

Oral Traditions as Informal Human Capital: Reframing Higher Education

Pedagogy in India

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Abstract

Contemporary higher education systems are mainly influenced by technology and standard examination methods. But in this process, traditional ways of learning that once strengthened students thinking and memory are often ignored. Oral traditions are the informal methods of human capital building in Indian higher education. While modern institutions increasingly focus on digital and text-based curriculum, oral methods such as storytelling, rhythmic recitation, and dialogic learning have traditionally improved memory, attention, and conversational ability. Based on Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach, the study claims that oral pedagogy improves cognitive retention and expressive capability at a low cost. In resource-constrained environments such as India, introducing organized oral approaches into college classes can boost student participation and educational outcomes without requiring extra infrastructural investment. The study supports that oral traditions are low-cost cognitive capital that may supplement current education systems and contribute to inclusive and sustainable human capital development.

Keywords: Oral traditions; Human Capital; Higher Education; Informal learning; Oral Pedagogy; Cognitive Development; Development Economics;

Introduction

The present higher education is constructed based on the structure curriculum and technology progression which majorly focus on students' grade and test outcomes and those job-oriented curriculum text-based models is dominating pedagogical structures across colleges and universities in India. However, this progress simultaneously reduces the important of oral traditions which are endowed with culture and interaction that helps to shape the student's

cognitive development.

Oral traditions are the practice of passing knowledge art ideas and culture which are received preserved and transmitted orally from one generation to another generation.

For example: storytelling, rhythmic recitation, monolog, narratives, and role play these are all informal yet structured methods of knowledge preservation and skill development these are not just the tools of cultural preservation but the mechanisms that enhanced memory preservation listening ability expressions communication and ethical thinking.

Oral tradition served as the main knowledge source in before literate and early literate societies these are also played their pivotal role as primary knowledge infrastructures, as a method of intellectual development and a tool of social development Without any hand written documentation. However, despite of their significance oral pedagogical traditions are miss interpreted as just rote memorizing techniques.

The nature of cognitive development is rooted in rhythmic recitation, repetition, narrative structures, and orientations that are sometimes discourage as outdated or non-academic in modern educational institutions which often balanced with innovation and technological advancements.

This paper argues that oral traditions can be analytically redefined as informal methods of human capital development. Instead of just positioning this oral pedagogy in opposition to modern or text-based systems the study proposes that oral traditions may complement contemporary models of instruction particularly in resource scarce institutional settings

By adopting such methods which based on human capital theory and capability theory this paper aims demonstrate that oral traditions are low-cost cognitive capital that can help to strengthening student engagement, retention, and communicative abilities in higher education.

Objectives

- To clarify the distinguish between rote memorization and structural oral pedagogy.
- To make oral traditions within the framework of accepted Economic theories of human capital and capability development.
- To assess the oral traditions significance in improving the outcomes of higher education in India.
- To analyse the challenges in adopting oral traditions in higher education.

In doing so the paper contributes to current discussions on inclusive, culturally responsive,

economically efficient, and low-cost models of educational development.

Definitions

Oral tradition is a form of human communication in which knowledge, arts, ideas, beliefs, and culture are received, preserved, and transmitted orally from one generation to another generation [1].

These traditions are transmissions through speech or song and includes folktales, ballets, chants prose or poetry. The person who passes these from one to another generation sometimes termed as “walking libraries” by John magnus in his work ‘Libraries in oral traditional societies’ international library review. Oral traditions are the traditions once held in common by a group and passed to many generations which is very long preservation of knowledge [2]

Ancient texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism were passed by oral traditions for example: Sruti’s, Vedas, Puranas etc. The Vedic text for orally composed and transmitted, without the use of script, in an unbroken line of transmission from teachers to student that was formalized early on. This ensured and impeccable textual transmission superior to the classical texts of other cultures; it is, in fact, something like a tape-recording...Not just the actual words, but even the long-lost musical (tonal) accent (as in old Greek or in Japanese) has been preserved up to the present [3].

Forms of Oral tradition

Storytelling and folklore: The fundamental component of oral traditions is storytelling and folklore these includes narratives of ethical teachings, myths, stories of legends, Epics, Historical events, and other cultures. These traditions on one hand serves as entertainment on the other hand it serves as instructions of morals and also it teaches cultural preservation to the younger generations. Storytelling and folklore are all interactive methods in which audience is can ask questions and at the end they were ask to tell the morals from the narratives. Story telling is common activity in festivals, in ceremonies, and in other cultural gatherings where all elder people came together and narrate the stories.

Proverbs and idioms: The proverbs and idioms are part of everyday conversations particularly to give advice, to resolve disputes, and to reinforce values and morals among people. Many proverbs are framed based on true experiences, natural metaphors, and World views. These are short sentences which can help for easy memorization but they ensure longevity of wisdom even in

modern era of societies.

The proverbs handbook of Wolf Gand mieder discuss about how they emphasize social values and wisdom. For instance, in the very beginning, he stated that proverbs offer a concise record of folk wisdom and have appeared in oral traditions, literature, art, and culture for centuries [4].

Ritual and ceremonial songs: In oral traditions the song that poems and speeches played a significant role especially in rituals and ceremonies. These offers special prayers and beliefs in oral forms. The songs chants play a crucial role in passing knowledge cultural values and collective memory with in communities.

Literature review and Theoretical framework

Human capital theory

The human capital theory was proposed by Theodore Shultz and Gary Becker in 1962 [6]. According to the theory investment in education and training lead to higher productivity and increased future earning potential for workers.

There are four components of human capital theory knowledge, skill, health, and experience. These are valuable attributes of life with education and training people can enhance these elements for greater productivity and economic contribution. Under this framework investment on education are essential and should be treated similarly to investment in physical capital which will intern in the long-term results in the form of improve productivity and income generation.

The educational investment includes indicator such as institutional infrastructures and enrolments but less attention has been given to informal pedagogy's this paper analytically extends human capital theory by examining oral traditions as potential informal pedagogy in cognitive and skill development.

Capability approach

The capability approach was given by Indian Economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. While human capital theory emphasizes productivity and economic returns, the Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen broadens the evaluative space of education. Sen argues that development should be assessed in terms of expanded capabilities—the real freedoms individuals possess to lead lives they value [7]. Education, in this perspective, enhances not only income-generating capacity but also expressive ability, participation, reasoning, and social engagement.

‘The capability approach: concepts, measures and application’ is the book edited by Flavio comim

Mozaffar Qizil Bash and Sabina Alkirs published by Cambridge University press in 2008 that explores the framework developed by Amartya Sen focusing on human freedom and wellbeing [8].

Oral pedagogical practices—such as dialogic teaching and storytelling—may strengthen communicative competence, confidence in articulation, and social interaction skills. From a capability perspective, these attributes represent expansions of functional freedoms rather than merely economic outputs. The linkage between oral pedagogy and capability expansion presented here is an analytical interpretation grounded in Sen’s framework, not an explicit formulation within his original work.

Oral Traditions in Educational Discourse

Anthropological and cultural scholarship has long documented the sophistication of oral knowledge systems. Institutions such as UNESCO recognize oral traditions as elements of intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing their role in knowledge preservation and identity formation [9]. Historically, oral systems in India—including dialogic Gurukul instruction and structured recitation methods—enabled complex knowledge transmission prior to widespread literacy.

In educational psychology, narrative learning and auditory repetition have been associated with improved memory encoding and recall. While this paper does not conduct empirical testing, it draws upon established interdisciplinary findings suggesting that rhythm, repetition, and emotional engagement enhance retention and comprehension. These insights provide indirect support for the conceptual argument advanced in this study.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research on human capital formation and growing literature on indigenous knowledge systems, limited scholarship has systematically examined oral traditions through a development economics lens within the context of contemporary Indian higher education. Most economic analyses focus on digital infrastructure, skill certification, and formal curriculum reform. This paper addresses this gap by analytically positioning oral traditions as informal yet economically relevant components of human capital formation. It does not claim new empirical evidence; rather, it synthesizes theoretical and interdisciplinary insights to construct a conceptual framework applicable to higher education policy discussions in India

Methodology

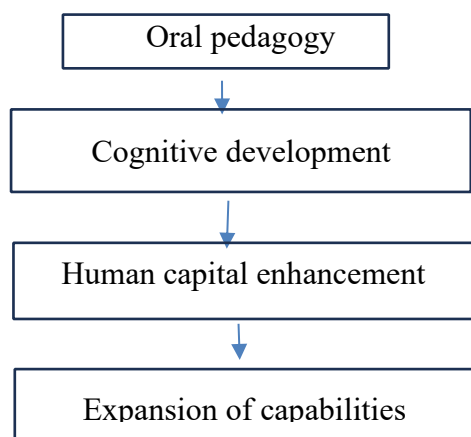
The study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research design instead of primary data collection and survey the paper relies on secondary literature, theoretical frameworks, and analytical interpretation drawn from development economics.

The objective is to construct a theoretically grounded framework that reinterprets oral traditions as an informal human capital formation in Indian higher education. By synthesizing economic theories with interdisciplinary findings, the study proposes a policy-oriented argument. The conclusions drawn are therefore analytical and normative in nature rather than statistically validated findings

Oral traditions as informal human capital

This chapter is the analytical contribution of the paper. Based on the established theories of human capital and capability expansion that study proposes conceptual framework that positioning oral traditions as informal methods of human capital formation in higher education

Analytical linkages



Oral pedagogy

Oral traditions like storytelling, rhythmic recitation, monologue, and narratives are required minimal infrastructure investment and can be provided within the existing classroom setting.

Development of cognitive skills

Interdisciplinary findings in cognitive and behavioural psychology indicate that repetition rhythms and narrative help to encode and remember the memory. It also strengths active listening, student engagement, quick responses, reasoning abilities, and spontaneous thinking abilities. The skills

contribute to cognitive retention and expressive clarity.

Human capital enhancement

In the context of human capital theory cognitive retention, repetition, narratives, reasoning, and analytical skills improve learning efficiency which results concepts clarity among students ultimately results in increased formal education efficiency without proportional increase in financial investment.

Capability expansion

From the context of capability expansion by Amartya Sen effective communication and interactive or dialogic involvement increases individuals' ability to participate in academic and social discussion. These oral traditions boost confidence, fluency, participatory, freedom, and intellectual thinking.

Oral traditions as low-cost cognitive capital

Oral pedagogy functions as low-cost human and cognitive capital. The technological advancements smart classrooms or digital classroom requires lot of funds. Unlike these methods the oral pedagogy avail at minimal cost. It depends on pedagogical design rather than infrastructure. In resource scarce higher education institutions, where it is hard to provide technology advanced classrooms this oral pathology becomes an economically significant technique. As oral traditions characterized by cognitive abilities, they may ensure efficient compliment to digital system rather than a substitution.

This analysis does not deny the technology integration rather it proposes a hybrid model where oral pedagogy coexist with the digital tools there by improving both accessibility and cognitive development among students.

Distinguishing oral pedagogy from rote memorization

Road memorization involves mechanical repetition without conceptual engagement whereas oral pedagogy involves rhythm, dialogic, narration, and interpretation which designed for conceptual reinforcement.

Analytical Discussion: Relevance in the Indian Context

This section analytically examines the relevance of structured oral pedagogy within contemporary Indian higher education. The discussion is interpretative and grounded in theoretical reasoning rather than empirical measurement.

Resource Constraints and Cost Efficiency

Indian higher education institutions, particularly public and semi-urban colleges, frequently operate under financial and infrastructural constraints. While digital expansion, smart classrooms, and learning management systems are increasingly emphasized, access to uniform technological infrastructure remains uneven.

Within the framework of Human Capital Theory associated with Gary Becker, educational inputs are evaluated in terms of their contribution to productivity. Most policy emphasis today focuses on capital-intensive inputs such as digital infrastructure, laboratory modernization, and skill certification mechanisms.

However, structured oral pedagogy represents a low-cost pedagogical intervention. It requires minimal financial expenditure and relies primarily on instructional design and classroom interaction. From an economic perspective, if such methods enhance retention and engagement without increasing institutional expenditure, they may improve the efficiency of educational investment.

Cognitive Retention and Learning Depth

Contemporary classroom practices often prioritize note-taking, slide-based teaching, and examination-oriented preparation. While efficient, such approaches may encourage surface learning when not combined with active engagement.

Interdisciplinary scholarship in cognitive science suggests that repetition, narrative framing, and dialogic reinforcement improve memory consolidation and conceptual clarity. Structured oral summaries, peer recitation, and discussion-based explanation may therefore strengthen encoding and recall processes.

The analytical argument advanced here is that oral reinforcement can deepen conceptual internalization. If students are able to articulate concepts verbally, the likelihood of long-term retention increases. Within a human capital framework, improved retention enhances the productivity of time spent in formal education.

Capability Expansion and Expressive Agency

Beyond productivity, education also expands participatory and expressive capacities. The Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen emphasizes that development must be assessed in terms of expanded freedoms rather than income alone.

Oral pedagogical systems—especially dialogic teaching—encourage students to speak, question, and respond. Such engagement strengthens confidence, communicative ability, and reasoning skills. These attributes represent expanded functional capabilities.

The linkage between oral pedagogy and capability expansion presented here is an analytical interpretation grounded in Sen’s framework. It is not an explicit claim made in his original work.

Complementarity with Digital Systems

This paper does not advocate a rejection of technological advancement. Digital tools enhance access, flexibility, and information dissemination. However, over-reliance on screen-based learning may reduce interpersonal academic engagement.

The conceptual position advanced in this study is that oral traditions should function as complementary pedagogical mechanisms. A hybrid classroom model—where digital content delivery is combined with structured oral reinforcement—may produce stronger cognitive outcomes than either system alone.

Challenges in Reintegrating Oral Pedagogy

Despite its conceptual relevance, the reintegration of oral pedagogy within contemporary higher education faces several institutional challenges. First, examination-oriented systems prioritize written performance and standardized assessment formats, leaving limited space for dialogic or oral evaluation methods. When academic success is predominantly measured through written reproduction, incentives for developing oral articulation and participatory skills weaken.

Second, oral traditions are frequently associated with rote memorization rather than structured cognitive engagement. This perception creates resistance among educators and policymakers who equate modernization with technological and text-based advancement. The distinction between mechanical repetition and concept-reinforcing oral pedagogy is often insufficiently recognized.

Third, faculty preparedness presents a structural constraint. Many instructors have themselves been trained within lecture-dominant systems and may lack exposure to dialogic or narrative-based instructional design. Without professional development and pedagogical reorientation, integration of oral methods may remain inconsistent.

Fourth, increasing digital dependence may unintentionally reduce interactive classroom engagement. While technological tools expand access and efficiency, over-reliance on screen-mediated instruction may limit spontaneous discussion and collective reasoning processes.

Finally, syllabus completion pressures and large classroom sizes may restrict opportunities for structured oral engagement. In time-constrained environments, instructors may prioritize content coverage over participatory reinforcement.

These challenges do not invalidate the conceptual argument advanced in this study. Rather, they highlight the need for deliberate and institutionally supported strategies if oral pedagogy is to function as a complementary mechanism of human capital development

Findings

- **Oral Pedagogy Enhances Cognitive Retention:** The study finds that oral methods such as storytelling, recitation, and dialogue improve memory retention and recall ability. Rhythm, repetition, and narrative structures help in better encoding of information, leading to deeper learning compared to passive note-taking.
- **Improvement in Communication and Expression:** Oral traditions significantly enhance students' verbal articulation, confidence, and clarity of thought. Students exposed to dialogic learning show better participation in discussions and academic interaction.
- **Oral Traditions Act as Informal Human Capital:** The paper establishes that oral pedagogy contributes to skill formation (communication, reasoning, listening). These skills increase learning efficiency and productivity, aligning with human capital theory.
- **Expansion of Capabilities Beyond Economic Outcomes:** From the capability approach perspective, oral pedagogy improves expressive freedom, social participation, and Critical thinking. Thus, education is not limited to income generation but also enhances overall human development.
- **Low-Cost and Economically Efficient Pedagogical Tool:** Oral pedagogy requires minimal infrastructure investment, unlike digital or smart classrooms. It is especially useful in resource-constrained institutions, making it a cost-effective educational strategy.
- **Complementary Role with Modern Education Systems:** The study finds that oral traditions are not substitutes but complements to digital learning. A hybrid model (oral + digital) can produce better academic outcomes than relying on a single method.
- **Distinction from Rote Learning:** A key finding is that structured oral pedagogy is conceptual and interactive, unlike rote memorization. Misinterpretation of oral methods as rote

learning is a major barrier to adoption.

- **Relevance in Indian Higher Education Context:** Oral traditions align well with: India's cultural learning systems, Multilingual classrooms and They help students understand concepts in familiar languages before formal academic expression.
- **Potential for Policy Integration:** Findings suggest that incorporating oral pedagogy in Curriculum design, Internal assessment and in Teaching methods which can improve overall educational outcomes without increasing costs.

Policy Implications

1. Curriculum-Level Integration

Higher education regulatory bodies and universities may formally recognize oral pedagogical components within course design. For example, structured oral summaries, peer explanation sessions, and dialogic reflections may be included as part of internal assessment. This does not require infrastructural expansion but reallocation of classroom design.

2. Faculty Development and Training

Teacher training workshops may include modules on structured oral pedagogy. Many instructors equate oral methods with rote learning. Professional development programs could clarify the distinction between mechanical repetition and concept-reinforcing oral engagement. This is aligned with reform-oriented frameworks such as the National Education Policy 2020 [16].

3. Assessment Reform

Higher education assessment systems in India remain examination-centric. Limited incorporation of oral components such as viva voce, concept explanation, and seminar-based evaluation may strengthen expressive capability and reduce over-dependence on written reproduction. This is a reform-oriented but practical suggestion.

4. Bridging Linguistic Diversity

India is multilingual. Structured oral engagement allows students to process concepts in a familiar linguistic medium before formal articulation in academic English. This may support inclusive classrooms without requiring additional financial investment. This strengthens your inclusive development argument.

5. Resource-Constrained Institutional Strategy

In rural or semi-urban colleges where digital infrastructure is limited, structured oral pedagogy

may serve as a compensatory academic strategy. Rather than perceiving limited infrastructure as purely a constraint, institutions may leverage oral engagement as an efficiency-enhancing tool.

Limitations of the Study

This study is conceptual in nature and does not include primary field data to empirically measure the impact of oral traditions on learning outcomes. The analysis relies mainly on secondary sources and theoretical interpretations, which may limit the ability to generalize findings across different educational settings. Additionally, the study does not quantitatively compare oral pedagogy with modern digital methods, and therefore cannot statistically establish superiority or effectiveness. Cultural diversity and regional variations in oral traditions are vast, but this paper discusses them in a broad framework, which may overlook local specificities. Finally, rapid technological changes and evolving educational policies may influence the relevance of the proposed framework over time.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that oral traditions can be analytically reframed as informal mechanisms of human capital formation within Indian higher education. While mainstream economic discourse predominantly evaluates education through measurable institutional inputs and standardized outcomes, informal pedagogical systems remain underexamined.

By extending the theoretical insights of Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach, this study proposes that structured oral pedagogy may function as low-cost cognitive capital. Oral methods have the potential to strengthen memory retention, articulation, and participatory capability without requiring additional financial investment.

The paper does not claim empirical verification. Rather, it constructs a conceptual framework intended to stimulate further research and policy dialogue. Future empirical studies may test the cognitive and economic effects of structured oral interventions in higher education settings.

Reintegrating culturally embedded pedagogical systems within modern institutions may contribute to more inclusive, participatory, and economically efficient models of educational development.

Education is not only what we read, but what we hear, share, and pass on.

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