

REPORT

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Sruti: A Discourse on Nature of Orality and Its Transmission

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The past decade has witnessed a renewed interest in the orality of speech and oral traditions. Scholars of culture, language, human psyche and history have delved into areas they term as pre-literate, non-literate and pre-historic. Although the discourse on orality has deepened our understanding of its nature, functioning and relationship vis-a-vis the written word, it has also problematized it further by advancing a series of dichotomous categories: oral-verbal; oral-aural; oral-literate; primary orality - secondary orality; pre-literate consciousness -literate consciousness and so on. How useful are these categories in understanding the dynamics of orality? How legitimate is the European hermeneutics in the context of other cultures, specifically South Asia? To what extent do studies of orality and oral traditions represent/misrepresent the perspectives of the participants and bearers of these traditions?

The international workshop on Sruti -Transmission of Oral Tradition, was an attempt to bring to focus various debates relating to Orality and to raise relevant methodological and epistemological issues. The workshop was jointly organized by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg from 19-23 November 2000. In a way this workshop was in continuation of a previous dialogue on Orality initiated during the International workshop on 'Katha Vachana aur Katha Vachak -Exploring India's Chanted Narrative' held in 1997 jointly by the IGNC and UNESCO. Whereas this workshop was rich in terms of empirical data, Sruti was an attempt at an in-depth discussion and debate. However the workshop's uniqueness lay not only in the debate it generated, but also in the authentic experience of the 'chanted sacred word' made available to the participants by the practitioners and bearers of various traditions.

The workshop which was conceived as a body with four parts, began with reverberations of sacred verses in Sanskrit, Avestha, Hebrew, Arabic, Prakrit, Pali, Bhot and Gurbani. Selection of the verses, and the dialogue that took place between the preachers/priests and the scholars helped reveal the deeper essence and meaning of the 'uttered' and the spoken 'word' in different traditions and the inherent transforming power of this 'word' , which is often equated with the divine himself.

The next four days were devoted to themes: Sruti; Transmission of Sacred Traditions; Concept of Sruti in Music; Listening to the Oral and Transmission of Knowledge. Papers in the first and second sessions explored the multiple ways in which orality expresses itself. The first session concentrated on the relationship between the 'written' and the 'oral' word and stressed the primacy of the oral word in transmission and preservation of different religious traditions, the written word notwithstanding. These papers also explored the concept and the hidden essence of the 'sound', which in many traditions is seen as a 'manifestation of Being'.

The papers under these sections also explored the relationship that exists between the performer and his audience, multiple ways in which oral compositions are created, performed and transmitted .But more importantly these papers shifted the focus from the textual-oral debate to the realm of experience, communication, emotions and transformation of the self that Sruti generates. Here the focus of discussion were concepts like '*bhav*', '*rasa*', '*satsang*' *sankalpa*', '*archana*' and '*samalpan*' , that make the realization of Sruti event possible and different in essence from what is understood through a term like 'Performance' .

The debate from here logically moved towards critiquing of academic understanding of orality. The papers under the section 'Listening to the Oral' critically reflected upon approaches influenced by text oriented methodologies and explored the perspectives offered by the framework provided by notions of 'intertextuality' 'simultaneity' 'reflexivity' etc. Here along with sruti, the aspects of smritis were taken up. Role of cultural memory, individual creation, myth and history and the multilevel dialogical interaction that takes place between the text, context and the community were explored here.

From here the workshop moved on to traditional modes of learning and transmission of knowledge. The papers here focused on two different issues: one, of the role of rituals, oral communications in preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge, and second, of the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and the need to preserve and make them available for contemporary socio-economic management.

The workshop thus generated a meaningful debate on the nature of orality in the context of expressive traditions with special reference to sound, music oral narratives, traditional knowledge systems and modes of their transmission at the same time raising questions about the appropriateness of methodologies rooted in ideological and culturally situated research traditions which may in fact misrepresent the perspectives of the participants and bearers of oral traditions.