The subject of oral-written continuum refers to the relationship observed by the folklorists between the oral and the written traditions. Although the two traditions, because of their analytical characteristics, are supposed to be two opposing and incompatible entities, their existence and interactions in-between on many real occasions are found to be in the pattern of two-way traffic, i.e. one is influential and complementary to the other. In many societies, the line of demarcation between oral and written cultural traditions is blurred into a continuum, where it is difficult to distinguish when/where the oral tradition ends and the written one begins, and vice versa. This condition is frequently referred to as an example when discussing the cultural or literary traditions of India. For example, there are numerous cases wherein performances which are oral in nature are nevertheless based on texts. They are referred to as textual performances. Textual performances are shown to be found in many societies, especially non-Western. However, the uniqueness in the case of India in this regard is the extent of its prevalence and development historically. Some of these cases will be taken up in the discussion that follows in this Unit.

As orality remains a distinguishing feature for many of the folklore materials, the nature of relationship between the oral and the written is an important concept in understanding the folklore forms and folk traditions in contrast to their written counterparts.
2.2 Oral Tradition: Characteristics

Oral tradition or oral culture refers to those traditions or cultures where human knowledge is handed down and practiced by the words of mouth, from one generation to the next. Various forms of oral literature, diverse expressive arts, craftsmanship and other traditional knowledge are passed on without the system of writing.

The characteristics of oral traditions can be analyzed in contrast to the written traditions. The first characteristic feature about oral tradition can be seen in its mode of transmission – which is oral or verbal. Such kinds of transmission always take place in the form of face-to-face communication. Secondly, all knowledge and information in oral tradition are stored only in human memory. Because of these two factors, all oral traditional resources across the world exhibit some common features. For example, as oral communication is solely dependent upon human memory which is prone to selective forgetting and selective remembering, oral resources are created anew in each phase of their transmissions. A piece of oral literature, such as a folktale, can never be told or recounted exactly in the same way in two different oral communications. In contrast, a piece of written literature, a novel or any written book remains exactly same till the manuscript exists. Because of this, we find different versions and variants of the same oral text. However, there are also attempts to preserve information in oral medium: folklorists have observed that long oral narratives demonstrate formulaic and memorizable patterns in their structural forms.

An important fact to be noted about oral tradition is that it exists in two types of societies: societies with writing or literate societies, and societies without writing or non-literate societies. In non-literate societies, where a system of writing does not exist, all communication takes place orally. The entire culture and tradition of a non-literate society can be designated as oral. On the other hand, in literate societies where the system of writing does take its due share in the communication processes, the oral culture appears like a sub-culture or a part of the whole culture. However, we need to ask here whether there are any exceptions to this condition of oral culture as a sub-culture to the written culture?

One of the peculiarities that has been frequently pointed out with regard to India and culture formation has been that written culture (i.e. literary traditions based on language that has script) may not be necessarily a ‘dominant’ culture vis-à-vis oral traditions. One of the methods of explaining this position could be through the critique of the concept of palace paradigm (propounded by Jawaharlal Handoo). The concept argues that literary cultures in India have historically been court cultures/traditions with little connection to the popular life, i.e. society at the level of the common people as opposed to the elites. It argues that to understand the life and social existence of the common people, it is important to focus on folk traditions. Through the concept, it is argued that the distinction of dominant and dominated culture may be an insufficient approach to explain production and practice of culture in India historically. However, there are two problems in the concept of palace paradigm. Firstly, it assumes that there is a rigid separation between literary and oral traditions. Numerous examples, such as textual performances (Katha tradition), show us that strict distinction between the two is not possible. Secondly, as it follows from the first problem, if production of culture is seen in terms of exchange relations (between literary and oral traditions),
then the issue of dominant and dominated partner becomes less significant than
the issue of nature of exchange relation and its role or impact in the production
or formation of culture.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: 1) Your answers should be within 300 words each;
       2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at
the of the Unit.

1) What are the distinctive characteristics of oral tradition in contrast to
written tradition? Are there any Indian peculiarities in this regard?

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2.3 THE ORAL-WRITTEN NEXUS: A CONTINUUM

Folklorists have demonstrated with examples drawn from various cultures across
time and space that oral and written traditions are not mutually exclusive
categories. The two traditions may be perceived as separately identifiable entities
or belonging to two different levels in a supposed hierarchical order. But they
are not absolutely cut off from one another. Rather a harmonic interplay between
them does exist which enrich both the traditions.

“Many of the standard comparisons between oral and literate cultures”, as Jack
Goody has observed, “are flawed because the role of writing is misrepresented.
Writing does not supplant oral communication; it is merely another channel of
communication, substituting for the oral only in certain contexts but at the same
time developing new ones.” (Goody 1992: 12). Let us take the example of the
Vedas which are regarded as one of the earliest specimens of Indian written
literature. One term that was used to describe these sacred texts was *sruti* which
means ‘hearing’ or ‘listening’. The reason is that the texts of the *Vedas* were
circulated in oral traditions, recounted in oral-aural interactions, before they were
written on manuscripts. In such contexts one needs to distinguish between mode
of origin (or composition) and the mode of transmission. For Instance, many
texts of medieval Indian Bhakti saints (such as Basavanna), were most probably
composed orally, written down later by disciples and then disseminated orally
again. Obviously there was also a transmission through writing. Thus the written
form is only a part of the history of the texts, one phase in the cycle of
transmission” (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986: 4)

At this point, it would be useful to take note of some of the perceived notions
about written traditions, especially written literature. A characteristic feature about
written literature is its known or individual authorship, whereas oral literary pieces are usually anonymous – created and re-created in oral traditions by unknown individuals in the course of time. However, the works of the best creative writers, it can be argued, are unlikely to be their absolute individual creations which are free from the inputs from traditional knowledge. Interpreting this issue of tradition and individual talent, T. S. Eliot had these famous words to say – “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (Eliot 1982: 37).

Thus, the demarcation between oral and written tradition in the real cultural manifestations are highly fragile which makes it complicated to label a particular phenomenon as oral or written in absolute terms. Instead of rigid a line of segregation, there exists a continuum between both the traditions.

The oral-written continuum is very much a part of Indian culture. In fact, the continued interaction between oral and written lore and the striking cultural productions thereof, is a distinctive feature of Indian culture. Some of the examples of this fact are already illustrated before. The well known anthologies of stories, such as Brihatkatha, Pancatantra, Vetalapanchavimsati, and the great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata etc. demonstrate how the narratives in oral circulation later became written texts. The remarkable diffusion of these stories within and outside the Indian territory was in fact the result of the many-phased transmissions from oral to written and written to oral discourses that took place at different points of time.

The oral-written continuum can also be tested in cultural forms other than literature. The knowledge of many traditional arts and performances were created, shared and disseminated orally in earlier times. With the coming of writing, that knowledge was transferred to written texts which became the rules or scripts for those artistic practices. Many of the classical performing arts of current times, which are called classical because of the presence of written regulatory scripts that govern those arts, went through such types of transformations.

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<td><strong>Note:</strong> 1) Your answers should be within 300 words each;</td>
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<td>2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Describe the nature of the relationship between oral and written tradition?</td>
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2.4 EXTENSION OF THE ORAL-WRITTEN MODEL

The concept of oral-written continuum can also be treated as parallel to a few other analytical categorizations of society and culture, such as the Great Tradition-Little Tradition and the folk-classical.

The notion of great tradition and little tradition refers to “[t]he distinction between the higher, elite levels of a civilization (great tradition) and the folk or popular levels (little tradition). Little traditions are most often associated with the pre-urban stages or non-urban, non-literate/illiterate levels of society and are products of the village or the common people. The basis of the great tradition is rooted in the little traditions of the folk level. As a society undergoes primary urbanization, the little traditions become codified, evolve into great traditions, and often fall subordinate to the aesthetics and learning of the great traditions” (Alison 1997: 426).

| Oral Folk Little Tradition | Written Classical Great Tradition |

In the above arrangement, the labels in the left column reflect the so-called informal, un-refined sections of a culture, and the labels on the right are used to designate the so-called high and refined facets of a culture. However, in contrast to their analytical demarcation, the real world experiences show that there always exists constant interplay between great tradition and little tradition, between the folk and the classical; and between the oral and the written.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: 1) Your answers should be within 300 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.
3) What could be other analytical models similar to the oral-written for describing culture and tradition?

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2.6 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


2.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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