

**TRANSLATING THE UNWRITTEN: A STUDY ON HOW ORAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH
TRANSLATION INFLUENCES CULTURAL MEMORY WITH REFERENCE TO PANCHATANTRA,
JATAKA TALES AND BANJARA ORAL NARRATIVES**

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Abstract:

Indian folklore is a rich repository of cultural memory, ethical frameworks, communal identities, and collective imagination. As stories travel across regions, languages, and generations, they undergo changes not only through the act of retelling but also through processes of translation, adaptation, and reinterpretation. This paper examines how translation influences cultural memory in Indian oral folklore through a comparative exploration of three significant narrative traditions: Panchatantra, Jataka Tales, and Banjara oral narratives. While the Panchatantra and Jataka stories have received global textual transmission through translation into numerous languages, Banjara narratives continue to function primarily in an oral ecosystem, preserving identity and memory through performance rather than writing. Through comparative analysis, the paper argues that translation plays a dual role: enabling cultural preservation and cross-cultural mobility while simultaneously transforming original meanings, values, and contexts. The study highlights how folklore evolves not only through linguistic translation but also through cultural reinterpretation shaped by time, audience, and socio-political shifts.

Keywords: oral folklore, translation, cultural memory, Panchatantra, Jataka Tales, Banjara oral tradition.

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Introduction:

Folklore in India encompasses a wide range of oral traditions, stories, songs, epics, riddles, proverbs, and ritual narratives, that serve as carriers of collective memory and identity. These narratives reflect philosophical traditions, societal values, memory of ecological worlds, and cultural ethics. Translation, both linguistic and cultural, has been integral to the transmission of folklore, shaping how stories are remembered, forgotten, or transformed across generations.

The present study focuses on three culturally influential narrative traditions: the *Panchatantra*, believed to have emerged around the 3rd century BCE; the *Jataka Tales*, rooted in Buddhist didactic philosophy; and the Banjara narratives, belonging to a nomadic tribal

community whose folklore remains predominantly oral. While *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* stories gained written and global circulation, Banjara narratives embody living memory through oral tradition. By comparing these narratives, the paper explores how translation interacts with memory, identity, and cultural continuity.

Translation as Cultural Transmission:

Translation in folklore is not merely linguistic; it is also cultural, contextual, and performative. Folklorists such as Jan Vansina and Walter Ong distinguish oral traditions from written texts by noting that oral narratives evolve dynamically with each retelling. Translation, therefore, exists even before textuality, in gestures, tone, improvisation, audience interaction, and environmental adaptation.

In the Indian context, folktales traveled across:

- **Regions and languages** (Sanskrit to Persian, Tamil, Pali, Hindi, Arabic, English)
- **Cultural belief systems** (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam)
- **Modes of narration** (oral, written manuscript, print, animation, digital media)

Each stage introduces interpretive shifts, thereby altering cultural memory.

The Panchatantra: Pedagogy, Pragmatism, and Global Adaptation

The *Panchatantra*, attributed to Vishnusharma, is a collection of interconnected animal fables written to educate princes in political strategy, moral reasoning, and survival ethics. The narrative logic of *Panchatantra* is pragmatic rather than moralistic. Unlike Western fables, its lessons do not promote selfless virtue but emphasize diplomacy, wisdom, and sometimes cunning.

The text's global transmission is one of the earliest examples of intercultural literary migration. The Persian translation *Kalila wa Dimna* (8th century CE), later Arabic versions, and subsequent European translations disseminated these stories worldwide. The narratives underwent cultural filtering: Buddhist elements faded, Persian courts emphasized political wisdom, and English translators softened references to sexuality, power tactics, or moral ambiguity to suit Victorian sensibilities.

Thus, translation reshaped cultural memory. In India, the *Panchatantra* retained its contextual pragmatism; globally, it was reframed as moral-ethical children's literature. The shift demonstrates how translation does not merely copy meaning—it constructs cultural memory based on audience expectations.

Jataka Tales: Ethics, Spirituality, and Buddhist Cultural Memory

The *Jataka Tales*, composed in Pali, recount previous lives of the Buddha as animals or humans. Unlike the *Panchatantra*, which values worldly intelligence, the *Jataka* stories foreground Buddhist virtues such as compassion, self-restraint, sacrifice, and non-violence. The tales serve as ethical exemplars rooted in the framework of *dharma* and *karma*.

Translation played a crucial role in spreading *Jataka* narratives across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and beyond. As they moved into Sinhala, Burmese, Thai, Chinese, and Tibetan traditions, narrative content was reshaped by religious, cultural, and artistic conventions.

For example:

- In Thai performances, *Jataka* stories became part of dance-drama.
- In Tibet, illustrations emphasized Buddhist cosmology.
- In modern English translations, stories were edited for brevity and accessibility.

Translation thus transformed *Jataka* narratives into hybrid cultural artefacts. While the spiritual essence persisted, ethical interpretation often reflected local philosophical frameworks. The tales became mnemonic tools for preserving Buddhist identity across borders, demonstrating how translation sustains cultural memory while enabling adaptability.

Banjara Oral Narratives: Memory, Identity, and Performative Preservation

Unlike the other two traditions, Banjara narratives belong to a living oral culture. The Banjara community, historically nomadic traders, preserves stories through performance, song, and ritual rather than manuscript culture. Their narratives include tales of ancestors,

migration journeys, supernatural encounters, animal fables, and heroic epics such as stories of *Lakhan Singh, Tejaji*, or *Banjaran Mata*.

Since these narratives are rarely translated into written form, they remain mutable and context-dependent. The storyteller (*kathanakar*) adapts language, metaphors, and emotional expression based on audience age, social setting, and ritual purpose. Cultural memory here exists as embodied practice rather than permanent text.

Attempts to document Banjara folklore in written Hindi, Marathi, or English often result in fragmentation. Performative elements, rhythm, emotional cadence, gestures, musicality—are lost. Additionally, translation into mainstream languages shifts power dynamics: tribal knowledge becomes assimilated into broader cultural frameworks, often without acknowledging its cultural sovereignty.

Thus, while translation offers preservation, it also risks erasing performative memory and indigenous identity.

Translation, Memory, and Transformation:

The relationship between cultural memory and translation can be understood through three conceptual frameworks:

1. Memory as Preservation

Translation archives narratives across time and geography. Without Persian and Arabic translations, the *Panchatantra* may not have survived as one of the world's most translated books. Similarly, *Jataka* tales preserved Buddhist ethical memory across centuries of political decline in India.

2. Memory as Adaptation

Stories remain alive because they evolve. When *Jataka* tales were embedded in Thai theatre or Japanese temple festivals, they gained new meaning. Translation enabled stories to be culturally reinterpreted rather than frozen.

3. Memory as Loss

Translation can also erase cultural contexts, humor, metaphors, and indigenous cosmology. For Banjara folklore, written translations cannot capture the living archive embodied by storytellers.

Thus, translation is not neutral; it is a transformative act that shapes how cultures remember.

Conclusion:

Indian folklore demonstrates the dynamic interplay between storytelling, translation, and cultural memory. The *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales* exemplify how narratives gain global longevity through translation, even as they undergo semantic and ideological shifts. In contrast, Banjara oral narratives challenge the assumption that preservation requires textualization, showing that memory can survive through performance rather than writing.

Ultimately, translation serves both as a bridge and a filter, carrying stories across centuries and borders while reshaping them to fit new cultural landscapes. The comparative study underscores the need for socially sensitive translation practices that respect cultural worldview, performance context, and community ownership.

Future scholarship must move beyond textual translation to include performative translation methodologies, recordings, ethnopoetic transcription, multisensory archiving, and community-led documentation. Only then can Indian folklore continue to evolve while maintaining its cultural soul.

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