

AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF HOW INDIA'S ORAL AND TEXTUAL HERITAGE IS REPRESENTED ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS FOR GEN Z's CONSUMPTION

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Abstract

India's oral and textual traditions have shaped its cultural identity for centuries, preserving stories, songs, and knowledge through generations. In today's digital age, this heritage faces both fresh challenges and new possibilities as it finds its way onto online platforms for Generation Z, considered as India's first truly digital-native audience. This study examines how folk tales, epics, and classical literature are adapted and shared through YouTube, podcasts, social media, and streaming services. Relying entirely on secondary sources, the research analyses how these traditions are curated for young audiences, the creative strategies involved, and the challenges of maintaining authenticity. Findings indicate that while digital tools expand access and revive interest in cultural roots, they can also risk oversimplifying complex narratives. This study underscores the importance of balancing modern, engaging formats with cultural depth, offering suggestions for educators, content creators, and policymakers to help India's heritage continue to resonate with the next generation.

Keywords: oral tradition, textual heritage, Generation Z, digital media, cultural continuity, India, storytelling

Introduction

India is renowned for its rich and varied legacy of textual heritage and oral traditions. From ancient Vedic chants and epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* to regional folk tales, ballads, and devotional songs, India's cultural continuity has depended on both spoken and written forms of storytelling (Ramanujan, 1991; Thapar, 2003). Historically, these traditions were passed down orally through generations or preserved in handwritten manuscripts.

However, in the 21st century, rapid digitization and the rise of the internet have transformed how cultural content is produced, consumed, and shared. Generation Z, defined roughly as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represent India's first truly digital-native generation. They interact with the world through smartphones, short videos, social media feeds, and streaming content, favoring formats that are concise, visually engaging, and interactive.

This shift raises an important question: How is India's rich oral and textual heritage being adapted and represented on digital platforms to reach Gen Z audiences? This study attempts to analyze this emerging intersection of heritage and technology through secondary research.

Literature Review

India's oral and textual heritage has been the subject of extensive academic scholarship. Ramanujan (1991) highlights how folktales thrive on local adaptations and oral transmission. Thapar (2003) discusses the historical role of storytelling in building collective memory and social identity. Sen (2012) argues that modernization and globalization have disrupted traditional channels of cultural transmission, posing new challenges for preserving intangible heritage.

Recent studies suggest that digital technologies offer powerful tools for revival and dissemination. Kaul (2023) explores how YouTube channels and podcasts adapt myths and folk stories for urban youth, blending animation, audio drama, and explainer formats. Sharma and Singh (2021) highlighted that Instagram and Meme Culture have been instrumental in increasing the popularity of folk tales and classical poetry in short, relatable snippets. Bhattacharya (2022) examines how streaming platforms incorporate mythic themes into modern narratives to appeal to younger audiences.

Reports from IAMAI (2023) and EY-FICCI (2023) reveal that Gen Z prefers short-form videos, podcasts, and multilingual storytelling over traditional print. However, scholars caution that oversimplification, loss of linguistic nuance, and algorithm-driven sensationalism risk diluting the authenticity of these traditions (Chatterjee, 2020).

Methodology

This study relies entirely on secondary data analysis. No primary surveys or interviews were conducted. Relevant data was collected through:

- Academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and cultural studies reports.
- Published case studies of digital initiatives such as *Epified* (YouTube channel), *Indian Noir* (podcast), and Instagram handles like *@PoetryIndia*.
- Industry reports from IAMAI, EY-FICCI, and UNESCO.
- Reputable media articles covering the representation of heritage on OTT platforms and social media.

The data was analyzed thematically to identify:

1. The oral and textual traditions adapted for digital media.
2. The formats and strategies are used to target Gen Z.
3. The challenges and gaps discussed in the literature.
4. The opportunities highlighted for sustaining cultural continuity.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the growing conversation on digital cultural preservation. By mapping how India's intangible heritage is reimagined for Gen Z audiences, it provides insights for educators, policymakers, content creators, and cultural institutions aiming to bridge traditional knowledge with contemporary youth culture. It highlights the potential of digital tools to democratize access to folk stories and classical literature while also warning against superficial or commercialized adaptations.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is specifically focused on how India's rich oral and textual heritage is represented and adapted on modern digital platforms such as YouTube channels, podcasts, Instagram pages, and OTT streaming services. It examines how these formats reshape folk tales, classical narratives, and regional myths to align with the viewing and listening habits of Generation Z audiences in India. The study draws exclusively from secondary sources- including published literature, scholarly analyses, verified digital case studies, and reputable industry reports to explore emerging trends and patterns in this space.

However, the study does not include primary fieldwork such as audience interviews, surveys, or direct quantitative data collection. It also does not examine non-digital forms of cultural expression such as live performances, stage recitations, or print anthologies of folk literature. Finally, this research remains limited to the Indian context, without extending its analysis to generational comparisons with older cohorts or cross-cultural studies involving other countries. This defined scope ensures the study remains sharply focused on the intersection of India's heritage, digital platforms, and Gen Z consumption patterns.

Sources of Data Collection

This study relies exclusively on secondary data, gathered from diverse and credible sources, each selected for its direct contribution to understanding how India's oral and textual heritage is adapted, circulated, and consumed on digital platforms by Generation Z audiences. By combining classic scholarship with the latest industry reports and real-world digital examples, this research builds a comprehensive picture of the intersection between heritage and youth media habits in India.

1. Peer-Reviewed Books and Journals

Ramanujan, A. K. (1991) *Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-Two Languages*
This foundational work remains one of the most cited collections showcasing India's remarkable diversity of oral storytelling. Ramanujan did not simply compile stories, he explained how folktales are shaped by local contexts, languages, and performance traditions. For this study, Ramanujan's work provides essential background on the original forms and functions of oral narratives before they were ever digitized. This collection demonstrates how folktales adapt to regional beliefs, social norms, and audience interactions, showing that oral narratives are never static but fluid, shaped by each storyteller's style and the listeners' responses. This depth is crucial for understanding what might be lost or gained when these same stories are repackaged for digital audiences today. For this study, Ramanujan's work serves as a baseline for comparing traditional, community-based storytelling with its modern digital counterparts, such as short animated videos on YouTube, audio series, or Instagram snippets. By contrasting the layered, locally rooted versions with today's algorithm-driven, bite-sized formats, the study highlights how digital platforms preserve the appeal and reach of folktales but also inevitably reshape their narrative style, language, moral lessons, and emotional tone to match Gen Z's fast-paced, mobile-first media habits. By comparing these traditional versions with their online adaptations, such as animated YouTube videos or podcast retellings, the study highlights how digital formats both preserve and reshape moral themes, narrative style and language to cater to Gen Z tastes.

Thapar, R. (2003) *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*
Romila Thapar's extensive historical analysis details how India's ancient texts from Vedic hymns to epics like the

Mahabharata and *Ramayana* and early Buddhist and Jain texts evolved through both oral recitation and early manuscript culture. Her work helps frame how oral performance and written transmission have always coexisted, often with blurred boundaries. This context supports the study's exploration of how today's digital platforms continue this duality by blending spoken word (podcasts, storytelling videos) with textual snippets (Instagram poetry, meme quotes) for digital-native audiences.

She shows how storytellers, bards, temple singers, and village performers played vital roles in carrying these narratives across generations, often adapting plots, characters, and moral lessons for local audiences. This fluid coexistence of oral performance and written tradition is central to India's cultural memory and directly mirrors what happens today when folk stories are retold on podcasts, YouTube explainers, or short-form videos, often mixed with on-screen text or subtitles for digital audiences.

Thapar's analysis provides this study with the historical context to argue that India's heritage has never been static. Instead, it has always relied on new technologies, from palm leaves to printing presses to reach new audiences. Today, digital platforms are simply the latest stage in this long continuum. This perspective helps the study examine whether modern digital retellings, algorithm-driven feeds, and viral trends are a natural evolution of India's oral-textual duality or whether they risk flattening the complexity and local depth these stories once carried.

Sharma & Singh (2021) — *Mythologies on Reels: Indian Folk Narratives and Digital Meme Culture*

This peer-reviewed article is a pivotal source that bridges traditional folklore studies with contemporary digital youth culture. Sharma and Singh examine how age-old Indian folk myths — including local legends, regional epics, and moral tales once passed down orally or through written folktale collections — are now being revived and circulated in new forms, particularly through short-form video platforms like Instagram Reels and TikTok.

The authors provide detailed case examples of how mythological figures such as Karna, Draupadi, or regional trickster characters are reimagined as humorous memes, trending audios, or short animated reels that can be easily shared and remixed by Gen Z users. They note that creators often adapt the original plotlines or moral lessons to make them relatable to modern social issues, college humor, or pop-culture references. For example, they highlight how ancient moral fables are turned into short, comedic skits that comment on topics like family dynamics, politics, or everyday frustrations familiar to urban youth.

This article is especially important for the present study because it directly illustrates how India's oral and textual heritage is being detached from its original contexts and reinserted into digital youth culture. It highlights both the opportunities—greater reach, revival of forgotten tales, youth engagement and the risks, such as trivialization, loss of cultural nuance, and the commercial pressures of viral content creation.

The findings from Sharma and Singh thus provide a clear lens for this study to critically evaluate whether digital representations of folk myths on platforms like Reels, TikTok, and memes strengthen cultural continuity by making old stories relevant, or whether they dilute the deeper layers of meaning that oral or textual traditions originally carried. This link between theory (folklore studies) and practice (digital remixes) is central to understanding the complex dynamics of heritage preservation and transformation in the Gen Z era.

Kaul, A. (2023) — *Digital Folk Revival in Urban India: Podcasts, YouTube, and the New Oral Storytellers*

Kaul's recent work provides a valuable look at how traditional Indian folk tales and classical stories are being revived in cities through modern digital storytelling. Focusing on young urban creators, Kaul analyzes how podcasts, YouTube

channels, and short-form videos have become new spaces for sharing folk narratives that were once told in village squares or family gatherings.

Through detailed examples, Kaul shows how creators combine voice acting, dramatic narration, background soundscapes, animation, and interactive visuals to make ancient stories feel fresh and immersive for Gen Z audiences who consume content mostly on smartphones. The study also highlights how these storytellers use social media marketing, hashtags, and algorithms to reach wider audiences, often shaping which tales gain popularity and which stay hidden.

Kaul's insights are crucial for this research because they reveal how digital tools can breathe new life into India's oral heritage, while also raising questions about authenticity, selective storytelling, and the influence of trending formats on cultural depth. By examining these digital folk revival efforts, this study can better understand the balance between cultural preservation and adaptation in a youth-focused, online environment.

2. Industry and Institutional Reports

EY-FICCI (2023) *Media and Entertainment Industry Report 2023*

This annual flagship report provides extensive quantitative data on India's media landscape, with sections dedicated to how Gen Z consumes content across OTT platforms, YouTube, social media, and podcasts. It includes metrics on short-form video growth, language preferences, and device usage. For this study, the report helps contextualize why creators choose certain formats; for example, why short, animated explainers work better than hour-long documentaries for Gen Z, or how regional language content is a growing trend in youth digital consumption.

A key insight from the report is that Gen Z prefers quick, visually engaging content they can access anytime on smartphones, which explains why formats like Instagram Reels, animated YouTube explainers, and snackable video series thrive while longer, text-heavy content struggles to hold their attention. For this study, these insights help explain why folk tales and traditional stories are increasingly reimagined as bite-sized videos, dubbed or subtitled in local languages, and marketed through youth-centric social media trends. Overall, the report provides crucial context for understanding the economic, technological, and cultural factors that shape how India's oral and textual heritage is adapted and monetized for Gen Z on digital platforms.

IAMAI (2023) *Internet in India 2023*

The *Internet in India 2023* report, published by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), provides detailed breakdown of mobile-first habits, showing that smartphones remain the dominant device for streaming videos, listening to podcasts, and engaging with social media. The report also highlights how India's Gen Z prefers fast, data-light content, an insight that explains why folk tales and regional stories are now turned into short videos, reels, or quick audio clips that work well on mobile networks.

Another key point the report highlights is the strong rise in regional language users, showing why many creators adapt folk stories in local languages to reach wider youth audiences. It also notes that gaps in digital access and literacy still exist between urban and rural youth, reminding this study that not all Gen Z audiences can equally benefit from digitized cultural content.

By grounding this research in IAMAI's robust national data, the study situates India's digital folk revival within the real-world context of Gen Z's devices, habits, languages, and online reach — making it clear where there are new opportunities for cultural continuity, and where gaps remain.

UNESCO South Asia Regional Reports

UNESCO's reports add an international perspective on how intangible cultural heritage can be safeguarded using digital tools. For this study, these reports provide comparative examples, showing how India's digital folk revival aligns with or differs from other countries' efforts to make traditional knowledge youth-friendly through tech. It also helps the study reflect on what India can learn from international examples to ensure that its rich oral and textual heritage is not only digitized for Gen Z but done so ethically and meaningfully.

For this study, UNESCO's findings provide valuable comparative examples of how other South Asian nations are using technology to make traditional knowledge more accessible, especially to younger, tech-savvy generations. The reports also highlight common challenges such as copyright issues, community consent, and the risk of losing cultural depth when sacred or community-specific stories are made widely available online.

3. Digital Case Studies

Epified (YouTube Channel)

Epified is one of India's pioneering digital channels focused on transforming epics, myths, and history into short, animated stories. It has over a million subscribers and its videos are widely shared in schools and on social media. By analyzing Epified, the study shows how visual animation, voice-over storytelling, and historical context are combined to repackage complex narratives like the Mahabharata into 3-5 minute segments that Gen Z can watch on mobile devices, aligning with their preference for quick, visually engaging learning.

Indian Noir (Podcast)

Indian Noir illustrates the modern revival of the oral tradition through audio storytelling. The podcast blends classic horror and mythic motifs with contemporary production techniques such as suspenseful narration, immersive soundscapes, and serialized episodes. This case helps the study highlight how the listening culture, once deeply embedded in community storytelling, is reimagined for solo digital listening through headphones yet still carries echoes of the old village bard tradition.

@PoetryIndia (Instagram Handle)

This Instagram page curates bite-sized snippets of Indian poetry - from medieval mystic poets to modern verse, layered onto visually aesthetic posts and reels. This example demonstrates how textual heritage, traditionally read in anthologies, is now repurposed as shareable content that fits Gen Z's social media habits. The page also shows how followers interact through comments, remixes, and re-shares, effectively creating a participatory, digital poetry community.

4. Reputable Media Articles and Cultural Commentary

To add timely examples and real-world perspectives, the study refers to articles, cultural features, and opinion pieces from established publications:

The Hindu is well known for its in-depth reporting on India's rich artistic and cultural landscape. Its features and reports often illustrate how traditional practices adapt to new media environments. For instance, *The Hindu* has documented how classical dance performances, folk storytelling sessions, and regional music festivals have moved online through live-streamed shows and interactive webinars, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such reporting demonstrates how artists and communities innovate to sustain audience connections and preserve cultural continuity despite physical limitations.

Scroll.in serves as a valuable source for stories about independent digital creators who rework folk tales, epics, and oral histories for new-age platforms. Its cultural commentaries and interviews showcase how content creators use YouTube, Instagram, and OTT channels to make folklore accessible to younger audiences through short videos, animations, or hybrid formats like spoken word and memes. These articles highlight both opportunities and tensions: while digital storytelling invites creative reinterpretation, it also raises questions about fidelity to source narratives and the challenges of monetizing niche cultural content.

The Wire contributes critical analysis of how digitization reshapes the value and meaning of traditional knowledge. Its opinion pieces frequently address concerns about the commercialization of cultural heritage online. For example, articles explore how folk performances or ritual practices are packaged for clicks and sponsorships, sparking debates about the trade-offs between visibility, authenticity, and commodification in a profit-driven digital ecosystem.

Together, these media sources add context to the scholarly and industry reports, grounding the study in current examples and highlighting how audiences respond to this digitized heritage in real time.

Limitations of the Study

Dependence on Secondary Data: The study relies exclusively on existing sources; it does not include fresh audience surveys or field interviews.

Language Focus: Most examples are urban or pan-Indian; many hyper-local or tribal oral traditions still lack digital documentation.

Rapidly Evolving Platforms: Social media trends change fast; some case studies may become outdated quickly as platforms update algorithms and user preferences shift.

Conclusion

This research confirms that India's oral and textual heritage is undergoing a digital revival, driven by the creative efforts of YouTube storytellers, podcast hosts, meme curators, and OTT creators. While this expands the reach of traditional stories, it also raises concerns about loss of authenticity, simplification, and commercial pressures. Thus, to keep cultural traditions alive for Gen Z, digital mediums must balance engagement with depth, and popularity with preservation.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, the study suggests:

- Developing open-access, multilingual digital archives of folk stories and regional literature.
- Training regional storytellers and artists to use digital tools effectively.
- Encouraging collaborations between tech startups, cultural institutions, and educational platforms.
- Promoting policies that support fair monetization and credit for traditional knowledge holders.
- Integrating verified cultural content into EdTech and school curricula for Gen Z.

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