Critical comparison between the ancient and the digital storytelling practices: An epistemological analysis

Fakira Mohan Nahak*

University Institute of Media Studies, Chandigarh University, Mohali, Punjab 140413, India

Abstract

Storytelling in native languages is an integral part of human life. This art form has been existing since immemorial times in India. In Indian society in general and in *Odia* society in particular the grandparents/parents used to play a key role in telling stories to their grandchildren. By virtue of their wisdom, they used to adopt the stories from the ancient texts to the contemporary needs and societal and family contexts. The oral practice that transcends spatiotemporal offers many insights to the kids through the informing and enlightening process. The present study is an engagement with the critical comparison between the ancient and the modern (digital) storytelling practices to find out which practice is more effective in transforming the kids into more ethical and responsible citizens. The present study applied an epistemological analysis to examine both the above pedagogical practices in relation to their effectiveness in boosting the creative and imagination levels to next higher levels. The study conducted several open ending interviews with the elders who engaged their kinds with the ancient stories and the modern practitioners involved in storytelling through digital platforms such as YouTube. After examining the contentions put forward by various stakeholders in the process of storytelling, the study showed that the ancient system of storytelling still has many advantages in enlightening the kids over the digital platforms of technological advancement notwithstanding.

Keywords: storytelling; traditional storytelling; digital storytelling; storytelling in *Odia*; imagination; epistemology

1. Introduction

Storytelling is in practice among people for over centuries. A story is nothing but a communication between an elder and a child. The storytelling worldwide initially was a child centric activity at homes. A story, commonly in the form of parables, has the potential to give the kids the different facets of the happenings in the world. It not only highlights the virtues but also despises the practice of evils; in other words, it includes conflicts and resolutions. The aim of the storyteller is not to impart the knowledge of any specific thing but to enhance the worldly wisdom among one's kids. There is always an attempt to ensure that the narrative of the story holds the kids in captive eloquence. There are different genres among stories and they can be a reminder of the past, a mirror of the present, or a spotlight into the future.

Storytelling has a long historical tradition both in India and abroad. It is an oral tradition that transcends all spatiotemporal limits. Ancestors have played a key role in perpetuating this great art form down to generations. In the traditional storytelling there is an intimacy between the storyteller and the kid. Depending upon the mood, interest and level of the kid the storytellers used to contrive necessary changes to his/her story or telling pattern.

Since hundreds of years, the stories of the great Indian epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata were told to kids softly and simply. The same story became little complex for the adolescents and came with deeper thoughts and philosophy along with interpretation for the matured adults. But these stories has remained an integral part of the Indian life. At different stages an individual is exposed to different kind of storytelling. It is considered as one of the most effective ways of communicating thoughts, ideas and philosophies to people through storytelling.

However, as time goes by the approach in storytelling has changed along with the technological inventions and interventions. Particularly, the evolution in the digital media, easy availability of the gadgets as well as the technology have created a different platform for the dissemination of information through storytelling. The evolution from the manual storytelling form to the analogue storytelling and then digital storytelling is nothing but a mechanical change in which the essence of the story along with its objectives remains the same. Nevertheless, the application of storytelling from the kids' domain to the higher platforms such as corporate relations, business, or crisis management has significantly developed in the field.

Several researchers have discussed about storytelling (e.g. Cekaitre & Bjork-Willen, 2018; Wu & Chen, 2020; Davis *et al.,* 2022), but papers investigating the comparison between the ancient and the modern (digital) storytelling practices, so far, is found rare. This study, in turn, aims to critically compare the

* Corresponding author:
Email: mohan.fakir@gmail.com

ancient and the modern (digital) storytelling practices to find out which practice is more effective in transforming the kids into more ethical and responsible citizens in the context of Indian Society. The present study applied epistemological analysis to examine both the above pedagogical practices in relation to their effectiveness in boosting the creative and imagination levels to next higher levels.

1.1. Genesis of storytelling

Storytelling is as ancient as humankind and it is universal. Even before the knowledge of writing, people have known the art of storytelling. It is not confined to any culture or age but it is applicable to all cultures and ages. The practice of storytelling exists just to inform, educate and transform the traditional knowledge system and values to the next generation (Society, 2020). When someone uses voice and gestures to tell a story, it is the oral storytelling. It can be presented in various formats like songs, rhymes, chants, epic poems, narrations, discourses and preaching. The story may be historically accurate or imaginative.

Mythology, fairy-tales and folktales, fables are some of the traditional storytelling practices and basically are the part of the oral storytelling tradition. Nevertheless, as time goes by, the storytellers have included personal narrative, representation of history, changing cultural norms and political commentary have become the part of storytelling (*Oral Storytelling*, 2021). In the traditional storytelling, the storyteller and the listener are in the comfortable close proximity and enjoy the conversation (mostly one way). Here, the most important part of the storyteller is to add his or her own characters, situations, or words; as a result, the same story takes different shapes in the process of development.

Telling a story and its success is completely dependent on how exactly well the storyteller has told the story (Barad, 2011). However, it depends largely on the pleasure it gives to the recipient or listener.

Story is considered as the foundation of all human learnings and teachings. Most of the indigenous culture storytelling is a practice validating the experiences of indigenous people and epistemologies of them (Iseke, 2013). The practice of storytelling provides the opportunities to indigenous people to express their experiences in indigenous languages. Also, the practice of storytelling helps in fostering relationships and the dissemination of traditional knowledge and cultures. Most of the indigenous people are engaged in oral storytelling traditions.

In India, a traditional knowledge transfer system, i.e. *Srutis*, is the ancient texts, which are self-explanatory from their names that these texts are heard by people and then documented. That means this knowledge has been inherited through telling-listening activities. The *Vedas* (supreme texts of Hinduism) are also treated as *Srutis* (Editors of Encyclopedia, 2015). Indian storytelling performs two things simultaneously, namely circulating and producing the knowledge (Strang, 2013).

In addition to *Vedas,* a storytelling called as Vishnu Sharma's Panchatantra in India is very popular and even has the reminiscent in different modified versions today. It is almost more than two thousand years old tradition. All stories are mainly intended to teach moral values or *Niti* to the rulers or kings and the ruled or the common men. This tradition is followed in most part of the world and the famous text has been translated into other world languages (Editors of Encyclopedia, 2017).

The storytelling tradition continues in most of the Indian languages. Talking about the traditional storytelling in *Odia* language (6th classical language of India) there are a number of examples to illustrate the process. *Kathatie kahun* (Let me tell a tale), *Kaluri benta, Abolakara Kahani, Aaima Kahani* (Grandma's stories) have contributed immensely to the legacy of Indian storytelling.(Das, 1958). Similarly, the folk forms from Odisha like *Pala, Daskathia, Ghuduki, Ghodanacha, Bharataleela,* etc. are the great examples of traditional storytelling in Odisha. Most of these forms play a vital role in rural communication and tell the story to rural communities.

In a research project, researchers (Biswal & Pramanik, 2020) emphasized that the traditional storytelling form in Odisha like *"Kathani"* is gradually disappearing from the lives of people. It is a popular folk tradition traditionally transmitted orally from ancestors to successors or generation to the next. Most of the "*Kathanis*" describe about the love of the prince and the princess, their meeting and marriage that are always entertaining and attractive for the kids. However, due to the advent of modern communication tools like television, smartphone, and mobile internet, the kids are going away from listening the traditional stories. As a result, the traditional storytelling format like *"Kathani"* is on the verge of extinction. In the *"Kathani"* tradition the storytellers are the grandparents and the listeners are the grandchildren. The children surround the storytellers and listen to him, but because of the changing family structures, breakdown of the joint families and shifting of pastime from story to television, this situation emerges.

With the change of time, the storytelling tradition has gradually shifted from the traditional oral storytelling to the modern digital format. So far as visual storytelling is concerned in a multicultural setup, the process needs a different approach (Sá, Menegazzi, et al., 2019). In the digital storytelling, the multiple modes are used. Most importantly it is the multimedia mode of storytelling in which the texts, graphics, visuals, music, voice narration all together make the digital storytelling effective. Any lacuna in any of these elements will affect the digital storytelling.

All of technology, storyteller, product and the engagement of audience with the storytelling process are the matter in digital storytelling (Choo et al., 2020). While creating digital stories for the children one must keep in mind the multicultural aspects and approaches to address the diversities (Sá, Sylla, et al., 2019). In the oral storytelling tradition the storyteller creates such an impression as if he knew the entire thing and compels the listener to imagine the story. So the successful storytellers are those who can create varied emotions, situations through their way of narration and presentation. But this progression and paradigm shift of presentation of stories have also gone through a progressive path. From the traditional form the storytelling initially was introduced in radio stations and it was targeted to school going children. From radio the same stories were shifted to television. Then, the Audio-visual presentation of the stories started. With the advent of smartphones and exponential growth of the mobile internet, the storytellers have then changed their platform.

Along with this the traditional storytellers like grandparents are not properly available on the digital platforms (Iseke & Moore, 2011). The new-age storytellers have created their base on different OTT (Over the Top) platforms including the largest platform YouTube (Coker et al., 2017). Talking

about the digital storytelling in Odia language, there are hundreds of YouTube channels creating contents targeting the kids as well as different age groups of audience. The likes, views, shares are the common visible parameters, which indicate the popularity of the story in the digital form. Besides this, every channel has its own statistics provided by the YouTube analytics. The digital storytelling involves critical thinking for composing the story. If the composition is not fine, then the outcome of the multimedia content creation process may not be effective (Yang, 2012).

Home is the place where story telling has taken its birth. The family members are the creators of the content. Especially, the grandparents and parents constitute the core of the story telling team at home. It is observed that the traditional storytelling has an adaptability as per the situation and convenience. As per the requirement of the child the storyteller used to mold the story and make necessary changes to it. It has a multidimensional approach. As the child is getting a particular dimension of the story framed by parents or grandparents with reference to a specific need of the child, s/he used to imagine the same within its framework. Thus, a single story may have multiple variation suiting various situations or contexts. The ability to manipulate the story in to various forms entirely is a creative activity of the elders of the home involved in storytelling to kids. Conveniently, the storyteller uses humans, animals, plants as characters in his/her story. But contrary to this, the contents in the form of stories created nowadays on various digital platforms have different kinds of manipulation. The best way of graphics design, creative visualization, dramatized narrations, and musical sound effects has made the story different from the traditional form of storytelling.

2. Methodology

For the present study the researcher has adopted a qualitative research method. The researcher conducted interview of a number of traditional as well as modern digital storytellers. The researcher also observed few digital storytelling platforms. The interview outcomes were then analyzed descriptively. Basically, there were interviewees engaged in media including print, television, radio and digital platforms. So their varied experience and observation about the changing trends in storytelling were also taken into account in this study.

3. Results and Discussion

The researcher discussed with a number of established story writers, storytellers and those engaged in digital storytelling these days in different India languages. Issues like various differences between the traditional storytelling and the digital storytelling, uniqueness, characteristics, challenges are discussed with these subject experts of the field.

Dillip Balabantaray, a veteran television content producer and story writer also has been active on digital platform and stated that the today digital platform has a larger reach. So, the story presented on the digital platform has bigger reach to its target audience. It is fast and involves maximum receivers. Earlier in the traditional storytelling, it took a long time to reach the masses. But it has a positive side i.e. proximity between the storyteller and the listener. There is a kind of emotional attachment between the two. On the other hand the digital platform has a full of dramatization or extreme dramatization. In the digital storytelling the virginity of the story is lost.

"The traditional storytelling as a practice in almost every family and normally told by the grannies always helps the kids in expanding their imagination and visualization. While, in digital storytelling this part is missing," narrates the young and popular storywriter, storyteller and development communicator Mr. Parambrahma Tripathy. He stated that, grandparents are so manipulative as they have made necessary changes to the story as per the mood, interest and requirement of the listener. Earlier children were brought up in the joint families, so for the bed time stories normally children from the 3-11 years age group join together to listen the story. Before the end of the story more than half of them sleep, and then the grannies change the course of the story and even end it abruptly. The next day the same story is once again told with a different twist, modulation and perspective. It is the freedom of the storyteller. Contrary to this, in the digital storytelling the imaginative part is missing and the target audience has been changed. Now only those who are having access to the digital platforms can access the content. The biggest problem of present day digital storytelling is the problem of plenty. The contents are there as if in the garbage. In this case accessing the right content in the digital platform is a herculean task.

Dr. Sarat Kumar Jena, an academician, story writer and a broadcaster advocated in favor of digital storytelling. He stated that this is the need of the hour. Earlier there was no communication facility available with people. So the human being as an individual and masses as society depended on traditional storytelling. But now the horizon has expanded. The concept of Diaspora has come up with a global audience. So the scientific advancement and technological development has given storytelling a boost. It helps in minimizing the gap and works as a joining force. He stated that by looking at the storytellers or writers, most of them are now targeting urban audience. Their focus is on city life, yet most of them are from rural background, which reflects in their writing. The writer and the target audience both are changed; now both are progressive. Earlier people had a faith, which was converted to science. Today, the influence of urban life is clearly visible in modern day's storytelling.

Dr. Akbar Rizvi, a Delhi-based storywriter as well as storyteller has started his multilingual digital storytelling platform "Kahani Depot" on YouTube. This platform provides classic *Odia* stories. He stated that "All are not literature lovers. But those who do not read the stories can love to listen. Providing literature on the digital platform is the sole aim of Kahani Depot. He puts an altogether different argument for both the style of storytelling. According to him, both the formats have their own uniqueness and identity at their place. The biggest problem is in the corrupt content on the platform. As a consequence, the good quality content takes a long time to come to the notice of the audience. As the content producer and storyteller on the digital platform he stated that it is too difficult to sustain in the market. It needs a financial support. He also pointed out that both the formats are different from each other and they are going to stay together. The traditional storytelling is mostly focused on religion, tourism, advice and moral education. Then, keeping the interest of the listener the story has been modified. So the detailing was also more there. Contrary to this, the indulgence and appearance of listener and storyteller are different from each other including the forms of the platforms. It seems impossible to follow the same

traditional storytelling in digital platform. The pace, speed, orientation are different in formats. The incredible part of digital storytelling is that the storyteller and listener are merged here.

Ms. Prachitara Mishra, a film journalist and broadcaster that has turned a professional storyteller on stage and digital platform has different arguments on storytelling. She argued that using graphics, diagrams or any other forms of visual aid before a kid, then it will revolve around that object or aid whatever is said. This will not allow the kid to imagine about the story to be told.. Traditionally, it is done by some of the members of the family those who are strong and vocal in storytelling. The way to tell the story can increase the anxiety, curiosity and interest among the listeners. That is the reason why we have not adopted the trendy graphics and animation to narrate the story. In the past, radio played a vital role to expand people imagination simply by storytelling. But as a storyteller on digital platform she felt that there is a need to invest money as well as promote the content on other platforms to attract people to watch the content and evaluate.

Veteran journalist and writer Mr. Nilambar Rath, the founder of a pure digital platform OdishaLive stated that the traditional storytelling is informal, intimate, interactive and customized. But the present form of digital storytelling has become a personal media, more formal and non-interactive. In the name of storytelling on digital platform content creators glorify sexuality, blind believes, rumors and much more. As a digital storyteller he observed that emotions can sell a lot on this platform. This makes the highest level of engagement.

The digital storytelling is gaining popularity and momentum day by day. But at the same time the quality of content, presentation and errors have become major roadblocks on this path. The number of digital channels and produced stories in *Odia* is also not a satisfactory statistics. After observing the contents of digital channels and discussion with the content creator as well as storytellers it can be stated that majority of the channels are not organized. Along with this there are numbers of faceless digital players working on the platform. These are the disguised digital players. Particularly those who are handling children stories and children activities should self-monitor the content. Most importantly, as compared to the traditional oral storytelling, the digital stories are effective and the impact of both the forms on the growing kids needs to be studied. Some of the experts from the storytelling field stated that the digital storytelling does not allow the listeners or viewers to imagine, and that needs to be investigated further. At the same time the multimedia content or digital stories can be used as a teaching aid for better understanding of the concept for the students. A study by Berlianti & Pradita (2021) showed that the practices of translanguaging are helpful in a way that the teachers could build an engaging dialogue for the students, enabling them to understand the complex learning materials.

There always exists a subtle conflict between the traditional people and modern people. Both blame each other on various issues. But it is also true that if somebody tries to create the stories with the ancient traditional touch, then that may create some impacts. Most important thing is that even after using the ancient storytelling mechanism it may be difficult for the modern day content creators to make the platform effective. Still there are certain facilitation is going on for making the

modern day storytelling more effective.

4. Conclusion

The fundamental structure and cardinal points of storytelling remain the same in ancient and modern storytelling practices. But in the modern or digital storytelling practices the personal touch is missing. In the ancient systems the storyteller had a direct impact on the listeners. There existed a one-to-one communication. The eye contacts, physical presence and body language along with the postures and gestures made the process of storytelling more interesting and effective. On the other hand the modern day's digital storytelling had taken away the personal touch from the listener or receiver of the message. It has the advantage of reaching to the number of receivers at a time, but it cannot create the feeling of belongingness. As this digital storytelling is non-interactive in nature, the storyteller becomes a one-way communicator. Any mechanism to address this issue and making digital storytelling effective may revive the ancient system within this modern technology.

References

Barad, D. (2011). Spark International Online Journal. *Spark International Online Journal*, *3*(III), 35–61.

Berlianti, D. G. A., & Pradita, I. (2021). Translanguaging in an EFL classroom discourse: To what extent it is helpful for the students?. *Communications in Humanities and Social Sciences*, *1*(1), 42–46. https://doi.org/10.21924/chss.1.1.2021.14

Biswal, M., & Pramanik, R. (2020). *Vanishing Oral Tradition : " Kathani " -A Folktale in Odisha. International Research Journal of Human Resource and Social Sciences,* 7 (7), 32-43

Cekaite, A., & Björk-Willén, P. (2018). Enchantment in storytelling: Co-operation and participation in children's aesthetic experience. Linguistics and Education, 48, 52–60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2018.08.005

Choo, Y. B., Abdullah, T., & Nawi, A. M. (2020). Digital storytelling vs. Oral storytelling: An analysis of the art of telling stories now and then. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, *8*(5 A). https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.081907

Coker, K. K., Flight, R. L., & Baima, D. M. (2017). Skip It or View It: The Role of Video Storytelling in Social Media Marketing. *Marketing Management Journal*, *27*(2), 75–87. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=128190010&site=eds-live&authtype=ip,shib&custid=s9815128

Das, S. (1958). Oriya Literature. *Indian Literature*, *2*(1), 125–133. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23328591

Editors of Encyclopedia. (2015). Shruti. In *Encyclopedia Britanica*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shruti

Editors of Encyclopedia. (2017). Panchatantra. In *Encyclopedia Britanica*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Panchatantra-Indian-literature

Iseke, J. (2013). *Indigenous Storytelling as Research Author (s): Judy Iseke Source : International Review of Qualitative Research , Vol . 6 , No . 4 (Winter 2013), pp . 559- Published by : University of California Press Stable URL : https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.152*. *6*(4), 559–577. https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2013.6.4.559.This

Iseke, J., & Moore, S. (2011). Community-based indigenous digital storytelling with elders and youth. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, *35*(4), 19–38. https://doi.org/10.17953/aicr.35.4.4588445552858866

Wu, J., & Chen, D. T. V. (2020). A Systematic Review of Educational Digital Storytelling. Computers & Education, 147, Article ID: 103786. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.103786

Davis L, Iraheta YA, Ho EW, Murillo AL, Feinsinger A, Waterman AD. Living Kidney Donation Stories and Advice Shared Through a Digital

Storytelling Library: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis. Kidney Med. 2022 May 21;4(7):100486. doi: 10.1016/j.xkme.2022.100486. PMID: 35755303; PMCID: PMC9218227.

Sá, G., Menegazzi, D., Caruso, A. P., & Sylla, C. (2019). Visual Development Processes for a Multicultural Storytelling Tool. *Proceedings of Confia*: 7th International Conference on Illustration & Animation

Sá, G., Sylla, C., Martins, V., Caruso, A., & Menegazzi, D. (2019). Multiculturalism and creativity in storytelling - Visual development of a digital manipulative for young children. *C and C 2019 - Proceedings of the 2019 Creativity and Cognition*, 369–381. https://doi.org/10.1145/3325480.3326571

Society, N. G. (2020). Storytelling and Cultural Traditions. *Nationalgeorgaphic.Org*. https://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/storytelling-and-cultural-traditions/

Strang, C. B. (2013). Indian Storytelling, Scientific Knowledge, and Power in the Florida Borderlands. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, *70*(4), 671–700. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.70.4.0671

Yang, Y. F. D. (2012). Multimodal Composing in Digital Storytelling. *Computers and Composition*, *29*(3), 221–238. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2012.07.001