Digital Transformations: Folksongs, Memory and the Sacred Metaphors in Haryana's Landscape

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Abstract

Folklore is capable of reflecting the feelings and desires of the folk that creates a material, cultural and spiritual value for the people. Drawing materials from the immediate environment, people have since time immemorial not only created folklore, but also mythology and the belief system and owing to the manner of subsistence, contact with the neighbouring groups produced common set of rules within and between men and the tribes/ groups, formed customs. These have further been impacted with every stage of development and greatly transformed in the present state of globalization and technological advancement. Progressing from one stage of culture to another because of altered circumstances, the past is preserved and related to the coming generations through memory, where mythology synchronized by metaphors, customs and belief systems regulate the life of man. Remembering and forgetting is integral to human existence and with technological expansion man has also endeavoured to keep alive the memory of his past, and also of the present, for the generations to come. However, in what form is this memory stored and transferred impact the way it would be remembered. From oral to textual to digital, the development is seen as a hope for preservation of diminishing folk traditions and folklore, but it is also argued that it comes with a cost. It has its own limitations. The paper, thus delves into the dynamics of folklore, particularly of Haryana, memory and the impact of technology and digitization in serving as a preservation source.

Keywords: *Folk, oral tradition, culture, digitalization, memory, epic, sacred*

Folk traditions and folklore, deeply intertwined with the lives of the people, have the unique capacity to reflect their emotions, aspirations, and values, thereby creating material, cultural, and spiritual significance for the community. Traditionally, folklore derives its inspiration from the environment, including the sacred landscapes and metaphors embedded in the natural world. These traditions emerged as attempts to explain natural phenomena that shape human existence. When embraced by a community, these explanations transformed into folklore, mythology, and belief systems which became deeply rooted in the region's cultural memory. Human interaction with the surrounding environment, modes of subsistence, and contact with neighboring groups fostered shared customs and norms, contributing to a collective identity within and between tribes or communities. As societies transition through various cultural stages due to changing circumstances, memories of the past are preserved and passed on, often through oral traditions like folksongs. These oral traditions, rich with sacred metaphors and tied to specific landscapes, regulate life by preserving ancient beliefs, customs, and communal memories which Andrew Lang calls the "relics of old races….which are in our time but not of it" (1893, p. 11).

While reflecting on the inadequacy of nineteenth-century definitions of folklore in a literate society, it is noted that folklore has often been wrongly associated with illiteracy. The assumption was that the prevalence of folklore would diminish with the increase of literacy. This perspective, however, overlooks the dynamic nature of folklore. Contrary to the belief that technology would lead to the decline of folk traditions by disrupting traditional communication methods, Alan Dundes argues that technology has actually augmented the transmission of folklore (1980, pp. 16-17). His assertion invites a re-evaluation of how digital platforms are not merely preserving but also transforming the way folklore is shared and remembered and necessitates an examination of the intersection of folklore, memory, and metaphor with technology. In the digital age, the transmission and preservation of these traditions face both challenges and opportunities. This evolving landscape prompts us to explore critical questions: How do digital platforms transform the preservation and dissemination of folksongs? Can digital adaptations retain the sacred metaphors and cultural memory embedded in these traditions? And how does the digital age reshape the interplay between folklore, memory, and sacred landscapes? Addressing these questions can deepen our understanding of the impact of digital transformations on cultural heritage of Haryana's folk traditions.

With this background, it is argued that folk traditions/ materials acquire continuity and travel over the medium of memory. The word memory has attracted people who have responded and added to its scope and understanding thus leading to substantial work on memory studies in diverse fields. Memory studies have traversed into diverse fields which not only engages the medical practitioners but has also been of special interest to psychologists who have tried to study it in a systematic manner giving us systematic models for better comprehension of memory and its function/process though their focus initially was more on individual perspective. Bartlett (1932) went beyond the individual to identify the influence of group dynamics on individual memory while Vygotsky (1978) linked memory and culture through narrative form. Sociologists, on the other hand, are more focussed on social and cultural base of shared memory, Cooley (1918) and Mead (1959) being prominent ones. Classical theorist Durkheim's (1961) discussion on commemorative rituals addresses the notion of social memory and is seen as a means of attaining shared morality and social cohesion. For historians, memory could alter or recreate the account of the past. Though it might have seemed to have organized the memory problem, but the past is reduced to an artifice, one susceptible to the most varied and sometimes the most culpable manipulations (Terdiman, 1993, p.31). However, moving away from conventional methodology, oral historians or to say historians studying oral traditions, have attempted to be more democratic in their attempt to give "history back to the people in their own words" (Thompson, 1988).

Memory as a heuristic tool of study cannot function in isolation, it reflects collective remembrance of the society which carries forward its cultural values through oral renderings. Individual memory develops in response to outward forces and therefore is influenced by contemporary events and forms collective memory. As a term, collective memory was first coined by Hofmannsthal in 1902 and was developed by Maurice Halbwachs. In his landmark work on memory studies, *Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925), Halbwachs gives a reflection on memory being social in nature and travelling through a generation to another. He rejects the idea that individuals could remember an event in isolation i.e. without the context of social group. Halbwachs argues that "our memories remain collective, and are in large part social, even if we exercise it alone" (Halbwachs 38). This collective dimension of memory explains how cultures preserve and transmit shared histories, myths, and values, making memory a vehicle for cultural continuity and identity. A person's family setting, religious affiliation, and social class all played

a part in shaping memories of the past, in Halbwachs' view, and thus memories are fundamentally social phenomena even if they appear to manifest at an individual level. Pierre Nora (*Realms of Memory*, 1992), regards memory nostalgically as a phenomenon that is no longer truly living[i]. D. D Koshambi's *Myth and Reality* examination of myths and legends provide critical insights on sacred stories narrating social realities; A.K. Ramanujan's essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas" point at the rich diversity of Indian Oral tradition and reflects on the folk narratives adapting sacred stories. Though it is the individual who "has" memory, but it is created collectively. It is relational- to people, to events, to things. The most personal recollections evolve out of communication and social interaction. These provide for a frame of reference[ii]. Also, memory works on the principle of reconstruction. Halbwachs writes, "only those recollections subsist that in every period society, working within its present-day frameworks, can reconstruct" (189). Richard Terdiman explores memory as an "active and dynamic process" that reconstructs the past according to the "needs, interests, and desires of the present" (Terdiman 14). Memory culture, the thesis of which is that "the past comes into being insofar as we refer to it", is a social obligation, is universal and found in all/any social group no matter how weak in form. As curiosity in past, its traditions fades over time, there is a pressing need to "rescue them by timely exertion" (Thoms, 862). Jan Assmann argues that: "Anyone who during today fixes his eyes on tomorrow must preserve yesterday from oblivion by grasping it through memory" (Assmann, 16-17)[iii]. Why is it that Assmann refers to 'memory' being the medium to preserve the past? We need to understand that memory in terms of how folk and folklore is approached with reference to texture (language including all verbal features like stress, rhyme, pitch etc.), text (the content in narration, singing, recitation of item of folklore) and context (situation in which the folklore item is engaged)[iv]. Meaning is derived when text, texture and context interact and give answers to the entire dynamics of human interaction. A variation in one will explain the variation in the other pointing at the pattern and system in projection that assigns meaning to the folklore. Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* is an instrumental extension of the triad of text-texture-context. Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember* (1989) traces the trajectory of 'inscribed and "incorporated" practices of memory focussing on how traditions are enacted and experienced in daily life. Romila Thapar eschews the memory-studies approach in favour of 'historical traditions', a term she refers to an understanding of the way in which the past is perceived, recorded, and used affords insights into early Indian society. Shahid Amin's *Event, Metaphor, Memory* makes a point at the politics

of remembrance. Talking of oral folk traditions of Haryana it is noteworthy to see how the oral traditions are remembered. One can see a similar politics of remembrance for *saangs* and *raginis* from south-west part of Haryana have been popular, preserved, studied and revived while bare minimum effort has been invested to collect and preserve the folksongs sung in the other parts of and also by women that characterize the lives of people in length and breath.

The past exists in the metaphors and memories are conditioned by them. Jan Assmann emphasizes that cultural memory is anchored in symbols and metaphors that resonate within specific cultural and regional contexts (*Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*). Metaphors indissolubly merge the idea with the image and provide, as Stibbe puts it "a frame from a specific, concrete and imaginable area of life to structure how a clearly distinct area of life is conceptualized" (64). They are something more than the mapping of the "source domain" and the "target domain", using specific frames for structuring. They are not mere linguistic devices but are fundamental to our existence, to our perception of the world, so much so that choosing a wrong metaphor may "contribute to the extermination of our species" (Nerlich & Jaspal,143). It is to be understood that metaphors are deeply rooted in their context, shaped by the time and place they arise from, tied to the identity of the groups that use them, and possess a unique power to reconstruct and re-imagine meaning on their own. It is, therefore, pertinent that metaphors can be altered, simplified, or even forgotten, impacting the richness and diversity of the original memory constructs and therefore there is a need to focus on memory generated by the folk, which by virtue of their form and content, are marginalized and considered less important. As Shahid Amin contends in *Event, Memory, Metaphor* that "Peasants do not write, they are written about. The speech of the humble folk is not normally recorded for posterity, it is wrenched from them in courtrooms and inquisitorial trails" (p. 1).

Metaphors exist in oral and obtain continuity through memory. And when the oral is brought down in writing the space dynamics come into force. There is surely a difference in oral memory and the written records. In *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977) and *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (1987) Jack Goody has argued the transition from oral to written culture that profoundly affect how knowledge and memories are organized and transmitted. Also, Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982) offers an influential understanding of the cognitive and cultural shift that occurs when societies move from oral to written

communication. He calls new age audio-visual technology (telephone, radio, television and other electronic devices) secondary orality- a "new orality" in present-day high- technology culture.

Since contemporary societies negotiate culture through media, there is no doubt that media (irrespective of its form that changes with the technological advancement) and culture are central to contemporary societies. Astrid Erll in *Memory and Culture* writes: "Cultural memory is unthinkable without media. It would be unconceivable without the role that media plays on both levels- the individual and the collective" (2011,p 113). Communication media channels the memory through which the oral traditions pass on horizontally and vertically. Media allows one to see, feel and comprehend the world around us and understand how it shapes our lives. Mass media plays a key role in constitution of memory, its continuity and remembrance of past. The oral traditions which are a collective creation when mediated/digitalized offer new opportunities (visibility, popularity) and new spaces.

Digitalization is a hope one can see since media is "the first draft of history" (Garde-Hansen, 2011, p3). Once placed in the periphery of digital world displaced, distanced audience, indigenes and natives experience an emotional connect and revived memories. It is thus argued that digital media seeks out, preserves and makes available the gradually disappearing while using and sharing what still exists. It aids people to create and nurture what is gradually disappearing while using and sharing what still exists. With the functionality of searching, locating and accessing a source easily, media has also accounted to visibility and popularity owing to wide outreach. The recent interest in oral traditions has witnessed efforts to preserve them and libraries, museums and galleries have encouraged digital repository of audio-visual documents, private tales, folksongs, performances etc.

Having delved into folk, folklore, memory, metaphors and digitalization, it would be worthwhile to bring together within the space-scape of Haryana and see the absorption of the narrative of *Rama-Sita* that has travelled through written, oral, and performing art (Ramlila) form to finally reach the illiterate but informed rural folk of Haryana to address the questions raised earlier in the paper. The language/dialect and performance has taken the epic the *Ramayana*, "a saga of identity and, a saga of alterity"[v] (Connelly, 225),on the journey from the elite literary circle to the common folk by interventions starting from Tulsidas down to efforts of people like Ahmad

Baksh Thanesari, (*Saang Ramayan* 1890-95) Yashwant Singh Tohanvi (*Arya Sangeet Ramayana* 1931) and Radhey Shyam (*Ramayan* 1939) to become a 'people's text'- a text belonging to the people, owned by the people, revered by the people of Haryana. In Haryana, the interpretations of the *Ramayana* have employed unique metaphors and symbols that reflect the region's values or moral outlook reflected in folksongs and absorbed in mannerisms. However, some of these region-specific metaphors are not retained in digital representations aimed at a national or global audience. This selective memory risks erasing local metaphors, as digital narratives often prioritize universally recognizable symbols over regionally specific ones. To break the monotony of politics of remembrance I further divulge the participation of women of Haryana in creating a unique oral narrative engrained with cultural metaphors unique to the identity of Haryana as they weave beautiful imagery in their folksong sung on different occasions. One can identify metaphors that manifest socio-cultural and even ecological meanings.

Though there are numerous folksongs and raginis that have references of the Ramayana, but this specific song has rich symbolic layers that have metaphorical depth and cultural resonance. It provides a rich canvas for analysis of how metaphors function and shape memory, culture and value system. To put forth this point, the folksong taken for such an analysis is one sung by women covered under *Mangal Geet.* It also is claimed that it is usually sung in the month of Kartik and there is also a reference that the song is usually sung by women in their old age when the time is considered apt to be absorbed in spirituality. However the song is sung by women the year round:

> *Raam ar Lakshman Dashrath ke bête, Dono Bankhand jyaa,*
>
> *e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan*
>
> *Ek ban chaalle do ban chaalle,Teejje me lag aai pyaas,*
>
> *e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan*
>
> *Chotta sa chora gau charaava, chore humne paani e pilaa*
>
> *e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan*
>
> *naa ure lotta naa ure jhaari,naa sarvar ke taal*
>
> *e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan*

Sita ke baag m te uthi e badali bhar gae johad ar Taal

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

bhar liya lotta, bhar li jhaari,pee lyo shree bhagwaan

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

ke se r naam baap daadde kaa, kaun tumhaari maa

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

baap daadde ka me naa[m] naa jaanu, Sita meri maa

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

chaal bahi chore thare ghar chaalla, kisi e tumhaari maa

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

khadi khadi sita kesh sukhaavehare vriksh ki chaanv

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

much par ri maata palla karle, bahar khade shri bhagwaan

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

ese dusht ka much naa dekhu jis ne diya banwas

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

paat gai dharti samaa gae sita lakhaave bhagwaan

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Sita samaandi ki chotti pakdi, chotti ki ban gae daab

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

chaand suraj ka graham laga ga jab chaahiyegi daab

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

es kaaya par doob jamaangi, chare Ram ki gaa

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

is kaaya pe taal khudange, piwe Ram ki maa

e ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Digital Version:

Ram naam sab te bada, uss te bada naa koe

Jo iska sumiran kare,shudh aatma hoe.

Raam aur Lachman Dashrath ke bête, Dono Bankhand jyaa,

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Ek ban chaalle do ban chaalle,Teejje me lag aai pyaas,

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Naa ad kooaa, naa ad johad, Naa koe sarwar taal

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Hark e ghar te uthi badaliyaa, Baras rahi jhar laae,

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Bhar gae Kooe Bhar gae Johad bhar gae sarvar taal

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Chitta sa chora gauan charave, paani to pyaao nanad laal

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Bhar ke lotta paani kaa lyaaya, paiyo toh shree bhagwaan,

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Tera paani hum jab peewenge naam bataao maai ar baap

Pitaa apne kaa naam naa jaanu, Sita se maahri maa,

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Chal bahi ladke us nagri me jit thaari Sita maa,

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Kahdi khadi Sita Kesh sukhaawe har rookh ke chaav,

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Dhak le ri maata in keesha ne bahar khade shree Ram

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Is maanas ka mukhda naa dekhu jeevat diyaa banwaas

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Paat gae dharti samaa gae Sita, Khade lakhhave shree Ram

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Bhaaj luhe ne chotta pakda, chotte me hari hari dhaab

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

Ram ki maaya Ram hi jaane, Bhaj lo jai jai Ram

He ji koe Ram mile bhagwaan

 (Haryanavi Bhajan-RAM AUR LAKSHMAN I SONAL DAHIYA I POORNIMA I HARVINDER MALIK I)

The role of metaphors in forming memory is central to how sacred narrations like the *Ramayana* are internalized and passed down within cultures. Rich with metaphors, this folk song keeps Sita at the centre, giving her space and agency wombing individual intellect that gives meaning to the *Sita-Dharti* metaphor and equates it with the Haryana-pastoral culture value system. Being an agrarian society, elements of nature are pious and worshipped by people. The song manifests the pastoral cultural ethics of Haryanvi society. The life and living of Haryanvi people depends on pastoral and agriculture practices which are a key socio-economic mode of life in Haryana. In this song the folk singers define and highlight how these pastoral cultural ethics play essential role in the life of Haryanvi people in three ways. One, the women singers emphasize on the role of water in the pastoral mode of production through *Sita-baag-badaliya* metaphor which is necessary for sustaining life, for agriculture and domesticated animals. Two, the women singers lay stress on reverence of vegetation that is a blessing of the Gods through the *Sita-chutla-doob* metaphor that not only feeds the animals but also has religious connotations that counters the solar and lunar eclipse thus exalting the blessings of a mother. Three, the pastoral culture is accentuated through the *Ram-Cow* metaphor with the cow feeding on *Doob* and water obtained from the *feminine-Sita-dharti* providing milk which is a complete food in itself. Thus, pastoral cultural ethics are mirrored by the singers who map and represent the epical moral and ethical material to the folk. Reverence and gratitude towards the nature and gods is expressed who represent that nature for making available the natural elements for sustenance of pastoral culture. Moreover, reference to *baap-dadda* or *Sheesh tere ne dhak le ri maata* (respect) reflect social ethos and values ingrained in the Haryanvi culture. Missing of any part of the song would mean missing the essence.

In the digital version of the song available to the common masses the centrality of *feminine-Sita-dharti* is shifted to *masculine-Har- Hari.* Further, the last ten lines that are essential carriers of pastoral culture are erased. Sita's return to *Dharti* (Earth) is emblematic of the cycle of dignity and reclamation—and her presence in form of *doob*, a concept that loses its nuanced meaning in digital adaptations which prioritize action over reflective symbolism. *Doob* (grass) in this song represents both the fragility of life and its tenacity in the face of adversity. It echoes the resilience of Sita, and the land itself, embodying the stoic acceptance of hardship common in rural life. When Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is shaped by material surroundings and landscapes that

communities identify with, this symbol, a common yet enduring element of the land- considered pious, has deep roots, is resilient and has role in almost all rituals in Haryana, metaphorically connects Haryanvi listeners to the perseverance of their ancestors and cultural values. Though subtle, yet the desire for its ever presence is risked and overlooked and erased in the digital adaptation. Susan Stewart's *On Longing* discusses how modern media compresses and simplifies cultural artifacts, often sidelining layered meanings and nuanced metaphors. She has argued that modern media commodifies memory, turning cultural symbols into consumable images while often neglecting the rich metaphors that shape collective identity. So, when Sita, the progenitor of rain (the clouds rising from her garden) is replaced with *Har/ Hari* the relevance of the last lines, the linking of *doob-ponds(water)-cow* become irrelevant and the folksong ends with *ram ki mahima raam hi jaane* leaving no space for question about the ways of god. While the folksong makes the gods intervention cyclical.The metaphor of rain, for example, as a sign of blessing and purification; the collection of this blessing in ponds that is the source for the rural folk for their sustenance is overlooked and the socio-cultural and emotional depth erased. The ever presence of Sita in the form of *doob* and water in the service of Ram (his Cow) make the people revere these elements.

Digital media tends to prioritize visual and immediate content, which often leads to the erosion of intricate metaphors. It has altered the way in oral traditions are preserved and transmitted. One may argue that it aids in preserving oral traditions and preventing their loss over generations, but it cannot be denied that it also leads to standardization of cultural expressions leading to loss of unique, localized nuances and variations in storytelling. The more a particular version of the *folklore* gets circulated and consumed digitally, the more other versions might get overshadowed or forgotten, limiting the diversity of oral traditions. Traditionally, the *Ramayana* in Haryana has been shared through live recitations, storytelling, and performances, with each performer adding their own metaphors. With digital platforms like YouTube, social media, and audio/video recordings, these oral renditions are now captured, stored, and distributed widely. This changes the nature of recollection, as memory is no longer only a communal and live experience but also a recorded one, available for repeated consumption. Terdiman's idea that memory is shaped by present cultural contexts contrasts with how digitization can create a more fixed version of these oral traditions. Once an oral performance of the *Ramayana* (consider Ramananad Sagar's

Ramayana) is recorded and distributed digitally, it becomes a reference point that might limit the fluidity and variability of future renditions. Such fixation of memory might reduce the dynamic nature of oral traditions, which traditionally thrive on spontaneity, adaptation, and change according to the local context. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, in *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (2009), has argued how in contrast to traditional forms of memory that allow for forgetting and reinterpretation, digital memories can lead to a fixed understanding of identity that may not accommodate change.

In this research piece I attemped to address the concerns related to my study of Folksongs of Haryana allied to classical epic the *Ramayana* and the impact of digital interface. The digitization of Haryanvi folksongs while offering broader accessibility and new modes of preservation is altering the cultural context and sacred essence of these songs. Technology does offer broader accessibility and new modes of preservation, but at the same time it alters text, texture, context, and thereby the sacred essence of the folksongs and also the way in which it is remembered in future.These new opportunities for preserving and sharing memories can also impose rigid frameworks on identity formation. Media is indeed seen as a lifeline in the crisis of identity and tradition raising certain red flags pertaining to selection and methodology. The "new orality" (secondary orality) that Ong referred, like literacy/ word technology fixes the oral in the time and space. The fluidity and the nuances of the oral (the empathetic, participatory, expansive and descriptive) is distanced in the new orality frame. While the oral traditions live, grow and experience the present, the 'new oral', the digital experiences the past; it makes it a thing of past. The challenge, therefore lies in navigating the tension between the permanence of digital memory and the fluidity of identity.

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[i] For a discussion of this aspect of Nora's thinking, see Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 139-146

[ii] Jan Assman refers to social frame of reference in context of memory culture.

[iii] Memory preservation has however been argued as being different from history. Read Jan Assmann's "Memory Culture" in *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 2011; Maurice Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory*, 1992

[iv] Alan Dunde proposes to analiyze any genre in terms of texture, text and context and argues that text has been of interest to folklorists while linguists are more focused on texture. The third, the context have beenthe engagement of the anthropologists.

[v] "Alterity" is the change that is necessitated to achieve group unity when an epic is perceived by that group in terms of identity. It becomes more obvious when performed.