



Storytelling in Indian Knowledge Systems and AI: From Oral Tradition to Algorithmic Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Around the world, storytelling traditions have been instrumental in passing on knowledge to future generations. The story and legacy of wisdom included in the oral traditions preserve the lessons passed down through the generations which enable the future generations to learn from the experiences of their forebears. They are renowned for their ability to successfully and informally carry, protect, and transmit knowledge. One of the world's most renowned oral traditions are found in India. It has a strong foundation in both written and oral storytelling. Storytelling has been an effective pedagogical tool for imparting information about ancient knowledge, language morality, human values, deep philosophical investigations, cultural heritage, and statecraft in the Indian Knowledge System. Indian storytelling customs include both local folktales and ancient epics- like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas, which are important religious and cultural texts as well as historical narratives. Indian storytelling comes in a variety of Folktales, Panchtantra, Vetala-panchavimsati, also called Baital Pachisi, Jataka tales, Tenalirama tales, and other customary bedtime stories are examples of oral storytelling traditions. In the modern digital age, Artificial Intelligence (AI) - especially generative and language based models-has brought a transition from oral traditions to algorithmic narratives that can create, modify and disseminate stories at a large scale. This paper explores how AI can serve as a contemporary narrative medium that aligns with IKS's contextual, dialogic, and experiential philosophical foundations.

Keywords: IKS, Oral traditions, Artificial Intelligence, Pedagogy, Algorithmic Narratives

Introduction

One of India's oldest and most important cultural customs is storytelling, which is vital for passing down knowledge, morals, history, and collective memory from one generation to the next. These spoken narratives are more than just stories; they are living archives that serve as a wealth of knowledge that shapes identities, preserves histories, and upholds social norms (Rajunayak 2025).

Indian society primarily relied on oral traditions to transmit and preserve its cultural legacy long before written texts were created. These customs, which included folktales, proverbs, *kathas*,

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legends, narratives, and bardic performances, were ingrained in daily life and constituted a vital component of India's intangible cultural heritage.

Folklore, which captures the way of life, traditions, rituals, beliefs, and social practices of communities, is the foundation of Indian storytelling traditions. Folk tales, which are thought to be the earliest type of folk art, originated as a means for people to convey their own experiences, valiant acts, natural occurrences, and moral lessons. These stories acted as a common cultural activity that promoted social cohesiveness and were frequently told by village elders. Folk tales made difficult concepts understandable to all societal segments by providing straightforward and creative explanations of the world's creation, human relationships, and moral behavior. The intimate connection between oral and written narratives is a characteristic of Indian oral traditions. For centuries, epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were performed texts through *kathas*, despite being accessible in written form. These tales were performed, sung, and told orally in temples, celebrations, weddings, and social events. Similar to this, books like the *Panchatantra* and *Jatakatales* served as both literary works and folktales at the same time, surviving in popular memory through oral transmission as opposed to individual authorship.

One of India's most significant storytelling traditions is represented by *kathas*. Kathas were first used to teach moral, religious, and social lessons during the Vedic era. Numerous regional styles, including *Hari Katha*, *Burra Katha*, *Yakshagana*, and *Kirtan*, developed over time, fusing storytelling with dance, music, and performance. These customs served as educational tools that clarified ideas like karma, dharma, devotion, and social responsibility in addition to being entertaining. The storyteller served as both a performer and a teacher, explaining ancient texts to the general public in their native tongues.

The preservation of local history and beliefs was also greatly aided by oral stories and legends. The actions of heroes, saints, and rulers were recounted in legends, which were positioned between myth and historical reality. This reinforced shared values and a sense of collective identity. As poets, historians, genealogists, and memory keepers, bards played a crucial role in this process. They ensured generational continuity by preserving local histories and cultural customs through songs, ballads, and recitations.



In India, oral traditions and storytelling essentially constitute a living knowledge system. Stories can adjust to shifting social and cultural contexts without losing their essential meanings because they are dynamic, interactive, and highly contextual. These customs emphasize how crucial narrative is to Indian society's ability to comprehend the world, develop moral consciousness, and maintain cultural continuity.

Objective

1. To examine the role of storytelling and oral traditions as foundational modes of knowledge transmission within Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).
2. To analyze the transition from traditional oral narratives and performative storytelling practices to AI-enabled and algorithmic forms of narrative generation.
3. To explore how Artificial Intelligence can contribute to the preservation, dissemination, and revitalization of Indian Knowledge Systems through digital storytelling, language technologies, and interactive narrative platforms.
4. To assess the potential of AI in maintaining linguistic diversity, cultural symbolism, contextual integrity, and regional specificity within Indian storytelling traditions.

Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative research methodology using only secondary data analysis. The research is based on a wide range of published sources including academic journal articles, books, policy documents, government reports, conference proceedings and scholarly literature on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), oral traditions, storytelling practices and Artificial Intelligence. The reviewed literature is relevant to digital humanities, AI-enabled storytelling, language technologies, folklore preservation and indigenous knowledge systems. The research employs a descriptive and analytical methodology to investigate the role of storytelling as a medium for disseminating knowledge within Indian Knowledge Systems and to explore how Artificial Intelligence is transforming traditional stories into digital and algorithmic forms. The study uses case examples such as AI-assisted manuscript digitization, digital archives, language technologies such as BHASINI, AI4Bharat and Sarvam AI, and AI-enabled preservation of folklore and indigenous knowledge to demonstrate the opportunities and challenges of integrating AI with traditional knowledge systems. This study critically evaluates the potential of



AI as a narrative medium for preserving, disseminating and revitalizing Indian Knowledge Systems through a synthesis of existing literature and contemporary developments in AI, while highlighting concerns related to cultural authenticity, narrative plurality, misrepresentation and ethical use of traditional knowledge.

Storytelling and Oral Traditions in India as Medium of Knowledge

This category, which is broadly referred to as Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), encompasses a wide range of epistemologies, from philosophical schools like Vedanta, Buddhism, and Jainism to Vedic cosmology, *Ayurveda*, *Yoga*, and *Nyaya* logic, along with extensive collections of epics, oral histories, and moral stories like the *Jataka* and *Panchtantra*. These systems, which provide insights into health, metaphysics, governance, education, and ethics, are not just academic but have historically been ingrained in daily life. Thus within Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), narrative is not merely a vehicle for entertainment but a foundational mode of knowing, transmitting, and preserving knowledge. Indian folk traditions reinforces this understanding by highlighting how oral forms such as folktales, myths, epics, ballads, and performative storytelling function as repositories of social memory, ethical instruction, and practical wisdom. For instance- *Harikatha*, or stories of God, which the storytellers recited were designed for adults rather than children recited; embodying as they did the principles of Hindu religion and philosophy, they served the dual purpose of education and entertainment. These stories were then told to children in the home by some elder of the family, entertaining them with some epic stories, racy folk tales or wise fables, and this practice continues to this day (Kumble 1962), thereby imbibing them with empathy, resilience and critical thinking. Knowledge in these traditions is embedded in story form so that it remains accessible, memorable, and contextually grounded across generations.

In the Vedic age knowledge was passed through memorization, recitation and performative transmission. The Vedas, considered to be the oldest scriptures, were passed down through the *Guru-Shishya* (teacher-disciple) *parampara*, a structured pedagogical system that ensured accuracy of sound, rhythm, and meaning. Techniques such as *Krama Patha* (recitation by sequence) and *Pada Patha* (recitation by word) illustrate how narrative sequencing and repetition functioned as epistemic tools, enabling precise preservation and interpretation of sacred



knowledge (Kumar 2025). For example, the hymns in the Rig Veda were written in a particular metric structure and are memorized word for word. Vedic hymns were living stories performed through chant, ritual, and conversation rather than just written texts (Kumar 2025). The use of mantras, especially the *Gayatri Mantra*, is an example of how communication functioned concurrently at the experiential, spiritual, and intellectual levels. Furthermore, dialogic exchanges between *Yājñavalkya* and his disciples, which are found in Upanishadic traditions, show that knowledge in IKS developed through narrative interaction as opposed to static exposition. The foundation for comprehending knowledge as contextual, relational, and performative-essential to the epistemological framework of Indian Knowledge Systems—was established by this oral-narrative culture (Kumar 2025).

Furthermore, the Shastras, which were written in Sanskrit and contained a variety of writings on philosophy, ethics, law, and arts, were a synthesis of oral and written tradition. The *Manusmriti*, for example, is a *Dharmashastra* that emphasizes moral standards and laws, including the obligations of various social classes. Its verses were frequently committed to memory and recited during legal and ethical debates, guaranteeing that their ideas were widely accepted and comprehended (Kumar 2025). Another important Shastra that describes the fundamentals of dramaturgy and performing arts is the *Natya Shastra*, which is credited to *Bharata Muni*. It had a significant impact on classical Indian art forms by providing rules for dance, music, and theater. Examples like these demonstrate how the Shastras used a dual mode of communication in which written texts and oral recitation complemented one another to preserve and disseminate intricate bodies of knowledge. This multifaceted strategy guaranteed the Shastras' continued authority and relevance in Indian society, offering a wealth of knowledge that still influences modern practice (Kumar 2025).

Additionally, oral narratives are important for maintaining customs and fostering ties within indigenous communities. Since they lack a script to preserve their historical past, many indigenous communities rely on oral traditions as a means of education, moral instruction, and cultural preservation to preserve the same (Rajunayak 2025).

Unlike modern disciplinary knowledge, which often separates fact from value, narrative knowledge in IKS integrates cosmology, morality, history, and everyday practice. For example,



folk narratives explain natural phenomena, social hierarchies, gender roles, and community norms while simultaneously reinforcing collective identity. The performative aspect of storytelling-through songs, rituals, and communal recitation-ensures that knowledge is not passively consumed but actively experienced and reinterpreted.

Oral traditions are dynamic rather than static. Storytellers adapt narratives to local contexts, audiences, and historical moments, allowing knowledge to evolve without losing its core ethical framework. This adaptive quality positions narrative as a living epistemology rather than a fixed archive. Such flexibility challenges Western notions of written texts as the sole legitimate carriers of knowledge and affirms the epistemic legitimacy of oral and folk traditions within IKS.

When viewed through the lens of Artificial Intelligence (AI), this narrative-centric epistemology gains renewed relevance. AI systems trained on large corpora increasingly rely on patterns, stories, and contextual associations to generate meaning. In this sense, algorithmic narratives mirror oral traditions by recombining existing knowledge into new contextual outputs. However, unlike traditional storytellers who are culturally embedded and ethically accountable, AI lacks lived experience and moral grounding. This raises critical questions about authorship, authenticity, and epistemic authority in algorithmically generated narratives.

Thus, positioning narrative as knowledge provides a crucial conceptual bridge between IKS and AI. While IKS foregrounds storytelling as an ethical, communal, and adaptive mode of knowing, AI transforms narratives into data-driven constructs optimized for prediction and efficiency. Understanding this contrast allows for a more nuanced engagement with AI as not merely a technological tool but as a contemporary narrative agent that must be guided by culturally rooted epistemologies.

Transition from Sruti and Smriti to Digital Memory

In India, the ancient *gurukul* system of education relied heavily on “*sruti*” (what is heard) and “*smriti*” (what is remembered). *Sruti* and *Smriti* served as the essential tool of imparting and receiving knowledge in *gurukkula* through *guru-shisyaparampara* across grammar, medicine, law, ecology, architecture, customs, dance etc. As has been mentioned earlier the Vedic



knowledge was transmitted from one generation to the another orally and the Vedic literature was possibly written and recorded at a later age by numerous writers/authors, therefore regarded as “impersonal, authorless”. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, written by Bharata, also confirms that the transmission of knowledge and information in the theory of aesthetics and drama was based on ‘*pathya*’ i.e. the articulated spoken word and the incanted word.

Thus chanting, performance, memorisation, and repetition ensured not only the survival of knowledge but also its adaptability to changing social contexts. Oral storytelling was participatory and interactive, enabling communities to reinterpret narratives while preserving their core ethical and philosophical meanings.

However, colonial interventions and modern education systems have marginalized oral traditions by privileging written texts and formalised curricula. As a result, many indigenous narratives were reduced to folklore or mythology, stripped of their epistemic legitimacy. The revival of storytelling through AI thus carries significant implications for epistemic restoration and cultural continuity.

Significance of AI as a Narrative Medium in IKS

AI-the digital storyteller

Artificial intelligence can be considered as a modern-day storyteller, as it narrates stories by identifying patterns and reacting to context instead of abiding by rigid rules. This method is very similar to Indian storytelling traditions, where relationships, circumstances, and moral dilemmas—rather than strict interpretations—are the sources of meaning. For example— in the *Mahābhārata*, the concept of dharma is discussed through contextual dilemmas, such as Yudhiṣṭhira’s decisions during exile or Arjuna’s moral crisis on the battlefield, where right action depends on circumstance, intention, and relational obligations rather than unchangeable principles. AI mimics the adaptability and situational nature of traditional Indian narratives by tailoring stories to various audiences and contexts.



Maintaining Indian Aesthetic Modes of Storytelling-Rasa, Navarasa and Dhvani

Aesthetic concepts like *rasa* (the emotional essence of drama), *navarasa* (nine emotional states), and *dhvani* (suggestive meaning), which emphasize evoking feelings rather than merely imparting knowledge, have a significant influence on Indian storytelling (Rathod 2025). The purpose of stories is to evoke feelings in the listener, such as fear, wonder, compassion, or serenity. For instance, scenes from the *Ramayana*, like Sita's suffering or Rama's banishment, are told in a way that encourages moral contemplation and empathy rather than merely advancing the plot.

By modifying a story's tone, tempo, and emotional flow according to the audience, AI-driven storytelling can help in the revival of these artistic traditions. AI can highlight various emotional layers, such as *karuṇa rasa* (compassion) or *Śāntarasa* (tranquillity), through adaptive narration, enabling modern audiences to experience Indian stories emotionally rather than just intellectually.

Transitioning from Static Archives to Interactive Story Worlds

AI makes storytelling interactive and responsive, in contrast to written texts or digital archives that preserve stories in static form. AI systems are able to mimic dialogue, retell epics, and modify stories in real time in response to audience engagement. The performative and conversational character of oral traditions, where storytelling was a shared experience between the narrator and the audience, is reflected in this interactivity. In this way, AI revitalizes storytelling as a living art form, going beyond digitization.

Ensuring Cultural Continuity

AI serves as a technology that acts as a bridge between tradition and modernity, the past and the present. AI marks a new stage in this historical continuum, much as previous shifts-from oral traditions to manuscripts-resaped knowledge transmission without eliminating indigenous epistemologies. AI ensures that IKS stories remain relevant in a global and digital environment while expanding their reach beyond local contexts through translation, narration, and digital dissemination. For instance, through Optical Character Recognition (OCR), AI can convert



images of ancient manuscripts into searchable digital text. Furthermore Natural Language Processing (NLP) can assist in translation, interpretation and analysis of complex Sanskrit texts. Also, AI-powered digital archives will help in preservation of this rich indigenous knowledge and make it accessible to researchers across the world.

Globalizing Indian Narratives through AI enabled visual storytelling

By enabling visually captivating storytelling formats akin to Japanese anime-*Naruto*, *Spirited Away*, *PsychoPass* etc., which has successfully globalized culturally ingrained myths, philosophies, Japanese values of impermanence (*mujō*), duty (*giri*), harmony (*wa*), and spiritual ambiguity, without losing local identity, Artificial Intelligence increases the global visibility of Indian Knowledge Systems. Similarly, AI-powered animation, character design, voice synthesis, and narrative generation tools can transform Indian epics, fables, and folk traditions-like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, *Panchatantra*, *Jataka* and local oral stories-into modern visual forms that are appealing to audiences across the world, especially the younger generation. For instance in *Naruto*, the creators have constructed a mythopoetic universe that similar to Mahabharata, where characters are neither strictly good nor evil, but must deal with moral ambiguity and social obligations (Rathod 2025). Such emotional depth and long-term character development helps viewers to internalize complex ethical principles, creating a space where philosophy is experienced through affective identification (Rathod 2025).

AI can help in multilingual dubbing and subtitling, adapting intricate stories into episodic formats rather than standalone like *Amar Chitra Katha*, *The Legend of Hanuman*, and preserving narrative continuity. Such visual storytelling, when guided by IKS aesthetics, can use symbolism and emotional pacing to communicate ideas like dharma, and moral complexity.

Maintaining Contextual Integrity and Narrative Plurality

The ability of AI to record and revive various storytelling traditions, such as folktales, tribal myths, and local epics, is a major contribution. Rather than homogenizing narratives, ethically designed AI systems can maintain linguistic diversity, cultural symbolism, and regional specificity. For example- India's BHASINI- is an AI-powered language platform that supports translation, speech recognition, and text generation in numerous Indian regional languages



thereby helping bridge communication gaps while preserving linguistic diversity. Likewise Indian Institute of Technology Madras has also developed AI4Bharat- an open source research initiative which focuses on developing AI for Indian languages. Its speech datasets include regional accents and linguistic variations which enables AI to recognise differences between standard Hindi and local variations. Another example is of Sarvam AI- an Indian ArtificialIntelligence startup founded by Vivek Raghavan and Pratyush Kumar in 2023-which focuses on building Generative AI and Large Language Models (LLMs) tailored for India, with a strong emphasis on Indian languages and voice-based AI applications. In other words, Sarvam AI develops language models that can understand and generate text in multiple Indian languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Telegu, Bengali, Marathi etc.

Use Digital Storytelling to inculcate Moral Values

In India, storytelling has always been used a medium to inculcate dharma and moral values in children. Rather than dictating strict moral rules, stories from epics and folklore position characters in complex situations and encourage listeners to think, feel, and judge for themselves. AI-driven storytelling can follow this approach by providing users with moral dilemmas inspired by these traditions, helping them to learn ethics through experience rather than dictum or instructions. By engaging people in emotionally rich situations, AI can build empathy, reflection, and moral sensitivity.

Limitations of AI-Enabled Storytelling in Indian Knowledge Systems

Selective Representation: AI depends on training data, which often prioritizes dominant, or mainstream narratives. As such, marginalized voices, regional traditions, and indigenous knowledge may be underrepresented or excluded, reinforcing existing epistemic hierarchies.

Homogenisation of Diverse Narratives: Artificial Intelligence can risks homogenizing the diverse story telling traditions of India into simplified, pan-Indian narratives if not carefully trained. This can wipe out regional specificity, linguistic diversity, and alternative interpretations that are vital to IKS.



Loss of Performative and Embodied Knowledge: Oral storytelling traditions depend hugely on voice, gesture, ritual, and community participation. AI-driven narratives might fail to capture these performative dimensions, resulting in partial or limited representations of India's living traditions.

Misrepresentation of Meaning: AI generates stories on the basis of statistical patterns rather than lived cultural understanding. This can lead to misinterpretation, alteration, oversimplification, or distortion of philosophical concepts such as *dharma*, *karma*, and *rasa*. An AI translation system may find it difficult to translate Sanskrit ideas which are not directly translatable into English. Terms like *Dharma*, *Karma*, *Moksha* or *Rta* have complex philosophical, ethical and spiritual meanings that have evolved over the centuries. For example, an AI model might translate Dharma as '*religion*' or '*duty*' and miss its deeper connotation of moral order, social responsibility and cosmic harmony. This may lead to an incomplete or misleading understanding of the concept by the users. In Ayurveda, AI systems trained chiefly on modern biomedical literature might interpret traditional concepts like *Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha* as fixed biological categories or diseases. These, however, are dynamic principles within a holistic system of health and well-being. Such reduction to biomedical equivalents may divest the philosophical foundations of Ayurvedic knowledge and may lead to over simplification.

Cultural Appropriation and Data Extraction: Digitizing traditional stories without the consent of community can risks turning cultural knowledge into extractable data, raising the issue of ownership, authorship, and ethical use. For instance, fables or legends of an indigenous community can transformed into AI driven stories, or anime without giving the original storytellers their due recognition or sharing the benefits earned from such content.

Issue of Authority or Control: Control over AI tools often lies with institutions/ technological companies, transferring narrative authority away from communities and original storyteller- who have historically given shape and transmitted these stories. For instance, if a technology company develops AI storytelling platforms on Indian epics or folklores, then the decisions regarding story selection, interpretation, language, and visual representation will be made by software developers or cultural institutions rather than by the original storytellers, folk artists. Under such circumstances the, living practitioners-such as *kathavachaks*, *Harikatha* performers,



or storytellers-may exercise little or no control over how their narratives are retold, altered, or circulated, resulting in transfer of control or ownership of the narrative from communities to algorithmic systems/institutions that run them.

Political and Ideological Manipulation: AI-enabled storytelling is not neutral. Decisions about data, design, and deployment can reflect political or ideological priorities, influencing which narratives are amplified and which are marginalized. For example- if AI is programmed to adhere to only state approved stories, ideologies or mainstream histories, it will highlight only those specific sections of epics, fables, stories or national histories ignoring dissenting opinions.

Conclusion

Storytelling/Oral Traditions are key to Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) as a means of imparting knowledge, teaching, moral values and ethical reflection. When Artificial Intelligence is regarded as a tool of storytelling rather than a purely computational tool, it offers immense opportunities to revive and circulate IKS in the globalized world. However, this potential can only be realised through ethical, contextual, and culturally grounded use of AI.

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