

Orality to Textuality: The Transmission of Knowledge in Early Hindu Traditions.**Dr Prashant Barthwal¹, Himani Pandey²**¹Assistant Professor, Dept of Political Science, Sri Aurobindo College, University of Delhi.ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0275-4474>

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the multifaceted transition over time between oral and written forms for conveying religious and philosophical knowledge in early Hindu traditions, from roughly the second millennium BC to the beginning of the common Era. This analysis draws heavily on interdisciplinary scholarship in Indology, comparative religion, linguistics, and the emergent discipline of orality-literacy studies to understand how the Vedic corpus, the oldest surviving body of Indo-European religious literature, was preserved and transmitted through complex mnemonic and educational techniques before it was codified in manuscript form. The central focus of this research is to apply and adapt Walter Ong's theoretical model, which distinguishes between primary oral cultures and literate cultures, and to highlight that, although writing systems became available in the Indian subcontinent, oral culture did not simply disappear. This study will evaluate many of the most significant aspects of traditional Indian culture and society by examining how written texts, including key works of Hindu religious literature such as the Mahabharata and the Puranas, came to be regarded as part of what we now call Hinduism. In addition to examining how these texts replaced oral forms of religious knowledge transmission, we will consider how they were produced in response to the development of new types of knowledge (i.e., grammatical or phonocentric) and the social context in which they were created. Additionally, we will analyse the influence of the Brahmin class in shaping these philosophies on phonocentrism through their roles as priestly practitioners and interpreters. Finally, we will consider how these textual developments have affected the transmission and evolution of sacred knowledge in both oral and literate forms throughout the history of Hinduism.....

Keywords: Vedic transmission, orality, textuality, Mimamsa, literacy, manuscript culture, Indian philosophy...**Introduction**

The question of knowledge transmission throughout time has been one of the most important topics in the history of civilisation. With respect to the majority of academic approaches to the history of civilisations influenced by Western intellectual traditions, writing is viewed as a major historical turning point from the transience and subjectivity of oral cultures to the permanence, accuracy, and endurance of written forms. While the dominant narrative supporting this viewpoint has been articulated most effectively by Walter Ong (Orality & Literacy) and further supported by Eric Havelock's studies of ancient Greece, it has been claimed that a relative cognitive and cultural break occurs between societies that possessed writing and those that did not. By examining the early history of the Hindu tradition, it becomes apparent that there are compelling examples, if not clear rebuttals, of the dominant Western model of knowledge transmission. In the Hindu tradition, oral knowledge existed before written knowledge. It consistently resisted its displacement, maintaining a claim to superior epistemological and soteriological value compared to written forms long after written systems became commonplace (Pollock, 2006, 12).

The Vedas, written down between about 1500 and 500 BC, are believed by many to be among the oldest surviving pieces of literature in any Indo-European language. That said, to refer to the Vedas as *texts* in the standard-meaning sense imposes on them a way of defining something that is outside of their true way of existing. The Vedas were not first *texts* and then *orally performed*; they were orally created, only slowly and partially, and with great reluctance, long after they had originally been created, before becoming manuscripts. Before becoming manuscripts, the transmission of the Vedas over the thousands of years was accomplished primarily through the human voice and trained memory, combined with an extremely complex system of phonological and grammatical checks designed to limit variations in how the Vedas were pronounced (Staal, 1996, p. 4). This paper discusses

how this happened, what philosophical and social structures supported this process, and what ultimately created the shift to becoming textual, which was never complete.

The examination is from the approximate start of the Rigveda period (about 1500–1200 BC) to the period when the *Dharmashastras* and classical Sanskrit literature were commonplace (early centuries C.E.), providing a very long-range view of knowledge as it develops over time. It also allows for discussion of how Buddhism and Jainism provide alternative perspectives on the role of writing in transmitting knowledge, helping us understand how the Brahminical attitude towards writing differs. The research is based on primary texts such as the *Rigveda*, *Taittiriya Upanishad*, *Panini's Ashtadhyayi*, and *Jaimini's Mimamsa Sutrās*, along with a wide variety of secondary sources, including both Indological and comparative religious literature.

Theoretical Framework: Orality, Literacy, and the Limits of Ong's Model

Walter Ong's (1982) thoughts about both orality and writing are a great source of inspiration for people who study the humanities. He classifies those who use oral language without writing as a group of people who use situational rather than abstract thought, additive/syntax instead of subordinate/syntax, aggregative rather than analytical thought, knowing as a result of participating in the experience as opposed to knowing as a result of being detached from the experience, and having a homeostatic relationship with the past where their memory fades if it is no longer relevant to what they need to remember in the current moment. In contrast, Ong argues that literacy enables the ability to think analytically, formulate precise definitions, construct a system of categories, and develop formal logic by externalising thought in a fixed, spatial format (Ong 1982, 36–57). Ong made it clear that he was referring to tendencies rather than absolute distinctions and therefore mentioned the existence of oral cultures with partial or limited forms of literacy. He provides supporting evidence for the general premise that orality gives way to literacy, suggesting that language use profoundly affects cognitive and sociocultural processes over time.

Goody (1986, 3) has pointed out that applying these ideas to Indian society has yielded both helpful information and challenges. He cautions against applying these ideas universally without taking cultural context and the narratives of the diverse histories of different literate traditions into account. Pollock (2006), in his comprehensive study, showed that Sanskrit literacy had a trajectory quite unlike that of Western alphabetic literacy, with written Sanskrit texts functioning more as commemorative or performative artefacts than as instruments of information transmission or democratic knowledge diffusion. Whereas writing in the Greek and later European tradition was understood as liberating knowledge from the fallibility of human memory, in the Brahminical tradition, it was understood as degrading it, introducing the possibility of scribal error, desacralization, and misappropriation by the unqualified (Pollock, 2006, 100–106). Finnegan (1977) and Foley (1988) have similarly challenged the sharp binary between oral and literate cultures, arguing for a much more complex spectrum of 'oral-formulaic' traditions, mixed modes of composition and performance, and literate cultures that preserve strong oral dimensions. The Hindu case, as this paper argues, is best understood not as a moment of transition from one pole to another but as a sophisticated negotiation between two complementary modes of knowledge, each serving distinct social, epistemological, and soteriological functions.

The Architecture of Vedic Oral Transmission

The Vedic tradition is perhaps the most technically sophisticated oral tradition ever documented. The Rigveda alone contains 10,552 hymns organised into ten mandalas, totalling approximately 153,826 words, all transmitted orally for centuries with a precision that modern scholars have verified through comparison of independently maintained recensions from different regions of the Indian subcontinent (Witzel, 1997, 258). The near-perfect agreement between these regionally divergent transmissional lineages testifies to the extraordinary effectiveness of the mnemonic and pedagogical system that sustained them.

The Vedic oral tradition operated through a hierarchy of recitational modes that served as an internal error-correction mechanism. The most basic mode, the *samhita-patha* (continuous recitation), rendered the text in its ordinary linear form with phonological combinations (*sandhi*) applied between words. Above this, the *pada-patha* (word-by-word recitation) separated each word in isolation, allowing identification of individual lexical units. More complex were the *krama-patha* (step recitation), *jata-patha* (braid recitation), *ghana-patha* (dense recitation), and several other modes in which words were recited in overlapping combinations, reversals, and permutations. A student who could recite a text using each of the 11 traditional modes had achieved a high degree of internalisation of both the phonological and semantic forms of that text (Staal, 1996, 17–24). The use of the modes served not only as a mnemonic system but was also believed to have independent religious efficacy. The *Ghana-patha* is often cited as one of the most meritorious forms of recitation; a scholar who could recite using this system would earn the title *ghanapathi*, denoting extraordinary scholarship and ritual authority (Michaels, 2004, 58). This suggests that the oral transmission of texts in the Vedic context was an active, analytically complex interaction with the language and that there were concurrent rigorous analyses of the phonology of the texts being memorised through the modes.

Based on extensive research into oral transmission of knowledge, *Gurukula* based, was the basic means of their respective communication; especially the method by which *Shishya* or student, spent time in their own home away from home in their Teacher's (Guru) home or worldly presence, over a period of time (approximately twelve years

in relation to Vedas); thereby developing not only an educational relationship, but, a trusting and submission-based relationship with the Teacher. The entire Gurukula process or model, by definition, used to shape the process of to transfer knowledge from *Guru* to *Shishya* through means of passing on Knowledge (as defined by Brahminical epistemology as living and transformational forms of energy/Knowledge) under the proper relationships (through proper relationships between Guru/Shishya) and also, under the correct ethical environments, in which the Shishya could continue to receive the appropriate energies (Knowledge) and have an appropriate, continuing support mechanism throughout the transmission process (supported through appropriate relationships, meaning, an ethical Gurukula environment).

The Taittiriya Upanishad is one of the major works in the collection known as the Upanishads. One particularly important section of this work is called the *Shiksha Valli*, in which a teacher gives a final lecture to his students on how to conduct themselves ethically, tell the truth, perform rituals, fulfil their duties to others, and follow other ethical courses of conduct. The *Shiksha Valli* begins with an analysis of phonology (shiksha), indicating that, in addition to being ethical and philosophical, the content of the Vedic curriculum is grounded in training in the language's phonological aspects. The acoustic characteristics of each phoneme, the sound of the voice, and the sound of the breath were not only considered instructional methods or approaches to teaching; they were also viewed as metaphysically and spiritually important (Deussen, 1908, 208).

Phonocentrism and the Ontology of Sacred Sound

Oral tradition took precedence in Vedic culture for reasons beyond the practical inability to write; it was an ingrained part of their philosophy (with significant meaning within it) and reflected a strong belief in phonocentrism. At the core of this phonocentric viewpoint is a goddess's (Vac, who was sometimes represented as the goddess of music) representation as both divine speech/the sacred word, presented in ways that were ultimately similar to those used when referencing the creator of the universe, Brahma. Rigveda 10.125 (the Vac Sukta) presents Vac speaking in the first person: she dwells in the gods, sustains the sky, fills all worlds, and is the ultimate ground of all knowledge and being. This hypostatization of speech as a divine power with ontological priority over all things had enduring consequences for Hindu attitudes toward oral versus written language.

The Mimamsa philosophical school, founded on the *Mimamsa sutras* attributed to Jaimini (c. 200 BC), developed this phonocentric intuition into a systematic theory of language. The Mimamsakas held that the Vedas were *apaurusheya*, not composed by any human or divine author but eternally existent and co-eternal with the universe (Clooney, 1990, 35). The phonemes (*sphotas*) of the Vedic texts were held to be eternal, uncreated, and self-revealing; the meaning of a Vedic sentence was directly experienced as an intuitive flash (*pratibha*) upon the completion of its utterance, without any mediating act of inference. This theory was developed in elaborate detail by the grammarian-philosopher *Bhartrhari* (c. 450–510 CE) in his *Vakyapadiya*, which argued that *Shabda-brahman*, the Absolute as Language, was the ultimate reality of which all other realities were transformations (Coward, 1990, 12).

The practical consequence of this philosophical position was that the written representation of a Vedic text could never be the Veda itself; it could at best be an imperfect, perishable, and potentially misleading shadow of the living text that existed in the trained voice and mind of a qualified reciter. Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* (c. 400 BCE), the foundational work of Sanskrit grammar, was itself composed as an oral text, a set of approximately 4,000 sutras (aphorisms) of such extreme concision that they could only be properly understood with the aid of an oral commentary tradition (Cardona, 1997, 267). By defining the Hindu textual canon as *shruti* (which is heard) versus *smriti* (which is remembered), the taxonomy of these texts has been rooted in a phonocentric way of knowing. The *Shruti* consists of the four Vedas and the associated Brahmanas and Aranyakas (Upanishads), and was categorically of divine origin and transmitted through an unbroken oral lineage (*parampara*) reaching back to the rishi seers who first 'heard' the eternal truths in deep meditative states. *Smriti*, the vast body of texts including the epics, Puranas, Dharmashastra, and philosophical commentaries, was of human origin, could be written down without hesitation, and possessed a derivative and conditional authority compared to the *shruti* (Doniger, 2009, 44). This hierarchy, while it did not prevent the composition of extensive written literature, maintained the special status of oral recitation as the privileged mode of accessing the most sacred and authoritative knowledge.

The Emergence of Writing and the Question of Brahmi Script

Writing came to India considerably later than to Mesopotamia, Egypt, or China. The Indus Valley script, used in the Harappan civilisation (c. 2600–1900 BCE), remains undeciphered and appears to have fallen out of use before the composition of the Rigveda; there is no convincing evidence of continuity between Harappan script and later Indian writing systems (Parpola, 1994, 7). The oldest clearly deciphered inscriptions in India are those of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (r. 268–232 BCE), written in Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts; these represent a fully developed writing system that must have had some prior history, though the origins of Brahmi remain debated (Salomon, 1998, 11).

The appearance of fully functional writing in the Ashokan period raises immediate questions about why the Brahminical tradition did not immediately adopt writing for the transmission of the Vedas. Several factors appear to have been at work. First, as discussed above, the phonocentric epistemology of the Brahminical tradition

positively devalued writing as a mode of sacred knowledge transmission. Second, the Brahmin community had a strong institutional and social interest in maintaining control over Vedic knowledge, and oral transmission through the gurukula system was an extremely effective mechanism for this control, far more effective than written texts, which could in principle be copied and accessed by those outside the authorised lineage (Olivelle, 1993, 47). Third, the level of phonological precision required by Vedic recitation was difficult to represent in any writing system; Indian scripts, including Brahmi, did not use spaces between words or mark all the phonological features necessary for accurate recitation without prior oral training (Salomon, 1998, 68).

Significantly, the early adoption of writing in India appears to have been driven not by the Brahminical elite but by the mercantile class (vaishyas) and by the heterodox traditions of Buddhism and Jainism. Ashoka's inscriptions were themselves propaganda for a Buddhist-influenced political and moral vision, and the early Buddhist sangha showed no particular reluctance to commit its teachings to writing. The Pali Canon was written down in Sri Lanka around 30 BCE, and the Jain Agamas were written down in the first centuries CE (Norman, 1983, 1). The contrast with the Brahminical tradition's persistent resistance to writing the Vedas is striking. It supports the interpretation that the latter's oralism was a deliberate, philosophically motivated choice rather than a mere technological limitation. When writing began to be used for Sanskrit texts in the Brahminical tradition, it was typically used first for non-Vedic purposes, for the composition of *kavya* (literary poetry), *nataka* (drama), and *Dharmashastras* (legal and ethical treatises). Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacarita* (c. 1st century CE) and Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* (c. 4th–5th century CE) are products of a sophisticated culture of Sanskrit literary composition in which writing played a significant role. Manu's *Manusmṛiti* (c. 200 BCE–200 CE), one of the most influential *Dharmashastra* texts, was clearly composed with an awareness of both oral and written modes of dissemination (Doniger and Smith, 1991, xliii). Nonetheless, the Vedic core of Brahminical education remained stubbornly oral.

The Epics, Puranas, and the Emergence of a Textual Culture

While the Vedic tradition maintained its commitment to oral transmission, a parallel tradition of narrative and devotional literature was emerging, showing a much more complex and ambivalent relationship to writing. The two great Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, are products of a long oral tradition of bardic composition and performance that was eventually crystallised into textual form. The *Mahabharata*, attributed to the sage Vyasa, was traditionally said to have been dictated by Vyasa and transcribed by the god Ganesha, a mythologization of the oral-to-written transition that neatly encodes the cultural anxiety surrounding this transition (van Buitenen, 1973, xv).

The *Mahabharata*, in its current form, is a text of approximately 100,000 verses, the longest poem in any literary tradition, and it shows clear signs of compositional layering that reflect its long oral prehistory. Albert Lord's (1960) theory of oral-formulaic composition, originally developed for Homeric and South Slavic epic poetry, has been applied by Brockington (1998) and others to the *Mahabharata* with considerable success, identifying formulaic half-lines, type-scenes, and metrically driven word-substitutions that bear the hallmarks of oral composition. The epic's frame narrative, in which the sage Vaishampayana recites the entire text at the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya, is itself a device for authorising the text's content by embedding it in an oral-performative context, by claiming that the text we are reading is a transcription of an oral performance (Sullivan, 1990, 3).

The Puranas, a vast corpus of texts dealing with cosmology, mythology, devotional religion, and royal genealogy, present an even more complex case. Traditionally eighteen in number (though many more exist), the Puranas were composed and elaborated over a period of roughly a thousand years (c. 300–1300 CE) and exist in multiple recensions showing significant regional variation. Rocher (1986, 13) has argued that the Puranas are best understood not as fixed texts but as living traditions in which textual and oral modes of composition, transmission, and performance were continuously intertwined. A Purana would be recited at festivals and ritual occasions (the *Bhagavata Purana*, for example, is still recited in its entirety over a period of seven days in certain communities), and the recitation itself was understood to generate religious merit for the performers and audience alike.

The genre of the Purana thus illustrates the distinctive hybrid mode of knowledge transmission that characterises much of the Hindu tradition: texts exist, but they are understood primarily as scripts for performance rather than as autonomous repositories of information. The authority of a Puranic passage derives not from its presence in a manuscript but from its recitation by an authorised Brahmin reciter (*kathaka*) in an appropriate ritual context. Lutgendorf (1991), in his study of the *Ramcharitmanas* tradition in northern India, has beautifully documented how this logic of text-as-script-for-performance operates in living Hindu devotional practice, a point to which we will return in the conclusion.

Manuscript Culture and the Technology of Textual Transmission

The eventual emergence of a manuscript culture in India, beginning perhaps around the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE and becoming widespread in the first millennium CE, introduced new possibilities and new challenges for the transmission of knowledge. Indian manuscripts were written on a variety of materials depending on region and period: palm leaf (*talapatra*) in South and Southeast Asia, birch bark (*bhurjapatra*) in Kashmir and the

Himalayas, and various types of prepared cloth and paper in later periods (Wujastyk, 2015, 43). Due to their fragile nature, these materials were often copied repeatedly to ensure they would survive. They were part of an established culture of copying to preserve the manuscript, rooted in religious and scholarly traditions.

To copy a manuscript was a good deed, and many scribes included a colophon in their manuscript citing their name, the date, the location, and the merit they were hoping to gain by having copied the manuscript. This created a steady supply of new copies; at the same time, it created a large body of different versions of a particular text as transcribing errors increased with the number of reproductions. This contrasts with the way Vedic literature was preserved by oral transmission, in which the text's transmission included a mechanism to identify and correct errors as they arose. In the case of manuscripts, transmission lacked a built-in mechanism to detect and correct errors. If a scribe copied a manuscript that they could not understand, an error would occur, and the draft copy would have that error at the time the copy was made, and that error would be present as well as multiplied into subsequent copies (Wujastyk, 2015, 67).

Brahminical tradition has been conscious of this problem through the careful collation of Vedic manuscripts against their oral recitation. Madhava-Vidyaranya and other medieval scholars asserted that, in cases of discrepancy between manuscript and oral tradition, authority came from the oral tradition rather than the written page (Pollock, 2006, 105). This principle placed the manuscript in a subordinate position to the oral lineage and guaranteed that the written text would never completely replace the oral tradition from which it derived. Several significant textual technologies were developed in India to improve the accuracy and accessibility of manuscript texts. Commentarial literature (bhāṣya, vṛtti, tika) served to explicate difficult passages, standardise interpretation, and transmit auxiliary oral traditions in written form. The tradition of the *karika*, a mnemonic verse summarising the content of a longer prose work, preserved the oral-mnemonic logic of the earlier tradition within a written medium. The elaborate system of Sanskrit grammatical and metrical analysis served as a check on textual corruption by making it easy to identify metrically or grammatically defective passages (Cardona, 1997, 283). These textual technologies collectively represent an adaptation of the precision and self-correcting mechanisms of the oral tradition to the different constraints of the written medium.

Colonialism, Print Culture, and the Transformation of the Tradition

The arrival of European scholarship and, eventually, print technology in India from the 16th century CE onwards created new challenges and transformations in the transmission of Hindu knowledge. The European Indologists of the 18th and 19th centuries, figures such as William Jones, H.H. Wilson, Max Müller, and Monier Monier-Williams, approached the Vedic texts primarily as written documents, applying the methods of classical philology developed for the study of Greek and Latin. Their great projects of edition, translation, and commentary, most notably Muller's Sacred Books of the East series, made Sanskrit texts available in printed form to a global scholarly audience for the first time, but also fundamentally transformed the nature of the texts by fixing them in a single authoritative written form and stripping them of their oral-performative context (Trautmann, 1997, 18).

The introduction of print to India from the late 18th century onwards had profound effects on the social dynamics of religious knowledge. Printed editions of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and devotional literature became widely available at low cost, making these texts accessible to a much wider audience than before. In the 19th century, there were several nationalist and reformist movements centred on important figures such as Rammohun Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Each of them relied on the printed word to share their understanding of Hindu scripture, thereby circumventing Brahmin pandits' oral authority and addressing a newly literate public. (Dalmia 1997, 5).

One example of this use of print to redefine religious authority among Hindus is the Arya Samaj, founded in 1875. Dayanand published many of his interpretations of the Vedas in English and Hindi, using them as the sole authority for Hindu belief and practice, and discarding the Smṛiti traditions (which include both the Puranas and the two great epics), deeming them later additions to the body of traditional religious knowledge. Notably, the way Dayanand viewed the Vedas was radically different from their traditional oral meaning, in which proper access to them was only through years of study under an appropriate guru (Jones 1976, 44). The irony of a religious movement requesting a return to the Vedas and, at the same time, fundamentally altering the manner in which they are received/inferred or providing/speaking for the truth again evidences the complexities and often contradictions of the transition from oral to print-based culture during the colonial period.

The significance of the non-translatable nature of Sanskrit

The meeting of Sanskrit, the ancient and holy language of India, with the Western intellectual tradition of Orientalism has been a complicated affair. At the very centre of this meeting is a profound contradiction: the non-translatability of Sanskrit and the difficulty of capturing it with the tools of Western linguistics and philosophy. This linguistic and philosophical distinction became an arena of fierce intellectual and political struggles between Orientalists who sought to examine, classify, and dominate Indian intellectual traditions. The non-translatable elements of Sanskrit clashed with Orientalist politics and scholarship, creating distortions in the representation of

the Indian intellectual tradition. The non-translatability of Sanskrit can explain the clash between Sanskrit and Orientalism, but only if one understands Sanskrit's distinctive linguistic and philosophical distinctions.

To understand how the non-translatability of Sanskrit affects the politics of Orientalism, it is important to examine the linguistic, cultural, and historical factors that have shaped the transfer of knowledge in Bharatiya. This transfer of knowledge has been of great significance to both Western and Indian philosophical thought. This is a matter of non-translatability. Sanskrit possesses unique features that make it difficult to translate into Western languages such as English. Non-translatability goes beyond language. Language, however, holds thought systems, contexts, and philosophies within itself. The highly inflected language, compounding, and the complex connections between the intellectual and religious traditions of the Bharatiya make Sanskrit non-translatable. The non-translatability of Sanskrit is multi-faceted. First, Sanskrit grammar preserves clarity and nuance lost in translation. The unique system of compound words (*samāsa*) makes it possible to express complex thoughts that would otherwise take very long English sentences to express. In Advaita Vedanta, Brahman stands for ultimate reality, the cosmic principle, and the universal soul, and is non-translatable.

Numerous significant concepts in Sanskrit have a long history of intellectual discussion due to their deep association with Indian philosophy and spirituality. Concepts such as Karma, Yoga, and Moksha have intricate theoretical and intellectual systems that require detailed elucidation and analysis. It was difficult for Orientalist scholars to understand Indian knowledge systems through Western thought and language because Sanskrit is untranslatable. According to Edward Said, Orientalism refers to the Western scholarly tradition that studies and represents Eastern cultures from a position of cultural superiority, to subdue or transform the Orient. The practices of Orientalist scholarship sometimes resulted in the distortion of Indian knowledge traditions in Sanskrit studies. The translation of difficult Sanskrit theories into Western languages and systems of thought led to unintended distortions. The politics of Orientalism, which involved an understanding of Indian philosophy within the framework of the Western philosophical tradition, greatly influenced the interpretation of Sanskrit. The approach often involved comparison and distortion of Indian philosophy.

The untranslatability of Sanskrit further exacerbated the problem. Asian scholars came up with approximate terms or coined new terms to describe complex concepts. An example of such a concept would be the distortion of the Advaita Vedanta position. Western philosophers were misled by early Orientalist translators who rendered Advaita Vedanta as monism. The translation failed to incorporate the Advaita Vedanta complex and distinct perspective on reality, which differs from Western monism. Orientalist Sanskrit appreciated certain literature and traditions that misrepresented Indian knowledge. Biblical and philosophical literature was preferred to oral traditions, folk wisdom and non-Brahmanical intellectual tradition. There are significant implications that emanate from this reading of Sanskrit literature and traditions. They influenced Western and Indian perception of Indian culture, philosophy and philosophical heritage. The Brahmanical texts were often preferred to other valid sources of Indian knowledge because Orientalists considered certain texts traditional or authentic. Some Asian scholars developed an exoticised perception of Indian culture due to the untranslatability of Sanskrit. The obscure and complex nature of Sanskrit and the extensive Sanskrit library were used to exoticise Indian knowledge.

Sanskrit texts require specialised knowledge to understand, making them inaccessible to many people and reinforcing elitism within Indian traditions. The non-translatability of Sanskrit and Orientalist politics affects current issues in Indian culture and identity. Sanskrit is being revitalised in India to recover its intellectual tradition. These revitalisation attempts are usually anti-Orientalist in nature; however, they can promote essentialist views of Indian culture, ignoring its diverse and rich character. The scriptures in Sanskrit have been translated and interpreted worldwide due to interest in Indian philosophy and spirituality abroad. This helped popularise Indian ideas, although international yoga and mindfulness movements have distorted or exploited Sanskrit ideas out of context. But a proper translation of Sanskrit in a post-Orientalist world is a very hard task. How could we convey the complexity of Sanskrit thought without romanticising or oversimplifying it? How could we make Sanskrit texts accessible around the globe without losing their cultural and philosophical essence? Intercultural hermeneutics, as an approach that seeks to engage with different philosophical traditions without assuming the supremacy or universality of any one, appears to be a promising way.

Finally, the interplay of the non-translatability of Sanskrit and Orientalism has played a crucial role in shaping our perceptions about knowledge traditions in India. This has resulted in distortions and misrepresentations in the process of translation and interpretation and, at the same time, opened up possibilities for new translation and interpretation practices and cross-cultural understanding of knowledge systems. The challenge that lies ahead for us is how to use Sanskrit's non-translatability without falling into the misrepresentations of Orientalism. The task is to find a way to preserve the richness of thought expressed in Sanskrit without falling into the trap of misrepresentations of it. Finally, exploring the non-translatability of Sanskrit will help us to reconsider our approach to language, culture and knowledge. This way, we will be able to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of human thought and understand it through translation and interpretation.

Conclusion

This research has outlined the complex and contentious process of transitioning from an oral tradition to a written tradition of knowledge transmission within ancient Hindu traditions. This transition was never fully completed. This analysis produced several key findings. First, the Vedic oral tradition was not just an early, less advanced version of a later, more advanced literate society but rather was in and of itself an advanced, sophisticated, and highly effective form of knowledge transmission that made conscious, philosophically reasoned judgments regarding which forms or modes of media would be selected for the long-term preservation and transmission of sacred knowledge. The phonocentric epistemological framework of the Brahmanical tradition, the most developed in the *Mīmamsa* and *Vyākaraṇa* philosophical traditions, provided a strong philosophical basis for the continuing prioritisation of oral over written transmission. The divine, eternal, and uncreated nature of the Vedic phonemes made all written forms of them fundamentally inferior to their actual verbal realisations. This preference was not a mere reactionary or traditionalist position; rather, it was an advanced philosophical conception with far-reaching implications for theories of language, theories of meaning, and the nature of religious experience.

The social dimensions of Vedic oralism, the restriction of access through caste and gender hierarchies, shaped the transition to textuality in complex ways. The emergence of bhakti literature in vernacular languages posed a significant challenge to Brahminical control over oral transmission, harnessing the democratic potential of performance-based oral culture against the elite oral monopoly of the Vedic tradition. Print culture and colonial-period reform movements further destabilised the social structures that had sustained Brahminical oralism, creating new forms of textual authority that were simultaneously more accessible and, in some ways, more reductive in their treatment of the texts.

The persistence of oral traditions in contemporary Hindu practices is a living testament to the fact that the oral-to-literate transition is neither universal nor irreversible. Current Vedic chanting, Puranic recitation and performance, kirtan, and guru-disciple forms of transmission manifest an epistemological commitment that directly contradicts the presuppositions of printed and digital culture's epistemological structure as it pertains to how it creates a relationship between community and knowledge; how we learn (transform); and sacredness and sound. The example of Hindu epics allows us to expand our comprehension of the many ways in which humans develop and utilise processes for the transfer of knowledge to one another, and to question the Western intellectual history that assumes literacy and thought were established through a process of logical progression. Ultimately, the history of the interrelationship between oral and written traditions within Hinduism is not one in which one has replaced the other. Rather, both are continuing in an ongoing conversation - at times creative and/or tense - producing two complementary manifestations of ways of being/knowing in the world of knowledge. This ongoing conversation continues today through an ever-present oral tradition as temples, gurukulas, and kirtan gatherings throughout the world, wherever human sound as voice manifests and actualises the eternal word.

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