: https://m.media-amazon.com/images/I/513D9A16ahL.jpg

3.2. Puppetry

Puppetry is a folk art form in many parts of India that uses the eyes and hearing to tell stories. The art of puppetry involves using stuffed animals or wooden and fabric dummies to tell a story. Indian puppetry is a multifaceted art form. India has a wide variety of puppet theatre and storytelling traditions. Puppetry has played an important role in the spread of information in most parts of the world. Puppetry, which combines aspects of all art forms, such as literature, painting, sculpture, music, dance, and theatre, can help students develop their creative abilities. The combination of the storyteller, the puppeteer, and the person operating the puppets and causing them to swing effortlessly results in an amazing performance for the audience which is well depicted in figure number 3. The plot and its characters are given liveliness by each puppet. Puppetry offers the ideal fusion of storytelling and imagination, whether it is through the use of hand puppets behind the veil or marionettes or dummies that dance with the strings (Hamilton, 2020, TOI, 2023).

Figure number 3: Puppetry. The image was extracted from the following link as described below:
https://historified.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/1.jpg

3.3.   Harikatha

Indian culture is the origin of the classic art form known as Harikatha, or the legends of Hari (also referred to as Lord Vishnu). Music, instruments, a storytelling style, and spiritual teachings and lessons that have been passed down through the years are all combined in Harikatha. Stories, folklore, and religious tales from the Ramayana and Mahabharata are presented to the audience by the kathakaars, or performers as shown in figure number 4. The story is told by kathakaars dressed traditionally, and Harikatha is well-known in many Indian states. Through storytelling, musical instrument accompaniment, and singing, they attract the audience (TOI, 2023).
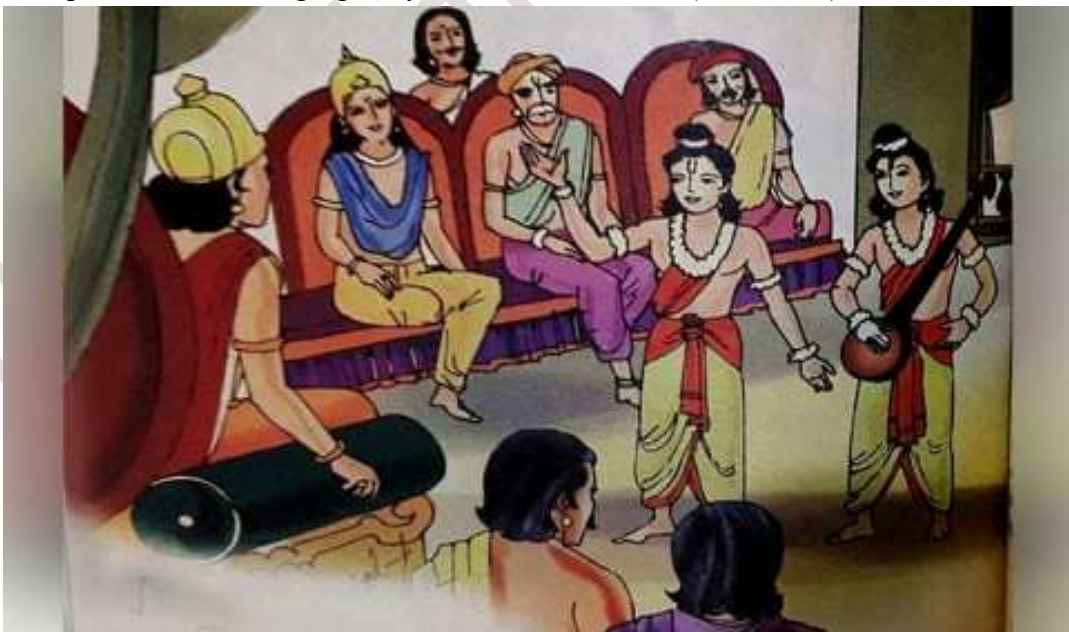

Figure number 4: Harikatha. The image was extracted from the following link as described below:
https://media.assettype.com/kalkionline%2F2023-08%2Fae5834cf-595d-4e8d-87c5-
e9e62eb31a61%2Fharikathai_Image.jpg

3.4.   Patachitra

Stories are painted on scrolls and sung by artists in the art form known as Patachitra. "Pata" is derived from the Sanskrit word "Patta," which means cloth, and "Chitra," which means painting. Stories are shown in Patachitra as frames on lengthy scrolls, which the Patuas who paint Patas slowly unfold while narrating the tale through their songs. Pater Gaan is the name of the songs. The vibrant colors, lines, and strokes of patachitra are well-known. The utilization of natural colors from regional sources, such as fruits and flowers, is one of Patachitra's unique features.

Mythological tales (Ramayana, Mahabharata, Mangalkabya), historical and contemporary topics (biographies of prominent people, nuclear war), and social issues (women's rights, children's rights, health, literacy) are only a handful of the numerous themes that the Patuas paint and sing on. To depict the Patachitra form, which is performed in Purulia, is well known for its simple compositions, minimal background adornment, and original themes, which stand in sharp contrast to the scroll   paintings   of   Medinipur,   Bankura,   and   Murshidabad (https://bengalpatachitra.com/about/).

Figure number 5: Patachitra. The image was extracted from the following link as described below:
https://www.zineart.in/images/PTC/PTC018011W.webp

3.5.   Dastangoi

The Dastangoi is a very captivating narrative style. Dastan means "a story" or "a tale," and Goi means "to tell." It is an ancient Urdu oral storytelling style. To grab the

audience's interest, a Dastango or storyteller combines a variety of elements, including gesture, vocabulary, vocal modulations, and many more. The melodic and rhythmic presentation of the Dastangoi involves listeners in a world of adventures, magic, and heroes. The fact that it has recently become popular again and that people are interested in it shows how much the craft of storytelling is valued. Dastangoi's narrative ability captivates listeners in addition to preserving cultural history. (TOI, 2023). Figure number 6 represents recitation of Dastangoi preserving the heritage of storytelling.
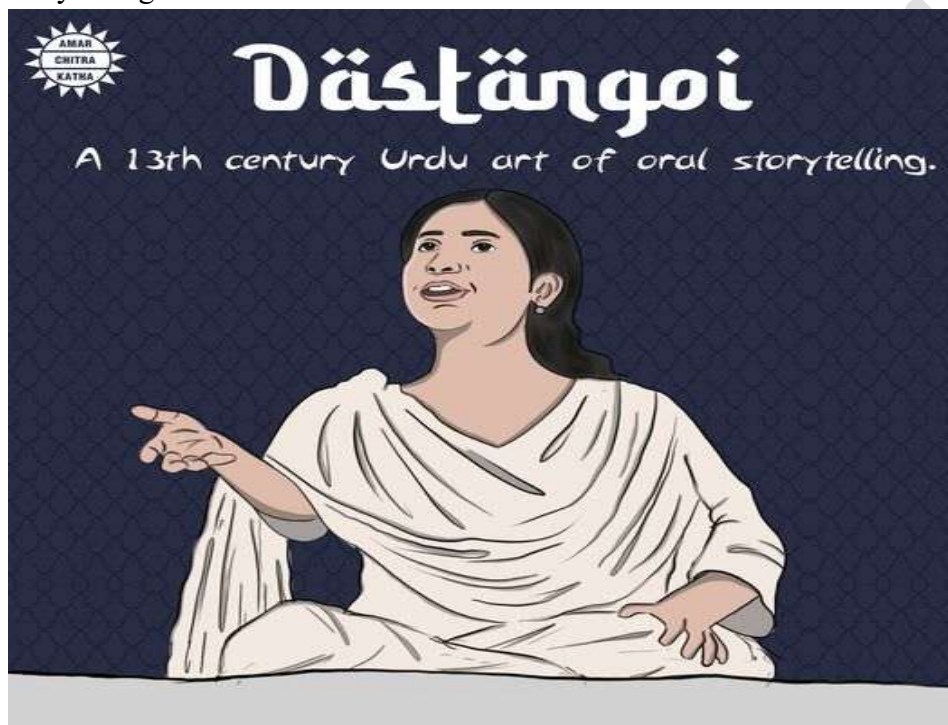

Figure number 6: Dastangoi. The image was extracted from the following link as described below:
https://www.amarchitrakatha.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Dastangoi.jpg

4. Role of Storytelling in Indian Knowledge System

Story telling plays a critical role in the Indian Knowledge System which is well elaborated under following headings:

4.1. Preservation and Transmission of traditions and culture

With a wealth of ancient knowledge in spirituality, philosophy, medicine, and the arts, Indian culture and civilization is among the oldest in the world. In order to preserve this knowledge, storytelling has been essential. Even before writing systems were widely used, oral traditions like reading epics or employing folktales made sure that knowledge was transmitted accurately. Indian folktales like Panchatantra and epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana have played a significant role in maintaining social norms, cultural values, and collective wisdom. These tales, which have been told for many generations, provide a window into the

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ethics, morality, and ideologies that influence Indian culture (Rani and Irdaya, 2023).

4.2. Ethical and Moral Education

There are many tales of heroes, gods, and common people with moral quandaries in the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other Puranas. With the portrayal of characters navigating difficult decisions and the results of their actions, they serve as examples of dharma (righteousness), karma (activity), and other ethical precepts (Hindu Mythology, 2024). Ethics are made simple for people of all ages by collections of tales and fables, like as the Panchatantra and Jataka tales, which employ animals and allegorical stories to teach virtues like courage, honesty, loyalty, and knowledge (Britannica, 2022). Stories frequently teach morals and ethical concepts in an approachable and captivating manner. Social norms and values are reinforced by stories. They impart knowledge on social roles, proper conduct, and relationship building (Japhet and Feek, 2022).

4.3. Philosophical and Spiritual Exploration

In the Indian knowledge system, stories frequently use metaphors to make difficult concepts easier to understand while delving into deep issues regarding existence, consciousness, and the natural world. The dialogue-based narrative found in texts like as the Upanishads promotes reflection on the nature of the self (Atman), the cosmos (Brahman), and liberation (Moksha) (Hindu Mythology, 2024). In order to explore love, devotion, and the unity of all beings, saints and poets from the Bhakti and Sufi traditions told stories through devotional music and poetry. This inspired millions of people and challenged conventional social structures. In order to communicate more profound spiritual and philosophical truths, stories frequently employ symbolism and metaphor. They explore concerns pertaining to reality, life, death, and the human condition (Chodavarapu, 2022).

4.4. Emotional and Social Education

The Indian knowledge system uses stories to promote empathy and a comprehension of human feelings. Complex characters such as Arjuna, Yudhishthira, and Karna, for instance, experience great moral and emotional hardships throughout the Mahabharata, providing insights into human nature and the societal effects of individual actions. The Indian knowledge system uses stories to promote empathy and a comprehension of human feelings. Complex characters such as Arjuna, Yudhishthira, and Karna, for instance, experience great moral and emotional hardships throughout the Mahabharata, providing insights into human nature and the societal effects of individual actions. Narratives are interwoven with social lessons and relationship dynamics, prompting listeners to consider the core Indian values like friendships, family responsibilities, loyalty, and compassion (Hindu Mythology, 2024).

4.5.   Historical Documentation and Collective Memory

Indian historical tales are renowned for their ability to maintain important personalities and events that are part of the communal memory and cultural identity. Written and oral histories frequently document historical events, battles, and ancient dynasties in order to aid future generations in understanding their ancestry. Additionally, regional stories offer an entertaining way to preserve geography, history, and social structures by fusing historical personalities, local heroes, and local lore. There are historical implications in many Indian stories, like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which mirror the social structures, conflicts, and values of their time. Beyond merely providing entertainment, these epic stories teach moral precepts, societal norms, and the complexity of human nature (HistoryRise, 2024).

In order to depict local history and geography, regional stories are essential. For example, during the First War of Indian Independence in 1857, the story of Rani Lakshmi Bai, Queen of Jhansi, represents bravery and resistance. She is a local hero who represents the spirit of empowerment and opposition since her legacy continues via plays, music, and books. In addition to honoring specific individuals, these narratives help communities connect with their history by weaving a tapestry of local pride and culture. An important part of the Indian knowledge system, the biography of Ashoka, one of the country's most admired kings, combines historical facts with moral teachings and cultural values. The way Ashoka changed from being a violent conqueror to a promoter of peace and Dharma (moral law) provides important lessons about ethics, human nature, and governance.

4.6.   Artistic and Aesthetic Expression

Stories are a major component of Indian classical dance, theatre, and music, which enables viewers to interact with cultural knowledge through the visual and performing arts. India has a long and cherished cultural legacy of dance (Eldridge , 2013). Movement, facial expressions, and music are used in storytelling traditions like Yakshagana and Kathakali, as well as dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Manipuri and so on to communicate epic and mythological tales, resulting in a multisensory educational experience. These Indian dance traditions, which have their roots in mythology, history, and spirituality, are a reflection of the nation's rich cultural legacy and geographical variety (Sharma, 2024). Traditional painting techniques like Madhubani and Warli are examples of visual arts that frequently portray mythological and folkloric tales, maintaining cultural knowledge and values through visual depictions.

4.7.   Contemporary Relevance and Adaptation

The role of storytelling in the Indian knowledge system (IKS) has gained significant contemporary relevance, especially when included into initiatives for

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cultural preservation and education. To encourage students' critical thinking and emotional health, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places a strong emphasis on incorporating traditional stories and moral lessons from books like the Bhagavad Gita (Jana and Adhikary, 2024; Singh, 2022). Students can connect with their identities and moral values through storytelling, which is an essential tool for promoting social awareness and passing down cultural legacy (Singh, 2022). Additionally, it promotes mindfulness and emotional resilience, offering a framework for dealing with both individual and societal issues ((Jana and Adhikary, 2024). Storytelling is therefore a vital instrument in contemporary education and social discourse since it not only maintains India's rich narrative traditions but also changes to suit the demands of modern society.

5. Conclusion

In India, storytelling is an essential instrument for cultural continuity, lifelong learning, and personal development since it connects the past and present. A timeless and flexible component of the Indian knowledge system, storytelling is intricately interwoven with its educational, spiritual, and cultural strands. From epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana to ancient writings like the Vedas, to modern educational adaptations like NEP 2020, storytelling is a potent tool for transferring cultural heritage, values, and information. This tradition fosters critical thinking, psychological resilience, and ethical growth while simultaneously preserving India's historical narratives and addressing contemporary educational and societal issues.

To sum up, storytelling is a timeless practice in the Indian knowledge system that easily changes to meet the demands of new generations while holding onto its fundamental wisdom. It demonstrates the richness and adaptability of Indian culture and demonstrates how deeply meaningful and transformational ancient customs can still be. Storytelling is still crucial to maintaining India's cultural heritage and promoting social and personal development as the country progresses in a globalized world. Storytelling is an essential component of India's legacy and present education since it connects history, spirituality, and current challenges and is a potent instrument for lifelong learning.

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