

Report of the International Conference on Katha Vachana aur Katha Vachak - Exploring India's Chanted Narratives

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A Unesco – sponsored International Workshop on *Katha Vachana Aur Katha Vachak - Exploring India's Chanted Narratives* was held at the IGNCA (New Delhi) from 3-7 February 1997. The workshop was linked with the Unesco's *Integral Study of the Silk Roads : Roads of Dialogue*, which is part of the World Decade for Cultural Development.

About thirty-five scholars from France, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Nepal, Sri Lanka, U.K. and from different parts of India, belonging to various disciplines, age groups, specializations, and regions took part in the workshop. Most of the scholars had rich field-experience in different parts of India. Their papers were illustrated and demonstrated by video presentation.

The following aspects of oral epics were taken up for closer examination :

- (a) nature of orality and methods of its transmission;
- (b) nature of composition and its socio-economic context;
- (c) performers, audience and nature of performance; and
- (d) regional and cultural dimensions.

The scholars deliberated upon various issues, beginning with fundamental questions concerning definitions and terminologies. The relevance of 19th century terminology developed in a specific socio-political context was debated. It was felt that the use of vernacular terms is more appropriate and correct, rather than trying to fit the data belonging to a different culture into categories of instruments designed for socio-political management. At the same time the fact is that some of these terms and definitions are essential for the purpose of nomenclature.

The debate on terminology led to the discussion on the nature of orality. Scholars were of the view that rather than juxtaposing the oral and the written, the fact of simultaneity should be stressed. The phenomena of simultaneity and complementarity are most visible in the methods of transmission of tradition as also in its very nature of performance. An epic performance belies all categories in terms of 'oral' 'textual' distinction, so far as the self-conscious individual artistic creation and collective participatory activities are concerned.

Another component of the oral epic, brought out at the workshop, is the intense relationship that exists between the bard and his audience. It was pointed out that the role of audience in moulding, preserving and perpetuating the tradition reveals its deep significance.

The discussion on the nature of composition led to review both formal elements and contextual relevance which enables the text to originate and function. Understanding of both these levels is essential to grasp the meaning of the text and its performance.

The last session, Regional and Cultural Dimensions, was conducted in Hindi, and it dealt with the epic traditions of Northern, Central and Western India. It was felt that if genuine allowance is made for vernacular, there will be better integration of method and data.

This workshop stressed the need for preserving through collection, documentation, and archiving, this intangible heritage, which is endangered in all areas of the world in more than one way. To this effect the workshop passed a resolution addressed to Unesco and the Government of India.

First, an appeal to Unesco : to consider the Oral Wisdom Tradition as World Heritage; and to constitute a Commission to carry out a study of the cultural dimension of a creative orality and balance transformation which would give traditional culture all the force it needs – a renewed sense of pride, and a new deal in development.

An appeal to the Government of India : to recognize the importance of orality in cultural development; to document oral traditions which are characterized not only by their diversity but also by their richness; and to promote oral education through performing arts, oral literature, oral history and indigenous worldview alongwith the modern system of education, specially at the primary stage.



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Unesco Chair programme

at the IGNCA

In close interaction with Unesco, New Delhi, a study of "Cultural Heritage as a Development Tool" was undertaken in India and Sri Lanka, with a view to evolve efficient models of development based on the real life situation of the indigenous artisans.

A Workshop was organized in Colombo, from 27th to 29th December 1997, in Collaboration with the Central Cultural Fund, Government of Sri Lanka, to discuss the preliminary findings of the study of artisans.

Unesco Fellowship



Dr. Radha Banerjee of IGNCA was awarded the Unesco Hirayama Silk Roads Fellowship to undertake a research programme in the field of Central Asian Art and Iconography. She is pursuing a project on the Synthetic Nature of Central Asian Art and Culture with special reference to Chinese Turkestan.

